

Universities should not smother uncomfortable debates: Editorial

If we cannot engage one another at a university, of all places, we are in very deep trouble.

By **STAR EDITORIAL BOARD**

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Universities, at their best, have always provided space for those who would challenge conventional wisdom. In this way, the academy has played a vital role in our social and cultural evolution. Despite or perhaps because of this, however, there are inevitably those who want to tame academia's disruptive tendencies and silence its outlying voices.

In these polarized times, this age-old struggle has become increasingly combative and dangerously divisive, with some on campus railing against political correctness to justify their hate and others imposing purity tests that chill rather than enable debate.

We have seen these themes playing out yet again in the case of Masuma Khan, the activist and student union executive at Dalhousie University in Halifax who was on the verge of official censure for her controversial views until the school's administration belatedly thought better of it.

Khan's trouble began last year when she posted a Facebook diatribe condemning Dalhousie's planned celebrations of Canada's 150th birthday. The post, now deleted, was a response to the Nova Scotia Young Progressive Conservatives, who had criticized a student union motion not to participate in the festivities. Canada's founding is nothing to fete, Khan argued, inextricable as it is from Indigenous suffering.

The post began with a bang – “At this point, f*** you all” – and ended with a barrage of equally uncivil hashtags: “#unlearn150, #whitefragilitycankissmyass and #yourwhitetearsarentsacredthislandis.”

Not surprisingly, many were upset. Streams of criticism followed, some of it fair, much of it racist. One student lodged a formal complaint with the university, characterizing the post as an attack on white people. (It is telling that the complainant, in filing a grievance purportedly about racism, inappropriately referred to Khan, who wears a hijab, as an immigrant, which she is not.)

What was surprising, however, was that the university’s senate initially chose to act on the complaint, calling Khan before a disciplinary hearing. This, too, sparked predictable outrage from those who argued rightly that the administration grossly overreacted and failed to uphold its responsibility to protect the right to free expression. On Wednesday, the school decided not to pursue the issue further.

In a way, Khan’s case is unusual. The raging debate over free speech on university campuses has usually focused on the right of far-right-wingers to tilt at the alleged tyranny of political correctness. The most famous such case in Canada is that of the divisive University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson.

Last year, Peterson posted a YouTube rant outlining his retrograde views on gender identity and his reasons for refusing to refer to certain transgender people by their pronoun of choice, prompting many on campus to call for his firing.

As we argued at the time, Peterson is wrong about just about everything – not least about basic human decency. But in a democratic society it is his right to be wrong. Those who called for his firing failed to appreciate that a university, which ought to be a sanctuary for the free exchange of ideas, is the very last institution that should seek to infringe on that right.

Khan’s screed against Canada 150 also makes a dubious case, in an arguably counterproductive style. It is possible to celebrate

Confederation and the considerable merits of the country thus formed while also grappling with shameful facets of our history and working to undo colonialism's destructive legacy.

That's not to say Khan is anything like Peterson. But if far-right professors have the right to stretch the bounds of acceptable discourse to preserve a power structure from which they benefit, so, too, must this student leader be allowed to more nobly err in her fight on the side of the oppressed.

As 25 lawyers from the university's law faculty put it in an open letter to the administration, "Expression which challenges majoritarian views, traditions, and practices that have caused harms to marginalized and oppressed minorities lies at the very core of Canada's constitutional commitment to the protection of political speech."

The lawyers' letter was just one of many defences of Khan that emerged over the past week, protests that seemed to move the university a little bit at a time. At first, the administration argued that the hearing was necessary to protect a safe learning environment. Then it grew more sensitive, insisting that Khan was not being hauled before the school's senate to defend herself against bogus allegations of "reverse racism," as some had suggested. By the middle of the week, the issue seemed to have been reduced primarily to the potential hurtfulness of Khan's use of the f-word.

On Wednesday, given that this case had clearly become a proxy for a larger ideological battle, the university rightly concluded that Khan's cursing and incivility were matters too picayune to pursue. The administration instead chose to make a far more important point absolutely clear: that Khan has the right to speak her mind, constrained only by the rule of law.

The growing instinct to suppress speech, whether from the right or the left, both arises from and feeds the troubling trend of ideological tribalism. Democracy depends on openness to new ideas and reasoned

debate. If we cannot engage one another at a university, of all places, we are in very deep trouble.

That's why Dalhousie's belated decision to drop the issue is so important. Not that it has resolved the tensions at play. The situation at the school remains a mess. Khan claims she has been mistreated. Those aggrieved by her post suggest justice has not been done. The debate rages on, disruptive and uncomfortable – just what we ought to expect on campus.