



# *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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23 February 2021

Ted Hewitt, PhD  
President, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council  
340 Albert Street  
Ottawa, ON K1P 6G4

Dear Dr Hewitt,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education. (For further information, see our website at [www.safs.ca](http://www.safs.ca).)

SAFS is concerned that the increasing commitment of the Canada Research Chairs Program (CRCP) to the theory and practice of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is contrary to sound academic values and will impede the ability of Canada's universities to serve their academic mission.

The CRCP now requires members of university recruitment and nomination committees to receive unconscious bias training, to be committed to EDI, to take account of slowdowns in the careers of applicants, and to have a positive attitude toward "non-traditional or unconventional" scholarship.

The CRCP also requires that at least one member of each such committee be female, indigenous, disabled or a member of a visible minority, all of which are academically irrelevant characteristics. It also requires that the committee include a recognized EDI "champion."

Universities have historically respected the academic freedom and professional judgement of professors by not requiring that they undergo training in order to participate in hiring, sit on academic senate or otherwise serve their university. Training presupposes a set body of knowledge, while academic freedom protects professors from having to hold prescribed doctrine. While a university might provide resources that members of a committee could choose to use, the university would not infringe on the academic freedom of the professor. The CRCP's requirement that professors undergo training in order to exercise their right to serve the university changes the relation between professors and their institution and undercuts the freedom professors need to remain independent thinkers.

The same criticism holds of requiring that professors on recruitment and nomination committees be committed to EDI. It violates academic freedom, just as requiring professors to swear loyalty oaths did.

It is difficult to see how committee members will honour the requirement that they take account of the time applicants for Canada Research Chairs were absent from academic life. Committee members would have to assign handicaps to candidates. That can make sense in golf for certain purposes. But there's no analogous purpose to be served in academia. As well, gathering information about time away from teaching or scholarly activity would seem to infringe on privacy. Following from that, those who wish to keep their private life private would be at a disadvantage relative to those who are happy to discuss their personal lives.

A piece of scholarship is neither better nor worse for being non-traditional or unconventional. Its value lies in its insight, its comprehensiveness, its originality and its other academic qualities. For the sake of finding the best scholars, members of hiring committees should not be encouraged to value unconventionality as though it were of academic significance. And they certainly should not be required to value a piece of scholarship because it exemplifies any particular way of knowing. That a work embodies an indigenous way of knowing, say, does not shield it from critical evaluation.

By requiring universities to use non-academic criteria in constructing recruitment and nomination committees, the CRCP is encouraging universities to treat researchers unfairly and will likely lower the quality of research in Canada. Both fairness and research quality can be attained only through seeking to identify the best researchers available and awarding chairs exclusively on grounds of academic merit.

Finally, universities function best by being allowed to direct their funds in their own way. That the CRCP makes money available to universities to hire academics is laudable. But by stipulating how the universities are to conduct their searches, and especially by requiring that they conduct them in ways that serve no academic ends, the CRCP is compromising the autonomy and integrity of the universities it seeks to benefit.

SAFS looks forward to hearing from you. We will post this letter on our website. With your permission, we will be pleased to post your reply together with it.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Mercer', written in a cursive style.

Mark Mercer, PhD  
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