

June 25, 2018

Dear Alex,

Thanks for your note and invitation for me to comment on the document "Freedom Matters", which has now been revised after a long process of debate and discussion. I described the first draft as "a feeble and troubling document that is unworthy of a university that wants to be taken seriously." I see no reason to revise or change my comments in relation to this draft. It contains most of the same problems and limitations.

Under the guise of defending free speech this document continues to emphasize the need for "balance" and "constraints" based on other concerns and interests. It gives heavy emphasis to concerns of "inclusion", "collaboration", "diversity", "marginalization" and "equity". Not only are these concerns ideologically loaded and committed to interpretations and priorities that reasonable people will contest, they turn attention away from the need to protect free speech to the need to constrain it. Ironically, one of the most obvious sources of concern is that the "balance" has been tipped heavily away from free speech and towards these (ideologically loaded and prejudicial) priorities and objectives. Although I am wholly sympathetic to many of the concerns and objectives identified and mentioned, I can well appreciate that many will read this document as a way of opening the door to suppressing ideas and viewpoints that fail to address the priorities of "marginalized groups" or those who are identified as "vulnerable minorities". For this reason, in my view, this document lacks the very balance and restraint that it claims to respect and sanction.

Not only is the document unbalanced it is a confused jumble of ideas and concerns. What is needed is a clear statement of what freedom of expression involves and what sort of activities and actions violate or constrain it. The very subject matter under investigation - the scope and authority of the document - is obscure. Moreover, while distinctions of various kinds are drawn (e.g. academic freedom/freedom of expression; various principles guiding freedom of expression/ etc.) none of this serves to confirm, much less emphasize, why freedom of expression should be given priority over competing concerns and interests (e.g. "inclusiveness", "security", etc.) unless there is a clear and obvious threat to the health and basic rights of others. One paragraph gives some lame and half-hearted attention to this matter - but it is overwhelmed by irrelevant and inflated claims relating to other (ideological) concerns and objectives.

I cannot arrive at any other conclusion than that this document will satisfy those who are already persuaded that worries about "free speech" are a convenient camouflage or smoke screen for those who are hostile to a progressive ideological agenda. I am not hostile to this agenda - at least under a reasonable interpretation - but I am worried that many of those who want to advance it believe that it legitimizes substantial constraints on the freedom of expression of those who oppose or even question these ideas and concerns. This document strikes me as a clear case in point.

It might well be asked, from a procedural point of view, on what basis Neil Guppy appointed the members of the Committee who wrote this document and to what extent it simply reflects the ideological prejudices of a particular cabal at the university?

Finally, with respect to the pedestrian and bureaucratic style in which this document has been written, I would point out that in a few pages it refers to the current and past Presidents of the University no less than five times. It is rather ironic to have a document devoted to freedom of expression adopt a house-style appropriate to hierarchical and authoritarian regimes. I would have preferred more attention to what some interesting and relevant authorities have to say on this subject and less about the pronouncements of our glorious leaders in the university administration.

I have taught at UBC for over thirty years - when I read this document I worry about what the next thirty years will do to the core values and integrity of this institution.

Best wishes,

Paul Russell

(Professor, Philosophy)