

Friday 23rd February 2024

Postgraduate Common Room

Meeting with Angela Breitenbach (Chair of the Faculty of Philosophy) and Bhaskar Vira (Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education) and Sophie Dandeleit.

Roughly 20 philosophy students across all parts in attendance.

Start Time: 16:00

Opening remarks:

Breitenbach:

- Racist views are not reflective of the faculty; this much is 'obvious'; wants to make sure that it's clear that the research project that Cofnas was hired to do has nothing to do with the views he is currently expressing and the posts that have caused upset.
- The faculty have not hired someone to work on anything to do with what has recently been published.
- As a faculty "we have worked very hard... to make this faculty inclusive for philosophy" "we have spent a lot of hours on thinking about and discussing issues of diversity, equality and inclusion"

Vira:

- Had no prior notice to the blog being published; caused great distress and disturbance.
- Many of senior management are outraged.
- Cofnas fellowship comes from external source; affiliation with Emmanuel college; trying to figure out what they *can* do.
- Need to have student groups to discuss these kinds of issues; how people are feeling, reacting, and what our expectations are in response.
- Expressed personal distaste and disgust about what has occurred.

Student question: From when he was hired we knew about some of his research; with the kind of work he has done, how did he come into this position when it was public knowledge re some things he had said before.

Breitenbach on hiring process: departments ask for expressions of interest to the department; internal selection process; if selected that person applies to Leverhulme trust with a research project/cv/project proposal/list of publications.

The project proposal was on the evolution of moral norms; that proposal was judged to be of academic merit. So was the CV and so were the publications- they were of "high academic standard"

"If one could've googled one would've found out more"

Student Question: was that a list of all publications? If so, is this not gross negligence? How did Cofnas get into this position?

Breitenbach: if one had looked more carefully one could've found this out. "I realise it's not satisfactory ultimately" – the idea that there is a 'lot going on and we don't have endless time'

Dandeleit: hiring process was discussed last year at a faculty board; it was decided that we need to have more people involved in the hiring process; used to only involve 1 or 2

people and they weren't necessarily reading everything on the CV. The process has been changed now so that the application is now available to the whole faculty; make it less likely that this kind of thing will be missed going forward.

Student Question: it is largely disheartening to know that once these views came to light there wasn't a stricter emphasis on keeping him away from students; given that Cambridge operates on such a 1-1 supervision basis. It's not safe to have the possibility of even being supervised by this kind of person. The greater risk is passing his views on to students who are white who may adopt his sentiments.

- **Breitenbach:** he is not teaching for the faculty now; he has resigned from his post as examiner which he was holding; he has resigned from any contact with students.

Student Question: the fact he was even allowed to supervise should never have been the case. He should never have been entitled to these roles. Is there any prospect of the faculty being stricter. His views are directly offensive.

- **Dandeleit:** yes, the issue is not just that the views are morally bankrupt; the issue is that a reasonable person can assume that these views negatively impact Cofnas' ability to be a good teacher. The faculty needs to be better in terms of 'quality control'. Faculty don't have authority to prohibit DoSes hiring specific supervisors but faculty need to do better quality control. His views aren't just controversial, they're inhibiting teaching.

Student Question: it is very concerning now learning that Cofnas has been an examiner; for however long he was being allowed to do this, his views could've affected his ability to examine, even if he were to claim that this was not the case.

- **Breitenbach:** does not know if he examined last year.
- **Philosophy representative:** he was only ever an MPhil examiner according to his CV.

Student Question: disappointed and disheartened considering the context of this university; this situation did not occur an extensive look into his CV- just googling his name would've exposed these views. He is very insulting and arrogant on twitter; don't understand how he got here, not only in academia but just on his own social media. It is an oversight. Especially because Cambridge seemingly makes attempts to be inclusive and intersectional. The Uni has been very negligent. This is another instance of people's basic feelings being overlooked. Students now have to deal with the university's negligence.

Further Student Comment: we understand the importance of maintaining a good social media profile; this university is not primarily a research institute, one of its primary functions is education and that comes with a sense of community. Also, Cofnas has particularly expressed disdain for students; he looked up his name in Varsity and posted a pic of every Varsity article and insinuated that we were all obsessed with him. Obvious disdain for student opinion. He should have no place in the University merely based on this. Some internal work must be done in the faculty to diversify. We need a lot more assurance that things like this won't continue. Why would black students ever want to come back here or have anything to do with the faculty again.

Further Student Comment: the effects are already being felt; prospective students have been messaging current students asking about Cambridge and its diversity; we cannot comfortably recommend philosophy as a degree at Cambridge university. Black students already experience prejudice concerning their academic credibility. It is gonna prevent black

talent from applying. Where is the line of breaking the code? Is there ever going to be a line?

- **Breitenbach**: There is a line/not an easy question;
- **Dandeleit**: there are conversations ongoing/ we do have a code of behaviour

Student Question (me): could you be as specific as possible about what is preventing the faculty from firing him:

- **Breitenbach**: there are employment laws; it's not a matter of just deciding to fire him. Leverhulme trust are seeking legal advice. It takes time. We have to take it slowly. They take our points on board they are relevant and important especially to our hiring process in the future. 'We don't take it lightly'. Also concerns with HR.

Student Question: can students not file complaints? We are all working in the same institution; if we were in an office we'd be able to file HR complaints; is this not something students can do? The university seems to be using freedom of speech to absolve responsibility for all of these wrongdoings.

- **Vira**: yes; anyone can file a complaint; this is free for anyone. It's called 'Dignity at Work'. There does exist a formal complaint process here. Primary funder is the Leverhulme trust; their scrutiny processed include looking at hundreds of applications; people who get hired have positive letters of support. As the primary funder, they now need to seek their own advice; if they were to cut the funding that would automatically terminate his contract because the university are not paying for him to be here. Vira is in charge of the inclusion policy. There are limits to exercising freedom of speech; yes; it might be difficult to discern when someone has crossed this line.
- **Personal note**: it might be better for us to start aiming our process toward the Leverhulme trust.

Student question: it will not be a good look if the only route to his termination the Leverhulme trust's decision. It would be appreciative to have something explicit and public; the university need to actually take a stance on this matter. ESPECIALLY because he is not a direct employee he is essentially a contractor. The matter extends to all students, and so far it is pretty much only the philosophy students who are receiving direct correspondence. Leverhulme Trust's statement is also only around 150 words; this is not good enough; it is not comprehensive enough. We need a clear and very public statement.

- **Vira**: there are very few things that get sent to the entirety of the student body. this is a very rare occurrence. We use it "sparingly". We use the website as a mechanism for communication. The all email chain is barely used for communication. We do not issue statements through email.

Student: surely this situation warrants one of those rare occurrences.

Further Student: we need more communication. Beyond this meeting, there is still a very high chance that Cofnas might still be here. If that is this situation, are we supposed to just leave this? If they aren't able to legitimately remove funding then what can students do except for concede.

- **Vira**: you can complain about him in a formal sense; go through the official complaint channel. Vira says in his view, Cofnas has crossed the line of all the concerns for 'freedom of speech'; need to delineate what we have control over versus what external bodies have control over. We are not "intending to brush it

under the carpet” at any stage. But there are a number of protocol to contend with. We are seeking expertise in the law of free speech; beyond Vira’s own instincts as a ‘human being’.

- **Breitenbach**: no decision has formally been made; we are not the ones who can just make a decision without advice; just to reiterate, the reason us students may not have heard much does not mean that the faculty are not working on it, or that they are wishing for the problem to disappear on its own.
- **Dandeleit**: maybe hearing more from the faculty in the interim may be helpful; faculty should think of ways to “elevate the visibility” of the statement already on the website- what about the faculty twitter feed or people we know on popular philosophy blogs.

Student: action does not just include his termination. Also, we cannot see or know about whatever the faculty are doing or working on behind the scenes. For Part IB students, this conversation has been ongoing for the entire duration of their time here. Cofnas is still being accommodated by the university.

Student Question (student representative): can you (senior faculty) give the students an explicit picture of what’s going on; there is implication of an HR investigation going on; it would be good to know if the faculty/university is seeking legal advice, and, what protocol/processes are actually being actioned within the university.

- **Vira**: anything said in public could be seen as prejudicial to his case; this could be held up in a court of law as ‘the university have already decided to sack me before going through an official process/or communicating with me.../ or some other complaint by Cofnas in a legal setting. Speaking now could prejudice an action that might be subsequently taken. Vira says he is happy for words to be attributed to him, but these words must be carefully chosen, the faculty must be cautious.

Student Comment: could you make clear what internal action is being taken.

- **Breitenbach**: expressed how disheartened she is; “deeply troubling and I wish it weren’t like that”. On process: the LH trust is involved, HR is involved, Breitenbach is explicitly asked that this is kept confidential. They can’t comment on their specific expectations or speculations on where this would go.
- **Vira**: we are looking at where this sits within HR law and on the law of freedom of speech; these are the two key considerations. The Dignity at Work policy is also relevant.

Student Question: is the university seeking legal advice.

- **Vira**: yes, the university is seeking legal advice. It would be “foolhardy not for us to seek legal advice”

Student Question: what happens if, after seeking all this advice, that you are advised NOT to take formal action of terminating his employment. If the faculty receive this advice, will they then decide to actually not take action? Will you *still* terminate him? Not everything must be subservient to the law?

- **Vira**: we are a regulated institution that has to stay in consideration of the law. To be seen as breaking the law would result in considerable action against the university.

Student Question: what are you doing for students who are *affected* by these views?

- **Breitenbach**: this meeting is for the purpose of working out what students want to happen. What would you like to happen? (she asks)

- **Vira:** an open meeting is being held next week at Emmanuel to determine what they can/should do for students.
- **Breitenbach:** we need to find a good way to do this
- **Vira:** Cofnas loves the publicity and notoriety.

Student Question: Cofnas uses his position to bolster his views; he directly uses his position at Cambridge to back up/reinforce his own views. Being at Cambridge actually affords him credibility- is this not a major concern?

- **Dandeleit:** this is not actually allowed; you can't do this or at least you have to declare it really clearly. Cofnas has not been doing this- someone needs to force him to declare that his views are not affiliated with the university.

Student Question: Is this the first time that this issue has actually been raised to this extent? Has this been brought to your attention before? There are actual tangible breaches to policy. Reference of student who has been personally impacted by Cofnas.

- **Vira:** apart from/prior to his blog; no.

Student Question: Cofnas is using Cambridge to give him credibility; even a statement from the Philosophy faculty on twitter saying 'his views aren't ours' is a bare minimum expectation going forward. Philosophy is not even one of the bigger courses at this university; the faculty is small; 1-1 supervisions could go anywhere and discuss anything. This is a terrifying prospect.

Students should be aware that there are people they can talk to. Students aren't aware of being able to complain or how this would actually be actioned. Especially because we are young; often 18; no 18 year old would feel empowered to against their supervisor and their Dos who has given them that supervisor. The university's position seems like an endorsement and Cofnas is using it as an endorsement.

- **Dandeleit:** we need to start having more formal conversations at the faculty level. Things move slowly in big institutions; it might be a while for something to come into place, but informal things *are possible*. Can student reps pass on that students can report concerns about supervisors? Sophie says that she herself is happy to be spoken to about this issue. We need informal mechanisms in the interim of waiting for some formal oversight mechanism to come into place. In her capacity as undergraduate coordinator.
- **Vira:** explicit recommendation is for DoSes to gather and act on behalf of their colleges/students. Because these are the people directly responsible for assigning supervisions. Moving supervisions to two people as a 'safeguarding exercise'.

Student Question: it was implied before that the trust deciding to remove funding is a fundamental step to removing Cofnas altogether. Does the University/faculty not have a right to remove someone who is derailing them completely

- **Vira:** yes, the university do have that ability.

Student Question: Cofnas resigning from his teaching roles- was that a voluntary thing?

- Breitenbach: yes, Cofnas resigned voluntarily.

Student Question: his views have been incredibly racist for a long time; it is not clear of the timeline of the faculty being made aware that he was racist, and then the action the faculty have started to make now. Seems like something became apparent directly after his employment? His Race/IQ paper was published (attempted to be published?) in 2019.

- **Breitenbach:** this blog is of a different order than the things previously, hence the more recent surge of action.

Student Comment: going forward needs to be far stricter guidelines on who is invited to be allowed to be an examiner; the arguments we use/things reference/the way we speak and write can all signify somebody's race or ethnic background in an exam context.

- **Breitenbach:** the decision came about in that the view was taken that he would be able to judge exams given the anonymity of being an examiner; he was perceived to be credible in this regard.

At this point several students expressed outrage at the fact this ever occurred.

- Especially because of Cofnas' remarks about the relationship between race and IQ.
- There is evidence of the fact that people in the faculty were aware of his personal views and the ramifications this could've had on the students in Philosophy, for a long time.
- **Vira:** each time someone is appointed to any particular role there are procedures that they go through; any ability to supervise, examine, anything else. "There have been failures, clearly"

Student Question: Alexander Bird did 1-1 meetings last year with people who expressed their concerns; and we assume that the decision to allow him to examine came after that. How did this happen?

Student Question: All of Cofnas' views are at a discord with him being able to judge the qualities of Philosophy essays which make them successful; like someone's ability to formulate arguments and apply case studies. There is a direct relation between his views and his ability to effectively educate and judge the quality of somebody else's work.

- **Vira:** he was not considered for 1A; he was only considered *this year*.

Students expressed that *this year* makes it even worse.

Student Question: the faculty do not care about us enough; this exact same thing happened last year and it was taken up with Alexander Bird. "You just don't care about us enough". This issue goes so far beyond the code of conduct that any professional should be held to in a university setting. We gave the allowance last year for this to happen again when no real action was taken. Students do not want to sit here again. Students of colour are deterred from even attending meetings such as these.

Student Question: the fact that Cofnas' view is being permitted at the professional level, is encouraging students in our demographic, in our age group, to express similar views or trying to defend his work. Cofnas is inciting behaviour amongst students.

- **Dandélet:** it is unacceptable that this has been going on for 2 years with no effect taken. Indeed, how are students able to expect anything to happen now. We need to make a list of actual next steps to take in the interim.

Student Question: what exactly is the point of the code of conduct if not to permit the faculty to get rid of people?

- **Vira:** it can never effect any particular action overnight.

- **Dandeleit:** there needs to be an official body to look at the code, the behaviour, and develop the explicit rationale to getting rid of him.

Student Question: we are not convinced that the faculty actually care enough. This is not something students are currently convinced of.

Dandeleit: ideas going forward:

- Instituting a discussion about formal procedures and about examiners, and about hiring.
- Look into whether we might be able to change the university's social media hiring policy. The university has an explicit policy to not consider things on social media into the official hiring process. Surely this has to change?

Student Question: other faculties have decolonize groups. One is possibly in the works for philosophy.

Also, there is not a Philosophy DoS in every single college. We need these to attend to the needs of students at specific colleges. Otherwise the course is not fit to be administered at that college.

- **Dandeleit:** we could explore prohibiting colleges without philosophy fellow representation from admitting any philosophy students at all.
- Another possibility would be to have supervisions centrally arranged so even if you don't have a dedicated DoS, your supos aren't set up by them anyway so this has less impact on your experience as a philosophy student.
- Getting some sense of the student perspectives on that choice would be really helpful.

Student Question: minorities in Philosophy have had barely any communication on what is set up to support them.

Further student comment: it is important to put together our own group comprised of students as well.

Student Question: (representative): addressed to students: 'Would people find it helpful if the faculty were to write up and publish a refutation of some of the points Cofnas has expressed?'

General sentiment in response to this was yes.

- **Dandeleit:** lots of people in the faculty completely disagree with it all. Lots of people, however, find themselves in the position that the thing they want to say is very disparaging. They also worry about writing a response to these papers as if they're normal philosophical views- don't want to legitimize them. But we cannot say what we want to say because it uses stronger language and then the staff would be in violation of the staff code of conduct. You can't disparage a colleague's work.
- **Vira:** every time we engage with him we legitimize his statements.
- **Breitenbach:** maybe we could ask a geneticist/scientist to contribute. We could publicize that information via the channels that we have.

Student Comment: it does not need to be a philosophical argument to refute his statements. We could publicize resources or links which show how ridiculous his statements are.

Talk of circulating the link to the 'Dignity at Work' HR forum on the university website.

<https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/policies-procedures/dignity-work-policy-2023-ed>

Dandelet: I would be happy to make a formal complaint now/today.

Student Question: if an individual makes a complaint, is the benefit that it might make the faculty take action?

- **Dandelet:** it goes to some university level body, not the faculty specifically.
- But yes, it would action something.

Student Question: there are many concerns about Cofnas' hiring; will the university/faculty begin an inquiry into these concerns?

- **Breitenbach:** some of this has been done; there has been a change of procedure.

Student Comment: someone's ability to be an educator needs to be a factor which is greatly considered in that person's hiring. Especially due to the intimate nature of education here. These people are educators and not just researchers.

- **Breitenbach and Vira and Dandelet:** completely agree; this university is centrally about education.

Student Question: what happens when these types of things are not so explicitly conveyed on social media?

- **Breitenbach:** we'd have to find a fault in the university's current policy. "There is no evidence for me that the policy isn't strict enough" "The discussion was had at the faculty level- I suppose, yeah, that is as far as it went"

Student Question: are there any plans for repercussions for the people who were responsible for hiring Cofnas? What is the reasoning process behind the people who allowed this?

- **Dandelet:** a change of procedure is the best way forward because the people who hired him weren't technically negligent relative to the procedure they were given; the people tasked with hiring couldn't have possibly read everything related to every single candidate. People involved didn't display special negligence. "These people did not do a Google search". "Had they become aware of that article and the ensuing criticism, this person would not have made the shortlist"
- **Basically expressed:** it's down to the procedure not to the people.

Student Question: the people who hired him- are you sure they didn't know- or is it that they are saying they didn't know?

Student Comment: on his CV, prior to his employment, there is an article called 'philosophy is being hijacked by woke twitter mobs' 'academics are trying to get my paper retracted and they haven't even read it' and more. These things are there, **actually on his CV.**

Student Suggestion: the faculty can do more in corresponding with marginalized students; the way to do this might be for staff members with actual experience of the issues to engage with students about this. e.g. staff members of ethnic minority. Need more student facing in general.

Stopped Scribing: 18:25