

# Equality, diversity, and the retirement age

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THE Personnel Committee of the University has recommended to the University that, instead of totally abolishing the retirement age, it should adopt an Employer Justified Retirement Age (EJRA). I disagree with this recommendation, and I believe that it contains many questionable elements. But in this note I shall concentrate on one specific reason, given by the Personnel Committee, for adopting an EJRA. It is the following reason:

*promoting equality and diversity, noting that the equality impact of abolishing the DRA [Default Retirement Age] would likely be to maintain the current situation in which the proportion of older academics and senior academic-related staff who are male and white is greater than amongst newer recruits, and to maintain the current situation in which the academic workforce is disproportionately older.<sup>1</sup>*

Thus one of the reasons for adopting the EJRA is, according to the Personnel Committee, to promote equality and diversity. According to this, not having any retirement age goes against equality and diversity because it will perpetuate a higher proportion of old white male staff over other groups.

This strikes me as a bad reason for adopting an EJRA, for equality and diversity are not academic values, and the promotion of equality and diversity is not an academic goal. Since the University is an academic institution, it should be guided primarily by academic values and goals.

Being guided primarily by academic values and goals is not the same as being guided uniquely by academic values and goals. Given that the University is inserted in the wider society, and that its activities, even its academic activities, have non-academic consequences, not all of the University's actions should be guided uniquely by academic values and goals. Nevertheless, the decision concerning the EJRA is one that should be guided principally by academic values and goals. For it is a decision that will have mainly academic consequences. In particular, adopting an EJRA will give an incentive to academics approaching the retirement age to leave the University and go to the USA, where there is no retirement age, rather than having to face the uncertainty of whether the University will want them to stay after 67. Indeed, if the University opts for an EJRA, it is easy to imagine American universities deliberately targeting Oxford academics within the age range of 60-67. No doubt many of our academics within that age range (both white male ones and otherwise) are extremely valuable, and it will be detrimental to the University's fundamental goal of academic excellence to lose them.

Of course not every valuable academic within the age range of 60-67 will decide to go to the USA. Some might simply want to retire at 67, some may be very confident that they will be allowed to stay after 67, and some might risk being forced to retire at 67 rather than having to live and work in the USA. But there will be a group of valuable academics who will feel tempted by the greater security about retirement offered by USA universities.

Thus not totally abolishing the retirement age will undermine our declared ambition of competing successfully with the top USA universities. In this connection, it should be noted that having a retirement age makes Oxford less

attractive than the top USA universities even to young researchers who are looking for a first job. For the USA package contains something our package does not contain, namely the possibility of choosing when to retire. One might think that this is not an important consideration for a young researcher at the beginning of their career. But although it might not be the primary consideration on which one decides what job to take, it is certainly one of the many factors that people have to factor in when making such decisions.

Furthermore, there is no reason why a university should be diverse in the sense of representing in its academic workforce different sex and race groups. The point of a university is not to promote diversity, and thus it should be clear that having a diverse workforce is not what improves or enhances the contribution to society or humanity at large that universities are supposed to make. No one in his sane mind would argue that a football team should promote diversity by choosing players from different races. It is clear that that would be a silly thing to do, since the point of a football team is to beat other teams, and being racially diverse (or racially homogeneous for that matter) does not increase the chances of beating other teams. This does not mean that universities are exactly like football teams, of course, since the point of a university is not to compete with, and "beat", other universities. But the point of the analogy is that in the same way in which a football team would not increase the chances of achieving its goals of succeeding at competition because of implementing a policy aimed at ensuring a racially diverse team, a university would not increase the chances of achieving its goals of academic excellence because of implementing a similar policy aimed at ensuring a racially and sexually diverse academic workforce. It should be an obvious point that what a university should do is to implement recruitment and retirement policies designed to have an excellent academic workforce, whether such policies make its academic workforce sexually and racially diverse or not. Therefore the decision concerning academic retirement age should not be based, not even partially, on a desire to promote equality and diversity.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the promotion of equality and diversity should not be used as reasons to adopt an EJRA. The reason for an EJRA based on promotion of equality and diversity is one more example of the introduction of non-academic concerns in what should be decided on purely academic grounds.

<sup>1</sup> Consultation on maintaining an Employer Justified Age Retirement on the abolition of the Default Retirement Age. Communication from the Personnel Committee, found at [http://www.ox.ac.uk/staff/staff\\_communications/update\\_on\\_major\\_issues/](http://www.ox.ac.uk/staff/staff_communications/update_on_major_issues/)

<sup>2</sup> But even if promoting equality and diversity has no place in deciding whether to abolish the retirement age, does it not follow from what I am arguing that, since by abolishing the retirement age the University would miss the recruitment of excellent young academics, the retirement age should not be abolished and, instead, an EJRA or something like it should be adopted? It does not. For there is no guarantee that in all cases the newly recruited academics will be better than the ones who have retired. Furthermore, abolishing the retirement age will at most slow down the recruitment of young academic for a few years, since what is relevant to the availability of posts is the proportion of academics retiring every year and not the age at which they retire (this last point is nicely argued for in a forthcoming piece by Brian Leftow).