

## Transcript

00:00:01 Artem

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening and welcome to EDI Dialogues at UCL.

Our topic of the day is affirmative action, and I would like to welcome Amin Afrouzi, who is a research fellow at Yale.

00:00:14 Amin

Thank you. Thanks for having me. It's a delight to be here at UCL.

00:00:19 Artem

I'm also here with two more of my colleagues. My name is Artem Massey and I'm a first-year philosophy student.

00:00:24 Simona

My name is Simona Aimar and I am the vice Dean of EDI for Arts and Humanities here at UCL.

00:00:32 Kirstine

And my name is Kirstine La Cour, I'm a PhD student in philosophy also here at UCL.

Now, a typical understanding of affirmative action in admissions would have it that we should use an awareness of characteristics like race or gender to moderate our initial selection from criteria that are blind to such characteristics. I mean, you've argued that we should understand the role of affirmative action quite differently.

Could you just briefly explain your position, perhaps illustrating with an example. How would your understanding of affirmative action play out, for example for an admissions officer here at a university like UCL.

00:01:10 Amin

Sure. Thank you so much for that question. Suppose you are trying to admit 20 students into UCL Master's for philosophy and when you select the 20%, you constantly see that certain minority groups are under-represented in the admitted pool, even though you get a fully representational candidate sort of pool. And now historically people thought that the way to combat that is to use different criteria for admission, such that this new criteria takes into account minority status and gives certain positive boost to people of minority backgrounds who are underrepresented in the accepted pool of candidates, and so then they could get an output that evenly distributed and proportionate to the candidate pool.

And I argue that instead we should think of the criteria still the same but that we should introduce a certain amount of error into the selection process such that we still get a representative number of candidates who are admitted.

Suppose out of the 20 candidates that you have, if you constantly get 12 non-minority students and eight minority students, what I'm trying to propose is that instead of changing the criteria, you still admit on the same criteria that's race or gender neutral, for example, but that you don't admit two of the candidates from the non-minority students who would have otherwise gotten admitted and instead of them, you admit two minority students who would have not otherwise gotten admitted. And so you will end up with 10 minority students and 10 non-minority students.

00:03:29 Kirstine

And could tell us a little bit about what led you to argue for this position. How did you come to this view?

00:03:37 Amin

So my interest was piqued when I realized that much of the time in the current affirmative action discourse, regardless of how you come to the debate, the numbers are attributed to underperformance of minority candidates so that when we got consistently eight minority candidates and twelve non-minority candidates, the idea is always that to explain this disparity in terms of minority candidates performing better than minority candidates, and I think that that's not always at least true. Because sometimes you can have minority candidates performing just as well on the neutral criteria, but still you end up with a disproportionate outcome.

And I tried to solve the puzzle of how that may be and my way of explaining that disparity is that it is possible that even when minority candidates are performing just as well, they are disproportionately negatively affected by implementation error. And to just illustrate that, we have a lot of empirical studies that show, for example, that it is likely for an admissions officer to more often select a candidate who shouldn't have been selected when they are non-minority than when they are minority, or conversely, they are more likely to not admit a candidate who should have been admitted when they are minority rather than non-minority.

And then this disparity in how those errors play out means that, for example, out of the 20 people who you selected, say, four shouldn't have been selected; out of those four, three candidates who shouldn't have been selected but did were non-minority candidates and instead of those four people, the four people who should have been selected, out of those, it turns out to be that you have three minority candidates. And so the error here, this is a human error basically or implementational error. It's not about the criteria being biased towards minority candidates, but in implementation, and much of this is implicit bias or, you know, just user error, human error and these tend to then disproportionately negatively affect minority candidates, and you will still get a disproportionately under-represented selected group even though all the candidates are performing equally well.

00:06:56 Artem

Nonetheless, this seems to give some type of concern where if we're not admitting the best candidates for certain positions, for example, we use medical students, if we're not admitting the best medical students, then this might lead to them not becoming the best doctors, right. So this is kind of a worry of mine because this is unfair to some candidates. How do you respond to that?

00:07:25 Amin

That's a good question. And I think many people share that anxiety.

First to the idea that the society has to bear the costs of this sort of intervention. So as you said, people may be worried that we don't have the best doctors then as a result in the society if we're not admitting the top candidates for medical school. There the problem is that we think that the people that we are admitting by error are going to be not necessarily qualified, but I think that's a mistake because first of all the margin of difference between these candidates are very low. Again go back to the example of 20 people that you are trying to admit. It is not the case that the person who ends up on this list at the place of 21 or 22 won't make a good doctor. They are probably as qualified or as capable to make good doctors if they were given the chance, and sometimes even it turns out that they are not just equally qualified, that they may be better qualified because when we try to select candidates, we are guessing a lot of times. And it may turn out that a candidate that doesn't look so good on the paper might actually outperform other of their peers, and vice versa. A candidate that looks really good on paper might not perform as well.

But even if, you know, we're selecting really based on capability and skill, the difference between the person who ranks 20 and 21 is so small that the output of this sort of intervention won't be actually in any sort of real difference in what quality doctors we'll get.

And to the point that it's unfair to the best performing candidates, similar sort of analysis applies because given that the criteria on the paper that we select based on don't necessarily always matches up to their actual performance in the real world as doctors means that it's not necessarily the case that they, the person who ends up 20 / 21 has the sort of right to be selected.

But beyond that, the population who disproportionately benefits from the errors in the system, can be held subject to evening that benefit out.

00:10:13 Simona

Thank you Amin, I find this embracing error approach really interesting, but I have a broad picture type of question. While doing EDI work at UCL, I see that there is a split in perception. Some people think that institutions are doing all they can and beyond to be fully equitable, whereas other people feel they are never doing nearly enough. And I wonder, what's your take on this?

00:10:49 Amin

That's a really good question and it is very hard for institutions sometimes to gauge on how much they should do. And I think this ties back to Artem's question about the social anxieties about what institutions are doing right. If the society perceives certain interventions as unjustified, then the institutions have to adjust their approach and how much they can do. So really how we understand or frame affirmative action will have downstream effects on whether an intervention by an institution is justified or how much of it is justified, and I think institutions find themselves trying to balance the expectations of different sectors of the public and the expectations of how their interventions are going to be perceived, if they're going to be perceived as fair and mandatory, then they're going to do more, and if they think that their interventions are going to be criticized, then they're going to hold back.

And maybe that's one way of bringing it together because affirmative action is not simply a purely legal question. Rather, it is a social question, it's a moral question, and it's a political question, and institutions are playing only one part in this bigger dialogue.

00:12:30 Kirstine

Obviously, there's much more to discuss, and Amin, I'm sure we'll all look forward to following your ongoing work on this topic. Thank you so much for your time here today. I'm Kirstine. I'm here with Artem and Simona, and this has been UCL EDI Dialogues.