

The phrase Old Masters is sexist, authors and students are told

Students and academics are being banned from using the term "Old Masters" and "seminal" because of claims they are sexist.

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Publishers and universities are outlawing dozens of seemingly innocuous words in case they cause offence.

Banned phrases on the list, which was originally drawn up by sociologists, include Old Masters, which has been used for centuries to refer to great painters - almost all of whom were in fact male.

It is claimed that the term discriminates against women and should be replaced by "classic artists".

The list of banned words was written by the British Sociological Association, whose members include dozens of professors, lecturers and researchers.

The list of allegedly racist words includes immigrants, developing nations and black, while so-called "disablist" terms include patient, the elderly and special needs.

It comes after one council outlawed the allegedly sexist phrase "man on the street", and another banned staff from saying "brainstorm" in case it offended people with epilepsy.

However the list of "sensitive" language is said by critics to amount to unwarranted censorship and wrongly assume that people are offended by words that have been in use for years.

Prof Frank Furedi, a sociologist at the University of Kent, said he was shocked when he saw the extent of the list and how readily academics had accepted it.

"I was genuinely taken aback when I discovered that the term 'Chinese Whisper' was offensive because of its apparently racist connotations. I was moved to despair when I found out that one of my favourite words, 'civilised', ought not be used by a culturally sensitive author because of its alleged racist implications."

Prof Furedi said that censorship is about the "policing of moral behaviour" by an army of campaign groups, teachers and media organisations who are on a "crusade" to ban certain words and promote their own politically correct alternatives.

He said people should see the efforts to ban certain words as the "coercive regulation" of everyday language and the "closing down of discussions" rather than positive attempts to protect vulnerable groups from offence.

The list of banned words is now sent out to prospective authors by Policy Press, a publisher of social science books and journals based at the University of Bristol, but is also used in many academic institutions.

The University of Bristol's School for Policy Studies recommends the guidelines to help students "challenge heterosexist assumptions", and they are included in a "toolkit" to combat institutional racism included on the University of Leeds' website.

King's College London says they "may provide a good starting point" and Liverpool John Moores University provides a link to them in its students' guide. The Open University said they are an "appropriate source of reference and advice" for students.

Napier University in Edinburgh says the list is "well worth looking at" while the University of East London advises its students they should "attempt to incorporate" it.

Even a secondary school in Norwich includes a link to the list on its website, with the statement: "Students may care to consider how far we inadvertently reproduce inaccurate sexist assumptions in the language we use, both written and spoken."

The list of racist terms features black, which "can be used in a racist sense" and should be changed to "black peoples" or "black communities".

Immigrants is said to have "racist overtones" because of its association with "immigration legislation", while developing nations - intended as a more sensitive replacement for Third World - is "prejudicial" because it implies a comparison with developed countries.

Although not included on the Policy Press list, the BSA warns authors against using civilisation because of its "racist overtones that derive from a colonialist perception of the world".

Among the "sexist" terms to be avoided are "seminal" and "disseminate" because they are derived from the word semen and supposedly imply a male-dominated view of the world.

Authors are also told to "avoid using medical labels" when writing about disabled people as this "may promote a view of them as patients".

In addition, the list says "special needs" should be changed to "additional needs", "patient" to "person" and "the elderly" to "older people".

"Able-bodied person" should be replaced with "non-disabled person", it is claimed.

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