



Higher education sector statement on promoting academic freedom and free speech

Academic freedom and freedom of speech sit at the heart of the UK's higher education sector. They are rightly championed for the role they play in driving forward research and innovation, as well as providing students with the opportunity to think critically and engage with different perspectives.

Without them, universities would not be able to fulfil one of their most essential aims: the advancement of understanding and pursuit of truth.

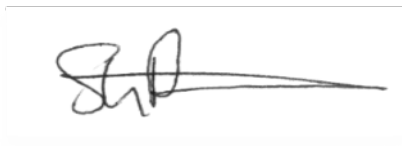
That is why universities take their responsibility to protect and promote both free speech and academic freedom seriously, and to ensure that these concepts are understood by the whole university community, including their international partnerships. Students and staff should not feel the need to self-censor and universities work hard to create a culture of intellectual enquiry. This means that students and staff will sometimes be exposed to views they find disagreeable, or even offensive, but it is crucial that a broad range of different voices can be heard, challenged, and debated, including the right to peaceful protest.

Universities must also invest in good relations between different groups on campus, creating a climate in which all students and staff can discuss a range of topics – including the complex and controversial – in the knowledge that they will be listened to and treated with mutual dignity, tolerance, and civility. Everyone, including those from marginalised groups,

should be able to speak up without fear of harassment or discrimination – which should never be tolerated or excused.

Getting this balance right is not always straightforward and relies on the close cooperation of all members of the university community, including in partnership with students' unions. Working together, we can continue to oppose harassment and discrimination, while also remaining steadfast in our commitment to the pursuit of truth and free exchange of ideas. It is only through fostering an honest dialogue and healthy debate that we advance understanding.

Signed by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SB', followed by a long horizontal stroke.

Steve Bright

Director of HE Operations

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What do 'freedom of speech' and 'academic freedom' mean?

While they are often used interchangeably, freedom of speech and academic freedom are different terms that relate to each other.

There are several different definitions for each concept, but broadly speaking:

Freedom of speech means everyone has the right to express lawful views and opinions freely, in speech or in writing, without interference.

Academic freedom means protecting the intellectual independence of academics to question and test received views and wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in danger of losing their jobs or privileges.