



Oxford University Chancellorship: your position regarding free speech at UK universities

Name of candidate: Maxim Parr-Reid

We are writing to all candidates for the Chancellorship of Oxford University, to ask them about their views and position on free speech and academic freedom. Our questions are set out below.

For ease of comparison, we invite candidates to type their answers below each of our questions.

We ask for your responses by the end of Wednesday 2nd October. Please reply to info@affs.uk.

QUESTIONS TO ALL CANDIDATES

1. **Do you think there is currently a free speech and/or academic freedom problem at UK universities?** Please give reasons for your answer, if you wish.

Yes. There shouldn't be an argument for banning the Oxford Union from freshers' fairs for hosting Kathleen Stock. I voted to uphold the invite to Trump era figure Steve Bannon because people like that ought to be challenged at the Union and the university should welcome this. Part of the search for objective true and universal knowledge is engaging with viewpoints you vociferously oppose. It's education 101.

2.

- a. **If an active politician (e.g. a Member of the House of Lords), did you support or oppose the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill (now Act) ("HEFSA") (or significant aspects of it) during its passage through Parliament?** Please provide any further information you consider relevant to your stance.

I'm not an active politician.

- b. **Do you consider that the suspension of the coming into effects of the main provisions of HEFSA pending "review and possible repeal" by the new Labour Government in July 2024 was appropriate?** Please give your reasons for your answer, if you wish.

Governments are welcome to review legislation. However, the law has only recently passed and surely these issues should and could have been addressed during its passing. Obviously there are other protections, such as strengthened actions against use of NDAs (according to the government website). Still, we need certainty about free speech on our university campuses.

3. Please give examples of how you have actively supported free speech (including, but not limited to) in the Higher Education sector) and/or academic freedom in your public life.

I have actively supported free speech as a member of various free speech supporting organisations such as the Facebook page Open Oxford before I even began studying at the university. I also supported free speech by opposing attempts to ban slates at the Oxford Union and by voting to uphold the 2018 invite to Steve Bannon to speak at the society that year.

4. In your public life, have you done anything which could be construed (or was considered by some to be) actively hostile to free speech and/or academic freedom? For instance, have you ever made severe personal attacks on someone you disagreed with in relation to a matter of lawful public debate, or instigated or joined in an online pile-on against them? If you have, please give details and explain the reasons for your actions.

I don't recall doing anything actively hostile to free speech or academic freedom. I believe I have been consistent on this issue for many years now. I have worked hard to engage in constructive debate in a range of different fora.

5. If someone is expressing views which are unpopular or offensive to some, but which were not illegal, would you consider they should be free to hold and express them? Please give reasons for your views, including any qualifications, if you wish.

I believe that if someone is expressing unpopular or offensive (to some) views, they should be free to hold and express them. Partly because you can't exactly police what views people hold.

I'm not a free speech absolutist, however, and that which is illegal, for example hate speech which is prohibited by law, shouldn't be openly expressed on university campuses.

6. Do you think that institutional neutrality at UK universities is necessary for the protection of free speech and/or academic freedom, including in the review, approval of and/or support for research plans, topics, applications and/or projects

and the grant or allocation of research funding? We would be interested to hear your reasoning.

I believe universities should be as neutral as possible, partly because they, as I understand it, received taxpayers' money. I would apply a similar standard to universities as we expect from the BBC or similar licence-focused broadcast media. These are effectively public institutions after all, particularly with a large portion of tuition fee income coming from the taxpayer.

7. **Do you think that the promotion and enforcement of programmes and policies relating to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion ("EDI") can give rise to any free speech/academic freedom issues?** We would be interested in hearing your views either way.

It depends on the policy. I don't believe that, in general, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion gives rise to any free speech/academic freedom issues. The inclusion of one should not automatically mean the exclusion of another.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion can boost freedom of speech by giving historically underrepresented groups a seat at the table.

If exposure to these diverse perspectives leads people to reflect on their own beliefs and preconceived ideas, then that is no bad thing.

8. **Do you consider that there are any free speech implications in asking for evidence of support for EDI programmes or campaigns (such as Stonewall or Athena Swan) in job application and promotion processes, and in the review, approval of and/or support for research plans, topics, applications and/or projects and the grant or allocation of research funding?** We would be interested in hearing your views either way.

Allyship is important, but it shouldn't be mandatory for everyone, if it is to be seen as legitimate and productive. People are free to not support EDI policies if they have objections to these.

I think there's a distinction to be drawn between private and public funding. I don't believe taxpayer funding should be reliant on support for EDI programmes. However, I recognise private benefactors and donors may want to support projects that embrace EDI. Much like ESG investing, this is something those who want private funding should consider.

9. **Do you think that it is necessary for a healthy free speech environment that a university should have a senior, experienced, non-conflicted officer responsible for**

promoting free speech and academic freedom (including in the review, approval of and/or support for research plans, topics, applications and/or projects and the grant or allocation of research funding) and developing and enforcing policies and requirements for achieving this? We would be interested in hearing your views either way.

I think universities should be left to self-regulate and any intervention should be considered as a last resort. Institutions like the Oxford Union value their independence from the university and I don't believe a senior, experienced non-conflicted officer should be there to police them.

A healthy free speech environment should be something that can develop organically.

10. Do you think it is necessary and/or appropriate to require students and/or staff (whether in the context of matriculation in the case of students, appointment and/or promotion in the case of staff or otherwise) to be required and/or invited to undergo "training" on contested subjects such as gender ideology and/or aspects of Critical Race Theory? In relation to such "training":

- a. Should the contents of the "training" (including questions asked of participants) be publicly available?

I don't think it should be required - it should be invited. Any hate speech that breaches the law should be dealt with using existing measures. I don't believe compelling people to attend the "training" alluded to here is helpful.

I believe freedom of speech means we can have meaningful engagement and debates and learn about different people's experiences, without forcing people to do things.

The contents of the training like the contents of a university curriculum should be publicly available, especially if taxpayer money is used to fund the provision of such courses and the pay of those delivering them

- b. Should students and/or staff be:
 - i. be required to "pass" such training? and/or
 - ii. entitled to decline to participate in such training?
 - iii. be discriminated against and/or penalised for failing to "pass" or "participate"?
 - iv. if so, how?

We would be interested in your views either way.

Nobody should be 'required' to attend the training and therefore shouldn't be required to 'pass' it.

11. Will you actively advocate for and support free speech protection and academic freedom, within the limits of the role of Chancellor of Oxford University? Will you view such support as a material requirement for the appointment of senior officers to the University? Please give any information that you think is relevant to share.

I will actively advocate for and support free speech in the same way I always have. This is not pandering or political posturing for the purpose of point-scoring. People know my record if they've read my responses here. Oxford has long had challenging debates and has a variety of fora for continuing to have these. As a life member of the Oxford Union, I hope this continues.

We welcome any other thoughts you may have on free speech at our universities, and at Oxford in particular. Please add them below.

Alumni for Free Speech

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