



Freedom of Speech

1 Do you think there is currently a free speech and/or academic freedom problem at UK universities?

Freedom of speech is a cornerstone of academic life and essential to the mission of universities as spaces for learning, inquiry, and the advancement of knowledge. A university is a place where diverse ideas, perspectives, and arguments can be openly explored and debated—even when they are controversial or against orthodoxy.

Isaiah Berlin's book 'Against the Current' is one of my favourites. It articulates why it is essential to argue against dominant ideas.

Protecting freedom of speech encourages intellectual risk-taking, critical thinking and innovation. Without the ability to question prevailing norms or challenge established beliefs, progress is stifled. Universities must remain places where such ideas can be voiced and examined.

In the UK today, it is often the political right that are most articulate about the importance of freedom of speech. However, there is a long-standing tradition of defence of freedom of speech on the left, including John Stuart Mill, Noam Chomsky, George Orwell, Rosa Luxemburg and John Mortimer.

We must all recollect that censorship rarely stays confined to one's political enemies. For example, powers used to silence the far-right today may be used tomorrow against environmentalists or anti-war activists. Freedom of speech is not just a protection for the powerful — it is a shield for the powerless.

Let us now look at two case studies. In both, there is a large body of reliable material available because of subsequent Employment Tribunals or independent Reports.

1. Prof Jo Phoenix, a criminologist at the Open University, held gender-critical views — specifically, that sex is biological and cannot be changed. After expressing these views, particularly in relation to prison policy and academic freedom, Prof Phoenix was subjected to a campaign of vilification by colleagues, including having events disrupted and experiencing a hostile work environment. In 2024, an Employment Tribunal ruled comprehensively in her favour, finding that the Open University failed to protect her freedom of expression and allowed a culture of intimidation to develop. The judgment is available [here](#). The Open University subsequently commissioned the Dandridge Report [here](#).

Prof Phoenix and her opponents both had a right to hold and express their views. However, any legitimate criticism or challenging of Prof Phoenix's views quickly descended into a systematic campaign of mobbing, discrimination and harassment by her opponents that was contrary to Employment Law. She convincingly won most points in her case.

I pick out two points in the Dandridge Report from which Cambridge University could usefully learn.

The first is “that disagreements should be effectively managed at an early stage to prevent them from escalating and turning into unacceptable behaviour which then becomes far harder to deal with.”

The second is that “the [Open University's] bullying and harassment policy and code do include examples of what amounts to bullying and harassment, but they are quite generic and there are no detailed, worked-up examples of what the definitions might look like in practice”.

2. Prof David Miller, a sociologist at Bristol University, was dismissed in 2021 after making statements about Zionism and Israel. Miller had claimed that Zionism was a racist ideology and accused Jewish student groups of being part of a “Zionist lobby”. This led to complaints of anti-semitism from students and community organisations. Miller argued that his statements were part of legitimate academic critique of Israel

and Zionism, protected under freedom of speech and academic freedom.

An Employment Tribunal ruled that Miller had been unfairly and wrongfully dismissed by the University of Bristol, and that his anti-Zionist beliefs qualified as a philosophical belief protected under the UK Equality Act (2010). The tribunal found that the university had acted with direct discrimination in dismissing him due to those beliefs. The judgment is available [here](#).

In both cases, the Employment Tribunal seems to me to have made the correct decision. It is reassuring that, in both cases, the Tribunals provided a defence of free speech, laying stress on the obligation of employers to ensure that staff can feel confident in expressing their views. This is true whether or not one agrees with the views of Prof Phoenix or Prof Miller.

2 How overriding do you think protections for free speech should be? Where do you think lines between free speech and other concerns and agendas should be drawn?

Protections for free speech should be strong and foundational, particularly in democratic and academic contexts. Free expression is not just one value among many; it is the precondition for meaningful participation, social progress and the ability to challenge orthodoxies.

Like any right, it exists in a social context, and must be balanced with other core values — such as protection from harm, dignity and equal access to public life. For instance, speech that incites violence, harasses individuals, or intentionally spreads harmful misinformation (e.g., Holocaust denial) can reasonably be subject to limits.

In universities, the line should be drawn to protect the conditions for open debate and learning. That means rejecting censorship on the basis of ideological discomfort — but also ensuring that marginalised students aren't silenced or excluded through hate speech or institutional bias.

It's not about creating "safe spaces" free from disagreement, but about ensuring that all voices can be heard — not just the loudest or most privileged.

3 How do you think Cambridge performs? Where (if anywhere) did you stand as regards the 2023 Helen Joyce affair at Caius College: did you state any view or take any actions?

There are very serious problems in Cambridge University.

For example, young scholars often find grant applications can be blocked or hindered by Heads of Department, compromising the principles of academic freedom that we hold so dear. The motivation here is very often academic jealousy or the desire to assert or gain control over grants. Sometimes, Heads of Department will refuse to permit grants to go forward unless changes are made to the proposal, including their names added as co-investigators. This is a repeated claim by young researchers, uninvestigated by the University.

Human Resources (HR) departments and the central administration wield considerable power. Academics critical of the direction of the university can often face retaliation, with grants blocked or promotion denied.

A shocking example is provided by the events described [here](#). The University commissioned an independent report by a barrister into bullying events at its Institute of Astronomy. Several staff members pulled out of providing testimony to the barrister over “fears they would face retaliation” (a direct quote from the barrister’s report). In other words, staff feared to say what had happened to them, lest HR or central administration retaliate.

It strikes at the very heart of a university if academics are frightened of speaking up because of retaliation.

There are also many YouTube videos on the Cambridge University channel on which comments are disabled and it’s not possible to downvote the video, it’s only possible to upvote. This is a clear infringement of free speech. There is an example at this [link](#). It’s especially concerning, as the subject of the video is precisely how we treat one another with courtesy and professionalism, even while robustly challenging each other’s views and opinions. Yet, comments are censored.

The Helen Joyce affair took place in Gonville and Caius College. I am not a member of the College and I did not participate in the matter. In my view, the Master of the College (Pippa Rogerson) exceeded her

authority in trying to ban the meeting. The Master has now been replaced.

4. HEFSA:

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?

I am 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?

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 received Royal Assent on 11 May 2023. The Act codifies duties for universities and students' unions to promote freedom of speech and established a complaints system overseen by the Office for Students. It is true that the more contentious aspects (the statutory tort allowing individuals to sue institutions for speech-related losses) have been delayed.

As noted already, there is substantial protection in employment law for employees who have been mistreated because of failure to protect their rights to freedom of speech and expression.

The statutory tort would have given valuable additional protections to those who are not University employees, such as students or visiting speakers.

5. 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.

Violations of free speech are intertwined with bullying and employment law. I have been extremely active in this area, setting up [the 21 Group](#).

The 21Group is a UK-wide campaign and support network addressing bullying, harassment and abuse in higher education. It aims to empower victims, raise awareness and push for independent investigations—calling for systemic change in how higher education handles bullying and harassment.

The 21 Group has helped 100s of victims of bullying and harassment in UK academia. This includes many individuals who were and are facing victimisation through expression of protected beliefs. This is unfortunately common in UK higher education. (The details of cases handled by the 21 Group are of course confidential).

The 21 Group publicly supported Prof Phoenix on Twitter/X in her Employment Tribunal case. It recognised this as a case of bullying and harassment.

6 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?

No, I have not done anything hostile to free speech.

On the contrary, I have taken a very public and proactive stand against bullying and harassment (including on-line bullying or pile-ons) via the 21 Group. Bullying is often driven by opposition to protected beliefs or characteristics.

7 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.

Yes — if someone's views are unpopular or offensive to some but not illegal, they should be free to express them. History shows that many ideas once considered offensive, including calls for civil rights, feminism, anti-colonialism, or LGBTQ+ equality, were initially condemned or silenced. Protecting the right to express dissenting views is crucial for any society that hopes to evolve.

That said, free speech is not freedom from criticism. Others also have the right to respond, challenge or protest against such speech, provided it is done peacefully and lawfully.

8 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?

How far should institutional neutrality be taken? Should it apply to the public comments of university officials?

Institutional neutrality at UK universities is important for the protection of free speech and academic freedom — particularly in the review, approval and support of research plans, topics and funding decisions.

When a university, as an institution, takes a public stance on politically or socially contested issues, it risks implicitly pressuring staff and students to conform to those views. This can create adverse effects: researchers may self-censor, avoid controversial topics or feel that their work must align with institutional positions to receive funding or career advancement. That undermines the university's core mission: to be a space for open inquiry and the testing of ideas, not the promotion of orthodoxy.

This is particularly acute in research. Decisions about which topics are "appropriate," "ethical," or even "impactful" can be shaped by institutional ideology, potentially silencing legitimate lines of inquiry. Neutrality helps ensure that research proposals are judged on scholarly merit, not political acceptability.

There are many examples of the deleterious effects of Imposing an ideology on research, such as the Deutsche Physik in the German universities of the 1930s or Lysenkoism in the Soviet universities of the 1960s.

In fact, as Germany and the Soviet Union found, this is one of the quickest and most efficient ways to destroy your universities!

9 What do you think of the recent fines by the OfS on the University of Sussex? Were they appropriate? What do you think their implications are for Cambridge?

The Office for Students (OfS) imposed a record £585,000 fine on the University of Sussex in March 2025. The OfS concluded that the university's 2018 trans & non-binary equality policy — prohibiting “transphobic propaganda”—had an unreasonable effect on lawful expression, notably impacting Prof Kathleen Stock and possibly others.

In my view, the campaign against Prof Stock crossed a clear line. It went well beyond the bounds of legitimate protest and broke the law. For instance, some students gathered outside her home, and the

protests—combined with sustained online harassment—raised serious concerns for her safety. Prof Stock was advised to install CCTV and hire private security. This constitutes an example of harassment. Prof Stock would have been justified in bringing a case against the University of Sussex in the Employment Tribunals. It is also likely that Health and Safety legislation was breached, as the University had a duty of care to Prof Stock as an employer.

Accordingly, the size of the fine is warranted.

However, to avoid the appearance of inconsistency, the OfS now needs to deal at least as stringently with Universities who repeatedly fail to act to prevent bullying or sexual harassment and misconduct or racial discrimination. Those fines are puny in comparison.

To be clear, the OfS needs to be firm about free speech . . . and about a whole range of other matters, too.

10 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?

In some cases, EDI initiatives are interpreted or applied in ways that prioritise the avoidance of discomfort over the robust exchange of ideas. This can lead to concerns about institutional overreach — for example, investigating or disciplining staff for expressing legitimate, if provocative, academic views.

If "inclusion" is defined too narrowly — as protecting students or staff from ever being exposed to ideas they find offensive — it risks undermining open inquiry, which often involves intellectual challenge, disagreement and critical scrutiny.

The case of Prof Steven Greer at Bristol University falls into this category.

Any complaint needs to be investigated. We have learnt this from the Jimmy Savile affair or the grooming gangs, where complainants were initially ignored. So, once Bristol University received a formal complaint from Bristol Islamic Society (BRISOC) about Prof Greer, it was obliged to investigate.

The scale of the investigation — namely, the hiring of an external barrister — seems disproportionate to the evidence provided by BRISOC. Also disturbing is that BRISOC initiated a bullying campaign against Prof Greer on social media while the investigation was in progress. This led to Prof Greer being the target of abuse.

There is a summary of the barrister's report [here](#). Without further details, it is hard to be sure but it looks as though the complaint was mishandled by Bristol University HR, as Prof Greer alleges [here](#).

11 Do you consider that there are any free speech implications in asking for evidence of support for “EDI” 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?

Athena SWAN is administered by a company called AdvanceHE, which is partly owned by UniversitiesUK. AdvanceHE operates as a service provider to universities, offering products such as high-cost training programmes. In my view, the relationship between AdvanceHE, UniversitiesUK and the Athena SWAN framework requires much greater transparency.

(In dealing with a case of misogynistic bullying at Cambridge University, I contacted Athena SWAN. They were not interested in offering practical help. They want to sell services to the university to make money for the company. I do not have a high opinion of the organisation).

I am not aware of any UK university that has any requirement of support for Stonewall or Athena SWAN in job applications or promotion. It would be contrary to employment law.

It's true that job and grant applications increasingly ask for evidence of outreach or public engagement. This reflects the growing recognition that universities are not only hubs of research and teaching but also public institutions with responsibilities to wider society. Outreach demonstrates a candidate's ability to communicate complex ideas in accessible ways—an increasingly valued skill, particularly for showing research impact. Candidates with outreach experience often contribute to widening participation through work with schools, or under-represented or disadvantaged groups, or local organisations. In my subject of astronomy, outreach or engagement with popular or amateur astronomy societies is viewed positively in job applications.

12 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 (and developing and enforcing policies and requirements for achieving this?

Appointing a senior, experienced and independent officer responsible for promoting free speech and academic freedom is a vital step.

As part of my manifesto, I have called for the appointment of a University Ombudsman [here](#). I have urged my fellow Chancellorship candidates to support this proposal and to pledge proper funding for the Ombudsman's office.

The Ombudsman's role must be powerful, not tokenistic. It must have clear authority and independence from other University officers.

If it's just a symbolic appointment, it won't change institutional behaviour or protect free speech or prevent bullying and harassment.

13 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 subjects such as gender ideology and/or aspects of Critical Race Theory?

I am not aware of any UK university that has training in gender ideology or critical race theory as a requirement for promotion. It would be contrary to employment law.

Academic appointments and promotions should always be based on quality of scholarly activity, such as teaching, research and mentoring.

14 Will you actively advocate for and support free speech protection and academic freedom, within the limits of the role of Chancellor of Cambridge University? Will you view such support as a material requirement for the appointment of senior officers to the University?

I will champion the protection of free speech and academic freedom throughout my tenure as Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. These principles are not optional add-ons; they are the lifeblood of a great university. Cambridge must remain a place where ideas can be explored rigorously and challenged openly.

I consider a proven commitment to free speech and academic freedom as a core requirement for all senior appointments. Anything less would compromise the essence of what Cambridge stands for.

In my campaign against bullying at the 21 Group (at significant personal and professional cost), I have already shown enormous commitment to safeguarding others with protected beliefs or characteristics. No other candidate for the Chancellorship has assumed a direct and personal responsibility for this, to my knowledge.

No other candidate has so far supported my campaign for a University Ombudsman to safeguard free speech and to ensure protection against bullying or retaliation for expression of protected beliefs.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these matters publicly in the context of the Cambridge Chancellorship.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light beige background. The signature reads "Prof Wyn Evans" in a cursive, flowing script. The "P" is large and loops around the "rof". The "Wyn" is written in a simple, connected cursive. The "Evans" is also in cursive, with a long, sweeping tail on the "s".

Prof Wyn Evans