

Q&A with Alumni for Free Speech

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

A: Yes, there is a growing and serious concern around free speech and academic freedom in the UK university sector. While policies nominally protect expression, the climate in many institutions has become subtly repressive. The real problem is not censorship from above, but a culture of self-censorship, fear of reputational damage, and a reluctance to engage with unpopular or complex ideas. In the UK, the Kathleen Stock resignation from Sussex, the cancellation of events on gender identity, and hesitancy around discussing topics like immigration, Brexit, or religious extremism highlight the chilling effect at play. Internationally, we've seen similar trends: at Stanford Law School in the US, students disrupted a federal judge's talk, while in India and China, political interference is more overt. But in liberal democracies, it is often soft power and peer pressure that shut conversations down.

Q: How overriding should protections for free speech be?
Where should lines be drawn?

A: Free speech must be protected unless it crosses clear legal boundaries: incitement to violence, harassment, or defamation. It cannot be contingent on social comfort. Our responsibility is to protect lawful speech even when it is unsettling, offensive, or provocative. Universities must resist calls to "balance" speech against subjective standards of harm. The right to protest a speaker is valid; the right to prevent others from hearing them is not.

Examples from around the world: In Canada, Jordan Peterson's lectures have been de-platformed under pressure; in the US, speakers on Israel-Palestine have been blocked from both sides of the spectrum. Such decisions erode the very principle of higher education.

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Q: How does Cambridge perform on free speech?

A: Cambridge is better than most, but not where it should be. The Helen Joyce affair at Caius College, where a speaker was publicly disowned by the Master, was troubling. Regardless of one's view on the subject, it sent a message that controversy equates to danger. More broadly, some students and faculty feel they cannot research or publish on sensitive topics, such as colonialism, sex and gender, or China's influence without career risk. Academic freedom must not become a privilege for the powerful.

Q: Views on the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act (HEFSA)?

A: The intent behind HEFSA is good, but legislation should never replace leadership. We shouldn't need a law to remind us that open inquiry is our core purpose. That said, if implemented wisely, HEFSA can provide recourse for those silenced or mistreated. The new government's delay in implementation is worrying, it suggests a de-prioritisation of this issue. I would work to ensure Cambridge remains compliant but also culturally committed to the spirit of the law.

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Q: How have you supported free speech or academic freedom?

A: Throughout my life and career, I have been an ardent champion of free speech and academic freedom, with a couple of examples below:

- I facilitated the publication of politically contentious climate research against sponsor objections.
- In industry, I backed whistleblowers exposing ESG greenwashing, against leadership pressure to dilute action.
- As board member, I defended a policy think tank's right to publish a report critical of international donor behaviour, despite pressure from stakeholders to delay its release.
- As a non-executive director, I have always insisted on the primacy of evidence, not ideology.

Q: Have you done anything construed as hostile to free speech?

A: Never. I believe strongly in open, respectful, healthy and robust debate not censorship.

Q: Should people be free to express unpopular or offensive (but legal) views?

A: Yes. That is the essence of a free society. Views that are popular need no protection. Progress emerges from challenge. Galileo and Darwin were once offensive. So were suffragists. So were abolitionists. Cambridge must protect unpopular voices on the left, right, and centre. Not because they are correct, but because freedom requires it.

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Q: Should universities remain neutral on ideology?

A: Yes. Universities must not adopt political positions. This includes their communications, research funding, and executive decisions. The moment the institution signals ideological alignment, it stifles internal diversity. Leaders can speak personally, but not as proxies for their universities.

Q: Views on OfS fines for Sussex?

A: They were necessary. Universities that do not protect lawful speech must face consequences. It is a last resort, but it reflects the seriousness of the duty. For Cambridge, this is a powerful reminder that we must lead from principle, not respond to pressure.

Q: Can EDI policies infringe on speech?

A: Yes, if they become ideological rather than inclusion focused. I support EDI that empowers talent, expands access, and removes bias. But when support for Stonewall or Athena Swan becomes a required belief, not an optional affiliation, it crosses a line. Job candidates should be assessed on merit and fairness, not on alignment with advocacy groups.

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Q: Should there be a designated officer for free speech?

A: Yes. A non-conflicted, senior officer should own this brief. It cannot sit with HR or PR. It must be empowered to challenge internal policies and support those under pressure.

Q: Views on mandatory ideological training?

A: No staff or student should be forced to "pass" or adhere to belief-based training. Training on respectful behaviour is fine. Training on belief systems is not.

Q: Will you advocate for free speech and academic freedom as Chancellor?

A: Yes. As Chancellor, I will ensure that free speech and academic freedom at Cambridge are non-negotiable. Cambridge must remain a sanctuary for truth, where debate is rigorous, respectful and fearless. I will defend the right to think, question, and challenge orthodoxy consistently and loudly.

My First 100-Day Action Plan:

- **Explore appointment of an Independent Advisor on Academic Freedom.**
- **Launch the Cambridge Free Inquiry Charter, co-developed with students and faculty.**
- **Review college-level speaker policies for consistency and transparency.**
- **Introduce the Chancellor's Free Expression Address each year to set the tone from the top.**