



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

Name of candidate: Tony Booth

We are writing to all candidates for the Chancellorship of Cambridge 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 **23 June 2025**. 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.

Free speech and academic freedom depend on a lack of coercion. Coercive relationships have been part of many organisations for a long time, including universities. Authoritarian cultures, cultures of deference, always constrain freedom of expression. The 2024 survey conducted by Cambridge University revealed high rates of dissatisfaction with how bullying and harassment have been addressed. Addressing discrimination is one of the stated core values of the University. A pertinent example of persistent discrimination is that not all members of permanent staff have a vote in this election and thus are prevented from having their concerns reflected in the choice of candidate.

So, yes, there is a problem of free speech and academic freedom at Cambridge University as in many other places. I am utterly committed to supporting every member of staff, every student, in being as free in their speech and actions as is compatible with the freedom of others. I am known for seeking out dialogue with people who disagree with me on issues of importance.

- 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?**

Freedoms conflict. We have to balance the freedom to express views and actions of some, against freedom from abuse and discrimination which restrict the freedom of expression of others. That is why I support equality legislation and human rights law. This survey would seem to be a push against such protections and if this is the case, it embodies a contradiction. If freedom of speech is promoted as a value, then it should apply to all. Ensuring that it does so inevitably involves complexities of thought and action.

3. How do you think Cambridge performs as regards:

- **being a place in which controversial and/or unpopular views can be freely aired and discussed?**

I think it is similar to other rather traditional institutions. In my time as chancellor, I would hope to see a considerable development of a culture of openness and dialogue, which by its nature is non-violent, between people of differing opinions.

- **promoting the importance of free speech and academic freedom?**

I learn from colleagues within the University that there is too much encouragement towards a culture of deference in some departments and a fear of stepping out of line. Nevertheless, it is possible to pursue a very successful career at the University while challenging it, even though this is done by only a small number of staff.

- **acting to protect free speech and academic freedom?**

I think improvements can be made and I would hope to see them as I explain below.

- **enforcing its requirements for protecting free speech and academic freedom, including requirements as regards the behaviour of staff and students?**

I think more can be done to promote a deeper understanding of, and promote dialogue on, these issues.

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?

I was not part of the dialogues about Helen Joyce at the time, but I have listened to her speak. The case raises issues about both free speech and the duty of care that the College authorities owe towards their students. There is a reality in this era that institutions with a responsibility towards young people, in schools and universities have to face. Young people more readily challenge their identities as gendered and sexed people, than they did in the past. This has come as a surprise to some who think it can be resolved by appealing to simple statements of fact. I believe that the issue will resolve itself eventually led by the good sense of many of today's young people. I think many people have not caught on to the connection between feelings of gender and sex fluidity as an escape from the pressures towards hypermasculinity and femininity portrayed through pornography and extremely well, in the film series, 'Adolescence'.

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? Please provide any further information you consider relevant about your stance.

- 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.

The HEFSA has been used as a political football between two political parties. I do not trust Labour any more than the Conservatives to sensibly reduce curbs on free expression in universities since both use such legislation to try to give themselves an advantage with groups of their core voters. The barriers to free speech and expression require careful analysis and I do not think that is reflected in HEFSA and may not be ameliorated by legislation.

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.**

I could write a book about this. Speaking up myself and encouraging colleagues and students to express their opinions clearly and without fear, has been an important feature of my time in full time employment at the Open University, Canterbury Christchurch University and then an honorary visiting research fellow at Cambridge University Faculty of Education. I led a reshaping of the area of special needs education at the Open University, resisted by Faculty but embraced in very large numbers by students. I opposed discriminatory practices along with students at Canterbury, and we quickly changed University policy towards allowing civil partnerships on the University premises. This subsequently helped to expand the scope of courses in other faculties and allowed for the development of new conferences, for example, on queer studies. As I write this, I have a glimpse of how academic restrictions operate through self-censorship since I imagine you do not want to hear what I am writing about here and considered omitting mention of "queer studies". The point stands whether you want to hear it or not.

I am the main author of the "Index for Inclusion: a guide to school development led by inclusive values". This last edition has been translated into 50 languages. As part of it, I worked with others to reshape the nature of curricula - how we divide up knowledge - for schools but also for everyone. The book is based on 2000 or so challenging questions as an encouragement to thinking honestly and freely about our schools, universities, all organisations. In Germany it has been used widely in kindergartens and even in churches. The book might be seen as enabling those interested in ideas of "equality, diversity and inclusion" to put their values into action and so you might be opposed to its use. We almost certainly have different notions of what free speech means and how it is restricted, but I would be happy to be in dialogue with you.

I champion the use of the first person in reporting research as making transparent the opinions of the authors. It recognises that pronouns used in English to promote good communication. I have had many conversations with other academics on this issue, who think that hiding their opinions behind impersonal forms of speech aids objectivity. So that leaves us, as readers, with the task of sorting out the difference between "it is said" and "the authors suggest that", for example.

If you are an academic or an officer at a university or college:

- **Can you evidence your work in support of free speech at your isn?**

I think you can get the flavour of where I stand from my previous answers. The most important way to encourage free speech in our universities is through the development of cultures in which every opinion is valued, and people do not try to substitute good argument with the exertion of power, by virtue of their position in a hierarchy.

- **Have there been any controversies or other matters giving rise to free speech problems within your area of responsibility, or you institution mor widely? What steps and public positions did you take in relation to them?**

I think you get the flavour of my arguments on this.

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? If you have, please give details and explain the reasons for your actions.**

I have never done that, but it has happened to me. I was attacked professionally in the 1970s and 1980s for putting forward arguments for the widening conception of ordinary or mainstream schools to include disabled children and young people within their communities. This position seems more commonplace now – although resisted by many, nonetheless. In this earlier period, I faced hostility from some other academics, professional exclusion, and even (relatively mild) threats of violence. Conversely, when I have seen someone bullied or mistreated for expressing their opinions, I have generally stepped in to support them.

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? Please give reasons for your views, including any qualifications, if you wish.**

I think it absurd to hold people accountable for their thoughts or the committing of thought crimes. I think it is important that there are opportunities for people to publicly express their thoughts within the law. I expect everyone to take responsibility for what they say and do, and not to seek to gratuitously abuse others even when it is legal to do so.

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?

We would be interested to hear your reasoning.

Neutrality is not defined here. Universities cannot be neutral when it comes to academic excellence, or violence or international law. Nor can it be neutral in promoting research to

limit environmental catastrophes or investing in fossil fuels or the arms industry. This inevitably involves the discouragement of some research activities, involving greenwashing for example, even where funding is readily available.

Cambridge University should be more neutral in the way it supports policies of the government of the day. Its support for the UK government's wish to double the size of Cambridge, in an area with a severe water shortage, against the wishes of many citizens is too partisan.

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 case is not resolved given the challenge by the University of Sussex that the ruling is unlawful. Cases such as that concerning the free speech of Kathleen Stock need to be resolved wherever possible through sensitive dialogue since they involve balancing the rights of one individual with the duty of care that an institution has, to both staff and students.

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?** We would be interested in hearing your views either way.

I wrote about this earlier in this survey. The implementation by management by any policy can give rise to the curbing free speech if it is done in an over-authoritarian way. If equality, diversity and inclusion policies are more than rhetoric and concern the implementation of inclusive values, building an anti-discriminatory culture that is enriching for everyone then they can reduce the restriction of free speech and expression of staff and students.

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?** We would be interested in hearing your views either way.

Discussion of EDI policies is in danger of involving a rhetorical game which gets called 'a culture war' in some circles, though it has very little to do with deep culture. People have to support equalities legislation and avoid discrimination against people based on their protected characteristics under the law. But they should also go beyond the law to avoid discrimination because it is the right thing to do.

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?** We would be interested in hearing your views either way.

I think this is the job of everyone. Institutional development at the University to create a culture of free expression for all students and staff, reducing bullying across the

University, has to be a necessary step over the next few years. But without the support of senior management within the University and the Colleges it could become another exercise in paper, box-ticking, compliance.

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? In relation to such “training”:**
- a. **Should the contents of the “training” (including questions asked of participants) be publicly available?**
 - 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 penalised for failing to “pass” or “participate”?**
 - iv. **if so, how?**

We would be interested in your views either way.

Forgive me for being brief as I have been busy putting on events as part of my campaign. As a professor of education, I would be happy to advise on staff opportunities for education. I see ‘training’ as applying to horses and dogs. Education involves dialogue and respectful engagement and challenge. I think there should be educational opportunities for staff which supports their teaching and research and their reflection on important issues but does not tell them or ‘train’ them how to think.

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? Please give any information that you think is relevant to share.**

I would be one of the very few candidates who would make a difference to how freedom of speech and expression is supported within the University not just in theory but in practice. I have huge respect for the University staff and students, but I am not deferential. I would love to witness less stress, greater freedom of thought and expression across the University and its Colleges. I have had a lifetime in education that has taught me how to help it to happen.

Finally we welcome any other thoughts you may have on free speech at our universities, and at Cambridge in particular. Please do add them below.

I think I have given you a good enough sample of my way of thinking for you to draw conclusions about whether you think I support your brand of free speech. If you publicise what I have written, I hope you will represent my voice fairly by giving examples of my actual words rather than only your interpretation of them, so as not to unwittingly restrict my freedom of speech. Thank you.

Alumni for Free Speech

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