

April 2026

Dear honoured supporters

Interim update on AFFS and BFSP

Here is an interim update of some of what we have been doing in the last 6 months or so.

You will recall that our campaign has two aspects:

- Alumni for Free Speech (“AFFS”) – www.affs.uk. AFFS harnesses alumni power to persuade and where necessary pressurise universities to support and protect free speech better.
- Best Free Speech Practice (“BFSP”) – www.bfsp.uk. This is a project to identify what the requirements actually are for protecting free speech, and to develop detailed technical statements of those requirements in various contexts; and to promote them and make them available for public use. For more information see [Universities & Higher Education](#).

AFFS’s recent work and the next few months

Here is some of our main work in the last few months.

For those of you with the inclination, [more details of AFFS’ campaigning work are here](#).

- **A study demonstrating a statistically significant correlation between levels of equality, diversity and inclusion (“EDI”) spending with levels of free speech non-compliance.** This time-consuming work produced no surprises to those who care about free speech that there is close correlation. This will be evidence that a great deal more work needs doing by universities to ensure that their EDI functions operate in a way which does not suppress free speech. [Read our study here](#).
- **EDI requirements on recruitment:** Our primary focus continues to be on a further and deeper review of all UK universities’ job advertisements for free speech failures, documenting concerning EDI-related requirements within academic recruitment processes, and applying pressure where we find them. No university should require applicants to submit information on their commitment to a vague, ill-defined agenda, which is often hijacked by extreme views and opinions, when applying to jobs. The law is, fortunately, on our side: universities must remove requirements on applicants to support EDI, or face severe consequences. Where we identify unlawful or non-compliant practices,

particularly in cases of repeated violations despite our prior engagement, we are reporting universities to their regulator, the Office for Students (“OfS”).

We have reported various universities to the OfS for likely free speech compliance failures in its recruitment practices: AFFS found multiple advertisements at many universities which stated (for instance) that applicants must “demonstrate their... commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion”, and others included in sections dealing with “essential” criteria for their roles a “demonstrable commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion”. AFFS writes to them, warning that these requirements are likely serious compliance failures, and subsequently write again warning the university that, unless these requirements were removed, AFFS would report the university to the OfS.. AFFS then reports non-compliers to the OfS. In cases where universities have less serious compliance failures, but have nonetheless proved unresponsive, or have declined to change their practices, we have reported them to the OfS without recommending formal investigation.

Successes in forcing compliance: we are, however, very pleased to report that pressure from AFFS has forced a significant number of universities to take substantive positive steps to bring themselves into compliance.

We are also starting work on a parallel campaign to stop the imposition of ideological requirements in the grant and funding approval processes (yes – really!).

- **AFFS contributed to a free speech victory at SOAS:** AFFS has helped ensure that a “land acknowledgement” requirement which would have required academics participating in a conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies (“SOAS”) to make and affirm certain political statements has been removed.
- **AFFS issue a detailed critique of Advance HE’s recent guidance on free speech:** AFFS recently wrote to all universities, the Office for Students and the group Universities UK to share our [comments](#) on Advance HE’s recent Guidance *Embedding Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion*. Advance HE is an external advisory and agenda group with great influence with UK universities. While their guidance was a great improvement on their previous positions, AFFS considers that it is in many respects incorrect (and, therefore, potentially misleading) as regards the relative strength, effect and impact of the legal and regulatory requirements to protect free speech. Our comments ran to more than 40 pages and took weeks to develop, but we believe that this intervention will help to improve the performance of Advance HE as regards free speech protection over time, and ensure that its advice is not accepted uncritically by universities.

Other current work includes:

- **Campaign on Institutional Neutrality.** The principle of institutional neutrality means that a university does not take a formal position on the moral, social, and political questions of the day. Its purpose is to create an open and tolerant environment where academics are free to take positions on these questions. Institutional neutrality has been the de facto position of universities for many years, but it is a position which universities are facing

increasing demands to abandon, and failures to maintain institutional neutrality contributed to many of the most prominent free speech failures in recent years.

Following sustained campaigning from AFFS and other free speech groups, there has been a very significant recent increase in the number of universities which have formally adopted institutional neutrality. AFFS has assessed the institutional neutrality policies (or lack thereof) of all UK universities, and will publish its report shortly. This will be the prelude to a further campaign to persuade universities to adopt institutional neutrality.

- *Taking up free speech failures as they arise – early intervention.* With our “rapid reaction” formats, we can get warning letters out in a couple of hours, before academics are failed by their universities: we have found that early intervention stops misbehaviour dead in its tracks: if we arrive after the crash has happened, they batten down the hatches and pretend they have done nothing wrong.
- *EDI training.* This can create free speech compliance problems by enforcing controversial viewpoints, or creating a hostile atmosphere for dissenters. We plan to conduct a similar campaign to the EDI-on-recruitment one: identifying compliance failures and applying pressure.

BFSP’s recent work and the next few months

BFSP has been busy as a result of changes in the legal and regulatory environment. BFSP continues to revise its statements about the legal requirements, and is working on new ones. While BFSP toils at a rather dark and dingy free speech coalface, these are proving to be valuable weapons, and pretty well unique. We now regard ourselves as free speech arms manufacturers.

Some recent published statements are as follows.

- Core [Statement of the legal requirements for protecting free speech at English HEPs](#). Our “Principal Statement” has been updated and circulated for regular use as a pressure tool.
- *Protected viewpoints under the Equality Act – Risks and necessary actions for employers and others* has been updated and circulated for regular use as a pressure tool.
- *Universities’ obligations as charities.* Universities, as charities, are under certain obligations not to promote or enforce ideological agendas. We believe that, to date, the importance of these duties have been underestimated by the “free speech movement”, and they may become a useful new tool in ensuring that universities do not adopt official positions on contested matters, and do not restrict the freedom of speech and academic freedom of their staff and students. We have developed detailed information about these requirements, further enlarging the free speech arsenal.
- Revised “*Know Your Rights statements*”: We have co-branded with Academics For Academic Freedom [four statements](#) for students and academics on the ground. Two of the statements are more detailed and the other two are one [pagers](#) designed for people to print to put on boards or hand out.

- [*Free Speech Codes: Compliance checklist*](#). The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 (“HEFSA”) requires universities to issue a “free speech code of practice”, a document which will be the core of any university’s efforts to protect free speech. This checklist makes it easy to assess whether a university’s code is compliant.
- [*Meetings at English HEPs: Free speech requirements and risks*](#). This statement sets out universities’ legal obligations with respect to free speech and the holding of meetings. The prevention or hinderance of meetings at universities on political grounds has been one major source of free speech failures in recent years. However, universities have robust duties not merely not to prevent meetings from going ahead, but to take concrete, proactive steps to ensure that they can go ahead. These obligations are explained in detail in the statement.
- [*EDI considerations and inquiries in the recruitment and research approval process at English universities; Free speech compliance issues*](#). This document sets out the legal requirements on English universities not to discriminate against applicants (except in certain legally determined and highly limited circumstances) for jobs on the basis of their commitment or lack thereof to EDI. It was the tool which enabled AFFS’ campaign this year on university recruitment, discussed above.
- [*EDI and similar courses, training and tests: Free speech requirement and risks for English universities*](#). This document sets out the legal requirements on English universities with respect to training for staff and students – an area of common non-compliance, for instance through requiring assent to contested viewpoints in order the have “passed”. It can be used now in individual cases of non-compliance, and may form the basis of future campaigns.
- [*Public Sector Equality Duty: Scope and interaction with free speech requirements*](#). The Public Sector Equality Duty is a requirement imposed on many types of organisation, including universities, to consider certain specified aims, when making decisions. It is widely misrepresented, and incorrect statements about it have been used to attempt to justify, legally, restrictions on lawful speech. This statement corrects common errors, and makes clear that it is subordinate to requirements to protect freedom of speech.

Other work for this year includes producing statements on:

- **Relationships with external activists:** Currently under way. Many universities maintain close relationships with external organisations such as Stonewall and Advance HE, which involve promoting and indeed enforcing their agendas (Stonewall even had a “no debate” policy!) and have on multiple occasions led universities to breach their legal and regulatory obligations regarding freedom of speech. We will produce a statement setting out universities’ legal and regulatory risks in associating with these organisations, which will underpin work to ensure that these relationships do not cause further free speech failures.
- **Colleges.** Currently under way. One of the contributions of HEFSA is to place duties to protect freedom of speech, similar to those on universities, on colleges and other

“constituent institutions” of universities. The absence of such duties was a lacuna in the previously existing free speech legislation. Our statement will set out in detail what colleges and other constituent institutions are required to do.

- **Scottish and Welsh legal requirements.** We are expanding our campaigns to include Scotland and Wales, which have different legal and regulatory requirements for universities.
- **Decolonisation.** Decolonisation, as a collection of ideas, is not inherently in tension with academic freedom. However, in practice, decolonisation agendas have often involved imposing ideological requirements on teaching and research, irrespective of, or against the views and wishes of, some academics subject to these agendas. This is contrary to academic freedom. Our statement will set out universities’ free speech and academic freedom obligations in this respect. It will underpin future work pushing back against restrictions on free speech.

We really do believe that we are on to something, and that AFFS and BFSP have already made a real difference, and are on track to make a major contribution over time. They will be effective cogs in a powerful free speech protection infrastructure. *We could not have got to this point without your amazing support, so thank you so much.*

With all our gratitude,

The AFFS team

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