

Alumni for Free Speech
Academics For Academic Freedom
London Universities' Council for Academic Freedom
Committee for Academic Freedom
Best Free Speech Practice

Sent by email to:

Vice-Chancellors and other senior officers, English universities and other higher education providers

23 April 2026

Dear officers

Free speech concerns with the position of the Henry Jackson Society following student societies mourning the death of Ayatollah Khamenei

The Henry Jackson Society (“HJS”) recently reported that 27 universities have student societies which have mourned the death of Ayatollah Khamenei and, in a letter to UCL, pressed the university to review whether one such society has breached its rules. The HJS has [urged](#) that “Universities must ensure their campuses are not being used as platforms to glorify authoritarian regimes or spread extremist narratives”, or as “platforms for foreign political influence or ideological messaging that may undermine community cohesion or public confidence in university governance”.

As free speech campaigners, we disagree.

If free speech means anything, it means defending the right to express views many find offensive, unacceptable or abhorrent. The Society’s demands confuse moral disgust and wider social concern with grounds for disciplinary action. The answer to objectionable speech is criticism and counter-argument, not censorship.

Further, universities are legally required to work to protect their academics’ and students’ free speech: they have no lawful basis for stopping speech simply because they consider it objectionable, still less speech by student societies over which they have limited control. They are also required to enable lawful protest, subject to limitations reflecting concerns such as physical safety.

Exceptions to these legal protections arise where students (or staff or visiting speakers):

- stray into unlawfulness, for instance by glorifying terrorism or supporting proscribed organisations;

- express views which are so extreme that they are excluded from the key legal protections¹ for free speech pursuant to Article 17 of the European Convention on Human Rights, such as speech which (amongst other things) is incompatible with democracy or other fundamental values, or contributes to the destruction of rights or freedom of others under the Convention. This is a very high bar to meet. It covers matters such as the promotion of totalitarian ideologies and Holocaust Denial; or
- contravene their university's lawful policies (for instance rules against harassment), where these are carefully drafted so as to be compliant with universities' legal duties to protect free speech, i.e. so as not be effective tools to suppress unwelcome viewpoints.

We do not consider that mourning the Ayatollah on its own meets the very high legal threshold for exclusion from free speech protections.

We recognise that this is a complex area. Different facts will apply, and careful analysis will be needed, in different cases.

As regards the universities themselves, we strongly urge them to remain neutral on public issues and not take sides or adopt contested viewpoints as their own, not least because it is a vital tool to minimise their risk of compliance failures. This includes resisting calls from external organisations to take actions which would be inconsistent with the university's neutrality, such as restricting or treating with disfavour certain lawful speech, and with impartially complying with their freedom of speech duties with respect to all and any lawful speech.²

We hope that this provides some support and clarity to universities about one aspect of a complex area.

Yours faithfully,

William Mackesy and Andrew Neish KC, Founders, [Alumni for Free Speech](#)

Professor Abhishek Saha (Queen Mary University of London), Professor Ian Pace, Professor of Music, Culture and Society, (City St George's, University of London) and Professor Stephen Warren (Imperial College London), Founder Members of the [London Universities' Council for Academic Freedom](#)

Professor Dennis Hayes, Director, [Academics For Academic Freedom](#)

Edward Skidelsky (Director), and Freddie Attenborough (Research Manager), [Committee for Academic Freedom](#)

¹ Effective protections for freedom of speech are provided by, amongst other legislation, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Equality Act 2010, and the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which requires universities to work to secure free speech, as acknowledged by the Office for Students.

² See the recent joint letter from various free speech campaigns on this matter at <https://bfsp.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Inst-N-letter-17.4-Final-2-1.pdf>

Andrew Neish KC and William Mackesy, Founders, [Best Free Speech Practice](#)