

Students' Perceptions of Freedom of Speech

On behalf of the Office for Students

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Background

Background

The Office for Students (OfS) is the regulator for higher education in England. It has a responsibility to protect the interests of students by supporting a diverse and independent higher education sector. This includes providing guidance to registered higher education providers and their constituent institutions.

This research aims to help the OfS understand more about freedom of speech amongst the student population, including explorations around:

- whether there are any topics that they think they can't speak freely about;
- their experiences of self-censoring;
- reasons for being unwilling/unable to raise controversial topics;
- awareness of students' speech rights; and
- what works well to promote open discussion in the classroom and on campus.

Approach

The findings are based on a multi-staged programme of research:

- A qualitative online community, lasting 4 days and involving 42 students.
- A quantitative survey of 1,039 university students across England. The sample is representative of university students in England by age, sex, study level, and study region.

Further detail on each stage can be found in the Appendix.

Guidance on analysis

Findings discussed in this report reflect participating students' self-reported perceptions around freedom of speech at universities and on campus. Full question wording is provided below each chart/graphic.

Figures and quantitative data presented are from the online survey. Where two or more groups are discussed, only statistically significant differences at the 95% confidence level are mentioned. Figures based on fewer than 50 respondents are not included or reported on. All analysis is conducted to two decimal places. Figures in charts/images may not sum to 100% due to rounding or due to the question allowing multiple selections.

Findings from the qualitative research are noted as "the qualitative research" or "community participants". The data collected was analysed using thematic analysis, systematically reviewing participants' responses across all activities to identify patterns of meaning and recurring ideas.

Executive summary

The findings suggest that students across England generally view freedom of speech as an essential part of university life, closely linked to intellectual growth, open debate, and social progress. While most believe that expressing opinions should be protected, they also widely agree that freedom of speech has limits and that there is a responsibility to respect others when expressing views. For many, especially international students, having a protected right to free expression is strongly tied to universal human rights.

There is evidence that awareness of rights among students is high – most know that there are protections, with around half recalling information directly from their university. However, knowledge and recall of specific protections is markedly lower.

This pattern of high overall awareness but lower recollection of specific protections is also echoed when thinking about how well freedom of speech is protected at their university/college. The majority think it is well protected in general, but respondents are almost evenly split on whether their institution would prioritise freedom of speech or causing offence. Most believe that their institution would prioritise staff and student safety over freedom of speech, though international students are less likely to say so than home students in England.

Although many students report endorsing free speech in principle, their comfort in discussing controversial or challenging topics varies by setting and audience. They most commonly report feeling free to discuss controversial or challenging topics in smaller, in-person environments. In-person seminars were particularly highlighted for their intimate environment, opportunity to gauge reactions, and absence of recordings leading to feelings of safe discussions. In contrast, lectures (particularly online) – with larger audiences, reduced social cues, and potential for recording – prompt concerns about misinterpretation and long-term consequences. Students from liberal arts and humanities disciplines are generally more likely to say that they felt free to discuss challenging/controversial topics across different settings, while STEM students say that they have fewer appropriate opportunities for open discussion.

Fear of social consequences consistently emerges as the most widely reported barrier to free expression across almost all environments. Students worry about being judged, socially ostracised, or drawing unwanted attention. They describe being anxious about being misunderstood, especially when discussing identity-related issues. Female students are more likely than male students to say that they restrict themselves due to lack of confidence or feeling less knowledgeable, while male students more often fear backlash from peers. Students from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to cite fear of academic or legal consequences, while those studying humanities are more likely to cite fear of being harassed or doubting their own confidence on sensitive topics.¹

Specific topics where students feel less free to express their views include: race and racism, immigration, religion, sex and politically charged international issues (especially Israel/Palestine). Some reasons for self-censorship include a sense of polarisation, fear of appearing to dismiss lived experiences, appearing insensitive or misinformed and fear of reinforcing stereotypes or being judged based on identity. International students in particular fear jeopardising their visa, academic standing or future career opportunities. They are also conscious of language barriers and worry that controversial views might be misinterpreted due to cultural differences.

Overall, students discuss wanting environments that encourage open discussion but also feel safe, predictable and respectful of those involved. Many say that they feel most secure expressing their views in trusted, private spaces and there is a desire for more student-led spaces. Clear boundaries set by staff, reassurance about acceptable behaviour, skilled moderation and enforcement of guidelines and explicit guidance on how free speech is protected can also improve confidence. Students also emphasise the importance of distinguishing lawful expression from harassment or hate speech, ensuring that all viewpoints (especially from marginalised groups) can be aired without fear of things escalating into personal attacks, hostility, harassment or intimidation.

¹ See the section on “Demographic terms” in the Appendix for a definition of ethnic minority backgrounds.

Quantitative findings

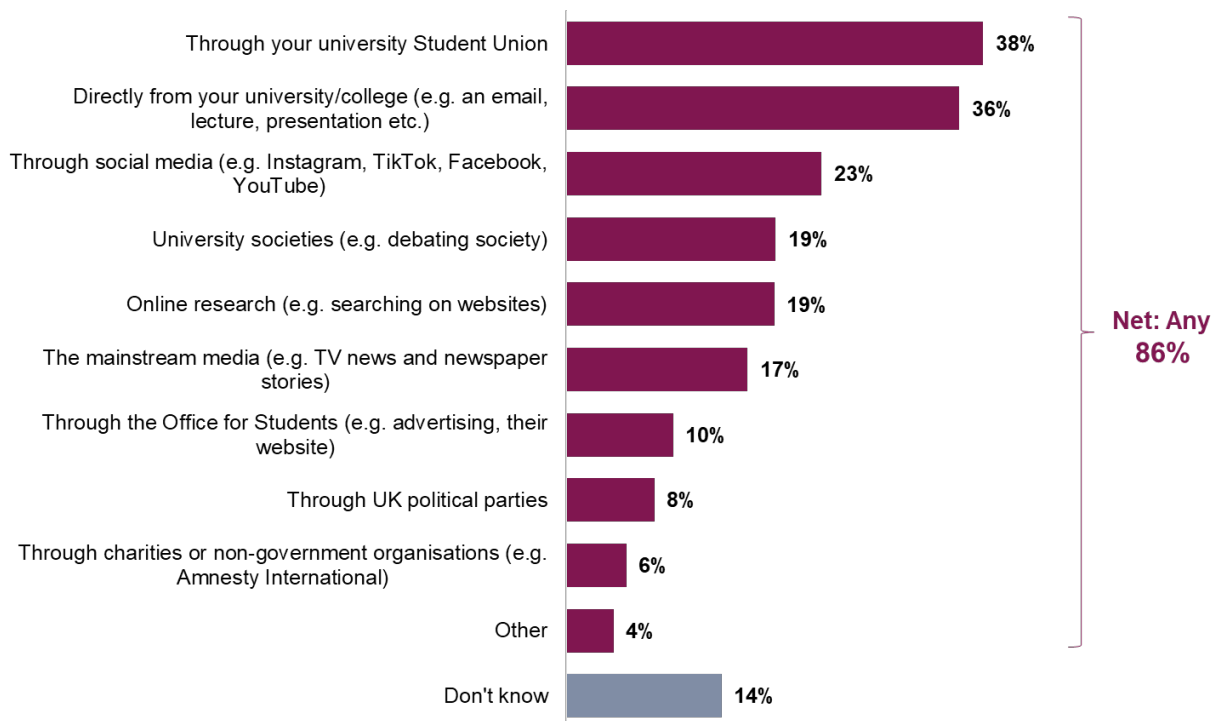
Awareness of rights to freedom of speech

Students' awareness of rights

Overall, a strong majority (84%) of students report being aware that they have some rights to freedom of speech. Nearly two in three (64%) students feel they know a lot or a little about these rights, with around half (49%) of this group reporting that they know a little about these rights compared to 16% who say they know a lot about them. One in five (20%) students say they are aware of these rights but know nothing about them, while one in ten (11%) report not being aware that they have these rights at all.

Students who are aware of their freedom of speech rights were then asked where they learned about these (Figure 1). Across tuition type, international students are more likely than home students in England to cite learning about these rights from the university Student Union (51% vs 37%), as well as online research (23% vs 19%), mainstream media (22% vs 16%) and through the Office for Students (15% vs 9%).

Figure 1. Where students learned about their freedom of speech rights

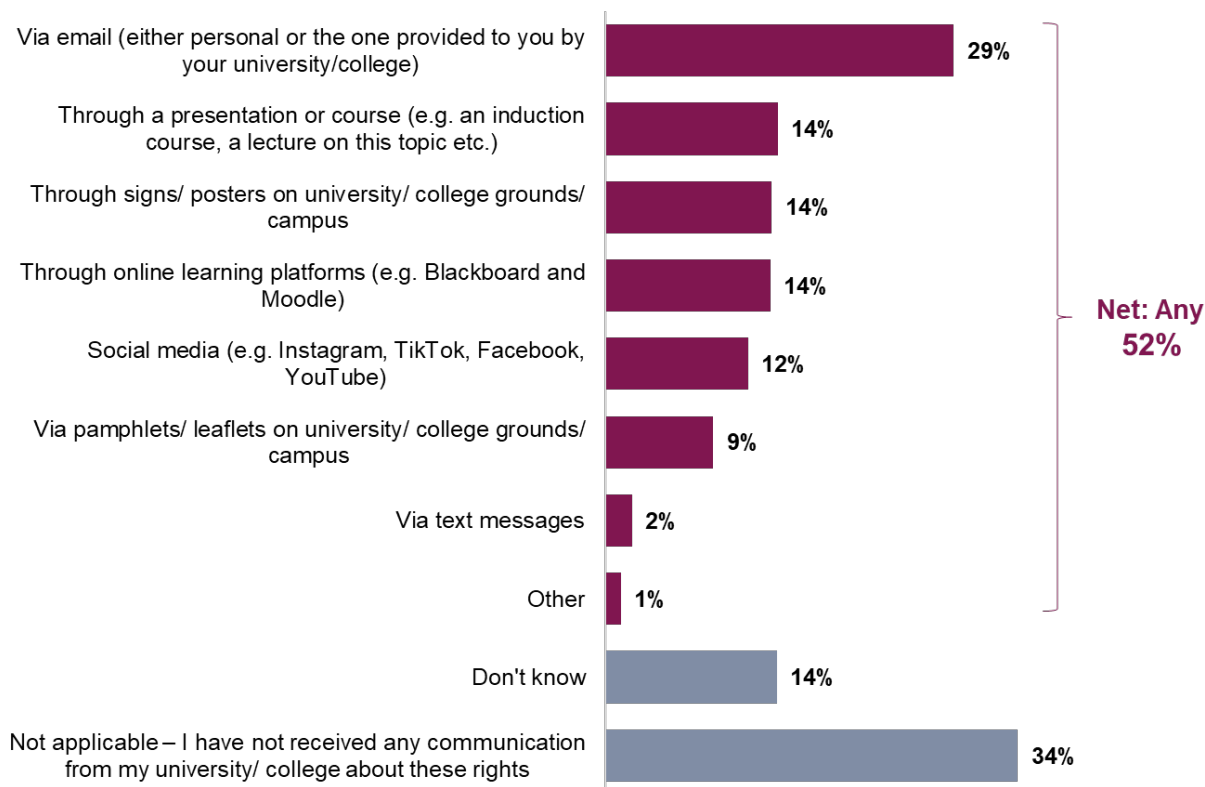


Q5. You said you are aware of your rights to freedom of speech at your university/college. In which, if any, of the following ways did you find out about your rights to freedom of speech at university/college? Please select all that apply.

Base: All those that are aware of their rights to freedom of speech at university/college (n=876)

Similarly, students were also asked if their institution directly communicated these rights to them, and if so, via what methods. Overall around half (52%) of students report receiving any communication directly from their university/college about their rights to freedom of speech (Figure 2). A third (34%) of students state that they did not receive any official communication about their rights to freedom of speech directly from their university, with home students in England being more likely to think this than international students (35% vs 25%).

Figure 2. Ways university/college communicated freedom of speech rights

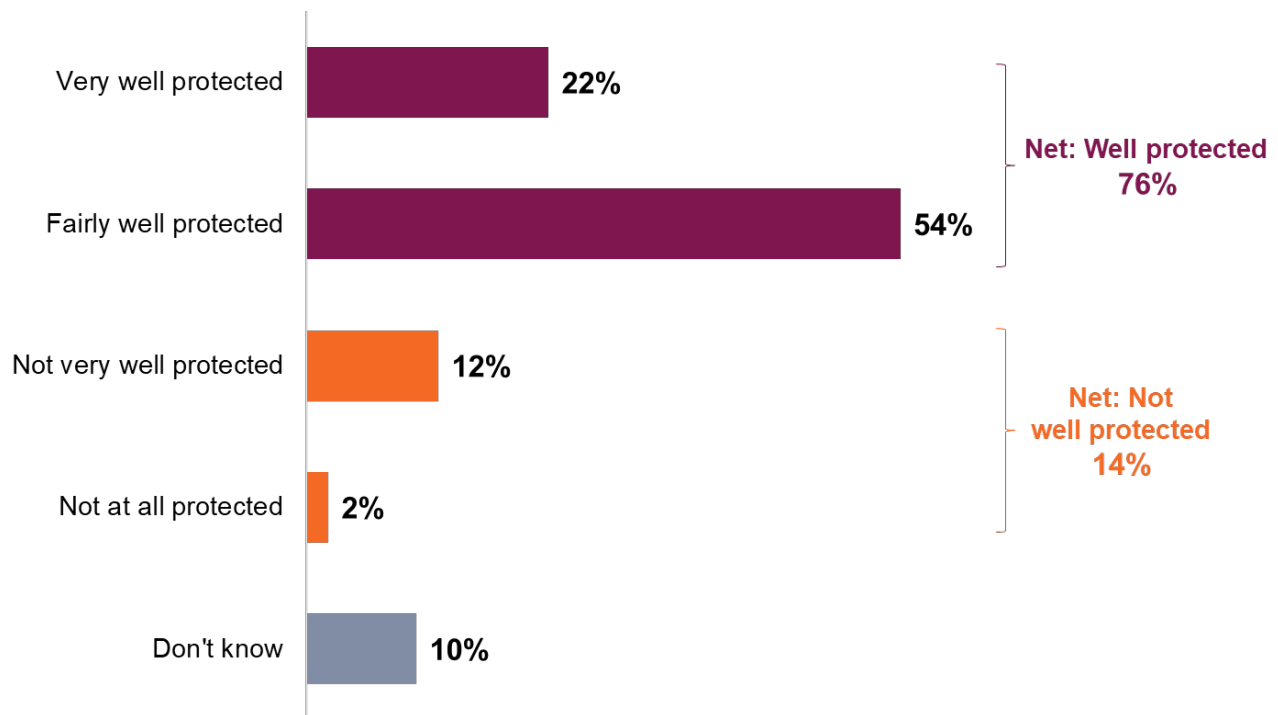


Q6. Since you started studying at your university/college, in which of the following ways, if any, has your university/college communicated information about your rights to freedom of speech? Please select all that apply.
Base: All (n=1,039)

Perceived protections around freedom of speech

When asked how well they think freedom of speech is protected on campuses, three quarters (76%) of students say it is well protected. 14% of students say freedom of speech is not very well or not at all protected at their institution (Figure 3).

Figure 3. How well protected is freedom of speech at their university/college



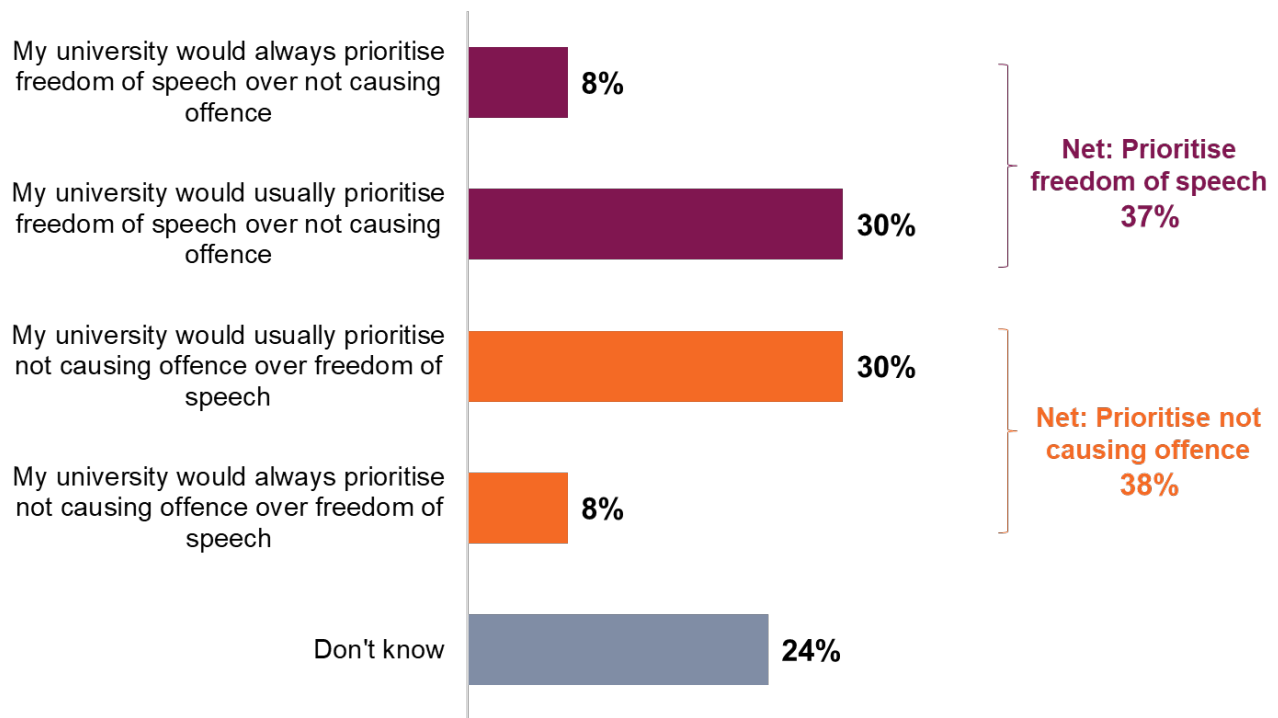
Q3. How well do you think freedom of speech and academic freedom are protected at your university/ college?
Base: All (n=1,039)

Male students are more likely than female students to say that freedom of speech is very well protected (26% vs 19% female students), while female students are more likely to say they are unsure (12% vs 7% males). Younger students are more likely to say it is well protected (84% of 18-20s vs 65% of 30+), while older students are the most likely to say it is not well protected (9% of 18-20s vs 20% of 30+). Looking across subjects, students studying liberal arts/humanities are the most likely to feel that freedom of speech is well protected (83%).

When looking at how universities might prioritise freedom of speech, students are split on how they feel their university would balance freedom of speech protections with not causing offence: 37% believe their university would prioritise freedom of speech over not causing offence, while a similar proportion (38%) feel the university would prioritise not causing offence instead (Figure 4).

A notable proportion say they are unsure (24%), with female students (29%), older students (38% of 30+) and those from lower social grades (32% C2DE) more likely to report this. International students are more likely than home students in England to think their university would always prioritise freedom of speech (12% vs 8%).

Figure 4. University prioritisation of freedom of speech vs not causing offence



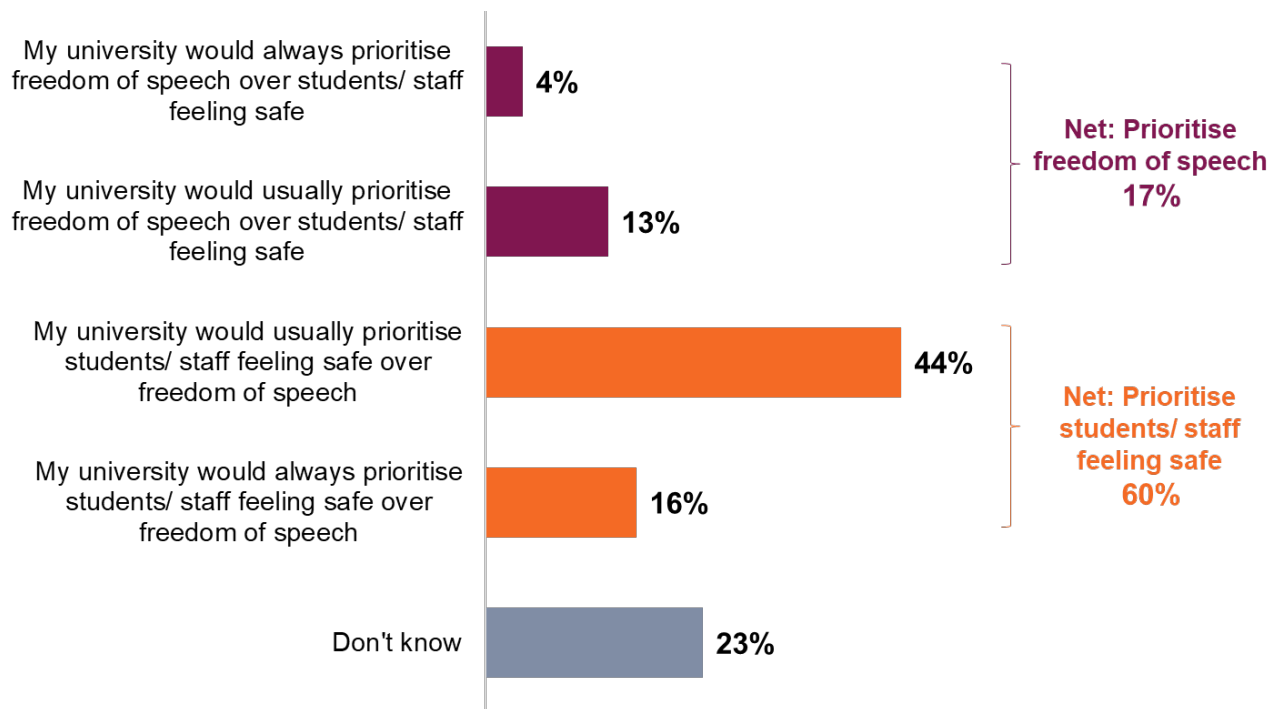
Q7. Thinking about freedom of speech and not causing offence... Which of the following comes closest to what you believe your university would prioritise?
Base: All (n=1,039)

However, when asked about how the university would balance freedom of speech with students/staff feeling safe (Figure 5), six in ten (60%) say their university would prioritise the latter over freedom of speech, though 23% say they are unsure.

Younger students (aged 18-20) are the most likely to believe the university would prioritise students/staff feeling safe (64% vs 50% of 30+). This is also the case amongst home students in England (60% vs 53% international students), while international students are more likely to believe they would prioritise freedom of speech (17% home students in England vs 23% international). This pattern is also mirrored when looking at ethnicity, as white students are more likely to say the institution would prioritise students/staff feeling safe (62% vs 53% ethnic minority students) while students from an ethnic minority background are more likely to believe they would prioritise freedom of speech over safety (16% white vs 22% ethnic minority students).²

² See the section on “Demographic terms” in the Appendix for a definition of ethnic minority students.

Figure 5. University prioritisation of freedom of speech vs students/staff feeling safe



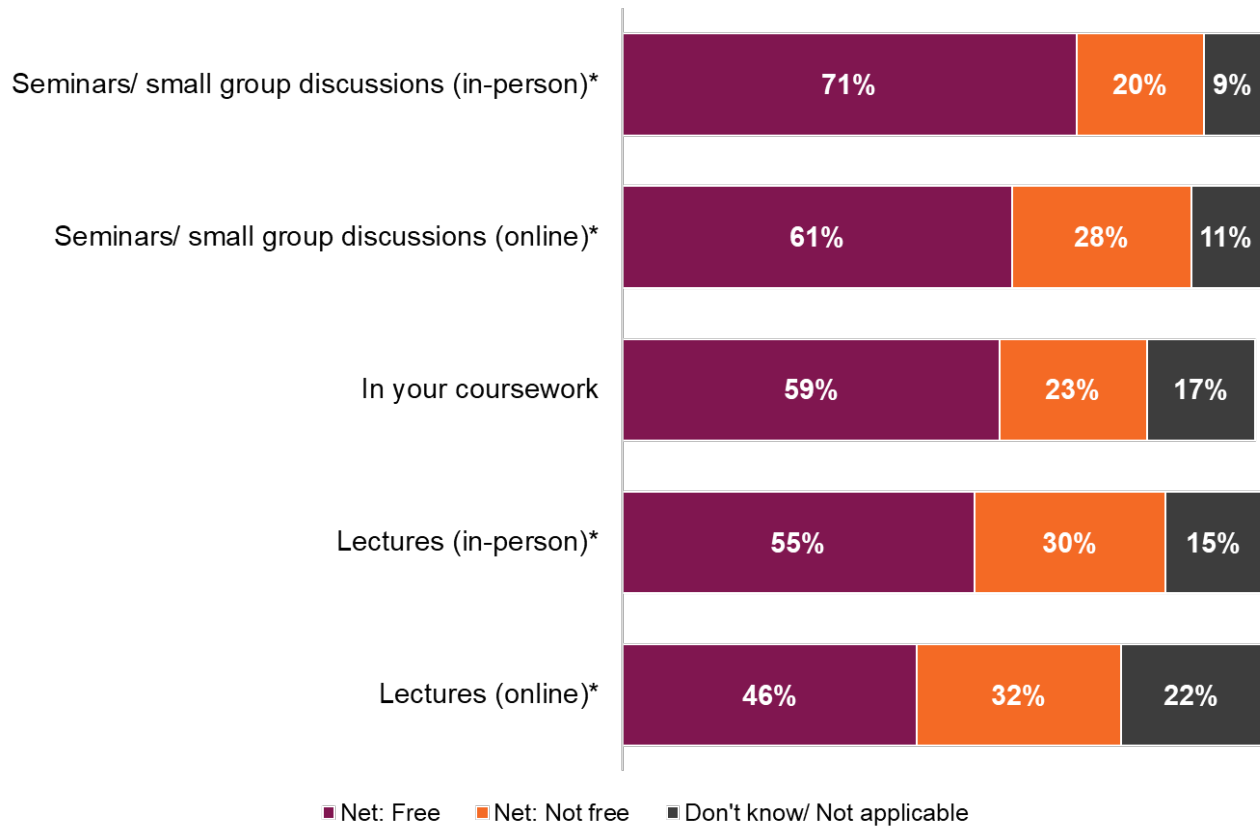
Q8. Thinking about freedom of speech and students/staff feeling safe... Which of the following comes closest to what you believe your university would prioritise?
Base: All (n=1,039)

Experiences of freedom of speech

Freedom of speech in academic settings

Students were asked, if they were to discuss challenging or controversial topics, how free they would feel to do so in a variety of environments within universities/colleges – as noted in Figure 6. A majority of students say they feel very free or fairly free to discuss these topics in all listed environments at their university/college, while 46% say this about online lectures.

Figure 6. How free students feel to discuss challenging/ controversial topics in academic settings



Q10. If you wanted to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/topics, how free, if at all, would you feel to do so in the following environments?

Base: All (n=1,039); those who attend in-person seminars (n=858); online seminars (n=300); in-person lectures (n=882); online lectures (n=508)

*Only asked to those who currently attend these types of environments

There are some differences that emerge regarding the size of the forum as well as online vs in-person spaces. For example, more students report feeling free to discuss challenging topics in smaller, group-based seminars – both in-person (71%) and online (61%) – compared to larger lecture environments (55% in-person, 46% online). And when comparing online and in-person methods, students consistently report being more likely to feel free to discuss these topics when in-person.

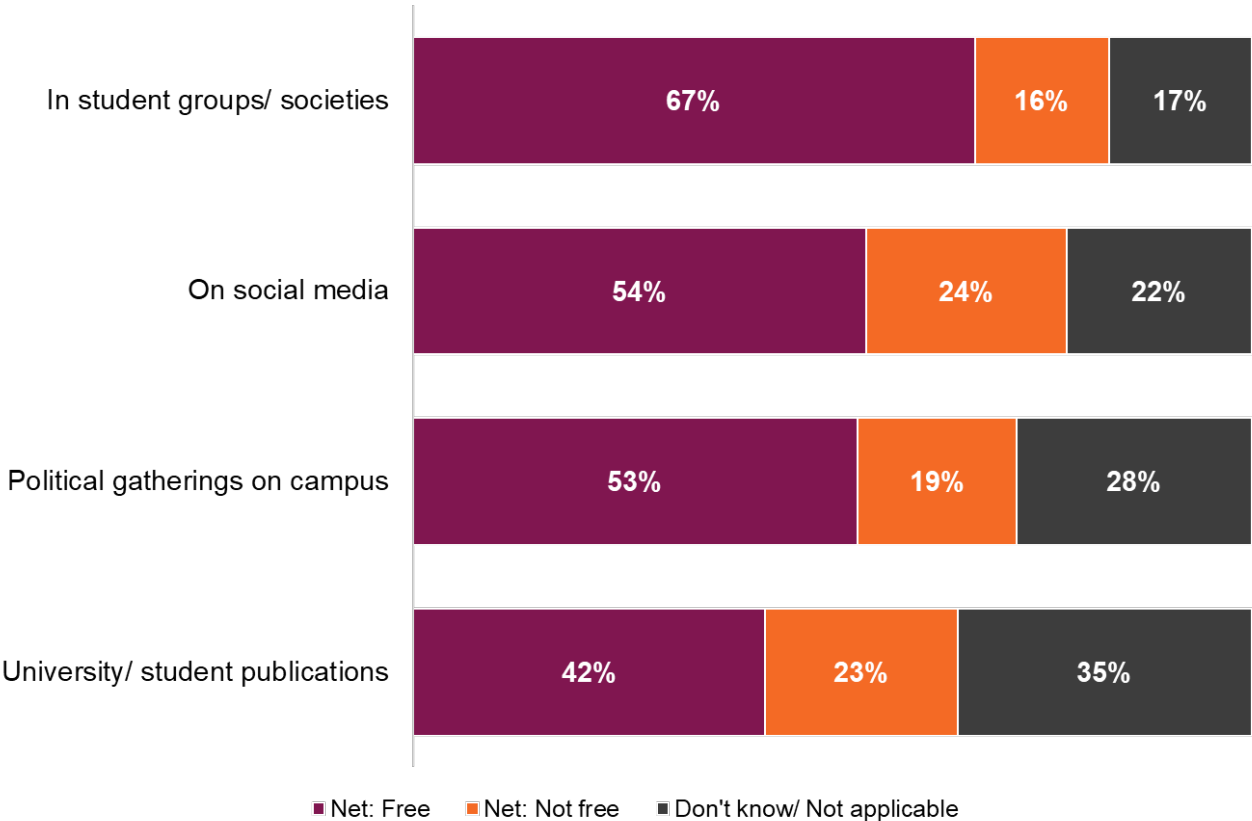
There is also some variety in views across degree subject: liberal arts/humanities students are the most likely to cite feeling free in their coursework (74%) while those studying biological sciences (45%) or computer sciences (41%) are the least likely to say this. Similarly, those studying liberal arts/humanities or law (both 83%) are also most likely to report feeling free to discuss topics during in-person seminars while those studying engineering (57%) are least likely to say they feel free to do so.

Finally, differences across home students in England and international students also emerge, as international students are more likely to report feeling free to discuss these topics within in-person lectures (66% vs 54% home students in England), while home students in England are more likely to feel free in their coursework (60% vs 56% international).

Freedom of speech in social settings

There are some differences when looking at university/college environments outside of teaching/class-based spaces (Figure 7).

Figure 7. How free students feel to discuss challenging/ controversial topics in social settings



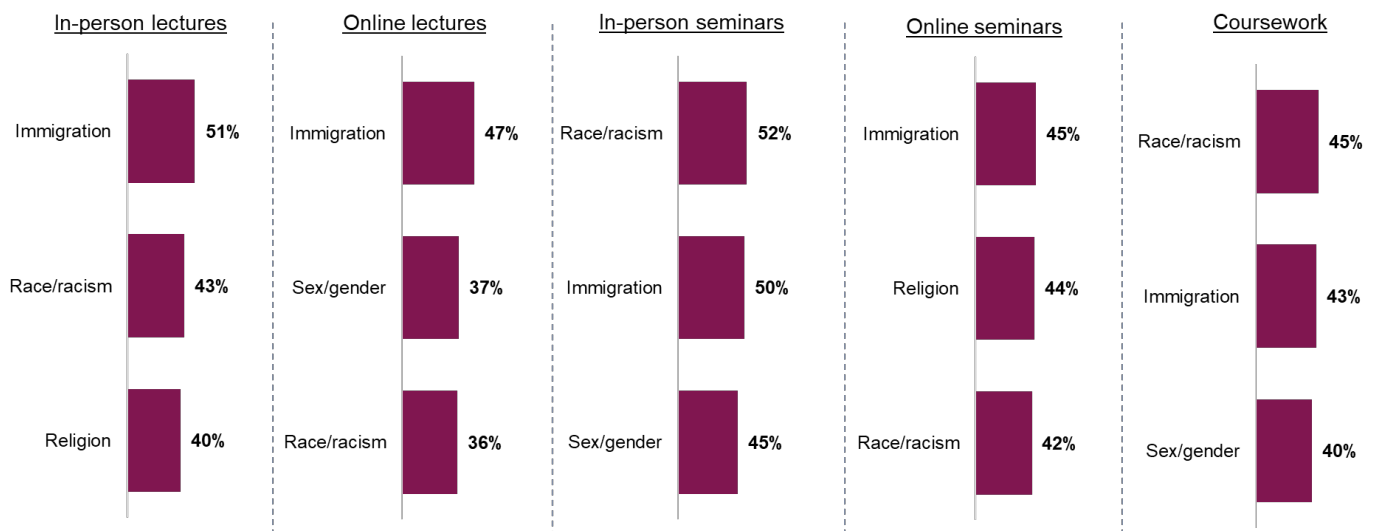
Q10. If you wanted to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/topics, how free, if at all, would you feel to do so in the following environments?
 Base: All (n=1,039)

Male students are more likely than female students to report feeling free on social media (58% vs 50% female), and undergraduate students are more likely than postgraduates to feel free within student groups/societies (69% vs 60%) or political gatherings (55% vs 48%). There are also some differences across subject, as law students are the most likely to cite feeling free in student groups/societies (79%), while computer science students are the least likely to say this (57%). International students are more likely than home students in England to report feeling free within university/student publications (52% vs 41%) and on social media (58% vs 53%), but less likely than home students in England to report feeling free at political gatherings on campus (45% vs 53%).

Topics seen as particularly controversial/challenging

Students were also asked what challenging/controversial topics they do not feel comfortable to discuss within academic contexts (full list of topics shown in Appendix). For lectures (both in-person and online) as well as coursework, students are most likely to say that they feel uncomfortable discussing the topic of immigration and race/ racism (Figure 8). Male students are more likely than female students to say that they do not feel comfortable discussing the issue of immigration in their coursework (51% vs 36%).

Figure 8. Top three controversial topics students do not feel comfortable discussing in study contexts

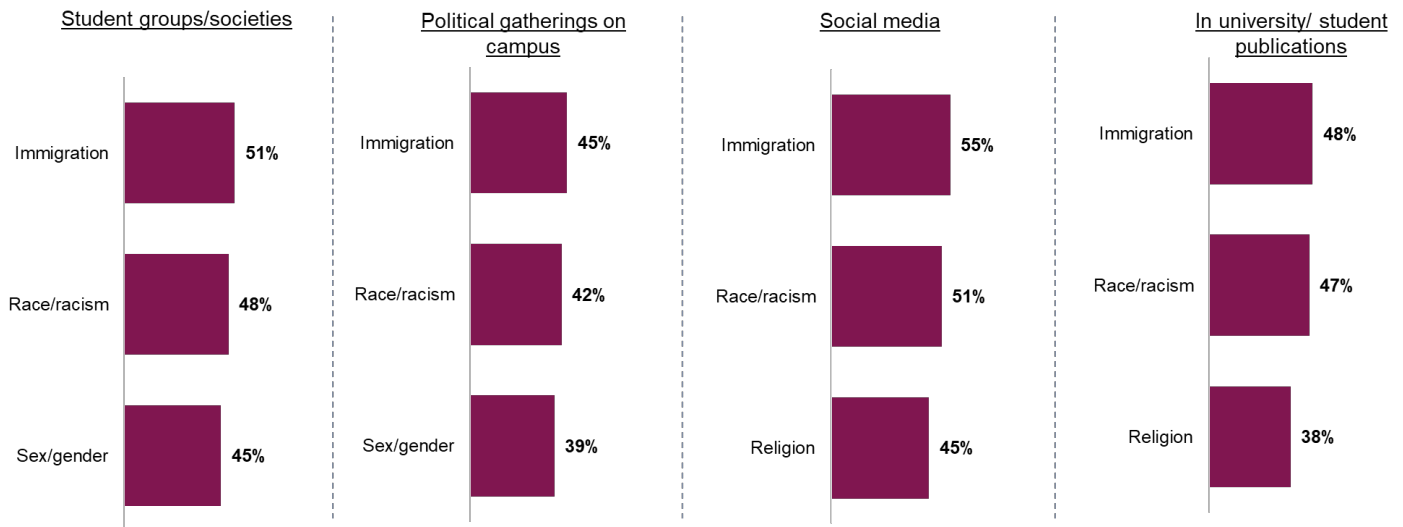


Q14. Which of the following topics would you not feel free to discuss in the following context? Please select all that apply in each column.

Base: All those that do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in one of the listed environments (n=273 to n=81)

A similar pattern also emerges when looking at what topics students do not feel comfortable to discuss in social settings (Figure 9) – immigration and race/ racism are the topics which students most-commonly cite not feeling free to discuss.

Figure 9. Top three controversial topics students do not feel comfortable discussing outside of their studies



Q14. Which of the following topics would you not feel free to discuss in the following context? Please select all that apply in each column.

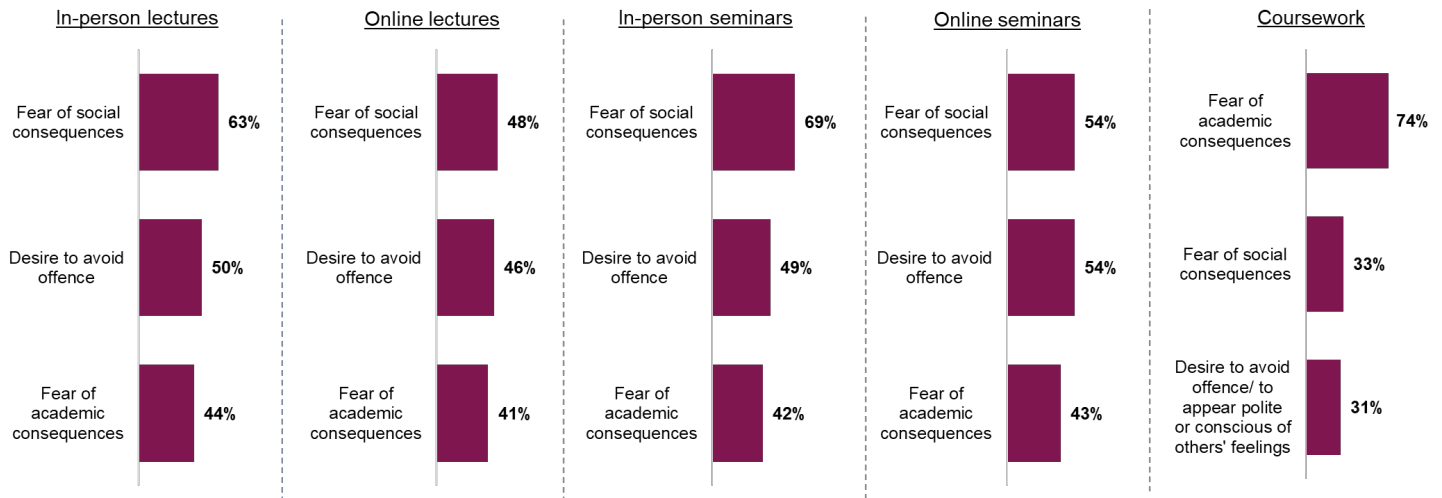
Base: All those that do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in one of the listed environments (n=254 to n=156)

Self-censorship and barriers to freedom of speech

Self-censorship in academic settings

Students were asked why they do not feel free to discuss controversial or challenging topics and what consequences they fear in each context. They most often cite fear of social consequences in all academic contexts except in their coursework (where fear of academic consequences is most common) (Figure 10). Though it is not the most commonly cited barrier, at least two-fifths of students who do not feel comfortable discussing challenging or controversial topics/ ideas report a fear of academic consequences across all academic settings - rising to three quarters when focusing on discussing these topics in their coursework.

Figure 10. Top three reasons for not feeling comfortable discussing controversial topics in study contexts



Q11. You said that you do not feel free to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/topics in the following scenario(s)...Which, if any, of the following are reasons why? Please select all that apply in each column

Base: All those that do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in one of the listed environments (n=273 to n=81)

Perceptions also differ by sex, with male students more likely than female students to say that they fear the social consequences of discussing such issues during in-person lectures (71% vs 57% female students) and online lectures (59% vs 40%). Female students are much more likely than male students to say they do not feel confident/knowledgeable enough to do so within all listed academic settings.³ Undergraduates are more likely to say they do not feel confident/knowledgeable enough to discuss controversial topics during in-person lectures (49% vs 23% postgraduate students).

Outside of sex and study level, students from an ethnic minority background are more likely than those from white ethnic backgrounds to say that they do not feel free to discuss controversial issues during in-person lectures due to fear of the academic consequences (56% vs 38%) or legal consequences (26% vs 14%). Views among those that fear discussing controversial ideas/topics diversify when looking at subject type, with those from a STEM background more likely than those that study a humanities-related subject to say they do so to avoid offence/appear polite during in-person lectures (64% vs 46%).

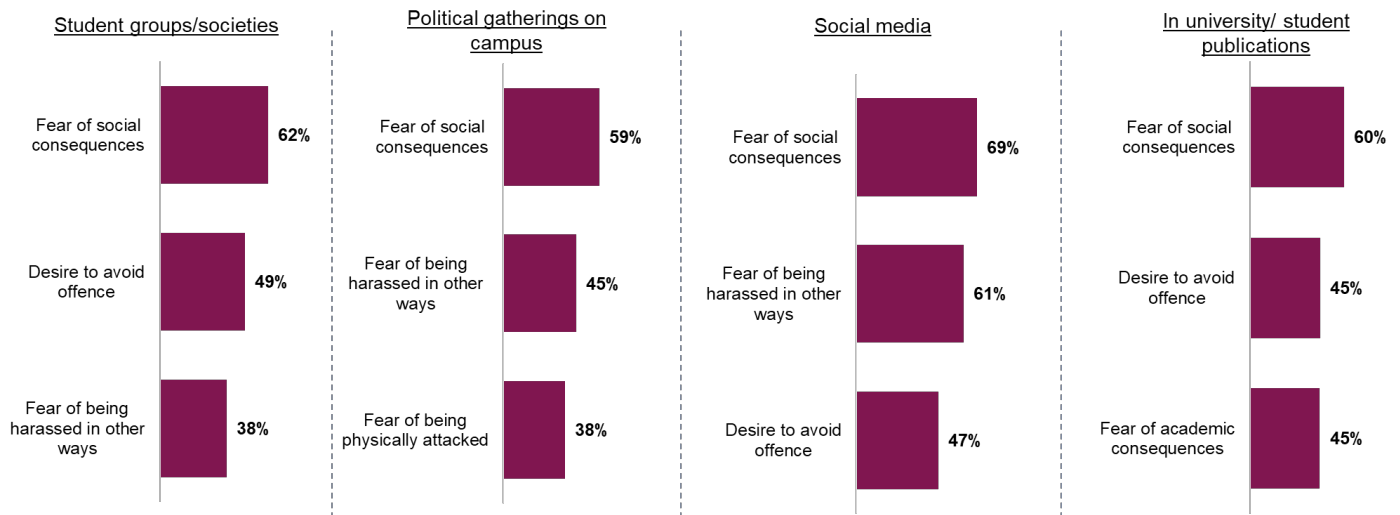
³ Female students are more likely than male students to not feel confident/knowledgeable enough to discuss challenging/controversial in the following academic settings: lectures (in-person): 50% vs. 35%, lectures (online): 35% vs. 15%, seminars (in-person): 44% vs. 23%, coursework: 37% vs. 20%.

Those studying a humanities subject are also more likely than those studying STEM degrees to fear the legal consequences (20% vs 9%) and being harassed (32% vs 18%) during in-person lectures.

Self-censorship in social settings

Fear of social consequences is the most frequently cited barrier to discussing challenging/controversial topics within each social setting (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Top three reasons for not feeling comfortable discussing controversial topics outside of study contexts



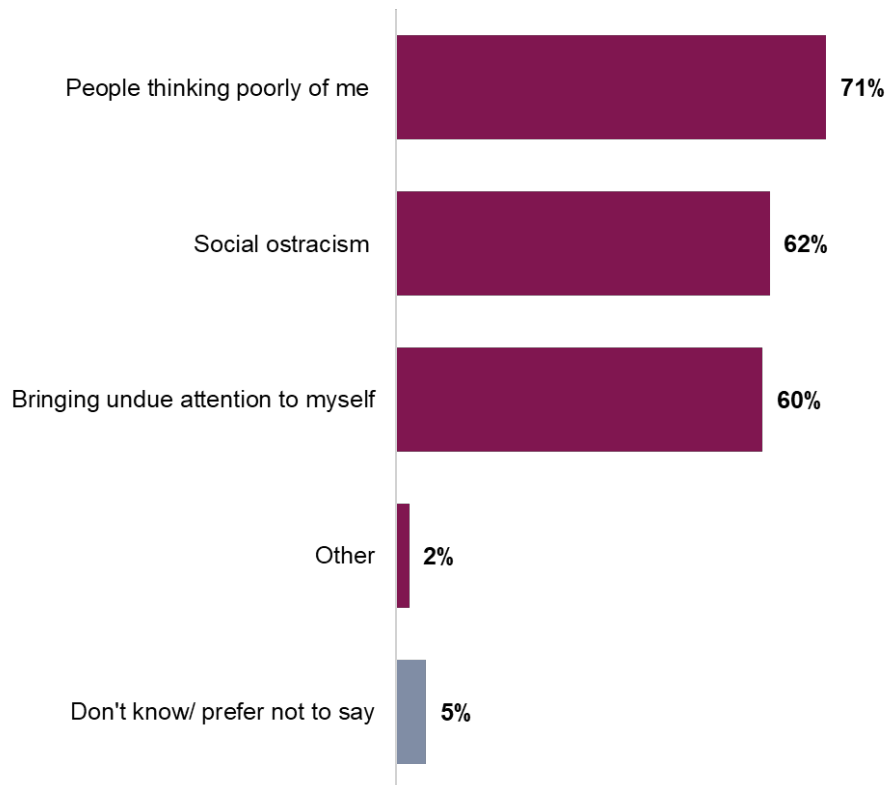
Q11. You said that you do not feel free to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/topics in the following scenario(s)... Which, if any, of the following are reasons why? Please select all that apply in each column

Base: All those that do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in one of the listed environments (n=273 to n=81)

The pattern of female students not feeling confident/knowledgeable enough to discuss challenging/controversial topics is also present within all listed social settings. For example, one in five (20%) male students say that they do not feel confident/knowledgeable to discuss controversial issues in student publications, compared with approximately a third (34%) of female students.

As noted above, fears of social consequences are the most-commonly cited reason for not feeling free to discuss controversial topics. When students who cited this reason were then specifically asked about the kind of social consequences they fear, people thinking poorly of them is most common, followed by fearing social ostracism and bringing undue attention to themselves. Male students are more likely than female students to say that they fear social ostracism, with more than two thirds (68%) of male students citing this compared with 57% of female students.

Figure 12. Reasons for fearing the social consequences



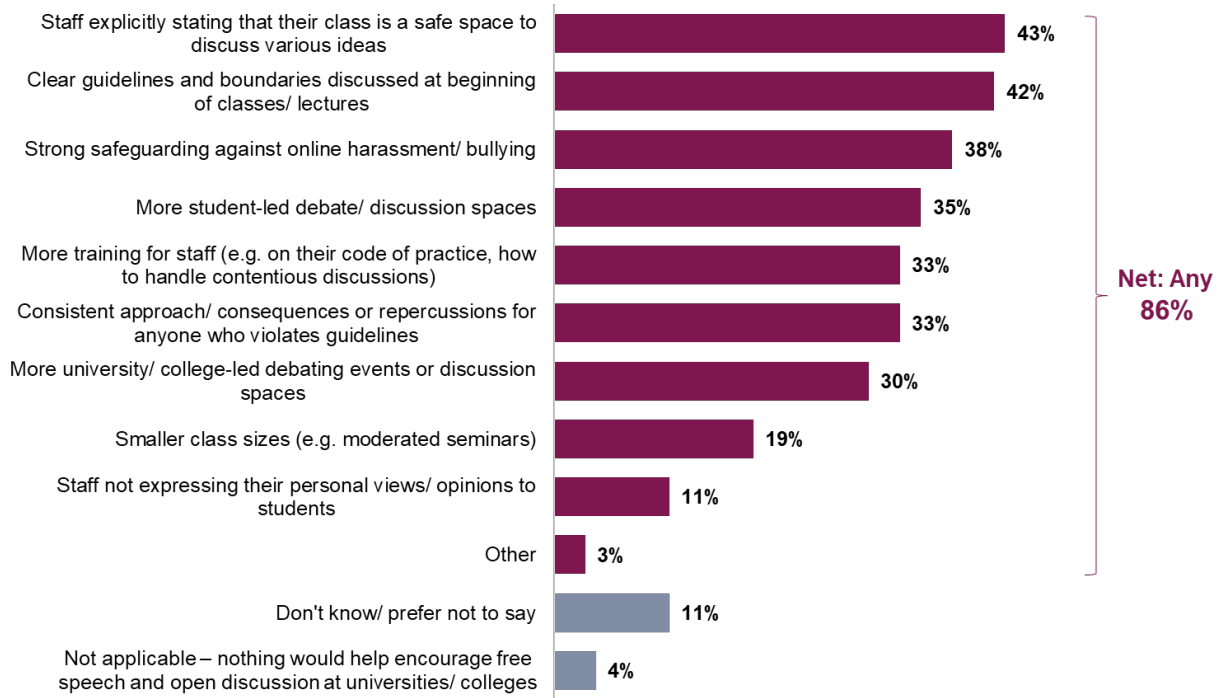
Q12. You said that you do not feel free to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/topics because of a fear of social consequences... What kind of consequences would these be?

Base: All who do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in any of the listed environments because of fear of social consequences (n=411)

Enhancing/ creating open discussion environments and solutions

Most students (86%) believe at least one type of listed intervention could help improve freedom of speech and open discussion at their university/college, with support for each of the listed interventions indicated in Figure 13. However, international students are less likely than home students in England to believe any measure could improve freedom of speech in higher education settings (78% vs 86%).

Figure 13. Ways of encouraging freedom of speech at university/ college



Q18. What of the following, if any, do you think could help encourage free speech and open discussion at universities/colleges? Please select all that apply.
 Base: All (n=1,039)

Qualitative findings

Students' understanding of freedom of speech

Defining freedom of speech

Students participating in the qualitative community describe freedom of speech as essential for intellectual exchange, critical thinking, and social progress, while asserting the need for responsibility and respect when expressing views. They frequently frame freedom of speech as a practical enabler of learning, viewing open expression and disagreement as essential to testing ideas, developing academic confidence and engaging meaningfully with complex or contested subject matter.

“I believe that free speech means that I am allowed to have emotions and feelings and I can express them openly without any judgement.” (Male, 20, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“The ability and right to publicly voice one’s own opinions... on a topic without the fear or threat of revenge or mass alienation”. (Male, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Perceived importance of freedom of speech

Most students consistently describe freedom of speech as foundational to both academic life and democratic society, and universities as settings where this principle should be actively upheld and modelled. Both home and international students emphasise its role in democratic ideals, social development and intellectual progress, frequently framing freedom of speech as a safeguard against authoritarianism, ideological conformity and the concentration of power.

“Without it we could easily fall into an authoritarian dictatorship where anyone who has a different opinion to the people in power can be arrested or worse.” (Male, 18, White, home student in England)

“It is vital in a productive society for people to be able to share ideas/complaints.”
(Male, 19, White, home student in England)

Beyond political arguments, many students highlight freedom of speech as essential for informed decision-making, learning through disagreement and exposure to perspectives that challenge existing assumptions.

“It lets us test our assumptions and biases, provoking reflections and thoughts”.
(Male, 31, White, home student in England)

“Free speech is valuable to obtain various insights, avoiding an echo chamber, especially in intellectual settings such as university/college.”

(Male, 32, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

International students echo these democratic and developmental narratives but place greater emphasis on diversity of perspectives, fairness and uneven risks faced by different groups when expressing controversial or marginal views. For many international students, freedom of speech is framed as a way to amplify marginalised voices, challenge structural inequalities and create space for institutional accountability and policy reform.

“People should have the right to make their voices heard, especially those who are marginalised by society.” (Female, 32, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“I feel a bit reluctant... because of the fear of the backlash that I feel I could receive from the student body/institution.” (Male, 20, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“You should still be cautious as alienating certain people with decision-making power e.g. the course director would put your academic and future career at risk.”

(Male, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“[When I think about speaking freely at university/college, I feel] like I do not have the luxury of expressing my ideas.” (Female, 34, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“It is vital for society to develop and grow in a balanced and inclusive manner for all stakeholders.”

(Male, 22 ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

While there is broad agreement on the definition and importance of freedom of speech in principle, responses from the online community indicate that this shared understanding does not always translate into equal confidence in exercising free speech in practice.

“The policies are in place, but there is minimal implementation and enforcement of these policies.”

(Female, 34, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Awareness of rights to freedom of speech

Students' awareness of rights

Across the online community, students perceive free speech as a right grounded in law and democratic principles. Home students in England often describe it as a fundamental right within university settings, emphasising the ability to express opinions without fear of academic or institutional consequences. International students also reference this rights-based concept but focus more on it as a universal human right against government suppression and persecution.

“The ability to express one's own opinions without persecution, excluding speech intended to cause harm/violate the rights of another person.” (Female, 21, White, home student in England)

“I believe free speech is the ability for us to speak/voice our thoughts or opinions without the risk of getting suppressed by the government. I also believe free speech is considered a human right.”
(Male, 19, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“The ability and right to publicly voice one's own opinions in a respectful and appropriate manner (i.e. without causing physical or psychological harm) on a topic without the fear or threat of revenge or mass alienation.” (Male, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU International student)

Both groups describe free speech as a reciprocal framework: the right to speak freely is inseparable from the responsibility to respect others' rights.

“It also means other individuals are free to disagree with you. It's challenging to get right because free speech is important, but so are the rights of vulnerable groups of people, and sometimes the two can conflict.” (Female, 24, White, home student in England)

“It's about having a voice, even if others disagree and respecting the right of others to share their views too.” (Male, 25, White, home student in England)

“Freedom of speech means the ability and right to publicly voice one's own opinions in a respectful and appropriate manner.” (Male, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Experiences of freedom of speech

Freedom of speech in academic settings

Most participants' willingness to share their beliefs is strongly influenced by the setting and level of trust in those present. As with the quantitative findings, in-person seminars are considered safer than large lectures or online sessions. Smaller discussion groups in seminars feel less intimidating than large lectures as they allow students to explain themselves fully, clarify their points and gauge reactions from fellow students and teachers in real time, reducing fear of misinterpretation or judgment.

“I am uncomfortable with most online environments because it is easier to have things taken out of context and spread widely.” (Female, 32, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“I feel happy discussing issues in person with others who I know. However, I find it harder to do this online as you lose a lot of social cues (e.g. when you're finished speaking, avoiding interrupting people, people's expressions).” (Male, 31, White, home student in England)

Additionally, clear boundaries set at the start of in-person discussions further increase comfort by defining what is acceptable. One-to-one sessions with trusted tutors also feel safe due to their private nature, away from peer judgement.

“I have found discussion in class easiest when guidelines and boundaries are set out at the start of sessions, so people know what to expect, and when there is a good session leader who understands how to moderate and move along discussion.” (Female, 24, White, home student in England)

Some participants highlight the absence of a “paper trail” or recordings of in-person sessions; this reduces fears that comments could be “misused against them”. Online learning environments are viewed as riskier because recordings of discussions in these environments could be taken out of context, shared on social media or scrutinised/misrepresented online, increasing reputational risk. Furthermore, the inability to gauge emotional reactions online heighten concerns about causing offence, leading to greater self-censorship. Email and written communication elicit mixed feelings: some appreciate the time to craft responses carefully, while others fear the permanence of a “paper trail” and potential misuse.

“There's nothing linking you to what you say in anonymous feedback, so there can't be any repercussions.” (Male, 18, White, home student in England)

“Over an email or online I would definitely feel less comfortable speaking freely, mostly as there is a permanent record of what I have said, which carries weight that I must say the ‘right’ thing. Definitely, the least free I would feel is in a lecture, due to the volume of students that are there, which would unnerve me as I would not be able to gauge how they would react to anything I say.”

(Male, 18, White, home student in England)

Overall, most students feel most comfortable speaking freely in trusted, private settings such as off-campus conversations, anonymous feedback channels and small discussions during in-person seminars. Large lectures, recorded online classes and formal written communication create discomfort due to fears of judgement, misinterpretation and permanent records.

“The environment of a lecture makes it less intuitive to speak openly due to the amount of people listening to you being somewhat daunting, and the fact that you don’t know how your ideas will be reacted to by the lecturer. Seminars are different and less daunting due to the smaller sizes and more intimate nature.” (Male, 19, White, home student in England)

Students also raise subject-based differences in the online qualitative community. Some students in STEM subjects mention that their courses offered fewer opportunities to express their opinions, making free speech feel less relevant to their academic experience. Though some science students note that ethical topics do come up in their course discussions occasionally, one student describes feeling unable to express views that differed from the dominant opinion.

“Whenever I have had to discuss ideas, I have always been welcomed with open minds to listen to my ideas. However, given that I am studying a BSc, there aren't usually ideas in seminars that would spark controversy as there are usually right or wrong answers.”

(Female, 21, White, home student in England)

“As a student studying a quantitative degree there are not many opportunities for me to express myself in an environment where free speech is important.”

(Male, 20, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“I don't think free speech is only limited to political issues as even a STEM student like me has many discussions about topics such as abortion, gene editing, epigenetics that are relevant to my degree and hot topics within medicine but still should be spoken about.”

(Female, 21, ethnic minority, home student in England)

Staff and student dynamics

In the online community, students' reported willingness to speak freely is strongly influenced by who they are speaking to, the perceived power dynamics and how they expect others to react. Although participants fear judgement from peers, most feel more comfortable around fellow students than university staff as peers do not have the authority to influence grades or impose academic consequences. However, some still fear backlash from peers whose views differ from their own, worrying about hostility, social exclusion or being reported to staff. Identity factors, such as appearance or religious clothing, are also linked to some students anticipating judgement or exclusion.

"It changes because of differing levels of power between these groups. Professors can bring about more kinds of negative consequences, as well as on differing scales than students."

(Female, 23, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

"I always know that what I say could have an indirect impact on my academic performance. It's often easier to speak with people your own age and it can be easier to make your voice heard."

(Male, 18, White, home student in England)

"A friend is easier to talk to as they are less likely to crash out on you whereas a lecturer or tutor has a position of authority over you so there are some topics I'd steer clear of."

(Male, 18, White, ethnic minority, home student in England)

"As a Muslim female wearing the veil, I feel I will be judged."

(Female, 22, ethnic minority, home student in England)

Interactions with staff and tutors are more complex. While many students, particularly postgraduates, feel comfortable with trusted tutors in private settings, most remain conscious of the power imbalance. They recognise that teaching staff ultimately control grades and academic progression, which leads them to "choose their words carefully", avoid disagreement and steer clear of controversial or personal topics. This dynamic results in students saying they were more agreeable and less open in discussions with lecturers or tutors compared to conversations with peers.

Power dynamics with lecturers and tutors create caution, leading students to self-censor and avoid controversial topics to protect grades and academic standing.

"Peers have less power in a disciplinary sense, so I feel more comfortable speaking freely to them."

(Female, 21, ethnic minority, home student in England)

“I feel very comfortable speaking with fellow students for the most part. It might be more difficult when there are people I know hold views that conflict with my own in key ways, e.g. myself and many of my friends are queer/trans, so I would feel less comfortable speaking freely about my life with someone who held transphobic beliefs. I wouldn't hide my beliefs but the way I talk about it might be different.”

(Female, 24, White, home student in England)

“There may be a slight difference between my peers and my tutors. With my peers I feel absolutely comfortable with talking to them about anything possible, as I feel like they are in a very similar situation to me... However, with tutors I am concerned about saying the 'right' thing, so perhaps I am less open to discuss my opinions with the fear that they may not be exactly what they are looking for.”

(Male, 18, White, home student in England)

Comparison of experiences between home and international students

Responses from international students in the online community describe UK universities as “safer spaces” compared to wider society in their home countries.

“In the UK, I feel encouraged to share my views. [In my country], we don't have freedom of speech in any sector of daily life, not just in universities.”

(Male, 28, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

However, these positive experiences are referenced alongside broader fears of power dynamics and risks to both academic status and future career prospects. Concerns extend to visa-related repercussions, with references to expulsion, funding withdrawal and even deportation, leading some to avoid activism or conceal identity during protests.

“You should still be cautious as alienating certain people with decision-making power, e.g. the course director, would put your academic and future career at risk.”

(Male, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“I have very opposing political views from the institution I currently attend, but I am on a student visa and my stay in this country, as well as my future, depend on me maintaining a clean record. There has been very strong pushback on pro-Palestinian speech in the UK and international students have been suspended over it, which results in a deportation.”

(Female, 23, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Language and cultural barriers are also felt to lead to self-censorship. Some international students mention disapproving stares from peers when they expressed personal opinions in the past. Their responses mention fear of speaking up to avoid embarrassment or misunderstanding - which contrasts with home students' (in England) perceptions, whose hesitations to speak freely were often centred around a negative institutional response.

“I know what I want to say in my head and in my first language, but when it comes out in wrong grammar, I felt stupid. The people's face when I say those things kind of traumatised me.”

(Female, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“I know we can freely ask and talk about whatever we think, but personally I am too shy and scared to make mistake. So, I escape.” (Female, 24, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“I don't think I have complete freedom to express some of my views, particularly those relating to the genocide in Palestine, as organisations supporting liberation for Palestine have experienced suppression by my university.” (Female, 24, White, home student in England)

Methods of self-censorship

To avoid “heated confrontations” or “backlash from strong minded students”, participants are cautious about the language they use and are selective about topics they comment on in seminars, group projects, or online forums. When sharing alternative viewpoints some admit that they deliberately avoid contributing or will “hold back” during debates during seminars, lecture and on campus due to fear of “strong reactions” from fellow students who hold the “majority view”. Some participants are uncertain about what is considered “acceptable” which contributes to hesitation or waiting to speak to assess the atmosphere of the conversation before they comment.

“My main concerns at school about self-expression are that, although I'm generally comfortable sharing my views, I hold back once in a while due to social and academic concerns. Personally, I sometimes worry about whether others will judge my opinions or how they would react especially during [discussions of] sensitive topics.” (Male, 19, White, home student in England)

“I feel intense worry about being misunderstood by my peers, as I see it happen often when group discussions become heated. I also feel like I must hold back in discussion because I struggle to know when political discussion is acceptable or not, so I avoid potentially inflammatory topics until someone else takes the lead. I haven't ever worried that I would face academic or disciplinary consequences for my speech.” (Female, 19, White, home student in England)

The fear of judgement and social repercussions is often rooted in uncertainty rather than opposition to debate. Some students reported holding back not because they reject free speech, but because they cannot reliably predict peer responses or institutional reactions. A few participants explain that unclear boundaries, inconsistent enforcement of rules and past experiences of reputational harm heighten this uncertainty, leading to cautious or selective participation.

Some international students express heightened anxiety that controversial comments or disagreement with tutors could negatively affect their grades or their position in university and therefore choose to withhold expressing their views if they disagree with tutors or fellow students. Additionally, a few international students did not feel confident enough to contribute due to feeling their opinion would not be valued because of their appearance or because English is not their first language.

“I respect some tutors that he/she will be objective and give a grade that I deserve. But I don't trust all of the tutors will be that mature to do that. That kind of worry makes me adjust what I say.”

(Female, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“I find the staff welcome to any ideas, opinions and questions. But sometimes from peers in my group I think they are not that welcome to my opinions and sometimes I am misunderstood. I think this is because English is not my first language.” (Female, 24, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

The Israel-Palestine conflict is frequently mentioned as an example of a topic participants hold back from discussing, due to fear of accusations of antisemitism or disciplinary action after witnessing others facing academic consequences. Trans rights are also avoided due to the polarised political climate and “recent legal developments” being said to make this topic potentially emotionally charged. Others refrain from sharing religious beliefs for fear of ridicule or social exclusion.

“I worry sometimes that I'll be shunned or made fun of if I discuss the ideals of Christianity in front of people, especially as my course has a lot of people who really don't like the idea of Christianity.”

(Male, 18, White, home student in England)

“I have seen instances of members of my course get in disciplinary trouble for speaking up about Palestine or even wearing pro-Palestinian pins, so I decided to avoid the risk.” (Female, 21, ethnic minority, home student in England)

“The way news media or government officials talk about people with certain views. And how laws/opinions change e.g. it feels much harder to talk about trans rights with recent legal developments coming down very strongly against trans people's existence in public life and right to be treated according to their lived gender.” (Female, 24, White, home student in England)

Examples of free speech in practice

While most students endorse free speech as a principle, some note that formal protections do not always translate into practice. Most students recognise that free speech is important for learning, but they also raise concerns about expressing their opinions at university. This balance can make free speech feel like both an opportunity and a risk in university life. As one student put it:

“Good discussion requires a diversity of perspectives and if things are taken too far and threatens inclusion then those perspectives will be lost.” (Female, 24, White, home student in England)

“I think my cohort are very aware of the ethical dilemmas our subject faces. We have had many group discussions on topics ranging from racism, indigenous rights, climate change, and vaccination and I have never felt that anyone has been intolerant or raised an especially controversial opinion. However, I don't think the university staff ever took special precautions for this (other than making space for these conversations, which is still important) – I think the students already knew to be respectful.” (Female, 21, White, home student in England)

Others state that discussion can broaden perspectives, such as debates on greenwashing or diagnosing conditions, which are described as respectful and intellectually stimulating.

“We have had discussions on issues such as the value of diagnosing conditions (e.g. ADHD) and the views around sending children to specialist education or keeping them in a mainstream school. There has never been a time where people were intolerant. People respect that others have differing views, which are based on their own experiences but also feel safe in presenting challenges to reflect on.”
(Male, 31, White, home student in England)

Some students describe moments when speaking up led to discomfort, misunderstanding or backlash, making them more cautious about contributing to future discussions. One student reports “unbelievable and aggressive” backlash when discussing personal experiences with stop-and-search, discouraging speaking up in the future. Another describes the pressure of “groupthink” during lectures on the Israel-Palestine conflict, despite the lecturer’s attempts to create an off-the-record space for discussion. Others report comments which they say were based on cultural stereotypes. Because of these experiences, students who say that they were targeted by these stereotypes felt that their right to free speech was not respected.

“For example, today in a lecture the difficult topic of Israel was discussed, and despite the lecturer pausing the recording to allow off the record thoughts, the entire class seemed to be homogenous on the issue. This may be because people don’t feel comfortable speaking in that environment or simply down to the demographics of those in a politics lecture. Either way, there were no dissenting opinions on a topic that probably should have more range.” (Male, 19, White, home student in England)

“Someone on my course once asked me if in my culture it’s normal for cousins to marry. I said not really anymore, nowadays most people choose not to. And she was adamant that it was due to cousins marrying that there are disabilities prevalent in the culture.”

(Female, 22, ethnic minority, home student in England)

“I do not feel comfortable talking about controversial issues as I fear it labels me in certain ways and also gets me unwanted attention.” (Female, 34, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“Yes, because I thought my views would not be valued because of how I physically appear.”

(Female, 22, ethnic minority, home student)

“I worry about peer perception and social consequences.”

(Male, 32, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

International students describe examples of varying good and poor practice, with some reporting productive debates on Uyghur suppression, climate change and AI controversies. Alongside this, discussions on Israel-Palestine are repeatedly cited, with some respondents claiming that criticism of the Israeli government actions was being conflated with antisemitism by peers or university staff.

“Any views opposing such horrific events can be wrongly labelled antisemitic, as some people or institution does not wish to separate critics towards the Israeli governments with views towards the Jewish community. Being able to separate critics towards a government action from hatred towards certain group must be acknowledged to enable free academic discussion.”

(Male, 32, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Some students state that there was intolerance around gender or religion discussions, while others said that they stayed silent due to fear of misinterpretation.

“One tutor freely talked about his opinion on how women should behave and how they should be treated. Some of us think that wasn't right. So, my friend freely told him she disagreed with him and that speech would offend women. I thought the same, but I didn't speak up. Maybe when similar things happen next time, I'll say what I want to say.”

(Female, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Topics seen as particularly controversial/challenging

Defining controversial topics

Participants in the qualitative community generally define controversial topics as those lacking consensus, characterised by multiple opposing viewpoints and heightened disagreement, often challenging “established norms” or dominant social narratives. Participants further emphasise that controversial topics frequently evoke strong emotional responses because they are closely bound to “lived experience”, moral values, or deeply held beliefs – making discussion feel personally exposing or risky.

“[A controversial topic is] a topic where different groups/people have opposing and strongly held beliefs. Often these beliefs are closely tied to their sense of moral right/wrong.”

(Female, 21, White, home student in England)

“[A controversial topic is] one which tends to evoke a strong emotional reaction in people.”

(Male, 24, White, home student in England)

“Controversial topics are subjects that divides opinions or challenges what is accepted generally or discussions that could trigger strong emotions or disagreements morally like in politics, religion, gender etc.” (Male, 19, White, home student in England)

In addition to personal characteristics and values, many students also frequently identify international and domestic politics, immigration, and their own institutional policies as controversial or challenging to discuss, particularly when these topics intersect with current events or media scrutiny. While most participants think that it is rare for institutions to formally label topics as controversial, many describe implicit or indirect signalling through institutional responses.

Across the community, students distinguish between controversy as an intellectual challenge and controversy as a perceived institutional or social risk, with the latter more likely to limit participation and encourage self-censorship.

“The topic of Israel and Palestine was labelled controversial in a recent lecture due to highly divided and extreme opinions around it.” (Male, 19, White, home student in England)

“The topic of the Israel/Palestine occupation and debates/speakers focused on the topic have been deemed controversial, due to their inflammatory nature.”
(Female, 19, White, home student in England)

“Israel/Palestine conflict was labelled controversial, and campus police broke up a peaceful protest.”
(Female, 21, White, home student in England)

Controversial topics in academic settings

Many participants in the online community state that discussing controversial topics is central to academic stimulation and the university experience, provided conversations remain respectful and avoid what they describe as offensive language or hate speech. Participants feel more confident discussing topics they had more of a factual understanding of, but also those on which they think their views would align with the majority. Topics such as climate change or university policies are seen as “less sensitive”, “less personal” and “less divisive”, therefore participants feel more comfortable sharing their views. These “less personal” topics allow conversations to focus on ideas rather than individuals or their experiences.

“I think you can have interesting discussions, and I think talking about these things is important but I also worry about the potential consequences/upsetting people as not everyone wants to have these discussions.” (Female, 24, White, home student in England)

“[Main barrier to free speech is] fear, of what may happen if I did speak out opposing the majority belief.” (Male, 55, White, home student in England)

“Sometimes it feels like there are "correct" opinions to have, and if you don't perfectly fit those, you should stay quiet. So, I try to be careful with words, I don't want to express myself honestly, but I also want to avoid conflicts or accidentally hurting someone. That's why I don't feel completely confident or completely restricted I'm somewhere in the middle.” (Male, 25, White, home student in England)

“The ones I'm comfortable with (mental health, sex and gender, climate change, own uni's policies), I feel I understand well and can provide grounded evidence for. However, the uncomfortable ones (religion, international politics, domestic politics immigration and race) I either don't have a good understanding of the topic area or previous experience has been met with backlash so have anxiety around these topics.” (Female, 23, White, home student in England)

Similar to the quantitative findings, topics related to race, immigration and sex and gender are considered most difficult to discuss as they are tied to personal identity or “lived experience”.

Race/ethnicity is deemed particularly sensitive; many students who are not from an ethnic minority background think that they lacked the knowledge to contribute to conversations around race. They are also concerned about denying the experiences of ethnic minorities, alongside making assumptions or appearing insensitive. In contrast, ethnic minority students worry about being judged based on appearance or differing cultural backgrounds, so fear that their views might be dismissed or misunderstood. It is common for ethnic minority and international students to fear expressing strong opinions which they say could lead to drawing unnecessary attention to themselves from other students and teachers.

“Race can sometimes be difficult to talk about, as there are not many people in my course who look like me.” (Male, 18, ethnic minority, home student in England)

“Race, immigration [are difficult to talk about] because the country seems to be polarised about those topics, and it is something that can bring unwanted attention.”
(Female, 34, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“I have a different race from the majority people in my uni and there is a racist tutor, so the subject comes up every time I talk to him, and it makes me and everyone uncomfortable.”
(Female, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Negative media discourse related to immigration, anti-immigration protests and perceived polarisation around this issue in the UK impacts international students' willingness to share their beliefs on immigration (this was especially felt by those who perceived their universities as "less diverse" in terms of the ethnic backgrounds of students). International students worry that their peers may support these sentiments, which discourages them from engaging in discussions around race and immigration. A few claim that their tutors hold far-right or discriminatory views and that this heightens their reluctance to engage.

"Because of what happened in [redacted] earlier when there were anti-immigration riots. The school is very close to that area, and I might interact with students or staff who support that perspective living in the area." (Female, 31, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

"Immigrant students are blamed for bringing their families and overburdening the health system, even on national TV." (Female, 34, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

"A senior tutor was pictured attending a far-right rally. This made many students angry and upset. It was especially difficult for foreign students on the course."
(Male, 24, White, home student in England)

Sex and gender are also challenging to discuss for participants. These topics are thought to be tied with personal identity, which increases likelihood for "heated/ emotionally charged" conversations. When discussing sex and gender, some participants report caution about phrasing and language to avoid causing offence. Religion and cultural differences present similar concerns for this topic, with students fearing they might unintentionally cause offence.

"With stuff like race or religion it's more about my lack of lived experience - there is only so much I can say given a lack of lived experience/knowledge and it is important to me that I don't assume things or make false statements, so I guess I am more limited in my discussions of these things."
(Female, 24, White British, Home student)

"Most of the time, I feel like I can share my views in class, especially when the topic is neutral or everyone generally agrees. But when the discussion turns to personal beliefs, politics, race, identity related issues I start to second guessing myself. I worry that one small misunderstanding could upset someone or lead to people judging me unfairly." (Male, 25, White, home student in England)

Controversial topics in social settings

The issue of immigration also features when students were asked unprompted what topics they feel uncomfortable discussing. Beyond this, issues regarding Israel/Palestine and party politics also arose, with one student mentioning that they avoid discussing it and try to appear more left wing in front of their peers:

“That I am a Conservative party member; any of my genuine views relating to UK politics I would pretend that I was more left wing.” (Female, 54, White, home student in England)

Other students also mention when unprompted that they do not feel comfortable talking about any controversial topic due to feeling uninformed about each controversial issue (whether this be international or more domestic).

“Any topic because I don’t feel confident enough in my knowledge to express my opinion.”
(Male, 19, White, home student in England)

Self-censorship and barriers to freedom of speech

Self-censorship in academic settings

As mentioned earlier in the report, students are least likely to feel free discussing controversial topics in lectures (whether online or in-person). This pattern of feeling restricted in lectures also emerges when students were asked why they do not feel free speaking about controversial topics. Many mentioned that lectures do not provide sufficient time or an appropriate setting to discuss these issues, with seminars being a better fit:

“In many situations, there is not time for student ideas, such as in a lecture. Asking a relevant question to the current material perhaps, but there is rarely time, nor does it feel appropriate, to derail the class for many people with a ‘controversial topic’.” (Male, 19, White, home student in England)

Self-censorship in social settings

Similar to the quantitative findings, social consequences are a concern for most participants in the community. After witnessing their peers gossip or criticise others for sharing their views, some participants fear harassment, exclusion or judgement which leads to self-censoring. Most participants think that those from majority groups such as White home students or those with “mainstream political views” generally feel safer expressing their beliefs than those from racial, religious, and gender minorities, and/or international students who fear that offering alternative views may draw “unwanted attention” to themselves.

“Students from majorities might feel more safe sharing their views (that are shared by the majority), while in contrast minorities might feel less safe, being afraid of repercussions from the majority.”

(Male, 28, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“Students from minority backgrounds or with unpopular political views often seem more cautious. They might worry about being judged or stereotyped, so they hold back. Meanwhile, students whose opinions match the majority seem more confident speaking.”

(Male, 25, White, home student in England)

“I’ve seen student[s] back down or hold back from contributing because they thought their opinions would not be popular.” (Male, 19, White, home student in England)

Some participants have personally witnessed fellow students refrain from sharing details about their home countries or religious backgrounds. Their motivation is often to avoid negative stereotypes or social backlash around cultural differences. Additionally, these minority groups are more likely to worry about disciplinary action or impacts to their grades from their universities, particularly when their views diverge from the “majority viewpoint”.

“I think students from marginalised groups feel less safe sharing their views because they are worried about harassment or judgement from other students. I think students with viewpoints that go against the university's own views also feel less safe speaking freely because of fear of consequences like disciplinary action, suspension or expulsion.” (Female, 21, ethnic minority, home student in England)

“I think there is always a need to be reticent of how minority groups within the university may feel, there is a strong barrier to their speech. As they are a smaller group in the university, they may feel like they will not be able to have a say on matters that are important to them, as they do not have a majority of people like them.” (Male, 18, White, home student in England)

Some participants state that peers who support Palestine feel unsafe to discuss this topic on campus after witnessing harsh disciplinary action against peers who voiced their opinions through activism on campus. Some also fear being labelled as antisemitic or “pro-terrorism” whilst “pro-Jewish” students fear being branded as “pro-genocide”.

“It has been evident that vocally pro-Palestine students and particularly those who engage in activism are less safe sharing their views and have been subject to disciplinary action by the university, dismissive treatment by the students’ union, and aggressive treatment from campus security.”

(Female, 24, White, home student in England)

“I think pro-Palestine students sometimes are less able to express their opinions for fear of being labelled as pro-terrorism or antisemitic. Paradoxically, students who express pro-Jewish views are also more at risk of being labelled Zionists or pro-genocide.”

(Female, 32, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Some international students, and others observing their experiences, also feel that coming from countries where free speech is restricted or where individuals face persecution for speaking out can affect how safe these students feel about expressing their views.

“I think previous lived experience of persecution over one’s beliefs and speech can be a factor for a lot of people, especially international students. I have mentioned my experience of watching academia being eroded in my home country being a strong influence of my self-censorship. Also, immigrant status that depends on the university is a major factor as well.”

(Female, 23, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“The international students fear misunderstanding and being judged. It’s just not in many countries’ cultures to have freedom of speech, so it will be hard to get used to it. All this freedom will not help because they are used to keep their opinion to themselves.”

(Male, 28, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

Creating open discussion environments and solutions

This section explores how universities can actively foster environments where students feel safe and supported to engage in open dialogue on controversial topics, drawing on both students’ lived experiences and their proposals for practical, institution-led solutions.

During the online community, students highlight the importance of clarity and reassurance from institutions. They want staff to state explicitly that freedom of speech is welcomed and outline ground rules for open and tolerant debate. Students emphasize the need for expectations to be embedded in their course syllabus, induction materials, and online platforms. They note that visible norms reduce uncertainty, prevent misinterpretation and signal that controversial topics can be discussed without risk of academic or institutional reprisal.

“Set up specific environments for it, make their stance on controversial topics clear so nothing is misinterpreted.” (Female, 22, White, home student in England)

Most students want universities to draw a clear line between lawful free speech and harmful behaviour. Transparent policies reassure students that expressing unpopular opinions will not lead to disciplinary action, while also protecting against hate speech and harassment. Students feel that ambiguity around policy boundaries often contributes more to self-censorship than the existence of rules themselves.

“Make the distinction between freedom of speech and the need to avoid insulting others... or expressing prejudice clear.” (Female, 21, White, home student in England)

“Reassurance about free speech policies and what is/isn’t allowed.”
(Female, 21, ethnic minority, home student in England)

Similar to the survey findings, some community participants also stress the role lecturers and moderators have in guiding discussions. Some students highlight that skilled facilitation – including neutrality, active listening, and timely intervention – helps maintain constructive dialogue and prevents discussions from escalating into personal attacks or hostility. Some suggest training staff to de-escalate heated exchanges and intervene when conversations cross into harassment or intimidation. They feel that this proactive approach would reassure students that their contributions will be respected.

“Ensure that there is no tolerance for discrimination and harassment. Provide guidelines for in-class discussions to keep them respectful.” (Female, 24, White, home student in England)

Participants in the qualitative community confirm the quantitative findings that students prefer smaller, structured discussion groups for sensitive topics, as these settings feel less intimidating and allow everyone to speak. Techniques such as inviting quieter voices first and using anonymous input channels (e.g. online forms or question boxes) are seen as effective in reducing anxiety. Anonymous options are particularly valued by those concerned about peer backlash, misinterpretation, or reputational consequences.

“In a group discussion, we should be encouraged to let the least senior, least experienced or least active voice their opinions first.” (Male, 22, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“Maybe the option for anonymously raising a talking point would help.”
(Female, 21, White, home student in England)

Students note that identity-linked topics such as race, religion, and gender often feel personal and emotionally charged. They emphasise the need for moderators to ensure respectful engagement.

“Being invited to participate more and being encouraged by saying our points are valued.”

(Female, 22, ethnic minority, home student in England)

“Being invited and encouraged for my views and them being valued and respected” (Female, 22, ethnic minority, home student in England)

When it comes to managing protests and controversial events on campuses, a few students call for universities to allow lawful protests and political events to proceed, with clear boundaries against hate speech and violence. Suggestions include designated protest areas, proportional security, and academic chairs to moderate contentious debates. These measures are viewed as necessary to uphold free expression while maintaining safety.

“Allow the discussion, allow the protests... only intervene if they are saying or doing something which causes others harm.” (Male, 27, White, home student in England)

“Provide additional security at controversial events... punish offenders who threaten or use violence to disrupt free speech.” (Male, 55, White, home student in England)

Finally, external factors such as social media backlash and reputational concerns are seen as barriers to open dialogue. A few participants express particular frustration when senior leaders were perceived to avoid difficult questions or discussions, interpreting this as passive discouragement. Transparent engagement, visible accountability, and clear communication are viewed as essential to sustaining trust in institutional commitments to free expression.

“People at the university executive level should engage directly with discussions on controversial topics and not dodge questions.” (Female, 32, ethnic minority, non-EU international student)

“Be upfront about their funding and what they fund so that when they present an opinion it’s clearer why they have that opinion.” (Female, 21, White, home student in England)

Appendix

Approach and methodology

The findings are based on a multi-staged programme of research:

- A qualitative online community, lasting 4 days and involving 42 students.
- A quantitative survey of 1,039 university students across England.

Qualitative methodology

Participants were recruited from the YouGov panel using a sampling strategy to ensure diversity and relevance to the research objectives.

A qualitative online community is a virtual, controlled, interactive platform which allowed participants to engage in discussions and complete activities and tasks. The qualitative online community featured a set of tasks and discussion prompts designed to take approximately 25–30 minutes across four days. Participants were required to complete each day's activities before moving on to the next.

The topics explored were organised thematically across the four days. The first day focused on defining freedom of speech and academic freedom, as well as participants' experiences of speaking freely in academic settings. The second day examined self-censorship and barriers to expression, including social, academic, and disciplinary concerns. On the third day, discussions centred on how different student groups experience freedom of speech and the impact of controversial topics on the campus climate. The final day invited participants to propose solutions and imagine their ideal environment for open discussion, including resources, policies, and initiatives that could foster a culture of free speech.

An online community approach offers several advantages over other methods. Participants (particularly younger audiences) often feel more comfortable sharing their views and experiences in a private community setting rather than a group environment. The dedicated community platform allows students to think about and reflect on their experiences, enabling us to capture more in-depth insights, rather than relying on memory during an interview or a focus group. This extended engagement period enables an ethnographic approach, providing authentic access to student's views and thoughts over several days.

The four-day online community ran from the 4th - 7th November 2025 with 42 students studying at English higher education providers registered with the Office for Students. Recruitment aimed to achieve a mix across key demographic and educational variables, including age, sex, ethnicity, region, socio-economic status, and household income. The sample also included both domestic and international students (EU and non-EU), a range of subjects and different higher education qualifications.

Figure 14. Qualitative sample composition

	Number of participants
Total	42
Age	
18 to 20	12
21 to 24	15
25 to 29	5
30+	10
Sex	
Male	21
Female	21
Fee type	
Home student in England	29
International student	13
Ethnicity	
White (including white minorities)	24
Non-white ethnic minority	18

Quantitative methodology

Quantitative findings are based on a sample of 1,039 university students from across England. Fieldwork was conducted using online research methods between the 1st to 18th December 2025.

Figures are weighted and representative of home students in England by age, sex, study level (undergraduate/postgraduate), and study region. The sample and weight scheme are drawn from Higher Education Statistics Agency figures.

Figure 15. Quantitative sample composition

	Unweighted N	Weighted N	Weighted %
Total	1039	1039	100%
Age			
18 to 20	424	384	41%
21 to 24	312	277	30%
25 to 29	119	135	11%
30+	184	243	18%
Sex			
Male	407	449	39%
Female	632	590	61%
Stage			
Undergraduate	750	748	72%
Postgraduate	289	291	28%
Study region			
North East	66	54	6%
North West	112	117	11%
Yorkshire and The Humber	110	98	11%
East Midlands	102	85	10%
West Midlands	107	109	10%
East of England	56	72	5%
London	208	234	20%
South East	137	137	13%
South West	108	92	10%
The Open University in England	33	41	3%
Fee type			
Home student in England	969	963	93%
International student	70	76	7%

	Unweighted N	Weighted N	Weighted %
Ethnicity			
White (including white minorities)	750	751	75%
Non-white ethnic minority	244	247	25%

Quality assurance

To ensure the findings are reliable and robust, several data quality measures were conducted throughout multiple stages of the project. These included panel-wide measures as well as respondent-level measures that are employed both in-survey and during the data cleaning/processing phase. Some measures included: attention & cooperation checks, soft launches, de-duplication, assessing technical data (such as checks to geolocation data, IP address consistency/duplication, etc), checks for consistency as well as response plausibility checks (e.g. analysing free-text answers). Any responses collected which were not deemed high quality were discarded and are not included in the final data.

Glossary of terms

Challenging/controversial topics

The following definition of challenging/controversial topics was shown to participants.

- Some ideas or theories may be considered challenging or controversial to discuss at university/college or more broadly. Such ideas or theories may arise, for instance, in discussion of the following topics:
 - Bioscience and medical ethics
 - Climate change and the environment
 - Domestic politics
 - Immigration
 - International politics e.g. policies of a foreign government
 - Race and racism
 - Religion
 - Sex and gender
 - Health policy (e.g. policies relating to vaccination).

However, this list is not exhaustive. Please consider these areas and any other topics when thinking about the following questions.

Demographic terms

The following categories were used for data analysis and reporting.

- **Ethnicity:** A question consistent with the Government’s harmonised standard for ethnic group questions in England was asked to all students. Those who identified their ethnic group/ background as English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, or any other white background were categorised as “White”. All other ethnic groups combined are categorised as having an ethnic minority background for the purposes of this report.
- **Fee type/international students:** Students were asked the type of fees they are paying for their current university course (home fees or international fees). Those paying international fees were asked if their home country is within or outside the EU. Students were not asked to name their home country, and any mention of specific countries has been redacted to preserve the anonymity of respondents.
- **Social grade:** A social classification which assigns a grade based on the occupation and employment of the chief income earner. For the purposes of the report, the social grades are grouped into ABC1 (higher social grades) and C2DE (lower social grades).
- **STEM degrees:** Students were asked the main degree subject they were studying (joint honours students were allowed to select two subjects). Those studying biological sciences, computer sciences, engineering, mathematics, or physical sciences were grouped as “STEM” subjects.

Freedom of speech

The following definitions of freedom of speech and academic freedom were shown to participants.

- When we say “Freedom of Speech”, we are referring to the freedom a person has to impart ideas, viewpoints or information by means of speech, writing or images.
- When we say “Academic Freedom”, we are referring to the freedom academic staff have to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas without risk to their jobs, privileges or likelihood of securing promotion or other jobs.

Both are rights protected on English university/college campuses by law.