

16 June 2025

# Freedom of speech in higher education



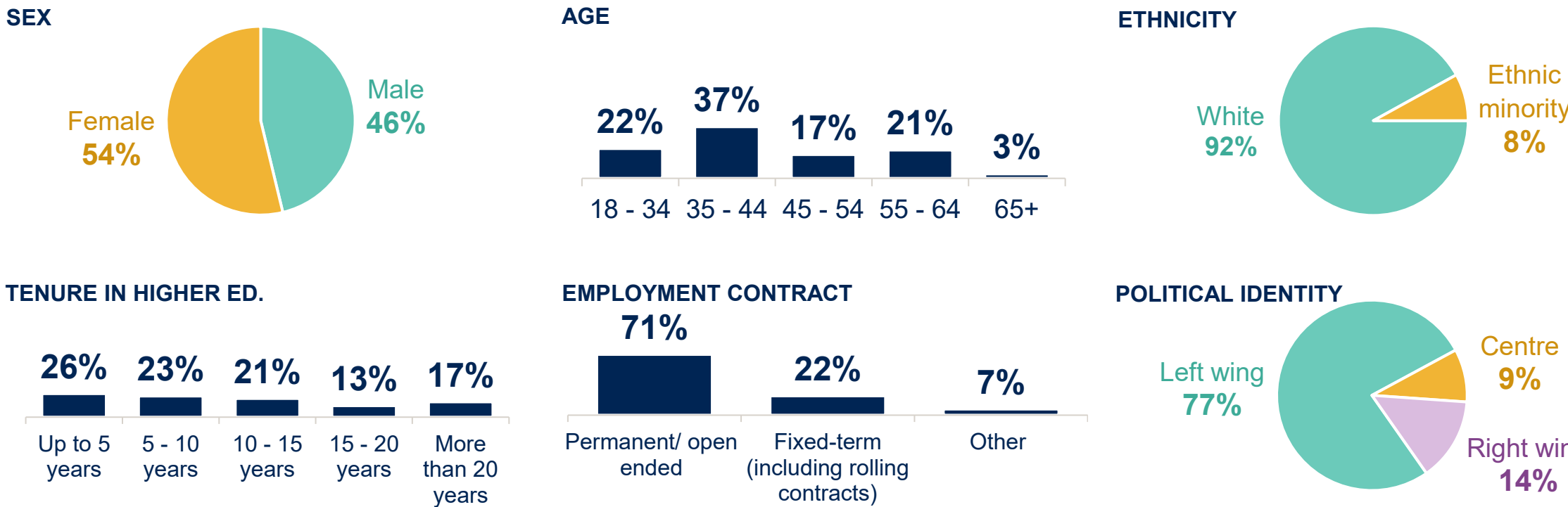
Report to the OfS by YouGov

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# Background

- On behalf of the Office for Students (OfS), YouGov conducted a survey of research and teaching staff in higher education in England.
- The survey focused on perceptions of free speech within higher education, and whether academics felt free to express challenging/controversial ideas and theories in their teaching, research, and other contexts.
- Fieldwork was undertaken between 15 March and 19 April 2024. Total sample size was 1,234 respondents.
- The sample has been weighted to reflect teaching staff in higher education by sex, age, and contract type. Below is a summary of the demographic characteristics of the weighted sample.



# Key findings (1)

## General perceptions of “freedom of speech” in higher education

- Most (89%) academics are confident they understand what freedom of speech means in higher education.
- Among those who shared comments in their own words, 15% feel there was a distinction between academic speech to communicate ideas and discriminatory speech. A similar proportion (15%) of those who shared comments do not see free speech as a major issue or perceive it as a “manufactured” issue.
- However, 8% of those who shared comments make general reference to self-censoring, and 2% mention self-censoring because they are uncertain about their university’s current policies/ practice.
- Half (50%) of the academics surveyed say that staff at their university can express views on some, but not all, controversial topics. **One in ten (9%) say they are not free to express views on any controversial topics.**
- Two-fifths (41%) say their university’s tolerance of a range of viewpoints has not changed during their tenure, while nearly three in ten (28%) say their university has become less tolerant.
- However, over two-thirds (70%) think that their university does protect freedom of speech and robust debate.
- Just under half (46%) think their university would prioritise freedom of speech over not causing offence, while two-thirds (67%) believe their university would prioritise staff/ students feeling safe over freedom of speech.
- Male academics are more likely than female academics to say their university prioritises freedom of speech over not causing offence (56% vs 37%).

# Key findings (2)

## Perceptions of personal freedom of speech in teaching, research, and other contexts

- Around a fifth (21%) do not feel free to discuss challenging/ controversial topics in their teaching. **This rises to a third (34%) of academics from ethnic minority backgrounds.**
- One in six (16%) academics do not feel free to discuss challenging/ controversial topics in their research and more than one in three (34%) do not feel free in other contexts such as speaking engagements and social media.
- In all three contexts, **female academics are more likely than male academics to say they do not feel free discussing challenging/ controversial topics.** In particular, a fifth of female academics (21%) say they do not feel free in their research compared to one in ten (11%) male academics saying the same.
- The leading reasons for not feeling free in each context are fears of professional and social consequences.
- Over half of those who do not feel free in their teaching cite pressure from senior staff (52%) or desire to avoid offences (53%).
- **A quarter (24%) of those who do not feel free in their teaching cite fear of physical attack.** This is consistent across tenure, sex, and political identity. This amounts to 5% of all academics surveyed.
- The most common topics that academics surveyed do not feel free to discuss are sex/ gender and race/ racism. However, there is considerable variation depending on whether it is in a teaching, research, or other context.

## Experiences of restrictions on freedom of speech

- 7% of academics surveyed have experienced negative comments/ treatment from senior staff as a result of expressing challenging/ controversial ideas.
- Of those who have experienced negative comments/ treatment, this most often came about after expressing views on sex/ gender (38%) or international politics (27%).

# ► Perceptions around “freedom of speech”

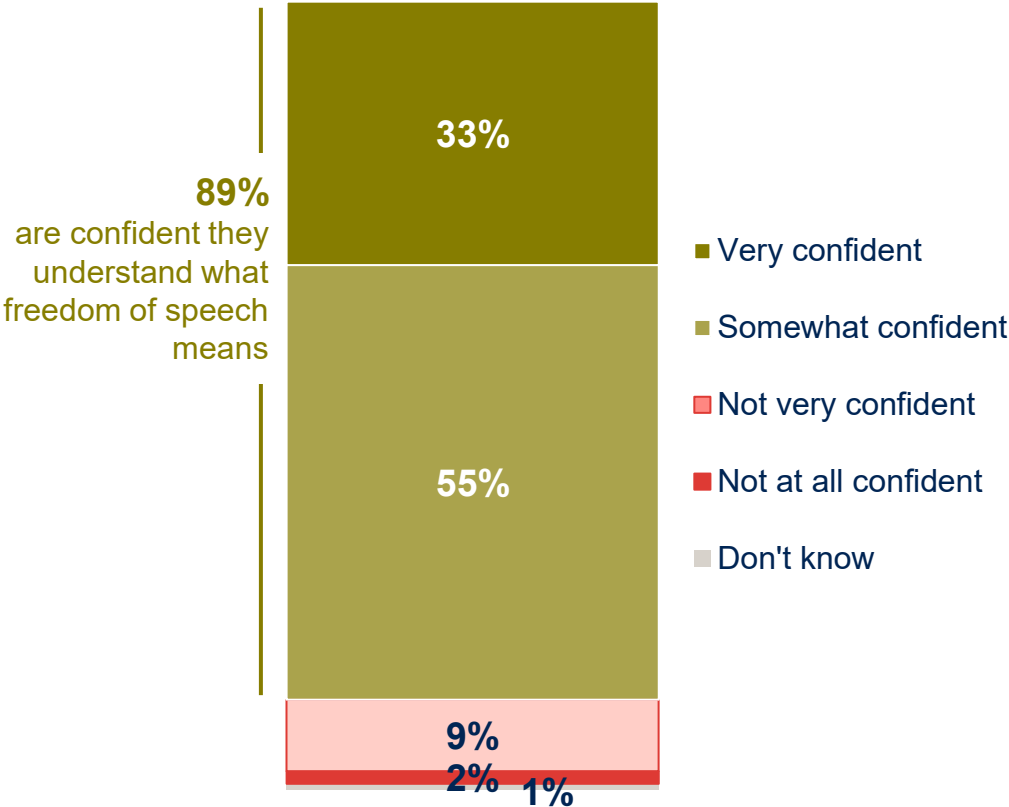
# Nearly all academics are confident they understand what freedom of speech means in higher education



Nine in ten are confident they understand what “freedom of speech” means in higher education, broadly consistent across different types of academics.

Confidence in understanding what “freedom of speech” means in higher education

There is no significant variation in overall confidence by political identity, ethnicity, or length of tenure in higher education.



However, those with permanent contracts are more likely than those on fixed-term contracts to be **very** confident they understand what “freedom of speech” means in higher education (37% vs 26%).

Male academics are also significantly more likely than female academics to say they are **very** confident in their understanding (41% vs 27%).

Q: How confident are you in your understanding of what “freedom of speech” means in higher education in England?  
Base: All academics surveyed (1234)

# However, they have mixed perspectives on how “freedom of speech” and related debates are actually dealt with

When asked for any further thoughts on the topics raised in the survey, academics' views can be grouped into three themes:

## Pressure and direction

Academics who shared comments identified key factors that may be at play in devoting attention to/ directing freedom of speech discussions in higher education.

These generally fell into three areas:

- **External agendas:** 14% of those who commented mentioned pressure from the political right, with 4% mentioning pressure from the left.
- **Student pressure:** 8% of those who shared their views said that people/ students are too easily offended or are not receptive to discussion of controversial topics. However, a similar proportion (9%) do not experience issues with freedom of speech or say their students are receptive to discussions.
- **Reputation and revenue:** some staff believe that universities worry about media attention (8%), while 2% negatively mentioned marketisation and revenue concerns.

## Different types of speech

Some academics said that academic freedom – to discuss and explore controversial topics in their teaching and research, based on evidence and expertise – is distinct from hate speech and discriminatory views. Of those who shared comments, 15% are in this vein.

Similarly, 15% of those who shared comments express that they do not see freedom of speech as a major issue or that they perceive concerns as a “manufactured” issue.

Indeed, 5% of those who expressed an opinion said that some topics intrinsically require sensitivity and nuance but that context is not infringing on freedom of speech.

However, a similar proportion of those who shared comments (4%) see a lack of consistency or consensus in how their university deals with contentious topics.

## Self-censorship concerns

There is an awareness among some respondents of self-censoring – 8% of those who shared comments made general reference to their self-censorship.

In particular, 8% of those who expressed opinions mentioned caution in light of some topics becoming increasingly polarised.

Academics commented on a lack of consensus on what constitutes freedom of speech and what topics are considered controversial – 2% specifically mentioned censoring themselves due to uncertainty about their university's policy/ practice.

In general, staff who shared comments had mixed perspectives on their university's policy and practice in this area. One in ten (10%) mentioned their university's policies in a negative light, while 8% mentioned them in a positive light.

# Most feel academics are free to express views on at least some controversial topics and many say tolerance is unchanged



Two-fifths say academics are free to express any views - this is highest among those who identify as centrist (54%), falling to 28% of those who identify as right-wing.

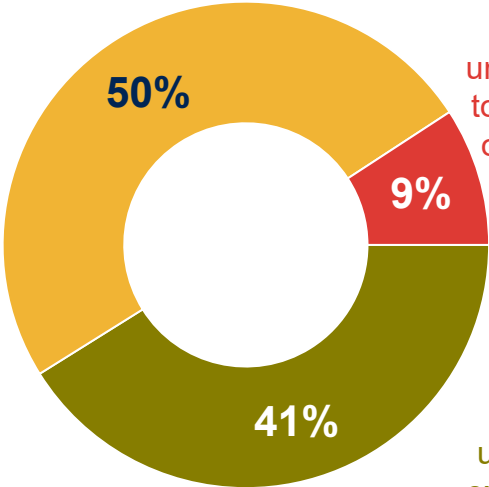
Perceived freedom to express controversial views  
(as long as they are not breaking the law)



Two-fifths say the tolerance of viewpoints has not changed over their tenure, but this falls to 21% of those in mathematics. 42% of those in mathematics and 36% of those in health/medicine think their university is now less tolerant.

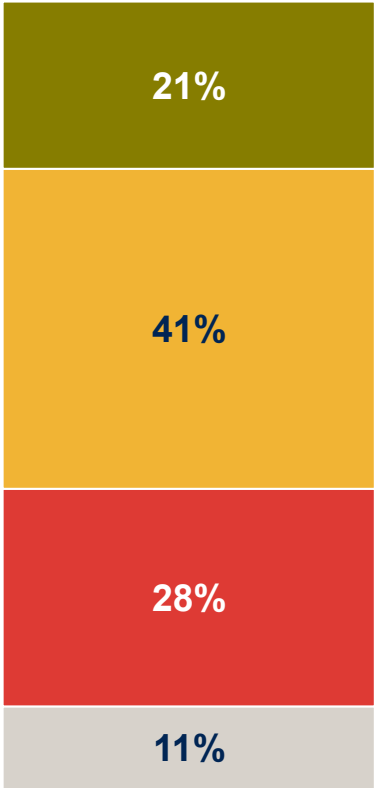
How university's tolerance of a range of viewpoints has changed

Academics at my university are free to express their views on **some, but not all** controversial topics



Academics at my university are **not free** to express their views on any controversial topic

Academics at my university **are free** to express their views on any controversial topic



- More tolerant
- Have not changed
- Less tolerant
- Don't know/prefer not to say

Q: Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?  
Base: All academics surveyed (1234)

Q: Regarding your university or college's tolerance of a wide range of viewpoints, would you say in the time that you have been working there that they have become...?  
Base: All academics surveyed (1234)



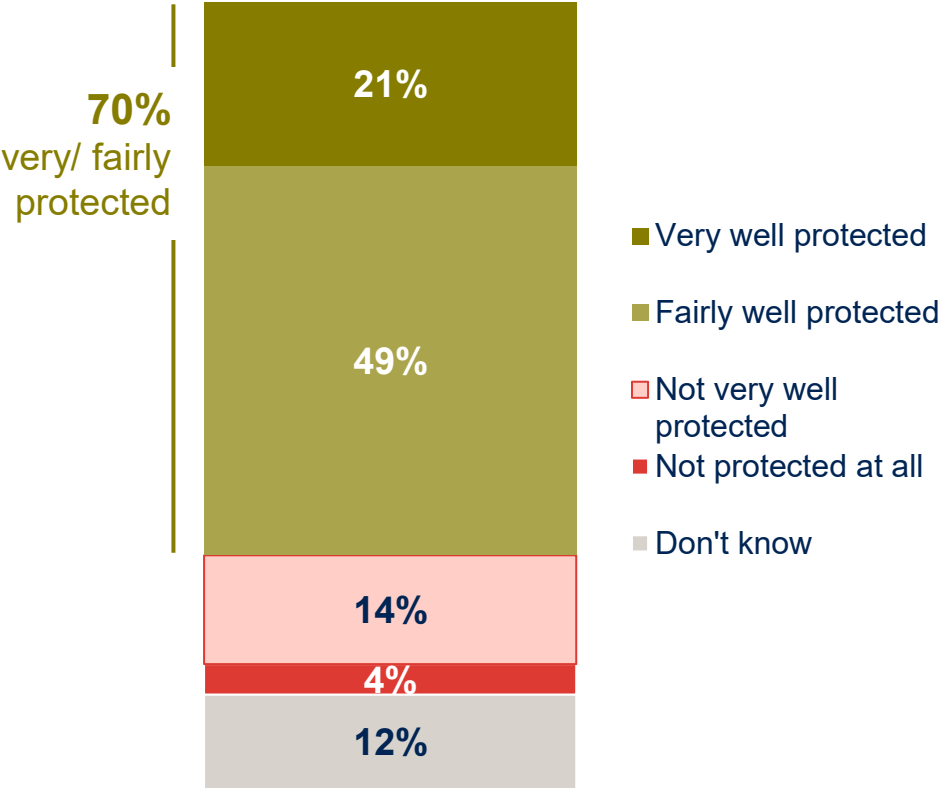
# Many academics feel their university does protect freedom of speech and robust debate



The majority say their university protects freedom of speech/ robust debate very/ fairly well. However, nearly one in five (18%) say their university does not protect freedom of speech/ robust debate very well or at all.

How well freedom of speech and robust debate are protected

Those who say their university has become less tolerant are split on how well their university protects freedom of speech/ robust debate - **44%** say it does this well while **46%** say it does not (10% do not know)



Of those who say their university protects freedom of speech/ robust debate very or fairly well:

- 51%** think academics at their university are free to express **any** views
- 47%** think **some, but not all**, views can be expressed freely
- 3% do not think** any views on controversial topics can be expressed

# Academics tend to think their university would prioritise freedom of speech over not causing offence, but not over feelings of safety

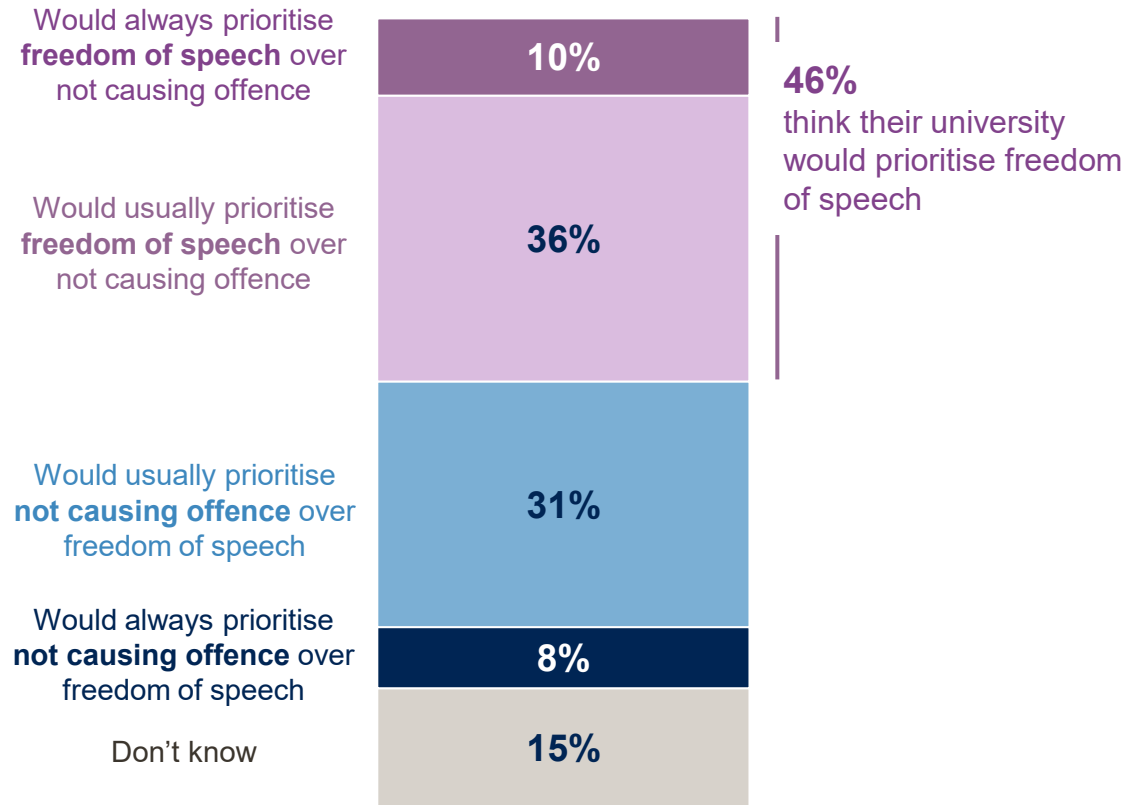


Nearly half think their university prioritises free speech over causing offence. Male academics are more likely than female academics to say their university prioritises freedom of speech (56% vs 37%).



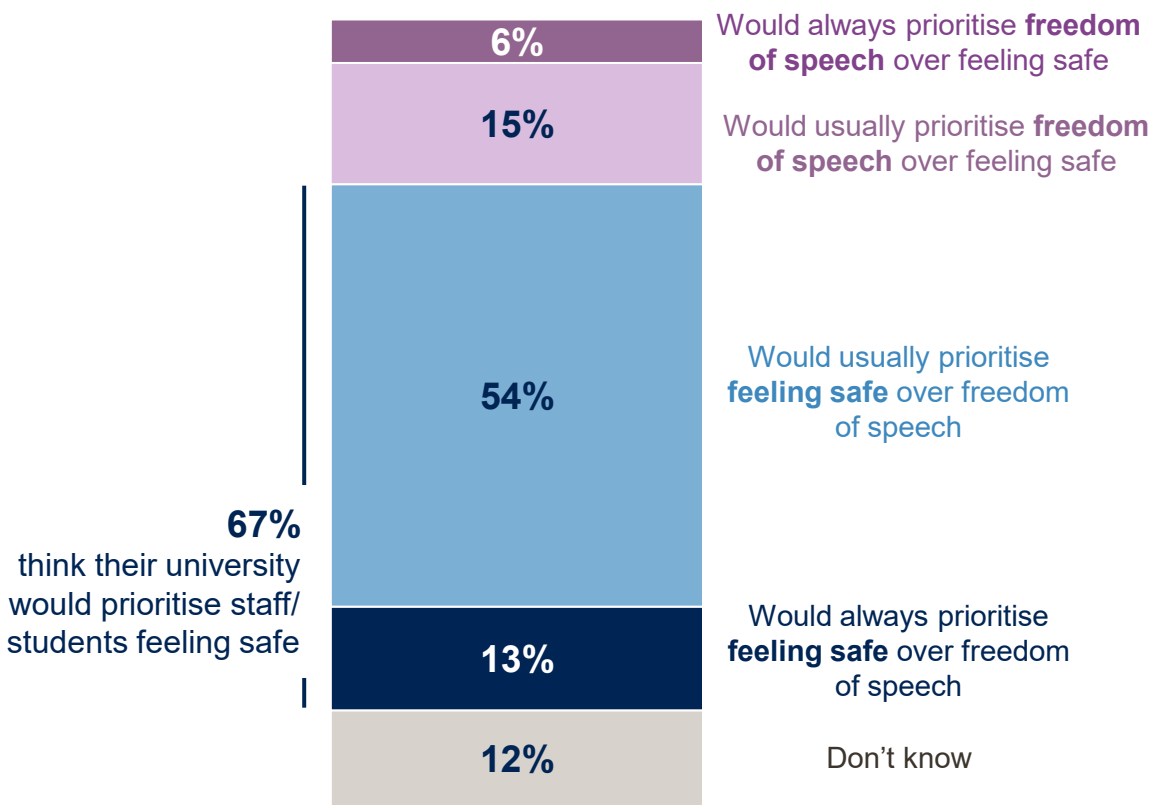
When it comes to staff/ students feeling safe, a fifth (21%) say their university would prioritise free speech over this – although this rises to 31% of those who have been in their role for more than 20 years.

Perception of university’s priority between freedom of speech and causing offence



Q: 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 academics surveyed (1234)

Perception of university’s priority between freedom of speech and staff/ students feeling safe



Q: 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 academics surveyed (1234)

▶ **Perceived “freedom  
of speech”**

# A sizeable minority do not feel free in their teaching, citing fear of professional and social consequences

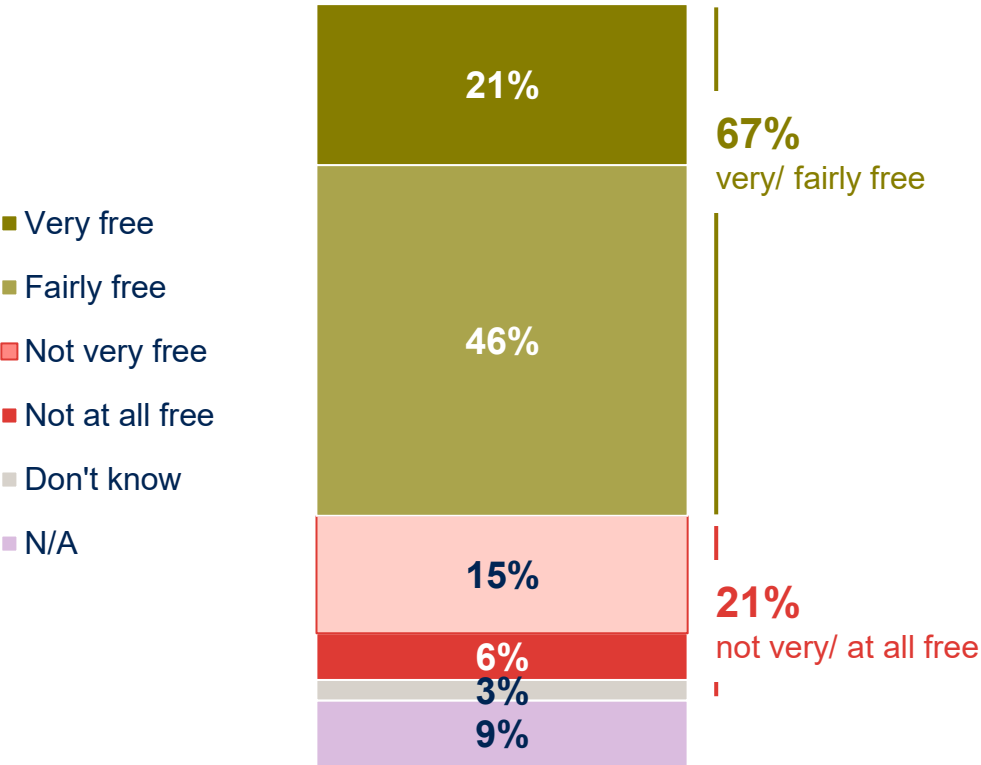


A fifth do not feel free to discuss controversial/challenging topics in their teaching. This rises from 19% of academics who identify as left-wing to a third (32%) of right-wing academics.



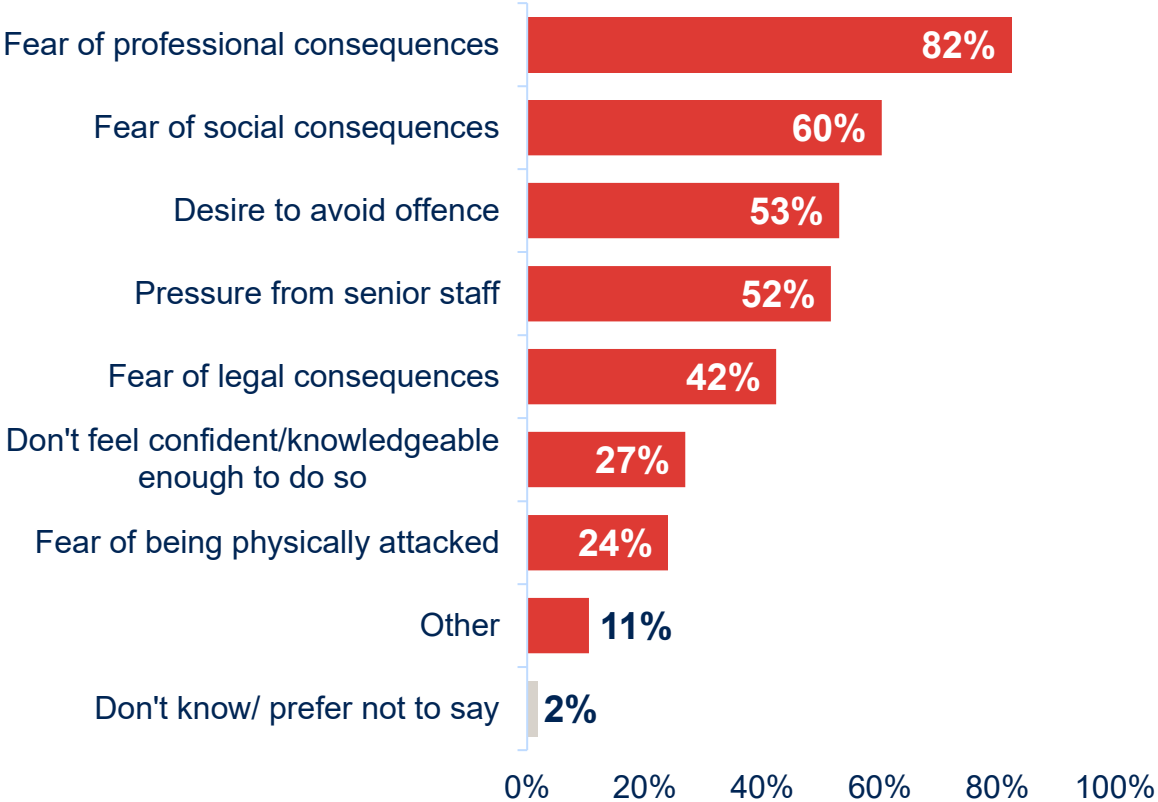
A majority cite fear of professional or social consequences as the reason they do not feel free in their teaching, but a quarter cite fear of physical attacks.

How free to discuss challenging/ controversial topics in their teaching



Q: 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? In your teaching.  
Base: All academics surveyed (1234)

Reasons do not feel free to discuss these topics in their teaching



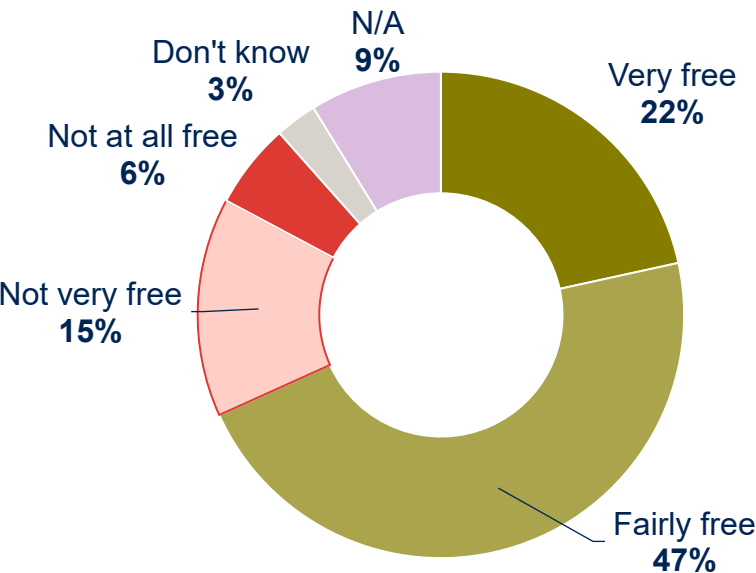
Q: You said that you do not feel free to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/ topics in the following scenario(s)... In your teaching. Which, if any, of the following are reasons why?  
Base: All academics surveyed who do not feel free to discuss controversial topics (278)

# Academics from non-white ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely than white academics to say they do not feel free in their teaching



Over two-thirds (68%) of white academics feel very or fairly free to discuss challenging/ controversial topics in their teaching, while a fifth (20%) do not feel free to do this.

How free to discuss challenging/controversial topics in their teaching (white academics)

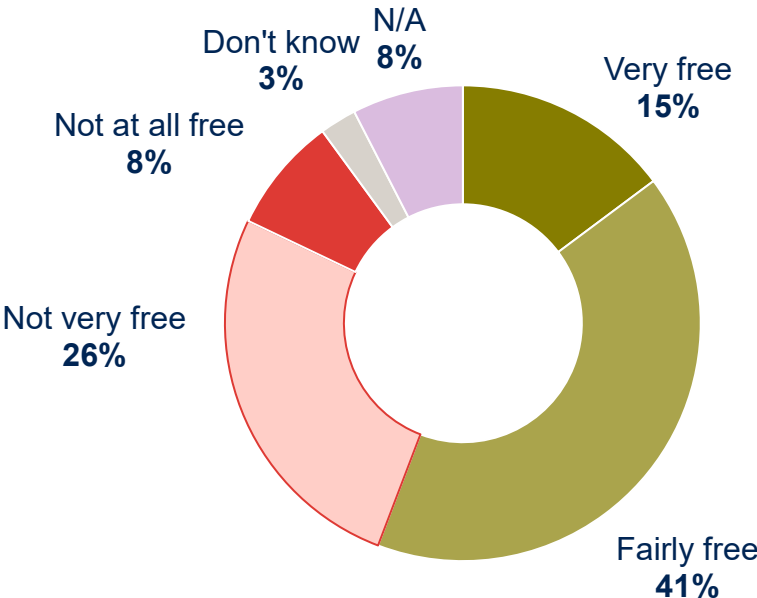


Q: If you wanted to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/topics, how free, if at all, would you feel to do so in the following environments? In your teaching.  
Base: All white academics surveyed (1138)



Over half (56%) of non-white ethnic minority academics feel very or fairly free to discuss challenging/ controversial topics in their teaching. A third (34%) do not feel free to do so, significantly higher than white academics.

How free to discuss challenging/controversial topics in their teaching (non-white ethnic minority academics)



Q: 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? In your teaching.  
Base: All non-white ethnic minority academics surveyed (73)

# A majority of academics feel free in their research, but those who don't feel free fear professional consequences

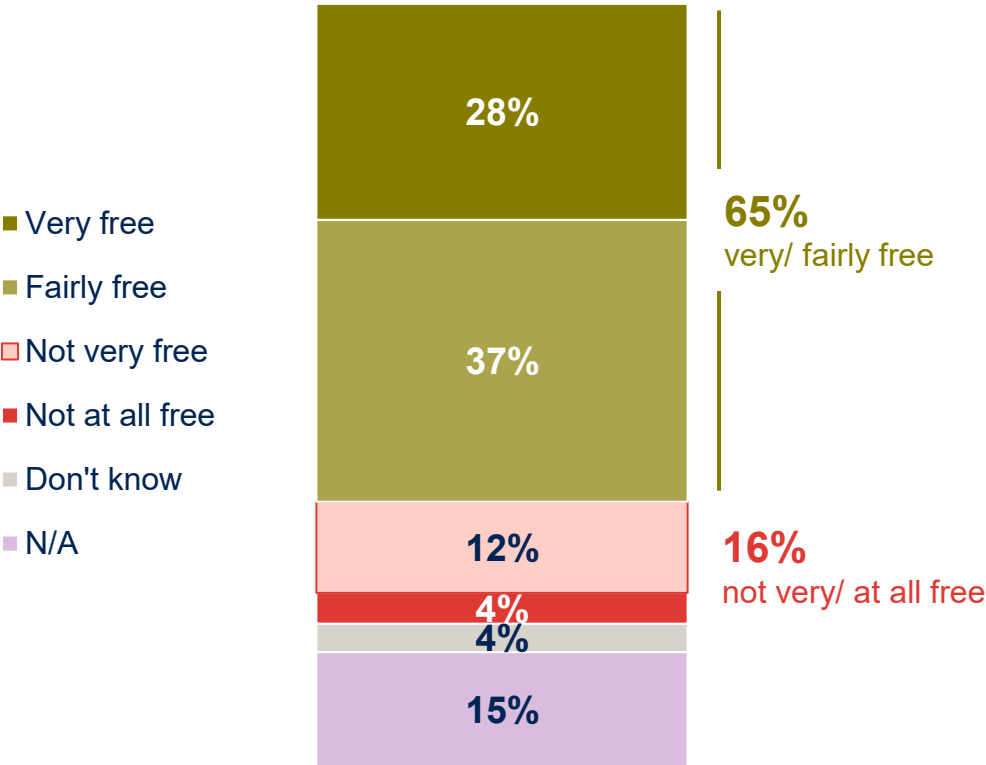


Two-thirds feel free in research contexts - this is lower amongst academics who consider themselves right-wing (51% feel free) compared to 69% of academics who consider themselves left-wing.



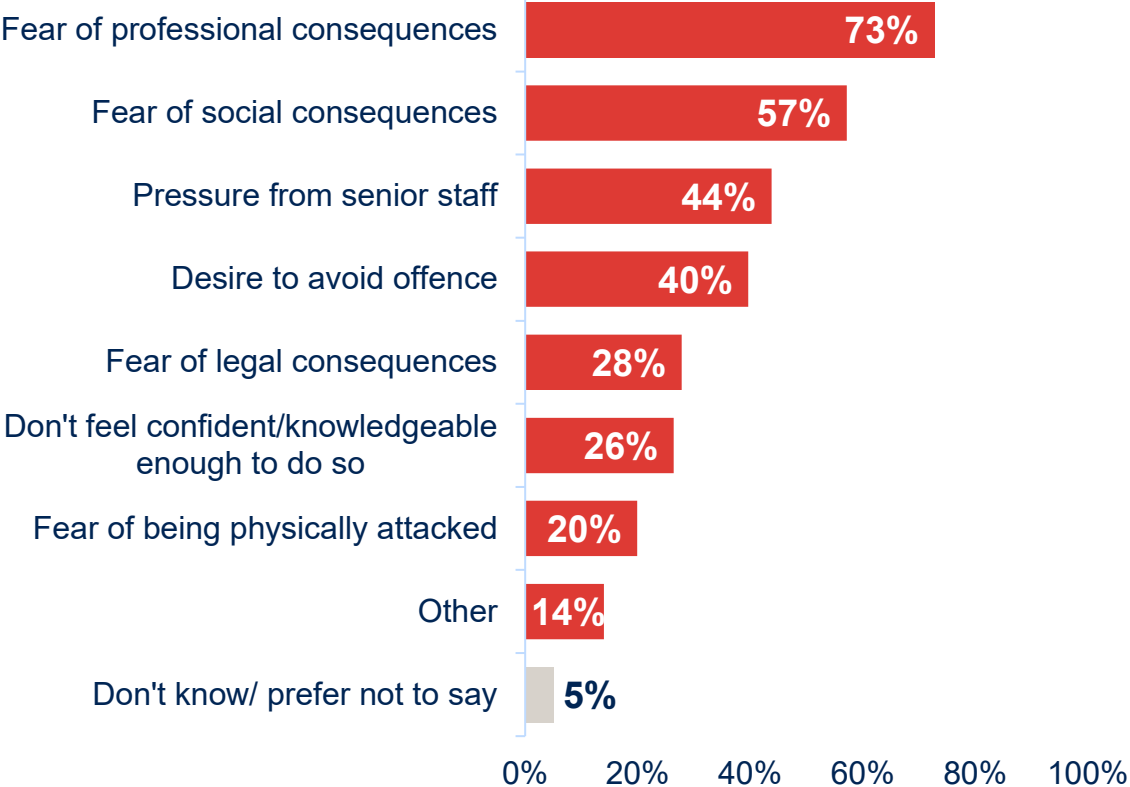
Fear of professional and social consequences remain chief amongst academic's concerns. However, those with more than 10 years tenure in higher education cite pressure from senior staff (58%).

How free to discuss challenging/controversial topics in their research



Q: 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? In your research.  
Base: All academics surveyed (1234)

Reasons do not feel free to discuss these topics in their research



Q: You said that you do not feel free to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/ topics in the following scenario(s)... In your research. Which, if any, of the following are reasons why?  
Base: All academics surveyed who do not feel free to discuss controversial topics (189)

# “Other contexts” are where the most academics feel restricted, while the underlying reasons remain the same

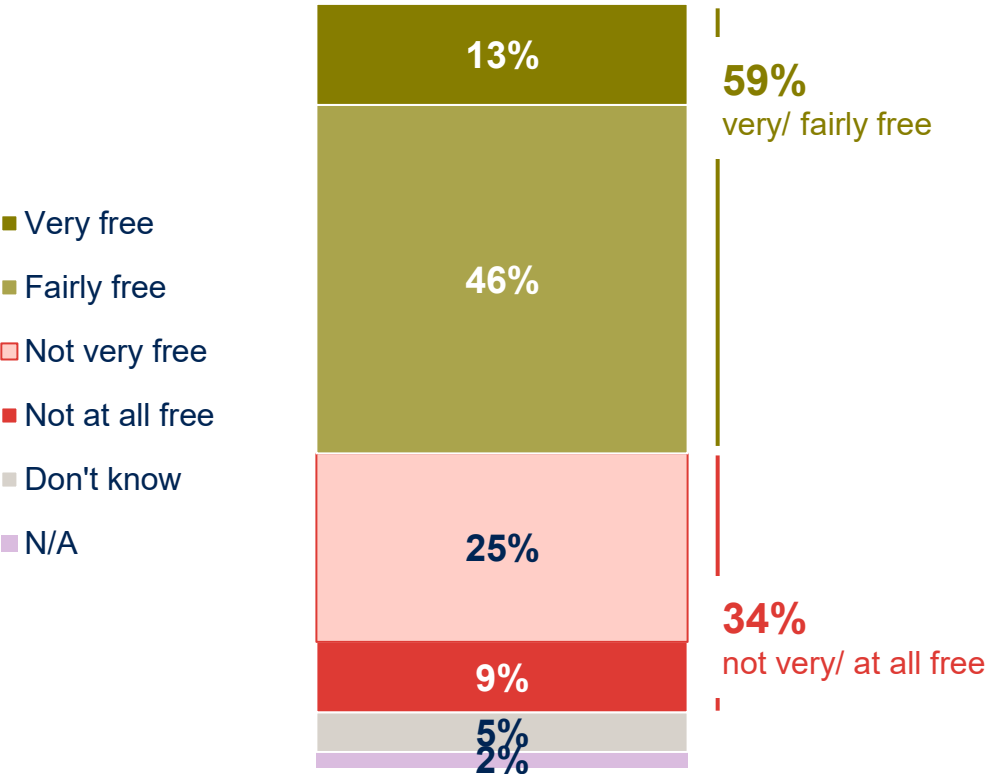


A third of academics do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in contexts other than teaching or research (e.g. speaking engagements, social media), rising from 31% of left-wing academics to 47% of right-wing academics.



Social and professional consequences continue to be feared, but left-wing academics are more likely to cite a desire to avoid offence (51% vs 34% right-wing).

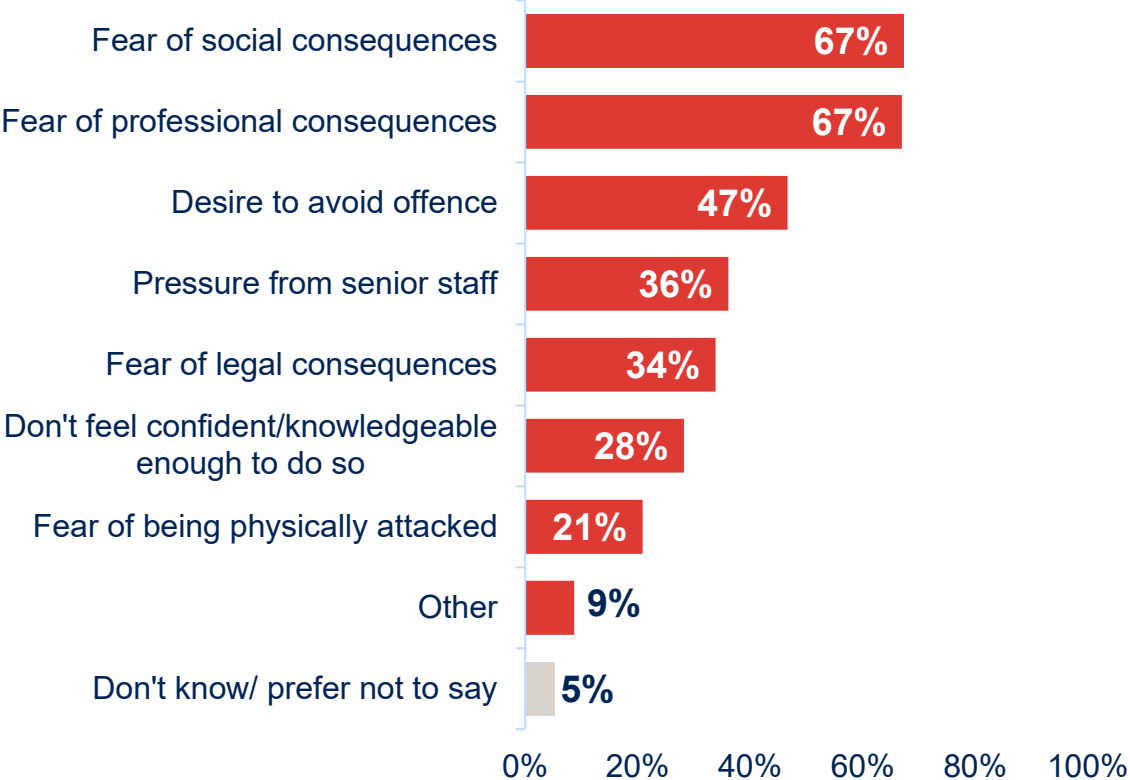
How free to discuss challenging/controversial topics in other contexts generally



Q: 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...In other contexts more generally (e.g. speaking engagements, blogs, social media, discussions with colleagues)

Base: All academics surveyed (1234)

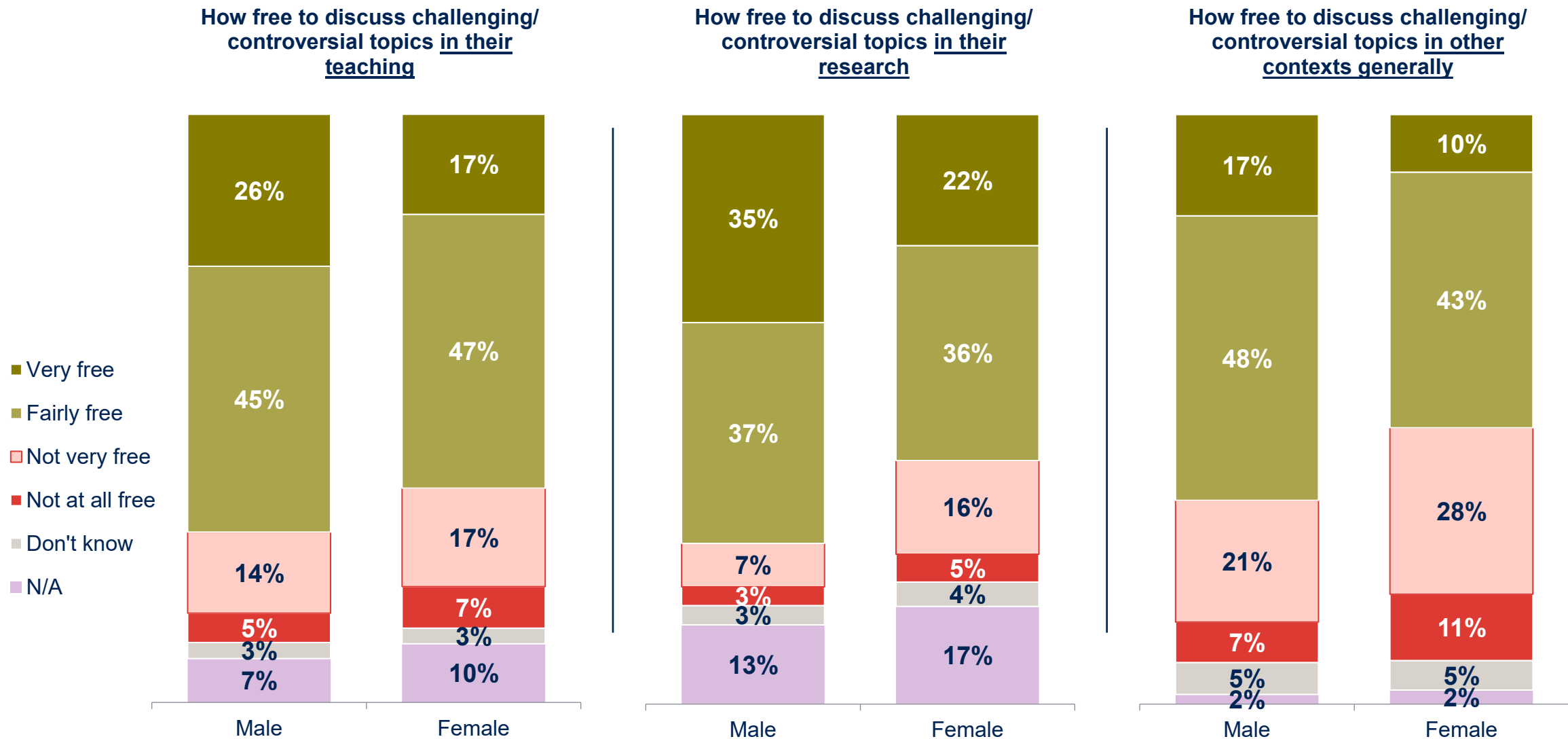
Reasons do not feel free to discuss these topics in other contexts generally



Q: You said that you do not feel free to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/ topics in the following scenario(s)... In other contexts more generally (e.g. speaking engagements, blogs, social media, discussions with colleagues). Which, if any, of the following are reasons why?

Base: All academics surveyed who do not feel free to discuss controversial topics (421)

# Male academics are more likely than female academics to say that they feel free to discuss challenging/ controversial topics in each scenario



Q: 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...[In your teaching/ In your research/ In other contexts more generally (e.g. speaking engagements, blogs, social media, discussions with colleagues)]  
Base: All male academics surveyed (615); All female academics surveyed (619)

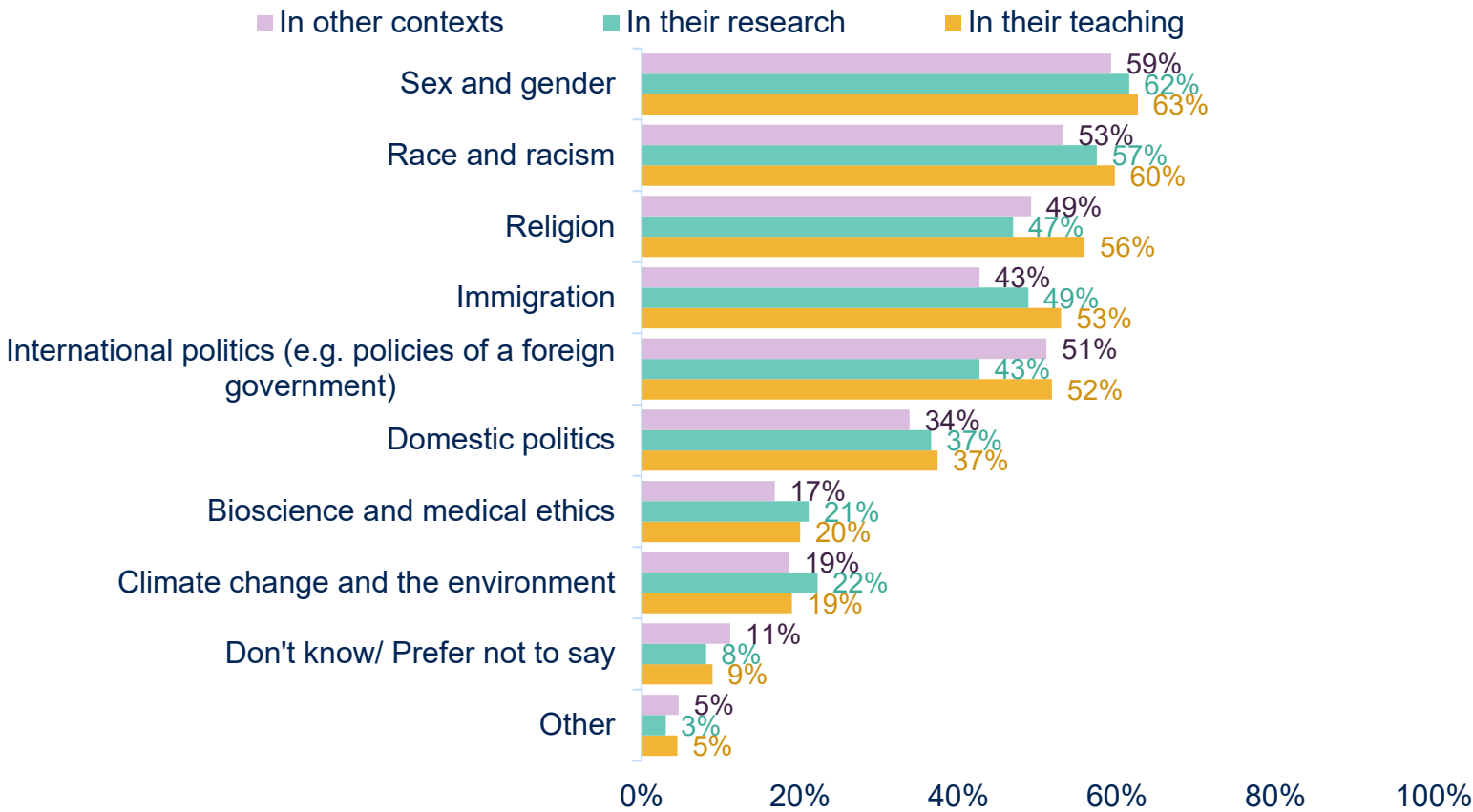


# Sex/ gender and race/ racism are the top topics academics feel restricted discussing, but there is considerable variation depending on context



**Perceived restrictions around discussing sex/ gender and race/ racism are consistent across the political spectrum.** However, those who identify as right-wing are more likely than left-wing academics to cite some topics, such as feeling restrictions in teaching immigration (77% vs 43% left-wing academics) or researching medical ethics (35% vs 15% left-wing academics).

## Topics academics do not feel free to discuss.



Of those who selected **domestic politics**, common topics mentioned are:

- Brexit
- COVID-19
- Political affiliation/ party politics
- Current UK government

Of those who selected **international politics**, common topics mentioned are:

- Israel/ Palestine
- Russia/ war in Ukraine
- Middle East
- China

Q: Which of the following topics would you not feel free to discuss in the following context?

Base: All academics surveyed who do not feel free to discuss controversial topics: in their teaching (278); in their research (187); in other contexts (e.g. speaking engagements, blogs, social media, discussions with colleagues) (409)

# ► Experiences around “freedom of speech”

# Most academics have not received negative comments/ treatment from senior staff for their views, but views on sex/ gender are the most likely to prompt this

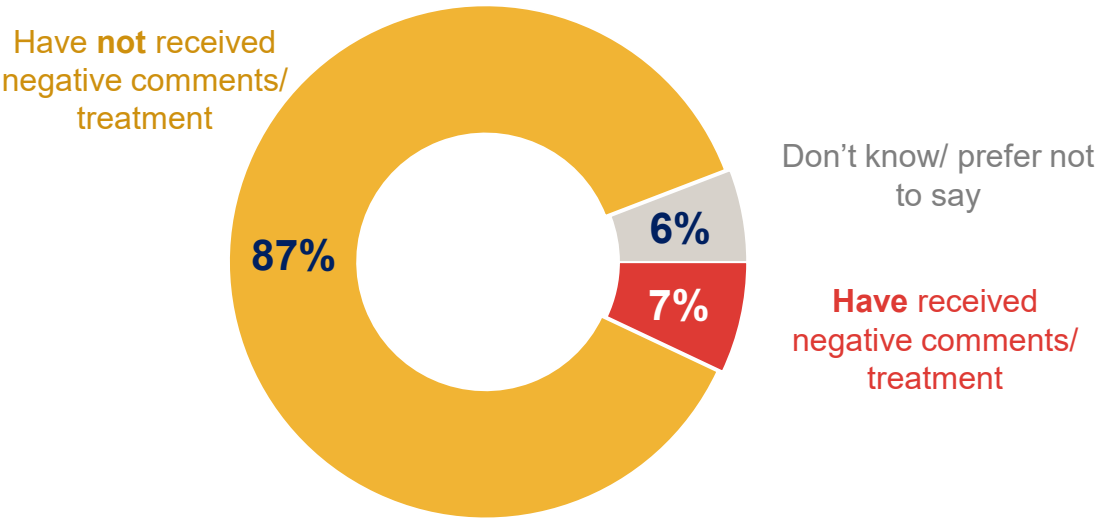


Nearly nine in ten report not having received negative comments/ treatment for their views, consistent across the political spectrum, contract type, and ethnicity. However, 12% of those teaching science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) topics report experiencing this, compared to 5% who teach non-STEM topics.



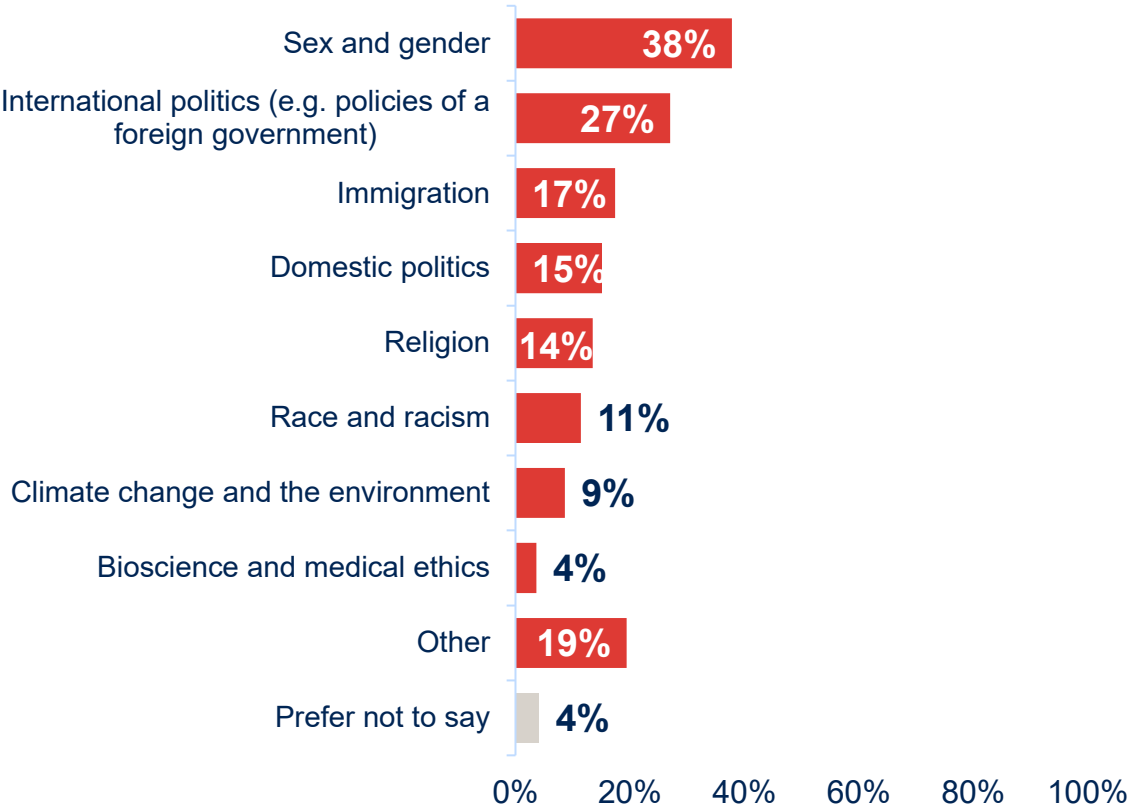
While there is no consensus on topics related to domestic politics that lead to negative comments, those who mentioned international politics cite views on China as well as Israel and Palestine.

Whether received negative comments/ treatment from senior staff for expressing controversial ideas (in the past 12 months)



Q: In the last 12 months, have you received negative comments or treatment (formally or informally) from senior staff at your university or college for expressing challenging or controversial ideas?  
Base: All academics surveyed (1234)

Topics discussed that resulted in academics receiving negative comments



Q: You said that you have recently received negative comments or treatment from senior staff at your institution for expressing challenging or controversial views... What was the topic(s)? Please select all that apply.  
Base: All academics surveyed who received negative comments/ treatment for expressing controversial ideas (81)

▶ **Thank you**