

Students' perceptions of freedom of speech

Introduction

Freedom of speech is fundamental to higher education. Students are entitled to learn in a culture that values vigorous debate, including in relation to difficult or contentious or discomforting topics. The core mission of universities and colleges is the pursuit of knowledge, and freedom of speech and academic freedom are fundamental to that purpose.¹ They provide a necessary context for advancing new ideas, encouraging productive debate and challenging conventional wisdom.

On a more personal level, for students – especially those transitioning from school to an adult career – university or college will be a period of personal change and growth as well as formal learning, and many will achieve this through meeting, exchanging ideas with, and coming to understand those with unfamiliar views. They may encounter ideas that they find shocking or offensive. Equally, others may be challenged by their views.

This is part of the purpose and benefit of higher education. Universities and colleges have a legal duty to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech within the law, and a legal duty to promote its importance in higher education.² The latter is also one of the legal duties of the Office for Students (OfS).³

The Office for Students is the independent regulator for higher education in England. We ensure that students from all backgrounds benefit from high quality higher education, delivered by a diverse, sustainable sector that continues to improve.

This student insight report presents what we know, from engagement with students, about what students think about freedom of speech and their experience of it, and of obstacles to it, during their higher education.

So we can better promote the interests of students, we wanted to hear more about their experiences in this area: how they experience freedom of speech at their university or college, what obstacles to expression they have encountered, and what in their view might be done to promote and to protect it. We therefore commissioned research from the polling company YouGov to learn more about what students think about freedom of speech and their experience of it, and of obstacles to it, during their higher education.

We intend to use the insight these students provided to inform our understanding when developing our future work on free speech. We hope that it will also be helpful for universities, colleges and student representatives as they support and communicate with students. This student insight report analyses the findings, which are presented in a separate YouGov research report.⁴

In short, students clearly value their freedom of speech, though they are not always able to describe in detail what their rights are in relation to it. International students and members of ethnic and religious minorities were often more acutely aware of pressures that might limit their willingness to express themselves freely. And students expressed, among other things, a strong preference for clarity and consistency from their institutions about free speech policies and practices.

Freedom of speech

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 defines freedom of speech as: ‘the freedom to impart ideas, opinions or information [...] by means of speech, writing or images (including in electronic form).’⁵ However, it does not extend to unlawful expression, for instance expression that amounts to unlawful harassment, or to unlawful support for legally proscribed organisations.

In 2025 we published guidance for universities and colleges on their duty to take steps to secure freedom of speech within the law.⁶

Methodology

In November 2025 YouGov carried out qualitative research with 42 students, who were asked to contribute to a discussion over four days.⁷ It also carried out a quantitative survey during December 2025 of 1,039 students at English universities, designed to be representative of the university population at large. More detail of the methodology is included in the YouGov report that accompanies this student insight report.⁸

In what follows, numerical and comparative findings are taken from the polling results, while the accompanying quotes come from students who took part in the qualitative research. We intend to consider these views among the other findings of this research while developing our future approach to regulation in this area.

The views reported are those of the students surveyed, and should not be taken as representing or being endorsed by the OfS.

Students' understanding of freedom of speech

Responses to the quantitative survey suggested that students' general awareness of their rights relating to freedom of speech was high, but not matched by a knowledge of detail. 84 per cent of respondents said they were aware in general terms of such rights, while only 11 per cent were unaware. However, nearly half (49 per cent) said they were aware of their rights but knew little about them, while only 16 per cent reported knowing a lot about them. Only around half (52 per cent) said that they had received any communication about their rights to freedom of speech directly from their institution.

Students in the qualitative research were able to articulate a nuanced understanding of freedom of speech as essential for intellectual exchange, critical thinking and decision making. They also understood the reciprocal nature of such rights – that if one person is free to express an opinion, another is free to criticise it. Participants saw freedom of speech as essential for democracy and social progress, and as a necessary safeguard against tyranny.

“ 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, UK student⁹

“ 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, UK student

In what emerges as a theme of the report, international students in the qualitative research placed a greater stress on the importance of diversity of perspectives and fairness, and the uneven risks faced by different groups when expressing controversial or marginal views.

“ 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

Students' experiences of freedom of speech

The majority of students were confident that freedom of speech was well protected on their campus: over three-quarters of respondents (76 per cent) said it was, although 14 per cent believed that it was not.

On the whole, students who were male or younger were more likely to believe that freedom of speech was well protected than women and mature students. This

represents another emerging trend, whereby men, white people, younger students and UK students often have more confidence in the right to freedom of speech than their peers of other groups. Members of domestic minorities, particularly ethnic or religious minorities, as well as international students, often felt that their contributions were more constrained.

“ 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, UK student

Belief that freedom of speech was well protected was also higher among respondents who were studying liberal arts or humanities than those in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

Asked whether they felt able to raise controversial or challenging ideas in lectures, students were more likely to say this was the case when the lectures were held in person (55 per cent) rather than online (46 per cent). In general, the smaller the study setting the more able in-person seminars respondents felt to discuss such contentious topics, with 71 per cent saying this of in person seminars or small group discussions.

In social contexts, 67 per cent of respondents felt able to raise controversial ideas in student groups and societies, whereas only 42 per cent said they would do so in a university or student publication. Men were more likely than women to feel free to do so on social media (58 per cent as opposed to 50 per cent), while both international students (45 per cent compared with 53 per cent for UK students) and postgraduate students (55 per cent compared with 48 per cent for undergraduates) felt less able to do so at political gatherings on campus. In general, it appeared that students on arts and humanities courses felt freer to raise controversial topics than those studying STEM subjects.

Among those poll respondents who said they felt uncomfortable raising difficult topics, immigration was the issue they worried most about mentioning in nearly all settings, whether study or social. Race or racism was another area they felt concerned about in all settings, while sex and gender issues and religion also scored highly.

The responses of participants in the qualitative research clarified that students consider in-person seminars and private tutorials safer than large lectures or online sessions – partly because social cues (for example, facial expressions, tone of voice or body language) give greater confidence in one’s responses, partly because there is a level of trust in those present, and partly because larger sessions are often recorded. This worry about being ‘on the record’ may also explain the poll respondents’ reluctance to commit their ideas on contentious issues to publication.

“ 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, UK student

“ 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

They also explained that one reason students on arts and humanities courses might feel freer to raise contentious issues than those in STEM subjects was a matter of opportunity, as such topics are less often relevant in the latter areas. Some, however, noted that philosophical and ethical questions could still arise.

“ 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, UK student

The qualitative research identified several specific areas of contention, again including immigration, race and sex and gender. Responses to the conflict between Israel and Palestine were raised several times as a specific challenge.

“ 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

While some international students in particular considered English universities to be safer spaces for free speech than they were used to in their home countries, others said that, in their experience of English universities, a belief in freedom of speech in principle did not always translate into practice.

“ 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

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

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

Students' expectations about freedom of speech

Poll respondents were evenly divided over whether they believed their university would prioritise freedom of speech over not causing offence or vice versa: 37 per cent said the former and 38 per cent the latter. In comparison, 60 per cent said that their university would prioritise ensuring that students and staff feel safe over protecting their freedom of speech. However, older students, international students and ethnic minority students were less likely to believe the latter.

In nearly all settings, both social and academic, the most frequent concern of those students who said they felt uncomfortable raising controversial topics was a fear of social consequences. The exception was coursework, where 74 per cent of those who felt uncomfortable were worried about academic consequences.

Students in the qualitative research elaborated on the social concerns that could underlie these fears. They worried about being misunderstood, judged or socially ostracised, or simply drawing unwanted attention to themselves. Sometimes these worries were tied to language and cultural barriers, or factors of identity. Some international students were concerned that their status put them in a more vulnerable position where they might jeopardise their visa, academic standing or future career opportunities.

“ 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, UK student

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

Female, 22, ethnic minority, UK 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

The views of academic staff

Between 15 March and 19 April 2024, YouGov conducted a poll of 1,234 academic staff on freedom of speech issues, also commissioned by the OfS.¹⁰ Because the figures come from different populations and time periods, and use different measures, they are not directly comparable with the outcomes of the student polling. They should therefore be read as indicative of differing perspectives, rather than precise differences.

In general, the academic staff surveyed were confident about their understanding of freedom of speech. Most academic respondents (89 per cent) said they were confident that they understood what freedom of speech means in higher education, while 70 per cent believed that their university protected freedom of speech and robust debate fairly or very well.

Only 41 per cent of the academic staff surveyed said that staff at their university were able to express views on controversial topics. As with students, female respondents and those from ethnic minority backgrounds felt generally less confident about raising such issues.

Just under half of academic staff (46 per cent) thought that their university would prioritise freedom of speech over not causing offence. Two-thirds (67 per cent) believed their university would prioritise staff and students feeling safe over freedom of speech.

Students' suggestions for freedom of speech

Most survey respondents agreed that some of the interventions that were offered as options in the survey could improve freedom of speech and open discussion at their institution. More UK than international students were confident of this (86 per cent compared with 78 per cent).

Students' responses to suggested ways of encouraging free speech and open discussion

In the survey, the following percentages of students agreed that the suggested approaches might encourage free speech and open discussion at their university or college:¹¹

- staff explicitly stating that their class is a safe space to discuss various ideas – 43 per cent
- clear guidelines and boundaries discussed at the beginning of classes or lectures – 42 per cent

- strong safeguarding against online harassment and bullying – 38 per cent
- more student-led debate and discussion spaces – 35 per cent
- a consistent approach to, and consequences or repercussions for anyone who violates, the guidelines – 33 per cent
- more training for staff, for instance on the code of practice or how to handle contentious discussions – 33 per cent
- more university or college-led debating events or discussion spaces – 30 per cent
- smaller class sizes, e.g. moderated seminars – 19 per cent
- staff not expressing their personal views and opinions to students – 11 per cent
- other – 3 per cent.

11 per cent of respondents said they didn't know or preferred not to say what would help encourage free speech and open discussion, while 4 per cent claimed that nothing would.

Students in the qualitative research had various ideas of their own about how to achieve this end.

Participants stressed that clear expectations should be set at the outset of a discussion. This might include stating that free speech was welcomed, emphasising the difference between free speech and harmful behaviour, and setting ground rules for open and tolerant debate.

“ Set up specific environments for it, make their stance on controversial topics clear so nothing is misinterpreted. ”

Female, 22, white, UK student

“ Make the distinction between freedom of speech and the need to avoid insulting others [...] or expressing prejudice clear. ”

Female, 21, white, UK student

Participants felt that institutional codes of practice should be embedded in students' course syllabuses, induction materials and online platforms, and that institutional policies should draw a clear and unambiguous line between lawful free speech and harmful behaviour. They suggested that where there was ambiguity about policy boundaries, especially about the kinds of expression that might lead to disciplinary action, this could cause self-censorship.

Participants wanted to see staff equipped with skills such as neutrality, active listening and timely intervention, so that they could notice contentious topics when they arise, deescalate exchanges that threatened to become confrontational and intervene when conversation became harassment or intimidation.

On the whole they also preferred smaller, structured groups for discussion. Some suggested anonymous input channels, such as online forms or question boxes, as a way of amplifying less confident voices.

“ Maybe the option for anonymously raising a talking point would help. ”

Female, 21, white, UK student

Some participants particularly wanted clear boundaries against hate speech and violence in the context of protests and controversial events on campus. Suggestions included security proportional to the threat to safety, academic chairs to moderate contentious debates and designated protest areas.

“ Allow the discussion, allow the protests... only intervene if they are saying or doing something which causes others harm. ”

Male, 27, white, UK student

Students suggested that, to sustain trust in the institution's commitment to freedom of speech, senior leaders should be prepared to engage with difficult questions and discussions visibly, clearly and accountably.

Conclusion

We have been encouraged by the steps taken by many institutions to meet their new duties around free speech and academic freedom. However, an important measure of their success is their impact on students themselves, and the responses in the YouGov polling and the qualitative research suggest that students might welcome specific further reforms.

The OfS is developing a new condition of registration for universities and colleges, which will include institutions' duties to take steps to secure freedom of speech and to promote its importance in higher education. In the meantime, this report should be useful to universities and colleges in considering the barriers their students may face in speaking up, and about how they might to do so more freely, both through curriculum design and managing dynamics in classrooms and other settings.

Notes

¹ In this report, for the sake of readability, we have used ‘universities and colleges’ (or sometimes simply ‘universities’ or ‘institutions’) to refer to what our regulatory framework and other more formal documents call ‘higher education providers’ or ‘providers’.

² See Gov.UK, [Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Act 2023](#).

³ See Gov.UK, [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#).

⁴ See YouGov, [‘Students’ perceptions of freedom of speech: On behalf of the Office for Students](#), published by the OfS.

⁵ Gov.UK, [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#) – Section A1 (amended by the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023).

⁶ OfS, [‘Regulatory advice 24: Guidance related to freedom of speech’](#). At the time of writing this guidance is subject to update following the University of Sussex judicial review.

⁷ The qualitative research took the form of a ‘qualitative online community’, a specific type of social research method that gathers insights from participants as they engage in a variety of daily activities over several days on an online platform. This approach was chosen because it involves a user-friendly platform that looks and feels like a social media platform, allowing respondents to interact with one another rather than solely with researchers. It is also closed, allowing participants to preserve their anonymity, which was important in view of the sensitivity of some of the topics under discussion.

⁸ See YouGov, [‘Students’ perceptions of freedom of speech: On behalf of the Office for Students](#), published by the OfS.

⁹ We have used ‘UK student’ in this report for students who may be described elsewhere as ‘home students’. See House of Commons Library, [‘Eligibility for home fee status and student support in England’](#), April 2025, for an explanation of ‘home’ or ‘overseas/international’ student status.

¹⁰ YouGov, [‘Freedom of speech in higher education: Survey outcomes’](#), published by the OfS.

¹¹ Responses to the question ‘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 respondents (1,039). Respondents could select multiple options.

