

Russell Group statement of Principles on Freedom of Speech

Academic freedom and freedom of speech anchor the commitment of our universities to the open and rigorous contestation of ideas. They are fundamental to our purpose as academic institutions, helping to drive knowledge and discovery in research and education. Freedom of speech extends to all who wish to seek, receive or impart information and ideas of all kinds, and includes the right to protest peacefully.

Facilitating an environment where all students and staff are able to inquire, study, and discuss is a responsibility our universities take extremely seriously. Russell Group universities work closely with staff, students' unions and other organisations to defend and maintain freedom of expression on campus. Speaker events addressing diverse views on complex issues go ahead every week at universities across the UK.

In such an environment, the ideas and views of different members of university communities will naturally often come into conflict. Our universities provide a wide range of fora where free and frank intellectual exchanges take place and the diverse views of individuals are tolerated, whilst also assuring the safety of students, staff and members of the public.

The academic freedom of teaching and research staff is protected through clear contractual arrangements, and in legislation. The autonomy this provides helps protect research and ensure curricula are diverse, considering the competing merits of different schools of thought. Across all disciplines, helping students develop the ability to argue a case and use appropriate evidence to challenge opposing views is an important part of the individual and collective educational experience at UK universities.

The right to free speech is not only central to the culture of our institutions, it is protected by law. In limited circumstances it can also be restricted by law. For example, free speech does not usually extend to hate speech, or to unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation that undermine the ability of students, researchers and academics to engage fully in university life. Where that takes place, our universities make no apology for taking swift action to stop it.

This commitment to upholding the legal protections afforded our university communities is entirely consistent with a wider commitment to the free and open discussion of challenging or controversial ideas. Where, in exceptional circumstances, our universities need to apply restrictions, they do so in a manner mindful of the fundamental importance of freedom of speech. By fostering a culture of mutual toleration in our universities, we strengthen freedom of speech by ensuring that all voices can be heard.