'You can't say that!' What students really think of free speech on campus

Nick Hillman

Executive Summary

We polled 1,000 full-time undergraduates on a range of free speech issues via YouthSight, a market research company specialising in students' views. Our questions are identical to those posed through the same polling company in 2016 (with two additions), allowing us to make a comparison of how views have changed over the past six years. The results show clearly that students have become significantly less supportive of free expression.

Free speech and discrimination

- 79% of students believe 'Students that feel threatened should always have their demands for safety respected' (up from 68% in 2016) while 4% disagree (down from 10% in 2016).

- 61% of students say 'when in doubt' their own university 'should ensure all students are protected from discrimination rather than allow unlimited free speech' (up from 37% in 2016).

- The proportion of students who believe 'universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints' has risen to 38% (up from 24% in 2016), and this view is considerably more common among male students (51%) than female students (28%).

- The proportion of students who agree that 'if you debate an issue like sexism or racism, you make it acceptable' has doubled to 35% (double the 17% result in 2016).

Events

- Most students believe one or more political groups should be banned from speaking at higher education institutions, including the English Defence League (26%), UKIP (24%), the British National Party (19%), the Communist Party (12%) and the Conservative Party (11%) – when presented with a long list of political organisations, just 13% say 'none of the above' should be banned from speaking (down from 27% in 2016).

- 64% of students think universities should 'consult special interest groups (e.g. religious groups or gender societies) about on-campus events' (up from 40% in 2016).

- When asked what rights students and staff should have to respond to an event they dislike, 39% of students say they should be able to 'hold a protest outside', 20% say they should be able to 'stop the event from happening' and 12% say they should be able to 'disrupt the event' (all up since 2016).

- The proportion of students who think 'gender segregation should be allowed at official university events' is 32% (up from 20% in 2016).

Students' unions

- 86% of students support the No-Platform policy of the National Union of Students, (up from 76% in 2016) while just 5% say 'the NUS should not limit free speech or discussion' (down from 11% in 2016).

- 62% of students support students' unions refusing to sell tabloid newspapers on grounds of sexism (up from 38% in 2016) while only 10% disagree.

- 39% of students believe 'students' unions should ban all speakers that cause offence to some students' (more than double the 16% figure in 2016).

Staffing and academic resources

- 77% of students believe there should be 'mandatory training for all university staff' on understanding 'other cultures' (up from 55% in 2016).

- The proportion of students who think academics should be fired if they 'teach material that heavily offends some students' is 36% (over double the 15% in 2016).

- When asked about university libraries, one-third of students (34%) say 'all resources should be included for the purpose of academic study, regardless of content' (down from almost one-half of students – 47% – in 2016).

Trigger warnings, removing memorials and safe spaces

- 86% of students support trigger warnings (up from 68% in 2016).

- Three-quarters (76%) of students think universities should always or sometimes 'get rid of' memorials of potentially controversial figures (up from one half **–** 51% **–** in 2016).

- 62% of students support safe-space policies (up from 48% in 2016).

Government

- Around one-half of students (48%) support the Government's proposal to establish a 'free speech champion' for universities in England while around one-quarter (23%) disagree and the rest are uncertain (29%).

Introduction

We posed 28 identical questions on free speech and related issues to full-time undergraduate students six years apart – plus, in 2022, we added a new question on England's proposed free speech champion and a second question (not discussed here) on students' voting record.

In the six years since we first polled students specifically on freedom of expression, back in 2016 (published as *Keeping Schtum*, HEPI Report 85), the political environment has changed dramatically and questions about free speech on campus have risen up the political agenda. At the time of our original polling, David Cameron was Prime Minister and riding high in the period between securing the first overall Conservative majority in the House of Commons since the early 1990s and the Brexit referendum, which was just a few months away (and during which university leaders spoke out strongly for Remain). Moreover, the student body has changed significantly since 2016 – six years ago, undergraduates had been born in the previous century whereas today's younger undergraduates were born after the turn of the millennium. Since starting higher education, current students have had to contend with COVID, industrial action and now a cost-of-living crisis.

Given these changes, we felt it was worth testing opinion again and the responses bear this out as they are in most cases distinctly different. Some areas have seen less change than others but, overall, the pattern is very clear as the changes that have occurred are overwhelmingly in one direction – towards more support for restricting freedom of expression on campus. Moreover, the scale of the changes are often stark. Given the long traditions of academic freedom, university autonomy and lively student debate, many people may be surprised, perhaps even unsettled, by the greater keenness of students to limit what their peers and lecturers can say and do within the law.

While the growing support for limiting others' freedoms may generally be aimed at protecting vulnerable minorities rather than for more nefarious ends, questions need to be asked about whether it is healthy to stifle free debate to the degree many students seem to want.

- Not only does it risk limiting potentially enriching conversations as well as academic freedom, it could also cause the very sort of tension it is designed to reduce by making people who do not subscribe to majority opinions feel less welcome on campus – and, in turn, provide policymakers with further excuses to challenge the higher education sector.

- The quality of education may suffer too, given that it is commonly recognised that the learning environment is enhanced when there is broad diversity among those being taught.

- Moreover, as HEPI has previously shown (in *Free Speech and Censorship on Campus*, HEPI Occasional Paper 21), history suggests those who aim to restrict other people's freedoms in the cause of liberation can sometimes find the same restrictions used against them in due course.

Six years ago, we noted that there was 'considerable ambivalence or confusion' about free speech issues. Often, when we asked students to plot their support or opposition to something on a five-point scale from 1 to 5, the most popular response was 3, the mid-point or most neutral possible answer. But we also argued that 'Overall, the answers to the questions suggest the pendulum may have swung too far away from favouring free speech.' This time, we are less tentative: it is clear that most students wish to see greater restrictions imposed on their peers than have tended to characterise higher education in the past. In other words, the pendulum has continued to swing further in the same direction. In some areas, there is not much room left for it to move further that way – for example, nine-in-10 students now support trigger warnings.

Outside higher education institutions, there has been such disquiet about campus restrictions on free speech that the Westminster Government is currently pushing through the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill. Students are regularly caricatured as woke snowflakes unwilling to have their opinions tested. However, we strongly caution against reading these polling results as providing straightforward support for the critics of students and the higher education sector. The culture wars that influential policymakers and some commentators have helped to stoke up may just as likely be the cause of the pushback from students as a symptom of it. Moreover, today's students come from a more diverse range of backgrounds than in the past and have faced a number of challenges that earlier generations did not. If younger students were to feel less insecure about their own futures, perhaps they might feel more relaxed about freedoms in general. In other words, from this survey alone it is not clear whether the strong push by the Westminster Government and the English regulator, the Office for Students, in favour of more protection for free speech in higher education is a reaction to the growth in less liberal views among students or whether it is in part to blame for students pushing back.

Methdology

> We polled 1,019 full-time undergraduate students (44% male and 56% female) through the polling company YouthSight (owned by Savanta) between 13 and 19 May 2022. Respondents received a £0.50p voucher credit. Quotas were set on gender, course year and university type to ensure a representative sample.
>
> All the questions were posed exactly as asked in our 2016 survey on the same topic except for one additional question on the Government's plan to establish a free speech champion at the Office for Students and a second new question on past voting behaviour that is not considered here.
>
> The order in which the results are presented in this HEPI Policy Note is different to the order in which the questions were asked. The full survey results, including questions not referred to below and with various crossbreaks, are freely available on the HEPI website.
>
> The margin of error, calculated at the 95% confidence level, is +/-3%.

Free speech and discrimination

When asked to rank their level of agreement from '1 – Completely disagree' to '5 – Completely agree' with the phrase 'Students that feel threatened should always have their demands for safety respected', an overwhelming majority of undergraduates (79%) express agreement, up from 68 per cent in 2016. Close to half (46%) opt for '5 – Completely agree' and a further one-third (33%) opt for '4'. The other three options are notably less popular than in 2016, with for example just 1 per cent of students opting for '1 – Completely disagree'.

The nature of any threat was not specified, so it was left up to respondents to determine whether to define it as major or minor and physical or verbal.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5 – Students that feel threatened should always have their demands for safety respected
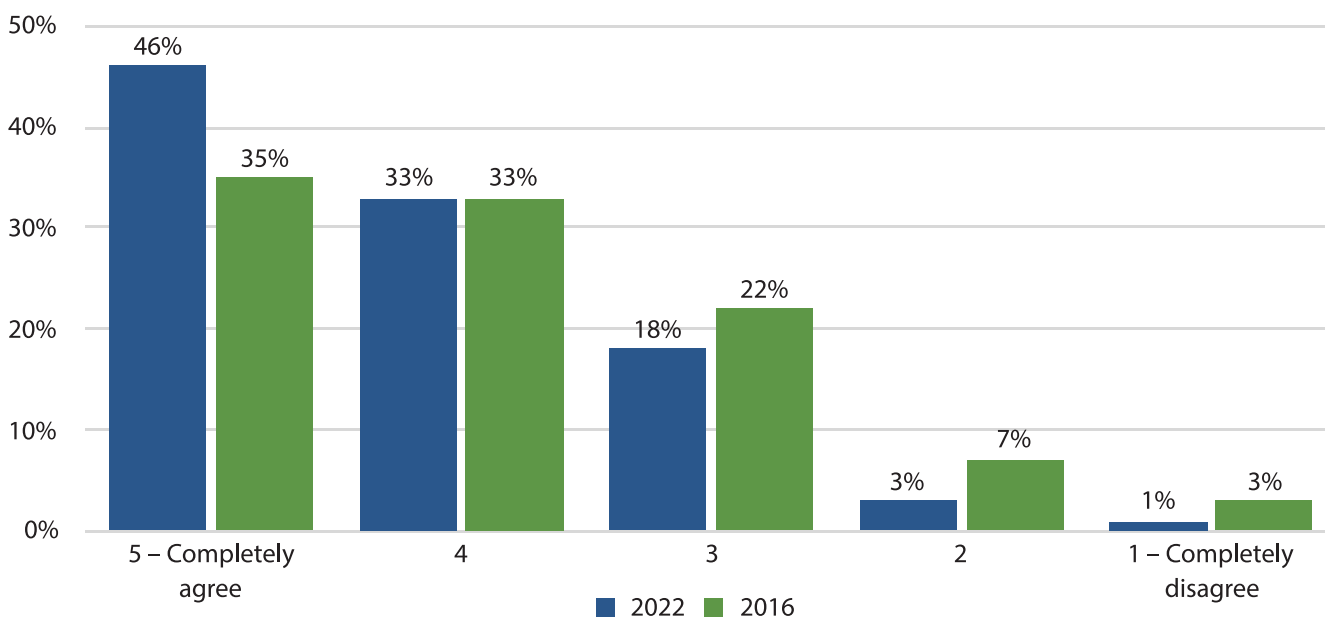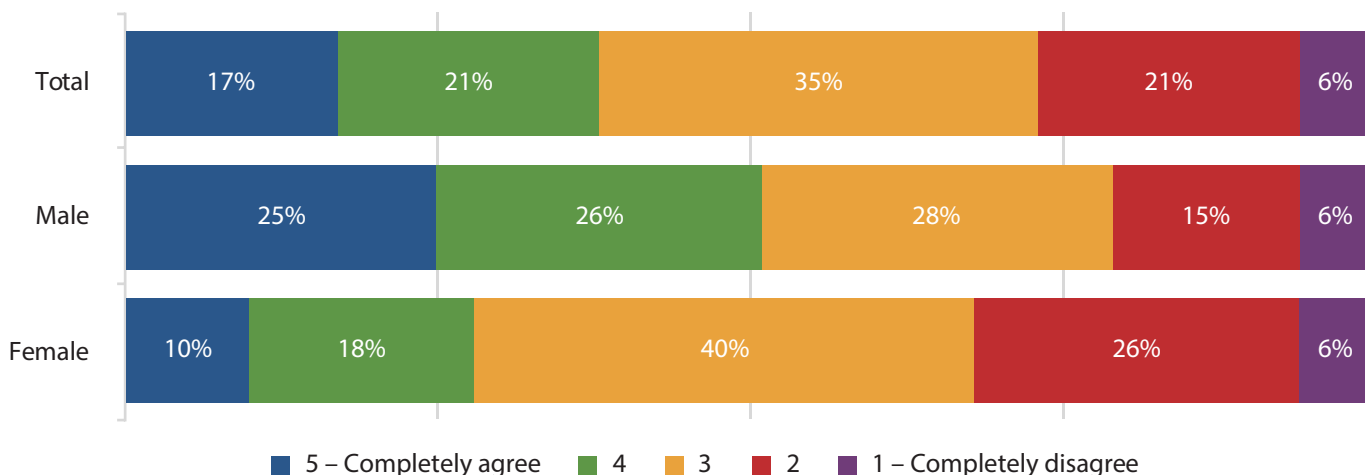

When asked about their own institutions' general approach to free speech, one-in-six students (17%) say 'they should focus on ensuring unlimited free speech on campus, although offence may occasionally be caused' (down from 27% in 2016). In contrast, significantly more than half of students (61%) express agreement with the idea that students' should be 'protected from discrimination rather than allow unlimited free speech' (up from 37% in 2016).

When in doubt, which approach should your university favour as an overall policy?
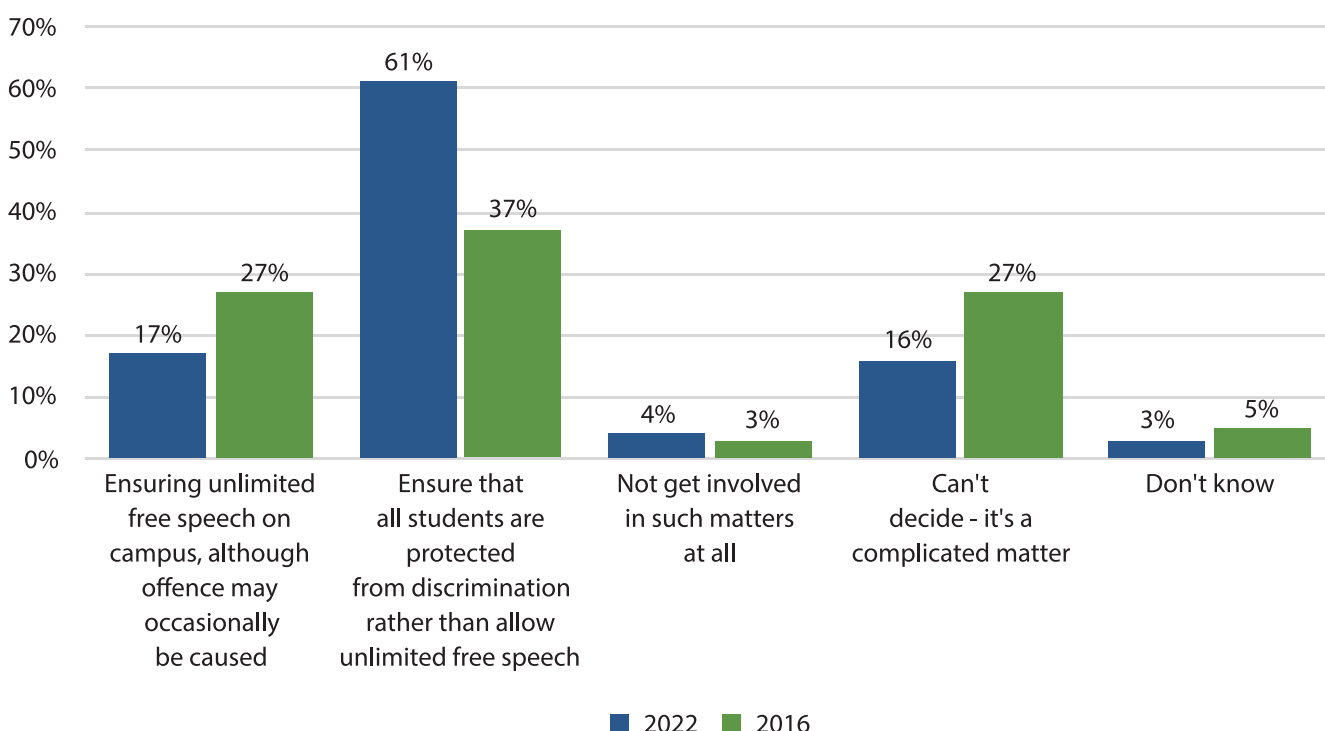

Overall, the results throughout this survey provide a secure evidence base for thinking that students are less keen on free expression than their counterparts were a few years ago – and many of the respondents themselves appear to recognise this is the case. When asked whether 'universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints', 38% agree, as measured by those who choose 4 or 5 on a five-point scale (up from 24% in 2016). Such support has increased more among male students (51%, up from 29% in 2016) than female students (28%, up from 20% in 2016).

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5 – Universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints

	5 – Completely agree	4	3	2	1 – Completely disagree
Total	17%	21%	35%	21%	6%
Male	25%	26%	28%	15%	6%
Female	10%	18%	40%	26%	6%

Further evidence of the growing tendency among students to want to close debate down rather than open up challenging issues is provided by the balance of responses when presented with the phrase, 'if you debate an issue like sexism or racism, you make it acceptable'. The proportion of students expressing some agreement with this has doubled to 35% (up from 17% in 2016) and the proportion expressing complete disagreement has halved (down from 38% to 20%). In 2016, the most popular answer was '1 – Completely disagree'; in 2022, the most popular answer was the most neutral option ('3').

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5 – If you debate an issue like sexism or racism, you make it acceptable

|	5 – Completely agree	4	3	2	1 – Completely disagree
2022	14%	21%	27%	18%	20%
2016	7%	10%	26%	20%	38%
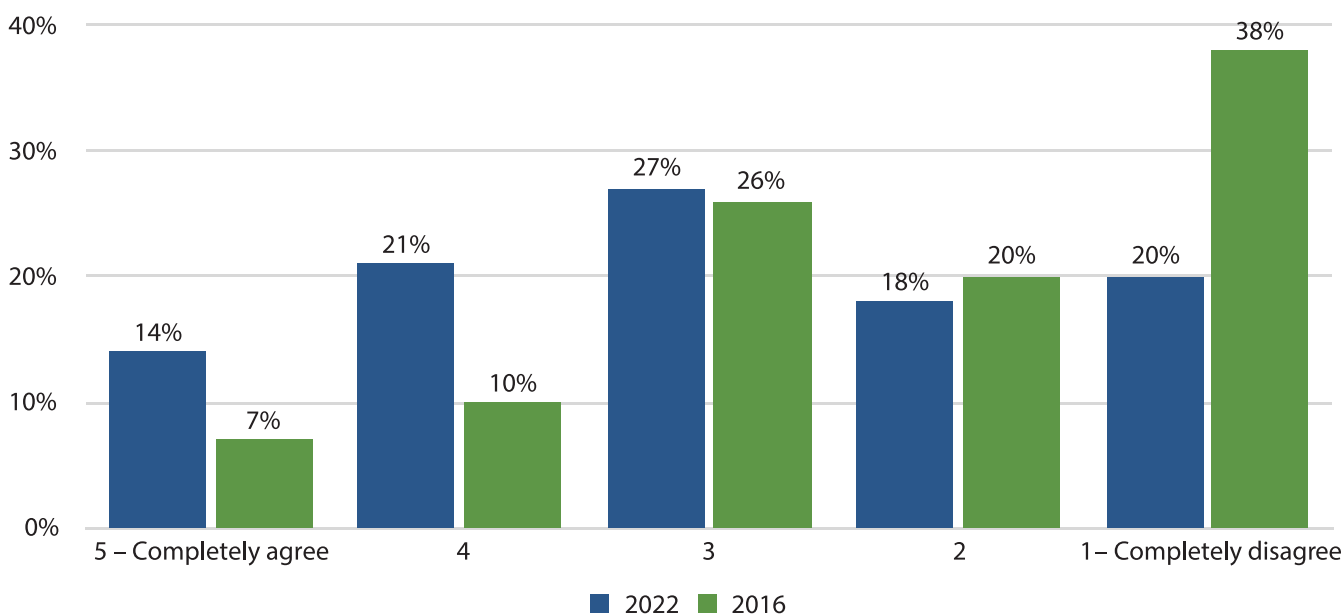
Events

When shown a list of political organisations, a majority of students express support for banning one or more from speaking at higher education institutions, confounding the notion that free debate is the best way to progress the battle of political ideas. Around one-in-four students say they would like to see a ban in higher education institutions on the English Defence League (26%) and a similar proportion say the same about UKIP (24%). Around one-in-five want to ban the British National Party (19%) and around one-in-nine say they want to see a ban on the Communist Party (12%) and the Conservative Party (11%), while there were lower levels of support for banning every other political party in the list provided to respondents. Just 13% of those answering said 'none of the above', down from 27% in 2016, while 28% opted for 'don't know'.

Which political parties, if any, do you think should be banned from speaking at events held at higher education institutions?

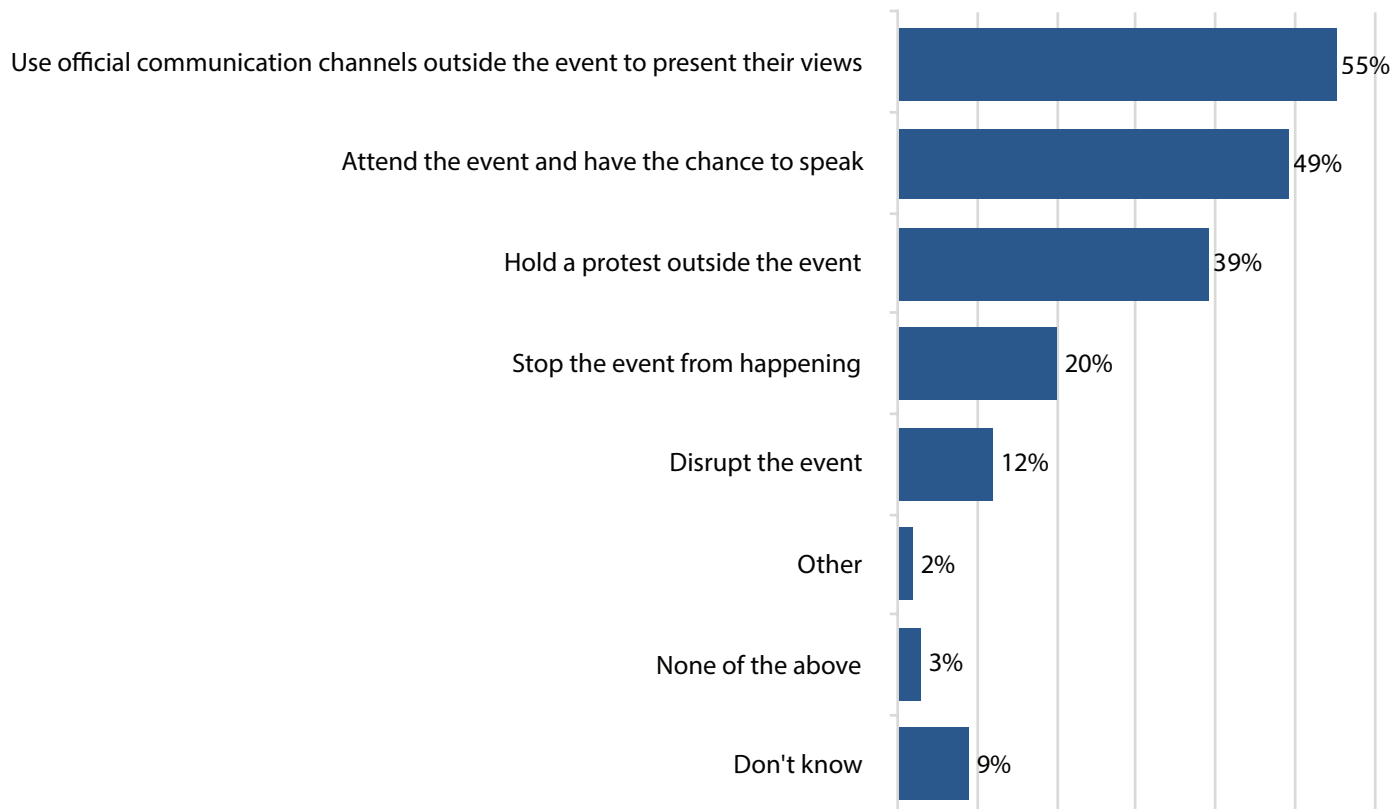|			
English Defence League	26%	Socialist Workers' Party	5%
UKIP	24%	The Liberal Democrats	5%
British National Party (BNP)	19%	The Scottish National Party (SNP)	5%
Communist Party of Great Britain	12%	The Green Party	5%
Conservative Party	11%	Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)	4%
Ulster Unionist Party	8%	Plaid Cymru	4%
Democratic Unionist Party	7%	Other	*%
Sinn Féin	6%	None of the above	13%
The Labour Party	5%	Don't know	28%

There has been a notable increase since 2016 in the proportion of students who think universities should 'consult special interest groups (e.g. religious groups or gender societies) about on-campus events', with around two-thirds (64%) expressing some support for this sentiment, up from 40% in 2016. In the past, nearly one-quarter of students (23%) disagreed, but in 2022 just 9% do so. Six years ago, the most popular single option, with 38% support was '3', which is the most neutral possible answer; now, the most popular option, with 40% support, is '4'. It was left to respondents to decide what form any consultation might take and what consequences would flow from it.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5 – Universities should consult special interest groups (e.g. religious societies or gender societies) about on-campus events
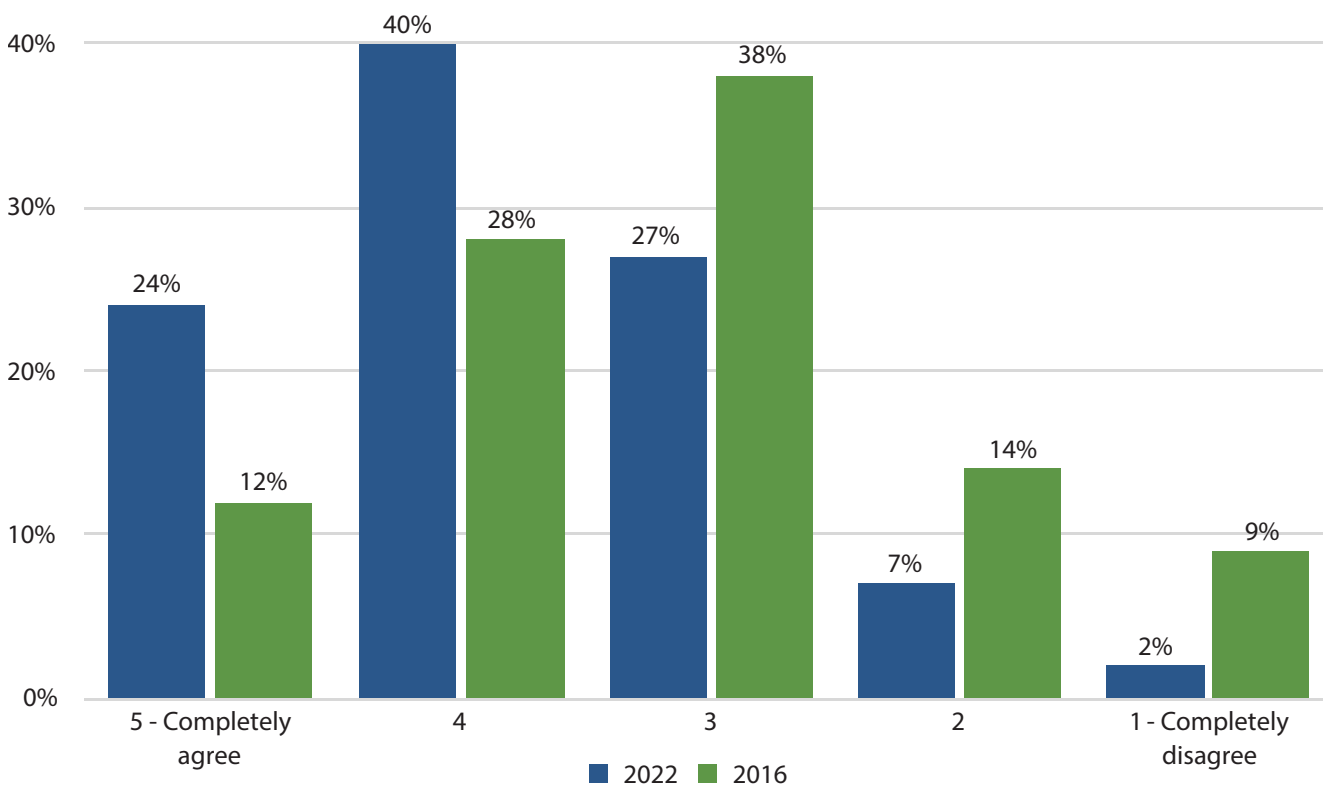
When asked what rights students and staff should have to respond to an event they dislike, 39% of students say they should be able to 'hold a protest outside' (up from 33% in 2016), 20% say they should be able to 'stop the event from happening' (up from 8% in 2016) and 12% say they should be able to 'disrupt the event' (up from 5% in 2016).

If some students or staff are unhappy with a particular event at their university that is taking place within the law, which of the below actions should they have the right to carry out?

Action	Percentage
Use official communication channels outside the event to present their views	55%
Attend the event and have the chance to speak	49%
Hold a protest outside the event	39%
Stop the event from happening	20%
Disrupt the event	12%
Other	2%
None of the above	3%
Don't know	9%

The poll included a question on separating men and women at official events. Respondents were told:

> *Gender segregation means having men and women sit apart. In your opinion, should gender segregation be allowed at official university events where it is a key part of the culture or religion of the student group involved?*

The proportion of students who said 'yes' was 32% (up from 20% in 2016) and the proportion who said 'no' was 44% (down from 54% in 2016), with 25% opting for 'don't know' (26% in 2016*)*.
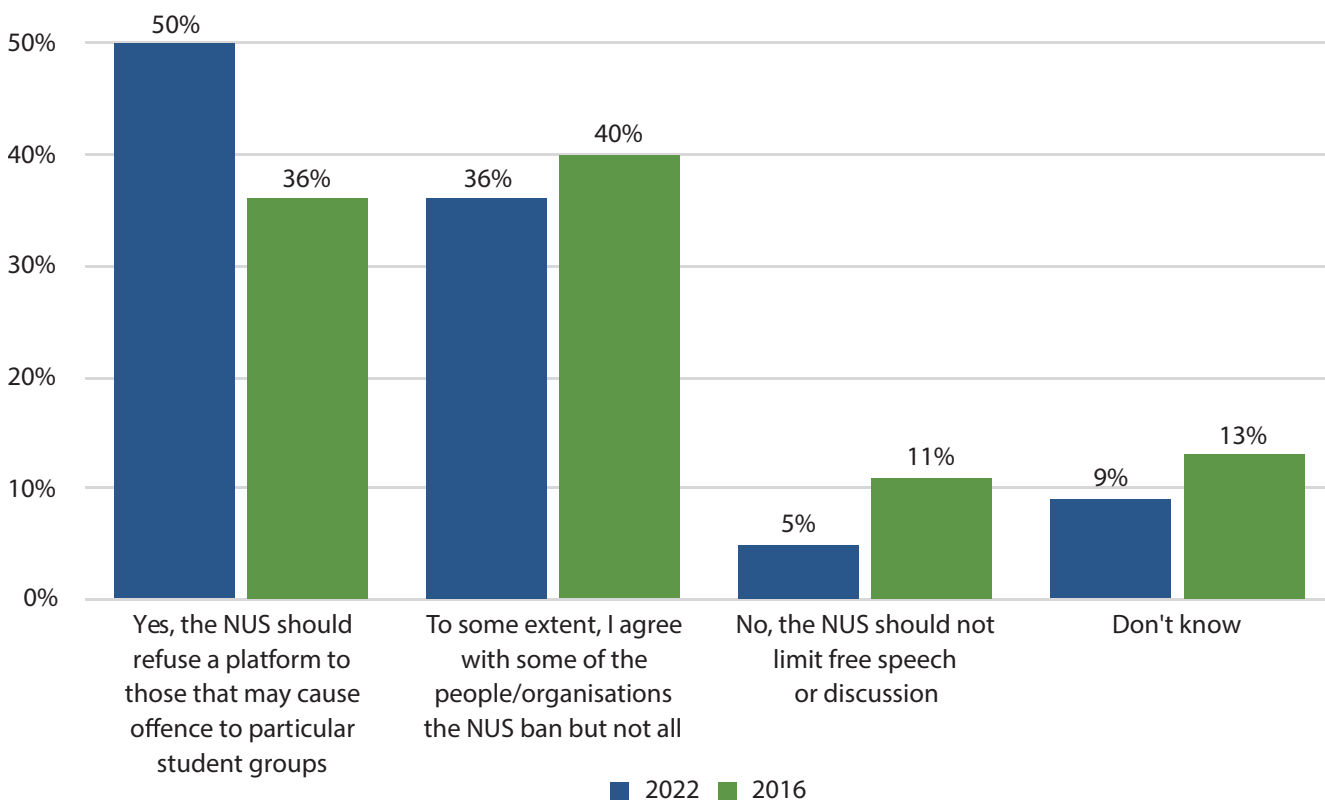
Students' unions

Individual students' unions and their sabbatical officers are core to improving the student experience by offering support, providing social spaces and lobbying for change, among other roles. Ministers in England want them to do more to ensure free speech and the draft legislation currently before the Westminster Parliament aims to include students' unions within the existing obligation on universities to protect freedom of speech. Collectively, the national student movement has been facing challenging times, with accusations of anti-semitism and electoral irregularities being levelled at the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Government using these allegations as a reason to break off contact.

We explored students' views about the NUS and individual students' unions in different ways. Regarding the NUS, respondents were told:

> *The National Union of Students (NUS) has a No Platform policy, which bans people thought to hold 'racist or fascist views' from standing for election or attending conferences and bans NUS representatives from sharing a platform with such individuals.*

On being asked 'Do you agree with the NUS's "no-platform" policies?', students offered overwhelming support, with half of respondents (50%) opting for the most supportive answer and over one-third more (36%) saying they support no platforming 'to some extent' – meaning nine-in-10 (86%) students now express some level of support (up from 76% in 2016). Just one-in-20 students (5%) say 'the NUS should not limit free speech or discussion' (down from 11% in 2016).

*Do you agree with the NUS's 'no-platform' policies?*

Almost two-thirds of students (62%) support students' unions refusing to sell tabloid newspapers on the grounds that they may portray sexism (up from 38% in 2016). Just 10% of students disagree, down from 26% in 2016. Again, whereas in 2016 the most popular was the neutral '3', now it is '4'. This implies that the sensitivity that a majority of students have towards certain opinions and outlets extends to wanting to make it more difficult for other students to access them. Some might regard such apparent backdoor censorship as contrary to the concept of both a free press and vibrant student debate; others might think the large majority of students in favour of making it more difficult to access certain newspapers should persuade editors and owners to reflect upon whether they are out-of-touch with a large number of potential readers.

Some student unions refuse to sell certain tabloid newspapers in their shops on the grounds that they display sexist views. To what extent do you agree with this policy?
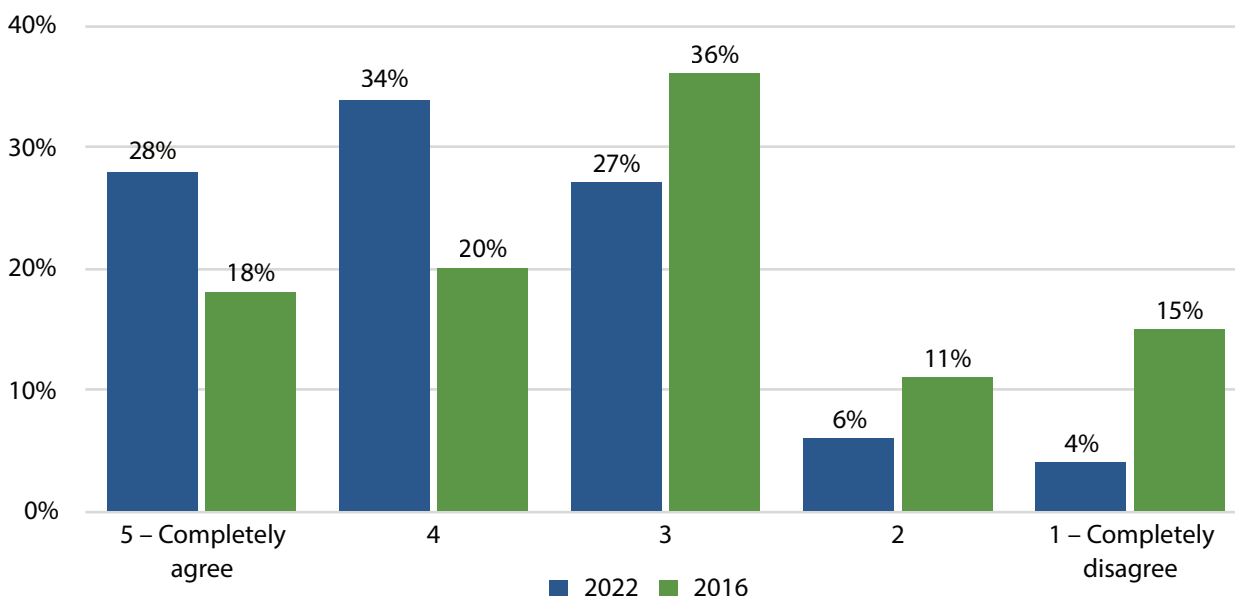
Four-in-10 students (39%) express support for the idea that 'students' unions should ban all speakers that cause offence to some students'. This is significantly higher than the 16% figure in 2016. The proportion that 'Completely agree' has more than doubled, from 5% to 12%, and the proportion who 'Completely disagree' has more than halved, from 27% to 11%.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5 – Students' unions should ban all speakers that may cause offence to some students
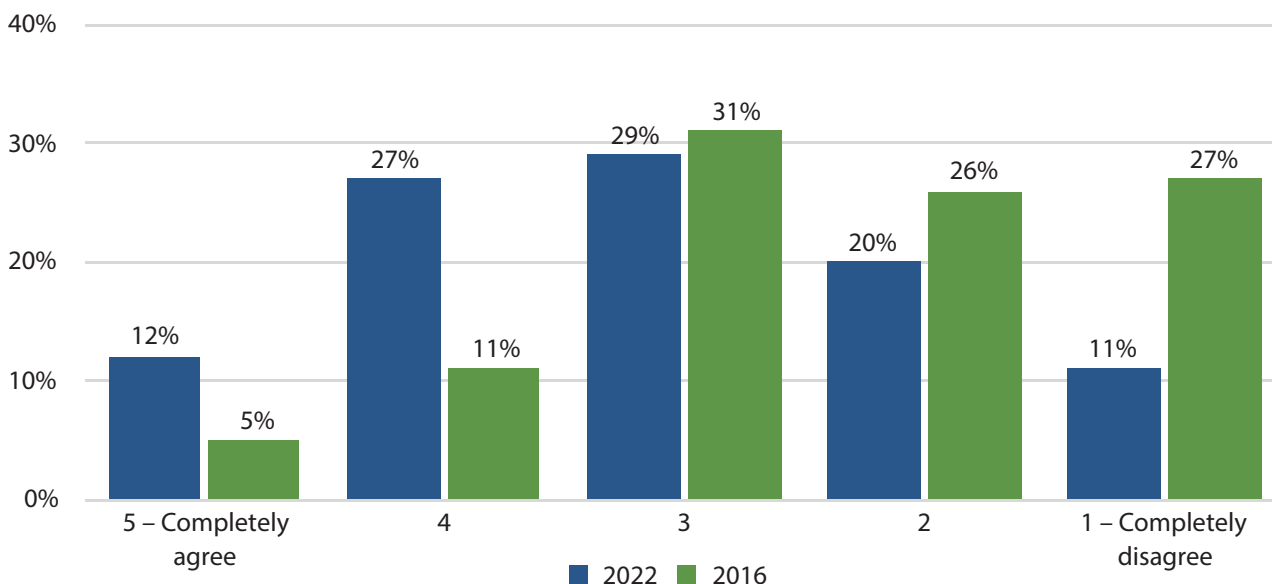

Staffing and academic resources

The survey additionally asked students for their views about free expression in relation to staffing. Over three-quarters of students (78%) express some level of support for 'mandatory training' to ensure university staff understand 'other cultures'. Although it remains unclear what content would be covered by any such training, how long any training course would be, what would happen to those who refused to do it or whether it would be possible to fail, support has risen significantly (from 55%) since 2016. Back then, the most popular option was the neutral '3'; today, it is '5 – Completely agree' and the proportion of respondents who 'Completely agree' has grown from one-quarter (26%) and is now approaching one-half (44%). The proportion who disagree either 'Completely' or less strongly has fallen from 15% to 5%.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5 – Training that teaches the ability to understand other cultures should be mandatory for all university staff
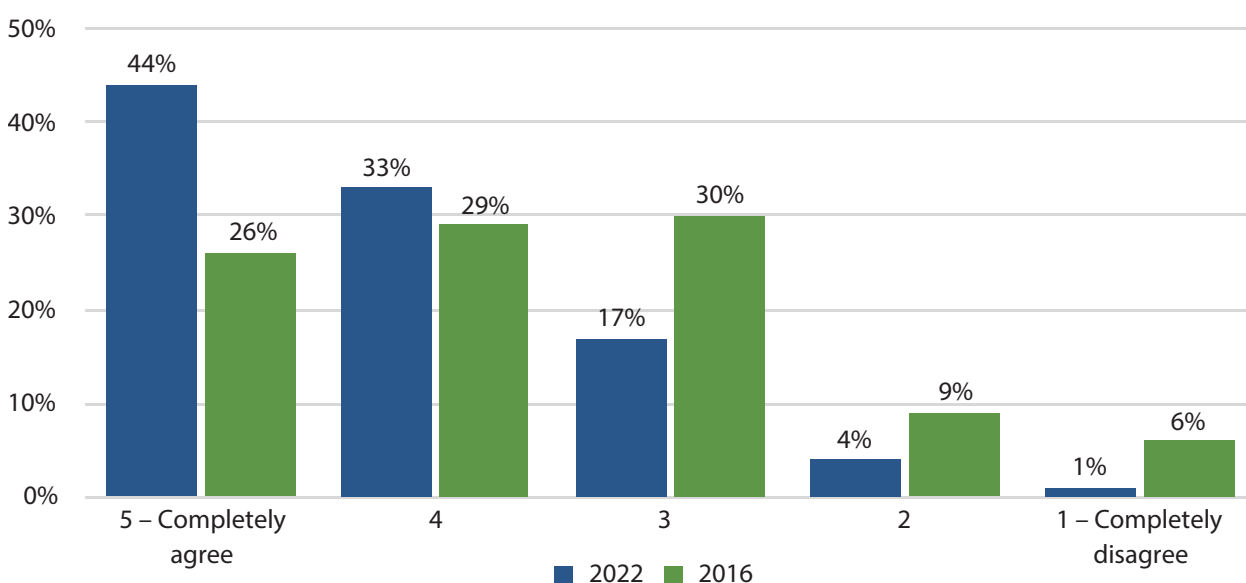
The uncompromising attitude of many students towards staff is evident elsewhere in the survey as well. More than one-third (36%) of undergraduates believe academics should be fired if they 'teach material that heavily offends some students', up from 15% in 2016.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement on a scale of 1 to 5 – If academics teach material that heavily offends some students, they should be fired
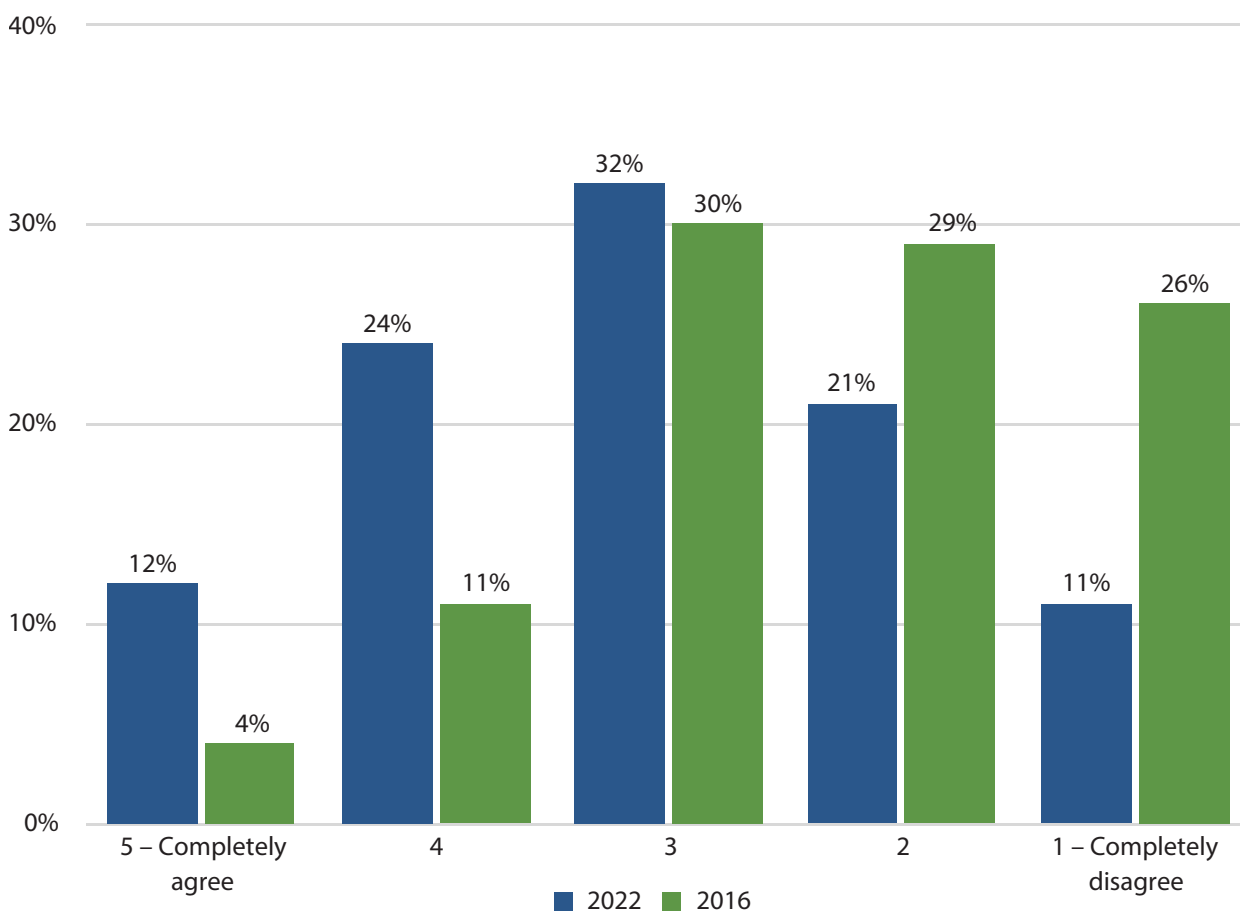
When questioned about the appropriate resources for university libraries to hold, one-third of students (34%) say 'all resources should be included for the purpose of academic study, regardless of content', which is down from almost one-half of students (47%) in 2016. The proportion of students responding 'don't know' has also fallen notably since 2016 and now stands at 12%, while a greater proportion of students want to ban each specific category of material that was asked about.

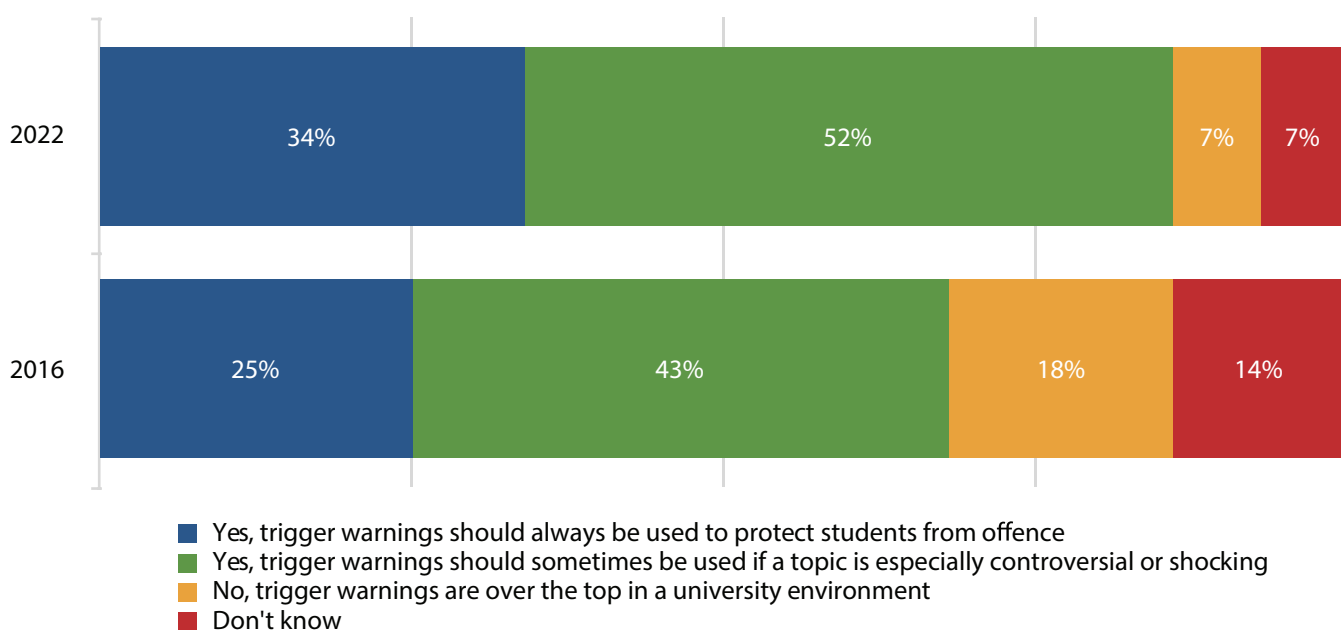| University libraries sometimes stock controversial resources (e.g. books) for the purposes of academic study. In your opinion, should any of the following resources be banned from university libraries even if they can be used for academic study?	2022	2016
Resources of sexual images that are illegal in the UK	32%	24%
Resources that deny the Holocaust or support fascism	27%	13%
Resources regarded as defending racism of any sort	23%	9%
Resources regarded as defending sexism of any sort	18%	7%
Resources that could be regarded as offensive to those with a religious faith	17%	6%
Resources arguing against democracy	10%	2%
Resources that support communism	8%	2%
All resources should be included for the purpose of academic study, regardless of content	34%	47%
Don't know	12%	20%

Trigger warnings, removing memorials and safe spaces

Respondents were provided with the following basic information about 'trigger warnings':

> *In many higher education courses, such as English literature or Law, difficult issues are sometimes discussed that some people may find uncomfortable – for example, issues around sexual consent. It has been suggested that lecturers should use 'trigger warnings' to warn students in advance so that those who wish to leave can do so.*

They were then asked if they agree with the concept. The proportion expressing strong support has risen to one-third (34%) in 2022 from one-quarter (25%) in 2016, and the total proportion offering any support has risen to around nine-in-10 students (86%) from two-thirds (68%). The proportion of students who say they do not support the idea has more than halved from 18% to 7% and the proportion who say they 'don't know' has halved from 14% to 7%.

Trigger warnings – Do you agree with this idea?

2022	34%	52%	7%	7%
2016	25%	43%	18%	14%

- ■ Yes, trigger warnings should always be used to protect students from offence
- ■ Yes, trigger warnings should sometimes be used if a topic is especially controversial or shocking
- ■ No, trigger warnings are over the top in a university environment
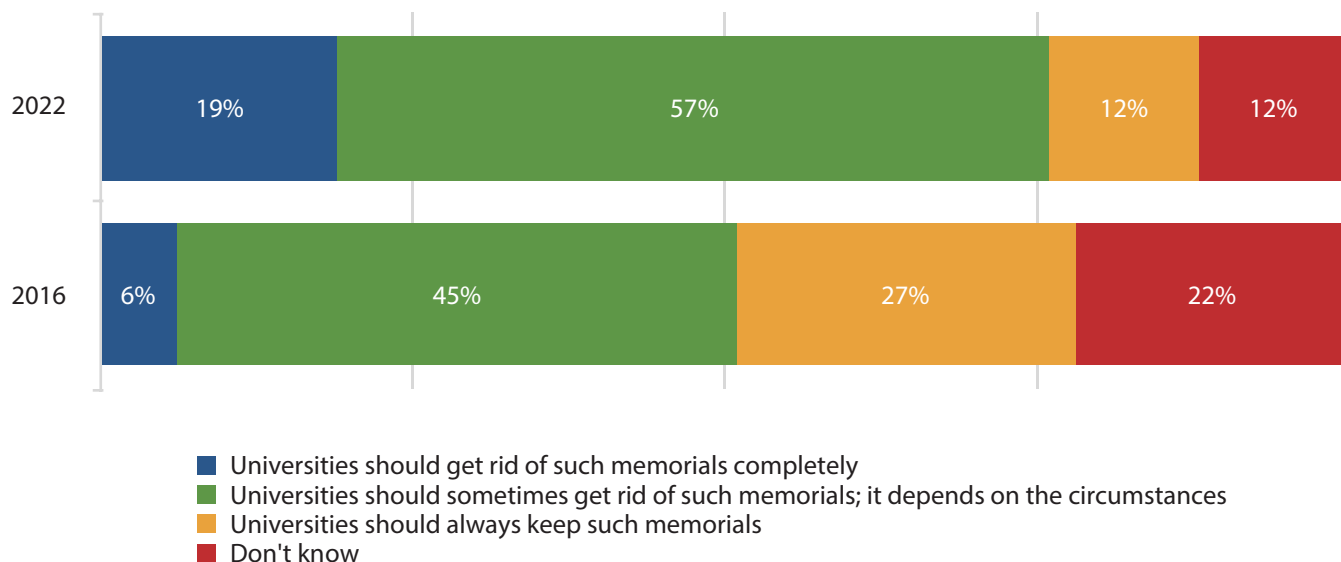- ■ Don't know

When we first polled students in detail on free speech issues, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign had recently reached the University of Oxford. Since then, campaigns to remove or contextualise memorials to controversial historical figures have continued, most notably with the deposition of a statue of Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020.

Therefore, we asked respondents about this issue after providing them with the following information:

> *Many universities accepted gifts in the past from people whose views are often regarded as outdated today, and still have memorials for those donors. Advocates for removing such memorials say universities should reflect modern opinion and consider the potential offence such memorials might cause. Opponents of removing them say these memorials are part of a university's history from a different time, and that history should not be rewritten in accordance with today's morals.*

A majority of students (57%) say 'Universities should sometimes get rid of' controversial memorials, depending on the circumstances', with a further 19% backing a more comprehensive removal policy. For both these options, there is notably more support than in 2016: overall, three-quarters of students (76%) express support for universities always or sometimes getting rid of memorials of potentially controversial figures compared to one-half (51%) in 2016. Judging by other polls, there appears to be much greater support for removing memorials among students than the public as a whole – for example, in 2020, research by Deltapoll for Policy Exchange found two-thirds of people (65%) thought 'Statues of people who were once celebrated should be allowed to stand'.

From your point of view, what should universities do today regarding such memorials?

Year	Get rid completely	Sometimes get rid	Always keep	Don't know
2022	19%	57%	12%	12%
2016	6%	45%	27%	22%

■ Universities should get rid of such memorials completely
■ Universities should sometimes get rid of such memorials; it depends on the circumstances
■ Universities should always keep such memorials
■ Don't know

The respondents were also provided with the following basic information about so-called safe-space policies before being asked whether they supported the concept or not:

> There have been calls for universities to be run as 'safe spaces', so that debate takes place within specific guidelines in order to ensure people do not feel threatened because of their gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity. However, opponents of safe space policies fear free speech might be suppressed and differing political views stifled as a result of safe space policies.

A majority of students (62%) back the idea, up from 48% in 2016. The proportion opposing safe spaces fell slightly over the same period (to 16%, from 20%) while the proportion of students answering 'don't know' fell by 10 percentage points, from 32% to 22%.

Do you think universities should adopt 'safe spaces' policies?

| Year	Yes	No	Don't know
2022	62%	16%	22%
2016	48%	20%	32%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know
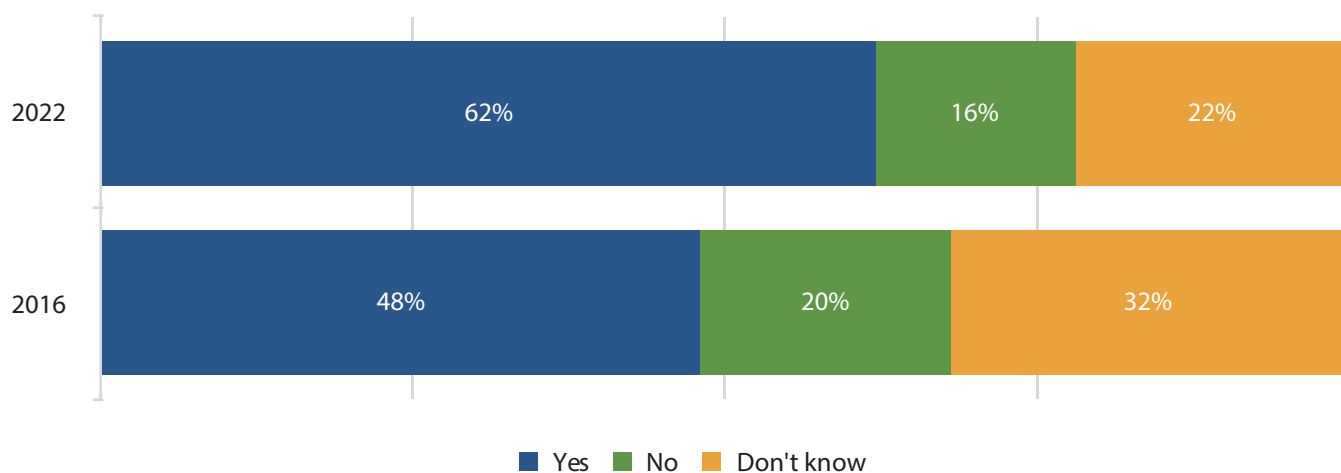
Government

The Westminster Government is currently seeking to strengthen the legal underpinning of academic freedom and free speech in higher education in England. One specific proposal is to introduce a new Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom, colloquially known as the 'free speech champion'. This role will be based in the Office for Students and the postholder will investigate potential infringements. We added a question to the survey on this idea, to sit alongside those first posed in 2016, and the answers reveal that around one-half of students (48%) support the idea of a new free speech champion while only around one-quarter (23%) disagree and the rest are uncertain (29%).

At first sight, this finding is a little surprising, given the responses to other questions in the survey. Perhaps students have a different conception of the new role than that envisaged by policymakers? If the free speech champion were ever to be expected to reconcile such apparently competing expectations, they would need to be someone with extraordinary skills.

The Government are keen to strengthen the law to protect free speech in universities, including appointing a 'free speech champion' to deal with complaints. Do you think this sounds like a good idea?

● Yes   ● No   ● Don't know
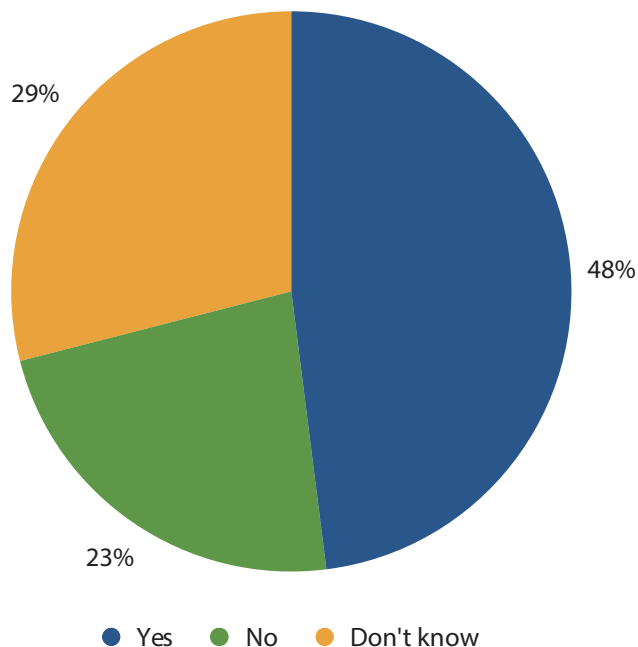
Conclusion

Our results provide the most comprehensive up-to-date picture on a range of issues to do with free speech and academic freedom on campus for the COVID generation of undergraduate students. They show that:

- **a large majority of students (and a higher proportion than in 2016) support those lighter touch interventions that are aimed at supporting more vulnerable learners,** even if this risks creating a more stifling academic environment – for example, nine-in-10 students support No-Platforming policies and trigger warnings and three-quarters want mandatory staff training 'on understanding other cultures';

- **around two-thirds of students express support for an additional layer of restrictions,** such as actively consulting 'special interest groups' before events take place, safe-space policies and banning tabloid newspapers from students' union shops – in all three of these examples, support has grown considerably since 2016; and

- **a smaller but sizeable proportion amounting to roughly four-in-10 students want much tougher restrictions on campus than have typically been seen,** including universities firing academics if they 'teach material that heavily offends some students' and students' unions banning 'all speakers that cause offence to some students' – in both these cases, support is currently more than twice as high as it was in 2016.

One thing is abundantly clear: students have become less liberal in their approach to freedom of expression in recent years. This may be primarily for reasons of compassion, with the objective of protecting the feelings and safety of other students, though it may also reflect a lack of resilience among a cohort that has faced unprecedented challenges.

Back in 2016, we tentatively said our findings suggested the overall situation may have swung beyond some of the core purposes of higher education, such as academic enquiry. This time, it is abundantly clear that a high proportion of students have a very different conception of academic freedom and free speech norms than earlier generations and from many of those who legislate, regulate or govern UK higher education institutions.

The last time we undertook this polling, we concluded that a more educated debate on free speech issues was needed to reduce confusion and uncertainty among students. But the fractious debates that have happened seem to have nudged students in one direction only, towards a greater likelihood of supporting new restrictions on free speech. So while there is less confusion and uncertainty, the result is not necessarily as expected. If media coverage or parliamentary business offer any sort of guide, people outside higher education appear often to have travelled concurrently in the opposite direction, becoming ever keener on enforcing and protecting free speech in universities, including through naming-and-shaming institutions, tougher regulatory powers and new primary legislation.

It is surely worth asking whether a less heated conversation might have produced more light and less heat on an inherently complicated area. Improving the quality of the debate in this area is easier said than done however, given that many people regard questions about freedom of expression as matters of principle rather than matters of nuance and when policymakers are tempted to keep other issues out of the headlines by engaging in culture wars.

One option now would be for institutions to respond reflexively to the growing demands of their students. But this could be an overly simplistic response. It is likely that many of our respondents have not fully thought through the full practical consequences or implementation challenges of the new restrictions that they say they support. Moreover, it is senior managers who must set, own and see through institutional policies, as agreed in advance with their governors and overseen by regulators and public authorities. While students are typically represented on universities' governing bodies and their elected representatives often work closely with university managers, they are only one small part of any institution's decision-making structures, which must also incorporate other interests.

A second possible response would be for universities to react to free speech challenges in exactly the same way as in the past. Their record is good, with data from the Office for Students showing only a minute percentage of events and speaker requests have been rejected in recent years. Yet maintaining old approaches feels untenable for additional reasons beyond changing student demands. For example, some topics have taken on extra significance over time (most notably, in recent years, trans issues), and these may conceivably need handling differently from the most high-profile issues of the past. Moreover, the wider environment is constantly changing with, for instance, new demands imposed on the sector by policymakers and more scrutiny by the media – not to mention resource constraints that necessitate trade-offs. In particular, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill currently before Parliament seeks to impose a duty on university governors in England to 'promote', rather than merely uphold, both 'freedom of speech within the law' and 'academic freedom for academic staff', thereby changing the underpinning legal framework.

A third potential response would be to wait for things to be done to the sector by outsiders. There is even the possibility of an unholy alliance between lawmakers wanting to crackdown on higher education institutions and senior institutional managers wanting the extra backbone provided by new rules. It would be ironic if policymakers on the right of the political spectrum, who tend to favour less regulation overall, were to intervene with new rules that were then welcomed by institutional leaders, who have historically been keen to protect the concept of an autonomous self-governing community of scholars. Indeed, there is a potential vicious circle in which ancient freedoms are protected by ever greater regulation.

This whole issue is especially challenging to tackle because of a three-part conundrum at its heart.

a) The level of student support for greater restrictions on free expression is so high that it is unlikely to be something that higher education institutions can grapple with on their own, assuming it is thought to need tackling, but instead is an issue for wider society.

b) Yet the intervention of public authorities, in the form of new legislation and greater regulatory powers, puts the concept of university autonomy and academic self-governance under strain.

c) Moreover, depending on how they are handled, new interventions may have the opposite effect of that intended by putting the concept of a culture war, with two competing sides reacting to one another, into sharper relief.

So the best option seems to be for the higher education sector to own the response to freedom of speech challenges as best it can, in many instances by beefing up what already happens. This should encompass:

1. **reassessing formal procedures,** such as existing codes of practice, to ensure they are sufficiently robust;

2. **implementing good practice consistently,** such as – where feasible – balancing controversial speakers with other speakers with different viewpoints;

3. **providing students with improved information on academic norms,** including during welcome weeks (and 'refresher' events);

4. **liaising with student groups** to help address their experiences of marginalisation and vulnerability;

5. **supporting students' unions and student societies to foster an open culture** that encourages vibrant debate;

6. **working collegially with other institutions to learn from what works,** via the higher education sector's representative bodies and missions groups;

7. **continuing co-operation with official authorities** when public safety appears to be at risk from extremism; and

8. **adopting a leadership culture that recognises the importance of free expression,** reinforced by the performance indicators for senior managers.

All of this needs to be combined with careful handling of external provocateurs who are more interested in raising tensions and wasting resources than starting enriching and illuminating debates. Universities are places of learning, scholarship and research; their role should not be expected to include putting their reputation for intellectual excellence on the line by providing a backdrop for provocateurs to play their games.

Such an approach is easier said than done when the real terms income for teaching home students is falling so fast, but it could be facilitated if regulators and policymakers focused more on support for institutions than admonishment.

The stark reality is that free speech questions are rarely simple. Even the doughtiest defenders of free speech tend to have their own red lines – as I have previously noted on the HEPI blog, we all tend to support free speech until we don't. The current Government, for example, expects educational institutions to take various actions to limit the growth of extremism while simultaneously pushing for freer debate on campus.

To the degree that things have swung too far in one direction, with too few students recognising the unavoidable trade-offs involved with ever greater restrictions on free speech, the key question is whether the best solution is more regulation or more robust governance / management or more softer interventions aimed at inculcating a diverse campus culture – or a combination of all three.

Recent HEPI publications

Student Academic Experience Survey 2022
AdvanceHE / hepi
Jonathan Neves (Advance HE) and Alexis Brown (HEPI)

STUDENT ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE SURVEY

Digging in? The changing tenure of UK vice-chancellors
Gatenby Sanderson
HEPI Policy Note 34   Nick Hillman, HEPI Director   May 2022

Introduction

It is unfashionable to express sympathy for university leaders, but – like other higher education staff – they have had a torrid couple of years. COVID, industrial action and policy uncertainty have meant a full in-tray of combustible material.

There is a limited number of issues on which populist commentators and the University and College Union (UCU) agree, but their criticisms of university leaders sometimes sound similar. These find an echo in much media coverage of the higher education sector.

The consensus is particularly clear when it comes to those at the top of the tree, whose job title is often 'Vice-Chancellor' – a term used in this paper to describe them all, though some are officially known by other titles instead or as well, including 'Chief Executive', 'Director', 'President', 'Principal', 'Provost' and 'Rector'.

Whether people have sympathy for vice-chancellors or not, there has been an expectation that the extra pressures on them – which come on top of major external changes, like greater marketisation, Brexit and (in England) a new interventionist regulator – could lead to a reduction in their average tenure.

This Policy Note measures the tenure of vice-chancellors at longer standing UK universities in four different ways. It shows that, possibly against expectations, the tenure of serving vice-chancellors has been rising and that, on average, vice-chancellors have served for a little over eight years when they stand down.

GatenbySanderson, an executive search firm and HEPI Partner, who specialise in recruiting vice-chancellors and chief executives for the public sector have separately compared tenure in different sectors. In health, average tenure for senior leaders is just three years. Before the pandemic, average tenure in local government was around eight years but turnover has shot up since the pandemic. Workload, burn-out and levels of public scrutiny are cited by many, resulting in a lack of talent in the pipeline.

GatenbySanderson recently explored the experience of recently appointed vice-chancellors, proving context is everything. Different institutions have different strategies and helping governors understand the nature and needs of their institution and how they get translated into honest expectations is critical. For now, vice-chancellors are staying in post longer, giving them more time to get under the skin of their institution as well as to implement new strategies.

Is there an ideal term of office? At key points of change, organisational strategies need to be reviewed and objectives established or reinforced. Those at the top must have the space and accountability to determine the vision and deliver the results. Too short a tenure results in either endless strategy development with little execution or permanent fire-fighting with no end goal and little impact. On the other hand, too little turnover can impede diversity and innovation.

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QAA 25th anniversary

Defining Quality
Vicki Stott, Chief Executive, QAA
HEPI Policy Note 33   March 2022

Introduction

Quality is a slippery term, not least because it is in part practical, in part philosophical and (almost) always relative. Yet it underpins higher education provision and is central to policy debate and regulatory approaches across the UK. So how do we define quality? An understanding of the different mechanisms at play can provide context to the debate.

At the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), we hold diverse roles in the regulatory, advisory, policy and voluntary spheres across the UK.[1] At the heart of all we do, we recognise the primary responsibility for maintaining quality and standards sits with providers themselves. Providers with degree-awarding powers have particular responsibility for the academic standards of the qualifications they award. For us, academic quality is a comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, higher education providers manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed, while meeting the legitimate expectations of students, employers, government and society in general. It is, of course, where we introduce expectations – particularly of such diverse audiences – that relativity begins to come significantly into play, and we open ourselves to the risk of ambiguity or confusion.

So, for us, academic quality is underpinned by reference points – designed, developed, agreed and adhered to by the sector to provide some commonality across the many faces of higher education provision. They are, thus, benchmarks of quality. Across higher education provision, we refer commonly to threshold standards – by which we mean the minimum acceptable level of achievement a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national qualifications frameworks (in England now adopted into the Regulatory Framework as sector-recognised standards) and in subject benchmark statements. Degree-awarding bodies set the academic standards expected for their courses (modules and awards). These may exceed the threshold academic standards and are more akin to output measures than benchmarks. They will typically be identified through internal mechanisms such as institutional policies, course documentation and marking criteria.

Already we can see that no definition is straightforward, and in fact what is meant by quality or standards will be very much dependent on the context, and perspective, of the speaker. So, in this provocation, I am going to outline in very general high-level terms what those words mean in contexts other than higher education, and then focus incrementally on what they mean in higher education generally and, finally, as used by QAA specifically.

While it is challenging to define terms in common usage, it is certainly not impossible. Quality can be considered on a spectrum, ranging (in order of sophistication of approach) from quality

This article reflects the opinions of QAA "outside" its role as Designated Quality Body and nothing within it should be read as representative of the views of the Office for Students nor as guidance in interpreting the Office for Students' regulatory framework.

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