No Platform: Speaker Events at University Debating Unions

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With a Foreword from Professor James Tooley

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Foreword

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When the University of Buckingham awarded an honorary doctorate to Dr Tony Sewell this summer, a columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* wrote that this showed 'outstanding moral leadership'. It is a wonderful accolade; I carry it with pride. But it is a disturbing sign of the times that so small an action can gain so large an approbation.

Dr Tony Sewell had been working to improve the lives of disadvantaged inner-city kids for many years. For his dedicated charitable work, the University of Nottingham, Dr Sewell's alma mater, offered him an honorary doctorate. Dr Sewell then chaired the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which sparked controversy with its suggestion that the 'claim the country is still institutionally racist is not borne out by the evidence'.

Nottingham then withdrew its offer of an honorary doctorate, in accordance with its awarding criteria, to avoid political controversies. So Buckingham stepped in. We wanted to honour Dr Sewell's lifetime of charitable work, but were also persuaded that the Commission's report had intellectual merit and that controversy is all part of the cut and thrust of lively and worthwhile academic debate.

For our pains, the Vice-Chancellors of both Nottingham and Buckingham were trolled on Twitter, reviled by different groups of course. It all highlights some of the difficulties universities face coming to grips with academic freedom and free speech.

In this context, it is a pleasure to write a Foreword to this new HEPI report. I have long admired HEPI and their interesting work across the higher education sector in general and concerning freedom of speech in particular. Earlier this year, for instance, HEPI published *'You can't say that!' What students really think of free speech on campus*, authored by Director Nick Hillman. This made for slightly chilling reading. Students, it appeared, are becoming increasingly censorious, with large majorities – growing since previous years – of respondents preferring 'safety' to free speech, or reporting that protecting students from discrimination is more important than free speech.

This current paper looks at an under-researched area in the free speech debate: the role of student societies and the speakers they invite – or sometimes do not invite. The 'left-wing' bias of student societies is not surprising (I would have liked to know more about how 'left' and 'right' were defined, however). Winston Churchill is often credited with saying that the young person who is not a socialist when they are 18 has no heart; the young will always find left-wing ideas appealing.

What is disturbing from this present study is not so much the problem of no-platforming, but the phenomenon of 'silent' no-platforming. That is, where 'otherwise suitable speakers' are not invited, because it is feared the invitation will spark a backlash from peers or the authorities. It is very reminiscent of findings from other great researchers in this area, such as Birkbeck's Eric Kaufmann, who reported large proportions of academics on 'the right' self-censoring, aware that if they ventured into researching or even talking about certain questions, they ran the risk of becoming academic pariahs.

The current paper also puts forward some interesting ideas on changes to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, currently progressing through Parliament. I particularly endorse the emphasis on 'cutting bureaucracy and giving universities autonomy'. The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) is explicit about 'the need to protect the institutional autonomy' of universities, which feels more honoured in the breach than in the observance. The current legislation seems likely to continue that trend.

Much of the discussion around the Bill and the broader issues of academic freedom tend to focus on the negative, stressing compliance issues, conditions of registration with the regulator and the severe problems of the undermining of free speech and academic freedom in universities.

For many academics, the focus only on the negative, on the 'sticks' of the law, rather than the positive, the 'carrots' of the intellectual and social attraction of academic freedom, is wearisome and could in the end be counterproductive. The current paper gives something of an antidote here, counselling against running straight to the regulator when problems arise. It is hopeful in its conclusion too: 'Free speech is not dead', it says, even though in some places it may need care and nurturing.

Executive summary

Concern about free speech in universities is growing. 'No-platforming' in universities, where speakers are denied the chance to speak because of their beliefs or past comments, is frequently the subject of media reports. Protests against speakers on campus seem to be common. Students themselves are accused of abandoning a commitment to free speech to protect themselves from harmful ideas. Student debating 'unions', as they are often called, face criticism from the left and right for hosting, or not hosting, speakers considered controversial. The problem is to be directly addressed by the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, currently before the House of Lords.

There is very little research on student societies, how they work or the speakers they invite. Debating unions, debating societies and politics societies claim to be neutral places where engaging debates on current affairs take place and challenging speakers have a platform. But to what extent do they meet this brief? How many universities have a neutral debating union where this occurs? Do they hear a range of perspectives, or are they in some sense biased? And when scandals do occur – cancellations, protests, backlash – how do they respond, and why?

This report puts a lens to debating unions to answer these questions in two ways. First, we compiled a list of all the speakers invited by debating unions in the academic year 2021/22 and coded them by political beliefs and occupation. The results tell us which societies are 'neutral', which are not, and which invite the most guests. Secondly, we interviewed organisers of student events to establish the decision process students use when deciding whom to invite. Their answers

give us key insights into society dynamics and the possible implications of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

Our investigation into invited speakers found the following:

- The Cambridge and Oxford Unions host by far the most speakers, with Cambridge hosting 195 and Oxford 183. The Durham Union came third with 37. Debating societies overall hosted 502 speakers in 2021/22.
- According to societies' social media, only 19 universities had a debating society which hosted at least one speaker event in that period. This is probably far fewer than before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Almost all societies had a left-wing bias, reflecting the political views of students as a whole. Overall, speakers also had a small left-wing bias. Almost a quarter of speakers were left-wing and around a fifth were right-wing.
- The most left-wing societies were Cardiff Politics Society and UCL Debating Society, the latter of which invited no right-wing speakers. The most right-wing were LSE Debate Society and the Durham Union.
- Politicians and academics were the most common occupations of guest speakers hosted by societies.

Our interviews with organisers found the following:

- Backlash and outrage among students against speakers hosted by a society was common. The most challenging events were with the Israeli Ambassador at LSE and Andrew Graham-Dixon at Cambridge, for which organisers received abuse from other students.
- Much more common than reported cases of no-platforming

was 'quiet' no-platforming, where students decided not to invite otherwise suitable speakers for their debates because of views held or past comments. Speakers quietly no-platformed included Alex Salmond, Liam Neeson, Tony Blair and Peter Hitchens.

- Student unions can also have a silencing effect: one student union told a society its funding would be 'cut' if it platformed a certain politician.
- Costs for contentious events can exceed £1,000, an impossible sum for most societies.

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill targets no-platforming directly by imposing legal penalties on institutions that no-platform speakers. This will be achieved by establishing a new legal 'tort' which would give victims of no-platforming the right to take legal action against the offending institution. Our key finding is that the tort may only have a limited impact where most no-platforming is 'quiet'. Students and institutions may respond to these measures not with more free speech, but with more caution.

To encourage the hosting of events, the Government should:

- ask the Office for Students to provide and distribute clear guidance which explains the complaints process and advises students on how to manage challenging events;
- streamline the Bill to allow higher education providers to handle most complaints internally, cutting bureaucracy and giving universities autonomy; and
- keep the tort, but make it the final stage of a four-step appeals process that begins with effective guidance, followed by internal processes at institutions and then complaints to the Office for Students.

1. Free speech in student societies

There numerous student unions in the UK representing the 2.7 million students studying in higher education.[1] Student unions can have hundreds of active student societies: Swansea has 150, Warwick has 250 and Oxford has more than 400.[2] Societies host sports matches, concerts, socials and a wide variety of speaker events, where guests who are not students at the university are invited to speak or participate. Some societies represent a political group, such as Labour and Conservative societies; others represent a political cause, like UCL's Climate Action Society.[3]

Student unions are generally ultimately accountable for the actions of student societies and oversee their activities. They can approve or reject events and new societies, sanction members and control the flow of subsidies. A society's committee, usually elected by the society's membership, runs its day-to-day activities.

Political views and self-censorship

Many universities have a thriving political culture. Today's students are overwhelmingly left-wing: polling by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) found in 2021/22 that at the 2019 General Election, of those who voted, 42% of students voted Labour and 10% for each of the Liberal Democrats and the Greens.[4] Only 11% voted Conservative.[5] They are also overwhelmingly Remainers: a 2019 survey found 76% wanted to stay in the EU, compared to 13% who supported some form of Brexit.[6]

Campuses have leant leftwards for years, but there is increasingly a concern that alternative viewpoints are being stifled. Policy Exchange made headlines in 2019 with the claim that, while nearly 90% of student Remainers would be

comfortable declaring they supported Remain, only 40% of Leavers would feel at ease indicating their views 'for fear of consequences to [their] career'.[7] A study by King's College London (KCL) found that 59% of Conservative supporters believed those with Conservative views were unwilling to express them openly.[8]

Members of other parties also feared giving honest political opinions. The KCL study found that 24% of Labour supporters, 22% of Lib Dems and 20% of Greens felt unable to express their views.[9] This has fuelled concerns that 'self-censorship', classifying one's own speech for fear of the consequences, has become common. Across all political beliefs, a quarter of students (25%) indicated they were 'scared' to express their views openly.[10] Another poll found similarly that 27% had hidden their views because their values 'clashed with their university'.[11] A very sizeable portion of students of all views do not consider university a comfortable place to discuss them.

Student attitudes to free speech

The rise of self-censorship does not necessarily represent a wholesale disregard among students for free speech. The study by King's College London also found that 81% of students believe free expression is more important than ever.[12] But when forced to trade free speech against the safety of students, many think safety is more important. Policy Exchange data show that when given the choice, 52% would choose free speech and 38% safety.[13] More recent data from HEPI found a large majority, 61%, are in favour of 'ensuring students are protected' against only 17% for 'unlimited free speech'.[14] The HEPI report also found that 39% supported banning all speakers that cause offence and 86% supported the no-platforming policy of the

National Union of Students.[15] Clearly the results are mixed, but a significant proportion – perhaps even a majority – no longer consider free speech a priority.

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, introduced to the House of Commons in May 2021, is currently before the House of Lords. The Bill was introduced in response to concerns about freedom of expression and academic freedom in UK higher education institutions. In its guide to the 2022 Queen's Speech, the Government said:

> *There is growing concern about a 'chilling effect' on university campuses that means that not all students and staff feel able to express themselves without fear of repercussions.*[16]

The main provisions of the Bill apply only to England.

The Bill's main provisions include:

- Ensuring that freedom of speech and academic freedom are supported to the fullest extent. The legislation builds on existing freedom of speech duties for higher education institutions and addresses gaps in current provision.[17]
- The creation of a new statutory tort, allowing individuals who have suffered from the failure of a university to honour its free speech requirements to seek 'redress' in court.[18] One example of such a failure might be the 'no-platforming' of a speaker on the basis of his or her views.
- A complaints process run by the Office for Students for those who believe universities have failed to meet their requirements, available to 'students, members, staff and visiting speakers'.[19] The Office for Students will have the ability to impose penalties for breaches of duty.
- The introduction of a 'free speech champion', formally called the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom, at the Office for Students to monitor no-platforming and academic freedom.[20]

Yet most students do not believe there is a free speech 'crisis'. The KCL report found a majority of students (56%) are content that their university is acting in the best interests of students with regards to free speech.[21] Nearly a quarter (23%) believe their university should go further to protect students against harmful speech.[22] Only 20% were 'libertarians' concerned that universities were going too far to limit free expression.[23] The idea of denying controversial speakers a platform now has broad acceptance among students.

HEPI found more discontent. It reported that 38% of students were concerned universities are 'becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints'.[24] According to the KCL study, roughly the same proportion of students (35%) believe that freedom of expression in the UK is threatened by a culture of 'safetyism', compared to 44% of the public.[25] That represents a sizeable number of students who believe there is a problem. Nonetheless, the overall impression is that some limits to free speech have become a normal part of university culture.

No-platforming

Much has been made of a recent spike in media reports on no-platforming. Others say the problem is overstated. During the Second Reading of the Higher Education Bill, the Rt Hon. David Davis MP argued:

> *The Bill is to correct a small — I grant you, it is small — but extraordinarily important symbolic aspect of this modern McCarthyism, namely the attempt to no-platform a number of speakers, including Amber Rudd, Julie Bindel, Peter Hitchens, Peter Tatchell and others … If established people with high reputations can be terrorised, suppressed*

> *or put down, how is it going to be for somebody without the defences that they have?*[26]

By comparison, during the Third Reading, the Shadow Higher Education Minister Matt Western MP commented:

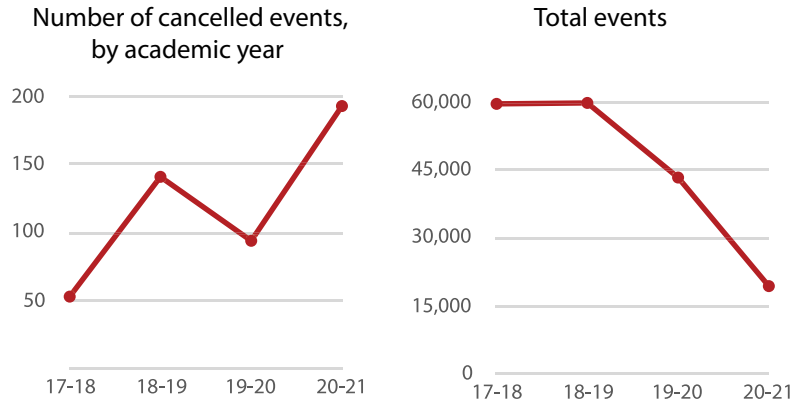
> *The Government have imposed this piece of unnecessary legislation on the House, expending 30 hours of parliamentary time on this Bill – a Bill primarily searching for a problem.*[27]

Data on the scale of no-platforming leaves a hazy picture. A survey by Wonkhe of 61 universities found that, of almost 10,000 speaker events planned in 2019/20, only six were cancelled, representing just 0.06% of the total, and mostly for logistical reasons.[28] At the other end of the scale, the group *Academics for Academic Freedom* claims to have found over 100 cases where individuals were no-platformed or where academics or speakers were attacked for their views.[29]

The most consistent data comes from the Office for Students, which include cancelled events as part of compulsory Prevent data collected from higher education institutions. They found that the number of cancelled events increased from 53 in the 2017/18 academic year to 193 in 2020/21.[30] At the 2021 peak, cancelled events represented about 1% of all events held by universities, a notable proportion.[31]

The spike in cancellations may have been encouraged by the pandemic, with the total number of events dropping significantly after 2019.[32] Most cancellations were for 'procedural issues', which could be anything from no-platforming to COVID measures or a lack of room space.[33] The data make it difficult to estimate the scale of the problem.

Figure 1: Number of cancelled speaker events and total speaker events from 2017 to 2021



There is also a concern that these low figures understate how serious the situation is. During the Second Reading of the Bill in the House of Lords, Baroness Fox argued in response to the Wonkhe statistics:

> *These no-platform stats miss the important point. Comments from opposition Benches here ignore the corrosive rise of self-censorship … The main problem is less about external speakers than about a toxic atmosphere on campus for students and staff. Self-censorship is damaging to intellectual inquiry.*[34]

The Baroness's comments represent a fear, not easily captured by data, that the relatively small number of no-platforming cases are indicative of a wider free speech problem.

Student unions

Underpinning society operations are student unions, the ultimate arbiters of what societies can do. A HEPI report from

2020 found that student unions have huge potential to hold universities to account, elevate under-represented voices, and give independent advice to students facing tough choices.[35]

Attitudes to student unions, however, are concerning. According to the 2022 *National Student Survey (NSS)*, only 52.6% of final year undergraduates believe that student unions 'effectively represent students' interests', down from a 66% satisfaction rate ten years earlier.[36] Critics have argued student unions consistently get poor turnout at elections and spend large amounts of money for mixed results.[37] According to NSS results, among the worst performers are Durham, Lancaster, Edinburgh and Warwick, generally high-ranking universities.[38]

2. Speaker events at debating unions

Debating unions are among the UK's oldest protectors of free speech. The Cambridge and Oxford Unions, established in 1815 and 1823 respectively and not affiliated to a local student union, are well known and have a long tradition of hosting guests to deliver speeches and engage in debates. They stretch across the UK: the Debating Society at University College London was founded in 1828 and the Literary and Scientific Society at Queen's University Belfast, better known as the 'Literific', in 1850.

Most political university societies take an ideological stance, have a specific campaigning agenda or are targeted at a subsection of the student population. By contrast, the professed aim of debating unions is to provide all students with a neutral platform to debate.

Yet the growth in no-platforming controversies has recently put doubt on these credentials. A chief concern is that students are platforming left-wingers and progressives while no-platforming those with views they disagree with. For this project, we investigated debating unions to determine which ones were hosting speaker events and the ideological disposition of invited speakers.

Debating unions represent only a very small proportion of student societies and therefore this research represents only one snapshot of student life. However, by focusing on a single type of society, we have been able to achieve greater depth than prior research in this area.

Methodology

Our research focused on the 140 members of Universities UK. For each university, we searched for 'debating society' and 'politics society' and used social media – usually a Facebook profile – to determine the speaker events, if any, a university society held in the 2021/22 academic year. Each speaker and the institution they were invited to was added to a database. The speakers accurately reflect the information available on a society's social media channels and every effort was made to check the information by interview, to which a large proportion of societies responded.

We collected data on 502 speakers across 19 student societies (listed on the Publications page on the HEPI website), whose universities were a mix of older and newer institutions. Each of the listed speakers was invited and had accepted an invitation. Although most events went ahead, a very small number were subsequently cancelled – see Chapter 3.

We then coded each speaker according to their political beliefs. A speaker was coded if they had expressed 'clear and consistent' beliefs on the left or right of the political spectrum. Speakers who had not expressed any strong political beliefs, had expressed contradictory political beliefs or those not necessarily attributable to one side of the UK political divide, or who had expressed political beliefs in the centre of the UK political spectrum, were given a neutral rating. A very small number of speakers were coded 'far left' or 'far right' because they had expressed beliefs far to the left or right of the contemporary Labour and Conservative parties respectively. Politicians from foreign political parties were generally coded left- or right-wing according to the political divide in their own countries. Speakers were also coded into broad occupational categories.

For each institution and occupation, we calculated the swing of left to right by taking the difference between the number of left-wing and right-wing speakers as a proportion of the total in that category. Institutions and occupations with more left-wing speakers swung to the left and those with more right-wing speakers swung to the right. No swing would indicate that an equal number leaned left and right. When calculating swing, to avoid extreme conclusions, we ignored institutions and occupation with under five confirmed speakers.

The state of debating unions

The first finding is the large proportion of UK universities whose students seem to lack speaker events. Of the 140 universities, only 19 had a debating or politics society which, according to their social media, held at least one speaker event in 2021/22. This represents only 14% of universities, leaving 121 (86%) without a neutral society which hosted external events. Some universities had a debating union which did not invite speakers, serving instead as discussion forums and organisers of social events for politically active students. Of the rest, a large number had previously existed but became inactive on social media in late 2019 or early 2020, suggesting they may not have survived the pandemic.

When considering the number of speakers invited, we found a striking inequality between the Oxbridge Unions and the rest. Of 502 speakers invited nationwide, 195 spoke at Cambridge and 183 at Oxford, from a total of 378, compared to 124 across all other institutions. The third-placed institution, Durham, invited 37. Of the 19 societies, only five invited more than ten speakers across the year.

Figure 2: The number of confirmed speakers, top five, 2021/22

Rank	Name of society	Speakers confirmed
1	Cambridge Union	195
2	Oxford Union	183
3	Durham Union	37
4	Sussex Politics Society	16
5	UCL Debating	14

Broken down by occupation, we found that about a quarter of speakers (121) were politicians or worked in policy. A fifth (90) were professors or academics.

When considered by institution, smaller societies tended to rely more heavily on politics and academia: 67% of speakers at Warwick and 57% at University College London (UCL) were academics; 38% of speakers at Sussex, and the vast majority of speakers at smaller societies such as Southampton, Lancaster and Cardiff, worked in politics.

At the three big Unions of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham, about a quarter of visiting speakers worked in politics and between 10% to 20% came from academia.

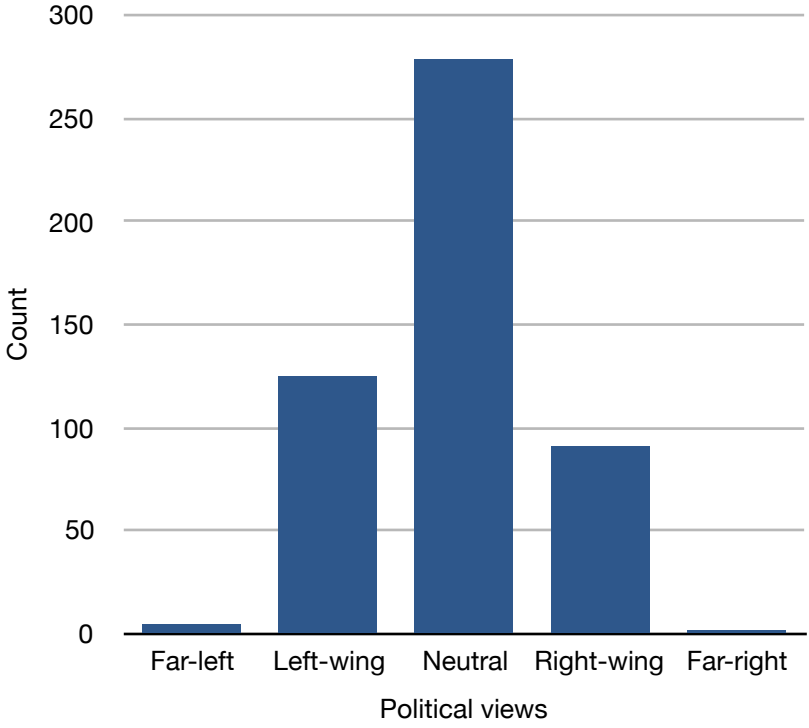
Figure 3: The most common occupations, top five, 2021/22

Occupation	**Proportion**
Politician, adviser, policy	24%
Academic	18%
Campaigner, activist	10%
Artist, celebrity, actor, musician	10%
Journalist	9%

Bias and neutrality

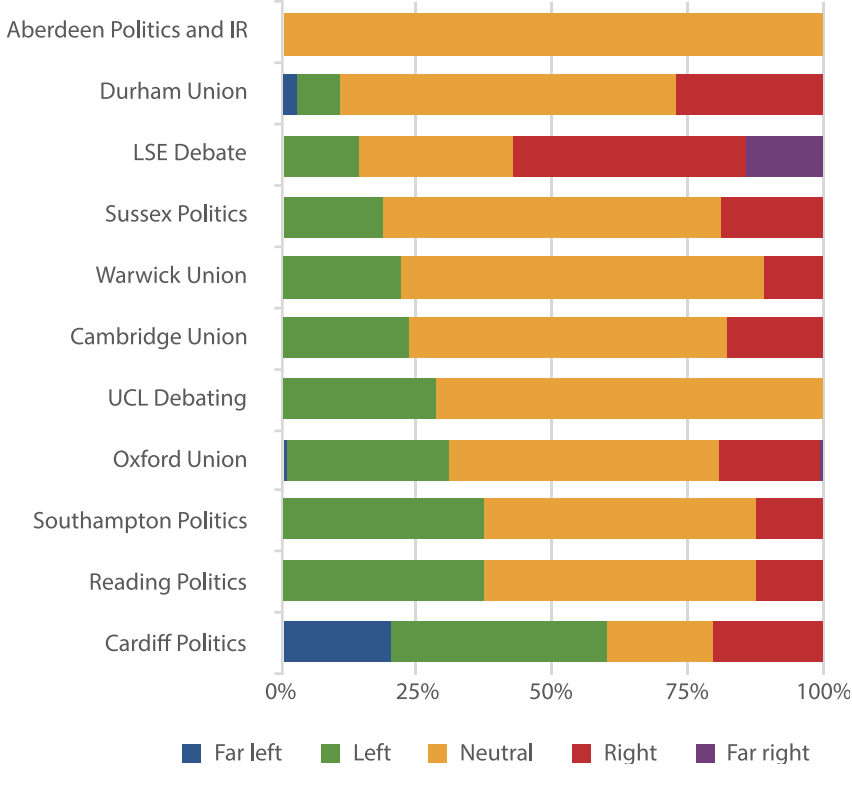
Our coding showed that debating societies as a whole had a marked left-wing bias. Of the 502 speakers, 278 were coded neutral, with 125 left-wing and 91 right-wing. Five speakers were coded far-left and two far-right.

Figure 4: Number of speakers by political views



Almost every institution had a left-wing bias, including both Oxbridge Unions. The only institutions with five or more speakers that had a right-wing bias were the London School of Economics (LSE), because it planned an event with three Tory politicians, and Durham. We should interpret the results cautiously, as they only show speakers who confirmed: it is possible, for example, equal numbers of each were invited but more left-wing speakers said yes.

Figure 5: Proportion of the speakers confirmed from each society by ideology, 2021/22



The differences between the number of left-wing and right-wing speakers were modest. Of Cambridge's 195 speakers, 45 were left-wing and 35 right-wing. At Oxford, the difference was larger, with 54 left-wing and 34 right-wing out of a total of 183. When considering swing we found Cardiff and UCL, the latter of which invited no right-wing speakers, to be the UK's most left-wing societies in 2021/22.

Figure 6: Swing of ideological beliefs at institutions with five or more confirmed speakers

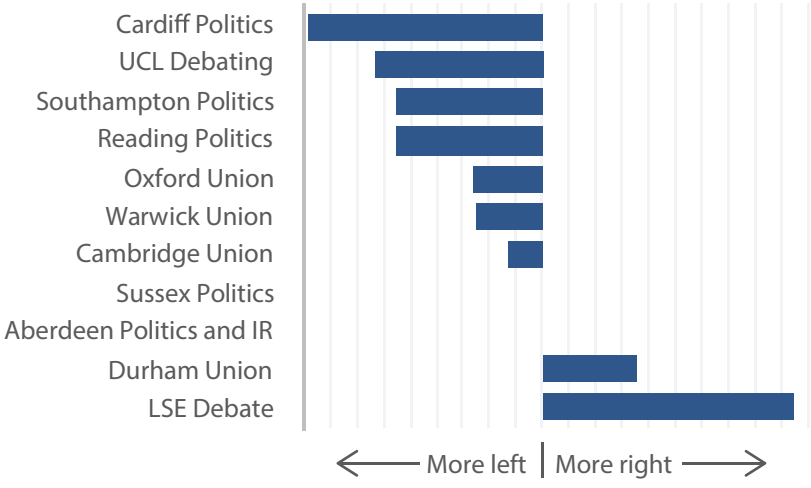
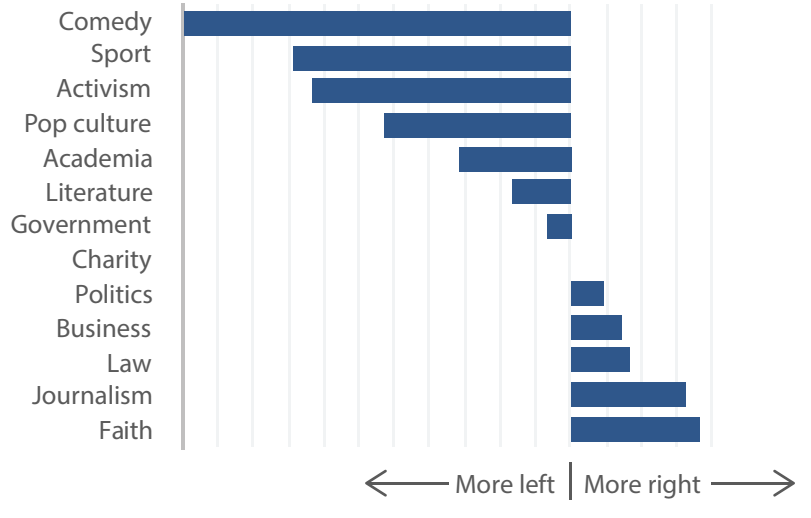


Figure 7: Swing of ideological beliefs for occupations invited on at least five occasions



When considering the swing among occupations, comedians were the most left-wing group, followed by athletes and activists. Those representing faith groups were the most right-wing and those who work in journalism, law, politics and business also had a right-wing bias. Government officials and those who worked at charities were the least biased.

Overall, students seemed to prefer left-wing speakers by a significant proportion. This indicates that the ideological preferences of committee members were broadly in line with the wider student population. There are however three reasons to believe that most debating unions are not left-wing 'echo chambers' and are open to considering a variety of opinions.

i) First, while the overall preference is for left-wing speakers, almost all unions heard from a diverse range of speakers, both in terms of their political ideologies and occupations. Speakers coded neutrally made up a majority at almost all universities, with this category consisting of many academics, journalists, diplomats and campaigners without a strongly left- or right-wing agenda. Even at the most left-wing societies, Cardiff and UCL, left-wingers made up only 40% and 30% respectively of speakers, with the rest representing neutral or right-wing backgrounds.

ii) Secondly, the left-wing bias comes in large part from 'non-political' speakers. At Oxford, for example, artists and athletes both had a significant left-wing bias, but they were usually invited to perform or discuss their careers rather than politics. These speakers were not invited for their views; it merely turns out that many of the public figures students like happen to be left-wing. Among those who were invited to give political opinions, there was more

balance: academics and campaigners leaned left; politicians and journalists leaned right.

iii) The format of events matters. Speakers were very often invited as part of debates, where the beliefs of one side would come up against the other. Even when a speaker was invited to give a talk, his or her opinions could be challenged by an interviewer, members of the audience or both. There were no cases recorded in interviews where speakers were given a platform without the expectation they would face challenging questions.

Overall, Oxford and Cambridge hoover up the vast majority of invited speakers. The political views of organisers tend to reflect the left-wing composition of the student body as a whole, but significant space is given to other voices, including right-wing ones. Students have a strong preference for hearing from politicians and academics, particularly in smaller societies, with many invitations extended to campaigners and celebrities as well.

3. The roots of no-platforming

To paint a picture of no-platforming in UK universities, we interviewed students across the UK involved in organising speaker events. We wanted to explore the barriers preventing societies from hosting speaker events to determine the most effective policy responses. We conducted 21 interviews with students at 15 universities in all four parts of the UK during August and September 2022.

Backlash

Many student organisers received vocal opposition to the speakers they invited. Much of the backlash was unpleasant but reasonable, such as comments on social media, personal messages and articles in the student press. Some criticism was internal: society committees were often divided over speakers. There was sometimes a stronger response, such as protests and walk-outs and – in the most severe cases – students were targeted for harassment and abuse.

Among the strongest backlash occurred in response to a speaker event with the Israeli Ambassador, Tzipi Hotovely, by the LSE Debate Society. Some in the committee resisted the event and others resigned afterwards. Students sent online abuse to organisers from anonymous accounts and a number of students, some of whom became aggressive, approached organisers on the LSE campus. Over 100 people protested outside the event when it took place and named organisers in protest chants. A small crowd of protestors went so far as to follow the organisers home and chant 'shame' against their home countries. Despite requests for security for the organisers and an explanation of their treatment, the student union provided none and took no action against students accused of harassment.

In another important case, a comedy debate at the Cambridge Union became the subject of controversy when Andrew Graham-Dixon, an invited speaker, impersonated Hitler during his speech. Student media heavily criticised Graham-Dixon's alleged use of a racist term and the President's failure to address it properly at the time. The criticism, described as a 'hit campaign' by a committee member, included death threats made against both the President, who was personally attacked in the student press for his comments during the event, and the Equalities Officer, who resigned as a result of the backlash. When the President pledged to create a 'blacklist' of speakers to prevent future incidents, the national media called him a 'Stalinist'. Other committee members also received abuse from students.

The following also reportedly occurred in response to speaker events:

- Interviewees at Cambridge indicated that abuse, often in the form of personal messages on Facebook Messenger, was a 'part of the job' committee members at the Cambridge Union had to accept. It often occurred at the release of the 'term card', the list of speakers scheduled to speak during the upcoming term.
- Two events at Queen's University Belfast, one with the Israeli Ambassador and the other on abortion, were met with protests and heavy criticism on social media.
- Organisers at the LSE continued to receive abuse in the run-up to an event with the Palestinian Ambassador, which was paired with the talk with the Israeli Ambassador.
- Organisers of an event with Steve Bannon at the Oxford Union in 2018 faced large protests and a motion of

impeachment in the Union President, who ultimately survived in his post.

Backlash often discouraged societies from running difficult events. At the LSE, the 'stress' involved with hosting the Israeli Ambassador split the committee, around half of whom resigned. It made the LSE reluctant to host future speaker events and reduced turnout to other events they ran. At Cambridge, the incident and the threat of a blacklist, though ultimately abandoned, made committee members more cautious in inviting speakers. Many 'big' speakers still refuse to attend because of the perception that the Union is hostile to free speech. The event also forced the Cambridge Union to create a 'comms plan' in case of future controversies.

Such events do not only affect the societies which run them, but also create a wider sense that controversies are worth avoiding. An organiser at Imperial College London said they decided to avoid 'political' events entirely after hearing about the incident at the LSE; that incident was also cited as a reason for caution by a Bristol society. Students at St Andrews became more cautious after the event at Cambridge because they wanted to avoid any risk of being attacked in the national media. An organiser at the Manchester Debating Union referred to an event with Katie Hopkins at Exeter in 2018, which provoked protests and a response from the University leadership, as a reason to avoid contentious speakers.

Protests and comments are legitimate and legal expressions of free speech; clearly targeted harassment is not. This backlash culture creates a climate of fear among student organisers who resultingly avoid difficult events.

Self-censorship

'Quiet' no-platforming, a form of self-censorship, occurs when speakers who would otherwise have been invited to an event are not invited because of their previous 'problematic' comments or views. Most interviewees had at some point engaged in some form of quiet no-platforming. For many societies it was a standard part of the organising process to check whether a speaker had made previous comments which could bring the society into disrepute.

Many were keen to stress the importance of safeguarding their members against discrimination and bigotry. This vetting process, though well meaning, meant many speakers were not given a platform. The extent of self-censorship was much more widespread than the relatively few cases of no-platforming publicised in the national press.

For example, the UCL Debating Society had planned an event about the participation of transgender people in sports for autumn 2021. Two speakers were already confirmed, including a transgender athlete and journalist with expertise in the field. A professor at a different university, who was invited to speak, requested that the event not take place because of the risk it would have a negative impact on transgender people. Following a discussion among the committee, the event was cancelled. Organisers cited two reasons: the society felt it did not have the experience or training to prevent discrimination against minorities at the event; and the organisers were not confident they would be able to respond properly to any backlash the event could have caused.

Interviewees at both the Oxford and Cambridge Unions reported several cases of self-censorship. A number of speakers

at Oxford, including Liam Neeson, Alex Salmond and Harry Enfield, were denied a platform because of comments they had previously made or controversies they had been involved in. At Cambridge, students displayed 'extreme' caution with their invitations after an interview with the then Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. When an interviewer was heavily criticised for failing to challenge properly remarks made by Mohamad that were widely seen as antisemitic, and the event led to reports in the national press, it provoked 'anxiety' among organisers.[39] Organisers quickly became fearful that an event gone wrong could have consequences for their reputation and careers and self-censored significantly as a result.

The unique 'hack' culture at the Oxford and Cambridge Unions may make the situation worse. According to an interviewee, members are chiefly concerned about their Union careers and worried about being attacked by the student press in an environment where 'popularity' is everything. He described a process where students systematically type the name of a potential speaker followed by 'controversy' into Google, at which point any speakers deemed to be 'controversial without merit' are dismissed as options.

Very often, motions have been changed to avoid the possibility of certain arguments coming up and speakers have been given narrow topics to speak on to avoid them straying into contentious areas. In other cases, speakers invited for an hour-long slot have not been given the standard 15-minute address, to avoid the possibility of creating a 'bully pulpit' where the speaker can speak without being challenged.

Interviewees reported a number of other cases where committees 'quietly' no-platformed speakers.

- In the Manchester University Debating Union, organisers saw so great a need to avoid backlash that committees would spend a week vetting potential speakers for past comments on various contentious issues. The vetting process was also included in official guidance passed over between committees. Motions about OnlyFans and the University of Manchester Vice-Chancellor were pulled for being too controversial and former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott was among speakers not given a platform due to the possibility of public fallout.
- A President at the Oxford Union 'refused' to hold a panel on the Israel-Palestine conflict because of the potential for backlash.
- The St Andrews Union avoided platforming controversial speakers, such as Peter Hitchens and Jordan Petersen, because of the need to avoid cementing the perception among students of being an 'Old Boys Club' that invited speakers to deliberately stir controversy.
- Cardiff Politics Society decided not to invite Tony Blair because of the possibility that his presence on campus could anger those whose relatives suffered in the invasion of Iraq.
- Imperial Debating Society indicated the need to avoid topics which were too 'personal' and could cause harm.

When asked to give reasons for the above decisions, speakers usually stressed the need to avoid controversy. In particular, many cited their own inexperience as students new to politics

and usually without considerable experience as organisers, chairs or interviewers. Many were not confident they could handle fallout or effectively challenge 'problematic' comments made by speakers. Almost all said unprompted that they had no interest in creating controversy for its own sake, and wanted to create an engaging political debate to help other students access a topic, but they were anxious not to draw criticism from other students.

Other campus controversies, not related to Debating or Politics societies, also weighed on the minds of organisers. The protests against the academic Kathleen Stock at Sussex, anger at the platforming of Ann Widdecombe at Cardiff University, controversy around an event at Durham involving columnist Rod Liddle, the platforming of Peter Tatchell and Germaine Greer by the University of Manchester's Students' Union and a saga involving the St Andrews newspaper *The Saint* were all held up in the interviews conducted for this report as scandals students were desperate to avoid repeating.[40] Many students platformed only 'safe' options, such as academics and left-wing politicians, as a way of hosting events without inviting the anger of their friends and colleagues.

Student unions

Regrettably, student unions (SUs) often present a barrier to effective organising and can sometimes put students off holding events entirely. For example:

- Manchester Student Union was described as highly obstructionist and bureaucratic and presented a major barrier to holding events. The Manchester SU turned down several events, including some relating to Israel and Iran, allegedly because of security costs. The Manchester

Debating Union ultimately abandoned attempts to get external speakers because it was so difficult to get speakers approved and reverted to only inviting academics from Manchester. In the 2022 NSS, only 41% of students felt that Manchester SU 'effectively represented' students' interests, compared to a national average of 52%.[41]

- One interviewee representing a society at a major university and who asked to remain anonymous described how a member of staff at their student union 'warned' the society would likely lose funding if they hosted a certain politician because of the 'risk' of backlash. The politician was confirmed to speak but the society subsequently cancelled the event.
- UCL described their Student Union as 'bureaucratic'. The Debating Society repeatedly asked the SU to provide a moderator for the debate on transgender athletes – a key measure which would have given them the confidence to host – but one was never provided.
- The Student Union at Sussex was also described as 'needlessly bureaucratic', requiring health and safety forms for each event and operating a room booking system which often did not work. The Sussex Student Union endorsement of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel was also cited as a barrier which might prevent Israeli speakers participating in events.[42]

On the other hand, some students were very complimentary about their student union. The SU at Queen's University Belfast had previously supported a debate on abortion going ahead despite large student protests. Cardiff Student Union approved events quickly, except for events where disruption

was expected and then only to organise security; and Southampton found their university open to accommodating challenging speakers. In the case of the LSE event with the Israeli Ambassador, their Student Union was also described as bureaucratic and 'slow', but agreed with organisers' arguments about the importance of hearing both sides of the debate and was ultimately supportive of the event.

For historical reasons, the Oxford, Cambridge and Durham Unions are independent from their respective Students' Unions. This is a significant difference that gives the Unions almost total control over their finances and who they invite. That does not always prevent the Student Union from being a barrier. The Cambridge Student Union allegedly ran a 'boycott the Union' campaign on the basis of the controversial speakers the Cambridge Union had invited, while the Durham Union said they had a poor 'working relationship' with their Student Union.

Media reporting

The media only rarely report on student events. On the occasions they do report, they tend to have two competing impacts. On the one hand, the media increases pressure on students to maintain their commitment to free speech. On the other hand, where students find reporting to be irresponsible or inaccurate, it makes them more cautious because of the risk of causing controversy.

The media reports of the LSE event paint a different impression to the organisers' descriptions. Press writeups of the incident suggest the Israeli Ambassador was the victim of violent 'threats' and was 'rushed' out of the event.[43] Other reports describe her as having received 'abuse'.[44] For organisers,

this seems an unfair characterisation of peaceful protesters exercising their right to free expression without violence.[45] They suggest that media reports focused on a single tweet by a 'troll' account 'LSE Class War' – an account which was subsequently deleted – are not representative of the attitude to the event across campus. Media reporting may have increased the backlash and controversy around the event and ensured it was widely heard about and discussed among students. It created more stress for organisers, who had pushed throughout for the event to occur, making them more cautious about holding further events.

The impact of the media at the Cambridge event with Andrew Graham-Dixon was more nuanced. Student newspapers reported on the incident immediately and the national press became involved when the Union President pledged to create a 'blacklist'.[46] The President's picture appeared in articles and he was personally accused of censoring free speech.[47] On the one hand, the scale of the media response was a major factor in persuading the Union to u-turn on the blacklist. On the other hand, the national attention attracted abuse against the committee from outside Cambridge, making subsequent committees more cautious over who they invited in order to prevent the possibility of a backlash. Other prominent speakers, such as John Cleese, subsequently refused to attend because they considered the society insufficiently protective of free speech.[48]

Media reporting can work in both directions. The threat of negative reports gives students a compelling reason not to cancel speakers. However, inaccurate reporting, especially that which creates controversy, can nudge cautious students towards 'safer' options if they are concerned they might be reported.

Costs and funding

Large costs for security, travel for speakers and room bookings are often a barrier and sometimes ruinous for societies. For example:

- Manchester was the only university where it was reported students would need to pay for rooms. Taken together with travel costs, these put the cost of speaker events at up to £1,000. Society members were forced to host events in collaboration with departments and 'beg' the department to cover room fees.
- At the LSE event with the Israeli Ambassador, security costs were 'well over £1,000'. Covering them was only possible, according to organisers, because the society was relatively 'wealthy'.
- At the three big Unions of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham as well as at St Andrews, accommodation and dinner are provided for speakers on top of travel costs, putting the cost of running a debate at up to £900. Events are funded by the drive for students to buy 'life membership', costing £65 at the Durham Union and £200 at the Cambridge Union.[49]
- The location of St Andrews and high travel costs mean they mostly ruled out getting speakers from London.
- Holding events online is occasionally touted as a solution to financial and logistical challenges, as events can be held without expecting speakers to travel across the country and paying the various costs of staging an event. However, online events were unpopular among interviewees, who frequently mentioned 'Zoom fatigue', complained of low turnout and suggested they made for lower quality debates.

All interviewees planned to host all or almost all of their events over the 2022/23 academic year in person.

Logistics and level of work

Students cite the huge organisational challenges of speaker events as a barrier. Perhaps surprisingly, most speakers reject invitations even from major societies like the Oxbridge Unions. As a result, students must 'relentlessly' send out between three times (according to a student from Queen's) and ten times (at relatively isolated Durham) more invites than speakers they hope to eventually host. A student from Cambridge said they had sent out 2,000 invitations to prepare for an upcoming term.

To host almost 200 speakers a year, the Oxbridge Unions operate on a different scale to other societies. Committees are formed of dozens of people: the incoming Oxford Union committee conducted up to 70 interviews over the summer of 2022 to appoint students for the autumn term. The roles were described as hugely logistical: organising dinners and photographers, setting up venues and arranging accommodation. Such is the toll that an interviewee from Oxford planned to defer his studies if elected to a top role because of the volume of work.

4. Case studies

Universities aiming for a thriving culture of student-run events, and students wishing to host them, may read this paper and wonder whether running speaker events is a quagmire best avoided. In fact, many universities and societies get it right. We highlight two cases which illustrate good practice and show key areas where small changes could have made a big difference.

The London School of Economics (LSE)

Paradoxically, while it received plenty of negative press coverage, the LSE event with the Ambassador from Israel contained many positive lessons. Organisers attempted to manage controversy and ensure a balanced set of perspectives from an early stage. To complement the event with Hotovely, organisers also invited the Palestinian Ambassador, Husam Zomlot, who accepted it two months later. Organisers reserved seats for students from Palestine and Israel, as well as student media and neutral parties.

The organisers also made efforts to contact potentially interested groups at LSE, such as those representing Palestinian students, make them aware of the event and include their perspectives. They hoped to avoid catching other students off guard and ensure students who wanted to ask challenging questions of the Israeli Ambassador could do so. In fact, there was initially a positive response from other committees; it was only when the event was made public that criticism escalated. Even then, the organisers were careful not to restrict the debate, impose conditions on the Ambassador's speech or reduce the level of rigour in questioning.

LSE institutions also showed consistent support for the event. While initially hesitant, the LSE Student Union invited organisers in to explain their rationale and were ultimately supportive. When, on the day, the size of protests looked to make cancellation necessary, members of LSE's directorial team allegedly insisted the event go ahead and provided further security.

The event itself ran smoothly, in large part down to the capable academic chair, Dr Lloyd Gruber, from the LSE's Department of International Development. Dr Gruber was able to field questions, drawing a range of perspectives from the audience while also challenging the Israeli Ambassador on her past comments. He also chaired the later event with the Palestinian Ambassador.

The organisation of the event was haphazard in parts, but it ultimately proceeded because of the commitment by students, the Student Union and the university to free speech. It ran into difficulties in three areas:

i) First, contacting student groups in advance failed to stem the student backlash. That need not mean such an approach will always fail. Getting the perspectives of interested students can make for good questioning and help interviewers sensitively deal with difficult topics, even if it does not prevent a negative reaction.

ii) Secondly, the outrage became a concern because of the way it was reported. Reporting made it appear that the Ambassador was unsafe, which organisers felt was untrue, and vilified protestors, most of whom were peaceful. Organisers became the target of attacks as a result of the climate of controversy around the event.

iii) Thirdly, organisers who were victims of harassment received no support from the Student Union, despite appeals to them to provide it.

Oxford

The Oxford Union attracted controversy with the inviting of Debra Soh, a Canadian political commentator whose views have been called 'transphobic' by critics, in early 2021.[50] The invite was immediately controversial and prompted the resignation of the society's Treasurer.[51]

The committee's response to outrage on campus, albeit belated, was to create a 'taskforce' which would compile questions from various interested parties and put the best ones to Soh at the event. The interviewer was therefore well-prepared and equipped to voice a variety of perspectives rather than going in blank. As Soh was still given a platform and the terms of her invitation were unchanged, the Union was able to challenge her critically without compromising its commitment to free speech.

Covering so many voices while maintaining an intellectually demanding environment is commendable for a one-hour talk. This 'taskforce' approach may be too demanding for every event but is useful when a speaker is particularly divisive. For other events, allowing the audience to pose questions guarantees some breadth in topics covered, but an effective way to grill speakers on difficult issues is usually a well-prepared interviewer.

Discussing unpopular themes need not mean courting controversy for its own sake and all participants gain more from a well-handled discussion. For sensitive topics and speakers, a single-speaker event tends to be more serious and

allows for greater depth into speakers' remarks. Debates, while narrowing speakers' remarks to a specific topic of interest, give the chair less scope to guide the discussion. As the Andrew Graham-Dixon event illustrates, debates also tend to have a lighter and more combative atmosphere less well-suited for serious conversations.

5. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Free speech is not dead in UK universities. Students around the country are enthusiastic about hosting perspectives that challenge orthodoxies and foster lively debate. But those students who care most about free speech are now tip-toeing through a minefield where a misstep could blow up in a backlash that vilifies them and hurts their reputation. Higher education institutions should support these students and calmly manage any outrage that follows, as some already do. The Government is right to push for free expression and critical thinking, but it should acknowledge the challenging circumstances students operate in, plan for controversy and work to create a culture where students do not suffer for organising events.

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill aims to raise the stakes for institutions who fail to meet their free speech obligations. It will create a complaints scheme at the Office for Students and a new legal tort, through which individuals can seek redress in court.[52] By creating a new level of accountability, the Government aims to shock universities and student unions into action. The Government rightfully seeks a solution to a real problem and, were the legislation already in place, some of the individuals discussed in this report could have taken advantage of the system.

However, the way that institutions are likely to respond is ambiguous. On the surface, 'classic' no-platforming may decrease. No university, college, student union or debating society will be comfortable cancelling an event if speakers can file a legal claim against them for infringement of their freedom of speech requirements. The threat of action may also motivate some student unions and universities to strengthen

their administrative processes, in case they are seen as impeding the organising of events.

Beneath the surface, the legislation may have a perverse effect. On top of backlash, logistical challenges, media reporting and security costs already associated with hosting events, student organisers will also have to contend with the possibility that their event with a controversial speaker could lead to a complaint to the Office for Students or involve the society in a legal case. Such cases may be expensive, stressful, time-consuming and embarrassing for both students and institutions. Additionally, as societies often depend on their student union for administrative matters, such as approving events, any chance of souring the relationship may make students think again.

As this report has shown, the most common student response to controversy is not more free speech, but more caution. Students scared of legal action might therefore host more 'safe' options and fewer alternative perspectives. If so, the Bill may make it harder, not easier, to host the best advocates and debate the most critical issues on campus.

There are further concerns that the need to protect free speech could compete with existing responsibilities on universities. The Russell Group has argued that the duties conferred by the legislation might 'undermine' efforts to comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty.[53] It has also raised concerns that the obligation to allow events to proceed might conflict with institutional obligations under Prevent, which legally requires checks on individuals to determine whether they have extremist views.[54] Universities UK has raised concerns that the tort could invite 'vexatious or frivolous claims' and that universities might incur significant 'cost, time and reputational

damage'.[55] To prevent additional bureaucracy, the Russell Group has suggested legislating to make the tort a 'backstop' after existing processes have been exhausted.[56]

Streamlining the legislation could resolve most issues quickly, avoid bureaucracy and protect institutional autonomy. Clear guidance to providers from the Office for Students will ensure that they know their obligations under the Bill. This should be distributed to students too, so they know their events meet required standards. Where things go wrong, most complaints can be dealt with quickly and easily by the higher education institutions themselves, who currently bear primary responsibility for managing student events. Only in rare cases where they cannot effectively resolve the issue should the Office for Students, and ultimately the courts, become involved.

We recommend the adoption of a four-stage complaints process for speaker events:

- **Stage 1:** Clear guidance from the Office for Students setting out the responsibilities for registered providers and students under the new legislation. Thorough guidance will ensure a joined-up national approach and avoid the need for institutions to draft their own guidance for students, potentially handing students material of mixed quality.
- **Stage 2:** A complaint made directly to the relevant institution, which will already have established complaints processes. This will reduce the burden on the Office for Students, give institutions the autonomy to handle most complaints internally and allow them to balance their various legal obligations.
- **Stage 3:** When an institution fails to meet its obligations or complainants wish to take further action, complaints

should then be made to the Office for Students, who can impose a fine.

- **Stage 4:** When there are grounds to believe the Office for Students' judgement is unsatisfactory, complainants should then be entitled to make a legal claim through the tort, which would function as an appeals process. Making legal action the last resort would save institutions and students embarrassment and costly time in court. Courts should, however, have the power to impose stronger penalties on non-compliant institutions.

As it stands, the legislation would introduce two new avenues for complaint, an appeal to the Office for Students and legal action under the tort. It also confers obligations on higher education institutions but excludes these institutions from the complaints process. The changes proposed here would explicitly define a role for institutions in handling complaints. Most importantly, these changes would create a clear order of priority for complaints so that the Office for Students and the courts would only be involved in the most serious or contentious cases.

In practice, as the legislation currently stands, a *de facto* order of priority is likely to be created. A litigant not exhausting a complaints process could suffer in the award of litigation costs – that is, they could win the claim but still have to pay both parties' costs. For consistency of process, we recommend this order be enshrined into the legislation. To avoid unnecessary confusion, it is also important that the guidance from the Office for Students makes it clear when students might want to make use of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

When guidance is complete and consistent, students and institutions can host speaker events with confidence because they know they will have met their obligations under the legislation. This is critical in an environment where quiet no-platforming is more common than cancelled events. The possibility of fines from the Office for Students and legal action would remain, so the Government can be confident it is still effectively holding institutions to account.

The Office for Students' guidance should be distributed to students during freshers' week and should include:

- A summary of the rights of students with regards to speaker events, including the right to invite speakers and the existence of legitimate channels for complaint such as protest.
- A full explanation of the complaints scheme and appeals process, including the consequences for cancelling events.
- Advice for students on holding contentious events, including: that students should ask a member of the university's academic staff to chair the event if they do not feel comfortable or experienced enough to do so; that students can request security from their university; and that students can choose to consult experts from the relevant area and interested student groups to ensure they are questioning speakers effectively.
- Advice for students on how to organise, publicise and chair a student event, on the grounds that students are not professional organisers or interviewers.

In addition, the Office for Students should ensure that institutions prepare for any security costs at contentious events,

to comply with the clause of the Bill requiring that security costs must never present a barrier to events going ahead.

The Office for Students and higher education institutions should go further and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to students who go beyond their legitimate right to free speech to abuse, harass or defame other students who run events. Although it may present a significant challenge, institutions must develop clear processes for distinguishing between students who engage in reasonable protest at events and those who overstep into abusive behaviour. The Government should continue its crackdown on online abuse and harassment, with particular attention given to cases where victims are university students.

Finally, institutions, and the student unions for which they are responsible, should cut unnecessary bureaucracy and reduce logistical and financial barriers to hosting student events. Institutions should make room bookings free and simple; should set ambitious targets for events to be approved and follow up when targets are not met; and streamline the formal documentation students must complete to host events.

When organising events, students should:

- continue to strive for balance among the speakers they invite, in order that a range of ideologies, perspectives and arguments from all kinds of backgrounds can be heard on campuses;
- implement the above suggestions when managing difficult events becomes challenging, including asking an experienced chair to run the event, fielding for questions from students, organising security and planning well in advance;

- responding firmly to any backlash and continue to host challenging events which tackle tough issues even when faced with opposition; and
- avoid quiet no-platforming whenever possible by demonstrating a willingness to invite any speaker who has a legitimate contribution to make, even when they have previously attracted controversy, for the sake of running challenging and enriching debates.

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This report analyses the state of debate on UK university campuses, with particular reference to student debating societies. It finds existing problems include a lot of 'quiet' no-platforming, meaning students are put off from inviting external speakers by the hassle, cost and risk of controversy. While rejecting the idea that there is a free speech crisis, the report nonetheless recommends improvements to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill to ensure it encourages lively, illuminating and well-attended events.

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