

*Alumni for Free Speech
London Universities' Council for Academic Freedom
Academics For Academic Freedom
Committee for Academic Freedom
Best Free Speech Practice*

TO:

All Vice-Chancellors and other senior officers, UK universities

Cc Chairs of Council (or other governing body, by whatever name)

5 May 2026

Dear University Leaders,

The pressing need for institutional neutrality at your university: report on increasing adoption

Various free speech advocates, including us, [wrote to you in April 2025](#) (the “2025 Joint Letter”) about the urgent need for UK universities to adopt a policy of institutional neutrality on social and political issues that do not directly concern core academic matters or institutional operations. References in this letter to “universities” also include reference to other providers of higher education.

This further letter calls your attention to a report by Alumni For Free Speech (“AFFS”) which has found that the number of universities that have formally adopted institutional neutrality appears to be growing rapidly.

We therefore urge your institution to adopt institutional neutrality before it becomes one of the laggards.

Why neutrality is necessary, and recent developments

As the 2025 Joint letter explained, as well as fostering viewpoint diversity, free speech and academic freedom, institutional neutrality offers one of the most effective ways to limit legal and compliance risks relating to free speech and academic freedom at UK universities.

Since the 2025 Joint Letter, there have been various further developments relating to the legal and regulatory environment which appear to have led to a growing recognition of the need for institutional neutrality. These have included the following.

- The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 has amended the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, strengthening protections for speech (including academic

freedom) at English universities¹ and introducing both much-needed additional accountability and a new legal duty to promote the importance of freedom of speech.

- Several well-known free speech controversies have reached conclusions which have resulted in huge financial and reputational cost to the institutions involved. These have included the OfS's finding that the University of Sussex breached its conditions of registration by having requirements that favoured one side of a contested debate over the other and the recent settlement of Martin Speake's claim against Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance for failing to protect him from attack for disputing contested claims and viewpoints.
- The case of Bangor University, explained in the AFFS report, is a good example of the protective benefits of institutional neutrality. In response to public accusations from Reform UK that the university had effectively banned it from campus after a student society declined to host two of its speakers, Bangor pointed out that: "The views expressed by societies are their own and do not reflect University policy. Bangor University remains politically neutral and supports freedom of speech."
- Professor Arif Ahmed, the OfS's Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom stated the following in a recent keynote speech the recent Westminster Higher Education Forum Conference².
 - While academics "absolutely have the right to express political views" which are "essential for a university to function", the expectations for senior management teams and the institution itself should be different. Institutional political statements "may be something that has a chilling effect on academics and students within their institutions, particularly those who are in more vulnerable positions such as academics on short-term contracts". "Therefore, we [the OfS] think there is a lot of value in universities adopting an approach of institutional neutrality."
 - There is a "balance to be struck" for senior university leaders, but "the more senior you are, the more difficult it is for you to express publicly your view on certain matters without its appearing to be the view of the institution". Senior officials should, therefore, "certainly think carefully" before "expressing political views about contested matters".
- Recent guidance published by Advance HE ("**AHE**"), *Embedding Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*³ recognises the importance of "institutional impartiality" (which we consider a somewhat opaque term but adjacent to "neutrality"). AHE's guidance also acknowledges that "HEIs should also be mindful of the

¹ Previously contained in Section 43 of the Education (No.2) Act 1986 (whose provisions continue to apply in Wales).

² As quoted in Times Higher Education, 23 March 2026,

³ As further discussed in AFFS' Report.

chilling effect that strong positions on inclusion may create for staff or students who hold different views”.⁴

- The forthcoming commencement of the OfS free speech complaints scheme on 1st September 2026⁵, which renders it especially pressing for English HEPs that they are compliant with their freedom of speech obligations. Adopting institutional neutrality is an effective means by which an HEP can take initiative to secure free speech and publicly demonstrate that it is serious about complying with its free speech obligations.

What institutional neutrality looks like

We have adjusted our statement about what would constitute institutional neutrality from what was in the 2025 Joint Letter, in the light of subsequent developments. We consider that the ideal policy would be consistent with the following.

“A commitment to institutional neutrality means that universities should formally adopt, in their governing documents or core policies, a statement that they will remain neutral on political, social and moral issues, except where legally required or necessary for their core functions. Pursuant to this, they would, as institutions, refrain from doing the following, and would make this known to their staff and students in their statement of neutrality or in supplemental or implementing policies or other documents.

- *Adopting or enforcing particular political, social, moral or ideological viewpoints or agendas (**Relevant Agendas**) unless doing so is legally or regulatorily required of them or necessary for the purposes of their core functions.*
- *Issuing statements on political, social, cultural, religious and moral issues that do not directly affect their core functions or institutional operations.*
- *Requiring or pressuring staff or students to promote or support particular Relevant Agendas, unless legally required of them.*
- *Adopting political symbols or flying flags that signal alignment with specific Relevant Agendas or political or social movements.*
- *Endorsing or (to the extent that doing so would be contrary to their institutional neutrality) affiliating with external organisations promoting particular Relevant Agendas, except as legally or regulatorily required of them.*

*For these purposes, the **core functions** of a university comprise education, research, and the pursuit of its charitable objects as defined in its charter. The above principles apply to the university and its component parts and to any person or body authorised or purporting to speak on behalf of the university or any of its component parts.*

⁴ See: Section 2.2.2.

⁵ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-04-20/hcws1525>

*In sum: institutional neutrality means that, if a higher education institution is not required to adopt a position in order to fulfil its mission of education and research, it is required not to adopt a position. However, institutional neutrality **does not**:*

- *Restrict individual academics, including those in senior positions, from expressing their own views on social and political issues—provided they do not do so on behalf of the institution.*
- *Mean neutrality on the university's fundamental commitment to free inquiry, which is integral to its core functions.*
- *Stop universities from stating a position on issues directly relevant to institutional operations (including financial decisions).*

It simply ensures that the university itself, as an institution, does not take sides on the contested political and moral issues of the day that do not directly affect its core functions, precisely in order to make space for scholars and students to weigh in on those issues as individuals.

To enlarge on the above:

- institutional neutrality requires universities to ensure that all staff maintain neutrality when **formally** expressing the university's institutional view. This would include, for example, not only official statements made by the Vice-Chancellor, but also statements made a university press officer (who may not be especially senior) when talking to the press on behalf of the university.
- As Professor Ahmed of the OfS recently said (see above) “the more senior you are, the more difficult it is for you to express publicly your view on certain matters without its appearing to be the view of the institution”. Senior officials should “certainly think carefully” about “expressing political views about contested matters”. What constitutes “senior” for this purpose is unclear and complicated.
- As Professor Ahmed recently said (see above), academics “absolutely have the right to express political views”.

AFFS's Report

AFFS' research into the adoption of institutional neutrality at UK universities found that:

- Of 178 universities researched, 32 (18%) have so far adopted a formal, public commitment to institutional neutrality.
- The number of universities that have formally adopted institutional neutrality appears to be growing rapidly. For example, the number of Russell Group universities with a formal, public commitment to institutional neutrality more than doubled (rising from three to seven (12.5% to 29.2%)) in the two years from January 2024.

AFFS analysed and rated the relevant policy or statement of those universities which have adopted institutional neutrality and concluded that the vast majority of such

policies/statements⁶ are “good” or “excellent”, scoring four or above out of five. It is therefore eminently possible for other universities also to make an effective, comprehensive commitment to institutional neutrality.

AFFS will be developing free speech protection rankings for universities in the next couple of years. Institutional neutrality will be a factor used in that assessment; its early or late adoption will form part of the assessment of that factor.

Key concluding points

As explained above, we believe that UK universities need to adopt institutional neutrality formally, both as a moral and societal necessity and to reduce their risks of legal and regulatory free speech compliance failures.

If, as AFFS’s findings suggest, the number of universities choosing to adopt institutional neutrality is rapidly increasing, those which fail to adopt it soon risk being seen as laggards who are less serious about free speech protection. From a governance and risk management perspective, it is likely that those institutions will also be failing to take an effective step to reduce their risk of non-compliance with their enhanced statutory duties to protect free speech and academic freedom.

We therefore urge your institution formally and publicly to adopt institutional neutrality as soon as possible.

We look forward to your institution taking a principled stand in favour of open and fearless intellectual engagement. While we do not ask for a response, your thoughts are welcome.

Yours faithfully,

William Mackesy and Andrew Neish KC, Founders, [Alumni for Free Speech](#)

Professor Abhishek Saha (QMUL), Professor Ian Pace (City St George’s), Professor Alice Sullivan (UCL), Dr John Armstrong (KCL) and Michelle Shipworth (UCL), Founder Members of the [London Universities' Council for Academic Freedom](#)

Professor Dennis Hayes, Director, [Academics For Academic Freedom](#)

Dr Edward Skidelsky, Director, and Freddie Attenborough, Research Manager, the [Committee for Academic Freedom](#)

Andrew Neish KC and William Mackesy, Founders, [Best Free Speech Practice](#)

⁶ 25 out of 32, or 78.1%.