

In March 2020 Cambridge University [proposed](#) a ‘free speech’ policy requiring (inter alia):

- (a) that academics, students, staff and visitors ‘respect’ the opinions and ‘identities’ of others.
- (b) that the University may prohibit speaker events that it reasonably expects to threaten the ‘welfare’ of students, staff or the general public.

By demanding ‘respect’ the proposed code policed not only our speech but also our minds, as Stephen Fry later [pointed out](#). Worse, the vagueness of ‘respect’, ‘identity’ and ‘welfare’ offered practically endless scope for abuse. One could easily imagine zealous or interested parties using (a) to exclude Richard Dawkins or Noam Chomsky for ‘disrespecting’ Christian or Jewish ‘identities’, or (b) to block Julie Bindel because her views on transgender people threaten their ‘welfare’ in *some* sense of that word.

I [spelt out these concerns](#) at a University discussion in June, but in September the University [insisted](#) on pressing ahead. I and my colleagues therefore proposed amendments eliminating (a) and (b) and forced a vote of the entire University. The [FT](#), the [Index on Censorship](#) and the [Cambridge Radical Feminist Network](#) all supported our campaign, as a former Astronomer Royal (Lord Rees), a Nobel laureate (Sir Greg Winter), a former Ambassador (Paul Collis) and the [Minister of State for Universities](#). Turnout was very strong and the result was about 4 to 1 [in favour of our amendments](#). In consequence our [policy](#) now offers strong and clear protection to the speech of academics, staff, students and visitors.

Why did it matter? At a time and place where no serious threats to free speech existed the ‘respect’ proposals would still have opened the door to exploitation by future censors. For that reason it would still have been necessary to fight them. But anyway, that time and place is not here and now: in Britain today, and especially and incredibly *in British Universities* today, free speech faces is more gravely threatened than at almost any time since 1689.

I got some sense of how things stand in this connection when I was soliciting signatures to force a vote. Normally it would have been a simple matter to get the 25 signatures necessary, but on this occasion many academics refused to sign, not because they didn’t support the amendments, but because they were *afraid* to do so in public.

A more specific threat concerns the rights of students and academics to raise questions about trans people. Anyone who suggests, in print or orally, in public or in private, that trans women should not be competing in women’s sports, or that single-sex toilets or prisons might possibly be worth preserving – any such person is now risking at best ostracism by her colleagues, and at worst disciplinary action, the removal of her job and even physical assault.

You could be forgiven for doubting it. Am I really saying that academics and students are being hounded for saying things that would be accepted by most people today and which until a few years ago would have been accepted as the merest common sense by nearly every human being who ever entertained them?

Yes, just so. At this [site](#) feminist scholars testify anonymously to abuse, investigation, or worse for just that. One writes:

I was reported to my university for retweeting a tweet that said men should not be allowed in women prisons even if they identified as a woman. I was asked to attend a meeting with the head of school... At the meeting I was accused of tweeting and retweeting transphobic content on my personal Twitter account (which did not identify me as an employee of the university). I was accused of making my students feel unsafe and that I was possibly guilty of a hate crime. I was threatened with disciplinary action.

Another:

We have been asked at University of Manchester to write our preferred pronouns on our email signatures. I really don't want anyone to define me or even be considering my gender, it feels deeply regressive. I know if I take a stand I will probably get sacked or something. It feels really sinister.

The biggest lecturers' Union, the UCU, [calls](#) free speech at universities a non-problem. Does it think that these lecturers, and hundreds like them, are all lying or mad?

The UK Government probably (and sensibly) does not, because it has now stepped in. In a [White Paper](#) of February 2021 it proposes a 'Free Speech Champion' office within the board of independent regulator for universities, along with enhanced protections for academics and students. The vote in Cambridge may have helped to prompt this intervention, and the Secretary of State for Education uses wording from our amendments in his new guidance for universities.

But the most important and I hope lasting effect of this campaign will not be on statutes but on University staff and students themselves. However oppressive things might currently seem, the vote showed very clearly that most of us still support the liberal values of the Enlightenment; and all it takes to make this current darkness recede is for enough of us to stop cringing.