

## Written evidence from Arif Ahmed (FOE0209)

I am Reader in Philosophy at Cambridge University and have been campaigning for free speech in higher education for at least a decade. I have already made a joint submission to this Inquiry with Prof. Nigel Biggar and others. This submission briefly sets out some observations on controversies in my own University.

Cambridge has recently seen several troubling incidents. The following stand out:

- In November 2017 the University imposed a PR manager as chair at a [student society meeting to discuss disinvestment from Israel](#) (over an academic at SOAS)
- In February 2019 the University forced academics to [disinvite an academic with conservative Christian views](#).
- In April 2019 a recently appointed junior academic was [sacked](#) from St Edmund's College in the face of protests over his research. In a [statement](#) on the firing the College cited the risk that the appointment 'could lead, directly or indirectly, to the College being used as a platform to promote views that could incite racial or religious hatred' (my emphasis).
- In October 2020 students demanded that a college sack a [long-serving member of staff](#) for taking the '[wrong](#)' side in the debate between women's rights and trans rights.

It was against the background of the first three incidents that in March 2020 the 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 (which is bad enough) but also our mental states, as Stephen Fry later [pointed out](#). Worse still, 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 [confirmed its intention](#) to press ahead regardless. I and my colleagues therefore proposed amendments eliminating (a) and (b) and forced a ballot of all senior academics. The [FT](#), the [Index on Censorship](#) and the [Cambridge Radical Feminist Network](#) all supported our campaign, as did the [Minister of State for Universities](#). The turnout was very high for a vote of this kind, 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.

This outcome was certainly a victory for free speech. But it was a *limited* victory and possibly also a *temporary* one. The threats to free speech in this sector (and elsewhere) have

not gone away. I am sure that many other submissions to this Inquiry will document these threats more helpfully and more accurately than I could manage here. But I do want to state some observations upon, and inferences from, my own recent experience in the hope that the Inquiry finds these data useful.

During the campaign I met many academics who favoured robust protections for free speech but were simply afraid to say so publicly. I also spoke to many students and colleagues who said that in the current atmosphere they are afraid to:

- question the aims or methods of BLM (the organization)
- question extensions of certain rights to transgender people
- question ‘decolonization’ of university syllabuses
- attack Israel’s settlements or express concern about the use of military force against Palestinians
- defend pro-life views
- admit that they had voted for, or in any way express support for, Brexit

Specifically, academics feared retaliation ranging from ‘mere’ hostility from colleagues, through non-promotion or non-recommendation for membership of professional bodies, to formal disciplinary action.

I am unsure whether these fears are always well-founded. But I am certain that they both exist and are widespread. That is already bad enough. Free speech is like market confidence in this way: a general *perception* of its absence is self-fulfilling. Such a perception is therefore also disastrous: it is hard to see how anything could more obviously threaten the whole purpose of higher education. Exposure to views that question or offend your fundamental beliefs and feelings, about yourself and society, is a large part of the point of attending university in the first place. But our universities, far from being crucibles in which is forged a skeptical and open-minded section of the electorate, now risk becoming state-subsidized echo chambers of which the main output is a middle class addicted to emotional safety and political conformity.

Obviously I cannot offer definitive solutions, but my own recent experience suggests some steps that universities might take, on the assumption – which may be more of a hope – that most Vice-Chancellors agree with the [Secretary of State](#) that ‘freedom of speech is one of those fundamental [right]s that universities are looked towards to uphold and protect’.

First, the Cambridge vote illustrated the power of **anonymous voting**. Academics who wouldn’t publicly support liberal policies at decision-making meetings would still *vote* for them in a credibly secret ballot. If – as the figures suggest – a small and vociferous minority has cowed a liberal but risk-averse majority out of speaking its mind, secret ballots may break its power. They should be the norm in every decision-making body in universities and in their faculties, departments and colleges.

Second, it will embolden staff and students if **all relevant documentation refers frequently and prominently to free speech protections**. It is not enough for there to be a free speech policy sitting quietly on one website. *Any* other policy covering verbal behaviour should be completely clear that the university will never prevent or sanction legal speech. For instance, university policies on harassment should be explicit that although religious and philosophical

belief are protected under the [Equality Act 2010](#), staff, students and visitors retain every right verbally to mock, satirize and disrespect any and all such beliefs (e.g. those of QAnon).

Third, it is obvious that the senior academics running most universities face conflicting pressures from students, staff, funding bodies and central government. It is not surprising that in trying to balance them even the most well-meaning Vice-Chancellors sometimes forget that free speech is not negotiable. One possible remedy would be for each university to appoint someone whose job it is never to forget it: that is, an **internal free speech officer**, this being a post of which the sole duty is to enforce compliance with the existing [section 43 duty](#) to promote free speech. Such a post, to be effective, should carry powers to examine and to amend policy and documentation across the university and at all levels of governance.

*01/02/2021*