



Student debrief

Freedom of speech
and academic freedom
in higher education

Thursday 16 October 2025

Introduction to today's team



Arif Ahmed

**Director of
Freedom of
Speech and
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Today we will:

- **Share recent OfS news and developments**
- **Discuss the topic of freedom of speech**
- **Open the floor to questions in general**
- **Not discuss live cases and individual providers**



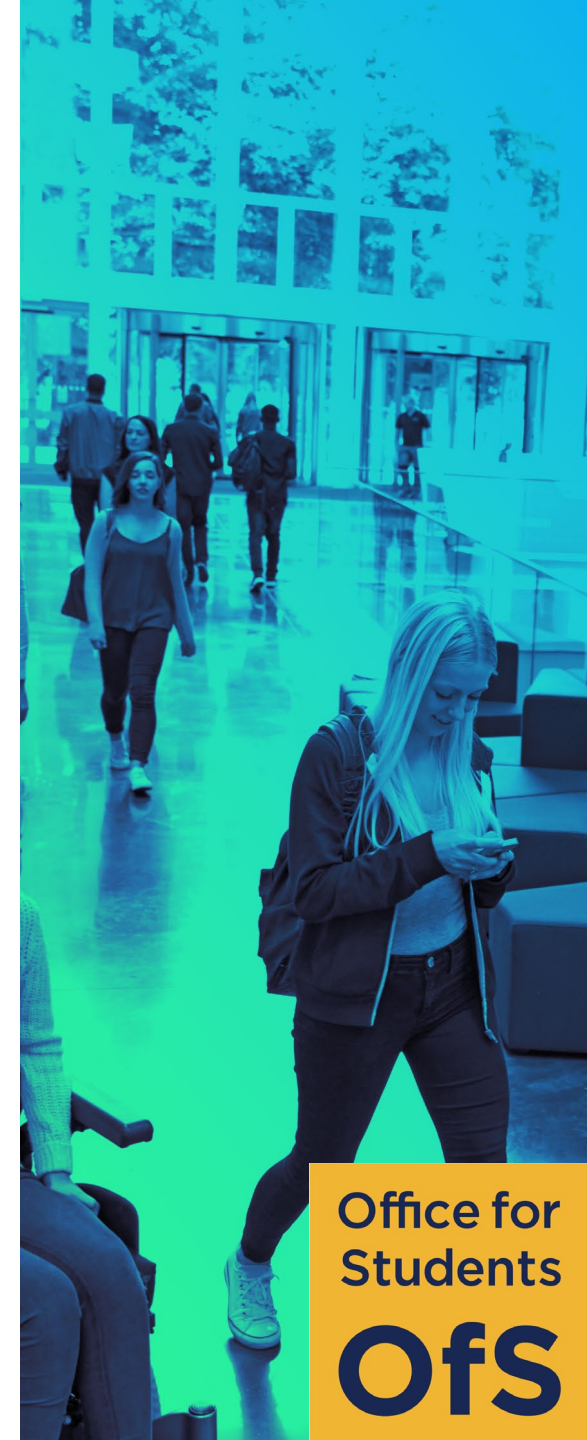
How your input will be used

- These events are a great way for us to hear your views and experiences as part of our work to understand and act in the interests of students.
- Therefore, comments, feedback and observations from this session may be used to inform and develop our policy, and could also appear in OfS publications.
- To protect anonymity, any contributions we use will be unnamed and most likely paraphrased.



Since our last event...

- In September we announced the results of our survey on sexual misconduct in English higher education.
- We've shared new insight this week on the experiences of disabled students.
- We've released a short film to boost student awareness of the OfS.



Freedom of speech team:



Arif Ahmed

**Director of Freedom of
Speech and Academic
Freedom**



Liam Izod

**Head of Regulatory
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In this section, we will:

- **Examine:**

- What freedom of speech means in higher education and why it matters.
- The role of the OfS in promoting free speech.

- **Hear from you to understand:**

- Are there any topics that students feel they can't speak freely about and why?
- What works to promote open discussion in both the classroom and more widely on campus?



What is freedom of speech and academic freedom?

- **Freedom of speech:** The freedom to impart ideas, viewpoints or information by means of speech, writing or images.
- **Academic freedom:** The freedom of academic staff to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas without risk to their jobs or professional standing.
- Both freedom of speech and academic freedom exist **within the law.**



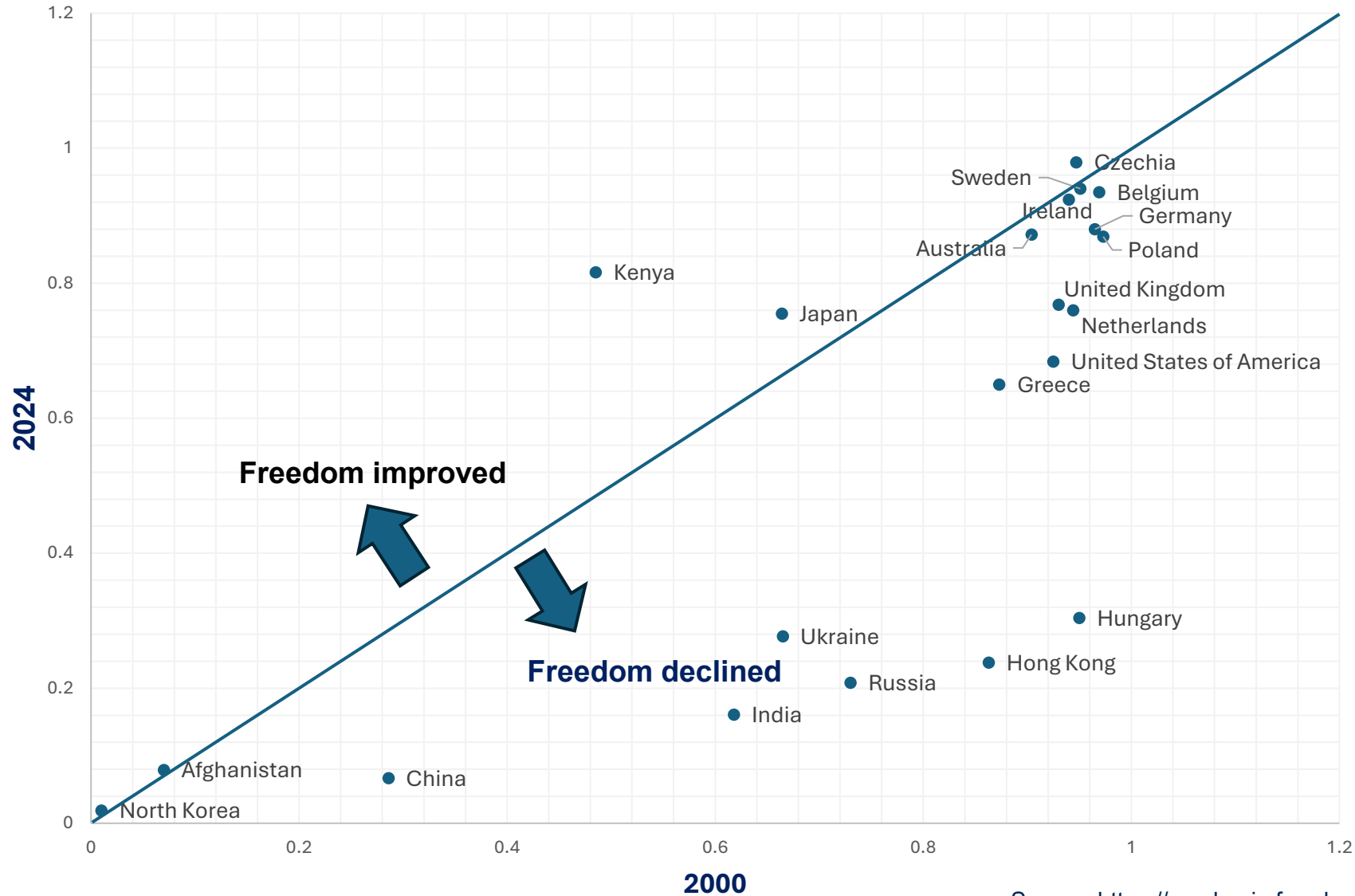
Why should we value free speech?

- Without free speech there is no challenge to conventional wisdom
- Ideas now considered positive were once considered radical and dangerous e.g. religious tolerance, racial equality, gay rights etc.
- A society that protects free speech contains the seeds of its own improvement. It can generate new ideas and question and strengthen existing ideas and dogmas.
- Even if a view is wrong, you must be free to express and engage with it. Otherwise, how will you, or anyone else, know why it is wrong?



Speech may be becoming less free

Academic Freedom Index change between the year 2000 and 2024



Source: <https://academic-freedom-index.net/data/>



Minority academics feel less free

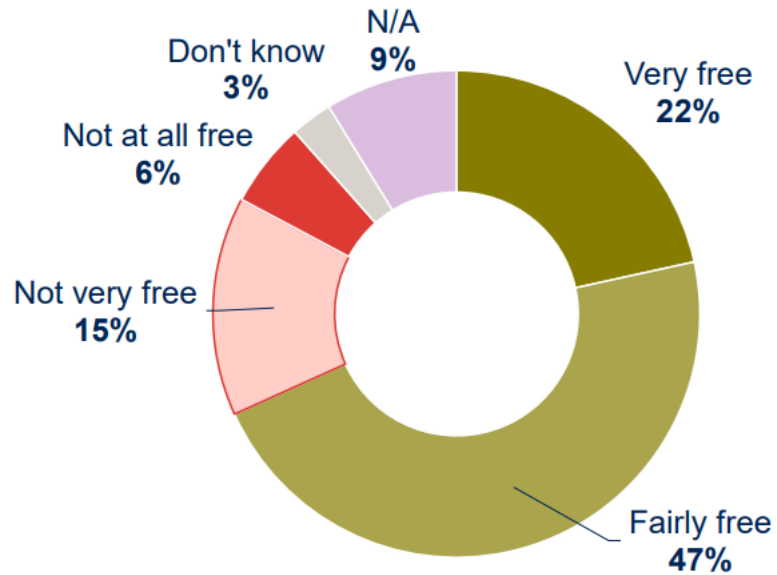
21% of research and teaching staff in English higher education do not feel free to discuss challenging or controversial topics in their teaching, rising to 34% of academics from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Source: 2025 OfS poll data

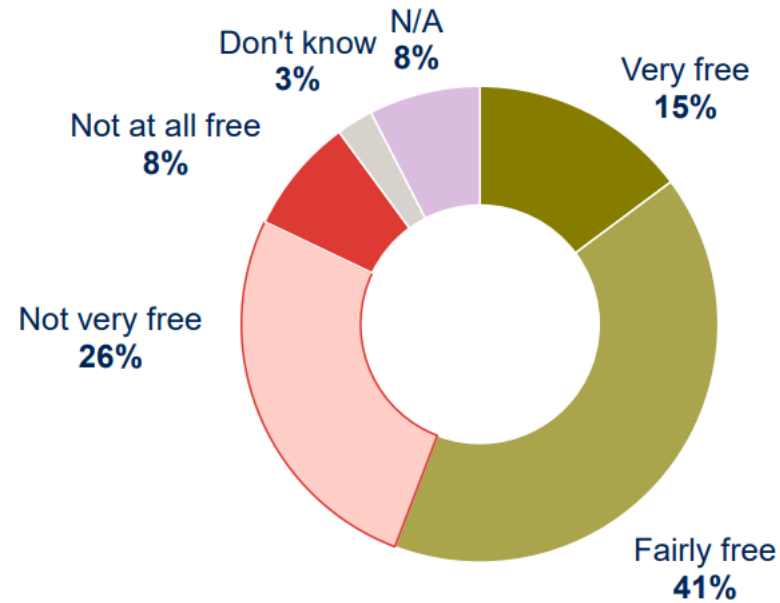


Minority academics feel less free

White academics



Non-white ethnic minority academics



Q: If you wanted to discuss challenging or controversial ideas/topics, how free, if at all, would you feel to do so in your teaching?

Source: 2025 OfS poll data



Female academics feel less free

21% of female academics say they do not feel free in their research compared to 11% of male academics saying the same.

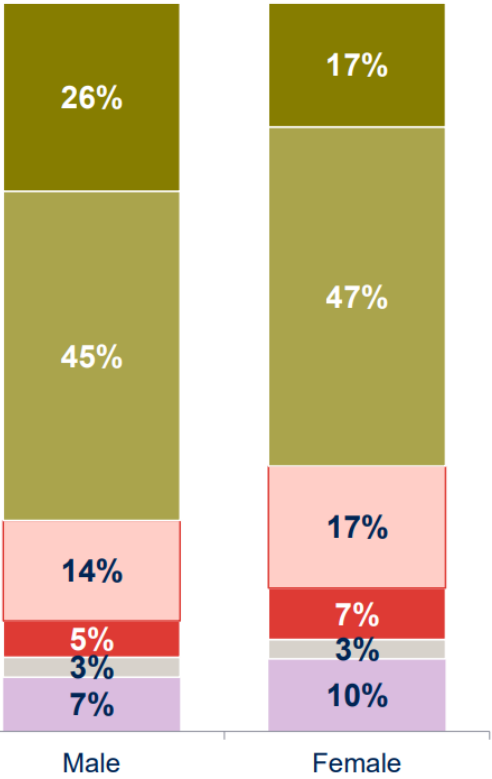
Source: 2025 OfS poll data



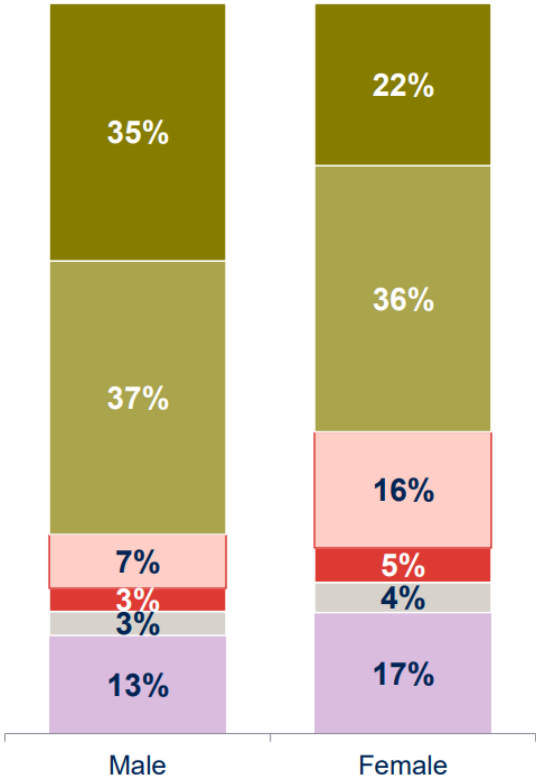
Female academics feel less free

Male academics are more likely than female academics to say that they feel free to discuss challenging/controversial topics in:

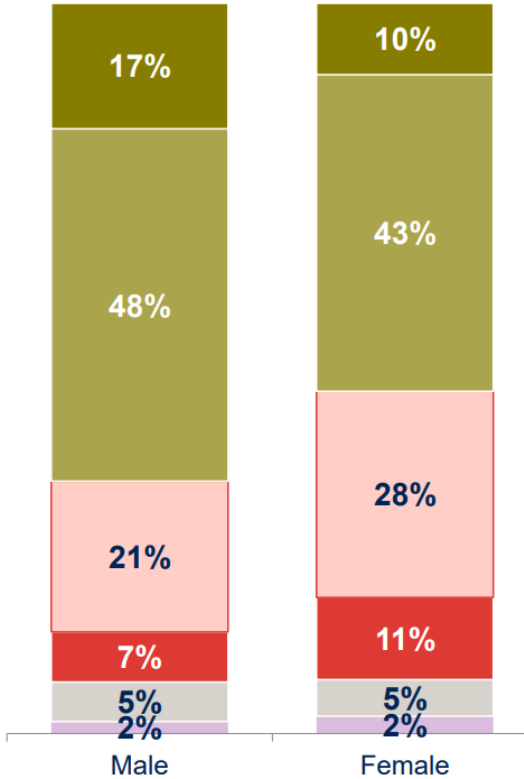
Their teaching



Their research



Other contexts generally



Source: 2025 OfS poll data



What's the OfS's interest?

- Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 gives English universities and colleges;
 - A duty to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech within the law.
 - A requirement for all universities to have codes of practice to ensure the protection of free speech.
 - A duty to promote the importance of freedom of speech in higher education.
- We regulate higher education providers through our 'conditions of registration', which require that:
 - A governing body takes such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured within the provider.
 - Academic staff at an English higher education provider have freedom within the law: to question and test received wisdom; and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions.



Case studies - Were their rights violated?

Please note that the following examples are entirely fictional and created for illustrative purposes only.

Case study: A

A university student made public remarks that were widely regarded as discriminatory and inflammatory toward a specific group (gay people). The language used was abusive and the comments were made in a public setting.

The university's investigation concluded that the remarks were likely to cause harassment, alarm, or distress, thereby constituting a criminal offence.

Following a formal disciplinary process, the student was permanently expelled from the university.

Was the university's response justified?

Case study: A.1

A university student made public remarks that were widely regarded as discriminatory and inflammatory toward a specific group (gay people). The language used was abusive, and the comments were made in a public setting.

The university's investigation was inconclusive as to whether the remarks were unlawful. Shortly afterwards, an individual from the minority went on record stating they felt harassed.

Following a formal disciplinary process, the student was permanently expelled from the university.

Was the university's response justified?

Case study: B

A university student led a society focused on human rights advocacy.

During a campus event, the society criticised the policies of a foreign government (known to detain and silence journalists) with financial ties to the university.

After the event, the student was called into a disciplinary meeting and informed that their leadership role in the society would be suspended due to “reputational risks.”

Was this justified?

Case study: B.1

A university student led a society focused on human rights advocacy.

During a campus event, the society criticised the policies of a research institution (who fund and advocate for renewable energy) with financial ties to the university. On the basis of depriving post industrial of societies of economic opportunity.

After the event, the student was called into a disciplinary meeting and informed that their leadership role in the society would be suspended due to “reputational risks.”

Was this justified?

Your thoughts:

Are there any topics that students feel they can't speak freely about and why?

Your thoughts:

What works to promote open discussion in both the classroom and more widely on campus?

Questions?

Office for
Students

OfS

Want to know more?

Check out our guide to help students understand their free speech rights -

[Free speech – a guide for students - Office for Students](#)

Contact us about:

Student debriefs, further signposting and questions:

studentengagement@officeforstudents.org.uk

Email comments: info@officeforstudents.org.uk



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