

Freedom of Speech Code of Practice

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Code of Practice (“the Code”) sets out the rights and obligations inherent within the principles of freedom of speech, the University of Reading’s values relating to freedom of speech and how those values uphold freedom of speech. The Code shall be construed and applied in the spirit of upholding those principles wherever reasonably practicable within the law.

2. University of Reading values

- 2.1 The University of Reading (“the University”) has a long and proud history of protecting and encouraging free speech and academic freedom within the law, in supporting colleagues and students to speak up on perceived controversial but important issues and welcoming external speakers with diverse political, social and philosophical positions.
- 2.2 The University encourages the pursuit of knowledge and truth as key components of achieving excellence in education and research and recognises the importance of, and promotes, plurality of viewpoints within its community, encouraging members of its community to express themselves freely and hold their own opinions even if their views are unpopular or could offend others.
- 2.3 The University enshrines academic freedom in its Charter of Incorporation, which states that:

Employees, in undertaking academic activity or directly supporting it, shall have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges.

- 2.4 The University encourages civil discourse between its members and expects tolerance of those with different views in accordance with the University’s Values for Working Together and Professional Behaviours and the Student Charter. It also recognises that freedom of speech and academic freedom must always operate within the law.

3. Scope

- 3.1 The University Executive Board is responsible for this Code and for providing assurance to the Council on its effective operation.
- 3.2 Except where in line with advancing the University's charitable objects (as defined in the University Charter) or on topics directly related to the activities of the University, the University does not take an institutional position on political, cultural and religious debates to ensure that individuals are not discouraged from expressing themselves freely within the law.
- 3.3 For the purposes of this Code of Practice, freedom of speech within the law is the freedom of individuals to impart ideas, opinions and information by means of speech, writing or images (including in electronic form). This applies across the range of University activity, including teaching, research and events.
- 3.4 For the purposes of this Code, academic freedom is the freedom within the law of employees and job applicants to the University undertaking academic activity or directly supporting it to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions without placing themselves at risk of losing their jobs or privileges, or reducing the likelihood of their securing promotion or different jobs at the University.
- 3.5 The following Code has been enacted to ensure that as far as reasonably practicable, freedom of speech within the law is secured for students, staff, members of Council and visiting speakers and that academic freedom is secured for relevant staff and job applicants.
- 3.6 The provisions of the Code apply to all staff, students, Council members, and visiting speakers of the University, as well as the Students' Union and any of the University or Students' Union's societies, clubs, or associations which normally operate on University of Reading premises.
- 3.7 The Code is binding on all staff, students and Council members of the University as well as those to whom the University's Freedom of Speech and Prevent Policy for Events applies.
- 3.8 For the purposes of this Code, references to University "Premises" shall include:
 - 3.8.1 Buildings and land occupied by the University or its subsidiaries; and
 - 3.8.2 Building and land owned by the University and occupied by the Students' Union; and
 - 3.8.3 University owned halls of residence.

This Code does not apply to land owned by the University and, except as at 3.8.2 and 3.8.3, leased or licenced to a third party.

3.9 This code will also apply to use of the University's digital technology systems.

4. Freedom of speech within the law

4.1 The University's starting point is that lawful speech will be permitted. Free speech includes lawful speech that may be offensive and/or hurtful to some.

4.2 Unlawful speech is not protected and is not covered under the provisions of this Code. Examples of unlawful speech include, but are not limited to,:

4.2.1 Unlawful discrimination and harassment

4.2.2 Criminal offences including but not limited to:

4.2.2.1 Hate Crimes

4.2.2.2 Support of, or inviting or encouraging support of a Proscribed Organisation

4.2.2.3 Public Order Offences

4.2.3 Defamation

4.3 The University shall take such steps, having particular regard to the importance of freedom of speech, as are reasonably practicable to secure freedom of speech within the law for every person to whom this Code applies.

4.4 In determining whether a step may be reasonably practicable, the University will have regard to the following:

4.4.1 The circumstances and context of the speech;

4.4.2 The manner of the speech;

4.4.3 The extent to which any steps undertaken by it would secure or restrict freedom of speech within the law;

4.4.4 The practical costs for the University and its staff, students and members of implementing any steps, including any impact on resources;

4.4.5 The financial constraints of the University;

- 4.4.6 Any legal or regulatory requirements by which the University is bound;
 - 4.4.7 The need to maintain the essential functions of the University; and
 - 4.4.8 The need to protect the physical safety of students, staff, members and visitors to the University
- 4.5 The University shall also ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that the use of its premises (as defined under this Code of Practice) is not denied to any individual or body of persons to whom this Codes applies, or that the terms of use by such individual or body of persons is based upon, any ground connected with:
- 4.5.1 The lawful ideas or opinions of the individual; or
 - 4.5.2 The policies or objectives of the body of persons, or the lawful ideas or opinions of any of its members.
- 4.6 In considering whether to permit its Premises and online platforms to be used for, or its name to be associated with, a particular Event, the University will uphold free speech within the law where reasonably practicable, and consider its other legal duties. When making decisions about whether Events on its Premises can go ahead and in line with its Freedom of Speech and Prevent Policy for Events and associated Review Processes, the University will consider whether the views or ideas to be put forward, the manner of their expression, or the event in question:
- 4.6.1 constitutes a criminal offence;
 - 4.6.2 constitutes a threat to public order, including whether a participant is from an organisation that is officially proscribed by the UK Government;
 - 4.6.3 constitutes a threat to the health and safety of individuals attending the event or in the locality which cannot be satisfactorily managed;
 - 4.6.4 incites or may incite others to commit criminal acts;
 - 4.6.5 constitutes or may constitute a breach of the University's legal duty to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism;
 - 4.6.6 infringes the legal rights of others or breaches legal requirements in respect of non-discrimination; or
 - 4.6.7 seeks to disrupt an authorised event or activity on University Premises or online platforms, noting that any protest must be conducted without infringing the rights of others, including the right to freedom of speech.
- 4.7 Other than in exceptional circumstances, the costs of security relating to the use of Premises shall not be passed to the person or organisation arranging the event.

Exceptional circumstances are where the cost of facilitating the event are wholly disproportionate to the scope and/or timing of the event in question.

- 4.8 The University has appropriate procedures in place in order to allow members, students, staff and visiting speakers to report any instance where they claim to have suffered adverse consequences as a result of action or inaction of the University in relation to securing their freedom of speech. Further details about the University's Freedom of Speech Complaints Scheme can be found on the [Freedom of Speech webpage](#).

5. Teaching and research

- 5.1 This section applies to ordinary academic activities taking place in teaching, education and research settings for example, timetabled workshops, lectures and seminars for students and research seminars for academic staff. Academic events outside this definition or those involving an External Speaker should be considered under the University's Freedom of Speech and Prevent Policy for Events.
- 5.2 When teaching or presenting potentially sensitive or controversial issues, the member of staff responsible for the activity (for example the module convener) should consider what steps they can take to ensure that freedom of speech is protected. This includes creating an inclusive environment that ensures that all students or participants are given the opportunity to present and argue in favour of alternative viewpoints, and teaching students principles that enable them to "disagree well".
- 5.3 In relation to teaching, further steps could include, for example:
- 5.3.1 Identifying in advance any topics that may cause upset and make it difficult for certain students to participate in the activities in question, how this may manifest and how it may be addressed if it does arise;
 - 5.3.2 Speaking to participants at the start of a module that contains potentially sensitive or contentious topics and outlining how challenging issues will be discussed in a way that allows all points of view to be expressed or discussed rigorously and respectfully;
 - 5.3.3 Providing information in advance about any sensitive or contentious content, to enable participants to prepare and to be able to articulate their point of view rigorously and respectfully during discussions; and
 - 5.3.4 Reminding all participants of their obligations under this Code and the University's expectations of behaviour under the Working Together and Professional Behaviours document, Regulations for Student Conduct and the Student Charter.

- 5.4 An activity should not be cancelled solely due to its sensitive or controversial nature as this would be depriving other individuals of the opportunity to express their freedom of speech and to explore challenging issues.
- 5.5 Where an individual's behaviour does not comply with this Code (for example, it is alleged that the expression of their purported free speech may extend to bullying, Harassment or incitement to hatred), this may become a matter to be addressed under the University's relevant procedures.
- 5.6 Where the member of staff responsible for the activity identifies that a topic is highly contentious and/or there is a risk that freedom of speech may be restricted and/or that this Code of Practice may be breached, they must escalate to their Head of School who will consider any further reasonably practicable steps that could be put in place in order to secure freedom of speech for students, staff and members.
- 5.7 Heads of School will have overall responsibility for ensuring that members of staff in their school are following the process set out in this clause (5), and that freedom of speech is being appropriately considered as part of ordinary academic activity within their school.

6. Events

- 6.1 An Event is defined in the Freedom of Speech and Prevent Policy for Events, as 'any organised activity, gathering, or assembly delivered by or on the Premises of the University of Reading, online and in-person, within the UK. Examples include, but are not limited to, hosted visits, recruitment or marketing engagement and events, debates, performances, exhibitions, protests, rallies, film-screenings, receptions, presentations and non-timetabled workshops, lectures and seminars. Ordinary academic activities including but not limited to timetabled workshops, lectures and seminars for students and research seminars for staff, are not covered under this definition **except where they involve an External Speaker**. Events may be formal or informal and may involve members of the University community or external guests.
- 6.2 The procedures set out in the University's Freedom of Speech and Prevent Policy for Events must be observed by staff, students, council members, visiting speakers and event organisers in respect of:
 - 6.2.1 Any Event as defined in the Freedom of Speech and Prevent Policy for Events (other than ordinary academic activities related to teaching and research which do not involve an External Speaker and are covered under section 5 above) to be held on University Premises; and
 - 6.2.2 Any Event as defined in the Freedom of Speech and Prevent Policy for Events held away from the University campus or Premises which is University organised or funded, including events organised by individuals, groups or societies.

7. General conduct

- 7.1 The University is committed to upholding freedom of speech within the law, which can only be achieved if all concerned behave with courtesy towards each other including to those who hold lawful views they may find to be abhorrent or offensive.
- 7.2 Every person to whom this Code applies shall refrain from conduct intended to prevent the enjoyment of freedom of speech within the law. This means that individuals should refrain from acting in a way which denies others their rights to freedom of speech within the law, including but not limited to:
- 7.2.1 Preventing others from accessing or leaving an area safely
- 7.2.2 Preventing others from being heard clearly or others from hearing clearly
- 7.3 Protests are an expression of lawful free speech, but should not be conducted in a manner that infringes upon the lawful free speech of others and should not prevent any other meeting or other activity from going ahead as scheduled or the ability of the University to maintain its essential functions.
- 7.4 The University expects that the Speaker and Events Code of Conduct will be followed where applicable.
- 7.5 For the avoidance of doubt, the review processes set out as part of the Freedom of Speech and Prevent Policy for Events need to be completed in addition to the Events Notification Process, where relevant.

8. Review

- 8.1 This Code will be reviewed and approved annually by the University Executive Board (UEB) and reported to Council. Such report will include details of any matters arising under the Policy or the University's Freedom of Speech Complaints Scheme.

9. Version control

Version	Section	Keeper	Reviewed	Approving authority	Approval date	Start date	Next review
1.0	Corporate Services	University Secretary	Annually and then every 3 years	UEB	19/05/25	01/08/25	01/08/26