

Mr Toby Young
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10 June 2021

Dear Mr Young,

Thank you for your letter. Russell Group universities have always protected the right to free speech and will continue to do so. Freedom of speech and the right to disagree are fundamental parts of debate and have been key to advancing knowledge and gaining different perspectives on everything from ethics and history to genetics and theoretical physics.

Our universities work hard to create an environment where a diverse range of views and ideas can be aired and debated across all disciplines. We recently underlined our determination to uphold freedom of expression with the publication of a statement of principles setting out how we protect free speech, which was backed by all members and welcomed by the Government.

The joint statement made clear the unambiguous commitment of our members to upholding the right of students, staff and visiting speakers within the law. It recognises facilitating an environment where all are able to inquire, study and discuss may result in conflict and reiterated the view of our members that the diverse views of all individuals should be tolerated as part of full and frank academic debates. These are points on which I am sure you and your colleagues within the Free Speech Union would agree.

What the statement also included was recognition that in some limited circumstances, free speech can be restricted by law. As you are aware, the Equality Act, Prevent Duty and other requirements placed on universities through legislation interact with the comprehensive existing legal framework that protects free speech and academic freedom.

While not all universities use Report and Support, the online tool allows for reporting of incidents and, crucially, provides an easy route to access advice and support. Contrary to what seems to be implied in your letter, reports do not automatically lead to investigations nor disciplinary proceedings. We are confident these mechanisms do not breach any current laws or inhibit free speech. Where a staff member or student feels their right to free expression has been inhibited we would definitely encourage them to speak to their university.

A series of reports into sexual harassment and racism from bodies such as the EHRC identified lack of understanding of reporting mechanisms or knowledge of how to access specialist support as key areas where universities needed to improve. The introduction of Report and Support - or Report and Support style

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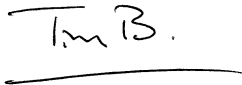
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tools - by many UK universities should be seen in this context. Our members make no apologies for acting to address issues raised by the EHRC and others. By fostering a culture of mutual toleration in our universities and supporting individuals, we strengthen freedom of speech by ensuring all voices can be heard.

Where appropriate, our members seek legal advice before introducing changes to internal processes which interact with legislation and statutory duties. Introducing measures around harassment will involve consideration of the Equality Act, including the clauses highlighted in your letter, free speech requirements under the Education Act 1986 and other relevant law. At all times, our members seek to act in a manner consistent with the legal guidance they receive.

We welcome your continued engagement around the legislation which is currently before Parliament. Engaging with diverse views is a critical aspect of the high-quality education Russell Group universities provide students. It is no less important in testing legislation to ensure new law is proportionate, balanced and effective.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim B.', followed by a horizontal line.

Dr Tim Bradshaw
Chief Executive, Russell Group