THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group 2025 Plan

Vision

The Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group seeks to foster a dynamic and diverse academic environment in which the frank and free exchange of views, based on mutual respect, is a hallmark of our University. The vision of this work is one of strengthening the productive difference and disagreement which has contributed to the University of Edinburgh being at the vanguard of knowledge for over four centuries.

Introduction

Freedom of expression, and the related concept of academic freedom, is a vital component of an open and democratic society, and the individual freedoms of those who are part of it. Academic freedom is fundamental to the University's purpose, protecting enquiry: research, teaching, and innovation. It is inevitable – and often desirable – that in an academic environment, different ideas within our community will contradict or conflict with others. Reflecting *Strategy 2030*, 'We will always value and protect freedom of expression, while respecting the boundaries dictated by law, decency, ethics and respect for others.'

By bringing together colleagues from across the University through an open call for participation, the Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group aims to strengthen academic freedom and freedom of expression within our community; seeking to build relationships and social capital; demonstrating through its ways of working that a challenging environment need not be a hostile one.

Foregrounding collaboration, the Working Group seeks to build capacity through distributive leadership to deliver an ambitious programme of activity constructed by Working Group members, with wider consultation and engagement, as appropriate.

Our 2025 Planned Outcomes

We will have gained a better appreciation of our staff and students' understanding and experience of academic freedom and freedom of expression, to inform work in this area.

We will understand what academic freedom and freedom of expression are, in the pursuit of a strengthened academic culture that encourages open dialogue and the respectful exchange of ideas and diverse perspectives.

We will have supported our diverse University community to better navigate difference and conflict through exploring approaches to dialogue, debate, and disagreement, while fostering a respectful and inclusive environment.

We will have reviewed the policies and processes around complaints through the lens of academic freedom and freedom of expression, seeking improvements in support of staff and students.

We will have increased the transparency and understanding around the policies, processes, responsibilities, and related guidance, concerning speakers and events.

We will have ensured that new and updated policies take account of academic freedom and freedom of expression.

We will have gained an increased knowledge of the work being done around academic freedom and freedom of expression in the sector and be able to further situate our activity within this wider context.

We will be able to recognise where the next challenge(s) to academic freedom and freedom of expression might come from and have structures and processes that we can use to horizon scan for future challenges.

Our Priorities for 2025

Planned Outcome	Enabling Work Stream	2025 Priority Activity
We will be able to recognise where the next challenge(s) to academic freedom and freedom of expression might come from and have structures and processes that we can use to horizon scan for future challenges.	Challenges Work Stream	Undertake research and create a typology of likely challenges (a document that would be periodically updated, discussed, and from which action could be derived). Identify a structure and process for updating the typology (that structure, or body, would also be responsible for on-going horizon scanning).
We will understand what academic freedom and freedom of expression are, in the pursuit of a strengthened academic culture that encourages open dialogue and the respectful exchange of ideas and diverse perspectives.	Curriculum and Education Work Stream	Develop academic freedom and freedom of expression principles to underpin communications and to promote understanding. Share and embed these principles across the University through, for example, the creation of a video for students which outlines the University's expectations around academic freedom and freedom of expression. An appropriately contextualised video for staff will also be planned in support of the outcome.

Planned Outcome	Enabling Work Stream	2025 Priority Activity
	Curriculum and Education Work Stream	Review education governance structures, such as new course and programme approvals' processes and Board of Studies, to embed the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression. Work with EUSA to scope an outline proposal for a Student Toolkit about academic freedom and freedom of expression.
We will have supported our diverse University community to better navigate difference and conflict through exploring approaches to dialogue, debate, and disagreement, while fostering a respectful and inclusive environment.	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Work Stream	Explore, plan and deliver events or workshops which exemplify and model dialogue, debate, and disagreement. Consider a mix of new events and integration with existing planned events and activities across Schools and Professional Services areas.
We will have reviewed the policies and processes around complaints through the lens of academic freedom and freedom of expression, seeking improvements in support of staff and students.	Institutional Support Task and Finish group	Working under HR's leadership, review relevant complaints policies, including investigation processes, from the perspective of Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression, considering also the perspective of those who have experienced these processes.

Planned Outcome	Enabling Work Stream	2025 Priority Activity
	Institutional Support Task and Finish group	Consider enhancements to the speed of investigation processes, any training needs, and the support of those involved.
We will have increased the transparency and understanding around the policies, processes, responsibilities, and related guidance, concerning speakers and events. We will have ensured that new and updated policies take account of academic freedom and freedom of expression.	Legislation and Policy Work Stream	From the perspective of Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression, review and propose enhancements to the policy on Speakers and Events (if needed) and related guidance, such as: room bookings for staff and students; and Protest Guidelines for Staff and Students; and Event Attendance Guidelines for Staff and Students. Lead the Working Group's contribution to HR's review of the Dignity and Respect Policy.
We will have gained a better understanding of our staff and students' understanding and experience of academic freedom and freedom of expression, to inform work in this area.	Research Task and Finish Group	Undertake desk-based research to design a piece of mixed-methods empirical research to be undertaken across the University, drawing upon a representative sample of staff and students to research their understanding and experience of academic freedom and freedom of expression. This work will inform the Working Group's subsequent activity.

Planned Outcome	Enabling Work Stream	2025 Priority Activity
We will have gained an increased knowledge of the work being done around academic freedom and freedom of expression in the sector and be able to further situate our activity within this wider context.	Research Task and Finish Group	Consider other relevant research approaches within the sector. Commission an external research agency to undertake the research on behalf of the Working Group.

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