



THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* EDINBURGH

# Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression

## Key Principles for Learning and Teaching

### What are Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression?

Academic freedom and freedom of expression are often used interchangeably, but they are distinct principles that apply in different ways to different groups within our University community. Together, they foster a culture of open inquiry, critical thinking, and meaningful dialogue. These values are fundamental to our core purpose, the pursuit of knowledge, and to the civic life of our University.

Academic Freedom primarily protects the rights of staff engaging in teaching, or the provision of learning or research (including students who are employed in such a capacity). It enables them to explore, develop, and communicate ideas or findings without fear of censorship or discipline, within the standards of scholarly enquiry. It is rooted specifically in the pursuit of knowledge through research and teaching within an academic context.

Freedom of expression, on the other hand, applies more broadly to all members of our University community, including staff, students, and visitors. It protects the rights of all individuals to express lawful views in speech, writing, or artistic expression.

Freedom of expression is one of the 'essential foundations of a democratic society because it guarantees people's right to exchange information, debate ideas and express opinions' (The European Court of Human Rights).

In Scotland, universities have a legal duty to protect academic freedom and freedom of expression, even when the views expressed may be controversial or unpopular, and may offend, shock, or disturb others.

Living and working well together in our diverse University community means listening with respect, engaging thoughtfully, and recognising the dignity of others, even when we disagree. Academic freedom and freedom of expression support open debate and the exchange of ideas, but they are accompanied by a shared responsibility to foster a respectful and inclusive environment where everyone can participate fully.



## Key Principles for Learning and Teaching

Our University is a place of intellectual challenge; to help our staff and students think, question, and grow. At the heart of our University community is a commitment to Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression.

In practice, this means we uphold the following fundamental principles:

### 1. Championing Diversity of Thought

We welcome and encourage diverse views, beliefs, and experiences – they are fundamental to who we are as a University.

Our University recognises the importance of fostering an environment in which diverse opinions can be expressed, debated, heard and challenged. This principle lies at the heart of what it means to be a university and is central to our intellectual and educational mission. It underpins how we operate as an academic community of researchers, teachers, and learners.

We value not only the freedom to express ideas, but also the shared processes of discussion, dialogue, and deliberation through which knowledge is shared, tested, refined, and advanced. These processes may take different forms – from critical debate and peer review; to more collaborative, participatory, and democratic models of enquiry that recognise different ways of knowing and the value of inclusive knowledge-making.

Through the open and respectful exchange of ideas, we are able to question conventional wisdom, challenge inequality, and generate new thinking – all of which are essential to a liberal democratic society in which all of us can thrive. Without such openness, advancement stalls. It is the responsibility of every member of our University community to uphold this fundamental and shared commitment to openness, dialogue, and tolerance in the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and truth.

### 2. Empowering Lawful Expression

We support everyone's right to lawfully express opinions, debate openly, and explore complex or controversial issues.

The expression of diverse views, within the law, is fundamental to both academic freedom and freedom of expression. Both are protected rights enshrined in Scots law. Our University has a legal duty to uphold these freedoms in practice, meaning that all our staff and students are entitled to teach, learn, and research in an environment that values vigorous debate and challenge in which their views can be expressed openly and lawfully.

No individual's view – whether expressed in teaching, research, or in classroom discussion – should be suppressed simply because it diverges from or challenges prevailing social or ideological norms. Equally, no individual or group within the University has the authority to determine the boundaries of legitimate debate, or to silence those with whom they disagree.

Academic freedom and freedom of expression includes lawful speech that some may find offensive or even hurtful. Both academic freedom and freedom of expression must be exercised in a manner which respects others to challenge, to question, and to contribute to the vibrant exchange of ideas that is essential to both education and democracy, and to the strengthening of our academic community.

### 3. Freedom within Boundaries

Academic freedom and freedom of expression have limits. Abuse, harassment, threats, or incitement to violence have no place in our University.

While academic freedom and freedom of expression are fundamental rights in the UK, these rights are qualified, not absolute. Both are protected by law, but their protection does not extend to unlawful forms of expression, such as abuse, harassment, discrimination, threats, or incitement to violence and extremism.

These behaviours are not protected forms of expression; they are unlawful and have no place at our University or in wider society.

Respectful and lawful expression is central to life at our University. While no one is required to agree with the views of others, everyone has the right to express lawful opinions and to be treated with dignity.

Equally, academic freedom and freedom of expression do not guarantee freedom from offence. It is not uncommon in academic and civil life to encounter views that are challenging, uncomfortable, or strongly expressed. Conflating disagreement or offence with harm risks undermining open discussion and may, at times, constitute an attempt to suppress debate for political or ideological reasons.

Within the law, we all are free to question, debate, and explore – even when the topics are difficult or controversial. Beyond the law, the expectation is that we engage in good faith, with a commitment to open, dignified, and respectful discussion. We all have a responsibility to recognise the limits of lawful expression and to operate within them.

### 4. Learning through Difference

Engaging with a range of perspectives broadens understanding and fosters intellectual and personal growth.

We grow, as individuals and as a University community, when we embrace the richness of difference and create the space for learning through difference.

Learning happens not only through structured teaching, but also through experiences, relationships, critical reflection, and collaborative exploration. At the heart of this is a recognition that people encounter the world in varied ways, shaped by identity, culture, history, and lived experience.

Universities are pluralistic spaces where a diversity of perspectives is not just welcomed, but essential. While engaging with a range of perspectives can be difficult and testing, it can also be inspiring.

By seriously engaging with difference, whether through dialogue, storytelling, or collaborative inquiry, we expand our understanding of others and of ourselves. It also deepens empathy, fosters curiosity, and cultivates the courage to question authority and confront injustice.

A culture of open inquiry depends on a shared commitment to both the right to be heard and civility in disagreement. Protecting the space for difference is a foundational responsibility of academic life that we all must uphold.

### 5. Developing Critical Thinking through Open Discourse

Engaging with different perspectives is key to developing critical thinking and to forming a shared understanding of others' experiences and worldviews.

Critical thinking is not instinctive; it is developed through questioning, analysis, and structured debate. It demands that we test our assumptions, weigh evidence, and consider opposing viewpoints in good faith. Open discourse, the ability to state, defend, and revise ideas in conversation with others, is essential to this process.



We often hold our beliefs with deep conviction. Yet, to think critically, we must be willing to listen, respond to challenge, and sometimes even change our minds.

Engaging in open, respectful dialogue, discussion and debate, even when it is uncomfortable, helps us distinguish between opinion and argument, between assertion and evidence. This fosters a deeper understanding and intellectual honesty.

Without such openness, we risk falling into groupthink, where ideas go untested and critical inquiry gives way to conformity. That is not the academic culture we strive for at our University. It is the responsibility of every member of our community to uphold an environment where ideas can be explored, debated, and refined freely, and where disagreement is seen not as a threat, but as a vital part of the pursuit of knowledge and the strengthening of our democratic life.

## 6. Challenging and Disagreeing Respectfully

Challenge must be civil and respectful. This is essential to an environment where everyone feels safe to express their views and feel included.

Disagreement is a natural and often necessary part of intellectual and civic life. Conversations on matters we care deeply about, whether in seminars, forums, or informal settings, can at times become impassioned or emotionally charged. We may use strong language to convey conviction or urgency. But the way we communicate matters.

Our ideas are far more likely to be heard, understood, and seriously considered when shared in a spirit of respect and grounded in evidence-based reasoning.

Attempts to intimidate, ridicule, or silence others, whether through aggression, mockery, or coercion, rarely changes minds. More often, they alienate listeners and undermine the credibility of our position and negatively impact our community.

A respectful culture of dialogue, discussion, and debate is essential to an environment in which everyone feels able to contribute without fear of personal harm, exclusion, or retaliation.

True inclusion means creating space for multiple voices and modes of expression, within the law. No one should be compelled to endorse or express values and beliefs, or to participate in activities, that conflict with their right to lawful expression or academic freedom.

## 7. Navigating Tension Thoughtfully

Genuine differences of opinion may cause discomfort or tension. Our role is not to shield each other, students and staff, from ideas which may be unwelcome, disagreeable, or even offensive, but to help each other to navigate them thoughtfully, critically and respectfully.

Through the course of learning, teaching, and research, we may encounter ideas, texts, or viewpoints that we fundamentally disagree with, even find offensive or emotionally challenging. This is not unusual; it reflects the complexity of the world we seek to understand. Issues worthy of academic inquiry are often complex and contested, and it is precisely the difficult or controversial ones that most demand open, rigorous and thoughtful discussion.

Avoiding such topics for fear of causing offence, even when well-intentioned, risks eroding the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression, as well as the core purpose of university life.

We do not have to respect or agree with every view we encounter, but we must engage with difference in a spirit of open-mindedness, tolerance, and respectful dialogue. Upholding this principle is the shared responsibility of all members of our University community; it is vital to sustaining a culture of free and critical inquiry.

