



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Discussing Controversial Topics

A Living Framework

Overview

A core purpose of higher education is the advancement of knowledge through critical inquiry, evidence-based reasoning, and open debate. Engaging with controversial topics is central to this purpose. The diverse community at the University of Edinburgh will inevitably hold a wide range of views on contentious topics, and people will sometimes have strongly held conflicting perspectives. We celebrate this plurality of viewpoints as a normal and valuable feature of academic life.

At the same time, discussion of controversial topics can be challenging, particularly where topics are personally, culturally, or socially sensitive. In these moments, it is especially important to pay attention to how people experience and engage in discussion. This is why the University seeks to foster learning environments that are intellectually rigorous and inclusive, in which members of the community are supported to engage with challenging material in ways that are mindful of the potential impact on others, while crucially remaining grounded in academic freedom and lawful freedom of expression.

More specifically, we aim to approach controversial discussions with care, reflection, and a commitment to dignity and mutual respect. We recognise that experiences of power, marginalisation, and discrimination often shape how individuals experience and participate in discussion, and we are committed to taking steps to reduce barriers to participation, so that all members of the community are able to contribute meaningfully. These commitments are underpinned by our responsibilities and aspirations to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

This Framework is intended to support constructive academic engagement across difference. It provides guidance on how to navigate controversial discussions in ways that uphold academic freedom and lawful freedom of expression, recognising that feelings of discomfort or offence, on their own, do not determine whether speech or academic activity is appropriate or permissible. It also recognises the importance of fostering inclusive, respectful, and supportive learning and working environments.

These commitments and obligations interact in complex ways.

For example:

- We encourage the exploration of controversial ideas, but this can sometimes lead to speech that is experienced or perceived as offensive, exclusionary, or unjust to some groups.
- We seek to promote equality and inclusion by creating a supportive and welcoming environment for everyone. However, this can create the expectation that limits will be placed on certain types of speech, or, conversely, that particular forms of speech will be required or prioritised.
- We have legal responsibilities to protected groups, and at times the rights and interests of different individuals and groups may be perceived as being in tension with one another.



Purpose

This document provides a ‘living framework’ to support greater mutual understanding and compassion across the University, through reflection on how we, as a community, might consider good practice in discussing controversial topics.

Specifically, the document:

- sets out a series of aspirational principles that reflect and reinforce existing good practice across the University.
- explores supporting concepts and how each principle may be interpreted and enacted in practice, raising questions for ongoing reflection and discussion.
- considers a range of institutional contexts in which controversial topics arise, highlighting variation in how such discussions may appropriately be approached in different settings.



Core Values and Aspirational Principles

Values and principles

As a university community, some of our most cherished values include academic freedom, freedom of expression, and equality, diversity, and inclusion. These values underpin our aspiration to discuss controversial topics in ways that advance knowledge and promote understanding, while recognising that disagreements are deeply felt by members of our community, and that consensus is undesirable and impossible on many topics. Within the law, members of the University community are free to question, debate, and explore even difficult or controversial topics, in line with the University's academic purpose.

Our hope in producing this 'living framework' is that it can be a resource for considering and exploring how we might have better dialogue across deep differences in viewpoints on campus.

These principles are offered as a set of ideas for the University community to consider. They are not statements of moral prescription or institutional rules, but rather a starting point for coordinating our shared intellectual life on campus. The principles and ideas may be contested by some, but they are not instructions. Rather, they are a starting point for conversations about how we might discuss difficult issues, so that we as a community can continue to improve our ways of teaching, researching, and advancing dialogue on challenging topics.

Good faith engagement

This framework also does not assume that everyone will engage in good faith. It recognises that, occasionally, commitments to freedom of expression and academic freedom may be invoked defensively by individuals whose primary intention is to cause egregious offence or to undermine constructive engagement. At the same time, motives and intentions can be difficult to discern, and there is often a tendency to attribute bad faith too readily to those holding different views. For this reason, the framework seeks to provide principles and considerations to support thoughtful, context-sensitive judgement, rather than judgements about intent. It is hoped that the framework itself may serve as an invitation to constructive dialogue, even among those who might previously have had little interest in good-faith engagement.

In what follows, we consider what each principle could mean in practice, to encourage further reflection on what they might mean in various contexts.

Aspirational Principles on Discussing Controversial Topics on Campus

1

We aim to show integrity, honesty, and curiosity in the pursuit of knowledge and mutual understanding

2

We aim to be thoughtful in our interactions, recognising diverse social hierarchies, and ensuring that all members of our community can contribute confidently and responsibly to discussion and debate

3

We aim to respect the rights of others and to challenge personal attacks and abuse

4

We aim to listen with openness and compassion, so that we can really hear each other's view

Aspirational Principles: Supporting Concepts and Practice

Universities have long been sites of social and political unrest, with students and faculty playing key roles in social justice, civil rights, and democracy movements. Within this, academic freedom and freedom of expression have been foundational tools for social change.

When our identity is closely tied to a societal issue, engaging responsibly in dialogue and debate about matters that may profoundly affect us can be challenging. By exploring the principles in the 'living framework', we are not asking members of our community to minimise their own deeply held, essential, beliefs and feelings about specific issues. Instead, the aim is to help strengthen the quality of dialogue about important issues, in ways that promote healthy and productive debate.



1

We aim to show integrity, honesty, and curiosity in the pursuit of knowledge and mutual understanding

This principle asks us to consider the honesty of our communication, how we seek to justify what we say, and how we might be open to acknowledging when we might be mistaken.

Supporting Concepts

- Strive to be well-informed when engaging in dialogue on contentious topics or be curious and open to learning, if you are not knowledgeable on the subject. Dialogue is well-informed when evidenced and reasoned.
- Consider the role of lived experience and how it may enrich or restrict the exploration of a challenging topic. Lived experience can be an important source of knowledge, but it should also be considered within the broader scholarly context.
- Critically consider the role of polarisation on contentious topics. Is it legitimate for one side of a polarised debate to be stigmatised, or does polarisation risk undermining complexity, nuance, and common ground?
- Respect principles of consultation and fact-based decision-making, appreciating that positions can change, corresponding with evolving learning and insights.

In practice this might mean:

- Recognising the need to give reasons for our views and expecting others to back up their views with reasons too.
- Showing appreciation for good points made by others with different views, and acknowledging when they change our mind.
- Being mindful of not contributing to misinformation or creating inaccurate and exaggerated arguments.
- Minimising the framing of complex issues in absolute 'us vs. them' terms.

2

We aim to be thoughtful in our interactions, appreciating the existence of diverse social hierarchies and ensuring that all members of the community can contribute confidently to discussion and debate

This principle asks how we might recognise and address imbalances in power, knowledge, and accessibility, which impact on the freedom to challenge ideas.

Supporting Concepts

- Understand that the interaction between academic freedom and freedom of expression and equality, diversity and inclusion may in some instances be less easy for those who have less power.
- Be tolerant of different viewpoints, but recognise that some groups disproportionately are, or have been, significant targets of intolerance themselves. We should recognise and be thoughtful of this wider context for groups who have faced intolerance, harassment, or discrimination to aid understanding, discussion, and debate.

In practice this might mean:

- Seeking to learn about, and reflect upon, diverse histories and inequalities as well as a range of possible power dynamics that may shape these, globally and locally.
- Not supposing that people assumed to be in one group have the same views or experiences, and reflecting on the diverse backgrounds and perspectives that can inform and motivate people's beliefs, opinions, and decisions.
- Consider how displays of perceived negative behaviour and emotions, such as disrespect and anger, may be driven by fear of harm or oppression. Constructive dialogue on contentious topics requires a basic level of civility between all parties for it to be meaningful.

3

We aim to respect the rights of others and challenge personal attacks and abuse

Through this principle, we can consider how to have healthy and constructive dialogue, even on topics where we may hold deeply held identity-constituting and emotive views.

Supporting Concepts

- Focus on the substance of the views, beliefs, or arguments expressed, not who is expressing them, and avoid attacking opposing individuals' character, motive, or personal traits.
- Avoid categorising all who share a characteristic as the same, such as all holding the same views or manifesting the same behaviours or sharing the same character traits.
- Seek to challenge our own and others' stereotypes and over-simplifications about other people with whom we may disagree.

In practice this might mean:

- Pre-empting bad faith contributions to dialogue and having a plan for addressing them through a thoughtful and reasoned approach.
- Challenging personal attacks on others and not condoning unacceptable behaviour, or redirecting the conversation more constructively.
- Familiarising ourselves with the University's policies on Dignity and Respect, and codes of conduct on behaviour.
- Recognising that collectivisation, mobilisation, and organised protests are all legitimate forms of freedom of expression. However, intimidation and harassment, or attempts to prevent others from exercising their rights to freedom of expression, are not acceptable online or in person, and we should seek to understand and enact the difference.



4

We aim to listen with openness and compassion so that we can really *hear* each other's views

Through this principle, we consider how engaging in meaningful dialogue may involve trying to understand another person's viewpoint and how this may have been shaped by their identity and experiences.

Supporting Concepts

- Understand that we do not truly believe in freedom of expression if we wish to silence the lawful expression of views from persons with whom we may disagree.
- Consider the power of empathy for others, and identify where it might be appropriate and educative to listen with compassion to those with very divergent viewpoints from our own.
- Understand that educational institutions should not seek to privilege or adopt one divisive and/or politically contentious definition, framing, or position over others on a controversial topic. Instead, it should seek to support a range of resources that advance EDI-sensitivity, within the scope of academic freedom. In line with this, no individual or group within the University has the authority to determine the boundaries of legitimate academic debate or to silence those with whom they disagree.

In practice this might mean:

- Establishing and protecting the space for dialogue as a supportive environment for responsible debate, to question with curiosity, and to share reflections. This means ensuring that diverse viewpoints can be heard, recognising that the best route to knowledge often includes careful consideration of divergent arguments.
- Understanding and emphasising that disagreement is okay, normal, and welcome as long as it is conducted with openness and compassion.
- Understanding that all viewpoints do not necessarily have to be considered equal, as deep scholarly expertise on a topic should be given more weight than an opinion being expressed in the moment that is not grounded in facts or evidence.
- Using skilled listening techniques, such as turn-taking, and allowing others to be heard without interruption, or only interrupting thoughtfully to move the dialogue on constructively.
- Seeking to make the purpose of any dialogue or debate on controversial topics clear from the outset and keeping this in mind throughout (Is it about conveying research findings, finding common ground, changing minds, identifying good questions, or giving space for different views, for example?).

Dialogue in Context

The context in which dialogue takes place in a university setting matters greatly, and expectations and practice will vary depending on the circumstances. In line with the University's Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression: Key Principles for Learning and Teaching, our role is not to shield each other, students and staff, from difficult or unwelcome ideas, but to support them to navigate such ideas thoughtfully, critically, and respectfully. This is particularly important when views are expressed that others may experience as contentious, harmful, or offensive, while recognising that such reactions, on their own, do not determine what is appropriate within academic contexts.

Academic lectures

Academic lectures are 'captive' spaces, most commonly in fixed physical environments. The lecture theatre may create a hierarchy and power imbalance, with the lecturer as the authority figure at the centre and students experiencing less autonomy over their learning experience.

Students should be encouraged to be independent, conscientious, and empathetic critical thinkers on

controversial and sensitive topics. Academics may bring well-founded historical, ethical, and/or scientific vantage points to lectures, but it is not their role to seek to 'indoctrinate' students with their perspective on any controversial issues, as this can risk narrowing intellectual horizons and stifling meaningful dialogue.

Seminar discussions

Seminar discussions can expand intellectual horizons by enabling interactive, inclusive, discourse. Diversifying the format of discussions can lead to more empathetic and constructive conversations on challenging topics, for example, through 'fish bowl' exercises involving listening circles.

Educators should set their expectations of respectful dialogue and ensure that all students can feel able and supported to pose different views from others. Active listening, the asking of open-ended questions, and validation and acknowledgement of students' concerns are all techniques that can help foster the space for meaningful dialogue across divergent views. Agreements on respectful discourse can be drawn up and agreed upon before a course/session starts.



Public events/talks

Organisers should give careful thought to the format of the event or talk. Beforehand, there should be consideration of how the event might allow space for dissenting views (whether that means allowing peaceful protests outside, modifying the events, or, if appropriate, flagging that other events will take place later with different speakers).

Organisers should strive to work with the University to put in place processes to enable events to go ahead smoothly, and to happen in a thoughtful way. In line with the University's Policy, there is a presumption in favour of allowing events and speakers to proceed, with proportionate conditions where necessary to ensure that events can take place lawfully and safely. The [Speakers and Events Oversight Group](#) can support with oversight, helping to ensure alignment with relevant policies and legal obligations, particularly concerning freedom of speech and safety.

Whilst audience members should not necessarily expect to hear 'both sides' of issues being represented in every event, efforts should be made to have content that does not perpetuate polarisation and which advances a given position through balanced reasoning and evidence, in line with scholarly standards of argument and debate.

The terms of the discussion or debate should be clearly set out in advance so the audience has a clear picture of what to expect, and on the basis of the description, they can decide not to attend or have the opportunity to leave. In line with the University's Event Organising and Event Attendance Guidelines, organisers and attendees should not take action to prevent speakers from being heard, prevent lawful participation, or deny access to those entitled to attend.

The [Staff and Student Event Attendance Guidelines](#) includes a set of 'do's' and 'don't' for events.

Student societies (and sports groups)

Clubs and Societies can operate as supportive spaces for students by providing an environment for people to authentically be themselves.

Student leaders can help build understanding and solidarity by helping their fellow students find common ground with others, and identify shared values to bridge divides between differing perspectives. Student leaders can help role model positive, healthy, behaviours that show respect for everyone's sense of belonging, even if they personally disagree or find the opinions of others challenging.



The campus ‘public square’

The University fully supports the right to peaceful protest, in line with our commitment to freedom of expression. However, actions which cause substantial and unwelcome disruption to the lives of other students or staff, or shut down debate, are not acceptable, as this undermines freedom of expression and academic exchange for others. In line with the University’s Protest Guidelines for Staff and Students, protest should not be carried out in ways that obstruct access to events or buildings, prevent speakers from being heard, or otherwise interfere with the lawful exercise of others’ rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

The University [provides clear guidance on protest](#) and members of our community are encouraged to read it. With rights come responsibilities, and it is important that protest is conducted responsibly in ways that do not impinge on the rights or sense of safety or belonging of others.

The line between lawful freedom of expression and breaches of our policies on conduct and Dignity and Respect is not always clear-cut and needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis, depending on the context.

Thoughtful and compassionate discourse and resources that promote understanding different perspectives, can help us all be more sensitive to the impact of our actions on others.

Common rooms/meetings and work corridors and beyond

Dialogue on contentious topics can occur anywhere; in meetings, in shared office spaces, student common rooms and at university-related social events. Whilst we aim to protect, rather than limit freedom of expression, we should all be sensitive to the time, place and manner of dialogue to ensure that sensitive topics are not necessarily imposed on others in unwanted ways.

Online discussions and social media

While social media enables diverse perspectives to be shared widely, the speed and scale of online responses, including the potential for instant backlash, can make nuanced conversations more difficult. Users may also gravitate toward, or be algorithmically directed to, communities that largely reflect their existing views.

Members of the University community should strive to conduct themselves as professionally online as they would in person; for example, when acting in a university-related capacity or where their university role is engaged, and in ways that are consistent with their contractual and professional responsibilities, within the parameters of academic freedom and freedom of expression. Online anonymity should not be seen as a way of obviating core values of respect and inclusivity. The University’s [Policy on Employee Use of Social Media](#) provides guidance on appropriate use.



Interaction with other University Policy

[Behaviours Charter](#)

[Computing Acceptable Use Policy](#)

[Dignity and Respect Policy](#)

[Event Attendance Guidelines for Staff and Students](#)

[Event Organising Guidelines for Staff and Students](#)

[Our Commitment to Freedom of Expression](#)

[Policy on Employee Use of Social Media](#)

[Protest Guidelines for Staff and Students](#)

[Speakers and Events Policy](#)

[Staff Disciplinary Policy](#)

[Student Code of Conduct](#)

Co-authors

The 'Living Framework' was collaboratively authored by members of the EDI Workstream of the University of Edinburgh's Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group.

The authors are:

Matthew Chrisman

Sam Coombes

Lilian Lee

Fiona McClement

Sybil Ramjathan

Sam Spiegel

David Smith (ed.)

Caroline Wallace

Sue Widdicombe



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH