THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Strengthening Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression at the University of Edinburgh

Worked Examples: Business-as-Usual Governance Framework

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Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group

Introduction

- This framework provides a structured approach to identifying, evaluating, and responding proportionately to emerging risks to academic freedom and freedom of expression.
- It embeds these activities within existing University governance arrangements and draws upon horizon-scanning and institutional evidence to support informed judgement.
- The Framework recognises disagreement and lawful expression as ordinary features of academic life, while unjustified restrictions require institutional attention.
- In doing so, it establishes an anticipatory, business-as-usual, pro-active approach to strengthening academic freedom and freedom of expression at the University of Edinburgh.

Worked Example One: Foreign Interference

Foreign interference: evidence and typology

The Annual Horizon Scan Identifies

International evidence indicates increasing use of foreign state pressure, surveillance, and transnational repression to influence the speech, teaching, research, and participation of students and academics beyond national borders.

The Typology categorises

- Mechanism (How?): Systemic and policy-based interference - transnational repression; where relevant, national security instruments.
- Perpetrator (Who acts?): State and government actors: foreign governments, state agencies, and state proxies.
- Body affected (Who or what is targeted?): Individuals; institutions; academic practices; student groups.

Foreign interference: evidence and typology

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation

- The University is relatively risk averse where Reputation, Compliance, and Core Information Assets are concerned, making these the principal lenses through which this emerging issue is evaluated.
- Consideration should also be given to Research, International Development, and People and Culture.

Potential Impacts

- Staff and student safety: colleagues and students with ties to states of concern may face pressure, surveillance, or reprisal, directed at relatives abroad.
- Research security: collaborations in sensitive areas may require export-control or trusted-research review, delaying projects and in some cases making them impossible to continue.

Foreign interference: impacts and risk categories

Potential Impacts

- International partnerships: agreements may need to be paused or renegotiated where partners are subject to state direction, with consequences for student mobility and joint provision.
- Teaching and supervision: colleagues may avoid particular topics, and students particular questions, narrowing what is taught and examined without any formal decision having been taken.

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation (Relevant University Risk Appetite categories)

- Reputation.
- Compliance.
- Research.
- International Development.
- Core Information Assets.
- People and Culture.

Foreign interference: evaluation and mitigations

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Evaluates the Evidence (Questions might include)

- Does the evidence indicate a pattern of pressure on staff or students from foreign states or proxies?
- Is the University's approach to partnership due diligence keeping pace with the risks identified?
- Do staff know how to report concerns?
- Is there evidence that existing policies on events, visiting speakers, and international collaborations are operating as intended?

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Identifies Mitigations

- Issue guidance for staff and students.
- Strengthen reporting mechanisms.
- Review international partnership governance.
- Coordinate with research security functions.

Foreign interference: reporting

Reporting

- Annual assessment submitted to the Risk Management Committee (RMC), highlighting increasing risks associated with foreign interference and transnational repression affecting academic freedom and freedom of expression.
- The Risk Advisory Group oversees implementation via relevant University committees and governance routes throughout the year. The Group reports annually to RMC on risks, mitigations, and implementation progress.

Worked Example Two: Digital Amplification and Online Harassment

Online harassment: evidence and typology

The Annual Horizon Scan Identifies

International evidence indicates increasing use of digital and social media to amplify academic disputes beyond their original context.

Coordinated online campaigns, harassment, and surveillance, associated with teaching, research, and public engagement, can create risks of self-censorship and constraints on lawful academic expression.

The Typology categorises

- Mechanism (How?): Institutional and societal pressure; online harassment, and surveillance.
- Perpetrator (Who acts?): Non-state external actors (media ecosystems, advocacy groups, coordinated online networks); potentially intra-university communities.
- Body affected (Who or what is targeted?): Individuals and academic practices; potentially institutions and student groups.

Online harassment: potential impacts

Potential Impacts:

- Self-censorship: colleagues withdraw from public engagement, media comment, and online platforms, removing the University's expertise from public debate at the moments it is most needed.
- Staff and student wellbeing: sustained personal abuse affects health, absence, and retention, and the willingness of colleagues to take on public-facing roles.
- Teaching and research choices: contested topics are quietly avoided in curriculum design and in the framing of research questions, narrowing the discipline over time.
- Institutional reputation: the University is judged on the speed and visibility of its response, rather than on the substance of the decision it takes.

Online harassment: risk appetite evaluation

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation (Relevant University Risk Appetite categories):

- Reputation.
- Compliance.
- Core Information Assets.
- People and Culture.
- Education & Student Experience.
- Research.

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation

- The University is relatively risk averse where Reputation, Compliance, and Core Information Assets are concerned making these the principal lenses through which this emerging issue is evaluated.
- Consideration should also be given to People and Culture, Education & Student Experience, and Research.

Online harassment: evaluation and mitigations

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Evaluates the evidence (Questions might include)

- To what extent are online campaigns creating a chilling effect on teaching, research, or public engagement?
- Are staff or students self-censoring?
- *Is there evidence that current arrangements are protecting lawful expression in digital environments?*
- *Are support and reporting arrangements being used, and is there evidence of unmet need?*

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Identifies Mitigations

- Strengthen digital engagement guidance.
- Review support arrangements for staff and students experiencing online harassment.
- Strengthen reporting and escalation pathways.

Online harassment: reporting

Reporting

- Annual assessment submitted to the Risk Management Committee (RMC), highlighting increasing digital amplification, online harassment, and surveillance, as institutional and societal mechanisms that may constrain academic freedom and freedom of expression.
- The Risk Advisory Group oversees implementation via relevant University committees and governance routes throughout the year. The Group reports annually to RMC on risks, mitigations, and implementation progress.

Worked Example Three: Institutional Neutrality

Institutional neutrality: evidence and typology

The Annual Horizon Scan Identifies

International evidence indicates increasing expectations that universities should either make, or refrain from making, institutional statements on contested political and social issues.

Competing expectations from governments, staff, students, alumni, donors, and campaign groups, are placing increasing pressure on institutional neutrality and decision-making.

The Typology categorises:

- Mechanism (How?): Institutional and societal pressure; political and ideological control or censorship, where pressure seeks to narrow permissible institutional or academic discourse.
- Perpetrator (Who acts?): Government; external actors; internal communities.
- Body affected (Who or what is targeted?): Institutions and academic practices; individuals.

Institutional neutrality: potential impacts

Potential Impacts

- Institutional autonomy: where the University is expected to speak, silence and speech are both read as positions, and the decision potentially shifts from academic judgement to whichever constituency applies the most pressure.
- Staff and student confidence: colleagues and students conclude that the University speaks for some and not for others, and trust in governance may erode unevenly across communities.
- Governance and decision-making: statements are issued at School or unit level in the absence of a clear route, producing inconsistency the institution then has to defend.
- Partner and donor relations: statements, and their absence, are interpreted by alumni, donors, and partners, as commitments, and expectations follow.

Institutional neutrality: potential impacts

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation (Relevant University Risk Appetite categories)

- Reputation.
- Compliance.
- People and Culture.
- Education & Student Experience.
- Research.

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation

- The University is relatively risk averse where Reputation and Compliance are concerned, making these the principal lenses through which this emerging issue is evaluated.
- Consideration should also be given to People and Culture and Education & Student Experience.

Institutional neutrality: evaluation and mitigations

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Evaluates the Evidence (Questions might include)

- Could institutional statements inadvertently constrain academic freedom or freedom of expression?
- Is there evidence that current guidance is understood and used?

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Identifies Mitigations

- Review and refresh institutional guidance on institutional statements and institutional voice.
- Review the governance arrangements through which statements are authorised.

Institutional neutrality: reporting

Reporting

- Annual assessment submitted to the Risk Management Committee (RMC), highlighting increasing pressures relating to institutional neutrality and their implications for academic freedom and freedom of expression.
- The Risk Advisory Group oversees implementation via relevant University committees and governance routes throughout the year. The Group reports annually to RMC on risks, mitigations, and implementation progress.

Worked Example Four: AI-Mediated Threats to Academic Freedom and Academic Discourse

AI-mediated threats: evidence and typology

The Annual Horizon Scan Identifies

International evidence indicates increasing use of generative AI to create, manipulate, and disseminate, academic content, creating new challenges for scholarly independence, public trust, and freedom of expression.

Synthetic media, AI-generated misinformation, and automated amplification are increasingly capable of influencing academic discourse.

The Typology categorises

- Mechanism (How?): Disinformation campaigns (including LLM grooming); institutional and societal pressure.
- Perpetrator (Who acts?): External actors; coordinated online networks; governments (where applicable).
- Body affected (Who or what is targeted?): Academic practices and individuals.

AI-mediated threats: potential impacts

Potential Impacts

- Research integrity: synthetic or manipulated material enters the scholarly record, with the burden of disproving it falling on the individual scholar.
- Scholarly independence: automated amplification and reputational attack shape which questions researchers are willing to pursue.
- Attribution and misrepresentation: fabricated statements and outputs are attributed to named staff, requiring correction by the University.
- Public trust in expertise: the University's published work becomes harder to distinguish from fabricated material carrying its name.

AI-mediated threats: risk appetite evaluation

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation (Relevant University Risk Appetite categories)

- Reputation.
- Compliance.
- Core Information Assets.
- Research.
- People and Culture.

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation

- The University is relatively risk averse where Reputation, Compliance, and Core Information Assets are concerned, making these the principal lenses through which this emerging issue is evaluated.
- Consideration should also be given to Research and People and Culture.

AI-mediated threats: evaluation and mitigations

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Evaluates the Evidence (Questions might include)

- Are AI-enabled misinformation or amplification campaigns constraining academic freedom or scholarly independence?
- Are support and reporting arrangements being used, and is there evidence of unmet need?
- Is there evidence that current guidance on generative AI is understood and used?

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Identifies Mitigations

- Review and refresh institutional guidance on the use of generative AI.
- Review monitoring and reporting arrangements.

AI-mediated threats: reporting

Reporting

- Annual assessment submitted to the Risk Management Committee (RMC), highlighting emerging risks associated with AI-generated misinformation, synthetic media and automated amplification affecting academic freedom, freedom of expression and scholarly independence.
- The Risk Advisory Group oversees implementation via relevant University committees and governance routes throughout the year. The Group reports annually to RMC on risks, mitigations, and implementation progress.

Worked Example Five: Contested Public Issues: Institutional Responses and Restriction

Contested public issues: evidence and typology

The Annual Horizon Scan Identifies

International evidence indicates that disputes over invited speakers, teaching, exhibitions, public engagement, and protest are increasingly met with cancellation, organised pressure, and weaponised accusation.

The risk to academic freedom and freedom of expression arises from these responses, and from the institutional expectation to manage them, rather than ordinarily from disagreement itself.

The Typology categorises

- Mechanism (How?): Censorship and cancellation of events; moral panic and weaponised accusations.
- Perpetrator (Who acts?): Internal communities; external actors; universities.
- Body affected (Who or what is targeted?): Academic practices; student groups; individuals.

Contested public issues: potential impacts

Potential Impacts

- Complaints and litigation: decisions to permit or to restrict events generate challenge from opposing directions at once, so procedural defensibility matters more than the outcome chosen.
- Cost of event management: security, stewarding, legal advice, and time-consumption, may become a de facto restriction on who is invited.
- Willingness to host: Schools and student societies decline to invite speakers, rather than manage the process; so, restriction happens by attrition and is never recorded as a decision.
- Reputation and public confidence: the University is judged on individual decisions taken under time pressure and, sometimes, on incomplete information.

Contested public issues: risk appetite evaluation

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation (Relevant University Risk Appetite categories)

- Reputation.
- Compliance.
- People and Culture.
- Education & Student Experience.
- Research.

The University Risk Appetite Framework informs evaluation

- The University is relatively risk averse where Reputation and Compliance are concerned, making these the principal lenses through which this emerging issue is evaluated.
- Consideration should also be given to People and Culture and Education & Student Experience.

Contested public issues: evaluation and mitigations

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Evaluates the Evidence (Questions might include)

- Are recurring patterns emerging that require institutional intervention to protect lawful expression?
- What does the evidence suggest about how existing governance arrangements are working in practice?

The AF&FoE Risk Advisory Group Identifies Mitigations

- Review the procedures governing speaker approval, event management, and protest.
- Strengthen support for staff and students who become the subject of organised campaigns.

Contested public issues: reporting

Reporting

- Annual assessment submitted to the Risk Management Committee (RMC), highlighting recurring pressures relating to contested public issues and their implications for academic freedom and freedom of expression.
- The Risk Advisory Group oversees implementation via relevant University committees and governance routes throughout the year. The Group reports annually to RMC on risks, mitigations, and implementation progress.

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