



Free Speech University Rankings 2018

Results Summary

About

The Free Speech University Rankings (FSUR) launched in 2015 as the UK's first annual nationwide analysis of campus censorship, examining the policies and actions of 115 universities and students' unions to provide a detailed insight into the state of free expression in the UK academy. The FSUR was launched by the online magazine *spiked*, with the support of a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.

How we rank

The FSUR uses a traffic-light system to assess universities' and students' unions' (SUs) approach to free speech.

Red: has actively censored speech or expression

Amber: has chilled speech or expression through excessive regulation

Green: has not restricted or regulated speech or expression

We assess the policies and 'actions' – ie, one-off bans – of university administrations and SUs separately, and arrive at an individual traffic-light ranking for each. We then produce an overall ranking for the entire 'institution' – that is, the university administration and SU taken together.

The information is gathered from Freedom of Information requests and publicly published minutes, policy documents and reports. Universities and SUs are contacted throughout the process. We assess policies that are in force at universities and SUs at the time of the release of each year's rankings – for the FSUR 2018, this was 6 February 2018. We collect actions that have been enacted over the course of the past three academic years.

For more information on how we rank, see 'Methodology'.

The results

The FSUR 2018 found that 54% of institutions were ranked Red, meaning they actively censor speech by banning certain views from being expressed on campus and / or ban specific texts, speakers and groups from campus on the basis of their content / views.

Out of the remaining institutions, 40% were ranked Amber, meaning they chill speech through unnecessary regulation, burdensome speaker-vetting procedures or guidance warning students against engaging in vague categories of expression – for example, ‘offensive’ or ‘provocative’ speech.

Just 6% were ranked Green, meaning they place no significant restrictions on speech, as far as we are aware.

Universities vs Students’ Unions

As we have seen in previous years, the 2018 rankings revealed that, when taken separately, students’ unions were significantly more likely to be ranked Red: 47% of SUs were Red, compared with 35% of university administrations.

However, as of 2018, there were more Green SUs than Green universities:

	RED	AMBER	GREEN
Universities	35%	53%	12%
Students’ Unions	47%	29%	24%

The best and worst

In 2018, the most restrictive institutions – those in which both the university and the SU were ranked Red, and had three or more actions, or bans, currently in force – were as follows:

- University of Edinburgh
- University of Oxford

The most free institutions – those in which both the university and the SU were ranked Green, and had zero actions, or bans, currently in force – were as follows:

- University of Buckingham

- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Wales Trinity St David

The bans

In the three academic years prior to the FSUR 2018 release, 81 specific bans were enacted across the 115 institutions we assessed. Here are some of the most prevalent kinds of ban:

- 17 institutions banned, suspended or in other ways punished students and student societies / sports teams over offensive speech or dress
- 12 institutions banned controversial speakers or events
- 10 institutions banned publications, predominantly tabloid newspapers

Sixty-one of these 81 bans were enacted by SUs.

The policies

Here are some of the most common censorious policies that we found in the FSUR 2018:

- 48% of institutions had censorious religion policies, often guarding against 'offending faith groups'
- 46% of institutions had censorious transgender policies, many outright banning 'transphobic' speech
- 37% of institutions had No Platform policies, banning, in the main, far-right and Islamist groups. (These were held almost entirely by SUs, with a few exceptions.)
- 23% of institutions had Safe Space policies, which restrict offensive, hurtful, judgemental or 'unsafe' speech. (These were exclusively held by SUs.)

The trends

Here are some of the trends we noted in the FSUR 2018.

Religion

In 2018, religion policies were the most prevalent category of censorious policy we found, with 48% of institutions warning students and speakers away from offending faith groups, or placing conditions on faith-based societies and events.

The SUs at East London, Cumbria, Lincoln, Huddersfield, Warwick and De Montfort all had policies urging students and external speakers to 'seek to avoid insulting other faiths or groups'. Others go further. The University of Nottingham Students' Union's 'Respecting Religion' policy states that 'the religious sensibilities of the union's members should be respected', noting that, in the past, anti-religious speakers and groups had made religious students feel 'unsafe'.

In 2015, the anti-Islamist campaigner Maryam Namazie was banned from speaking by Warwick Students' Union on similar grounds.

Religious groups are hit by these policies, too. Some universities and SUs place limits on proselytism, and require more procedures for faith-based student groups to be set up or to hold events. In 2017, an Oxford college banned a campus Christian group, the Christian Union, from its freshers' fair because it was deemed potentially 'harmful' to students.

Transgender

In 2018, transgender policies were among the most prevalent category of censorious policy we found, with 46% of institutions holding policies that either ban transphobia outright, urge or require students to use transgender pronouns, or otherwise regulate discussion of transgender issues.

The vast majority of the most severe restrictions in this area come from universities. Several university policies enforce outright bans on 'transphobic' speech, often in almost identical wording: Leeds Beckett, Newcastle and Imperial are among the universities that ban 'transphobic propaganda', in the form of 'written materials, graffiti, music or speeches', and have committed themselves to removing such materials from university premises where they are found. Just as concerning are the universities, including St Andrews, Sussex and Cardiff, that commit themselves to ridding the curriculum of 'transphobic' material.

Student speech and conduct

Over the three academic years to February 2018, 17 institutions have banned, punished or expelled students for offensive expression.

In October 2015, a Christian social-work student at the University of Sheffield, Felix Ngole, was expelled from his course over a Facebook post in which he called homosexuality an 'abomination'. Elsewhere, universities have clamped down on

student sports clubs and societies holding social events with 'offensive' fancy-dress themes. In October 2016, the University of Bristol Students' Union banned a 'chav-themed social'. And in November 2017, the University of Durham intervened to stop a 'Thatcher vs Miners' social.

More strikingly, students who have tried to set up societies, publications and run events challenging campus censorship have also found themselves censored. In September 2015, *No Offence*, a student free-speech magazine at Oxford, was banned from the Oxford University Students' Union freshers' fair. In November 2017, a free-speech society at Sussex had an event with a UKIP MEP postponed after the SU asked to see his speech in advance. And in March 2017, the student Conservative society at Lincoln had its social-media accounts suspended by the SU after it tweeted Lincoln's 2017 Free Speech University Rankings profile.

Methodology

Definitions

University: refers to a university administration – separate from the academic staff and the students' union (SU).

Students' Union: refers to the students' union administration.

Institution: refers to the university and students' union when taken as a whole.

Policy: a document held by a university or a students' union that governs or sets guideline for students' conduct and speech, or mandates certain procedures with regard to events and materials.

Action: a decision taken by either a university or a students' union that curbs free speech. This includes, but is not limited to, bans on specific speakers, books, newspapers, songs and words. These are binding restrictions, but are too specific to be considered a policy.

The traffic light

The FSUR uses a traffic-light system to assess and rank each individual university and students' union (SU). An overall ranking for the institution – the university and SU as a whole – is then arrived at as an average of the two rankings, so as to give a picture of the freedom a student can generally expect to experience on a particular campus. Each individual policy and action is also ranked using the traffic light.

We cover policies and bans relating to all forms of expression, from what students are allowed to say, to what publications, songs or adverts they are allowed to engage with, to what speakers they are allowed to invite to campus and what clothes they are allowed to wear.

What's more, we also include policies and programmes that constitute 'thought reform', such as mandatory classes for all students aimed at tackling alleged biases or attitudes, and policies that require students to express or defer to certain ideas, regardless of whether they agree with them. We maintain that being compelled to think or to express something is as corrosive to free speech as being prohibited from expressing something.

RED: A students' union, university or institution that is hostile to free speech and free expression, mandating explicit restrictions on speech, including, but not limited to, bans on specific ideologies, political affiliations, beliefs, books, speakers or words.

AMBER: A students' union, university or institution that chills free speech and free expression through restricting vague and subjective types of speech, such as 'offensive' or 'insulting' speech, or burdensome vetting procedures for events, speakers, posters or publications. Many policies in this category might not explicitly limit speech, but have the potential to be used to that end, due to vague or careless wording.

GREEN: A students' union, university or institution that, as far as we are aware, places no significant restrictions on free speech and expression – other than where such speech or expression is unlawful.

Research

Policies and actions are gathered from Freedom of Information requests and publicly published minutes, policy documents, statements and media reports. Universities and SUs are contacted throughout the process. We assess policies that are currently in force at universities and SUs at the time of each year's rankings release, and we assess actions that have been enacted over the past three academic years. The policies and actions we assess are ones which apply only to students' speech and conduct. While academic freedom is a closely related issue, the FSUR is a student-focused project.

Policies

The types of policy we examine include but are not limited to:

University:

- Free Speech and External Speaker policies
- Bullying and Harassment policies
- Equal Opportunities policies

Students' Union:

- No Platform policies
- Safe Space policies
- Student Codes of Conduct

It should be noted that holding one of the above policies does not constitute an automatic offence – they are each assessed on the basis of their content. For example, harassment policies are not in and of themselves censorious. Most are not. But policies that define expressing controversial views, in general, as a form of harassment may be included.

Actions

The types of action we examine include but are not limited to:

- Bans on speakers
- Bans on newspapers
- Punishment of students on the grounds of offensive expression

In each year's research, we include actions that have taken place in the past three academic years – the average lifespan of an SU ban.

Sample

We assess 115 institutions. The universities were selected from the lists of the higher-education funding bodies of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. A number of institutions were excluded on a range of grounds, including size and specialism, so that we were comparing institution like-for-like. Medical, arts and agricultural institutions, for example, have been excluded entirely.

For universities which have multiple students' unions or associations linked with them, we assess them, collectively, as one entity, while noting which policies and actions originate from each union.

For universities which function under the college system, with individual college administrations and common rooms, we only assess the policies of the overarching university and SU. However, actions taken by individual colleges or common rooms contribute to the university's or SU's respective ranking, as they provide an indication of the culture on campus with regard to free speech.

The law

There are numerous restrictions placed on speech by UK law. We have not marked down any institution for attempting to restrict illegal speech or avoid illegal speech being uttered on its premises. It is when institutions cross the line – knowingly or unknowingly – into policing legal speech that they are given a negative assessment.

The individual ranking

A university's or SU's individual ranking is arrived at by assessing its policies and actions. This, in most cases, amounts to the equivalent of its most severe policy. For example, a university that holds three Amber policies and one Red policy would receive an overall Red ranking. This is on the condition that said Red policy poses a significant threat to free speech and expression. Censorious policies that only affect a specific area of campus life, such as IT policies, are given the weight of a Red or Amber action for this reason.

Red or Amber actions are the equivalent of one third of the weight of a Red or Amber policy. So, for instance, if an otherwise Amber university has three Red actions to its name, this would raise its ranking to an overall Red. What's more, if an otherwise Green university has two Red actions to its name, this will raise the university to an Amber ranking. Red actions refer to explicit bans, whereas Amber actions refer to decisions that chill free speech: for example, a university or SU calling on the other to ban something, or mandating trigger warnings on a particular text – while neither has the effect of directly censoring material, both contribute to a more cautious, censorious atmosphere.

The overall ranking

The institution's overall ranking is the average of the university's and SU's individual ranking. When one is Red and the other is Green, the overall ranking is Amber. But if one is Amber and the other is either Red or Green, the number and severity of the policies on either side are used to make a judgement as to what ranking the institution should receive.

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