# Students say fear of sanctions and poor debate skills are choking campus free speech



The Higher Education Policy Institute blog by Lauren Amdor presents a pointed snapshot of how students at a leading institution perceive the contested terrain of campus speech. Her research, conducted while she served as a sabbatical officer at the London School of Economics Students’ Union, draws together a substantial body of student testimony and a short survey that surfaces persistent anxiety about speaking up, uneven confidence in encountering challenging ideas, and a demand for clearer institutional practice on the boundary between lawful—but potentially harmful—speech and conduct that warrants sanction. According to the original report, these concerns are not abstract: they speak directly to how learning, participation and protest are experienced on campus.

The headline figures are stark and consistent across reporting. The HEPI blog records responses from 592 students; a separate summary of the same work in Wonkhe described 593 responses, a trivial discrepancy that does not alter the overall pattern. Between a quarter and a third of students reported discomfort speaking in class, three‑quarters said teachers shape what speech is acceptable in the classroom, and nearly half felt ill‑equipped to respond to legally protected but damaging speech. Around half of respondents also said their campus offered few opportunities for structured dialogue between groups holding opposing views. These quantitative findings sit alongside rich qualitative material from the project’s focus groups that helps explain why the numbers matter to day‑to‑day student life. (The LSESU has publicly summarised similar findings and proposed workshops and initiatives to address them.)

What students described goes beyond nervousness about offending others. A recurring theme was fear of institutional repercussions: possible disciplinary action, academic penalties, visa consequences for international students, and social ostracism for holding minority viewpoints. Students explicitly linked these fears to recent disciplinary episodes involving campus protests, especially demonstrations related to Palestine, and described a resultant “chilling effect on free speech” when controversial opinions interact with the prospect of formal sanctions. Independent organisations monitoring campus activity have also documented cases where universities used policing, litigation or disciplinary measures to clear encampments and protests, raising alarms about whether responses have been proportionate and rights‑respecting.

A related thread in the research was inadequate preparation for emotionally charged debate. Many students—particularly those from religious or ethnic minorities—said they lacked the skills and institutional support to navigate conflictual conversations without fear of causing offence or being accused of discriminatory speech. The project referenced National Student Survey data suggesting that minority‑group students often feel less free to express their views, and focus groups on faith in the classroom found practising students commonly seek to avoid contentious debates about personal belief. Where debate culture varies between departments or is shaped by cultural norms, students start from uneven baselines; the research argues for tailored support rather than one‑size‑fits‑all approaches.

The students’ critique also engaged with the Act’s protection of academic freedom for staff. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, as enacted, affirms that academic staff have a right to express controversial or unpopular views without adverse treatment. Students in the study nonetheless reported that this legal protection can create a perceived barrier to their participation: some felt reluctant to contest staff viewpoints or to risk being seen as disrespectful. Many suggested that the solution is not neutering staff speech but investing in pedagogic training so academics can foster rigorous disagreement without discrimination and manage sensitive exchanges constructively.

All of this unfolds against a shifting policy environment. The Act itself sets new duties on registered higher education providers to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech within the law for staff, students and visiting speakers, and to adopt codes of practice and safeguards around non‑disclosure agreements. Yet the government paused the commencement of the Act in July 2024, citing concerns about student welfare, the risk that it might protect hate speech, and the potential legal and financial burdens on providers. Regulators and institutions have not stood still: the Office for Students has published Regulatory Advice 24, which offers a three‑step framework for assessing compliance, examples of unlawful speech and practical measures providers might consider, while emphasising that its guidance is not a substitute for legal advice and will evolve with experience.

The policy tension—between securing lawful expression and protecting student welfare—has been amplified by reports from academic and disciplinary watchdogs. The Committee on Academic Freedom at a specialist learned society has publicly criticised what it described as university repression of student encampments and protests that began in autumn 2023, documenting instances of policing, litigation to remove encampments and referrals to counter‑extremism channels. These accounts underscore the point made in the student research: institutional choices about security, discipline and engagement shape whether protest and contestation feel safe and legitimate to students.

Against this background, the HEPI project sets out pragmatic recommendations that map clearly onto what students themselves said they want. They include: a clear, accessible articulation of how universities balance freedom of speech with rights against discrimination and privacy, including examples of speech or conduct likely to trigger disciplinary processes; a baseline provision of “soft skills” in respectful disagreement, incorporated across courses; the creation and resourcing of facilitated dialogue spaces that deliberately cross religious, ethnic and ideological boundaries; and targeted training for academic staff in facilitating debate while respecting academic freedom. These remedies are consonant with steps already being taken at some institutions: the LSE Students’ Union has established a Campus Relations Group to bring society leaders into constructive dialogue with university decision‑makers and to co‑design events, training and policies intended to protect marginalised students while opening up debate.

Students’ unions, as the HEPI author argues, occupy a unique position in this landscape. They can convene student‑led forums, lobby institutions for clearer policy and represent student concerns in a way that neither government guidance nor regulatory documents can do by themselves. At the same time, regulators and providers must supply the legal clarity, resources and staff training that underpin any durable campus culture of confident, contested speech. The pause to the Act and the Office for Students’ evolving guidance together make one thing plain: without clearer, consistently communicated institutional practice and investment in skill‑building, legal duties alone will not resolve the anxieties the research reveals.

If universities are serious about promoting free speech in the broadest sense, the evidence from this study suggests they must treat the problem as pedagogic and cultural as well as legal. That means clarifying the rules, equipping staff and students with the tools to disagree well, protecting legitimate protest and ensuring that disciplinary responses are proportionate and transparent. The policy debate will continue in Whitehall and in governing bodies, but the immediate test is local: whether campuses can translate duties on paper into everyday practice that both protects students and enables the robust exchange of ideas.

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/), [[5]](https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/were-taking-action-to-strengthen-free-speech-on-campus/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/), [[5]](https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/were-taking-action-to-strengthen-free-speech-on-campus/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/), [[7]](https://www.brismes.ac.uk/news/statement-on-universities-repression-of-student-encampments)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/16/enacted), [[1]](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/16/enacted), [[2]](https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/07/free-speech-act-what-you-need-to-know/), [[4]](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-24-guidance-related-to-freedom-of-speech/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[7]](https://www.brismes.ac.uk/news/statement-on-universities-repression-of-student-encampments), [[1]](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/), [[4]](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-24-guidance-related-to-freedom-of-speech/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/), [[5]](https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/were-taking-action-to-strengthen-free-speech-on-campus/), [[6]](https://www.lsesu.com/news/article/6001/Summary-of-the-LSESU-Student-Campus-Relations-Group/)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/), [[4]](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-24-guidance-related-to-freedom-of-speech/), [[2]](https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/07/free-speech-act-what-you-need-to-know/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/08/13/draft-title-free-speech-lauren-amdor/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/07/free-speech-act-what-you-need-to-know/> - This government Education Hub page explains that although the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 received Royal Assent, the government paused commencement regulations and stopped bringing the Act into force in July 2024 due to concerns about impacts on student welfare, potential protection of hate speech, and legal and financial burdens on providers. It summarises why implementation was halted, outlines possible next steps including repeal or further consideration, and describes the Act’s duties on universities and students’ unions to secure lawful freedom of speech. The page highlights stakeholder concerns and emphasises the need to balance safety with free expression.
3. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/16/enacted> - The legislation.gov.uk entry reproduces the text of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, setting out new duties for registered higher education providers to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech within the law for staff, students and visiting speakers. It defines academic freedom for academic staff and prohibits adverse treatment for expressing controversial or unpopular opinions. The Act requires institutions to adopt codes of practice, forbids non‑disclosure agreements that silence complainants in certain cases, and clarifies the legal framework that providers must follow when balancing lawful speech and restrictions compatible with human rights obligations in practice locally.
4. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-24-guidance-related-to-freedom-of-speech/> - The Office for Students’ Regulatory Advice 24 provides guidance to higher education providers about duties under the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, explaining the ‘secure’ and ‘code’ duties and offering a three‑step framework for assessing compliance. It defines ‘freedom of speech’ and ‘academic freedom’, gives examples of unlawful speech and practical steps providers might take to secure lawful expression, and sets out expectations for codes of practice. The guidance stresses proportionate, evidence‑based decision‑making, and advises providers to seek legal advice where appropriate, while noting the guidance is not definitive legal advice and will be updated with experience regularly.
5. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/were-taking-action-to-strengthen-free-speech-on-campus/> - The Wonkhe blog reports on LSESU’s Power to Speak survey findings and related initiatives, summarising responses from 593 students which revealed many felt unable or ill‑equipped to engage with challenging speech. It highlights that one in four students reported discomfort speaking up in class, 75% thought teachers defined acceptable classroom speech, 45% felt unequipped to respond to legally protected but damaging speech, and around half saw few opportunities for structured dialogue between opposing groups. Wonkhe also describes LSESU’s Campus Relations Group and planned workshops to build skills, support dialogue and inform institutional policy responses on campus and improve student experience.
6. <https://www.lsesu.com/news/article/6001/Summary-of-the-LSESU-Student-Campus-Relations-Group/> - The LSESU webpage describes the Student Campus Relations Group established to provide student input into LSE’s approach to campus relations, free speech and protest. Chaired by sabbatical officers, the group brings together society leaders across diverse perspectives to foster constructive dialogue, advise university decision‑makers, and develop recommendations on safe spaces, protest rights and campus inclusivity. The page lists aims, membership and meeting frequency, emphasising transparency through published minutes and student feedback. It positions the group as a forum to address tensions around contentious topics, support marginalised students, and shape initiatives such as dialogue events, training and collaborative projects across campus.
7. <https://www.brismes.ac.uk/news/statement-on-universities-repression-of-student-encampments> - BRISMES’ Committee on Academic Freedom published a statement condemning university repression of student encampments and protests opposing Israel’s war on Gaza, documenting disciplinary actions, police interventions, litigation to remove encampments, and reported surveillance or referrals to Prevent. The statement, based on reports gathered since October 2023, alleges universities have not consistently upheld freedom of expression and academic freedom, and highlights risks to lawful protest and safety. BRISMES calls for universities to protect peaceful dissent, resist disproportionate punitive measures, and ensure that disciplinary processes and security responses respect students’ rights to protest and to free academic inquiry and protect minority groups.