

## Arif Ahmed: Seeking the truth is something worth fighting for

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A university is not a club. It is not a political lobby. It is not a seminary. It is not a “brand”. It exists to seek and speak truth, whatever it costs and whoever it upsets. Therefore, without freedom to explore controversial or “offensive” ideas, a university is nothing.

These freedoms are worth fighting for, which is why I feel tremendously honoured to have been appointed director for freedom of speech and academic freedom at the Office for Students, the independent regulator of higher education in England. There are urgent threats to free speech and academic freedom in our universities and colleges. We must use all means necessary to address them. Free speech matters beyond the campus. Barack Obama said: “The purpose of . . . free speech is to make sure we are forced to use argument and reason and words in making our democracy work.”

We settle disputes by discussion, not censorship or violence. Today that idea is fading across our institutions. Universities must defend it. Democracy itself is at stake. New legislation means universities and colleges must promote, and take steps to secure, academic freedom and free speech within the law. The regulator will interpret this broadly. Breaches could include: cancelling a talk on women’s rights due to internal political pressure, or disciplining a lecturer for provocative anti-monarchist tweets. In response to a breach the regulator can issue fines.

The public sector equality duty means institutions must “have due regard” to the need to achieve certain equality aims. They should be clear about equality implications of their decisions. They must recognise the desirability of achieving equality aims, but in the context of the importance of free speech and academic freedom.

Similarly, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition is an important tool for understanding how antisemitism manifests itself in the 21st century. Adopting it sends a strong signal to students and staff facing antisemitism. But it must not restrict legitimate political speech and protest.

I have had concerns about this in the past. Since then, I have seen at Cambridge how in practice the working definition can accommodate robust support for free speech and academic freedom. More recently, the report of the parliamentary task force on antisemitism in higher education indicates that none of the 56 university adopters who were asked reported that its adoption had in any way restricted freedom of speech.

I will act impartially. I have no interest in promoting the views of this or of any future government. I have no interest in any “culture war”.

I will defend free speech within the law for *all* views and approaches: postcolonial theory as much as gender-critical feminism. Free speech for just one side is not free speech at all. Free speech for all sides benefits all sides. This, not censorship, is the only real engine of both scientific discovery and social progress.

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