



Freedom of Speech Code of Practice

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Approved by: RHUL Council
RHSU Board of Trustees

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This Code of Practice is available in accessible formats on request from the Governance team.

Please contact: governance.office@rhul.ac.uk

Freedom of Speech Code of Practice

Updated July 2026



1. Scope

- 1.1. Royal Holloway and Bedford New College (known as Royal Holloway, University of London, hereafter 'the University') and the Royal Holloway Students' Union (hereafter 'RHSU') and are committed to securing freedom of speech and academic freedom within the law for our staff, members, students, and visiting speakers.
- 1.2. This Freedom of Speech Code of Practice ("the Code") is intended to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for the staff, members, and students of the University, and for visiting speakers.
- 1.3. The Code applies to all events organised by staff or students that are funded by or use the University and/or the RHSU branding. This includes events held on or off University or RHSU premises, as well as online events delivered via social media or streaming platforms.

2. Principles

- 2.1. Respectful debate and conversation can help us challenge discrimination, intolerance, and harmful attitudes, and build strong, positive communities. We recognise that the sharing of ideas is crucial for learning, critical thinking, engaging with and challenging different perspectives, however unpopular or controversial.
- 2.2. Freedom of speech applies to everyone, which means that people are generally free to speak, write or otherwise express their ideas and opinions, without censorship or interference from the state or public authorities, subject only to narrow exceptions. The right to express views and ideas freely is a fundamental right protected under Article 10 of ECHR, which extends to the expression of views that may shock, disturb, or offend the deeply held beliefs of others, and is an essential part of democracy.
- 2.3. Mindful of its legal obligations, the University will foster an environment in which all members of its academic staff can participate fully. They should feel able, within the law, to be able to question and test received wisdom and to express new ideas, views, beliefs and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves at risk of losing their job or privileges at the University or adversely affecting their likelihood of securing promotion or a different job at the University. Consideration of the importance of freedom of speech and academic freedom will extend to the planning and provision of teaching and the curriculum at the University.
- 2.4. All visitors to and members of the University community must be mindful of the following:
 - The right to freedom of speech must be exercised within the law. It is a qualified right (which means that the right to freedom of speech must be balanced against other rights and duties; and that there are certain very

specific reasons or circumstances where limitations on speech can be made by law, e.g. for the prevention of disorder or crime);

- Freedom of speech and academic freedom do not protect statements that unlawfully discriminate against or harass, or incite violence or hatred against, other persons and groups. The University has legal responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 to have due regard to the need to:
 - eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act.
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

2.5. Relevant protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion, or belief (including none), sex, and sexual orientation.

- However, the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 should not be interpreted to undermine freedom of speech and academic freedom. As a result, students' learning experience and the working environment of staff may include exposure to research, course material, discussions or speaker's views that they find offensive, contentious or unacceptable, and this is unlikely to be considered unlawful harassment or discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.
- It is not always easy to draw the boundary between expressing intolerant or offensive views (which are afforded protection under freedom of speech) and unlawful speech. In each situation consideration must be given to the particular circumstances, including the intention of the person making the statement, the context in which they make it, the intended audience, and the particular words and form of communication. A recipient's perception will be taken into account, along with whether it is reasonable for the conduct in question to have had that effect on them.
- The protection of freedom of speech does not extend to allowing a speaker to commit a criminal offence in the course of speaking. It is a criminal offence to stir up hatred on racial or religious grounds, or on the ground of sexual orientation. Offensive or insulting language may also constitute harassment, either under the Equality Act 2010, or if directed at an individual under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997.
- Universities are subject to the statutory "Prevent" duty under The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 "to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism", including all forms of terrorism.
- Universities and Student Unions have other legal responsibilities, such as those relating to preventing discrimination, harassment and victimisation and the health, safety and welfare of employees, students, external speakers and visitors. In each case, these need to be balanced with the duty to promote and secure freedom of speech.

2.6. As explained above, the University is subject to the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equalities Act 2010 which requires us to have due regard to the need to promote good relations between different communities protected by equality law. In the context of our duties in relation to freedom of

speech and academic freedom, we must consider the potential impact on staff and students who may have one or more protected characteristics.

- 2.7. Staff and students, both individually and in groups, have an obligation to treat others with respect. All members of the University are responsible for helping to create a community that is free from unlawful discrimination, harassment, and bullying.
- 2.8. The University and RHSU will ensure individuals and groups are supported in participating in vigorous debate, even on topics they might find personally uncomfortable or offensive. In respect of external speaker events, the University and RHSU will approach these on the basis that they should proceed, in compliance with the law and this Code, and that individuals and groups will not be denied the use of its premises or facilities based on their ideas, opinions, policy or objectives. The only exceptions to this are [proscribed organisations](#), and the University and RHSU will not host these organisations, speakers connected to these organisations nor speakers who are likely to encourage support for these organisations.
- 2.9. The University and RHSU shall not, as a matter of principle, seek to require an event organiser to meet unusual costs relating to security and/or other health and safety issues related to running the event. In certain exceptional circumstances where, in the reasonable opinion of the University's Chief Operating Officer or other nominated member of the University's Executive Board (having sought appropriate advice) the additional costs would be prohibitive, the University will discuss with the event organiser how best to enable the event to go ahead. This might include a proportionate sharing of some, or all, of the relevant costs, or hosting an event online.
 - Additional security and health and safety costs would be viewed as prohibitive when such costs exceed the equivalent cost of 24 hours of full University security.
 - The University will define, annually, a maximum budget for additional security and health and safety costs associated with events covered by the Code. Once this ceiling has been reached, the organisers of events for which further additional security and health and safety costs are deemed necessary will be required to pay such costs in full, to move the event online, or to postpone the event. This limit will be of the order of the equivalent of 12 x 24 hours of full university security.

3. Requesting the invitation of External Speakers to events on University and RHSU premises (offline or online).

- 3.1. The University's Event with External Speakers Procedure (Appendix 1) sets out the approval process for events within the scope of this Code, which are not an integral part of the day-to-day academic or administrative business of the University, and which will be attended by external speakers.
- 3.2. The Event with External Speakers Procedure will not normally need to be applied to visiting speakers who are contributing to approved academic programmes, research seminars, or similar knowledge-sharing activities that form part of the University's normal day-to-day business.
- 3.3. The University is committed to promoting freedom of speech within the law and academic freedom. Colleagues are encouraged to understand the Procedure's risk-based approach, which is intended to support the respectful exchange of ideas.

- 3.4. Colleagues organising approved academic programmes, research seminars, or similar knowledge-sharing activities that form part of the University's normal day-to-day business within Departments, Research Centres or Professional Services should feel able to call on the Procedure where appropriate, particularly where this would help the Event Lead ensure that the University's legal obligations are met. This may include, for example, obligations relating to the safety and security of visitors, staff and students which may require additional resource that is not available locally.
- 3.5. Staff and students organising events are expected to organise their activities in line with the policies and procedures of the University or RHSU, including but not restricted to the University Events Safety Policy: [rhul-events-safety-policy-v1.1-final.pdf](#) and RHSU risk assessment guidance: [Risk Assessments: What, How, When and Why : Royal Holloway Students' Union](#).

4. Conduct

- 4.1. Attendees at all events, whether attended by external speakers or otherwise, (including those speaking at, chairing, or running the event) are always expected to conduct themselves in accordance with this Code.
- 4.2. We expect that colleagues who are organising academic activities do so with an awareness of the rights of any student or member of staff of the University, or any visitor to the University to freedom of speech.
- 4.3. It is good practice for all external speakers to agree to abide by the provisions of the Freedom of Speech Code of Practice and sign the speaker agreement form Appendix 2. This is **mandatory** for all events assessed as **medium or high risk**.

5. Review and Lessons Learned

- 5.1. Annually, the University and RHSU will review the effectiveness of their procedures under the Code and share lessons learned, to better secure and promote freedom of speech and academic freedom within the law for our staff, members, students, and visiting speakers.

6. Related Documents

- 6.1. This Code should be read in conjunction with the following documents, as necessary:

RHUL Events Safety Policy:	rhul-events-safety-policy-v1.1-final.pdf
RHSU risk assessment guidance	Risk Assessments: What, How, When and Why : Royal Holloway Students' Union
RHUL events toolkit	Events toolkit - Royal Holloway Staff Intranet
RHSU events guidance	How to put on an event - A Guide to Event Planning : Royal Holloway Students' Union .
Estates policies and events guides	Founder's Square Policy and Events Guide , The Atrium Events Policy and Booking Guide , The Study Terrace Events Policy and Guide to Booking , The Picture Gallery Events Policy and Guide to Booking

Dignity at Work policy	dignity-at-work-july-2025-final.pdf
Dignity and Respect (students) Policy	30.-dignity-and-respect-policy-v3-jun-24.pdf
Prevent Policy	safeguarding-the-prevent-duty-jan-22.pdf
Acceptable Use of IT Policy	acceptable-use-of-information-technology.pdf
Staff Social Media Policy	social-media-policy.pdf
Staff Disciplinary Policy and Procedure	JCAUT
Student Conduct Regulations	Student Policies & Regulations Hub
RHSU Constitution and Bye Laws	Constitution
RHSU Social media policy	Social-Media-Policy-2025(1).pdf

7. Appendices

Appendix 1 **Events with External Speakers Guidance and forms**

Appendix 2: **AGREEMENT AND GUIDELINES FOR EXTERNAL SPEAKERS**

Version Control:

V 1.0	A Bramley	Approved by EB subject to amends
V 1.1	A Bramley	Updated following EB and JEC with amends
V 1.2	A Bramley	Updated following RHSU Trustees meeting. Approved by RHUL Council 9 th July 2026

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