

Freedom of Speech at Imperial College Union – Framing the debate

1. Topic for discussion:

- 1.1. Negative portrayals of students' unions have featured regularly in the media in recent months, posing a risk to effective engagement with our members and other stakeholders.
- 1.2. **How can Imperial College Union develop and present a positive narrative around the role of free speech, debate and dialogue, balanced against student wellbeing and regulatory requirements, within its student communities?**

2. Background

- 2.1. The question of how students' unions engage with freedom of speech has become a subject of heated discussion in the British & American media in recent years, discussed in media outlets from across the political spectrum.
- 2.2. The most common premise put forward in these articles is one that is harmful to public perceptions of students' unions. Specifically, that students' unions have been 'captured' by small minorities of students who are more concerned with 'virtue signalling' than what the authors consider to be typical student life, and that this signifies a 'creeping illiberalism' being introduced to society at the cost of robust debates and freedom of thought and speech.

2.3. Excerpts from relevant articles:

2.3.1. *Have you met the Stepford students? They're everywhere. On campuses across the land. Sitting stony-eyed in lecture halls or surreptitiously policing beer-fuelled banter in the uni bar. They look like students, dress like students, smell like students. But their student brains have been replaced by brains bereft of critical faculties and programmed to conform. To the untrained eye, they seem like your average book-devouring, ideas-discussing, H&M-adorned youth, but anyone who's spent more than five minutes in their company will know that these students are far more interested in shutting debate down than opening it up.¹*

2.3.2. *University ain't what it used to be. With bans on offensive speakers, saucy pop songs, un-PC student societies and laddish sports teams, censorship has laid siege to British campus life. And it's time students did something about it. If you believe university is a place for saying the unsayable and thinking the unthinkable, if you think students are made of tougher stuff than ban-happy students' unions like to make out, then join the campaign today.²*

¹ Spectator, *Free speech is so last century. Today's students want the 'right to be comfortable'*, November 2014 <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/11/free-speech-is-so-last-century-todays-students-want-the-right-to-be-comfortable/>

² Spiked, *Challenging the campus censors*, February 2017 <http://www.spiked-online.com/down-with-campus-censorship-campaign>

- 2.4. The debate is closely linked to discussions about perceived intellectual and political bias in higher education institutions, and in a wider sense, the role that higher education plays in society.
- 2.5. Specific practices which are variously supported or attacked by different articles include:
 - 2.5.1. 'Safe spaces' (both physical and editorial)
 - 2.5.2. No-platform policies (through which an SU or university may choose not to host speakers from a certain organisation or political viewpoint)
 - 2.5.3. Trigger warnings
 - 2.5.4. Censorship by universities and students' unions
 - 2.5.5. Behaviour guidelines and codes of conduct
 - 2.5.6. Student-led campaigns regarding curriculum content
 - 2.5.7. Boycotts (for example, of the Sun newspaper)
- 2.6. Articles on this topic have been written in the [Guardian](#), [Telegraph](#), [Daily Mail](#), [Spectator](#), [Huffington Post](#), [Buzzfeed](#), [Times](#) and more. The Spectator has a regular feature, [Stepford Students](#), on this topic.

3. Relevance to Imperial College Union

- 3.1. Students' unions are generally portrayed in the media as all similar in political activities and outlook, particularly around freedom of speech and censorship. Imperial College Union is not excluded from this, regardless of our status as independent of the National Union of Students, University of London Union or any other coalition of students' unions.
- 3.2. Any negative trend in public perception of students' unions will directly affect how our current, past and future members perceive us. Without action, there is a risk that this public perception will reduce the likelihood of our incoming members understanding our role and purpose accurately, which may have a negative effect on their democratic engagement with us. Additionally, this public perception could affect relationships with alumni and other external stakeholders, who may not want to engage with an organisation they perceive as censorious.
- 3.3. Imperial College Union does not have a history of engaging in many of the practices attacked by commentators, such as trigger warnings, no-platforming, or boycotting. However, some of our practices could be perceived as restrictive of free speech – such as:
 - 3.3.1. Our safe space policy (which sets out behaviour we consider unacceptable in our premises, such as sexual harassment)
 - 3.3.2. Our external speakers policy, which sets out how we will meet regulatory and College requirements when speakers from outside the Imperial community are invited to campus
- 3.4. In the absence of any specific messaging or public stance from us, we run the risk of being tarred with the same brush as all other students' unions.

4. Encouraging debate, dialogue and citizenship

- 4.1. *Our Strategy* commits us to “empower[ing] students to be proactive, responsible citizens who have the capacity to change the world”. Related objectives include reinforcing the importance of global citizenship, supporting students to ensure their voice is heard, and cultivating student communities, all in the context of having the strongest and most inclusive democracy of any students’ union in the UK.
- 4.2. It is important to recognise that a key component of a strong democracy is the existence of healthy dialogues and debates on a wide range of topics, with all student groups given the opportunity to contribute as they wish.
- 4.3. These commitments simultaneously highlight how Imperial College Union has no intention of stifling debate or ‘protecting’ our students from having their opinions challenged, and point the way towards an alternate narrative of the role of freedom of speech within our community.
- 4.4. Viewed through the frame of freedom of speech being closely linked to healthy levels of dialogue and debate, there are other questions we must ask of ourselves:
 - 4.4.1. Are our democratic structures – such as Council and the Officer Trustees – adequately supported to understand the role of free speech and healthy debate?
 - 4.4.2. Are our student-led activities supportive of this – for example, could we support our Debating Society to reach the levels of student engagement and social impact achieved by equivalents at Oxford, Cambridge or Durham?
 - 4.4.3. There are regular external speaker events held by clubs, societies and projects; are we confident that they are supported to attract audiences wider than their club membership?
 - 4.4.4. Do we communicate to our members and stakeholders our role in supporting a healthy debate and dialogue on a wide range of topics, as part of our strategic objective of helping our members to become capable and confident citizens?

5. Regulatory background

- 5.1. There are legal and regulatory requirements that we must meet regarding the kinds of events, speakers and events we can permit on campus, including:
 - 5.1.1. The government’s PREVENT legislation
 - 5.1.2. College’s own conduct guidelines and expectations on student behaviour
 - 5.1.3. College’s requirements regarding external speakers
 - 5.1.4. Licensing law governing the activities we can tolerate in our licensed spaces
 - 5.1.5. Legal requirements around harassment and discrimination
 - 5.1.6. Charity Commission requirements
- 5.2. Some of these legal requirements are themselves the subject of intense political debate, such as PREVENT and legislation regarding political activities undertaken by charities.

6. Discussion points

- 6.1. Is the Board confident that we are meeting our regulatory requirements effectively, and that we are successfully communicating the legal rather than political basis of regulation around freedom of speech?
- 6.2. Is the Board confident that we are communicating an accurate and positive narrative about freedom of speech at Imperial College Union – namely that we meet our regulatory requirements, organisational standards, and student expectations, while maintaining a healthy attitude to freedom of speech as part of a strategic commitment to student development and citizenship?
- 6.3. How do we communicate the message that we have a diversity of opinions in our student body, and that we support an *ongoing dialogue* between views rather than a competitive debate that has a ‘winner’ and a ‘loser’ in our democratic structures?
- 6.4. Are we facilitating enough high-quality debate within our student communities, whether through our democratic structures, student media, or groups such as the Debating Society?
- 6.5. Are we adequately recognising and managing the risks posed by these narratives to our stakeholder relationships, including past, current and future members, and our high levels of democratic engagement?