

Freedom of Speech – Framing the debate at Imperial College Union

1. Background

- 1.1. The question of how students' unions support freedom of speech has become a subject of heated discussion in the British & American media in recent years, discussed in newspapers from across the political spectrum.
- 1.2. The most common premise put forward in these articles are 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.
- 1.3. Excerpts from relevant articles:
 - 1.3.1. *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 But their student brains have been replaced by brains bereft of critical faculties and programmed to conform.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
 - 1.3.2. *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. Find out how you can get involved below.*²
- 1.4. 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.
- 1.5. Specific practices which are variously supported or attacked by different articles include:
 - 1.5.1. 'Safe spaces' (both physical and editorial)
 - 1.5.2. No-platform policies (through which an SU or university may choose not to host speakers from a certain organisation or political viewpoint)
 - 1.5.3. Trigger warnings
 - 1.5.4. Censorship by universities and students' unions

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>

- 1.5.5. Behaviour guidelines and codes of conduct
 - 1.5.6. Student-led campaigns regarding curriculum content
 - 1.5.7. Boycotts (for example, of the Sun newspaper)
- 1.6. 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.

2. Relevance to Imperial College Union

- 2.1. Students' unions are generally perceived to all be similar in political activities and outlook, particularly around freedom of speech and censorship. Imperial College Union is not excluded from this, regardless of our membership or otherwise of the National Union of Students, University of London Union or any other coalition of students' unions.
- 2.2. There are legal and regulatory requirements that we must meet regarding the kinds of events, speakers and events we can permit on campus, including:
 - 2.2.1. College's own conduct guidelines and expectations on student behaviour
 - 2.2.2. PREVENT legislation
 - 2.2.3. College's requirements regarding external speakers
 - 2.2.4. Licensing law governing the activities we can tolerate in our licensed spaces
 - 2.2.5. Legal requirements around harassment and discrimination
 - 2.2.6. Charity Commission requirements
- 2.3. This means that in the absence of any specific messaging or public stance from us, we will be tarred with the same brush as all other students' unions.

3. Discussion points

- 3.1. What should our narrative be regarding how we meet our regulatory requirements, organisational standards, and student expectations, while maintaining a healthy attitude to freedom of speech?
- 3.2. How do we communicate the legal and regulatory basis of policies such as the External Speakers policy?
- 3.3. 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?
- 3.4. Are we facilitating enough debate through our democratic structures, student media, and groups such as Debating Society?
- 3.5. How can we capitalise on our high levels of democratic engagement relative to other students' unions?