



Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech

1. Introduction

1.1 This Code of Practice sets out the College's values and expectations relating to freedom of speech and academic freedom and how these values and expectations are applied to College activities.

1.2 Freedom of speech means the freedom, within the law, to receive and impart ideas, opinions or information by means of speech, writing, or images (including in electronic form).

1.3 Academic freedom, in relation to the College's academic staff, means their freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and opinions – this includes controversial or unpopular opinions, including opinions about the College – without institutional censorship and without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges. (cf. Statute XX.1.1.a.)¹

1.4 References in this Code of Practice to 'College premises' mean all land, buildings, facilities, and other property in the possession of, or owned, leased, used, supervised or controlled by the College when, and insofar as, they are used for purposes relating to the provision of higher education or academic life.

1.5 The University and the Oxford Students' Union each have their own Codes of Practice on Freedom of Speech.

2. Legislative framework

2 The legal duty of UK universities to protect free speech and academic freedom is enshrined in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017², as amended by the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023³. Freedom of speech is also protected under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights⁴ which has effect in the UK through the Human Rights Act 1998⁵. Academic freedom is also protected under the Education Reform Act 1988⁶. Other relevant legislation includes the Public Sector Equality Duty, which requires universities to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different groups⁷; and section 31 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015⁸.

3. Values

3.1 Freedom of speech and academic freedom are central tenets of the College's core activities.

¹ <https://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/official-information/>

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents>

³ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/16/contents>

⁴ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/law-reference/european-convention-human-rights-article-10>

⁵ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents>

⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-equality-duty-guidance-for-public-authorities/public-sector-equality-duty-guidance-for-public-authorities>

⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/contents>

3.2 In all its activities, the College seeks to:

- (1) secure and promote civic and academic freedoms including freedom of speech;
- (2) ensure a very high level of protection for the lawful expression of a viewpoint and for speech in an academic context; and
- (3) foster a culture of openness and inclusivity, in which members of our community and the public engage with each other in debate and discussion, no matter what their views, and remain open to intellectual challenge.

3.3 A culture of free, open, and robust discussion means that individuals are inevitably confronted with views that some may find unsettling, extreme, or offensive.

3.4 Within the bounds prescribed by law, all voices or views which any member of our community considers relevant should be given the chance of a hearing. They should also be exposed to evidence, questioning, and argument. As an integral part of its commitment to freedom of expression, the College will take steps to ensure that all such exchanges happen peacefully and respectfully. With appropriate regulation of the time, place, and manner of events, members of our community should have no reasonable grounds to feel intimidated or censored.

4. Conduct

4.1 The College is committed to fostering an inclusive culture which promotes equality, values diversity, and maintains an environment in which the rights and dignity of all members of the College community are respected. The College does not tolerate any form of harassment or victimisation and expects all members of the College community, its visitors, and contractors to treat each other responsibly.

4.2 Peaceful protest is a legitimate expression of freedom of speech. It must also remain open to debate. The respect which the College expects all members of the College community to demonstrate towards each other is equally important where it comprises respect for the right of others to speak freely and exercise their academic freedom.

4.3 Complaints about the behaviour of individuals should be made under the appropriate procedure (cf. the College's Complaints procedure⁹):

- a) Complaints about non-academic employees should be made to the line-manager of the person concerned;
- b) Complaints about academic employees acting in their capacity as academics should be made to the Senior Tutor;
- c) Complaints about academic employees acting in non-academic capacities should be made to the Provost, except in the case of complaints about Personal Tutors (which should be made to the Tutor for Undergraduates) or Graduate Advisors (which should be made to the Tutor for Graduates);
- d) Complaints about the Provost should be made to the senior Official Fellow;
- e) Complaints about students should be made under the College's Non-Academic Disciplinary Procedure¹⁰; and
- f) Complaints about others should in the first instance be made to the Provost.

⁹ <https://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/College-complaints-procedure.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/non-academic-rules-and-procedures/>

4.4 Complaints that arise in the University context (ie. in the course of University activity or on University premises) should normally be made to the University¹¹.

4.5 All activity must be risk assessed and planned in accordance with the College's Health and Safety Policy¹².

5. Procedures

5.1 These procedures are to be followed by staff and students (including College Common Rooms and Societies) when organising any activities that relate to academic life, whether those activities take place on or off College premises.

5.2 In making any decision under any of these procedures or otherwise, or adopting any policy that could directly or indirectly (and positively or negatively) affect freedom of speech, the College will remain mindful of its duties under the legislation indicated in 2, above.

5.3 A breach of this Code may lead to disciplinary action being taken under the appropriate College procedure indicated in 4.3, above.

6. College Meetings and Events

6.1 Members, students (including Common Rooms and College Societies), and employees of the College who are organising meetings or events (whether in person or online) or are responsible for administering external bookings of College premises are responsible for assessing those meetings and events in the context of this Code of Practice, the College's Guide for event bookings¹³, and other relevant College policies including regulation 16 of the Regulations for Junior Members¹⁴.

6.2 A demonstration or protest on College premises will fall within the College's procedures for meetings and events. As such, organisers must contact the College in advance, following the procedure set out above, and a risk assessment will be required. The College has a duty to facilitate lawful protests and will work with organisers to ensure that lawful protests can take place but do not violate the College's Regulations and hence result in disciplinary procedures. College members are reminded that all students with a contract to study at Oxford must abide by University Statutes, and that students may face disciplinary investigation if University Statutes are breached. College members are particularly encouraged to consult University Statute XI, which is particularly relevant to protests¹⁵.

7. Monitoring and review

7 The College will periodically review the contents and operation of this Code of Practice and report on its operation and recommend amendments to it for consideration by Governing Body as appropriate or necessary.

Approved by the Governing Body on 18th June 2025.

¹¹ The University's Code of Practice is at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/freedom-of-speech/code-of-practice>, and its complaints procedure is at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/freedom-of-speech/complaints-procedure>.

¹² https://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Health-Safety-Policy_Fire-Safety-Policy-May-22.pdf

¹³ <https://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/guide-for-event-bookings/>

¹⁴ <https://www.queens.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/College-Regulations-2023.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/statute-xi-university-discipline-0>