



# Free speech and decolonisation in British universities

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## Author

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## Introduction

### Overview:

- 70 per cent of UK universities are undertaking some form of decolonisation – either by official university policies/statements or academics within the university advocating for it.
- There were 374 free speech controversies in UK universities between January 2017 and August 2020 – 123 were related to transgenderism and 14 were related to Islam.
- Free speech controversies occur more frequently in universities which have official policies/statements on decolonisation, as well as academic advocates of decolonisation – as too do free speech societies.
- Free speech controversies tend to accompany transgender-related restrictions on free speech as well as decolonisation. These are considerably more common in ‘better’ universities and – to some degree – in the universities which have low levels of student satisfaction. They also tend to go hand in hand with free speech societies.
- The presence of free speech societies in universities tends to be positively and moderately associated with transgender restrictions, decolonisation measures and free speech controversies. They are also more common in better universities.
- However, correlations are mostly moderate, implying these things can happen at any university.

Source: Civitas, ‘Academic Freedom in Our Universities: The Best and the Worst’, <https://www.civitas.org.uk/press/academic-freedom-in-our-universities-the-best-and-the-worst/> and Civitas analysis.

Attacks on free speech seem to be worsening, with recent examples including the attempted assassination of Sir Salman Rushdie and the Batley teacher forced into hiding by Islamist extremists. In our universities that are supposed to be bastions of free inquiry, we are seeing staff under pressure to conform to transgender ideology and in some cases, driven out of their jobs for expressing their scepticism, such as the case of Kathleen Stock at the University of Sussex.

In addition to this, we are seeing the spread of a phenomena known as ‘decolonisation’. This is something that has no concrete definition and seeks to rewrite academic curricula as well as reorder the university as an institution, in the name of making them more ‘inclusive’. Is this a threat to academic freedom? The answer is ‘yes’, if it entails pressure on academics by radical activists to conform, overriding their independence in setting their reading lists and writing their lectures.

This briefing assesses the extent to which decolonisation is present in British universities. It finds it to be far more entrenched than previously thought, with 70 per cent having either a formal commitment to decolonisation, or academics advocating for it from within.<sup>1</sup>

It then looks at the extent of free speech controversies within universities, examining the roles of regulation and free speech societies. It finds decolonisation and free speech controversies tend to occur somewhat more in elite universities and universities where students are less satisfied. It concludes with a summary of students' views on free speech, arguing there are a growing number of students who prefer cossetting to free inquiry.

This paper would not have been possible without the assistance of Dr Jim McConalogue and Rachel Neal. Gratitude to them and all others involved is expressed.

## Methodology

This briefing builds on past Civitas research (in both 2020 and 2022) that classified universities in terms of the extent to which they had policies that were restrictive of free speech.<sup>2</sup> Researchers scoured publicly available sources online (university websites and local and national media) for references to decolonisation, as well as the number of written policies (rules and stipulations), the existence of free speech controversies, and the presence of free speech societies. For further details, see the Appendix.

## What is meant by decolonisation?

The answer is many things that range from the relatively benign to the revolutionary. Some say this is only about diversifying the curriculum that is taught in universities, to make them more inclusive. Such an idea may seem reasonable, but we can challenge its implicit assumptions. Do people from a minority group really respond best to works written by people who have the same skin colour as they do? Why wouldn't a European country have a curriculum focused on its own tradition first, the European second, and the rest of the world third?

The frightening side of decolonisation becomes apparent through a series of interviews with activists, reported in *The Guardian* (2020). They make clear the expectations of a cultural revolution.<sup>3</sup> This stems from the idea that the institutions and cultural practices of a society *lead* to injustice, violence and exploitation, and can and must be replaced by new ones.

Here are some quotations from the *Guardian* article:

'Decolonising is about de-centring Eurocentric knowledge production. It's acknowledgement of alternative forms and centres of knowledge and contribution to the world, especially from revolutionary academics and thinkers who aren't old white, middle-aged men. This is more than just about reading lists and racism.'

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<sup>1</sup> Civitas analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Civitas, 'Academic Freedom in Our Universities: The Best and the Worst', <https://www.civitas.org.uk/press/academic-freedom-in-our-universities-the-best-and-the-worst/>

<sup>3</sup> David Batty, 'Only a fifth of UK universities say they are 'decolonising' curriculum', <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/11/only-fifth-of-uk-universities-have-said-they-will-decolonise-curriculum>

*Student, Decolonise SOAS*

‘Our entire education system, and even our concept of what knowledge is, cannot be untangled from its colonial roots and once we start looking at the curriculum, we provide non-white students with the power to demand more change and more justice... Attempts by universities to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ will always be performative without a proper confrontation of how white supremacy and colonialism continue to manifest within academic institutions. The curriculum is a product of its environment and starting and ending our work with the curriculum will not create lasting change.’

*Student, Decolonise Kings College London*

‘We’ve still got archaic, anachronistic tutors and curricula that’s never changed.’

*Professor Heidi Mirza, Goldsmiths*

These quotations portray the ideas that decolonisation is about redefining what is meant by ‘knowledge’ and ambitions to make anew the institutions of higher education. For a professor to be dismissing colleagues as ‘archaic’ and ‘anachronistic’, in effect calling for their dismissal and replacement, or ‘re-education’ is wrong. This is a displacement of the liberal tradition in the British university system.

Nor are we told what ‘the New’ will be and how it will be superior. Are Darwin’s theories based on empirical observation or the fact that he was a white man, later to be dead, and Britain an imperial power? The two student leaders quoted were in their early twenties, and so how they would have formulated anything better is questionable. Those who have yet to graduate presume to teach academics how to teach. Often you will see proponents of decolonisation encouraging this.

Advocates of decolonisation will present their case as benign, mild and educationally beneficial, as well as just. But university academics and administrators need to realise that it will inevitably entail a politically-minded bureaucracy that will come to dominate.

Consider the example of a Higher Education Policy Institute paper authored by Mia Liyanage, called *Miseducation: Decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities*.<sup>4</sup> She argued there is a ‘silent crisis’ in higher education institutions, occurring because ‘the UK higher education sector has refused to engage sufficiently with decolonisation or its proponents’. She recommends universities ‘institutionalise decolonisation’ by implementing specific departmental roles. Additionally, universities should ‘institutionalise engagement with students’. For instance, they could ‘establish channels for discussion between students and faculty... through working groups or student internships.’

Further recommendations include: a ‘structural shift’ in universities; ‘interrogating staff and students’ positionality before even approaching curricula’; forming cross-institutional

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<sup>4</sup> Mia Liyanage, ‘Miseducation: decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities’, [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HEPI\\_Miseducation\\_Debate-Paper-23\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HEPI_Miseducation_Debate-Paper-23_FINAL.pdf)

networks; and universities engaging ‘with experts on issues such as unconscious bias, and interrogating both their harassment procedures and their marking criteria along these lines.’ The idea of ‘positionality’ reflects the belief there is no such thing as knowledge, only perspective defined by privilege or its lack. That students and staff are to be ‘interrogated’ on things they cannot help becomes a form of inquisition. This would entail their screening for bad thoughts.

## The extent of decolonisation

The extent to which decolonisation is at work in British universities is hard to ascertain given the lack of precise definition, and in any case, likely underestimated. The same *Guardian* article from 2020 and referenced above, featured details of a series of requests made under the Freedom of Information Act to 128 universities. They showed 24 were ‘committed to decolonising their curriculums’ (19 per cent). Of those 24, 11 said they were committed to reform across the whole institution – with most efforts being limited to departments or a handful of academics/students.

Eighty-four were ‘committed to making their curricula more diverse, international or inclusive’ (65 per cent). And 34 were ‘consulting BAME students on curriculum design’ (27 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

We employed a different method. Civitas researchers scoured university websites, recording any mention of either formal university policies or official statements/commitments on decolonisation or any mention of academics pushing for decolonisation. Our data gathering took place over March and May 2022.

Results are presented in the table below. They show over half have an official commitment in some form, while a third have academics within advocating for decolonisation. Seven out of 10 have at least one or the other.<sup>6</sup>

*Table 1. Number of universities undertaking some form of decolonisation (N=140)*

Official polices/statements (1)	Academic advocates (2)	Either (1) or (2)
79 (56%)	48 (34%)	98 (70%)

Source: Civitas analysis.

## Free speech controversies

Our researchers previously identified 374 controversies across 137 universities, that took place between January 2017 and August 2020.<sup>7</sup> Our data gathering took place between March and August 2020. These occurred in 93 universities (68 per cent). One hundred and

<sup>5</sup> David Batty, ‘Only a fifth of UK universities say they are ‘decolonising’ curriculum’, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/11/only-fifth-of-uk-universities-have-said-they-will-decolonise-curriculum>

<sup>6</sup> The correlation between the two variables is 0.06.

<sup>7</sup> Civitas, ‘Academic Freedom in Our Universities: The Best and the Worst’, <https://www.civitas.org.uk/press/academic-freedom-in-our-universities-the-best-and-the-worst/>



twenty-three pertained to transgenderism, with just 14 to do with Islam. Full details of the different types of controversy and their circumstances are presented in the table below.

*Table 2. Free speech controversies in British universities - number and characteristics*

Type of controversy	Frequency
All controversies	374
Specific 'transphobic' controversy	123
Specific 'Islamophobic' controversy	14
External pressure group involvement	55
Allegations of occupational dismissal/suspension	15
Presence of petitions/open letters	142
Pressure from university societies/groups	62
Pressure through social media	119
Instances of disinvitation/'no-platforming'	30
Event cancellations/disinvitation of external speaker due to PREVENT	0
Radical students/societies prevented from speaking due to PREVENT guidance	1
Reported incidences of banned individuals/organisations	3

Source: Civitas analysis.

## Free speech societies

Out of 140 universities studied in 2022, 79 (56 per cent) had free speech societies, or debating or libertarian societies.<sup>8</sup>

## Correlates

This section presents details of correlation analysis carried out on key variables of interest. Two separate measurements are introduced into the analysis, one measuring university performance, with higher scores meaning more prestigious and better performing universities (these being ranking scores that are the basis for university rankings), and another measuring student satisfaction, with higher scores meaning greater satisfaction. See the Appendix for further details.

### *i. Decolonisation*

As seen in the table below, moderate correlations are found for some variables. Official policies/statements on decolonisation tend to be associated with greater transgender-related policy restrictions on free speech,<sup>9</sup> but not general restrictions, stressing their radical nature. Better universities tend to have official statements or policies on

<sup>8</sup> Civitas analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Restrictions relating to indices for the number of restrictions found within university and student union policies on transgenderism that defined 'gender offensive speech' (see appendix).

decolonisation more often. Official policies/statements are also associated somewhat with lower levels of student satisfaction.<sup>10</sup>

Free speech controversies occur more often where there are official policies/statements as well as academic advocates of decolonisation, as too do free speech societies.

*Table 3. Correlates of decolonisation measures (Pearson correlation coefficient)*

	<b>Official policies/statements</b>	<b>Academic advocates</b>	<b>Either/or</b>
Free speech controversies	0.28	0.28	0.26
General restrictions	0.08	-0.02	0.02
Transgender-related policy restrictions	0.20	0.10	0.10
University ranking score	0.31	0.09	0.19
Student satisfaction	-0.24	-0.09	-0.22
Presence of free speech societies	0.21	0.24	0.25

Source: Civitas analysis.

*ii. Free speech controversies*

Free speech controversies tend to accompany transgender-related restrictions on free speech as well as decolonisation. They are substantially more common in better universities and, to some degree, where students are less satisfied. They also tend to go hand in hand with free speech societies.

*Table 4. Correlates of free speech controversies (Pearson correlation coefficient)*

	<b>Free speech controversies</b>
General restrictions	0.00
Transgender-related policy restrictions	0.29
Official decolonisation policy	0.28
Academic advocates of decolonisation	0.28
University ranking score	0.60
Student satisfaction	-0.32
Presence of free speech societies	0.31

Source: Civitas analysis.

*iii. Free speech societies*

The presence of free speech societies tends to be positively and moderately associated with transgender restrictions, as well as decolonisation measures and free speech controversies. Once more, they are more common in better universities. General restrictions appear to do

<sup>10</sup> There is not much variance in the satisfaction variable, so it would be wrong to infer that where decolonisation is present, students are emphatically miserable. The lack of variance could further imply a bias in the measurement design towards the centre or a limited set of possible responses. Nevertheless, a correlation does exist. This caveat holds in subsequent analyses.

nothing to stymie free speech societies. No correlation exists for student satisfaction and free speech societies.

*Table 5. Correlates of free speech societies (Pearson correlation coefficient)*

	Free speech societies
General restrictions	-0.05
Transgender-related policy restrictions	0.17
Official decolonisation policy	0.21
Academic advocates of decolonisation	0.24
University ranking score	0.44
Student satisfaction	0.04
Presence of free speech controversies	0.31

Source: Civitas analysis.

## Students' views on free speech

There has been an ongoing discussion over the years regarding free speech at universities, with public figures being told they cannot speak on-campus because of backlash or the potential for it, or lecturers having their careers impacted upon because of their views. But it is not just external speakers and lecturers unable to express their opinions – a 2020 survey conducted by Survation found that 27 per cent of students have hidden their views. More than one-third (36 per cent) of students say they hold opinions that are legal to express but that their university, students' union, and even their own peers, deem unacceptable.<sup>11</sup>

Around 30 to 50 per cent of students consistently support academic freedom, according to research conducted by Policy Exchange. Yet there is also 'evidence of chilling effects on students' speech' – meaning even some mainstream political views are unable to be comfortably discussed in seminar rooms. Moreover, this would leave at least half either unsure or preferring 'emotional safety'.<sup>12</sup>

Another survey, conducted last year for the Higher Education Policy Institute by YouSight, asked one thousand full-time undergraduate students about a range of free speech issues; a repeat of polling conducted in 2016. Based on this exercise, it was discovered 'students have become significantly less supportive of free expression' in recent years.

The number of students who believed 'Students that feel threatened should always have their demands for safety respected' has increased by 11 percentage points between 2016 and 2022 – from 68 per cent to 79 per cent.<sup>13</sup>

Sixty-one per cent of students think that when there is any doubt, 'their own university should ensure all students are protected from discrimination rather than allow unlimited free speech' – a 24 percentage point increase from 2016.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> ADF UK, 2020 National Survey, <https://www.protectfreespeech.uk/national-poll/>

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Simpson and Eric Kaufmann, Policy Exchange, 'Academic freedom in the UK', <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Academic-freedom-in-the-UK-1.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Nick Hillman, "You can't say that!" What students really think of free speech on campus', <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/You-cant-say-that-What-students-really-think-of-free-speech-on-campus.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

The percentage of students who agreed that ‘if you debate an issue like sexism or racism, you make it acceptable’ more than doubled from 17 per cent in 2016 to 35 per cent in 2022.<sup>15</sup>

When asked what rights students and staff should have to respond to an event they disapprove of, 39 per cent said they should be able to ‘hold a protest outside’, 20 per cent thought they should be able to ‘stop the event from happening’, and 12 per cent said they should be allowed to ‘disrupt the event’ (all of these were up from the 2016 percentages).<sup>16</sup>

The results further showed that 77 per cent ‘of students believe there should be ‘mandatory training for all university staff’ on understanding ‘other cultures’ (up by 22 percentage points since 2016); and **36 per cent of students thought ‘academics should be fired if they ‘teach material that heavily offends some students’** – more than double the 2016 figure of 15 per cent.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in terms of trigger warnings, safe spaces and the removal of controversial memorials, 86 per cent of students supported trigger warnings (up from 68 per cent in 2016); 76 per cent of students thought ‘universities should always or sometimes ‘get rid of’ memorials of potentially controversial figures’ – up from just over half (51 per cent) in 2016; and 62 per cent of students supported safe space policies – a 14 point rise since 2016.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the evidence shows a strong and growing censorious cohort of students who prefer cossetting over intellectual challenge, as though the harms of the latter were real and unbearable.

## Compared to the general public

While students are becoming more opposed to academic freedom, research by YouGov in 2018 found their positions were generally in line with those of the overall population. However, some important differences can be noted.

When asked if an event with a speaker who denies the Holocaust happened should go ahead, 68 per cent of students did not think the event should be allowed to go ahead<sup>19</sup> – compared to 61 per cent of the public.<sup>20</sup>

For a speaker who wants to see all immigrants sent back to their country of origin, 52 per cent of students said the event should not go ahead<sup>21</sup> – compared to 41 per cent of the public.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> YouGov, 2018 survey of students, [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/piziwl3whi/free%20speech%20-%20students.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/piziwl3whi/free%20speech%20-%20students.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> YouGov, 2018 survey of the general public, [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/9syx7oj94f/Free%20speech%20-%20general%20population\\_w.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/9syx7oj94f/Free%20speech%20-%20general%20population_w.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> YouGov, 2018 survey of students, [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/piziwl3whi/free%20speech%20-%20students.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/piziwl3whi/free%20speech%20-%20students.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> YouGov, 2018 survey of the general public, [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/9syx7oj94f/Free%20speech%20-%20general%20population\\_w.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/9syx7oj94f/Free%20speech%20-%20general%20population_w.pdf)

For a speaker who did not think ‘transgender women could be “real” women’, 48 per cent of students believed the event should not be allowed<sup>23</sup> – compared to 33 per cent of the public.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusions and discussion

The decolonisation movement is more pronounced in British universities than previously thought. In some form, either through official statements or academic advocates, it is present in seven out of 10 universities.<sup>25</sup>

The threats to free speech, controversies and the new radicalism of transgenderism and decolonisation tend to be associated with elite universities. But so too do free speech societies, implying that, at the very least, there will be resistance to authoritarianism. Top universities are both more ‘woke’ and more libertarian.

There are also some signs that where decolonisation, protections for transgenderism, and free speech controversies exist, students are less satisfied. The relationship will likely not be causal since such things will impact on few students for too little of their time. But this pattern is consistent with a general one of failure in the day job and grand political gestures pertaining to ‘social justice’ to compensate, apparent across many of our institutions.

The strength of correlations unearthed in this analysis, or lack thereof, would imply however that these things can happen at any university, despite whatever general patterns there might be. Correlative relationships are no basis for determining the efficacy of free speech societies, or regulations for that matter. Ultimately, if censoriousness is to be defeated on campus, it requires imaginative effort from real individuals, engaged in defending freedom of inquiry. Just because you have a free speech society does not mean you are bound to win. As a further caveat, our data are convenience data, consisting of whatever our researchers could come across. Thus, where things are not reported or discovered, they will not appear in our data. The fact of correlations would however suggest the data are picking up something very real.

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<sup>23</sup> YouGov, 2018 survey of students, [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/pizjwl3whi/free%20speech%20-%20students.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/pizjwl3whi/free%20speech%20-%20students.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> YouGov, 2018 survey of the general public, [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/9syx7oj94f/Free%20speech%20-%20general%20population\\_w.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/9syx7oj94f/Free%20speech%20-%20general%20population_w.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Civitas analysis.

## Appendix – Methodology

This briefing builds on past Civitas work that looked to gauge the extent of restrictions on free speech in British universities.<sup>26</sup>

Researchers scoured university websites and local and national media for:

- Mention of free speech controversies;
- Rules and regulations pertaining to what can be said.

For the above, data on 137 universities were collected over the period March to August 2020. The controversies themselves occurred between 2017 and 2020.

- Commitments to ‘decolonisation’.
- The presence of free speech societies.

For those indicators, data on 140 universities were collected over the period between March and May 2022.

### *Free speech controversies*

Researchers counted the number of general reported controversies and case studies on or near campus. They also counted specific controversies pertaining to transgenderism or Islam. They further noted the presence of: external pressure group involvement, allegations of occupational dismissals/suspensions, petitions/open letters, pressure through university society group, social media pressure, disinvitation/no-platforming, PREVENT-related cancellations and banned individuals/speakers.

### *Rules and regulations*

The number of specific rules and regulations were counted pertaining to: policies on free speech/expression, bullying and harassment policies that define offensive speech, IT regulations referring to ‘offense’, equal opportunities policies mentioning offensive speech, ‘safe spaces’ used to avoid offence, unacceptable ‘speech acts’ listed in student and staff codes.

We further counted the rules and regulations found within university and student union policies on transgenderism, that defined ‘gender offensive speech’. These were summed to give indices of general restrictions and transgender-related restrictions.

### *Decolonisation*

Researchers noted any official university or departmental policy or vice chancellor call for decolonisation, as well as the presence of any academics who have advocated for it.

### *Free speech societies*

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<sup>26</sup> Civitas, ‘Academic Freedom in Our Universities: the Best and the Worst’, <https://www.civitas.org.uk/press/academic-freedom-in-our-universities-the-best-and-the-worst/>

Researchers noted the presence of any debating/libertarian societies, or campaigning free speech societies.

Data were further supplemented with university rankings data from 2022.<sup>27</sup> Universities are ranked according to an index composed of items measuring standards within universities. Scores on this index were used to measure university standing in the correlation analysis above. It ranges from 304 to 1000, with a mean of 604 and a standard deviation of 143. One sub-item on the index measures student satisfaction, which was also included in the same analysis. It ranges from 3.72 to 4.3, with a mean of 4.03 and a standard deviation of 0.1. For both these measurements, higher numbers mean greater standing/satisfaction.

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<sup>27</sup> Complete University Guide, 'University League Tables 2023', <https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings>  
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