

IMPERIAL

Imperial Essentials

**Freedom of Speech
and Academic Freedom**

Introduction

Welcome to Imperial College London, a world-leading STEMB university. Whether you are here to teach, research, support, or study, you are joining an institution that values rigorous inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge that leads to real-world impact. In this overview, we will introduce two foundational principles and freedoms that underpin our work: Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom.

What are the Freedoms?

These freedoms are essential to the integrity of our research, teaching, and public engagement:

Freedom of Speech means the freedom to receive and impart ideas, opinions or information, whether through speech, writing, or images (including digital formats). This right applies to all members of the Imperial community, including students, staff, and invited speakers. It protects the expression of views that may be controversial, unpopular, or challenging.

“within the law” freedom of speech is a qualified right, meaning it must be exercised within the boundaries of the law. This includes compliance with criminal and civil restrictions (such as laws against incitement to violence or terrorism, harassment, defamation, and breaches of privacy or confidentiality). Institutions must also balance overlapping legal duties, including the Prevent Duty under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 and the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010, which require careful consideration alongside the obligation to uphold lawful free speech.

Academic Freedom refers to the freedom for academic staff to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without risk to their employment, professional standing, or career progression within the institution. It enables academics to pursue lines of inquiry that may challenge dominant narratives, explore sensitive topics, or contribute to public debate.

Imperial recognises the importance of, and supports, these freedoms as part of its core mission: to interrogate the forces that shape our world and to use that understanding to address global challenges.

Legal and Regulatory Framework

These freedoms are protected by law and reflect the legal framework under:

- The Education (No. 2) Act 1986 (Section 43)
- The Human Rights Act 1998 (Article 10)
- The Equality Act 2010
- The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023

They also align with the expectations of the Office for Students, which regulates universities' compliance with freedom of speech and academic freedom duties.

Imperial's Freedom of Speech Code of Practice and Events Procedure ensure that, as far as reasonably practicable, lawful freedom of speech is secured for students, staff, and visiting speakers, and that academic freedom is upheld for academic staff. These policies apply to all members of the Imperial community, including honorary staff, visitors, and external speakers.

Why are the Freedoms Important?

Universities are widely recognised as important contributors to public life. They play a role in shaping national identity, informing public policy, and engaging in cultural and societal discourse. As their visibility and influence have grown, so too has public and political interest in how universities operate and the values they promote.

This increased attention brings both opportunities and challenges. While it can enhance the impact of academic work, it also introduces complexities. Political narratives, funding priorities, and regulatory developments can influence the academic environment and require institutions to navigate competing expectations, including the need to uphold academic freedom while meeting broader legal and societal responsibilities. This can have several implications:

- Academics may self-censor, particularly in areas of public controversy.
- Institutions must navigate overlapping legal duties, including free speech and equality obligations.
- Universities may avoid hosting certain speakers or events to minimise reputational or legal risk.
- Government policy may indirectly shape research agendas and teaching content.

Imperial recognises these challenges and is committed to managing them responsibly; ensuring that academic freedom is protected while maintaining a respectful and inclusive environment for all members of its community.

Institutional Safeguards

Imperial has established policies and procedures to support these freedoms and principles:

- A [Freedom of Speech Code of Practice](#) – sets out how the University secures lawful freedom of speech and academic freedom.
- An [Events Procedure](#) – ensures that external speakers and activities are managed appropriately.
- A [Freedom of Speech Complaints Procedure](#) – available to anyone who believes their rights have been infringed.

These frameworks are designed to ensure that lawful expression is protected, while balancing other rights and obligations.

Your Role and Responsibilities

As a member of Imperial, you are expected to:

- Express your views respectfully
- Engage with diverse perspectives
- Uphold academic integrity and scientific rigour
- Seek guidance when planning events or engaging in sensitive research
- Follow our policies and procedures

By engaging with and upholding these principles, you contribute to the integrity of Imperial's academic mission and help foster a community that is open to diverse perspectives, committed to respectful dialogue, and enriched by intellectual exchange.

For further information, please refer to the Code of Practice and related guidance and resources on our webpages.