



Freedom of Speech

Policy and Code of Practice for Meetings and Events

Policy first adopted by Governing Body in TT 2021 to take effect 01 October 2021 and updated in MT 2023 and summer 2024. This latest version was approved by Governing Body on 30 October 2024.

Worcester College is required by the Education Act 1986 s. 43 to keep an up-to-date Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech. This document sets out the College's policy and code of practice. The updated code is not intended to signal any change to the College's pre-existing position that freedom of speech and academic freedom are central tenets of College life and must be robustly protected.

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Freedom of Speech Policy Statement

Introduction

1. Freedom of speech and expression are central tenets of learning and an important part of College and University life.
2. Worcester College seeks to protect robustly civic and academic freedoms and to foster an academic culture of openness and inclusivity, in which members of our community engage in debate critically but courteously, and remain open to both intellectual challenge and change.
3. The legal duty of UK universities to protect free speech is enshrined in legislation, placing duties on the governing body of a higher education provider to i) secure freedom of speech; and ii) maintain a code of practice.
4. The right to freedom of expression is also subject to important limitations, for example to prevent unlawful discrimination, harassment or incitement to violence or hatred against other individuals or groups. It is against the law to discriminate against someone because of a protected characteristic.¹ There are other laws such as privacy, libel and defamation which may restrict freedom of speech in certain circumstances.
5. In protecting the right to freedom of expression, the College recognises that its members may at times be confronted with views that some find unsettling, extreme or offensive. The College shall always aim, therefore, to foster freedom of expression within a framework of robust civility, which welcomes evidence and challenge in an environment of respectful

¹ [The Equality Act 2010](#) prohibits discrimination on the basis of nine protected characteristics – age, gender reassignment, being pregnant or on maternity leave, disability, race including colour, nationality, national or ethnic origin, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

debate and peaceful exchange. The College will not allow this right to be abused for the purpose of hatred or bigotry.

6. This Freedom of Speech Policy and Code of Practice is part of a framework of principles and operational procedures for the management of issues relating to the exercise of the right to freedom of speech. It shall be brought to the attention of students and staff in inductions and trainings, and through annual reference in Student, Staff and Academic Handbooks.
7. Worcester College is under no legal obligation to allow meetings to be held on College premises which are open to members of the public or made purely on a commercial basis, and therefore reserves the right to decline to accept a booking by a third party, or to cancel such a booking, particularly (but not exclusively) with reference to any major risks or issues related to such activity both on the grounds of health and safety and in the context of this Code.

Key principles

8. Worcester College believes that a culture of free, open and robust discussion can be achieved only if all concerned engage critically but courteously with each other. The College is committed to fostering an inclusive culture which promotes equality, values diversity and maintains a working, learning and social environment in which the rights and dignity of all members of the College community are respected.
9. The College believes that everyone has the right, within the bounds set by law, to express, receive, test and question views, opinions or information without fear of intimidation, discrimination or censorship.
10. Worcester College:
 - a. is fully committed to the right of freedom of speech as a fundamental aspect of University life;
 - b. takes account of the statutory frameworks within which freedom of speech must or may be circumscribed, but will not obstruct speech that is lawful;
 - c. will not tolerate any form of harassment or victimisation and expects all members of the College, its visitors and contractors to treat each other with respect, courtesy and consideration;²
 - d. encourages respectful debate, including debate of difficult and controversial issues, but will not allow freedom of expression to be abused for the purpose of hatred or bigotry; and
 - e. recognises that protest is also a valid part of freedom of expression, but it must be peaceful and not be allowed to shut down lawful debate or infringe the rights of others.
11. The College will take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for its members, students and employees, and for visiting speakers. The College's Code of Practice for Meetings and Events is underpinned by the principles of free speech, and sets out the procedures and conduct required of those organising or attending meetings or other activities.

² See the Worcester College Policy on Harassment.

12. The Worcester College Freedom of Speech Policy and Code of Practice applies to all Worcester College members and its students' unions and societies. A breach of this Policy may be considered a disciplinary matter under the relevant staff or student disciplinary procedures; in the most serious cases, such a breach could lead to dismissal or expulsion from College.

Code of Practice for College Meetings and Events

1. The College ensures that its teaching, research, curriculum, policies and procedures reflect its duties to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable and having particular regard to their importance, freedom of speech and academic freedom within the law.
2. However, this Code of Practice must be followed by all members, students and employees of Worcester College and visiting speakers in respect of any activities that relate to academic life, whether those activities take place on or off College premises, including activities relating to: admission, appointment, reappointment, employment and promotion of staff, disciplinary matters, equality, diversity and inclusion, harassment and bullying, IT, social media, Prevent duty, principles of curricular design, academic integrity in research, speaker events, staff and student codes of conduct.
3. 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. Wherever possible, they should also be exposed to evidence, questioning and argument. As an integral part of this commitment to freedom of expression, we 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. Nothing in this Code of Practice shall be taken to prohibit the legitimate exercise of the right to protest by peaceful means; provided always that nothing is done which contravenes this Code, or the statutes, bylaws or regulations of the College.
5. 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 Worcester College.
6. References in this Code of Practice to “College members” mean the current Provost, current Fellows (as defined in Statute V of the Worcester College Statutes), current students, and current employees of Worcester College.

Responsibilities of event organisers

7. Subject to paragraph 1, all members, students and employees of the College who are organising meetings or events (including those that take place online), or are responsible for administering external bookings of College premises, are responsible for assessing whether there are any risks or issues related to such activity both on the grounds of health and safety and in the context of this Code.
8. Any College member (including student members) or employee involved in arranging events with internal or external speakers, including meetings, exhibitions or other assemblies, (“relevant activity”) on College premises must notify the **Dean** immediately in writing³ and with details *if they become aware of any reason* that suggests the relevant activity:
 - a. risks being the subject of protest;
 - b. risks breaching this Policy;
 - c. may give rise to an environment in which people will experience, or could reasonably fear, discrimination, harassment, intimidation, verbal abuse or violence, particularly (but not exclusively) on account of their age, disability, gender

³ The Internal Events Booking Form includes an entry to address this assessment requirement.

reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy, maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation;

- d. is likely to pose a risk to the safety of those lawfully on College premises, or to public safety; and/or contravenes section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000, in that: (i) the proposed speaker belongs to, or professes to belong to, a proscribed organisation; or (ii) the proposed speaker will use the event to support, or to further the activities of, a proscribed organisation.
- 9. If organisers are in any doubt or have any questions or need for further information, they are encouraged to discuss the situation with the Home Bursar in the first instance, and then seek advice from the Dean and (if appropriate) the University Security Services.
- 10. Information is required at least **seven working days in advance** (although the Dean may, at her/his discretion, agree to receive information closer to the time of the meeting than this). The meeting or event may be cancelled where the required information has not been provided seven working days in advance.
- 11. A frivolous, vexatious and/or malicious referral may lead to disciplinary action being taken under the relevant College procedure.
- 12. Upon referral to the Dean, the procedures set out below will be implemented.

Referral procedures

- 13. The Dean shall act in a risk-based and proportionate manner and with the desire, wherever possible, to enable events or meetings to proceed.
- 14. The Dean will, upon notification of a referral based on the assessment as noted above, or on receipt of similar information from any other source regarding a relevant activity on College premises, consider the details and context within the relevant legal framework. Such consideration may include, amongst other matters:
 - a. Principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom under, for example, the Education Reform Act 1988;
 - b. Freedom of speech and freedom of expression under the common law and the Human Rights Act 1998, along with any other relevant rights such as those relating to freedom of religion and belief and freedom of assembly;
 - c. Provisions prohibiting discrimination and harassment and promoting equality under the Equality Act 2010 and, where relevant, the Public Sector Equality Duty;
 - d. The “Prevent duty” under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 which requires universities to ‘have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’ (section 26 (1)) and which also provides that ‘when carrying out the duty imposed by section 26 (1)’, universities ‘must have particular regard to the duty to ensure freedom of speech; and to the importance of academic freedom’;
 - e. The College’s obligations for the health and safety of students, staff and visitors under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and at common law;
 - f. The College’s obligations under charity law;
 - g. Other potential obligations under criminal or civil law; and
 - h. What reasonably practicable steps can be taken to mitigate any risks identified.

15. In considering the above matter, the Dean may consult other College Members or employees (other than any individual who may be asked to review the decision under the terms of this Policy), may seek further information from relevant parties, and/or may obtain independent legal advice if considered appropriate.
16. The lawful expression of controversial, unpopular or critical views by an invited speaker do not in themselves constitute grounds for withholding permission for a meeting or event. However, an assessment may conclude that measures should be in place to ensure such views can be subject to robust debate, critique and challenge.
17. As required by section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000, the Dean will not give permission to hold a meeting or event where it is known that:
 - a. the proposed speaker belongs to, or professes to belong to, a proscribed organisation; or
 - b. the proposed speaker will use the event to support, or to further the activities of, a proscribed organisation.⁴
18. Based on the above analysis and an assessment of any risks, the Dean will decide whether the relevant activity should be subject to any reasonably practicable conditions to mitigate any risks identified, including whether the risks are to individual health and safety, to freedom of speech, or to academic freedom. Examples of such conditions might include:
 - a. Postponing or relocating a meeting;
 - b. Putting in place appropriate stewarding, security and/or arrangements for access to the activity;
 - c. Ensuring there is an opportunity for different viewpoints to be appropriately represented or challenged;
 - d. Appointment of a meeting chair;
 - e. Designation of organisers;
 - f. Agreeing arrangements with the University Proctors, University Security Services and/or the police;
 - g. Ensuring that promotional material for an event or a precis of a speech is submitted in advance; and
 - h. Taking any other reasonable steps to allow the event to proceed.
19. If the Dean is not satisfied that the risks identified can be mitigated sufficiently, they will decide either that the relevant activity will be postponed until appropriately satisfactory arrangements can be made, or, as a last resort, that it will be cancelled.
20. Organisers of meetings and events must cooperate and comply with any conditions imposed concerning the arrangements for the conduct of the meeting.
21. College members (including student members) and employees responsible for delivering or organising the relevant activity will cooperate in implementing any such conditions.
22. In the event that the Dean considers that the risks cannot be mitigated by the imposition of conditions, or the organiser(s) refuse(s) to comply with the indicated conditions, the Dean

⁴ Proscribed organisations are designated by the Home Office:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2>

has the right to cancel the meeting or event and they may do so even if the relevant College procedure has not been exhausted.

23. The Dean will communicate their decision promptly and will set out the reasons for the decision.
24. A breach of this Code may lead to disciplinary action being taken under the appropriate College procedure, including the Disciplinary Procedure for staff or the Student Non-Academic Disciplinary Procedure for students.

Disputes and appeals

25. In the event that any College member (including student members), invited speaker or organiser of a relevant College event is dissatisfied with any decisions taken under this Policy, they may within 7 days of the decision ask the Provost to review that decision, setting out clear reasons for their unhappiness or dissatisfaction.
26. The Provost or Provost's delegate (as appropriate) will communicate their decision on the appeal promptly and will set out the reasons for the decision.

Responsibilities and delegation

27. The Governing Body of the College has overall responsibility for the effective operation of this Policy and for ensuring compliance with relevant legislation. Regular review of this policy is delegated to the **People and Culture Committee** with guidance from the Governance and Compliance Committee if legislation or compliance obligations change.
28. Where any relevant individual specified in this Policy is unavailable for any reason, their function under this Policy may be delegated as specified below:

Relevant individual	Delegate individual
Dean	Vice Dean
Provost	Vice Provost

Related Policies

The following College policies⁵ also relate to this Freedom of Speech Policy

- Student Complaints
- Student Discipline
- Staff Discipline
- Prevent Policy
- Harassment Policy
- Equalities Policy

⁵ College policies are available on: <https://www.worc.ox.ac.uk/about/governance/policies> and on the College Intranet

Appendix

Internal Event Booking Form

Current event booking form: <https://app.onlinesurveys.jisc.ac.uk/s/oxford/student-event-booking-form-worcester-college-oxford>

Full information on your event is required before your request can be considered – please answer all the questions below.

Please be aware that if your booking is confirmed and the nature of your event subsequently changes significantly, you must inform the Academic Office. Your original booking may have to be cancelled, and a new booking request submitted, depending on the nature of the changes.

Please be aware that in a small number of circumstances, there may be a charge for events organised on behalf of a University society – you will be informed if this is this case.

This form will be submitted to the Academic Office, for initial assessment and approval. It may be referred to the Dean, if there are any risks considered in the context of health, safety, freedom of speech, equalities or Prevent duty.

Summary

- Your name
- Your contact details (email address/ telephone)
- Details of organisers
(Are you organising this event on behalf of an individual or organisation, or are any other organisations involved?)
- Main purpose and nature of event
(If your event involves a guest speaker, please provide the speaker's name and affiliations. If you are booking a film night, please provide the title/s of the film/s you will be screening, along with any identifying information, e.g. which version of a film if it has been re-made).

Event logistical details

- Date of the event
- Time of the event (from/to)
- Which room has been requested via the room booking system?
- Will you be in attendance for the duration of the event, including setting up and clearing away?
- Who will be attending? College members / University members / Members of the public
- What is the maximum number of people expected to attend?
- Is it a ticketed event?
- Will your event involve noise levels which will be audible outside the intended area, bearing in mind the use of surrounding rooms and areas?
- Will equipment or instruments, etc. need to be transported through College?
- Do you intend to serve food/drink?
- Will Alcohol be served or otherwise available?
- Will anyone attending require a security presence? (If yes, please explain)
- Do you intend to use any additional lighting or electrical equipment?
(If yes, please raise a support ticket at <https://support.worc.ox.ac.uk> at least a week before your event so that the necessary checks can be carried out.)

Freedom of Speech and Event Referrals

Do you have reason to believe this event should be referred for an additional assessment of risks related to the College's Code of Practice for Meetings and Events?

Such reasons may include that the event:

- risks being the subject of protest;
- risks breaching the College's Freedom of Speech Policy;
- may give rise to an environment in which people will experience, or could reasonably fear, discrimination, harassment, intimidation, verbal abuse or violence;
- poses a risk to the safety of those lawfully on College premises, or to public safety; and/or
- contravenes section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000, in that: (i) the proposed speaker belongs to, or professes to belong to, a proscribed organisation; or (ii) the proposed speaker will use the event to support, or to further the activities of, a proscribed organisation.

If yes, please explain.

If yes, this event will be referred to the Dean to assess the risks in relation to the College's Code of Practice for Meeting and Events. Additional measures may be put in place to allow this event to go ahead.