

## Government to tackle 'safe space' culture in higher education

By [Joseph Silke](#), Editor

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York holds an 'amber' rating on the Spiked free speech ranking . Image: Arian Kriesch

Universities will be penalised if they fail to address 'safe space' culture under new government scheme announced by universities minister Jo Johnson. Johnson wrote to the Times today outlining plans for a new Office for Students (OfS) which will have the power to fine, suspend or even deregister institutions which allow freedom of speech to be threatened on campus. The Department for Education has said that universities must commit to free speech in their governing documents and ensure that this is upheld by staff; student unions and student societies.

There has been a rise in censorship of speakers across the United Kingdom in recent years. Prominent figures such as feminist Germaine Greer; activist Peter Tatchell and campaigner Julie Bindel, for example, have all been 'no-platformed' at universities across the country. Research by Spiked as well as the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust this past year found that nine in ten universities in the UK restrict freedom of expression. Publications such as the Sun and Charlie Hebdo have also faced bans as well as events deemed too offensive such as so-called 'chav' themed socials.

"No-platforming and safe spaces shouldn't be used to shut down legitimate free speech" said Jo Johnson. "Our young people and students need to accept the legitimacy of healthy vigorous debate in which people can disagree with one another." The OfS receives its legal powers in April. Sir Michael Barber, head of the unit, said: "ensuring freedom of speech and learning how to disagree with diverse opinions and differing views of the world is a fundamental aspect of learning at university. The OfS will promote it vigorously."

York currently holds an 'amber' rating on the Spiked university free speech rankings. Policy makers were criticised in late 2015 when the university banned events for International Men's Day raising awareness of high suicide rates; lower life expectancy and difficulty reaching higher education for men in the UK after a petition by feminist groups claimed the events failed to acknowledge "the patriarchal structures which underpin society." York became the subject of an investigation last year after five students committed suicide in 12 months, the highest number in a single year at any university.

The OfS will embark on a consultation period with universities to establish how it will operate within the new regulatory framework. The government hopes that the new measures will preserve the intellectual rigour of British higher education and uphold British values. "It goes to the heart of our democratic values and is a principle universities hold dear," Johnson said, "freedom of speech is a fundamentally British value which is undermined by a reluctance of institutions to embrace healthy vigorous debate. Our universities must open minds, not close them."



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Steph

20 Oct '17 at 5:03 pm

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