

Student experience of freedom of expression in UK universities

Working paper from an exploratory study

Background and motivation for study

Boris Johnson's manifesto for his successful December 2019 general election in the UK included a commitment to 'strengthen academic freedom and free speech in universities'.¹ This commitment was reasserted in *The Times* in February 2020 in an article written by Johnson's Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, where he argued that 'universities themselves could be doing much more in this area'. If they did not create 'unambiguous guidance', Williamson stated, he may be forced to implement tougher regulation backed up, if needed, by new laws.²

However, freedom of expression in the UK university sector is already subject to a complex array of legislation. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9), freedom of expression (Article 10), and freedom of assembly and association (Article 11) are safeguarded by the European Convention on Human Rights, which was incorporated into UK law by the Human Rights Act 1998. Section 43 of the Education Act (No. 2) 1986 imposes a positive and proactive duty on universities to establish and follow a code of practice to protect freedom of speech. The Act provides that 'persons concerned in the government of any establishment [...] shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the establishment and for visiting speakers'.

Exercising this freedom 'within the law' means that it is restricted by criminal and civil law. Certain types of conduct and speech are already unlawful under the Public Order Act 1986, Protection from Harassment Act 1997, Terrorism Acts 2000 and 2006, and the Equality Act 2010. Universities also have a specific statutory requirement under the Government's Prevent Duty, in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, to take steps to address the risk of students being drawn into terrorism through exposure to extremist views outside the law.

The Office for Students Regulatory Framework, which puts into place the provisions of the Higher Education & Research Act 2017, states that the governing body of a higher education provider must take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured within the provider.

Despite this regulatory framework, the politicisation of freedom of expression continues

Williamson's comments build on a sustained focus on the issue of freedom of expression in universities by the UK Conservative Party, which mirrors similar political strategies in the US and Australia. The allegation being made by right-leaning politicians and commentators is that free speech is being suppressed (or 'chilled') in universities because of their left-wing bias. As the influential Daily Mail commentator Toby Young put it, 'our colleges have become seminaries of politically correct nonsense – left-wing madrassas whose purpose is not to disseminate knowledge and promote understanding but to suppress politically incorrect facts and stifle debate'.³ Irrespective of whether this is factually correct or not, the long term political strategy seems to be to force universities to acknowledge that there is an issue and through that create (one could argue, ironically, a 'safe') space for more open discussion on issues on the right of the political spectrum and through that secure long term political support for right leaning parties.

These issues came into sharp focus for our own institution when King's College London reviewed, updated and operationalised position, policies and procedures on freedom of expression in 2017. Over a year long process, a joint statement on freedom of expression⁴ was agreed with the student union (which we understand is the only such joint statement in the UK), along with a committee that had equal and joint membership of students and staff on managing events that were pre-determined to be high risk in terms of threatening freedom of expression. From an operational perspective freedom of expression was defined as encompassing the 'four freedoms' of free speech, academic freedom, freedom from hate and freedom to protest, with the university having to manage, and optimise, the tensions between these dimensions which at times can conflict with one another.

This process coincided with two events, in March 2018, when freedom of expression was prevented. The first was an event co-hosted by King's Libertarian Society (a student society) and the Ayn Rand Centre, which was a panel discussion with Yaron Brook and Carl Benjamin on the 'Philosophy of objectivism'. The event was violently disrupted by 'antifascist' protestors, including with a member of security staff being knocked out and smoke bombs set off in an auditorium.⁵ The second was a joint event between King's College London's and City University's Israel Societies (again student societies), and the Pinsky Center, where the former Israeli prime minister Dan Meridor spoke on 'Threats and Challenges'. In a subsequent investigation, it was concluded that 'the event was undoubtedly disturbed by the protests, but it was not disrupted to a degree that prevented the freedom of speech.'

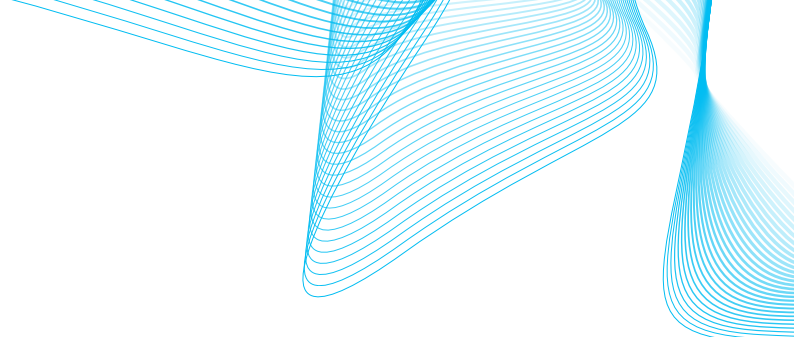


This prompted a broader exploration of the data around student experiences and attitudes on freedom of expression and the realisation that there was very little empirical evidence, especially in the UK.”

It should be stressed that these are 'rare' events. King's College London hosts about 3,000 events a year. Over the past five years there have been around half-a-dozen incidents which you could legitimately critique King's for not upholding its commitment to freedom of expression – that is 6 out of 15,000 which is 0.04 per cent.

But what do students actually think?

During the process of reviewing and updating its position, policies and procedures on freedom of expression, a number of engagements occurred with students and student groups that seemed to indicate King's students were broadly supportive of freedom



of expression and found that some of the dualisms – between right and left, between students and university administrators, and between universities and broader society – were not evident in their lived experiences. This prompted a broader exploration of the data around student experiences and attitudes on freedom of expression and the realisation that there was very little empirical evidence, especially in the UK. At the time there were two studies: the first was a 2016 survey by the Higher Education Policy Institute that surveyed 1,006 undergraduates using YouthSight’s Opinion Panel Community; and the second was a 2018 YouGov survey of 1,004 students.

This review of existing surveys led to the decision to undertake a larger exploratory survey of UK students. One of our primary goals was to achieve a large enough sample to allow a detailed disaggregation into attitudinal groups, enabling subsamples to be studied as entities in their own right.

We published a detailed report of the survey results in December 2019,⁶ and subsequently ran two student focus groups to further understand some of the more nuanced and sensitive issues, and their implications for policy. In this paper we report on the results of the focus groups, as well as the relevant survey data that we used to prompt discussions. The next section describes the methodological approach we took in developing and administering the survey, along with the process of focus group recruitment and structure. We then present three findings that raised questions for future research and conclude by highlighting some possible methodological and policy implications of our work to date and areas to explore in the future. We should stress this is an emerging body of applied research and is not grounded in theory, but is focused on providing a foundation for introducing the student voice into debates about freedom of expression.

Methods

The findings in this paper draw from two exploratory surveys fielded in summer 2019 (one with 2,153 students enrolled at UK HEIs and the other with a representative sample of 2,179 adults aged 16-75 in Britain) and two focus groups held at King’s College London and the University of Melbourne in February 2020. The student survey (YouthSight) was the main instrument, with a subset of questions asked in the general public survey (Ipsos MORI).

The survey instrument was developed by: reviewing the limited number of studies and surveys on freedom of expression; through consultations with colleagues; and informed by our own experience. This resulted in the inclusion of seven comparative statements that are routinely used in surveys on freedom of expression in the US, and a 15-item Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which enables the data to be interrogated by underlying moral profile. The definition of freedom of expression uses the framing adopted by King’s College London,⁷ which was developed through extensive consultation with the Students’ Union.

Fieldwork for the student survey was carried out between 29th July and 2nd August 2019, and the general public survey between 26th-30th July 2019. We then tested findings with two focus groups of students at King’s College London (4th Feb 2020)

2,153

surveys with students
enrolled at UK HEIs

2,179

surveys with the general
public in Britain

26

students engaged in
focus groups hosted in
London and Melbourne

and the University of Melbourne (10th Feb 2020). Potential participants were invited to complete a screening questionnaire, which included nine statements as well as a range of demographic questions. Each answer was scored out of ten points across three cluster categories (described in section 3), according to the proportion of the response in the original survey data, giving a total score of 90. Participants were then selected blindly through the following process to ensure representation of a wide range of views:

- 5 highest Libertarian scores
- 5 highest Activist scores
- 5 highest Contented scores
- 2-3 additional students to ensure demographic and political representation

18 students were then invited to the focus group in London and 17 in Melbourne, resulting in achieved participation of 14 and 12 students, respectively. Across two hours, these students were asked to: feedback on the report, including what was surprising, what was stating the obvious, what was not covered that should have been; interpret key issues, including violence, extreme views and safety; and develop policy recommendations tailored towards universities, student unions, government and regulators, and students.

Findings

The results of the survey were published in December 2019 (see Box 1 for headline findings). This study was intended as a scoping exercise to provide a foundation from which to explore how freedom of expression is viewed by the student population and the salience of related issues. It provides some of the most comprehensive survey data on student attitudes towards freedom of expression in the UK, with the larger sample size enabling exploration of clusters within student attitudes.⁸

We chose a two-step cluster analysis in order to identify group structures within the data, enabling us to explore groupings that may not be apparent nor previously known, such as associated viewpoints across a range of variables. Cluster prediction primarily drew from a battery of 27 statements, where respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements (the nine statements that were most important for cluster prediction can be found in Box 2).

Three attitudinal clusters were identified, each with salient shared characteristics. As summarised in Box 1, these included: the degree to which individuals perceive a ‘chilling effect’ in their university; the type of trust they place in their university to support freedom of expression; and the acts they consider justifiable to counter offensive or intolerant viewpoints. We characterised these groups as follows:

1. ‘Contented’ (56 per cent of sample) – This group of students generally feel free to express their views, but have given little thought to freedom of expression. They trust that their university is taking the issue seriously and acting in the best interests of their students. As an individual, they feel free from harm, hatred and discrimination, and prefer to be part of a community where they are not exposed to intolerant or offensive ideas.

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Box 1: Key findings from report

Students think freedom of expression is under threat, but not in their own university

- 81 per cent of students think that freedom of expression is more important than ever, with 86 per cent specifically concerned that social media is enabling people to express intolerant views.
- Most students consider freedom of expression to be more threatened in the UK overall than in their own university. On average, just 12 per cent of students hear about such incidents very or fairly often. Yet there are signs of a ‘chilling effect’, with 25 per cent of students scared to express their views openly.
- When asked about the approaches taken by HE institutions, 73 per cent of students say universities are taking seriously the need to protect students from hatred. Similarly, 63 per cent of students say free speech and robust debate are well protected in their university.

Students hold similar views to the general population on freedom of expression

- There is considerable agreement between students and the general public on a range of issues relating to freedom of expression. The area with least agreement is the political views of academics, with twice as many members of the public (26 per cent) than students (13 per cent) disagreeing that most academics are left-wing – yet most say they don’t know (43 per cent public; 52 per cent students).
- The public, however, show slightly greater concern that freedom of expression in the UK is threatened by a culture of ‘safetyism’ (44 per cent public; 35 per cent students).

Students in the UK do not share a single, homogeneous view on freedom of expression

We identified three clusters of attitudes among the student population, which we refer to as the ‘Contented’ (56 per cent), ‘Activist’ (23 per cent) and ‘Libertarian’ (20 per cent). These groups differ based on:

- *The chilling effect and uncomfortable ideas* – Students who are Libertarian in outlook are more inclined to think that their peers are reluctant to express their views. Libertarians also prefer to be exposed to a wide range of opinions. The majority of students in this group feel it is not their university’s role to shield them from views they might find offensive or intolerant.
- *Trust in the institution* – Across all four freedoms, the Contented and the Activist groups believe their university is protecting freedom of expression and trust them to take appropriate action. The Libertarian is less certain, placing more conditional trust in their institution to intervene to protect the four freedoms. They resist intervention from their university in all but extreme cases, such as protecting against hate speech and racism.
- *Acts considered justifiable to shut down offensive or intolerant viewpoints* – While mostly holding conflicting views on all other aspects of freedom of expression, Activists and Libertarians are both more likely to think that violence and shouting down speakers can be an appropriate response to counter viewpoints that they find offensive or intolerant. 30 per cent of Activists and 33 per cent of Libertarians support these more extreme forms of action.



This study provides some of the most comprehensive survey data on student attitudes towards freedom of expression in Britain, enabling exploration of clusters within student attitudes.”

Box 2: Key variables for cluster predictions

1. 'I am free to express my views at university'
2. 'Academics are free to express their views at my university'
3. 'I am free to protest at my university'
4. 'Universities are taking seriously the need to protect students from hatred so that everyone can enjoy an equal right to express themselves freely'
5. 'University officials have the right to ban persons with extreme views from speaking on campus'
6. 'I am free from discrimination, harm or hatred at my university'
7. 'It is important to be part of a university community where I am not exposed to intolerant or offensive ideas'
8. "Safe space" policies and a culture of 'safetyism' in universities is threatening freedom of expression'
9. 'Demonstrations or rallies by unpopular political groups should be prohibited at my University'

2. 'Activist' (23 per cent of sample) – This group of students believe strongly that they and others are free to express their views at university and are confident about their freedom to protest. They feel strongly that their university is taking seriously its duty to protect students from hatred so that everyone can enjoy an equal right to express themselves freely, but support banning people with extreme views from speaking on campus.
3. 'Libertarian' (20 per cent of sample) – These students are less certain about whether they can express their views freely at their university. They feel confident – but not certain – that they are free to protest, but are not convinced that their university is taking seriously the need to protect students from hatred. They do not believe that it is a university's place to shield people from intolerant or offensive ideas and feel that safe-space policies and the suppression of demonstrations or rallies representing unpopular political views pose a threat to freedom of expression.



The student population holds contradictory preferences for how freedom of expression should be handled by their university as well as by the government, regulators and other bodies.”

We openly acknowledge that these cluster descriptions require further testing and iteration. Yet the cluster analysis does tell us two important things. First, that students differ considerably in their interest in freedom of expression, falling on a spectrum between those who haven't given it much thought to those who hold deep opinions on the issue. And second, they draw attention to the fact that there is no magic set of solutions that will satisfy the concerns and preferences of all students. Even among students most engaged with issues relating to freedom of expression, some will welcome intervention from their institution and others will, on principle, resist it.

These clusters, while nascent, recognise that students in the UK do not share a single, homogeneous view on freedom of expression. Rather, the student population holds contradictory preferences for how freedom of expression should be handled by their

university as well as by the government, regulators and other bodies. In the following subsections, we draw out some of the issues that this scoping study raised, contextualised by insights from the student focus groups conducted in February 2020, which are being reported on for the first time. In so doing, we hope to highlight three areas that require further investigation and identify some considerations to be addressed in future research.

Student attitudes towards freedom of expression are not as partisan as often assumed

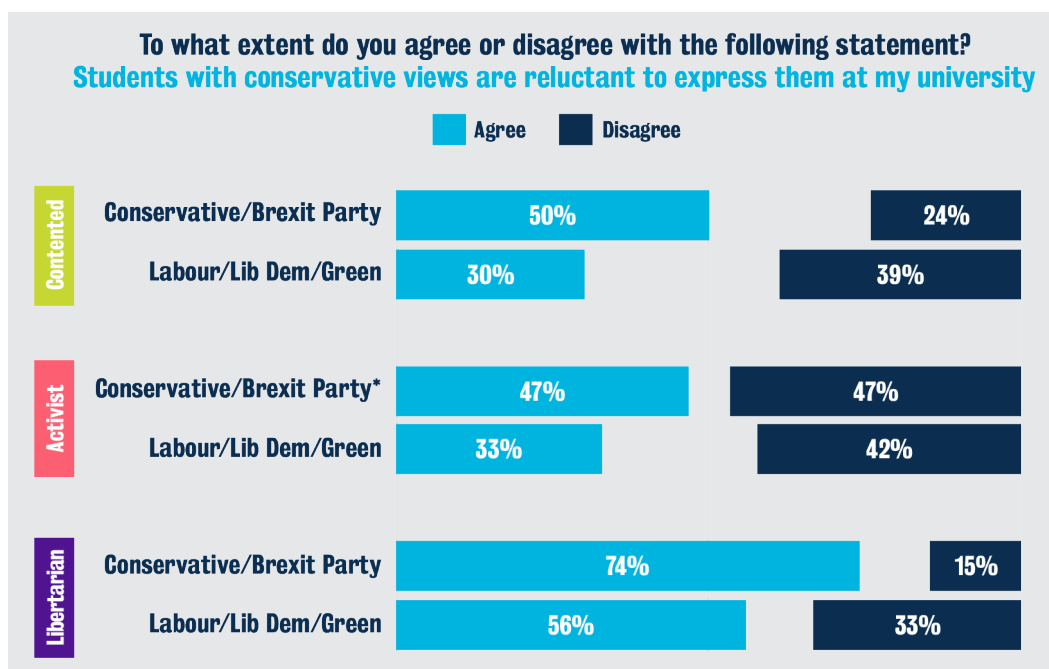
Partisanship is often associated with a perceived ‘chilling effect’ in universities, where some students are reluctant to express their views for fear of repercussions. And this was borne out in our survey too. Perceptions of self-censorship were much higher among right leaning students, with 59 per cent of Conservative voters agreeing that students with conservative views self-censor on campus, compared with roughly one in three Labour, Lib Dem or Green voters. Yet understanding the chilling effect as a purely political phenomenon, as a war between liberals and conservatives, arguably misses important aspects of the phenomenon.

Concern about the chilling effect was a key characteristic of the Libertarian cluster. While this group has the highest representation of right-leaning political views, it includes a plurality of political affiliations from the left as well (see Table 1). As shown in Figure 1, these three attitudinal clusters reveal a stronger gradient of concern about self-censorship among their peers with conservative views, compared to their respective political identities. Libertarians are also more concerned about expressing their views,

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN PER CLUSTER

Demographic type	Contented	Activist	Libertarian
Gender	Female – 64% Male – 35%	Female – 56% Male – 44%	Male – 62% Female – 38%
Voting intention if a general election was held tomorrow	Labour – 31% Lib Dem – 17% Green Party – 15% Don't know – 12% Conservative – 8% Rather not say – 7% Would not vote – 6% SNP/Plaid Cymru – 3% Brexit Party – 1% Other – 1%	Labour – 37% Green Party – 18% Lib Dem – 14% Don't know – 8% Conservative – 8% SNP/Plaid Cymru – 5% Would not vote – 5% Rather not say – 4% Brexit Party – 2% Other – *%	Labour – 29% Conservative – 18% Lib Dem – 16% Green Party – 11% Brexit Party – 8% Don't know – 6% Would not vote – 5% Rather not say – 4% Other – 2% SNP/Plaid Cymru – 1%
Voting intention if a referendum on EU membership was held tomorrow	Remain – 80% Leave – 11% Don't know – 6% Would not vote – 3%	Remain – 83% Leave – 10% Don't know – 5% Would not vote – 2%	Remain – 65% Leave – 29% Don't know – 4% Would not vote – 2%

FIGURE 1: CHILLING EFFECT BY CLUSTER



regardless of political affiliation. Whereas over two-thirds of Activists and the Contented – of all political persuasions – feel confident in expressing their views, 55 per cent of right-leaning and 44 per cent of left-leaning Libertarians feel unable to express their views in their university for fear of disagreeing with their peers.

In focus groups, students emphasised the need to broaden the focus away from political identity in actions taken to mitigate the chilling effect. A better understanding of the issue, they argued, would follow from a broader consideration of different demographic risk groups, including gender, race and ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, along with research into which faculties and departments are more affected. For example, are there any toxic cultures?

The solutions proposed by students were also not explicitly partisan. Rather, they emphasised the need to learn how to disagree better and to cultivate inclusive learning environments that encourage civil debate. They welcomed the introduction of tools or awareness campaigns for both academics and students on strategic communications, supporting individuals to learn to disagree with each other without it being perceived as a personal attack, as well as opportunities to frame discussions in a way that challenges and develops opinions, rather than exchanging personal attacks. Mechanisms by which students suggested this could be achieved include staff training on facilitation and moderation of respectful discussion and debate, and anonymous portals to submit ideas for discussion or to provide feedback on teaching and reading lists.

Student focus groups highlighted some of the limitations that exist within the current freedom of expression debate

Our survey showed that students consider freedom of expression to be a highly salient issue, but few have had any direct experience of freedom of expression being inhibited

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in their own institution. On average, just 12 per cent of students said they had heard about the four freedoms – freedom to protest, academic freedom, free speech and freedom from hate – being inhibited in their own university very or fairly often. By contrast, 46 per cent say they have never heard about such incidents and 31 per cent say they have not heard about them very often.

This was, however, one of a number of findings that participants in the focus groups felt were stating the obvious about life at university (as summarised in Table 2), along with the left-leaning nature of universities and the use of social media to express intolerant views. This is confounded by the surprise in London and Melbourne that as many as 26 per cent of students think that violence is acceptable to counter hate speech. While for some students who had witnessed heated disagreement based on unpopular political views, the idea that one in four students felt unsafe expressing their views was hardly surprising, for others this was much higher than expected. Universities as places of self-censorship was simply not borne out in their own experiences of life on campus.

Students in the London and Melbourne focus groups recognised the need for greater understanding of lived experiences and case studies. The dominant, dramatised image

TABLE 2: STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON FINDINGS FROM SURVEY

What surprised you most?

- 26% student think violence is OK (K, M)
- Non-stereotypical responses (K, M)
- Chilling effect (K)
- Lack of definitions (M)

Key stats

- 26% of students think violence is justified response to hate speech or racially-charged comments
- Students not that different to the public, eg 81% of students and 79% of the general public think that ‘freedom of expression is more important than ever’
- 25% of students scared to express their views at their university for fear of disagreeing with their peers

What was stating the obvious?

- Left-leaning nature of universities (K,M)
- That students feel freedom of expression is a non-issue in their own university (K,M)
- ‘Chilling effects’ (M)
- Use of social media (M)

Key stats

- 35% of students and 31% of the public agree that the majority of academics are left leaning (compared to 13% and 26% who respectively disagree – 52% and 43% say they don’t know).
- On average, just 12 per cent of students say they hear about freedom of expression being inhibited in their own university very or fairly often. 63% of students say free speech and robust debate are well protected in their university.
- 37% agree that students with conservative views are reluctant to express them, compared to 14% who feel the same applies for students with left-wing views
- 86% of students agree that ‘the widespread use of social media has allowed people to express intolerant views’

What else did you want to know?

- Lived experiences and case studies (K, M)
- More attention to be given to demographics beyond political affiliation, particularly religion and culture (K, M)
- University policy – what is it and how implemented? (M, K)
- Who benefits from making freedom of expression an issue? (K)
- Attitudes of university staff towards freedom of expression (M)
- Impact of social media (K)

of partisan culture wars on campus, characterised by shouting matches between conservatives and liberals, and banished right-wing speakers, signals that the nature of problem is poorly understood. Indeed, while participants had high awareness of the debate taking place in the media, their exposure to university policy and existing laws and guidelines was much lower. A recommendation that students asked of university leaderships, student unions and governments/regulators alike was more clarity on the terms of debate, and accessible and transparent communication about what universities are doing about it, which should be monitored by student union leaderships.

Concepts and terminology used when discussing freedom of expression can be ambiguous

Freedom of expression, in and of itself, can be a confusing term. In the report, we defined freedom of expression as a balance of four freedoms: free speech, academic freedom, freedom to protest and freedom from hate. 79 per cent of students agreed it was a university's role to balance these tensions to protect freedom of expression, rather than protect one or some elements more than others (21 per cent agreed). Yet in our interactions with students in the focus groups, it was clear that one element was often more salient in how each individual conceptualised freedom of expression: for example, for some the debate hinged on fair processes for protest, whereas for others freedom of expression was synonymous with 'free speech'. A key recommendation generated in both focus groups was accordingly the need for clear frameworks and definitions for understanding freedom of expression.

However, there are also many more terms used within these debates that are highly ambiguous – even concepts that may seem universally understandable, such as violence, extreme views and safety. What, precisely, is in our minds when we consider such issues is an important question, and is one that we put directly to our two focus groups. The response, as described below, reinforced the need for a more sophisticated and specific use of language when engaging with freedom of expression as an issue.

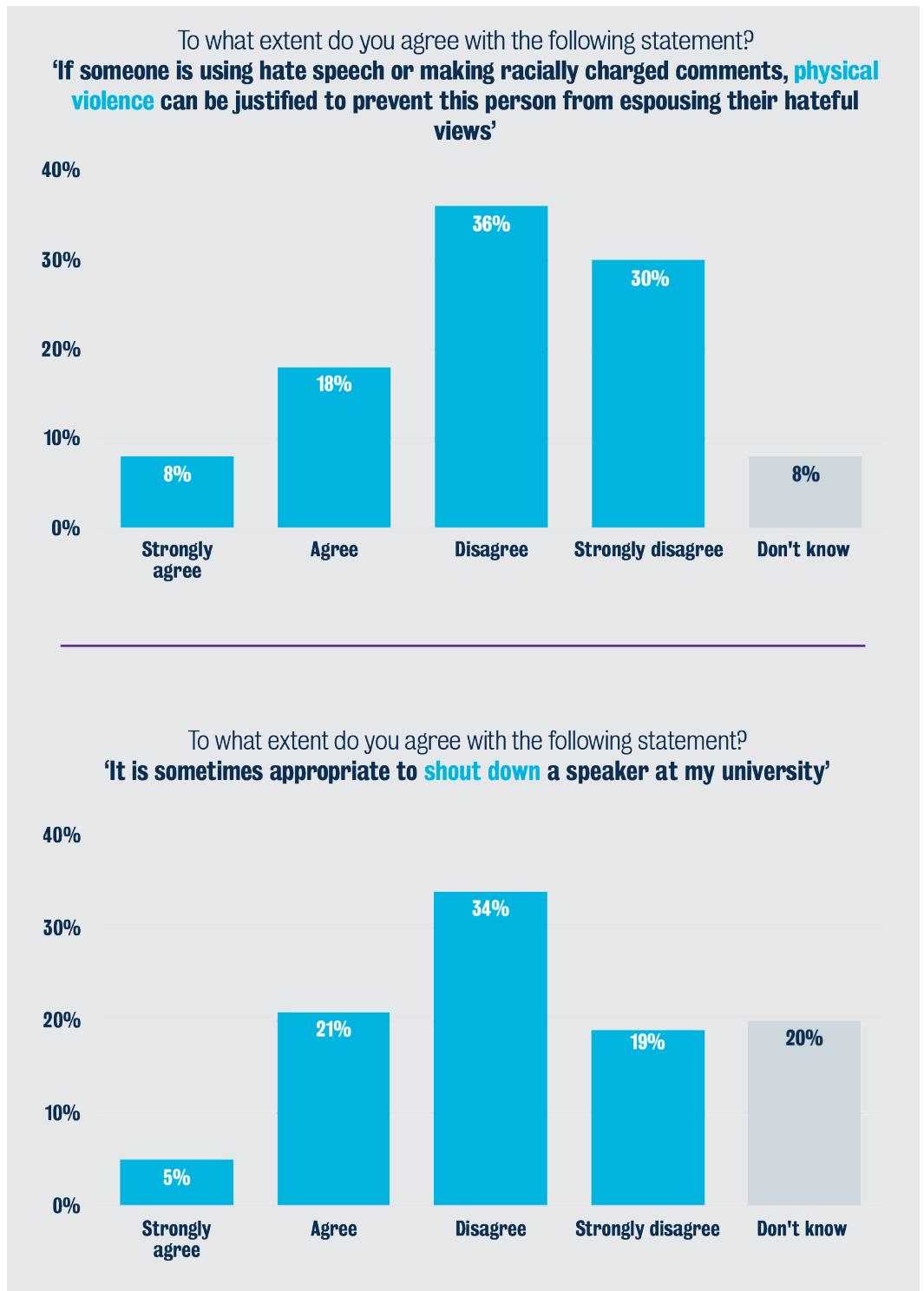
Violence

In the survey, we presented students with two statements that have appeared in surveys fielded in the US, the first asking students whether it is acceptable to shout down a speaker to prevent them from talking (source: Knight Foundation, *First Amendment Survey*),⁹ and the second asking if physical violence can be justified to counter hate speech or racially charged comments (source: McLaughlin, *National Undergraduate Study*).¹⁰ As shown in Figure 2, when we fielded these questions in the UK, equal proportions of students agreed that verbal or physical violence can be justified. 26 per cent agreed with both statements – albeit a notably higher share of students were unsure when it comes to verbal forms of violence (20 per cent responded 'don't know') than physical violence (8 per cent 'don't know'). Does it then follow that students consider the two forms of violence to be equivalent? Arguably not.

In focus group discussions, students urged that context is important. The sense of threat matters: milk shaking or egging, some participants argued, is not inherently 'violent', whereas use of smoke bombs or punching people you disagree with is. Moreover, justification of physical violence is dependent on the situation to which you are responding. While students emphasised that non-violence is the norm, they

are uncomfortable with the idea that they would ‘sit there and do nothing’ if they saw someone being abused. Whether violence is being used to protest, to prevent or to protect is therefore vital.

FIGURE 2: STUDENT RESPONSES TO PHYSICAL VS VERBAL VIOLENCE



Extreme views

A notable finding in the survey was the distinction respondents made between ‘unpopular’ political views and ‘extreme views’. As shown in Figure 3, 63 per cent of students felt that university officials should have ‘the right to ban persons with extreme views from speaking on campus’, whereas 26 per cent felt that the same treatment should apply to ‘unpopular political groups’.¹¹

For some students, the term ‘extreme views’ evoked links with terrorism and anarchism; it suggested some element of violence, or threat of violence. For others, extreme views were also seen to provoke polarisation at the furthest ends of the political spectrum, presenting ideas as ‘black and white’, with little nuance. ‘Unpopular political views’, on the other hand, was seen to be based on rational argument.

Both groups, however, recognised that the boundary between unpopular and extreme views is far from clear cut. How we define ‘rational argument’, in particular, can be hard to disentangle, not least because what is considered a marginal or fringe view is culturally and historically determined (for example, students alluded to how perceptions of the Suffragettes, same sex marriage and even veganism have evolved). Students also emphasised the need to consider the role of personal identities. What is likely to be considered challenging or offensive depends on the nature of the statement and its meaning at the time. The group in London argued that people are no less tolerant of offensive statements now than in the past, but what is deemed offensive has changed, becoming more sensitive to violations of rights and identity, particularly with regards to race, religion and gender.

Safety

What it means for universities to keep students ‘safe’ is a contentious topic. However, the survey data suggests that the acts universities take to protect students from more overtly illegal forms of hate garner more popular support. For example, while marginally more students believe that ‘risk-adverse policies’ threaten freedom of expression (34 per cent agree) than support it (27 per cent disagree), a clear majority (73 per cent) are supportive that universities are ‘taking seriously the need to protect students from hatred’. Views on interventions such as ‘safe space’ policies are, however, more mixed, with the idea of ‘safe spaces’ or a culture of ‘safetyism’ dividing opinion (see Figure 4).

In part, such distributions reflect the different and conflicting views among the study body on the role of the university in intervening in freedom of expression. For example, in the London focus group the discussion on safe spaces was divided, with some students voicing concern about bureaucracy, arguing that such policies have a detrimental effect in shielding students from the difficult conversations and uncomfortable ideas they will be exposed to in the ‘real world’. Yet these discussions also revealed some of the ambiguity around what we imagine a ‘safe space’ to be. Is it, for example, a dedicated physical space? Do safe space policies apply to the broader environment, such as lecture theatres or classrooms? Is a safe space somewhere where you are not challenged at all, or is it a place in which you are challenged respectfully? When terms were clarified, we found that consensus began to build around the idea of

safe spaces as providing the tools to learn and develop tolerance, such as academic skills to moderate effective and respectful debate, and exposure to diverse viewpoints in the classroom.

FIGURE 3: LEVELS OF TOLERANCE FOR UNPOPULAR AND EXTREME VIEWS

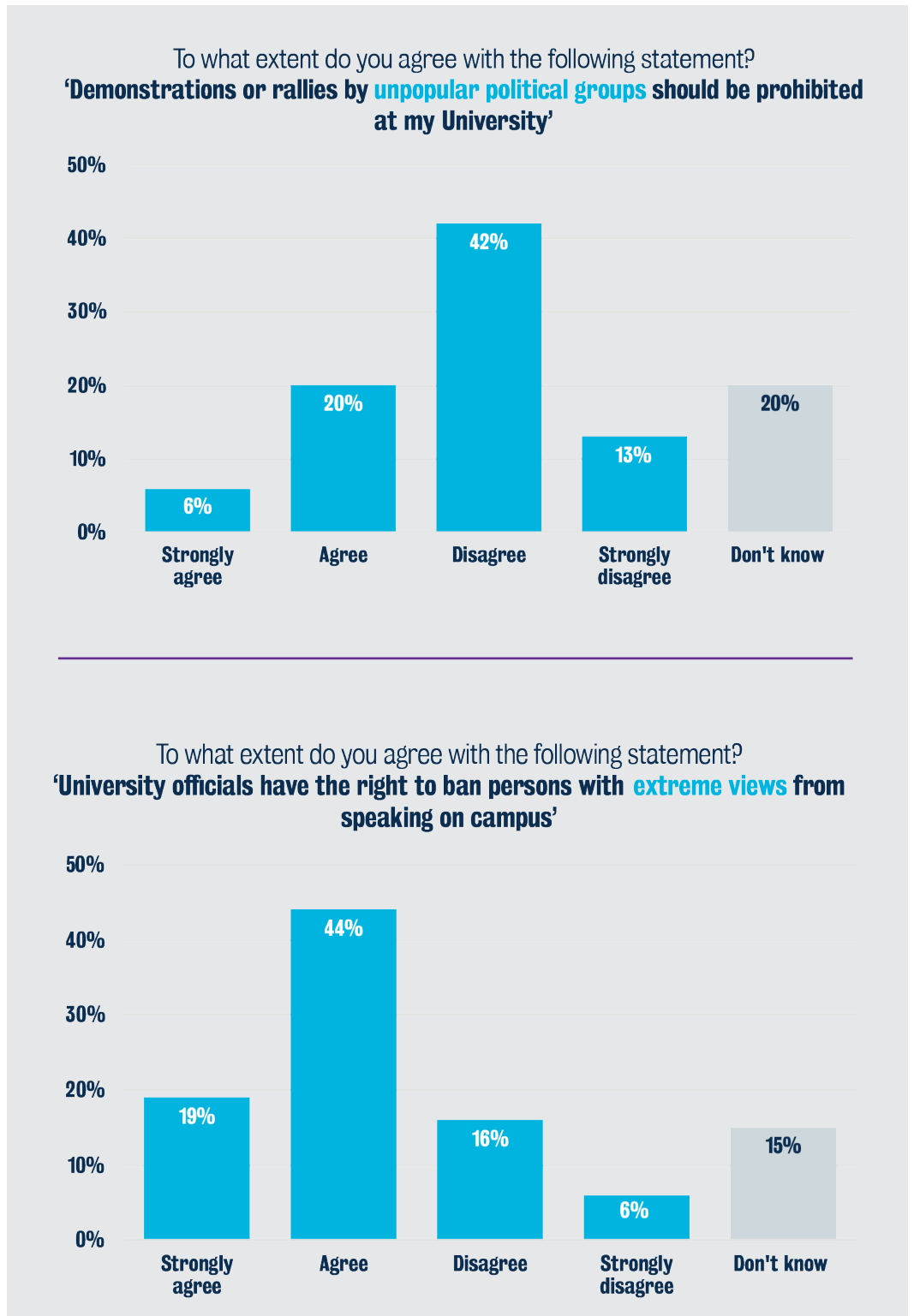
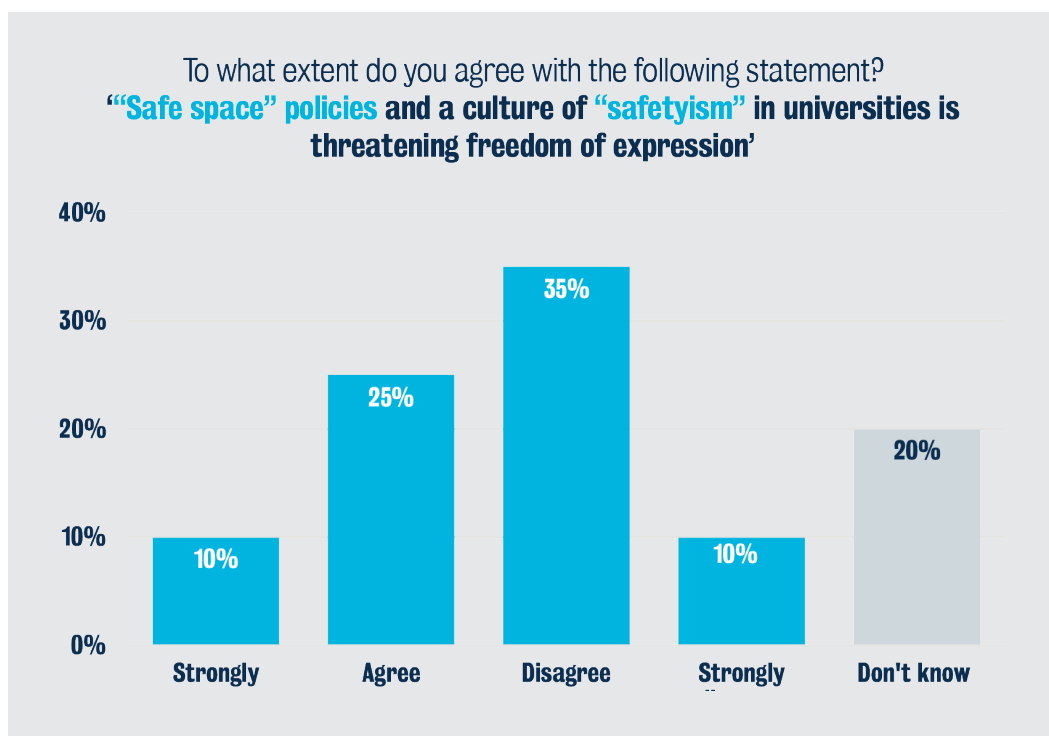


FIGURE 4: ATTITUDES TO SAFE SPACE POLICIES



Concluding reflections

The motivation for the research reported in this paper was to understand what students really think about freedom of expression. This interest arose from the development of policy and procedures on freedom of expression at King’s College London. What was evident from that process was the lack of ‘student voice’ in the debate and the limited empirical evidence that aimed to understand those sentiments.

Overall, our study shows that students are broadly supportive of freedom of expression, that events where freedom of expression is breached are rare but there is a legitimate and concerning issue around the ‘chilling effect’, where students holding particular views feel intimidated in raising them on campus. However, we believe that the most important contribution our study makes to the small but emerging field of empirical studies on student attitudes on freedom of expression, is the understanding that students are not a single homogenous group but have different attitudes which, in our study, clustered into three distinct groups.

We would be the first to acknowledge that our work is a small first step into a complex and nuanced field, and the survey and associated focus groups have limitations. As such, we would position this work as an exploratory study that we would like to build on over the coming years. With that in mind, below we draw out a number of observations that will inform our future work and hopefully that of others. We split these between methodological and policy considerations.



Students are broadly supportive of freedom of expression and events where freedom of expression is breached are rare, but there is a legitimate and concerning issue around the ‘chilling effect’.”



Methodological considerations

If we were to repeat the survey, we would significantly increase the sample size, perhaps to 4,000-8,000. The reason for this is that we would like to understand in more detail some of the subgroups identified in our sample of 2,000. For example, there is a very interesting group of Activists who identify as Conservative and Brexit Party voters – however this group is very small (n=45) and thus we are unable to drill into the data further. Similarly, there is a group of Libertarians who say they would vote Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green in an election. Whilst this group is larger (n=213) it is still too small to meaningfully interrogate further.

A second methodological issue would be to ask less ambiguous questions – or provide scenarios with more specificity. As discussed, we were initially very surprised by the finding that 26 per cent of students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: ‘If someone is using hate speech or making racially charged comments, physical violence can be justified to prevent this person from espousing their hateful views’ (see Figure 2). But as was apparent from the discussion in the student focus groups, the concept of ‘physical violence’ is too broad, ranging from throwing a milkshake over someone through to physical assault, as occurred at the King’s Libertarian Society event described in the introduction. In subsequent surveys we would like to explore the use of scenarios as used in a recent Policy Exchange study (that post-dated the work reported here),¹² as well as aspiring to be more specific on various concepts such as violence, safety and extreme views.

Although not a methodological issue in itself, we would be interested in expanding the scope of the work to survey attitudes of academic and professional staff in UK universities. For example, there is a lot of commentary on the political orientation and values of university staff. In our survey, 35 per cent of students and 31 per cent of the general public agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘the majority of academics are left wing’. But on this narrow point, there is limited evidence. A recent paper trying to answer the question ‘Are universities are left wing bastions?’, based on data from European countries, concluded that, yes, ‘professors are more liberal and left leaning than other professionals. However, there is no greater homogeneity of political orientation among the professoriate relative to other specific professions, suggesting there is a diversity of opinions which is similar to what professionals would find in other occupations’.¹³ We would love to find a way to run a survey to understand what academic and professional staff attitudes are to freedom of expression and, as with Van de Werfhorst (2019) study, would anticipate that, like students, there is a diverse range of views.

Finally, and again a comment more on scope than methods, from our work to date we do think there is an interesting opportunity to provide a broader palette of methods to create a more nuanced understanding of what students, academics and professional staff think about freedom of expression and to understand what works in protecting those freedoms. Our work has been limited to two methods – survey and focus groups – and each of those can be further strengthened in both design and execution. Additionally, there are opportunities to apply behavioural and experimental methods to see whether attitudes can be changed – both in the short term and longer term. For example, at King’s, for events that are deemed to be at risk to some breach of freedom of expression,

we have taken to providing a statement of King's joint policy on the issue (either on a slide or sometimes readout). But does this have any impact? It would be perfectly feasible to randomise this intervention and events and undertake short before and after surveys of attendees to see if attitudes shift.

Policy considerations

All the above illustrates that there is a strong agenda for further research and, given the ongoing political debate, a need to bring that evidence to policy formulation. With that in mind – and strongly caveating by the exploratory nature of our work to date – we think there are four issues that policy makers need to consider at this stage, before that evidence base is further strengthened.

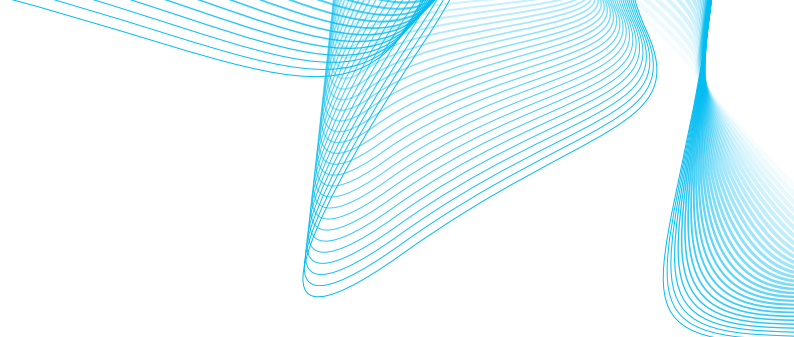
First, is the need to have a clear understanding of the policy objective from specific interventions. For example, current 'newspaper chatter' in the UK indicates that there could be further regulation of universities on the issue of freedom of expression, but as noted in the introduction there is already a strong policy framework. Further regulation in the UK is unlikely to make any difference to the issue and thus will be wholly symbolic. However, in our view, if there is a potential gap in that framework it is perhaps the regulation of student unions and the need for them to be held to account for protecting freedom of expression. This was illustrated recently when Amber Rudd, the former Home Secretary and leading Conservative Party politician, was disinvented at short notice by a student society at Oxford University.¹⁴ In the ensuing media storm, the university rather than the student society was being blamed for 'no platforming' Rudd, leading to the university putting out a public statement distancing itself from the society and condemning its actions.¹⁵

The second policy consideration is the fundamental acknowledgement that the 'four freedoms' (in King's operational definition) are at tension with one another. The commitment in the Conservative Party manifesto to 'strengthen academic freedom and free speech in universities' is a case in point, as was clearly made in our student focus groups. The tension here is that the students believed that their freedom of expression was being threatened by biased and partisan reading lists provided to them by their lecturers. However, as viewed through the lens of academic freedom it would be inappropriate for university management to intervene and suggest or require more balanced reading lists. Similarly, in the UK, Prevent legislation – aimed at reducing radicalisation in universities – inhibits free speech whilst arguably providing some form of protection for freedom from hate. On the ground, these tensions are real for university and student unions and thus at the end of the day they have to in effect use their judgement to optimise an imperfect situation. A realisation of these inevitable and inherent contradictions needs to be incorporated into any robust policy framework.

Third, and as already noted a number of times, the student population (and one suspects the broader university community) do not have a homogeneous set of views and attitudes on issues of freedom of expression. We identified two groups with significantly differential views – Activists and Libertarians – in our study. The fact that these groups make up about 40 per cent of the student population make it very hard to operationalise policies that will be accepted by the whole university community: the university and student union administrators are 'damned if they do, and damned if they don't'. Whilst



A more systemic approach to learning what works and sharing that evidence is needed in a field that is high on hyperbole and low on evidence.”



there may be no ideal solution to this, the need to recognise this diversity of views will be important for both policy makers developing national frameworks and those implementing such policies within universities.

Finally, given these tensions and diversity of views, it will be vital that new policy frameworks are appropriately evaluated – whether this is new national regulation or micro interventions. A more systemic approach to learning what works and sharing that evidence is needed in a field that is high on hyperbole and low on evidence. Building the framework to create, gather and share that evidence will be a critical first step in protecting freedom of expression in universities in the UK and globally.

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⁸ The total number of students surveyed (n=2,153) is larger than the Higher Education Policy Institute’s (HEPI) 2016 study, which surveyed 1,006 undergraduates using YouthSight’s OpinionPanel Community, YouGov’s 2018 survey of UK students (n=1,004), and the more recent 2019 Policy Exchange study (n=505) using the Prolific Academic survey platform.

⁹ Original question wording: “Do you think each of the following actions that could be taken by college students are always acceptable, sometimes acceptable, or never acceptable? How about shouting down speakers or trying to prevent them from talking” (Knight Foundation/Gallup, First Amendment Survey – 3,014 US College students, 1 Nov to 10 Dec 2017).

¹⁰ Original question wording: “If someone is using hate speech or making racially charged comments, physical violence can be justified to prevent this person from espousing their hateful views” (McLaughlin, National Undergraduate Study – 800 undergraduate students, 16-24 Sep 2017).

¹¹ Question wordings mirror those from surveys fielded in the US by Heterodox Academy.

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