



# Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group

Terms of Reference April 2023

## Convener and Administrative Support:

**Convener:** Kim Graham - Provost and Chair of the Working Group

**Deputy Convener:** Leigh Chalmers – Vice Principal and University Secretary

**Administrative support:** Provost's Office

## Purpose:

The University is committed to upholding freedom of expression, and facilitating an environment where all members of our community are able to inquire, study, and debate. This is reflected in the University's [Commitment to Freedom of Expression](#) statement and its alignment with the recent Universities UK statement reaffirming the sector's commitment to upholding and promoting freedom of speech.

The right to freedom of expression in a University community sits alongside the related principle of academic freedom. Academic freedom means academics have the ability to express their opinions, question established ideas and develop new ones, and present controversial or unpopular points of view, without placing their employment at risk.

In recent years, there have been some stark examples of the differing perspectives around freedom of expression within the University (and across the Higher Education Sector as a whole). In Edinburgh these have included the campaign around the re-naming of the David Hume Tower, issues relating to gender, and decolonisation work, the latter two being sector-wide.

This has led to increased scrutiny of the University's handling of this issue, as well as the sector as a whole. In addition, feedback from the University Court and Senate on these topics noted that the University should encourage a broad conversation on freedom of expression and academic freedom across the University community – in particular, at local level – as well as engagement with relevant external stakeholders.

The ultimate aim of the Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Working Group (the "**Working Group**") will be to support and enable the continuation of freedom of expression and academic freedom at the University of Edinburgh, in a safe and respectful manner, and have effective processes in place to intervene if that is being compromised.

## Scope and remit:

The Working Group has been established to review a number of issues that have arisen on the topic of academic freedom and freedom of expression at the University, and to submit an action plan to address identified issues to the University Executive.

The role of the Working Group will be to identify how the University can best support academic freedom and freedom of expression across its staff and student community, by drawing together an action plan for submission to the University Executive.

### **Outputs (in order of priority):**

1. To discuss and create an **action plan** in relation to academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus and submit this to the University Executive for review.

This action plan will take into account the University's Strategy 2030 where relevant, and set out proposed responsibilities within the University for taking its various elements forward.

The action plan could include:

- a. work to assess the current state of academic freedom and freedom of expression for staff and students on campus – i.e., to identify the key issues (including both internal and external factors) that should be addressed by recommendations in the action plan;
  - b. arranging events to discuss and promote academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus, facilitating a broad conversation across the University and with other universities/relevant stakeholders on academic freedom and freedom of expression issues which highlights that this matter is the responsibility of the whole academic community, and raising awareness and understanding of the University's Freedom of Expression statement;
  - c. reviewing relevant policies such as the External Speaker Policy and Dignity and Respect Policy, taking into account relevant legal obligations such as those under the Equality Act 2010, their interaction with freedom of expression/academic freedom of staff and students, and feedback from staff and students derived from the broader discussion referenced at b. above on any particular areas of concern, e.g. self-censorship; and submitting any proposed revisions to the University Executive;
  - d. considering any gaps in existing University processes and training, e.g. support for staff in relation to the use of social media, guidance for Heads of School in facilitating and handling the expression of controversial views, and making recommendations, informed by the lived experience of staff and students and reflecting a range of views across the University community, in respect of these.
2. To review the University's Freedom of Expression statement.
  3. To create a communications plan in relation to academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus that includes engagement with key stakeholders and consideration of the policy and regulatory environment.

### **Membership:**

- Kim Graham – Provost and Chair of the Working Group
- Leigh Chalmers – Vice Principal and University Secretary
- James Smith – Vice Principal, International
- Sarah Cunningham-Burley - Professor of Medical and Family Sociology and University lead for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- Lucy Evans – Deputy Secretary, Students
- Lauren Byrne - EUSA VP Welfare
- David Smith – Head of Moray House School of Education and Sport
- John Devaney - Dean and Head of the School of Social and Political Science, and Centenary Chair of Social Work
- Anne-Marie Coriat, Registrar, College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine
- Thorunn Helgason, Head of School of Biological Sciences, College of Science and Engineering
- David Matheson – Managing Solicitor, Legal Services
- Theresa Merrick, Communications and Marketing

**Frequency and Timing of meetings:**

The Group will meet on a regular basis as required and will keep the frequency of meetings under review.

**Deadlines and Delivery:**

An Action Plan shall be submitted to the University Executive for review in the first term of the academic year 23-24, with progress updates provided subsequently.