

# **Policy on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech**

## **1 Introduction**

In accordance with the duties imposed upon it by the Office for Students, the University of Essex Online (UoEO) has instituted the following Policy to ensure that we can promote academic freedom and freedom of speech within the law for members of UoEO (including the Staff/and Students).

Universities and higher education providers play an important role in society as places of debate and discussion within the law, where ideas can be tested, where students learn to challenge ideas and think for themselves, and where rationality underpins the pursuit of knowledge. UoEO is fully committed to promoting an environment in which intense inquiry and informed argument generates lasting ideas, and where members of its community have a responsibility both to challenge and to listen fully.

This commitment is of long standing. UoEO awards are validated by the University of Essex, and the University's Royal Charter provides that "Academic staff shall have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges". This commitment is reflected in the University of Essex Strategic Plan 2019–2028, which affirms the University's identity as a community of free thinkers. The Strategic Plan highlights the importance of rigorous debate, challenging received wisdom, advancing world-class research, and creating an inclusive and respectful environment in which students and staff can thrive.

## **2 Access to the Virtual Learning Environment**

To give expression to this commitment, access to the UoEO Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) will not normally be denied to any registered student, staff member, or invited speaker on the basis of:

- the beliefs or views they hold, or
- the policies or objectives of the organisation they represent.

Restrictions will only be applied where:

- the expression of such beliefs or views would be unlawful, or where there are reasonable grounds to anticipate unlawful expression on the relevant occasion;
- required for compliance with legislation, including the Education (No 2) Act 1986, the Education Reform Act 1988, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, or the Equality Act 2010; or
- necessary to protect the safety, health, or welfare of members of the UoEO community and others lawfully accessing the VLE.

In addition, UoEO affirms that freedom of speech does not extend to harassment, bullying, or sexual misconduct. Such behaviours undermine the rights and safety of others and are therefore incompatible with UoEO's values. Any such conduct will be addressed under the Kaplan Online Learning (KOL) Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy, which works alongside this Policy to ensure that freedom of speech is upheld in a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment.

UoEO will not restrict debate or deliberation simply because views may be considered unwise or offensive. However, all members of the UoEO community are expected to respect this same principle by not obstructing or interfering with the rights of others to express views with which they may strongly disagree.

Responsible Manager	Date of approval	Related Policies
Academic Director	August 2025	<u><b>Use of the Virtual Learning Environment and Social Media Policy</b></u>  <u><b>Student Code of Conduct Policy</b></u>  <u><b>Prevent Policy</b></u>



		<b><u>Harassment, Bullying and Sexual Misconduct Policy</u></b>
--	--	---

## Appendix A – Glossary of Terms

### ■ Academic Freedom

The right of staff and students, within the law, to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas or controversial opinions without risk to employment, study, or privileges.

### ■ Freedom of Speech (within the law)

The right to express opinions and ideas freely, subject to legal restrictions such as those preventing incitement to violence, harassment, or hate speech.

### ■ Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

The online platform through which UoEO delivers teaching, learning resources, discussion forums, workshops, and assessments.

### ■ Unlawful Expression

Speech or expression that violates UK law, including (but not limited to) incitement to violence, racial or religious hatred, harassment, threats, or discriminatory abuse.

### ■ Reasonably Anticipated

A standard applied where it is expected, on the basis of evidence or context, that unlawful expression is likely to occur if unrestricted access or activity is permitted.

### ■ Harassment

Unwanted behaviour related to a protected characteristic (e.g., race, gender, religion, sexual orientation) that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.

### ■ Sexual Misconduct

Any unwelcome sexual behaviour including harassment, assault, unwanted advances, or exploitation, as defined in the Kaplan Online Learning Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy.



■ **Equality Act 2010**

UK legislation providing protection against discrimination, harassment, and victimisation on the basis of protected characteristics.

■ **Office for Students (OfS)**

The independent regulator for higher education in England, responsible for ensuring quality, safeguarding students' interests, and upholding regulatory conditions such as academic freedom.