

Warwick Student Union have now done the right thing – but universities themselves must step up to defend free speech

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After taking relentless criticism on Twitter and Facebook, Warwick Student Union has reversed its decision to block Maryam Namazie from speaking on campus. Though the right decision has been made in the end, universities themselves must step up to defend free speech from puritanical student unions.

Contrite Student Union officials at Warwick have offered what looks like a [heartfelt apology](#) to secularist campaigner Maryam Namazie, after a weekend in which the Union and university were robustly criticised on Twitter, Facebook and in the national media for the Union's decision to block a talk featuring Namazie in October.

The Union have said that their own internal process for vetting speakers was [not properly followed](#) and that the decision to decline the request to host her by Warwick Atheists, Humanists and Secularists Society was only [preliminary](#).

Whatever the exact truth of it, the right result has come about; the Student Union seems genuinely to have learnt its lesson and with any luck officious Student Union busybodies in other institutions will at least think twice before blocking other speakers.

From now on, no decision by a Student Union or university to restrict freedom of speech on campus should be thought of as a 'free hit'. Each will exact a cost in public condemnation and media pressure, and each will inflict considerable reputational damage. Hopefully this will at least temper the impulse to censor.

It [should be politically excruciating](#) for Student Unions to enforce restrictions on free speech in the form of de facto blasphemy laws, and public pressure has immense power to force institutions to do the right thing, even if it is for the wrong reasons. Through this we might hope to ultimately change the pervasive culture of intellectually 'safe' (read empty) spaces and approved thought, imported from the United States, which President Obama [helpfully denounced](#) – in an intervention which might hopefully give some cover to students critical of the current, stifling orthodoxy.

We cannot rely on public outrage alone to defend free speech. Nor can we count on a 'Twitter storm' materialising at the right time with the requisite intensity, armed with the correct facts, every time that a university or union makes a censorious decision (such things happen so often – we are only weeks into the new term).

The law places a duty on universities to defend free speech, and beyond individual victories like the Warwick U-turn, something tangible needs to change. The pro-free speech side are scoring tactical victories, while in full-fledged strategic retreat.

Warwick Student Union has capitulated over one speaker, and over one event, but their policy documents remain unaltered. Significantly, their statement blames an abuse of process, rather than

questioning their policy itself. There is seemingly no acknowledgement that a policy which states that external speakers must "avoid insulting other faiths" is unacceptable.

This blasphemy law with a friendly face appears in the policy documents of others institutions, all aimed at promoting "community cohesion" or some other noble end, and the free speech rankings consequently make for grim reading. In a [traffic light system](#) rating universities on their free speech credentials, there are more universities rated amber than green, and more rated red than amber.

Just 23 universities are ranked green, less than half the number considered to have "banned and actively censored ideas on campus."

We cannot even bank the 'green' universities as safe; restrictions on their students' free speech, particularly regarding criticism of religion, are an encroaching danger. This is the climate in which the Warwick episode occurred.

Universities need to step-up and insist that their affiliated Student Unions, which they fund, obey the law and fulfil their legal, moral and scholarly duty to defend – and actively promote – freedom of expression on campus.

The Education (No. 2) Act 1986 is very clear. Universities must "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." Universities UK [describe this](#) as a "positive and proactive legal duty".

Given the current climate, and repeated attacks on freedom of expression which form a pattern of behaviour on the part of Student Unions, I think the time has long since come for universities to take steps – as required by law – to ensure free expression is actually secured.

Higher education currently faces a perfect storm of identity politics, misused 'safe space' policies, and the commercialisation of higher education with a 'customer is always right' attitude, to say nothing of the increasingly bold and outrageous attempts to enforce blasphemy laws around the world.

The institutions where so many of these battles play out cannot remain neutral or actively unhelpful any longer: we are now in the farcical situation where universities must be more radical and progressive in defending students' freedoms than Student Unions.

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