

Universities UK withdraws its guidance on gender segregation

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Universities UK (UUK) has withdrawn its [controversial guidance](#) that gender segregation could be permitted at UK universities.

This comes shortly after Downing Street weighed in on the debate; the prime minister's official spokesperson said Mr Cameron "doesn't believe guest speakers should be allowed to address segregated audiences," and that he felt "very strongly about this".

Chief Executive of UUK, Nicola Dandridge, responded saying: "Universities UK agrees entirely with the prime minister that universities should not enforce gender segregation on audiences at the request of guest speakers. However, where the gender segregation is voluntary, the law is unclear".

She stated that UUK is now working with lawyers and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to clarify the position, but that, in the meantime, it has withdrawn the case study in the guidance which triggered the debate.

The EHRC had said that it thought the gender segregation aspect of the guidance was potentially unlawful. Its chief executive, Mark Hammond, argued that gender segregation was "not permissible" under equalities laws, adding that UUK's guidance required clarification.

David Cameron's intervention followed comments by the education secretary, Michael Gove, who had been amongst those calling for a withdrawal of the original guidance, which he described as "wrong and harmful". He rejected the notion that segregation could be defended on the grounds of free expression, commenting, "we should not pander to extremism. Speakers who insist on segregating audiences should not be indulged by educators".

On Thursday, Chukka Umunna, shadow business secretary, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme that he was "horrified" by UUK's position.

Earlier this week, a large protest against the guidance was held outside the UUK's office on Human Rights day, drawing national [coverage from Channel 4](#).

UUK had [originally advised](#) that segregation by gender in talks from external speakers is fine, as long as men and women are sitting on a "side by side basis" and one party is not at a disadvantage.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, commented, "We welcome this development, having always maintained that a commitment to free speech does not extend to a speaker determining that an audience be segregated on gender grounds".

He cautioned however, that the guidelines should not be simply "adjusted" so that a way round can be found so as to make gender segregation pass a legal test. He said, "Such segregation is wrong *in principle* and should be stopped in universities entirely. Even voluntary segregation symbolises a mind-set that puts women in a different — and inferior — category."

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