ROBINSON COLLEGE

Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech

These Regulations were made by the College Council pursuant to Statute IV.4(iii) and, insofar as they concern student discipline, Statute XXX of the College Statutes, on 21 September 2026

1. Introduction

1.1 Robinson College is fully committed to the principle of freedom of speech, and to its promotion.

1.2 This Code of Practice explains this commitment, and summarises the procedures used by the College to manage these issues.

2. Scope

2.1 This Code of Practice applies to:

a) all members and employees of the College; and

b) visiting speakers and all other persons invited to, or otherwise lawfully participating in, College activities on College premises.

2.2 The Code does not apply to purely commercial events on College premises, but even here the College will take steps to fulfil the legal obligations described in section 3.

2.3 References in the Code to "College premises" means premises, whether indoor or outdoor, over which the College exercises control.

3. Key Concepts and Legislative Framework

3.1 Freedom of speech means the freedom, within the law, to receive and impart ideas, opinions or information by means of speech, writing or images (including in electronic form) without interference.

3.2 Academic freedom, in relation to academic staff associated with the College, means their freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without loss of their jobs, association or privileges at the College, or any reduction in the likelihood of their securing promotion or other work at the College.

3.3 These concepts are underpinned by the Human Rights Act 1998, which gives effect in national law to the European Convention on Human Rights. Article 10 of the Convention protects freedom of

expression as a fundamental freedom and sets out the limited grounds on which that freedom might be restricted.

3.4 Section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 places a duty on the College, in the exercise of its functions, to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'. The College is required to have procedures for assessing the risks associated with events that are hosted, funded, affiliated or branded by the College. These procedures must be exercised with regard to the importance of protecting freedom of speech.

3.5 Under the Equality Act 2010, members and staff must not be subjected to unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation or threats of violence on the grounds of race, sex, age, religion or philosophical belief, sexual orientation, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, or pregnancy or maternity. Other legislation provides similar protection. But neither the Equality Act or other legislation is to be interpreted as to undermine freedom of speech and academic freedom. Students' learning experience and the working environment of members and staff may include exposure to research, course material, discussion or speakers' views that they find offensive, contentious or unacceptable, but are nonetheless within the law.

3.6 Other legislation, concerning terrorism or public order for example, may be relevant in particular situations. The College is not under any obligation to secure or promote freedom of speech that contravenes the law.

4. Values

4.1 The College places value on freedom of thought and expression, and freedom from discrimination. The College encourages its members, staff and visitors to engage in robust, challenging, evidence-based and civil debate as an important part of academic enquiry and College life, even if they find the viewpoints expressed to be disagreeable, unwelcome or distasteful. The steps the College takes to embed these values are set out in section 5.

4.2 The College fosters an environment in which all of its members and staff can participate fully in College life, feel able to question and test received wisdom, and express new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions within the law, without fear of intolerance or discrimination.

4.3 In exercising their right to freedom of speech, the College expects its members, staff and visitors to be tolerant of the differing opinions of others, in line with the core value of freedom of expression. The College also expects its members, staff and visitors to be tolerant of the diverse identities of others, in line with the core value of freedom from discrimination. While debate and discussion may be robust and challenging, all speakers have a right to be heard when exercising their right to free speech within the law. Neither speakers nor listeners should have reasonable grounds to feel censored or intimidated.

4.4 The College will ensure that members and staff are able to exercise freedom of thought and expression within the law without placing themselves at risk of losing their job, Fellowship or other association with the College, or any College privileges and benefits, and without affecting the likelihood of their securing other jobs, work or roles in the College. The College expects all members and staff to engage with intellectual and ideological challenges in a constructive, questioning and peaceable way. The right of members to freedom of assembly, and to protest against certain viewpoints, should not obstruct the ability of others to exercise their lawful freedom of speech.

5. Steps the College Takes to Ensure Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom

5.1 The College will ensure that its teaching, curriculum, programmes of events, policies and procedures reflect its duties to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, freedom of speech and academic freedom within the law and the very high level of protection for the lawful expression of viewpoints and for speech in an academic context. This commitment by the College extends (but is not limited) to:

a) its processes for programme development and approval, quality assurance and academic assessment;

b) its processes for admission, appointment, reappointment and promotion;

c) its policies relating to equality, diversity and inclusion (including the public sector equality duty) and the Prevent duty;

d) its disciplinary code and other policies, which will ensure no individual will be subjected to disciplinary sanction or other less favourable treatment by or on behalf of the College because of the lawful exercise of freedom of speech or academic freedom.

5.2 The College does not enter into non-disclosure agreements related to complaints about sexual misconduct, bullying or harassment.

6. College, RCSA or MCR events – Procedures and Conduct of Attendees

6.1 The College encourages its members and staff to invite a wide range of speakers into College and to engage critically but courteously with them. This Code provides the only mechanism by which the College can cancel or impose conditions on College events because of the event's subject matter, or its speaker, or both. This is to ensure that the use of College premises is not inappropriately denied to any individual or body of persons on any ground connected with their beliefs or views or the policy or objectives of a body (with the exception of proscribed groups or organisations) of which

they are a member. However, all speakers should anticipate that their views might be subject to robust debate, critique and challenge.

6.2 The starting point should always be that the event should go ahead and that cancellation is exceptional and undesirable. Depending on the circumstances, it may however be reasonable to refuse permission for a College event where the College reasonably believes (from the nature of the speakers or from similar activities in the past whether held at the College or not) that:

a) the views likely to be expressed by any speaker are contrary to the law;

b) the speaker is likely to incite breaches of the law or to intend breaches of the peace to occur;

c) the event will not permit contrary or opposing viewpoints to be held or expressed;

d) the speaker and/or the organisation they represent advocates or engages in violence in the furtherance of their political, religious, philosophical or other beliefs;

e) the views likely to be expressed by any speaker are for the promotion of any illegal organisation or purpose, including organisations listed on the government's list of proscribed terrorist groups or organisations; or

f) it is in the interest of public safety, the prevention of disorder or crime, the proper functioning of the College or the protection of those persons lawfully on College premises, that the event does not take place.

6.3 The lawful expression of controversial or unpopular views will not in itself constitute reasonable grounds for withholding permission for a College event.

6.4 Where the College is reasonably satisfied that the otherwise lawful expression of views at an event on College premises is likely to give rise to disorder or threats to the safety of participants or the wider College community, the College will consider what steps it is necessary and proportionate to take to ensure the safety of all persons and the security of College premises. These may include, but are not limited to:

a) requirements as to the provision of security or stewards;

b) arranging for the speaker to be part of a panel;

c) ensuring that a member of staff is in attendance;

d) requiring the event to take place in alternative premises, at a later date, or in a different format.

6.5 The College may impose on the organisers such conditions and requirements as are reasonably necessary in all the circumstances, ensuring that they go no further than is necessary to address the risks it has identified.

6.6 These narrow exceptions to the general principle of freedom of speech are not intended ever to apply in a way that is inconsistent with the College's commitment to the free and open discussion of ideas.

6.7 Those attending events at the College are expected to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the following principles:

a) everyone has the right to free speech within the law;

b) protest is itself a legitimate expression of freedom of speech but protesters should recognise the rights of others participating in the event, and in particular not violate the rights of others to speak during the event. Protest must not shut down debate.

6.8 Where any person or body to whom this Code of Practice applies is seeking to hold an event on College premises which is outside of the normal academic curriculum the processes in the Annex must be followed, except where the event is purely commercial.

7. Breaches and Complaints

7.1 Where the College receives a complaint about the exercise of academic freedom or freedom of speech, or about a possible infringement of this Code, it will consider which of its procedures are most appropriate to consider the complaint, making such enquiries and seeking such information as it considers necessary. The College's disciplinary or grievance procedures may be invoked.

7.2 In particular:

a) Complaints from students may be pursued through the College's Student Complaints Procedure. Students may additionally take a complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

b) Complaints from academic staff may be brought by grievance under the College Statutes. See also paragraph 7.3 below.

c) Complaints from non-academic staff may be brought by raising a concern with the HR Office. See also paragraph 7.3 below.

7.3 The Office for Students (OfS) operates a free speech complaints scheme. Under the scheme, the OfS can review complaints about free speech from non-student members, staff, applicants for academic posts, and actual or invited visiting speakers. The scheme is free to use. Further information is available on its website.[1]

8. Monitoring and Review

8.1 The point of contact for any query about this Code of Practice and its Annex is a College Officer or member of staff, to be nominated by the Warden.

[1] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/freedom-of-speech/free-speech-complaints/

Annex: Processes for events on College premises

A1. This Annex is issued under paragraph 6.8 of the College's Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech, which reads: "Where any person or body to whom this Code of Practice applies is seeking to hold a College event on College premises which is outside of the normal academic curriculum the processes in the Annex shall be followed, except where the event is purely commercial."

Organisation and approval of events on College premises

A2. Any event on College premises to which this Annex applies should have at least one organiser who is responsible for the event and is a member of the College, a member of staff, or a student in another college of the University. If an event is proposed without such an organiser, it may only take place once that person has been identified.

A3. Permission is required for events to be held on College premises, whether indoors or outdoors. Permission should be sought from the Chaplain in respect of the Chapel, and from the Conferencing Team in respect of all other spaces in College.

A4. It is anticipated that, in the vast majority of cases, the Chaplain or the Conferencing Team will straightforwardly consider the request as part of normal business.

A5. However, in the exceptional circumstances that the Chaplain or the Conferencing Team considers that the holding of the event might reasonably be refused on any of the grounds set out at paragraph 6.2 of the College's Code of Practice, there is a process of escalation to a Referral Group. Only the Referral Group may refuse permission in this way and on these grounds.

A6. The Referral Group will be appointed annually by Council, and will include the Warden, one Fellow and one student representative. If any member is unavailable to consider a particular matter, the Warden or the Deputy Warden may appoint substitutes. The Referral Group will be free to determine its procedure, such as deciding whether or not it needs to meet.

A7. A member of the College or a member of staff who is concerned that a particular forthcoming event should be escalated to the Referral Group may do so directly by emailing the Warden.

A8. The Referral Group will, having consulted as necessary, determine whether the event can go ahead as originally planned, or should be subject to reasonable conditions such as those set out in paragraph 6.4 of the Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech. Only in exceptional circumstances, when there are risks which cannot be mitigated or the event organiser refuses to meet any conditions imposed, will permission be withheld.

A9. Any decision by the Referral Group (including one upheld on appeal) that an event should not take place, or may only take place subject to conditions, is binding and takes precedence over any other decision which may have been taken by any other body or officer in the College (except a decision by Council as trustees of the College) subject to the right of appeal set out below.

A10. An organiser who is unhappy with the Referral Group's decision has the right of appeal to the Council.

Management of events on College premises

A11. Once approved, the organisers of events must comply with any conditions set by the College.

In addition to seeking the permission referred to above, the organisers of any event to be held on College premises (especially one which is to be addressed or attended by persons who are not resident members of the University) which the organisers believe might attract significant protest and at which lawful free speech might be compromised should consult the Director of Operations at the earliest opportunity and ideally at least seven working days in advance.

A12. The organisers of any event must comply with any lawful and reasonable instructions given by a College officer, or by any other person authorised to act on behalf of the College, in the proper discharge of their duties.

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