

We mustn't lose sight of upholding our right to free speech

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Douglas Robb, headmaster of Gresham's School in Norfolk, argues that schools need to increase the teaching of political principles and ideologies to all children, so that there is more widespread understanding of society at large.

From what I see in the news it seems that debates at university are not nearly as much fun as they were some years ago! As a student of Politics and Economics at the University of Edinburgh, I participated in debates about political ideology, feminism, issues of race and much more, and enjoyed the experience immensely.

Although there were, undoubtedly, outrageous comments made during the course of such debates, I wouldn't have said that the debates themselves were controversial. In fact, I would say that they were doing precisely what they were supposed to be doing for us as undergraduates – ['developing our moral and debating muscles'](#).

Even when a fellow student seemed to hold a deeply unpopular or inflammatory opinion, they were permitted to make their point. We were also permitted to make a personal value judgement about them and their opinions based on the image of themselves they were presenting, and to choose whether to challenge their view, to try to change their mind, or to try to understand more about why they held such opinions.

It goes without saying, but there is a very important difference between saying something that is unpopular or offensive – take the topic of abortion, or whether a country should go to war – and saying something that is illegal – denying the holocaust or inciting violence. Making the distinction between the two is often not straight-forward. What is straight-forward, though, is that we mustn't make the mistake of putting our commitment to upholding our right to free speech on the back burner, as we pursue moral and earnest attempts to also protect people from unnecessary offence. A case in point is the extension of university 'No Platform' policies to avoid causing offence (rather than to avoid giving a platform to proscribed groups, as was the intention of such policies) for instance, [the University of Cape Town rescinded an invitation to the journalist who commissioned the Danish cartoons of Mohammad](#).

Clearly times have changed since I was an undergraduate; we could discuss the merits of Marxism, for instance, in relative safety. We didn't have to worry about our views being quoted on social media, and the potential of being labelled forever more as a communist. 'Safe spaces' at universities are a current hot topic but, instead of providing students with a place in which to conduct such debates about difficult or potentially controversial ideas without fear of repercussion, as I was fortunate to enjoy, these 'safe spaces' are intended to provide people with a place to discuss issues without having people disagree with them, or offend them with their retort. A culture has developed in which people are now hesitant to share their personal opinions – from how they voted in the EU referendum, perhaps, to how they might vote on the topic of same sex marriage – for fear of losing their job, or social standing. Teachers and lecturers are not immune, and are often anxious to share their own opinions even within the context of a topical debate or [even when invited to by students](#).

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