

Freedom of Speech in Higher Education (30th March 2020)

by Prof Alison Scott-Baumann and Dr Maryyum Mehmood

On Thursday 27th February, Professor Scott-Baumann and Dr Mehmood represented SOAS Corridors of Power (CoP) at the **Universities UK 'Enhancing the Student Experience'** annual event. Our two CoP delegates spoke on the **panel: 'Freedom of Speech in Higher Education'**.

Professor Scott-Baumann initiated the talk by introducing the **Islam on campus research project**, for which she was the primary investigator. The Islam on campus research team **(2015-2018)** collected and analysed the largest data set yet produced: **2,020 students attending 132 universities in England, Wales, Scotland and N. Ireland answered a survey. Between them, the team of academics from SOAS, Lancaster, Coventry and Durham Universities collected 140 hours of interviews and focus groups at 6 universities.**

Their findings show that **students across the board feel limited in what they can say and discuss**, what topics they can study and which books they can get out of the library. This **applies to all students**, not only Muslims. More significant is the **negative impact of Prevent and the Charity Commission regulation of Student Unions**. This creates a deafening white noise that makes it difficult to work out what free speech is. According to their findings, students across the **UK believe that religious identity on campus is a force for good** and many believe they are **tolerant of differences. Muslim students and staff and others of colour** also embrace this principle, but in practice they do **experience discrimination**. Excellent **solutions** were suggested by students and staff, including: **increase chaplaincy provision** and ensure that all **major faiths are equally and respectfully represented** (including Jewish students); provide more courses that have a **strong interfaith component** and counteract media misinformation e.g. on Islam and Judaism; **increase opportunities for interfaith social mixing** e.g. non-alcoholic social spaces. Finally and most importantly, the research recommends support for student unions with negotiating free speech issues.

Dr Mehmood highlighted the importance of not just amplifying student voices, but a firm commitment to ensuring that their words are taken heed of and applied in university teaching environments. The **key to sustainably and practically upholding freedom of speech in higher education is dialogue, debate and discussion in a respectful and safe setting**. Universities are not just about attaining degrees; we must **ensure that students are equipped with the tools and techniques required to influence those in power**. Dr Mehmood introduced the [Corridors of Power project](#), its aims and objectives, and how those in the wider Higher Education Academy can get involved. She also spoke about **CoP's promotion of the [ParliaMentors](#) UN award-winning leadership programme** for university students from different faith and belief backgrounds. The programme, which is **run by the Faith & Belief Forum**, is a prime example of how **students can collaborate to create real social change, all the while being mentored by serving MPs**. Through **expert-led training, support from local and national NGOs, and access to Westminster**, ParliaMentors gives students the networks and skills they need to effect real change in their communities, in their careers and in the political arena. **Enhancing the student experience is about empowering students**, especially those most in need. It is **through collaborative initiatives** that this can most effectively be achieved. Ultimately, **freedom of speech and safety of students cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive**; it is imperative to ensure that both are **protected in unison**.

Visit our website for further briefings (<https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/>). If you would like a personal briefing or clarification on any of the issues raised here, please contact Dr Mehmood mm167@soas.ac.uk. Do contact Professor Alison Scott-Baumann and her team for further briefings and access to other experts as150@soas.ac.uk