THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

**Guidance for teaching and research on sensitive topics**

*Introduction*

The University of Leeds is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression within the law. As a global institution, we welcome staff, students and visitors from around the world and encourage critical thinking through the open exchange of ideas and opinions, including where this concerns potentially sensitive subjects.

The introduction on 30 June 2020 of the National Security Law (NSL) in China has raised questions about how staff should approach the teaching of, and research into, certain subjects. Under this law, an individual – whether inside or outside China – who is writing or commenting in public on Chinese affairs may be deemed to have broken the law if they are expressing views which the Chinese authorities regard as interference or undermining.

Staff and students may be concerned about the implications of the NSL, and this could have a chilling effect on free speech and freedom of expression. For example, there may be a reluctance among some students to express views about aspects of Chinese politics, history or society in lectures, seminars, group discussions and presentations.

Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) may also be concerned about undertaking research in such areas.

This guidance does not relate solely to the NSL, but seeks to address the broader ethical and practical concerns about pedagogy and freedom of speech and to raise awareness of emerging issues which are arising from the growth in online teaching. Some international students may feel that the laws and prevailing beliefs in their own country leave them similarly compromised if studying issues surrounding religion or sexuality, for example. While the discussion of issues in an open, respectful environment should be encouraged, staff should consider how best to approach the learning and teaching of what may be deeply-held beliefs.

This guidance is not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to provide information which can educate and empower staff, either individually or in the context of their School, to find flexible solutions to challenges that they may encounter.

*Key points*

The University is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression within the law. Staff should continue to teach the Leeds curriculum in full, and not alter teaching materials or self-censor when covering potentially sensitive subjects.

Students are keen to develop critical thinking skills and should expect to engage with alternative perspectives as part of the curriculum. In certain teaching contexts it may be desirable and even essential to engage with highly sensitive political topics.

Staff should, however, be alert to potential risks when teaching certain topics, and may choose to make allowances in some circumstances. For example, staff teaching a module about the politics of contemporary China should continue to teach content in full, but be mindful that some students might feel uncomfortable when considering some subjects and, as a result, be reluctant to actively participate in group discussions or presentations during synchronous teaching and learning activities. Students should not be penalised academically for this.

Staff should avoid “ambushing” students in class with direct questions about potentially sensitive issues when these issues are not core module components.

Where it is important pedagogically for students to engage with such challenging issues, they should be given the opportunity to critically engage in different ways, perhaps via a written submission rather than a class presentation.

Such scenarios will not concern the majority of staff. However, colleagues should be alert to scenarios where teaching unwittingly strays into a sensitive area, and they might be unaware of potential risks and how to respond.

During their research degree candidature, PGRs, as the creators of new knowledge, should not refrain from exploring, questioning and challenging ideas even where this concerns sensitive subjects.

Supervisors should continue to fully support PGRs carrying out research on challenging subjects in accordance with the general principles set out above but should be alert to potential risks. In the first instance, PGRs and supervisors should discuss any concerns with the Director of Postgraduate Research Studies in their School.

When considering the publication of research on sensitive subjects, supervisors and PGRs may wish to consider whether it is appropriate to take steps such as embargo on the publication of research findings for a set period.

Any concerns should be raised with the relevant Director of Postgraduate Research Studies or the Graduate School.

*Online teaching*

The growth in online teaching creates exciting new opportunities for pedagogy, but also raises questions where this concerns the teaching of sensitive subjects for students in the UK, and in some countries overseas.

When UK-based staff are teaching students based in China or Hong Kong, colleagues should be alert to the risks associated with the electronic transmission of learning and teaching materials which might be judged sensitive.

Staff should take care with the recording of educational activities that cover particularly sensitive material. Staff should seek guidance from their Heads of School about requesting an exemption from recording where there are concerns about the recording and publication of politically sensitive material.

Staff should take care with the recording of educational activities where it is likely to involve students commenting on sensitive topics, and may wish to stop recordings during interactive activities, or edit these before publication.

Staff should also remind students that privately recording such discussions violates the University’s Audio Visual Recording Policy, unless a student with a disability needs to make a recording for their own use.

Students working with course materials or writing assessments that are potentially sensitive should be encouraged to store written work or other saved documents on the University’s servers and not on their personal computers.

The University’s Freedom of Expression protocol is here: <https://www.leeds.ac.uk/secretariat/documents/freedom_of_expression_protocol.pdf>

Universities UK (UUK) has issued further guidance - ‘Managing risks in internationalisation’: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/managing-risks-in-internationalisation.aspx>

UUK states: “Rigorous, informed debate is at the foundation of high-quality higher education and the advancement of knowledge, underpinned by values of academic freedom and freedom of speech. We must work together proactively to ensure the key values of UK higher education are understood, protected and championed at every level of the institution.” (p.23)