

Policy and Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom

The object of this Policy, the Code of Practice and related policies is to delineate how Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom are protected by and operated within the law at the RVC.

1. Policy Statement

The Royal Veterinary College (the RVC) is fully committed to securing and promoting the freedom of speech and academic freedom for all staff, students and visiting speakers. This code sets out how we will achieve that and meet our obligation under the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023.

The RVC will take all such steps as are reasonably practical to ensure freedom of speech and academic freedom within the law is secured for its students, staff and visiting speakers. It will also ensure the freedom of its Academic Staff within the law to question, and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing jobs or privileges.

2. Scope

This Policy and the Code of Practice applies to all staff and students of the RVC together with organisations and authorised individuals using our premises for events.

3. Context

The RVC is committed to its values. These are defined as: “a combination of professionalism and commitment, manifest in a culture of compassion and caring, that speaks to others of our respect for our heritage, our dedication to quality and innovation, our devotion to the advancement of knowledge and the alleviation of suffering”, and they are given further effect by the RVC Charter which exhorts its members to work “ethically and with integrity and not to take any action which would be detrimental, irresponsible or unreasonable in the view of society”.

The principle of academic freedom is enshrined in our Royal Charter (Section 9) and Statutes (15 1b & 3a) as well as in legislation as: “the freedom for our Academic Staff within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing jobs or privileges”.

The rights to Academic Freedom, Freedom of Speech and also Freedom of Expression (as defined in the Human Rights Act 1998 (Article 10)) are not absolute. They are freedoms within the Law, and it is not only concomitant with our values but equally the duty of the RVC to ensure whilst protecting Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression that offences are not committed under either:

- the Public Order Act 1986 - which criminalises incitement to racial hatred or hatred against persons on religious grounds or on grounds of sexual orientation; or
- the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 which asks us to both have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and to our duties under the Education Act 1986 (Section 43); or

- The Terrorism Acts 2000 and 2006 which makes it an offence to arrange, manage or assist in arranging or managing a meeting in the knowledge that the meeting is to support or further the activities of a proscribed organisation; or
- Serious Crime Act 2007 in relation to encouraging or assisting the commission of an offence (sections 44-46)
- Other relevant legislation as is or as may be agreed from time to time.

4. Authority of the Policy and Code of Practice and associated policies and procedures

This Policy and the Code of Practice applies to all staff, students and visiting speakers, and any other category of individual authorised to be on the RVC's premises.

The Policy and Code of Practice are designed to ensure so far as is reasonably practical, that the use of any premises of the RVC is not denied to any individual or body of persons on any ground connected with the beliefs or views of that individual or of any member of that body or the policy or objectives of that body.

The Policy and Code of Practice apply to all and works alongside related existing and new policies and procedures of the RVC including but not limited to:

- Events Booking Policy & Procedure
- Visitors Booking Policy & Procedure
- Dignity at Work Policy
- Equality Policies & Guidance
- Student Social Media Policy
- IT Acceptable Use Policy
- Public Interest Disclosure

5. Criteria for decision-making over events and visiting speakers

In considering whether or not to allow a particular event to take place on its premises or elsewhere under its authority, the RVC Event Sponsor has to consider:

- a) Whether the views or ideas to be put forward (or the manner of their expression) infringe the legally recognised rights of others, or breach legal provisions on non-discrimination
- b) Whether the activity in question:
 - Constitutes a criminal offence
 - Constitutes a threat to public safety of individuals, or
 - Incites others to commit criminal acts

The RVC will bear the cost of appropriate security for approved events except in exceptional circumstances. Circumstances are 'exceptional' when security costs are not proportionate to the cost associated with running the event and exceed a reasonable amount. In these circumstances the residue of the security costs will be passed onto the organisers.

Should the RVC Event Sponsor require a second opinion on whether to allow an event to take place, all matters will be referred to the College Executive Committee for a final decision.

6. Grievances, Complaints and Concerns

The RVC would hope that all grievances, complaints and concerns could be satisfactorily addressed through informal discussion resolution, however in the case that:

- Any student who has cause to believe that that they are suffering personal harm or distress through the misapplication of this policy should utilise the RVC's Complaints Procedure.
- Any member of staff who has cause to believe that they are suffering personal harm or distress through the misapplication of this policy should utilise the RVC's Grievance Procedure.

7. Disciplinary Offences

The RVC will normally hope to informally resolve matters of potentially unsatisfactory conduct, without resorting to formal procedures. Recognising however, that this is not always possible, the RVC's disciplinary procedure may be used as a formal means of helping and encouraging employees to achieve and maintain acceptable standards in relation to this Policy, the Code of Practice and related procedures.

Approved by the RVC Council on the 04 July 2024