

Memo on Stonewall and Academic Freedom

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The SMC has recently announced that the School is withdrawing from the Stonewall charity on the basis of academic freedom considerations, according to a recent [staff news announcement](#): "SMC believe the best way to ensure ongoing advancement of equity, diversity and inclusion, which includes sustaining LSE as a place for the free exchange of ideas and academic discussion, is through not renewing our membership."

Issues of academic freedom lie squarely within the remit of the LSE's Academic Board. Its [terms of reference](#) state: "To the Academic Board are brought all major issues of general policy affecting the academic life of the School and its development." So, it appears to be a procedural error that the Academic Board was not consulted on a policy decision that involved considerations of academic freedom.

In this memo, I would like to discuss the fact that the LSE's participation in Stonewall places no restrictions whatsoever on the free academic exchange of ideas. Not one. Absolutely everything Stonewall offers is advisory and non-binding, and none of its advice bears on academic freedom.

Let me begin by explaining what the Stonewall charity does for the LSE.

Like most useful services, the service Stonewall provides is insultingly pedestrian. It consists in a feedback exercise, called the Diversity Champions programme, aimed at improving equity, diversity and inclusion for LGBTQ+ employees. Its most visible feature is an annual poll of university staff. Data from that poll is collected, together with a university report, and used to provide feedback on the treatment and understanding of LGBTQ+ people. The topics include things like policies and benefits, monitoring, senior leadership, and community engagement. Participants also receive a national ranking amongst other employers, called the [Workplace Equality Index](#), together with concrete advice about how to improve. A university is free to take or ignore that advice. However, the exercise is an annual occasion to form an action plan to hold the SMC accountable to its commitments to LGBTQ+ staff and students, especially since our scores have been falling year on year.

Stonewall's advisory feedback includes a popular training programme for staff LGBTQ+ Role Model and Ally mentors. There is also a wealth of tailored advice and resources, including on how to navigate the legal status of free speech in different countries.

Forgive me for repeating this point: Stonewall creates resources in support of academic freedom of speech, which you may [read for yourself](#).

There is also advice in support of trans, non-binary and intersex staff and students. For example, the LSE has a large number of single-occupant toilets that are gendered, which is not welcoming for these people, and some changing spaces without a non-gendered changing room option. Stonewall also provides legal advice if a university solicits it, such as how to interpret the phrase "gender identity" according to the 2010 UK Equalities Act, which is a very dynamic legal landscape in UK courts right now.

I expect you might now be wondering about topics of more salacious public interest, and of potential relevance to academic freedom, such as: whether the meaning and status of gender and sex is a suitable topic for academic discussion. **The topic of academic freedom plays absolutely no role in any of Stonewall's employer programmes.** Stonewall does not count how many times a university provides a platform for some political or philosophical discussion in lecture theatres or hallways. Their guidance does not evaluate whether or not a controversial philosopher, activist, or fantasy author was mentioned in talks, classes, or articles. If you have any doubt about this, take a moment and have a look at how Stonewall's [Workplace Equality Index](#) is scored. Details about the programme are well-documented on Stonewall's website. Their character can also be confirmed by myself or any of us who have participated in the Stonewall evaluation exercise.

If you find this surprising, there is a ready explanation: misinformation about Stonewall is being repeated so routinely that it may soon become theology. Political campaign groups routinely present themselves as free speech defenders and provide heavily-footnoted critiques of Stonewall. The quantities of irrelevant citations produced are comparable to the best artificial intelligence generators. However, what you will not find in those documents is any evidence of a Stonewall university programme restricting academic freedom.

Let it be hallowed that free academic discussion is welcome at the LSE. Some members of the community may fear that academic freedom is a problem at the LSE that should be improved. However, this does not imply that the problem is caused by Stonewall's university feedback programmes.

We are right to be concerned about academic freedom. But remember that freedom in the twenty-first century is often delivered as a wooden horse filled with unnecessary burdens. One such horse was recently delivered to British voters disguised as freedom from European tyranny. By withdrawing from Stonewall, the LSE is similarly giving up the only serious protection for its LGBTQ+ staff and students, through considerations of freedom that have no basis in fact.

It is the job of the Academic Board to evaluate any policy that bears on academic life at the LSE, especially regarding academic freedom. There is so much on this year, but this is one of the really important ones. I ask the Academic Board to please carefully consider this issue.

— [Bryan W. Roberts](#)

