



Guidance for Event Organisers: does your event require a self-assessment under the External Speakers Policy?

Introduction

Since 1 August 2025, the University has been under a duty, in sections A1 to A3 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, to take steps that are reasonably practicable to secure freedom of speech within the law for its staff, members, students and visiting speakers, having particular regard to the importance of freedom of speech.

This guidance helps you identify whether a self-assessment is required. Being within scope of the Policy does not mean that an event is likely to be refused: the starting point is that events go ahead (a presumption of approval), and the purpose of the self-assessment is to identify the reasonably practicable steps that will allow the event to proceed safely and lawfully.

From 1 September 2026, a visiting speaker who has been invited to speak at the University, and any member of staff or non-student member affected, may complain directly to the Office for Students if they consider that their lawful freedom of speech or academic freedom has not been secured. Every decision to permit, postpone, condition or refuse an event must therefore be recorded in writing, together with the reasons for it and the free speech considerations taken into account.

Scope

An **External Speaker Event** is any organised activity, meeting, or gathering held under the auspices of the University or Bristol SU, whether held on or off University premises or online, at which one or more individuals who are **not current students, staff, or formally appointed officers of the University** are invited to speak, present, teach, debate, or otherwise address an audience.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Guest lectures, seminars, workshops, and panel discussions;
- Conferences, symposiums, and public talks;
- Student society events featuring invited speakers;
- Webinars or virtual sessions hosted or endorsed by the University;
- Events co-hosted with external organisations where non-university individuals are speaking.

For the purposes of the External Speakers Policy ("the Policy"), an event will be considered an External Speaker Event **regardless of whether it is open to the public or restricted to members of the University**, and irrespective of whether attendance is free or ticketed.

An individual will be considered an **external speaker** if they:

- Are not currently employed by, enrolled at, or formally contracted by the University in a capacity directly related to the event as set out in section 2 below; and
- Are invited primarily for the purpose of contributing expertise, opinion, or commentary.

Exclusions: What Is Not an External Speaker Event

This definition does not normally include routine teaching delivered by visiting academics under formal contractual arrangements, or internal university meetings where external individuals are present but not acting as speakers.

The following activities will **not normally be classified as External Speaker Events** for the purposes of this policy:

1. Internal University Activities

- Teaching, lectures, seminars, tutorials, or assessments delivered by **current university staff or enrolled students** as part of their normal academic duties;
- Internal meetings, committees, or governance activities where external individuals may attend but are **not acting in a speaking or presenting role**;
- Presentations delivered by students as part of coursework, assessed work, or student-led academic activity.

2. Contracted or Appointed Roles

- Teaching or speaking delivered by individuals who are **formally contracted, employed, or appointed by the University** (e.g. visiting lecturers, adjunct professors, examiners, consultants acting within their contractual duties);
- External professionals delivering training or instruction **as part of a pre-approved service contract or procurement arrangement**.

3. Informal or Incidental Participation

- Events where external individuals are **passive attendees only**, and do not address the audience;
- Career fairs, networking events, or exhibitions where external participants are present primarily to **engage informally rather than deliver structured presentations** (unless they are giving a talk or formal session).

4. Routine Collaboration Activities

- Academic collaboration meetings, research project discussions, departmental seminars and partnership working groups where contributions are primarily interactive;

However, any activity listed above that involves sensitive or controversial issues would fall into the remit of the Policy and should be assessed by the Event Organiser by completing the self-assessment form as per the procedure set out in the Policy. The fact that a topic is sensitive or controversial is not, on its own, a valid reason to restrict or refuse the activity. Lawful speech is protected even where it may offend, shock or disturb, and any restriction must be lawful, necessary and proportionate.

- Supervision meetings involving external partners (e.g. placement supervisors, industry mentors) where no public or formal presentation is taking place.

5. Private or Social Events

- Purely social or hospitality events (e.g. receptions, dinners) where any remarks made are **incidental, informal, and not the primary purpose of the event**
- Events organised privately by individuals that **are not held under the University's name, premises, or auspices.**

6. Pre-Recorded or Published Content (with no live engagement)

- Use of pre-recorded lectures, media clips, or published materials in teaching, where the original speaker is **not participating in the event itself.**

Clarifying Principle

An activity will generally **not** be considered an External Speaker Event where:

- There is **no invited external individual acting in a formal speaking, presenting, or addressing role,** or
- The individual's involvement arises from a **formal contractual, employment, or routine academic arrangement,** rather than a discrete invitation to speak, or
- Academic meetings or seminars where contributions from the external participants are interactive, unless the content is sensitive or controversial.

Borderline Cases

Where there is uncertainty, the defining test should be:

Is the external individual being invited specifically to address an audience in a structured way under the University's name or auspices?

If yes, the activity is likely to be an External Speaker Event and should fall within scope.

If in Scope

If the activity is in scope, complete the self-assessment as early as possible and within the time periods set out in the Policy. Late referral reduces the options available for allowing the event to proceed and increases the risk that the University fails to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech.

Do not require the organiser to meet security costs as a condition of a controversial event proceeding, and do not cancel, relocate or curtail an event solely because of the anticipated reaction of others. If either course appears necessary, escalate the case to Legal Services before any decision is communicated.

If you remain unsure about whether your event is an external speaker event under the Policy, contact Legal Services for advice by emailing legal-services@bristol.ac.uk