

## Policy on Free Speech and Safe Space

Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of Amsterdam, November 2019

Engaging with potentially controversial issues in diverse environments, such as we do in our university programmes, can sometimes lead to tensions, even conflict. This creates a dilemma: On the one hand, we seek to provide a study environment in which UvA students and teachers feel safe and respected; on the other hand, we subscribe to the fundamental value of academic freedom, which requires freedom of expression. In this policy document we clarify our response to this dilemma: We reject the approach of seeking to prevent or control conflict through censorship or directives. Instead, we promote the values of diversity, freedom of speech, and respect, and we foster open engagement to negotiate inevitable tensions in a process of mutual learning.

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At the University of Amsterdam, students are exposed to the highest standards of research-inspired academic teaching. Our study programmes are dynamic learning spaces relying on both physical and virtual interaction. In all our programmes we encourage active learning by establishing meaningful human contact and interaction between students, teachers, and sometimes guests in diverse, inclusive, and inspiring environments. Often, our programmes include students from different nationalities and are conducted in English. Then we speak of working within an “international classroom.”<sup>1</sup> **We strongly welcome diversity in our programmes.** We are convinced that national and other forms of diversity enhance the learning experience for everyone involved and help our students to develop useful networks and intercultural and communication skills. By creating a diverse and dynamic learning environment we want to help our students grow into well-informed and open-minded citizens capable of creating new knowledge and insight and becoming drivers of innovation in tomorrow’s world. We want to see our graduates move on to play pivotal roles in devising solutions to societal problems and in breaking down societal divides, locally and globally.

Diversity – national, gender, political, religious, sexual, racial/ethnic, ability-related and other forms – enhances learning because people with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and views bring different perspectives to a discussion and help everyone to see the issues discussed in

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<sup>1</sup> This document draws on an advice prepared in June 2018 by the UvA-wide “Taskforce International Classroom” and entitled “Amsterdam’s Global University in the Classroom”.

novel ways.<sup>2</sup> Being confronted with other perspectives in that way can be truly eye-opening and transformative. It can also help us make the world a better place by fostering mutual understanding and laying foundations for cooperation. However, being confronted with other perspectives can sometimes also be uncomfortable and trigger negative emotions. There has in the past years been much discussion and debate within academic circles in which people try to balance the value of free speech with that of a “safe space” in which people will be protected from being upset.<sup>3</sup> Different academic institutions strike a different balance in this debate. This document clarifies the position we take at the University of Amsterdam’s Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

**We ascribe to the value of free speech, without the fear of censorship, discrimination, or condemnation.** In our programmes, all students – no matter where they come from and what their experiences have been -- are encouraged to speak up, write freely, listen critically, challenge each other, and in this way learn. This reflects Dutch educational culture which, in international comparison, tends to value inquisitiveness, assertiveness, and taking position. We expect that students and faculty will be engaged in discussion, debate, and sometimes disagreement. In the latter case, the ultimate outcome of discussion may be “agreeing to disagree” – it may not be possible to come to a shared judgment, and that is fine. Important is respect for each other’s views and the feeling that we can exchange those views openly. It also means being able to raise supposed taboo issues, defend unpopular opinions, or use scientific argument to question common sense. Students and teachers should feel safe to express themselves and be brave enough to do so – that is the meaning we at the UvA give to “safe space” in academia.<sup>4</sup>

**The limits to free speech are given by the principles of civility and mutual respect.**

Responsibility to uphold these principles lies with both staff and students. The freedom of expression does not include the freedom to insult or threaten others. However, people may perceive differently when a line has been overstepped. Important for creating our safe space is that everyone can speak up if they feel that the tone of the conversation has become too hostile, the conversation is biased, or if they are otherwise made uncomfortable. Also, if someone wants to be addressed differently, for example in a differently gendered or non-gendered way, we want them to feel safe to ask. We do not, however, place restrictions beforehand on our teachers about what they can speak about or how. They may raise topics or

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<sup>2</sup> In study programmes where this is relevant, notably in the social sciences and humanities, the curriculum itself can be diversified for the same reason: to give space to different perspectives linked to, for example, different historical experiences.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of “safe space” is at its core aimed at protecting people against active marginalization, stereotyping, or discriminatory abuse, but often extended to promise protection against other forms of provocation or emotional disturbance (e.g. by reminders of possible personal trauma).

<sup>4</sup> This notion is sometimes referred to as “brave space” as opposed to “safe space”. Other definitions of safe spaces are, of course, also legitimately in use at the university. Students and staff may, for example, apply the term to events or areas on campus that provide space for a particular group (e.g. women or sexual minorities).

make statements that shock you. As a student you should understand that this is not done to offend you, but to make you think. If you want to object, you are invited to do so openly.

Our position on academic freedom entails that **we do not require the use of “trigger warnings”** as they are now in place in some academic institutions, i.e., alerts given to students by teachers prior to presenting or discussing any material that might be potentially controversial or upsetting. At the GSSS, each faculty member can, at their own discretion, preface the presentation of potentially upsetting material with a content warning. If such an explicit warning is given, any student has the right to excuse themselves temporarily from the class. However, this is NOT a required or routine practice. We believe that learning is inherently a process of questioning and grappling with controversial, sometimes difficult and negatively laden topics. We want to provide a supportive and open environment in which to do so. Shielding students from this process is antithetical to our pedagogical principles.

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In conclusion, we do not aim for a space that is made safe by fear of speaking one’s mind, a space where topics or opinions are pre-selected as acceptable, suspicious, or condemnable. Instead, we aim for a brave space that is made safe by mutual openness and respect, a genuine acceptance of diversity, and a shared desire to learn with and from each other, a space where all students, irrespective of their background, are made to feel welcome and engage, and where we equally respect the professionalism and humanity of our teaching staff.