

64% doubt YUSU's commitment to upholding free speech

Survey reveals that more than half of University of York students doubt YUSU's efforts on free speech

By [Chris Owen](#), Editor (2015/16)

Tuesday 16 February 2016



Credit: Jack Richardson

A Nouse study into student opinions on free speech and censorship at York has found that 64 per cent of students either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that YUSU “upholds free speech on campus very well”.

By comparison, the survey found that just over half of students disagree or strongly disagree that the University itself upholds free speech very well, reflecting a slightly more favourable stance towards its track record on free speech than YUSU's. When asked to respond to the statement “YUSU values free speech on campus very highly”, 56 per cent of students said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed. When asked to respond to the same statement of the University, 43 per cent responded negatively.

The news comes after York was downgraded from a ‘Green’ to ‘Amber’ university in Spiked's University Free Speech Rankings. An ‘Amber’ university “chills free speech and free expression by issuing guidance with regard to appropriate speech and conduct”.

Spiked cites the cancellation of the University's recognition of International Men's Day in December 2015, as well as the University's definition of harassment as including “offensive verbal or practical jokes”. The Guide also references YUSU's zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment, which it says restricts “unwelcome or unwanted sexual innuendoes” to the detriment of free speech.

When asked if they agreed that the University's cancellation of International Men's Day at York was an

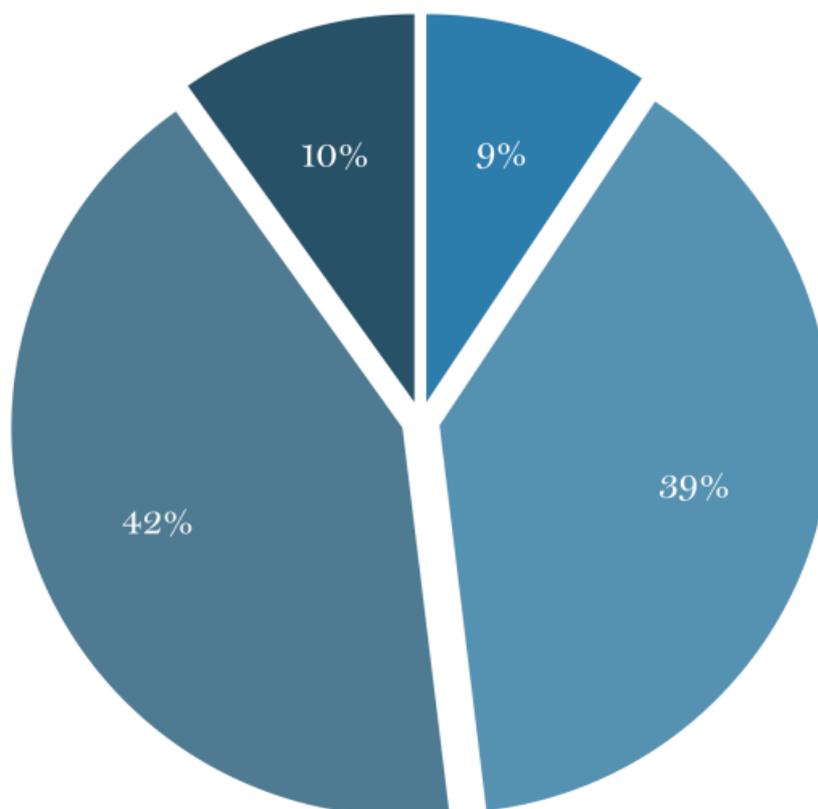
example of campus censorship, 57 per cent answered 'Yes', with 10 per cent saying they weren't sure. On the topic of the University's definition of harassment as including "offensive verbal or practical jokes", just 36 per cent of students felt that this represented an example of censorship.

215 responses were submitted to the survey in six days, which is the first of its kind to be conducted at York. Respondents - 98 per cent of whom agreed that free speech at a University was important or very important - were also asked to share their thoughts freely on the reasons for the answers provided.

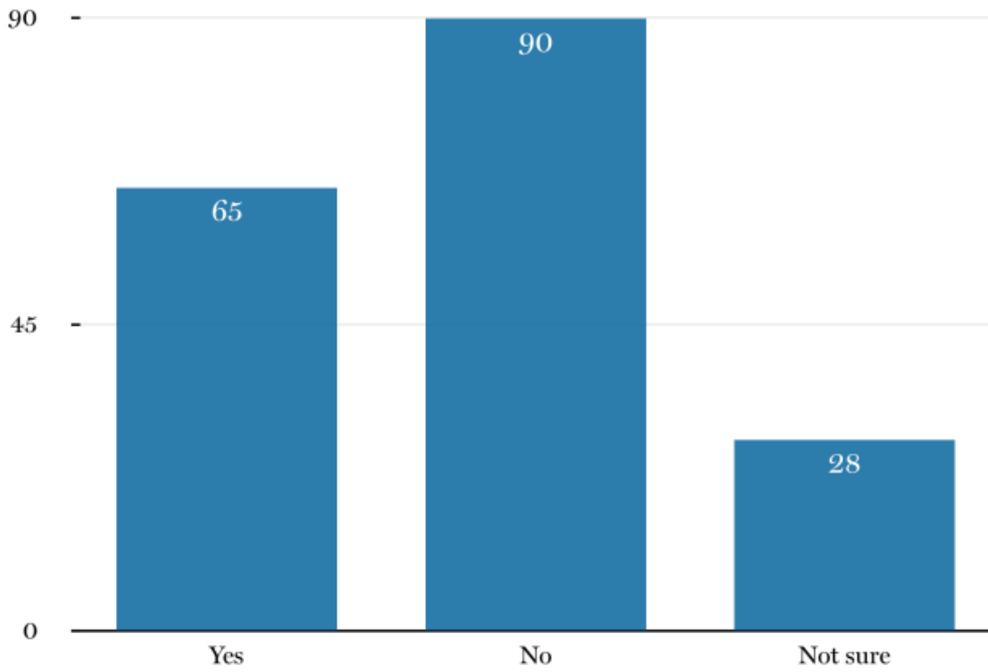
On the point of YUSU's track record, some felt that the Union's duty of care interfered with its commitment to preserving free speech. One respondent said that YUSU's "code of conduct focuses too much on 'wellbeing' to the detriment of rigorous debate and speech", and another declared that "while it is crucial to strike a fair balance between minority rights and freedom of speech/expression, YUSU constantly favours the former at the expense of the latter".

Others questioned the political neutrality of YUSU and pointed to this as potentially interfering with its ability to make decisions regarding free speech-related issues like no-platforming of speakers; one student said that "YUSU does a commendable job of supporting free speech for left wing views." Another respondent declared YUSU's insistence that all content be proofed before it can be published in student media as "a blatant contravention of the principle of free expression". However, another student stated that "free speech is not devalued by YUSU to the extent it is by the University".

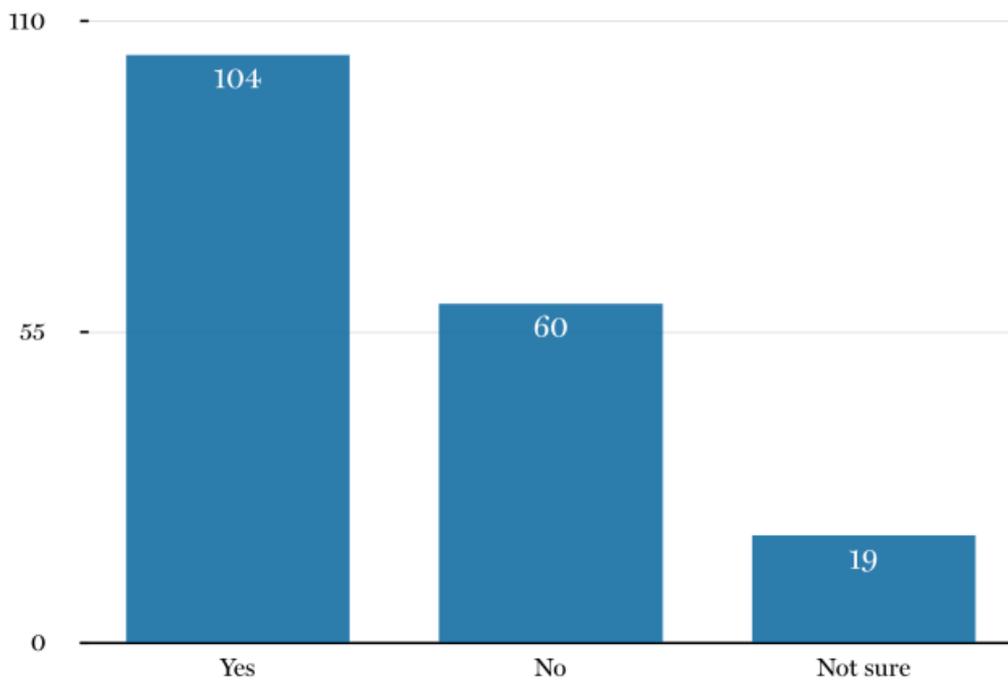
● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree



"The University of York upholds free speech on campus very well." [Click right to see more results](#)

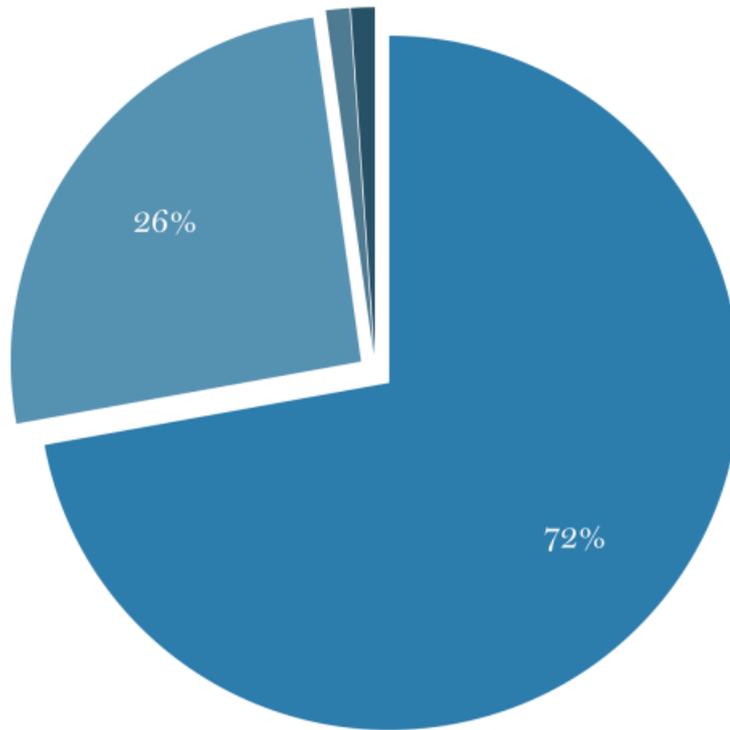


Do you think the University's Harassment Policy, which defines harassment, in part, as 'offensive verbal or practical jokes', is an example of campus censorship? N.B. 32 submissions discounted for incomplete responses.



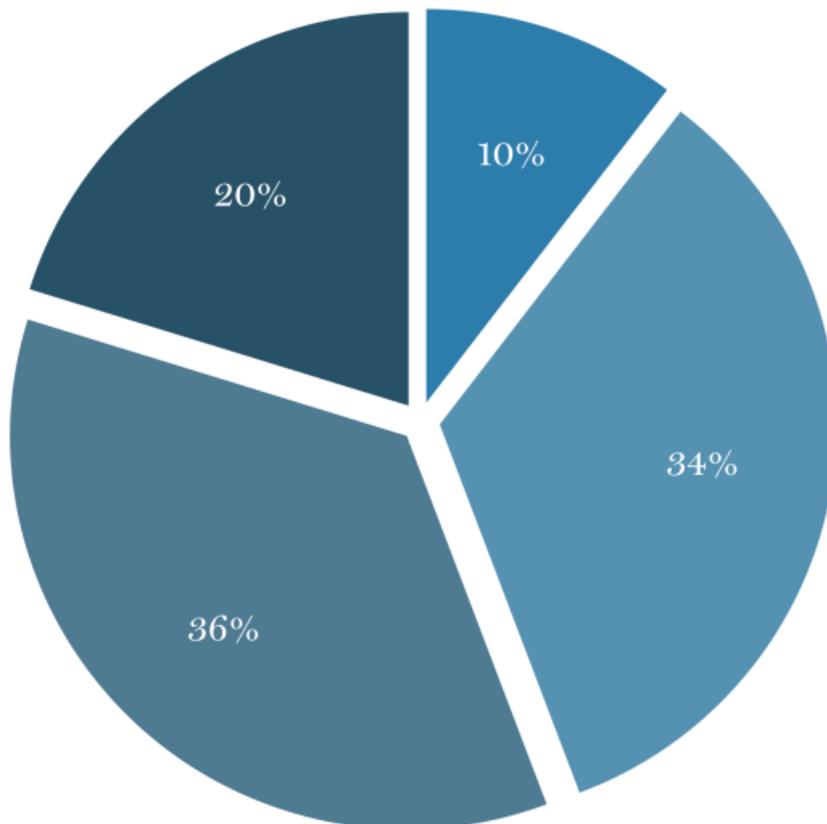
Do you think the University's decision to cancel its participation in International Men's Day in December 2015 was an example of campus censorship?

● Very important ● Important ● Unimportant ● Very unimportant



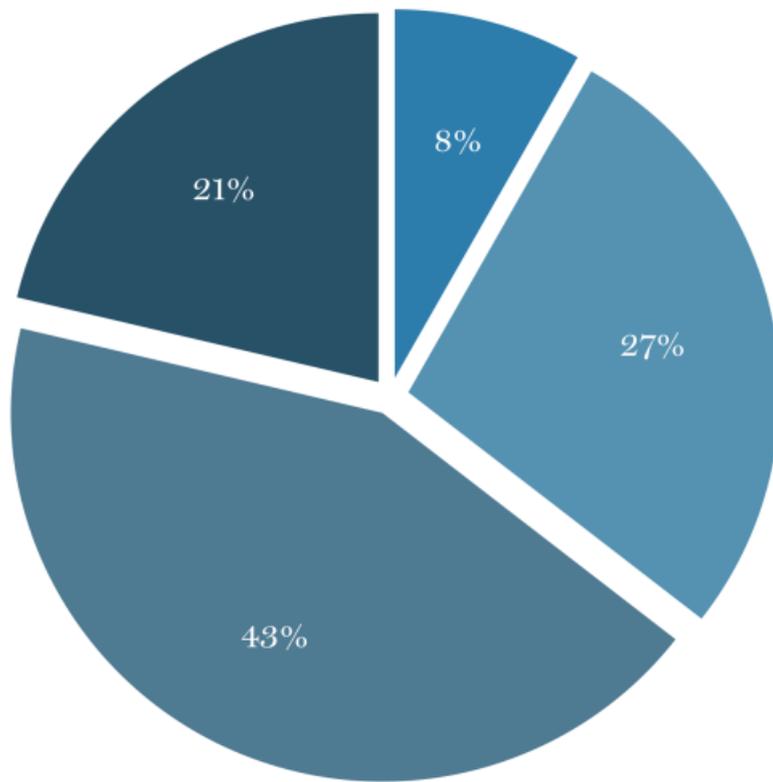
In your opinion, how important is free speech - defined as 'the right to express any opinions without censorship or restraint' - on a University campus?

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

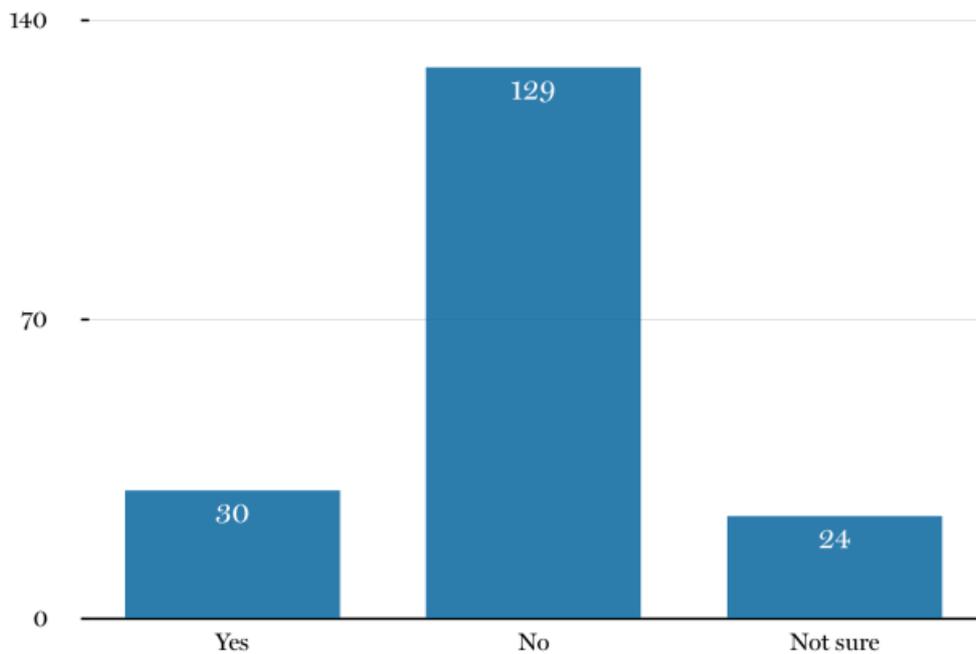


"YUSU values free speech on campus very highly." Do you...

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree

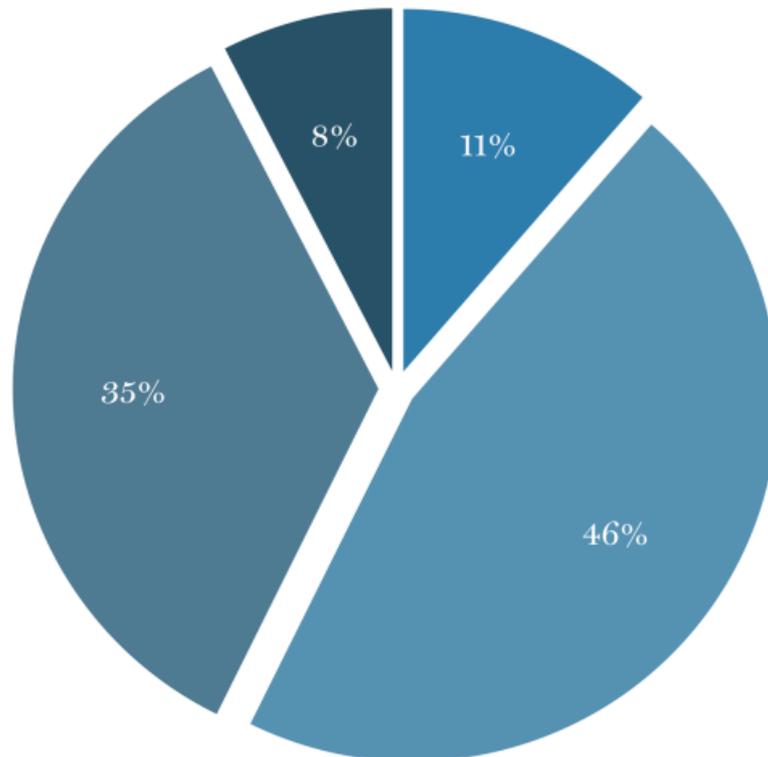


"YUSU upholds free speech on campus very well." Do you...



Do you think the York University Student's Union's (YUSU) 'Zero tolerance towards sexual harassment' policy, which includes 'unwanted sexual gestures or innuendos', is an example of campus censorship?

● Strongly agree ● Agree ● Disagree ● Strongly disagree



"The University of York values free speech on campus very highly." Do you...

Thoughts on the University's approach to censorship and free speech mainly centred around its cancellation of International Men's Day on campus. "The University has seemed easily persuaded at times to cancel events and speakers, rather than stand its ground for varied free speech," one respondent said. Another pointed out that, while the University's track record is "a bit of a mixed bag, they allowed the Pro-Life society to exist despite heavy opposition".

On the subject of harassment guidelines, one said that "the rules against sexual harassment are 100 per cent justifiable, but when you include rules against 'offensive verbal' communication, you completely suffocate free speech". Another student declared that "It's hard to draw a line on things branded as 'unwanted' and/or 'offensive'," but that total acceptance of free speech was an equally "uncomfortable" prospect.

Of the survey findings, David Duncan, Registrar & Secretary, commented that "a commitment to upholding academic freedom and free speech more generally is integral to the University's values. While encouraging all members of the University community to treat each other with courtesy and respect, we will continue to foster an environment in which students and staff can express their views freely."

"Here at York we don't have a no-platforming policy," said YUSU President Ben Leatham. "It is not something students voted in favour of. The statistics shown are concerning though. Over my last five months as President I am committed to ensuring a standardised approach is established whereby the student papers are autonomous to write what they want within the law and any speaker is allowed to come and speak on campus provided no laws are broken."



5 comments

M. O. Edwards

17 Feb '16 at 9:52 am

Everybody knows FemSoc and the Socialist Society hold way too much power over YUSU and they are actively hostile to free speech.

Funny that FemSoc didn't turn up to Martin Daubney's event with the York Union last night. Happy to be vocal online where they can shout rather than debate, but when it comes to an actual debate, spineless cowards.

The one staff member who did turn up to the event, admitted she signed the letter but then refused to explain why she signed it. They are just anti-debate and are a cancer to free speech.

It is also hard to take Ben seriously when he said in the Vision at the time he would campaign to have Milo banned if that is what students wanted (only a minority did).

I suggest people learn how to debate rather than hide behind private groups on Facebook ruining free speech for everybody else.

[▲ Report](#)

Ashley

17 Feb '16 at 12:10 pm

The numbers in response to people agreeing with you on the survey aren't as strong as you're pretending, and those quotes have been so carefully cherrypicked.

By the way - if you think your readerbase is an accurate reflection of all students at York you are so, so oblivious to reality.

[▲ Report](#)

Thomas

18 Feb '16 at 11:24 am

With the sincerest amount of respect, when 56% percent of people in the university in a decent sized poll say they doubt the free speech of YUSU, then we have to take it seriously. I'm pretty agnostic on how YUSU views it, all I can say is that they were exceedingly supportive of free speech if anything from my experience of them at least, and as the UKIP Chair, I should know.

I do not claim that Nouse is an accurate reflection of all students on campus (I'm sure if we polled Femsoc or the Socialist Society we'd get a very different response). What I do say is that nobody has a right to dictate what opinions can or cannot be said on Campus. The University of York is better than many other institutions for not having a No-platform policy, despite Spiked's downgrade. I hope it stays that way, even if the vocal minority of students don't like it.

[▲ Report](#)

Matt

19 Feb '16 at 12:08 pm

215 responses might be a 'decent sized poll' if the respondents were a random sample of students.

But I'd be very, very surprised if this was a random sample. Usually student newspapers just stick up a poll on facebook, and only those who are very interested in the topic respond to it, meaning you end up with a massively biased result.

[▲ Report](#)

Chris

18 Feb '16 at 10:11 am

"Any speaker is allowed to come and speak...providing no laws are broken"

Really?! Leatham all ready for his entry to Parliament. #IMD #Milo

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