Solidarity Toolkit
UCU Newcastle branch
version 1 - 5 November 2026

1. Introduction

Institutes of critical and higher education have long been targets of authoritarian and fascist regimes, who seek to discipline expertise, decimate dissent, and create a culture of fear. The resurgence of far right politics - from outwith and within the academy - ratchets up the pressures facing already financially beleaguered UK universities, calling into question the values, ethics and purposes of higher education in a world increasingly directed by authoritarian ideals. Our members are more vulnerable than ever before to tactics of intimidation and bad faith, and technologies of surveillance; with interpretations of institutional policies and national laws being stress-tested.

Even when such tactics are resisted and proven false, chilling effects on speech and research freedom remain, particularly for those already in marginalised and precarious positions in the academy. Prof Jason Arday warned that the far-right have a well-used playbook for silencing academics. We must update our own to refuse the silencing.

This toolkit is aimed in the first instance at UCU members who are either directly affected by far-right activity, or reps and members who are accompanying or advising affected colleagues. While there are established patterns to the targeting of academics, each instance will have specific circumstances that call for strategic responses. This resource guide attempts to cover some of the policies, documents and processes currently in place in most UK higher education institutions that are most relevant to formulating responses to far-right attacks on research and teaching. This document is also intended as a template that may be adopted by other branches, is not prescriptive by any means, and will require frequent updating to ensure links to most recent versions of policies and guidance.

The techniques deployed by fascists are not new, but they are, as they have always been, enabled by those who privilege order over justice, and pragmatism over the ethics of equality, diversity and inclusion. We urge members to reject appeasement or capitulation, and instead to boldly stand with and protect colleagues at risk of or already subject to targeting.

2. What to do and what to know

Respectful review, constructive critique, discussion, argumentation, feedback, response and dialogue in good faith are part of the robust systems of research and teaching in universities. Abuse, harassment, threats, personal attacks, public pile-ons and persecution for the work we do are not acceptable; but increasingly frequent in divided, populist and polarised political contexts. The same processes that provide academic bedrock are as easily manipulated to diminish the critical work we do. Higher education institutions in the UK have yet to catch up to the socio-political realities facing academics today. Compared with colleagues across the world who have historically operated in hostile environments, there are far fewer coherent strategies, clear pathways of recourse, or groups that may be easily mobilised to create safety nets to support targeted scholars in the UK.

With the increased pressure on academics to create visibility and adhere to marketable versions of impact and public engagement, there is a tendency to leave it up to individual academics to not just publish or perish, but now also sink or swim, often alone, in the attention we are expected to actively seek out to justify our jobs. Few, if any, academics have any sort of robust media training or professional networks of support for fielding this level of attention. There is little mental health support to speak of, and no clear chains of accountability or legal assistance. This must change urgently, and the UCU must be at the forefront of bringing about this change.

2.1. Suggested contact points and institutional reporting/support (Newcastle-specific)
Facing harassment for our work can be an isolating and disorienting experience. Below are some key contacts to reach out to and reporting/support mechanisms to be aware of. Reps seeking to use this template should ensure links in this section are amended to reflect institution-specific contact points, and are kept up to date.

- UCU unit reps
- UCU casework
- line managers and/or unit EDI leads
- NU anonymous reporting for hate crime, hate incidents, and/or sexual violence experienced by Newcastle University colleagues. Note that reporting anonymously will not trigger support or formal reporting mechanisms. For this to happen, a grievance has to be raised.
- NU Grievance procedures
    - Grievance policy
    - Grievance, bullying and harassment procedures
- NU Press Office
- NU freedom of speech governance enquiries governanceoffice@newcastle.ac.uk

2.2. Suggested resources
The following guides provide good practical advice for dealing with attacks. It is important to take steps to mitigate digital and physical safety risks, make and keep detailed notes, establish and activate networks of support and solidarity, and understand all available reporting options and mechanisms.

- ★ American Association of University Professors (AAUP) - Targeted Harassment of Faculty | AAUP
    - resources and actions for researchers
- ★ The Anti-Autocracy Handbook: A Scholars' Guide to Navigating Democratic Backsliding (2025)
- ★ A Digital Lynching (2026) (includes a practical guide for supporting targeted persons)

2.3. Branches should consider lobbying institutions to implement coherent strategies that move onus of dealing with intimidation and harassment away from individual academics toward collective and institutional frameworks. The AAUP provides an **institutional toolkit and sample policy** that can be readily adopted by academic institutions to pro-actively support and protect staff.

3. Relevant policies and laws

This section covers the broad policies and legislation that are good to be aware of. Knowing your rights, and having a good overview understanding of relevant general sector and institutional policies can go a long way in developing strategies of response and resistance. This section will require regular updating, and reps seeking to adapt this toolkit should edit and amend especially section 3.1. on institutional policies accordingly.

3.1 Institutional (Newcastle-specific)

- Disciplinary policy
- Bullying and Harassment Policy
- Colleague conduct
- Sexual misconduct policy
- Transitioning at Work Policy (Supporting Trans and Non-Binary Colleagues)
- Student conduct and discipline
- Code of Practice for free speech
- Policy and Procedure on Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblowing)
- Social media guide
- Statement on internet use (note clause 3.4)

3.2. Sector

A key guidance document that we recommend reps and members read and understand is the Office for Students Regulatory advice 24: Guidance related to freedom of speech. This document lays out duties of universities pertaining to free speech, including the 3-step framework for complying with the 'secure' duty. Crucially, this document is at the heart of tensions between free speech and universities' duty of care; written initially in the context of fabricated "culture wars" that in many ways paved the way for the mainstreaming of far-right discourses and weaponisation of academic processes.

- This OfS regulatory advice should be read against the High Court's judgement against the OfS - April 29, 2026 The University of Sussex -v- The Office for Students
    - background: https://www.sussex.ac.uk/news/focus/freedom-of-speech
    - https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/lessons-learned-from-the-university-of-sussex-judicial-review/
    - This case holds implications for institutional codes of practice on free speech. The High Court found that the OfS decision to sanction the University of Sussex for alleged breaches of its conditions of registration was unlawful. In particular, the High Court found that the OfS was biased, it misunderstood the concepts of freedom of speech and academic freedom, it exceeded its regulatory powers, and it failed to take relevant matters into account. See also Section 4 of this UCU branch guidance: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/15823/Guide-for-UCU-branches-Trans-non-binary-and-intersex-inclusion/pdf/UCU_Trans_FWS_Supreme_Court_guide_June26.pdf

3.3. Broader legislation

- **Equality Act 2010**
  - Protected characteristics include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
  - Prohibited conduct includes discrimination (direct and indirect), harassment and victimisation.
- The **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974** imposes a general duty on employers to reasonably ensure the health, safety, and welfare of all employees. A wide range of secondary regulations supplement this duty in specific areas.
  - Understanding what the **employers' duty of care** is important. See for example https://www.setfords.co.uk/2026/04/16/employers-duty-of-care/
- Free speech laws are covered in the **Human Rights Act 1998**, specifically Articles 9, 10, 11 and 17. These are however not unlimited rights, and subject to e.g.,
  - Public Order Act 1986
  - Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006
  - Crime and Policy Act 2026
  - Defamation Act 2013
  - Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (whistleblower protections)
  - Trans Rights in the workplace - https://transactual.org.uk/law/workplaces/
- **Acas guidance**
  - Raising and dealing with problems at work
  - Discrimination at work
  - Acas Code of Practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures

4. Example scenarios

Scenario 1: A colleague makes or shares racist and/or transphobic posts on social media

You discover that a colleague has posted or reposted content on a public social media account that you believe is racist and/or transphobic. The content may target particular communities, reproduce discriminatory stereotypes, or appear to endorse discriminatory ideas or treatment. Other colleagues and/or students are concerned about the implications for their working or learning environment.

What could you do?

1. Document the posts carefully.

Record the original posts, including screenshots, dates, links and relevant context. Distinguish between content the colleague authored, reposted, quoted critically or endorsed. Avoid redistributing offensive material or content unnecessarily. Also note the differences between expressing controversial political beliefs and conduct that may amount to unlawful harassment, discrimination, threats or incitement.

2. Contact your union representative or branch committee

Members who become aware of concerning posts should contact their section UCU rep, the branch secretary or equality officer. You are not obliged to confront the colleague directly, and in many instances, this is not advisable. Where there is an immediate threat or targeted harassment, contact university security if appropriate.

3. Organise a meeting with members in the affected section

The branch will consider organising a confidential meeting with UCU members in the section where the colleague works to understand how members feel about the posts and whether they have experienced or witnessed related discriminatory behaviour. Following the meeting, the branch can agree next steps with affected members before approaching management or initiating a collective grievance.

4. Raise concerns formally with university management

The branch may request a meeting with HR or the university's equality team, asking management to assess the conduct under relevant equality, dignity-at-work and social media policies. The branch will also request interim protections where affected members face ongoing harassment or risks.

5. Consider a collective grievance

Where multiple members are affected, or where management has failed to address a wider workplace concern, the branch may consider co-ordinating a collective grievance.

Scenario 2: A member is targeted by an online harassment campaign or 'pile-on' because of their research, teaching or public engagement.

A member publishes research, teaches or speaks publicly about a contentious subject. Their work attracts hostile attention from media outlets, political organisations, campaign groups or individuals, resulting in an online pile-on or harassment campaign. This may include abusive or threatening messages, personal attacks, misrepresentation of their work, or coordinated complaints and demands that the university investigate, discipline or dismiss them.

What could you do?

1. If the harassment occurs outside working hours:

Online harassment and pile-ons can happen at any time, including weekends, evenings and university holidays. If you are targeted when UCU reps or university support services are unavailable, you should take the following immediate steps:

Prioritise your safety: if you receive credible threats, feel unsafe or have your personal information shared online, contact the police where appropriate and report those making the posts to the social media platform.

Preserve evidence: take screenshots of abusive or threatening posts, messages and media coverage. Record dates, usernames and links where possible. Save this information securely in case it is needed for a union case, university complaint or police report.

Protect your online accounts and personal information: consider adjusting privacy settings, limiting who can contact or tag you, and using the blocking, muting and reporting functions. Check whether personal contact details are publicly accessible. You do not need to engage with abusive accounts or respond to hostile messages.

Avoid responding under pressure: you are <u>not</u> obliged to respond immediately to hostile posts, media enquiries or allegations. Where possible, wait until you can obtain advice and support before issuing public statements or engaging with journalists.

Contact someone you trust: consider letting a trusted colleague, friend or union member know what is happening. You should not have to manage harassment alone.

Notify your union and university: email your union rep, branch secretary or relevant committee member so there is a record of the incident, even if they cannot respond immediately. You should also contact your line manager.

Keep a record of any institutional response: if university management contacts you about the incident, keep a record of the exchange. If you are asked to attend a meeting or respond to allegations, request union representation and appropriate time to seek advice.

2. Establish contact with UCU section rep or committee members. They will speak confidentially with you about what happened and establish what support you need. This will include:

➔ Reviewing the evidence of harassment, threats, media coverage or coordinated complaints.
➔ Establishing whether university management has contacted you, and any action they have taken.
➔ Discussing what action you would like the union to take, including whether you want a public response.

3. **Raise concerns formally with university management.** The branch will request an urgent meeting with university management or HR to establish what action the university is taking to protect you. The branch may ask management to:

➔ Provide appropriate safety, wellbeing and digital security support.
➔ Uphold and support the member's academic freedom and right to undertake lawful research, teaching and public engagement.
➔ Resist improper external pressure to discipline, dismiss or silence the member.
➔ Ensure that complaints arising from online campaigns are assessed fairly and on their merits rather than according to the volume of complaints received.

➔ Provide communications support and, where agreed with the member, publicly affirm the university's commitment to academic freedom.

4. **Organise collective solidarity and escalate where necessary.** With the affected member's agreement, the branch should consider appropriate collective action, which might include:
   - ➔ A branch statement supporting the member's academic freedom and opposing harassment.
   - ➔ A collective letter to university management requesting action.
   - ➔ A branch motion calling for stronger university protections.
   - ➔ Raising the issue at JNCs or other meetings
   - ➔ Coordinating with regional or national on a wider response.

5. Relevant UCU work

- UCU branch guidance: responding to the tragic loss of Professor Jason Arday
- Kings College London UCU undertook a pioneering dispute in 2025 in defence of members suffering targeting and harassment.KCL UCU is balloting members! Our local dispute on protection of staff and academic freedom; divestment from companies profiting from genocide; King's Council reform; and meaningful workplace consultation | King's College London
- University of Bristol v Dr David Miller: [2026] EAT 84 - GOV.UK
- UCU Congress motions
  - Mischaracterisation of 'Academic Freedom' and freedom of speech (Motion 13, 2023-2024, passed)

6. Relevant organisations

- British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) Committee on Academic Freedom
- Scholars at Risk

7. Template motion

Motion on collectively opposing mediatised pile-ons after Jason Arday

This branch notes:

- Growing social-media and press pile-ons, and weaponised complaints personally and professionally targeting individual academics.
- HE(FS)A 2023 and OfS regulatory guidance (for England) mean a duty to promote free speech even if it is 'controversial and unpopular […] within the law', including racist and anti-trans viewpoints.

- The far right's increasing presence on campus.
- The press and social-media targeting of A MEMBER.

This branch resolves:

- To collectivise the defence of members using UCU's branch, regional and national resources, and to widely circulate BMSC guidance.
- To provide campaigning and media training for branch reps in how to respond, including rapid response training, with advice on retraction, defamation, harassment and free speech regulations.
- To put in place anti-pile-on agreements alongside health and safety and anti-harassment policy demands on management.
- To encourage active member engagement in social movements (STUR, PSC, WAFR, CVP, STW) as best preparation for active solidarity and defence.