

Bridget Phillipson
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Via e-mail only

8 May 2025

Dear Bridget,

I write to you on behalf of our members across the higher education sector, to express our grave concerns regarding the recent ruling by the Office for Students (OfS) and the imposition of an unprecedented fine of £585,000 on the University of Sussex.

This penalty—levied without speaking to a single current staff member at the institution—has sent shockwaves through a sector already struggling under the weight of chronic underfunding, widespread casualisation, and the sustained erosion of working conditions. The size of the fine is not only disproportionate but damaging and threatens to set a precedent that could further destabilise university finances at a critical time. It is deeply troubling that while the OfS has signalled a renewed focus on the financial stability in the sector, it has simultaneously chosen to impose a fine that could undermine the very institutions it purports to regulate.

We note that the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex described the investigation as "political scapegoating"—a view echoed by many in the academic community. We share that view. The framing of complex and sensitive issues around transphobia and inclusion as simply matters of "free speech" is a deliberate and dangerous oversimplification. It serves only to silence marginalised voices and compromise the commitment of universities to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

This ruling is not merely about one university. A broader application of its principles could chill efforts to create safer, more inclusive environments. The implication that institutions might face punitive action for protecting staff and students from harm is deeply concerning. The precedent risks encouraging universities to retreat from their equality duties for fear of regulatory backlash – indeed we have already seen Universities hastily removing their policies.

We call on the Office for Students and the Secretary of State for Education to reflect on the damaging consequences of this approach, and to engage in meaningful dialogue with sector representatives, trade unions, and equality bodies to ensure that future regulatory interventions uphold both the financial and moral responsibilities of our institutions.

Our universities are not battlegrounds for culture wars. They are key national assets central to the UK's strategic ambitions for innovation, skills, and economic growth. Undermining their financial and institutional stability through disproportionate regulatory action jeopardises not only staff and students, but the very foundations of the government's plan for national renewal.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jo Grady'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first part, 'Jo', is written with a large, stylized 'J' that loops around. The second part, 'Grady', is written in a more standard cursive script.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary