

# News story: Jo Johnson calls for free speech to be protected on campus

Universities Minister Jo Johnson has today (19 October) called on the new Office for Students (OfS) to champion free speech in UK universities, as part of a newly launched consultation.

The consultation has been launched primarily to help establish how the OfS, the new regulator for English higher education, will undertake its main functions – ensuring teaching standards continue to rise so all students receive a high-quality education

As part of the consultation the Universities Minister has asked the OfS to focus on ensuring institutions recognise the importance of freedom of speech and the role it plays in ensuring open debate. The aim is to ensure students are exposed to a wide range of issues and ideas in a safe environment without fear of censorship, rebuke or reprisal.

Earlier in the year the Government extended the statutory duty to secure free speech so that it will apply to all providers of higher education registered with the new Office for Students in the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA). The Office for Students will be able to hold providers to account to ensure that lawful freedom of speech is upheld by their staff and student unions and student societies.

Universities Minister Jo Johnson said:

Free speech is one of the foundations on which our higher education tradition is built. It goes to the heart of our democratic values and is a principle I know universities hold dear.

I know there is good practice out there, and am proud that some of our university leaders and academics have publicly defended free speech. But there are still examples of censorship where groups have sought to stifle those who do not agree with them.

This is why I want the OfS to work with universities to encourage a culture of openness and debate and ensure that those with different backgrounds or perspectives can flourish in a higher education environment.

The consultation is on the 'technical details' of how the OfS will operate. This includes looking at:

- Compulsory participation in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for higher education providers with over 500 students;
- Publication and justification of high salaries for senior staff;
- Transparency on how students can transfer between courses and

- empowerment of students through clearer student contracts; and
- The outcome of the consultation will form part of the OfS' 'Regulatory Framework' which will come into force for the academic year 2019 / 20.

Chair of the Office for Students, Sir Michael Barber said:

This consultation document sets out a framework for a new era in higher education. The Office for Students will be a modern regulator which consistently puts the interests of students – short, medium and long-term – first. It sets out a bold agenda and highlights the importance from a student perspective of fair access, excellent teaching, progression into worthwhile jobs and value for money.

The success of our universities has never been more important to the future of our country. The proposals in this consultation document will enable our universities to contribute to the cultural and economic growth of cities, regions and the whole country and to continue to thrive on the global stage.

Ensuring freedom of speech and learning how to disagree with diverse opinions and differing views of the world is a fundamental aspect of learning at university. The OfS will promote it vigorously.

The OfS, which was established through the HERA, will be officially launched on 1 April 2018 and has been created to allow more choice for students and more competition in the interest of students.

It has been established as a single regulator to replace the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for fair Access (OFFA).

Ministers have appointed Sir Michael Barber as the Chair of the OfS and Nicola Dandridge as its Chief Executive.

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## **[Press release: Consultation launched on laws around antique firearms](#)**

The Home Office has today (Thursday 19 October) published [proposals to update the laws around antique firearms](#), following advice from the police and the Law Commission of a rise in criminal cases involving antique weapons.

A new consultation will consider enshrining in law a new definition of antique firearms, which will help ensure older firearms which still pose a danger to the public are licensed.

Minister for Policing and the Fire Service Nick Hurd said:

This country has some of the most robust gun laws anywhere in the world.

But we must not be complacent, which is why these laws are kept under review, and a rise in antique guns being used in crime requires action.

This consultation will bring clarity to the law so that older firearms that still pose a danger to the public are properly licensed to stop them falling into the hands of criminals.

The consultation follows recent convictions connected to the misuse of antique weapons. In November 2015, 18 members of the 'Burger Bar Boys' gang in Birmingham received substantial sentences for a range of firearms offences. They had sourced antique firearms and arranged for ammunition to be specially made to fit the weapons. They had then sold the weapons to criminal gangs for considerable profit.

In June 2017, Sultan Meer from London was sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment for firearm offences. A police investigation showed that Meer, who claimed to be a collector of antique firearms but was already prohibited from possessing a firearm, was obtaining antique guns and trying to acquire ammunition for them.

The consultation will consider which obsolete cartridges and propulsion systems will lead to a firearm being considered antique. It will also consider a change to the automatic cut-off date of manufacture after which all weapons must be licensed. Currently this date is 1939 but this could shift to 1900.

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## **[Statement to Parliament: High Speed Rail \(Preparation\) Act 2013, Annual Expenditure Report for 2016-17](#)**

The [High Speed Rail \(Preparation\) Act annual expenditure report](#) is published today under Section 2 of the High Speed Rail (Preparation) Act 2013.

The report covers the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017.

A copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

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# [Press release: Geovation welcomes a new generation of disruptive property and location data businesses](#)

Geovation has expanded its programme to support three new PropTech start-ups. This is the first time the programme will back PropTech disruptors and follows news that HMLR will begin to collaborate with OS to stimulate the innovative use of land and property technology and data through Geovation.

The PropTech businesses will be joining [the programme](#) alongside three GeoTech start-ups.

Business Minister Lord Prior said:

Building more affordable homes is central to the Government's commitment to creating an economy that works for everyone and the partnership between HM Land Registry and Ordnance Survey is a new and exciting chapter of this.

The Geovation Programme encourages and supports the growing number of new start-ups driving innovation in the housing sector. Geovation is now supporting six new PropTech and GeoTech companies to develop new technologies to propel the UK towards becoming a global leader in the land and property market.

The PropTech businesses are:

[Rentr](#) tracks UK local authority licensing schemes for rental properties, identifying properties that meet regulated safety standards. Landlords and agents can audit entire portfolios broken down by postcode in seconds and review the daily status changes of individual properties.

[Orbital Witness](#) uses satellite imagery, property ownership data and cutting edge artificial intelligence (AI) to conduct due diligence on properties to assist conveyancers, by highlighting areas of risk early.

[AskPorter](#) is an AI machine learning messaging platform that optimises property and facilities management by reducing administration and management costs while improving customer satisfaction. The platform uses an intuitive conversational interface that enables a chatbot to answer common questions.

The GeoTech businesses are:

[FlowX](#) offers a low-cost solution to traffic congestion, and the pollution this causes, by providing object classification algorithms to exciting

sensory data. This is achieved by integrating data from existing infrastructure sensors and then applying machine learning to give the ability to react to congestion before it even happens.

[Safe & the City](#) aims to build a safer community one step at a time by creating a GPS app that uses evidence informed data and crowdsourced geotagged information to paint a picture of safe routes and what streets to walk down.

[Explaain](#) reinvents the online article. Most journalists put the most noteworthy information first and leave context and background for later. Explaain allows journalists to include more of the research that doesn't usually make it into a final article. They recently used their technology to run GE2017.com – a voting preference app that had more than 2 million completed surveys in the run-up to this year's general election. They will be developing location-aware alerts and reminders, and geospatial context for cards.

John Abbott, Director of Digital, Data and Technology at HM Land Registry says:

With our support these start-ups have the opportunity to revolutionise the technology that underpins the property sector and create data-driven services that will make property related transactions simpler, faster and cheaper for everyone.

During the first six months of the programme, participants will develop their ideas to prototype stage. They will benefit from £10,000 of funding and commit to spending twenty hours per week on their project. At this point the prototype will be assessed for its commercial viability. If the Geovation team decides it has viability, the following six months will be spent creating a product and launching it, assisted with a further £10,000 funding.

Alex Wrottesley, Head of Geovation, says:

We're very excited to be working with these businesses. The programme offers an exceptional launchpad for any new business in the PropTech or GeoTech markets and we're looking forward to giving this new group our full support.

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**[Press release: Car hire sites](#)**

# investigated over hidden charges

The sites are being investigated due to concerns they are breaking consumer law by hitting customers with hidden charges and unexpected fees, such as for fuel, or late night pick-ups and drop-offs.

Over the last year the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has been working with car hire comparison sites to ensure their customers get clear and accurate prices.

As a result of this, there has been a significant improvement in the accuracy and clarity of information on car rental price comparison websites and, today, standards are much higher across much of the sector. For example, most comparison websites now clearly flag young driver surcharges and one-way fees in the prices they quote.

However, a small number of businesses have been identified which may have still not made adequate improvements.

This has resulted in the launch of 2 enforcement cases and prompted the CMA to publish advice to the sector on how to comply with consumer law, issuing letters to 40 companies, asking them to maintain standards and, where necessary, make improvements to comply with the law.

The advice makes clear the CMA's expectations, such as:

- including all extra charges in the price they first give their customers;
- clearly setting out fuel pricing policies to customers; and
- warning them about high excess or deposits amounts.

Today's announcement builds on the CMA's work with the European Commission into 'the big 5' car rental firms in 2015, which resulted in savings of an estimated £100 million for UK customers.

It also follows the CMA's year-long in-depth examination of online comparison tools, which set out clear ground rules for all sites. They should be:

- Clear on key issues such as how they make their money;
- Accurate in the information they provide;
- Responsible about how they use people's personal data; and
- Easy to use.

James MacBeth, Project Director, said:

For many people hiring a car is an essential component to days out, holidays and trips. No one should be misled or face unexpected charges, whether they choose to book directly with the car hire company or through a comparison site.

While we have seen improvements in the way car hire comparison sites quote prices, we are still concerned that some companies may not have faced up to their legal obligations, and as a result we have opened 2 enforcement cases.

We expect this sector to provide clearer information about the true costs, and to explain upfront what customers will actually pay. Businesses must read our advice and make the necessary changes. If companies break the law they risk enforcement action, as these cases show.

People thinking about renting a car overseas should look at [our advice](#) and the [Citizens Advice top tips](#) to help you avoid being caught out when renting a car.

## Notes to editors

1. The CMA is the UK's primary competition and consumer authority. It is an independent non-ministerial government department with responsibility for carrying out investigations into mergers, markets and the regulated industries and enforcing competition and consumer law. For CMA updates, follow us on Twitter [@CMAgovuk](#), [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#) and [LinkedIn](#).
2. The key pieces of consumer protection legislation relevant to the CMA's investigation are the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 (CPRs) and Part 2 of the Consumer Rights Act 2015. The CPRs contain a general prohibition against unfair commercial practices and specific prohibitions against misleading actions, misleading omissions and aggressive commercial practices. Part 2 of the Consumer Rights Act aims to protect consumers against unfair contract terms and notices, and requires contract terms to be fair and transparent.
3. The CMA has not reached a final view on whether the practices it is concerned about breach consumer protection law, and will listen to the companies' responses to its concerns. If necessary the CMA will take action through the courts to enforce that law under Part 8 of the Enterprise Act 2002. Ultimately, only a court can rule that a particular term or practice infringes the law.
4. The CMA will continue to take steps to encourage and maintain compliance with consumer law in this sector. This will include conducting a review in early 2018 with further enforcement cases if necessary. It is also gathering evidence on complaints about problems that people have experienced overseas (in particular those relating to charges for damage) in order to build on the work we have already done with overseas regulators to tackle problems experienced abroad.
5. Media enquiries to the CMA should be directed to [press@cma.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:press@cma.gsi.gov.uk) or 020 3738 6798.