

The Free Speech Union
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[FreeSpeechUnion.org](https://www.FreeSpeechUnion.org)

Dr James Mannion,
Director,
Rethinking Education

23rd September 2023

Dear Dr Mannion,

I am writing to you in my capacity as General Secretary of the Free Speech Union, a non-partisan, mass-membership public interest body that stands up for the speech rights of its members and campaigns for free speech more widely. This letter concerns the decision by the company you are a director of – Rethinking Education – to no-platform Dr Alka Sehgal-Cuthbert.

Dr Sehgal-Cuthbert is the director of the anti-racism group Don't Divide Us, which campaigns for society to "treat everyone as an individual worthy of respect regardless of race, religion or the colour of their skin". She is a former lecturer and teacher, with a doctorate in the sociology and philosophy of education from Cambridge University. Given her considerable expertise, you invited her to speak at your conference today on the topic of indoctrination and impartiality in schools.

According to correspondence that Dr Sehgal-Cuthbert has shared with us, you rescinded her invitation 48 hours before she was due to speak, supposedly because other attendees claimed they would feel "unsafe" if she attended. You have stated that "psychological safety is a precursor to free and open debate" and you have taken the decision to disinvite Dr Sehgal-Cuthbert even though you have not sought to "explore the reasons why these people feel unsafe". It isn't clear from your statement how many of the attendees have said Dr Sehgal-Cuthbert's appearance would make them feel unsafe – or, indeed, if any of them have.

In your public statement on this matter,¹ you say that "safety considerations needed to be our primary focus" and that attendees "did not feel safe to appear at the conference". If this is really true, why didn't you simply tell the attendees expressing this concern that any fears they might have for their psychological safety if they hear what Dr Sehgal-Cuthbert has to say were entirely baseless? If any of the attendees have said they would find it psychologically disturbing to be addressed by a black anti-racism campaigner, why not disinvite them rather than Dr Sehgal-Cuthbert?

I cannot imagine any reasonable basis for another attendee to feel unsafe in Dr Sehgal-Cuthbert's presence. On the contrary, it sounds as if you – or the complainants, if they really exist – are inventing this as an excuse to no-platform her. In our work, we frequently find that "safety" is invoked by intolerant activists as a pretext to silence those with whom they disagree.

As you will know, schools are expected to promote British values, including tolerance for those with different religious and philosophical beliefs. Your decision to no-platform Dr Sehgal-Cuthbert – presumably because of her philosophical beliefs – is a clear breach of this important value. If you do not apologise to her, retract your allegation and give her an opportunity to speak in future we will ask the Department for Education to open an investigation into Rethinking Education to see whether it is an appropriate company for schools to purchase services from, given that it appears to hold at least one British value in contempt.

Yours sincerely,

¹ <https://www.rethinking-ed.org/rethinking-ed-2023>

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cc. The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State for Education
The Rt Hon Kemi Badenoch MP, Minister for Women and Equalities
Mr Robin Simcox, Commissioner for Countering Extremism