

Opinion **The FT View**

Trump's compact threatens to quash US academic freedom

Universities should stand united against the White House's demands

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The campus of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Along with Brown University, the institution has rejected the White House's compact as an assault on free speech © AFP/Getty Images

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The Maga movement's campaign to remake the US's institutional and social fabric intensified this month, when the White House issued a handful of universities — now [extended](#) to the whole sector — with a “[compact](#) for academic excellence”.

The compact, which people associated with the initiative [describe](#) as open to feedback from the universities themselves, prescribes a range of reforms from the Maga wish list, on the penalty of losing federal funding. The demands range from the micromanaged — such as requiring single-sex toilets and a price cap on tuition for US students — to the ideological, including “merit-based” admissions with no consideration for historically oppressed groups.

The initiative adds to the pressure Donald Trump's administration has already piled on US universities, notably Columbia and Harvard. As it so often does, the administration has latched on to real if minor shortcomings and used them as a fulcrum to advance its own goals. Indeed. Americans well beyond the Maga camp

have harboured concerns that universities were too politically homogenous for their own good, let leftwing identity politics chill debate, and bungled their responsibilities in managing protests against Israel.

But even if the Trump administration's ostensible efforts at improvement were made in good faith, they would be a cure worse than the disease. A government is entitled to set reasonable conditions for institutions to be eligible for subsidies and of course to enforce the law. But that is not what the proposed compact does. As a remedy for any skewed hiring it offers a policy of purity tests; in the place of alleged leftwing bias the compact requires schools to take action against those who "belittle" conservative viewpoints.

The compact is part of the administration's wider campaign against dissent and Trump's personal vindictiveness towards criticism. His administration has targeted lawyers, journalists, comedians and universities with prosecutions, harassment and financial penalties. Recently, members of the US armed forces have been [put on alert](#) against political disapproval of the president, and visas have been revoked on the basis of showing disrespect for Charlie Kirk's murder.

The compact is an intensification of a broader campaign to bend academia to the government's will or, failing that, to diminish its critical voice in the public sphere. The inconsistencies in the administration's demands give the game away. It rejects diversity and inclusion considerations in admissions and hiring, but backs conservative viewpoints.

Protecting free enquiry is not done by "abolishing institutional units that purposefully . . . belittle . . . conservative ideas", as the compact demands. Do those ideas include, for example, disputing greenhouse gas effects in the atmosphere, or the efficacy of vaccines? Does refuting their scientific standing count as belittling them?

Of the initial nine recipients of the proposal, two — the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Brown University — have rejected it as an assault on free speech and enquiry. The most powerful universities, and those with the deepest pockets, should

rally behind them. That would make it easier for the more exposed ones to do the same. With little sign of Trump letting up, however, they must steward their affairs tightly: prepare for funding cuts and address any problems that give the administration the pretexts it needs.

Universities are communities of enquiry: their first job is to foster environments of civil disagreement in the pursuit of objective truth. Signing Trump's compact would do the opposite.

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