

Visiting Speakers - Summary of 2013-14

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Introduction

This document is a summary of some of the issues and challenges we have faced as an organisation from the management of external speakers over the past academic year. Such events pose a variety of risks to us as an organisation. We have to ensure that we are compliant with our own internal policies and procedures as well as those of Imperial College, which are all designed around ensuring we meet our legal obligations. Additionally we have to consider the reputational risks and threats to good campus relations that may ensue from certain speakers and topics. This year we revised our policy on external speakers and drafted a new Freedom of Speech and Events Approval Policy which is now in effect after approval at the Board of Trustees in May 2014. This policy incorporates the latest best practice and guidance from bodies such as NUS and Universities UK.

Student groups have continued to get approaches from external organisations wishing to co-host or provide speakers, which brings its own challenges. Ascertaining the relationships and issues involved, and researching the partner organisations is a time consuming necessity which can involve a great deal of liaison and communication with individuals and departments within College.

Off-site events

Following the participation by Jalal Ibn Saeed in an Islamic Society event in October 2013 we ensured the redrafted Freedom of Speech and Events Approval Policy contained provisions for the approval of speakers at events taking place away from campus. These provisions were included on the advice of the College and the Police. This speaker is alleged to have spoken out in support of the Taliban and this only came to light after the event took place due to having no process for approving off-site speakers.

Gender Segregation & External Speakers

At the beginning of February a tweet was received by the College which alleged that imposed gender segregation had occurred at an event hosted by the Islamic Society where Abdel Rahman Murphy was speaking. The tweet provided a link to a photo on Facebook. This tweet came a few months after the Universities UK report about gender segregation was withdrawn following controversy over their conclusion that gender segregation imposed by speakers was acceptable.

The tweet was authored by Chris Moos, an LSE student who received some media attention last year for wearing satirical T-shirts depicting 'Jesus and Mo' at LSE's Freshers' Fair and the subsequent court case around freedom of speech. The Islamic Society were insistent that no instruction was given by the organisers or the speaker as to the seating arrangements, yet self-segregation subsequently occurred. Following the social media coverage the Union worked with College Communications to develop a briefing note on the subject of gender segregation at student events. The incident received little media attention. Subsequent attendance by Union staff and officers at both Islamic Society and Muslim Medics events has demonstrated that audiences at these events "self-segregate" to a large degree and there is no element of compulsion that has been witnessed or reported.

Restrictions on events

This year the following restrictions were placed on events as preconditions for them going ahead. Usually all these restrictions were put in place rather than just one or two:

- Pre-registration
- Students only
- Extra College security to be paid for (Greek Minister only)
- No photos (then agreed that a designated committee member could take them but others could not)
- No gender segregation (where this is a relevant concern)
- Union attendance to monitor segregation and/or content

Highlights

Every year it is worth highlighting that the challenges and pressures that we face are a reflection of the ambitious aims and ambitions of our students. Clubs, Societies & Projects regularly invite a diverse range of illustrious speakers and guests to talk on a wide array of interesting and thought provoking topics. A few highlights from the year include:

- As part of the same series of events involving the Greek Minister for Health the Hellenic Society also hosted Konstantinos Bikas, The Greek Ambassador to the UK, speaking on the topic of the Greek Presidency of the EU.
- Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association spoke to the Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society.
- The Conservative Society secured Dominic Grieve, QC, the Attorney General to speak on the subject of Law and Politics.
- Our brand new Lego Society invited Warren Elsmore, full time Lego artist, Lego exhibition organiser, and author of books on Lego.
- The RCSU Science Challenge Launch had keynote speeches from Eliza Manningham Butler and Lord Robert Winston.

These are just a few examples from a whole array of medical seminars, academic workshops, careers talks, and conferences, with a range of interesting speakers. We will continue to work with group to help them secure high profile speakers and successfully manage these events.

Summary & Recommendations

The overall number of issues in relation to our numbers of speakers has remained low. A continued approach of dialogue and consultation with student groups has helped ensure that issues are well managed. The dialogue and relationship we have with student volunteers in some of the groups mentioned in this report would be unprecedented at many institutions. Unlike last year we have received no formal complaints relating to speakers, which is vindication of a more pro-active approach to risk identification. However this year there has been greater external scrutiny of events

taking place on UK university campuses with more media coverage of issues and problems. This has coincided with a potentially increasingly risk averse College approach on these issues. College decision making often takes longer than equivalent processes in the Union, resulting in students getting confused and annoyed at delays, which are perceived as stonewalling attempts. We risk endangering our good relationship with groups who invite high profile speakers and risk them moving off-campus where oversight is more challenging if this does not improve.

Going forward in to next year there are various steps we should take to ensure our continued good management of external speakers:

- Continue to prioritise relationship building with groups who invite high profile speakers and who discuss topics which are likely to create strong feelings amongst students.
- Providing training for officers and staff (including College staff) on the risks associated with external speakers and equipping them with the skills and knowledge to assess risks and issues.
- Continue to engage with College to ensure quick decision making and communication to student groups on decisions pertaining to their events.
- Review our new Freedom of Speech and Events Approval Policy after it has operated for a full academic year.

Appendix – Event Case Studies

Yusuf Chambers and Hamza Tsortzis

It is in this context of heightened awareness of potential gender segregation that these two speakers were invited on to campus. Both these speakers came in second term and were processed according to our policies. At each event a sabbatical officer was present to ensure compliance with the conditions put in place.

In February the Islamic Society invited Yusuf Chambers to speak. Yusuf Chambers has received negative publicity online around his alleged views on homosexuality. These are generally put forward as allegations and there is no first hand evidence available. When invited to speak at the University of York in 2012 there was a campaign against him speaking yet the Union and University found no grounds to cancel the event having assessed the evidence available to them. He has also responded to these allegations and clarified his position in various media interviews including with LGBT media outlets.

Yusuf Chambers also spoke at an Islamic Society event at Imperial in February 2013 as part of a panel discussion with several speakers on the topic of “How I became a Muslim”. No issues arose from his attendance at this event. Likewise no issues arose from his participation in the Islamic Society’s event this February and we received no complaints from students prior to the event. This was in comparison to the previous year’s visit where complaints and concerns were raised by students beforehand. The website ‘Student Rights’ did mention his attendance in a general article entitled “Islam Awareness Week sees intolerant preachers invited onto campuses” which summarised a range of different visits by various speakers to UK campuses. No mainstream media coverage or enquiries came out of this.

In March Muslim Medics invited Hamza Tsortzis to speak. Hamza Tsortzis is a former member of Hizb-ut Tahrir, a Sunni Islam political organisation which has the goal of re-establishing the Caliphate and the implementation of Sharia Law, and calls for the dismantling of the Israeli State. It is on the National Union of Students “No Platform” list of proscribed organisations. It is not however designated as a proscribed organisation by HM Government. The topic of the talk was the relatively uncontroversial Science and Miracles behind quranic revelations

Prior membership of a group does not necessarily inform what someone’s current views are of course. Majjad Nawaz, now director of counter-extremism thinktank the Quilliam Foundation was also a past member of the group, although he has publically renounced it. Evidence on Hamza Tsortzis’ views are hard to come by. He has spoken at various universities before and there are no reports of any law breaking taking place.

Islamic Society invited this speaker in 2013 but in light of negative media coverage of the UCL event where gender segregation was alleged to have been demanded by speakers, they decided at that point in time to cancel due to fears of been caught up in the negative publicity. Given Hamza was directly involved in this issue around gender segregation at UCL some caution was needed. We were nonetheless happy with the precautions put in place and believed College were also content.

Given the sensitivity of the event our Student Activities Manager attended. On arrival there were two police officers present at the venue including the University police liaison officer. The Union had not been informed that this was happening and neither had the student organisers. On speaking to the police it transpired that they had been told about the event a few hours earlier by College

security. The police presence provided a negative impression to the student organisers of the event, especially in the context that the Union had not been informed beforehand. The student organisers were bemused and a little frustrated at this imposition. Damage limitation at the event and afterwards was undertaken to provide reassurance that this was routine and that the police presence was there for their safety and to allow the event to go ahead.

In both these events College decision making could have been more swift in the opinion of the student groups involved who felt that they were being stonewalled and subject to more scrutiny than was justified. Work needs to be done to ensure that communication is improved between the various actors in the approval processes. It currently feels like decision making is not taking place in the hope that the Union intervenes to cancel events itself or convince students to do so. Whilst sometimes we may wish to do this, on these occasions it was not warranted or required.

It's important in context to have an understanding of why these speakers are invited by students on a regular basis despite the controversy they attract. This isn't due to a desire to be provocative or a way of attracting audience through controversy. There is a limited pool of good public speakers with knowledge of Islam who can relate it to the lives of young British muslims. These speakers are good at what they do, and connect with their audience. It is also hard to find speakers regardless of topic and there is a limited pool from which to draw from. This is by no means restricted to Islamic societies; other faith groups, academic networks, and campaign groups all often rely on a central bank or rota of speakers. These speakers also in part attract controversy as they simply get more oxygen of publicity. As they tour many universities their views are more likely to get reported (or misreported). Discussions of faith are complex, theoretical and liable to interpretation hence some of the issues that arise. Disentangling allegations of genuine hate speech from controversial yet legal religious perspectives can be very difficult. This is not to say that there aren't examples of speakers who practice hate speech in a university environment, but we need to be conscious of this context when making decisions.

Pakistan Society

The Pakistan Society Committee decided that its portfolio of activities was missing any political discussion events. As a result in January they extended an invitation to Dr Farooq Sattar, the parliamentary leader of the MQM (Muttahida Qaumi Movement) political party in Pakistan. Like many Pakistani political parties the MQM has a large base in London including permanent members of its executive being drawn from here. The MQM is unfortunately rather controversial though. It is a legitimate political party in Pakistan (controlling local government in Islamabad for example) yet it has been linked to criminal activity including political killings. It is a proscribed organisation by the Canadian government. The UK government has been taking action against the MQM's finances but it's not a proscribed terrorist organisation nor is it on HM treasury's list of financial sanctions targets. Its officials have also been targeted themselves in London as a recent murder demonstrated.

Initially the event was not within the 2 week notice rule we have and we made the decision not to allow it to go ahead due to the potential issues there could be. Security and the College Secretary were made aware of it at this stage. The Society went away to reschedule for later in the term. We again engaged with Security about this speaker as naturally we had concerns, and felt that a police opinion should be sought. Eventually this happened, but again this was after some delay. The event was allowed to go ahead but the speaker pulled out and it did not take place.

Greek Minister of Health

In March the Hellenic Society hosted the Greek Health Minister Adonis Georgiades for an event that was part of a series of three speaker events called "Greek Presidency in London". The series aimed to promote the importance of the Greek EU Presidency in the context of recent and current developments in the country. In the words of the society: "Our goal is to raise awareness and host a discussion about the situation arising from the crisis in the Greek and European economies, analyse the national effort of exiting this crisis, share ideas and examine positive paths ahead".

The event was cleared in the normal way and security provided two officers specifically at the event. The Greek Health Minister attracts some controversy, which is why specific security arrangements were put in place. This controversy is related both to his government's economic programme and alleged anti-semitic remarks and far right links of the Minister himself. He had spoken at Harvard recently with no reported issues. It was felt that the event could be allowed to go ahead by ourselves and security who also ensured a police presence at the event.

Prior to the event a statement was released by a group calling itself the Greek Solidarity Campaign, and claiming to represent staff and students at Imperial College. This statement laid out their opposition to an invite to the Minister having been issued. At this stage it was felt that the security arrangements remained sufficient.

At the event there was a lot of heckling from a substantial minority of the audience and a heated discussion with one audience member which was captured on video and photography and subsequently tweeted and shared online. Claims were made that the Minister hit the audience member. However in actual fact the Minister had given the audience member a small microphone which he was holding in his hand and asking for it back at this stage (as far as we know).

This erupted in the Greek national media, and there were some limited UK press enquiries. We met with the President of the Hellenic Society specifically to advise against him engaging in any media enquires relating to this event. Despite this the Society President chose to speak to a variety of Greek media organisations (although no UK organisations), and the Minister himself made several media appearances to set the record straight. We reluctantly allowed the Hellenic Society to put out a short factual statement targeted at their members (and emphatically not a press statement) to clarify some issues.

This event got very personal and led to some falling out between Committee members within the Society. The Society Chair was attacked on social media (although nothing constituted harassment) and felt unfairly targeted. Warnings had been given both before and afterwards and support (as far as possible) was offered.

Departmental Issues

Last year this report warned of the risks of departments booking spaces for student groups but not taking responsibility for the booking and the College's rules and legal duties. The main concern here is around approval and vetting for external speakers and the subsequent security procedures which may be required. This is also a continuing concern around alcohol consumption at events. This year we have had two events where speakers have not gone through our approval channels. We have also engaged with the Chaplaincy and the Conferences & Events Office to ensure that our reporting and approval systems for events booked through these routes were capturing all speakers and the information we required on them.

Every Nation Christian

The Every Nation Christian Society booked a room through the ESE department. This event was picked up on due to poster advertisements. It involved a speaker called Sean Doherty from an organisation named 'Living Out'. The event was entitled "Sexuality meets Spirituality (Is Christianity homophobic?)". This organisation bills itself as "a support group of same-sex attracted Christians and other friends" and promotes a "plain reading" of Biblical scripture. There were concerns that the event could attract controversy and the Society was made to postpone the event so that it could be assessed. Conditions were put in place, the event approval went through the proper channels and the event went ahead with no issues three weeks later than initially scheduled.

Greenpeace

After this event ESE directed another student to the Union. The event was for a student group called "Geology for Global Development" which was not affiliated to the Union. The students involved were keen to find a space to host a talk by a scientist from Greenpeace. The department apparently had some concerns. As one student put it:

"it was thought to be a bit risky to invite someone from Greenpeace to give a talk as Greenpeace is obviously 'anti-oil' and a lot of oil companies sponsor our department."

The impression the students had was that the department therefore did not want to host the event in the department itself on these grounds rather than due to any issues with College policies. We asked them to consider becoming a Union society but informed them that we couldn't do anything in this instance as the event was too soon. ESE staff helped arrange for them to have the talk in a different building. We informed security on their behalf and wanted to make clear it was not a Union event.

The upside of this was that the group who were organising the speaker have now successfully applied to be an official Union Project.