

External Speaker Guidance

Best Practice & Engaging Sensitive Issues

Once your event has been approved by the Union and QMUL, you must discuss with your committee members and Union staff which steps you will need to take to ensure the successful organisation of your event

The following points outline some of the actions that can be taken to ensure that sensitive issues are handled properly and are the best practice for all speaker events.

Form of event

Choose a form of event that will enable different views to be presented and discussed but leave those who are present to make up their own minds. For example, a debate is designed so that one view “wins” and another “loses” so, unless the motion is worded very carefully, it may not be appropriate for a sensitive issue.

The same range of views can probably be expressed through a panel discussion where panellists can have their say and answer questions, people in the audience can contribute but there doesn't have to be a formal conclusion. Use TV and Radio programmes as models, for example – Any Questions (R4), Question Time (BBC1), Start the Week (BBC1). Alternatively a traditional event with speakers and questions might serve the same purpose.

Topic and Title

Express the topic for discussion or the motion for debate carefully. Try to make sure that it does not build in a presumption in favour of one side of the argument or another, or implicitly cast aspersions on those who take a particular view. It must also avoid inciting hatred. For example “Should the time limit for legal abortions be cut?” provides a way of discussing a sensitive issue in a way that respects all people's views, whereas “Maintaining the 24 week limit for legal abortions is immoral” casts the same discussion in a less sensitive way.

Promotion

Consider how you will promote the event safely. Ensure language or imagery used does not upset or threaten any other groups, students or members of the public. All marketing material will need to be approved by Union staff and must include the Union logo.

Check your social networks regularly; if you receive any negative comments refer these to the Union to mitigate any potential risks.

Chair

Choose the person to chair a debate or panel with care. They need to be familiar with the issue in order to moderate the discussion and to ensure that all sides have opportunity to express their views. However, if the Chair is known to have strong views on the subject under discussion, it might be difficult for the participants to have confidence in them, or for the Chair not to let their own views influence the way the discussion is conducted. This could be a member of academic staff

Speakers

Choose speakers/panel members carefully. In a university it is particularly important to ensure that they have knowledge and credibility in the subject they are speaking about. Never ask someone to speak on behalf of a view that they do not hold or a belief that they do not share. Try to make sure that those in the University who have views on an issue under discussion either choose or are comfortable with whoever is asked to present

their side of the argument. For example, in an inter-faith discussion, those speaking on behalf of a particular faith should be chosen by or approved by members of the faith group in the University.

External Speakers

It is important to make sure external speakers have the knowledge and experience that will make them credible contributors to a discussion at the University and who, themselves, will understand and respect the sensitivities that might arise in a diverse community. Please see the External Speaker Policy for further information.

Briefing

Provide all chairs and speakers, whether internal or external, with a clear brief about their role, the topic under discussion, the format of the event and make clear that it should be conducted within the spirit of these guidelines.

Security

Always inform the Union (through the booking procedures) when an external speaker will be arrive and where they will be whilst on campus. The organiser, Union and QMUL security may also need to discuss whether any special precautions need to be taken.

Attendees

You will need to have a guest list, the Union or QMUL security may ask for this in advance. Consider who the event is open to; clearly explain on the booking form who is being invited. If non student members of the public are invited then extra measures will need to be put in place to comply with University health and safety, this is usually quite costly to adhere to.