

Managing events – the review process

Recently, the university debating society ran an event focusing on the Israel / Palestine situation entitled 'will we see a solution in our lifetimes?' Due to the nature of the topic extra measures were taken to manage the event.

The event was emotionally charged at times but was well chaired and enabled both sides to give their viewpoints. There were some demonstrations prior to the debate on campus, but these were all peaceful, well observed and managed. However, since the event there has been significant press coverage of the event. A member of the panel, a journalist and author who was raised in a refugee camp in Gaza stated that he "did not believe there would ever be peace" and that he "agreed with the fundamentals of Hamas". At the time this drew challenge from the crowd, and when questioned by a Jewish student on these comments he stated "I grew up hating Israelis because all I knew were soldiers and those that had made me grow up with nothing. I don't agree with violence but I do think that at times you should fight for what you believe in. Without that many great political leaders and good people would never have made change. I don't condone terrorism in any way, but I saw just as much killing from the Israelis".

The event has now featured on several websites that deal with extremism, and one national news site. There is pressure from the media to produce a statement as to why the university is "allowing extremist speakers on campus?" and there is the allegation that the university regularly allows "extremist speakers a platform on campus"

Factors to consider

- Universities have qualified legal responsibilities to facilitate freedom of speech and academic freedom. Universities UK have produced guidance in this area
- The communications department for the university should have involvement as early as possible to help respond to media enquiries
- It may be useful to provide details of the procedures that were followed in arranging the event and the extra factors that were adopted for this particular event due to the subject content
- A review process post event should be considered and may help formulate the response, and also how future events are planned
- Whilst measures can be put in place to help mitigate risk, you can never predict what someone will say
- As part of mitigating the risk from a controversial topic or speaker you may wish to discuss the values of the university and expected standards of those speaking. You may also wish to discuss the theme and topic of what they're intending to say.
- Whether the event is run by an external organisation, or one aligned to the university can affect both the booking process, and the type of sanctions imposed post event.

- If the event, speakers or organisers (if external) have previously held events at other universities it may be worthwhile investigating how they were managed, and problems that arose as a result of the event.
- It's important to note that speakers may discuss topics or statements that might be unpleasant but that does not make them illegal.

University reflections

“We had an issue when an Israeli student approached me before an event to let me know that he was going to ‘raise hell’ towards our main speaker due to some things he’d said in the past. He wanted to take him on in the question and answer section because of views previously expressed, which were taken out of context. [The speaker] was born in a refugee camp in the Gaza strip, he clearly would have views! I allowed the student to take him on, but made it clear that [the speaker] was there to talk about the resurgence of Al Quaida and how he hates them. THAT’S what the discussion was about, and the student might expose himself to ridicule if he solely wanted to talk about a completely different topic. In the end he did, and came across a little stupid for bringing it up at all” Director of foundation and university lecturer

“We have situations where something is made of a speaker’s views that are totally out of context of the topic they’re speaking at the university. We had a Doctor come and speak to the Palestinian society of his experiences from Gaza. There was protest due to some previous statements he’d made, which were used out of context and he’d apologised. He’d never tried to radicalise or say anything illegal, just that he disagreed. I went to the event and felt it was a good event with a fine speaker”. University Vice Provost