

ACCESS DENIED:
EXPLORATORY STUDY
INVESTIGATING THE
CANCELLATION OF
STUDENT ISLAMIC
SOCIETY EVENTS
ACROSS LONDON
UNIVERSITIES

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Claystone is an independent
think tank formed to offer
research, analysis and reasoned
solutions to foster social
cohesion in relation to Muslims
in Britain.

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Executive summary

This exploratory study surveyed student Islamic societies at 25 London universities and identified that since Jan 1st 2011 until July 1st 2013, at least 7 universities had cancelled 13 Islamic society events which involved visiting speakers.

These cancellations took place without the consent of the Islamic societies. The reasons for these cancellations, as identified by the study, were primarily due to:

- Pressure placed on the universities from external groups
- Universities claiming that the visiting speakers promoted views that were not consistent with its values

After a review of university policies and guidelines, the study found that universities had been in contravention of their own policies and procedures in relation to visiting speakers, and that events were being cancelled prematurely and through subjective interpretations of university values.

The findings of the study suggested that freedom of speech within universities was being restricted. This could be interpreted as a breach of the Section 43(1) of the 1986 Education (No 2) Act, which requires universities institutions to ensure that freedom speech and expression is protected.

PART 1 OVERVIEW AND RESEARCH PROBLEM:

In June 2011, the Home Secretary, Theresa May, announced a 'crackdown on campus radicalism', suggesting universities were complacent about the threat of radicalisation on campus and criticised the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS), an umbrella group representing the interests and views of Islamic societies across UK and Ireland, for not challenging extremism sufficiently .

This claim was challenged by the representative body for UK universities, Universities UK, in its 2011 report 'Freedom of speech on campus: rights and responsibilities' . Universities UK Chief Executive, Nicola Dandridge, suggested that universities had no more of a problem [with respect to violent extremism] than the rest of society and stated that students had to be left to monitor visiting speakers themselves. In addition to this, Ms Dandridge stated that she had obtained advice from the police and MI5:

"They are telling us that there is not necessarily a link that they can prove between open debate in universities and violent extremism subsequently."

This is a view shared by the National Union of Students (NUS) whose then President, Aaron Porter, suggested it was "...irresponsible of Theresa May to try to shift the blame for non-violent extremism onto universities or students." He further added:

"Facing up to the challenges that non-violent extremism brings to campus life requires careful support and guidance from Government, not wild sensationalism that only serves to unfairly demonise Muslim students. In our experience, groups like FOSIS are part of the solution, not the problem."

FOSIS have argued that freedom of speech on campus was being restricted as a number of events organised by the student Islamic societies had been unfairly cancelled, with certain visiting speakers being banned. Ibrahim Ali, Vice President of FOSIS stated that this was due to the "...unverified assumption that radicalisation is occurring on campus, despite this being refuted by the Universities UK and the NUS."

Given the allegations of cancelled Islamic society events and the banning of visiting speakers; the purpose of this brief study was decided to identify to what extent (if any), such incidences were occurring across universities in London.

PART 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study adopted a survey methodology. The universities that were selected for the survey were based on those that were recognised within the Times Higher Education university rankings for 2012-2013.

A list of student Islamic societies was collated through web-based research and was reconciled with the list of institutions that were officially ranked by the Times Higher Education.

The remit of this study was to focus on events organised by a student union Islamic society which involved an invitation to one or more visiting speakers. It did not include other events organised by Islamic societies or events of other societies.

A questionnaire was developed as part of the survey and was sent out to all identified Islamic societies. This questionnaire was sent out via email and reminder emails were sent out bi-weekly for three weeks, requesting completion of the questionnaires. In total, 25 questionnaires were distributed, with 17 being completed and returned.

The results of the completed questionnaires indicated that some Islamic societies had experienced multiple instances of events being cancelled. However, the statements obtained from the Islamic societies required verification and further web-based research was performed for the purpose of cross-checking the veracity of the claims. This included historical searches on the relevant Islamic society, student union and university websites; as well as news articles from local and national media outlets pertaining to the events in question.

During this process, evidence was collated relating to other cancelled events. Additional web-based research was carried out to establish whether there were any incidents within the London-based Islamic societies who did not respond to the questionnaires. Through this process, other incidents of event cancellations were found. It should also be noted that numerous incidents were omitted from this study as they could not be verified or comprehensively documented at this point, given the departure of relevant students and staff at university.

A review and study of the university guidelines, policies and procedures for student societies was carried out to ascertain whether they had been breached by speakers or Islamic societies.

It was also cited by numerous Islamic societies that external pressure groups were another reason for the cancelation (or near-cancellation) of events which had sought to lobby and influence the university's decision. A separate study of the main pressure group involved has also been conducted to establish their origins, background and level of activity in relation to Islamic societies.

PART 3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

During the period of investigation, Jan 1st 2011 until July 1st 2013, it was found that 7 universities had cancelled 13 Islamic society events.

This study documents examples of universities acting to cancel events without verifying allegations provided by pressure groups against speakers. This had resulted in reversals to decisions of banning speakers later taking place.

It also meant Islamic societies encountered unnecessary obstacles to their activities and may have restricted freedom of expression on campus. Moreover, an example was documented where ‘university values’ were used as a reason to cancel female-only events. The basis for this appeared to be subjective when analysing the university’s equalities and diversity policy.

This study concludes that there is evidence to suggest some universities may have breached the legally protected status of lawful ‘free speech’ and its necessary inclusion within an institution’s values. Some of the cancelled events demonstrate universities giving a subjective interpretation of their institution’s values, which has led to a misapplication of their own policies on speakers.

PART 4 RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the findings of this study; the following recommendations are made for the attention of university officials, student union executives and student society members:

1. Universities and students' unions have a duty of responsibility to ensure that freedom of speech and expression is upheld on university campuses in spite of the attempts of external pressure groups.
2. Any complaints or allegations made regarding visiting speakers must be verified for authenticity.
3. If complaints relate to comments or views allegedly held by a visiting speaker, then it needs to be determined whether such views fall outside the remit of the law. If the comments do not fall outside the remit of the law; then irrespective of whether some may disagree with the content and tone of the comments, universities and students' unions should ensure that the right to air such views is upheld.
4. Universities and students' unions have a duty of care towards its student members and open communication and dialogue should precede any potential action which may jeopardise student trust.
5. The guidelines issued by Universities UK regarding external speakers in higher education institutions should be implemented fully by universities and students' unions.

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