

ROEHAMPTON UNIVERSITY
GUIDELINES FOR ENGAGING WITH SENSITIVE ISSUES

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ROEHAMPTON UNIVERSITY

ROEHAMPTON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' UNION

Guidelines for engaging with sensitive issues

1. Introduction

Roehampton University (RU) has a very diverse community of students and staff. Its values, listed in paragraph 3, set out a vision for this community as one in which all its members can learn, mature and contribute to society. Realising this vision will involve engaging with controversial issues. In a diverse institution there are unparalleled opportunities to do this in a constructive way. However, some of the issues are particularly sensitive and the exploration of them must be undertaken with care. Problems sometimes arise when activities are promoted or conducted in ways that knowingly cause offence to others and/or demean people because of their characteristics, their beliefs, their views or their behaviour. At the extreme end of the spectrum, activities may constitute a criminal offence if, for example, they incite hatred on the basis of religious belief. These guidelines have been adopted by both by RU and the Students' Union (RSU). They are intended to help members of the University community tackle sensitive issues in ways that respect the integrity of others and their right to hold views that are different from those of others.

2. Rights, responsibilities and legal obligations

A University is a place where the right to freedom of speech is upheld and cherished. But this freedom must be exercised with respect for, and sensitivity towards, others. In addition, we must comply with relevant legislation in all areas of activity. In terms of sensitive issues this includes, but is not limited to, age, disability, gender, race, religion and belief, sexual orientation and gender identity. RU's policies on diversity and equal opportunity, harassment and complaints also apply.¹

3. University values

These values give expression to the sort of community RU aspires to be.

- We challenge, inspire and support our students as individuals, to grow intellectually, personally and spiritually
- We prepare our students to be responsible citizens and leaders in a fast-changing, complex world
- We are committed to serving the needs of local communities and to contributing to the economic, social and cultural success of South and West London

¹ <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/humanresources/files/DEOpolicyCouncilapproved0307.doc>
<http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/humanresources/files/harassment.doc>
<http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/universitysecretariat/StudentComplaintsProcedure0809%20Word4Web.doc>

- We work to promote social justice through our outreach and teaching programmes, and through research, consultancy and engagement with communities
- We encourage learning, creativity and the arts as ways of nurturing the human spirit and improving the quality of life
- We are engaged in the pursuit of truth through reason, research and debate based on freedom of thought and expression
- We promote equality, diversity, mutual respect and understanding

4. Guidelines

The following points outline some of the actions that can be taken to ensure that sensitive issues are handled appropriately:

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 Chair

Choose the person to chair a debate or panel with care. She/he needs 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 him/her, or for the Chair not to let his/her own views influence the way the discussion is conducted.

4.4 *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.

4.5 *External speakers*

Groups may well wish to invite external speakers for events. It is important to make sure that such people 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.

4.6 *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.

4.7 *Security*

Always inform Security when an external speaker will be arriving and where they will be whilst on campus, and discuss with them whether any special precautions need to be taken.

Recommended by:

*Peter Briggs, Special Adviser to the Vice-Chancellor;
Robin Geller, University Secretary and Registrar; and
Gary Coates, President of the Roehampton Students' Union*

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