

# Handout six: good relations scenarios

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## 1 Invitations to external speakers

In the run up to a local election, a student debating society asks for permission to hold a meeting in a lecture theatre. Speakers from the political parties fielding candidates in the election, including a speaker from a far-right party, are invited to speak. The far-right party has a history of incitement to racial, religious and homophobic hatred and a senior member of the party has recently been convicted of incitement to racial and religious hatred. None of the staff members have attended any previous presentation given by the speaker in question, but they are concerned that he may create a hostile environment for staff or students or may contravene the law.

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## 2 Lawful speech

During a lecture on the history of Tibet, a university lecturer expresses strong opinions on the actions of the Chinese government. Her remarks are felt to be offensive and insulting by some Chinese students present, who make a complaint of harassment. The lecturer's opposition to China's role in Tibet is evident in her involvement in a boycott of Chinese institutions, about which she comments extensively on her page on the university's social networking system. The students argue that this activity is indirectly discriminatory and mount a campaign against it.

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## 3 Protests

A student animal rights group stages a protest outside the university restaurant about the way in which food is resourced. They gather at the gates to the building, hand out leaflets protesting about the preparation methods for halal and kosher food, the use of non-free range eggs and chickens, and animal welfare generally, but do not enter university premises. Their protest is peaceful but both members of the catering staff and students entering the site complain that they feel intimidated by the presence of the demonstrators and the placards they carry. A few days later a statement is issued naming particular members of staff who work in the restaurant and threatening them by saying that their home addresses are known. The university does not know the identities of those responsible for the statement and the organisers of the protest also claim not to have this information.



#### 4 Individual/group behaviour

An administrator who works in a university's open-plan admissions office is a member of a Christian group which believes homosexual practice is contrary to the law of God. He has chosen the extract from the Bible, Leviticus 18:22, as his screensaver. The extract states, 'You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is abomination'. Staff are generally free to personalise their screensavers and, provided that they are not obscene, the university does not seek to regulate their form and content. This text is within the view of his colleagues, one of whom is gay, several of whom complain to their manager about the offensive nature of the screensaver. The administrator does not directly refer to his colleague's homosexuality.

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#### 5 Individual/group behaviour

A support group for trans students takes an active part in an institution's diversity month by running workshops to raise awareness of trans issues. These workshops involve members of the group talking about their personal experiences of transitioning. The workshops have received a lot of publicity, largely positive, and have been featured both in the student newspaper and on local radio.

The institution receives a request for a meeting from a group of female students who feel that the workshops are promoting a very conservative view of gender, reinforcing gender stereotypes and resulting in the harassment of women who do not conform to those stereotypes in their body shape, style and appearance. They have recent examples of a number of occasions when female students, particularly lesbian students, have been subjected to abusive comments about their appearance and say that these have increased since the workshops began. There is no evidence that any members of the trans group have been directly responsible for this behaviour.

In response the trans students point to a debate organised by the feminist society which considered the politics of gender reassignment and which caused considerable offence among the trans community for some of the views expressed.

## 6 Individual/group behaviour

A university receives a complaint from a student about the conduct of some other students in one of her seminar groups. She is offended by their frequent references to the lecturer's well-known history of mental ill-health and use of terms such as 'nutty' and 'mad'.

The lecturer has not made a complaint. When asked about the incident he says that he feels that the terms are used in good humour, and it makes him feel accepted within the group. He is happy to be open about his history of mental illness and feels that he is a good role model for any student who might have a similar condition.

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## 7 Displays of notices, distribution of literature and electronic communications

Members of an anti-abortion group, some of whom are members of staff and students of the university, put flyers on notice boards, in common areas and under doors of student rooms in halls of residence. In addition to strong wording urging women not to have abortions and referring to abortion as murder, the flyers contain graphic pictures of an abortion and claim abortion is immoral and should be illegal. They also email staff who work in the university's medical centre which offers an abortion referral service. The emails, which do not identify the sender but originate from the university's system, address members of staff personally stating that acts of violence such as abortion beget violence and those who help women obtain abortions are vulnerable to being attacked.

While the anti-abortion group is not officially part of any other student association on campus and quite a few of its members are also members of faith societies. There is some concern among these societies that they will be the focus of counter protest.

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## 8 Banning of groups

Members of an extreme political organisation, who are not students or staff, come to a campus to distribute flyers and put up posters promoting their policies and views and generally to canvass support. A number of students complain that they believe this to be contravening the institution's equality policy; some students claim to have been intimidated and threatened by members of the organisation in the past.

## 9 Students' unions

Students in support of Palestine (SiSoP) has existed for a number of years, affiliated to the students' union. Its constitution states that the objective of the club is to support the Palestinian struggle for independence by increasing awareness and raising funds. The society operates according to students' union rules, membership is open to all students and there are several Jewish members. SiSoP has taken care to ensure that its criticism of the actions of the Israeli state have not promoted antisemitism and relationships with the Jewish students' society have always been amicable.

Following a change of leadership there are several complaints that the society is adopting a more aggressive stance in its publications that is bordering on antisemitic. Two of the Jewish members of the society complain that they are being marginalised and no longer feel welcome at meetings and social events. Following a public meeting organised by SiSoP a Jewish student was threatened on their way home (off campus). While there is no evidence that the threat was made by anyone connected to SiSoP, a number of students insist that the society has been supportive of activity likely to harm the Jewish community and insist that it should be banned.

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## 10 Students' unions

The students' union at a university takes pride in organising a vibrant freshers' week, full of entertainment to introduce students to university life and help them to feel at home. Student societies are encouraged to put on activities during the week and the response from them is usually enthusiastic.

One student society organises a photographic treasure hunt. Participants are given a list of things to photograph at various locations across campus. While some of the subjects are innocuous many involve students (most frequently women) in states of undress or in sexual poses.

The majority of students who take part seem to enjoy the treasure hunt. However, two female students complain that they were put under pressure to pose for photographs that made them feel uncomfortable. One of the female students eventually gave in having been assured that the photograph would not be published. She has just learned that a photo showing her in a sexual pose is posted on the student society's website and she is extremely

distressed. She wants to know what the university intends to do about the situation.

Initial conversations between the university and the students' union are not well received by some students who take offence at what they perceive to be censorship. There is a heated discussion on the university's online forum with accusations that the university is anti-heterosexual, pushing an agenda that is repressive of personal freedom, in thrall to conservative and religious forces, promoting sexual and gender stereotypes, and there are calls for organised protest.

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## 11 Community engagement

As part of their course, a group of drama students write and produce a play for performance on university premises. The play is a fictional story of a young Sikh woman who is forced to marry against her wishes and the discrimination she faces within the local community when she leaves the marriage. It deals with issues of tension between generations, different interpretations of religion and the interface between religious belief and gender. The university campus is based in a city with a large Sikh community, and the university has a number of Sikh students. Before the opening of the play some Sikh students and members of the local Gurdwara complain that it is highly offensive and demand that the university cancels all performances. This angers other members of the university's community (including the Asian Women's Group campaigning against forced marriage and honour-based violence) who demand that the performance continues.

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## 12 Community engagement

A university begins to get complaints from ethnic minority students who claim to have experienced abuse and discrimination while travelling on a popular public bus route leading to the main campus during evening. The university does not have a history of such incidents and is concerned by the response from the local police and bus operating company who seem slow to act.

At a meeting with the local Neighbourhood Multi-Agency Forum it is apparent that the incidents have taken place in an area where a number of Roma families have been recently housed, that similar allegations have been made from members of the

local community and counter-allegations of hate incidents made by the families in question. The police and other agencies are experiencing challenges in engaging with the Roma community who are reluctant to work with them. The university has good connections with other local community groups who make use of campus facilities but to date has not developed a relationship with the Roma community. Further discussions identify that the families may be in the target group for widening participation initiatives. To its knowledge, the university has never had a Roma student.

