

COU12D008

Title: *An Approach to Sensitive and Controversial Issues*
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Issue

From time to time the Vice-Chancellor, on behalf of the University, is asked to take a position on sensitive and/or controversial matters. A request might come directly or through another organisation in which the University has a stake and often relates to matters relevant to international relations. The pressure to act can come from the Student Union, Trades Unions, groups of staff or other sources outside the University.

A recent instance has led the Executive Team (ET) to reflect more generally on how we should respond in these circumstances and it concluded that it would be helpful if Council could offer some formal guidance.

Recommendation

Council is invited to consider and approve the guidance set out in the body of this paper.

Resource Implications

There are no resource implications.

Risk Implications

The handling of these sensitive or controversial issues can have reputational and, prospectively, financial risks associated with them. Taking a stance on a particular issue can impact upon the University's collaborations or business interests in other countries where, for example, numbers of students come from those countries with government scholarships. On the other hand, there might be a reputational risk if the University is not prepared to take a position in cases where core values of the University (liberalism, inclusion, freedom of expression) are threatened.

Equality and Diversity

It is possible that issues such as these could be associated with questions of equality and diversity.

Timing of decisions

N/A

Further Information

Further information is available from the Registrar and Secretary, Mr Brian Summers, tel. 01603 592208, email b.summers@uea.ac.uk

Discussion

The University is an incorporated body with many thousands of members including past and present students and staff. It enjoys the privilege of incorporation to pursue its charitable objects of education, research and activities ancillary thereto. It is not incorporated or structured to campaign on issues which do not directly affect its interests or those of its beneficiaries (primarily the student body). There is extensive guidance available from the Charity Commission as to the factors to be considered by a charity when considering action of a campaigning nature, but importantly decisions on such matters require careful reflection and consideration of risks. They should not be a hasty reaction to circumstances, and the fundamental question to ask is does this really further the purposes of the charity? Even when issues are of clear relevance to the University, it has to weigh many factors in the balance and is often best advised to maintain a silent public position. A willingness to speak out can imply that we condone matters on which we are silent.

ET recommends that Council considers endorsing the following guidance:

- a) that the University is not, fundamentally, a campaigning organisation. Its predisposition is not to take public stances on sensitive or controversial issues that are not of clear and direct relevance to the University and its wellbeing;
- b) more often than not, the University is better able to make a positive impact through engagement, discussion and/or the outputs of its academic endeavours (objective, evidence based research) rather than public statements which can risk disaffecting others and hindering or curtailing constructive dialogue;
- c) the University would, in any case, not take a stance on a sensitive or controversial issue unless it was sure that it had a comprehensive and balanced view of the matter and was convinced that the University's best interests would be promoted by taking a public position;
- d) if, and notwithstanding the foregoing, ET considers that the interests of the University would be well served by associating the University directly or indirectly with some form of statement, protest, or campaign on an issue that it deems sensitive or controversial, then the Chairman should be consulted in advance of such a statement being made, and desirably Council.