

Guidance for Chairs at External Speaker Events

General Event Guidance

Pre-Event

Before an event begins it can often be useful to discuss any practical issues with the speaker(s), to help set expectations and prevent confusion. It's recommended that you:

- » Arrange to meet the speaker(s) around 15-20 minutes before the event.
- » Go through the Briefing for External Speakers at Students' Union UCL Events which sets out the expectations they have agreed to and must meet.
- » Reconfirm the key topics the event will cover, and reiterate any prior agreement of subject areas which have been agreed not to be discussed or focused on.
- » If any security or other measures have been put in place, be prepared to answer questions about why/how they are being deployed. Please note the speaker should have been informed and agreed to any measures in advance of the event.
- » Confirm the key topics and order of the event, i.e. introduction by chair, lecture, Q&A session etc., and give speaker(s) an idea of when the event will end.
- » Confirm the running order and seating position if there are a number of speakers.
- » Re-confirm how long each speaker is expected to speak for and advise that you will tell speakers when their presentation ought to end and explain how you will indicate to them that their time is over.
- » Check with speaker(s) that any PowerPoint presentation they are using has been loaded onto the computer and they are aware of how to use the system.
- » If the event is being recorded, advise the speaker to turn off their mobile phone, as it may interfere with the audio recording. Please also ask the speaker to speak directly into the microphone and not walk about unless they have a lapel mic, regardless of the theatre's acoustics. This is essential for audibility on the day. If during the event a speaker starts walking away from the microphone you should ask them to move closer to it or provide a roaming microphone if available.

Introduction

It is important that when beginning proceedings the chair sets the tone for the event. It's recommended that the chair:

- » Introduce themselves to the audience.
- » Welcome the audience to the event, explaining which club/society or officer is hosting.
- » Go through fire evacuation procedures.
- » Briefly set out the running order for the proceedings, including highlighting any Q&A session which may be happening, and say when the event is expected to end.

- » Provide some biographical information on the speaker(s).
- » Advise the audience to put their mobile phones on silent to avoid disrupting the event.
- » Keep the speaker(s) to time, if possible.

Question and Answer Session

This can be the hardest part of the event to manage, but thoughtful preparation can add significant value to the event for both the speakers and the audience.

- » At the start of the Q&A session it is recommended that the chair reminds those wishing to ask a question to be short and clear. Please be proactive and be willing to interrupt someone who does embark on a speech rather than a question. In doing this, however, you should remember that some questioners may be quite nervous and may perceive this to be antagonistic, so be polite but firm. You can by interrupt saying something such as “thank you, but I am conscious of time so we need to move on”.
- » Sometimes a chair can improve the discussion by taking a cluster of questions before returning to the platform for comment. This reduces the risk of the panel dominating the Q&A session.
- » Chairs should ensure that they take questions from a balance of those in the audience with differing views.

Conclusion

At the end of the event the chair should:

- » Thank the audience for coming.
- » If the event is part of a series, tell the audience details of the next event.
- » Most importantly thank the speaker(s).

Protecting Freedom of Speech

Summary

Freedom of speech is enshrined in both Students’ Union UCL’s Memorandum & Articles of Association, Students’ Union UCL Bye-Laws¹ and in the UCL Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech². Our parent institution UCL is bound by section 43 of the Education Act 1986³, which places a direct obligation on universities to ‘take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the establishment and for visiting speakers’. Students’ Union UCL is committed to empowering and support our clubs, societies and officers to organise invitations for a variety of speakers that stimulate debate and further the non-academic development of our members. We will facilitate events where speakers are allowed the right to express their views and experiences, while differing, challenging and antithetical views are also heard and debated in a non-threatening environment. In order to do this, we expect all event organisers to ensure

¹ Students’ Union UCL Memorandum & Articles of Association, Students’ Union UCL Bye-Laws. Available from: <https://studentsunionucl.org/governing-documents> [Accessed September 2024]

² UCL Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech. Available from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/srs/compliance/prevent-ucl/external-speakers>, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/srs/sites/srs/files/ucl_code_of_practice_on_freedom_of_speech.pdf [Accessed September 2024]

³ Education Act (No. 2) 1986. Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/61/contents> [Accessed September 2024]

they understand and follow the External Speaker Information and Process⁴ which highlights our expectations, the process by which speakers must be approved and the legislation we must consider when running external speaker events.

The Role of the Chairperson

It is important to recognise that your responsibility doesn't stop when the speaker is approved, it is the event organiser's responsibility to uphold our policies during the event and to help protect the speaker(s) and attendees' right to freedom of speech throughout. One of the best ways to do this is by appointing a strong chairperson for the event.

The chairperson is the individual who presides over the meeting, introducing speakers, ensuring appropriate timings, fielding questions and generally making sure the event runs smoothly. They also have a significant responsibility to uphold and be well versed in relevant Union policies, ensuring freedom of speech is maintained for any external speaker(s) and event attendees.

- » The chair sets the tone for the meeting, ensuring a balanced debate.
- » They are empowered to react proactively to situations and should challenge inappropriate actions or behaviours, working with the Union or UCL staff to steer the event on the right course.
- » The chair works to ensure events are inclusive and conducted in a way that allows for differing viewpoints and opinions to be expressed and debated in a non-threatening environment.

Event organisers will often take on the role of chairperson and are expected to follow these guidelines, however in certain circumstances an impartial chairperson, nominated and trained by the Union, will be asked to lead events.

The Union's Responsibilities

It is the Union's responsibility to act within the legal framework set out in UK legislation, the UCL Code of Practice and our charitable objects to ensure protection of freedom of speech within the law. To maintain our duty of care for the health and safety of all staff, students and visitors in particular we will:

- » Do all that is reasonably practicable to protect our members from unlawful direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation.
- » Not allow communication which is threatening, abusive or intended to harass, alarm or distress.
- » Not allow communication which targets a person, or group of people based on their skin colour, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender (sexual or identified), age, disability, marriage and civil partnership.
- » Not allow communication which could reasonably be perceived to encourage unlawful action or glorify the unlawful actions of a group or organisation.
- » Comply with UK counter-terrorism law. This is regardless of debate over terrorism legislation, the basis of proscription, or the basis of an organisation or individuals being labelled as terrorist. This means the Union cannot allow a speaker to proceed with speaking at the event if they:

⁴ Students' Union UCL External Speaker Information and Process. Available from: <https://studentsunionucl.org/how-to/clubs-and-societies/organise-event-with-external-speaker> [Accessed September 2024]

- » Are a member of or profess to be a member of a ‘proscribed organisation’.⁵
- » Make any statement at the event which may encourage terrorism or support a proscribed organisation (including expressing their own support for a proscribed organisation) or the furtherance of a proscribed organisation’s activities.

The chairperson must pay particular attention to the points above. While the Union can and will put steps in place to achieve these aims, it is the chairperson who is the main point of authority at the event itself and the person that needs to react if one of these areas is criteria is not being met. For high-risk events, Union staff will be present to support the chair, but as a student driven organisation, we want to empower the student chairperson to take appropriate action when needed.

Chairs at Charity Events

Students’ Union UCL is a registered charity and therefore all Union club, society or officer events are ‘charitable events.’ This means that their content, purpose and delivery must fit within the Union’s charitable objects and must not put the charity’s reputation at risk. The Union’s objects are the advancement of education of students at UCL for the public benefit by:

- » Promoting the interests and welfare of students at UCL during their course of study and representing, supporting and advising students;
- » Being the recognised representative channel between students and UCL and any other external bodies;
- » Providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of its’ students.

The chairperson needs to be mindful that all events should be about creating discussion and debate which is of interest to the student body and provides an opportunity for students to develop and express their opinions. This is why it is so important that that the right to freedom of speech is applied fairly and constantly to all groups. Practically this means making sure that a variety of different views from the audience are allowed to be expressed, and challenging behaviour that might try to shut down or stop these views being heard.

Expectations

In the event of inappropriate behaviour and/or a breach of our freedom of speech policy the chair should:

- » Challenge the behaviour immediately.
- » Cut the speaker (audience or invited external speaker) short and move to the next question and or/next section of the talk.
- » Remind everyone that we expect all speakers and attendees to follow the Union Freedom of Speech Policy⁶ and UCL Code of Practice, and that discriminatory or threatening behaviour will not be tolerated.
- » Remind the audience and speakers about the topic and focus of the meeting.

⁵ Home Office, (2013) Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2> [Accessed September 2024]

⁶ Students’ Union UCL Freedom of Speech Policy. Available from: <https://studentsunionucl.org/> [Accessed September 2024]

- » In exceptional circumstances or where indicated to do so by UCL or Students' Union UCL representatives, end the event immediately.

Protests and Disruptions

Serious protests or disruptions at Union events are rare but those acting as 'chair' should be fully aware of how best to manage the situation if it occurs.

Disruption on a scale that means the chair needs to intervene is very rare, but if it does happen you as the chair need to be aware that UCL Security will not normally physically remove protestors unless there is a physical threat to the audience/speaker/chair; in those circumstances immediate action would be taken by UCL Security.

Peaceful protest to controversial events is an important right and one which must be protected. The external speakers and all attendees in the room have a right to freedom of speech and therefore in exceptional circumstance the chair may have to intervene if a meeting is disrupted to such an extent that the purpose of the talk/event/debate cannot be fulfilled – e.g. the invited external speaker is unable to complete their talk.

1. In the first instance the chair should verbally ask any disruptive audience members to allow the event to continue.
2. If disruption continues the chair should indicate that the disruption is breaching our Freedom of Speech Policy.
3. In the event of non-compliance the chair should state that if disruption continues they will have to ask UCL Security to escort the individual(s) causing the issue out of the room.
4. If non-compliance continues, liaise with UCL Security accordingly who will take the decision about the best course of action.

Premature End of the Meeting

If disturbance continues and is not controllable you should consult with UCL Security who will be present at this point and who will take the final decision on whether the meeting should be closed on the grounds of safety.