

LSESU says no to Islamophobia and calls for Real Student Rights

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This Union Notes:

1. That November is Islamophobia Awareness Month in the UK.
2. That Student Rights is an organisation claiming to support ‘freedom from extremism’^[1] on UK university campuses and mostly criticises speakers it sees as ‘extremists’ who have been invited by Islamic societies^[2] but has in the past expressed opposition to student union ‘no-platform’ policy for the BNP.^[3]
3. That Student Rights’ most recent report on gender segregation^[4], focusing on Islamic society events, failed in almost every case to determine whether segregation was enforced or voluntary and presented the phenomenon as ‘part of a wider, discriminatory trend’ on campuses^[5] which resulted in headlines in the mainstream media associating gender segregation with ‘extremism’.^[6]
4. That Student Rights is not transparent about its origins or funding but has never refuted allegations in the press that it is ‘a side project of the neoconservative Henry Jackson Society’^[7], a think tank whose associate director, Douglas Murray, has argued that ‘conditions for Muslims in Europe must be made harder across the board’^[8]. Nor has it ever challenged reports that it receives funding from the Henry Jackson Society^[9].
5. That the Institute of Race Relations has noted with concern^[10], that Student Rights’ work and reporting has been used by far-right groups to target a Muslim-student event^[11] which led to reported threats of violence and the event subsequently having to be cancelled by the university^[12].
6. That Student Rights was established in 2009 as a reaction to what it calls ‘increasing political extremism’^[13] on campus – which director Raheem Kassam is reported to have said is a reference to a wave of peaceful occupations that took place on UK campuses to protest Israel’s bombing of Gaza in Operation Cast Lead.^[14]

This Union Believes:

7. That Student Rights activities fuel Islamophobia, by disproportionately and unfairly targeting Muslim students, contributing to their marginalisation and ostracisation, damaging campus cohesion and feeding into a growing trend of Islamophobic discourse in wider society which should always be challenged, particularly in Islamophobia Awareness Month.
8. That the claims Student Rights makes to the press are too often been sensationalist, misleading and lacking in nuance, designed to grab headlines about so-called ‘extremism’ on campus, regardless of the impact on students.
9. That whether intentional or not, it is deeply damaging that Student Rights’ approach – which bypasses students themselves - should lead to a situation in which far-right groups come onto a campus, creating a climate in which students feel persecuted and threatened and potentially endangering students’ welfare.
10. That NUS VP Welfare 2012-13, Pete Mercer, was right to condemn Student Rights’ approach as a ‘witch-hunt’ and NUS Black Students Officer 2013-14 Aaron Kiely is right to support the grassroots student campaign ‘Real Student Rights’ which aims to expose and discredit Student Rights.

11. That Student Rights legitimacy is questionable given its limited or non-existent links to actual students, inconsistency on the issue of no-platform policies, creation as a reaction to peaceful pro-Palestinian activism, lack of transparency about its origins and funding, and in particular its alleged links to the Henry Jackson Society, the think tank which employs Douglas Murray, widely criticised for making comments perceived as Islamophobic.

12. That it is not the place of any external organisation – particularly one as non-transparent and dubiously connected as Student Rights - to undermine the Student Union's autonomy or interfere with co-operation between the union and university in their work to ensure that pre-existing guidelines regarding external speakers are followed.

This Union Resolves:

13. To mandate SU officers to release a public statement/open letter addressed to Student Rights criticising their lack of transparency, sensationalism, divisive and counter-productive activities and disproportionate preoccupation with Muslim students and calling on them to drastically change their approach and mentality.

14. To circulate the 'Real Student Rights' petition via email / social media.

15. To write to the university management, making explicit their concerns about the group Student Rights, and the effect that their activities have on students welfare, campus cohesion and on freedom of speech on campus as well as re-iterating the union's desire to maintain its autonomy in determining guidelines on external speakers without outside interference.

16. To maintain ongoing communication and for a mandated officer(s) to report back to the SU on any developments including asking the university to inform the SU of any attempts by Student Rights to lobby them regarding any student groups' activities.

References

[1] http://www.studentrights.org.uk/about_us

[2] <http://www.studentrights.org.uk>

[3] <http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1nkge/LondonStudentissue10/resources/index.htm>

[4] http://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/141019975?access_key=key-8swxo6lwrn6wnxkqm9&allow_share=true&view_mode=scroll

[5] *ibid.*

[6] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/hilary-aked/student-rights-campus-extremism-study_b_3277503.html

[7] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/hilary-aked/student-rights-claims-media-mistakes_b_3303703.html

[8] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mehdi-hasan/douglas-murray-edl-dodgy-videos-me_b_3675193.html

[9] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/hilary-aked/student-rights-campus-extremism-study_b_3277503.html

[10] <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/far-right-targets-islamic-events/>

[11] - <http://casualsunited.wordpress.com/2013/01/04/he-reckons-does-he-i-think-this-retreat-is-gonna-run-into-a-few-problems-edl-casualsunited/>

[12] - <http://www.reading.ac.uk/news-and-events/releases/PR490014.aspx>

[13] http://www.studentrights.org.uk/about_us

[14] <http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1nkge/LondonStudentissue10/resources/index.htm>