
Values-based Impartiality

GUIDANCE FOR SENIOR MANAGEMENT

On

**The University's Approach to Complex Social and
Geopolitical Emergencies**

Recent events have initiated an active discussion at King's College London about when and what position the University should take on geopolitical and complex social issues. In this short paper we lay out some guiding principles for our response as a University, distinguishing thereby what individuals and groups may do, from what the University as an entity should do. In doing so we recognise that:

1. Universities are social institutions with a special duty to society and an obligation to its community. Universities in general, and King's in particular, has always been alive to its duty to protect academic inquiry and academic freedom as stated in our Charter. The UK Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act now proposes a particular understanding of freedom of expression and academic freedom, and a duty to promote academic freedom, to which we also now must be bound. At the same time, we are a community of students and scholars, who not only have ideas, but also perspectives, experiences, feelings, emotions, hopes and expectations from their place of work and study.
2. We must find a unique balance between our Duty of Academic Freedom as expressly stated in our Charter and in the Law, and our regard for a diverse and inclusive academic community with learning at its heart. We must do so realizing that what may seem the self-evident truth at one time often becomes an inadequate view of reality with time (e.g., how thoughts about creationism gave way to our understanding of evolution, here at King's). At the same time actions and views that would seem self-evidently wrong at one time have come to be understandable, and even laudable at another (e.g., how decolonisation has come to replace service to the Empire). Universities are some of the longest surviving institutions where the free exchange of ideas enables the challenging of established orders, while a sense of community keeps it from fracturing at every new social or political conflict. Therefore, how we balance our duties and community is critical to our future.
3. In this context what often comes up is "What is the University's view on this matter?" Often, it is asked, why is the University not taking a position, not condemning a particular course of action or position that seems clearly wrong to most people and where many other institutions, and sometimes even other universities, may have taken a position.
4. This paper provides guidance to how the senior leaders should approach these matters. The overall approach proposed is one of **values-based impartiality**. The overriding value of a university like King's must be academic inquiry and academic freedom, and the pursuit of that value requires that the University, as a corporate entity, be measured in what it says about complex social and geopolitical issues.
5. What these challenges have in common, is that there is often more than one view at King's. It is only natural that each group of King's students and staff affected by such situations want their plight to be seen and acknowledged and their cause supported by the University itself. When we only recognise the perspective of a group of students and not another, or when we recognize their perspective in one instance and not another, we inadvertently and negatively affect their sense of belonging as part of the King's community. Thus, in the service of its Duty and its Community, King's needs a consistent approach to these matters.
6. While we speak about the "University" in general terms – there is no single answer for all universities. The position that King's will take with respect to this question is informed by our unique history and circumstances and will continue to be so.

The King's Context

7. King's is now a much more international university than in its past. It has students from at least 150 countries each of which has its own political dynamics and governance models which have inbuilt potential for structural and/or large-scale violence and recalcitrant conflict.
8. Similarly, students bring to the King's community not only their national identities, but also their personal, sexual, gender, religious, ethical, and increasingly their environmental sensibilities and identities. And as in the geopolitical matters above, when issues affect these identities, or pit one against the other, students and staff often like the University to take their side.
9. We have not always been consistent in our responses, nor have we always offered clarity to our community about why we speak on some issues, and not all. It is important that our communities understand what we do or do not do in those situations and why.

Lessons from King's responses to geopolitical emergencies in the recent past

10. Our record of response to political and geopolitical conflicts that impact members of our community throw up some lessons:
 - i. We have had an **uneven response** to geopolitical emergencies affecting members of the King's community. Some events go without a mention while others get a lot of attention (the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis occurred before the Israeli-Gaza crisis and was not mentioned in our communications). There is accusation of **double standards** when we acknowledge the perspective of some and not of others.
 - ii. **The potential for hostility towards our students:** We have seen situations where a group of students are demonised because their countries are declared by the University to be aggressors or offenders.
 - iii. **Straddling the threshold of legality:** The actions of some of our members during these periods either through visible support for proscribed organisations or expressions that can be construed as "hate speech" can take them into the zone of illegality, creating complications for the institution. It is our duty to guide our students and staff about the limits of the law – assisting them to express their views within it and ensuring that they do not cross that line inadvertently. It is the University's duty to inform its staff about this line, but it must be done in a way that is not itself intimidating or inhibiting legal discourse.
 - iv. **Responding to local attention and pressure:** Our response is sometimes influenced by the degree to which an issue interests or affects sections of the King's community (particularly if that section is visible or well organised), or the degree to which the issue attracts global attention (e.g., Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Israeli-Palestinian conflicts). At some level this is understandable and natural, as it is not possible for a community to have equal concern for all global issues. At another level we need to have enough consistency in our actions to defend against a **perception of bias** based along regional, social, or economic grounds.
 - v. **Complexity of politics and consequences of positions:** We are often pressured, by petition and campaigns, to take a stance as an institution. On the face of it, making a public statement about our collective humanity seems harmless. But such seemingly

simple expressions convey a political stance that we haven't always been conscious of. Condemning Russia's attack of Ukraine, as subtly as we did, added to the demonisation of Russia which required the protection of our Russian students who faced further isolation. We face similar challenges in the current Israel-Gaza conflict. Responding with statements to each evolving international crisis is an unwinnable approach, which makes us seem inconsistent and fosters divisions within our community.

Through all this what has been consistently lauded and appreciated is the **consistency of pastoral support** provided through our Chaplaincy and other divisions and the concern and the allowances by the rest of the University.

Values-Based Impartiality – Principles to Guide Future Responses

11. We propose the following principles to guide our future response:

- **Our first priority is the Safety and Security of our Staff and Students**

The security and physical safety of our students and staff is our first concern. In this regard, we will always speak and reach out to our students and staff and provide them with the care and support they need. This has always been appreciated by our students and staff. To achieve this, we should communicate and will take the positions that are necessary. Sometimes this would mean reaching out to bespoke students directly [e.g., when a few students are affected directly]. Sometimes, this would mean messaging to a group from a region, or with some characteristics [e.g., when students from a particular country are affected]. And sometimes, this might mean communicating to the entire University.

Communicating this concern rarely requires public statements or taking political positions. However, there may be instances where publicly expressing our concern and actively lobbying is in the direct security interest of our students. In doing so we need to evaluate whether a public statement is indeed the best way to achieve our goal. In fact, in some circumstances (e.g., when staff abroad may be held by a hostile government or group), making such statements may worsen the situation. Deciding this will always remain a matter of context and judgement.

- **Our Duty of Academic Freedom requires Values-based Impartiality.**

Academic freedom expressly stated in the King's Charter, freedom of speech and expression, which is enshrined in law and considered a fundamental human right, and open scholarly debate are at the heart of King's. This is a fundamental value for us a university. When the security of our students and staff is not directly and imminently threatened, this value trumps others. We must defend the right of individuals to speak. They should be free to support, condemn, condone, discuss, and debate about all issues, including geopolitical and complex social issues – within the limits of the law.

In the service of this Duty, it is important that the University, as an institution and a corporation, not express a view, save where it directly impacts the security and safety of our staff and students. We are not a lobby or trade association and as such do not seek political goals or make public or corporate statements. Because a university or employer taking a position or a stance on an issue naturally inhibits the ability of a student or employee to speak their mind the University should avoid this, in all but the most exceptional circumstances.

The University taking a view or not cannot be seen just as a matter of majority or plurality. Just because 51% of the University, or for that matter even 99% of the University's staff feel a particular way, should not propel the University to take a position on geopolitical or sociopolitical issues. Because by doing so, we would create a tilted stage. We would send a message to a minority of our staff that they are against the institution, and the institution is against them. When the noted geologist and King's academic Professor Charles Lyell [who later became Sir Charles] was arguing

against James Ussher's chronology of creation in the 1830s at King's, most of the faculty and students considered it wrong and few would have voted for him to continue to outrage morals. Yet, history teaches us that entire society benefitted by allowing him, and others, to continue academic inquiry and where it led them.

Therefore, in restricting our public position to those instances that directly impact the security and safety of our staff and students, our impartiality is a values-based position. It may seem easier to just go with the majority, or side with the powerful at a given moment. Values-based impartiality is not, as some may see it, an act of omission – but an active matter of principled restraint. We will seek to be fair and unbiased in the pursuit of this.

But restraint as a corporate body, should not mean silence within the University. Quite the opposite. The University encourages its staff and students to actively engage in a scholarly discussion of these very complex issues. There are enough people, bodies and institutions in our society that jump to taking polarized views based on ideology and limited information. The place of the University in such times is to ensure a thoughtful, scholarly discussion that sheds light on these issues – so that we, and the rest of society, may learn. That is the point of academic freedom. That is the purpose of a University.

But this academic freedom is not an unchanging absolute and does not mean “anything goes”. Our interpretation of academic freedom does not include any license for racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination or the use of the protections of academic freedom to question the humanity of others or their right to exist as equals. Similarly, while we protect the rights of academics to question beliefs and cherished positions – we do not allow them to do it in way that targets or denigrates a particular individual or individuals. Therefore, we do not see an incompatibility between inclusivity and academic freedom – though it requires special attention and norms to realize both.

- **Our regard for a Diverse and Inclusive Academic Community**

Given that we support and welcome students and staff from different countries, religions, and identities – diversity is natural, but so is inclusion. In fact, our seeking diversity and inclusion and our adherence to the rights of an individual to have and express their views freely, may even create an inherent tension, and not always will there be perfect harmony in this large academic community. And that is why it is important that we foster respect for each other and expect civility in discourse.

We differentiate between fostering respect and expecting civility. Respect is an attitude of admiration and esteem. It is deeply personal, and to be true it is something that must be earned. We shall do our best to foster it, but we must acknowledge that it cannot be demanded, especially when people hold deeply conflicting views. Civility on the other hand is a behavioural norm, it is a standard of behaviour that is set by a community and expected in social interactions, regardless of whether one holds admiration or esteem for the other.

It is our expectation that when such contentious matters are discussed at the University, they are done with civility. A debate on these matters at King's is different from a free-for-all at Hyde Park. Our students and staff are entitled to hold and express their views and express them [within the limit of the law], even views that are offensive to others or make them uncomfortable. But they are not allowed to harass, bully, or intimidate individuals or groups.

Those of opposing views owe each other the civility to present their views based on reason, to listen and respond to counterarguments. The intent is not to convince the other, but to understand the other point of view. Civility is enabled by the fact that the University is not there to declare a winner or a winning position. Civility is upheld because the University will act when it violates our policies regarding misconduct.

- **Expression of Impartiality with Independence**

There are many who will not agree with this position, especially when it comes to a cause or a view they feel so dearly about. To ensure that the wisdom of this values-based impartiality is supported over time, it is critical that it be applied with fair and unbiased judgement and independence across all instances, regardless of pressures from within and without. It is acknowledged that at times this will be difficult, but only when this impartiality is expressed independently, and over time, will we fulfil our Duty and serve our Community.

Final Note

This document is intended as guidance. Previous iterations were discussed by the Vice-Chancellor's Senior Team, the Academic Board, University Executive, One King's Leadership Team, and presented to the Council of the University. It will be revalidated periodically through the University's Academic Board, University Executive and Council.

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