

Written evidence from Warwick Students' Union (FSU0094)

Warwick Students' Union (SU) is the main representative body for 25,000+ students at the University of Warwick.

The following evidence is submitted as a rebuttal to some of the claims made during this enquiry regarding Warwick SU's own role in the "suppression" of free speech through our alleged "banning" of an external speaker.

More broadly, we would like to offer additional context, nuance and correctives to an area which is often painted in broad brush-strokes, but ultimately bears little resemblance to the reality of the situation.

Executive Summary

- Widespread stereotypes and biases leading to misreporting of items in the media
- Subsequent confusion of issues by media and government
- 'Censorship' case study: boycotts vs "bans"
- External speaker protocols and due diligence
- Case study: Maryam Namazie at Warwick SU
- The right to freedom of speech vs. the right to a platform
- *Sp!ked* magazine and their problematic role in this issue
- Notes on "Trigger Warnings"

CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

1. During the past few years, students (with a particular focus on millennials) have been frequently caricatured as overly-sensitive, ban-happy "Snowflakes" too fragile to cope with the "real world", and thus needing to be mollicoddled via an over-abundance of "trigger warnings" and wellbeing measures.

2. This is a narrative which has been largely created (and subsequently seized upon) by right-leaning groups and media organisations in a bid to discredit progressive political movements - not least the desire inherent in many young people to forge a fairer and better world for those groups who have previously found themselves marginalised (e.g. women, students with disabilities, LGBTUA+ students and those from BME backgrounds).

3. It is therefore particularly troubling that this narrative is potentially now being used to inform government policy – especially so in light of what appears to be a systemic move towards weakening the collective bargaining power of students through their unions.

4. Put bluntly, there is frequently no room for nuance in the discussion of this issue. As noted in the NUS response to this enquiry:

"Often the following are conflated by government and the media: Universities, higher education institutions, students' unions and 'on campus'; banning a speaker, risk mitigation for speakers

(punitive and not) and failing to invite speakers; formal and informal learning spaces, and social spaces.” (Point 6)

5. As a result, the issues often become confused and reduced to attention-grabbing headlines - a particularly telling example of this was the *Daily Telegraph*’s sensationalised recent report “Student forces Cambridge to drop white authors”, which was quietly later corrected to: “The proposals were in fact recommendations. Neither they nor the open letter called for the University to replace white authors with black ones and there are no plans to do so”.

6. Often cited as an example of illiberal doctrine, the NUS’s ‘No Platform’ policy in fact contains only six extremist organisations: Hizb ut-tahrir (HUT), Al-Muhajiroun (AM), the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPAC), the British National Party (BNP), the English Defence League (EDL) and National Action.² Clearly, reducing the ability of these groups to speak or recruit on campuses as a matter of due diligence does not serve to undermine “freedom of speech” in universities.

7. Students’ Unions are independent membership-led organisations and registered charities. As such, they are bound by UK Charity Law. Aside from exercising good governance by conducting thorough risk assessments, they are also duty-bound to adhere to the terms set out in UK Education Act; as noted in the NUS’s response to this enquiry, the Prevent duty is an additional piece of legislation which often proves highly problematic when attempting to reconcile notions of “free speech” against both practical realities and politically-driven ideology.

The following response illuminates several other issues pertinent to this enquiry.

BOYCOTTS vs. “BANS”

8. Much is made in the media of the democratic decisions undertaken by Students’ Unions to “ban” or restrict access to items or services which they feeling run contrary to the values of their membership base or community. However, there is a key distinction which needs to be drawn here, one which is frequently ignored in discussions relating to this subject.

9. A ban is an authoritative unilateral action taken in response to something which refuses to conform to a rigid set of beliefs. It is ideologically motivated, intractable, disempowering, and entered into without nuance or flexibility.

10. A boycott, on the other hand – of the type often practised by Students’ Unions - is a democratic action, enacted to put pressure on a given company or entity to change their practises. This is a tried and tested political tactic which has been instrumental throughout history in bringing about change where conventional political actions have failed – most famously in South Africa during the Apartheid era, though more recently in such campaigns as *Stop Funding Hate*.

11. Much has been made of the decision by several Students’ Unions to “ban” the sale of *The Sun* newspaper on campuses due to its continuation of Page 3. In actuality, however, rather than representing an illiberal blanket action, this has represented the empowering use of the economic resources at an SU’s disposal (many of which run their own shops), hitting what has been deemed to be an unethical company directly in the pockets and providing a tangible financial incentive to change its practices.

MARYAM NAMAZIE AT WARWICK SU

12. We were extremely disappointed - though perhaps unsurprised - to see that Warwick SU was mentioned in this enquiry as an example of a Students' Union which "banned" an external speaker, Maryam Namazie.

13. Ms Namazie was not ever, and would never have been, "banned" from speaking at Warwick University by the Students' Union - indeed, no external speaker has ever been prevented from hosting a talk at the University of Warwick. Despite widespread reports of such instances in the media, as noted in point 23 of the NUS response to this enquiry, *"According to research undertaken by ChangeSU last year, no students' unions reported having banned an external speaker in the previous 12 months."*

14. At Warwick, this situation arose from a mistake by a member of administrative staff, who failed to correctly follow the procedure put in place for external speaker requests. During the preliminary stages of processing a request, our Student Activities team carry out a Risk Assessment researching the basic history of a given speaker to determine what, if any, issues may arise based on previous talks given at other institutions. Where problems are identified, these are flagged and then referred up the management chain so that these issues can be resolved – *always* with a view to the talk eventually taking place.

15. Unfortunately, the member of staff failed to do this, instead mistakenly informing the event organisers that this incomplete process had now been finalised. Rather than liaising with the Students' Union to query this, the student society in question instead took their story to the speaker and national press, in turn generating a whirlwind of negative attention which led to physical and online threats being made to the President of the Students' Union, widespread misreporting in the press and the abuse of staff on social media.

16. As soon as this simple human error was brought to our attention, the correct procedure was immediately followed, the supposed "decision" reversed and the speaker's talk confirmed. The details of this process were, however, not reported as thoroughly; over 3 years on, the story that Warwick SU "banned" Maryam Namazie still persists, and is now on Parliamentary record as part of this enquiry. It is simply not true.

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH vs. THE RIGHT TO A PLATFORM

17. Though much has been made of the NUS' 'No Platform' policy, this does *not* translate to all Students' Unions – SUs are autonomous bodies, and therefore can democratically decide their own policies on this matter.

18. Nevertheless, the right to freedom of speech is often wrongly equated with the right to a guaranteed or automatic platform from which to air those views. An equivalent analogy would be whether someone with opinions contrary to yours has the right to invade your private space and propagate these views. Clearly, no-one is disputing the individual's right to hold those opinions –

however, they do *not* the right to come into your house, building, workplace or organisation and broadcast them.

19. It is easy for figures such as Peter Tatchell and Julie Bindell, both of whom have the attention of and access to national media, to take out double-page spreads in newspapers making the case for their supposed “persecution” in this area (particularly when it fits the existing agenda of those news outlets). The same courtesy is rarely extended to those attempting to make the case *against* such individuals – many of whom often come from minority backgrounds and face vigorous persecution when attempting to voice opinions in the public sphere. Recently, an NUS Officer simply declined a place on a panel with Peter Tatchell – this was then deemed a “Freedom of Speech” issue, when in actual fact it was simply a case of the individual exercising their own freedom of choice.

20. In the instance of speakers with problematic viewpoints (e.g. racist organisations, proponents of eugenics or Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists, who argue that Trans women do not have the right to be recognised or even exist as women), there exists a significant risk to marginalised groups, and both SUs and Universities have a responsibility to mitigate against this.

21. In the most extreme circumstances, where the threat of physical violence is very real, this might mean not allowing an event to go ahead. However, *in the vast majority of cases*, this means working closely with Liberation Officers and student societies to ensure that their wellbeing is considered, and – most crucially - that their voices are able to be heard too. Though this may well include facilitating student protest against speakers/events, it is worth stressing that protest is an absolutely fundamental aspect of freedom of speech.

SPIKED MAGAZINE

22. It is disconcerting and even a little disturbing to see the extent to which the testimony of *Sp!ked* magazine has been privileged in this enquiry. *Sp!ked* is not a legitimate news source. It is a fringe comment website whose ideologically-driven, hard-libertarian outlook offers a mirror to the themes covered by *Breitbart* in the US: nationalism, race, identity politics and “freedom of speech”.

23. For the past few years, Warwick has been given a blanket ‘Red’ ranking in *Sp!ked*’s annual “Free Speech Rankings” coverage, which is widely circulated throughout the mainstream media. However, once again, this is a misnomer designed to propagate the publication’s own political agenda.

24. The methodology used to calculate these rankings is frequently based on flawed logic (see “Boycotts vs Bans” above) or inaccurate research, as in the case of Maryam Namazie at Warwick. Most deceptively of all, however, it often factors in the basic requirements of UK law. Clearly, an organisation or employer having Bullying & Harassment or Equality & Diversity policies in place are not the same as blithely restricting “free speech”. (Also included in Warwick’s recent ranking was the University’s Trans & Gender Reassignment policy, which simply states that members of the university community should respect whichever preferred pronouns are specified by an individual.)

25. By contrast, *Sp!ked*’s conception of free speech is the ability to say anything at any time to anyone - regardless of the consequences, legal/personal repercussions or even potential

criminality of such an action. Rather than being accepted as statistical fact, their campaign should be viewed critically in the context of their other articles and content.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

26. Despite being easily caricatured, Content Notes and 'Trigger Warnings' are inherently linked to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), in which external triggers may cause an involuntary relapse in symptoms of a given trauma. As a condition which has only gained formal recognition in the past few decades, instances of Content Notes have become particularly prevalent on the internet to warn individuals about the potential for relapse in articles referring to sexual assault, acts of violence or other illnesses such as eating disorders. However, in daily life they are also now becoming useful to prevent undue trauma being inflicted upon sufferers when this can be easily prevented.

27. The most famous misconstrued recent example of this was when one University lecturer had the courtesy to alert students to the discussion of sexual violence and sexual assault in a Shakespeare play. Clearly, in such an instance, attaching a 'Trigger Warning' is literally no more ludicrous than placing an announcement stating that a news report "contains images which some viewers may find distressing". However, the subsequent media reporting posited this action as yet an example of "political correctness gone mad", "Snowflake students" and the victory of "Social Justice Warriors" over common sense.

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