

**Vice Chancellor and President's Commentary:  
Response to a report by the Independent Panel  
September 2015**

In May this year The University of Westminster appointed an Independent Panel to provide an external and impartial review of the effectiveness of our current policies and procedures around freedom of speech. The Panel was to establish how the University could combine upholding freedom of speech with any forthcoming legal changes as well as reviewing any wider implications for the University and sector. The Panel was chaired by Lord Kenneth Morgan, a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales.

There are competing responsibilities on universities enshrined in the law, not least to promote free speech and a duty to ensure a safe learning environment. Over recent years the University of Westminster has introduced a comprehensive event and external speaker policy to manage these legal obligations. These can all be viewed on our website [www.westminster.ac.uk/commissioned-reports](http://www.westminster.ac.uk/commissioned-reports).

It is important that any reader of this report understands the context in which we operate as an institution and our ethos of expanding education opportunities for all regardless of status. Like London, our diversity is among our key strengths and our community reflects the city we have served for more than 175 years. The University is a large metropolitan institution with 20,000 students and over 2,900 staff. Students come to us from more than 150 nations and we combine this vibrant external mix with a very diverse UK student base. One in five of our students is studying for a postgraduate degree. Our undergraduate population includes a high proportion of female (57%) and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students (62%). Most of our undergraduate students join us from the state sector, with many from low income families, and most commute from home. Our commitment to seek out intellectually able students from a wide variety of backgrounds remains as strong as ever.

Our Students' Union and its societies also reflect this diversity. The Panel focused on one society; however, we have over 100 student-led societies and sports clubs, ranging from film, investment trading, performing arts, and politics to netball and rugby. While the actions of a few can deflect the spotlight away from many great achievements, we must continue to celebrate all interests and successes in our community.

**Report's findings**

The report provides a highly constructive mechanism to ensure that we can offer a vibrant atmosphere, guided by strong values and within an effective and safe framework to create freedom for inquiry and debate. The Panel found no evidence of radicalisation taking place at the University.

There are, however, steps needed to improve areas such as governance around external speakers and the Students' Union. In response to the findings, we are making some immediate

changes in preparation for the start of the new academic year. We are also appointing an Advisory Group with two external members to help us advance a longer term agenda to further enhance the student experience in our diverse, cosmopolitan environment. Details of the Advisory Group are due to be published in the forthcoming semester.

## Summary of Agreed Actions to Date

- **Speaker policies:**

**External speaker requests:** The role and powers of the Referred Student Activities Committee (RSAC) was set up in 2014; its duties included overseeing external speakers and assessing applications where a speaker was deemed potentially controversial. The Committee has considered how it might strengthen its role and has confirmed that the timetable will be more strictly enforced to permit appeals against speakers and exclude late changes in speaker. In addition, any speaker deemed lawful but contentious by the Committee will in future only attend on the basis of them being part of a panel debate or a discussion to ensure a breadth of views is represented.

- **Students' Union Governance:**

**Promoting positive values, respect and tolerance:** The University will work with the Students' Union to make sure that its activities fit with the University's values, to increase the involvement of women and to ensure that policies and procedures are implemented in a timely and effective manner. All University Students' Union officers and new chairs of societies will be required to sign up to The Student Charter and the new Students' Union Code of Conduct. This sets out expectations around the governance of student societies, behaviour of members and ensuring respect and tolerance for others. The Student Charter is available here [www.westminster.ac.uk/student-charter](http://www.westminster.ac.uk/student-charter) and Students' Union Handbook can be found here

[http://issuu.com/westminstersu/docs/society\\_handbook\\_f70db368923a9a/7?e=12027548/13575068](http://issuu.com/westminstersu/docs/society_handbook_f70db368923a9a/7?e=12027548/13575068)

- **Promoting University-wide values:**

**Communications:** The University has a number of communications challenges operating across multiple sites. We are exploring initiatives to facilitate dialogue across students with different backgrounds and bring them together. With input from the Advisory Group, a report shall be presented to the University Executive Board in spring 2016.

**Diversity Training:** The University's new online diversity training tool will be released to new staff, extended to existing staff and developed for student use. 'Equality and Diversity Essentials' will be rolled out in the new academic year, commencing in October.

**Pastoral care and support:** As a large metropolitan university we are mindful of the complexities of living in a capital city with its external influences. The University has a strong induction and pastoral care programme to support students but we will strengthen these activities over the coming academic year with the input from the new Advisory Group.

## **Looking Ahead**

Universities must provide safe places to promote freedom of debate and stimulate inquiry and creativity within a safe and tolerant community. In nearly two centuries, our mission has been to make a real-world difference to people's lives: a belief in education for all, developing individuals to their full potential regardless of background.

The University is committed to being a responsive and transparent institution, not only providing excellent professional and academic education opportunities, but supporting our students to develop through respect and good values. The work being undertaken from this report complements our 2020 plan which sets out the University's strategic vision and our commitment to achieve our "One University" goal.

I thank the members of the panel who gave up their time to complete this review. In addition to Lord Morgan, the Panel included: Fiyaz Mughal OBE, Director of Faith Matters; Smita Jamdar, Partner and Head of Education at Shakespeare Martineau LLP and Lakshmi Cheeli, an HR Professional.

**Professor Geoff Petts**  
**Vice Chancellor and President**

**September 2015**