

Occupation of the George Square Lecture Theatre.

The student occupation of the George Square Lecture Theatre which started at lunchtime on Wednesday 11 February came to an end at 9am on Monday 16 February. Classes scheduled for the George Square Lecture Theatre were relocated on Thursday, Friday and Monday morning. Following the occupation, a small group of the students met with the Principal and the University Secretary.

The students involved raised a number of issues with the University relating to its involvement with companies which trade with Israel and with regard to the situation in Gaza. The University understands the humanitarian objectives which underlie the occupation and the sincerity of the students involved. It fully shares their concern for the victims of war and violence, wherever they may be. Whilst it could not condone the occupation, the University recognised that it was conducted peacefully and calmly, and that constructive discussions have resulted in a satisfactory outcome.

The students raised six issues with the University, and these are dealt with briefly below:

Boycott of companies: The University has indicated that it is willing to review its relationship with any companies, with which it has contracts, which the students believe fall into the category of 'enabling the conflict or occupation'.

With specific regard to the use of bottled Eden Springs water, the University acknowledges that there are strongly held concerns about Eden Springs, and that were it not for the fact that it is preparing to cease using bottled water, it would have been necessary to review the purchase of water from Eden Springs. In the event, the University is committed to ceasing to purchase bottled water, and to implement this fully by the beginning of the next academic year.

Divestment: The University has advised the students on how they can bring forward proposals for disinvestment from specific companies through its Socially Responsible Investment policy <http://www.aaps.ed.ac.uk/Governance/SociallyResponsibleInvestment2006.pdf> . Any such proposals would receive full consideration on their merits and against the criteria set out in the policy

The University has declined to change its policy so as to disbar certain companies involved in arms and defence from Careers Fairs or other recruitment activities, or to change its policy on the receipt of research funds from certain companies.

The University has pointed out to the students the routes by which, through their elected representative, they are able to seek to influence policies in these areas.

Scholarships: The University has agreed to fund five one-year Masters scholarships or the equivalent in undergraduate scholarships for students from Gaza. The terms of these scholarships will be determined following consultation. The University has previously provided scholarships in other humanitarian situations, for example the recent major earthquake in southern China.

Aid: The University has indicated that it is willing to facilitate a collection of items not currently used, such as books and PCs, in partnership with student body and to look at ways of securing funding for delivery through joint fundraising: it would be willing to work with an appropriate NGO for this purpose.

Education: The University is willing to facilitate a series of lectures and debates on issues relating to the conflict in the Middle East and the situation in Palestine during the coming academic year. There is to be joint agreement on speakers. The expectation is that such events would be suitable for delivery in an academic context, with unrestricted access and the opportunity for questions and debate.

The University has subsequently had discussions with representatives of the students in regard to a mutually agreed framework for taking these matters forward. The students sought assurance that no sanctions would be taken against them as a consequence of the occupation. Technically the occupying students were in breach of the disciplinary code, but given their peaceful approach, willingness to enter into constructive dialogue and the absence of damage to University property or disruption to teaching the University decided to take no disciplinary action.

The University is grateful to staff and to students not involved in the occupation who were affected by it for their patience and cooperation, and especially to its Security staff who managed events on a day to day basis in an exemplary manner.

Melvyn Cornish
University Secretary
17 February 2009