

Toby Young
General Secretary
The Free Speech Union
85 Great Portland Street
London
W1W 7LT

Tuesday 13 October 2020

Dear Mr Young

I am writing in response to your letter to Professor Paul Layzell, dated 12 October 2020, in which you raise a formal complaint in relation to the 'no-platforming of the former Labour MP Chris Williamson'.

There are a few inaccuracies within your letter which I would like to clarify.

It is incorrect to say that Chris Williamson was no-platformed by the Students' Union. The invitation was rescinded by a member of Debating Society due to the fact that the society had not followed the Union's Guest Speaker Policy & Procedure, insofar as they had not submitted an event proposal, they had not spoken to the Union regarding the invitation and, as a consequence, they had not enabled the Union to conduct the appropriate background checks which are required as a result of the No Platforming for Hate Speech Policy, which was passed at Referendum in 2019.

The first the Students' Union became aware of the event was two days prior to the scheduled event when it was advertised on social media, at which point I personally got in touch with Debating Society to find out more information. I did not ask them to cancel the event, I simply highlighted that it had not been through the required process and asked them to hold off advertising the event until we had a chance to discuss with them further. The response I received was that they would postpone the event until a later date. In the meantime we received two resignations from members of the Debating Society committee, in which they cited that they had never supported the event. We are in the process of investigating exactly what led to the event becoming confirmed but we are currently of the opinion that Chris Williamson may have been invited by an individual member of the society and not the society as a whole.

I do appreciate that the lack of cancellation notice would not have been ideal for Chris Williamson, and I can only apologise on behalf of the Debating Society for this. However, I am sure you would appreciate that as a professional organisation, regulated by the Charity Commission, we have a number of policies and procedures in place for a whole host of reasons (i.e. health, safety, and legal compliance etc) and it is incumbent on us to ensure that these are adhered to.

For the avoidance of any doubt, all student groups were trained in the requirements to follow a Guest Speaker Policy & Procedure in training sessions held on 25 June, 3 July, 9 July and 9 September. The process is also included on our website and within a risk assessment guidance document, which all student groups were asked to complete before commencing any activity. Members of Debating Society were also heavily involved in the discussions around the No Platforming referendum held last year. It is our view, therefore, that all committee members would have been aware of the Guest Speaker Policy & Procedure and we are disappointed that they chose not to comply with the process outlined within.

The final point I would make is that we are fully cognisant of just how emotive the subject of freedom of speech and no platforming is for so many students and we have seen passionate debate on both sides of the table over the years. Last year's referendum result, which as you point out achieved a narrow victory in favour of a No Platform for Hate Speech Policy, clearly highlights how divided this opinion is. What is also clear to us, however, is that as an organisation the Students' Union exists for the benefit of its members and it is those members who have democratically mandated us to implement a No Platform for Hate Speech Policy. It is incumbent on us to ensure that this mandate is respected and action taken accordingly.

I hope this clarifies some of the issues you raise.

Yours sincerely

Kate Roberts
Royal Holloway Students' Union President & Chair of the Board of Trustees