



# **Managing Campus Tensions Amidst the Israel-Palestine Conflict**

**A Guide by Together For Humanity**

[togetherforhumanity.co.uk](https://togetherforhumanity.co.uk)

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# Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Israel and Palestine is causing immense pain and contributing to rising community tension and polarisation in the UK.

This tension is playing out across society, but issues are particularly acute on university campuses, presenting unique challenges for higher education institutions (HEIs).

This guidance document aims to assist leaders in these institutions in dealing with tensions and creating spaces for students to engage in discussions, navigate challenges, and counter polarisation.

# Background

Together for Humanity is part of the Together Coalition, which exists to build kinder, closer and more connected communities, creating major national moments of connection such as The Big Help Out and Thank You Day.

In late 2023, we launched Together for Humanity as a standalone campaign, aimed at countering threats to UK social cohesion, such as antisemitism, Islamophobia, and political polarisation in relation to the Israel-Palestine. Whilst these threats are not new, the current conflict in Israel-Palestine has significantly exacerbated them.

Our work has included creating spaces for people to come together in a series of vigils across the country – to mourn the loss of all innocent lives, and to stand united against all forms of hatred. We've also created resources to support leaders dealing with acute community tensions, including in schools, HEIs, and local councils.

# Who This Guidance is for

This guidance is intended for anyone in a position of leadership within HEIs, including senior leadership teams, student services, student unions, and student society leaders.

While not exhaustive, it provides essential steps to consider and examples of good practice to support your efforts.

# Part 1: Recognise the Context

## Acknowledging Pain

It's essential to acknowledge the profound impact that global events can have on both students and staff.

The suffering and loss of life in both Gaza and Israel resonate deeply with many individuals within the university. For some, the connection to these events is personal and direct, involving familial ties or cultural affiliations. For others, it's a matter of empathetic concern for human suffering. The emotional responses to these events can range broadly, from grief and outrage to a profound sense of helplessness.

This variety of emotional reactions can significantly impact the daily lives and mental well-being of students and staff. They can manifest as anger, anxiety, or a noticeable withdrawal from regular campus activities and interactions. Such reactions are understandable human responses to complex and distressing situations.

Acknowledging this pain is the first crucial step in creating a supportive campus environment. It involves recognising that the Israel-Palestine conflict, though geographically distant, has a very real and immediate effect on the emotional landscape of the university. Understanding this impact is key to fostering a compassionate and empathetic community.

## Mental Health and Wellbeing

Whilst many students and staff will be feeling pain as a result of the conflict in Israel and Palestine, the stress and emotional strain may in some cases lead to more severe mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety.

You should recognise that students and staff may require additional mental health support and take steps to proactively communicate the availability of support, and put in place resources to ensure mental health support services on campus are equipped to cope with increased demand.

Students and staff with direct ties to Israel or Palestine may be particularly at risk from mental ill health, however, many other students and staff members may still be struggling with the heavy emotional toll of news from the conflict, and potentially from navigating increasingly tense and polarised environments on campus.

YoungMinds, which provides mental health and wellbeing support for young people aged 25 and under, has published tips on dealing with the mental health impacts of the conflict. Mind has also published more general guidance on dealing with distressing topics in the news. Some students and staff may benefit from these resources, in addition to on campus mental health support services.

You should consider your responsibilities to support students and staff struggling with mental health and wellbeing holistically, such as offering extensions to students directly affected, and extending mental health support services to students who may have left campuses to be with their families.

## Reflecting the History

You should avoid referring to the conflict in Israel and Palestine solely as a recent set of events. The conflict, which has persisted in various forms since 1948, is not only a current geopolitical event but also a historical situation with a profound impact on global politics, societies, and individuals.

The origins of the conflict date back to the early 20th century and have evolved through a series of significant events, including the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and subsequent wars and uprisings. This history is marked by a series of complex, intertwined narratives, each deeply rooted in the identities, beliefs, and experiences of the people involved.

Understanding this historical context is crucial for comprehending the current state of the conflict. It's not a simple issue with clear-cut sides or solutions; it's a deeply nuanced situation with cultural, religious, and political dimensions that have developed over decades. The ramifications of this ongoing situation have resonated across the world, influencing international relations, policies, and public opinion.

For members of the university community, especially those with personal or cultural ties to the region, this historical context can deeply affect their perspectives and responses to the conflict. It's important to acknowledge that individuals' viewpoints may be shaped by this complex history, which can lead to strong emotional and intellectual responses.

The ongoing nature of the conflict means that it continues to evolve, with new developments influencing public discourse and personal attitudes. As such, the university environment must be adaptable and sensitive to these changes, providing a space where diverse perspectives and experiences can be expressed and heard respectfully.

# Part 2: Monitoring of Tensions on Campus

## The Importance of Monitoring

The role of campus leaders in actively monitoring and addressing tensions cannot be overstated. Given the sensitive nature of this issue, it's imperative to be vigilant in observing and understanding the dynamics of campus interactions related to this conflict.

Observation plays a critical role in identifying and managing tensions. It involves more than just responding to incidents; it requires a proactive approach to detect underlying patterns and triggers that might lead to increased tensions.

Campus leaders should be attentive to changes in campus sentiment, particularly following significant developments in Israel and Palestine, and during periods that coincide with major events in the religious calendar, or other relevant events such as Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations, or the International Day To Combat Islamophobia.

Monitoring should involve looking at the broader picture of campus life, including paying attention to student discussions, social media trends among the student body, and the general mood during university events. You should seek to understand whether there are specific times of the week or month, specific campus events or other moments that consistently lead to heightened tension. Understanding these patterns is key to preempting and mitigating potential issues.

Campus leaders should also be attuned to the nuances of daily student interactions to understand more subtle signs of increasing tension or discomfort among students. This could manifest in several different ways, such as unexpected increases in frustration about seemingly unrelated issues which may be emblematic of a deeper sense of marginalisation and mistrust.

For example, some universities have reported an increasing number of complaints about the quality or availability of kosher or halal food, increased pressure for additional prayer rooms on campus, or requests for changes to course reading materials.

These kinds of issues are all important in their own right and will often be unrelated. You should proactively seek to ensure students do not feel marginalised in any way, but you should be mindful of subtle leading indicators of potentially deeper frustration and marginalisation on campus.

# Part 3: Be the Example

## Leading by Example

University leaders, including both staff and student leaders hold a unique position of influence and are often looked upon as role models by students. In this context, leading by example is crucial.

Modelling good practices involves demonstrating respect, empathy, and understanding in all interactions. Leaders should be mindful of their language and actions, ensuring they do not inadvertently alienate or marginalise any group. This approach helps in creating a campus culture where diverse perspectives are respected and where dialogue is encouraged.

## Impartiality and Non-Partisanship

Leaders should approach their role with an impartial stance, recognising that credibility and trust are essential in being seen as a source of support. This means suspending personal views and biases to approach each situation objectively.

When listening to students' perspectives on the conflict, it is crucial to avoid jumping to conclusions or prioritising any viewpoint. Leaders should strive to understand the varied experiences and emotions of all individuals involved, acknowledging the complexity of the conflict and the diverse ways in which it impacts members of the university community.

This approach not only helps in resolving conflicts more effectively but also plays a critical role in maintaining a sense of trust and safety on campus. When leaders are perceived as impartial and unbiased, students and staff are more likely to engage in open dialogue and seek support.

## Control What You Can

Expressing a particular stance as an institution or calling for specific solutions to the conflict in Israel and Palestine may seem like a reasonable response, but HEIs should ground their approach in the context of what they can feasibly control.

University leaders can control many elements on campus to support community cohesion, including fostering an inclusive environment, ensuring easy access to support services, and maintaining transparent and fair complaint resolution processes.

Creating an inclusive campus culture involves actively working to prevent discrimination and harassment, and ensuring no student feels marginalised or unheard. Leaders should ensure that policies are in place to address any form of bias or prejudice and that these policies are enforced consistently.

Access to support services is another crucial area. Universities should provide resources such as counselling, legal advice, and academic support to those affected by the conflict. Ensuring these services are readily accessible and well-publicised is key to their effectiveness.

Where specific issues on campus arise, complaint resolution processes should be clear, fair, and efficient. This includes having a transparent system for reporting issues, a fair investigation process, and timely resolution of complaints. By maintaining these processes, university leaders can ensure that all concerns related to the conflict are addressed appropriately and effectively.

## **Commit to Learning**

Many of the challenges students and staff are currently navigating are deeply complex and cannot be reduced to simplistic statements or slogans.

Student and staff leaders have an important responsibility to commit to developing deeper contextual understandings of key issues to help guide and improve your approach to responding to challenges and tensions. You should balance this responsibility with the need to act quickly in some situations, whilst making an effort to understand the context behind tensions and heightened emotions on campus.

Tensions in Israel and Palestine have resulted in violence over a period spanning many decades. The current conflict following the Hamas attacks last October has resulted in horrendous pain and suffering for many.

In the UK, political polarisation over Israel and Palestine has a long history. Whilst the current conflict has exacerbated this polarisation, you should be conscious that different views over what should happen in the region have always existed.

Likewise, antisemitism and Islamophobia have been significantly exacerbated by the current conflict, but have deep home-grown roots in the UK. Hatred and discrimination towards Muslims and Jews exists at every level of society, and is embedded within many of our institutions at a structural level.

Responding to tensions on campus doesn't require you to become an expert in the Israel-Palestine conflict or antisemitism and Islamophobia, but committing to learning more about these issues is important to ensure you can respond effectively.

You may find this detailed guidance on [antisemitism](#) and [Islamophobia](#) from Universities UK useful.



# Part 4: Build Trust

## Transparency in Communication

Building trust within the university community is crucial. A key aspect of fostering this trust is through transparent communication.

Transparency in communication involves openly sharing information about how the university plans to handle issues related to the tensions on campus. This means not only disseminating information about decisions that have been taken, but also providing rationale and context behind decisions where possible. When the community understands the 'why' behind actions, it helps in building a sense of trust and inclusivity.

It's also important for the university to acknowledge and address any misinformation or rumours that may spread about its positions and responses. Misinformation can quickly spread via social media, and university leaders should take an active role in providing accurate, timely information to counteract any potential misunderstandings or misconceptions that may drive further polarisation or tension.

In instances where the university is unable to provide certain information, for legal or privacy reasons, it should communicate these limitations, clearly explaining why certain information cannot be shared can prevent speculation and mistrust.

Transparency in communication also means being consistent in messaging across different channels and departments. Inconsistencies in information can lead to confusion and scepticism. Ensuring that all departments and leaders are on the same page and communicate a unified message is essential.

## Visibility

The visibility and accessibility of university leaders play a significant role in building and maintaining trust. Leaders should be active and present in the campus community, participating in events and being available for discussions.

Being visible and approachable allows leaders to more effectively communicate the university's stance and efforts regarding the conflict. It also enables them to gather firsthand insights into the campus atmosphere, which can inform more effective decision-making and policy implementation.

## Active Listening

Active listening is about more than just hearing what students and staff are saying; it involves a deep level of engagement and understanding, demonstrating respect and empathy towards their concerns and experiences.

You should start by approaching conversations with an open mind. As outlined above, students and staff will each have diverse experiences and perspectives that influence how they engage in conversations about the conflict and resulting tensions on campus. These perspectives may differ from your own, but you should take care to listen fully and avoid immediately dismissing or invalidating perspectives from students and staff, as this can lead to a sense of alienation and distrust.

Leaders should strive to make students and staff feel heard and valued. This can be achieved by engaging in a dialogue, expressing genuine interest in their experiences, and asking clarifying questions. These efforts not only aid in better understanding their perspective but also convey a sense of respect and care for their wellbeing.

Active listening also involves being attentive to non-verbal cues and emotions that may not be explicitly stated. This sensitivity can help in identifying underlying concerns or issues that might be contributing to the individual's reaction to the conflict.

Establishing channels for regular feedback is also crucial in understanding and addressing the needs and concerns of students and staff. Consider how you can create opportunities for students and staff to share their views and raise challenges they may be experiencing. This could include extending drop-in hours held by student services teams, offering additional office hours for students if you are a member of academic staff, or hosting forums where students can openly discuss their perspectives.

Open forums can be particularly effective in fostering a sense of community and open communication, but should be managed carefully to avoid creating additional tension. When well organised with effective safeguards, these events can enable direct interaction between the university leadership and the wider campus community, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of different perspectives on the conflict.

## Consistent Enforcement of Policies

Applying policies uniformly across all student and staff groups ensures that everyone is held to the same standards, irrespective of their viewpoints or affiliations related to the conflict. This approach helps in avoiding perceptions of bias or favouritism, which can significantly undermine trust and respect on campus.

It is also important for the university to clearly communicate its policies as noted above, especially those that pertain to discrimination, harassment, and campus conduct. Understanding these policies and their implications helps students and staff to navigate their interactions more responsibly and respectfully.

When incidents do arise, the university should address them promptly and transparently, following the established procedures. This demonstrates the institution's commitment to upholding its values and maintaining a safe and inclusive environment for all.

# Part 5: Create Space for Open Discussion

## Freedom of Speech and Expression

Universities have a crucial role in facilitating freedom of expression. Creating an environment on campus that allows for the expression of diverse viewpoints is critical to fostering a deeper understanding of the nuances of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the steps necessary to promote community cohesion in the UK.

Universities UK have developed a [comprehensive guide](#) setting out steps HEIs should take in line with the Government's new Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act.

## Dialogue

You may find it beneficial to create spaces on campus to host dialogue sessions with staff and students.

Together for Humanity has convened several dialogue sessions in various university campuses, bringing together students and staff with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. We have found this to be an important and positive experience for students and staff alike, helping to reduce tensions on campus and build connections across divides.

We have found that creating spaces for students and staff to actively listen to different perspectives and viewpoints helps to break down barriers. You may find that inviting speakers with relevant lived experience of antisemitism or Islamophobia to share their experiences during these sessions is helpful, or you may wish to show pre-recorded videos during the session. Together for Humanity's website features a resources page which includes several videos you may wish to show during dialogue sessions.

If you host a dialogue space on campus, you should provide a clear structure for the session, ensure the discussion takes place safely and respectfully, and put guardrails in place to protect students and staff entering the space. You should acknowledge that pain and suffering exists on all sides, and that the rise of antisemitism and anti-Muslim prejudice is greatly impacting communities.

We also recommend appointing an experienced and impartial facilitator. This is particularly important if you think dialogue may prove particularly challenging.

At the start of any dialogue session, you should set ground rules and communicate them clearly. This will ensure that everyone in the space is on the same page and empowers the organiser or facilitator to curtail any conversations or emotions that become problematic to the entire group.

You should try to ensure that participants come from a broad range of backgrounds. Reducing the conflict to a binary creates issues and can encourage debate rather than active listening. Including participants from other communities, such as Christians, and those of no faith, as opposed to solely Jewish and Muslim participants can create a more productive dynamic allowing participants to break out of a binary discussion.

Try to keep the conversation away from "establishing facts" or assigning blame or guilt. Social media makes it hard to distinguish the reality on the ground, and it is easy to find narratives or stories that reinforce one's position. There is not an end to this discussion.

If appropriate, transition this conversation to a local context, exploring what has happened on campus and what the factors are that can encourage greater dialogue and understanding on campus.

You should be mindful that some students or staff with divergent views may not wish to engage in debate or discussion. In such cases, you should never seek to force people to engage in discussion. Consider ways you may be able to get people into the same room to discuss a different issue entirely that resonates with a wider range of people, such as accessibility on campus, housing, or access to student services. This can be a useful way to break down barriers between groups and pave the way for future engagement.

# Part 6: Managing Tensions When They Bubble Over:

## Conflict Resolution and De-escalation Techniques

In situations where tensions bubble over into conflict, such as instances of hate speech, intimidation or violence, your priority should be to quickly de-escalate the situation and avoid exacerbating tensions. You should always communicate with non-confrontational, clear, and language.

- 1. Immediate Response:** It's important to have a rapid response plan in case of conflict. This might include a designated crisis response team trained in de-escalation techniques and conflict resolution. You should ensure your security teams understand the context of potential protests or disturbances, and recognise the strong emotions likely to be involved. You should also ensure that anyone involved in managing or responding to potential conflict on campus is trained to recognise where free speech may cross the line to become hate speech or intimidation.
- 2. Safety First:** Prioritise the safety of all individuals. If there is any threat of violence, ensure that campus security is involved and that they handle the situation with the utmost respect for students' rights and safety.
- 3. Open Communication Channels:** Facilitate open lines of communication. Allow individuals or groups to express their concerns and grievances. Listening can often be a powerful tool in de-escalating tensions. Remember that many students and staff are experiencing significant pain, and their responses – whilst potentially disruptive – may be the only way they feel able to communicate. It is natural to want to listen to groups who engage more calmly and constructively, but you should make an effort to ensure that you listen to all students and staff irrespective of how they choose to engage to avoid prioritising a specific group.
- 4. Neutral Mediation:** In cases where tensions are high, consider bringing in a neutral mediator. This individual can help facilitate dialogue and assist in finding a peaceful resolution.
- 5. Monitoring Social Media:** Monitor social media channels for any signs of escalating tensions or planned disruptions. Address misinformation and provide accurate updates to prevent rumours from intensifying the situation.
- 6. Educational Workshops:** Following an incident, organise workshops or seminars on conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity, and the impact of hate speech. These can help in healing the community and preventing future incidents.
- 7. Review and Learn:** After a conflict, review the response to understand what worked and what didn't. Use these insights to improve future responses and policies.
- 8. Understand your legal responsibilities:** Under the Government's Prevent Duty, HEIs and other specified organisations are required to have a "due regard to the need to prevent individuals from being drawn into terrorism. You should balance this duty with the importance of upholding the welfare of students and staff, as well as the principles of freedom of expression and academic freedom.

# Part 7: Engaging with External Stakeholders

## Government Relations

Given the dynamic nature of public discourse around issues like free speech and hate speech, it's crucial to maintain a constructive relationship with government bodies.

This may involve providing proactive updates on emerging issues and tensions on campus, and providing feedback on the effectiveness of policies aimed at protecting students and staff from discrimination and extremism.

You should be mindful of the complex political landscape and be prepared for interpretations of statutory requirements and guidance to evolve over time. Whilst proactive and constructive dialogue with government can help to mitigate the risk of significant changes in expectations around how HEIs should respond to challenges on campus, you should also ensure your response is grounded in clear institutional values.

The Chicago Principles are often cited as an example of good practice around developing clear values that balance the importance of freedom of expression and academic freedom with responsibilities to promote safety on campus and protect students and staff from discrimination.

## Alumni and Funders

You should regularly engage with relevant external stakeholders, such as your alumni community and funders, providing proactive updates on how you are handling any key challenges on campus. This should include information on university initiatives, responses to community concerns, and myth-busting any inaccurate information which has entered the public domain.

If concerns are raised by external stakeholders, you should respond sensitively, transparently, and emphasise a willingness to engage in constructive dialogue. It may be helpful to prepare reactive messaging lines around specific issues with a high risk of gaining attention from external stakeholders, including alumni and funders.

The diversity of viewpoints over the Israel-Palestine conflict and the nature of challenges around cohesion here in the UK means it is highly likely that some external stakeholders will be unhappy with your response. This is unavoidable, and requires leaders to rely on their core principles and values to determine the right course of action in different circumstances. It also requires significant resilience on the part of staff and student leaders on campus to uphold difficult decisions – such as deciding not to take a public stance on the conflict – in the face of certain criticism from some groups.

Recognising that some groups may not agree with your approach should not be a reason not to engage with these groups. It will remain important to explain the context behind difficult decisions clearly, and to create space for different groups to share their viewpoints.

## Further Support

In addition to the guidance provided in this document, Together for Humanity is exploring ways to offer more bespoke support, including working with universities to host events on campus. If you would like to discuss further ways we may be able to support your university, please contact Emeka Forbes at [emeka@together.org.uk](mailto:emeka@together.org.uk).