

Investigation notes for complaints received in relation to external speaker event held on 28 October 2025.

Introduction

1. The University received a substantial number of complaints and feedback in relation to a guest speaker lecture from Justice for Innocent Men Scotland (JIMS) as part of the CRM404 class on Tuesday 28 October 2025.
2. In line with the University's Complaints Handling Procedure, and due to the volume of complaints and feedback received and the significant and ongoing press interest in the matter, it was agreed that the handling of the complaints should move straight to a Stage 2 investigation.
3. Two members of the Senior Management Team (SMT) were asked to investigate these complaints. In doing so they received support from People Services and the Complaints Team in Student and Academic Services. During the time the investigation was taking place, neither investigator participated in any University/SMT decisions relating to the University's response to media or other enquiries on this matter.

Summary of complaints

4. At the time that investigation took place in November, the University had received over 300 complaints and/or feedback in relation to the guest lecture.
5. The vast majority of these (c. 86%) were from external individuals or organisations, 14% were from Abertay students, and <1% were from Abertay staff members. Of the responses received from Abertay students, the majority were from students who were not registered on the criminology programme or undertaking the module. One complaint was received from a student who was in the class on 28 October and anonymous feedback from two others was passed on by the class representative.
6. Feedback was also received from Abertay Students' Association, including 89 pieces of feedback collated following an open meeting, most of which was anonymous.

Issues raised

7. The issues raised by the complaints and feedback prior to the investigation were as follows:
 - Concerns from students that there had been no prewarning about the content and the effect that the content could have had on them.

- Concerns about the external organisation's views and about the University hosting this organisation and the impact on the reputation of the University. There were also concerns raised about safety on campus.
 - Concerns about the University's approval processes for external speakers and about its safeguarding responsibilities towards students.
8. It was noted that the University had also had some feedback in support of the event and in support of the right to freedom of expression, including by some students in the CRM 404 class and some communications from JIMS.

Approach to investigation

9. The focus of the investigation was to establish the facts relating to the external speaker event on 28 October, and to consider any issues arising from this.
10. In order to do this:
- The information contained in the complaints / feedback submissions was reviewed in detail. This review included the feedback in support of the event.
 - Documentation relating to the module and the programme was reviewed. This included reviewing content on the virtual learning environment, which included recordings of previous classes delivered by the module leader.
 - Meetings were held with the module leader, with senior staff in the Faculty and with students registered on the module who were in the class on 28 October.

Key lines of inquiry

11. The investigation focused on answering the following questions:
- a) What happened in the classroom on 28 October?
 - b) What notice were students given in advance of this?
 - c) What was the context/rationale for inviting JIMS? How did this fit into the module?
 - d) More widely, what guidance is given to academic staff on the use of external speakers in the curriculum?

Our findings

a) What happened in the classroom on 28 October?

12. Module CRM404, Policing and Criminal Justice in the 21st Century, is a fourth-year module in the Department of Sociological and Psychological Sciences. The module descriptor (<https://modules.abertay.ac.uk/module/CRM404>) states that the aim of the module is "to provide the student with knowledge and understanding of critical issues

in policing and the challenges facing it in the 21st century”. The stated learning outcomes include enabling students “to develop a critical understanding of the issues surrounding policing and changes in criminal justice policies and practices”. In line with University policies, the module is reviewed on an annual basis. In the review during 2024-25, no changes were made to the module descriptor for academic year 2025-26.

13. The class scheduled for 28 October 2025 was in week 7 of term with the title of “‘Victim’ Feminism and Trauma Informed Approach”. It was planned that this would consist of a lecture from the module leader and then a presentation from invited speakers from Justice for Innocent Men Scotland (JIMS). We noted that the class the previous week had followed a similar format with participation from another external organisation.
14. From discussion with the module leader and students, we confirmed that the class followed the planned format with a lecture followed by a presentation from three speakers from JIMS. Students noted that a fire alarm had gone off during the session which had interrupted the class.
15. The students we spoke to reported that the focus of the JIMS talk had been on the criminal justice system and advocating for fair trials and bringing this to life with their own interactions with the courts and legal system. They considered that this had been an appropriate topic and that the class felt fairly ‘standard’.
16. Students we spoke to told us they were surprised at the social media reaction afterwards given that, in their view, this did not reflect the views from students who were in the class. The students did not recognise the events that occurred in the classroom from the descriptions of the events as presented on social media. Some students commented that the events after the class had had a negative impact on them.

b) Were students given notice of the event in advance?

17. The opening lecture delivered in Week 1 indicated to students that there would be external guest speakers and that one of those speakers would possibly be JIMS, but the speaker session had not been finalised. Over a 6-minute period, an outline of JIMS was given to students at the time and contextualised in victim feminism and the module leader’s research on miscarriages of justice in Scotland which included a short summary of the JIMS position and the relationship with that research.

18. The information on the virtual learning environment set out the topic of the class but did not state that JIMS would be participating. We saw an email which was sent by the module leader to all students on 24 October 2025 entitled “Guest Speaker: Justice for Innocent Men Scotland (JIMS)” which stated that: “Next week's lecture is followed by a guest speaker, Marsha, whose partner was imprisoned for rape. She will not be talking about her experience alone but explaining why JIMS was set up and what she thinks some of the problems are for receiving a fair trial in Scotland.”
19. The timing of the email was in line with other communications relating to classes that term. Our discussion confirmed that this had been sent and the information noted by students. Some students confirmed to us that they had undertaken their own research on JIMS following receipt of the email and before attending class. They also indicated that, as fourth-year criminology students, it was their responsibility to critically assess the information which was provided before and during classes. One student indicated they had not read the email before the class.
20. We considered whether the content of the email provided sufficient information. We established from our discussions that there is currently no guidance for academic staff on what good practice looks like for trigger warnings about potentially sensitive topics. This is left to professional judgement. In this context, we concluded that the email did indicate what the content of the session was likely to be.

Recommendation 1: The University should consider providing guidance to academic staff on the circumstances in which trigger warnings should be given to students and on the format these warnings should take.

c) What was the context /rationale for inviting JIMS? How does this fit into the module?

21. JIMS website states that JIMS “stand for truth, fairness, justice and the protection of fundamental human rights for all. JIMS is dedicated to supporting men in Scotland who have been falsely accused of SO crimes. Our focus is on the lack of fair trials in these cases, and our campaign is centred around fighting for justice, transparency, and much needed reform in the legal system”.
22. In our discussion with the module leader, we sought to understand the rationale for inviting JIMS and not other organisations. He outlined the links, in his view, between the work of JIMS and the focus of the module. He indicated that JIMS was currently an active group and that he had invited them to offer a victim’s perspective and to talk about their experience of the criminal justice system. He also indicated that his research currently focused on this area.

23. We noted previous press coverage of his participation in a recent protest held by JIMS. We asked if he had any formal connection to JIMS and he confirmed that he did not, though he had met some of the speakers previously. The module leader indicated that the extreme views expressed by some JIMS supporters on social media did not reflect the wider organisation's views.
24. Students we spoke to confirmed the importance of hearing a range of views, even if they did not agree with the views being presented. They considered this important to develop critical thinking skills.
25. Students we spoke to also considered that this was an appropriate organisation to include in the module. They noted that this did not mean that they accepted or endorsed the views but acknowledged that it was appropriate to explore these issues. Some students did question the balance of the argument in the classroom, if both speakers and module leader held overlapping views.

d) What guidance is given to academic staff on the use of external speakers in the curriculum?

26. We sought to understand whether the University has a policy in relation to handling of potentially controversial content in teaching and what the normal expectations were for academic staff.
27. Our meetings with the module leader and separately with senior staff in the Faculty confirmed that academic staff in the Department were strongly encouraged to invite external speakers to speak to students. There was a general consensus from the staff members we spoke to that it was regarded as a strength for students to have opportunity to hear and to engage with a range of voices. Students also welcomed this.
28. In relation to the CRM404 speaker on 28 October, we saw evidence that the module leader had contacted the Head of Department to query whether or not the JIMS session should be recorded, although it is accepted that the Head was asked to consider this one specific aspect and not the invitation to the speaker.
29. In response to our questions, it was confirmed that there is no process for approval of external speakers participating in classes, this is left to the professional judgment of each module tutor. This appears to be the position across the University. It was also confirmed that no guidance exists in relation to the handling of potentially controversial speakers.

30. We noted that the University was currently refreshing its policy on external events and speakers on campus but that academic delivery was not included in the scope of this policy.
31. We conclude that the involvement of external speakers in teaching can provide a rich and valuable experience for students, however we consider that it would be helpful for there to be guidance in place relating to the handling of these events. This should set out the circumstances and process for alerting senior managers to a potentially controversial event so that any potential impact on the University's reputation can be managed appropriately. It may be that had the University had advance notice of the event, it would have been better prepared to handle the associated challenges. At the same time, the University should strengthen its statement and guidance on freedom of expression, reflecting its legal obligations and best practice in the sector.¹

Recommendation 2: The University should consider providing guidance to academic staff on the use of external speakers and how any potentially controversial speakers or subjects should be handled. This should include consideration of how to incorporate external viewpoints in the curriculum in a balanced way that reflects a range of perspectives on sensitive subjects.

Recommendation 3: The University should set out and publish its position on freedom of expression.

Conclusion and recommendations

32. The inclusion of an external speaker from JIMS was appropriate in the context of this module and the topic and therefore the complaints are not upheld.
33. We recognise the value of involving external speakers in the curriculum but further consideration should be given as to whether the University should provide guidance around this, particularly around speakers or topics which may be considered controversial. This should recognise the importance of freedom of expression within the law but should also recognise the importance of University management being aware of any potentially controversial events so that appropriate actions.
34. We note that the vast majority of feedback the University received was in connection to the hosting of the event rather than the content as presented to students and that having guidance in place would help the University to respond in similar circumstances in future.

¹ /<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/freedom-of-expression-guide-for-higher-education-providers-and-students-unions-scotland.pdf>

35. Our recommendations are as follows:

Recommendation 1: The University should consider providing guidance to academic staff on the circumstances in which trigger warnings should be given to students and on the format these warnings should take.

Recommendation 2: The University should consider providing guidance to academic staff on the use of external speakers and how any potentially controversial speakers or subjects should be handled. This should include consideration of how to incorporate external viewpoints into the curriculum in a balanced way that reflects a range of perspectives on sensitive subjects.

Recommendation 3: The University should set out and publish its position on freedom of expression.

ENDS

Further information:

Module descriptor: <https://modules.abertay.ac.uk/module/CRM404>