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Presidential statement on anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and the political independence of universities

TORONTO, March 19, 2009 –The protests and disturbances on our campus around global issues in recent weeks have underlined key principles that the university has always stood for and will always stand for.

It is the right of any community member to express his or her view within the law without fear of intimidation or harassment. Disturbing reports have been circulating in the media of students being subjected to actions and remarks which many have felt to be inspired by anti-Semitism.

Let me say without fear or favour that I and the University community as a whole utterly condemn any racist act, including those of an anti-Semitic or indeed Islamophobic nature.

Political activism is no excuse for racism or hatred of any kind.

This is why we are thoroughly investigating recent incidents and why I have set up the new Task Force on Student Life, Learning and Community, chaired by the Provost-designate, so we can together agree and enforce community standards of civil discourse that we all abide by.

Many of the recent disturbances have been linked to developments in the Middle East and both sides of the issue have been quick to interpret the University's recent sanctions against four student clubs as evidence that the University has some kind of hidden agenda with regard to the Middle East.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is important for the outside community as well as the York community to understand that it is simply inaccurate to portray the University as being on one side of this issue or the other. The University has no geo-political interest whatsoever in this arena or any other.

The University's priority is that discourse on the Middle East and other contentious issues be freely conducted without infringing on the rights of others and without disrupting the academic functioning of the university.

Universities exist for the free exchange of ideas and sometimes this can feel uncomfortable. But ideas are what universities are all about and ideas can only flourish in an atmosphere free of intolerance, hatred and harassment.

It is the responsibility of those with strong views on either side of this debate to conduct themselves in such a way that they do not demonize the other side, nor create an atmosphere where intolerance is the inevitable outcome. Racism and hatred of any kind – including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia – are easily bred in an atmosphere of intolerance and hostility.

It is up to each and every one of us to play our part in ensuring that we contribute to a climate where ideas can flourish freely.

