Starting-up in the UK – Best Practice

Structuring Your Society

A good society should be run on democratic lines and be as inclusive as possible. It is good practise to draft a constitution of core beliefs so that discussion can be channelled into productive areas. Examples of “core beliefs” used in societies working on Palestinian issues include commitments to the Palestinian Right to Education, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign and to a no-platform policy for racists or fascists.

Recognition from the Students’ Union

If a society is formed in a university, it is best to register it as part of the Students’ Union. This gives the group access to a budget that can be used to subsidise events and room booking rights, which is vital for a society. However, some Student Unions are antagonistic towards the Palestine Solidarity movement and make it difficult to form an official society. In such cases a campaigning group can be formed around an email list in order to put pressure on the student union to support a Palestine society.

Hold regular meetings

It is important to hold regular meetings and events to show that the group is active. Fortnightly or weekly meetings are effective. These can be tied to a regular event. For instance, some groups organise regular stalls where they raise awareness amongst other students about the cause. In general it is good to keep meetings as open as possible, unless your group is planning something that requires a certain level of privacy. Having an inclusive structure means more people will get involved rather than just members of the executive committee.

Having an effective facilitator

It is essential to have a good facilitator at meetings. S/he should remain neutral with regard to the issues or topics under discussion, especially if the subject matter is contentious, and encourage discussion from all participants. Discussion can become dominated by a few individuals and some people may feel uncomfortable about contributing as a result, even if they have valuable contributions to make. The facilitator should elicit the opinions of the whole group as much as possible by noticing when people have not contributed to the discussion and inviting them to join in.

Setting an Agenda

Without an agenda meetings can be very time consuming. This can put people off remaining active within the movement. An agenda focuses the discussion on key issues and ensures that matters are not overlooked by concerns that seem more pressing. It is good to publicise the agenda before hand and to allow participants to add items to it before the meeting.
Decision Making

Most groups adopt a consensual decision making approach. Having clearly defined core beliefs, aims and objectives will help. Adopting rules for the discussion, such as using hand gestures to signify agreement rather than stating approval - can also be useful. This provides a speedy and easy way of showing agreement on a subject before moving on to other items. In larger groups it is better to cede the floor to people who have the attention of the facilitator so that discussion is not dominated by the most talkative. However, the facilitator should use his or her discretion to allow people to follow up on points that have just been raised. Consensual decision making becomes problematic when a group is especially divided over a particular issue. Then it can be better to have a vote and decide the course of action through a vote.

Agreeing objectives and action points

It is useful to identify the aims or objectives of the different points on the agenda. For instance, a continuous aim of the Right to Read campaign is to raise awareness of the Israeli government’s violations of the right to education in Palestine. A long term aim could be to change the policy of the university with regard to opening up their journal subscriptions to universities in Palestine.

It is important to identify key action points to achieve the objectives of campaigns. These are specific tasks that need to be completed. For instance, an initial action point for the Right to Read campaign could be to write a letter to the University’s library asking them to open their electronic archives. The movement is international and it is possible to adapt previously used tactics to achieve aims or it is even better to be creative.

Review

It is important to review the efficacy of action points, to enable the group to become better organised over time as the shortcomings of particular tactics are addressed. For instance in the case of the Right to Read campaign, if the student group’s demand is rejected by the university it may be possible to assess why and work out a new strategy for approaching the issue.