UK-Palestine Student Union Twinning: First Steps

Why is student union twinning important?

Student union twinning is a useful way of raising awareness on campus as well as offering an opportunity to develop active links with Palestinian students. It can also help “test the water” for relatively new campaigns by gauging the level of awareness on campus so other campaigns can be targeted more effectively. Twinning can help provide campaigns with visible successes and encourage continued involvement.

Twinning can be more than a gesture of solidarity; it can be used to promote active links between universities and the respective student bodies. This is one of the most effective ways of raising awareness and furthering later campaigns. For instance, one of the criticisms of the campaign for boycott, divestment and sanctions is that it harms Palestinians as well and it can be very helpful to hear the opinions of students at universities under occupation.

About this guide

This guide is not prescriptive. It is based on personal experience and its key message is that activism is dynamic and works best when it is inclusive, and people feel able to express themselves, allowing space for creative ways to advance campaigns. This document is therefore a guide rather than a manual and hopefully will be especially for new and small groups.

Assess your university’s awareness

It is important to gauge the existing level of knowledge about Palestinians and the blocks on their right to education. Traditional methods of student campaigning, such as having a stall in the main thoroughfare through the campus, often provide effective ways of speaking to people. It can also be useful to draft a petition rather than rely exclusively on leaflets as this creates an opportunity to talk to people about the issue. On campuses there is often a large number of societies publicising various causes or events so it is best to stand out from the crowd by doing something original or eye-catching. For instance, one effective tactic, that was pioneered at Manchester University, but has been used on several different campuses, is to have students sit on the ground with an open book on their lap and an Israeli flag blindfolding them.

Hold an Event

Holding an event is an effective way of raising awareness about your campaign. This could be with an academic expert on the issue or in the form of a video conference with students or others in occupied Palestine. This is an excellent way to broaden the campaign and could be followed by a discussion on whether twinning would be a useful strategy for the campaign at your university.

How is policy adopted by your Student Union?

Universities vary substantially in terms of how democratic they are and how much space there is for students to influence policy directly. The Charities Act in 2006 has forced changes on many students unions. The National Union of Students advice for implementing these changes unfortunately tends to reduce the level of democracy and student control over policy. More and more unions in the UK are adopting structures similar to De Montfort University, whereby
motions have to passed by the Student Council before being passed on to the Annual General Meeting where they can be voted on by students.

The situation is very different in more democratic student unions such as the London School of Economics or the School of African and Oriental Studies, which both have regular Union General Meetings, where all students can submit policy to be debated and voted upon.

It is important to recognise the specific structure of your student union and to identify the best place to concentrate resources. However, the most effective strategy is usually to build as large as possible base of support through awareness raising activities.

Writing the Motion

A sample twinning motion, passed by the LSE Students’ Union in November 2009 is available in a separate document. However, it needs to be adapted for the student union that you are trying to twin. There are often specific rules for motions, such as word limits or a requirement to have student ID numbers on the forms, so make sure that the motion follows the relevant stipulations. It is important to double check all of the sourced material to make sure there are no dead links and that the information is still up to date. People who are hostile to the cause are likely to pick up on a single error and try to focus the debate on that, rather than the substance of the motion.

As the motion is general, it is important to choose a specific university to twin with in Palestine. The Twinning with Palestine Network has a list on its website (www.twinningwithpalestine.net) of those universities that are currently twinned. If possible it is best to contact the Palestinian university’s student union to see whether they would be willing to twin with your student union.

Passing the Motion

This is obviously one of the more difficult aspects of the twinning campaign. If it needs to go through the student council and no one in your student group is a part of this council then it is particularly important to show the depth of student support for twinning. An email writing campaign to key figures in the council or a petition could be a helpful way to demonstrate the level of support.

Once it passes through to the Union General Meeting or the Annual General Meeting a lot more awareness raising needs to be conducted to ensure that people vote in favour of the motion. Hostile elements on campus and possibly even beyond (the Israeli Embassy takes an active interest in UK student politics) will mobilise against the motion. However, although they are vocal, they are rarely a sizable faction on UK campuses. The key is to convince the majority of students to vote in favour of human rights. This can be done by a continuing informative and detailed awareness campaigns on Israeli blocks on the Palestinian right to education.

It is important that the motion is presented by strong speakers. Confidence at public speaking is beneficial but it is also essential that the speakers are knowledgeable on the facts of the occupation so that they can answer questions convincingly. There are usually two speakers for either side.

Israel lobby groups may oppose the motion outright or try to amend the motion. The amendments have to be voted on and approved. Make sure you familiarise yourself with the rules regarding amendments, as there are usually deadlines before they can be submitted. With amendments, both sides usually get two speakers for and against and it is important to have several back up speakers for this.

In some cases, Israel lobby groups have mobilised factions in other universities to come to the meetings to vote. This is an obvious infraction of the rules and needs to be combated by making sure the vote is overseen in a fair manner. ID checks are an effective barrier to non-student voting.

What to do if the motion falls

This is a setback rather than the end to the campaign. A group meeting should review what went well and badly for the future.

It is always important to review the effectiveness of action points. In this way your group will become better organised over time as the shortcomings of particular tactics are addressed and a new strategy is formulated for approaching the issue.
What to do if the motion passes

If the motion passes it is vitally important that the momentum created by a successful campaign continues and positive links are made with the twinned university. It is essential to call a society meeting to review progress so far and a twinning taskforce meeting as soon as possible. This should be conducted in a similar form to that outlined in the “campaigning best practise” sheet.

If, for example, your motion mandates the Education and Welfare Officer to write a letter to your university’s administration, asking for access for Palestinian Universities to online journal subscriptions and to co-ordinate with the Twinning Taskforce to advance this campaign, you could draft the letter for the Education and Welfare Officer to send off. It is also important to publicise the letter to show that you are making progress on the follow up to the motion. If the school administration rejects the idea, it should be followed up in a concerted campaign.

For further advice please contact Aimee Shalan shalana@caabu.org