Guidelines for dealing with 'controversial' events in research and teaching at the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies at the University of Vienna

The role of the humanities has undergone a decisive transformation in recent decades – driven by the *cultural turn*, the emergence of new forms of political protest culture and the challenges of a globalised society shaped by migration. Researchers at the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies see themselves as critical thinkers who engage reflexively with cultures, identities and forms of communication, and in so doing help shape political, social, cultural, economic and ecological debates.

The humanities currently see themselves as a seismograph, a mirror and a guide within a historically shaped present. This perspective gives rise to specific content and formats in research and teaching. In recent years, the engagement with topics perceived as 'controversial' and politically motivated has gained particular significance. Guest lectures presenting ideological or activist positions provide important impulses in this context: they enable both researchers and students to refine, critically analyse and nuancedly contextualise discourses – whilst simultaneously fostering their ability to deal with complexity.

This does not, of course, apply to events that incite violence, promote neo-Nazi activities or propagate discriminatory views, from which the University of Vienna and the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies firmly distance themselves. After all, the freedom of research and teaching, academic integrity, and the guarantee of respect, objectivity, equality and protection against discrimination, as set out in the University of Vienna's Code of Conduct, form the basis of all academic activity.

However, even debates that are in line with democracy and the rule of law may, at first glance, conflict with the University's event guidelines, which reserve the right to distance themselves from speakers by cancelling events if the management deems them a threat to 'order' and 'security'. The aim, however, should be not to cancel events on current, socially relevant and even 'controversial' topics across the board, but rather to make them possible for the sake of scholarly benefit without the university fearing damage to its reputation as a result.

The following set of guidelines for organisers (both students and staff) and office holders are intended to help avoid conflicts within the Faculty and the University, prevent damage to the public reputation of individual academics, forestall self-censorship, and guarantee the high quality and relevance of research and teaching at the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies.

Lead time for planning

To ensure that an event can be held in a timely manner, a lead time of at least 8 weeks prior to the event is required wherever possible.

In addition to complying with the guidelines and safety measures for events at the University of Vienna (Conference and Event Management), we recommend the following steps:

Self-reflection

Before organising your planned event, ask yourself, as a student or researcher, whether it could be regarded as 'controversial'. This is the case with topics that

- relate to wars and political conflicts.
- involve ideological stances perceived as radical or extreme in public debate.
- revolve around issues of discrimination and *political correctness*.
- are activist-motivated or contain activist elements.
- concern marginalised perspectives and challenge established narratives or authorities.

An event could also be considered 'controversial' if the invited person

- is frequently criticised in the media or tends to be viewed negatively.
- has already been perceived as controversial in past public appearances.
- is subject to political or religious persecution elsewhere.

If you are unsure about how to classify them, please consult with any co-organisers or the invited person.

Transparency

If you classify your event as 'controversial', it is advisable not only to comply with the required information obligations in the context of the organisation, invitation and staging of the event, but also to pay particular attention to transparent communication.

Make it explicitly clear

- what academic objectives you are pursuing by holding the event.
- who is organising the event and who is responsible for issuing invitations.
- who is funding the event.
- what (potentially contradictory) views and positions are attributed to the speaker in public discourse.
- that you are committed to the values of the University of Vienna's Code of Conduct.
- whether security measures need to be put in place (in consultation with Conference and Event Management).

Contact persons at the department

If you are planning an event on a 'controversial' topic in the field of research, it is advisable to inform the head of department; in the field of teaching, you should notify the directorate of studies. In this case, you should ideally also outline the academic insights and learning objectives for students that you hope to achieve through the planned event.

Points of contact in the Dean's Office

If, as a head of department or directorate of studies, you have any doubts regarding a planned event for any reason, or if, as an organiser, you feel that you are not receiving sufficient support from the head of department or directorate of studies for your event, please contact the Dean's Office, which will always discuss your enquiry as a team:

- Dean (available at any time to answer all queries)
- Vice-Dean for Research (particularly if your enquiry concerns an academic event)
- Vice-Dean for Teaching (particularly for events falling within the scope of teaching)

The Dean's Office undertakes to work with the organisers to provide a clear assessment of the feasibility of the event, to provide support where necessary, and to represent this position to the Rectorate.

If you choose to follow this internal faculty procedure, last-minute cancellations of events are more likely to be avoided, and all parties involved are transparently included in the decision-making processes. Should your event receive critical media coverage or be cancelled by the Rectorate, you are less likely to face criticism as an individual, and your personal and academic reputation will be safeguarded.

These guidelines were adopted at the Faculty Conference on 22 October 2025 and have been agreed with the University Rectorate. They will be evaluated in three years' time and revised if necessary.