

Student-led conference “Justice in the World: Reality or Utopia? Shaping global perceptions”

The event

With the support of the Library’s Postgraduate Community Engagement Team and the Department of Politics and International Studies, three postgraduate students organised and hosted a conference about Justice in times of economic austerity.

Three postgraduate students at the Department of Politics and International Studies, Anna Brachtendorf, Damian Kurowski and Julia Wdowin, received this year’s grant from the Library’s Postgraduate Community Engagement Team for their idea for an interdisciplinary conference on Justice in the World.

In introductory speech by Dr. Juanita Elias from the Department for Politics and International Studies opened the event, followed by a panel discussion titled “Can economic austerity be just? Effects on society, family and left-wing protest”. Professor Peter Burnham from the University of Birmingham discussed the capital-state relationship and its evolving nature from a theoretical point of view. Dr. Sarah Marie Hall from the University of Manchester highlighted the effects of austerity politics on gender, class, and generational inequalities. Dr. David Bailey from the University of Birmingham mapped left-wing protest both spatially and diachronically and thereby connected it to economic policies of austerity.

An animated, interactive session of questions followed the panel. Over several rounds, the participants debated, amongst others, the concept of class, the effects of economic austerity on the international political economy, and normative approaches to austerity policies. Subsequently, a postgraduate student, Imran Mohammed from the Centre of Lifelong Learning, gave a presentation about the relationship between justice, human rights and the social work profession, as well as its empowerment potential. This presentation again aroused significant curiosity and brought on many interesting questions from many participants. The following lunch gave students as well as panelists and presenters the chance for further exchange.

Celebrating the success of the conference, the organisers would like to extend their sincere thanks to the speakers for sharing their research and presentations, to all the participants, many of whom became actively involved in discussions, and to the Library's Postgraduate Community Engagement Team as well as the Department of Politics and International Studies for their financial and practical support throughout the entire process. They are grateful for this opportunity to learn, and support the renewal of the competition and the grant in order to allow more students to grow on numerous levels.

Challenges

The main challenge we encountered was convincing speakers to participate in our panels. This was mainly due to the fact that the period during which we planned to contact the speakers was roughly the same during which we had a lot of coursework to do. Furthermore, the time of the conference was apparently among the busiest during the academic year, with academics spending a lot of time on marking essays and exams. We learned that academic staff at universities is very busy and that invitations to speak at conferences must be sent out as early as possible in order to ensure a good turnout.

What would you do differently?

- Start contacting speakers much earlier
- Work on a more professional PR-scheme, including a website, regular Facebook updates, and reaching out to students, also at other universities, more persistently

What have you taken away from the experience?

The conference has helped us develop many soft skills, such as sending out professional and friendly emails to well-known and prestigious academics, speaking in front of an audience, and instead of giving up in the face of adversity to change one's point of view and keep going nevertheless.