

University of Edinburgh students win “best secularist student activity” award

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This year's [National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Student Societies](#) (AHS) award for the best secularist student activity has been awarded to [University of Edinburgh Humanist Society](#) in recognition of their recent efforts to influence and change Edinburgh University Students Association (EUSA) policy.

The prize fund, sponsored by National Secular Society, aims to support student groups who have organised events or activities that have helped promote secularism and secular values in their universities.

The University of Edinburgh Humanist Society's secular activities involved attempts to promote secularism on campus by submitting two motions to their university's student association.

In one motion submitted by the Society, they called on EUSA to identify itself as a secular organisation and to be proactive in promoting secularism to the student body and secular ideas as part of its wider social activism. They asked EUSA to "challenge negative connotations around the word and ideology". The [motion fell](#), with students "feeling uncomfortable" voting in favour of it.

The motion had been preceded by another put forward by the Society a few weeks before, which sought to disallow imposed or directed segregation, based on any characteristic (but aimed at gender [given the UUK guidance](#) published at the end of last year and increasing attempts to segregate by gender at events on campus). The motion explicitly noted that individuals should be allowed to segregate themselves, if they wanted.

The "Separate But Equal" motion also fell, this time amid accusations of "open Islamophobia" against the Society. Only about 8 people out of 70 voted for it. The Society's Secretary, Ian Scott, [reported that](#) a number of people indicated to him afterwards that they privately supported the motion, but given that two Muslim women had spoken out so strongly against it, they didn't see it as their place to vote on the issue. Others indicated that they also supported the motion, but were afraid of being seen as Islamophobic if they were to have voted in favour of it.

Of the motions, the University of Edinburgh Humanist Society said: "We would like to think that our motions have benefitted the student body by bringing the issue of secularism into consciousness. Although the motions failed, student council debate was an opportunity to articulate secularism and combat negative connotations (e.g. "militant, anti-religious" etc).

Rory Fenton, President of the AHS, said: "This is a well-deserved award. Edinburgh University Humanists have been consistent and tireless campaigners for secularism in their students' union. Their actions have been an important reminder that secularism can be practised as well as preached by our societies."

Luke Hecht, President of University of Edinburgh Humanist Society, said: "It is encouraging to be recognised for our efforts. Although these two motions were rejected, we intend to keep raising the

issue of secularism on campus and this award will help us to raise awareness of our future campaigns."

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "The issue of secularism is much misunderstood and sometimes deliberately misrepresented. We therefore have a big job raising awareness of its value – even for religious believers. These debates are a start. It is clear that there is a big hill to climb, but –as they say – every journey starts with the first step. I hope the University of Edinburgh group will keep on plugging the message until it gets through. And that they will stand as an example to others. Congratulations for making such an excellent start."

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