

Hijab day: open letter by Frédéric Mion, President of Sciences Po (29 April 2016)

The initiative of a few of our students to organise a debate on the Islamic headscarf on our premises, suggesting somewhat provocatively that their fellow female and male students try wearing it, has sparked surprise, concern and in some cases anger.

Sciences Po in no way encouraged this student initiative, which indeed took a rather questionable form. But neither was it up to us to try and prohibit it. Unlike primary and secondary school, university is by its very nature a place for debate, where adults, young and old, are free to make their beliefs known – including in a visible manner – and to discuss their positions on all issues. Only such statements as are punishable by law or those liable to disrupt public order are prohibited, and we are highly vigilant that these limits not be breached.

Although it elicits strong differences of opinion, the debate on the headscarf does not fall foul of the law, nor does it challenge the principle of secularism to which our university is firmly and unflinchingly committed. It is our responsibility as a higher education institution not to prevent debate, including on controversial subjects. I believe that it is through discussion and comparing different arguments that we have the best chance to build a more peaceful society, not by silencing sensitive topics.

In point of fact, the political and media overreaction to this event was in distinct contrast to the calm and curiosity with which it actually played out. There was criticism and debate, contradictions were aired, but always respectfully.

Finally, in case some have forgotten, I would like to point out that Sciences Po is proud to host a great many events that promote the place of women in our society – and in all societies – and respect for their full rights. As a [member of UN Women's HeForShe network](#) for gender equality, we have implemented a [concrete action plan in favour of gender equality](#) and have instituted a [programme](#) that allows our students to address equality issues throughout their studies. This includes information at the welcome sessions for all new students, courses on gender relations, awareness-raising among leaders of associations and clubs, and promotion of gender equality by our guidance counselling and careers services, through meetings and practical workshops.

As Sciences Po has the good fortune to train excellent female and male students of every generation, I find the strength and diversity of their debates cause for celebration. It is our firm belief that if we want to overcome our differences to build a future together which is more peaceful and more just than our present, the door to debate must remain wide open, and will do so at Sciences Po.

Frédéric Mion
President of Sciences Po