

February 28, 2024

**Office of the President**

1050 KANEFF TOWER  
4700 KEELE ST  
TORONTO ON  
CANADA M3J 1P3  
T 416 736 5200  
[www.yorku.ca/president](http://www.yorku.ca/president)

Dear Colleagues,

We are writing to share widely how the University administration has responded to a problematic incident on February 2, 2024, when Toronto Police Services (TPS) interrupted a lecture by Dr. Muhannad Ayyash, a distinguished Palestinian scholar from Mount Royal University who had been invited by York colleagues to give a talk about his research, *The Palestinian Struggle for Liberation: Aspirations for a Decolonial Life*. For those unfamiliar with the incident, please see the appended message from the Provost, shared with a number of York colleagues on February 7, 2024.

We share the concerns of many York community members about the potential impact of this incident on the values of inclusive free speech and diversity of thought that are fundamental to the University's mission.

Since the incident, York Community Safety has been heavily engaged with TPS to understand what precipitated TPS's appearance and to prevent any such future occurrence. TPS has now formally confirmed:

1. That they were not contacted by a member of York's administration or wider community about the lecture or to request their presence;
2. That TPS did not inform York of their security concerns or their plans to enter campus; and
3. That contrary to statements from the officers at the time, TPS was acting on information they independently identified as warranting a security presence. We do not have further details about what they used to flag the lecture in this way but have communicated our concerns about these mechanisms and the misidentification of this lecture, in particular.

TPS acknowledges the above errors and are collaborating with Orville Wallace, Executive Director of Community Safety at York, to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The MOU will clarify and strengthen the parameters for TPS presence on any York campus and their involvement in university activities.

Other members of the administration, including Provost & Vice-President Academic, Lisa Philipps, and Interim Vice-President Equity, People & Culture, Laina Bay-Cheng, have met with some of those affected by this incident, including but not limited to those in the room and Dr. Ayyash himself. While any intrusion into academic space and discourse is concerning, this particular incident – involving a Palestinian scholar speaking on Palestinian rights and in the midst of the crises in Israel and Palestine – has exacerbated feelings of alienation and marginalization already undermining York's academic community. We sincerely regret the imposition on Dr. Ayyash and lecture attendees and the consequent erosion of trust, particularly at this troubled and troubling time.



The University will continue to examine this particular incident, to prevent any future recurrence, and to advocate for the free exploration and exchange of ideas at York.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rhonda Lenton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R".

Rhonda Lenton, PhD  
President and Vice-Chancellor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa Philipps". The signature is cursive and somewhat stylized.

Lisa Philipps  
Provost and Vice-President Academic

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laina Bay-Cheng". The signature is very stylized and elongated, with a large loop at the end.

Laina Bay-Cheng  
Vice-President Equity, People and Culture



## Provost & Vice-President Academic

Dear Colleagues,

I have heard from a number of you about the troubling situation that unfolded on Friday, Feb 2 when Toronto Police (TPS) interrupted a scholarly lecture on our Keele campus. Thank you for taking the time to write to me and others about this. Please be assured that the University administration was unaware that TPS was on campus.

Upon hearing from colleagues on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the University immediately took several actions to both understand and engage with members of the community who were impacted. I would like to underscore that the University administration did not call TPS or ask TPS to attend.

The lecture – offered by a respected, visiting academic guest – was hosted and attended by York faculty members and graduate students.

Given the centrality of scholarly discussions to our academic mission, the University has serious concerns about police presence in any classroom where there is no safety concern. The University regrets that a distinguished academic guest and the other participants in this event were imposed on in this manner. We value the important work done by the organizers of this event, which was one in a series, to create space for scholarly discussion and learning on difficult topics.

The University's Community Safety team promptly reached out to TPS on Feb 2 to understand how and why officers were sent to the classroom and is meeting with TPS to seek further information on how the officers came to be on campus, if any call was made to TPS to request their presence, and if so by whom. The existing protocol between York and TPS has been strongly reinforced, which means that TPS should contact Community Safety prior to attending our campuses, whenever possible, unless there is an urgent risk to safety.

Several colleagues have also written to inquire about one of the organizers of the guest lecture, who has shared that their passport York login access was suspended. Many have expressed concern and asked if it was perhaps connected to the lecture. After university IT (UIT) colleagues looked into this matter, we can confirm that the individual and several other community members were unfortunately impacted by a phishing attack.

Phishing scams are an increasingly common form of attack on IT systems across all industries. This attack was sent from a compromised account at another Ontario post-secondary institution to thousands of accounts across many Canadian universities on Feb 2.

York's cybersecurity systems automatically alert the UIT team when an attempt is made to login with York credentials from a questionable location. Of the 400 York accounts that received this phishing attack, six were compromised before York's security team could clear the harmful messages from York's email system.

Based on cybersecurity protocols UIT acted quickly to temporarily lock these six accounts, and then to restore access to them once the authorized user had changed their PPY password. This is done to protect both the account user and the University.

We commit to sharing any new information that we receive on these important matters, subject to protecting individual privacy.

Sincerely,

Lisa Philipps

Provost and Vice-President Academic

York University