



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

Professor Koen Lamberts

Vice-Chancellor, The University of Sheffield

Sent by Email: To Personal Assistant Rachel Frith, r.l.frith@sheffield.ac.uk

1 November 2024

Dear Professor Lamberts,

We are writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our deep concerns regarding recent actions taken by the University of Sheffield, which appear to restrict freedom of speech and academic freedom, particularly concerning discussions on Palestine and the Middle East.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

We have been made aware that a planned teach-in entitled "*What Is Happening in Gaza?*", originally scheduled for 1 October, was prevented from taking place, citing the "controversial" nature of the event and a new "events safety guidance" policy introduced in April 2024. This was an academic event, organised by University staff members with expertise in the area, intended for an internal audience of staff and students. No external speakers were involved. We are troubled by several aspects of the University's decision to cancel the event, as we discuss further below.

The new "events safety guidance" policy cited by University Security appears to target events like conferences and fairs, not internal academic seminars. The cancellation of this event, which falls within normal University research and teaching activities, suggests that the policy is being applied inconsistently. Such an interpretation raises concerns about selective enforcement that may inhibit free academic discourse.

By blocking this academic event, particularly under the justification that its content is "controversial", the University appears to be in violation of its legal obligations under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which grants academic staff at English universities the right to "(i) to question and test received wisdom, and (ii) to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions" and under Section 43 of the Education (No. 2) Act 1986, which requires that universities "shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the establishment". The University's actions appear to contradict these obligations, given that the event was part of an academic effort to engage students in critical discussions about current global issues.

We have also been made aware of a troubling pattern over the past year in which the University's security team has intervened in events related to Palestine. Staff have been informed that any event related to Palestine and Gaza is considered 'controversial' and therefore requires additional security assessments. This practice stigmatizes the discussion of Palestine by implying it poses a threat to campus safety and security. Security interventions have included last-minute venue changes, heightened security presence with body cameras, bag searches, ID checks, and the prohibition of placards and face coverings. These excessive

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales.

Company Number: 08747770 | Registered Charity Number: 1161206 | VAT Registration Number: 828 5681 90



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

restrictions, compounded by a lack of transparency in the University's risk assessment process, have even led to the cancellation of events, including the 'Campus Voices for Palestine - Solidarity against Scholasticide' panel. 'Scholasticide' refers to the systematic destruction of Palestinian education and it is, therefore, very troubling that the University would suppress discussion of this [reality](#) facing our colleagues in Gaza. By treating discussions on Palestine as requiring disproportionate scrutiny, the University not only stifles academic freedom but also undermines the diversity of perspectives that universities should promote. Such actions may even constitute a form of discrimination.

The University of Sheffield prides itself on its commitment to intellectual inquiry and the freedom to discuss challenging topics. By curbing an event discussing current events in Gaza, the University risks undermining these core values. The cancellation of the teach-in and the broader restrictions on similar discussions appear to contradict the University's own Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom policy and call into question the University's commitment to open and free debate.

As the Committee on Academic Freedom at BRISMES, we are concerned that the University's actions appear to be part of a much wider and deeply troubling trend within UK academia that the Committee [has documented](#), in which certain subjects, especially those related to Palestine and the Middle East, are unduly restricted under the guise of "safety" or avoiding "controversy." This practice represents a significant threat to academic freedom, a principle that the University must uphold for its staff, students, and the wider academic community.

We respectfully urge the University of Sheffield to review the application of its "events safety guidance" policy in light of these concerns. We also request that the University reaffirm its commitment to the principles of free academic inquiry and ensure that discussions on complex and politically sensitive topics, such as Palestine and the Middle East, are not subject to unjust censorship or additional restrictions or barriers.

We look forward to your response and hope to see the University take meaningful steps to protect academic freedom, both in this case and in its broader academic practices.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES)

cc. *Sheffield UCU* <ucu@sheffield.ac.uk>

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit:

[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales.

Company Number: 08747770 | Registered Charity Number: 1161206 | VAT Registration Number: 828 5681 90