

Professor Lisa Roberts
Vice Chancellor, University of Exeter

Sent by Email

2 July 2026

Dear Vice Chancellor Professor Lisa Roberts,

We are writing on behalf of the Council of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), the UK's leading scholarly association for the study of the Middle East, to express our deep concern about the proposed reductions to academic posts in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, including within the Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies (IAIS). We understand that all academic staff within IAIS have been placed "at risk" of redundancy.

Our concern arises primarily from our responsibility as the principal professional association representing Middle Eastern Studies in the UK. IAIS has consistently distinguished itself through its pioneering and high-impact research, award-winning teaching, and visible leadership within and beyond the academy. It is ranked third in the UK for African and Middle Eastern Studies by the Complete University Guide (2027), and second for Area Studies in the UK's national Research Excellence Framework (REF). IAIS is also one of the UK's leading centres for the teaching of Arabic, in addition to Persian and Turkish.

Its scholars have made significant contributions to the field of Middle Eastern studies internationally and to multiple disciplines: as editors of leading journals and book series, trustees and chairs of professional associations, convenors of international conferences (including the 2023 BRISMES annual conference), leaders of working groups, peer reviewers, QAA benchmark panel members, external examiners, policy advisors and as members of REF panels. In addition, IAIS is home to a number of internationally-recognised centres of expertise, including the European Centre for Palestine Studies, the Centre for Kurdish Studies, and the Centre for Gulf Studies. Collectively, these activities reflect not only the distinction of individual scholars but also IAIS's standing as a major international hub of scholarly excellence.

For these reasons, we are deeply concerned that the proposed redundancies would have consequences extending far beyond Exeter. They would diminish one of the UK's foremost centres



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

for Middle Eastern Studies, weakening research capacity, reducing opportunities for students, undermining specialist language provision, and damaging the international standing of the discipline. Such losses would be felt across the wider academic community in the UK and beyond. Moreover, at a time when universities increasingly seek to attract internationally mobile students, weakening internationally recognised centres of regional expertise is strategically counterproductive.

We recognise that universities are operating under severe financial pressures and that these pressures present difficult choices for university leaders. However, it is equally important to recognise that the current crisis in UK higher education is structural. It stems from long-term policy choices concerning university funding, tuition fees, immigration policy, marketisation, and the growing dependence of universities on volatile international student recruitment. These are systemic challenges rather than failures of individual departments or disciplines.

For this reason, redundancies cannot provide a sustainable solution. While they may deliver short-term financial savings, they also weaken the very foundations on which universities depend: high-quality teaching, research excellence, student experience, disciplinary breadth, and international reputation. Reduced staffing leads to heavier workloads, fewer course options, diminished research capacity, lower staff morale, and a less attractive environment for both domestic and international students. Rather than resolving the financial crisis, such measures risk reinforcing it.

Learning communities and research cultures cannot simply be rebuilt once finances improve. They depend upon long-term relationships, mentoring, institutional memory, and sustained intellectual collaboration. Once these are disrupted, rebuilding them is difficult and, in some cases, impossible. The long-term damage caused by redundancies therefore extends well beyond any immediate budgetary savings.

The appropriate response to the challenges facing higher education is not the permanent reduction of academic capacity but collective engagement with the structural causes of the crisis. University leaders, staff, students, trade unions, learned societies, and the wider sector all have an important role to play in advocating for a sustainable funding model that protects the UK's internationally recognised strengths in teaching and research.

We therefore urge the University Executive Board to reconsider the proposed redundancies within IAIS and more broadly across the university. Protecting jobs is in the interests of the University of Exeter, the wider scholarly community and of the long-term health of Middle Eastern Studies in the UK. Decisions taken now will shape the future of the discipline for many years to come.

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Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Professor Dina Matar
BRISMES President-Elect

cc.

Professor Dan Charman, Senior Vice-President and Provost;

Professor Gareth Stansfield OBE, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean, Faculty of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences;

Professor Helen Berry, Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor, Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences;

Professor Adam Watt, Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor, Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.