



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 David Phoenix, Vice-Chancellor, The Open University

Professor Josie Fraser, Deputy Vice-Chancellor

Dave Hall, University Secretary

Paul Traynor, Chief Financial Officer

Professor Mark Brandon, Interim Pro-Vice-Chancellor R&I

Professor Ian Pickup, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students

Allán Laville, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Professor Adrienne Scullion, Executive Dean, FASS

Professor Mark Durkin, Executive Dean, FBL

Professor Mike Fernando, Executive Dean, STEM

Professor Klaus-Dieter, Executive Dean, WELS

John D'Arcy, Director, Ireland

Martin Boyle, Director, Scotland

Ben Lewis, Director, Wales

Emma Stace, Chief Digital Information Officer Emma Stace

Vikki Matthews, Chief People Officer

Ceri Rose, Chief Communications and Marketing Officer

Sent by Email

26 February 2026

Dear Professor Phoenix and members of the Vice Chancellor's Executive,

We are writing on behalf of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies' (BRISMES) Committee on Academic Freedom to express our profound concern about your university's response to a letter from the UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) regarding the use of the term 'ancient Palestine.' Based on the information available to us, it appears that the university's response risks requiring academics to frame their teaching according to the preferred perspective of an external political pressure group, which would constitute a clear violation of 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



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

We understand that you received a letter in late November 2025 from UKLFI regarding the use of the term ‘ancient Palestine’ in some of the teaching materials used in the module *A111: Discovering the Arts and Humanities*. UKLFI is an openly political pressure group, with the [express aim](#) of “creating a supportive climate of opinion in the United Kingdom towards Israel.” It has a history of attempting to interfere with the production of academic materials relating to Palestine-Israel, [for example](#) its attempts to influence the content of textbooks in ways that eminent professors in the field deemed biased towards Israel.

Our concerns centre on the response provided by the university in a letter dated 18 December 2025, sent by Professor Adrienne Scullion, the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. In that letter, despite acknowledging that the use of the term ‘ancient Palestine’ is “academically appropriate,” she wrote: “We will not use the term again in future learning materials,” and repeated this assurance in the letter’s conclusion. This commitment is confirmed by UKLFI’s [public statement](#). On the 9th January 2026, the university circulated an internal bulletin to numerous staff members noting that the university “agreed to change references to ‘Ancient Palestine’” after this complaint and provided a hyperlink to UKLFI’s statement. It therefore appears clear that the Faculty’s Executive Dean, on behalf of the university, has stated that no academic members of staff at The Open University may use the term ‘ancient Palestine’ in future learning materials, regardless of and overruling any academic judgment that staff may exercise. This appears to be a blatant violation of your staff’s academic freedom. While your internal statement of 17th February argued that there was “no evidence of restriction on academic freedom,” we do not see how a commitment to an external lobbying group that a lawful, academically appropriate term will not be used in future teaching materials can possibly be compatible with academic freedom.

We also have concerns and questions about the process through which we understand an agreement was reached to “caveat” the use of the term in existing materials. While module teams should of course be free to revise their teaching materials, this should not be done at the behest of, or as a result of pressure from, an external political lobbying group. As the Office for Students makes [clear](#), “[a]cademic staff should not be constrained or pressured in their teaching to endorse or reject particular value judgements.” We are concerned that in this instance staff may have felt unduly pressured by senior management into making these changes.

Furthermore, in the same letter referred to above, Professor Scullion writes that “the team...accept that the term is now problematic in a way that, perhaps, it was not when the materials were written in 2018.” The university’s correspondence therefore confusingly states both that the term is

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

“academically appropriate” yet that it is also “now problematic.” At multiple points, the letter invokes the “contemporary political context” as grounds for reconsidering the use of the term. It is unclear how or why the “contemporary political context” (characterised by [UKLFI](#) as “contemporary political sensitivities”) should have any bearing on the use of “academically appropriate” terminology.

If the “contemporary political context” in question is the actions of the Israeli military in Gaza since October 2023, which the [International Court of Justice](#) has found to present a plausible risk of genocide, and which numerous international human rights [organisations](#), [UN bodies](#) and [scholars](#) have described as genocidal, then the decision to prohibit the term “ancient Palestine” becomes not merely puzzling but deeply troubling. In a moment when Palestinians face mass displacement, destruction of cultural heritage, and threats to collective existence, suppressing the historical nomenclature of Palestine risks participating, however inadvertently, in the erasure of Palestinian historical presence.

As you are no doubt aware, the 2023 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act places specific obligations upon universities to secure freedom of speech within the law, including lawful speech “[that may be offensive or hurtful to some](#),” and regardless of whether external lobby groups approve of the viewpoint that the speech expresses. As the regulatory guidance from the [Office for Students](#) makes clear: “The Equality Act does not require providers or constituent institutions to protect students or others from ideas that they might find offensive.”

In light of these concerns, and that your university’s recent actions may be incompatible with its obligations under the 2023 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act and the Office for Students Regulatory Advice 24, we call upon you to:

- publicly confirm that your staff will be free to use the terminology that they deem academically appropriate, including the term ‘ancient Palestine’;
- publicly clarify that the use of caveats within existing material can be used (or not) at the discretion of the academic staff with relevant expertise; and
- review the policies under which the letter to UKLFI was responded to, in order to ensure that they do not result in violations of academic freedom in the future.

We believe that it is important that these assurances and clarifications are offered publicly, particularly given the media attention surrounding the use of the term ‘ancient Palestine.’ While the

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

evidence available to us indicates that violations of academic freedom appear to have occurred, even if this is not the case, a failure to offer a transparent account of events risks setting a dangerous precedent for further politicised attacks on Middle Eastern Studies.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

CC.

Professor Arif Ahmed, Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom, Office for Students
Malcolm Sweeting, Pro-Chancellor and Chair of the Council, Open University
Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow DBE CBE, Vice-Chair of the Council, Open University

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