



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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

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The Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP

Sent by Email: public.enquiries@homeoffice.gov.uk
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Cc. Baroness Jacqui Smith, Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education

Sent by Email: correspondence.unit@education.gov.uk
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27 March 2026

Dear Home Secretary,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our serious concern regarding the reported introduction of an “emergency brake” on student visas for applicants from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar, and Sudan.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe dedicated to the study of the Middle East and North Africa. The Society is committed to promoting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in relation to its study in the United Kingdom and internationally.

This decision raises significant concerns regarding the academic freedom, mobility, and equal treatment of students and scholars from the affected countries. Measures of this nature risk excluding individuals on the basis of nationality and, in doing so, undermine the principles of openness and international exchange that underpin the UK’s higher education sector. They also deprive universities of the invaluable contributions made by students and researchers whose lived experience and contextual knowledge enrich teaching and research, particularly within the social sciences.

We are also concerned about the broader implications for the UK’s higher education sector. International students play a vital role in sustaining universities financially and intellectually. At a time when many institutions are already under considerable strain, restrictions of this kind risk exacerbating existing challenges and may, over time, damage the UK’s global reputation as a welcoming destination for study and research.

Furthermore, the policy raises serious ethical and legal questions. The right to seek asylum is a fundamental principle of international law. We note the Home Office’s [reference](#) to a reported increase of 470% in asylum applications associated with the student route from these countries. While such figures merit careful consideration, they require contextualisation in terms of absolute numbers, as well as the broader conditions in the countries concerned, many of which are experiencing conflict, instability, or systemic persecution. In such contexts, an increase in asylum claims is not unexpected.

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Even if there are concerns about potential misuse of the student route, it is difficult to see how a blanket restriction affecting entire nationalities constitutes a proportionate or evidence-based response. In effect, this policy punishes an entire nationality for the actions of a few. This approach is fundamentally at odds with the principle of individualized assessment that underpins both fair immigration policy and the UK's own legal traditions.

In addition, restricting access to higher education for students from conflict-affected and politically unstable contexts risks undermining longer-term global recovery and stability. Access to UK higher education has long played a crucial role in equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and networks necessary to contribute to the rebuilding and development of their home societies. Limiting these opportunities may have consequences not only for individuals, but also for the future prospects of countries already facing profound challenges.

We respectfully urge the Home Office to reconsider this approach and to engage with the higher education sector and relevant stakeholders in developing policies that address your concerns without undermining academic freedom, international collaboration, and the UK's longstanding commitment to educational openness. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further and to contribute constructively to any review of the policy.

As is standard practice, we will publish this letter on our website, and will be happy to also publish your reply.

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 Committee on Academic Freedom, British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES)

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

[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)

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