

Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell
President and Vice-Chancellor
University of Manchester

Sent By Email: president@manchester.ac.uk

8 March 2022

Dear Professor Rothwell,

Re: Alistair Hudson, Director, Whitworth Art Gallery and the attack on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our concerns about the University's treatment of Alistair Hudson, Director, Whitworth Art Gallery (WAG), and that this may be connected with his roles relating to the Forensic Architecture exhibition, Cloud Studies in August 2021. We understand that Mr. Hudson was initially told his post would be terminated following a series of complaints filed by UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) related to a statement of solidarity with Palestine's liberation struggle which was part of this exhibition.¹ We further understand that in the wake of a public outcry against this move, the University decided to backtrack the termination decision and has offered instead to change his job description.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in the UK and 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 note that the University has adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism and we are concerned to what extent the University drew upon this document when it reached decisions regarding WAG exhibitions and staff.² In particular we are concerned that the matters we brought to the attention of the UK Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights inquiry into freedom of expression³ in 2021 may be pertinent. In this submission, we stated that several of the IHRA's working definition's examples risk stifling open discussions concerning the conditions under which Israel was established; Israeli laws, state policies and actions; Zionist ideology; and the ongoing implications of these laws and ideology for Palestinian human rights. Applying such a definition risks discriminating against Palestinian students and staff with regard to their rights to freedom of expression, as well as impacting non-

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/feb/22/whitworth-gallery-director-alistair-hudson-forced-out-over-palestinian-statement>

² <https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=52612>

³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/93/human-rights-joint-committee/news/120588/inquiry-launch-freedom-of-expression/>

Palestinians who are speaking out in support of Palestinian human rights and against complicity with breaches of national and international laws.

We further believe that the WAG has a duty to provide space for freedom of academic and artistic expression to exhibitors and that in turn the University has a duty to protect and support staff against attacks on their academic and artistic freedom of expression. These basic principles seem to have been breached twice. First, when management tried to censor an exhibition by Forensic Architecture following a complaint by UKLFI. Second, when the University decided to terminate Mr. Hudson's contract, also as a result of a complaint submitted by UKLFI.⁴

While it now seems that the University is backtracking, and instead of terminating Mr. Hudson's contract it has decided to change his job description, it is apparent that the decisions taken by University leadership will likely send a chilling message to staff and students. We are particularly concerned since your recent actions suggest that employees and students can be disciplined or even lose their jobs if they are critical of human rights-abusive policies carried out by the Israeli government. We therefore ask that the University refrain from using the IHRA definition of antisemitism as a code for identifying anti-Semitic speech acts and respect the basic principles of academic freedom and freedom of speech and refrain from intervening in the shows exhibited at WAG. Finally, we ask you ensure that Mr. Hudson's job description provides him with the full authority (and protections from external intervention) to decide which shows and items are exhibited at WAG without fear of retribution.

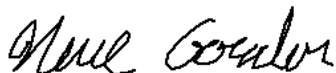
Yours sincerely,



Professor The Baroness Afshar OBE

President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom



Professor Neve Gordon

Vice-President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

⁴ <https://forensic-architecture.org/programme/news/forensic-architecture-stands-with-palestine-whitworth-exhibition-statement>
