

Thousands of UK academics oppose government censorship of Palestinian solidarity

Thomas Scripps
3 November 2023

Thousands of UK academics have rebelled against the Conservative government's attempt to enforce support for Israel's onslaught on Gaza in universities and other higher education and research institutions.

On October 28, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Michelle Donelan published an open letter to the CEO of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)—an independent public body that funds and directs academic research in the UK.

Donelan wrote “to express, in the most serious terms, my disgust and outrage at Research England's appointment of individuals to an advisory group on equality, diversity and inclusion who, since the 7 October attack [organised by Hamas against Israel], have been sharing some extremist views on social media.”

The examples she cites are a “post on X by Professor Kate Sang, who stated that the UK's crackdown on Hamas support in the UK was ‘disturbing’,” and “amplification by Dr Kamna Patel, University College London, of a post on X that condemns violence on both sides but makes reference to Israel's ‘genocide and apartheid’.”

The UK is not cracking down on support for Hamas, but on any show of opposition to Israel's crimes against humanity in Gaza, or solidarity with the Palestinians killed, maimed, and displaced. This is what Sang described as “disturbing”. Evidence that Israel is an apartheid state engaged in genocide is overwhelming.

As punishment, Donelan demands that UKRI “take swift action” to “immediately close this group [the advisory group on equality] and undertake an urgent investigation into how this happened,” with a response to be provided in the next day “with an update on your plans”.

UKRI gave its cowardly, reprehensible answer within half an hour, posting on X, “We are deeply concerned to have discovered these comments. We are conducting an immediate investigation.”

CEO Ottoline Leyser published her response to Donelan

on October 31, expressing her own “deep concern” and pledging “swift and robust action”. The advisory group was suspended “with immediate effect”, an investigation launched, and a review begun into “our advisory structures to ensure that they are fit for purpose.”

By the time Leyser's craven letter was published, over 1,300 academics had signed an open letter to the UKRI denouncing “the current wave of repression and attempts at censorship led by the government against lawful expressions of solidarity with Palestinians and criticisms of the Israeli military's heavy bombardment of the Gaza Strip since 7 October.”

The list of signatories has grown continuously since, passing 3,150 at time of publication.

Answering Donelan's slanders of their colleagues, the letter states, “We categorically refute the suggestion that expressions of support for Palestinian civilians and their right to engage in organised political resistance can be equated with support for Hamas and believe that such a conflation serves to undermine popular and growing opposition to Israel's bombardment and policies of siege against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.”

It notes “that many internationally respected human rights experts ... have concluded that Israel is practising apartheid against the Palestinian people. Even if this were not the case, the academic would still have the right to express that opinion. Meanwhile, on 15 October 2023, over 800 scholars and practitioners of international law, conflict studies and genocide studies signed a public statement warning of the possibility of genocide being perpetrated by Israeli forces against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.”

Raising the alarm over the government's “attack on individual freedom of expression and academic freedom” and “unacceptable political interference”, the letter warns, “We are concerned that this intervention marks an attempt to create a climate of fear to deter academics from expressing opposition to grave human rights violations by Israel.”

In an indictment of the UKRI in light of Leyser's grovelling response to Donelan, the letter continues, "If UKRI does not defend the advisory group from this unilateral state repression, this will send a devastating message to all academics, researchers, and students in the sector."

It concludes by urging "the whole British academic community to take a stand against the UK government's attack on academic freedom and equality, and to all forms of intimidation aimed at punishing individuals for showing solidarity with Palestinians."

This call must be taken up across UK university campuses. And it must base itself on an understanding that students and staff confront a far-reaching authoritarian campaign supported by Labour and the Tories alike.

Under the banner of protecting academic freedom—Donelan's demand for censorship begins with the cynical statement "Academic freedom and free speech are totally sacrosanct"—the government has been seeking to engineer a massive shift to the right at university campuses. This has been a cross-party effort, and closely connected with the slanderous campaign against "left anti-Semitism" spearheaded by the reactionary International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.

In August 2020, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented on a report produced by the house thinktank of the Tory Party, the Policy Exchange, "Academic freedom in the UK: Protecting viewpoint diversity." The WSWs summarised its purpose as arguing "for a combined intervention into both academia and student politics on campus to suppress left-wing protest and give free rein to far-right ideologues."

The foreword was provided by former Labour MP Ruth Smeeth, a veteran Blairite and key player in the anti-Semitism witch hunt in the party against Corbyn's supporters. Between 2005 and 2007, she served as director of public affairs and campaigns for the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM), a pro-Israel lobby group.

The WSWs article warned, "The relentlessness of this campaign is rooted in the turn of the ruling class towards dictatorial methods and ideologies... They are seeking a stranglehold on the universities to lay the intellectual groundwork for a vicious counterrevolutionary assault on the working class."

This is confirmed in terrible fashion in Gaza and by the crackdowns on protests around the world.

Denunciations of an unacceptable left-wing bias on campus have been combined with a targeted persecution of opponents of the Israeli government, with the IHRA definition rolled out across three quarters of universities and used to intimidate pro-Palestinian, anti-Zionist and generally

left opinion—among staff and students.

Now this campaign is being given more teeth with the government's dictatorial plans for a catch-all definition of political "extremism" to use as a pretext for funding cuts and arrests. The *Times* reported Monday, "Michael Gove, the communities secretary, is expected to set out a new, non-statutory definition of extremism by the end of the year that will make it easier to crack down on charities, places of worship, universities and other organisations that spread radical ideology or host hate preachers." It adds that the move "was planned before October 7".

Legislation is already underway to ban public bodies like universities or local councils from supporting boycott or divestment campaigns to protest human rights abuses—or even from expressing a wish to do so if not prevented by the law. The pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, modelled on the 1980s movement against apartheid South Africa, is the openly acknowledged target.

The rapid and principled response of thousands of professors, doctors, researchers and PhD students to the latest authoritarian intervention in Israel's defence by Donelan shows the enormous well of opposition in academia to the government's campaign. It follows the open letter of now close to 11,000 healthcare workers and medical students denouncing the Department of Health and Social Care's "unilateral expression of solidarity" with Israel.

What is needed is a political perspective to turn this mass sentiment into a programme of action to stop the slaughter in Gaza and the threat of a regional and world war. Students and academics should contact the Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality to discuss this question and make plans to attend our upcoming meetings.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact