

ANTISEMITISM ON CAMPUS: PROTECTING FREE SPEECH, PREVENTING DISCRIMINATION

Summary

This report sets out the approach of the Intra-Communal Professorial Group (ICPG) to the question of free speech on university campuses, and, in particular, speech concerning Jewish people Jewish organisations, Israel, and Zionism.

Universities are continually having to strike a balance between their legal obligations to protect free speech and academic freedom and to prevent discrimination and harassment of those who share a relevant protected characteristic – including both Jewish identity and Israeli nationality. Over recent years, there has been a perception that, when it comes to certain contentious issues – most notably debates over gender and sex-based rights – universities have placed more importance on reducing alleged harms to certain groups than on the protection of academic freedom. This has led to high-profile legal challenges to alleged harassment, bullying, ‘no platforming’ or ‘mobbing’ of academics who held what were, in the context of the university, unpopular opinions.

Over the past decade, the issue of free speech in universities has grown in public prominence, with particular focus on the rise of cancel culture, no-platforming, and the heckling of speakers. In response, the previous Conservative government passed the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, which would have obliged universities to actively promote free speech. The new Labour government, however, recently announced they were pausing the implementation of the Act. Explicit reference was made to the concerns of Jewish students about the possible impact of the Act.

These concerns were connected to the fierce expressions of anti-Zionist and anti-Israel sentiment on university campuses since the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 and Israel’s subsequent war in Gaza. Some of this expression has tipped over into outright anti-Jewish discrimination and harassment. Jewish students and staff have reported feeling unable to fully participate in the life of the university for fear of being abused, harassed or attacked. This atmosphere has exacerbated what was already considered a hostile environment by many Jewish students and staff, driven by the radical anti-Israel politics that dominates many departments, disciplines, academic trade unions and the NUS. Within this worldview, Israel and Zionism are not merely sharply critiqued, in a manner to be expected of any state, government or

nationalist ideology. Rather they are transformed into the symbolic image of all that is wrong with the world.

The growing dominance of this worldview on university campuses has made harassment and discrimination against Jewish staff and students more prevalent. But it also poses a threat to academic freedom. Attempts by a minority of academics to impose radical anti-Zionist positions upon entire disciplines and departments can make the price of taking a counter-position very high. In certain departments, staff and students who do not accept the tenets of radical anti-Zionism can find themselves subject to social ostracisation, vexatious complaints, targeted harassment or political protests. This risk is exacerbated when the hegemonic position within a department is reinforced by the most vocal student political movements and by external speakers.

Tackling the problem of Israel-related antisemitism on campus requires action on various fronts. Universities need to be much more attuned to how the normalisation of radical anti-Zionism on campuses can affect Jewish staff and students. And they need to be much clearer in identifying where rhetoric on Israel shifts from legitimate criticism to antisemitism, and better at communicating this to staff and students.

This report sets out seven categories of statement regarding Israel and Zionism that are acknowledged as antisemitic by virtually all scholars of antisemitism. The regulation of these forms of speech on campus would have a significant impact on the experience of Jewish staff and students. The report suggests specific policies that universities can adopt to lessen the likelihood of anti-Jewish discrimination and harassment, while protecting free speech and academic freedom. These range from ways of dealing with encampments and protests to developing protocols for external speakers, hecklers, political posters and the use of social media by both academics and students.