

## **Another University Attacked by pro-Israel Lobby Groups**

Branch notes:

- Sheffield Hallam doctoral student, Shahd Abusalama, UCU member and Palestinian from Gaza, is accused by pro-Israel media of antisemitic tweets;
- one decade-old post from 2012, long retracted, dates from her experience as a young woman in a Gaza refugee camp under continual Israeli bombardment;
- under external and UCU branch pressure, SHU rescinded the decision to suspend her contracted classes but she remains under investigation;
- UCU national policy on malicious allegations and the IHRA definition.

These attacks threaten academic freedom and free discussion. Uniquely, they deny Palestinians the right to discuss, research and name the nature of their oppression.

Branch resolve to

- write urging confirmation that criticism of Zionism is not incompatible with SHU employment;
- issue a public statement of support for Shahd;
- urge UCU national President to ensure support for targeted members;
- raise the issue of malicious allegations, and use of the IHRA definition, with our own management.

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## **Model Letter to Sheffield Hallam University**

31st January 2022

Professor Sir Chris Husbands  
Vice-Chancellor Sheffield Hallam University

c.c. Richard Calvert, Deputy VC  
Professor Kevin Kerrigan, Pro-VC  
Professor David Shepherd, Pro-VC  
Professor Chris Wigginton, Pro-VC  
Ms. Deborah Harry, Chief Finance & Planning Officer  
Dr. Sally Jackson, Chief People Officer  
Dr. Geff Green, Head of Department  
Sir Bob Kerslake, Chair, Board of Governors  
Dr. Camila Bassi, Chair Sheffield Hallam UCU  
Dr. Karen Grainger, Vice-Chair Sheffield Hallam UCU

Dear Professor Husbands,

### **Re.: the Assault on Ms. Shahd Abusalama**

On behalf of the this branch of the UCU, I am writing to express the concern of colleagues at our University over the assault on the name and the good character of Ms. Abusalama by a variety of pro-Israel groups and publications.

We are pleased to hear that you have now lifted the suspension of the teaching for which Ms. Abusalama had been contracted but we still have two concerns: that the University and its investigating officers may be unaware that this character assassination is not an isolated case but part of a UK-wide, systematic attempt to use the IHRA definition to silence the voice of Palestinian colleagues in the UK Higher Education sector; and that the intention of this coordinated campaign is to deny Palestinians, both staff and students, and their supporters, the freedom to discuss their oppression on campuses, and to name its character.

Only one of the items of 'evidence' cited in the pro-Israel press is in any way problematic, and this consists of a tweet from a decade ago when Ms. Abusalama was barely 20 years old, and living under siege in one of Gaza's refugee camps. This tweet has since been comprehensively disavowed by Ms. Abusalama. Her [retraction](#) is linked here.

This attack on Ms. Abusalama is only the latest in a series of such interventions against academic staff at a range of UK universities by various pro-Israel organisations, including UK Lawyers for Israel, the Campaign Against Antisemitism, and the Jewish Chronicle. The extension of this campaign across the university sector followed the intervention in 2020 of the then Secretary of State for Education, who threatened financial penalties for universities that did not adopt the IHRA definition. The students and staff targeted for accusations of being motivated by antisemitism are those who criticize Israel in the defence of Palestinian rights. As has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars in the field, the 'illustrative examples' that have been attached to the IHRA definition undermine its utility for identifying antisemitism, and transform it into a weapon to silence debate about the Israel-Palestine conflict.

At a time when awareness and sensitivity is growing about the oppressions and cruelties of the past, in which Britain has often played a leading role, and about the racist attitudes that underpinned them, the campaign against Palestinians, and those support them, and against those scholars whose work questions the accuracy of the Israeli state's narrative and justifications, **suggests that, uniquely, it should only be Palestinians who are denied the right to discuss, research and name the nature of their condition.**

Ms. Abusalama has been a vocal critic of the character of the Israeli state, and of its oppressive policies towards Palestinians, both in Israel and in the Occupied Territories, and towards those in the Palestinian diaspora who are denied the lawful right to return to their homes. Her characterisation of the nature of the oppression of the Palestinians has the moral authority of Archbishop Desmond Tutu behind it. Undoubtedly, it is for this reason that she is being targeted with these accusations.

The objective of the accusations is to make an example of her and of other scholars who are critical of Israel so as to deter academic staff from criticism of Israel and/or of Zionism in their teaching or in their scholarship, as well as in their personal political activity. That the exercise has the potential to destroy the professional academic careers of the individuals who are so targeted is presumably thought to render it more effective in chilling open debate and discussion, and in closing down the freedom of critical academic research in this area.

We urge you to uphold the principle of academic freedom. Your University needs to recognise that there is nothing *eo ipso* antisemitic in the criticism of Israel or of Zionism, or in the historical judgment that names Israeli policy as one of apartheid. Thus it needs to affirm that there is no incompatibility between a contract to teach at Sheffield Hallam and exercising the right to criticise Israel policy, and to criticise Zionism as a political philosophy and as a political project.

Finally, we urge you to review your University's adoption of the IHRA definition which has underpinned all of the examples of such malicious accusations across the HE sector over the last period.

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