



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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Sent by Email

9 October 2020

Dear Vice Chancellor,

Adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism

I am writing to ask your institution to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. The number of universities which have adopted the IHRA definition remains shamefully low, and I have asked my officials to look at developing options to address this.

The government adopted the IHRA definition in 2016. We were the first government to do so, but many other countries, institutions and organisations have followed suit. The IHRA definition helps clarify how antisemitism can manifest itself in the 21st century, as follows (alongside examples):

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”¹

Since 2016, two Universities Ministers have written to you concerning antisemitism in higher education, setting out government's support for the IHRA definition. In October last year, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, also wrote to you, strongly urging you to formally adopt the IHRA definition and use it on all appropriate occasions. The question has been raised many times in both Houses of Parliament, demonstrating the strength of feeling and support for the IHRA definition.

¹ The full text of the definition can be found at:
https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/press_release_document_antisemitism.pdf

In recent years, I know that some universities have made real progress in tackling the scourge of antisemitism. I also welcome the work that Universities UK (UUK) is doing to address this issue, and look forward to seeing the upcoming guidance that UUK is publishing on 'Tackling Racial Harassment in Higher Education' on our campuses. However, there remain too many disturbing incidents of antisemitism on campus, from both students and staff, and a lack of willingness by too many universities to confront this.

The definition helps us better understand and recognise instances of antisemitism, and gives examples of the kind of behaviours, which, depending on the circumstances, could constitute antisemitism.

However, I am frankly disappointed that the majority of higher education providers have not yet adopted the IHRA definition. I am surprised that some universities have actively chosen not to use this straightforward way to demonstrate clearly that they do not tolerate antisemitism. These providers are letting down all their staff and students, and, shamefully, their Jewish students in particular.

While many universities have rightly been quick over the summer to demonstrate their readiness to take action against other forms of racism, it is frankly disturbing that so many are dragging their feet on the matter of antisemitism. The repugnant belief that antisemitism is somehow a less serious, or more acceptable, form of racism has taken insidious hold in some parts of British society, and I am quite clear that universities must play their part in rooting out this attitude and demonstrating that antisemitism is abhorrent.

I believe sincerely that adopting the IHRA definition is morally the right thing to do. Without it, Jewish students say they simply do not feel protected, should they be subject to an antisemitic attack, whether physically, verbally or online and, sadly, we are hearing of an upturn in online incidents since the start of the pandemic.

I do not want to see higher education providers continuing to ignore the issue of antisemitism. Adoption of the IHRA definition shows that providers are taking this matter seriously. If they do not demonstrate that they are taking their responsibilities in this regard seriously, I will consider going further to ensure that all providers are tackling antisemitism, with robust measures in place to address issues when they arise. I have asked my officials to explore how best to achieve this. I have asked my officials to consider options that include directing the OfS to impose a new regulatory condition of registration and suspending funding streams for universities at which antisemitic incidents occur and which have not signed up to the definition.

And so I urge you now to do the right thing, and adopt the IHRA definition if your institution has not already done so. If you have reservations, the Universities Minister or I would be happy to meet you to discuss them. You should have no doubt: this government has zero tolerance towards antisemitism. If I have not seen the overwhelming majority of institutions adopting the definition by Christmas then I will act.

The government and universities must work together to eradicate antisemitism from our world leading higher education sector. Adopting the IHRA definition is an excellent and essential step towards that goal.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education