Tackling antisemitism: practical guidance for UK universities

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Antisemitism – prejudice or hatred towards Jews - is wrong and should not be tolerated at universities or anywhere in society. We strongly urge our members to do all they can to tackle antisemitism.

This is particularly important given the historically high levels of antisemitism in the UK. A 2020 report by the Community Security Trust on antisemitism in higher education highlighted Jewish students’ experiences of harassment, threatening behaviour, and assault. The nature and pattern of antisemitic incidents has also been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.
About this briefing

This briefing seeks to raise awareness of antisemitism and suggest practical actions that universities can take to tackle the issue. It builds on the principles of our Changing the culture framework and outlines how the recommendations in our guidance on tackling racial harassment may be applied specifically to antisemitic racial harassment. We have developed this guidance following engagement with the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) and the Community Security Trust (CST), a charity that works to protect British Jews from antisemitism.

While this briefing focuses primarily on antisemitism experienced by students, we think many of the recommendations will also be relevant to Jewish staff working in the higher education sector. Ensuring the safety of both staff and students is crucial in creating inclusive communities.

Wider context

We recognise that many universities’ activities to address antisemitism will be part of a broader programme of work to address harassment. It is also in line with their obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty, which includes a requirement to foster good relations between groups of people who share different characteristics, including on the grounds of religion and belief.

Universities in England will also be mindful of the Office for Students (OfS) statement of expectations on preventing and addressing harassment. The OfS has called for universities to review their systems, policies and procedures against the statement by the beginning of the 2021–22 academic year.

Universities must balance their legal duties to both foster good relations and safeguard students and ensure freedom of intellectual enquiry and expression within the law. Freedom of expression is not a justification for harassment.

Since late 2020, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, has called on universities to do more to address antisemitism. Much discussion in the sector has focused on the expectation that universities adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism (see further information on page 7).

While having appropriate definitions is an important and useful part of an institution’s approach to antisemitism, addressing the issue also requires a broader set of actions. Universities need robust, effective policies and processes, carried out as part of a whole-institution approach.
Nature and scale of antisemitism

Antisemitic incidents in the UK are at historically high levels in recent years. This is the case even when accounting for a slight decrease in incidents in 2020, which may be due to Covid-19 lockdowns. 1,813 antisemitic incidents were recorded in the UK in 2019, and 1,668 in 2020. As with all forms of harassment and hate crime, it is important to bear in mind that these figures only represent incidents that have been reported: the true number of antisemitic incidents is likely to be much higher.

Since 2018, the CST has taken action to improve reporting of antisemitic incidents at UK universities.

In higher education:

There are approximately 8,500 Jewish students studying at UK universities. 123 incidents of antisemitism at UK universities were recorded in the academic years 2018–19 and 19–20. Of these incidents, 51 occurred online.

39 incidents took place on university campuses, and 33 took place off-campus, but were related to the individual’s life as a student (eg at a student club night).

Incidents tended to be concentrated at universities with the largest number of Jewish students, reflecting the national trend for antisemitic incidents to happen more in areas with larger Jewish populations. Antisemitism was perpetrated by a range of people, including university staff and student union officers.

The majority of antisemitic incidents were categorised as being ‘abusive behaviour’, such as antisemitic comments directed at students in class or in group chats. A small number of assaults, threats, and incidences of damage or desecration of property were also recorded.

Although the antisemitic incidents recorded took several, varied forms, the CST notes that antisemitism connected to broader political issues and debates (such as those concerning the Middle East, the Labour party, or conspiracy theories) can be especially challenging for Jewish students.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) 2019 inquiry into racial harassment at universities also found evidence of antisemitism at UK universities.

One of the most common forms of antisemitic harassment was identified as students experiencing harassment, including intimidation, around protest events on campus.
Steps to prevent and respond to antisemitism

UUK’s Changing the culture framework, and our recent guidance on tackling racial harassment, are intended to be widely applicable.

We expect the recommendations made in these publications to be relevant to tackling antisemitism. This includes the importance of centering the experiences of those who have experienced racial harassment.

Issue 1: There is limited understanding of antisemitism

- CST research has highlighted that staff and students at UK universities can often have a limited understanding of what constitutes antisemitism. In many cases, this is because there are incomplete and inappropriate definitions of antisemitism, meaning that incidents are not always recognised as antisemitic by the university. This lack of recognition can then result in a poor response.

- Dangerous misrepresentations of Judaism and Jewish people can be seen in numerous conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories incorrectly and maliciously attribute global events (eg Covid-19) to Jewish involvement or assert that Jewish groups have too much influence over politics, finance, or the media. Antisemitic conspiracy theories accounted for almost 20% of all antisemitic incidents reported in the UK in 2020. They are not new, but the internet and social media has made them accessible to more people, including university students and staff.

- Jewish students and staff may also experience microaggressions. Microaggressions are a form of harassment and should not be tolerated. However, an increased understanding of antisemitism may decrease microaggressive acts which can arise from a lack of understanding.
Suggested actions and best practice

• In consultation with staff and student communities, including groups representing Jewish students, consider adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism (see further information on page 7). This can help make sure there is an accepted standard to measure antisemitism and assess complaints. If your institution decides to adopt the definition, make sure this is widely shared with everyone in the university community.

• Build relationships with Jewish groups, such as university societies (including J-Socs) and seek to actively create a welcoming environment for Jewish students and staff on campus. This may include ensuring provision of kosher food, and arrangements to avoid exams taking place on Jewish holidays. Consider partnering with these groups to support their activities, such as events to mark Holocaust Memorial Day and campaigns to raise awareness of antisemitism.

• Consider adopting guidelines on how to respectfully discuss political issues, such as discussions about Israel and the Middle East, without engaging in antisemitism. Some example guidelines can be found on the learning elucidat website.

• While mainly focused on schools, the ‘Lessons from Auschwitz’ project run by the Holocaust Educational Trust also works with universities, providing an important way for students to learn about how they can tackle antisemitism and all forms of hate. Further information about upcoming trips and events can be found the Holocaust Educational Trust website.
The IHRA definition of antisemitism

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance adopted the following working definition of antisemitism, which has since been adopted by the UK government and many other public institutions:

“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.”

The definition is followed by 11 examples which demonstrate how antisemitism may manifest in practice. The Antisemitism Policy Trust states that the working definition should be considered as helpful guidelines when judging statements or actions in context, rather than a legal definition.

As such, the IHRA definition should not be seen as restricting free speech or academic freedom, and universities that choose to adopt the definition should make sure it is used and understood in combination with other duties and protections.
The Union of Jewish Students said:

‘Antisemitism is rising on campus and universities need to take serious steps to tackle this and protect their Jewish students. Critically, adopting the IHRA working definition of antisemitism is paramount to building trust between Jewish students and their institutions. The definition has proven to be a useful tool in supporting investigators and providing guidance, when dealing with complaints. Jewish students have the right to study without fear of antisemitic hatred and abuse and feel safe on their campus.’

The Community Security Trust said:

‘Antisemitism ought to have no place in any university, but sadly Jewish students regularly find that this is not the case. It is essential that universities have appropriate policies and processes to support Jewish students when they experience antisemitism, beginning with the ability to recognise and investigate complaints of antisemitism when they occur. The IHRA working definition of antisemitism helps to guide investigators and its adoption and use will inspire confidence in Jewish students that their concerns are taken seriously. It has been widely used over several years for this purpose and has proven itself to be a helpful, practical tool in tackling antisemitism.’

Adopting the definition

Universities UK has asked members to consider adopting the IHRA definition as part of their approaches to tackling antisemitism. This briefing gives examples about how it can be a useful tool to help universities tackle antisemitism on campuses.

The Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, wrote to all English universities in October 2020 requesting that they adopt the IHRA definition. He stated that he was exploring taking action against institutions that did not. This was followed up in February 2021 with a request to the OfS to undertake a scooping exercise to identify providers reluctant to adopt the definition and consider mandatory reporting of antisemitic incidents.
Issue 2: The under-reporting of antisemitic incidents and issues with complaints processes

- The CST note that some universities have failed to address complaints of antisemitism in a fair, objective, and timely manner. This can result in students and staff not reporting antisemitic incidents to their university. Evidence from the EHRC also shows that there is significant under-reporting of all forms of racial harassment throughout the higher education sector.

- The level of trust in how an institution responds to complaints is a key factor in whether incidents are reported. The poor handling of one incident can have a knock-on effect: other students can be deterred from coming forward in case they have a similar experience. Improving how institutions respond to antisemitism is therefore crucial to improving reporting levels.

Suggested actions and best practice

- Universities should review their procedures for handling racial harassment complaints to ensure they are fit for purpose and reflect best practice. This should include for complaints of antisemitism. Further support and guidance, including links to complaints handling frameworks in the four UK nations, is available in UUK’s guidance on tackling racial harassment. Reviews of policies and procedures should involve students and staff, including actively consulting groups representing Jewish students and staff.

- It is crucial that universities have a single clear, appropriate, definition of what constitutes antisemitism and antisemitic behaviour, which is consistently used in complaints and disciplinary procedures. This will instill confidence in the reporting party that the university understands the issue and provides a consistent reference point for investigations.

- Complaints should be handled in a timely manner. When timescales are out of the university’s control, such as when waiting for the outcome of a police investigation, it is important to keep the reporting party up-to-date with progress to help manage their expectations.
• Complaints processes should be impartial and make sure that there is no conflict of interest for those involved in the process. Jewish students have raised concerns about the lack of impartiality, and the possible impact complaining might have on their studies, especially when there is a power imbalance between the reporting and responding parties (e.g., a student and a lecturer). CST found that incidents of antisemitic behaviour by academic staff represented over 10% of the total recorded in the academic years 2018–20.15

• Universities should be sensitive in their expectations of the reporting party where there is a power imbalance. For example, on occasion, Jewish students have been challenged for bringing a complaint when they did not ‘call out’ a lecturer’s antisemitic comments at the time. However, publicly challenging a lecturer, especially when they may fear reprisals, is likely to be a difficult experience for a Jewish student.

• Universities should be clear about their expectations around supporting evidence for complaints, and who is responsible for gathering this. Complaints should not be automatically rejected due to a lack of supporting evidence where this would be difficult to collect (e.g., comments in a private conversation). Students who make a complaint in good faith should not face any consequences if their complaint is not upheld.

• Universities should work closely with others who may receive complaints about antisemitism at the university. For instance, many students feel more comfortable taking a complaint to their students’ union before the university. Make sure there are clear processes in place for how the university and SU will manage complaints.

• Some students may also feel more comfortable to have a report made on their behalf by a third party – such as the UIS or CST. This can provide a ‘halfway house’ between named and anonymous reporting. We encourage universities to consider adopting third party reporting. We also encourage universities who do not currently offer an option for anonymous reporting to consider this where possible.

• Students may prefer to report incidents after they have graduated, for fear of reprisals during their studies. Universities should consider whether it is appropriate to accept and investigate historical complaints.
Issue 3: Online harassment

- A significant amount of antisemitic incidents at universities were recorded as taking place online, including on social media platforms or in group chats on platforms such as WhatsApp.16

- Online harassment was a significant issue even before Covid-19, and presents a number of challenges, such as the difficulty in tracing ‘anonymous’ commenters. However, given the pandemic has increased students’ dependence on online spaces for socialising and learning, addressing the issue is more important than ever.

Suggested actions and best practice

- As outlined in UUK’s guidance on tackling online harassment, and tackling racial harassment, it is important that expectations for online behaviour – and the sanctions for not following them – are clearly defined and communicated.17 Crucially, incidents that happen online should be treated with the same severity as incidents that happen offline.

- Ensure that relevant policies and procedures – such as those relevant to bullying and harassment, safeguarding, IT usage, and lecture capture – are joined-up and consistent throughout the university.18

- Campus antisemitism can often be connected to political disagreement, which can include online debates on political issues (such as those relating to Israel or the Middle East). Set an expectation that individuals responsible for such debates (eg on Twitter or Facebook) post explicit expectations on respectful speech, and also clearly highlight how users can report antisemitic comments and any other forms of harassment or hate speech.

- When considering online harassment, universities should be mindful that ‘online’ can be considered a distinct form of harassment, rather than simply a medium. Online harassment can be delivered incessantly, regardless of location, across multiple platforms, and cause ‘pile-ons’ in a way that physical harassment cannot.19 Universities should be aware of this, and the possible impact on victims of online harassment as a result, when responding to incidents of online harassment.
Case studies
In February 2019, concerns were raised about antisemitism at the University of Essex. This followed a vote against the creation of a new Jewish Society by some members of the students’ union, as well as social media posts by a member of academic staff.

The university responded swiftly, immediately suspending the member of staff, and taking action with the students’ union to ensure the Jewish Society was established. The vice-chancellor also put out a statement, highlighting that antisemitism was antithetical to the university’s values, and stating the actions it was taking in response. This statement was praised for its honesty, robustness, and willingness to learn. An event, attended by around 500 staff and students, was held on campus the following week to signal solidarity and support for the university’s Jewish community.

The university immediately undertook a review of the experiences of Jewish staff and students at Essex, led by the deputy vice-chancellor, to ensure its response lived up to its high expectations on promoting equality and diversity. This review included an external panel of three prominent Jewish figures in the UK. Appointing independent experts from outside the university to examine the issues was an important part of the university’s efforts to regain trust. The review made a series of recommendations which were endorsed by the university’s senate and council. All the recommendations have been implemented.

A senior academic and member of the university’s executive board is designated as Inclusion Champion for Jewish Students and Staff. The person chosen for this role is not Jewish and receives reverse mentoring from a member of academic or professional services staff who is Jewish. The Inclusion Champion role provides a visible point of contact for Jews on campus and the role-holder can use their position of influence to act quickly if issues arise, often nipping them in the bud.

The university continues to support Jewish students and staff in a variety of ways. An annual week-long programme of events to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day is organised with input from staff and student societies and includes a shabbat service that builds bridges with members of the local Jewish community who come onto campus (or, for 2021, via Zoom). In 2019, a play was staged on campus, dealing with issues of antisemitism. The university provides facilities for Jewish students to hold shabbat services throughout term time. Support was also provided for a student-organised event that brought the Israeli ambassador to speak in 2020.

CST and UJS have acknowledged the University of Essex as a positive example of both how universities can respond to antisemitic incidents that happen at university, as well as creating a welcoming environment for their Jewish community.
Middlesex University places a strong emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion, and tackling discrimination and hate. It is proud to have one of the most diverse student populations in the country, and is located in the London Borough of Barnet, placing it at the heart of the largest Jewish community in Europe. Within this context, the university looks to ensure it robustly prevents and responds to antisemitism to create a safe, welcoming environment for all.

In collaboration with its students’ union, Middlesex University announced it had adopted the IHRA working definition of antisemitism as part of a wider initiative to develop an overarching ‘statement on faith’. The statement on faith is being co-created with students to allow different groups to define their own lived experience and articulate harassment in their own terms. It will be underpinned by several statements on different forms of race- and faith-based harassment, including the IHRA definition, as well as definitions of Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination.

The university sees the adoption of the IHRA definition as a significant and important step in creating meaningful interfaith dialogue within both the university and local communities. To do this, they recognise that it is first important that everyone feels safe to be who they are, and able to articulate and express their views and identity.

The role of the IHRA definition as the most accepted definition of antisemitism within Jewish communities was key for the university. While acknowledging the concerns and sensitivities around its application, they see the IHRA definition as a practical tool that shows their commitment and intent to tackle antisemitism, rather than a rigid definition.

University leaders see the adoption of the IHRA definition as just the start of Middlesex’ work to tackle antisemitism, and crucially, part of its ongoing wider work tackling all forms of racism and discrimination. Working closely with students to co-create initiatives is a key part of the university’s approach to equality, diversity and inclusion, and leaders continue to actively engage with the university J-Soc, Students’ Union, UJS, and local faith groups. The university is now reviewing its relevant policies and procedures to ensure these align with the IHRA definition and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims definition of Islamophobia, while also ensuring that academic freedom and freedom of speech are protected and nurtured.

The university is a proud champion of free speech and academic freedom, but is also clear that these should never be used as justifications for racism or hatred.

Middlesex has introduced an incident reporting system for all students to foster a positive, non-adversarial approach to reporting of all incidents, minor or large. This will enable the university to understand issues and patterns of incidents occurring ‘on the ground’, build trust, and create an open dialogue with their students. A similar mechanism is being scoped for staff.

To acknowledge its role and responsibility to the community, the university has become a hate crime reporting centre, meaning that any member of the local community can report a hate incident to the university and receive support.

University leaders are committed to continuing this work, and have recently created the role of pro vice-chancellor for equality, diversity and inclusion, demonstrating the university’s commitment to ensuring that equality, diversity and inclusion – including tackling antisemitism - are at the heart of all they do.
The University of Birmingham has a proud history as a destination of choice for Jewish students, and in the last academic year hosted 1,500 Jewish students on campus. The university greatly values its community of Jewish students, and it is important that they are well supported. As part of the University of Birmingham’s successful entry for the Race Equality Charter Bronze award, a campus-wide survey was conducted with over 2,500 students. The survey indicated that Jewish students were very positive about recommending the University of Birmingham to prospective students (6.26 out of 7).

In November 2020, the university formally adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism – this is in parallel with its existing expectations that all members of the University community should be treated with dignity and respect and that there is no place on its campus nor within its community for any form of discrimination. While formal reports of antisemitism in the university community are rare, the university is continuously reviewing its awareness raising, education and support for any reports of discriminatory behaviour.

Issues of antisemitism are embedded throughout the university’s work on equality, diversity and inclusion. It has launched a new educational module for all students that focuses on equality, diversity and inclusion which will be expanded to reach more students in the next academic year. The university also plans to increase its existing peer-led active bystander training. It is one of the very few UK universities with a dedicated student equality, diversity, and inclusion team who respond to reports of antisemitism and any equality issues for students.

The university’s work in this area is overseen by a hate crimes and hate incidents working group, chaired by Professor Jo Duberley, the Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor for equality, diversity and inclusion. This is focused on raising awareness of hate incidents and harassment and reviewing our reporting tools and support routes.

There is a close relationship between the university and the Guild of Students, which includes the official Jewish Society (Birmingham JSoc). JSoc is affiliated with the university’s chaplaincy where Jewish chaplains are available to offer advice, counselling and Jewish education to students and staff. The university is also served by a Hillel House in Edgbaston, which provides accommodation and hospitality to Jewish students. Students are also able to select to live in kosher university accommodation, which allows Jewish students to experience ‘halls’ life while feeling comfortable at the same time. Both the Guild of Students and the multi-faith chaplaincy team are stakeholders in the university’s good campus relations group. This group has a remit for monitoring tensions on campus and in the community, and directing supportive actions to enhance freedom of speech, respectful dialogue between student groups and overall positive actions in support of good campus relations.
Buckinghamshire New University always felt it had a strong record in combating antisemitism with few staff or students explicitly raising concerns, and very few cases being reported through student services or human resources. Nonetheless, when the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP, wrote to all university vice-chancellors on 9 October 2020 asking them to ensure their universities adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism, it felt it should debate the issues. The university first engaged its council, raising with them the approach it intended to take. This included separate ‘open house’ events for both students and staff led by the vice-chancellor.

The meetings with students and staff raised a range of perspectives. Some felt they were not sufficiently informed, while others felt strongly – both in favour of and against the adoption of the IHRA definition. Interestingly, the discussions surfaced discontent among some Jewish staff members who felt the university had not always been as clear in rejecting antisemitism as it had about other forms of racism. Some were disappointed that discussions were needed, feeling that the university executive could and should have simply decided to adopt the definition. Equally, some members of staff felt strongly that the university should not adopt the definition, citing concerns over free speech.

The university reached a broad consensus in favour of the IHRA definition, amended by two additional clauses suggested by the UK government Home Affairs Select Committee in 2016. These clauses were intended at the time to put in place additional safeguards around free speech. Additionally, it was widely felt that adopting the amended definition should be seen as part of a wider initiative to ensure the university adopts definitions related to other protected characteristics, eg Islamophobia, Romaphobia, homophobia.

The range of opinion on this issue was then put before a joint meeting of senate and council. A healthy debate led to the unanimous agreement to adopt the amended IHRA definition, seen in the context of wider work on equality, diversity and inclusion.
Resources

- Antisemitism awareness training for students’ union staff, delivered by UJS
- Community Security Trust advise universities on antisemitism
- Holocaust Educational Trust, offers ‘Lessons from Auschwitz’ project, including university-specific events coming soon
- ‘Religion and belief: supporting inclusion of staff and students in higher education and colleges’ Advance HE (2018)
- ‘A guide to the IHRA definition of antisemitism’ Antisemitism Policy Trust (2020)
- ‘Myths and misconceptions about Jews’ Antisemitism Policy Trust (2020)
- ‘Antisemitism: what you need to know’ Antisemitism Policy Trust/Community Security Trust
- ‘Campus antisemitism in Britain, 2018-2020’ Community Security Trust (2020)
- ‘Tackling religion or belief-related harassment and hate incidents: a guide for higher education providers’ Coventry University (2020)
- ‘Catalyst for change: protecting students from hate crime, sexual violence and online harassment in higher education’ Office for Students (2019)
- ‘Statement of expectations for preventing and addressing harassment and sexual misconduct affecting students in higher education’ Office for Students (2021)
- ‘Talking about antisemitism’ TUC Education
- ‘Changing the culture’ Universities UK (2016)
- ‘Tackling online harassment and promoting online welfare’ Universities UK (2019)
- ‘Tackling racial harassment in higher education’ Universities UK (2020)
Endnotes

1 Community Security Trust (2020) ‘Campus antisemitism in Britain 2018-20’

2 Jews are recognised as an ethnic group by UK law, meaning that antisemitism is considered a form of racial harassment. Some antisemitic incidents may be motivated by prejudice towards the Jewish faith, although not all Jewish people actively adhere to the religious tenets of Judaism, with many non-religious people considering themselves to be culturally and/or ethnically Jewish.

3 UUK is aware of some members’ concerns relating to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill and how this may interact with preventing antisemitism. We are working with the government to ensure the Bill is proportionate, workable, and does not have unintended consequences. It is crucial that the new legislation is accompanied by guidance to assist members with interpreting the different duties placed upon them.


5 Community Security Trust (2020) ‘Campus antisemitism in Britain 2018-20’

6 Ibid


9 Recommendation five: define terminology and create a common understanding of racial harassment. (Universities UK (2020), ‘Tackling racial harassment in higher education’)  

10 We are aware of other definitions of antisemitism, including the Jerusalem Declaration. This was developed by a group of international academics working on antisemitism. A number of Jewish groups in the UK, including UJS and CST, do not consider this to be an alternative to the IHRA definition.

11 Antisemitism Policy Trust (2020) ‘A guide to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism’

12 Community Security Trust (2020) ‘Campus antisemitism in Britain 2018-20’


14 Recommendation 10: ensure that procedures for managing racial harassment complaints are fit for purpose. (Universities UK (2020), ‘Tackling racial harassment in higher education’)

15 Community Security Trust (2020), ‘Campus antisemitism in Britain 2018-20’

16 Ibid

17 Recommendation seven: address racial harassment online. (Universities UK (2020), ‘Tackling racial harassment in higher education’)

18 The University of Suffolk has developed a higher education online safeguarding self-review tool to review the effectiveness of existing policies.

19 Phippen A, Bond E (2021) ‘Times Higher Education’ ‘If the OfS doesn’t appear to take online abuse seriously, who will?’
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