

The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology
Via e-mail

30 October 2023

Dear Ms Donelan

I am extremely concerned by your letter to the UKRI Chief Executive, Dame Ottoline Leyser, dated 28th October 2023, which singles out the academics Professor Kate Sang and Dr Kamna Patel for criticism over their social media activity in relation to recent events in Israel and Palestine, and the response of the UK government to those events.

First, it is a serious misrepresentation to suggest that the individuals above have expressed 'sympathy or support' for Hamas, whose actions UCU has strongly condemned. The posts you reference instead appear to outline legitimate concerns about the UK government's authoritarian response to expressions of support for Palestinian rights, and concerns about the Israeli government's actions in blockading Gaza and precipitating a humanitarian crisis which has been widely condemned by the international community, including the United Nations. To artificially conflate expression of these views with support for a proscribed organisation is deeply damaging, and a significant threat to lawful freedom of speech.

Second, this intervention into the running of UKRI and Research England represents a worrying level of political interference in the running of a non-governmental organisation. Ensuring the independence of research funding and administration from government pressure is paramount to the effective protection of academic freedom. Your wider demand that the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion work being pursued by UKRI should be effectively abandoned is not only a disproportionate response to the concerns you raise about specific social media posts, but it is a dramatic overreach into operational matters which will lead many in the sector to question the independence of the funding body. It is also symptomatic of this government's continued disregard for the need to tackle systemic discrimination across all aspects of public life.

Furthermore, the suggestion that all academics involved in advising UKRI or any other public body on any issue must refrain from the expression of any form of political view is not only unworkable on a practical level, but also risks creating a chilling effect on freedom of speech and academic freedom on a wide range of matters. It is simply not possible to reconcile the government's purported commitment to freedom of speech within the law with interventions of this kind.

Finally, it is hugely irresponsible to use your platform to publicly single out two individual academics in this way, without any consideration of due process and no

apparent thought to their wellbeing or safety. Your position as Secretary of State gives you a significant reach on social media; as you acknowledge in your letter, these are febrile times, and I would encourage you to use your platform in a more responsible way that seeks to de-escalate tensions rather than stoking further division.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Grady'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and the name 'Grady' written in a flowing script.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary