

Charles Woods  
The Pinsker Centre

10 November 2023

Dear Charles and signatories

Thank you for writing to me. These are extraordinarily difficult times and many in our community are deeply impacted by events. We are certainly not immune to what is happening in wider society, but I strongly reject the description of a 'torrent of antisemitism' at UCL. There have been instances of unacceptable behaviour, but this is not reflective of the vast majority of our campus. On the contrary, there has been widespread concern about the effects of the current situation in Israel and Gaza on our students and staff, and enormous efforts across the institution to support everyone directly and indirectly affected.

Since the attacks on 7 October, my office and I have been in close contact with UCL's JSoc and Friends of Israel Society, as well as with the UJS and other community organisations. I had a long meeting with JSoc and UJS last week and a conversation with Friends of Israel this week, both of which were hugely helpful in understanding their experiences on campus during this time and how we can support them. We have had very positive feedback from JSoc and UJS about the proactive approach we are taking to support Jewish students through this very distressing time, which they say they have found reassuring and comforting.

I have issued several messages to all staff and students, with a particular focus on taking a strong stance on antisemitism on our campus and making sure that our community understands the implications of Hamas' status as a proscribed organisation. You can see the first message sent on 12 October here <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/oct/message-provost-israel-gaza-and-our-community> and the subsequent one sent on 25 October here <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/oct/provosts-update-ongoing-support-our-community>. We have a daily stand up meeting in order to monitor the situation on campus and respond swiftly to issues and concerns.

Thanks to our good communications channels with JSoc, we have been able to hear concerns and incidents affecting Jewish students quickly and directly. I hope it is a signal of their trust in our support that UJS chose UCL to host a vigil for Israel on 19 October, open to students across all London universities, which I am glad that we were able to safely support at the heart of our campus. We are providing extra security for all JSoc events on campus in order to reassure and support them, though it is, of course, deeply wrong that they do not feel comfortable holding events without that precaution.

On the specific concerns raised in your letter:

We reacted immediately to condemn the language contained in the UCL UCU motion, and you can see our response here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/oct/ucl-statement-response-motions-passed-local-branch-university-and-college-union>

I wrote twice to the branch Executive Committee urging them to withdraw the motion and remove it from their webpages, which they declined to do. I then followed up to give them notice that, if they failed to remove the motion by 6pm on 9 November, UCL would do so, and the motion has now been removed. You will be aware that UCU is an entirely separate and independent organisation from UCL, and there is therefore no suggestion that any positions taken by UCU reflect UCL's views.

Students' Union UCL took swift action in the week following 7 October to make sure student societies were aware of the consequences of crossing the line into unlawful speech, and it is significant that the incidents you raise did not occur later than 10 October. In the main, pro-Palestinian student societies have worked constructively with the SU and UCL to ensure that their activities do not cross the line into speech that would be unacceptable. Where that is not the case, action has been taken; for example, the Marxist Society was suspended for refusing to take down posters on campus regarded as inflammatory. The SU also put out a statement of support for all those affected by the conflict in Israel and Gaza and condemning antisemitism: <https://studentsunionucl.org/articles/supporting-our-community-during-ongoing-conflict-in-israel-and-palestine>

While there will be opinions expressed that many people would find offensive and wrong, universities have a legal duty to uphold all freedom of speech within the law for students, staff and visiting speakers, and therefore has no grounds to prevent any views being expressed that do not cross the threshold into illegality. We take legal advice on a regular basis to ensure that we are clear that all speech on campus is legal and that all events can be managed appropriately and securely.

We uphold and promote the right to freedom of speech within the law for all members of our community, and will always respect the right of students and staff to express unpopular or controversial opinions, which is a core part of what a university should be. That does not mean that we in any way tolerate harassment, bullying or discrimination. We investigate all complaints thoroughly and will take disciplinary action in accordance with our policies and procedures. We always urge anyone who has experienced or witnessed incidents to report them.

We have been aware for some time that antisemitism is something that is poorly understood and poorly recognised in parts of our community and, in order to address that issue thoroughly, set up an Antisemitism Education Action Plan working group to come up with a clear, practical programme of education and awareness. That group included members representing the Community Security Trust and the Board of Deputies, for whose expertise and time we are hugely grateful. One of the recommendations of this group was the creation of an expert role in our EDI team focused on antisemitism awareness, and the Antisemitism Programme Manager is now in place and playing an incredibly valuable role at this time.

We have been proactive about supporting Jewish students and acting on their concerns, and we will continue to ensure that UCL is a secure place for Jewish students and staff. I would be extremely happy to discuss this with you further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Spence'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent loop at the end.