

Glasgow University must stop undermining scholarship by deferring to false claims of antisemitism

We wish to publicly express our rejection of the decision by Glasgow University in May 2021 to apologise for an article on pro-Israel advocacy originally published in its eSharp journal in 2017. This followed complaints, amplified in a news report, that its content was antisemitic. The paper was accepted for publication following the standard process of double-blind peer-review. The article is an academic account of public relations, lobbying, advocacy and information management, which is a well-established area of academic study. However the editorial board of the journal and Glasgow University have since endorsed the view that because the subject is advocacy for Israel, then the article promotes 'an unfounded antisemitic theory'.

This untenable position implies that other groups, states and corporations can all be the subject of critical academic analysis, but commentary on pro-Israel advocacy must be limited. Others may be described as organising, planning or seeking influence, and even disseminating propaganda or misleading accounts. But it is falsely asserted that description of such behaviour by Israel or its advocates cannot be neutral observation or analysis; a racist meaning and intent is imputed and assumed without evidence.

Academic research must be guided by the validity and reliability of evidence. The evaluation of academic work has to be based on established protocols including crucially peer review. In this case, the original peer review process has been overturned by the university and editorial board. Their apology includes a peremptory comment on 'bias' in sources and use of data without any detail at all on what they believe is wrong in the article. The author was not contacted, and only heard of the complaints when approached by a newspaper.

The university has even issued a statement on the affair saying it is against 'hate speech', an extraordinary description of a properly reviewed academic article without any racist intent. The statement goes on to claim that its action is consistent with the university's recent adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism. That definition has been widely criticised, and this action by the University of Glasgow demonstrates how damaging it can be to academic freedom.

We stand absolutely against antisemitism and all forms of discrimination; but the making of false claims is entirely counterproductive since it spreads confusion and weakens the struggle against actual racism.

We call on the university to withdraw both its apology and its statement linking the article to hate speech, and to assert its commitment to free speech and the right to critical commentary in scholarship.

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