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The Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP

Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education

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Steve Winston
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3 April 2023

Dear Mr Winston,

Thank you for your letter of 9 February, setting out your concerns about the events at University College London (UCL) on 7 February.

Antisemitism is unacceptable anywhere in our society, including in our universities, which should be welcoming and inclusive environments for all. I expect higher education (HE) providers to be at the forefront of tackling antisemitism on campus. We have encouraged institutions to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, to have universal clarity about what is and what is not antisemitic.

HE providers must take reasonably practicable steps to ensure that speakers do so within the law, as well as those who wish to protest in disagreement with those views, in accordance with the Education (No. 2) Act 1986). The right to peaceful protest is a fundamental tool of civic expression and will not be curtailed by this government. It is in itself an aspect of freedom of speech and so is protected by legislation. If there is a protest against a particular person or group because they have said something controversial but lawful, providers should decide on the measures they need to take to ensure that students can speak freely.

As universities are independent and autonomous institutions, the 7 February protest is a matter for UCL to investigate, I expect any evidence of inciting racial hatred to be shared with relevant law enforcement agencies. You are correct that individuals have the freedom to speak on topics of their choice, as well as to engage in peaceful protests against such speech, and both of these aspects of freedom of speech need to be protected. Nevertheless, either myself or department officials will contact UCL to discuss your concerns.

I hope this has helped to clarify the government's position and thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

The Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education