

BIAJS

British and Irish
Association for Jewish Studies

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Minutes

BIAJS Annual General Meeting 11 July 2022
King's College London

Present

24 present, but this also includes a number of non-voting individuals / non-member attendees

Apologies

David Tollerton (Secretary) unable to attend for personal reasons.

Minutes of previous meeting

Available on the BIAJS website (<https://biajs.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/AGM-2021-minutes.pdf>).

Matters arising

No matters arising

Committee and Officers

Karen Skinazi nominated as president elect for 2023/24. All vote in favour except one abstention.

Sonia Golanz, nominated as events officer. All vote in favour except one abstention.

Alex Samely, nominated as committee member. All vote in favour except one abstention.

Lindsey Askin renewed as treasurer. All vote in favour except one abstention.

David Tollerton renewed as secretary. All vote in favour except one abstention.

Zuleika Rodgers renewed web officer. All vote in favour except one abstention.

Yulia Egorova renewed as bulletin editor. All vote in favour except one abstention.

Ben Gidley renewed as social media officers. All vote in favour except one abstention.

President's report

Andrea Schatz (AS), referring to the KCL conference, particularly highlights the work of the panel on Ukraine and the session for early career scholars. Regarding pandemic conditions, AS notes that the conference has been wholly in-person for practical planning reasons, but that the association needs to think about issues of digital inclusivity. She notes evidence that the pandemic has been especially hard for early career scholars lacking networking opportunities. AS thanks Helen Spurling for her work through the year on EDI policy and James Renton for leading the Antisemitism Working Group (particularly noting the online event with Rabbi Charles Middleburgh in March 2022). She raises concerns about the situation of rabbinic, medieval, and early modern Jewish studies in the UK and Ireland, with some posts appearing to have disappeared. AS thanks all on the committee for their work during 2021-22.

Treasurer's report and membership motions vote

Lindsey Askin provides a summary of the two accounts, noting that the association's finances are broadly stable. New members are named and welcomed.

The following motions are explained and voted on. All achieve the 2/3 majority required for amendments to the constitution.

- For BIAJS to adopt a more updated online payment and signup method for members.
- For BIAJS to propose income-based membership dues rate which includes optional one-off/regular donations.
- For BIAJS to offer Institutional membership.
- For BIAJS to elect a membership secretary.

Sacha Stern suggests that GDPR compliance should be part of the new membership officer's duties.

Secretary's report

Yulia Egorova (YE) reads the first part of David Tollerton's (DT) report: "I am sad that due to personal circumstances I am not able to be there in person. Given the amount of business to cover in this meeting I'll be brief. I am pleased with the activity of BIAJS over the last year, and particularly thank Andrea Schatz for setting up this first in-person conference in several years. I am also grateful to the judges on the book and essay prize competitions for volunteering their time to support these valuable initiatives. I was especially pleased with the event discussing antisemitism held in March, and am grateful for participation from colleagues on the BIAJS committee, the Union of Jewish Studies, and Rabbi Dr Charles Middleburgh from the Dublin Jewish Progressive Congregation & Leo Baeck. This summer marks the end of Susy Rees' time as BIAJS studentship holder and I want to record my thanks to her for all her work for the association in recent years. We should also note that this July also marks the end of Helen Spurling's time on the committee after a decade as secretary and then president, and we should warmly acknowledge all her work in these roles. Most recently, she has led the drafting of a new BIAJS Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity policy, and this was circulated to members on Friday (see appendix 1). Following any queries on the draft, we should vote on whether it is to be adopted."

In the following debate, three concerns are raised regarding the EDI draft:

- The proposal to "[t]ake seriously the concerns of the British and Irish Jewish communities," may hamper academic freedom and such communities are poorly defined.
- The policy should use language of 'sex' rather than 'gender', reflecting the Equality Act.
- The purpose of the policy is unclear given that the Equality Act is law.

Member agree for this EDI policy to be revisited in a future AGM.

YE reads the rest of DT's report: "The only other final piece of business from the Secretary is to vote on a motion (circulated to members on Friday) to explicitly recognise the possibility of holding AGMs online or as online/in-person hybrid events. The COVID-19 pandemic has normalised the use of online meetings and highlighted the complications of in-person attendance (issues already growing in prominence in relation to disability, caring responsibilities, and related matters). The BIAJS constitution currently makes no mention of holding online or as online/in-person events. This motion proposes making minor amendments to the constitution to more explicitly recognise the possibility of such arrangements." The motion on holding hybrid AGMs is supported by a 2/3 majority.

Web officer's report

No major issues are raised.

Bulletin editor's report

YE thanks Hannah Ewence for her work as bulletin editor and notes that, over the coming year, there will need to be further reflection on the best format of the bulletin.

Social media officer's report

Ben Gidley notes that the association's Twitter following is now over 2,000, and effort has been made to use it to publicise and support Jewish studies in the UK and Ireland.

Postgraduate / Early Careers report

In Katharina Keim's absence Susy Rees outlines the PG/ECR events taking place at the conference.

Incoming President's report

James Renton (JR) introduces himself and notes that he is honoured to be following AS as president. The 2023 conference will take place at Edge Hill on 10-12 July, focusing on race. He notes that EAJS have already provided a bursary to support PG/ECR researchers.

Motions submitted by Professor Adam Sutcliffe

The two motions were circulated to members in advance of the AGM (see appendix 2). Adam Sutcliffe introduces the motions, arguing that they are a necessary response to pressure on universities to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism. He suggests that BIAJS response has thus far been inadequate. Sutcliffe states that the first motion is moderate and cannot see why anyone would oppose it. A key aspect of the first motion is the appeal for consultations with experts in the study of antisemitism and related fields. He notes that the second motion goes further, suggesting that unwarranted use of IHRA has been made in university settings this past year and it should be revoked. Solidarity with colleagues is key.

Sacha Stern asks for clarity on how the motions will be used and whether they will replace the current statement on antisemitism.

Naftali Loewenthal notes the consensus that we want academic freedom, but add that we also want universities to be safe spaces. Jewish students feel that the IHRA definition helps to make campuses safer spaces in a way that the Jerusalem Declaration does not. He suggests that it is unfortunate that BIAJS is being brought into the political arena. Loewenthal opposes the motions and urges others to do likewise.

JR suggests that some members may not see the content of motion 1 as a given and we have to respect the variety of viewpoints. Together, these motions are likely to alienate some members of the association. Personal campaigns against the IHRA definition should not be imposed on others within the association. JR also queries some of the content/sources of the footnotes included with the motions.

Eva Frojmovic (EF) suggests that motion 1 is a grievance about academic experts not being consulted on antisemitism policy. Issues surrounding antisemitism are invariably political. EF notes that Jewish students and other staff are flagging difficulties on campuses regarding antisemitism and they feel that the IHRA definition provides support.

Adam Sutcliffe is invited to respond before the final vote. He notes academics are equally responsible for offering protection to Muslim students against Islamophobia; it is ethically important to support the motion and to resist government politicisation of the antisemitism definition. He encourages members to vote according to what is right.

Votes for motion 1:

In favour: 6 (in person) + 4 (proxy)

Against: 14 (in person) + 9 (proxy)

Abstain: 3

Votes for motion 2:

In favour: 2 (in person) + 4 (proxy)

Against: 18 (in person) + 9 (proxy)

Abstain: 2 (in person)

AOB

None

Date of the next AGM

July 2023

Minutes by Mia Spiro and David Tollerton

Appendix 1 – Text of the proposed EDI policy

The British Association for Jewish Studies (BIAJS) is committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion within our community, and challenging discrimination.

The aim is for BIAJS to represent all sections of our community, and for all our members to feel respected and be provided with equality of opportunity.

BIAJS will not unlawfully discriminate because of the Equality Act 2010 protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (including colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origin), religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

BIAJS commits to:

- Encourage equality, diversity and inclusion in BIAJS activities.
- Create a community of Jewish Studies scholars, professionals and students where individuals feel welcome, included, supported and valued. We ask all our members to value the diversity of the BIAJS community, including members of all backgrounds.
- Take seriously the concerns of the British and Irish Jewish communities, while balancing our commitment to support the academic freedom of our members.
- Create an environment free of bullying, harassment, victimisation, antisemitism and other types of discrimination, promoting dignity and respect for all, where individual differences and the contributions of all members are recognised and valued.
- Take seriously allegations of bullying, harassment, victimisation, antisemitism and other types of discrimination in the course of the association's activities or connected to its interests. Anyone found to have behaved unacceptably will be the subject of disciplinary action. Fair criticism of staff or student performance or conduct will not be considered to be bullying or harassment, provided that those involved are treated with dignity, courtesy and respect.
- Make opportunities for participation in BIAJS events and activities available to all members through regular announcements in the BIAJS newsletter and on the BIAJS website.
- Nominate candidates for the Executive Committee in accordance with the BIAJS Constitution.
- Ensure that the Executive Committee members:
 - represent a good gender balance
 - represent the full chronological range of Jewish Studies expertise and a variety of disciplinary perspectives
 - include the range of universities in the UK and Ireland, with the principle that each institution be represented no more than once on the Committee at any given time
- Support members in the early stages of their career and be inclusive of precariously employed and/or independent scholars.
- Promote scholarship and scholars working in the full chronological and global range of Jewish Studies expertise, including the comprehensive breadth of Jewish historic and current experiences and identities.
- Ensure that the annual conference reflects the diversity of our community in terms of gender and career stages, and asks for mixed-gender panels as an organising principle.
- Ensure that assessment panels (e.g., for the annual book prizes, essay prizes, REF nominations, studentship awards) are mixed-gender, represent the appropriate range of disciplinary expertise in Jewish Studies, and a range of universities in the UK and Ireland.
- Produce processes transparent to all our members in making nominations for the REF or other national or international positions, and consult our members in making nominations.
- Ask all of our members to play their part in supporting BIAJS to promote EDI, and take personal responsibility and accountability for their behaviour, actions and decision-making and the impact they can have on EDI.
- Review BIAJS policies and update them when necessary to ensure fairness, and take action to address any issues

If a member has a grievance related to EDI, they should contact the Secretary of BIAJS and the President in the first instance. All those involved should ensure that confidentiality is maintained, for both the complainant and the complainant.

Appendix 2 – Text of the two motions proposed by Adam Sutcliffe

Motion 1

Statement on Antisemitism and Academic Freedom

The British and Irish Association for Jewish Studies (BIAJS), as a professional association, the constitutionally defined aim of which is to ‘promote and defend ... the scholarly study of Jewish culture in all its aspects’, notes with concern the current politicization of the topic of antisemitism in the UK (and beyond). We lament the lack of attention to the voices of expert scholars in this area, not only in public debate but also often by the UK government and university leaders.

We agree with the recent statement from the Task Force on Antisemitism and Academic Freedom of our parallel organization in the United States, the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS), that ‘the goal of a university is to facilitate – not shut down – conversations, including ones about Israel, Zionism, anti-Zionism, and Palestinian rights’.¹

We note, as also stated by the AJS Task Force, that any single definition of antisemitism, given the complexity of the phenomenon, will always be advisory at best, and that the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) can, alongside other definitions, be a valuable tool.²

We strongly urge our university leaders to ensure that discussions and decisions on antisemitism and academic freedom do not take place without proper consultation with those scholars with relevant scholarly expertise. These consultations must also include colleagues who teach on Jewish history and / or the modern Middle East, for which the preservation of a healthy campus environment of open debate for students of all backgrounds and perspectives is essential.

Motion 2

BIAJS resolves to add its signature to the statement below, which has already been signed by several British professional scholarly associations in related fields:

Statement Regarding the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism

We, the undersigned X professional associations with a combined membership of Y academic staff and postgraduate students are writing to express our profound concern about the pressure applied on universities to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. We are deeply troubled by the definition’s effect on free speech within the law when it comes to teaching, research and discussion of Israeli government policies, the formation of the Israeli state, the nature of Zionism as an ideology and movement, and the violation of Palestinian human rights.

We fully support steps to root out antisemitism and all forms of racism from university campuses. This particular definition, however, risks creating confusion between lawful criticisms of the government of Israel and antisemitism, given that seven of the eleven illustrative examples relate to Israel. There have been a growing number of cases in the past year of accusations of antisemitism against staff and students who have voiced criticisms of the Israeli government without prima facie evidence of antisemitism.³ Even when these complaints are not upheld, the threats of dismissal/expulsion that accompany

¹ Working Report from the AJS Task Force on Antisemitism and Academic Freedom, February 2022:

https://www.associationforjewishstudies.org/docs/default-source/ad-files/a-working-report-from-the-ajs-task-force-on-antisemitism-and-academic-freedom.pdf?sfvrsn=5c4d54d_5

² AJS working report, guideline 2:2; <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org> .

³ Recently, [Sheffield Hallam University](#) suspended from teaching a Palestinian PhD student, who is a refugee from the Gaza Strip, and a high profile advocate for Palestinian rights, following bad faith accusations of antisemitism with regards to her social media posts. In August last year, [the University of Manchester](#) censored an artistic exhibition by removing a statement of solidarity with Palestinians, following pressure from pro-Israel groups, who claimed that the “inflammatory language and representations [of Jewish people]” breached the university’s public sector equality duty. Also last year, the [University of Glasgow](#), following complaints by an external party, apologised for an academic journal article on pro-Israel advocacy, published in its postgraduate research journal, prefacing it

investigatory proceedings are highly stressful for the individuals who are targeted, and often stigmatize them for many years even though the accusations had proven to be unsubstantiated.

In October 2020, former education secretary Gavin Williamson wrote a letter to English university vice-chancellors requesting that they adopt the IHRA definition or face financial penalties. More recently, education secretary Nadhim Zahawi was reported as stating that adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism by universities is “[essential, not optional](#)”. As a result of these pressures, a substantial number of UK universities have adopted the definition and, in many cases, this has been done without consultation with relevant academic experts in their own institutions and bypassing the normal bodies responsible for university policy. In so doing, they have not only ignored their own staff but also the considerable criticisms of the definition by legal scholars, experts in antisemitism and Palestinian academics.⁴

We stand absolutely against antisemitism and all forms of racism and discrimination; but labelling lawful speech that is critical of the Israeli government as antisemitic is entirely counterproductive since it spreads confusion and weakens the struggle against actual racism in our universities, whilst threatening the freedom of expression that is essential for academic life.

We urge universities to protect academic freedom and freedom of expression, to defend university autonomy against the government’s pressure to adopt the IHRA definition, and to revoke the definition where it has been adopted.

British International Studies Association (BISA)

British Society for Middle East Studies (BRISMES)

European International Studies Association (EISA)

Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA)

with a statement alleging that the article ‘promote[s] an unfounded antisemitic theory regarding the State of Israel and its activity in the United Kingdom’. This decision overturned the academic peer review process, without any evidence of antisemitism within the article. The [University of Glasgow](#) also attempted to censor an invited speaker, who was meant to speak about his recent book, *Decolonizing Palestine: Hamas between the Anticolonial and Postcolonial* (Cornell University Press, 2020), following a groundless complaint.

⁴ We note that Kenneth Stern, who was among the IHRA definition’s drafters, [rejects its adoption](#) as a campus hate speech code arguing that it “will harm not only pro-Palestinian advocates, but also Jewish students and faculty, and the academy itself.” [A letter](#) signed by eight senior lawyers, published on 7 January 2021, challenges the legal basis of the definition and charges Gavin Williamson with “improper interference”. [A letter](#) from 122 Palestinian and Arab intellectuals detailed the ways the IHRA definition, and its attendant examples, has been instrumentalised in several contexts to silence defenders of Palestinian rights. In a [comprehensive report](#), scholars at UCL outline the problematic implications of adopting the IHRA definition for teaching and academic research and conclude that the definition is ‘not fit for purpose’. [A letter](#) from over 70 Israeli academics working in UK universities outlines several fallacies informing the IHRA definition as well as its chilling effect on staff and students. The scholars also note that the Equality Act is a much better tool for fighting hate speech.