

19 August 2025

Open letter from Jewish Voices of Inner Sydney condemning the attempted cancelling of Dr Abdel-Fattah by a group of pro-Israel Zionist academics

Jewish Voices of Inner Sydney (JVOIS) are a diverse group of Jewish residents of inner Sydney who support human rights and oppose antisemitism and racism, in all its forms.

JVOIS's members are deeply concerned by the intervention of academics writing under the banner of Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism (self-styled as 5A) attempting to cancel Dr Abdel-Fattah's contribution to the Bendigo Writers Festival.

The 5A group wrote to La Trobe University and the Bendigo Council organisers of the festival using their academic signatures. As the council is a local government the correspondence is now a matter of public record.

JVOIS encourage participation of academics in public debate but are concerned in this instance, because the authors did not make a public contribution but instead acted covertly, using their public credentials in non-public correspondence to accuse Dr Abdel-Fattah of being a "known racist person" and an antisemite – it seems this is the modus operandi of the group. In doing so, the letter's authors put forward a number of views both directly and by implication, that they relied on to justify their complaint, that we find offensive, including but not limited to:

- that anti-Zionism (being against the ethnocultural nationalist political ideology of Zionism) is a form of antisemitism – implying that JVOIS's members who oppose the political ideology of Zionism, are antisemites
- that Jews who oppose the political ideology of Zionism, like members of JVOIS, are "situated at the extreme fringes of the Jewish community" – disparaging and belittling our Jewish identity as either less worthy or unreasonable or both
- that Jewish self-determination in Israel is more important than the human rights of other people, i.e. a form of supremacism, is inherent in Judaism
- that the genocide the State of Israel is committing in Gaza against the Palestinian people is a matter about which Palestinian people may not speak unless "both sides of the debate [are] represented". International law requires action to prevent genocide, not an even-handed debate that platforms supporters of the perpetrators of the genocide.

The authors of the letter were clear that they intended it to result in actions by La Trobe University and/or the organisers of the Bendigo Writers Festival that would cause Dr Abdel-Fattah to be silenced or withdraw from the festival.

Due to the poorly considered response from La Trobe University, a code of conduct that included the problematic Universities Australia definition of antisemitism drawn from the contentious IHRA definition that conflates criticism of Israel with antisemitism, was sent to festival participants. The code sought to constrain the speech of all the participating writers but that was clearly targeted at Dr Abdel-Fattah. It was reported by the ABC that 50 people withdrew in protest, and the festival was left in tatters.

The collapse of the festival, that puts its future in peril, represents a significant loss to the cultural life of the Australian community and was directly caused by the intervention of 5A

and the poor judgement of the university and council in response. The response showed them to be easily swayed by 5A's grab-bag of confected, decontextualised and unfounded complaints of antisemitism dressed in legal sounding language, including a predominance of references to complaints that they themselves had planted.

We encourage La Trobe University to investigate the decision-making process that led to the code of conduct being issued and to publish the outcomes of the investigation. For example, is issuing a code of conduct that is not balanced by other documents like the French Model Code that allows for uncomfortable discussions supportive of academic freedom? It is appropriate that the university, as a publicly funded institution, owns its significant part in the failure of the festival.

We encourage the authors of the letter of complaint to put their names on the public record and to own and be accountable for their views and their methods by publishing all their past and future complaints. We do not want the authors and the other members of their group to be silenced but rather to be part of a public discussion about Jewish identity, Zionism, and the actions of the State of Israel, including the current genocide in Gaza, the ongoing ethnic cleansing of the West Bank, and the brutal occupation of the last 77 years.

We urge all universities to encourage their academic staff to use their publicly funded and privileged platforms to add to public discussion and debate and not to use them to make private complaints aimed at silencing views that they don't like. It is instructive to read Dr Abdel-Fattah's testimony about the campaign that has been waged against her by 5A and others (<https://www.deepcutnews.com/p/pro-israel-groups-have-attacked-me>).

JVOIS looks forward to a positive response from La Trobe University's Vice Chancellor, the authors of the letter of complaint and other members of 5A, and all universities whose staff may be involved with groups like 5A.

Jesse McNicoll, Glebe

Jewish Voices of Inner Sydney

This open letter is copied to the Vice Chancellors of universities that 5A claim to have members at:

Australian Catholic University, Charles Darwin University, Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity Australia, Curtin University, Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, Federation University Australia, Flinders University, La Trobe University, Macquarie University, Monash University, Murdoch University, RMIT University, Southern Cross University, Swinburne University of Technology, The Australian National University, The University of Adelaide, The University of Melbourne, The University of New England, The University of Notre Dame Australia, The University of Queensland, The University of Sydney, The University of Western Australia, University of Canberra, University of New South Wales (UNSW), University of Tasmania, University of Technology Sydney, University of Wollongong, Victoria University, Western Sydney University