

February 22, 2024

Office of the President

1050 KANEFF TOWER
4700 KEELE ST
TORONTO ON
CANADA M3J 1P3
T 416 736 5200
www.yorku.ca/president

Sent via email : Shafqat.Ali@parl.gc.ca

Dear Members of Parliament: Shafqat Ali, Chandra Arya, Paul Chiang, Lena Metlege Diab, Elizabeth May, Ken McDonald, Mike Morrice, Yasir Naqvi, Sonia Sidhu, Tony Van Bynen, Patrick Weiler, Salma Zahid and Sameer Zuberi,

Thank you for reaching out and sharing your concerns about the increase in Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab discrimination across Canada in the last few months.

York University shares your concerns and is taking robust steps to address them on our campuses. We appreciate the opportunity to address the important issues you have raised in your letter of February 4, 2024.

Question 1: How does the university address and combat Islamophobia, antisemitism, and anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab discrimination?

York takes all forms of discrimination very seriously, including Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab discrimination. Islamophobia and antisemitism are specifically referenced in our [Decolonizing, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#). Our comprehensive [DEDI](#) learning Toolkit for all students, faculty and staff implements and enhances our DEDI Strategy, providing the tools for active learning, self-reflection and participation to further the DEDI Strategy.

We are committed to upholding human rights, and recognizing dignity for all, as set out in our [Human Rights Policy and Procedures](#). Further, our [Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities](#) describes the responsibility to behave in a way that does not harm or threaten to harm another person's physical or mental wellbeing and the responsibility to uphold an atmosphere of civility, honesty, equity, and respect for others, thereby valuing the inherent diversity in the University community.

In our [Hate Propaganda \(Guidelines\)](#) we reaffirm the University's commitment to provide an environment conducive to freedom of enquiry and expression where all members of the community may learn, teach, work and live, free from prejudice, inequality and discrimination. In addition to the policies and principles referred to above, we have robust education and enforcement mechanisms such as our [Centre for Human Rights Equity and Inclusion Procedure for Dealing with Complaints of Harassment and Discrimination](#).



The University's Policy on [Workplace Harassment Prevention](#) addresses vexatious comment or conduct against another. Our [Healthy Workplace Policy](#) illustrates the University's commitment to developing and fostering a healthy and safe working environment for all community members including faculty, staff, students.

York University is committed to the principle of free speech, as set out in various documents including our [Statement of Policy on Free Speech](#). We also recognize that free speech is not without limits, particularly on a university campus in which respectful discourse is a necessity to the advancement of learning. Those limits include the prohibitions of threats, harassing or speech or conduct, discriminatory speech or conduct, and speech or conduct that tends to denigrate, degrade, or vilify a person or group as noted in our [FAQ](#) on Free Speech.

In addition to the above measures, we are in discussion with Muslim and Islamic Studies colleagues, faculty and staff about facilitating mechanisms for work on Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab discrimination. We will receive recommendations to our leadership team on ways the University can combat Islamophobia, improve the campus experience, and enhance safety and support for members of the Muslim and SWANA communities. We have also established a university coordinating committee on antisemitism.

Lastly, the senior administration has been meeting regularly with several recognized student groups to discuss the current experiences and challenges for Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab students and how the University can best support all our students at this time.

Question 2: What positive steps have you taken, and will you take, to protect students' career prospects as they engage in debate on the Middle East conflict?

York University is committed to creating an environment where our students feel safe and do not face inappropriate consequences for the legitimate exercise of free speech at the University consistent with the University's [Statement of Policy on Free Speech](#) and related education materials. In addition, student associations and student groups have access to extensive training and support from York's Student and Community Leadership Development department.

Question 3: How does the university ensure that academic freedom, and freedom of speech, association and assembly, is protected when members of the university community engage in debate related to the Middle East conflict?

Universities are both the creators and protectors of academic freedom, for without it we cannot fulfil our missions as institutions of higher learning and exploration. We are committed to free speech, as shown by our [Statement of Policy on Free Speech](#). We spent two intensive years conducting broad consultations to develop and implement the [President's Initiative on Open and Respectful Dialogue](#) to reaffirm York's protection of and broad support for free speech and expression inherent not only in the spoken word but also in a wide variety of expressive activities on campus.

York's [Temporary Use of University Space Regulation](#) enables assembly in campus spaces, and applications for event approval include that the events must adhere to all York's policies and procedures, including those related to free speech, equity, rights and responsibilities.:

In our [Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities](#) and various University policies, including the [Statement of Policy on Free Speech](#), the University reaffirms its commitment to free enquiry and expression and to uphold the right of all University community members and guests to express their views within the law and without fear of intimidation or harassment. In all use of university space, while the University encourages and expects the respectful exchange of ideas, it is understood that free expression and safety are complementary.

Further, to ensure an atmosphere in which academic freedom, freedom of speech, assembly and association continue to flourish at York, in the days after October 7, 2023, the University proactively took a number of steps to strengthen [security and safety measures](#) on our campuses and [well-being resources](#). The enhanced safety and security measures were shared widely with community members here: <https://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2023/10/14/a-message-for-the-york-community/>. Our Campus Safety staff utilize a community-centered approach to minimize any negative interactions between individuals and groups on our campuses and work to ensure that peaceful protest is supported while ensuring it does not interrupt academic activities.

Question 4: What measures is your university taking to support students and faculty who are uncomfortable, upset or offended by the robust debate and critical analysis at the heart of the quest for knowledge?

As detailed in response to Question 7, York has always prioritized the well-being of the members of our community. The gift of *Mino Bimaadiziwin* or the Good Life is one of six core priorities espoused in the University's Academic Plan.

We take a variety of steps to support the capacity of York community members to engage in "robust debate and critical analysis" understanding the importance of creating space for challenging issues to be discussed with respect and tolerance of competing views. We also recognize the need for accompanying psychosocial and socioemotional supports.

Faculty and staff members have access to supports through negotiated Benefits programs, the University's Employee & Family Assistance Program, and multiple other university and community resources ([Faculty & Staff Well-being Resources | York University](#)). York students have access to a full suite of campus and community supports ([Student Well-being Resources | York University](#)). Recognizing the socioemotional effects of the violence in Israel and Gaza since October 7, senior

administrators have held special support gatherings and listening sessions for faculty and staff members and hosted a workshop in secondary traumatic stress.

The Office of Student Community Relations (OSCR), which addresses complaints against students, prioritizes an educative, negotiated, and reparative approach to student complaints. Since October 7, OSCR has dealt with numerous related issues and complaints, and has encouraged dialogue and mutual understanding in order to resolve them. When a formal adjudication is requested by the complainant, OSCR ensures that due process and personal support are provided to both complainant and respondent.

Question 5: What is your university doing to ensure academic freedom and freedom of expression are not compromised during this deeply polarized time, when disinformation is commonplace, and donors and alumni are seeking to intervene?

York University is a diverse community that has a well-established reputation for ensuring that our community members are able to bring their expertise to bear on addressing the complex global issues we face. Principles of academic freedom and free speech are inherent in our policies and are fundamental to our mission as an academic institution: we are steadfast in adhering to them for to fail to do so is anathema to our very core as an institution of higher learning. All of the policies, measures, efforts, and steps described in this letter and our communications with our university community including alumni and donors, are consistent with, and in furtherance of, these principles. Protecting that mission also requires that we not leave room for any expression of intolerance or hatred in any form whatsoever.

Question 6: Will you commit to engage with relevant student groups and faculty/staff unions to foster an open dialogue and gain insights into the realities of racism and discrimination and how to structurally address it?

We have been in regular communication and dialogue with relevant student groups and employee unions. Our collective agreements have concrete commitments embedded in them to counter discrimination and advance equity, and we have regular channels of communication and collaboration about these issues through joint committees, advisory councils, and equity caucuses.

The University also has an institutional [*Decolonizing, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy*](#) with concrete actions that build on the many initiatives undertaken by faculty, staff and students over the years.

As noted in previous responses, since October 7, we have taken further steps to engage with Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, Israeli, and Jewish colleagues to ensure the university administration is alert to their most pressing needs and recommendations, and responsive in addressing both individual and systemic concerns.

Question 7: What efforts is the university undertaking to promote peaceful solutions, constructive dialogue and conflict-resolution as it relates to the Middle East conflict within the campus community?

York takes pride in our university's tradition of the "robust debate and critical analysis" noted in Question 4. We also recognize that the ability to engage constructively across intellectual and/or ideological differences cannot be taken for granted and instead must be supported through opportunities for skill-building and investments in relational culture.

This was the impetus behind the 2019 founding of the *President's Initiative on Open & Respectful Dialogue* and the regular offering of related workshops (e.g., *Understanding Freedom of Expression at York U* and *Dialogue Across Difference*). Since December 2023, we have also offered multiple workshops in managing classroom disruptions, supporting student inclusion, and using restorative practices such as listening circles. The overarching goal of these trainings is to deepen our capacity to engage in difficult conversations and encounter opposing viewpoints without disrespect or dehumanization.

To further sponsor, model, and practice engagement in constructive dialogue, we are launching a *Toward Open & Respectful Dialogues* funding program to support faculty, staff, and/or student-initiated efforts to cultivate thoughtful discussion and understanding of complex, contentious issues. Two such initiatives are:

- An *Open Office Hours series* regarding the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Each session is co-hosted by Jewish and Muslim faculty members from History, Humanities, and Religious Studies and the meetings are open to all York faculty, staff, and students.
- *Bridging the Gap*, founded by Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, and Palestinian students and alumni who engage in intergroup dialogue in order to resist dehumanization of the "other" and to deepen their understanding of the complexity of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Others are invited to join the dialogue group or to witness their discussions and commitments to mutual respect.

The *Relational Culture Workshop Series*, organized by the Office of the Vice-President, Equity, People and Culture, provides York students, staff and faculty members with access to a series of learning opportunities to enrich skills for working with each other at York.

York also provides supports and resources to faculty and instructors through our Teaching Commons to help them navigate challenging conversations or conflict in classroom environments including regular offerings such as [Strategies to Facilitate Dialogue and Challenging Conversations in the Classroom](#).

Know that we take very seriously our educative mission, enshrined in our policies, to advance and protect academic freedom, freedom of discussion and debate as well as to gather and associate in furtherance of such freedoms. It is through these mechanisms, conducted in a secure and inclusive environment on campus, that peaceful solutions, constructive dialogue, and conflict-resolution may be advanced.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rhonda Lenton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "L".

Rhonda Lenton, PhD
President and Vice-Chancellor