PRESS RELEASE

*University of Bristol referred to regulator for ‘catastrophic failure’ to protect academic freedom*

The University of Bristol has been referred to the Office for Students (OfS) – the universities’ regulator – for allegedly ‘catastrophic failures’ in governance and management relating to several cases, particularly the ‘BRISOC scandal’ relating to Professor Steven Greer. The signatories to the referral letter claim that the latter bears a striking resemblance to the Kathleen Stock controversy at the University of Sussex and that ‘there are no good reasons’ for the OfS not treat them in the same manner.

In 2021, Professor Kathleen Stock was hounded out of her job at the University of Sussex by an angry mob which accused her of ‘transphobia’. In March this year the OfS fined the University £585,000 for associated governance and management problems. The BRISOC scandal involved an official complaint and a social media campaign against Professor Greer, also in 2021, led by the University of Bristol Islamic Society (BRISOC). Alleging Islamophobia, the Society demanded the dismissal of Professor Greer and the scrapping of the Islam, China and the Far East module on his human rights course. However, in July that year, the professor was exonerated by an official University inquiry. He retired in September 2022 having never taught at the University again. In 2023 Greer published *Falsely Accused of Islamophobia: My Struggle Against Academic Cancellation*. A sequel, *Islamophobia and free speech*, will appear later this year.

The referral letter lists Bristol’s governance and managerial failures as follows: admission of BRISOC’s ‘manifestly false’ official complaint in October 2020 in spite of numerous failures by the University to follow its own procedures; failure to take reasonable steps to protect Professor Greer from BRISOC’s potentially life threatening social media campaign by, for example, disciplining those involved; cancelling the Islam, China and the Far East module in spite of the University’s own inquiry, and the opinion of a KC, having found that the allegations about it were groundless; publicly announcing Professor Greer’s exoneration but stating that the University nevertheless recognised BRISOC’s ‘concerns’ and that the module had been cancelled to respect student ‘sensitivities’. Greer maintains that these decisions and actions not only compounded the damage to his reputation and increased the risk of physical harm, but also chilled lawful academic debate.

In a 14-page letter to the University of Bristol, dated 11 April 2023, Alumni for Free Speech (AFFS) documented the ‘catastrophic’ failures at the heart of the BRISOC scandal. AFFS said: ‘Professor Greer, AFFS and others have made numerous unsuccessful attempts to persuade the University to settle the controversy. It is now apparent, however, that only the decisive intervention of the OfS can address the enduring chilling effects of the scandal upon lawful and legitimate academic debate in Britain about Islam.’

Hardeep Singh of the Network of Sikh Organizations (NSO) said that, ‘quite apart from the damage to Professor Greer, the most enduring, and most serious systemic effect of the governance and management failures at the University of Bristol has been the ongoing censorship – particularly self-censorship – of academic debate about Islam, not only at the University of Bristol itself, but in British universities generally and possibly others elsewhere’. Dr Taj Hargey, Imam of the Oxford Islamic Congregation and Provost of the Oxford Institute for British Islam (OIBI), adds: ‘it would be a brave scholar who, in the aftermath of the BRISOC controversy, were publicly to raise similar lawful and legitimate questions about the social, political, and legal implications of mainstream Islam, as those made by Professor Greer.’ Condemning the University’s ‘cowardly equivocation about Professor Greer’s manifest innocence’, Maryam Namazie, of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, said that ‘this has exposed the professor to an enduring risk of physical attack, including murder. Others have lost their lives at the hands of fanatics for less’.

Tim Dieppe, from Christian Concern claimed that ‘the BRISOC scandal has contributed significantly to the emergence of a *de facto* prohibition of blasphemy against Islam in the UK, enforced not by the courts, but by public institutions capitulating to militant online mobs. The OfS urgently needs to intervene in the BRISOC scandal in order to challenge this regressive trend.’

In addition to AFFS, NSO, OIBI, the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, and the Oxford Islamic Congregation, the letter of referral has also been signed by the Free Speech Union, Academics for Academic Freedom, the Committee for Academic Freedom, Don’t Divide Us, Christian Concern, the Global Hindu Federation, and Project Resist.