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Mixed views on Wilkie censure

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The [University of Oxford](#) has suspended a senior academic who rejected an Israeli student's application to work with him because of what he called the country's "gross human rights abuses on the Palestinians." The decision has drawn mixed reaction from British academics.

Andrew Wilkie, Nuffield professor of pathology at the University of Oxford, apparently turned away Amit Duvshani, 26, a student at Tel Aviv University, because of his nationality and not his academic record.

Following an [investigation](#) by the university's Visitation Board, the vice-chancellor, [Colin Lucas](#), last week suspended Wilkie from his academic duties for 2 months without pay. Wilkie will be required to undergo equal opportunities training during his time away from the university.

A spokesperson for the university [said](#), "This ruling reflects that there can be no place for any form of discrimination within the University of Oxford other than on the grounds of merit. Professor Wilkie fully accepts the gravity of the situation and is determined to make full use of training to ensure that his actions and those of his staff reflect best practice in future."

Duvshani, a molecular biology student, applied to be supervised for his PhD in Wilkie's laboratory. But in June of this year, he received an E-mail rejection from Wilkie, which explained: "I am sure that you are perfectly nice at a personal level, but no way would I take on somebody who had served in the Israeli army."

The professor also wrote: "I have a huge problem with the way that the Israelis take the moral high ground from their appalling treatment in the Holocaust, and then inflict gross human rights abuses on the Palestinians because they [the Palestinians] wish to live in their own country."

The academic community remained divided on the issue this week.

Geoffrey Alderman, the vice president of academic affairs at the [American InterContinental University](#) in London and a leading opponent of any academic boycott of Israel, told us that the university's response was too lenient. "They could have booted him out of the university, and there is a part of me that says they should have. However, that might have made a martyr out of him," he said.

He added, "Whatever one's private views about world matters, it is a terrible thing to tell a prospective student you are not interested in his or her application because of his or her nationality."

However, Andrew Marks, the president and founder of [International Academic Friends of Israel](#), a group that campaigns for academic freedom, welcomed the news. "We consider Oxford University's strong reprimand of Professor Wilkie an encouraging indication that it will not tolerate breaches of academic and scientific freedom," he said.

The [Association of University Teachers](#), the United Kingdom's largest lecturers' union, voted by about two to one to reject a call for an academic boycott of Israel at its annual conference in May this year. Paul Cottrell, the union's assistant general secretary said this week, "We do not support and will actively

oppose any attempt to deny students the right [of equal access to higher education] purely on the basis of their opinions or beliefs."

But Michael Cohen, a founder member of the [Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards](#), said that many academics were very unhappy with how Wilkie had been treated. "I think Oxford has behaved in an extraordinarily heavy-handed way. As far as I can understand, he acted out of principle, and they have suspended him for it," he said.

Cohen, who is a philosophy lecturer at the [University of Wales, Swansea](#), added, "I believe in freedom of expression. That applies to everyone, including academics. Oxford's response has been completely over the top."

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