

The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology
Via e-mail

07 November 2023

Dear Ms Donelan

I am writing to express UCU's alarm at evidence published in the *i* newspaper on Friday 3 November¹ suggesting that your special advisors in the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT) wrote a dossier compiling the views, social media posts, academic records, and trade union activities, of university staff.

The dossier, reportedly prepared by politically-appointed staff answerable to you, was the product of extensive surveillance of an academic. It is split into three sections, respectively titled "anti-racism", "transgender advocacy", and "militant leftism". This document also notes, as though it were a bad thing, that the academic has "endorsed scholarships for black students."

Combined with your intervention last week, which successfully pressured a nominally independent research body into censoring two academics for expressing legitimate and legal political beliefs, this dossier suggests that you are a driving force behind government attacks on academic freedom and freedom of speech.

For the entire time I have been UCU general secretary, the Conservative government you serve has been lecturing us about a crisis of academic freedom and freedom of speech on campus, for which you have blamed staff and students.

There is indeed such a crisis, but as your actions in recent weeks have demonstrated, the threat to these freedoms comes from the authoritarian agenda of your party, not education staff or those they teach. From keeping the Prevent duty, to imposing the IHRA definition on universities, and introducing new restrictions on protest, this government gravely imperils the freedoms it claims to protect.

While you were Minister for Higher Education, we met several times to discuss, among other things, academic freedom and freedom of speech. You said to me at one such meeting in February 2021 that the problem on campus was not just 'no platforming', but censorship and the chilling effect of a culture where people feel unable to express themselves freely.

It is ironic, therefore, that as a cabinet minister you have chosen to lead the most open attack on academic freedom we have seen in Britain in some time. It should not be necessary to remind you that the absence of such undue state interference is a

¹ <https://inews.co.uk/news/government-prepared-secret-dossier-academics-blm-2730858>

central precondition for both academic freedom and freedom of expression. What kind of chilling effect do you imagine your surveillance and heavy-handed censorship has?

To restore any faith in your government and the department you lead, it is incumbent on you to account for how your special advisors came to spend time investigating university staff for expressing legitimate beliefs and put a stop to such practices. Education workers, especially those who have been monitored, deserve to know who authorised these dossiers, for what use they have been compiled, and how they are being used. I also urge you, once again, to withdraw your interference with UKRI.

Your attacks on academic freedom and the equalities agenda are not only anti-democratic – posing a serious threat to our rights – but deeply damaging to the UK's higher education sector and its global reputation.

If you choose to spend the remainder of your time in office attacking university staff and degrading democracy in the process, then you will face a united trade union and sector fighting you every step of the way. We will take whatever action is necessary to defend our members.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary