

Petition for a Welsh Government inquiry into the campaign of trans rights activists at Cardiff University

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 7 Tachwedd 2022
Petitions Committee | 7 November 2022

Reference: SR22/3945-3

Petition Number: P-06-1298

Petition title: Petition for a Welsh Government inquiry into the campaign of trans rights activists at Cardiff University

Text of petition: In recent months at Cardiff University, transgender rights activists have waged a campaign of harassment and violent threats against academics critical of Stonewall. We feel that the university and police have failed to protect the academics, potentially reflecting the links of these organisations with Stonewall. We call for an inquiry into this affair.

More information about this case can be found [here](#):



1. Background

On 17 June 2021, 15 academics at Cardiff University signed an open letter which called for a reconsideration of the University's continuing participation in the Stonewall Diversity Champion programme.

The programme was set up in 2001 to support employers to embed LGBTQ+ inclusion in workplaces "and enter the Workplace Equality Index and Global Workplace Equality Index", where they are benchmarked against other companies. In 2021 a number of high profile employers, which had participated in the programme, ended their partnership with Stonewall. These included media watchdog Ofcom, BBC, the UK Government's Cabinet Office, and the UK's equality watchdog, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

The letter stated support for the rights of transgender staff and students, but said that continued membership of **Stonewall's Diversity Champion programme** needs to be reviewed on the basis that:

being associated with Stonewall lies in tension with two of the university's core values: 1) academic freedom and 2) respect for the rights of all staff and students, including women.

Cardiff University also received a letter from staff, students and alumni who disputed the claims made, stating that:

this is a gross misreading of the Equality Act: transphobic views, like homophobic views, are only protected beliefs – people have the right to hold these views, but Universities and other institutions have no duty to protect them from criticism or academic rigour in a democratic society.

The letter called on Cardiff University to issue a "renewed statement of commitment to the rights and wellbeing of their LGBTQ+ staff and students".

1.1. Actions taken by the University

A letter to Minister for Education and Welsh Language, Jeremy Miles MS in February 2022 by the Free Speech Union provides a detailed timeline of events following the publication of the open letter, including descriptions of the alleged threats made against signatories of the letter and meetings which took place between the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Communications Director at the University and the actions taken by them.

The letter states that following the publication of the letter:

a leaflet was distributed on campus picturing a woman holding a gun, the names and pictures of the signatories, and the caption “ACT NOW”. A student whistleblower then revealed violent threats being made on the Facebook page of the Cardiff LGBT+ Society.

It goes onto say that in January 2022, nine of the original fifteen signatories wrote to the Deputy Vice Chancellor expressing their dissatisfaction with the handling of the matter, stating that the University had “overlooked crucial evidence” and:

the University is failing to uphold its legal duty under section 43 of the Education (No 2) Act 1986 to secure freedom of speech. Worse, when serious and well-evidenced concerns about this hostile campaign were brought to the University’s attention, it neglected to act, misplaced evidence, failed to conduct a timely and thorough investigation and refused to re-open the investigation when the violent threats were repeated.

It also states that “despite the continuing campaign against these academics, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor concluded that it was not necessary to make further statements on this issue and the University had acted “reasonably” and had taken “practical steps to safeguard the health, safety and wellbeing of all staff and students involved in this matter”.

Cardiff University has also [published a statement](#) relating to the issues outlined in the Free Speech Union’s letter to Jeremy Miles

2. Welsh Government action

In it’s letter to the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, Jeremy Miles MS, the Free Speech Union called on him to:

Consider what interpretation you might make with the Vice-Chancellor or elsewhere that could have a material impact. In particular, we would welcome any action you could take to remind Cardiff [University] of its legal duties under current legislation.

In his response to the Petitions Committee, the Minister said:

As higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, disputes between students, staff and their universities are a matter for the

universities themselves. Therefore, neither the Welsh Government nor Welsh Ministers are able to intervene. Any potential issues of alleged unacceptable behaviour by staff or students are, ultimately, a matter for the university to address under its internal policies.

The Minister stressed that he would “expect the university to continue to meet all of its legislative requirements in respect of freedom of speech and academic freedom and its obligations under the Equality Act 2010.”

The Minister states that the Higher Education Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the statutory regulator of HE in Wales has received an “assurance from the university that the matter has been thoroughly investigated” and the police are “satisfied that there was no evidence of any laws being broken.”

He states that there is nothing in the letter from the Free Speech Union which “evidences a clear breach of legislative compliance” and that the university had published a Code of Practice and has therefore complied with Section 43 of the Education (No2) Act 1986. The Minister also states that it is the Equality and Human Rights Commission that is responsible for investigating compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty in Wales (which requires that all universities comply with the Equality Act 2020).

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.