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Via e-mail ceo@ukri.org

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Dear Professor Leyser

I wish to convey our anger and disappointment at UKRI's capitulation to the demands of the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology in relation to the suspension of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) advisory board.

As outlined in our letter to Michelle Donelan on Monday¹, the University and College Union (UCU) is clear that the Secretary of State has not only seriously misrepresented the views expressed by two members of the advisory board in a transparently political attack, but completely disregarded due process and lacked any consideration for the welfare of those individuals in the manner of her intervention. Her letter was also a concerning example of ministerial overreach into the operational affairs of an independent body in a way that presents a significant threat to academic freedom and is completely contrary to the government's supposed commitment to freedom of speech.

The accusations made by the Secretary of State against the individuals in question don't stand up to even basic scrutiny. The social media posts identified were legitimate expressions of opinion within the law; many respected individuals and organisations including the United Nations have made much more strident comments on the situation in Palestine without similar concerns being raised. The way in which these academics' comments have been singled out, misconstrued and conflated with concerns about the wider EDI agenda exposes this for what it is: a flagrantly political attack on efforts to address systemic inequality in both our research sphere and wider public life, by a minister in search of a headline.

It is therefore deeply disappointing that, instead of pushing back against the inappropriate and disproportionate demands which are a thinly veiled excuse to attack wider EDI efforts, you have capitulated to unwarranted pressure and in doing so offered validity to this intervention by opting to suspend the advisory board. This decision will have a serious negative impact on the sector's confidence in the independence of UKRI's decision-making processes. It is absolutely paramount to the

¹ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14171/Michelle-Donelan-UKIRacademic-freedom-letter-30-Oct-23/pdf/20231030_Michelle_Donelan.pdf

protection of academic freedom that bodies who administer research funding are able to operate free from the whim of ministerial diktat. That UKRI has failed so entirely to uphold this principle in its response to the Secretary of State is a cause of great concern. Your actions have given academics cause to think carefully about whether they wish to continue to serve on UKRI bodies given the politicization of the organization. We are already seeing principled resignations from such bodies and warn you that you have very little time to preserve what is left of UKRI's credibility in the eyes of the sector. Unless you reverse the decision to suspend the advisory board within 48 hours, we will call for UCU members to resign from all voluntary UKRI positions.

Furthermore, the suspension of the EDI advisory board suggests a worrying lack of commitment to the advancement of equality, diversity and inclusion within the research community. It is very clear that the letter was part of government efforts to foster division and stoke a culture war by presenting the pursuit of equality in public life as 'wokism' and added bureaucracy. UKRI's decision to suspend the EDI group and effectively buy into this narrative sends a damaging message that its equality agenda is dispensable as soon as the going gets tough.

Finally, both your initial response on social media and the letter yesterday have failed the individual academics singled out for criticism by the Secretary of State. It would be reasonable to expect that appointed members of a UKRI advisory board could expect the organisation, at a minimum, to emphasise the need for due process rather than kneejerk public condemnation. It is bitterly disappointing that they have not received this basic level of respect in the face of a blatantly political attack.

In terms of next steps, we are seeking legal advice in relation to the impact on the individuals of both the Secretary of State's accusations and UKRI's response. I would urge you to take immediate steps outlined in this letter to restore confidence that UKRI can be robustly independent from government interference, and prevent mass resignations. The sector needs to be reassured that UKRI's review, which we were concerned to see referred to in the Terms of Reference as to be 'conducted internally', will take into account the views of experts in the field, as well as those of the Secretary of State's former special advisor, so I am calling on you to provide urgent assurances on this point.

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