



University and College Union

19 January 2012

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Rt Hon David Willetts MP  
Minister of State for universities and science  
Department for Business, Innovation & Skills  
1 Victoria Street  
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Dear David

Many thanks for the meeting last week where I think we had a genuinely useful discussion around regulation of for-profit providers.

One issue UCU is very concerned about which we did not have time to discuss are the new memorandums of understanding agreed between BIS, UK higher education institutions and the Colombian ministry of science, technology and innovation ministry, COLCIENCIAS.

Through our involvement in Education International, Justice for Colombia and Amnesty International, UCU remains deeply concerned that Colombian teacher trade unionists continue to be subjected to death threats and displacement from their homes and workplaces. Most alarming is the high number of assassinations, with at least 12 murders in 2011.

UCU also continues to be extremely concerned about the continuing imprisonment of Lilianny Obando, human rights defender and former auxiliary teacher in the Sociology department at the National University of Colombia, and the ongoing state harassment of her colleague, Dr. Miguel Angel Beltran, university professor and member of ASPU, the Colombian trade union of academics. UCU lead an international campaign to have Dr Beltran released from two years imprisonment, when he was eventually declared innocent of the charge of 'rebellion'.

UCU is fully in favour of free and open collaboration between academics and universities internationally, in the interests of staff, students and higher education. However, our members would want to be sure that collaboration was indeed free and open, and also that the UK government and higher education institutions would seize the opportunity offered by such links to press for the ending of repressive action against academic and other trade unionists. I have myself visited Colombia and seen at first hand the horrendous results of such repression.

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It would be helpful to know whether these issues and individual cases were raised during the roundtable discussions facilitated by BIS in November and what other representations you have made or intend to make to the Colombian authorities on such matters. UCU believes that alongside the liberty and safety of our Colombian academic colleagues, the issue of the safeguarding of academic freedom in Colombia is very important.

Furthermore, I note plans for a UK delegation to Colombia in 2012 which will explore potential areas for collaboration between the two countries' science and innovation communities. I'd like to know more information about the UK delegation to Colombia, including the list of participants and the itinerary that they will be undertaking. In particular, I'd like to know whether the delegation intends to speak to staff and student representatives in Colombia, so that they can gain a better understanding of the real situation on the ground.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sally Hunt', with a horizontal line underneath.

Sally Hunt  
General Secretary