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Professor Paul Layzell
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12th October 2020

By email to pam.kaur@royalholloway.ac.uk

Dear Prof Layzell,

I wish to make a formal complaint about the no-platforming of the former Labour MP Chris Williamson. He was invited to address the Royal Holloway Debating Society, but the invitation was rescinded following the intervention of the President of the Students' Union. It is my understanding that the no-platforming of Mr Williamson occurred in response to lobbying by the local Labour Party and a number of other Royal Holloway student societies. Although the decision to no-platform him was supported by the President of the Debating Society, other members of the Society had presumably judged that Mr Williamson's opinions are a proper subject for debate and invited him to speak.

I would draw to your attention your University's [Code of Practice](#) on Freedom of Speech, of which this appears to be a clear breach. That Code states:

Royal Holloway, University of London is committed to the principles of academic freedom and of free speech within the law. It believes that vigorous debate is proper and acceptable and that the College must enable a wide range of views and opinions on social, economic, political and religious issues, however unpopular or controversial.

The University's [procedure](#) for inviting external speakers also recognises the importance of free speech:

Opportunities to engage with a wide range of thought-provoking opinions and perspectives are encouraged and welcomed. We regularly invite a wide range of speakers to events both on and off campus and each year both the College and the Students' Union run a successful programme of events.

I understand that the same regulations also impose constraints on societies when inviting external speakers if "there is demonstrated potential difficulty for a speaker to enter or leave College premises safely and/or to deliver their speech" and they also state that "students are expected to err on the side of caution". However, given that Mr Williamson's participation would have been online and not in person, it is difficult to see how this might inspire campus protests or overburden the campus security staff.

I note that the Students' Union held a referendum in 2019 in which a narrow, but definitive, victory was won for a No Platform for Hate Speech policy. This defines "hate speech" as:

An expression of hatred toward someone on account of that person's colour, race, disability, nationality (including citizenship), ethnic or national origin, religious belief, sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. The expression should be threatening or abusive, and is intended to harass, alarm, or distress another individual or community of individuals.

While Mr Williamson is undoubtedly a controversial figure, he has not been charged with, or found guilty of, any criminal offences. That is to say, nothing he's said or written has been shown to be unlawful. Some of his remarks have been called "anti-Semitic", but these remarks were not attacks on Jews but criticisms of those who accused the Labour Party of not doing enough to tackle anti-Semitism in its ranks, as well as criticisms of the Party for over-reacting to these allegations. Notwithstanding this, he has condemned anti-Semitism, describing it as "utterly repugnant and a scourge on society, which is why I stand in absolute solidarity with anyone who is subjected to anti-Semitic abuse". I have not trawled through everything Mr Williamson has said or written, but I cannot find anything that constitutes "hate speech", as defined above. His remarks about the investigations of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party were not "expressions of hatred" nor were they "threatening or abusive".

In July 2019, more than one hundred signatories, describing themselves as "all Jews", signed a letter of support for Mr Williamson, including Noam Chomsky, one of the world's leading public intellectuals. Others who've defended Mr Williamson include the film directors Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, the musicians Brian Eno and Roger Waters, the journalist John Pilger, the actor Miriam Margolyes and the comedian Alexei Sayle. I do not share Mr Williamson's political views, but I strongly defend his right to free speech and vigorously dispute the claim that anything he's said or written comes anywhere near to the Students' Union's definition "hate speech".

If the University allows this no-platforming to stand, it could be in breach of the legal duty of UK universities to protect free speech, as set out in the Education (N^o 2) Act 1986, which was passed, in part, to prevent the no-platforming of visiting speakers at British universities. In particular, it would be a breach of s.43(a) of the 1986 Act, which requires universities to:

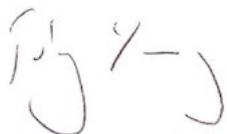
... take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the establishment and for visiting speakers.

While the Royal Holloway Debating Society is under no obligation to invite anyone to speak at its events, once it has extended an invitation to a particular speaker it is under an obligation not to rescind that invitation at the behest of other students who disapprove of the speaker or disagree with the speaker's political views. For a student society to withdraw an invitation to a speaker at the behest of other students who disapprove of the speaker's views endangers freedom of speech on campus because it effectively gives groups of activists and protestors the power of veto over the expression of viewpoints they disagree with. This is a point made clear in the guidance produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission last year entitled "[Freedom of expression: a guide for higher education providers and students' unions in England and Wales](#)". According to this guidance, a higher education provider, or a student society, is within its rights not to invite a particular speaker; but once it has extended an invitation it should not then withdraw it and if it does so – or if a university does nothing to restore that speaker's invitation – it may be in breach of s.43 of the Education (N^o 2) Act 1986.

I very much hope you will intervene to ensure that the Royal Holloway Debating Society honours its invitation to Mr Williamson, thereby upholding the University's stated commitment to free speech and ensuring that it is not in breach of s.43 of the Education (N^o 2) Act 1986.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Toby Young'.

Toby Young

General Secretary

The Free Speech Union

toby@freespeechunion.org

cc: College Council, Royal Holloway
Kate Roberts, President, Royal Holloway Students' Union
Vaanee Sarihyan, President, Royal Holloway Debating Society
The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan, Minister of State for Universities, Department for Education
Mr Iain Mansfield, Department for Education
Sir Michael Barber, Chair, Office for Students
Ms Nicola Dandridge, CEO, Office for Students
Mr David Smy, Office for Students