

15 March 2022

Professor Karen O'Brien
Vice-Chancellor and Warden
Durham University
Stockton Road
Durham
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From: Durham UCU, Durham BAME Network, and Durham Intersectional Feminism Society, Durham University Labour Club

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

The incident involving Prof. Tim Luckhurst at South College in December 2021 rightly provoked outrage at the time. Students who signed up for a celebratory social event (and staff working at the event) were subjected to a deliberately provocative and hateful speech. Students were then insulted for exercising a choice not to listen. In the aftermath of the incident, [many](#) of [us](#) outlined a number of actions that we urged the University to take in response.

In the days following, University leaders acknowledged 'considerable distress and anger' and expressed concern over the alleged 'behaviours exhibited.' Importantly, they also committed to take action following an investigation. University leaders recognised a 'need to set standards and expectations on how we discuss and debate issues respectfully,' stated that 'we must work to create a tolerant, inclusive University that treats others with respect not arrogance,' and stated that it is 'critical ... we make real our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and make respect everybody's responsibility.' The University expressed a 'hope that through this experience, we become a stronger University.'

Staff and students were asked to patiently await the results of the investigation headed by Professor Jane Macnaughton. We complied with this request in good faith – and as we know, student leaders received targeted abuse in the interim. Rather than share lessons learned and reflect together on how to ensure that this does not happen again, however, the investigation was concluded [without a commitment](#) to release any of the findings. Then, Prof. Luckhurst was returned to duties (and was present at a South College formal) without any communication from him or from the University. The University's most recent [statement](#) confirms that while new recommendations will be made on engaging external speakers, the recommendations of the initial report will not be released. Further, the University will not provide sufficient information to provide insight into how the incident was allowed to occur in spite of University procedures and policies. There has been no genuine apology, and no evidence that the University will learn from this deplorable incident.

This is a slap in the face to members of the University community who have respected the process. We are fully aware of the fact that some elements of the investigation were and/or remain confidential. This in no way precludes the need to communicate on: **a) what led up to the incident; b) what lessons can be learned; c) what actions should now be taken; and d) whether Prof. Luckhurst now acknowledges that his behaviour was unacceptable and cannot be excused by a 'commitment to free speech.'** In its silence, the University is sending a powerful message about its commitment 'to providing a safe place to live, work and study for all' once the glare of the media has waned. We deserve better.

Durham University's 'reputation for being elitist, for not always being as welcoming or as inclusive as we would like to be' has been acknowledged by University leadership. Students are rightly raising a range of issues in relation to the South College incident. They are [calling for](#) rent strikes, Open Day protests, and submitting low scores on the NSS if these demands are not met. It should be noted that this term has also been marked by strike action over two separate disputes, and the news that Durham University has the lowest proportion of newly enrolled students from state schools among Russell Group universities. In this context, it is all the more important for the University to be transparent, and to follow through on University leaders' stated commitment to action.

The University must immediately provide information on all non-confidential aspects of the investigation, including but not limited to: which University processes were or were not followed in relation to the event; what knowledge University leaders had about the event beforehand; and what the recommendations of the report are. Rather than attempt to sweep the incident under the rug, the University should **repair the damage** and it should delay no further in doing so.