

# Cambridge University suspends PhD student for peaceful protest

Paul Bond  
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Cambridge University has imposed an unprecedented seven-term (two-and-a-half-year) suspension on a PhD student, Owen Holland, for his part in a peaceful protest last November.

The move is a gross violation of Holland's democratic rights. It is calculated to intimidate students and counter all expressions of political dissent.

Holland's crime is to have led the collective reading of a poem against Universities Minister David Willetts. This led to Willetts's talk being cancelled. No other protester that night has been penalised in the same way. But the severity of the punishment meted out is intended to deter future protests.

Willetts was invited to speak at an event on "the idea of the university". He is the architect of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's Higher Education policies, which have seen savage budget cuts and a massive hike in student fees. He is an enthusiastic advocate of private sector involvement in Higher Education.

More than 100 protesters assembled outside the hall before the meeting. They argued that the meeting simply provided Willetts with a platform for justifying his policies. Dr. Priyamvada Gopal of Churchill College told the university newspaper *Varsity*, "There is no evidence that the event...will foster any meaningful debate or accountable decision making". Or, as Holland's poem puts it, "We interrupt your performance tonight/ because nothing is up for debate here/ your mind is made up/ you are not for turning."

Between 25 and 30 protesters, many from the group Cambridge Defend Education, entered the meeting hall. There were some scuffles with security guards. Five protesters complained of injuries inflicted as they were grabbed and dragged away.

Inside the hall, Holland began declaiming the poem,

"Go Home, David", with other protesters repeating each line. Footage of the event can be found [here](#).

The poem denounces the turning of education into a tool for business and market economics, asking Willetts, "Is it that the Brave New World/ you are trying to inaugurate/ will, in fact, preclude scholarship?"

It continued, "So we understand/ that you do not want us to think/ too rigorously, or too critically./ So go on:/ lobotomise us./ Tell us that we are beyond the pale./ Make us over/ into the drones and ciphers/ of your economy./ Your world will be the poorer."

The poem can be read in full [here](#).

The organisers were forced to call off the meeting and locked the hall.

Cambridge University Students Union (CUSU) moved quickly to distance itself from the protest. President Gerard Tully's official statement began by defending the protest before the meeting, saying it was "entirely right that students and academics" protest against a Higher Education policy "which is actively damaging to the quality of education that Cambridge (and other universities) offer and creates an unfair financial barrier to students from the broadest backgrounds aspiring to University".

But he went on to claim that the meeting had offered students "the opportunity and choice to hear and question Mr. Willetts", and that the protests had prevented this. CUSU, he wrote, "cannot support this":

"Freedom of expression is one of the founding principles of University education—no matter how objectionable the views being espoused are. Students believe in this principle and so does CUSU, so we cannot support any protest that violates it—which the disruption of David Willetts' talk tonight clearly did".

The spurious claims of the CUSU chimed perfectly

with the persecution of Holland. The University Advocate and the University began disciplinary proceedings against him for “impeding freedom of speech”. He was charged and summoned to a hearing at the Court of Discipline.

Around 60 academics wrote to the University vice-chancellor, Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, on February 21, expressing concern that targeting one student “could reasonably be supposed to intimidate this individual”. The academics noted that more than 50 senior members of the University had signed a statement at the time that the protests were “proportionate and justified.”

The letter called on the University “not to persecute those involved in the protest” and to “strike a more appropriate balance between protecting its members’ rights to freedom of assembly and association and the right of others to freedom of speech.”

When this letter received no response, more than 60 students issued a statement to the University authorities saying that they had participated equally in the protest, and calling on the University to charge them in the same way.

The University proceeded with the charges against Holland. After a six-hour hearing, the Court of Discipline found him guilty of “recklessly or intentionally impeding free speech within the Precincts of the University.”

Where the University Advocate had been recommending suspension for one term, the Court of Discipline pressed for seven terms. To put this in context, CUSU Welfare & Rights Officer Chris Page noted that “the last time the University Court dismissed a student was for plagiarism of a thesis, and...in the past ten years the greatest punishment for a protest [has] been a £100 fine.”

There has been widespread anger at the punishment, with petitions and marches being organised in Cambridge and elsewhere across the country.

Signatories to the February 21 letter have condemned the punishment. Dr. Mete Atature expressed concern that the University “is comfortable with the idea of destroying the academic career of one of its students for reciting a poem”.

The length of the sentence, he said, suggested that those responsible for it “have fallen deep into the trap of enforcing obedience through victimisation and heavy-handed punishment.”

Professor Simon Jarvis has denounced the University Court, describing Cambridge as “a place which likes to flatter the rich and powerful, and to silence any dissent amongst its own students.”

CUSU head Tully has belatedly and cynically attempted to distance the union from the attack on Holland, calling his punishment “in no sense a fair application of justice.” Such weasel words should be met with contempt and the demand that all action taken against Holland be withdrawn immediately.



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