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The University Of Reading

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## **An Open Letter Regarding The Safety Of The Transgender Community At The University Of Reading, University Policy, and Academic Standards**

Dear Vice-Chancellor

As you are aware, Dr Holly Lawford-Smith was invited to speak at the University of Reading on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2022 in a lecture titled ‘Who put the GI in SOGI?’.

The topic of her discussion—the exclusion of transgender conversion therapy from conversion therapy bills—is of concern to a significant number of students and staff of the University, as evidenced by the number of complaints that the Diversity and Student Complaints departments have, and will in all probability, continue to receive. This is further evidenced by the protest held on the 25th itself with over 80 organisers and attendees coming together in under 48 hours’ notice, which succeeded in attracting press attention<sup>12</sup>.

We believe inviting a speaker to discuss this topic is in violation of several previous statements and policies laid out by the University, including Harassment and Bullying policies, #NeverOK guidelines, and the External Speaker Code of Conduct.

The University defines harassment as “unwanted behaviour that is offensive or makes someone feel distressed, degraded or intimidated” and bullying as “offensive, intimidating, or malicious behaviour which can be physical, verbal and non-verbal (e.g. via text or social media)”<sup>3</sup>. The University determines harassment as “defined by the reasonable perception of the complainant’ rather than the ‘intent of the person causing offence”.

Dr Lawford-Smith’s views that Transgender people should not be protected from conversion therapy, a practice considered torture by the United Nations, creates a hostile environment for trans students and staff within Lawford-Smith’s own talks, and across the wider campus and community. The University has an obligation to the safety and well-being of its students. Inviting the promotion of anti-trans rhetoric is not in accord with this obligation.

We recognise that the precise text of an address cannot always be known in advance and that Dr Lawford-Smith was instructed to adhere to the external speakers code of conduct.

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<sup>1</sup><https://rdg.today/lgbtq-rights-groups-criticise-reading-unis-conversion-therapy-lecture/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.readingchronicle.co.uk/news/20092109.University-reading-accused-platforming-transphobia/>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.reading.ac.uk/essentials/The-Important-Stuff/Values-and-Behaviours/Equality>

However as feared, she did not do so. Furthermore it is our view that it was entirely predictable that discussion on such a topic carried high risk of a policy breach.

The External Speaker Code of Conduct requires speakers not ‘discriminate against or harass any person or group on the grounds of sex; *gender reassignment*; race, nationality or ethnicity; disability; religious or other similar belief; sexual orientation; marriage or civil partnership; pregnancy or maternity or age’. Arguing for the exclusion of trans people from the protection under the Conversion Therapy (Prohibition) Bill<sup>4</sup> is tantamount to encouraging discrimination against trans people, as well as disregarding their right to safety. It is our belief that, due to this, Dr Lawford-Smith is clearly in violation of this code of conduct, and in inviting Dr Lawford-Smith to argue for the exclusion of transgender and gender-nonconforming people from this bill, the University of Reading has knowingly enabled a violation of its own rules for conduct.

Dr Lawford-Smith’s position encourages the endangerment of transgender people, frames their gender identity as mental illness, and reinforces transphobia. In the lecture itself, Dr Lawford-Smith refused to acknowledge gender expression, intentionally and repeatedly referred to individuals by the wrong sexuality, gender, and used incorrect pronouns: referring to transgender persons in heterosexual relationships as if they were cisgender homosexuals. This amounts to harassment under both the UK Equality Act 2010<sup>5</sup> and the University’s policies. Dr Lawford-Smith refused to acknowledge papers that treat gender expression appropriately, an act of academic dishonesty.

We acknowledge the topic of conversion therapies as a valid subject for a balanced, academic debate. It is subject to both political debate and judicial scrutiny at present. This talk was not however presented as an academic debate, but as an experienced authority providing their perspective on how the law should be. While it may be possible—though difficult—to host such a debate without also breaching the rights of students and staff within an environment free from harassment and discrimination, the talk given made no such attempt at this.

The particular choice of Dr Lawford-Smith as a speaker, and by an equally controversial member of the Reading Faculty, was never going to promote appropriate and inclusive academic debate. Over 1400 students signed a letter to the University of Melbourne to condemn Dr Lawford-Smith’s transphobia and the transphobic website she hosts. This controversy was clear from the outset. Staging the ‘Who put the GI in Sogi?’ at the University of Reading, and publicly defending it when questioned<sup>6</sup>, is irresponsible, dangerous, and

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<sup>4</sup><https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2939>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

<sup>6</sup><https://twitter.com/UniofReading/status/1518566682859655168>

transphobic.

Because access to the lecture required emailing a professor it was also in breach of another of the University's policies: any presented ideas must be 'open to challenge and question'. The presented ideas were not 'open to challenge and question' as the lecture was a closed event. Not only does the lecture encourage the endangerment of a minority group, but it does so without the opportunity for open scrutiny. While it might be said that any person who wished to attend could have sent notice to the professor, this would for many of the concerned parties, mean disclosing in full their identities and contact details to a person who has leaked such information publicly in the past<sup>7</sup>. In addition to this, the lecture had three security guards outside the lecture hall, and two at each door. These guards asked for identification from all students entering, providing an additional entry barrier that is not typically present for talks at the University, creating a hostile environment and preventing any *open* challenge or questioning of Dr Lawford-Smith.

Concerns about the lecture were raised prior to the event and were met with no action. We encourage the University to remedy Dr Lawford-Smith's and its own breach of conduct. We also ask the University carefully considers the invitation of future guest speakers and the discussions both the University and the speaker facilitates. We specifically encourage due diligence to be taken in researching previous controversial incidents with speakers before an invitation is sent.

We also call upon the University to publicly reaffirm its commitment to the rights of all individuals, including transgender and gender-nonconforming people, to experience their University life in a safe manner, free from discrimination and harassment.

We look forward to hearing the University's response, the measures put in place to ensure breaches of your policies do not occur again, and your actions to remedy the breaches which have already occurred.

University of Reading, Trans Vigil.

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9736211/Professor-shares-letter-Reading-student-warning-gender-critical-talks-problematic.html>