

Prof. Paul Wellings,
Vice-Chancellor,
Lancaster University,
Lancaster. LA1 4YW.
Date:.....

Dear Professor Wellings,

I am concerned that the university is bringing criminal charges against six students and members of the local community for peacefully protesting against the Corporate Venturing Conference held in the George Fox Building on 10th September 2004. I understand that the university has taken the view that the protestors were trespassers in order that it can bring criminal charges of Aggravated Trespass against them. The university cannot hide behind the statement that it believes the protest was a criminal act, because the university effectively creates the offence of Aggravated Trespass by regarding the protestors as trespassers. This amounts to the criminalisation of peaceful protest, and is not the sort of action that a university with a reputation for free thinking should undertake.

The aim of the Corporate Venturing Conference was to forge links between Lancaster University and north-west industries. Several activists entered the conference to protest against the commercialisation of university research, and the human rights and environmental track records of some of the companies represented at the conference. The protestors unfurled banners and attempted to address the conference but were quickly removed from the conference room, after which they continued to protest outside.

The right to freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the university has a moral and legal duty to ensure freedom of expression, even where the views expressed are critical of university policies or activities. If the university is to collaborate with companies with long histories of human rights abuses and environmental destruction, such as BAE Systems and Shell, then it has a duty to allow and even facilitate the expression of views opposing those companies and the university's involvement with them. In this case, the protestors were in fact representing views held by a wide section of the public, and were drawing attention to issues of serious ethical concern. It is wrong, and in the long term counterproductive, for an academic institution to ignore such concerns, let alone to prosecute those who raise them.

Furthermore, it is offensive to Quakers that the building which bears the name of one of their founders was used to house a conference attended not only by arms manufacturers and Ministry of Defence officials, but companies whose human rights records leave a lot to be desired. The Quakers in Lancaster did in fact express concern to the university in 2000 about a recruiting seminar to be held in the George Fox Building at which BAE Systems were represented, and the university agreed at that time to move the event to another venue. The university has clearly continued to act insensitively in its use of the George Fox Building. The university has also failed to grasp the wider implications of associations with unethical companies: on the one hand it strives to promote fair trade goods and to become a fair trade campus, whilst on the other hand it actively builds links with companies associated with human rights and environmental abuse. I understand that the local Green Party councillors have pledged their support to those being prosecuted, and that the Students' Union has also passed a motion condemning the prosecution.

Why is the university regarding the protest as an act of trespass? I would ask you to take a tolerant approach towards people who exercise their freedom of speech to raise serious ethical issues on campus, even where this causes inconvenience to the university. I strongly urge the university to stop treating the protest in the George Fox Building as an act of trespass, thereby removing the possibility of criminal proceedings. Until this happens, I shall certainly be advising my friends and family not to consider study at Lancaster University because of its attitude towards those who engage in protest.

Yours sincerely,

Name:.....

Address:.....

.....

.....