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UCL’s decision to cut ties with Stonewall is not about ‘impartiality’ – it is an attack on trans inclusion

A little before Christmas last year, UCL made the decision to [withdraw from their partnership with Stonewall](#), a well-known charity advocating for LGBTQ+ rights – becoming the first university in the country to do so. The university has withdrawn from the charity’s [Workplace Equality Index](#), which rates LGBTQ+ inclusion at workplaces, as well as its [Diversity Champions programme](#), which is responsible for conducting trainings and reviewing inclusion policies.

According to the university’s management and Academic Board, this decision was made because of concerns about “[inhibiting academic work and discussion within UCL about sex and gender identity](#)” and “academic freedom and freedom of speech”. What becomes apparent is that the conversation on transgender rights is increasingly being framed around ideas of freedom of speech and impartiality, as in the case of the BBC’s withdrawal [from the same programme](#) last year. Ties to Stonewall are not the only way to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ (and specifically transgender) students. However, when this news is placed in the context of [increased attacks on the organisation for its support of trans rights](#), it is understandable that LGBTQ+ students would not feel safe on campus.

These concerns about ‘free speech’ are situated in a context where a ‘culture war’ against transgender people has been propagated by the British press, the flames of which continue to be fanned by such actions. In the coverage of [the campaign to sack Kathleen Stock and her subsequent resignation](#), as well as [the de-platforming of Jo Phoenix](#), it is hard to see how some media outlets are maintaining a balanced perspective, with many of them selectively giving attention to transphobic views and individuals. In a [piece](#) by the *Daily Mail* that was supposed to be about Jo Phoenix, the case of a man attacking two women in a women’s-only prison after entering it under a “transgender persona” is highlighted, while the fact that 11 transgender prisoners were assaulted in 2019 is only afforded a single sentence in the article. In a similar vein, Kathleen Stock was [profiled by The Guardian](#), in a piece that is largely sympathetic to her and does not even attempt to challenge some of the claims she makes. If free speech is truly under attack, as many trans-exclusionary feminists would claim, would the coverage of their views be given such care, understanding, and nuance?

It is also evident that these concerns are not reflective of the mood on campus. In response to the decision, groups including the [UCL SU](#) and [Out@UCL](#), the university’s student and staff LGBTQ+ network, have shared statements, and a [petition](#) calling for the university to rejoin the schemes has been signed by nearly 2000 staff, students, and alumni. If Stonewall championing trans rights was truly viewed by the majority as a threat to students and academics being able to have honest, open conversations, it is unlikely that there would have been such opposition to UCL cutting ties with the charity.

Perhaps even more fundamentally, it’s important to consider whether “academic freedom” in the face of oppression should even be considered so crucial. According to a 2018 report, [one in three UK employers would not hire a trans person](#) and, in a [2021 report by Galop](#), 4 in 5 respondents had experienced a form of transphobic hate-crime. The Gender Recognition Act has yet to be reformed, in spite of [calls for change from the Women and Equalities Committee](#), and trans people continue to be excluded from the healthcare they need. When a leading institution turns its back on trans students and staff by withdrawing from an equalities programme as they are being increasingly victimised across the country, it cannot be viewed as a ‘neutral act’. A real commitment to free speech would not shut out advocates for trans rights and then blame them for undermining “academic debates about sex and gender identity”.

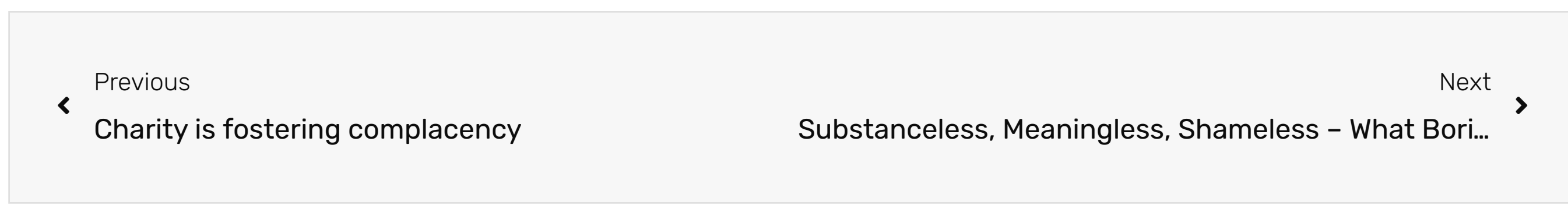
While it may seem irrelevant to LSE, UCL’s decision sets a precedent that puts our own LGBTQ+ community at risk. At a time where such marginalisation is becoming more and more commonplace, institutions can either support LGBTQ+ individuals wholeheartedly, or they can continue to exclude them from academic and professional settings. If UCL wants to “[re-double \[their\] work around LGBTQ+ equality and inclusion](#)”, perhaps they should start listening to the students, staff, and alumni that are warning them against this decision.

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