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PRESS RELEASE

Nottingham University Students and Staff Express Serious Concerns about Recent Use of Terrorism Act on Campus and Demand Academic Freedom

Following six days in police custody under the Terrorism Act, two well-known and popular members of the University of Nottingham – a student and a member of staff – were released without charge on Tuesday, 20 May. Students and staff wish to express grave concerns about the operation on a number of grounds.

1. Academic freedom

The arrests were in relation to alleged 'radical material', which the student was apparently in possession of for research purposes. Lecturers in the student's department, as well as academics throughout the university, are deeply concerned about the ramifications of this arrest for academia and political research. An academic who is familiar with the arrested student explained that his research topic was about contemporary political issues that are highly relevant to current foreign policy. The criminalisation of this kind of research is an extremely worrying sign for academic freedom, suggesting sharp limits to what may be researched at university.

2. Racism and Islamophobia

One of the officers who was involved in interviewing academic staff openly stated that: "This would never have happened if the student had been white." It seems that the over-zealous nature of the operation, causing great injury and distress to the students, their family, and friends, was spurred on by the ethnicity and religious background of the students involved. Police behaviour during the operation, including the targeting of ethnic minorities for questioning, also suggested institutional racism. When the arrest is put within the wider context of heightened 'security' measures, police harassment of Muslims, and widespread curtailments to civil liberties, a sinister picture of the political climate created by recent terrorism legislation emerges.

3. Use of Terrorism Act to target political activists

During questioning, the police regularly attempted to collate information about student activism and peaceful campaigning. They asked numerous questions about the student peace magazine 'Ceasefire', and other political student activities. The overt police presence on campus, combined with increased and intimidating police presence at peaceful demonstrations, has created a climate of fear amongst some students. Many saw the operation as a message from the police that they are likely to arrest those who have been engaged in peaceful political activities. There is widespread concern in the community that the police are criminalising peaceful activists using terrorism legislation, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005.

4. Behaviour of the university

Many of the university's statements during this time have concerned and angered students and academics. Amidst the great amount of rhetoric that the university put out during this period, supporting the police and assuming guilt of its own students, it also spoke of stopping groups or individuals who "unsettle the harmony of the campus." This appeared to be a direct reference to recent, peaceful student activism and protest, suggesting that the university is willing to clamp down on political protest using the Terrorism Act 2000 and the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005. One politics lecturer suggested that the university had called the police onto campus with the ultimate aim of creating a "depoliticised" body of students and academics. Throughout this period, the university has continually ignored the fear caused by police presence and investigation into legitimate political activities, the concern of staff and students about the criminalisation of research, the racist and Islamophobic nature of the police action, and the worrying indication that the university provided intelligence on its own members, possibly racially profiling its staff and students.

Academics and students from across the University of Nottingham, and members of the public from the wider community, are calling for:

- a) The guaranteed right to academic freedom

- b) An end to the criminalisation of political research
- c) An end to police and university racism and Islamophobia and the full assertion of civil rights and liberties on campus

We demand that the University of Nottingham publicly:

- a) Acknowledges the disproportionate nature of the police response, and makes a formal complaint to the police
- b) Acknowledges the unreserved innocence of the student and staff member in question
- c) Apologises for the great distress caused to them, their families, and their friends
- d) Guarantees academic and political freedom on campus
- e) Declares its commitment to freedom of speech and freedom of expression on campus

[ENDS]

Notes for editors:

The two men were arrested on Wednesday 14 May, 2008 in the morning. They were held for six days whilst a thorough investigation involving their families and friends was carried out. They were released without charge on Tuesday 20 May, 2008 in the afternoon. One was immediately re-arrested on immigration charges.

The above document will be circulated in the form of a petition over the next week, to be signed by professors, lecturers, university staff, students, and members of the wider community.

Member of the Nottingham community will be organising an ongoing campaign against the improper and vindictive use of terrorism legislation, in conjunction with solicitors, barristers, civil liberties experts, academics, students, and members of the public.

For more information please contact staffandstudents@gmail.com.