Dear Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology,

We are writing to express our anger and disappointment at the <u>speech given by the Secretary of</u> <u>State for Science, Innovation and Technology at the Conservative Party Conference 2023</u>, and <u>accompanying posters and social media posts</u>. These state that government policy will be '*kicking woke ideology out of science*' and that '*Conservatives are safeguarding scientific research from the denial of biology and the steady creep of political correctness*.' This was described as a plan "*to depoliticise science*".

We are extremely concerned about both the content and possible implications of the speech, and what it says about the government's views on both science policy and inclusion. We address these directly as follows:

- 'Woke ideology' / 'Creep of political correctness'. We assume that this refers to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives such as AthenaSwan, the Race Equality Charter and others. Multiple sources of evidence highlight that women, some ethnic minorities, disabled people and those of lower socioeconomic status are underrepresented in science <sup>1</sup>. This represents a loss and overall deficit of scientific talent from the UK workforce. The recent parliamentary inquiry into this issue concluded that "The Government should make improving diversity and inclusion in STEM—and indeed in all aspects of society—a central part of its day-to-day activities and future agenda." and made 26 conclusions and recommendations to achieve a more representative UK scientific workforce<sup>2</sup>. EDI initiatives are not some fringe ideology, but are key priorities for scientific institutions including UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and The Royal Society and multiple professional scientific bodies <sup>3</sup>. Research shows that diverse scientific and corporate teams are more productive and have higher impact than homogenous groups 4-8. This is not political correctness. It is integral to ensuring UK science is inclusive of talent from a diverse range of backgrounds, and can maximise its contribution to the UK economy and global scientific standing. Inviting hostility to efforts to diversify science runs counter to the government's own Research and Development (R&D) people and culture strategy<sup>9</sup> which highlights the importance of "attracting, developing and retaining diverse people". The Secretary of State's position thus puts the ambition to "cement the UK's place as a science and technology superpower"<sup>10</sup> at risk.
- 'Denial of biology'. From the Secretary of State's speech it is clear that this refers to the government's increasing adoption of policies that put the lives and wellbeing of trans people at risk. When it comes to sex determination it is simplistic binary arguments, such as those <u>used by the Prime Minister himself</u>, that deny biology. The biology of human sex is significantly more complex than just XX chromosomes = female and XY = male. There are multiple levels of "biological sex", including genetic, anatomical, physiological and hormonal, which may not align with each other <sup>11,12</sup>. Even within genetic definitions of sex, there are multiple interacting genes involved in complex networks <sup>11–13</sup>. Sex determination at birth is on the basis of external genitalia, so does not consider the multiple factors contributing to "biological sex". Additionally, up to 1.7% of the population have Differences in Sex Development (DSD) or are intersex <sup>14</sup>. To appeal to "biological sex" as the Secretary of State has done is over-simplistic, unscientific and exclusionary rhetoric under the pretence of objectivity <sup>15</sup>.

Furthermore, as the Secretary of State acknowledges, "biological sex" and personal/social gender identity are distinct. At least 0.5% of the UK population identify as a different gender to

their sex registered at birth <sup>16</sup>. Combining DSD, intersex, non-binary and trans communities, this represents up to 1.5 million people in the UK that the government implies should be excluded from participating in biomedical, sports science and other research. Research in many contexts does not need to (nor should) restrict itself to a binary definition of sex or gender, and can be inclusive of intersex, non-binary and/or trans participants without losing scientific rigour. The Secretary of State directly criticises initiatives such as the Scottish Chief Statistician's guidance with respect to sex and gender <sup>17</sup>, but such pragmatic advice ensures accuracy in data collection and research design, and alignment with legislation including the Equality Act 2010 and the Data Protection Act 2018. We find it disturbing that over-simplistic or scientifically illiterate arguments about complex biological systems are being used to stoke so-called culture wars and make the UK increasingly hostile towards people identifying as intersex, non-binary and/or trans. Reductive and discredited biological models have been used to underpin historical and contemporary human rights abuses through scientific racism and eugenics <sup>18,19</sup>, and have no place in modern scientific inquiry.

'Safeguarding scientific research' / 'Depoliticising science'. Far from depoliticising science, this policy appears to be driven by ideology. The government is attempting to dictate how questions of sex and gender are addressed by academics. Such government interference in scientific research threatens academic freedom - a principle which the government claims to uphold <sup>20</sup>. It also contradicts the Haldane principle , enshrined in UK law, which states that decisions about how to spend research funds should be made by researchers rather than politicians <sup>21</sup>. The rhetoric displayed at the party conference is not safeguarding science, but instead putting key policy underpinnings of the UK's academic science ecosystem at risk.

Science does not happen in a vacuum. Science is designed, funded, and conducted by people, and has real impacts on individuals and society. To meet the significant global challenges we face from healthcare to environmental sustainability to realising the potential of AI, we need diverse teams of scientists and other experts who can develop evidence-based, ethical and socially responsible solutions that positively benefit everyone. This culture needs to be embedded in all stages of scientific education and training, and in the scientific infrastructure of journals, funders and professional bodies. Disability, sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status and cultural background should not be a barrier to participation in science. Everyone should be included in science, protected from abuse in the name of science, and benefit from the products of science.

Finally, we strongly challenge the claim that the government is responding to *'the legitimate concerns of the scientific community*'. The views expressed in the Secretary of State's speech do not reflect the view of UK scientists. On the contrary, many are appalled, saddened and angry that the government claims to be speaking for science in this way. Multiple professional societies have already reaffirmed their commitment to inclusivity after the Secretary of State's speech <sup>3</sup>. We add our signatures below to signal our opposition of the government's position on these issues.

A serious government would be driving forwards a bold and ambitious plan to enable UK scientists to make maximum impact, not using science as a vehicle to drive partisan arguments and dog-whistle politics. We strongly condemn both the messaging and the underlying narrative as one that does not represent the interests or needs of science, scientists or perhaps most critically, society. We also ask that the Secretary of State provides reassurance that the government is still committed to developing a diverse scientific workforce, and to safeguarding academic freedom and the Haldane principle.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Katharine Hubbard (she/her), University of Hull Dr Andrea Paterlini (he/him), University of Edinburgh Prof Rachel Oliver (she/her), University of Cambridge Dr Rebecca Williams (she/her), University of Hull Prof Christopher Jackson (he/him), Imperial College Dr Izzy Jayasinghe (she/her), The University of Sheffield

The names of signatories to the open letter are below.

- 2054 people signed the letter and gave consent for their signature to be counted.
- 1825 people gave consent for their name and details to be displayed. 229 signatories wished to remain anonymous.
- 1851 signatories are scientists or are working in a science related area.
- Of those, 1638 were UK based scientists, representing 80% of the signatures.
- A wide range of scientific fields was represented. The most common were chemistry, psychology, neuroscience, ecology, physics and microbiology.

Professor Cathy Abbott (she/her), University of Edinburgh Dr Povl Abrahamsen (he/him) Prof Nicholas Achilleos (he/him), UCL Dr Nikolai Adamski (he/him), The John Innes Centre Dr. Jeremy C. Adcock Professor David Adger (he/him), FBA, Queen Mary University of London Karen Adler, M.Sc. University of Leicester Dr Philip Adsley (he/him), Texas A&M University Dr Pearl Agyakwa Dr Amrita Ahluwalia, University of Dundee Dr Caglar Akcay (he/him), Anglia Ruskin University, UK The ALBA Network (for diversity & equity in brain sciences) Prof Martin Albrecht (he/him or they/them), King's College London Dr Felicity Alcock (she/her), Newcastle University, UK Mr Robert Alexander (he/him) University of Bristol Dr Jane Alexander (she/her) College of Staten Island/CUNY, USA Prof Michelle Alexander (she/her) Eesa Ali Robert Allen (he/him), University of Nottingham Francesca Allsop BSc, PGDip, AFHEA, RD, Wrexham University Prof Eduardo Alonso (he/him), City, University of London, UK John Altringham (he/him), Emeritus Professor of Ecology and Conservation, University of Leeds, UK Dr Ines Alvarez Rodrigo (she/her), The Francis Crick Institute, UK Dr Samuel Amsbury (He/Him), University of Sheffield, UK Iona Anderson (she/her), Imperial College London Professor Jackie Andrade Dr Andrew Cairns (he/him), Imperial College London, UK Dr Billy Andrews, University of Plymouth Mx Rei Anthony PGDip (they/them) Miss Ella Appleyard (she/her) PgDIP PCIfA Dr. Lucía Arce Cubas (she/her), University of Cambridge Miss Jodie Victoria Armand (she/her), University of Sheffield, UK. Dr Emily May Armstrong, University of Glasgow & University of Bristol, UK Michael Armstrong (they/them) Dr Heike Arnolds (she/her), University of Liverpool, UK

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