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Subject: A Call for an Independent Review into the Treatment, Support and Protection of Autistic and Neurodivergent Staff in Higher Education

18 August 2026

To: The Vice-Chancellor and Senior Leadership of the University of Cambridge

Cc: Relevant disability, equality, staff wellbeing and higher education bodies

Dear Cambridge University

The Commonwealth Disabled Peoples Forum (CDPF) extends its deepest condolences to the family, friends, colleagues and communities of Professor Jason Arday, an autistic academic and former Professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Cambridge, following his tragic death.

Professor Arday was an accomplished scholar whose work contributed significantly to conversations concerning race, inequality, higher education, social justice and inclusion.

His death has nevertheless raised profound questions about the treatment, support and protection of autistic, neurodivergent and disabled people within higher education settings.

The CDPF writes not to prejudge the circumstances surrounding Professor Arday's death, nor to attribute legal responsibility to any individual or Institution. Rather, we believe his death requires serious and transparent reflection on whether institutions are adequately protecting the dignity, wellbeing, equality and human rights of autistic and neurodivergent staff.

A Human Rights Issue

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD) establishes that disability rights are human rights.

Several provisions are particularly relevant to the treatment of disabled and neurodivergent people in higher education.

Article 5 establishes equality and non-discrimination and recognises the importance of reasonable accommodation.

Article 8 calls for action to combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to persons with disabilities.

Article 16 recognises the right of persons with disabilities to freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse.

Article 27 recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others, including the right to just and favourable conditions of work, protection from harassment and access to reasonable accommodation.

These rights must apply throughout a person's working life, including during periods of conflict, professional scrutiny, disciplinary processes, public criticism or personal crisis.

Racism, Autism and Intersectional Discrimination

Professor Arday's experience cannot be understood solely through the lens of autism or disability.

Professor Arday was also a Black academic, and the CDPF believes that the potential intersection between racism, ableism, neurodivergence and professional power must be explicitly recognised.

There has been significant public concern about the racial dimensions of the scrutiny directed towards Professor Arday. These concerns should not be dismissed or considered separately from questions about disability and neurodivergence.

Autistic and neurodivergent scholars from Black and other Global Majority backgrounds may experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, stereotyping and disadvantage.

The CDPF therefore believes that any meaningful review must consider whether racialised scrutiny, racial stereotypes and the intersection of race and neurodivergence contributed to the intensity or nature of the professional and public attention Professor Arday experienced.

Institutions must understand that a person's experience of discrimination cannot always be separated neatly into individual categories. Race, disability, neurodivergence and other forms of inequality can intersect and compound one another.

Media Scrutiny and Psychological Harm

The CDPF fully recognises the fundamental importance of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Journalists have a legitimate role in investigating institutions and holding individuals and organisations accountable. However, freedom of expression must coexist with responsibility.

In the digital age, an individual can become the focus of an extraordinary cycle of reporting, commentary, speculation, social-media amplification and public condemnation. The cumulative impact can be profoundly different from any single article, post or comment. This raises an important question:

When does legitimate public-interest scrutiny become sustained humiliation, harassment or psychological harm?

The CDPF is not suggesting that legitimate journalism should be restricted, nor is it making a finding that media coverage caused Professor Arday's death. Rather, we believe society must be willing to examine the potential consequences of sustained public scrutiny, particularly when the individual concerned is disabled, neurodivergent or otherwise vulnerable to disproportionate social and professional pressures. Accountability and humanity must coexist.

The Responsibility of Cambridge University

Universities are workplaces, educational institutions and communities. Their responsibilities towards disabled and neurodivergent staff must therefore extend beyond recruitment.

Meaningful inclusion requires accessible communication, reasonable accommodation, appropriate workload considerations, protection from discrimination and harassment, psychologically safe working environments and trusted mechanisms through which staff can seek assistance. Support should not only become available once an individual reaches a crisis point.

Prevention must be part of inclusion.

The responsibility to protect staff does not end at the university's physical or digital workplace.

Where an employee becomes the subject of extraordinary and sustained public and media scrutiny, particularly where that employee is disabled or neurodivergent, the University should have mechanisms to assess the potential impact on that individual's wellbeing and to provide appropriate support and protection.

Cambridge could not control what journalists or members of the public chose to publish. However, the University had a responsibility to consider whether Professor Arday was experiencing an exceptional level of pressure and whether additional measures, reasonable accommodations, welfare support or other protections were necessary.

An employer's responsibility to support a disabled employee does not disappear when the source of the pressure comes from outside the institution.

The CDPF believes universities must have clear procedures for responding when external media attention, online harassment or public scrutiny creates a significant risk to the wellbeing of a disabled or neurodivergent member of staff.

This is particularly relevant *to Article 16 of the UNCRPD*, concerning protection from exploitation, violence and abuse, and *Article 27*, concerning the right to work in just and favourable conditions and to be protected from harassment.

The question for Cambridge is therefore not whether it could have prevented the media from reporting on Professor Arday.

The question is whether everything reasonably possible was done to protect and support an autistic member of its academic community who was experiencing extraordinary public pressure.

For autistic academics in particular, institutional systems should recognise that communication, sensory environments, workplace expectations and crises may create barriers that are not experienced in the same way by non-autistic colleagues.

The responsibility cannot rest entirely on the individual to repeatedly disclose, explain and advocate for their needs.

The CDPF's Call to the University of Cambridge

The Commonwealth Disabled Peoples Forum respectfully calls upon the University of Cambridge to consider an independent and transparent review of the systems available to autistic, neurodivergent and disabled staff.

Such a review should examine:

1. Whether reasonable accommodations are accessible, effective and consistently implemented.
2. Whether autistic and neurodivergent staff have access to appropriate wellbeing and crisis support.
3. Whether staff have safe and confidential mechanisms through which to raise concerns.
4. How the University responds when a disabled or neurodivergent staff member becomes subject to extraordinary media or online scrutiny.
5. Whether existing policies adequately address discrimination, harassment and psychological safety.
6. Whether institutional procedures are accessible to autistic and neurodivergent staff.
7. Whether the University's policies and practices reflect the principles *of Articles 5, 8, 16 and 27 of the UNCRPD*.
8. Whether autistic and neurodivergent staff -particularly those from Global Majority backgrounds are meaningfully involved in developing the policies and support systems that affect them.
9. Whether stronger independent mechanisms are required to support disabled staff when institutional processes themselves become a source of significant distress.

A Wider Commonwealth Responsibility

This issue extends beyond Cambridge. Universities throughout the Commonwealth employ thousands of disabled and neurodivergent academics and professional staff. The CDPF therefore believes that Professor Arday's death should encourage universities, governments and other institutions to examine whether their policies genuinely uphold the principles of the UNCRPD.

We should not wait for another tragedy before asking whether our systems are working.

We should not require an autistic academic to reach breaking point before meaningful support becomes available. And inclusion should not be measured simply by whether autistic people are allowed through the door.

True inclusion means creating environments in which autistic and neurodivergent people can belong, participate, contribute and thrive.

Professor Arday's Legacy

Professor Arday's life and contribution to higher education should not be reduced to the controversy surrounding the final period of his life.

He was an autistic academic who achieved extraordinary things in a system that has historically excluded many people who think, communicate and experience the world differently.

His life and death should compel institutions to examine whether they are genuinely prepared to support autistic people not only in moments of achievement, but also during periods of vulnerability and crisis.

We must be able to hold people accountable without destroying their humanity, able to investigate without humiliating and disagree without dehumanising.

The UNCRPD provides a human-rights framework for achieving this. The responsibility now lies with institutions to ensure that these principles exist not merely on paper, but in the everyday experiences of disabled people.

The CDPF therefore calls for meaningful reflection, independent scrutiny and concrete action to ensure that the dignity, equality, safety and human rights of autistic, neurodivergent and disabled staff are protected.

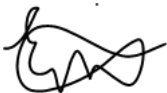
Professor Jason Arday's life mattered. His contribution mattered. His humanity mattered.

The CDPF extends its deepest condolences to his family, friends, colleagues and all those who knew and loved him.

May his legacy become a catalyst for meaningful and lasting change.

Issued on behalf of the Commonwealth Disabled Peoples Forum

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emile Gouws', with a stylized, cursive script.

Dr Emile Gouws

Representative of underrepresented groups