The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London  SW1A 2AA

The Rt Hon. James Cleverly
Secretary of State
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
King Charles Street
London  SW1A 2AH

28 September 2022

Dear Prime Minister Elizabeth Truss,
Dear Foreign Secretary James Cleverly,

We, the undersigned academics, students and university/college employees, are writing to request urgent action on the case of University of Leeds PhD candidate and Saudi women’s rights activist Salma al-Shehab, who has recently been sentenced in Saudi Arabia to 34 years in prison solely for her peaceful activity on Twitter.

Salma, a 34-year-old mother of two children, is a dental hygienist and PhD student at Leeds University in the United Kingdom, where she has been resident. She was arrested on 15 January 2021 while on holiday in Saudi Arabia, and subjected to solitary confinement and lengthy sessions of questioning over 285 days before finally being brought to court.

In April 2022, she was sentenced to six years in prison, after an already grossly unfair trial. However, following an appeal in the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) her sentence was extended on 9 August 2022 to 34 years, to be followed by a 34 year travel ban. This is the longest known sentence ever issued to a peaceful activist in Saudi Arabia.

The charges against Salma related solely to her peaceful activity on Twitter, in which she tweeted in favour of women’s rights and basic freedoms in Saudi Arabia, as well as in support of fellow Saudi women’s rights activists such as Loujain al-Hathloul.

Salma’s sentence follows straight after the recent diplomatic rehabilitation of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman, who had been largely shunned since the state-sponsored killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. It shows that the Saudi leadership should continue to be held at arm’s length until the authorities demonstrate genuine commitment to human rights. Despite their constant rhetoric of reform and support for women’s rights, the Saudi authorities have shown themselves to be hellbent as ever on crushing any form of peaceful dissent – and Western leaders’ embrace of Mohammed bin Salman makes them feel empowered to do so.

We cannot stay silent in the face of such repression, and the UK, as a close ally of Saudi Arabia, has considerable leverage that it can use. We therefore ask you, Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, to: 
● secure immediate British consular access to Salma al-Shehab;
● make immediate representations to your Saudi counterparts to help secure her immediate release and the quashing of her conviction; and
● issue a public statement condemning the Saudi authorities’ imprisonment and sentencing of Salma al-Shehab.

Salma should be looking forward, like us, to the new academic year, instead of languishing behind bars for the ‘crime’ of tweeting her legitimate opinions. She must be freed, reunited with her family, and allowed to finish her PhD in the UK.

We look forward to your prompt response on this critical issue.

Signatories below:

1. Zara-Angela Abbas, Demonstrator, University of Roehampton
2. Michael Abberton, UCU Branch President, University of Cambridge
3. Philip Abbot, EAP Lecturer, Northumbria University
4. Samer Abdelnour, Senior Lecturer, University of Edinburgh
5. Allen Abramson, Senior Lecturer, University College London
6. Professor Gilbert Achcar, Professor of Development Studies and International Relations, SOAS, University of London
7. Elisabetta Adami, Associate Professor of Multimodal Communication, University of Leeds
8. Richard Adams, Research Manager, University of Nottingham
9. Professor Katharine Adeney, Professor of Comparative Politics, University of Nottingham
10. Michael Akinlabi, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Northumbria University
11. Umberto Albarella, Professor of Archaeology, University of Sheffield
12. Dr Sarah Alderson, Associate Professor in Primary Care, University of Leeds
13. Dr Anne Alexander, Research Associate, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge
14. Marie Allègre, PhD Candidate & Language Tutor, University of Birmingham
15. Richard Laurence Allwright, Retired Lecturer, Lancaster University
16. Margaret Ames, Senior Lecturer, Aberystwyth University
17. Naomi Anderson Whittaker, Library Customer Services Assistant, University of Leeds
18. Michael Anderson, Professor Emeritus, University of Kent
19. Christopher Andrew, Web Developer, University of York
20. Jon Andrews, Academic Skills Advisor, University of Birmingham
21. Dr Madawi al-Rasheed, Visiting Professor at the Middle East Centre, London School of Economics
22. Alexandra Arntsen, Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University
23. Dr William Astle, University Senior Lecturer and Cambridge UCU Branch Treasurer, University of Cambridge
24. Daniel Avery, Data Analyst, University of Oxford
25. Flavio Azevedo, Associate Researcher, University of Cambridge
26. Dr Freya Bailes, Associate Professor in Music Psychology, University of Leeds
27. Laura Bailey, Research Assistant, University of Leeds
28. Dr Maud Bailey, Lecturer, University of Edinburgh
29. Jessica Bailey, Research Associate, University of Sheffield
30. Phil Baker, Lecturer, Loughborough College
31. Dr. A. Bala, Lecturer, Oxford Brookes University
32. Dr Ruth Ballardie, Senior Lecturer; Co-Chair University of Greenwich UCU branch, University of Greenwich
33. Randy Banks, Retired, University of Essex
34. Ella Barker, PhD Student, University of York
35. Dr Yvonne Barnard, Lecturer, University of Leeds
36. Patricia Bartley, Fellowship Coordinator, University of York
37. Katharina Becker, PhD Student, University of Exeter
38. Helen Beebee, Professor of Philosophy of Science, University of Leeds
39. Rebecca Beeken, Associate Professor, University of Leeds
40. Dr Sandra Bell, Lecturer, University of Leeds
41. Rosemary Betterton, Emeritus Professor in Women's Studies, Lancaster University
42. Dr Lia Betti, Senior Lecturer in Health Sciences, University of Roehampton
43. Gregorio Bettiza, Senior Lecturer, University of Exeter
44. Sam Betts-Davies, PhD Student, University of Leeds
45. Dr Luke Bhatia, Lecturer in International Politics, Department of Politics, University of Manchester
46. Nazlin Bhimani, Research Support & Special Collections Librarian, UCL IOE
47. Andreas Bieler, Professor of Political Economy, University of Nottingham
48. Eugenia Bilbao-Goyoaga, PhD Candidate, London School of Economics
49. Francesca Bisby, Lecturer, Hull College
50. Dr Helena Bonett, Postdoctoral Researcher, Kingston University
51. Ruth Bookbinder, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Leeds
52. Sabah Boufkhed, Lecturer, University of Manchester
53. Emilia Boulton, Associate Lecturer, University of the Arts London
54. Ian Bradley, University of Manchester
55. Dr Stephen Bradley, National Institute of Health Research Academic Clinical Lecturer, University of Leeds
56. Sara Bragadina, Lecturer, University College London
57. Clara Brassard, PhD Student, University of St Andrews
58. Dr Chris H. Bryant, Lecturer, University of Salford
59. Roger Brock, Senior Lecturer in Classics, University of Leeds
60. Rachel Brown, Library Staff, University of Leeds
61. Dr Ruth Brown, Senior Lecturer, University of East London
62. Philippa Browning, Professor, University of Manchester
63. Dr. Ian Bruff, Senior Lecturer in European Politics, University of Manchester
64. Melanie Brunner, Lecturer in Medieval Studies, University of Leeds
65. Angharad Butler-Rees, Research Fellow, University of Warwick
66. Helen Butt, Lecturer in English for Academic Purposes, University of Leeds
67. Will Byrd, Research Assistant, LSE
68. Dr Anton Caruana Galizia, Lecturer in History, Newcastle University
69. Dr Caroline Casey, Lecturer in Management, University of York
70. John Chalcraft, Professor of Middle East History and Politics, London School of Economics
71. Dr Douglas Chalmers, Senior Lecturer, Glasgow Caledonian University
72. Duncan Chambers, Research Fellow, University of Sheffield
73. Sultan Chaudhury, Students’ Union President, University of Nottingham
74. Dr Simon Chin-Yee, Lecturer in International Development, Dept of Political Sciences, University College London
75. David Chippett, Tutor, University of York
76. Dr Tanzil Chowdhury, Senior Lecturer in Law, Queen Mary University of London
77. Andrew Chubb, Senior Lecturer, Lancaster University
78. Rachael Clark, LinkedIn Learning Project Assistant, University of Leeds
79. Pam Clarke, Researcher, University of Liverpool
80. Richard Cleminson, Professor of Hispanic Studies, University of Leeds
81. Peter Cranie, Senior Lecturer, Edge Hill University
82. Stefano Cremonesi, Associate Professor, Durham University
83. Jean Crocker, Lecturer in English for Academic Purposes (retired), Teesside University
84. Catherine Cobham, Honorary Lecturer in Arabic, University of St Andrews
85. Andy Coles, UCU Member, Manchester University (retired)
86. Naomi Collhoun, Impact and Engagement Officer, University of Leeds
87. Anita Collins, Programme Manager, Lifelong Learning Centre, University of Leeds
88. Jonathan Colman, Senior Lecturer in History, University of Central Lancashire
89. Mark Colpus, Senior Lecturer, University of Greenwich
90. Ines Cordeiro Dias, Lecturer, University of Leeds
91. Dr Michael Costen, Former Dean of Continuing Education, University of Bristol
92. Dr Christine Cornea, Associate Professor, University of East Anglia
93. Clare Cummings, PhD Student, University of Manchester
94. Steve Cushion, Senior Research Fellow, University College London
95. Jill Daniels, Senior Lecturer, University of East London
96. Dr Jane Dalton, Academic development consultant, University of Leeds
97. Giampaolo D’Alessandro, Professor, University of Southampton
98. Sally Dalton, Library Research Support Advisor, University of Leeds
99. Kevin Daws, Lecturer, City of Bristol College
100. Chris Day, Associate Lecturer, University of Exeter
101. Dr Christina Delistathi, Principal Lecturer, University of Westminster
102. Nikos Diamantis, Associate Professor, University of Nottingham
103. James Dickins, Professor of Arabic, University of Leeds
104. Chris Dietz, Lecturer in Law & Social Justice, University of Leeds
105. Richard Dixon-Payne, Retired Senior Lecturer, London Metropolitan University
106. Marketa Dolezalova, Research Fellow, University of Leeds
107. Mr C Downs, Associate Lecturer, Open University
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109. Samantha Durdy, PhD, University of Liverpool
110. Bernadette Driscoll, Teacher, College of North West London
111. Simon Dye, Senior Lecturer, University of Greenwich
112. Professor Anoush Ehteshami, Professor of International Relations, Director, Institute for Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, Durham University
113. Dr Tiina Eilola, Lecturer in Psychology, University of Leeds
114. Gayathri Eknath, PhD Student, Cardiff University
115. Charlie Ely, PhD Student, University of Leeds
116. Hadi Enayat, Associate Tutor, SOAS, University of London
117. Lee Etchels, Research Fellow, University of Leeds
118. Rosanna Evans, PhD Candidate, University of Leeds
119. Matthew Evans, Senior Lecturer in Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex
120. Anna Ferrazzano, Disability support assistant, Open University
121. Dr Irene Fernández-Molina, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, University of Exeter
122. Dr Alice Finden, Assistant Professor of International Politics, Durham University
123. Dr Julie Firmstone, Associate Professor, University of Leeds
124. Arabella Fisher, Associate Lecturer, Open University
125. Dr Peter Fletcher, Lecturer, Keele University
126. James Foley, Tutor, University of Sheffield
127. Anne Foley, Senior Lecturer, UWE Bristol
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130. Daisy Forster, Community Officer, University of Nottingham
131. Marie Fox, Lecturer, University of the Arts London
132. Robbie Foy, Professor of Primary Care, University of Leeds
133. Dr Andreas Fulda, Associate Professor, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham
134. Dr Franco Galdini, University of Manchester
135. Katherine Gallagher, Academic Programmes and Quality Adviser, University of Sheffield
136. Dr Sol Gamsu, UCU Branch President, Durham University
137. Daniel Gardener, PhD Student, University of Edinburgh
138. Adam Gargani, Teaching Fellow, Arabic Translation and Linguistics, University of Leeds
139. Jo Gate-Eastley, Senior Counsellor, Queen Mary University of London
140. Dr Catherine Gegout, Associate Professor in International Relations, University of Nottingham
141. Christelle Genoud, Research Associate, King’s College London
142. Dr Rachael Gillibrand, Lecturer in Inclusive Learning, University of Leeds
143. Peter Girling, Systems Librarian, University of Cambridge
144. Babs Gisborne, Retired Lecturer
145. Jeremy Goldberg, Reader, University of York
146. Karen Gordon, Curriculum Manager and Lecturer, Oaklands College
147. Professor Julian Goodare, Emeritus Professor of History, University of Edinburgh
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153. Dr Anthony Gorman, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Edinburgh
154. Marine Gueguin, PhD Researcher, University of Leeds
155. Astrid Haas, Research Fellow, University of Central Lancashire
156. John Habron-James, Head of Music, Health & Wellbeing, Royal Northern College of Music
157. Dr Louise Hall, Research Fellow, University of Leeds
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159. Olivia Hamlyn, Lecturer, Birkbeck, University of London
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161. Voirrey Hampson, Retired Lecturer, Edge Hill
162. Andrew Hannington, PhD Student, Cardiff University
163. Alan Harrison, Retired Lecturer, Brunel University
164. Liam Harte, Professor of Irish Literature, University of Manchester
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166. Dr Matthew Hedges, Department of Politics, University of Exeter
167. Ursula Head, Tutor, Westminster Adult Education Service
168. Deana Heath, Professor, University of Liverpool
169. Malcolm Heath, Professor of Greek Language and Literature, University of Leeds
170. John Heathershaw, Professor of International Relations, University of Exeter
171. Elane Heffernan, UCU member, University of Kent
172. Sarah Hiepler, PhD Student, University of Aberdeen
173. Margot Hill, UCU branch Secretary, Croydon College
174. (Dr) Alan Hobson, Associate Lecturer, Open University
175. Dr Daryl Hodge, Research Assistant, University of Liverpool
176. Michaela Hodges, Social Inclusion Officer, University of Warwick
177. Bella Hogeween, Coordinator, University of Glasgow
178. Daniel Hollingworth, PhD Student, Leeds Beckett University
179. Dr. Alison Hollinrake, Lecturer, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)
180. Lynda Holmes, UCU, University of Strathclyde
181. Katherine Holmes, PhD Student, Imperial College London
182. Hadewych Honné, PhD Student, University of Edinburgh
183. Heidi Hopkins, Associate Professor, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM)
184. Margherita Huntley, Lecturer and UCU rep, University of the Arts London
185. Dr Stephen Hurt, Reader in International Relations, Oxford Brookes University
186. Reinhard Huss, Retired Public Health Academic, University of Leeds
187. Joy Igiebor, Tutor, University of London
188. Elizabeth Ingleson, Assistant Professor, London School of Economics
189. Chris Inglis, Learning Support Coordinator, BIMM Bristol
190. Caroline Mary Jackson-Houlston, Retired Senior Lecturer/Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Brookes University
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196. Lewis Jones, Lecturer, London Metropolitan University
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198. Anna Judson, Assistant Professor (Teaching), Durham University
199. Lesley Kane, Associate Lecturer, Open University
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207. Michael Kenna, Tutor, Offender Learning, PeoplePlus
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209. Deniz Kesici, PhD Candidate, University of Sheffield
210. Dr Alexandra Kokoli, Senior Lecturer in Visual Culture & Programme Leader, BA Fine Art, Middlesex University London
211. Dr Alice König, Senior Lecturer, University of St Andrews
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275. Professor Catherine O'Rourke, Professor of Global Law, Durham Law School, Durham University
276. William Orr, College Lecturer, South & City College Birmingham
277. Stephen O'Sullivan, Academic English Tutor, UCU Member, Loughborough University (retired)
278. Dr Quentin Outram, Senior Lecturer, University of Leeds
279. Catherine Paine, Strategy Delivery Unit, Durham University
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286. Kate Perris, Assistant Librarian, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
Phoenix Perry, MSc Creative Computing Course Leader, UAL Creative Computing Institute

Oliver Phillips, Professor, University of Leeds

Jordan Phizacklea-Cullen, Student Support Coordinator, University of Sheffield International College

Joanne Pickering, Research Tutor, Royal College of Art

Eva Pilis, Professor of Law, King's College London

Marco Pino, Senior Lecturer, Loughborough University

Julian Pittard, Reader in Theoretical Astrophysics, University of Leeds

Anna Pollert, Emerita Professor Of Sociology, University of the West of England

Professor Megan Povey, Professor of Food Physics, University of Leeds

Lucia Pradella, Senior Lecturer in International Political Economy, King's College London

Dr Tena Prelec, Research Associate, DPIR, University of Oxford

Alex Prichard, Associate Professor in International Political Theory, University of Exeter

Kirsty Priestley, Academic Quality and Policy Officer, Leeds Trinity University

Chrisostomos Prodromou, Senior Lecturer, University of Sussex

Rachel Proudfoot, Research Data Management Advisor, University of Leeds

Dr Sara Prot, Lecturer, Coventry University

Dr Nicole Renehan, Assistant Professor, Durham University

Dr Thomas Renstrom, Associate Professor, Durham University

Professor Nicola Pratt, Professor of the International Politics of the Middle East, University of Warwick

Ali Raiss-Tousi, Senior Lecturer, Anglia Ruskin University London

Jennifer Rivas Perez, Academic Development Consultant, University of Leeds

Owen Radford-Lloyd, Data and Systems Senior Analyst, University of Leeds

Stephen Read, Professor Emeritus of the History and Philosophy of Logic, University of St Andrews

Ana Redondo, UCU Chair Bedfordshire branch, University of Bedfordshire

Phil Reed, Teaching and Learning Librarian, University of Manchester

Dr Michael Reeve, Lecturer in History, Bishop Grosseteste University

Gwendolen Reilly, Professor, University of Sheffield

Suzanne Richards, Professor of Health Services Research, University of Leeds

Kate Richardson, Faculty Education and Student Experience Manager, University of Sheffield

Kester Richardson-Dawes, Committee Member QMUL UCU, Queen Mary University of London

Adrian Rixon, Senior Engineer, Cardiff University

Gary Robertshaw, Lecturer, Open University

Olivia Robinson, Lecturer, University of Birmingham

Dr Claudia Rogers, Academic Practice Manager, University of Leeds

Stephen Rooney, Teaching Fellow, Aston University

Maria Rosa Antognazza, Professor, King's College London

Kelli C. Rudolph, Head of the Department of Classical and Archaeological Studies, University of Kent

Seb Rumsby, Lecturer, Queen Mary University of London

Dr Amy Russell, Senior Research Fellow, University of Leeds
326. Victoria Sala Arslan, Academic Skills Tutor, University of Huddersfield
327. Constantina Sampani, Associate Professor, University of Leicester
328. Lyndon Saunders, Lecturer and Programme Leader, Salford University
329. David Schaich, Lecturer and UKRI Future Leader Fellow, University of Liverpool
330. Sabrina Schmidt, EdD Student, Plymouth University
331. Jason Scott-Warren, Professor of Early Modern Literature and Culture, University of Cambridge
332. Gary Siddall, Tutor offender learning, Novus
333. Dr Freya Sierhuis, Senior Lecturer, University of York
334. Keith Simpson, Senior Lecturer/Barrister City, University of London
335. Dr Ella Simpson, Senior Lecturer, University of Greenwich
336. Leanne Shearmur, Research Assistant, University of Leeds
337. Robert Shenton, Postgraduate Researcher, University of Leeds
338. Bethany Shiner, Senior Lecturer, Middlesex University London
339. Jessica Sklair, Lecturer, Queen Mary University of London
340. Vasileios Skliris, Research Associate, Cardiff University
341. Holly Smith, Lecturer in Higher Education, University College London
342. Joanne Smith Finley, Reader in Chinese Studies, Newcastle University
343. Dr Rasha Soliman, Associate Professor, University of Leeds
344. James Souter, Lecturer in Political Theory and International Politics, University of Leeds
345. Professor Andy Stafford, Professor of French and Critical Theory, University of Leeds
346. Kate Steel, Lecturer, UWE Bristol
347. Dr David Steenson, Senior Lecturer in Electronics, University of Leeds
348. Dr Stacia Stetkiewicz, Assistant Professor, University of Nottingham
349. Professor Helen Steward, Professor of Philosophy of Mind and Action, University of Leeds
350. Dr Rosemary Stock, Senior Lecturer, University of West London
351. Laura Stubbs, Data Manager, University of Leeds
352. Eugen Stulz, Assoc Prof Chemistry, University of Southampton
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358. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, Research Fellow, University of Manchester
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360. Dr Owen Thomas, Academic Clinical Fellow, University of Leeds
361. Nancy Thumim, Associate Professor, University of Leeds
362. Dr Ana Tiganescu, Senior Research Fellow (and mother), Leeds Institute of Clinical and Metabolic Medicine, University of Leeds
363. Matteo Tiratelli, Lecturer, University College London
364. Gemma Traviss-Turner, Lecturer in School of Medicine, University of Leeds
365. Jean-Marc Trouille, Associate Professor, University of Bradford
366. Sarah Turnbull, Main Grade Lecturer, South and City College Birmingham
367. Dr Lewis Turner, Lecturer in International Politics, Newcastle University
368. Mustafa Turus, Lecturer, City and Islington College
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<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position/Role</th>
<th>Institution/University</th>
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<tr>
<td>369</td>
<td>Adam Unwin</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>University College London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>370</td>
<td>Armando Vargas-Palacios</td>
<td>Senior Research Fellow</td>
<td>University of Leeds</td>
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<tr>
<td>371</td>
<td>Frances Varley</td>
<td>PhD Student/Associate Lecturer</td>
<td>The Courtauld Institute of Art</td>
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<td>372</td>
<td>Professor Marc Valeri</td>
<td>Associate Professor in Political Economy of the Middle East</td>
<td>University of Exeter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>373</td>
<td>Dr Anne Velenturf</td>
<td>Senior Research Fellow</td>
<td>University of Leeds</td>
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<tr>
<td>374</td>
<td>Marina Vishmidt</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Goldsmiths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>375</td>
<td>Dr Nicole Votruba</td>
<td>Senior Research fellow</td>
<td>University of Oxford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>376</td>
<td>Gill Walker</td>
<td>Acquisitions &amp; Reading Lists Assistant</td>
<td>University of Leeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>377</td>
<td>Chloe Wallace</td>
<td>UCU Branch President</td>
<td>University of Leeds</td>
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<tr>
<td>378</td>
<td>Sean Wallis</td>
<td>Principal Research Fellow</td>
<td>Survey of English Usage, University College London</td>
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<td>379</td>
<td>Gina Walter</td>
<td>PhD Candidate and Teacher</td>
<td>University of Bristol</td>
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<td>380</td>
<td>Lena Wånggren</td>
<td>Teaching Fellow</td>
<td>University of Edinburgh</td>
</tr>
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<td>381</td>
<td>Kevin Ward</td>
<td>Student Welfare Adviser</td>
<td>Middlesex University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>382</td>
<td>Aidan Westwood</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>University of Leeds</td>
</tr>
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<td>383</td>
<td>Emily Wheeler</td>
<td>Learning Advisor</td>
<td>University of Leeds</td>
</tr>
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<td>384</td>
<td>Giuseppe White</td>
<td>Associate Lecturer</td>
<td>Open University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>385</td>
<td>Gareth White</td>
<td>Reader in Theatre and Performance</td>
<td>Royal Central School of Speech and Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>386</td>
<td>Dr Xanthe Whittaker</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>University of Leeds</td>
</tr>
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