

## **“This feels like the start of something”: storying the 2010 Exeter Occupation**

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# “This feels like the start of something” — Storying the 2010 Exeter Occupation

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## Abstract

The University of Exeter was home to a student led occupation in November and December 2010. The occupation was a protest against education and public sector cuts and the rise in student tuition fees. It also became a site for a progressive re-presentation of the university, with the temporary space of the Exeter Free University, a publically accessible pedagogical space within the heart of the neoliberal university. This intervention emerged from a collaborative writing workshop within the Exeter Free University. Here, the storying (or, perhaps, storifying) of the Exeter Occupation is re-presented through the writing of the occupation, created at the time, in and through the emerging spaces of protest, radical pedagogy, and collective creativity. We mediate the unfolding dialogues but allow the material to speak for itself, to unfold and tell the story.

## Introduction

This intervention emerged from a collaborative writing workshop within the Exeter Free University, a progressive pedagogical space<sup>2</sup> created through a ten-day student led occupation at the University of Exeter in December 2010. The



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<sup>2</sup> I use ‘progressive’ in recognition that this went beyond radical (to attack the root cause) to imagine and prefigure something new. The Exeter Free University was open to all, anybody could teach, facilitate a workshop, skill share, or attend lectures/workshops. A flip chart was available for people to add a session and timetables publicly displayed, in the university and online.

participatory workshop focused on the possibilities and practicalities of writing *in, of, and for* the Exeter Occupation; how to Write the occupation. The workshop participants - a mixture of students, academics and non-academics, from the age of 9 years upward - decided that raw, unmediated, collaborative, and productive accounts of the occupation were already being written through the Occupation's social media: a Wordpress blog, Facebook page and Twitter feed.<sup>3</sup> To supplement the virtual spaces we also introduced an in-situ form of social media: an A5 communal journal for written reflections, *Exeter Un-cut: the stories of the Exeter Open Occupation*.

The physical spaces of assembly, practical solidarity, and prefigurative politics of the 2010 university occupations will probably remain the principal legacies, affirming the continued importance of face-to-face convergence to social movement organising (Burton, 2012). The virtual spaces of social media undoubtedly played a central role in the spread and longevity of the occupations (in Exeter and beyond), facilitating the networking of spatially dispersed groups, the mobility of tactics and affective solidarity within and between occupations. Research has documented the importance of social media as tool for local, national, and transnational organising (Pickerill, 2007) contributing to the speed and dissemination of information and garnering the practical (and affective) solidarity that underpins organising (Castells, 2001). Social media have also provided new sites for ethnographic research (Murthy, 2008) and for generating content and providing space for collaborative writing (e.g. Cook et al, 2011; Sakellariadis et al., 2008).

As active occupiers, we approach this intervention as reflective participants. The storying of the Exeter Occupation is through the narrative device of representation, mediated accounts using social media produced in and of the occupation. The majority of the material was written from within the Exeter Occupation and frequently through the use of the communal web 2.0 identities that occupiers were mandated to use if holding to the ethos of the wider occupation. This intervention, therefore, is also a 'writing story' (after Richardson 2001), accounting for the relational and more bounded spaces from which the storying emerges; acknowledging that the circumstances in which we write affects what we write (here both in and of the occupation) and that any reading will be affected by the knowledge of its construction. For the remainder of this paper we use italicised text to denote our own reflections (to add context and shape), all other text was

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<sup>3</sup> Twitter, Wordpress, and Facebook refer to trademarked web 2.0 platforms; user generated interactive sources. Twitter enables messages of 140 characters or less, which are instantly disseminated to subscribers – @ExeterOccupied had 775 followers. Facebook groups are public or closed sites where messages, video, and images, can be posted and shared; 'Exeter Occupied' was an open group with 670 friends/subscribers. Wordpress blogs, such as <http://exeteroccupation.wordpress.com/> are free, easy to edit and manage (within Europe and the US at least). Passwords for each platform were available within the occupation's main physical site.

written in and of the occupation as it unfolded between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010; nine days that ‘felt like the start of something’.

### **The Exeter Occupation: protest, solidarity & community**

*On the 30<sup>th</sup> November 2010, a national day of action against cuts to higher education (and a lifting of the cap on fees to £27k) was followed by a wave of student led occupations in universities and colleges across the UK. Within Exeter, local resistance to education cuts was initiated by students from city schools and Exeter College (a Further Education college with 11,000 students), through “a string of noisy public demonstrations” and sit-ins (Anon 2010a) (see Fig. 1). On December 6<sup>th</sup>, the principal of Exeter College cancelled an anti-cuts debate that had been organised by his students, citing concern that “many people outside the college had been invited to attend” (Anon 2010b). In response to the cancellation, College students collaborated with University Of Exeter staff and students to organise a ‘Fight the Cuts!’ event at the University the following evening (7<sup>th</sup> December), by which time 27 universities across the UK had student occupations. ‘Fight the Cuts!’ was an open assembly, where Trades Union and political representatives, students (from schools, sixth-form college, and university), university lecturers, postgraduates, and local residents addressed a number of practical considerations as to why and how local resistance could be undertaken.*



Figure 1: Demonstration in Exeter city centre & sit-in at Exeter College  
Source: Lanty Bunning aworldtwin.net 1/12/2010

*On the 8<sup>th</sup> December co-ordinated demonstrations started from the College and University, they converged in the city centre for a public rally. Guided by hundreds of circulated flyers that simply called for people to ‘Resist, Occupy, and Transform’, demonstrators marched back to the University, through the centre of the campus, and into the 350 seat ‘Newman A’ lecture theatre. This is when Exeter’s ‘open occupation’<sup>4</sup> began (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). The tuition fees vote in*

<sup>4</sup> The lecture theatre remained open; timetabled lectures continued on the proviso that they were publically accessible and started with a short statement read by and on behalf of the Exeter Occupation.

*the House of Commons took place the following day and the lecture theatre remained occupied until 17<sup>th</sup> December. Facebook and Twitter quickly became the principal means of communication between and beyond the occupiers.*



Figure 2: The first minutes of Occupation: Left, protestors sit down in Newman A allowing lecture to finish; Right, Discussions begin, blog and Facebook start. Source: Facebook 8/12/2010.

***Exeter Occupied:*** After a couple of minutes of craziness, and a very surprised lecture audience, protestors sat down quietly in spare seats and on the floor so that teaching could continue. The lecturer couldn't have taken it better, and quickly resumed advanced mathematics tuition to a swollen crowd. This was an excellent constructive start to our peaceful occupation ... With the lecture over the occupiers set to discussing what to do next: spreading the word, agreeing a statement of our position, and working out what to do with our opportunity to re-imagine what a university should be! (Facebook 8/12).

***Exeter Occupation:*** ... there are a gang of people with laptops doing some 21st century media work! (Facebook 8/12).

***Exeter Occupation:*** Welcome everyone, please invite your friends to become fans of this [Facebook] page. Photos and updates will follow! (Facebook 8/12).

***Exeter Occupation:*** Most are having a big discussion thrashing out a statement of what we stand for and what we want using consensus decision-making. It's going surprisingly well considering how many are here (Facebook 8/12).





Figure 3: Six of 51 Occupation portraits. Source: Facebook 8/12/2010

**Exeter Occupation:** Press release. A group of 144 people, comprising Exeter College students, Exeter University staff and students as well as members of the public have occupied a lecture theatre in the Peter Chalk Centre on Exeter University Campus. The occupation took place after a loud, visible and high spirited march which saw University and College students rally in Bedford Square. A list of requests have been drawn up, and those occupying are calling for a full, independent re-assessment of the spending cuts to education as well as a public statement from Exeter University Vice Chancellor and President of Universities UK, Steve Smith, affirming that he does not represent the views of staff and students at Exeter University. David, 24, an MSc student at Exeter University said, ‘this occupation is of huge symbolic importance at a time when education is under attack and it is Exeter’s Vice-Chancellor who’s leading the charge.’ A member of the public, 43, present at the occupation, said, ‘I live in Exeter and give my full support to students occupying this lecture theatre. We have to reject the cuts!’ A member of staff who wished to remain anonymous added, ‘staff at this university stand in solidarity with the students at this occupation. These cuts affect all of us and our ability to teach.’ The action is part of a wider student movement which has seen at least 27 universities occupied across the UK. Exeter students have been sending messages of support to all involved across the UK in opposing the planned education cuts, ahead of tomorrow’s crucial Commons vote [tomorrow].

Democratically drafted and agreed, Wednesday 8th December 2010:

- We call for MPs to vote against the rise in tuition fees on Thursday 9th December.
- Students of Exeter, supported by the University of Exeter Students’ Guild, oppose Higher Education cuts and the proposed fees rise.

- Students of Exeter oppose EMA/ALG<sup>5</sup> cuts, Higher Education cuts and the proposed fees rise. We call on the Exeter College Students' Union to support our action.
- We call on Steve Smith, as President of Universities UK, to issue a statement acknowledging he does not represent the opinions of a significant proportion of the Higher Education sector.
- We call for a full public inquiry into higher education reform to be undertaken by an independent body.
- We oppose the privatisation of our schools and the abolition of EMA and AIM Higher.
- We express solidarity with all who are taking peaceful action to oppose the government cuts.
- We call for the recognition of the equality of all university subjects.
- No participants will face disciplinary action by the University of Exeter, or any other body, if they take part in peaceful occupation and protest.
- We stand in solidarity with students and others globally who protest the neo-liberal cuts agenda, particularly in Education.

Signed, University of Exeter Open Occupation (Facebook 8/12).

**Matt:** Brilliant feelings of solidarity and unified direction as a set of aims and a call for student rights is agreed through a very democratic example of consensus voting... good work everyone! (Facebook 8/12)

**Mike:** Great work guys! I was wondering if Exeter was going to join the list of occupied universities (Facebook 8/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** Thanks a lot for your support! We have had at least one alumnus speaking here this afternoon (Facebook 8/12)

**Exeter Occupation:** ...being reported on the Guardian website! (Facebook 8/12)

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<sup>5</sup> The EMA and ALG were financial support mechanisms intended to enable young people and adults from low-income households to attend full-time further education courses. The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) supported 16-19 year olds to a maximum of £30 each week, the Adult Learning Grant supported those over 19 with £30 per week. The ALG ceased to exist in September 2011 and the maximum EMA payment has been reduced to £20, with lower amounts (£10, £20 per week) being abolished altogether. The loss of the EMA was an important political argument amongst the rural demographic of Exeter College students, where travel costs are high and part-time supplementary incomes less available.

**James:** I will spread the word of your efforts to the Exeter students at Tremough<sup>6</sup>. We had Exeter students at our occupation, which ended yesterday... our small group is still fighting the cuts, we just had a protest in Falmouth. You will always have our support. Solidarity from Falmouth (Facebook 8/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** Thanks, and remember that if everyone invites their friends to this page information will spread that much better. We've already got nearly 100 fans after an hour or so online! (Facebook 8/12).

**Pedyr:** From someone who helped organise the occupation of Northcote House<sup>7</sup> in 2001, wishing the current occupiers every success: build, build, build! (Facebook 9/12).

**Gary:** Well done. I've given you guys a couple of shouts out on ... local community radio in Aberdeen. Here till midnight (Facebook 8/12).

**Lizi:** Have you got requests for what you want Exeter residents (outside of the occupation) to do tomorrow to support you? People are asking... (Facebook 8/12).

**Steve:** Solidarity greetings from Tiverton - your occupation and the continuing protests against this lying, cheating, rotten government are an inspiration to workers everywhere! It reminds me of the Anti Poll-Tax movement - never forget that we defeated not only the Poll Tax, but got Thatcher removed as Prime Minister by a mass movement! YOU CAN WIN don't let anyone tell you otherwise! (Facebook 11/12).

*Occupying the University of Exeter's largest lecture theatre, a symbolic and geographically strategic site (in the centre of the main campus), was an act of direct contestation. University authorities made little attempt to resist or evict the Occupation and antagonism was most visible between participants and the wider student body. The open nature of Facebook provided a platform for student-student contestation.*

**Jamie:** Grow the hell up (Facebook 8/12).

**Matt:** An excellent and well-reasoned argument there. Well done! (Facebook 8/12).

**Jamie:** There's no point, no one here will listen, but here goes anyway <http://factsonfees.com/> (Facebook 8/12).

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<sup>6</sup> A campus in Cornwall, shared between University of Exeter and Falmouth Art College.

<sup>7</sup> University of Exeter executive offices.



**Jess:** Been on factsonfees.com ... nothing new, nothing special, and nothing to dispute the fact that the government are cutting 80% from the higher education budget making it viable to raise fees [...] The assumption that people in occupations haven't read these so called "facts" is nonsense. We've read them, we've ignored them because they don't take into account everything the government is doing on education. Reasons for fees being introduced at this level (massive gaps in funding left by cuts) not mentioned and not justified. Cuts to EMA and the problems it will cause for poorer students studying at college not mentioned or justified. Fact that the market has no place in education in any case not mentioned, unless you count a lot of meaningless business jargon. Damage done to subjects like humanities, arts and social sciences which will have their entire budgets cut not mentioned; factsonfees.com is not a reasoned argument in any way shape of form when looking at the whole debate over higher education which is what the occupations are doing. The myth that should be disproved here is that there is nothing more to this debate than raising fees (Facebook 8/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** It has come to our attention that some university students feel the occupation disrupts their study. This is not true, no lectures are disrupted and free education is offered in a consistent timetable of activity. Any students with questions or issues are welcome to come and discuss them with the friendly faces occupying Newman A! Join us! (Facebook 13/12).

**Jamie:** Thanks for the email and seeing us today. From the video further down, it looks like everyone went into and disrupted a Wednesday lecture, standing at the front chanting at them when this all started so this is not true? (Facebook 13/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** Yes we appreciate that the initial entrance to the Newman A was rather dramatic, however what is not always obvious is that we did in fact take our seats and allow the lecture to finish in silence. It was an impressive site to see! (Facebook 13/12).

### **Becoming the Exeter Free University**

*The 350-seat lecture theatre was filled as people from across the university and beyond gathered on 9<sup>th</sup> December to watch the live coverage of the Commons vote on the rise in tuition fees and the unfolding protests taking place outside of the Houses of Parliament. The vote (to lift the current cap on tuition fees and allow a rise up to £9,000 per year) did not come as a surprise. In a written response to the vote, for the online think-tank Ekklesia, Politics Lecturer John Heathershaw described the progressive space that was emerging through the Exeter Occupation: "They are people of faith and those without, socialists and liberals, activists and learners. They aspire to a society where personal wealth is not the ultimate*

objective and hold that the notion of public good is not some fanciful idea which is economically indefensible but is integral to keeping us all together as society. In short, they are what university should be about: the free and open discussion of alternative ideas” (2010). (See Fig. 4).



Figure 4: A poster taped to the Newman A wall. Source: Exeter Occupied 15/12/2010

**Ghee:**...watching the BBC live feed from the House of Commons, awaiting the vote. A palpable tension ... (Facebook 9/12).

**Patrick:** ... left at about half 6ish today just after the vote but massive respect goes out from me to everyone still at the uni staying the night etc, and despite the outcome of the vote I think we all deserve to be extremely proud of ourselves for this x (Facebook 9/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** Indeed the vote was a disappointment but not an unexpected one, so at least there were no deflated expectations ... We've been concentrating on creating an alternative space within the university with free lectures etc: an experiment which is fortunately not affected by the vote (Facebook 9/12).

**Exeter Occupied:** Dear Professor Smith, in response to the outcome of the vote to cut state funding in higher education today, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2010, the Exeter Occupation Alliance hereby pledge to continue to fight what we understand to be an ideological move on the part of the current government. We do not believe that cuts must be made to the public sector in response to the current deficit, and we also believe that making cuts to higher education will not, by any means, prove beneficial to the educational sector as a whole. By supporting the increase in tuition fees, we feel that you have misrepresented thousands

of students and staff today, and many more students and staff of the future, both as vice chancellor of the University of Exeter and president of Universities UK. We are therefore making the following pledge in response to an overwhelming show of solidarity among students, staff, and the general public across the country and around the world. We pledge to:

- Continue to oppose these cuts and do everything in our power to challenge the ideology that they represent.
- Continue to organise marches of protest at the University of Exeter, in the city centre, and across the country to show our commitment to overhauling the outcome of the vote.
- Continue a policy of occupations of university buildings at times when the University of Exeter and Universities UK support or propose new action to the detriment of students and staff working in higher education.
- Continue to lobby and petition our local MPs for a reversal of this new legislation.
- Petition for a full public inquiry into higher education reform to be undertaken by an independent body.
- Continue to challenge the University of Exeter and Universities UK when we feel that their actions and decisions misrepresent the greater good of students today and in the future.
- Support staff industrial action taken in response to redundancies.
- Fight for Exeter to commit to lead the way for widening participation, meeting and surpassing pledges of other universities.
- Continue to build links with students and staff groups at other universities, trade unions, anti-cuts alliances, and other organisations to coordinate a unified opposition to this legislation.
- For us, and for many other student and staff groups across the country, losing the vote on cuts in higher education today marks the launch of an energetic new campaign, and we hereby pledge to do everything in our power to fight this new legislation until it is reversed.

Signed, The University of Exeter Open Occupation (Blog 9/12).

*Whilst remaining a space of direct contestation, the Exeter Occupation also created, re-imagined and re-presented the pedagogical space of the university. The 'Exeter Free University' began to take shape.*

**Exeter Occupation:** Enjoying an impromptu lecture on Adorno (Facebook 8/12)

**Exeter Occupation:**... moving on to Habermas. Free, open education (all are welcome) with a critical slant. Just what many of us want a university to be all about (Facebook 8/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** Come and join us today in Newman A, where we're creating what a university might be, with lectures open to all, education with a critical slant and much more besides! (Facebook 9/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** Good morning guys, we've been informed that lectures in 'Newman A' have been moved or even cancelled altogether due apparently to our occupation. This was not our intent. The Occupation wishes to state that interfering with the students' right to learn and the lecturer's right to teach is not and will not ever be in our aims; we offered to watch in silence but appear to have been ignored (Blog 9/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** There's plenty of space for other speakers and events in amongst this tentative programme: Flyering around campus and around Exeter - all day! Last-minute lobbying of Lib Dem MPs – all day! 9.30 Wake-up yoga. 10.00 'Welcome to the Occupation' meeting and ITV [camera crew] turn up; 11.00 Prof Richard Seyford, Classics department; 12.15 Prof Philip Henscher, English department. 13.00ish LUNCH; 14.00 Dr Ian Cook, Geography department: "critical pedagogy"; 15.00 Discussion group: "critical theory of protest"; 16.00 Philosophy Society students' debate: "ethics of peaceful protest"; 17.00 Preparation for action relating to the Commons vote. 18.00 Watching the vote, with action to be discussed; 19.00 Exeter Anarchist Reading Group; 21.00 Films and music (Facebook 9/12).

**Matt:** Just a quick update; we are recording some lectures that are being given by members of staff at the occupation, and will be posting the links to them on YouTube when we have them up. Just waiting for them to load, but as they are around 700mb it is taking quite a while. Bear with us ... On another note, thank you so much to everyone showing support, don't forget to invite your friends and help to increase the circulation of our message: NO to the cuts! (Facebook 8/12).

**Exeter Occupation:** Bit of light relief in amongst the politics: about forty people are working out a elaborate dance routine in Occupied Newman A, as a response to the UCL Occupation, who have laid down an impressive challenge (Facebook 9/12).

**Lizi:** Thanks Exeter Occupation for welcoming the Exeter Woodcraft kids up to use your space in the cafe, about 15-20 kids, all ages making arts and crafts, enjoying an anti-cuts free environment!!! (Facebook 11/12).

**@ExeterOccupied:** Sitting silently through a lecture on Mary Wollstonecraft, Enlightenment, Romanticism & the Travel Narrative (Twitter 13/12).

**Exeter Occupied:** Press release. Students at the University of Exeter are continuing their peaceful occupation of the largest lecture theatre on campus ... The occupiers have set up a “Free University”, where anyone can teach and anyone can learn. “This is in direct contrast to what the government is trying to do to our education system” said Caitlin Hayward-Tapp, a third year English student “They want to privatise schools by making them into Academies, and raise the level of tuition fees so only the children of the rich will be able to go to university. We want to enable everyone to learn about whatever they want to learn, without payment”. University lecturers and others have spoken on such subjects as ‘Democracy and Space in Classical Athens’, ‘The Geography of Protest’, and ‘Education Alternatives’. Meanwhile, occupiers are learning about Tai Chi, consensus decision-making, and French feminists. All kinds of people from Devon and beyond have expressed support. A group of children from Exeter Woodcraft Folk ran craft activities on Saturday. Members of the National Union of Teachers and the Green Party have visited, and Aaron Porter, president of the National Union of Students, came to show his support. Members of a local Methodist church sent cakes, and a nine year old girl made a passionate plea to help protect her education. On Saturday a 92 year old grandmother dropped in to show her support – one of the first women to study at Oxford University. She said “I agree with what the students are doing here - it's important for people from every generation to support students. Also, of course, charities are being affected and the elderly will no doubt be hit by the cuts too”. “It’s been fantastic” said Ghee Bowman, a local man who supports the students “there was a lot disappointment on Thursday evening after the vote in the House of Commons, but we’ve realised that we’re part of a bigger movement against cuts that will continue, and our spirits are high. We’re creating something new here, a new way of learning, a new way of taking action in society. Although many of them are sleeping in the lecture theatre, the occupiers have been taking great care of the space, with the help of the porters. Disruption to lectures has been kept to a minimum, the rubbish is being separated for recycling, and there has been no damage to the space ... (Blog 13/12)

**Exeter Occupation:** 1 week on ... Last Wednesday students from Exeter College, University and friends marched through the city. ... In the 7 days that have passed the Newman A lecture theatre has transformed into a free university, with lectures, workshops, discussions, performances, and creativity a plenty. Whilst scheduled

lectures take place we sit peacefully, but when they finish we fill the space with a wonderful and organic programme of inspirational talks and lectures, free tea and delicious food, and many beautiful ideas. The Christmas tree is now up (Blog 15/12).

*On December 15<sup>th</sup> Exeter University's Vice Chancellor, and then President of Universities UK, Professor Steve Smith accepted an invitation to visit the Exeter Occupation; he addressed the evening assembly and answered questions. The discussion was open to all, tweeted live via @ExeterOccupied, filmed and distributed on YouTube. (see Fig. 5).*



Figure 5: Stills from Steve Smith's discussions with Exeter Occupiers. Source: YouTube 15/12/2010.<sup>8</sup>

**@ExeterOccupied:** Discussing what we want to put to Steve Smith. A Free University space will be our primary point (Twitter 15/12).

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: I'm happy to take your questions. After the Lords', we're now working out what all of this means.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Q: We would like a permanent space for free education.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: Timetabling is an issue. Taking a space out of the timetable would be tricky. We are willing to work with you, but a permanent space is problematic.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Q: How do you feel about the principle of free universities?

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: 'Free' means paid for somewhere else. There will be no resistance on space booking from us. The campus is open.

<sup>8</sup> Broadcast in 4 parts <http://www.youtube.com/user/exeteroccupied?feature=watch>



**@ExeterOccupied:** Q: Even if the cuts are necessary, these are ineffective. Why do you not see them as ideological?

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: They are ideological. They are fixed and non-negotiable.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Q: Do you support non-violent action against the cuts?

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: I support non-violent action, was pleased with numbers on first London rally.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: I would not criticise the demos or the media.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: There is a real issue about the indebtedness of the country. I'm depressed the way HE [Higher Education] has been single out.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Q: Could you educate students about ideology?

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: Conservatives want more students, for less money.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Q: would you donate the bonus to your salary to @UKuncut<sup>9</sup>?

**@ExeterOccupied:** Smith: I support a number of charities, incl. U of E hardship fund.

**@ExeterOccupied:** Steve Smith has left after donating to our cause.



Figure 6: Posters by Ruby and Edie, in Newman A. Source: Personal photos 10/12/2010

<sup>9</sup> UKUncut is a direct action movement highlighting alternatives to public sector cuts and exposing tax avoidance by large businesses, such as Vodafone (see [www.ukuncut.org.uk](http://www.ukuncut.org.uk)).

## The end of the beginning: reflecting and moving on

*On the 17<sup>th</sup> December Exeter Occupied left the Newman A lecture theatre. The decision was made through consensus and reflected a desire to end the occupation on the occupier's own terms. The lecture theatre was cleaned, a rally took place, and occupiers marched from the building with banners. The occupation of Newman A ended but meetings and collective actions continued and a locally based, nationally connected, 'occupy' movement has emerged in Exeter, including a two month long protest camp in the city centre in 2011. Conclusions remain unwritten.*

**Exeter Occupation:** The Exeter Open Occupation draws to a close today, and many events are planned to celebrate what we have achieved. There will be 'Free University' lectures from 1pm, a final rally at 5.30, and we will be leaving together at 6.30. Please join us to celebrate the last 9 days and to plan for the future. The Exeter Open Occupation xx (Blog 17/12).

**Alice:** ... thank you for past week and a bit. The occupation was a joy to be a part of, and it was all of you who made it so successful!! (Facebook 17/12).

**@ExeterOccupied:** Preparing to march down Stocker Road. Whilst this marks the end of this occupation, this is NOT the end of the movement (Twitter 17/12).

**Claudia:** ... it hasn't simply taught me about French feminism, monkeys with rakes, and critical theory (although it has). It has expanded my outlook on life and shown that it is possible to create a fully functioning community with altruistic people from all walks of life with a common purpose. This may not be a story in its conventional form, but the linear narrative that follows a group of strangers to bonds of friendship and LEARNING (that happened to be free Mr. Cameron) is well worth reading. I ♥ HUMANITY!!! (Occupation Journal).

**Eamonn:** The variety of people that have come is interesting; the storyteller with Nigerian chants & Ukrainian folk tales seem particularly memorable to me. I suspect we know that this has done little in itself; it seems an important catalyst. I have found many of my own illusions and self-deceptions shattered in just a few days. It has been a supreme education for my understanding of myself [...](Occupation Journal).

**Lindy:** I loved Sasha and Jos' lectures on the Thursday. This has been the best week ever and I loved everyone here (Occupation Journal).

**Ghee:** Since we marched in here last Wednesday I haven't been able to concentrate on my work, my family think I'm a stranger. The Occupation has filled my waking hours, and I wake up in the night with

ideas for what to do next. This Occupation feels like the most significant thing that's happened in Exeter politics since we moved here in 1997 (Occupation Journal).

*Anon:* Came up here on Thursday morning, expecting to exercise my cynicism but was completely sucked in. It's been a rare and huge pleasure to meet a group of individuals with such passion and intelligence, and the atmosphere has been fantastic. Spoke to someone about the occupation who agreed with the anti-cuts position but described the occupiers as 'dreamers'. Well if that's all it is, I'm proud to have dreamed with you [...] (Occupation Journal).

*Anon:* Attended a march one Wednesday unknown to me it would result in a week of learning far beyond my formal education. A lesson in cooperation, respect and Adorno!! Not to mention the best time I have had since Starting Uni – the people, the respect, the optimism, the activity, the learning, the food, the support all of it came together and sent a clear message to all those who have been involved – there is another way of living which doesn't rely on conflict and greed. Thankyou to everyone who each added their own lesson to this experience. Thankyou for giving me faith in people again [...] We will all take a message from this, mine is hope (Occupation Journal).

*Anon:* I've always been known as a realist and a romantic by my close friends. From the few three days I've been privileged enough to spend at the Occupation. I leave as an optimist, with newly revived faith in our generation, a passionate believer in hope with stories from so many great people I've had the wonder of talking to. I am still both realistic and romantic, but in a far greater, more knowledgeable, more grateful way [...] (Occupation Journal).

*Anon:* I've really enjoyed the open learning ethos that's been created here, so different to my experiences during my degree [...] (Occupation Journal).

*Alice:* The occupation has taught me many things, to juggle (a task which has taken many days), to appreciate that education is possibly the best gift of all and most importantly that a few people can stand up and try to make a difference. I have honestly learnt more this week than in the last two and a bit years! This place has provided an open space for learning, I'm very sad that it has to end but I know next year we will fight on and continue to work towards a better way of education! [...] (Occupation Journal).

*Lena:* The Exeter Occupation has been one of the best experiences of my life and one of the proudest and worthwhile experiences at University. I have felt for a long time that education is the most

valuable gift you can be given. It is the way to achieve social mobility and democracy. Up until I did this I thought I was on my own in believing in this at University. Education has transformed my life and given me hope and the opportunity to expand my horizons [...] this week and a half of occupation to defend education has taught me some of the most valuable forms of knowledge. It has taught me about myself, the power of people and just how amazing a group of strangers learning and being together can be [...] I feel revitalised in my commitment to fight on in what I believe [...] (Occupation Journal).

**Anon:** The occupation is so much more than just a protest. I have met so many people in the last week that I would never otherwise have met. I think that the joining of Exeter Uni and College has created a really positive open atmosphere that I want to come back to whenever I'm away. Everyone has been so easy to talk to and views have been very openly discussed [...] I especially enjoyed the free for all lectures (Occupation Journal).

**Anon:** I came to the occupation after hearing about the plan being formulated over a long (well, a week or so!) period beforehand. The environment the occupation has created is more normally present at a woodcraft camp, festival, or amongst a group of good friends...The free lectures were just brilliant and have completely awoken my appetite for learning [...] (Occupation Journal).

**Caitlin:** Finding the words to express how deeply this occupation has affected me is nigh on impossible. It has impacted upon me as an individual, it has altered my understanding of education and it has shown me how real the possibility of community is in Exeter. I've met so many people this week who previously thought that were alone in their anger and desire for activism in this town – we have been united here under a common aim, a shared sentiment, and that has been unbelievably powerful. For me one of the best elements of the occupation has been the trust and safety in this space. If you'd told me a week ago that I would consider somewhere on campus as my 'home', and as an entirely safe space, I would have laughed at you. And yet, having created this space, there is finally somewhere on campus that I feel totally at ease – unjudged and safe. This atmosphere has allowed for everyone to feel comfortable enough to offer up their knowledge to the group, and the free education that was the result [...] the most positive experience I've had at Exeter University, and I genuinely believe I've learnt more in this week than in three years of my degree (Occupation Journal).

**Blondie:** We are different in beliefs, backgrounds and appearance but we are all here for the same thing. I have laughed, debated and

protested with some brilliant people. I hope my past in stopping the cuts will help me and my children. I will never forget this as long as I live (Occupation Journal).

**Meg:** This occupation has opened my eyes to so much more than simply fighting the cuts. Through lectures and 3am conversations I have learnt so much and I'm going to miss it. I have met some amazing people and I have to admit I will miss everyone so much as for the last 9 days they have gone from strangers to family [...] PS Lindy Hop was AWESOME (Occupation Journal).

**Loughlin:** Who would have thought that the University of Exeter would join with that august fraternity of occupied universities, pioneering the opposition to the government's ideology of cuts and fees? ...However, we have done more than that. We have taken the heart of a marketized university and created therein a space for free education, where anyone is welcome as long as they crave to learn [...] (Occupation Journal).

**Anon:** It was great to see students, staff and the general public working together with one aim in mind. There have been lectures, workshops, and open discussions and I think we have proved that free education can exist [...] (Occupation Journal).

**Owen:** For me the occupation was completely spontaneous. I woke up late (typical students etc.) and ran to town to catch up with the procession, then followed along, ending up in Newman A in the middle of a maths lecture! By this time, I was determined that I would stay the night and do everything I could to help the cause. I guess you could say I was filled with revolutionary fervour! In the past, politics for me has always been of the 'armchair' variety [...] Never again will I sit at home powerlessly shouting at the news – this occupation has made me realise that action is possible (Occupation Journal).

**M:** I've been at uni for 7 years now. I've taught 8 classes on 3 modules at two different institutions. Yet I've learnt more in the last week than in the last 10 years. It's been a pleasure to meet people, discuss everything from politics to music to food, and to realise that the 'apathy' generation is putting their parents to shame (Occupation Journal).

**Becky:** It's opened my eyes to a new political experience and its further cemented my views on the cuts! Taking part in lectures, dancing, singing & discussions have been great and lindy hopping was immense!! (Occupation Journal).

**Lizi, Jess, Finn and Mike:** Felt so proud of Exeter students and followers [...] felt so proud when my 9 year old felt so moved she

stood up to publically thanks the occupiers – a first for her. Thanks you for enabling me to show her and her 6 year old brother that standing together can be an uplifting and amazing experience. Thanks for letting us woodies fill the café with craft making kids [...] (Occupation Journal 16-17 December).

**Tim:** nine days which have changed my life. I leave here having learned enormous amounts about myself and the world in which we live. A truly life changing experience [...] (Occupation Journal).

**Elizabeth:** I have never learnt so much, had so much fun or felt so inspired by a group of amazing people who I am really sad to be leaving. We have achieved something amazing which I will never forget and these have genuinely been some of the best days of my life. Can't wait for the New Year and the continuation of Exeter Occupation Un-Cut! (Occupation Journal).

**Hannah:** Perhaps this isn't the best time to be writing in the Occupation book, but I feel like I've met the kind of people who really see the world in the same way that I do by joining in this occupation - and although I've only spent 2 nights sleeping over – I feel like the occupation has been a major part of my life for the past 9 days. (Occupation Journal).

**Anon:** I've got very bored in the last few years listening to people complain that 'young people' have no interest in politics and then offering them a politics of greed, self-interest, lies and corruption, and war-mongering. So, you've proved that there is another politics of collective creativity, democratic decision-making and a refusal to see our social resources converted to private ownership. I am so proud of you all [...] (Occupation Journal).

**Rob:** Watch this space [...] (Occupation Journal).

## Acknowledgements

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