

Are academics freely able to criticise the idea of 'gender identity' in UK Universities?



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A huge range of academic questions are raised by the claim that having an inner “sense” of *gender identity* is an important category, alongside or even instead of the categories of *biological sex* and *socially perceived sex*. These include: how to understand and respond to the rapid rise in trans-identified children and teens; whether transwomen should have legitimate access to woman-only spaces (prisons, refuges, hostels, changing rooms and bathrooms) and special resources (scholarships, prizes, all-woman shortlists, quotas); whether data should record gender identity rather than birth sex; whether transwomen have any moral right to compete with female athletes in the same sporting categories; whether sexual orientation is towards gender identity or sex; and other questions too.

These questions are of immense social significance. They have consequences both for trans people and for natal women in particular. Universities are the places where particular answers to these questions first get conceptualised, and then sent out into the world, to be acted upon by policy-makers. It's therefore imperative to ask: to what extent are normal academic processes of free intellectual inquiry and unfettered critical scrutiny operating with respect to such questions, and the answers currently being produced to them? Is dissent enabled, as a means of checking for any errors? Are academics (and students) who disagree with a dominant paradigm being allowed to say so without intimidation, and being listened to without obvious bias or prejudice? Are arguments being met with counter-arguments from other academics, and evidence with counter-evidence, as would normally be the case: or are people's characters being maligned and intentions smeared, as a means of silencing? Are refereeing, editorial, and grant-funding processes robust enough to ensure that a range of perspectives are published and funded, rather than simply those which correspond to the favoured beliefs of academic gate-keepers? Are University management structures firmly and visibly in place to mitigate against intimidation from students and the general public, and allow free inquiry to be pursued? The following evidence, collected over the course of 7 days, after an open call on Twitter for anonymous testimonies from academics, may give some insight into the current situation for

gender-critical academics in UK Universities. (Broadly speaking, gender-critical academics argue that there are problems, either conceptually or practically or both, with the legal and social prioritisation of the notion of gender identity over categories such as sex. They also tend to be critical of gender, understood as distinct sets of social stereotypes — “femininity”; “masculinity” — attached to the sexes, arguing that these are contingent, harmful, and should not be perpetuated).

(Addendum: I've been asked about the sex distribution of these testimonies: 22 women; 6 men.)

Academic 1

“My Head of Department called me into a meeting to discuss an anonymous complaint made about me, by someone claiming to be a student. The student claimed that two of my retweets were ‘transphobic’ and made them feel ‘unsafe’. I have been very quiet on social media on this issue because I am scared to speak out, so I was a bit confused as to how anything I'd retweeted could possibly be interpreted as transphobic. My HoD was also not clear on what was transphobic about them, and HR also could not answer this question. HR also confirmed that as it was anonymous complaint they couldn't take any action anyway. Apparently, this did not satisfy the Equalities Group who pushed for me to be investigated for these two retweets. Left admitting there was nothing transphobic about the retweets, Equalities then pointed to the comments made by other people on the original tweets. Clearly I have absolutely no control over this, which they eventually admitted. This has left me feeling particularly vulnerable — it is not nice to know that unknown individuals and colleagues in Equalities (who should also be protecting female members of staff), are scrutinising every tweet looking for evidence against me. It also means that numerous people in HR and the Faculty Executive (who probably haven't really looked into this issue closely) will associate me with a transphobic complaint from a student. When Equalities were asked what action they expected to be taken they said ‘none’, so I really feel this was just an exercise in letting me know they're watching me. I had previously already tried to raise some of my concerns with our Equalities Group regarding our adoption of self ID due to the need to balance the rights of female students, particularly Muslim and Jewish students, and trans students in certain settings like residential field trips, changing rooms and toilets on campus and essentially been completely ignored, so I'm left wondering whether they had been watching me before this complaint came in.”

Academic 2

“These events are in chronological order, and begin last summer. I list them as separate incidents unless I have reason to identify connections between them:

- When I contacted my University's head of HR to discuss emails from trans activist students that I found intimidating, I received no response to my email.
- The academic responsible for “teaching and learning” assured students in my department that they would not have to be taught by me if they disagreed with my views.

- My department decided to establish a postgraduate programme in gender and queer studies. I was asked to teach on this. I asked for an open discussion about the programme's title and focus, in order to consider sex as well as gender, and that not all teaching staff are uncritical of 'queerness'. This request was refused.
- Together with a small group of colleagues I asked for and received a meeting with the head of the equality and diversity unit and the head of HR to discuss our concerns that the University's transgender policy conflicted with the institution's commitment to academic freedom. We also raised specific instances of harassment and intimidation, in my case from students setting up a Facebook petition calling for me to be disciplined/sacked and emails from students purporting to represent the larger student body. We were told they would look into it and get back to us within 2 months. That was 5 months ago and we have heard nothing.
- When an article about my 'transphobia' appeared in a student newspaper my employer wrote a press release which sought to distance themselves from my views. I had to threaten legal action to have the content of the release changed.
- On discovering that candidates for students' union roles were making manifesto pledges to have me sacked, I complained to my employer that I was experiencing bullying and harassment and asked that these candidates be spoken to about appropriate behaviour.

This request was refused on the grounds that 'an election isn't the right time'."

Academic 3

"I have been no-platformed at two conferences so far this year, including one conference that was being organised and held at my university. The official position from senior management is that everything I have expressed on social media and in other public forums is consistent with its policies on academic freedom. However, senior figures in my department have said I should not publicly refer to the no-platforming incidents. They have also said that I should be careful about what I say publicly on trans issues because it might affect partnerships with other stakeholders and upset colleagues who hold a different view. This has left me wondering about whether I have a long-term future at the university."

Academic 4

"Having worked in academia for several years, I have become increasingly concerned about the teaching of gender. At one point I was open about my critical views on gender identity but following significant abuse, harassment and threats online, and my employer being contacted, I chose to remove my public profile and become anonymous. Whilst my Head of School at the time was not necessarily hostile, she was confused and wary of being viewed as discriminatory. I have predominantly taught social work and sociology; both subjects which incorporate an understanding of discrimination and societal impact on female bodies. However, at one point I taught gender under the theme of femininities and masculinities. I offered a clear and open space in order to consider different arguments, debates and analysis; inviting a trans woman in

to share their experiences of 'womanhood.' Following this session I felt neither myself nor my students were any further forward in understanding what gender identity is, what form it takes, how it develops or indeed if it is an internal or biological sense. In fact, it appeared to reinforce arguments relating to social constructions and stereotypes. I now only teach social work and tread very carefully in terms of questioning gender identity and trans theories. Teaching on children and families courses tend to include an examination of identity and what forms our sense of gender. I regularly attend module sessions where we discuss content and approaches, and I am frequently raising the issue of why our students are given trans children as examples rather than lesbians, for example. Additionally, I challenge the notion of gender being anything other than a social construct albeit in a very measured and questioning way in order to not be viewed as difficult or bigoted. Currently, these challenges are being considered and some changes have been made to the curriculum but it has involved an extremely delicate and patient approach. There is very little space or opportunity to openly discuss anything to do with the conflict between trans rights and women's rights, and I continue this work offline as much as possible."

Academic 5

"I am a senior Professor. I have worked for 30 years as an academic, with most of my research with a record of specialist teaching in feminist studies, and women's writing and history. In late November 2017, a complaint was made to my employer about alleged 'transphobia' in my use of Twitter — my tweets and retweets. As an academic, I use Twitter in my own name, with a link to my University web page, as encouraged by my University's social media policy. I was retweeting a lot of gender critical material, but not only that. I tweet and retweet scholarly material, other political material (eg opposing Brexit), and miscellaneous personal observations, comments, and jokes, or retweeting those of other people. This is all normal use of Twitter. In November 2017, I attracted a lot of attention from transactivists after I had responded to a Tweet from Owen Jones, *Guardian* journalist, asking him not to call women 'cis' as it was offensive to those of us who did not conform to oppressive gender roles. It was after that Tweet (and the hundreds of abusive tweets I received in response), that I was contacted first by my University's Press Office following up an enquiry from the student newspaper of my university, which wanted to run a story on my alleged 'transphobia.' The Press Office assured me that I was under no suspicion, and the student newspaper had been informed that publication of that story would be considered libellous. Later information I heard from a friend in another part of my life altogether leads me to wonder if it wasn't also from a Twitter exchange I had with a former student at around this time. He responded to something I tweeted by asking me "So you don't believe transwomen are women? #NoDebate" I didn't answer Yes or No but responded that he needed to think about women's lived experience. At the time I was fairly agnostic about it — I have a trans woman colleague whom I would never think of as a man. I subsequently found out that his brother had just

transitioned. I suspect this graduate then contacted friends who were current students in my department, who then went to the Student Guild, who decided my Twitter was so seriously transphobic that they could not speak to me — I might misgender them in a conversation — but that the complaint needed to be escalated straight to an employment disciplinary. About a week after the University Press Officer contacted me to say that I had nothing to be concerned about, a letter informing me that I was under investigation for transphobia arrived at my home. At this point, I was told by my university's HR that I may not speak with anyone about the complaint, except close family and my union. I was specifically forbidden from discussing it with colleagues or on social media. I was also told that I had to keep working as normal. It's testament to my dedication to my job (but I'm not special — I think this is normal for academics) that I didn't immediately get signed off on stress leave. I was told that I would be the subject of a formal investigation, which might lead to disciplinary proceedings. At this point, I was not given a copy of the complaint. I was told I would not receive that until my interview with the investigator.

I took advice from the University's third party employee care package people: it was very useful, and it seemed to me that the woman I spoke to was familiar with the kind of situation in which I found myself. It suggests to me that these complaints are far more numerous than we any of us know publicly. And that academics are told they must not speak of the complaints, as I was told.

Eventually, the matter was dealt with at the highest level of the University, by the Director and Deputy Director of Human Resources. I suspect it was because of a concern about freedom of speech on campus. My Pro Vice Chancellor (Dean as was) contacted me to say that I should expect contact from the University's HR Director. I suspect he intervened in the situation; I know that our College's HR Business partner also contacted me to say that I could speak to him at any time. These kindnesses were very sustaining at a difficult time. I think they all came from a concern about academic freedom. My Vice Chancellor is publicly vocal about the necessity of universities maintaining freedom of speech. XXXX [University] has a no no-platforming policy. A year later (quite recently) I was told by my PVC that both the VC and the Provost were very concerned about my case.

I saw the complaint about a fortnight after the letter informing me of the complaint and investigation. The complaint was made by a student whom I have not, to my knowledge, ever spoken to, let alone taught — from another College, in a discipline not mine. I was told that the student was a 'representative' of a larger group of 4 or 5 students, who did not want to be identified. This particular student had volunteered to have her name attached to the complaint. The larger group was made up of students from my own Department. At the end of the process, I was told that they had authorised HR to tell me that they were XXXX [discipline] students, but not their names. Although I really did *not* want to know their names, this left me feeling as

though there were target on my back. Even the Deputy Director of HR admitted (again at the end of the process in February 2018) that she suspected a certain level of 'group think' in this. The complaint contained no definition of transphobia. Instead it made a series of weak claims: for example, because I retweeted a link to a blog which "misgendered" a gender-fluid performance artist, I would misgender a student. The performance artist concerned is a biologically male performance artist (who calls himself 'gender-fluid, not trans) notorious for dressing up as a young teen girl and performing her as a 'slut,' who required TopShop to allow him to use the women's fitting room — I was concerned about the misogyny of this. There were also claims that my political views would cause me to be unfair in my marking of transgender students. The overall aim was to have me sacked: the statement's opening paragraph included the demand that 'If XXXX [author] stands by her views, she should not be permitted to continue teaching at the University.' And this same demand for me to recant my views or be stopped from teaching was repeated throughout the complaint.

Many of the claims — particularly the claim that by retweeting gender-critical material, I would be biased in my marking of students — were specious and ill-informed. Setting aside my clear professional integrity, demonstrated over the entirety of my career, my university's stringent requirements in marking, second marking, and moderating all assessed student work anonymously mean that any individual staff bias is nearly impossible, and would require unethical collusion with colleagues. There were very few tweets quoted which were mine: most of the tweets cited in the complaint were my retweets of others tweets. It is common practice in using Twitter to retweet all sorts of materials, including tweets/views with which one might disagree.

Investigations found that I was not transphobic. However, the process took almost 3 months, during which I was required to keep working, not to speak about the matter, and then make a statement to justify myself. In that statement I was asked to apologise to the complainant. I refused to apologise for transphobia, as I am not transphobic. However, as a dedicated teacher, I was prepared to apologise for any distress caused to a student. I also removed any affiliation with my university from my Twitter biography, and added the "Retweets not endorsements" caveat.

When I requested advice from the Deputy Director of HR — as my employer — about how I might safely use Twitter in future, or how I might speak or write about this experience, or how I might position any scholarly research I might wish to pursue in this field, I was advised to 'be careful.' There was no other clear guidance.

In the light of this experience, and the ambiguous advice I have received from my university's HR experts, I believe that my academic freedom of speech has been compromised. For about a year, I did not tweet much gender-critical from my real name Twitter account. I have unfollowed gender-critical feminists from my named account.

During this whole investigation, I was writing a scholarly essay about the State censorship and

resulting self-censorship of a woman writer in 1824; I am struck by the parallels almost 200 years later. However, I am not sure that I am brave enough to write about those parallels.

However, I have written briefly about clashes of rights in radical, progressive politics, in the Introduction to an edited collection of essays

On a personal note, my work/writing schedule lapsed. The stress of December 2017 to February 2018 meant that I had to pull out of at least two scholarly commitments (both essays in books which would have been important for my ongoing research), to the detriment of my professional reputation. At work, my colleagues actually approached me to ask whether I was seriously ill — one colleague told me that she thought I had been diagnosed with cancer. But I had wonderful support from a local UCU case-worker, and from a friend who is a high-level academic administrator.

Overall, I have been targeted because of my political views as a gender-critical feminist. My feminist activism (such as it is) is about centring and focusing on women. I am not particularly interested in transgender matters in and of themselves; I have known and worked closely with transwomen without issue — I consider a colleague at a previous university a good friend.

However, I *am* concerned about the effects of the current confusion of sex and gender, and the potential for changes to the Gender Recognition Act to erase women's hard-won rights to sex-based protection afforded by the 2010 Equalities Act.

In all of this, I am most concerned with the attacks by men, and trans-identified men, on the fundamental definition of 'woman.' I do not believe that women are 'non-men' (according to the Green Party) or that — to paraphrase Germaine Greer, a woman is a man with his penis cut off. There is a long cultural history in European thought that position women as 'Other' — as not-men, or defective men, in an oppressive gendered hierarchy. I am constantly reminded of the 2000 years of Judeo-Christian mythology of woman, made from Adam's rib. I have spent my 30 years as an academic feminist scholar contending against these views.

The deep irony is that I'm a no-one; I'm not famous like Germaine Greer or Mary Beard. I've just done my little bit to try to look after young women in HE: mentoring them, agitating for reconsideration of salary appointment levels (my PVC will confirm that!), running courses and modules which introduce feminist theatre history to undergraduates, and publishing research which focuses on women, and their work. But still transactivists have tried to silence me. Reflection a year later: The whole incident has left me still angry, and also self-doubting. I regard myself now as a coward — I haven't spoken publicly (as others have), and I feel that I've backed out of the one thing I could do at the moment. However, my mental well-being was at stake, and would be again. And my livelihood — I'm single, with no domestic emotional or financial support, and a huge mortgage. I need my job, and I'm good at my job. I do my feminist activism through my teaching — next year, I'll revive my 'Women and Theatre' module, which I know in the past has enlightened and inspired my students."

Academic 6

“I’m an editor for an open access journal. We’re a very small team, and a close knit community. Or so I thought. As a result of signing the letter to the *Sunday Times* (16/6/19) I have been asked to recant my views or resign as editor. I will not back down — I cannot. I have seen how colleagues I respect have been ostracised for holding what I believe to be reasonable views, and I added my name to the list of signatories as I could not sit by and watch them be vilified while I did nothing.

I am very upset that this letter is being misinterpreted so badly. I am actually shocked that some fellow academics seem unable to read the argument presented, rather than responding to second hand misrepresentations. I am amazed that all of my years of careful editing can be swept away because of a misreading of my feminist views. It’s frightening. The longer term implications of this terrify me. I am on a fixed term contract, and have reasonable expectations of being made permanent this summer. Now I worry that my contract will not be extended.”

Academic 7

“Someone communicated a complaint (one can only guess what this means) to my place of work about what I liked and retweeted on twitter in relation to genuine medical concerns from academic and medical experts regarding the effects of hormone blockers. I was not asked to stop tweeting by my University but to make sure that any views were clearly expressed as coming from me or other sources, not the University, which was the case. What alarmed me was I was not able to be told who made the complaint about my tweeting activity which I found to be very odd, and the fact people are being targeted at work for sharing scientific evidence based research from professional sources such as medical journals such as *The BMJ* and Oxford University.”

Academic 8

“When I signed your letter in the Guardian I didn’t think there was anything controversial in it; the principles of academic freedom are important to uphold, and I couldn’t see why anyone could think otherwise. How naive I was!

A few days after it was published, a junior colleague (some twenty years younger than me, and relatively new to the department) asked if she could ‘have a word with me’. She came in and closed the door. She said two students had complained to her about my being a signatory to the letter in the Guardian. One of them was a young transman who I know personally, having taught them in the first year when they were presenting as female, and was on friendly terms with. The other one had not wanted their identity divulged. They had wanted me to know “that their feelings are hurt.” That they hadn’t realised I was “transphobic”. I told my colleague that I defend their right to live as they wish to live and that I also defend other people’s right to study what they wish to study. I defend my own right to say that women don’t have penises (and men do not have vaginas) and that I do not regard the statement of biological fact as transphobic. I said that I am not in any way transphobic, which the student I was personally acquainted with (and had spent some time with only two weeks previously) should surely know, as I was always

respectful and friendly towards them, including using their new name and preferred pronouns in personal conversations. At this stage, as you can probably tell, I was blissfully unaware that anyone who doesn't believe transwomen are "actual biological women" (and transmen are "actual biological men") is automatically deemed "transphobic".

After my colleague left, I emailed the student I knew personally. Naively, I suppose, thinking this would clear up any misunderstanding! This is a copy of the email:

Dear X,

I gather from Y that you and another student came to her to say you were upset about my signing the letter in the Guardian. I signed the letter to stand with my academic colleagues who have been intimidated, abused, doxxed and threatened for expressing concerns about the way that the proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act intersect with the Equality Act. These changes, in my view, require careful thought and full discussion, and those who want to discuss them should not feel harassed, threatened, or silenced. Alongside freedom of speech, I defend the principle of academic freedom. I believe that no research area, so long as it passes ethical considerations, should be taboo.

I would defend to the hilt the right of anyone — trans or not — to state their own truths; to live as they wish, and to define their own identity. But does that mean they have a right to over-ride the truths (or identities) of others? To police the language and thought of others? When the dictionary definition of 'woman' is deemed hate speech, we are in a strange place. I believe the complexities of writing gender self-ID into law needs open discussion for democracy to function as it should. It's really as simple as that.

Be well, and have a good weekend/reading week.

Two weeks later my Head of Department came to see me. He told me that the student was treating my email to them as a form of harassment. They went to my HoD with a Student Union rep to complain about me. The word "transphobia" came up. My HoD said he had to wear his managerial hat and "de-escalate". He said he had used that word with them and had to explain that it didn't mean "silence them". He had told the student that I probably didn't realise I was being transphobic, comparing it to perhaps not realising sometimes if he was being a little bit racist. He told me that the student had serious mental health issues and feels themselves to be a victim. They had told him that they felt "unsafe" being on campus when I was on campus. For context, I don't believe in, or adhere to, traditional gender roles. I am gender non-conforming and so are several members of my close family. I was criticised in the past for "allowing" my son to come to my second wedding as my bridesmaid. Actually, I lent him the dress. So to be denounced as "transphobic" would be hilarious if it weren't so dangerous. My HoD advised me to say nothing on the issue, to anyone, to have no more contact with my former student, and to "play the ball low" so as to lessen the risk of them "scoring a goal" against me. It was made robustly clear that I should stay silent if I didn't want trouble. He said the best we could hope for is to wait for the student (in their third year) to graduation in 7

months' time, and for the fuss to die down.

After that meeting, I recalled that the week before reading week, the day after my email to my ex-student, two tall blokes I didn't recognise had turned up at my door, just as I was leaving my office to teach. I said I was going to teach, and they said could they come and see me in my office hours. They had no reason to see me because they were not my students. I felt vaguely threatened by them, though couldn't put my finger on why. A couple of days later I had decided to take the following week's office hours as Annual Leave. Subsequently, I came to believe their visit had something to do with the accusations of transphobia against me. I was glad that my office hours for the next few weeks were fully booked by my own students, so that had those two young men turned up again, they would not have found me alone. The thought of them unnerved me, and I had more than a couple of nightmares.

Two weeks later after my first meeting with him, my HoD came to see me again. He said there had been another accusation of transphobia, this time by a trans student in my current year group. Apparently, some comments I had written in the feedback on their formative assignment had been deemed transphobic. This was essentially because it has spread through the university's LGBT society that I was a transphobe just for signing that letter, so everything was being seen through that lens. The feedback was no different to the feedback I would have given anyone else who had written as the student had. I was very upset by this accusation, because — again — I had been nothing but friendly and respectful to this trans student and was doing nothing other than trying to help them improve their writing.

These responses to what I consider normal behaviour and mild views have been shocking to me. I have been too afraid to put myself any further into the firing line. My small taste of what was in store for me for stepping out of line was enough. I love my job and do not want to jeopardise it, or my ability to do it effectively. I do not want to be afraid of who will turn up at my office door. I realise this is cowardly. I realise that you and others are suffering for beliefs that I share with you, while I am trying to prevent further damage to my standing and career. I am sorry for being so cowardly. I am ashamed that — after years of being the kind of woman who is not afraid to stand up and be counted — I am allowing myself to be silenced. I have thought long and hard about this. Thinking about how much stress I felt under in the autumn term, I do not want to suffer that again. In addition, I am aware of my responsibility to my family to make sure I can continue to financially provide for them, which accusations of “transphobia” would jeopardise.

I am now very careful about what I comment on or 'like' on social media under my own name. Despite my professional cowardice, I am looking for other ways — using my primary skill set — to contribute positively to this debate, and to change its tone. But it seems we are in a very difficult and dangerous position.”

Academic 9

“I work at XXX [academic School within University]. Various changes have taken place

incrementally but stepping back and reviewing after a couple of years shows the nature of changes.

Our senior management committee includes Professor XXX, a person prominent in feminist and gender studies. And pastoral support under responsibility of Dr XXX, a colleague who works closely with Professor XXX.

Professor XXX was involved in setting up the LGBTQ network within the University. Professor XXX is in a senior role regarding research. Their assessment of research was important for promotion cases made by the school.

Both Professor XXX and Dr XXXX are active on twitter promoting transgender issues, liking and retweeting material. This has included promoting material from the student body expressly criticising appearances and contributions by "TERFs", and joining protests against a feminist event.

As staff, we are encouraged to attend training sessions for pastoral support. It is unusual to have sessions on specific topics in addition to general sessions at the beginning of the academic year, other than dealing with distressed students. A Stonewall-approved session was run at the end of the academic year with an expectation that all staff should attend, and an indication that we should improve the way we deal with transgender students in particular. This can be contrasted with sessions on issues such as distressed student issues where staff do not have a similar expectation of attendance. After this session an email was distributed asking us, as best practice, to add preferred pronouns to email signatures to ensure that we were more welcoming to trans students. Many members of staff did so. Some did not.

The training session was presented as compulsory for staff involved in provision of pastoral support. In our school almost every member of academic staff has a role in providing pastoral support. For the last academic year a new system of LGBT advocates was introduced with designated members of staff offering specific pastoral support to LGBT students. Discussion with representatives from our school's representative body indicated that they were not clear why this had been introduced when there seemed to be other priorities within the pastoral support system. The focus was to be primarily for trans students. There does not seem to be data as to how often the advocates have been used. However, on checking with a senior administrator it appeared that the School (which has hundreds of new entrants every year) has had one trans student over an eight year period.

The pastoral support system is occasionally used as a vehicle to provide general talks to students on study skills and the like. This year, for the first time, there was a special interest talk by XXXX [prominent trans activist]. All first year students were "strongly encouraged" to attend, by email. The email was sent in the name of the head of school therefore giving weight to it. The class immediately before the talk was a compulsory subject for all of our principal degree programme students. We have never had any speakers on other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 address the student body, despite, for example,

some issues in recent years with racist behaviour among part of the student body. The university has hosted (and funded) events regarding transgender issues, heavily promoted within the institution to students and staff. The role of the university and individual schools within the university in funding one big event only became apparent to staff days before the event ran. These events have ran without any call for balance in the contributions, although events reflecting women's interests have been subject to protests and calls for balanced contributors to ensure the trans perspective was reflected".

Academic 10

"I am currently self-employed as a consultant, although, I remain affiliated with XXXX University via research groups and ongoing publication of research undertaken collaboratively. Prior to my self-employment, I worked in academia as a lecturer and researcher for number of years at my affiliating universities. Last year, I was doxxed with the malicious intent of damaging my reputation as an academic, my professional carer and my personal life as a parent. At first, I was targeted by transactivists on social media who repeatedly tagged my affiliating institutions and colleagues making various claims that I was transphobic, bigoted, sexist, racist and homophobic. To disengage with this targeted online abuse, I deactivated my social media accounts. Later that evening I received calls from colleagues at my affiliating university to inform me that someone had emailed academics, within my affiliated departments and research groups, making allegations of transphobia (for making distinctions between sex and gender and expressing concern about single sex provisions, rights and protections for females), racism (for a crude comparison I made regarding the appropriation of race compared with the appropriation of the opposite sex), homophobia (because this is a default of the aforementioned transphobia) and sexism (for highlighting the oppressions women and girls face because of the biological sex). In addition, further allegations were made that I may be psychotic due to my views on biological sex and the construct of gender, and consequently I should not be around children or vulnerable people. As a parent, carer and practitioner with vulnerable people, who requires an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks, I was deeply concerned and upset about these defaming allegations about my character and psychological state of mind. As I was not an employee at my affiliating university at the time of these emails, I was unable to access support from the institution on this matter, and as a self-employed women, in the early stages of building a consultancy business, I was unable to afford the costs of legal advice and representation. Thankfully, my colleagues in academia who know my personally have maintained our professional relationship in terms of research publications and interests. However, I was unable to defend myself against these defaming allegations to those colleagues whom I do not have a personal relationship with, and I fear that these allegations and my lack of recourse will have long-term impacts on my reputation with my extended colleagues in

academia. This harassment has caused me stress, anxiety and emotional distress and has succeeded in the silencing of my views and beliefs on the matter of issues that affect me and the rest of the female sex”.

Academic 11

“The story of my failed attempt to get ethics clearance.

In February this year I contacted my university’s ethics officer to ask the procedure for getting ethics clearance for a series of planned interviews for a project with a colleague at another university on the development of ideas about gender identity. One of the people we hoped to interview was the founder of the Tavistock Gender Identity Development Service.

I was directed to my department ethics officer (a colleague I had known for decades, and a friend) for advice. Over tea, my colleague advised me not to pursue the research, telling me that I should think about my reputation as a scholar. She seemed uneasy about the application and said that it was important that it should not seem as if it had been nodded through by a friend. She warned that she might have to recuse herself because of her friendship but warned me that her replacement might be less sympathetic to the project. I was astonished that the application should be viewed as controversial given that I was proposing to talk to a retired psychologist about the history of the service he had set up. Given her obvious embarrassment I suggested that perhaps my collaborator would seek ethics clearance instead.

In a series of emails that followed our meeting my colleague wrote: ‘In my earlier email, I forgot to mention that the Head of Dept needs to sign off the ethics application.’ She added that ‘If it is a joint project, with another institution taking the lead, then the [university] Ethics Committee has to see the documentation and also give its approval.’

I did not pursue the application which seemed to me to have been prejudged as problematic. As usual, it’s hard to prove anything given that much of this exchange was shaped by the embarrassment of ruining a friendship with a colleague I had known for decades.”

Academic 12

“I received an internal reader’s review for a book on humanism for a major US publisher. One chapter of the book was on transhumanism and one aspect of this chapter was on new ideas about transgender people. I also sent a sample paper which has a small section about the well-documented harassment, intimidation and censorship of UK women’s organizations wanting to discuss the impact of transgender issues on women’s and girls’ rights. The internal reviewer claimed this showed that I was ‘calling for the acceptance of the speech rights of trans-exclusionary feminists over the human rights of trans people’.

The internal reviewer went on to say my work was ‘materially dangerous’ to transpeople, I was denying the ‘validity of trans women’s identities and existence’, and I was denying the ‘grave risk of serious and mortal violence’ faced by ‘especially impoverished trans women of colour’.

The book was rejected on these grounds. Suffice to say, I had not mentioned these issues and nothing I had written promoted hatred or bigotry against trans (or indeed any other) people.”

Academic 13

“When I signed a letter in a national newspaper, as one of the more junior voices alongside over 50 academics concerned at the way free and open intellectual debate over trans issues is being stifled in British Universities, little did I suspect that I would myself become a case study. A couple of weeks after signing, a student who goes by a male pronoun, who attended my classes often wearing typically male clothing (but sometimes not, I later reflected) wrote to me to say that as somebody who identifies as gender non-binary, they were alarmed by my signing the letter. They asked me to explain myself. As a teacher, I felt happy to do so — both to engaging in a dialogue about an important current social issue with a student, and because I felt that it was only fair that I explain myself to somebody affected by these matters personally and directly. I had told myself when signing that if challenged on my reasons, it was my responsibility to engage. I thus offered to meet the student in office hours to talk through the various issues. The student declined my offer to meet, and said they felt uncomfortable being in my presence given what my views might be, and asked me to explain myself via email. In retrospect I suspect this was always a trap. But like an elephant, I trundled in. So on a Saturday afternoon, I sat down and spent over 30 minutes laying out my (once upon a time very boring and unorthodox) views on the distinction between sex and gender, the place of social construction, but most crucially of all an emphasis that whatever I think about the theoretical issues regarding gender and identify, there was no doubt or question that all students were welcoming in my class and indeed our university, and that the rights of trans and non-binary people are equal to those of all others. Nonetheless, I stated, if we aren't able to talk openly about these issues then we will lose the basis of not just what a university is for and about, but how a free and open society can continue to exist. A couple of weeks passed and I didn't hear back. Then one day the student replied with a long and emotional email. I glanced at it and it looked very confused, so I elected not to reply to them until I was less busy, at the weekend. Before I got around to it, however, a colleague came to see me in private, and warned me that the student in question had been BCC-ing them (as personal tutor) ,and for all we knew others, into the correspondence. Alarmed, I immediately went to speak to my Head of Department, and together we decided that given the student did not appear to be acting in good faith, I should desist communication. I wrote a polite email back thanking the student for their response, saying I would try to get back to them when less busy, but in reality attempting to de-escalate by withdrawing. After all, it's my right not to continue to engage if I feel that such engagement is not in good faith. Nothing happened for a while, until my Head of Department asked to see me a month or so later. He let me know that the student had put in a formal complaint against me. I was a little surprised, but laughed it off — I had done nothing but send a polite email expressing disagreement over a theoretical issue, whilst emphasising this person's rights and equal status in society and our university. Surely nothing could come of this? My HoD assured me

(truthfully, and I am grateful for their support) that they were 100% behind me, even though of course all official procedures would have to be followed. A few weeks later I received a request to meet with an Executive Dean in another School of the University, unconnected to my own. A date was arranged, and I tried not to think about it. On the day of the meeting, 45 minutes before it was scheduled to start, I was sent a document laying out the (stage 2) complaint. I was accused of “bullying, harassment and discrimination”, “denying the existence of trans people” and “denying the rights of trans people” (in direct, literal, contradiction to what my email actually said, it might be noted). As regards “outcomes” desired by the student in terms of resolution, it was suggested that I receive the same disciplinary sanctions as if I had been found to have acted in a racist manner towards another university member, and that I be sent on appropriate training and education courses to make me aware of the wrongs that I had committed. Shaken, I proceeded to the interview with the Executive Dean. In retrospect the dean did everything by the book — impartially, according to the strict letter of procedure, and so forth. I can of course have no complaint about this — but psychologically speaking, the process is nonetheless little short of traumatising. For the charges were being taken literally and seriously: bullying, harassment, discrimination. Naively, I had expected an informal chat so that boxes could be ticked and this nonsense could be dismissed. Instead, I found myself in an Orwellian world wherein my words affirming the equal rights of trans people were taken as evidence that I was transphobic because I did not simply and uncritically accept the stated claims of a particular trans person regarding the theory of gender. As the meeting progressed — 90 minutes in all — I began to feel more and more panicked. I have been in post for only a little more than a year and a half. I have not yet passed probation, and thus my contract can be terminated relatively easily. 10 years of doctoral and post-doctoral work to finally secure a job in a research university, and suddenly I felt like this might be snatched away. In retrospect, I was over-reacting. But it’s hard to appreciate just how — even when convinced of my innocence, and the justness of the issues I was defending (academic free speech, truthful discussion of complex social issues) — paranoid and worried such a process renders one, unless one has actually been through it. The student who made the complaint emphasised repeatedly that I had made them feel hurt and excluded and was not respecting their right to exist, whilst citing my decision to disengage as itself evidence that I was not treating them equally and proof that I was transphobic. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. I became even more chilled when my Head of Department warned me that although he and other senior academics thought the charges ridiculous and were supporting me, members of the University administrative structure were looking at cases like mine and siding with the complainants. I began to understand how Alice felt when she went down the rabbit hole, and everything in Wonderland was suddenly inverted.

In the end the complaint was dismissed. (As it happens, I was the last to know: my Head of Department had to chase down official correspondence that was never sent to me, even when the student was told of the outcome weeks before — a nice touch from the University, that did not endear management to me one bit.) The student responded by sending angry emails to various senior figures accusing the entire university of institutional transphobia. I'm out of the firing line now, but my entire department undertook compulsory Gender Awareness Training recently, where the only permitted truths about gender identity, biology and social construction were imparted to a room of 40 PhD-possessed academics, who being savvier than me already knew better than to answer back.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to sign another letter in another national newspaper on these issues. I thought about it carefully. I decided not to. I wish I could say I had a better reason, but the truth is I was just too scared that I would find myself the subject of another complaint — and I didn't have the courage to risk it. I guess you could say that the student won, in the end. Some dismiss the claim that there is a chilling effect of trans activism on university campuses. So I ask: whose right to exist — to speak freely about an issue that really matters, and in turn goes to the heart of what it means to be a free society — is being denied now?"

Academic 14

"Both XXXX [a signatory to the Sunday Times letter] and I [another signatory] have been on the receiving end of a Twitter barrage re signing, directed at our institutions from Student Unions. XXXX's has included tweets saying that people that express such views deserve a "hard slap" and deserve "suspending".

My experience has been slightly less hostile but with numerous accusations of being a "transphobe". The main thing that struck me is that no-one has emailed me or asked to speak to me re this. I had assumed that this would be a consequence of signing and I find it dispiriting that views are just shouted on Twitter but no-one seems to have the slightest interest in actually engaging with this. My managers have taken a position, broadly, of say nothing at all but they have made clear that, as an individual, I am free to respond if I wish but that their view is that this would just make matters worse."

Academic 15

"Our University Press Office reports public debate with a bias that suggests institutional opposition to any academic exploration of gender critical feminism. For instance, when some academics signed an open letter asking Stonewall to "clarify that it fully supports academic freedom of thought," the Press Office instead reported this to staff as "a letter opposing calls for trans-inclusive education." They didn't link to the letter so that staff could judge for themselves. On my corridor, there are three of us who have discussed these issues in private, and we are deeply concerned about the intellectual and societal repercussions of how the current climate inhibits academic enquiry."

Academic 16

"I have been reported to my university for tweeting/retweeting 'transphobic' tweets- the complainant is anonymous and external to the university. I was asked to meet with my HOD and someone from HR who during the meeting claimed I had violated the terms of the university's trans policy although neither of them could tell me how exactly how I had done that. After the meeting I received an email that again claimed I had tweeted/retweet 'transphobic' material. I was told that there was an expectation I would not tweet or retweet content of this kind in the future. My twitter account does not name the institution where I work. I was also warned that I could be accused of hate speech and was in danger of making my students feel unsafe.

The relationship between the university and the concept of academic freedom has always been mediated by a complex set of structural rules and cultural systems leading to conflicts of interest and it would be naive to insist that it is otherwise. I have been aware of this as a working class academic who has negotiated these norms and conflicts throughout my academic career. That process has been difficult but possible what we are witnessing now is a closing down of avenues of negotiation and compromise and an overt rejection of scientific, cultural and philosophical enquiry into what has become one of the most important debates of the present moment. Subtleties, nuances, impact assessments have all been ignored to be replaced by an authoritarian policing that rejects any discussion of self definition.

The relationship between my own beliefs and the issue of self-definition has been completely dismissed.

As a Marxist I believe there is an objective material reality that exists independently of feelings or perception. Therefore I believe in the biological reality of sex). My beliefs are now being labeled transphobic".

Academic 17

"A few weeks after I first put my name to a published "gender critical" piece, I got a phone call from a colleague asking me to step down from the international advisory board of a new book series that he had invited me to join about year earlier. At the time, he and his co-editor were very keen to have me on board, and had also invited me to submit a book proposal for the series, which I did and which they had happily accepted. He now informed me that they didn't want me to be involved in the project, because of my views. I had made no secret of my views in the past and we had had several discussions on the issues over the past months, including some disagreements, which did not seem to get in the way of our friendship and collegial relationship. I thought it was completely outrageous to be asked to step down from the Board, and I told him so, although I agreed to do so as I did not want to get in to a row with him and his co-editor. I was really upset, but sent a brief and polite email to the Editors asking them to put in writing their reasons for asking me to step down. I pointed out that it was rather odd for people purporting to be doing critical work in their field to be distancing themselves from a colleague taking a critical view on a current orthodoxy; and stated that I had no problem

collaborating with people who disagreed with me. I asked that, if they had decided they didn't want gender-critical feminists on the board, they do me the courtesy of stating this explicitly. Of course they would not. They sent me, instead, a condescending, evasive and frankly misogynistic response stating that it was "a pity we wouldn't be able to work together", and that we should keep this in perspective and remember that there were far more important things to worry ourselves about (i.e. "calm down dear"). It became clear to me that, whatever I responded, they would not come out and state their reasons for dis-inviting me as they were scared I would go public with it and expose them for engaging in a witch-hunt. I am more senior than them and well-connected with several prominent scholars in our field who I could have brought this up with, but I decided to drop it because I do not want to sink to their level, and I have no desire to get involved in a public feud with colleagues in our discipline. Although I was very hurt and upset, as I pointed out, at this point in my career it is no big deal for me to be on another advisory board. But if I was a junior female academic applying for promotion, this is exactly the kind of thing that could be the difference between getting the promotion and not getting it. I doubt they even considered this.

Obviously this example cannot be attributed to the Stonewall guidance/policy, but it is of course the ideological framing of these issues pushed so successfully by Stonewall and other groups that has succeeded in painting any departure from the orthodoxy as "transphobic" and therefore legitimating, indeed normalising, such behaviour towards dissenting academic colleagues, particularly women.

There is another incident I would like to mention, that I feel is really important in light of the typical accusations that signatories of such letters are all white and racist, amongst other things. The way I found out about the Stonewall HE guidance is that it was sent to me by a junior colleague who got it from her departmental Equal Opportunities Liaison Officer. This colleague is a Black woman who felt she could not speak out about her concerns. As is well documented, the institutional racism in British academia and beyond means that Black women face significant challenges and obstacles to promotion, so they are far less likely to be found in senior academic positions. And because the personal and professional risks of speaking out on this issue are so high, it is more likely to be academics in secure, more senior positions, who are also less vulnerable because of not being in already marginalised groups, who do so. So, yes, no surprise really that most of the signatories are white; there's intersectionality for you."

Academic 18

"Until the end of June I am still seconded to XXX [name of University] where I worked full-time between 2012–2017. I am also editor of a UK-based journal. I am now based in a country where feminism still means equality for women, which means I don't worry about the impact on my job of tweeting gender-critical comments, but I do worry a lot about the impact it might have on my journal work. I followed the debates for a long time before I had the courage to even "like" a

gender-critical comment, but the increasing hostility towards gender-critical scholars pushed me to openly show support. I have since been added to TERF blockers. Since your Times letter was published I have seen fellow editors in my field use their journal platforms to critique GC scholars, and I do worry that at some point I might be targeted by those who think a GC scholar should not be editing a major journal. This worry increased when I saw the campaign against another journal editor. No one has said anything to me, so I am not experiencing direct pressure, instead I am affected by the hostile climate. At first it gave me real anxiety, my hands would shake before posting a gender-critical comment. But now I am mostly just really angry, so I comment more freely despite the worry that this might affect me as an editor, or the reputation of my journal.”

Academic 19

“My particular reason for signing the *Sunday Times* letter is my concern regarding the stifling effect on university teachers created by fears of being accused of transphobia. In my own case, students from my department complained to my Head of Department about my Twitter activity, with the allegation that my views were a threat to their safety in the department as trans and non-binary students. I had tweeted or endorsed nothing transphobic and was not accused of having done so, but I had retweeted material and supported colleagues which or with whom these students disagreed, and which or whom they considered transphobic. A meeting was held between my HoD, our faculty head and these students at which their concerns were discussed. I found out about this meeting when one of the students tweeted about it, and, as the meeting was not minuted, met with my HoD to find out more. I understood from them that both the department and faculty were concerned not to upset trans and gender-diverse students who saw our department as a “safe space”. I share the desire to support our trans and non-binary students, to make sure that they know that they are welcome and valued members of our academic community, and to uphold their rights. However, I feel that I should be able to express my views (which are broadly gender-critical) in public, without fear of censure. I have been contacted by many colleagues, at my institution and elsewhere, who share these views, but feel unable to speak out about them for fear of suffering reprisals, either professional, or personal (in which I would include intimidation, online abuse, and physical threat of assault). These are very real concerns, and they are not unfounded. Colleagues whom I hardly know personally have messaged me to apologise for their “cowardice” (their word, not mine) in not expressing themselves publicly. Such colleagues are often on the job market or in precarious contracts and, in the words of one, “I am sorry, but I simply cannot take the risk”. As a university teacher who has been accused of transphobic views (largely on Twitter, but by association by the students who complained), I have a vested interest in pressing Stonewall to define what it means by “transphobic” teaching. I do not work in the field of gender studies, though I work a little on historical conceptions of gender. I am not transphobic, and do not hold

or promote transphobic views. I believe that I should be allowed to interrogate the theory of gender identity without being accused of “debating trans people’s right to exist”. A frustrating result of the ST letter is that very few respondents seem to have thought about the detail of its contents. I have seen tweets suggesting that I want the right to misgender trans people, or to be openly transphobic at work. Nothing could be further from the truth. I have never misgendered anyone, and have no desire to do so. I treat my trans students and colleagues — all my students and colleagues, I hope! — with respect, even when I disagree with them on a particular issue. The fact that I do not personally have an experience of having a felt sense of gender, or gender identity, does not mean that I do not uphold other people’s right to say that they do have one. At an institutional level, I do not feel unsupported, and a number of colleagues from my department have told me they share my views and support my position. It remains to be seen whether this institutional support will be maintained in the future. I respect my HoD’s desire to support trans and non-binary students, but I hope this desire will not be upheld at the expense of academic staff who pose no threat to anyone’s safety.”

Academic 20

“I’m a Senior Lecturer and have taught at this university for the last 20 years. I’ve been actively involved in research, teaching and various management roles in the department. I’m outspoken and confident in dealing with university policy and practice, with few qualms in expressing my opinion, even where that means pushing back against authority or convention.

The promotion of gender-identity dogma, and shaming of any questions, is the first thing that has had me hold my tongue and keep silent. I still try to do the best for our students; but this has gone under cover as people cautiously sound one another out to see whether it’s safe to express concerns. “Do you know who managed to keep the female toilets in that building?”

“What about Athena Swan? Can we still explicitly encourage female students?”

During the GRA consultation I retweeted a piece from WPUK that condemned silencing women. A research student mailed me to explain WPUK was a hate group, and my retweeting concerned them. They could not believe I might read the WPUK website and not see it as inciting hate. Since then, the student will not work with me in case that advances my career, which to them is unacceptable.

These complaints from a student, expressed directly to me and through mutual colleagues, have been silencing. I am now reluctant (OK, scared) to post anything more about this on social media; I avoid raising the topic with other students and staff.

I’m also reading a lot more Mumsnet as a result, and that’s been a great positive outcome. Plus, I got to attend one of the speaker meetings on women’s rights, and that was excellent. Colleagues have signed petitions to ban speakers I have been keen to hear. Our student union says opinions like mine, that female liberation is as urgent as ever, are forbidden hate speech. Even our local UCU branch, who had been somewhat open to differences of opinion, is now closing down discussion.

I’m ashamed, though, that as a male academic with a solid long-term position I’ve failed to put

my head above the parapet. Yes, I've been able to discuss with a couple of GC colleagues, and make small pushes in committees; but I've been cowed by the fear of dispute and conflict, and been too polite to make a fuss. I wish I did better. I wish our university did better."

Academic 21

"I took an undergrad session on Gender (1st yrs) and had got no further than asking them to define woman/female sex vs gender when a vocal student announced this was "triggering". I went ahead anyway but it took some crowd management. That's scary because student complaints and feedback can spiral and I fundamentally believe in helping students be critical thinkers and questioners but felt sick even at this small scale because I've seen how vicious this gets on Twitter between fellow academics! We need to be able to discuss this stuff! My main subject at work is SEN and Inclusion and I passionately believe in Inclusion... and I also believe there is a necessity to distinguish between sex and gender, to challenge social stereotypes of gender and to retain sex as a protected characteristic. Happy to support anyone's gender ID totally. Don't believe can change sex. Passionate about women's sports and fearful of impact of self sex-ID. More fearful about inability to discuss this without perma-label of bigot etc. All the colleagues I've spoken to agree. When I see academics I respect and whose work I admire, who I've seen at conferences, speak out to say my stance is basically evil that makes me feel unable to speak out online because I've seen how that ignites. Although I would speak in a face to face context and do. A colleague I do not know at my uni signed the anti-terf letter and that makes me very anxious about conflict in my workplace. I've taught and fully supported trans students. I think the hatred in this debate that tries to close down calm and respectful conversation will make them fear me if they know my views... but they have no need to fear me. The nasty playground stuff on both sides needs to stop — it is this that makes involvement in discussion of the topic fearful. It has become very polarised and impossible to agree with some of one side's views without being boxed there.... if exploring the topic becomes too dangerous then people will opt for the 'safe' option.... which is the full on trans-activist stance, with its apparently PC 'credibility'."

Academic 22

"I won't go through the usual litany of 'I'm not a transphobe', 'I'm not a homophobe', etc — *of course I'm not* and those attacking me for being a Gender Critical feminist know this full well. The words are weapons designed to silence anyone who deviates from the standard narrative. I'm on the left and I always been, and I've been a feminist all my life, but having recently expressed concerns about the creeping authoritarianism of trans activism, the potential impact on women's rights, and the threat to freedom of thought and speech, I now find myself labelled a Fascist, a Nazi and (with boring inevitability), a transphobe and homophobe. So how do I feel? I feel frustrated because the intimidation is so widespread that Gender Critical feminists look to be in the minority when we actually express the concerns of the majority, within universities and within the broader society. The campaign of intimidation has

silenced everyone and it's been left to the undaunted few to speak. I feel depressed by the lack of questioning about the gender narrative; the obedience is truly alarming. What happened to academic values of critique and enquiry? I'm worried by the harm that trans activism is doing to the lesbian and trans communities, many of whom stand with us. I'm angry that so many men have taken the opportunity to 'legitimately' express their hatred of women, to abuse us, and to try and erode our hard-won rights. And I'm disappointed that so many women, desperate to signal their right-on credentials or to advance their careers, have joined them, undermining and ridiculing women and never asking themselves what they are *doing* when they engage in this.

I will carry on speaking out and I will continue to defend academic freedom of speech. To deal with the backlash is undeniably difficult; I don't have much self-confidence and the online abuse is designed to destroy any self-belief that you may have scraped together over the years. To be shunned by colleagues and friends you've worked with for years because they fear 'guilt' by association, to have your professional reputation trashed online, to feel frightened of students when you've spent a lifetime supporting them, is all horrible. I won't shut up like a good girl, though — the issues matter too much for that."

Academic 23

"My overall impression, rereading this, is that what comes over is that I'm a terrible coward and have experienced nothing that should have put me off, especially when compared to what you and many other more visibly GC academics endure. Thing is it's true: I am very conflict-averse, generally not very political, and frankly scared of the whole situation.

- XXX was student union LGBT+ officer here. Called women not willing to countenance sex with XX's penis "cuntscum" and called for their expulsion from the university. University did nothing, citing independence of student union. Did seem to manage to lean on XXX [same officer] and the union once XXX [same officer] hoped that police would "die", though — so not as independent as all that, when it mattered.
- Rector of the university retweeted something about a parliamentary information meeting — which I had already urged my MP to attend — and attracted a storm of protest. Instead of supporting her perfectly civil free speech, a university spokesperson made a statement including that the university had "zero tolerance for transphobia". I wrote to the (then new) Principal of the University supporting her and pointing out that although the university's actual policies were (and are) pretty sensible, the meaning of "transphobia" is so contested and in some people's eyes so broad that that was a really unfortunate way to summarise the university's position, especially as XXXX [member of University receiving protests] hadn't said anything remotely objectionable. I got a brush-off reply from him. Conclusion: the principal of the university doesn't get it, and doesn't robustly support free speech.
- The same principal made a pronouncement about coming down hard on anyone leaving

“Woman. Noun. Adult human female” stickers on university premises, suggesting that CCTV footage could be used to support disciplinary action against staff or students doing that — he even said the police had been involved. OK, stickering is vandalism and it's fine for the university not to tolerate it, but a more sensible principal would have made it symmetric, applying to e.g. “some women have penises get over it” stickers as well.

- The students' union is running a campaign called No Terfs on our Turf. Apparently, the use of the derogatory term “terf” has been raised with the university-level equality and diversity committee, but it is considered to be covered by free speech. It doesn't take much imagination to think of derogatory words for other groups, similarly frequently used to incite violence against members of the groups, that would never be permitted to be in the title of student union campaigns and on banners on university premises. I'll refrain from listing them.
- The university did host and stick with the recent Women's Sex-Based Rights panel — very good.
- A member of staff at the university reported on Twitter having contacted HR to complain about other members of staff who signed your recent Sunday Times letter — there was a link to the email asking whether HR were going to take action against them. Tweet seems to have gone now. I hope HR have told this person where to stick this complaint? I'm not sure, though. I had been regretting not having seen an invitation to sign it — not so sure now.

So, like that. Not outright attacks from senior management — but equivocation and lack of support for women in the university, leading me to feel that I can't predict what the university might suddenly deem transphobic and sackable. (The university does not have a good record on following its own processes if it isn't convenient to do so — I don't feel I could rely on the university to do what, on paper, it seems clear it should do.) Especially, the university authorities seem unwilling to push back at all against attacks on gender critical women from the student union. In an environment where it doesn't take much in the way of student complaint to make one's life hell, definitely chilling in practice. I'm currently in an uncomfortable middle ground: I sign letters that are really carefully worded, on request, and I have attended meetings, but I feel this is already living pretty dangerously and that I have to be very careful indeed about what I say. I hate it and don't feel I signed up for this.”

Academic 24

“I signed the letter which provoked a lot of discussion on social media. As a result, anonymous members of staff apparently complained about my position on the ‘trans’ issue. Nothing else, just the trans issue. The aim of discussion was to generate fear (colleagues complained and their identities protected), and I was also led to think that my actions could lead trans people committing suicide. This meeting was designed to produce feelings of fear and it did — but it also revealed to me the crisis from non discussion at universities.”

Academic 25

“After I signed the *Guardian* letter, I became aware that more than one member of Senior Management had discussed it, my involvement, and my professionalism and suitability to work Open Days in future. The most difficult thing was that these conversations were happening in private, and often with my friends, seemingly on the premise that anyone who heard about it would be unsympathetic to the Gender Critical argument and by extension to me. It’s also worth noting that not some of the people initiating these conversations were open about not having read or understood the letter. Several of my colleagues regularly tweet about, and talk about, ‘TERFS’, which makes me feel uncomfortable and unsafe. I don’t feel able to challenge them on their public use of a term which is so often used by others in connection direct calls for violence toward women who think as I do.”

Academic 26

“Last week, my UCU branch passed a motion on trans and non-binary equality. The motion includes:

UCU XXX [name of University] believes:

- All members have the right to exist and be recognised as the gender they themselves identify as.

- All our members have the right to hold personal opinions.

- Our members do not have a right to be free from criticism for these opinions, nor be

guaranteed a platform by the union to express them.

- We should not support members in weaponising their speech to question the existence of trans and non-binary colleagues.

XXX [name of University] resolves to:

- Work with the student union LGBT+ officers and the Staff Pride Network on creating a trans inclusive university.

- Create a LGBT+ subcommittee within the branch.

- Employ good practice, such as that created by STUC and UCU, to provide guidance for members on gender identity and trans inclusion in the workplace.

- Host a workshop on gender identity and trans rights (e.g. by Scottish Trans Alliance or Trans Edu) for interested UCU members, to counteract lack of information around trans and non-

binary equality.

- To call on the University of XXX to ensure that all events held in the name of [name of university] and on [name of university] premises are in line with the Dignity and Respect Policy and that [name of university] neither host nor facilitate meetings which contain content which is transphobic, biphobic or homophobic or otherwise detrimental to the safety and wellbeing of LGBT+ staff.

To fully understand the apparent sub-text of this motion, a little context is needed. It’s clear

(e.g. from previous discussions in the branch, and individuals’ and the branch’s collective

response to particular events and flashpoints) that ‘criticism’ of gender-critical views is

considered acceptable and necessary by a majority of branch officers and committee even when

it contains insulting and abusive language, defamation, slurs, hyperbolic claims and allegations of bad faith. It's also clear that any discussion of women's sex-based rights or the notion of sex as biological is considered transphobic and a denial of the existence of trans and non-binary colleagues — and since (as repeatedly asserted within the branch, including during the debate on the motion) only trans people have the right to define what constitutes transphobia, it's impossible for non-trans people to defend themselves against such a charge. What the motion does, then, is establish that any criticism, no matter how vicious, of a member's gender-critical views as expressed in their teaching, research and/or contribution to public life, is justified, and that the branch will not support them. Put simply, the branch position is that any member who is targeted for gender-critical views deserves to be so targeted and will not be supported. It feels hostile and leaves me and a few others very vulnerable.

I'm a UCU rep and very active branch member. Since the motion was passed a number of colleagues have contacted me to say they've cancelled their UCU membership or are considering doing so. I'm also a lesbian, but I cannot feel in any way supported by the prospect of an LGBT+ subcommittee within the branch as its purpose appears to be to further embed some of the most intolerant aspects of transactivism. I'm in the relatively fortunate position of working in a university which has recently publicly re-stated its commitment to academic freedom and to defending universities as places where controversial and difficult discussions can take place. This gives me a measure of protection. But as a lifelong trade unionist it's deeply distressing to know that my union has committed itself to a local policy of non-support in the very arena where I'm likely to need it in the coming months.”

Current doctoral student

“I wrote my Masters dissertation at Oxford on the problems in the Women & Equalities Committee Report into gender identity and the proposals they made for changes to the GRA 2004 and the Equality Act 2010 — I argued that the changes proposed would introduce contradictions in the law, and that the authors had seriously overlooked the fact that single-sex exemptions are justified for different reasons in different contexts, e.g. the reason we have sex-segregated sports is not the same as the reason we have sex-segregated prisons, even though

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should be careful who I speak to about my research. I've since shown this dissertation to my current PhD supervisor, who agrees both that it's publishable work and that it would be very risky to send it out for publication, especially given that I'm about to enter the job market. “

Former student

“When planning my dissertation for my last masters degree (relating to sex differences and emphasising brains aren't gendered), my tutor and I had to meet secretly to discuss our gender critical views as we were the only ones in the entire department (school of law and social

justice — I'm sure you can imagine) to share them. She suddenly stopped replying to my emails one day which I think is related to my publicly being critical of queer theory during a lecture. I can't blame her — I'm a student and she was a tenured professor, so severing connections with me makes sense. She told me at the time things were very tense with regards to gender politics so it wouldn't take much to join the dots.

I had originally planned to go on to a doctoral programme but I just can't bear it in the current academic climate. I am trying to find the resolve to just do it anyway, but it's courage one has to dig deep for at the start of a career.”

Transgender University Feminism Research



1.1K claps



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[See responses \(7\)](#)