

Written evidence from Professor Alice Sullivan et al (FOE0086)

We are a group of UCL academics who share concerns regarding academic freedom, free speech, and women's rights.

1. This submission addresses the situation in universities. We focus on the question of academic freedom to address questions regarding sex, gender and gender identity (Suissa and Sullivan 2021).
2. Biological sex is a vital empirical and conceptual category for academics across a range of disciplines, particularly within the natural and social sciences.
3. However, a prominent strand of gender identity ideology holds the view, asserted vociferously by campaigners and activists, that it is “transphobic” merely to assert that sex exists as a meaningful category, distinct from people’s self-declared “gender identity”. Lobby groups such as Stonewall demand affirmation of the mantra “Trans Women Are Women”, with explicit and repeated refusals, through widespread use of the slogan “No Debate”, to engage in questions about the meaning of these terms. The slogan thus functions not as an empirical statement but as a demand to adhere to the ontological position that claims about people’s “gender identity” trump claims about their biological sex. Gender identity ideology is, in this sense, absolutist, demanding that we ignore material evidence of the relevance of biological sex in any context.
4. In this climate, students are being denied the opportunity to hear a range of views on, for example, the societal, historical and environmental factors contributing to sexism and misogyny, or the existence of biological sex differences, and certain topics are deemed off-limits. Students’ political participation is constrained, and some female students in particular report being unable to speak their minds in class.
5. Academic freedom is essential for the production and dissemination of knowledge, including on difficult topics. Universities have a vital role to play in contributing to public and policy debates on complex issues. Examples of research being suppressed or constrained in this area include: attempts to have Lisa Littman’s (2018) study on the sharp increase in adolescent girls suffering gender dysphoria removed following its publication; the refusal of Bath Spa University to allow James Caspian’s proposed research on detransitioners; and attempts to remove Michele Moore from her position as editor of the journal *Disability and Society* for challenging ‘born in the wrong body’ narratives, and highlighting the high proportion of autistic girls presenting at gender identity clinics.
6. There is a wider chilling effect, with serious consequences beyond academia. The lack of data, evidence and analysis regarding the experimental treatment administered to young patients presenting at gender identity clinics is a clear case in point.
7. The view that it is transphobic to acknowledge biological sex as even potentially relevant has led gender identity campaigners to demand that social and human scientists must not collect data on sex, and philosophers must not use sex as a conceptual category. Such demands are fundamentally antithetical to academic freedom.

8. We are aware of ethics committees at two major universities that have prevented, or tried to prevent, data being collected on sex, because sex-based data collection offends against gender identity ideology.
9. A research methods seminar to discuss data collection on sex and gender was cancelled to avoid platforming one of us (Sullivan) due to the fact that her view that sex is an important demographic variable for data collection was deemed to make audience members 'unsafe'.
10. Harassment and vexatious complaints against staff and students by gender identity activists are a common phenomenon. Extreme examples of this have been widely reported, for example the historian Selina Todd is accompanied to lectures by security guards as Oxford University has received credible threats against her. There are many lower profile cases of (mainly) female academics facing campaigns of defamation and campaigns to have them sacked (see Stock 2019). The personal costs of such processes, in terms of mental and emotional stress and financial insecurity, especially for those on precarious contracts, should not be underestimated.
11. A number of university events have been cancelled due to threats from gender identity activists. One example is an event scheduled in 2019 at Edinburgh University on the teaching of gender identity in Scottish schools. Given that DfE guidance for English schools on this matter was changed some months after the cancellation of this event, this illustrates the way in which a culture of silencing prevents academics, policymakers and practitioners from coming together to discuss matters of public importance, with potentially damaging consequences for policy and practice, and in this case, for young people.
12. As co-convenors of the "Women's Liberation 2020" conference at UCL, some of us gained first-hand experience of the role of university administrators in assessing "risk", in terms of physical threat and reputational management. Because events discussing women's rights have faced threats of violence and campaigns of smears, they are deemed "high risk". In contrast, there are no documented cases of university events organised by gender identity campaigners facing such threats, hence these events pose no special risk. This generates a perverse incentive, and a power imbalance between those who are willing to use intimidatory tactics and those who are not. Indeed, our experience of obstruction in organising a conference on women's rights, in the face of defamatory accusations from activists who took issue with some of the positions articulated by some of our invited speakers, came just months after our institution had hosted a conference on "Trans Lives", with a range of speakers in support of the gender identity position on this "controversial" issue, yet this event attracted no such threats or calls for its cancellation.
13. Universities need to give serious consideration to whether some of the organisations they work with operate in a way which is incompatible with the core value of academic freedom. Lobby groups such as Stonewall and Gendered Intelligence provide training at many institutions, yet these organisations promote a particular perspective on gender, and face serious criticisms for their role in silencing debate. All university policies should be assessed to ensure their alignment with academic freedom. Universities are legally bound to protect both gender reassignment *and* sex as protected characteristics under the Equality Act, and it is not acceptable that they should impose an official ideological view on gender identity which erases sex (Biggs 2018). "Policy capture", whereby a small number of powerful lobbyists determine policy without proper scrutiny (Murray and Blackburn 2019), has driven policy on sex and gender identity at our universities as it has at

other institutions.

14. The climate within academia is inevitably influenced by the broader political arena, where gender identity activists have sought to shut down debate, often using violent misogynistic

language and behaviour. Gender identity activists have adopted the slogan and hashtag #nodebate, claiming that debate constitutes ‘real harm’ or even ‘literal violence’.

15. Current hate speech law, in combination with current police guidance and practice on hate speech, has a chilling effect, and creates a hierarchy of rights. Sex is a protected characteristic under EA2010 (which defines woman as “a female of any age”). But women are not protected as a sex class under hate speech law, while other groups are. This leaves women as a sex class, including students and academics, particularly vulnerable to suppression of speech on issues which concern them.

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