

The Mail's 'Brexit bias' witch-hunt is wrong, but raises uncomfortable home truths



*Chris Heaton-Harris MP was wrong to ask vice-chancellors for details of their Brexit teaching, and the subsequent Daily Mail witch-hunt against Remainers is contemptible. But, **Lee Jones** argues, the imbroglio does highlight some serious problems within academia and its relationship to wider society.*

As one of the small handful of openly pro-Brexit academics, I was quoted in all of [the initial coverage](#) of the letter sent by Chris Heaton-Harris MP to university vice-chancellors requesting the names of professors teaching about Brexit and their course materials. My firm line was: "Universities are autonomous and politicians have no right to intimidate academics by scrutinising their courses." Predictably, however, the *Daily Mail* followed Heaton-Harris's lead by launching a witch-hunt for "Brexit bias" in universities. The reaction has been apoplectic.

Whatever my views on Brexit, it was easy for me to condemn Heaton-Harris because my commitment to academic freedom (and freedom more generally) is principled and consistent, not opportunistic and determined by particular circumstances. So I am on record, for example, attacking the government's Prevent programme, criticising no-platforming, "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings", supporting Thai colleagues threatened by military officers, defending a professor who tweeted favourably about "white genocide", and attacking the suppression of research on transgenderism on the grounds it could be offensive. I have just launched [a petition](#) expressing solidarity with the journal *Third World Quarterly*, which published an article piece defending colonialism then faced a 10,000-strong petition (whose signatories included many academics) demanding its retraction death threats against the editor-in-chief, leading to the article being withdrawn. It has been heartening to see so many scholars rush to defend academic freedom during the Heaton-Harris imbroglio. How many, I wonder, will show principled consistency and support this petition?

Despite my opposition to both Heaton-Harris and the *Mail's* witch-hunt, I do feel that this episode reveals some genuine problems in contemporary academia. There is clear evidence of "groupthink" in universities in relation to Brexit, and that can have negative consequences for both research and teaching. While fending off external raids on universities, we also need to take a long hard look at our own practices.

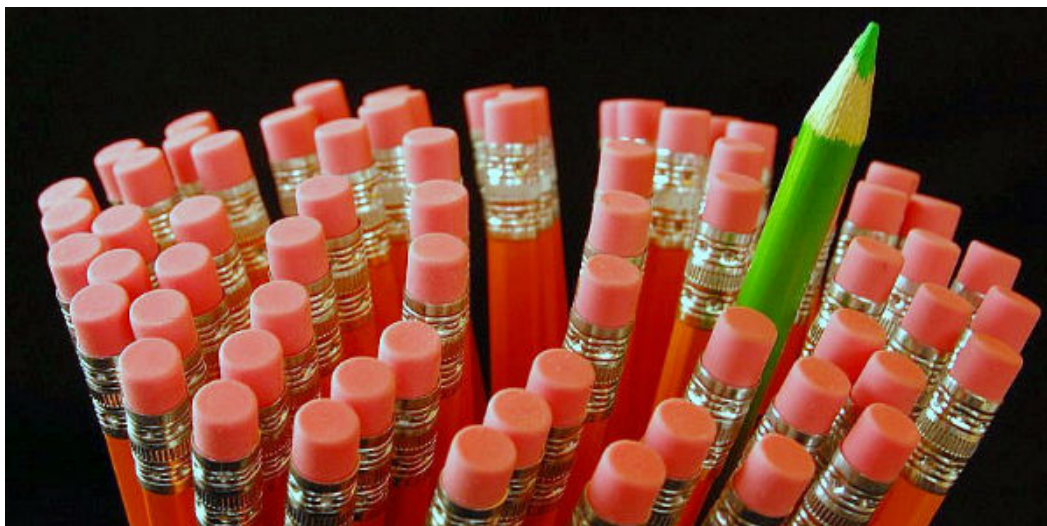


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The *Daily Mail's* attack on "Remainer Universities" is very crude, but it does contain kernels of truth. It is clearly absurd to expect views among educated specialists to mirror those of the wider public. If years of education and research made no difference to one's perspective, there would be no reason for universities to exist. The *Mail's* sloppy use of "bias" is also pernicious. For them, any pro-Remain position on the part of universities or academics expresses "bias". However, it is perfectly possible to come to a reasoned judgement that comes down on one side of a debate. Expressing that judgement is not "bias"; it is the conclusion of a rational thought process. We do not accuse universities teaching Einstein's theory of relativity of "bias" against Newtonian physics.

However, Politics is not Physics. Political questions are inseparable from value judgements. At the heart of the UK's divisions over Brexit are basic disagreements about the value we should attach to things like democracy, sovereignty and autonomy versus things like free trade and freedom of movement. Should we endure the dissolution of sovereignty in exchange for greater economic prosperity? Are we willing to trade off economic decline in order to restore control over our borders? Do we value or dislike the large-scale immigration that the EU's free movement has brought about?

Many Remainers – including some academics – fail to recognise this debate as a legitimate clash of values and preferences. They commit the ideological mistake of seeing their perspective not as an expression of particular values (and, we might add, material self-interest) but purely as the outcome of rational reflection, meaning their viewpoint is simply correct, or at least superior to alternatives. Accordingly, the referendum's outcome is often depicted – including by many academics – as the triumph of irrationality over good sense. The "comedian" Mitch Benn [summed up](#) this view in his response to the *Daily Mail*: "if all the clever people disagree with you, it may not be the case that they're all 'biased'. It COULD just be that you're *wrong*". The increasingly unhinged philosopher and arch-Remoaner A.C. Grayling [states](#) that the government is "suicidal" and should be "suspended, and rationality restored".

Perhaps few Remainer academics would go so far as to support a coup. But there is doubtless a widespread view that the Leave vote was produced by a disdain for "experts", "fake news", and irrational and/or malign voters. This prejudice swiftly influenced research output, as academics helped to produce highly dubious reports alleging "low information" voters were [bamboozled](#) by the misleading Leave campaign, [exaggerating](#) the extent of post-referendum racism, and [misleadingly inflating](#) the positive response to Jo Cox MP's murder during the referendum campaign. One even claimed to have [discovered a correlation](#) between Leave-voting and obesity (subtext: Brexiteers are stupid *and* fat).

Much of the reaction to the Heaton-Harris imbroglia has been of a similar tone, with even supposedly "humorous" responses [dripping with](#) elitist condescension. Exaggerated references to "McCarthyism" and "Leninism" (huh?), or [even](#) "fascism" and "the Stasi" reflect a low-level hysteria fanned by misleading stories of EU academics being [barred](#) from advising government or even being [deported](#). The cool scepticism that is supposed to inform academic thinking is often markedly absent when it comes to Brexit.

It is not exaggerated, then, to identify a strong academic "groupthink" around Brexit. Before the referendum, many universities and their sectoral bodies campaigned openly for Remain, with zero internal consultation and no consideration of the impact on scholars and students who disagreed with this. That they now object to being called "Remainer Universities" is frankly bizarre. Without exception, every academic I have met since the referendum automatically assumes that I voted Remain, and they often proceed to make disparaging remarks about Brexit and those supporting it. My immediate colleagues are delightful people, treating me more with bemusement than hostility. But an intimate friend of 10 years' standing, who is also an academic, cut me off completely after the referendum, accusing me of racism. I know other pro-Leave academics who have been blanked in the corridors or face derision or [shouting matches](#) for publishing articles critical of the EU and its leading politicians. One of the *Guardian's* "anonymous academics" [complained](#) of being treated like a "pariah" for supporting Leave.

This kind of groupthink, and the disconnection from much of the rest of society that it implies, is not healthy for scholarship or teaching.

A lack of reflexivity has provoked a particularly deep crisis in political science, which has catastrophically failed to predict or understand the most significant political developments of our time: Brexit, the election of Trump, and the success of Jeremy Corbyn. Most political scientists were sneeringly dismissive of all three, and now find themselves badly exposed. A few – perhaps most notably Matthew Goodwin – have eaten humble pie and devoted themselves to understanding the referendum outcome, producing sympathetic and insightful research that explains Leave voting, rather than merely condemning or lamenting it. But many have returned to their routine snarkiness on social media, while many academic presentations continue to conflate Brexit and Trump as signs of a world gone mad.

It is difficult to imagine that this attitude never affects university teaching. To be clear, I think it is possible for an academic to harbour a personal opinion while never expressing it in the classroom. But this takes considerable effort and a particular pedagogical approach, to conceal one's own attitude, to encourage students to take all perspectives seriously, and to create space for them to develop their own, independent evaluation of the material. Many academics do not do this. Some simply reject this "liberal" approach to pedagogy. Others, influenced by poststructuralist and postcolonial theory, see all knowledge as inherently power-laden and are determined to expose this during teaching, pushing their classes in a radical direction. Still others are insufficiently reflexive, believing – as noted above – that their perspective is obviously correct and/or will be widely shared by their peers and students. Others, like academics who circulate Remain literature by email or in classes, perhaps simply don't care about using their lectern as a pulpit, seeing it as their duty as right-thinking intellectuals to spread the gospel.

Beyond Brexit, objective [evidence](#) of left-wing "groupthink" in the academy is clear. Too few of us pause to consider the environment that this is creating for students who do not share our perspective. Others even [organise seminars](#) on "dealing with right-wing views in the classroom". To be clear, I am not suggesting that students are "brainwashed" by lecturers. Most young people were anti-Brexit anyway and needed little encouragement from their lecturers. Moreover, students are thinking adults – the irony of preachy teaching is that it often puts students off. As one colleague [quipped](#) on Twitter, "I can't even convince my students to double-space their essays, I doubt I have any influence on how they vote in referendums." My point is a different one. In today's competitive, instrumentalist era, most students are intensely cue-conscious and eager to please their lecturers. When strong views are expressed by authority figures (or even simply by a majority of students), it takes a brave 18 year old to express a contrary perspective, or risk a low mark in an essay. Academics may protest that they are professionals and would never mark-down a contrary argument. Perhaps. But without a very strong steer to students on freedom of expression and the value of debate – which too few academics are willing to provide these days – how are students themselves supposed to know this?

The Heaton-Harris imbroglio signifies a growing "culture war" in Britain, as politics polarises along lines of education level and age, rather than older markers like social class. Witch-hunts like those launched by the *Daily Mail* risk importing from the United States a growing concern about the lack of "[viewpoint diversity](#)" among academics, which the right depicts as "bias" and an offence against *students'* academic freedom. We must nip this in the bud. The principle of academic freedom must be upheld. It is for academics alone to decide what and how they teach, and no amount of managerial meddling, student protest, media outcry, or jumped-up MPs should be allowed to determine curricula. The idea that academic views should somehow represent those of wider society is a completely pernicious one, inimical to free thought.

But in fending off external attacks, we should not believe that there is no problem to be addressed here. The question is who should address it. The answer is: us. The price of academic freedom is self-governance, requiring continual reflection on our own biases and limitations, and continual struggle to improve. Many academics insist on just such an approach when it comes to gender and race in our teaching. We would do well to extend this attitude to Brexit, and beyond.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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[The EU locked in neoliberalism and locked out its people. Brexit is the alternative](#)