

## What I teach about Brexit to my (so far distinctly Eurosceptical) students



*The MP Chris Heaton-Harris has asked vice-chancellors to disclose the names of academics teaching about the EU, and the content of their courses. **Oliver Daddow (University of Nottingham)** explains what students on his new Brexit: Foreign Policy and the Withdrawal from Europe course are studying. Many are indignant at the suggestion they would soak up 'Remain propaganda' and most currently think Britain should not have joined the EU in the first place.*

In a [letter sent to university Vice-Chancellors](#) on 3 October 2017, Chris Heaton-Harris – a government whip and MP for Daventry – asked to be supplied with 'the names of professors at your establishment who are involved in the teaching of European affairs, with particular reference to Brexit'. He also asked to see the syllabi and online lectures relating to the teaching of this topic.

Much of the reaction to the letter has speculated on the following questions. Why did he want the information? What was his purpose in garnering it and what would be done with it? Was it an official government request or was Heaton-Harris acting in a personal capacity? What did the request mean for academic freedom, enshrined in statute since 1988?

Some of these questions have now been answered, but the debate has not died down. The universities minister, Jo Johnson, [attempted to clear things up](#) by saying Heaton-Harris was writing a book, an explanation that did little to quell academic suspicions about McCarthyism. First the judges are traitors to the people, now our scholars are letting the Brexit side down. On the political right, newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* leapt to Heaton-Harris's defence. Stephen Glover, for example, wrote of the 'patronising, elitist hysteria of universities' which seem to have 'something to hide'.



Students at the University of Nottingham's Welcome Fair, September 2017. Photo: [University of Nottingham](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

As someone who this academic year has been convening a shiny new module on Brexit, I am very well placed to explain things as I see them from the academic coalface. My module is called *Brexit: British Foreign Policy and the Withdrawal from Europe*. It is a [research-led](#) final year undergraduate module taught over 11 weeks. Its central aim – from the accompanying module handbook – is to help students ‘interpret Brexit as the latest manifestation of a long-running and extremely divisive national debate about Britain’s role in the world’. This year it has recruited over 60 students. Brexit sure is good for business.

The module tells the story from the end of the Second World War through to the 2016 referendum. Students examine the Attlee Labour governments 1945-51, Churchill’s peacetime administration 1951-55, Britain’s applications to the common market and Charles de Gaulle’s vetos in the 1960s, accession and referendum in the 1970s, Thatcher, the budget rebate and the Single European Act in the 1980s, Major, the Maastricht Treaty and the Exchange Rate Mechanism in the 1990s, the New Labour Years 1997-2010 and the Coalition government 2010-2015.

We end with a week studying campaign documents, speeches and materials for the Leave and Remain sides respectively. This feeds directly into the assessments (see below). The reading list is extensive, containing all sorts of histories, diaries, biographies and primary sources. Students are encouraged to read widely and go beyond the reading list when they can – ‘effort’ and depth of evidence culled from a range of sources is highly prized in university writing.

The weekly 45-minute lectures give a biographic overview of the ‘cast’ of political leaders involved, followed by a general flavour of the European policy dilemmas facing the government or governments we study that week. The lectures combine holistic surveys of events, plus hints and tips on further sources and links to useful websites, which students can access at their leisure after the lecture through the University’s Virtual Learning Environment. In sum, lectures scaffold the topic for students. They promote [deep learning](#) in seminars and prepare students to do their best at the assessments.

The two-hour seminars consolidate information students have gleaned from the lectures and are an opportunity to put the primary sources into action. Throughout, we try to approach the policy challenges through the eyes of those involved at the time. We eschew hindsight and try to develop the skill of empathy without gullibility. We start with a jointly put-together timeline to frame discussions, then students discuss what they made of the primary sources, archival records of Cabinet discussions, speeches and policy documents. Next week, for example, we are debating the origins of Euroscepticism in Thatcher’s Bruges speech, the creation of the Bruges Group and Major’s Maastricht travails.

Module assessment is through a combination of a group presentation about one of the historical eras, and a written essay of 4,000 words. Students choose from one of the following essay questions: 1) Why did Leave campaigners want Britain out of the EU? Critically evaluate the ways in which they drew on historical traditions of thought in British foreign policy role to back their claims. Or

2) Why did Remain campaigners want Britain to stay in the EU? Critically evaluate the ways in which they drew on historical traditions of thought in British foreign policy to back their claims.

Given what I teach about Brexit, what do I make of Heaton-Harris’s letter? I thought I would take a cue from the individuals at the sharp end, my students. In seminars earlier this week, I gave them all a copy of the letter and asked for their thoughts. Some did not find it an issue (‘information gathering’; ‘governments fund universities, so why not?’). One student saw it as a useful distraction technique by universities from the contentious issues of [over-inflated Vice-Chancellor’s pay](#). I think I have found a spin doctor.

I was most interested, however, in the following reaction. Several students argued that, if the letter was intending to ‘police’ thought on Brexit, the letter displayed a gross ignorance about the goals of higher education. A sizeable number voiced expressed dismay that they were being treated like brainless sops, soaking up propaganda uncritically, too stupid or lazy to challenge the ‘dons’. Glover’s *Daily Mail* piece seems to cleave to that stereotype when he writes that, all too easily, ‘young student minds could be influenced’ by Remain propaganda.

Three things have struck me during this rather unsavoury episode. The first is that the picture of my role as ‘don’ painted by some commentators does zero justice to how I conceive my day to day classroom activities. I design learning to meet [Quality Assurance Agency benchmarks](#) and the university’s degree requirements. I do not see my role as convincing the students to think as I do, thankfully for them. Lecturers and professors (as they are known in the 21st century) encourage critical thinking in students and a respect for evidence-based arguments. This equips students with the knowledge plus the advanced written and verbal dexterity to help them get fulfilling and interesting jobs.

The second conclusion concerns bias. I happen to think that the Leave campaign was a masterful piece of political campaigning and that the Remain campaign was a shambolically organised assembly of ill-coordinated messages based on outmoded arguments that might have held in 1975, but not 2016. I will discuss these views openly with students at the relevant point in the module, should they wish me to. Nevertheless, the only propaganda on offer in my classes is that students should value hard work and be motivated to seek out and seize all the opportunities on offer at university. Through their mastery of academic skills I hope they develop the employability and leadership skills to make a positive contribution to society in the future, whatever they choose that to be. I do not grade their work on whether or not they share my opinion, I am evaluating *how* they think, not *what* they think.

Finally, do not overestimate the willingness – but as importantly, the ability – of academics to lead students up the garden path. I do not and cannot tell students what to think, nor would I wish to. They are astute, thinking individuals who would see through me in a flash. Free student votes in seminars on this module to date have shown a huge majority to be against Britain joining the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Defence Community and the European Community in the 1950s. Every single student agreed that De Gaulle was correct to stop Britain joining the Community in 1963 and again in 1967 because it did not share enough common history, identity or economic compatibility with the continent. I rather doubt this opinion will change over the rest of the module.

Far from talking Britain down, I appear to have convinced students that the European option was not and is not right for Britain.

Oh, and by the way, I voted Remain.

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

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