

Catechism class at British universities

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In the Roman Catholic church, children are required to attend catechism class in order to learn their religion's key dogmas, as a prerequisite for confirmation and First Communion. Likewise, in some British universities today, students are required to take mandatory trainings in key “woke” dogmas, as a prerequisite for admission to education.

(By now you probably think I'm some kind of right-wing nut and are inclined to stop reading. I can assure you that I'm neither right-wing nor a nut; but even if I were, what's the loss in looking at the facts and then evaluating them for yourself?)

Some of these mandatory trainings have been gleefully reported in the conservative press, with lurid headlines like “[University of Kent accused of promoting ‘woke’ conformism in the guise of education as it tells every student to complete diversity course](#)” and “[St Andrews University sets bias test for entry](#).” (Thus far the left-leaning press has been silent.)

But what are the facts about these trainings? Mightn't they just be sensible and laudable attempts to “challenge you to think about your own behaviour, the way you interact with others and the impact this could be having on someone else's experience,” [as the Kent bureaucrats put it?](#)

With the help of a colleague at the University of Kent, I was able to obtain screenshots of some sections of their mandatory training. (My Freedom of Information Act requests at both Kent and St Andrews are still pending.)

The University of Kent's “Expect Respect” e-module was made mandatory for students [starting in 2018](#), and the version from that year is [publicly available](#). There's nothing particularly “woke” about it: it's mostly vanilla Equality Act and anti-rape stuff, together with lots of PR department bla-bla-bla about the university and its values ([see this compilation of screenshots](#)).

Nevertheless, even this uncontroversial material contains at least one serious factual error: namely, for the “knowledge test” question “Harassment is ...”, the allegedly correct answer is “unwanted behaviour or conduct which is related to a legally protected characteristic defined in the Equality Act 2010”; but [what the Equality Act actually says](#) is “unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic *[that] has the purpose or effect of violating [a person's] dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for [that person]*” — a much more restrictive criterion. (The correct definition is given earlier in the training, but then forgotten in the quiz.) But that's a minor criticism.

The 2021 version of Expect Respect is quite different. After some of its contents were leaked to the [Telegraph](#) and the [Times](#), the university opted to respond publicly. [An article](#) in the local newspaper KentLive carries the title “University of Kent debunks claims students made to take ‘white privilege’ course” and cites an unnamed (why?) “University of Kent spokesperson” as insisting that the training was “neither compulsory nor solely focused on the concept of white privilege” (those are the journalist's words, not the spokesperson's). The latter statement is quite true, as will be seen shortly. But the former statement is — how shall I say it? — not exactly the whole truth and nothing but the truth. [At least six University of Kent webpages](#), dating from July 2018 through

August 2021 — all are accessible as of this writing, though they may not stay that way for long (if not, [see them all here](#)) — refer to the Expect Respect training as “compulsory” for students. For instance, a webpage dated 8 October 2020 states unambiguously that

The Expect Respect module is a compulsory module for all registered students at the University of Kent, regardless of what you are studying or whether you are an undergraduate and [*sic*] postgraduate student.

Perhaps the module should be expanded to include training about honesty, and made compulsory also for Kent administrators and spokespeople.

(Kent’s Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Education and Student Experience, [Professor Richard Reece](#), kindly responded to my request for an explanation of this discrepancy: see [here](#). He also [declined my request](#) to make the current version of the Expect Respect module publicly available, as the 2018 version was and still is.)

But what is the content of this training? And how does it differ from the 2018 version?

The two most contentious parts of the new training are the sections on “[Sex, Gender & Sexuality](#)” and “[\(Anti-\)Racism, Xenophobia and White Privilege](#)”. So let’s look a bit at those.

One quiz on “Sex, Gender & Sexuality” asks the student, in rather convoluted prose:

Discrimination, regulation in the form of negatively impacting expectations, and violence perpetuated [*sic*] against individuals who do not meet or uphold binary expectations to one’s sex assigned at birth is called . . .

Old-fashioned that I am, I figured that the correct answer would be “sexism and homophobia.” But that wasn’t on the list: the only allowed options were “gender roles,” “transphobia” and “toxic masculinity.” Could I then say “all of the above”? No, that answer wasn’t allowed either. Can you now guess what the officially approved answer is? Here, as throughout the module, if you get it wrong, you get a red highlighted x and a “retry” button. And when you do finally get it correct, you receive a gold star: just like in nursery school.

Another question in the same section asks, rather more clearly:

True or False: Sex is, in fact, a diverse, multi-expressive form of identity, and a full spectrum.

I leave it to you, dear reader, to guess what the “correct” response is, according to the deep expertise in biology and psychology displayed by the University of Kent administration.

But of course there’s no need to *guess* the correct answer; it suffices to regurgitate the “training” one has already received:

Sex, most typically is a term used to refer to a biological imperative of one’s identity often assigned at birth and reaffirmed at death.

Commonly, society refers to sex in a categorical sense of **Male** and **Female** and yet, this way of thinking is not scientifically complete. Sex is, in fact, a diverse, multi-expressive form of identity, and a full spectrum is inclusive of **intersex** identities. Despite this, sex is a sociologically understood and socially enforced category which lies at the basis for discrimination called sexism.

Put aside the horrid prose in this mishmash of “woke” buzzwords and dogmas (though “[reaffirmed at death](#)” was admittedly a nice touch); put aside that throwing around arcane in-group jargon — learn the approved terminology if you want to join the club — is the exact opposite of “inclusivity”; and put aside the gross logical fallacies and factual errors that are packed into every single sentence of this paragraph (fallacies that are carefully analysed in philosopher Kathleen Stock’s lucidly written book *Material Girls*). The bottom line is that these assertions are, at a bare minimum, *controversial*. Any intelligent person should know that. As one professor at the University of Kent explained in her [letter of protest](#),

[T]here are furious debates surrounding some of the matters covered in what is presented as ‘training.’ My view is that these are legitimate debates, not settled questions, and it is the proper role of the academy to encourage open and better debate about them than currently occurs.

The Expect Respect module, by contrast, treats these propositions as incontrovertible truths, on a par with the information in the fire-safety module that is also mandatory for first-year students. And it goes without saying that this attitude towards ideas is a gross perversion of the mission of the university: it is the replacement of debate by catechism.

The Expect Respect module also misstates UK law, by claiming that

[T]he 2010 Equality Act also legally protects individuals across the spectrum of sex and gender identities as well as the ability to outwardly express that identity.

This is simply false. One of the “protected characteristics” of the [Equality Act 2010](#) is “sex,” defined in the conventional sense as “a man or a woman.” True, the [Gender Recognition Act 2004](#) says that a person in possession of a Gender Recognition Certificate is to be treated as a member of the new sex — male or female — for almost all legal purposes. But the Equality Act does not recognize any “spectrum of sex”; sex is either male or female.

Another protected characteristic under the Equality Act is “[gender reassignment](#),” which is defined (admittedly rather confusingly) as “proposing to undergo, is undergoing or has undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of reassigning the person’s sex by changing physiological or other attributes of sex.” There is no reference in the Equality Act to the more nebulous concept of “gender identity” (for a clear discussion of which, see again [Kathleen Stock](#)). True, there have been *proposals*, most notably by [the lobby group Stonewall](#), to amend the Gender Recognition Act and the Equality Act to enshrine gender self-identification as a legal principle and to protect “gender identity” *per se*. But Parliament has taken no action in that direction. Kent’s training misleads

students by stating “[the law as Stonewall would prefer it to be, rather than the law as it is](#),” in the words of barrister Akua Reindorf.

The section on “(Anti-)Racism, Xenophobia and White Privilege,” by contrast, is both better written and more substantial. I invite readers to [take a look at it](#) and judge for themselves. In my view — for whatever that is worth — it contains much food for thought about how the daily lives of members of minority racial groups can differ radically from those of the majority. The subsection on microaggressions, for instance, gives some sensible suggestions about avoiding insensitive comments like “Where are you actually from?,” “You are so articulate!” and “Is that your real hair?” These tips won’t be news to many people, of course, and this primer on microaggressions wouldn’t pass muster in any decent undergraduate course in psychology or sociology — for instance, the [carefully reasoned criticisms of conceptual unclarity in the notion of microaggression](#) are nowhere mentioned — but this material may nonetheless be helpful to some beginning students.

With the section on white privilege, things get more controversial. The trouble begins with the notion itself: is it really a *privilege* to be “not socially inconvenienced or negatively targeted” on the basis of one’s race? Shouldn’t that just be considered normal, with the opposite being called *discrimination*? Or [as commenter Jaysmith71 wrote on Mumsnet](#), rather more earthily:

Being treated not quite so shittily as someone else is not what I call a privilege. Proper decent treatment by society is no privilege. It is everyone’s right, regardless of background.

Indeed, [the original 1989 article by Peggy McIntosh](#) that popularized the concept of “white privilege” — from which many of Expect Respect’s examples are lifted verbatim — acknowledged that

we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, [while] others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive.

That important distinction is too often forgotten nowadays.

But let’s put to the side this conceptualization of “privilege,” and look instead at the 13 specific examples offered; here are a few:

- “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.”
- “I am never asked to speak for or represent my race as a whole.”
- “I can go shopping without being followed or harassed.”
- “I can be assured of a generally positive relationship with the police.”
- “I can easily find children’s books and toys that overwhelming [*sic*] represent my race.”

All of these represent, in my view, things worth pondering and discussing: they could be useful as starting points for exploration in a sociology class, or for careful empirical study. Even the example that elicited the most scorn in the press coverage — “I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race” — draws attention to some interesting issues. Of course, it elides the key variable of socioeconomic class; [as one commenter observed](#), “Is there a module on class, accents and actual poverty or is the assumption that all white students have this privilege?” But despite this serious inadequacy, this item, in the hands of a skilful sociology professor or lecturer, could lead to an illuminating discussion of the complex relationship between speech, dress, class and race. The trouble with the Expect Respect module is that it has turned food for thought into catechism. Put your check-mark on all 13 of the alleged examples of white privilege; then, and only then, you receive your gold star.

The “education” on sex, gender and racism that is contained in these modules was not developed, as far as can be ascertained, by the Biology Department or the Sociology Department or the Psychology Department or the Law Faculty — that is, by anyone with any relevant subject expertise. The creators, it seems, were bureaucrats: the Student Services office, the Human Resources office, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity office, the Corporate Communications office, the Vice-Chancellor’s office. So it may be no surprise, then, that these modules reflect the attitudes and interests of these administrative officials, not those of researchers and educators, and that they are organised in managerial fashion as catechism to be memorized and regurgitated, rather than in pedagogical fashion as ideas for discussion and debate. All this is, of course, part and parcel of university administrators’ long-term encroachment on the traditional prerogatives of academic staff.

But as usual, the Americans got there first. As early as 2007, a seriously creepy — actually, a more accurate word would be *chilling* — programme of indoctrination at the University of Delaware, designed by the university’s Office of Residence Life and made mandatory for all 7,000 students living in dorms, [was publicly exposed](#). From a questionnaire asking “When did you discover your sexual identity?” — to be discussed in a one-on-one with the Resident Assistant in his dorm room — to “Diversity Facilitation Training” explaining that the term “racist” [“applies to all white people \(i.e., people of European descent\) living in the United States, regardless of class, gender, religion, culture or sexuality,”](#) the programme aimed to inculcate a caricature of “woke” dogma (although that word had [not yet caught on](#)) on issues [ranging from gender equity and affirmative action to pollution and farming practices, sweatshop labor, and slavery](#). As the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) [commented](#):

It is normally the faculty’s prerogative to investigate and debate these issues with students. But Res Life was setting the educational agenda — as well as the opinions that students were expected to internalize. The same people who probably would have objected strenuously (and rightfully) to an “American patriotism” curriculum saw nothing wrong with imposing their own very specific agenda on students.

(see also [here](#) and [here](#)).

FIRE cited the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), which struck down a mandatory flag salute in the public schools — a courageous decision taken even while the country was at war:

If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.

(And university administrators can certainly be considered “petty” officials, in both senses of the word.) FIRE went on to ask rhetorically:

Was the University of Delaware really unaware that a state-sponsored institution of higher education in the United States has no legal or moral right to engage in a program of systematic thought reform? Did the promoters of the “citizenship” and “sustainability” curriculum have such little respect for the First Amendment’s protection of the human and American right to freedom of conscience? Or did they simply value “sustainability” and diversity with so much urgency that no violation of individual rights was too much?

and they concluded that:

Delaware’s residence life education program, which presumed to show students the specific ideological assumptions they needed in order to be better people, crossed the line — not just a little, but extensively and in many ways — from education into unconscionably arrogant, invasive, and immoral thought reform. The moral and legal problems posed by the residence life education program were abundant and cut to the core of the most essential rights of a free people. What made the programme so offensive was moral: its brazen disregard for autonomy, dignity, and individual conscience, and the sheer contempt it displayed for the university’s students.

That should have been the end of the story: the University of Delaware president, embarrassed by these public revelations, promptly suspended the programme. But a year later the Res Life bureaucrats succeeded, after four attempts, to get the programme reinstated in [slightly modified form](#). A few years after that, the main architect of the programme was [elected President](#) of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA); and in 2017 she was awarded the [ACPA Excellence in Practice award](#) “for her decades-long commitment to national best practices in designs, program implementations and services for UD’s residential students.”

Nowadays, [similar programmes](#) — though usually less invasive — [apparently exist](#) at [dozens of universities](#) around the country (though hard data is lacking at present). In 2017, for instance, the University of California at Los Angeles created paid positions for students in “social-justice advocacy,” to help their peers “navigate a world that operates on whiteness, patriarchy, and heteronormativity as the primary ideologies.” “In other words,” [as one commentator mordantly observed](#), “they’ll help their fellow students beg

all the questions that universities are supposed to be asking, and thus deprive them of the education they're supposed to be getting.”

If one is to believe the university administrations, all these mandatory trainings have arisen in response to demand — in one sense or other of the word, at least — from students. [As a St Andrews spokesperson explained](#),

With the exception of the good academic practice training, all of these modules were introduced in response to clearly expressed student demand. Our students pushed for the mandatory consent module, wrote the sustainability module, and were central members of the equality, diversity and inclusion group which brought in the mandatory diversity module.

(see also [here](#)). Similarly, [a Kent spokesperson said](#),

We introduced the Expect Respect module in 2020 in response to requests from our students that we promote greater awareness of the things we can all do to make everyone feel safe and supported on our campuses. It is also part of our broader commitment to being inclusive and welcoming to all who study and work with us.

And the Kent student union [confirmed that](#)

Working with our student members and the University, the ‘Expect Respect’ module was updated with input and feedback from Kent Union Officers and our [Student Networks](#) [link added by me].

So not only are core academic functions, traditionally conducted by lecturers and professors, now being usurped by administrative offices — what Kors and Silverglate called, two decades ago, the “[shadow university](#)” — but now the administrators’ own “educational” efforts are, it appears, being partially outsourced to students. From the administrators’ point of view this makes perfect sense: after all, for the corporate university, the students are customers, and a successful business does everything possible to accommodate its customers whenever that doesn’t disadvantage its own bottom line. So the university doesn’t offer price rebates when face-to-face teaching is replaced by online, and it doesn’t close the residence halls to protect students and communities from an epidemic (that would forfeit revenue); but we do give them whatever woke indoctrination they demand, since it costs very little.

But who is “they”? Who are the students demanding woke indoctrination? Is this really a grassroots demand?

In practice what seems to happen — and it would be good to obtain more documentation on this — is that the university administration takes the student union as its primary interlocutor; and in most cases that union is run by a minority of activists, since they

are the only students who are willing to devote so much time and energy away from their studies and social pursuits. And then the relationship becomes a two-way street: the anointed minority of student leaders exploits its entrée into the university administration in order to insert its own views about what is essential “learning” and to impose them onto the mass of apolitical students.

What is striking, in all this, is the disconnect between the official descriptions of these trainings and their actual content.

If the university spokespeople are to be believed, these trainings are merely “supporting everyone to ensure all members of our community are treated with dignity and respect” ([Kent](#)) and “to align with St Andrews’ strategic priorities . . . and help develop skills and awareness valuable to life at university” ([St Andrews](#)). Are they aware what really sits inside the pretty packaging?

For the university bigwigs and their public relations flacks, perhaps not: they are simply reciting the party line; that’s their job. But the people who actually devised these trainings — the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) officers — surely know what they contain. Are they intentionally misrepresenting the trainings’ substance, all the better to hide it from public scrutiny? Maybe; but on second thought, maybe not. Perhaps these administrators are so ensconced in their own echo chambers — both ideological and bureaucratic — that they are [sincerely unaware](#) that anything in their trainings might be controversial among fair-minded people. Perhaps they really think that their teachings about white privilege and transphobia and all the rest are simply progressive common sense: the routine understandings required of anyone who wants to be a good citizen of a diverse community in the twenty-first century. An updating of Victorian good manners. Teaching 18-year-olds how to play together nicely.

Even so, one has to wonder how students will react to a mandatory “training” in which they are supplied a blatantly one-sided perspective on highly controversial issues and are required to tick the “correct” answers to each question before being allowed their freedom. Will they be grateful for this exposure (however superficial) to challenging new concepts like [femmephobia](#) and [chrono-centrism](#), and as a result become more sympathetic to the lived experience of racial and sexual minorities? Some students, no doubt, will respond in this way — at least that is to be hoped. But how many more will resent the university’s high-handed attempt at thought control, and as a result possibly become *less* sympathetic to those same intended beneficiaries (nearly all of whom had no role in creating this propaganda, and many of whom would not endorse it)? These are of course empirical questions, and they urgently need empirical answers. Devising experiments to test them might be a good project for a PhD dissertation (or even undergraduate research) in social psychology. Until that happens, can we really be confident that these trainings are doing more good than harm, even by the narrow standards of their creators?

But there are, of course, also larger issues here: namely, the nature of education, and the proper role of the university. Traditionally educators have thought — and some of

us old fogies still think — that the central purpose of the university is to foster critical thinking: confronting arguments with counterarguments and learning to distinguish strong from weak ones, seeking relevant empirical data and learning to weigh its significance, questioning moral and ethical values. All these intellectual tools can be brought to bear on the important issues of sex, gender and racism; and no doubt many professors and lecturers at the University of Kent are already doing just that in their classes. The Expect Respect module, with its officious attitude towards “education” and its utter disrespect towards the students’ own brains, undermines all this.

As a group of students at King’s College London have written in regard to a [similar training module there](#):

[T]he online format of the course is problematic and patronising, forcing students to accept its content at face value regardless of what they think. University should provide open debate: students should learn *how* to think rather than *what* to think. A series of online videos and graphics that spoon-feed values to students without providing room for objection does not uphold this standard.

Obviously some students, at least, have a clear understanding of the mission of the university in a democratic polity. Perhaps they can volunteer to teach [John Stuart Mill](#) to their vice-chancellors.