

Open Letter from OU staff and Postgraduate Research Students - Response to the launch of the Gender Critical Research Network

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Please note: This is not a letter for undergraduate students to sign - there is a response being organised by OU Pride for students via another google form for gathering feelings/statements from students which you can [contribute to](#) and has a [similar letter which you can sign](#).

We, the undersigned Open University faculty and staff, write to express our profound disappointment and concern at the recent launching of the Gender Critical Research Network as a special interest group within the Health & Wellbeing strategic research area, which is being hosted on official OU channels. 'Gender critical' feminism is a strand of thought and a belief that is fundamentally hostile to the rights of trans, non-binary, and genderqueer people. It is in this context that we write to express our concerns, and to reaffirm our commitment to our trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming students and colleagues. We are concerned that the OU's decision to approve and promote this network is in conflict with its obligations under the Equality Act 2010, and particularly the Public Sector Equality Duty regarding gender reassignment.

The recent Employment Appeal Tribunal (Maya Forstater v CGD Europe and Others: UKEAT/0105/20/JOJ) confirmed that gender critical views are a protected belief. However, the EAT also highlighted that manifesting gender critical beliefs by misgendering or harassing trans people in a context covered by the Equality Act, such as the workplace, would likely amount to unlawful discrimination. We are concerned to see that the Gender Critical Research Network is already using OU platforms to circulate prejudicial statements. For example, the Savage Minds podcast episode linked to from its Open University homepage, and via the FASS academics newsletter (Issue 36: 7 June 2021), contains references to trans women as 'men in dresses' (00:58:41); explicitly argues against trans rights (00:55:22); and incorrectly claims that the LGBT rights organisation Stonewall is suggesting that lesbians should 'suck female cock' (00:57:03).

The OU's mission is to make higher education open to all, as well as promoting social justice and equality, as acknowledged in recent Pride statements which affirm the OU's support of LGBTQ+ staff and students. Furthermore, the OU's [Gender Identity Policy and Guidance](#) states that staff have a responsibility to 'respect the dignity of all students and their self-identified gender status' and that OU students should be able to study in an environment 'free from discrimination, harassment and victimisation in a place where everyone is treated with dignity and respect'. We believe that the OU has a duty of care towards its trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming students and staff, and that the Gender Critical Research Network directly impedes this duty.

We stand opposed to the backing of this network by the OU, including the use of official OU social media platforms, OU branding and the alignment of this network with the Health & Wellbeing SRA. We do not believe that freedom of speech or academic freedom should come at the expense of marginalised groups, such as those possessing protected characteristics under the law. This includes honouring commitments made in the [OU statement of principles on academic freedom](#) to take action to avoid hostility, degradation and harm, for instance, 'in promoting our ideas we will make every reasonable effort to minimise the risks of any harm, either physical or psychological, arising for any person, institution or community'.

We call on the OU Vice Chancellor's Executive Team to take the following actions:

1. To withdraw its public support for and affiliation with the Gender Critical Research Network
2. To affirm their position as a trans inclusive employer
3. To commit to developing a concrete plan of action for supporting and affirming trans students and staff in this trans-hostile external and internal environment

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Signatories