

# HEADLINERS

## Cults on campus

### Children's Express reporters look at why the number of university students joining cults is on the increase

*There are 500 cults in operation in the UK today and according to Ian Haworth, the founder of the Cult Information Centre, it is not loners or those who have narrow views on life who become members. It is especially those with healthy, enquiring minds who make easy targets. This is why cults can be attractive to many young people just settling into university life.*

The easiest people to recruit are those who have an economically advantaged background; an average to above average intelligence, a good education, and those who can be described as idealistic because they are caring and would like to make the world a better place, says Ian Haworth.

18-year-old Annabel is in her second term at university in London and believes that the environment and atmosphere of campus life can be conducive to cults.

University is about broadening your horizons and finding out a bit more about yourself. You will be trying to think in a different way and a different mindset because in a sense you are an adult now. At university a lot of people are by themselves, and unless you are really used to that, it is not a nice experience. People get lonely you are looking for anything that will make you friends quickly, she says.

For those very reasons, it is often during the first few months of university that young people can be drawn to cults. The enquiring mind and the idealism that many young people have, coupled with the desire to find a new group of friends are what cults play on to recruit new members. Using methods that are often very familiar, they make people feel good about themselves. This often makes it so hard to say no.

According to the National Union of Students, a cult is a highly manipulative group that exploits its members and can cause psychological, financial and physical harm. It dictates, in great detail, the behaviour, thoughts and emotions of its followers. It is by appealing to young people's sense of broadening horizons that cults recruit new members.

A cult won't have a sign informing you that they are trying to manipulate you and destroy your freedom of thought. A recruiter would seem genuinely friendly, and they might not make it clear what they expect of you or what the nature of the group is. They might ask you if you are interested in answering the big questions of life, such as 'Does God exist?' and 'Why am I here?' Once you say you are interested, you are invited to come to a meeting to hear the answers.

Cults then use cleverly disguised techniques to keep new members, even hypnosis.

Some groups might call it meditation, others might call it a new form of relaxation. People are put into a trance state and are programmed to understand that this particular group that they're now in is the be-all and end-all, says Ian Haworth.

Another common technique is called 'love bombing'. This creates a sense of family and belonging, which is compelling if you have just left home for the first time. In reality it is based on you being convinced or brain washed into agreeing with everything the cult stands for and having no will of your own.

The love is based on your obeying them at all times, so it is conditional love. The moment you deviate from what is expected in the group, the moment you question something that is going on, that is the moment the love is turned off.

Approximately 34 campuses in the UK have banned cults from operating on their premises, but the numbers of students being recruited is still on the increase as cults recruit members both on and off the university campus. Cult leaders take advantage of the fact that there is poor education about their methods and the effects of membership in mainstream society. As one university student said, 'You wouldn't know if you were being approached by a cult at all.'

It seems the only way to protect yourself is through personal education. Shuma, 18, also a first year at university in London, agrees.

I think it is about education, because young people don't know anything about cults. You go to a new group or society with an open mind so you are more vulnerable. It is about awareness, because if you know about these things, you are less likely to engage with it, because you are aware of the dangers.

But Annabel disagrees. I think if there was education about cults, it wouldn't work, people wouldn't take it seriously...but I do think there needs to be some kind of support line for young people.

There is a complicated system of pastoral care at most universities, mainly comprised of a chain of people who all have other jobs. There is a personal tutor you can go to, and if you don't like them, there's another person, and if you don't like them, says Shuma.

These people are writing their own little books and articles. They only have one hour of their office time a week they can offer you. I don't think I would ever go and say I want to talk about cults.

She and Annabel agree it would be humiliating to go to someone you respected and tell them you had been persuaded to join a cult.

Can you imagine going to a really intelligent person who has a PhD or something and saying you have joined a cult? They expect you to be intelligent because you are at university and they would probably think there is something wrong with this person and that they must be really stupid joining a cult. They could really judge you, and even if they are really clever, they might miss the fact that it is the qualities that get you into university that mean you are vulnerable to manipulation, says Shuma.

So even university professors don't know that students can be persuaded to join a cult, and from what Ian Haworth is saying, it's definitely not stupid people who are the most susceptible.

I think that more could be done to protect everyone from cults, including young people, if there was more public education on the topic. Public education is the key.

Until education about cults becomes more mainstream and is taken more seriously, young people have to learn to look out for themselves. Our advice is: read up, watch out and spend your money on beer.

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## About the team

This story was produced by Samir Pasha, 15 and Ella Parry Davies, 16. It was published by the timesonline website.

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