

## Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Students and Staff in Further and Higher Education: Practical Advice for Colleges and Universities

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*Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Students and Staff in Further and Higher Education* offers an in-depth analysis of the inequalities experienced by the transgender community in higher education throughout Scotland. This book is based on the TransEDU research conducted by Matson Lawrence and Stephanie Mckendry. Their research explored transgender and non-binary student and staff involvement and quality of life in higher education. The aim of this book is to explain the various ways in which trans and gender non-conforming individuals face harassment or other inequities and how these experiences can be mitigated in further and higher education (FHE).<sup>1</sup>

The authors both work in equality and inclusion at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, UK, and have a combined 18 years of experience in FHE. Lawrence is currently the Equality and Diversity lead supporting equality, diversity, and inclusion across the university and was a researcher with NORFACE-funded CILIA-LGBTQI+ study examining intersectional life course (in)equalities among LGBTQI+ people in four European countries from 2018 to 2021. Mckendry is the Head of Access, Equality, and Inclusion, where she leads the team responsible for increasing opportunities and removing barriers to study and success.

The book opens with an introduction to transgender terms, difficulties faced by the community, and a discussion of current research. To be clear, it is necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Further and higher education, a term commonly used in the UK, is an umbrella term for educational experiences following secondary school. Higher education is usually reserved for education at the university level.

and important for individuals to understand these terms and what they mean to the community who uses them. At the same time, it is discouraging that as of 2019 our research and literature had not moved much beyond basic education in trans terminology. It is my hope that we can move past the need for basic definitions to introduce the topic of transgender individuals to a greater focus on equity and inclusion.

The second chapter outlines the TransEDU research conducted in Scotland between July 2016 and November 2017. The research was supported by the Scottish Funding Council and aimed to answer three primary questions:

1. What barriers do trans applicants, students, and staff face in FHE in Scotland?
2. What are the support needs of these communities?
3. What supports are institutions currently offering these populations?

The first stage of the research was conducted via an online survey for self-identified “trans, non-binary, and gender diverse” people. The survey was sent through a variety of channels, including but not limited to universities, student unions and labs, and staff networks. Qualtrics, a popular university survey platform, was used to collect the survey responses. The researchers analyzed the data multiple times separately and then cross-referenced their coding to generate important themes.

TransEDU found trans and gender diverse people exist in every FHE setting in Scotland, necessitating visible and proactive support in each location. Despite being grounded in a specific national educational context, the findings are likely generalizable to postsecondary institutions around the world. As the authors note, “it is unlikely non-Scottish institutions should expect many differences in the experiences and needs of their own populations.” For this reason, their research has far-reaching implications and valuable insights to offer to institutions wanting to expand access and reduce barriers to transgender or gender non-conforming individuals.

While this research is far-reaching and valuable, one limitation is the lack of participation of older individuals in the study. Most participants were aged 16 to 24, which may be expected in studies focused on trans and gender non-conforming individuals in higher education. Many professors offer extra credit opportunities for participation in academic research studies. Students are also exposed to research methodology in many of their classes, which could lead them to be more curious and less suspicious of research than the general population. That many studies in FHE do not incorporate staff may have also contributed to lower levels of participation

among this group. As a result, the TransEDU study offers a limited understanding of the experiences of transgender or gender non-conforming staff members. The book paints a broad view of how students and staff can be helped, but it is unclear whether the conclusions drawn from research on staff experiences are as strong as those derived from the student research.

The rest of the book offers a glimpse into barriers faced by trans people in accessing, studying, and making friends in higher education and in finding employment in FHE. Steps that colleges and universities can take to draft trans-inclusive policies and support those who are actively transitioning are important aspects of this book. Suggestions made by the authors include “fly[ing] the trans flag, mark[ing] events such as Trans Remembrance Day and Trans Day of Visibility within annual institutional calendars and participat[ing] visibly in Pride events.” These small acts send a powerful message of acceptance and inclusion across a wide scale. The authors also suggest allowing students and staff to use flex time to access gender-affirming healthcare as trans individuals often need to travel great distances to receive adequate professional care.

The authors’ experience in inclusion and diversity initiatives shines through in this book in more ways than one. Lawrence and Mckendry explain how trans people are often expected to play advocate and teacher simultaneously. They are also expected to do the emotional labor involved with educational and advocacy initiatives. The authors note it is important to have others advocate for the trans community on their behalf so this community does not have to exhaust their own resources while existing as marginalized people. Transgender individuals are often subjected to ridicule, bullying, and physical and mental abuse. Therefore, having cisgender individuals advocate on behalf of trans individuals not only normalizes trans people but also makes it easier for trans people to find those who can offer support and understanding. It also helps those who might be closeted, stealth, or otherwise unable to reveal their trans identity feel more safe and secure in their environment.

The insistence that colleges and universities must require offices or individuals dedicated to the enhancement of transgender students and staff is arguably the most important aspect of this book. The authors are clear advocates for the development of trans and gender non-conforming individuals within FHE. While reading this book, one begins to understand some of the challenges inherent in this work but also finds thoroughly researched suggestions on how to increase visibility and awareness of trans support on campus. The book showcases a plethora of examples of how to include trans individuals on and around campus, from simplifying name change documents to eliminating gender markers from official records. Such changes can be easily fitted within existing frameworks by adding a section with

preferred name into application materials. Institutions can also support students through the transition process by being more flexible with absences for transition-related healthcare or even offering gender-affirming healthcare on campus.

For orientation, transition, and retention specialists, this book and the research it contains are valuable for improving the quality of life on campus for all students. By making campuses safer for marginalized communities, we are able to create a freer and more open environment for students and staff. Helping the trans community will make new students want to come to the university and stay for the duration of their college careers because they feel safe, welcomed, and included. The same holds true for transfer students. Any student who identifies as transgender or gender non-conforming will see the work done in making campus a safe place and seek it out for these reasons alone. These techniques could be particularly advantageous to universities in smaller states or regions that have low student enrollment.

As a transgender man and student currently working a graduate position in higher education, I found this book incredibly interesting and helpful for institutions aiming to increase trans visibility on campus (which should be all campuses). While the introduction may be basic, it is needed. Any practitioner within higher education can benefit from the information in this book and the specific and definitive understanding of the transgender community it holds. I highly recommend all higher education staff and professionals read this book and immediately reexamine or introduce transgender inclusion initiatives on their campuses.