

Guide for the Implementation of Gender-Neutral Admin

The aim of this guide is to explain how colleges, faculties and other university institutions can implement “gender-neutral admin”, i.e. a series of measures to make sure that their interaction with students and other individuals is always respectful of everyone’s gender identity. The guide addresses three areas: unnecessary gendered language, gender options in forms, and procedures to change one’s name/pronouns/title/gender marker.

Summarised recommendations:

- In administrative documents and official communication, to replace all instances of indefinite gendered languages (e.g. “s/he”, “he/she”, “he or she”, etc.) with the gender-neutral pronoun “they”.
- Use ‘To whom it may concern’ instead of ‘Sir/Madam’, as well as the gender-neutral title “Mx” on top of “Mr/Mrs”.
- In all forms where the gender of the respondent is requested, to provide options beyond the “male/female” binary. Ideally, a “non-binary” option should be provided, as well as a general “other” option where the gender identity of the respondent could be described by respondents themselves. It should also be considered whether such a question is necessary to the form.
- To include a ‘preferred pronouns’ field in all forms, with an open box rather than a multiple-choice selection.
- To provide an easily accessible online guide, centralising all relevant information regarding how to change one’s name, pronouns, gender marker and title in all of the university’s institutions.
- Adopt centralized protocols and provide training and guidance to staff to make the process of changing names, pronouns, gender markers and other personal information simpler.
- Identify a member of staff that students can contact, possibly in the Student Registry, who can take care of name and personal information changes centrally.

Grounds for proposal:

There are many existing non-binary (people who do not identify as either male or female, or have fluid genders), trans (people who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth), and intersex (people who are born with ambiguous sexual characteristics) students in the university, for whom gender neutral admin would make administration processes and interactions significantly less taxing. In the 2018 Big Cambridge LGBT+ Survey organised by CUSU LGBT+, out of 400 respondents, 71 identified as trans or non-binary. Stonewall (an organisation working for LGBT+ rights and welfare) estimates that there are between 300,000 and 500,000 trans people in the UK. In Cambridge, this would translate to 100 to 150 students - hardly a negligible number. Admin is something that everyone has to do whilst at university; making it gender-neutral would significantly reduce the stress, anxiety, and confusion that trans and non-binary students often go through with administrations.

Unnecessarily gendered language:

It is commonly thought that the English language has no gender-neutral singular third person pronoun: “he” and “she” are both gendered, and “it” is used for non-human entities (and thus, it is dehumanising when used to address non-binary individuals). As a result, when talking

about single individuals whose gender is unspecified, administrative documents often use “he/she”, “s/he”, “he or she”, etc.

However, the pronoun “they” has historically been used as a pronoun to refer to single individuals whose gender is unspecified. Common examples include:

- "Somebody left *their* umbrella in the office. Would *they* please collect it?"
- "The *patient* should be told at the outset how much *they* will be required to pay."
- "But a *journalist* should not be forced to reveal *their* sources."¹

Since then, the they/them/their pronouns have been embraced by non-binary individuals to avoid being misgendered by binary pronouns. As such, replacing unnecessarily gendered pronouns with they/them/theirs has a double advantage: not only is it grammatically accurate and simpler, it is also inclusive of non-binary gender identities. Making that change helps create a more inclusive environment for all Cambridge students.

Gender options in forms:

A majority of administrative forms still present their respondents with binary options when asking for their gender. This is often due to two reasons: simple ignorance or forgetfulness about the existence of non-binary gender identities; and the idea that binary gender options are needed to have statistically significant data about gender disparities. While the first can be simply resolved by increasing the visibility of non-binary identities, the second is an understandable but misguided concern: binary gender options may offer more statistical simplicity, but they also misrepresent the reality of students’ gender identities. Providing options beyond the male/female binary might seem like an effort and require a change of adopted practices, but it will also lead to more accuracy and inclusivity in the long-run.

Nevertheless, these extra gender options need to be implemented properly. A bad example which has come to our attention recently is the following:

- Male
- Female
- Not listed here

This model can be perceived as offensive (by presenting non-binary identities as an afterthought), and it also lumps all non-binary identities together by not providing respondents with the opportunity to be more specific.

The model we would recommend is the following:

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Other: [write-in option]

This model is more appropriate by acknowledging “non-binary” as an actual gender identity, while leaving respondents with the possibility to describe their gender in more detail through the “Other” option. If the structure of your form design does not allow for write-in options, keeping the “Other” option (with no write-in) would still be important. There are gender

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singular_they

identities beyond the male/female dichotomy that do not necessarily correspond to the non-binary identity (e.g. genderfluid, genderqueer, agender, etc.).

Another important point is to avoid having the following model:

- Man [or cis man]
- Trans man
- Woman [or cis woman]
- Trans woman
- Non-binary
- Other

Men and women, whether they are cisgender or transgender, are still fully men and women. Having a “man” / “trans man” and “woman” / “trans woman” distinction implies that trans men and women are not seen as “actual” men and women; the inclusion of these options in forms might come with good intentions, but it is unnecessarily exclusive. Having a “cis man” / “trans man” and “cis woman” / “trans woman” distinction, where it is not relevant to what the form is attempting to collect data upon, is also to be avoided: it forces trans people to disclose their transgender identity in a context where the information is unnecessary. The only context where such a division would be appropriate is one where the form attempts to gather information about trans identities specifically.

Procedures to change one’s name/pronoun/title/gender marker:

The current process for changing names, pronouns, titles and gender markers within the University’s systems is over-complicated and severely under-advertised. Because there are so many different systems, with a lack of coordination between colleges, faculties and central administrative offices, it is exceedingly difficult to reliably change this information everywhere. CUSU LGBT+’s website has a guide for undergoing this process containing five rather chunky steps. Even after completing these steps, however, students may be unpleasantly surprised by their dead-name (a prior name which is often kept strictly secret) being used out of the blue.

A remedy for this problem requires someone to take responsibility. Ideally, students should be able to contact a member of staff or an office (most obviously the Student Registry) with knowledge of the University’s labyrinth of systems, who can either guide them through the process or take care of it themselves.

At the college level it is often as simple as emailing the tutorial office, but unfortunately most students are unaware of the procedure and many do not know where to direct their queries. It would be ideal for each college to make it clear how students can undertake this process on their website or through the JCR/MCR. In all cases, clearly communicating the options available to students is key.

It is also recommended that members of staff who maintain regular contact with students, such as tutors, supervisors, nurses and counsellors, be given broad awareness of whom to contact if a student would like to change their personal information. They should be informed of any name- and pronoun-changes so that students do not have to personally tell every member of staff with whom they have contact.

Guide written by the CUSU LGBT+ committee.

