

Guide for the Implementation of Gender-Neutral Dress Codes

The aim of this guide is to explain the need for and the ways to implement gender-neutral dress codes in colleges.

Summarised recommendations:

- To remove all reference to gender in dress codes
- To remove unnecessary binary distinctions from dress codes
- To make dress codes more specific and explanatory of their requirements

Practical methods of implementation:

Removing references to gender in dress codes and not having a binary dress code is a very easy change for colleges to make in order to ensure that their trans and non-binary members feel comfortable - it is possible to have formal wear but not gender it. An example can be seen in Downing's Formal Dinner Dress Code where there are multiple options that can be worn and mixed and matched:

- "Suits with shirt or blouse,
- Long trousers with shirt or blouse,
- Dress,
- Skirt with shirt or blouse,
- Neckties, cravats and polo necked sweaters are all acceptable, but open necked attire is not"¹

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 dress codes would provide access to events from which they have felt uncomfortably excluded. 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.

There is significant evidence that trans and non-binary people (23.4%²) have refrained from attending formal events, including meals, because of a lack of dress code they are comfortable in wearing. Upon arriving in Cambridge, many trans and non-binary people feel uncomfortable at matriculation due to being forced to wear clothes that reduce them to what their gender identity is perceived to be. The university's guidelines for graduation clothing are binary-gendered, and this can cause anxiety for trans and non-binary students.

For many people, having two options (male or female, or two options that clearly imply this gender binary) is actually a no-option scenario. The anxiety related to having to choose either of these "options" is one of the reasons that many trans and non-binary people are discouraged from attending formal events. Trans and non-binary people are sometimes

¹ See <http://www.dow.cam.ac.uk/students/catering/formal-hall-dress-and-conduct>

² Out of the 400 respondents to CUSU LGBT+'s 2018 Big Cambridge LGBT+ Survey.

challenged if they use the binary dress option that is closest to their gender identity, which further prompts internalized self-policing by the affected students.

In general, de-gendering dress codes can be helpful for all students, by more explicitly stating the dress requirements. Often, a dress code will say something along the lines of “jacket and tie or equivalent”, which is vague and especially confusing for people who would not wear a jacket and tie. De-gendering dress codes, and removing the binary options implying gender, means that dress codes will have to be more specific, and thus more useful to anyone who needs to follow them.

The introduction of gender-neutral dress codes would be a meaningful sign of increased recognition for all non-binary, trans and intersex people who may pass through the university, whether they are members of the university or not. If more colleges and functions gave gender-neutral dress codes, it would send a more welcoming message to prospective applicants from trans, intersex and non-binary backgrounds, into all parts of Cambridge, rather than being excluded from the formal traditions.

Guide written by the CUSU LGBT+ committee.

