

# **Trans and non-binary student experiences in UK higher education**

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Higher Education Policy Institute

**HEPI Report 174**

## **About the authors**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Definitions

These definitions follow those provided by the World Health Organisation and the UK Office for National Statistics.<sup>1</sup> As was observed by Lord Reed in a recent Supreme Court case, the choice of language in the discussion of gender identification often signifies allegiance to a particular point of view.<sup>2</sup> We hope to use appropriately neutral terminology in this report, and in the event that terms used cause offence, please accept our apology as that is not our intention. We wish, however, to use terms in a manner that is consistent within this document in order that our findings and meaning can be understood.

<b>Gender</b>	The characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time. <sup>i</sup>
<b>Gender identity</b>	A person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's physiology or sex they were assigned at birth.
<b>LGB+</b>	An umbrella term for those people who describe their sexual orientation in a way other than straight or heterosexual. It includes people who describe their sexual orientation as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, queer, and other terms.
<b>LGBTQ+</b>	People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer. The plus sign represents the vast diversity of people in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sex characteristics. Some surveys we report on use the term 'LGBT' instead.

i We note that the Equality Act 2010 and the Gender Recognition Act 2004 both use the terms 'sex' and 'gender', as well as 'man' and 'male' and 'woman' and 'female' in interchangeable ways. Our decision not to do so, following the approach taken by the World Health Organisation, among others, is to aid clarity and ensure our findings and recommendations are fully understood.

- Non-binary** An umbrella term to describe people whose gender identity does not fit into the binary categories of man and woman. Non-binary people may, or may not, identify as trans.
- Sex** Sex refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male. While these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, they tend to differentiate humans as males and females.
- Trans, Transgender** Umbrella terms to describe people whose gender identity is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.

The terms 'cis' and 'cisgender' have been used increasingly in recent years. These terms are used to refer to people whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.<sup>3</sup> However, while many find these terms valuable, they may not be widely used or understood. Therefore, we avoid the terms here and use the language 'students who are not trans' or similar when we refer to this group.

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## Executive Summary

This report draws together, for the first time, new data on the experiences of trans and non-binary students in higher education. Based on new and existing survey data and interviews with students and academics, it tracks the trans and non-binary student experience from application, through study, to their life after graduation.

### Key findings:

- At the point of applying to higher education, trans and non-binary people may face additional challenges. Trans people are much more likely to have experience of the care system than the wider population and trans, and particularly non-binary people, have higher rates of disability than the wider population.
- Trans applicants may be applying to university with lower grades than their fellow students, and both trans and non-binary applicants consider themselves less prepared for higher education.
- Trans and non-binary students face financial challenges during their studies for a multitude of reasons, including estrangement, paying for private medical care, and concerns over accessing institutional hardship funds. We estimate that nearly two-fifths (39 per cent) of trans people are of traditional university age (18-21) for some or all of the time they are transitioning.
- Trans and non-binary students report higher levels of loneliness than their fellow students, and value in-person interactions through their higher education journey. For example, 56 per cent of applicants feel 'rejected by others', compared with 26 per cent of their peers who are not trans.
- Trans and non-binary people face challenges to their wellbeing – and the difference in reported wellbeing can be significant when compared to people who are not trans or non-binary. This is true throughout the applicant-student-graduate journey, but the difference is smallest while they are a student, and largest while they are an applicant.

- Some trans students are less likely to complete their course in higher education, or may take longer to do so, than students who are not trans. Those who do complete their course, however, achieve around the same grades as students who are not trans or non-binary.
- Despite this, trans and non-binary graduates are employed at less senior levels and at lower salaries than students who are not trans or non-binary. Fifteen months after leaving higher education, the average trans student earns nearly £2,000 a year less than the average student who is not trans.

## **Recommendations**

- Data collection should be more consistent across the sector to provide further insights to the trans and non-binary student experience – particularly around graduate outcomes.
- Higher education staff, particularly those in pastoral care roles, should undergo training to understand trans and non-binary identities and challenges. Having a named contact for trans and non-binary students at institutions may be helpful.
- Institutions should provide training to staff in financial assistance roles, so they are clear on the challenges faced by trans and non-binary students.
- Academic staff should be vigilant in relation to students who are struggling, particularly those with low attendance rates, or who are asking for multiple assignment extensions.
- Consideration should be given to supporting students in their transition to the world of work.

## Introduction

In the 2021 census, 262,000 people in England and Wales are described as having a different gender from their sex registered at birth.<sup>4</sup> We describe these people with the bracket 'trans and non-binary'. This bracket is not intended to be prescriptive: not everyone who falls in this bracket will use one or both terms. It is instead deliberately broad, intended to include all those whose gender identity is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth, or being a 'man' or 'woman', or both.

The 2021 Census suggests that trans and non-binary people make up only around 0.5 per cent of the adult population in England and Wales. However, the trans community has become the subject of an increasingly public and fraught discussion. Trans people and vocal supporters of trans rights have been subject to abuse and harassment. People who hold gender-critical views (including that sex is biological, that people cannot change sex and that sex is distinct from gender-identity) have also faced harassment and abuse. Members of both the Government and Official Opposition have used the word 'toxic' to describe the debate around trans rights.<sup>5</sup> This environment is not conducive to robust, evidence-based public discussion.

A central aim of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) is to inform the debate on higher education. There are few issues where this is needed more than the trans and non-binary student experience. Despite the inclusion of 'gender reassignment' in the 2010 Equality Act, the definition of which is contested, there is little data on the experiences of trans and non-binary people, including in higher education. Existing guidance from Advance HE and TransEDU (which provides a central resource for information on supporting trans applicants, students and staff in colleges and universities) covers some aspects of supporting trans and non-binary students, such as the legal responsibilities of institutions and creating an inclusive environment, but not others, such as student safety, access to financial support, or careers.<sup>6</sup> This difficult information environment is a concern because it raises the risk that trans and non-binary students are not sufficiently supported through their higher education journey.

This report does not seek to resolve every debate around trans rights. Instead, it starts from the hopefully uncontentious premise that trans and



non-binary people have the same entitlement to an enriching, supportive and safe experience of higher education as any other student.

We hope to give institutions the tools to enable their trans and non-binary students to have this experience. For the first time, this report draws together new data on the experiences of trans and non-binary students in higher education at three stages in their higher education journey: as applicants, students and graduates. It considers the challenges they face, the barriers to their success, their wellbeing, relationships with peers and personal safety. It reflects on the current support these students receive, and their relationships with their institutions. It considers the challenges and complexities involved in supporting trans and non-binary students, particularly as they relate to institutions' legal and regulatory obligations to protect the philosophical beliefs of staff and students. Finally, it offers some recommendations for how institutions might act on these challenges and help their trans and non-binary students have an excellent experience of higher education and beyond.

#### *Data included in this report*

This report has been possible because the higher education sector has recently begun collecting data on trans and non-binary students. For example:

- The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), which collects data on students and staff, first asked students about their gender identity in 2012.
- The admissions service UCAS added a question on trans identity in 2016 and a question on gender identity in 2024, including an option for applicants to indicate they use a term other than 'Man' or 'Woman'.
- The HEPI and Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* (SAES) added a question on trans identity in 2021. In 2022, an option was added for respondents to define their gender identity as non-binary and a separate question on sex was also added.
- The Unite Students Applicant Index, has existed in its current form since 2022. It has always asked a question about gender identity, and since 2023 has also asked a separate question about trans identity.

For the full details of the surveys we use, see the Annex to this report.

Partly because respondents to student surveys only recently had the opportunity to describe themselves as trans, non-binary, or with another gender identity, there are a wide range of practices for asking people about whether they are trans or non-binary:

- The 2018 National LGBT Survey asked respondents for their gender identity, which included both 'woman or girl' and 'trans woman or girl' as separate categories, 'man or boy' and 'trans man or boy' and another category for 'Non-binary, Genderqueer, Agender or Gender fluid'.
- UCAS now asks all applicants 'Do you identify as transgender?'
- The Unite Students Applicant Index asks 'Do you consider yourself to be trans?' and also asks for applicants' gender, with the available options being 'Male', 'Female' and 'Other'.
- HESA asks students 'Is your gender identity the same as the gender you were originally assigned at birth?'

Students' answers to these questions will vary depending on the exact wording of the question. This means that some caution is needed when comparing data from different sources. Where possible, we have replicated the language from the survey the data came from, such as using 'transgender' instead of 'trans' where a question uses this word.

Additionally, not all the surveys have allowed students to specify that they are non-binary. For example, UCAS has only recently added an option (for those applying for entry to higher education in 2024) to indicate they are non-binary, and data from this intake were not available at the time of writing. Those submitting data to HESA do not currently have the option to indicate a student is non-binary, which may limit the information that institutions collect about their non-binary students.

Advance HE, a charity which works to improve the quality of higher education, recommends the wording 'Are you trans or do you have a trans history?'.<sup>7</sup> This wording is used in the *Student Academic Experience Survey* (SAES), jointly produced annually by Advance HE and HEPI. The 2023 version of the SAES informs this report. There, in addition to the above question, students are also asked for their sex and gender identity, including an option to specify they are non-binary or have a different gender identity.<sup>8</sup>

In this report, we highlight interesting findings relating to trans students, non-binary students, and other students whose gender identity is different from the sex they were originally assigned at birth. Differences between groups, such as between trans students and students who are not trans, are highlighted with commentary in the text where they are statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level.

We also interviewed some trans and non-binary students and some academics whose research has previously focused on the experience of trans and non-binary students in higher education. These semi-structured interviews were designed to explore questions raised by the data. The students who participated were offered an Amazon voucher for their time.

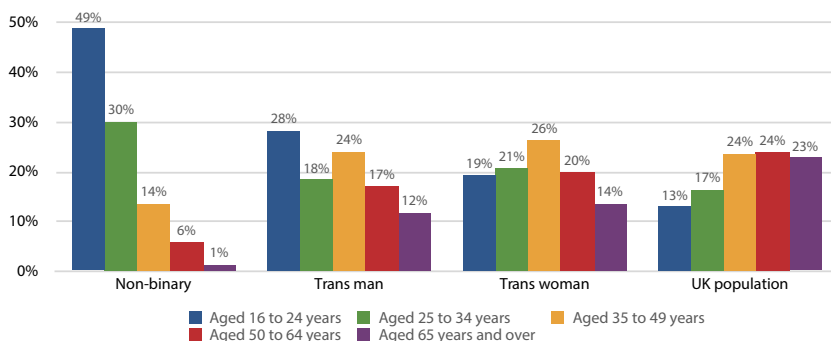
Using these new data, we look in depth at the experiences of trans and non-binary students throughout their higher education journey. We go beyond their academic work to evaluate wider aspects of the student experience, like their wellbeing, safety, financial challenges and graduate careers. To do so, we collate data from each stage of the university journey, from applicant to student and to graduate, building the most detailed picture yet of what it means to be trans or non-binary in higher education in the UK today.

## Part 1 – Being trans and non-binary in the UK

For the first time, the 2021 Census gave people the opportunity to indicate their gender is different from their sex registered at birth. Of the 262,000 trans and non-binary people in England and Wales who specified their identity, about 48,000 (0.1 per cent of the population) describe themselves as trans men and about the same number as trans women. A further 30,000 (0.06 per cent) identify as non-binary and 18,000 (0.04 per cent) use a different gender identity. Some 118,000 (0.24 per cent) did not specify their gender identity. Across the census population, 2.9 million (6 per cent) did not answer the question.<sup>9</sup>

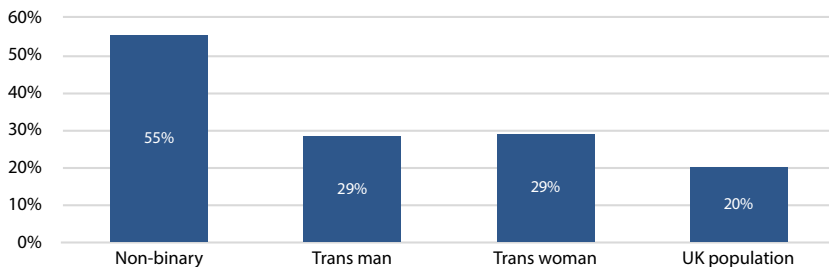
Data on gender identity and age show that trans and non-binary people are on average younger than the overall population. While only 13 per cent of the adult population are aged 16-24, this rises to 19 per cent of trans women and 28 per cent of trans men. Some 49 per cent of those with another gender identity different from their sex registered at birth are aged 16-24.<sup>10</sup> We have described these people under the broad label 'non-binary', though not all these people will describe themselves that way.

*Figure 1: population aged over 15, by age and gender identity. Source: Office for National Statistics<sup>11</sup>*



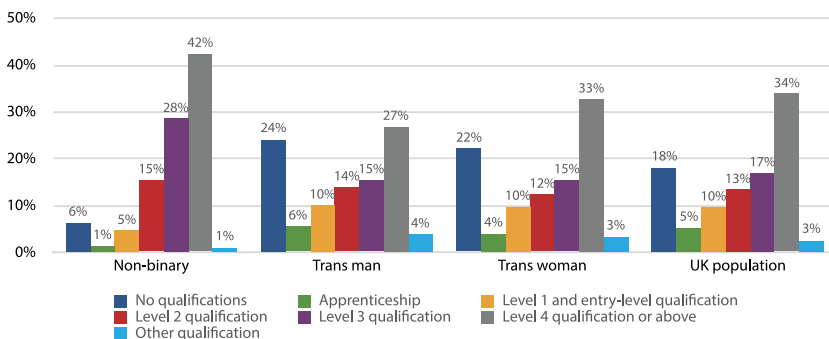
Trans and non-binary people also have much higher rates of disability than the general population: 29 per cent of trans men, the same proportion of trans women, and 55 per cent of non-binary people indicate that they are disabled. This is much higher than the 20 per cent of the UK population who indicate they are disabled.

*Figure 2: proportion indicating they are disabled under the Equality Act. Source: Office for National Statistics<sup>12</sup>*



The 2021 Census also has data on the highest qualification held by gender identity. These data show that trans people are typically less qualified than the UK population overall, with 24 per cent of trans men and 22 per cent of trans women holding no qualification, compared with 18 per cent of the whole UK population. Conversely, non-binary people are much more qualified, with only 6 per cent holding no qualification and 42 per cent holding a qualification at degree level or above. Given that the majority of non-binary people are aged 16-34, the impact of the expansion of higher education in recent decades may be influencing the higher rates of Level 4 or above qualifications. However, this does not explain the higher levels of qualification at Levels 2 and 3, and the very low numbers of non-binary people who have no qualifications.

*Figure 3: highest qualification held. Source: Office for National Statistics<sup>13</sup>*



According to the 2018 National LGBT Survey, trans and non-binary people reported earning lower salaries than the UK average. In 2017, 60 per cent of trans and non-binary respondents earned less than £20,000. The median income for the UK population that year was £23,474.

In summary, the group of people in the 'trans or non-binary' bracket is not homogenous. Non-binary people are generally qualified at a higher level than the average UK citizen, while trans people are generally qualified at a lower level. Both groups are younger than the UK average, but those identifying as non-binary or with another gender identity different from their sex registered at birth are particularly young. And both groups, particularly non-binary people, have very high rates of disability. The reasons for these differences are not always clear and more research is needed to understand the unique needs and characteristics of these groups.

### *Transitioning*

While many trans and non-binary people undergo medical transition, which can involve taking hormones or having surgery, many also do not. Transitioning gender can also include social transitioning – such as telling friends and family about their gender identity or wearing different clothes – and legal transitioning such as changing official documents.<sup>14</sup>

For young people who do decide to undergo a medical procedure, the situation is very challenging. England's sole state-run youth gender clinic Tavistock was rated inadequate in a review. It has now closed, and two new centres – one in the Northwest, and one in London – have opened.<sup>15</sup> At present, young people face a very long waiting period significantly exceeding other NHS waiting times for treatment, leaving many waiting years to begin the process of medically transitioning.<sup>16</sup>

Some people who transition go on to pause, stop or reverse the process of transition, often referred to as 'detransitioning'.<sup>17</sup> People may detransition for a variety of reasons, including regret, but also because they feel insufficiently supported with their transition.<sup>18</sup> Detransitioning does not always translate to people not being, or no longer identifying as, trans. It is believed that only a small number of those who transition go on to detransition but, as noted in the final report of the Cass Review, the evidence base on detransitioning is very weak. For example, it is not

discussed in any of the data which inform this report.<sup>19</sup>

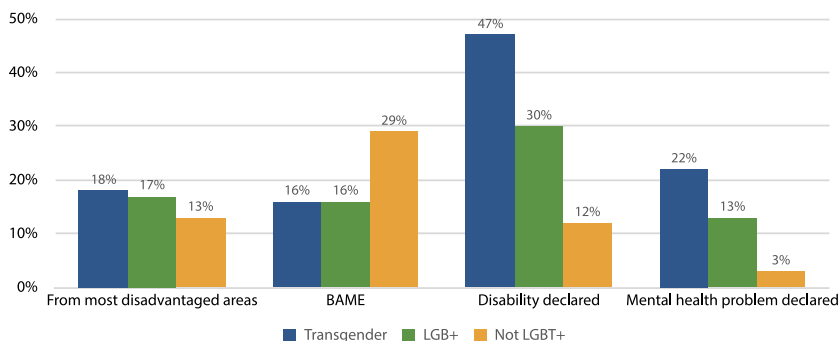
The next section focuses on the experience of trans and non-binary applicants, those in the process of applying to enter higher education.

## Part 2 – Applying to higher education

Trans and non-binary people enter higher education with a great range of experiences and perspectives. This section explores the most common experiences and considers the effect they have on students' further study.

It draws on quantitative data from two sources. The 2021 report *What is the experience of LGBT+ students in education?* was published by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in collaboration with the charity Stonewall.<sup>20</sup> It provides information about the experiences of students describing themselves as trans, though not about non-binary students. The *Unite Students Applicant Index 2023* contains data both on students considering themselves trans and describing their gender as 'other'. We refer to these students as non-binary, though some of these students may not use this label. Some may also describe themselves as both trans and non-binary. For more information, see the Annex.

Figure 4: applicants with each characteristic. Source: UCAS<sup>21 ii</sup>



### Characteristics

The 2021 UCAS survey compares the experiences of trans students with LGB+ students and those who are not LGBT+. It shows that trans applicants more often come from the most disadvantaged areas (18 per cent) than applicants who are not LGBT+ (13 per cent). About 16 per cent of trans students have a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background, the same

ii Some students will be in both the transgender and LGB+ group: see the Annex for more information. These breakdowns match the original way the data are portrayed.

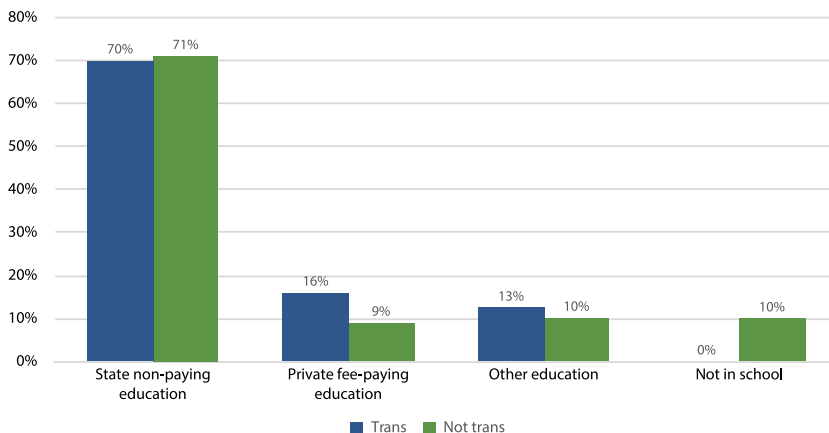


proportion as LGB+ students but a smaller proportion than of students who are not LGBT+, of whom 29 per cent are BAME. Nearly half of trans applicants (47 per cent) declare a disability and more than a fifth (22 per cent) declare a mental health condition, significantly exceeding the rates of other groups.

However, trans students are significantly more likely to tell their university about their disability, with 70 per cent of disabled trans students having done so compared with 55 per cent of disabled students who are not trans.<sup>22</sup>

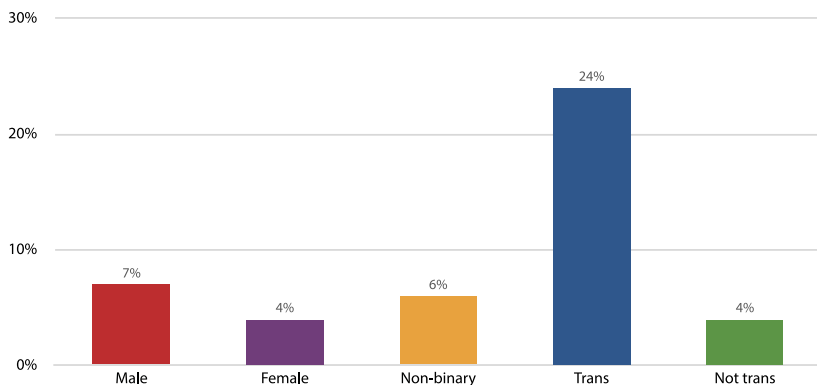
The *Applicant Index* shows that a higher proportion of trans applicants have attended private fee-paying education than applicants who are not trans. This may be because a higher proportion of students in fee-paying schools are trans than in state-funded schools, or because trans students in fee-paying schools apply to higher education at a higher rate.<sup>23</sup>

*Figure 5: educational setting attended in the last two years. Source: Unite Students<sup>24</sup>*



The proportion of trans students with experience of care is very high. Nearly a quarter of trans respondents to the *Applicant Index* (24 per cent) have at some point been in local authority care, six times the rate of students who are not trans (4 per cent). However, we found it surprising that the number of non-binary students who have been in care is significantly lower than the rate for trans students and is not significantly different from male or female students.<sup>25</sup>

*Figure 6: I am or have previously been in local authority care, by gender and trans identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>26</sup>*



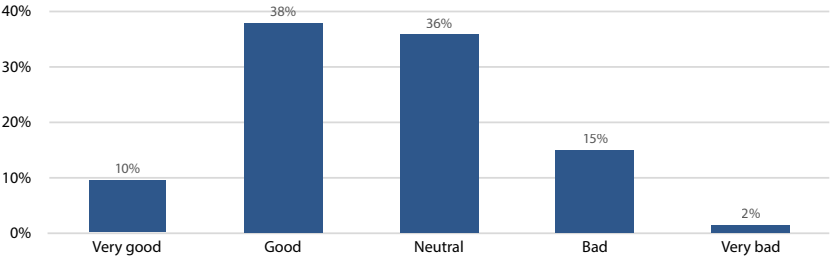
With so many trans and non-binary young people having a disability or mental health condition, or having been in care, it is essential to adopt an intersectional approach to supporting trans and non-binary students which takes account of the full range of an individual student's needs.<sup>27</sup>

According to UCAS, trans students also apply to higher education with lower attainment than students who are not trans. They have consistently lower-than-average A-level grades, are less likely to apply for a course with an early deadline such as courses at Oxford and Cambridge and are less likely to apply to a high-tariff provider. They also receive lower attainment in BTEC qualifications.<sup>28</sup>

### *Preparedness for higher education*

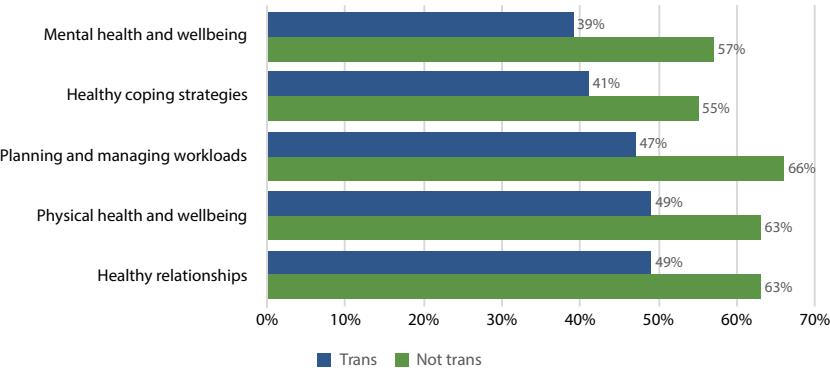
Regarding their time at school, 48 per cent of trans students had a positive experience and 17 per cent had a negative experience. This is a little worse than comparable results for LGB+ students, of whom 47 per cent had a positive experience and 12 per cent had a negative experience. For the trans students whose experience was positive, this was most often (84 per cent) because they could talk openly about their identity. When a student's experience was negative, they most commonly (85 per cent of respondents) said this was because of bullying. As this survey focused only on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, we do not have comparable data for students who are not LGBTQ+.

Figure 7: overall experience of school for transgender applicants. Source: UCAS<sup>29</sup>

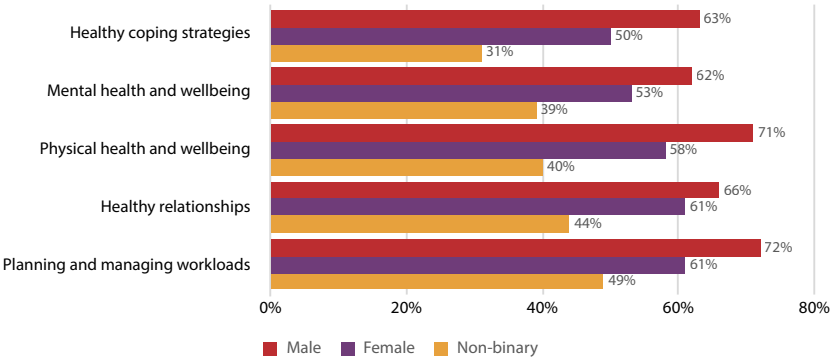


Trans and non-binary students consider themselves significantly less prepared by their school or college than other students. Trans and non-binary applicants were significantly less likely to say their school or college was effective in preparing them in the following five areas – managing workloads, coping strategies, mental wellbeing, physical wellbeing and healthy relationships. Particularly few said they had been taught healthy coping strategies (31 per cent for non-binary applicants, 41 per cent for trans) or supported with mental health and wellbeing (39 per cent for both).

Figure 8: my school or college has been 'effective' in preparing me for these areas in higher education, by trans identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>30</sup>

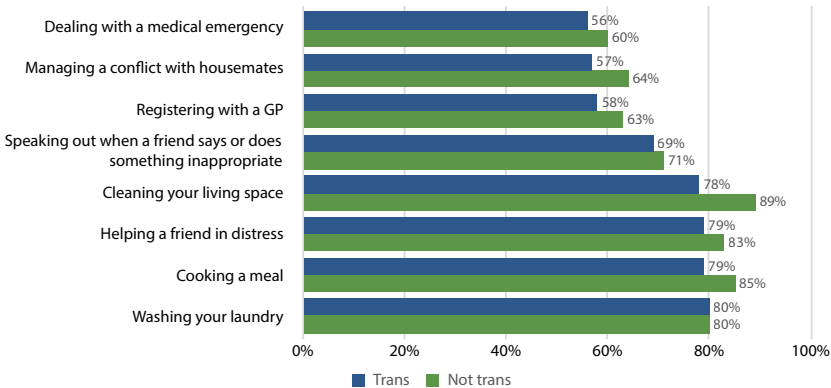


*Figure 9: my school or college has been 'effective' in preparing me for the following areas in higher education, by gender identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>31</sup>*



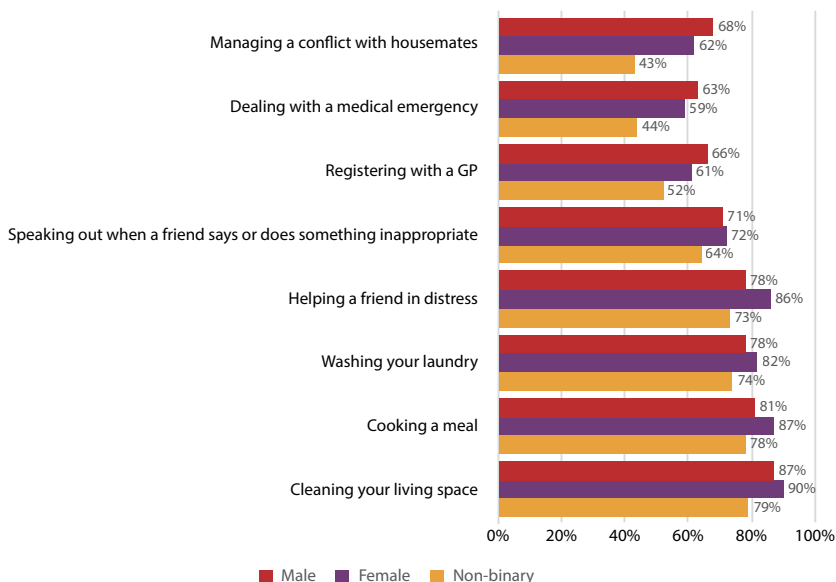
By contrast, in a variety of practical tasks, such as cooking, managing social conflict or registering with a GP, trans students do not consider themselves significantly less confident. The finding on interactions with a GP is notable: trans or non-binary students undergoing medical transition are likely to have had more interactions with the National Health Service (NHS), but these interactions may not always have been positive.<sup>32</sup>

*Figure 10: I would be confident if asked to do the following tomorrow, by trans identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>33</sup>*



By contrast, the differences between non-binary students and others typically are significant. They consider themselves unconfident with tasks such as managing conflict (where only 43 per cent are confident) or dealing with a medical emergency (where 44 per cent are confident).

*Figure 11: I would be confident if asked to do the following tomorrow, by gender identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>34</sup>*



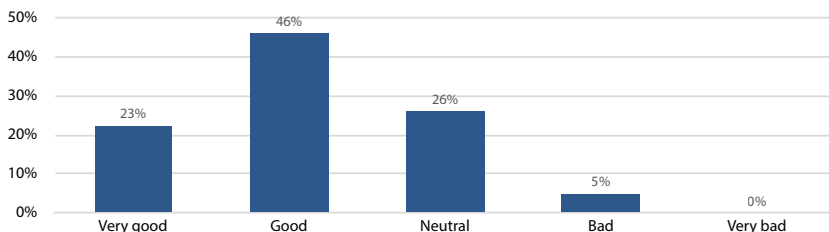
Finally, trans students are also significantly more likely than LGB+ students to have looked ahead at the support services which will be available for them at university, with 55 per cent having done so compared with less than a third (31 per cent) of LGBTQ+ students overall (though there will be some overlap between these two groups).<sup>35</sup> Interviewees who considered themselves trans while applying for university described doing significant research into the culture of the institutions and city they were applying to, to determine whether they have a welcoming culture for trans students.

Students who had a positive educational experience at school talked about wanting to continue this, while those who had a difficult educational experience at school wanted to escape from it by applying to a provider and locality they believed would be welcoming and inclusive.

## Attitudes to higher education

Trans applicants are typically excited for their future in higher education, with 69 per cent expecting their experience to be good or very good.<sup>36</sup>

*Figure 12: expectations for their experience in higher education, transgender applicants. Source: UCAS<sup>37</sup>*



Like other groups of students, trans and non-binary students generally believe the university will be able to look after them, keep them safe and that they will find people like them. The differences between student groups for most indicators are not statistically significant. However, trans and non-binary students are significantly less confident that the university will be able to meet their specific needs: only 64 per cent of non-binary students are confident their university can do this, compared with 79 per cent of female students and 80 per cent of male students – as figure 14 shows.

*Figure 13: proportion agreeing, by trans identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>38</sup>*

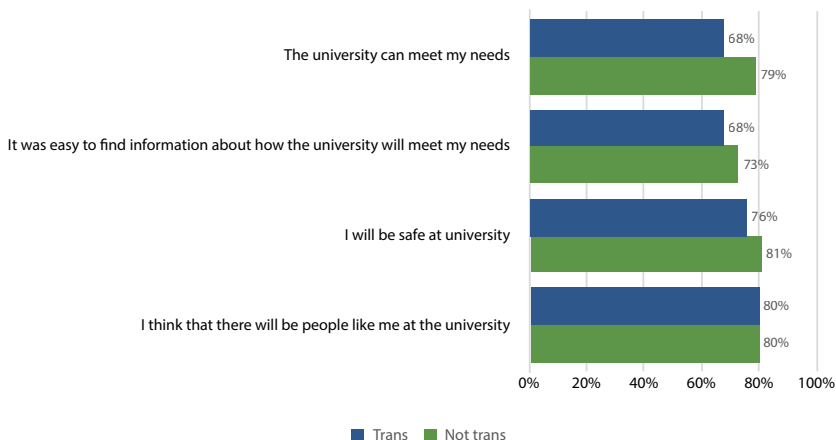
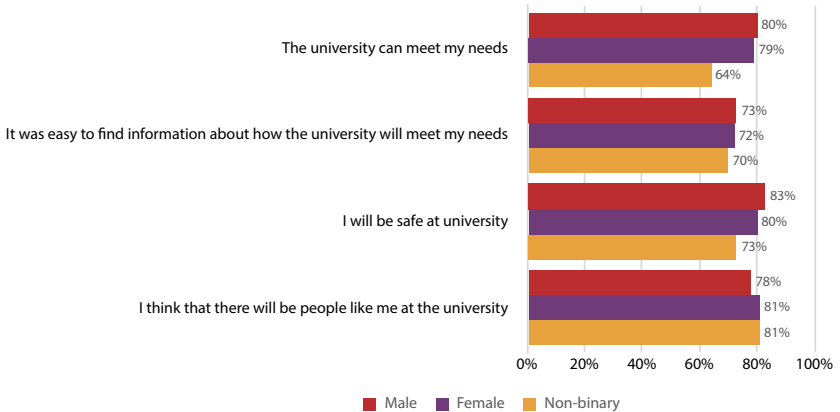
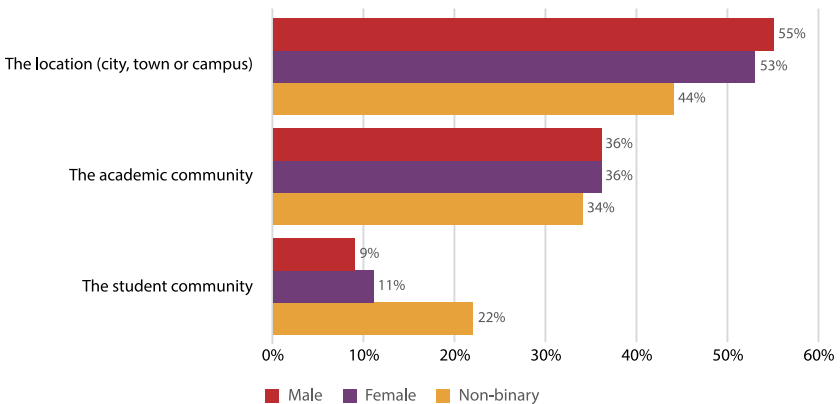


Figure 14: proportion agreeing, by gender identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>39</sup>



When considering whether location, academic community or student community is most important when choosing a university, all groups of applicants value the location most highly and the student community least. However, significantly more non-binary students value the student community more than other groups, with more than a fifth (22 per cent) voting this most important compared with 9 per cent of male students and 11 per cent of female students.

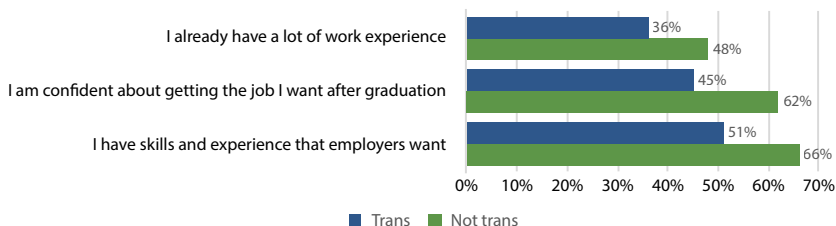
Figure 15: 'most important' to consider when deciding where to go to university, by gender identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>40</sup>



## Attitudes to post-university outcomes

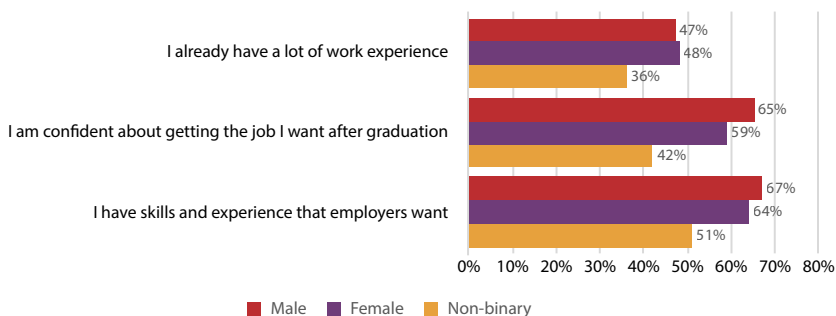
We found that trans and non-binary students are significantly less confident in their level of work experience. Most strikingly, only two-fifths (42 per cent) of non-binary students are confident about getting the job they want after graduation. By comparison, two-thirds (65 per cent) of men and 59 per cent of women are confident of getting the job they want – a statistically significant difference.<sup>41</sup>

Figure 16: proportion agreeing, by trans identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>42</sup>



In the interviews we conducted with students when developing this report, one student explained to us that pre-transition she had been very successful in recruitment rounds, securing four out of the five jobs she had applied for. However, following her transition, she applied for ten roles and was successful in none of these applications. She felt strongly that this was due to her presentation as a trans woman. Rather than being less well-prepared for work, students felt the barriers for them to access work were higher.

Figure 17: proportion agreeing, by gender identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>43</sup>





## Wellbeing

Figures 18 and 19 illustrate that the mental health and wellbeing of trans and non-binary applicants are often poorer than their peers. The *Applicant Index* asks respondents four questions about their wellbeing, on which respondents are asked to rate themselves out of 10. The mean scores for each group are displayed here. Trans and non-binary applicants consider themselves to have lower wellbeing by all indicators. In some cases, such as with overall satisfaction, the differences are not large. However high levels of anxiety remain a particular concern.

Figure 18: mean scores out of 10, by trans identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>44</sup>

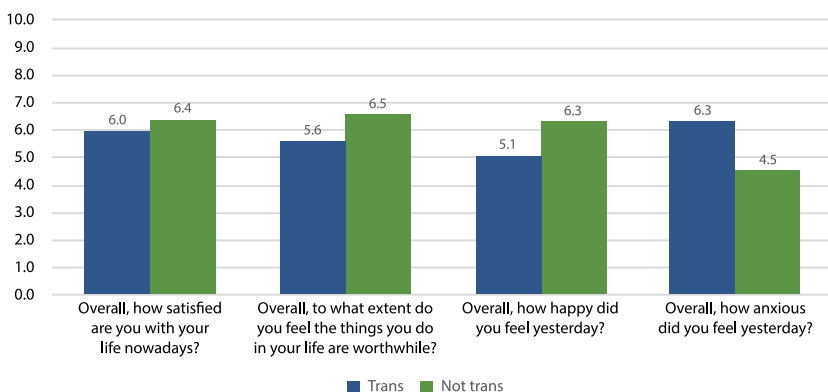
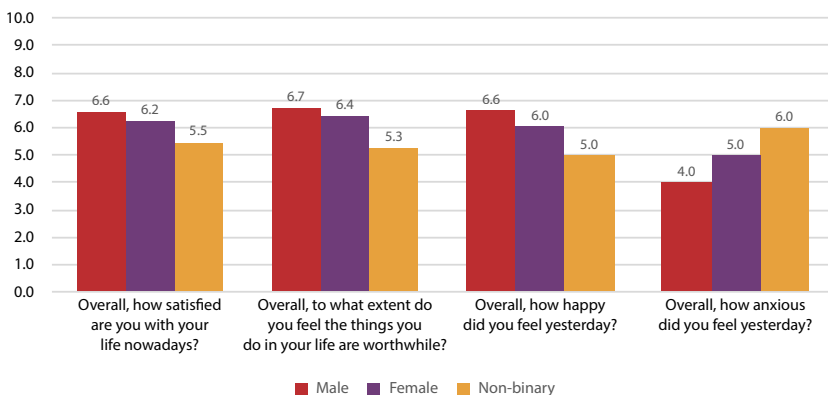


Figure 19: mean scores out of 10, by gender identity. Source: Unite Students<sup>45</sup>



In relation to wellbeing, one student told us:

*It is really tough living in a climate that is playing on our downfall. The Government, both historically and at the moment, are actively hostile towards trans people. It's awful being scapegoated for just existing.*

The *Applicant Index* also asks students three statements about their social wellbeing – whether they feel loved, whether they feel rejected and whether they feel ashamed. These results make for concerning reading. While only around a fifth (22 per cent) of applicants who are not trans say they ‘feel ashamed’, this rises to well over half (56 per cent) of trans applicants. Less than half of trans applicants say they ‘feel loved’, compared with seven-in-ten students (72 per cent) who are not trans.

Figure 20: proportion agreeing with each statement, by trans identity. Source: *Unite Students*<sup>46</sup>

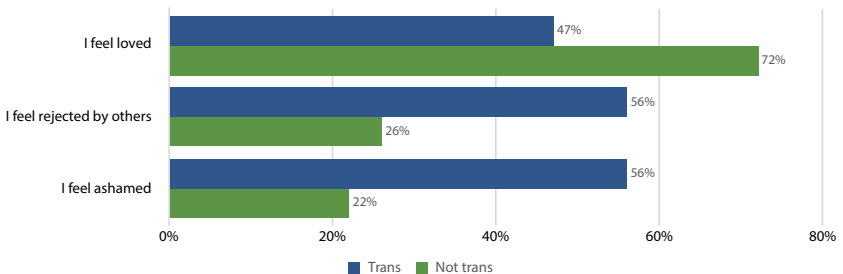
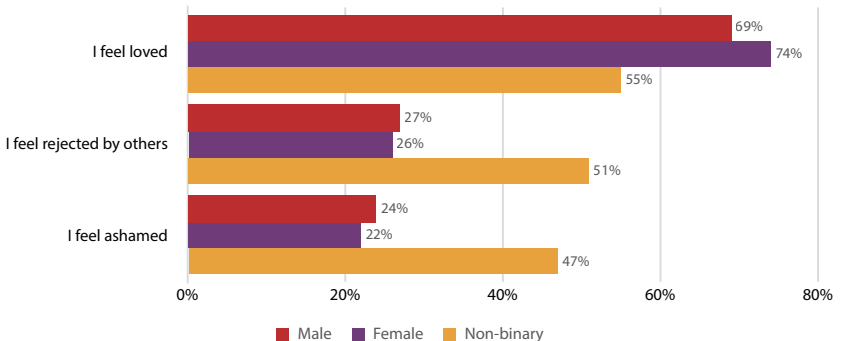


Figure 21: proportion agreeing with each statement, by gender identity. Source: *Unite Students*<sup>47</sup>



## *Summary*

Trans and non-binary applicants to higher education appear to start from an altogether more challenging base. They have less confidence in the skills they received from school, a poorer overall experience of school and, for some students, lower grades. They also have much poorer wellbeing and mental health, particularly around their relationships with others. But it remains positive that despite all these challenges, trans and non-binary people still apply for higher education in significant numbers. And they are enormously optimistic about higher education, though they are not always confident their new institution will be able to meet their specific needs. The next section explores whether, and how, higher education meets these expectations.

## **Part 3 – The trans and non-binary experience at university**

### *Methods*

This section draws on two further data sources to paint a picture of the experiences of trans and non-binary students in higher education. The 2023 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* (SAES) includes questions on gender identity, trans identity and sex. The Annex lists the exact questions and response options.

Before weighting, 195 respondents (2 per cent) described themselves as non-binary and 19 (0.2 per cent) described themselves in another way. As the latter group is very small, we have put them into the category of non-binary students. We recognise not all will use the label ‘non-binary’: by contrast, respondents to a recent report focusing on the experiences of non-binary students and staff described their gender identity in a range of different ways.<sup>48</sup> We use ‘non-binary’ as an umbrella term to describe all those students who do not identify as male or female.

Before weighting, 443 respondents to the SAES (4 per cent) said they were trans or had a trans history. The majority of trans respondents to the SAES (56 per cent) identify as male. At only 12 per cent, there is limited representation from trans women. About three-in-ten (29 per cent) identify as non-binary.

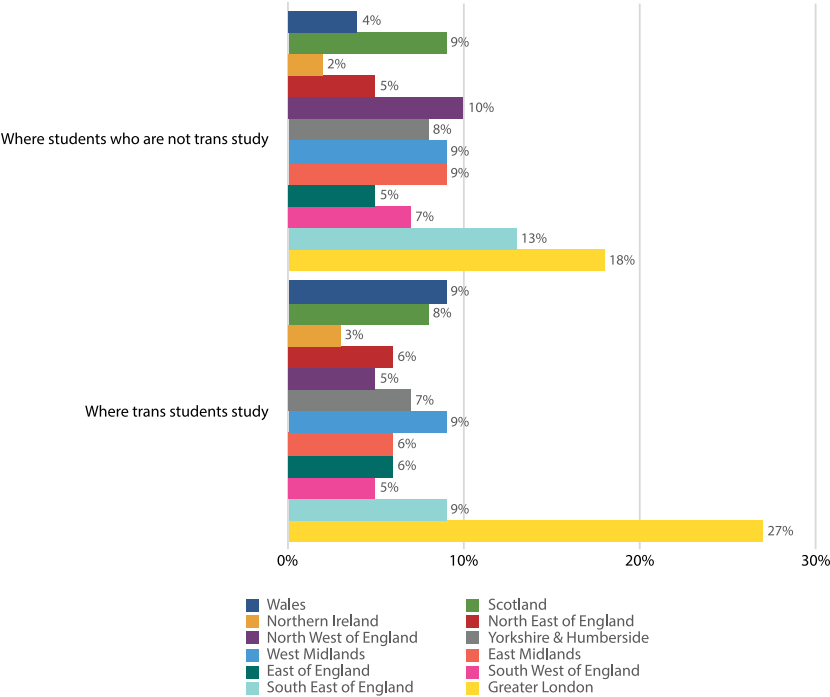
We also draw on the 2018 *National LGBT Survey*, a major national effort produced by the Government Equalities Office surveying people considering themselves LGBT.<sup>49</sup> Of survey respondents, 6.9 per cent said they are non-binary, 3.5 per cent describe themselves as a trans woman and 2.9 per cent describe themselves as a trans man. As discussed in the Annex, this survey has some limitations; however, it remains valuable given that at the time of surveying it was, according to the Government Equalities Office, the largest survey of its kind in the world.

### *Characteristics*

The SAES reports detailed demographic data on students. Trans and non-binary students are significantly more likely to say they have a disability: 59 per cent of non-binary students and 60 per cent of trans students report having a disability compared with 27 per cent of all students.

A disproportionately high percentage of trans students study in London and Wales, as compared to their peers who are not trans, and a disproportionately small number study in universities in the North West and Southeast of England. Elsewhere the differences are not significant.

Figure 22: Where students are studying in the UK. Source HEPI/Advance HE.<sup>50</sup>



Trans students are less likely to live at home, with only 24 per cent of trans students doing so compared to 33 per cent of students who are not trans. But the proportion of non-binary students who live at home (31 per cent) is not significantly different from the proportion of male students (33 per cent) and female students (32 per cent).

As in the data referring to applicants, trans students were more likely to have been to private school (17 per cent, compared to 9 per cent among students who are not trans), but non-binary students were less likely (5 per cent, compared to 12 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women).

The SAES does not have reliable data on the relationship between trans and non-binary students and their family members. However, a significant number of trans and non-binary students are likely to be estranged from relatives. A 2023 survey found 46 per cent of trans young people and 43 per cent of non-binary young people are estranged from at least one relative.<sup>51</sup>

### Academic experience

Figure 23: course area studied. Some course areas with few students are excluded. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>52</sup>

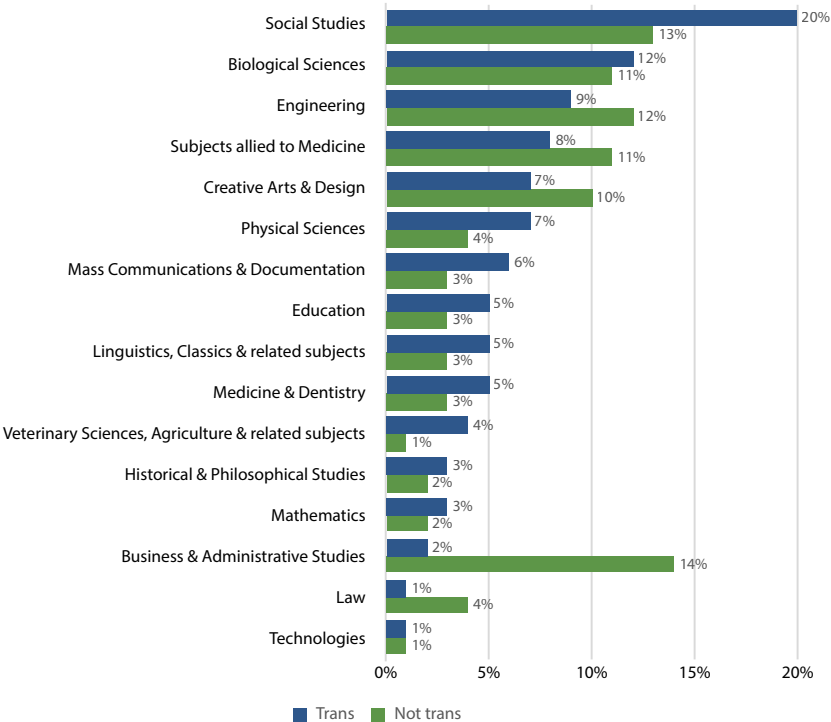
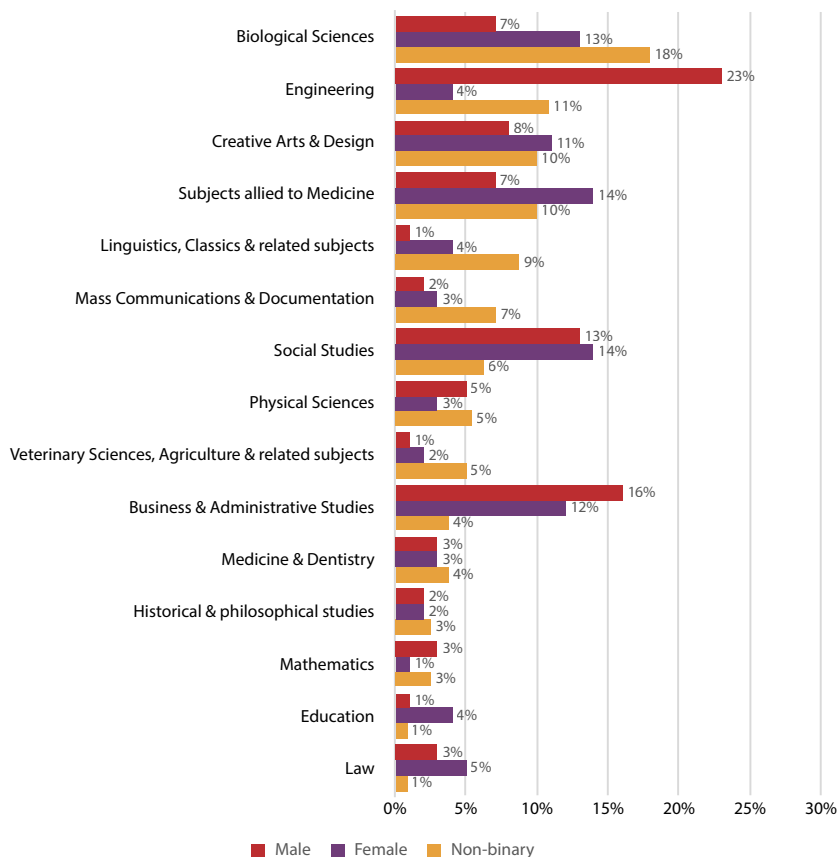


Figure 24: course area studied. Some course areas with few students are excluded. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>53</sup>



Some of those interviewed mentioned stereotypes around trans and non-binary students studying some courses, such as in creative subjects or humanities, at much higher rates than other students. The evidence for this proves to be mixed. Trans students study Social Studies subjects at significantly higher rates (20 per cent) than students who are not trans (13 per cent). But the next three most popular are all STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects: Biological Sciences, Engineering, and subjects allied to Medicine. The biggest difference is in

the field of Business and Administrative Studies, which only 2 per cent of trans students study compared to 14 per cent of students who are not trans. There are also statistically significant differences in the proportions studying Veterinary Sciences, Physical Sciences, Law, Mass Communications and Linguistics and Classics.

Similarly, for non-binary students, the most popular subjects are in STEM. While Biological Sciences, Veterinary Sciences, Linguistics and Classics and Mass Communications courses are significantly more popular than for male and female students, Social Studies courses are less popular. Again, very few non-binary students study Business or Law.

### Attendance

To measure overall attendance, we took the number of hours attended as a fraction of the number of scheduled hours. While the attendance rate of non-binary students (85 per cent) is about the same as male and female students (82 per cent and 86 per cent respectively), at 77 per cent the rate for trans students is lower.

Figure 25: attendance, by trans identity. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>54</sup>

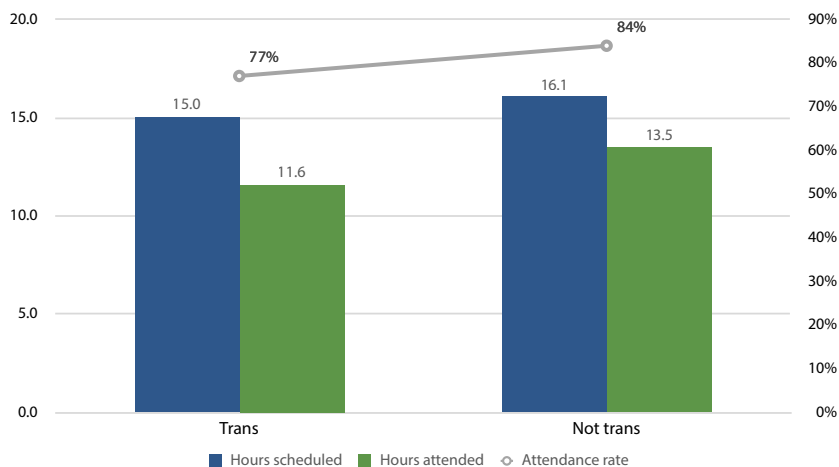
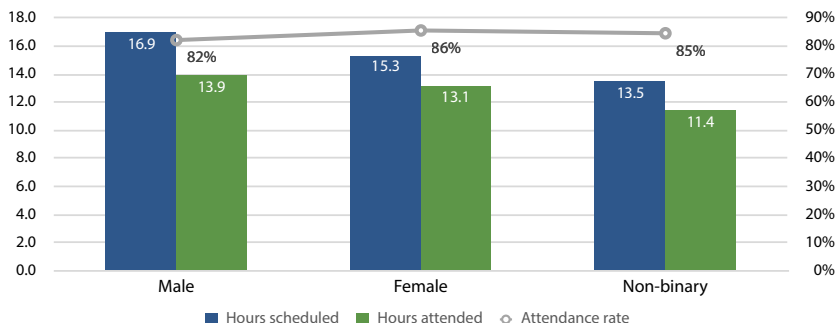




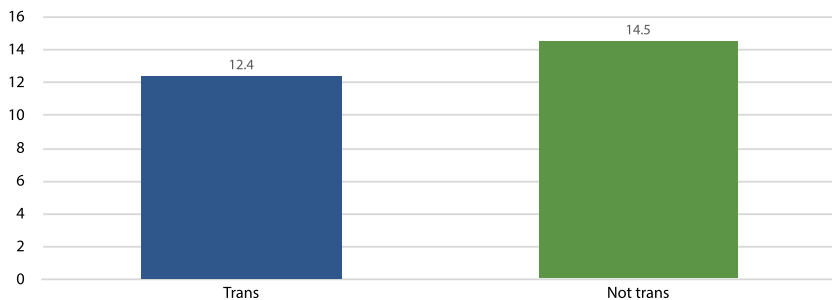
Figure 26: attendance, by gender identity. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>55</sup>



In addition to the concerns about wellbeing raised in this section and undergoing transition discussed in Part 5, factors affecting attendance are likely to include issues of belonging – whether students feel comfortable being their authentic selves in lectures and classes – a lack of family support due to weaker relationships or estrangement and social isolation.<sup>56</sup>

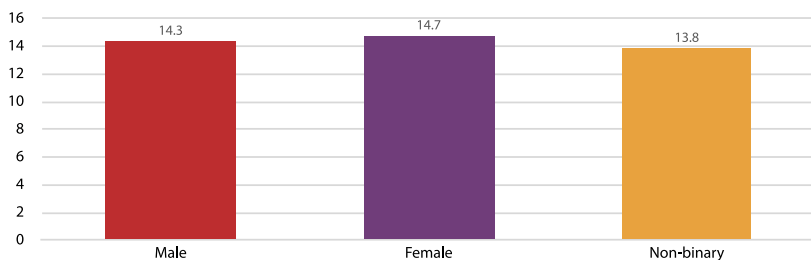
In addition to having a poorer attendance rate, trans and non-binary students also spend less time studying independently by more than two hours a week. While students who are not trans spend around 14 and a half hours studying independently each week, this falls to less than 12 and a half hours for trans students. Non-binary students also spend a little less time studying – around 13 and a half hours a week – than their male and female peers.<sup>57</sup>

Figure 27: average number of hours per week during term-time spent on independent work. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>58</sup>



This may be partly explained by subject choice, with a smaller proportion of trans students taking intensive subjects like Law while a higher proportion take comparatively less intensive courses like Social Studies.

*Figure 28: average number of hours per week during term-time spent on independent work. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>59</sup>*



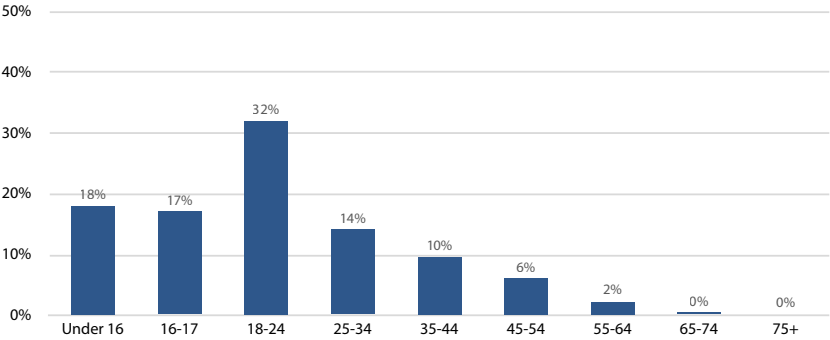
Students told us that attendance could be challenging because of their need to access healthcare, of which availability is limited. For example, students may wish to access hormonal treatment, psychological support such as counselling, speech and language therapy (often to help them sound more typical of their gender identity) or surgery as part of their transition. This is sometimes referred to as ‘gender-affirming healthcare’. One student explained that in their local area, people who were referred for gender-affirming healthcare in 2018 are only now being offered their first appointment. Access to healthcare on the NHS feels impossible for many of the students we spoke to, and these students are therefore accessing healthcare privately, which is costly and logistically difficult.

One student explained that their attendance is affected because they are on hormone replacement treatment (HRT) and need regular blood tests. They cannot access the HRT or blood tests on the NHS and must pay for them privately. The cheapest way for them to access the blood tests is to access a private clinic in London, which is only open on Tuesdays. The journey and appointments take up the whole day.

The above challenges are particularly important to be aware of as many trans and non-binary students will be transitioning during their time in higher education. The *National LGBT Survey* reports that more than a third (35 per cent) of trans and non-binary people report having started transitioning by age 18 and two-thirds (67 per cent) by age 25. Trans men

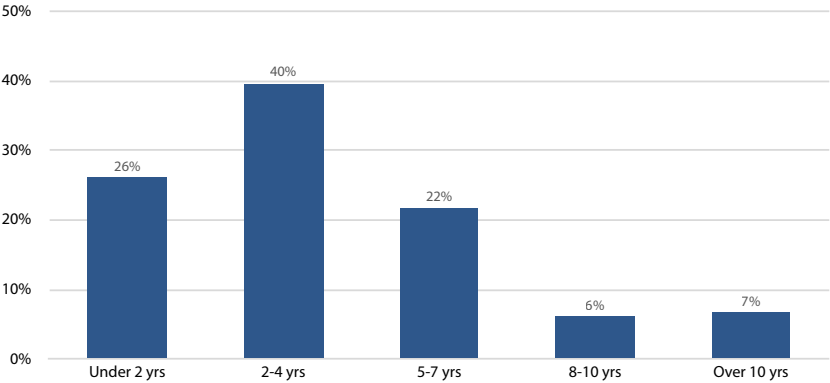
and non-binary people begin transitioning at a younger age, with 84 and 78 per cent respectively having begun their transition by age 25. However, trans women begin their transition later, with only 44 per cent having begun their transition by 25.

Figure 29: age respondents started transitioning, of those who transitioned.  
Source: Government Equalities Office<sup>60</sup>



Those who described themselves as having completed their transition were then asked how long their transition took. A majority (66 per cent) said their transition took four years or less, with a small number (7 per cent) saying it took longer than 10 years.

Figure 30: time taken to completely transition, of those who transitioned.  
Source: Government Equalities Office<sup>61</sup>



By making some conservative statistical assumptions, including that people are evenly distributed within bands and the time taken to transition is independent of the age at which the person started to transition, we estimate that nearly two-fifths (39 per cent) of those who transition will be of traditional university age (18-21 years old) for some or all of their transition.

Regarding workload, trans and non-binary students apply for extensions at significantly greater rates than their peers. While only 23 per cent of all students apply for extensions, this rises to 45 per cent of trans students and 47 per cent of non-binary students. One-in-eight trans students (12 per cent) have requested over five extensions in the last term. This is more than six times the proportion of students who are not trans.

Figure 31: extensions applied for in the last term. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>62</sup>

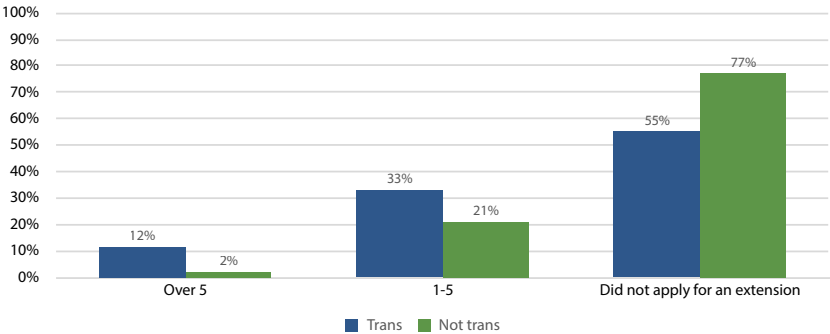
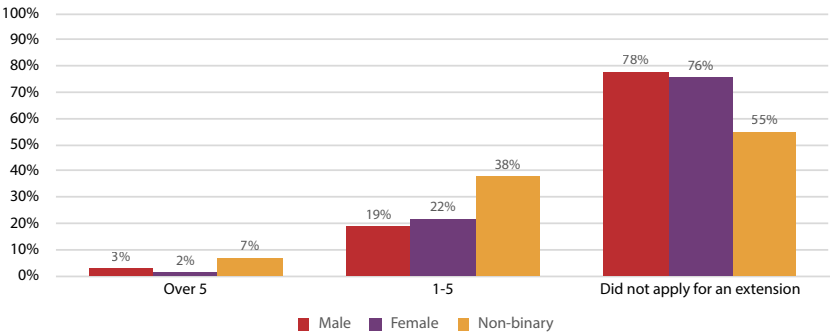


Figure 32: extensions applied for in the last term. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>63</sup>



The lower number of hours spent on academic work may be partly explained by higher levels of employment. While 55 per cent of students who are not trans work part-time, more than two-thirds of trans students (67 per cent) work in paid employment during term-time. But when looking only at those students who work, trans students work fewer hours than their peers who are not trans. Non-binary students tend to work at about the same rates as other students.

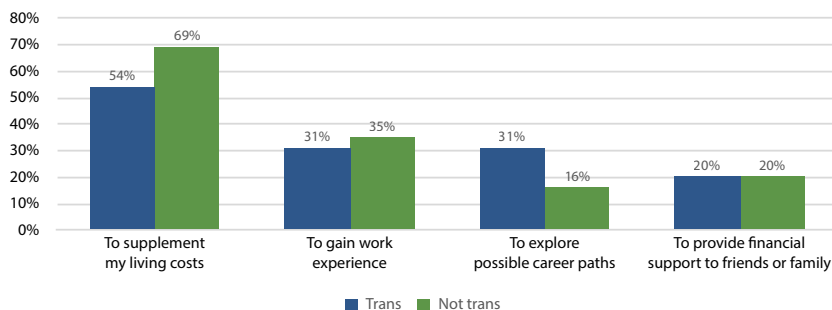
*Figure 33: number of hours worked by students who work at least one hour a week, by trans identity. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>64</sup>*



Trans and non-binary students have much greater concerns about the cost of living, with nearly half of trans students (45 per cent) and nearly two-fifths of non-binary students (38 per cent) indicating that the cost of living has negatively impacted their studies 'a lot'. By comparison, about a quarter (26 per cent) of all students say the cost of living has impacted their studies a lot.

But the reasons that trans students do paid employment are slightly different from other students: they do so less often to supplement their living costs (54 per cent, versus 69 per cent of other students who do so primarily for this reason) and more often to explore possible career paths (31 per cent, versus just 16 per cent of students who are not trans).

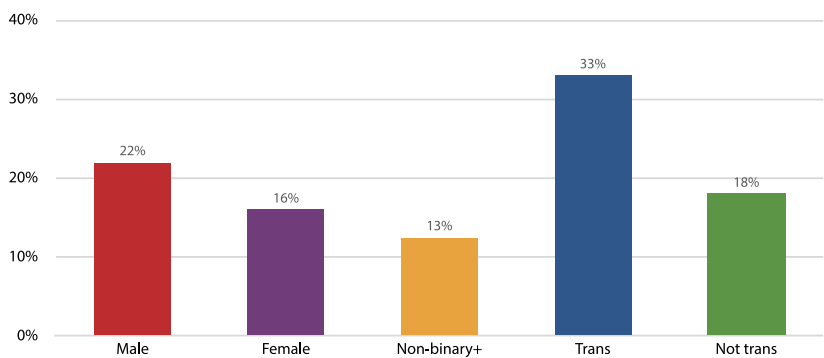
*Figure 34: reasons why students work, excluding 'other'. Respondents could choose multiple options. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>65</sup>*



Some financial challenges faced by trans and non-binary students relate to the costs of funding their healthcare. Some students we spoke to cited this as a reason for undertaking paid employment. Others said they have struggled to access hardship funds because there is money in their bank accounts, which is being saved to cover the costs of their medical transition. Students were also concerned about being ‘outed’ during an application for a hardship fund, as costly fees for hormonal treatments on their bank statements would require explanation. Students suggested that training for financial support advisors, excluding savings for surgery from consideration, and communicating to students that both these mitigations are in place would make hardship fund applications easier.

Students referenced other ‘hidden’ costs of transition, such as applying for replacement passports. Higher education institutions are advised to recognise a ‘statutory declaration of name change’ as well as evidence of a name change via deed poll.<sup>66</sup> However, some students shared with us that their institution requires a passport to change their name at their institution.

*Figure 35: proportion saying my experience was ‘better’ than expected. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>67</sup>*



Students also noted that many trans and non-binary students are estranged from their families. This presents some additional challenges, including that these students have no access to income from their parents.

What do trans and non-binary students think of their experience in higher education? In Part 2 of this report, we saw that trans and non-binary

students have high expectations of higher education. As Figure 35 shows, trans students consider these expectations met or exceeded significantly more often, with a third (33 per cent) saying that their experience was 'better' than expected compared with a sixth (18 per cent) of students who are not trans. However, non-binary students are less enthusiastic, with only 13 per cent saying it exceeded expectations. Instead, a majority (56 per cent) say their experience was better in some ways and worse in others.

The *Student Academic Experience Survey* also gives students a chance to explain why their experience was better or worse than expected. For both trans and non-binary students whose experience exceeded their expectations, their main surprises were almost entirely about course quality – the course was appropriately challenging, the feedback was good and the classes were a good size. Both cohorts also mention they are pleased with their own level of effort.

*Figure 36: top five reasons why experience exceeded expectations for trans students and non-binary students. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>68</sup>*

Trans students	Non-binary students
1. The course has the right level of challenge.	1. I have put in a good amount of effort myself.
2. I have put in a good amount of effort myself.	2. The course has the right level of challenge.
3. The feedback is good.	3. The teaching groups are good size.
4. The teaching groups are good size.	4. Teaching staff are accessible.
5. The course is well-organised.	5. The feedback is good.

When the experience is worse than expected, trans and non-binary students also stress their level of effort as not being high enough. However, both groups emphasise the lack of support from staff about independent study and class time as being key. These results suggest that trans and non-binary students particularly value the interaction they have with academic staff.

Figure 37: top five reasons why experience failed to meet expectations for trans students and non-binary students. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>69</sup>

Trans students	Non-binary students
1. There is too little in-person interaction with staff.	1. I haven't put in enough effort myself.
2. I receive fewer in-person contact hours than I was expecting.	2. The teaching quality is worse than I expected.
3. I haven't put in enough effort myself.	3. I don't feel supported in my independent study.
4. I don't feel supported in my independent study.	4. The course is poorly organised.
5. Industrial action by university staff.	5. Industrial action by university staff.

Non-binary students also raise concerns about the curriculum, with only 60 per cent saying it is 'sufficiently inclusive and diverse', compared with 71 per cent of male and female students.

Trans and non-binary students tend to feel their degree is poorer value for money than other students. They particularly value 'quality', with up to 80 per cent of trans and non-binary students citing it as affecting their perception of course value.

Figure 38: what students were talking about when they gave their answer on value for money. Students could select more than one option. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>70</sup>

Trans students	Non-binary students
1. Quality (77 per cent)	1. Quality (80 per cent)
2. Teaching intensity (55 per cent)	2. Price (60 per cent)
3. Price (43 per cent)	3. Teaching intensity (58 per cent)
4. Outcomes (34 per cent)	4. Outcomes (43 per cent)



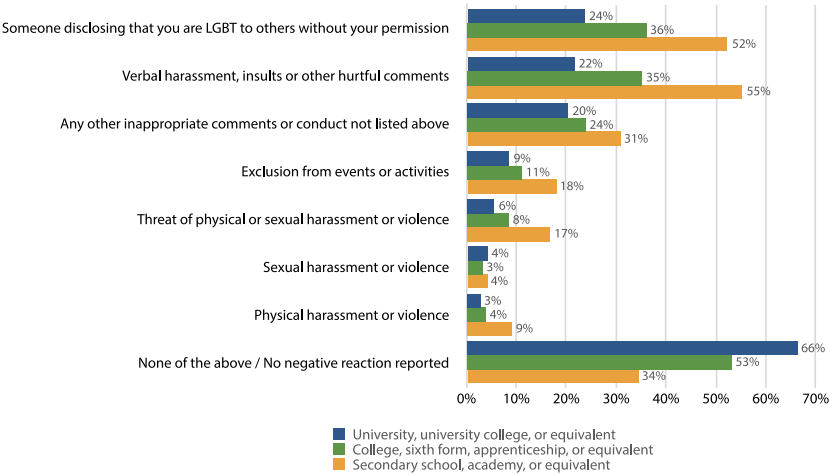
Concerning value for money, some students felt they were not gaining the equivalent value from the courses as their non-trans peers. One student told us:

*We are paying a lot of money to be disrespected and marginalised. Are we really getting the service that was advertised to us, compared to non-trans students? We are getting a really bad service for what we are paying for. There are some wonderful teachers, yes, but it is not en masse.*

*Safety and wider experience*

Concerns have been raised over the safety of trans and non-binary people in education from others who may do them direct harm. We find that the threat of harmful incidents remains substantial in universities, and the picture is mixed when compared with other educational settings, such as schools, colleges and apprenticeships. For example, while around a fifth of trans people (22 per cent) have faced verbal harassment for being LGBT in universities, this rises to 35 per cent in colleges and apprenticeships and 55 per cent in secondary schools and academies. While 9 per cent of those in schools had experienced physical harassment or violence, this falls to 4 per cent in colleges and 3 per cent in universities.<sup>71</sup>

*Figure 39: this incident occurred to me because I am LGBT – trans respondents – by type of institution attended. Source: Government Equalities Office<sup>72</sup>*



A similar question to trans and non-binary people across the UK population in the *National LGBT Survey* asked whether respondents had 'ever' avoided expressing their gender identity 'for fear of a negative reaction'. Some 67 per cent of respondents said yes, rising to three-quarters (75 per cent) of those aged 18-24.<sup>73</sup> While direct comparisons are difficult, trans and non-binary people in higher education may consider themselves a little safer in some aspects of their higher education experience, however, they still face significant risks.

In our interviews, we gathered that higher education is often seen as a more tolerant space than other forms of education, with its diverse student populations, wide range of student groups and visibly LGBTQ+ academics.<sup>74</sup> But there is more work to do. Some institutions have made more progress than others, perhaps leading trans and non-binary students to congregate in certain institutions, particularly in urban centres, which they may consider more tolerant.<sup>75</sup> This creates a risk of self-reinforcing spirals, where the institutions considered more open to trans and non-binary students become increasingly diverse while others become less so.

One solution adopted by some institutions to the challenge of safety is through 'LGBTQ+ flats', which are set aside for students who identify as LGBTQ+ and which these students can opt into when they apply for accommodation. The students and academics we spoke to reported LGBTQ+ flats being an overwhelmingly positive experience for those who had lived in them.<sup>76</sup> In particular, these flats make it much more likely students will have a safe and tolerant space to come home to where they do not need to regularly explain or justify themselves.

In the interviews we conducted, one student – who was not in an LGBTQ+ flat – told us that they wanted to begin their transition during their first year of university but did not feel able to do so due to fear of the response of one of their flatmates. Instead, they waited until they had moved in with friends during their second year.

Some institutions already reserve flats for other groups, such as mature students, single-sex flats, and flats for students who do not drink alcohol. However, it may be undesirable for students to be separated in this way. It is up for discussion whether LGBTQ+ flats represent a legitimate extension of these other arrangements – if they are themselves legitimate – or if this

is a regressive step which risks making campuses more segregated and less tolerant. Notably, the students we spoke to were overwhelmingly in favour of the availability of LGBTQ+ flats.

There are some further challenges with implementing LGBTQ+ flats. Some students we interviewed felt unable to apply to these flats as they were not out to their parents who were helping them with their application. These challenges might be partly addressed, for example, by allowing students to move into an LGBTQ+ flat while at university. Others highlighted that given the particular financial challenges faced by trans and non-binary students, LGBTQ+ flats should ideally be available in more affordable accommodation blocks. Finally, given the higher rates of mental health problems faced by LGBTQ+ students, it may be useful for wellbeing and mental health teams to reach out proactively to these flats to ensure that students are aware of the support on offer and emphasise that it is inclusive of their identities.

*Wellbeing*

Overall, non-binary students rate themselves as having lower wellbeing while at university, according to all four indicators. For trans students, the picture is somewhat more mixed. They score about the same as other students on how satisfied and happy they are but worse on measures of how worthwhile the things they do are. Trans students also indicate higher levels of anxiety.

*Figure 40: mean scores out of 10 by statement. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>77</sup>*

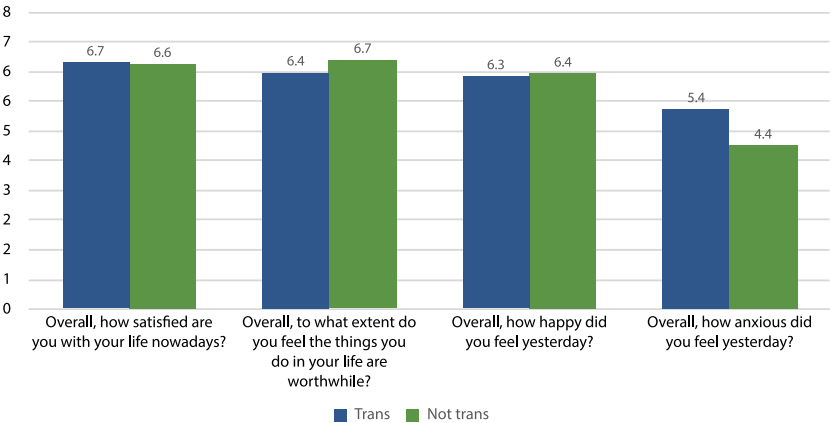
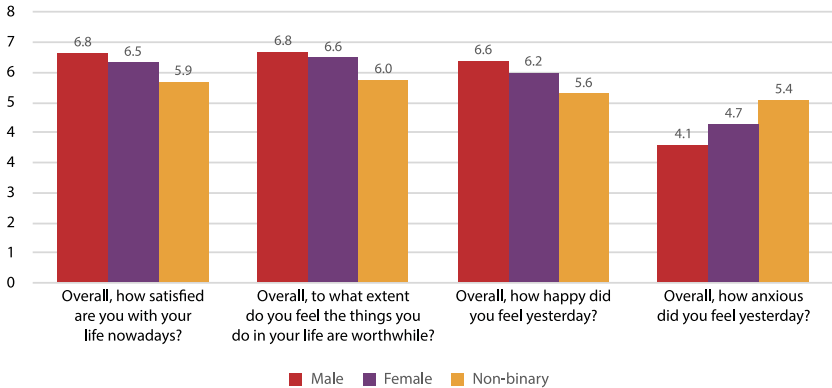


Figure 41: mean scores out of 10 by statement. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>78</sup>



As with applicants, the existing data report significant concerns about trans and non-binary students' social wellbeing. Most strikingly, 50 per cent of trans students said they felt lonely 'all' or 'most' of the time. This is twice the rate for students who are not trans, which is 25 per cent. The proportion of trans students lonely 'all the time' (16 per cent) is four times the rate of students who are not trans (4 per cent). Non-binary students also reported significantly higher levels of loneliness.

### Summary

Trans and non-binary students face a unique set of challenges in higher education. The financial, social and time burdens of transitioning, particularly but not exclusively medically, heavily affect trans and non-binary students' university experience, giving them less time to study and less money to support themselves. They exist in an environment which, while not quite as challenging as other educational settings, remains more uncomfortable and sometimes more dangerous than for other students. Perhaps the most critical challenges are social ones. Trans and non-binary students report much higher levels of loneliness, and often value the in-person interaction they have with a university particularly highly. The next section explores how these students get on once they graduate and move into the workplace or further study.

## **Part 4 – The trans and non-binary experience after graduation**

### *Methods*

In this section, we continue to draw on the HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey but rely primarily on data purchased for this project from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). In addition to a question on sex, institutions are expected to report to HESA the answer to the following question: 'Is your gender identity the same as the gender you were originally assigned at birth?.'

In the most recent academic year for which we have data, 2020/21, some 2,334,824 students are reported as answering 'Yes' to this question (around 79.5 per cent of all students), 20,777 as reported as answering 'No' (0.7 per cent), and the answer for the remaining 579,666 is unknown (around 19.8 per cent). Of those students whose answer is known, those answering 'Yes' constitute around 99.1 per cent and those answering 'No' constitute around 0.9 per cent.

We expect that those answering 'No' include students identifying as trans, non-binary, and with other gender identities. We group them here under the broad, non-prescriptive label 'trans or non-binary'.

It should be noted that the Office for Students (OfS) also publishes similar data on its student characteristics dashboards. These dashboards also depend on HESA data. Where there are differences between the OfS data and data published here, this is likely to be because different populations have been used, meaning the data refer to slightly different groups of students.<sup>79</sup>

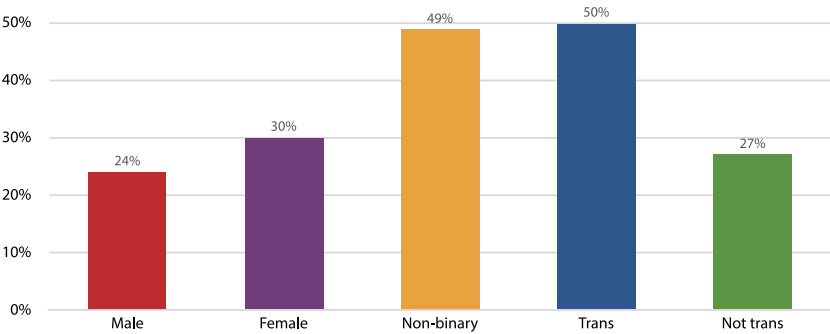
### *Graduate outcomes*

The previous chapters emphasised that many trans and non-binary students face more intense challenges than other students. These challenges might be expected to have a significant effect on their graduate outcomes. For example, the SAES reports that trans and non-binary students are significantly more likely to consider withdrawing.

The largest contributor is poor mental health, with 59 per cent of non-binary students who considered withdrawing citing this as the main reason. Trans students also cited mental health more than any other factor

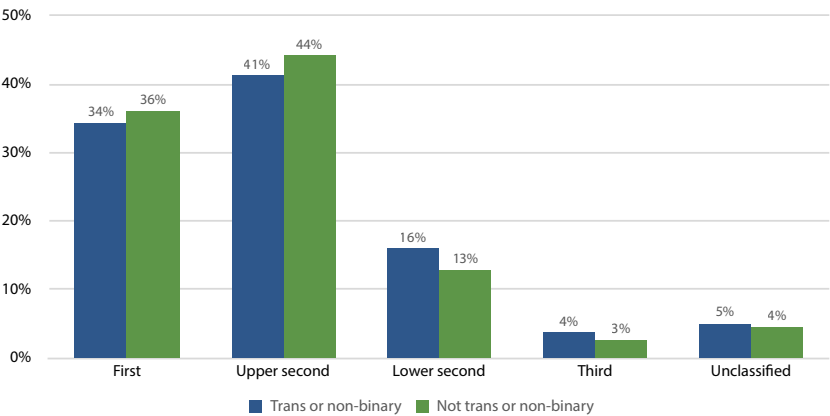
(28 per cent) but also attributed the challenge to a wider variety of other reasons, including physical health (9 per cent), insufficient interaction with teaching staff (8 per cent) and ‘the wider student experience’ (7 per cent).

Figure 42: proportion who have considered withdrawing, by gender and trans identity. Source: HEPI / Advance HE<sup>80</sup>



HESA data show that trans and non-binary students also get lower grades – but the difference is relatively small. In 2020/21, three-quarters of trans or non-binary students (75 per cent) earned a ‘good’ degree, that is, classified a first or upper second, compared with four-fifths (80 per cent) of students who are not trans or non-binary.

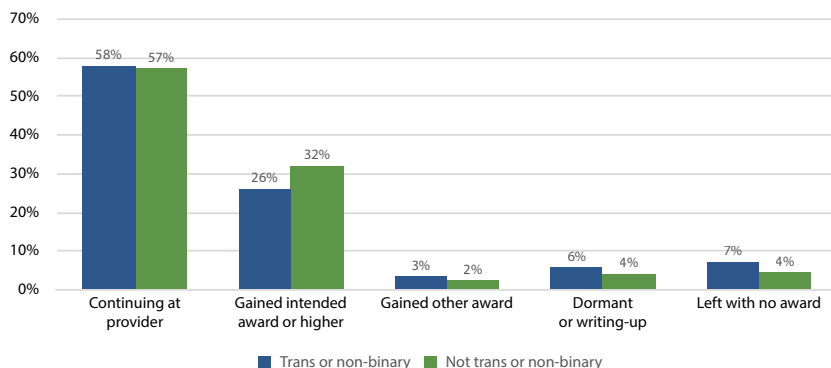
Figure 43: first-degree grade classification by gender and trans identity. Source: HESA<sup>81</sup>



Similarly, trans and non-binary students have poorer rates of ‘continuation’, representing the proportion of students who are still in higher education or who gain a qualification a year after the first record was taken. In 2020/21, fewer trans or non-binary students finished their courses (26 per cent, as compared with 32 per cent of students who are not trans or non-binary). Instead, more trans or non-binary students gained another award, were ‘dormant’ or writing up or left without an award (16 per cent in total of trans or non-binary students, versus 10 per cent in total of students who are not trans or not binary).<sup>iii</sup> Issues of preparedness, belonging and safety discussed in previous sections may have contributed to these differences.<sup>82</sup>

*Figure 44: continuation status by gender and trans identity, 2020/21. Source: HESA<sup>83</sup>*

### Graduate activities



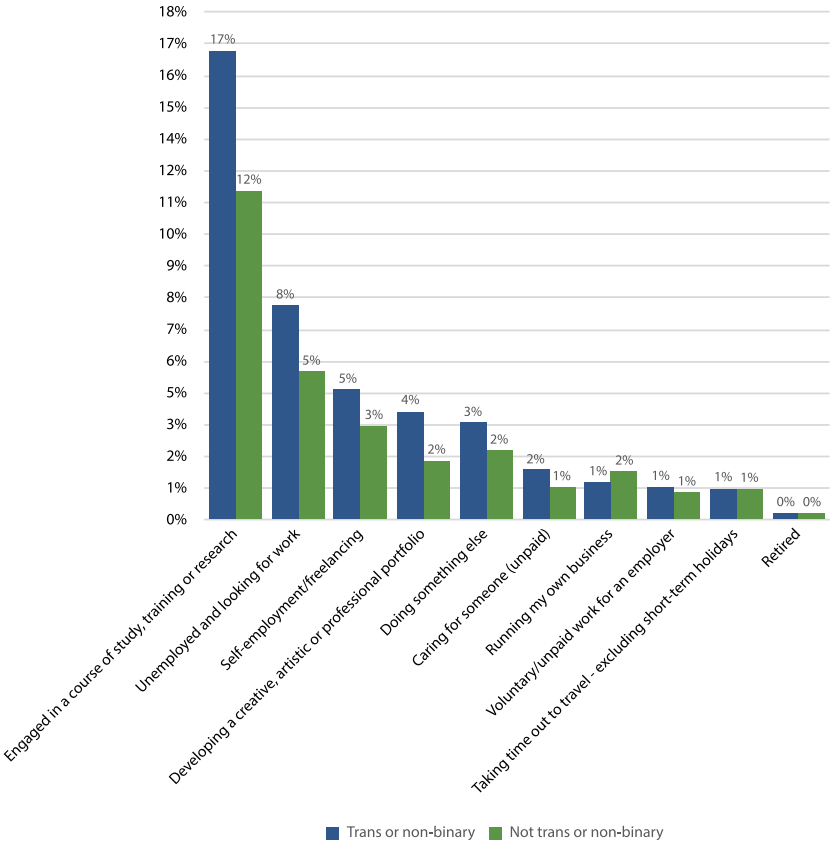
Most graduates enter paid employment after graduating, regardless of their trans or non-binary status. However, only 58 per cent of trans and non-binary graduates are in paid work as their self-described ‘main activity’ 15 months after graduation, compared with 70 per cent of graduates who are not trans or non-binary.<sup>84</sup>

What are trans and non-binary students doing instead? Figure 45 illustrates that about half the gap is explained by trans and non-binary students undertaking study, training or research at greater rates. Trans and non-binary students also have higher rates of unemployment and self-

iii Dormant students are those that have taken a break in their studies for whatever reason.

employment, they are more likely to be developing artistic portfolios, and they are more often caring for someone. Trans and non-binary graduates are less likely to be running their own business, compared to graduates who are not trans or non-binary.

Figure 45: main activity 15 months after graduation, by gender and trans identity. 'Paid work' is excluded (this is 58 per cent for trans or non-binary students and 70 per cent for students who are not trans or non-binary). Source: HESA<sup>85</sup>

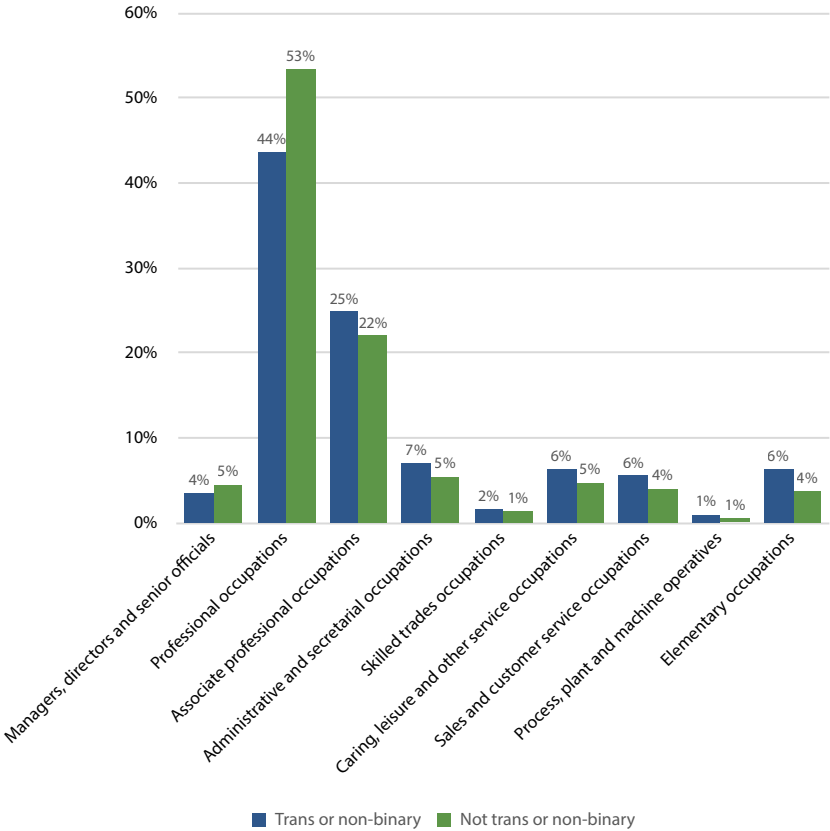


Diving deeper into the experiences of those in paid work, trans and non-binary graduates are underrepresented in managerial and professional



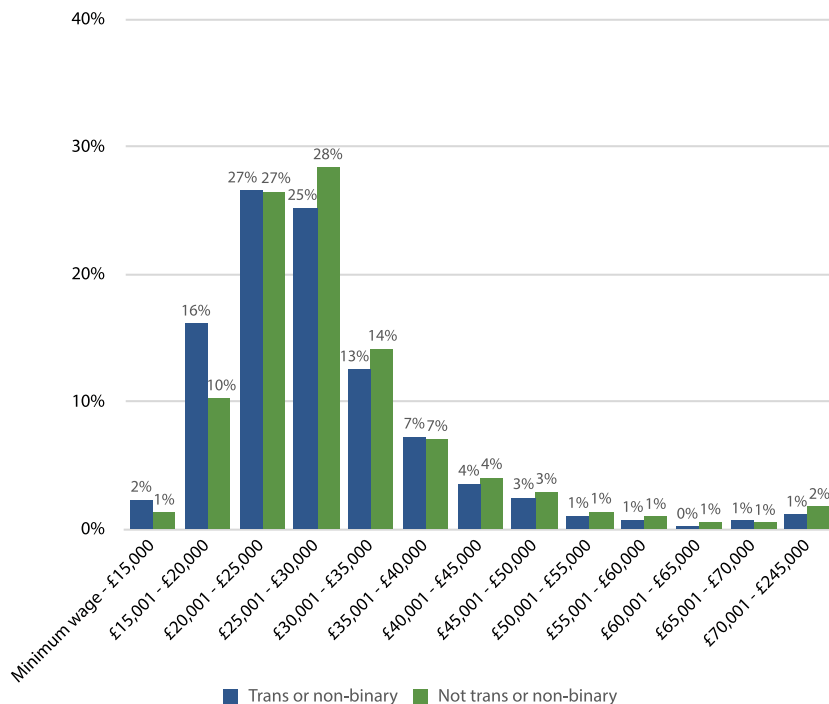
occupations and overrepresented in administrative and elementary occupations. Students who are not trans or non-binary are 10 percentage points more likely to be in a managerial or professional role 15 months after graduation than students who are trans or non-binary.

Figure 46: category of work by Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2020 and gender identity. Source: HESA<sup>86</sup>



Perhaps as a result of the above, trans and non-binary students also have lower salaries 15 months after graduating. Figure 47 shows the salary distributions for graduates by whether they are trans or non-binary.

Figure 47: salary distribution by gender identity. Source: HESA<sup>87</sup>



By assuming salaries are spread uniformly within each salary band (except for those on minimum wage, who we have presumed would be earning £15,000), it is possible to estimate the mean salary for both groups of graduates. We estimate that trans and non-binary graduates have a mean salary of £28,987, compared with a mean of £30,925. This represents an average annual loss for trans and non-binary students of £1,938 per person.

We also calculated similar estimates for mean salary by degree type to determine the size of the salary premium in each case. At £932 a year, the penalty is smallest for undergraduates, but rises to nearly £4,000 for postgraduate students. This may be related in part to subject choice; for example, we noted above that few trans and non-binary students study Law or Business. However, this fails to explain why trans and non-binary graduates enter less senior roles.

Figure 48: estimated mean annual salary 15 months after graduation, by gender identity, and 'Trans and non-binary penalty', calculated by subtracting mean salary for students who are not trans or non-binary from the mean salary for those who are trans or non-binary. Source: HESA<sup>88</sup>

	<b>Mean salary: Not trans or non-binary</b>	<b>Mean salary: Trans or non-binary</b>	<b>Trans and non-binary penalty</b>
First degree	£27,959	£27,027	£932
Other undergraduate	£28,446	£26,422	£2,023
Postgraduate	£37,623	£33,741	£3,882
<b>Overall</b>	<b>£30,925</b>	<b>£28,987</b>	<b>£1,938</b>

Trans and non-binary graduates entering the workplace are likely to face significant challenges, which may explain many of the findings above. A third of UK employers are 'less likely' to hire a trans person.<sup>89</sup> Further, the *British Attitudes Survey 34* (2017) reported that there was still a substantial minority of respondents who believe transgender people should 'probably' or 'definitely' not be employed as police officers (15 per cent of people) and primary school teachers (21 per cent).<sup>90</sup>

In practice, there is likely to be significant variation in employers' understanding of trans and non-binary people. Given the relatively small number of trans and non-binary people in the UK, many employers may not have needed to consider these issues.<sup>91</sup> Larger employers may be better prepared to support them as they have larger, better-funded human resources teams and are more likely to have worked with trans and non-binary people before.<sup>92</sup>

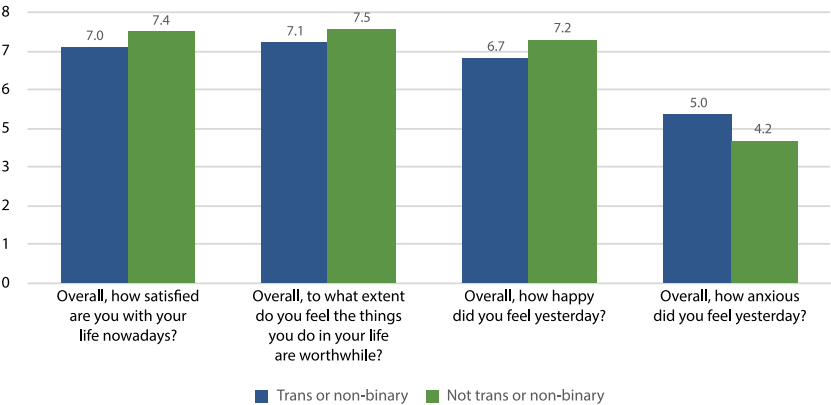
Nonetheless, this variation has serious consequences for trans and non-binary people, who may not receive the support they need and may also face a lack of understanding or prejudice from their colleagues. Trans and non-binary people may develop strategies to help them continue in the workplace, such as choosing careers in areas known to be more tolerant or working out how to conform to existing workplace norms.<sup>93</sup> But it can be challenging for trans and non-binary people to advocate for

themselves diplomatically without having a counterproductive effect on their relationship with an employer or their colleagues.<sup>94</sup> There is therefore an important role to play for higher education institutions to support trans and non-binary people to prepare for entering the workforce.

### Wellbeing

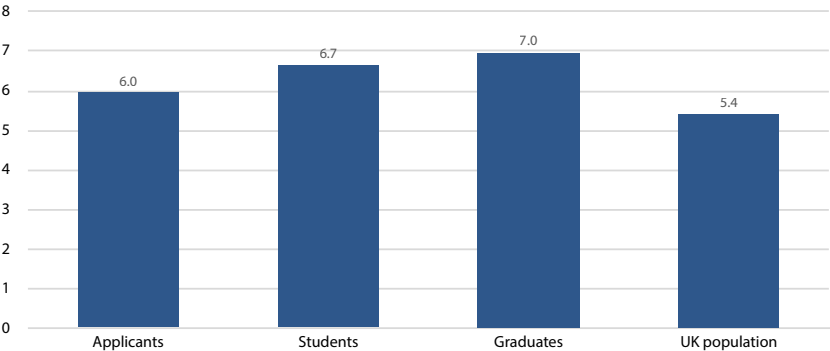
We can also compare the self-reported wellbeing of trans and non-binary students with those who are not trans and non-binary, using the same questions discussed above, which were posed to graduates 15 months after graduating. Once again, trans and non-binary graduates report substantially lower wellbeing on all indicators. The largest gap is in reported levels of anxiety.

*Figure 49: estimated mean score out of 10 for each statement 15 months after graduation, by gender identity. The scores are estimates derived by assuming scores are uniformly distributed within bands. Source: HESA<sup>95</sup>*



These data make it possible to track average wellbeing throughout students' experience of higher education. Figure 50 compares mean life satisfaction of trans applicants, students, graduates and compares it to the average life satisfaction for trans people in the whole UK population. One important finding is that trans students at all stages of their journey through higher education – applicant, student and graduate – report higher life satisfaction than the overall trans population.

Figure 50: mean score out of 10 to the question ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?’ for people describing themselves as trans (Applicants, Students, and the UK population) and for people saying their gender identity is different from the one they were assigned at birth (Graduates). The score for Graduates is an estimate derived from bands by assuming scores are uniformly distributed within bands. Source: HESA<sup>96</sup>



Given all of the above concerns raised about the challenges for trans and non-binary graduates, it may be surprising that the wellbeing of graduates is higher than other groups. In fact, this is consistent with the trend for all respondents and is not particular to trans and non-binary students. As shown in Figure 51, graduates of all gender identities typically report higher levels of life satisfaction than both students and applicants.

Figure 51: overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Mean life satisfaction out of 10 (left-hand axis); life satisfaction of students who are not trans or non-binary minus life satisfaction of students who are trans or non-binary (right-hand axis). Source: HESA<sup>97</sup>

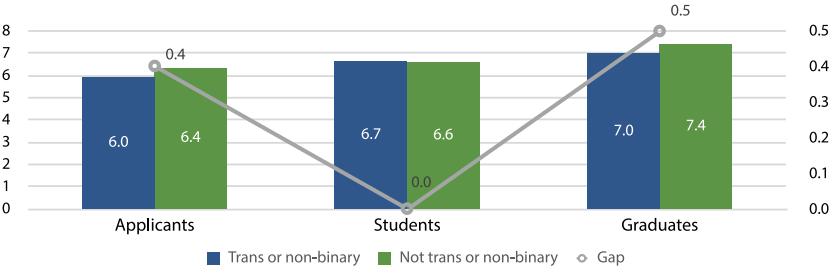
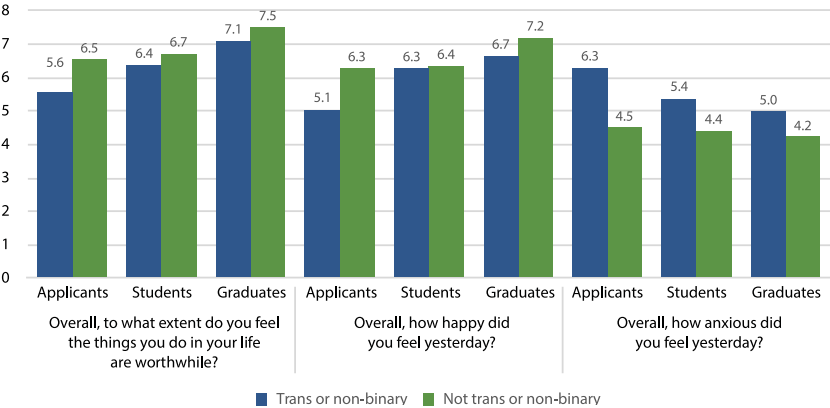


Figure 51 also demonstrates the size of the gap between the wellbeing of trans or non-binary students and their classmates (or eventually colleagues) who are not trans or non-binary. This demonstrates that there is a sizeable gap at the applicant stage which entirely disappears while students are at university but reappears once they leave.

This trend appears to be confirmed in responses to two other wellbeing questions, how worthwhile respondents' actions are and how happy they feel. Consider again the gap in wellbeing between those who describe themselves as trans or non-binary and those who do not. For both questions, the gap is smallest while the respondent is a student and largest while they are an applicant.

Figure 52: answers to three wellbeing questions, mean out of 10. Source: HESA<sup>98</sup>



However, self-reported levels of anxiety buck this trend. All groups report the highest anxiety while an applicant and the lowest while a graduate, and the gap between those who are and are not trans and non-binary also decreases throughout. At all stages, however, trans and non-binary respondents have considerably higher levels of anxiety than respondents who are not trans or non-binary.

### Summary

Trans students apply to university with lower grades than their non-trans counterparts (though non-binary students may not). They may face additional challenges within their studies, and yet, they gain degree

classifications on a similar level to their non-trans classmates. Despite achieving more highly than may be expected in higher education, trans and non-binary students are not seeing equitable graduate outcomes comparative to their classmates, particularly in relation to categories of work and salary levels. Further, it appears that some trans and non-binary students may take longer to complete their award, and may often gain a different award or leave without any qualification.

## **Part 5 – The trans and non-binary student voice**

In addition to the commentary added above, the students we interviewed shared with us further thoughts about their university experience.

### *Name-change processes*

Many students who transitioned at university wanted to change their name, pronouns, gender marker or all three of these fields on their university system. This was from their legal or birth name (sometimes referred to as a 'dead name') to their chosen name. This process was mentioned by almost all the students we spoke to, who called it difficult, humiliating, laborious and taxing. Higher education institutions often have multiple digital systems containing student information, and not all of these are linked. One university that mapped this out found that there were over 100 different systems in use across the institution. Students could often update their preferred name, with no requirement for documentation. However, the preferred name was not used as default across the institution, and only updated on some systems and not others.

Students described the difficulty and humiliation of being referred to using their birth name once they had transitioned. This often happened in their departments, where older class lists were being used, or in adjacent parts of the organisation that had their own systems, such as the gym. One student went as far as collating a list of the systems that had to be manually updated and handed this to the university, which then took action. The process of changing a student's name in a streamlined fashion, raised by almost all the students we spoke to, is one of the most difficult challenges for institutions to overcome. There is a particular need for sensitivity in name usage around cases where students are 'out' as trans at university but not at their home address.

It is important to note the difference between students requesting a name change on their student identification, or their preferred name on the student records system, compared with requesting a name change on legal documentation, such as a degree certificate. To be clear about these differences, institutions should provide clear 'name change' guidance to students. Many institutions already do this well, although the resulting name change process – particularly across multiple systems – can still be challenging.



### *Staff training*

Many students considered most staff they interacted with to be understanding and tolerant. However, students did advocate for training for all staff, particularly wellbeing and pastoral care staff, in understanding trans identities and the barriers trans and non-binary students may face. Given that transgender individuals have – on average – higher rates of autism, this intersects with the need to provide training on neurodiversity.<sup>99</sup> The need for training on neurodiversity was raised by the students we interviewed.

### *Use of pronouns*

Students who had been studying for several years felt that the sharing of pronouns, particularly by staff members, had increased over the past few years, and this was welcomed. For example, an academic leading a seminar may say:

*Hi, I'm Dr Clare Smith, and my pronouns are she and hers.*

Students described 'reading a room' to see if they would be able and safe to share their pronouns. This was a process they might experience in every seminar, lab or group work session. When staff members shared or welcomed the sharing of pronouns, this made the educational environment more inclusive for trans and non-binary students. Students also welcomed the inclusion of pronouns on email signatures, particularly by staff.

### *Gender neutral toilets*

Students felt anxiety about having access to toilets they felt comfortable to use. If only female-gendered or male-gendered toilets were available, students felt that they were at risk of being challenged about their perceived gender within these gendered spaces. Some students felt as though they may be challenged in both female-gendered and male-gendered toilets. Being unsure as to whether they could access a toilet safely meant some students felt unable to participate in activities both at and outside of university.

In addition, the *Non-binary genders in Higher Education* report, a survey of 367 non-binary staff and students, found that 51 per cent of participants said that their gender felt frequently erased. The lack of inclusive

administrative processes and the unavailability of gender-neutral toilets played a prominent part in the participants' feelings of erasure.<sup>100</sup>

There are strongly held views over maintaining female-only spaces for modesty, cultural and religious reasons, and this is one of the most contentious areas of trans inclusion. However, the students we spoke to did not call for all toilets to be made gender-neutral. Instead, they recommended that some gender-neutral toilets be available across campus. Students advocated for self-contained, private toilets. That is, a fully enclosed toilet room with a sink, for individual use.

In May 2024, the Government announced new requirements regarding the provision of toilets, including that:

*...new non-domestic buildings, including restaurants, shopping centres, offices and public toilets will be required to provide separate single-sex toilets for women and men. Self-contained, universal toilets may be provided in addition, where space allows, or instead of single-sex toilets where there isn't enough space.*

*In addition to single-sex toilets becoming the default for new non-domestic buildings and places undertaking major refurbishment, the policy encourages provision of self-contained universal toilets, which are a fully enclosed toilet room with a washbasin and hand-drying facilities for individual use.<sup>101</sup>*

These new requirements will have an impact on estate planning for higher education institutions (in England), although these will apply only to new buildings.

Students also requested that period products be made freely available and that these be included in gender-neutral toilets, along with sanitary bins, so students can access them without fear of being challenged. This was particularly important to trans male students and some non-binary students. Ensuring that gender-neutral toilets are adequately signposted and having a map showing the gender-neutral toilets on campus was welcomed.

### *Curriculum*

Students were keen to see trans academics represented in their studies, as well as trans history. They felt that in some cases, trans history was only

represented with negative connotations, such as the tragedy of the AIDS crisis and the impact of this on the LGBTQ+ community. They would like to see more about the everyday work and stories of trans people, as well as curricula that celebrate the stories of trans people. The students positively singled out academics who already taught a broad curriculum, including trans-inclusive curricula.

### *Intersectionality*

The students that we spoke to were all members of their LGBTQ+ society and tended to be involved in the LGBTQ+ community. Many spoke about having been dealt 'a good hand of cards' compared to other students they knew. This included having access to private healthcare or having supportive families. This was perhaps part of the reason they felt able to take part in this report. They were keen to point out that many of their trans and non-binary friends had more difficulties, including trans students with disabilities, or trans students of colour, who face multiple forms of discrimination.

## **Part 6 – Creating an inclusive trans- and non-binary environment, within the wider equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) landscape**

This report considers the trans and non-binary experience in higher education and seeks to make recommendations to make this experience more equitable. However, writing recommendations, and acting upon them, is not always straightforward. Higher education institutions need to balance the protections for all protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act 2010. This includes the protected characteristics of sex, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, and religion or belief, among others. For example, as well as their duties towards trans and non-binary students and staff, higher education institutions also have duties towards students and staff who hold gender-critical views.

For institutions, aligning policies, training, facilities and approaches that are inclusive of all the members of a university community can be very challenging.

### *Staff*

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) provide resources and guidance on how to support transgender and non-binary people in the workplace, as part of a broader equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policy.

The CIPD state that:

*Balancing the differing needs, beliefs and views within an organisation around transgender and non-binary EDI can sometimes cause conflict in organisations, particularly in relation to the use of facilities and toilets.*

The CIPD also reference recent cases which make clear that people with gender-critical beliefs can express these views without necessarily being seen to discriminate against transgender and non-binary people.<sup>102</sup>

Gender-critical beliefs include the beliefs that ‘sex is biological and immutable, people cannot change their sex and sex is distinct from gender-identity’.<sup>103</sup>

There is a particular focus on the right to hold gender-critical beliefs, and how this interacts with developing trans-inclusive environments on

campus. Given the timeliness of discussions around employment and gender-critical beliefs, we felt it helpful to outline this in more detail.

This section of the report refers to two different processes: Employment Tribunals and Employment Appeal Tribunals (EATs). It is important to note that Employment Tribunals do not set a binding precedent. However, a decision of the EAT is binding upon Employment Tribunals.

There have been a number of Employment Appeal Tribunals held since 2021 related to gender-critical beliefs, and these provide important information for institutions. These cases are outlined in detail by Patrick Briône in House of Commons Library documents.<sup>104</sup>

The Equality Act protects religion and similar philosophical beliefs. In a 2009 test case, *Grainger plc Vs Nicholson*, Grainger identified what was needed for a belief to be a similar philosophical belief. Subsequent cases, including that of *Maya Forstater*, have held that gender-critical beliefs are capable of being a similar philosophical belief, where these meet the Grainger criteria. However, in these cases, the judgements note that while gender-critical beliefs can be protected, this is distinct from how those beliefs manifest. For example, in the *Maya Forstater* case, which found that Forstater's beliefs 'must be tolerated in a pluralist society' it also stated that:

*This does not mean that those with gender-critical beliefs can 'misgender' trans persons with impunity.*

The EAT went on to explain that harassing or discriminating against trans people in the workplace is also prohibited under the Equality Act.

Therefore, employers need to ensure that colleagues who hold gender-critical beliefs are not harassed or discriminated against because of their beliefs. They must also ensure that trans and non-binary members of their community are not harassed or discriminated against because of their trans and non-binary status. This can be a very difficult line to walk.

There has been a further, more recent case, this time within higher education. This case was an Employment Tribunal, not an Employment Appeal Tribunal – and it is worth noting again that Employment Tribunals do not set binding precedents. The following focus on this case is not intended to raise it above its legal value, but rather to highlight the complexities involved in the decision-making process.

Professor Joanna Phoenix was employed at the Open University until her resignation on 2 December 2021. The following information is taken from the Employment Tribunal's reserved judgement.<sup>105</sup>

Professor Phoenix brought her claim on the basis that the Open University had failed to support and protect her from discrimination and harassment, and that she was constructively dismissed as a result.

The tribunal determined that several complaints of harassment and direct discrimination, as well as complaints of constructive unfair dismissal, wrongful dismissal and post-employment victimisation brought by Professor Phoenix were well founded. (Three complaints of harassment and direct discrimination were not well founded. A complaint of post-employment discrimination was not well founded. A claim of indirect discrimination was withdrawn and a complaint of direct discrimination and harassment was out of time and dismissed.)

The 156-page tribunal judgement contains much nuance and detail that cannot be covered fully in this report. For colleagues working in the areas of equality, diversity, inclusion and free speech, it is worth reading the judgement. It demonstrates the complexities involved in cases such as this, and the difficulties institutions will face when trying to meet their duties under both equalities and free speech legislation.

The report shows the complexity involved in whether harassment or discrimination has taken place. However, the tribunal did focus on particular types of behaviour which did constitute harassment or discrimination. These included:

- the public nature of some of the actions – including an open letter, and a series of tweets. In particular, when the public nature of this action was not perceived to be necessary to achieve the stated motivation, that was to lobby to the Open University to close down a gender-critical research network; and
- name calling, including the terms 'TERF' (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) and 'transphobic'.

The tribunal also draws a distinction between communications directed to an individual, based on their protected beliefs, and communications directed to the world at large. In this particular instance, communications

directed to the world at large were considered to be 'a legitimate exercise in freedom of speech and did not amount to harassment'.

Importantly, the tribunal found that the Open University failed to protect Phoenix from being harassed or discriminated against because of her gender-critical beliefs.

The Tribunal also considered the distinction between Phoenix having a belief and the manifestation of that belief 'to be pertinent'.

It appears, from the cases outlined above, that gender-critical beliefs are protected under the Equality Act – provided they meet the Grainger criteria for whether a belief qualifies as a philosophical belief – and that institutions must act to ensure that colleagues are protected from harassment and discrimination because of their beliefs.

It also appears that how those beliefs are manifested cannot themselves breach the thresholds of harassment or discrimination towards others.

The tricky role that institutions find themselves in is training their staff and students on the very detailed nuances that define the point at which disagreement becomes harassment or discrimination, whilst also promoting free speech. Encouraging enthusiastic, contentious and at times offensive debate is difficult when the nature or manner in which this takes place may determine whether and how this becomes unlawful.

## Part 7 – Conclusion and recommendations

Higher education can be challenging for many students, but this report suggests there are hardships which trans and non-binary students face uniquely or with greater intensity than other students. Trans and non-binary students may need more support from their institution so they can have the fantastic experience all students deserve to receive.

In each recommendation, we note that support for trans and non-binary students should always be intersectional. The data in this report indicate that trans and non-binary students are more likely than the average student to be care-experienced, have a disability, have a mental health condition, and be estranged from family. These characteristics may come with additional challenges which institutions should account for.

These recommendations are not absolute – in some cases, there may be good reasons not to adopt them – but we believe that each would increase the quality of trans and non-binary students' experience of higher education.

### *Data collection*

As discussed in the introduction, the sector continues to collect data on sex and gender identity in a variety of ways. In some cases, this means complete data are not collected. In other cases, the differences between the questions asked inhibit effective analysis and direct comparison. Broadly in line with guidance from Advance HE, **we recommend data be collected through the following three questions and sets of responses:**

1. What is your sex?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Prefer not to say.

Sex is a protected characteristic under the 2010 Equality Act, so holding data on sex is important for institutions to be able to meet their duties under this act. It is useful to include an explanatory note to indicate that the question on sex will be followed by questions on gender identity and trans status.



2. How would you describe your gender identity?

- a. Man
- b. Woman
- c. Non-binary
- d. In another way (specify, if you wish)
- e. Prefer not to say.

**HESA does not currently ask institutions to report their students' gender identity: we recommend it does so, using this question.** This would also ensure that students have the opportunity to share their gender identity with their institution – should they wish to do so. The findings in this report suggest that sex and gender intersect with a student's experience of higher education in different ways, and therefore, both are important for institutions to collect to gain a better understanding of their student population.

Finally, we note in the Annex that there are likely to have been issues with the question in the 2021 Census and therefore consider it best to ask respondents whether they are trans directly.

3. Are you trans or do you have a trans history?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to say.<sup>106</sup>

#### *Financial support*

**Institutions should review their hardship fund and bursary criteria to ensure that trans students are not excluded from financial support routes** due to their savings for surgery, expenditure on hormone treatment or other expenses. Institutions should continue to ensure support is available for students who are estranged from their families. Training should be given to financial support advisors to understand challenges faced by trans and non-binary students and inclusive processes and practices communicated to students.

By making this recommendation, we do not mean to say that savings for

this surgery are more important than savings for other kinds of surgery. We focus primarily on trans and non-binary students here because they are the primary subject of this report. Given current waiting times for assessments and medical procedures through the NHS, savings for private healthcare, which may be undertaken by many different students for a range of reasons, may be something that institutions could consider excluding from hardship fund assessment processes.

### *Academic support*

Trans students particularly value face-to-face interaction with academic staff and frequently cite the availability or lack of interaction as playing a decisive role in their overall experience of higher education. Ensuring there are opportunities for in-person interaction, through teaching and support, is ideal. This will be even more important in blended learning models. For distance-learning providers, ensuring that interpersonal interactions are available to students would be helpful. Given that trans and non-binary students are more likely to state that they have a disability, particular consideration should be given to the accessibility of these interactions.

Possibly due to constraints on their time and finances, trans and non-binary students have poorer attendance and spend less time on independent work. **Institutions should have due regard to these challenges and be particularly vigilant when looking for signs a student is struggling,** such as poor attendance or frequently requesting extensions.

Additionally, we recommend that courses such as Business which attract very few trans and non-binary students should consider why this is so. Course leaders should take initial steps to support trans and non-binary students to access and succeed in such courses where they wish to do so.

### *Supporting careers and personal development*

This report shows that trans and non-binary students feel significantly less confident about entering employment when they arrive in higher education and progress into professional- and managerial-level jobs at lower rates. The primary responsibility for creating an inclusive environment falls on employers, but higher education institutions may also be able to play a supporting role.

**We recommend that particular attention be given to the career advice that institutions give to trans and non-binary students.** Careers teams should be aware of the particular challenges faced by this group of students. Connecting trans and non-binary students with alumni or mentors in a similar industry who have already faced these challenges may help to prepare students for work. LGBTQ+ societies may be able to help facilitate this.

### *Administration*

We recommend that institutions audit their administrative processes for title, name and gender marker changes on university systems. Where possible, this process should be straightforward for the student, and the changes made or requested should flow throughout the institution. We recognise that this can be a labour- and resource-intensive process to get right. There are particular circumstances where additional information or processes are needed, such as a name change for a degree certification process. These circumstances should be clearly explained to students to manage expectations. Careful consideration will be needed for managing name changes for students who are 'out' at university, but not at home.

### *Wellbeing*

While trans and non-binary people consider themselves comparatively happier and more satisfied with their lives when in higher education as compared with other stages in their lives, their wellbeing often remains lower than for other student groups and sometimes significantly so.

**We recommend that institutions have a named contact or contacts for issues related to gender identity.** This should be a person with a good understanding of the challenges faced by trans and non-binary students and who can handle these issues sensitively. The contact(s) should be reachable by students and staff, with relevant information found in one place, such as an email address or place on a university website, and this should be communicated to students. This approach should be familiar to institutions, who may already have a named contact for other groups such as care-experienced students and serves as a highly visible way of supporting trans and non-binary students.<sup>107</sup>

We recommend that training is delivered for academic and support staff about the experience of being trans or non-binary and how students can be supported, including good practice around the use of language, pronouns and names.<sup>108</sup> More in-depth training should be available for support staff to ensure they understand the challenges faced by trans and non-binary students.

Social wellbeing emerges as being particularly important. Trans and non-binary students strongly value feeling part of a community and having close relationships with others but are often unable to do so.

**We recommend institutions adopt strategies targeted at improving the social wellbeing of trans and non-binary students.** This may include:

- initiatives to support student societies representing trans and non-binary students or LGBTQ+ students;
- initiatives fostering understanding and tolerance between trans and non-binary students and students who are not trans or non-binary;
- initiatives to support inclusion of trans and non-binary students in societies, clubs and social networks; and
- the curation of spaces reserved or designed primarily for trans and non-binary students or LGBTQ+ students. This may include the offer of LGBTQ+ flats, although we also recognise the arguments against these.

Many have already implemented initiatives such as these and this is welcome. Evaluating these initiatives for impact is a helpful further step.

Institutions should ensure that gender-neutral toilets are available on campus. Aligning with both the calls from the students we interviewed, and the Government's consultation on the provision of public toilets, these should be provided – where possible – in addition to female or male toilets. Ideally, gender-neutral toilets should be single cubicle and self-contained, that is a toilet and a sink within a room, without a shared communal space. Due to the historic under-provision of public toilets for women, if toilets need to be converted to gender-neutral toilets, these conversions should happen from male toilets, where possible and practical.<sup>109</sup> Gender-neutral toilets should contain sanitary bins, and for institutions which offer free period products, these should be available in gender-neutral toilets also. A

map outlining the provision of gender-neutral toilets on campus would be welcome.

### *Student safety*

The consistent and fair application of existing safety policies is essential. Institutions should act decisively against members of their institution who harass or discriminate against trans and non-binary students (or staff). Noting that trans and non-binary students appear to be at greater risk of harm than other students, **we recommend that staff who investigate student complaints have a good understanding of the challenges faced by trans and non-binary students and be well-equipped to support them through the complaints process.**

Equally, institutions should act decisively against members of their institution who harass or discriminate against students (or staff) who hold gender-critical beliefs. **We recommend that staff who investigate student complaints have a good understanding of the challenges faced by gender-critical staff and students and be well-equipped to support them through the complaints process.**

### *Free speech*

Institutions should be keenly aware of their responsibilities to uphold freedom of speech where it is protected by law. Balancing free speech and inclusivity will be a significant challenge in the coming years.<sup>110</sup> Where speech is distressing, offensive or disrespectful but not illegal, it is likely to be protected and universities may face legal action if they do not take sufficient steps to ensure it can be spoken. But so that the exchange of ideas can be as positive an experience for all students as possible, **we recommend that universities take steps to educate students and staff on engaging in informed debate which is, as much as possible, respectful; to engage a wide variety of perspectives; and to empower all groups of students to put forward their views.** We accept that this is a challenging, and evolving, aspect of the work of universities.

The line where robust discussion and disagreement crosses into harassment or discrimination can be complex and nuanced. Institutions will be required to understand this level of detail, explain this to both staff and students and use this understanding to adjudicate in staff and student

misconduct cases. This will be challenging. Draft guidance published by the Office for Students outlines an example where an institution stating that ‘misgendering is never acceptable’ is very likely to restrict freedom of speech within the law, depending on the facts of the case. The example given is a student referring to a trans woman as ‘he’ in a criminology essay because the student considers this necessary for clarity.<sup>111</sup>

It would be helpful for the final guidance to also include an example where misgendering would not be likely to be within lawful speech. Where institutions are balancing competing duties (in this case, free speech versus harassment) it would be useful to have examples looking at both sides of the coin. Detailed guidance will allow universities to train staff and students accordingly, prevent and respond to harassment of trans and non-binary students, manage expectations, promote free speech and ensure the right to express gender-critical beliefs can be upheld.

#### *Further guidance*

Advance HE’s 2016 guidance document *Trans staff and students in HE and colleges: improving experiences* covers several areas beyond the scope of this report. These include:

- An overview of relevant legislation.
- Suggested policies for supporting trans inclusion.
- Recommendations for building a trans-inclusive university culture.
- Guidance on supporting trans and non-binary people through medical processes.<sup>112</sup>

The *Non-binary genders in higher education: survey findings, report and recommendations* from the University of Westminster provides information and guidance on the non-binary experience in higher education.<sup>113</sup>

TransEDU provide resources and information for supporting trans, non-binary & gender diverse applicants, students and staff in further and higher education.<sup>114</sup>

The CIPD have produced guidance on transgender and non-binary inclusion within the wider EDI context.<sup>115</sup>

## Annex – Data used in this report

**2021 Census.**<sup>116</sup> For the first time, the 2021 Census in England and Wales asked those aged 16 or over ‘Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?’. Overall, 45.7 million people, 94 per cent of the UK population aged 16 or over, answered the question, with 45.4 million (93.5 per cent) answering ‘yes’ and 262,000 (0.05 per cent) answering ‘no’. Those answering ‘no’ were further invited to write in their gender identity, with 48,000 (0.1 per cent) identifying as a trans man, 48,000 (0.1 per cent) as a trans woman, 30,000 (0.06 per cent) identifying as non-binary and 18,000 (0.04 per cent) having a different gender identity. A further 118,000 (0.24 per cent) answered ‘no’ but did not write in a gender identity.

However, various concerns have been raised that the question was not answered accurately. On the one hand, some have suggested the question is likely to have been misunderstood by respondents, particularly with those who are not native English speakers, or otherwise answered wrongly, leading to many people who are not trans or non-binary to falsely indicate they are and causing the figure to overestimate the number of trans and non-binary people.<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, 2.9 million people did not answer the (optional) question; additionally, the Census is filled in by one person in each household and trans and non-binary people may not be ‘out’ (that is, open about the fact that they are trans or non-binary) to the person who filled out the survey, which might have caused this figure to be an underestimate.

**Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data.**<sup>118</sup> This includes two questions asked to students. The first is ‘Is your gender identity the same as the gender you were originally assigned at birth?’ (‘Yes’, ‘No’ or ‘Prefer not to say’). This question was added in 2012 but has only been compulsory for higher education institutions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales from 2018/19. It remains optional for Scotland. Those answering ‘No’ should include all trans and non-binary students and those with another gender identity, but it does not allow for distinguishing trans, non-binary and other identities. HESA also asks students ‘What is your sex?’ (‘Male’, ‘Female’, ‘Other’), referring to legal sex, meaning either the sex on a student’s birth certificate or on a Gender Reassignment certificate. The ‘Other’ option is expected to only be used for a third sex legally recognised by another country.<sup>119</sup>

We used two HESA datasets for this report:

- Data on continuation and grade classification, which included 2,935,267 students studying in 2020/21.
- Data regarding graduate outcomes, including salary, main activity, previous study, Occupational Classification, grade classification, qualification, and wellbeing indicators, which included 356,950 students who graduated in 2020/21.

**National LGBT Survey (2018)** published by the Government Equalities Office.<sup>120</sup> The survey had over 108,000 responses from LGBT people across the UK. Respondents were asked for their gender identity, with options including 'a woman or girl', 'a man or boy', 'a trans woman or trans girl', 'a trans man or trans boy', and 'Non-binary, Genderqueer, Agender or Gender fluid'. However, it is likely that those respondents in higher education have mostly left; concerns have also been raised about the representativeness of the survey, given a large proportion of those surveyed are younger.<sup>121</sup>

**Student Academic Experience Survey 2023 (SAES).**<sup>122</sup> This annual survey is published by HEPI and Advance HE. We use the 2023 version for this report, which had 10,163 respondents. Previously, the SAES had only a question on gender with the options 'Male' and 'Female'. A question on trans identity and history was added in 2021. In 2022, the question on gender was updated to include other gender identities and an additional question was asked on sex. The 2023 questions were as follows:

- 'What is your sex?' ('Male', 'Female', 'Prefer not to say').
- 'How would you describe your gender identity?' ('Male', 'Female', 'Non-binary', 'In another way' and 'Prefer not to say').
- 'Are you trans or do you have a trans history?' ('Yes', 'No', 'I don't know' and 'Prefer not to say').

Before weighting, 195 respondents (2 per cent) described themselves as non-binary and 19 (0.2 per cent) described themselves in another way, giving a total of 214. Of these students, 160 answered the question on trans identity, with 90 (56 per cent of those who responded) saying they are trans or have a trans history and 70 (44 per cent) saying they are not trans and do not have a trans history. A further 443 respondents (4 per cent



of all respondents) said they were trans or had a trans history, of which a majority (56 per cent) identify as male, 12 per cent identify as female, 29 per cent as non-binary and 2 per cent in another way.

**Unite Students Applicant Index 2023.**<sup>123</sup> The Index surveyed 2,141 applicants hoping to start an undergraduate degree in the 2023-24 academic year. Research for the report was carried out in May 2023. The Index includes two questions about gender identity:

- ‘Do you consider yourself to be trans?’. Overall 73 students answered ‘yes’ and these students are classed as trans in the *Applicant Index* and this report. Of these students, 33 (42 per cent) described themselves as male, 13 (16 per cent) as female, and 32 (40 per cent) as non-binary.
- A question asking for students’ gender (‘Male’, ‘Female’ and ‘Other’). Overall, 77 students chose ‘Other’. We use the broad label ‘non-binary’ to refer to these students, though some may refer to themselves with other labels. The two questions are not mutually exclusive, so some people may be in both categories.

**What is the experience of LGBT+ students in education? (2021)** published by the admissions service UCAS in collaboration with the charity Stonewall.<sup>124</sup> The report analyses the data provided by those who applied to higher education through UCAS in 2020 and identified as LGBT+ in their application. Potential applicants are asked: ‘Do you identify as transgender?’ when they apply, with 2,395 respondents answering ‘Yes’. By comparison, 40,755 students described themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or other and were grouped into the LGB category (which we have referred to as LGB+). However, applicants were only given the option to describe themselves as ‘non-binary’ for the first time for entry in 2024, and data on these applicants are not yet available, so UCAS data cannot yet be used to explore the experiences of non-binary students. Confidence intervals are also not specified.

### *Overlap between trans and LGB+ categories*

Figure 5 explores the demographic traits of transgender and LGB+ applicants. Some students will be in both groups, but the UCAS survey from which the data are drawn does not indicate the size of the overlap. We might estimate the size of the overlap by drawing on other data. Ten

per cent of LGB+ students in the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) say they are trans or have a trans history, and 13 per cent of LGBTQ+ students in the Applicant Index identify as trans. Conversely, in the SAES, 60 per cent of trans students say they are LGB+, while in the Applicant Index, 80 per cent of trans students say they are LGBTQ+.

The Applicant Index is limited for this purpose, as it uses LGBTQ+ rather than LGB+ for a discussion of sexuality. However, the trend is clear. Trans students make up a relatively small proportion of LGB+ students, but LGB+ students make up a significant proportion, and likely a majority, of trans students. The overlap is therefore likely to have a large impact on the result for trans students.

### *Transitioning at university age*

On page 36, we estimated that just under two-fifths (38.9 per cent) of trans people will be of university age (18-21) during some or all of their transition. This calculation was made based on two variables provided in the National LGBT Survey, the age that trans people who transition begin their transition and the time taken to transition, which are presented as bands. We made the following four assumptions:

1. People are uniformly distributed within the two given bands.
2. The two variables are independent; that is, the time taken to complete a transition is unaffected by the age at which the person began their transition.
3. Very few people take more than 15 years to fully transition.
4. Very few begin to transition before age 9.

We recognise there will be some exceptions to assumptions (3) and (4). We used age 9 because this is the earliest age that the UK National Health Service (NHS) suggests parents seek support for a child experiencing gender dysphoria.<sup>125</sup> Data from the 'non-binary genders in higher education' report further suggest only 3 per cent of non-binary people in higher education considered themselves to be non-binary before the age of 11.<sup>126</sup>

Nonetheless, our figures are estimates and more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of transitioning.

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**Authored by Josh Freeman and Rose Stephenson, this pivotal report explores the experiences of trans and non-binary students across UK higher education. It compiles new and existing data, alongside interviews with students and academics, to outline the journey from application, through study, to post-graduation. It highlights the unique combination of challenges trans and non-binary students face, including lower academic readiness, financial difficulties, mental health issues and challenges in gaining employment. Key recommendations are made for improving inclusion and support, making this report an essential resource for educational institutions committed to enhancing diversity and equity.**



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