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Moving academia beyond the gender binary

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Transgender and gender diverse (T&GD) people have an increasing profile in the public consciousness. In tertiary education it has become apparent that to give all students an equal chance to succeed in their studies, education providers must make changes to include T&GD students and staff. Over the past several years the University of Auckland has undertaken many initiatives in collaboration with a student group “Trans on Campus” to make academia more inclusive of T&GD people. The initiatives undertaken include formally recognizing T&GD identities as well as providing procedures and guidelines to ensure their safety. This paper identifies important steps that can be taken to make the academic environment welcoming for T&GD students and staff, as well as presenting examples where these steps have been successful.

Keywords: equity, inclusion, transgender and gender diverse (T&GD) people

Introduction

Transgender and gender diverse (T&GD) people have an increasing profile in both society and academia. However, they face distinct obstacles that many in the rest of society do not, because of the culturally normative assumptions that everyone’s sex and gender are aligned and that everyone fits into the female and male gender binary. In the tertiary education environment these obstacles can cause T&GD people to experience minority stress which has been shown to affect their performance (Powell, 2016). Making academia more inclusive of T&GD people is important for achievement and successful careers, and many of the changes also improve the environment for all in academia.

I am an Associate Professor studying astrophysics in the Department of Physics at the University of Auckland and I am transgender. My understanding of my identity has grown with time and I am non-binary, which means I don’t neatly fit into the male/female gender binary. Since 2015 I have become increasingly open regarding being transgender and increasingly aware of the problems encountered by T&GD people at all levels of academia. This awareness has been gained by personal interaction and experience with T&GD students and staff, both in person and on social media, particularly Twitter.

In this article I provide an overview of the issues and obstacles that exist within academia for T&GD staff and students, and illustrate these through current literature, my own experience and the steps taken by New Zealand universities, especially the University of Auckland, to make academia inclusive of T&GD people.

Most of the population never give their gender a second thought; they are happy to align gender with the sex they were assigned at birth, and are described as being cisgender (McIntyre, 2018). Yet 1.2 to 3.7% (Clark et al., 2014) of the population ask this question of themselves, sometimes multiple times every day. Their gender either does not simply align with the sex they were

assigned at birth or fit into the male and female gender binary. Furthermore, gender identity and expression are not always directly linked to each other. When someone takes steps to align their gender expression, and sometimes their sex, with their gender identity they are referred to as transitioning.

Social expectations can feel to be savagely demanding of those who don't fit them. In all cases, a person whose sex, gender identity and expression are not aligned are likely to face obstacles in their daily lives that most others do not experience. These include not being called by their correct pronouns (e.g. he/she/they), not being able to use a public bathroom without harassment, inability to compete in sports or experiencing harassment while obtaining medical care and support (Human Rights Commission, 2008; Veale et al., 2019). Concerningly, research shows that 20 to 50% of transgender and gender diverse people attempt suicide (Haas et al., 2014). Rates of self-harm are also high among this group (Clark et al., 2014; Miller & Grollman, 2015). However, those who are supported through successful transition have a greatly improved quality of life, similar to that of the general population (Durwood, McLaughlin & Olson, 2017; Gomez-Gil et al., 2012; Gorin-Lazard, 2012).

Research into how to include T&GD students in academia is increasing. Studies range from explaining and covering some basic steps towards inclusion (Spade, 2011) to more detailed studies of the obstacles T&GD students encounter in tertiary education (Valentine, Wood & Plummer, 2009; Powell, 2016). These provide some idea of desirable changes to academia, and there are growing resources for how to make more inclusive classrooms (e.g. InsideOUT, 2016; University of Birmingham, 2017). They start with the simple acts of avoiding abusive and discriminatory language, allowing people to identify within university systems beyond binary gender options and providing more all-gender toilets on campus.

The status of research about LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) people in higher education was recently summarized by Renn (2010). A key point she made was that T&GD students are included by some researchers into LGBT without actively acknowledging the differences between T and LGB. Sexual orientation, which gender you are attracted to, is disconnected and very different to gender identity, what gender best represents you. The issues that affect T&GD students can be overlooked and lost under the LGBT banner with the assumption that all problems these groups experience are similar and that it is enough to "queer" the academy. In the "queering the academy" special issue in Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), for example, T&GD people were not discussed separately, ignoring much of the discussion from Renn (2010) about how important the distinction is. T&GD people often experience practical problems and discrimination that LGB people do not. For example, T&GD people often encounter harassment when using toilets and they can be outed when someone asked to see their identity documents. Thus, while it is beneficial to combine these groups, we should not forget their separate specific needs.

In this article, I clarify terms and facts concerning T&GD people. I then outline the obstacles that limit the inclusion of T&GD students and staff, and detail examples of good practice for academic institutions to remove these obstacles, highlighting the importance of both small groups of active people and wider institutional action.

Mythbusting transgender and gender diverse people

While the publicity of T&GD issues might make it appear that we're being accepted in (western industrialised democratic) society – and increasingly, we are – there is still unacceptable

harassment directed towards T&GD people. Transphobia (less commonly known as transprejudice) and anti-trans bias is very real, and examples include being ostracised by friends and family, refusal of service in restaurants and difficulty in finding employment (Human Rights Commission, 2008; Veale et al., 2019). Many transphobic actions are based on lack of knowledge or misunderstanding. It is thus vital to define and clarify the terms and facts concerning T&GD people.

It is important to understand that sex and gender are quite different. At birth, your sex is determined by a doctor looking at your body and categorising your biological reproductive ability as male, female or intersex. Somewhere between 0.1% and 1.7% of births don't fit the typical male or female definition and are intersex (Blackless et al., 2000). The natural variation in sexual development is an active area of research, and we are only beginning to understand how bodies develop differently (e.g. Ainsworth, 2015; Fausto-Sterling, 2015) and the underlying genetic factors.

Separate to a person's sex is that person's gender. This is the social construct by which we categorise people as a "man" or a "woman". In short, sex is about your body; gender is about your identity, how you present and how you wish to be seen. It is becoming clear that gender arises from both 'nature' and 'nurture' working together (e.g. Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2012). Here it becomes useful to separate out gender identity and gender expression, as these are independent. Each of these vary significantly between people. They can also vary with time for one person. For most people their sex, gender identity and expression align, with man to male to masculine appearance or woman to female to feminine appearance: such a person is a gender-conforming cisgender individual. When sex and gender identity are unaligned the person is transgender. However, gender expression does not have to align to the persons gender identity, and a person can be gender nonconforming.

For some people, gender does not align to the female and male binary. It is possible to identify with a mix of genders or with an entirely different gender. There are multiple cultures (e.g. Māori, Samoan, Tongan, North American, Mexican, Indian and older European cultures) where a third gender (or more) is recognised and celebrated; the idea of gender being more than just male or female has been around for millennia (Nanda, 1999). Even though T&GD people have been known for a very long time, they have at times been ignored, marginalised or victimised by the dominant culture. Today terms such as gender, androgynous, gender diverse, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, genderfluid, non-binary and enby have evolved.

For T&GD people, being able to live in their gender identity and to access appropriate medical treatments if desired leads to vastly improved health outcomes and quality of life (Durwood, McLaughlin & Olson, 2017; Gomez-Gil et al., 2012; Gorin-Lazard, 2012). It is inadvisable to force those who struggle with their assigned gender daily to just "accept it". For some T&GD people, medical transition is very important. This may include surgery to align their body with their gender identity. A more common step is for trans people to take hormones, which significantly influence secondary sex characteristics in bodies. By contrast some people transition only socially, where expression and identity are aligned through outward expression of gender.

A simple guide of how to deal with T&GD people is as follows:

- Use our pronouns and names and don't treat us differently.
- Do not out T&GD people without their consent.
- Do not ask intrusive questions – would you answer a similar question yourself?

- Use inclusive language and examples (e.g. partner, spouse, them/they).

An excellent resource for those who wish to learn more about T&GD people is the book “Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community” (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). Another introduction can be found in the “genderbread person” resources (Killermann, 2017).

Transgender and gender diverse people in academia

The obstacles for a T&GD person in society include constant discrimination and harassment as they try to go about their lives (Human Rights Commission, 2008). While many people are accepting of T&GD people, a few are actively hostile, and many are unconsciously biased. Inside universities and tertiary education environments there is perhaps less discrimination and harassment than in wider society, but they still exist. There are also obstacles unique to the tertiary environment (Institute of Physics, Royal Astronomical Society & Royal Society of Chemistry, 2019; Powell, 2016; Valentine, Wood & Plummer, 2009). Typically, they concern changing personal details on institutional records or being asked not to use toilets or changing facilities. The severity of problems depends on a T&GD person’s stage of transition. A person who transitions before university may meet fewer issues. More significant problems are encountered by T&GD people who find that the university environment is the first time they can begin to explore their gender identity.

The step of being yourself for the first time and outing yourself can be an immensely stressful time. Academic staff have a significant amount of privilege although many T&GD faculty encounter problems in finding employment, receiving negative student evaluations and higher rates of discrimination and harassment than LGB faculty (Dualitea, 2014; Hanna, 2016; McKinnon, 2014; Mink, 2016; Russ, Simonds & Hunt, 2002; Valentine et al., 2009). In comparison students are far more vulnerable (Powell, 2016; Valentine et al., 2009) especially if they are keeping their trans identity confidential while transitioning.

While studies have been undertaken around the world on the experiences of LGB and T&GD people in academia (e.g. Institute of Physics, Royal Astronomical Society & Royal Society of Chemistry, 2019; Valentine et al., 2009) the local culture of a country can change the nature of the experiences of minority groups (Suen, 2015). The first detailed New Zealand study was undertaken by Powell (2016) who investigated the experience of T&GD students in tertiary education in New Zealand. The work revealed that discrimination was not overt or intended (one of the seven students interviewed did experience discrimination). Even so, there was a pervasive thread of microaggressions. Every time a class list is handed around or a roll is called the student might be outed or challenged with the “oh but that was a female name”. Perhaps the worst case is when the student needs to visit the toilet. Most people don’t have to stand in front of two doors and decide whether they should go in one and run the risk of being verbally harassed or the other where they might get physically harassed. Even if they opt for the all gender accessible toilets they might be challenged with a “why are you going in there?”. This leads to the students experiencing a state of hypervigilance, always being on guard and having to plan out their day, for example how to avoid certain groups of people or to use a bathroom at a quiet time of day. It is a significant extra mental load in comparison to cisgender students.

In addition to the challenges from interacting with other members of academia, discrimination may also exist at an institutional level. Administrative processes and course curriculums typically assume only binary gender. This can range from discussion of only men and women in gender studies courses, or psychology courses where laboratory experiments assume that

gender is a binary. But this can extend to gender options on forms and surveys for administrative purposes or gender segregation of student groups, societies and sports teams. In the planning and design of new buildings, only male or female toilets and changing rooms may be considered, when including all-gender facilities would be easiest at this point. In the wider world T&GD people encounter many of the same problems but many businesses are becoming more inclusive and universities are in some ways being left behind (Weiss, 2007).

Without support students and staff members must develop their own personal strategies to overcome these issues. When T&GD people make contact with one another they can share their knowledge and strategies and provide support and mentoring to each other. My experience with this is consistent with the findings of studies in this area (e.g. Powell, 2016), who found that significant personal interactions were often a comfort for T&GD students. A well-educated, understanding and proactive person can make an enormous impact on making T&GD students feel welcome. If universities and tertiary education establishments undertake simple steps (e.g. Spade, 2011) to normalize inclusion of T&GD students the experience and achievements of these students will improve.

Positive steps and results at the University of Auckland

As an out transgender person, I have advocated for T&GD people at the University of Auckland and helped to shape institutional policy. Over the last 5 years there has been a significant shift in the treatment of T&GD people at the University of Auckland. This has been evidenced by a decline in the number of students asking me to talk to the Equity office about serious issues. Also, the nature of interactions with the Equity office have become less urgent with change becoming embedded within University administration.

The pathway toward this current situation began in 2013 with two separate events. First was that the University of Auckland Equity office created the University wide LGBTI staff/student network. This has grown and been renamed the LGBTQITakatāpui+ staff/student network, as well as encouraging the creation of faculty-based rainbow groups (University of Auckland, 2019a).

At the same time a group of transgender students formed a group called, “Trans on Campus” (ToC) that was part working-group, part social group; to do something about the isolation of trans students and lack of community on campus. It provided a forum for T&GD students to connect and to voice complaints and concerns. While it was initially led by students, staff members have joined, and we have together worked to achieve the group’s aims.

An important part of the group is the mutual support members can provide each other with everyone becoming both mentor and mentee. While the group coordinates via meetings and an online group, we have also attempted to raise awareness of the issues facing T&GD people. This has been achieved by running events, such as “Tea for Trans” and a “Transademia symposium” that included both discussion and formal talks. These are open to both students and staff and can be used to highlight important issues for T&GD people as well highlighting the work of T&GD academics. A problem with the group is how to advertise it while ensuring student safety, although with a higher profile for the group and the LGBTQITakatāpui+ staff/student network at the University this is improving.

The Equity Office in collaboration with ToC led to several important changes as well as raise awareness of T&GD issues in the University. The primary achievements are as follows:

- The University provides funds for students to legally change their name and obtain photo identification with this name. This ensures students are recognized in their identity and increases their safety by preventing accidental outing. The rate of uptake of this has been approximately one student a month. This was instigated by the Vice-Chancellor and it has had a significant impact on how supported the students feel.
- Included with this name change support was clarification of the process by which students could change their computing system user identifier. This is because if their identifier did not match their new name people asked intrusive questions. This also had a positive impact for other, non-T&GD people, who need to change the identifier for other valid reasons.
- The addition of a significant amount of information on the University equity website around the inclusion of T&GD people, as well as the broader rainbow community (University of Auckland, 2019a, 2019b).
- In data collection and surveys a third option of “diverse gender” has been included. Taking a more complex approach to viewing gender such as this allows for a deeper understanding of gender equity within the University (Rasmussen et al., 2019).
- Creation of a comprehensive policy on the inclusion of T&GD students in University sport. In practice students self-identify their gender but it becomes more complex for inter-university competitions. Here a more detailed policy is required to conform to the rules set by the international community. The current inclusion policy in place for inter-University sport (UTSNZ, 2017) is problematic and presents obstacles to inclusion of T&GD students in sport.
- Creation of policy and guidelines to help managers to support staff who wish to transition at work. This is beginning to provide extended coverage of aid to staff as well as students.
- Inclusion of T&GD people in training for student hall residents as an important group within the rainbow community. Furthermore, we have had positive discussions around how to ensure the safety of T&GD students in halls.
- A ToC student also led raising awareness of T&GD people in travel bookings. This is especially important in ensuring use of the correct names and gender. This is supported by an increasing number of airlines allowing their travellers to identify as gender diverse.
- Individuals at the University have begun to edit course documentation to become more inclusive, replacing occurrences of “he/she” with “they”. This dismantles the assumption of a gender binary throughout the university. While this may appear a subtle change, it can revolutionize people’s thinking (Case et al., 2012). When a gender-neutral pronoun was created in 2012 in Sweden there was initially some scepticism, but it’s growing use has shifted attitudes towards being more positive about T&GD people. This shows that a small change can have a significant impact (Gustafsson, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015).

These many achievements are all centred around recognizing the needs and identities of T&GD staff and students and most importantly ensuring their safety. There are however still issues to address. The primary one is toilet provision and access. The University has increased the number of all-gender bathrooms, but they are still few and far between. In practice toilet use is by self-identification: for people to use the bathroom of their choice, however a larger number of all-gender bathrooms will allow greater safety for T&GD people as well as not forcing non-binary people to have to pick one bathroom or the other. The situation is slowly changing but other Universities such as Auckland University of Technology have also made significant and

rapid progress in this. They have led the way in this respect with 165 toilets now assigned as all-gender (Fitzgerald, 2017).

All the above steps have vastly improved the environment for T&GD people at the University of Auckland. The evidence for this is that since 2013 there are now fewer situations concerning T&GD students that need to be dealt with by staff members. Also, the nature of discussions in ToC has changed toward supporting one another rather than achieving change within the University. Of initiatives to date the most important has been the funding of name changes for students. Providing grants to aid T&GD students is an effective way for a university to signal they are welcome. This support is not unique to the University of Auckland, the Unitec Institute of Technology have grants to help gender diverse students fund their education (Unitec, 2019).

Summary and looking to the future

In this article I have explored the issues of T&GD people within the university environment (as staff and students) and have outlined how to make academia more inclusive of T&GD people. The breadth and diversity of the steps demonstrates that there is no single action that can be taken, but that a broad range of initiatives are required to improve academia for T&GD people.

It is important to note that there are benefits of this work for the broader academic community. Raising the discussion of equity and inclusion within an institution encourages people to think about the experiences of others. Also challenging all aspects of the gender binary of female and male in expression, identity and roles can lead to greater consideration of all aspects of gender equity.

Other benefits are more tangible: more all-gender bathrooms allow carers of someone of the opposite gender to support them more easily. Similarly, specifying other processes required by T&GD people, such as changing computer identifiers, enables all who may need to do this.

Finally, there are many other aspects to equity and inclusion that must be considered in academia beyond gender such as race, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic status and these issues can all intersect (e.g. Prescod-Weinstein, 2017; Traxler et al., 2016). Raising awareness that academia is unequal, even for one group, is important because by bringing these issues out into the open and driving education and discussion the result can only be positive. Asking questions about gender and seeing the problems with the binary system leads to a broader understanding and acceptance for all.

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