Life as a trans+ student

Insight briefing

Student Space is led by Student Minds, the UK's student mental health charity.

Introduction

At Student Minds, we have a clear understanding that there is a bi-directional relationship between inequality and mental health. Those who experience mental health difficulties often report facing inequality and similarly, those who face other forms of inequality (racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism etc.) often report detrimental impacts to their mental health as a result.

There is a limited but growing body of evidence which explores this specifically in the trans+* student population. At Student Minds, we have heard anecdotally for many years that trans+ students are disproportionately experiencing mental health issues and seeking support from mental health services which often lack understanding or specialism in trans+ issues. This has been further demonstrated in research shared throughout this report.

In addition, we have become increasingly aware and concerned about the hostility and transphobia faced by trans+ students in today's society, including in higher education and across the media. The negative mental health impacts of this are clear.

We use the term 'trans+' as a broad and inclusive term to define a wide range of transgender (trans) and non-binary identities. The '+' in trans+ serves the same purpose as the + in LGBTQ+. This term was selected by our trans+ steering group.

Life as a trans+ student

As we explored this issue further, it became apparent that trans+ students would benefit from a package of tailored support, and that this support should be co-created with trans+ students who have lived experience of the relevant issues.

Our content package, 'Life as a Trans+ Student' was developed alongside a Steering Group of 8 trans+ students and trans-led charity Gendered Intelligence to offer advice and reflections on navigating university life as a transgender and/or non-binary student.

Whilst such support is vital, it is also important that we remain focused on dismantling the inequalities that result in barriers to good mental health and education for marginalised communities like trans+ students. At Student Minds, we remain committed to achieving our vision of a world where no student is held back by their mental health. We will not stop until this is a reality for all.

Methodology

Methodology

In producing this report, we have included a range of sources which offer insight into the mental health and broader higher education experiences of trans+ students.

For the purpose of this report, Student Minds analysed the data tables published from:

- the Student Academic Experience Survey 2024 (HEPI, 2024) and
- the Applicant Index 2024 (Unite Students, 2024).

We also make reference to existing research published by a range of other organisations and individuals.

A challenge exists in comparing findings of different pieces of research, due to the varying ways data around trans+ identities is gathered and reported on. In analysing the Student Academic Experience Survey, we analysed data based on responses to the question: 'Are you trans or do you have a trans history?' ('yes', n=270). In analysing the Applicant Index, we analysed data based on responses to the question: 'Do you consider yourself to be trans?' (yes, n=128).

Trans+ students' mental health

Trans+ students have consistently been more likely to report experiencing mental health issues, and have also been more likely to share poorer outcomes on factors relating to mental health, such as loneliness, happiness and anxiety.

- According to UCAS (2021), 22% of trans applicants disclosed a mental health condition. 55% had already looked into what specific services are available to cater for their needs ahead of starting at university or college.

- More recent data from Unite Students' 2024 Applicant Index shows that applicants who identify as trans are more likely to have a mental health condition (34%) than non-trans students (18%) and are more likely to have missed school or college in the last two years due to mental health issues (81% vs 33%).

- Looking at the mental health of non-binary students in particular, Cibyl's 2024 Student Mental Health Study also supports findings that gender diverse students are more likely to experience mental health issues, with 61% of non-binary students reporting experience of mental health difficulties.

Trans+ students' mental health

"Research indicates that transgender people are more likely to experience poor mental health, especially depression, anxiety, and panic attacks, with rates higher than the general population norms. Quality of life (both mental and physical) also appears to be lower for this population compared to the general cisgender (non-transgender) population. This is likely to be at least partly caused by the fact that transgender people are more likely to face a series of difficulties, which may include the experience of dysphoria towards their bodies, physical and social transitions, transphobia, discrimination, prejudice, and bullying. Undergoing these experiences can have a significant negative impact upon trans students' wellbeing, which can negatively affect academic achievement and can lead to academic dropout."

- Education for Mental Health (Hughes et al, 2022)

Trans+ students' mental health

The Student Academic Experience Survey 2024 utilises the ONS4 set of wellbeing measures, which consider:

- Life satisfaction
- Whether the things someone does in life feel worthwhile
- Happiness the day prior
- Anxiety the day prior

Analysis of responses found that students who were trans or who had a trans history responded more negatively on each measure compared to non-trans students.

Similarly, Wonkhe and Peason (2022) reported that trans and non-binary students are less likely to report feeling happy at university.

Trans+ students' mental health

A consistent and concerning trend visible in the research we considered is the extent to which trans+ students are experiencing loneliness.

- Using the same measure to understand how often students experience loneliness, both HEPI's Student Academic Experience Survey 2024 and Unite Students' Applicant Index 2024 show that over 50% of trans respondents feel lonely either most or all of the time. Both surveys also found that this is over twice the proportion of non-trans respondents who said the same.

- Similar findings were also reported by Wonkhe and Pearson (2022), who found trans and non-binary students were far more likely to report feeling lonely at university.

- Given that "student loneliness has been shown to be the strongest overall predictor of mental distress in the student population" (Hughes and Spanner, 2024), such findings are concerning and demonstrate the clear need for targeted interventions to tackle loneliness amongst the trans+ student community.

Trans+ students' mental health

The impact of transphobia on mental health was articulated in an <u>article by Jay</u> for Centre for Mental Health:

"I think a lot about what it's like for those of us who have parts of our identities become 'hot topics'; when our existence, lives, and experiences are contested. It's hard enough trying to cope in this world and figure ourselves out, whether we're trans or not. I just want to live my life, instead of feeling like I'm dodging transphobic bullets from the media, the government, and the world.

I have the privilege of being able to somewhat hide my trans identity and play along with being cisgender in certain settings. But it's exhausting never being able to be my full self and having to be in flux between identities. I don't have the privilege of safety and stability that cisgender people have. I hate hiding from myself all the time. There's things I probably would like to explore further in my gender identity, but so much of my time and energy is spent trying to blend in for my safety. I'm scared I'll always be living a half-life. That's not good for anyone's mental health.

I'm particularly hyper-vigilant about my gender identity in the context of mental health services. I'm always wondering what name to use or if I'll mention my gender identity. If I am myself, I'll be worrying about documents not lining up and what other people might think if they see them and what the consequences could be. When writing articles like this, I never use my real name. I'm always living in some level of fear."

Community and belonging

Community and belonging

The issue of community and belonging has long been discussed within higher education, with particular focus given to the topic during and following the Covid-19 pandemic. It is therefore unsurprising that in exploring the experiences of trans+ students, the matter of community and belonging arose as a key theme. In their first meeting, our student steering group identified and reflected on the importance of finding a sense of community in both LGBTQ+ specific and non-LGBTQ+ specific spaces as a key issue.

Other research has also highlighted disparity in trans+ students finding a sense of belonging at university:

- HEPI's Student Academic Experience Survey 2024 found that respondents who identified as trans or as having a trans history were less likely to agree they feel a sense of belonging at university (54% vs 64%) and almost twice as likely to disagree (23% vs 12%).

- Similar findings were reported by Wonkhe and Pearson (2022), who found that non-binary students were less likely to report feeling a sense of belonging at university than those who identify as either male or female. Those who identified as trans were also slightly less likely to report sense of belonging than cisgender students.

Community and belonging

Feeling seen and validated is arguably a vital component in experiencing a sense of belonging. Sadly, research by Benato, Fraser and White (2023) has found this is rarely the experience of non-binary students and staff in higher education, who frequently reported feeling their gender is erased. Headline findings from their survey, conducted in 2019, include:

- Only 1 in 5 non-binary students felt able to be fully open with their teachers about their gender.

- Half of all research participants (non-binary students and staff) said there have frequently been moments when their gender has felt erased at university, compared to just 7.8% who said their gender is frequently validated, seen or accepted.

- 62% of students said their institution has specific gender-neutral toilets, but of these, only 54% said they are easy to find and 27% said they are always adequately signed.

- One research participant shared the following: "My gender is a part of who I am, and how I see and communicate with the world. Every time that's cut off, so am I. I want to feel safe and respected. I want to feel heard."

Community and belonging

Similar findings were also shared by Mckendry and Lawrence (2017), who acknowledged the cumulative impact of seemingly 'small issues' on an individual's overall sense of belonging:

"Administrative barriers such as binary gender options on forms, difficulties in updating names and having to use an accessible toilet because of a dearth of gender neutral facilities may all individually be small issues. Collectively, however, they contributed to a feeling of otherness, of difference and perceived hostility. Intrusive questions about physical transition or medical procedures were commonly experienced when peers or colleagues referred to interviewees' trans identity, which further contributed to feelings of unease."

Academic experience

Academic experience

Taking a whole-university approach to mental health, it's vital to recognise the role of academic experience in supporting and improving staff and student wellbeing. This includes how inclusive the curriculum is, students' experiences in the classroom, and how well supported a student feels to complete their course.

Unfortunately, the research we considered shows that trans+ students consistently report barriers to a positive academic experience. Mckendry and Lawrence (2017) identified 'curriculum' as a key theme in their analysis, with research participants reporting "barriers and challenges with respect to teaching and learning". This included difficulties with peers, teaching staff, curriculum content, and placements. They reported that:

> "some reflected that where issues concerning trans people were discussed in learning and teaching contexts, the content was all too often inaccurate and outdated, and in some cases even offensive and potentially harmful. Students on professional and industrial placements were particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding, hostility and even cruelty in the placement environment".

Similarly, Wonkhe and Pearson (2022) reported that non-binary and trans-identifying students are less likely to agree their course content is consistently inclusive.

Academic experience

HEPI's 2024 Student Academic Experience Survey also offers helpful insight into the experiences of trans+ students, with 270 students who are trans or who have a trans history completing the survey. Some findings from Student Minds' analysis of responses include:

- Trans students or those with a trans history were less likely to say all or the majority of their teaching staff were helpful or supportive (56% vs 64%).

- Trans students or those with a trans history were more likely to have applied for an extension on assignments, with just 60% saying they had never requested an extension compared to 76% of non-trans respondents.

- Trans students or those with a trans history responded similarly to non-trans students in response to the question "to what extent do you agree or disagree that your institution promotes good relations between different groups on campus (for example, by tackling intolerance and promoting understanding of diversity and respect for all)", with 70% agreeing compared to 72% of non-trans students.

Academic experience

Evidence suggests that trans+ students are more likely to consider withdrawing from university, or to feel less sure that they will finish their course:

- HEPI's Student Academic Experience Survey 2024 found that trans students, or those with a trans history, were twice as likely to say they've considered withdrawing from university than non-trans students (50% vs 24%).

- Unite Students' Applicant Index 2024 found that university applicants who consider themselves to be trans were less likely to feel sure they will finish their course (58%) than those who did not consider themselves to be trans (84%).

One participant in Benato, Fraser and White's (2023) research said: "I feel like academia does not recognise me and my experiences, and that it will be an uphill struggle (on top of studying, working, and marginalisation of other aspects of my identity, like race, class, and disability) to demand recognition and a safer working environment."
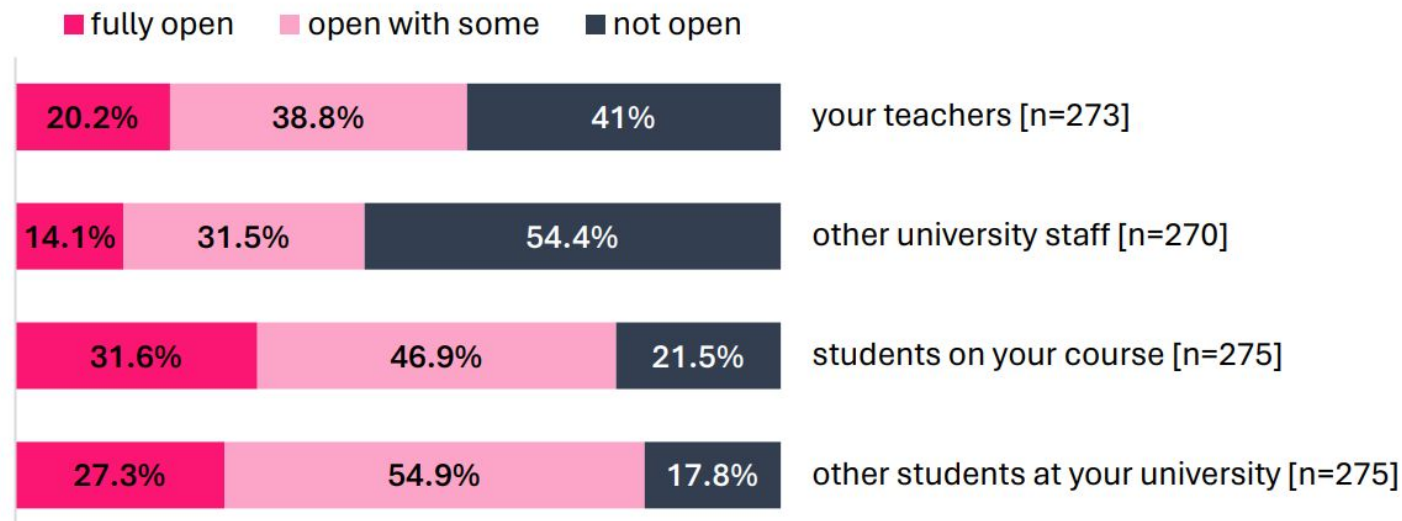
Relationships and support

Relationships and access to support emerges as a key issue in literature relating to trans' students experiences.

- Students who identify as trans or as having a trans history are far more likely to say they'd consider themselves estranged from their parents (27% vs 7%) (HEPI, 2024).

- Mckendry and Lawrence (2017) found participants reported experiencing high levels of barriers to their learning or work, with 86% of survey respondents experiencing barriers in direct relation to their trans status or gender diverse identity. The biggest challenge concerned peer relationships with colleagues and fellow students, with many experiencing ignorance and hostility.

- Unite Students' Applicant Index (2024) found that trans university applicants were less likely to say they have someone to turn to in a crisis (49% vs 69%), and less likely to agree that on the whole, they have good relationships with family and friends (51% vs 79%). Trans applicants were also more likely to disagree with the statement 'I feel loved' (32% vs 11%).

Relationships and support

Research by Benato, Fraser and White (2023) also explores the relationships non-binary students have at university, including who students feel able to be open with about their gender:

Figure 3: Students – Who have you been able to be open with about your gender?

- fully open
- open with some
- not open

	fully open	open with some	not open	
your teachers [n=273]	20.2%	38.8%	41%	
other university staff [n=270]	14.1%	31.5%	54.4%	
students on your course [n=275]	31.6%	46.9%	21.5%	
other students at your university [n=275]	27.3%	54.9%	17.8%	

Qualitative responses gathered in the research highlight some students' concerns around not having their chosen pronouns respected, and feeling as though their classmates would not understand a non-binary gender identity.

Relationships and support

When specifically considering support for trans+ students, one theme commonly identified by our student steering group and within the literature is the importance of accessible and effective admin processes.

Our trans+ student steering group discussed the challenge of 'never ending trans admin', which they described as 'admin nightmares associated with being trans'. This included facing challenges in trying to change their name and/or pronouns on university systems, or sharing important information in relation to matters like trusted contacts or healthcare (e.g. having planned surgery).

Such barriers were also identified in Mckendry and Lawrence's (2017) research. They found:

"Navigating administrative systems and institutional bureaucracies emerged as a significant barrier for trans applicants, students and staff. Participants discussed the lack of clear processes across institutions and related external agencies, and many were forced to disclose their trans status – often repeatedly – as a result of these insufficiencies".

Relationships and support

Similar barriers were also reported by non-binary participants in Benato, Fraser and White's (2023) research:

- Whilst the majority of non-binary students (71%) had wanted to do 'non-binary life admin' at university, only 59% had been able to.
- The researchers commented on a 'mixed picture' of what is available, with the ability to indicate a preferred name appearing widespread, whilst the ability to provide appropriate gender markers was not.
- In qualitative responses, participants shared experiences of updating preferences which were then ignored by university staff members, or of only being able to update names/pronouns in certain places, resulting in harmful inconsistencies.

Safety

Safety

Sadly, the safety of trans+ students at university is still a concern, and this is apparent in the research we considered.

In research by Mckendry and Lawrence (2017), safety was identified as one of eight predominant themes discussed in interviews and free-text survey responses. They reported:

"many people expressed anxiety about their learning or workplace environment in relation to personal safety or, at the very least, perceived hostility".

This included experiencing clear and targeted transphobia, as well as 'covert hostility' which made trans+ staff and students feel unable to share their identity. The mental health impacts of one incident were recalled by a participant who described feeling 'anxious, depressed, shunned and devalued' after experiencing transphobia in the workplace.

Wonkhe and Pearson (2022) also found that trans and non-binary students are less likely to report feeling safe being themselves at university.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality

An incredibly important theme highlighted by our student steering group and also clearly recognised in the literature is the role of intersectionality in shaping students' experiences.

Our student steering group acknowledged that trans+ students with intersecting identities will have different experiences to those who identify in other ways. It was recognised that having access to support which acknowledges and accounts for intersectionality is vital.

Intersectionality is also identified throughout much of the research considered in this report. In particular, experiences of being trans+ and racially minoritised, or as being trans+ and disabled were commonly reported on (Mckendry and Lawrence, 2017; Benato, Fraser and White, 2023).

UCAS (2021) data shows that trans applicants are the most likely to declare a mental health condition or disability at 47% - with mental health declarations (22%) the highest, then multiple disabilities (10%), 6% declare a learning difficulty and 6% declare an autistic disorder. Wonkhe and Pearson's (2022) research found that 49% of non-binary students and 52% of students with a trans identity report access issues due to a physical disability or mental health condition.

Recommendations

We acknowledge that the findings presented throughout this report can make for difficult reading. It is not right that trans+ students experience so many barriers to their education and to having good mental health. We are committed to improving university communities to ensure they are the inclusive, welcoming spaces they can and should be. In working towards this goal, we are sharing some key recommendations drawn from the discussions had by our student steering group, as well as from the wider literature we reviewed throughout this report.

1. **Admin processes should be trans-inclusive**, with opportunities for trans+ students to disclose their gender (including non-binary genders) and chosen pronouns if they wish to. Processes to update name(s), gender, pronouns etc., should be easy to find and follow. Any changes should be communicated with relevant staff and updated on all university systems. Students and staff should have the opportunity to indicate their preferences for when which name/title etc. should be used (e.g. in official communications vs internal communications).

2. **Co-produce university-wide policy on trans+ inclusion** incorporating issues such as leave entitlement for medical procedures and appointments, as well as processes for raising, reporting and resolving reporting breaches of said policy.

Recommendations

3. **Introduce a named contact** for students, prospective students and university staff to facilitate signposting, informal discussions and learning. This named contact should be appropriately trained in trans+ inclusion and able to effectively signpost to appropriate support and learning materials or opportunities where required.

4. **Ensure trans+ inclusion is embedded in sustainable, organisation-wide training on equality, diversity and inclusion.** This should include content on the experiences of the trans+ community, including non-binary genders, and best practice guidance on the use of language, pronouns and names.

5. **Develop inclusive curriculum which includes appropriate and positive trans+ inclusion.** This is particularly important in subjects such as medicine and law, where transgender people are often excluded or poorly represented.

6. **Ensure that trans+ inclusive facilities are accessible and well sign-posted**, including gender-neutral toilets and changing facilities. All toilet facilities should provide sanitary bins and products.

Recommendations

7. **Visibly promote and celebrate gender diversity and trans+ inclusion.** Be deliberate in creating environments where trans+ students feel safe and included, for example by allowing students to introduce themselves (rather than reading a class register), avoiding unnecessarily gendered language (such as 'ladies and gentlemen'), and modelling good practice by sharing pronouns. Acknowledge events such as LGBTQ+ History Month, Trans Day of Remembrance, and Trans Day of Visibility.

8. **Demonstrate a commitment to trans+ inclusion.** Respect and use students' chosen name and/or pronouns – do not assume these. Let students and colleagues know that you are open to being corrected and any mistakes you do make are unintentional. Create an environment where learning can happen for all, making an effort to demonstrate conscious inclusion.

Life as a trans+ student

Life as a trans+ student

Working with a steering group of 8 trans+ students and with guidance and support from Gendered Intelligence, Student Minds has co-created a package of tailored support for trans+ students, available on Student Space. The package includes a range of articles and videos, as well as a podcast series produced and hosted by All Things Mental Health, exploring topics such as:

- Managing difficult conversations about transness at university
- The unknown realities of transgender BAME students
- The 'non-binary' identity: navigating the challenges that come with being a non-binary student
- Looking after your wellbeing as a trans activist
- Balancing identities as a Black queer student: navigating white LGBTQ+ spaces and cis-het Black spaces
- Tackling loneliness through my LGBTQIA+ society

Interested in sharing Life as a trans+ student with your student communities? Download our Comms Pack.

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Thank you for your support!

Together we can improve the experience of trans+ students as they navigate university life.

If you have general questions about the Student Space programme please contact:

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