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Stevie Lane
Edith Cowan University

Casey Thomas
Edith Cowan University

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Beyond Inclusion: Developing Guidelines to Support Trans, Gender Diverse and Non-Binary Communities

Stevie Lane
Casey Thomas

Edith Cowan University

Abstract

In early 2020, Edith Cowan University (ECU) identified the need for a proactive approach to supporting and affirming trans, gender diverse, and non-binary (TGDNB) students, staff, alumni, and the wider community. While there was general support and focus on LGBTIQ+ initiatives broadly at ECU, there were no existing supports to address the unique needs and raise awareness of the experiences of TGDNB people. This paper outlines ECU's process to develop TGDNB Support Guidelines, including research, forming a working group to drive resource development, consultation from different areas within the university, a launch event, training, and ensuring the document was widely promoted and used after the launch. The paper also identifies the issues TGDNB students are facing, outcomes of the continued work to advocate for trans people at ECU, as well as the challenges we face and goals we continue to work toward.

Keywords

Trans, Transgender, Gender diverse, Non-binary, Gender affirmation, LGBTIQ+, Inclusive practice, Equity, Diversity and inclusion, Student support, Student success

Introduction

In 2020, Edith Cowan University (ECU) identified the need for a proactive approach to supporting and affirming trans, gender diverse, and non-binary (TGDNB) students, staff, alumni, and the wider community. In the year prior, Pride @ ECU, an LGBTIQ+ advisory sub-committee of the ECU Equity and Diversity Committee which provides high-level advice to the Vice-Chancellor, had been established to drive LGTBIQA+ initiatives across the university. Whilst awareness and education on LGBTIQ+ experiences and actions for allyship had been implemented by this stage, the Pride @ ECU Sub-Committee brought attention to the unique experiences and needs of TGDNB people specifically. In lieu of national data on university experiences of TGDNB students, the Equity Projects team conducted a review of internal institutional surveys and consultations, literature, and best practice examples from other institutions. This review confirmed the stigma, discrimination, and violence experienced by TGDNB people; the impact on their health and wellbeing (Hill et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2021; Hyde et al., 2014; McNeil et al., 2012; Strauss et al., 2017); and, as such, the impact on their ability to meaningfully engage in education and learning. It also demonstrated that, whilst there is a legal framework designed to protect against discrimination based on gender identity and history, learning and work environments in which people can thrive require working beyond legal framings to a focus on safety, celebration, and belonging. The Pride @ ECU Sub-Committee committed to identifying tangible actions to ensure TGDNB people felt safe, supported, and affirmed at ECU. This process included the creation of Support Guidelines objectives, a TGDNB Resource Working Group, consultation process, and embedding of supports into practice. This paper outlines how this project was enacted and highlights the impact of, and challenges within, this process.

Background — Understanding TGDNB experiences in higher education

Tertiary institutions have a responsibility to provide equitable access to education. While the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) and various state-based laws provide legal frameworks to protect

against discrimination based on gender identity and history, TGDNB people still experience stigma, discrimination, and violence, sometimes daily. This can have a huge impact on someone's health and wellbeing, with TGDNB people experiencing higher rates of mental illness, suicidality, and self-harm, compared to their cisgender peers (Hill et al., 2020; Hyde et al., 2014; McNeil et al., 2012). For trans young people specifically, research shows that almost 50 per cent have attempted suicide at least once in their lives (Strauss et al., 2017), and providing social support and using their chosen name can drastically reduce depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behaviour (Russell et al., 2018).

TGDNB communities, and even LGBTIQA+ communities more broadly, are not an identified equity group in the tertiary education sector in Australia. While the Australian Government's *Higher Education Standards Framework* does reference diversity and equity (see 2.2), there is no specific reference to any group beyond those already formally identified (students from non-English speaking backgrounds, students with disability, women in non-traditional areas, Indigenous students, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and students from regional and remote locations). This leaves the definition of "student diversity" intentionally vague, and therefore it is possible to exclude groups. This absence, coupled with limitations in data required by the government for reporting purposes and ideological opposition to supporting the existence and rights of TGDNB people by those holding power, means consistent data collection on this group within the tertiary sector does not exist. It is therefore often difficult, if not impossible, to measure the experiences, success, and retention rates of TGDNB students. This means that individual institutions are responsible for ensuring they seek and understand the experiences of TGDNB students, and are proactive in providing culturally safe support, information, and opportunities to help them thrive.

The limited data available show the experiences of TGDNB people in university in Australia are largely negative. Following the initial review of literature conducted by Equity Projects in 2020, the *Writing Themselves In 4* research project (Hill et al., 2021) investigated the experiences of young LGBTQA+ people between the ages of 14 and 21 years. The study found that, of those at university, almost 30 per cent had felt unsafe or uncomfortable at university due to their sexuality or gender identity within the last 12 months. One in six of these students (17.2 per cent) reported missing days at their university in the past 12 months because of this (Hill et al., 2021). When it came to trans, gender diverse, and non-binary people specifically, almost three-quarters of trans men (74.3 per cent), and two-thirds of trans women and non-binary people (67.7 per cent and 65.8 per cent, respectively) said that they felt unsafe or uncomfortable at their educational institution (including, but not limited to, universities), compared to less than 50 per cent of cisgender men and cisgender women (44.2 per cent and 42.2 per cent, respectively).

The 2021 National Student Safety Survey (Heywood et al., 2022) looked at the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in Australia. The survey found that, within the previous 12 months, transgender and non-binary students faced much higher rates of sexual harassment (14.7 per cent and 22.4 per cent respectively) in a university context, compared to women (10.5 per cent) and men (3.9 per cent). This pattern continued when asked about sexual assault, with transgender and non-binary people experiencing higher rates (3.2 per cent and 2.2 per cent, respectively) compared to women (1.4 per cent) and men (0.6 per cent) in a university context within the last 12 months.

TGDNB people's experiences are not all negative though. With the appropriate support, in environments that affirm their gender, they can be happy, healthy, and thrive in their life, and in their tertiary studies. Additionally, by explicitly showing support for, and raising awareness of,

TGDNB people and experiences, it is possible to reduce the sharing of misinformation and harmful views and create safer and more welcoming environments.

Trans Pathways (Strauss et al., 2017)—the largest study looking at the mental health and care pathways for trans and gender diverse young people in Australia—recommended teachers and staff at universities and other institutions seek out information on gender diversity and use it to incorporate equitable and inclusive practice to counter negative mental health and wellbeing outcomes for TGDNB people. *Writing Themselves In 4* (Hill et al., 2021), which focused on LGBTQA+ young people (14 to 21 years), recommended changes to policy with specific reference to bullying, stigma, and discrimination; interventions to prevent violence and abuse; affirming practices such as celebrating days of significance and promoting the use of bathrooms, including all gender bathrooms, that align with one's gender; and ensuring positive representation of LGBTQA+ communities in varied ways throughout education curricula.

TGDNB Support Guidelines objectives

After the review of internal institutional surveys and consultations, literature, and best practice examples from other institutions, the Pride @ ECU Sub-Committee agreed to develop a practical resource for the university that empowered TGDNB community members and the ECU staff supporting and working alongside them. The Sub-Committee recommended the development of a set of guidelines to:

1. support TGDNB students, staff, and alumni to affirm their gender at ECU;
2. provide guidance for students, staff, and alumni who may be supporting TGDNB people and communities at ECU, including additional guidance for line managers to support their staff, and for staff to support students and alumni; and
3. increase knowledge of TGDNB experiences so that people at ECU understand why it is important to provide specific support to TGDNB people while at university.

Collaboration and engagement

Pride @ ECU—an LGBTQA+ advisory Sub-Committee of the ECU Equity and Diversity Committee which provides high-level advice to the Vice-Chancellor—convened a TGDNB Resource Working Group early in 2020. The Working Group consisted of:

- a TGDNB Community Consultant from Trans folk of WA,
- a TGDNB student Queer Collective representative,
- a TGDNB Alumni representative,
- a staff member from Equity Projects (LGBTIQA+),
- a staff member from Human Resources (HR),
- a staff member from the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT),
- a staff member from the Strategic Governance Services Centre (SGSC), and
- two staff members from Student Life.

Once the TGDNB Resource Working Group was formed, they consulted with Pride in Diversity, of which ECU was (and still is) a member, before starting to work on the content of the document.

The staff representative from Equity Projects coordinated the project and collated information from other members. Each member of the Working Group was able to provide insight into existing

processes and gaps in inclusive and affirming practice at ECU, based on their lived experience and lived and/or professional expertise. Of particular importance is the fact that the TGDNB people in the Working Group led and created content specifically outlining the experiences of the community.

It should be noted that the TGDNB people involved in this working group were compensated for their time. It is important to pay people to share their lived experience and expertise because this shows value in what they contribute. Without the lived experience and expertise of the TGDNB people in this working group, this resource would not have been possible. Compensating people for their lived experience and expertise can also help to address power imbalances and promote social justice. In many cases, people with lived experience and expertise may come from marginalised or oppressed communities and paying them for their contributions can help to redistribute power and resources in a more equitable manner.

Consultation and feedback

The Working Group consulted with various teams within the university to ensure all information and processes at the university were accurately captured. For example, through consultation with the Alumni Relations team, an additional section for Alumni was added, separate to the staff and student sections, due to the different scenarios alumni may face including changing their name on their testamur post-graduation. The Working Group also consulted with Student Administration—responsible for maintaining student records and student system maintenance—and Digital and Campus Services—responsible for IT services and support—to determine which systems could display someone’s preferred or affirmed name¹ and which systems would display legal name.

It was important, as part of consultation and feedback, to engage with and listen to people who did not have a lot of experience or knowledge in supporting TGDNB people. This ensured that the final resource could be best understood by the broader ECU community, some of whom might also not be experienced in supporting TGDNB people themselves.

Once the draft of the *TGDNB Support Guidelines* was completed, this was sent to Pride @ ECU for feedback and approval, and then to the Equity and Diversity Committee for further feedback and final approval.

The launch and embedding the guidelines into practice

On Trans Day of Visibility on 31 March 2021, ECU held a launch for the Guidelines. This was done with an online panel with the TGDNB people involved in the Working Group and ECU’s Director, Access and Equity. The panel was facilitated by the WA Relationship Manager from Pride in Diversity. Panel members discussed the process of putting the Guidelines together as well as the importance of trans visibility and lived experience. Following the launch, the Equity Projects team member (LGBTIQA+) undertook a staff roadshow for the Guidelines to allow individual teams to learn more and ask questions relevant to their areas. The roadshow also helped in promoting the Equity Projects team as a point of contact, should staff have further questions or run into any difficulties.

The Equity Projects team also organised Trans 101 training delivered by TransFolk of WA for representatives from teams listed as support contacts in the Guidelines. The purpose of this training

¹ Note: Systems at ECU use the term “preferred name” to refer to the non-legal name by which someone wishes to be addressed. We know that a trans person’s chosen name is not “preferred” and so, outside of these systems, we use the term “affirmed name” instead, or sometimes as well, to avoid confusion.

was to increase support staff knowledge about TGDNB people's experiences and further embed inclusive practice. Within the session, the Equity Projects team facilitated workshopping and planning of ideas and changes areas could make in their daily practice to take back to their team to implement. Ideas included logging issues that come up for TGDNB students to support identification of gaps in practices, including pronouns in email signatures and on name badges to signal safety and inclusion; creating an internal resource for the University Contact Officers (UCO) focusing on the UCO principles of providing students and staff with pathways and resources; research into how we can provide students the option to have their preferred or affirmed name on their Student ID (work in progress); and embedding inclusive language, representation, and content into curricula. From here, we continued to follow up with training participants to check in and see what progress they had made and if further support was required. This strategy has enabled us to hold individuals and teams accountable for making ECU a safer and more inclusive place for TGDNB people.

Where is ECU now?

The Support Guidelines, and the data collected during the development of the Guidelines, have been used to justify and hold ECU accountable for continuing to develop the supports and resources required to provide a safe and affirming environment for TGDNB people at the university.

There is greater awareness of the specific difficulties TGDNB students might experience during their studies, and there is more educated support for these students, no matter what stage they might be at with affirming their gender. TGDNB students at ECU experience a range of issues that may impact on their ability to succeed at university. From the research and information collected before the development of the Guidelines, and since, we know these issues are not unique to ECU, and many are not even unique to the tertiary education sector.

TGDNB students at ECU have shared a range of concerns or challenges with the university. Their experiences have included family non-acceptance (including violence, coercive control, and out casting); financial problems and homelessness due to being kicked out of home or difficulties in finding employment due to gender identity; not feeling comfortable to share their gender identity with university staff or peers due to fear of bias, misunderstanding, or belittling; concern for practicum placements; and mental health concerns. Associated with this combination of personal, social, and familial concerns, students have expressed concern regarding keeping up with their studies.

In response, ECU's Student Success team has been able to support students with guidance on changing gender, title, and name in ECU systems. The team has also provided ongoing one-on-one support on navigating university life and—where applicable—gender affirmation, and linking students with information about, and referrals to, various university and community organisations. Practical supports have also been organised, such as provision of emergency accommodation, liaison with academic staff regarding assessment extensions or other access considerations, financial support to assist with legal name change, coordination with campus Security regarding safety concerns, and assistance to prepare students for difficult conversations.

University-wide, ECU has made many gains toward improving the experiences of TGDNB students, including:

- All gender bathrooms have been introduced across all campuses, including plans for the future city campus which will include all gender bathroom blocks in certain locations and an all gender single stall next to each gendered block.

- Students are no longer required to provide any documentation to update their title, gender marker, and preferred/affirmed name in the Student Information System (SIS). In addition, gender-neutral titles and gender markers have been added as options in the SIS.
- There has been a pronounced increase in the visibility of pronouns usage among staff members; for example, in employee email signatures and on name badges, resulting in positive feedback from staff supporting TGDNB students and TGDNB students themselves.
- There has been a pronounced increase in referrals to internal and external support services and social groups.
- Students and employees can include their pronouns in our Learning Management System, Canvas, and on Microsoft Teams.
- Students can designate the name they wish to have called out during their graduation ceremony and, should they change their name legally after graduation, they can get a new testamur at no cost.
- Since 2022, ECU has hosted a TGDNB Meet and Greet session as part of the orientation program each semester. This is in addition to Pride and LGBTIQA+ events.
- ECU asks students on enrolment if they are part of the LGBTIQA+ community. The question is optional, but we have found that many students are choosing to select “yes” and enabling provision of specialised communications for support and involvement in targeted initiatives.

One of the most important things we can do for students is to listen to where they are at and what they need, then tailor our support to their individual needs.

Conclusion

The development of the *TGDNB Support Guidelines* took a collaborative approach, led by lived experience, and lived and professional expertise. This has made for a more comprehensive, impactful, and practical resource for the ECU community, and a tool to promote further change. The Guidelines have been referenced by staff and students as a helpful resource to navigate processes and systems, and to advocate for themselves and others. It has also been valuable in identifying gaps in our practice and setting goals for continual improvement. Access and Equity and the Student Success team continue to log issues and/or complaints that come to our attention and use this to advocate for further change. While we have made significant improvements with TGDNB student experiences at ECU, there continue to be hurdles on which we must continue to work. This includes working to improve the use of preferred and/or affirmed names, titles, and gender markers across all possible systems, and untangling the required use of legal name where use of affirmed name is possible, to avoid deadnaming and maintain TGDNB student dignity. Despite challenges and complexity, progress to date leaves us committed to, and optimistic about, ongoing and long-term change.

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The authors may be contacted via:

Stevie Lane — s.lane@ecu.edu.au

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