

POLICY BRIEF

Understanding the Lived Experiences of Gender Minority Students in Irish Third-Level Education: Steps Towards Achieving Safety and Inclusion



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief is based upon the survey project “Understanding the Lived Experiences of Gender Minority Students in Irish Third-Level Education: A National Survey of Transgender, Non-Binary, and Gender Non-Conforming Students.” The project aimed to address a lack of vital data regarding gender minority students, and the Irish gender minority community more broadly, to help refine and author inclusive, effective, and grounded educational and governmental gender policies based on the voices of the community.

A survey was designed with feedback from stakeholders, a pilot completed by gender minority students, Trinity College Dublin School of Natural Sciences’ ethical review process, and a research lab held at Karlstad University. The survey questions were designed to collect key demographic data, as well as insights into major obstacles and forms of harassment, the efficacy of existing gender policies, sources of resilience and support, and the current climate (i.e. perceived levels of acceptance and safety).

From mid-June until the end of July, a digital survey was open to current students, recent graduates (within three years), and those that did not complete their programmes. All members of the gender minority community were invited to participate and self-identify (as well as select multiple gender identities). Additionally, the survey was open to attendees of all third level institutions in the Republic of Ireland. Educational and NGO partners (such as the Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) and the National LGBTI Federation (NXF)) helped to promote the survey via social media. 123 viable responses were collected, with high completion rates across 55 questions. Although the results suggest neutral to slightly positive trends regarding acceptance (by staff, administrators, and students), the project uncovered high rates of harassment, administrative policies negatively impacting students’ well-being (to the point of dropping-out), and a variety of off-campus obstacles that students must contend with.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The survey results reflect a diversity of identities and orientations. Non-binary was the leading gender identity (c. 39%), followed by Male (AFAB) at c. 24%, Transmasculine at c. 17%, Female (AMAB) at c. 17%, and Genderqueer at c. 13%.

The high percentage of masculine identifying respondents invites further investigation

into the demographics of the gender minority community and whether trans feminine people have a significantly more difficult time accessing higher education.

Only 6% of respondents identified as Heterosexual. The leading sexual orientations were Bisexual (25%), Queer (19%), and Pansexual (19%).

Respondents reported high rates of chronic illness (c. 19%), learning disabilities (c. 14%) and mental illnesses/disabilities (c. 53%).

There were a limited number of responses from ethnic minorities. However, they reinforce that trans people of colour can face particularly high degrees of harassment.

Likert questions registered very strong preferences for gender neutral bathrooms and changing facilities. However, due to limited access to such facilities, 35.6% percent of respondents reported excessive delays between using restrooms, 59.3% reported using bathrooms where they felt uncomfortable, 24.6% reported discomfort or pain, 22.9% reported using a gender-neutral bathroom that was not clean or sanitary, and 5.9% reported medical issues due to bathroom access issues. Additional open-ended questions reinforced that accessing bathrooms can be problematic and a daily concern.

Administrative barriers are a pressing concern for many students, particularly limited gender options (c. 47%), limited or non-existent gender guidelines (34%), difficulty changing gender markers (c. 31%), and difficulty changing student IDs (28%).

Students mainly sought reasonable accommodations from teaching staff (c. 26%), campus mental health services (c. 17%), and academic registries (c. 15%). However, nearly 12% of students haven't sought for reasonable accommodations due to not knowing whom to ask, while c. 17% are nervous about approaching anyone for them.

Regarding harassment, nearly 51% of students reported inappropriate questions about their body and sexuality, while c. 40% reported verbal insults/jokes and c. 19% reported sexually inappropriate remarks and catcalling. Students also reported being pressured to keep quiet about their identity (c. 35%) and harassment (c. 15%). Students were the most common perpetrators at 45%, followed by people outside of the campus community (17%) and teaching staff (8%). Classrooms, common areas/library, and outdoor campus grounds were the most common areas for harassment.

Concerning off-campus obstacles, mental health or medical issues was the most frequently reported (c. 78%), followed by familial issues (c. 51%), financial issues (c. 50%), and limited access to medical or transition services (c. 49%). Issues with finding safe housing and gaining employment were also prevalent.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

1. Formal recognition of third-gender identities and pronouns; enabling students to self-identify with the registrar and on official documents rather than select an incongruous gender identity from a limited selection.
2. Streamlined, non-intrusive, and published guidelines regarding administrative procedures (such as changing gender markers, IDs, or names). These processes should not be medicalised or allow for institutional gatekeeping.
3. Safe, accessible, and sanitary gender-neutral bathrooms with proper signage are especially critical to gender minority students' health, safety, and well-being. It would also be advantageous to have stickers or signage with information on gender, LGBTQI+, and student helplines within these bathrooms.
4. Established guidelines for inclusion within exercise facilities and sporting clubs.
5. Gender guidelines that explicitly include reasonable accommodations for mental health crises, accessing non-medical transitioning services, and medical transitioning (for those students that it is relevant to).
6. While it would be ideal to make training available for all interested staff members and students on trans and gender variant issues, institutions should establish a baseline by prioritising training for campus healthcare providers, as well as key persons in campus security, human resources, diversity units, registrars, and other bodies that are in positions where they are likely to support gender minority students or investigate incidents of harassment/discrimination.
7. Establish safe points of contact within departments for LGBTQI+ students to approach for support, advice, and arranging reasonable accommodations. Contact information for these persons, along with institutional support (e.g. Equality Officers), should be advertised and included within orientation literature.
8. Explicit protections for students against discrimination due to gender identity, gender expression, and sex, with specific mention of Intersex persons. These should be complemented by formal and rapid procedures to investigate incidents and shield students from any offenders that may have power over them (e.g. a tutor or supervisor).
9. Have accessible maps that provide locations of gender neutral bathrooms (and related rooms/services) on campus, as well as in surrounding buildings with public access.
10. Make information on institutional crisis services and emergency supports (e.g. university hardship funds) available to students unions, LGBTQI+ societies, and

local NGOs to increase referrals.

11. Symbols of acceptance and solidarity can greatly encourage students. Pride flags, stickers indicating trans inclusive gender segregated bathrooms, and LGBTQI+ campus events are just some examples of the ways to remind students that they are welcome.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTAL BODIES

1. Legal recognition of third-gender identities will not only allow citizens and residents to fully express themselves, but remove any legal ambiguities and allow full protection under the law.
2. The high rates of harassment, as well as difficulties obtaining safe housing and employment, uncovered by this project help reinforce the clear and evident need for comprehensive hate crime, hate speech, and discrimination legislation.
3. Irish law enforcement has recently made efforts to combat sexual violence through dedicated investigative units. A specialised unit to deal with hate crimes, more broadly, in an informed and sensitive manner is highly recommended.
4. This research highlights the need for medical and mental healthcare to become more aware of the LGBTQI+ community's needs. A voluntary accreditation process, indicating that a provider or office is LGBTQI+ friendly and trained, may reduce community members' apprehension about accessing services while increasing their effectiveness.
5. Reform gender clinic services via consultation and partnership with community stakeholders and WPATH (World Professional Association of Transgender Health) standards. Additionally, there is an opportunity to employ (or consult) gender minority medical professionals to help administer and directly provide services. The community must be integral to designing the policies and services that impact their lives in such a vital way. Additionally, it must be part of implementing such services and doing so may restore the rapport that has been damaged due to long waiting periods and the loss of referrals.
6. LGBTQI+ NGOs and community organisations are currently providing essential services and supports to the gender minority community. Any governmental initiatives related to this community should leverage the expertise, networks, and rapport these groups possess.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TUTORS AND SUPERVISORS

Foremost, it's important to note that gender minority students share the same aspirations and educational goals as other students. This community has often been subject to misinformation, stereotyping, and politicization; something which obscures the fact that the vast majority of these students simply wish to pursue their education and be treated with dignity.

Students from this community have a vast array of experiences, backgrounds, and identities. For those that transition, their journeys can take considerably different paths (all of which are valid). We invite staff members, when appropriate, to listen to students and invite them to share in order to understand the particularities of their situation rather than make assumptions.

It should be noted that students may have been discriminated against before within their current institution or at another one (leading to a transfer or incomplete degree), as well as outside of higher education. As such, they may be wary or apprehensive about approaching staff for support. Pride paraphernalia, as well as NGO logos, safe space indicators, or equality statements in course syllabi, may be some ways to indicate to students that you are approachable.

Gender minority students may require reasonable accommodations. Higher education can be stressful for any student. Potential familial and social marginalisation, as well as harassment or bullying, greatly amplify these stresses and lead to acute crises. By being cognizant of this, you can make more empathetic decisions about providing extensions, excused absences, and related supports when appropriate.

It is also important to note that not only are educational programmes lengthy, but often come at formative junctures in a person's life. Students may wish to transition (socially and or medically) or express their gender in a new way during their programme. Some may need to travel abroad to access services. We ask that you do not discourage students from pursuing their gender journey. Rather, there are opportunities to work together and schedule potential trips, absences, appointments, and medical stays at opportune times for all parties. As trans and gender variant healthcare and services are not easily accessible, there may not be opportunities to delay or reschedule appointments. Cancellation would have a devastating impact on a person.

Complement institutional guidelines with information from NGOs. TENI, BelongTo, Jigsaw, LGBT Ireland, Cork Gender Rebels, and the NXF have resources and research that

is of great use.

FUTURE WORK

This research was envisioned as a beachhead for future works by providing baseline data, exploring the community's demographics and general characteristics, and highlighting key issues in higher education. However, the report and this brief are not the terminal products of this research. The database constructed from the survey will continue to be analysed, with specific emphasis on geographic and intersectional approaches. Additionally, interviews and qualitative research will be done to complement the existing data. This project had a limited scope. It's hoped that the approach applied to this research can be adapted to survey the larger community in Ireland, as well as the Intersex community more specifically. There is also an opportunity to survey other nations and Northern Ireland in a similar manner.

PARTNERS AND COPYRIGHT

This project was conducted in association with the Transgender Equality Network Ireland, the National LGBTI Federation of Ireland, and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Unit. Funding and support for the initial survey were provided by the Trinity Equality Fund (Trinity College Dublin). The copyright © remains with the authors.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Please contact transsurveyireland@gmail.com if you have any questions about the project. If you require any support services, please contact TENI at office@teni.ie.

ACCESSING THE FULL REPORT

The full report is publically available via <http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/89697>

If you are interested in following the ongoing project's updates, you can do so here <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Understanding-and-Improving-the-Lived-Experiences-of-Sexual-and-Gender-Minority-Students-in-Ireland>