This case study describes the experiences of an undergraduate student who began his course in October 2010. He had registered with a female name. He gained access to support via the Student Centre and the Learning Centre at Central (previously called Student Support Services) for a range of different needs over the course of his first year. This included mentoring. He soon disclosed to a range of staff at Central that he wanted to transition and live as a man. The student has a history of self-harming, which started when he was 11, and he was self-harming at the point of accessing support at the institution.

The student had been diagnosed with depression several years prior to him commencing his studies and has had medication in the past. In early 2011 he came out as trans to his family. His life had become more strained due to highly negative responses from his family and he had been told to leave the family home. The Student Centre at Central along with other organisations, played a part in supporting his immediate housing crisis. However, because he was not prepared to leave his full-time study in Higher Education, he did not qualify for housing opportunities provided by the LGBT voluntary sector.

The student changed his name by deed poll and a plan was put in place at Central for the Academic Registry to amend his details and for IT Services to issue him with a new email address. Gendered Intelligence, an organisation that works with young trans people, were approached by the Learning Centre team in order to help them think through some of the logistics of communicating the student’s self-identified gender identity to all students across the three-year programme.

A member of staff from Gendered Intelligence attended a meeting with the Head of Student Support Services to discuss the disclosure of the young person’s trans status to his peers. There was a further meeting with other members of the University staff, including a member of the student’s Course Team to talk through the specifics of this request. Because the Gendered Intelligence worker had become familiar with the university setting, it was felt that it would be appropriate for him to be present at a large meeting with the student year group when the announcement took place. The worker from Gendered Intelligence and an academic member of staff informed the group that this student identifies as transgender and is now living his life as a man. They stated that the student’s new name is X and his preferred pronoun is ‘he’. They informed the other students that he would be issued with a new email address and the old one will be redundant after a specified period of time, that he will use male facilities and be treated as male. The student group were reminded of Central’s policies relating to equality and diversity, which include a policy statement on transgender
equality. The url link was distributed for those who wished to access that information from the website.

It was also stated for the peer group that the student was happy for people to ask him questions that were deemed appropriate and relevant to him being supported through his studies. Students were reminded that they were able to find out more about transgender experiences through other means, and they were directed to various useful organisations and sources of information. The Course Team member also stated that they would be happy to be approached by any students if they had any questions.

Following this meeting, the University contracted Gendered Intelligence to be part of the Learning Centre team as a mentor for the period of time of the students’ transition. In reference to this work with a transgender student, the then Head of Student Support Services stated:

“It was useful to have an opportunity to share information and discuss the welfare of the particular student concerned and to identify the student’s priorities and concerns. Before the meeting, I think it is fair to say that we were struggling. It was useful to have some reassurance about support being offered externally and to be able to start joining this up so we were not replicating effort or offering contradictory advice either to other staff or the student themselves.” (Head of Student Support Services)

The member of Academic Staff who work as part of the Course Team said:

“As a new lecturer, having the external expert support and guidance from the student’s mentor, in order to ensure that the student was receiving the correct support, was invaluable. Knowing that the student had this mentor meant that we were also able to concentrate on the student’s academic welfare, safe in the knowledge that he was able to access expert support and guidance. Additionally, the joint meetings with all the people involved in the student’s welfare meant that we were able to ensure that everyone was on the same page and did not offer conflicting advice.” (Lecturer)

After the meeting with the year group, the student stated:

“It has only been one day and everything has been going really well. Teachers and students are using the right pronouns and it feels amazing. Every hour I’m flooded by FB [Facebook] messages, texts, emails and personal comments from people saying how much they respect me for this.” (Young trans man, student)

Mentoring with the external mentor started in July 2011. During initial sessions, discussions centred on the student’s medical transition, approaching their GP and
accessing Gender Identity Services. There were also discussions about the effects of taking the hormone testosterone, and what the various methods of administration of that hormone treatment are. The mentor also liaised with various medical practitioners to ensure they were receiving the right information and documents in order for the process to be as smooth as possible.

At the beginning of the academic year 2011/12, the student entered the second year of his degree. He had commenced his hormone therapy, however, he continued to feel anxious and emotional. He was stressed about his financial situation. He continued to have no relationship with his family. In November 2011, he suffered from another housing crisis and was rehoused in a hostel. Here he was also offered a support worker. His physicality was changing, but he felt frustrated by the long process for desired effects of the hormone treatment such as voice change, facial hair growth etc. In sessions with the mentor he talked about the advantages and disadvantages of passing as male and explored whether there were other things that could be done in order to ‘look’ older. He was alert to what other people (students and staff) would say about his appearance, as well as what he felt were patronizing attitudes towards him, as someone who looked younger than his actual age. The student claimed that his moods continued to be up and down.

Options around chest surgery were also explored during sessions. The mentor and student researched together some of the various surgeons and procedures that would be available to him in the future. The student asked questions about the time it takes to recover, time needed off work, the pain that he would have, his care needs as well as the expected results of such surgery.

Mentoring sessions continued to take place but were not regular due to the more chaotic nature of the student’s life. The student has stated, however, that his course and his learning experience is a very positive aspect of his life. He claimed that he has ‘come out’ to more people at University and stated that he finds it hard during holiday periods when he is not on site and among his peer group. Through his studies, he had also been introduced to theatre companies who work with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, as well as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans identities and experiences. He had also enjoyed being on placements in different settings as part of his course.