

SUPPORTING TRANSGENDER STUDENTS AT CENTRAL SCHOOL OF SPEECH & DRAMA

**CENTRAL
SCHOOL**
OF SPEECH & DRAMA

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INTRODUCTION

The number of transgender students in Higher Education has been increasing over recent years. More people who identify as transgender are studying on Central School of Speech & Drama's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Some students transitioned some time ago, whilst others are just 'coming out' as transgender and consequently are managing life changes alongside their studies.

In 2011, Central established a mentoring service for students who identify as transgender. The mentoring service is for students who are undergoing gender reassignment, intend to undergo gender reassignment, or at some time in the past have undergone gender reassignment. Mentoring takes place where mental health conditions (for example depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal tendencies) are being exacerbated because of feelings around gender identity. Due to the specialist nature of such students' needs, external expertise was brought in. This document provides contextual information on the subject of transgender people studying in Higher Education and should be read alongside the case studies of two students who were studying at Central and were supported by the institution in connection with their gender identity. Together, the documents outline issues that arose for the students and how their needs have been met by the Higher Education Institution.

WHAT IS TRANSGENDER?

Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (2006) use transgender as their term of choice for 'a wide range of phenomena that call attention to the fact that "gender", as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and

encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity' (p3). Transgender and trans are terms that are used increasingly in many contexts including university settings. They describe a person who feels that the gender they were assigned at birth is not a correct or complete description of what they are or feel themselves to be. The term transgender can be used to describe a person who undergoes gender reassignment in order to live in their self-identified gender (for example men or women), but can also be used to describe a wide range of gender expressions that are variations from normative gender expression (for example masculine or 'butch' women, feminine men and cross-dressers). Genderqueer is another term that has gained currency in recent years and describes someone who identifies their gender as other than 'man' or 'woman', or someone who identifies as neither, both, or some combination thereof. Some genderqueer people may identify as a third gender or move between gender descriptions in a fluid way. Genderqueer as a political term challenges the binary of gender (male/ female) and heteronormativity. Significantly, reclamation of the historically derogative term 'queer' has not been universal and not everyone likes or uses the term.

CONTEXT: EQUALITY LEGISLATION

Widening Participation has meant more students are coming into Higher Education from diverse backgrounds, with different identities, abilities and healthcare needs. The Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the Equalities Act 2010 ensure that transgender people who are working and studying are protected from discrimination and harassment. The Disability Discrimination Act, which includes those with mental health conditions, establishes a duty of care to students who have the right to legal redress if 'reasonable adjustments' are not made. Gender Identity Disorder is currently the diagnosis that is received from a medical practitioner to any person who wishes to undergo gender reassignment. According to the Sex Discrimination Act (amended 1999): "Gender Reassignment is a process which is undertaken under medical supervision for the purposes of reassigning a person's sex by changing physiologically or other characteristics of sex and includes any part of such a process" (SDA Section 2a Medical). Under the

Gender Recognition Act 2004, a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) gives full legal recognition to a person who has undergone gender reassignment. This changes birth certificates and a person's trans status is confidential.

All public services are bound to promote equality through the Equalities Act 2010. This highlights protected characteristics such as race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion or belief, and gender reassignment. This Act aims to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment. For the purposes of this Act, removing the requirement for medical supervision has changed the definition of gender reassignment. This means that you can self-identify as a person who is undergoing, has undergone or intends to undergo gender reassignment. You do not have to be over 18 to be protected. Public sector organisations have to demonstrate due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations in the course of developing policies and delivering services through the Public Sector Equality Duty.

MENTAL HEALTH OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

Research indicates that trans people may be particularly at risk of experiencing difficulties with their emotional health and mental wellbeing, due to the barriers they face in connection with their gender identity. *Engendered Penalties* (2007) tells us that 31% of trans people attempt suicide, with 16% making repeated attempts; 10% of trans people are bullied in the workplace; 6% are physically assaulted; 73% experience harassment; 10% are victims of threatening behaviour. The report states that “young transgender people are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and harassment” with a striking 64% of young trans men and 44% of young trans women experiencing harassment or bullying at school.

In May 2008, Dr Kath Browne with Dr Jason Lim carried out an in-depth study of LGBT Lives in Brighton & Hove called “Count Me In Too”. In this study they found “42% of trans people said they had poor or very poor emotional and mental wellbeing over the past 12 months, compared to less than 1 in 5 [25%] respondents [LGBT people] overall” (Browne, 2008). Browne adds that trans people are “significantly more likely” than other

groups to have had difficulties in the last 5 years with significant emotional distress, depression, anxiety, anger management, fears/ phobias, panic attacks, addictions/ dependencies and suicidal thoughts.

In 2011, Gendered Intelligence, an organisation that works with transgender people from the ages of 13 - 25, carried out its own survey called "Capturing Journeys". Interviewing 40 of its members, it notes that 16 of the young people (40%) were not 'out' as trans in their everyday lives, including their education, workplace, home life or within their local settings; 12 (30%) were suffering or had suffered from depression; 25 (62.5%) described themselves as having low confidence, insecurities and low self-worth; 22 (55%) claimed to feel socially anxious regularly; 12 (30%) were currently self-harming or had self-harmed at some time in the recent past (6 months).

MENTORING AT CENTRAL

Central's mentoring scheme for transgender students and those wishing to explore their gender identity offers the opportunity to explore feelings and needs with a person who has knowledge and experience of being trans. Discussions can include topics such as undergoing a medical or social transition, as well as looking at difficult and challenging aspects of living and studying as a transgender person. The mentoring scheme aims to offer practical support and takes a problem-solving approach to issues that relate to the student's gender identity. Each mentor aims to explore, with the student, various coping strategies to help overcome difficulties, and to harness the strengths and resilience of the individual.

The mentor ensures that the student has access to relevant information so that they can make informed choices about their lives. The mentor can also act as an advocate in addressing the student's needs within the University or, if required, with other external agencies, such as Gender Identity Clinics, health services, social workers, housing officers and employers. The mentor may help with university administration, financial support, careers advice, and in accessing support and services within and outside of university (specifically where it relates to name or gender change on documents).

Detailed examples of the ways that Central and in particular, the mentoring scheme, have supported transgender students can be found within the two case studies. Specific areas that mentors working with transgender students have addressed are:

- offering information that will benefit any decision making around transitioning or identifying as trans, or questions about their gender identity;
- supporting the student with their social and medical transition;
- demonstrating an understanding of transgender identities, including gender queer and gender variance;
- managing name changes and administrative tasks such as changing details on important documents and records;
- liaising with staff with regard to supporting the student within their academic setting, offering information around language, the practicalities of transitions and legal compliances for public sector bodies;
- liaising with peers, parents, and others who are supporting the person who may also have questions around what it means to be trans;
- addressing other needs such as housing and family life, police and health matters.