



# Creating inclusive environments for trans and gender-diverse students

## Why is this important?

The University of Melbourne's vision for education aims to create supportive environments in which students can explore, take risks and grow. As stated in *Advancing Students and Education Strategy 2030*, a key component of this involves celebrating "the tapestry of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that our students and staff bring."

Trans and gender diverse (TGD) students are a valued part of this tapestry. The University's commitment to supporting TGD students is articulated through the Diversity & Inclusion Strategy, LGBTIQA+ Inclusion Action Plan, and Gender Affirmation Policy, which are all underpinned by national and state-based legislative requirements.

Research suggests that TGD students face extra challenges in learning environments compared to their peers. These challenges stem from the ongoing broader socio-political climate in which we live, which impacts on their inclusion in society (including their family or culture of origin) and also affects the context of their university experience (see Resources).

Few people can learn effectively if they do not feel safe, and the University of Melbourne might be one of the few safe places that some TGD students have. This guide contains practical, evidence-based strategies that you can use to create welcoming and supportive learning spaces where *all* students can thrive.

# How to make your class welcoming

Below are some important concrete steps you can take to help students feel accepted. These steps should be followed all the time and not only if you have a TGD student, as they are good for everyone.

## Pronouns and names

Using correct names and pronouns is an important way to signal to students that you respect them and welcome them to your classroom as they are.

- ◆ **Share your pronouns** to model the practice (e.g., in your email signature, when you introduce yourself, in your zoom tag, etc). University pronoun pins are available in the Parkville Merchandise Shop (wholesale).
- ◆ On the first day of class, instead of reading from the class roll, **ask students to introduce themselves** with their preferred name. Make a note of the alignment with the official roll (which may have their legal name) so you remember but be sure to call them as they request, regardless of what is on the official roll. This also has the advantage of enabling you to hear the proper pronunciation of each student's name.
- ◆ **Encourage *but do not force* students to share their pronouns** when they introduce themselves; a requirement can feel coercive and revealing them can be hard for questioning or closeted TGD students.
- ◆ Mention to students that **they can reach out privately to you** if they wish to clarify anything about how they should be called. If *you* are confused, reach out privately to the student to clarify; do not have a conversation in front of everyone. Some TGD students might not be out to everyone; follow their wishes.
- ◆ **Use gender-neutral pronouns** like they/them if you don't know someone's gender — not just students but also authors whose work you discuss, people that others mention, etc.
- ◆ If you get something wrong, you should **neither ignore it nor apologise excessively**. Say sorry once, use the correct version, and move on. Afterwards, practice so you don't repeat the mistake.

## Best practices around gender

Always assume there is at least one TGD person in your class, even if they haven't identified themselves to you!

- ◆ **Avoid presuming that no TGD people are present.** Recognise that "debates" about transgender rights or experiences can be deeply alienating and very damaging to TGD people as well as allies.
- ◆ **Don't call on TGD people to explain something** TGD-related to the rest of the class. If they offer that is fine, but it should be up to the student, relevant to the topic, and clear that they do not speak for all TGD people.
- ◆ **Don't ask TGD people personal questions** about their life history, body, or feelings. If you wouldn't ask a cisgender person that kind of question, don't ask it of a TGD person. If you have *any* doubt, don't ask.
- ◆ **Don't use gender to divide students** into groups: ask them to organise themselves, or do it randomly.
- ◆ **Avoid gendered language:** e.g., say "everyone" or "students" instead of "ladies and gentlemen" or "guys"
- ◆ **Don't stereotype based on gender.** This includes things like asking apparently male students to do more physical activities, using scenarios or examples based on traditional gender roles, etc.

# Practical tips and common concerns

## I find it hard to use they/them pronouns; it feels ungrammatical

This is not uncommon, even though we normally use neutral pronouns in English when we don't know someone's gender (e.g.: "I saw an intruder! They ran out the door") and this usage is not new. Luckily it's just habit that makes this difficult, so it will feel more natural with practice. The key is to *practice in your thoughts*, not just when you're in front of the person. If you get used to using the right pronouns when thinking about someone, then you're less likely to mess up later!

## What if I do or say something wrong?

It's ok to make mistakes! We all do. If you do, acknowledge it, correct it, and move on ("my mistake, sorry, [correct name/pronoun]...") The main thing is to know that people can tell the difference between occasional honest errors and deliberate insults; only the latter are a big issue. So try not to dwell on your error. or make it into a big deal. Channel any embarrassment into practicing so you don't repeat it. Don't direct your feelings at your TGD students or make it their job to manage your emotions. Just do your best and keep trying and you'll be fine.

## What do I do if a student comes out to me as TGD?

Congratulations! You must be doing a great job for them to trust you with this. First, affirm them with a positive and compassionate attitude. Second, listen to them and ask what they need. You don't need to know all the answers; the main thing is that you hear what they have to say and provide empathy and support. Third, refer them to University services and, if you need, seek out such services yourself for additional guidance (see Resources).

## What do I do if another person misgenders or hassles my TGD student?

If it is accidental or minor, do the same thing as you'd do if you made a mistake: don't make a big deal out of it, but correct it quickly and move on. If it is consistent, correct the offender more explicitly in private. If the intent is hostile or it continues even after this, treat this as you would any other kind of intentional harassment (see Resources).

## What if this doesn't align with my personal beliefs?

Our recommendations are underpinned by University Policy and legislative requirements. They are about supporting your students, to whom you owe a duty of care to provide an educational environment that is free from discrimination. You aren't obligated to share their internal experiences or agree with them about the abstract meaning of gender. You *are* required to show them common courtesies like addressing them as they wish to be called.

## How can I make my curriculum more inclusive?

If you aren't well-versed in TGD issues, resist the temptation to make them a focus; implementing something badly can be more distressing than simply ignoring the topic. That said, there are simple things you can do, like wearing a pronoun pin, occasionally showing pictures of TGD people on slides (without calling extra attention to them), including "non-binary" as an option in polls or datasets, acknowledging days of importance like Transgender Day of Visibility, mentioning shows or media with TGD characters, putting a pride sticker on your laptop, etc. Be thoughtful and authentic to yourself. These things might feel small to you but can be very meaningful to a student who is struggling or who feels invisible.

# Need further support?

## Specialist resources

- ◆ The **Safer Community Program** gives support and advice about inappropriate, concerning, or threatening behaviour in general
- ◆ It also offers **specialist support for TGD people**, including about how to navigate IT/admin systems and processes, change one's name, access services, etc
- ◆ This includes the ability to **make appointments** with a dedicated Gender Affirmation advisor who can provide specialised, personal, and confidential guidance on all of these things.

## Social support

- ◆ The **Pride in Action Network** is a group of queer students and staff (and allies) dedicated to building community here
- ◆ There is LGBTIQA+ friendly **counselling** offered through UoM
- ◆ The UMSU **Queer Department** offers support and connection to LGBTIQA+ students at UoM
- ◆ Victorian **Pride Centre** is a hub for LGBTIQA+ communities and organisations: many resources and groups to connect to

## Learning more

- ◆ **Wikipedia** is a good starting point to understand TGD people
- ◆ **Transgender Victoria** is the state's leading body working for TGD health and rights
- ◆ **Amnesty International** monitors the state of the world for TGD and other queer people

## Did you know...?

- ◆ The Victorian Equal Opportunity Act (2010) prevents discrimination on the basis of gender identity and requires organisations to uphold positive duty of care, meaning the University must create an environment where discrimination is unlikely to occur.
- ◆ Students at UoM have a right to enrol under a preferred name, even if it is not their legal name. IT systems are complex and don't always reflect the preferred name. Don't assume the system is correct (e.g., LMS or email); follow your students' lead.
- ◆ It can be challenging to figure out how to map feelings of gender to cultural labels or decisions. It is thus not uncommon for TGD folks to "try on" different ways of presenting or labelling themselves; this is a key part of the process of figuring things out and is not a sign that their feelings are not real. You do not need to help them figure things out, but you can refer them to the resources above.
- ◆ Although TGD people have always existed, the words describing them have changed over time and vary considerably between languages and (sub)cultures. You don't have to be an expert; just listen to your students and use the terms they prefer.
- ◆ Being TGD (which is about gender identity) is not the same as being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual (which is about the kind of person one is or is not attracted to). TGD people have the same variation in sexual attraction that cisgender folks do. Gender identity is also distinct from sex, which depends on many factors (that may vary) including hormones, gametes, chromosomes, genitalia, etc