

# Out in sport

**Supporting trans students  
in sport in further and higher  
education**

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# Introduction

## The research

NUS' *Out in sport* report revealed for the first time the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) students in sport. The research found that while a majority of LGBT students do participate in some form of sporting or fitness activity, and the majority of those participating in team sports were having a positive experience doing so, there were significant barriers faced by many LGBT students in deciding to participate in sport in the first place, and there were a significant minority of LGBT students who had had negative experiences of participating in sport.

13.7 per cent (n=116) of *Out in sport* survey respondents identified as trans in some way, including as a gender variant person (8.2 per cent), trans man (3.7 per cent), trans woman (1.5 per cent), gender queer (1.2 per cent), and other trans identities (3.8 per cent).<sup>1</sup> While this was a relatively high number of responses, the raw numbers were low enough to mean that in-depth analysis looking at specific segments of the trans respondents was not always possible.

### More resources:

#### Out in sport: LGBT students' experiences of sport

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/open/lgbt/Out-in-Sport-report/>

#### Out in sport: Students' union case studies

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/open/lgbt/Out-in-Sport-Case-Studies/>

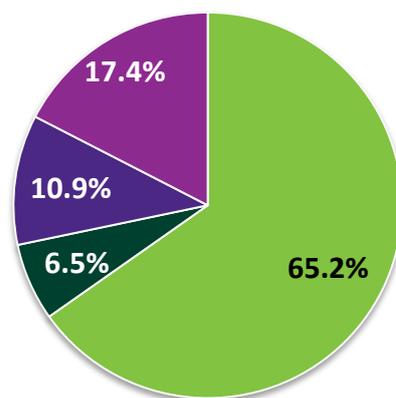
#### Out in sport poster

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/open/lgbt/Out-in-Sport-Poster/>

## Trans students in sport

However, analysis did reveal that while roughly the same proportion of trans students are open to everyone in their sport about their gender identity as LGB students are open about their sexual orientation, a higher proportion of trans students (6.5 per cent) were open to their coach/management only, compared to LGB students, where this figure was closer to one per cent. This may indicate that trans students are more reluctant to be open with their peers, or conversely that they are more likely to find it difficult to participate in sport at all without informing a coach of their gender identity.

**Figure 1: Which of the following best describes how open you are about your gender identity/sexual orientation in the sport you are involved in? (Trans respondents only)**



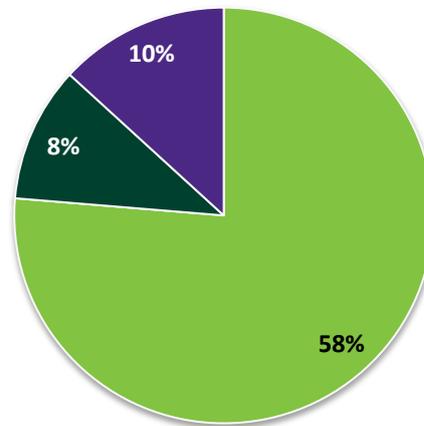
- Open to everyone
- Open to coach/management only
- Open to peers/teammates only
- Not open to anyone

This possible explanation is supported by the data showing that ten per cent of trans respondents were somewhat uncomfortable about being open within their sport setting (figure 2), while comparable figures for LGB students were under five per cent.

Trans students who did not participate in sport were also far more likely to report that they were put off by gendered sports teams, they did not find the facilities (i.e. showers, changing rooms, etc) inclusive, or they felt uncomfortable in the gender-specific kit and/or clothing.

*Out in sport* and its recommendations are aimed at improving the sporting experiences of all LGBT students, but unions can take particular action to support trans students to participate in sport and to enjoy it to the fullest extent possible.

**Figure 2: How comfortable are you about being open? (Trans respondents only)**



- Very/somewhat comfortable
- Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- Very/somewhat uncomfortable

# Tools for students' unions

## Policies and eligibility

Trans students in the research indicated that they were sometimes prevented from participating in sport by a lack of clarity over whether they were eligible to participate in sports in their current gender identity.

The governing body for student sport in the UK is British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS). BUCS' "Transgender policy" states that "where transgender issues arise, the policy of the National Governing Body (NGB) for each sport should be adopted with respect to any eligibility issues."<sup>2</sup>

NUS has investigated the policies of the NGBs of the twenty most popular sports identified by LGBT students in the *Out in sport* report. Many NGBs use the International Olympic Committee (IOC) guidance which requires athletes who have transitioned after puberty to have completed any surgical changes, to have received legal recognition in their new gender, and to have been receiving hormonal treatment for a sufficient length of time (recommended as no sooner than two years).<sup>3</sup> NGBs that do not defer to IOC guidance generally still require either surgery or hormone therapy, particularly for trans women.

In general, the policies of NGBs rarely make provision for trans people who choose not to undergo surgery or receive hormone therapy. NUS was not able to find any NGB which affirmed that all trans athletes are eligible to compete as the gender with which they identify.

Overall, the policies of NGBs are not fit for purpose for student sport on both a practical level and in terms of values considerations.

## Practical considerations

Student sport differs from other sport that student athletes are only involved for the period of a few years (while they are a student), and many student athletes are young adults.

## NUS believes that all trans students should be able to compete in student sport as the gender with which they identify.

Since (in the UK) medical transition options such as hormones or surgery are not generally available to people under 18, regulations from NGBs around medical transitions pose significant barriers to trans students who may arrive in FE or HE without having had the chance to make the changes required by the regulations even if they had wanted to.

## Values considerations

Sport organised by students' unions and educational institutions is different to sport organised outside of an educational setting in terms of its values as well.

Sport in an educational setting is just as much about personal development as it is about competition. Through sport, student athletes develop leadership, teamwork, and other skills which not only enrich students' lives but also lead to greater employability and prospects for the future. The policies of NGBs may have weighted the value of competition in comparison to these other considerations more heavily than a students' union or educational institution would do.

Students' unions and institutions also have to consider equalities implications and the value of inclusivity as part of their activity. There are a number of benefits to ensuring that trans students feel welcome and included in participating in all levels of sport. As the Equality Challenge Unit points out in relation to sport services in higher education, an inclusive

approach to sport services can have many benefits, including:

- generating and sustaining financial income;
- offering a competitive service; and
- helping to meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010<sup>4</sup>

NUS LGBT believes that all trans students should be able to compete in student sport as the gender with which they identify and encourages students' unions and athletic unions to lobby BUCS to revise its policy.

In the meantime, there are actions that students' unions can take to make their sport provision as inclusive as possible:

- **Make information about eligibility easily accessible:**

Any team which is not playing under BUCS organisation (such as intramural teams and friendly matches) should be open to all students to participate as the gender in which they identify. Publicising this can remove some of the barriers to trans students' participation. Where regulations outside the SU or AU's control may prevent some trans students from participating, this information should also be made easily accessible. Unions can simultaneously indicate that they disagree with this policy, thereby continuing to send inclusive messages to trans students.

- **Provide more mixed-gender sporting options:**

This recommendation from the original *Out in sport* report removes any question of trans students' eligibility and also ensure that students who identify as genderqueer or otherwise identify outside of the gender binary. 18 per cent of respondents who did not participate in sport said that they had been put off by gendered sports teams, and 16 per cent of respondents chose 'having more mixed gender sports teams' as one of the top three steps they would like to see to encourage more LGBT students to be involved in sport.

## Facilities and equipment

While 12.8 per cent of all survey respondents who did not participate in sport cited the facilities not being inclusive as a barrier, this rose to 36.1 per cent of trans respondents. Focus group participants cited single-cubicle changing rooms as a crucial way to protect trans people's privacy and 10.9 per cent of all survey respondents selected 'ensuring facilities are gender neutral' as one of the top three steps to encourage more LGBT students to participate in sport.

*Out in sport* recommends that students' unions and institutions audit their sports facilities to assess how inclusive they are and to understand any changes that need to be made.

If your union is specifically looking to audit sport facilities for trans-inclusiveness, you should ensure that trans students are involved in the audit process. NUS has created a model facilities audit as a tool for students' unions or institutions wishing to undertake this process.

## Model facilities audit

<b>1. Physical environment</b>			
<b>a. Are there facilities to allow students who wish to do so to shower and change clothes in private?</b>	Yes	Somewhat	No
Notes:			
<b>b. Are the provisions for private and group changing/showering facilities of equal quality?</b>	Yes	Somewhat	No
Notes:			
<b>c. Is there anything that could be changed about the physical condition of the facilities to make them more accessible to LGBT students?</b>	Yes	Somewhat	No
Notes:			
<b>2. Interpersonal environment</b>			
<b>a. Is there a culture of tolerance and inclusion inside the facilities?</b>	Yes	Somewhat	No
Notes:			
<b>b. Do the facilities convey the message that LGBT students are welcome?</b>	Yes	Somewhat	No
Notes:			
<b>c. Is there anything that could be changed about the interpersonal environment to make it more accessible to LGBT students?</b>	Yes	Somewhat	No
Notes:			

## Further research on your campus

The barriers to trans students' participation in sport highlighted above have come from national research on this area, but trans students on your campus may face a different set of circumstances.

You may want to do a some qualitative research such as interviews or a focus group with trans students at your institution to better understand how they feel about the sporting opportunities provided and what they would like to see changed.

### Research with trans students on your campus: Key questions to ask

- Are there enough opportunities for trans students to participate in sport at our institution?
- Is the culture of sport at our institution welcoming and inclusive of trans students?
- What are the barriers to trans students' participation in sport at our institution?
- In addition to the issues of eligibility policies and facilities which were identified in this briefing, are there any other areas of participation in sport that raise particular concerns for trans students?
- What could the students' union and/or the institution be doing differently to encourage more trans students to participate in sport?
- What are the differences in experience amongst different types of trans students (including different gender identities, sexual orientations, races, disabilities, religions, ages, and other aspects of identity)?
- How can the students' union and/or institution ensure it is meeting the needs of all trans students with regards to sporting opportunities?

## Ask trans students on your campus: Are there enough opportunities for trans students to participate in sport at our institution?

Interviews and focus groups are great ways to gather information, particularly when you think the group of students you are targeting might be quite small as a proportion of the overall student population. Qualitative research is ideal for eliciting in-depth information about a subject area. It can give participants an opportunity to explain the reasons behind their actions as well as illuminating the personal impacts that policies and practices have on individuals.

Interviews are generally one-on-one conversations while focus groups are most effective when held with small numbers of students (8-10 people). In either case, you should assure students that their anonymity will be protected and that they are under no obligation to participate. However, you can also make clear the benefits of participation, in terms of shaping the students' union's or institution's action on trans people in sport.

It is normally considered good practice to record your interviews or focus groups in order to more accurately report what was said, and you should make sure to write down your analysis as soon as possible after the focus group or interview, so that you remember all the details of the interaction.

It is also good practice to communicate the results of the research, and what you plan to do with it, back to participants.

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## Conclusion

The *Out in sport* research demonstrated that many trans students do participate in sport and enjoy their time whilst doing so—however there remains a significant proportion of trans students who face barriers to participating in student sport.

This guide is intended to help students' unions understand the particular issues raised by trans students and to give unions the tools to make their sports provision more inclusive of trans students. The most important principle of this is to include trans students in your actions so that you ensure the changes you make will be as effective as possible.

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## Further reading

NUS (2010). *Guide to becoming trans inclusive for student activists and authors*.  
<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/open/lgbt/Trans-Students-Guide/>

Griffin, Pat and Carroll, Helen (2010). *On the team: Equal opportunity for transgender athletes*  
[https://www.genderspectrum.org/images/stories/On\\_The\\_Team.pdf](https://www.genderspectrum.org/images/stories/On_The_Team.pdf)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Respondents could select more than one option.

<sup>2</sup> British Universities and Colleges Sport (2012). *BUCS Transgender Policy*. Available from:  
[http://c1593.r93.cf3.rackcdn.com/BUCS\\_Transgender\\_Policy.pdf](http://c1593.r93.cf3.rackcdn.com/BUCS_Transgender_Policy.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> UK Sport (2005). *Transsexual People and Sport: Guidance for sporting bodies*. Department for Culture, Media, and Sport:  
<http://www.uk sport.gov.uk/publications/transsexual-people-and-sport>

<sup>4</sup> Equality Challenge Unit (2011). *Include and inspire: Sport services and fitness services in higher education*. Available from:  
<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/include-and-inspire-sport-and-fitness-services-in-higher-education>

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