Briefing – Pronoun Integration at UCL Policy Proposal

Date: 19 January 2024
Audience: Welfare and Community Zone

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

The Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Team at UCL has Pronoun Guidance which outlines the importance of using pronouns, especially at a global university like UCL.[1]There is also additional staff guidance available to support the needs of LGB[2] and Trans Employees.[3]

UCL also has Policy and guidance to help staff support transitioning and non-binary students, which provides a comprehensive explanation of the support a variety of departments can give these students.[4] This also covers practical changes such as updating student records and obtaining gender recognition certificates. A key quote from this policy is "UCL staff will help to make certain that no student is subject to discrimination or harassment as a result of gender presentation."

UCL's Prevention of Bullying, Harassment and Sexual Misconduct Policy specifically states that speculating or gossiping about someone's perceived sexuality or gender identity, refusing to use someone's preferred gendered pronoun or dead naming are forms of unacceptable behaviours.[5]

UCL's website also has a page dedicated to adding and sharing pronouns on Zoom. This includes a how-to guide on adding pronouns on Zoom profiles.[6]

Specific departments and faculties are promoting inclusivity in communications among their students and staff. For instance, the Faculty of Brain Sciences has highlighted the pronoun feature on the MS Teams platform at UCL and the Chemical Engineering Department endorses the UCL-wide 'Dignity at Work' policy.[7] UCL has also funded a project on 'Increasing the visibility of pronouns within clinical settings' during 2022-2023.[8] Further, students have spearheaded initiatives such as the pronouns badges project within the UCL community.[9]

At the Students' Union, we already encourage elected sabbatical officers, elected student officers and staff members to share their pronouns on their email signature. However, individuals are not required to share their pronouns, and therefore may choose not to. There is also a similar procedure in place for election candidates where they can share their pronouns if they wish.

[1] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/equality-areas/lgbtq-equality/pronouns-work
[2] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/equality-areas/lgbtq-equality/lgbtq-support-and-guidance
[3] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/sites/human-resources/files/trans_guidance_1.pdf
[4] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/policies/equality-and-diversity/students-transitioning-gender
[5] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/prevention-bullying-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct-policy
[6] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/isd/adding-and-sharing-pronouns-zoom
[7] https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/fbs-edi/category/lgbtq/; https://www.ucl.ac.uk/chemical-engineering/equality-diversity-inclusion/dignity-work
[8] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers/changemakers-projects/2022-23-projects
[9] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/about-ioe/ioe-life/graduation/graduation-2022

What would change if the policy was successful?

SU clubs and society committee members would receive training on gender-related issues, especially in regards to trans people, encouraging the use of pronouns, and how to integrate these into online systems they use.

The SU would also continue to encourage elected officers and staff to share their pronouns across digital platforms and in communications.

The SU would lobby UCL to ensure that online platforms have integrated pronoun options, including custom options on Moodle and Portico. This could be further enhanced by ensuring that there are tutorials and instructions available about how to include your pronouns in these systems.

The SU would also implement a research/feedback mechanism to understand the impact of the policy and how students (especially LGBTQ+ students) perceive the sharing of pronouns.

What is the relevant national / international context to this situation?

In the UK, legal protections against discrimination based on gender identity are embedded in the Equality Act 2010. Employers are expected to create inclusive environments, and this includes respecting individuals' chosen pronouns.

Universities in the UK are increasingly incorporating pronoun awareness into campus culture.[10] Student unions, support services, and academic institutions are working to create environments that respect and acknowledge diverse gender identities.

From an international perspective, legal protections for gender identity and pronoun usage vary globally. Some countries, like Canada and Australia, have similar legal frameworks as the UK, while others may have limited or no specific protections.

In some countries, there might be more conservative views, making it challenging for individuals to openly express their preferred pronouns. In contrast, more progressive nations may have embraced inclusive practices. Sensitivity to cultural nuances is crucial in creating inclusive environments that transcend national boundaries.

With the rise of remote work and international collaborations in academia, understanding and respecting diverse pronoun usages have become essential.

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

The use of personal pronouns is an important part of an individual's gender identity. Gender reassignment is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 and this legislation protects people at any stage of their transition against discrimination and harassment[11].

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[10] https://www.imperial.ac.uk/equality/resources/lgbtq-equality/pronouns/; https://www.qmul.ac.uk/student-advice-and-signposting-hub/being-an-advisor/trans-students/; https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/a-small-part-of-making-a-big-difference-adding-pronouns-to-staff-profiles

[11] https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/equality/equality-act-2010/your-rights-under-equality-act-2010/gender-reassignment-discrimination

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

In 2021, a similar policy was passed in the Education Zone which lapses on 31/01/2024.[12]

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder / public relations issues with this policy proposal?

Implementing pronoun integration would require training programmes for staff, elected officers and club & society committee members. Costs associated with creating and delivering these programmes, including materials and potential use of external trainers, should be considered.

Operations staff within the SU may need to dedicate time to update existing digital platforms.

The cost of the suggested research project should also be considered, with staff time to undertake the research and draft the research report.

Are there any sustainability implications to this item for discussion?

No.

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this item for discussion?

By proactively incorporating pronoun awareness, we signal a resolute commitment to diversity and inclusion. It is about creating an environment where everyone feels not only welcome but truly valued.

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

Training programmes would have to be designed for elected student officers, SU staff, and SU club and society committee members for pronoun awareness and integration.

The SU would lobby UCL to advocate for improved and integrated pronoun options on online platforms. This training should be accessible to all students with clear instructions and would also include encouraging students and leaders to include their pronouns in email signatures.

The SU would also facilitate the use of pronoun badges by students, student leaders, and union members.

The SU will also conduct follow-up research to understand the impact of the policy and how students, especially LGBTQ+ students, perceive the sharing of pronouns. A feedback mechanism can be established for students to share their experiences and suggestions regarding the implementation of pronoun usage. This can help identify areas for improvement and address any challenges that arise.

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[12] https://studentsunionucl.org/policy/up2107/pronouns-in-class