



**The Experiences of Transgender
Students Accessing and Using**

The Gender Expression Fund

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Foreword

In 2022, Students' Union UCL launched the Gender Expression Fund. This fund was established as a supportive measure for our trans and gender nonconforming students, particularly in light of the cost of living crisis. Since its launch, over 100 students have accessed the fund, with over £7,000 of financial support being delivered.

The fundamental objective of the Gender Expression Fund is to facilitate trans and gender nonconforming students' expression their chosen identity, in a manner akin to any other individual who does not face challenges in presenting their identity.

Since the withdrawal of UCL from Stonewall, many of our LGBTQ+ students, specifically trans students, have felt let down. Unfortunately, this has been compounded by an increase in the prevalence of anti-trans rhetoric. The Gender Expression Fund therefore has an important role to play in alleviating some of the stresses of having an identity that is constantly spot-lit in culture wars, and one that often also carries with it an additional financial burden, often compounded by other difficulties.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the inception, significance, and influence of our Gender Expression Fund. Our findings underscore the necessity of robust institutional support to ensure trans and gender nonconforming students do not fall through the cracks.

Unfortunately, despite the fund's existence, challenges persist. Staff members lack awareness about the fund, hindering effective signposting for students, and there is a broader pattern of insufficient training and education across UCL. In response, this report outlines actionable steps that UCL should take to enhance support for the trans and gender nonconforming community.

Finally, thank you to our Policy and Research Team for their brilliant work on this project. We now have real insight into the impact Gender Expression Funds can play, and helpful, evidence-based suggestions as to what more can be done.

Ahmad Ismail, Equity and Inclusion Officer 2023-2024

Executive summary

The Gender Expression Fund (GEF) was launched by Students' Union UCL in 2022. Set up at the request of UCL's LGBTQ+ Student Network, the GEF is part of a commitment made by UCL's President & Provost Dr Michael Spence in February 2022 to supporting trans, non-binary, and gender nonconforming students and staff.

In the 2022-2023 academic year, 84 students received funding via the GEF, totalling almost £5,000. By applying online through a webpage hosted on the Students' Union UCL website, transgender students were able to apply for a grant of up to £100 to be used to purchase gender expression products (or services and travel related to gender expression). This report sought to explore and evaluate recipients' experiences with the fund through a mixed-method analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected from the relevant body of students.

Through the above, this report illustrates that the GEF was experienced positively by a large majority of students who successfully accessed it (n=21/25). Specifically, 84% of respondents reported that they found the application process easy (n=21/25). Moreover, respondents unanimously agreed that accessing the fund had had a positive impact on their 'well-being and experience as a student at UCL' (n=25/25). Within this, 76% (n=20/25) stated that they 'strongly' agreed with this correlation (n = 19/25). A strong majority of 80% also stated that they either 'strongly agreed' (40%) (n=10/25) or 'agreed' (40%) (n=10/25) with the statement 'accessing the fund had a positive impact on my academic engagement at UCL'. However, while respondents understood the GEF to be an important and 'vital' step in improving trans-inclusivity on campus, they stressed that it should not be the extent of efforts in this regard. Ultimately, this report, therefore, recommends that the GEF be renewed with improvements made to the accessibility of the fund. It also recommends the creation of future trans-specific initiatives to improve trans-inclusion for transgender students on campus.

Methodology

This mixed-method study investigated the impact of the GEF on those who had accessed it in the last 12 months. All participants consented that they were happy to be contacted for specific research purposes and were recruited via email. The project combined a quantitative survey (n = 25) exploring recipients experiences with applying for, accessing, and using the fund, as well as perspectives on trans-inclusivity within UCL, and a qualitative focus group study (n = 3) analysed using thematic analysis. The focus group was facilitated by one researcher and notes were taken by a secondary researcher. This focus group was recorded via Teams, but not transcribed. The recording was used as a reference when constructing this report, and, along with the notes, was stored securely and deleted after the report's completion. In the focus group, a small group of survey respondents were brought together to further discuss their experiences applying, accessing, and using the GEF, as well as the trans¹ student experience at UCL. The primary researcher performed a singular follow-up interview after the focus group with a focus group participant, with the specific purpose of further discussing the GEF's impact on the academic engagement of postgraduate research students, as well as the transgender doctoral student experience more broadly. This interview was conducted via Teams and recorded for note-taking purposes. This recording was stored safely and deleted after the report's completion. The outlined approach allowed us to draw more meaningful conclusions between the experiences of these students, building on the quantitative findings of the survey as a framework to understand the qualitative data.

¹ Within this report, the term 'transgender' is used to represent transgender, non-binary, gender nonconforming or otherwise gender diverse individuals (Lange 2021).

Literature review

Alex Lange's 2021 research paper 'How transgender students get in, pay for, and explore gender in college' provides an insightful literary introduction to approaching the issue of trans students and their funding of gender expression products while enrolled in Higher Education (HE) institutions. As they state, entering HE allows all students – cisgender and transgender – the opportunity 'to access opportunities that might 'otherwise be closed off to them', both through gaining further education/training and also through being placed in a new and independent environment (Lange 2021 p.66). For transgender students specifically, the university environment 'provides the added benefit of experiencing a new environment in which they can live as their authentic selves, away from the gaze of important others like parents or previous peer groups' (Lange 2021 p.66; Nicolazzo 2016). For students in a major metropolitan city such as those at University College London (UCL), this is particularly pertinent given the presence of larger queer communities in these spaces. Accordingly, this can add an extra level of support and encouragement for the expression of transgender identity (Lange 2021, Austin 2022).

Being able to access this new-found potential for gender expression is proven to be an important factor in the improvement of the wellbeing, mental health, and overall happiness for transgender students. This has been demonstrated by Austin et al. in 'Gender euphoria: a grounded theory exploration of experiencing gender affirmation' (Austin et al. 2022). Here, they state that being provided with the opportunity for gender expression can lead to improved feelings of 'belonging' on campus for students, and perhaps also improve academic performance (Goldberg et al. 2019). However, as Lange's paper goes on to explore, there are numerous financial barriers which impact the ability of transgender students to access these gender expression products (Lange 2021). Within the UK context, students face stagnant maintenance loans and increasing living costs (Lange 2021, Goldberg and Kivalanka 2019). As reported in the Russell Group Students' Union's (RGSU) 'Student Cost of Living Report', students are experiencing 'immense financial pressure' (RGSU 2023 p.3). The report illustrates that a quarter of students are 'regularly going without food or necessities because they cannot afford them', '54% of students believe their academic performance' and mental health have both 'suffered due to the cost-of-living crisis' (RGSU 2023).

Trans students report 'greater concern' over cost-of-living (Freeman and Stephenson 2024 p.37). A May 2024 report into 'Transgender and non-binary student experiences in higher education' reported that 45% of trans students have had their studies 'negatively impacted' by the cost of living crisis, a disproportionate figure given that only 26% of all students said the same (Freeman and Stephenson 2024 p.37). For many trans students, increased living costs present additional barriers. For example, trans individuals, as well as other LGBT+ individuals, often encounter a lack of familial support, leading to strained, or rejected, relationships with parents (Fuller and Riggs 2018, van Doussa et al. 2017). As a result, some trans students are not able to reach out to, or rely on, their parents for financial support (van Doussa et al. 2017, Freeman and Stephenson 2024).

Moreover, unlike their cisgender peers, trans students also are faced with extra gender-related expenses as a result of their identity. Using products which affirm, and facilitate socially ‘passing’² as, the gender identified with (as opposed to the one assigned) has been shown to play a vital role in establishing and affirming one’s proximity to health, as well as playing a central role in reducing the gender dysphoria for trans individuals across the globe (Strübel and Goswami 2022). This, in turn correlates with improving the happiness, confidence, and overall personal well-being of trans individuals (Dhejne et al. 2018). Accordingly, this can spark other forms of positive impact, such as better workplace or academic performance (Messman and Leslie 2019). However, these gender expression products and services (which include items like binders, packers, shoes in specialist sizes, specialised body hair removal) often come with a high price tag. To give an example, a high-quality, respiratory-system safe chest binder for transmasculine individuals from Spectrum Outfitters (a leading UK producer of chest binders for transmasculine people) costs between £40-45 (Spectrum Outfitters 2024). Given the large impact of the current cost of living crisis on UK students, as well as the added level of financial precarity faced by trans students, gender expression products can be financially inaccessible for many trans students (RGSU 2024, Fuller and Riggs 2018, van Doussa et al. 2017). Consequently, the existence of funds created to assist trans students with the purchasing of gender expression products can present a lifeline to individuals who would otherwise be unable to access this vital form of support. Students’ Union UCL’s ‘Gender Expression Fund’ is one example of this idea exercised in-practice, along with similar funds launched by Manchester Students’ Union, Cambridge Students’ Union, and Exeter Students’ Guild, among others.

Furthermore, these funds hold an added importance when one considers the contextual sociocultural and political climate they exist within. With anti-trans rhetoric on the rise both in the UK and abroad, trans students often report feeling isolated and unsupported by the higher education institutions they study in (Freeman and Stepheson 2024). In Freeman and Stepheson’s 2024 report, ‘Transgender and non-binary student experiences in higher education’, around 56% of transgender applicants reported feeling ‘rejected by others’ compared to 26% of cisgender applicants (Freeman and Stepheson 2024 p.6). They also felt concern over the possibility of accessing institutional funds, citing concern over whether university staff members would understand, and take seriously, their needs (Freeman and Stepheson 2024 p.38). The creation, and continued existence, of specific funds available for trans students to address the unique financial challenges that they face is imperative to creating a more equitable university experience for all students and a culture of acceptance within the university.

² ‘Passing’ is a verb used within the LGBT+ community to mean being socially ‘read’ as one’s correct gender identity.

Why did people apply for the fund?

1. Value of Gender Expression Products

As stated, the use of affirming gender expression products has been shown to positively correlate with increased wellbeing, mental health, academic performance, and overall happiness for transgender people (Strübel and Goswami 2022, Dhejne et al 2018, Messman and Leslie 2019). They do this through allowing trans people to better express themselves as the gender they identify with, enabling them to ‘pass’ in social situations and alleviate gender dysphoria (Strübel and Goswami 2022, Dhejne et al 2018, Messman and Leslie 2019). Trans students’ strong desire to access these products was evident in their responses. In reference to gender expression products, students (in both the survey and the focus group) repeatedly used the terms ‘need’ and ‘necessity’ to describe their relationship to gender expression products, demonstrating their importance.

Students also reported that they were motivated to apply for the GEF due to the positive effects that owning gender expression products would have on their life, including their experience as a student at UCL. Gender expression products increase the chances for students to be ‘passing’ socially as the gender they identify with, meaning that correct gender pronouns (or at least the ‘least wrong’) and language would be used more frequently or without explanation. This would allow for a more comfortable navigation of university life inside and outside of the lecture hall, particularly on ‘harder’ days. This was an idea particularly expressed by students who held additional responsibilities within UCL, such as student staff within the Students’ Union or those who held a Postgraduate Teaching Assistant (PGTA) role. For postgraduate research/ doctoral students, this extended to attending national and international academic conferences as a UCL-based researcher. For trans students with these additional professional and academic responsibilities, being able to present themselves as the gender they identify with clearly holds an increased layer of meaning and importance.

“I feel more confident when I wear the clothes that match my gender. I am happy to be out and do activities comfortably with other people.”

2. Financial Cost

In both the survey and the focus group data, the ‘financial stress’ associated with accessing gender expression products was cited as the dominating motivator for transgender students to apply for the GEF. A large majority of the students were keen to stress that, if they were to purchase the gender expression products they require to present as their chosen gender, it would mean that they would need to make ‘sacrifices elsewhere’, including sacrificing ‘basic necessities’. More specifically, out of the 25 responses given to an open comment survey question asking about motivations for application, 19 out of 25 responses mentioned not being able to access ‘desperately’ needed dysphoria-alleviating gender expression products because of a lack of funds (n = 19/25).

“I was struggling to justify spending money on products that I desperately needed to alleviate dysphoria or to be more comfortable in my expression. The fund meant I could access these with peace of mind, making it one less thing to worry about.”

“High cost of living meant that I didn’t have enough money of my own to be able to purchase products that supported my gender expression.”

Moreover, a smaller group of students voiced that they applied for the fund because of its ability to provide a source of funding that could be accessed outside of the knowledge of their family – particularly parents. Beyond the 19 respondents who stated that they would be unable to reasonably afford gender expression products, two students voiced that although they theoretically would be able to afford a gender expression product, they would be unable to purchase it because of family surveillance (n= 2/25).

In other words, for these students, if their families were able to see that they purchased gender expression products, this would have opened them up to questioning about their gender identity, and the potential repercussions that could come from that (Fuller and Riggs 2018, van Doussa et al 2017). In the focus group discussion, one student voiced that while they were able to explain an expense such as a haircut, buying something more obviously related to gender transition (such as a chest binder) would cause issues between themselves and their parents, to the extent that they believed they would risk being cut off from their principal income. For these students, applying to the GEF was motivated by its ability to allow for the purchase of gender expression products outside of familial supervision and surveillance.

“A lack of monetary support from my family in regards to transition.”

“I’d been considering buying a couple of binders for myself for a while but was paranoid about requesting money from my family to do so.”

Access

1. Value of Gender Expression Products

Students found out about the fund through a variety of sources, with no specific individual source dominating referrals of students to the fund. Combined, the Students' Union UCL's website, emails and Instagram page (which appeared in the 'other' category) accounted for 57% of student's awareness of the fund (n = 17/30).³ Within this category of union-related communication, the Students' Union UCL website took the largest proportion (53%, n = 9/17). Out of the remaining 47% of relevant responses, Students' Union UCL emails accounted for 41% (n = 7/17) and Students' Union UCL's Instagram accounted for just 6% (n = 1/17). Outside of union-related communication, 'Friends / Word of Mouth' was selected seven times (23%, n = 7/30), and the LGBTQ+ Network's stall at the Societies Fair was highlighted three times within the 'Other' category. It was voiced that individuals with student-staff involvement in the union and the university would be more likely to be made aware of the fund through network involvement, or college referral. Lastly, signposting to the fund by academic staff was selected only three times (10%) as a response (n = 3/30). Positively, this suggests that some staff are aware of the fund's existence and are willing to encourage their transgender students to apply.

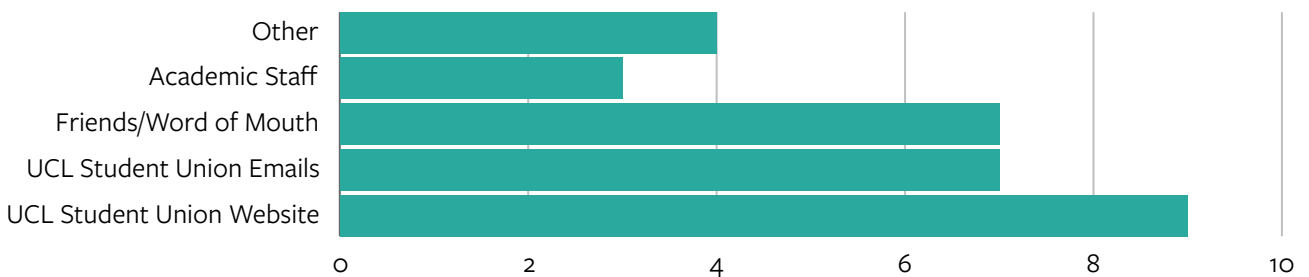


Figure 1. A bar chart showing the answers to the question 'How did you find out about the fund?' (n = 30).

2. Application Experience

The application process for the GEF consists of an online webform hosted on Students' Union UCL's website. The webform could be completed on either a phone, computer, or tablet. In a trust-based process, students self-declare their name, email address, student number, bank details, and gender identity. Applicants are then asked to describe what they intend to purchase using the fund, including details around item expenses. Applicants do not have to show how much money they have available in their bank account as this is not a means-tested fund. All information provided through the responses is kept confidential. After submitting the online form, the student is contacted by union staff

³ This data is pulled from the responses to Q.2 of the survey, where research participants were able to select multiple answers. 5 participants selected more than one option.

via email, and their requested funds (up to £100) are deposited into their given bank account.

Overall, as is illustrated by Figure 2, students reported that they had a positive experience with engaging in this process of access. When asked how they found the process, 84% of respondents reported that they found the process easy (n = 21/25). Specifically, 24% of the total responses selected that it 'extremely easy' (n = 6/25), and 60% reported that it was 'somewhat easy' (n = 15/25).

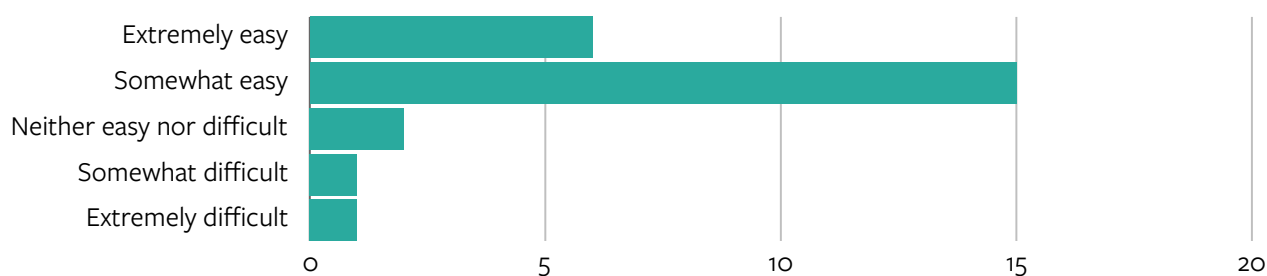


Figure 2. A bar chart showing the answers to the question ‘How did you find the process of accessing the GEF?’.

“The application process was easy and straightforward, and everything was sorted out quickly.”

When engaging with union staff via email, students felt that the staff were ‘discrete and understanding’, operating with the knowledge that gender expression products were something ‘needed’ by trans students. As one student noted, this made a welcome change from the attitude ‘too often’ present with trans-related support, where gender expression products are treated like a frivolity. Within this, there was a particular appreciation for union staff’s understanding of non-binary identities. A student voiced that this not only made them feel ‘validated’ in their identity, but also improved their experience of the application process itself.

Furthermore, several students expressed that the webform being short to complete and simple to navigate had made the process accommodating to their neurodivergence. As one student went on to discuss in the focus group, given the fact that ‘a significant body of clinical research has demonstrated that neurodivergent individuals are more likely than neurotypical individuals to have trans and/or gender expansive identities’, the importance of this should not be understated (Bornstien 2022 p.iii).

Lastly, applicants praised the absence of any means-testing within the application process. As discussed in the previous section of this report, ‘Why did people apply?’, some students applied to the GEF because although they could theoretically afford to purchase gender expression products without sacrificing other necessities, they experienced familial financial surveillance to some degree. In their cases, they were unable to access money from UCL’s hardship funds because these funds are means tested. Application to these funds requires students to show proof of their financial circumstance

through bank account evidence. If required to show their bank account statements, students in the aforementioned circumstance would be understood to be able to purchase gender expression products, when in actuality that is not the case. There was praise, therefore, from the students for the fact that the fund's application process did not rely on this evidence.

“The fund was very generous, helpful and completely supportive. At no stage did I feel like the people who were providing the funds felt as though my needs were frivolous or “a choice” as is too often the case when it comes to support for trans people.”

“Staff were discrete and understanding. The timeframe could be a little faster for responses and I have had to follow up about receiving funds before.”

Just two participants selected that they found the application process ‘extremely difficult’ or ‘somewhat difficult’ (n = 2/25), and a further two thought that the process was ‘neither easy nor difficult’ (n = 2/25). The most significant criticism from students on the application process was the response timeframe. Although some students thought the waiting time was ‘reasonable’, a significant amount reported that they needed to follow up with union staff at least once in order to be able to access the fund – this was particularly the case over the summer period. Although students voiced understanding over the constraints of the summer working period, postgraduate students expressed that this was still term-time for them, and that they still were on campus needing to access the fund.

“It was a good experience and easy, but there was poor responsiveness over the summer break, which is frustrating as I was/am a postgraduate student and so that was still term time that I was on campus for.”

There was an acknowledgment of a lack of ‘psychological’ accessibility within the fund's application process. One student voiced that it could have been more encouraging to have the process ‘humanised’ by including links to the stories of past recipients of the fund on the Students’ Union webpage, as has been done in the case of Students’ Union UCL’s emergency grant (Student’s Union UCL 2024). As explored, trans students often feel a lack of support within the university, and so it would be valuable to demonstrate the tangibility of an initiative designed to assist and empower them (Freeman and Stephenson 2024).

“Honestly I was shocked that UCL had anything like the GEF. So it was really good for it to be easy to access, and quick with a response. I received the full £100 and it was so helpful for my wellbeing.”

Individual Impact

1. Personal well-being

Students who participated in this research unanimously felt that accessing the GEF had a positive impact on their well-being and experience as a UCL student (n = 25/25). When asked to rate their agreement with the statement 'accessing the fund has had a positive impact on my well-being and experience as a student at UCL', 76% of students selected that they 'strongly agreed' (n = 19/25). The remaining 24% of students selected that they 'agreed' with the statement (n = 6/25).

Rate your agreement with the following statement: “Accessing the fund has had a positive impact on my well-being and experience as a student at UCL.”

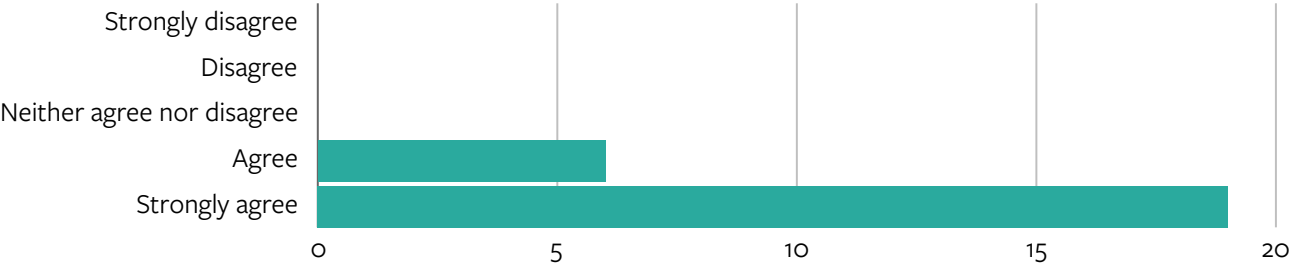


Figure 3. A bar chart showing the answers to asking participants to rate their agreement with the statement 'accessing the fund has had a positive impact on my well-being and experience as a student at UCL'.

This data demonstrates that even when students found the application process difficult, they still experienced a positive impact from accessing the fund. In other words, even for the 8% who found the fund application process 'extremely difficult' or 'somewhat difficult', there was a positive impact on their 'well-being and experience as a student at UCL'.

2. Academic

Furthermore, a strong majority of students reported that accessing gender expression products through the money provided by the fund had positively impacted their academic engagement at UCL. Specifically, 80% of students stated that they either 'strongly agreed' (40%, n = 10/25) or 'agreed' (40%, n = 10/25) with the statement 'accessing the fund had a positive impact on my academic engagement at UCL'.

Rate your agreement with the following statement: “Accessing the fund had a positive impact on my academic engagement at UCL.”

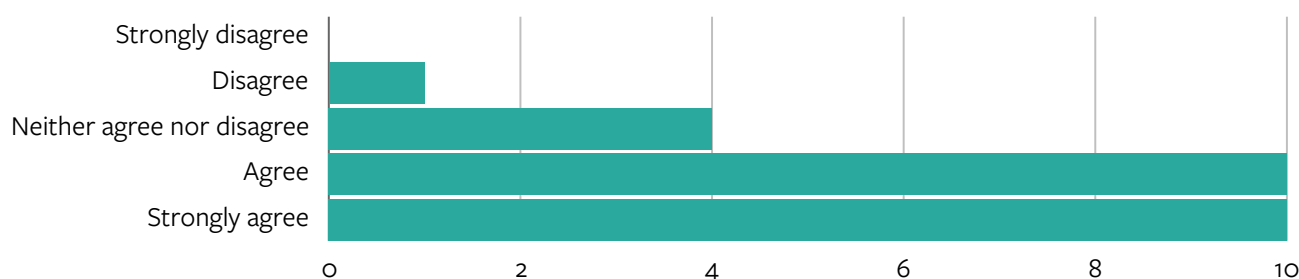


Figure 4. A bar chart showing the answers to asking participants to rate their agreement with the statement ‘accessing the fund has had a positive impact on my academic engagement at UCL’.

For postgraduate research students, this improvement in academic engagement was particularly important. It is crucial to recognise the difference in academic experience between postgraduate students and undergraduate students, particularly in the context of UCL where, as of 2021/2022, 49% of students are postgraduates (HESA). For postgraduate research students specifically, engagement in the academic community is not only performed as a student, but also as a representative of UCL research staff. This could be through working as a PGTA on undergraduate courses, or through involvement in an academic conference.

In a 1-1 follow-up interview specifically focused on exploring the fund’s impact on academic engagement for trans postgraduate research students, the student stated that being able to access gender expression products had improved their experience as a postgraduate research student. Using gender expression products allowed for the student to navigate inter-departmental relationships with their academic colleagues more easily, particularly because it prompted others to use their correct pronouns without asking. Furthermore, using gender expression products afforded by the fund had increased their confidence in presenting and being photographed at future academic conferences. These findings support existing literature which suggest that trans individuals see improvement in academic and workplace performance when they are able to socially present as their correct gender identity (Messman and Leslie 2019).

“I was able to buy binders, hair clipper and a packer using the fund. They helped me significantly on passing as a guy.”

“I received the fund and was able to order what I needed and receive it, which made me feel comfortable enough to go out and engage with my studies.”

“The fund was able to offer me the exact type of assistance I requested, which was really helpful.”

Community Impact

As the above analysis has demonstrated, individuals who successfully accessed the GEF reported a generally positive experience with applying for and utilising it. As stated, even though a small proportion of respondents saw the need for improvements to the process of accessing the fund and noted lack of positive impact on their academic performance, all agreed that the fund had improved their ‘well-being’ and ‘experience as a student at UCL’, with over a quarter of respondents ‘strongly agreeing’ (n = 19/25). As well as the fund’s impact on individual student experiences, this report was interested in understanding if, and how, the fund’s existence had impacted the trans community’s emic understanding of their community’s positionality within UCL. In other words, this report sought to explore whether tangible knowledge of the GEF would have bearing on trans students’ understanding of the state of trans inclusivity at UCL. When participants were asked to rate their agreement with the statement ‘UCL fosters a supportive environment for trans, non-binary, gender-non-conforming or otherwise gender diverse students’, responses were more varied than to any other survey question.

Rate your agreement with the following statement: “UCL fosters a supportive environment for trans, non-binary, gender-non-conforming or otherwise gender diverse students.”

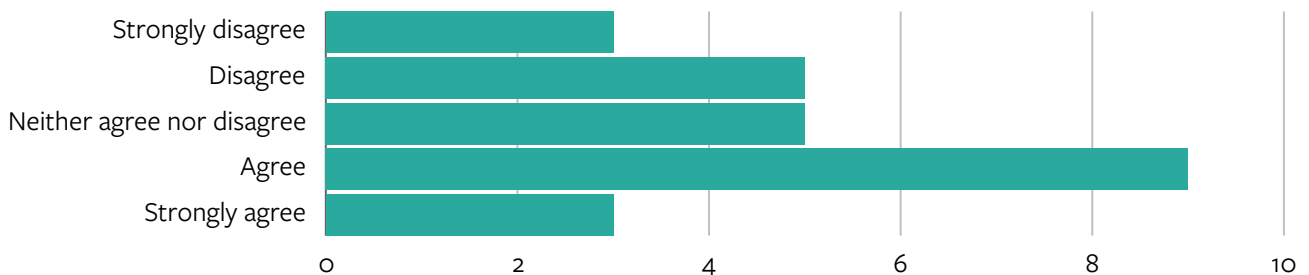


Figure 5. A bar chart showing the answers to asking participants to rate their agreement with the statement ‘UCL fosters a supportive environment for trans, non-binary, gender-non-conforming or otherwise gender diverse students?’.

48% of survey participants said they could ‘agree’ (36%) or ‘strongly agree’ (12%) (n = 12/25). In opposition, 32% of participants selected ‘disagree’ (20%) or ‘strongly disagree’ (12%) (n = 8/25). The remaining 20% of students felt that they could not ‘agree nor disagree’ with either side (n = 5/25). This is the largest proportion of disagreement present throughout the results of the survey, as well as the smallest proportion of acceptance, suggesting a difference between opinion on the merit of the GEF and the level of trans-inclusivity at UCL. Participants had the opportunity to expand on their perspective in an open ‘final comments’ section of the survey. These responses thematically corroborated this idea. In their comments, students tended to pair an appreciation for the GEF’s existence with criticism over UCL’s position of trans-inclusivity. This standpoint was further shown in the focus group discussion, where the participants expressed the opinion that, while the GEF was a welcome and ‘vital’ initiative, they felt that the culture of trans-inclusivity on the UCL campus needed improvement. Academically, students expressed that staff attitudes to trans students vastly differed

between individual staff members. They felt that while some members of staff make a concerted effort to make their trans students feel welcome, some of the students had experienced staff members being ‘dismissive’ or ‘insulting’ to their trans identity. One student reported that a module convener had printed out a register which included their previous name. The student corrected it each time until the convenor, within ear shot of the rest of the class, said they were aware of the change but ‘did not want to waste paper by reprinting the register’.

One student, with experience in a student-staff role, voiced that there needed to be more Students’ Union UCL roles created with the specific purpose of supporting the transgender community. This was echoed by a discussion on the broader need for more queer-specific initiatives in general, with criticism voiced over the perceived ‘folding in’ of queer-inclusion within broader EDI. In other words, students expressed a desire for structured inclusionary efforts specifically for the trans community. A large amount of support was given to the idea, suggested by one student, of a ‘hub’ on campus specifically for queer students. It was proposed that this would function as a physical community space that could serve as both a common room and an ad-hoc event/ meeting space.

The topic of inclusion within sport was also discussed, with students reporting that gendered sports (such as weightlifting) at UCL were spaces where they would feel uncomfortable being ‘out’ as a trans person. The students explained that in these spaces it would be uncomfortable and ‘exhausting’ to continually communicate and explain their trans identity. The issue of changing room spaces was particularly important within this. One student, a keen swimmer before entering university, paid to sign up to swimming but realised it would be unfeasible to attend because they could not correctly access the changing rooms, noting that they could not use the men’s changing room and were uncomfortable using the women’s changing room. This experience left the student feeling emotionally upset, as well as socially isolated.

One particular criticism raised by several respondents was a sense of isolation and discomfort evoked by events held within UCL that platform academics and speakers who hold gender critical views. Among these responses, one student commented these events on campus feel “directly adverse to what the institution is claiming as fostering a supportive and inclusive environment”.

Given that academic freedom and freedom of expression are crucial to the functioning of the university, this report will not suggest that these events should be banned or speakers deplatformed. However, it does advocate for the opportunity for UCL to champion a balanced approach to its engagement in this discourse. Encouraging the opposing (e.g. ‘pro-trans’) point-of-view more prominently on campus would both respect crucial freedom of expression, as well as indicate to trans students that their dignity, opinions, and lived experiences hold equal importance and value.

“While I am extraordinarily appreciative of the fund and the many students and members of staff who make UCL an inclusive place to be a trans student, the uni still has a long way to go in terms of making it a completely safe and welcoming space for trans students, highlighted by the strong anti-trans sentiments that can be found particularly among some staff and

academics in the university. Regardless, I am very glad that such a fund exists, and I hope it continues in the future.”

“Initiatives like the GEF are an extremely positive step in making the UCL campus more trans-friendly, and the help you’re offering is of course, vital.”

Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, the GEF is experienced positively by the students who receive it, both in terms of experience with the application process, as well as the impact felt by its use. Trans students see the fund as a ‘vital’, ‘positive step in making the UCL campus more trans-friendly’, and it is something that they would like to see continue in the future.

Unfortunately, the fund does not represent a solution to the problem of trans-inclusivity at UCL and should not be understood as such. Participants in this report’s research repeatedly voiced their criticism of the current state of trans-inclusivity at UCL, and stress that more needs to be done, in addition to the fund, to improve the experiences of trans students. Delving into the topic in greater detail in the focus group session, participants reported issues with trans-inclusivity across campus life.

Recommendations

1. The renewal of the Gender Expression Fund

As has been illustrated by this report, the GEF has had a positive impact on the experiences of transgender students at UCL. According to the data collected, accessing the gender expression fund positively shaped transgender individuals' personal wellbeing and experience as a student at UCL, as well as improved their academic engagement. These findings exist in support of the wider body of relevant academic literature, which has shown that social transition (through the use of affirming gender expression products) correlates with improved mental health, happiness, and academic/workplace performance (Strübel and Goswami 2022, Dhejne et al 2018, Messman and Leslie 2019). Subsequently, this report recommends that:

- The funding for the GEF be renewed for a further three academic years.

2. Improvements to Gender Expression Fund's accessibility

As this report has shown, the process of accessing the GEF was largely experienced positively by students. However, suggestions were made to further improve the fund's accessibility moving forward. These recommendations should be adopted if the fund is renewed:

- Continue to raise the fund's profile amongst UCL staff, allowing for more trans students to be signposted towards the fund.
- Continue to raise the fund's profile amongst UCL students, particularly students in positions of responsibility (e.g. course representatives or society leaders). This would allow for more trans students to be signposted towards the fund.
- Consider improving the psychological accessibility of the fund. To improve the 'psychological accessibility' of the fund, a webpage should be created highlighting the experiences of past GEF recipients in accessing and using the fund. Through giving a 'face' to the fund, it would be further demystified for potential recipients and empower them to apply. This has been done previously for the Students' Union's emergency grant initiatives - <https://studentsunionucl.org/articles/what-its-like-getting-financial-support>. One recipient of the fund has already voiced that they would be interested in sharing their story in a similar format as those on the 'what it's like getting financial support' (Students' Union 2024).

3. Improving trans-inclusivity at UCL

Finally, this report has demonstrated that while the GEF is greatly appreciated, this should not be the extent of UCL's efforts at trans inclusivity. The below recommendations would complement the GEF and concretely illustrate UCL's commitment trans inclusivity:

- Consider further research into exploring the experiences of trans students with sports at UCL.
- Introduce initiatives to empower trans students to access sports facilities more easily. For example, introduce a trans/ queer night at Bloomsbury fitness (similar to the women's night), and create safe changing spaces for trans students wishing to use the sports facilities.
- Consider the creation of more Students' Union UCL roles structured around supporting the trans student community.
- Consider the creation of a campus 'hub' for queer students to function as a common room and ad-hoc events space.
- Consider creating advice material for academic staff members to refer to when working with trans students – for example, a short video, leaflet, or PowerPoint presentation.

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