Spilling the T: An exploration of trans* student experiences in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

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Many transgender and gender-diverse individuals worldwide must negotiate their personhoods in societal and structural landscapes that often respond with invalidation, or worse, hostility and violence. Furthermore, transness is widely politicised through arguments based on religious beliefs and/or the essentialism of biology in defining gender. The associated rhetoric is used for fearmongering to regulate and control bodies. This rhetoric has material impacts on the physical and psychological safety of transgender individuals.

This qualitative study is the first of its kind to provide depth and nuance to the lived experience of transgender and gender-diverse university students in the Republic of Ireland, a country which permits self-identification of gender. To explore these student experiences, 16 participants who self-identified as having a trans* identity were interviewed. The findings are considered through the lens of the critical trans framework for education (Kean, 2021). The findings indicate that, despite pockets of progress, institutional and cultural genderism are embedded in campuses in numerous ways, revealing a disconnect between policy and lived reality. Thus, university norms need to be critically reimagined to challenge cisnormativity and create inclusive environments where trans* students are liberated. Key practical recommendations from this research include enhancements to student records options, for staff to undergo training in responding to and supporting trans* students, for trans* identities to be made visible in curricula, and for campuses to have suitable provision of gender-neutral facilities.

This study provides the data and evidence needed to advocate for and implement such changes in institutional culture and practice. By creating genuine inclusion, acceptance and understanding, Irish universities have the power to help normalise trans* identities in the state and beyond. This is crucial at a time when anti-trans* rhetoric and 'gender critical ideology' have the potential to take hold in Ireland and its academic institutions.

trans* = umbrella term for a wide range of gender identities

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And finally, my four-legged family members, Ella, Sam, Ocean and Bonnie.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the contents of this thesis are my own original work and have not been previously submitted, in part or in full, for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Signed

Fiona French

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Chapter 1 What's the story? : Introduction

(*What's the story?* This is an Irish colloquialism meaning 'what news do you have?'. It is used to open a conversation; the use here is for the thesis opening/introduction)

1.1 Introduction

Despite increased recognition and understanding of gender-diverse identities in recent decades, the situation for many gender non-conforming individuals across the globe remains precarious. This precarity is a result of gender identity becoming a site of controversy in social, political and religious spheres. The debates that ensue regulate an individual's right to live authentically in their gender. They threaten the safety and well-being of trans* individuals in all regions, including Ireland. This introductory chapter, therefore, provides an overview of the current situation for trans* individuals in Ireland and beyond. The chapter then outlines the climate and rights for trans* individuals within the Republic of Ireland (ROI), a country which allows the self-identification of gender. Next, the introductory chapter sets the scene for the thesis by providing the motivation for and significance of the study, then explains the language used within the study. Finally, an overview of the thesis structure and its chapters is provided.

1.2 Trans* Lives

Transgender and gender-diverse individuals face many unique challenges that stem from societal, familial, medical, and legal factors (James et al., 2023). Many trans* people encounter barriers to trans-affirming medical care and the inability to change their gender on official documents (see Wolfe et al., 2023; Blus-Kadosh & Hartal, 2024; Goldfarb et al., 2024; Obasi & Nick, 2024; McMahon, 2024). Many will experience familial rejection, others will experience social isolation, and many are subjected to politicised transphobia. Transphobic rhetoric is particularly evident in parts of Eastern Europe, Latin America, Italy and Russia (Butler, 2024). In these regions, 'gender ideology' is being politically portrayed as a threat to the stability of the heteronormative family structure and leads to the unravelling of ethical behaviours across society (ibid). Examples include Italy's current prime minister's claims that gender will divest people of their sexed identity; Vladimir Putin called Europe 'Gayropa' and proclaims that gender will undo the notion of mother and father; and the Pope outrageously compared the

threat of gender ideology to the threat of nuclear war (ibid). Butler (2024) labels this anti-trans* phantasm as a 'psychosocial fantasy' that is created to preserve existing social orders through stoking fear of gender.

As part of this poisonous rhetoric, adult trans* women are being demonised as predators trying to gain access to women's spaces or transitioning to gain an advantage in sports. Extremely concerningly, in February 2025, President Trump issued an executive order banning trans* women and girls competing in female sports in the USA. This was quickly enacted by the US National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), despite the President of the NCAA stating in 2024 that there were only ten (of over 500,000) transgender athletes in the Association (*NCAA Bars Transgender Athletes from Women's Sports after Trump Order*, 2025). The Trump administration's ban reflects a new level of hateful politicisation of trans* lives in the US and has potential impacts beyond sport, and beyond US borders.

However, individuals with diverse gender identities are not new in any society nor recently created by the spread of 'gender ideology', as though transness were a contagious social trend. As Faye (2022, p.19) highlights, "…there aren't greater numbers of trans* children asserting a trans* identity than there were in times past. There are simply more children who feel able to talk about it openly and seek support and advocacy from their parents." Furthermore, research supports a growing recognition of gender diversity that is transforming the conceptualisation of gender and equality, both in educational contexts and more broadly for young people (Bragg et al., 2018). Thus, the increasing visibility and awareness of gender diversity would explain the increase in young adults coming out, rather than 'gender ideology' being the corrupting force.

Regardless of regional specifics, trans* individuals are subjected to the stress of living in a world that regularly invalidates or is hostile to their identity (see Tyni et al., 2024; Mezza et al., 2023; Pucket et al., 2023). Consequently, trans* individuals are at a higher risk for mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Keefe et al., 2024; Hajek et al., 2023).

The challenges and risk factors outlined above can be intensified for trans* youth. This is because many are dependent on potentially unsupportive families and subjected to

institutionalised cisnormativity in schooling systems (see Neary, 2018; McBride, 2020; Horton, 2023; Neary & McBride, 2021; Neary & McBride, 2024). Gender-based discrimination from peers in schools is also most prevalent towards those who do not conform to binary expectations of gender (Jackson, 2020). Thus, for many trans* youth, reaching the age of majority and leaving school might free them from certain restrictions, such as single-sex schools, bullying and restrictive gendered uniforms. Being freed from these restrictions may enable some to begin exploring and expressing their gender identity. For the increasing numbers of trans* youth entering higher education, it may offer the promise of an inclusive environment in which to live authentically. This is because neoliberal higher education institutes regularly present themselves as diverse and inclusive places of learning and knowledge creation. Much of the increased diversity and inclusion has been driven by demographic changes, globalisation and social movements and been formally reflected in the increase of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies in many UK and European higher education institutes (HEIs) (Hoffman et al., 2018; Scott, 2020). Within the Republic of Ireland, for example, universities are obligated to meet equality and diversity requirements enacted through EU and national legislation (Scott, 2020; Collins & Crowley, 2023). Thus, when selecting where to attend university, trans* students in a US study report that, in addition to course and career considerations, they actively research institutions' commitments to gender-diversity inclusion (Lange et al., 2021).

However, many minority individuals in various regions find that their lived experiences in HEIs do not live up to the inclusive rhetoric of their policies (Barkas et al., 2022; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Furthermore, marginalisation stemming from a disconnect between policy pronouncements and lived reality has particularly impacted transgender and gender-diverse students (Mearns et al., 2020). This is partly because much LGBTQ+ research in university contexts tends to conflate the experience of LGBTQ+ students into one group (Kean, 2021). As a result, trans* identities are often erased or misrepresented within higher education research (BrckaLorenz et al., 2017). This misrepresentation is concerning as gender non-conforming students have been reported to find the classroom climate less accepting than their lesbian, gay and bisexual peers (Garvey et al., 2019; Jackson, 2020). However, if trans* student experiences are not explicitly

researched, universities are able to deceive themselves that their inclusion aims are more successful than the lived reality. Consequently, this thesis aims to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What experiences do transgender and gender-diverse students have within Irish universities?

RQ2: What do transgender and gender-diverse students advocate for making Irish universities trans-inclusive?

RQ3: What are the implications for Irish universities?

1.3 Positionality, motivation and significance

I am a supportive parent of a transgender teenager and an employee at a Dublin university. I fully recognise all gender identities and support an individual's right to self-identify their gender, irrespective of medical interventions. Thus, this research comes from a starting point of gender expansiveness which recognises the complex social, biological and structural influences that shape an individual's unique gender identity. This understanding of gender is discussed more fully in chapter 3.

I believe that all trans* individuals have a right to live their lives free from gender-based oppression and precarity. Naturally, this encapsulates the belief that trans* university students are entitled to experience a campus and educational environment which does not cause them unnecessary challenges, distress or harm.

From a place of parental 'gender literacy' (Neary, 2019) gained after my daughter's identity disclosure, I was keen to increase my knowledge of how trans* students were experiencing university life in the Republic of Ireland (ROI). I was able to find one study that focused on transgender and gender-diverse youth in Ireland aged 15-24. This was undertaken by the University of Limerick and the Transgender Equality Network Ireland (known as TENI). Four of the nineteen participants were in third-level education (McBride et al., 2020). Third level means post-secondary school education, such as studying in universities and further education colleges. The results for this third-level student cohort are not reported independently from school-based participants. Still, some key findings in the report show instances of transphobia from staff and peers,

deficits in adequate support, lack of access to gender-appropriate bathrooms, barriers to participating in sports, and overall marginalisation (McBride et al., 2020).

I also found one primarily quantitative study from 2019 that specifically focused on third-level transgender and gender-diverse students in Ireland. Trinity College Dublin and the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland undertook this national survey of gender minority students in higher education. The survey found overall experiences of discrimination and marginalisation in Irish higher education institutes (HEIs). The findings included administrative barriers to recognising identity in records, misnaming and misgendering, and lack of access to suitable infrastructure such as bathrooms, housing and sports changing facilities in the Republic (Chevalier et al., 2019). These survey findings echo several of the findings from the post-primary youth report. Overall, the limited published research indicates that post-primary education and HEIs are not creating environments that are sufficiently trans-inclusive and trans-welcoming.

Research undertaken in other regions (mainly the USA and UK) had greater prevalence in the published literature. These UK and US-based studies are informative, but they differ from the historical, political and religious climates that influence Ireland. As Jackson (2020, p.227) rightly states, “Policy priorities relating to gender and education are strongly influenced by geopolitics, wealth and discourses about gender”. Consequently, the experiences and education of trans* individuals in Irish society may differ from those in other regions. This has motivated me to research trans* student experiences in Irish universities.

The research in this thesis is significant in being the first to undertake exploratory primary qualitative research into the experiences of self-identified trans* university students in the Republic. It goes beyond the quantitative 2019 national survey by providing depth and nuance to trans* student experiences. It illuminates negative experiences for transgender and gender-diverse students and what they advocate for improvements. However, it is not purely deficit-focused; it also explores the supports, practices and approaches that trans* students report as already being successful. This study also adds to the minimal body of knowledge of transgender and gender-diverse students in HEIs in the Irish Republic. The participants’ lived experiences, viewed through the lens of a new trans framework for education, contribute to the developing

field of transgender studies. The participants' campus life worlds and subjectivities elucidate the spatial and geographical specificities of trans* students in Ireland with the intended outcome of facilitating material improvements. This study helps fill a dearth of knowledge about trans* lives and contributes greatly to trans studies in the Irish context. Furthermore, in time, the thesis findings may serve as a historical record for the interdisciplinary subfield of trans history.

Crucially, at the international level, the findings have the potential to be an important contribution to the complex policy-lived reality nexus, reporting firsthand from trans* students who are studying in universities with Gender Identity and Expression policies within a country that permits self-identification (allowing citizens to change their legal gender markers without medical validation).

The policy–lived reality nexus refers to the intersection between what institutions say (their formal commitments in policies) and the actual experiences of individuals from marginalised groups (the lived reality). While Irish universities' policies may articulate firm commitments to inclusion and respect for all gender identities, the lived realities of trans* students may reveal gaps in implementation, a lack of accountability, and a need for cultural change. Exploring this nexus for the first time within the context offered by this thesis is informative for higher education bodies and governmental policymakers, the stakeholders who can ensure universities become genuine sites of inclusion.

Furthermore, the insights from this study emerge from a context that empowers gender self-identification at the state level, sending a powerful signal to its institutions about ideological trust, institutional inclusiveness, and a commitment to rights-based governance. This is particularly important for knowledge building in trans studies as much of the current literature originates from the US and UK, a dominance in the field that leads to assumptions and its own norms.

To achieve trans* inclusion, it is essential that universities are proactive in providing support and equality for trans* students, not reactive (McKendry & Lawrence, 2020). This research aims to forefront the needs of trans* university students to enable Irish universities and their stakeholders to implement effective proactive measures that are aware of policy implementation gaps. As Abraham et al. (2023) state in relation to

decolonising university admissions, “If universities’ claims of valuing equality, diversity, and inclusivity are to ring true, they have to walk the walk.” This thesis shows them how to do just that for trans* students.

The remainder of this introductory chapter situates trans* lives within the context of the Irish state. It then discusses key terminology and language use**.** Finally, it lays out the structure of the thesis with a summary of each section.

1.4 The Irish national context

In recent decades, the Republic of Ireland began a period of change initiated by greater economic prosperity and the uncovering of widespread abuse within the Catholic church. Consequently, the ROI has evolved from a country with laws and societal expectations stemming from Catholicism’s restrictive teachings to a much more progressive state. Ireland was the first country to legislate for marriage equality by popular vote in 2015 (Caollaí & Hilliard, 2015) and appointed the world’s fourth and Ireland’s first openly gay head of government in Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Leo Varadkar. Varadkar was also Ireland’s first Taoiseach with Indian heritage. The nation has generally been proud of these developments as symbols of its growth post-British colonialism and post-Catholicism. They were viewed as evidence of the diverse and liberal society in modern Ireland. Neary (2018) notes that these societal shifts brought greater visibility of transgender and gender-diverse identities.

This visibility is evident in trans* rights that have been enacted in legislation during the last decade. In 2015, the Gender Recognition Act in ROI made it possible for individuals over the age of 18 to be given full legal recognition of self-identified male or female gender by the State (Office of the Attorney General, n.d.). The Act also permits the re-issuing of birth certificates aligned to that gender (ibid). Younger individuals aged 16-17 years are permitted by the Act to make a formal application for gender recognition with their parents’ consent (ibid), although this process can be onerous and requires a psychological evaluation. The Act also provides that a state-issued gender recognition certificate (GRC) can be used as proof of gender or identity but that it is not required except for legal purposes (ibid). At the time the Act was passed, a Human Rights Watch article lauded Ireland as a global leader in transgender rights (“Dispatches: Ireland Steps out as Global Transgender Leader”, 2015). Additionally, following a 2018 review of the

2015 Act, a legal name change is available to persons over the age of 18 at the same time as self-declaring gender (*Gender Recognition*, n.d.). Individuals aged 14-17 years old are permitted to apply for a name change through a deed poll with their parent's written consent but there is no provision for name change or gender recognition for young people under the age of 14 (ibid). At present, there is a bill pending with Seanad Éireann (the Irish Parliament) to amend the 2015 Act to ensure that the law recognises the status of non-binary persons who do not identify as either male or female.

Currently, Ireland is one of few countries globally with laws permitting an individual's self-determination of gender. Such governmental-led policies and bills illustrate somewhat positive societal and state recognition of trans* individuals. This state-level recognition has been reflected in certain Irish universities' policies, a number of which permit use of a chosen name and self-identification of gender on campus (summary available in appendix 1). However, it is important to reiterate that the existence of such policies does not guarantee they positively transform the experiences of their intended beneficiaries.

These legislative and institutional measures in Ireland have been enacted despite increasingly polarised and politicised anti-trans* public discourse that has risen to prominence elsewhere. Transphobic discourse has been particularly heated in the neighbouring United Kingdom (UK). Faye (2022) insightfully notes that the anti-trans* feminist discourse is peculiar to British feminism, even within the British left-wing media. However, it is viewed as unacceptable by most Western feminists. Fortunately, Irish feminists, LGBTQ+ rights and social justice organisations have been working to resist the dissemination of trans-exclusionary rhetoric in public spaces within the Republic. This resistance has often come in the form of protests at anti-trans* events. Additionally, an open letter voicing opposition to a UK-based anti-trans* event in Dublin highlights the colonialist lens through which transphobic rhetoric is viewed by leading Irish feminists. The letter states,

> Do you have any kind of concept of what a feminism in a country shaped by struggle against Empire looks like?... We have had enough of colonialism in Ireland without needing more of it from you.

(Redmond, 2018)

In contrast to the gender expansive legal processes and the feminist support rooted in decolonisation, Ireland was found to have the worst provision of trans* healthcare in the EU (Tgeu, 2022). Furthermore, statistics released by An Garda Síochána (the Irish police force) in 2023 showed a 30% increase in hate crimes from the previous year, with LGBTQI+ attacks being the second most prevalent after racism-based hate crimes *(Hate Crime Statistics,* 2023*).* Additionally, a recent analysis was undertaken on country-level structural stigma in European countries and its impact on trans* individuals' life satisfaction. Ireland was found to have lower levels of life satisfaction amongst transgender individuals than the EU average overall (Bränström, & Pachankis, 2021). These data indicate that trans* individuals in Ireland are still encountering life-affecting challenges. Thus, while Ireland may, on the surface, appear to be a welcoming and inclusive society for trans* individuals, there is passive and active transphobia and transphobic violence in the Republic.

This thesis, therefore, recognises the wider structural, political, and ideological debates and contexts, with their potential to impact trans* lives, rights and inclusivity in Ireland.

1.5 Terminology and language use

An individual may identify as a different *gender identity* (a person's own sense of their gender) to their *sex assigned at birth* (sex based on external reproductive organs at birth). Transgender and its short form, *trans*,* are used as umbrella terms for individuals who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. The asterisk after trans* is used to signify the many and various gender non-conforming and non-gendered identities that exist. The asterisk encompasses a broad spectrum that includes non-binary (identifying as neither male nor female), genderqueer (gender does not correspond to traditional gender distinctions), agender (does not identify with any gender) and gender fluid (gender identity is fluid). The term transgender also refers to individuals who have transitioned from one binary gender to another, e.g. male to female, with or without hormonal or surgical medical assistance.

Gender expression describes how any individual externally presents their gender through behaviour and appearance. *Cisgender* describes an individual whose gender

aligns with their sex assigned at birth. Consequently, *cisnormativity* refers to the bias that cisgender identities are standard, and other gender identities are less legitimate or can be erased. Cisnormativity is embedded across societal structures and disadvantages individuals that do not conform to cisgendered expectations.

While recognising the wide range of gender identities and preferences for describing gender that exist, this paper adheres to the one of the current norms of using *trans** to encompass all individuals who identify differently from their sex assigned at birth.

This research also acknowledges that throughout the thesis, the language choices and terminology of gender are in, and constrained by English. Thus, the language and terminology may not be relevant to all individuals, may become outdated, and may be replaced by new language. This thesis respects the right of any individual to define their gender in the way that best aligns with their identity or to not define their gender at all. This researcher concurs with Stryker et al. (2008, p.11), "we understand genders as potentially porous and permeable spatial territories …, each capable of supporting rich and rapidly proliferating ecologies of embodied difference." The evolution and understanding of gender that Stryker refers to will naturally lead to the evolution of the language of gender.

A glossary of terms in English, with each term also given in its current translation *as Gaeilge* (in Irish), where it exists, is available after the appendices in this thesis document. I am not a competent Irish speaker so only use *Gaeilge* for proper nouns within the thesis. However, the glossary *as Gaeilge* is given in recognition of the trans* individuals who are Irish speakers on the island of Ireland.

In further recognition of the geographical location, the chapter titles have been given names from commonly used colloquial phrases in Ireland. Colloquialisms in any region are a linguistic short-hand for belonging, community-building and identity – key aims of this work for trans* individuals. Additionally, colloquialisms hold a special place in Hiberno-English by providing an Irish distinction from standard English. Thus, each colloquial phrase for a chapter title has been chosen for its expressiveness rooted in Irish identity and its connection to the chapter topic. The meaning of each colloquialism is given at the start of each chapter under the title.

1.6 Thesis content overview and structure

Chapter 2 provides a review of the existing published literature on transgender and gender-diverse students and their higher education experiences. The findings in the literature are related to Irish universities' policies where relevant. Much of the published literature was generated within the US, with fewer contributions from the UK, Europe and other regions. Overall, the findings in the literature suggest that campus climates in these regions are not inclusive for trans* students. This is due to a combination of factors. Trans* students report that they are often digitally misgendered through administrative systems that do not allow for chosen names and self-identification of gender. Furthermore, physical spaces such as housing, bathrooms and changing rooms are assigned to a male/female binary, with limited or no provision of gender-neutral or single-occupancy facilities. Additionally, trans* identities are often erased or not recognised in teaching spaces. This happens through faculty misgendering and misnaming of trans* students, and through trans* authors and materials being absent from curricula. These factors and other experiences described in the literature are explored in chapter 2 and reveal a gap between EDI commitments and trans* students' lived realities.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the research's view of gender and the theoretical framework through which the project and its findings are viewed. The core framework is Kean's (2021) critical trans framework for education. Kean (2021) advocates for three principles to be at the heart of teaching, learning and researching in education. These principles are: 1) Gender operates on individual, institutional, and cultural levels; 2) Genderism (embeddedness of the gender binary) is a system of oppression that interacts with all other systems of oppression; 3) Epistemic injustice and the critical importance of trans experiential knowledge (Kean, 2021).

Kean's principles are informed by consideration of multidisciplinary findings and rooted in this researcher's understanding of gender. Theory and authors that inform the principles are discussed in this chapter and the framework provides an overarching lens through which the research recognises the multilayered influences that shape the experiences of trans* university students. These range from the personal, to the cultural, to the structural. Chapter 3 discusses the framework in full.

The thesis then moves to chapter 4, which details the methodology, the qualitative research methods and data analysis. This study used constructivist phenomenological qualitative research methods. Data generation was via semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes each, with 16 self-identified trans* students. These students were enrolled in five (of the thirteen) Irish universities and were a balanced mix of undergraduate, taught postgraduate and postgraduate research students. Interviews were transcribed, then coded and analysed using NVivo software for qualitative data analysis. Participants' gender identities are represented through pronouns. Details of the methodology and methods are provided in chapter 4.

Chapters 5 to 8 contain the findings, analysis and discussion, which comprise the main body of the thesis. Each of these four chapters represents four main themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Chapter 5 discusses opportunities and challenges of gender identity disclosure. These include registration, housing and classroom experiences. This chapter provides insight into how identity disclosure is an ongoing process mediated by the context in Irish campuses and perceptions of psychological safety.

Chapter 6 considers situations where trans* students frequently encounter cisnormativity (the societal and structural bias that privileges cisgender individuals). Cisnormativity is evident when supportive policy pronouncements are not aligned with administrative systems and records. A lack of gender-neutral and single-occupancy spaces, and experiences in university clubs and societies also reflect inherent social and structural cisgenderism (genderism that privileges cisgender individuals).

Chapter 7 focuses on the power imbalance that trans* students have with faculty and staff. It explores how challenging it can be for trans* students to correct misgendering and misnaming that come from individuals with relative power. There is also special consideration of postgraduate trans* students. They navigate various and complex power dynamics with faculty, peers and the students they teach. These situations are coupled with distrust of reporting mechanisms. The recommendations are for greater awareness of these power imbalances, greater support for trans* tutors and local allies for initial reporting.

In chapter 8, the thesis reflects on the visibility and invisibility of transgender students. While passing (being perceived by others as cisgender) provides some safety, it can also create stress and a disconnect between authentic self and societal perception. Additionally, visibility of trans* identities in academic spaces through appropriately presented materials is seen as lacking, yet essential to normalising trans* identities. Trans* visibility at the institutional level is also necessary for genuine trans-inclusion.

Each of these four main chapters is supported by quotes from the primary data and utilises the multidisciplinary theoretical framework and published work to provide insight into the reasons behind the participants experiences.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by summarising the study and the recommendations in direct response to the research questions. The findings indicate that trans* students in ROI live with a level of precarity created by structural, cultural and social cisgender norms being embedded across campuses. Some key recommendations are: more robust gender identity and expression policies and discrimination reporting; providing a trans* student information hub; wider provision of gender-neutral/single-occupancy facilities; education in gender identities; and more visibility of trans* and minority identities in curricula and teaching spaces.

The nexus between policy and lived reality for trans* students in Ireland's universities is a unifying theme throughout the findings. Exploration of this nexus reveals a persistent gap between formal claims of inclusion and everyday experiences. While all ROI universities have adopted policies aimed at promoting gender diversity, the findings reveal where inclusion is symbolic and lacking consistent implementation or cultural buy-in. This disconnect illustrates that institutional policy alone cannot guarantee safety or belonging, even within a country that permits self-ID. Instead, systemic transformation requires sustained commitment to trans-informed practice, staff education, and centring trans* voices in decision-making processes. Ultimately, meaningful inclusion is measured not by what policies say, but by how trans* students experience the university as a space of recognition, support, and agency.

Furthermore, the institutional operation of gender could be said to reflect the cisnormative situation at the national level; state legislative measures and institutional policy pronouncements are supportive, but the lived realities of trans* individuals reflect a somewhat different situation. Finally, this thesis calls for Irish universities to work together to effect material change that normalises trans* identities. This is imperative at a time when discourse around trans* lives is becoming increasingly prominent and oppressive.

Chapter 2 It's a bit banjaxed: review of the literature

(*banjaxed* means broken/not working; a bit broken and not working describes the situation in the literature in third-level education for trans* students)

2.1 Introduction

In setting the scene for the thesis, the introductory chapter provided an understanding of the precariousness of trans* lives and the situation for trans* individuals in Ireland. It discussed the transphobic political, religious and social discourses that threaten trans* individuals' personhoods and their freedom to embody their gender identities (see Butler, 2024). Consequently, there are disproportionately high levels of assault and discrimination based on gender identity. Precarity also negatively impacts mental health and more distressingly in some cases, results in suicide (see Dickey & Budge, 2020; Toomey et al., 2018).

Furthermore, as a societal minority, trans* individuals navigate and experience a world that is nearly always coded to the gender binary population (see Tyni et al., 2024; Mezza et al., 2023; Pucket et al., 2023). The introductory chapter shared how Western higher education institutions may appear to offer trans* youth the promise of liberal understandings of their gender identity, yet lived realities may not deliver on that (Barkas et al., 2022; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Mearns et al, 2020). As researchers have highlighted, the gender binary is deeply embedded in higher education and institutions are not necessarily designed to meet or include trans* student needs (Nicolazzo, 2021; Kean, 2021). Consequently, trans* students may experience higher education as a source of gender identity-related frustration, anxiety, stress and (micro)aggressions.

This chapter builds on that introduction by focusing in more depth on trans* lives in higher education. It reviews what is already known from the existing published literature on trans* student experiences in higher education. The literature reveals that trans* students are often marginalised and oppressed through structural and cultural cisgender norms.

In addition to the published literature, I accessed the thirteen Irish universities' Gender Identity and Expression policies via publicly available institutional webpages. These

policies all state respect, equality, inclusion and non-discrimination for any gender identity. At the practical level, a number of these policies include the ability to self-identify gender and record a chosen name. A summary of such mechanisms provided within each university is available in Appendix 1. Irish universities' policies are referred to within this chapter, and throughout the thesis where relevant.

The sections that follow in this chapter are organised according to core themes that emerge from the literature, with discussion of how these themes impact well-being, sense of belonging and inclusion for trans* students.

2.2 Campus Climate and Gender Minority Stress

Campus climate is an accumulation of attitudes, behaviours, levels of respect and inclusion (Rankin, 2005). That climate is constructed on an ongoing basis and is influenced by sociopolitical and cultural climates in broader society (Weiss et al., 2021). Consequently, campus climate is an integral part of the student experience. A welcoming university climate creates a sense of belonging, which positively affects academic achievement, retention, persistence, motivation and well-being for all in its community (see Veach, 2023; Mayhew et al., 2016; Freeman et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Research into trans* students in higher education supports this with findings that trans* student perceptions of a positive campus climate are linked to academic attainment, adjustment to college life, student satisfaction, and a sense of belonging (Pryor, 2015; Flint et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, the limited but growing body of research in this field from other regions indicates that campus climates are often not welcoming for trans* students. They are reported to experience disproportionately high levels of harassment, discrimination and bullying (Gartner et al., 2023; Seelman, 2014; Johnston, 2016; Bilodeau, 2009; Martinez-Guzman & Inigues-Rueda, 2017; Rankin et al., 2010). Some of the underlying reasons behind unwelcoming campus climates can be viewed through the lens of Kean's (2021) critical trans framework for education. Campuses are influenced by how gender operates at the institutional and socio-cultural level (ibid). Where adverse climates in universities are present, it is usually a result of higher education institutes and the microclimates within them tending to reflect and strengthen societal genderism (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Genderism is the rigid adherence to biologically assigned binary sex

norms (Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019), which stems from the wider cultural macrosystem. Such norms can be oppressive to trans* students and are often compounded by a lack of trans* experience being centred in universities' inclusion initiatives (Kean, 2021).

It should also be highlighted that a campus climate may not be homogenous. Within different areas of university life in any one institution, such as individual degree programmes, classrooms, clubs and societies, micro-climates are formed (Courtney et al., 2024; Seigel, 2019). These microclimates may differ in their inclusion and recognition of trans* identities. For example, a trans* student may experience a trans-inclusive climate in their degree programme but may encounter a less favourable climate with campus services and accommodation, or vice-versa.

Any climate that is not welcoming of gender non-conforming identities creates gender-related stress for trans* students. Gender minority stress theory (Hendricks & Testa, 2012) proposes that structural issues compromise all aspects of well-being. Testa et al., (2015) later developed the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience (GMSR) measure. The following diagram illustrates the factors that Testa et al. (2015) identified as causing stress and aiding resilience:

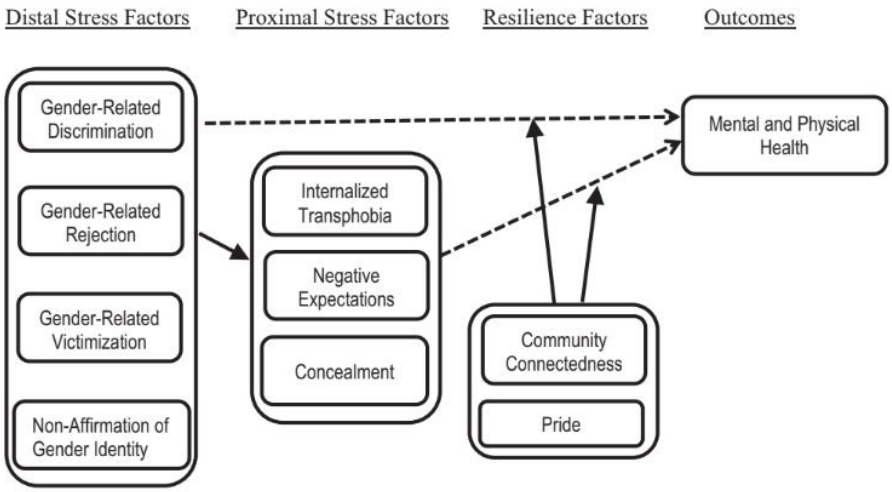

Figure 1. Minority stress and resilience factors in transgender and gender non-conforming people. Dashed line indicates inverse relationships.

(Figure 1 from Testa et al., 2015, p.67)

As can be seen from the diagram, the factors are divided into four categories: distal (external) stress factors of (gender identity-related) discrimination, rejection, victimisation and non-affirmation (Testa et al., 2015). External factors feed into proximal (internal) stress factors of internalised transphobia, negative expectations and/or concealment. In contrast, community connectedness and pride are resilience factors. All of these positively or negatively impact mental and physical health.

Thus, the various factors that constitute campus climates have the potential to create community connectedness and strengthen resilience in trans* students. In contrast, an unwelcoming climate can generate gender-related stress. Of these several key factors, student records are the first to be considered in more depth in this chapter.

2.3 Student Records

Within the literature from other regions (primarily the US, UK and Australia), a dominating theme that emerges as a source of stress is student records. Trans* students are often unable to record their chosen name and/or gender marker within university records systems unless they have already undertaken the associated legal changes (see Day et al., 2024; Copeland & Feldman, 2023; Nicolazzo, 2023; Flint et al. 2023). Not being able to record gender identity constitutes non-affirmation of that identity and is a form of oppression.

Trans* students may wish to change legal documentation but are not in a position to do so for reasons such as living with parents opposed to the change or being financially dependent on them (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015). Another consideration is that trans* students who are only starting to come out may not yet be ready to undertake the significant step of legal changes (ibid). Furthermore, binary genders of male-female offered for legal recognition may not be congruent with an individual's identity. As a result, students' legal documentation may not align with their identity.

Trans* students' gender identities and chosen names not being reflected on 'front end' campus records are indicative of (cis)genderism and the institutional operation of gender (see Kean, 2021). The lack of appropriate records leads to unwanted outing, misgendering, misnaming, invalidation, increased minority stress and creates the potential for harassment and discrimination (see Day et al., 2024; Copeland & Feldman,

2023; Nicolazzo, 2023; Flint et al. 2023; Brauer, 2017; Beemyn & Brauer, 2015, Pryor, 2015).

Misgendering is when an individual is addressed using a gender, gender pronoun, or social cues that do not align with their gender identity. Misgendering can also include misnaming (when a person is addressed by a name that does not align with their gender identity). The inability of IT systems to record a trans* identity is known as 'digital misgendering' (Seigel, 2019) and 'administrative violence' (Spade, 2015; Copeland & Feldman, 2023). It contributes to external stress factors and stems from Kean's institutional and societal genderism. In contrast, McEnfarter and Iovannone's (2020) study found that the ability to use chosen names led directly to a higher level of student engagement.

Digital misgendering and misnaming not only impact class lists and student records generally, but also importantly affect names shown on student ID cards and student email addresses generated from names (Chevalier et al., 2019; Garvey et al., 2021). Consequently, McKendry and Lawrence (2020) recommend providing two student cards for genderfluid students, e.g. each card shows a different gender. Having more than one card facilitates the individual in how they would like to present at various times and affirms gender identity. However, it is quite possible that more than two cards may be needed. Additionally, administrative mechanisms may not acknowledge nor provide appropriate options for students who are non-binary and gender fluid (Gillard, 2022; Smith et al., 2022; Seelman, 2014; Bilodeau, 2007; Mintz, 2011). Thus, broader gender options are recommended in all systems, along with recording chosen names on 'front end' systems and associated IDs (ibid). These enhancements are important for institutional data collection purposes and to avoid invalidating and marginalising trans* individuals.

Furthermore, it follows that trans* students who choose to disclose their identity but do not have this recorded within systems and on ID will be required to rely on the memory, understanding and effort of those informed (see Day et al., 2024; Copeland & Feldman, 2023; Nicolazzo, 2023; Flint et al., 2023; Brauer, 2017; Beemyn & Brauer, 2015, Pryor, 2015; Beemyn, 2005). Disclosures may need to be repeated with different faculty and staff every semester. Unfortunately, such a repeated and constant need to out

oneself and correct others can be extremely stressful. Having records that accurately reflect identity may not entirely mitigate against a hostile climate of discrimination and microaggressions. However, from the evidence in many of the cited studies, it would appear to reduce the resilience required by trans* students to engage academically and socially with campus life.

In the US, the University of Vermont (UVM) was the first institution to enable students to select a chosen name which could be reflected across campus systems (Brauer, 2017). In 2004 and 2009, UVM pioneered enhancements to their Banner system (a widely used HEI student information system) to maintain the 'back end' record of a student's legal name and gender (ibid). In tandem, they provided added functionality for students to record chosen names and gender pronouns to match gender identity on the system's 'front end'. In UVM, these 'front end' records appear across internal campus Banner systems on class lists, student cards, email addresses and so on (ibid). For technical staff, Brauer's 2017 paper maps in detail the specific system mechanisms and changes needed, proving that it is achievable to implement a 'front end' record. Brauer (2017) does, however, warn that enhancement is an ongoing process, with instances of student misnaming or misgendering still occurring. This means a university's student information services (SIS) will likely need to be streamlined and monitored to avoid having differing records in different campus domains. Systems will also need to include data fields that recognise the difference between *legal sex* assigned at birth and *gender* (Nowicki, 2019). Although it is not necessarily simple to implement these records enhancements, it is possible (see Linley & Kligo, 2018; Parks & Straka, 2018).

The national survey of gender minority students in Ireland found that trans* students in Irish universities were also experiencing administrative and digital genderism. The survey findings report the following breakdown for 'Administrative barriers or institutional policies that limit inclusion or well-being' (n=122):

- Limited gender options on forms etc. (46.72%)
- Limited or non-existent gender guidelines (33.61%)
- Difficulty in changing gender markers (32.79%)
- Difficulty changing name (22.13%)

(Chevalier et al., 2019, p.27)

Additionally, Chevalier, Murphy and Buggy (2019, p.35) reported that a number of respondents to their survey of over 100 transgender and gender-diverse students had found themselves "approaching their institutions for these procedures multiple times, only to be given conflicting directions, having to deal with staff that weren't sure how to proceed, or find that there were no procedures for Non-Binary identities". It would, therefore, appear that practices in Irish HEIs do not reflect their policy pronouncements of supportive gender-expansive values and many are upholding the dominant gender binary.

From this researcher's policy review (see Appendix 1), eight (out of thirteen) Irish universities currently state that they permit front-end administrative change of name for internal systems without requiring legal documentation. Five of these eight universities also state that they permit self-identification of gender without legal documentation, and in total, six universities permit gender self-ID. In summary, over half of Irish universities support name changes without legal documents to match, but less than half support gender self-identification on internal records. This situation demonstrates that non-conforming gender identities are not being digitally recognised and verified in many universities. Furthermore, procedural guidelines accompanying several policies indicate that where changes are permitted, they may not be streamlined across campus records. Lack of streamlining means trans* students who avail of self-identification may still be vulnerable to misgendering, misnaming and outing.

Unfortunately, genderism and lack of inclusion are not only found in administrative systems. Teaching spaces are also a site of marginalisation, invalidation and precarity for trans* identities. The next section provides details of trans* student experiences in classroom contexts.

2.4 Teaching spaces and curriculum

In the classroom context in the literature, many postgraduate and undergraduate students have reported encountering transphobic comments from teaching staff, supervisors and lecturers (Bonner-Thompson et al., 2021; Beemyn, 2012; Garvey et al., 2019; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019; Catalano, 2015; Dugan et al., 2012; Pryor,

2015). Whilst a participant in one study was encouraged to report inappropriate body-related comments made by a member of faculty, the precariousness of unequal power relations and the potential ramifications meant that the transphobic comments went unchallenged by the student (Bonner-Thompson et al., 2021). The paper did not expand further than power relations. However, there may well be broader instances of transphobic comments going unchallenged, which has practice implications regarding robustness of discrimination reporting processes.

Overt discrimination may also come from student peers within teaching spaces. Across the literature, trans* students reported faculty not correcting negative and discriminatory comments by other students (e.g. Breyer & Mankowski, 2024; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019; Flint et al., 2019; Pryor, 2015). Thus, while the faculty themselves may not be the source of discrimination, their inaction to address it gives implicit permission to continue the transphobic behaviour. Catalano (2015) rightly argues that trans* students should not be required or expected to hold peers and faculty to account in teaching spaces. This is not dissimilar to the oppressive experiences of other, now recognised, situations of discrimination such as racism and sexism towards people of colour and women. Thus, it essential that faculty that are educated in trans* identities and actively uphold institutional respect for them. Otherwise, bias and prejudice will negatively impact trans* students' well-being.

A further cause of trans* student precarity and stress stems from misgendering and misnaming in teaching spaces by peers and faculty (Breyer & Mankowski, 2024; Goldberg, Beemyn & Smith, 2019; Wentling, 2015; Brauer, 2017; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Dickey, 2019; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019; McEnfarter & Iovannone, 2020; McLemore, 2015; Whitley, 2022). Misgendering and misnaming may be due to faculty making errors or not willing to try (Flint et al., 2023; McLemore, 2015; McEnfarter & Iovannone, 2020). Trans* students may also carry the stress and anxiety from an underlying fear that misgendering may occur at any time. Living in fear is oppressive, which links to Kean's principles of genderism being a form of oppression.

Part of the cause of misgendering may be due to a lack of gender-neutral pronouns for humans in the English language (Airton, 2018). However, in recent years there has been the emergence in standard English of the use of the pronoun *they* for a singular third

person, often used by non-binary individuals (Airton, 2018; Norris & Welch, 2020). It is now the recommended default for referring to individuals when pronouns are unknown. Using *they* as the default pronoun could help overcome institutionally embedded binary genderism and contribute to making campuses more inclusive for trans* individuals.

Despite some controversy and resistance, efforts at the normalisation of pronouns can be seen by the increased use of the 'pronoun go-round'. This is when individuals introduce themselves using names and pronouns one by one (Norris & Welch, 2020). The pronoun-go-round is becoming more common in smaller group settings at the commencement of new teaching terms. The practice is well-intentioned and aims to provide opportunities to express and recognise various gender identities. It is evidence of faculty trying to create inclusive, gender-expansive teaching spaces and is explicitly supported by some authors (see Wentling, 2015; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Knutson et al., 2022). However, it may cause concern to some students who feel unsafe about sharing their identity in an unknown environment (see Knutson et al., 2022; Goldberg, Beemyn & Smith, 2019). Thus, other less pressurised methods of introducing pronoun use may be more advisable. For example, faculty can always use their own pronouns first and leave it up to students whether they wish to offer theirs.

Once faculty know students' pronouns, Airton (2018) argues that using them correctly may require 'extra' effort by faculty and staff but not 'excessive' effort. This extra effort is important as using appropriate pronouns acknowledges the fullness of trans* students' personhood (Norris & Welch, 2020; Wentling, 2015; Goldberg, Beemyn & Smith, 2019). Correct pronoun use provides gender identity affirmation and reduces gender-related stress. However, as the literature reveals, trans* students may feel that it is less stressful to accept being misgendered than create discomfort or run the risk of potential discrimination (Pryor, 2015; Flint et al., 2019; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019; McEnfarter & Iovannone, 2020). Thus the 'extra' effort by faculty in pronoun use is essential to trans* student well-being as they may not be willing to correct faculty.

In this review, it is also essential to recognise that components of identity that lead to marginalisation tend to be disaggregated, e.g. race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, nationality. However, identity is layered and incorporates multiple identities in campus contexts (Haley et al., 2018; Kean, 2021). This means that trans* individuals with

multiple marginalised identities are more likely to experience transphobia (Kean, 2021; Broom, 2019; Garvey et al., 2019). For example, the literature reports that trans* students of colour were less likely to be open about their identity in the classroom (Garvey et al., 2019). However, some felt that expressing their identities was an essential act of resistance to disrupt institutional norms (ibid). Additionally, the literature highlights particular 'within group' differences. For example, non-binary, agender and genderfluid students are reported to experience more frequent occurrences of misgendering in teaching spaces (McLemore, 2015; Wentling, 2015; Beemyn, 2016).

Thus, education and awareness raising for faculty and staff on inherent bias, a range of gender identities, and understanding of intersectional identities should help build conceptual bridges (Haley et al., 2018; Kean, 2021; Goldberg & Allen, 2018). Building conceptual bridges to facilitate engagement and understanding not only benefits trans* students but also students from other marginalised groups.

Encouragingly and contrastingly, in Goldberg, Kuvalanka and Dickey's (2019) study, participants highlighted that while faculty may not have been fully educated on gender-diverse identities, they made a significant effort to learn, be compassionate and use appropriate language. Within that particular US context, at least, the effort was appreciated and indicates that faculty should not fear mistakes when making a genuine effort.

Positive attempts at inclusion and awareness raising may also come from trans* students being called upon to educate their peers and faculty within teaching spaces (Breyer & Mankowski, 2024; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019; Pierre, 2017; Flint et al., 2019). Unfortunately, calling on trans* students for this purpose can be misguided and not always welcomed. Pierre (2017, p.108) found that "respondents wished to avoid the burden of being their own advocates and only educational resource on these topics". Even more concerning is that these types of discussions can sometimes lead to wholly inappropriate questions, e.g. the status of sexual organs (Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Dickey, 2019). This type of questioning causes significant distress. Consequently, such discussions should only be held when a climate of respect, understanding and awareness has already been established in the classroom.

Curriculum content is another area which is highlighted as a source of marginalisation within classroom contexts. Scholarship by trans* authors and trans* experiences appear to be largely missing from curriculum materials. Goldberg, Beemyn and Smith's (2019) US study included 507 transgender and gender non-conforming students. The study participants made suggestions for inclusion of course content that included scholarship by transgender and gender-diverse authors and academics (ibid). Trans* identities in curricula would enable trans* students to see themselves reflected and represented within the academic community, and their peers could be exposed to more diversity and visibility on trans* identities.

Furthermore, respondents in one published study reported feeling more affirmed when their institutions' programmes included LGBT and queer studies (Garvey, 2020). While not all students may enrol in these due to discipline-specific options and requirements, a university's interest in running such programmes clearly signals a more welcoming climate. However, Malatino (2015) highlights that trans* inclusion in spaces where it has a traditional home, such as feminist, sexuality and gender studies, has had a 'special guest' approach. Additionally, coverage when it exists in other disciplines is often superficial (Goldberg, Beemyn & Smith, 2019). Consequently, it may create a feeling of 'othering' in trans* students in these programmes. Much like the experience of traditionally marginalised groups, a lack of representation and/or mere tokenism negatively impacts trans* students' sense of belonging and affirmation.

Unfortunately, the curriculum and culture in STEM disciplines are generally reported as not being trans* friendly, particularly Health Sciences (Whitley, 2022). There appear to be cisnormative curricula (assuming that everyone is cisgender) in STEM (ibid). Unfortunately, cisnormative curricula in STEM has been identified as a cause of social normalisation of excluding trans* identities and acceptance of misgendering (Whitley, 2022). As a result, trans* students in these fields report more frequent discrimination or lack of understanding (Pryor, 2015; Whitley, 2022). Unsurprisingly, trans* students in STEM subjects are more likely to withdraw or take leave from their programmes and are less likely to be open about their identities (Kersey & Voigt, 2021). Knutson et al. (2022) assert, "Professors and researchers may be under the impression that, because their courses do not explicitly deal with social justice or diverse identities, they do not need

to broach these topics in class." The authors argue that this deprives all students of the chance to experience growth from a greater understanding of diversity (ibid).

More positively, Social and Natural Sciences, which tend to take a social constructivist approach to knowledge creation, are reported as more supportive of trans* identities within curricula and within the wider classroom environment (Whitley, 2022).

Within the Irish higher education context, there are concerning findings that nearly a quarter of all harassment occurred in the classroom (Chevalier et al., 2019). The categories and types of harassment included sexually inappropriate remarks, verbal insults or jokes, inappropriate questions, pressure not to reveal identity and pressure to keep quiet about harassment (ibid). In terms of reporting harassment, both in the classroom and elsewhere, less than 30% of participants in the Irish survey stated they felt comfortable reporting transphobic incidents to their institution (ibid). Among other possible reasons, non-reporting may be due to an imbalance of power, a lack of confidence in policy mechanisms and/or a fear of not being believed. The study does not elaborate on the underlying reasons, but the situation itself is worryingly in contrast to the pronouncements and protections stated in Irish universities' policies.

Furthermore, trans-inclusion and respect in teaching spaces are not the only considerations for creating equity of experience at the interpersonal level. Beyond the classroom, trans* students regularly interact with an institution's professional staff. How these interactions unfold will have an impact on trans* student well-being and their perceptions of campus climate. The next section, therefore, focuses on trans* student experiences with student services.

2.5 Professional Staff and Student Services

A trans-inclusive academic community of faculty and student peers may initially spring to mind as the dominant source of campus inclusion or exclusion for a trans* student. However, a welcoming campus climate is not solely created in the classroom and is equally dependent on a university's network of professional services staff. These staff include administration, student advisory services, library, campus security, accommodation, campus health services and so on. Staff in these units may often be the first point of contact for students. For example, student records' staff for someone who

is transitioning and campus security staff for students who feel unsafe on campus. Thus, a university's professional and support services staff can have a powerful impact on trans* students' experiences.

This impact, whether positive or negative, begins when students select their institution, e.g., visibly trans-friendly on webpages and in recruitment material. A positive impact can be reinforced as students arrive on campus to begin their degree programmes. For example, anticipatory socialisation initiatives (ASIs) during orientation are reported to be greatly appreciated by trans* students (Lange et al., 2021). These ASIs may include peer leaders and administrative staff normalising the sharing of pronouns, taking meaningful and prompt steps to rectify any missteps in language use (oral and written), as well as sharing information about trans-specific or LGBTQ+ organizations and events (ibid). Additionally, proactively inclusive institutions that provide and staff LGBTQ+ resource centres are well-placed to provide a range of supports and services to the campus community, such as counselling referrals, ally training, and advocacy (Garvey, 2020). The literature also advises that any supports and programmes should be aware of intersectionality as trans* students may hold multiple identities, e.g. disability, race, socio-economic status. In Seelman's study (2014, p.632), participants recommended that "campuses provide support and programming that recognise the whole person – all of the identities a person brings along into campus – and the complexities that entails". In other words, staff in support services should be trained and provided with resources to take a holistic approach to supporting all marginalised identities.

Furthermore, trans* students reportedly have higher levels of depression and anxiety than the cisgender population (Knutson et al., 2022; Anderssen et al., 2020). This means they are more likely to need to avail of support services, whether that be student advisors or medical staff. However, much like many campus services, there may be a tendency for trans* individuals to avoid accessing these services due to concerns about discrimination (Knutson et al., 2022). It is, therefore, essential that all university employees and service providers understand trans* identities to ensure that inclusive environments are created in every aspect of campus life.

2.6 Campus facilities and spaces

A further cause of distress to trans* students is that gender-segregated bathrooms and changing areas are currently the norm in many Western public spaces (see Davis, 2020; McGuire et al., 2022). This segregation has fed into the design, build and allocation of these facilities on campuses (Laidlaw, 2020). University accommodation may also be assigned to align with a cisgender male-female binary (Laidlaw, 2020; Marx et al., 2024). It could mean that a trans* student will only be offered accommodation and be able to access facilities according to their sex assigned at birth. Such allocations leave trans* students (with fears of being) vulnerable to harassment and potential transphobic assault (Laidlaw, 2020; Goldberg, 2018; Seelman, 2014). Furthermore, space allocation based on binary sex segregation creates a situation where trans* students feel neither psychologically nor physically safe, adds to the build-up of gender-related stress, and forces trans* students to avoid using campus facilities (Marx et al., 2024, Laidlaw, 2020, Goldberg, 2018; Seelman 2014). Such structural invalidation of identity may lead to less academic success and a potential outcome of withdrawal from university.

In the 2019 Irish survey, the ability to access gender-neutral bathrooms and changing spaces was found to be the overwhelmingly preferred option (Chevalier et al., 2019). In the Irish study, current lack of adequate access manifests as over 35% reporting delaying bathroom use to an excessive extent and nearly 6% incurring medical issues due to inadequate restroom access (Chevalier et al., 2019, p.28). As the survey authors emphasise, “To a cisgender person, a bathroom may have limited significance or emotion attached to it”. While that may not be true for all cisgender individuals, it is understandable how bathroom access is a source of anxiety for trans* students and a situation that could lead to medical issues.

On-campus housing may be another concern. Students who find themselves faced with anti-trans* flatmates and cis-biased accommodation staff are likely to move to off-campus accommodation, move to another university, or find solo housing (Pryor et al., 2016). Moving off campus can lead to isolation, alienation, and additional financial costs (Siegel, 2019). For student housing in the Irish university context, the 2019 gender minority student quantitative survey found that nearly 45% of transgender and gender-diverse student respondents in Ireland lived with their family, 25% lived in shared rental

accommodation, and approximately 6% lived in either university or student specific residences (Chevalier et al., 2019, pps.10-11). It should also be noted that the Irish housing availability and affordability crisis, along with limited governmental financial support, are additional reasons for such high levels of students living with family. Unfortunately, in the quantitative study, over 50% of gender minority students who are residing in family homes reported difficulties arising from the situation, which negatively impacted their academic studies (ibid).

2.7 Clubs and Societies

Extra-curricular activities in educational settings are generally considered to improve mental health, increase sense of belonging, create social resilience and improve academic performance (see Chan, 2016; Thompson et al., 2013; Buckley & Lee, 2021). However, participation in certain campus clubs and societies, especially sports teams, tends to privilege the cisgender majority and can alienate and exclude trans* students (Mendes et al., 2023).

There is wider political and societal debate about trans* individuals in sports, particularly that of trans* women. However, most university-level sports clubs and teams are not elite. Still, university-level sports are often inaccessible to trans* individuals (Mendes et al., 2023). The authors explain that this is because “Sport constitutes a highly gendered environment in which conventional concepts of masculinity, as well as femininity, are frequently reinforced and maintained.” (Mendes et al., 2023, p. 335). This means that trans* university-level athletes face gender-based difficulties in sports participation and may consequently avoid it (see Jones et al., 2017; Klein et al., 2019; Ellis et al., 2014). Thus, sports teams and other gendered university clubs and organisations need to recognise their contribution to upholding restrictive norms. Extra-curricular activities should not be made inaccessible to trans* students or any student due to non-inclusive sports policies and inadequate changing facilities. Furthermore, it has become even more essential for universities outside of the USA to ensure inclusivity in sports, in light of the Trump administration’s recent ban on trans* women competing in sports.

Additionally, in Ireland, student fees generally include a compulsory charge for sports facilities (Chevalier et al., 2019). By not providing gender-inclusive sports teams and

gender-inclusive changing facilities, universities are charging trans* students for services, clubs and societies in which they may not be able to participate.

More positively, trans* students have been reported to find LGBTQ+ campus organisations and centres as sources of support and affirmation (Beemyn, 2016; Bonner-Thompson et, 2021; Formby, 2017a). Many students who may not be out on campus are able to share their identities in these organisations and receive emotional support and practical advice from their peers (ibid). However, these spaces are often overwhelmingly populated by cisgender LGB students who may express cisnormative biases (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). As a result, greater trans-inclusion in LGBTQ+ organisations, as well as trans-only spaces, are cited in the literature as improvements that would be welcomed (ibid). Consideration also needs to be given to the genuine inclusion of non-binary students who may be made to feel that they are 'not trans* enough' (Nicolazzo, 2016; Beemyn, 2019; Goldberg, 2018). Furthermore, trans* students whose first language may not be English in an English-speaking university (Bonner-Thompson et al., 2021) and students who may hold other/multiple marginalised identities need to be provided with welcoming, inclusive extra-curricular spaces.

It should also be noted that institutions that merely provide funding and a physical space to host LGBTQ+ societies, without further institutional input and support, are outsourcing the practical and emotional work of inclusion to students (Bonner-Thompson et al., 2021).

2.8 Chapter summary and gap in the literature

It can be argued that the above themes, to varying degrees, are echoed in the gender-related principles identified in Kean's (2021) framework (discussed in the next chapter). The principles that illuminate these themes are primarily institutional and societal genderism, the operation of gender and its oppressive impact, and the lack of inclusion of trans* experiential knowledge across institutional frameworks. This is interwoven with how gender operates at the individual level for both trans* students and the people they encounter, whether that be staff or students.

More specific examples from the literature evidence a lack of trans* identities being reflected in curriculum and infrastructure planning, as well as policy and practice-related

disjunctures. Stemming from genderism, this lack of consideration for trans* identities leads to oppression through marginalisation and identity erasure. It can occur through sex-segregated facilities and misgendering through pronouns and names (misnaming). There can also be a lack of awareness or respect among staff and faculty in relation to trans* identities, as well as cisgendered student information systems that do not record trans* identities.

In a recent paper based on survey data from non-binary students in the UK, Benato et al. (2024, p.1) highlight that "universities must get beyond 'peeing and pronouns' to reimagine higher education as an accessible and inclusive space." To make meaningful change efforts, it is therefore essential, as Kean (2021) highlights in the third principle, to place trans* experiences and trans* epistemologies at the centre of change efforts.

Unfortunately, transforming higher education into a fully inclusive space is an uphill challenge, as many long-standing disparities persist in the sector. Much like the findings of the published literature on trans* students, students from other long-standing underrepresented groups continue to face barriers, such as those related to race, class, sexual orientation and disability (Rana, 2024). For example, research has shown that students from marginalised racial and ethnic groups are often subjected to microaggressions, discrimination, and a lack of cultural representation (Wong et al., 2021). Additionally, students of colour are likely to suffer from academic underachievement due to a lack of support networks and financial resources (ibid). Similarly, although Ireland's student population has become increasingly diverse, research illustrates a struggle to create environments where students of colour feel a sense of belonging (Darby, 2020). Furthermore, the underrepresentation of minorities in academic staff and leadership roles means students are often without important role models and mentors who share similar cultural or lived experiences (Ajayi et al., 2021).

Additionally, the culture of elite universities in many regions tends to reflect values and practices that are alienating to students from lower-income households (Reay, 2021). Lower-income students often experience a cultural capital disadvantage, meaning that their ways of knowing and communicating may be devalued in academic settings (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Also, many low-income students will need to work to fund their studies and support themselves (Case, 2018). This requirement can be detrimental

to their academic performance and social integration (ibid). Disabled individuals in higher education also continue to encounter challenges that are not only caused by physical access issues. These challenges include ableist attitudes, stigma around disclosure and difficulties in securing appropriate accommodations (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Brewer et al., 2025). Thus, disparities in academic achievement and graduation rates often reflect not only pre-university inequities but also campus climates that fail to support diversity and inclusion.

Part of the reason such inequalities persist is due to a disconnect between the rhetoric in institutional Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies and actual practice. Ahmed (2012) argues that EDI often becomes institutionalised through documents and 'tick-box' practices that serve to signal progress without disrupting the existing power structures. Policies may create the appearance of action while enabling institutions to maintain the status quo (ibid). Furthermore, the use of symbolic language creates distance between universities and the structural inequalities they have created. The result is that EDI can become more of a bureaucratic exercise rather than a transformative tool (ibid).

Policy and practice disconnect can also result from limited or uneven implementation of EDI initiatives, even when those involved have the best of intentions. For example, EDI committees and working groups are frequently under-resourced (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019), and the burden of inclusion efforts often falls disproportionately on minority individuals (Gewin, 2020). These individuals are expected to lead institutional transformation without necessarily having the power, resources or support to do so effectively. Additionally, while policies may reference intersectionality and systemic change, few institutions incorporate these principles into practice in a sustained or critical way (Arkins and Kortesidou, 2024; Wolbring and Lillywhite, 2024). Consequently, many EDI initiatives do not address the deeper, structural causes of inequality, leading to growing scepticism in marginalised communities about the sincerity of institutional commitments (ibid). It is therefore essential that inclusion initiatives are adequately resourced and reimagined to address structural and cultural change across an institution for all minority individuals.

Importantly, this literature review reveals a gap in the literature, in that there appears to be no qualitative research specifically on trans* student experiences in regions that permit self-identification of gender. The EU states that currently permit self-ID are Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland (see ILGA European Rainbow Map, 2025). While transgender youth are mentioned in broad EU studies around mental health and gender services, only one 2020 study, using an online questionnaire, was found on life satisfaction and mental health of transgender students in Norway (Anderssen et al., 2020).

Consequently, this thesis may potentially be the first qualitative study to reveal how trans* students experience higher education in a state that permits self-ID. Furthermore, with most universities in the Republic claiming to support all gender identities, this thesis explores student experiences within a region that offers easily accessible state-level recognition and widely established institutional policies that support gender diversity. This setting contrasts with the contexts that dominate the literature, a dominance which leads to erasure of specific national and regional socio-cultural and political specificities. In this study, the interface between student and institution is explored within a country that has legislatively and socially committed to trans* rights and is not politically reactionary. The findings of this thesis, therefore, have the potential to expand, enrich and deepen existing frameworks, as the current US and UK dominance leads to the importation of norms, with questions and assumptions based on those particular cultural and state contexts.

Fortunately, as shown in the literature and in contrast to many negative and inequitable experiences reported, some trans* students may find that entering higher education provides their first opportunity to explore and express their gender identity. This is perhaps due to living away from home and contemporary youth being increasingly accepting of identity exploration (Beemyn, 2016, Lange et al., 2021). It has also been reported that for some trans* students, campuses are a much more liberal and safe space than the wider town/city (Bonner-Thompson et al., 2021). Much like the various forms of trans* identities and expressions, there are varying higher education

experiences for trans* students. For some, higher education experiences can be positive and identity-affirming.

The next chapter shares the understanding of the term ‘gender’ within this research. It then explores the critical trans framework for education through which the trans* student experiences in the Republic can be viewed.

Chapter 3 Fierce quare: the theoretical lens

(*fierce quare* means very queer; the thesis does not specifically use a lens of queer theory but the understanding of gender and the theoretical tool are encompassed within queerness)

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the thesis provided a review of what is already known about trans* student experiences from the published literature. The literature illuminated the ways trans* identities are marginalised or supported in higher education. This chapter moves from these published studies to the theoretical underpinnings of this research.

This chapter first shares the understanding of 'gender' as an expansive term within this study. The understanding is rooted in feminism and the developments stemming from responses to Judith Butler's early work by trans studies theorists. From this expansive understanding of gender, the chapter then explores the underpinnings of the main theoretical framework through which the experiences of the participants in this study can be considered.

The critical trans (with no asterisk) framework for education (Kean, 2021) was selected to provide a unifying scaffolding that builds on existing authors and theories. It collates these into a framework of principles which can be applied to trans* individuals in educational settings. This multi-disciplinary framework is relevant to the scope of this study and the context of education. It provides the overarching insight to understand the root cause of many trans* student experiences. It provides the thesis' theoretical lens through which the factors that influence trans* identities in education can be revealed. The theoretical framework helps achieve the aims of this research, to provide depth of understanding of trans* student lives in Ireland which can be utilised to make a material difference in those lives.

3.2 The lens and understanding of gender within this study

Cultural, social, psychological, biological and performative aspects of human existence are all encompassed within the term 'gender'. Traditional views confine gender to a strict binary of male and female. In contrast, many contemporary understandings and the lens of this thesis recognise a spectrum of gender identities, acknowledging that

gender is not solely based on biological sex (determinism via chromosomes and reproductive organs).

Changes in the conceptualisation of gender and gendered roles became evident in Western feminism in the latter half of the 20th century. Feminist challenges to stereotypical expectations of gender were largely rooted in socio-cultural constructivism. This proposes that social interactions, cultural and geographical circumstances, historical events and language are interconnected in shaping gender identities and roles ((Voronina, 2019). These insights highlighted the extent to which societal norms and expectations form 'gender'. In their groundbreaking work, Gender Trouble in the 1990's, Judith Butler extended on these influences arguing that gender is a regulatory regime that instils norms and punishes those who do not conform. Butler also introduced the concept of performativity in relation to gender. Performativity, however, should not be confused with 'performance'. Rather, performativity refers to how gender is co-constituted through repeated behaviours, language and actions over time, and through external societal structures and responses to those acts. The concept of performativity proposes that gender is not pre-defined or biologically determined; it does not exist prior to undertaking a series of gendered acts. Performativity, therefore, suggests that gender is dynamic, constantly 'becoming', and not pre-determined or confined to rigid binary categories (Butler, 1990;2007;2011). The insight that gender is unfixed and continuously co-constituted generated a more complex and nuanced understanding of gender.

However, Butler's work is not without its criticisms from trans studies theorists, particularly in its potential to marginalise and devalue the material, embodied and lived experiences of individuals who (wish to) transition to stable binary transgender identities (Prosser, 1998). While recognising the value of Butler's work, Prosser argued that Butler's dismantling of fixed gender implies that such binary trans* individuals have succumbed to normative gender expectations (ibid). Prosser demonstrates that Butler's work is problematic in that it denies intrinsic core gender and the embodied trans* experience (Prosser, 1998). Furthermore, performativity is criticised as an overly individualistic concept; performativity ignores the broader institutional structures in which gender operates, as though gender were a matter of choice (ibid).

Another key criticism of Butler's work comes from Namaste (2000), who asserts that Butler tends to use trans* figures as conceptual tools rather than as real individuals. Namaste accuses Butler of using complex experiences for theoretical purposes, which overlooks lived identities and struggles (ibid). Namaste maintains that Butler's focus on performativity and drag insufficiently addresses the broader institutional, economic, racial and labour-related dimensions of trans* lives (ibid.). For instance, drag is treated as a metaphor while realities such as prostitution and the conditions enabling many trans* women to access transition are ignored. Namaste, therefore, critiques Butler for not examining how these social and labour relations shape gendered existence. Serano (2007) also critiques Butler's claims that 'gender is drag' and 'gender is performance' and is concerned that these phrases have led to interpretations and perceptions in popular culture that all gender is performance.

Susan Stryker's (2004) work highlights the need to focus on trans* individuals' lived experience; individuals who experience their (trans) gender as an intrinsic part of their being. Although Stryker recognises that gender can be 'done', she emphasises that it is most certainly not a performance that can be discarded (ibid). Stryker et al (2008) also introduced the concept of trans-ing. The authors describe trans-ing as a movement or process rather than a fixed identity. The term emphasises that gender is dynamic and relational (ibid). The use of the term shifts attention from the stable categories of male or female to the acts of becoming, resisting, or transforming gender norms. Trans-ing encapsulates the ongoing, embodied work of navigating and disrupting cisnormative gender categories and boundaries (ibid). Stryker et al. (2008) position this process as both personal and political. They highlight its capacity to unsettle established frameworks, a belief that aligns with queer, feminist, and anti-colonial frameworks that emphasise process over fixed categories.

Butler has engaged with criticism of their early work on gender by expanding on their analysis in subsequent publications such as 'Undoing Gender' (2004), 'Bodies That Matter' (2011), a new introduction to reissues of 'Gender Trouble' and their post-9/11 publications. Although Butler has continued to defend performativity, arguing that it is not a performance but a process, there is now greater recognition in their work of intersectionality and how gender is shaped by power relations. Butler has subsequently

clarified their recognition that gender is not experienced by all individuals in the same way and that it intersects with all other social categories, such as race and class. Butler ultimately argues that their work does not call for the eradication of gender entirely, but that fixed gender categories are oppressive and limiting.

As a result of the trans theorists who have highlighted trans* materialities and lived experiences, as well as Butler's clarification and development of their concepts, the current understandings of gender that now prevail stress its complexity. These contemporary understandings acknowledge both social, biological and structural factors. This thesis agrees with the interaction of social, biological and structural factors in shaping each person's gender. It recognises the importance of Butler's work in laying the foundations for such understandings to develop, whilst also respecting that how each individual experiences their gender is unique. For some, such as those with binary trans* identities, it may be fixed. Finally, I agree with Kean (2021, p. 263), whose framework provides the lens through which the findings of this research are viewed, when they state, "I reject the notion that there are right and wrong ways of knowing gender or being transgender."

The debates which have expanded understandings of gender have evolved alongside queer and trans* advocacy for changes in policies, representation, and societal attitudes towards non-normative identities. The development of the theories outlined and the associated activism are arguably key factors in societal developments in relation to sex and gender. Such developments include increased recognition and wider societal acceptance of non-heterosexual romantic partnerships, marriage equality in many secular democratic societies, and gender-diverse identities becoming increasingly visible during the 21st century.

Despite the expansion in the understanding of gender, societal norms are currently still founded on a dominant male/female gender binary assigned according to external genitalia at birth. Thus, there remain many challenges for trans* individuals navigating a world that is coded to favour individuals for whom birth sex assignment aligns with gender identity (known as cisgender individuals). In response to these embedded binary norms being evident in educational settings, the critical trans framework for education was developed. The next section explores the three principles on which it is founded.

3.3 A Critical Trans Framework for Education

Building on "the work of scholars in education, gender studies, disability studies, social work, philosophy, and sociology" (Kean, 2021, p.262), Kean published a theoretical framework bringing together these multidisciplinary roots. The framework seeks to deconstruct normative assumptions about gender, promote inclusivity, and challenge the institutional and structural status quo (Kean, 2021). It outlines three core principles to place gender diversity at the centre of teaching, learning and research, and to improve policy and climate in educational settings (ibid). The three main principles are explored in the following sections, and each principle is expanded upon by considering Kean's paper. The discussion of the principles is contextualised within relevant theory and published work which informs them.

It is important to state that all three levels in the first principle and in the overarching principles are interdependent and co-constructed, despite being considered individually for discussion purposes.

3.3.1 First principle: Gender operates on individual, institutional, and cultural levels

The first principle of the framework is that gender operates on individual, institutional, and cultural levels (Kean, 2021). This principle highlights the multi-layered and multi-level aspects of how gender is conceived. It connects to queer and transgender theory in the conceptualisation of self and embodiment, and of gender being through co-construction and interaction with the social world. In the following sections, each of these three areas of the operation of gender is examined in greater depth.

At the individual level, Kean's first principle highlights that for every person, *doing*, *performing*, *embodying* and *practicing* gender is entirely unique. This recognition of the individuality of gender provides an insight through which the thesis research can recognise that not all trans* students will have the same gender-related experience, even within the same programme and institutional setting. Each student will have a different social context and history, a different way of embodying their gender. Additionally, each student will be at different stages within the exploration, formation, expression and disclosure of their trans* identity. Furthermore, for many, a particular gender is not their destination and for many, gender identity and expression may change

during a person's time at university and during their life. As a result, trans* student choices of (in)visibility of their gender identity may be different at different times.

In *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Keegan, 2019), the editors and contributors present a nuanced and critical examination of what visibility actually means for transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. Visibility is often portrayed as a gateway to recognition and inclusion. However, this work reframes such doors as traps, spaces where trans* bodies and narratives are only legitimised insofar as they adhere to hegemonic norms (ibid). In other words, the access afforded by visibility may be conditional and precarious, tied to what the mainstream is willing to accept. This work highlights the paradox that periods of heightened media visibility for trans* individuals often coincide with increased violence, especially against trans* women of colour (ibid). In this framing, visibility does not guarantee safety or progress; it can provoke backlash. The anthology also introduces a third concept. Unlike a visible entrance or exit, the trapdoor is a secret passage which can lead to modes of existence that redefine recognition, outside the impositions of cisnormative culture (ibid).

In practical day-to-day terms on campus, student preferences for (in)visibility will depend on the setting with regard to levels of emotional and physical safety. This individual identity management (how much information people in stigmatised groups choose to disclose or make visible) needs to be navigated with each new social context (Lewis et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2021), whether that be in different situations within a university setting or elsewhere. As Doyle (2022) recognises, the process of authentic internal gender identity recognition and external gender expression is complex, nuanced and may be met with support or hostility. The response will, in part, depend on the institutional and cultural conceptions of gender discussed more fully later in this section.

Furthermore, an individual's gender identity development journey (with or without a destination) will impact when a trans* student may be ready to share that identity with social groups, student peers, faculty and staff in their institution. It will also be dependent on the climate. There are theoretical arguments that concealing, or not concealing, a trans* identity can lead to empowerment or oppression (Beauchamp, 2019; Edelman, 2009). While authentic presentation of self positively impacts psychological well-being, it is understandable that trans* individuals may prefer not to

disclose their identities. This is especially true when doing so may threaten physical and emotional safety (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019; Bränström & Pachankis, 2021). The act of *passing*, the term used for a transgender person who is perceived as cisgender, can be the ultimate aim for some people transitioning from one binary gender to another (Billard, 2019). However, *passing* is not the goal for others. Thus, trans* (in)visibility and disclosure are complex and may need to be constantly navigated.

In research specifically focused on trans men's coming out stories, Kade (2021, p.1) notes that identity disclosure is an ongoing process "mediated by various contextual concerns." Kade asserts that *symbolic disclosure* usually happens to strengthen bonds or to have accurate gender recognition (Kade, 2021). In contrast, *disclosure avoidance* may stem from concerns related to avoiding discrimination from others or avoiding the personal and emotional demands that coming out requires (ibid). Thus, disclosures are nuanced, complicated, and based on an assessment of anticipated losses and gains arising from (non)disclosure.

It is also important to emphasise that the conception of gender also applies to non-trans* individuals; how any person expresses their gender and how they conceive and construct their gender identity (influenced by internal and external factors) is unique. It is merely the case that most people embody a gender that aligns with the societal matrix for their sex assigned at birth. For such cisgender people, their conception, awareness and understanding of gender, in conjunction with their socio-cultural setting, is likely to influence how they respond to trans* individuals. It will likely impact how accepting they are and whether they perceive a trans* person to be violating their view of gender 'rules'.

The second part of Kean's (2021) first principle spotlights that gender operates at the institutional level. The power of institutional structures in shaping identity should not be underestimated. Jeness and Gerlinger (2020, p.182) state, "it is a sociological truism that organisational context matters when it comes to understanding individual and collective perceptions of ourselves". It is an early understanding of this truism, and wider contexts, that led to Butler's explanation of 'doing' gender. 'Doing' means gender can only exist and be repeatedly affirmed and constructed when there is recognition of that gender (Butler, 1990;2007;2011). This includes institutional recognition.

Institutions are able to regulate and control gender by perpetuating traditional gender norms through institutional mechanisms. These mechanisms include differential treatment in education, the workplace, the legal system, religious teachings, and healthcare. By perpetuating these norms, institutions maintain a system of gender-based power relations that can limit individuals' opportunities and freedoms. Within Kean's framework, it is highlighted that institutional gender in education is expressed through policies and practices, gendered administrative systems and male/female sex-segregated facilities (Kean, 2021).

Stewart (2017) explains that campus administrative systems uphold the dominant gender binary when they do not recognise identities that exist outside of male/female. This lack of recognition can be termed 'administrative violence' (Spade, 2015). Administrative violence is the harm and control exerted by bureaucratic systems, such as ID requirements, welfare programmes, healthcare systems, immigration enforcement, and prison systems that disproportionately target and regulate marginalised communities (ibid). Unlike police brutality or hate crimes, administrative violence is not typically visible or recognised as violence; it is embedded in the routine operations of governmental agencies (ibid). This insight draws attention to the fact that administrative systems are not neutral. In reality, they often reinforce dominant norms and uphold marginalisation related to race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability (ibid). For example, requiring students to submit legal documents to change their name or gender in campus systems makes it difficult or impossible to have identity recognised across ID cards, class lists, housing assignments, and health records. These are forms of administrative violence by universities as they cause material and psychological harm to trans* students, even when being presented as neutral.

A lack of administrative recognition is a form of genderism that polices and (intentionally or unintentionally) constrains gender identity and expression. It is harmful to those it does not 'verify'. According to self-verification theory, people seek to find coherence and consistency between their internal identity and how others perceive them through their interactions and responses (Gomez et al., 2009). If institutional operation of gender creates inconsistencies between the view of oneself and the external verification of that, it leads to social identity threat (ibid). Whether that inconsistency happens through IT

systems, through being misgendered/misnamed on campus in social and academic settings, or the assignation of spaces to binary genders, the threat to social identity creates psychological distress and impacts well-being. As Butler (2004;2005, p.2) asserts, "If the schemes of recognition that are available to us are … those that 'undo' the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced." By not providing mechanisms to recognise and fully integrate trans* identities into campus life, universities are harmfully using their power to 'undo' the identities of their trans* students.

However, it is important to highlight that Spade (2015) warns against superficial administrative solutions. Inclusion is not liberation, as it often leaves the underlying oppressive structures intact (ibid). For example, adding more gender options to administrative systems may improve verification for some individuals. However, it does not automatically increase gender literacy and acceptance of non-normative genders across a campus. Furthermore, Spade (2015) cautions against policy reforms as ultimate solutions. He argues that inclusionary reforms do not disrupt the root cause of oppression (ibid). Efforts like adding trans-inclusive language or bias training do not address material harm; they may merely create the illusion of progress and may only benefit the most privileged within a marginalised group.

Spade echoes Ahmed (2012), who argues that diversity statements and policies are often non-performative*,* in that institutional policies often claim to enact change, e.g. promote inclusion, but do not result in real institutional change. Additionally, Ahmed argues that inclusion is often conditional, such that marginalised individuals are only welcomed into institutions if they do not disrupt existing norms (ibid).

As previously discussed in the literature review, Ahmed (2021) also highlights the challenging, complex and often contradictory role of EDI staff within institutions, especially universities. While staff in these units are meant to address systemic injustice, EDI workers often face institutional resistance and lack the power and resources to make material change (ibid).

Ahmed (2021) proposes that the most effective way to highlight the gap between what universities claim to do and what they do is to use complaint. For Ahmed, a complaint is

more than a report of wrongdoing; complaint is a form of action against institutional violence. However, she emphasises that the act of complaining is often punished more than the original harm (ibid). To illustrate this, Ahmed uses the metaphor of the institutional wall to describe how organisations, particularly universities, block or deflect complaints about racism, sexism, and other forms of structural violence. When individuals speak out, they often find themselves hitting a wall due to bureaucratic delays or retaliation, rather than receiving support (ibid). Ahmed explains that the wall is an active structure of power that protects the institution and casts the person making the complaint as problematic (ibid). The more someone pushes against the wall, the more they are perceived as the problem. Thus, the wall wears people down, it isolates them and often leads to what Ahmed calls the 'complaint graveyard' (ibid). The result is that institutions maintain their public image of fairness and preserve existing hierarchies. Despite the difficulty, Ahmed insists that complaint is political and important in effecting change (ibid).

These insights into the challenges of enacting real change and dismantling norms in institutions reflect many of the issues faced in challenging and dismantling norms in broader society. As institutions are often reflections of socio-cultural norms, the way they operate and what identities they accept and validate are consequently influenced by those norms. Irish universities cannot, therefore, be separated from the structures that exist in the rest of Irish society, nor any public discourse seeking to invalidate or control trans* identities.

The cultural level is the third part of Kean's first principle. As described in the introduction, Ireland is legislatively supportive of trans* identities, and there is a level of societal acceptance and validation. There is also protection of trans* identities against discrimination. Nevertheless, the current cultural norms are still underpinned by dominant ideologies of heterosexualism, white supremacism and patriarchy. All of these were embedded in the teachings of the Catholic church and thus woven into the fabric of society until very recently. Furthermore, the anti-trans* rhetoric that has spread through many regions in Europe and globally cannot be ruled out as a potential threat to greater trans-inclusivity in Ireland.

In terms of culture at the meso level within a university setting, it could be said that campus climate is a reflection of the university's culture, which is often intertwined with the macro national culture. At the micro level, culture exists within any given academic discipline or field and will likely be reflected within university departments. In the lived experience of many trans* students in Ireland, the effects of macro-, meso- and micro-culturally embedded binary genderism may be evident in a lack of understanding or even hostility to trans* identities. These norms may be evidenced in misgendering through pronouns, despite individuals having shared and disclosed them, through texts and materials that do not include trans* scholarship or content, and through possibly transphobic faculty and peer behaviours.

Finally, in relation to Kean's first principle, it is essential to reiterate that the individual, institutional, and cultural levels in which gender is formed and operates are not isolated and are fully interwoven horizontally and vertically.

3.3.2 Second principle: Genderism is a system of oppression that interacts with all other systems of oppression.

Kean's second principle draws attention to the adverse effects of how one gender category can dominate and oppress another. Kean also highlights how hegemonic genderism increases the difficulties experienced by individuals who hold other marginalised identities (Kean, 2021). For example, trans* people of colour and trans* people with disabilities are subjected to the compounding of discrimination.

In relation to gender-based oppression, the more well-known and traditional understanding is the oppression of (cisgender) women by men. However, this understanding tends only to consider two binary genders. Genderism is, in fact, the domination and oppression of any gender. It is the confinement to predetermined roles and ways of expressing gender, along with the various punishments when these are not adhered to. Kean (2021) emphasises that typical understandings of sexism or heterosexism do not capture the nuance of transgender and gender-diverse oppression. When discussing trans* men, Kean (2021, p.267) states, "the complex gender experiences of trans people do not fit the 'men versus women' narrative that sexism tends to push." Thus, genderism experienced by trans* individuals is particularly unique.

The unique and complex oppression of genderism experienced by trans* individuals is *cisgenderism.* This term specifically describes the systemic and social dominance of individuals whose sex assigned at birth aligns to their gender identity. It is a form anti-trans* genderism that emerged in the work of Ansara and Hegarty (2012) as an *-ism* that developed from earlier use of cisgender. Cisgenderism privileges the identities of cisgender individuals over those with non-cisgender identities. This privilege is given through a range of embedded belief systems, expectations, structures and practices that are underpinned by the assumption that all individuals are (or should be) cisgender.

Cisgenderism can be evident in societal structures such as legal protections and recognition, healthcare provision, media, and language. This societal genderism extends into institutions, creating *institutional cisgenderism* (see Seelman, 2014; Serano, 2007). It is reflected in a privileging of cisgender (cis) identities over trans* ones. It means cis identities are inherently viewed as being 'normal' or 'better' by the institution, with associated organisational structures and attitudes to that effect (ibid). Institutional genderism and the institutional construction of gender can be expressed in universities in policies and practices, administrative systems, campus climate, provision of campus health services, accommodation, professional and academic staff behaviours, and in many other overt and covert ways. This thesis explores potential institutional (cis)genderism in the Irish university context.

Additionally, Kean highlights that gender-based oppression interacts with all other forms of oppression. For example, an individual may face overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination, such as a trans* person with a disability who experiences oppression due to genderism and/or ableism. This interaction compounds the oppression and is known as intersectionality. The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Crenshaw, an American legal scholar, in 1989. Crenshaw's focus was on black women. She argued that traditional feminist and anti-racist frameworks often overlooked the unique experiences of those who are marginalised by multiple systems of oppression simultaneously. For example, someone who is both black and a woman may experience racism and sexism (ibid). Since these initial insights from Crenshaw, the concept has expanded, and intersectionality is now widely used to analyse how different forms of inequality and identity, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability,

intersect. However, intersectionality is not just about adding up identities. Rather, it is about examining how power operates through interlocking systems of domination (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). To do so means recognising how racism, sexism, capitalism, and other hierarchies work together to maintain social inequality (ibid). Furthermore, Hill Collins and Bilge emphasise that intersectionality is always situated; it is specific to the historical, cultural, and political context (ibid). Thus, what intersectionality looks like in one state or region may differ from how it applies in other parts of the world.

While this thesis does not explicitly use an intersectional lens to analyse the findings, it recognises and highlights where individuals' multiple minority identities have intersected with institutional power structures to compound discrimination and oppression.

In summary, cisgenderism, within genderism, is a prejudicial bias that erases, marginalises and/or penalises individuals who contravene dominant binary gender norms. These norms are built on the belief there are only two genders, male and female, and that these correspond to sex assigned at birth. Furthermore, some trans* individuals are at the intersection of more than one marginalised identity. These identities are interconnected and not separate layers. Consequently, minority individuals may experience multiple forms of discrimination when their identities intersect with power in a context that structurally marginalises them.

3.3.3 Third principle: Epistemic injustice and the critical importance of trans* experiential knowledge

The third principle in Kean's framework is epistemic injustice and the critical importance of trans* experiential knowledge (Kean, 2021). The term epistemic injustice comes from the field of philosophy and describes an injustice committed against a person in their position as a 'knower'. The phrase was first introduced by philosopher Miranda Fricker, who identifies two main forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical (Fricker, 2008).

Testimonial injustice relates to marginalised individuals being given less credibility in their spoken or written testimony due to discrimination and bias in the person receiving it (Fricker, 2008). The testimony is not believed or taken seriously due to a prejudice

about the individual. The prejudice is based on race, gender and other identity factors, rather than the content of the testimony itself. This prejudice impedes the flow of knowledge and wrongs the individual who is giving testimony (ibid). Fricker gives the example of a person of colour not being believed by a jury (ibid). In a university setting, testimonial injustice may be evident in a trans* student not being believed when reporting transphobic behaviour due to prejudice and bias against trans* identities.

The second type of epistemic injustice is hermeneutical injustice. This is where a person is unable to fully make sense of a social experience due to a wider collective gap in knowledge and understanding (ibid). It happens at an earlier stage than testimonial injustice. The sense-making gap results from minority experiences and voices being marginalised and unheard, so they have been unable to contribute a collective interpretation of experience (ibid). To this end, Vipond (2018) explores how trans* life writers navigate the demand for cultural intelligibility. These writers often choose to craft narratives that will make them legible and recognisable to mainstream audiences by employing tropes such as 'born in the wrong body' or childhood cross-gender identification (ibid). These narrative conventions help authors achieve a form of intelligibility and visibility validated by cisnormative expectations. However, this is often at the expense of sharing the complexity and authenticity of trans* narratives and does not fill sense-making gaps (ibid).

As a consequence of this lack of collective sense-making, a person may feel a sense of having been wronged or feeling 'wrong' but will be unable to interpret and articulate exactly how and why. Alternatively, the individual may attempt to share their experience, but a lack of understanding on the part of the person receiving the testimony invalidates it, leading to testimonial injustice. Fricker (2008, p.69) explains this lack of "collective interpretive resources as *structurally prejudiced*".

Thus, epistemic injustice is an 'ethical dysfunction' (Fricker, 2008) that trans* individuals face stemming from genderism and what Dotson (2011) terms 'social ignorance' about trans* identities. The marginalisation by dominant groups leads to lack of knowledge and validation of trans* experiences. Furthermore, in keeping with work on race, ethnicity and other marginalised identities, Kean (2021) asserts that not being

intelligible to the dominant societal group has the terrible outcome of being perceived as not needing human rights.

Being unintelligible in educational settings may manifest as inadequate protection from prejudice and bullying, being made to feel unsafe or othered, and having a trans* identity dismissed as a sexual identity, among many other possibilities. Worryingly, the heightening anti-trans* rhetoric in the global socio-political context will potentially heighten prejudice and increase the likelihood of epistemic injustice towards trans* individuals.

To ameliorate epistemic injustice, it is necessary for the person hearing the testimony to correct for bias and prejudice to neutralise the injustice (Fricker, 2009). Such corrections will require 'testimonial sensitivity' through an understanding of minority identities. This sensitivity also needs awareness from the testimony receiver of their own prejudice, perhaps via anti-bias training (ibid). However, it would be necessary for trans* lives to be considered worthy of the time, cost and effort to do this. Additionally, any efforts to implement testimonial sensitivity will only be effective if trans* narratives and identities are fully understood and integrated into societal collective knowledge. Of most concern, though, is that such measures are less likely to be implemented when trans* lives are dehumanised due to their perceived threat to the status quo.

The critical trans framework advocates for trans* experience and narrative being at the centre of research and change efforts in education (Kean, 2021). Centring trans* narratives enables trans* identities to become intelligible, material, and visible. Namaste (2011, p.27) emphasises this belief: "If people are marginalized in and through the production of knowledge, then a truly transformative intellectual practice would collaborate with such individuals and communities to ensure that their political and intellectual priorities were addressed".

In accordance with Kean's recommendations, experiential trans* knowledge and trans* epistemologies to advance knowledge form the data generation in this research. Trans* student experiences are the core of the project. Kean's framework, building on insights provided by philosophy, sociology, queer and transgender theory, provides the

theoretical scaffolding through which this thesis elucidates trans* experiences in Irish universities.

In conclusion, undertaking this study through a lens of Kean's framework, and its roots in multi-disciplinary research, informs the approach to the project's data generation, data analysis, findings and discussion. Using the theoretical lens of Kean's principles that foregrounds understanding and knowledge of trans* identities is particularly important for this researcher who holds a cisgender, white, heterosexual, able-bodied identity.

Chapter 4 Fair play: methodology and methods

(fair play means well done; this chapter explains how the research was 'done well' – the methods and methodology used being ones that are fair and ethical)

4.1 Introduction

Having provided the theoretical underpinnings of this study in the preceding chapter, this chapter provides the philosophical foundations of the study, practical information on the data generation and data analysis processes, as well as the ethical considerations.

A phenomenological methodology using qualitative data methods was used to gain meaningful insight to answer the research questions. This approach was chosen to provide detail and depth (Patton, 2015) to understand the phenomena. It was implemented through one-to-one interviews with participants. The interviews were transcribed and then coded using NVivo software. The following sections give details on the methodology and methods used in this study.

4.2 Research Methodology and Design

4.2.1 Philosophical Foundations and Methodology

The philosophical foundations of this research are informed by Butler's views on subjectivity, particularly in their texts Gender Trouble (1990) and The Psychic Life of Power (1997). In their work, Butler proposes that subjectivity is fluid, relational, and discursively produced, and recognises the performative nature of language, including in interviews or narrative accounts (bid.). Subjectivity acknowledges my role as the researcher in co-producing knowledge and creating subjectivities in the research context. The understanding of participant experiences is therefore not simply being reported or uncovered. The understanding is subjective; it is constructed, negotiated, and formed within the research encounter itself.

Acknowledging subjectivity in the research process, this study is grounded in a constructivist ontological and epistemological stance. The constructivist ontological stance recognises that trans* students' experiences in Irish higher education are not uniform or objective. Instead, participants' realities are constructed through language, culture, and interaction (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005). The participants are meaning-makers,

not just sources of information. By grounding the study in a constructivist ontology, this research emphasises rich, nuanced, and subjective accounts of reality. This stance is taken to avoid generalisation and foreground individual and collective sense-making, exploring how trans* students experience their realities within the specific social, cultural, and institutional frameworks of Irish universities. In the context of trans* students in Irish universities, the constructivist ontology assumes that both gender and university experiences are shaped through discourse, policy, and institutional practice and do not exist in a vacuum or solely in participants' minds.

Aligned to this ontology, a constructivist epistemology assumes that knowledge is also constructed rather than discovered. Knowledge emerges and is shaped by interactions between participants and the researcher, as well as the contexts in which these interactions occur (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Furthermore, the research does not aim to uncover an objective or universal truth about the experiences of trans* students. Instead, it aims to explore how students interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to their lived realities within the university setting. Within the constructivist epistemology, the emphasis is on understanding participants' meaning-making processes and how institutional cultures and norms shape their experiences (ibid).

For example, when a participant discusses feeling marginalised in a classroom setting where their pronouns are ignored or misused, this is not interpreted as a singular event, but as part of a broader construction of gender within higher education. This interpretation reflects both the ontological stance (that such realities are constructed) and the epistemological stance (that these understandings are co-created during the research process).

This epistemological and ontological stance acknowledges the influence of my own positionality and the reflexive nature of qualitative inquiry. It recognises that the data generated through this study's interviews are also shaped by the researcher, the research relationship and broader structures (Finlay, 2002). Thus, the research process in this study is a collaborative effort, where meaning is jointly developed rather than passively recorded.

In summary, constructivist ontology and epistemology together support an approach to this research that is interpretive, flexible, and participant-centred, allowing for a nuanced and situated understanding of the (potentially diverse) realities experienced by trans* students in Irish universities. The use of this approach recognises the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants, and consequently, the findings from this study. As such, insights emerge not just from the participants' interview responses alone, but also from the study design and their interaction with me, as the researcher. It acknowledges that I am not functioning as a detached observer but as a participant in the meaning-making process, guided by reflexivity and an awareness of my gender expansive positionality.

In keeping with the constructivist stance, the methodological approach for this study is phenomenological inquiry (Dibley, 2020; Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), which uses inductive and structured qualitative analysis to explore and reveal the essential themes of a phenomenon. In this research, the phenomenon is the lived experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate trans* students in universities in the Republic of Ireland.

Qualitative phenomenology aims to facilitate insight into an experience from the perspective and understanding of the person experiencing it (Dibley, 2020). Language is a commonly used way of communicating experience to others, although other mediums, such as photography and art, may be used in phenomenological enquiry (ibid). In this study, (English) language through interview was the medium employed to provide a literal voice to the trans* students at the centre of the research.

4.2.2 Reflexivity

As previously outlined in the philosophical foundations of this study, the researcher is deeply involved in data collection and data interpretation. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the self in qualitative research as there can only be an “illusion of objectivity” (Warin, 2011, p. 810). By recognising their subjectivity, researchers can become more reflexive to gain distance from the data (Warin, 2011). Warin argues that being reflexive (critically examining one’s own positionality, decisions, and impact) is deeply interwoven with maintaining ethical mindfulness. Ethical mindfulness is an

ongoing awareness of ethical considerations 'in practice', not just during a study's initial ethics approval stage (ibid). Importantly, though, reflexivity does not necessarily lead to self-awareness and sensitivity (ibid). Furthermore, reflexivity is not merely introspection; it is an active, ethical process. Researchers must continually question how their identity, methods, and relationships shape the research and adjust accordingly.

I come to this study as a (relatively privileged) university employee who regularly interacts with university administrative systems and policies. Additionally, I am the parent of a trans* teen. I therefore have a strong connection to the participants as young trans* individuals, understand institutional structures, and am aware that my child's experiences (and the world I hope she experiences) shape the study design and my interactions with participants.

Recognising this, I undertook an extended anti-bias training session prior to commencing data generation. This training was to increase self-awareness and reduce the impact of my subjectivities during the interviews and data analysis. The training taught me that bias can often be identified through an emotional response, which Warin (2011) also points out are flags to ethically important moments.

The training I undertook taught me, as far as possible, to self-question, identify and correct for bias, and recognise when I should be ethically mindful. Using the tools from this training, I undertook 'bracketing' (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) in advance of data collection. 'Bracketing' is a reflexive process to explore, identify and suspend any potential researcher biases and preconceptions that might unduly interfere with research process. The bracketing was repeated throughout the project, initially while undertaking interviews (which responses I followed up on more thoroughly), then through self-questioning around the thematic codes during data analysis and later while writing the findings. The primary aim was to avoid my own cisgender identity, my identity as university employee, my identity as parent of a trans* teen, and my privilege creating undue bias towards certain data during the data generation process. The main bias correction I found I needed to do make was giving equal attention and weight to positive experiences.

4.2.3 Ethics

The trans* student community is a minority group with potentially vulnerable individuals so ethical considerations were particularly salient. Thus, ethics approval was sought via application in October 2022 to the Lancaster University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC). Ethics approval was granted on 11th November 2022 (see approval letter in Appendix 2)

The ethical considerations for the project followed guidance from research on ethical recruitment and collaboration with transgender and gender-diverse participants (Vincent, 2018). Recommendations most relevant to this project were:

- Ensuring that participants could see a clear value in the research before undertaking the time and emotional labour to participate in interviews (Vincent, 2018). No financial compensation was given to participants, but the information provided stated the importance of the research.
- Being transparent about researcher motives by sharing my connection to the trans* community, rather than potentially being another cisgender researcher exploiting trans* experiences for their own or another gain (ibid)
- Providing contact information for an individual other than the researcher (ibid). For this study, participant information sheets provided contact details for the researcher's supervisor and Head of Department. This allows feedback or concerns to be shared independently of the researcher-participant dynamic.
- Demonstrating knowledge and awareness of linguistic nuance (ibid), e.g. using transgender as an adjective, not a noun.
- Being mindful of feminist methodology, which ensures that a researcher does not dehumanise a participant as a 'subject'. For example, this includes being aware of misogyny, classism, racism and other systems of oppression and marginalisation (ibid).

Participants were sent an outline of the themes and question types that would be covered in advance of the interview. Participants were able to skip any questions at any point during the interview without explanation. They could also terminate the interview at any point without explanation and withdraw their data from the study within two

weeks of being interviewed. The participant information sheet (see Appendix 3) also provided a list of Irish-based support resources, helplines and organisations for post-interview support as needed.

4.2.4 Anonymity and de-identifiability

Pseudonyms were used for transcripts. Participants were invited to choose their own pseudonym, although some requested the researcher choose one for them. One participant did not want to use a pseudonym and asked to be referred to as 'a participant'. The researcher did not probe about the reasons behind this to maintain the participant's feeling of safety and the researcher's respect for their request.

The transcripts were de-identified by removing institutional, course, and city names (see Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). These have been changed within quotes to a generic term, using italics and brackets to demonstrate the change.

Quotes are given to forefront participant voices and contribute to the thesis discussion. Thus, care was taken during the reporting and discussion of findings to ensure that repeatedly quoting participants would not enable identities to be pieced together. Where this was in danger of happening, pseudonyms were replaced by 'participant' or 'student' in certain places.

4.2.5 Data Type

Following ethics approval, data generation came from qualitative semi-structured one-to-one interviews of 50 to 60 minutes each. There were 16 volunteer self-identified trans* student participants over the age of 18.

The choice of interview is to provide a richness of insight into the complexity of trans* student experiences that extend beyond the quantitative findings of the 2019 Irish national survey. In line with interview tool recommendations to obtain valid data, the researcher aimed to "avoid asking leading questions or modifying informants' views about a phenomenon" (Daniel & Harland, 2017, p.57). However, I recognise that the question types and categories themselves are leading to a degree.

The interviews were semi-structured to ensure a level of consistency in topics across interviews, which an open interview approach could not provide. A fully structured interview would have been too restrictive.

Topic areas that the interviews explored were:

- Teaching spaces
- University administration
- University policy
- Campus facilities
- University clubs and societies
- Other aspects and experiences related to identity that participants wanted to share
- Overall campus climate

The full question schedule for the semi-structured interviews is available in Appendix 4.

4.2.6 Data set size and details

The ideal sample size for qualitative data generation is generally agreed to be when the point of saturation is reached, where no new data or insights are being revealed (Mason, 2010). However, the uniqueness and variety of trans* identities means that the student participants are non-homogenous and limited in number, meaning data may never reach saturation point. That said, the analysis of the 16 interviews in the data reached a degree of consensus around core themes (outlined in section 4.5 of this chapter). The sample size could therefore be considered large enough to provide data adequacy.

Total number of participants: 16

Number of institutions	5
Number of undergraduate students	6
Number of taught postgraduate students	5
Number of research postgraduate students	5

The five institutions which the participants attended at the time of the interviews are all universities, rather than further education colleges. The five universities are located in

cities and geographically represent two of the four provinces on the island of Ireland. These are Leinster in the southeast (2 universities) and Munster in the south-west (3 universities). The universities ranged in size from approximately 38,000 students (the largest in Ireland) to 15,000 students (the smallest in the study). All five universities offer degree programmes from level 8 (Honours bachelor's degree) to level 10 (Doctoral degree) on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Two of the universities are new multi-campus technical universities that also offer NFQ level 7 awards (ordinary bachelor's degree).

Breakdown of participant pronouns:

they/them	6 students
he/him	4 students
she/her	2 students
she/they	1 student
they/she	1 student
he/they	2 students

Representation of identities within the thesis findings is through pronouns; the research focus is not on specific trans* identities nor the labels of gender. Equally, this is not a comparative study between binary trans* (male/female) and non-binary trans* identities. Rather, the thesis explores how gender non-conforming individuals experience a cisnormative university environment.

Academic disciplines represented by participants were:

- Social Sciences
- Engineering
- Health & Sports Sciences
- Arts & Humanities
- Law

4.2.7 Call for participants

The request for participants was circulated using professional contacts and networks, as well as through Irish universities' LGBTQ+ societies. This was done via social media and email in early 2023. Access to the networks of the thesis supervisor, Professor Carolyn Jackson, was also generously given to assist participant recruitment. An initial number of participants also led to some snowballing. The text for the Call for Participants is available in Appendix 5.

The decision to use an approach primarily based on existing networks and contacts was due to the vulnerable nature of the potential participants. The rationale was that participants would be more likely to volunteer to share their experiences if they heard about the research from a trusted source.

The calls for participants and interviews were scheduled in the second half of the Irish university academic year 2022/23. This is after the December/early January assessment period and before the April/May exams and assessment deadlines. This timeframe was chosen as it was when students were most likely to be available and able to participate. The call began circulating late January 2023, and the last participant made contact in late March. A second call in Autumn 2023 would have been undertaken if the response had been low, but it was not required.

4.2.8 Participant selection and sampling

Participants needed to be enrolled in one of the thirteen Irish universities, either undergraduate or postgraduate, and self-identify under the trans* umbrella, which includes gender non-conforming and non-binary identities. Trans* students who had taken a break from their programme or had left their institution due to reasons related to their gender identity would also have been included. However, no-one in this position came forward to participate.

4.2.9 Consent

All participants were required to read the participant information sheet (see Appendix 3). They were all offered the opportunity to ask questions via email and verbally prior to the commencement of the interview. Participants' understanding of their consent was

also checked prior to commencing interviews. All participants signed and dated the consent form before interviews started. Consent forms were filed in password-protected storage. A sample consent form is available in Appendix 6.

4.2.10 Data recording

The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and then transcribed. Field notes would have been made during interviews if that had been a participant's preference, but all opted for recording.

Nine interviews were via Zoom, and seven were in-person. For Zoom interviews, the recording was made using Zoom software in a password-protected account. For data security, the recordings were downloaded and then deleted from the Zoom cloud the same day that they were made. A small offline digital recording device was used for in-person interviews. Each digital recording was erased from the device after it had been downloaded into a password protected file.

4.3 Pilot interviews overview and reflections

The semi-structured interview questions were piloted with two individuals before beginning full data generation. The two participants in the pilot interview were trans* students that I know and who had expressed an interest in being part of the study. Both participants are comfortable enough with me to provide honest feedback on the pilot.

The pilot interviews took place on Zoom in December 2022. Zoom was used as it was most convenient for the participants. In line with the research ethics application, only the audio recordings and transcripts were kept for data.

The feedback from the participants on the interview questions and interview style were largely positive. There were two suggestions made for improvements:

1. There did not need to be so many general 'warm up' questions at the start and to move into the main questions a little sooner (which was successfully done in the second pilot interview).
2. Ask the interviewees for their pronouns at the start of the interview. I already knew the pronouns of the two pilot participants, but this was an important point to ensure that it was done at the start for others in the study.

Reflections on pilot interviews:

1. Both interviews were comfortably within an hour. This meant there would be time to explore experiences in more depth in the main interviews without being unduly demanding of participants' time.
2. The semi-structured questions covered all the intended areas, and the more open questions successfully enabled participants to share experiences that had not been specifically covered elsewhere.
3. In response to one question area, participants sometimes expanded into different areas that would be covered by questions later in the schedule. This helped trial and practice not interrupting participants' flow, then to refer back to those answers when the same topic arose later in the interview.
4. Both pilot interviewees said they were glad to be able to support the study and praised the warm and open interview style, which was very encouraging.

The two pilot interviews went well and there was no need to make any significant changes to interview questions or style. Therefore, these two interviews were included in the research data. Both participants were contacted and consented to have their experiences included in the main study.

4.4 Full Interviews and reflections

4.4.1 Pre-Interview

The one-to-one interviews were arranged following initial email contact from students who had received the study details and request for participation. Arranging the interviews usually involved a number of emails to ensure that the potential participants had all the information they needed to decide whether to proceed. Then, further emails followed to arrange a time, date and place.

4.4.2 Interview locations

All seven in-person interviews were held in a suitable location on the campus of each participant's university. For some on-campus interviews, I obtained a visitor pass to meet in library or study rooms that the participant had booked. Other interviews were

held in quiet locations on campus that participants had suggested. The other seven interviews (as well as the two pilot ones) were conducted via Zoom.

Reflections on main interviews:

1. I did not expect to have such a large and quick response to the initial circulation of the call for participants. I thought that the responses would be slow and steady and depend on snowballing to much a greater extent.
2. I felt very grateful for the positive response to the call and the willingness of trans* students to contact (for many) a stranger to share their identity and their experiences.
3. I was very conscious during the interviews of trying to ensure that the participants felt at ease and that they were in a safe space. This was done through a warm, friendly welcome and open body language and facial expressions from start to finish.
4. I adapted the semi-structured question order when participants' responses naturally flowed into later sections at earlier interview stages.
5. I felt that my follow-up questions and interview skills developed with experience. At times, participants deviated from their university experiences. Initially, I felt I ought to be keeping the interview completely 'on track', but I quickly realised that they were sharing the personal background that informed their answers. This showed a high level of trust and indicated participants wanting to present their whole personhood. It also gave me a greater understanding of their experiences and helped inform my follow-up questions.
6. Many of the students told me at the end of the interviews that they were glad they had taken part and that sharing their stories had been a positive and affirming experience. For many, it was the first time they had shared their university experience in its entirety with someone other than close friends and/or family.
7. I am aware that voices are missing from this study, those of trans* students who did not want, or were not ready, to share their experiences.

4.4.3 Interview transcription

Draft transcripts of the interviews were initially created using transcription software. A transcription service was not used due to the sensitive nature of the content.

For password protected Zoom interviews, the transcript generated by Zoom software was used as the draft for creating the final transcript. For in-person interviews, the digital audio file was uploaded to an MS Word document. MS Word transcription software was then used to generate a draft transcript.

Due to the inaccuracy of the Zoom and Microsoft transcripts, each draft transcript was then amended for accuracy while listening to each interview section by section. It also ensured the content accurately reflected the 'multi-level text' of the interview and helped achieve close familiarity with the data in advance of coding (Mason, 2018).

After each interview, the speaker names on transcripts were changed to the participant's chosen pseudonym, or preferred option for anonymity. When reviewing and amending the draft transcripts for accuracy, names of institutions and any other individuals were removed and replaced with suitable unidentifiable alternatives such as *this university.* This ensured that any data or security breach would not leave a participant in a vulnerable position.

4.5 Data Analysis and Coding

The process of qualitative data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases: familiarisation with the data; generating the initial codes; looking for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and finally, reporting. NVivo20, a qualitative data analysis tool, was used for coding and thematic analysis.

Following familiarisation with the data through transcription, initial coding was based on interview question areas, with nodes for sub-sections that had emerged under each main code. This is also known as open coding (Creswell, 2013).

The initial codes covering experiences and recommendations for each area were:

CODE	NODES
Reasons for choosing university	Local, Financial, English speaking

Teaching spaces	Curriculum, Peers, Faculty, Students as staff
Administration	With legal docs, Without legal docs, Staff
Policy	Types, Clarity, Availability
Physical Spaces	Housing, Bathrooms, Changing Rooms
Clubs & Societies	Changing rooms, uniforms
Other considerations	Health centres, Emergency supports
Campus Climate	

The initial open coding, along with re-reading relevant theory and literature, created the starting point to identify overarching themes within data. Subsequently, the data were analysed and re-analysed to identify further themes and sub-themes that had emerged within the responses. This is a process known as axial coding (Creswell, 2013). The approach was composed of inductive (bottom-up) and deductive (top-down). The overarching themes that were defined and named correspond closely to the structure and reporting of themes in the findings chapters. The final fifth theme was incorporated into the other chapters so that the thesis was not deficit focused until the end. This provided balance in the main body.

The final five themes from the coding process were:

CODE	NODES
Coming into university and disclosure	applications, registration, housing, faculty, students
Genderism/Cisgender normativity	Policies, administrative systems, physical spaces, extra-curricular
Power imbalance	Academic staff, postgrad tutors, reporting, cultural competence
(in)Visibility	Passing, academic spaces, misgendering, special treatment, institutional level
Being	Inclusive disciplines, communities, allies, resilience, climate, acceptance

Reflections on coding:

1. The initial coding to align with interview questions helped to create a structure within which to analyse the data further.
2. To move forward from this point, my supervisor encouraged me to step back, take some time to reconsider theory, and then start to re-analyse the data with a more thematic approach.
3. Re-analysis led to core themes from which sub-themes could be drawn for the final codes and nodes. This created a whole story for the thesis (in line with Creswell's 2013 recommendations for axial coding).
4. The above processes were undertaken with the aim of avoiding bias and not being only drawn to what I expected to find. This led to the recognition of less expected themes.

4.6 What does the thesis not do?

This thesis is not a comparative study between institutions nor between gender identities, e.g. non-binary student experiences versus binary trans* experiences, or trans* male versus trans* female experiences in Irish universities. The study only explores Irish university experiences and does not explore the situation for other third-level colleges and further education institutes. Additionally, although intersectional identities are reported when relevant and shared by the participants, this study does not apply an intersectional lens to the findings.

Student health centres arose as a theme in the findings. However, when planning out the body of the thesis and the findings, it became evident that many of the issues relating to health care problems in student health centres are a direct consequence of the appalling inadequacy of trans* health care in Ireland. Thus, addressing healthcare issues is beyond the scope of this thesis. The measures required to rectify this situation lie with higher governmental bodies and the state. However, the insights into trans* lives and the recommendations for trans-inclusivity that are provided by this thesis, such as staff education initiatives, use of pronouns and chosen names, are relevant to all professional staff, including those in student health centres.

Thus, as the first qualitative study of its kind in the Irish Republic, this study reveals the broader situation for trans* university students in the country at present and lays a foundation on which future, more narrowly focused studies can build.

The following four chapters (5 – 8) present the findings, discussion and analysis of the main themes that emerged from the data generation described in this chapter.

Chapter 5: C'mere to me: coming out when the university says you're in

(c'mere to me is a phrase used to get someone's attention before you tell them something or ask them something, usually less public e.g. coming out)

5.1 Introduction

> "The biggest thing would just be if we could formally use preferred names"
>
> (Liam, he/him)

This chapter is the first of the findings and discussion chapters, sharing the participants' experiences of disclosing their gender identity within their institutions. During the interview process and data analysis, it became evident that coming out and disclosure were core elements which impacted many other aspects of a student's university experience. Consequently, this section discusses the circumstances and situations in which (non)disclosure was reported by study participants. Each section is divided according to the key themes and areas that emerged from data analysis.

These students' experiences are summarised and fully discussed in the final section of the chapter. The discussion is through the lens of the thesis's theoretical underpinnings, as well as exploring the intersections of policy, policy-related practice and lived reality.

The critical trans framework for education asserts that gender operates at the individual level (Kean, 2021). This is influenced and is interdependent on how gender operates at the institutional and cultural level (ibid), as discussed in chapter three. The operation of gender at the individual level means that how a person experiences their gender identity, how open they choose to be about their gender identity, and how they choose to express that identity differs from one person to another. Equally, deciding whether to be out in university is influenced by many factors. For example, the institution's structural organisation of gender and whether claims of respect and inclusion align with individuals' lived realities (Ahmed, 2012; Spade, 2015), the wider societal operation of gender and how the individual experiences these.

Importantly, it should be noted that all participants in this study had already disclosed their identity to some extent, even if only socially to close friends. Consequently, the

findings do not reflect the experiences of students who had not shared their gender identity with anyone in their university nor their reasons behind complete non-disclosure.

Trans* students' decisions to come out are influenced by numerous personal and contextual factors on an ongoing basis. Thus, there is no given point at which it can be assumed all trans* students will want to disclose or that the disclosure is a singular event (Marques, 2020). Depending on admissions and selection procedures, the first point of disclosure could occur during the application process.

5.2 Applications

Research in other regions shows that requiring a personal statement and/or entry interview can deter trans* students from applying to HEIs (see Seelman, 2014). In the Republic of Ireland, however, entry interviews are less of a concern for school leavers going into undergraduate degrees as nearly all university undergraduate degree offers are made solely on academic achievement. Achievement is calculated through a points-based system from grades in terminal examinations at the end of schooling. Additionally, not all postgraduate programmes will specifically require a personal statement. The situation of places being offered on academic achievement for many programmes in Ireland is, therefore, positive in terms of not creating stress for trans* students about whether they will need to come out in an application. This may be one of the reasons why, surprisingly, for many students who participated in this study, perceived trans-friendliness was not necessarily one of the most important factors when deciding which institution to apply to.

In the interview questions, it was anticipated that trans-friendliness would have been an important factor. However, the students' key considerations tended to be the location (generally within reasonable travelling distance of home for Irish students for financial reasons) and that Ireland is an English-speaking country for international students. Additionally, interest in the programme offered and academic reputation were decision-making factors.

As an example, Blue (they/them) was motivated by academic reasons, sharing why they chose their university,

> ...mostly, for the (*area of my discipline)* that I study.

and

> …the university has a good reputation.

Ari (they/them) stated their reasons as,

> It was close to home. We weren't really in a financial place to go anywhere else, so I live just really close to here.

Furthermore, following Brexit, Irish universities have become a popular choice for EU students who want to study through the English language. Interestingly, none of the EU students mentioned the UK anti-trans* rhetoric and climate as reasons to avoid the UK. As Charlie (they/them) highlighted about their choice of university in Ireland,

> That doesn't have anything to do with my gender or my identity. It's just that I love the country and the nature, and I also wanted to go to a country that has a language that I already know at a very good level.

Another EU student, Darcy (they/them), on an Erasmus programme stated,

> And with Brexit, I was worried that the British universities would be unavailable for like, the Erasmus.

However, trans-inclusion was not completely ignored as a consideration. Dean (he/him) said,

> I chose this institution because a famous transgender theorist decided to give a talk here a few years ago, so I felt like this was a nice environment to continue my studies.

Additionally, Noah (they/them), who was familiar with the work of some of their university's societies from their time in local schooling, shared,

> ...and it was just really nice that that was a very trans-inclusive space.

From these accounts, it seems trans-inclusivity was evident within these institutions, either through societies or through whom they choose to platform. Viewed through Kean's (2021) lens, these two students had perceived that their (future) universities were willing to exercise institutional power in ways that did not promote only a cisnormative climate.

The main focus for applicants on location, university reputation, and programme of interest is an indication that, for many trans* students studying in Ireland, there is some equity with the wider student body in institutional selection. For these participants, concerns about coming out during application processes do not appear to be affecting choice. This may also be due to previous neutral or positive responses towards their trans* identity, so they did not anticipate overt transphobia. Kean's (2021) principles highlight that the wider cultural context impacts institutional culture. Thus, these findings may also be reflective of the Irish socio-cultural and political context, which although not entirely welcoming, is somewhat less hostile than certain other regions.

However, it does not necessarily indicate that how gender operates at the institutional level in these universities is equitable for trans* students in practice. Rather, some equity in the application process may merely be a fortunate additional outcome of the Irish grades-based entry system for many trans* students. Nevertheless, for many trans* students studying in Irish universities, disclosure becomes a consideration once they have accepted a place on a degree programme.

5.3 Registration

Many of today's youth are coming out at an average age of 16 (Goldberg, 2018). However, that does not mean that after accepting a university offer, trans* students who are already out do not have to consider to whom, where, how, when, and if it will be safe to share their gender identity. Additionally, students who begin to explore and develop their gender identity during their time at university may only want to come out later in their degree programme. Furthermore, many students may identify as differing genders during their degree journey or are gender fluid (Bilodeau, 2007; Mintz, 2011).

For many trans* students in Irish universities who have not legally transitioned but wish to come out, a potential point for disclosure is quite often during registration. For some participants in the study, digital disclosure during registration was facilitated by being able to record a chosen name and self-identify their gender, including non-binary, on university systems. This was done during or shortly after the enrolment process without needing legal documents to match. The ability to self-identify within the university is reflective of a degree of inclusion in institutional operation of gender (Kean, 2021).

The students in this study who were able to do so reported that recording their identity and chosen name on SIS significantly reduced any anxiety about having to personally come out face-to-face with staff and students on campus.

This was illustrated by Charlie (they/them), an Erasmus student spending one year in an Irish university. Charlie's legal name and gender did not match their identity. They shared,

> I have the option to enter with my chosen name and my correct gender identity at *(university*). So, they don't even have my dead name anywhere on the record … I don't have to come up to the lecturer and explain the name situation and I see that as an experience that is less stressful for me."

A *dead name* is a name given at birth that is no longer used by the individual. The ability to use their chosen name was evidently very positive for Charlie. Mike (he/him) felt similarly when he started his postgraduate degree with his name and gender aligned with his identity. Mike previously had to study under his birth name and sex assigned at birth. He explained,

> I came in as Mike, which I had never had that luxury before, and it's not a luxury, but you know, it felt like it.

Mike's use of 'luxury' as the emotion of recording his name and gender at registration indicates the level of stress that had previously been experienced when using his dead name. Furthermore, the use of 'luxury' shows how unusual it is having his identity and name align, given Mike's institutional and cultural experiences prior to that. Clearly, Mike and students like him are trying to exist in environments where there is not always full institutional recognition of non-normative identities without legal documentation

from the state. However, this gendered expression of power is oppressive to trans* individuals (Kean, 2021) and lack of recognition should not be the case in purportedly inclusive institutions within a progressive country.

At a practical level where universities are cognisant of retention rates, not having a chosen name and gender option at registration can deter students from staying at an institution when they know it is available elsewhere. This relates to retention factors noted in the literature (see McEnfarter & Iovannone, 2020; Pryor, 2015). For Swift (he/him), being unable to record his identity on internal systems was a key factor in leaving his master's university to start doctoral study in another institution. He explained,

> Gender identity was not a discussion in my master's university … it's all based on your birth sex … and one of the reasons why I was not interested in continuing PhD at my Master's university …. my PhD university does allow you to do that.

It is evident from these three students and others in the study that verification of internal identity being met with external recognition is incredibly affirming (see Gomez et al., 2009). For universities, verification and affirmation can attract students, increase retention and reflects the recommendations from published literature in studies from other regions (e.g Day et al., 2024; Copeland & Feldman, 2023; Nicolazzo, 2023; Flint et al., 2023; Brauer, 2017; Beemyn & Brauer, 2015, Pryor, 2015).

However, none of the students in this study shared that they could enter pronouns in their institutional records. Viewed through Kean's (2021) lens, lack of a pronoun field in records demonstrates that, while the conception and operation of gender in administrative systems may be broadening in some institutions, there is still institutional regulation and restriction of gender.

5.4 Housing

Another initial area where students ready to share their gender identity may want and need to do so is when registering for accommodation. This is particularly relevant in

situations where universities assign students to single-sex housing according to sex assigned at birth.

One participant, Kay (she/her), whose legal documents reflect her sex assigned at birth, requested an all-female apartment in her university. This request was respected, and Kay was given a room in an all-female apartment. However, she suspects this was not her initial allocation. Kay shared that an apartment across from hers is nearly all-male, with only one female student; Kay thinks that the female student must have initially been assigned to her apartment and she to the mostly male apartment. Kay said,

> As for my housing, I asked for female-only housing … and there is a room [*meaning apartment*] opposite to us and our same floor where it's five men, one woman. So, 90% they did a quick mix with the allocation.

Kay believes the housing allocations team swapped her with the other female student to try to facilitate Kay's request. If Kay's speculation is correct, it shows some institutional recognition and understanding of Kay's identity by the staff involved in allocations. Importantly, Kay did not have to spend the year in all-male accommodation.

At the time of Kay's interview, I did not think to ask if it was known how the female student in mostly male accommodation felt about the situation. The housing may not have been an issue for the other female student, but it does have the potential to cause discomfort and create resentment for a number of parties. It is, therefore, clear that all students would benefit from trans* students having the ability to record their self-identified gender(s) in housing allocation systems.

Mike (he/him) was allocated all-female housing based on sex assigned at birth on his legal documentation, again reflecting a biological essentialist view by the institution. He was not given any option to select alternate housing. As housing was difficult to secure (reflecting the supply shortage of affordable housing in Ireland) he took the accommodation anyway, stating,

> It was just done. I struggled so hard to get accommodation that I just kind of didn't want to rock the boat. So, I just went when they said they'd take me.

The situation of needing to take the only accommodation offered illustrates the compounding of marginalisation highlighted by Kean's second principle of genderism interacting with other marginalised identities. In this instance, where economic resources were limited, dominant gender binaries within power structures intersected with low income to force Mike into accepting the housing. Financial vulnerability and precarity required this individual to accept the institutional undoing of his gender identity.

5.5 Faculty-initiated disclosure opportunities

Where institutional genderism is hard coded into registration systems, individual faculty can overcome this and create an inclusive environment for trans* students. Swift (he/him), a PhD student in this study, who also teaches undergraduate students, shared,

> What I do with my students, at least, is I send around a form in advance, and I ask them to indicate their preferred name, preferred pronouns, and if they're comfortable with me using that in class … it just automatically sets up a conversation around potential transness … and even the cis people in the room have then at least had that kind of confronted … Then, of course, there's always the option for prefer not to say.

Emailing students in this way provides an opportunity to come out and avoids misnaming and misgendering anyone who wants to share their identity. Furthermore, as Swift states, it signals to the whole student cohort that this is an inclusive environment where all gender identities are welcome. The pre-class contact helps create a climate that gives external validation to internal identity, one that is not embedded in genderism. It clearly signals that all genders are valid in that teaching space, regardless of institutional and cultural expressions of gender. Additionally, by emailing students in advance, teaching staff also avoid pressurising identity management situations (see Lewis et al., 2022).

Identity management situations often arise in what is commonly referred to as the 'pronoun-go-round'. It is usually undertaken in small group settings, such as tutorials and workshops. At the first class meeting, the lecturer/tutor starts by introducing themselves, then one by one, students introduce themselves with names and pronouns (see Norris & Welch, 2020; Wentling, 2015; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Knutson et al., 2022). Aside from generally getting to know each other, the aim is to provide a space in which trans* students can share their identity. For many trans* students who feel that the space is safe, the pronoun-go-round is appreciated. Jack (they/them) shared,

> I really like it when the lecturer, themselves, shares their pronouns, because that kind of normalises it and encourages who wants to do so. So, I had mostly positive experiences.

Another student, Ari (they/them), whose teaching staff have not used pronouns in small group introductions, suggested adding pronouns to the introductory practices,

> If we can all go around and everyone knows what pronouns are, everyone knows what pronouns they use, and then once everyone is comfortable using their own pronouns, they can feel more open to understanding other people's pronouns.

However, Jack (they/them) also cautioned, the practice could force individuals into misgendering themselves. They said,

> We cannot force people to be comfortable with maybe sharing pronouns that do not reflect their gender identity.

Understandably, students in a room with new people may be concerned about facing overt or covert discrimination stemming from (cis)genderism highlighted by Kean (2021). The pronoun-go-round, therefore, has the potential to force someone to either out themselves or misgender/ misname themselves. Furthermore, those disclosures may be forgotten by the lecturer.

Noah's (they/them) experience of the pronoun-go-round has been frustrating due to failures to remember their pronouns. They explained,

> I think definitely one of the challenges that keeps cropping up for me is that … I'll make sure to say like my pronouns, are they/them. But the lecture never really takes note of that … many, many times I'll be misgendered throughout the year.

The mixed findings on the pronoun-go-round in this study in Ireland are supported by mixed recommendations in the wider international research. There are some advocates for the practice (see Wentling, 2015; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017) and scholars who advise against it (see Knutson et al., 2022; Goldberg, Beemyn & Smith, 2019). Thus, it seems advisable to exercise caution and be wary of using the pronoun-go-round as trans* students may not know for certain if they are in a hostile or supportive environment.

Other approaches can be used to make trans* students feel validated and accepted, overcome institutional discrimination within teaching spaces, and visibly demonstrate staff validation of trans* identities (foregrounded by Kean, 2021). A simple practice that trans* students in this study say they appreciate is when lecturers introduce themselves to large groups using their pronouns to create trans-inclusivity and a sense of understanding for trans* students. This is done without any requirement or pressure for students to introduce themselves. For example, Charlie (they/them) said,

> It would be nice if when people introduce themselves, they introduce their pronouns as well.

And if people do not,

> … that kind of alienates me.

It appears that by introducing their own pronouns, lecturers are opening a door for trans* students to come out and share their pronouns when ready, at any point in their

gender identity development. Equally importantly, participants perceive that this practice raises awareness of pronouns and helps normalise trans* identities for all students.

5.6 Student-initiated disclosures to faculty

Rather than leave what might happen when they arrive in class to chance, some students in the study who felt confident enough to do so chose to initiate contact with teaching staff in advance of class. Positively, they found that disclosures were well-received. These faculty responses may demonstrate that, on a personal level at least, many teaching staff appear to be understanding, giving validation to non-normative gender identities.

One example is Darcy (they/them), who has socially transitioned but does not have the option to record a chosen name and gender on university systems. Consequently, they opted to email teaching staff in advance of class commencement. Darcy explained,

> I sent an email about that to my teachers, just like a few weeks ago to inform them about the fact that my dead name is still showing up … and that I used they/them pronouns.

However, Darcy ’s approach may not be for everyone, and it did put a burden on another participant. Liam (he/him) shared a time when he only remembered right before the start of term that he needed to inform new lecturers of his identity. This was stressful but, fortunately, Liam’s lecturers saw the email in time and respected his identity.

Rather than coming out by email or other direct correspondence, some trans* students prefer to tell lecturers in person when it seems relevant and safe to do so. Asher (they/he) explained,

> I don't make a point to share it with everyone. It's kind of like if it comes up … It's nothing personal about the lecturers. It's like the context … the nature of the subject.

This use of context relates to assessing potential gains and losses from sharing identity. Trans* individuals will assess the context before making a decision whether to disclose or not (Kade, 2021). It highlights how the operationalisation of gender at the individual, institutional, and cultural levels (Kean, 2021) can impact disclosure decisions, and that barriers to disclosure can be actively and passively created.

5.7 Student-student disclosures

Aside from coming out to staff and faculty, trans* students will have to navigate when and how to come out to peers. Some participants tended to share their identity with close friends on their programme first. This is termed symbolic disclosure, which strengthens bonds (Kade, 2021). For example, Harper (they/she) has only shared their identity with people they are close to on their programme. Harper said,

> I haven't made it publicly known in terms of education, only my close friends.

When it came to coming out to other students, not friends, many chose to disclose when the conversation made it relevant and they felt they were in a safe environment. Some participants mentioned sharing their identity when it came up in conversation. Others disclosed their gender identity when assigned to group work and projects because they did not want to be repeatedly misgendered and misnamed.

Disclosure to an assigned group was the case for Ari (they/them). They do not usually have much interaction with their peers due to being in very large lecture theatres with a large student cohort. Ari explained,

> We don't really speak much to each other, we're quite closed off, unfortunately. So, like, people would be on their own unless we're like in a group project. But then, like, I would tell them that my name and then they/them pronouns.

For other students who are ready to let everyone on their programme know after they transition socially during the programme, rather than tell people one by one, they might share on class forums. Although not everyone would be comfortable using an online

forum, one participant shared his identity with his class via social media. Liam (he/him) explained,

> I do remember we had a group chat and I just, I made a new (*social media)* page, and I sent in a message saying, this is me, same person. I'm coming back with a new name and pronouns, or whatever, and just got lots of very nice messages back.

In contrast, Robyn (she/her), has legally transitioned so does not need to let people know in terms of a mismatch with her name and gender on records. Robyn, therefore, only chooses to share her trans* status with close friends. She said,

> I've only really told my friends if it's relevant, but like, I think people have kind of gathered it at this point.

Another participant in the study has also transitioned legally and is researching in an area related to trans* identities. This student is faced with deciding whether to disclose his trans* identity when discussing his research. The student shared,

> Then, do I want to disclose when speaking about (*this area)*, and because, you know, people obviously have a kind of curiosity about. 'Why are you so kind of passionate about that area of research or whatever?'
>
> And so, I gave a presentation this week … I was like 'I don't care if that makes anybody kind of … figure anything out'. I was like 'I just want to discuss my research because it's important, and it's interesting.'

For this participant, the possible discomfort of identity disclosure outweighed the potential challenges that might come from it. Thus, it seems when gender identity aligns with legal documentation, the choice of whether to disclose is being influenced by the relevance of that disclosure in any given personal or academic context. Disclosures in these circumstances appear to be undertaken to strengthen bonds or to assert the right to a gender identity.

However, not all students who have legally transitioned have been able to choose whether to be stealth (not disclose identity) or not. For Ruari (he/him), who has legally transitioned, there has been an issue of being misgendered through pronouns. Ruari has disclosed his status to people he feels comfortable with on his course and has permitted them to tell others. Ruari shared,

> I've had issues with someone who I don't think got the memo that I was trans*. I think someone gave them the memo at some point. For a while they weren't using my pronouns, which was a bit stressful, but that was all sorted.

Ruari was comfortable and preferred to rely on others he trusted to disclose his status more widely on his behalf. By others doing this, his peers rectified a situation of misgendering that likely stemmed from another student's cisnormativity and finding a trans* identity unintelligible. The socio-cultural misreading of Ruari's gender by another student clearly caused him gender-related stress and indicates that understanding of trans* identities among certain members of the student body is lacking. Alternatively, if Ruari's identity was being recognised, it was being dismissed as not worthy of validation. Fortunately, it seems that a number of Ruari's peers are gender expansive and willing to advocate for him.

5.8 Summary & Discussion

The decision on when and why a trans* student may choose to disclose their gender identity is complex, multi-layered and very personal. The lens of Kean's framework (2021) illuminates how institutional expressions of gender, discerned through institutional culture and practices stemming from policy, influence disclosure. For example, institutional expressions of gender are evident in information systems and housing allocations. They are also expressed through climates created by faculty and students (Kean, 2021). In these student accounts, there is clear evidence of embedded cisnormativity, with certain individuals and institutions making genuine efforts to counterbalance that.

As can be seen in these findings, many students appreciated being able to record their identity in student record systems at registration, particularly when they did not have legal documents to match. The ability to do this reflects certain institutions' operation

of gender is not only cisnormative. Whether or not students had this ability also impacted housing allocations, with the unfortunate situation of institutional genderism forcing acceptance of same-sex housing that did not align with identity.

As previously discussed, having a gender identity recognised and recorded by an institution can be validating and affirming. Although all Irish universities make policy claims of gender inclusivity, these students' experiences elucidate where that is being effective and, in contrast, where institutions are upholding existing norms.

As Crasnow (2021) argues, governments tend to only recognise trans* bodies as 'becoming bodies'. As a result, many governments only recognise bodies that will become/transition into one that conforms to secure static criteria or have already done so. It reflects 'trapped in the wrong body' thinking that upholds male/female gender binaries and does not recognise other gender identities. This governmental/state-level thinking rooted in (cis)genderism is consequently reflected in institutions such as universities, despite policy claims to the contrary.

Furthermore, institutional static and binary conceptions of gender are likely to discourage disclosures. They may make it impossible for many students to have their identity institutionally recognised at any point, e.g. those who are gender fluid, agender, or non-binary. In a binary system, such identities are institutionally erased and socially illegible.

From policy review, eight out of thirteen Irish universities have taken steps to validate trans* identities in their internal administrative systems. Within these findings, and despite the fact that administrative recognition does not guarantee cultural change (Spade, 2015), it is evident how meaningful administrative validation is for trans* participants in this study. The universities that have successfully implemented administrative recognition of trans* identities could provide a practice model for the other five universities. Their example could also encourage other institutions in the wider socio-cultural context to do the same and decrease gendered administrative discrimination beyond campus contexts. However, it is also important to stress Spade's (2015) warning that merely trying to create trans-inclusion through policy and its

associated administrative options does not automatically increase institutional gender literacy nor foster gender-expansive cultures.

Kean's lens (2021) shows that faculty behaviours are therefore another consideration when assessing whether a university genuinely takes a critical approach to governing gender norms. In face-to-face settings, some faculty created opportunities for disclosure and displayed at least awareness of trans* identities. These individuals may be a reflection of positively shifting socio-cultural attitudes toward trans* identities in Ireland, reflected in the state's legislative foundations. Notably, the use of pronoun-go-rounds is not routine in classroom settings. This indicates that either faculty and teaching staff are aware that this introductory practice can impact trans* student safety or that faculty are not recognising trans* identities. There were mixed findings in this study regarding group introductions, where students share names and pronouns. Those students who were comfortable doing so felt validated. However, it was reported this could place trans* students in a vulnerable position of misgendering/misnaming themselves or coming out to strangers. This warning reflects a policy and lived-reality gap; despite institutional commitments to trans* identities, psychological safety is not automatically a given in classroom settings.

It is also reported that some faculty responded with understanding to student-initiated disclosures, which indicates certain cultural shifts towards inclusion that are not just policy/paper-based. However, most disclosures to faculty or other students were prompted by a need and desire for recognition that did not already exist at the (cisnormative) institutional level.

In terms of symbolic disclosure (Kade, 2021) in this study, all participants had come out to friends and peers in their course to whom they felt comfortable and close. This reflects the establishment of what Bilodeau (2005) refers to as their transgender social identity. Some students chose to disclose to people with whom they were close, and some were happy for others to make that disclosure on their behalf. However, students who have legally transitioned to a gender binary were less likely to share their trans* identity. They tended to do so only when it felt relevant or safe to make symbolic disclosure to strengthen bonds (Kade, 2021).

Overall, disclosures in this study would indicate that trans* students who have not legally transitioned and whose institutions do not support social transitions on records are more likely to be required to come out. Coming out is likely undertaken to avoid social identity threat from repeatedly facing an environment where their view of themselves is met with external non-verification (Gomez et al., 2009). However, the need to disclose to avoid non-verification undermines trans* students' bodily autonomy and their right to privacy. This is an oppressive situation that stems from genderism (highlighted in Kean's second principle). Trans* people, like anyone else, should have the agency to decide when, how, and to whom they disclose personal aspects of their identity.

Theory and research, as reflected in these findings, demonstrate that the process of coming out for trans* students in university settings is deeply influenced by intersecting social, institutional, and cultural dynamics. Kean's theoretical framework (2021) emphasises that gender identity is shaped not only by individual expression but also by institutional structures and socio-cultural norms that often reinforce cisnormativity. Coming out, therefore, is not simply a personal act but a negotiation with environments that may marginalise or invalidate trans* identities. Disclosure will be partly dependent on their gender identity development (Bilodeau, 2005). It will also be shaped by internal and external socio-cultural and political factors, as well as the anticipated risk or gain that coming out will pose (Kade, 2021). Furthermore, these theories and findings underscore that coming out in higher education in Ireland and elsewhere (e.g. Nicolazzo, 2017) is not a one-time event but an ongoing, strategic, and often fraught process shaped by policies, peers, cultures, and access to affirming resources.

Crucially, viewing the experiences shared in this chapter through Kean's lens, the intersection of disclosure with the policy–lived reality nexus for trans* students becomes evident. A number of gaps are revealed between institutional commitments to inclusion and the actual experiences of trans* students on campuses. In line with state recognition and protection of transgender identities, most Irish universities have adopted policies that purport to affirm gender diversity. However, trans* students are being repeatedly required to disclose their gender identity in ways that are emotionally taxing. Many of these students' experiences reveal the complex circumstances

surrounding disclosure, which lead to it not necessarily or simply being a personal choice. Instead, the participants' disclosures are shaped by what Kean's (2021) framework highlights as systemic norms, inconsistent policy implementation and cultural climate. As a result, it is evident that commitments made on paper are at times failing to translate into meaningful support or safety in practice. This situation reflects the issue with institutional EDI which Ahmed (2012) spotlights, in that it frequently does not unsettle the established power structures and dismantle inequalities. Thus, these trans* students' experiences of coming out demonstrate a need for institutions to address not just what policies state and permit, but how they are lived by those most affected.

However, an interesting insight emerges in contrast to the literature (see Lange et al., 2021; Seelman, 2014). The majority of participants did not cite perceived institutional trans-friendliness as a core consideration in their choice of institution. This situation is partly a by-product of the points-based entry system for undergraduate students (which does not require interviews) and financial considerations (living close to home). However, it may also point to an expectation of not being a target of discrimination within any particular institution. This possibly reflects the impact of trans-recognition at the state level, forming the expectation that state-funded institutions, such as universities, are unlikely to be actively hostile environments.

Chapter 6: Minus craic: colliding with cisnormativity

(minus craic means it's not good or not fun at all; the situation when students encounter cisnormativity)

6.1 Introduction

"Bathrooms, of course, that's a big topic." (Charlie (they/them))

The previous chapter shared the findings from student experiences of identity disclosure in their universities. As chapter five illustrated, the level and prevalence of cisgender norms and institutional operation of gender impact how and when a student comes out. However, cisgender norms are evident in the data analysis in many areas of campus life and impact trans* students in more ways than just willingness to disclose. With the lens of Kean's 2021 framework providing insight into causes and with reference to theory and published literature, this chapter shares, and then discusses the main circumstances in which trans* students encounter cisnormativity and cisgenderism in their universities.

As a reminder, Kean's first principle highlights that gender at the institutional level is expressed through university policies and practices, gendered administrative systems and male/female sex-segregated facilities (Kean, 2021). These institutional expressions lead to trans* student identities being invalidated, often being made invisible, and their needs being unmet. Being invisible and invalidated contributes to the distal (external) and proximal (internal) stress factors identified by Testa et al. (2015). The effect on trans* students is the oppression of their ability to live fully in their identity and with equity to cisgender students in their institutions. This negative impact is the underpinning of Kean's second principle, which states that genderism is a system of oppression and epistemic injustice (Kean, 2021).

Aside from cultural norms being reflected in institutions, the cisnormativity in campuses may also stem from the fact that trans* individuals might not have been part of policy-making and infrastructure design. The need for trans* individuals' input is stressed in Kean's (2021) third principle as the importance of trans* experiential knowledge in decision-making and change efforts.

This second chapter on the findings presents the levels of prevalence and the impact of cisnormativity on participants, as well as their recommendations for change. Each section is divided according to the key themes and areas that emerged from data analysis. These experiences are then discussed in depth in the final section of the chapter.

6.2 Policies and policy mechanisms

The policy that is most likely to affect trans* students in practice relates to gender identity and expression. In Irish universities, this is the policy most likely to protect trans* students' rights to be treated with dignity and respect.

It is evident from interviews in this study that most participants were not familiar with their universities' policies in relation to their identities. For example, Harper (they/she) shared,

> I haven't heard of any policies. I don't think I've had any trouble with any policies. Not that I'm aware of anyways. So yeah, I'm not entirely sure.

Harper's lack of awareness of policy could be taken to mean that policies are working effectively to ensure that Harper has an equitable, trans-inclusive experience. However, others who were also unaware of their universities' policies were more sceptical of their impact in protecting and supporting trans* students. For example, Blue (they/them) was doubtful of the existence of such policies. They reported,

> I know that, because of other students, we realised there was not a policy for sexual harassment, for example. And I have the feeling that if there's not even a policy for that, why would there be a policy for like how to treat trans* people? That's just my assumption.

This scepticism from Blue and other participants is unlikely due to them being cynical individuals. It is possibly grounded in a general feeling that stems from experiencing various forms of epistemic injustice, genderism and oppression within their institutions (highlighted in Kean's 2021 principles). Additionally, this feeling may be evidence of the proximal (internal) stress factor of negative expectations given by Testa et al. (2015) that

comes from gender-related invalidation and non-affirmation by their institutions. Arguably, if participants had experienced a positive impact from institutional operationalisation of gender, they would have speculated differently about policy.

For those who were aware of policies, they did not report on them wholly positively. Ruari (he/him) felt the policy he encountered was not applied in practice. He stated,

> I will say that the policy that our college has in regards to trans* and non-binary stuff is like, it's just a bunch of words that really don't mean anything. Like, they say all this wonderful stuff and then they don't do it.

Ruari's comments appear to reflect a disjuncture between policy pronouncements and lived reality.

Another student, Ari (they/them), encountered a lack of clarity. They had tried to make a name change based on a policy they found, which appeared to permit a change without legal documentation. However, Ari was unable to make the change when they tried. Ari explained,

> Well, whenever I did kind of go about changing my name to Ari, I did look up the policies about this and they were quite confusing.

In Ari's experience, and the experience of others in this study, it appears that the policy they consulted indicated that the institutional operation of gender was expansive. However, in practice, there was no mechanism which respected and affirmed their chosen name at an institutional level.

Ari is not alone. For example, Liam (he/him) shared his experience of not having a student card that matched his chosen name until he had legal recognition,

> You would sit down in the exam hall, and you'd need to leave your ID card on the table for the duration of the exam … So, kind of little things that, kind of, I really kind of took on the chin, and just did daily.

A lack of coherence across university systems and records caused issues for Dean (he/him) and Jack (they/them). They both shared that they had made front-end name changes on their student records, but their email addresses still corresponded to their

legal names. Both students had encountered challenges in being issued a new email. When it was eventually issued, the original email address was shut down without warning and all correspondence was lost. While their university was trying to provide an appropriately named email address, the stress caused by the change was an undue burden and led to the loss of important information and contacts. From the Irish trans* student survey, Chevalier et al. (2019) found that having identity aligned across systems and ID was an issue for many students in their ROI-based quantitative study.

Experiences of being deadnamed clearly disadvantage trans* students and illustrate the stressful and oppressive nature of a cisgender default in university systems. Furthermore, a number of trans* students who were changing to a chosen or legal name reported that the administrators they were in contact with replied using their birth name and not the chosen or new legal name they had stated. One student was told they needed additional identification that matched their deed poll to have the name changed on their academic transcript. The administrator adding documentation requirements may reflect a cisnormative default in individual staff, likely stemming from their own binary understanding of gender at the individual and cultural levels (from Kean's first principle).

Thus, it appears that professional staff are not being supported in applying policy measures consistently and have not been provided with an understanding of the policy beneficiaries, in this instance, trans* individuals. This reveals a policy – practice disconnect.

Furthermore, policies are not always accessible to students; lack of knowledge about policies appears to be influenced by policy inaccessibility to the student body. Noah (they/them) was unaware of gender identity related policies, stating,

> I think the main thing for me is that, like, there's no information anywhere. It's so hidden, like, I don't know if I can record my pronouns, or if I can change my name … I've no idea where to even look.

Noah's words emphasise that, despite being aimed at supporting trans* students, the burden of finding policy-related mechanisms may be placed on the trans* student. Noah

was not alone in their experience. It should not be the case that students are burdened with the need to navigate complicated or unclear policy to avail of the rights it affords them. Nor should a student be responsible for ensuring that staff are implementing those policies appropriately.

One participant, Mike (he/him), expressed his awareness of the need for ongoing consideration and monitoring of policy-related changes to ensure they are effectively implemented. He shared,

> There needs to be measurable outcomes … that needs to be mapped very clearly to like, maybe it's a 3-year plan … and there needs to be a dedicated oversight committee … and obviously there needs to be trans* voices in the process.

Inclusion of trans* voices is in line with Kean's third principle, which advocates for the critical importance of trans* experiential knowledge (Kean, 2021). Without this knowledge input, change and inclusion measures are less likely to achieve their stated aims.

Mike (he/him) reported unpaid voluntary involvement in the gender identity and expression policy drafting process at his undergraduate university. However, in retrospect, he felt that his participation may have been box-ticking on the part of the institution; his participation was only in the early drafting stages, and the final policy that was published did not reflect much of his input. Mike said,

> I would have done a lot of the drafting around the policy. But then, because of the bureaucratics of the university, I never got to be in a room where it was talked about … and you know, the policy that they had … wasn't what I wrote in many ways.

It is also possible that this student experienced a form of epistemic injustice (also spotlighted in Kean's third principle) where the testimony and account given to the university's policy committee were minimalised and met with bias. The dominant group may not have recognised the account given by the minority individual due to a lack of

collective understanding (hermeneutical injustice), or it was minimised or not trusted due to prejudice (testimonial injustice).

6.3 Physical spaces assigned to the gender binary

Another frequent way that institutional and cultural expressions of gender reflect systemic cisnormativity is in the assignation of physical spaces to the male/female binary. Such spaces are manifestations of the traditional biological essentialist view of gender that is based on external sex organs and dominant heteronormativity; individuals with one set of external sex organs determined at birth should use one enclosed area and be separated from individuals with different sex organs. This restrictive binary thinking in space allocation most significantly affects the trans* participants when they need to use public restrooms and changing areas for exercise. Lack of access to adequate facilities could also be considered a cause of Testa et al.'s (2015) distal stress factor of gender-related discrimination. Furthermore, these spaces become a way of enforcing and policing gender binaries (Davis, 2019).

Consequently, trans* students are often left with no option except to use facilities that best match their external appearance according to hegemonic cisgendered cultural norms. For example, Dean (he/him) shared that he is unable to locate any gender-neutral bathrooms on his campus. Due to safety concerns, he feels left with no choice but to use the female bathroom,

> I look more like a girl … so I feel safer where other people look like me than when they don't.

The impact of this on Dean is quite psychologically upsetting. He went on to say,

> Every time I go to the bathroom, I'm like, 'Why am I here? Why am I not somewhere else?' and it always brings up your own issues … you feel like there's a problem with yourself.

Clearly, bathroom use is a stress factor that is negatively impacting Dean's mental health. The lack of safe, comfortable access to a bathroom that aligns with his gender is compounding his stress from other factors related to his identity.

Additionally, students who have a physical appearance that would not be traditionally read as either male or female (according to dominant and oppressive socio-cultural expectations of gender expression) encounter challenges. This is reflected in having to decide which bathroom they are least likely to encounter adverse reactions. Jack (they/them) stated,

> I have started medical transitioning now, so I've been wondering about, at some point, when I don't pass as a woman, but I also don't pass as a man, I don't know where I am gonna go, because I would probably feel uncomfortable or unsafe in either space.

From these comments, it would seem Jack is experiencing fear (Kean, 2021) from distal stress factors (Testa et al., 2015) of potential gender discrimination and victimisation. As Jack is transitioning, they likely expect to enter a constant state of vigilance. Jack's stress will be caused by their university's physical infrastructure upholding heteronormative and cisnormative conceptions of gender expression.

Jack (they/them) and Dean (he/him) are not alone in their concerns and discomfort about bathroom access. For example, one participant opted to travel home just to go to the bathroom, which naturally had an impact on his time to study on campus. Another participant shared that she was particularly conscious of the anti-trans* rhetoric around trans* women using female bathrooms. It is oppressive to live with such daily gender-related anxiety created by institutional cisnormativity.

A common workaround that Irish institutions appear to employ is to assign facilities that were originally designated to disabled individuals to become gender neutral. However, such superficial allocation is not a dismantling of norms nor a cultural shift. This surface level facilities provision of disabled bathrooms creates discomfort due to legitimate concerns about delaying and distressing people who need adapted spaces. Additionally, trans* students worry about drawing attention to themselves for using disabled facilities and being read by others as trans*. Ruari (he/him) explained this as follows,

> The bathrooms are single stall, wheelchair accessible, which is great for, obviously, trans* people in wheelchairs or with disabilities. But you definitely

> feel a bit odd going in sometimes, especially if they're next to some of the other bathrooms, and people might kind of look at you and think, 'why would they go in there?'

Ruari's sentiments are not dissimilar to the majority of students, who shared their discomfort at potentially causing inconvenience to a disabled person or drawing attention to themselves. This discomfort also demonstrates that as a marginalised group, trans* students do not want to cause distress to any other minority group.

Encouragingly, it was reported that some institutions have tried to implement gender-neutral bathrooms as separate facilities from disabled bathrooms. The provision of these gender-neutral facilities is an indication of some normalisation of trans* identities within the relevant institutions. However, the students whose campuses provided gender-neutral bathrooms also shared that they were not always clean and in working order, or their location was not easily found.

Concerns about binary spaces are not only related to access to bathrooms. It is also an issue with changing spaces for non-cisgendered bodies in gym and sports areas. Robyn (she/her) explained that she had not encountered any issues using female bathrooms but had been availing of the university's swimming pool changing area when she went to the gym. She had found these single-occupancy cubicles by chance and felt more comfortable using those rather than the gym-changing space. Furthermore, the swimming pool changing facilities are near the gym, so using them did not draw unwanted attention. In relation to the gym changing spaces, Robyn said,

> There's a male changing room and a female changing room, and in those changing rooms they have a pretty open space … there's nothing like, really private, which did kind of like concern me … I should be respectful of the other women using the change area … I know that it can be a little scary seeing someone else's genitalia, and like, to be totally frank, I wouldn't be comfortable with that either.

Robyn's feelings acutely illustrate that trans* individuals not only want to protect their privacy but also be respectful of the privacy of others.

The student experiences reported here sadly reflect how embedded cultural heteronormativity and cisnormativity is expressed in institutions' facilities. This cisnormativity polices and restricts non-normative identities and bodies.

6.4 Clubs and societies

Clubs and societies can be important communities that provide a source of belonging and connectedness which positively affects well-being, especially for those in minority groups such as LGBT (Formby, 2017a). Unsurprisingly, studies have shown the value of community when specifically considering trans* individuals (see Sherman et al., 2020; Paceley et al., 2017).

For many, the supportive community they find may be through student organisations. For some participants, LGBTQ+ societies were reported as vital in providing a place of belonging. Belonging gained from such societies matches findings from other regions (see Beemyn, 2019; Bonner-Thompson et, 2021; Formby, 2017b). Liam (he/him) summed up sentiments that were shared by others when he said the following about his time as an undergraduate student,

> The LGBT Society was my saving grace. Like, it was where I made, like, my closest friends and had people that I could kind of go to. And yeah, kinda have support, so that I didn't feel so isolated.

The importance of finding a community that gives a sense of belonging has a significant positive impact on trans* students, whether that community is through friends or university societies. However, while student-run spaces can become havens of belonging for trans* students, they also have the potential to become places in which they encounter expressions of transphobia.

In the Film Society in his institution, Ruari (he/him) shared that he received a lack of understanding and invalidation of his trans* identity. He said,

> Someone asked me my name and I said, 'My name is Ruari', and this person's name was also Ruari. So, we had the same name. And this person was very confused by the fact I was saying my name, which was his name … he was like, 'but that's a boy's name, and you're a girl'. And I was like, hold on, hold on one second there. So that was uncomfortable.

Ruari remembered some transphobic comments followed, after the individual became aware of Ruari's trans* identity. Ruari believes the Film Society committee spoke to the student afterwards. Unfortunately, as a result of the incident, Ruari understandably did not feel psychologically safe about attending the Film Society again. This is most likely due to the stress factor of gender-related discrimination (Testa et al., 2015) and can be viewed through the lens of Kean's framework as a form of oppression from genderism.

Another participant, Blue (they/them), shared that they had felt particularly unwelcome in their institution's Feminist Society. They were unsure whether to interpret the climate as a lack of awareness of trans* identities, or if perhaps there were undercurrents of trans-exclusionary feminism (another form of oppressive genderism, known as TERF-ism). Blue explained,

> They were always talking only about yeah, us women, and whatever … I think it was probably more trans* unaware. But maybe it was TERF-y … I felt unsafe and unseen enough to not go there again.

Perhaps the most concerning and unexpected situation for trans* students is when they experience marginalisation or invalidation within LGBTQ+ Societies. This marginalisation often occurs when the T in the acronym is not being recognised. For example, in some societies for queer identities, trans* participants reported that the spaces were dominated by, and centred on, cisgender identities. One participant explained that within the LGBT Society in his university, the Trans* Representative voted onto the committee the previous year was a cisgender person. The cisgender person was voted into the role despite there being trans* candidates. This outcome had understandably been received badly by the trans* members in the society.

This type of situation oppresses trans* students and disregards what Kean's (2021) third principle highlights as the importance of trans* experience being part of decision-making processes. Not having a trans* representative in an LBGTQ+ society not only invalidates trans* identities but, in the example given by the participant, led to concerns about the way the society runs in a practical sense. For example, these concerns could involve organising trips and accommodation with passports in dead names, making sleeping arrangements, changing facilities and so on.

From these experiences and others shared by participants, it seems to be especially distressing and marginalising for trans* students to find that the society that should be a safe space is not that at all. Similar experiences were revealed in other regions in the published literature (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018), with authors drawing particular attention to the need to consider non-binary identities (Nicolazzo, 2016a; Beemyn, 2019; Goldberg, 2018).

In certain circumstances, trans* students may encounter difficulties simply due to a lack of awareness or lack of thought about how to be trans-inclusive, rather than conscious trans-exclusion. One participant expressed an interest in joining their university's cheerleading club. However, the design of the female cheerleading outfits deterred her from joining. Robyn (she/her) shared,

> I would rather totally avoid it … than be possibly exposed to some sort of like, you know 'Listen, we don't feel comfortable with you, wearing like the micro mini skirt' … I haven't been made to feel reassured that there is, like, you know, neutrality in terms of whatever you could wear.

From Robyn's account, it is concerning to hear that the prevailing expectation is one of non-recognition of trans* identities and potential phobia about trans* bodies. In particular, Robyn expressed awareness of the potential undertones of hostility towards trans women's bodies.

In terms of recommendations, most participants felt that it should be part of the requirements from the university that societies cater for trans* students and their needs. Blue (they/them) said,

> Because there are several rules that like, when you open a new society … I think there are plenty of regulations … So, I think if it would be in one of those requirements … I think that's a good idea.

A few participants recommended that universities provide support for clubs and societies in terms of training for committee members. This institutional support should in part assist all clubs and societies in being inclusive. As Bonner-Thompson et al. (2021) cautioned, universities should not merely outsource the work of inclusion to student clubs and societies. It should be recognised that these extra-curricular groups have the potential to reflect the wider situation of trans* experiential knowledge being disregarded, as well as potentially being hostile environments. Additionally, participants advocated that universities should have a clear, robust process that ensures action can be taken in relation to anyone displaying transphobic behaviours within student organisations. Ruari (he/him) said that currently, in his institution,

> It's really difficult to get an approval for someone being banned from the society.

Charlie (they/them) suggested that all societies could help normalise trans* identities through, for example, the use of pronouns, possibly by providing pronoun badges. They said,

> What I would always recommend is probably buttons … that would also be nice to implement in all the societies. It doesn't have to be buttons, necessarily. But you know, normalising telling your pronouns.

Without the initiatives recommended above, trans* students are more likely to be directly or indirectly excluded and oppressed in student-led organisations. They may be unable to fully participate in campus and student and be deprived of essential social support and identity growth (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005).

6.5 Summary and Discussion

The students in this study reported colliding with cisnormativity in the following ways: in policy and/or practice measures that did not permit or streamline name and gender marker changes; in spaces assigned to male/female based on sex assigned at birth; in lack of trans* awareness among some administrators; and in lack of trans-inclusion and possible transphobia in clubs and societies. Notably, the use of university bathrooms and changing facilities is a source of anxiety. Although the participants do report specific trans-inclusive measures, the findings in this study reflect many of the situations reported in the wider literature that contribute to gender minority stress (Testa et al., 2015). These stress factors impact trans* students' ability to participate wholly and equally in all aspects of campus life.

From these students' lived realities, it seems evident that institutional expressions of gender are not always aligned with institutional values declared in policy, nor the values behind government-empowered gender self-identification at the state level. Kean's (2021) framework and these findings illustrate that when trans* students find themselves in cisnormative campus settings, friction is created between identity and the institution. Kean's insights reveal how the students' collisions in this study are caused by embedded norms in university infrastructure and culture. For example, when universities assign spaces according to legal sex, it further reflects institutional operation of gender (Kean's first principle) that is rooted in cisnormativity. Intentionally or unintentionally, it reveals a biological essentialist viewpoint. Furthermore, it undermines any gender-expansive and inclusive policy intentions. By assigning spaces based on sex assigned at birth, institutions are implying that they do not recognise self-identified trans* women as 'real' women or that self-identified trans* men are not 'real' men, whilst also erasing all other gender diverse identities.

Positively, participants reported the presence of gender-neutral facilities across multiple Irish campuses in the study, indicating recognition of gendered needs that extends beyond the binary and beyond stereotypical expectations of appearance. However, these facilities tended to be marginal spaces – difficult to find, devoid of regular use and not always well-maintained. Alternatively, there were additionally purposed disabled spaces. Neither of these 'solutions' materially addresses marginalisation.

Participant accounts in this study also reveal a disconnect between policy and administrative/staff practice. Social practice theory examines the recurrent, unconsidered practices that are undertaken daily (Saunders, 2011). Social practice theory suggests that the audience for policies and practices that support gender diversity is institutional staff, faculty and administrators. The beneficiaries are the gender-diverse students who depend on faculty and staff implementing policies in a way that does not cause difficulty or distress. However, the social practice perspective highlights that people do not necessarily follow a logical way to achieve an understood aim, as practices are nested horizontally and vertically and are social and evolving (ibid). Consequently, a broadly supportive pronouncement of a gender diversity and expression policy may not be enacted or 'practised' in an appropriately supportive way for its beneficiaries. An example of this is when students in this study attempted to make name changes on campus records on the basis of a supportive policy but were unable to do so in practice. Even worse, one participant had legal recognition from the state, but a staff member tried to create further ID barriers that are not legally required.

Kean's framing of gender-normativity as an institutional structure provides the insight to understand how these trans* students will continue to physically, epistemically, and socially collide with university life when that structure remains unaltered. These students' experiences are not passive or isolated incidents; they will persist unless power is redistributed, trans* identities are epistemically centred, and the institution itself is redesigned. Equally, these collisions are not accidental: according to Kean, higher-education institutions "reinforce and uphold the idea that there are two sexes and two accompanying genders with no possibility for anything else," (Kean, 2021, p.264), which in practice renders trans* experiences "institutionally illegible and unrecognized." (Kean, 2021, p.265). Furthermore, these institutional norms indicate the extent to which cisnormativity remains embedded in broader cultural norms, despite state-level mechanisms, as institutions rarely exist in juxtaposition to these norms.

Additionally, as Kean (2021) urges and one of the participants recommends, trans* experiential knowledge is essential to policy and inclusion efforts. Without this knowledge, efforts to redefine norms are likely to be much less effective for the intended beneficiaries. The sharing of this knowledge should also be appropriately

remunerated and acted upon. Otherwise, trans* students' free labour is a form of exploitation in the service of the dominant group, providing an external impression of inclusion for the institution.

As previously discussed, increasing awareness and attention to minority and underrepresented groups in recent years within neo-liberal higher education has brought increased policy consideration to equality, diversity and inclusion. However, meeting inclusion commitments through engagement between policy and practice can cause numerous challenges (Scott, 2020), such as staffing, training, culture change, and preference for previous operational norms. From the participants' accounts, these factors appear to be some of the reasons behind students in this study colliding with cisnormativity. Furthermore, Ahmed's (2012) prominent research on higher education diversity stakeholders illustrates how diversity practices and policies have the potential to be more about external impressions than real change. This is partly due to the processes of neoliberalisation having focused higher education towards the interests of hyper-capitalism (Lumb and Burke, 2025), and EDI being a potentially superficial tool to attract students. However, the focus on commercialisation and marketisation almost certainly guarantees that hegemonic interests in higher education benefit from uncritical EDI ambitions (Burke and Lumb 2024). Consequently, the experiences of the trans* students in this study demonstrate that equality, diversity and inclusion policy pronouncements should not necessarily be taken at face value in the Irish context.

Hearing firsthand from the students in this study, it seems that despite gender identity and expression policies' claims of respect and inclusion for trans* identities, many universities are not taking adequate action to create an environment that does not reinforce genderism. Additionally, universities that have taken steps to become gender expansive in some areas are not ensuring that inclusion initiatives are embedded in all aspects of campus life.

Regardless of their gender identities, whether binary trans* (male/female) or not, with legal recognition or not, it appears that trans* students in this study are facing numerous expressions of hegemonic cisgenderism across campuses. If Irish universities genuinely wish to dismantle gender-based norms and overcome prejudices that cause trans* students to collide with cisnormativity, it is essential that they undo structural and

cultural biases. Otherwise, universities run the risk of reinforcing trans* oppression and preventing trans* students from engaging fully in all aspects of campus and student life.

Having discussed how cisnormativity impacts trans* students, the next chapter considers the interplay of power and cisnormativity at the interpersonal level.

Chapter 7: Cop on: power relations

(cop on means use your common sense, don't be ignorant or naïve about something obvious; in this chapter it means being aware of power)

7.1 Introduction

"There's a power differential there." (Noah, they/them)

In the previous two chapters, it can be seen how institutional power, deployed through systems and structures to the benefit of the cisgender majority, marginalises trans* students in digital and physical spaces. On a more interpersonal level, power differentials compound the marginalisation.

Across the literature, a frequent cause of stress and distress for trans* students is being misgendered and misnamed by academic staff (Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Dickey, 2019; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019; Wentling, 2015; Brauer, 2017; McEnfarter & Iovannone, 2020; McLemore, 2015; Whitley, 2022). However, it is hard to correct individuals in positions of power. Also, students may not be familiar with or trust discrimination reporting mechanisms. This distrust possibly reflects an expectation of testimonial injustice or a feeling that incidents are not serious enough to be reported (Krebs et al., 2016; Cantor et al., 2015). The ability to hold to account individuals who engage in transphobic behaviour and language is considered a priority by researchers in the field (see Goldberg, 2018; Seelman, 2014).

Kean's (2021) framework highlights that professional staff and faculty wield significant institutional power that can either affirm or marginalise trans* students within educational settings. Kean argues that educators and administrators often operate within frameworks that presume gender identities are binary and reinforce cisnormative assumptions. The power held by these individuals can consequently erase or invalidate trans* identities through, for example, curriculum design and language use. Thus, for trans* students, the actions and behaviours of staff will directly impact their sense of belonging and safety on campus.

This chapter recounts the experiences and impact of unequal power relations on trans* student participants in this study. It shares the experiences that reveal the intersection

of trans* identities and individual staff power on Irish university campuses and provides participant recommendations for change. The findings are summarised and discussed in depth in the closing section of the chapter.

7.2 Academic staff

A frequent occurrence that invalidates a trans* student's identity is through misgendering and misnaming in teaching spaces. When misgendering and misnaming occur, even if it is perceived as an error rather than an act of transphobia, it is difficult for the trans* student to correct the staff member due to the power imbalance between them. Dean (he/him) summed up the challenge of correcting faculty as follows,

> When you feel like they're there on a pedestal and you have to do it, it feels intimidating to me.

Another participant, Darcy (they/them) stated,

> I don't correct people and I don't have the courage to.

Additionally, when students do have the confidence to correct someone in a position of power who misgenders or misnames them, they can be met with excuses for the occurrence. There is also the possibility of emotional labour being transferred to the trans* student to make the other person feel better about their error.

Blue (they/them) expressed how hollow it feels when someone uses their age and generation to excuse misgendering. They stated an excuse was,

> 'Oh, yeah, it's so difficult, you know we're not used to that in our generation.' … they shouldn't use excuses.

Making excuses to dismiss the situation is a form of epistemic injustice, as highlighted by Kean's (2021) framework. It is happening because the testimony of the trans* person about their identity is being dismissed, and the error is self-excused by the person in the dominant group. It also reflects that genuine recognition of that identity is lacking,

possibly because the individual does conform to traditional cisnormative expectations of gender.

From participant accounts, it becomes evident that burdening a trans* student with 'forgiveness' for an error is another use of the staff member's power. Due to the power imbalance, the student is required to stay in an uncomfortable situation, listening to excuses and then having to make the staff member feel better. It is using power to shift the focus to the staff member's feelings rather than genuinely considering the impact of the whole situation on the trans* student.

Blue (they/them) explained how they respond and feel about misgendering as follows,

> If they hear it for the first time … I would like them not to do a big thing out of it. If somebody reacts, 'Okay, thanks for telling me', and then go on and never misgender me again, perfect! … when they should actually know, I mean, not making it all about themselves, because I think this is the problem … It's okay if it happened, if your intention was not bad, if you forgot, for whatever reason. But the only thing you can do is just to use my right pronouns in the future like, apologise and move on, you know, don't try to make me forgive you for this.

From Blue's account, the fact that someone apologises indicates that it was unlikely there was malicious intent behind the misgendering but does reflect the embeddedness of cisnormativity. It should not, however, become the labour of the trans* student to validate a person who has just invalidated them.

Dean (he/him) shared that when someone offers to 'try harder', it is upsetting because it shows that they do not genuinely accept or recognise his gender identity. Dean stated,

> You don't need to tell me that you're trying harder because that makes me feel as if you really don't see me as who I am.

Dean explained that the 'try harder' pledge, while well intended, actually causes further upset and invalidation. He finds it a painful inconsistency between his identity and how others respond to him. Naturally, a power imbalance with staff means that Dean feels unable to explain the emotional complexity of his situation, deepening the hurt of misgendering.

Additionally, it is burdensome, stressful and upsetting to trans* students to have to repeatedly find the courage to correct someone in a position of power when that person repeatedly misgenders them. Swift (he/him) explained,

> My adviser is one of the more established professors in the department and I have been very clear to her about my pronouns, but she definitely still, like, introduces me to people using she/her pronouns, which I have never used at (*this university)*, and I did, you know, gently correct her in an email. And she said, 'Oh, of course I know your pronouns'. So, she's not aware she's doing it.

Swift's choice of 'one of the more established professors' illustrates his awareness of the power and status of the faculty member. Additionally, although Swift acknowledges that the misgendering appears to be accidental, he explained that the repeated misgendering was beginning to cause him distress. Furthermore, he shared that he was unsure what avenues could be used to improve the situation other than the gentle approach of email that he had tried before.

Even more concerningly, one postgraduate student reported that the misgendering and misnaming he received in his undergraduate degree was widespread and involved overt discrimination rooted in transphobia. The chronic level of the situation led to him missing a significant number of classes in various modules. He expressed his hope that the climate in his undergraduate institution will have subsequently changed in the intervening years (which are not that numerous) while he has been pursuing postgraduate study in a different university.

These participants' experiences demonstrate that it often requires courage for trans* students to initially come out to staff, knowing that there could be material academic impacts from discrimination by staff due to their power. Although no participant felt that they had been graded harshly in assessments due to their trans* identity, the fear is that correcting faculty for misgendering and misnaming could negatively impact educational achievement. Still, it may sadly be the case that some staff hold a biological essentialist view of gender that has been formed within their cultural context. Fortunately, this did not appear to be the situation in most accounts given by participants in these Irish university contexts. It appears that most staff are not transphobic but do lack gender literacy.

7.3 Postgraduate student tutors

Within universities in the Republic of Ireland, like many institutions in other regions, postgraduate students will often work in teaching roles on undergraduate programmes. These teaching roles place students in the position of being junior colleagues to lecturers, professional colleagues of equal status to other teaching students, and having a position of relative power in relation to bachelor's degree students. These roles result in trans* postgraduate students navigating complex and differing power relations within the same institution, more so than a standard university employee within a defined hierarchical structure or a typical student. Teaching while studying for a doctoral degree can be difficult for any student, but even more so for one who may be a target for prejudice.

One participant, who is a postgraduate researcher in a trans-related area, explained that he has received discrimination in academia and from some students that he teaches. He shared,

> I experience a lot of hostility towards my academic work. I experience a lot of transphobia in conference spaces and sometimes from students … I've gotten essay submissions that I'm correcting, and that rhetoric, that transphobic rhetoric is embedded in the essays.

These expressions of transphobia are naturally distressing. Fortunately, this student has received support and understanding from module conveners and faculty with whom he works. The willingness of faculty to use their institutionally recognised power and insider status to support and take appropriate action on behalf of trans* postgraduate research students experiencing gender-based discrimination is likely to be an important factor in ensuring they are not driven out of the academy. It also reflects a culture of respect within certain members of the academy in Ireland.

Respect for trans* identities is also a factor in general discussions in private between colleagues, senior or not, around trans* identities. One PhD student found himself in a situation where trans* identities came up among peers who teach. Unfortunately, there was a tone that did not indicate respect. Swift (he/him) explained,

> Sometimes, when people say things like they/them pronouns of whatever, there's kind of like a little laugh in their voice … I think it's an internal thing, I legitimately don't think it comes from a place of hatred. But I do think it comes from a place of like, 'Oh well, we'll be tolerant', without thinking people in the room could also fall under this category.

Due to the lack of seniority and often precarious nature of doctoral student teaching work, it is difficult for trans* students to call out such behaviour. The behaviour is also likely underpinned by cisnormativity among peers and only basic knowledge of trans* identities, reflecting 'tolerance' but not genuine understanding and acceptance.

For disclosure, some postgraduate students may want the support and assistance from a more senior individual. For example, one participant suggested that at the outset, within a department or a local level, it can be helpful for a trans-aware supervisor to share the individual's identity with colleagues on behalf of the student (if they wish). By doing so, the trans* person does not have to disclose their identity one-by-one to all staff members. Disclosure by a supervisor also offers institutional authority and support to the trans* student and their identity. This suggestion was given by a participant whose supervisor used their position of authority to visibly support the student so that

he did not have to make himself vulnerable in coming out to senior faculty.

Some staff members have shown awareness of the additional support that trans* students in teaching roles may need in teaching spaces. Dean's (he/him) supervisor took the lead in establishing the culture in the class that Dean was going to teach. Dean explained that his supervisor did not specifically disclose Dean's gender identity to the students but spoke to the class generally,

> He opened the first lesson in class that I had with him, saying that 'this is a class where everything is up for debate but not gender identity, not bigotry, and any of that is not allowed. If you have any thoughts or feelings, you cannot express them here.'

This type of opener at the beginning of a module demonstrates a faculty member using their power in institutional settings to minimise the likelihood of discrimination, whether that be for trans* teaching staff or other trans* students within a class. However, as universities have a fundamental role in facilitating open discussion, it would be advisable (if not already covered) to accompany such a declaration with how to have respectful discussions, e.g. the difference between free speech and hate speech. This could be done alongside the use of critical and inclusive pedagogies in challenging norms, consideration of minority identities and privilege, awareness of bias, and other ways of creating a culture of understanding and respect (see Tuitt et al., 2023). Otherwise, students may feel they are being silenced, which is unlikely to lead to greater understanding and may have the opposite effect.

Another PhD participant (who did not wish to use a pseudonym) shared how much she appreciated colleagues correcting others on her name and pronouns. They shared,

> Some of my colleagues really jump in and say no, this is their name, these are their pronouns. They're quite good at that, I would say.

Again, this is an example of faculty using their power to ensure that the person in a more vulnerable position is not forced to correct the misgendering and misnaming themselves.

From the experiences reported, it seems that postgraduate students who teach and hold a trans* identity are likely to need an extra willingness from their supervisor and senior staff to provide support in navigating misgendering and misnaming in predominantly cisnormative campuses. The staff members actions in the accounts illustrates use of power to set a tone that minimises potential transphobia and microaggressions within the institution and builds a culture in academia in which trans* postgraduate students are more likely to remain.

7.4 Reporting misgendering, misnaming, discrimination and microaggressions

While all universities in the Republic have a dignity and respect policy, it is also evident from the students' responses in this study that the embedding of dignity and respect in institutional structures is not always visible. Furthermore, the steps students can take when their identities are met with a lack of respect may not always be entirely clear or fit for purpose. In the Irish quantitative survey of trans* students, only 30% of trans* students indicated that they felt comfortable reporting transphobic incidents (Chevalier et al., 2019). Within this study, none of the participants shared that they had reported incidents related to gender identity.

Kay (she/her) shared her recommendations on how to make reporting structures simple for students. She said,

> I would definitely appreciate them mentioning, like at the start of the programme … an outline of, 'Listen, the faculty head says if any issues come up with bullying, email or whatever, please mention it to us directly. We will take action quickly for you.' That might help a bit more for newer students … Like, just, not even gender, just if you're being harassed. Period. How to escalate and like if the professor ignores you, escalate higher and higher and higher.

Clarity on how to report easily would mean that students need not navigate nor have a complete understanding of institutional structures. As findings in this study in chapter six in relation to policy show, students are generally unaware of policies and associated mechanisms. Participants also expressed some scepticism about policy efficacy in chapter six. Thus, as Kay suggests, it may be preferable to report locally and confidentially initially rather than escalate incidents to an institutional level in the first

instance. A preference for reporting locally may be due to vulnerability and fears of testimony being met with bias, a form of epistemic injustice.

A suggestion for local level, lower key reporting in the first instance, with the aim of straightforward resolution, is to have a trans-aware contact person. For example, this could be a staff ally at the local level to whom misnaming and misgendering could be reported informally. One participant (who did not want to use a pseudonym) suggested,

> I think it would be interesting to have a diversity champion in each department, which is like somebody who knows the policies and procedures … I do think it would be nice to have somebody who opts in for the role in the first place and says I am, like, welcoming of these identities and can affirm it on their behalf.

While, ideally, this contact person/ally may hold a trans* or minority status, it is not essential. The participant said,

> To be honest, I think it could just be somebody who's gone through sufficient amounts of, like, EDI sensitivity trainings.

From this suggestion, it could be helpful for trans* students to have an ally with institutional power at the college or departmental level for guidance and informal reporting of misgendering and misnaming. Informal reporting may facilitate low-key resolutions (where appropriate) without causing distress or burdening the trans* student with tackling an institutional 'brick wall' (Ahmed, 2021).

For more extreme situations that stem from prejudice, Ruari (he/him) explained that there also needs to be some form of reporting that requires accountability at the institutional level to enact meaningful change. He shared,

> Our college does have a tool for reporting discrimination … The way that you report it, you're reporting specific individuals and specific incidents. It doesn't give you an option to report, like, institutional discrimination, which is really bad, because it means that students can't speak up against that institutional discrimination. And I feel like it's kind of intentional to put the blame on individuals rather than on the structure.

Here, Ruari highlights that only reporting individuals is unlikely to be effective in changing institutional culture or redressing how institutional power is already marginalising and erasing trans* identities. Tracking and reporting could lead to visibility that reporting discrimination is effective, that cultural change is prioritised, and make it more likely for trans* students to come forward for support.

7.5 Allies

Allies are incredibly important for creating safe environments that can nurture, validate and advocate for minority groups (see Finnerty et al., 2014; Shelton, 2019; Abrams et al., 2021). Within university settings, faculty and staff who are considerate and aware of trans* student needs, who are willing to dismantle genderism, are significant allies. Allyship may take the form of helpful guidance in navigating institutional policies and supports, by being a sensitive and supportive point of contact who validates and recognises the student's identity, or by providing authentic recognition where formal institutional structures for gender expansiveness are lacking. For example, Mike (he/him) received crucial information from his head of department as he entered university for postgraduate study. He shared his experience of being able to record his chosen name and self-identify gender as follows,

> My Head of Department put me in touch with the (*central student services*) and we set up a meeting. I came over. They were lovely. They were like, 'This is what we're gonna do'. They called me my chosen name, you know. Just, there was no question or anything like that and they just gave me my new card, and they were like, this will work for you now.

Mike's experience provides an example of a senior faculty member using their institutional knowledge to be an effective and thoughtful ally. Sensitive institutional staff and trans-inclusive administration systems followed through on this. If it is possible for one university to implement a genuinely expansive approach to operationalising gender, then it is arguably possible for all universities in the Republic to do the same.

Another student, Ari (they/them), recounted how they appreciated the validation and support of an administrator in their department. Ari shared,

> Our allocations officer, for example, she's the person that kind of helps us with placement, so I would tell her, like, I have actually gone into her office and had a few chats with her.

The placement administrator took time to talk to Ari to better understand their identity. Consequently, Ari noticed this administrator had used her power to change how Ari was addressed when they went on placement. The administrators care and actions were meaningful for Ari, providing a sense of acceptance and validation.

Additionally for Mike (he/him), the Students' Union was instrumental in supporting him to stay in university and continue his undergraduate programme when he was experiencing difficulties related to his gender identity. He shared,

> They gave me the advice I needed in terms of okay, 'You need to go to your Head of School, tell them what's going on, and they can then help you with extenuating circumstances', but … if it wasn't for the Welfare Officer knowing that I probably would have failed and, yeah, potentially dropped out.

These examples stress how individuals within universities can use their power and institutional knowledge to be advocates and allies. They are making a meaningful difference toward recognising trans* students' complete personhoods and providing important practical support. These examples also indicate that essential cultural shifts may be in progress.

Other students can also be crucial allies, and many participants reported how important the support of classmates can be in correcting misgendering and misnaming. Understandably, students may have concerns and reservations about calling out or correcting people in authority. However, members of the student body who understand that gender is not based on a restrictive set of criteria can be successful in helping to affect behavioural changes and campus culture. Furthermore, it means the trans* student does not have the discomfort of needing to do the correction themselves.

7.6 Trans* awareness training for cultural competence

The findings in this study have illuminated numerous ways in which hegemonic cisgenderism has impacted trans* student experiences. It is evident that there are pockets of well-intentioned individuals, and some cultural policy and practice initiatives that are becoming embedded within institutions. However, many of these participants are faced with institutional power and cultural norms that are based on gender essentialism. These norms invalidate and erase trans* identities. Throughout the findings in this section, and in previous sections, the participants have encountered lack of understanding of trans* identities. However, research has shown that HEI professionals who undertake diversity training enhance their cultural competency and willingness to take steps to foster inclusion (Cabler, 2022). This shift in individuals may lead to advocacy and change-making at the institutional level and to how faculty respond to student disclosures of their trans* identities at a classroom level. For example, Charlie (they/them) shared,

> It would still be good to have more staff training or more frequent staff training … then I would feel safer maybe explaining name or pronouns or even … writing a paper about something that is related to queer issues.

Charlie's assertion that the university should ensure students are aware that staff have undergone training to counter heterogenderism highlights the importance of the visibility of inclusion initiatives at an institutional level. Additionally, such training should not only be confined to academic staff but should also include administrative and other professional staff.

Swift (he/him) found that he was experiencing tension with administrative staff once he started to advocate for himself, explaining,

> I would say on the surface it's trans-inclusive. I think, when you start getting into things like talking to administration, or agitating or asking for help … as soon as you're somewhat different, you add friction … I have felt things just get slightly more difficult administratively.

Another participant, Harper (they/she), shared,

> I definitely think that anybody in a position of power, staff, faculty, that they should have some sort of training to make sure that they understand what power they hold over their students.

Furthermore, the wider student body may also need to be included in diversity and awareness initiatives about other marginalised identities. Such initiatives directed at students could potentially be part of orientation and would benefit the whole student body. As one participant (who did not wish to use a pseudonym) stated,

> I think sometimes it's easy if you're not in any, like, minority status to just float through the university and never have that.

Finally, a recommendation is that such training should be compulsory so that university community members cannot just self-select. This is because self-selection would likely only include the individuals already trying to be inclusive and wishing to do better. A non-compulsory approach was viewed by participants as likely to be ineffective.

To avoid 'trickle up' activism (Spade, 2015), the minority group of trans* students must not be left as the only parties to educate and advocate for themselves. Thus, it seems crucial that at a minimum, staff and faculty (the collective keepers of institutional power) are informed and educated. This could be achieved through education initiatives that provide a base-level understanding of non-normative gender identities, a degree of 'gender literacy' (Neary, 2019). Such initiatives would mean that universities with policy proclamations of inclusion are taking responsibility for aligning their climates with their stated values.

For example, an initiative could require regular mandatory education programmes. However, education programmes alone are not sufficient. Darcy (they/them) warned,

> They just go to go there because it's like 2 hours at the beginning in the semester and they just do it to get it done, and then they go back to their old ways after that.

Darcy highlights that some staff might never have been required to consider their identity or privilege, and they may not independently make changes following awareness and education programmes. Crucially, such initiatives must therefore not be reduced to a box-ticking exercise. They need to be supported by genuine change in institutional culture and a robust anti-discrimination policy with appropriate reporting mechanisms (in line with the findings of Seelman, 2014).

7.7 Summary and Discussion

A frequent occurrence that invalidates a trans* student's identity is through misgendering and misnaming in teaching spaces. This may be the result of a staff member assuming a student's gender based on cisnormative assumptions about appearance, voice pitch, hair, clothing and so on. It may also be due to the student's legal name being the only name recorded on Student Information Systems (SIS). In certain instances, the misgendering and misnaming may occur because the trans* student has not disclosed their identity to the staff member, perhaps because there has been no safe opportunity, mechanism or invitation to do so.

More frequently in these findings, the trans* student will have disclosed their identity and pronouns only to find that these are not being recognised and used. In this study, the underlying reason for this is perceived to be forgetting the disclosure. This perception reveals that there tend not to be transphobic undertones within Irish university staff. However, forgetting disclosures does show a lack of intelligibility of trans* identities; if staff need to 'remember' someone's gender, then it is unlikely that they genuinely recognise it. Naturally, staff have numerous demands on their time, but making the extra, not excessive, effort to remember and use a student's chosen name and correct pronouns is essential in creating an inclusive and equitable environment for trans* students (see Airton, 2018).

While it appears that many of the staff these participants encounter wish to be inclusive, their efforts are often informed by a cisnormative understanding of gender identities. Whether intentional or not, it is a manifestation of genderism that further oppresses trans* students (Kean, 2021). It prevents trans* individuals from being verified in their personhood on campus. Furthermore, students often feel unable to correct or challenge staff due to power imbalances.

The findings in this study also indicate that trans* students are currently not utilising existing reporting mechanisms. There is also a recommendation for reporting and accountability mechanisms at an institutional level. Current mechanisms may be overlooking epistemic injustice and may be part of the underlying cause of local-level challenges facing trans* individuals. Insight into the reluctance about reporting within institutions is provided by Ahmed (2021). Ahmed highlights how formal complaint mechanisms often fall short, frequently silencing or isolating complainants, or labelling them troublemakers (ibid). When creating reporting mechanisms, Kean's third principle emphasises epistemic injustice and the importance of trans* experiential knowledge. If trans* students' testimonies are not recognised or are dismissed as not serious by the staff who receive them, trans* students will experience further marginalisation and minority stress. To counteract this, Ahmed advocates for the formation of *complaint collectives* (ibid). These are supportive alliances that sustain the momentum of complaints and counteract institutional silencing or non-recognition. From participants' suggestions to have an ally and/or local level reporting, it seems that trans* students in Ireland would appreciate an individual with institutional power being part of that collective.

Furthermore, postgraduate students who hold a trans* identity are likely to benefit from additional support in navigating the various roles and power differentials that potentially open them up to misgendering and hostility. This study's participants view allies with institutional power as being able to mitigate some of the gender minority stress and gender-based oppression experienced by trans* students.

The findings in this chapter demonstrate how institutional power concentrated at the staff level can have a profound impact on the well-being, sense of belonging, and potential academic success of trans* students. Kean (2021) highlights how faculty and staff occupy and wield institutional power to shape, and reshape, gender norms within their organisations. Drawing upon the first principle (individual, institutional, socio-cultural), Kean argues that the institutional tier is where policies, structures, and practices (many of which reinforce cisnormativity) become visible and actionable. Faculty and staff are thus institutional agents whose everyday actions either uphold

gendered norms or confront them. Fortunately, in Irish universities, it seems that staff challenges to gender norms are beginning to take hold.

The framework's second principle situates genderism as a systemic oppression that intersects with race, ability, and class, putting a responsibility on faculty/staff to address embedded inequalities when designing course content, mentoring structures, or performance evaluations (ibid). Although not universal, there is evidence in some participants' accounts that mentoring structures are, at least informally, being implemented in Irish universities. Finally, in Kean's view, truly transformative change requires faculty and staff not only to celebrate gender diversity but to actively centre trans experiential knowledge in institutional decision-making (ibid). In other words, to create sites of institutional resistance and gender justice rather than sites of neutrality.

Kean's framework echoes Ahmed (2012), who shows how faculty operate as vectors of institutional power at the individual level, through everyday actions and decisions. Faculty and university staff have the power to decide who fits into what Ahmed (2012) calls the 'institutional habitus' (the daily atmosphere that rewards alignment with existing norms). This dynamic means that staff are not only implementing policy, but they are shaping the very texture of the institution and students' sense of belonging. In Ahmed's view, the real work of inclusion only occurs when faculty disrupt, not reproduce, the governing norms of how knowledge, authority, and belonging are distributed (ibid).

Through the experiences of the trans* students in this study, it is positive to see evidence of how some staff are taking steps to disrupt hegemonic cisnormativity and embed the trans-inclusivity stated in policy into their daily practices. In other instances, trans* students have been clear about how faculty could further use their power to ensure that institutional commitments to gender expansiveness are enacted in practice, making a material difference to trans* students' lived realities. These actions have the ability to centre minority agency and redefine inclusion as an ongoing practice, not a PR statement.

This chapter has explored how power can either compound or reduce the impact of cisnormativity on campuses for this study's participants. It can be seen that the power

held by staff can, and in certain instances is, being deployed in Ireland's universities to counteract cisnormativity rather than render trans* identities invisible. The next chapter explores the complexities of (in)visibility of trans* identities on campus.

Chapter 8: Scarlet: navigating visibility and invisibility

(*scarlet* means feeling embarrassed, feeling exposed; exposure relates to the visibility and invisibility of trans* students)

8.1 Introduction

"I think queer identities at the (*university)* campus are completely invisible."

(Blue, they/them)

The previous chapters have illuminated how trans* identities are often misread and unrecognised. This can render trans* identities invisible (unseen) or hyper-visible (overly scrutinised) due to embedded stereotypical norms about gender identity and expression. This occurs despite institutional claims of equality and inclusion of gender diverse identities.

Trans* students' accounts in the previous chapters have shown that recognising and acknowledging their identities on campus is meaningful to them; appropriate visibility within the institutional and departmental framework impacts trans* students' well-being and academic success. However, being visible is not always a desirable goal. This final findings and discussion chapter, therefore, focuses on the visibility and invisibility of trans* students as revealed through the experiences recounted by participants.

At the individual level for the trans* student, choosing whether or not to be visible would seem to depend on the safety of the climate and context in which a trans* student finds themselves. If trans* and minority individuals feel that being visible will threaten their emotional and physical safety, they may choose to conceal their identity as far as they possibly can. Individual levels of visibility will also be strongly influenced by where someone is in their personal, often non-linear, identity journey.

At the departmental level, the culture within disciplines, along with faculty members' understanding of gender, may mean that curriculum content does not acknowledge there are more than two genders (see Whitley et al., 2022). Furthermore, trans* authors

and scholarship may not be evident. The result is that trans* identities become invisible and erased within teaching contexts (Goldberg, Kuvalanka and Dickey, 2019).

Through the lens of Kean's framework, which posits that gender operates at the individual, institutional and socio-cultural level, this chapter discusses trans* participants' willingness to be (in)visible. It considers how they navigate the dichotomy and challenge of being both visible and invisible at the same time. This chapter also employs the lens of Kean's second principle, which is that genderism is a system of oppression that intersects with all other forms of oppression. These principles and their relevant theoretical underpinnings are deployed within the final section of the chapter to interpret the experiences of the participants and consequently advocate for trans* epistemologies to be at the centre of change initiatives (the basis of Kean's third principle).

8.2 Passing

Nicolazzo (2017, p.168) explains *passing* for a trans* individual as "the ability to be socially (mis)read as having a particular gender identity." This usually means being perceived as cisgender. Although passing is controversial and can be viewed as reinforcing the gender binary, it offers the opportunity for trans* individuals who can pass to be invisible on campus. Passing means not standing out as being trans* and not being open to potential discrimination. Thus, for those for whom it is an option in an uncertain environment, passing may provide the benefit of emotional and physical safety. As Humiston's thesis on campus climate in a USA college highlights,

> Transgender and gender-diverse and nonbinary students who navigate the cisnormative environment and can fit into or pass within the gender binary are granted privileges based on society's gender socialization.
>
> (Humiston, 2017, p.64)

As Humiston recognises, being able to pass facilitates the use of spaces assigned to the gender binary but may also means that an individual's trans* identity is erased (ibid). Thus, passing can cause stress due to concealment, one of the proximal (internal) stress

factors in the gender minority stress and resilience (GMSR) measurements (Testa et al., 2015).

The situation of passing has had mixed responses in this study. Harper (they/she) explained that they often masked (hid) their gender identity due to the cisnormative climate in their discipline. Harper consequently felt she had been open to less discrimination. They shared,

> I haven't had too many negatives I've had to deal with during my university experience … because of kind of masking my gender, which then has not caused me to kind of deal with some negative effects that can come from being transgender and gender diverse.

Charlie (they/them) shared that if they choose to dress in a feminine way, e.g. wearing skirts, they know others will read them as female. However, the burden of oppressive norms from genderism when dressing this way has an emotional toll. It is not Charlie's intention to pass as cisgender and being read as female limits their ability to exist authentically. They said,

> If I wear this skirt or dress, I'm going to be perceived as female, which means, I feel a lot less safe going to the men's bathroom, so I have to go to the women's bathroom all day. I've already started my day with this.

It appears that making one's trans* identity visible in a non-inclusive cisnormative climate can create discomfort. Climates that force trans* individuals into hiding or into limiting their gender expression to protect themselves from (cis)genderism are oppressive (Kean, 2021). In such circumstances, there may be some security in passing, but it may have a psychosocial impact due to lack of self-verification. Furthermore, the accounts from the participants in this study indicate that the embedded nature of these gendered norms has created a concern in some trans* students that they will be challenged or experience discrimination for expressing their identity.

Additionally, it is important to state that for trans* individuals who can pass, a non-inclusive campus climate may mean they still experience discriminatory behaviours. This

was the situation for one participant who was read as part of another minority group. Liam (he/him) shared,

> I've had slurs shouted at me, but more so homophobic than transphobic. Again, I think it's a very unique experience in that I do pass … so it was a very double-edged sword.

As Liam's account illustrates, the ability to pass as a cisgender man does not protect Liam from prejudice. When being read as a homosexual man, he may unfortunately find himself targeted for that identity.

Darcy (they/them), however, felt that looking like a non-heterosexual cisgender person (on a different campus from Liam) would be a safer situation. They said,

> I still do feel like on campus, if I like, if I looked like the stereotypical gay man, I would be safer than if I looked like a transgender man or a transgender woman.

While these students clearly have fears about their emotional and physical safety when their trans* identity is visible, none of them reported any overt verbal or physical transphobic attacks. This is in contrast to reports from the US and UK (e.g. Conron et al., 2022; Regan, 2022). Not having experienced physical abuse may be due to these students' ability to accurately assess an environment and take steps to avoid harm, rather than being in fully inclusive campuses, as safety is not a given for LGBTQ students in Irish universities (see USI, 2013; Chevalier et al., 2019). However, it does also point to Irish campuses being potentially safer than those in other regions, and within the state itself, compared to earlier studies.

For trans* students who are unable to pass as cisgender, or do not wish to pass, it seems a large student cohort can provide a welcomed anonymity. While there is still some visibility, a large number of people may make it likely that there are more non-conforming students (of any identity). There are also usually many people around who

may mitigate unwanted scrutiny and allay concerns about being targeted. One participant (who did not want to use pseudonym) shared,

> I think the number of students is a big factor in being anonymous … I like to be a passing, fleeting, visibility, representation and that's sufficient for me … I still feel like a fish in a big pond, of like, a colourful fish in a big pond.

From the experiences shared, it can be understood that passing reduces concerns about being open to discrimination. However, the oppression and suppression of personhood can carry an emotional toll and/or make someone vulnerable to other forms of discrimination. For others, passing may not be an option, and there may be a sense of safety in numbers in a large campus population.

8.3 (In)Visibility in academic spaces

Certain disciplines may lend themselves to consideration of gender and identity, with content from queer authors. Other disciplines may not view gender identity as relevant or impactful to their content. However, it has been shown through published literature that an inclusive pedagogical approach to curricula, which considers gender to be expansive and unfixed, creates more trans-inclusive educational spaces (see Seelman, 2014; Blackburn, 2014; Richmond, 2015; Keenan, 2017; Shelton & Lester, 2018). Through interviews for this study, it became apparent that the academic content participants encounter often renders trans* identities invisible.

For example, one participant shared an experience from a statistics class where data were presented with a male/female separation, as is the current norm. Charlie (they/them) pointed out that there are more than two genders, which the lecturer accepted. Although there was no expectation of the lecturer to invalidate the findings or completely change the class content, the participant noted that it would have been very simple and inclusive to at least briefly mention that the data only recognised two (of many) genders. Charlie shared,

> I would have liked to hear my lecturer point that out from the beginning or yeah, right away and not just waiting for someone else to bring it up and then react to it … it's just one sentence.

If the lecturer had simply acknowledged the existence of more than two binary genders at the outset, it would have given positive visibility and validation to the diversity of gender identities within than teaching space. Doing so may have also fed into trans* identity normalisation within the student cohort.

As Harper (they/she) stated about the consideration of gender expansiveness,

> I think that bringing these topics up in class, it can kind of facilitate a lot of discussion within the students. And that can kind of make it less of a … taboo topic to bring up. And it could make a lot of people, including myself, a lot more open to discussing our own experiences with our professors and our peers and everybody.

It would, however, be important to ensure that any discussion about identities is undertaken in a climate of respect and does not lead to inappropriate questions or uninformed discriminatory opinions.

In another example, trans* students and their peers in a class repeatedly brought up the existence of trans* identities. Their persistence resulted in some content amendments that recognised and made trans* identities visible. Blue (they/them) explained,

> And then in this old video … she had listed, I think, only like male and female … and then suddenly, as other examples in the next year, in our year, she changed those slides to other gender identities, and it was because we were really proactive in class, always telling like, 'oh, no, but non-binary people also exist, for example.'

It is positive to have the reports that, where trans* students have been comfortable making themselves visible to ensure their identities are recognised in teaching content, it has been validated by lecturers. Their testimonies have been believed. However, the burden appears to still be on trans* students to make this happen and requires to them to become highly visible.

When considering trans* identities in teaching material, staff may not be well informed and unable to appropriately facilitate discussion. Thus, they avoid the content. Ari felt that this was the case in their social science lectures, sharing,

> I've actually found it quite frustrating because lecturers tend to fly over any kind of topic about LGBTQ … there was like a whole topic about consent in terms of LGBTQ and the lecturer was just like we'll get back to that later, but this happened in all of my semesters … they kind of leave it … like you're to do it yourself, look it up yourself.

The missed opportunity to afford queer and trans* identities visibility within the teaching space was clearly invalidating to the participant. Ari did not perceive this omission as queer- or transphobic. Rather, Ari felt it arose from a lack of knowledge on the part of the lecturer. They went on to say,

> So, like, I feel like they just kind of don't know enough … it definitely did make me feel invalidated and one of my friends that's in my friend group, he's gay as well and we were both like, 'Did that just actually happen?'

Another participant studying sports science explained that they no longer shared their identity or drew attention to non-binary identities in course content. They no longer wanted the burden and visibility of explaining and/or defending assumptions that would be made about them. They shared,

> I don't really put that out there … it can cause people to have a lot of questions about, you know my political stances on whether certain athletes should be brought into certain events and things … I feel like it kind of brought me back into masking a lot more.

Additionally, when trans* identities are being made visible in academic spaces, it may be done to box-tick gender diversity. One PhD participant (she/they) explained that she had been asked to work on a project purely because of their gender identity. They shared,

> I was actually called upon to write on an article recently, which then, when I drilled down into it, was they just wanted my name as a non-binary researcher because it wasn't going to be published otherwise, and I quickly took myself off that project. I'm not going to be taken advantage of in that situation.

Ensuring that trans* researchers are included and made visible in academia is essential. However, making them visible purely to signal diversity is understandably received as disingenuous. It does not provide recognition of their academic ability and was felt to be exploitative by the participant in this study.

However, when handled with insight, knowledge and sensitivity, content that acknowledges trans* identities is greatly appreciated by the students in this study. Such content was seen as providing the opportunity not only to validate trans* students but to shift gender-normative thinking in other students in the class. Jack (they/them), who is studying in Arts and has taken gender-related modules stated,

> I know it probably varies from department to department, but the department I'm in now, everyone is always very respectful and mindful of pronouns. It's a very inclusive space, I find.

Asher (they/he), studying in Social Sciences, shared,

> I feel like the environment I'm in is a good model for what a good one is. People are relatively informed.

Additionally, recognition of trans* identities is welcomed for the visibility and normalisation it brings in classroom asides and anecdotes, the same as any other identity, even when not executed perfectly. Dean (he/him) explained,

> I mean even the professor himself, who wasn't trans*, but there was like a very funny anecdote where he wasn't using the right pronouns and he was messing up but he was, it was still, he was trying … sometimes it's even nice to see people actively trying … it wasn't perfect, but it was nice.

Even more impactful, it appears that academic content that makes non-normative genders visible can create spaces and climates where trans* students feel comfortable

and accepted beyond the classroom. The students in this study reported that the curriculum content was, on the whole, socio-culturally respectful and impactful in the Arts and Social Sciences. This then extended to the climate within discipline-specific buildings. Interestingly, Ruari (he/him), who is not an Arts student, chose to meet for his interview in the Arts building of his university and explained,

> So, this isn't in my building, this is the Arts building. In this building, I feel fine. Like, sometimes I would like, use the men's bathroom … the Arts are more accepting.
>
> So, my building is the STEM building … I don't feel comfortable in there at all and that's the thing I've heard across the board from LGBT people in general … it isn't accepting really of queerness and the student body there is also less accepting."

Ruari's experience would seem to indicate that teaching and content can have an impact in creating inclusive climates and attitudes outside the classroom.

Robyn (she/her), who is taking some social science modules, said that even at the surface level, the appearance of the student cohort (their choice of clothing and styling) made her feel that there was an openness to diversity amongst peers. The openness and diversity created a positive, safe and welcoming environment for her. She shared,

> Even the fashion and like, you know, I hate to be so ... surface level, but you walk into the *(subject)* lectures, people are wearing like big cardigans with all different colours and flowers, and, like, you know, they're having fun with their look.

It appears that the external expression of identity within the student cohort signals a sensibility of allowing people to be individuals, to being more open to non-conforming identities, whether gender-related or otherwise. In this situation, being visible is not perceived as a threatening situation.

In contrast, it sadly seems that, Law and STEM are less welcoming of visible difference and that there may be more likelihood of trans* students feeling 'looked at'. One participant studying Law found her cohort to be somewhat frosty and her visibility made

her feel extremely uncomfortable, being viewed as a curiosity. Another, who is studying Engineering, has never felt any gender identity related negativity, but she does feel uncomfortably visible as a gender minority at times. Kay (she/her) explained,

> It can be annoying some days, especially … when I'm dysphoric, it's harder, but then there are days when I just own it … act confident.

Not unsurprisingly, disciplines that relate to gender studies or sensitively recognise gender within their content are considered incredibly welcoming. Another participant described the support and guidance he received from faculty in this discipline and highlighted that he felt this was also due to being within the gender studies discipline. Mike (he/him) said,

> I just do want to name that I think that's disciplinary specific, though. I think that had a big part in them, being, you know, gender studies, feminists, committed to social justice. They knew what it meant for me.

Thus, it seems that certain disciplines are places where the visibility of trans* identities creates a sense of genuine acceptance, validation, understanding and support. This is likely due to the nature of their content and the individuals attracted to work and study in them.

However, consideration and normalisation of difference, privilege and oppression need not be confined to a few disciplines. As places of higher learning, universities have a unique opportunity to facilitate their student cohorts in recognising and challenging norms and prejudices, not only for trans* individuals but for all marginalised groups. With tight, primarily government-funded budgets in relation to teaching, there is pressure on universities to provide value to the state. Regardless of academic discipline, a crucial claim that any university should be able to make is that it has taught its students how to think critically and not merely accept the status quo.

8.4 Misgendering, misnaming and special treatment

When someone is misgendered or misnamed, usually due to societal cisnormativity and societal gender expression norms, it invalidates that individual's identity. As discussed in chapter seven, trans* students may find it challenging to correct others due to a power imbalance. Additionally, the reluctance to correct others can also stem from the discomfort of making themselves visible in a context and climate that has just invalidated their identity. One student, Asher (they/he), shared another reason why they do not want to correct misgendering,

> It can be uncomfortable to bring attention to the fact that I'm different.

In Asher's situation, anxiety about becoming hyper-visible is connected to a fear of othering or being 'looked at'. Other students recounted a similar situation of not wanting the visibility and attention that come from correcting misgendering and misnaming within a group setting. Dean (he/him) explained,

> It's like you're on stage and they're spectators and they're also people witnessing that.

Jack (they/them) expressed the reason behind their hesitancy to correct misgendering and misnaming as feeling exposed. They explained,

> I think it is mostly part of the thing that it makes me feel more exposed if I directly correct them.

These students' responses to misgendering and misnaming demonstrate the discomfort and fear trans* students may experience when having to make themselves visible in a potentially precarious situation. Similar student responses are evident in the published literature (see (Goldberg, Beemyn & Smith, 2019; Wentling, 2015; Brauer, 2017; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Dickey, 2019; Goldberg, Kuvalanka & Black, 2019; McEnfarter & Iovannone, 2020; McLemore, 2015; Whitley, 2022). Applying Kean's lens to these situations, it seems to stem from the way gender is operationalised by individuals who are teaching and by the institution more widely, both of which are influenced by the broader cultural climate.

Unfortunately, the combination of these factors being rooted in genderism means that a faculty member responding inappropriately can reinforce to trans* students that they should remain invisible. One participant explained,

> There was one lecturer like that when I shared my gender and the fact that I'm autistic with her, she treated that with like, like it was a very big deal … that made me a bit uncomfortable, even though it wasn't anything like explicitly negative, it felt like othering … like she said it was a lot, the way I perceived it, anyway, it was that she didn't feel like that was socially acceptable to say.

This interaction signalled that the student's multiple identities should remain invisible, almost admonishing them for sharing that they hold more than one non-normative identity; the message was that it was 'a lot'. The implication is that the student would have been given some understanding and recognition for holding one minority identity, but expecting acceptance for two minority identities was asking too much. In this instance, the student felt reproached for making them both visible.

Noah (they/them) has found they have had to de-prioritise their pronouns and gender identity due to their intersectional identity and requirement for Disability Support Services (DSS). Noah shared,

> Lectures will often come up to me and ask me if I'm a foreign student or whatever just because I'm not white … I'm not a foreign student, but I am a DSS student … And then just there's much, like, self-advocating and communication that I have to do that. I guess my pronouns … it's at the bottom of my priority list, even though I am kind of starkly reminded when I get misgendered, like, in front of an entire class.

These students' intersectional identities created further oppression through admonishment to suppress their identity(ies) and/or having to decide which ones to prioritise. Through various means, they are discouraged from making all their identities visible at once.

However, some students welcome the opportunity to share their pronouns, correct people, and make themselves and their trans* identities visible. Possibly, these students have had some external affirmation of their identity, enabling them to self-advocate without feeling too fearful of the repercussions. Ari shared,

> I do enjoy kind of teaching people, letting them know and showing them that there is another aspect to just male and female, there's transgender and gender-diverse, everything. But it does get kind of tiring to have to keep doing it.

It seems that, although educating other on trans* identities can be a burden at times, it can be self-affirming. However, this student was also doubtful that, without some education or awareness, the understanding and visibility of trans* identities and how to use pronouns would be very low. Ari went on to say,

> I guarantee 80% of the lads in this university will just be like I use' man' pronouns like that kind of thing.

This reflects an expectation of some ignorance and possible mocking behaviours from other students. The expectation may be based on past experiences of genderism. Thus, when trans* students are educating others in class, such interactions would need to be carefully moderated by an authority figure, likely a lecturer.

Ultimately, trans* students do not want special treatment. They only want the same opportunity to be both visible and invisible that cisgender students have, to have equity in that existence. One student (who does not wish to use pseudonym) summed this up as the right to exist in mediocrity. They said,

> Always in media, we see the trans* person who was killed or the trans* person who is like this beaming example of what is a good person is … let's have the mediocrity in the middle and enjoy that.

For a student who has experienced 'mediocrity' or 'neutrality' with faculty, it is very welcome. Robyn (she/her) shared,

> I would say that I've had like very neutral experiences. I wouldn't say I've been made to feel included or excluded, just a very neutral equal treatment which I appreciate. I'd like, I frankly don't want, like, too much special treatment, or anything like that, especially in regards to my gender.

The participants who refer to mediocrity and neutrality are really referring to genuine equity. Although some participants welcome the opportunity to educate others, most do not wish to be made hyper visible purely because of their minority status. It is a form of oppression that trans* students often have to conceal their identities or potentially run the risk of becoming a curiosity. It reflects the embeddedness of genderism within the individuals they encounter, the institutions in which they study, and to some extent, within the Irish cultural context.

8.5 Creating visibility at the institutional level

To proactively counter the oppression of genderism, the participants shared campus-level approaches that can be undertaken to making trans* identities visibly welcomed and genuinely normalised.

An easily implemented form of visibility that comes from the university is to display pride signs and flags. Although pride month takes place in June (which is outside the regular academic year in Ireland), pride events need not and should not only be confined to guest status. Asher (they/he) shared the significance of pride flags being displayed at the start of the academic year in their university. They said,

> In our Student Union, the start of the first semester, they had like little pride flags up and because, like I know, for some of the people there that feels like a safe space.

Noah (they/them) expressed a similar positive pride initiative that creates visibility in their university all year round,

> I mean even, like it's a small thing, but like the Pride Walkway. You know, that made me really happy when I was a first year coming in. So, it's really significant, and, you know, like the library, have done things for pride month, where they have like stickers everywhere. And like it really does make a difference.

Although initiatives such as pride flags and pride month events may, in certain instances, be for the external institutional appearance of inclusion, when backed up by climate, these measures can make a difference to trans* students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, it signals to others on campus that queer and trans* individuals should be welcomed and respected. Such visibility at the institutional level clearly holds importance for the students in this study.

To help create a welcoming climate, more specifically for trans* students, another participant (who did not want to use a pseudonym) suggested including links within the student information system to relevant information and policies. These links could assist trans* students with awareness of ability to be visible (when they wish) and have their identity recognised within the institution. She explained,

> I guess a very user-friendly interface on the website would be ideal. Or even when, where, you can change your gender on the system … if there was something similar on your profile like 'hey, if you need this stuff when you're inside your profile, this is something that you may find useful' … 'Flash - Transgender and gender-diverse policies.'

Such information links could help trans* students know that policies exist, and help can be sought to ensure they are being implemented for the beneficiaries.

Ari (they/them) suggested that the orientation packs that every university distributes could raise visibility and awareness by including information on trans* identities as follows,

> When you become a student in (*this institution*), you will you get a whole little packet in the mail with your student card … One of the things they could easily just include this little bit like,
>
> 'Gender- you could be any/all of this. If somebody else's is different than yours, if somebody else is different than what you'd normally think, just embrace it, kind of, it's normal'.

This suggestion echoes the anticipatory socialisation initiatives (ASIs) during orientation that are advocated by Lange et al. (2021). ASIs may involve sharing information on trans-specific or LGBTQ+ groups and activities, as well as normalising the sharing of pronouns by peer leaders.

In addition, the visibility of all-gender spaces normalises trans* students on campus. Additionally, gender-neutral bathrooms and changing spaces fulfil an essential practical need for trans* students (discussed in chapter 6). In relation to normalisation of trans* identities through visibility, Asher (they/he) shared,

> I think one of the problems is because there is not this kind of thing, like, the symbol where it indicates whatever, all genders can use this bathroom, things like that.

It is clear that many participants feel that trans* visibility at the institutional level could help overcome oppressive genderism and contribute towards normalising trans* identities. Additionally, any initiatives are more likely to be successful if trans* individuals have input into how they are implemented (Seelman et al., 2014). By recognising the importance of trans* experiential knowledge, universities are more likely to shift their institutional operationalisation of gender through informed and appropriate material changes.

Sadly, Ruari (he/him) expressed his disappointment with the lack of trans* visibility on campus in his university. He said,

> The EDI team in our college is absolutely appalling because they're basically just a marketing team. Like, when I quizzed them about the lack of gender-neutral facilities on the campus, they were like 'there was a panel forum and then they decided this is the way to go'.
>
> But I was like, 'How many trans* and non-binary people were on that panel?' And they never got back to me.

The lack of response led Ruari to conclude that there were no trans* people included in the forum. At a minimum, not responding to Ruari's request for information showed there was some lack of respect for Ruari's concerns as a trans* individual.

For real cultural change, participants recommend that trans* individuals are included in initiative planning. Blue (they/them) highlighted this as follows,

> I think it's really, especially difficult for people, for cis people, to understand what trans* even means, like in terms of how trans* people feel, but also how their life is impacted by their trans* identity.

Reassuringly, some participants in this study reported that their overall campus experience has been generally welcoming. Asher (they/he) summed up their university experience as follows,

> I suppose overall, the general response is like acceptance. They wouldn't, like, go out of their way to say anything positive, but they would, they would just be like, 'oh, okay'. Like, that's really what I want. So that's good to have, that kind of like, acceptance. And just like being treated, like, just like anyone.

Charlie (they/them), was similar saying,

> Actually, it's neutral or positive. I haven't really had any negative experiences. People are um, either they don't care and they just accept it, or they're curious. I have to educate people, I have to explain things to them but I haven't had any

> like questions that are too personal or that are like … not appropriate … my experience is that my peers or the other cis students try to be respectful.

Interestingly, Jack (they/them) and Darcy (they/them) shared that being in an English-speaking country helped make their experiences better in terms of gender identity and non-binary pronouns. Jack explained,

> I enjoy it in terms of my identity there. Some things that are made a lot easier by living in an English-speaking country … in terms of gendered language. It's much of the struggle with *[Latin-based language].*

For Jack (they/them), Darcy (they/them), Charlie (they/them) and Asher (they/he), and others in this study, their perceptions of their university experiences are, on the whole, positive. They feel this despite sharing specific situations that were not positive during their interviews. It would appear they are not letting certain events define their whole university experience. It seems that within their campuses, or the parts of their campuses in which they spend the most time, trans* identities have, to some extent, been normalised.

In relation to macro level considerations, one participant felt that there was an onus on the academy within Ireland to ensure the anti-trans* rhetoric that has been promoted by some purported feminist academics elsewhere does not take hold in Ireland. Mike (he/him) calls on universities and academics to step forward. He shared,

> I think, universities, particularly like people in feminist disciplines, need to take more ownership over challenging that. Because I would really hate to see Irish universities and Irish intellectual spaces go the way of the UK. I just think it'd be such a disservice to the feminist tradition we do have.

As shown throughout the findings, trans* students face precarity in many campus environments. This precarity could be alleviated quite significantly by the university-level initiatives recommended by participants and will help overcome genderism within university systems and structures.

8.6 Summary and Discussion

The participants' firsthand experiences in this chapter show that trans* students in ROI universities are often lacking recognition in academic spaces, except in disciplines where queer identities have a traditional home. Furthermore, correcting misgendering and misnaming requires participants to become hyper-visible to assert their identities or accept the lack of recognition. It does, however, seem that institutional steps such as pride flags and social initiatives that recognise gender diverse identities are seen as creating a sense of belonging and a welcoming environment.

Unfortunately, without institutional recognition, trans* students exist as anomalies who become either hyper-visible or erased. In this study, it appears that trans* individuals are often institutionally invisible by default. This invisibility is due to institutional cisnormativity rendering trans* identities structurally absent (Kean, 2021). When university forms, policies, curricula, class lists, bathrooms, and official welcome materials encode only binary sex/gender options, trans* students simply do not exist in institutional terms. Paradoxically, when a trans* student visibly diverges from binary norms (whether in fashion, voice, or body shape), that divergence can become a source of scrutiny. Neither extreme is liberating. Invisibility means being unnamed, unverified or denied; hypervisibility means standing under an intrusive spotlight. Consequently, trans* students become simultaneously unseen and over-seen, with neither option providing safety and belonging.

For some students, passing can be a way to avoid this stress. However, passing can be a site of negotiation where trans* students try to achieve a balance between achieving relative safety, protecting physical/psychological integrity, and conforming to normative expectations that erase their identity and difference. It also creates a situation of relative privilege; those who can pass gain acceptance, access and recognition, while those who cannot face marginalisation. Furthermore, the politics of passing are deeply tied to institutional governance. As this study has elucidated, universities regulate gender expression through administrative practices and policies (Kean, 2021). Thus, the pressure to pass may be both personal and systemic. Critically, when universities operate as if passing is the ideal outcome, they automatically reinforce cisnormative

environments instead of asking how institutional norms must change to support authentic, dignified, visible lives for all gender-diverse students.

From the accounts in this study, it is evident that trans* students are often required to orchestrate their own visibility through emotional labour, by correcting pronouns, correcting names and highlighting gender diversity in cisnormative curriculum content, whilst wanting to avoid token inclusion. Consequently, transgender students' campus experiences are characterised by a tension between visibility and invisibility. This tension exists moment to moment and over time.

Kean's (2021) framework highlights that the visibility and invisibility of trans* students are shaped by institutional and administrative norms, rather than by individual choices. As a result, even those students who are out are routinely rendered invisible by structures and cultures that do not account for their lived experience. Far from representing authentic inclusion, Kean's lens shows how institutional invisibility is only destabilised when trans* students explicitly demand recognition. However, those students who do speak up bear the burden of being visible whilst also carrying the cost of visibility. This cost often takes an emotional and psychological toll. In short, Kean's lens applied to these student experiences illustrates that visibility in Irish universities is not merely about being out or accepted. Rather, it is about whether institutional infrastructures legitimise, respect, and make space for trans* identities in their everyday practices.

According to Butler (1990), subjectivity emerges only if one fits into prevailing regimes of intelligibility. In Undoing Gender, Butler (2004) also introduces the notion of 'livable' and 'unlivable' lives. To make a life livable requires normative acknowledgement (legal, social, cultural). Butler's work suggests that institutions are complicit when they allow visibility only via exceptions rather than transforming which bodies count.

Conversely, universities that co-produce recognition not only affirm individuals but reconstruct visibility itself. From the accounts in this study, co-production of recognition is currently occurring through trans* identities in curricula, gender-inclusive language in

institutional documents, self-selection of gender options in record systems, and display of pride and trans* flags. True visibility, therefore, emerges not from individual effort but from institutions actively redesigning the norms of which lives count, matter, and belong.

Positively, the inclusion of minority viewpoints and gender-expansive content and authors in certain Irish degree programmes seems to be contributing to the production of more socially aware and inclusive disciplines. These appear to be dismantling gendered norms outside the classroom as well, e.g. the Arts building at Ruari's university. Graduates from such programmes will take that understanding out into their workplaces and lives. As Hafford-Letchfield et al. state,

> As colleges and universities grapple with creating inclusive environments for transgender students, they need to link macro-level issues, such as the complexity of identity, with the confines of a modern learning environment.
>
> (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017, p.11)

Graduates who have been educated in an environment that has given them an understanding of macro-level equality issues have the potential to affect positive change in numerous businesses and organisations within Ireland and beyond.

It is also important to reiterate that visibility alone is no guarantor of inclusion (Keegan, 2019; Vipond, 2018). It is therefore the institutions' orientation toward trans* bodies, e.g. what identities are included in curricula, symbolic gestures, and everyday encounters, that determines whether trans* visibility becomes vulnerability or valued presence. Currently, universities in ROI have policy statements that value trans* identities; however, the lived realities within this study reveal mixed institutional success in restructuring norms. Although the participants in this Irish study have fortunately not been subjected to physical abuse, the rhetoric from policy is not universally creating sites of inclusion in any consistent manner for all non-cisgender identities.

Chapter 9 Sure look it: conclusion

(sure look it is a generic discourse marker to indicate you're going to sum up/end a conversation; in this case, conclude the thesis)

9.1 Introduction

The transgender population in the UK is estimated to be between 300,000 and half a million (Bonner-Thompson et al., 2021) and approximately 2% (100,000) of the population in the Republic of Ireland (Higgins et al., 2016). The body of research into this gender minority is steadily growing. However, little is known about trans* student experiences in the Republic of Ireland, one of a small number of countries which permits self-identification of gender. This thesis has been undertaken to fill that knowledge gap. By interviewing 16 self-identified trans* students in five universities using a constructivist approach, this thesis has sought to provide insight, understanding and nuance to their experiences.

The themes that emerged from data generation have been considered through a gender expansive lens, the lens of the critical trans framework for education (Kean, 2021) and the associated theories and literature.

The themes within this thesis have not only illuminated embedded cisnormativity and a policy – lived reality disconnect within Ireland's universities but have also shared practices and climates that are dismantling gender norms. The findings are informative to both institutional and state-level decision-making bodies and provide new insight for trans studies on the campus life worlds for trans* students in a country that permits self-ID.

In the following sections, this final chapter collates and summarises the findings, with analysis and discussion of the main themes in direct response to the research questions.

9.2 RQ1: What experiences do transgender and gender-diverse students have within Irish Universities?

Despite support in legislation at the national level and policies aimed at trans-inclusion at the institutional level, it seems that trans* students in Irish universities frequently find their identities are unintelligible to those around them on campus. As Ireland is one of

few European countries that permit self-identification, there is evidence of cultural shifts towards gender-expansive norms that are enshrined in university policy. However, I had hoped to find more inclusive campuses by hearing firsthand about the lived realities of participants. This was naïve, as it appears institutional practice or shifts in culture do not sufficiently support the seemingly top-down approach to trans-acceptance. However, in contrast to the findings in other regions, trans* students in Ireland are not overly concerned with perceived trans-friendliness in their future institutions, reflecting an expectation that no university in the state is likely to be overtly hostile. Additionally, it was a relief to find that no trans* student in this study reported any physical violence on campus resulting from transphobia. However, there are still numerous factors that create precarity due to the gap between policy claims and lived experience.

Levels of precarity appear to be integral to whether a trans* individual will come out. The choice of when to disclose one's gender identity is a complicated, multifaceted, and deeply personal one. Trans* student interactions with the university in relation to their gender identity often begin with registration and may be the first opportunity for disclosure. Digitally recording a trans* identity may avoid the need for face-to-face disclosure in a new environment. Additionally, being able to come out via registration can potentially prevent the need for repeated disclosures in every new campus setting. However, for many students in this study, they were unable to register their gender identity. This inability was due to their not having legal documentation for chosen names and self-identification of gender. Although some universities permitted chosen names and genders to be recorded without legal documents to match, other universities' student information systems did not enable this function. This administrative barrier exists despite all universities in Ireland having policies claiming to respect and protect gender identity and expression (see summary of policy provisions in Appendix 1). In line with legislation, universities enable such changes with legal documentation to match but not all students were in a position to take the legal route. Additionally, one student encountered a lack of understanding about the legality of gender recognition from the state.

The consequences of inadequate SIS functions for chosen name and self-identification of gender within an institution were that some students were assigned to single-sex housing based on their sex assigned at birth. Another consequence was that students then had to face the decision of whether to disclose or mask their identity in class settings. Disclosures in this study appeared to be contingent upon internal and external socio-cultural considerations, and the expected benefit or danger associated with coming out. These disclosures were generally met with acceptance, though not all.

Unfortunately, once a student had disclosed their identity to others outside their friendship group or community, usually within a classroom context, there were still numerous instances of misgendering, misnaming and lack of genuine understanding. Most of these instances seemed to be explained by faculty and staff as 'forgetting' to use the correct name and/or pronouns. Being able to forget is an indication that the individual's gender identity is unintelligible. Having one's gender unreadable and unintelligible causes upset and psychological harm to these students, yet it is difficult for students to correct staff members due to power imbalances. There is also a lack of clarity and/or distrust about reporting mechanisms when a student is on the receiving end of repeated misgendering, misnaming and institutional discrimination.

The students in this study also found difficulty in accessing facilities that were single occupancy and/or gender neutral. Facilities access was most challenging when needing to use bathrooms and changing spaces. Some universities have created all gender spaces, which shows institutional commitment to going further than policy pronouncements. However, these spaces were often not signposted or well-maintained. Where adapted bathrooms had been designated for all gender use, the participants report not wanting to cause delays and possible distress to a disabled user. However, the alternatives were often to use a space in which their appearance best matched constrained societal ideas about gender expression. This was inconvenient for some, distressing for others, and exceptionally challenging when someone is transitioning or does not have an appearance that 'fits' with traditional expectations of binary male or female. It not only causes physical discomfort but also threatens psychological safety.

Positively, many of the trans* student participants have found a sense of belonging and support when they are able to find a community, either through social connections or campus organisations. These communities and connections also affirm the participants' identities. They help counterbalance what Testa et al. (2015) identified as the proximal (internal) stress factor of negative expectations and provide the resilience factor of community connectedness (ibid).

Additionally, from the accounts given, it is evident that the micro and meso climates within classrooms and spaces occupied by disciplines that tend to consider difference and privilege are likely to be welcoming. Trans* students can exist and embody their identities with a sense of normalcy in these spaces, without having to assess emotional or psychological risks on an ongoing basis. The welcoming climates in such disciplines are not universal, but there appears to be a tendency for that to be the case within this study and the wider literature.

From the various accounts, it is evident that many of these trans* students find depths of resilience in order to navigate campuses. The examples throughout this thesis demonstrate that these students are successfully progressing in their studies and serve as testaments to their resilience. While often describing experiences of distress and marginalisation due to the dominant cisnormative climate in universities, these trans* students' narratives also offer testimonies of resilience and determination. Trans* student narratives and epistemologies, therefore, are not only those of being invalidated or merely to be pitied, but those of overcoming challenges and being successful.

Additionally, this study reveals several examples of initiatives and actors who appear to be changing institutional culture, such as faculty members mentoring their trans* postgraduate students, department heads directing their students to Registry staff who sensitively and appropriately change administrative records without the need for legal documents, and housing officers who quickly arrange single-sex housing that matches the trans* student's gender. Furthermore, trans* students who advocated for trans* identities in classroom curricula were validated.

9.3 RQ2: What do transgender and gender-diverse students advocate for making Irish universities trans-inclusive?

The recommendations from the trans* student participants are multi-layered and need to be implemented at various levels within Irish institutions. The recommendations are a mix of practical supports and staff education that the participants have identified as important to improving trans* student lives. These are categorised and discussed in the following section.

9.3.1 Policies

From the accounts given by participants in this thesis, it seems there can be a lack of clarity about mechanisms provided by Gender, Identity and Expression policies. There is also a degree of mistrust around Dignity and Respect policies and reporting discrimination. Thus, the recommendation would be that these are reviewed for clarity and robustness. These policies must cover certain key areas (summarised in this section) and for those to be implemented into practice with high levels of visibility and reliability. Robust, transparent policy mechanisms visibly enacted into practice can help ensure trans* students have the same equity of experience and ability to succeed in their education as non-trans* students.

In terms of policy content in relation to gender identity and expression policies, there should be the ability to record a self-identified chosen names on front-end systems, along with self-chosen gender markers. The addition of a field for pronouns within student information systems is also recommended to avoid misgendering. According to participants' accounts, a pronoun field is not currently provided by any of the Irish universities represented in this study.

Once a student has recorded their identity in front-end systems, all aspects of student accounts need to reflect that identity to avoid digital outing, e.g. on emails, student cards, VLE, and Zoom.

The other key policy area that may impact trans* students is dignity and respect/non-discrimination. Diverse gender identities appear to be recognised in these policies within Irish universities. However, there needs to be simple (anonymous if desired) reporting processes for discrimination, including micro-aggressions, need to be established. The

recommendation for initial local reporting and support seems to be the preferred approach to instances of misgendering and misnaming.

In order to ensure that policy implementation aligns to policy intentions, planning needs to include provision of staffing resources. Consequently, staff training may be required to embed those policies into practice in the way they are intended. Furthermore, the staff who will be working on and implementing relevant policies should be educated in trans* identities to avoid misgendering and misnaming students during the process.

Additionally, students and staff not working in policy should not have to be policy experts, self-advocates, or search widely to find policy-related information. Implementing the recommendation to include an information hub and/or weblinks across information systems will help counter varying policy understanding and access levels. These links could also connect to associated guidance documents for additional clarity on the processes so there is no confusion about what policies do or do not permit.

Finally, participants' recommendations are that universities must ensure trans* individuals are paid to participate in the drafting and ratification process regarding policies and other change reviews. Without trans* experiential knowledge, any policy initiative is less likely to meet the needs of its beneficiaries.

9.3.2 Physical spaces

The participants in this study advocate for greater provision of gender-neutral and/or single-occupancy facilities across all areas of campus. These facilities must also be well-maintained. Additionally, a much higher level of provision would normalise the use of such facilities by individuals of all genders, thus not 'outing' or 'othering' the transgender individual. It is also likely that universities will have increasing numbers of trans* staff as some of the current generation of students progress into professional life. This may also encourage some staff already in post to feel safe about disclosing their identities.

To achieve this level of facilities provision, university estates services need to retrofit buildings where possible, plan for the proper provision of gender-neutral and single occupancy facilities in any refurbishments and have wide provision of gender-neutral and single occupancy facilities as standard in any new developments. Additionally, to

ensure that trans* students are aware of the existence and location of such facilities, there should be clear signage within buildings.

Campus housing is another physical space that needs to be reviewed to ensure it is inclusive of trans* identities. Information on exactly what type of rooms, bathrooms, gender mix and so on should be available to students when booking their campus accommodation. As discussed in this thesis, being assigned to housing based on sex assigned at birth or being assigned to single-sex housing while transitioning can be challenging and potentially very distressing. Thus, it is recommended that universities provide housing that allows students to self-select options according to gender or select housing that provides a mix of genders. This would ensure trans* students are not forced to out themselves to new flatmates, live in spaces that do not align with their gender, or share bathrooms and washing spaces which may cause discomfort to themselves and others.

9.3.3 Information Hub

The majority of trans* students report having to bear the burden of finding information, potentially via complex policy searches and/or by word of mouth from other trans* students or staff who happen to be informed. Consequently, trans* students' ability to access information, and resources and services is often piecemeal and inconsistent. Universities should, therefore, ensure there is dedicated information hub, such as a webpage (potentially suited to fall within EDI departments and/or student registry). Such a hub could provide a collated and straightforward overview of trans* specific information. This hub would have helpful links to information such as: university supports and college/departmental trans ally representatives; options for front-end name/gender/pronoun changes if they exist; maps for gender-neutral facilities and changing spaces on campus; reporting discrimination procedures and processes; trans* groups and services in the local community/city; emergency/crisis supports; clubs and societies guidance and information, e.g. gender-neutral uniforms, mixed teams, changing facilities, awareness of travel considerations. By having this helpful information centrally located, trans* students will not be reliant on word of mouth or bear the burden of trying to navigate information and policies themselves.

9.3.4 Full staff training

As the participants have shared, there are varying levels of staff awareness and understanding of trans* identities. Thus, it is essential that all university staff have the same baseline level of what trans* identities are and how to respond respectfully, knowing what is and what is not appropriate. They need 'gender literacy' (Neary, 2019). Additionally, staff need a solid baseline understanding of the challenges that trans* students can face, e.g. securing safe housing, possibly being financially cut off and estranged from family, undergoing gender-affirming medical treatments. These all take a toll and may impact the ability to attend classes and meet other university and degree obligations.

The recommendation is, therefore, that all professional and academic staff undergo regular mandatory education in equality, diversity and inclusion that includes trans* identities, e.g. every two years. This education could be via a short online course before the start of the academic year, although EDI units will know best how to facilitate engagement. The participants recommended that the awareness and education should be mandatory to ensure that it is not only taken by individuals who are already trans-friendly; that it reaches those who may be less inclined to find this information for themselves. Relevant professional staff would also benefit from specialised training in gender identity-related awareness, university supports and administrative options.

Another potentially beneficial recommendation is to have a trans* advocate/ally in each department or college as the go-to person if it is not possible to regularly keep all staff up-to-date on this type of information.

9.3.5 Teaching & Learning Environments

From the experiences shared in this study, it is evident that curriculum content which acknowledges there are more than two (cis)genders and provides content from trans* authors is very valuable in validating trans* students. Gender-expansive curriculum content is also crucial in educating cisgender students about non-normative identities. All students being exposed to content that encourages them to think critically about privilege and minority individuals benefits not only trans* students but the university as a whole in the graduates it produces.

To be able to confidently introduce such content in teaching spaces, it would be helpful if faculty have access to additional optional trans* specific classroom/teaching space training which covers for example: how to behave if errors are made with pronouns and names; knowing potential issues with the use of the 'pronoun go-round'; being aware of current terminology; knowing how to respond to difficult or challenging questions in classroom discussions; being cautious about calling on trans* students to be the classroom educator.

The final consideration for teaching spaces is the potential additional support by senior faculty for trans* individuals in teaching roles (postgraduate researchers in this study). These trans* individuals may have to deal with lack of understanding, misgendering, misnaming and negative comments from students in their classes, from senior faculty and from their peers. Within this, there are several power dynamics which leave the trans* student in a vulnerable position and may make it difficult for them to report discrimination and microaggressions. It is imperative that such early-stage academics are not forced out of academia due to hostile or unsupportive climates. The academy would be much poorer without them.

9.4: RQ3: What are the implications for Irish universities?

The factors behind these students' experiences and their recommendations for change can be explained using the lens provided the critical trans framework for education, the three principles of which are: 1) gender operates on individual, institutional, and cultural levels; 2) genderism is a system of oppression that interacts with all other systems of oppression; 3) epistemic injustice and the critical importance of trans* experiential knowledge (Kean, 2021). Kean's framework has provided a theoretical lens for this thesis that demonstrates creating equitable experiences for trans* students in higher education requires a critical, structural understanding of gender and oppression. This lens reveals that it is necessary to challenge and dismantle the binary and normative assumptions embedded in the Irish higher education system. Kean's lens also provides insight into the understanding that gender is complex and socially and institutionally enforced. Kean identifies genderism, the system that privileges cisnormativity, as a key barrier to trans* inclusion, often operating alongside racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. Central to Kean's argument and a recommendation from participants is

the need to centre trans* students' lived experiences as vital contributors to reshaping education. Through the theoretical lens applied to the findings of this study, this thesis calls for educators and institutions to actively disrupt gendered structures, listen to trans* voices, and engage in transformative practices that consistently and coherently go beyond surface level rhetoric in policies.

Furthermore, the experiences shared by the participants in this study reveal that the institutional operationalisation of gender is at odds with the institutional ideals stated in policy. This disconnect between policy and lived reality can also be understood through the work of Ahmed (2012; 2021) and Spade (2015), who offer critical perspectives on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within institutions. These authors foreground how structural inequalities have a tendency to persist when there are only surface-level commitments to change (generally via policy). Ahmed (2012) argues that EDI efforts often become 'non-performative' actions that merely signal valuing diversity while maintaining exclusionary practices. Examples of non-performance indicators in this study include students who expected but were unable to make name and gender marker changes on student records despite the supportive rhetoric in institutional policy; students who were misgendered and misnamed despite disclosures; spaces assigned to two binary genders; and many more.

Additionally, Ahmed emphasises how individuals who lodge complaints about inequality are often labelled as the problem themselves and are faced with impenetrable institutional 'brick walls' (Ahmed, 2021). This understanding of complaint often being ineffective in institutions can be seen in participants' lack of awareness or willingness to use discrimination reporting structures. The recommendation for trans* allies at the local level within an institution shows that support is needed when lodging a complaint (possibly as part of forming a *complaint collective,* as advised by Ahmed (2021).

Similarly, Spade (2015) critiques top-down policy and administrative reforms as insufficient to achieve justice for gender non-conforming people. Instead, Spade advocates for grassroots strategies that tackle power structures directly, rather than relying on institutional recognition (ibid). However, it should be noted that, although

superficial, the ability to record chosen name and self-identify gender on university systems is reported as essential and meaningful for the participants in this Irish study.

Positively, from the experiences of participants within this study in a country that permits self-ID, it can be seen that some faculty and professional staff in universities are increasingly playing a pivotal role in shifting institutional culture to be more trans-inclusive. Examples include staff implementing curricula to reflect diverse gender identities, adopting inclusive language, and acknowledging cisnormative assumptions in teaching spaces. Professional staff in some accounts are also effectively and sensitively implementing gender-inclusive measures in administrative settings, such as chosen name and self-ID gender recognition, and some campuses are providing all-gender facilities. While these efforts vary across institutions, they collectively point to a potential cultural shift that moves beyond tokenistic gestures and toward systemic, ongoing transformation of campus environments (advocated by Kean, 2021; Ahmed, 2012; Spade, 2015). Nonetheless, the findings illustrate that this transformative work is often uneven and dependent on the commitment of individual actors.

As a consequence of uneven measures across Ireland's campuses, trans* student experiences appear to be overly dependent on which individuals they encounter, or how well a student can find and navigate policy documents and associated processes. Additionally, the exact provision of these varies between universities. For example, a trans* student may hear from peers about the location and existence of gender-neutral bathrooms but another student does not; a trans* student may encounter a member of staff who is not familiar with institutional policies and wrongly informs a student that it is not possible to implement a name change request; a trans* student may encounter faculty or staff who ask about pronouns and make an effort to use them, but another student may find the opposite, potentially leading to iterative microaggressions of misgendering. These variances in trans* student experiences within and across institutions is inequitable and underscores the need for institutional accountability and sustained change.

Furthermore, trans* students are often forced to rely on advocating for themselves, but many may feel unable to do so, or know who to approach for support and guidance. This is an unduly burdensome situation. Thus, institutional acknowledgement of systemic

and structural bias is a necessary first step in creating robust and clear policies, practices, space provision and education programmes to increase gender literacy. Then, these must be effectively and consistently embedded across all aspects of institutional life. Bias acknowledgement combined with a cohesive approach to institutional culture change could mean that all trans* students within an institution would have the same levels of inclusion and support regardless of which individuals they encounter.

Furthermore, allies can be a powerful source of change and creators of a sense of belonging at the macro, micro and meso levels. For example, academics in Irish institutions continuing to advocate on institutional, local and international platforms for trans* rights (in contrast to the purportedly feminist anti-trans rhetoric from academics in the UK) and individuals making a difference to the trans* students in their departments. The understanding and validation allies can and already do provide makes a meaningful difference to the socio-cultural environment around them and the trans* lives they positively impact.

Given the mechanism for gender self-ID in the Republic of Ireland, there is already state-level recognition and support for the right of individuals to determine their own gender without medical or psychological gatekeeping. This recognition reflects a commitment by a non-reactionary governance system to personal autonomy, human rights, and legal recognition of trans* people. It signals a progressive legal framework that values privacy and bodily integrity. While this does not guarantee social acceptance, it does guarantee that institutional steps towards trans* justice will not (currently) create governmental backlash or jeopardise state funding. Consequently, there is a unique opportunity for the thirteen ROI universities, all of which have gender identity and expression policies, to collaborate in transformative trans* justice. Without a collaborative approach, some institutions may unintentionally signal that equality, diversity and inclusion are not highly valued. This may lead to expressions of non-inclusive behaviours towards other minority groups as well as trans* students. A unified approach by Irish universities would ensure this does not happen and facilitate the pooling of resources and knowledge. Taking into consideration some variances in campuses and institutional resources, a combined approach with a baseline minimum provision of the areas of recommendation

in this thesis would ensure equity for all trans* university students across the Republic. It would also work towards bringing a cultural shift in gender expansiveness beyond campuses.

Finally, Kean's critical trans framework for education (2021) does not specifically address resilience, but in any situation of oppression, resilience is necessary to continue in that environment. The experiences shared in this thesis elucidate the resilience that trans* students have demonstrated while existing in a society and campus climate that is coded to favour and privilege the dominant group of cisgender individuals. This research calls for resilience not to remain a default requirement for trans* students and for universities to review and rethink their approaches to trans* inclusion.

9.5 Closing

In Ireland and around the world, transgender individuals are required to navigate their personhoods in societal and structural contexts that frequently react with invalidation or, worse, animosity and violence. Within Ireland, the state offers legal recognition of gender identity based on the principle of self-declaration. However, there are inadequate support services and varying degrees of social acceptance. Despite cultural, social, and familial barriers, increasing numbers of trans* youth are already entering higher education and will continue to do so.

This study is the first to offer depth and nuance to the lived experience of trans* students in Irish universities. It also appears to be the first qualitative research to offer insight into the lives of trans* students in a country which permits gender self-ID. Crucially, the participants' subjectivities elucidate the spatial and geographical specificities of trans* students in Ireland. While there are many similarities to the reported experiences of trans* students in other regions, there are also specificities which impact trans* students' experiences in Ireland that are not necessarily norms in research from other regions. These specificities include all universities making policy commitments to gender diversity (eight of which permit campus self-ID); feminist academics countering rather than fuelling 'gender critical ideology' on national platforms; and an equitable points-based system for university entry at the undergraduate level to mixed-gender, state-funded (not private) institutions. The findings in this study also show certain shifts in institutional culture that possibly stem

from these specificities. Crucially, the findings offer new knowledge to trans studies that is not rooted in the assumptions and norms generated by a US and UK dominance in the field.

However, through the lens of Kean's (2021) critical trans framework for education, this thesis also provides insight into the many subtle and not-so-subtle ways that hegemonic genderism affects the lives of both binary and non-binary trans* students in Ireland. The contributions from participants reveal that, although gender identity inclusion and protection measures are in place, with pockets of cultural shifts, the lived experiences of trans* students frequently deviate from declared institutional policy goals. The findings show that genderism pervades campuses through institutional power, structures and campus climate. The results of this genderism are regular occurrences of oppression, marginalisation and distress to trans* students.

Unfortunately, even within a country with legal self-identification of gender, the findings demonstrate that universities often remain non-inclusive if that legal change is not backed by deep institutional culture and power-structure reform. The institutional policy and lived reality nexus in Irish universities appears to mirror the wider Irish cultural situation, where self-declaration of gender is permitted and protected. However, reported life satisfaction in trans* individuals is lower than the European average (Bränström & Pachankis, 2021), and LGBTQ+ hate crimes are rising (Hate Crime Statistics, 2023).

While self-ID removes one barrier, true recognition justice demands that trans* students hold full status within institutional life, i.e., equal standing in classrooms, administrative systems, and everyday interactions, not just on paper but in policy. Without truly inclusive cultures and practices in a country's core institutions, self-ID from the state and within institutions becomes symbolic rather than substantive recognition.

Importantly, key authors warn that universities often produce policies and rhetoric about inclusion without disrupting discriminatory structures (Ahmed, 2012; Spade, 2015). Such 'non-performative' commitments allow institutions to appear inclusive while minimising the material changes needed for trans* people to thrive (Ahmed,

2012). Furthermore, self-ID must not reinforce fixed or binary identities (Spade, 2015). Often, self-ID policies can solidify a normative gender binary that current theoretical understandings of gender seek to destabilise, e.g. only providing male/female options and not having fields to record pronouns. Additionally, a university environment can remain hostile if it upholds misgendering, forces students into ill-fitting housing, or denies access to safe changing or bathroom facilities (Kean, 2021). Such settings place trans* students in a state of precariousness and delegitimisation.

Due to the country's small number of universities, this thesis proposes that there is a unique opportunity to further dismantle cultural (cis)gendered norms. The thirteen universities could collaborate to implement cohesive policies, practices, pedagogical principles, and infrastructure enhancements to provide equity in the lives of trans* students. It is critical that these proactive measures are implemented to normalise trans* identities rather than exclude or erase them. As the first of its kind, this thesis provides the evidence for its call to cohesively foster genuine inclusion, acceptance, and understanding for trans* students across all of Ireland's universities.

Together, these findings highlight that universities in self-ID countries must go beyond textually including trans* rights: they must continue to actively transform campus cultures, redistribute institutional resources, and depart from gendered norms. Furthermore, this paradigm shift must not rely solely on the individuals who are already working to change culture; recognition must become widespread practice, not just policy. At a time when anti-trans* rhetoric in other regions has the potential to gain traction in Ireland, this study offers the data required to sustain crucial changes in culture and practice.

Appendix 1: Overview of ROI university Gender Identity & Expression policy mechanisms (January 2025)

University	Specific policy for Gender Diversity	Change to chosen name permitted without legal documentation (Y=yes; N = no)	Change to self-determined gender permitted without legal documentation (Y=yes; N = no)	Ability to record pronouns
University College Dublin	Gender Identity and Expression Policy, 2017 Gender Identity and Expression Guidelines	Y – A person's file or record should always reflect their current name and gender. Some records can be changed at the request of the individual without the requirement for legal documentation regarding a name change.	Y	Not stated
Dublin City University	Student Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy, 2019	N – required to produce official documentation e.g., deed poll, gender recognition cert, birth cert, passport.	N - A person's file or record will always reflect their legal name and gender.	Not stated
University of Limerick	Gender Identity & Gender Expression Policy, 2022	N - required to produce official documentation e.g., deed poll, gender recognition cert, birth cert, passport.	Y – Gender can be changed in some records at the request of the individual without the requirement for legal documentation.	Not stated
University College Cork	Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy, 2018	Y - students will be allowed to change their recorded name and/or gender in UCC if applying to do so under the UCC Gender Identity and Expression Policy.	Y – see previous column	Not stated
Trinity College Dublin	Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy, 2018	Interim option - with the expectation that official documentation will follow	Interim – see previous column.	Not stated
NUI Maynooth University	Gender Identity and Expression Policy, 2018	N – Students are not able to record a 'preferred' on student records system.	Y- gender: Students can update their gender status on their student record as: - Male - Female - Gender non-binary - Prefer not to say (Un-disclosed)	Not stated
NUI Galway	Gender Identity and Expression Policy, 2018	Y –Student Academic Administration will update records to reflect the individual's new social name.	N - Official student records will be updated upon provision of official documentation.	Not stated
Royal College of Surgeons	Gender Identity and Expression Policy, 2018	N - RCSI will maintain records in the name and gender under which an individual originally applied to, and was admitted, to RCSI.	N – see previous column	Not stated

University	Specific policy for Gender Diversity	Change to chosen name permitted on internal records (Y=yes; N = no)	Change to self-determined gender permitted on internal records (Y=yes; N = no)	Ability to record pronouns
Technical University Dublin	Gender Identity & Gender Expression Policy for Staff and Students, 2020 Gender identity and gender expression supports (incl policy guidelines)	Y - Under the Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy students are able to change their recorded name and/or gender on most university systems - with or without legal documentation	Y	Not stated but policy mentions change of gender marker
Munster Technical University	Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy, 2018 Student change of details regulations, 2023	Y - Transgender and otherwise gender-transitioning students without access to official supporting documentation can submit a Change of Personal Details Form	Unclear – unable to access change of personal details form	Not stated
Atlantic Technical University	Gender Identity and Gender Expression Policy, 2024 Gender Identity & Expression Procedure, 2024	Y - endeavour to support, as far as reasonably practicable, student and staff members by enabling use of 'preferred name' on designated ATU systems in the absence of documentation being furnished to legally change name and identity.	Unclear – see previous column	Not stated
South East Technical University	Gender Identity and Expression Policy, 2023 Gender Identity & Expression Procedures & Guidelines not available	Y- We will balance the dual needs of the student or staff member's desire to have a preferred name and identity recorded on public-facing systems while also maintaining an accurate account of the record of each student/staff member	Unclear if identity includes gender– see previous column	Not stated
Technical University Shannon	Gender Identity and Expression Policy, 2024	Y - Name change on online TUS platforms only (does not require official documentation)	Y – gender section on form open for individual to complete	Pronouns section given in form for change of personal details

Appendix 2: Ethics approval letter

Educational Research | Lancaster University

11th November 2022

Dear Fiona

Thank you for submitting your ethics application and additional information for **An Exploration of Transgender Student Experiences in Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland**. The information you provided has been reviewed and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As Principal Investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer (Dr Richard Budd or Dr Natasa Lackovic).
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to **Prof Carolyn Jackson** for approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you require further information about this.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Doherty
Programme Co-ordinator
PhD in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement

Appendix 3: Participant information sheet

Study Title: An Exploration of Transgender Student Experiences in Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

Who is the researcher?
I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about transgender student experiences in higher education in the Republic of Ireland.
I am a mature student who works in an Irish University and also a parent to a transgender teenager. I am undertaking this research to add your valuable voices to the limited literature about the university experiences of students like you and my child who identify within the transgender umbrella.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to provide universities with a greater understanding and provide guidance on how to be inclusive for individuals with transgender identities. This will be done by asking you to share your experience of being a student in an Irish university and find out what you recommend for making it more trans-inclusive.

Why have I been invited?
You have been invited because have self-identified as a transgender student in higher education in Ireland. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve a 60-minute (approximately) interview by yourself with me, the researcher. In the interview, you will answer questions and talk with me about your experiences. If there are questions during the interview that you do not wish to answer, then these can be skipped without any explanation needed.

Depending on your preference, the interview can be in person or on Zoom, with or without video. With your consent, the audio of the interview will be recorded, via Zoom audio or using

a digital recorder for in-person interviews, and transcribed. Alternatively, notes will be taken during the interview if you prefer not to be audio recorded.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
Your insights will make a significant contribution to our understanding of difficulties, and positive experiences, of transgender students in Irish universities so that research-led recommendations for inclusivity can be shared with universities.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after taking part in the study

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part other than the use of your time. Your data will be anonymised and you can also choose how you would be referred to via a pseudonym or a generic reference, e.g. Student A/1. There will not be a reference to any particular person and their identity in the reporting of the data that you provide.

There is a possibility of discomfort or feeling upset about some of the topics that you will discuss. If this happens, you are welcome to stop the interview and continue after a break, continue at a later date, or withdraw altogether.

At the end of this information sheet there is a list of useful contact numbers for organisations and professionals that you may wish to contact for support.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study will have access to the ideas you share with me. On request and only if needed, my supervisor will be given access to anonymised transcripts of the interview.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in **any publications or other ways of sharing the findings.**

I aim to share the findings as widely as possible to raise awareness and provide recommendations for positive inclusive measures. I will therefore use the information you have shared with me in the following ways:

I will use it for my PhD thesis and other academic publications, for example submitting the findings for potential publication in an academic journal.
I will present the results of my study at academic conferences and inform policy-makers about the results of the study.
The results of the study will be shared in presentations, articles and reports. This may also include media reports and other media information sharing platforms such as blogs.
At no point will I name or identify any participants.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic).In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me:
Tel: +353 86 253 0371

Email: f.french@lancaster.ac.uk

Or my supervisor: Dr Carolyn Jack (they/them)son
Address: Educational Research Department, County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, UK

Email: c.Jack (they/them)son@lancaster.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:

Professor Paul Ashwin – Head of Department

Tel: +44 (0)1524 594443
Email: P.Ashwin@Lancaster.ac.uk

Room: County South, D32, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YD, UK.

Sources of support
Transgender Equality Network Ireland website: teni.ie

(including healthcare information, support information, gender recognition certificate guidance)

BeLongTo: 01 670 6223 office hours; **belongto.org**

(supporting LGBTI+ youth 14-23 years old)

Anonymous Text Support 24/7: Text LGBTI+ to 086 1800 280 anytime.

Standard SMS rates may apply.

National LGBT support line: freephone 1800 929 539

Mondays – Thursdays 6.30pm -10pm; Fridays 4pm- 10pm; Saturdays and Sundays 4pm-6pm

Samaritans: freephone 116 133

24 hours per day, 365 days per year

Transgender Family Support Line: 01 907 3707

Tuesdays 10am-12pm; Sundays 6pm-9pm

LGBT Ireland website: lgbt.ie (including online chat service)

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix 4: Interview Questions

Note: Key interview questions and areas will be shared in advance to allow participants time to consider their answers. See section B the end of this document for topics and brief question overview which will be shared in advance.

<u>Section A: semi-structured interview schedule which will be used by the researcher</u>

Extra information before starting recording: If anything you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my supervisor. If possible, I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

General introduction and profile information for all participants – using pseudonyms that will be agreed before recording starts

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this important study. As you already know, I'm a PhD researcher and I'm also the parent of transgender teen. From the interview information I emailed before we met today, you'll have seen that there are some specific topics that we're going to talk about but, to begin, I'd really like to get to know more about you. Could you tell me about yourself? (open)

Follow-up if needed

- *What age you are?*
- *Are you living away from home to study?*
- *How are you finding that?*
- *Would you like to tell me about your gender identity?*
- *Which university are you studying in?*
- *Why did you choose to study there?*

Is there anything else about yourself, gender related or otherwise, that you would like to share?

(*If not covered*) I'd also love to hear about your degree and how you are finding it. Can you tell me about that? (open)

Follow-up if needed

- *What degree are you studying?*
- *Why did you choose it?*
- *What do you enjoy about it?*

Is there anything else about university or degree that you would like to share before we start talking about more specific aspects of your university experience?

Move on to semi-structured questions of experience of different aspects of university life

<u>Teaching Spaces</u>

Thank you for sharing that. It's really nice to get to know you. So, following on from what you shared about your degree, I'd really like to hear about your experience of teaching spaces such as lectures, classrooms, seminars, workshops. I'm keen to know whether you find them

inclusive of your gender identity. This might include content in learning materials, and recognition and respect for your identity such as people using your chosen name and pronouns.

Please could you tell me about your experiences in teaching spaces? (open)

Additional questions as needed:

- *In what ways do you find that university faculty and teaching staff are inclusive or non-inclusive of your identity?*
- *In what ways do you find that other students are inclusive in classrooms and teaching spaces?*
- *Have you had any experiences with faculty where you found that they were not being inclusive?*
- *And what about peers when you are in teaching spaces? Have you found them to be non-inclusive of your gender identity in any ways?*
- *Are there any ways that you feel that the topics and materials in your programme support or exclude your identity?*

What, if anything, do you think should be done to make classrooms and teaching spaces fully trans-inclusive?

Follow-on questions dependent on participant answers

<u>University Administration</u>

Thank you. I'd now like to move on to talk about your experiences with university administration and the university systems. For example, university records for your name, gender, pronouns and so on. Can you tell me in what ways you have been supported and recognised in your identity, or not, by your university's administrative systems and/or administrative staff? (open)

Additional questions as needed:

- *Can you tell me if you have found any administrative processes that support your gender identity?*
- *What about administrative staff? Have they been helpful and inclusive?*
- *What, if any, aspects of university administration have you found that are unsupportive or creating barriers resulting from your gender identity?*

What, if anything, do you suggest your university should do to make sure they have full trans inclusion in their administration services?

Follow-on questions dependent on participant answers

Leading into: <u>University Policies</u>

Thank you for sharing that. As you probably know, university administration processes are often set up as a result of university policy. Please could you tell me about any policies in your university that relate to support and inclusion of your gender identity? (open)

For example, Gender Identity and Expression; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Non-discrimination policies

Additional questions as needed (If aware):

What particular policies provide support and inclusion for your gender identity?

In what ways do you feel those policies support you?

In what ways do you suggest that your university's policies could be improved to become (more) trans-inclusive?

(If not): Why do you think you aren't aware of any relevant policies for trans students in your university?

Follow-on questions dependent on participant answers

Campus facilities

Thank you. I'd now like to ask you about campus facilities. For example, bathrooms, sports changing facilities and student housing (if relevant) that are aligned to your gender; the places that are often designated according to male/female gender binaries, if you're oKay (she/her) with that topic.

Would you be willing to tell me about your experience of accessing and using campus facilities? (open)

Additional questions as needed

- *To what extent does your university provide facilities aligned with your gender?*
- *Do those facilities sufficiently help you to participate and meet your needs in campus life?*
- *Are there any ways that your university's facilities stop you from participating in campus life, or perhaps make you feel uncomfortable?*

What, if anything, do you suggest your university should do to make campus facilities fully trans-inclusive and meet needs?

Follow-on questions dependent on participant answers

University clubs and societies

Now let's move on to talk about clubs, societies and other organisations that are part of your university. Can you tell me about your experience of being part of any of these in your university? (open)

Additional questions as needed

- Have you joined, or thought about joining, any clubs and societies in your university?

- If so, what were they and why did you want to join them?

- Tell me how you find/found that? In what ways was it trans-inclusive or not inclusive?

- Have you found any campus groups that are dedicated to support and build a community among trans students?

If you haven't joined any clubs or societies, can you tell me why?

What suggestions do you have for making your university's clubs and societies more inclusive?

Follow-on questions dependent on participant answers

Other aspects and experiences related to identity

I'm aware that there may be other aspects of your university life that are impacted by your identity (gender or otherwise) that I haven't yet asked about. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about? (open)

Additional questions as needed

- *In what other ways, if any, have you found your university to be inclusive?*
- *In what other ways, if any, have you found your university experience to be non-inclusive?*
- *Do you find that any other aspects of your identity, aside from gender, positively or negatively affect your inclusion in university?*

What recommendations, if any, would you like to make related to this?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Follow-on questions dependent on participant answers

Campus Climate

And finally, I'd like to ask overall how welcoming and inclusive, or not, you feel your university is?

What do you think are the main reasons for that? including any of those we've already discussed

What suggestions do you have, if any, to create a more (trans) inclusive climate in your university?

Finish: That brings us to the end of the interview. I'd like to remind you that you can withdraw within two weeks from today by emailing me and you need not give a reason. Please also remember that support resource contacts are listed on your participant information sheet.

Thank you very much for your time sharing your experiences and extremely valuable participation in this interview.

Interview Section B: questions overview to be shared with participants via email prior to interview

Dear …….

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study.

There is no need to do anything to prepare for the interview. Here are the question areas that I'm going to ask you about. This is so you can have time to think about these beforehand (if you want).

1. Getting to know you – general information about you, your identity, which university, which degree.
2. Teaching spaces – What experiences have you had in lectures, seminars, tutorials etc? In what ways have faculty and student peers been trans-inclusive (or not)? What do you suggest, if anything, for making teaching spaces more trans-inclusive?
3. University administration – In what ways do administrative systems and staff support your gender identity? In what ways have you found administrative systems and staff non-inclusive? What do you suggest, if anything, for making your universities administration (more) trans-inclusive?
4. University policies – Are you aware of any policies that you feel are supportive and inclusive of your identity? In what ways, if any, do you suggest your university's policies could be made (more) trans-inclusive? If you don't know of any policies, why do you think this is the case?
5. Campus facilities – For example, bathrooms that are suitable for your gender, sports changing facilities, student housing (if relevant), places that are often designated according to male/female gender binaries.
6. Campus clubs and societies – Have you joined, or thought about joining, any organisations or groups in your university? Tell me how you find/found that? In what ways was it trans-inclusive or not inclusive? What suggestions do you have for making your university's clubs and societies more inclusive? If you haven't joined any clubs or societies, can you tell me why not?
7. Other aspects and experiences– Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your university experience? In what other ways, if any, have you found your university to be inclusive? In what other ways, if any, have you found your university to be non-inclusive? What recommendations for changes, if any, would you like to make?
8. Campus climate – Overall, how welcoming and inclusive do you find your university? What are the main reasons for that? (which may include aspects previously mentioned) In what ways, if any, could the overall environment/climate of your university be made (more) trans-inclusive?

The above is just a short summary of the question and areas. You'll have the opportunity to discuss them in a lot more detail during the interview. If there is any area mentioned above that you do not wish to discuss, you can tell me and we'll skip that part (no explanation or reason needed).

Also, I'd be very grateful during the interview if you could tell me about anything else that you want to share in the 'other aspects and experiences' section, if it's not covered by the main topics for the interview.

I'm really looking forward to meeting with you soon!

Fiona

Appendix 5: Call for Participants

Email

Subject: Transgender and gender-diverse students in Irish universities- please share your experience

I am writing to make a request and invite volunteer participants to be interviewed for my PhD research into transgender and gender-diverse student experiences in higher education in the Republic of Ireland. I am inviting any university student in the Republic of Ireland who is over 18 years of age and identifies under the transgender umbrella e.g. trans, non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, to give their valuable time to share their university experiences via an interview with me. The interviews will take place January – April 2023 and can be undertaken in-person or via Zoom

Who is the researcher?
I am a mature PhD student with Lancaster University who works in an Irish University. I am also the parent to a transgender teenager. I am undertaking this research to add your valuable voices to the limited literature about the university experiences of students like you and my child who identify within the transgender umbrella.

Why should I take part?
There is very limited information about transgender students in Ireland so I really want to hear from you. What is university like for you? What can be done to make your experiences better? Your contribution will help inform Irish universities of what they can do to help support positive changes.

The details
I am attaching a detailed participant information sheet. Please take time to read the information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Ready to take part?
Please contact Fiona French tel: +353 86 253 0371 email: f.french@lancaster.ac.uk

Many thanks for your time and consideration of this invitation.

Warm wishes,

Fiona

Social Media

Please share your university experience!

Do you identify as transgender, non-binary, gender-diverse, gender non-conforming, gender fluid or any other non-cisgender identity? Are you over 18 and a student in an Irish university? Are you willing to confidentially share your experiences through an interview with a PhD researcher?

If so, please dm me or email PhD student Fiona French f.french@lancaster.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Consent form

Project Title: An Exploration of Transgender Student Experiences in Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland

Name of Researcher: Fiona French

Email: f.french@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 2 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
4. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, or field notes made if I prefer, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Date Signature

Gender …… ……..

Pronouns……..

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____ **Date** _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Glossary of Terms - **English/Gaeilge** (where Irish term exists)

Agender/Aininscneach – A gender identity which is considered to be neutral. It may also be used to mean genderless – some people who consider themselves neutrally gendered or genderless may identify as both agender and gender neutral, while others prefer one term or the other

Chosen name – the use of a first, middle and/or last name that is different from a person's legal name, often chosen as a reflection of gender identity

Cisgender/Cisinscneach – Adjective for someone whose gender identity is aligned with their sex assigned at birth

Cisnormativity/Ciosnormatacht - The incorrect assumption that everyone is cisgender, which structurally and socially privileges cisgender individuals and disadvantages those with diverse gender identities.

Gay/Aerach- Sexually or romantically attracted to people of the same gender or sex

Gender binary/Dénérthacht inscne- A gender system which only recognises women and men

Gender dysphoria – a term used to describe the psychological distress caused by an incongruence between one's gender identity and sex assigned at birth.

Gender expression/ Léiriú inscne - the way in which people show their gender identity, especially through dress, mannerisms and behaviour

Gender fluid/Solúbtha óthaobh inscne de- gender fluid individuals experience different gender identities at different times. A gender fluid person's gender identity can be multiple genders at once, then switch to none at all, or move between single gender identities. Some gender fluid people regularly move between only a few specific genders, perhaps as few as two.

Gender markers – denotes the gender of person e.g. male (M)/female(F)/non-binary(NB)

Gender non-conforming/Neamh-chomhréireach ó thaobh inscne de - Gender identities that fall outside of the binary of man or woman and thus do not conform to traditional genders and their roles. This includes a wide variety of gender identities.

Gender normativity/Normatacht inscne – adhering to or reinforcing particular standards and behaviours expected of male/masculinity and female/femininity

Genderqueer/Aiteach ó thaobh inscne de - having a gender identity that is not simply male or female, or experiencing gender in a way that is different from the way society expects

Heterosexual/Heitrighnéasachas - sexually or romantically attracted to men if you are a woman, and women if you are a man

Homophobia/Homafóibe - harmful or unfair words and/or actions based on a fear or dislike of gay people or queer people (= people who do not fit a society's traditional ideas about gender or sexuality)

Misgender/Mí-inscnigh – Refer to a person with words or a phrase (e.g. pronouns) that do not accurately reflect their gender identity

Non- binary/ neamh-dhénártha - having a gender identity that is not simply male or female

Passing/ Pasáil – An expression for when a person is seen by others as their true gender, as opposed to the gender assigned to them at birth. Some people dislike this word as it implies that trans people are hiding something. For some trans people, however, 'passing' or being seen as their true gender, is important.

Pronouns/Forainmneacha - Someone's pronouns are the way they choose to be referred to according to their gender identity, e.g. she/her, they/them, he/him, he/they, they/she

Queer/Aiteach - having or relating to a gender identity or a sexuality that does not fit society's traditional ideas about gender or sexuality

Sex/Gnéis- the physical state of being either male, female, or intersex

Sex assigned at birth – the gender that someone is said to be when they are born. This is usually based on their external genitalia

Sexual orientation/Sexuality /Claonadh gnéis -1. the fact of someone being sexually or romantically attracted to people of a particular gender, or more than one gender

2. people who are sexually or romantically attracted to people of a particular gender, or more than one gender, considered as a group

Transgender/Trasinscneach - used to describe someone whose gender does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth

Trans*/Tras -short for transgender, and an umbrella term for all gender (and no gender) identities that are not cisgender

Trans man/Fear trasinscneach -A man who was assigned female at birth (AFAB) but identifies as a man. Some trans men make physical changes through hormones or surgery; others do not. Some trans men may refer to themselves as FTM (female-to-male), however others prefer to refer to themselves simply as a man, or men of transgender experience.

Trans woman/Bean trasinscneach -A woman who was assigned male at birth (AMAB) but identifies as a woman. Some trans women make physical changes through hormones or surgery; others do not. Some trans women may refer to themselves as

MTF (male-to-female), however others prefer to refer to themselves simply as a woman or women of transgender experience.

Transness -the fact of being transgender

Transphobia/Trasfóibe- policies, behaviours, rules, etc. that result in a continued unfair advantage to cisgender people (= people whose gender matches the body they were born with) and unfair or harmful treatment of transgender and non-binary people (= people whose gender does not match the body they were born with)

Definitions based on Transgender Equality Network Ireland (n.d); An Foclóir Aiteach/The Queer Dictionary 2nd edition (2022); The Cambridge Dictionary (2024)

Acronyms

Acronym	Full Term
ASI	Anticipatory Socialisation Initiatives
Brexit	The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union
DSS	Decision Support Service (part of Ireland's Mental Health Commission)
EDI	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
EU	European Union
GRC	Gender Recognition Certification
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ID	Identification
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer + all other sexuality & gender related minorities
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association (USA)
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications (Ireland)
ROI	Republic of Ireland
RTÉ	Radio Telifíse Éireann (the Irish national broadcasting corporation)
SIS	Student Information System
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics
TENI	Transgender Equality Network Ireland
TERF	Transgender Exclusionary Radical Feminists
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
UVM	University of Vermont Michigan
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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