

Supporting trans staff and students: Rachel's story

Dr Rachel Jean Pawling, Department of Mechanical Engineering, University College London

Background

I am a 34 year old postdoctoral research associate in the UCL department of mechanical engineering. I first came to UCL as an undergraduate in 1997, graduating in 2001 and continuing my studies in a part-time PhD. I gained my PhD in 2007 and have continued my research in the department. My area of research is computer aided ship design, and I have been quite active in this subject, being lead or co-author on approximately 25 papers, including reprints in trade journals and regular presentations to the main national and international conferences on this subject. This means that, professionally, my being transgender will never be a secret.

I have been aware of the schism between my physical or assigned sex and my gender identification since I was in primary school. My first thoughts of transition came in my early teens when I learned that such a thing was possible. I came close to transitioning in my early twenties, after graduation, but lost my confidence. After a decade of increasing discomfort, in mid-2012 I resolved to transition – although this decision making process did not happen overnight, and rather there was a change over some unspecified period from 'no' to 'yes'.

Much of the material I was exposed to in my formative years concentrated on the negative side of the process – difficulties in finding understanding doctors and psychiatrists, the strain of having to live a highly restricted life to satisfy their demands, potential delays etc. This all convinced me that I wanted to come out to my friends – for the second time – and to explore my gender identity with them before approaching medical professionals for further help. This started in early October 2012, when I first presented as female at a private dinner with a friend. In early November I began to spend weekends as a woman, both in private and with friends. Through mid-November I was telling more of my friends that I intended to transition, at that point only part-time, but intended to move forward as fast as possible.

Support from the university

One of the defining emotions of this time was the difficulty I experienced when switching back to presenting as male at the end of the weekend. I found that my perception of dysphoria was greatly enhanced, and I was becoming depressed by the strain of maintaining an appearance I no longer felt any connection to. However, at this time I believed that it was only possible to go full-time – to actually live as a woman – after having seen a psychiatrist. I had informed my supervisor, who I have worked with for over a decade, and he had been extremely supportive. It was suggested to me that UCL might be more permissive, so I decided to ask.

I contacted Sarah Guise by email on the 26 November. I chose her as my contact because she was the head of equality and diversity, so would either be able to help directly, or point me in

the right direction. I requested a meeting as soon as possible, with the intention of finding out what UCL's attitude was to transitioners going full time without a carry letter or similar.

We met at the HR office the following afternoon. Sarah explained that post-2010 the emphasis was on the seriousness of my intent to transition, rather than the exact details of the stage I was currently at, and that she had helped another transsexual transition while at UCL.

Action plan

We discussed the timetable for my transition at work, which was centred around using the winter break as a convenient time to go full-time, the usefulness of a transition action plan, options for informing my colleagues and the availability of support within the HR organisation.

I drew up an outline transition action plan with my supervisor the same day. This described the general timeframe for my transition over the next month, and listed the individuals and groups I would need to inform, and when and how I would do this. The most important thing I found about the action plan was simply that it had an end. The list of people to be informed was long, but it was finite, and so was a practical proposition. The significance of seeing so serious a task written down as a finite bullet-pointed list cannot be overstated.

Informing colleagues

I grouped the colleagues I needed to inform into how I wanted to inform them: face-to-face, individual email and group email. First on the list was my departmental head, who I met (with my supervisor) on the 28 November. He was extremely supportive and with the support of both he and my supervisor I set to writing my transition letter.

My departmental colleagues were all to be informed either face-to-face or by individually addressed (but otherwise identical) emails. I worked through the list of people I wanted to inform face-to-face, and when this was complete issued the transition letter via email. The colleagues I told in person were primarily the other academics in my research group, but also the administrative staff I worked most closely with on a daily basis (secretaries, IT sysadmin and contract management). I arranged a meeting to tell all my research students together.

There was a question of timing of the email letter. With the winter break approaching, some staff members might go on leave early. There was also the question of the departmental Christmas party. I was not planning on attending the event this year, but the two questions were; before or after and if before, how close to the event? Through discussion with my supervisor and the head of department, we decided that two to three working days before the event was best – it would not be the most recent thing on the minds of those attending, and this would avoid it becoming *the* topic of conversation.

With the departmental letter sent out, a series of emails were sent to the leaders of the various research projects I am involved with. This was a version of the transition letter with departmental-specific lines removed. They were given the option of disseminating the letter themselves if they wished.

- [Rachel's story: writing the letter](#)

Responses from colleagues and students

My colleagues have been very supportive. In all cases I received a positive response when telling people face-to-face. Five colleagues had met other transgender people in work (or in school).

Individual quotes can of course give a skewed impression, but these are a few notable ones.

‘Fine, as long as you’re not leaving, we need your brain!’

‘You’re very brave –now you will find out how hard it is for women!’

‘The only thing I have an issue with is that the NHS pays for it.’ (during discussion)

‘If you ever have any problems, just come to me and I’ll deal with it.’

‘I don’t really know my reaction when I see you significantly transformed, but I hope I will manage to accept this fact and get over it. I realised that life has more colours than most people manage to notice over their lifetime.’

‘Never before has it been more appropriate to wish someone happiness and contentment for the New Year.’

Generally responses indicated surprise, but support. From discussions with my supervisor and other colleagues I understand that there was some discussion of my email, and everyone was surprised but supportive. Roughly half the people I sent the letter to responded in person.

I had been full-time for approximately three weeks before returning to work in January, so felt comfortable in myself. I was a little uncertain of how my colleagues would react, however. Generally, they have carried on as normal. I have been greeted with smiles, and the use of names and pronouns have been broadly correct. This has been the same in meetings with project partners.

It is worth mentioning that there are a relatively small number of women in engineering, so I’m simply less likely to be using the toilets at the same time as another woman, but eventually (after about two weeks!) it happened. She didn’t seem to have any problem with this – just smiled and carried on with her make-up. When I have used public facilities, generally I may get a second glance, but no overt hostility.

So far being a trans woman in a field traditionally dominated by men has not introduced any great problems. However, it is very important to remember that I have been working with people who knew me before, and I do see that I am treated differently from [cis](#) colleagues. This may be because I exist in some third category – ie a modified man rather than a woman – it may be because I don’t physically pass very well, or it may be because I don’t have the same history of experiences as other women in engineering, so don’t act in the same way (I have never been one to keep my opinions to myself!). This is something that will I suspect change in the future, as I become involved with new projects and meet people for the first time. The next major tests will be my presentation of papers at two conferences this summer, as the regular attendees only ever see me once a year, and there will be many other engineers and researchers whom I have never met.

I have had some interaction with the undergraduates I had been working with before. There seemed to be no difference at all in how they responded to me, the level of respect I was

afforded etc. Students I pass in the corridors around campus seem to react far less than the everyday public on the street. It is obvious that some students do notice, but they rarely look twice, and so far I have not been the subject of the mild verbal abuse which happened occasionally when I was first out in public.