

Supporting trans staff and students: Lily's story

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Overall, I would say transitioning at university has been a very good experience.

I initially left university to transition, taking a break from education in February 2012, with the intent to return that September to finish my degree. Comparing transitioning outside of university, to within - there is no comparison. University is, in my opinion, the best place to transition (practically only of course, medically its best to transition earlier in life).

The university environment is perfect for transitioning, because it tends to be far more accepting than the rest of society, full of people who are more open to new ideas. But also most universities will have many networks of support already in place that trans people can use, should things become hard (which for most, they will).

I found that the gender identity clinic (GIC) really encouraged me to transition in university as it provides the real life experience that they required, but in a safe and stable way, that they could monitor. So in terms of progressing through the NHS system as a trans person, it did help to transition at university.

Support from the university

For me personally the main things that have helped my transition have been:

- The flexibility: when I was having a really bad day and my dysphoria was awful, I had the ability to make a decision to miss a lecture—and it was probably not as much of a big deal as missing a day of work.
- The existing support for students such as the disability service and the counselling service which all help when you need extra support.
- The LGBT society: this was probably the single most important thing in supporting my transition. They provide a safe space, an accepting environment, and a way to socialise.

For my first few weeks back at university, the only places I would go (as they were the only places I felt safe) were my lectures, and the LGBT society. Since then, through the society I have branched out, and I'm now far more active in the student community than I ever was before transitioning.

Areas where there could be more support

Of course, my experience wasn't perfect and I certainly encountered problems. The majority came from some of my fellow students who were less accepting. **Universities should do more to ensure their student body is as trans-friendly as possible through awareness-raising and other initiatives.**

I also experienced difficulties with certain staff that universities might not think have much to do with students. I live in a women-only flat, for example, and the amount of strange reactions and comments I get from cleaning staff can be quite hard to deal with. **This could be solved with better staff training and extending that training to all staff at the university, not just the most obviously ‘student facing’ ones.**

Gender-neutral toilets are also really helpful, and this is especially important for evening/late-night venues where often using the female toilets doesn't feel safe.

I would also have benefited from a better link-up between the university and GIC and other NHS services, and acknowledgement by the university of what it meant for my studies that I had to travel back from London to Exeter many times through each term for my GIC appointments and other doctor appointments. It is a huge expense and a real pain, but transferring care isn't really an option as you would have to transfer it right back again in the summer.

But despite any problems, university remains one of the most accepting and easy places to transition, and one that I recommend to many young trans people.