gsa

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
graduate student
association

April

2021

Graduate Student
Association

Submission to the University of Melbourne gender affirmation policy consultation

Background

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. We are led by an elected Council of 15 graduate students, and on behalf of over 30,000 constituents we represent graduate student interests to the University and wider community, provide facilities and services, deliver events and activities to promote graduate student community and academic excellence, and supports 149 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.

The University of Melbourne has proposed a new gender affirmation policy that provides a framework for an inclusive culture at the University, and outlines processes for transgender and gender diverse members of the University community to have their gender identity and expression affirmed.

GSA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the University of Melbourne's new proposed gender affirmation policy. This policy will promote the health and wellbeing of transgender and gender diverse students by supporting students in affirming their gender identity.

Summary

GSA consulted with graduate student representatives to provide feedback on the proposed policy. Representatives to University committees, misconduct representatives, council members, and GSA staff were invited to provide feedback guided by the following questions:

- Do you believe the objective is suitable?
- Do you have any comments on the seven policies as outlined in section four?
- Do you have any comments on the procedural principles outlined in section five?
- What do you believe should be the role of students and student organisations in implementing and monitoring this policy?

Graduate student representatives communicated support for the policy and its objective. Suggestions were received on providing clarity on definitions and processes and linking the policy to other resources and support services. There is also a need for the policy to acknowledge the impact of cultural diversity, and how understandings and expressions of gender differ cross-culturally.

A limitation of the feedback collected is that we were unable to consult with the broader graduate student population, owing to the short timeline for feedback. GSA has encouraged graduate students to submit feedback to the University directly.

Providing clear definitions

The policy provides some brief definitions. These definitions may be insufficiently detailed or difficult to interpret for students from diverse cultural backgrounds. We have University community members from many diverse backgrounds who may have different understandings of gender and gender expression. We suggest expanding the definitions provided, including adding definitions of 'transgender', 'gender diverse', and 'non-binary'.

Recommendation 1: Expand the policy to clearly define terminology including 'transgender', 'gender diverse', 'non-binary'.

The provided definition of 'gender affirmation' may be overly technical for students unfamiliar with the language used. It may be unclear to students that the term 'gender affirmation' can be used to replace the expression 'gender transition'. A plain language definition would assist students in understanding the concept of gender affirmation.

Recommendation 2: Provide a plain language definition of 'gender affirmation'.

Recognising cultural diversity

The policy should acknowledge the diversity of cultures and nationalities represented in the University community, and how these intersect with understandings of gender. This could be incorporated in section 4.6, adding a statement to express that the University recognises cultural diversity and differences in how gender and gender expression are understood.

Recommendation 3: Add a statement to the policy expressing recognition of cultural diversity and that this influences understandings of gender and gender identity.

Linking resources

Several students commented on the need for accompanying online resources to assist students to understand key concepts and navigate University processes and support services. The policy could also link to the University's FAQ pages on gender identification[1] and changing one's name[2]. These resources provide practical advice for students wishing to update their name, title, and gender, and outline which University systems will reflect changes. The University could also consider providing plain-language booklets for students and staff undertaking gender affirmation, as has been implemented at other universities[3].

---

[1] University of Melbourne 2021, 'FAQ / Gender identification for trans and gender diverse students', accessed from < https://ask.unimelb.edu.au/faq/6152/>

[2] University of Melbourne 2021, 'FAQ / Changing your name and details', accessed from <https://ask.unimelb.edu.au/faq/4591/>

[3] E.g. RMIT University 2019, 'Gender affirmation at RMIT: A guide to supporting gender affirmation', accessed from < https://www.rmit.edu.au/content/dam/rmit/documents/Students/Support_and_Facilities/dgss/Gender-Affirmation-Guide-RMIT-University.pdf>

Recommendation 4: Provide students with accompanying resources to understand and navigate university processes for gender affirmation.

The policy refers to gender affirmation plans for staff and students. It is unclear in the policy if Stop 1 can provide students with assistance to create a gender affirmation plan or is only equipped to discuss and support implementation of a gender affirmation plan. In either case, the policy should link to a gender affirmation template like the template used by other universities[4]. This would provide clarity on the process and who is responsible for facilitating it. Further guidance needs to be provided on updating and communicating a students' pronouns (it is unclear if this will be handled through the gender affirmation plan).

Recommendation 5: Specify where students can obtain assistance in developing a gender affirmation plan.

Recommendation 6: Provide a gender affirmation plan template.

Applying the policy

Feedback was received on the application of the proposed policy to a transphobic website published by a University of Melbourne academic, which GSA opposed in a media statement[5]. The policy states that the University "does not support the exercise of freedom of speech when the exercise undermines the capacity of individuals to participate fully in the University". The website would require action from the University under the proposed policy. In accordance with Section 4.7 of the proposed policy, based on the University's assessment of the potential harm of the website, they will be required to either not allow the website to proceed or take steps to mitigate harm.

---

[4] E.g. Victoria University n.d., 'Gender affirmation plan for student', accessed from
<https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/gender-affirmation-plan-students-template.docx>
[5] University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association 2021, 'GSA condemns transphobic website from university academic', accessed from < https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/media-release-gsa-condemns-transphobic-website-university-academic/>