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Leading LGBTQ+ body and UCU call for an end to “systemic transphobia” at University of Leeds.

📅 September 10, 2021 [🗨️ 0 Comment](#)

The University of Leeds’ LGBTQ+ Staff Network and University College Union (UCU) have written a joint letter to the VC Simone Buitendijk calling for an end to what they call the “hostile environment” on campus for transgender staff and students. The bodies which represent thousands of staff and students at Leeds, claim that the University has “seriously damaged [the] relationship with its trans and wider LGBTQ+ community”.

This letter comes after a

[U-turn made by the University in March of 2021 to not change its Trans Equality Policy, < https://www.thegryphon.co.uk/2021/03/11/university-scrap-trans-equality-policy-rollback/>](https://www.thegryphon.co.uk/2021/03/11/university-scrap-trans-equality-policy-rollback/)

following pressure applied by students and staff. Buitendijk has previously come under fire for liking and sharing content on Twitter deemed as anti-trans. At the time of the controversy, she apologised, releasing a statement that said “I now realise that social media is not the correct forum for such sensitive debates.”

One of the issues highlighted in the letter is what the bodies call the “significant safety risk” that the University’s IT systems pose to its transgender staff and students. It is claimed that these systems are not able to digital manage identity changes and in doing so reveal the previous names, titles, gender, or natal sex of transgender individuals. The letter alleges that the University has been aware of this technological safety risk since 2017 but has not as of yet “taken effective action” to remedy the issue.

One current member of staff has said that these technological deficiencies in the University of Leeds led them to be ‘outed as trans and dead named to new colleagues who did not know me

before my transition'. Despite this individual following all instructions given by the University to change their name, their 'dead name' continued to show up on many systems over a year later. This has taken a significant toll on this individual's mental health, with them saying that it has been both 'humiliating and dehumanising'

The Gryphon contacted the University about the issues with their IT systems. A spokesperson responded, saying "we are addressing our current IT systems' inability to support name changes or rename login accounts as part of a significant investment programme in our IT infrastructure. This is not a problem that can be fixed quickly, although it is a priority. In the meantime, we are undertaking a short project to improve how we address these issues on an individual basis and apply solutions more widely, where we can."

The letter also accuses the University of acting unlawfully under the 2004 Gender Recognition Act and directly contradicting their own "Guidance to Support Trans Staff and Students". This accusation is in light of senior management asking trans staff to provide Gender Recognition Certificates (GRCs) in order to change their gender markers on University records. The University's own guidance states that 'it is NEVER appropriate and it is unlawful to ask a trans person for a Gender Recognition Certificate'.



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In response to this allegation, a spokesperson from the University stated that "we do not require Gender Recognition Certificates or other such forms of documentation but do accept that the position was unclear for a short period."

The letter also criticises the conduct of the Big Leeds Conversation, an online platform that facilitates anonymous discussion of the University's values, for failing to remove or moderate "widespread transphobic comments". One member of staff says that, 'there are a few people who have "niche" opinions which they would not feel confident expressing, unless they had the cover of anonymity". They go on to say that the content on this platform is 'some of the most explicit transphobia that I have ever seen in a University context'.

The UCU and LGBTQ+ Staff Network do emphasise that racist comments on the platform, which was facilitated by an external company, were removed to spare members of the University community from harm and distress. However, 'this same level of care and regard [was] not extended to the University's transgender community'.

In a statement, a University spokesperson said that "the company facilitating the Big Leeds Conversation on our behalf has confirmed that no comments were removed. Although some may have been uncomfortable to read, they were ultimately maintained as a demonstration of our commitment to free speech, and to allow those taking part to express their views."

At a wider level, the letter raises concerns about the everyday culture of transphobia found on campus. Staff and students testify to being asked invasive questions about their genitals, having colleagues stop socialising with them after coming out as transgender, and having difficulty accessing gender-neutral toilets. With the new academic year due to start in a couple of weeks, the letter reminds the University that it is running out of time to protect new staff and students from this as well as those who have transitioned over the summer.

The University “strongly deny the assertion” that they have created a “hostile environment” for transgender staff and students on campus. However, they also admit that “we do recognise we have further to go in this area, and want to work with our community on this. The University has a clear commitment to ensuring equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and this is demonstrated by work underway to develop a new University EDI strategy.”

As of publication, a spokesperson from the University has said that they have approached representative signatories of the letter, suggesting to meet very soon to discuss the actions they are proposing to take.

A contact from one of the signatory groups told The Gryphon that they have not had the offer to meet with the Vice-Chancellor, as requested, and have been told in the University’s meeting request that are only permitted to be represented by one member from each signatory group. They claim this is inadequate in ensuring the mental health safety of representatives.

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