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University IT systems fail trans community, claim staff and students

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The University of Leeds has been accused of failing to comply with the Equality Act, Data Protection (GDPR), and the Gender Recognition Act in regards to the way it stores the data of transgender staff and students. The University’s trans community are allegedly being “outed” by IT systems as their deadnames (the birth name that they no longer use) appear on the IT systems in ways which they say the University cannot control or understand.

Transgender staff and students claim that this is not only humiliating and damaging to their mental health, but that it also makes them vulnerable to hate crime and discrimination. Furthermore, several sources claim that management is downplaying or even ignoring the issue.

The Gryphon has seen evidence that proves the University has known about this problem since 2016.

One source told us of a first-year transgender male student who was known to their peers by their male name and had changed their name within the University’s IT systems. During an online seminar on Blackboard, their deadname appeared on screen. When the student started speaking, their lecturer interrupted them stating that they were confused as to why a female name appeared on screen when a male voice was speaking. The student then had to explain the discrepancy between their voice and their female-presenting name by outing themselves as trans; most of the students in the session were unaware of the student’s transgender status beforehand.

Sharing someone’s transgender status without the person’s explicit consent may be unlawful under the Gender Recognition Act. Maximum individual fines for contravention of this act could be as high as £5000.

When presented with these allegations, the University said it took its responsibilities for data protection extremely seriously.

One source, a University staff member, explained why deadnames reappear in the first place: “The original central IT system was made over two decades ago. Its creator is long gone and a lot of the knowledge needed to deal with it hasn’t been handed down. Consequently, successive IT staff have added, changed and built upon the system to the point where it has become a messy and complex web. There are about 12 core IT systems used by the University but over 300 in operation across campus. This is why, even if a transgender person goes through the process of officially changing their name, their deadname can still crop up on other systems at any time.”

“At the moment, it is then left to the trans person to try and contact someone who might be able to remove the deadname from each system, but this is like a game of whack-a-mole, and it is absolutely impossible for an individual to find the right person.”

This comes after the publication of a joint letter from the University’s LGBTQ+ Staff Network and University College Union (UCU) last August. The letter was addressed to VC Simone Buitendijk and called for an end to what the letter refers to as “systemic transphobia” and the “hostile environment” on campus for transgender staff and students and specifically addressed the IT problem.

Although the University reached out to signatories of the letter to organise a meeting, one source claims they felt they had been “misled” by management:

“University management agreed to meet with 3 representatives, one from UCU, one from the LGBTQ+ Staff Network and one from LUU’s LGBTQ+ Society,” one source said. “But they would only host a meeting in-person on campus despite the fact that one representative was not in Leeds and about to move abroad. Also, we were still very much in the pandemic (September 2021) and we raised concerns about our safety and transmitting the virus. Despite the amount of teaching that still takes place online, they said that a virtual meeting would ‘not be conducive to facilitating the change in the scale of mistrust’. It doesn’t make any sense.”

What’s more, once management agreed to hold a virtual meeting, they allegedly changed the agenda. “Instead of discussing the issues we raised in the open letter, they decided that the meeting should ‘not get into detail of policies and actions, but rather to convey a desire to invest time working through these hard issues together in a face to face environment’. So, they made it a meeting about why the meeting should have taken place in person.”

The signatories expressed dissatisfaction at the change of agenda and said they would only attend a meeting to discuss action on the IT problem.

Another member of staff had their suspicions about why the University approached the meeting in this way. “I think they are trying to run us around in circles so we will drop the issue. However, they also get to say that they attempted to meet with us and we weren’t co-operative.” The staff member then references a “sensationalist” Times piece on the UCU letter, published in October 2021, where the University said “we strongly deny the assertion that we have created a ‘hostile environment’ for transgender staff and students, but recognise that we need to do more to alleviate concerns that have been put to us and are working with our community to do so.”

A University spokesperson said: “While we disagree with elements of our interactions with the three groups’ representatives last year as depicted here, in the interests of maintaining constructive relationships we want to continue move forward and make progress together.”

In the aftermath of the joint open letter, the University pointed to the fact that it had earlier that year promised to spend £76 million on a new IT system which could take up to 5 years to come into effect.

In the meantime, the University established a working group in its IT department in September 2021 to create a manual process to manage the systems’ shortcomings and prevent deadnames from being shared. LUU LGBTQ+ Society’s Christos Minas, who has worked with the group since November, is unhappy with the project’s lack of progress so far.

“They originally told us that the deadline for a solution would be the end of December and they didn’t meet that,” he says. “They then told us that things would be sorted by 7th March. It’s not going to happen. After we demanded transparency from management, we found that they didn’t

even have the beginning of an effective process. All they have done for the last six months is investigate and prove the fact that they don't know how to fix things. It's really frustrating."

However, Minas does not blame the staff from IT services in the working group. "It's the fault of whoever commissioned this. They don't seem to understand the urgency of the situation. We had to fight to even be able to give feedback."

Yet, the challenges faced by trans staff and students are administrative as well as technological. Connor Scott-Gardner, a current MA student in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, says that the process of changing his name was "a nightmare".

"You have to download a form, fill it in, and give it to student services with your deed poll," he says. "But when I went to download the form, I found that it wasn't screen reader accessible which is obviously crucial to me as I am blind."

Scott-Gardner then found Student Services to be unhelpful when he pointed out this accessibility issue. Even when he got his masters supervisor involved, things didn't improve.

"They came back to [my supervisor] and said that they wouldn't provide him with a screen-reader accessible form. [My supervisor] engaged in a month-long argument with them just to get a form that I could fill in," Scott-Gardner claims.

The University has a duty under the Equality Act to provide reasonable adjustments for disabled people.

Even when Scott-Gardner eventually filled out an accessible form, he claims Student Services still seemed clueless. "I went to the counter and they said that they didn't know how to deal with the forms but would try and find someone who did. The idea of such a personal set of documents being passed around an office made me really stress out."

After a few days of not hearing anything, Scott-Gardner chased Student Services for an update. They told him that he needed to sign the original form by hand. "I explained to them several times that I cannot hand sign things as I am blind but they wouldn't engage with me. I ended up having to threaten to take action against them before they accepted it. There was no need for that entire process."

Another source, an undergraduate student, told The Gryphon that they approached Student Services with the same form and was met by confusion:

"They turned me away as they'd 'never heard of someone changing their first name before' and refused to help, then a Queer member of staff came off break... then [they] told me to send it to ssc@leeds.ac.uk... Throughout this entire interaction they were the only one that called me by [my chosen name], the other staff who refused to help me still called me by my deadname."

Despite receiving confirmation of his name change from the University, Scott-Gardner still encountered his deadname on some IT systems months later. "I was going to run for a society position but when I logged into Engage I was like oh f**k it's got my old name. I don't want that right there for everyone just to access all the time. I felt like I had to disclose I was trans to people at LUU just to be able to change it." After this, he realised that he had been deadnamed for months on the membership lists of societies he had joined. A source from LUU confirmed that the Engage platform receives student data from the University's central IT systems.

Although names show up correctly in some IT systems, Scott-Gardner explains that it's the degree of uncertainty of where a deadname may crop up that causes him so much anxiety. "It is not only massively inconvenient but also dehumanising." Scott-Gardner says he has received no apology at any point. He is also not certain that the problem has been solved.

"This has been going on for years now at the Uni, it's not like it's a new issue, and they're just not taking any of it seriously. What about those who have experienced domestic violence who might have changed their name? Or people who have experienced honour abuse? It's such a safety risk for several groups of people."

Scott-Gardner also speculated why the University hasn't fixed the problem yet. He questioned whether those in power understood the experiences of trans people and to what extent the University is reluctant to spend money addressing the issues sooner than it has to. "It's easy not

to care about something when it doesn't affect you and [to] not understand the magnitude of how terrible this is," he says.

He also cites the rise of Gender Critical rhetoric in the mainstream media as a possible factor. Scott-Gardner believes that: "The less accepting you are the easier it is for universities at the moment. I wouldn't be surprised if those at higher levels are thinking: 'let's scale these policies back because we are going to at some point get pulled into The Times for being accepting of trans people'".

"We really need the student body to get behind this and support the trans community," one transgender member of University staff told us. "When [students] did that last year to prevent the roll-back on the Trans Equality Policy, they achieved what we as staff had been trying to do [in 3 months], but hadn't managed, in just five days. As a result, the University U-turned."

A University spokesperson said: "The University values the diversity of its students and staff – trans students and staff enrich our University community and we strive to provide a positive working and learning environment free from discrimination, harassment or victimisation.

"It is a source of concern if we have not lived up to our objectives in any individual cases, and we take our responsibilities for data protection extremely seriously.

"Whilst we have made significant strides to improve some of the related issues, such as digital accessibility, we recognise that aspects of our IT estate are out of date and in urgent need of improvement. We have approved an investment of £76 million to do so. This large and complex challenge will be delivered through more than 20 projects over a five year period.

"Work already underway includes a short project to further improve how we manually process identity changes. We continue to work with affected groups and to consult stakeholders, making further improvements and completing testing. We will continue to update our community on the project's progress."

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