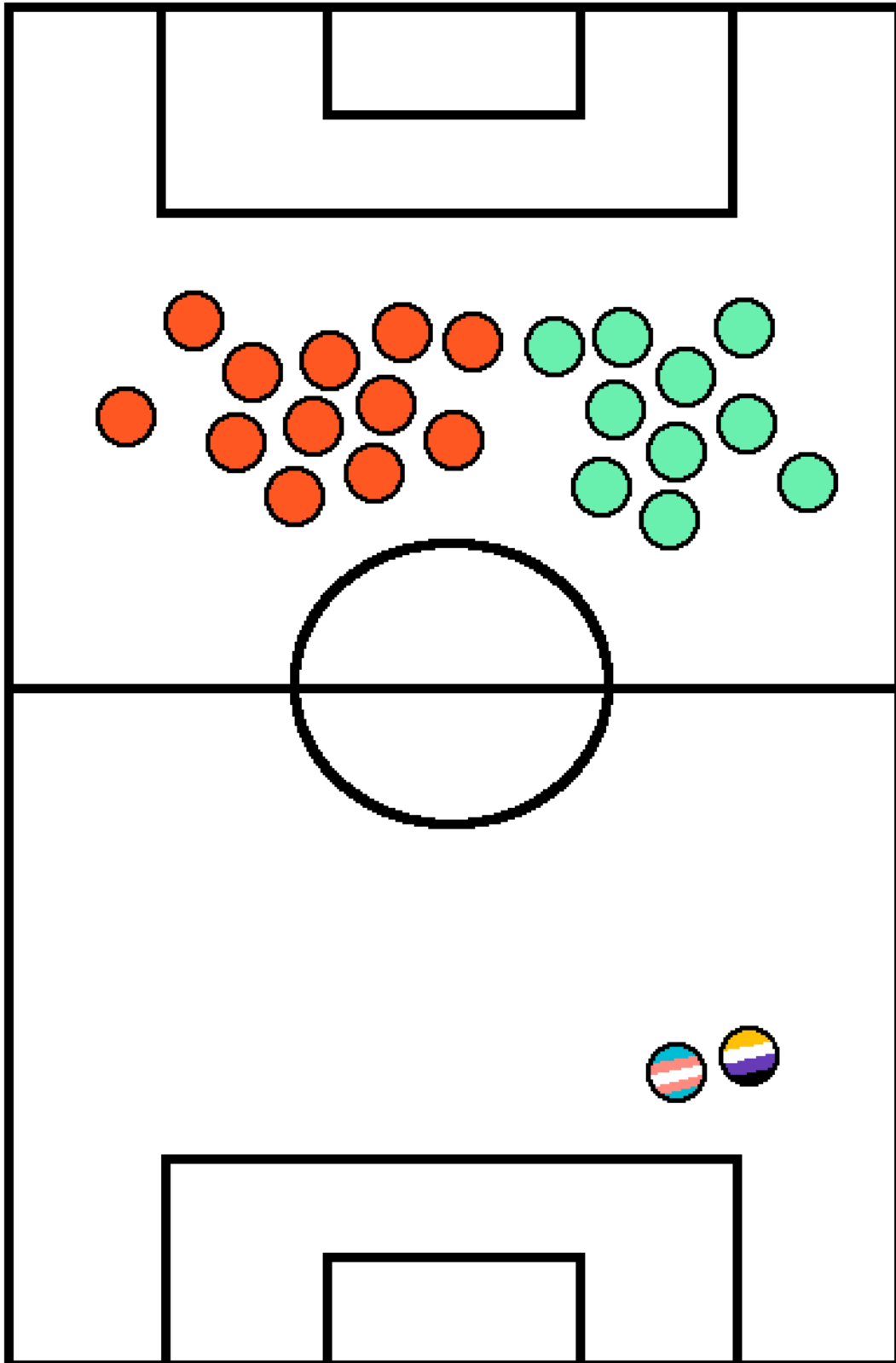


**Are trans and non-binary students excluded from sports? If so, how can we prevent this?**

Jay Jones | Social Mobility Student Research Hub, University of Warwick



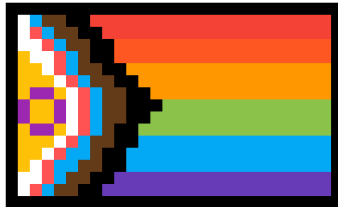
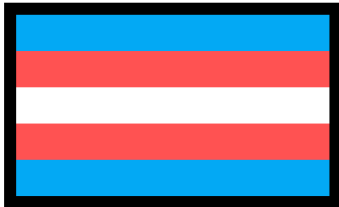
## **Acknowledgements**

To Kiran and Grannie, my greatest supporters.

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I would like to thank the Social Mobility Student Research Hub, for giving me this fantastic opportunity.



## CHAPTER 1

*The gender-affirming nosebleed: the trans joy we find in teamwork*



### *Background*

The World Health Organisation states that “regular physical activity provides significant physical and mental health benefits”, and most people are aware of this. Sports are a compulsory part of our education system, as the government recognises the positive effects it has on children’s development. However, the concept of transgender youth and transgender adults participating in sports is the focus of global uproar. One only has to look at the recent case of Imane Khelif, an Algerian boxer at the 2024 Olympics, subject to a worldwide bullying campaign and ‘transvestigation’<sup>1</sup>, simply for having the appearance of a woman who does not conform to white and Western standards of femininity.

We cannot deny the rise in anti-trans rhetoric in recent years, and it is particularly apparent in the realm of sports. If we all agree that sports has such a positive impact on physical and mental wellbeing, can we not conclude that trans\* people are missing out on those positive effects, by virtue of being excluded and denied opportunities to take part?

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<sup>1</sup>Global News, (2024, August 16). *Olympic boxer Imane Khelif speaks out about gender identity controversy: "It affected me a lot"* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAuExelqtpg>

### *My own experiences*

As a teen, I fought for my right to play on the boys' team for our physical education classes. I got changed in a nearby disabled toilet while everyone else was bullied for wearing briefs instead of boxers, or picked on for their weight.

My P.E teacher was extremely encouraging and treated me like just another one of the guys, which meant more to me than I could ever explain to him in the tiny thank-you card I offered at the end of the year. Still, I'll never forget the look of abject horror on his face when he kicked a ball back to our team over the fence, hitting me squarely in the face and causing my first ever nosebleed. Triumphant, I made the slow, long journey to the first-aid office, recounting the story to anyone I met on the way.

Trans joy is a concept that all trans people are familiar with, due to its fleeting and rare nature. We are often plagued with feelings of nostalgia and isolation, a longing for the childhoods we never got to live, for the experiences we didn't get to have. For me, taking part in team sports was a hugely affirming part of my week, despite the controversy it had caused within my school, and the health impacts I experienced by binding during exercise.

This camaraderie was something I left behind at secondary school. At university, the sports scene felt much more competitive and inaccessible. The controversy over whether trans people should be allowed to compete in the same gender category as their identity showed no signs of resolving itself, and thus, I resigned myself to a degree void of sports, void of the health benefits that it offers, and the sense of pride and accomplishment that comes with playing on a team.

### *My research and its aims*

My research is focused on whether trans and non-binary students feel excluded from sports at university. I know I do, but do others feel the same?

What I really wanted when designing my research was to give the community a chance to experience an inclusive atmosphere during sports, to recreate the feelings of brotherhood that I'd had during my secondary school P.E lessons. So I decided to organise an inclusive sports day, where trans and non-binary students of any gender identity could come and join in with the activities that they'd missed out on.

I contacted multiple sports clubs at Warwick, asking if they'd be interested in volunteering to run some sessions. I contacted the Sports and Wellness Hub, Warwick Sport, and the VP Sports, asking if anyone could help me with sourcing equipment, venues, and volunteers.

I began the process feeling optimistic and hopeful, but as the weeks passed by, I kept hitting roadblocks. These roadblocks included a lack of volunteers, low number of participants, insufficient marketing/advertisement, and a lack of funding for hiring a venue and equipment. What was once planned to be an all-day event with volunteers from all sorts of clubs, complete with lunch break, free equipment, and a free venue, quickly shrank in scope until it was a kickabout in the local park. I became anxious and stressed - having felt excluded from sports myself, I did not have the confidence to run sports sessions alone. Unfortunately, by

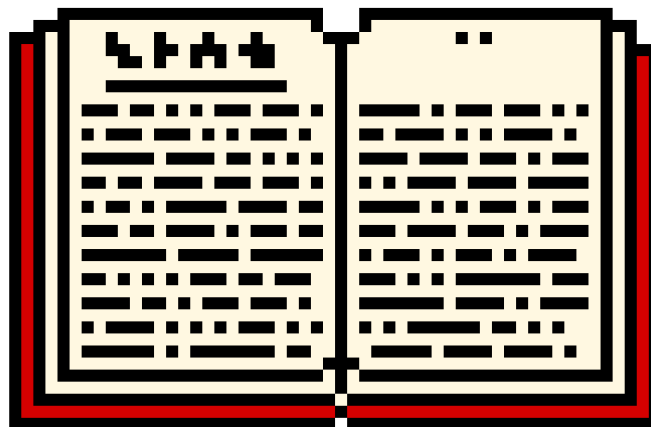
that time, I had several of my small participant group dropping out, and it was ultimately decided that the event would be cancelled.

I felt extremely disheartened. I had wanted to prove the benefits of trans-inclusive sports, and I had planned to get feedback from my participants before and after to demonstrate how the experience had positively impacted them. Without this sports day, I believed it would be much more difficult to convince people that pursuing inclusivity within sports is a worthwhile endeavour.

However, my supervisor encouraged me to learn from the experience and use it to my advantage. The difficulties I encountered during my attempts to organise a sports day clearly show that individuals can't take on this responsibility alone. Universities and other institutions must invest in inclusive sports, providing events, volunteers, venues, equipment, and marketing, in order to maximise participation and show their commitment to equality. Over the course of this paper, I will discuss further recommendations for universities to develop inclusive practices within sports, based on the findings of my research.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Literature review*



The experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals are not widely written about compared to other demographics, but progress has been made and there are valuable sources that I used to inform my research. While seeking out relevant academic sources, I found that there was research regarding the mental and physical health benefits of sports, and there was research regarding the disadvantages faced by transgender people, but less research regarding trans participation in sports, especially casual. There were sources that discussed societal attitudes towards transgender sports participation, particularly in the fields of competitive sport and physical education classes in primary or secondary schools, but the research I found regarding trans\* students' experience of sports at university had not featured many participants.

Multiple sources prove that participating in sports has a significant benefit for mental and physical health. For example, in 2006, a study confirmed the undeniable evidence that regular physical activity is effective in preventing chronic diseases such as cardiovascular

disease, cancer, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, depression, and premature death (Warburton, Nicol, and Bredin, 2006). Furthermore, it was found in 1996 that physical activity results in “a reduced risk of premature mortality and reduced risks of coronary heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer, and diabetes mellitus”, as well as stating that “regular participation in physical activity also appears to reduce depression and anxiety, improve mood, and enhance ability to perform daily tasks throughout the lifespan” (United States Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General, 1996, p.11).

Regarding the issues faced by transgender people, a study found that within the transgender population, “rates of self-harming, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts were high, with 44% of respondents having self-harmed, 78% thinking about suicide and 40% of those having attempted suicide at some point over the life course. However, gender transition was shown to drastically reduce rates of self-harm and suicidal ideation within this group” (McNeil, Bailey, Ellis, & Regan, Transgender Equality Network Ireland, 2013, p.48). Furthermore, it has been proven that misgendering has a highly negative impact on the mental health of trans and non-binary individuals, with one study stating that “invalidating the identity of gender-diverse (e.g., transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary) people is strongly associated with clinically notable levels of psychological distress” (Pease, M., Williams, N.D., Iwamoto, D.K., Salerno, J.P., 2022, Impact Statement). These sources indicate that the transgender population faces mental health issues and significant discrimination within society, which extends to all areas of life, including education and sports.

Moving on to the context of transgender people within sports, research shows that the topic has become increasingly controversial across the world, and that there is conflicting, insufficient guidance concerning transgender participation in sports. Elizabeth A. Sharrow argues that “characteristics of bodies and their alleged role in evidencing sex itself have fueled the tactics of anti-transgender activists on the political Right”, before she adds “However, the target of their aims is not mere policy change but a state-sanctioned return to a narrowly cis- and heteropatriarchal gender order” (Sharrow, 2021, [Abstract]), and points out the recent trends towards anti-transgender policies within sports. Helen J. Carroll notes that “most school athletic programmes are unprepared to address even basic accommodations such as knowing what pronouns or names to use when referring to a transgender student, where a transgender student should change clothes for practice or competition, or what bathroom or shower that student should use” (Carroll, 2014, p.367), illustrating the woeful lack of sports provision for transgender youth. Research indicates that there is no universal agreement on the conditions which a transgender person must meet in order to compete or participate in sports, and if they should be permitted to join the team of their gender identity, use the changing facilities according to their gender identity, or even wear the sports kit they prefer (Whitehouse et al., 2022).

Adam Love discusses the supposed trans-inclusive policies introduced by organisations such as the IOC (International Olympic Committee), which are designed to open up competitive sport to transgender participants, but in reality are a rigid, invasive, and interrogative set of demands that many transgender people will not meet (e.g, requiring sex reassignment genital surgery) (Love, 2006). Catherine Phipps observes that “these policies may be more relevant to elite-level competition, as opposed to UK university sport, which is usually (although not always) played recreationally and at a lower standard. These kinds of policies, requiring extensive procedures such as gender-affirming surgery, have the potential

to exclude trans\* students from participation entirely” (Phipps, 2019, p.89). Phipps’ study also addresses barriers to trans\* participation in university sport, but only interviewed one trans\* person, which is why my study, with a greater number of participants, is able to further cement findings that sport is inaccessible to trans and non-binary students.

### *Methodology*

My methodology involved a simple online questionnaire, the results of which suggest that the exclusion of trans and non-binary students is near universal, and there are a myriad of barriers faced by these students when it comes to participating in sports.

Participants were recruited using posters displayed throughout the campus of Warwick University, a QR code at a conference relating to trans activism, word-of-mouth, and via official support groups for trans\* and non-binary students.

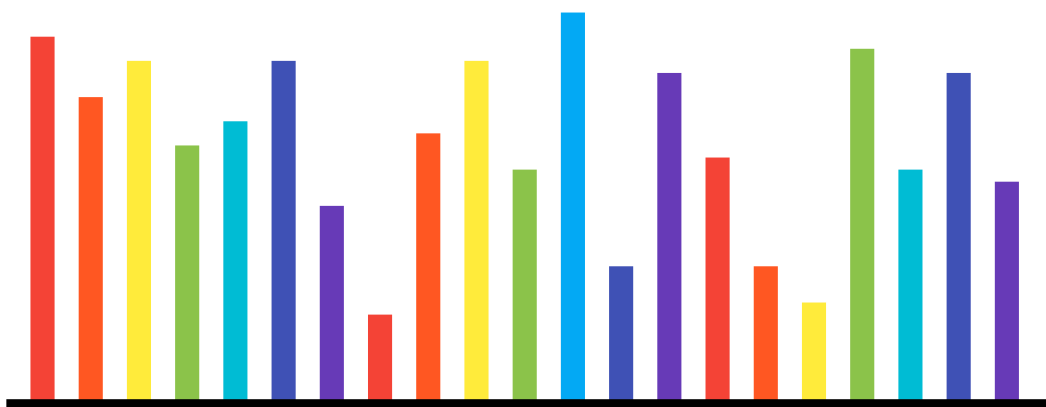
The questionnaire sought to gather data on whether trans and non-binary students want to get involved with sports at university, whether they have already tried, and how they found that experience. There were 19 responses. The majority of participants belonged to the 18-21 age bracket, and the rest were between 22 and 24. All participants identified as transgender and/or non-binary, with a varying range of individual gender identities under that umbrella. Data was also collected on whether they had transitioned medically, i.e., started hormone replacement therapy or had gender affirming surgery, but this did not seem to increase or decrease their likelihood of participating or feeling excluded.

Throughout the report, you will encounter anonymous quotes written by participants in their survey responses.

Let’s look into the responses and the data I gathered.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### *Data analysis*



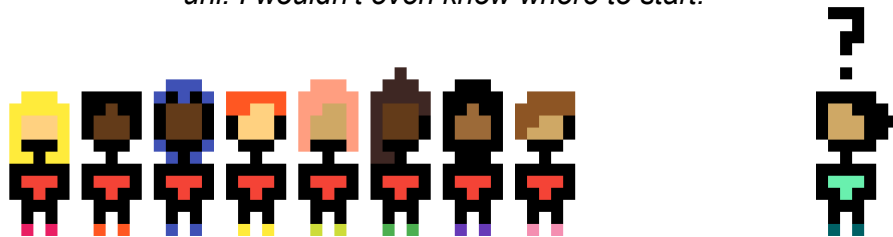
It is important to acknowledge that every participant has a different experience of transness. For example, some participants had undergone HRT (hormone replacement therapy) and gender affirming surgery, whereas most had not. It is likely that some students

are planning to medically transition in the future, and may only feel comfortable partaking in sports once they have further advanced with their medical transition. But others may not want to undergo physical changes, and this may also have an effect on their feelings regarding sports. Additionally, barriers to medical transition, such as not wanting to take time off to recover from surgery, difficulty obtaining HRT, or lack of familial support, can be more oppressive for students compared to those who are financially independent and/or out of education.

That being said, clear findings that were common to all gender identities and stages of transition emerged from the research that I have organised into four different sections.

### 1. Trans students face specific barriers to getting involved with sports.

*“I don’t feel like there was any way for me to get involved with sports as a trans person at uni. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”*



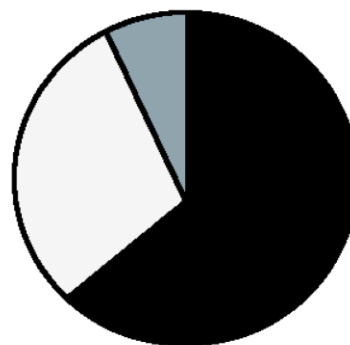
*“People are generally uneducated on social issues like transgender identities etc... they also have an apparently very closed circle and it’s difficult to approach.”*

### HAVE YOU TRIED TO GET INVOLVED WITH SPORTS AT UNIVERSITY?

YES

NO

CHOOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE



The questionnaire found that almost 58% of participants had *tried* to get involved with sports at university, but almost 37% had not.

Those who had tried to get involved cited the following motivations: mental health benefits, physical health benefits, having previous experience with sports, seeing trans or non-binary people on exec or visibly involved with sports clubs, clubs posting about queer inclusivity on social media, or the existence of mixed teams. The most common reason to get involved was the mental health benefits that it provides.



Those who did not try to get involved cited the following reasons: the drinking culture, having to pick a gendered team, fearing discrimination or a lack of trans awareness, discomfort about changing in public, lack of skill, cost, time commitment, a general disinterest in sports as a hobby, and feeling intimidated because they didn't know anyone. The most common reason to not get involved was fearing discrimination or a lack of awareness around trans people, closely followed by cost.

*“Just generally changing or having my body seen by others can already trigger dysphoria, let alone when it's in an environment made for people the same birth sex as me.”*

Many of these issues affect cisgender students as well, such as drinking culture, lack of skill, time and financial commitments, not being interested in sports, and feeling intimidated about joining a group as a newcomer. But some of the listed reasons are clearly specific to the experiences of trans and non-binary students. Fearing a lack of trans awareness or discrimination, having to pick a gendered team, discomfort about changing in public, and questions of representation are all issues that specifically concern trans and non-binary students, and it's highly important to acknowledge these extra concerns affect their likelihood of participation.

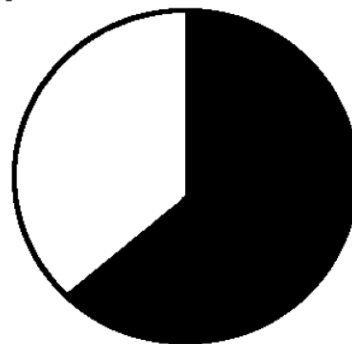
*“I researched this extensively before coming to uni as a fresher and remember being surprised by how few societies advertised a dedicated mixed team or had a mixed sport society dedicated to it. Felt like my preferences of sports didn't matter, as I already had such a limited choice.”*

## HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE OR PERCEPTION OF CHANGING ROOMS EVER AFFECTED YOUR DECISION TO PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS?

YES

NO

CHOOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE



*“When I try to participate in solo/casual sports centre it is clear to me that the sport centre does not see maintaining the gender neutral facilities as a priority which also makes me feel excluded here. Every time I visited the sport centre in the last 1.5 years the gender neutral changing room has been locked, with no explanation if repairs are ongoing, nor should any repairs take this long. When I go late in the evening too, sometimes the gender neutral cubicles are inexplicably locked, while the main gendered bathrooms aren't.”*

*“It's often unclear if there are changing rooms available for non-binary people.”*

*“I have not felt that there is a correct or safe changing room for me.”*

68% of participants said that their experience of changing rooms had affected their decision to participate in sports. This is likely due to the fact that gender neutral changing facilities are more welcoming and inclusive, and if they are not available, gender non-conforming people are at greater risk. Universities (and indeed, institutions on a larger scale) should invest in changing facilities that are inclusive of all genders, so that the comfort of non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals is increased, and therefore their likelihood of participating.

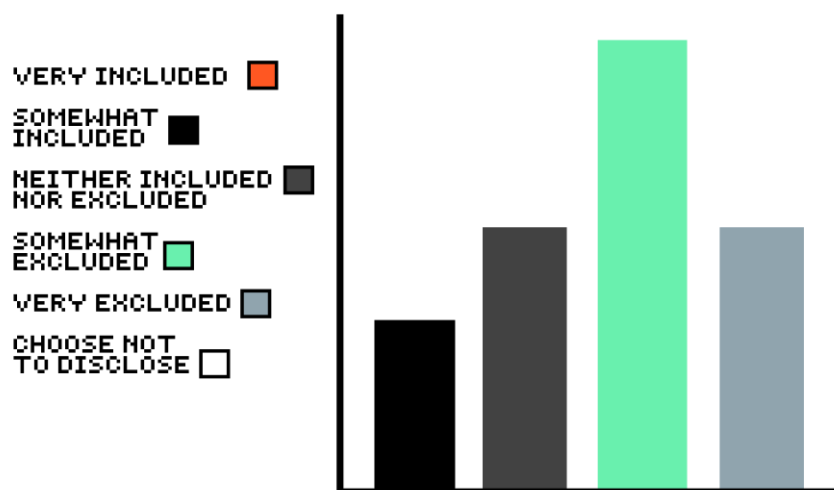
*“I’ve had a horrible time in changing rooms, particularly recently. I am often told I am in the wrong one at the uni gym when I use the female one but feel unsafe using the men’s one since as someone who was assigned female at birth and who has not had any kind of gender confirmation surgery, I would rather my body back up my choice.”*

*“I often went already in sports wear then would walk home after and change in my accom because I didn’t feel comfortable in either of the gendered changing rooms at the sports centre.”*

## 2. Trans\* students do not feel included in sports at university

*“Being non-binary means I feel like I don’t really fit in gendered sports.”*

### HOW INCLUDED OR EXCLUDED DO YOU FEEL WHEN IT COMES TO SPORTS AT YOUR UNIVERSITY?



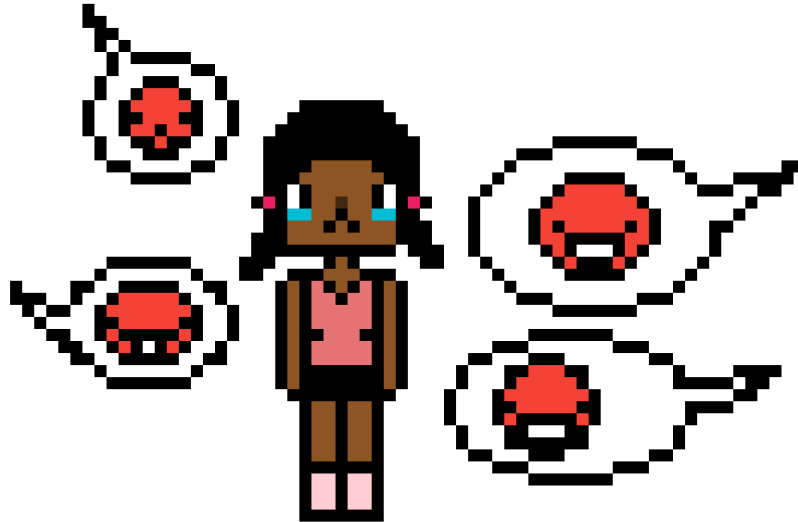
*“I find that the sports I am interested in have gendered components and I fear they lack trans awareness and inclusive policies.”*

This graph shows that no students felt ‘very included’, only 15% felt somewhat included, and more concerning, 63% felt at least somewhat excluded. The remaining percentage felt neither included nor excluded. Feelings of exclusion act as deterrents to anyone who wishes to get involved with sports, and these responses show that gender diverse people are unlikely to feel included, due to their gender identity. Moreover, the fact that no students felt ‘very included’ shows that more can be done to foster a welcoming atmosphere in sports clubs and events.

*"I don't feel comfortable to be myself in my rugby club, felt like I had to pretend to be someone else and this made me fall out of love with something I had done for a decade."*

### 3. Trans\* students avoid taking part in sports due to fear of discrimination.

*"I was made fun of at school in the female changing rooms for being trans/queer."*

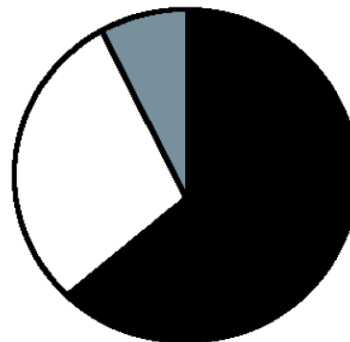


**HAVE YOU EVER AVOIDED TAKING PART IN SPORTS DUE TO FEAR OF BEING MISGENDERED?**

YES

NO

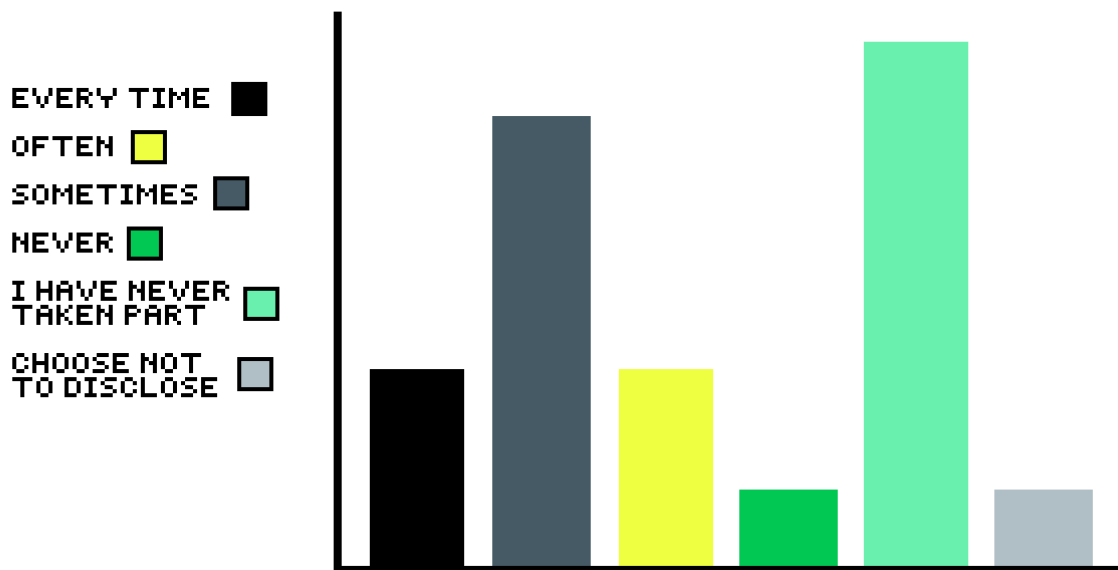
CHOOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE



This chart indicates that 63% of participants had avoided taking part due to fear of being misgendered. It can be difficult to speak up and correct people on pronoun usage, and even if students declare their preferred pronouns, others may refuse to use them. Accordingly, some students may prefer to avoid taking part entirely, in order to lessen the likelihood of being misgendered and the distress that follows.

Pease et al.'s findings on the psychological effects of misgendering (Pease et al., 2022) supports my conclusion that if they are misgendered while doing so, trans\* people are less likely to participate in sports, due to the distress that it causes. The high frequency of misgendering shown in the graph below correlates to the lower numbers of participation found in trans\* students.

## HAVE YOU EVER BEEN MISGENDERED DURING SPORTS ACTIVITIES AT UNIVERSITY?



Almost 37% of participants had never taken part in sports activities at university. Out of the remainder who had taken part (excluding one participant who chose not to disclose), 90% had been misgendered at least sometimes.

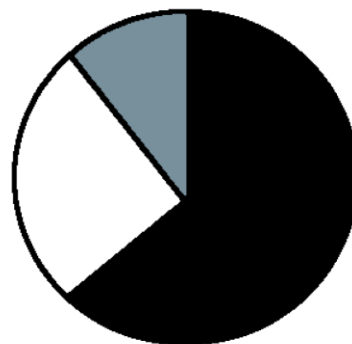
*"In general few people respect my pronouns, and I do not feel welcome or safe to demand this in the club."*

## HAVE YOU EVER AVOIDED TAKING PART IN SPORTS DUE TO FEAR OF BEING DISCRIMINATED AGAINST, ATTACKED, OR HARASSED?

YES

NO

CHOOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE



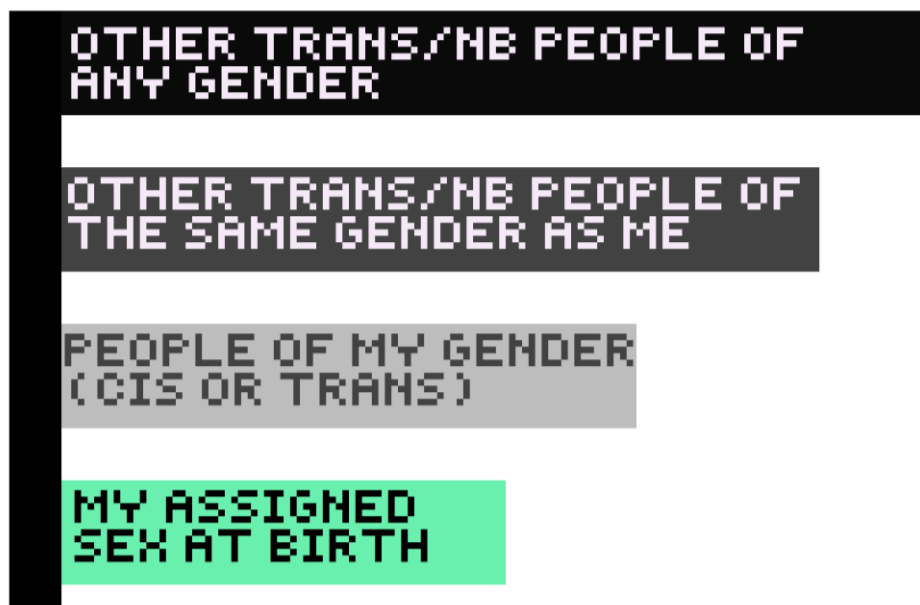
Almost 56% of participants responded that they had avoided taking part in sports due to fear of being discriminated against, attacked, or harassed. This is an unacceptably high percentage of people and indicates that trans\* students do not feel safe at university, and do not have faith in their university to protect them from such discrimination or harassment.

4. Trans\* students feel most comfortable participating in sports with other trans\* people.



*"I would feel much more comfortable taking part in sports with fellow trans people - I would feel safe, seen, and understood."*

**WITH WHOM WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO SHARE A CHANGING ROOM?**



*"Other trans people would be understanding of my identity whereas a single sex space would make me feel uncomfortable and misgendered even if they were nice about it."*

These responses clearly demonstrate that trans\* students would prefer to participate in sports with other trans\* people. Some may consider it more gender-affirming to participate with trans\* people of the same gender identity, but overall, the majority would be happiest taking part with other trans\* people of any gender identity. Participants suggested that cisgender participants may be more likely to misgender them or misunderstand their identity.

*“I prefer to participate with other trans/NB athletes because they are less likely to ask intrusive questions about my gender identity and body than cis people regardless of assigned sex at birth.”*





They also reported that they would feel more comfortable and safe around other trans\* people. This is because cisgender people often ask intrusive questions, misgender people deliberately or accidentally, and enact bullying or discrimination on their trans\* and non-binary peers. It may be possible to increase feelings of comfort and safety by educating cisgender staff and students on transgender issues in the hope of decreasing ignorant or hurtful comments, but at the same time, it is important to offer community spaces or events dedicated just to trans and non-binary students, so that they feel completely relaxed and don't have to fear any judgement.

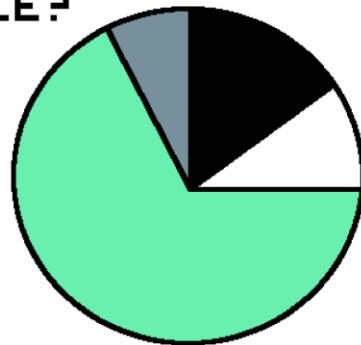
*“I feel more comfortable around trans/queer people as they are inclusive and non-judgemental.”*

### 5. Trans\* students want to get involved with sports.

*“I'd like to have the choice of joining a sport where my identity is known, respected, and I am treated as equal to cis counterparts.”*

**DOES YOUR UNIVERSITY OFFER ANY SPORTS EVENTS OR CLUBS THAT ARE INCLUSIVE TO TRANS AND NON-BINARY PEOPLE?**

YES    
NO    
DON'T KNOW    
CHOOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE  



68% of participants didn't know if their university offered any sports events or clubs that were inclusive to trans and non-binary people. This has twofold significance: firstly, it suggests that there are not many inclusive sports initiatives at university, and secondly, those that do exist are poorly advertised.

*“It makes me feel very happy playing sport, plus exercise makes me feel good too.”*

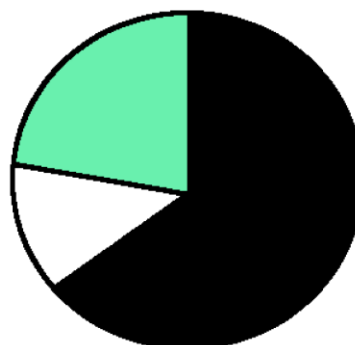
## WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN AN INCLUSIVE SPORTS EVENT DEDICATED TO TRANS AND NON-BINARY PARTICIPANTS?

YES

NO

DON'T KNOW

CHOOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE



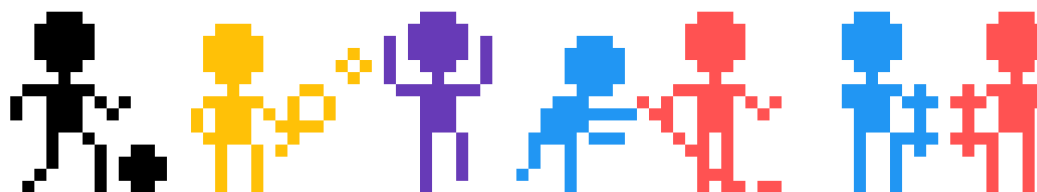
A small percentage weren't sure if they would be interested in inclusive sports events dedicated to trans and non-binary participants, and a smaller percentage said no. It is important to acknowledge that many trans\* people don't want to be singled out as transgender, and wish to be perceived as cisgender. However, the majority of participants said they would be interested in a sports event catered to trans and non-binary people. This proves that there is a desire within the trans\* community to participate in sports, as long as provisions are made for their comfort and safety.

### *Summary of findings*

1. **Trans\* students face specific barriers to getting involved with sports**, such as lack of changing facilities and the absence of mixed teams.
2. **Trans\* students do not feel included in sports at university**, citing a lack of trans awareness, a lack of mixed teams, and a lack of trans-inclusive policies.
3. **Trans\* students avoid taking part in sports due to fear of discrimination**, showing that sports clubs are a particularly hostile environment for them.
4. **Trans\* students feel most comfortable participating in sports with other trans\* people**, who they believe are most likely to respect their gender identity and not judge them on their appearance or ability.
5. **Trans\* students want to get involved with sports**, but often don't know where to start, or simply don't feel welcome.

## CHAPTER 4

*Recommendations: what can we learn and implement?*



After going through all the responses to the questionnaire, I have identified the following key areas that universities should address in order to make sports more trans-inclusive:

## **1. An intersectional approach**

Universities should acknowledge that transgender and non-binary students may have intersecting demographic characteristics that can compound their disadvantages, such as belonging to lower socio-economic groups. They may struggle to afford the cost of sports equipment, they may have disabilities and require accessible venues, and so on. Universities should adapt their policies so that they are as inclusive as possible for all groups: this may include subsidising the cost of sports memberships, offering free sessions, ensuring the accessibility of venues, and encouraging feedback from students.

## **2. Ensuring the availability of gender neutral changing facilities**

Universities must ensure that gender neutral changing facilities are available, with cubicles to ensure privacy. This is highly important when it comes to protecting transgender and non-binary students from discrimination and gender dysphoria.

*“I went to the sports centre and found that the gender neutral changing facility is locked, and continued to be so for at least a year. This tells me the sports centre does not care to ensure these facilities are operational, thereby excluding trans and non-binary students.”*

## **3. Advertising and marketing inclusive events**

Universities should advertise and market inclusive events to ensure the maximum number of participants. They should also consider helping to advertise inclusive events organised by societies and clubs, to spread awareness and increase engagement. This means that more transgender and non-binary students will become aware of the opportunities available to them, in a direct attempt to combat the uncertainty demonstrated in the questionnaire responses.

## **4. Offering training to established clubs**

*“My club all trains together and does not segregate based on gender identity in training which is nice (often times if we are splitting into groups it is based on skill level, similar 'body type' (aka would you be in similar categories, regardless of gender) or who can help who the most)*

In order to tackle concerns of ignorance, lack of education, and inaccurate beliefs held regarding transgender and non-binary people, universities should offer training to sports clubs and other relevant groups on the topic of transgender issues. For example, they could inform people about the importance of respecting pronouns, allow members to train with people who share their gender identity, allow people freedom of gender-affirming sports clothing, and spread awareness on transgender health, such as dispelling myths around the biological advantages or disadvantages trans\* people may have within sports, educating people on medical transition and its effects, and encouraging safe chest-binding practices.



This training should be devised by gender diverse people, with sufficient funding and consultation with trans and non-binary students throughout the process, to prioritise the needs and wants of those who will use these services.

## 5. Organising regular trans-inclusive events and resources

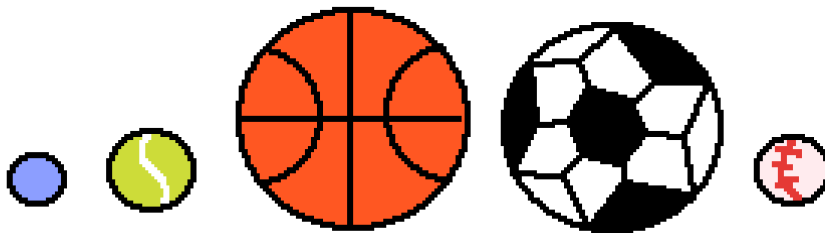
*“The safety and comfort that comes with being with others from the community is needed in sports.”*

Universities should offer trans-inclusive sports events where people can participate on the basis of casual enjoyment and health benefits. At least some of these events and spaces should be dedicated solely to transgender and non-binary people, not just as an addendum in small print that they are welcome, but a space openly dedicated to only them so they can feel comfortable and gain a sense of community. It is helpful, but not necessarily sufficient, to label these events as “LGBT+ friendly”, because being gay, lesbian, and bisexual does not necessarily translate to understanding the experiences of trans\* people.

They should also offer specialist counselling and support when students face issues such as misgendering, have clear guidelines on dealing with discrimination, and have tolerant policies when it comes to students who are medically transitioning and may need time out or other accommodations. Some universities provide funding for gender-affirming sportswear such as binders, sports bras, swimsuits, etc., which is a good example to follow.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Conclusion*



In summary, the aim of my paper is to convince universities that investing in trans-inclusive sports is worthwhile. While the debate surrounding trans\* participation in competitive sports rages on, transgender and non-binary students are continually excluded from the physical and mental health benefits that come with participating in sports. Universities should strive to provide equal opportunities for all their students, and can only do so by devising, funding, and supporting inclusive practices within sports.

One participant was able to neatly summarise the ethos behind this study:

*“My dream is to just have a fun time playing sports without worrying about anyone’s gender. I’m not interested in going pro, I just want to enjoy myself and not fear being judged or misgendered when doing a hobby. I feel that playing sports with other trans people is the*

*most likely way to yield that result but I'd be happy to play alongside anyone who was kind and respectful."*

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