gender-neutral toilets briefing
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Introduction

This briefing contains information about gender-neutral toilets (GNTs): why they are important and how you can campaign to install them in your own union. It is written as a series of questions and answers, followed by case studies of unions who have campaigned for gender-neutral toilets, and ideas for next steps you can take.

We hope you find the briefing helpful. If you have any questions that aren't answered here, or would like any support in campaigning for facilities in your own union, please do not hesitate to get in touch with NUS LGBT: lgbt@nus.org.uk

Questions and Answers

What are gender-neutral toilets?

Gender-neutral toilets (GNTs) are toilets and/or bathroom facilities which do not have gendered signage and which do not require the person using them to define into a gender. Rather than being unisex (both male and female), gender-neutral toilets assign no gender whatsoever to people using them. There are three main ways in which they can be installed:

- the Single Toilet Model, which is one or more single gender-neutral toilets with their own sink/hand dryers etc (similar to a disabled toilet);
- the Multiple Cubicle Model, a set of toilets without gendered signage. This can be done by putting in a new set of toilets entirely, or by changing the signs on a set of existing toilets;
- the ‘Accessible’ Toilet Model, whereby the existing disabled toilet is changed into an ‘accessible’ toilet. These are accessible for disabled people and those who wish to use gender-neutral toilets.

Who uses gender-neutral toilets?

The simple answer is anyone! That is the whole point of ‘neutralising’ the gendered signage on the doors of the toilets. They can be used by anyone, regardless of gender, without fear of incident, discrimination or harassment.

Often, a gender-neutral toilet is a positive choice for those with more ambiguous gender presentation or those who do not fit into the rigid categories of looking like a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’. People with a more ambiguous gender presentation can be subject to discrimination whichever gendered toilet they use, and therefore a gender-neutral toilet can provide a safer alternative to traditional male and female toilets. These people may or may not identify as trans, or as LGBT.

Some trans people identify outside of the gender binary, and choose not to define their gender as either a man or woman. Having gender-neutral toilets ensures that these people will not be forced to choose the ‘best option’ toilet instead of one they actually feel comfortable with.
Why are gender-neutral toilets important in a students’ union?

Students’ unions have always been at the forefront of the liberation movements. We should be leading the way for trans inclusion. Installing gender-neutral toilets is a simple and very effective way to make a student’s union more inclusive.

Winning the Arguments

Some unions have found that there has been some opposition to installing gender-neutral toilets. In this section we address some of the concerns raised.

Installing a gender-neutral toilet will cost too much money.

We don’t believe that cost should be used as a reason not to install a gender-neutral toilet, but regardless of that fact the costs involved can be very minimal. The change could be as simple as changing existing signage from gendered to gender-neutral. If your students’ union is going through some refurbishment, or you know this is likely to occur in the near future, then this may be the perfect time to propose that gender-neutral toilets become part of the redevelopment.

The costs involved can’t be justified by the number of people using these toilets.

As we stated above, the cost should never be used as a reason not to install gender-neutral toilets. The cost involved can be very minimal - just a few pounds for some new signs and maps to the nearest gendered toilets. You will probably be surprised by the amount of students who will want to use the new toilets. Equally, providing the toilets, even if they only benefit a few students, is well worth the effort to make your union a more inclusive space.

Groups who segregate the sexes for religious or cultural reasons will not be comfortable with gender-neutral toilets.

NUS would never suggest changing all your union’s toilets from gendered to gender-neutral, especially with this in mind. Some people may feel uncomfortable using gender-neutral toilets, and as such there should always be both gendered and gender-neutral toilets available. If there are only one set of toilets in the building, you could use the accessible toilet model – designating all disabled toilets gender-neutral and for everyone.

Women won’t want to share a toilet with men – toilets are a safe space for women away from men.

If any women feel uncomfortable using a gender-neutral toilet, there should be gendered toilets available alongside, or the accessible toilet model as outlined above. You could put a small map on the door of each set of toilets, showing where the nearest gendered/gender-neutral toilet is. The costs involved in this are minimal, and everyone can find their preferred toilet.
By putting in gender-neutral toilets, you are segregating trans people, therefore making them more visible and subject to discrimination.

Gender-neutral toilets are not ‘trans’ toilets. They are not specifically for trans people only, and many trans people may wish to use a gendered toilet. They are for anyone to use and there is no reason why people using them would be identified as trans. This should be made clear in any publicity surrounding the introduction of the toilets.

If more than one gender is allowed into the toilets, then of course people are going to use them to have sex in!

If people want to have sex in a toilet, then they are probably going to do it in whichever toilets are available! If this should prove a problem in your gender-neutral toilets, then your union security staff should deal with it in the same way they would deal with any incident. Signs could be put up in all toilets to make clear that unacceptable behaviour, whatever its nature, would result in being removed from the union.

And anyway... we don't have any trans students here.

It's near impossible to suggest that a students' union has no trans members whatsoever. Your union is very likely to have trans members, although they may not be out as trans, or may not be engaged in union activities. But as we have already discussed, gender-neutral toilets are not just for trans students, so the number of trans students in your union is irrelevant. A positive side effect to the introduction of gender-neutral toilets however will be to show your commitment as a union to dealing with gender issues and making your building accessible to all, and this may make trans students feel more comfortable about being out.

Case Studies

In this section three unions discuss how they campaigned to install gender-neutral toilets in their union buildings.

University of Manchester Students' Union (UMSU)

UMSU decided to implement gender-neutral toilets after NUS LGBT Conference 2007, where we learnt about their benefit. We put a motion to the Council Meeting in November 2007, which resolved to provide facilities for trans students, including one set of gender-neutral toilets in the union.

It was agreed that instead of building a new set or changing just one toilet, we would ‘de-gender’ some existing toilets by replacing the women’s and men’s signs with signs saying ‘toilets’ and ‘toilets with urinals’.

It was in the summer of 2008 that the newly elected executive ensured these changes occurred.
The student paper reported on the issue in their editorial calling it ‘political correctness gone mad’. This was then picked up by the national media, who suggested all toilets in the University had become gender-neutral! We dealt with this by issuing a press-release about the decision with the facts included, and as an exec team, refusing to comment beyond this. We also hosted a big debate, and ran an information campaign on the issue.

The main thing I would advise is that you can’t just put in gender-neutral toilets and expect people to understand the reasons why. Education and implementation come hand-in-hand, and its essential to have your arguments ready.

The best thing about putting in gender-neutral toilets is that many students have benefited immensely from them, with a number who have said they go out of their way to use those toilets specifically.

Staffordshire University Students’ Union

We decided to campaign for gender-neutral toilets in our union as some students approached me as LGBT officer and said they had problems or did not feel comfortable using gendered facilities at our union venues due to their gender presentation. Having seen gender-neutral toilets in use in other venues I suggested that this may be an answer to their issues and they agreed.

I spoke with various students of differing gender identities to get their opinions on the idea of gender-neutral toilets. These were largely in favour and of those that did object the vast majority said that they would be happy to see gender-neutral toilets provided there were also gendered facilities available.

I then brought the idea to Union Council as a discussion point to get their views and opinions. It was agreed that it should be looked into and a member of staff was asked to carry out a feasibility study to identify possible sites for a GNT and ways of implementing them.

Following this study it was then agreed to have a trial of a GNT in one Union venue to what the reaction was from students. It was also decided that if this trial was a success we would look at implementing GNTs in other venues with a view to also asking the university to consider providing gender-neutral facilities in their buildings.

The trial began in our main nightclub venue at our Stoke-on-Trent campus in January 2009. The reaction from students has been largely positive with very few complaints from students and a large number of positive comments from both trans and non-trans students.

There have been a few instances of students misusing the toilets but these have been dealt with admirably by security staff. There were also requests for interviews from the media; these were all handled by the president to ensure that the same information was being given out consistently.

The best advice I would give anyone who wants to install GNTs would be to:

• consult students of all gender backgrounds and sexualities before even attempting to bring forward the idea in any official way;

• don't dismiss students with concerns, however unreasonable or narrow-minded those concerns may seem to you;
• make sure you have a designated person/people to deal with media enquiries should you receive any, and make sure that all your officer team know who they are as a media request could come to any officer regardless of their remit;

• make sure that, if you can, you have evidence to back up the need for GNTs. Many people will be fair more receptive if you can give a genuine example of where a gender-neutral toilet would have made a big difference to an actual student.

Birmingham University Guild of Students

We first tried to implement gender-neutral toilets after hearing that the Guild would be going through a complete redevelopment and therefore having new toilets put in. We thought this would be a good opportunity, and so submitted a motion to Guild Council to make sure GNTs were put into the plan for the redevelopment.

Unfortunately, Guild Council rejected this motion, mainly due to the fact that most people did not understand what gender-neutral toilets were and what they entailed. The main barrier we came up against was misunderstanding and false arguments against the toilets.

One of the main arguments people used was that they didn’t know how many trans students there were and so how did we know the toilets were going to benefit any students on campus at all?

After the motion fell, the group then started to put together solid arguments for the implementation of gender-neutral toilets and consulted with some trans members of the LGBT association on how they might like to see the toilets implemented.

A few months later we brought the proposals back to Guild Council and after a better introduction, we managed to make a better case and the proposals were accepted and the gender-neutral toilets were added into the draft plans for the redevelopment of the building.

Unfortunately, the University did not sign off the plan for the toilets as they thought that having the toilets in the Guild would set precedent for the rest of campus. As they were giving money to the union for the redevelopment, they had the final say on the plans.

From our experience it is important to note that as well as opposition and misunderstanding from students or your union, you might also come up against opposition from your institution and this is often much harder to get around.
What to do next

1. Speak to your students’ union executive officers or sabbatical officers – for example your vice president welfare, or an equality and diversity officer, who may have responsibility for liberation groups and can help you moving forward. If they need some more information about gender-neutral toilets, give them this briefing to read!

2. If you face opposition from your students’ union, perhaps you could think about proposing a motion to your union council, student parliament or similar. For information and help with writing a motion, contact NUS LGBT at lgbt@nus.org.uk

3. Make sure you consult with the widest range of people possible, from your LGBT group, campaign collective or assembly to students who use the union: find out what people think. It is more than likely that LGBT students will think the idea of gender-neutral toilets is a positive one, and when presenting the idea, it’s a good idea to have as much evidence as possible to support your case.

4. Make sure you think about every possible objection or question you might be asked – some are covered in this briefing but chances are you will get many more questions and it’s important that the concerns of students are met with confident responses.

5. Know the ideas and arguments for gender-neutral toilets inside out. Remember to many students, and students’ union sabbatical officers and your institution, a gender-neutral toilet is a completely new concept.

6. Be prepared for media attention. As detailed in some of the case studies in this briefing, there has been both positive and negative media attention surrounding gender-neutral toilets in students’ unions. Draft a press release for your union paper, or ask them to write a story on it. It’s much more likely to have a positive tone if you are involved in it.

7. Contact us! We’re always interested to hear what’s going on in unions across the UK, so if your planning on implementing gender-neutral toilets or need advice or guidance of any kind, let us know! Email lgbt@nus.org.uk