

# “I Am Tired All the Time from Existing”: Understanding Nonbinary Student and Staff Experiences of Higher Education in the UK as Social Harm

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Transgender inclusion is an increasingly prominent part of “equality, diversity, and inclusion” agendas in higher education. However, there has been little attention to the specific experiences of nonbinary students and staff. This article seeks to redress this and draws on data from an online survey conducted in 2019 of UK nonbinary higher education staff and students. The survey data highlight the importance participants attach to having their gender known and respected in their higher education institution, but also contained pervasive reports of erasure, invisibility, and ridicule in their work and/or study lives. We analyze these experiences through the lens of social harm in order to focus on the institutional norms, structures and practices that shape nonbinary experiences of higher education, and to counteract narratives of vulnerability/victimhood. Our analysis demonstrates the interconnections between mechanisms of harm in higher education, effects of harm as manifested in reports of exhaustion, distress, and fear, and the strategies nonbinary people engage in to mitigate or resist harm.

**KEYWORDS** nonbinary gender; social harm; higher education; transgender; erasure  
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In their efforts to address gender diversity, UK higher education institutions have thus far largely centered around two nodes: “transgender” and “inclusion.” Indeed, transgender inclusion is increasingly prominent in “equality, diversity, and inclusion” agendas in higher education, in part due to their requirement to comply with the 2010 Equality Act. This has resulted in universities and colleges adopting policies and guidance on, for example, transitioning at work and supporting transgender students. The aim of this article is to open up and expand this discussion in two key ways, firstly by focusing specifically on the experiences of nonbinary staff and students in higher education, and secondly by drawing on theories of social harm to understand those experiences.

While nonbinary gender is not a new phenomenon (Lester 2017; Vincent 2020), during the last 10–15 years nonbinary people have become more visible as part of wider trans and queer communities in the UK. Furthermore, government data has shown that younger people are more likely to identify as nonbinary than those over 35 (Government Equalities Office 2018; ONS 2023). Thus, there is a higher prevalence of nonbinary people amongst typical university-aged students than in the general population. We use “nonbinary” as an inevitably inadequate term to describe all those whose gender is outside the exclusive categories of man or woman. Nonbinary people are a particularly heterogenous group in terms of how they describe their gender(s). Indeed, the survey this article is based on contained 93 different formulations of self-defined nonbinary gender (see Benato et al. 2023). There are also wide variations in terms of whether they use the term “trans” to describe themselves, what pronouns or titles they use, or whether or not they undertake any kinds of social or medical transition. We are aware that many of the experiences of nonbinary people in higher education will overlap with experiences of other trans people, whose experiences are also not homogenous, and that they intersect along lines of race, class, disability, migrant status, sexuality, and gender expression in ways that undermine the idea of a singular nonbinary experience. The data we draw on in this article is from an online survey conducted in 2019 of 367 nonbinary higher education staff and students in the UK. This was the first UK survey to focus exclusively on nonbinary participants.

In this article we bring a framework of social harm to understand the experiences of nonbinary staff and students reported in the survey. The social harm approach, also known as zemiology, has contributed to the analysis of a wide variety of issues including state corporate harms (Tombs 2019), the harms of border controls (Iliadou 2019), the harms of austerity (Pemberton 2015), anti-trans harms (Boukli and Copson 2019; Boukli and Renz 2018), as well as the harms imposed by gender norms and heteronormativity (Bibbings 2004; Pantazis 2004). A social harm conceptual, analytical, and empirical lens sheds light on social injury and takes us “beyond the confines of criminal law and the cultures of crime” and “away from targeting certain populations through regulation and discipline” (Boukli and Kotze 2018, 4). Social harm exceeds the interpersonal or individualist level and highlights the structures that perpetuate

harm. Our survey captured a range of individual stories from participants; each story is meaningful as it offers a map of the harm inflicted to this person. We want to bear witness to those stories, but we do not want this to be addressed at an individual level. Rather, we aim to demonstrate how they reflect larger dynamics and collective issues. We are interested in how structures perpetuate harm, so while our data recount individual stories and experiences, as a whole the data map out and locate collective struggles and narratives of harm.

In the argument that follows we first set out our methodological approach and theoretical framework, before moving on to discuss the qualitative data from the survey and analysis of the interconnections between mechanisms of harm in higher education, effects of harm as manifested in reports of exhaustion, distress, and fear, and the strategies nonbinary people engage in to mitigate or resist harm.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Our data come from a UK-wide online survey conducted in 2019 as part of the Nonbinary in Higher Education: Lived Experiences, Imagined Futures project. This exclusive focus on nonbinary people arose in part from our own experiences as nonbinary academics in UK higher education and the need we saw to separate nonbinary experiences from the wider “trans” or LGBTQI+ ones that are more often the subject of research and inclusion policies or guidance (Lawrence and Mckendry 2019; Nicolazzo 2017; Regan 2023). We began the project with a survey to allow us to gather data more broadly on how nonbinary staff and students were negotiating their work and studies. We recruited participants through social media and community networks over a six-week period. Eligible participants included students or recent (within 5 years) graduates, PhD students, and staff who teach. Teaching was broadly understood to include academics, as well as staff such as librarians and learning developers. We limited the staff participants to those who teach in some form because our research is focused on learning and teaching spaces within the university. The survey was open to anyone who identified their gender as “nonbinary,” which we described as any of the range of gender identities that fall outside the man/woman binary, and participants were able to define their gender within that parameter.

Our survey contained quantitative and qualitative elements with 75 closed and open-ended questions (Benato et al. 2019). All questions in the survey, except for consent, were optional to answer. This article focuses on the sections of the survey which aimed to understand the importance of nonbinary gender for participants in the context of higher education, for example the desire to be known and recognized as nonbinary, as well as the nuances of their experiences of erasure and validation. The design of these questions was informed by existing literature that highlights the erasure of nonbinary people. For instance, Vincent (2020), Zimman and Hall (2009, 169), and Zimman (2017, 89 and 97) all argue that the experiences of constantly being erased through misgendering and misrepresentation, as well as being denied healthcare and legal validation, are contributing factors to both psychological and physical harms, as well as socially harmful conditions such as poverty. We therefore designed survey questions to explore how the erasure of possibilities beyond binary gender affected participants’ experiences in higher education.

Despite actively encouraging discussion of affirming experiences, a preliminary analysis of the survey results indicated a preponderance of qualitative data recounting negative and difficult experiences across the survey participants. As nonbinary researchers, we were not surprised at the depth and number of painful experiences participants recounted. It was nonetheless deeply challenging to sit with the stories and responses they shared. We sought to find ways to understand them individually and collectively. Our preliminary readings of the responses led us toward social harm as a theoretical and methodological tool for understanding participants' narratives and experiences.

Social harm opens a discursive space to articulate a multiplicity of harms that lie outside the conventional discourses of crime and the criminal justice system. These are injurious acts and omissions that occur both on interpersonal and structural levels. Processes of social harm generation have not yet been explored in relation to higher education. Yet, in social harm literature, scholars have highlighted that in all aspects of social life, such as education, workplaces, and healthcare, societies "can have a host of injurious consequences" (Pemberton 2015, 145). With particular reference to education, formal education systems and informal opportunities for development and learning are often understood to be supporting the ability to lead lives of "one's own choosing," based on key cognitive skills, such as communication and critical evaluation as well as a range of practical and intellectual skills (Pemberton 2015, 29). Further, educational experiences and qualifications are, particularly when negative, often linked to unemployment and material insecurity (Pemberton 2015, 126; Wikeley et al. 2009). The right to education, as set out in Article 2 (Protocol 1) of the Human Rights Act 1998, may be infringed when certain people are systematically excluded from higher education. It therefore follows that the systematic exclusion from higher education and from opportunities to develop can be perceived as harms. In this sense, social harm constitutes a nuanced conceptual tool to understand some of our survey results, excavating a multiplicity of harms that occur at interpersonal and institutional levels in higher education institutions.

In recent years, scholars have recognized that trans, nonbinary, and queer people are often understood as victims and the problems they face located within the individuals themselves instead of focusing on wider societal cisgenderism, systemic transphobia, and the harmful attitudes of others (Armitage 2020, 15; Budge et al. 2020; Nicholas 2020, 3). In line with this, utilizing a social harm approach moves away from presenting nonbinary communities as inherently vulnerable and the experiences of participants as individual problems. It instead focuses on the wider societal and structural issues that are present in institutional settings. Drawing on theories of social harm also allows us to consider the array of harms described by our nonbinary participants and to begin conceptualize the range of diverse socially harmful (or injurious) behaviors that are inflicted by social processes (Pemberton 2015).

In the existing literature, attempts have been made to mark out a typology of harms (Hillyard and Tombs 2004; Paoli and Greenfield 2018; Pemberton 2015). Hillyard and Tombs (2004, 19–21) for example, distinguish between physical harms, financial/economic harms, emotional, and psychological harms, and something that has been described as "cultural safety" (Alvesalo 1999 as quoted in Hillyard and Tombs 2004, 20). In our analysis, we used social harm as a conceptual tool for understanding our data as

well as a method for surfacing and naming social exclusion and the mechanics of marginalization. The typologies and taxonomies of social harm informed the approach we took in the analysis of our data, providing an initial model through which to grasp the possible structural conditions underpinning individuals' narratives of navigating higher education.

In this article we focus solely on qualitative data analysis, with quantitative data provided to give context for our participants (for further discussion of the survey's quantitative findings, please see Benato et al. 2023 and Benato et al. 2024). Our analysis of the qualitative data followed a three-stage thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006). First, we identified the various contours of harm evidenced by participants. We were led by explicit references to violence, assault, damage, marginalization, humiliation, ridicule, anxiety, hostility, stigma, and exhaustion. Second, we grouped these references using the following typologies of social harm; physical, economic, emotional, psychological, cultural, and academic/pedagogic harms, based on and expanding the types referenced by Hillyard and Tombs (2004) discussed above. This initial analysis gave us an understanding of the range of social harms experienced by our participants, but not necessarily how they were produced nor how they interconnected. With this in mind we, re-sorted the data into three categories we named: mechanisms of harm, effects of harm and strategies for dealing with harm. In delineating the mechanisms and effects of harm, we identified abuse and ridicule, refusal and denial, and erasure as the key mechanisms through which harm was caused, while exhaustion, distress and anxiety, and fear were the key effects of that harm. Strategies for dealing with harm included regulating visibility, leaving higher education and undertaking additional labor.

Thematic analysis allowed us to understand the nuances of participants' experiences and to understand how the mechanisms, effects of and responses to social harm interlock. For example, erasure is both a mechanism and an effect of harm, while the harm-reduction strategies employed by participants often caused further harm in the form of exhaustion, distress, or erasure. Nonetheless, we have attempted to present them thematically in the analysis that follows.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The survey attracted 367 participants, which we refer to as belonging to one of three groups: "students" (including all levels of current student and recent [within 5 years] graduates;  $n = 277$ ), "PhD students" (PhD students who also undertake teaching work;  $n = 30$ ), and "staff" (academic staff and other staff who teach;  $n = 60$ ). Participants were invited to describe their gender identity. We received 356 responses providing 93 unique terms and phrases (see Benato et al. 2023). Eleven percent of participants were from minoritized racial or ethnic backgrounds, while 44.3% ( $n = 160$ ) declared a disability or disabilities. Participants came from across academic disciplines: Academic Skills 0.9% ( $n = 3$ ); Business 1.2% ( $n = 4$ ); STEM subjects 24.2% ( $n = 79$ ); Social Sciences and Law 28.4% ( $n = 93$ ); and Arts and Humanities 45.3% ( $n = 148$ ).

To understand the significance of participants' nonbinary genders to their experiences of higher education we included a series of questions using Likert scales. Three are relevant here. First, we asked participants to rank how important it was that peo-

ple at their university knew their gender and treated them accordingly. We received 362 responses to this question with 43.9% ( $n = 159$ ) indicating it was very important; 34.5% ( $n = 125$ ) somewhat important; 12.4% ( $n = 45$ ) neither important nor unimportant; 6.6% ( $n = 24$ ) not particularly important; and 2.5% ( $n = 9$ ) not at all important. Second, we asked participants if there had been moments when their gender felt particularly validated, seen or accepted at university. We received a total of 357 responses: yes, frequently 7.8% ( $n = 28$ ); yes, occasionally 35% ( $n = 125$ ); yes, rarely 31.4% ( $n = 112$ ); and no, never 25.8% ( $n = 92$ ). Third, we asked participants if there had been moments when their gender felt erased at university. We received a total of 355 responses: yes, frequently 51.3% ( $n = 182$ ); yes, occasionally 28.2% ( $n = 100$ ); yes, rarely 9.6% ( $n = 34$ ); and no, never 11% ( $n = 39$ ).

The comparatively high incidence of positive responses, 78.4% ( $n = 284$ ) reporting that it is “very” or “somewhat” important that people know participants’ genders and treat them accordingly, should be considered alongside the high numbers of participants feeling that their gender was erased and the low number that felt validated or seen. This reflects the significance that having a set of discourses and practices that enable nonbinary lives to be visible, meaningful, and culturally intelligible in higher education held for participants. As will become clear from our analysis of the data, participants’ lived experiences demonstrate that universities fall short of providing a space in which their nonbinary genders were recognized and could flourish.

### **Mechanisms of Harm**

In this first section we outline the practices and norms through which harm was produced in the lives of the participants, which we have identified as “mechanisms” of harm. We found three key mechanisms: overt instances of abuse and ridicule, conscious refusals, and denials to acknowledge or accommodate nonbinary genders/identities, and erasure. The erasure of nonbinary gender(s) alludes to the lack of cultural intelligibility of gender outside binary conceptions, as reflected in language (pronouns, titles), physical space (gendered toilets and changing rooms), and absence of legal recognition in the UK beyond anti-discrimination measures (see HM Courts and Tribunals Service 2020).

#### ***Abuse and Ridicule***

When asked about their experiences in higher education our participants shared many different instances of abuse and ridicule that were related to both institutional structures and encounters with individual members of staff and students. For example, they referred to mocking and joking regarding nonbinary and trans people.

I’ve heard other students making comments or jokes about nonbinary people and trans people as a whole, which makes me feel incredibly uncomfortable and sometimes unsafe. (Undergraduate student)

It is really hard, lecturers often make fun of nonbinary identities and students laugh along, and forms and stuff never include us. (Postgraduate student)

People often make transphobic comments to me about my appearance  
... People erase trans people, laugh at the only 2 (only 2!) all gender toi-  
lets and diversity training. (Part-time, fixed-term staff)

Even when “jokes” were not directed specifically at the participants they had the effect of producing discomfort and fear. Abuse and ridicule represent an overt, and often overtly transphobic, mechanism of inflicting harm.

### *Refusal and Denial*

We now turn to more insidious mechanisms, which we have called refusal and denial. These mechanisms include misgendering, deadnaming, and the refusal (sometimes persistent) to use inclusive language, and the more passive or “forgetful” non-use of correct pronouns and names.

Significantly, participants reported that misgendering takes place regardless of institutional architecture; institutions with good policy frameworks and practices were not immune. Misgendering and deadnaming (referring to someone by a name they no longer use) also occur regardless of the actions that participants took or others took on their behalf. For example, participants told us:

One tutor in particular repeatedly and deliberately misgendered me, even after I corrected him repeatedly in person, and by email, and asked the faculty administrator to send round an email to faculty staff reminding everyone. (Undergraduate student)

It is a part of my identity that is dependent on other people referring to me correctly. When colleagues or other students don't do so, it leaves me in a situation of having to guess whether they're doing it out of ignorance or out of maliciousness, and whether or not I should correct them. This conflict or grief takes away from energy I could be spending on my teaching or studies. (PhD student)

Some participants reported that they were left wondering whether these practices of refusal were intentional and whether any action they could take would have an impact. The data contained frequent reports of this process of conflict, refusal, and grief requiring energy to process and navigate. Ultimately it redirects energy and work away from learning, teaching and research to navigating and confronting practices of refusal and denial. These experiences were compounded when participants reported intersectional challenges, often finding themselves having to choose one aspect of themselves over another. For example:

Because I already find it hard to be at the research spaces used by other students/staff members due to my auditory processing disorder and executive functioning problems, I have with many people given up on trying to correct their language when I am misgendered and so coming “out” as trans/nonbinary, however I do it, is often temporary. (PhD student)

Refusal and denial also extend to directly contesting the existence of nonbinary people. For instance, one of our participants shared that they were, “regularly deadnamed and misgendered by staff and peers; one lecturer stated during teaching that ‘some people feel that they are nonbinary but I don't know how much I believe that’” (Postgradu-

ate student). It is important to note that denying nonbinary people exist is a different tactic to refusing to use someone's pronouns or name. Given the power dynamics in a classroom setting, this refusal to "believe" that students may be nonbinary can be particularly detrimental and can be cloaked as academic debate or as policing disciplinary knowledge. In a context of learning this plays out in traditional power dynamics and hierarchies of knowledge, so that our student participants were left in a position of having both their self-knowledge and their academic knowledge refused. Disciplinary and academic knowledges are also misconstrued to engage in refusal and denial. One staff member recalled, "being challenged that 'it's all a social construct' (with reference to Judith Butler) by a previous head of department" (full-time, fixed-term staff). The reference to Butler here works not only as an attempt to dismiss this participant's own identity, but a whole field of gender theory which is presumed to support and legitimate such identities. In almost all the examples above refusal and denial happens along institutional power lines whether they be between students and staff or between members of staff. As one participant powerfully articulates "acceptance of my identity shouldn't be conditional on me withstanding interrogation: a nonbinary identity isn't a philosophical stand-point, it's just existing" (undergraduate student).

### *Erasure*

As a term, erasure helped us design our survey, so it is unsurprising that it is a key theme in the data. We specifically asked participants about their experiences of erasure because it is already a central motif in academic and activist discussions of nonbinary gender and identity (see Bear Bergman and Barker 2017; Shuster and Lamont 2020; Vincent 2020). We asked participants "Have there been moments when your gender felt erased at University?" As previously noted, their responses reflected the dissonance between their desire for visibility and their actual experience. Only 11% ( $n = 39$ ) reported that their gender never felt erased at university, while only 7.8% ( $n = 28$ ) reported that their gender frequently was validated, seen or accepted at university. This reveals a significant disparity between the 78.4% ( $n = 284$ ) who indicated that it is important that people at the university know their gender and treat them accordingly and those whose experience was of erasure or rare validation. While we asked these specific questions because we knew they would resonate with participants and yield nuanced data about the multiple forms erasure takes, participants independently reference erasure in response to many of the questions in the survey.

### *Administrative Erasure*

Administrative erasure is distinguished from denial as discussed above to refer to instances such as a lack of options for nonbinary genders on forms and paperwork. This was reported as happening in multiple aspects of university life for students and staff including, finance systems, HR records, university profiles, enrolment, class registers, and graduation certificates. Participants reported their administrative erasure in terms of not being able to indicate their gender, pronouns, or a chosen/preferred name on their student or staff record, which impacted them not only at initial application/registration but in ways that followed their journeys through institutions. This administrative erasure leads to consistent misnaming and misgendering. One participant explained very clearly how this process of administrative erasure functions:



Various aspects of the university's administrative architecture (particularly forms and online portals relating to finances etc) remain rooted in a language of binary sex, leaving little room to have my gender identity registered by the institution. (PhD student)

### *Physical Erasure*

A complex example of erasure emerged around the provision of gender-neutral toilets. Our survey asked participants "Does your institution have specific gender-neutral toilets? (i.e. we mean toilets specifically designated as gender neutral, not disability or accessible toilets that have been appropriated for multiple uses)." All 367 participants answered this question with 63% saying yes, 31% saying no and 6% said they did not know.

For some participants access issues were about the physical location of toilet facilities in relation to their classrooms or offices, for example:

There are buildings on campus which have no gender neutral toilets and so I consistently have to go out of my way to use a gender neutral toilet.  
(Undergraduate student)

For participants who also had a physical disability this often intersected with the availability of gender-neutral toilets around accessibility:

I typically use accessible/disabled toilets because of this disability which often aren't gendered but in the building where my office is these toilets are within gendered bathroom suites. So I would have to walk further to another building to use a gender neutral accessible toilet which unfortunately my body won't allow for. (PhD student)

Finally, the absence of gender-neutral toilets causes a kind of symbolic erasure that has a very tangible and felt impact for participants each time they need to access a toilet.

Although there are gender neutral toilets in the university, there are none in the building where I work. Every time I use the "male" toilet I feel erased because anyone seeing me go in can say to themselves "oh, he's really a man because he has accepted the label on the door." (Full-time, permanent staff)

The importance of gender-neutral toilets for the majority of participants cannot be overstated. Participants' responses demonstrate the level of physical and emotional labor they are required to undertake to access appropriate facilities in their places of work and study (see also Benato et al. 2024).

### *Intersectional Erasure*

Erasure takes different forms if a person has intersecting or multiple marginalized identities, where one identity is presumed to exclude another or where because of a culture of scarcity people are compelled to prioritize aspects of their identities in order to access services. The following participant demonstrates how this ties into larger dynamics of racism and coloniality.

Queer stuff at uni is presented as a very white thing. Tutors couldn't even imagine that positive queer stuff happens in the global south. Feminism was taught in an almost white savior way, as if it needed to be brought to "other" countries and communities. I remember we had a

good class in intersectionality that was completely hijacked by students who wanted to “debate” trans people. When I then worked at the same uni and was the only queer POC [person of color] I was treated like I didn’t know anything about being queer cos I was from a backwards place. (Postgraduate student)

Other participants, including those with disabilities, reported issues arising from institutional cultures’ inability to recognize and support multifaceted needs. For example,

As a disabled person whose disability is ‘invisible’ as it is a mental health issue, I have been told by students and lecturers and other staff that it would be better for my mental health if I was not trans or if I chose a binary gender. (Undergraduate student)

Class (I am from a very low-income family) because of the amount of formal events at my university that require expensive outfits that are much more difficult to find for someone whose body isn’t the expected shape. I would normally buy all my clothes in charity shops but it isn’t possible for formal outfits because my body doesn’t match the gendered clothes that I have to wear. (Undergraduate student)

Significantly, while participants shared their individual experiences and feelings of erasure, what these collectively demonstrate is a wider system of erasure – or a system that maintains and reproduces erasure – in which universities become sites where the issues become visible or experienced in new ways. Overall university culture for participants not only did not make space for nonbinary people but it actively erased them and their experiences. As one participant shared: “I feel very, very invisible” (PhD student).

## **Effects of Harm**

In this section we outline three effects of harm that relate to the mechanisms previously discussed and these are exhaustion, distress/anxiety, and fear. In doing so we do not mean to imply that the mechanisms “cause” these effects in a linear fashion, rather the mechanisms and effects are related in a more inter-connected and cyclical relationship. The effects of harm we have identified are also in many ways generic and experienced widely by other minoritized groups pointing to broader structural and institutional issues, not just the individuals or communities within them. Nevertheless, there was a pervasive emphasis in the data on emotional and psychological harms brought about by issues that are directly related to participants’ nonbinary genders.

### ***Exhaustion***

In response to the cumulative effort of having to explain themselves, their pronouns, or their needs to colleagues, tutors or university administration, or being on the receiving end of (micro)aggressions, participants frequently reported feelings of exhaustion brought about by the “constant,” “routine,” and “everyday” ways in which their gender is ignored. Participants noted the detrimental impact this had on their ability to study and/or work. Student participants noted that:

It is exhausting to keep up with my studies which I already struggle with and continually have to validate and justify my own identity. (Undergraduate student)

I am tired all the time from existing which makes putting work into my degree draining. (Undergraduate student)

These comments also allude to the labor that is required by nonbinary people to exist in higher education spaces, something one participant explicitly referred to:

It's tiring you know? As a nonbinary person I am always out (or I am misgendered and misread) and there's a huge amount of work that comes with being often the only visibly out nonbinary person...within a cohort of students and staff. (PhD student)

### *Distress and Anxiety*

As well as causing exhaustion, it was evident from our survey that many participants experienced more specific forms of distress and anxiety as a result of their experiences in higher education. This effect of harm aligned most closely to the type of psychological or emotional harm described in the literature on social harm (see Boukli and Copson 2019; Hillyard and Tombs 2007; Pemberton 2007). Participants identified the negative impacts of erasure as both creating and compounding mental health issues:

[Erasure] has a negative impact on my mental health, due to constant misgendering and the need to decide whether to correct people or just put up with it. (Postgraduate student)

Experiencing erasure saps my energy and sometimes makes me really anxious, drastically lowering my capability to do my work. (Full-time, fixed-term staff)

Another participant eloquently expressed the difficulties of navigating the effects of harm as an individual within a neoliberal structure that responsabilizes them for dealing with the mechanisms of harm.

I am autistic, the misgendering seriously damages my mental health but the way trans inclusive policies (which I was largely unaware of) are enforced (or not) leave me responsible to correct others' language around me repeatedly, something which I struggle to do. (PhD student)

This demonstrates the interlinked cycles of erasure and harm whereby experiences of erasure not only cause distress but then responses to that distress further erase nonbinary students. Other participants attested that the anxiety caused and compounded by mechanisms of harm had a direct impact on their ability to perform academically (attendance, assignments, results etc). Such responses are especially damning of institutions that exist to facilitate learning.

### *Fear*

A final effect of harm for participants was fear or a feeling of not being "safe." This was very real for participants even if they did not, or could not, articulate exactly what they were afraid of. Different experiences (or potential experiences) triggered fear even if the feared consequences did not occur. This particular effect of harm is a specter

throughout our results that we were consistently aware of, but that rarely manifested itself in a tangible way. Participants clearly altered their behaviors to avoid the perceived consequences of what caused their fear, for example:

Generally feeling unsafe to say “actually, I’m not cis” because I was afraid that it would be considered “wrong.” (Undergraduate student)

People have made fun of non binary genders and trans people in general. I do not feel safe being open about my identity, or wearing anything that clearly identifies me as a trans person. (Undergraduate student)

Some participants’ fears were the direct result of being in universities and social worlds where there is open and unchallenged transphobia. Indeed, we have deliberately not reproduced some participants’ responses here so as to ensure their anonymity and safety. Other participants revealed how a more general atmosphere of transphobia both within and beyond the university contributed to them being cautious and fearful in their interactions with others in higher education spaces:

I also feel strongly that the current media hostility around trans issues in general is having a very negative impact. While I used to assume that people would be broadly open to these issues, I personally am much more cautious/wary about speaking out about these issues—as it’s hard to know whether you are going to encounter hostility. (Full-time permanent staff)

On three occasions at least, tutors have made offhand transphobic comments during tutorials that have left me feeling nervous and unsafe. (Undergraduate student)

### **Strategies for Dealing with Harm**

The final section of our analysis deals with the strategies our participants engaged in to mitigate harm. Far from being passive, participants deployed various harm-reduction and survival strategies which we have divided into three main types; leaving higher education, regulating visibility, and undertaking additional labor. Those opting to leave higher education rather than endure the harms it was inflicting on them were in a minority, but for some it was an effective strategy. The other strategies were often adopted ambivalently, as a compromised response to harm. Regulating visibility, or making choices about when to be and when not to be open about gender, was one such strategy participants more often assented to, rather than one they embraced as a positive choice. Finally, we found many nonbinary staff and students in higher education undertaking additional labor to raise awareness, educate others, or lobby to change institutional policies and practices as a form of harm-reduction strategy.

#### ***Leaving Higher Education***

For a small group of participants leaving higher education is the only viable survival strategy. This group consisted of undergraduate through doctoral researchers, early-career researchers, and established academics. The reasons given for leaving are often interlinked with mental health and, importantly, sometimes participants cited quite specific aspects of their university experience, such as the curriculum, as the pivotal factor for leaving.

After my experiences with the curriculum I feel quite hesitant about continuing this journey as it feels like the discipline is not for me. (Post-graduate student)

As always with misgendering and erasure it worsens my already questionable mental health... I'm close to flunking out...again. (Undergraduate student)

I'm in probably one of the very best HEIs [higher education institution] to be "different" in any way and I'm still leaving! (Full-time, permanent staff)

Worryingly, one participant revealed that the current hostile environment around trans and nonbinary students and staff is a relatively recent shift that is changing their perception about a possible and continued future in higher education:

My heart goes out to anyone and everyone who works or studies at an institution with actively hostile colleagues or instructors. I never imagined a few years ago I'd want to leave academia—this isn't entirely due to the moral panic around gender, but it surely doesn't help. (Full-time, fixed-term staff)

### *Regulating Visibility*

The regularity with which participants "chose" not to declare or "come out" about their gender gives further context to the question about how important it is to have one's gender acknowledged in higher education. Participants' reasons for regulating visibility are complex and cannot be reduced to a simple narrative, furthermore the decision to not declare gender often (re)produced harms of its own, notably further erasure of nonbinary existence and further misgendering. We briefly outline below some of the reasons to demonstrate this complexity and how this is a choice made in a range of contexts that are often about how participants survive a harmful environment.

Some participants regulated their visibility as nonbinary as an anticipatory strategy wherein their experiences of the higher education environment suggest that being open about their gender will cause further harm. One participant anticipated "people won't understand or will think I'm just being 'alternative'" (PhD student). Many thought that nothing would change or that colleagues or students would respond poorly if they came out, reflecting a generalized understanding that their university environments are unsupportive for nonbinary people.

I am not yet out as nonbinary in my immediate workplace. There are staff there who I suspect may respond poorly. (Full-time, fixed-term staff)

Participants' decisions to not come out were also specifically related to other people's expectations, not just that gender is binary, but that nonbinary gender will be expressed in particular ways dependent on perceived assignation at birth. As one participant explained:

I am currently hiding behind the "she" because it's easier for other people and I'm accommodating their understanding of me. I'm non binary, AFAB [assigned female at birth], and femme presenting, and I just don't

think people will get it. I haven't dared have the conversation to get to a point where I've been erased—but I anticipate it significantly. (PhD student)

Such responses reveal very low expectations for how colleagues, tutors, and fellow students might respond. A significant aspect is the sense that people would not want to understand, which is an important distinction from being unable to understand and reveals the hostility of the environment these participants are working and studying in. As a strategy, regulating visibility has consequences, especially around the exhaustion it causes:

My gender is important because it's such a large part of who I am, and if I am to fully be myself at work and actually build relationships with colleagues and students it would be nice for me to be able to be more open with my gender identity in the workplace, but I don't feel that it is a supportive environment for it. The energy I spend hiding at work takes a toll mentally and physically and I definitely have low morale at work as a result. (Full-time, permanent staff)

Exhaustion is an important factor in how participants weigh their decisions. In contrast to the participant above who was exhausted by not coming out, the participants below used this strategy to avoid the exhaustion of negotiating an administration and environment unable to accommodate them:

Outing myself can feel exhausting, so I don't tend to do this actively unless it's relevant e.g. making a point [about] the gender diversity existing in my dept or being visible to students because I want to be a figure that I needed but didn't have. (Postgraduate student)

Misgendering is obviously constant, the question is whether it causes more pain than doing the admin to avoid some of it. (PhD student)

What is clear from these responses is that there is labor involved in negotiating whether or not to be open, and the consequences either way of those decisions. For some participants these negotiations are not just about being open about their nonbinary identity, they also intersect with practical considerations that have material consequences for their studies and careers.

I can't be out at work because frankly, I feel like it makes my position of employment less stable. I have a young family and so I feel like I have to prioritise keeping my job. (Full-time, permanent staff)

Students' considerations for not coming out hinged around whether being out would jeopardize their access to funding and scholarships, support services or fair treatment by staff.

When I was applying for funding for my PhD research...I had to make the decision as to whether to be true to myself or to use the incorrect pronouns and possibly increase my chance of getting funding. I wasn't ready to stand up for myself so I went for the latter option and felt terrible. (PhD student)

I feel like I cannot speak up because I need to stay on the good side of the tutor for when I need approval for disability accommodations. (Undergraduate student)

This strategy has particular implications for people with intersecting identities, as illustrated further by the participant below whose decisions extend beyond their time as a student into career and financial considerations.

I am a visibly queer disabled immigrant researching a highly stigmatised topic. I feel unable to come out as nonbinary, because this would add another layer of other-ness to the way my institution and possible future employers see me. I know how difficult the academic job market is, and how conservative my field (business) is, and I know that by coming out I would shoot my already precarious opportunities in the foot. My current goal is to come out once I am safely and securely employed.  
(PhD student)

### *Additional Labor*

A final strategy some participants undertook as a response to harm was to take on additional, usually unpaid or voluntary, labor. This often involved work such as campaigning for gender-neutral toilets, developing inclusion policies as part of “equality, diversity and inclusion” committees or giving talks/workshops to train or raise awareness amongst staff and students. For these participants this was often a future-oriented strategy and was a way of making their university a better place for the nonbinary people who would follow them. Some participants appear to find this an effective way of meeting some of their needs and subsequently report positive actions and change within their institutions.

We (the LGBT+ soc committee) managed to get them to relabel some bathrooms as gender-neutral...Another time would be when I gave a talk/workshop about gender to staff. (Undergraduate student)

However, the majority of participants demonstrate ambivalence to this strategy. Participants discussed voluntary labor as a mitigating strategy regardless of whether they endorsed it or not. This may be because, as others have argued, institutions expect minoritized people to participate in equality and diversity initiatives (Ahmed 2012). While some measure of change may be achieved, this strategy also leads to exhaustion and detracts from participants’ energy for study, teaching and research (see Nicolazzo 2017).

I’m hyper aware and hyper annoyed about the privileges and elitism upon which my university is built and sustained. This makes me determined to make exclusions and inequalities in HE [higher education] visible and challenge them. Often this means being an institutional nuisance and asking awkward questions in EDI [equality, diversity and inclusion] meetings (I’m on the committee) and pushing for change...I think about this stuff constantly, which is necessary but exhausting.  
(PhD student)

Rather than seeking out and engaging in more formal university “equality, diversity and inclusion” work, other participants were drawn in less consensually and were expected to undertake this labor by virtue of being nonbinary. For example:

There is an extra burden to educate people around gender that goes beyond official roles and this, while validating and rewarding at times, can be exhausting. (Full-time, permanent staff)

This type of labor is particularly exhausting because it is so closely related to participants' sense of self. This takes particular forms when students are forced to become educators and engage along hierarchical power lines with lecturers as well as other students.

I often felt like I had to educate my professors and classmates on trans issues, and if I didn't then ignorance would continue. (Postgraduate student)

## CONCLUSION

Our ultimate aim in conducting this analysis is to work towards a future in which non-binary people, alongside all those with minoritized identities, are not harmed by their interactions with higher education institutions and rather can thrive in their work and studies in those environments. Drawing on theories of social harm has allowed us to map out some of the complex ways harm is currently manifested, but also to see how mechanisms, effects and strategies to reduce harm interconnect. For example, the mechanism of harm (abuse and ridicule) creates a further effect of harm (fear), which may cause the regulation of visibility, thus reproducing erasure, which reduces the cultural intelligibility of nonbinary people allowing for it to be ridiculed. Many participants' responses highlight the interconnection between erasure as a mechanism of harm, exhaustion as an effect of harm, and not coming out as a harm reduction strategy. Our overall analysis shows how these harms are produced structurally and how they impact on different nonbinary people in different ways, particularly along the lines of race, class, disability, neurodivergence and gender expression. As our participants' stories indicate, many institutions respond with inclusion policies or "equality, diversity and inclusion" agendas but these are often insufficient to bring about the change that participants need. As we seek to move toward spaces in which nonbinary people can thrive in higher education we must find ways to recognize social harm, to listen to and acknowledge the experiences of nonbinary people and find ways in which institutions can be accountable for the structural dimensions of these social harms.

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