

The SDU TEK Guide to Alternative Gender Identities

Executive summary

SDU should be an inclusive, safe place to be, and this needs to be true for people with alternative gender identities as well. In this guide we go through the complexities involved, but the key messages are:

- Not everyone identifies with gender in the same way – and we need to deal with it.
- Show respect to how people present and how they wish to be addressed – even if it shifts.
- Use the name and pronoun a person wishes to identify with – deadnaming is not OK.
- Don't make assumptions and don't ask questions you wouldn't ask any other students/colleagues.
- Gender and sexuality do not necessarily have a direct connection – and it's really not your business.
- If you make a mistake, that happens. Just remember to acknowledge and apologize.
- Let's make sure our workplace and our classrooms are safe, inclusive spaces!

What are “alternative gender identities”?

To begin, let's be clear that there's a difference between sex (which is biological) and gender (which is a social and lived category). For most people, neither sex nor gender are complicated things. We were born a specific sex, we identified with that, and grew and lived with it as our gender. If you were born with male genitalia, never thought there was anything strange with that, and have lived your entire life as a man – good for you. Still, not everyone has the same experience, nor should you expect that your experience is the only valid one.

There are many ways in which our gender identity can be more complex than the simple boy/girl/man/woman-binary. Some may experience that their bodies are not in line with the gender they consider theirs, others may think that the binary split is too clumsy and restrictive. That is why we today may have, both among our colleagues and our students, people who have a different gender identity from the one the majority might be familiar with. This guide tries to clarify the terms related to this, and give some advice how to relate to issues that might arise when working with individuals who have alternative gender identities.

On being transgender

One of the most discussed groups here are people who are transgender, i.e. who do not identify with the sex their bodies showed when born and the gender therefore assigned to them, to the point that they disagree with their assigned gender. This often involves people who were born with one gender's genitalia and hormone structure, but who identify with the opposite gender. Earlier one used the term “transsexual”, but this is today considered

pejorative. It is common to think that a transgender person is just someone who has gone through a full transition, including hormone therapy and gender re-assignment surgery, but this is not true. Some transgender people do transition fully from one gender to another, but others may only partly do so (and may e.g. not opt for the surgery).

In all cases, the polite and respectful thing when engaging with a transgender person is to accept the way in which they present and wish to identify. It is not up to anyone else how the transition has occurred, or to which degree. If for instance a student that you previously knew as a boy called Jens turns up after summer break, presenting as a woman and requesting to be referred to as Jenni, this is a choice that should be honored. To still call this person “Jens”, after they clearly have indicated their preferred name and pronouns, is called “deadnaming” and should be avoided at all costs. Mistakes may happen, but should be acknowledged and apologized for.

There are many ways to be transgendered, and the transition may take more time with some than with others. In all cases, respect and civility should be the hallmark in interactions with all people at the university, including those with alternative gender identities. Just like you wouldn’t ask a “cisgender” (the term for a person who identifies with the gender assigned at birth) student about their genitals or their sex-life (and we dearly hope you do not), the same goes for a transgender student.

Transgender people often face both fear, harassment, and ridicule, even in today’s society – to a degree we may say that our society is transphobic. To this comes the fact that transitioning can be a very difficult process, both mentally and physically (particularly if e.g. more invasive therapies come into play). It is up to every person at the university not to add to the struggle, and show simple courtesy and basic acceptance. Sometimes the very small gesture of remembering the name and pronoun a person wishes to be used for them can go a long way.

On being genderqueer

There are other forms of gender identification beyond being (or wanting to transition to) a man or a woman. Here we use genderqueer to cover a broad range of alternative ways of identifying one’s gender, including but not limited to non-binary, genderfluid, or bigender identification. If a person identifies as e.g. non-binary, that does not mean that they are transgendered, simply that they are not comfortable about being “boxed in” to one gender or another. Some identify as “agender”, which means that they identify neither as male or female – although some agender people may also identify as transgender and/or non-binary. Others may instead have a more genderfluid outlook, and present more as male at times, and again more as female at others. In particularly younger people, this may simply be a case of trying to figure oneself out and finding what kind of gender presentation one feels most comfortable with. This means that just because e.g. a student has a non-traditional “gender expression”, such as wearing makeup and female clothing, does not necessarily mean that they are transgender. They may still identify primarily as male, wish to be called “Jens”, and have male pronouns used, even though they aren’t conformist or bound to rigid gender identifications. Some might wonder what the difference between non-binary and agender is, and this is understandable. A simplified explanation might be that a non-binary person may for a period of time to use gender expressions normally understood as female, and may even have relationships that would be interpreted as straight and heterosexual. This does not

mean that they want to feel locked into this, and wish to reserve the right to choose other gender and similar expressions later. An agender person has chosen to distance themselves from traditional gender expressions, and even the idea that they might be seen as one or the other. Simplifying a bit we might say that identifying as non-binary is closer to a genderfluid identity, whereas identifying as agender means that one wishes to escape the binary altogether. That said, people may have their own way of interpreting these categories, and may have identifications that do not fit in with what is suggested above. Again, asking for how people wish to be identified, and respecting their choices is paramount.

Some expressions that are good to know, even though they are rarer, are “intersex” and “bigender”. An intersex individual is usually one born with a mix of chromosomes, anatomy, and hormones that makes precise identification of their sex complicated. Earlier, doctors simply decided for the baby, including using surgery to “fix” their gender. Today, this would be considered unethical. A person who is intersex are not necessarily transgender, although some are, and may identify as both intersex and non-binary or bigender. A bigender individual is someone who rather than not accepting being either a man or a woman chooses to be both. Whilst it might be difficult for a person who identifies along the gender binary to grasp this, there are people who even identify as multigender. It should be noted that both intersex and bigender are rare, but an inclusive organization such as SDU should be prepared to accommodate individuals who are so born or so identify.

Being genderqueer – our umbrella term here – does not need to say anything about either gender expression or sexuality. You may have colleagues who present as male, are heterosexual, and who still identify as e.g. genderfluid. Similarly, just because a student presents as female, they may still be uncomfortable being referred to as “she/her/hers”. In all cases, the most important thing is to be openminded and respectful.

The tricky question of sexuality

On the whole, the sexuality of your colleagues or your students can be summarized in the pithy saying: “None of your business.”. That said, a few words may be necessary when it comes to assumptions regarding gender identities and sexuality. The most important thing to understand is that they do not necessarily have any direct connection. A transgender woman (and when we say this, we always refer to what a person has become, not what they were) may show a sexual interest to men, women, or both. Nothing in transgenderism means that e.g. heterosexuality “follows” the transitioning gender. Similarly, a non-binary person that had a specific gender assigned at birth may still be attracted to that gender, the opposite gender, both, or only to individuals who also identify as non-binary. Whilst all this might seem confusing to people who have lived with heterosexuality and cisgender as the norm, one shouldn’t make assumptions one way or another.

In addition, there are categories such as “asexual” or “aromantic”. These terms refer to people who, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, do not have any desire for sexual intimacy or romantic such. You can thus be a transgender male, yet have no interest in sex or romance with either gender. Again, these are deeply personal choices, should not have to be argued for or questioned, and deserve respect and civility in the workplace.

I think I've messed up!

That's OK. Everyone slips up. The reason we've written this is not to say that one should be afraid of being around people with different gender identities, but rather that one should be aware of the same. Most people who are e.g. transgender or non-binary confront misunderstandings or hatred on a day to day basis, so a little kindness goes a long way. If you feel that you've deadnamed a person or asked an inappropriate question, a good way to counter this is to apologize and to ask what the person you've offended would like to say in response (and then, obviously, to listen to this). People with non-traditional gender identities may not want to answer prying questions, but will usually be happy to answer questions about how they wish to be addressed and what would make a work- or teaching-situation more safe for them.

We all mess up at times, but it is also up to us all to be mindful of the people we work with and the people we teach. It is not up to us to tell them how to be or love, and instead we should pay attention to how we can be respectful and kind towards all the people we interact with at the university, regardless of whether they live their lives or define their identities in the same way as we do. At SDU we should strive to create an inclusive and supportive environment for everyone, be mindful of our words and actions, and accept that not everyone might be just like us – and that's completely alright.

A few definitions, to help people out

Agender: A person who distances themselves from any gender assignment or expression. Some, but not all, non-binary individuals identify as agender, and some agender people identify as transgender.

Aromantic/asexual: An individual who has no interest in romantic or sexual relationships. This category can contain both cisgender, genderqueer, and transgender people.

Bigender: A person who identifies as being both male and female at the same time, or who might even identify with more genders than the two traditional ones.

Cisgender: An individual who identifies with the gender assignment they received as a child – i.e. your parents were told you were a boy/girl, you were raised as this, and you have never questioned the same. If you find this guide odd and confusing, there is a great likelihood that you are cisgender.

Deadnaming: To refer to a transgender person with their “dead name”, i.e. the name they had when they were still considered belonging to the other gender. This is considered hurtful and very uncaring, and should be avoided.

Genderfluid: A person who is comfortable switching between various gender expressions, e.g. so that they might at times present as being one gender, at others the opposite gender, and possibly a mix of both. A genderfluid person might be non-binary, or exploring their gender

identity and later identify as transgender, but may also just prefer not to be fixed in their gender expression.

Genderqueer: A broad category that contains a number of non-traditional ways to identify with and express gender. Note that not all people who may seem to fit under this heading identify as being genderqueer.

Intersex: An individual who was born with chromosomes, gonads, or genitals that do not neatly fit common ideas about male or female bodies. In earlier, less enlightened times, such persons would be seen as aberrations to be fixed, but today we accept and celebrate the diversity of humans – even if they do not fit our simple categorizations.

Non-binary: A person who does not identify exclusively with either gender in the gender binary, but instead rejects having to pick one over the other.

Transgender: Individuals who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth and feel that this is incorrect, and who instead identify as being a person of the opposite gender to this. May be transitioning, or may not be. Please be aware of how they prefer to be referred to.

Transsexual: An old way to refer to transgender people which is today seen as pejorative and hurtful. Avoid using this term, unless you are very sure of what you're doing.

Transitioning: The process through which a transgender person is finding their own, comfortable gender identity. This may include, but does not have to, hormonal treatments and surgical procedures. A transition is a very personal thing, and unless asked to talk about it, you should not (cf. someone's divorce or other marital issues). People transition in a multitude of ways, some fully, some in a more limited manner. In all cases, their choice should be respected and treated with civility.

Two-spirit: A very special case of non-binary gender identity, unique to Native American and First Nations individuals. Mentioned here only to point out that there are cultures where alternative gender identities have been both accepted and respected for thousands of years.