

## Using Pronouns at Work Guidance

### **What are pronouns?**

Pronouns are the words we use to refer to a person or a group of people. For example, 'she/her/hers', 'he/him/his', 'they/them/theirs'. The pronouns we use for an individual are based on their gender and although we may assume a person's gender based on their name, appearance, voice, or expression, and assume which pronouns to use for them, this may not always be correct.

Although it is most common for people to use the pronouns 'she/her/hers' and 'he/him/his', many people use gender-neutral pronouns such as 'they/them/theirs', and some people use '[neopronouns](#)' such as 'Ze/Zir/Zirs'.

### **Why is using the correct pronouns for a person important?**

A person's identity is made up of multiple parts and gender is one of these. Being mis-identified, either accidentally or on purpose, is uncomfortable for anyone.

For trans and/or non-binary people, the use of the correct pronouns holds particular weight because often trans and/or non-binary people will have undertaken a long and often difficult journey to be recognised as their correct gender. Invalidating this by using incorrect pronouns can be painful for trans and non-binary people and cause distress. Repeated and deliberate use of incorrect pronouns when referring to a trans and/or non-binary staff member may constitute harassment under the University of Bristol's 'Acceptable Behaviour at Work Policy Statement'.

### **How do I know which pronouns are correct?**

It may feel easier to assume which pronouns a person uses based on how they look or speak. However, it is impossible to know if someone is trans and/or non-binary by looking at them and so it is important to use the correct pronouns for everyone, not just those who you know to be trans and/or non-binary.

The best way of ensuring that you are using the correct pronouns is to ask. An example question you could use is 'can I ask which pronouns you use?' or 'what pronouns should I use to refer to you?'. If you are in a meeting, it may be beneficial to introduce yourself at the start of the meeting and include your pronouns. This will help others to feel comfortable introducing their pronouns also. For example, you could say 'Hi everyone I'm John, my pronouns are he/him, and I work in the Faculty of Science'.

By being proactive and introducing pronoun introductions to regular conversations and meetings you can help to create a culture at the University of Bristol where this is normal and easy. This will contribute to ensuring that the University is a welcoming and supportive place for everyone.

Introducing pronouns can also be beneficial for people who have uncommon or gender-neutral names.

### **What if I make a mistake?**

It is normal to occasionally make mistakes when using pronouns. Honest mistakes are easily fixed with a quick apology and the use of the correct pronouns going forward. Here is an example which demonstrates this:

Person A: 'Sam is over there I am sure he can help you out'

Person B: 'Actually Sam uses they/them pronouns'

Person A: 'Oh I am sorry, thank you for correcting me, I am sure they can help you out'

If someone corrects you, it is important not to become defensive or make a big deal out of it. Simply thank the person for correcting you, apologise swiftly, and use the correct pronouns going forward. If you find yourself being corrected regularly, take the time to reflect and think about how you can change the language that you use, or how you can introduce pronoun introductions into your everyday conversations.

### **What can I do to be more inclusive?**

It's great that you are thinking of ways to be more inclusive. Many colleagues have added their pronouns to their email signatures. This is a simple way to let others know what pronouns you use, normalise the introduction of pronouns, and show others that you are aware of the importance of using the correct pronouns.

Here is an example:

***Dr John Smith***

*Lecturer in Physics*

*My pronouns are he/him/his*

For further information please familiarise yourself with the following resources:

<http://bristol.ac.uk/inclusion/lgbt/trans-inclusion/>

<https://www.mypronouns.org/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/importance-pronouns-work-chris-mosier/>

<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/grammar/punct/genderneutralpronouns/>

<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/international-pronouns-day>