

# A shift to gender-neutral language in schools and higher education institutions

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Historically, the terms 'head boy' and 'head girl' originated in British boarding schools in the 19th century. They were positions that were often chosen from the senior class and given privileges and duties, such as serving on school governing bodies and serving as role models for other students. Other schools and institutions of higher education, including those in other countries such as South Africa, later copied this custom, and it is still practised today.



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Similarly, concepts such as 'head boy', 'head girl', 'brotherhood' and 'sisterhood' remain among the longest-standing traditions and practices used in schools and post-school institutions for leadership positions as well as selected groups for men and women. The numerous and diverse gender groupings that are now present in these institutions, however, are not served by this heritage.

Currently, in schools and higher education institutions (HEIs), there is a significant portion of the student body that is multi-faceted in terms of gender identity and expression; institutions are now experiencing a growing number of gender non-conforming, non-binary, and transgender students.

One of the biggest concerns right now is whether South Africa's schooling system and HEIs are prepared to acknowledge this reality or not. Are they prepared to change their long-standing traditions and 'language' to also cater for sexual minority groups and/or gender-diverse groups that do not match the gender binary or the norm?



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These are crucial questions to ask and address because of the difficulties these students are currently experiencing, such as a sense of isolation, bullying, discrimination, and lack of safety (due to their sexual orientation and gender identity). Thus, these questions are imperative for our institutions to consider the established traditions of promoting participation by all, while valuing diversity and inclusivity.

Given the shifting demographics of their student body, basic education and higher education institutions (HEIs) should work harder than ever to create inclusive environments for all students, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation. Re-imagining diversity and inclusivity within schools and HEIs is important for all students – more importantly for historically underrepresented and marginalised populations.

For instance, when it comes to higher education institutions (HEIs), they reflect one of society's most complex and diversified groups. They serve as a symbol of an environment where diversity goes beyond ethnicity, colour, economic background, and gender, to name a few. HEIs host students from various walks of life; however, despite the obvious diversity within HEIs, there is still a lack of comprehensive acceptance of the complex and diverse nature of the current student body and how this necessitates changes to university practices, procedures, and traditions.

### **A shift towards inclusive concepts and terminologies**

Abolishing gender-binary concepts and terminologies for more inclusive ones

More recently, the 'head boy and head girl' concepts have come under fire; several students have become increasingly vocal in resisting binary thinking, traditions, and practices regarding gender identity and expression. Given the diverse nature of the student population, increased awareness and the complexities of gender identity and expression have given rise to questions regarding practices and traditions that (do not) promote gender inclusivity on campuses, such as the 'head girl and head boy' culture.

Against this background, the long-standing tradition of using terminologies that only recognise the gender binary ought to be denounced, as it is discriminatory and exclusionary towards students who do not identify as either male or female for participation in leadership roles. These concepts exclude transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students from participating and being equally recognised in these leadership roles because of their gender identity and expression.



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In addition, such terms are unfair in that they force trans, gender non-binary, and/or non-conforming persons to fit into a particular binary box to attain certain roles and accolades. Moreover, concepts and titles such as 'head boy or head girl' insinuate that gender is the primary reason to attain or occupy leadership positions – which should not be the case.

Given the above, traditions change over time, and institutions should follow suit. It is time for all educational institutions to embrace gender-neutral alternatives to old titles and customs in order to give all students an equal chance to engage in leadership roles. More inclusive terms could include concepts such as 'head student', 'head prefect' or 'student leader', and abandon practices of selection and leadership based solely on gender.

This change is important, as it will reflect the true nature of diversity within our schools and campuses and reflect a growing recognition of the importance of creating a welcoming and accepting environment for all students, regardless of their gender identity and expression.

Using gender inclusive language in institutions of learning affirms students whose identity is outside of the 'societal norm', creates a more inclusive environment for all students, demonstrates respect for all students, and ensures that all students are accurately represented. Overall, using gender-inclusive language is a crucial aspect of creating a welcoming and inclusive university environment for all students.

### **Reflect the true nature of diversity**

Institutions of learning, such as basic education and higher learning institutions, must therefore renounce practices, language, and traditions that legitimise and serve only the gender binary – that is, man and woman – in favour of diversity and inclusivity, which acknowledges various gender identities and sexual orientations.

Equally important is the creation of gender terminologies and concepts out of respect for the uniqueness and validity of each student's self-perception and identity. Having only practices and traditions that recognise someone, for instance, based on their biological sex, creates a very unsafe and unwelcoming environment for persons who do not conform to social norms regarding gender expression, presentation, or identity. Abolishing gendered titles is one way to challenge and disrupt traditional gender norms and to help create a more equal and inclusive society for all.

Why is it important for institutions of higher learning to adopt gender-inclusive language and terminology?

Universities ought to move away from thinking along the lines of the gender binary. It is important for institutions of higher learning to adopt gender-inclusive campus traditions and 'language', because the use of binary gender-specific titles and campus traditions is very limiting and exclusionary as it does not reflect the diversity of gender identities and expressions.

Gender-binary processes and 'language' lead to a sense of exclusion for persons who identify as either gender non-conforming or transgender and/or gender-diverse – who generally do not identify as male or female. By changing the concepts, 'language' used, and campus culture to be more inclusive and reflective of the diversity of gender identities, universities can create a more welcoming and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their gender.

Additionally, this transformation can also help to raise awareness of gender and sexuality issues and encourage students to think more critically about traditional gender roles and expectations.

Overall, changing binary gender-specific titles to be more inclusive is a step towards creating a more equitable and inclusive society where all individuals are valued and respected, regardless of their gender identity. This helps to break down gender stereotypes, promote equality, and foster a sense of belonging for all students, regardless of their gender. Furthermore, it sends a message that all students are valued and respected, and that the university is committed to creating an inclusive environment for all.

This can foster a greater sense of belonging and empowerment among students and can also help to break down gender-based stereotypes and discrimination. Additionally, gender-neutral language and titles can help to create a more equitable playing field for students, regardless of their gender. This can promote leadership opportunities for all students, regardless of their gender identity, and help to create a more diverse and representative student body.

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