

Ucas warned over plans to scrap male and female terms

Sian Griffiths and Glen Keogh

More than 70 academics have signed an open letter to education ministers criticising proposals by Ucas, the university admissions body, to change the way it records the sex of applicants.

From next year, Ucas plans to stop asking university applicants to choose whether they “most identify” with being “male” or “female”. It will instead ask whether they identify as “man” or “woman”; or they may choose “I prefer to use another term” or “I prefer not to say”.

The move is designed to be seen as more accommodating to those who self-identify as transgender or non-binary.

The group of professors led by Alice Sullivan, a sociologist from University College London, say it will harm important academic research and lead to an “erosion of sex-based data” in education that will make it “impossible to track trends over time”.

Sullivan claimed the move away from data collection on sex was “driven by lobbying by organisations and activists who oppose any acknowledgment that sex matters”.

The letter accuses Ucas, which manages about 700,000 applications each year for full-time undergraduate courses, of “fudging gender identity and sex into one question”.

It adds: “The suggested question gives no indication of whether respondents identify as trans, so will not facilitate equalities monitoring or research according to trans status or gender reassignment.

“It is vital that Ucas should collect data on sex, preferably alongside a distinct and properly constructed question on gender identity.”

The academics have raised concerns that a “lack of accurate data on sex” will make it impossible to track the success of initiatives such as those aimed at increasing the proportion of women in subjects such as engineering, maths and medicine.

The signatories include lecturers from Oxford, Edinburgh, King’s College London, Bristol, Durham and Manchester universities and nine fellows of the British Academy. They say: “In data collection, it is vital to ensure that terminology is clear.”

They have warned the Department for Education that the “shift away” from collecting accurate data on sex has “occurred without transparency or consultation with relevant experts”.

The letter adds: “We believe that ministerial intervention is now necessary to restore data collection on sex.”

Separately, Sullivan, the lead author, said: “We are in favour of collecting data on gender identity, but this must be in addition to, not instead of, data on sex.”

Clare Marchant, Ucas chief executive, said: “Ucas has introduced a new set of responses to the current gender identity question for early 2023 based on feedback.”

She added it was “important that institutions know how their students identify” and that Ucas would “continue to work with experts and colleagues across the sector and government to understand how we can improve on the options presented, relating to both gender and legal sex”.

The Department for Education was contacted for comment.