



Article

Pronouns, Pin Badges and Pride: LGBTQ+ Student Experiences of Inclusion and Belonging in a UK University

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Abstract: This article provides findings from a small-scale project undertaken to understand the student experience of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) student community in a large post-92 university in England. Focus groups were conducted with students that explored areas of student life, including support, the campus environment, and belonging. A social constructivist theoretical perspective underpins the article. Students develop common knowledge via social processes that are powerfully influenced by cultural factors that are constantly in a state of flux. The article also rejects essentialist delineations of LGBTQ+ gender and sexuality and subscribes instead to a Butlerian framework of identity where behaviours associated with gender and sexuality are instruments of regulatory regimes. Even within a university culture that is inclusive and welcoming, opportunities were not always provided for LGBTQ+ students to speak about their personal lives and identities authentically, and university classrooms did not always feel like safe places for students. Whilst staff were generally helpful and supportive to their LGBTQ+ students, many lacked the knowledge and skills to confidently meet the needs of these students, particularly those identifying as trans and non-binary. The recommendations include calls for universities to commit to high-quality mandatory training for staff so that trans and non-binary students in particular are supported by staff appropriately equipped to support their needs.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; identity; gender; sexuality; university; authentic



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1. Introduction

This article provides findings from a small-scale project undertaken to understand the student experience of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) student community in a large post-92 university in England. A post-92 university refers to a university in the United Kingdom that gained university status after the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. This act allowed polytechnics and some colleges of higher education to become universities. These institutions were typically more focused on vocational education and applied research before gaining university status. Post-92 universities are known for their emphasis on widening participation, offering a diverse range of courses, and often having strong links with industry and the local community.

Focus groups were conducted with students in February and March 2023 that explored areas of student life such as accessing help and support, life as an LGBTQ+ student on campus, and the extent of their sense of belonging. Findings from the focus groups were analysed thematically, and five topic areas emerged: being informed, inclusive environment, support at university, belonging, and 'I wish'. These terms are defined as follows by the authors:

Being informed:

Having access to and understanding relevant information, allowing individuals to make knowledgeable decisions and stay aware of important issues or developments.

Inclusive environment:

A university campus and community where all individuals, regardless of their background, identity, or abilities, feel welcomed, respected, and valued. This involves actively removing barriers to participation and ensuring equity of opportunity for everyone.

Support at university:

The range of services and resources provided by a university to assist students in their academic, personal, and social development. This can include academic advising, mental health services, financial aid, career counselling, and peer support networks.

Belonging:

A sense of acceptance and connection within a community or group. It involves feeling valued, understood, and included, which contributes to an individual's overall well-being and engagement.

'I wish':

A desire or hope for improvements in the university culture and community. It reflects aspirations or changes the LGBTQ+ students would like to see in their circumstances or environment.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is responsible for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of quantitative information about higher education in the United Kingdom. HESA collects data on students who, under the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#), have protected characteristics, including race, faith, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. However, HESA asks universities only to report on student engagement, progress, and attainment for students who have disabilities or are Black and minority ethnic. Performance data are not then analysed by sexual or gender identity. For this reason, LGBTQ+ students are not always identified as a priority group for support or intervention at the same rates as students with other protected characteristics that HESA does report on. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), through which almost all undergraduate students apply to universities in the UK, began to include sexual orientation within their initial application form in 2015, but there has been no duty placed on universities to monitor and utilise this information in ways they do for disabilities, race, and care-experienced applicants. Consequently, little is known about the university experiences of LGBTQ+ students, including the numbers that complete their degrees on time, drop out or intermit, and gain employment upon graduation.

In the large post-92 university in which this research is based, student services staff noticed that LGBTQ+ students were overrepresented among students accessing its counselling and well-being service. Students with worries linked to their sexuality or gender identity were also overrepresented among those logged by counselling and well-being as being a 'Cause for Concern'. This qualitative project therefore seeks to understand the lived experience of the LGBTQ+ students at one university. In particular, it explores how these students access personal and academic support and what potential barriers and issues they face as LGBTQ+ students.

The article sets out to answer the following research questions:

1. How do LGBTQ+ students perceive their sense of belonging and inclusion within the university environment?
2. What needs to change to improve the university environment for LGBTQ+ students?

The article begins with a review of the literature before describing the methodology deployed to collect LGBTQ+ student data. It then presents the findings from this research, analyses the student responses, and applies these to the literature. After the concluding paragraphs, the article makes recommendations for how universities may create a more inclusive environment for their LGBTQ+ students.

2. Literature Review

A student's time at university can be a transformative one. It is often the first time they have lived away from their parents, and they are exposed to peers from a whole host of different backgrounds. Finding one's group and achieving a sense of belonging is critically important. Belonging is a multifaceted and situational concept that varies for each university student. Thomas (2012), referencing Vallerand (1997) and Goodenow (1993), describes university belonging as the personal feelings of connection or relatedness to the institution, which includes feelings of acceptance, respect, inclusion, and support (Thomas 2012, pp. 12–13).

In 2022, a survey by WONKHE and Pearson of over 5000 UK university students confirmed the complexity and contextual nature of belonging. They identified essential elements for fostering student belonging: peer connections, diverse and inclusive learning materials, supportive systems, and autonomy in decision-making. This project aimed to provide specific insights into these findings within a modern post-92 university, examining factors that enhance belonging for both students and staff. Similar aspects of belonging have been highlighted in other studies, such as those Cashmore et al. (2012).

For LGBTQ+ students, university may be the first time they come out to others, especially if their parents have been disapproving of LGBTQ+ identities (Ellis 2009). According to Marzetti et al. (2022), some parents react negatively when their child comes out as LGBTQ+ and a few reject their children altogether. The absence of an inclusive or stable environment at home can negatively affect the ability of LGBTQ+ young people to engage in education (Bradlow et al. 2020). Even those LGBTQ+ students who come from a loving and inclusive home background, when arriving at university, make an important decision about whether they will come out to their new peer group and lecturers.

It is not surprising, therefore, that university students who identify as LGBTQ+ have an increased risk of developing depression and anxiety when compared to their cis and heterosexual peers (Neves and Hillman 2017). They experience multiple societal stressors that can, without intervention, result in poor mental health and may have an adverse effect on university completion. Research by Baams et al. (2015) found that identity suppression in particular holds risks for psychological harm and interferes with students' motivation to succeed. Research by Jadvā et al. (2021) with LGBTQ+ adolescents, aged 11–19 years, examined the rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts in 3000 students. As a result, 65% of the young people reported self-harm, 74% said they experienced suicidal ideation, and 26% had attempted suicide.

Based on survey data collected from a sample of 291 LGBTQ+ students from 42 universities across the UK, Ellis (2009) identified a correlation between homophobia and depression, anxiety, and attempted suicide in LGBTQ+ students. She also found that 23.4% of the LGBTQ+ students surveyed by Ellis indicated that they had, on at least one occasion, been a victim of homophobic harassment/discrimination since being at university. Common forms of harassment comprise derogatory remarks (77.9%), direct or indirect verbal harassment or threats (47.1%), and threats of physical violence (26.5%).

In the UK, support services, particularly mental health services for young people, are oversubscribed. Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson (2020) found that in 2018–19, approximately 25% of children and young people referred to specialist mental health services were never accepted into treatment. Their report concluded that support, when eventually offered, mental health support typically arrives too late when issues are already acute and entrenched.

According to Ellis (2009), there is evidence to suggest that university equality policies do not necessarily help LGBTQ+ students feel safe or included in their university communities (Ellis 2009). Ellis noted that despite a growing emphasis on equality and diversity in universities, homophobia and transphobia on campus were still significant problems. Ellis found evidence that universities often provided support services for LGBTQ+ students, but this tended to be in the aftermath of a crisis, and very little preventative work took place.

Gnan (2019) conducted research with 1948 LGBTQ+ students in the UK and found that LGBTQ+ students were over-represented in mental health support services and were more likely to suffer low self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness when compared with their heterosexual and cisgender student peers. Gnan (2019) identified that support for LGBTQ+ students in social spaces and online was vital and that LGBTQ+ university staff openness was key to the creation of safe, inclusive spaces on campus.

The creation of LGBTQ+ spaces on campus and online is complex. Poynter and Washington (2005) studied the campus experience of LGBTQ+ students in the United States and found that minority group student organisations such as LGBTQ+ societies were more likely to lead to segregation between students with protected characteristics. This was particularly apparent between students of faith and students with LGBTQ+ identities, as a number of faiths are critical of homosexuality. Minority group student organisations were also likely to create tensions for students who identified with more than one protected characteristic, as minority group membership forced individuals to identify with one characteristic over another. Poynter and Washington advocate cross-cultural, inclusive student communities that engage all students in discussions about race, religion, sexuality, and gender identities.

Kulick et al. (2017), conducting research with 420 LGBTQ+ students, found they were twice as likely to experience distress when compared with their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Kulick et al. (2017) identified harmful micro-aggressions in social spaces on campus where a consistent but subtle accumulation of discrimination led to psychological distress for LGBTQ+ students. Kulick et al. identified 'sustained narratives of degradation' (p. 76), which correlated to negative self-esteem amongst LGBTQ+ students who reported feeling inferior and despondent. Kulick et al. noted that LGBTQ+ students often felt duty bound to become activists for the LGBTQ+ community, but the resilience needed to sustain such activism created despondency longer term. They called for more investment in services to support LGBTQ+ university students and further research to investigate the campus engagement behaviours of LGBTQ+ students and their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

University can be particularly challenging for students who are transgender or non-binary (TNB). Research into the experiences of trans and non-binary (TNB) university students in the UK has highlighted ongoing challenges. Smith et al. (2022) found that while some universities have made strides in creating supportive environments through policies like gender-neutral facilities and the use of chosen names and pronouns, significant barriers remain.

Howansky et al.'s research in 2021 (Howansky et al. 2021) considered the lived experience of trans and non-binary young people in education. It found that 80% of young trans people had self-harmed and 40% of trans young people had attempted suicide. found trans and non-binary young people had lower levels of self-esteem than their cisgender peers, much of it linked to misgendering or the failure of others to recognise and use their preferred pronouns.

Freeman and Stephenson (2024) examined the mental health and well-being of TNB students, revealing a higher prevalence of mental health issues compared to their cisgender peers. Contributing factors identified included the stress of navigating non-inclusive environments, lack of understanding from university staff and peers, and the additional burden of advocating for their rights. Freeman and Stephenson call for comprehensive support systems, including mental health services tailored to TNB students' needs. Additionally, they identify that fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding through education and training is essential to mitigate these challenges and promote a more supportive university experience. Storrie and Rohleder (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with six transgender university students and found that transgender students face high levels of stigma and discrimination leading to poor mental health and suicidal ideation. Storrie and Rohleder found that the transgender students welcomed LGBTQ+ societies as a safe space but recognised too that the associated segregation often left transgender students feeling disempowered.

This research is needed as the literature shows that many LGBTQ+ students still do not perceive universities as safe spaces. It highlights the gap between policy and practice, emphasising the need for more effective measures to create genuine inclusion. The literature also shows that LGBTQ+ students are over-represented in types of students accessing help for mental health and well-being. By focusing on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in one university, this research attempts to develop a better understanding of what it is like to be a student so that more meaningful and impactful strategies can be developed to improve their sense of belonging and overall well-being.

3. Theoretical Framework

A social constructivist (Vygotsky 1987) framework underpins this research. Students are understood as having their own personal history of learning, but also in developing common knowledge via social processes that are powerfully influenced by cultural factors. Cultures and their knowledge base are constantly in a state of flux as a result of reflection, shared understanding, and social expression. It is important also to stress that this article rejects essentialist delineations of LGBTQ+ gender and sexuality. Instead, it subscribes to an interpretivist framework of identity, recognising in common with Butler (1990) that behaviours associated with gender and sexuality are ‘instruments of regulatory regimes’ and the ‘normalizing categories of oppressive structures’ (pp. 13–14).

Despite the tensions, using Judith Butler within a social constructivist framework on LGBTQ+ inclusion, identities are not fixed but are constructed and perpetually evolving through repeated social performances. Butler aligns well with social constructivist views that knowledge and identities are shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts. Using Butler alongside social constructivism provides a critical lens to examine how university norms and power structures influence the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ individuals.

By the time students arrive at university, they have been educated and coerced into practises of gender regulation and heteronormativity through practises that endure through all stages of education, from the play corner in reception through to the school leavers’ prom (Robinson 2002). Heteronormativity and gender regulation drive discourses of power in education (Gray 2010). Male masculinity dominates, achieving its superior status through misogynistic and homophobic cultural and social representations. When applied here, this article assumes then that through life-long compulsory participation in heteronormative environments, LGBTQ+ university students are othered and therefore experience their university community differently than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, facing considerable additional challenges.

3.1. Methodology and Methods

This project employed an exploratory case study approach as outlined by Yin (2009), situated within a social constructivist and interpretivist framework. This methodology was chosen to capture a comprehensive understanding of participants’ perceptions of their lived experiences at university. By adopting this approach, the researchers aimed to delve deeply into the nuanced and subjective experiences of LGBTQ+ students.

The use of Bassey’s (1999) concept of ‘fuzzy generalisations’ was integral to this study. Fuzzy generalisations offer a way to address the longstanding issue of causality in social research. Bassey proposes a balanced approach that avoids the extremes of abandoning the search for causality as futile and the overly simplistic commitment to generalisability found in positivist traditions. Instead, fuzzy generalisations allow for statements with inherent uncertainty, which can be made in case study research without compromising its credibility. This approach enabled the researchers to draw meaningful, albeit tentative, conclusions about the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, providing valuable insights while acknowledging the complexity and variability of social phenomena.

Students identifying as LGBTQ+ from across each of the universities were invited to take part in an online focus group where they were asked to reflect on their student experience and sense of belonging at the university. Participation was advertised via

the university's LGBTQ+ societies, on campus information screens, through social media channels, and via staff and student newsletters and intranet pages.

Thirty students registered interest by contacting the research team. Participant information sheets, consent forms, and Teams links were sent to all thirty, and six students then took part in the focus groups. There were a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate students from across three of the four campuses, and it included distance-based learners, as well as those who were living locally and on campus.

Each focus group lasted between 40 and 70 min and was led by one member of the research team, with other team members present as observers. The questions in the focus groups were semi-structured to allow the participants to lead the researchers into areas that were of most importance to them but included the following:

- In what ways does the university demonstrate awareness of LGBTQ+ identities? (Institutionally, professionally, and academically)
- Are there areas where the university is succeeding at being inclusive? Can you give examples? (Facilities, services, teaching, and administration)? Are there areas where the university could improve its inclusivity? Can you give examples? (Facilities, services, teaching, and administration)
- Have you accessed any support services at the university? (Personal, social, and academic) If yes, can you describe your experience? (Access, outcome, satisfaction, and personalisation)
- As a new LGBTQ+ student, what information would be useful for you to know?
- Where would you look to find the LGBTQ+ community? (Student Union, local community services)
- What does the word "belonging" mean to you? What helps you feel a sense of belonging at the university?

Each focus group was transcribed using the transcription tool embedded in Microsoft Teams, and, at the end of each focus group, one of the research team edited the transcript by listening back to correct errors and anonymise any identifiable data. The transcripts were imported into NVivo; each one underwent thematic analysis individually and was then analysed alongside the others to develop overall themes. The collected transcript data were first analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. This involved coding the data, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting the findings within the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Next, Bassey's concept of fuzzy generalisations was applied to draw tentative conclusions that acknowledged the inherent uncertainty and variability in social research. This allowed us to make meaningful statements about LGBTQ+ student experiences without overgeneralising.

The research was guided by the British Education Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research ([British Educational Research Association \(BERA\) 2018](#)), carried out with the approval of our university's ethics review committee. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymised prior to analysis.

This research did not attempt to provide findings that could be generalised. Whilst the data were collected in accordance with the ethical application made, the positionality of the researchers, all of whom had been students and two of whom identified as LGBTQ+, must be acknowledged. There is no doubt that something of their own lived experience at university and their support as academics for members of the university LGBTQ+ student community impacted their interpretation of the data. Whilst this is an obvious limitation of the research, it also provided a richness to the data analysis as the researchers were able to empathise with the students, and this aided the quality of the discussion in the focus groups.

3.2. Context of the Study

The research featured in this article was undertaken in a post-1992 university based across four campuses in England. The student population comprises a combination of

school leavers and mature students from a wide variety of backgrounds, educational and life experiences. The Table 1 shows the university's demographic data and the number of participants in each category:

Table 1. Student Population by Sexuality.

Self-Identified Category	Student Population	Percentage of University Population	Participants
Total Students	21,193	100%	6
Heterosexual	17,012	80%	0
Gay or Lesbian	279	1.8%	5
Gay Man	212	1%	2
Gay Woman/Lesbian	170	0.8%	3
Bisexual	860	4%	1
Preferred Not to Disclose	2109	10%	0

Of a total of 21,193 students enrolled with the university at the time of data collection, 80% (17,012) identified as heterosexual on registration, 1.8% (279) gay or lesbian (1% gay man and 0.8% gay woman/lesbian), and 4% (860) bisexual; the remaining 10% (2109) preferred not to provide this information. The university has an active staff LGBTQ+ network, as well as LGBTQ+ societies within the Students' Union across two of its sites.

4. Results and Discussion

By employing a social constructivist and interpretivist framework, the researchers were able to capture the nuanced and subjective experiences of LGBTQ+ students, providing a rich, detailed picture of their university life. This approach allowed for the identification of key themes such as the need for better access to information, the importance of visible signs of inclusion, and the necessity for comprehensive staff training. The use of Bassey's (1999) concept of 'fuzzy generalisations' enabled the researchers to draw tentative conclusions about the broader LGBTQ+ student experience, acknowledging the inherent uncertainties in social research while maintaining the study's trustworthiness. This methodology was crucial in understanding the complex dynamics at play and in making informed recommendations for creating a more inclusive university environment.

Thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts identified five key areas, which were being informed, the inclusive environment, accessing support, a sense of belonging, and suggestions for improvements called 'I wish'. To present and analyse the findings, this article will now reflect in turn on each key area in turn.

4.1. Being Informed

Alessi et al. (2017) observed that when LGBTQ+ students have to use energy to manage social stressors relating to their sexual identity, this results in them being less successful in their academic studies. It is, therefore, important that universities do all they can to mitigate against social stressors by giving new LGBTQ+ students access to all the information they need when they start university. When asked how the LGBTQ+ students learnt of events, activities, societies, and sources of support, participants all agreed that they would have liked specific information related to the LGBTQ+ university community as an applicant and then as a new starter arriving at university. Whilst no one said that the existence of a vibrant LGBTQ+ community would have swayed them in their choice of university, they agreed that knowing there was an LGBTQ+ community was an important signifier that the university was inclusive.

Access to LGBTQ+ community information was discussed as some participants experienced difficulties locating specific LGBTQ+ sources or resources. Participants were directed towards a generic student union site, but the LGBTQ+ sources often had names that were

not instantly recognisable as LGBTQ+ specific, such as ‘alphabet soup’. Participants felt that these names felt like an in-joke and so did not encourage new members to join, as one lesbian student stated,

As new students you kind of get told here’s a society page, here’s a student union page. And like, here’s everything you need to know but there’s nothing there . . . it’s hard to find where stuff that’s like related to you. Especially things with like crazy names that don’t really make sense unless you’re part of like an in group.

There appeared to be a tension too between information sources that were owned by the Student’s Union and those coming from the university’s student services. The university app helped with this, but information still remained quite disparate and scattered, as this gay male student observed,

I barely looked at it [SU website] when I first joined . . . I think they encourage you to download an app, the app which tells you what’s going on campus, I used that quite a lot when I first joined. I don’t know if it’s still going, but maybe just a tile on the app to see what’s what.

[Green et al. \(2020\)](#) advocate that leaders of universities should incorporate LGBTQ+ affirming virtual extracurricular activities into the campus experience to strengthen and maintain social support and community connectedness. Our participants would no doubt add that the advertising of such activities should be centrally located, clearly named, and easy to find to ensure maximum engagement from LGBTQ+ students. going on around on campus.

University social media channels were another means by which LGBTQ+ students attempted to stay informed of support, resources, or activities, but again, multiple platforms made it challenging for them to distil the LGBTQ+-related content. One mature lesbian student explained that they were part of a closed student Facebook group but felt that it was not suitable for their needs as it was so busy they struggled to keep track of some of the language used in the threads and conversations,

I couldn’t tell you what they talk about most of the time. Like I don’t understand it, I think I’m just too old and I’m not even old!

According to [Green et al. \(2020\)](#), universities should leverage social media to connect LGBTQ+ individuals to trusted, accessible, and affirming health and wellbeing resources. This comment from a mature student suggests, however, that universities should resist a one-size-fits-all approach to LGBTQ+ resources and recognise that mature LGBTQ+ students are likely to want a different university experience than their school-leaver counterparts. According to [Salerno et al. \(2020\)](#), it is important to acknowledge and understand the unique vulnerabilities of LGBTQ+ populations. They add that it is well-established that LGBTQ+ people face social disadvantages and mental health disparities. Therefore, universities must recognise this and make specific provision for LGBTQ+-specific resources to be easily accessible in one place so as to mitigate against the vulnerabilities this population experiences.

4.2. Inclusive Environment

After exploring how accessed information, the participants were asked next to explore what an inclusive university environment meant to them. All participants agreed that seeing LGBTQ+ flags, banners, and signifiers on campus helped them to feel included at university. However, two lesbian participants stressed that the signs and symbols were not enough in themselves and must be accompanied by celebrations and activities at key times of the year, such as Pride and LGBTQ+ History Month. One of the lesbians introduced the concept of rainbow-washing. The Urban Dictionary defines rainbow-washing as ‘the act of using or adding rainbow colours and/or imagery to advertising, apparel, accessories, landmarks . . . in order to indicate progressive support for LGBTQ+ equality (and earn consumer credibility)—but with a minimum of effort or pragmatic result.’ She stated,

I think sometimes we see the flags and we see banners up and stuff, but its rainbow washing. I don't know if people know what they're celebrating or what they're trying to.

According to [Lee \(2023\)](#), equality kite marks such as the Stonewall Diversity Champion Awards help signal to LGBTQ+ stakeholders that the university is a safe space in which to come out. Rainbow flags, pin badges, and lanyards can similarly signify LGBTQ+ inclusion. [Calvard et al. \(2020\)](#) state that LGBTQ+ diversity signifiers can influence a person's decision to come out, as they indicate the presence of other LGBTQ+ people and allies in the workplace. [Prasad et al. \(2011\)](#) concur but caution that even where an organisation has the best of intentions to create an inclusive workplace, symbols alone, especially when displayed once or twice a year during Pride LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+ History months, can feel half-hearted and hollow when there is an absence of meaningful policy, activity, or inclusive practice behind the symbols. [Payne and Smith \(2012\)](#) too stress that strategies that promote single days of visibility may not disrupt deeply ingrained heteronormativity.

The university had recently become the headline sponsor of Pride events in three of the locations in which the university was based. Participants said that this sponsorship meant a good deal to them and had led to a series of events in which the LGBTQ+ staff and student community came together. One gay participant called for greater involvement from allies and wished that Pride was embraced more by other university communities too. He said,

We are our own community. We are our own group. We do need our own events and our own things, but that's not to say that we can't integrate everybody into that rather than exclude inside in groups because nobody knows who it's for or what it's about.

He added that Pride could be a bigger celebration if other societies and groups acknowledged it too and stressed that the LGBTQ+ university community must then reciprocate by celebrating the key celebration dates of other marginalised communities. Research by [Calvard et al. \(2020\)](#) concurs with the view of this participant. They state that, for a university to be truly inclusive, overt symbols of LGBTQ+ visibility must form part of culture and policy that engages all university stakeholders in inclusive practice and genuinely celebrates diversity.

The existence of safe spaces on campus and online for LGBTQ+ students was important to the creation of an inclusive university environment. All participants agreed that there was an absence of LGBTQ+ options in the local area, such as bars and clubs, and as a consequence, the university LGBTQ+-specific societies and clubs had a heightened sense of importance to them socially. One mature lesbian, when asked if she would recommend the social life at the university to prospective LGBTQ+ students, stated,

I'd recommend the university, but I might say you'd might be better off going to Brighton or somewhere there's a bigger community.

[Ellis \(2009\)](#) found that universities tended to focus on classrooms as safe spaces but accomplished little in protecting LGBTQ+ students in social spaces, accommodation, or online. Whilst a university cannot be responsible for the prevalence of LGBTQ+ specific resources in the community in which it is based, it can, through its civic engagement, blur the lines between the university and the LGBTQ+ community within which it is located. Sponsorship of events such as Pride can help with this, as can involvement in and support of LGBTQ+ charities, events, and organisations. One participant cited an example of this where staff from the university were board members of a local LGBTQ+ charity that supported trans and non-binary young people, including students from the university.

The LGBTQ+ participants stated that having trusted people to go to was integral to the creation of an inclusive and safe university. Again, the issue of signs and symbols of LGBTQ+ inclusion was raised. Participants were adept at looking for clues among staff members that they were LGBTQ+ inclusive. Rainbow pin badges were helpful, and one non-binary student stressed that they actively looked out for staff who used pronouns in

their email signatures. Another student had learnt to trust their instinct and said that staff and other students needed to pass their ‘vibe check’ before they felt safe in their company.

Whilst the participants welcomed LGBTQ+ staff wearing rainbow pin badges or rainbow lanyards, they did not wish to see such symbols being more widely adopted by straight cis allies in the university community, as it lost impact and significance if adopted by everyone. A non-binary student stated,

I think if every member of staff were to put one on their lanyard it could be more hazardous than no one having it on to start with.

Lee (2023) states that signs of LGBTQ+ diversity, such as a rainbow flag on an office door or a pride emoji in an email signature, are a powerful way in which LGBTQ+ staff can disrupt or queer the cis and heteronormativity in the university workplace, and LGBTQ+ show LGBTQ+ students that they can approach them if they are in need of support.

Another way the LGBTQ+ student participants determined whether a staff member was an ally or, in the words of one non-binary student, a ‘safe person’, was whether, when introducing themselves, they used their pronouns. They added,

I think it would be better for like everyone to kind of be aware of things like pronouns . . . use their pronouns and to introduce themselves their pronouns just for normalisation. So, it would be good as a new student coming in to see like it’s an accepting environment.

When the trans or non-binary students were asked by the staff member which pronouns they used, this created even greater confidence that the staff member was an ally or LGBTQ+ themselves. The trans and non-binary participants admitted, however, that there was significant work to do before this became the norm in the university community. One trans student expressed frustration that even when staff were explicitly asked to use the correct pronouns, some still failed to do so,

The biggest issue I’ve had is like just staff not using the correct pronouns for me, despite me going on now for 18 weeks at them about it.

Poynter and Washington (2005) assert that university staff must allow students to name themselves and their identities, and these names and pronouns must be respected and adhered to. There is evidence to suggest that staff do not necessarily fail to use pronouns through carelessness, but instead they often lack confidence around the language of the LGBTQ+ community and so avoid it altogether rather than make a mistake. Marzetti et al. (2022) notes that heterosexual and cisgender university stakeholders often fear they ‘may say the wrong thing’, and this leads to an absence of discussion around LGBT+ issues. Training for staff is key here as ever more gender-diverse students enter our universities. We must ensure staff undertake mandatory professional development to ensure they have the confidence and understanding to appropriately address those within their classes.

4.3. Support at University

The experiences of participants in accessing support related to their sexual or gender identity were mixed at the university. Some participants perceived dismissiveness from staff when they reported homophobic or transphobic micro-aggressions from classmates. One non-binary participant described approaching a lecturer for help after encountering homophobic negativity from a peer. They stated,

I have flat out been told by one of the people on my course that I am absolutely delusional and that he will never respect like my identity . . . I did bring this up with one of my lecturers and it was kind of like, oh, I’ll see what I can do. But you can’t change someone’s mind.

The lecturer’s appraisal that they had to change the mind of another student in order to resolve this issue for the student is misplaced and suggests that this member of staff at least did not recognise their duty of care towards their student or the Equality Act (2010).

Ellis (2009) states that universities need to be much more proactive in addressing diversity issues, and this includes mobilising staff to oppose and challenge all types of homophobia through rigorous training and awareness-raising amongst staff.

None of the participants said that they had approached counselling or wellbeing services at the university for help or support that was specifically LGBTQ+ related, and all said they would prefer to access services external to the university for anything that was LGBTQ+ specific. One mature lesbian student perceived that the help available within the university was too generic. She stated,

I would look outside definitely. Mainly I guess because I don't know, If I was going to look for something support wise, I'd probably want to look for someone specialist and I'd probably want to search outside for that

Again, staff training seems to be key here, as there is a perception from participants that the university services do not provide the specialist knowledge they would need to be adequately supported. Another lesbian participant concurred and suggested the need to speak to different agents across the university was off-putting. She stated,

I think the issue of having to speak to multiple different people about which what to me felt like the same issue, kind of made it more lengthy, more difficult and more stressful. But I understand that like everyone has a different speciality and you kind of have to go through one to get to the other. I feel like if I hadn't been fortunate enough to have all three people in the same building at the same time with availability at that moment. I wouldn't have then gone on to the next step in the ladder. I would have just like probably dropped it because it felt like too much.

Ellis (2009) calls for a multi-faceted approach to creating LGBTQ+ inclusivity, including instigating sanctions for prejudiced behaviour and, most importantly, embedding LGBT issues within the wider practises around inclusivity across all the support services students access.

When participants reached out for help from their personal tutor, they reported generally positive experiences. One lesbian participant had been well supported and attributed this to the consistency of having the same tutor throughout their three years at the university. She stated,

I'm quite fortunate in that when I have reached out for help, I've had one person to speak to throughout my three years at uni and it's been consistent all the way through. I think that person is very attuned into what sort of support I need, and I get that support, I feel safe in that environment and can access the help I need.

Formby (2017) called for greater pastoral support for LGBTQ+ students. Noting the importance of the personal tutor, she advocates consistency wherever possible. This student had benefitted from the same personal tutor for three years and clearly felt safe with this person.

4.4. Belonging

The extent to which students adjust to university depends, in part, on their perceived quality of the interpersonal relationships and the extent to which they feel that they belong (Reeve 2014). The fourth area explored with the LGBTQ+ students was therefore belonging to the university. Ahn and Davis (2019) suggest that academic and social engagement, surroundings, and personal space are all fundamental to belonging. Participants in the focus groups were asked to describe what belonging to the university meant to them. Participants described belonging as a positive feeling that came when they perceived they were included within the university community. Whilst most of the participants did not necessarily perceive that belonging was closely linked to their LGBTQ+ identities, one mature student who identified as lesbian asserted that to her, a sense of belonging depended on finding other LGBTQ+ students and staff with whom she had common interests. She added that for the LGBTQ+ students, a sense of community had elevated importance,

It's really important to LGBT people in general to have a sense of community and belonging, and that isn't necessarily with like a group of other LGBT people, often is though . . . often people will seek to find it and when people are university they will often seek to find that community, sometimes for the first time . . . that sense of community is really strong because it almost feels for a lot of LGBT people, it can feel like a really, really strong sense of community and those experiences are really, really powerful.

According to [Evangelista et al. \(2022\)](#), the extent to which an LGBTQ+ student feels they belong to a university is linked closely to their academic persistence and well-being. They add that promoting belonging and positive identities in LGBTQ+ students not only validates their sense of self but can also mitigate against negative psychosocial outcomes. [Sotardi et al.'s \(2022\)](#) research in New Zealand found that LGBTQ+ students conceived of belonging differently to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. They found that achieving belongingness involved peers accepting all elements of the students' identity, including their sexual orientation, before they could feel truly valued and respected. They added that for this reason, achieving belonging may take longer for LGBTQ+ students than it may for their peers.

4.5. *I Wish*

The final area of discussion with the focus group participants was relatively open-ended in a section we labelled 'I wish'. Here, participants were invited to describe anything they thought the university might do to improve their experience as an LGBTQ+ student. There were a range of responses from participants, many of which involved revisiting topics raised in the previous sections. However, preparation for work placement or employment after university was an area in which all agreed they would welcome LGBTQ+ specific support. A gay student assigned male at birth captured the comments of the rest, stating,

Workplace education! LGBTQ+ students and what it can be like in the workplace and how to deal with the various different problems that might occur, that type of thing.

Others added that they would welcome support on how to be their authentic selves in the workplace and how they might navigate their initial interactions with employers or work-based tutors. This was particularly concerning for a non-binary student who planned to become a teacher, where the gender identities permeate all aspects of school life. [Fletcher and Everly \(2021\)](#), researching the life satisfaction of LGBTQ+ employees, explored the roles of disclosure and authenticity at work. Their results show that the perception of LGBTQ+ supportive practises in the workplace is directly linked with rates of disclosure and perceptions of authenticity at work and is indirectly related to employee workplace and life satisfaction.

The second suggestion for improvement related to accomplishing more to celebrate individuals at the university from a diverse range of backgrounds, as one lesbian participant noted,

I'd like to see more integrated celebration of people from different backgrounds as well, whether that's like LGBT or anything else . . . celebration of the wonderful, powerful things that that people from different groups do.

[Poynter and Washington \(2005\)](#) advocate cross-cultural, inclusive student communities that engage all students in celebrations of race, religion, sexuality, and other identities. They also recommend seeking opportunities to bring expert speakers to campus and seeking campus role models to speak to the complexities of intersectional identities. The UK's [Equality Act \(2010\)](#) legislates for equality and diversity based on protected characteristics such as gender, sexuality, faith, and race. Whilst this Act has helped provide clarity on who is and who is not a minority in need of protection from discrimination, it has served to create separate streams of diversity and inclusion work, which sometimes leads to tensions between protected characteristics, such as faith and sexuality. Research by [Valentine and Waite \(2012\)](#), however, showed that in reality LGBTQ+ people and people of

faith demonstrate an ethic of care towards marginalised others in recognition of their own complex intersectional identities. They found that people of faith had a commitment to compassion based on an essentialist conceptualisation of LGBTQ+ identities as something that individuals cannot choose. In common with our participant, Lee (2023) calls for a departure from protected characteristics towards a 'better-together' approach to equality and diversity, whereby marginalised communities work together towards a common goal of inclusion for all.

5. Conclusions

This small-scale research project with LGBTQ+ students at a large post-92 university in England identified key areas in which universities could provide a more inclusive environment for their LGBTQ+ students. The two research questions identified in the introduction have been answered as follows:

5.1. How Do LGBTQ+ Students Perceive Their Sense of Belonging and Inclusion Within the University Environment?

The university was shown to be a welcoming place for LGBTQ+ students. However, the enduring systems of power and knowledge in all areas of society prevailed, and identities and relationships that conformed to the traditional norms and values of heterosexuality, masculinity, and femininity were perceived by participants to be privileged. Even within a university culture that is inclusive and welcoming, opportunities must be provided for LGBTQ+ students to speak about their personal lives and identities authentically, and the university classrooms did not always feel like a safe place to do this. Whilst staff were generally helpful and supportive to their LGBTQ+ students, many lacked the knowledge and skills to confidently meet the needs of these students, particularly those identifying as trans and non-binary. Some trans and non-binary students expressed frustration that despite their repeated efforts, staff did not use their chosen pronouns or name in class. It is vital that diversity training provides all staff with the confidence to provide an environment that respects gender identity and ensures all students are treated with dignity and respect.

The LGBTQ+ students participating in this research struggled to know where to access LGBTQ+ related information at the university, as this seemed to lay deep within web pages and was spread across the Students Union and student services areas. The students would have liked information on the support and social opportunities in the local area but called for a single repository for information that avoided them actively seeking this or missing opportunities completely.

Where students had the consistent presence of a personal tutor, support was generally good. However, the sheer size of the university daunted some, and it was not always clear where and from whom students should access support. Some participants looked for signifiers of LGBTQ+ identities or allyship amongst staff. Signs and symbols of LGBTQ+ identities, such as rainbow flags and rainbow lanyards, were important to students when seeking a 'safe' person to talk to. A rainbow flag on an office door or a pride emoji in an email signature served to disrupt or queer the cis and heteronormativity in the university, and staff displaying such signs and symbols of LGBTQ+ inclusion were often role models to LGBTQ+ students.

Signs and symbols of LGBTQ+ inclusion were also important to students in reassuring them that their workplace was a safe space. As early as the application stage for a place at the university, inclusive kite marks such as Stonewall's Diversity Champion status indicated to prospective students that the university would be welcoming. Symbols that recognise LGBTQ+ Pride and History months on campus also helped the students to feel that they belonged, provided that there was evidence that inclusive policies and activities sat behind the gestures.

5.2. What Needs to Change to Improve the University Environment for LGBTQ+ Students?

Analysis of the student responses has led the researchers to make nine recommendations for the creation of LGBTQ+ inclusive university environments.

All university communities are different, and so, first and foremost, staff should engage in meaningful consultation with LGBTQ+ student societies to ensure that policies and processes are inclusive and students are heard.

Well-trained and confident staff are vital to LGBTQ+ inclusive environments. In-person mandatory training is needed in which staff are given the tools to create a zero-tolerance approach to LGBTQ+ discrimination, bullying, and harassment.

Training for staff should also include confidence and knowledge building on effective support for trans and non-binary students. Universities should develop a policy to support trans students who are transitioning, including information on confidentiality and the use of university facilities.

University systems and processes must enable students to simply, without barriers, record their chosen name and pronouns, and these must be adopted by everyone at all times. Cis members of the university should also be encouraged to use their pronouns to normalise the inclusion of these in common parlance.

The university should establish a single point of contact where LGBTQ+ students can report harassment or abuse. Where possible, this should remain constant throughout their time at university and be someone the student knows and trusts.

LGBTQ+ inclusion starts at induction, and so universities should ensure new students are signposted to local LGBTQ+ services and societies. Resources and support available in the local area should also be provided, and ideally, all information should be held in a single source that is updated regularly.

Where possible, universities should make sure that LGBTQ+ perspectives and identities are well represented within course content to ensure that LGBTQ+ history and experiences are represented in teaching.

Universities should celebrate LGBTQ+ key dates in the calendar but avoid rainbow-washing by ensuring activities and guest speakers are organised during this period. To support the development of community and a sense of belonging, students should have a say in the organisation and planning of events that are targeted for them to ensure they are relevant and inclusive.

Employability and work placement university heads should provide specific support for LGBTQ+ students before they embark on placements, work experience, or enter the workplace. This could include making introductions, coming out in the workplace, and networking. Universities may also develop a student leader programme that equips students in practice-based courses and in the final year of their courses with the skills and confidence to navigate the workplace and be their authentic selves.

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