

### Final Report: Coming out and fitting in: A qualitative exploration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer students' university experiences

Dr Michael Keenan

#### 1. Executive summary

The research explored the student experiences of LGBTQ identifying undergraduates in English universities using questionnaire and focus group methods. Specifically the research focused on the freedoms and constraints experienced by LGBTQ students in the everyday. In doing so the project made use of the concept of sexual citizenship (Richardson 2000, Seidman 2005) as a framework for reflecting upon student experiences. The research found that although many LGBTQ students focused on and emphasised the positive this positive was improvement rather than perfection. Universities were still experienced by many as heteronormative spaces which marginalised and stigmatised LGBTQ identities, constraining the everyday lives of many respondents. Seidman (2005) has argued that citizenship must move beyond toleration to equality, emphasising social equality rather than rights. This research found that although universities often spoke publicly of commitment to equality and LGBTQ rights this did not necessarily follow through on the ground in the everyday experiences of LGBTQ students. Initial recommendations are provided for the further incorporation of LGBTQ students into university life as full and valued members of university communities.

#### 2. Summary of project aims and objectives

The research aimed to explore LGBTQ students' experiences at university in order to improve understanding and inform policy.

In order to achieve this aim the project's objectives were 1. identify and explore LGBTQ students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in university life; 2. access and reflect on the ways in which LGBTQ students reflexively negotiate with experiences of exclusion or negativity; 3. engage with issues of student diversity and access in Higher Education. Utilizing an interactionist perspective the research focuses on constraint and limits of acceptance discussed in current literature on sexual citizenship.

#### 3. Outline of methodology and project timetable

This exploratory project focussed on narrative accounts of episodes of inclusion and exclusion during LGBTQ students' university careers. The research utilised two distinct but complimentary methods. A broadly qualitative online questionnaire with over 700 usable submissions and 5 focus groups with a total of 33 participants, which accessed group as well

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as individual narratives. This combination of methods was designed to access both breadth and depth in terms of the data collected in the research.

## Project timetable

Month	Activity
November – December 2012	Application for ethical approval from NTU.
December 2012 – January 2013	Setting up of facebook and twitter accounts. Initial emails to student societies and student representatives at all HEFCE listed institutions.
January 2013	First responses on facebook site.
February 2013	Discussed and agreed inclusion of questionnaire In project with SRHE.
March 2013	Publication of story about research on Gay News. Publication of survey on surveymonkey site. Second round of publicity – to all student societies, NUS LGBT and student pride.
April 2013	Contacting all available union presidents/LGBT and Welfare officers to attempt to reach beyond student societies. Some emergent data used in conference presentation to the Gender and Education Association.
May 2013	Undertook first 2 focus groups.
June 2013	3 <sup>rd</sup> focus group.
July –September 2013	Work on identifying further LGBTQ groups for focus groups. 3 <sup>rd</sup> round of publicity. Working on finalising contract for transcription.
October – November 2013	First transcriptions received. 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> focus groups undertaken.

	Survey closed on 24 <sup>th</sup> November.
December 2013	Transcriptions received. Presentation of research to SRHE NR conference. Acceptance of abstract for BSA 2014 conference. Invitation to submit chapter on sexual citizenship and LGBTQ student experience to edited collection.

Qualitative questionnaire responses and focus group transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis. Themes emerged through initial listening to recorded focus groups, and reading of text files. Initial themes referred to positive acceptance, invisibility, incorporation, heteronormativity, fear, expectation of negativity, 'banter' and labelling. Further analysis saw the emergence of specific 'types' of limiting practice on the lives of LGBTQ students. It is these which are reported below.

#### **4. Analysis of results**

This section presents some emerging findings from the project. Though many narratives were positive, emphasising the 'normality' of experience, and the freedoms and opportunities associated with university life, many students identified negativity. Indeed many positive narratives were positive while emphasising they avoided negativity, or ignored homophobic comments. With reference to the limits or constraints on LGBTQ citizenship at university, the research identified three specific types of constraint

##### *1. Open discrimination and violence*

Active and open discrimination and violence was discussed in a number of narratives. One student wrote of their experiences saying

One night the ring leader invited a group of guys who had been thrown out of the students union for violence and being too drunk into our flat, she then got them to bang on the door and shout slurs like 'lesbian and dyke' to me, they threatened to rape me and tried getting

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in through my window. I chased them away but after the boys had gone I went out to confront the girl who had started all the trouble, she hit me and pulled me outside the flat and continued to hit and kick me as well as trying to smash my head against the concrete.

Similar experiences of physical or verbal abuse were reported across the sample, Taulke-Johnson (2010) has previously illustrated university halls can be a place of violence and abuse, leading to the view that universities are not safe spaces (Ellis 2009). In the current research such experiences were not only in halls but also in classrooms and in student unions. Verbal abuse was more common than physical, however the possibility of both impacted upon respondents' feelings of safety on campus.

On an institutional level perceived disapproval was discussed. One focus group emphasised the barriers they felt were placed on their society. Others discussed rejection when universities refused to fly the rainbow flag. One institution was quoted as having felt the rainbow flag was 'inappropriate' for open days.

## *2. Marginality through absence/heteronormativity*

This experience of difference reflects views of higher education institutions as heteronormative (Ripley et al 2012). Here LGBTQ experience was marginalised through its invisibility. One respondent discussed their experiences saying

[There is a clear] focus on how race and gender plays into a history of oppression. However, the history of LGBTQ people is often totally disregarded. I really frustrate myself about it too, as I haven't ever said this to any of my lecturers because I guess I still have some internalised homophobia or something that makes me worried of being labelled the "angry lesbian who pushes LGBTQ issues at every opportunity"

This narrative illustrates not only that LGBTQ issues are felt to be missing from the curriculum and therefore unimportant, but also that their absence adds to the individual's sense that she herself is out of order in raising the issue with staff. This fear of being a stereotype illustrates the perception that such a stereotype still exists and that it is a 'negative' one, which separates lesbian identity from the mainstream. Richardson's (2004) discussion of sexual citizenship draws out the dangers of assimilation which pull LGBTQ individuals into heterosexual norms and values, rather than questioning and reorientating those norms and values.

Another example which eloquently brought home the difficulties LGBTQ voices and experiences being absent was –

I felt uncomfortable once because a teacher showed a clip of an actor and an actress. The teacher remarked that all the women in the room must have been drooling over the actor... and then said "oh and for the boys, the actress was hot too!" I guess it's not appropriate in the classroom to begin with, but I felt embarrassed. A few people knew I was bisexual, and I was terrified that someone would make a joke ... I felt the teacher's comments seemed to completely dismiss that anyone in his class would be LGB.

Here what is most notable is that an everyday experience brings marginalisation for this respondent who felt 'terrified'. Such terror is associated with perceived reaction from the heterosexist society which ignores LGBTQ presence. Ripley et al. (2012) underline the heteronormativity of the classroom emphasising that LGBTQ examples are seen as out of the norm.

### *3. Experiencing difference in 'positive' interactions*

This primarily occurred between close peers. Often examples were viewed to be positive, with respondents recounting people telling them they had never liked gay or lesbian people until they met them. Respondents also discussed 'banter' as a site of positivity. However this was also a site of marginalisation as the following example illustrates.

We were just going up the stairs and they shouted out 'here come the gays' yeh, ha ha, no, but they didn't have their keys and they were all drunk so, and then one them went 'the batty boys got the keys' and he [partner] didn't hear it, I heard it but I didn't say anything to him cos I knew that it's not really a nice thing to say [mmm] but there is actually no harm- I mean I genuinely, I'm not bothered by it, there's no harm in it whatsoever.

This narrative illustrates the continuing othering which LGBTQ students experience – even amongst 'friends'. It attempts to construct a positive story but also illustrates an awareness of negativity, even taking responsibility for the experience with phrases like 'I'm not bothered by it'.

On an institutional level respondents saw a focus on students to take charge of the 'LGBTQ' issues. Student societies contacted during the research were running helplines for fellow students, organising Pride and LGBT History month events, offering welfare and educational events.. Although the institutions were here not seen as rejecting LGBTQ, such activity highlights LGBTQ people as separate whilst broadly illustrating 'acceptance'.

## **5. Project conclusions/outcomes**

As mentioned above this is more of a work in progress report than a final report. Overall the study illustrates that students do see reason for positivity regarding their university experiences, however LGBTQ students continue to feel marginalised and fearful in a variety of university contexts. The findings illustrated above show that many university campuses continue to be both heteronormative and heterosexist. Despite universities increasingly engaging with LGBTQ equality in terms of admissions procedures and equality monitoring (partly due to legal obligation – Ellis 2009) this does not necessarily translate to everyday experience for LGBTQ students.

Seidman (2005) argues that to encourage social as well as rights based equality there has to be developments in three ways – (1) in the presence of and respect of LGBTQ voices and perspectives, (2) in a diversification of norms and conventions, (3) a valuing of LGBTQ culture and history. Similar developments are required in universities, for example advertising and marketing around campus should be more inclusive; LGBTQ voices need to be included in events which are not specifically LGBTQ, and more focus put on identifying and celebrating LGBTQ individuals who have contributed to universities. In short LGBTQ experience needs to be included in everyday business not added to it.

## **6. Summary of next steps planned**

### **6.1 Presentation of work**

Early findings from the work contributed to a presentation at Gender and Education Association Biennial Conference 2013. London South Bank University 23 -26: April 2013

A presentation on aspects of the research was presented to SRHE Newer Researcher's Conference 2013. Celtic Manor, Newport: 10 December 2013

3 presentations are forthcoming

1. Contribution to a future SRHE Access and Widening Participation event to present findings from the research
2. Abstract accepted for BSA Annual Conference 2014, Leeds University Apr 23 2014 to Apr 25 2014.
3. Abstract Submission to Troubling Narratives: Identity Matters. University of Huddersfield: 19th and 20th June 2014.

## 6.2 Publication of work

*There are plans for 2 specific publications from the research with more to follow*

'Experiencing acceptance and difference: Understanding the university experiences of LGBTQ students in England'. To be submitted to 'Studies in Higher Education'

'Sexual citizenship and the university' to be submitted for inclusion in an edited collection (following invitation) on "Where does theory come from in educational research? A compendium of practitioner projects"

## 6.3 Any plans to continue with the work or proposals for further research which might compliment this project.

I see two immediate areas for development of the research:

Firstly, despite the huge response to the questionnaire there are limits to the qualitative data which can be collected using this method. There is clear space for a larger interview/ focus group/ diary based study which engages with students more in depth to develop the existing data and findings

Secondly, the experiences of trans\* students would benefit from further study. This is an area which myself and a colleague would be keen to explore and we are considering the possibility of applying for scoping funds (for example those offered by the SRHE) to explore this option further.

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