

Misguided Tokenism: Issues of LGBTQ+ Inclusion at University

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Abstract

One in five LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus) people experienced a hate crime as a direct result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the UK (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017). This has been explained in research to be more likely to happen in a society that is structured favourably for certain identities or characteristics over others (for example, white, male, heterosexual). LGBTQ+ people are often subjected to harassment and discrimination as a result of beliefs and traditions held by wider society (Kelleher, 2009; Subhrajit, 2014). LGBTQ+ youth, in particular are at greater risk of numerous health and wellbeing issues, including harassment and discrimination and face various barriers in education such as lack of staff LGBTQ+ knowledge and lack of social support (Munoz-Plaza, et al., 2002; Toomey, et al., 2013). The majority of research into LGBTQ+ student experiences has been conducted in the US and that there is little research into the topic for UK students. The current study asked 59 students from four university campuses in the UK to reflect on their perceptions of inclusion of LGBTQ+ students at their campus. Data revealed the strengths and weaknesses that universities exhibit in the inclusion and treatment of these students including a need for staff training into LGBTQ+ issues, better gender-neutral facilities, and more effective recognition of LGBTQ+ events. Recommendations for improvements are made and future research is also discussed.

Key Words: LGBTQ+; tokenism; inclusivity

In 2017, one in five LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus) people who identify as male or female experienced a hate crime as a direct result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the UK. The number rises for people who identify as non-binary to two in five (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017). The Crown Prosecution Service (2020) refer to a hate crime as “*a range of criminal behaviour where the perpetrator is motivated by hostility or demonstrates hostility towards the victim's disability, race, religion, sexual orientation or transgender identity*” (p.1). Where society is structured in a particular way to privilege certain groups over others, those belonging to the “outgroups” may not only be more susceptible to hate crimes but also experience a sense of social exclusion (Bernstein et al., 2010).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes social exclusion as a dynamic process guided by unequal power relationships across four main areas – economic, political, social, and cultural – and that it results in inclusion/exclusion characterised by unequal access to resources, capabilities, and rights, which leads to inequality and negatively impacts an individual’s health and wellbeing (Mathieson et al., 2008). There are two types of exclusion recognised by WHO: Active Exclusion – in which exclusion is direct and intentional and usually the result of discriminatory actions based on gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, or class; and Passive Exclusion – which arises indirectly, usually as a knock-on effect of decisions made in institutions, or as an oversight of diversity (Mathieson et al., 2008).

Being excluded from - or not actively included in - a community can have detrimental impacts on a person’s identity and sense of self (Bastian & Haslam, 2010). In a study of 72 undergraduate students by Bastian and Haslam (2010), it was found that people feel less human when they are excluded from a community and believe that those who are excluding them also view them as less human. These findings replicated findings from Sommer and Baumeister (2002), who also found that being ostracised was often followed by feelings of negative self-views. Being excluded, or not actively included, was also shown to lead to viewing oneself as cold, rigid, object-like, and emotionless which was in line with Kelman (1973) who suggested that denial of membership to a community of interconnected individuals is a pivotal property of dehumanisation. Furthermore, findings by Twenge et al. (2003) showed that people who were rejected by a group were less likely to display self-

awareness than those who were accepted and also were more likely to agree that 'life is meaningless' than those who were accepted. This study consisted of 54 participants, who were all undergraduate psychology students. Although the study had a relatively small sample size, it was thoroughly conducted and consisted of a total of six experiments, all building on the previous in order to gain the most information in the most effective way. Stringent measures were also taken to ensure that every participant received the same conditions within the study, such as the facilitator using a script for instructions and reading this in the same tone, from the same place in the room for each participant (Twenge et al., 2003). This study also argued that people exhibit these outlooks as a means of avoiding the experience of viewing themselves as dehumanised. In concurrence, being ignored or treated with indifference are both fundamental in the dehumanisation and social exclusion of others (Bestian & Halsam, 2010; Twenge et al., 2003).

LGBTQ+ people are often subject to prejudice rooted in traditions and beliefs about sexuality and gender, held by wider society, and are frequently victims of social and cultural injustice (Kelleher, 2009; Subhrajit, 2014). Arguably, the lack of social recognition hinders LGBTQ+ people from living a life in which their basic rights as humans are met (Subhrajit, 2014). They are very likely to experience harassment, discrimination and physical or mental abuse as a direct result of their sexual orientation or gender identity than those who identify as heterosexual or cisgender (Ellis, 2009; Kelleher, 2009; Subhrajit, 2014). This is often rooted in homophobia (a strong hatred or fear of homosexuality), or institutionalized heterosexism/cissexism (when heterosexuality/cisgenderism is assumed; Stonewall, 2020; Subhrajit, 2014).

Changes in UK law over the past decade has seen a movement towards the end of LGBTQ+ discrimination. Amongst the changes, more places of education, employers and public services are fighting to abolish discrimination and advocate for inclusion and equality for people who identify as LGBTQ+. However, for many individuals, changes in law have not been reflected into true equality, specifically for transgender and gender-nonconforming (GNC) individuals. In a study for Stonewall (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017) which surveyed 5,375 LGBTQ+ people across England, Scotland and Wales, it was reported that young people aged 18-24 were more likely to experience harassment with 56% of transgender

youths and 33% of LGB+ youths who are not transgender experiencing a hate crime or discrimination due to their gender identity or sexual orientation in 2017. The study considered hate crimes whether they were reported or not and looked at discrimination experienced in daily life in five main areas: business and services; renting or buying a home; public services; religion; and sport. The study did not, however, look at discrimination at school/places of education (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017). It is important that we understand the level of harassment and discrimination of LGBTQ+ people in these places especially since the study also found that young LGBTQ+ people aged 18-24 are more likely to experience harassment (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017). Looking at places like universities would be beneficial as people of this age make up a large majority of the student body at universities (UCAS, 2017). It is also particularly important that we explore LGBTQ+ experiences of discrimination at university as this is typically the first time that young people have been living away from their home and, specifically for young LGBTQ+ people, it is likely to be the first time that they have chance to explore their sexual or gender identity without the influence of family or secondary school which can be difficult environments in which to 'come out' (Ellis, 2009).

Literature shows that LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk of numerous health and wellbeing issues such as experiencing harassment, waning school performance, homelessness, substance misuse, and suicide ideation or attempts (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002; Kelleher, 2009). In addition, young LGBTQ+ people, and GNC people in particular, face various barriers in school such as fear of unfair treatment, lack of staff LGBTQ+ knowledge, and lack of social support or groups for LGBTQ+ students such as gay-straight alliance groups (GSAs; Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002; Toomey et al., 2013).

The majority of research into LGBTQ+ student's experiences has been conducted in the US and that there is little research into the topic for UK students. One study that breaks this trend however, looked at experiences of 291 LGBTQ+ students aged between 18 and 52 ($M = 22$) from 42 universities across the UK (Ellis, 2009). The sample was mainly made up of white participants (90.7%) but covered a wide range of subjects and disciplines. Data in this study was gathered through a questionnaire, as was chosen due to this being seen as an effective method in similar, published papers. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions,

made up of 5-point Likert scales, forced-choice (yes/no), and open-response boxes. They found that homophobia on UK university campuses is a significant issue and that universities are not being perceived nor experienced as ‘safe spaces’ in which to be open about sexual orientation or gender identity by LGBTQ+ students. Participants in the study reported events of verbal and physical homophobia from both staff and students in many capacities, such as in halls of residence, on campus, online and in lectures (Ellis, 2009). The study also reported that half of LGBTQ+ students had concealed their sexuality or gender identity to avoid harassment or discrimination. Similarly, two in five participants reported concealing their sexuality or gender identity from university staff in fear of it having negative consequences despite the study also finding that the majority of participants felt that the climate of classes to be accepting of LGBTQ+ people (Ellis, 2009). Regarding these aforementioned barriers faced by LGBTQ+ students, the experiences of these barriers may be internalised and so influence expectations of social responses throughout early adulthood and beyond (Cornish, 2012). The negative impacts of homophobic or heterosexist discrimination can continue into early adulthood and can affect the quality of life of young adults, as discrimination – not the nature of being LGBTQ+ – has been directly linked to long-term psychological impacts (Kelleher, 2009; Toomey et al., 2013). It is therefore critical that Universities promote inclusive practices in order to offer a safe learning environment for all students but also to role model best practice.

Ellis’ study (2009) looked at a wide range of UK universities, spread evenly across England, Scotland, and Wales, however, the study was conducted over a decade ago. It also only considered the perceptions of LGBTQ+ students and not of all students. While this is the demographic that was being studied, it did mean that those who were not ‘out’ about their sexuality or gender identity may not be as open to responding to the call for participants. It also means that there was no data gathered on outside perceptions of how LGBTQ+ students experience equality while at university, which could have given a unique view from onlookers (Ellis, 2009). Since the report was published, there have been major improvements in the way that we work inclusively in the UK, including the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2014, therefore it is plausible that the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in the UK have changed. The current research aims to explore the contemporary experiences and perceptions of equality and inclusion for LGBTQ+ students in the UK.

Situating the Research

The ontological stance of this research is working on the premise that how environments in institutions, that have been designed and operated for decades on the assumption that gender is binary, may currently present a problem to how individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ experience them. The ontological challenge of the 21st century institution is to design systems and facilities that recognise we have moved beyond the binary concept of gender and hetero-norms. In this research, it is intended to take a pragmatic approach to the problem of inclusion on university campuses which remains consistent with a socially constructed definition of gender that enables equality to be the privileged position. The role of participatory research necessitates the use of methods that enable participants to tell their story. A pragmatic approach would enable the participant voice to be part of the process of identifying areas for change and proposing ideas for enhancement. As a self-identifying member of the LGBTQ+ community, the researcher's values have led the current research in a direction to further understand the lived experiences of individuals within the LGBTQ+ community within Higher Education in order to highlight both the positive aspects and areas that could use improvement. As someone who identifies as LGBTQ+, the researcher understands that their values and opinions may have influence over the study and its execution. Because of this understanding, extra care was taken when designing the questions in order to maintain a neutral tone throughout as to not influence participant answers with the researcher's tacit bias.

Method

Design

A mixed-methods, online questionnaire was conducted with the aim of gaining an understanding of how students perceive the inclusion and equality of LGBTQ+ students at university.

Participants

Students across four campuses from universities in England were given opportunity to take part on a voluntary basis. In total 59 students completed the questionnaire. The age range was 18 - 60 and the sample comprised males (n = 9), females (n = 46), non-binary (n = 3) and

trans men (n = 1). Of those who participated, 22 people identified as a sexuality other than heterosexual and two people identified as transgender.

Materials

Each participant was shown a welcome page, an information sheet detailing what the study involved, and a consent form in which they had the opportunity to consent to taking part in the study. Participants were then taken to the questionnaire to complete. Participants were also directed to a debrief form which gave information on how to withdraw if desired and signposting for support if needed. All materials were written sensitively to assure anonymity could be assured.

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed through the University of Cumbria intranet and via email. Each participant was first shown the welcome page and information sheet to read and if they wanted to participate, they were asked to complete the consent form. Participants were then directed to the questionnaire. Upon completion, participants were asked to give final consent, shown how to delete their internet history should they wish, and shown a debrief sheet. Participants were then shown a thank you page. All data was transferred to a database to be analysed.

Ethics

The study was completed in line with University of Cumbria ethical guidelines and the British Psychological Society's guidelines for ethical practice. All data was anonymous, and each participant was asked to give a memorable keyword so that, if they wished to withdraw from the study, their responses could be sourced and removed.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative data was collected with intentions of taking findings to a deliberative inquiry. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the deliberative inquiry could not take place. The findings from this section of the study will be utilised in a second study in the future, in which a deliberative inquiry can be safely conducted.

The main themes chosen from the qualitative data were ‘Facilities’, ‘Staff’, ‘Awareness’, and ‘Participatory Decision Making’. These themes and the corresponding sub themes are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Main Themes and Corresponding Sub Themes

Main Themes	Sub Themes
Facilities	Toilets/Changing Rooms LGBTQ+ Societies/Groups
Staff	Lecturers Counsellors
Awareness	Events Support Services
Participatory Decision Making	The LGBTQ+ Community

The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2015). The researcher familiarised themselves with the data by reading through and then re-reading while looking to create initial themes from patterns in the responses. This was repeated per instructions set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) until four main themes were created with related subthemes. For the purpose of fitting into a word limit, only two themes are discussed.

Facilities

The first theme, Facilities, encompasses two sub themes: Toilets/Changing Rooms; and LGBTQ+ Groups.

Toilets/Changing Rooms. The overall discussion surrounding the topic of toilets and changing rooms was that participants felt there needed to be more done to make them inclusive of all genders. One participant noted that

“It was a massive step gaining the gender-neutral toilets at the campus, however, it would have been much more of a statement of care, worth and equality if they had been their own separate toilet cubicle or unit rather than just sticking the label on the disabled toilets.”.

Evidently, this campus has made some steps towards the inclusion of GNC students by adding a 'gender-neutral' sign to the accessible toilets. However, this gesture may have been better received by LGBTQ+ students had the gender-neutral toilets been their own unit, separate from accessible facilities, as suggested by participant's comments. Regardless of the fact that accessible toilets are already gender-neutral, irrespective of whether there is a sign on the door that says so or not (because an accessible toilet is about access, not gender), it is obvious that people who use accessible toilets do so out of necessity and to add to the footfall of able-bodied people using these units will inevitably have detrimental effects on the people who need to use them (Kerr, 2017). By combining the accessible toilets and gender-neutral toilets into one space, it can be perceived as erasing the needs of differently-abled people in favour for another marginalised group, while not necessarily benefitting either party (Kerr, 2017). Equally, it is important to have gender-neutral toilets, or toilets that recognise ones needs/gender, as not having these can leave someone feeling unrecognised and unwelcome which in turn can lead to unhealthy habits such as restricting food and drink intake, or 'holding on' for extended periods, which will have some serious detrimental effects on one's health and well-being (Slater & Jones, 2018). So, while this decision from the university to might have been done with the best intentions, it might have hindered two already marginalised communities, instead of benefitting one.

LGBTQ+ Groups. In line with the quantitative data that showed 47.62% of LGBTQ+ students would join an LGBTQ+ group or GSA if their campus had one, the qualitative data showed that students wanted their campus to have such a group or that there was one, but it was poorly ran. One participant said

“My LGBTQ Group was partially disbanded after our leader left for a different university. This means we have had no meetings or additional information since September”.

To see that this university campus had attempted to establish an LGBTQ+ group is a positive glimpse at something that universities are doing for their LGBTQ+ students however it has possibly been poorly run and members of the group had not had any information from September to February (the time of completing the questionnaire) since their leader left. Goodenow et al. (2006) found that LGBTQ+ students in a school that runs a GSA reported fewer suicide attempts than students at schools without such a group. They also reported less dating violence, less threats of or actual violence at school, and were skipping school due to fear less than students attending a school without a GSA (Goodenow et al., 2006). This study shows the positive impact that having a GSA can have on not only the mental wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students but also that having a GSA makes LGBTQ+ students more likely to attend school and therefore they will gain a better education as opposed to a student who is skipping school (Reid, 2020).

Staff

This next theme, Staff, encompasses two subthemes: Lecturers and Counsellor.

Lecturers. With the quantitative data showing that the average score given by participants for the inclusiveness of language used by lecturers being 7.75, it could be assumed that lecturers are being inclusive of LGBTQ+ students. Some of the participants reflected this sentiment that lecturers are inclusive in the qualitative data with participants stating that:

“I have lecture(r)s that are keen to learn more, and feel are happy to ask questions” d
“I feel that my course (Psychology) is very inclusive of LGBTQ+, and the lecturers are very understanding”.

This is in line with findings by Ellis (2009) who found that of all homophobic discrimination that happened on university premises, only 4.4% were perpetrated by lecturers, showing that the majority of lecturers are not being outwardly discriminatory towards LGBTQ+ students (Ellis, 2009). However, in quantitative aspect of the present study, many students noted downfalls in the treatment of LGBTQ+ students. One participant stated:

“I think that language used by lecturers need to be modernised as it may cause offence or exclusions to others”

While a second suggested that lecturers:

“include LGBTQ+ example in lectures”.

Young people, particularly those who are experiencing issues related to their sexuality and/or gender identity, are continuously in search of acceptance and belonging. Experiencing inclusive language in the classroom can create an atmosphere of inclusion that allows students to know that they are seen, and they are able to be themselves openly (Weinberg, 2009). Aside from the use of hostile language, such as homophobic/transphobic appellations, there are also many ways in which language enforces heterosexism/cissexism for example, using ‘woman’ and ‘man’ when referring to a person’s physiology (e.g., women’s bodies) or simply addressing a room as ‘ladies and gentlemen’ (Zimman, 2017). Weinberg (2009) suggests giving educators a list of inclusive language and behavioural guidelines to aid their inclusion of LGBTQ+ students. It is also suggested that educators have training on gender-inclusive language (Weingberg, 2009; Zimman, 2017). Gender neutral language, where gender is not an important piece of information in a sentence, is useful in avoiding the assumption of gender based on visual or auditory stereotypes. It is also useful to use gender-neutral language to replace words that are usually gendered (e.g., using ‘parent’ instead of ‘mother’ or ‘father’; Zimman, 2017). Another participant stated that:

“It’s clear that staff have limited experience about transgender experiences and how they can help, but they are keen to learn”.

If students are witnessing an eagerness to learn about transgender issues, then perhaps, universities should consider training their lecturers in the use of gender-neutral and gender inclusive language, to make all students feel comfortable and included.

Counsellors. University counsellors did not score well on the quantitative aspect of this study, with LGBTQ+ students scoring how comfortable they would feel discussing their feelings surrounding their sexuality or gender identity with a university counsellor an average of 5.32 out of 10. In the quantitative aspect of this study, one participant stated:

“I have accessed the universities mental health services which are difficult to access and very outdated in the strategies they use so I wouldn't recommend these to anyone”.

It is clear from this strong statement that the experience of engaging with the university counsellor has been a negative one for this individual and perhaps that is something that has been experienced by a majority of students, so reflected in the poor scores given to the service. There were, however, no specifics given to the nature of LGBTQ+ issues with regard to counselling at university, apart from one comment which was given in answer to the question ‘how might your university improve support services for LGBTQ+ students’ which said:

“If people knew where to go/who they could speak to for LBGTGA counselling”.

This shows that students are not always receiving information that they need about support that is available to them, specifically support for LGBTQ+ students. However, to take trend from the subtheme above, should university counsellors receive more training, they may be more appealing to students who need to discuss their feelings surrounding their sexuality or gender identity. In a UK study of school counsellors by Owen-Pugh and Baines (2014), participants reported feeling unprepared to work with LGBTQ+ students and the study recommended counsellor training with importance placed on inclusion and a need for trainees to be able to explore issues of sexuality and gender. In concurrence with this study, Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2015) found that, while school counsellors felt confident in working with transgender people, they felt that they lacked the clinical knowledge to help them professionally. They also agreed that ongoing training for school counsellors on the issues of the LGBTQ+ community should take place while outlining the role that school counsellors can have in reforming an institution wide approach to transgender issues. This study did, however, display an impact of gender and religious beliefs on the acceptance of transgender people, which should be considered when selecting a professional to work in supporting transgender students (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2015). These studies, together with the present findings, suggest a want from both counsellors and students for counsellors to receive training on LGBTQ+ issues in order to competently support LGBT+ students (Owen-Pugh & Baines, 2014; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2015).

Reflection and Future Research

The current study, while effective and revealing, could have been improved by some simple changes. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small for the spread of the recruitment

and a bigger sample size would have given more generalisability to the results. In addition, had more LGBTQ+ students participated, then the data yielded could have been more inclusive of all sexualities and gender identities.

While this research showed the inclusion shown to LGBTQ+ students, it is not representative of all minorities and further research should be conducted to explore the student experiences of differently-abled students, single parent students, ethnic minority students, and return-to-education students. It is also noted that people who identify as LGBTQ+, may also be part of another minority group and so differentiating by these may have shown more unique experiences of marginalisation. This study also only captures the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and it would be beneficial to study inclusion from the perspective of LGBTQ+ staff. Finally, the current research was intended as a two-step study; with step one being the online questionnaire and step two being a deliberative inquiry, in which the findings from step one are presented to a panel of university and LGBTQ+ community stakeholders in order to devise an action plan for bettering the student experience for LGBTQ+ students. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the deliberative inquiry had to be cancelled. It is the intent of the researcher that the deliberative inquiry will still take place in a future project and that the data shown here can be used to make improvements to the universities involved, once such a gathering is allowed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study was conducted through a mixed methods design, online questionnaire. Participants, from four university campuses in the UK, completed the questionnaire, which sought to explore the contemporary experiences and perceptions of equality and inclusion for LGBTQ+ students in the UK. The results showed that students were left wanting more from many aspects of their university in way of inclusion and equality. Participants expressed positively that they felt safe at university, that harassment of LGBTQ+ students was rare with most participants saying they would feel comfortable reporting harassment of a peer to a member of staff. Participants also discussed how their lecturers were open to learning about LGBTQ+ issues. However, they did feel that language used in lectures could be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ people and LGBTQ+ examples could be given more in class.

In contrast, participants reported a need for improved counselling services for LGBTQ+ students, better staff awareness, and for gender-neutral facilities that are independent of accessible facilities. LGBTQ+ events and societies scored poorly, with most participants saying that they did not think that their campus celebrated important LGBTQ+ dates effectively and most participants reported having no GSA on their campus or having one that was poorly ran. The idea of “misguided tokenism” was a strong theme with participants reporting that little importance was placed upon LGBTQ+ events, services or issues. One resolve to this issue that was expressed repeatedly by participants, is by including LGBTQ+ students in decisions that affect them. LGBTQ+ students want to be included in event planning of LGBTQ+ days, or societies, or facilities that are intended to enhance their student experience.

Overall, it is clear that the universities involved are making improvements to the way in which LGBTQ+ students are treated and included however there are still issues at hand. Universities should be an inclusive place for all students and there are some improvements that need to be made before that happens.

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