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Academic Development
Discussion Briefing:
**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,
and Transgender (LGBT)**
Perspectives and
Learning at University

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Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Perspectives and Learning at University

This briefing is designed to raise awareness of the needs of LGBT students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. To achieve this it:

- explores, from a student learning perspective, why academics need 'to bother' with the issue of LGBT experience of university study
- suggests readings and resources for use as part of academic development strategies designed to enhance learning and teaching
- summarises key themes in recent research on LGBT students' experience of being at university
- provides an up-to-date reference list for further study.

Definitions

Within educational research on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender experience, 'LGBT' has become a common acronym, illustrating a tendency to cluster communities which do not necessarily see themselves as 'all the same'. Until recently, in UK legislation, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) community was covered under separate laws to the Transgender (T) community. The Single Equality Act (2010) pulled this legislation together. For the purposes of this briefing, the LGBT acronym has been used unless it refers to a piece of research which specified that it only covered either LGB or T. In educational literature, T covers a broader constituent than in legislation. In educational literature T refers to transsexuals, transvestites and those who identify as of no fixed gender, whereas legislation refers predominantly to those who have undergone or are currently undergoing gender re-assignment.

Why bother?

The primary answer to this question is a law-based one. The Single Equality Act (2010) requires universities as public authorities to:

- eliminate discrimination
- promote equality of opportunity
- foster good relations between diverse groups¹.

As members of a protected characteristic minority (as defined within the Act), the LGBT community is covered by the Act.

Apart from this legal context, however, there is also an educational perspective: the outcomes of research on LGBT student experience of the learning environment provide the justification for taking the issue seriously even without a legislative requirement to do so. For example, research on 'campus climate' in the USA and Australia has indicated that LGBT students frequently report the following problems (Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998):

- fears for their physical safety
- frequent occurrences of disparaging remarks or jokes regarding sexual orientation
- anti-gay graffiti
- a high degree of inaccurate information and stereotypes reflected in student attitudes
- lack of visibility of gay role models or access to supportive services
- conflicts in classes regarding the topic of sexual orientation
- students feeling as if they need to censor themselves in classroom environments or academic activities for fear of negative repercussions
- lack of integration of sexual orientation into the curriculum.

Clearly, the way LGBT students experience campus at both interpersonal and structural levels has an impact.

Little research occurred with respect to the LGBT university student experience during the period in which Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988)² was enacted. Since the

1 The Single Equality Duty, which comes into force April 2011, also requires public authorities to consider reducing socio-economic inequalities. The Higher Education sector, however, is exempt from this part of the Duty as articulated in this piece of legislation.

2 Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) expressly prohibited: (i) the intentional promotion of homosexuality by a local authority; (ii) the "promotion in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship". This amendment was only repealed in Scotland in 2000 after a heated media campaign that called for a national plebiscite. It was repealed in the rest of the UK in 2003.

repeal of Section 28, UK based research has suggested that LGBT students value their universities as a place where they can be themselves, but regularly experience verbal harassment and anti-gay sentiment, particularly from other students (Valentine, Wood & Plummer, 2009; Ellis, 2009).

Additionally, in a recent study commissioned by the UK organization, Stonewall, it was clear that many Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual individuals anticipate that 'being open about their sexuality' will hold them back in politics, education, families, and the justice system (Hunt & Dick, 2008). If Higher Education has played any role in the development of such expectations, it is worth reviewing:

- how we teach
- what we ask our students to learn
- whether the environments we provide are 'inclusive'.

A question commonly posed is: but surely these are just wider societal issues. It's not really about the curriculum is it?

Because our curricular activities come from dominant norms within wider society that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) exclude others, it is about the curriculum. In as much as what we do in our curricular activities is representative of the dominant norm, they can leave minority groups invisible and their experience undervalued.

In this situation, we need to consider what impact there might be on LGBT students rarely seeing themselves reflected back in the curriculum. When students study a subject or discipline, being able to make meaning from what they are learning is, in part, affected by being able to identify with the material. Arguably, for many minority group students this is relatively more difficult than for the majority and can as such be considered a structural disadvantage.

What might LGBT students overall learning experiences be like if they were in a homo-normative rather than a hetero-normative curricular context? It is unsurprising that when asked about being on campus, LGBT students focus more on every day 'micro-aggressions'³ they experience, rather than the more abstract elements of structural disadvantage that exist through societal norms.

3 These are defined in Critical Race Theory as 'stunning small encounters usually unnoticed by the majority or normative group' (Delgado & Stefania, 2001). Such encounters are often played down by the perpetrators, but can have both an immediate and an accumulative negative effect on the recipients.

Imagine, for example, an academic who designs curriculum content from their research. Will this research necessarily have involved exploring beyond certain a priori assumptions about the discipline and its geographical and cultural location? If, in addition to the context of the discipline, the academic also subscribes to societal values on sexuality that question the appropriateness of LGBT expression, could the following happen?⁴

- the academic deliberately omits material relating to LGBT perspectives on a subject
- the academic omits material that portrays LGBT people in a positive light⁵
- the academic deliberately includes material where LGBT persons are portrayed in a negative light.

Yet, it is clearly more than just an issue of what is or is not included in the content of a course, as the scenarios quoted above show. It is also an issue of how we facilitate the learning environments in which the students function. For example, what sort of learning climate might we create if we:

- deliberately ignore matters of sexual orientation when they arise in the classroom
- don't react to derogatory remarks made towards staff, students and people outside of the classrooms
- behave differently to those we suspect of being LGBT
- feel that our beliefs make it imperative for us to challenge a student about sexuality?

The point about these reflections is: **In Higher Education, what we include and how we teach it are intrinsically interlinked and together form part of the basis of the dominant culture provided by the student's subject area and institution. If this dominant culture clearly negatively judges or omits the LGBT experience, it is perhaps not unsurprising that expectations within this group are likely to be more pessimistic than optimistic.**

With this assumption in mind, the rest of the briefing provides summaries of useful resources and research relevant to LGBT student experience as well as an outline of key themes in recent research on LGBT students' experience of being at university. These can be used within the provision of opportunities for academics to explore inclusive learning, teaching and assessment.

4 This material is adapted from: Kahn, 2006.

5 One needs to bear in mind the impact of legislative shifts in the last decade. Deliberate omission of positive images of homosexuality in the very recent past, however, has been viewed as legally sanctioned – whether or not this was actually how Section 28 was applied. (See: Local Government Act (1988) chapter 9: Section 28 @ www.opsi.gov.uk)

Reading and Resources for Initial and Continuing Academic Development

1. Taking LGBT Equality Further and Higher: A training and best practice guide for colleges and universities.

This toolkit was designed by LGBT Youth Scotland, NUS Scotland, communities and local government, and Equality Forward. Like the Race Equality Toolkit ⁶, it is designed to assist both organizations and individuals to reflect on the learning environment within the Further and Higher Education sector. It provides sections on:

- relevant legislation up to but not including the Single Equality Act (2010)
- learning and teaching guidance for best practice (Section 2.1 is specifically for academic staff and their teaching and learning environments)
- employment and management guidance for best practice
- culture, environment and ethos.

The toolkit is particularly good for exploring issues of negative stereotyping, assumptions of heterosexuality as an exclusive norm in the curriculum (via the omission of alternative images, viewpoints, narratives). It is available as a word document at:

www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/schools-and-education/colleges-and-universities.htm

2. Epstein, D., Flynn, S. & Telford, D. (2003) Silences and tensions in curricula and pedagogy at university. In their: *Silenced Sexualities in Schools and Universities*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, pp. 101-120.

This chapter, though partially out of date because of legislative changes since 2000, provides an excellent introduction to the impact of being homosexual in a context which assumes heterosexuality as the norm. Based on a longitudinal study undertaken with 12 gay male undergraduates at various UK universities between 1998 and 2000 (and supplemented by material on the lesbian and female student voice from UK, USA & Canada), it notes that the 'architecture of young people's sexual worlds is contributed to by two key educational environments:

- the structures and practices of the institution in which the students study
- the 'peer milieu' of informal social interaction.

6 www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/raceequalitytoolkit

Each of these operate (through structural and symbolic mechanisms) in a manner which regulates what is and is not acceptable within the represented community at a given moment in time.

3. Ellis, Sonja J. (2009) *Diversity and Inclusivity at University: A Survey of the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) Students in the UK*. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning*, 57(6): 723-739.

This paper reports on a study carried out between April and August 2006 that had an express aim of gathering baseline descriptive data regarding campus climate in relation to homophobia in the UK. 291 self-selected LGBT students from 42 universities across the UK made up the sample. Key findings were:

- although extreme acts (e.g. actual physical violence) are relatively uncommon, verbal harassment and anti-LGBT sentiments are prevalent (p. 735)
- fellow students were mainly responsible for incidents of homophobia, both through explicitly negative LGBT sentiment and also through resistance to visibility and inclusivity (p. 735)
- campus climate is controlling enough to encourage LGBT students to act heterosexual (p. 735).

As a consequence of these findings, Sonja Ellis posits that the problem is less to do with structural issues, curriculum content or staff conduct (as indicated by Epstein, Flynn & Telford, 2003), and more to do with student cultures (p. 736). Having said this, she acknowledges that embedding curriculum content, at the same time as zero-tolerance of all forms of prejudice on campus, should be the focus of culture change in universities.

4. Valentine, G., Wood, N. & Plummer, P. (2009) *The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff and students in higher education*. Equality Challenge Unit Research Report.

This recent Equality Challenge Unit⁷ publication explores the experience of LGBT Staff and Students in Higher Education (England and Wales only) and can be found at: www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/lgbt-staff-and-students-in-he. The key findings with respect to students were:

⁷ The Equality Challenge Unit was established in 2001 to promote equality for staff employed in the higher education sector. Its role was expanded in 2006 to cover equality and diversity issues for students as well as staff. Due to funding divisions, until 2010 its attention was focused on Wales and England. From January 2011, however, this remit is being extended to include Scotland.

- 46% of LGB students interviewed have received homophobic comments from other students and 8.9% from staff
- the majority of students described their institution as providing a safe space where they 'could be themselves'
- sexuality, homophobic discrimination and bullying have played a part in 20% of LGB students and 28.5% of Transgender students taking time out of their courses (figures which are higher than the national average)
- the threat of losing financial support from their families and of actually losing it remains a concern, though only for a minority.

General research literature focus

With respect to LGBT experience in Higher Education and the possible impact on learning, inferences can be drawn from more general studies of student learning in aspects of the learning, teaching, and assessment environments that might impact on persistence, resilience and visibility within the curriculum. Additionally, LGBT centred research has focused predominantly on two areas: campus climate and identity development. These are introduced below.

At a more theoretical level, 'queer critical theory', has also been used to interpret issues of pedagogy (See: Britzman, 1995; Loutzenheiser & Macintosh, 2004; Macintosh, 2007). Academics using queer critical theory, challenge the normative assumptions embodied within forms of curriculum and pedagogical relationships through problematising 'difference' and have influenced the debates on the hidden agendas of university learning environments (See, for example: Sumara & Davis, 1999). For an up to date review of the 'state of play' concerning LGBT student experience research in the USA see: Renn (2010).

1. Campus and classroom climate

(Useful summary: Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 1998; Ellis, 2009; Further reading: Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Epstein, Flynn & Telford, 2003; Goody & de Vries, 2002; La Salle, 1992; Taulke-Johnson, 2008).

The campus and classroom climate material is particularly helpful in pointing out how the campus environment in which our students operate and the different phrases we use on a daily basis can have a detrimental or beneficial impact. Particularly pertinent is research outlining common types of utterance and the implications of using them in the classroom climate. In 1992 La Salle, for example, undertook a textual analysis of 1,952 academic staff who responded to a survey on issues relating to sexual orientation. Comments were

divided into the five key categories below. La Salle noticed that the greatest proportion of comments from her evidence fell in the 'oppositional' category.

- advocating (of LGB rights)
- accepting
- neutral
- oppositional
- hostile.

Some aspects of the student learning environment seem to be more emphasised in the campus climate data. In short these divide into: disciplinary differences, the interface between religion and sexual orientation, transgender student experience, and age and inter-generational experiences.

- **Disciplinary Differences**

There is some suggestion in the literature that students in hard science disciplinary areas report more negative attitudes and classroom climate towards LGBT issues than in the other disciplinary areas (See: Epstein, Flynn & Telford, 2003; Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Toynton, 2007). More recently, Valentine, Wood & Plummer (2009, pp. 9-11) found that there were statistically significant relationships between LGBT experience of homophobic and biphobic comments and the disciplines they were studying, especially with regards to: medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences; agriculture and related subjects; engineering; business and administration studies; European languages; literature and related subjects; and education.

- **The Interface between religion and belief and sexual orientation**

Valentine, Wood & Plummer (2009) noted that potential and actual tensions were experienced when LGBT students and religious students were in public arenas (including the classroom) on campus. Indeed, earlier in this briefing, the work of Kahn (2006) was used to show how religiously-based prejudice might come to be played out in the classroom. While not wishing to negate these observations, one needs to be clear that the same rights accorded to the LGBT community are enshrined within the Single Equality Act for those of a religious belief (who are also identified as a 'protected characteristic' within the new legislation). Equally, observers need to avoid excessively stereotyping 'believers' as homophobes. There is clearly diversity within the religious communities. The issue is more one of who has power over whom in a given situation and how it is used. The list of possible actions cited by Kahn could be equally reversed and viewed as potential interactions that secularists would undertake in the face of religious belief including towards those in the LGBT community who have religious faith.

▪ **Transgender-students**

Transgender-students face particular issues within the LGBT community, with arguably more structural disadvantages in terms of appropriate institutional approaches to healthcare, housing, counselling services, toilets and university records systems (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis & Tubbs, 2005). Additionally, there is an appropriate perception among T students that academic staff are ill-informed or just ignorant about transgender (McKinney, 2005). Valentine, Wood & Plummer (2009) also found that transgender students encounter a far higher proportion of negative treatment than LGB students, including higher levels of physical threat.

▪ **Age and inter-generational experiences**

In the context of an increasingly ageing population, interest in the learning experiences of post 50-year-old adults in the context of higher education has emerged (See: Finsden & McCullough, 2008). This is part of a growing body of enquiry, which argues that to understand contemporary ageing, it is imperative that recognition is given to its diversity (Biggs & Daatland, 2006). What may be distinctive about older LGBT adults' learning experiences and how such distinctions play out in the classroom have yet to be mapped within the campus climate literature.⁸

Campus and classroom climate studies emphasise the way everyday communication disadvantages the LGBT student at a relatively more profound level than non-LGBT students. Derived from this are questions concerning the extent to which such a context directly disadvantages those students. Of course, the difficulty of focusing on the 'tragic' aspects of LGBT experience is that it can lead to an emphasis on a 'pathologised' model of the LGBT student body which is not necessary helpful (See: Taulke-Johnson, 2008). Indeed, it is clear that LGBT strategies for dealing with distressing environments (both overt homophobia and subtle normative pressures regarding appropriate gender behaviour) are nuanced and not all entirely negative in outcome (See: Scourfield, Roen & McDermott, 2008).

2. LGB Identity development

(Useful summary: Evans 1998; Further reading: Abes, Jones & McEwan, 2007; Carter, 1997; D'Augelli, 1994; Konik & Stewart, 2004; Loutzenheiser, 2005; Toynton, 2007)

⁸ This material comes from a personal communication with Chris McAllister, who is currently doing his PhD at the University of Glasgow on: Becoming a model of inclusion and openness? An exploration of the scope of adult and higher education in Scotland to create spaces of transformative learning for older LGBT adults.

Put simply, how an individual comes to think and feel about their sexual orientation can be mapped out as a series of steps. For the LGB individual these steps might include a shift from confusion to tolerance to acceptance to pride to synthesis. In terms of the impact on learning, the key issue here is the role that shame might play in different stages of identity development. Arguably, in the early stages of identity development a student may feel less confident in general as a result of discomfort with sexual identity. This might account for higher drop out rates of LGB students as reported in Loutzenheiser (2005).

This is seductively coherent as a process but depends on a seemingly fixed notion of gender and sexuality. This need not, however, be entirely negative. Such an approach might appeal to those in the sciences precisely because it does allow for a possibility of essentialism (See: Toynton, 2007). Additionally, for some students, though identity development is painful, they can also develop relatively more mature ways of understanding their environments (reported in Konik & Stewart, 2004).

Most of the research has come from either an Australian or an American context and the earlier articles tend to be focused on male experience (although this is changing). Research that looks at the intersections of different identities has added complexity to the simple structures (See: Abes, Jones & McEwan, 2007).

In summary, the evidence of LGBT student experience suggests that relative to other heterosexual students, there are more challenges to negotiate while at university, including high levels of banal homophobia and biphobia, and relative invisibility in both the curriculum and the structures of higher education. The aspirations embedded in the Single Equality Act, to eliminate discrimination, reduce disadvantage, and foster good relations between students and with staff, are core to learning, teaching and assessment design which has inclusion at its heart. LGBT student experience provides a unique view of a community where diversity is supposed to be valued and the areas institutions might tackle to achieve such an aspiration.

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