

## **How should we 'care' for LGBT+ students within higher education?**

FORMBY, Eleanor <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4137-6592>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/16470/>

---

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

### **Citation:**

FORMBY, Eleanor (2017). How should we 'care' for LGBT+ students within higher education? *Pastoral care in education: an international journal of personal, social and emotional development*, 35 (3), 203-220. [Article]

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

## **How should we 'care' for LGBT+ students within higher education?**

Eleanor Formby

Sheffield Hallam University

Arundel building

City campus

Howard Street

Sheffield S1 1WB

0114 225 6065

e.formby@shu.ac.uk

### **ABSTRACT**

This article draws on a recent UK research project about lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT+) perspectives on university to examine the implications for pastoral care and other service provision on campus. In a departure from previous scholarship that has tended to understand LGBT+ students as 'vulnerable' and/or needing 'support', it argues that university spaces should be (re)framed in a way that moves beyond (only) personal or individual 'care'. The article outlines some of the issues that LGBT+ students may face under the following headings: Curriculum and course content; Discrimination, prejudice and bullying; Facilities and service provision on campus; A continuum of experiences. Following these, a final section draws some conclusions and implications for practice in higher education.

### **KEYWORDS**

Gender identity; Homophobia; Sexuality; Support; University

## INTRODUCTION

Within research on the lives of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people, school-based experiences of homophobic, (and to a lesser extent) biphobic and transphobic (HBT) bullying often dominate (Airton, 2013; Formby, 2015). Whilst there is increasing policy, practice and lay awareness of HBT bullying, growing academic arguments also point to the potential downside of the prevailing 'victim' discourses that this tends to result in (Ellis, 2007; Formby, 2015; Rofes, 2004). The field of literature on LGBT experiences of higher education (HE) is smaller but shows a somewhat similar trend in its focus on experiences of discrimination, prejudice and bullying on campus. In the United States in particular, a focus on 'campus climate' – defined by Rankin (2005: 17) as "the cumulative attitudes, behaviours, and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential" – tends to emphasise negative experiences. This is perhaps understandable given evidence on the potential impact of such experiences (NUS, 2014).

In this paper I will explore four themes related to HE: Curriculum and course content; Discrimination, prejudice and bullying; Facilities and service provision on campus; A continuum of experiences. For information, I use 'trans' as an umbrella term that includes a diverse range of gender expressions and embodied experiences. Similarly, research participants identified with a range of gender and sexual identities, including (but not limited to) asexual, bisexual, fluid, gay, genderless, gender neutral, lesbian, non-binary, panromantic, pansexual, trans, transgender, and queer. I therefore use the plus symbol added to the common LGBT acronym to mark these additional identities, but when referring to other research use the acronyms they adopted, i.e. LGB for lesbian, gay and bisexual; LGBT for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans(gender); LGBTQ for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans(gender) and queer (Keenan, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Self and Hudson, 2015) or questioning (METRO, 2014).

Valentine, Wood and Plummer (2009) reported that sexuality and homophobic discrimination or bullying resulted in 20% of LGB students in their research taking time out of their course. Similarly, 29% of trans students had taken time out due to trans-related issues, transphobic bullying or harassment (Valentine et al, 2009). These findings were later supported by National Union of Students (NUS) research (2014) which found that LGBT students who had experienced homophobic or transphobic harassment were 2-3 times more likely to consider leaving their course. Within this, a feeling of 'not fitting in' was the main reason for 56% of LGB students considering dropping out. Over half (51%) of their trans respondents had also seriously considered dropping out of their course (NUS, 2014). European research (Formby, 2014) has also suggested that poor experiences can lead to students missing classes, changing university and/or dropping out altogether. If for no other reason than retention rates, therefore, the experiences of LGBT+ students should be of interest to universities.

In American research examining campus-based LGBTQ centres, "nearly all participants responded that a primary function of the center space was to create and provide respite/safety from heterosexism and cissexism" (Self and Hudson, 2015: 227). 'Safety' here equates with the avoidance of 'harm', and visibility, as well as connection and community belonging (Self and Hudson, 2015). 'Safety' is therefore not just about an absence of harm, but is "far more nebulous than this and relates to broader societal 'acceptances'... [and] possibilities of enacting LGBT identities in taken for granted, indeed ordinary, ways" (Browne and Bakshi, 2013: 135-136). This is noticeably similar to how LGBT people have talked about LGBT (often scene-based) spaces in the UK (Formby, 2017). Other 'safe zones' have also been implemented on American campuses to try and raise the visibility and inclusion of LGBT+ students (Case, Kanenberg and Erich, 2010; Evans, 2002). Safety is often equated with a metaphorical 'home' (Formby, 2017; Self and Hudson, 2015), but I would argue that this 'home' is about more than individual 'support', as specific spaces can engender feelings of connection, belonging and/or community without people necessarily being framed as 'vulnerable'. However, differential access to feelings of 'safety' or 'home', and indeed to

university itself, remind us of the importance of understanding experiences as influenced by intersecting aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, gender, social class, and so on. LGBT+ students should therefore not be seen as a homogenous group. Falconer and Taylor (2016: 7), for example, provide strong evidence of the complexities and particularities of university experiences among religious LGBT students, where “conflicts continued to play out during their period of higher education, compounding feelings of insecurity and exclusion”.

Despite evidence of negative experiences, in NUS (2014) research LGBT students overall still had a positive view of HE, and tended to find university a ‘safer space’ than the rest of society. Earlier research also found that the majority of students said their institution had enabled them to ‘be themselves’ by coming out as LGB or trans (Valentine et al, 2009). This could indicate that students tend to minimise their negative experiences, as some research suggests (Keenan, 2015a; Msibi and Jagessar, 2015), perhaps because they want to believe that university is a ‘safer space’. In part this may also be because people and spaces of higher education are erroneously conflated with ‘tolerance’, so that “events which can be read as homophobic... can actually be framed, experienced and made sense as not” (Taulke-Johnson, 2008: 128). However, perceptions of university as ‘safer’ than elsewhere clearly suggest that people have negative expectations of wider society (see Formby, 2017 for further discussion).

A body of work that critiques the notions of vulnerability and support within education contexts can also be applied to the experiences of LGBT+ students. In their work, Ecclestone and Brunila (2015: 485) have critiqued preoccupations with social justice that “privilege attention to psycho-emotional vulnerabilities”, which they link to a “wider therapisation of popular culture and everyday life” (Ecclestone and Brunila, 2015: 485). Drawing on Ecclestone’s (2007) work, Leathwood and Hey (2009: 432) draw attention to the need for HE practitioners to “attend to the needs of students and, yet, to avoid constructing them as ‘diminished’ subjects”. However, they also caution that critiques such as

Ecclestone's may attempt to instil an erroneous "distinction between the public and the private, with emotions constructed as private (and/or pathological) inner possessions of the individual", and positioning "'support' as the opposite of 'challenge' and 'hard critical thinking'" (Leathwood and Hey, 2009: 435).

In the context of the above discussion, I am interested in the implications for pastoral care for LGBT+ students in HE. I argue for the need to move away from seeing young LGBT+ people as inherently 'vulnerable', at the same time as asking questions about what we (who work in HE) could and should do to improve LGBT+ inclusion at universities. In particular, I will draw on data from recent #FreshersToFinals research to examine how university spaces might be (re)framed in a way that moves beyond personal/individual 'support' or 'care'. The article presents research results in the context of existing evidence, and examines these in light of broader scholarship on pastoral care within education.

## **THE RESEARCH**

The #FreshersToFinals project was designed to address the relative gap in UK evidence concerning LGBT+ people's perspectives on HE. It aimed to identify the current 'state of play' of existing research in the field via an international literature review, and to discuss this literature with those with direct experience of considering and/or attending university. The literature review findings were therefore explored within consultation groups to see what, if anything, participants could add to the dominant themes, drawing on their own perspectives and experiences. Consultation data was thus used to 'test' and expand existing literature, particularly as much of it emanates from America which may or may not be relevant to a UK context.

### **Stage 1:**

A literature review was conducted using systematic methods. The literature search used various databases (including, for example, ASSIA, ERIC, ProQuest and Web of Science) to

search for material across a range of subject disciplines, such as (but not limited to) education, sociology and psychology. The following search terms were used:

- Bisexual + further stud\*, higher education, university, campus or college
- Gay + further stud\*, higher education, university, campus or college
- Homosexual + further stud\*, higher education, university, campus or college
- Lesbian + further stud\*, higher education, university, campus or college
- LGBT + further stud\*, higher education, university, campus or college
- Sexual minorit\* + further stud\*, higher education, university, campus or college
- Trans\* + further stud\*, higher education, university, campus or college.

In total, 1441 references were found, and the English language results were considered for inclusion based on their relevance to the project and geographical location. Where possible, UK sources were focussed on. Snowballing was also used, following up references from those found and read. Overall, 47 references were read in full, supplemented by literature already known to the author. Those excluded included those dated prior to 2002 and those deemed less relevant to a UK context, for instance those focussing on religious institutions in America. Literature included used a range of research methods, including both qualitative and quantitative (nothing was excluded on the basis of its methodology).

## Stage 2:

Following on from Stage 1, a small number of consultation events with LGBT+ students and (non-student) young people (and staff members who worked with them) were held to further explore the themes identified in the literature review. These groups were pragmatically selected, drawing on the professional networks of the author (i.e. existing groups and youth workers were contacted to see if they would be willing to support the research). There were open invitations for people from the groups to participate, with no specific target numbers. In

the end, one group was quite large and the other two relatively small. Staff members and volunteers were included where they supported the youth groups (the older/students group did not have such workers) to enable the group members to feel ‘safe’ with the unknown researcher, and because of the insights they might be able to offer. For each group, the research was explained, and the literature themes outlined. Participants were then encouraged to comment on these themes and any related gaps, identifying how their experiences and perceptions supported or differed from the existing evidence.

The largest event was with current students attending university; the two smaller group discussions took place within existing LGBT+ groups that were largely made up of people not attending university (see Table 1). I do not claim that the results from these consultation groups are representative or generalisable (in particular there were limitations to the geographical spread of the groups), but the participants made original contributions and valuable additions to the literature that has enabled a broader scope for this article. Each consultation group was digitally recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analysed thematically, using principles of framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) to identify themes within question areas for each research encounter. These were then synthesised as a whole dataset, ensuring that data were not taken out of context.

Table 1: Consultation group details

Group	No. of students or young people aged 18-24	No. of staff/volunteers working with young people
1: LGBT+ university students	28	-
2: LGBT+ youth group	8	5
3: College-based LGBT+ group	3	2
Total	39	7



The study was approved by the university's research ethics committee, and adhered to guidelines of the British Sociological Association and the National Children's Bureau. Ethical protocols about anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, rights to withdraw, and secure data storage were explained and followed at all times.

Throughout the following section, I draw on findings from the literature review and data from the consultation stage, using (anonymised) illustrative extracts from participant comments. Unfortunately, the audio recordings did not allow me to distinguish participants clearly enough to assign individual quotes. As the article focuses on issues at university, data from Group 1 is drawn on more heavily (data from Groups 2 and 3 elicited more information on university choice-making that has been reported elsewhere).

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

From the literature review stage of the research I identified five overarching themes relating to university choice-making; financial issues; curriculum and course content; discrimination, prejudice and bullying; facilities and service provision on campus (including accommodation issues and careers-related issues). In the remainder of this article I focus on the latter three issues that are most pertinent to pastoral care and other university services.

### **Curriculum and course content**

A key component of university life is inevitably the subject(s) students study, and LGBT+ students could face difficulties here. Ellis (2009) reported that LGBT issues were inadequately represented in the curriculum, and only a minority of her respondents felt comfortable raising these subjects in class. In other research, respondents did not see LGB, and particularly trans, experiences and history reflected in their curriculum (NUS, 2014). However, responses were somewhat less negative in other large-scale research by METRO (2014), who asked respondents how 'LGBTQ issues, people and their achievements' were

'handled' on their course, and where just under a quarter (23%) said they were 'ignored or not mentioned' or 'referred to negatively' (though this proportion was higher (31%) for transgender respondents). In part, this may be due to variable levels of staff confidence, discomfort and/or ability (Davy, Amsler and Duncombe, 2015; Formby, 2013), which means that it is not necessarily easy to improve such circumstances in the immediate future.

Consultation participants animatedly argued that curriculum invisibility was an issue, summed up by one participant who described their course content as "pale, male, stale". Similarly, another commented:

"Same old straight, white men, [we] need to study [the] achievements of others"  
(Participant, group 1).

Students were able to provide many examples of the ways in which they felt "forgotten" within the content of their learning, or at best, "tagged on":

"No queer research is ever discussed, even in social psychology, LGBT issues aren't mentioned. Research into relationships is always hetero[sexual] focussed"  
(Participant, group 1)

"No consideration for LGBT+ issues when studying politics and public policy. Things like the NHS, agenda setting, etc didn't even mention LGBT issues. Also, no-one else in the class understands why this is hard" (Participant, group 1)

"It feels like it is just an extra and not something vital, like it should be mainstreamed. It should be throughout all our learning, both in social science subjects and in STEM subjects, and it's persistently upsetting that it's like 'oh, I guess we can talk about this

weird group of people if you're into it' on the end of the whole course" (Participant, group 1).

In subjects where participants did not necessarily expect to learn about LGBT+ identities or histories, examples used could still be experienced as inaccurate and/or insensitive, supporting evidence above on a lack of awareness about sexual and/or (trans)gender identity:

"In mathematics... I do think some of the examples used are a bit insensitive. I got very annoyed recently when my statistics course notes used gender as an example of a binary statistic. It literally said 'An example of statistics in this way could be gender because all participants in the survey are either male or female'. That's so annoying" (Participant, group 1).

### **Discrimination, prejudice and bullying**

The second key theme identified in the literature and discussed with participants concerned experiences of discrimination, prejudice or bullying at university. Previous UK evidence has highlighted the existence of sexism, misogyny and homophobia on campus, which adversely influences LGBT students' experiences (NUS, 2012a). Research by Ellis (2009) reported that just under a quarter (23%) of students surveyed had experienced homophobic harassment or discrimination at least once, usually from other students. Moreover, over half (54%) of respondents had deliberately concealed their sexual or gender identity, leading her to conclude that because the prevalence of homophobic incidents on campus is quite low "LGBT students do not particularly perceive a 'climate of fear', but [still] actively behave in ways that respond to such a climate" (Ellis, 2009: 733). Valentine et al's (2009) research found that trans students encountered a higher proportion of negative treatment, including physical threat, than LGB students. Nearly two-thirds (60%) of their respondents were not out to teaching staff because they were cautious about or feared discrimination (Valentine et

al, 2009). More recent research has also highlighted the experiences of trans students, identifying that just 21% felt completely safe on campus; by contrast, 37% of LGB students felt completely safe (NUS, 2014). Overall, one in five LGB and one in three trans respondents had experienced at least one form of bullying or harassment on campus, but levels of reporting of verbal or physical harassment, threats and intimidation were low (NUS, 2014).

Research by Keenan (2014) suggested that whilst universities often speak publically of their commitment to equality and diversity, including LGBT rights, this does not necessarily match the everyday lived experience of LGBT+ students, with incidents of verbal abuse and physical violence still apparent. Though the former were more common than the latter, both still influence students' perceptions of safety on campus. As with Taulke-Johnson's (2010b) earlier research, some language that could be described as offensive was minimised and explained as 'banter', but Keenan (2015a) notes that this still objectifies and 'others' LGBTQ students, and is therefore a limited form of inclusion, or, what he has called elsewhere (2015b), 'inclusive exclusion'. In Keenan's (2015a, 2015b) research, experiences included being: 'collected' as an 'exotic' friend; seen as an information source; and responsible for 'fitting in', despite potentially offensive 'banter'. The occurrence of such 'banter' was also illustrated within the #FreshersToFinals consultation:

“[I experience] ‘lesbian’ banter but I’m confident enough to say the ‘joke’ is enough”  
(Participant, group 1).

Other consultation participants also identified problematic language use that has been well-documented at school-level (e.g. see Guasp, 2012, 2014; Thurlow, 2001):

“Problematic language [such as] ‘that’s so gay’” (Participant, group 1).

More widely, participants identified other experiences of what they saw as prejudice, discrimination or intolerance towards LGBT people:

“Clearly still prejudice and discrimination within universities... LGBT people looked down upon more than straight peers” (Participant, group 1)

“Outside of LGBT societies and safe spaces, most people are subtly intolerant” (Participant, group 1).

This perceived intolerance was one of the reasons participants engaged in self-censorship (Formby, 2017) or identity management (Formby, 2013) practices. As such, experiences of, or fears about, prejudice and discrimination were identified as an issue that impacted upon varying levels or times of ‘outness’:

“[It is] still difficult to be out to random people like housemates and seminar groups” (Participant, group 1)

“[I] work in a gay bar but certain people I don’t tell as I get scared” (Participant, group 1).

NUS (2012b) research has suggested that initiations and the prevalence of ‘lad culture’ within sports teams can prevent LGBT students from joining sports teams, and related concerns were also evident within the consultation:

“Behaviour modification is one of my biggest issues, I’m still not totally out to my sports team” (Participant, group 1).

As previous research has identified (Formby, 2015), misnaming and mispronouncing was a particular issue for students who identified as trans or gender non-binary, which was thought to be symptomatic of a wider lack of awareness or understanding about gender identity:

“Sexuality very accepted. Gender identity, expression and presentation much less accepted” (Participant, group 1).

This lack of understanding and/or acceptance was identified among both students and staff, supporting previous evidence on trans young people’s experiences (Formby, 2015):

“Assumptions of gender made by [campus] bar staff and lecturers, as well as occasional slurs used in lectures” (Participant, group 1).

Whilst Stroup, Glass and Cohn (2014) have suggested that bisexual students face particular challenges in establishing friendships and making decisions about whether or when to disclose their identity (in comparison with lesbian or gay students), the experiences of asexual people were specifically highlighted in the #FreshersToFinals consultation stage. Comments on the erasure of asexual identities were similar to evidence on bisexual erasure:

“[The] main issue is asexual erasure, people don’t know what it is and get confused [or] think it’s weird if I explain. Discrimination I’ve faced is more ignorant than malicious” (Participant, group 1).

However, there was specific feedback on LGBT spaces feeling sexualised (see also Formby, 2017), which could dissuade those who identified as asexual from participation:

“I’m an asexual and I’ve found that LGBT spaces are quite sexualised and for me that’s like, it’s really off-putting” (Participant, group 1).

## **Facilities and service provision on campus**

For the third theme, I grouped together a series of issues under the heading of facilities and services, including accommodation. Although Msibi and Jagessar (2015) identified that university residences (in South Africa) can provide opportunities for 'freedom' and independence from family, Taulke-Johnson (2010b) found evidence (in the UK) of vandalism being used to permanently brand participant's doors with anti-gay sentiments, causing some to voluntarily transfer university accommodation, and others to modify their behaviour in order to not allow 'gayness' to have a visible presence in the accommodation. Valentine et al (2009) also reported that students can experience homophobic abuse in university accommodation, with some of their participants describing what they felt were inappropriate responses to this, when institutions suggested that they (rather than the perpetrators) transfer accommodation. They also identified that accommodation can be a specific concern for trans students, because of some institutions' gender-based housing practices that may include shared bathrooms (Valentine et al, 2009). Discussions about whether 'victims' or 'perpetrators' should be 'forced' to move accommodation featured within the consultation too, suggesting that universities need to be mindful of the complexity of tackling cases of abuse or discrimination in campus halls of residence. Some participants in Valentine et al's (2009) research suggested that they would have liked to be able to request 'gay-friendly' housing, but others were clear that they did not want to be 'segregated' in specialist housing, and wanted institutions to work to create safe, inclusive spaces for all. Very similar opinions were voiced within the consultation.

The consultation uncovered many issues related to housemates' attitudes or misunderstandings, particularly of trans students, which regularly highlighted the lack of choice around some university accommodation:

“We had one person [in this group], and I know they won’t mind me telling the story... who had a great experience at school being LGBT... The school members of staff were really supportive, their friends all very positive. Went to university and was in a halls and it just happened to be that there were several different people who were homophobic for one reason or another... she said that living in those halls was the most horrific year of her life” (Staff member supporting group 2)

“A friend [who is a] lesbian got a shared room for financial reasons and was put with a Catholic girl who was very opposed to LGBT people. Eventually she came round but there were a few months of avoiding her own room” (Participant, group 1).

Perhaps not surprisingly, such experiences could restrict students’ relationships with others, and impacted upon their decision/ability to be ‘out’:

“A friend who is not out is called ‘the lesbian’ by her housemates, so doesn’t want to come out... [her] relationships have to be secret or non-existent” (Participant, group 1).

Other impacts included feeling isolated, uncomfortable, the subject of jokes, being called ‘too sensitive’ when challenging people’s language use, and feeling obliged to educate housemates (how) to be more inclusive of LGBT+ identities (see also Keenan, 2015a, 2015b).

NUS (2014) research reported that trans students felt the main difficulties on campus were the lack of gender-neutral toilets and facilities; the prevalence of transphobia; the lack of policies to support updating their name and gender on the student register; and issues related to university security services. Lack of gender-neutral toilets and changing facilities was also a key concern within the consultation, alongside frustration with limited, and



limiting, gender and sexuality options on official university-related forms. In addition, dissatisfaction with university counselling and medical service provision was identified, supporting previous research that has identified poor experiences of (non-specialist) counsellors and health service provision amongst LGBT people (Formby, 2013, 2014; Beemyn, 2005; McKinney, 2005). These experiences point to the need for staff training to improve knowledge about sexuality and (trans)gender identity:

“Counselling services are presumptive that issues are related to sexuality that aren’t... [and] untrained to deal with trans issues” (Participant, group 1)

“Lack of knowledge in university medical centre and use of transphobic language” (Participant, group 1).

Another campus-based facility that can particularly impact on LGBT+ students is careers-related guidance. Evidence from the US has suggested that non-heterosexual students receive less support and guidance (Nauta, Saucier and Woodard, 2001), and some have argued that “[careers] counsellors need to take sexual orientation issues, particularly past experiences of discrimination [into consideration], when working with LGBT clients” (Schneider and Dimito, 2010: 1355). Scott, Belke and Barfield (2011) have proposed that transgender students face unique challenges that many university careers advisors are not equipped to handle. These include, for example, awareness about potential discrimination in securing references, and how a name change can impact upon employment history records. Perhaps as a result, transgender students may avoid seeking career development support altogether (Scott et al, 2011).

Recent UK evidence has indicated that minority sexual orientations may be disadvantaged in seeking work. Drydakís’ (2015) research identified that participation in gay and lesbian university students’ unions negatively affected participants’ workplace prospects, with the

probability of gay or lesbian applicants receiving an invitation to interview 5% lower than their heterosexual counterparts. Related to this, European research (Formby, 2014) suggests that some students may hide their LGBT-related activities or activism whilst at university, in order to (try) to gain employment:

“There are things I am too afraid to put on my CV, such as... my activities with my university’s LGBT society” (cited in Formby, 2014: 23).

Concerns about CVs also featured in #FreshersToFinals, along with broader fears related to employment:

“I would like more careers-related advice as I’m currently unsure how to present myself through my CV etc. Currently, I feel there is nowhere I can access this information” (Participant, group 1)

“I work in languages and sometimes feel worried about when I go to work in a foreign country” (Participant, group 1).

Issues about presentation of self or identity were specifically raised in relation to interview dress and performance:

“Would subscribe to binary norms and dress in a suit for an interview, despite being gender-fluid and not necessarily defining as a man on the day of interview”  
(Participant, group 1).

These concerns highlight that LGBT+ students’ needs may not (only) be emotional, but (also) practical. Whilst developments in LGBT-specific careers mentoring schemes at some

institutions may offer help in this regard, there has as yet been little research and evaluation of these.

Within the consultation stage there was much discussion of LGBT societies and groups on campus, which can impact upon LGBT+ students' experiences of HE. One of the benefits of going to university was identified in relation to these groups and their ability to facilitate new friendships. However, participants' expectations of these groups were not always met:

“LGBT spaces are not as safe as inclusive as I was led to believe. At my local group, my sexuality isn't represented, and there's always a huge scene focus, which isn't really for me” (Participant, group 1).

Though disappointments in LGBT spaces, which can act as deterrents to people becoming involved, have been reported elsewhere (Formby, 2017), these may be particularly significant on campus where groups and societies are expected to offer places of 'safety', as well as opportunities for networking. Whilst there is existing evidence on discrimination, exclusion and 'hierarchies' between and amongst LGBT people (Formby, 2017; Hines, 2010; Simpson, 2012), it is of note that Keenan (2015a) found LGBTQ societies also maintaining 'hierarchies' in which some LGBT+ people are excluded.

Different experiences of groups often assumed to be supportive did not always relate to exclusions or hierarchies, however. It was noted, for instance, that the 'success' of these groups could depend on the size of the university, and/or how active the students' union was. Different kinds of ethos were also noted between groups focussing primarily on offering support, those tending to only provide social activities, and those with more of a campaigning/activist emphasis:

“I think welfare has to be at the forefront of any LGBT+ society, as we are the welcoming family and friends for people who perhaps have none” (Participant, group 1)

“If you want to go and hang out with some people and that’s all you want to do, then you should have the right to do that, but... if you feel like you need to lobby for something or you feel like you need to make your voice heard, then you should have the right to do that as well” (Participant, group 1)

“Societies should do politics and welfare. We have three welfare officers and try to run campaigns every term to raise awareness of issues, for example polyamory and asexual awareness” (Participant, group 1).

For students involved in running these groups or services, this could be isolating and/or wearing, which suggests that those tasked with support may also themselves sometimes require support:

“I’m from [a university where] we’re split across like different cities altogether... I’m literally the only person in the entire university working for LGBT and I’m a student... which can be a bit tough at times” (Participant, group 1).

Where students’ union officer roles had been broadened to cover all equalities issues, this was largely felt to be ineffective, particularly in terms of time available and ability to draw on personal experience:

“The one [officer] for next year is also really great, but it’s too much expecting them to work on LGBT, women’s issues, BME, mental health, and all that, when... they’re full-

time students, like they don't have staff for this, so it is too much to put the whole of equality and diversity [on them]" (Participant, group 1)

"She's very lovely and approachable, but she represents over 30,000 students... there's not a whole lot of contact time between her and the student body and even though she's great she doesn't come from a lived experience of being LGBTQ" (Participant, group 1).

### **A continuum of experiences**

Overall, participants thought that being at university was (or would be) a more positive experience than being at school. This belief was informed by word of mouth (for example family and friends) and popular culture (such as television programmes). Supporting Taulke-Johnson's previous (2008, 2010a) research, participants thought that those entering HE would necessarily be predisposed to be more liberal or 'understanding' in their attitudes. Greater age and associated confidence was also assumed to make university 'easier' than school. Echoing similar findings elsewhere (Falconer and Taylor, 2016; Msibi and Jagessar, 2015; Taulke-Johnson, 2008), additional advantages of going away to university were identified in relation to distance from family (surveillance) and/or (former) peers.

Nevertheless, going to university could present financial challenges, particularly where families were unsupportive of 'new' identities, necessitating 'early' (or at least unexpected) financial independence. These circumstances could, unsurprisingly, prove stressful for students, where financial support was used as a mechanism for (attempted) parental control over, or influence on, how students lived their lives, which could deter or prevent access to LGBT groups and organisations.

As a whole, the research indicates that there is a broad continuum of experiences, with many examples somewhere in the middle, and/or shifting over time. At one end of the

continuum, university can be described as a positive experience that facilitates greater freedom to explore gender and sexual identities or practices, within a more welcoming and inclusive environment than school, as exemplified in this comment:

“I think higher education is much, much more accessible and a better place for LGBTQ students. For me as a gay man I found it very open and encouraging and friendly” (cited in Formby, 2014: 7).

This echoes other (UK) research which describes participants ‘escaping’ to safety at university as a form of resilience amongst LGBT young people (Scourfield, Roen and McDermott, 2008). However, at the other end of this continuum, university is not experienced as a place of safety or freedom for (some) LGBT+ people. Previous research, for example, has illustrated negative experiences, and by implication unsupportive environments, which participants linked with their ability to complete their university course:

“As an LGBTQ person I’ve experienced more depression and less friendship and I spent huge amounts of time sorting out myself and my emotions than I would have done otherwise. This made it harder for me to choose the right course, and may make me drop out of university” (cited in Formby, 2014: 23).

Other (UK) research has also documented violent (and unreported) homophobic incidents at university (McDermott, Roen and Scourfield, 2008). Therefore, I argue, on the one hand HE may be a place to escape *to*, whilst on the other hand it may present an environment which people need or desire to escape *from*. Partly this is a result of differing lived experience, among different individuals, on different courses, at different institutions, with different cultures, and in different locations, but it illustrates the need for greater understanding beyond the ‘bullied’ or ‘suicidal’ LGBT student that is sometimes assumed or portrayed, particularly in the context of American campuses.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

This article has set out some of the issues that LGBT+ students may face in HE. In doing so, it has confirmed, illustrated and extended existing literature. In particular, findings from the research appear to move away from a tendency within (UK) school-age research to result in polarised and conflicting arguments, for instance that the majority of LGB young people are bullied (Guasp, 2012), or that homophobia is in decline across schools (McCormack, 2012). Despite the advancement of legal protections for LGBT people in the UK, this research demonstrates that there remain potential issues for those who identify as LGBT+ who wish to attend university. It is interesting to note that those actually at university were more likely to talk about their course content and careers-related issues, whilst those not (yet) at university often talked more about university choice-making and perceptions or fears related to discrimination and bullying. This may be because once at university students have more positive experiences than some expect, and therefore have different concerns whilst there, whereas those not yet at university may be more likely to experience apprehension or fear. This is understandable for anyone embarking on a new experience, but for some LGBT+ people this may be specifically related to their identities, possibly influenced by popular culture, word of mouth and/or previous experiences, which may or may not be applicable to HE settings. There is similar evidence from within health-related research that word of mouth and fears about other people's experiences can act as a barrier to access or participation (Formby, 2011). This could usefully be explored further in future HE research.

I now wish to discuss the above findings in light of literature outlined in the introduction. In doing so, I argue that whilst these issues can, and often are, framed as individual 'support' or 'care' needs, they can also be viewed as evidence of the heteronormativity and cisnormativity that prevail in university settings (and elsewhere). We should therefore 'care' for LGBT+ students by challenging these systems of oppression. I thus support Msibi and Jagessar's (2015: 760) contention that HE "needs to start taking seriously the role of

patriarchy and heteronormativity in the lives of our students... our institutions are heterosexualised and are misogynistic". Rather than seeing LGBT+ students as inherently 'in need', we should examine university spaces and services themselves as needing structural change. As has been recently argued, "scholars need to guard against painting same-sex-identifying university students with a brush of powerlessness and victimhood... the picture is much more complex, needing contextualisation and deeper exploration" (Msibi and Jagessar, 2015: 760). This would necessarily go beyond 'tick box' assessments, such as Stonewall (the UK's leading LGBT charity) indexes which seek to measure and promote inclusion, but which can limit institutional practice to "a restrictive and celebratory, rather than radical or realistic, measure of diversity" (Falconer and Taylor, 2016: 3). It has been suggested that some, if not most, UK universities only engage with LGBTQ identities episodically, for example during LGBT history month or to coincide with local Pride events (Keenan, 2015a). In addition, some pass responsibility for LGBTQ student wellbeing, at least in part, onto student-led LGBTQ societies or students' union roles (Keenan, 2015a). These approaches can therefore be viewed as limited in their efforts, and likely to be limited in their impact.

Research in HE settings that illustrates the complexity of experiences should, I suggest, be utilised to inform complex, thorough, and appropriate responses. The evidence above indicates that these should be institutional and not individualist, though I recognise, as Keenan (2015b) argued, that it is the 'informality' of the dominance of heterosexuality that makes successful university responses more difficult to achieve. Similarly, my research participants suggested that other people's actions and responses could be 'habitual' rather than 'intentionally offensive', though they still impacted upon their experiences.

Overall, the research suggests a need for nuanced understandings and responses to LGBT+ experiences of university. There are many practical implications, the key points of which can be grouped into three overarching areas. First, an inclusive campus and curriculum



throughout (with visible diversity, including of LGBT+ identities and histories) would be a step forward, and importantly would not involve portraying LGBT+ students as 'in need'. This is likely to necessitate training and information for staff, and greater provision of gender-neutral toilets and changing facilities on campus. Additionally, all university records and documentation should be able to be updated with regard to name and/or gender identity, and allow options other than only 'female' or 'male'. Second, universities should facilitate and adequately resource, support, and/or train student-led peer organisation, activities and/or welfare roles, for example via NUS and/or institution-based LGBT societies and groups. Third, the provision of university-based advice, information and support services (including careers-related) should be inclusive, and of use to LGBT+ students, but should not assume 'victimhood'. In terms of accommodation, this may require the amendment of policies or procedures governing student housing choice, and non-discriminatory practices.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to thank all the participants and project partners who contributed their time, insights and experiences to the research. The research was funded using Higher Education Innovation Funding.

## **REFERENCES**

Airton, L. (2013) 'Leave those kids alone: On the conflation of school homophobia and suffering queers', *Curriculum Inquiry* 43(5): 532-562.

Beemyn, B.G. (2005) 'Making campuses more inclusive of transgender students', *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* 3(1): 77-87.

Browne, K. and Bakshi, L. (2013) *Ordinary in Brighton: LGBT, activisms and the city*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Case, K.A., Kanenberg, H. and Erich, S.A. (2010) 'Strategies for building a learning environment of inclusion and acceptance for LGBTIQ students' in Bertram, C.C., Crowley, M.S. and Massey, S.G. (eds) *Beyond progress and marginalization*. New York: Peter Lang.

Davy, Z., Amsler, S. and Duncombe, K. (2015) 'Facilitating LGBT medical, health and social care content in higher education teaching, *Qualitative Research in Education* 4(2): 134-162.

Drydakis, N. (2015) 'Sexual orientation discrimination in the United Kingdom's labour market: A field experiment', *Human Relations* 68(11): 1769-1796.

Ecclestone, K. (2007) 'Resisting images of the 'diminished self': The implications of emotional well-being and emotional engagement in educational policy', *Journal of Education Policy* 22(4): 455-470.

Ecclestone, K. and Brunila, K. (2015) 'Governing emotionally vulnerable subjects and 'therapisation' of social justice', *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 23(4): 485-506.

Ellis, S.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* 57(6): 723-739.

Ellis, V. (2007) 'Sexualities and schooling in England after Section 28: Measuring and managing at-risk identities', *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* 4(3): 13-30.

Evans, N.J. (2002) 'The impact of an LGBT safe zone project on campus climate', *Journal of College Student Development* 43(4): 522-538.

Falconer, E. and Taylor, Y. (2016) 'Negotiating queer and religious identities in higher education: Queering 'progression' in the 'university experience'', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.

Formby, E. (2011) 'Lesbian and bisexual women's human rights, sexual rights and sexual citizenship: Negotiating sexual health in England', *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 13(10): 1165-79.

Formby, E. (2013) 'Understanding and responding to homophobia and bullying: Contrasting staff and young people's views within community settings in England', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 10(4): 302-16.

Formby, E. (2014) *The impact of homophobic and transphobic bullying on education and employment: A European survey*. Brussels: IGLYO.

Formby, E. (2015) 'Limitations of focussing on homophobic, biphobic and transphobic 'bullying' to understand and address LGBT young people's experiences within and beyond school', *Sex Education* 15(6): 626-640.

Formby, E. (2017) *Exploring LGBT spaces and communities: Contrasting identities, belongings and wellbeing*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Guasp, A. (2012) *The school report: The experiences of young gay people in Britain's schools in 2012*. London: Stonewall.

Guasp, A. (2014) *The teachers' report: Homophobic bullying in Britain's schools*. London: Stonewall.

Hines, S. (2010) 'Queerly situated: Exploring constraints and negotiations of trans queer subjectivities', *Gender, Place and Culture* 17(5): 597-613.

Keenan, M. (2014) *Coming out and fitting in: A qualitative exploration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer students' university experiences*. Nottingham: Nottingham Trent University.

Keenan, M. (2015a) 'Coming out, standing out, and being left out: Exploring the university experiences of LGBT students', unpublished paper presented at *From freshers' week to finals: Using LGBT student perspectives of higher education to inform research and practice* seminar, Society for Research into Higher Education, London.

Keenan, M. (2015b) 'Experiencing inclusive exclusion: LGBTQ student experiences in English universities', unpublished paper presented at *What (not) to do: Young people, gender and sexuality* SexGen seminar, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield.

Leathwood, C. and Hey, V. (2009) 'Gender/ed discourses and emotional sub-texts: Theorising emotion in UK higher education', *Teaching in Higher Education* 14(4): 429-440.

McCormack, M. (2012) *The declining significance of homophobia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McDermott, E., Roen, K. and Scourfield, J. (2008) 'Avoiding shame: Young LGBT people, homophobia and self-destructive behaviours', *Culture, health and sexuality* 10(8): 815-829.

McKinney, J.S. (2005) 'On the margins: A study of the experiences of transgender college students', *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* 3(1): 63-76.

METRO (2014) *Youth chances survey of 16-25 year olds: First reference report*. London: METRO.

Msibi, T. and Jagessar, V. (2015) 'Restricted freedom: Negotiating same-sex identifications in the residential spaces of a South African university', *Higher Education Research and Development* 34(4): 750-762.

Nauta, M.M., Saucier, A.M. and Woodard, L.E. (2001) 'Interpersonal influences on students' academic and career decisions: The impact of sexual orientation', *The Career Development Quarterly* 49(4): 352-362.

NUS (2012a) *That's what she said: Women students' experiences of 'lad culture' in higher education*. London: NUS.

NUS (2012b) *Out in sport: LGBT students' experiences of sport*. London: NUS.

NUS (2014) *Education beyond the straight and narrow: LGBT students' experience in higher education*. London: NUS.

Rankin, S.R. (2005) 'Campus climates for sexual minorities', *New Directions for Student Services* 111: 17-23.

Ritchie, J. and Spencer, L. (1994) 'Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research' in Bryman, A. and Burgess, R.G. (eds) *Analyzing qualitative research*. London: Routledge.

Rofes, E. (2004) 'Martyr-target-victim: Interrogating narratives of persecution and suffering among queer youth' in Rasmussen, M.L., Rofes, E. and Talburt, S. (eds) *Youth and*

*sexualities: Pleasure, subversion, and insubordination in and out of schools*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schneider, M.S. and Dimito, A. (2010) 'Factors influencing the career and academic choices of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, *Journal of Homosexuality* 57(10): 1355-1369.

Scott, D.A., Belke, S.L. and Barfield, H.G. (2011) 'Career development with transgender college students: Implications for career and employment counsellors', *Journal of Employment Counseling* 48(3): 105-113.

Scourfield, J., Roen, K. and McDermott, E. (2008) 'Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people's experiences of distress: Resilience, ambivalence and self-destructive behaviour', *Health and Social Care in the Community* 16(3): 329-336.

Self, J.M. and Hudson, K.D. (2015) 'Dangerous waters and brave space: A critical feminist inquiry of campus LGBTQ centers', *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 27(2): 216-245.

Simpson, P. (2012) 'Perils, precariousness and pleasures: Middle-aged gay men negotiating urban "heterospaces"', *Sociological Research Online* 17(3): 23.

Stroup, J., Glass, J. and Cohn, T.J. (2014) 'The adjustment to U.S. rural college campuses for bisexual students in comparison to gay and lesbian students: An exploratory study', *Journal of Bisexuality* 14(1): 94-109.

Taulke-Johnson, R. (2008) 'Moving beyond homophobia, harassment and intolerance: Gay male university students' alternative narratives', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 29(1): 121-133.

Taulke-Johnson, R. (2010a) 'Queer decisions? Gay male students' university choices', *Studies in Higher Education* 35(3): 247-261.

Taulke-Johnson, R. (2010b) 'Assertion, regulation and consent: Gay students, straight flatmates, and the (hetero)sexualisation of university accommodation space', *Gender and Education* 22(4): 401-417.

Thurlow, C. (2001) 'Naming the "outsider within": Homophobic pejoratives and the verbal abuse of lesbian, gay and bisexual high-school pupils', *Journal of Adolescence* 24(1): 25-38.

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