

‘Whose Rainbow?’ Project Report



**A research project looking at the
use of rainbow symbolism and
LGBT+ inclusion initiatives in
higher education**

Contents

Report summary.....	1
What is the project about?.....	2
The context.....	2
What did we do?.....	2
What did we find out?	3
1. Changing understandings and feelings around rainbows.....	3
2. Tokenism: The gap between image and action.....	3
3. Intersectionality.....	5
4. Political climate and being afraid to criticise.....	5
5. The extra labour of being LGBT+ in higher education.....	6
6. Communication, community and trying to make change.....	7
7. Precarity and the wider higher education context.....	7
Recommendations.....	9
Adequate resourcing of equality, diversity and inclusion.....	9
Making LGBT+ inclusion a priority across the university and all year round.....	9
Creating clear and transparent communication channels for staff and students.....	9
Collaboration between staff networks with student societies.....	10
Labour relations.....	10
Building trust and proving commitment to LGBT+ inclusion.....	10

Report summary

1. Most participants said that although the rainbow had been important symbolism at a point in their lives, it had lost its significance due to its use during COVID-19 and tokenistic use by institutions and corporations. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that it could still be important for some people, especially those newer to their LGBT-identity, and thought that it could still be important symbolism for LGBT+ people to see on university campuses.
2. Participants felt frustrated that universities often wanted to 'show off' their LGBT+ inclusiveness (especially during LGBT History and Pride months), without making meaningful changes to create inclusive, welcoming and safe places for LGBT+ staff and students.
3. Some participants felt that the visibility of the rainbow flag made LGBT+ inclusion easier to 'show off' than work towards other forms of equality. Furthermore, some participants spoke about LGBT+ inclusion in universities (including in LGBT+ staff networks and student societies) predominantly working for cisgender lesbian and gay, white, non-disabled people. Doctoral students - positioned somewhere between staff and student - often felt forgotten about in such schemes.
4. Despite often feeling critical of universities LGBT+ initiatives, participants also said that the broader anti-LGBT+ political climate made them fearful of criticising even tokenistic attempts at inclusion, in fear of them being taken away altogether.
5. Participants spoke extensively about the extra labour that is expected and required of LGBT+ people in universities. This included the personal labour of staying safe, being recognised and addressed correctly; the labour of being an assumed 'spokesperson' for all LGBT+ people; and feeling a responsibility to try and make positive changes for other LGBT+ people in their university. Participants pointed out that while universities often expected and relied on their labour, they were rarely willing to adequately resource it.
6. Making even small changes within universities was often difficult. Participants said it was unclear who they should raise any issues with, that decision making processes weren't transparent, and that there was a lack of accountability. Undergraduate students in particular felt reliant on having LGBT-inclusive lecturers.
7. Working conditions in higher education were frequently brought up by staff as context for all of the above. Staff worried that Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives were used as an excuse to not engage with trade unions, leading some to resign from their EDI roles.

What is the project about?

The context

The rainbow flag is largely recognised as a symbol of LGBT+ inclusion. However, originally designed by and for LGBT+ people, it is now widely used by corporations and institutions to demonstrate a welcoming environment for LGBT+ people. Whilst some LGBT+ people welcome this move, arguing that it mainstreams, and therefore legitimises, LGBT+ identities, others have been more critical - naming it ‘rainbow capitalism’¹ - and arguing that such a move is only symbolic in nature, usually ignoring harms done to LGBT+ people locally and globally. This argument is strengthened by a UK political climate which, over the past decade, has seen a rapid increase in anti-LGB, and particularly anti-trans, sentiment. Since 2016, the UK has slipped from being consistently ranked [the most LGBT-friendly country in Europe, to being ranked at only 15 in 2024](#), with [marked increases in LGB, and particularly trans, hate crime](#).

Complicating this relationship further, in Spring 2020, the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, rainbow symbolism adopted a new meaning. Children in the UK were encouraged to draw rainbows and stick them to windows to demonstrate support for the NHS. The phenomenon took off; [a bus, previously used for LGBTQIA+ Pride events \(cancelled due to the pandemic\) was rebranded an ‘NHS bus’](#); and Paul Hollywood, presenter of BBC series, The Great British Bake Off, asked contestants to bake

rainbow bagels to [‘represent the NHS’ with no mention of their significance to LGBT+ people](#). Although, as we write this report, four years later, the relationship between the rainbow and the NHS has diminished somewhat, at the time, many LGBT+ people felt that this was an [act of erasure](#), and highlighted that it could indeed be dangerous - the rainbow no longer offering reassurance of a ‘safe space’, because there was no way of knowing whether a rainbow signals support of the NHS, or a welcoming attitude towards LGBT+ people.

What did we do?

It is from within this context that the ‘Whose Rainbow?’ project evolved. Focusing our attention on universities, we wanted to know how rainbow symbolism is used within higher education, and what this meant for the experiences of LGBT+ staff and students within these institutions.

Our research took place between December 2021 and December 2022. During this time, we interviewed 17 LGBT+ staff (in professional service and academic roles), 15 LGBT+ students (ranging from undergraduate to PhD), 5 LGBT+ participants who were both students and staff, and 3 self-declared allies.

¹Rainbow capitalism refers to institutions and corporations profiting of LGBTQIA+ identities, in ways which offer little benefit to LGBT+ people.



All demographic information was collected with open text options; and completing it was not compulsory. In total, 22 of the 40 participants chose to complete the demographic information. Participants offered in total 9 different gender options: 7 male, 8 female and another 7 falling outside of male/female. There were 10 sexualities specified: with 1 choosing heterosexual, 3 gay, 3 lesbian, 4 bi or pan, 4 queer, 2 asexual, and 5 choosing to position themselves elsewhere (e.g. gay to bisexual-ish; questioning, straight(ish)). The majority of participants (17) were white, with one specifying white Irish, and another white European. One participant responded with 'mixed/unsure', one GRT (Gypsy, Roma and Traveller), and one Malaysian Chinese. 12 out of the 22 respondents were disabled, including physical impairments, mental illness and neurodivergence. There was an additional free text option for participants to share anything else that they wished about their identity; some chose to expand on and complicate their sexuality or gender identities, one specified Romany ancestry, another that they were trans, and one that they were an immigrant.

Interviews lasted on average 1 hour. We asked participants about: 1) their relationships to the rainbow and other forms of LGBT+ symbolism; 2) their experiences in HE as LGBT+ people/allies; and 3) their thoughts on the use of symbols of LGBT+ inclusion in their universities. Therefore, although the project was framed by rainbows, conversations in interviews were broader, largely revolving around what institutions, and universities in particular, should be doing to support and make change for LGBT+ people.

What did we find out?

In this report we focus on seven key themes which highlight LGBT+ staff and student's experiences in higher education, and their feelings about how rainbow symbolism is used in their universities.

1. Changing understandings of and feelings around rainbows

Many participants acknowledged that rainbows had been an important symbol at particular times in their lives; often during early stages of coming out and/or understanding themselves as LGBT+. Therefore, despite a reduction in personal significance, it was commonly expressed that the rainbow could still be important to display on university campuses, especially for students. Indeed, some students at Oxford and Cambridge universities in particular, spoke about continuing struggles to get their colleges to fly a rainbow flag.

However, the combination of rainbows being used as symbols to celebrate the NHS during early stages of COVID-19, and what was largely considered its shallow use by institutions and corporations, meant that many participants talked about the rainbow flag losing its meaning. For some, particularly younger participants, flags representing their individual identity (e.g. the ace or bi flag) were more important. Sometimes these lesser known symbols and flags were used as more subtle (and, for some, safer) ways to be recognised by other queer people. Equally, many participants spoke of other symbols now having more political meaning: most widely brought up was the progress flag, but the pink triangle and red ribbon were also mentioned.

2. Tokenism: The gap between image and action

Participants reported frustration with the mere presence of rainbows being seen as the totality of the work; that by stating that they are inclusive and displaying the rainbow, institutions are achieving 'inclusion'. A staff member, for example, spoke of being told by a non-LGBT+ colleague that a venue 'must be inclusive' because they fly the rainbow flag. There was particular annoyance at institutions working hard to display LGBT-inclusiveness during LGBT+ History and Pride months, but not at other times of the year.

‘On the 1st of July I got a reply to an email from someone in the HR of my institution telling me to take the rainbow logo out of my email signature because it was not Pride month anymore.

That just really told me what that was all about. That this was all for show. During June only - only June! - they were using this rainbow logo. And all year round they were undermining trans staff, they were instituting transphobic policies, they were supporting transphobic speech on campus.’

Bernie, Academic Staff

Universities’ use of rainbows lanyards was brought up on multiple occasions. These were used inconsistently between (and sometimes within) institutions, making their meaning unclear. Many students, for example, assumed that a rainbow lanyard meant that a member of staff was LGBT+ themselves, when often they were distributed to self-declared ‘allies’, and usually came with little or no training. LGBT+ staff worried that this confusion could be harmful if, for example, a student approached a member of staff wearing a rainbow lanyard, only to find they didn’t have the knowledge or language to discuss LGBT+ issues.

Furthermore, some participants felt that rainbows and their interlinked Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives were used to prevent meaningful action or change. An undergraduate student, for example, was told her curriculum could not be made more trans inclusive, because the trans inclusion policy was only just in the process of being written. In this instance, the trans inclusion policy was being used to prevent trans inclusion.

3. Intersectionality

Many of our participants held multiple marginalised identities, and were also involved in EDI work or activism in relation to other forms of oppression (e.g. ableism, racism). These participants were often the most critical of rainbow symbolism. One disabled participant, for example, said that the rainbow for her symbolised LGBT+ spaces that were not accessible and therefore in which she was not expected to participate. This feeling extended to staff groups and student societies. An international student of colour talked about the student LGBT+ society mostly organising events which centred around alcohol, which meant that they were unable to attend. Relatedly, doctoral students - positioned somewhere between staff and student - felt like neither student societies nor staff networks expected their attendance.

Furthermore, participants pointed out that a 'visibility-as-inclusivity' attitude can lead to LGBT+ EDI work being seen as the fun and easy demographic compared to others like disability or race. Flying the rainbow flag was, to an extent, seen as an 'easy win' for universities.

Some participants felt that (often surface level) profiling of their LGBT+ inclusiveness was easier for universities to get recognition for than any work towards anti-racism or disability inclusion, who did not have such recognisable symbols of inclusion.

4. Political climate and being afraid to criticise

Interviews were carried out during a time of increasingly anti-LGBT+ sentiment, and some participants were seeing the implications of this within higher education. Some academic staff researching trans issues, for example, were aware that their work could put them at risk of abuse, particularly if it was picked-up by the press, and largely felt unsupported institutionally in mitigating this risk.

Some participants were working or studying in universities that had been in the media due to rolling back on LGBT+ inclusion, through, for example, the protection of high-profile 'gender-critical' academics, or withdrawal from LGBT+ inclusion schemes, such as Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index. Participants at these institutions said how unwelcome and



‘I feel like the queer movement, and the Pride flag consequently, have been co-opted, because white people fly the flag and they claim to stand for queer equality, but there is no queer equality until there is also no racism. And I feel like a lot of white people just ignore the racism part.’

Charlie, Masters student

unlistened-to they felt in those institutions; some students spoke of advising prospective students to avoid their university, while some staff felt compelled to find work elsewhere.

The anti-LGBT+ political context which was playing out, whilst universities broadly continued along liberal paths to LGBT+ inclusion (e.g. flying the rainbow flag), proved to be conflicting for some participants. Those that had provided their negative experiences of institutions’ use of rainbows and related EDI work, commonly also expressed a great deal of anxiety that these imperfect, tokenising gestures to inclusivity were under threat, making them difficult to criticise out of concern that nothing would replace them.

5. The extra labour of being LGBT+ in higher education

Most participants talked about the extra labour that was required and expected of them

as LGBT+ people. This ranged from the personal labour of ensuring that they were safe, or recognised and addressed correctly; to expectations that they would offer guidance and advice on LGBT+ issues; and broader attempts to make wider institutional change. More often than not, labour was uncompensated and expected to be done on top of their usual jobs and studies, even when it was an official EDI-based role, advertised by the university. Nevertheless, staff in particular often felt a sense of responsibility towards other LGBT+ people, especially students, in trying to make the institution more welcoming. This was sometimes an internal conflict for participants: wanting to make positive change, whilst not wanting to work, uncompensated, for their universities. Indeed, it was widely felt that rather than being recognised and thanked for their work in making the institution more equitable, participants were often positioned as an annoyance. Some felt that this could have career implications for them, when applying for promotion or other jobs.

6. Communication, community and trying to make change

Many participants spoke of long, drawn-out attempts to try and make changes within their institutions. Many of these involved small but important changes to make administrative processes more inclusive, such as expanding what gender and title options were available on forms. Staff and students alike said that it was very difficult to know who the correct person was to speak to about such things, with nobody seemingly taking responsibility. Students in particular said that their experiences felt very reliant on individual tutors. As such, attempts to make change were often given up on. The feeling was that although LGBT+ staff and students were often asked to give their labour to EDI initiatives, they were not actually listened to when they made suggestions that could make positive change.

7. Precarity and the wider higher education context

Our data collection took place during a time of industrial action over pay and conditions in higher education, some of it directly related to EDI². This context was brought up by

participants: some worried about their EDI roles undermining union demands. One participant, for example, said that their university was not willing to negotiate with the union's demands to close gender and ethnic pay gaps because they were already doing their own EDI work in these areas. Indeed, several participants talked about resigning from EDI-related roles due to universities' lack of willingness to improve wider working conditions for their staff (and therefore learning conditions for students).

Several staff also highlighted that the increasing reliance on short-term precarious contracts directly impacted on what felt possible in terms of trying to make change. Speaking up felt risky for some staff on short-term contracts, due to fears that it would impact on their contract being extended and/or ability to find another job. Furthermore, staff on short-term contracts often felt less invested in trying to make change in an institution, because they would not necessarily be there to see the outcome.

² Between 2019 and 2023 the University and College Union (UCU), which represents a range of university staff, took industrial action over [pensions, pay, workload, equality, and casualisation](#).

‘It’s a difficult one to navigate. It’s like, I shouldn’t be expending the emotional energy to explain this stuff to you but if I don’t, you’re probably not going to go and look it up. You’re probably going to find something on the internet that’s wrong or offensive or goodness only knows.’

Aarto, IT Support Staff

‘Having a permanent contract really changes how you feel about your workplace, dramatically. I feel now in my role much more able to be a pain in the arse. That’s my new sort of hobby! I have the security to be annoying, because I have the long-term vision that I can still be here to see the outcomes of this.’

Carla, Academic Staff



Recommendations

Rainbows came, through our interviews, to represent a range of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) related issues in universities. The recommendations below, therefore, do not focus directly on rainbow symbolism, but ways in which universities could be more welcoming and equitable spaces for LGBT+ students and staff.

Adequate resourcing of equality, diversity and inclusion

Universities need to adequately fund equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives, whilst also accounting for the extra work that LGBT+ staff put into LGBT+ inclusion more informally. Where LGBT+ inclusion schemes are set-up, they need to be clearly thought-through alongside LGBT+ people who are meaningfully compensated for their time, which may include recognising such efforts in routes to promotion. This is imperative to ensure that schemes intending to ‘include’ do not result in causing more harm to LGBT+ people. Additionally, universities need to understand the current political climate for LGBT+ people, and not withdraw inclusion schemes if they face anti-LGBT+ backlash.

Making LGBT+ inclusion a priority across the university and all year round

LGBT+ people exist all year round. LGBT+ visibility and inclusion, therefore, should not only be a priority during LGBT+ History Month, Pride Month and particular ‘awareness’ weeks.

Creating clear and transparent communication channels for staff and students

Staff and students require clear ways to communicate problems with the university. Students, for example, should not be reliant on having an LGBT+-inclusive lecturer or other contact in order to communicate problems with their curriculum, administrative processes and university structures. Furthermore, there need to be resourced routes for problems to be raised collectively.



This may mean better resourcing of staff networks and student societies. However, it should be noted that staff networks and student societies don't always feel like inclusive spaces, particularly for LGBT+ people who are multiply-marginalised. It is imperative that staff networks and student societies consider other axes of diversity, and how they too can be exclusionary spaces.

Collaboration between staff networks with student societies

Although we acknowledge that there will be times where LGBT+ staff and students want to meet separately to one-another, there is potential for LGBT+ staff networks and student societies to work more closely together than is often currently the case. This would provide wider LGBT+ solidarity networks, opportunities to understand the different and overlapping barriers and priorities for LGBT+ staff and students, and create more welcoming spaces for doctoral students who often do not feel belonging in either space.

Labour relations

LGBT+ people's work and study conditions can-

not be separated from wider labour conditions within higher education. Universities therefore need to address wider workplace issues around workload and pay, including pay gaps within the sector and precarity. This will mean engagement with trade unions. Improving staff working conditions would have a knock on effect on student learning conditions.

Building trust and proving commitment to LGBT+ inclusion

LGBT+ people working and studying in universities do not currently trust that universities would retain even a veneer of inclusion if the political context around LGBT+ issues continues to decline. Universities, therefore, need to understand and acknowledge the issues that LGBT+ students and staff are facing, and prove to LGBT+ students and staff that they are committed to LGBT+ inclusion whatever the political context. One way to do this is to move away from a performative approach to inclusion, to instead meaningfully engage with LGBT+ staff and student needs, and remain consistent in this approach long term, with the understanding that building trust will take time.

Research team

Tig Slater, Sheffield Hallam University

Drew Simms, Sheffield Hallam University

Eleanor Formby, Sheffield Hallam University

Acknowledgements

We extend our thanks to our participants that gave up their time to take part in this project.

Illustrations and design by Rosie Murrell

This project was funded by a British Academy & Leverhulme Small Grant.

To reference

Slater, T., Simms, D. and Formby, E. (2024). 'Whose Rainbow?' Project Report: A Research Project Looking at the use of Rainbow Symbolism and LGBT+ Inclusion Initiatives in Higher Education. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Hallam University.

Contact

For enquiries about this research, email Dr Tig Slater at tig.slater@shu.ac.uk

Follow the project at <http://whoserainbow.wordpress.com>



**Sheffield
Hallam
University**

LEVERHULME
TRUST

**The
British
Academy**

Sheffield Hallam University

Whose Rainbow? Project Report. A research project looking at the use of rainbow symbolism and LGBT+ inclusion initiatives in higher education

SLATER, Tig <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6739-7784>>, SIMMS, Drew and FORMBY, Eleanor <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4137-6592>>

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

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/34366/>

Copyright and re-use policy

Please visit <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/34366/> and <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html> for further details about copyright and re-use permissions.