

Untangling Hope Labour from Care Labour: LGBT+ People Navigating Equality Diversity and Inclusion Work in Higher Education.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Untangling hope labour from care labour: LGBT+ people navigating equality, diversity and inclusion work in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the ‘Whose Rainbow?’ project, exploring LGBT+ staff and students’ conflicted relationships to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) work in UK Higher Education (HE). Drawing on interview data, we illustrate the expectation on LGBT+ people to ‘embody diversity’ within HE, and the labour that comes with such expectation. Whilst most participants undertook some EDI work, they were aware of their own potential exploitation, and the limits of the work itself. Yet, participants felt a responsibility to make change for other LGBT+ people, particularly those with less institutional power. We theorize this conflict through the concepts of hope labour and care labour. Whilst hope labour is usually used to think about (exploitative) voluntary work done in the hope of secure(r) employment, we argue that it can be productively used to think about marginalized people’s relationships to EDI work. We conceptualize care labour, however, as a more radical act involving collective efforts to redistribute power. We show that whilst most participants were striving towards care labour, this was hard to disentangle from institutionally demanded hope labour. Nevertheless, we highlight glimmers of care: through trade unions, informal networks, acts of defacement and radical reimaginings of universities.

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Introduction

This paper reports on findings from a research project – known as ‘Whose Rainbow?’ – which used symbolism of the rainbow as a ‘jumping off’ point to explore LGBT+ people’s experiences of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) schemes in UK¹ Higher Education (HE) institutions. In particular, we were interested in: participants’ relationships with the Pride rainbow and other forms of LGBT+ symbolism; their experiences in HE as LGBT+ people; their thoughts on the use of symbols of LGBT+ inclusion in universities. Progression of the project was elongated by global events, personal happenings and the slow pace of academia. Having originally conceived the idea for ‘Whose Rainbow?’ in 2017, we are writing this paper now in 2024, and the data collection – 40 interviews with

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LGBT+ staff and students – took place mainly in 2022. These 7 years saw substantial shifts in contexts relevant to the project's focus: 1) a global pandemic, for a period of which the rainbow symbol, associated with LGBT+ pride and acceptance, became synonymous with support for the UK's National Health Service; 2) considerable periods of industrial action in UK HE; 3) upticks in anti-gender, anti-LGB, and especially anti-trans sentiments² across Europe (RESIST Project Team, 2024), with the UK slipping from its position as one of Europe's most LGBT+ friendly countries to becoming known as a bastion of transphobia (ILGA Europe 2024; Pearce et al., 2020).

This worsening social context for LGBT+ people has had particular implications for HE (Phipps, 2020; Webster, 2024). These include the implementation of the UK's Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act of 2023 which purports to ensure that the use of HE and student union premises cannot be denied to any group or individual on the basis of their ideas, beliefs or views. However, as Riley (2020) points out, the new law largely responds to – and provides for the banning of – protests on campus when racist and transphobic speakers are invited to student unions and universities (see also Pearce, 2021; Webster, 2024). There have also been organized campaigns to submit Freedom of Information Requests to HE institutions, aiming to discredit and encourage withdrawal from Stonewall's Diversity Champions scheme, the main LGBT+ charter mark used by UK universities (Gwenffrewi, 2022). This led to a number of universities, including University College London (UCL) and London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), withdrawing from Stonewall schemes, citing both a lack of EDI resources and concerns about membership constraining 'academic freedom' in harmful debates on sex and gender. These decisions to withdraw were strongly contested by the universities' LGBT+ staff and student bodies (qUCL, 2022; Spectrum and LSE Students' Union 2023).

The above paragraphs summarize the context of the research in this paper. Allen (2015, pp. 282–682) identifies two broad categories of research on LGBT+ experiences in HE: 1) studies concerned with 'visibility, campus climate and identity'; and 2) studies addressing 'what queer can do' by using 'queer insights to interrogate seemingly non-queer subjects'. Our study bridges this distinction, giving insights not only into LGBT+ people's engagements with HE but also into issues of labour, community and care in HE. We show that LGBT+ staff and students in HE are expected to 'embody diversity' (Ahmed, 2012) by performing significant additional EDI labour³ in the academy. We find, however, that although participants usually did some form of EDI work, their decisions as to whether and how to engage with this work were not simple. On the one hand, participants were critical of EDI initiatives and reluctant to offer their (usually uncompensated) labour to schemes with the potential to benefit the institution more than LGBT+ people. This perspective aligns with theoretical and autoethnographic arguments made elsewhere and which we explore further below. On the other hand, participants often felt a responsibility to try to make universities more hospitable places for LGBT+ people, particularly those with less institutional power than themselves. We theorize this conflict by introducing the concepts of hope labour and care labour. Hope labour is un(der)paid work, done in the present with an expectation of improved future working conditions, resulting in significant exploitation and gains for an employer (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Although the concept has not been applied to EDI work, we argue that our participants' engagement with EDI initiatives could be usefully understood as a form of hope labour. We show that participants were typically

conscious of their exploitation, and striving towards something closer to the types of care labour advocated by, for example, Malatino (2020) in relation to trans care, Piepznia-Samarasinha (2018) in their intersectional exploration of care and disability justice and Winters and Ningard (2023) in their call for queer care work in the academy. Yet, whilst we agree with Malatino's (2020, p. 5) call for care to be centred in the present moment where 'trans lives are recurrently and brutally utilized as a political wedge issue', and Winters and Ningard's call for queer care work in HE, we show that – for our participants – it was difficult to disentangle work done for LGBT+ people (care labour) and work done for the institution (hope labour). We turn now to our literature review, beginning by situating our study within existing scholarship on LGBT+ people's experiences in UK HE.

Being LGBT+ in UK Higher Education

The body of literature exploring LGBT+ people's experiences of UK universities is relatively small (O'Riordan et al., 2022). The research that does exist has discussed the experiences of students more than staff and focused more on undergraduate and taught postgraduate students than on research/doctoral students (English & Fenby-Hulse, 2019; Ings, 2015). Nevertheless, there are trends in the stories told over time. One trend counters the assumption that university campuses are necessarily a 'safe place' for LGBT+ students (Ellis, 2009; Formby, 2015, 2017; Lee et al., 2024). Ellis (2009) and Formby (2015), for example, highlighted that although LGBT+ students generally found universities more LGBT+ friendly than most of society, there were still issues regarding social isolation and LGBT-related influences on academic attainment, choice of career and migration decisions – findings echoed by Lee et al. (2024).

In a small-scale study focusing on LGBT+ (though mainly LGB) staff at one post-92 university,⁴ Lee (2023) found that staff were more out to colleagues than students, appreciated LGBT+ role models in senior positions, valued staff networks, and were reassured by signalling such as the presence of rainbow symbolism or charter mark schemes. As we discuss later in this paper, this response to institutional signalling contrasts with some of our own findings (see also Slater et al., 2024). It also conflicts with more intersectional arguments made by other authors, such as Winters and Ningard (2023), who contend that *despite* queer representation on campus (whether that be rainbow flags or EDI policy), queer people remain precariously positioned in HE, with different queer people holding different amounts of institutional power due to other forms of social positioning such as class, race, disability and job status, as well as the prestige and finances of their university.

Although some earlier research negates trans people's experiences (e.g. Ellis, 2009), an increase in trans visibility and backlash mean that more recent studies stress trans-specific issues (Benato et al., 2024; Formby, 2015, 2017; Lee et al., 2024; Mckendry & Lawrence, 2017; Regan, 2023). Here, authors show that trans and non-binary people experience numerous barriers in HE, including difficulties with colleagues and other students (including through misgendering), a lack of gender-neutral facilities and problems navigating administrative processes. O'Riordan et al. (2022) found that trans young people applying to university often did extensive research before deciding on a university, but rather than look at policy, they looked for the existence of gender-neutral toilets, a visible LGBT+

community, and suitable accommodation. Toilets were not just about physical provision, but about an institutional acknowledgement of trans people's existence (see Jones & Slater, 2020).

There are also several theoretical and autoethnographic papers highlighting the impact of transphobia in HE. Pearce (2020), for example, explains the importance of community and workplace solidarity efforts for trans women and other marginalized researchers to survive in the academy. Pearce et al. (2020) describe the potential for transphobic complaints to be made against staff when attempting to teach around trans issues. Slater (2023) highlights the risk of harassment that trans researchers face when doing public-facing trans-affirmative work. Humphrey et al. (2023) and Slater and Liddiard (2018) describe the difficulties in trying to do trans and queer work within disciplinary spaces that have powerful transphobic gatekeepers.

Running throughout these studies are several threads. First, there is an acknowledgement that LGBT+, and particularly trans, people's HE experiences are steeped in bureaucracy and laborious attempts to make systems work for them and other LGBT+ people (Benato et al., 2024). Indeed, O'Riordan et al. (2022) show that even prior to being accepted as a student by a university, trans people's encounters with HE involve significant increased bureaucracy, whereas Slater's (2023) and Pearce's (2020) accounts show that efforts to stay safe within the academy continue to burden academics at all career stages, but with specific implications for those who are more precariously employed and/or early career. Second, there is a general scepticism about university policy as a solution to the problems of HE for LGBT+ people. Third, there are hints throughout these studies as to the potential usefulness of community within LGBT+ HE spaces. This paper brings together these three threads, exploring the additional labour required of LGBT+ people to just exist in HE, but also how that interplays with EDI initiative engagement and community-building. We turn now to discuss how these themes have emerged empirically and been theorized in the wider literature.

Theorizing EDI and labour

Whilst literature explored so far focuses directly on LGBT+ students and/or staff, there is wider literature that looks at EDI in universities from different marginalized perspectives. Literature has pointed to the white, middle-class, masculine and ableist habitus of HE, and how that leads to the marginalization of working-class women academics (Rickett & Morris, 2020), staff of colour (Madriaga & Blaisdell, 2024) and disabled students and staff (Hannam-Swain, 2017; Peruzzo & Raaper, 2023), among others. Researchers have also explored particular EDI initiatives. Bhopal and Pitkin (2020), for example, argue that the Race Equality Charter gives universities a veneer of being anti-racist whilst the institutions are not actually addressing racist conditions. Doharty et al. (2020) argue that a discourse of 'decolonising' embeds, rather than dismantles, whiteness in universities. Clavero and Galligan (2021) show that Gender Equity Plans fail to deliver gender justice in academia and highlight that the labour for such plans falls disproportionately on women. Other authors, however, argue that one can be critical of EDI initiatives but use them strategically in ways that are resistant to neoliberal agendas (e.g. Madriaga and Blaisdell (2024) on race-based staff forums; Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) on Athena SWAN).

Whilst some authors may see spaces of strategic resistance within EDI schemes, there remains a general scepticism towards EDI policy and its ability to make useful, structural change which will benefit people marginalized within HE. Ahmed (2012) develops theoretical frameworks to explain this position. She argues that diversity is a 'hopeful performative'. In other words, the repetition of the word diversity (by management, in policy, and so on) is assumed to equate to a positive good: 'diversity as a speech act might be understood as generating its own promise, *as if we can catch the positivity of diversity from repeating the word*' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 67, italics in original). Ahmed also argues that although, at first glance, EDI policy may appear to fail to achieve what it sets out (i.e. to further EDI), this is itself the point of EDI policy: EDI schemes "'work" precisely by *not* bringing about the effects that they name' (p. 413). In other words, Ahmed contends that EDI policy functions to stop change happening and names this phenomenon non-performativity. In Ahmed's (2021) later work, *Complaint*, she furthers this idea, arguing that there is a strategic inefficiency – a slowness – built into universities which works to maintain the status quo. Throughout Ahmed's work, it is clear that making or attempting to make meaningful EDI-based changes within HE is a slow, laborious process.

Also relevant is a body of literature, which explores wider working conditions in academia. Academic jobs are often characterized by high workloads, precarity, an expectation of mobility and a 'love of the job' (Ivancheva et al., 2019; Pérez & Montoya, 2018; Rosa, 2021). These conditions mean that there is often an assumption that work – particularly research work for more junior academics but also, as we will show, EDI work – will be done outside of contracted hours. An expectation to work for free, in order to gain the necessary exposure and experience for future paid employment, has been termed hope labour (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Because hope labour involves the hope of future secure(r) employment, it also demands emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) in that workers portray themselves in ways that are favourable to their employers. Although explorations of hope labour began through theorizing internships, voluntary and un(der)paid work in the cultural sector (e.g. Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021), we argue that the concept of hope labour can be productively utilized to theorize EDI labour in HE. We make this argument for several reasons. First, as others have argued, the backdrop of increasing precarity for academics and, increasingly, administrative and professional services staff (Leeming, 2024), makes hope labour relevant to the sector (Brax, 2024; Illingworth & Scott, 2023). Second, paid and unpaid work are not always mutually exclusive, but symbiotic and sometimes hard to disentangle from one-another: HE is an illustrative example of how informal, free work is demanded by formal working arrangements (Alacovska, 2018). Third, EDI labour, like hope labour, relies on the hope of better future working/studying conditions. Fourth, EDI labour can be equally exploitative, through both its lack of compensation and its demands for emotional labour and regulation.

We also use hope labour because it expresses, in a way that the term 'EDI labour' does not, the *hope* for change, and desire for care and relationality, which participants reflected were their motivations for taking on EDI roles. When used in relation to EDI, the individual's hope is not only for more secure work for oneself but is also driven by a sense of responsibility to improve working and studying environments for others. Through our use of hope labour, therefore, we further the work of others (e.g. Alacovska, 2018; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021) who consider hope labour in relation to collectivity and social

responsibility. Indeed, we consider hope labour alongside (and not necessarily mutually exclusive to) care labour; that is, the labour of caring for one another. In our particular case, caring for other LGBT+ people who are part of the same institutional environment, especially those with less institutional power. For Winters and Ningard (2023, p. 29), care labour is ‘essential to survival within our current academy and to transformation of the knowledges and practices as we build new worlds together’. Similarly, in their ‘queer manifesto against LGBT+ inclusion in universities’, Breeze and Leigh (2022) reject EDI labour, which they see as exploitative, in favour of care labour: ‘it’s only by refusing the work of the “inclusion regimes” of the university that queer HE workers can make space for collectivizing resources for queer flourishing, including beyond HE’ (p413). Whilst in agreement with these scholars, our empirical data furthers and complicates their arguments. We show that participants’ strivings towards care labour are entangled with and relational to the hope labour demanded by the institution. Before introducing our data, we turn to give more detail on our research methods.

Methodology

The idea for this research began in 2017. At the time, one of us was feeling institutionally unsupported as an academic facing harassment for their leadership of a public-facing queer- and trans-affirming project (Slater, 2023). During the course of that project, however, there was a visible increase in rainbow symbolism around their university. This included university-branded rainbow coffee cups, the flying of rainbow flags and, most notably, the launching of what was known as an allies scheme. The allies scheme was simple – anybody working in the university could declare themselves an LGBT+ ally, at which point they would be given a rainbow lanyard and encouraged to add a university-branded ‘allies’ icon to their email signature. This scheme was not unique to our university. As we have written elsewhere, allies schemes (often including rainbow lanyards) have been commonplace in universities, although run in varying ways (Slater et al., 2024; Slater, 2024; see also Calvard et al., 2020). Indeed, we could consider allies schemes an example of Ahmed’s ‘hopeful performatives’: if one declares themselves an ally enough times, then they become an ally, even without any material acts of allyship. This was something we felt critical of, and which the ‘Whose Rainbow?’ project wanted to address.

However, research (and gaining research funding) takes time. Our research was carried out between 2021 and 2024, with the majority of interviews taking place in 2022. During this time, there were several shifts in the contexts of our study, as outlined above. Least touched on so far, but arguably with the biggest global repercussions, was the COVID-19 pandemic. The early lockdown stages of Spring 2020 (in the UK) brought changes that were directly relevant to our project: people were encouraged to use the rainbow symbol to show support for the National Health Service (NHS). In one example, a bus that had previously been used for LGBT+ Pride events was rebranded as an ‘NHS bus’ (Milton, 2020). In another example, contestants in the popular television show *The Great British Bake-Off* were asked to bake rainbow bagels to ‘represent the NHS’, with no mention of the significance of rainbows to LGBT+ people (Tabberer, 2020).

This new context – rainbows being shallowly used in corporate and institutional settings, while simultaneously distanced from LGBT+ people in public consciousness –

shaped our research and the methods we chose. The methods employed, to facilitate the sharing of in-depth, nuanced insights from our participants, consisted of 40 online semi-structured interviews with 17 LGBT+ staff (in professional service and academic roles), 15 LGBT+ students (ranging from undergraduate to PhD), five participants who were both staff and students, and three self-declared allies involved in some form of EDI work. During interviews, we asked participants about three main areas: their relationships with the Pride rainbow and other forms of LGBT+ symbolism; their experiences in HE as LGBT+ people/allies; their thoughts on the use of symbols of LGBT+ inclusion in their university/ies. Most interviews lasted around 1 hour. Ethical approval was given by Sheffield Hallam University.

Participants were recruited from multiple universities in the UK through online outreach (utilizing social media and JISC Mails), via organizations and networks such as trade union branches and student unions and through snowballing. We asked for LGBT+ people (or allies) working or studying in UK universities. Participants were self-selecting, and more people expressed an interest in participating than we were able to interview, so those expressing an interest were asked to complete a screening questionnaire: the objective was to speak to people with different institutional positions (e.g. professional services, academic staff; undergraduate, master's or doctoral student), different relations to EDI schemes (e.g. involved with allies schemes or LGBT+ staff networks, involved in disability or race-based schemes, or not involved in any schemes or student societies), and different demographics. We are not claiming that the study is representative, but did try to ensure a diversity of participants.

All demographic information was collected with open-text options within an online form that was sent to participants prior to interview; completing it was not compulsory. In total, 22 of our participants chose to provide demographic information, with this relatively low number possibly related to the process we adopted, or due to concerns about anonymity (though we did say we would not attach any demographic information to individuals). We also made space in interviews for people to share aspects of their identity that felt relevant to their experiences, for example, some participants spoke about race or disability, and others about being trans, or in relation to their specific sexuality. Participants specified nine different gender identities: seven men, eight women, and seven others falling outside of man/woman. There were 10 sexualities specified: one heterosexual, three gay, three lesbian, four bi(sexual) or pan(sexual), four queer, two asexual, and five choosing to position themselves elsewhere. The majority of participants (17) were white, with one specifying white Irish, and one white European. One participant responded with 'mixed/unsure', one GRT (Gypsy, Roma and Traveller), and one Malaysian Chinese. Twelve of the 22 respondents were disabled. There was an additional free-text option for participants to share anything else about their identity: some expanded on and complicated their sexuality or gender identities; one specified Romany ancestry; one wrote that they were trans; and another wrote that they were an immigrant. All participant names used in this paper are pseudonyms, with participants given the option of choosing their own (if they did not, we chose it). Care has been taken to ensure participant anonymity: demographic information is deliberately not assigned to participant quotes, and where appropriate, we have changed some details (e.g. areas of academic expertise), so participants are not identifiable. All participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts. A decision was made to not make this data open, in order to not risk

identification from full transcripts, or transcripts being accessed by those with harmful intentions.

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted on NVivo, with this inductive process involving identifying and categorizing recurring themes arising throughout the data. Each researcher individually coded a selection of transcripts before coming together to agree on a list of codes which were then used for the remaining transcripts. Labour and community were both selected as important codes which required further interrogation, and became the subject of this paper. Because we aimed to have some degree of public-facing-ness to our project, and particularly to offer something back to participants faster than academic publishing processes allow, we used blog writing as a way of engaging with and sharing our data (<http://whoserainbow.wordpress.com>).

Findings

We turn now to outline our findings, which speak to the overarching themes of hope labour and care labour. We do this by exploring how participants talked about their involvement in, and/or views on, EDI 'work', within sections addressing: Being a spokesperson and embodying diversity; Being asked versus being listened to; Industrial relations and trade unions; University-affiliated communities; Informal care webs.

Being a spokesperson and embodying diversity

The university extracts the labour of performing LGBT+ visibility in just the right way: the disclosure, the coming out, the staying in, role modelling, respectability, managing colleagues' feelings while explaining their cisheterosexism, branded rainbow lanyards, smiling happy gays. (Breeze & Leigh, 2022, p. 424)

Many participants talked about the expectation that they were available to be consulted on LGBT+ issues. This included what Breeze and Leigh (2022) call the 'labour of liberal bureaucracy': being asked to sit on EDI committees, review policy, and so on. It also included managing personal relationships and expectations by fielding questions from well-meaning colleagues. As Hannah, a doctoral student who also taught in the department, put it:

I feel like I've become the representative of an entire diverse community. I am *the* LGBT person – oh, we've got Hannah, if there's something we want to know, we'll go to Hannah. I don't even know some things that you're asking me! I'm not the right person to ask. But whenever something LGBT related comes up, I'm the person they come to.

Ahmed (2012) explores how people of colour come to embody diversity in HE. Hannah felt similarly – that she had come to embody all possible knowledge about LGBT+ issues, despite not always feeling confident that she knew the answers. Hannah was not the only participant to feel this way. Several academics talked about being asked to share their LGBT+ expertise outside their own disciplinary area. Nicole, for example, said:

I have had a colleague who came to me at the beginning of this term who said would you teach a class on queer theory to Masters Psychology students. I'm a criminologist! But because one of the co-leaders of the module turned out to have some really transphobic views, they'd wanted to have somebody come in as the counter . . . well of course I'm going to say yes, but. . .!

In their book *Care Work*, Piepznia-Samarasinha (2018, p. 137) explores the gendered, classed and racialized labour of care work. Remarking on the numerous requests they get from their community, they write 'And you know what's going to happen? You're going to do those things. Because you do, indeed, care. Because it's the right thing to do. Because you're good at it. Because you want to'. Writing from a HE context, Gaudet et al. (2021) highlight that care acts in academia – towards students, colleagues, institutions, and families – are undervalued, overlooked and disproportionality fall on women. Accounts from participants, such as Nicole, resonate strongly with this: they recognized and critiqued the expectation of labour, but they often honoured requests because they cared about (and felt a responsibility for) other LGBT+ people's experiences of HE. Another academic, Felix, also regularly had students being sent to them from outside their own disciplinary expertise. As they illustrated, there was rarely an acknowledgement or understanding of the emotional labour that was required of LGBT+ people in these situations:

I think this is going to become increasingly a problem. I had a student on an MA course email me who wants to talk about writing an essay on the conversion therapy debate. And I was like, I cannot emotionally deal with this. They'd been sent to me by a colleague, who's great, but I think we're going to see . . . I get one or two students who are cis[gender] who have found this niche thing that they'd never heard of before and isn't this really exciting. And they're clueless. It's really hard to support them and support myself.

The university's lack of clear channels for students to raise LGBT+ related suggestions or complaints led to further reliance on individual LGBT+ staff to embody diversity, rather than it being embedded into structures of the university. Alissa, like other undergraduate students, spoke at length about how difficult it was to know who to speak to 'when something goes wrong', remarking that her inclusion as an LGBT+ student felt reliant on the 'attitudes of individual tutors'. Ahmed (2012) illustrates how an uneven distribution of responsibility for equality can become a mechanism of social reproduction. Hannah, Nicole and Felix, like many of our other participants, recognized this. Yet, participants also *cared* about the issues, and about other LGBT+ people that were affected by the issues, and so they felt a sense of responsibility for topics to be treated with the nuance and sensitivity that they deserved, and to try to make change, particularly for students. They were required to care, because the institution itself was uncaring. Aarto, who worked in IT support, summed this up when they said:

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.

Being asked versus being listened to (or caring in an uncaring system)

Wu (2021) writes that despite EDI initiatives, there is a systemic and institutional ‘ignoring’ of racism in HE. Similarly, in our study, whilst participants were asked and expected to deliver work on LGBT+ issues, this did not mean that they felt listened to. Students and staff discussed long-winded and difficult processes involved in trying to make even small changes within large institutions, such as making administrative systems more inclusive to non-binary people by including more than just man/woman gender options. These participants were caring, and attempting to enact care for others, through trying to change an uncaring system. The ‘strategic inefficiency’ (Ahmed, 2021) of the institution often led participants to give up after being sent around in circles to numerous different people, none of whom would take responsibility for an exclusionary system. For students (and also staff on short-term contracts, which we come onto below), change happened so slowly that they never saw any outcome of their efforts before graduating. Alissa had fed back to tutors that the medical teaching they received was not representative of trans people, only to be told that the university were ‘currently working on their trans inclusion policy and were working to make changes within the university to make things better’. The non-performativity (Ahmed, 2012) of the trans inclusion policy here is explicit: before it is even written, the trans inclusion policy is used to stop the curriculum becoming more trans-inclusive. Trans people’s experiences must be contained within this policy and only allowed to enter the wider university in controlled, institutionally sanctioned ways. Charlie, a master’s student, also illustrated the university’s attempts to maintain the status quo by compartmentalizing marginalized groups into ‘correct’ spaces and forums. Reflecting on their experiences as a student representative for their course, they said:

I was mentioning what [international] students were facing. But one of the staff members said to me that I should only bring up issues that affect the majority and I shouldn’t bring up anything that affects minority students because the impact is not big. So I do not think they are committed to LGBTQ inclusion if that is one of their responses.

Hope labour has been characterized by the figure of the entrepreneur (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021), resonating with the sales pitch often given to students in these kinds of roles: sit on this committee, represent your peers; it will look good on your CV. However, for Charlie, this role as a course representative should have been about care labour – pushing for change which would benefit themselves and their peers – and as a queer, non-binary, international student of colour, the instruction that they were given to only represent ‘the majority’ made little sense, even on an individual level. Charlie’s aspirations for care labour – concerned with intersectionality and redistribution of power – were particularly clear when asked what changes they would like to see in the university:

The starting point I came from is – I want universities to stop being the institutions that they are. There’s so much historical oppression that comes from universities. I want the knowledge production to be more rooted with communities. So, queer people, disabled people, Black people or people of colour. All countries’ peoples. They would be the site of knowledge production, because a lot of them have wisdom. I can remember my frustration and inner conflict when I came to university – just how top-down the entire process is.

Moving towards care labour: industrial relations and trade unions

Interviews took place during a time of industrial action by the University and College Union (UCU)⁵ over pay and working conditions. Some participants brought this up as important context for their EDI work. As Andrew, an academic and active UCU member said:

The university wants to be seen to be doing things and making progressive changes, but it isn't willing to actually put its money where its mouth is. The strikes were kind of an embodiment of that – they claimed to be wanting to create good working environments, which result in increased student satisfaction and all that kind of stuff, but actually they're not willing to give people proper pensions and pay and decent working conditions.

The frustrations that Andrew described led to what Ahmed (2017) might call a 'snap' – reaching a breaking point where he had publicly resigned from his EDI roles, to instead get further involved in his union, which he felt was 'more productive than the university bureaucracy'. Other participants also brought up trade union work as an alternative to university EDI work. Plotnikof et al. (2021) describe the depoliticization of institutional diversity work. For some participants, such as Aarto, doing EDI-based work through unions made its political nature more explicit; they described their time with UNISON⁶ as feeling 'more like activism' than their university EDI work. Furthermore, they pointed to their time being accounted for when working for UNISON:

[Working for UNISON] felt more useful than doing stuff with the staff networks. If you're an officer for UNISON, then it's built in that you're allowed to have X percentage of time away from your regular duties, whereas when you're doing these sorts of in-role university-run and led and owned things, you're just sort of like – there, do it, and do all 100% of your regular work at the same time. So it's a bit more – I don't know – it felt a bit more useful and also actual time allotted to it.

For Aarto, being compensated for their time through their union was a material recognition of their labour, which the university was not willing to give. It also made their work more sustainable, which was particularly pertinent because they had previously had to give up their role as chair of the LGBT+ staff network due to the volume of work in their mandated duties. Having their time compensated allowed EDI work to move away from exploitative hope labour towards a more viable framework of care labour.

Felix, a lecturer who had sat on numerous EDI-related committees in their university, also mentioned that industrial action led them to question the (hope) labour of university EDI work. They explained their frustration at university management refusing to meet with their union branch, commenting that the only time that management responded was when somebody scribbled on a university-issued poster which read 'your mental health and wellbeing matters to us', adding sarcastic comments about workplace conditions. Reflecting on this, they said:

I'm just so tempted to go and spray-paint the whole hall or something. Because we have no way ... we do surveys after surveys and, yeah, that's the only way we have of expressing anger and it doesn't really seem to do anything. Yes. More local art. More defacement. [laughs]

Ahmed (2021) explains how EDI labour can be seen as 'institutional venting'; a release valve that lets people complain in a contained way, but through which no change

happens. Felix had recognized this, and, like Andrew, they were considering resigning from their role as chair of the EDI committee. Although they noted that their position in this committee may have contributed to their promotion, they worried that it also made them ‘complicit in the tokenising of equality’ and ‘undermining the union’. As Felix explained, ‘these initiatives, they seem to be a way that the university can avoid talking to the union by saying, “oh, we’re already doing this in our own way”’. EDI policy and practice worked to ‘block action insofar as the document gets taken up as evidence that we have “done it”’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 101). Through their experience of trying to make change through committee work, Felix had come to feel that alternative responses were needed – actions that were more radical than those sanctioned through the university; indeed, ‘more defacement’ was positioned as the more caring response, with more potential to redistribute power.

University-affiliated communities: care and inclusion or rifts and exclusion?

So far we have discussed some of the additional labour that was required and expected of LGBT+ staff and students in HE, showing that participants often went into EDI work with the hope of making change, but then felt frustrated, exploited and sometimes politically and ethically compromised through this work. For some participants, trade unions could act as potential care webs – places which were felt to be more productive and better compensated spaces through which to make positive change for LGBT+ people. Participants also discussed LGBT+ staff networks or student societies at their institutions. Resonating with Madriaga and Blaisdell’s (2024) work on race-based staff networks, for some participants these groups were a welcome relief from the heteronormativity of their everyday work/study. Some undergraduate students said that most of their social networks were made through the LGBT+ society. One student, Sarah, talked at length about how social trips to LGBT-related films and exhibitions with the society meant that she had connected to queer history in ways that she would not have done on her own. Another student, Dawn, spoke positively about a WhatsApp group for LGBT+ students that she was invited to join prior to beginning her course. Now in her fourth year, she continued to be part of the society, and enjoyed running events, guiding and advising newer students.

Some staff also made positive remarks about staff networks: they enjoyed attending events and/or appreciated the work that colleagues put into ensuring a visible LGBT+ presence. Marcus talked about a recent high-profile decision at his university which had felt hostile to LGBT+ people. This had highlighted to him the importance of the LGBT+ staff network, which he described as ‘grassroots’ and a place of ‘thoughtful inclusivity’. It also became clear, however, that there was little consistency and sometimes little clarity in how staff networks functioned and what their aims were. Whereas some participants, like Marcus, felt that their staff networks were more autonomous or grassroots – perhaps akin to care webs – others said that the groups were linked with HR departments, felt more bureaucratic, and were entwined with forms of hope labour. Annie, who had worked at various institutions, summarized some of this confusion:

My wider experience has mostly been [that LGBT+ staff networks are] semi-informal networking, in the sense that you might be the only non-straight person or non-cis[gender] person in your department . . . helping you find other people, and that in some ways has been nice, but

more internal looking than aiming to change the organisation, and a feeling that the organisation has them because they have to, rather than because they really want to. I'm honestly not sure structurally if [our staff network] is its own unit or affiliated to HR.

Like other forms of EDI hope labour, staff networks were often reliant on the goodwill of staff running them on top of their day-to-day duties, and it was not always clear whether the labour was benefiting other LGBT+ people more than it benefited the institution. Furthermore, the voluntary basis on which they were run often meant that whilst there were occasional bursts of activity, at other times networks lay dormant. This was exacerbated by high workloads, which did not afford staff the time to do anything outside of their everyday duties, as well as by precarious short-term contracts which contributed to staff not feeling invested in making change or establishing relationships in an institution.

Another observation made by participants was that staff networks and student societies tended to cater predominantly for white, non-disabled, cisgender lesbian and gay people. Nicole, for example, felt that she might not be understood or welcome in the staff network as a bisexual person in a mixed-gender relationship. Annie spoke about staff networks that she had attended being 'very white, middle-class and able-bodied'. She speculated that this may have been why they sometimes felt apolitical: 'while there were points of shared identity, they did not feel particularly political or particularly interested in changing the status quo, because actually the status quo was alright as far as they were concerned'.

So, whilst for some participants staff networks were sorts of care webs, for many others they felt like another form of hope labour: work that was predominantly about making universities look good but leading to little change. Carla, for instance, said that she decided to leave the staff network when they chose to run an event on a strike day, which she felt demonstrated their lack of understanding of how queer politics related to wider working conditions. Andrew was also sceptical about staff networks, arguing that they had little institutional power. As outlined earlier, several participants mentioned universities removing their Stonewall affiliations, which had been in the press around the time of interviews. This illustrated Andrew's point about the lack of power afforded to staff networks in shaping decisions. However, Andrew also felt that the voluntary basis on which networks ran could afford them some leverage. He gave the example of an entire staff network publicly resigning over the university's invitation of a transphobic speaker (Brooks, 2019). Perhaps ironically though, this 'queer refusal' (Breeze & Leigh, 2022) resulted in the collapse of the staff network, with nobody left to run it.

Student societies were similarly critiqued for their potential to exclude some people and to be apolitical spaces. Diamond, who was asexual, said that she had not been to LGBT+ student societies due to a 'fear of not being fully accepted, or someone being a bit awful about it'. Several participants, such as Charlie, said that student societies were unwelcoming to them because they usually revolved around alcohol and/or felt inaccessible and exclusionary in other ways (see also Formby, 2015):

I feel slightly estranged from them because – even though they do have [some] non-binary people and they do have a diverse community – a lot of the events that they organise tend to be sort of hangouts with alcohol and what I call extroverted settings where you're required to socialise and go out ... And I'm an introvert and that makes me really uncomfortable. And

they're really white. And white people generally make me ... the white culture around the LGBTQ society makes me feel quite alienated. So, I do like to talk to them but at the same time there's a barrier there.

Other students also felt the lack of an attachment to university LGBT+ communities. Erin, a mature undergraduate student who was studying remotely, said that she relied on a mixture of a Facebook group and Twitter (now 'X') for her LGBT+ university community. However, this had felt inadequate when facing particular issues of transphobia at her institution. Most doctoral students interviewed said that because they were positioned somewhere between staff and student, neither the staff networks nor the student societies catered for them. Some were not sure whether they were allowed to join the staff network, whereas others, like Al, knew that they were eligible but were not sure how comfortable they would feel there:

There's an LGBTQ staff network, which technically I'm allowed to join because I'm a member of staff, but it feels weird, because [I'm only on] an hourly contract. Then there's the student stuff which is alcohol-driven and for undergrads, fundamentally. They go clubbing on a Tuesday night. It was suggested that they do some non-alcohol events, 'oh we might occasionally run a film night'. They do some specific identity group things, with cake and stuff, but it's like at 2 o'clock on a Wednesday, and I'm just like, 'leave work to go ... ?' So I think that's a hard gap to bridge as a PhD student. If I was redesigning it, I'd do some division of taught students which is the undergrad and taught master's students, and the PhD students and staff together. I'm young for a PhD student. I started when I was 22. A lot of people start when they're like 30, and so then it's like your life has more in common with a staff member than an 18-year-old who's going drinking.

Most participants said that there was little interaction between student societies and staff networks. One student, John, craved shared spaces. He talked about the isolation that he felt working as a master's student focusing on LGBT+ research. He wished students could link up with LGBT+ staff working in LGBT+ research areas. Resonating with John's feelings, participants who had experienced LGBT+ staff and student connections spoke positively about this being a way to create more inclusive spaces, for example, Nicole said:

At my previous place of employment [the staff network] was a bit more radical and I think that was the link between the staff/student side. It was shaped by quite a politically inclined student union and student body as a whole. I found it a bit more welcoming, a bit more inclusive to non-white folk, to people who are outside of the gender binary. Disability was included a bit more, not perfectly but it didn't feel that it was excluded, didn't feel that it would be unexpected to have a disabled person attend, whereas in other networks I've joined it's been a bit, 'oh, what, we have to do access as well?'

The most positive accounts were about societies which offered a range of activities and ways to engage.

Informal care webs

For the reasons outlined above, many participants, particularly those who were trans and/or multiply marginalized, told us that they had found forms of LGBT+ community outside LGBT+ staff networks and student societies, and often outside their own institutions. These informal networks were particularly pertinent at times of dispute with the university (often around instances of institutional transphobia). At these times, community and care

felt most important to participants, and hope labour felt most insufficient. The value and necessity of external networks was illustrated by Thomas, an openly trans academic, working in trans studies, whose key connections were outside of his own institution. He spoke of a network of trans academics that had built up over a decade since his PhD and the importance of peer-to-peer support:

Quite a few of us [trans academics] know each other. There are examples of allies at other institutions. There are some people I know who are cis[gender] but work in LGBTQ research who have actually been really great about helping me get my foot in the door as an early career researcher, inviting me onto projects, making sure that kind of thing happens. I was very fortunate with my PhD supervisor who was also trans, which must be pretty rare. That was good. But I think quite a lot of it ends up going outside the institution and being on more of a peer basis.

The network that Thomas described could be positioned as an example of a queer care web in academia. For Winters and Ningard (2023, p. 30), queer care webs require ‘strong collective social structures, which take a considerable amount of time to cultivate and do not resemble our structures, and likely, do not reflect the goals of the university as a hostile system’. Possibilities of queer care webs include ‘supporting each other emotionally, establishing writing groups, co-authoring publications and sharing and collaborating on teaching materials’ (Winters & Ningard, 2023, p. 29). Often, the more radical networks that participants spoke of were informal and not attached to a particular university. However, they also involved whisper networks and sometimes relied on people being out, at least within certain spaces. For example, when Charlie, a master’s student, was asked how they established a community, they said ‘I just tell people what my pronouns are and then I think the other students are also more happy to tell me that they are queer’. So, community-building may rely on outness and – to go back to Thomas’ example – the goodwill of others in helping them to ‘get a foot in the door’. These pivots for networking could result in only slightly queered lines of what Downes (2023, p. 102) calls ‘straight sharing’ – that is, sharing through which ‘white wealthy people repeatedly profit most’. As Piepznia-Samarasinha (2018) argues, within networks that would consider themselves more progressive or even radical, there remain injustices and exclusion including racism and ableism. How does one become the person that gets help to have a foot in the door? As such, when asked what they would like to see happen if they had a magic wand to change the university and make life better for LGBT+ people, many participants weighed the balance between small practical changes (which may be possible within the structures of EDI hope work) and a desire to demolish the system and start again.

Conclusion

We come to make revisions to this paper at a time of uncertainty for trans people in the UK. Between us submitting the paper and making revisions following the peer-review process, the Supreme Court has made changes to the legal definition of womanhood, with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) following this up with ‘interim guidance’ which the LGBT+ sector and others have condemned as a potentially unlawful attempt to push trans people out of public life

(Good Law Project, 2025). We do not yet know what from the guidance will become law and, with respect to this paper, neither do we know how the HE sector will respond. During this unsettling time, we find ourselves asking: where is best to put our own limited energy? Do we engage with our institutions; speak publicly from our areas of disciplinary expertise; reach out to and support mutual aid projects in our local queer communities; talk to our neighbours, clearly situating this ruling as unjust? All these questions, of course, are relevant to this paper where we have shown the additional EDI labour that is expected of LGBT+ staff and students in UK HE, and the complex negotiations that LGBT+ people make when deciding whether and how to engage with this work. Many of our participants agreed with arguments made by theorists (e.g. Ahmed, Breeze and Leigh, Winters and Ningard) we have cited: that EDI work is always conditional, relies on free labour of marginalized people, and is often of benefit to the institution, so therefore cannot be considered in isolation from wider labour conditions. Yet, at the same time, participants felt a responsibility to try to make positive change for other LGBT+ people, particularly those with less institutional power, which often involved some degree of involvement in university-sanctioned EDI work. Through our arguments, we have furthered theories of hope labour, showing that it can be useful to consider EDI work a form of hope labour – in that it is often exploitative and uncompensated, yet staff and students get involved in the hope of improving work and study environments for other LGBT+ people. Indeed, even when not necessarily achieving its original aim, hope labour sometimes led to community and connections that would not have otherwise existed. Many participants, however, were also critical of this work, and their place within it. Some had publicly resigned from EDI roles, particularly during periods of disagreement which included institutional transphobia and industrial action.

Generally, what participants were striving for was more akin to (collective) care labour; a more radical and less hierarchical form of activism which prioritized LGBT+ people over institutional image and reputation. But, caring in an uncaring institution was hard; the lines between exploitative labour and community care are not always obvious, so – like our own deliberations in the particular political moment that we are writing in – deciding where to put limited time and resource was difficult. Often, in trying to make change, participants ended up sitting somewhere between hope and care labour. For some participants, LGBT+ staff networks or student societies provided a space of care, whereas others found them lacking or exclusionary, and more akin to individualized hope labour. Trade unions, which tended to compensate people for their labour, were seen by some as more activist or productive spaces through which to care/make change, though, we know ourselves that trade unions should not be idealized as unconditionally queer and trans inclusive spaces.⁷ For others, who had perhaps been led to a snapping point (Ahmed, 2017), the solution was more radical still: defacement, or imagining a world where universities were not considered the pinnacle of knowledge production. What was clear, was that forms of queer community, and informal care webs – whilst never perfect, likely exclusionary to some, but hopefully struggling to be better – were highly valued, especially for trans people, who often experienced the most marginalization. As we revise this paper in 2025, therefore, this aspiration for intersectional, solidarity-building community care within and across HE seems more important than ever.

Notes

1. We had participants from universities in England, Scotland and Wales, but not Northern Ireland.
2. As we reflect on in the conclusion, in the time between submission of this paper and making revisions, the UK political landscape for trans people dramatically declined further when, on 16th April 2025, the Supreme Court made changes to the legal definition of womanhood, with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) following this up with 'interim guidance' which the LGBT+ sector has condemned as a potentially unlawful attempt to push trans people out of public life (Good Law Project, 2025).
3. By EDI labour we mean any labour related to equality, diversity and inclusion policy and practice in an institution.
4. A post-92 university in the UK is a former polytechnic or other HE institution that attained university status under the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992.
5. The University and College Union (UCU) represents academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians, technicians, professional staff and postgraduates in universities. The industrial action was called over pensions, pay, workload, equality, and casualization.
6. UNISON represents many non-academic staff in higher education.
7. For a recent example demonstrating this see this open letter protesting UNISON's response to the Supreme Court ruling: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf9oD2MknP5qInOkqx8hMWf4wk-EzlyASHiAj5bqTykWmh2UQ/viewform>

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