

Out in Sport

LGBT Students' Experiences of Sport



national union of students

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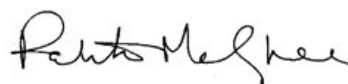
Foreword

As the only university mentioned in the original bid for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and the institution closest to the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, we have been playing our part in any way we can to build on their legacy. We have been focussed increasing participation in sport among the communities that live around those state-of-the-art buildings in East London, as well as the role we can play in developing disability sport at community and elite levels. We were happy, therefore, to support this research as an important contribution to the debate around access to sport for LGBT students.

Universities and colleges will always be one of the places where people try a sport for the first time. We must foster an environment where people from all walks of life feel comfortable signing up to sports teams during freshers' week and beyond. We must also work closely with partners in schools, government, communities, and business to build clear and supported routes that encourage participation in sport through educational institutions. Let's make sure the doors of our sports halls are open to more than just the usual suspects.

There are lots of lessons that students' unions, sport unions, and directors of sport can learn from this report and its subsequent recommendations and I urge them to work closely together to improve the access of LGBT students to sport.

After all, it is only through sport for all that we can truly deliver the next record-breaking Team GB.



Professor Patrick McGhee
Vice-Chancellor, University of East London



Introduction

Welcome to the NUS LGBT Campaign report, Out in Sport. This report gives the findings from our research into the sporting experiences of LGBT students in further and higher education, an area that has only seen limited research in the past.

We know that sport is a huge part of university and college life for many students and also that it is one of the primary ways that students engage with their students' unions. From our work representing LGBT students across the UK, we know that many LGBT students have found sports teams to be a welcoming and supportive environment, enriching their time at university. However, the NUS LGBT campaign has also heard of students feeling uncomfortable engaging in sport for a variety of cultural, structural, and other reasons. We believe that no student should feel excluded from participating in any activity open to their peers – particularly not something as integral to university and college life as sport.

In a year where there has been more attention on sport in the UK than ever before, we decided to undertake this research into exactly what barriers LGBT students face in

regards to their participation in sport, as well as the experiences of LGBT athletes when they do make the decision to participate.

Homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are enormous issues that need to be broken down into smaller, more concrete areas in order to be tackled effectively. Drawing on the research, this report makes ten practical recommendations for actions that sports teams, students' unions, educational institutions, and other organisations can take to begin to remove the barriers to LGBT students' participation in sport. We look forward to working with all those involved in providing sporting opportunities for LGBT students in order to make college and university sport more welcoming for LGBT students, and indeed, for everyone.



Finn McGoldrick
NUS LGBT Officer (Women's Place)

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

For many students, including many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) students who participated in this research, sport is an important part of university or college life. Yet many LGBT students feel excluded or uncomfortable participating in sport because of factors including the culture, structure, and physical environment in which sport takes place.

In 2011, as the UK prepared to host one of the biggest sporting events in the world, the NUS LGBT campaign launched a research project into the sporting experiences of LGBT students. The project consisted of a literature review, an online survey of 845 LGBT students, and nine workshops with students across the UK. Both the survey and the workshops explored LGBT students' experiences participating in and coming out in sport, as well as the barriers that prevent LGBT students from getting more involved in sport.

The NUS LGBT campaign believes that LGBT students should be able to fully enjoy and benefit from participation in sport. This report makes specific recommendations for sports teams, students' unions, institutions, and other organisations to enable them to work towards achieving this goal.

Participation in sport

The majority of LGBT students participate in sport or fitness activities of some type, although the type of sport and activity varies across sexual orientation and gender identity.

- 59.1 per cent of LGBT students participate in an individual sport or fitness activity, 34.6 per cent participate in an organised team sport, and 23.0 per cent participate in an informal team sport. Lesbian women are much more likely than any other group to participate in an organised team sport, with 52.0 per cent of respondents doing so.
- Running is the most common form of sporting activity overall, with 18.8 per cent of respondents

participating. Going to the gym is more popular with gay and bisexual men, while rugby is more popular with lesbian women.

- Most LGBT students are participating in sport organised by their students' union (50.9 per cent) or their university/college (27.1 per cent).

Experiences in sport

Many LGBT students who participate in sport have a positive experience while doing so.

- Nearly two thirds (62.2 per cent) of LGBT students who participate in team sport are open about their sexual orientation or gender identity to their teammates and coaches.
- 17.1 per cent of LGBT students who participate in team sport are not open to anyone. The main reason for this was that they do not think it is relevant, but 20.5 per cent of those who are not out are worried it might result in verbal or physical abuse on account of homophobia, transphobia, or biphobia.
- Only about a third of LGBT students (36.6 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that equality policies with regards to sport were visible at their institution.

Barriers to participation

Although many LGBT students who do not participate in sport are simply not interested or do not have the time, the research has identified that there are clear cultural, structural, and physical barriers that prevent some LGBT students from participating in sport.

- 46.8 per cent of LGBT students who do not participate in sport find the culture around sport alienating or unwelcoming.
- 41.9 per cent had a negative experience at school which has meant that they don't want to get involved at college or university.

- 14.3 per cent had experienced homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia which has put them off from participating.
- 18.7 per cent were put off by gendered sports teams, and this rose to 38.9 per cent of trans respondents.
- 9.4 per cent were put off by gender-specific kit and/or clothing, and this rose to 36.1 per cent for trans respondents.
- 12.8 per cent do not find the facilities, such as showers or changing rooms, inclusive and this rose to 36.1 per cent for trans respondents.

Making sport more inclusive

LGBT students have clear opinions on the way that sport can be made more inclusive.

- The most popular suggestion for encouraging more LGBT people to be involved in sport was tackling homophobia/transphobia/biphobia in sport within schools, which received the support of 48.3 per cent of LGBT students.
- There was also substantial support for celebrating LGBT role models in sport; training for staff and coaches; training for sports societies; a clear and visible equality policy; having more mixed-gender sports teams; and ensuring facilities are gender neutral.

Recommendations

For sports teams and societies

Sports teams and societies, and others who are directly involved in the delivery of sporting experiences for students should:

- **Publicise LGBT-friendliness:** In order to create an environment that is welcoming to LGBT students, sports teams and societies should publicly demonstrate their inclusiveness, such as through the Government's charter for action on tackling homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in sport.
- **Adopt a zero tolerance to homophobia policy:** Sports teams and societies need to be clear that homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic abuse is unacceptable through a clearly articulated zero tolerance policy. This will help to ensure that LGBT students feel safe to participate in sport.

- **Provide guidance for trans students:** Sports teams and societies should make available a clear and easily accessible policy on whether, and under what conditions, trans students are eligible to participate and/or compete in sport.

For students' unions

Students' unions, providers of further and higher education, national governing bodies of sport, and others who provide and regulate sport for students should:

- **Provide more mixed-gender sporting options:** Students' unions and others that provide and regulate sport should make more mixed-gender teams available in order to mitigate the effects of gender stereotypes in sport and enable LGBT students to feel more comfortable participating.
- **Audit sports facilities:** Students should have the option of single-cubicle, gender-neutral facilities such as showers and changing rooms. Educational institutions and others providing sports facilities should audit their existing facilities to assess how inclusive they are, and include LGBT students in this process. New facilities should be built with the express purpose of being inclusive to all.
- **Train sports teams and societies:** Students' unions and others organising the provision of sport should provide training that enables sports teams and societies to create a welcoming, supportive environment where LGBT students feel comfortable being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, and empowers them to eliminate homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia from sport.
- **Train coaches and other sports staff:** Organisations that provide and regulate sport should provide training for coaches and staff on how to lead LGBT-positive environments. Organisations involved in the training of coaches should incorporate LGBT issues into their training provision.

- **Support and celebrate LGBT role models:** Only athletes themselves can decide whether to be open about their sexuality, but organisations providing sporting opportunities should support those who do come out and celebrate them as role models, whether on a national or local level. Organisations should strive to create an atmosphere in which athletes are comfortable and supported in being open about their sexuality.

For schools

Schools and other providers of sports activities for under-16-year-olds should:

- **Teach LGBT-inclusiveness:** Schools and other providers of sports activities for under-16-year-olds should use sport as a way to teach children that homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are unacceptable, and that all members of a sports team should contribute to creating an inclusive environment.
- **Encourage a broad range of sporting activities:** Schools and other providers of sports activities should make an effort to support students to participate in a broad range of sports, including those that are not typical for their gender.

Background

Background

For many students, sport is an important part of college and university life. Yet many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) students feel excluded or uncomfortable participating in sport because of a variety of cultural and structural barriers. The NUS LGBT campaign designed this research to better understand the sporting experiences of LGBT students in further and higher education.

LGBT sporting experiences in further and higher education

There is a surprising lack of evidence about LGBT students' experiences of sport. The evidence that does exist is worrying; in 2009 the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) found that 62.9 per cent of LGB students in higher education were not open about their sexual orientation in their sports societies.¹ In further education, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) found that only 35.2 per cent of LGB adult learners and 30 per cent of trans adult learners were fully or partially open in their sport activities; sport had one of the lowest rates of openness and represented a 21 per cent gap for LGB learners and a 30 per cent gap for trans learners in comparison to their openness with their tutors.²

The SFA research also asked about areas of perceived safety within the learning environment. Sports areas and facilities were rated one of the lowest areas of safety, with 19.4 per cent of students stating that sports areas were fairly unsafe or not at all safe.³

The fact that LGBT students are less likely to be out in their sporting activities, and that they find sporting areas comparatively unsafe, hints at larger issues around the inclusivity of sport in further and higher education that this research sought to investigate more fully.

LGBT sporting experiences in schools

The perceptions and attitudes of students in further and higher education will be shaped by their experiences in

school. Research from Stonewall shows that 55 per cent of LGB pupils have experienced direct bullying in school and that bullying has an impact on students' interest in playing sports – two thirds (68 per cent) of LGB pupils say they do not like team sports; this rises to 75 per cent of LGB pupils who have been bullied. In addition, boys are more than twice as likely as girls to be bullied during sport.⁴

Ofsted's report on bullying in schools found that homophobic bullying, and particularly the use of the word 'gay', is still endemic in many primary and secondary schools and that staff were not always fully equipped to deal with this. The Equality Network has found that 'homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic bullying continues to be a major problem' in school sports environments and 'often goes unchallenged' by teachers and coaches, a finding that was consistent with research from the Child Protection in Sport Unit.^{6,7} The research also found that these negative experiences continued to affect LGBT people's engagement with sport well beyond their time at school.

LGBT sporting experiences outside of education

Outside of the education context, there has in recent years been increased attention on the inclusivity of sports in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity. However, much of this attention is based on anecdotal evidence and there are still many gaps in the literature.⁸

Sport England's *Active People Survey* has demonstrated that roughly the same proportion of gay men and straight men participate in a sport once per week (45.2 per cent and 42.4 per cent, respectively). However, the proportion of lesbians participating regularly (43.7 per cent) is much higher than the proportion of straight women doing so (30.8 per cent). 33.6 per cent of bisexual men and 43.8 per cent of bisexual women participated in sport once a week (information on trans people's participation was not collected).⁹ The most common sports for LGB people to

participate in were keeping fit/going to the gym, swimming, cycling, and athletics. LGB participation in football is far less prevalent than the population as a whole.¹⁰

Football, as one of the UK's most popular sports, has sometimes been a lightning rod for concerns about homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in sport. Stonewall's *Leagues Behind* report found that 70 per cent of fans had heard homophobic abuse at games and more than a quarter of fans believed that football was an anti-gay sport (compared to about ten per cent believing that football was a racist sport).¹¹ A smaller investigation by the Rugby Football League into the perceptions and experiences of young LGBT people found that fear of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia were a barrier preventing LGBT young people from attending live matches.¹²

The importance of gender

The intersection of gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation is an important part of LGBT people's experiences of sport. Sport England has highlighted the gendered nature of sport and the fact that many of the issues experienced by LGBT people in sport can in fact be traced back to 'gender stereotypes and perceptions about masculinity and femininity.'¹³ Rugby Football League's research into young LGBT people produced a similar finding.¹⁴

Trans people's experiences in sport is an under-researched area, but there are clear barriers to trans people participating and feeling comfortable in sport due to the fact that many sports teams are single-gender and have historically been built around a model that sees gender as a binary and static characteristic.

The policy environment

In 2011, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) published its action plan for LGBT equality which noted the importance of LGBT equality in sport as a route to changing culture and attitudes towards LGBT people in their communities and in society. The GEO stated that it would, amongst other things:¹⁵

- work with National Governing Bodies and the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) to explore ways to tackle homophobia and transphobia in sport;
- Produce and promote a charter against homophobia and transphobia in sport;
- Ensure that the upcoming Sport England strategy is inclusive to LGBT people.

The most public of these initiatives has been the launch of the government's *Charter for Action on Tackling Homophobia and Transphobia in Sport* in March 2011 with the backing of major sporting bodies such as the Football Association, Rugby Football League, and Rugby Football Union. NUS signed up to the charter shortly after its launch. The charter consists of four points:¹⁶

1. We believe that everyone should be able to participate in and enjoy sport – whoever they are and whatever their background.
2. We believe that sport is about fairness and equality, respect and dignity. Sport teaches individuals how to strive and succeed, how to cope with success and disappointment, and brings people together with a common goal.
3. We are committed to making these values a reality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. We will work together, and individually, to rid sport of homophobia and transphobia.
4. We will make sport a welcome place for everyone – for those participating in sport, those attending sporting events and for those working or volunteering in sports at any level. We will work with all these groups to ensure they have a voice, and to challenge unacceptable behaviour.

In addition to government initiatives, there are high-profile initiatives occurring within the sport world more broadly, including a toolkit on tackling homophobia and homophobic bullying from Show Racism the Red Card¹⁷ and the Let's Kick Homophobia out of Football campaign.¹⁸

Within the education sector, the Equality Challenge Unit has sought to provide guidance for sports service managers in higher education about making sport and fitness services more inclusive, highlighting both their duty to do so under the equality act as well as the benefits that an inclusive sports service can provide to the entire university community.¹⁹

It is clear that LGBT equality in sport is increasingly on the policy agenda, but gaps in the research may be preventing sports teams, students' unions, institutions, and others from knowing exactly how to tackle the issues. With this in mind, the NUS LGBT campaign undertook this research into LGBT students' sporting experiences.

Methodology

Methodology

This research was carried out between February and April 2012 and consisted of an in-depth literature review, one-to-one interviews with experts, a national online survey, and a series of workshops with students in further and higher education.

The online survey was developed after research into the existing data and policy landscape pertaining to LGBT and sport. The survey ran from 21 February to 21 May 2012 and was open to all LGBT students (as defined by the NUS LGBT campaign). The survey was publicised via NUS' mailing lists of sabbatical officers across the UK, was advertised in the NUS LGBT Campaign newsletter, and was promoted via social media. NUS also enabled attendees at National Student Pride 2012 (Brighton, 24-26 February) to complete the survey by bringing laptops to the event with links to the survey.

The survey received a total of 1,186 responses, of which 845 were valid. The majority of respondents (82.7 per cent) were studying in a higher education, while 8.4 per cent were at a sixth form college or school sixth form, and 5.8 per cent were at a college of further education. A further 3.1 per cent of respondents studied in a different setting. For full demographic information about the survey respondents, see appendix 1.

A series of nine workshops were organised across the UK, held at institutions of further and higher education as well as at events organised by the NUS LGBT campaign such as LGBT Activist Days and the NUS LGBT Conference. In addition to workshops with LGBT students (regardless of whether they participated in sport), workshops were also held with student athletes who did not identify as LGBT (appendix 3). Workshops were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts were used for thematic analysis to support the analysis of the survey data.

The research was also shaped by a steering group of key stakeholders including representatives of organisations dealing with LGBT issues, equality and diversity, sport, and further and higher education (appendix 2), which met three times during the project period.

Research Findings

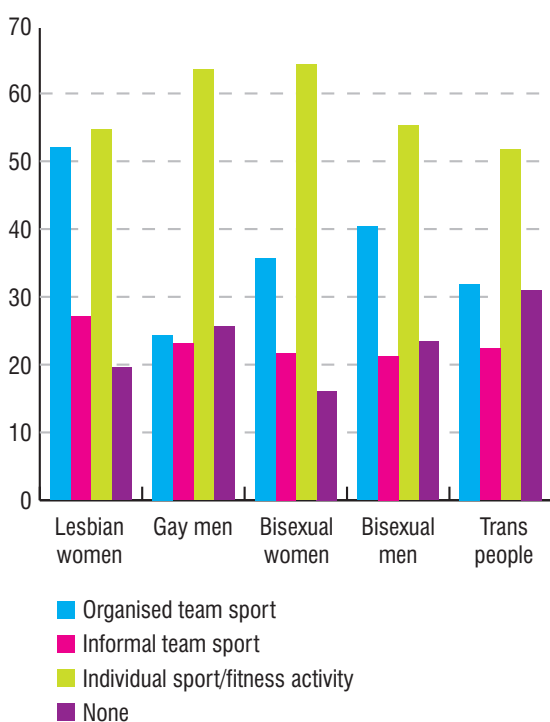
LGBT participation in sport

Types of sport participation

The majority of respondents to the online survey participated in some form of sport or fitness activity. 34.6 per cent participated in an organised team sport, 23.0 per cent participated in an informal team sport, 23.0 per cent participated in an individual sport or fitness activity, and 59.1 per cent participated in an individual sport or fitness activity. 24.0 per cent of respondents did not participate in any sporting or fitness activity.

The pattern of participation in different types of sport and fitness activity is generally similar across lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans respondents²⁰ (figure 1). Individual sport or fitness activity is by far the most popular activity, generally followed by organised team sport and then informal team sport. The exception to this is organised team sport amongst lesbian women;

Figure 1. Please indicate which of the following statements, if any, best represent your current involvement in sport. Please select all that apply.



over half of lesbian women participate in an organised team sport, far above the proportions for any other group. In addition, trans people were most likely not to participate in any sporting activity. Although not directly comparable, the patterns of participation in sport found in our research are broadly similar to those identified in Sport England's *Active People Survey*.²¹

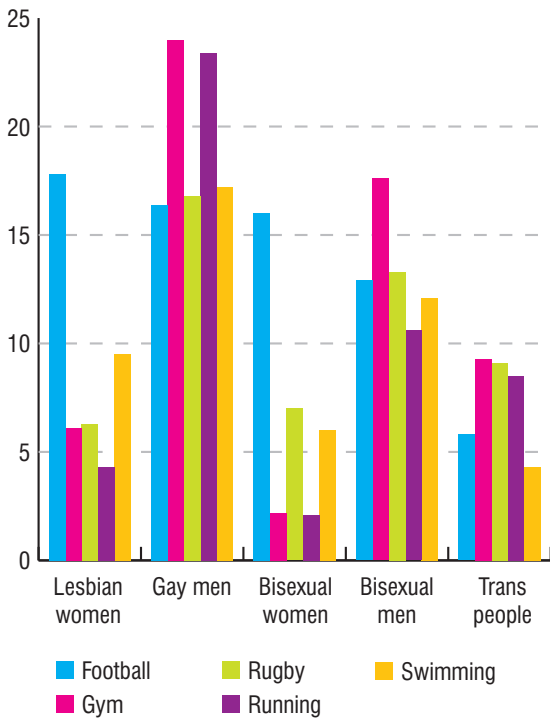
Sporting and fitness activities

The most common form of sporting activity for all respondents was going to the gym, with 18.8 per cent of all survey respondents participating in this activity. Running was the next most popular activity for all respondents, at 15.0 per cent overall. However, after these two sports, the picture starts to vary for people of different sexual orientations and gender identities (figure 2):

- Lesbian women were much more likely to participate in rugby and football than any other group. They were also more likely to lift weights and participate in basketball/netball.
- Going to the gym was most popular with gay and bisexual men.
- Despite having an overall participation rate of less than five per cent, martial arts was a popular activity for lesbian women, bisexual men, and trans people (all with more than five per cent participation).
- Swimming was least popular with trans people, who are the only group with less than five per cent participation in this activity.
- Football was least popular with bisexual men, who are the only group to have less than five per cent participation in this activity.

Contributions to the workshops also demonstrated the gendered nature of sport and highlighted the way that students' sports choices are informed by perceptions and stereotypes about the types of sporting activities that are deemed appropriate for different genders.

Figure 2. What sport or fitness activity do you do?²²

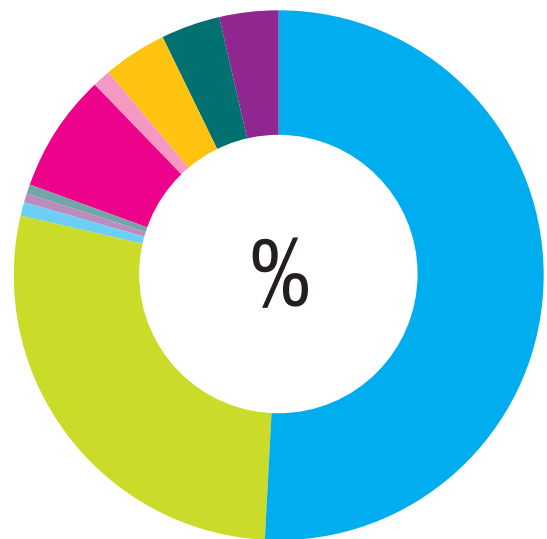


The vast majority of those who participated in a formal or informal team sport said that their team was mixed with LGBT and non-LGBT participants (85.8 per cent). Less than one per cent of the survey participants played on an LGBT-specific team such as a gay football team. This may be due to a lack of interest in LGBT-specific sports but could also be the result of a lack of LGBT-specific sporting options in many university towns. There is clearly some interest for LGBT-specific options amongst survey respondents, as seen below:

“I’ve never heard of an LGBT-only sports team.” – survey respondent, bisexual woman, FE

“[I would like] More advertising for LGBT sports and fitness clubs ... I can’t find any in my area!” – Survey respondent, bisexual woman, HE

Figure 3. Who organises the sporting activity that you are most heavily involved in?



Sporting providers

Among those who participated in organised sport, just over half (50.9 per cent) of survey respondents participated in sport organised by their students' union and just over a quarter (27.1 per cent) participated in sport organised by their university or college (figure 3). This has important implications, as it means that changes that students' unions and educational institutions make to their sports provision will have the potential to improve the experiences of the vast majority of students who participate in sport.

As might be expected due to the differences in form and function of students' unions in further education, the proportion of respondents at a college of further education or a sixth form (referred to hereafter as FE respondents) that participated in sport organised by their students' unions is very low (4.5 per cent). However, 45.5 per cent of FE respondents participated in sport organised by their educational institution.

Experiences in sport

Many workshop participants and survey respondents who did participate in sport were having an overwhelmingly positive experience in doing so.

“College is like a blessing really. There’s no judgement here, you don’t get stereotyped, you don’t get laughed at for being gay. It’s just, ‘he’s gay,’ that’s it.” – workshop participant, gay man, FE

“What I found out is that everyone was really fine with it [my sexual orientation]. I think one of the main times everyone found out was at our Christmas meal and someone would come round and be like ‘oh, wow, you’re bi,’ and I was like, ‘yeah’ and they were like, ‘cool’ – and just went and buy me a drink. And it was like really being able to come to a completely different environment like university, rather than being at home for the last 18 years, you can just kind of establish yourself as who you want to be.”

– workshop participant, bisexual man, HE

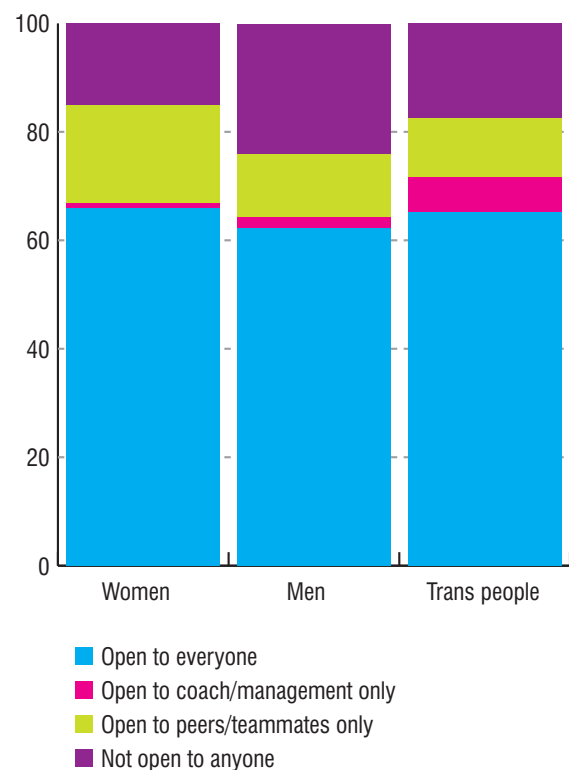
It is not surprising that those LGBT students who have chosen to participate in or remain in sport are having a positive experience; sport is a voluntary activity and it would be unlikely that an individual would continue to participate if their experience was negative. However, the experiences of LGBT students who do participate in sport can shed light on how sport can be made more inclusive for all LGBT students.

Coming out

The survey asked about how open respondents were about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Nearly two thirds (62.2 per cent) of respondents who participated in some kind of team sport were open to everyone. This proportion is much higher than previous research suggests, but may be partially influenced by the numbers of LGBT activists who responded to the survey.²³

A further 14.0 per cent were open to their peers/teammates only. Only one per cent were open to their coach/management only. However, 17.1 per cent of respondents were not open at all. These proportions were broadly similar across men and women, as well as trans respondents (which includes trans people who identify as men and women in addition to people who have non-binary gender identities). Men were slightly more likely not to be open to anyone, women were slightly more likely to be open to their peers/teammates only, and trans respondents were slightly more likely to be open to their coach or management only (figure 4).

Figure 4. Which of the following best describes how open you are about your gender identity/sexual orientation in the sport you are involved in?



Respondents suggested that it could be easier to be open if there were other LGBT people on the team:

“The best encouragement is if other people in the sport are already out. My coach was bi, and three of my teammates were out as well.” – survey respondent, bisexual man, HE

However, some respondents noted that a culture of casual homophobia can intimidate students into hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity:

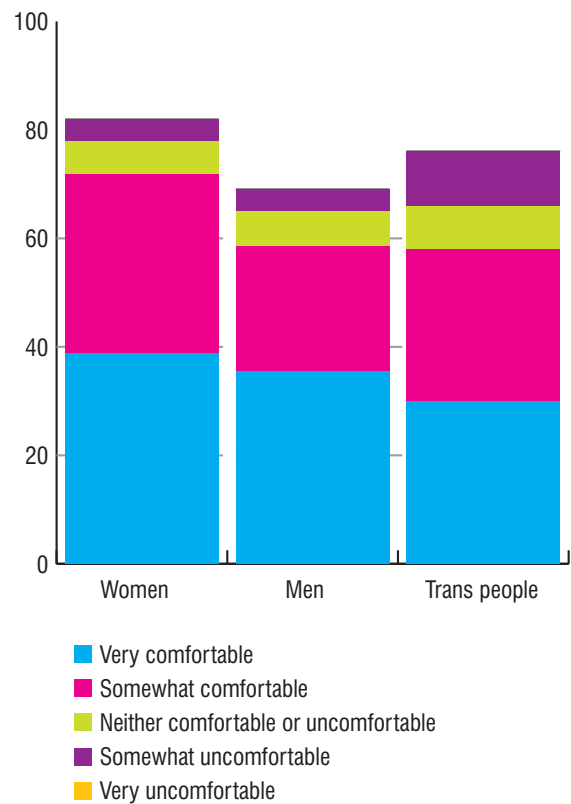
“Hearing discriminatory language can stop people coming out which is a shame because most of the time if a gay person does come out team members are very supportive and aren't in fact homophobic at all.” – survey respondent, lesbian woman, HE

We also asked survey respondents whether they were comfortable with being open. Two thirds (66.3 per cent) of those who participated in a team sport were very or somewhat comfortable about being open. A further 6.2 per cent were neither comfortable not uncomfortable, 4.4 per cent were somewhat uncomfortable, and no respondents said they were very uncomfortable. These proportions were broadly similar for men and women, but, overall, trans respondents were less likely to be very comfortable and more likely to be somewhat uncomfortable about being open (figure 5).

Those who were not fully open about their sexual orientation or gender identity were asked what prevented them from being open within their sport. Over half (58.2 per cent) of those who answered the question did not think their sexual orientation or gender identity was relevant, which was reflected in the workshops as well:

“It was just a matter of winning the games, there was no social element to it whatsoever so there wasn't really a need [to come out]” – workshop participant, man (sexual orientation not given), HE

Figure 5. How comfortable are you about being open?

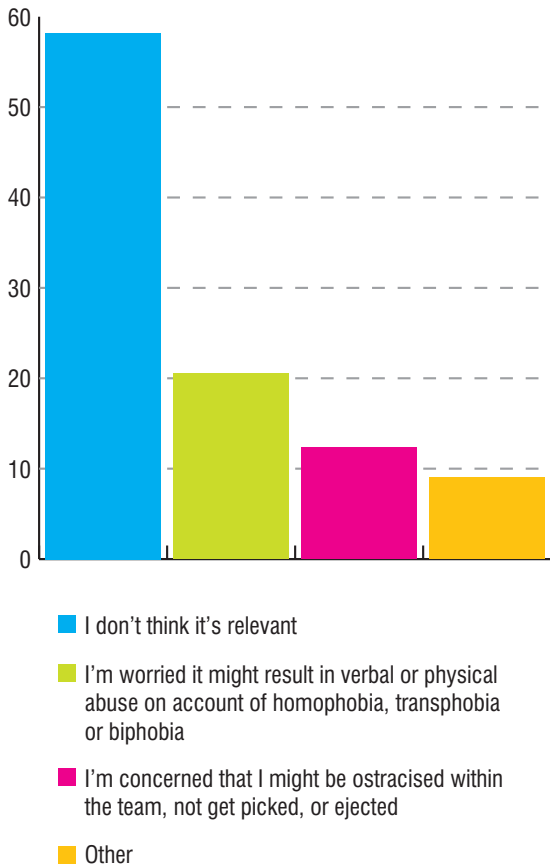


However, one in five (20.5 per cent) respondents who were not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity were worried it might result in verbal or physical abuse on account of homophobia, transphobia, or biphobia. 12.9 per cent were concerned they might be ostracised within the team, not get picked, or ejected (figure 6). For trans respondents the percentage who were worried that coming out might result in verbal or physical abuse rose to 27.8 per cent.

Many respondents highlighted that, in order to make people feel comfortable being open, teams should demonstrate their inclusiveness.

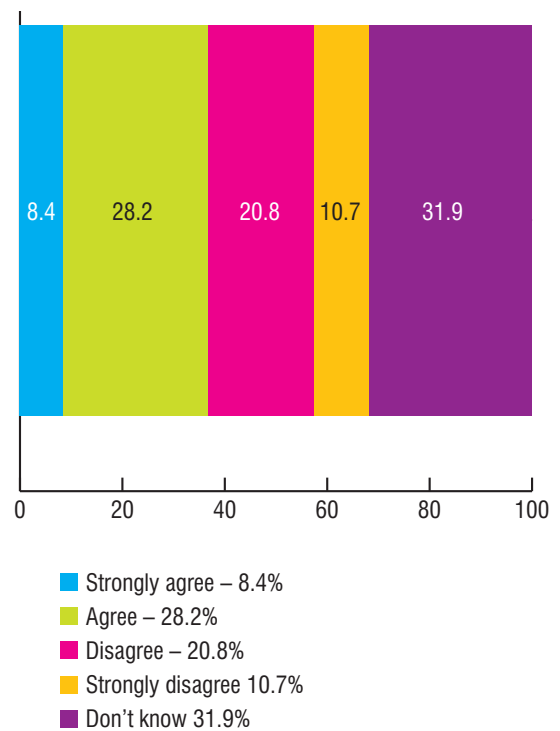
“Make sure they know they are in an inclusive and supportive environment as people won't come out if they are worried they would then be excluded.” –survey respondent, lesbian woman, HE

Figure 6. Please indicate which of the following statements best describe what prevents you from being open about your sexual orientation/gender identity in the sport you are involved in.



To understand the current prevalence of equality policies in sports societies and teams, the survey asked respondents whether they felt that equality policies with regard to sport were visible at their institutions. Only about a third (36.6 per cent) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that equality policies with regard to sport were visible, highlighting that this is a clear area where institutions and students' unions can improve (figure 7).

Figure 7. To what extent, if at all, do you agree that equality policies with regard to sport are visible at your institution?



Equality policies

Both survey respondents and workshop participants highlighted the importance of a visible and enforced equality policy in helping LGBT students feel comfortable participating in sport.

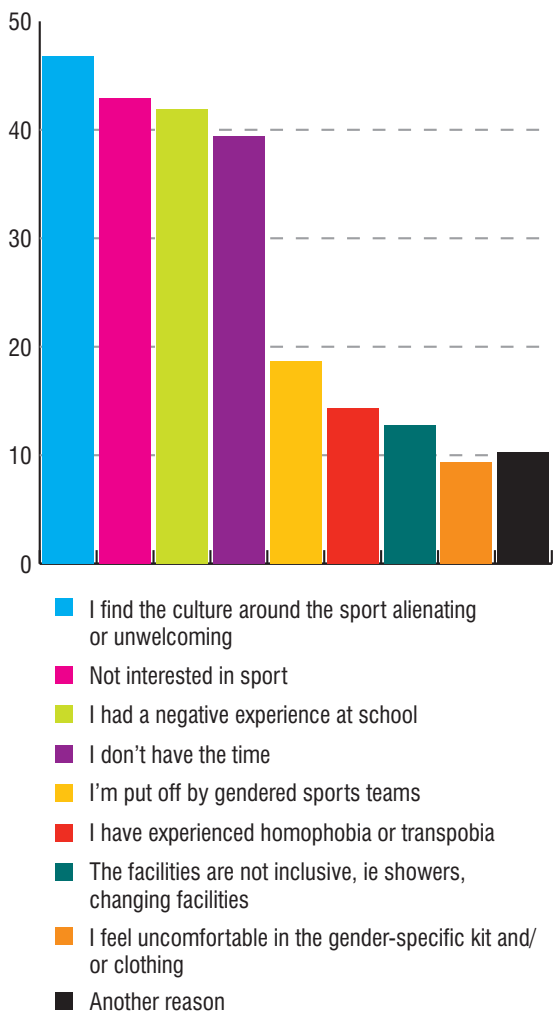
“There needs to be policy in place within clubs/organisations that protect those who come out.” – survey respondent, lesbian woman, HE

“[There should be a] clear and fully enforced equality policy where homophobia/transphobia is punished.” – survey respondent, bi-curious woman, FE

Barriers to participation

Survey participants who did not participate in sport were asked why this was the case. It is important to remember that lack of participation in sport does not always signal a barrier related to a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity; roughly four in ten of our survey respondents were not interested in sport, or did not have the time. However, large numbers of respondents did actively identify barriers around the sporting culture, previous negative experiences of sport, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, and the gendered nature of sport and its infrastructure (figure 8). These barriers will be discussed, in turn, below.

Figure 8. Why don't you currently participate in sport? Select all that apply.



Sporting culture

On many campuses, participation in sport has strong associations with certain behaviours and norms which many of our research participants found unwelcoming. This was a common theme raised in the workshops, and nearly half of survey respondents (46.8 per cent) said that they find the culture around the sport alienating or unwelcoming. In the survey’s qualitative comments, this came through particularly strongly.

“I find ‘lad’ culture completely intimidating and fear being ridiculed”. – survey respondent, gay man, HE

Sports initiations were often mentioned in workshops as a manifestation of this intimidating culture. Initiations can often involve homophobic ‘banter’ as a form of humiliation. It is important to note that this perception of initiations can deter LGBT students from joining a sports team or society, regardless of whether this form of initiations is actually practised by the team in question.

Workshop participants also discussed ‘banter’ on the pitch or in the changing rooms, which they recognised was not meant offensively, but can still be damaging in its effects. There was also concern over homophobic chants by the opposite team, and social events such as nights out that were often focussed on romantic liaisons with the opposite sex.

“[My athletic union’s] parties are so straight-hookup focused that it did not feel like a safe space outside my team.” – survey respondent, lesbian woman, HE

Many workshop participants stressed that and that as individuals they rarely felt discriminated against or victimised, but that the culture of sports teams can be heteronormative and homophobic, without realising the effect this may have on the members of the team.

Homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia

Closely related to the issue of sporting culture is the (perceived or real) prevalence and tolerance of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in some sporting environments. A smaller, but still substantial, proportion of survey respondents said that they had experienced homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia (14.3 per cent) and that this prevented them from getting more involved in sport.

“It is easier to get thru a day/its activities without the fear of physical retaliation or verbal name calling/shitty look or even made to feel like the odd one out.” – survey respondent, gay man, HE

The issue of homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia in sports teams also came through when respondents were asked about ways in which LGBT students could be encouraged to participate more in sport. The third and fourth most popular suggestions were training for staff and coaches (29.9 per cent) and training for sports societies (22.0 per cent) on inclusive sport and tackling homophobia/transphobia/biphobia.

“Everyone says that it doesn't matter who you are and you should be true to yourself but it's hard when even in a day and age where everyone is considered to be more liberal and accepting, there are still those, especially in sport that would display a homophobic attitude.” – survey respondent, bisexual man, HE

Experiences in school

Homophobic bullying is a part of many LGBT people's lives while they are in school.²⁴ Previous research has shown that if this occurs in relation to sporting activity, it can put people off from participating in sport later in their lives, even if their current environment would be more welcoming.²⁵ When asked what prevented them from being more involved in sport, more than four in ten survey respondents (41.9 per cent) attributed this to a negative experience at school.

“In the winter, PE was compulsory and you had to play rugby and football. You have guys in there that are proper homophobic, they just like terrorise you and make you not want to go to PE. I used to never turn up to PE in winter. They can be really harsh sometimes and really horrible. They can say really horrible things to you.” – workshop participant, man (sexual orientation not given), FE

The issue of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in schools was clearly very important to survey respondents; when respondents were asked to select three steps which would encourage LGBT students to become more involved in sport, almost half of respondents (48.3 per cent) chose 'tackling homophobia/transphobia/biphobia in sport within schools'.

The gendered nature of sport

Sport is an intensely gendered activity, with the vast majority of sports taking place in gender-specific teams. Nearly one in five survey respondents (18.7 per cent) said they were put off by gendered sports teams, and nearly one in ten (9.4 per cent) felt uncomfortable in the gender-specific kit or clothing. These proportions rose to more than one third for trans respondents (38.9 per cent and 36.1 per cent, respectively).

When survey respondents were asked how LGBT students could be encouraged to participate more in sport, there was considerable support for more mixed gender teams, with 16.3 per cent of respondents selecting this as one of their top three steps. This was also one of the most commonly cited suggestions in our workshops.

There were a variety of reasons that mixed-gender teams were regarded as positive for LGBT participation. For some, both trans and non-trans people, mixed-gender teams could help them to overcome the expectations about masculinity and femininity present in different sports.

“I feel having more mixed sports in class and extra curricular clubs would encourage me to join in, as I do not fit the 'norm' of my sex. Having members of the opposite sex within the session would make me (and others) feel comfortable participating.”

– survey respondent, gay gender variant man, FE

Workshop participants also pointed out that some teams (such as a football or rugby team) can have a reputation for being spaces of hypermasculinity and homophobia, and that regardless of whether this is the case, the perception can discourage LGBT people from joining a team. Mixed-gender teams were seen as a way to overcome these perceptions.

For trans people, mixed gender teams can also help to remove worries around eligibility for single-gender teams. In general, the issue of clarifying eligibility was very important to trans respondents.

“[It needs to] be clear if I can compete as my preferred gender identity.” – survey respondent, gay trans man, HE

Facilities

Closely related to the issue of mixed-gender teams is the importance of facilities which create a safe and inclusive environment for all participants.

When asked what prevented them from participating in sport, 12.8 per cent of respondents also said that the facilities such as showers and changing rooms are not inclusive. This was much higher for trans respondents, with over a third (36.1 per cent) of trans respondents highlighting this issue as preventing them from participating.

Single-cubicle changing rooms were seen as a crucial way to protect trans people's privacy, but were also seen as important to LGB respondents who saw changing rooms as a site of potential harassment or homophobia:

“I'm concerned about playing in sport given that people have ignorant ideas regarding changing rooms.” – survey respondent, gay man, HE

Making sport more inclusive

It is clear that many LGBT students have positive experiences participating in sport and that some sports teams and societies can be very welcoming of students of all sexual orientations and gender identities. However, this welcoming and inclusive culture is not universal among all sports societies and teams. We asked survey respondents and workshop participants how sport could be made more inclusive.

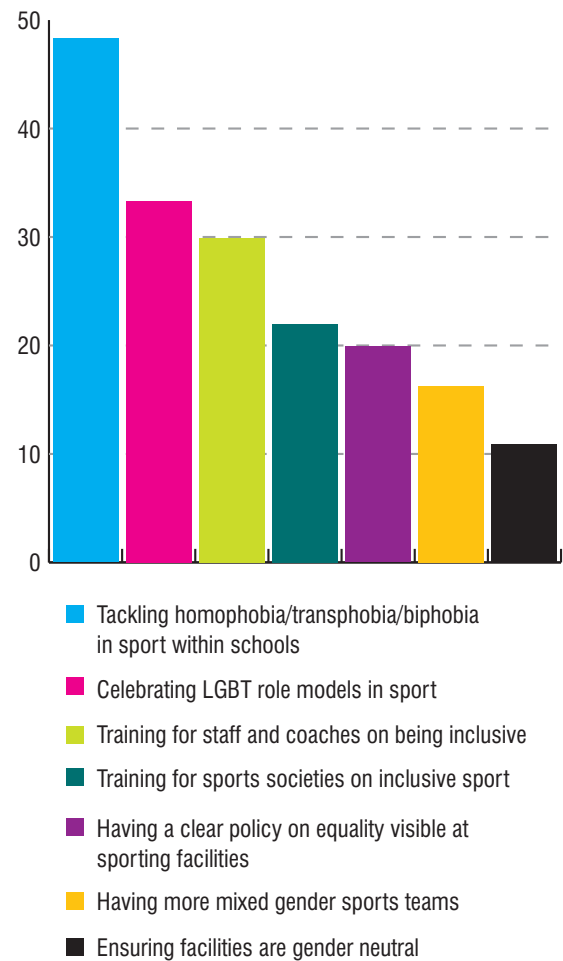
When survey respondents were asked about how LGBT students could be encouraged to become more involved in sport, the most popular solution was tackling homophobia/transphobia/biphobia in sport within schools (48.3 per cent), an issue which has already been explored in this report. The second most popular suggestion was celebrating LGBT role models in sport (33.3 per cent), highlighting the importance of changing the culture of sport and making it more inclusive (figure 9).

There was substantial support for other steps which institutions and students' unions can take, including training for both staff/coaches and sports societies on inclusive sport and tackling homophobia/transphobia/ biphobia; having a clear policy on equality visible at sporting facilities; having more mixed gender sports teams; and ensuring facilities are gender neutral. Many of these solutions have been discussed above in considering the barriers to participation faced by LGBT students.

Many participants also suggested that a zero tolerance policy for homophobic actions, with real sanctions if it was violated, would be an important element of making sport more inclusive:

“There should be visible strict punishments for homophobia in sport.” – survey respondent, bisexual woman, HE

Figure 9. Which three steps would be most helpful to encourage LGBT students to be more involved in sport?



Conclusions

Conclusions

Sport is an important part of many students' experience in further and higher education, and our research shows that there are many LGBT students who are active in sports and enjoying a positive experience. Sports teams and societies can be welcoming to LGBT students and a positive space where LGBT students feel accepted – however, this experience is not shared by all, and in many cases LGBT students face barriers that prevent them from participating in sport in the first place.

The barriers to LGBT students' participation in sport can be cultural, structural, or physical. Cultural barriers are perhaps most significant, with the main reasons not to participate in sport (outside of lack of interest and practical considerations like time and money) being that students find the culture around sport alienating or intimidating, or that they have had a negative experience at school. It is important to note that LGBT students' perceptions of the culture around student sport can pose a barrier to their participation, regardless of whether their perception is accurate.

Structural issues, such as the reliance on single-gender sports teams and gender-specific kit and clothing, also cause LGBT students to be hesitant to participate in sport. This barrier is even more significant for trans students who lack sufficient information about whether they are eligible to participate and/or compete on a single-gender team.

Physical conditions such as the way changing rooms and other facilities are laid out are also very important. This is not only because LGBT students may be concerned for their privacy but also because the traditional setup of these facilities (for instance a group shower room) is seen as conducive to homophobic behaviour or comments.

These barriers are preventing LGBT students from fully enjoying and benefitting from participation in sport, and need to be eliminated. Crucially, the majority of LGBT students' sporting activity is organised by their students' unions or educational institutions. That means that students' unions and providers of further and higher education can take action that has a real effect on the way that LGBT students experience sport.

This report's recommendations – for sports teams themselves, for students' unions, educational institutions, and others who provide the structure around which sports are organised, and for those involved in providing sport opportunities to under-16-year-olds – are designed to make it clear to all involved how they can take action to remove the barriers to LGBT students' participation in sport. Through changes to policy, practice, training, and facilities, sporting opportunities for students can be made more welcoming for LGBT students, enabling them to fully enjoy the contribution that participation in sport can make to their lives as students.

Recommendations

Recommendations

For sports teams and societies

Sports teams and societies, and others who are directly involved in the delivery of sporting experiences for students should:

- **Publicise LGBT-friendliness:** In order to create an environment that is welcoming to LGBT students, sports teams and societies should publicly demonstrate their inclusiveness, such as through the Government's charter for action on tackling homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in sport.
- **Adopt a zero tolerance to homophobia policy:** Sports teams and societies need to be clear that homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic abuse is unacceptable through a clearly articulated zero tolerance policy. This will help to ensure that LGBT students feel safe to participate in sport.
- **Provide guidance for trans students:** Sports teams and societies should make available a clear and easily accessible policy on whether, and under what conditions, trans students are eligible to participate and/or compete in sport.

For students' unions

Students' unions, providers of further and higher education, national governing bodies of sport, and others who provide and regulate sports for students should:

- **Provide more mixed-gender sporting options:** Students' unions and others that provide and regulate sport should make more mixed-gender teams available in order to mitigate the effects of gender stereotypes in sport and enable LGBT students to feel more comfortable participating.
- **Audit sports facilities:** Students should have the option of single-cubicle, gender-neutral facilities such as showers and changing rooms. Educational institutions and others providing sports facilities

should audit their existing facilities to assess how inclusive they are, and include LGBT students in this process. New facilities should be built with the express purpose of being inclusive to all.

- **Train sports teams and societies:** Students' unions and others organising the provision of sport should provide training that enables sports teams and societies to create a welcoming, supportive environment where LGBT students feel comfortable being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, and on how to eliminate homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia from sport.
- **Train coaches and other sports staff:** Organisations that provide and regulate sport should provide training for coaches and staff on how to lead LGBT-positive environments. Organisations involved in the training of coaches should incorporate LGBT issues into their training provision.
- **Support and celebrate LGBT role models:** Only athletes themselves can decide whether to be open about their sexuality, but organisations providing sporting opportunities should support those who do come out and celebrate them as role models, whether on a national or local level. Organisations should strive to create an atmosphere in which athletes are comfortable and supported in being open about their sexuality.

For schools

Schools and other providers of sports activities for under-16-year-olds should:

- **Teach LGBT-inclusiveness:** Schools and other providers of sports activities for under-16-year-olds should use sport as a way to teach children that homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are unacceptable, and that all members of a sports team should contribute to creating an inclusive environment.

- **Encourage a broad range of sporting activities:**
Schools and other providers of sports activities should make an effort to support students to participate in a broad range of sports, including those that are not typical for their gender.

Endnotes

Endnotes

- ¹ Equality Challenge Unit (2009). *The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans staff and students in Higher Education*. London: Equality Challenge Unit.
- ² Skills Funding Agency (2011). *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Adult Learning*. Coventry: Skills Funding Agency.
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- ⁴ Stonewall (2012). *The School Report: The experiences of young gay people in Britain's schools*. London: Stonewall.
- ⁵ Ofsted (2012). *No Place for Bullying: How schools create a positive culture and prevent and tackle bullying*. Manchester: Officer for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills.
- ⁶ Equality Network (2012). *Out for Sport: Tackling homophobia and transphobia in sport*. Edinburgh: Equality Network.
- ⁷ Alexander, Kate, Stafford, Anne, and Lewis, Ruth (2011). *The Experiences of Children Participating in Organised Sport in the UK*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh/ NSPCC Child Protection Research Centre.
- ⁸ Brackenridge, Celia, Alldred, Pam, and Jarvis, Ali (2008). *A review of sexual orientation in sport*. Edinburgh: SportsScotland.
- ⁹ Sport England (2012). *Active People Survey 6: Participation by sexual identity*.
- ¹⁰ Sport England (2011). *Active People Survey 6: Faith and sexual orientation*.
- ¹¹ Stonewall (2009). *Leagues behind: Football's failure to tackle anti-gay abuse*. London: Stonewall.
- ¹² Rugby Football League (2012) *Perceptions and experiences of Rugby League: Young LGBT people*. Leeds: Rugby Football League.
- ¹³ Breckenridge, Alldred, and Jarvis (2008).
- ¹⁴ Rugby Football League (2012).
- ¹⁵ Government Equalities Office (2011). *Working for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Equality: Moving forward*. London: Government Equalities Office.
- ¹⁶ Government Equalities Office (2011). *Charter for Action on Tackling Homophobia and Transphobia in Sport*. London: Government Equalities Office.
- ¹⁷ *Show Racism the Red Card*, <http://www.srtrc.org/>
- ¹⁸ Let's Kick Homophobia out of Football, <http://www.kickitout.org/1048.php>
- ¹⁹ Equality Challenge Unit (2010). *Trans staff and students in higher education, revised 2010*. London: Equality Challenge Unit.
- ²⁰ For the purposes of this report, trans respondents are those who identified with one of the following terms: trans man, trans woman, transsexual person, gender variant person, cross-dressing person, transvestite person, intersex person, or another trans identity.
- ²¹ Sport England (2012). *Active People Survey 6: Participation by sexual identity*.
- ²² Sports with more than five per cent participation overall.
- ²³ Equality Challenge Unit (2009).
- ²⁴ Stonewall (2012). *The school report*.
- ²⁵ Equality Network (2012). *Out for sport*.
- ²⁶ In this report, we use the term 'respondents' to mean valid respondents.
- ²⁷ Respondents who identified as heterosexual were considered valid responses if they also identified as trans.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

About the Survey respondents

The online survey received a total of 1,186 responses of which 845 were valid.²⁶

82.7 per cent (n=699) of the respondents were students studying in a higher education (HE) setting, 5.8 per cent (n=49) were taking their course a college of further education (FE), and 8.4 per cent (n=71) were at a sixth form college or school sixth form. The remaining 3.1 per cent (n=26) was made up of students studying courses at other locations such as their place of work or via distance learning. Although attempts were made to increase the number of FE respondents, the nature of the NUS LGBT campaign's network and reach meant that the majority of respondents were in HE.

48.9 per cent (n=413) of survey respondents identified as female, 46.2 per cent (n=390) as male, and 1.9 per cent (n=16) identified as gender queer. A further 3.1 per cent (n=26) identified their gender in another way. This report uses the terms 'men' and 'women' rather than 'male' and 'female' to reflect gender rather than sex.

64.6 (n=546) per cent of the survey respondents identified as gay or lesbian and 23.7 per cent (n=200) identified as bisexual. A further 2.8 per cent (n=24) identified as queer, 2.0 per cent (n=17) as heterosexual²⁷, 1.8 per cent (n=15) as pansexual, and 1.5 per cent (n=13) as asexual. 1.1 per cent (n=9) of respondents preferred not to give their sexual orientation and 2.5 per cent (n=21) identified it in another way.

8.8 per cent (n=74) of respondents had gone through any part of a process to change from the sex/gender they were described as at birth to the gender they identified with, or intended to go through such a process. However, in a separate question, 13.7 (n=116) per cent of survey respondents identified as trans in some way – 8.2 per cent (n=69) of respondents identified as a gender variant person, 3.7 per cent (n=37) identified as trans men, and 1.5 per cent (n=13) as trans women. A further 1.2 per cent (n=10) identified as gender queer. 3.8 per cent (n=46) of respondents

identified as trans in another way (respondents could select all that applied). For the purposes of this analysis, we have defined the category 'trans' as all those who have identified as trans in some way.

68.4 (n= 578) per cent of survey respondents were White British and a further 10.4 per cent (n=88) were of other white backgrounds (including white Irish). 2.6 per cent (n=22) of responders were of Asian or Asian British backgrounds, 1.4 per cent (n=12) were Black or Black British, and 3.1 per cent (n=29) were of other or mixed backgrounds.

16.1 per cent (n=136) of the respondents considered themselves to have a disability, impairment, or long-term health condition. Overall, 7.3 per cent (n=62) of survey respondents had mental health difficulties, 6.9 per cent (n=58) had unseen disabilities, and 4.5 per cent (n=38) had learning difficulties. A further 5.3 per cent (n=45) of respondents had another type of disability, impairment, or long-term health condition (respondents could select more than one disability).

55 per cent (n=465) of respondents indicated that they had no religion or belief. 17.8 per cent (n=150) of respondents described their religion as Christian, and a further 8.3 per cent (n=45) of respondents described themselves as having another religion (including Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, and Sikh). 3.2 per cent (n=27) of respondents said they were atheist or agnostic. 2.8 per cent (n=24) of respondents preferred not to give their religion or belief.

The survey did not ask about respondents' age.

Although the survey was open to all LGBT students, the way in which it was advertised (through NUS LGBT's networks) means that it is likely the sample is over representative of LGBT activists, and therefore likely to be people who are open about their sexuality and comfortable about being open. It is also possible that it over-represents LGBT people who participate in sport, due to the title of the survey (Out in Sport) being attractive to LGBT athletes.

Appendix 2:

Steering group members

Georgina Agnies and John Brookstien, British Universities and Colleges Sport

Alice Ashworth and Chris Dye, Stonewall

Seth Atkin, University and College Union

Dan Baker, Youth Chances

Rachel Graham and Katie Mitchell, Sport England

Paul Hambley, LSIS and the Forum on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Chloe Lord, Trans by Degree

Clare Pavitt and Neil Baker, Equality Challenge Unit

Richard Pyle, University of East London

Ian Rivers, Brunel University

Sarah Williams, Student Rugby League

Appendix 3:

List of workshops

Out in Sport workshops were held at the following locations from November 2011 – May 2012:

- LGBT Activist Day, London
- LGBT Activist Day, Bradford
- LGBT Activist Day, Swansea
- LGBT Activist Day, Strathclyde
- NUS LGBT Conference, Manchester
- City College Coventry
- Royal Holloway University of London
- Huntingdon City College
- Liverpool Hope University

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