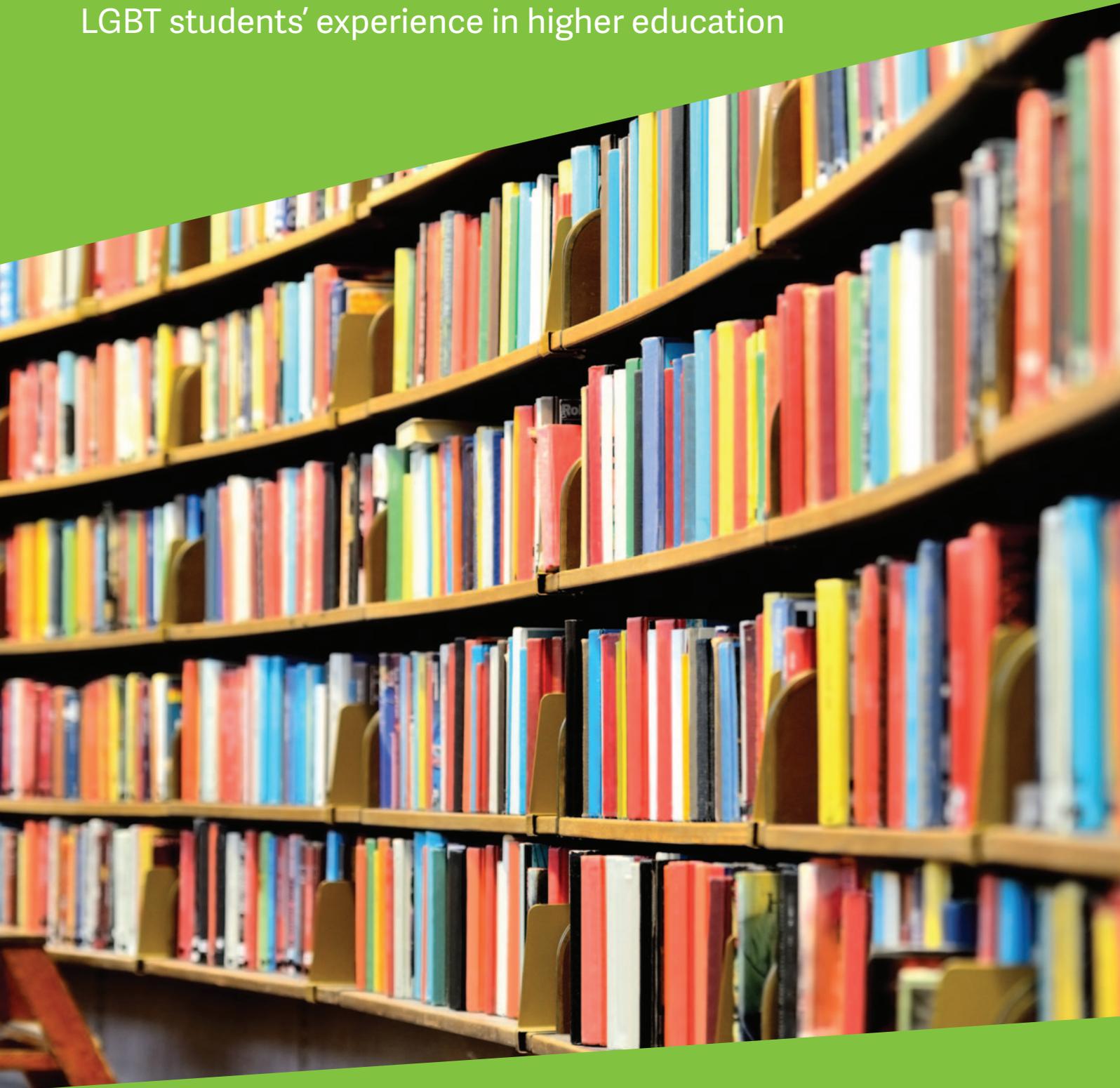
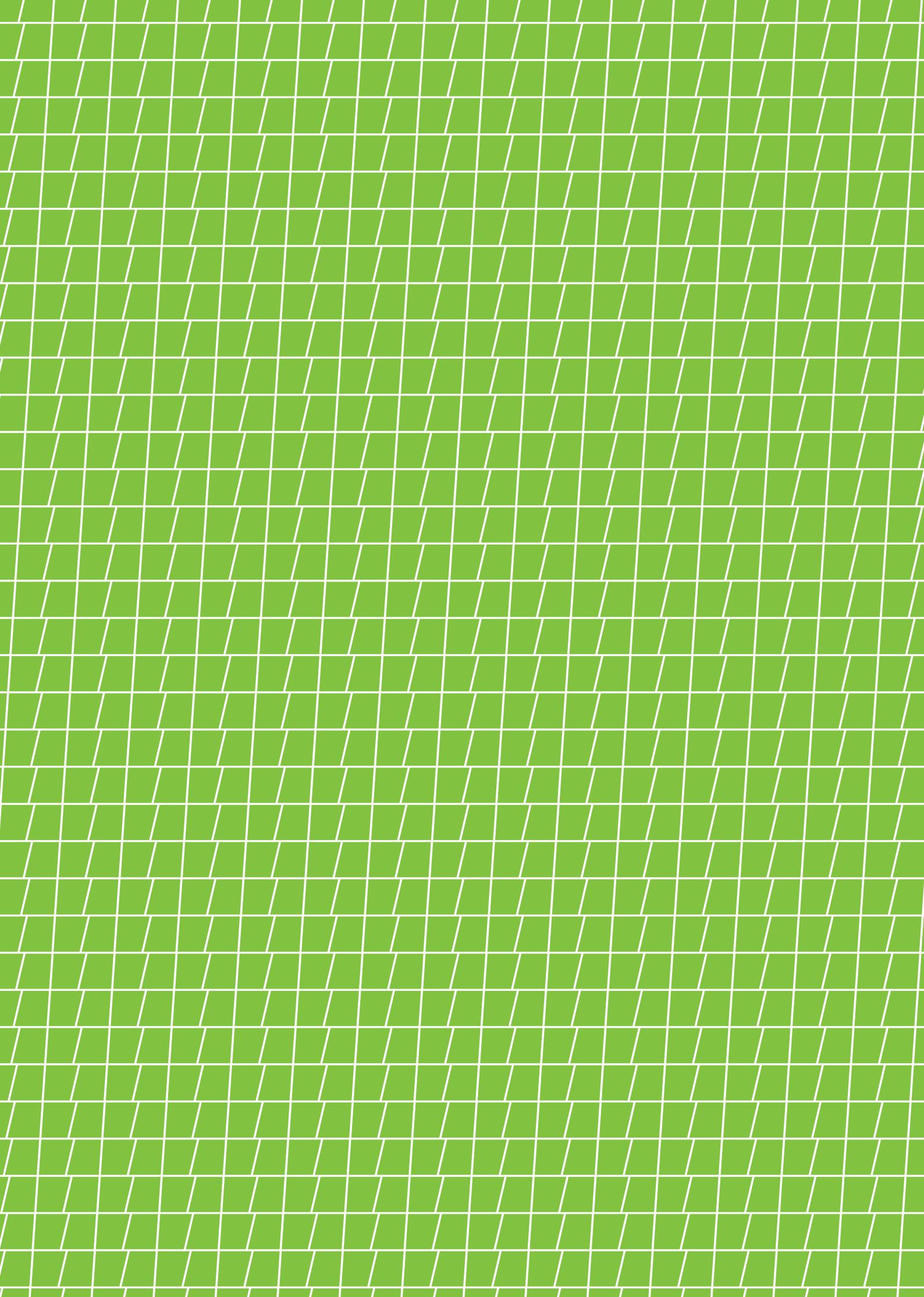


# Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow

LGBT students' experience in higher education





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# Foreword

Over the last 40 years the NUS LGBT Campaign has come a long way in terms of legislative change and public perception of LGBT issues.

However many LGBT people continue to feel isolated in education and society. Many suffer mental health and financial issues and all too often we hear cases of LGBT students leaving education as an indirect result of their identity.

We have never commissioned such in-depth research into the specific experiences and attainment of LGBT students in Higher Education. This research confirms our fears about the impact of estrangement, discrimination and coming out on LGBT students.

This report evidences the role LGBT societies have for LGBT students, combining a social, welfare and campaigning role. We know that they are often under resourced in comparison to the impact they play on student's retention and attainment. This research shows that investing in LGBT provision will pay dividends in terms of the experience and involvement of students within the students' union and university.

This research should be seen as an initial step, as the evidence we need to lobby and campaign for change in universities and that the plight of LGBT students can no longer be ignored. It also highlights the difference in experiences that LGB and trans students have, and it is the responsibility of LGBT societies and officers to educate others on trans issues.

We hope that this work spurs on research into the experiences of students in further education. We hope that students' unions and institutions rise to the challenge of proactively supporting LGBT students.

This report is the first step for many in understanding and working with LGBT students to change the world around them for the better, and the NUS LGBT campaign will be with you every step of the way.

Finn McGoldrick, NUS LGBT Officer (Women's Place)  
Sky Yarlett, NUS LGBT Officer (Open Place)

# Acknowledgements

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Louisa Acciari  
Research and Policy Officer (Liberation)

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# Executive Summary

# Executive Summary

This research, the first of its kind, explores the experience of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) students in higher education, focusing specifically on their everyday life on campus, their access to different services and factors that influence success and course completion. This report draws on a national survey of more than 4,000 respondents from 80 higher education institutions in the UK that was conducted between February and March 2014. It also comprises case studies from the universities of Bangor, Nottingham, Manchester Metropolitan, University College London, the University of London and from an online focus group with trans students.

## Terminology

We use 'LGB+' to refer to respondents who defined their sexuality as lesbian, gay, bisexual or in another way (including queer, asexual, pansexual or 'unsure'). The category 'in another way' was too diverse to enable meaningful analysis of more precise sub-categories.

The term 'trans' is used to refer to respondents who said their gender identity did not correspond to the identity they were assigned at birth. We only consider here their gender identity and not their sexual orientation, as trans respondents cited all the options available to define their sexuality (14 per cent self-defined as heterosexual, 9 per cent as gay, 12 per cent as lesbian, 32.5 per cent as bisexual and 32.5 per cent self-defined in another way).

'LGBT' refers to the community as a whole.

## Key findings

### Safety and well-being

- Just two in ten (20.6 per cent) trans students feel completely safe on campus, less than half the proportion of their heterosexual counterparts (43 per cent) and significantly less than the 36.7 per cent of LGB+ students who feel completely safe.
- One in five LGB+ and one in three trans respondents have experienced at least one form of bullying or harassment on their campus.
- LGB+ students are more likely to consider dropping out than heterosexual students: 25 per cent of heterosexual have seriously considered dropping out of their course compared to 27.7 per cent of gay, 26.6 per cent of lesbian, and 30 per cent of bisexual.
- More than half of LGB+ respondents (56 per cent) cited the feeling of not fitting in as the main reason for considering dropping out.
- LGBT students who have experienced a form of homophobic or transphobic harassment are 2–3 times more likely to consider leaving their course.

### Coming out as a trans student

- One in two (51 per cent) trans respondents have seriously considered dropping out of their course.
- Of those who had considered dropping out, around two thirds mentioned the feeling of not fitting in and mentioned health problems (67 and 65 per cent respectively)
- One in seven trans respondents has had to interrupt their studies because of their transition.
- Trans students experience an intersection of issues, with 41.6 per cent of them reported having a disability, compared to 17.5 per cent of the whole sample.
- Trans respondents are twice as likely as LGB students to have experienced harassment (22 per cent vs. 9 per cent), threats or intimidations (13.5 per cent vs. 6 per cent), and physical assault on campus (5 per cent vs. 2 per cent).

- Our focus group with trans students revealed that the main difficulties faced on campus are: the lack of gender-neutral toilets and facilities; the lack of policies to update their name and gender in the student register; issues with university security services; and the prevalence of transphobia.

### Campus culture

- On a scale of 1–10, heterosexual students are most positive about student services and support at their institution (7.7), followed by LGB+ (7.3), while trans students feel the least positive (7.0).
- Levels of reporting of verbal or physical harassment, threats and intimidation are low. Only 14 per cent of LGBT respondents who experienced name-calling, 23 per cent of those who experienced harassment, 26 per cent of those who experienced threats and intimidation, and a third of those who experienced physical assault reported it to at least one person.
- Only 16 per cent of respondents who experienced physical assault based on their (perceived) sexuality or gender identity reported it to the police.
- Victims of negative behaviour relating to their (perceived) sexuality or gender identity mostly reported these incidents to their tutors (45.5 per cent), to a friend (40 per cent) or to their students' union (26.8 per cent).

### Teaching and learning

- On a scale of 1–10, LGB+ students' average score of agreement with the statement "I see LGB experiences and history reflected in my curriculum" is only 3.9 and for trans students it is 3.5.
- For the statement, "I see trans experiences and history reflected in my curriculum," the scores are 2.8 for LGB+ students and 2.5 for trans students.
- Gay men students tend to feel more confident to speak up in class than lesbian, bisexual and trans students: 83 per cent of gay respondents feel confident to speak up in class, compared to 76.20 per cent of lesbian, 74.70 per cent of bisexual and 70.30 per cent of trans respondents.
- One in 10 trans students never feels comfortable to speak up in class.

- LGBT students who are out to their tutors tend to feel more confident to speak up in class (89 per cent) than those who are only out to their friends (79 per cent).

### LGBT activism and representation

- Students' unions seem to provide a safe haven for some LGBT students. They are more likely to run for elections than heterosexual students: 11 per cent of heterosexual respondents have considered running for elections in their union compared to 16.6 per cent of LGB+ and 23 per cent of trans students.
- 19 per cent of gay men respondents have considered running for election compared to 13 per cent of lesbian and 14 per cent of bisexual students.
- 27.5 per cent of LGB+ students and 41.5 per cent of trans students are members of their institution's LGBT society.
- 45 per cent of LGB+ respondents and 52 per cent of trans respondents were aware that their university has an LGBT society before applying to study there.
- LGBT students are more involved in political and campaigning societies than heterosexual students (10 per cent vs. 5 per cent), but much less likely to be members of sports clubs (15 per cent vs. 20 per cent) and religious societies (2 per cent vs. 5 per cent).
- The main reasons LGBT students cited for not being involved in any societies were a lack of time (35 per cent), missed opportunity (22 per cent), an absence of interest (16 per cent) or the lack of inclusiveness of societies (8 per cent).

# Introduction

# Introduction

This report presents findings from nationwide research into the experience of LGBT students in the UK, combining six student-led research projects and a national survey. Despite recent progresses towards equal rights, many studies show that homophobia and transphobia are still very much part of our society. A YouGov poll in August 2013 found that one in five lesbian, gay and bisexual employees have experienced verbal bullying at their workplace in the past five years and one in four said they were not at all open to colleagues about their sexual orientation.<sup>1</sup>

Data on LGBT students is quite hard to find as higher education institutions (HEIs) do not collect and monitor data on this group. We do not even know how many students identify as LGBT across the UK. The 2013 *Household Survey*<sup>2</sup> estimates that 1.5 per cent of adults in the UK identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, with this proportion rising to 2.6 per cent for young people aged 16–24. If we extrapolate from this, there would be at least 175,000 students identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB), with around 12,500 in London. But this seems to be a very conservative estimate, which does not capture people identifying as trans. When asked about their sexuality and gender identity, almost 4 per cent of respondents to this survey selected ‘do not know’ or ‘prefer not to say’, which means that there could be around 6 per cent of adults who do not self-define as straight/heterosexual.

Most importantly, this lack of data also means that we do not know the extent to which LGBT students are discriminated against and the impact this has on their student lives. Through a combination of qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, this research tries to better understand their journey and experiences in higher education.

## Aims and objectives

Previous research studies have focused on one specific aspect of student life, such as their participation in sports<sup>3</sup> or their mental health and well-being.<sup>4</sup> This report looks more broadly at LGBT students’ experience on campus and analyses the specific challenges they face as students.

This research focuses on LGBT students’ access to, and success in, higher education and identifies some common barriers they face. It also highlights the important role that LGBT societies and students’ unions can play in student well-being and retention.

This report examines the impact of homophobic and transphobic discrimination on students’ academic journey, and the barriers they face to come out as gay or trans students. Do universities provide a safe and supportive environment for young people questioning their sexuality and gender identity? Do LGBT students benefit from their time at university as much as other students?

This research is just a beginning. It provides statistical evidence of ongoing discrimination on the grounds of sexuality and gender identity and powerful testimonies from members of the student community. However, it could not cover all aspects of students’ experience of education and areas such as graduation or exams are not included here. Most importantly, in light of this evidence, we need a concerted action between unions and institutions to make a positive change in the life of LGBT students.

## Methodology

NUS commissioned students and students’ union to lead research projects at their institution. We received case studies from Bangor University, the University of Nottingham, Manchester Metropolitan University, University College London, the University of London, and the University of Glasgow. Their findings are presented in this report alongside the results from our national survey.

## Bangor University

The project was led by Bangor University Students’ Union under the supervision of Rhys Taylor, Vice President Education and Welfare, and Danielle Barnard, Academic Representation Unit Co-ordinator. Their research focused on understanding how to improve LGBT students’ experiences of education and identified key factors that contribute to students’ ability to engage in curricular and co-curricular

activities. They also looked at the role of student societies in students' retention and success. This project gathered evidence from 30 LGBT participants through two online surveys and two workshops in February 2014.

### University of Nottingham

The project was led by the University of Nottingham Students' Union and the LGBT Network, under the supervision of Jack Salter, LGBT Officer, and Heather Watkins, Political Insight Co-ordinator. Their research focused on communicating the impact of LGBT societies on students' retention and experience as well as building students' confidence in disclosing their sexuality or gender identity. It comprised an online survey with 70 respondents and one focus group, both conducted in February 2014.

### Manchester Metropolitan University

This project was led by Caroline Matthew, a student at Manchester Metropolitan University. Its aim was to gain insight into the educational experiences of LGBT students in higher education and to understand how gender may influence the educational experience of this group. A survey was promoted in February 2014 through Manchester Metropolitan University and Manchester University societies, including LGBT societies. It gathered 29 valid answers.

### University College London (UCL)

This project was led by the University College London Union (UCLU) under the supervision of UCLU staff member Vicki Baars. This research coincided with UCL reviewing and rewriting its Equality and Diversity Strategy. Research included three qualitative focus groups held in January and February 2014 with a total of 16 LGBT participants. Students were asked about their experience at UCL, their access to services and their feelings about disclosing sexual orientation and gender identity to the institution.

### University of London

This project was led by Paolo Morini and Orlanda Ward, two PhD students at University of London. They analysed how students' sexual orientation and gender

shape their experience and time at university and provided an intersectional approach to sexualities and identities. They conducted a survey of 75 LGBT respondents across five University of London colleges (UCL, King's College, SOAS, Queen Mary and Birkbeck) between January and March 2014.

### Trans student's focus group

An online focus group dedicated to the experience of trans students was facilitated by Rhianna Humphrey, a student at the University of Glasgow, in March 2014. The discussion gathered 10 participants from across the UK, and touched on different aspects of their journey from course selection and application to access to services on campus. This project used the online programme Chat Cloud, providing participants with complete anonymity and enabling participants from different locations to be connected in real time.

### National survey

In addition to these case studies, NUS carried out a national online survey that was publicised from 10 February to 3 March via the NUS newsletter and LGBT campaign. Over 5,000 students from 80 UK universities participated but after cleaning the data the reference N for the sample is 4,240. The sample size varies for some questions and the exact population is specified when necessary.

The survey had four sections: changing gender identity while studying (when applicable); engagement and activism; safety and well-being; and support and inclusion. There was also an open box at the end where more than 350 respondents left a comment. We carried statistical analysis on SPSS and only included in the report results that were significant at 95 per cent or 99 per cent.

### Sample composition

- Ethnicity: 86 per cent of respondents self-identified as White, 4 per cent as mixed or multiple ethnic groups, 5.8 per cent as Asian and 3 per cent as Black.
- Fee status: UK students comprised 91 per cent of the sample; EU students comprised 4 per cent of the sample; and international students 5 per cent.

- Enrolment status: 75.8 per cent of respondents are full-time undergraduate students, 11.8 per cent are part-time undergraduate students, 7.8 per cent are full-time postgraduate students and 4.5 per cent are part-time postgraduate students.
- Study area: 36 per cent of respondents are studying arts and humanities, 15 per cent health or medical sciences, 25 per cent STEM subjects and 24 per cent social sciences.
- Sexual orientation: 46 per cent of respondents self-identified as straight/heterosexual, 21 per cent as gay, 10 per cent as lesbian, 20 per cent as bisexual and 3 per cent defined their sexual orientation in another way (the most commonly-cited other sexualities were asexual, pansexual, queer, gender queer, fluid and unsure).
- Gender identity: 62 per cent of respondents self-defined as women, 35 per cent as men and 3 per cent self-defined in another way (including androgynous, non-binary, a-gendered, gender-queer and fluid) or preferred not to answer this question; when asked if their gender identity correspond to the gender they were originally assigned at birth, 96 per cent of respondents answered “yes”, 3 per cent “no” and 1 per cent preferred not to answer.
- Disability: 17.5 per cent of respondents reported having a disability.
- Employment status: half of respondents are not in employment and the other half work either part-time (28 per cent), occasionally (12 per cent) or full-time (10 per cent).
- Age: 60 per cent of respondents are aged 18–21, 16 per cent 22–25, 14 per cent 26–35 and 10 per cent are over 35.
- Country of study: 89 per cent of respondents are registered students in England, 3.5 per cent in Scotland, 6 per cent in Wales and 1.5 per cent in Northern Ireland.

Thus the sample is mostly composed of LGBT, women, England-based, white and undergraduate students. Because it is a self-selecting sample it is not representative of the entire UK student population, and in the absence of data on the exact number of LGBT students we cannot weight the answers or create quotas. The small size of the black and minority ethnic (BME) and non-UK respondent sample also

limits our ability to conduct in-depth intersectional analysis. However, our answers from LGBT students are comparable to other similar surveys and consistent with the literature.

### Scope of the research

The survey and local case studies only cover higher education. Respondents were not asked about their experience prior to becoming a student, although some mentioned this in focus groups and open comments. This research tried to be comprehensive but could not address every aspect of student life, and some key moments such as graduation or exams are missing. Life in student halls is not extensively researched either. We focused mostly on daily life on campus and the perception LGBT students have of their institutions and courses. Finally, this research is about sexual orientation and gender identity and does not look at other forms of discrimination or abuse, although we pay attention to intersections between different aspects of students’ identity.

### Structure of the report

This report is organised in three main sections: literature review; research findings; and conclusions and recommendations. The research findings are presented in five chapters: safety and well-being; coming out as a trans student; campus culture; teaching and learning; LGBT activism and representation.

# Literature review

# Understanding the plurality of sexualities and identities

## 1. Gender and queer theories

Academic work on LGBT starts in the late 1980s with deconstructionist and post-structuralist theories that challenge the policing of bodies and sexuality. Foucault,<sup>5</sup> for instance, insists on the creation of acceptable and 'deviant' sexualities as a way to control reproduction and family formations. Queer studies emerge from this in the 1990s, with the founding works of De Lauretis (1989)<sup>6</sup> and Sedgwick (1990).<sup>7</sup> In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick argues that the binary opposition heterosexuality/homosexuality limits our understanding of human sexual experiences and she poses queer sexuality as a third possibility to overcome rigid conceptions of sexuality.

Similarly, Butler (1990)<sup>8</sup> proposes fluid and 'troubled' gender identities as a way to challenge the imposed heteronormativity. She argues that identities are always open to contestation and redefinition, and that challenging the binary opposition men/women could produce a new form of self-identification. The imposed continuity between sex/gender/sexuality to be recognised as a person forms part of what Butler calls the 'compulsory heteronormativity', a system in which two asymmetric genders (man/woman) are produced and maintained. She contends, "The binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive and medicojuridical hegemonies."<sup>9</sup> In this context, queer identity is conceived as a tool against power regimes and control of sexualities.

Following from that, Seidman (1996)<sup>10</sup> poses the five following premises of queer theory:

- identities are always multiple
- identities are constructed and serve to mark the normal and the deviant
- identities are subject to contestation and challenge
- politics centred on 'homosexuality' reinforce the binary opposition homo/heterosexual
- queer studies are interdisciplinary

Thus the very concept of sexuality is open to challenge and the way it defines individuals' identity needs to be rethought. Categorising individuals according to their declared or perceived sexual orientation serves to reinforce the distinction between the norm – heterosexuality – and deviations. Queer theory appears as a conceptual tool to challenge these binary oppositions – people can be many different things at the same time, or change over time. It also provides a new perspective on sexuality, allowing us to disconnect it from pre-established norms or models and especially from reproduction.

More recently, Phellas (2012)<sup>11</sup> has made the case for using the word 'sexualities' to insist on the plurality of possibilities and challenge heterosexuality as the norm. He argues that LGBT has been defined in opposition and in contestation to heterosexuality, and suggests that 'sexualities' would move beyond this by erasing the constant reference to hetero and non-hetero sexualities.

## 2. Representing LGBT experiences

This research is inscribed in these debates and recognises the need to move beyond binary oppositions. It uses gender and queer theories to challenge the heteronormativity of the education system and to examine how certain behaviours reinforce the norm by excluding 'deviant' identities. We will however refer to the categories heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans to underline the differences in students' experiences of education. As highlighted by Whittle (2002)<sup>12</sup> and Sharpe (2002)<sup>13</sup>, queer studies use the term 'LGBT' as an encompassing umbrella but there is not much research done on the specificities of each of these sexualities, and the experiences of bisexual and trans people tend to be erased.

We will therefore navigate between the imperative of analysing each group separately to understand their specificities while recognising that we should aim to

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deconstruct the categories heterosexual/non-heterosexual. This tension echoes similar difficulties faced by feminist theorists and activists, who simultaneously need to create a category 'women' to make discriminations visible while fighting for the abolition of distinctions between men and women. This is what Spivak (1993)<sup>14</sup> has called the 'strategic essentialism'. She argues that we need to refer to the very category we want to deconstruct in order to mobilise and secure rights for this category, and that by doing so we are left with "the useful yet semimournful position of the unavoidable usefulness of something that is dangerous."<sup>15</sup>

We use the label 'LGBT' here to draw attention to discriminations and barriers students face because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is also used as a political term to emphasise the fact that heterosexuality is only one form of sexuality among others. By doing this, we are aware that differences rather than similarities are being accentuated and that we reinforce the distinction between heterosexual and non-heterosexual. Reflecting Spivak's quote, this is not a theoretical choice but a temporary strategy to combat inequalities.

Renn (2010)<sup>16</sup> highlights the transformative potential of queer theory for higher education theories and practices and argues that it provides a better way to analyse students' multiple experiences. The author identifies three main aspects that have been the subject of queer studies research: the visibility of LGBT people; the campus climate for LGBT people; and the changing construction of LGBT identities and experiences. This report will focus mostly on the campus climate and the perceptions of LGBT students, and will explore the difference their sexuality and gender identity have on their experience of higher education.

Finally, sexual orientation and gender identity are understood and analysed as political in the sense that they are part of one's citizenship and personhood.

Plummer (2003)<sup>17</sup> argues that LGBT movements create a new type of citizenship that includes intimate citizenship as a "public discourse on the personal life". Bodies and sexualities become new forms of self-identification and legitimate grounds on which to claim rights and equality. Richardson (2000)<sup>18</sup> further suggests that the discourse on rights itself has been changed and that sexual rights are now included in the definition of citizenship. Thus citizens, and people, are entitled to recognition and protection from discrimination based on their intimate and lived experience.<sup>19</sup> Society as a whole, and more specifically HEIs, are responsible for providing this protection and ensuring that every student is treated equally, regardless of their sexualities or identities.

# Discrimination and harassment in education

## 1. Schools and colleges

Most studies on LGBT pupils and discrimination at school conclude that the level of harassment or ill treatment is much higher in secondary education than it is at university. Stonewall's 2012<sup>20</sup> report on Britain's schools shows, for instance, that **55 per cent of LGB young people experience homophobic bullying** and 99 per cent of respondents hear phrases such as "that's so gay" in their school. Only 10 per cent of respondents reported teachers challenging homophobic language every time they hear it and only half of respondents said that their school actively combats homophobic bullying. The survey also indicates that bullying of LGB pupils is lower in schools that explicitly state that homophobic bullying is wrong, which stresses the importance of educational institutions having clear procedures and values.

A comprehensive study led by Youth Chances in 2014<sup>21</sup> further reveals that 49 per cent of LGBT young people feel that their time at school has been affected by hostility or fear. A great majority of respondents to that study (65 per cent of LGB+ and 71 per cent of trans respondents) believed that their school badly or very badly supported pupils with issues of sexuality or gender identity. LGBT respondents are also less likely than heterosexuals to report being well-informed about same-sex relationships and that their school is inclusive of LGBT people. On average, respondents reported worse experiences of discrimination and harassment at school and in the workplace compared to university.

Little research has been done on further education, but a report published by the Skill Funding Agency<sup>22</sup> suggests that the level of discrimination is quite high there too. Indeed, **30 per cent of trans learners and 14 per cent of LGB learners have experienced bullying or harassment in an adult learning context** due to their gender identity or sexual orientation. Respondents stated that discrimination most commonly takes place during practical work in the classroom, and **half of**

learners who experienced bullying or harassment said that other learners from their course were involved. The greatest barrier to learning identified by respondents is "insensitive curriculum content". This study also highlights that trans learners are less open about their identity in a learning context than LGB students, and lesbian and trans respondents are less likely than gay men to be aware of LGBT policies and support at their institution.

## 2. Higher education

Two important pieces of research have been recently published on LGBT students in the UK. The first was conducted in 2008 by Ellis,<sup>23</sup> with a sample of 291 LGBT students from 42 UK universities. Her results show that homophobia is still prevalent on campuses, with **one in four students surveyed indicating that they have been victims of homophobic harassment on at least one occasion. The majority of incidents were perpetrated by other students (76 per cent) and a small number by academic staff (4 per cent).**

Ellis' study also identifies halls, social spaces and student organisations as common sites of discrimination. Interestingly, despite evidence of harassment against LGBT students, only a minority of respondents say they think it is common. However, **almost one in four have feared for their safety** because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and half of respondents have deliberately concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid intimidation. She concludes from this that the occurrence of homophobic incidents on campus is quite low, but is still sufficiently frequent to create a climate of fear and fear of harassment: "this would seem to suggest that LGBT students do not particularly perceive a 'climate of fear' but actively behave in ways that respond to such a climate."<sup>24</sup>

Although the great majority of Ellis' respondents (75 per cent) agree that the climate of their classes is accepting of LGBT people, they also reported that

LGBT issues are inadequately represented in the curriculum and only a minority feel comfortable in raising these issues in class.

Ellis' research is important in better understanding the experience of LGBT students in the UK. On comparable questions, our research obtained similar results, which shows that unfortunately things have not changed much in the past six years. Our research explores in more depth the consequences of harassment on students and offers a systematic comparison with heterosexual students on issues of well-being and satisfaction.

Equality Challenge Unit (ECU)<sup>25</sup> conducted a survey on the experience of LGBT students and staff in 2009, revealing very similar patterns. LGBT respondents reported significant levels of negative treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation from fellow students – **49.5 per cent of harassment came from fellow students**. This had caused them stress, loss of confidence and self-exclusion from social and academic spaces. Two-thirds of respondents were not out to their tutors or lecturers because they feared discrimination; and **15 per cent of LGB and 35 per cent of trans students reported fearing losing financial support if they came out to their parents** about their sexual orientation or trans status. Another important finding from this survey is that institutions' policies on equality and inclusion play a role in the choice of institution for 15 per cent of LGB and 24 per cent of trans students.

These two studies offer a baseline against which to compare our results, even if the methodology, range and type of questions were quite different. They both reveal some common patterns such as the fear of coming out, the ongoing presence of homophobia and transphobia, disparities among LGBT students themselves and the fact that perpetrators of homophobia and transphobia tend to be fellow students.

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# The mental health and well-being of LGBT people

## 1. A population more at risk

Several studies show that LGBT people, and more specifically young LGBT people, face higher risks of experiencing mental ill health, violence and abuse. Russell (2001)<sup>26</sup> argues that **LGB adolescents in the US are more at risk of experiencing violence** than non-LGB young people and that this has an impact on their ability to come out. The level of hostility within their environment prevents many young people from being open about, or sometimes even accepting, their sexual orientation.

Another study based on US Department of Health data,<sup>27</sup> demonstrates that lesbian and gay young people are 2–6 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual young people and that they accounted for more than 30 per cent of all teen suicides. LGB teenagers are also more at risk when ties with friends and families are broken, and more likely to run away from home.

Similar patterns have been found in the UK: 42 per cent of LGBT respondents to the Youth Chances<sup>28</sup> survey reported having experienced depression or anxiety, compared to 29 per cent of non-LGBT respondents. **LGBT young people are also more likely to report self-harming (52 per cent)** than non-LGBT respondents in the sample (35 per cent). Also worrying, **44 per cent of LGBT respondents have thought of suicide**, compared to 26 per cent of non-LGBT respondents and 21 per cent of young people of the same age group.

**Young LGBT people tend to be more exposed to sexual abuse**, with 18 per cent of LGB and 25 per cent of trans respondents reporting having experienced sexual abuse, compared to 11 per cent of non-LGBT respondents. On average, LGBT respondents are more likely to declare having a physical or mental health condition (21 per cent of heterosexual, 30 per cent of LGB and 48 per cent trans respondents).

None of these studies explored LGBT students specifically, but they reveal the level of difficulties faced

by young LGBT people. As a group, they are more exposed to violence and abuse and consistently express lower levels of well-being than their heterosexual peers. The effect this has on their education and ability to study should be researched further.

## 2. Psychological consequences of harassment

LGBT people's mental ill health is often associated with bullying and harassment. Rivers (2001)<sup>29</sup> argues that homophobic bullying and harassment have long-term impacts on LGBT people, who become more likely to contemplate self-harm. Similarly, Chakraborty's study on the non-heterosexual population in the UK shows that this group reports higher levels of mental health problems, and that this is strongly correlated to having experienced discrimination. He affirms that **discrimination can be analysed as a predictor of mental disorders.**<sup>30</sup>

Ryan and Rivers<sup>31</sup> conducted a comparative study between the US and UK that tries to measure the negative impact of victimisation on LGB young people's well-being. They show that, in the US, LGB young people are four times more likely than their heterosexual peers to have skipped school because they felt unsafe or threatened, and one in three reported having been victimised at school. **As a result, they had lower academic achievements and retention rates.**

Despite a lack of comparable data for the UK, this study concludes nonetheless that in both countries, **LGB young people are more likely to attempt suicide and are much more exposed to multiple health risks such as HIV.** It also reveals that a greater proportion of bisexual young people report experiencing negative attitudes towards them than lesbian and gay young people, and that they are more likely to have attempted suicide. This research does, however, ignore the experience of trans people, and problematically affirms that bisexual people's higher level of distress is due to their 'unstable' identity. The authors seem to consider that bisexuality

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is a stage between heterosexuality and homosexuality and that young people will make a definite choice later in their life.

NUS research also points out different levels of well-being and satisfaction among LGBT students, with bisexual students tending on average to be less satisfied with their student experience than lesbian and gay respondents. We believe that more research is needed to understand the causes of these differences, which cannot be attributed to an 'unstable' sexual identity. We suggest that this most probably reflects a lack of visibility of bisexuality within LGBT student communities and a lack of consideration for bisexual people's specific needs and difficulties.

### 3. Trans people's mental health

A ground-breaking study carried out by the Equality Network<sup>32</sup> in Scotland in 2012 explores how the process of transitioning impacts on the mental health and well-being of trans people. It reveals that **70 per cent of participants are more satisfied with their lives after transitioning** while 2 per cent are less satisfied; and 85 per cent are more satisfied with their body since undertaking hormone therapy, 87 per cent after undertaking non-genital surgery and 90 per cent after genital surgery.

Respondents also reported that the period of waiting to be seen by a professional at a gender identity clinic can lead to worsening mental health or emotional well-being, and 29 per cent of respondents feel their gender identity was treated by mental health professionals as a symptom of mental illness instead of being validated as genuine. **Respondents mention using mental health services mostly before transition (45 per cent) rather than during transition (18 per cent).** None reported using these services after transition.

A great majority of respondents to the Equality Network study, **74 per cent, feel that their mental health improved as a result of transitioning,** and 5 per

cent reported a decline because of lack of support from friends and relatives. Most had no regrets after transition, and those who did mentioned losing friends and family as the most difficult consequence. A striking **90 per cent of respondents reported being told that trans people were not 'normal'** and 38 per cent had experienced sexual harassment. The majority of respondents (81 per cent) avoided certain situations such as using public toilets, gyms or clothing shops due to fear of harassment.

What this study highlights is that trans people tend to be satisfied post-transition as they feel better about their body. It is the barriers that trans people have to face that makes the process difficult and risks worsening their mental health, including the way they are treated by medical staff, friends and family members. This echoes the experience of trans students who participated in our research and had to face numerous difficulties to access treatment during their studies.

# Between isolation and visibility

## 1. Negotiating the coming out

The climate on campus, and in society in general, heavily influences the willingness and capacity of LGBT people to come out. For instance, a historical study of the gay student movement in the US<sup>33</sup> shows that the first pro-gay student league created at Columbia in 1967 was actually mostly composed of straight students. The league offered a cover for gay students and protected them from harassment or abuse by other students. It also avoided gay students being forced to come out to defend their rights as they were part of a bigger group of heterosexual people.

If the stigma associated with being gay is much lower now than decades ago, the tension between coming out and 'passing as straight' is nonetheless still very much present for LGBT students in the UK. Victimization and harassment at school are still quite common. A study on the high school environment in the US<sup>34</sup> **links the high-risk status of young LGBT people to their isolation and lack of support.** The authors argue that the absence of a strong social network that provides emotional and institutional support can lead to isolation and enhance LGBT young people's risk of mental ill health and distress. Worryingly, participants in this research identified their **family members as being the least supportive** and most did not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to their parents.

The main barriers to coming out mentioned by participants in the US study include the fear of losing support, being shut out or seen as sexually predatory by friends, and the fear of unfair treatment by teachers. The authors affirm that heteronormativity is constantly enforced and reproduced by teachers and staff in high schools, which creates a gap between LGBT pupils' feelings and what they perceive as being the norm:

*"Confronted with their own sense of alienation and confusion, as well as the overwhelming negative messages about homosexuality in their home and school environments, respondents described their sexual identity formation as a process characterised by varying degrees of denial and acceptance."*<sup>35</sup>

The widespread image of homosexuality as something **bad or wrong** enhances LGBT young people's fear of coming out and contributes to their feeling of being different or not 'fitting in'. Finally, the authors underline the 'cognitive isolation' experienced by this group as they have very limited access to information about sexual orientation or gender identity and do not know where to look for support most of the time.

This is consistent with findings from the Youth Chances<sup>36</sup> survey in the UK, which show that **only 19 per cent of LGB+ respondents are out to everyone at school, compared to 49 per cent at university.** School and secondary education appear to be relatively intolerant environments and do not enable young people to find the support they need to come out or talk about their sexual and gender identity. Besides, LGBT young people feel much less accepted in their local community than their heterosexual counterparts, particularly in religious organisations and sports, which further contributes to their social isolation.

## 2. Financial difficulties

Another important aspect that has been insufficiently researched is the financial situation of LGBT students. A survey carried out by NUS in 2011<sup>37</sup> found that LGB+ students are less likely to receive information on their financial entitlements from family members than heterosexual students, and subsequently less likely to receive financial support or help paying for course costs from their families. They are also more likely to be in debt, and in higher amounts of debt, than their heterosexual counterparts. Most worryingly, **respondents are more than twice as likely as heterosexual students to have taken on high-risk debt** such as payday loans.

Other studies show that LGBT young people are more likely to be homeless or run away from home than their heterosexual peers.<sup>38</sup> Among respondents to the Youth Chances survey, nearly **one in 10 had to leave their home for reasons relating to their sexuality or gender identity.** However, the impact this has on LGBT young people's success and remaining in education is

underexplored, as are the consequences for their professional careers.

According to existing data on poverty in LGBT communities, we can presume that LGBT students' financial difficulties persist after graduation. A recent report<sup>39</sup> published in the US confirms that **poverty rates are higher among gay men and lesbians** than in the general population. The study also describes trans poverty as being "extraordinarily high" and shows that unemployment rates among trans people are double the national rate. There is no integrated data on discrimination at the workplace, but existing surveys suggest that it is quite prevalent. LGB staff in higher education in the UK report negative treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity from colleagues (34 per cent) and students (19 per cent),<sup>40</sup> and one in 10 LGB adults who experienced a hate crime report having been victimised by a work colleague.<sup>41</sup>

We must therefore pay attention to the multiple barriers that LGBT people face as students, from social isolation to a lack of financial support and discrimination on campus. It is important to consider these factors simultaneously to understand LGBT students' experience of higher education and the consequences this has on their well-being and future life.

# Research findings

# Safety and well-being

## 1. Homophobic and transphobic bullying

Overall, LGBT students tend to feel less safe on their campus than heterosexual students. The average of “feeling safe”, rated on a scale of 1–10, varies from 8.7 for heterosexual students to 7.5 for trans students. Gay, lesbian and bisexual respondents have a “feeling safe” mean greater than 8. Although they all report a quite high level of safety, differences between groups are statistically significant: 43 per cent of heterosexual respondents rated their feeling of safety as 10/10, compared to 36.7 per cent of LGB+ and 20.6 per cent of trans students.

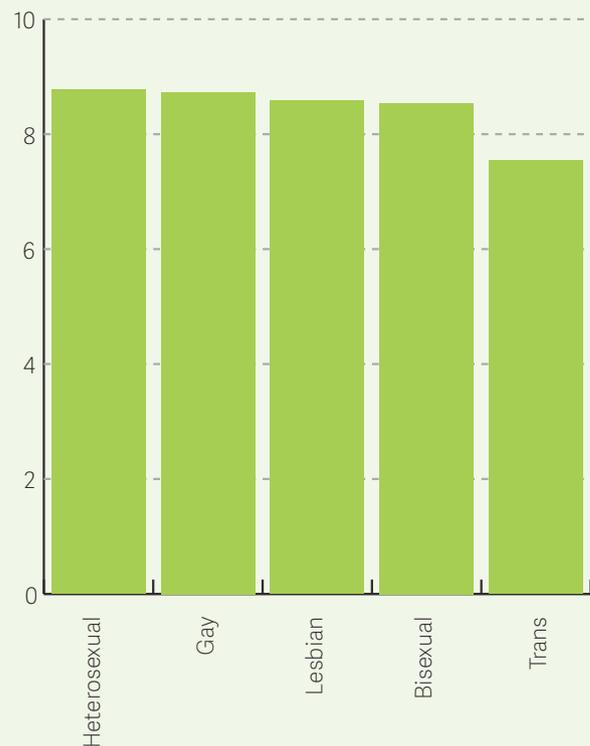
Some respondents also highlighted the fact that university is safer than streets, bars or the outside world more generally:

*“I don't think that university is really a bad place for people of the LGBT community to be. My partner is a trans Female to Male (FtM) and another fellow classmate is FtM too and we all feel really comfortable in our building and on our course. There was an incident a few weeks back which knocked my confidence when there was a really homophobic group playing badminton with me who were first-years of the university. It made me really uncomfortable and upset and I wanted to quit the sport all together. In reality, I think the city is a worse place to express yourself than on campus at the university...”* (Trans respondent to the national survey)

What is more worrying is the relatively high occurrence of homophobic and transphobic behaviours in higher education institutions. Indeed, one in five LGB+ students and one in three trans students have experienced at least one form of bullying or harassment on their campus. It is also striking that trans students consistently suffer more harassment than other students. They are twice as likely as LGB+ respondents to have experienced threats or intimidation and physical assaults.

Figure 1: Feeling safe on campus

Q25. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 meaning not safe at all and 10 very safe, how safe do you feel on your campus? (N = 3,883)

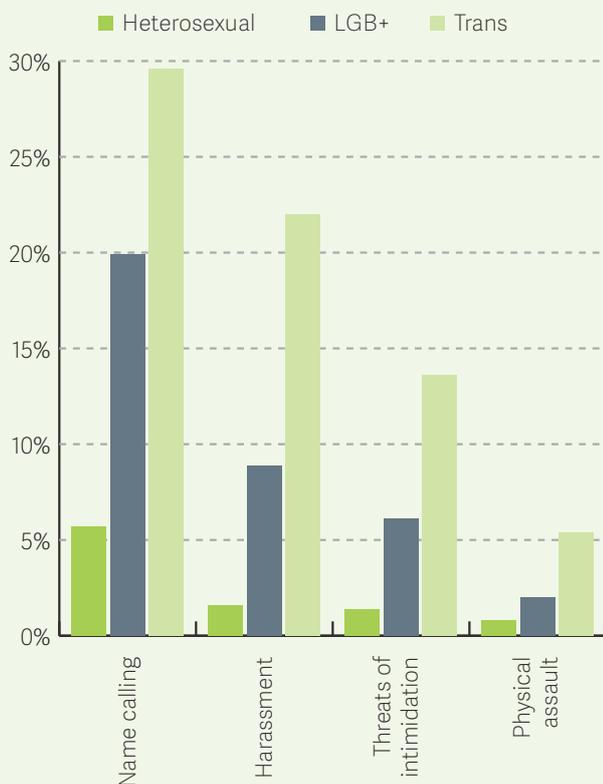


This data is quite consistent with the findings from the 2014 Youth Chances report: 18 per cent of LGB+ respondents and 25 per cent of trans respondents have experienced name-calling at least once; 5 per cent of LGB+ and 8 per cent of trans have experienced threats or intimidation at least once; and 3 per cent of LGB+ and 5 per cent of trans have experienced a physical attack at least once.

As in other studies, perpetrators were most often identified as being men students. LGBT students are thus more victimised and excluded by their peers than by academic staff or tutors. The Manchester Metropolitan University report highlights that 30 per cent of students felt they had been isolated from social groups because of their sexuality.

**Figure 2: Homophobic and transphobic bullying on campus**

Q26. Have you ever experienced homophobic or transphobic harassment on your campus?  
(N = 3,880)



Gay men students tend to experience more harassment and abuse on the grounds of their sexual orientation than lesbian and bisexual women: 20.7 per cent of gay men respondents reported having experienced name-calling, compared to 18. per cent of lesbian and bisexual women respondents; and 6.8 per cent of gay men reported having experienced threats or intimidation, compared to 5 per cent of lesbian and bisexual women respondents. This is in part linked to the fact that gay men students are more out on campus than lesbian and bisexual women, and are therefore more visible to perpetrators of homophobic behaviour. Another element to consider is that violence against women might be based more on their gender than their sexual orientation – other studies that asked about harassment on campus without specifying homophobic or transphobic behaviour show very clearly gendered results.

Some women respondents also identified homophobia as a being part of 'lad culture'. This was confirmed by the University of London survey, in which respondents mentioned persistent sexism and misogyny at their institution.

*"I have witnessed on multiple occasions, and have sometimes been a direct recipient of, sexist behaviour... On another occasion, a study group formed entirely of males with the exception of myself, was waiting for the person using the studio we had booked to leave. When the door opened a pretty female came through the door. All the men commented: 'I didn't expect to see THAT coming out of a studio,' implying it is unsuitable or inappropriate for women to be seen using music technology. I have also witnessed a great deal of 'lad' behaviour on campus. I am upset that in an educational institution people do not think to challenge their archaic sexist views."* (Lesbian respondent to the national survey)

*"The homophobic comments I have experienced are normally from the assumption that because I am a feminist, I must be a lesbian. I try to correct people where I can, telling them that anyone can be a feminist, no matter what their identity or sexuality may be. However, if I am on my own and feel threatened, I will probably not speak up."* (Straight woman respondent to the national survey)

Respondents have fewer complaints about staff, who are not usually seen as perpetrators of bullying or harassment. Issues with staff are mostly linked to the curriculum, except for trans students, among whom the great majority reported being repeatedly misnamed and mis-gendered by their tutors.

About a hundred respondents to the national survey said they had not suffered directly from homophobic or transphobic bullying but had witnessed it on campus, or knew a friend who had experienced this behaviour. Some also mention inappropriate jokes or 'banter' but do not always identify this as verbal harassment, suggesting that the extent of LGBT harassment could be greater than reported by survey respondents. The most commonly cited issue in this respect is the pejorative meaning associated with the word 'gay':

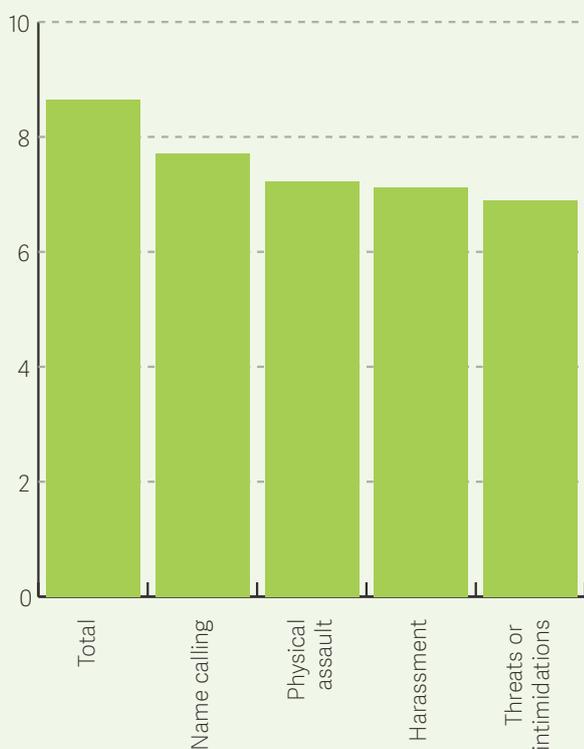
*“Using words such as ‘gay’ in a derogatory way has become so commonplace, I don’t feel justified speaking out against it. I’d feel like I’d be making a nuisance, even though every time I hear the word used in that way it continues to feed the idea that being gay is bad, despite being out. When the survey asked whether I believe people will intervene seeing transphobic/homophobic behaviour, I’ve rated it low because I’ve included using transphobic/homophobic language as trans/homophobic behaviour, whether or not it is used flippantly. Making jokes about transgender people, either to poke fun or say they’re ‘disgusting’, is completely socially acceptable. Having said that, I believe that if people saw someone being threatened for being LGBT, people would step in.”* (Gay respondent to the national survey)

Finally, ‘passing straight’ seems to be a strategy used by an important proportion of LGBT students to protect themselves from homophobia and transphobia. Terms such as ‘looking straight’ or being ‘stealth’ are commonly used by respondents. This makes it harder to measure the level of actual harassment and discrimination, but indicates a certain climate of fear, at least for some LGBT students:

*“The general attitude on our campus is one [that is] extremely anti-gay or bi and I would not feel comfortable coming out to anyone about my liking for guys as well as women. Completely believe that it would affect marking of assignments. Not tolerant at all.”* (Bisexual respondent to the national survey)

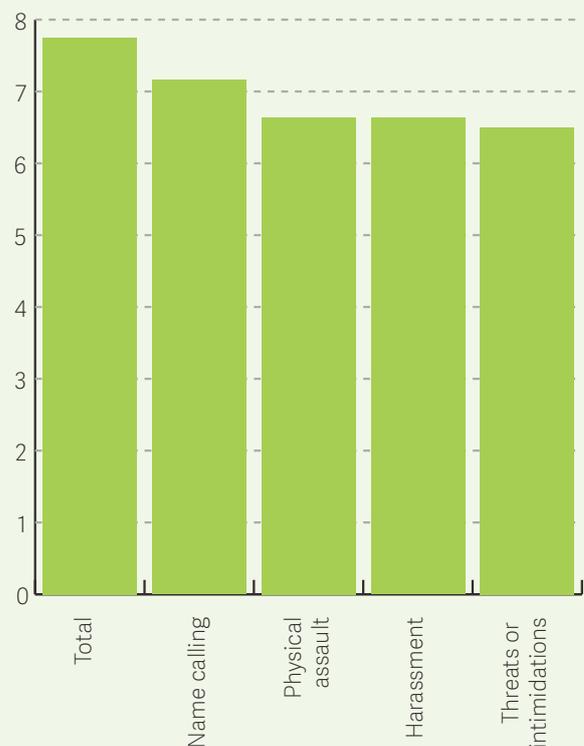
**Figure 3: Safety rating among victims of homophobic or transphobic bullying**

Q25. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 meaning not safe at all and 10 very safe, how safe do you feel on your campus? (N = 3,883)



**Figure 4: Overall satisfaction among victims of homophobic or transphobic bullying**

Q35. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 extremely satisfied, how would you rate your overall experience at your current institution? (N = 3,401)



Unsurprisingly, students who have experienced homophobic or transphobic bullying feel less safe than others and are less satisfied by their experience at university. Figures 3 and 4 show the average rating on safety and satisfaction among respondents who have experienced homophobic or transphobic abuse on campus. Respondents who have experienced name-calling rate their feeling of safety 7.7 out of 10, compared to 8.7 for the whole sample; respondents who have experienced physical assault rate it 7.2; respondents who have experienced harassment rate it 7.1 and respondents who have experienced threats or intimidation rate it 6.9.

## 2. LGBT students' retention

LGBT students are on average more likely to have considered dropping out than heterosexual students (25.4 per cent versus 30 per cent). However, this

percentage hides important variations among LGBT students themselves as 30 per cent of bisexual respondents and 46.50 per cent of students self-defining 'in another way' reported having seriously considered dropping out. More worryingly, half of trans respondents (51 per cent) have seriously considered dropping out.

Among LGB+ students, the main reasons cited are: the feeling of not fitting in (56 per cent); personal, family or relationship problems (53.7 per cent), and wrong choice of subject (52 per cent). An important proportion also mentioned health problems (45 per cent) and financial difficulties (43 per cent).

Regarding the feeling of not fitting in at university being a factor in considering leaving, the answers of LGB+ students differed significantly from those of heterosexual students (56 per cent versus 47 per cent).

Figure 5: Respondents who have considered dropping out, by sexual orientation

Q33. Have you ever seriously considered leaving your course or dropping out? (N = 2,553)

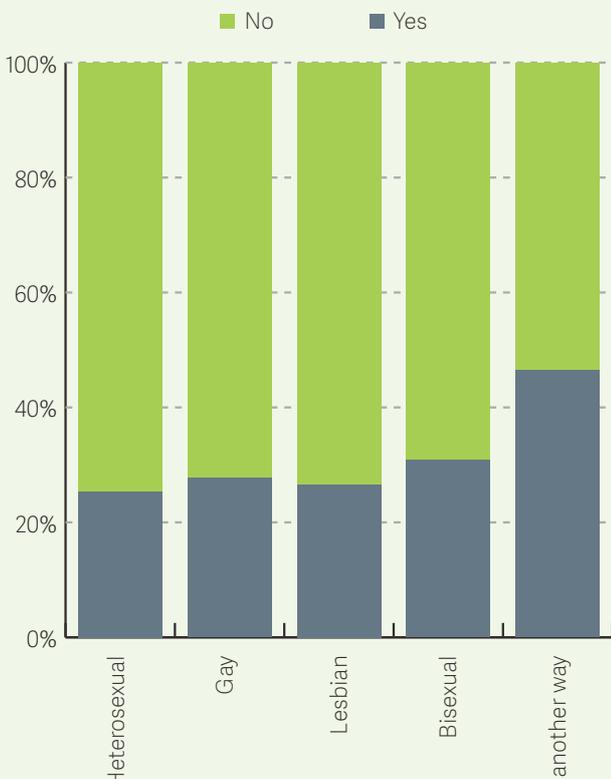


Figure 6: Respondents who have considered dropping out by gender identity

Q33. Have you ever seriously considered leaving your course or dropping out? (N = 2,553)

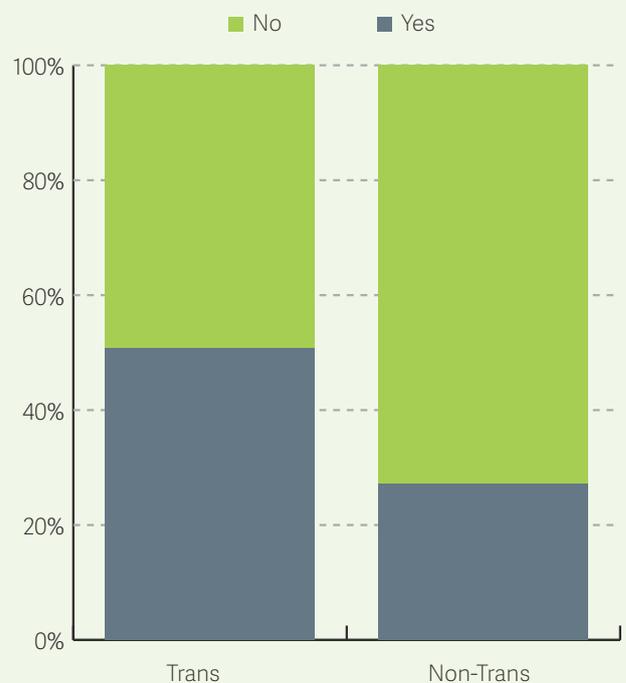
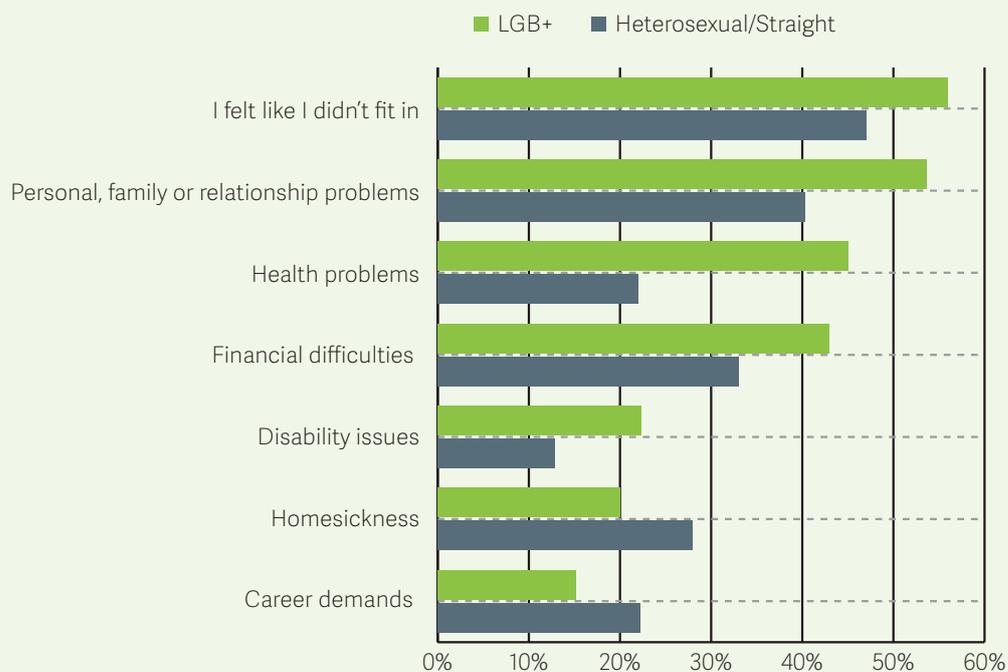


Figure 7: Reasons for considering dropping out – LGB+ students

Q34. If yes, what are the main reasons? (N = 961)



Figure 8: Main differences between LGB+ and heterosexual students in reasons for considering dropping out



There were clear differences between LGB+ and heterosexual students in terms of other reasons for considering leaving their course: personal, family or relationship problems (53.7 per cent versus 40.3 per cent, respectively); health problems (44.8 per cent versus 22 per cent); financial difficulties (43 per cent versus 33 per cent); and disability issues (22.3 per cent versus 13 per cent). However, LGB+ students are less likely to cite homesickness (20 per cent versus, 28 per cent) or career demands (15.2 per cent versus 22.2 per cent) as reasons for seriously thinking about leaving their course.

The reasons cited by trans students follow a quite different order. They are much more likely to mention health problems (64.5 per cent), disability issues (43.5 per cent) or the fact that they feel unsupported by their institution (45 per cent). Support to LGBT students should take these specificities and differences into account. Although all LGBT students cite the feeling of not fitting in as the first reason for considering leaving, thereafter LGB+ and trans students seem to face quite different difficulties.

Although the sample of BME students is too small to allow a more refined statistical analysis, we can see that **Black LGB+ students are more likely to have considered dropping out** than other ethnicities (47.4 per cent compared to 30.6 per cent of White LGB+ and 17 per cent of Asian LGB+ respondents). Further research on the intersection of race, gender identity and sexual orientation is needed to identify the different forms of oppression that social groups face.

Another important element to consider is the impact of bullying on retention. It is striking to see that **students who have experienced a form of homophobic or transphobic harassment are 2–3 times more likely to have considered leaving their course** than those who never experienced any bullying. The majority of students who have experienced harassment, threats or intimidations or physical assault have seriously considered dropping out. If homophobic or transphobic bullying is only experienced by a minority of LGBT students, its detrimental effects on retention and student well-being must be urgently addressed by institutions.

Figure 9: Reason for considering dropping out – trans students



**Table 1: Impact of homophobic or transphobic bullying on retention**

Type of bullying or harassment experienced by student		Percentage of respondents who have seriously considered dropping out or leaving their course
Name calling	Yes	41.70%
	No	26.20%
Harrasment	Yes	53.10%
	No	27.10%
Threats or intimidation	Yes	56.30%
	No	27.40%
Physical assault	Yes	60.00%
	No	28.20%

### 3. Outness and inclusion

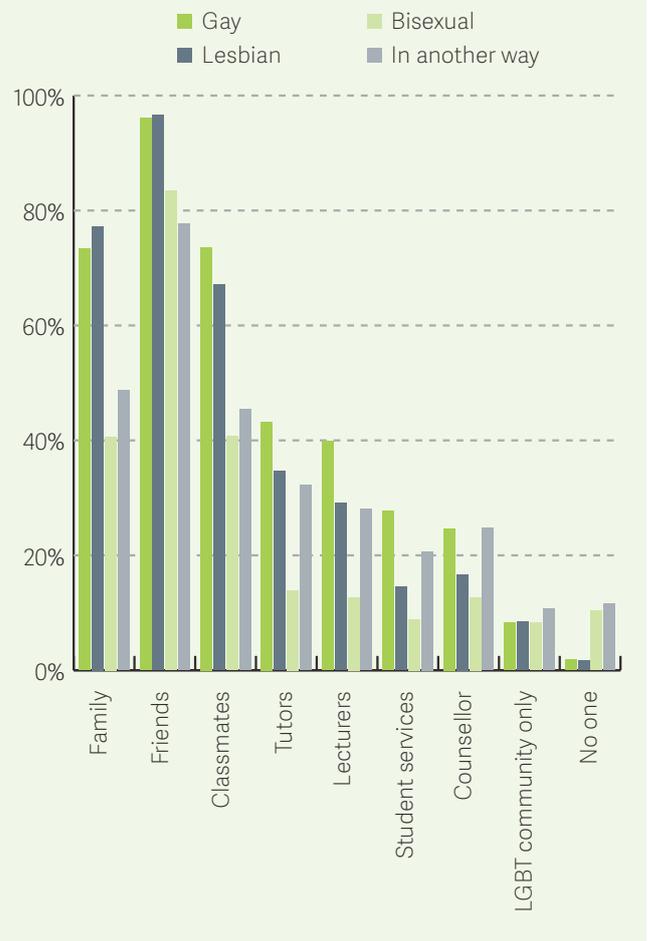
In general, LGB+ students tend to be more out to their friends and family than they are to staff at their educational institution. However, bisexual students and those defining their sexuality ‘in another way’ are consistently less out than gay and lesbian students. Only 40 per cent of bisexual respondents are out to their family, compared to 72.5 per cent of gay and 77 per cent of lesbian respondents; 82 per cent are out to their friends, compared to 96 per cent of gay and lesbian respondents; and slightly more than one in 10 bisexual students are out to academic staff, compared to 40 per cent of gay and a third of lesbian respondents.

Some gay respondents explained that they are not out to their teachers simply because they do not find it relevant or do not want to discuss their sexuality in an academic context. Thus, not being out on campus is not automatically a sign of discrimination or lower well-being. Nonetheless, the disparities within LGB+ students are quite important. Gay men students tend to be much more out to everyone than those identifying as lesbian, bisexual or another sexuality. This suggests that gay men might feel less discriminated against and are more comfortable in being visible as non-straight.

Being out does not have a clear effect on students’ satisfaction with their institution or on retention. However, it does seem that **those who are out to their**

**Figure 10: Level of ‘outness’ by sexual orientation**

Q24. Who are you out to? (N = 3,856)



**tutors and lecturers feel more confident to speak up in class** and feel more included in group learning activities. As shown in tables 2 and 3, a large majority of LGBT students are actively involved in class activities, but there is a statistically significant difference between those who are out to no one or to their friends only and those who are out to their teachers.

Offering a supportive and non-judgemental environment therefore appears to be crucial in enabling students who want to come out to do so without fear of discrimination or bullying. Moreover, their experience in the classroom and **their feelings of inclusion are positively affected by being out**, which means that feeling able to be open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity does influence the overall well-being of LGBT students.

## Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow

**Table 2: Confidence to speak up class and 'outness'**

Q30. Do you feel confident to speak up in class? (N = 3,421)

Who are you out to?	Yes, always	Yes, most of the time	No, most of the time	No, never	Total Yes
Family	35.07%	46.15%	14.18%	4.66%	81.22%
Friends	30.73%	48.17%	16.01%	5.14%	78.90%
Classmates	36.43%	45.78%	14.42%	3.45%	82.21%
Tutors	45.50%	43.54%	7.81%	3.15%	89.04%
Lecturers	47.18%	42.39%	7.86%	2.56%	89.57%
Student services	43.52%	42.49%	9.84%	4.15%	86.01%
Counsellor	34.31%	47.69%	11.68%	6.33%	82.00%
No one	26.69%	46.61%	20.72%	5.98%	73.30%

**Table 3: Feeling of inclusion in group learning activities and 'outness'**

Q31. Do you feel included in group learning activities? (N = 3,421)

Who are you out to?	Yes, always	Yes, most of the time	No, most of the time	No, never	Total Yes
Family	47.00%	43.12%	7.69%	2.26%	90.12%
Friends	43.03%	46.20%	8.50%	2.32%	89.23%
Classmates	48.77%	43.10%	6.90%	1.30%	91.87%
Tutors	54.35%	38.44%	5.41%	1.80%	92.79%
Lecturers	56.07%	36.92%	5.81%	1.20%	92.99%
Student services	50.52%	39.90%	8.03%	1.55%	90.42%
Counsellor	42.58%	44.53%	9.49%	3.41%	87.11%
No one	37.45%	47.41%	12.35%	2.79%	84.86%

# Coming out as a trans student

## 1. The struggle for recognition

Trans students face specific difficulties related to the lack of recognition of their identity. They stand out within LGBT community as being particularly vulnerable and unconsidered by HEIs. The main reasons for trans respondents' dissatisfaction with institutions are: the lack of gender-neutral facilities; the lack of a policy to update records; difficulties with security services; and the prevalence of transphobia on campus.

The lack of gender-neutral toilets and facilities is very often cited as a major issue, which could in some cases completely prevent trans students from using them. A student also reported using men's facilities as this is the gender he identifies with, but feels very unsafe as he is still seen as a woman:

*"I've not had any surgery and get changed in the men's, and I'm aware how unsafe this is and also that security etc would likely blame me for taking the risk if I was assaulted in gym changing rooms..."*

(Trans students online focus group participant)

The lack of a clear policy on updating records, meaning that in some institutions trans students could not change their name or gender in the register, was another common problem faced by trans respondents. Only one participant reported finding it easy to change their details. This administrative blockage can result in students being outed to their tutors or classmates against their will. It can also lead to absurd situations such as students not being able to access campus facilities because they are registered under the incorrect name:

*"I found student services very helpful in terms of providing a new ID card, but they managed to fail to register me correctly in my new name and gender for the entirety of my final year, despite regular contact and having all my legal documents. As a result I had to write my dissertation without being able to get into the library because I wasn't registered as a student."*

(Trans students online focus group participant)

*"There was no policy on how to update gender on student records. I spent over a year sending emails back and forth with the uni explaining that I was not going to provide 'a gender recognition certificate or a letter from your surgeon' (yes, they did ask for those) and it is unlawful and discriminatory to ask me to do so. Eventually I caved and brought them a letter from a doctor – but there was a whole year in which my student record listed me incorrectly as 'female' next to my very male-typical name. I do not know how many members of staff had access to that information but it was too many. My department also outed me as trans to all my lecturers during my undergrad without asking me first. The uni-run counselling service also initially refused to change the name on my file to my actual name. Disability Services refused to get me my educational assessment re-printed with the correct name and pronouns."*

(Trans respondent to the national survey)

Some respondents also mentioned difficulties with security services due to a mismatch between their name on student id and their new identity:

*"They [the security services] did make comments when I occasionally dressed as how I define."*

(Trans students online focus group participant)

*"I faced a lot of issues with security over name-changing documents and my birth name being given out without my consent to external groups from my student records. I had a lecturer tell me I needed to 'conform' more to be accepted. I had to take on a great deal personally to train members of staff on the appropriate ways of treating trans people."* (Trans respondent to the national survey)

Another issue pointed out by participants is the difficulty trans students face in having their situation recognised for mitigating circumstances or as a valid request for academic accommodations. Most trans respondents said they usually had to prove they have a disability or another health issue and failed to have their transition considered as 'sufficient evidence'.

*"I would have paused my studies in my final year, due to the previously mentioned transphobia which really messed up my mental health, but due to the way my course is shaped I would have had to then work in a group with people I didn't know rather than supportive friends."* (Trans students online focus group participant)

The absence of procedure to report transphobia is also perceived by students as a lack of support from their university. Most trans respondents did not know who to talk to or how to report transphobic abuse, or said they thought the issue would not be addressed properly. They describe the attitude of staff and student services as either completely uninformed about trans issues or very patronising. Terms such as 'distress' are cited often, as well as a feeling of isolation and loneliness:

*"I felt invisible, stupid, misgendered, and there was nothing they could do about it, nor was there any staff who fully understood my situation on site."* (Trans respondent to the national survey)

*"I had to interrupt my studies twice due to mental health, and change to part-time when I returned due to estrangement and continuing mental health issues that were definitely affected by issues of transphobia and cissexism in the classroom and at uni."* (Trans students online focus group participant)

*"Actually, I've seriously considered giving up my uni because coming out was so stressful and there seemed so little help or understanding, and if it wasn't for friends then I would have gone."* (Trans students online focus group participant)

The numerous difficulties faced by trans students also reveal the tension between coming out and being 'stealth'. Broad (2002)<sup>42</sup> affirms that trans movements are caught between the need for identity-building and identity-blurring, and simultaneously express identity claim and deconstruction. They need recognition for discriminations to be addressed, but aspire at the same time to ending rigid and binary categories. If gender identity was no longer used to mark the difference between people, most of these issues would not happen and trans students would not have to face all these barriers.

## 2. Health and well-being

Among trans respondents to our survey, one in seven had to interrupt their studies because of their transition (23 out of 161 respondents); and 54 per cent of those felt that their institution did not provide the necessary support. The respondents who had to interrupt their studies because of their transition described very precisely their difficulties in accessing treatment and the effects this had on them. Many mentioned depression and anxiety, others reported difficulties in focusing and concentrating on their studies during hormonal treatment. The whole process is usually described as emotionally and physically painful and the level of isolation experienced by trans students is striking.

*"It was very hard to transition at uni because I was confused about where I was going and I failed my first attempt at my first year because I was so anxious about being misgendered and 'found out'. I couldn't pay attention in lectures and often got as far as the classroom door only to have a panic attack and have to go home... I partly failed because I was having therapy in [hospital in London] every other week and it took the whole day to get there and I had to drop a module with lectures on Wednesday mornings. Then because of blowback I'd have difficulty the next day because of the dark things I was getting into in my therapy sessions and I'd often not be able to go in on Thursdays and sometimes longer. (Therapy did help though, I realised I wasn't FtM and I didn't need to pick just one gender in life.) ... I dropped out, but I did come back after a year away and they set me up to do the modules I failed plus some third-year modules, and I passed most of those and went into my actual final year. Then, because of illness, I had to mitigate a lot of work so finished lectures but didn't hand in everything until August and then I found that I had an outstanding assignment and then I fell apart, and I was meant to hand it in last month but had to mitigate it again due to mental and physical ill health."* (Trans respondent to the national survey)

Many respondents further suffer from their families' negative reaction and lack of support. When parents do not approve the change of identity or the transition, students are left without financial resources and feel

even more isolated. The cost of transition and having to get a job to pay for treatment also appears to be quite a common issue for trans students.

*“I was made homeless at the end of first year because my parents were having a hard time coming to terms with it, which meant that my first year grades were not great. Starting hormones in second year, and the associated emotional changes, meant my second year grades were bad. The fact that I cannot breathe/etc easily in [my] third year is also impacting my study, and the financial cost of transition (the campus health service lied about referring me to [a hospital in London] and I had to go private or I would have killed myself) has made it near-impossible for me to continue being a student.”* (Trans respondent to the national survey)

Overall, trans participants in our online focus group have had a very bad experience with gender clinics, although they are happier after their transition. They reported very complicated processes to access treatment; the location of clinics, often distant from campus; the disrespectful attitude of medical staff; and the cost of surgery and therapy.

*“Basically, going to the doctor or having any contact with a medical professional at all means taking an entire day off doing anything else because it's so stressful.”* (Trans students online focus group participant)

This echoes a recent study on trans mental health,<sup>43</sup> which proves that long periods of waiting to see professionals in gender clinics can have a negative impact on trans people’s mental health and emotional well-being. A great majority of trans participants in this research project also expressed dissatisfaction with the services provided by gender clinics and reported receiving negative treatment from clinic staff.

Despite the small size of the sample, we can observe a **negative effect of transition on trans students’ satisfaction with their educational institution**. If trans students are overall less satisfied than non-trans students, there are significant differences between those who have transitioned and those who have not. More specifically, trans students who have had to interrupt their studies because of their transition have a much lower level of satisfaction with their university.

Table 4: Impact of transition on satisfaction

Trans students’ experience of transition	How satisfied are you with student services and support at your institution?*	How would you rate your overall experience at your current institution?*
Interrupted studies because of transition	5.8	6.2
Did not interrupt studies because of transition	6.3	7
Did not transition	7.4	7.6
Total trans respondents	6.5	7

\* On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 extremely satisfied

### 3. Intersection of discriminations

Trans respondents are much more likely to report having a disability. Some 41.6 per cent of trans respondents, compared to 20.3 per cent of LGB+ and 14.2 per cent of heterosexual respondents reported having a disability. A wide range of disabilities are mentioned, including dyslexia, depression, diabetes, high blood pressure and autism. Further research is necessary to better understand the link between mental health issues and students’ gender identity. However, it seems that coming out in a non-supportive environment, difficulties in accessing appropriate treatment and losing family support are aggravating factors of depression and mental health problems.

Other forms of disability that are less directly correlated to gender identity, such as diabetes, are an additional burden for trans students. Trans respondents often struggle to have their disability issue recognised as something separate from their gender identity, and educational institutions seem to fail in offering them adequate support.

Trans participants in the online focus groups said that their **difficulties for being recognised started at the application process stage** as UCAS and university application forms only provide binary options (man or woman). Having to choose a single identity that does

not correspond to the way they self-identify can cause problems at university, such as needing to change details in registers. Some respondents complain about the lack of information sharing between university services, such as student registers and health services. For example, one trans research participant was registered under two different names for several months.

Student halls are often cited as places of prevalent transphobic and homophobic behaviour. Many trans respondents have either had a bad experience in their hall or fear even trying to get a room in student accommodation because of the anticipated reaction of their flatmates. Some students also face problems with security services in halls and report being mocked because of their appearance. Despite some issues faced with abusive landlords, the majority of trans respondents express a clear preference for private sector accommodation.

*“Halls were run down to the point that my health was so bad I didn’t feel comfortable coming out the whole time I was living there.”* (Trans students online focus group participant)

Finally, there is a shared feeling that staff and students on campus are ignorant about trans issues. All trans participants report being misnamed and mis-gendered, although with different frequency, and being constantly asked inappropriate questions about their sexuality or identity. Despite these difficulties, they quite unanimously **feel safer at university than in any other place** because of conflicts with their families, abuse in streets and bars and bullying from flatmates or landlords. Although highly flawed, universities seem to have at least some resources for trans students.

In campuses where student societies are perceived as inclusive and understanding, this had a clear positive impact on trans students’ learning experience and retention. Some mention that having a place where they can be heard makes a huge difference, and support groups are often cited as one possible solution to trans students’ isolation and distress.

*“Being trans in general isn’t easy and I’m not sure what would make it easier other than being open and honest about it. I think it’s important for there to be resources and groups in place at universities to allow students to do that safely. It would give them support and hopefully help to ease them into uni life and take their focus away from transition so they can concentrate on studying.”* (Trans students online focus group participant)

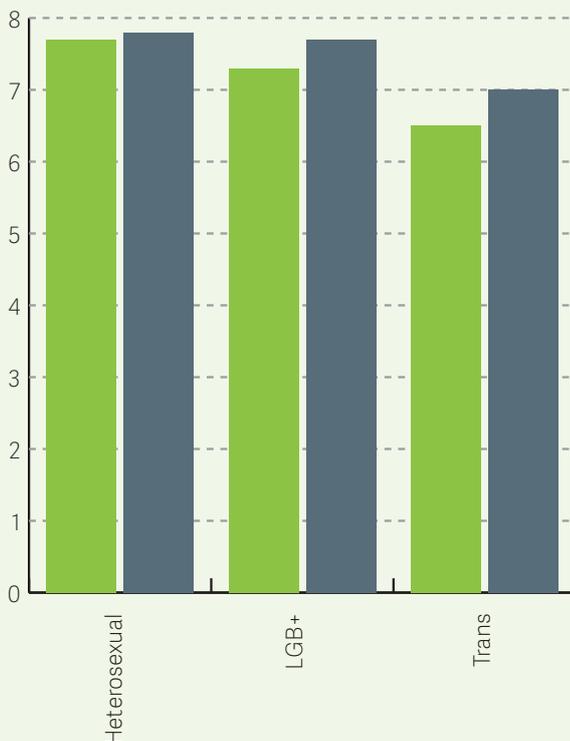
# Campus culture

## 1. Services and satisfaction

On average, respondents are quite satisfied with their institution and their experience as students. There are, however, statistically significant variations between heterosexual, LGB+ and trans respondents' satisfaction levels. On a scale of 1 to 10, heterosexual students rate student services and support at their institution 7.7, compared to 7.3 for LGB+ and 7.0 for trans respondents. There is also a significant difference between heterosexual and trans respondents' satisfaction with their overall experience as a student, respectively 7.8 and 7.0 out of 10. This is reinforced by the fact that 20 per cent of heterosexual respondents rate their overall student experience 10, compared to 14 per cent of LGB+ and only 8 per cent of trans respondents.

**Figure 11: Students' satisfaction by sexual orientation and gender identity**

- Satisfaction average score on a scale of 1–10 with student services
- Satisfaction average score on a scale of 1–10 with overall experience at current institution



When it comes to satisfaction with student services, we also notice differences between disabled and non-disabled students (average score of 7.0 versus 7.6 out of 10, respectively); UK and international students (7.5 versus 6.9); and White and BME students (7.5 versus 7.1). The sample of international and BME students is too small to analyse the intersection of these dimensions with sexual orientation and gender identity, but this should be considered in future research.

In critiquing student services, respondents mostly mention a **lack of information** for LGBT students on their campus and state that they are often not aware that support services exist, or do not know who to talk to when they face an issue related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

*"I would add that the counselling services, though excellent at [a university in London], could perhaps be advertised in a more specific way to those LGBT students in the process of 'coming out'. Specific marketing might be effective in persuading those most in need of help to reach out when it might not otherwise have occurred to them to do so."* (Gay respondent to the national survey)

Training for staff is quite a common suggestion made by respondents. LGBT respondents feel that equality and diversity policies are better implemented for ethnic minorities and disabled students than they are for sexual orientation and gender identity issues.

*"In general, I believe my uni is a safe space for LGBT students but there is still room for improvement and a need to roll out equality and diversity training for staff and some students."* (Gay respondent to the national survey)

*"As a nursing student, I feel that [a university in London] should provide information on LGBT support within my profession, such as healthcare agencies and unions that best support people who identify as LGBT. As this is such a demanding degree I feel that the nursing and midwifery course co-ordinators and other professions within the sector should provide additional support."* (Lesbian respondent to the national survey)

An issue that seems to trouble respondents at the University of London is **limited access to health services**. Some participants in UCLU focus group reported having experienced mental ill health and one of their major complaints relates to the **eight-week waiting list** to access student psychological services. One participant looked for a private practitioner but could not afford it. Many respondents to the survey and participants in focus groups expressed a wish to have **sexual health services** more attentive to LGBT needs.

*“I think something would be interesting relating to sexual health and sexual education matters perhaps. Yes, you don’t particularly get them in school or college in this country and obviously sexual health is one of the key LGBT issues across the world, it is a completely different set up in each country and often it is not spoken about or educated about fully so maybe some kind of system like that; a drop in session at the beginning of term or some kind of service where people can go for advice on sexual health, contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STI) testing or something like that, along those lines.”* (UCLU focus group participant)

Local case studies confirm that, overall, **university is a positive experience for LGBT students and much more positive than secondary education**. At Manchester Metropolitan University, LGBT research participants are happier and more open about their sexuality following coming to university. The vast majority of respondents, **74 per cent, have found university to be the most welcoming educational environment**. This is particularly true for women respondents, at 92 per cent. Despite still-prevalent homophobia and the various difficulties they face, LGBT students seem able to find stronger networks of support and solidarity at university than in other places.

This is consistent with other research into secondary education, such as the survey conducted by Youth Chances in 2014. Whereas 49 per cent of LGB+ and 67 per cent of trans respondents in that study said that their time at school was affected by discrimination or fear of discrimination, this proportion fell to 10 per cent of LGB+ and 21 per cent of trans respondents regarding their experience of university.

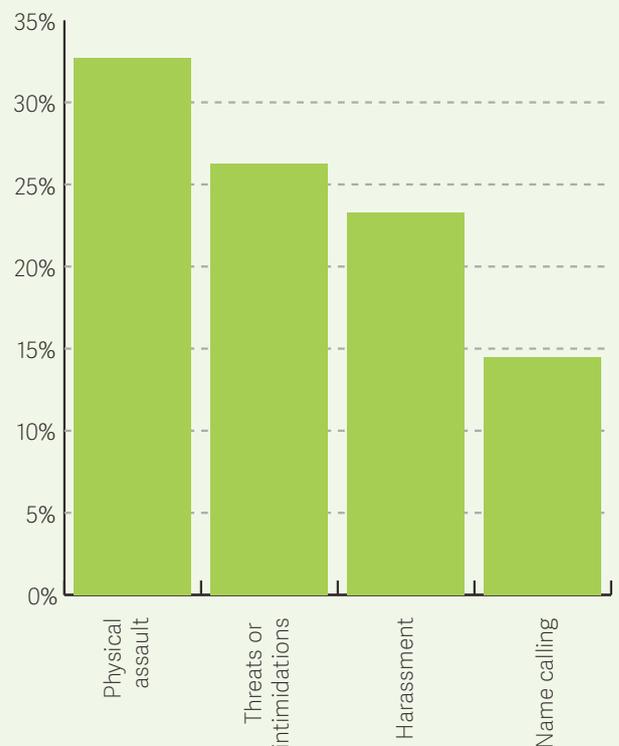
## 2. Crime report and institutions’ policies

Only a minority of students who have experienced **homophobic or transphobic harassment** reported the incident to someone: 14 per cent of those who experienced name-calling; 23 per cent of those who experienced harassment; 26 per cent of those who experienced threats and intimidation; and a third (32.70 per cent) of those who experienced physical assault reported it to at least one person.

It is quite problematic to see that name-calling is significantly less reported than other types of abuse. This might be because students think it is not ‘bad enough’ or feel that their institution will not intervene in such cases. This perception should be challenged, as name-calling can really affect students’ well-being and, according to our research, those who have experienced it are twice as likely to consider dropping out as those who have not.

Figure 12: Level of report by type of bullying

Q27. Did you report the incident? (N = 3,870)



When asked who they reported the incident to, students mostly cited their tutor or a friend. It is reassuring to see that students can trust their tutors and to some extent rely on official channels at their educational institution. The students' union is the third most common place to report bullying or abuse, cited by more than one in four respondents. This means that **unions have an important role in providing welfare to their members** and officers should receive adequate training to deal with homophobic and transphobic behaviour.

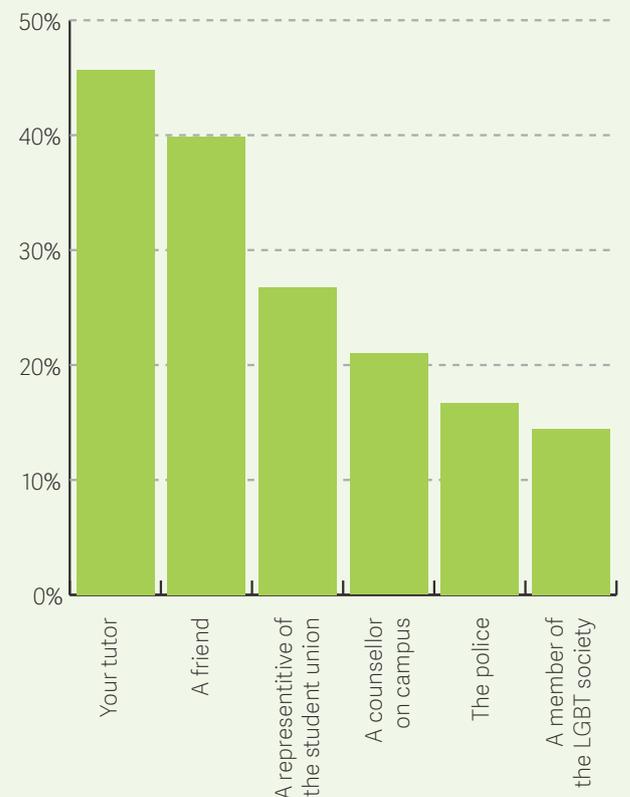
As shown in *Mapping Participation*,<sup>44</sup> an important proportion of students (42 per cent) believe that their students' union has improved their overall university experience. The fact that students choose to report crime on campus to their students' union is certainly linked to this positive appreciation and should be taken into account by elected officers in a more systematic way.

**Worryingly, only 9 out of 55 (16 per cent) of students who have experienced homophobic or transphobic physical assault reported it to the police.** These numbers are quite similar to the reporting of sexual abuse by women students. NUS research *Hidden Marks*<sup>45</sup> shows that only 17 per cent of victims of physical assault reported the incident to the police. The most common reason overall for not reporting is that **students do not feel that what has happened is serious enough to report.** For victims of serious sexual assault, the most common reason for not reporting is the feeling of shame or embarrassment, and 43 per cent of respondents feared being blamed for what happened to them.

Stonewall's 2013 hate crime survey<sup>46</sup> reveals that **two-thirds of LGB people who have experienced a hate crime incident did not report it to anyone.** The reasons for not reporting it to the police include anticipation that it will not be taken seriously, fear of negative response and the belief that there is little the police can do. Even if this is not directly the responsibility of universities, there is an urgent need for better enforcement of the law and maybe more sustained partnerships between universities and police or security agents.

Figure 13: Person the incident was reported to

Q28. Who did you report the incident to? (N = 138)



Some respondents to our survey also complained about the lack of effectiveness of the Equality Act 2010 regarding homophobic and transphobic discrimination on campus. Students feel they do not know the rules well enough, or that they are not implemented, which is also a factor preventing them from reporting homophobic and transphobic incidents. Some even fear that being out will actually lead to unequal treatment.

Students' perception varies a lot depending on their institution and place of study, which reveals that there is no common framework across the country as to how to protect LGBT students from discrimination. The establishment of clear guidelines and the dissemination of good practice could really improve LGBT students' experience by giving them a 'model' to refer to in cases of discrimination.

### 3. Disclosing data on sexual orientation and gender identity

One important barrier to our research (and other research on LGBT students) is the absence of data collection and monitoring by HEIs. Without a consistent monitoring it is hard to evaluate how many students self-define as LGBT, how well they succeed at university and the impact this has on their professional career.

However, participants in our research express mixed feelings regarding disclosure and monitoring. Some are unsure of how this information would be used and fear that it would be linked to their grades or used against them. Others feel that their sexual orientation and gender identity is not relevant to their education and that there are no valid reasons to disclose such information to their institution. Another concern relates to the fluidity of sexuality – one research participant asked what would happen if someone changed his/her sexual orientation during their degree. Having to inform the student register would clearly breach one's anonymity. Reluctance from staff and students is also expressed in the ECU survey (2009),<sup>47</sup> in which participants expressed fears that this information would be linked to their academic or professional records.

The majority of participants in our research are not completely opposed to disclosing information on their sexual orientation but would only agree to do so under specific conditions, including the **absolute guarantee of anonymity, having a clear understanding about how the information will be used and knowing who will use and access it**. Participants in the UCLU focus groups mention statistical analysis, targeted communication and informing policies and services as good reasons for collecting data on students' sexual orientation and gender identity.

In the University of Nottingham survey, a small majority of the sample (55.6 per cent) disclosed their gender history or sexual orientation to the university and, of these, 68.6 per cent were perfectly happy to disclose. However a significant minority of the sample (19 per cent) choose not to disclose, mainly because **they do not want to be labelled, are not clear what the information will be used for, or are not clear who would access the information**.

This confirms that if it is made clear to students what the information will be used for, and who will have access to it, rates of disclosure around sexual orientation and gender identity could be significantly increased. In turn, this would help students' unions and universities to recognise and support their LGBT members more effectively. Students also feel they would be happier about disclosure if it remained **non-mandatory** and was ideally either **self-defining, or involved sensitive categorisation**.

# Teaching and learning

## 1. Challenging non-inclusive curricula

Homophobia and transphobia on campus seem to affect LGBT students' appreciation of their courses. The great majority of respondents reported that they do not see LGBT experiences and history reflected in their curriculum. On a scale of 1–10, LGB+ students' average score of agreement with the statement "I see LGB experiences and history reflected in my curriculum" is only 3.9 and for trans students it is 3.5. For the statement, "I see trans experiences and history reflected in my curriculum," their scores are even lower – 2.8 for LGB+ students and 2.5 for trans students. Interestingly, heterosexual respondents have a much more positive view and tend to agree with those statements more than LGBT students.

Some gay men respondents do not think this is an issue and say that that not all courses necessarily need to include LGBT perspective or history. However, most comments about this lack are negative and respondents often expressed the wish to see LGBT issues taken into account more systematically.

*"There seem to be the odd feminist and race-friendly modules to choose from, but I have not seen any so far that deal with LGBT issues."*

(Bisexual respondent to the national survey)

### Table 5: Inclusion of LGBT perspectives in the curriculum

Q32. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 means strongly disagree and 10 strongly agree, how much do you agree with the following statements? (N = 3,421)

	I see LGB experiences and history reflected in my curriculum	I see trans* experiences and history reflected in my curriculum
Heterosexual	4.44	3.98
LGB+	3.93	2.76
Trans	3.54	2.47
Total	4.10	3.20

*"I am not inclined to speak about my sexuality because it is not dealt with in the syllabus. As a trainee teacher, I think it is very important that gender and sexuality issues are introduced by lecturers who are confident and comfortable with their own sexuality. This is not my experience. It is all about them, not us!"* (Bisexual respondent to the national survey)

There are quite important variations on LGBT curricular content according to subject discipline. On average, it seems that arts and humanities subjects are better than other fields at including LGBT experiences in their curricula, while STEM disciplines received the lowest scores. Although it is understandable that disciplines such as mathematics may have fewer opportunities to include LGBT experiences and history, other scientific courses such as medicine or health sciences could easily improve in this sense. Similarly, arts, humanities and social science subjects could take LGBT perspectives into account much more by diversifying the authors cited, including critical theories such as queer and gender studies into their curriculum, or by using more LGBT examples in their teaching. This might also improve students' confidence to speak up in class, which appears to be lower in STEM disciplines. Indeed, 81.4 per cent of respondents studying arts and humanities said they feel confident to speak up in class (total "yes always" + "yes most of the time"), compared to 72.5 per cent of STEM respondents.

These concerns are further expressed within local focus groups. In Manchester Metropolitan University focus groups, women participants reported that lesbian and bisexual experiences are completely invisible in their curricula, even in courses that discuss sexuality:

*"Bisexuality does not exist at my university. For example, when discussing non-heterosexual characters in literature, tutors only ever discuss them in terms of gay/straight binary, the word 'bisexual' never enters into the discussion, even when characters' orientation is clearly not towards only one gender."* (Manchester Metropolitan University focus group participant)

*Table 6: Inclusion of LGBT perspectives by area of study*

What is your study area?	I see LGB experiences and history reflected in my curriculum and/or module options	I see trans* experiences and history reflected in my curriculum and/or module options
Arts and Humanities	4.8	3.5
Social and Historical Sciences	4.4	3.4
Medical and/or Health Sciences	3.9	3.3
Mathematics, Life Sciences, Biology, Engineering, Architecture	3.1	2.7
Total sample	4.1	3.3

The research conducted by Bangor University Students' Union also shows that the lack of identification with the social environment can lead to disengagement with the curriculum. When LGBT perspectives are reflected in course content, students tend to feel more included and more comfortable with their learning environment. The ECU survey (2009)<sup>48</sup> also indicates that students value lecturers being out in the classroom and, where appropriate, using LGBT examples or material. This is perceived as a sign of commitment to quality and increases students' confidence.

Finally, the University of London research suggests that a majority of LGBT students would like to raise LGBT issues in the classroom but only a minority report actually having done so. For instance, in arts and humanities degrees, 87.1 per cent of respondents would consider bringing LGBT perspectives to the discussion but only 48.4 per cent actually reported having done this. Among respondents who had raised gender-related issues in class, the majority feel that the response was neutral or negative, with more than 50 per cent of respondents reporting negative comments. Respondents also express an interest in gender or sexuality-related classes, but a third of respondents (32.4 per cent) do not know if such courses were offered as part of their degree.

## 2. Tutors' and lecturers' behaviour

Overall, respondents are quite satisfied with their tutors and lecturers (except for issues regarding the curriculum) and usually reported having good relationships with them:

*"I feel like my university is quite on the ball with LGBT things. I know a handful of students, including myself, are very open about being LGB and have encountered no problems from other students at all. I find everyone to be really quite accepting and supportive. All of my lecturers are incredibly supportive, and I have never felt uncomfortable or unsafe at my university. However, in addition to the great atmosphere at [a university in London] I think it is time that LGBT experiences are added into the curriculum as they are very rarely, if ever, spoken about. I do not think this is out of any discriminatory reasons at all, but maybe out of not being aware of how this could be done or educated enough in the area."* (Bisexual respondent to the national survey)

We can also see from the national survey that LGBT students have more faith in their academic staff than in fellow students to intervene in the event of homophobic or transphobic behaviour. On average, LGB+ students gave an agreement score of 7.6 out of 10 to the statement "I believe my lecturers would intervene if they witnessed homophobic behaviour in the classroom" and 7.2 for transphobic behaviour. In contrast, LGB+ students' average score regarding students' intervention against homophobic behaviour is 7.0 out of 10, and 6.3 for transphobic behaviour.

Another striking trend is that heterosexual students have a much more positive perception than their LGBT peers of the prevalence of homophobia and transphobia on campus and on average seem much more convinced that staff or other students would

**Table 7: Perceived support in the event of homophobic or transphobic behaviour**

Q32. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 means strongly disagree and 10 strongly agree, how much do you agree with the following statements? (N = 3,421)

	I believe my lecturers would intervene if they witnessed:		I believe students would intervene if they witnessed:					
	homophobic behaviour in the classroom	transphobic behaviour in the classroom	homophobic behaviour in the classroom	transphobic behaviour in the classroom	homophobic behaviour in other learning spaces	transphobic behaviour in other learning spaces	homophobic behaviour in social spaces	transphobic behaviour in social spaces
Heterosexual	8	7.9	7.4	7.3	7	6.9	6.8	6.6
LGB+	7.6	7.2	7	6.3	6.4	5.8	6.1	5.5
Trans	7	6	6.6	5	5.7	4.6	5.5	4.3
Total sample	7.7	7.5	7.2	6.7	6.7	6.3	6.4	6

intervene if it occurred. The contrast is particularly strong with trans students. This suggests that heterosexual students are ready to express their solidarity and believe people should not be harassed on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but they do not seem to be fully aware of the level of discrimination faced by their LGBT peers.

However, some LGBT respondents have experienced homophobic or transphobic behaviour from academic staff, but most often seem to link it to a lack of knowledge rather negative intention. Many students also complained about assumed heterosexuality in the classroom and the lack of consideration for other sexual orientations in discussions:

*“The homophobic behaviour I experienced was actually a lecturer commenting on a student dropping out because of his ‘personal problems’, which she wasn’t surprised at given the bracelets he was wearing and she thought he was wearing eyeliner!”* (Heterosexual respondent to the national survey)

*“... In the [language] classes the teacher asks us questions which assume we’re straight, for example one lesson happened to be all-female and she asks us what we were looking for in our future husbands, and I was so disgusted because it was*

*so shallow and also none of her business. If she wanted us to practise using adjectives then she could have asked us to describe a friend instead ...”*

(University of Bangor focus group participant)

If staff do not mean to be exclusive or hurtful, some training on LGBT issues could be beneficial in order to avoid situations such as those described here. A simple diversification of examples used in the classroom, or a compassionate position regarding students’ identity, could considerably improve LGBT students’ relationship with their tutors and lecturers.

### 3. Atmosphere in the classroom

The atmosphere in the classroom is also quite positive overall. As a group, LGBT students are as confident as heterosexual peers to speak up in class and feel as much included in learning activities. But again there are important variations within LGBT students themselves. Although the vast majority of LGBT respondents answered positively to questions about classroom confidence, the differences between them were statistically significant and indicate areas where institutions can improve.

Gay students tend to feel more confident than lesbian, bisexual and trans students – 83 per cent of gay respondents feel confident to speak up in class (“yes

always” + “yes most of the time”), compared to 76.2 per cent of lesbian, 74.7 per cent of bisexual and 70.3 per cent of trans respondents. What is more concerning is that **one in 10 trans students never feel comfortable to speak up in class**. The same trend is observable for group learning activities – 90.3 per cent of gay respondents feel included in group learning activities, compared to 88.3 per cent of lesbian, 87.6 per cent of bisexual and 82.8 per cent of trans respondents.

Gay men have a higher level of satisfaction with group learning experiences than heterosexual students, which reflects in part the fact that our sample of heterosexual respondents is mainly composed of women. Indeed, in terms of confidence in the classroom, gender and gender identities seem to be more significant than sexual orientation. On average, 83 per cent of men respondents and 76 per cent of women respondents feel confident to speak up in class, and men are much more likely to answer “yes

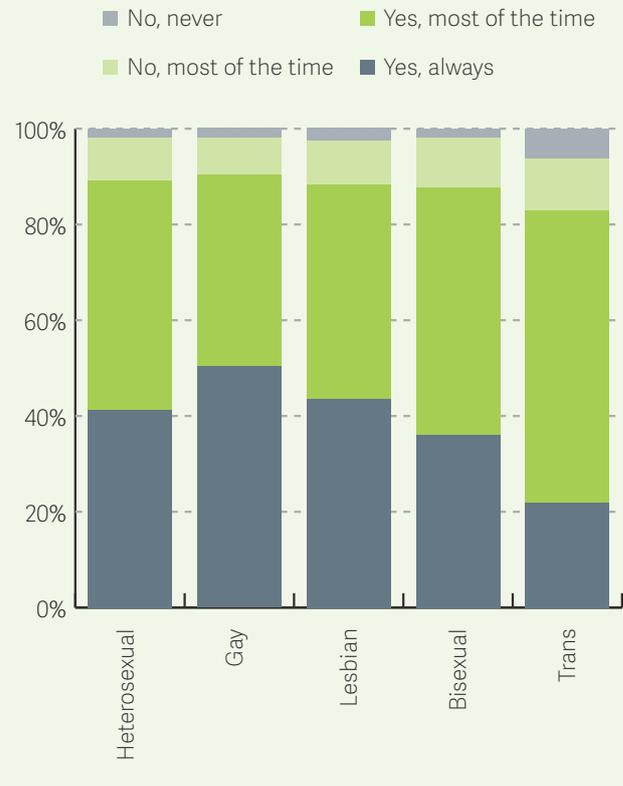
Figure 14: Confidence in the classroom

Q30. Do you feel confident to speak up in class? (N = 3,305)



Figure 15: Inclusion in learning activities

Q31. Do you feel included in group learning activities? (N = 3,305)



always” than women (40 per cent versus 26 per cent). This means that almost one in four women do not feel confident to speak up in the classroom.

# LGBT activism and representation

## 1. Level and type of engagement

LGBT students' activism on campus plays an important role in their educational experience: it both protects them from discrimination by offering safe spaces to meet each other, and enables them to fight against it by politicising sexuality and gender identity issues.

As a group, LGBT students are as likely as heterosexuals to be involved in their students' union but seem to be **more likely to run for elections**. Indeed, 11 per cent of heterosexual respondents have considered running for elections in their union compared to 16.6 per cent of LGB+ and 23 per cent of trans students. There are, however, important variations within the group: a greater proportion of gay respondents answered "yes" to the question 'Have you ever considered running for elections in your union?' than lesbian and bisexual respondents (respectively 18.8 per cent, 13.3 per cent and 14.3 per cent). **Gender is also strongly correlated to students' attitude towards elections** – 18 per cent of men respondents have considered running, compared to 11 per cent of women respondents.

Trans students are three times more likely than non-trans students (41.6 per cent versus 14.6 per cent) and twice as likely as LGB+ students (27.50 per cent) to be member of the LGBT society, which confirms the importance of the society in their student life. However, this finding masks variations among LGB+ students, as lesbian respondents (32 per cent) and students who define their sexuality 'in another way' (40.3 per cent) are more engaged in the LGBT society than gay respondents (26.8 per cent) and bisexual respondents (24.1 per cent).

Trans students are also more likely to be involved in feminist and political or campaigning societies but less likely to be involved in sports clubs and cultural or country-based societies. **Overall, trans students tend to be more involved in student societies**: 35.7 per cent of trans respondents reported being members of no societies on their campus, compared to 53.7 per cent of non-trans respondents.

This could reflect a bias in our sample as LGBT students who participated in the survey might be more active in societies and unions than non-participants. However, a study carried out by NUS<sup>49</sup> in 2013 on students' participation shows similar trends. In this study, LGBT respondents are twice as likely as non-LGBT students to participate in students' union campaigning (8 per cent versus 4 per cent) and to stand for an elected position (13 per cent versus 7 per cent). This suggests that **LGBT students tend to be more active in political and campaign-based organisations**.

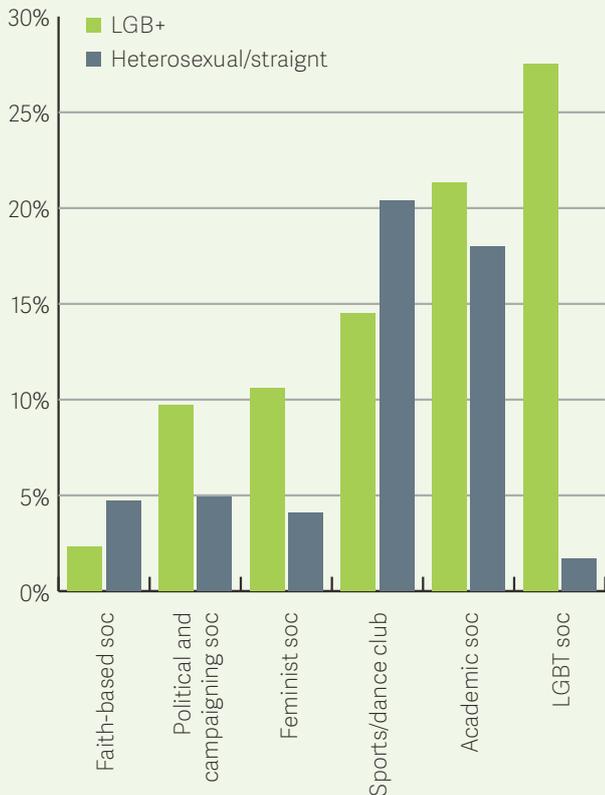
Melucci (1996)<sup>50</sup> argues that social movements aim to resist domination and repression, and that power can be defined as the possibility to participate and impose new definitions. Thus, it could be expected that groups that are more oppressed will feel more strongly the urge to mobilise and challenge mainstream definitions of citizenship. Through their activism, LGBT students reclaim their sexuality and gender identity as part of their citizenship and as new definitions of equality. They are able to use social stigma as a political resource and, as suggested by Santos (2013),<sup>51</sup> to extend the feminist principle that "the private is political".

Differences in the type of engagement of LGB+ and heterosexual respondents are statistically significant for LGBT societies, academic societies, feminist societies and political or campaigning societies, in which LGB+ students tend to be more involved than their heterosexual peers. In contrast, they LGB+ are less involved in sports and dance clubs and in faith-based societies.

Regarding sports, LGB+ students' lower level of involvement does not necessarily mean they had a bad experience. *Out in Sport*, NUS research<sup>52</sup> published in 2012, shows that a majority of LGBT students participate in sports or fitness activity, although not always on campus. **A great majority (62 per cent) of LGBT students who take part in organised physical activity are open about their sexual orientation or gender identity to their teammates or coaches**; and 60

**Figure 16: Type of engagement by sexual orientation**

Q16. Are you member of one or more of the following student societies? (N = 4,242)



per cent of those who are not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity think it is not relevant to their sporting pastime. However, this study also highlighted important barriers to participation that should be taken into account by sports clubs. Some 47 per cent of LGBT students who do not participate in sport find the culture around sport alienating or unwelcoming; 14 per cent have experienced homophobia, biphobia or transphobia that has put them off participating in sport; and 19 per cent were put off by gendered sports teams.

As for religious groups, the lower level of involvement by LGBT students may reflect some tensions between both communities (although the proportion of heterosexual students who participate in religious societies is also quite small). Several respondents to our national survey expressed concerns with religious

and faith-based societies on their campus as they felt their campaigns were offensive or homophobic:

*“A lot of homophobia tends to come from academic or religious arguments from very conservative religious organisations. This is rarely openly challenged for fear of offending religion. The churches and Christian societies in particular claim that their actions (funding anti-homosexual groups abroad, distributing gay conversion literature) and comments (especially about gay marriage) are not homophobic, but they have a massive presence over campus and it is difficult to argue against them when they are so numerous ...”* (Lesbian respondent to the national survey)

The Youth Chances<sup>53</sup> survey shows that 59 per cent of LGBT young people that would be interested in joining a religious organisation did not do so because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. A report published by The Forum (2010)<sup>54</sup> on sexual orientation and faith in further education reveals that learners identifying as both religious and LGBT experienced a “high degree of personal turmoil” because they had to hide an important aspect of their identity. Some LGBT learners who hold religious beliefs also avoid contact with LGBT students and societies, for fear of being outed to their co-religionists. Nevertheless, 41 per cent of learners surveyed think there are mutually respectful relationships between LGBT staff and learners and those of different faiths and beliefs, which shows that conflicts can be prevented and resolved.

## 2. Reasons for not being involved in student societies

The main reasons cited by LGBT respondents for not being involved in any society are:

- **Lack of time (35.2 per cent)**, including course workload, paid or voluntary work, family commitments, or travelling time because of the distance between home and university.
- **Missed opportunity (21.5 per cent)**, which covers the lack of a particular society on campus, a lack of information on existing societies and how to join them, or for some respondents the lack of an LGBT society. About 100 respondents were also distant learners and therefore did not have a campus with societies.

- A lack of interest (15.6 per cent) in student societies in general or in the specific societies present on campus.
- Accessibility – 8.3 per cent of respondents felt that student societies were not sufficiently accessible because of their cost, ‘cliquey’ atmosphere, because they do not include mature students or disabled people, or because they only offer drinking activities. Some respondents also feel too shy or anxious to join a society, or fear being outed if they do.

Here again there is some variation between LGBT students, although the order of preferences remains the same. Gay respondents are more likely to answer they are not interested in joining student societies (20.4 per cent) than lesbian (11.3 per cent) and bisexual (18.1 per cent) respondents. On the other hand, more lesbian respondents reported lack of time as a factor (38.7 per cent), compared to gay (26.4 per cent) and bisexual (32.1

per cent) respondents. Trans students are much more likely to cite lack of accessibility as an important reason for not joining societies (26.5 per cent). These results are consistent with the NUS report *Mapping Participation* (2013)<sup>55</sup>, which shows that the main barriers to participation in campus activities cited by students are a lack of time and not knowing how to get involved.

Although lack of societies’ accessibility is only cited by a minority of students, it should nonetheless be considered by student societies. A lesbian respondent to the national survey expressed her anxiety about being in large groups and suggested that it was linked to homophobic behaviour and comments:

*“There’s always going to be situations that make people uncomfortable, and for me that is large groups of people I don’t know. If that group includes males I will often feel more anxious as comments regarding threesomes with my girlfriend get made, and it is offensive and annoying that this is what people think is a good way to bond with a new person. In this sense I struggle to meet new people in groups and this missed out on the feel of being in societies for fear of those big groups.”*

Figure 17: Reasons for not being involved in student societies

Q20. If none, why? (N = 2,023)



\* The number of trans respondents to this question is too small to be included (less than 10 per reason)

### 3. The role of LGBT societies

An important proportion of LGB+ respondents (45 per cent), and the majority of trans respondents (52 per cent) were aware of the existence of an LGBT society before applying to their university. This suggests that the presence of an LGBT society plays an important part in LGBT applicants’ choice of university as they actively look for that information before applying to their course.

Data from the local case studies seems to confirm this trend. At the University of Nottingham, a focus group participant suggested that knowing about the LGBT Network impacted on her choice of university:

*“I found out about the network before, long before I came to uni, before I even made the choice to come to Nottingham. I was following someone on Twitter who happened to be in [the LGBT Network] committee. I was speaking to her and then she told me about the network, and I looked into it, I saw the Weebly [LGBT Network] site, and I found out it was one of the best networks, and it actually did make an impact on my decision to come here ... I wouldn’t say it was a deciding factor, but it narrowed it down.”*

Figure 18: Awareness of LGBT society prior to university application

Q18. Were you aware that your university had an LGBT society before applying? (N = 4,238)



Respondents’ appreciation of LGBT societies contrasts widely and no clear pattern emerges from the focus groups. This varies according to the university or place of study and students’ individual expectations, which are quite diverse. The University of London study suggests that there is a polarisation of experience between those who feel they ‘fit in’ with the LGBT community and those who do not.

On the negative side, participants often cited the fact that LGBT societies focus too much on drinking and going out, and not enough on supporting the community or offering other activities:

*“The LGBT Society at [a university in the South West of England] isn’t there to support LGBT students. They are a society that just seems to go out drinking/sleeping with each other. There is no strong presence at the university from them as a*

*society and they have become famed for just being about ‘fucking and drinking’ rather than supporting a minority of students who often come to [the student union]/counselling etc. with issues that a group like that should deal with!” (Gay respondent to the national survey)*

The case studies from Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of London also reveal that not every LGBT student is out and they may be reluctant to join the LGBT society for fear of disclosure. Some students mentioned visiting LGBT Facebook events and freshers’ week stalls as making them particularly visible. This was strongly linked to issues around LGBT societies’ recruitment of, and communication with, members. Although the Internet is a central tool to communicate their activities, LGBT societies need to find other ways to reach students who might not be out to everyone.

The University of Nottingham focus group and survey show the importance of face-to-face meetings and being introduced to the LGBT Network by a friend. About a quarter of its research participants found out about the LGBT Network by word of mouth. One participant clearly expressed the difficulties of joining an LGBT group in front of everyone during freshers’ week:

*“I think it’s really difficult for people who aren’t necessarily confident, like they’re not out, to walk up to a stall. You think at the time, everyone will see if I walk up ... everyone will notice, you know, they won’t, but that’s quite a big worry I think.”*

Some LGBT respondents complained about the lack of inclusiveness of their students’ unions, although an important proportion is engaged in students’ unions and/or societies. Dissatisfaction is more prevalent among trans students, who report feminist societies being ‘increasingly transphobic’ or LGBT officers saying ‘transphobic stuff’ because of their lack of understanding and knowledge about trans people.

Despite these critiques, most respondents highlight the positive role their union and LGBT societies have had in their educational experience. Those spaces are usually described as safer and more welcoming than the rest of campus, even when they are imperfect:

*“I’ve had negative experiences or responses to being trans in every university building I’ve been in, including the students’ union (SU), but only in the SU have I ever been listened to about them and those experiences dealt with. So that makes me feel safer there than anywhere else.”* (Trans student online focus group participant)

Many students also cite the **sense of belonging and community** their LGBT society has created for them. The research led by Bangor University Students’ Union shows that participating in the union creates a strong sense of belonging and helps students to identify with their institution. Similarly, the LGBT Network at the University of Nottingham seems to be an important factor in LGBT integration in student life. Overall, the services that LGBT societies provide to LGBT students are appreciated, and research participants value the support they have received to settle into both their university and the city:

*“I thought in the first semester there were some activities that were really good to [help us] settle in ... I’ve mentioned said the Meet and Greet [event organised by the Network] but also there was a scavenger hunt around Nottingham, and that really helped me to get to know my way around Nottingham.”* (University of Nottingham focus group participant)

Some participants in UCLU focus groups mentioned the recognition and celebration of their identity as something empowering. They appreciate the fact that the union includes this dimension in its activities, with events such as LGBT History Month, that make them feel part of the student community:

*“Coming from an area where I was fairly stigmatised for being LGBT, it’s just nice to be in a place where it’s just recognised that this is just something, that LGBT people are a significant proportion of the population and that this is taken into account. I feel it is taken into account by the union and I think also by the university itself, so, I think the union has done a good job while I’ve been here, at sort of integrating and welcoming LGBT students.”* (UCLU focus group participant)

Overall, it seems that the main reason for joining LGBT groups on campus is to **meet people and socialise in a safe and friendly space**. In Nottingham, the LGBT Network is mostly known for its social events – 87 per cent of respondents in the Nottingham study were aware of this type of service. At the University of London, 59.5 per cent of respondents who attended an LGBT event did so to meet fellow LGBT students. As explained by one research participant, it is important to find a **“sympathetic audience”** where he could discuss gender identity and sexual orientation **“without fear of a negative response”**.

# Conclusion and recommendations

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# Conclusion

This research has demonstrated **persistent levels of homophobia and transphobia** that on UK campuses. As observed by Ellis, “although extreme acts (eg actual physical violence) are relatively uncommon, verbal harassment and anti-LGBT sentiments are prevalent.”<sup>56</sup> This **climate of fear** prevents students from coming out and sharing their concerns with other students and members of staff at their university. It also has a damaging impact on their studies and increases the likelihood of them considering dropping out. **Students who have experienced homophobic or transphobic bullying and harassment are 2–3 times more likely to consider dropping out or leaving their course.**

Trans students stand out as a particularly vulnerable group within the LGBT student population. They are much **more exposed to bullying and harassment**, experience more **physical and mental health problems** and are **twice as likely to have considered dropping out**. The lack of universities’ consideration for their specific needs contributes to making trans students feel excluded from social and teaching spaces. Being repeatedly misnamed and misgendered also represents a major barrier to trans students’ inclusion and appreciation of their experience in higher education.

The lack of procedures to protect students from homophobic and transphobic behaviours appears to be a quite common issue across UK universities. **Homophobic and transphobic incidents remain largely under-reported** and there seems to be no clear point of contact for victims on campus. Despite this, LGBT students overall have a positive view of higher education and **tend to find university a safer space than the rest of society**. If they express concerns about disclosing data on their sexual orientation and gender identity, these seem to be mostly linked to uncertainties about the use and protection of this information. Institutions can overcome this by building confidence among students and working with students’ unions.

If LGBT students’ overall experience of teaching and learning is quite positive, it is nonetheless affected by homophobia and transphobia on campus. A great

majority of LGBT respondents would like to see **LGBT perspectives and authors more systematically included in the curriculum** where this is possible. This would create a greater sense of belonging for LGBT students and show universities’ commitment to equality and diversity. Furthermore, a more sensitive attitude from academic staff towards sexual orientation and gender identity would help LGBT students to feel more included in the classroom. Heterosexuality should not be assumed, and teachers should try to diversify more their examples and exercises to take into account everyone’s perspective.

Finally, this study shows that **LGBT students tend to be more active in unions and campaigning student societies** than their heterosexual peers. This might be explained by a greater need to challenge discrimination and to create a more inclusive society in which sexual orientation and gender identity are part of the equality framework. There are, however, important **challenges for religious and sports societies**, in which many LGBT students feel unwelcome. In contrast, LGBT societies appear to play a major role in LGBT applicants’ choice of university and in providing much-needed support to these students once they are at university.

Some areas need to be explored in further research. First of all, a similar study should be carried out in further education to understand key issues and enable comparison with higher education. Homophobia and transphobia in students’ halls should be investigated further as it appears to be a particularly oppressive space for LGBT students. Although this research has tried to adopt an intersectional approach, the specific intersections of sexuality and gender identity with race, class and disability deserve more detailed research.

Lastly, it would be interesting to explore the perceptions of LGBT issues by non-LGBT students and to better understand the motivations of perpetrators of homophobic and transphobic behaviour. This would enable students’ unions and LGBT societies to deliver more impactful prevention campaigns and to effectively tackle prejudices on campus.

# Recommendations

## For institutions

- Implement, enforce and advertise **zero tolerance policies** regarding homophobic and transphobic behaviour, harassment and bullying.
- Create clear procedures to address homophobia and transphobia, and establish a **point of contact** on campus so students can easily report acts of bullying committed against them or someone they know.
- Include LGBT issues and anti-bullying policies during inductions, particularly in halls of residence
- Improve **access to information and services**, specifically health services on campus, and improve information on sexual health for every sexuality.
- Have **gender-neutral toilets and facilities** to enable everyone use them safely and without fear of being outed or misgendered.
- **Facilitate changes of name and gender on student registers** and preserve students' confidentiality in doing so.
- **Train staff on LGBT issues** and include respect for students' identity in the university code of conduct to avoid situations where students are misnamed or misgendered.
- **Include LGBT perspectives and authors in curricula** and raise students' awareness on equality and diversity issues to prevent ignorant or offensive comments in social or teaching spaces.
- **Build LGBT students' confidence in institutional data collection and monitoring** by working with unions and LGBT societies to determine best practices; ideally, data should be collected at the registration stage along with other demographic indicators, it should be non-compulsory and self-defining, and data protection should be guaranteed.
- Facilitate relationships between LGBT staff networks and societies
- Include LGBT provision and positive LGBT content in prospectus, introducing your LGBT society to all students

## For unions

- **Implement compulsory training for presidents of societies** on how to include LGBT students, with special attention given to sports clubs to make them more accessible and less gender segregated.
- **Encourage dialogue between LGBT and religious societies** to prevent conflicts and foster good campus relationships; creating an agreement to work together from both societies.
- **Build more inclusive unions** by electing an LGBT officer, creating safe spaces within the union and including LGBT perspectives more often in campaigns and publicity.
- **Support LGBT societies** to fully enable them to play their role within the community.
- **Have a zero tolerance policy** regarding homophobia, 'banter' or derogatory comments and make it clear in the union's code of conduct that such behaviour is not acceptable.
- Become a third party hate crime reporting site.
- **Train officers on how to support victims of homophobic and transphobic bullying** as the union is often a first port of call for students experiencing this behaviour; officers need to be able to respond to students' needs and refer them to appropriate services when necessary.

## For LGBT societies

- **Create a system of buddies or peer-to-peer support** for LGBT students to facilitate their inclusion in student life.
- **Innovate in recruitment and advertising** and provide a safe way for students who are not out to join the society (eg meet outside campus, have a chat online where students can use pseudonyms to communicate).
- **Diversify activities** to avoid being a drinking-only society, offer other forms of socialising (such as lunches, games and visiting the city), support groups and campaigns on LGBT rights.

- **Organise awareness-raising events** such as LGBT History Month to improve all students' knowledge of LGBT issues.
- **Better take into account trans issues** and have a trans representative on the committee to ensure that trans voices are heard within the society.

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# Endnotes

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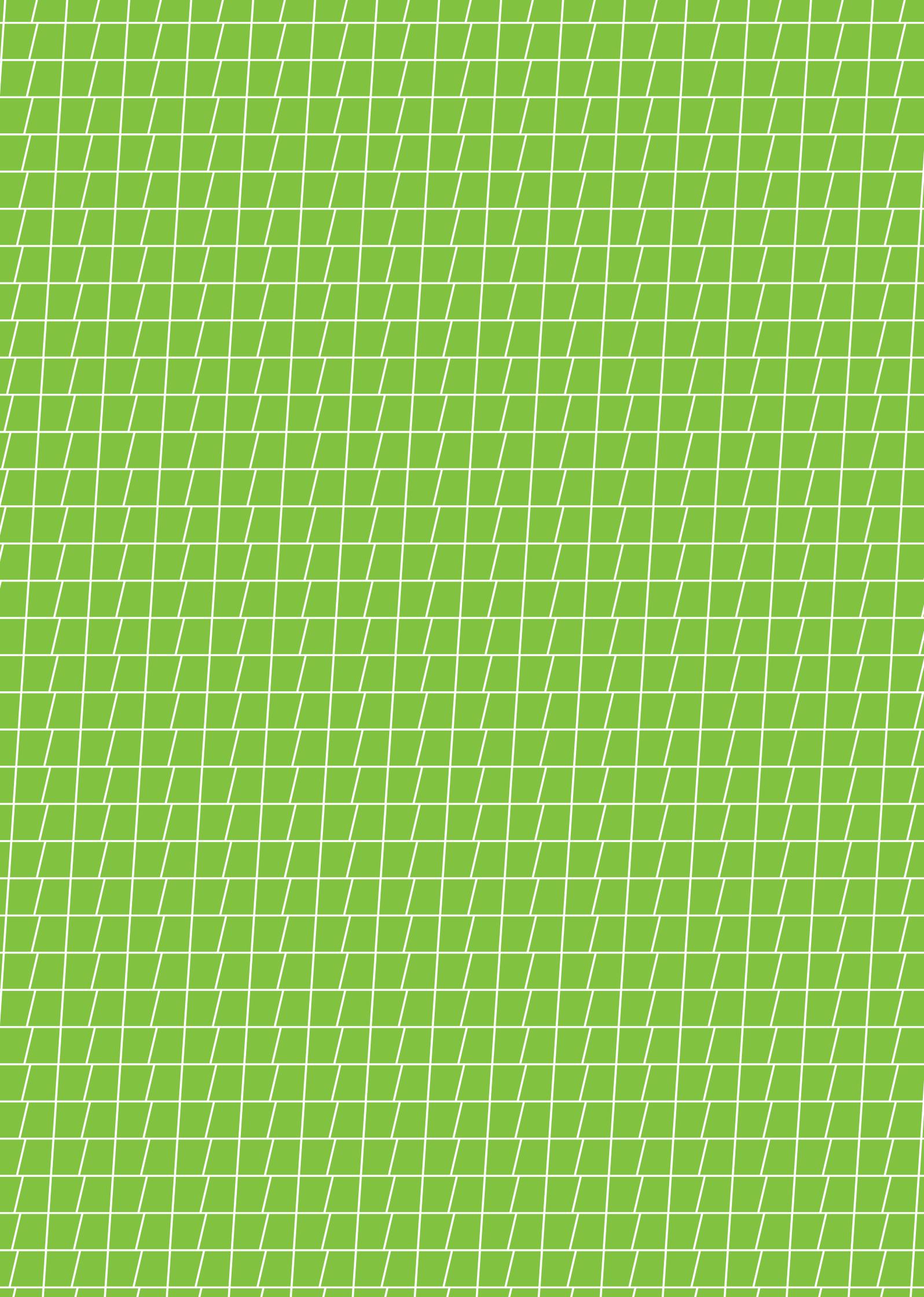
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