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A Mixed Methods Study to Explore the Lived Experiences of Support Offered to LGBTQ+ Students in Higher Education.

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Abstract

Since 2016, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within the United Kingdom (UK) have reported an increase of 40% in undergraduate applications from individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other (LGBTQ+) and an 85% increase in trans declarations. Despite a recent positive sector report exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in Higher Education, (UCAS 2021), the academic literature paints a more negative picture. Much of the existing literature comes from interviews with HEI staff, and therefore, this study, as part of a staff research internship, aimed to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Co-design with LGBTQ+ students facilitated the development of an online survey with 26 respondents and a semi-structured interview guide with 6 respondents. Three themes exploring the lived experiences were constructed using thematic analysis: educational impact, belonging and institutional trust. Sub-themes within highlighted that campaigns designed to demonstrate support for LGBTQ+ students were seen as tokenistic and lacked depth. Support services did not have appropriate knowledge of the key issues impacting this portion of the student body. Discourse between the individual facets of the LGBTQ+ community highlighted a lack of belonging leading to self-isolation and disengagement. Overall, this was seen as a lack of trust and acceptance from the institution, leading to disengagement from academic studies. Recommendations include increased visibility of an ally programme, education of key issues impacting LGBTQ+ students and meaningful, evidence led co-production of policies, procedures, and service provision.

Keywords higher education. LGBTQ+. Support. Student Experience. Belonging

Terminology

The acronym LGBTQ+ is often used to describe a range of sexual and gender identities that fall outside of normative societal constructs. Lesbian, gay and bisexual are definitions of sexual orientation and trans refers to an individual whose gender identity is different to the one assigned to them at birth. The term queer refers to an individual's identity that falls outside of defined labels and may include nonbinary or gender fluidity expressions. The letter Q may also relate to questioning, denoting an individual who is questioning their sexual or gender identity. The + sign refers to all sexual orientations and gender identities, including allyship. Other iterations of the LGBTQ+ include the letter 'I' denoting intersex and 'A' denoting asexual. The term intersex refers to an individual with variations in reproductive anatomy outside of the typical female/male binary system of gender assignment. The term asexual describes a person who does not experience sexual attraction. The author acknowledges that there are many different expressions of gender and sexual identity that may not fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella and different acronyms may be used to describe these. This study and literature review, however, refer to LGBTQ+ as this is the most prevalent within the current literature unless where participants have used alternative acronyms.

Introduction/Background

Over the past 10 years, there has been an increase in the number of students identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community within UK HEIs with a 40% increase since 2016 of undergraduate applicants identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other and an 86% increase in declared trans applicants via UCAS, (UCAS 2021).

Inclusivity and support services are important factors for LGBTQ+ students when applying for university, (UCAS 2021). As a transitional point for exploring individuality, (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017) it is therefore right that HEIs help to facilitate an inclusive and safe environment for students and that specific support measures and interventions are identified and in place. Engagement of under-represented student groups, particularly at initial contact with institutions helps to facilitate inclusivity, fostering a culture of belonging within both social environments and the wider university community. A sense of belonging is directly linked to

academic motivation and success, (Owusu-Agyeman 2021). Whilst students remain positive about higher education, concerns do remain.

Recent reports are suggestive of improved understanding of LGBTQ+ issues in UK HEIs with applicants reporting feeling positive about their transition to university. (UCAS 2021). Unfortunately, the academic literature paints a somewhat different picture, (Ellis, 2009).

This staff internship opportunity for the first author was initially created by the second author as an adjunct to an Office for Students (OfS) project, “The creative mental health and LGBTQ+ framework”, where a variety of partners worked together over 2 years to provide workshops in mental health, mentorship and arts and creativity. Over 200 students took part in the project and 32 became resilient peer support mentors, supported by student wellbeing services. The students who took part in this internship research were purposely not part of the OfS project as we wanted to capture the wider cultural experiences of UCLan for other LGBTQ+ students.

Literature Review

To establish the current level of knowledge around these key issues, an iterative literature search following principles suggested by Siu and Comerasamy (2013) was conducted. The primary electronic database SCOPUS was used with the following Boolean string (TITLE-ABS-KEY (“LGBTQ+”) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (university* OR (“higher education”)).

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion:

Peer-reviewed papers, publication between 2012 and 2023, Full-text in English Language, research conducted in UK HEIs.

Exclusion:

Non-English language, research conducted outside of UK HEIs.

The initial search yielded (n = 43) publications after limiters of date range and country were applied. After inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, the search yielded (n

= 7) articles for review. The author acknowledges that literature in this field is limited within the UK therefore, backwards and forwards citation searching (Parahoo, 2014) was adopted, yielding a further (n = 5) publications. A total of 12 articles were included in the review.

Of the 12 papers within this review, one was a rapid evidence assessment, (n=5) were interview-based, (n = 5) were questionnaire based and one involved participatory research, Studies were based within universities across England, Wales, and Scotland

A narrative synthesis, (Baumeister & Leary, 1997) of 12 papers published in the UK was used to explore the key themes impacting LGBTQ+ students in UK HEIs.

The themes highlighted were:

- a) Safe spaces
- b) Visibility
- c) Education

a) Safe Spaces

Safe spaces may include physical accommodations, including gender-neutral bathrooms for trans student acceptance, and peer support, including student-led societies. The importance of such spaces has been widely recognised within the literature, (Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021, Mearns et al 2019, Storrie & Rehleder 2018, English & Fernby-Hulse 2019, McKendry & Lawrence 2017).

Bonner-Thompson et al, (2021) report that trans students often adjusted their outward appearance to use traditional binary marked bathrooms or resorted to using disabled facilities to avoid confrontation. This adds to perceived feelings of constant observation and judgement, (Mearns et al 2019). Trans people are often perceived as 'not fitting in' with traditional societal gender norms, yet they are expected to navigate physical spaces shaped around them, impacting negatively on mental health, (McDermott et al 2013 in Bonner-Thompson et al 2021).

Students develop their identity, friendship groups and coping strategies outside of the classroom environment during social events and informal networks, (Nicolazzo et al, 2017 in Bonner-Thompson et al 2021). Strong student-led societies and groups are

reported as a source of comfort, support, and general education for LGBTQ+ students within the literature, (Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021, Mearns et al, 2019, O’Riordan, 2022). These peer-led groups help students to navigate the often-difficult aspects of their identity such as coming out and guidance on administrative procedures around changes of pronouns or gender. Specific LGBTQ+ spaces were not always seen as supportive; many social events revolved around alcohol, raising intersectionality and cultural issues. Students not yet ‘out’ within their friendship groups felt too conscious of being seen within a large LGBTQ+ group due to fear of discrimination, (Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021, Glazzard et al, 2021). Mature, post-graduate and non-live-in students do not generally engage with campus life the same as those of a younger age living in student accommodation, leading to this subgroup feeling further isolated, (Mearns et al, 2019, English & Fernby-Hulse, 2019).

Whilst student-led, societies are a welcome addition for LGBTQ+ students, having one group for all sexual and gender identities may move to disempower the very communities within it (Storrie & Rohleder, 2018; Formby, 2017). It is suggested that trans and non-binary students particularly, avoid such societies due to a heightened risk of transphobia in these environments, (Smith et al, 2021).

b) Visibility

Stonewall’s University Report noted that 60% of responders had received negative comments about their gender identity from fellow students, (Gooch & Bachmann, 2018). What is concerning particularly in this report is that out of 39% of students reporting that they were not confident in reporting discrimination at university, one in five of these had been encouraged by staff members to hide their identities to avoid this. This is further supported by Formby, (2017) and McKendry and Lawrence, (2017) who found that many LGBTQ+ students hid their true sexual or gender identity to avoid discrimination. Where policies were in place, the Youth Chances Survey found that 31% of LGBTQ+ students were not aware of how to find them and the processes involved, (Grimwood, 2017, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017). Interestingly within the literature, students report that university campuses are generally more accepting than their wider community highlighting meaningful interactions with academic staff as increasing a sense of wellbeing and inclusion, (Storrie & Rohleder 2018, Glazzard et

al 2020). A lack of visible LGBTQ+ role models within academia was highlighted as lacking by English and Fernby-Hulst, (2019).

c) Education

Visibility and representation within the educational curriculum were highlighted as important throughout the literature, (Glazzard et al, 2020, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017). Although events within HEIs such as Pride and commitments to LGBTQ+ inclusion have become more widespread, visibility of the LGBTQ+ community within course curricula is still lacking, an issue especially prevalent within professional programmes such as nursing and teaching, (Ellis, 2009, NUS, 2014, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning has become an increasingly popular method of learning within UK HEIs. Abuse based on sexual, or gender identity often occurs in disinhibited environments such as social media, and bars, (Haslop et al, 2021, Storrie & Rohleder, 2018, Smith et al, 2021). Haslop et al, (2021) found that 48.81% of their respondents felt as though abuse received online was not worth reporting. Smith et al, (2021) highlight that online abuse may lead to educational disadvantages, particularly for LGBTQ+ students as these environments are often avoided, particularly by trans and non-binary students due to perceived fears of abuse.

Specific education surrounding administrative processes was also highlighted in the literature. Where students were able to change names and pronouns easily, not all administrative processes were completed at the same time. This leads to the phenomenon of 'deadnaming'. This involves other students, administration and teaching staff referring to students as their previous name or pronouns, (Mearns et al, 2019, Formby, 2017, O'Riordan et al, 2022, English & Fernby-Hulse, 2019, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017).

Unlike heterosexual, cis-gendered peers, LGBTQ+ students consistently disclose their sexual and gender identities and often feel obliged to answer questions about this from students and staff alike, (Storrie & Rohleder, 2018, Talbot et al, 2022). This leads to a feeling of sole responsibility for educating their academic community, risking further discrimination and time away from coursework, (O'Riordan et al, 2022, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017) This perhaps suggests a lack of education around LGBTQ+ issues in higher education institutions, (Smith et al 2021).

From the limited literature is clear that whilst UK HEIs have made positive steps to facilitate a more inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students, there is more to be done.

The use of co-design is advocated by the Office for Students (OfS) as a method of increasing inclusive practice as active partners, especially with underrepresented communities with health inequalities such as LGBTQ+ students (Wavehill, 2022)

This study aimed to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and involve them in the co-design of research activities fostering inclusion and empowerment..

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted as part of a staff research internship and ethical approval was granted from the University of Central Lancashire Ethical Approval Board to advertise across the university for students from the LGBTQ+ community to co-create all aspects of the present study. Co-design followed the key principles set out by Hickey et al, (2018) and allowed for the creation of a survey and semi-structured interview guide for which further ethical approval was granted.

Research Method

An initial scoping exercise was conducted in conversations with key departments within the university by the GS to determine what supportive measures and interventions specifically for LGBTQ+ students currently existed. This included wellbeing, inclusive support, and the Student's Union. Activities currently in existence were Pride events run in collaboration with the local community and student led LGBTQ+ and Trans societies.

Phase 1 - Co-Design

Co-Design is a process where student experiences and resources are integrated to facilitate a range of improved experiences (Zarandi et al, 2021). Power and responsibility are shared throughout the process with, individual perspectives listened to and given the ability to contribute equally in a collaborative way, (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felton, 2014 Cited in Bryson & Callaghan, 2021). As the researcher identifies as a

cis-gendered, heterosexual woman, the co-design of the present research allowed members of the LGBTQ+ student community to identify areas of concern and importance to them. This also ensured that all aspects of the study design were appropriate and relevant.

Participants were recruited through posters in high-traffic student areas, including canteens and school notice boards. Eligibility required current student status, identifying as LGBTQ+, the ability to read and understand the English Language and access to Microsoft Teams. Demographic data for the co-design group can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Co-Design Group Demographic Data.

Variable	Descriptive Statistics	N =
Level of Study	Undergraduate	4
	Postgraduate	0
	Doctoral	3
Academic School	Health (Inc. Medicine & Allied Health)	4
	Languages	1
	Sciences	1
	Engineering & Computing	1
Gender	Female	2
	Male	2
	Trans	1
	Non-binary	1
	Agender	1
Sexual Orientation	Bisexual	1
	Queer	1
	Lesbian	2
	Gay	2
	Asexual	1

Phase 2 Online Survey

Data Collection

An anonymous survey was created via Online Surveys to allow the collection of demographic data around sexual and gender identity, course, and year of study. Questions also explored supportive measures and interventions the participants had accessed at the university and the perceived impact of these. Further questions about discrimination and the visibility of LGBTQ+ issues in their course were also asked. Participants were recruited through posters containing a QR Code to the survey in high-traffic student areas, including canteens and school notice boards, as well as snowball sampling from members of the co-design group. Criteria for participation included being a current student status, identifying as LGBTQ+, having the ability to read and understand the English Language and having access to Microsoft Teams. Participants chose their personal identity in terms of gender and sexuality, and these have remained in the text that follows.

Participants were invited to provide their email address at the bottom of the online survey if they consented to be contacted by the researcher for an individual, semi-structured interview to explore their lived experience further.

N = 26 participants completed the online survey, with one excluded from the analysis due to not fulfilling the eligibility criteria.

Demographic data for online survey study participants can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Online Survey Participant Demographic Data

Variable	Descriptive Statistics	N = (%)
Level of Study	Undergraduate	(76%)
	Postgraduate	(4%)
	Doctoral	(20%)
Academic School	Health (inc medicine & allied health)	(36%)
	Languages	(24%)

	Arts & Media	(16%)
	Engineering & Computing	(12%)
	N/A	(12%)
Gender	Female	(36%)
	Male	(8%)
	Trans	(32%)
	Non-Binary	(4%)
	Gender Fluid	(8%)
	Agender	(12%)
Sexual Orientation	Pansexual	(20%)
	Bi-Sexual	(40%)
	Queer	(4%)
	Gay	(12%)
	Lesbian	(4%)
	Asexual	(20%)

Analysis of Online Survey

Online Survey data was collated within the programme itself, allowing for quantitative representation of themes found during the initial literature review. Descriptive statistics from the online survey can be found in table 3.

Table 3: Online Survey Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Possible Range	Descriptive Statistics
How does sexual or gender identity impact on overall course experience?	0 - 10	M = 5.69 SD = 1.77

Visibility of LGBTQ+ issues within course	0 - 10	M = 5.08 SD = 2.35
How does sexual or gender identity impact on extra-curricular activities?	0 - 10	M = 5.08 SD = 2.38
How beneficial are supportive activities to your student experience?	0 - 10	M = 6.54 SD = 2.85
Have you accessed any supportive measure of interventions specifically for LGBTQ+ students?		Yes = 40% No = 60%
Have you ever felt discriminated against due to sexual or gender identity?		Yes = 40% No = 60%
Was this from staff or students?		Staff = 40% Students = 40% Both = 20%
Are you aware of the policy for reporting discrimination?		Yes = 52% No = 48%

Phase 3 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative comments from the online survey were included in the overall thematic analysis alongside semi-structured interview data to explore further the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education. A Phenomenological approach (Emiliussen et al, 2021) was used to provide a more detailed exploration of personal experiences at the university. Six Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students further, each lasting up to 60 minutes following a phenomenological-based approach.

Table 4: Semi-Structured Interview Participant Demographic Data

Name	Age Range	Gender	Sexuality	Academic School	Level of Study
Laura	30 – 35	Trans female	Asexual	Engineering & Computing	Undergraduate
Harry	21 – 29	Trans male	Pansexual	Health	Undergraduate
Alex	18 – 20	Non-binary	Asexual	Engineering	Undergraduate
Molly	50+	Trans female	Lesbian	Arts	Undergraduate
Edward	40 – 49	Male	Gay	Arts	Undergraduate
Madeleine	40 - 49	Female	Lesbian	Health	Doctoral

NB: Age ranges were used for participants to reduce the likelihood of identification due to the sensitive nature of the data.

Qualitative data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke, (2022). Initial transcription and coding were conducted by GS (lead researcher) and independently reviewed by GR. Theme construction was developed and agreed upon by both researchers. Interpretation of quantitative data was conducted in collaboration by both researchers alongside qualitative analysis.

Following analysis of the data, three main themes were constructed, each with several sub-themes: educational impact, belonging and institutional trust, as displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Theme Summary Table

Main Theme	Characteristics
Educational Impact	Despite being a safe space to be open, limitations around open discussion of LGBTQ+ issues in curricula were highlighted. A lack of understanding of these impact of these issues from support services led to disengagement and reduced attendance.
Belonging	Community support is important, but there are issues with the definition of a community and the expectations of such.

Institutional Trust	Positive reports around overall acceptance and support however some innovations lack depth. Concerns raised around administrative support and diversity.
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Educational Impact

The educational impact of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ should not be underestimated. Participants reported university to be a safe space for acceptance of their gender or sexual identity. However, a lack of open discussions of key LGBTQ+ issues and their impact in curricula were highlighted, leading to for some, disengagement from the course. Participants on courses dominated by stereotypical societal gender norms struggled to engage in class discussion for fear of being ‘found out’ as highlighted by Laura, a trans student studying engineering.

“If I ever speak aloud in a lecture because they don’t have a context to where the voice is coming from, they will look over me, looking for someone else.”

Alex, a non-binary student, felt as though they were not able to be their whole selves for fear of exclusion due to the demographics of their course.

“To be open, but not too open would be like compromising to my degree or like people wouldn’t want to work with me on projects and stuff. Engineering is very male dominated and straight. It’s sometimes easier to just not mention it, not bring it up.”

Participants described the visibility and discussion of LGBTQ+ issues as part of their taught content as important to them. However, this was wholly dependent on whether it was seen to be relevant to their academic discipline. Edward, a mature gay man, when asked if there were any discussions around LGBTQ+ issues in his course, said:

“Oh God, no. I wouldn’t have expected there to be”.

Conversely, Harry a trans student in a healthcare discipline:

“I don’t think it is taught much in healthcare at all. Even if it’s just making people aware of the fact that there are significant differences in health outcomes for LGB people”.

Only 40% of survey respondents reported that they had accessed targeted support for LGBTQ+ during their time as a student, citing accessibility and lack of understanding. Molly, a trans female, said:

“Although there is a lot of talk about the support network, and it is there, there’s no doubt that it can be so immensely hard to get it”.

One participant also reported that when mental health support was accessed, a lack of understanding put further strains on them as an individual.

“When I was accessing mental health support through the wellbeing service, that was quite difficult for me because I was just playing the role of educator all the time”.

This highlights the lack of understanding around the impact of key issues affecting LGBTQ+ students. When students act in the role of educator, the therapeutic benefit of wellbeing services is reduced, and support is not therefore accessed.

Belonging

All the participants cited a strong sense of belonging as important for their wellbeing at university, with a large amount of discourse about what this meant. All participants had sought support from the LGBTQ+ society with a multitude of experiences.

Laura, a trans student, said:

“I’m part of the LGBT society, they meet up once a month and I feel it’s good.”

Conversely, Edward had a very different experience.

“I was told I’m not gay enough to be part of the society because I am too conservative.”

Discussions around student-led support revealed a lack of representation of all individuals under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, leaving some participants feeling even more isolated. Edward, a gay mature student, described how campaigns run by the LGBTQ+ society were mostly orientated to trans-related concerns and, although important, did not represent him as a gay man.

“LGB is sexual orientation, TQIA is a gender expression. Over the past 5 years, I feel as though the LGB is being erased, you can’t just be gay anymore, it’s not fashionable.”

Wider community events in conjunction with the local area, such as Pride, were seen as largely for financial gain and not representative of the whole LGBTQ+ community, as highlighted by Madeleine.

“It’s very marketed towards like money, money, money.”

Alongside the discourse between LGB and TQ+/TQIA, there also appeared to be conflicts across age groups in terms of the purpose of university life, as well as the format in which community support is navigated.

Madeleine, a mature lesbian woman, cites a lack of advertising around face-to-face events for LGBTQ+ students as contributing to feelings of isolation.

“If I could have got involved in more LGBTQ+ stuff, I think I would have enhanced my experience and it would have given me that sense of belonging”.

Conversely, Alex describes online chat spaces specifically for LGBTQ+ issues as:

“Somewhere I can be open and feel safe to discuss things I’m not comfortable discussing verbally.”

Institutional Trust

Participants were positive about innovations demonstrating support and acceptance for LGBTQ+ students. However, it was highlighted that having these more prominent to prospective candidates would positively influence university selection for LGBTQ+ students.

“If I had seen the things, I know now [such as the rainbow lanyards and emails with pronouns], I wouldn’t have considered some of the other places I thought about.”
(Alex).

Conversely, other participants found such innovations to be tokenistic without addressing the key issues.

*“All of a sudden, everybody’s wearing rainbow lanyards, and just feel like saying, do you actually know what they represent and what they actually stand for?”
(Madeleine)*

Another concern impacting on student trust in the university was around administration issues, as highlighted by Harry, a trans student.

“When I actually came out as trans there were supportive emails sent through about changing my name etc, but it wasn’t actually done until I was taken to a disciplinary meeting. That just confirmed all the thoughts in my head”.

A lack of trust in the institution was further compounded by a lack of diversity and representation of LGBTQ+ people from university management, as highlighted by Alex.

“I don’t feel represented, but it’s probably because I’m aware of the demographic of the people who run this university and they all look the same, old, white men.”

This theme demonstrates the impact of innovations outside of the classroom for LGBTQ+ students. Whilst for some, this is an added benefit to university life, for others it is a vital part of being accepted. A lack of representation and understanding can lead to feelings of isolation and a decreased reputation of the university.

“I was going to do my masters here, but I’ve been hurt that much in the last four weeks, and I’ve decided you won’t get any more money out of me.” (Molly).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education. As a mixed methods study, the quantitative results shown in Table 3 suggest that sexual and gender identity do not impact overall experiences. Whilst discrimination exists, participants could access reporting policies where appropriate. To explore the lived experiences further, the emphasis will now be on the qualitative findings from this study, allowing participant voices to shine through.

Educational Impact

Whilst acknowledging that university was a safe place to be themselves, analysis revealed that students employed self-imposed limitations on their sexual and gender identity for fear of discrimination, (Formby, 2017, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017). This was more prevalent in courses dominated by societal gender stereotypes, further supporting previous literature suggesting the same of professional courses, (Ellis, 2009, NUS, 2014, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017).

Whilst the impact on educational attainment has not been specifically explored in this study, it was highlighted by 2 participants that they did not feel comfortable being open about their sexual and gender identity during classes. Fear of exclusion during group work tasks and their identity being found out were cited as reasons for this. Educational research acknowledges that increased active student participation in classroom discussions deepens levels of understanding, in turn increasing attainment, (Hase & Kenyon, 2000). Contemporary pedagogy encourages the increased use of active participatory learning, such as open discussion to support an emerging body of work around heutagogy. This approach facilitates the development of self-determined learners as active participants in their education as opposed to passive recipients of knowledge, (Hase & Kenyon, 2000). The findings from this study arouse concerns for inclusivity within some programmes due to less confident or open LGBTQ+ students becoming isolated for fear of their identity being revealed. It has been shown that feelings of isolation and a lack of interaction within learning environments can lead to a decreased sense of belonging directly affecting academic success, (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021). It is further suggested that focussing extra-curricular activities on the socio-cultural needs of students creates greater awareness and understanding, thus increasing a sense of social connectedness, (Owusu-Agyeman, 2021).

In contrast to Glazzard et al, (2020), and McKendry and Lawrence, (2017) the quantitative results from this study show that participants on average were satisfied with the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues taught within their course. Qualitative analysis revealed that this was only if deemed relevant to their academic discipline. Students enrolled on healthcare and arts-related courses particularly highlighted a preference for increased taught content about LGBTQ+ issues within their curricula. This, however, could be attributed to the higher representation of LGBTQ+ participants

within the current study enrolled on these courses, akin to reporting data suggesting a higher proportion of LGBTQ+ students undertaking such courses, (NUS, 2021).

A lack of understanding from support services of the key issues impacting LGBTQ+ students was highlighted by all participants, yet only 10% of survey respondents reported accessing it. Qualitative analysis revealed that trans people found access to mental health support difficult to navigate. Those seeking support felt as though they needed to act as the role of educators to fill knowledge gaps on key issues for trans people. Not only does this disrupt the therapeutic benefit, but it may increase the emotional burden, leading to disengagement with support. This is in agreement with the literature, identifying that training on the issues impacting LGBTQ+ students is vital for appropriate support, (Smith et al, 2021). Owusu-Agyeman, (2021) suggests that whilst a supportive transition to higher education can be directly linked to academic motivation and success, equal importance must be given to additional support services.

Universities offer both pastoral and formal mental health support. However, findings from this study highlight a lack of understanding of the issues affecting LGBTQ+ students, leaving this support falling short of requirements. This deficit has implications for disengagement with support services and ultimately academic studies.

Belonging

The literature highlighted strong, student-led societies as a source of peer support and comfort for LGBTQ+ students, ((Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021, Mearns et al, 2019, O’Riordan, 2022). However, the existence of a singular, defined group for all sexual and gender identities has the potential for conflict. The literature supports this view, highlighting trans and non-binary students feeling the most isolated from such groups, (Storrie & Rohleder ,2018, Formby, 2017). It is suggested that it is the extra-curricular activities that a student engages in that help to shape their identity at university and beyond due to forming close-knit friendship groups and belonging at a key transition point to adulthood, (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014, McKendry & Lawrence, 2017).

Interestingly, findings from this study revealed that trans students were appreciative of the peer support gained from the LGBTQ+ society, in contrast to the literature (Smith

et al, 2012). The same was not true of gay and lesbian participants who felt as though they were not accepted within these groups. Belongingness as a concept has been suggested to be contextual, for example, by being a student; however, it is true that an individual can feel as though they belong in one environment but not another (Hagerty et al., 1992). The discourse around peer support was also apparent across age groups in terms of accessibility. Younger participants were appreciative of social media and online platforms for conversations and meeting people, yet mature students preferred face-to-face events for peer interactions. A lack of face-to-face opportunities contributed to a sense of isolation for one doctoral study student, supporting the work of Mearns et al, (2019) & English and Fernby-Hulse, (2019).

The concepts and representation of community and belonging were common across participants. Events in conjunction with the local city, such as Pride, were reported as being not inclusive for all LGBTQ+ people and seen as largely for financial gain. A community, in terms of a social construct, conjures up strong imagery of something positive with such depictions of 'solidarity' and 'all in it together'. Contemporary definitions of a community suggest that at its essence is a shared story rather than an identity. This enables individuals as part of a shared identity forming narrative to share their own story, thus enriching, and developing said narrative, (Lowe, 2022). Community spaces, both physical and emotional should be organically developed into a rich tapestry of experiences and shared narratives of the very people within it. Generic support structures for groups of individuals outside of societal gender or sexual identity norms can lead to further feelings of isolation.

Institutional Trust

Recent sector reports highlight that UK HEIs are making positive steps towards inclusion and support for LGBTQ+ students, (UCAS, 2021). Findings from this study showed that campaigns designed to show support were perceived as tokenistic and lacking depth. Lanyards displaying the Pride flag and the inclusion of pro-nouns on email signatures were seen as positive, particularly for one student who had grown up not exposed to different identity presentations. For under-represented student groups, engagement and visibility of accepting and inclusive practices at initial contact with a university adds to a perceived sense of belonging. It also has the potential to influence

the decision-making process positively, (NUS, 2014). A lack of engagement with such practices by universities facilitates perceptions of non-acceptance of a student's individuality, (Walton & Cohen, 2007b). Qualitative analysis revealed the Pride flag to be an important part of an LGBTQ+ person's identity. Participants highlighted the need for increased education about the flag's history and importance to demonstrate true acceptance and inclusion.

A lack of diversity in university management was highlighted by 3 of the participants. This appears to support the literature suggesting that increased visibility of, and access to representative role models aid in fostering a sense of inclusion, student engagement and belonging, particularly for under-represented student groups, (Storrie & Rohleder, 2018, Glazzard et al, 2020, English & Fernby-Hulst, 2019). Universities celebrate and role-model academic success. Representation of the rich and diverse communities within the institution may help to increase trust in it as an accepting and inclusive learning environment. 'Ethic of reciprocity' refers to meaningful reciprocal student-staff partnerships that strengthen role-modelling and support networks. These relationships facilitate the empowerment of under-represented student groups by validating their position within the institution as an integral contributor to its success, thus increasing belonging, (Cook-Sather & Felton, 2017).

Institutional trust is also lacking when processes or systems are inconsistent. One participant reported positive pastoral support at the initial disclosure of their gender and sexual identity to their personal tutor. It was only during meetings with school-level management that their name was able to be changed. Clear and consistent administrative policies and procedures with appropriate signposting may help to increase feelings of acceptance further, (Goldberg et al, 2019).

Whilst attainment was not looked at specifically within this study, a lack of trust in the institution led participants to actively disengage from their studies and support services. This has the potential to negatively impact overall student attainment and retention as well as National University Rankings and subsequent financial implications for the institution.

Participants within this study were primarily engaged in undergraduate-level study. However, the constructed themes of institutional trust and belonging were also highlighted as important by one doctoral participant. Additional research exploring the

unique experiences of doctoral students in HEIs would be beneficial given the typical self-directed nature of such academic study.

A strength of this small research project is the personal experiences of the participants and the use of co-creation to inform changes. As a Phenomenological approach was used, the analysis and interpretation were subjective, and reflexivity was used by the first author to recognise any influence in this process. As such, this is not a positivistic, generalisable study but is transferable to other settings if deemed useful. This study relates specifically to the university where it was completed with the specific participants. However, other institutions may consider (preferably in co-creation with students') the suitability of highlighted recommendations.

Conclusion

The findings from this study show that the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education are multi-faceted. When issues are not appropriately supported, there can be implications for education, personal development, and the institution itself.

The transition to higher education can be a significant time point to young adulthood helping to shape a person's understanding of their identity and sense of belonging in broader society. Given the current economic climate of the UK, this has never been truer. Students across the World experienced barriers to role-modelling, beginnings of academic freedom and explorations of identity experienced post-compulsory education due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is further confounded by mental health diagnoses increasing rapidly due to social isolation. This further supports the notion that it is right for HEIs to provide accepting environments which allow students to explore their sexual and gender identities with appropriate support whilst achieving academic success.

The cost-of-living crisis post-pandemic in the UK has seen a reduction of applications in traditional ways to higher education. Increased apprenticeship provision with industry links has been adopted by UK HEIs as part of the Government widening participation strategy. This strategy aims to increase underrepresented student groups' access to higher education. A proactive approach to appropriate, evidence-

led support for such groups would increase academic success and facilitate a more accepting and diverse culture within the UK economy.

Recommendations

- Introduction of an ally programme within academic schools. Staff with additional training in issues affecting LGBTQ+ students could act as a point of contact for support with administrative procedures, support and information dissemination.
- This Ally programme should be accessible to students, facilitating increased visibility and role-modelling.
- Meaningful co-creation of policies and curriculum design with representation of the LGBTQ+ student body.
- Education and events supported by the LGBTQ+ student and staff body during Pride month.
- Management meetings with LGBTQ+ students and staff to inform support service provision.
- Increased diversity and representation across university management and visible celebrations of diverse student success.
- Future research to explore the experiences of doctoral students given the typically self-directed nature of such study.

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