

The experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual staff and students in higher education



**Equality and
Human Rights
Commission**



Equality Challenge Unit

Acknowledgements

Professor Gill Valentine and Dr Nichola Wood were commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission to write this paper.

The research on which this document is based was commissioned by the Equality Challenge Unit. ECU works with the higher education sector to promote equality and diversity for all staff and students. The full research report '*The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff and students in higher education*' can be downloaded from the ECU website at:

<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/lgbt-staff-and-students-in-he>

We would like to thank ECU for allowing us to draw from their research findings and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender staff and students who gave up their time to share their experiences with us. We are very grateful to Susan Botcherby of the Equality and Human Rights Commission for her support and editorial guidance and Ian Rivers and Ian Warwick for their helpful comments in the preparation of this paper.

Introduction



In the last five years there have been a series of legal changes extending the rights of, and providing new protections for, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people. Yet, research suggests that attitudes to minority groups do not always evolve in line with legislative frameworks.

Studies of LGB people's experiences in schools suggest that homophobia is still rife in these educational environments (Stonewall, 2007; NASUWT, 2003) and that LGB people still expect to experience discrimination in many workplaces (Stonewall, 2008a, 2008b). Until the ECU research on which this paper is based, little investigation has been made as to whether equality legislation has altered LGB staff and students' experiences of, or perceptions of, barriers/opportunities within the higher education (HE) sector at a national level (though see DTI Women and Equality Unit and LGBT Youth Scotland 2006).

Despite a number of initiatives to tackle inequality within individual HEIs, not one Higher Education Institution (HEI) features in the top 100 organisations in Stonewall's equality index (<http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1477.asp>). This suggests that Higher Education could lag behind other sectors in proactively tackling equality for LGB people.

Gill Valentine and Nichola Wood were commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (the Commission) to write this seminar summary paper, after presenting findings from the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) funded research into the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) staff and students in HE at a seminar in April 2009.

The ECU research about LGBT staff and students' experiences of HEIs (ECU, 2009), drew from an evidence base of 4,205 responses from two online surveys: a survey of 2,704 LGBT students and a survey of 1,501 LGBT staff. This paper focuses on the findings from the LGB respondents. The ECU survey was designed by the research

team (Professor Gill Valentine, Professor Paul Plummer and Dr Nichola Wood) in collaboration with an ECU steering group. It was disseminated by the ECU through equality units within HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Scottish HEIs were not included in this study because Scotland has its own independent authority for the promotion of equality) and by the research team and steering group members through union mailing lists, academic discipline mailing lists and through wider LGBT networks.

Survey responses were received from 134 out of 149 HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. A handful of HEIs refused to circulate an email about the survey to their staff and students. As the LGBT population of the HE sector is unknown it is not possible to assess how representative the respondents are of this population. The qualitative element of this research included 12 focus groups held in six different HEIs and 18 interviews with individuals. The institutions where the research was conducted were sampled to include: traditional universities, post-1992 universities and specialist

The experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual staff and students in higher education

university colleges. These were located in all three national regions covered by the ECU's remit in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan contexts and included both campus and split-site institutions. The identities of these institutions have been withheld to protect the confidentiality of those who participated in the study (ECU, 2009).

The aims of this paper are:

- i) to identify what is known about the LGB population in this sector by outlining the key sources of HE data and what information is, or is not, collected about both students and staff
- ii) to examine the experiences and outcomes of LGB students and staff in HE by drawing on data from the quantitative and qualitative ECU research.
- iii) to identify how equality is currently promoted within HEIs and the implications of this paper for the development of this work.

This paper identifies a severe lack of data and knowledge about the LGB population of staff and students in the HE sector. Sexual orientation is notably absent from all of the information collected by UCAS about student applications, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) about student satisfaction with courses, and the Higher Education

Statistics Agency (HESA) about enrolment and leavers' destinations (as is data on religion and belief). Not collecting data about the sexual orientation of students and staff and a lack of understanding about the experiences and needs of this group matter because sexual orientation is not just a private matter, LGB staff and students experience negative treatment including both explicit and implicit discrimination within HEIs.

This paper therefore argues that the systematic collection of data about sexual orientation in the higher education sector is crucial because otherwise it will not be possible to measure (in)equality in relation to sexual orientation, to identify problems that need to be acted on and where these may be arising, and to assess the impact of any policy or service delivery changes in the sector. The ECU research implies that there is an urgent need to tackle the negative treatment of LGB staff and students and to demonstrate overt commitment to LGB equality in HE.

Who counts? What the data can say about the sector's LGB staff and student populations

UCAS is responsible for managing applications for entry to full-time undergraduate courses at HE institutions in the UK (www.ucas.ac.uk). Its Annual Datasets provide information about applications and accepted applicants by qualification (Degree, Foundation degree, HND). These national datasets cover a five year period, and are available across certain key themes: Institution, Subject, Age, Region/Domicile, Qualifications, Ethnicity/Social Class and

International. Final data relating to any annual entry cycle is normally available in February, with summary data available in January. It also provides specialist advice for mature students and disabled students. UCAS does not, however, deal with applications to part-time undergraduate or postgraduate courses, nor does it collect information on graduates or dropout rates.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is a non-departmental public body of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which is responsible for the distribution of funding to Universities and Colleges of higher and further education in England. It runs a number of data collection and monitoring exercises including the annual Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey (HESES) about students on recognised higher education courses,

and the National Student Survey (which serves as part of the quality assurance framework for higher education) which, since 2005, has been the mechanism for collecting feedback from final year undergraduates. The National Student Survey is conducted in all HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Scotland has its own Quality Enhancement Framework) and some Scottish HEIs also chose to participate in the 2008 National Student Survey.

The survey collects data on gender, age, ethnicity and disability status. As such the data enables patterns to be identified in student satisfaction ratings according to these aspects of students' identities as well as for different universities and subjects. The results of the National Student Survey, plus other Teaching Quality Information (TQI) data are available on the Unistats website: www.unistats.co.uk.



The Higher Education Statistics

Agency (HESA) (www.hesa.ac.uk) collects data about student enrolments at each publicly funded higher education institution in the UK (this information is available from the academic year 1994/95 onwards). It is based on a count of all enrolments on 1 December each academic year excluding dormant students (those who have ceased studying but have not formally de-registered), postdoctoral students and those whose whole programme of study will be completed outside of the UK. Specifically, HESA collects data about UK students by:

- A/AS level/Highers points score and tariff points score
- Age
- Classification obtained by first degree qualifiers
- Cost centre
- Disability
- Domicile (the place of the student's permanent/home address prior to the start of their studies)
- Ethnicity
- Expected length of study programme
- First year indicator
- FTE – Student full-time equivalence
- Gender
- Highest qualification on entry
- Level of study/Qualification aim (for example undergraduate/postgraduate)
- Location of institution
- Major source of tuition fees
- Mode of study (for example full time, sandwich, part time)

- Subject/area of study (a new subject classification called JACS was introduced in 2002/03)
- Term-time accommodation (institution maintained property, parental/guardian home, own home etc. This is available only for full-time and sandwich students).

In addition, HESA collects data about the destination of leavers after graduation. Since 2002/03 this data has been collected through a survey carried out approximately six months after students leave a HEI. This survey replaced the former First Destinations Supplement (FDS), improving on it by collecting more information and covering more postgraduate courses, as well as those leavers who studied part time. Specifically, the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey provides data on leavers':

- Activity
- Qualification required for job
- Location of employment
- Employer size
- Institution of further study
- Type of qualification of further study
- Mode of further study
- Standard Industrial Classification (SIC)
- Standard Occupational Classification (SOC).

In the 2003/04 academic year HESA introduced a new record of staff data which combined and replaced the three staff data streams that it had gathered previously. This covers all academic (including medical practitioners, dentists, veterinarians and other healthcare professionals who undertake lecturing or research activities)

and non-academic staff who have a contract of employment with a HEI in the UK. This data can be analysed in terms of people and employment contracts.

It contains information about:

- Academic employment function (for example teaching only, research only, teaching and research etc.)
- Activity (ie the occupation type associated with a contract)
- Age
- Cost centre
- Disability
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Grade (applies only to academic staff)
- Highest qualification held
- Location of institution
- Mode of employment (for example full time, full time term only, part time, part time term only)
- Nationality
- Subject of highest qualification
- Source of salary (for example wholly institution financed or funded by other body, for example NHS etc.)
- Terms of employment (open-ended/permanent, fixed-term contract).

In sum sexual orientation is notably absent from **all** of the information collected by UCAS about student applications, HEFCE about student satisfaction with courses, and HESA about enrolment and leavers'

destinations (as is data on religion and belief). As such it is impossible to identify any patterns for LGB students in relation to **applications, incoming attainment** (for example A/AS/Highers point scores) **performance indicators** (for example non-continuation rates) **outcome data** (class of degree, employment of graduates) and **student satisfaction**, in the way that it is possible to determine such patterns in relation to age, disability, ethnicity and gender (for example, HESA has recently identified a gender gap in teaching qualifications).

Nor does UCAS provide any specialist information about LGB students applying to an HEI (for example about the availability of appropriate accommodation, or how to prove estrangement from parents). Likewise, HESA does not collect data about the sexual orientation of academic and non-academic staff despite collecting data about the majority of the other equality strands.



The experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual staff and students in higher education

This statistical ‘silence’ in relation to sexual orientation implies sexuality is a ‘private’ matter and that it has no public manifestations and consequences. Yet, homophobic prejudice and discrimination may be just as likely to occur in HE as in other employment sectors. The lack of national data about LGB students and staff in the HE sector is therefore significant because this population is currently unknown, as such it is not possible from existing data to measure (in)equality in relation to sexual orientation in order to identify any problems that need to be acted on and where these may be arising (ie in relation to which categories of staff/ students and which types of institution or location) as these issues will not necessarily occur evenly or manifest themselves in the same way throughout the sector. Nor is it possible to assess the impact of any changes in the sector, such as the delivery of any new equality policies or the effectiveness of targeted support or service delivery. More broadly, a sector’s own knowledge of its population powerfully frames the conditions and terms through which its ‘customers’/ employees see themselves as an organisation.

Being counted: LGB staff and students’ attitudes to monitoring in relation to sexual orientation

The ECU research about LGB staff and students’ experiences of HEIs in England found that only 50 per cent of staff and students currently, or would if asked, be prepared to disclose their sexual orientation to their HEI. This reluctance to ‘come out’ reflects a lack of trust in the sector because HEIs have yet to effectively demonstrate their commitment to LGB equality.

Notably, the ECU research identified fears among some of the research participants about how HEIs might use data on sexual orientation. LGB staff participants had concerns that this information might be associated with their employment records, while students were wary that the data might be accessible to their parents or that information about their sexual orientation might be used by admissions tutors to discriminate against them.



Such resistance to disclosing sexual orientation suggests that if UCAS, HESA and HEFCE want to collect this data HEIs will need to win the trust of LGB staff and students: ‘firstly, by demonstrating their commitment to equality prior to attempting to monitor staff/students’ sexual orientation; secondly, by providing clear information about how this data would be anonymised, and to whom access might be granted; and thirdly, by demonstrating why and how it would be used in order to offset fears that the information would only be collected to ‘tick an equality box’ rather than to develop positive support or policies to meet the needs of this population’ (Valentine et al., 2009).

Recognition that monitoring forms and surveys are likely to attract a low response rate from LGB staff and students is in itself a deterrent to some for providing information about their sexual orientation. The fear is that the sector will regard a low response rate from LGB staff/students as evidence that this only represents a small population within the sector and so will not pay proper regard to sexual orientation equality instead of acknowledging that a low response may reflect resistance or barriers to completion. Consequently, some respondents to the ECU research argued that if sufficient numbers do not disclose their sexual orientation then the data will be identified as obviously unreliable. For such reasons it is important that the sector monitors LGB staff and students numbers for several years – while building trust – in order to maximise the reliability of the data, before too much emphasis is placed upon the statistics. The wording of monitoring forms and surveys are also likely to affect the response rates. These need to offer a range of categories that recognise the complexity and fluidity of how

individuals self define their sexual orientation. Here, the HE sector can learn from the approach adopted in other sectors as well as the expertise of organisations such as Stonewall.

LGB student experiences of higher education institutions

The ECU research found that HEIs are a positive space in the lives of the majority of LGB ‘traditional’ undergraduates (ie those aged approximately 18–21) because universities and colleges represent new environments where young people are able to define their own adult sexual identities away from the childhood contexts of school and family life where many have encountered homophobia. In total, 90 per cent of LGB respondents to the student survey are **out** to their peers. However, while appreciating the potential freedom to ‘be themselves’ at university, in practice almost two-thirds are **not** out to tutors 61.3 per cent (n=1400); lecturers 64.3 per cent (n=1316); and almost three-quarters (72.8 per cent, n=1105) are **not** out to accommodation staff.

LGB students (including those who were out to only some as well as those who were out to everyone) reported significant levels of negative treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation from fellow students (49.5 per cent), tutors/lecturers (10.4 per cent), and those who work in other areas of their HEI (10.6 per cent).

The experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual staff and students in higher education

LGB students in 'new' (post-1992) HEI and university colleges were more likely to report that they had been treated negatively by other students and their tutors/lecturers than students in 'traditional' HEIs. Notably, the ECU research identified statistically significant relationships between LGB students' experiences of homophobic/biphobic comments and verbal abuse by tutors/lecturers in the disciplines of: Medicine and Dentistry; Veterinary Sciences; Agriculture and related subjects; Engineering; Business and Administration Studies; European Languages; Literature and related subjects; and Education. This perhaps reflects the fact that disciplines have different cultures (for example in terms of the likelihood with which they will cover LGB issues in the syllabi, their internal politics, and the visibility of staff from diverse backgrounds) (Toynton, 2007).

Some LGB students also described how banal forms of negative treatment had caused them to experience stress, to lose confidence, and in some cases to self-exclude from specific spaces within the university (such as sports clubs or religious student societies). Students have the least ability to avoid negative treatment through self-exclusion in student halls of residence or housing, where some LGB students reported severe homophobic abuse. Such accounts perhaps contribute to explaining why 20 per cent of LGB respondents to the ECU student survey reported having taken time out of their courses. These figures suggest a need for the sector to provide more formal support for LGB students, and training for HEI staff about the need to be sensitive to the type of issues that may affect LGB students' academic performance.

Most undergraduate students remain financially dependent on their parents, or receive financial assistance (35 per cent of LGB students, n=745) based on an assessment of their parents' income. As such 15 per cent of LGB students respondents to the ECU survey stated that they fear losing financial support if they come out to their parents about their sexual orientation. For a minority of students these fears are well-founded. The parents of 4.9 per cent of LGB student respondents refuse to provide financial support for them as specified by their Local Education Authority assessment. A further 3 per cent of LGB students are, in effect, estranged from their parents, but do not know how to prove this legally and so receive no financial support.

While only a few of the LGB respondents to the ECU research had been financially cut off by their parents or denied support from hardship funds, others were aware of personal friends or fellow LGB group members who had had such experiences. In this way, the negative experiences of a minority of LGB students can nonetheless have a much wider impact when they are vicariously disseminated through peer group social networks.

In this context, some LGB students reported that they are deliberately waiting until they are in employment and are financially independent before coming out to their parents. This, however, creates problems for some LGB students in terms of managing the boundary between their identities at home and identities at university. As such, one of the main reasons why some students are reluctant to declare their sexual orientation in official

data gathering exercises (see 2 above) is a fear that their sexual orientation might accidentally be revealed through formal or informal contact between the HEI/its staff and their parents.

Students who took part in the ECU research expressed frustration when their courses failed to include LGB examples or materials (where relevant), and at the lack of LGB academic literature/journals available at their HEIs. LGB students value academic staff being 'out' in the classroom because this creates space for students to express their own identities and gives them confidence that the institution respects LGB equality and that it is safe to come out. Some students expressed a desire for LGB staff to act as formal mentors and also to become involved in supporting and developing LGB and LGBT student groups.

LGB staff experiences of higher education institutions

The ECU research found that only just over a third (38.6 per cent, n=567) of respondents to the staff survey were out to 'everyone'. Early career staff (ie those aged 16–34) were less likely to be out in their HEIs than older staff. The three main barriers to disclosing sexual orientation were identified as: concerns about employment security and discrimination; teaching and pastoral related fears that students might respond in homophobic ways to disclosure; and anxieties that an LGB identity might compromise respondents' research agendas.

LGB staff reported significant levels of negative treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation from colleagues (33.8 per cent), students (18.9 per cent), and those who work in other areas of their HEI (25.3 per cent). Experiences of discrimination reported by LGB staff included systematic institutional discrimination and implicit discrimination in relation to promotions, discretionary pay rises and redundancies. LGB staff reported experiences of covert discrimination through exclusion from social networks. It was suggested that this can impact on professional development as these networks provide informal occasions for consultation, information about work-related opportunities, and the development of research networks.

The ECU research also identified that the underlying assumption that HEI staff are heterosexual can have unintended consequences for some LGB staff. In particular, family friendly policies which provide flexible working hours for parents (heterosexual or same sex) were described by some informants as being applied within their institutions in ways that have inadvertently negative impacts on childless heterosexual and LGB staff. For example, the ill-considered application of such policies can become an indirect mechanism through which parents' workloads are indirectly transferred onto childless heterosexual and LGB staff, as well as contributing to making alternative kinds of lifestyle and relationships invisible in the workplace. Indeed, there is a lack of understanding about LGB lifestyles, particularly sex-positive, non-monogamous cultures.

Participants (both women and men) in the qualitative element of the ECU research suggested that gay men may be more likely to experience discrimination in HEIs because they are more visible than lesbians. It was argued by some groups that lesbians often have their identities unintentionally read by others as heterosexual because it is less remarkable for two women to have a close or intimate friendship than for two men and it is also more common for lesbians to have children than gay men. However, lesbians also described significant levels of discrimination on the basis of gender and a difficulty in some cases of distinguishing between negative experiences at the intersection between gender and sexual orientation.

The ECU research findings indicated that homophobic remarks are rarely considered unacceptable or challenged by other staff in the same way that banal racist or disablist comments are addressed (c.f. Silverschanz et al., 2007). Just less than half of the staff (47.1 per cent, n=706) respondents to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that abuse, harassment or bullying towards LGB staff are dealt with as serious disciplinary offences at their institutions. The lack of senior staff (professorial staff, senior management, vice chancellors, chancellors, and members of governing councils) known to be openly LGB within HEIs was also read by respondents as an implicit signal that sexual orientation is a barrier to progression in the sector.

While LGB students would like LGB staff to 'come out' and to provide formal support by mentoring LGB or LGBT student societies and individual LGB students, LGB staff are

generally reluctant to do so because of concerns about how to manage the boundary between their professional and personal relationships with LGB students. Coming out can create a hostile environment in the classroom that makes it harder for some students to learn and can provoke a backlash towards the member of staff concerned, making them vulnerable to harassment or complaints from homophobic students or inappropriate crushes from LGB students.

How equality is currently promoted in HEIs

HEIs are increasingly conscious of the need to demonstrate their commitment to equality through strategies including increasing the diversity of senior management teams and representing the diversity of the staff/student body in marketing materials. However, the ECU research identified an absence of LGB staff and students from many of these forms of representation. Moreover, examples such as the selection of chancellors and the award of honorary degrees to individuals who have publicly expressed homophobic views, were regarded by some of the research participants as evidence of the implicit endorsement of homophobia by particular institutions.

The extent to which there are established LGB or LGBT support groups for staff and/or students, and visible LGB 'role model'/mentors on campus varies widely between universities. The ECU staff survey also revealed a lack of awareness among respondents of policies, rights and support offered by their HEI in relation to sexual orientation and equality.



Over a third (37.1 per cent) of LGBT staff reported that they did not know if their institution has a written policy that addresses discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, nearly a half (47.9 per cent, n=719) stated that they did not know if there was a supportive procedure for reporting homophobic harassment/discrimination in their institution and nearly two-thirds (63 per cent, n=945) did not know if there was a supportive procedure for reporting biphobic harassment/discrimination.

The ECU research identified that the HE sector has been slow to communicate the implications of recent legal changes to staff and students (for example the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2003) which prohibit direct or indirect discrimination, victimisation or harassment on the grounds of sexual orientation; and the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2007) which

means it is unlawful for anyone providing good, facilities, services or managing premises to discriminate against a person on the grounds of sexual orientation. For example, almost three-quarters (72.2 per cent) of LGB staff respondents to the ECU survey did not know if their institution offered bereavement, adoption and maternity/paternity leave to lesbian/gay civil partners; and almost a quarter (24.3 per cent, n=639) of LGB students reported that they are not aware that there is a legal framework that protects them from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation/trans status at their HEI.

Only 4.4 per cent (n=119) of students and 4.3 per cent (n=65) of staff respondents to the ECU surveys said that their institution carried out regular attitudinal surveys about the experiences of LGB students/staff. This poor level of consultation with LGB staff was contrasted unfavourably with that perceived to be accorded to ethnic

The experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual staff and students in higher education



minority groups, disabled staff and women staff. In general, the majority of the respondents to the ECU survey believed that equality issues related to sexual orientation were treated less seriously by their institution than race (53.3 per cent, n=782, of LGB staff) and disability (51 per cent, n=748, of LGB staff). The focus groups suggested that there was a lack of proper resourcing for equality training within the HEI sector and that equality staff commonly have less grasp of LGB issues compared to those relating to the other equality strands, which some respondents suggested may reflect the longer standing legal obligations HEIs have had to address discrimination in relation to race, gender and disability.

The ECU qualitative research identified particular emerging tensions between LGB and faith groups in the HE sector. Difficulties can arise where faith and LGB groups come together in public spaces on

campus such as students' unions. Tensions between staff/students of faith and those who are LGB were also identified in teaching spaces and in student accommodation. The challenge for HEIs is how to deal with the complex relationships between LGB and faith groups/individuals on campus in ways that ensure that the values and practices of both groups are respected, while neither group feels unfairly treated or discriminated against.

Recommendations to emerge from respondents to the ECU research to improve the delivery of equality and diversity policy in relation to sexual orientation included the need for all HEIs to establish and fund staff LGB groups/networks and to create LGB staff mentoring systems akin to those employed in some UK HEIs in relation to gender – a practice apparently already modelled in some American institutions.

Participants in the qualitative research suggested that it is particularly important that universities are proactive in providing this information through internal communication strategies including: induction procedures, equality and diversity training, email distribution lists and web pages, because staff and students who are not 'out' may be too fearful or uncomfortable to ask a line manager or HR contact personally for this information. Moreover, inclusive strategies represent sound business sense. The ECU survey found, for example, that sexual orientation was a factor in the choice of institution for 14.7 per cent of LGB students.

Summary and implications

- The LGB population of staff and students in higher education is currently unknown because no national data is collected about sexual orientation through application and monitoring forms or surveys by UCAS, HESA and HEFCE. Yet such data is gathered in relation to most other equality strands, namely: age, disability, ethnicity, and gender (though excluding religion and belief).
- The HE sector is behind some other public sectors in relation to gathering national data about its LGB staff and student populations. It needs to learn from other sectors' experiences of monitoring sexual orientation.
- The systematic collection of data about sexual orientation in the HE sector is crucial because it is not just a private matter, it has public consequences. This is demonstrated by the findings of the ECU research about the experiences of LGB staff and students in HEIs which uncovered a range of evidence of the negative treatment of LGB staff and students, and both explicit and implicit discrimination within HEIs.
- Unless UCAS, HESA and HEFCE collect data on sexual orientation it will not be possible to: measure (in)equality in relation to sexual orientation; identify problems that need to be acted on and where these may be arising (ie in relation to which categories of staff/ students and which types of institution or location); and assess the impact of any changes in the sector, such as the delivery of new equality policies or the effectiveness of targeted support or service delivery.
- It is the responsibility of UCAS, HESA and HEFCE to take a lead on the monitoring of sexual orientation. There is a legal, moral and business case for doing so.
- The ECU research identified that about 50 per cent of LGB staff and students may initially be reluctant to disclose such information because of a lack of trust in the sector in relation to the motivation for collecting this information and how the data may be stored and used. The sector therefore needs to develop strategies to gain the confidence of its LGB staff and students to maximise the reliability of data gathering on sexual orientation. It can do this by learning from the experience of other sectors, as well as by drawing on the expertise of organisations such as Stonewall and that of its own academic staff with research interests in the field of equality and diversity.

- The response of the HE sector to equality in relation to sexual orientation is perceived by LGB staff and students to be unfavourable compared to its response to other equality strands, most notably disability and race. In addition, the ECU research has identified emerging tensions between LGB and faith communities/individuals on campus that need to be proactively addressed.
- In addition to monitoring sexual orientation as described above, the evidence of the ECU research is that HEIs could improve the position of LGB staff/students by: recognising LGB students' informal estrangement from parents as grounds to receive hardship funds; being sensitive to the need to maintain the privacy of students' lives and identities in all communication with parents; creating safe spaces within accommodation networks to support LGB students to be fully integrated with other students; providing more formal support for LGB students and training for staff about the type of issues that may affect LGB students' academic attendance, performance and participation rates; providing more and better equality training in relation to sexual orientation including improving communication about the recent legal changes; establishing effective support networks for LGB staff and students; including LGB images and issues in representations of HEIs (eg prospectus, websites etc.) and addressing the lack of senior staff and members of governing bodies who are openly LGB.

Endnote

ⁱ Not all student respondents to the survey came into contact with tutors, lecturers or accommodation staff (for example some are mature students living in their own homes, or postgraduates who do not attend lecture classes). The statistics presented here do not include respondents who ticked not applicable to this survey question.

References

- ECU (2009) *The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans staff and students in higher education*. London: ECU <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/lgbt-staff-and-students-in-he>
- NASUWT (2003) *Tackling Homophobic Bullying*. Birmingham: NASUWT www.nasuwt.org.uk/consum/groups/public/@equalityandtraining/documents/nas_download/nasuwt_000233.pdf
- Silverschanz, P., Cortina, L.M., Konik, J. and Magley, V.J. (2007) *Slurs, Snubs, and Queer Jokes: Incidence and Impact of Heterosexist Harassment in Academia Sex Roles* (2008) 58:179–191.
- Stonewall (annual) *Workplace Equality Index*. London: Stonewall. www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1477.asp
- Stonewall (2007) *The School Report: The Experiences of Young Gay People in Britain's Schools*. London: Stonewall. www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/school_report.pdf
- Stonewall (2008a) *Serves You Right: Lesbian and Gay People's Experiences of Discrimination*. London: Stonewall. www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/servesyouright.pdf
- Stonewall (2008b) *The Double-Glazed Glass Ceiling: Lesbians in the Workplace*. London: Stonewall. www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/2430.asp

Contacts

England

Arndale House
The Arndale Centre
Manchester M4 3AQ

Helpline:

Telephone
0845 604 6610

Textphone
0845 604 6620

Fax
0845 604 6630

Scotland

The Optima Building
58 Robertson Street
Glasgow G2 8DU

Helpline:

Telephone
0845 604 5510

Textphone
0845 604 5520

Fax
0845 604 5530

Wales

3rd Floor
3 Callaghan Square
Cardiff CF10 5BT

Helpline:

Telephone
0845 604 8810

Textphone
0845 604 8820

Fax
0845 604 8830

Helpline opening times:

Monday to Friday: 9am-5pm

If you require this publication in an alternative format and/or language please contact the relevant helpline to discuss your needs. All publications are also available to download and order in a variety of formats from our website:

www.equalityhumanrights.com

© Equality and Human Rights
Commission

Published October 2009

ISBN 978 1 84206 219 7

Designed by Studio North
www.studionorth.co.uk

This summary provides new insights into LGB data collection in higher education (HE) and presents findings from an ECU funded qualitative and quantitative study covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland, to offer authoritative evidence into the experiences of LGB staff and students in HE.

What is already known on this topic

- Studies of lesbian, gay and bisexual people's experiences in schools suggest that homophobia is still rife in these educational environments.
- Until the ECU research, there had been little or no evidence as to whether equality legislation has altered LGB staff and students' experiences of, or perceptions of, barriers and opportunities within the HE sector at a national level.

What this paper says

- The ECU research is the most comprehensive study of the experiences of LGB staff and students in HE to date.
- HEIs are a relatively positive space in the lives of the majority of LGB 'traditional' undergraduates (i.e. those aged approximately 18–21), representing new environments where young people are better able to define their own adult sexual identities away from the childhood contexts of school and family life where many have encountered homophobia.

- Sexual orientation is notably absent from **all** of the information collected by UCAS about student applications, HEFCE about student satisfaction with courses, and HESA about enrolment and leavers' destinations (as is data on religion and belief).
- Half (49.5 per cent) of LGB students reported significant levels of negative treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation from fellow students and a third (33.8 per cent) of LGB staff reported similar treatment from colleagues.
- 15 per cent of LGB student respondents stated that they fear losing financial support if they come out to their parents about their sexual orientation. The parents of 4.9 per cent of LGB student respondents refused to provide financial support for them as specified by their Local Education Authority assessment.
- The findings may contribute to explaining why 20 per cent of LGB respondents to the student survey reported having taken time out of their courses.