

# The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff and students in higher education

Research report 2009



Equality Challenge Unit

# Foreword

Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) supports the higher education sector to promote equality and diversity for all staff and students. This involves working with higher education institutions to develop a shared understanding of the challenges that the sector faces.

To date, there has been little research conducted into the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) staff and students in higher education, and a variety of contrasting views have been expressed about the need for work in this field. This report draws on research commissioned by ECU to build an authoritative evidence base of the actual – rather than perceived – experiences of LGBT staff and students.

The report shows unequivocally that, while higher education institutions provide a very positive space for many LGBT students, there is a real need for the sector to engage with this equality area and to review how it provides support for, and addresses discrimination against, LGBT staff and students.

Using this report, ECU will work in partnership with the higher education sector to identify how best to address the issues outlined.

# Equality Challenge Unit

The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff and students in higher education  
Research report 2009

## Contents

Executive summary – key findings	1
1 Introduction	6
2 LGBT students' experiences of higher education	9
3 LGBT staff experiences of higher education	28
4 Teaching, learning and the curriculum	40
5 Monitoring for sexual orientation and trans identity	44
6 Representation, consultation, communication and training	49
7 Sexual orientation and faith	59
8 Making complaints	63
9 Implications	66
10 About the study	67
References and useful sources	70

**This report was researched and written by Professor Gill Valentine and Dr Nichola Wood, University of Leeds and Professor Paul Plummer, University of Calgary**

## **Acknowledgements**

Equality Challenge Unit would like to thank the members of the steering group who gave generously of their time and expertise to shape the research and this research report:

- = Seth Atkin, University and College Union
- = Rehana Azam, GMB
- = Susan Botcherby, Equality and Human Rights Commission
- = Lucy Brookes, National Union of Students
- = Barbara Bush, London School of Economics, UPA nominee
- = Matt Evans, Kings College London
- = Professor Jeff Frank, Royal Holloway
- = Mark Gittoes, Higher Education Funding Council for England
- = Ruth Hunt, Stonewall
- = Lesley Mansell, Loughborough University
- = Darren Mooney, University of Chester
- = Professor Mustafa Ozbilgin, University of East Anglia
- = Tamsin Piper, Unite
- = Paula Shelley, Universities and Colleges Employers Association
- = Geraldine Smith, National Union of Students
- = Carola Towle, UNISON
- = Harri Weeks, University of Manchester.

Special thanks are extended to Professor Gill Valentine, Dr Nichola Wood and Professor Paul Plummer for their dedicated and professional approach to this research.

## **Contact**

Chris Hall, Senior Policy Adviser  
Email: [chris.hall@ecu.ac.uk](mailto:chris.hall@ecu.ac.uk)

## Executive summary – key findings

To date, there has been little research about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) staff and students in higher education. This report addresses this lack of knowledge, and aims to support the higher education sector by identifying where efforts can be best placed to develop this part of the diversity agenda.

The findings are based on an analysis of 4205 responses to an online survey disseminated to LGBT staff and students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. There were 2704 LGBT students, 781 LGBT support staff and 720 LGBT academic staff respondents to the survey, which was supplemented by 12 focus groups with LGB staff and students and 18 individual interviews.

Equality Challenge Unit will be consulting with the sector in spring 2009 to determine how the issues identified can best be addressed.

This summary presents some of the key findings of the research.

### **LGBT students' experiences of higher education**

Higher education provides an important space where LGBT students are able to 'be themselves' and establish an independent adult identity away from the childhood contexts of school and family life.

The majority (90.2%) of LGB students are out to their university friends, but almost two-thirds are not out to tutors (61.3%) or lecturers (64.3%) as they fear discrimination.

15% of LGB students and 34.8% of trans students fear losing financial support if they come out to their parents about their sexual orientation or trans status.

The parents of 4.9% of LGB students and 7.1% of trans students refuse to provide financial support for them as specified by their local education authority assessment. A further 3% of LGB students and 9.2% of trans students are, in effect, estranged from their parents, but do not know how to prove this legally and so receive no financial support.

## Executive summary – key findings

LGB students reported significant levels of negative treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation, from fellow students (49.5%), tutors/lecturers (10.4%), and those who work in other areas of their HEI (10.6%).

Trans students encountered higher levels of negative treatment than LGB students. Almost a quarter (22.6%) of trans students have been bullied or discriminated against since starting university.

Trans students experience particular anxiety about whether staff and students in their HEI will use their preferred/correct gender pronoun and whether they will be prevented from using the toilet appropriate to their preferred/acquired gender.

Some LGBT students described how banal forms of negative treatment lead to stress or loss of confidence, and self-exclusion from specific spaces within the university. 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% of LGB students and 28.5% of trans students have taken time out of their course.

### **LGBT staff experiences of higher education**

Just over a third (38.6%) of LGB staff are out to 'everyone'.

Some LGB staff are concerned about being out because of employment security and discrimination; fears that students might respond in homophobic ways; and anxieties that an LGB identity might compromise their research agenda.

Experiences of discrimination reported by LGBT staff included systematic institutional discrimination and implicit discrimination in relation to promotions, discretionary pay rises and redundancies. 23% of trans staff and 4.2% of LGB staff reported that they have been denied a promotion due to their trans status or sexual orientation.

LGB staff reported significant levels of negative treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation from colleagues (33.8%), students (18.9%), and those who work in other areas of their HEI (25.3%).

The levels of negative treatment reported by trans staff were higher than that reported by LGB staff. Trans staff reported particular problems with changing personal details on institutional records; being asked not to use toilets or changing facilities that are appropriate for their preferred/correct gender; and misunderstandings of the duties imposed on HEIs by the presentation of a Gender Recognition Certificate.

LGB staff reported experiences of covert discrimination through exclusion from social networks. It was suggested that this can have an impact on professional development, as these networks provide informal occasions for consultation, information about work-related opportunities, and the development of research networks.

### **Teaching, learning and the curriculum**

Students value lecturers being out in the classroom and, where appropriate, using LGBT examples or materials. This gives students confidence that the institution respects LGBT equality.

The LGB student focus groups revealed a desire for LGB staff to act as formal mentors and to become involved in supporting and developing student groups. While some LGB staff recognise that by coming out they provide a role model for both LGB and heterosexual students, such openness is not always well received by students, and can raise concerns for LGB staff about how to manage the boundary between professional and personal relationships.

### **Monitoring for sexual orientation and trans identity**

The majority of HEIs do not currently monitor the sexual orientation of their staff or students.

Just over 50% of LGB staff and just under 50% of LGB students do, or would if offered the opportunity, self-identify as LGB to their HEI. The figures were much lower for trans respondents, with only a third of trans staff and 40% of trans students being willing to disclose their trans status to their HEI.

Reluctance to disclose sexual orientation or trans status reflects staff concerns that the data will be linked to employment records, students' anxieties over disclosure

## Executive summary – key findings

to parents, and worries about data security. Some trans respondents also stressed that it is inappropriate for HEIs to ask those who have a Gender Recognition Certificate about their trans status.

The research identified an important need for HEIs to win the trust of their LGBT staff/student community before attempting to monitor staff/student sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

### **Representation, consultation, communication and training**

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 research identified an absence of LGBT staff and students from many of these forms of representation.

Inclusive strategies represent sound business sense. The survey demonstrated that sexual orientation and/or gender identity was a factor in the choice of institution for 14.7% of LGB and 23.7% of trans students.

The survey revealed a lack of awareness among staff respondents of LGBT policies, rights and support offered by their HEI. Over a third (37.1%) of LGBT staff do not know if their institution has a written policy that addresses discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Almost two-thirds (61.8%) of LGBT staff do not know if a policy exists in their institution to address discrimination on the grounds of trans identity.

Almost three-quarters (72.2%) of LGB staff do not know if their institution offers bereavement, adoption and maternity/paternity leave to lesbian/gay civil partners.

41.3% of staff do not know if their HEI has an LGBT group for staff; 59% of staff do not know if their union has a workplace LGBT group; and 42.3% are unaware if their trade union has a national LGBT group.

Over 50% of LGB and trans staff think that equality issues related to sexual orientation and/or trans identity are treated less seriously than race and disability by their institution. Likewise, over 50% of trans students and over a third of LGB students think that trans and sexual orientation issues, respectively, are treated less seriously than race and disability in their HEI.

### **Sexual orientation and faith**

The research identifies particular emerging tensions between LGBT and faith groups in the HE sector.

Difficulties can arise where faith and LGBT groups come together in public spaces on campus, such as students' unions. Tensions between staff/students of faith and those who are LGBT were also identified in teaching spaces and in student accommodation.

The challenge for HEIs is how to deal with the complex relationships between LGBT and faith groups/individuals on campus in ways that ensure the values and practices of both groups are respected, while neither group feels unfairly treated or discriminated against.

### **Making complaints**

A small minority of LGB staff (2.8%) and trans staff (8.2%) either have made (since 2003), or are in the process of making, a complaint against their employer on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity. 3.2% of LGB students and 5.4% of trans students either have made, or are in the process of making, a complaint against other students or staff.

The focus groups indicated a lack of awareness about where to obtain support or how to take forward a complaint.

# 1 Introduction

The past five years have seen a series of legal changes extending the rights of, and providing new protections for, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people. This legislation includes:

- ⇒ the **Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2003)**, which prohibit direct or indirect discrimination, victimisation or harassment on the grounds of sexual orientation
- ⇒ the **Gender Recognition Act (2004)**, which allows unmarried trans people who can fulfil the Act's evidence requirements to seek full legal recognition in their acquired gender
- ⇒ the **Civil Partnership Act (2005)**, which introduced rights for lesbians and gay men who register as couples
- ⇒ the **Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2007)**, which make it unlawful for anyone providing goods, facilities or services, or managing premises, to discriminate against a person on the grounds of sexual orientation.

This new legal landscape has implications for the higher education sector (guidance for employers in the sector can be found at [www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk)). But research suggests that attitudes to minority groups do not always evolve in line with legislative frameworks. Studies of LGBT people's experiences in schools suggest that homophobia is still rife in these educational environments (NASUWT 2003; Stonewall, 2007) and that LGBT people still expect to experience discrimination in many workplaces (Stonewall 2008a, 2008b).

To date, there has been little research about the experiences of LGBT staff and students in higher education at national level (although see DTI *et al.*, 2006). Although many institutions have taken steps to support these groups, there has been little coordination or sharing of information about such initiatives.

This report addresses this lack of knowledge by outlining the findings of an Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) study of LGBT staff and students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup> It draws on an evidence base of 4205 online survey responses (2704 LGBT students, 781 LGBT support

---

1. Scottish HEIs are not included in this study as Scotland has its own independent body – Equality Forward – which promotes equality in Scottish higher education.

staff and 720 LGBT academic staff) as well as 12 focus groups with LGB staff and students (supplemented by an additional 10 interviews to explore the experiences of mature students, postgraduates and senior staff) and eight in-depth interviews with trans staff and students.

### **Aim of the research**

The aim of this research is to support the higher education sector by identifying what, and where, efforts can be best placed to develop this part of the diversity agenda. This is especially pertinent given that the proposed new Equality Bill may extend equality legislation on sexual orientation to bring it in line with the protections and rights afforded to the other equality areas. This will require a focus by HEIs on issues affecting LGBT staff and students, including the anticipated introduction of a 'positive' duty on the sector to promote equality for LGB staff and students.

This report considers the experiences of both LGB and trans staff and students. But it is important to recognise that although the forms of prejudice and discrimination faced by trans people are often similar to those experienced by LGB people, and that for those identifying as LGBT there can be a blurring of the boundaries between issues of gender and those of sexuality, for others there is a very clear distinction. Many trans people are heterosexual and see themselves as having little in common with the LGB community. The surveys on which these findings are based allowed trans respondents who identified as LGB or heterosexual to follow different routes through; the findings from the LGB and trans research are sometimes integrated in this report, and sometimes explored separately.<sup>2</sup>

It is also important to recognise that there is a great deal of diversity in terms of how individuals self-identify (particularly in relation to gender and sexuality) within both the LGB and transgender communities. Some trans respondents preferred to identify themselves as agendered, polygendered, non-gendered or gender queer, while others wished to identify as simply male or female. In this report 'trans' is used

---

2. The surveys also allowed other groups of staff and students to be routed past some questions, which were not relevant to their experience of higher education. For example, postgraduates did not answer questions that were specifically designed to capture undergraduate experiences. This means that sometimes the statistics presented in this report are referring to specific groups of staff and students, not the total number of respondents. For this reason, where a statistic is quoted the number of respondents is also given in brackets.

## Introduction

as an inclusive term for those who identify themselves as transgender, transsexual or transvestite. It serves as an umbrella term to describe those undergoing gender transition; those who identify as having a gender different from that of their birth, and who may or may not have decided not to undergo medical treatment; and those who choose to present themselves in clothing typically worn by the other sex. The term 'acquired gender' is used by the Gender Recognition Act to refer to the current gender in which a trans person is living permanently. The term 'preferred gender' refers to the gender a trans person identifies as, but may or may not live in permanently.

## 2 LGBT students' experiences of higher education

Higher education is a very important and positive space in the lives of the majority of LGBT 'traditional' undergraduates (those aged approximately 18–21). It represents a new environment where young people are able to define their own adult gender and sexual identities away from the childhood contexts of school and family life. This is especially pertinent given that homophobia is still commonplace in many schools (Stonewall, 2007). This LGBT student survey revealed, for example, that 42.4% of LGB respondents (1114) and 38.7% of trans students (72) had been bullied at school.

You wouldn't even dream of telling like even your friends that you were gay 'cause of the amount of like stick you would have got for it, and I can even imagine the teachers being really anti-gay as well.

[coming to university it's] so much more comfortable to be out and I didn't have stupid people shouting things at me any more. And it was just a lot better and no one cared, but in school it was a bit hellish.

*LGB student focus group*

Many LGBT students are reluctant to come out to their parents about their sexuality or preferred gender identity while living at home full-time, both out of concern that they may be rejected by their family, and also out of a desire to protect their parents from the emotional hurt or disappointment that they anticipate such a revelation will cause. 52.9% (1390) of the LGB respondents were not out to anyone when they were at school, and 66.7% (124) of trans students did not present themselves in their preferred gender at school.

### **A space for coming out**

In contrast to the school environment, HEIs have traditionally been imagined as liberal spaces. In the LGB student focus groups and trans interviews, notwithstanding some experiences of homophobia and discrimination, the majority of participants described their institution as providing a crucially important space in their life, away from the family home and childhood/school friendship networks, which had enabled them to 'be themselves' by coming out as LGB or trans to their peers and establishing an independent adult identity. In particular, HEIs were acknowledged as cosmopolitan spaces that generally

## LGBT students' experiences of higher education

promote tolerance, where differences in terms of sexual orientation and trans status are commonly accepted. Social spaces in students' unions were identified as much safer environments in which to be openly gay than everyday public spaces and even than wider LGBT community spaces, which might be subject to targeted homophobia. Where LGBT students did encounter prejudice and discrimination from their peers, most were readily able to draw on support from other LGBT students and/or avoid the reoccurrence of these situations because of the range and diversity of spaces and social networks available on campus. Many of the LGB focus group participants described how they have grown in confidence since entering their HEI, which perhaps explains why 20% (525) of the LGB survey respondents reported that they had come out to their parents since starting their higher education studies.

Speaker 1: Uni's just generally recognised as a place where you can just be yourself. If you haven't had a chance to be before. And there's like so many different types of people from different backgrounds ...

Speaker 2: You can be that person that you've always wanted to be and maybe you haven't been in the past. And that's why it's easier to come out when you're at uni because if you were at school then people would already have, like you know, pre-thoughts on who you are, and then you're, like, having to challenge that. Whereas if you come to university ... it's a clean slate.

*LGB student focus group*

Similarly, going to university enables many trans students to live in their preferred gender for the first time, away from their parents, local community and family GP practice.

I decided I wasn't ready to talk to my parents about that yet. I decided I would ignore it. Well, not ignore it, but leave out the NHS and the sort of doctors and the whole route you're meant to go down, until I was at first year of university. When I came here I realised, you know, living without my parents at the moment, sort of as an adult in my own right, and I spoke to a very nice doctor here who took me seriously.

*Trans student interview*

### **Fear of discrimination**

While the majority of LGB students (90.2%, 2190) are out to their university friends, most are more cautious about being out to staff within their institution. 61.3% (1400) are not out to tutors; 64.3% (1316) are not out to lecturers; and 72.8% (1105)

are not out to accommodation staff.<sup>3</sup> There are statistically significant relationships between undergraduate year group and being out, and between student age and being out. First-year students are less likely to be out to their director of studies/tutor, and in students' union societies than other year groups. Mature students are less likely to be out to friends at university and fellow students in tutor groups and lectures, but are more likely to be out to their director of studies/tutor.

While some LGB students in the focus groups argued that sexual orientation was a private matter, which they choose not to disclose because it is irrelevant to their academic life, others have concerns that they may encounter discrimination from staff, albeit in ways that sometimes draw on ageist stereotypes.

Speaker 1: I don't think I'd be entirely comfortable with that [coming out to HEI staff] 'cause I mean it's a bunch of strangers and if it's on your file or whatever ... I mean these are people that, you know, are going to be in charge of your accommodation or in charge of your lectures or your education, that sort of thing. I'd be afraid of some bad reactions ...

Speaker 2: I would be kind of worried about, you know, people kind of finding out before they got to know me and, you know, judging me ... I don't like people saying well, you know this girl's gay and you know, typical stereotype.

Speaker 3: Yeah. 'Cause there's a lot of lecturers that are older, and older people you see can be a bit prejudiced against it [*sic*] ... And I would be afraid of that, about not getting helped ...

Speaker 4: Yeah I'd be the same ... exams are anonymous so I wouldn't be worried too much about my marks in the exam, but for coursework I'd be very worried about some of the people in the [department] that would mark me down for it. So [that's] probably why I'd never come out.

*LGB student focus group*

### Homophobia within different disciplines

The LGB student survey revealed statistically significant relationships between students' negative experiences and the disciplines in which they are studying. For example, there were statistically significant relationships between LGB students' experiences of homophobic/biphobic comments and verbal abuse by tutors/

---

3. Not all student respondents to the survey come into contact with tutors, lecturers or accommodation staff (e.g. some are mature students living in their own home, or postgraduates who do not attend lecture classes). The statistics presented here do not include respondents who ticked 'not applicable' to this survey question.

### Box 1 What is preventing you from being out?

*Survey responses from mature LGB students*

- = As a distance learner, I rarely encounter my fellow students, it doesn't come up so I don't really need to mention it, however I am very out otherwise, at work and socially.
- = I don't have enough contact with them to actually say, and also I am married so people naturally tend to assume I am straight.
- = Social restraints. There is discrimination on many more levels than this survey has covered so far. For starters, it is still assumed, first and foremost, that one is straight. From then on it's basically an obstacle course, or a strategic game of choices.
- = Contacts with some other students are too brief to discuss personal matters at all.
- = Depends on how much you know that person – higher levels of contact mean more chances to talk about personal circumstances.
- = From past experience, I find it easier for others to relate to me if they presume I'm straight. If the subject were raised in conversation, I would never deny my sexuality.
- = I am a distance learner and have so far hardly any contact with others. If I would get to the point where I discuss personal details (like I went on holiday with my girlfriend) I could, and would, say so. So far I just talk about course content.
- = There is no real need to discuss this with the people I study with. I have an active social life that I have built up over the years.
- = Bisexuality is an invisible sexuality if you are in a monogamous relationship with the opposite gender. Makes it harder to come out without looking like a bit of an attention-seeker!
- = I just don't see that many people, as I am a distance learner. I have never mentioned it at tutorials – purely because the subject has never come up: I never really get to know people well enough to discuss my personal life.
- = I was publicly outed by a fellow student in my first year, so being out to the student body wasn't my choice.
- = I'm an older female in a mainly young male faculty – a particularly awkward situation. I would disclose if asked directly, I am 100% out in every other area of my life except to my elderly mother.

lecturers in medicine and dentistry; veterinary sciences; agriculture and related subjects; engineering; business and administration studies; European languages; literature and related subjects; and education. These statistics are supported by some of the open-ended comments on the online survey, which indicated a particular concern about disciplinary homophobia in medicine and related health subjects, such as nursing and midwifery (see Box 2). In addition, the open-ended comments also suggest that some students perceive that in some cases the religion or belief of a staff member may influence how they respond to LGBT issues.

### **Box 2 Why do you feel unable to come out on campus?**

*Comments from LGB student survey*

- = I'm afraid of discrimination.
- = You can't tell at first if lecturers are homophobic – I want to check.
- = Perceived heterosexism and lack of understanding about bisexuality – people do like to pigeonhole one way or the other.
- = The atmosphere at my university is incredibly homophobic.
- = It may affect my grades.
- = I don't want to risk my future career by concerning someone with my sexuality when it is not necessary.
- = I don't want to be 'labelled'.
- = I don't want it to hurt me professionally.
- = I'm a medic, and most older consultants/lecturers and closed-minded medical students are simply not gay-savvy.
- = I am studying to be a nurse and feel that my sexuality will compromise this, as a lesbian nurse does not seem to be looked upon favourably within the healthcare profession.
- = I worry that it might cause comment because of the course I am doing, midwifery.
- = Medicine is a homophobic subject.
- = Fear of religion-oriented bullying.
- = Lecturer made it clear that he disapproved of homosexuality for religious reasons during lecture.
- = Tutor is strongly Christian.

### Financial dependency

Despite the opportunities that HEIs provide for LGBT students to define their own independent adult identity, most students either remain financially dependent on their parents, or receive financial assistance based on an assessment of their parents' income. 15% of LGB students (118) and 34.8% of trans students (16) stated that they fear losing financial support if they come out to their parents about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Speaker 1: My Mum's very, very religious and I know she wouldn't approve. And my Dad just makes jokes about it [homosexuality] all the time ... So I can't imagine ever coming out to them until, you know, I'm financially secure and got a house of my own and, you know, if they have a problem with it then I don't have to deal with it [laughs] ... .

Speaker 2: Yeah. I know a few people whose parents found out and threatened to, you know, disown them and who might, you know, take away their privileges and stuff until they've, you know, seen sense and became straight.

*LGB student focus group*

Obviously, with planning to transition and everything, it's probably quite a good idea for me to tell my parents at some point ... but there's the fact that they are very Catholic and they're quite homophobic and transphobic. And basically I think they might cut me off. And as you're probably aware the estrangement provisions at the moment are a load of crap, so that's a bit of a worry.

*Trans student interview*

For a minority of students, these fears are well founded. The parents of 4.9% (105) of LGB student respondents and 7.1% (10) of trans student respondents have refused to provide financial support for them as specified by their local education authority assessment. 3% (63) of LGB students and 9.2% (13) of trans students are in effect estranged from their parents but do not know how to prove this legally, and so are receiving no financial support (for more information on estrangement see NUS, 2008). A minority of LGB (13.6%, 292) and trans (18.7%, 28) student respondents had sought support from their institution's hardship funds. Of those who applied for institutional help in this way, 19.5% of LGB students (57) and 42.9% of trans students (12) have had their application rejected. While only a few of the LGBT participants in the qualitative research had been financially cut off by their parents or denied support from hardship funds, others were aware of personal friends or fellow LGBT group members who had had such experiences, or had had to become

legally estranged from their parents as a result of their sexual orientation/gender identity so that they could receive local education authority support. Awareness of the negative experiences of this minority of LGBT students, disseminated through peer group social networks, can have a wider impact on LGBT students coming out to their parents.

My Muslim friend who came out to his family, they've basically disowned him [on the basis of their religious belief]. And like, obviously, you know that's a really horrendous situation, and I definitely think in that sort of situation, you know, formal help should be provided. And I know a few other friends who say that they're too scared to come out to their parents because of fear that ... It's not just monetary, it's emotional as well, they'd definitely fear the consequences and it does cause them lot of anxiety.

*LGB student focus group*

On the application form, it says which parent do you normally live with, mother, father, both, neither? ... And then it says, we'll assess your claim based on the parent you normally live with, and I thought well, it's surely neither ... Three months later, nothing had happened. So I phoned them up and they said 'oh we're waiting for your parents' financial details' ... And I said 'but I don't know, I don't know if they'll even fill the form in, 'cause my Mum probably would but my Step-dad...' It turns out he did in the end. Well, Mum filled it in and got him to sign it. But I said to them, 'I don't know if he'll agree to sign something that's going to benefit me.' And they said 'oh you might have a case for estrangement then,' which would mean I'd get thousands of pounds a year to live on, which would be really good. And then they phoned me back an hour later and said it turns out that you can't be estranged from a step-parent.

*Trans student interview*

In this context, several LGB and trans informants described how they plan to wait until they are in employment and are financially independent before coming out to their parents. However, this creates problems for some LGBT students in terms of managing the boundary between their identity at home and their identity at university. One of the main reasons why some students are reluctant to come out about their sexual orientation or trans status on university admission or monitoring forms (see section 5), to university accommodation and welfare services, or to academic staff, is a fear that their LGBT identity might accidentally be revealed to their parents through formal or informal contact between the HEI and its staff, and their parents.

## LGBT students' experiences of higher education

I'm not out to my family, so that's mainly the reason I haven't said anything to my course mates, I suppose, because some of my course mates are friends from back where I grew up, and I'm not sure I trust them to keep their mouths closed ... I mean, the only thing is it getting back to my parents, that's just what I don't want ... I mean, once I'm settled by myself, I'm not relying on them for anything, then I probably will tell them, but I mean I still go home at Christmas and they still help me out now and then doing stuff, so I'm happy as I am doing it like this.

*LGB student focus group*

My family don't know. For me it's a massive big deal 'cause of the whole religion thing. 'Cause, to be gay, I mean, it's just not allowed ... That's what they say. So my family don't know at all ... couldn't even imagine just telling them ... I could never be open about it to my family ... When I was in my first year I was worried all the time, thinking, like, who's driving past [gay clubs]. 'Cause lots of taxi drivers know my elder brothers and my Dad 'cause my brothers know the Asian community [here] really, really well ... And there's not that many Asian gays as well in [city] ... Like, at home I'm kind of one way and with my friends at uni I'm a different way ... there's certain things that I'll wear or dress or talk like at home, that would, like that I wouldn't do at uni, and *vice versa*.

*LGB student focus group*

I remember when I was a first year in halls of residence, they put me in a dormitory of all girls ... But I mean it wasn't somewhere that I was feeling particularly comfortable at that point ... On the forms that we were sent coming into university, when we were in first year, there was no, you know, can you be dormed with people with the same gender, opposite gender, for religious reasons, blah-blah-blah-blah. And there was no opportunity to discuss any other issue, you know ... I mean I was tempted to sort of ring them up and discuss it with them, but as I was at the time living with my parents, I couldn't ... risk it ... there wasn't an opportunity to do it 'cause my Mum was dealing with all of the forms and everything ... I didn't want her to be told that way ... I think certainly with some of the forms, then it would be a good idea to have that sort of option, you know, to let people know that perhaps you do want different circumstances, you know, you want to make sure that your tutors have had sensitivity training or whatnot ... especially when you are moving into university from living in a situation with other family members, parents, that might not know.

*Trans student interview*

While many LGBT students have a very supportive family, the focus group participants and interviewees described a number of negative and painful experiences when they had come out to their family or been 'outed' in wider neighbourhood or faith-based communities.

I just wrote, I'm having a sex change. Handed it to my Mum. And I could tell in her face she knew. I could see exactly what she was thinking. ... And then she walked out. She didn't come back for a day. ... Within a week I had a text from her saying you need to come home because I've told your Step-dad and he wants to speak to you. I got home. All of my stuff was out on the front lawn. He went absolutely crazy.

*Trans student interview*

Yeah, I don't like going home 'cause ... There's a really scummy estate at the back of my house, and you know, they found out I was gay and then started throwing things over the walls. They smashed the windows. My parents eventually stopped paying to get the windows done. They've actually just boarded them up 'cause it's cheaper ... They're still abusive, still horrible. Every time I go home and they see me, they renew it. I was attacked by one of them at the bottom of my street and he went to jail for it.

*LGB student focus group*

### **Negative treatment on campus**

The survey revealed that LGB students experience significant levels of negative treatment from fellow students, tutors/lecturers, and those who work in other areas of an HEI (Table 1).

There are statistically significant relationships between all the above kinds of discriminatory behaviour by students, and age. Those aged 16–25 were more likely to report experiences of negative treatment because of their sexual orientation (homophobic/biphobic comments and verbal abuse, threatening behaviour and physical and sexual abuse). There was also a significant relationship between being treated negatively by tutors/lecturers on the grounds of sexual orientation, and age. Here the reverse pattern was evident, with mature students more likely to report that they had been treated negatively by lecturers/tutors.

There are statistically significant relationships between LGB students' negative experiences and their place of study, which indicate that HEIs in specific types of location may need to focus more on particular issues. Those in Welsh and Northern

Table 1 Percentage of LGB students who experience negative treatment						
	Treatment by other students		Treatment by tutors/lecturers		Treatment by workers in other areas of HEI	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Had been treated in a negative way because of their sexual orientation	49.5	1300	10.4	234	10.6	278
Had received homophobic/biphobic comments	46.8	1228	8.9	234	9.2	241
Had encountered homophobic/biphobic verbal abuse	31.0	815	2.8	73	3.9	103
Had encountered threatening behaviour	15.2	400	1.4	38	2.0	52
Had experienced physical abuse	6.7	175	1.0	27	1.1	29
Had experienced sexual abuse	3.7	98	1.1	30	1.0	25

Irish HEIs were more likely to have experienced homophobic/biphobic comments and verbal abuse from fellow students; and LGB students studying in Wales were more likely to report being treated negatively by their tutors and lecturers. LGB students from rural HEIs were more likely to report that they had been treated negatively by fellow students, and received homophobic/biphobic comments and verbal abuse from their peers. Similarly, LGB students in post-1992 HEIs were more likely to report that they had been treated negatively by other students and their tutors/lecturers, and that they had received homophobic/biphobic comments, verbal abuse, threatening behaviour and physical abuse from fellow students.

Research on hate crimes (Herek and Berrill 1992) suggests that lesbians and gay men are more likely to be attacked in gay-identified spaces (such as outside gay pubs, in well known cruising areas) than in everyday public spaces. It has been argued that this is because these spaces identify LGB people as a visible target for homophobia. This well established relationship between LGB visibility and

experiences of homophobia offers one possible explanation for why LGB students who study in 'gay-friendly' locations<sup>4</sup> were more likely to report that they have been bullied or discriminated against since they started university/college. Similarly, these students are also more likely to be treated negatively by other students and tutors/lecturers. This is further supported by the experience of a student who had completed his undergraduate degree at a rurally based campus HEI and then moved to an HEI in a gay-friendly city to start a postgraduate course. He observed that he actually felt safer in the close-knit environment of the rural campus institution, because the conduct of those on site can be policed more easily by the HEI.

I think at a campus university, where there's not much of a gay scene in the town, I think people need that connection if they want to meet people, but not so much in a place like [gay-friendly city]. I don't think ... I wouldn't blame it on the university itself, but I'd say [rural campus university] felt safer because you were sort of in the campus bubble, where everyone was a student. You know that everyone is bound by the non-discrimination rules etc., whereas here the university's a lot more spread out and you haven't got the same feeling of it as a campus bubble.

*LGB postgraduate student interview*

### **Effect on attainment**

The percentage of LGB students who felt that tutors discriminated in ways that directly affected their attainment was low (only 1.7%, 45, felt they were awarded lower marks, and 3%, 78, that they received less advice or support with their studies because of their sexual orientation). Nonetheless, some focus group participants described how more indirect/banal forms of negative treatment – particularly by their fellow students – led to stress or a loss of confidence, which affected their concentration or ability to study. Of the LGB student respondents to the survey, a small minority (6.2%, 164) have been made to feel uncomfortable in a tutorial or supervision; 13.1% (344) bullied or discriminated against since starting university; 11.4% (299) made to feel uncomfortable by other students in group work; and 4% (104) made to feel uncomfortable by other students during a field trip or study abroad.

---

4. HEIs located in cities with well established and prominent gay scenes; the definition does not relate to whether the institution itself might be perceived as gay-friendly.

### Students' unions

Although students' unions were generally described as supportive spaces, two participants described negative experiences in these spaces, where security staff had acted inappropriately by removing LGBT students who were being harassed because they had kissed or danced together, rather than removing the perpetrators of the homophobia.

There was an incident where a friend of ours ... He was in the Union one night with his boyfriend at the time and they were kissing and whatever, and they were actually thrown out. And obviously, well he's on the LGBT committee here, and so he took this further and apologies were made and, you know, they did say it shouldn't have happened, but at the end of the day he was still embarrassed in front of all those people and thrown out for doing something everybody else was doing.

*LGB student focus group*

### Self-exclusion

While students reported that in most cases they still experience their institution as a positive space, because they can escape homophobia by avoiding problematic students, this commonly means they have to self-exclude themselves from specific spaces within the university, or avoid coming out in university spaces perceived to be potentially homophobic/biphobic. For gay men, this is most notably sports clubs/societies and military groups such as officer training corps (OTC), spaces associated with assertive masculinity, where homophobia may be commonplace. Overall, 62.9% (645) of LGB respondents to the student survey reported that they are not out in sports societies.

LGBT students with a religion or belief which they feel does not approve of their sexual orientation often felt they had to avoid their religious student society.

#### **Box 3 If applicable, what is preventing you from being out?**

*Comments from open-ended questions on the student LGB survey*

- = I do martial arts, which involves coming into close proximity with other males, and they may find it uneasy if I came out, even though they have nothing to worry about.
- = As a member of the OTC, the male-dominated, traditional, military environment is not particularly favourable towards homosexuality.

Muslim students who self-identify as LGBT explained that they did not want other Muslim students to see them with LGBT individuals/groups. This was described as particularly problematic in HEIs with a large Muslim population, as this makes it difficult for LGBT Muslim students to access LGBT student events in the union without being observed by other students from their faith community. In one institution where the research was conducted, which is located in a community with a strongly conservative Christian tradition, this experience of being under surveillance was also shared by Christian LGBT students. Here, the student focus group claimed that the LGBT society cannot have a visible presence in the students' union because of concerns that some LGBT students might be too fearful of being outed by association to attend events.

Speaker 1: They don't even have gay nights ... the union doesn't really do them.

Speaker 2: So we're organising a night next year because people don't go because it's LGBT. And we've had to team up with someone else, another group.

Speaker 1: Yeah, like we're not calling it the LGBT night because people just won't go and people will turn up to see who's gay, you know. So it can't even be called that ... so it's got to be like a music night or something, you know.

*LGB student focus group*

### **Student accommodation**

The space where students have least ability to adopt the tactic of avoidance is in student halls of residence or housing. This is an issue that arises particularly for first-year students because most have little or no choice about the accommodation to which they are allocated, whereas students in subsequent academic years can potentially choose where, and with whom, they live.

Several focus group participants described encountering severe homophobic abuse in university/college accommodation, in one case resulting in the police being called to deal with homophobic violence, and in another resulting in a student becoming homeless. In most cases, these incidents had been reported to the institution concerned. In the examples above, the institution's response was to offer to move the LGB student who was being harassed to alternative accommodation, rather than addressing the matter with, or moving, the perpetrators. In each case the LGB students concerned felt they were, in effect, being further victimised by the institution because they, rather than the perpetrators, would face the disruption and inconvenience of moving, and in

## LGBT students' experiences of higher education

some cases would be located in inferior/less convenient accommodation, so they had chosen to stay in housing situations where they were encountering discrimination on a matter of principle. Some of the focus groups suggested that accommodation forms should enable students to request 'gay-friendly' housing – although it was also acknowledged that this should be phrased in such a way that LGBT students did not necessarily have to 'come out' by requesting this type of accommodation. The issue of student accommodation was also a concern for the trans student interviewees. This was because of the way accommodation is commonly allocated on the basis of gender; and sometimes requires the use of shared bathrooms. Students were concerned, however, to stress that they did not want to be segregated in LGBT-only housing, but rather that HEIs should work to create safe spaces within their accommodation network to support LGBT students to be integrated fully with other students.

Speaker 1: I've had some trouble. I had to move out of my house

Speaker 2: Actually yeah the halls of residence were a bit kind of scummy in the first year. I got stuck with homophobic people ... You know, when you apply for the student halls, I reckon they should actually ask orientation so that, like, you don't get stuck with people who might be abusive, 'cause I was incredibly uncomfortable. My housemates wouldn't speak to me and so I ended up basically moving into [student's] kitchen.

Facilitator: So what happened? I mean, were you in a shared house or a hall?

Speaker 2: Yeah, shared house with five people, and only one of them would actually speak to me ... so I thought well, yeah, don't really want to be with these people, they make me feel uncomfortable. I spent a lot of time either shut up in my room or as far away from them as I could get ...

*LGB student focus group*

[They should consider] safety for trans students in halls. Like don't put a trans student in a single-sex flat or in a single-sex accommodation. And, like, don't make them use communal showers and stuff ... I wanted to be in a self-catered hall that was in little flats, but I ended up, like, in a massive catered hall. It was pretty much like a boarding school ... But I think if trans students have, like, special accommodation needs like their own en-suite bathroom and stuff, I think that should definitely be taken into account ... the floors sort of alternated, boy, girl, boy, girl. I found that, like, the friendship groups that formed were quite sort of gendered, and I didn't really, like, fit into that at all.

*Trans student interview*

### **Box 4 Do you ever feel informally excluded in your university/college as a result of your sexuality?**

*Comments from open-ended questions on the student LGB survey*

- = Flatmates on campus in year one were mostly male, and never stopped making jokes or asking stupid or graphic questions about my bisexuality – I never wanted to be social with them because of this.
- = Generally not wanting to be associated with me in class practicals, many people make comments within earshot, to make sure I'm aware I'm not welcome. Excluded from many social situations.
- = Sometimes not invited to parties with straight couples, and the homophobic boys leaving a party or gathering when I turn up, or not willing to talk to me in front of other people.
- = No-one ever asks me any sport-type questions. Never included/invited to five-a-side games. Also, no-one ever asks me what I have been doing.
- = A group of fellow students, who I get on well with in class and treated 'as a friend' in class, never invite me out when they go out.
- = I don't receive invitations to social events, and am frequently excluded from gatherings for lunch or at coffee breaks.
- = Once people find out that I am gay, they assume that I don't want to go to the pub or watch football with them, and if I do, I get comments like, you are only watching the football so you can perv at the footballers' legs.
- = Before I came out to other male students in my university-provided accommodation, I was treated no different, as 'one of the lads'. Since coming out, it has been apparent that I am expected to go out with the girls and will enjoy their company more.
- = In my department, especially, I feel that people don't really understand that homosexuality exists, and it's a bit of a taboo subject so some are almost scared of me!
- = Flatmates are more unwilling to invite me out with them because they assume that because I am bi, I must fancy all of them.
- = Social events all presume one is heterosexual. Example: a student society held a 'get-to-know', a fresher event in which men would pick a bolt (as in hardware) from a jar and women a nut (as in hardware), with the idea that one would strike up conversations.

### Informal exclusion

In addition to negative experiences in student accommodation, LGB students also described a range of experiences of banal discrimination and informal exclusion (see Box 4). There is a statistically significant relationship between experiences of informal exclusion and age. Students aged 22–25 (the common age at which to undertake a taught or research postgraduate degree) were more likely to report experiences of informal exclusion.

### Transphobia

Trans students have encountered higher levels of negative treatment than LGB students, and disturbingly high levels of threatening behaviour, physical abuse and sexual abuse – particularly from other students (see Table 2).

Of the trans student respondents to the survey, 22.6% (42) have been bullied or discriminated against since starting university; 17.2% (32) have been made to feel uncomfortable in class by lecturers; 12.4% (23) have been made to

**Table 2 Percentage of trans students treated in negative ways**

	Treatment by other students		Treatment by tutors/lecturers		Treatment by workers in other areas of HEI	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Had been treated in a negative way because of their trans status	47.3	88	28.5	53	24.7	46
Had received transphobic comments	42.5	79	19.4	36	17.2	32
Had encountered transphobic verbal abuse	29.6	55	12.9	24	12.4	23
Had encountered threatening behaviour	22.6	42	5.9	11	8.1	15
Had experienced physical abuse	11.3	21	4.8	9	5.4	10
Had experienced sexual abuse	8.6	16	5.4	10	5.4	10

feel uncomfortable in a tutorial or supervision; 17.2% (32) have made to feel uncomfortable by other students in group work, and 9.1% (17) have been made to feel uncomfortable by other students on field trip or study abroad. A higher percentage of trans than LGB students also reported that they felt they were awarded lower marks (5.4 compared with 1.7%), and received less advice or support with their studies because of their trans status (7.5 compared with 3%).

In the interviews, trans students described common experiences of being stared at and gossiped about.

Sometimes it upsets me because, like ... people do stare, you know. I think some people think I'm a lesbian. Some people think, like, I'm a weird man ... And I can tell there's a lot of people, like, in straight and gay communities who don't really want to befriend me.

*Trans student interview*

... so I started uni in September, obviously, by December, you know, there'd been a lot, a lot of rumours going round, you know, what is it, let's follow it to the toilet, and stuff like that. You know, just silly things like that used to really, really upset me. And then there was a group of girls that would continuously just slag me off, and my friends would say no, leave him alone. And it got to a point where I just thought, you know what, I'm going to tell it how it is. So in one of the seminars, I just went up the front and I said to the seminar leader, I said right, I'm speaking ... and I just said to everybody, you know, I'm not here for you to gawk at, I'm not here to answer your negative questions, but if you want to know stuff, then ask me nicely and don't talk about me behind my back because it gets back to me.

*Trans student interview*

For trans students, the extent to which they can 'pass' as their preferred/acquired gender after transition affects whether they encounter discrimination and negative treatment. Transitioning takes a long time. In the initial stage – prior to hormone treatment and surgery – it is often difficult for students to pass successfully as their preferred gender. In particular, their voice (especially on the telephone in the absence of visual markers of gender) can fail to reflect a trans students' preferred identity.

Some interviewees suggested that those in the process of transitioning, or who have already transitioned, experience less discrimination because they are becoming one gender or the other; whereas there is less understanding of those who occasionally present in their preferred gender (such as those who cross-dress)

## LGBT students' experiences of higher education

because their identity falls outside binary understandings of gender. Likewise, some interviewees also argued that those who transition from male to female may encounter more discrimination than those who transition from female to male, because they are giving up male privilege, which men in particular find hard to understand, and because there is less media recognition and stereotyping of female to male transitions. For many, including those who can pass as their preferred gender, maintaining the secret of their history is of crucial importance.

None of the people that I've moved in with this year, none of them know and they haven't got a clue I'm trans. It's wicked. Nobody's got any idea whatsoever ... I get really paranoid to go in the kitchen just in a T-shirt just in case they see. No one's looking. Nobody knows. Nobody's got a clue. And at the same time, it really, really makes me anxious 'cause I think, well, what if they do find out and then I get home and they've trashed my room or stolen all my food or whatever.

*Trans student interview*

Trans students experience particular anxiety about whether they will be referred to by staff and fellow students by their preferred/correct gender pronoun, and whether they will be prevented from using the toilet appropriate to their preferred/acquired gender.

I've complained about the toilet situation, I've felt, like, intimidated to go into the men's toilet, and I didn't feel comfortable in the women's toilet either. You know, nothing's ever really done. They just say, oh, use the disabled toilet.

*Trans student interview*

Like LGB students, trans students also reported numerous experiences of informal exclusion.

I mean, I don't feel I could join the men's hockey team or something like that, because I'm not really a man. And then I couldn't really join the woman's hockey team, 'cause I'm too strong still, if you know what I mean. I don't know. And I don't think they would fully accept it, or like it either. So, I mean, I think it's one of the things it's more ... to make yourself comfortable.

*Trans student interview*

Because I know there was a lecturer at [university] who was male to female, and I heard some of the, I don't know the lady at all, but I heard some of the staff talking about it and referring to her by the wrong gender and being very derogatory ... I think it's a horrible way to treat people.

*Trans student interview*

### **Box 5 Do you ever feel informally excluded in your university/college as a result of your preferred/acquired gender?**

*Comments from open-ended questions on the student trans survey*

- = Lack of gender-neutral toilets, so I alternate and make people feel uncomfortable, I'm not generally invited to boys' things or girls' things, and if I am invited and attend, I feel weird being where I shouldn't be and not being treated like I socially belong.
- = A lack of gender-neutral toilet facilities makes some events awkward due to presentation. Plus, I do not know of any other trans students.
- = People aren't really as accepting of trans people and don't seem to understand why it is you are that way. I don't feel comfortable to present myself as I would like in some circumstances because I am worried about being excluded because of it.

### **Suspending studies**

Such accounts perhaps contribute to explaining why 20% (524) of LGB students and 28.5% (53) of trans students have taken time out of their course. These figures are higher than the national average, and suggest a need for the sector to provide more formal support for LGBT students, and training for HEI staff about the need to be sensitive to the types of issue that may affect LGBT students' academic performance.

### 3 LGBT staff experiences of higher education

Of the LGBT respondents to the staff survey, 89.4% (1313) are out to at least a few people in the workplace, but of these, 38.6% (567) are out to 'everyone', and only 31% (455) are out to 'most people'. There is a statistically significant relationship between age and being out. Early-career staff (those aged 16–34) are less likely to be out in their HEI than older staff.

#### Barriers to coming out

The focus groups identified three main barriers to coming out, which are also reflected in some of the open-ended comments made in the staff survey. Firstly, concerns about employment security and discrimination – here, staff on fixed-term contracts and early-career staff on probation perceive that by coming out they may prejudice the possibility of having their contract made permanent, extended or renewed. This observation appears to be supported by evidence from the LGBT staff survey, which identified a significant relationship between type of employment contract and being out in the workplace – staff on fixed-term contracts are less likely to be out. Notwithstanding the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation Regulations) 2003, a number of staff expressed concern that they might encounter prejudice and discrimination in their institution.

Well, as a new member of staff, it's really hard to, kind of, get to know what, like, LGBT organisations that I could join ... 'Cause when I was a student it was so easy, but as a member of staff I would be really afraid of my position to, you know, I might ... my contract might not be renewed if I cause trouble ... if I came out.

*LGB staff focus group*

I'd be happy enough to be out as a student, but as a professional, kind of working your way into an actual job, you would play it a bit more safe.

*LGB staff focus group*

Secondly, regarding teaching and pastoral issues, concerns were expressed by LGBT focus group participants that coming out widely within the institution might make it more difficult to fulfil pastoral roles and responsibilities with students; and/or that students might respond in a homophobic way towards out LGBT staff in both formal contexts (e.g. awarding them poor teaching scores, challenging them in

lectures) and informal contexts (e.g. malicious gossip, false accusations). Some LGBT staff who have research expertise in queer issues deliberately chose not to teach on their research specialism in order to avoid implicitly outing themselves or attracting hostility from students.

I also don't teach on the areas in which my PhD was, which was around kind of queer health ... Well, I know that one, it immediately outs me, which I don't necessarily have a problem with, except that I teach 300 medical students and, you know, it's quite an intimidating group to teach ... as a group, I struggle to teach anything with them around diversity.

*LGB staff focus group*

I'm not out overtly ... I'm in the job partly because I really value the sort of pastoral side of the work on ... well, as much as teaching and research. And so my accessibility to the students who come to me for all sorts of different things is very important. And that's why I'm not out, because I know that for some students it would be a problem to know me to be gay. And I regret that, but I live with it. I cope with it.

*LGB staff focus group*

Thirdly, research agendas – staff with research interests in areas where an LGBT identity might compromise their ability to carry out empirical research with relevant communities, work with key stakeholders, or have credibility in particular academic fields are commonly circumspect about their sexual orientation or gender identity in order to protect and develop their research career. This issue was raised particularly by focus group participants working in the fields of medicine, theology and religious studies, and Islamic studies.

I'm doing some research myself with Muslims ... I mean, it's absolutely impossible to come out where I am now, because I imagine that people wouldn't talk to me, you know, if I was out ... it would be difficult to get a lot of trust from the Muslim community ... so there's just no way to be gay when you're kind of in religious studies.

*LGB staff focus group*

### Box 6 What prevents you from being out at work?

*Comments from open-ended questions on the staff LGB survey*

- = It's unclear what the positive benefits of being out are, and there are possible (never acknowledged) negative repercussions.
- = Office gossip, promotion potential.
- = Fear of students' reactions.
- = I was told not to tell people, since others have been bullied.
- = This is my first time in a same-sex relationship and I am not really sure how to deal with telling people at work, some of whom regularly joke about such things.
- = General fear of being joked about.
- = Possible derogatory comments and negative perspectives.
- = Fear of homophobia from students.
- = Fear of stereotyping.
- = Having outed myself in the past at two different employers, I've lost my job shortly afterwards.

### Negative treatment on campus

One staff focus group described systematic institutional discrimination towards LGBT staff and students within the institution. The participants argued that there was an underlying culture of homophobia throughout the institution, which stemmed in part from its Christian mission statement, and was perpetuated by the senior management team. They provided examples of when they perceived they had been discriminated against in relation to promotion, research and teaching.

Speaker 1: Being consistently sidelined when it comes to promotions. Having my research dismissed, or barriers constantly being put up whenever I try and do anything that's to do with queer studies, which is my area. Just general attitudes from certain managers, who treat me slightly differently to other members of staff, especially if problems arise ...

Speaker 2: So what I found is something similar to what [name] has said. Definitely, promotion is blocked. Definitely, you are turned down for positions even though you are, ... the most qualified, even more than qualified. You could

be simply turned down with no real acknowledgement as to why that's the case. And what I'm finding at the moment is that getting into any managerial position or senior position where you actually wield power is extremely difficult ... I've been blocked at every turn. ...

Speaker 1: Within the faculty, there is definitely a structure which oppresses LGBT staff, definitely.

*LGB staff focus group*

Other focus groups did not describe their experiences as evidence of systematic institutional discrimination in the same way (and only 7%, 103, of LGB staff survey respondents stated that their HEI was quite or very homophobic/biphobic). Nonetheless, concern was also expressed by other LGBT staff in both the survey and qualitative research about implicit discrimination in relation to promotions, discretionary pay rises and redundancies, and about whether HEIs would instigate spousal hires<sup>5</sup> if a potential employee had a same-sex partner. For example, 23% (14) of trans staff and 4.2% (62) of LGB staff reported that they had been denied a promotion; and 11.5% (7) of trans staff and 2.9% (42) of LGB staff stated they had been denied an increment, bonus or discretionary payment.

... being a gay man, I'm much quieter than my heterosexual counterparts, who would be more forthright in asking and demanding ... in some ways, I've held myself back a little bit ... I know there are a number of people who are on the same grade as I am and are higher up that grade who are heterosexual and are less experienced and less qualified ... but that would be in my nature as a gay man. I'm a bit soft, and I wouldn't be as pushy [lacks confidence to challenge it ... suspicion because he's not a family man].

*LGB staff focus group*

... there is a kind of invisible hierarchy of men with families to support ... and those without families to support, and kind of single women, you know, coming right down the bottom of the list ... That sense that you're not really serious about your work ... you don't need it as much as the married man with the family. And certainly when there's cuts and redundancies and things, there's a kind of oh its terrible for such and such, they've got kids going through school, and blah de blah. And you think well, yeah, it's pretty terrible if you're a single lesbian, actually, you know, the cat will not support me.

*LGB staff focus group*

---

5. Increasingly, HEI professionals are part of dual career couples. A 'spousal hire' occurs when an HEI offers a successful job applicant employment for their spouse or partner, as an incentive for them to accept the post.

## LGBT staff experiences of higher education

The LGBT staff survey revealed patterns according to gender. In particular, among respondents there was a statistically significant relationship between being male and being denied promotion, an increment, bonus or discretionary one-off payment, and being treated negatively by colleagues (in terms of homophobic comments and verbal abuse, threatening behaviour and physical abuse). There was also a statistically significant relationship between being male and being out in the workplace. Taken together, these results indicate that gay men may be more likely to experience discrimination in these ways because they are more visible in higher education. This finding was further supported by some of the LGBT staff focus groups, where it was argued that lesbians can 'pass' or have their identity unintentionally read by others as heterosexual, even when colleagues see them with their partner, because culturally it is less remarkable for two women to have a close/intimate friendship (e.g. to be tactile or affectionate with each other in public, or to share a house) than for two men, and it is also more common for lesbians than for gay men to have children. Stonewall's (2008c) research with lesbian and bisexual women about their experiences of a range of different workplaces also found that many women can hide their identity as lesbian if they want to.

The survey revealed significant evidence that LGBT staff experience negative treatment from work colleagues, students, and those who work in other areas of their institution. These figures exceed broadly similar statistics in relation to racial harassment experienced by minority ethnic staff in Carter *et al.*'s (1999) study of *Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education* (survey questions were phrased in a similar but not identical way); and they are significantly higher than broadly similar statistics for experiences of discrimination on the basis of age reported in Manfredi's (2008) study of age diversity in the higher education sector (although the questions were not worded identically).

There are statistically significant relationships between where LGBT staff work, and reports of discrimination. Staff employed in Northern Irish HEIs, and those who work in rural HEIs and campus-based HEIs, are all more likely to be treated negatively on the grounds of their sexual orientation by current work colleagues, students and others working in their institution. In addition, LGBT staff in rural HEIs are more likely to feel informally excluded in their current place of work.

**Table 3 Percentage of LGB staff who experience negative treatment**

	Treatment by work colleagues		Treatment by students		Treatment by workers in other areas of HEI	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Had been treated in a negative way because of their sexual orientation	33.8	496	18.9	277	25.3	371
Had received homophobic/biphobic comments	31.7	466	19.2	281	20.9	307
Had encountered homophobic/biphobic verbal abuse	11	161	8.2	120	6.5	96
Had encountered threatening behaviour	4.4	64	3.7	55	2.5	36
Had experienced physical abuse	1.0	15	0.9	13	0.7	11
Had experienced sexual abuse	1.5	22	0.7	11	1.0	15

## Homophobia

The most common form of discrimination reported in the LGB staff focus groups was banal homophobic remarks. These had either been directed at individuals who participated in the focus group, or had been overheard being directed towards, or commenting about, others. The participants claimed that homophobic remarks are rarely considered unacceptable or challenged by other staff in the way that they anticipate, or have witnessed, colleagues responding to banal racist or disablist comments. 47.1% of the staff respondents to the survey (706) agreed or strongly agreed that abuse, harassment and bullying towards LGBT staff are dealt with as serious disciplinary offences at their institution.

I don't feel confident about being fully open within my department because there is banter ... in a Chris Moyles sense.

*LGB staff focus group*

## LGBT staff experiences of higher education

Students that come in to me to say about something, and they go 'that's so gay'. I pull them up and say 'oh, are you homophobic?' ... 'Cause I'm not going to have them stand there and have them say that to me.

*LGB staff interview*

My line manager ... but for sort of five years I would get constant questions about my health ... the sort of implication was that, you know, because I'm gay, maybe I have AIDS or HIV ...

I've had, at a previous institution, I had staff making quite intrusive, inappropriate, repulsive comments ... Like, about my partner at the time. Either questions about his masculinity, that they thought he was a bit butch, bit masculine, about the fact he wasn't, kind of, incredibly effeminate. And so they made comments about his gender in that sense, which is deeply homophobic. And at the same institution I got questioned about what kind of sex you have ...

*LGB staff focus group*

## Transphobia

The level of negative treatment of trans staff reported was higher than that reported by LGB staff. In particular, the trans survey respondents identified high levels of actual physical and sexual abuse from students, work colleagues, and those working in other areas of the respondents' institutions. Trans staff also reported that 23% (14) of those who have transitioned have not been formally addressed in their acquired gender in communications with their employer; 13.1% (8) of trans staff have been asked to not use the toilets or changing facilities of their preferred or acquired gender; and a small minority (4.9%, 3) reported that students made no effort to refer to trans staff in their acquired/preferred gender. One trans staff interviewee described the academic labour market as, in effect, transphobic.

What I have found is, in academia generally, I cannot get shortlisted for a job, never mind appointed for a job. I have seen people get jobs with CVs that don't compare with mine and I've not even been shortlisted for it. I've had direct responses from senior staff at other universities ... the Vice-Chancellor really doesn't want the university associated with you. I actually got some compensation this year from one university whose V-C threw my application in the bin. I'd been headhunted for the post. Threw it in a bin and made a filthy joke about bearded ladies and cunnilingus. And I happen to know that because someone at another university was on the appointment committee and rang me up ... I really didn't want to go to an employment tribunal with it, though I could have done and the person concerned was willing to give the evidence [on my behalf]. But I felt it would damage any chance of me ever moving on.

*Trans staff interview*

For trans staff, changing their personal details (e.g. name and gender) on all institutional records is an important part of the transition. Prior to the introduction of the Gender Recognition Act (2004), institutions routinely changed people's details on production of a doctor's note. However, since the introduction of the Gender Recognition Act, some HEIs are mistakenly under the impression that names, gender or pronouns cannot now be changed without a gender recognition certificate (Whittle *et al.*, 2007). This is not the case. Moreover, there is a general misunderstanding within HEIs of the duties imposed on institutions by the presentation of a gender recognition certificate.

I said I've actually just got my Gender Recognition Certificate, I would like you [talking to HR] now to go and purge those records from when I first worked here in the 1970s ... you can go through with a black pen ... why don't you just get shot of them? And she went right, yes, yes, I've read it [the Gender Recognition Act]. Put the phone down. Five minutes later, I get a phone call from the head of Human Resources saying congratulations. And she just hadn't got the idea that my Gender Recognition Certificate imposed all sorts of duties upon them. And that certainly, you know, certainly from doing training recently, people cannot grasp the extent of that responsibility, you know ... to ensure non-disclosure.

*Trans staff interview*

### **Lack of support**

Generally, focus group participants suggested that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia towards staff are not taken seriously within the higher education sector, and remain part of everyday culture. 37.1% of LGBT staff respondents (557) did not know if their institution has a written policy addressing discrimination against LGB staff; 47.9% of staff respondents (719) did not know if there was a supportive procedure for reporting homophobic harassment/discrimination in their institution; and 63% (945) did not know if there was a supportive procedure for reporting biphobic harassment/discrimination.

Likewise, 61.8% of LGBT staff respondents (928) did not know if their institution has a written policy addressing discrimination against trans staff; and 63.6% (954) did not know if their institution has a supportive procedure for reporting transphobic harassment/discrimination.

This lack of knowledge deters some LGBT staff from accessing support within the institution. Many of the LGB staff who participated in the focus groups, for example,

**Table 4 Percentage of trans staff who experience negative treatment**

	Treatment by work colleagues		Treatment by students		Treatment by workers in other areas of HEI	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Had been treated in a negative way because of their trans status	41	25	39.3	24	42.6	26
Had received transphobic comments	34.4	21	27.9	17	32.8	20
Had encountered transphobic verbal abuse	27.9	17	23	14	26.2	16
Had encountered threatening behaviour	23	14	13.1	8	16.4	10
Had experienced physical abuse	4.9	3	8.2	5	6.6	4
Had experienced sexual abuse	8.2	5	8.2	5	6.6	4

either lacked the confidence to report the incidents they recalled, or stated that their comments had been dismissed as insignificant by a union or HEI.

People haven't been speaking out about issues ... people are so silent all the time and think any homophobic remarks ... would go unreported, and they just feel there's nothing they can do, that's just the way it is, and this is the way they live it.

*LGB staff focus group*

### Unspoken discrimination

More subtle forms of homophobia reported in the qualitative element included LGBT staff being advised not to pursue research interests in queer studies, and to remove publications based on LGBT research from their CV on the basis this may lead to them being discriminated against.

I was on a fixed-term contract and there was a [permanent] job I applied for when I was here, and at the time somebody advising me on my application

suggested that I take out a whole tranche of publications because they were very clearly writing on lesbian topics, writing for lesbian journals and newspapers, and I just thought oh come on, you know, if that's going to make a difference I don't want to work here.

*LGB staff focus group*

Many focus group participants also suggested that they experience covert discrimination that is not openly articulated. This was most often described in terms of exclusion from social networks. The surveys revealed that 29.5% (18) of trans staff and 14.2% (209) of LGB staff feel informally excluded in their current place of work. Research participants suggested that such experiences matter, because it is through informal social networks that colleagues are often informally consulted or sounded out about workplace decisions, and there are potential professional consequences of not being part of such networks (not being consulted, missing out on work-related information and opportunities, being excluded from research networks). Yet the participants argued that such experiences of informal exclusion are hard to prove or challenge, precisely because they are not widely visible.

There are informal cultures around work, and I think there are ... implications around that. The sense of those, kind of, invisible colleagues, if you like, of people who get consulted and thought about when, you know, people are being selected to do certain things.

*LGB staff focus group*

Speaker 1: I think my experience here is ... I've seen how intertwined social and research networks are. And, you know, you get invited to take part, say, in a publication or some sort of project by knowing somebody socially. So your research network can suffer if you're excluded ... I mean, in all the time that I've been here, I've never been invited to any extramural get-togethers ...

Speaker 2: Well, as you say ... I'm aware there's lots of kind of social stuff that goes on behind my back, but because I keep out of it, then actually I'm probably keeping myself out of research networks, which I'm always surprised at how connections happen.

*LGB staff focus group*

Speaker 1: ... [it's] the latent stuff which is actually much more difficult to deal with than comments to your face ...

Speaker 2: ... the most difficult thing I've found is countering all of the unspokenness and the sort of attitudes and the sort of, you know, all the stuff that isn't said is somehow there, that's so difficult to deal with or counter.

*LGB staff focus group*

### **Box 7 Do you ever feel informally excluded in your current place of work as a result of your lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity?**

*Comments from open-ended questions on the staff LGB survey*

- = Heterosexism is rife. Marriage and heterosexual relationships are the norm and widely celebrated. My relationship is rarely talked about in similar terms because my partner is also a woman.
- = Collections for gifts for straight but not gay weddings; recognition of family time for straight but not not-straight couples (exploitation of gays and singles 'because they don't have kids and they have more time to do the work').
- = My immediate boss is very heterocentric and has refused me leave to support my partner in the past, therefore I do not feel able to bring any future partner to work events.
- = My partner is a member of the university's Senior Management Board, and as such is invited to frequent social events for the university. While other heterosexual managers' partners are invited, I, generally, am not.
- = I am made fun of at Christmas parties, I haven't been invited to anyone's house.
- = Many social events, such as dinner parties, which are important locations for establishing a place in senior management (in a department or the institution) are only open to heterosexual women, mostly those with high-achieving husbands. AKA heterosexual privilege.
- = When I got married last year to my partner of 10 years, I was a bit disappointed that it was not treated in the same way as a heterosexual marriage by fellow management team members, e.g. a card or something. I just think it didn't occur to them.
- = A feeling of discomfort around my sexuality. My boss [a Pro Vice-Chancellor] knew I went through a civil partnership, but it was never mentioned. At the same time, biographies of colleagues always tend to mention that they are 'married to a lovely wife'.

Beyond experiences of banal homophobia and exclusion, respondents also raised concerns about the everyday heteronormative nature of HEIs, which has unintended consequences for some LGB staff. In particular, family-friendly policies that provide flexible working hours for parents (heterosexual or same-sex) were described by some informants as being applied within their institution 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 relationship invisible in the workplace.

I'm very wary of the family-friendly policies. I do believe that my colleagues who have children get a lot more flexibility in their work, which I can't take advantage of ... colleagues are taking long, long breaks in summertime whenever I'm still on campus, and someone has to pick up that work.

*LGB staff focus group*

Likewise, formal institutional events such as staff festivals, some university staff functions and formal events (such as invitations to the Vice-Chancellor's house for drinks for professors and their spouses), as well as everyday coffee room cultural practices of marking marriages, births, and so on, also unintentionally produce a heteronormative culture that is experienced by LGB staff as exclusionary.

Speaker 1: Like the staff festival we had, and that was very, you know, bring all your family, and I was really disappointed with how the university marketed that. And also when I actually went to the festival, it was awash with kids ... don't get me wrong, I like kids and stuff, but ... there wasn't any space for other people ... there wasn't even any kind of effort made to accommodate other kinds of viewpoint and other different lifestyles.

Speaker 2: I would agree with you. It was, like, very family values, and you know, not alternative family values. It was very, sort of, heteronormative.

*LGB staff focus group*

There was one of our colleagues, she set up home with her partner ... and was actually quite upset that nobody would acknowledge it ... there was all this fuss about somebody getting married, and cards being bought, and we had to sign, and it didn't happen for her and she was quite upset ...

*LGB staff focus group*

Focus group participants recognised that there was a lack of understanding about LGB lifestyles, particularly sex-positive, non-monogamous culture, which meant that even when heterosexual staff do attempt to talk to LGB colleagues about their personal lives, they constantly do so from a heterosexual frame of reference.

## 4 Teaching, learning and the curriculum

The extent to which sexuality and trans issues are evident in the curriculum, or acknowledged in classroom discussions or through the practices of staff and students, varies widely according to discipline.

The use of LGBT examples or materials is highly valued by students in arts, humanities and social science subjects. Some focus group participants described their frustration when curricula acknowledged feminist and black perspectives, but ignored a queer studies perspective; or at the lack of LGBT academic literature/journals available at their HEI.

One of the things I like about doing history is that ... here it's incredibly modern. It focuses on feminism and on women's role in history. It tackles a gendered approach to history. It's got a racial approach to history. We study slavery. We study black and minority ethnic things ... We've got a very modern, leftist view of a lot of subjects in history, but we don't cover trans history or LGB history. We don't look at either of those.

*LGB student interview*

Likewise, students value lecturers being out in the classroom. This creates space for students to express their own identity, and gives them confidence that the institution respects LGBT equality, and that it is safe to come out. Some students actively seek out LGBT staff with whom to discuss their personal problems. The LGB student focus groups also identified a desire among some students for LGBT staff to act as formal mentors, and also to become involved in supporting and developing LGBT student groups. The majority of LGBT students (92.5%, 2500) reported that they do not have an LGBT mentor at their university or college and, where they do have a mentor, this is most likely to be a fellow student or someone from the students' union/welfare services.

I sort of get comfort from it a little bit because it's, sort of, like, it's nice to just sort of notice that, you know, gayness is sort of normal, and sort of around all areas ... basically the vast majority of people grow up in a pretty heteronormative environment, so it's nice when it, sort of, filters down for your, sort of, life.

*LGB student focus group.*

Having tutors who are [LGB], I mean, I think it's nice 'cause it sets a relaxed atmosphere there. 'Cause then, if the tutors are allowed to be open and free about their sexuality, then why can't the students? And it takes away that, like, 'oh my god, what do you mean, you're gay?'. Well, she's gay as well, so she's living a successful life, you know, she's a lecturer, why can't I be gay?

*LGB student focus group.*

In turn, LGBT staff feel some responsibility to pay attention to whether there are LGBT students on their modules, and to use LGBT examples or readings. Many staff also recognise that by coming out, they provide a role model both for LGB students, and for those heterosexual students who assume they do not know any bisexual people, lesbians or gay men. Yet such openness is not always well received by students, as demonstrated by the survey results about negative treatment of LGBT staff by students (see sections 2 and 3). The focus groups also elicited examples of a range of negative responses, from minor sniggering through to more outright hostility.

I had a horrible incident in a lecture theatre when, in my lecture, I touched on abortion, euthanasia, finally came to gay marriage. And I had Islamic students start to shout me down [on the grounds of belief] and one of them stood up and just gave me this huge diatribe, how I was a disgrace to the human race, I did appalling things by having children, you know, how dare I bring these children into the world? ... I felt it was a very serious incident, mostly because, in fact, it had a real impact on lesbian and gay students. We didn't have any trans students in the hall at that point, but we ... regularly have them because they've come because I'm here, and they therefore think it would be a safe space.

*Trans staff interview*

In a previous job I ... would do quite a bit of classroom teaching as well. So the whole lecture theatres would get some sniggering and stuff like that ... And there would be some comments there.

*LGB staff focus group*

So I will bring lesbian writers, gay writers. And kind of promote and argue, you know, a discussion at the moment about difference ... It's gone horrendously wrong in other settings, where I've had really very difficult situations with students, one of whom ended up kind of ... well, she acted very badly to the inclusion of some lesbian fiction books in the book box, and actually threw it across the classroom in a sort of rage ... And so, to her I said well, you know, you have very strong feelings about this so I have to tell you that, you know, one of your teachers is a lesbian. And she ... went through this 'oh I always thought such and such was a ... [general laughter]. No, no, no [laughs], it's me. And she kind of was speechless, and then [she] said, but you can't be, because I like you.

*LGB staff focus group*

## Teaching, learning and the curriculum

For staff, there are also concerns about how to manage the boundary between their professional and personal relationships with LGB students. Some focus group participants gave examples of LGB students who had over-identified with them as out members of staff, and thus placed demands or expectations on the staff member, making them uncomfortable. Several participants also described fears that students (heterosexual or LGB) might misuse knowledge about their sexual orientation to victimise them, for example by making false accusations that they had behaved in a sexually inappropriate manner towards a student.

Speaker 1: ... if a female student who'd come and seen me in the office, I'm sometimes wary about, you know, closing the door ...

Speaker 2: I never do that. Never close the door ... I'm always terrified of that. Actually terrified. Even going in the lift or something like that. I just always feel quite vulnerable 'cause I know that my institution would never support me. I'd be hung out to dry.

*LGB staff focus group*

The problems of managing the boundaries between professional and personal relationships are complicated where universities are located in rural communities, small towns or cities with a very small gay community, and staff and students are likely to encounter each other if they go out on the gay scene. In order to maintain professional boundaries and, in particular, their authority in the classroom, most staff avoid the LGB scene altogether. This means that LGB staff commonly may feel personally isolated from local LGB networks, which is particularly difficult for single staff or those new to a location, and who do not already have established LGB networks in the institution or locality. For this reason, staff LGBT support groups are highly valued, particularly by new staff, as a way of establishing personal networks without risking social contact with students.

I haven't been in here for very long ... I came out very slowly here actually, which was quite a ... was a huge culture shock for me 'cause I was very much engaged in all of the stuff in my previous universities ... But here it's been very, very different ... because where I work has been very conservative about gender. I don't know that there's that many queer staff. Maybe there's lots of queer students, but I don't interact with them because in the past when I've done that, that's led to ... it's very difficult to discipline the students when I was interacting with them socially in the queer, kind of, scene. So I have avoided that in [this city].

*LGB staff focus group*

The growth of online social networking sites has added further complexity to attempts by staff to maintain a professional distance from LGB students. Some feel they have to be more rigorous about avoiding contact with students through websites such as Facebook, compared with their heterosexual colleagues; others also feel inhibited about using LGBT online spaces.

When I go online, 'cause I've got no idea of who's looking at your various profiles, and so this question around how much of yourself do you reveal? ... how do you guard your content, and how much of it ... you actually release to people. I'm very, kind of, out online and I'm always terrified that, you know, someone clicks on your profile ... it just terrifies me that a student can, that they can then know so much about you from that, like a profile or something ... Social networking sites like gaydar. I think those kind of things have made it kind of hard ... 'cause I always like to think I can manage my identity here, I'm very careful and very cautious and very private, and I think well, actually, I'm going online and it's completely out there ... ! think you always have this assumption that your students won't go on these sites and you're thinking, well, the chances are that probably some of them do ...

*LGB staff focus group*

These concerns are accentuated by a perception among some staff that their institution would not support them if an issue arose about staff/student boundaries, or if a student was to make a complaint against them. One focus group illustrated this by describing the way a colleague had been driven out of the university as a result of a wrongful accusation relating to taking a group of students for an end-of-term drink.

As a result of such concerns, some LGBT staff are reluctant to act as formal mentors for LGBT students, or to become involved in supporting LGBT student groups. However, they did agree that specific members of staff should be identified to whom LGBT students might go to seek advice or support, and that staff should also provide appropriate support to LGBT student groups, but that these staff members should not necessarily be self-identified as LGBT.

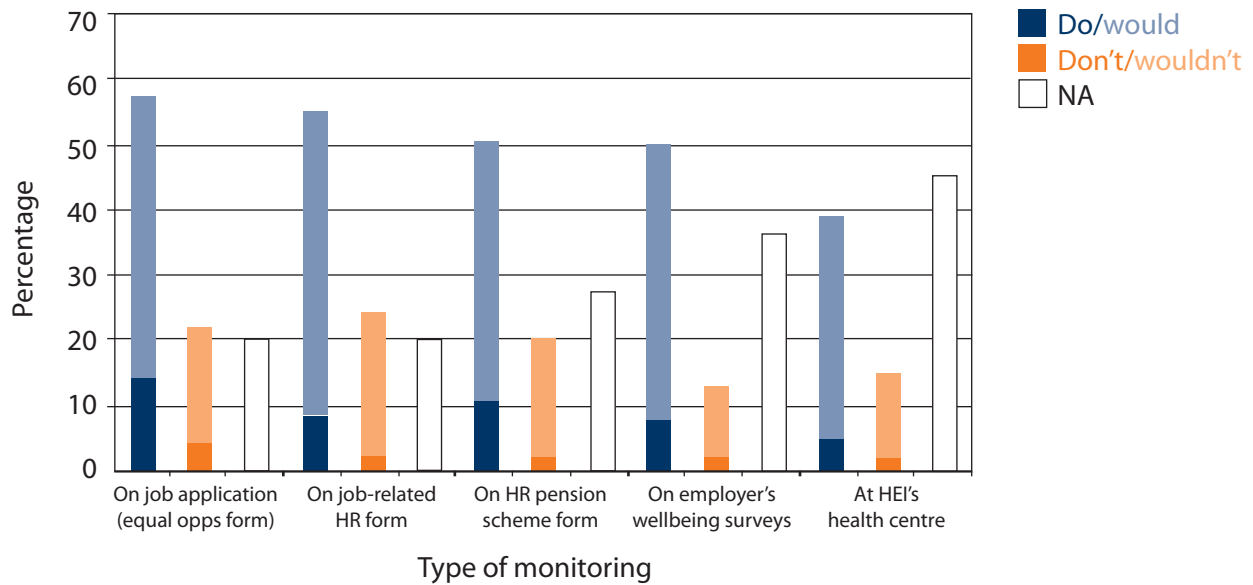
## 5 Monitoring for sexual orientation and trans identity

The majority of HEIs do not currently monitor the sexual orientation of their staff or students. Understanding how many staff and students identify as LGB and trans, and where they are located within institutions, may better enable the sector to meet the needs of, and provide support for, this group. Some focus group participants suggested that the LGBT staff and student populations of HEIs are likely to be much higher than the sector probably anticipates. The advantage of disclosure is that it would enable the LGBT community to make a more effective argument for the provision of specialist support and equality provisions.

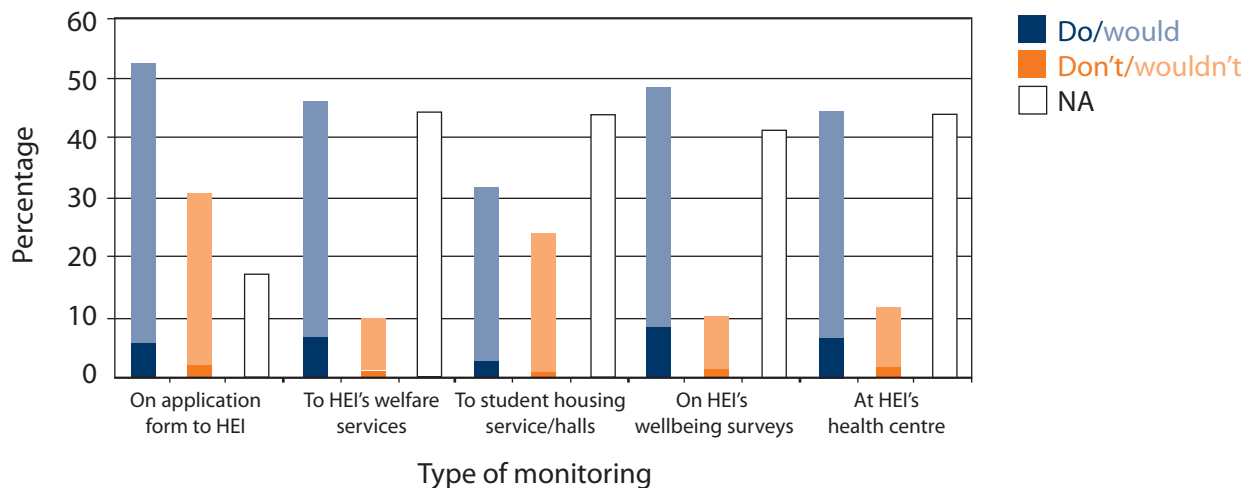
However, the survey identified that just over 50% of staff (Figure 1) and just under 50% of students (Figure 2) do, or would if offered the opportunity, self-identify as LGB if asked to disclose this information to their institution. The numbers were much lower for trans respondents, with only around a third of trans staff (Figure 3) and 40% of trans students (Figure 4) being willing to disclose their trans status to their HEI. For all groups of staff and students, this reluctance to come out is most evident in relation to institutional health centres. These findings have implications for the provision of support services by HEIs to LGBT staff and students.

In particular, staff and students who have not come out in the context of their HEI may understandably be reluctant to complete such forms. The qualitative research with LGBT staff and students identified a concern about how the HEI might use the data. While LGBT staff participants were wary that this information might be linked to their employment record, students expressed anxiety that the data might be accessible to their parents, or that such information might be used by admissions tutors to discriminate against them. Other focus group participants identified concerns about the security of the data – one informant described how he had seen information on a colleague's file in his School that should not have been released beyond the human resources department. Trans interviewees also pointed out that it would be inappropriate to ask for this information for those who have a Gender Recognition Certificate, and trans staff and students living in their preferred gender might be reluctant to risk disclosure because of concerns about discrimination.

## Monitoring for sexual orientation and trans identity



**Figure 1** Attitudes to monitoring (LGB staff)

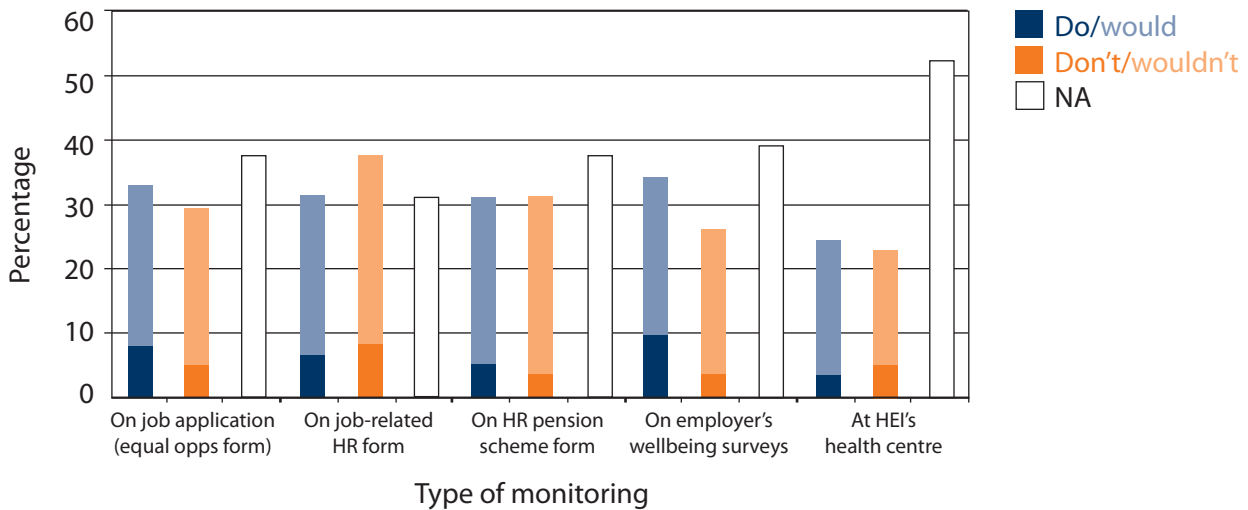


**Figure 2** Attitudes to monitoring (LGB students)

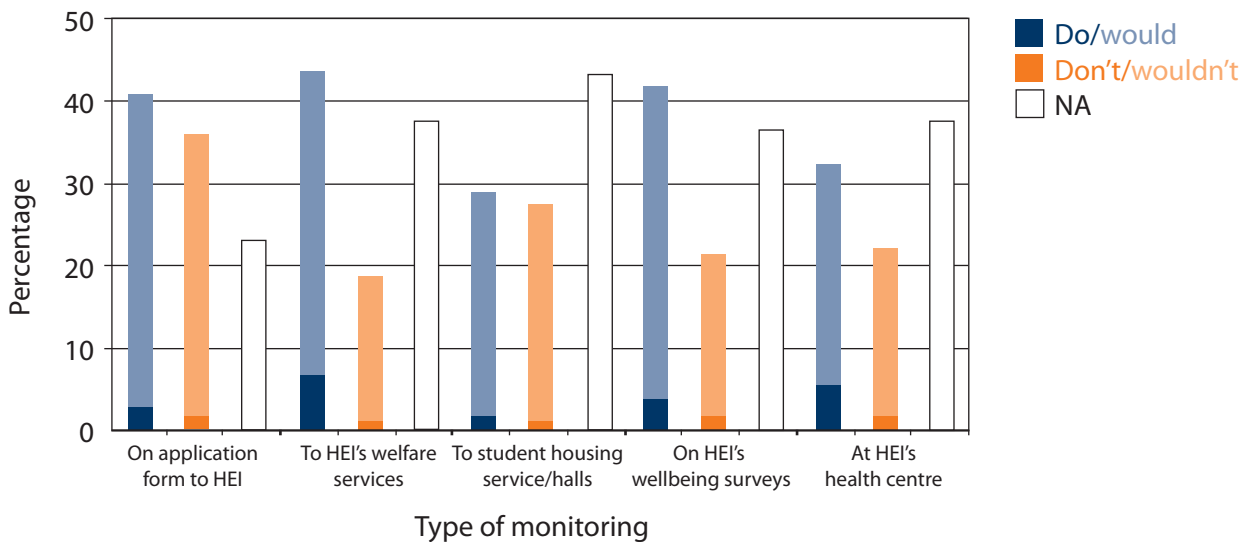
I think monitoring is really problematic, because I think people are not sure that they won't be victimised on discovery, and for many transsexual people, if they have developed a private sense of life ... beyond it, it's not something they want to engage with. They don't want to do anything that might risk disclosure, because they feel their experience in the past, before they became disappeared, was dreadful, and they've no reason to believe that it would be any better nowadays ... [There's] no incentive at all ... all of us have suffered badly in our jobs, in our social spaces and our homes have all been ... victimised, and our families, because of who we are. And so for people who have not, ... who thought they've escaped that, the idea of going back to it is just appalling.

*Trans staff interview*

## Monitoring for sexual orientation and trans identity



**Figure 3** Attitudes to monitoring (trans staff)



**Figure 4** Attitudes to monitoring (trans students)

## Removing barriers to disclosure

The focus groups and interviews identified an important need for HEIs to win the trust of their LGBT staff/student communities: firstly, by demonstrating their commitment to equality before attempting to monitor staff/student sexual orientation and/or gender identity; secondly, by providing clear information about how such data would be anonymised, and to whom access might be granted; and thirdly, by demonstrating why and how information was to be used to offset fears that it would be collected only to 'tick an equality box', rather than to develop positive support or policies to meet the needs of LGBT staff and students.

## Monitoring for sexual orientation and trans identity

It depends, doesn't it, whether it's kind of anonymised and separated off ... and whether it's used for monitoring purposes, or whether it's something to do with staff records. And I think at the moment I would feel ... not suspicious of why they did it, but not as comfortable. I applied for another job a couple of years ago that was a fairly small, not-for-profit, charitable type of organisation ... it was the first time actually on the equal opps monitoring form that it did talk about civil partnership, blah-de-blah, kind of thing. And I thought, okay, I'll tick that ... I was happy to do that 'cause it gave you a positive feel about the ethos of that organisation. I don't have the same feel about the university as an institution, of thinking ... they really know this stuff.

*LGB staff focus group*

I am deeply suspicious about it. I also think there's a level of incompetence. They probably lose them or something. They'll probably just get binned.

*LGB staff focus group*

I wouldn't declare it, I would be afraid ... that people like admission tutors are going to look at my UCAS form ... I'd think, well, I know he's [sic] not meant to judge, but would it really ... you never really know the truth behind these things ... some would declare it, but I think a lot of people would hide it, so they'd never truly know the numbers of gay people at the university.

*LGB student focus group*

Recognition that monitoring forms are likely to attract a low response rate from LGBT staff and students is in itself a deterrent to some providing this information. A concern is that HEIs will regard low response rates as evidence that there is only a small LGBT staff/student population, and thus will not give proper regard to sexual orientation and trans equality, instead of acknowledging that a low response may reflect barriers to completion. Consequently, some focus group participants and interviewees reasoned that it may be better not to respond to monitoring forms because if sufficient numbers do not disclose their sexual orientation or trans status, the data will be identified as obviously unreliable. For such reasons, it is important that HEIs monitor LGBT staff and student numbers for several years – while building trust with these communities – in order to maximise the reliability of the data before too much emphasis is placed on the statistics.

There's people that aren't out, so it leaves your statistics wrong ... They might go, there's only ... a very small number of LGB staff employed here, we won't do that [provide services] ... people that are lesbian, gay or bisexual might feel they need to hide it because they wouldn't want friends or family finding out.

*LGB staff focus group*

## Monitoring for sexual orientation and trans identity

The wording of monitoring forms was also identified as a crucial factor affecting likely response rates. These need to offer a range of categories that recognise the complexity and fluidity of how individuals self-define, as well as offering the choice to withhold this information.

How accurate are these figures that you're getting? Are people going to come out? I mean ... the boxes are very kind of rigid for me ... I mean, do I put myself down as trans, or a woman, or a woman with a trans history, or an M to F every now and again, when I feel like speaking about it? Do you know what I mean? Is a lesbian just a woman who sleeps with women, or if she every now and again has sex with a bloke, is she bisexual then? Well, she might not identify as bisexual. It's just, like, a minefield ... at least in my mind.

*Trans student interview*

... by ticking a box, am I sort of defining the kind of essence that is me? You know, the last few years I've seen quite a lot of confusion and change, and I suppose that I have a sense of instability, you know ... I suppose I worry about just sort of putting myself into a box. Given that the issue for the last couple of years has been precisely about breaking out of a box that, you know, I was gay, and I now consider myself to be bisexual. And thinking back, that was clearly the case from very early on ... So it makes me think, well you know, why do we bother at all with identifying ourselves in particular categories.

*LGB staff interview*

Speaker 1: The wording has to be very careful to get people to self disclose ... putting it on paper is quite intimidating ...

Speaker 2: You've got to be allowed to choose and be comfortable choosing whether you disclose this information or not, and it should be okay either way.

*LGB staff focus group*

I think there should be, like, an option to, like, refuse as well, 'cause I think especially if you're just coming to uni, there's obviously going to be a lot of people who are still confused about where they're lying within that spectrum. So I think if there was, like, an option to leave that blank as well, then I think that would be maybe the most fair way to ask the question.

*LGB student focus group*

## 6 Representation, consultation, communication and training

Sexual orientation and trans issues are regarded as an absent presence within the HEI sector. Absent, because they are rarely mentioned – yet present in terms of both the daily lived experience of LGBT staff and students, and the changing legal framework within which HEIs are expected to operate. The focus groups identified this absent presence in four main ways: *representation, consultation, communication and training*.

### Representation

Universities are increasingly conscious of the need to demonstrate their commitment to equality through a number of strategies, including acknowledging the achievement of female staff, increasing the diversity of senior management teams, marking events such as international women's day, and the inclusion of images of minority ethnic and disabled students in marketing materials. However, the focus groups identified the absence of LGBT staff or students from all these forms of representation. One focus group participant, who worked in the careers service at his HEI, stated that it is expected to produce careers materials that represent and are relevant to all ethnic groups and disabilities, but it does not currently provide information about LGBT-friendly or -safe employers/graduate recruiters.

You see a lot of information on the university's website about the first woman professor in such and such, and that kind of thing, and that's valid. But you don't see any acknowledgement about the first, you know, gay professor, you know. Maybe that's not ... maybe that's not appropriate, but that kind of acknowledgement would be good really.

*LGB staff focus group*

Yet the survey demonstrated that sexual orientation and/or gender identity was a factor in the choice of institution by 14.7% (385) of LGB students and 23.7% (44) of trans students. The focus group discussions also identified that LGBT-positive images in university brochures, prospectus and websites would influence not only students' choice of institution, but also the employment decisions of academic and non-academic staff. Inclusive strategies represent sound business sense.

... the reason why I chose this uni was because it was the only university that I could find that had a specific page on the website about trans people, and that they were inclusive, and this, that and the other. And I thought, oh well, I'll go there and I'll start my transition there.

*Trans student interview*

## Representation, consultation, communication and training

We need a bit more effort to reflect the diversity and true experience of being a student ... if you could present the city as gay-friendly and acknowledged that kind of thing, it would influence students to put this uni as a firm choice.

*LGB staff focus group*

If it was two exactly similar universities, everything was exactly the same, and one said we support, you know, a gay-friendly environment, and one didn't, I would definitely look for the one that stated it, you know. It would definitely influence me.

*LGB student focus group*

The focus groups suggested that the lack of senior staff (professorial staff, senior management, Vice-Chancellors, Chancellors and members of governing councils) known to be openly LGBT, both within their own institution and in the HEI sector as a whole, may implicitly signal that identifying as LGBT is a barrier to progression in the sector. The informants at two HEIs raised concerns about their institutions' implicit endorsement of homophobia through the selection of a Chancellor and the award of honorary degrees to individuals who have publicly expressed homophobic views. Here, unfavourable comparisons were also drawn between the anticipated response of HEIs to similar situations where potential candidates for positions or honours were known to hold racist views.

I'm not aware of any colleagues who are really senior in the organisation who are gay ... I'm not aware of people who have progressed as gay people to the higher levels of Pro Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors and stuff like that. I can't think of any at all.

*LGB staff focus group*

Speaker 1: We have a Chancellor ... I find that very hard because he's been very vocal about, you know, against gay couples adopting and things. So I find it hard being, having him as my Chancellor ...

Speaker 2: What we did was, as a university, we've hitched our wagon to this person not fully realising how much of a loose cannon he was at various points ... I know there is a member of staff who's felt so strongly about this she wrote to the Chancellor personally ... because in the area that she works in, they do talk about gender issues and sexuality issues. She said, how am I supposed to hold my face up in the classroom if one of the students goes, yeah, but the Chancellor says you're evil, or whatever.

*LGB staff focus group*

The lack of presence of LGBT issues in higher education is further evidenced by the fact that only 29.7% (446) of respondents to the staff survey said that their

institution had an LGBT group for staff, with 41.3% (620) responding that they did not know whether it did or not. Of the respondents to the staff survey who were members of a trade union, only 11.4% (81) said that their union had a workplace/branch LGBT group, with 59% (418) stating that they did not know whether a workplace union group existed, and 42.3% (300) being unaware whether their union had a national LGBT group. These findings suggest that there is a need for HEIs and unions to establish a more effective support network for LGBT staff, and to communicate information about such groups more successfully.

While awareness of LGBT student groups was higher than that of staff groups, with 57.8% (1562) of respondents to the student LGBT survey stating they were aware that their HEI had such a group, only 51.7% (813) of students who were aware a group existed were actually members of this group. 35.5% (931) of LGB students and 31.7% (59) of trans students stated that they perceive their institution's LGBT student group to be a supportive space.

Comments to an open-ended question on the survey, and in the qualitative element of the research, indicated that these groups are predominantly run by, and for, traditional full-time undergraduates (aged 18–21), who form a cliquy friendship group, and commonly do not represent or serve the needs of the wider student body, including postgraduates, minority ethnic, part-time and mature students. In particular, there was a statistically significant relationship between type of degree and membership of an LGBT student society. Taught and research postgraduates were less likely to be members of these groups. In addition, some student LGBT groups were criticised by focus group participants for their exclusionary practices towards bisexual or trans students, although evidence was also provided of other groups that are fully inclusive of all queer identities.

I think you have different priorities because, as a postgrad, especially when I'd been in work, I perhaps had different things I wanted to do. I didn't want to just go clubbing all the time, that I might have wanted to do more when I was an undergrad, and you didn't feel included at all. So then there was a member of staff who told me that there was a network of LGB staff at the university as well, but then again, I didn't feel comfortable going to that because I'm not a staff member. So I think you're kind of caught between these two things, of like undergraduate students who just want to go clubbing and so on the scene, and all of these things, and are quite immature in many ways, as you are at that age. And then this kind of formal network of academics or whatever, that's a bit too, kind of, formal and official, and you're kind of trapped somewhere in the middle almost.

*LGB postgraduate student interview*

## Representation, consultation, communication and training

I mean, I do go to the odd LGBT thing here on campus just purely to put the T side, 'cause they always forget, you know, it's kind of tagged on the end. And I think that's out of, I wouldn't say ignorance, but about just now knowing, you know, about what's it about. So I just like to, kind of, just put my two-pennorth in [laughs].

*Trans postgraduate student interview*

Organising social events, and outings to clubs, rather than providing support and information, were identified as the most common activities of LGBT students' union groups. Students who were struggling to come to terms with their sexual or trans identity complained that they found these groups to be intimidating or unsupportive spaces, yet they did not know where else to go for help and support. This was particularly problematic for students studying in non-metropolitan universities, where there was little or no established LGBT scene in the local community. As most LGBT student groups rely on the time and efforts of a student committee, their demographic make-up and the extent to which they are active and inclusive can vary from year to year, according to the interests and commitment of particular elected officers. For these reasons, some focus group participants and interviewees suggested that LGBT student groups should receive staff or union support in order to enable them to provide a more effective support/information function, and to ensure their inclusivity and consistency.

Speaker 1: Yeah it would be better, like, 'cause I know it's all student-run, isn't it? It would be better if it was run by staff or someone just, like, a bit more formal, that you could go and talk to, instead of it being so laid back.

Speaker 2: Yeah, I'd agree, 'cause it's just a group of friends.

Speaker 3: 'Cause it's, like, a group of friends, yeah. You just want to go clubbing.

Speaker 1: And I'm not saying, like, it should be regulated, how the LGBT run, but if there is a more formal structure to it.

Speaker 2: Yeah, I would feel more comfortable maybe speaking to them and, like, feeling, like, it's part of the formalities of university as well as just a fun society or whatever.

*LGB student focus group*

The research identified the need for HEI support groups to be more effective in communicating their existence and in delivering effective support to their LGBT employees and students (particularly in providing ways for LGBT postgraduate

and mature students to establish networks with each other). But focus group participants in some institutions were also concerned that LGBT meetings or events should not be promoted so visibly across campus that they might become the target for homophobia. It was also pointed out that highly visible groups and events can deter those who may be most in need of information or support – such as those who are not out, or who may be struggling with their identity – from attending (see sections 2 and 3). Rather, some respondents suggested that LGBT staff and student support groups need to be promoted in subtle ways (e.g. using references to rainbow flags or the colour pink) so that they are only recognised as such by ‘those in the know’.

### **Box 8 Are you a member of [your university/college] LGBT group?**

*Comments from open-ended questions on the student survey*

- = Members are typically undergraduates – no postgrads/staff/mature students that I know of.
- = It seems to be geared at the 18–21-year-olds, and I wouldn't feel like I fitted in.
- = I am considerably uncomfortable about joining this group, due to age difference. I am 58 years old and it seems mostly for young people.
- = I feel it's aimed more at younger, undergraduate people.
- = I wanted to, but I'm just scared I might not fit in because of my ethnicity. I also feel that if people knew I was in the group, they would pull themselves away from me.
- = The LGBT society seems transphobic. I pass as my acquired gender and do not disclose to most people now, but I still hear transphobic comments.
- = Because my university is very pro-gay and I don't feel like segregating myself when I'm perfectly accepted already in my current surrounding. I may, however, attend to see what actually goes on, that's one problem actually – I don't actually know what goes on.

With me, it would be like that ‘rainbow dinner’ [name changed], and I think that's great because anyone can go ... It says, you know, if you're a [department] student or if you're not, if you're gay, if you're not, you can go. And it's literally just like people getting together and having a drink or going for a meal ... I just think that's great because it's not advertised as a big whole gay night thing, but if you are gay and you're scared and you don't know anyone, you can think, oh, maybe I could just go along to it.

*LGB student focus group*

### Consultation

The survey revealed that 19.8% of students (310) said that their LGBT student group was involved in discussions about the student learning experience, and 36.8% (576) were involved in discussions on student services and organisations. However, only 4.4% (119) of students and 4.3% (65) of staff respondents said that their institution carried out regular attitude surveys about the experiences of LGB students/staff and only 2.1% (56) of students and 2.5% (38) of staff respondents said their institution did so in relation to the experiences of trans students/staff. Indeed, the chance to 'have a voice' was one of the main factors that motivated some of the participants to attend the focus groups. The evidence of the qualitative research was that universities should establish (where not already present), and work closely with LGBT staff and student groups; and that in particular they should also draw on the expertise of those staff with research interests in the field of equality and specifically sexual orientation, as this expertise is a wasted resource. The level of consultation with LGBT staff was contrasted unfavourably with that perceived to be accorded to minority ethnic groups, disabled staff and women staff, although some respondents recognised that this reflected the fact that higher education has legal duties to take positive steps to address discrimination in relation to these other equality areas.

Speaker 1: I don't think it [LGBT issues] addressed in any way ... it's not addressed ... we've never sat down and thought, are there any issues that we need to address in the faculty or the wider university? Yeah, I mean, that's why I've come to the focus group.

Speaker 2: The email [asking staff and students to participate in this research] was the first thing that I'd ever come across from our institution doing anything.  
*LGB staff focus group*

### Communication about legal changes and LGBT rights

In the past five years, the legal rights of LGBT staff have changed dramatically through the introduction of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, Gender Recognition Act 2004, Civil Partnership Act 2005 and Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007. Yet none of the focus group participants was aware of any attempt by their HR or equality and diversity unit to communicate the implications of these legal changes in their HEI to staff and students.

Speaker 1: I think the changes in the law were not heralded in any way, so I wonder to what extent people have been made aware of it, unless they know because the university's not, sort of, taken a lead on letting people know, and probably more importantly letting all staff know, not just stating LGBT staff need to know, but all staff need to know. I don't think that's actually happened ...

Speaker 2: ... we seem to be, at least verbally, we seem to be quite good at other things like race and disability.

*LGB staff focus group*

The survey revealed that 59.6% (874) of the LGB staff did not know if their institution offered survivor pension entitlement to same-sex partners of all staff; 72.2% (1059) did not know if their institution offered bereavement, adoption and maternity/paternity leave to lesbian/gay civil partners; and 84.4% (1238) did not know if their institution offered bereavement, adoption and maternity/paternity leave to lesbian and gay employees who are not registered as civil partners. Among students, 24.3% (639) of LGB, and 34.9% (65) of trans 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.

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. This is 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.

Speaker 1: I mean, my partner's going into hospital next month. I don't know if I have to have that as leave ... it's not overtly clear really as to what our rights are, when, you know, we need to take time off for partner's sickness and things like that, really.

Speaker 2: And again, it's that thing of how readily you'd pick up the phone to talk to anybody in HR and say by the way, in terms of sexuality ... you know, well, who do you go and talk to about this?

*LGB staff focus group*

[As] a lesbian, if I had a child, and we're thinking of doing this, and we're trying to, kind of, work out how we might do it in academia. You know, one of us is on ... me on a short-term, fixed-term research contract and, you know, how

## Representation, consultation, communication and training

we can possibly, you know, get maternity pay, and what would happen to [partner] if I had it [the baby]. Like, would she get paternity pay, or would she be able to somehow get some time off work? [another participant explains she would be entitled to leave] ... they would give me that time off, there would be gossip and that would be really horrible ... And 'cause of that gossip I wouldn't get a job afterwards, probably, you know, that's the kind of feeling. They wouldn't really renew my contract. Well, it's a possibility that there would be repercussions to that, even though they'd, you know, given me three months off. Brilliant [laughs].

*LGB staff focus group*

### Equality and diversity training

The majority of LGB and trans staff think that equality issues related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity are treated less seriously than race by their institution (53.3%, 782, of LGB staff; 55.7%, 34, of trans staff) and less seriously than disability (51%, 748, of LGB staff; 55.7%, 34, of trans staff). Likewise, over 50% of trans students and over a third of LGB students think that trans and sexual orientation issues, respectively, are treated less seriously than race or disability by their HEI. The focus groups suggested that there was a lack of proper resourcing for equality training within the higher education sector, and that equality staff commonly have less grasp of LGBT issues compared with those relating to the other equality areas.

It [sexual orientation] is way down the list in terms of legislation, it's gender, then it's disability, and sexual orientation's way down there ... Health and safety is even above ... so all of the other equality comes first.

*LGB staff focus group*

I went to the Equality and Diversity Training Day ... probably about 90% of the time it was about race and ethnicity and, yeah, disabled people as well ... It [sexual orientation] was kind of mentioned, but then 'let's move swiftly on'.

*LGB staff focus group*

Like, for example, with the disability thing, they've done sort of educational courses and, you know, outreach sort of information. And, you know, there was a compulsory day ... everybody had to attend. And rightly so I think, because people, you know, do need to be aware of, sort of, all the issues around it. But there hasn't been an equivalent for, you know, homosexuality, and I think the legislation was brought in about the same time, the equality legislation. So, you know, it's very telling that it's been ignored. So, yeah, there isn't anything that's done proactively in any way.

*LGB staff interview*

But it [LGBT equality] could do with perhaps a little bit more attention from the university, 'cause they do do a lot of very good work about disability, about race and ethnicity and religion. They're very careful to be very good with these things, because they have to be. Whereas, sort of, transgender issues are maybe a little bit, sort of ... not ignored, but sort of forgotten about in the rush to be good with everything else.

*Trans student interview*

Some individuals also gave examples of attending equality training where LGBT issues were discussed in inappropriate ways. Some examples were also given where participants at equality events had raised religiously motivated objections to LGBT rights, which were not appropriately challenged or dealt with by staff trainers. One participant, who was a member of a staff LGB group, described how the university equality service kept 'forgetting' to circulate consultation documents to the group.

The general feeling among many of the focus groups was that HEIs pay lip-service to equality in general, and sexual orientation in particular, but there is no proper substance to institutional and sector initiatives. In short, the common refrain was 'nothing ever changes'.

Speaker 1: I mean, at the moment everything is done in a tokenistic way. It's producing documents and statements and stationery, and things like that, and I think it needs to be a lot more substantial ... it needs to have some substance. It needs to have an active organisation that's given some support from the institution in terms of, you know, financial, some money or allocations to be, like, an LGBT officer that they should have, that should be supported by the institution.

Speaker 2: The bottom line, surely, is that anything that is done with other minority groups should be matched by sexual orientation – representatives, groups, whatever.

*LGB staff focus group*

Recommendations to emerge from the focus groups to improve the delivery of equality and diversity policy in relation to sexual orientation include the need for all HEIs to establish and fund staff LGBT groups/networks, and to create LGBT staff mentoring systems akin to those employed in some UK HEIs in relation to gender, a practice apparently already modelled in some American institutions. Evidence from other research with LGB employees in a range of different organisations suggests

## Representation, consultation, communication and training

that LGBT employee network groups, a visible commitment to LGBT equality from senior leaders, and a public commitment to embedding LGBT equality in every aspect of an organisation can have a positive impact on the work performance and productivity of LGBT employees (Stonewall, 2008c).

## 7 Sexual orientation and faith

HEIs are diverse and cosmopolitan spaces, and necessarily bring together individuals and groups with different views and values. This research (including the open-ended comments on the survey and focus groups with both staff and students) has identified particular emerging tensions between LGBT and faith groups within the higher education sector. Religious groups that express negative views about lesbian and gay sexuality can give the impression that *all* people of faith object to lesbian and gay people. However, religious teachings can be interpreted in different ways such that in practice, faith communities can include a very diverse range of attitudes towards homosexuality. Likewise, while some parts of the LGBT community are dismissive of religion and belief, which can create a perception that all LGBT people are anti-religion, there are LGBT people involved in all faith communities (albeit with different degrees of visibility). Moreover, research with people of faith (from Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu communities) about their attitudes towards homosexuality (Stonewall, 2008d) suggests that although individuals may not agree with the way some LGB people live their lives, they still recognise that LGB people deserve the same protection from discrimination as other minority groups, and that many change their personal views about sexual orientation when they meet LGB people.

The challenge for HEIs is how to deal with these complex relationships between LGBT and faith groups/individuals on campus in ways that ensure the values and practices of both groups are respected, while at the same time neither group feels unfairly treated or discriminated against. It is a difficult balancing act, which one interviewee likened to a juggler trying to keep multiple plates spinning.

The university has to incorporate everybody's difference, you know, and it's very difficult marrying up, especially things such as sexuality, with religious or fundamental religious, not religion in general, but, like, these kind of fundamental religious views. And so the university is in, like, this juggling position of going, oh, keep them happy and they're kind of going like this [miming a spinning motion] with plates, you know, and trying to keep them all up.

*Trans postgraduate student interview*

## Sexual orientation and faith

While this report does not include the voice of non-LGBT people of faith, by identifying the LGBT perspective (both with and without a religious belief), it does shed light on the issues the sector needs to begin to address, and the spaces within HEIs in which they arise.

In particular, some of the focus groups argued that, inevitably, difficulties can arise where faith and LGBT groups come together in public spaces on campus, where views and values are publicly promoted and debated, such as students' unions. In one case there had been incidents of an LGBT group and Christian union group both picketing each other's meetings. In another case, a student LGB focus group reported that different faith groups on campus had organised collectively to vote against LGBT students who stood for positions of responsibility within the students' union.

A second space where the research suggests that these issues commonly arise is in student accommodation (see section 2). Here, tensions are more common between individuals than between groups.

A couple of weeks ago, it came out that one of the room mates was homophobic and that's caused a lot of difficulties in our house ... it's more of a religious issue with my flatmate ... I mean we were sort of good friends ... She was more of a friend of a friend last year, and we hung out and stuff, and she didn't seem to have any difficulty with it. But this year she's been very stand-offish about not wanting to hang out with me and not being comfortable with sharing the house with me, and locking her room and that sort of stuff. So it's been a bit stressful at home. But, I mean, I have another friend who's religious as well, who I'm sharing with, and although she has issues with it, you know, she handles it ... So I've sort of got, you know, the extreme version and the less extreme version.

*LGB student focus group*

Tensions between staff/students of faith and those who are LGBT were also frequently identified in teaching spaces. Here, the focus groups and individual interviews reported several examples where students had interrupted classes to challenge lecturers or tutors presenting LGBT materials, on the grounds of their religion or belief (see section 4). Managing or responding to these kinds of situation can be particularly difficult for early-career staff or postgraduate tutors

who have relatively limited teaching experience. Likewise, LGBT students can feel unsafe when they are in classroom situations where homophobic views are openly expressed.

When I was doing a seminar about sexuality, and there was a very strong Catholic student in there, who started arguing about how he thought sexuality was wrong and unnatural even though we'd spent the last half an hour discussing why, you know, this idea of being 'natural' rather than socially constructed was, like, not very useful. And he was a very difficult student. He often would say quite aggressive and difficult things. And, I mean, I felt that ... I mean, people, they do, first-year undergraduates do say things like that, especially when you're talking about these topics. And I find it hard to deal with homophobia. As a gay man, I find it quite hard to deal with that issue because it's, kind of ... it's so self-invested

*LGB postgraduate student interview*

... one of my housemates who's gay studies religion and theology and, like, she has to work, like, in quite a small group in a module about gender, and it's made her feel, like, very uncomfortable because a lot of the group are, like, really homophobic and quite ignorant and just making, like, these really horrible homophobic comments and transphobic stuff. And that's made her, like, quite unsafe really. I wouldn't be overly confident about the university sorting things out. But if I could find that they had a policy which they weren't acting on, I'd definitely try and pull them up on it.

*Trans student interview*

It was suggested in the focus groups that an awareness of potential tensions between LGBT and faith groups on campus can act as a deterrent to staff and students coming out; some academic staff from including LGBT examples or literature in their teaching; and non-academic staff including reference to LGBT issues in administrative material and at open days. Some focus group participants argued that they did not have confidence that their institution would support them where disputes arose between individuals/groups on the grounds of sexual orientation and religion or belief.

Some of the focus group respondents and open-ended comments to the survey suggest that these kinds of issue are particularly prevalent in institutions or specific disciplines that have a strong Christian ethos, or in institutions or specific disciplines where the demographic make-up includes a high proportion of Muslim or international students.

## Sexual orientation and faith

I was in [university] before here, and there was a lot of issues with the Christian union and the scripture union ... it was very strong bible belt ... and there was lots of problems with students there, and just a legitimacy of homophobia that I just don't feel here [in a different university].

*LGB staff focus group*

The year I started, there was a three-line whip about attending equality training ... And, well, there were some very inappropriate comments made by [people of religion and belief] ... there's an evangelical Christian presence on campus ... which is very strong ... it's one of the things that probably worries me most.

*LGB staff focus group*

The Vice-Chancellor is appointed to the university having to profess Christian beliefs ... and I thought that means I can never be Vice-Chancellor here because there were certain aspects of Christian belief that I have problems with, and I think that's wrong, why can't I be Vice-Chancellor [laughter].

*LGB staff focus group*

### **Box 9 Do you ever feel informally excluded in your university/college as a result of your sexuality?**

*Comments from open-ended questions on the LGB student survey*

- = There is a strong disability, religion and ethnic student bias at [university]. During first week there was no advice or guidance about LGBT issues. I feel afraid to come out to everyone.
- = The university goes to such extremes to please religious groups that they forget (perhaps deliberately?) that these groups are oppressing/threatening/insulting other students. LGB students are expected to put up with this and keep quiet.
- = As a gay person, this is part of daily experience, i.e. a group of 'straight lads' are not going to invite the 'gay lad' to sit with them. There is distinct discomfort between out gay people and individuals with strong religious beliefs.

## 8 Making complaints

The survey responses indicated that a small minority of trans staff (8.2%,  $n = 5$ ) and LGB staff (2.8%, 43) either have made (since 2003), or are in the process of making, a complaint against their employer; and 5.4% (10) of trans students and 3.2% (85) of LGB students either have made, or are in the process of making, a complaint against other students or lecturers/tutors on the grounds of their trans identity or sexual orientation, respectively. Fewer than half (45.1%, 1219) the LGB student respondents to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that abuse, harassment and bullying towards LGBT staff/students are dealt with as serious disciplinary offences at their institution. The LGB student and staff focus groups also indicated a lack of awareness about where to obtain support or how to take forward a complaint, further reinforcing the need for universities and unions to improve their communication in relation to LGBT issues.

What I found interesting with the survey was that I didn't know the answer to most of the questions. I found that quite interesting 'cause I have gone through the induction process, but actually I found I couldn't answer the questions.

*LGB staff focus group*

Some staff members who had attempted to make complaints reported that they were not taken seriously by either a union or the institution. Some participants described how it was suggested that they were being 'too sensitive', which they had the impression also drew on popular stereotypes of gay men as overemotional. Such experiences were contrasted by participants with how they anticipated a similar complaint of racism or sexism would be handled. The following quotations illustrate the types of experience encountered by some individuals when making complaints to managers in particular institutions, or meeting with individual union representatives.

I made complaints about direct homophobic comments being made to me by my manager many years ago, and I ended up being told to stop taking it so seriously ... 'Don't worry about it'. And even, you know, which disappointed me hugely, coming from the union representative.

*LGB staff focus group*

Speaker 1: Whenever I've raised concerns, you know, their immediate response is that I'm overreacting, I'm oversensitive ... They raised questions about my health, that I'm being irrational, you know, it's these sorts of questions that they constantly raise ... .

## Making complaints

Speaker 2: ... Of course, what you're describing, which I've also experienced, is that basically you're some of sort of overemotional, effeminate freak ...

Speaker 3: Yes, they're very good at closing ranks, protecting each other and then, you know, marginalising you even further, so you feel even more bullied by the end of it. So essentially they're trying to force you to just give up, give in and not fight.

Speaker 4: The latest incident I had was when I was going to ... I went to bring some sort of action against not being appointed to a post. And I was told 'oh, are you really going to make all that fuss? You're going to make all this, sort of, work for me' ... so of course I backed off.

*LGB staff focus group*

And I remember students who wouldn't turn up for classes with me because I was trans ... [on the basis of their religious belief]. And trying to take the process through of saying this is unacceptable, you know, it's unacceptable for these students to say they won't be taught by me. You know, and from the course leader, through to the head of department, through to the Dean, right through to senior staff, the first response was always, well, you've got to understand, it's very difficult for these people [because of their religious belief], and one would have to educate them about the fact that if the same thing was done to a member of staff who was disabled, or who was black, or whatever, they would take it very seriously. But they've never taken it very seriously, and I think I really noticed that last year.

*Trans staff interview*

Other individuals, however, reported the opposite experience, in which they felt their experience had been taken too seriously and they had been pressurised to take out a formal grievance. A union can support a member of staff to take a complaint forward through a formal process, but such experiences are sometimes perceived by LGBT staff as if union representatives are looking for cases through which they can pick disputes with management, as the example below illustrates.

Speaker 1: I know that if I had a problem ... I do feel the union would be very supportive. It's just the thought of having to go through the whole formal process. I mean, I went to the department about an issue, and basically it was quite a minor issue actually, but he [union representative providing advice] said 'well I'd watch it if I were you before you take out a grievance against the university'. It was actually a minor issue, but he blew it up into the only way you can deal with it is basically by taking out a grievance against the university ...

Speaker 2: One member of staff wanted to take something further [a different example] and the unions got involved, and again wanted to push it much further than she wanted to ... [they] wanted to have a go at the management. So she [the complaint] was almost, like, inconsequential.

*LGB staff focus group*

One focus group raised the question of whether it might be possible for institutions to establish equality champions (to address LGBT as well as other equality strand issues) among staff across campus, who could be approached informally. These staff champions would not have an institutional or union requirement to manage complaints through particular formal processes, but rather might be able to raise problems experienced by LGBT staff in informal but strategic ways without the need for individual complainants to be identified. As one focus group member pointed out, it is much easier to challenge prejudice on behalf of others than that directed towards yourself because 'it's bloody tiring to keep fighting and it takes an emotional toll'.

## 9 Implications

A significant proportion of the staff and students of every HEI will be LGBT. Government research estimates that between 5 and 7% of the UK population is LGB, and those statistics are likely to be replicated in HEIs.<sup>6</sup> This research identifies a number of serious issues relating to the experience of LGBT staff and students. There are good reasons why institutions should address these issues. Quite apart from the fundamental wellbeing of those staff and students, there will also be benefits to the institutions in terms of staff and student retention, reduction of time spent dealing with complaints, protection of institutional reputation and legal compliance.

Using just a few examples drawn from the report, it can be seen how raising the commitment to LGBT equality will have an impact across an institution – on the decisions and actions of senior managers and governors; on human resources departments as they are involved in developing and disseminating policies such as the maternity and paternity rights available for same sex couples; on students' unions due to their responsibility to manage the interactions of student societies and sports clubs; on managers of student accommodation, arising from their responsibility to consider the welfare and rights of LGBT students; and on those responsible for developing teaching, learning and research as they consider how the needs of LGBT staff and students are met.

The report identifies that there are likely to be some areas where steps could be taken relatively quickly to build on the positive messages or to address negative experiences, for example by including positive images of same-sex couples in prospectuses. Other issues identified, such as tackling banal homophobia, or managing harmonious relations between faith and LGBT groups, may be more complex.

ECU will be consulting with the sector in spring 2009 to determine how the research findings can be taken forward most effectively.

---

6. DTI (2004) *Final Regulatory Impact Assessment: Civil Partnership*. Department for Trade and Industry, London.

## 10 About the study

The findings in this report are based on an evidence base of 4205 responses from two online surveys: a survey of 2704 LGBT students and a survey of 1501 LGBT staff.

The respondents to the student survey self-identified in the following ways: 619 as bisexual; 186 as trans; 719 as lesbian/gay women; 1161 as gay men; 126 as queer; and 48 as heterosexual with a trans identity or background (31 answered 'other').

Of the respondents, 2456 (over 90%) self-identified as white, 28 as black, 94 as Asian, 87 as other, and 39 as not known/refused to answer. The majority of respondents were undergraduates (73%), with 11% studying for master's, 7.4% identified as research postgraduates, and 3% responded that they were completing other types of qualification.

The respondents to the staff survey self-identified in the following ways: 203 as bisexual; 61 as trans; 499 as lesbian/gay women; 704 as gay men; 62 as queer; and 27 as heterosexual with a trans identity or background (six answered 'other'). Just under two-thirds (59.8%) were employed in pre-1992 universities, approximately a third (34.4%) were employed in post-1992 universities, and the remainder (2.9%) in higher education colleges.

Of the staff respondents, 1408 (93.8%) self-identified as white, nine as black, 26 as Asian, 39 as other and 19 as not known/refused to answer; 29.2% were aged 25–34, 49.3% were 35–49, and 16.7% were 50–64.

In order to address both similarities and differences in the experiences of LGB and trans staff/students, the online surveys utilised skip functions, allowing respondents to be routed from general questions applicable to all LGBT respondents to those parts of the survey that contained trans- or LGB-specific questions. The route that respondents took through the survey was determined by the first two questions, where respondents were asked to disclose their gender and their sexuality. Where respondents identified as transgender and LGB, they were routed to answer both sets of questions.

The survey responses were received from 134 out of 149 HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scottish HEIs were not included in this study because Scotland has its own independent body which promotes equality in Scottish higher

## About the study

education. This body, Equality Forward and LGBT Youth Scotland have conducted research on LGBT issues in Scottish HEIs, published as *The Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations in Scottish Colleges and Universities* (DTI et al., 2006) and at [www.lgbtyouth.org.uk](http://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk) and [www.equalityforwardscotland.ac.uk](http://www.equalityforwardscotland.ac.uk).

The surveys, which underwent pilot testing and amendment, were designed by the research team in collaboration with an ECU steering group. Details of the surveys were disseminated by ECU through equality units within HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and by the research team and steering group members through union mailing lists and academic discipline mailing lists, and through wider LGBT networks. Interestingly, a handful of HEIs refused to circulate an email about the survey to staff and students, and ECU also received a few pieces of 'hate' mail following publicity about the survey being posted online.

Twelve focus groups were held in six different HEIs. These included pre- and post-1992 HEIs, located in all three national regions covered by ECU's remit, including both metropolitan and non-metropolitan contexts, and both campus and split-site institutions. The focus groups allowed researchers more in-depth understanding of the experiences of LGB staff and students evident from the emerging survey findings. This method also enabled the research to capture the complexity of individuals' experiences in the context of multiple identities, and to explore the wider culture of particular types of institution and the different types of community in which they are embedded. The focus group participants were recruited from the survey, and by snowballing through institutional staff and student LGB support groups and networks. The make-up of most of the LGB student focus groups included undergraduates and postgraduates; the staff focus groups included both academic and non-academic staff from a diverse range of disciplines/areas of the university, and at differing levels of experience and seniority.

In order to explore in more detail the experiences of postgraduates, mature students and staff at different career stages, a further eight in-depth interviews (some individual and some in pairs) were carried out with respondents recruited from the survey who were unable to attend focus groups. The identities of the institutions where the research was conducted have been withheld in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants.

As trans staff and students were the least visible of the groups addressed in this study, it proved difficult to recruit enough participants to take part in trans focus

groups in any one institution. Rather, 10 trans staff and students were recruited from the survey responses, and through transgendered networks/forums and word of mouth, to take part in individual or paired interviews. These interviews explored similar issues to the LGB focus groups.

The focus groups and in-depth interviews – which lasted up to one and a half hours – were recorded and transcribed. The quantitative and qualitative findings were analysed using conventional social science methods. The extracts used from focus groups discussions and interview transcripts are verbatim. Three ellipsis dots (...) indicate that edits have been made.

The whole project has been conducted in consultation with a project steering group. In addition to representatives from ECU, this included:

- = Equality and Human Rights Commission
- = Eight institutional representatives
- = GMB
- = Higher Education Funding Council for England
- = National Union of Students
- = Stonewall
- = Unison
- = Unite
- = Universities and Colleges Employers Association
- = University and College Union
- = Universities Personnel Association

## References and useful sources

Breitenbach (2004) *Researching Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Northern Ireland*. Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Equality Directorate, Belfast.

Carter, J., Fenton, S. and Modood, T. (1999) *Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education*. Policy Studies Institute, London.

DTI, Women & Equality Unit and LGBT Youth Scotland (2006) *The Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations in Scottish Colleges and Universities*.

[www.lgbtyouth.org.uk](http://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk)

Herek, G.M. and Berrill, K.T. (eds) (1992) *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*. Sage, Newbury, CA, USA.

Manfredi, S. (2008) *Developing Good Practice in Managing Age Diversity in the Higher Education Sector: An Evidence Based Approach*. Oxford Brookes University, Oxford.

<https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/agediversity/Home>

NASUWT (2003) *Tackling Homophobic Bullying*. NASUWT, Birmingham.

[www.nasuwt.org.uk/consum/groups/public/@equalityandtraining/documents/nas\\_download/nasuwt\\_000233.pdf](http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/consum/groups/public/@equalityandtraining/documents/nas_download/nasuwt_000233.pdf)

NUS (2008) *Evaluating Estrangement: A Report into the Estrangement Application Process in Higher Education and Student Finance*. National Union of Students, London.

Stonewall (annual) *Workplace Equality Index*.

[www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1477.asp](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1477.asp)

Stonewall (2007) *The School Report: The Experiences of Young Gay People in Britain's Schools*. Stonewall, London. [www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/school\\_report.pdf](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/school_report.pdf)

Stonewall (2008a) *Serves You Right: Lesbian and Gay People's Experiences of Discrimination*. Stonewall, London.

[www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/servesyouright.pdf](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/servesyouright.pdf)

Stonewall (2008b) *The Double-Glazed Glass Ceiling: Lesbians in the Workplace*.

Stonewall, London. [www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/2430.asp](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/2430.asp)

Stonewall (2008c) *Peak Performance: Gay People and Productivity*. Stonewall,

London. [www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/2305.asp](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/2305.asp)

Stonewall (2008d) *Love They Neighbour: What People of Faith Really Think About Homosexuality*. Stonewall, London.

[www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/love\\_thy\\_neighbour.pdf](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/love_thy_neighbour.pdf)

Whittle, S., Turner, L. and Al-Alami, M. (2007) *Engendered Penalties; Transgender and Transsexual People's Experiences of Inequality and Discrimination*. Communities and Local Government Publications, Wetherby.

[www.pfc.org.uk/files/EngenderedPenalties.pdf](http://www.pfc.org.uk/files/EngenderedPenalties.pdf)







Equality Challenge Unit

[www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk)

**Equality Challenge Unit supports the higher education sector to realise the potential of all staff and students whatever their race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, or age, to the benefit of those individuals, higher education institutions and society.**

**© Equality Challenge Unit. ECU's publications are produced free of charge to the HE sector. Information can be reproduced accurately as long as the source is clearly identified. Alternative formats are available: E: [pubs@ecu.ac.uk](mailto:pubs@ecu.ac.uk), T: 020 7438 1010**

**Company limited by guarantee, No. 05689975. Registered Charity No. 1114417**