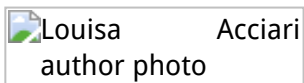


## A compulsory heteronormative university? The regulation of sexualities and identities in the UK higher education system



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It is often believed that universities are open and progressive places where everyone can and express themselves. However, several studies highlight the ongoing discriminations against oppressed groups such as **women**, **Black** and **LGBT** people. The particular experience of LGBT students is quite difficult to capture as there is no consistent data collection and monitoring. It also represents an epistemological challenge around the use of the category 'LGBT'. By using it as opposed to 'heterosexuality' we risk reinforcing the idea that one is the norm while the other represents the deviation (Phellas 2012).

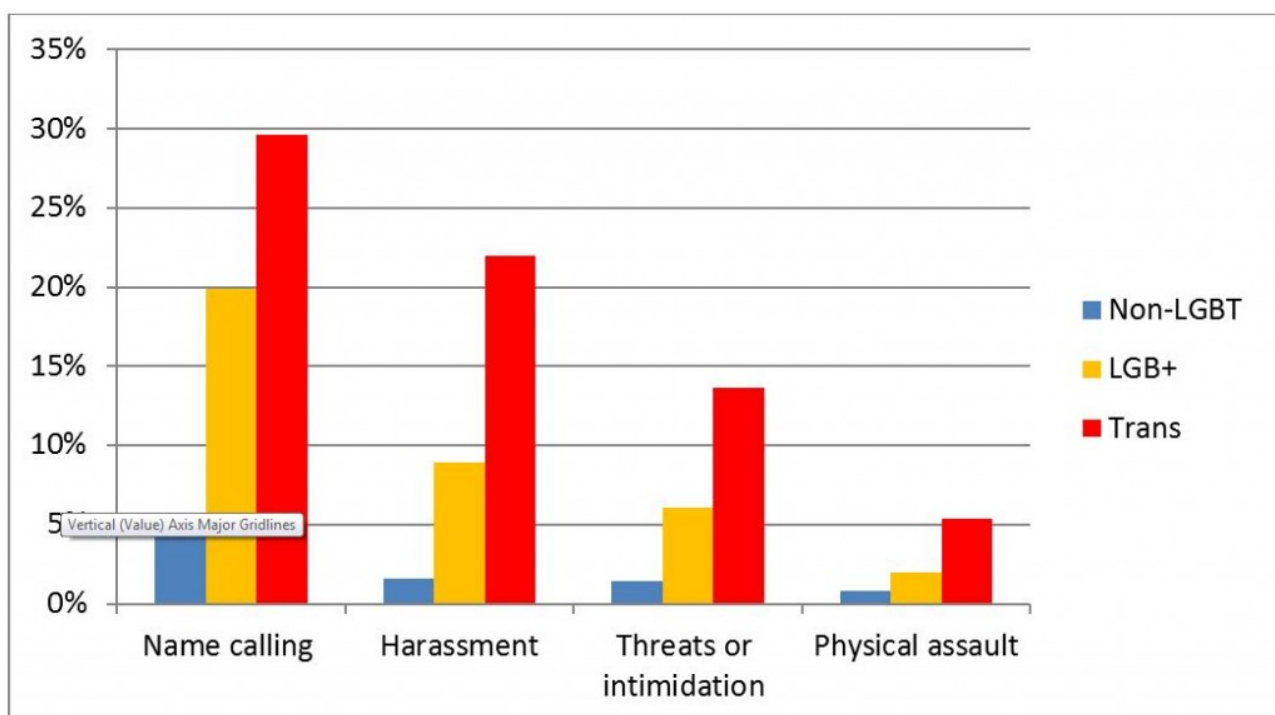
An enquiry into the education system nonetheless remains necessary to understand how certain rules and behaviours reproduce heteronormativity, thereby excluding other sexualities and identities.

### Discrimination and harassment on campus

Research conducted by NUS entitled '*Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow*' reveals that LGBT students feel less safe on campus than non-LGBT students, they are more likely to consider dropping out, and are exposed to increased levels of bullying. Among those who seriously considered dropping-out, 56 per cent mentioned the feeling of not fitting in as the main reason.

About 1 in 3 LGB+ and 1 in 5 trans students have experienced at least one form of harassment on campus. Trans students are twice as likely to experience harassment, threats or intimidation in comparison to their LGB+ counterparts.

Figure 1: Homophobic and transphobic bullying on campus



Q26.  
Have  
you  
ever

experienced homophobic or transphobic harassment on your campus? (N = 3,880)

Bullying and harassment negatively impact LGBT students' satisfaction with their experience at university and considerably increase their probability of dropping out. Indeed, victims of harassment are two to three times more likely to have considered leaving their course than those who did not experience any form of harassment.

Table 1: Impact of homophobic and transphobic bullying on retention

Type of bullying or harassment experienced by student		Percentage of respondents who have seriously considered dropping out or leaving their course
Name calling	Yes	41.7%
	No	26.2%
Harassment	Yes	53.1%
	No	27.1%
Threats or intimidation	Yes	56.3%
	No	27.4%
Physical assault	Yes	60.0%
	No	28.2%

Homophobic and transphobic harassment is often insidious and not directly violent. Respondents to the NUS survey did not always identify insults or negative comments as being harassment; the perception of what is acceptable remains largely defined in relation to the heterosexual norm. Very few students report 'name calling', as they usually do not believe that it is sufficiently abusive to report, even though victims of this form of abuse are twice as likely to have considered dropping out.

*Using words such as 'gay' in a derogatory way has become so commonplace, I don't feel justified speaking out against it. I'd feel like I'd be making a nuisance, even though every time I hear the word used in that way it continues to feed the idea that being gay is bad, despite being out (...)* (Gay male respondent to the survey)

## Heteronormative spaces and rules

Other issues raised in the NUS report include a non-inclusive curriculum, a lack of gender-neutral toilets and facilities in addition to a lack of procedures to report bullying. The vast majority of respondents reported not seeing LGBT experiences and history reflected in their curriculum, which contributes to their invisibility. It also establishes heterosexuality and binary gender identities as the standard. Queering the curriculum would imply a radical transformation not only of the content, but also of teaching practices, making education more interdisciplinary, less hierarchical, and capable of analysing the multiple experiences of the human being (Renn 2010).

Things that might seem insignificant, like the sign on the door of a toilet, actually play a central role in the regulation of bodies and identities. Trans respondents reported very uncomfortable situations that they are put in, particularly when toilets and facilities are not neutral, which sometimes means they cannot use them at all:

*“I’ve not had any surgery and get changed in the men’s, and I’m aware how unsafe this is and also that security etc would likely blame me for taking the risk if I was assaulted in gym changing rooms...”* (Trans students online focus group participant)

The lack of clear procedures to report homophobia and transphobia further reflects the absence of consideration for this specific form of discrimination by institutions. Only a minority of victims report the incident and they often do not know who to talk to. Thus, everything in higher education institutions from the curriculum to the facilities seems to be enforcing a compulsory heteronormativity. The whole organisation of the educational space contributes to the exclusion of the ‘deviant’ and the invisibilisation of LGBT people’s identities.

### **Moving ‘beyond the straight and narrow’**

So why is this important? Can universities be inclusive of every oppressed group?

I believe equality should be at the core of the educational system. If we want universities that are accessible to everyone and where anyone can succeed, then we should find every form of discrimination problematic and systematically fight against it. It should not be acceptable to see a group of people constantly experiencing bullying and consequently being more likely to drop out.

I also believe that whether we are LGBT or not, heteronormativity affects us. The obligation to conform to a gender role, to behave in a certain way and to be exclusively male or female, oppresses us all. Human identities are complex and multiple, and as argued by Butler (1990: 26), ‘The binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive and medicojuridical hegemonies.’

And finally, yes I believe universities can be these inclusive and revolutionary places where we actively challenge oppression. We can change the curriculum, make our campuses safer, and promote equality in our learning and teaching practices. To reach that objective, NUS report recommends some practical steps.

#### **For institutions:**

- Implement, enforce and advertise zero tolerance policies regarding homophobic and transphobic behaviour, ‘banter’, harassment and bullying. Verbal harassment must be addressed by institutions’ policies and recognised as a form of homophobic and transphobic bullying.
- Related to that, institutions need clear policies to report abuse and a point of contact for students victim of homophobic and transphobic harassment. Anti-bullying policies should be included in induction programmes, particularly in halls of residence.
- Have gender-neutral toilets and facilities to enable everyone using them safely and without fear of being outed or misgendered. Institutions should also facilitate changes of name and gender on student registers and preserve students’ confidentiality in doing so.
- Include LGBT perspectives and authors in curricula and raise students’ awareness on equality and diversity issues to prevent ignorant or offensive comments in social or teaching spaces. Just like gender and postcolonial studies play an important role in feminist and Black liberation movements, queer and LGBT studies must become a recognised discipline that is offered to all students.

#### **For students’ unions:**

- Implement compulsory training for presidents of societies on how to include LGBT students, with special attention given to sports clubs to make them more accessible and less gender segregated.
- Build more inclusive unions by electing an LGBT officer, creating safe spaces within the union and including LGBT perspectives more often in campaigns and publicity.
- Become a third party hate crime reporting site and train officers on how to support victims of homophobic and transphobic bullying.



## For LGBT societies:

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

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