An Exploration of Lived Experiences of Sexually and Gender Diverse Staff Members in Higher Education: A Case Study

Panagiotis Pentaris, Alan Dudley, David Evans, David Hockham, Carmen Yau, Kassandra Matthews & Rania Hassan

Published online: 26 Jun 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

An Exploration of Lived Experiences of Sexually and Gender Diverse Staff Members in Higher Education: A Case Study

Panagiotis Pentaris, PhD [a], Alan Dudley, BA, MA, PG Dip [b], David Evans, PhD[b], David Hockham, PhD [c], Carmen Yau, PhD [a], Kassandra Matthews, BSc[d], and Rania Hassan, BA, MSc[d]

aDepartment of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK; bInstitute for Lifecourse Development, University of Greenwich, London, UK; cSchool of Stage and Screen, Institute for Lifecourse Development, University of Greenwich, London, UK; dSchool of Health Sciences, University of Greenwich, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Sexually and gender diverse staff in Higher Education Institutions may experience a sense of belonging and acceptance in inclusive environments, but may also face discrimination and bias, leading to feelings of isolation and exclusion. This paper reports on findings from 40 in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions with LGBTQIA+ self-identified staff members in a HEI and LGBTQIA+ allies who may identify as LGBTQIA+ themselves. Findings reveal that first impressions when joining a university as a staff member may have a long-lasting effect, while both positive and negative experiences are present. Further, a pattern is developed among gay men who may be placing more emphasis on their relationship with line managers, which can be supportive but at times toxic, unsupportive and inattentive. In addition to this, the findings highlight discrimination faced by staff, its impact on their wellbeing, and the significance of visibility and representation. This paper concludes that lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ staff members in Higher Education continue to be mixed with a high percentage of staff experiencing discrimination, primarily in the form of microaggressions, but institutions need to be more pro-active to foster safe spaces for all with more inclusive policies and practices.

Introduction

Since 2000, the UK has seen significant changes in legislation, policies and practices regarding inclusivity and promoting diversity. The *Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2000*[1] aligned gay men's rights with those of their heterosexual counterparts by reducing the age of consent to 16, which was a testament for breaking long-standing stereotypes and prejudice that

CONTACT Panagiotis Pentaris ✉ Panagiotis.Pentaris@gold.ac.uk 📠 Department of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies, Goldsmiths University of London, 23 St. James, Rm103, London SE146NW, UK.

associated gay men with pedophilia (Freund et al., 1984; Friedrichs, 2022). Further, the *Adoption and Children Act 2002*[2] enabled lesbian women and gay men to adopt; the *Employment Equality Regulations 2003*[3] provided protection from discrimination at the workplace, while the *Equality Act Regulations 2007*[4] protected from discrimination in goods and services and the *Gender Recognition Act 2004*[5] promoted the rights of people reassigning their gender. Since 2013, gay marriage was legalized in England, Wales, and Scotland, while in 2020 Northern Ireland followed; moving along from Civil Partnerships since 2004. Most importantly, the *Equality Act 2010*[6] came to solidify people's right to the characteristics making up who they are, inclusive of people's sexuality and gender.

The UK Government has focused on promoting an inclusive environment across all spheres of society. The LGBT Action Plan (2018) highlights the responsibilities of the Government and mandates the appointment of LGBT leaders in healthcare, the implementation of anti-biphobic, transphobic and homophobic bullying programs in schools, and the need to end the practice of conversion therapy, to name a few. Following on from this, the *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2020–2024* (CMA, 2020) emphasizes the focus on an inclusive workforce and the intention to consider people's voices in decision-making processes. Worthy changes have been noted elsewhere (Pentaris, 2019), too, but this case study is rooted in the UK.

However, legislative advancements are neither exhaustive nor representative of societal progression. Pentaris (2019), drawing on Pichardo's (2011) work, postulated that legal and social rights are intertwined and intrinsically brought together but certainly have a different pace. Progression in legal rights is not an equal advancement of social rights. That said, people identifying with LGBTQIA+ identities continue to face discrimination and oppressive behaviors in society, including Higher Education (HE), the focus of this paper.

HEIs in the UK are required, like other organizations, to augment and update policies and procedures in line with the changing government legislation. Albeit these changes, though, the experiences of LGBTQIA+ staff have not always been positive. Guyan (2016) explored LGBT+ identities in HE with a survey among 305 HE staff members who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or other. This study showed that that staff recognized positive changes in HEIs, yet there are still binary and more patriarchal frameworks prevalent within policies and practices.

Blumenfeld et al. (2016) opined that university staff and students who identify with LGBTQIA+ identities are at a much higher risk for harassment and oppression than their heterosexual and gender-binary counterparts. Vaccaro (2012), though, has previously argued that LGBTQIA+ staff on similar or same university roles and grades, also tend to share their experiences of LGBTQIA+, which gives room for exploring power dynamics in HE, another influencer of oppression and discriminatory experiences.

Studies like that of Ellis (2009) continue to emphasize that despite many changes in legislation about the promotion of equality and equity, and support for the rights of LGBTQIA+ self-identified individuals, campuses and HE remain a space not recognized as "safe" by students and staff. Similarly, Grimwood (2017) argued that albeit the positive experiences of LGBTQIA+ students, there are still many occasions where students feel oppressed or experience derogatory comments. Additionally, Natzler and Evans (2021) considered that many LGBTQIA+ students felt unprepared or under-prepared for positive sex and relationships at university, due to lack of commensurate Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) at school, before entering university. Findings from the present study set the context for an argument to remove heteronormative cultures from HE, which will gradually give space to students and staff to feel safer and more valued (Pentaris et al., 2022).

Overall, research has largely focused on university students but not as much on LGBTQIA+ staff members. Yet, there has been some work focusing on LGBT+[7] Staff Networks and how those can become mechanisms to overcome many of the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ staff. Hastings and Mansell (2015) explored how LGBT+ Staff Networks in HE could potentially overcome many of these issues, but recognized the challenges those networks face, mostly the reality of stereotypical approaches to policy and practice, as well as the perpetuation of a binary and patriarchal way of thinking in HE.

Recent reports in the UK have all concluded with similar results. The report by the University and College Union (UCU) (2021), for example, showed that over three quarters of LGBTQIA+ staff in HE has seriously considered leaving the sector due to derogatory language used and oppressive environments. Drawing on this and other reports (e.g., Stonewall's reports), LGBTQIA+ staff face a heightened risk of mental health issues due to negative lived experiences. Both the *LGBT Britain: Health (2018)*[8] and the *Trans Lives Survey 2021: Enduring the UK's hostile environment*[9] reports opined that over half of the LGBT+ staff in HE continues to face derogatory language and discrimination, with those identifying as trans being at higher risk of such.

In addition to that, Ng and Rumens (2017) offered that workplaces, including HEIs, often feature heterosexist activities, perspectives and/or policies, which reinforce a gendered view, more heterosexual, of the employees and their environment. This characterization of workplaces is further recognized by the Government Equalities Office (2018). Such policies and practices often lead to derogatory remarks and generalizations (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022).

Despite abundant evidence about the negative lived experiences of LGBT+ staff in HE, there is similarly growing evidence showing positive aspects of that experience, including supportive colleagues and line managers (Huffman et al., 2008), which leads to progression and heightened job satisfaction (Pitcher et al., 2018; Webster et al., 2018). The current study is founded on

recent evidence suggesting that LGBTQIA+ self-identified individuals continue to face derogatory, oppressive and discriminatory behaviors in the environments in which they move, and specifically in HEIs. This paper reports on primary data detailing the lived experiences of sexually and gender diverse individuals in HE.

Method

This is an emancipatory qualitative case study design underpinned by interpretive epistemology. It is part of a larger mixed methods study exploring the LGBT+ culture in HE and what it means to be an LGBT+ staff member in HE. The paper focuses on one aspect of this study, exploring the lived experiences of gender and sexually diverse staff in HE. For a more conclusive outcome, the study included both LGBT+ self-identified individuals, as well as LGBT+ allies, who may or may not identify as LGBT+. This mixed approach to the study participants gave room for a more rounded exploration of the topic.

The study was conducted between September 2021 and August 2022 and used qualitative interviewing and focus group discussions. The former method facilitated a more private conversation allowing participants to share their lived experiences more candidly, including how incidents of harassment, microaggressions, bullying or other may affect their wellbeing. Forty interviews (50–90 minutes each) were conducted between December 2021 and March 2022, via Microsoft Teams. They were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Six focus group discussions followed between February and May 2022. The focus groups consisted of four to eight members, which, according to Bryman (2016) and Flick (2022), allows participation and commitment as well as the enablement of a dialogue with varied perspectives. A total of 35 individuals of diverse backgrounds participated in the focus groups, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each; they took place via Microsoft Teams and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for the purposes of analysis. A debrief period of approximately five to ten minutes was offered with both the interviews and the focus groups, to ensure that participants were leaving the room as they arrived, and otherwise references to support services were made (more in the ethics section below).

Process

An invitation with a participant information sheet was sent out to approximately 1,900 staff members of a single HEI, with a 15% response rate to the overall study, which is representative of the staff (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). Those interested in the study contacted the research team and following initial conversations and a consent form, the interviews were conducted. Thereafter, an invitation to partake in the focus group discussions was sent out to all staff,

including the interview respondents. Those interested, once again, had the opportunity to ask questions and gave written consent to take part in the study. Participants were also given the option to review their interview transcripts and offer clarity where there were gaps.

Data analysis

The study used reflexive thematic analysis to explore and interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). No coding framework was used, but applying deduction and a situated interpretive reflexive approach, the researchers organically developed codes and themes which created an initial framework from the interviews, which later informed the focus group discussion guide. This is in line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) reminder that thematic analysis is not a singular process or approach but has a mix of paradigmatic dimensions. Given the sensitive nature of this study (i.e., inviting participants to share lived experiences of potentially harmful situations to themselves, such as harassment and microaggressions), we drew on queer theory (Jagose, 1996) when coding themes, recognizing pre-conceived experiences of homophobia, transphobia, biphobia or other negative situations.

The data were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software used to assist with the management and analysis of data. With the use of this software, patterns within the data were identified, analyzed and now reported (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six phases of thematic analysis were followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), starting with familiarization with the data. The data were partially transcribed by the research assistant and research officer in the team, and partially by a professional service. Two of the main researchers thoroughly read and re-read the transcripts, and three additional members of the team reviewed initial ideas in relation to the data collected. The next phase was about generating initial codes—helping to collate data relevant to each code. The third phase focused on searching for themes; exploring the codes and clustering them into themes. Those were later reviewed by four members of the research team, helping to generate a thematic map. With an ongoing analysis and review, the themes were defined and refined, which led to the current phase of reporting on them.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval by the University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Greenwich. All participants were offered the chance to have a discussion and ask questions with either the research lead or research officer of the team, prior to contributing. A participant information sheet was provided at the recruitment stage,

and all participants gave consent at the start. Each interview and focus group discussion were followed by a debriefing session to ensure that any potential emotional impact from the respondents' participation was addressed, and services for further support were recommended where requested. All participants had the right to withdraw from the study without giving reason, and the core research team held weekly meetings of updates in the process, which added to the reflexive approach to the study.

Findings

This part of the study focused on recording the lived experiences of LGBT+ self-identified staff in HE and develop a deeper understanding of those, which will support with the development of more inclusive practices and institutional policies. The participants contributing to this part of the study identified as male (50%), female (43%), transgender (7%), gay man (33%), lesbian (21%), bisexual (16%), demisexual (2%), and panromantic grey-sexual (8%). The remainder of the sample did not disclose their sexuality, out of preference. That said, even though this part of the study holds good representation of diverse identities of gender and sexuality, it is limited to those participating in it and should not be seen as a measurement for generalizations.

The study generated five themes, each of which captures recurrent patterns of experience or behavior. These themes are interconnected, feeding into the overall lived experience of LGBT+ staff. Further, these themes contain both positive and negative experiences, and are often defined by the number of years participants have been employed at the given institution. Those themes are: first impressions; management; invisibility; discrimination and oppression; and authenticity. The following sections address each of them separately and offer interview extracts.

First impressions

The data largely revealed experiences from when staff first joined the university. These first impressions appeared to influence staff members' overall experience, regardless of how long they had been employed by the institution. 52% of the participants felt welcomed when they first arrived at the university, yet there may have been a distinction between those who first joined as students and later returned as employees. Furthermore, these experiences of having felt welcomed at first, were associated with the respective department or faculty of the university staff had joined. Specifically, participants based in disciplinary areas such as social sciences and humanities tended to report a more positive experience than their counterparts, while professional staff

had mixed experiences, regardless of the section of the university they worked for.

> I think for me it's been quite open to start with, and I felt very welcome and that was very positive. (non-binary, unassigned)

> Most people were welcoming. They did not really have an issue with me being trans. (female, transgender)

> Everyone I came into contact was really nice. I felt the University to be quite a welcoming place. (female, lesbian)

> I cannot speak for the whole university, but in my department, everyone was very friendly and supportive from the beginning. (male, gay man)

The remainder of the participants (48%) shared experiences that were more unpleasant; they had felt unwelcomed; oppressed; uncertain; even facing hostility. The mixture of negative experiences when first joining the university were due to either of the following reasons, or a combination of those: local teams, specific individuals, organization and structure.

> First off, I would say joining the university was not nice. I faced a lot of hostility. (female, lesbian)

> I think maybe things that I represent were not necessarily welcome when I first joined, or that has been my experience anyway. (male, gay man)

> To this day, I still cannot work out if my experience was mostly racism, or the fact that I am a gay woman, or actually a combination of the two. I honestly cannot say. It felt like racism at the time, but of course there were comments about the fact that they thought I was gay, because at the time I kept silent. (female, lesbian)

> I joined in 2009. At the time, I was occasionally misgendered by students and staff. It still occasionally happens today. (female, transgender)

The data also revealed that LGBT+ staff members' initial experiences of joining the university were informed by the induction programs and/or meetings and/or training they engaged with. Particularly, participants not only reflected on their induction but also the degree to which that was inclusive of information about different staff networks, as well as opportunities to receive support and guidance based on their unique characteristics.

Overall, approximately 80% of the participants found their induction inclusive and informative, as well as a process that accentuated their feelings of welcome. Yet, there are also data (20% of participants) that highlight more negative experiences during induction, which may or may have not impacted on the overall experience when joining the university.

> My experience of the induction was just a meeting with [name] who was the [role] of the faculty at the time. It was just to introduce ourselves and that was it. (male, demisexual)

I do not remember it [LGBT+] being mentioned, no. I do not recall any queerness being mentioned. (female, panromantic greysexual)

Induction was very poor, and this was nothing that was brought up (non-binary, bisexual).

Management

In addition to the first impressions, data provides evidence of how different management styles experienced by LGBT+ staff directly impacted on their wellbeing and life at the university. 27% of the participants discussed this area, of which 92% identified as gay men, showing a pattern that gay men may put more emphasis on their relationships with line management, or that their counterparts do not wish to explore this area as much for reasons that this study does not reveal.

The data complement experiences about how welcome staff have felt when joining the university, but also indicate the degree of trust in the institution altogether. At large, data show that LGBT+ staff, and specifically gay men find line managers to be supportive, albeit occasions when they are found to be unsupportive, inattentive, reactional, or toxic (Figure 1).

Supportive

Overall, staff shared that their line manager has been supportive and positive, either due to having an already established understanding of the unique identities and experiences of LGBT+ staff, or due to being open and willing
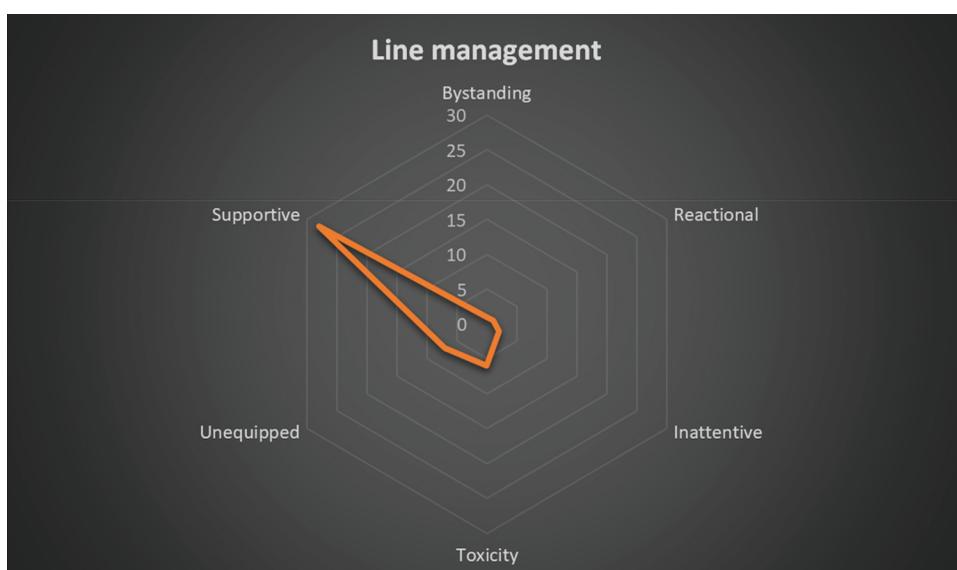

Figure 1. Line management approaches.

to learn and develop their approach to this area generally. In other words, LGBT+ staff who found their line managers to be open and supportive, also did not feel their identities and lived experience to be dismissed or negated in any way.

> My relationship with my line manager has been very positive. I think that I have always had line managers who have cared very much about my development. (male, demisexual)

> I have good relationships with my line managers. I feel quite happy that I could talk to them about anything . . . it appears that there is fairly transparent management. And when decisions are made, it is very clear to everyone why those decisions are made. (male, gay man)

> I am friendly with my new line manager, and he is really great, and we chat about our personal lives quite a lot, and I feel comfortable doing so. I have a female partner and he knows her name and will ask after her and stuff. (female, lesbian)

Unequipped

Data also showed, not at large ($n = 6$), that line managers were unequipped to address matters relating to LGBT+ identities. Such findings primarily allude to ingrained heteronormative and gendered views, which often underpin practice in HE.

> Later on, when I had my third child, I had to say to my manager of my complex or rainbow family life and what was going on, and even then the pressure was enormous for me to give precise dates when we were going to have the child etc. and how many children we were going to have. (female, lesbian)

> I moved to a different team and . . . again he [line manager] would occasionally slip up and misgender me. I think some of the management needs more sensitive training on this aspect. (female, transgender)

Toxicity

Further to finding line management unsupportive or unequipped at times, participants further expressed that this extends to the degree of creating a toxic environment or direct discrimination, thus placing more pressure on LGBT+ individuals and creating an environment in which they feel oppressed.

> It is usually in small ways that we have thought about maybe taking some action through unions or something. But because it is always in very small ways, on their own they do not amount to much. It is usually . . . there is a lot of micro management, and patronizing and just generally creating kind of a toxic environment. (female, panromantic greysexual)

> The response was very disappointing, because essentially the response was that, "I am sorry you felt that way," which is an absolutely wrong response, because essentially they

took no responsibility . . . it is [a] very patronising approach and I have seen that happen a lot. (male, gay man)

It was more about the manager's ridiculous style, and also the kind of culture he created within the department. I think it was very much about that and his own prejudices, I must be honest with you, towards gay people. (female, lesbian)

Inattentive

Two participants identifying as female shared that their experiences with their line managers have been that they have been distant and inattentive altogether. That said, little guidance or support in relation to their progression, achievements, as well as wellbeing and how they are navigating difficulties linked with their LGBT+ identities were offered.

What is interesting is my line managers have no real clue what I do. Because they are in incredibly different fields. So, my first line manager had no clue about my area of work. So, from a career perspective, it made no real sense at all, and the second line manager, she is amazing, but again, has no real understanding of what I do. (female, lesbian)

Reactional

Furthermore, data show that line managers, when it comes to LGBT+ identities, may become reactional rather than proactive and supportive from the start. This poses challenges in relation to whether staff are "out" as LGBT+ or not. This was recognized by a few individuals, and the following participant stated:

Line managers can sometimes just leave it to when something is raised. For example, I was not out and so how can I understand that my line manager is as open as they are or as considerate of those issues as they are if I have not been the one to investigate that? (male, demisexual)

Bystanding

Not at large, but at times line managers have been experienced as bystanders to issues relating to LGBT+ identities.

This thing was particularly difficult about that was that the person sat next to me was my line manager who afterwards said, "Oh, maybe I should have stepped in, but you seemed to be coping all right." It is the absolute opposite of being an ally. (male, gay man)

Discrimination and oppression

81% of the sample (4/5) shared experiences of direct discrimination or witnessing discrimination. Such experiences and instances may had been on campus and in person, via social media, or when working remotely and

online, especially during the lockdown periods associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The information from this data shows that such situations make staff more aware of the varied attitudes toward non-conforming sexualities and genders, and those impact negatively on their overall experience.

Jaccard's coefficient of the linguistic associations between the different themes emerging from the data showed that those discussing biphobia also refer to increased distress from the experience, while structural racism is associated with mispronouncing names and bullying. In addition to that, feelings of dysphoria and increased anxiety were associated with direct abuse or misgendering. These links show potential results to such types of discrimination.

Moreover, Jaccard's coefficient revealed that biphobia is more prevalent when working in smaller teams, while microaggressions (e.g., slurs and jokes) are directly linked with any type of discrimination. Further, transphobia links with feelings of dysphoria, and positive discrimination may lead to feelings of exclusion. Lastly, the same analysis showed that unconscious biases go hand in hand with the likelihood of misgendering.

The data show 11 types of discrimination experienced or witnessed at the university by LGBT+ staff (Figure 2). The most discussed experience is that of microaggressions, including slurs and jokes, which are not always conscious and may not always intend to harm but eventually do, as discussed later.

> It is one of those things where you are never quite sure what is going on behind the scenes, and I have heard some things from other people . . . I have heard, for example, that my first line manager did have an issue with me being trans, but he never vocalised that to me but apparently, he did vocalise that to other people . . . It is never deliberate, but it still stings. (female, transgender)

> I had a really funny experience where I was talking about how we had rats in our garden, and I was like, "I went over and I poked around to sort out the rats, because my partner is really scared," and this woman I work with was like, "why was your partner scared? It should have been him, like he should have been the one doing it". (female, lesbian)

> We will go around the table in a meeting where somebody will be talking about challenges with raising children and because they will know I am a gay man they will make a comment in passing that, "well, of course these are not issues you would be troubled with . . . ". (male, gay man)

> But sometimes some individuals are of the impression that if you are a gay man then you are after men all the time. As if there is one sexuality that is over sexualised, and the rest are fine. It is a huge stereotype historically about the gay population. (male, gay man)

Data also showed that such discriminatory and oppressive comments and behaviors may also come from within the LGBT+ community or population of the university. This is emphasizing the increasing diversity of recognized identities under the umbrella of LGBT+.

microaggressions, slurs, jokes
- xenophobia
- 'baby brain'
- mispronouncing names

racism and homophobia

structural discrimination
- tick-box exercises

sexism
- 'Being a woman in this world sucks because just the sexism and being afraid basically'.

bullying
- 'Bullying. They are...challenging someone is not the same as being aggressive towards them or anything'.

direct abuse
- 'The one that was very obviously - I witnessed it - was direct abuse. It was not said in a jokey way. It did not come across as being banter; it just seemed to be quite aggressive'.

misgendering
- 'I might bew misgendered throughout, right? So, as a person, my identity there is not a problem being myself but how that is then perceived by other people, that is rather the problem than me being myself'. (P35, non-binary, unassigned).

transphobia
- 'I was a lot more obviously trans back then as well, because I'd only recently transitioned. So mostly positive (experience) but also had its negatives'. (P32, female, transgender).

ageism
- 'There is an attempt to stop old men getting, it was something I went to at the Welcome Institute and someone stood up in front of a room full of archivists, curators, and said, "we do not want old men volunteering in archives because they are so blinkered"'. (P38, male, gay man).

biphobia
- One of my colleagues at the time, they would identify as bi, anb they had a situation where they had been shouted at by a colleague and I arrived at work and they were all shaking and trembling...they were very upset'. (P13, female, heterosexual).

positive discrimination
- 'So, essentially, "oh you are gay. It is good to have diverse people in this group, you should be part of this group." So, the concern is whether in fact you are included in things just because of your diversity or you are included because one appreciates your skills or your knowledge, your expertise'. (P15, male, gay man).

Figure 2. Types of discrimination experienced or witnessed.

> The saddest thing is that I have had this even from within queer circles, where people . . . when once asked how I identify, I answered but the way they responded made me feel like a human zoo. (female, panromantic greysexual)

Part of the microaggressions were instances such as xenophobia, "baby-brain," as well as the mispronunciation of names. These were key examples of intersected experiences, and so was the experience intertwining racism and homophobia which was expressed by few participants.

> It felt like racism at the time, but of course there were comments about the fact that they thought I was gay because at the time I did not say anything. (female, lesbian)

Structural discrimination was key in the findings, emphasizing how procedures, teaching content, and institutional policies may be designed and/or delivered in ways which promote discrimination, prejudice and oppression among the LGBT+ population of the university.

So, the content we teach is all quite neutral, and we are beginning to introduce texts which focus on LGBT+ issues or representation of non-normative identities in children's literature. However, the majority of what we teach is very much normative. (male, demisexual)

One of the HR policies on staff relationships specifically states that if you are a member of staff, and you are seeing another member of staff, both members tell their line managers about it. My partner does not believe that they should have to tell people whether they are gay or not and did not want to necessarily be out at work. If I tell my manager, I am outing somebody and that is not OK. (male, gay man)

Data further revealed that LGBT+ staff are also concerned with how students perceive such identities and respond to them, showing that at times those are oppressive and discriminatory, mostly manifesting as microaggressions.

The students are not necessarily up to speed with that sort of issue and how to address trans people. (female, transgender)

I have experienced discrimination from students, and I had students leave my classroom with a face of disgust and then they never came back. (male, gay man)

Impact

The data further revealed the impact of discrimination experienced by LGBT+ staff. The findings here are key to understanding the effects that oppressive and discriminatory practices and policies have on the individual, and regardless of whether they are intentional (e.g., in the form of micro-invalidations — Robinson et al., 2022).

Data show seven distinct but interconnected ways by which individuals are impacted. Those are: anger, anxiety, feelings of disrespect, feelings of distress, feelings of exclusion and isolation, and feelings of dysphoria. Such impact is intertwined and two or more of these might emerge with one's experience, while feelings of disrespect, for example, will also lead to feelings of exclusion, creating thus a multi-layered and complex inter-causal relationship between them. Additionally, these experiences further impact on a person's performance at work and overall wellbeing, leading to other key areas of concern mentioned in the discussion section.

I guess, this is a common thing to a lot of gay people, that you make a decision every single day whether you come out to somebody. That bullying persists in a very low level from people. It is very frustrating. Not only is it not OK, it is a very difficult situation to work in. (male, gay man)

All this alienates you and excludes you (male, gay man).

It affects me in terms of it gives me a little bit of dysphoria. (female, transgender)

> I have definitely experienced that in terms of not having a sense of belonging, feeling ostracized, and sort of alienated and feeling undermined, negated, dismissed absolutely. (male, gay man)

> So, yeah, two years of therapy and that was really helpful actually, given the response at work. (female, lesbian)

Authenticity

Following on from the overall experience of LGBT+ staff at the institution, and the types of discrimination, as well as their impact, this study focused on the degrees to which LGBT+ staff are able or comfortable to be their authentic self at work, accentuating key challenges, especially regarding identity and representation.

The data were analyzed with a Jaccard's coefficient to allow for an exploration of the association of different themes found in the data. This analysis showed that individuals who feel comfortable being their authentic self at work also promote authenticity and individuality more comfortably, becoming advocates and active allies themselves. At large, 44% of the participants ($n = 18$) shared that they feel comfortable being their authentic self at work. Majority of those ($n = 12$) identified as gay men. The same individuals also expressed comfort in being open with colleagues, about their sexuality.

> Although I do not directly say to my students that I am a trans woman, I would be very open with them if they were to ask. (female, transgender)

> I feel that I can always be my authentic self at work regardless of who I am interacting with. (male, gay man)

> I feel that I can be myself here and discuss things openly (male, bisexual).

50% of those feeling comfortable being their authentic self at work ($n = 9$) also suggested feeling safe doing so. The remainder of the sample may not necessarily share views that they feel unsafe but may feel uncomfortable being themselves overall.

> So, my partner is female, and I will usually say, and in front of certain members of staff, I will go for gender neutral terms. I just think like hearing people making comments which made me feel like, not necessarily unsafe but slightly uncomfortable in being myself, which I guess I would count as like microaggression. (female, lesbian)

> Because I identify as non-binary, it causes very particular kinds of difficulties in the workplace. So, it does not necessarily mean that I am being myself, but it means continuous repetition of who that is, continuous reminders of what that is. (non-binary, unassigned)

Additionally, there is evidence that some staff choose not to be open at work as they separate their *personal* from their *work* self.

> I mean, I do have a work self, but I would not say that is inauthentic. You just behave slightly differently in a professional context than you would at a pub with your friends. (male, demisexual)

Discussion

The study aimed to record the lived experiences of LGBT+ self-identified staff in higher education and to develop a deeper understanding of those experiences to support the development of more inclusive practices and institutional policies, informed by key national legislation [e.g., *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2020–2024* (CMA, 2020)]. The participants in the study represented a diverse range of gender and sexuality identities, including male (50%), female (43%), transgender (7%), gay man (33%), lesbian (21%), bisexual (16%), demisexual (2%), and panromantic greysexual (8%). Five themes were generated, each of which captures recurrent patterns of experience or behavior (Sears et al., 2021).

Key UK legislation on inclusivity in the workplace centers around the Equality Act 2010, which consolidates previous anti-discriminatory laws into a single framework to ensure fair treatment and prevent discrimination based on protected characteristics. The Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against employees on the grounds of protected characteristics such as age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. This Act mandates employers to make reasonable adjustments for employees to ensure they are not at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts. It also addresses indirect discrimination, where policies and procedures may impact unfairly and disproportionately on employees.

Despite these legal protections, the data from this study showed that inclusivity experiences vary significantly. While 52% of the participants felt welcomed initially their experiences were heavily influenced by their department or faculty. Those in social sciences and humanities, including education, health and social care, reported a more positive experiences compared to other areas, whereas professional staff had mixed experiences. However, 48% of the participants encountered negative experiences, such as feeling unwelcome, oppressed, uncertain, or facing hostility. These issues were often attributed to local teams, specific individuals, and organizational structures. Participants also reflected on the inclusiveness of the induction process and whether it provided information about different staff communities and networks and opportunities for support and guidance. Such findings corroborate with research exploring leadership and strategies in creating safer spaces (Hernandez, 2022), while others' perception of LGBTQIA+ experiences of joining an organization are often skewed based on stereotypical thinking

which might influence the overall experiences (Sears et al., 2021). Such notions are

Even though this study did not focus on the causality of the varied experiences about first impressions, the data does indicate heterogeneity in the experience as positive feelings may be the product of different circumstances each time. For example, individuals with longer experience at a university may have a different view of their first impressions than those joining more recently. A leading factor for that would also be the changing nature of HEIs over the years, especially as different legislation (e.g., human rights and employment law) applies (Kay, 2022). For example, the implementation of the Gender Recognition Act 2024 streamlines the process for transgender individuals to legally change their gender, removing burdensome medical requirements and allowing self-identification. This Act aims to protect transgender employees from discrimination and ensure their rights are respected in the workplace, while it safeguards further LGBTQIA+ employees by promoting fair treatment and equal opportunities in all aspects of employment. Such legislative protections are recent and shape the environment for more recent staff and younger professionals, but they do not always reconcile the trauma and experiences of staff with a longer period of service, when such frameworks and protections were unavailable.

The data also showed that 27% of the participants discussed the impact of different management styles on their wellbeing and experience at the university. 92% of these participants identified as gay men, indicating a pattern that gay men may place more emphasis on their relationships with line management. The data showed that LGBT+ staff, and specifically gay men, found line managers to be supportive, although there were also instances of unsupportiveness, inattentiveness, or reactiveness. Staff who found their line managers to be open and supportive felt that their identities and experiences were not dismissed or negated. However, some line managers were experienced as unequipped to address matters relating to LGBT+ identities, which often reflected ingrained heteronormative and gendered views. Additionally, some line managers created a toxic environment and placed more pressure on LGBT+ individuals, while others were distant and inattentive, offering little guidance or support in relation to their wellbeing and experiences as LGBT+ individuals. These findings lend to the argument by Colgan (2016) that line managers should assume the role of an advocate to ensure inclusive environments and supportive relationships, and thus higher job satisfaction and equality (also see Colgan et al., 2020). While this study did not fully explore line managers' training, it is worth noting that research (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016) has found that training programs focused on LGBTQIA+ issues improve the managers' ability to support their staff effectively and increases overall awareness and sensitivity.

Participants further reported feeling invisible both within the institution and in their personal lives. This evidence is relevant to previous research in

healthcare (Boland, 2017) or when viewed at the intersection with other identities like disability (A. A. Bell, 2019). This invisibility was often due to the lack of representation and visibility of LGBT+ individuals, which in turn created a feeling of isolation and marginalization. Visibility and representation are important factors in creating a more inclusive environment and the impact of not feeling seen or heard (Strain, 2022). This experience extends to the need for inclusive policies and practices that facilitate inclusive environments and a safe space in which LGBTQIA+ staff feel visible and supported (M. P. Bell et al., 2011). The study also highlighted that LGBTQIA+ staff face discrimination in various forms, including microaggressions, derogatory comments, and exclusion from social events and activities, and such incidents impact on their wellbeing and their overall experience at the university. The negative impact of discrimination in all its forms is not new (e.g., Casey et al., 2019) but this knowledge should support the development of more inclusive practices and policies which will improve the overall experiences of LGBTQIA+ staff. Applying queer theory, the emergent theoretical frame from post-structuralist and feminist thoughts, which critically examines and deconstructs normative concepts of gender and sexuality, to workplace policies and practices necessitates the creation of environments that embrace diversity and reject rigid categorizations. When informed by queer theory, inclusive policies promote nondiscrimination, recognize diverse gender identities and sexuality, and support non-binary approaches to opportunities and benefits (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1993).

Finally, participants discussed the importance of authenticity in creating a positive work environment and the impact of not being able to express their true selves. They also discussed the importance of creating safe spaces for LGBT+ individuals to be themselves and the impact of not having such spaces. Tinoco-Giraldo et al. (2021) explored the ways in which HE environments can become more inclusive, and indeed, and according to this study's findings, fostering a space in which individuals can express their true selves is a significant starting point. If anything, this study shows that we are not yet at the place where HEIs are a safe space for everyone to be authentic and therefore happy in their work environment (Williamson, 2020).

The study provides valuable insights into the experiences of LGBT+ staff in HE and highlights the importance of creating inclusive practices and policies. The study alone cannot recognize the relationships between cause and effect but certainly accentuates current knowledge about the need for safer spaces in HE, while it contests the oftentimes argued positions about an inclusive environment already established. Conclusively, it accentuates the gaps in HE which disadvantage LGBTQIA+ individuals, and it offers knowledge that may inform the development of non-binary and flexible approaches in policies and practices to ensure safe and inclusive environments.

Limitations of the study

This study sheds some light on the area of lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ self-identified individuals. However, there are several limitations to it that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was conducted in a specific geographic location and HEI, and the findings may not be generalizable to other regions or countries. The experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals can vary greatly depending on cultural, social, and political contexts. Therefore, caution should be exercised when interpreting the results of this study outside of the specific context in which it was conducted.

Secondly, while efforts were made to recruit participants from a diverse range of backgrounds and industries, it is possible that certain perspectives or experiences were underrepresented in the sample—for example, demisexual or non-binary individuals. Future studies could benefit from more diverse sample sizes to improve the generalizability of the findings.

Thirdly, this study focused on the lived experiences of staff members. While these are important issues, they do not necessarily capture the full range of experiences that LGBTQIA+ individuals may have when working with students in HE. Future studies could benefit from exploring the whole HE sectors, inclusive of both students and staff.

Lastly, the study did not draw on results based on intersected identities, yet focused on gender and sexuality more specifically. Future work can draw on intersectionality and explore corroborating factors to the reported experiences as those are influenced by other identities, such as LGBTQIA+ staff with a disability, or across different ethnicities, and so on.

Conclusions

This research study has shed light on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in HE. The findings have shown that there is still much work to be done in creating inclusive and supportive environments for LGBTQIA+ individuals. While progress has been made in recent years, discrimination and marginalization continue to be major barriers. Universities need to take proactive steps to address the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ staff. This includes implementing policies and programs that support individuals, as well as educating the broader university community about issues related to LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences, while increasing visibility and representation. Ultimately, creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals in HEIs is not just a matter of social justice, but also a matter of academic excellence. When LGBTQIA+ individuals are supported and valued, they are better able to succeed, progress and contribute to the broader university community. It is our hope that this research study will serve as a catalyst for continued efforts to create more inclusive and welcoming universities for all.

Notes

1. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/44/contents.
2. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/38/contents.
3. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2003/1660/contents/made.
4. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2007/1263/contents/made.
5. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/contents.
6. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents.
7. The acronym LGBT+ is used interchangeably here with all its variations.
8. https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-britain-health.
9. https://www.transactual.org.uk/trans-lives-21.

Disclosure statement

Funding

ORCID

Panagiotis Pentaris ⬛ http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5593-8555
Alan Dudley ⬛ http://orcid.org/0009-0005-6752-6036
David Hockham ⬛ http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9362-1137
Carmen Yau ⬛ http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3101-9487

References

Balakrishnan, S., & Mohapatra, M. (2022). Exploring experiences at work beyond the binary: Identity, inclusion and allyship. *IUP Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *21*(2), 24–58. https://ssrn.com/abstract=4271317

Bell, A. A. (2019). Exploring the experiences of LGBTQIA+ collegians with disabilities: Maybe I exist. In E. M. Zamani-Gallaher, D. D. Choudhuri, & J. L. Taylor (Eds.), *Rethinking LGBTQIA students and collegiate contexts* (pp. 45–58). Routledge.

Bell, M. P., Özbilgin, M. F., Beauregard, T. A., & Sürgevil, O. (2011). Voice, silence, and diversity in 21st century organizations: Strategies for inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees. *Human Resource Management*, *50*(1), 131–146. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20401

Blumenfeld, W. J., Weber, G. N., & Rankin, S. (2016). In our own voice: Campus climate as a mediating factor in the persistence of LGBT people in higher education. In E. A. Mikulec & P. C. Miller (Ed.), *Queering classrooms: Personal narratives and educational practices to support LGBTQ youth in schools* (pp. 1–20). Information Age Publishing.

Boland, A. (2017). God of the hinge: Treating LGBTQIA patients. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, *62*(5), 688–700. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12349

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.

Burmeister, E., & Aitken, L. M. (2012). Sample size: How many is enough? *Australian Critical Care*, *25*(4), 271–274. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aucc.2012.07.002

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Casey, L. S., Reisner, S. L., Findling, M. G., Blendon, R. J., Benson, J. M., Sayde, J. M., & Miller, C. (2019). Discrimination in the United States: Experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer Americans. *Health Services Research*, *54*(S2), 1454–1466. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.13229

Colgan, F. (2016). LGBT company network groups in the UK: Tackling opportunities and complexities in the workplace. In T. Köllen (Ed.), *Sexual orientation and transgender issues in organizations: Global perspectives on LGBT workforce diversity* (pp. 525–538). Springer.

Colgan, F., Wright, T., Creegan, C., & McKearney, A. (2020). Equality and diversity policies and practices at work: Lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers. *Equal Opportunities International*, *25*(6), 465–482.

Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). (2020). *Equality, diversity and inclusion strategy 2020–2024*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cma-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2020-to-2024/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2020-to-2024

Ellis, S. J. (2009). Diversity and inclusivity at university: A survey of the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) students in the UK. *Higher Education*, *57*(6), 723–739. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9172-y

Flick, U. (2022). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research design*. SAGE.

Freund, K., Heasman, G., Racansky, I. G., & Glancy, G. (1984). Pedophilia and heterosexuality vs. homosexuality. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, *10*(3), 193–200. https://doi.org/10.1080/00926238408405945

Friedrichs, J. H. (2022). Transnational networks of child sexual abuse and consumerism: Edward Brongersma and the pedophilia debate of the 1970s and 1980s. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, *31*(2), 169–191. https://doi.org/10.7560/JHS31202

Government Equalities Office. (2018). *LGBT Action Plan 2018: Improving the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people*. https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office

Grimwood, M. E. (2017). What do LGBTQ students say about their experience of university in the UK? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, *21*(4), 140–143.

Guyan. (2016). *The experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual staff in UK higher education*. https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/ecu/Research_Insight-Experiences_of_LGB_staff_final-Feb_2018_1579776936.pdf

Hastings, R., & Mansell, O. (2015). Somewhere over the rainbow: The challenges and opportunities open to LGBT* staff. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, *19*(4), 122–126.

Hernandez, M. R. (2022). *On institutional commitment: The role of LGBTQ+ centers in faculty leadership & visibility in American higher education* [Doctoral dissertation]. Texas Tech University.

Huffman, A. H., Watrous-Rodriguez, K. M., & King, E. B. (2008). Supporting a diverse workforce: What type of support is most meaningful for lesbian and gay employees? *Human Resource Management: Published in Cooperation with the School of Business Administration,*

the University of Michigan and in Alliance with the Society of Human Resources Management, *47*(2), 237–253. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20210

Jagose, A. (1996). *Queer theory: An introduction*. NYU Press.

Kay, C. M. (2022). *Challenges of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) students in higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University].

LGBT Action Plan. (2018). https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lgbt-action-plan -2018-improving-the-lives-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people/lgbt-action-plan-2018-improving-the-lives-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people

Natzler, M., & Evans, D. (2021). *Student relationships, sex and sexual health survey. Higher education policy institute.* https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Student-Relationships-Sex-and-Sexual-Health-Survey_Report-139_FINAL.pdf

Ng, E., & Rumens, N. (2017). Diversity and inclusion for LGBT workers: Current issues and new horizons for research. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences / Revue Canadienne des Sciences de l'Administration*, *34*(2), 109–120. https://doi.org/10.1002/cjas.1443

Ozturk, M. B., & Tatli, A. (2016). Gender identity inclusion in the workplace: Broadening diversity management research and practice through the case of transgender employees in the UK. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *27*(8), 781–802. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2015.1042902

Pentaris, P. (2019). A constructive analysis of the formation of LGBTQ families: Where Utopia and Reality meet. *International Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, *13*(1), 60–65.

Pentaris, P., Evans, D., Hockham, D., Yau, C., Dudley, A., Matthews, K., & Hassan, R. (2022). *LGBT+ culture in higher education.* https://docs.gre.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0035/297935/lgbt-culture-in-he-research-report-september-2022.pdf

Pichardo, J. I. (2011). We are family (or not): Social and legal recognition of same-sex relationships and lesbian and gay families in Spain. *Sexualities*, *14*(5), 544–561. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711415217

Pitcher, E. N., Camacho, T. P., Renn, K. A., & Woodford, M. R. (2018). Affirming policies, programs, and supportive services: Using an organizational perspective to understand LGBTQ+ college student success. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *11*(2), 117. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000048

Robinson, D., Adams, T. R., Williams, B. K., & Williams, N. N. (2022). Surviving higher learning: Microinvalidations of Black junior faculty in higher education. In A. M. Allen & J. T. Stewart (Eds.), *We're not OK: Black faculty experiences and higher education strategies* (pp. 75–93). Cambridge University Press.

Sears, B., Mallory, C., & Luhur, W. (2021). *Public and private sector employees' perceptions of discrimination against LGBTQ people.*

Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). *Tendencies*. Duke University Press.

Strain, A. (2022). I say Gay: The many benefits of LGBTQIA+ inclusive education. *Voices of USU: An anthology of student writing* (Vol.15). https://uen.pressbooks.pub/voicesofusu vol15/chapter/i-say-gay-the-many-benefits-of-lgbtqia-inclusive-education/

Tinoco-Giraldo, H., Torrecilla Sánchez, E. M., & García-Peñalvo, F. J. (2021). An analysis of LGBTQIA+ university students' perceptions about sexual and gender diversity. *Sustainability*, *13*(21), 11786. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132111786

University and College Union. (2021). *Survey on LGBT+ experiences in higher education.* https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/11536/Survey-shows-widespread-LGBT-discrimination-in-higher-education

Vaccaro, A. (2012). Campus microclimates for LGBT faculty, staff, and students: An exploration of the intersections of social identity and campus roles. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *49*(4), 429–446. https://doi.org/10.1515/jsarp-2012-6473

Webster, J. R., Adams, G. A., Maranto, C. L., Sawyer, K., & Thoroughgood, C. (2018). Workplace contextual supports for LGBT employees: A review, meta-analysis, and agenda for future research. *Human Resource Management*, *57*(1), 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21873

Williamson, T. (2020). *Queer workers and workspaces: Stories about emotions and embodied experiences of LGBTQIA people in work-related spaces.*