REPORT

# LGBT+ volunteering in higher education: Community and ambivalence

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# Summary

In this paper I report on my PhD research, where I investigate the ways in which LGBT+ volunteers within English Higher Education (e.g. students volunteering for LGBT+ societies and/or Students' Unions, or staff involved in their LGBT+ staff network) describe their aims, objectives, successes and obstacles in their volunteering work. I am particularly interested in whether and how volunteers make sense of their ambivalent position within and/or against institutional context, institutional image and institutional history. I am using a Discourse Analytical methodology to analyse interviews, focus groups, and university promotional material. This methodology allows me to collect qualitative data that allows LGBT+ volunteers to speak on these topics in their own words. This combination of data will give an insight into what is and is not conducive for LGBT+ working relations in Higher Education, and will allow me to formulate recommendations for how universities can act in ways that materially benefit LGBT+ students, rather than implementing cosmetic changes.

# Introduction

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw the United Kingdom involved in a rapid acceleration of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT+) legal inclusion – from the protection from workplace harassment on grounds of gender reassignment or sexual orientation (1999), the right to adoption (2002), legal recognition of one's gender identity (2004), to civil partnership (2004), and eventually marriage (2013). Furthermore, men who have sex with men are no longer banned from donating blood in the UK as of 2021. This ban was initially implemented in the 1980s among fear of donor blood being a source for the spread of HIV/AIDS.[1]

Where LGBT+ identities were initially legally constituted as outside the imagined ideal of the UK as a nation (Anderson, 1983), many of these identities have now been both acknowledged and incorporated as part of this very ideal, by recognising the presence of (some) LGBT+ people as lawful, and incorporating LGBT+ people into those realms of subjecthood that are associated with (re)producing the future (Edelman, 2004) of a nation's population: marriage, the workplace, healthcare, the military, and child-rearing.

This of course does not mean that LGBT+ communities are free from oppression, but that the source of this oppression is no longer always easily identified in apparatuses that (re)produce the nation. Where legal rights to join in civic life might have been a priority for some LGBT+ advocacy groupings in the past, there is now the much less easily definable/measurable task of enacting social change. It should also be noted that the right to join in civic life has not been extended to every LGBT+ person equally. Indeed, incorporation of some LGBT+ people into the nation, can be predicated on the oppression of other LGBT+ people (Puar, 2007; Jourian, 2015).

It is against this background of increased legal acceptance (but also academic and communal ambivalence around the national 'role' of gender and sexuality that this legal acceptance is built on) that I am conducting my research on the experiences and intentions of LGBT+ volunteers in Higher Education (HE) in England. With the vast majority of English universities having visible volunteer-run LGBT+ student societies, and over half of universities having volunteer-run LGBT+ staff networks, it is clear that there is a certain demand for these

communities in the HE sector. However, the function and aims of these communities, as well as the experiences of those who participate and organise within them, are not always clear-cut. It is my aim to find out how LGBT+ volunteers narrate the aims and objectives of their organising, as well as how they experience the (lack of) support they receive from their university.

In this paper, I will firstly give a brief overview of the university sector, its approach to diversity, and the research done with LGBT+ people in particular. I will then outline how I aim to fill existing gaps in the literature in my research, and how this relates to my own experiences as an LGBT+ volunteer. I will follow this by outlining the process of undertaking pilot interviews, and some preliminary findings that resulted from these interviews. I will conclude by discussing what the next steps in this research are/will be.

## Diversity in the university

Researching the current relationship between English universities and the LGBT+ people who work and study in them, inevitably means researching the role that marketisation of the HE sector has had on how diversity is viewed. Studies on the self-promotional efforts of universities have found that 'diversity' has come to be seen by HE institutions as an objective to be achieved (Buckhardt et al., 2016, p.2), a set of values to be displayed publicly, not just to attract a diverse student body, but also to appeal to potential investors and other financial stakeholders (Morphew and Hartley, 2006).

Subsequently, universities may phrase the implementation of equality and diversity policies in language that implies that equality diversity has always already been achieved, rather than reporting on the outcome or precise function of these policies (Tlili, 2007). Alison Phipps argues that universities have an interest in addressing the way the university looks, rather than the way it is experienced. She names this dynamic 'institutional airbrushing', and argues that it is rooted in the idea that enacting systemic change can be seen as an admission that an institution is systemically flawed, which can attract negative media attention (Phipps, 2020).

## LGBT+ at university

At the moment there is a significant lack of investigation into the experiences of LGBT+ people at English universities, as most research on this topic comes from the United States. The existing research does not paint a hopeful picture - students have a severe lack of trust in their university handling issues of discrimination appropriately, with one UK-based study reporting that 86% of LGBT+ students did not think that it was worth reporting an incident of homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia in their institution (Grimwood, 2017). Similarly, in a qualitative UK-based study on LGBT+ staff training some participants expressed concern that the training was not seen as a long-term engagement with LGBT+ inequalities, but rather something to be ticked off a checklist (Calvard, O'Toole and Hardwick, 2020, p.363). Furthermore, a 2016 report co-created by the University and Colleges Union, the National Union of Students, the Equality Challenge Unit and the Learning and Work Institute found a similar gap between the protection of LGBT+ staff in principle, versus doing so in praxis. The report noted that while nearly 80% of staff in Further and Higher Education institutions mentioned that their institution had policies in place to protect staff against discrimination based on sexual orientation (74% for gender identity), less than half thought that these policies were effective in actually tackling discrimination in the workplace (SGForum, 2016).

It seems that LGBT+ people too are affected by the dynamic of institutional airbrushing.

Furthermore, while extensive chronicling and archiving of particular LGBT+ student societies has taken place (Ghaziani, 2011; O'Riordan and Webb, 2020), there seem to be no studies that comparatively explore LGBT+ volunteering communities as communities, including all of the contradictions, similarities, and differences within and between communities that this kind of research can uncover. My own experiences of volunteering in LGBT+ societies and networks has been ambivalent. On the one hand, it gave me a sense of purpose to help sustain a community of like-minded people. On the other hand, it also seemed to me that these communities are under a lot of pressure to provide essential services, despite not always having the resources, expertise, or funding to do so. Over the years I have seen these communities be used to access mental health support, housing support, exchange healthcare information, provide guidance on various kinds of trauma (including sexual violence, familial abuse, and physical violence), and as spaces to fundraise for private medical treatment.

My preliminary research has shown that being a volunteer within a university setting came with particular ambivalences that are specific to the HE sector. In student volunteers' cases, these services were provided on top of studying for a degree, for which the student is paying tuition fees that have increased over threefold since 2012 - even more so for students paying international fees. For university staff volunteers, these services were often interwoven with their paid work, creating blurred boundaries between the kind of work they voluntarily took on, versus the kind of work that they could demand payment for. This was especially pertinent for voluntary work which, in the eyes of volunteers, promoted the reputation of the university and was therefore free labour which was directly beneficial to their employers. It is my aim to find out whether other volunteers also experience this ambivalence, and if so, how they navigate this.

# Research questions and methodology

While my final thesis will cover a broader field, I have focused on the following two research questions for the purposes of this paper:

1. What are LGBT+ volunteers' views on the role of their work within the university system?

2. How do LGBT+ volunteers experience the support (or lack thereof) from their institution of education with regards to working towards LGBT-friendliness?

In order to answer these questions, I have conducted nineteen one-on-one synchronous online interviews with people who have participated in university-based LGBT+ volunteering in the period 2017-2022. These interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule, which allowed me to investigate unexpected matters that arose in the interview, as well as considering how participants navigated their position as a volunteer, without assuming what this navigation may look like (Lune and Berg, 2017). These interviews were meant to gain, not an objective view of volunteering life, but rather information on how volunteering is experienced by volunteers: how they frame their participation, and what language they use to describe everyday activities (Wray and Bloomer, 2012; Lune and Berg, 2017).

I am currently coding my data in NVivo. I performed Initial Open Coding. Codes that arose from this process were collated into overarching themes using Focused Coding, paying

attention to patterns of similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation (Saldaña, 2009, p.18). As the process of interviewing is still ongoing, this paper will concern itself only with the three pilot interviews that were conducted to refine the interview schedule and test out the procedural aspects of the interview process.

# Pilot interviews

Three pilot interviews were conducted in July and August 2021 to refine the interview schedule and ensure that all questions were worded in a way that elicited the right kind of response, while also leaving room for participants to bring in topics of their own. All three participants in the pilot interviews were part of the same LGBT+ student society between 2012 and 2016. Participants were intentionally selected as a convenience sample (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p. 218), in order not to diminish the number of people who fit the research inclusion criteria. All participants were known to me prior to the pilot interviews and were contacted directly via social media. All participants identified as cisgender women and were aged 25-28. Two interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and one was conducted face-to-face. The interviews took roughly forty minutes each.

Prior to the interview, participants were asked the following demographic questions for monitoring of the sample:

1. At what university/universities were you based during your LGBT+ volunteering?

2. What was your role(s) during your time as an LGBT+ volunteer?

3. How would you describe your sexuality?

4. How would you describe your gender identity?

5. How would you describe your ethnicity?

6. What is your age?

7. Which pronouns do you use?

These questions were explicitly open-ended to allow for participants to describe their demographic markers to the extent that they felt was appropriate. Participants were also told that they could opt not to answer these questions if they did not feel comfortable doing so. They were asked to return these questions prior to the interview. All participants returned the questions ahead of the interview, and all participants were happy to answer all of them, seemingly indicating that these questions are not seen as too much of an imposition on either their privacy or their time.

By virtue of being a researcher, I had a certain level of power during the conversation which may have caused the participants to feel like they need to disclose more than they would actually feel comfortable doing (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 162), especially with a topic that is so intertwined with participants' personal and affective histories. In order to keep participant wellbeing at the heart of the interview procedure, participants were reminded just before the start of the interview that they could pause or stop the interview at any time. The interview schedule was also set up in such a way that no obviously emotionally charged questions were asked, meaning that if any emotionally intense topic arose, it would be the participant who took the lead, rather than myself.

Although these strategies do not undo the researcher-participant dynamic, they seemed to have worked to mitigate it, by finding a balance between participants' autonomy in bringing up topics that are important to them, and their autonomy in deciding how much to disclose: one of the participants noted that some "really bad things" had happened in her student society, but immediately caveated this with the statement that this was not something that she was going to discuss in the interview. Another participant described an interaction with a university staff member, but explicitly said that she did not want to identify this person by name on-record. These two examples show that participants were both able to identify their own boundaries and also felt comfortable in explicitly asserting them to me.

# Analysis and changes to interview schedule

Interviews were transcribed in NVivo, where phrases were coded during Initial Open Coding using in vivo codes, to stay close to participants' own language-use. These codes were then grouped into overarching themes using Focused Coding. These themes were created to broadly correspond to the different research questions, although room was made for new themes to emerge as well (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017, p.669).

Changes were made to the interview schedule as a result of the pilot interviews. For instance, a question on university expectations was added, as the first participant did not talk about her expectations of the university at all. It also became clear that participants would anticipate certain questions or topics before they came up in the interview schedule. It was therefore decided to let go of the particular order in which questions were asked, and simply follow the trail that the participant was already on, and have the questions merely as guidelines to avoid any topics being completely missed out. This was to avoid asking the participant to repeat themselves (which might give the impression that I was not paying attention to their initial responses), and to allow for a narrative where the participant decided upon the order in which topics were addressed, as well as whether/how these topics fit together, rather than following a strict schedule.

# Preliminary findings

Of course, given that these were pilot interviews, and given their small and non-diverse sample size, it is impossible to draw conclusive, generalisable results from these interviews. However, the analysis of the interviews did illuminate certain points of interest for the remainder of the study, to which I will now turn.

One notable finding which will inform my further research, is that all participants rooted their volunteering work in connections to other people within the university space, while finding value in making these connections comfortable and easily accessible for (potential) new members of the society. This was often contrasted with disappointment regarding participants' own experiences of unwelcome or intimidating initial contact with LGBT+ communities, or seeing other people feel isolated or insecure within the events that were put on by a student society. This making of comfortable connections is a relatively intangible goal compared to, for instance, implementing a particular policy at university or national level. My research will therefore aim to flesh out how value is constructed within LGBT+ volunteering

communities in relation to these intangible goals of comfort, kinship, and security, and particularly the extent to which these align with or differ from normative discourses of reproductive futurity.

Participants also noted the difficulties in juggling responsibilities and committing resources, time and effort to student societies while doing a degree and/or working. Given the continued increasing cost of education and the rising financial precarity the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it, it will be interesting to see how current LGBT+ volunteers work to balance their education, their income, and their unpaid work.

Participants also spoke about concepts like 'welfare' and 'diversity' in ambivalent or sometimes even contradictory terms. For instance, 'diversity' was at one point used to describe an already existing level of variety in human experiences which simply needed to be acknowledged within the university curriculum. Yet at other times the term was used to describe an ideal situation of variety within LGBT+ spaces, which had not yet been achieved. This is reminiscent of the various temporal meanings that the academic literature has identified as falling under the term 'diversity'.

On top of this, participants expressed frustration with their wish for the university to be in a role of responsibility towards their LGBT+ volunteering community, versus the actual steps that university staff took towards performing this role, which were positioned as inadequate. This seems to indicate several communicative frictions, firstly around how certain buzzwords are used, but also what the expectations are regarding responsibility towards these concepts, and what happens when these expectations are not fulfilled.

While, again, these pilot interviews are not sufficient to draw broader conclusions from, they do provide a small insight into the dynamics of volunteering communities, and have worked as an orienting device for my further research. Here, I will have the opportunity to explore in more depth the ways that universities are expected to act in relation to concepts like welfare and diversity, what universities do to raise certain expectations (in for instance promotional material), and whether or not LGBT+ volunteers experience their universities as meeting those expectations. I will now turn to a discussion of this further research.

# Further study

This paper is being written as I am halfway through conducting and transcribing twenty interviews with LGBT+ volunteers. When initial coding and analysis has started, I will set up focus groups with my participants, to allow for a discussion on the initial findings. The decision to incorporate focus groups was made as a result of keeping LGBT+ wellbeing and direct benefit to LGBT+ people as a meta-textual aim of my research: I found it difficult to reconcile the notion that I am doing something for these communities as a whole, with the knowledge that any results or recommendations based on my research will take months, if not years to formulate - by which time many participants might have left the field already.

It was therefore decided that focus groups could allow participants to meet other LGBT+ volunteers, and use the space not just to verify or challenge my preliminary results, but also as a network to exchange feelings, experiences, and strategies. This is part of a wider strategy of making my research as minimal an imposition on my participants' emotional and financial needs, through for instance giving them an online voucher as a thank-you for their time, by allowing them to choose their own pseudonym to avoid coercive naming, and by

altering the interview schedule to allow participants to take the lead on any potentially distressing topics (see above).

The schedules for the interviews and focus groups will be informed by the information found in the pilot interviews, as will the subsequent analysis of the data. The findings from the interviews and focus groups will be compared to findings from Multimodal Analysis of university promotional material. This comparison aims to find similarities, differences, contradictions and ambiguities between how the university is presented in promotional material, and how it is experienced by LGBT+ volunteers.

Following the pilot interviews, I will focus specifically on the various uses of terms like 'welfare' and 'diversity', as well as the positioning of volunteers in relation to the university as an institution. This will uncover the variety of discourses at play within the neoliberal university with regards to LGBT+ people, and hopefully allow for a deeper insight into whether/how universities can support LGBT+ volunteers to achieve the aims that they find valuable or essential within their communities.

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