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developing  
LGBTQIA+ inclusive  
spaces in LJMU's  
School of  
Humanities &  
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*Proud/Loud/Heard... ?  
Exploring LGBT+ identity, being and experiences  
LGBT+ research conference 2023*

# Queer Communities: Developing LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Spaces in LJMU's School of Humanities & Social Science

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This paper presents a small-scale intervention in the social and educational environment of the School of Humanities and Social Science (HSS) at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). The project – supported through funded LJMU Curriculum Enhancement Internships – aims to create space to discuss queer life, space and joy within the school's academic environment, critically consider challenges for queer students in Higher Education, and co-create materials to improve LGBTQIA+ inclusion and visibility. The Queer Communities project aimed to build on the wider work undertaken at LJMU, through EDI initiatives such as Understanding Pronouns videos (LJMU, 2022) and John Moores Students Union projects and societies by developing student-led and school specific spaces for developing LGBTQIA+ community and enhancing visibility.

Queer Communities project was developed in line with the funding scheme's theme of Education for Wellbeing by making an intervention into the learning environment to support a specific group of students' wellbeing and success. It aims to develop community and resources that directly support their resilience and self-esteem while studying. The project took place over twelve weeks, with three student interns employed to research, reflect on, and develop their ideas around queer communities in the academy. Here, I will outline the institutional, local and social contexts of the project, discuss the students' contributions, and some of the outcomes being developed.

City and Campus Contexts Increasing attention has been paid by policymaking bodies and researchers to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in tertiary education. While inclusion of LGBTQIA+ students has improved overall, there remain several issues that impact this group, especially around their need 'to feel represented – to feel their views are listened to' (Neves and Hewitt, 2021, p33). Where this is lacking, retention becomes a concern, as they face barriers in addition to those associated with navigating the liminal space that students occupy (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010; Meyer & Land, 2005; Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014). LGBTQIA+ students also attend university against a background of wider cultural backlash and moral panic, often focused on – but not limited to – trans and non-binary people (see Taylor, Brim & Mahn, 2023; IPSO, 2020; Gwenffrewi, 2022).

Visit Liverpool – the Liverpool City Region combined authority's tourism arm - is amongst many social, cultural and political institutions that foreground the queer-friendly status of the city. Their website declares 'Liverpool City Region is proud to be a friendly, inclusive place to visit' (Visit Liverpool, date unknown, para 1). Elsewhere, organisations and institutions demonstrate civic buy-in to LGBTQIA+ culture and history. Examples include: big

events like the historically Barclays sponsored Liverpool City Region Pride, museum exhibitions such as Museum of Liverpool's 'April Ashley: Portrait of a Lady' (2013-14), the city-centre 'Pride Quarter', continued arts funding for events like Homotopia Festival, and hosting 2023's Eurovision Song Contest. As a city with four Higher Education Institutions (Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool Institute of the Performing Arts, and University of Liverpool), there is regular engagement by the universities with LGBTQIA+ calendar events. They also have various queer staff and/or student networks. The city is also broadly known as the home city of notable queer figures such as Paul O'Grady/Lily Savage, April Ashley, Brian Epstein and The Vivienne. Liverpool also has multiple queer community spaces and community led organisations such as Comics Youth CIC, Lovelocks Coffee Shop, LGBT+ Socialists, Reclaim Pride and Trans Pride.

In contrast to its outwardly queer-friendly image, the city has also seen increased levels of hate crime year-on-year since at least 2018, with violent attacks on LGBTQIA+ people being reported in the local and national news. We also saw the vandalism of public artworks in 2021 including Rosa Kusabbi's *Hate Has No Place in Liverpool*, and the smashing of the window at FACT where Ben Youdan's work *Queer with No Fear* was on display (see Pidd & Wolfe-Robinson, 2021). The local situation sits within a wider context of increased UK and international news coverage of LGBTQIA+ related stories, largely relating to trans people (e.g. IPSO, 2020). This coverage is usually negative, including attacks on LGBT+ charity Stonewall in national newspapers like *The Guardian* (Gwenffrewi, 2022).

Undertaking the project alongside students meant reflecting carefully on this context, and the additional stress, distress and precariousness our queer students may experience. As a queer person and educator, this project also stemmed from my experience with a potential university student, who approached me after I spoke at a local Pride event in 2022 – the student asked: '*I'm going to X university in September... is it safe for me there?*'. This experience also underscored the importance of queer visibility and queer role models within the university for LGBTQIA+ students and applicants for creating a safe and inclusive environment from their first encounter with HE, that we cannot take for granted exists in wider society.

In the institutional context, it must be understood that wider local environment impacts on us within the University – we are part of the city, and the good and the bad impact on our staff and students. Therefore, it is important we acknowledge that for current and future students, there may be some trepidation about attending university – even in a city as historically accepting as Liverpool. This adds to a wider sense of precarity that LGBTQIA+ people can experience, particularly as 'queers have been failed in institutional life, including via unemployment, impermanence, and misrecognition, and their experiences of precarity and plural and intersectional, extending in and out of the university' (Taylor, Brim & Mahn, 2023, p.1). Both being LGBTQIA+ *and* being a student can be seen as occupying liminal identities – sometimes accepted, other times under threat, and often on the margins or

seen as in between more normative (e.g. straight, cis) or apparently stable categories (e.g. child, working adult). Many have pointed out that education and learning are themselves liminal spaces and experiences, defined by change and transition (Meyer & Land, 2005; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010; Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014).

### Approach: Student-centred action

This project aimed to start from the experiences of students, giving them a sense of ownership and recognising they are experts in their own experiences. While incredibly valuable, research-based interventions have tended to focus on identifying, voicing, framing the problems of HE spaces for LGBTQIA+ students/staff. Here, our purpose was to focus on our School and institutional context and consider how we can improve the sense of community and belonging for queer students in HSS, rather than document and dissect their difficulties. Importantly, our project was not about turning the students into research subjects, and avoiding exposing them to (re)traumatisation (see the discussion of ethical issues in Bonner-Thompson *et al* (2021)).

The intern recruitment process was conducted by an open call to all students in HSS, with the intention of appointing 2-4 students to work on the project. Three eligible students applied (meeting the criteria of being enrolled in programmes in the School) and all were appointed following an interview with two members of staff. There may be many reasons for the limited engagement with potential recruitment to the project, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. The interns were from first year Sociology, final year History with English, and postgraduate International Relations and Politics (who is also a BA Media, Culture & Communication alumni and therefore known to me), providing an interesting profile of students across our subject areas and levels of study. The small group enabled us to develop a sense of community within the project and hopefully a feeling of ownership and collaboration. I met regularly with the students (c. bi-weekly) to discuss progress, ideas and make plans, with tasks allocated through this collaborative process. This is a method of collaboration I have used on multiple research projects, and here it proved helpful in fostering co-creation rather than replicating the traditionally vertical power structure of teacher-student.

The students were responsible for conducting research into the School, institutional and sectoral contexts. This included reviewing support and resources available and exploring examples of good practice for LGBTQIA+ inclusion within tertiary education and in other sectors. They worked with me as Project Lead to write to staff and students with requests for information on the queer curriculum and to develop a listening forum and guided discussion questions. Where communications with the wider student or staff body were required, the project lead facilitated this as staff have broader email facilities than

students, but the interns were responsible for writing these communications. The interns decided to produce a report for School Leadership Team and resources including postcards and posters and were enthusiastic about proposing future event ideas to increase LGBTQIA+ visibility in the School.

Finally, it was important that this project could be supported with a paid internship. Too often people from marginalised communities / with marginalised identities are expected to do what falls broadly under the umbrella of “EDI work” on top of their other work, with little to no remuneration. The granting of Teaching and Learning Academy internship funding meant that the students could be provided with financial and pastoral support and an opportunity for professional development while tackling this important issue and developing a legacy of increased LGBTQIA+ visibility for staff and students in HSS.

### Queer Student Experience and Expertise

The students’ input was invaluable to this project, as it enabled us to see the work the university does through their eyes. They could point to several issues that were not immediately clear to me, as a member of staff who has been involved in the EDI initiatives of the university. The students identified a range of good and poor practice at three different levels, which fed into our outputs and future activities.

As the School specific level, the students quickly identified the lack of all gender toilets in John Foster Building (where HSS is based) as an issue. John Foster Building is one of the only historic buildings that remain on our LJMU campus that is used for teaching and has been subject to a prolonged schedule of building work over the last few years. While bathroom renovations were mooted, structural work to the building’s roof, updating IT facilities, and cosmetic changes to parts of the building have taken priority. Alongside the lack of all gender toilets, gendered bathroom signage was also considered unnecessary and exclusionary by the students. They summarised their perception of the School as generally having a staff who are sensitive to LGBTQIA+ issues, but that the building’s amenities are generally poor.

(In)visibility was a key theme in the student’s observations at School level. They reported limited queer visibility amongst staff – stating I was the only queer lecturer in their academic community. This perceived lack of visibility was extended to the content of their courses, which they felt had little relevant material that examined or highlighted LGBTQIA+ issues, people, and communities. They also keenly felt a total lack of LGBTQIA+ visibility in social spaces or extra-curricular events. These issues were characterised by the students as limiting their sense of belonging as LGBTQIA+ students within HSS.

The students identified a number of University-wide issues, which were often linked to online spaces and resources. They found the university's online resources useful generally –

previously unexplored by them – but felt few of these were directed specifically at students. The presence of a hate crime reporting facility via John Moores Student Union was welcomed, but the students felt this was not joined up clearly and intuitively with wider support. Their biggest concern is that the majority of university level content focused on mental (ill)health and dealing with the consequences of adverse events, rather than community building, visibility and belonging. These issues could be characterised as representing a somewhat top-down approach to LGBTQIA+ inclusion and support. There exist some very useful resources, e.g. EDI Canvas site (our institutional Virtual Learning Environment) and pronouns explainer videos, however these were not seen as accessible and available to students. The focus on support for adverse events was welcomed, but the students would welcome more institutional focus on ‘queer joy’. Discussion with the students highlighted that it is especially important these resources feel embedded rather than top-down to avoid diversity and inclusion being perceived ‘as a way not only of marketing the university but of making the university into a marketplace’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 53).

At a Sector-wide level, the students suggested that more practical consideration of creating safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ students needed. A key issue for them – which feeds back to the institutional and School levels – is a lack of information available for LGBTQIA+ students who need support leaving unsupportive homes. This could be extended to parallel resources needed for HE staff (academic and academic related) to be able to better support these students. Research reports and charter marks from organisations such as Stonewall were welcomed, but it was not clear to the group how these things impact the material conditions of queer students within universities.

These issues highlighted by the students underscored the need for research to translate into action that is tangible to the student experience. These observations also surfaced the important link between a wider context of moral panic and homo/transphobia in the media and society and the transitional or liminal status of students. For some queer students we know they are leaving an unsafe, unsupportive, or even hostile home and able to live their lives without hiding part of their identity for the first time. LJMU has a dedicated suite of care leavers support, and perhaps a similar set of resources could be developed to support queer students.

### Project Outcomes: physical and digital legacy

Having students work with me on this project has been invaluable. As noted above, they are the experts in their own experience. While I share some of their experiences as an LGBTQIA+ person, my generational and professional position means I have a fundamentally different perspective on what it is like to be a queer student in Liverpool in 2023. The

resources developed from the project aim to address the key issues of visibility and community through a range of digital and printed materials and live events.

Printed materials are being developed as a key outcome of the project. From surveying staff in HSS, we found at least 25 modules that deal with LGBTQIA+ themes, issues and people in some way. These include individual lectures, workshops, readings, explorations of theoretical perspectives, social issues, and debates, or inclusion within wider discussions. This information has been used in posters for each programme area to be displayed in rotation in the John Foster Building outlining LGBTQIA+ research and teaching within the School. Postcards for distribution at Induction and Recruitment events to promote each subject area's Queer Curriculum and increase LGBTQIA+ visibility for current and prospective students. While the students were pleased to find there was *some* representation of LGBTQIA+ people, issues and perspectives within the HSS curriculum, this is only 25 of circa 140 undergraduate modules being run within the School. Clearly, there is much work to be done to open up queering our curriculum.

The project's digital materials are being developed at present, and will be adapted following discussions with Teaching and Learning Academy and EDI teams to ensure we are not duplicating work, and different resources are cross-referenced – e.g. the university's Personal Tutoring Guide. A module on Queer Communities & Inclusion is being built in my Programme's Canvas Community site. The aim is to export this to Canvas Commons so any member of staff at LJMU can add it to their own Community or module sites. This will include a user guide, links to internal and city-wide resources and spaces, curriculum information (and templates for other subject areas to use), a Queer Vocabulary Quiz, and video resources such as presentation recordings. The digital materials in production will ensure the project has use for staff and students across LJMU in the future.

Live events had two aims: information gathering and information sharing. To gather information, the regular team meetings were crucial. They offered a (semi)structured space for the students to feedback and discuss their experiences and ideas. They also provided space to develop an open forum to get feedback from staff & students on their perceptions of LGBTQIA+ visibility in HSS – both generally and in curricula. To share information, I have arranged meetings with our Director of School to discuss findings and the future of the project, and begun to develop cross-university service discussions, for example with the Student Advice and Wellbeing and Accommodation teams. I have also taken opportunities to share the project within and outside the university, and within and outside my department through internal and external events and conferences. This has been key to ensuring LGBTQIA+ inclusion becomes more than a tick-box exercise and to embed queer visibility into our academic and pastoral practice.

The live events have been key in developing the impact of the project within and outside LJMU. Presentations within HSS and People, Politics, Communications Subject area have opened discussions with colleagues and produced further responses to the Queer

Curriculum call-out. Meeting with the Director of School was instrumental in developing space to continue the project in coming academic years. In addition to funding printed material, we will incorporate LGBTQIA+ focused activities into the forthcoming Student Voice Week activities within HSS, ensuring the visibility of queer people and ideas will continue in the School – a key issue highlighted by the interns.

Presentation at an internal LJMU academic and professional services conference enabled the project outcomes to be shared with colleagues across LJMU. The Q&A saw contributions from across different Faculties, and connections were made with staff from the Teaching and Learning Academy, Human Resources, Student Advice and Wellbeing, and Accommodation Advice. We aim to meet and discuss how to share resources and inform each other's expertise across service areas moving forward. Presentation and publication through the UCU LGBT+ Research Conference provided an opportunity to share the project with colleagues from across the Higher and Further Education Sectors in the UK, generating connections with researchers using a range of methods and approaches to support LGBTQIA+ students. The publication of the video and text versions of the project will provide a legacy outside LJMU, through an organisation with a strong track record of advocacy and policy development around LGBTQIA+ issues. This will hopefully enable aspects of the project to be taken up and adapted in other institutions.

### Impacts and Recommendations

The main impact the project has had so far is that the profile of LGBTQIA+ ideas, curricula, and people has been raised in HSS. It has provided a space for staff and students to reflect on their interpersonal, professional, and academic knowledge of queer issues and ideas and how they are incorporated into their curricula. The project has also prompted a number of key findings and recommendations to support queer community building and inclusion within our academic environment.

First, we should not take for granted that staff and student experiences vary and differ, and so do our perceptions of institutional EDI work. Institutional EDI work tends to be more visible to staff than students, and we must bridge the gap between JMSU and LJMU resources and initiatives to ensure the whole university community is aware of and can access them. The students felt strongly that it is important to facilitate informal spaces for LGBTQIA+ students alongside the formal teaching context, where students can feel listened to and take ownership of their activities. We will pilot this through Student Voice activities over the coming academic year, and consider where we can include extra-curricular space through events such as our regular craft club, or film screenings.

The students had very limited access to information outside their own programmes, which can lead to siloed and insular perception of the School as a whole. They were particularly unaware of LGBTQIA+ content within their programme curricula at their current level of



study, or across all levels of study, leading to a perceived lack of queer content and limited sense of belonging and community. To ensure these are visible within the curriculum in a way that supports our queer students, we need to do a better job of explicitly signposting when we are examining queer content in the classroom. Teaching across HSS includes LGBTQIA+ case studies across health, media, gaming, soaps, film, exhibitions, archives, festivals, demographic data, sports, gender studies, politics, Middle Eastern and American history, and literature. The rich variety of examples will be promoted through the postcard and poster projects, enhancing the visibility of LGBTQIA+ related teaching, and demonstrating HSS is a queer-inclusive space. However, the School of Humanities and Social Sciences has only one module specifically dedicated to LGBTQIA+ content – Queer Britain, in the History department. It came to our attention that this module will not run from 2023-24 due to staffing. This is a shame, and staff expertise should be maintained in this area, particularly as the module is currently run by a precariously employed colleague whose contract is not being renewed.

There have been limited responses to the project that are overall positive but also relieved to feel they do not need to personally worry about engaging with LGBTQIA+ issues if they can signpost to the project outputs. This is a disappointing response that suggests EDI is not something that everyone feels they should be responsible for, and I propose to address this through staff development within the School. However, the project has highlighted that students are keen to see Equality and Diversity centred in our curricula and throughout our learning communities, and that we should be active and confident in developing and promoting good practice in this area.

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