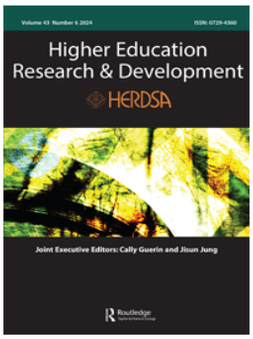

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Including LGBTQ+ early career higher education staff: learning from the policy and practice for supporting LGBTQ+ students

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ABSTRACT

This discursive paper addresses the lack of recent robust research on the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) Higher Education (HE) staff, particularly Early Career Academics in the UK. While efforts have focused on supporting LGBTQ+ students, scant attention has been given to the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ staff. Existing studies highlight issues such as harassment, avoidance, and job insecurity for LGBTQ+ HE staff in the United States. Notably, the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom (UK) has made significant effort in relation to LGBTQ+ student support, yet broader inclusivity efforts for staff seems to remain limited. Arguably, LGBTQ+ HE staff navigate a delicate balance between openness and potential repercussions, impacting their professional relationships with colleagues and students, career progression, performance ratings, and overall wellbeing. The paper underscores the need for more research, recommendations, and inclusive policies to foster a more supportive environment for LGBTQ+ Early Career Academics in UK HE.

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LGBTQ+; LGBTQ+ academics; LGBTQ+ higher education; inclusion; higher education

Introduction

There is a growing need for research into the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within early career academic positions in UK Higher Education (HE). This is due to the increasing recognition of the barriers faced by members of this community in academia, and the need to understand and address these issues (Wanelik et al., 2020; Hamilton & Giles, 2022).

First, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing discrimination and marginalisation faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in society as a whole; in the UK violence towards LGBTQ+ people is increasing each year since 2015 (Brooks & Murray, 2021; Hubbard, 2021). Despite progress towards greater acceptance and inclusivity, LGBTQ+ people face multiple challenges, including hate crime, discrimination and unequal access to healthcare and employment opportunities (Glazzard & Stones, 2019). These challenges are often

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compounded within academic settings, which can be highly competitive, normative, and hierarchical (Barnett et al., 2013).

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ individuals in academia face particular challenges related to their identity, including a lack of representation, limited access to support networks, and exclusion from opportunities for progression (Lee, 2021). There is less clarity on the impact on Early Career Academics. They may be vulnerable to these challenges, especially as they are still establishing themselves in their disciplinary fields and may lack the support available to more established scholars. By further researching the barriers LGBTQ+ Early Career Academics face, there is scope to work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment with greater transparency.

The challenges facing LGBTQ+ early career HE staff and learning from elsewhere

This discursive paper aims to illuminate the seeming lack of robust research into the experiences of LGBTQ+ higher education staff, particularly Early Career Academics, and the pragmatic steps that can be taken to develop a more LGBTQ+ inclusive academy. There has been more attention given to how staff can support LGBTQ+ students. Vaccaro et al. (2019) discuss in the United States how faculty undertake training to help avoid unwelcoming learning environments for LGBTQ+ students. One of the outcomes of the staff training was a more inclusive environment for both staff and students; the premise of the training was grounded in student belonging and competency in LGBTQ+ matters.

Interestingly, whilst there has been some work to create more inclusive campuses to support diverse students' sense of belonging, this is something that is not as apparent for staff. For example, Barnett et al. (2013) report that LGBTQ+ HE staff in the United States face harassment, avoidance, and lack job security. Such findings resonate with research in the UK which found that 3 in 5 LGBTQ+ people face hate crime but only 1 in 5 can access support following a hate crime in the public (Hubbard, 2021), and in UK HE 7% of LGB students and 33% of Trans students face hate crime, and 2 in 5 LGBTQ+ students hide their identity (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018). Barnett et al. (2013) called for further insights into the experiences of LGBTQ+ HE staff. However, there largely remains a dearth of literature, and a lack of pragmatic/recommendation papers, particularly in relation to the UK HE context. We draw on learning and insights from HE in international contexts to help better contextualise the efforts being made in the UK, and the way in which identities play a role in the challenges and opportunities LGBTQ+ academics face.

As Turner (2010) argues, 'queer teachers confronting and constructing their identity as professionals is emotional work' (p. 288). Drawing on their research with two queer university academics who were responsible for teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Bennett et al. (2015) argue that 'to reveal an alternative sexuality to cross-cultural cohorts is also an inherently political act' (p. 717). One chose to separate her personal and professional identity to avoid 'pushing' a '"queer" "Western" political agenda' (p. 718) and to ensure that students from backgrounds which condemn or criminalise queer identities were not overwhelmed. The other made a conscious decision to disclose the fact that he was a gay Aboriginal man as a way of

confronting and challenging deep-seated heteronormative assumptions that prevail within culturally diverse communities.

Griffin's (1992) seminal research on identity management is a useful theoretical lens for examining the strategies that queer educators deploy to manage their personal identities. According to Griffin, queer teachers adopt the strategies of 'passing', 'covering', 'being implicitly out', and 'being explicitly out'. Passing is the strategy of pretending to be heterosexual. Covering involves self-censorship to prevent others from identifying them as queer. Being implicitly out involves sharing personal information with others (for example, colleagues or students) without explicitly labelling oneself as queer. Being explicitly out means disclosing one's personal identity to specific individuals. Queer educators need to carefully negotiate their personal and professional identities (Gray, 2013) and some decide to split their public and private selves (Connell, 2015). Recent research shows that globally queer teachers conceal or cover their sexual identity due to fear of discrimination (Beagan et al., 2021; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Rothmann, 2014; Russell, 2021).

Le Cui's (2023) research on queer teachers living with HIV/AIDS in China provides an important contribution to knowledge. Within China, despite advances in legislation which have resulted in the decriminalisation of homosexuality, queer people are largely viewed as abnormal (Cui, 2023) and teachers living with infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, are legally banned from teaching. Given this context, it is therefore unsurprising that many will choose to conceal their identities. Cui draws on the experiences of one university academic who was living with HIV. The data in this study demonstrate the extreme strategies that the academic enacted to conceal his HIV status. He was 'double closeted' (p. 838) in that he was forced to conceal both his sexuality and his HIV status to avoid stigmatisation.

Davies and Neustifter (2023) articulate their personal experiences of being queer university academics, working within the heteronormative milieu of the Canadian university. The authors used their positions as queer academics to disrupt the normative environment of their university. They actively made visible their queerness and established professional relationships with other queer academics to disrupt the forces of heteronormativity and cisgenderism. However, they acknowledged the 'emotional labour' which they experienced as a result of needing to educate others about non-normative identities.

Efforts have been made by some UK universities to create more inclusive LGBTQ+ learning environments and for students (and staff) to be more confident in their identities. Notably, the University of Birmingham has made significant progress in relation to LGBTQ+ student support and pedagogy (Ward & Gale, 2016). Initiatives included student mentoring and a national LGBTQ+ conference. However, although this institution appears to be leading in this aspect of inclusive curricula and LGBTQ+ support, at other UK universities much of the action to support LGBTQ+ students appears to be centred on what individual academics/staff members do. However, research has shown that when LGBTQ+ staff (and their allies) take action to increase visibility, this can result in significant ramifications. For example, Clarke (2016, 2019) explores how the simple act of wearing a gay pride t-shirt can lead to altered perceptions of the person, increase student complaints, and potentially be viewed as selfish. This research also highlights potential benefits to staff visibility, including better professional

relationships and the availability of visible role models for students. Arguably, LGBTQ+ staff visibility might challenge the status quo and lead to negative impacts on the important performance metrics, including high-stakes student satisfaction surveys. Satisfaction surveys are impacted due to the cognitive biases by students associated with LGBTQ+ staff members being othered and seen as deviant or out of place (Clarke, 2016, 2019). Arguably, HE staff must constantly negotiate their identities and make decisions about what might and might not be acceptable to the various competing expectations of students, the university, and society.

HE has long been the bastion of facilitating academic freedom and expression, and that is a contributing factor in encouraging their authentic selves. This is a theme discussed by Reinert and Yakaboski (2017). In particular, they highlight the importance of being out as Lesbian women to help better navigate both their professional and personal lives, thus enabling them to build meaningful relationships and enjoy a better quality of life. Being authentic in the academy reduced the stress they experienced because they did not need to conceal aspects of lives and live in fear that they might be 'outed'. Whilst this research was conducted in the United States, Glazzard and Stones (2019) highlighted similar stresses for LGBTQ+ students in higher education in the UK. Glazzard and Stones (2019) also highlight that LGBTQ+ students experience multiple transitions which must be navigated daily. LGBTQ+ students negotiate their identities in different contexts to support their sense of belonging and in some circumstances, they may conceal their identities to fit into heteronormative environments (Glazzard & Stones, 2019). This research highlighted the need for inclusive curricula and models of student partnership which increase students' agency. Similarly, LGBTQ+ Early Career Academics are required to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their personal identities (McCune, 2021). They too are at heightened risk of exclusion (Glazzard & Stones, 2019) and may experience bullying (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018), harassment (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018), microaggressions (Ward & Gale, 2016) and reduced opportunities for career progression (Valentine et al., 2009).

It is a requirement for universities in the UK to have an equal opportunities policy which in part covers Sexual Orientation and Gender Reassignment, due to the Equality Act of 2010. However, unlike some of the other protected characteristics that have passed into the Office for Students priority groups, LGBTQ+ students are not considered an underrepresented group (OfS, 2024). Although they are not considered an underrepresented group, the OfS has recognised that there are disparities for LGBTQ+ students. However, it is concerning that only 30% of the universities in England specifically mention supporting the LGBTQ+ community in their Access and Participation plans (a key document required by the OfS for each university setting out how it will widen participation and support inclusion) (Callander, 2020). Thus, LGBTQ+ access and participation are at risk of falling through the cracks of the consciousness of the HE sector (and university leaders), resulting in there being fewer conversations and opportunities within universities. This context makes the lived experience more challenging for LGBTQ+ staff and students. Messinger (2011) has highlighted the role of individual staff, and staff acting as a collective, to bring about change for creating LGBTQ+ friendly policy and how effective advocates of policy change can have a significant impact on the culture and sense of inclusion that students (and staff) may feel as part of broader changes.

Conclusion and recommendations

While research on LGBTQ+ HE staff experiences has been growing, particularly in the western HE sector, there are still perceived shortages of research. Based upon research in the UK and in international contexts there are a number of reasons for this.

- Historical neglect: The academic study of LGBTQ+ issues is relatively recent, and historically, these experiences were often overlooked or marginalised in research, and often still is, particularly in the context of homosexuality being illegal in 65 jurisdictions of the world (Human Dignity Trust, 2024). This neglect has led to gaps in understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by LGBTQ+ HE staff.
- Underrepresentation in academia: The underrepresentation of visible LGBTQ+ individuals in academic positions may contribute to a lack of research (Veldhuis, 2020). For example, in our professional experiences, there have been some universities where there are no visible LGBTQ+ senior leaders, and indeed whilst allies are vital it does not replace the idea of 'you can't be what you can't see'. In addition to that, if the research staff themselves do not reflect the diversity of the population, certain experiences may be overlooked or silences in knowledge made.
- Fear of discrimination: Some LGBTQ+ people might be hesitant to participate in research due to concerns about discrimination, stigma, or the potential impact on their career (Clarke, 2016; Veldhuis, 2020). This fear may hinder recruitment to research studies.
- Intersectionality challenges: LGBTQ+ individuals often belong to multiple marginalised groups, including race, ethnicity, gender, age, and disability (Veldhuis, 2020). The intersectionality of these identities makes it challenging to capture the full range of experiences in a singular study.
- Limited research funding: Research on LGBTQ+ issues might not always be prioritised in funding allocations, and as seen is not considered a priority group for OfS disparities (OfS, 2024). Limited resources can constrain the scope and scale of studies, impacting the depth and breadth of research on LGBTQ+ HE staff experiences.
- Changing social dynamics: As societal attitudes evolve, so too does the focus of research. Over time, there may be shifts in research priorities, and as recently seen in UK HE, the defunding of the social sciences and humanities (O'Hara, 2024).

There has been some research into LGBTQ+ student and staff experiences, including the *LGBT in Britain Report* (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018) and before that the Equality Challenge Unit's *The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans staff and students in higher education* report (Valentine et al., 2009). However, there is a lack of understanding of how LGBTQ+ staff at different career stages, and in particular how Early Career Academics, navigate and overcome the challenges they may face. Additionally, in the current HE context, which places staff much more in the digital spaces, it is important to understand how staff manage their identities in the online contexts which they inhabit and the implications for them if they choose to be visible in those spaces.

As a starting point we recommend that universities consider the following:

1. Whole staff training on LGBTQ+ inclusion: The impact of staff training is significant in terms of raising awareness of LGBTQ+ barriers to participation and helps colleagues to become allies and assist in building inclusive environments (Vaccaro et al., 2019).
2. Implementing an LGBTQ+ staff network: Developing meaningful opportunities for staff to come together in safe spaces and to be able to be their more authentic self is important for mental wellbeing and social cohesion (Bachmann & Gooch, 2018; Fletcher et al., 2019).
3. Inclusive recruitment practices: It is essential that recruitment practices do not place barriers to ensuring a diverse staff body, particularly in leadership. This is important as it helps universities to be more reflective of society and teams to be better placed for making robust decisions (Fletcher et al., 2019).
4. Mentoring and Role Models: It is important for LGBTQ+ Early Career staff to see people like them reflected in leadership. Role models are vital for helping to provide inspiration and visibility of diverse people (Lee, 2021). Additionally, having access to mentoring and programmes that will support staff progression is important in developing individuals and the organisation, and retaining talent (Fletcher et al., 2019; Lee, 2021).

This article provides a catalyst for further discussion on supporting LGBTQ+ Early Career HE staff. The authors have identified the lack of UK-specific research into supporting LGBTQ+ staff and the need for more attention to be paid to individuals' experiences. We have outlined some of the key challenges and possible starting points for a more inclusive HE work environment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data accessibility

This paper is a review of literature and policy as per the reference listed and has not involved empirical data collection. As such there is no data to disclose or store.

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