

# LGBTQ+ Inclusion at Universities: Testimonies and Recommendations from the 'Out at Cambridge' Study

Elisabeth T. Sandler

---

## Introduction

It is spring 2019. In the Department of Sociology, I am interviewing undergraduate student Eddie. We sit next to a window, biscuits and recording devices between us, and she says:

“There is something about meeting older LGBT people, especially successful ones in the field that you might want to go into. I remember, I was 18 and I went to dinner at this two people’s house and they were like 45-year-old lesbians, they are married and I sat there, had dinner and in the car on my way home, I just burst to tears. It was because I hadn’t realised that I didn’t have an image of what my future could look like. They were just two women eating dinner, they live in a nice house and they live very normal lives. I didn’t know what that might look like, so that was incredibly powerful to me to be just be like ‘Oh I could be happy in the future’. I had not even realised that I had not realised that. Thinking about my future was kind of blank, I just could not imagine it until I met these people and I didn’t know that I needed this so much. So having older queer academics is kind of like this. It is incredibly powerful to see LGBT people

absolutely flourishing and ... succeeding in their field. It is like, 'I could be like that, I could see myself doing that.'"<sup>1</sup>

Qualitative researchers are storytellers, so what better way to start engaging with qualitative data from the 'Out at Cambridge' study than with a story. Throughout the next pages, many such stories will be shared to answer the following questions: (1) Why does LGBTQ+ inclusion at universities matter? (2) How can we contribute to LGBTQ+ inclusive university settings?

The answers to these questions are based on data from the 'Out at Cambridge' study and are therefore context dependent. To allow better of judgment of to which extent the findings might be relevant for other settings (transferability), for example other universities or education and workplace settings, I will provide contextual information such as: What makes the University of Cambridge unique compared to other university structures? What were the objectives of the 'Out at Cambridge' study? How was the data generated? What was my potential impact on the data? And who are those people whose stories are made heard?<sup>2</sup>

In addition to this contextual positioning of the data, I will position the findings within LGBTQ+ inclusion discourses. In other words, I will address how my suggestions fit into wider dialogues – research and organisational practices – around LGBTQ+ inclusion. Before any of that, however, I will clarify my key terms: LGBTQ+, coming out, and LGBTQ+ inclusion.

## Terminology

**LGBTQ+**<sup>3</sup> – and related terms such as LGBT, LGBTQAI, and more – are clusters of the first letters of words that represent different identities. The acronym stands for: lesbian,

- 
- 1 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 38; All participant quotes are taken from the study report, with slight formatting changes. I cut all original "...” from the direct quotes to consistently indicate quote shortenings within this publication.
  - 2 Keywords to sub-sections (e.g. methodology) as well as themes that answer the publication questions (e.g. home) are put in bold to improve readability and thereby enhance audience inclusivity within this publication.
  - 3 LGBTQ+ is one of the most common terms, which is why it was used in the study and this publication.

gay, bisexual, trans, queer or – in rarer cases – questioning, and other identities that are included in the +, for example asexual, pansexual, and intersex. What becomes apparent when listing these identities is that LGBTQ+ refers to a variety of sexual orientation aspects. For example, to identities that describe to whom individuals feel sexually attracted (e.g. gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer)<sup>4</sup> and under which circumstances, to what extent, or whether sexual attraction is experienced at all (e.g. asexual, demisexual). It can, though often the topic of heated discussions, refer to sexual practices and preferences (e.g. BDSM and kink, which can be part of an individual's queer identity). And for some individuals – again widely debated – the acronym indicates their relationship constellations (e.g. non-monogamous). But alongside sexuality, LGBTQ+ also refers to gender, to individuals' (non)gender identification (e.g. non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, agender) and gender identification background (e.g. trans). Finally, the term can include identities that refer to variations within individuals' secondary sexual characteristics, sex chromosomes, and hormonal development (e.g. intersex).

Thus, there are many differences within LGBTQ+. Not everyone who considers themselves a member of the LGBTQ+ community identifies in the same way, nor does everyone have the same experience. Experiences can vary based on a multitude of reasons. For example, some LGBTQ+ identities are more stigmatised than others, some identities are more relevant for a certain setting such as the university or a specific academic discipline, and different identities intersect with one's other social categories of difference. These differences are also apparent in the data presented below.

In addition to these differences, there are also similarities. What unites these identities is that, at least on a wider societal level, they are considered non-normative. Thus, despite differentials of vulnerability, LGBTQ+ sub-categories all historically have and still tend to be considered to go against the norm. This non-normative status can lead to additional efforts in navigating these identities at best and discrimination, oppression, and violence at worst.

---

4 Individuals often define LGBTQ+ identities differently, so this and following examples might not apply to everyone. Moreover, some LGBTQ+ individuals take on several sub-identities. Both applied to my participants.

Another aspect these identities have in common is their potential to remain hidden. I purposefully write “potential” because, as will become apparent later, there are several exceptions to this invisibility, which again alter experience. The dominant discourse of non-normativity around LGBTQ+ identities and, in some cases, the possibility of hiding this minority status, enable a question LGBTQ+ individuals continuously ask themselves: Should I disclose my LGBTQ+ identity? This question leads to the second main term: coming out.

Surprisingly, **coming out**, a term thoroughly embedded in LGBTQ+ culture now, does not originate within LGBTQ+ contexts. In the 18th and 19th century, coming out referred to “[t]he process of formally entering society”<sup>5</sup>, often through coming-out balls or parties among the upper class and aristocracy. According to communication scholar Travers Scott, “this term was appropriated, in a camp spirit, to refer to a homosexual’s escape from isolation ... and entering into their discovery of, introduction to, and integration into ... gay subcultures”<sup>6</sup>. In contrast to the original meaning of coming out as an entering and arriving in (LGBTQ+) society, nowadays, coming out refers to an exit. This, because of the associated closet metaphor which indicates a transfer from the inside (“in the closet”: concealing being LGBTQ+) to the outside (“out of the closet”: being openly LGBTQ+). The phrase goes back to the mid-1960s:

“‘The closet’ was associated with the later, liberation-era gay politics emerging in the mid-1960s. Here, the source metaphor was ‘a skeleton in the closet,’ a secret that is hidden due to its social stigma. In refuting the social condemnation of sexual and gender minorities, one refused to play by this logic. Instead of being ashamed of the skeleton, one took pride in it. The skeleton was visibly celebrated in public, rather than hidden away in a closet, because it was the hiding that gave the closet its power to define the skeleton as deviant.”<sup>7</sup>

This idiom variation links coming out to pride. As I write in another publication<sup>8</sup>, pride applies to the exiting of a place that, through its secrecy, reproduces power and meaning structures that require and justify having to hide or be ashamed of that which

---

5 Oxford English Dictionary 2021: para. 2

6 Scott 2018: 146

7 *ibid.*

8 Sandler 2022

the closet conceals. Attaching pride instead of shame to the skeleton/information is then a rebellious act and attempt to disrupt the reproduction of meaning that considers the skeleton/information a social stigma. Thus, Travers Scott concludes that pride was and still is considered a means to reverse homophobia.

Unsurprisingly then, LGBTQ+ pride as a concept (e.g. think of the LGBTQ+ movement slogan “out and proud”), as an event (e.g. LGBTQ+ pride month celebrations and marches), and – often controversially so – as a corporate marketing strategy (e.g. organisational sponsorship and branding during pride month and events), is at the heart of **LGBTQ+ inclusion** practices. Inclusion “often refers to social inclusion, which is concerned with reducing inequalities between the relatively disadvantaged sectors of society and the relatively advantaged”.<sup>9</sup> In the case of LGBTQ+ inclusion, that means the reduction of inequalities between LGBTQ+ individuals and heterosexual, cis-gendered, potentially monogamously living, possibly vanilla sex having<sup>10</sup> individuals within our society (all based on what is considered the overall norm and therefore on top of a “sex hierarchy”<sup>11</sup>). The process of equalising these positionalities that are so inherent to social access and power operates on different levels. As organisational psychologist Bernardo Ferdman writes, inclusion is a multilevel process, “including the individual, interpersonal, group, organizational, and societal”.<sup>12</sup>

Ferdman’s theory is apparent in the following LGBTQ+ inclusion practices that all play out on multiple levels: bringing into force social policies that protect LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination on a structural and interpersonal level, changing social and organisational policies that are part of the social exclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals, and normalising LGBTQ+ visibility through social, organisational, and individual practices (e.g. LGBTQ+ inclusive teaching, including pronouns in one’s email signatures). These are considered LGBTQ+ inclusion practices because they are means of fighting against the stigmatisation and discrimination of LGBTQ+ individuals. What can further contribute to LGBTQ+ inclusion is LGBTQ+ research. Accordingly, it was the aim for LGBTQ+ inclusion – organisationally and societally – that motivated the ‘Out at Cambridge’ study.

---

9 Griffiths 2015: para. 1

10 Regarding non-monogamy and kink (in contrast to vanilla sex), the practice of those sexuality aspects should not be generalised for all or only linked to LGBTQ+ individuals.

11 See: Rubin 1984

12 Ferdman 2014: 14

## Context

'Out at Cambridge' is a nine-month long study that was conducted in 2019 by *lgbtQ+@cam*, "an initiative launched ... to promote interdisciplinary research, outreach and network building related to queer, trans and sexuality studies at the University of Cambridge".<sup>13</sup> The study was a collaborative project, with programme director Prof. Sarah Franklin as the Principal Investigator, Ms. Heather Stallard as the programme administrator, Dr. Marcin Smietana and Dr. Robert Pralat as study consultants, and myself as the full-time researcher. Several other people were involved, some of whose study reflections can be listened to in our 'Out at Cambridge' video series.<sup>14</sup> We also created a research report,<sup>15</sup> on which this publication is based.

Our **study objectives** were (1) knowledge extension towards "factors that contribute to comfort and discomfort to disclose, the meaning given to 'being out' at the University of Cambridge, and individual as well as institutional consequences of LGBTQ+ disclosure and concealment",<sup>16</sup> all to (2) "encourage policy and welfare changes to make universities and other workplaces safer spaces and to keep supporting and enabling resources that already make a difference".<sup>17</sup> In addition to (3) public engagement, with the goal of sensitisation toward LGBTQ+ lives, the study further aimed at (4) securing funds to continue LGBTQ+ inclusion work on a wider scale. As a result, the *Travers Smith lgbtQ+@cam Doctoral Bursary* was created, a scholarship that partially funds my current PhD research, which is a continuation and expansion of this study. We are also fundraising for a chair in LGBTQ+ studies at the University of Cambridge.

Our **methodology** comprised two types of purposive sampling. First, generic purposive sampling with a research flyer to reach a heterogenous group of LGBTQ+ identifying Cambridge students and staff members, followed by snowball sampling halfway through the recruitment to diversify the sample. Based on this, I conducted, audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed 55 semi-structured interviews, including five pilot interviews. Before the start of data collection, I secured ethical

---

13 *lgbtQ+@cam* 2021a: para. 1

14 See: *lgbtQ+@cam* 2020

15 See: *lgbtQ+@cam* 2019

16 *lgbtQ+@cam* 2021b: para. 2

17 *lgbtQ+@cam* 2021b: para. 3

approval from the University of Cambridge and informed consent from each participant. I further employed the member checking of transcripts and direct quotes before publication, to provide participants with enhanced agency over their sensitive narratives and to increase the credibility of the data. Within this publication, all participant names are changed for anonymity reasons. Participants had the option of choosing their own name, a sensitivity strategy to increase control over their data and honour their gender identity and ethnic heritage. For further details on the research design, see our research report.

The study was funded by and conducted within the **University of Cambridge**.<sup>18</sup> Founded in 1209, Cambridge is an elite university, consisting of over 100 departments, faculties, and institutes, 116 libraries, over 500 student led clubs and societies, and 31 Colleges. Moreover, the publishing business Cambridge University Press, the qualification provider Cambridge Assessment, as well as eight museums and a Botanic Garden fall under the Cambridge University umbrella. All of this creates a variety of work and study spaces as well as a unique university structure that shapes participants' experiences. For example, "[s]tudents live, eat and socialise in one of the University's 31 autonomous Colleges".<sup>19</sup> This means that students have normally moved out from their family homes and often experience "family" and "home" within their Colleges. What is further unique to the Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge) system, is that "[u]ndergraduates receive College supervisions – small group teaching sessions".<sup>20</sup> The small group teaching arrangements, in addition to an elite university that only accepts a small number of students each year, create a much more personalised learning and lecturing setting in which students as well as supervisors engage. Typically, Cambridge University members can also participate in many formal events (e.g. weekly College formal dinners, gatherings, and May balls) which require certain dress codes that tend to be highly gendered. As became transparent during the interviews, this can complicate LGBTQ+ identity expression and, in addition to the university's "White male upper class" history, can either restrict access altogether or compromise people's sense of belonging.

---

18 Funded by the Department of Sociology and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

19 University of Cambridge 2021: para. 2

20 *ibid.*

We can clearly see the latter in the **sample composition**, where Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) voices were underrepresented (11 out of 55 participants identified as non-White), despite my sampling efforts towards making these underrepresented voices heard. The overall sample is further composed of 31 staff members (e.g. academic and academic-related staff members, administrators, librarians, staff members from Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Assessment, and Cambridge Museums) and 24 students (11 undergraduate and 13 postgraduate students). Participants came from 23 disciplines across all six Schools and, in order of frequency, self-identified as gay, bisexual, queer, lesbian, trans, non-binary, pansexual, homosexual, asexual, gender queer, finsexual, and intersex.

To **position myself** (reflexivity), I have several similarities with my participants that were either visible (e.g. being a Cambridge University member) or made transparent to them (e.g. coming out as LGBTQ+ and cis-gendered). All this positioned me as an insider within the organisation and LGBTQ+ community which, I feel, led to increased trust and openness from my participants. This, in turn, enriched the narratives. However, it is possible that my insider status led to participants or me assuming certain knowledge which then did not get shared or probed in the interviews. On the other hand, my insider position helped me to follow up with relevant questions during the interviews. Moreover, being an insider and active member of Cambridge's LGBTQ+ community, I had already established relationships or familiarity with some of my participants. Again, this led to instant trust and openness during the interviews, in addition to a fast recruitment phase. However, my familiarity bore the danger of sympathy biases. To counteract this, I kept a research diary on my interview experiences and methodological decisions. Working within a team also allowed numerous moments of peer debriefing (e.g. regular feedback through team meetings, collaborative writing of the research report). This way, we ensured the analysis is based on participants' lives and the data<sup>21</sup> rather than my biases (confirmability), while also increasing the credibility of the data in having me contextualise quotes and correcting mis- or overinterpretations made by my colleagues. During these peer debriefings, I made sure the data was anonymised. This was particularly important because my colleagues, being active LGBTQ+ Cambridge University members themselves, would have known participants. I therefore ensured that only I had access to identifying

---

21 Helped by my systematic and inductive coding, code-categorisation, and theme development.



information, and I paid special attention to not disclose their participant status at university LGBTQ+ events and informal encounters around my colleagues. Finally, I was a 25-year-old researcher – quite young for this position<sup>22</sup> – and, on top of that, younger looking, as I am often told. I experienced this as an advantage because it helped to equalise the power dynamics between my participants and me. Considering me as a peer, student participants seemed comfortable to talk to me right away, and staff member participants, once they heard that I am a staff member too, also treated me as an equal. For example, I remember one staff member participant assuming that this research is part of a PhD dissertation. After finding out that it is, in fact, a project commissioned by the University of Cambridge, I had the impression he was not only positively surprised – perhaps because of my age – but also more motivated during the interview. Increased motivation maybe because university team projects tend to have greater force and thereby potentially a larger impact on policy changes than degree projects.

## Why LGBTQ+ inclusion matters

To start engaging with the question why LGBTQ+ inclusion within universities matters, I want to introduce Lawrence, a trans man and Cambridge undergraduate student. It has been about three years since the day of our interview. Despite the time that has passed, up to this day, our conversation remains vividly in my mind and heart. He told me:

“Cambridge as an institution is your life for the three years you are here and what everything revolves around here, for better or for worse. And your college and department are your two main institutional spaces you engage with, they are your home base, your centre. And if you didn’t have the kind of feeling of being able to be out and open in your home and in your intellectual space, it would affect everything else and make your three years so much harder here. If

---

22 I was trusted with this position due to my experience with LGBTQ+ research and specialisation on qualitative research methods (e.g. Oxford *MSc Education ‘Research Training’* degree, methodology teaching experience). I was also supported by my wonderful colleagues (listed above) who were always available for feedback and advice.

you have had a hard day for whatever reason, the fact that you are out and feel comfortable in college and department means you can return to those spaces. And if those institutions aren't safe then Cambridge is not safe and that is a big problem for people. It is a terrifying thought for me that people don't have that because it is so, so vital in making sure you are well and healthy, politically and mentally and physically, and actually are able to make the most of your degree and your institution and your time here."<sup>23</sup>

I remember how I felt then. My burning chest, deep feelings of sorrow, of care, of awe. Awe about what Lawrence managed to capture, that could otherwise go unnoticed. As a qualitative researcher there are moments when you know that what you are hearing will become a main quote, because the narrative captures the essence of what you are researching and why you are researching it. This was one of these moments, and all that was left for me to do was to lean back and learn. Lawrence continued:

“From 18 to 21 are formative years and the idea that those would be spent having to suppress huge parts of your identity, when coming to university is the point at which you should be able to say ‘I am making myself and my identity as an adult’ and not being constrained by school and home and the baggage of eighteen years of people knowing you from when you were a baby. Coming to university, it is so important to have that identity formation of your own and not being able to do that and not being able to do that safely in the main institutions within the institution – your college and department – to which you belong is just frankly terrible.”<sup>24</sup>

What characterises both quotes is the special meaning Lawrence gives the space (quote one) and time (quote two) a university represents. For Lawrence – as well as several other student participants – Cambridge with its departmental and College spaces was considered their **home**.

---

23 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 29

24 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 35

In addition, Cambridge Colleges advertise themselves as home spaces. For example, in *A Guide to Cambridge Colleges*,<sup>25</sup> a document for postgraduate studies applicants that was published in 2019 by the university, ten Cambridge Colleges introduce themselves as homes (e.g. “feels like home”, “a welcoming and fostering home”, “quickly becomes home”, “College is home”). Two Colleges even refer to themselves as a family (e.g. “feels like a big family”, “become part of its family”). In the 2020 published document *University of Cambridge Undergraduate Prospectus 2021*,<sup>26</sup> eleven Cambridge Colleges use “home” to refer to themselves (e.g. “is home”, “feel at home”, “Dome is Home”, “you’ll come home to a College that”, “can’t imagine a better place to call home”). In these two guides alone, there are sixteen different Cambridge Colleges that portray themselves as families or homes.

This meaning given to and communicated by Cambridge, makes LGBTQ+ inclusion within it even more important.<sup>27</sup> As postgraduate student Olivia said:

“If I couldn’t be out, it would detract from the sense that Cambridge could feel like home. Colleges are always saying ‘This is your home’ so you want to be able to act like it is your home, be open with the person that you love there and express yourself how you want to express yourself.”<sup>28</sup>

But Olivia, alongside some other participants, did not only refer to her College as home. Departments were considered home spaces too. Experiencing the department as an LGBTQ+ inclusive space contributed to Olivia’s sense of safety and comfort to be out and thereby connect with others which, according to her, leads to “feeling at home” within it.

“Being out in the department enables me to have some areas in common and relationships with my colleagues which I wouldn’t be able to have otherwise. Being able to have those conversations makes everyone more comfortable and

---

25 University of Cambridge 2019

26 University of Cambridge 2020

27 As my colleague Hakan Sandal-Wilson kindly pointed out, in addition to LGBTQ+ accepting and affirming spaces, we should think about what other (intersectional) qualities can make Cambridge Colleges feel like home. Accessibility or anti-racist stances, for example.

28 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 35

at home. There is something about being able to breathe slightly more easily when you have people who you can share marginal experiences with. It is freer.”<sup>29</sup>

“Freer” and “able to breathe slightly more easily”. Olivia’s descriptions remind me of those by other participants – undergraduates, postgraduates, and staff members – related to being out within the University of Cambridge. For example, participants spoke of honesty with themselves and openness about themselves with others as “just really a relief”, as “liberating”, as “one less layer of thought”, and thereby “very relaxing”.<sup>30</sup> According to several participants, such feelings linked to experienced comfort and safety to be out positively impacted their **mental health** and **social lives**. Undergraduate student Cara, for example, described:

“Compared to the time before I disclosed myself at Cambridge, being out to the extent I am now makes me feel a lot more comfortable with who I am and confident in myself. I feel more confident walking around and chatting to people than I used to which is really nice.”<sup>31</sup>

What strengthens these findings is that participants commented on the opposite for cases of LGBTQ+ concealment. For instance, participants described feelings of isolation, distancing, loneliness, and difficulty in relation to not being out or not being able to be out to the extent they want, which negatively impacted their social lives. Postgraduate student Ella told me:

“I don’t share my LGBTQ identity with many people which means that being LGBTQ becomes more an identity in an isolating way and less an identity in a collective way. Either you identify ‘with’ or you identify ‘as separate from’ and I feel like I am identifying as ‘separate from’ – separate from straight people.”<sup>32</sup>

---

29 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 30

30 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 29f.

31 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 30

32 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 31

Ella's narrative – which is very much in line with sociological perspectives towards identity regarding (1) sameness and difference<sup>33</sup> and (2) identities being prescribed, performed, played out, and made sense of socially<sup>34</sup> – is particularly disheartening in the context of universities. This is because universities and, as already discussed, Cambridge Colleges are meant to be social spaces. Especially for students, universities should be spaces of encounter, collaboration, and discussion to learn, develop, and grow in, on an intellectual and personal level, socially and safely, as Lawrence partly described above.

Not all university members think of the university in that sense, of course. After all, how a space is experienced and what meaning the space and experience within it is being given, also depends on one's positionality and way of engaging with(in) the space. For example, non-academic staff member participants did not describe Cambridge as their (intellectual) home. Rather, it was considered a space in which they **spend a lot of time** alongside others, which again made LGBTQ+ inclusion important. For example, staff member Victor shared with me:

“My sexuality is not something anyone needs to know on a professional level but on a personal level, I have to see my work colleagues every single day and I want to be myself around them. It is as simple as that. My husband is part of my self, so I want to be able to talk freely about him in the office.”<sup>35</sup>

The time spent with colleagues can form a base for friendships. This was another reason staff member participants, including non-academic staff members, mentioned for the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusive workplaces. Alice said:

---

33 As sociologist Steph Lawler (2014: 10) explains so effectively: “[W]e share common identities – as humans, say, but also, within this, as ‘women’, ‘men’, ‘British’, ‘American’, ‘white’, ‘black’, etc., etc. At the same time, however, there is another aspect of identity, which suggest people’s uniqueness, their difference from others. Western notions of identity rely on these two modes of understanding, so that people are understood as being simultaneously the same and different”.

34 I refer here to the conceptual and methodological legacy of many scholars, including Erving Goffman's work on stigma, Norbert Elias' work on community identities, Judith Butler's work on performativity, and George Herbert Mead's contributions towards the theory of symbolic interactionism, to name just a few.

35 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 32

“On a personal level, it is really important to me to be out because I don’t think I feel I was having honest relationships with co-workers which often times become friendships, so it would be incredible [sic] restrictive not to be able to disclose myself and I would find it hard to stay in a job where I couldn’t do that. It would be very difficult to build any interpersonal relationship that extended beyond the very coldly professional and I think that would make work quite an unpleasant environment.”<sup>36</sup>

Victor and Alice both speak about LGBTQ+ inclusive workplaces on a personal as well as a professional level, with an emphasis on the “personal level”. Their narratives highlight the social nature of workplaces and thereby demonstrate how the personal and professional intersect.

This focus on the personal is in line with what has been discussed so far. Up until this point, participants’ voices provided insight into why LGBTQ+ inclusive university spaces matter to individuals on a personal level. Based on the data I have discussed thus far, LGBTQ+ inclusion matters because for some (e.g. students, academic-staff members) the university is their intellectual and potentially also physical home, with some individuals – especially (undergraduate) students – engaging with this space at a crucial time of their overall development and with the aim for personal and intellectual growth. But even if the university, as a time and space, is experienced differently, the sheer amount of time spent in it as a workplace, alongside others, makes LGBTQ+ inclusion within it important.

Another main theme within the data answers the question from the “professional level” perspective: Why does LGBTQ+ inclusion matter to universities as businesses? Many participants described positive university experiences linked to LGBTQ+ inclusion, which benefit the university. For example, several staff members told me about their **sense of pride** to be associated with a pro-LGBTQ+ Cambridge University. Whenever I think about this theme, I remember what academic staff member Amber told me in relation to Cambridge’s rainbow flags during LGBT history month in February:

---

36 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 31

“It is nice when the LGBT flags are all up in February. That is a really nice gesture. One thing is to say, ‘Oh we are all equal’ and another thing is to be unashamed as an institution, unashamed of showing that you support this. I don’t identify with institutions very much in general, but I do feel proud of Cambridge when I see the flags, I just feel welcome. It is a feeling of joy and pride of working here, of being part of it and contributing. I am contributing a lot of my time, energy and effort. Of course, it is my job and I get paid but still, the institution benefits from me contributing all that and I prefer to benefit an institution that has a high institutional visibility of supporting LGBT people. It just makes me much happier to contribute what I contribute. I think the more welcome people feel the more they will give to the university.”<sup>37</sup>

As Amber describes here, feeling welcomed with her LGBTQ+ identity through Cambridge’s LGBTQ+ inclusion practices strengthened her sense of organisational belonging which makes her happy to contribute and potentially **happy to contribute more**. With her last sentence – “I think the more welcome people feel the more they will give to the university” – Amber refers to a principle that transcends LGBTQ+ matters. It is a general statement which she links to her LGBTQ+ specific experience. I discovered a similar general principle which plays out LGBTQ+ specifically when I interviewed Erin, an academic-related staff member: being able to be yourself makes one happier and frees up head space, which increases **work focus**.

“Being out in my workplace generally makes me happy and I think if I am happier, I am better at what I do, basically. It is nice to not have to be constantly second guessing yourself or questioning how you will be received. And it frees up a lot of head space and allows me to focus on teaching, on work, on research, on all the things that are actually important, which is excellent. I think not being able to be authentically yourself and not having the freedom to explore what that means, you end up going into a little shell and it is very much a ‘get head down, do the job, clock out, go home’ kind of mentality which is not great. So, I think it is very, very helpful to be in an environment where you can be yourself, whatever that is. Whether that is LGBT identity, whether that is culture, background, language,

---

37 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 36

religion, anything like that. Having a space that allows you to be yourself without question is incredibly helpful.”<sup>38</sup>

As with Amber, Erin’s principle applies not only to LGBTQ+ individuals. Erin speaks out for the inclusion and celebration of diversity more generally which, in turn, will benefit the university through increased work focus and productivity.

Along these lines, most participants expressed that if they could not be themselves, which, for them, included being openly LGBTQ+, they would **leave the university** or they would not have considered Cambridge in the first place. Olivia, whose narratives we already encountered before, even expressed the potential consequence of having to leave involuntarily – a dropping out of her course – if she could not be openly out as LGBTQ+, due to mental health challenges.

“I am already on intermission for mental health reasons. If concealing was another stressor to add to it, I would probably drop out. It might be easier for other people but for me, like that one extra stressor affecting every part of your life on top of what I am already trying to deal with would I think be too much.”<sup>39</sup>

Once more, the intersection of the personal with the professional becomes apparent. LGBTQ+ inclusion that benefits university members on a personal level can benefit the university professionally through happier, well-functioning, and better performing university members. A lack of LGBTQ+ inclusion can seriously harm the university in the form of wasted potential, time, and money spent on university members whose work is being negatively impacted by a threatened sense of safety, comfort, and focus, or who decide to leave or drop out as a result of it. This argument aligns with other LGBTQ+ inclusion research.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, as discussed above, universities are social spaces in which individuals interact with one another professionally and personally. This means that within this system, LGBTQ+ people’s sense of safety and comfort – or the lack thereof – also impacts the people around them. In this sense, LGBTQ+ inclusion **affects everyone**. For example,

---

38 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 37

39 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 39

40 For example, see Badgett et al. 2013, Hossain et al. 2020 or Pichler et al. 2018.



staff member Lizz told me in our interview how her sense of comfort leads to everyone feeling more comfortable at work:

“Because my employer makes me feel comfortable about being open about being trans-female, the people around me, I get the impression, are more comfortable with it and therefore it makes me even more able to feel comfortable. I certainly think if someone doesn’t have to worry about accidentally really offending someone with the slightest mistake, they are less likely to be funny about it. If people get too defensive, they put other people on the defensive as well, whereas if everyone is just of the opinion ‘Let’s just be comfortable with this’, everyone feels more comfortable.”<sup>41</sup>

Through my interview with academic-related staff member Chloe, it becomes clear that this sense of comfort and safety to be openly oneself is even more important when being in a team leader position.

“Not being out can make one a closed person. When you are a team leader and in a pastoral care position, you need to be an open person. If one is not out, and is hiding something, one can feel that you are not relaxed. This can be picked up by the team subconsciously and therefore the team won’t necessarily open up to you, and you can struggle to build empathetic relationships. This is what I found. So my team is much happier now that I am out and much more relaxed, and much more focused to some extent as well, now that I am out.”<sup>42</sup>

As can be seen in Chloe’s quote, LGBTQ+ inclusive workplaces might not only impact the **work performance** of LGBTQ+ people (in Chloe’s case, being a better team leader) but also the performance of non-LGBTQ+ people. Similarly, though not directly expressed by Lizz, it seems likely that higher levels of comfort within her team would also lead to increased work performance by her colleagues. These narratives provide insights into how LGBTQ+ inclusion can benefit institutions financially – a widely researched topic that is often referred to as a “business case” for LGBTQ+ inclusion.

---

41 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 37

42 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 36

Within recent years, this popular **business case argument** has drawn heavy criticism. Gender and the economy scholar Sarah Kaplan summarises:

“The problems arise because the business case may not actually motivate managers to act, it may be alienating to those for whom the business case is being made, and it may create moral struggles for the people who feel they must make the business case to justify social action.”<sup>43</sup>

Kaplan’s third point – moral struggles – is in line with the position that making a business case for LGBTQ+ inclusion would be less or even unethical. I remember being asked something similar in a Q&A after having presented the study findings. An audience member enquired how I relate to criticism that this research would contribute to a pink-washing of the “Cambridge brand” and thereby diminish my work. I appreciated the question. I also paused to think carefully about how to word my response. I too have felt discomfort with making a business case in the past. Should not be an interest in people’s wellbeing and social justice be reason enough for societal and organisational change? Over the years, I have become more pragmatic. My motivation for this research originates from first-hand experience with this topic and care for my community. It truly pains me to know that in this very moment, individuals are discriminated against, deprived opportunities, and subjected to violence for being LGBTQ+. And I believe that qualitative research, with its capacity to remind audiences that there are “real people” behind the data, can lead to empathy and pass on that sense of care that drives my work. However, I currently<sup>44</sup> believe that if a business case argument will motivate people to implement structural or individual changes that improve the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals, then this – as a starting point – is good enough for me.<sup>45</sup> Besides, once structures are changing and individuals become more

---

43 Kaplan 2020: 1

44 It will be interesting to see where I position myself within the business case debate in the future. I will certainly continue to think about it critically and am interested in constructive debates.

45 My position falls under a grey area within the business case ethics debate. This, because I acknowledge that “irrespective of its motives, the institutionalization of a business case logic for diversity in organizations has allowed people to actively respond to ethical demands for diversity” (Rhodes 2017: 542).

equalised, I believe more moments of encounter are possible, which in turn can lead to empathy and care.

These considerations directly lead to the second main question within this publication: What can be done? Whether it is because we care about people, money, or both, what can we do to make universities more LGBTQ+ inclusive?

## What we can do

I identified three main factors that contributed to participants' sense of comfort to disclose their LGBTQ+ identity within the university, if they desired to do so. They are: (1) LGBTQ+ visibility of others, (2) organisational symbols and signs of support, and (3) intellectual relevance. If we want to create more LGBTQ+ inclusive universities, I suggest starting there.<sup>46</sup> I will finish this sub-chapter with a discussion of (4) identity specific inclusion practices.

Of course, these findings are based on a group of LGBTQ+ identifying Cambridge University members. The expressed experiences and needs of my participants might not cover those of all LGBTQ+ individuals at Cambridge and beyond. After all, my suggestions are based on trends within the data. These trends, however, can be proportioned – strengthened or weakened – when positioned within wider LGBTQ+ inclusion discourses. For this reason, I will put the suggestions in a dialogue with other LGBTQ+ inclusion research and organisational practices.

(1) The first LGBTQ+ inclusion factor is **LGBTQ+ visibility of others**. As most participants, coming from all participant groups, told me, the outness of people around them – for example colleagues, academics (let us remember Eddie's introductory quote), students, staff members, and especially staff members occupying positions of power such as heads of departments, faculties, or Colleges – contributed to them feeling more comfortable and safer to be out as well. This, because other people's LGBTQ+ visibility demonstrated acceptance and safety within this space, provided

---

<sup>46</sup> While bearing in mind that needs are complex and sometimes contradictory. Thus, I consider it important to keep some sense of flexibility and allowing individuals a say in the creation of organisational policies or practices.

solidarity in numbers, and contributed to them feeling they are not the only one.<sup>47</sup> Academic-related staff member Drew illustrates this theme perfectly:

“The fact that there are LGBT members of staff around, who are open and out, helps to make me feel more comfortable to disclose my own LGBT status. This is because there are people that are showing that you can disclose and nothing bad will happen. It also shows you have got people that you can go to and speak to.”<sup>48</sup>

It is precisely this demonstration of safety and an encouragement to be oneself that Avery, a former head of department, was aiming for through being out.

“I think within a head of the department role, you have the responsibility to create a department in which people can be themselves. I very much believe in leading by example and disclosing myself is part of the example.”<sup>49</sup>

LGBTQ+ visibility of others is also a very commonly suggested and implemented LGBTQ+ inclusion practice outside of the ‘Out at Cambridge’ study. Ways to increase LGBTQ+ visibility are **LGBT employee networks**<sup>50</sup> or, as the equivalent for students, having **LGBTQ+ student societies and representatives**. At the University of Cambridge, multiple LGBTQ+ student groups exist and most Colleges have designated LGBTQ+ student body officers. Moreover, many universities – to name some UK universities: Glasgow, Greenwich, Leeds, Sheffield, St Andrews, Oxford, Warwick, York, Queen Mary (London) – implemented a **role model scheme** where LGBTQ+ identifying university members, especially members in positions of power, volunteer to make their LGBTQ+ identities visible on websites and email signatures. We are currently implementing something similar at Cambridge’s collegial and departmental level. Despite or rather precisely because of the popularity of this LGBTQ+ inclusion practice, I consider it of utmost importance to **not expect and pressure** individuals into a role

---

47 For a more detailed explanation of these themes, see lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 19.

48 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 18

49 *ibid.*

50 Colgan et al. 2012; Mcfadden/Crowley-Henry 2018.

model position. Some university settings are simply not LGBTQ+ inclusive enough yet for it to be safe or comfortable to make the first step. And even if the setting is in parts LGBTQ+ inclusive, there is often emotional labour linked to being a visible representative of the community, on top of the labour linked to navigating coming outs<sup>51</sup> in the first place. Several participants talked about this labour when describing other people's expectation of soothing them after heteronormative assumptions about their relationship constellation or other people's expectation to educate them on LGBTQ+ terminology, experiences, and political correctness. In our interview, postgraduate student Parker and I talked in detail about the labour linked to being a representative.

"I don't know whether I want to do the work of educating people because at the end of the day they get to go away and don't think about that conversation for the rest of the day, carry on with their work and do what they need to do. And depending how that conversation goes, I leave feeling exhausted or angry or upset and then I cannot get what I need to do done. So, in a way I think that labour that is expected of you when you are representative is making the whole university experience even more difficult for marginalised individuals and communities when it is hard enough as it is."<sup>52</sup>

This labour linked to being visibly LGBTQ+ impacted Parker's decision not to come out as gender queer within Cambridge University settings.

"I feel like I made a considered decision to not go through that process of coming out again because I am not willing to invest the energy into it, given that I won't be in this space in three months. It is more like a strategy of self-preservation and I think there can be pride in that too. You shouldn't feel an obligation to be out all of the time if you feel it is detrimental to your wellbeing or to your own work because I think people who aren't marginalised don't realise how much

---

51 I purposefully use the plural here. Within our heteronormative and cisnormative society, LGBTQ+ individuals constantly have to come out; one is considered heterosexual and cis-gendered unless/until one comes out.

52 [lgbtQ+@cam](https://lgbtq+.cam.ac.uk/) 2019: 42

energy marginalised communities and folk have to invest in being visible but not too visible, being safe, making sure you feel comfortable, and negotiating all of the micro-aggressions and conflicts that you encounter every day.”<sup>53</sup>

Parker speaks of concealment as a self-preservation strategy and, as coming out is often considered, an act of pride. These quotes challenge the dominant discourse around coming out, namely outness as the “ultimate goal” and the only way to be one’s “true self” and a “proud and good gay”. And it certainly complicates LGBTQ+ visibility as an inclusion practice. Because on the one hand, LGBTQ+ visibility can contribute to achieving a state in which LGBTQ+ identities are no longer considered odd or unusual, even when still being a minority group. On the other hand, can we expect already marginalised and therefore disadvantaged and more vulnerable people to do this labour? But then again, without this labour, which leads to a changing of norms and meaning given to being LGBTQ+, how can we achieve LGBTQ+ inclusion? As undergraduate student Becky said about other people being out as intersex, especially in the context of not feeling safe enough to do this labour herself:

“I am very grateful for people who choose to live outside of that invisibility, people who disclose they’re being intersex. I think it’s really, really brave and really vital as well. It’s almost, not necessarily that they are doing it for the rest of us but it’s so great that someone does disclose for those who can’t feel like they can be completely open, so I really, really admire it.”<sup>54</sup>

After I probed the word “brave”, Becky added:

“To be open about being intersex, you make yourself vulnerable to people’s abuse or people’s negative reactions. I suppose that’s what I mean with ‘brave’, to know that you might come up against people who do not behave very nicely about it and to do it anyway.”<sup>55</sup>

---

53 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 43

54 *ibid.*

55 *ibid.*

Her clarification gives a sense of what it means to be a representative within a context where LGBTQ+ inclusion is needed, but in which lack of inclusion makes visibility neither safe nor desirable.

Finally, not only the act but also the sheer wish for LGBTQ+ visibility and representation can speak for a position of privilege. Last week, when I contacted Eddie about her quote on having had dinner with older lesbians (see introduction) she wrote: “It’s ... funny to read things I said a few years ago – I wonder if you interviewed me now if you’d get a much more cynical quote!”. I asked her what happened. Referring to her trans friends’ experiences of violence, she replied:

“I still think representation is valuable, especially to LGBT people in the first few years after they ‘come out’ or start to identify in particular ways, but I guess I have become more aware of the fact that many members of our communities face far more acute issues regarding things like immediate safety or housing. Although I definitely did have concerns about my safety at 19, I didn’t face the levels of violence and harassment that are standard for my friends who are more visibly gender non-conforming than myself, including in Cambridge. I couldn’t picture what my future could look like as a lesbian, and representation helped with that. But I felt safe enough to take for granted the fact that I had a future – and one that might include dinners in nice houses. ... [V]isibly gender non-conforming people, particularly those who are trans women and/or BME, face extraordinary levels of violence daily in some parts of the world, including in the UK, such that their futures often can’t be taken for granted.”<sup>56</sup>

“I felt safe enough to take for granted the fact that I had a future”. Eddy’s words still get under my skin. Her email illustrates what was discussed earlier: not all LGBTQ+ identity experiences are the same because not all LGBTQ+ sub-identities are given the same meaning. Some are much more stigmatised, vulnerable, and one might even say “acceptable”<sup>57</sup> than others. And based on where one finds oneself on that scale,

---

56 Eddie consented to the anonymised and slightly edited sharing of this email conversation. Thank you, Eddie!

57 I believe that in our current Western society, there are more “acceptable” LGBTQ+ identities (e.g. White married gay man) and “less acceptable” identities (e.g. non-binary, trans identities).

or on intersectional axes of marginalisation,<sup>58</sup> different needs are on the forefront of one's mind. LGBTQ+ visibility and representation is important, but only if one's life is not at risk first.

I suggest the following additional practices to deal with the addressed complexities around "LGBTQ+ visibility of others" as an inclusion practice. First, **protecting LGBTQ+ individuals** through legislative and organisational policies so it is safe for them to be visible if they want to. Second, **compensating the additional labour** linked to being a diversity champion as well as, third, offering **organisational LGBTQ+ diversity and equality training** to reduce the amount of additional labour. Finally, implementing symbols and signs of support on an organisational level so people feel comfortable to be visible, especially if they are the first openly out LGBTQ+ individual within a setting. The latter will be discussed now.

(2) **Organisational<sup>59</sup> symbols and signs of support** also addresses visibility, but not in terms of visibility of being LGBTQ+ oneself. Instead, visibility of being pro-LGBTQ+ as an organisation and as a non-LGBTQ+ identifying member (allyship). This concept was already mentioned by Amber above when she said:

"It is nice when the LGBT flags are all up in February. That is a really nice gesture. One thing is to say, 'Oh we are all equal' and another thing is to be unashamed as an institution, unashamed of showing that you support this."<sup>60</sup>

Demonstrating not being ashamed, in other words LGBTQ+ pride, and showing LGBTQ+ support can be achieved in many ways. Some of the practices that made a difference to my participants were: rainbow flags during LGBT history month, LGBTQ+ safe space posters in academic offices, rainbow flag pin batches, LGBTQ+ events<sup>61</sup>, LGBTQ+ research within the university, LGBTQ+ supportive posts and tweets on University of Cambridge social media accounts, pronouns put into email signatures

---

58 For a core reading on intersectionality see Crenshaw 1991.

59 Strictly speaking, universities are educational organisations, not institutions as many participants referred to them in colloquial speech. To stay close to participants' words, I used the term "institution" within the research report. But in this publication – where I engage with LGBTQ+ inclusion specific jargon – I will use the technical term and refer to the following data as "organisational symbols and signs of support".

60 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 36

61 Even if not attending, just knowing these events exist "symbolise[d] greater recognition and acceptance" (lgbtq+@cam 2019: 21) for a postgraduate student participant.



(which can be very important to trans individuals as discussed later), LGBTQ+ religious services, and LGBTQ+ initiatives such as lgbtQ+@cam which organises LGBTQ+ events throughout the year and commissions LGBTQ+ research.

Many other universities are implementing similar LGBTQ+ inclusion practices that fall under the category of “organisational symbols and signs of support”. For example, the “You are welcome here” **sticker campaign** is popular within U.S. higher education and enacted at Brown, MIT, and Yale, to name just a few. Further, UK universities such as Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Oxford, Oxford Brookes, Sheffield, Newcastle, and many more provide (mostly free) **rainbow lanyards** which include the university logo.

It is important, however, that these expressions are authentic. For example, some participants were sensitive to whether these symbols and signs of support are genuine or tokenistic. For example, postgraduate student Robert said:

“Just having your research flyer in the department and having this study – that in itself makes me feel more comfortable to be out. Because it is something that people are taking seriously, and people are talking about. It really is great to know that there is serious, in-depth consideration of the LGBTQ+ community at the university level rather than simple pinkwashing.”<sup>62</sup>

Organisational symbols and signs of support – ideally coming from a focus on improving individuals’ lives rather than the organisational image – do matter, especially in a context in which being LGBTQ+ is still marginalised. Postgraduate student Kate explained this beautifully in our interview:

“As an institution, the university is quite good at putting out visible symbols with all the flags that have been up and stuff like that. That is really nice. Because we live in a society where LGBTQ people are marginalised, there is more need to be explicit that you are okay with LGBTQ and that you want to celebrate it because the overall context is that there is still a degree of marginalisation. In that sense, silence about LGBTQ is never good. You can’t just assume that people will feel comfortable if you say nothing. So probably, if your institution or

---

62 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 21

department is saying nothing about LGBTQ, people are going to assume that it is because you think it should not be talked about or you think it is something that is inappropriate to discuss. So I think there is a need to encourage people to feel comfortable and not assuming that people will feel comfortable without that.”<sup>63</sup>

Kate’s words really get to me. Every time. Still. Her words emphasise the importance of being proactive as an organisation, as a university, as a workplace. But ultimately, it is the people at Cambridge University that make it Cambridge, people who push for that visibility, people who get proactive in creating events, putting up rainbow flags, and fighting for that visibility if they are being pushed back.<sup>64</sup> While acknowledging the importance of organisational proactivity, I also want to emphasise the importance of individual proactivity. In my mind, passing LGBTQ+ proactivity on to the organisation – saying “the university should deal with it” – can bear dangers. Because it makes us forget that we are, in fact, the university and that LGBTQ+ inclusion starts on an individual level. As academic-related staff member Erin, whom we met earlier, said:

“It’s the people who make all the difference. It’s people who, even if they are not themselves LGBT, they get it and they are visible in their support. It is the tiny, little gestures such as putting your pronouns in your email signature or wearing a little pin badge with the rainbow flag on it for the start of February. It’s those little tiny gestures that actually make a huge difference, because they make you feel safe.”<sup>65</sup>

(3) The third main LGBTQ+ inclusion factor is **intellectual relevance**. Based on the earlier discussion that “university” does not mean the same for all its members, this factor is academic-specific and grounded in data from student and academic staff member participants only. The factor refers to LGBTQ+ topics and perspectives being given intellectual relevance within professional university settings, for example

---

63 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 22

64 Up until this year, many students challenged Cambridge Colleges for not putting up rainbow flags during LGBT history month (see: Meng 2020) and protested against rainbow flag bans in student halls (see: Turner 2021).

65 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 21

through **LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula** or **LGBTQ+ research**. To illustrate, I want to share the experiences of two students that could not have been more different. Kai, a postgraduate student, was negatively impacted by his LGBTQ+ exclusive curricula.

“I feel it is inappropriate to disclose my sexual identity in the department, for sure. I want people to talk about it or discuss how it affects how we are looking at certain material or how we are engaging with theory but that is not part of the conversation. Part of it is the curriculum and our syllabus and the way we are teaching things. We almost don’t talk about any LGBTQ issues at all and I feel like ‘Oh, maybe this is just not relevant to my discipline’ even though I know it is. The way that theory and material is taught and presented to us is done so in a way where I feel like my gayness has no place here.”<sup>66</sup>

On the other hand, it is LGBTQ+ inclusive teaching and departmental LGBTQ+ research representation that contributed to Mia enjoying her undergraduate degree so deeply.

“Part of the reason why I love my subject is because I can explicitly address LGBTQ+ topics. LGBTQ+ is something that I care about but it is not just something that I care about in my personal life, it is something that I can develop academically. And to realise that this interest is shared by a lot of people in my department is something that is really great, that definitely contributed to me being comfortable to disclose myself.”<sup>67</sup>

What stands out to me is Mia’s first sentence in which she describes that LGBTQ+ is not only something she cares about in her “personal life” but something she can “develop academically”. Similarly, academic staff member Quinn told me in our interview:

“I feel comfortable to disclose myself in my department because there is academic work around LGBTQ+ topics, so it feels it is not just like ‘That’s your

---

66 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 23

67 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 24

personal life and this is your professional life' but it is part of what we do, it is part of our research."<sup>68</sup>

Mia and Quinn's narratives both mention the personal and professional, a reoccurring theme that was already addressed in relation to why LGBTQ+ inclusion matters. Being able to incorporate the personal in a professional setting through experiencing their LGBTQ+ identities being given intellectual relevance, contributed to both participants feeling more comfortable to be themselves.

In sum, LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula and LGBTQ+ research mattered to students as well as academic staff members. Students appreciated and, if not available, missed the opportunity to research, read, and write about LGBTQ+ topics and to see this personal interest being given professional meaning by the research areas of academic staff members around them. Lecturers, in turn, felt more comfortable to be out if they were teaching openly out LGBTQ+ students or if their course topic made it relevant (e.g. researching and teaching on queer theory, sexuality, gender, sexual health). For example, academic staff member Matt said:

"I remember that I was consciously out in class because I knew that the class was about LGBTQ+ topics. I don't know what it would be like if I was teaching other disciplines. Maybe it would somehow be less relevant to disclose myself then."<sup>69</sup>

In contrast to STEM, in the humanities and social sciences, LGBTQ+ topics and perspectives tend to be more established and considered relevant within their fields. **LGBTQ+ STEM** initiatives try to catch up in visibly celebrating the research and academic lives of LGBTQ+ scientists (e.g. see "500 Queer Scientists", "Pride in STEM", "Proud Science Alliance", "LGBTQ+ Advocacy in STEM" and many university specific campaigns). At lgbtQ+@cam, we created a 'Queer(y)ing the curriculum' video series<sup>70</sup> where academics, including scientists, share their thoughts on how to make curriculums more LGBTQ+ inclusive.

---

68 *ibid.*

69 *ibid.*

70 lgbtQ+@cam 2021c

(4) At last, I want to point towards **identity specific inclusion practices**. As discussed within the terminology section at the beginning, not all LGBTQ+ identities refer to the same social category of difference (e.g. sexuality, gender). With that, some LGBTQ+ sub-identities play out differently than others in social and professional settings, in addition to being more stigmatised than others. I dedicate this final section to trans-specific experiences and inclusion practices.

There are several factors that contributed to trans identifying participants' unique LGBTQ+ experiences. First, their LGBTQ+ identity relates to gender, not sexuality. This made their LGBTQ+ identity more professionally relevant. Let us remember staff member Victor's earlier statement: "My sexuality is not something anyone needs to know on a professional level".<sup>71</sup> Gender, on the other hand, is something others need to know professionally. Academic staff member Blake illustrates this by saying:

"Being bisexual has never been a big part of my identity because it doesn't have to be. However, I need to be gendered correctly, so my gender has to be part of my professional life."<sup>72</sup>

What is particularly interesting here is Blake's comparison of two LGBTQ+ identities – one linked to sexuality (bisexuality) and the other linked to gender (trans) – that play out differently. This is not to say that sexuality cannot be intellectually and thus professionally relevant, as just discussed. However, gender does not need to be made professionally relevant, it already is. What makes gender naturally relevant for any social setting, is its fundamental role for shaping social interaction and treatment, as undergraduate student Dawn points out:

"Gender is very relevant. Even at the basic level, pronouns are a thing that are always at play and that are probably one of the most important things to me in terms of my social treatment."<sup>73</sup>

---

71 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 32

72 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 27

73 ibid.

Most importantly, though, **gender identifications and pronouns should never be assumed**. This, because some individuals might not “pass” as their gender, meaning that strangers’ assumptions regarding their gender is not in line with their actual gender identification or pronouns. An important and increasingly popular trans inclusion practice, then, is to normalise **asking for and sharing pronouns**, for example through including them in email signatures or introduction rounds.<sup>74</sup> It is a trans inclusion practice that can and should be implemented by everyone, regardless of one’s gender identification background, to not further single out trans individuals and to communicate trans awareness and safety. Erin, a trans identifying academic-related staff member from earlier, summarises:

“Whatever your gender identity, putting your pronouns into your email signature helps normalise gender diversity and then therefore makes people who are non-binary or trans feel safer.”<sup>75</sup>

Trans inclusion practices<sup>76</sup> are of utmost importance because, on top of often being more stigmatised than other LGBTQ+ identities,<sup>77</sup> many trans identifying individuals do not have the choice to conceal their trans identity. This was also apparent within the ‘Out at Cambridge’ study where some participants described involuntary LGBTQ+ visibility due to not passing as their identified gender or because of their gender-neutral pronouns (e.g. they/them), which ultimately outed them. Without an option of concealing their LGBTQ+ identity, coming out was not considered a choice. For example, academic staff member Hannah told me:

“The word disclosure doesn’t feel quite right because disclosure implies choice, this moment where you are like ‘Shall I tell people I am trans?’ I don’t have this choice. ... I don’t have that option. I don’t think I will pass ever. I think I am readable as LGBT and I don’t feel like I have any control. There is no decision

---

74 For example: “Hello, my name is Elisabeth. My pronouns are she/her”.

75 lgbtq+@cam 2019: 45

76 Another important trans inclusion practice mentioned by a student participant is gender-neutral toilets.

77 To name one out of many empirical examples, see Bachmann and Gooch (2018). The disproportionate stigmatisation and vulnerability of trans individuals was also illustrated in Eddy’s email, discussed earlier.

to make, there is no point where I am like “Shall I disclose some kind of queer status?” because I think it is just readable.”<sup>78</sup>

This lack of choice can put already disproportionately vulnerable individuals in an even more vulnerable position.

## Conclusion

To summarise, data from the ‘Out at Cambridge’ study suggests that **LGBTQ+ inclusion at universities matters** because the university is a social space in which individuals spend numerous hours to live, sleep, eat, socialise, learn, grow, challenge themselves, establish themselves, reinvent themselves, or simply to earn a living. This time is mostly spent around others, which means that how people feel, behave, and are treated also impacts the people around them. It is the responsibility of a university to ensure all its members are safe and well, something that will also positively benefit the university as a business in return.

One of the most important LGBTQ+ inclusion practices that can be implemented to make university members feel safer and more comfortable is **LGBTQ+ visibility**, which is two-dimensional. First, visibility about being LGBTQ+ oneself (LGBTQ+ visibility of others) and second, visibility about being pro-LGBTQ+ as an organisation and as a non-LGBTQ+ identifying individual (organisational symbols and signs of support, allyship). However, the former – taking on a role model function through being openly LGBTQ+ – should by no means be expected or pressured. And even if individuals volunteer for a diversity champion position, it is important to organisationally acknowledge and reduce the additional labour linked to it.

Further, LGBTQ+ identities referring to sexuality can be made more **professionally relevant** within academic settings – which can increase comfort and safety – through LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula and research (intellectual relevance). By contrast, LGBTQ+ identities that refer to gender already hold professional relevance. Trans specific inclusion practices, such as normalising the sharing of pronouns instead of assuming them, can support individuals in navigating these non-normative identities related

---

78 lgbtQ+@cam 2019: 26

to gender, which not only tend to be more stigmatised but also more visible. These **identity specific inclusion practices** are of particular importance because involuntary LGBTQ+ visibility can deprive moments of choice around coming out and make trans individuals even more vulnerable.

Personally, I believe that trans visibility – whether voluntary or not, desired or not – will remain, unless profound changes occur in how people construct and perform gender. So long as binary classifications of gender remain operative, for example the belief that humans are born as either boys or girls – clearly distinguishable – who then turn into men and women, people will probably continue to notice identifiers of difference regarding gender and thus sexuality. Moreover, LGBTQ+ individuals might continue to be a minority group, who therefore continue to come out. Of utmost importance, then, is the implementation of practices that do not single out people with visible differences. **My hope for LGBTQ+ inclusion** – within universities and society at large – is that we develop and structurally embed frameworks around gender and sexuality that are elastic enough to allow flexibility, that value diversity, and that require mutual kindness and respect.

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank my participants. Your openness, trust, and time makes research and publications like this one possible. Without you, I could not do this important work. I hope I did your stories justice. They deserve to be heard, understood, shared, valued, and learned from.

My deep gratitude also goes to my following colleagues whose feedback on this publication and support during the research was as helpful as it was generous: Sarah Franklin, Marcin Smietana, Robert Pralat, Heather Stallard, Shelly Harder, Hakan Sandal-Wilson, Naoise Murphy, and Zoe Nunn. I deeply appreciate all of you.

Special thanks also to Travers Smith Law Firm and Mr. Daniel Gerring in particular. Thank you for your financial support regarding our research report and my doctoral bursary to continue this research.

And finally, thank you to everyone else who helped making the ‘Out at Cambridge’ study possible and who gave me a platform to share these findings. The latter includes colleagues from the Research Platform Center Interdisciplinary Gender Studies (CGI)



at the University of Innsbruck. Thank you for making me part of your gender lecture series and book publication.

## References

- Bachmann, C. L./Gooch, B. (2018): "LGBT in Britain: University Report". In: [https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/lgbt\\_in\\_britain\\_universities\\_report.pdf](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/lgbt_in_britain_universities_report.pdf) (13.01.2022).
- Badgett, M. V. L./Durso, L. E/Mallory, C./Kastanis, A. (2013): "The Business Impact of LGBT-Supportive Workplace Policies". In: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3vt6t9zx> (13.01.2022).
- Colgan, F/McKearney, A./Brook, P. (2012): "Visibility and voice in organisations: Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered employee networks". In: *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 31/4, 359-378.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991): "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". In: *Stanford Law Review*, 43/6, 1241-99.
- Ferdman, B. M. (2014): "The Practice of Inclusion in Diverse Organizations: Toward a Systemic and Inclusive Framework". Ferdman, B. M./Deane, B. R. (Eds.): *Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 3-54.
- Griffiths, M. (2015): "Inclusion". Wallace, S. (Ed.): *A Dictionary of Education*. 2nd edition. Open University Press.
- Hossain, M./Atif, M./Ahmed, A./Mia, L. (2020): "Do LGBT Workplace Diversity Policies Create Value for Firms? ". In: *Journal of Business Ethics*, 167/4, 775-791.
- Kaplan, S. (2020): "Beyond the Business Case for Social Responsibility". In: *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 6/1, 1-4.
- Lawler, S. (2014): *Identity. Sociological Perspectives*. 2nd edition. Polity Press.
- lgbtQ+@cam. (2019): "Out at Cambridge: Why LGBTQ+ disclosure matters to individuals and institutions". In: [https://www.lgbtq.sociology.cam.ac.uk/system/files/documents/copy\\_of\\_out-at-cambridge.pdf](https://www.lgbtq.sociology.cam.ac.uk/system/files/documents/copy_of_out-at-cambridge.pdf) (28.01.2022)
- lgbtQ+@cam. (2020): "*Out at Cambridge*". In: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8I7NPx5qCcmYKNhQy0AHb\\_H1qMELACtS](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8I7NPx5qCcmYKNhQy0AHb_H1qMELACtS) (13.01.2020).
- lgbtQ+@cam. (2021a): "Welcome to Q+". In: <https://www.lgbtq.sociology.cam.ac.uk/> (13.01.2022).

- lgbtQ+@cam. (2021b): "Out at Cambridge". In: <https://www.lgbtq.sociology.cam.ac.uk/projects/out-at-cambridge> (13.01.2022).
- lgbtQ+@cam. (2021c): "Queer(y)ing the Curriculum". <https://www.lgbtq.sociology.cam.ac.uk/projects/queer-y-ing-the-curriculum> (13.01.2022).
- McFadden, C./Crowley-Henry, M. (2018): "'My People': The potential of LGBT employee networks in reducing stigmatization and providing voice". In: *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 29/5, 1056-1081.
- Meng, Y. (2020, February 26): "Clare students fly LGBT+ pride flag in defiance of College decision". In: <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/18828> (13.01.2022).
- Oxford English Dictionary. (2021): "coming out". In: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/416963?rskey=qgMK5K> (13.01.2022).
- Pichler, S./Blazovich, J. L./Cook, K. A./Huston, J. M./Strawser, W. R. (2018): "Do LGBT-supportive corporate policies enhance firm performance?". In: *Human Resource Management*, 57/1, 263-278.
- Rhodes, C. (2017): "Ethical Praxis and the Business Case for LGBT Diversity: Political Insights from Judith Butler and Emmanuel Levinas: Ethical Praxis and the Business Case for LGBT Diversity". In: *Gender, Work, and Organization*, 24/5, 533-546.
- Rubin, G. (1984): "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality". Vance, C. (Ed.): *Pleasure and Danger*. Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 267-319.
- Sandler, E. T. (2022): "An overview of coming out research: Introducing a three-lens typology". In: *Sociology Compass*, e12958, 1-48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12958>
- Scott, D. T. (2018): "'Coming out of the closet' – examining a metaphor". In: *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42/3, 145-154.
- Turner, C. (2021, April 23): "Cambridge college bans flags in student halls". In: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/04/22/cambridge-college-bans-lgbt-flags-student-halls/> (13.01.2022).
- University of Cambridge. (2019): "A Guide to Cambridge Colleges". In: [https://www.postgraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/college\\_fact\\_files\\_2019\\_0.pdf](https://www.postgraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/college_fact_files_2019_0.pdf) (13.01.2022).
- University of Cambridge. (2020): "University of Cambridge Undergraduate Prospectus 2021". In: [https://issuu.com/caowebeditor/docs/uoc\\_prospectus\\_2021](https://issuu.com/caowebeditor/docs/uoc_prospectus_2021) (13.01.2022).
- University of Cambridge. (2021): "Colleges and Departments". In: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/colleges-and-departments?ucam-ref=home-menu> (13.01.2022).