Category is... Staff and student experiences of Rainbow Office Hours

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Abstract

In this paper we present staff and student experiences of "Rainbow Office Hours", a distinct, safe space for LGBTQ+ community engagement in higher education, challenging traditional professional identity boundaries and promoting visibility and representation. Originating at the University of Glasgow in 2019, students are invited to attend specific times labelled as Rainbow Office Hours with an LGBTQ+ member of staff to discuss anything LGBTQ+ related. This initiative has helped foster an inclusive campus climate, underscoring the need for broader institutional support for LGBTQ+ identities. We advocate for integrating queer perspectives across academic disciplines, emphasising the critical role of representation in educational environments and critiquing the prevailing heteronormative and cisnormative institutional cultures that discourage the integration of sexual and gender minority issues into academia. We cannot, and will not, leave who we are at the door when we arrive at work.
There has been an increase in the number of university applicants who disclose an LGBTQ+ identity in their UCAS application, with 7.2% of the total UK domiciled applicants in 2020 identifying as such (UCAS, 2021). Although this is 2.5 times the national average for adults, it is still likely a lower bound estimate given the multiple reasons that students, and staff, may not wish to disclose. Relatedly, the journey to understanding, accepting, and finding comfort in one’s LGBTQ+ identity might be one that happens only during a person’s time at university (Beemyn, 2011) or later in life (Hall, 2021). Yet, the higher proportion of sexual and gender minorities in higher education compared to the general community may give a false impression of progressive institutional culture or safe haven for LGBTQ+ identities and expression. While some aspects of this may be true, most institutions (particularly in their role as employers), like any other workplace (Mizzi, 2013), are still ensconced in heteronormative and cisnormative expectations of staff professionalism and respectability politics.

Whether spoken or unspoken, these normative expectations result in cautious discouragement of educators incorporating sexual or gender minority into pedagogy or professional identity (Davies, 2021, Mizzi & Star, 2019). Given the instability of higher education employment and preponderance of temporary and fixed-term contracts, this may escalate the risk for LGBTQ+ employees to authentically express their identities if that expression deviates from the cis- or hetero-normative expectations. With an increasing focus on graduate employability and marketability, these expectations of professionalism may not only be implicitly reinforced to students by staff who feel compelled to model them, but also explicitly baked into curricula and learning objectives. This is most salient in specific disciplines (e.g. Law, Education, Psychology, Medicine, Nursing and Healthcare) with pro forma for professional behaviour and conduct that typically endorse Eurocentric, white, neuronormative, thin, able-bodied, cis- and hetero- norms.

Our ‘point of departure’ is a rejection of these assumed norms, and the notion of separating who we are as individuals from who we are as professionals, by holding ‘Rainbow Office Hours’ to offer diverse queer representation and community to students and colleagues.

**What are Rainbow Office Hours and how do we run them?**

A more comprehensive guide can be found Nordmann et al. (2022), but in sum, students are invited to attend specific times labelled as Rainbow Office Hours with an LGBTQ+ member of staff to discuss anything LGBTQ+ related. These are explicitly distinct from standard open-door staff consultation hours and have run at the University of Glasgow since 2019 as both in-person and online formats. They are normally timed to coincide with awareness days
such as National Coming Out Day, International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia, and LGBT History Month but not exclusively, and some staff may encourage students to visit their standard office hours for the same purpose. For online sessions, we use Zoom with the waiting room enabled. For in-person sessions, we meet students in our offices. In case of shared office spaces, staff book a private space or ensure that any office mates are elsewhere during the office hours. Both online and in-person sessions are drop-in as requiring students to book may put them off and some may not wish to be recorded as having attended.

We have found it important to be clear in the intent and boundaries of this support given that, although the intent is pastoral and community-building, most staff involved do not have the training and experience to triage mental health and psychological challenges. While this kind of training should mandatorily be provided for all student-facing staff at universities, the purpose of Rainbow Office Hours is not to replicate specialist support provided by frontline student services. As LGBTQ+ individuals we are cognisant of the negative and potentially traumatising experiences LGBTQ+ students and colleagues might have faced, however Rainbow Office Hours are intended to be an opportunity to foster belonging, agency and empowerment. From practical support like navigating University policy and procedures regarding name and gender changes, to making visible LGBTQ+ staff and student communities working to reimagine fields such as STEM with a queer presence. Most often students who attend (whether out or not) simply wish to know or speak to another LGBTQ+ person and share experiences without needing to ‘translate’ themselves into a cis/het frame of reference.

Importance of Representation

Data from UCAS (2021), suggests that positive campus climate experiences at school or college are related to students being able to express their LGBTQ+ identities openly. Whereas negative experiences are related to harassment based on identity, and a lack of LGBTQ+ representation in the school/college educational curriculum. Within a sector-wide crisis for student mental health that is only compounded by the sustained impact of the pandemic, and the current cost of living crisis, LGBTQ+ students sit in a particular position of vulnerability. Alongside other minoritised identities, LGBTQ+ students are at greater risk of mental ill-health (Sanders, 2023, “Student mental health problems have almost tripled, study finds”, 2023). University Counselling and Psychological Services, exerting a heroic effort whilst woefully under-resourced and over-burdened, may also not be culturally informed in a manner that meets the needs of LGBTQ+ students (Windust, 2024). Within this context, and
with no immediate change on the horizon, informal and ancillary community support from peers and staff may play a vital role.

Within the university curriculum, how LGBTQ+ friendly an academic subject area is perceived depends on how inclusive the subject is of LGBTQ+ identities (Forbes, 2022). Subject areas are perceived to be more LGBTQ+ friendly if they provide a platform for discussion of LGBTQ+ issues (e.g., in humanities and social sciences), compared to subjects which do not easily lend themselves towards such discussion (e.g. STEM) and where students themselves in their queerness may be seen as inappropriate. In Forbes (2022), LGBTQ+ students also reported that they would be more likely to seek support from staff in subjects perceived to be more LGBTQ+ friendly, than those in other subjects due to the teaching staff’s experience in discussing LGBTQ+ issues.

Rainbow Office Hours may serve as a resource for individuals contemplating coming out, however, this is not necessarily the aim of the initiative. It is important to highlight that navigating the journey of coming out (or not) in the workplace is highly personal, and it may be influenced by several factors, including the dynamic between diverse groups within the institution. Lee (2022) explores, for example, how HE staff might be comfortable being out to colleagues, but less so with students. Relatedly, it also highlights the importance of senior leadership to empower staff to believe in their progress within the university, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, and especially if those who hold positions of seniority are also ‘out’.

Beyond the personal level, Rainbow Office Hours holds the potential to impact at institutional level. A study published in 2020 (Banas et al., 2020) showed that intergroup contact has a direct effect on prejudice, and higher education may be the first opportunity that some students have to encounter ‘out’ LGBTQ role models (Ellis, 2009). By enhancing the visibility of LGBTQ+ students/staff and facilitating both inter- and intragroup contact, Rainbow Office Hours provides a platform for meaningful interpersonal interactions, and potentially supporting attitude change (Sink & Mastro, 2018, Esses, 2002).

**Staff Experiences of Rainbow Office Hours**

Usage of Rainbow Office Hours has been variable within, and across academic sessions. However, the impact of having visible LGBTQ+ staff has been hugely positive. LGBTQ+ students within our cohorts have reported that they feel well-represented and that the provision of office hours helps establish the institution as a welcoming and LGBTQ+ friendly
environment. We have found this to be a particularly significant opportunity for international students who may never have had the opportunity to be publicly out, discuss their sexuality, or who need help to find queer spaces in a new city/country. Given the sector-wide expansion of overseas recruitment drives, this holds particular relevance in higher education institutions where roughly a quarter of students are from overseas, increasing to 45% amongst postgraduate students (UK Government, 2023).

From our personal experiences as staff, Rainbow Office Hours have been a hugely rewarding and affirming experience, not just to serve as supportive role models for students, but also to consolidate and take pride in our own unique professional identities. Though not an explicit aim, in providing an opportunity to intentionally and publicly bring our whole selves to work, participating in Rainbow Office Hours has enhanced our own sense of belonging and identity at our institution. The conflation of personal and professional identities is never questioned when those identities are cis- and hetero-normative. It is rarely controversial to mention the mere existence of an opposite binary-gender partner in the workplace yet such a freedom is less often afforded to queer people where personal experience has taught us that it can be viewed as an inappropriate level of disclosure. Importantly, as more staff have joined these activities, the representations of queerness shown to students has diversified enormously and the presence of a declared list of ‘out’ names is powerful. Just as visibility and freedom for identity exploration and expression is important for international students, so too is the opportunity for staff to publicly express their identity in a way that might be denied in their home country.

**Caveats & Cautions**

It is important to acknowledge that this public visibility and offer of Rainbow Office Hours is not risk-free, must be considered with caution, and pastoral support for staff prioritised. There are inherent consequences to being LGBTQ+ and being visibly out in any workplace that may lead to both direct and indirect (Clarke, 2016; Oberle et al., 2011; Russ et al., 2002; Sundberg et al., 2021) harm and discrimination. Transgender staff may be particularly cautious about openly identifying themselves as trans, given the recent increase in anti-trans rhetoric and legislation both in the UK and globally (Pearce et al., 2020). This is no different in the higher education context and may be cultivated by university policy, management, colleagues and even students. In addition to these known professional risks, there are personal and mental health burdens that, although we may usually feel resilient to, we are never immune. Minoritised identities already often carry the disproportionate emotional burden and under-recognised labour of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) work and this work is leveraged by institutions and organisations who often do not tangibly support or
acknowledge the individuals with lived experience who do the graft. This may not change in our academic lifetime, but it is important to acknowledge to avoid all-permeating bitterness. Rainbow Office Hours are an endeavour fuelled by a passion to give back to our own LGBTQ+ community, offer the representation we did not see, and assert our presence and contribution within the wider university community. Yet to protect and preserve ourselves, it is important to identify a supportive and compassionate circle of peers who can offer advice and opinion in managing the emotional burden, bolstering resilience, maintaining the sometimes-delicate line of healthy distance, and knowing when to escalate if the need arises.

It is also important for cis/het allies to reflect on whether this is a space and an activity that should involve them. While allyship is vital, it is our view that support can be offered in a variety of ways other than actively participating in Rainbow Office Hours as an ally.

**Student Experiences of Rainbow Office Hours**

This section provides an account of varied queer student experiences and perspectives, based on my (AS) personal experience as an undergraduate student, past conversations with other queer students, and my involvement with the LGBTQ+ student society. Personal examples or generalised arguments are provided where appropriate, to represent experiences beyond my personal lived experience and obscure the specificities of my personal queer identity.

Starting university in 2020 as an international student meant that I was entering a new social environment in an unfamiliar city, at a time when meeting people was harder than ever due to lockdown restrictions and online course delivery. However, these conditions also provided a social “blank slate”, and therefore an opportunity to find my queer identity in a new environment more diverse than the rural environment I grew up in. This kind of division between social spheres within and outwith university can be particularly helpful for students to realise and express their trans identity, as it can be harder to come out to family or older friends. Personally, establishing connections in local queer communities and finding my place within that network has been a central theme of my university experience. My present-day sense of self and belonging would not be the same without ample opportunities provided for social and academic exchange between queer students and queer staff. Rainbow Office Hours, which for me meant visiting a queer staff member in regular office hours just to chat about life on a regular basis, were a prominent element of that journey. And beyond myself, almost every queer student I have spoken to in my department has mentioned visiting Rainbow Office Hours at least once, with unanimously positive experiences.
The mere presence of Rainbow Office Hours suggests that there are queer adults with established lives, careers and futures who are comfortable being visibly queer. For young queer people, especially trans and nonbinary people, it can be hard to imagine our futures, or imagine ourselves existing comfortably in the workplace. Our life trajectories tend to diverge from cisgender heterosexual norms dictating what adulthood is supposed to look like. For first-generation or estranged university students, academia may feel particularly intimidating or unwelcoming. Therefore, simply seeing queer faculty exist openly and visibly in the workplace might make that kind of future feel more possible for us too.

Fundamentally, Rainbow Office Hours provide a dedicated time and space to talk to a queer staff member, with a variety of possible reasons for and positive outcomes from such conversations. On the most basic level, queer staff might personally relate to student experiences like navigating difficult family relationships, identity exploration, considerations surrounding coming out and identity disclosure, and more. For queer students, including myself, feeling like someone is “one of us” makes us feel more at ease talking to them and sharing aspects of ourselves with, whether there is a specific shared identity or not. However, sharing a specific queer identity or background (culturally, economically, ethnically, …) can provide even greater ease. Consequently, a staff member providing Rainbow Office Hours could be the first person that we feel safe enough to come out to or ask for help from. Trans and gender diverse students might feel most comfortable asking queer or gender diverse staff for help with issues related to transition, which could be as simple as administrative support for name changes. There are more examples I could give, but the bottom line is that conversations with queer staff can foster a sense of belonging at the university, and more importantly foster a sense of queer community. However, the benefits of Rainbow Office Hours in my personal experience were scaffolded by the wider context of my department and university, so I will subsequently consider caveats to Rainbow Office Hours as I see them from that context.

LGBTQ+ inclusion is established through my university by institutional EDI policies (University of Glasgow, 2024), with important trans-inclusive policies consistent with recommended practice (Pugh, 2016), and LGBTQ+ issues were embedded into my curriculum in first year and beyond as part of wider decolonising the curriculum efforts. A subject-specific LGBTQ+ network exists to host academic and social events in my department and there is a large, active LGBTQ+ society at university. Additionally, there is an overwhelming sense among my peers that staff care about our wellbeing, and are actively dedicated to fostering an inclusive environment, which contrasts with experiences of peers in other subject areas. Rainbow Office Hours were therefore part of a wider student-focused and LGBTQ+ friendly culture. Moreover, dedicated queer staff were the ones who made
them possible. Thus, for Rainbow Office Hours to be successful, staff who are willing and able to be visibly queer have to be present in the first place. That in turn is dependent on national and institutional context, from legal workplace protections for sexuality and gender variance, to concrete inclusive hiring practices and workplace climates at higher education institutions. It is no exaggeration to say that the queer staff members have been the backbone of my positive LGBTQ+ community at university. They have been the ones investing time and energy into creating Rainbow Office Hours, but also facilitating various other LGBTQ+ events, including those for queer students to meet each other. Therefore, the structure provided by Rainbow Office Hours for queer staff-student exchange was only one piece of the puzzle for me because there were other spaces for that kind of community connection. Conversely, in an institutional context without the same kind of LGBTQ+ inclusive practice and community, Rainbow Office Hours could plausibly play a much more central role for queer students. Nonetheless, I am thankful that Rainbow Office Hours exist at my university. As I approach the end of my degree, I look back fondly to regular visits to the queer staff member’s office hours, visiting both alone or at times with friends, and I would wish any other queer student the opportunity to have that kind of positive relationship in their university experience.

**Conclusion**

Outwith the immediate university community and culture, the current global climate of increased conservatism is disproportionately impacting, and too often violently threatening, gender and sexual minorities. Now more than ever, representation and safe haven are vital. We hope that by sharing our experiences and the positive outcomes of these endeavours we can emphasise the archaic and prohibitive nature of normative expectations of professionalism and begin to subvert them.

While we encourage all LGBTQ+ staff within HE to consider supporting Rainbow Office Hours, our primary call to action is for these efforts, and the additional individual burden of existing as a minoritised identity, to be recognised and tangibly supported by HE institutions.

Within a sector-wide acknowledgement of a need to decolonise curricula and Anglo-centric HE culture, the intersectional nature of this work cannot be ignored. There is an overwhelming need for greater faculty representation and advocacy for diversity in sexuality, gender, body size, neurotypes, cultural and ethnic representation, disability, socio-economic background, and religion. We cannot, and will not, leave who we are at the door when we arrive at work.
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