

Cylchlythyr | Circular

Safe and inclusive higher education: supporting LGBTQ+ staff and students

Date: 24 April 2024
Reference: W24/05HE
To: Heads of higher education institutions in Wales
Principals of regulated further education colleges in Wales
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This circular provides information to universities and regulated colleges on safe and inclusive higher education as this relates to supporting LGBTQ+ students and staff in higher education. The circular includes practical examples of universities' support for LGBTQ+ people and it takes account of the [Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan](#).

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Introduction

1. This circular provides information to universities and regulated colleges on safe and inclusive higher education as this relates to supporting LGBTQ+ students and staff in higher education. The circular includes practical examples of universities' support for LGBTQ+ people and it takes account of the [Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan](#).
2. This information circular contributes to our commitment to promote and support equality of opportunity in higher education and takes account of the [Equality Act's](#) (2010) aim to protect people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. Safe and inclusive higher education should be an outcome of effective Strategic Equality Plans and supports the [Wellbeing of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#) goals, particularly of an Equal Wales and a Healthy Wales.¹
3. This circular takes account of the [Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan](#), which sets out an action to 'ensure that all colleges and universities in Wales are LGBTQ+ inclusive environments for learners, students, and staff' (action 29).
4. This circular uses the term 'LGBTQ+' staff and students. We recognise that defining identities is complex and people choose to identify in different ways. We have used the term LGBTQ+ consistently to align with the definitions used Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan. We recognise the LGBTQ+ terminology is continuing to evolve in both English and Welsh and we aim to be sensitive and use appropriate and inclusive terminology. While this circular relates to supporting LGBTQ+ staff and students, we recognise the importance of taking account of issues of intersectionality and of taking a 'whole institution' approach to securing safe and inclusive higher education.
5. This circular should be read in conjunction with the following circulars and any updates to them:
 - [W23/06HE: Safe and inclusive higher education: supporting equality and diversity education](#)
 - [W23/29HE: Tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence in higher education](#)
 - [W22/25HE: Race equality in higher education and 2022/23 allocations and 2021/22 monitoring](#)
 - [W23/24HE: Well-being and health: well-being and health strategy funding 2023/24 and 2022/23 and 2023/24 monitoring requirements](#)
6. From 1 August 2024, the [Commission for Tertiary Education and Research](#) (the Commission) will hold strategic duties to promote equality of opportunity and through regulation to set a condition of registration regarding student and staff welfare. This circular provides information that will be taken into account by the Commission in due course.

¹ We recognise the goals are interdependent.

UK-wide policy, guidance and practice

7. A summary of UK-wide policy guidance and practice is available at **Annex A**.

Welsh Government and HEFCW priorities

8. LGBTQ+ policies and actions formed part of the [Programme of Government 2021-26](#) and within the [co-operation agreement](#) was the aim to 'make Wales the most LGBTQ+ friendly nation in Europe'.
9. Safe and inclusive higher education is a key theme of the Welsh Government's strategies and LGBTQ+ Action Plan. The [Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales](#) expects '*that all colleges and universities in Wales are LGBTQ+ inclusive environments for learners, students and staff*'.
10. To deliver these outcomes the Welsh Government commits HEFCW to working with universities:
 - i. 'to encourage universities to take account of issues of intersectionality, including sexual orientation and gender reassignment, when considering how they support their diverse staff and student populations; and
 - ii. to ensure their Strategic Equality Plans set out how they will meet their duties under the Equality Act 2010 as it relates to gender reassignment and sexual orientation.'
11. The Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan recognises that it is not possible to separate complexities related to gender reassignment and LGBTQ+ identities. Within its commitment to design and implement a fully LGBTQ+ inclusive whole school approach, the Action Plan states that HEFCW (and later the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) should be included as a partner.
12. The LGBTQ+ Action Plan has set expectations that these commitments are met within the medium-term which corresponds to the lifetime of the current Senedd (2021-2026). The [Welsh Government Equality Evidence Unit](#) will provide data to ensure these commitments are met and underpinned by an evidence base.
13. There are other areas in the Action Plan where HEFCW, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, and the tertiary sector could make a contribution, including:
 - i. Action 13 commits Welsh Government to 'target violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence among LGBTQ+ communities'. The [Office for National Statistics](#) suggested that Black, Asian and ethnic minority LGBTQ+ people are more likely than White people to suffer domestic abuse from a partner (17% to 11%). In November 2023, HEFCW published information circular [W23/29HE: Tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence in higher education](#) and requested that universities submit reports to us on tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) in higher education. At the time of writing we are reviewing these submissions. We will monitor how

universities are taking account of the needs of LGBTQ+ people as they continue to develop their VAWDASV support.

- ii. Action 17 commits 'to ensure Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary remains inclusive of LGBTQ+ people'. To deliver this, the Welsh Government will 'gather evidence of positive and negative experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers to [the asylum process and] integration to Wales to understand and consider their needs'. In January 2021, to contribute to this commitment, HEFCW published [circular W21/03HE: Supporting asylum seekers and refugees in higher education in Wales: HEFCW audit including practice case studies](#).
14. The Equality and Human Rights Commission as the Welsh Government's regulator has published [Is Wales Fairer 2023](#). It notes that '*in Wales there are some clear policies to address the inequalities faced by LGBTQ+ groups...but more work should be done to improve data collection and policy implementation to take account of intersectional challenges*'. The report notes that 56.5% of university student respondents said they told 'most' or 'all' of their classmates or other students about their identity. We encourage universities to take account of this.
15. HEFCW's [Fee and Access Plans for 2024/25 – 2026/27](#) guidance supports equality of opportunity and promotion of higher education, including to people with protected characteristics. The purpose of the plans in this context is to promote equality of opportunity.

University policies and practices

16. In late 2023 we completed a desk-based review of universities' websites and the information they provide about supporting LGBTQ+ staff and students. We have identified the following interesting practice:
 - Most universities reference supporting LGBTQ+ communities of staff and students in their Strategic Equality Plans.
 - All universities have Well-being and Health, including mental health, strategies and annual implementation plans, funded by HEFCW. They have considered equality and intersectionality, conducted equality impact assessments and where appropriate included related actions in their implementation plans. HEFCW guidance expects universities' strategies and plans to take account of the needs of LGBTQ+ people.
 - Most universities confirm that they have LGBTQ+ staff networks that support staff. Two of these support postgraduate students.
 - Most universities students' unions have established LGBTQ+ support networks.
 - All universities have completed #stepchange self-assessment tools that include a focus on safe universities and equality and diversity.
 - One university provides period products in all toilets, regardless of gender, to ensure that these are available to transgender people in their toilet of choice.
 - Some universities encourage staff and students to include their preferred pronouns in their email signatures.

- One university enables students to record their chosen name as opposed to their birth name when enrolling at the university.
 - One university publishes its advice, information and guidance on hate crimes² on its website.
 - One university has a financial grant criteria which includes particular support for transgender students.
 - Some universities are considering LGBTQ+ specific accommodation.
17. To support LGBTQ+ students, universities and students' unions can engage with third sector agencies with expertise and support. Some universities are [Stonewall diversity champions](#), inclusive employers and members of the [Stonewall Workplace Equality Index](#). Three universities in Wales have Stonewall diversity champions status and four universities are identified as [inclusive employers](#).
18. The examples in this section are sourced from publically available information. We recognise that other universities may offer similar activities and support which has not been included in this review. We welcome where universities share interesting practice through networks to promote equality of opportunity and safe and inclusive higher education.

Next steps

19. We will monitor universities' Strategic Equality Plans published in April 2024 to inform our understanding of how they are meeting their equalities duties and contributing to the Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan. In developing underpinning action plans for Strategic Equality Plans we encourage universities to be explicit in how they will meet their duties under the Equality Act 2010 as it relates to sexual orientation and gender reassignment.
20. All universities in Wales have Well-being and Health strategies, with the majority being reviewed or rewritten by 2025. In funding these strategies, we expect their implementation plans to take account of the needs of people with protected characteristics, informed by equality impact assessments.
21. We will work closely with our partners to support universities and regulated colleges to meet the expectations set out in Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ Action Plan. As the Commission becomes responsible for the oversight of higher education, with a strategic duty to promote collaboration between providers of tertiary education and trade unions, it will take account of the Welsh Government [social partnership](#) expectations including engaging with union representatives to support staff with protected characteristics. The Commission will share with the tertiary sector information and advice, including UK-wide guidance, particularly in emerging areas such as support for transgender people.

² A hate crime is any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on a person's actual or presumed disability, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or whether they are transgender.

Further information

22. For further information, contact Jane Johns (jane.johns@hefcw.ac.uk).

Assessing the impact of our policies

23. We have carried out an impact assessment screening to help safeguard against discrimination and promote equality. We considered the impact of policies on the Welsh language, and Welsh language provision within the HE sector in Wales and potential impacts towards the goals set out in the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 including our Well-Being Objectives. Contact equality@hefcw.ac.uk for more information about impact assessments.
24. We expect our equality impact assessment process for all our policies take account of people with protected characteristics, including the sex and sexual orientation of people in higher education. Our safe and inclusive higher education policy takes an intersectional approach to protected characteristics. Our equality impact assessment has identified a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing as the average effects of the pandemic on student wellbeing were 50% larger for LGBTQ+ people than their peers, and this gap has persisted. Higher rates of mental health conditions have also been identified amongst LGBTQ+ women. There should also be a positive impact on gender reassignment as one in four LGBTQ+ students say their university does not demonstrate visible commitment to trans equality³.
25. Our equality impact assessment has also identified that LGBTQ+ students from diverse ethnic backgrounds continue to face higher levels of marginalisation due to intersections of their identity. Sexual identity may be an especially complex issue for some people from diverse ethnic backgrounds due to cultural, religious and safety considerations.
26. There are currently some resources including information, advice and guidance to help universities with supporting their LGBTQ+ staff and students available from [Student Space](#). HEFCW's review of universities' Strategic Equality Plans' implementation strategies and Wellbeing and Health Strategies will encourage universities to review current support to ensure they meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students and staff.

³ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/how-universities-can-support-lgbtq

Annex A

UK wide policy, guidance and practice

1. [Stonewall Cymru](#) highlight the importance of an intersectional approach, recognising that LGBTQ+ students, as well as being more likely to declare a mental health condition, are also more likely to “come from a disadvantaged area.” Stonewall identified additional barriers for LGBTQ+ students arising from “familial conflict or estrangement” meaning they may struggle to find secure and affordable housing outside of term time.
2. [Advance HE](#) note that LGBTQ+ students “may face higher rates of non-continuation in studies, have specific needs around mental health support and may face higher rates of harassment”.
3. [Student Minds](#) provides resources and information for LGBTQ+ students from university professionals and alumni which is published in a guide online.
4. Since 2020, HEFCW has co-funded [Student Space](#) with the [Office for Students](#). [Student Space](#) provides advice and information to navigate student life. There is specific support for LGBTQ+ students, including on dealing with [anxiety and isolation](#) and [training on safety and abuse](#).
5. In 2021, UCAS published a [report](#) which identifies that each year 40,000 LGBTQ+ students apply to UK higher education. In terms of intersectionality:
 - 17% of LGBTQ+ students are from the most disadvantaged areas (POLAR4).
 - LGBTQ+ students are more likely to declare a disability than non-LGBTQ+ students (30% versus 12%), particularly a mental health condition (13% versus 2.9%).
 - LGBTQ+ applicants are more likely to have declared they are white than non-LGBTQ+ applicants, with 82% of LGBTQ+ applicants being white compared to 68% of non-LGBTQ+ applicants.
6. In 2022, a [Universities UK insight publication](#) noted that:
 - 42% of LGBTQ+ students hide or disguise the fact they are LGBTQ+ due to fear of discrimination.
 - one in ten LGBTQ+ students say that their university lacks visible commitment to LGB equality.
 - one in four LGBTQ+ students say that their university doesn't demonstrate visible commitment to trans equality.
 - 17% of trans students have reported being unable to use the university toilet they feel comfortable with as gender neutral toilets are not the norm at all UK university campuses.
7. In 2022, TASO released a report on [The Wellbeing of LGBTQ+ Students](#). The report is based in data analysis from the Student Academic Experiences Survey which captures views of more than 10,000 students each year. The report found the following:

- Average effects of the pandemic on student wellbeing were 50% larger for LGBTQ+ people than for their peers, and this gap has persisted.
 - More than half of all transgender students now experience high anxiety.
 - Asexual people experience systematically the worst wellbeing of any sexual orientation group.
 - Gaps in anxiety between LGBTQ+ students and straight students will take more than 20 years to close, at pre-pandemic rates.
8. The Welsh Parliament's Children, Young People and Education Committee set out in its [Mental Health Support in Higher Education publication](#) in 2023 that LGBTQ+ students face higher rates of mental health issues.
9. It is recommended in the report that HEFCW (and thereafter the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) "*should reduce the risk to students of experiencing discrimination or bullying in education arising from their sexual orientation, including recording and reporting incidents*".