

*Improving the Higher Education
experience for LGBT+ students: key
recommendations and reflections on a
partnership*

Article

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Improving the Higher Education experience for LGBT+ students: Key Recommendations and Reflections on a Partnership

1. Context for pedagogic partnership

The focus of this paper is two-fold – firstly, we will detail the background to our project as well as the key recommendations arising from our project, with the second focus being a reflection on the pedagogic partnership by each author.

Background

Previous research (e.g. Ellis, 2009) has shown variable levels across campuses for LGBT+ inclusivity. This is an issue as LGBT+ students are at a greater risk of developing a mental health condition (Chakraborty, McManus, Brugha, Bebbington & King, 2011) due to stigma, prejudice and discrimination (Meyer, 1995), which in turn can affect academic attainment and student experience (Windmeyer, Humphrey & Baker, 2013). In light of these points, Allán Laville (Dean for Diversity and Inclusion) applied for funding from the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP) to explore the experiences of LGBT+ students at the University of Reading. The funding was approved in February 2019 and the research study took place between June and August 2019.

As part of this funding, Charlotte Field, a student on the MSci Applied Psychology (Clinical) programme, was employed as an intern and had a leading role in the literature review, methodology, data collection, data analysis and write-up of the findings. Lucy Hart was a student on the Postgraduate Certificate in Evidence-Based Psychological Treatments, who received teaching on working with sexual diversity in a therapeutic setting from Allán Laville. Lucy approached Allán about contributing to ongoing research at the University and as a result of this, subsequently became a Research Assistant in Clinical Psychology contributing to the data collection, data analysis and write-up of the findings.

Key recommendations arising from the project

The first key recommendation was students would like more information on where to go for support – both internal and external support. The importance of appropriate signposting is key to supporting LGBT+ individuals (Laville, 2013; 2017) and to support this, we have created a resource directory that provides information and contact details for 25 LGBT+ organisations and have shared this with the Student's Union as well as the LGBT+ student society.

We are also liaising with student services to improve the visibility of LGBT+ support and allyship. For example, having a LGBT+ ally logo and information on public-facing documents and website. This is important as Cocks, Jonas and Laville (2019) found that a barrier for LGBT+ individuals in accessing support services is the worry that support staff will not understand LGBT+ considerations, so this visibility aims to alleviate that worry.

The second key recommendation was for wider dissemination of staff training in Trans Awareness. A face-to-face training session is already delivered three times a year however, future training could be delivered online through a VLE or another interactive platform. This would support staff in developing their awareness of Trans inclusion in a more accessible way.

The final recommendation was to develop student-staff partnerships within LGBT+ inclusion. This can take the form of a research study like this one or a student-staff partnership event for LGBT+ History Month or at Pride. The latter was identified by students as an area of existing best practice. One student commented “*My reason for attending this university was I met some of my lecturers at Reading Pride.[...] on visit days and things there are these little LGBT postcards that you see around the department especially in meteorology and so seeing those I was I don't know I felt welcomed and it was nice. [...] There are lecturers out there being positive and that's also really good.*”. At Reading Pride, the University's stall is supported by staff and students and is one of our largest LGBT+ events.

To provide support for these recommendations at the University of Reading, they now feature in the University's 2020 Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report. Therefore, our student-staff partnership has led to a change in institutional priorities for our LGBT+ students.

Nationally, the findings from this project have been disseminated by the authors at the Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRteN) conference at the University of Cambridge in December 2019 and disseminated by Mental Elf on Twitter (approx. 78,000 followers). This level of national dissemination should support the implementation of our recommendations for Higher Education on a wider scale.

In the following section, each author has provided their key reflections on the pedagogic partnership. In regard to the structure of these reflections, we had a group discussion on potential questions to answer with each author choosing the questions which fitted best with their reflective style.

2. Reflections on pedagogic partnership

2.1. Reflection from Allán Laville

What is your understanding of pedagogical partnership?

My understanding of pedagogical partnership is shared power partnership between students and staff, with the aim of improving Teaching & Learning, and the student experience. This was my key take-home point from attending the Student-Staff Partnership Symposium at the University of Surrey in September 2019.

What excites and compels you about pedagogical partnership?

The key part of pedagogical partnership is the opportunity to learn from our students. If you take the time to pause and speak to students, there are often excellent insights into how we can improve student experience. I also think that having students engaging in all parts of the research process adds significant value. For example, when I was a student, I would have felt much more comfortable speaking to a peer about my student experience than to a member of

staff! This is simply because of the feeling that peers will understand your journey better. I was compelled to engage in a pedagogical partnership as I truly believe that the key to understanding and improving student experience is to ask and involve students in the whole exploratory journey.

What doubts or concerns do you have about pedagogical partnership?

To be honest, a concern would initially be the student-staff professional interaction. It is key that both staff and students can contribute in a meaningful way and for all parties to understand the importance of a collaborative way of working. Without this, it is very easy for the pedagogical partnership to fail. In my opinion, this is key to the shared power concept discussed by Alison Cook-Sather at the symposium keynote.

What was my experience of pedagogical partnership?

The experience of the pedagogical partnership with Charlotte and Lucy was an excellent one. The reason I say this is that the team worked very well together, and we all brought a different viewpoint to the work. I had designed the initial research study, but Charlotte and Lucy 'lived it' through the data collection of interviewing 10 University of Reading LGBT+ students, transcribing the interviews and then completing the thematic analysis. It was through their hard work, enthusiasm and dedication that we managed to create the key recommendations for Higher Education, as discussed in the opening section of this paper.

How was this different from what work in educational institutions has been previously? How has it affected you as a staff member?

Previous work has been by engaging in focus groups with other members of staff, which I think misses the key point that students are the experts of their own experience. In regard to how this work has affected me, it has made it really clear that my future pedagogic projects need to be student-staff partnership projects. To this end, I have been successful in gaining funding for three further pedagogic partnership projects, which will take place throughout the coming year. These projects explore the experiences of our students with specific learning difficulties, embedding wellbeing within assessment and feedback, and improving access to psychoeducational materials for individuals with learning disabilities.

What effect might your work have on your campus?

I think this is two-fold. The first effect on campus will be promoting the importance of pedagogic partnership and supporting others to adopt this approach. For some staff, it might be the first time that they are planning on working in this way, so we could provide some guidance on what worked well for us as well as what to avoid!

The second effect is the impact on LGBT+ student experience. The University of Reading already engages in inclusive practice for our staff and students, as evidenced in being awarded Top 100 Employer status by Stonewall in 2019 and 2020, which also considers student experience. However, our findings will support inclusive practice even further.

What advice do you have for others interested in or embarking on such partnership work?

Whilst some people might have reservations about partnership work, I cannot recommend it highly enough! It is important to take a step back and review our current T&L practices as well as considering how partnership work can support the student voice as well as students' sense of belonging in the academic community. As mentioned earlier, one might be concerned about power shifts, but 'shared power' is the key concept to keep in mind here. In our partnership, we found having clear roles for each member of the team to be key in reaching a successful outcome.

I believe that my current work has been deeply enriched by engaging in a pedagogic partnership. Beyond the outcomes of the work, it has been an absolute pleasure to work with Charlotte and Lucy. Our students are also our future leaders and we should acknowledge that in our approach to improving Teaching & Learning in Higher Education.

2.2. Reflection from Charlotte Field

My motivations for applying for the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme ('UROP') are as follows. I believe it was a good opportunity to further my clinical experience in undertaking research in a subject that I am interested and passionate about. So, I applied for Dr Allán Laville's project, 'Exploring the Experiences of LGBT+ students at The University of Reading'.

Why it is an important project for you?

This project was important for me because I feel very strongly about treating people with respect and kindness no matter the circumstances including sexual orientation. Additionally, I believe it is important to have a better understanding and knowledge of people's experiences that may not necessarily be your own. Ultimately, the more knowledgeable you are the more able you are to treat people the way they would like to be treated.

As indicated previously the research project itself was invaluable as a learning curve for me. Both in terms of the impact on Higher Education for members of the LGBT+ community and the research and write up process. As I am going into my final year in which research plays such a pivotal role, I feel I am coming from a more prepared position and have a more realistic viewpoint in terms of the level of organisation and work that is required.

How did you feel initially about embarking on this project?

At first, I did feel apprehension in the task I was about to undertake. This was mainly surrounding the commute to University from home, interviewing participants and the subsequent write up of the results. Certainly, as my limited experience - prior to undertaking the UROP project - was confined to completing lab reports for my Research Methods and Data Analysis modules during first and second year.

So, what happened to manage this?

However, the initial meeting with Allán served to not only put me at ease but also served to solidify my understanding of the research topic as well as my role within the project itself.

From the beginning of the project I then felt able to complete the tasks set to me by my supervisor due to the level of support that I had been given.

A clear example of this was the recruitment of another Research Assistant (RA) to contribute to the research. This subsequently spread out the workload further and this served as another source of support, in addition to learning when analysing the results using coding and thematic analysis, which were techniques that I was not at first familiar with.

I believe that the research and write up process have benefited from a development of a good rapport between Allán as a staff member and myself as a student. Indeed, a clear indication of a good student-staff partnership is the mutual benefit for each party member. A testament to this partnership was brainstorming within meetings about other projects that would be of benefit, both for my progression and experience as well as projects that would link to the role of Dean for Diversity and Inclusion.

What you have learnt?

As highlighted previously, the UROP project itself has been a significant learning curve for myself as a researcher as I have learnt invaluable skills, both conducting and writing up research. Primarily, this centres around the development of my interviewing skills which was of relevance considering the potential sensitive nature of the topics discussed. The analysis and write up of a paper of extended length and higher calibre than was required in my two previous years of research methods was also of benefit. Certainly, the research skills I have learnt will be invaluable for carrying out my dissertation during my final year.

From my experience, I have learned that student-staff partnerships are of great benefit in developing good working relationships with staff members who share mutual interests in mental health. They also facilitate opportunities for reciprocal learning from both the student and staff experiences, opinions and ideas. This creates balanced and well thought out outcomes in research.

What your key points are for future collaborations?

There are several key points I will take with me for any future collaborations. Student-staff partnerships are very important if a student wants to further their experience in their studies. Therefore, in future collaborations, I will seek to build a collaborative relationship with the staff member to enhance my learning and experience further.

Certainly, when undertaking any kind of project, the need to be organised and the ability to effectively manage tasks are of great importance. My overall experience of this collaboration was wholly positive, and this can be attributed in part to the regular opportunities to touch base and the delegation of roles and work. In future, from the onset of any collaboration, it is of great importance to agree regular communication and updates on developments as well as having clearly defined roles and delegation of the work from the beginning.

2.3. Reflection from Lucy Hart

What is your understanding of pedagogical partnership?

My understanding of pedagogical partnership is where both student and staff share their experiences to support future teaching and learning.

What excites and compels you about pedagogical partnership and also what doubts and concerns do you have?

From a students' perspective, the pedagogical partnership is an empowering experience. The partnership allows current students to contribute and support the development of the University to improve the experiences for future students.

As the research project commenced, my clinical training and time as a student was ending. This was a concern for me, as my presence on campus had decreased, unlike Allán and Charlotte who were based on site. I was concerned that I would be unable to attend research meetings to share information, which could have caused a power-imbalance between Allán, Charlotte and I. Collaboratively, we overcame this barrier through flexible and remote working (i.e. Teams and conference calls) around my clinical working hours.

What was my experience of a pedagogical partnership?

My experience working in a pedagogical partnership with Allán and Charlotte has been excellent. From the partnership, I have learnt that it is important to consider each members' working style, schedule and to communicate clearly, in order to maintain a reliable and robust working partnership. In our partnership, we took ownership of our individual roles, we communicated effectively and set deadlines in order to keep the project running smoothly. I am grateful to Allán and Charlotte for their consideration of others in the partnership.

*How was this different from what your work in educational institutions has been previously?
How has it affected you as a student?*

Having studied at three different academic institutes, this is the first opportunity I have had to participate in a pedagogical partnership. Being involved with this project, adds an additional layer to the student experience. Personally, I was not required to produce a research project for my PGCert at the University of Reading. Yet, the pedagogical partnership enabled me to pursue my research interests alongside my studies.

Allán, Charlotte and I attended the SMaRteN conference at the University of Cambridge in December 2019 where we disseminated our findings from the research project. This provided me with the opportunity to network with other researchers and share my insight on student experiences from a student perspective. This also complimented my clinical practice as I was able to give insight from the perspective of a mental health practitioner who works with students with common mental health problems.

What effect might your work have on your campus?

Firstly, we want to show the students of the University of Reading that their voices are being heard. Through listening to the LGBT+ community, we are able to provide evidence-based suggestions for change to the University in order to improve student experiences, by making it a more inclusive space.

Secondly, we hope to encourage others to include professional practice students in pedagogical partnerships, within the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences and other schools. Our work demonstrates how affective flexible and remote working can be in achieving completion of research projects.

What advice do you have for others interested in or embarking on such partnership work?

As students, we have a large volume of academic work we are required to complete as part of our degrees. So, it may feel daunting when hearing what is required of 'pedagogical partnership'. However, I would like to put your mind at ease. It is possible to balance course work and the projects additional requirements. You are working directly with an academic educator; they are there to support you and will understand if you need to work to a more flexible deadline. In my opinion, the partnership was a fantastic opportunity to contribute to making effective change and give back to the University community. I feel I have also grown as an individual, as I have gained new skills which I can utilize in my career moving forward.

3. Conclusion

To reflect back on the first focus of this paper, our findings contribute directly to supporting the experience of LGBT+ students in HE. We have disseminated our findings at both an institutional and national level, which should support other HEIs in their approach to student support.

In regard to the second focus of this paper, our pedagogic partnership has supported us to see a) the importance of shared power within a partnership, b) how empowering the partnership can be for students, c) how the partnership supports student voice and sense of belonging within the academic community, d) the importance of clear communication and defined roles with the partnership, and e) the realised benefits of partnership in improving T&L in HE.

We hope this paper has inspired you to engage in pedagogic partnership as it benefits students, staff and the wider HE sector.

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