OUT AT CAMBRIDGE

Why LGBTQ+ disclosure matters to individuals and institutions

A report by lgbtQ+@cam
October 2019

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

lgbtQ+@cam

queer bisexual
asexual trans
non-binary
pansexual gay
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Foreword

University is a time of change for many young people. It is a time for all students to learn, grow and enjoy independence. But for many lesbian, gay, bi and trans students, the experience can be marred by discrimination, exclusion and abuse because of who they are.

Many LGBT people come out for the first time when they reach University and are able to explore the meaning of their true identity. But conversely, many LGBT students also encounter unwelcoming environments, and feel unable to come out and be themselves. We know from our research at Stonewall that LGBT people who are BAME, trans or disabled are particularly likely to face anti-LGBT discrimination at university.

Given that many LGBT students cannot be open about their LGBT identity at home, it can be particularly important that university environments are inclusive and welcoming.

There's no single 'LGBT story' at university. Everyone's experiences differ, but through the testimonies of those LGBT students who have felt able to be themselves at university, we know what a transformative impact an inclusive environment can have.

LGBT students, and staff, perform better at university when they can be themselves. We need people with a diversity of perspectives and experiences to drive forward innovation and new avenues of research in our universities.

It's essential that universities and higher education providers send out a clear and proactive message of inclusion. This can range from relatively small gestures like flying the rainbow flag during Pride, alongside bigger and more important measures like clear anti-discrimination policies and training for staff — all of this makes a difference.

This report makes a very important contribution to the quest to create an inclusive culture at Cambridge University. The testimonials of those who took part add great richness to this very thoughtful investigation into how LGBT staff and students navigate the complex area of disclosure.

Jan Gooding
(she/her)
Chair, Stonewall

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This study was conducted to explore, document and analyse the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and staff at the University of Cambridge. In this report, we share our findings as well as our recommendations for improving the university climate for LGBTQ+ people. We hope **Out at Cambridge** can help to narrow the gap between those LGBTQ+ members of the university community who feel validated and supported at Cambridge, and those who experience the university as much less welcoming. Difficult though it is to offer precise guidance on such a complex matter, we are fortunate to have basic research tools at our disposal with which to increase our understanding and appreciation of why LGBTQ+ perspectives matter, and how we can learn from them within and beyond the university. As this study demonstrates, there are many valuable lessons to be learned, even from a small exploratory study within a single institution.

Using research tools to open new avenues of enquiry is the primary goal of **lgbtQ+@cam**, the new inter-disciplinary programme here at Cambridge which has sponsored and led this study. Launched in 2018 with three years of funding from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Department of Sociology, **Q+** aims to promote research, outreach and network building related to queer, trans and sexuality studies across all six Schools at the University of Cambridge. By exploring the difference it makes to 'Que(e)ry the Curriculum' across the disciplines, to incorporate trans perspectives into teaching on a range of subjects, to reshape canonical legacies, and to build stronger links to LGBTQ+ research and study programmes nationally and internationally, our goal is to increase participation in this transformative field, and to transform higher education as a result.

Out at Cambridge is the first study we have undertaken, and we conducted it in part to show how and why LGBTQ+ research can make a difference for everyone by improving the quality of academic life across the board. We also conducted the study because we were surprised at the recent Stonewall Report (2018) findings showing high degrees of concealment and anxiety among LGBTQ+ students at British universities. These findings motivated us to learn more about what is happening on our own campus.

In presenting our findings on the factors that increase or decrease the comfort of LGBTQ+ staff and students to disclose their identities within the Cambridge community, we have tried to make clear both the advantages and limitations of a study that is qualitative and indicative, rather than quantitative or representative. The main advantages of using a qualitative research design are that we can not only identify factors that influence disclosure, but analyse how they shape disclosure patterns, and thus discover how these patterns can be influenced or changed.

Another advantage of more in-depth qualitative data is that we can really get a feel for what we are investigating at a personal, quotidian and emotional level. Among other things, this allows us to usefully identify productive avenues for future research — including more systematic quantitative studies of specific correlations, such as the strong link identified in this Report between 'feeling more at home' and being more engaged in academic research. Findings such as these will undoubtedly repay further study for the entire university community.

We hope you will benefit from reading this report, and that you'll also learn more about the lgbtQ+@cam programme. Please visit our website where you can find out more about what we do and who's involved, and which events are coming up. We'd welcome any comments you have about this report and its findings, or any other aspect of our work here at Cambridge.

**Sarah Franklin
(she/her)
Director, lgbtQ+@cam**

www.lgbtq.sociology.cam.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

The lgbtQ+@cam programme was launched in January 2018 and is intended to raise the profile of this subject area, in both teaching and research, across the University. The programme is based in the Department of Sociology and supported by over 200 members of other Departments and Faculties across all six Schools. Thank you to everyone who has been so enthusiastic about this programme in its first two years, and especially to Heather Stallard, our Programme Administrator, all the members of our Advisory Board, and our Steering Group. We are especially grateful to Jan Gooding for agreeing to write the Foreword for this Report.

We were fortunate that one of our recent Sociology MPhil graduates, Elisabeth Sandler, was already working for the department as a Research Assistant when the idea for this study arose. With characteristic dedication and drive, Elisabeth was able to complete data collection and thematic analysis within a six-month period as a full-time researcher and we are deeply indebted to her not only for her efficiency but also the care and sensitivity that she brought to every aspect of the data collection for this project. Elisabeth was part of an experienced team of researchers including Dr Marcin Smietana, who closely supervised the study, and Dr Robert Pralat, who served as a consultant.

We are also grateful to our participants, our team of readers, our copy editor Jo Shortt Butler, Nicolas Canal for taking the photographs used in this report, and the design team at Createpod. Sarah Franklin is the Director of lgbtQ+@cam as well as the Principal Investigator on this study. The programme is funded by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences New Initiatives programme, and we are very grateful for their support.

The printing of this report was made possible through the generosity of the law firm Travers Smith, our first corporate supporter. We are also delighted that this research will be taken forward thanks to a significant three year gift from Travers Smith to establish the Travers Smith lgbtQ+@cam Doctoral Bursary. Sincere thanks to Daniel Gerring, Chris Hale and all at Travers Smith.

Introduction

This study builds on a small but significant body of previous work exploring the perspectives of LGBTQ+ students and staff in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. Through our experience over the past two years of setting up the **Q+** programme at Cambridge, and launching the QRUK (Queer Research UK) national network, we have met hundreds of LGBTQ+ people working in the university sector across the globe as well as here at Cambridge. We have spoken to students, staff, administrators and alumni from Cambridge, and we have worked with a diverse international community of LGBTQ+ academics, artists, activists and administrators. The response to this programme has been so positive that we have hosted or co-sponsored more than 50 events — from workshops, lectures and conferences to plays, performances and exhibits. The energy and excitement surrounding these activities has at times been overwhelming. At the same time, however, we have heard familiar stories again and again about the exclusions, prejudice and hostility that remain all too prominent in the daily lives of LGBTQ+ people — even at universities like Cambridge, where it might be assumed that homophobia is a thing of the past.

Last year, in October 2018, we co-sponsored a panel to discuss findings of the Stonewall publication *LGBT in Britain: University Report* (Bachmann and Gooch 2018), which included the following findings:

- **More than two in five** LGBT students (42 per cent) **hid or disguised** that they are LGBT at university in the last year because they were afraid of discrimination.
- **One in five trans** students (20 per cent) were encouraged by university staff to **hide or disguise** that they are trans.

- **One in four non-binary** students (24 per cent) and **one in six trans** students (16 per cent) don't feel able to wear clothes representing their **gender expression** at university. (p. 5)

LGBT IN BRITAIN
UNIVERSITY REPORT

Stonewall
Acceptance without exception

These findings surprised us and motivated us to conduct this exploratory, in-depth, qualitative study here at Cambridge. Our goal was to more systematically investigate the experiences of LGBTQ+ people at this university, in order to understand better what Cambridge feels like from an LGBTQ+ perspective, and to see if there are any areas where improvements need to be made.

The findings presented here are the first ever reported on LGBTQ+ experiences at Cambridge, and our research should be considered exploratory rather than exhaustive. Our study was not designed to be comprehensive, or even representative: we did not survey the student body but rather conducted 55 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with members of the University community, including students and staff. Our findings largely confirm many of the other studies we have read, including the pathbreaking work by the Birmingham team led by Nicki Ward and Nicola Gale (2017) on LGBTQ+ experiences at British universities. As they note, "there is a very positive story emerging" (p. 5) about the transformative legislative changes in the UK and their impact of LGBTQ+ peoples' experiences of university life, but there is also an underside to this process which is that the ongoing — and still high — levels of discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people in all walks of life can be underestimated as a result of the highly visible, but uneven, progress that has been made in recent years.

This study suggests that a related dissonance pattern, or mismatch, is associated with increasing social acceptance of LGBTQ+ lives and perspectives in the HE sector, which is that the gap between those who feel more comfortable and accepted, and those who do not, may have widened. We found, for example, that while there is now a large and growing group of LGBTQ+ students and staff at the University of Cambridge who feel welcomed, supported, valued, safe and protected — and in many respects more comfortable at university than in any other environment they have experienced — there is another group that feels displaced and isolated, and which is at increased risk of under-performing, falling ill or dropping out. The gap between these groups is both significant and telling. While many — and indeed most — students and staff interviewed for this study reported feeling sufficiently comfortable to freely disclose their LGBTQ+ identities within most university contexts, a significant minority did not feel able to disclose at all for fear of appearing inappropriate through oversharing, or unprofessional, and thus risking exposure, stigma and exclusion. We have to assume as well that, as with any study relying on volunteer interviewees, some LGBTQ+ peoples' need to conceal their identities would preclude their participation in a study of this kind.

Although we were pleased to discover the many creative and empowering ways that staff members and students manage being out at Cambridge, a significant and concerning theme in our findings from this study is the substantial amount of time, attention and effort involved in managing LGBTQ+ identities, even for those quite comfortable sharing and discussing them. For a significant number of respondents, the sheer quantity of labour involved in explaining themselves to others was a notable feature of their daily lives in colleges and departments. The work of managing identities — for example explaining pronouns, or why certain identity terms were necessary — was compounded by concerns about 'imposing' on others or creating difficulties for colleagues. We found, for example, evidence in some interviews with LGBTQ+ students and staff of high levels of concern about the extent to which their identities, perspectives and even physical presence in teams, departments or colleges can create awkwardness and discomfort. In some cases, we also detected a sense of fear related to the potential penalties of being insufficiently discrete. For some, this was a low-level background fear related to the gap between an ostensibly more welcoming climate for LGBTQ+ people and the ongoing reality of (sometimes carefully concealed) homophobia. For others, the fear of coming out was too strong to enable any disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identities at all, as the risks were perceived to be too great. In response to the dual reality of greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ in general alongside evidence of ongoing discomfort around this issue remaining widespread, most interviewees emphasised the ongoing importance of explicit institutional endorsements of the value of LGBTQ+ equality. But on the other hand, while support from colleagues, line managers, administrative officers, tutors and supervisors was highly welcomed, it could also feel at times invasive, insensitive and counter-productive. Simple recommendations in this area, in other words, are easier to formulate than to deliver as we live in a society which is still getting used to LGBTQ+ as a new norm.

We chose to focus on 'comfort to disclose' as a variable in part because it would enable us to compare different spaces and places, as well as groups and activities within the university. However, what we found was that very similar factors such as 'feeling at home' (or not at home) were reported to increase or decrease comfort to disclose across many different contexts. Our research thus confirms that comfort to disclosure — and factors related to this variable — can be used as an effective, and informative, measure of the extent to which LGBTQ+ students and staff feel safe, valued, included, supported and protected within the university community. We found that a sense of 'feeling at home' was critical to inspiring more authentic and meaningful participation in university life, including engagement with research, teaching and learning. Conversely, the interview data suggest that a common response to feeling that LGBTQ+ identities and experiences are 'irrelevant' or 'inappropriate' within the university is to consider leaving. As noted above, there is a significant gap between the positive feelings of being included, engaged and passionate about your work or study community, and being prepared to leave a community where you feel so unwelcome it is as though you don't exist. As we note in our final section on 'Recommendations', one of the most important findings of our study is how much of a difference small changes can make in bridging this gap.

Cambridge is for many LGBTQ+ people a comfortable and empowering home. The past half century has seen significant progress in the form of major social, cultural, political and legal changes that have benefitted LGBTQ+ people across the globe. There is a risk, however, that these very changes can mask the significant amount of discrimination, prejudice, stigma and outright hostility many LGBTQ+ people still experience — including at the University of Cambridge. While completing this study, for example, and in setting up the lgbtQ+@cam programme over the past two years, we have often been met with incredulous looks — 'Does Cambridge really have a problem with LGBTQ+ people?' The presumed answer is of course 'Surely not!'. But despite being rated by the online site The Tab as "the gayest uni in the UK" (2014), Cambridge does not feature even in the top 10 of the 2015 Stonewall guide on gay-friendly universities in the UK (Tucker, 2014). As with many forms of discrimination, the people least likely to encounter it head on are also potentially the least likely to notice the problem.

In contrast to the incredulity of some that Cambridge has 'an issue with gays', our work with LGBTQ+ alumni from the University of Cambridge paints a very different picture. Indeed a frequent comment from alumni at events we organise is 'I'm really glad you've started this programme', often followed by 'I wasn't able to be out at Cambridge when I was there' or 'I had some pretty difficult experiences and I am glad something is being done to make it easier for others'.

This gap in the perception of Cambridge between people (usually LGBTQ+) who have directly experienced its more unwelcoming — or openly homophobic — side, and those who find it hard to believe that such intolerance could even exist at this university, is replicated in the findings of this study, which show that despite being a safe home for many LGBTQ+ people, homophobia still makes Cambridge feel unsafe for too many others.

As emphasised in our list of recommendations at the end of this report, small steps can make a big difference — and this is welcome news. As participants often reminded us, big steps are also still needed. We were pleased to discover what a positive difference, for example, the new **Q+** programme has made to so many LGBTQ+ people at Cambridge in the barely two years it has been in existence.

We hope this Report will become a transformative talking point, teaching point, and point of reference to closing the gaps that remain around comfort to disclose at Cambridge. Comfort to disclose is a valuable and revealing index of the ability of LGBTQ+ students and staff to work, relax, socialise, and 'just be ordinary' within the Cambridge University community, and we hope the contents of this report will help to ensure that as many people as possible can feel safe and supported in their work and study here.

Key findings

- All of the participants in this study considered it **important to feel comfortable to disclose** their LGBTQ+ identities within the University of Cambridge — whether or not they felt able or decided to disclose themselves.

- Managing LGBTQ+ disclosure in the manner they felt most comfortable with, and on **terms they could control** themselves, were highly valued components of institutional life for the participants in this study.

- The feelings of relief from **not having to hide, lie, or censor** themselves described by interviewees repeatedly confirmed the positive influence of a pro-LGBTQ+ climate on social life, work enjoyment and performance, stress reduction, and mental health.

- A considerable number of participants described their response to feeling **unable to disclose their identities comfortably would be to leave the University of Cambridge**.

- There was greater comfort to disclose for many participants if co-workers, students, staff, and especially **people in positions of power** such as heads of departments or colleges, were openly out.

- **Proactive messages of institutional support** increased a sense of being included, welcomed, accepted, and safe. Examples included the use of the rainbow flag, the use of pronouns in email signatures, LGBTQ+ research programmes, social events, seminars and lectures on LGBTQ+ topics, and LGBTQ+ related messages in University social media outlets.

- **Visible signs and messages of support** — both direct and indirect — decreased participants' concern about appearing unprofessional or inappropriate when disclosing their LGBTQ+ identities within colleges, teams or departments.

- The terms '**relevant**' and '**irrelevant**' reflect a concern, especially among younger scholars, about disclosing in spaces where their LGBTQ+ identities might be seen to be out of place or intrusive.

'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.'

- Examples of behaviour that enabled participants to feel their identities were 'relevant' included **LGBTQ+ topics being covered in the taught curriculum** and the **disclosure of other departmental members**.

- Many participants described the amount of **labour** involved in managing their (non)disclosure as significant and expressed hope for a less labour-intensive manner of existing as 'themselves' in the future.

- Overall, the personal and professional assessments by participants in this study of their **options to freely and safely disclose their LGBTQ+ identities** at the University of Cambridge served as an important litmus test of the university's ability to create an inclusive and welcoming climate for all its students and staff.

- For some **trans, non-binary, and gender queer people, disclosure is not a choice**. For example, if participants did not pass with their gender preference, identified as non-binary, or used gender-neutral pronouns, they were being 'pre-disclosed' by their appearance and pronouns.

- Trans participants who did not pass as the gender they identified with or participants who preferred gender neutral pronouns, often had to endure being **involuntarily out** because the alternative of not being addressed with their right pronouns, was considered worse. These participants had to be involuntarily out in order to not be outed involuntarily.

- Conversely, some trans participants who passed as cis-gendered and as their identified gender, considered it irrelevant or **undesirable to disclose their previous gender identities**.

- Participants' **voluntary concealment** of their LGBTQ+ identities from time to time and place to place, often resulted from a desire to not be reduced to this aspect of their identity or tokenised in a context where LGBTQ+ identities are still not considered 'normal and ordinary' at work.

Methodology

We conducted this qualitative interview study in order to find initial answers to the following questions:

1. **How do Cambridge students and staff manage their LGBTQ+ identities within the university community?**
2. **What factors influence participants' comfort or discomfort to disclose?**
3. **Are there patterns in the data that can guide recommendations for creating a more inclusive university community?**

Within the scope of research question one, we were interested in participants' decisions and experiences around disclosure at the University of Cambridge as well as institutional spaces and settings where they felt (more/less) comfortable or uncomfortable to disclose their LGBTQ+ identities. Research question two was designed to help us identify key factors that influence disclosure. Question three guided us in formulating recommendations that are valuable for institutions generally and for the University of Cambridge specifically.

By combining our factor-finding search with thematic analysis of patterns in the data, we developed our indicative conclusions. We also sought to explore the interpretations and meaning interviewees attached to varying levels of comfort or discomfort around disclosure, and the feelings they associated with these patterns or experiences. Moreover, we were interested in the causal explanations offered by students and staff for differing levels of comfort and discomfort around the question of being out at Cambridge.

In order to recruit participants, a research flyer (Figure 1) was circulated by the LGBT+ Staff Network, as well as faculties, departments, and colleges of the University of Cambridge. Participants who met the inclusion criteria (identifying as LGBTQ+ and being a member of the University of Cambridge) were recruited on a first-come-first-served basis. We used elements of both 'snowball' and 'purposive' sampling to reach out to as wide a constituency as possible.

Participants were invited to share their LGBTQ+ disclosure experiences in a semi-structured, face-to-face interview. Following confirmation of their willingness to contribute to the study and the scheduling of an interview, participants attended the Department of Sociology where most of the interviews were held. Each participant signed the Information and Consent Form (see Appendix 1) outlining the aims and goals of the study and was asked to provide demographic information on a voluntary basis (see Appendix 2). The interview topic guide, listing the areas to be explored and suggestions for questions and sequence that could be altered in the immediate interview in order to achieve a harmonic conversation and flow, is included in Appendix 3.

Figure 1, Research flyer for recruiting participants

After receiving ethics approval from the University of Cambridge, researcher Elisabeth Sandler conducted five pilot interviews and a total of 55 semi-structured interviews between February and April 2019. These interviews were audio-recorded and selectively transcribed. Each transcript was then sent to the respective participant to be reviewed and corrected if necessary (member checking). Being given the opportunity to review their interview transcript also enabled participants to re-consent to the use of the data. The data was then coded for themes and analysed for patterns (thematic analysis) in order to complete an initial, small-scale factor-finding study. Some direct quotations used in this report have been slightly altered to increase its readability (and then reviewed by the interviewee in order to ensure the meaning of the quote had not been changed — a standard procedure known as member checking).

Our methodology for data collection, while conventional in its techniques, was applied with added care for consent due to the sensitive and personal nature of the material being discussed. Among other measures we used to maximise participants' control over their contributions was the option to withdraw their consent at any point prior to the confirmation of anonymised extracts for publication. A final round of consent approvals was completed for each quotation used in this report.

In total we interviewed 31 staff members and 24 students for this study. The 31 staff members include academic staff, administrators, research staff, retired staff, and staff at Cambridge University museums, Cambridge libraries, Cambridge Assessment, and Cambridge University Press. Among the students, 11 were undergraduates and 13 were postgraduates.

Participants came from 23 disciplines across all six Schools: Humanities and Social Sciences (Archaeology, Criminology, Education, History, Law, Social Anthropology, Sociology (20 participants)), Arts and Humanities (e.g. Classics, English, Linguistics, Music (7 participants)), Biological Sciences (e.g. Biology, Medicine, Genetics (7 participants)), Physical Sciences (e.g. Mathematics, Earth Sciences and Geography, Physics and Chemistry (5 participants)), Technology (e.g. Engineering, Computer Sciences, Management (3 participants)) and Clinical Medicine (2 participants).

Participants identified as gay (15 participants), bisexual (12 participants), queer (11 participants), lesbian (9 participants), trans (6 participants), non-binary (6 participants), pansexual (5 participants), homosexual (3 participants), asexual (3 participants), gender queer (2 participants), finsexual (1 participant), intersex (1 participant) and in one case as two of these categories.

Like the University of Cambridge more generally, the participant pool was **predominantly white** (44 out of 55 participants identified as white/Caucasian). Since our study was not designed to be statistically representative, but rather as an indicative factor-finding and exploratory analysis, it cannot be used to derive proportionate or statistically generalisable patterns. Small qualitative studies tend to be well-suited for areas that have not previously been explored in any depth (or at all). Although a few studies of LGBTQ+ identities in higher education have been undertaken, this topic is not extensively studied (especially in the UK), and thus would be described as weakly characterised in terms of established (or any) analytic variables. In order to establish well-characterised variables and correlations, findings have to be repeated across several different studies, at which point it becomes possible to select the key variables one would use to design a large scale, quantitative and statistically representative study. We offer further suggestions for future research later in this report.

The methodological advantage of semi-structured, open-ended, face-to-face interviews is the ability to identify factors that might not have been obvious to begin with — as well as unexpected patterns. Valuable analytic leads can also emerge through participants' own causal explanations for their feelings, perceptions or behaviour. An example in this study was the factor of 'relevance', which is discussed in more depth below. Small-scale, factor-finding studies, then, help to identify unanticipated causal elements that can be difficult to detect using large-scale quantitative methods, which are often designed precisely in order to screen out everything expect the key variables being measured.

In the following sections, we outline what we learned and what we concluded from the data set we analysed. At the close of this report we include participants' suggestions, as well as our own recommendations, for improving the climate for LGBTQ+ students and staff at the University of Cambridge.

31 staff

24 students

44 white

11 BME

20 humanities & social sciences

7 arts & humanities

7 biological sciences

5 physical sciences

3 technology

2 clinical medicine

What influences comfort to disclose?

'I very much believe in leading by example and disclosing myself is part of the example.'

Although this study identified a wide range of factors influencing LGBTQ+ peoples' comfort to disclose their identities within the University of Cambridge, an overall and unequivocal finding was that comfort to disclose mattered a lot to the participants in this study. Comfort to disclose, or to be identified as queer or trans, had many positive associations for interviewees, including feeling more 'at home' within the institution, feeling that their identities were 'relevant' in their workplace, experiencing a sense of being recognised and welcomed, being able to work more productively, shedding a sense of fear about being outed, feeling safer, and above all sensing they were valued because of their LGBTQ+ identities and not in spite of them. Discomfort with disclosure was associated with much more negative feelings of exclusion and translated for many participants as a sense of risk — or in some cases fear. Unsurprisingly, feelings of inclusion and connection were correlated to specific behaviours and physical states, such as being able to focus more effectively on work, live more healthily, express themselves more freely, relax socially, and enjoy being a valued member of the community. Comfort to disclose is a particularly helpful variable with which to explore the close and often direct link between an individual feeling valued within an institution and that individual's evaluation of that institution. LGBTQ+ students and staff who felt valued for who they were, and comfortable having their identities openly identified, reported that they valued the institution more in return.

Overall, the participants in this study felt comfortable at Cambridge and able to manage their identities in terms of being more, less, or not at all out, despite the fact that many found managing their identities to be hard work. In general, what might be called a 'win-win' situation seemed to be the norm: when LGBTQ+ people could be open about themselves, the university became a more comfortable place for them to live and work, and vice-versa.

It is all the more important, then, given the benefits of greater openness when it feels safe and comfortable for LGBTQ+ people to be out, for as many remaining barriers to be removed as possible. For although it is heartening to witness the significant social and legal changes that have broadly speaking led to a more hospitable climate for LGBTQ+ people over the past two decades, the ongoing difficulties and discrimination members of this community continue to face — sometimes on a daily basis — are significant and also costly. Moreover, it is precisely the amount of progress that has been made that can lead to the question we often encountered in setting up the **lgbtQ+@cam programme** — of whether such initiatives are really necessary. Since many LGBTQ+ people learn early in their lives to conceal their identities, and often internalise a sense of shame related to being queer or trans, it can take years to undo layers of conditioning. Habitual discretion may come to feel much safer than disclosure.

Together, the sense that 'society has moved on' and that LGBTQ+ identities are no longer 'anything to be ashamed of' can lead to an underestimation of the degree to which powerful structural forces continue to marginalise LGBTQ+ people. As the following sections illustrate, specific actions and measures can make a big difference to offset the ongoing effects of what might be called the 'background homophobia' of everyday institutional life.

Others disclosing

Interviewees consistently reported that a key factor increasing their comfort to disclose as LGBTQ+ was whether other people such as co-workers, students, staff — and especially powerful people such as heads of departments or colleges — were openly out. The 'others disclosing around you' factor was mentioned across all participant groups, including undergraduate and graduate students, academic and academic-related staff, as well as administrators.

Reasons given by participants for why others being openly out mattered to them ranged from a lessened fear of reprisal, to a greater sense of shared community, and freedom of expression.

'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.'
(academic-related staff member)

'LGBTQ+ visibility of others means that I can be someone who is comfortable with myself, who can accept myself, who feels accepted by others and who can express all of myself. And I think that is the most important thing that a person can ask for in life.'
(undergraduate student)

Disclosure by LGBTQ+ individuals in positions of power particularly conveyed safety and comfort to participants in this study, which found that such disclosure can make a 'huge difference to everyone' (academic staff member) — including non-heterosexual colleagues. According to one postgraduate student, the disclosure of the head of her department 'sets the tone and changes the power dynamics', enabling this interviewee to feel more comfortable disclosing her LGBTQ+ identity within this space as well.

'That very fact that … we have an out-gay woman as head of the department is a huge difference and it makes a huge difference to everyone in the department, especially to people who also don't identify as straight.'
(academic staff member)

The positive impact on LGBTQ+ individuals' comfort to disclose when people in leadership positions are openly out was also mentioned by a former head of department, who viewed personal disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identity as a key component of creating a department where people can be themselves.

'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.'
(former head of department)

'Others disclosing' was a relevant factor influencing comfort to disclose within a variety of institutional spaces including the university in general, individual departments, research groups, colleges, sports teams, classrooms and lecture theatres. Many participants described the transformation of spaces, groups or activities that were previously perceived as 'not-queer' to those in which it was more possible to be 'explicitly openly gay' to be a direct result of (more) people being openly out.

'Having someone around who shares your experience very much matters to the overall experience of being queer in a traditionally not-queer space. It is not that sport has been heterosexual forever, it is just that we haven't been out.'
(undergraduate student)

'A lot of students on one specific course I taught were gay. I came out too in the course of the year because I got the confidence to do it. I knew the students would accept it. … That was the first time in my career where I was explicitly openly gay.'
(retired academic staff member)

The three most frequently mentioned explanations for why the disclosure of others contributed to participants' own increased sense of comfort to disclose can be summarised as follows:

- **'Not being the only one':** The disclosure of others negates the sense of being isolated and instead confirms the proximity of people who are like oneself which facilitates a sense of shared experience, understanding, and belonging.
- **Solidarity in numbers:** Knowing others have disclosed around you creates the feeling of having someone to reach out to, and someone who would back you up if problems arose around your own disclosure within this space.
- **Acceptability, safety, and protection:** When other people have disclosed safely, and without reprisal, it confirms that a precedent for acceptance has been set and offers reassuring evidence that an individual will not be perceived negatively as 'weird' or 'odd'.

'There is more need to be explicit that you are okay with LGBTQ and that you want to celebrate it.'

In the same way that the disclosure of others helps to confirm that you are 'not the only one', that 'someone has done it before you' and that there is a safety net if things go wrong, secrecy and non-disclosure also send a signal — of the potential dangers of disclosure. When we probed for factors that contributed to participants' discomfort to disclose their LGBTQ+ identities at Cambridge, several mentioned the concealment of others as a primary factor increasing discomfort and reinforcing a fear of disclosing themselves.

Participants' detailed accounts of these two (opposing) patterns — disclosure of others increasing comfort to disclose vs. the concealment of others increasing fear of disclosure — help to explain why the (non)disclosure of others is a powerful factor influencing the ability to be out at Cambridge.

These personal testimonies also reinforce one of the most important overall findings of our study which is the significant difference small changes can make. As illustrated by the quotations above, and in the many others like them we encountered in the interviews, even a single individual coming out, for example in a classroom or on a sports team, can effect radical change both by disrupting and reversing the directional pattern because it sets a new, countervailing, precedent and alternative to the status quo.

Symbols and signs of support

A second key factor influencing participants' comfort to disclose was their perception of university and university members' support for the LGBTQ+ community. To a surprising extent, plain and simple — but publicly visible — signs and symbols of support were reported to play a principal role in interviewees' assessments of acceptance levels of LGBTQ+ disclosure. Two broad categories of publicly visible support emerged from this study: one was the use of symbols such as the rainbow flag that directly conveyed support for the LGBTQ+ community and thereby contributed to comfort to disclose among participants. The other was the presence of signs of individual and institutional support for LGBTQ+ spaces and activities on campus, which were reported by participants to convey a sense of reassurance and safety.

The rainbow flag as a symbol of LGBTQ+ support reappeared in a variety of forms in participants' narratives. A significant number of participants described the positive impact of the flying of the rainbow flag on university buildings such as colleges, departments, or libraries as well as buildings that are connected to their academic position at the university, for example the hospital.

'The rainbow flags that are flying on the first day of LGBT history month, that is something that is really lovely to see. It is affirming to see them fly. … Cambridge is where I spend a lot of my time which is why I am invested in this university and to see that Cambridge is an accepting place obviously means a lot.'
(undergraduate student)

Participants also mentioned rainbow flag symbols on posters, stickers, pin badges, pro-LGBTQ+ posters and even rainbow lanyards.

'My tutor has a LGBT safe space poster outside the office, so I feel like if I had to engage with disclosing myself then I know that I could do that here.'

(undergraduate student)

'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.'

(academic-related staff member)

In addition to the display of familiar symbols, participants interpreted institutional signs of support to include publicity for LGBTQ+ activities, such as LGBTQ+ speakers, seminars and lectures on LGBTQ+ topics, and research initiatives such as **lgbtQ+@cam**.

'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.'

(postgraduate student)

'lgbtQ+@cam has been really helpful. … Just the fact that this initiative exists, that there are events happening and that LGBTQ+ is in some ways a focus of the university has helped me to feel more comfortable to disclose myself.'

(postgraduate student)

Even if they do not attend such events, many LGBTQ+ participants in this study reported that the presence of activities related to, and even simply acknowledging, their lives and experiences helped to establish a sense of a safer and more caring environment.

'It can be uncomfortable to go to big LGBTQ+ events for me. However, knowing these events are there is comforting in itself … because to me it symbolises greater recognition and acceptance … even if I am not attending.'

(postgraduate student)

LGBTQ+ related tweets and articles on institutional social media and websites, as well as religious services with a positive focus on the LGBTQ+ community, were also seen as signs of being welcomed and accepted.

'Things like having a tweet on the workplace's twitter account for LGBT history month or having a rainbow flag on the whiteboard are visible symbols that this is a place where we are welcoming and accepting.'

(academic-related staff member)

'I went to a service during February put on by the chaplain at King's College who is very vocal about the LGBT community. That service was really wonderful to go to because there was a college chaplain saying, 'Being LGBTQ+ is okay and here I am welcoming all these people'. Having this service felt quite emotional for me … and really helped me to feel more comfortable to disclose myself. … That has been really huge.'

(undergraduate student)

Together, these various signs of institutional interest in, and concern about, LGBTQ+ lives and experiences contributed to a sense of inclusion, belonging and legitimacy. Significantly, they also increased a sense of safety. Several participants specifically mentioned that their confidence that 'any kind of harassment or prejudice would be taken incredibly seriously' (staff member) by the university was reinforced by visible public acknowledgement of the importance of LGBTQ+ issues and perspectives. Public institutional support was considered important by some interviewees because it allowed them 'to feel confident to be out knowing that if someone were to react badly to that, then the university has already stated in policy that that person is not permitted to act in a prejudiced way against them. In short, being out cannot harm one's career' (staff member).

Some interviewees also mentioned examples of reaching out to the LGBTQ+ community such as the use of pronouns in email signatures having a significant and meaningful impact. Again, mentioning the importance of 'small gestures' that 'add up' to make LGBTQ+ people feel safer, one interviewee spoke for many in describing the everyday actions that could make the difference between a welcoming or isolating environment.

'Whatever your gender identity, putting your pronouns into your email signature helps normalise gender diversity and then therefore makes people who are non-binary feel safer. … It's the small gestures that seem to not be that big of a deal, but they add up to create a sense of either a welcoming environment or an isolating environment.'
(academic-related staff member)

Signs and visible symbols of support particularly mattered to participants when they came from university members who do not identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves. These proactive messages of acceptance and safety from straight colleagues were seen to be important, especially within a society where LGBTQ+ people are still marginalised:

'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 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.'
(postgraduate student)

In addition, then, to creating a more welcoming and safer atmosphere, explicit expressions of support for LGBTQ+ students and staff, especially by non-LGBTQ+ colleagues, were seen to break the silence around LGBTQ+ issues, and to send a loud and clear message that it is OK for LGBTQ+ people to be out. More subtly, these messages were seen to communicate an awareness that in spite of a superficial level of acknowledging, welcoming and celebrating LGBTQ+ lives we still live in a society that poses many obstacles of prejudice and stigmatisation against LGBTQ+ people, which has to be countered by public expressions of support. Because, as the above interviewee put it, '[y]ou can't just assume that people will feel comfortable if you say nothing', it is important for colleagues to speak up. Signs and symbols of support thus signify not only care and protection, and that LGBTQ+ people are valued members of the university community but demonstrate that non-LGBTQ+ colleagues are willing to make an effort to join them in challenging a still somewhat homophobic status quo.

'My gayness has no place here.'

Intellectual relevance

A third major factor influencing participants' comfort to disclose their LGBTQ+ identity was a sense of the intellectual (ir)relevance of LGBTQ+ topics and/or perspectives. This factor, which we also describe as the 'context appropriateness' element in the management of disclosure, may not be specific to Cambridge so much as the HE sector, or indeed academia more generally. This finding is best interpreted in relation to the feeling that primarily motivates it, namely the sense that one's personal sexual identity is irrelevant to scholarly work and an academic environment, academic research or the core topics of the disciplines.

As one postgraduate student described the situation, the sense that it could be seen as unprofessional or inappropriate to disclose LGBTQ+ identities in a university context can be correlated to a silence around LGBTQ+ issues that is, to a degree, built in to the formal academic curriculum and the disciplines.

> '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.'
>
> (postgraduate student)

The sense that 'maybe this is just not relevant' can also be interpreted, especially in light of the comments above concerning the need for explicit statements of support, to index a fear among many LGBTQ+ people that in spite of a much more welcoming climate than in the past, their identities are still uncomfortable for others, and are best kept quiet or concealed altogether to avoid awkwardness or controversy. It is obviously more difficult for LGBTQ+ people, who will almost inevitably have already internalised a degree of self-censorship, to feel comfortable with an identity that makes other people uneasy — despite how comfortable they may be with it themselves.

To some extent, the question of the relevance of LGBTQ+ perspectives to the curriculum varies by discipline: LGBTQ+ perspectives are at present, for example, more well-established in teaching and research in the humanities and social sciences. LGBTQ+ perspectives can be found in some STEM disciplines, such as biology and psychology, but are almost entirely absent from others, such as mathematics or chemistry. As we discuss further below, the finding that 'intellectual relevance' is a key factor influencing disclosure opens up some especially important questions in terms of what to recommend in cases of disciplines (such as engineering or computing) where these perspectives are effectively non-existent.

We can see, for example, the difference a sense of LGBTQ+ topics being seen to be intellectually and academically relevant makes to the participants who made the following comments about coursework, research and teaching in their fields.

Coursework

'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.'

(undergraduate student)

Research

'The spaces where I feel most comfortable to disclose myself are within my own department because my LGBTQ+ identity is so related to my research that I feel it adds authenticity and relevance to my research.'

(postgraduate student)

'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 personal life and this is your professional life' but it is part of what we do, it is part of our research.'

(academic staff member)

'I work in social science and there is a good sensitivity to issues of gender and sexuality and I address those subjects in some aspects of my work. … In my department there is ideological support, and LGBTQ+ topics are considered important.'

(academic staff member)

Teaching

'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.'

'Disclosure implies choice … I don't have this choice.'

To the extent that interviewees described greater reluctance to disclose their LGBTQ+ identities in contexts where they are seen to be 'irrelevant', but a greater sense of engagement with their department and their research when their identity 'adds authenticity and relevance' (postgraduate student) to their research, it is clear that the question of 'academic relevance' is more significant than it might seem. Indeed, implicit in the word 'relevant' is a sense of connection: to be irrelevant is to be unrelated, peripheral, extraneous and out of place. By extension, if 'relevant' implies a connection, there may be several ways in which such a connection can be created in contexts where it is currently missing. It may be that 'being gay' is irrelevant to constructing an effective algorithm, for example. But it is only a small step to using an example in a lecture or a research paper of an effective algorithm that relates — or connects — to the gay community, for example how posts or hashtags are classified by Facebook and Instagram.

The concern about relevance, then, acts as both a condensation and provocation: it condenses the concerns about space, place, community, conduct, perceptions and behaviour into a single category, namely that of meaningful connection. Likewise, the contrast between feeling relevant, engaged and inspired as opposed to irrelevant, out of place and fearful, recapitulates an important overall finding of the study, namely the large gap between those participants who felt Cambridge was one of the most supportive environments they had ever experienced and those who felt disconnected from their community and unable to disclose their LGBTQ+ identities publicly, or even to close colleagues.

The complexity of disclosure

So far in this Report we have largely addressed disclosure as a matter of being out or not. However, this is an oversimplification. Some LGBTQ+ individuals may be entirely closeted, a little bit out, very out, or in various different stages of out-ness at different times — even within specific settings (e.g. out to some but not to others in a college or department). Disclosure is also complicated in that the rapid expansion of identity categories related to sex and gender continues to evolve and change, as do the linguistic terms used. For some participants, being out is not the issue, for example if they are visibly non-binary, gender queer, or pass as the opposite gender. Whether or not to disclose is not always an option for LGBTQ+ people, and some trans, non-binary and gender queer interviewees in this study did not consider 'coming out' to be a choice, as their self-presentation 'outed' them visibly. Other trans interviewees for this study, who passed as the gender they identified with, felt in contrast that it was their choice to decide for themselves whether they wanted to share their gender background and thus disclose being trans. Thus, to even have a choice at all in terms of disclosure was considered by some interviewees to be a privilege, given that passing as a single, normative gender is not always the default for trans, non-binary, and gender queer individuals — nor their desired state — particularly for individuals who do not want to be read as either male or female. If participants did not pass as male or female, identified as non-binary, or used gender-neutral pronouns, 'disclosure' was not a particularly helpful category. In other words, they were being 'pre-disclosed' by their appearance and pronouns — and thus often required to explain themselves, in a manner that could become tedious and tiresome. For some of these interviewees, the whole question of disclosure was irrelevant because they do not have the privilege to choose whether to disclose or not.

'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. … As a trans person you could stay in the closet forever and never transition … and there is the decision to come out and then to take steps towards transitioning, that is a kind of disclosure. … There is another kind of disclosure from … the other end of the transition where like, 'How do people perceive me? Shall I be open about the fact I am trans or shall I aim to be stealth?' … 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 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.'
(academic staff member)

'It is just assumed that I am cis gender. I don't know if lucky is the right word in that respect, but it is just, I am in a privileged position of not really having to worry about dealing with disclosure too much. … I am part of the trans community, and I celebrate transgender pride … so it is not something that I want to hide about myself or something that I am worried about sharing but I suppose it is still kind of exciting if somebody refers to me as 'him' by default … in public. I guess people just naturally doing that is exciting because it feels right, and people are finally getting it right.'
(postgraduate student)

As indicated in the last quote, it was sometimes considered irrelevant or undesirable for trans participants who passed to disclose their gender background. This is not surprising given participants' often negative (past) experiences with being openly trans and their desire to 'just live their lives and get on with it.' (staff member).

'Being trans has had a bigger impact on my life, far bigger impact, in terms of the affect it has had on my relationships, in terms of the effect it has had on my career and on my personal life and on my safety as well. So, it has had a bigger effect but ideally, I would like it to be unimportant, you know, this sort of historical fact about me that doesn't really shape my present anymore.'
(staff member)

'For me, being queer — my sexuality — there is very little in Cambridge that makes me feel like I would not be accepted at all. It is not about that, my queerness in Cambridge is about community, it is about my friends, … while my trans-ness definitely is a thing that is not easy to be in Cambridge, it is not easy to be anywhere. And even though Cambridge is amazing, you can't just do it like you can, you can just be queer here, but you can't just be trans.'
(undergraduate student)

In sum, it is important to note that while disclosure is a potent variable for exploring the extent to which LGBTQ+ people feel comfortable, at home, and/or free to manage their identities as they choose in a variety of situations and settings, it is a variable that has important limitations in the context of a rapidly shifting landscape of gender and sexuality. The disclosure of gender through the use of pronouns, for example, does not necessarily identify an individual as LGBTQ+. If, however, a person's assumed gender does not match the pronouns used to address them, or if the pronouns are gender-neutral, simply ensuring the right pronouns are used requires disclosure of an LGBTQ+ identity. In such cases, some participants felt they had to disclose more than they wanted in order to simply ensure they are addressed correctly. They had to be involuntarily out, in other words, to not be outed involuntarily.

'Being treated as my actual gender is a really, really important thing to me.'

As the following comments from interviewees make clear, trans, non-binary, and gender queer participants may have overlapping identities to manage — for example their LGBTQ+ identity and their gender. Whereas some gay, lesbian or bisexual interviewees expressed concerns about whether disclosure of their sexual identity was 'relevant' or 'professional', other trans, non-binary, and gender queer participants considered disclosure of their gender and correct pronoun use to be a primary necessity within a professional setting. As we would expect today, in a situation of rapid social flux around such questions, views about the importance of identity correctness, or 'getting it right', varied across a spectrum of gender and sexual identities among interviewees. As well as sexuality, gender is now a terrain of disclosure, and complex levels of comfort and discomfort surround the question of 'getting the hang of how to present'.

'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.'
(academic staff member)

'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.'
(undergraduate student)

'Nobody is gonna start regarding you as anything else until they start using different language to describe you. So, pronouns are important because if everybody keeps calling me 'he' and I keep presenting being fine with that then people are gonna think that I am a 'he'. … I don't like to impose any of myself on other people, so it is a very uncomfortable thing to tell people and correct them if they mis-gender me but I have realised it is important for my wellbeing to be referred to with right pronouns.'
(postgraduate student)

'Being treated as my actual gender is a really, really important thing to me. How people treat you based on your gender and based on how they see you as your gender is really, really obvious in pretty much every interaction with people. It is really hard to have a completely ungendered interaction which is part of why it is so important for me to be out.'
(undergraduate student)

'People need to know my gender because they need to know how to talk to me, and they need to know how to refer to me.'
(undergraduate student)

'I applied for the job at Cambridge and I realised that this was such a good opportunity to start presenting as female, as myself all the time because it was a clean break. So my first day at Cambridge was what I would consider to be my first day of presenting as myself full-time which of course meant I was still very much getting the hang of how to present as me, so I didn't have much of a choice in that sense whether to disclose or not to disclose; if I wanted to be gendered correctly, I had to tell people.'

(staff member)

For this individual, starting a new job at Cambridge represented not only 'a good opportunity' to begin to present as female 'full-time', but also to experiment with 'how to present as me'. Although this meant not disclosing as trans, it involved a different kind of disclosure — of a self that could be gendered correctly all the time. Such an experiment reflects many of the most important values of the university as a place where freedom of thought and the pursuit of curiosity can flourish. It is no big leap to draw parallels between the remarkable transformations that have given rise to new gender paradigms over the past quarter century and changes that have affected other canonical models, for example of cellular potential, genetic determinism, quantum particles or evolution. The very difficulty of adapting to new gender paradigms is a measure of their deep roots — not only in social institutions and everyday practices, but in the structural concepts that underlie many disciplines.

Enabling LGBTQ+ people to explore and express who they are and feel more at home in doing so can be increased by taking small steps. And both individuals and the university communities they are part of can gain significant benefits as a result.
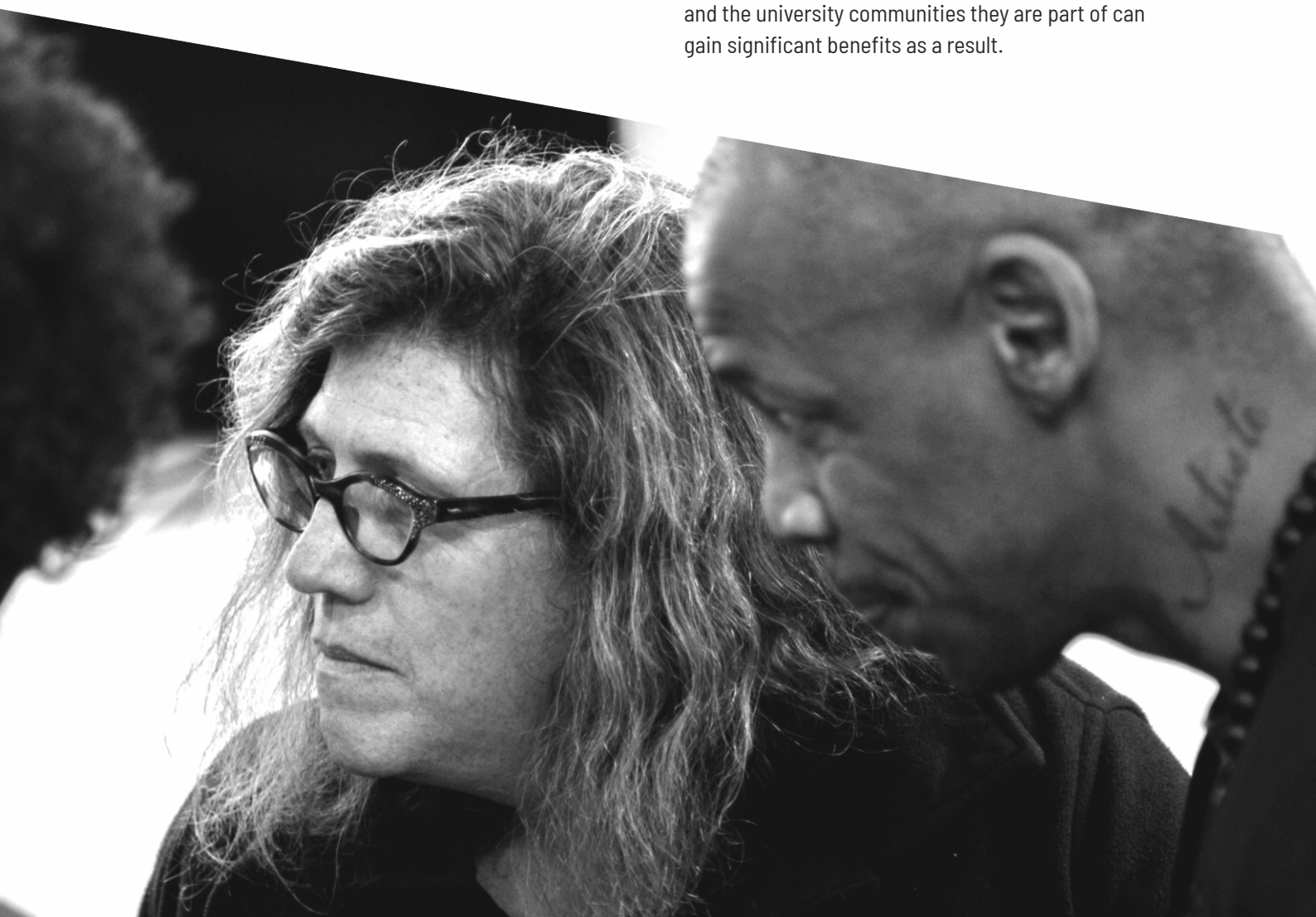
Why does comfort to disclose matter?

'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 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.'

(undergraduate student)

Although the university is a work environment, it is also a home for many people — and as this interviewee observes, there is all the difference in the world between a place that feels safe and comfortable and one that is neither. Especially for students, for whom Cambridge not only provides a home for up to three years, but a vital and formative space of growth and education at a critical point in their lives, it is indeed 'a big problem' if your home base is not a home.

Staff also experience institutional life as formative: it shapes their day-to-day routines, it supplies their livelihood, and it is their professional 'home'.

Feeling uncomfortable, however, is not only a problem for individuals. When members of a department, a college, a laboratory or an organisation are not feeling comfortable it is often a sign that something is not quite right, and this sense of discomfort can affect an entire group. Discomfort, after all, is often a very socially legible and palpable feeling. Comfort to disclose, and its opposite — discomfort, fear and anxiety — consequently affect both individuals and institutions in tandem. Our study revealed both sides of this coin. This section concludes with some additional observations about the importance of managing disclosure.

Why does disclosure matter to individuals?

One of the most palpable benefits of being able to freely disclose their LGBTQ+ identities described by participants in this study is the feeling of relief and an end to the burdens of concealment and secrecy.

'Being honest with myself and being increasingly open with people that I know and trust … is just really a relief.'

(staff member)

'I want to be myself. … It is as simple as that.'

'I hate going through life with these kind of big secrets (not being out), and I think a lot of LGBT people do feel that. We are sick of it by the time we get to adulthood. The policing oneself that you do when you are not out — I just cannot imagine how I would be able to get the work done if I was worrying about that.'
(academic-related staff member)

Interviewees described the sense of liberation after coming out and no longer having to hide, lie, or censor themselves anymore. Being able to be entirely themselves allowed many participants to 'just get on with life.' (staff member)

'It is liberating to be out in finally being able to not second guessing what you say and taking pressure off yourself, … it is one less layer of thought. … It is liberating to just be yourself and to throw off old opinions that were harmful. Coming out makes you look into the future completely different … so it is a kind of liberation in that sense of self.'
(undergraduate student)

'Being able to be out at Cambridge is very relaxing. You don't have to think about who you tell what and you can just live your daily life as everyone else would.'
(postgraduate student)

Being able to be themselves, relaxed and comfortable, positively impacted participants' social lives as well as their relationships to colleagues. Repeatedly interviewees described feeling more at ease, freer, more positive, and 'able to breathe more easily' following open disclosure.

'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.'
(undergraduate student)

'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 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.'
(postgraduate student)

'Coming out to people and getting positive responses … made me feel a lot more relaxed around them and a lot more positive because I knew that I wasn't hiding something and it wasn't hanging over me that at some point I was possibly going to have to tell them I am trans or trying to remember who knew and who didn't know.'
(postgraduate student)

Not only individuals, but 'everyone', can feel 'more comfortable and at home' when freedom to disclose is the norm. In contrast, concealment is described in more negative terms such as isolating, distancing, restrictive, lonely, hard and dicult.`

'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.'
(postgraduate student)

'If I could not disclose myself at Cambridge, I would close myself off slightly. If I think back to the time when I was at university … where I could become friends with people but it all may have got to a certain stage and then it felt like there was a wall. I felt I can't cross that wall because I don't want people to know the truth about me. Not being able to come out means you stop being as engaged as you could be with people because you know that you can't talk about who you are. And when other people in the office very comfortably talk about their partners and their children and what they are doing — their social activities — … somebody then says 'Oh what did you do at the weekend?' and it would be like 'I can't really say', then you create that distance so that other people don't ask the difficult questions. I think that that would impact your mental health and your sense of self-worth as well.'
(academic-related staff member)

The sense of awkwardness and discomfort that emerges from even these two brief descriptions of separation — of becoming closed off, being separated by a wall from other people, not being able to join in conversations, disengaging, and experiencing mental stress — again remind us that it is not only individuals who are affected by lack of freedom to disclose, but groups, spaces, and what we might call social ecosystems.

In addition to the physical language of walls and separations, interviewees also described the discomfort of non-disclosure in terms of an inability to be fully honest or present in the work and college environment — leading to a sense of loneliness and withdrawal.

'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 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.'
(staff member)

'When I came up to Cambridge in the 60s, I wasn't out as gay. In fact, I had terrible times as an undergraduate because the college was very homophobic in those days. … Now, … I am open about my relationship and everywhere I go I am accepted. … That was unthinkable when I first came up here. … It was terrible. I felt very isolated and alone.'
(retired academic staff member)

'For me, not being out at all is hard in a lot of ways because it means that you can't share certain experiences. ... Like, going into an all-girls school is not something that people think about when they see me because they read me as male and not as trans-male. ... I only ever had female friends growing up and I am now trying to navigate getting on really well with women, having a lot in common, but not being able to interact when they are talking about female specific experiences or if I do, worrying I'm gonna be accused of mansplaining when it is something that I have had experience of. I feel like I would like to be out in order to share myself more wholly and to be more wholly involved in conversations.'

(staff member)

It is university spaces such as departments, research groups, and offices where postgraduate students and most staff spend a lot of time, if not most of their time. Thus, feeling comfortable to disclose and to be oneself was considered crucial.

'It's a good thing that it is my research group which is that space for me where I feel the most comfortable in terms of my LGBTQ+ identity because this is where I am on a daily basis, where I am going to be spending my next three years. ... Because this is the space where you are spending most of your time and energy, it is important to feel comfortable. ... As long as this is okay, I think I will be fine. ... It would be nice if there were more queer spaces in my college or more events going on ... but at the same time, my research group is really the ultimate. And if this is okay, then I am okay, I will be fine, I will manage, because this is the baseline.'

(postgraduate student)

'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.'

(staff member)

If your research group or office is your 'baseline' and 'the space where you are spending most of your time and energy', it is important to be able to communicate openly about who you are, and to share the basic elements of your daily life.

Interviewees also emphasised the importance of being able to disclose comfortably amidst the already stressful challenges of completing a degree at Cambridge. Students as well as staff acknowledged the importance of not having to worry about yet another thing — such as LGBTQ+ disclosure — on top of all the accumulated pressures Cambridge students already face.

'Being able to disclose myself gives me a general feeling of being comfortable and not having to worry about little things on top of all the work and stress. There is a lot of stress already involved in the whole Cambridge experience so having stuff added on that would not be great.'

(undergraduate student)

'Especially in the university setting, it is ridiculous for people to not be accepting of different identities. … What students should be worrying about is their next essay. They should not have to worry about 'Oh if I tell those person I am gay, will they reject me?', that shouldn't happen. And while we can't control the responses of other students, I think if you make it clear on an institutional level that homophobic and transphobic behaviour is unacceptable then it permeates. … Having been a student and also now as a staff member, I think I have a sense of what I expect of a university.'

(staff member)

Alleviating the stressful conditions of university life and creating an environment where different identities are accepted, were seen by several interviewees to be an obligation Cambridge should take seriously as a world-leading institution. Participants also referred to the opportunity to effect wider societal changes in attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, and the important role played by a world leading university in positively impacting people's lives beyond the university bubble. Famous LGBTQ+ alumni and openly out university members who are being celebrated and backed up by their institution can set an example for others.

'A university should be at the forefront of society and if we are not growing, if we are not accepting of change and diversity, then we are not at the forefront, we are behind. Universities are meant to be radical spaces.'

(staff member)

'With Cambridge being so prestigious and a well-esteemed, top ranking institution worldwide, being able to say … 'I am doing great here as a queer person doing research on queer topics' and being able to succeed and to have support and recognition here, this is me protesting against my conservative background and indirectly telling them: 'You guys are wrong! You should be more like this really good institution called Cambridge and be more accepting of gay people.'

(postgraduate student)

Coming to Cambridge where they can be free to disclose who they are for the first time was particularly meaningful for people with previous experiences of rejection and prejudice toward their LGBTQ+ identities. For some participants, feeling comfortable to be out at Cambridge helped them to recover from dicult past` experiences and regain lost confidence.

'I think if I am happier, I am better at what I do.'

'Work was a huge, huge step in making me feel more confident just in general, even when I am not at work, even when I am in completely non-work-related situations. … If work hadn't been so accepting, I would not be who I am now. After I started realising who I was, that I am trans, I went through this phase … which was really dark and really difficult, just not knowing what any of this meant. There was a lot of self-doubt and … there was a lot of 'What will my family think? What will my friends think? What would a future job look like?', so many really difficult thoughts and emotions. … When I first came out to my parents, they were quite opposed to me being trans but as they realised that they were in a minority — because all my friends were okay with it and when my job was very accepting of it — they were like 'Okay, we probably are okay with this, actually'. And now, they are really supportive too.'

(staff member)

Similarly, other participants described improved mental health because of their positive experience of LGBTQ+ disclosure at Cambridge.

'It means so much that I can present the way I feel comfortable presenting and not feel like people are going to treat me badly for it. Because I do struggle with dysphoria quite a lot sometimes and being able to dress the way I want all the time helps so much. … I find it difficult knowing that there are certain things I never got the chance to do, certain things I will never get the chance to do. Never having to hide who I am helps so much.'

(staff member)

'If you don't feel like you can express yourself for who you are then that is going to lead you to feeling more alone, lacking self-esteem and certainty. I have felt so much more confident and I have felt generally more content and happier as a result … in terms of being out. It boosted my mental health.'

(undergraduate student)

Finally, being more open about their LGBTQ+ identities helped some Cambridge students and staff to feel more positive and happier at work, creating a sense that they had something special to give back and that they could occupy 'a position of strength' in relation to identities often associated with more negative consequences.

'Being out helps me professionally because I have created a niche for myself at work. People come and ask me questions, like 'Is this okay to say?'. It is kind of nice emotionally to be in that kind of position of strength, to be able to be 'Yes. I know this'. … I think being openly out helps me to make an impact at work, a small impact but things move slowly. Sharing with colleagues and teaching them about heteronormativity, what it means, and its impact on us employees and our customers is really gratifying. Also, BAME stuff. I do a lot of that. Sometimes people just don't realise how straight and white and male our society is depicted. They have never noticed heteronormativity and how prevalent it is. It is just everywhere. Once someone told me that now she knows more about heteronormativity, she sees it everywhere. So, to be able to at least make small changes makes me much happier at work actually.'

(staff member)

'In supervisions, … I can give a queer take on whatever it is and get listened to and it is a take that is really appreciated. … My queerness is really valuable to academia because I do have this angle that other people don't necessarily have which is such a nice thing. Being LGBTQ+ has given me something rather than just taking things away from me.'
(undergraduate student)

One of the most frequent themes mentioned by students, including both postgraduates and under-graduates, was the importance of a sense of home within the institution, particularly within colleges. For some, Cambridge even represented more of a home than their actual family home.

'It is very nice to be able to not have to think about hiding things, it makes it feel a lot more homely. I don't think I would regard Cambridge as my home if I felt like I was having to hide my LGBTQ+ identity.'
(undergraduate student)

'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.'
(graduate student)

The fact that Cambridge functions as a home for students during their formative years was another reason cited by interviewees to explain why freedom to openly disclose is so important.

'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.'
(undergraduate student)

'When students are here, … they are coming into their own identities so the university should be a place where they feel free and safe to explore their own identities. For a lot of people, coming to university might be the first time they get away from families or towns or whatever where they don't feel safe.'
(staff member)

For all of the many reasons disclosure is described as vital to the experiences of students and staff and their ability to feel fully integrated with the social ecosystems of their work and study environments, we noticed too in our data how often disclosure was itself seen as a marker or index of wider cultural and even ethical values within the institution. In addition to the sense that the university is a special — albeit stressful — environment, we heard our interviewees emphasising the unique obligation of the university to give something back, to set a positive example, and to lead.

Why does disclosure matter to institutions?

'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.'

(academic-related staff)

As we have seen in the previous section, interviewees valued the benefits of freedom to manage their LGBTQ+ identities as individuals, but also as members of the wider university community and society at large. Several Cambridge staff described a strengthened sense of institutional belonging and pride in the university's achievements through its message that it welcomes LGBTQ+ people and unashamedly encourages them to be open about who they are.

'I am very proud that I get to represent the University in the schools, colleges and the other places in the world that I work as a representative and that simultaneously, if it comes up that I have a same sex partner, that part of that … message is that 'You can work for the University of Cambridge and be openly gay, it is not something that you have to hide away'. So I feel pride at being part of an organisation that says "Everyone is accepted".'

(staff member)

'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.'

(academic staff member)

In the second quotation we can recognise the same critical message we heard earlier about superficial markers of institutional tolerance that belie the more serious ongoing problems of heterosexism, but this is countered by a description of feeling happier working for an institution that visibly welcomes LGBTQ+ people. Speaking as someone who '[doesn't] identify with institutions very much in general', this extract from an interview with an academic staff member describes a sense of joy in working for an institution that 'has a high … visibility of supporting gay people'. There is an institutional principle articulated here: 'You will put more time and energy into your job if you feel well and welcome.' (academic staff member)

Other participants similarly described the benefits of 'being able to be authentically yourself' in terms of being happier and experiencing reduced stress and distraction due to not having to navigate their concealment anymore. Reduced stress and a greater sense of safety, as we saw earlier, were described as increasing the ability to focus on the job.

'Disclosing myself at Cambridge can help others to come to terms with their own sexuality and to provide support for them.'

'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, back-ground, language, religion, anything like that. Having a space that allows you to be yourself without question is incredibly helpful.'

(academic-related staff member)

'It is great that I don't have to think or worry about outing myself in my research group anymore, now that I am out. And it is so necessary because doing a PhD is hard enough, being a human being is hard enough and all of the things that we all as individuals have to content with is hard enough. So, having to think about disclosure would just be an extra level of stress that I don't need. Being out allows me a certain level of safety and comfort and lets me focus on my work which is necessary.'

(postgraduate student)

Further, for some Cambridge staff, their relaxation through being able to be themselves contributed to increased comfort and productivity levels of team members. As one transgender staff member noted, there is a positive knock-on effect when employers ensure that everyone is 'comfortable about being open' about who they are, because 'everyone feels more comfortable'.

'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.'

(staff member)

Another way in which the wider staff and student population benefit from a more comfortable atmosphere in which LGBTQ+ disclosure can take place uneventfully is through the stronger sense of community such openness and trust encourage. As noted in the first finding section, openly out role models are key to this process by enabling a more diverse group of people to feel inspired and encouraged about their (academic) futures. Another knock-on cycle of progressive change in this context becomes visible in the testimonies of the many interviewees who described how role models in their past inspired them to be openly out and to become role models for other students and staff.

'I realised that one of my closest friends here was not out to people when he first came to Cambridge but because I was very open about being LGBTQ+ on our first day in Fresher's week, he came out to me before almost everyone else. This made me realise that being visible is something that helps people, so I have tried to actively acknowledge being LGBTQ+ or if someone makes a heteronormative assumption about me to disrupt that.'
(undergraduate student)

'Disclosing myself at Cambridge can help others to come to terms with their own sexuality and to provide support for them. I think that is why once I came out, I started to get more actively involved in gay groups. … Being openly out and engaged in LGBTQ+ groups is a way of making sure that other people have the same opportunities that I had and that people that are still struggling know that there is a network of people around them.'
(academic-related staff member)

'I try to be as visibly out as possible … because other people doing that was so important to me four years ago.'
(undergraduate student)

In one particularly moving account of the power of role models to inspire more open LGBTQ+ futures, an undergraduate described the transformative effect of meeting a professionally successful LGBTQ+ couple living 'very normal lives' and realising 'I didn't know that I needed this so much'.

'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 being succeeding in their field. It is like, 'I could be like that, I could see myself doing that.'
(undergraduate student)

Although the languages of 'family' and 'home' can be complicated for LGBTQ+ people, who may not have felt entirely at home in their families of origin or who may have been isolated by shame and fear within their previous home environments, these are nonetheless terms that are often used to describe what is positive about feeling a connection with others — in what is frequently referred to as the college, department or university 'community'. Another word used by interviewees to describe the importance of being able to publicly disclose their identities was 'connection'.

'There are times when disclosing myself feels more actively important. There is a connection with people who speak openly about being LGBT+ or LGBT+ issues ... and I think this connection is important in Cambridge, especially because of the college system. The word 'family' and 'community' gets thrown around a lot and I don't think you can be a family or a community if you don't accept everyone within it. So, the fact that people are talking about being LGBT+ and LGBT+ issues is part of creating a community and it is part of building connections between people.'

(staff member)

In the same way that building connections is 'part of creating community' so too is a sense of alienation created by feeling disconnected. As noted earlier, another way to understand the importance of 'relevance' to disclosure is to understand 'being relevant' in terms of 'having a connection'. For some postgraduate students, feeling disconnected and having to conceal themselves was not intolerable or a reason to leave the university. As one put it, inability to disclose 'would not be a deal breaker' (postgraduate student). Despite such students' expectations of not feeling 'at home', of life being lonelier, and concealment having a negative impact on their academic work, there were compensatory benefits: 'Cambridge changes the direction of your life in so many ways', as another postgraduate student observed. For these interviewees, the impact of a Cambridge degree overweighed the costs of concealment.

Other participants in the study, and in particular some who were suffering from mental health issues, described the stress of having to conceal themselves would be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, leading them to consider dropping out. These students were less willing to pay the high costs of involuntary concealment as the price of their Cambridge degree.

'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.'

(postgraduate student)

Other participants could not bring themselves to 'go back into the closet' in order to survive within an institution where concealment was the norm. For many such individuals, inability to disclose their identities was too great a sacrifice, and too risky, too 'emotionally and psychologically devastating', as one academic staff member put it. Others found it impossible to imagine coping with such a situation and found it dicult to imagine themselves working 'in an environment where there was a lack of acceptance' (staff member). Interviewees in this category reported they would rather look for a different place to work or study than remain closeted or in hiding.

'If I didn't have an environment that would facilitate me being out, I would probably not be able to go to Cambridge. I would have to find a different university because ... I just can't convincingly hide being LGBTQ+ so it just wouldn't work. ... If I was in an environment where I couldn't look like this because I was scared of being found out then that would decrease my mental wellbeing to such a point where I could not go here.'

(undergraduate student)

'If I could not disclose myself at Cambridge, I would move. I would try and work in a different university. I mean if I had the choice, Cambridge is great, but I would not sacrifice that. If I could not be open here and I could be open in Cardiff or Edinburgh or whatever other place, oh I think I would move tomorrow, yeah I would just find another job.'
(academic staff member)

'If I weren't able to disclose about my sexuality, I think that would make it impossible for me to work here. I think it would make it impossible for me to work here because I have been with my partner now for eight years and we are hopefully getting married next year which I look really forward to. He is an enormous part of my life, we are the main things in each other's lives, we really get on great and I think to not be able to talk about him at work, to have to hide that, I think would make it impossible for me to work here, both practically speaking, because I don't think it would be possible to hide the fact but also I think it would be emotionally and psychologically devastating to have to do that, because it is a huge part of my life.'
(academic staff member)

'Although active disclosure is not always important to me, the absence of that freedom would be hurtful. … I just don't find it acceptable for people not to be welcoming now. Especially in the university setting, it is ridiculous for people to not be accepting of different identities. I would find it unacceptable and I don't think I could work for long in an environment where there was a lack of acceptance like that.'
(staff member)

'I don't think I would be here if I wasn't out because it is really important to me to be out. … I cannot even imagine what my everyday experience would look like if I weren't sharing that with people. I would be researching something different and I would have different friends. … Honestly, being out is such a big part of my life. … The reason I am in academia is for education and for activism. And without that activist impact I don't feel like my work has much value or much purpose. So firstly, I don't think I would be at Cambridge if I had to conceal myself because I don't know what the purpose of my work here would be. Secondly, I probably wouldn't be studying what I'm studying. And thirdly, for my own mental health and wellbeing, I don't think I could spend a year in a place where I couldn't be honest and open.'
(postgraduate student)

'This constant process of coming out to everybody again and again and again and honestly, it's just exhausting.'

As can be seen in these comments, the ability to be out and to disclose without fear of reprisal, in an environment that is seen to be accepting of diversity, is not only desirable but essential from the point of view of many of the LGBTQ+ students and staff interviewed for this study. These comments clearly show the potential high cost to institutions that are perceived to be hesitant or dilatory in their efforts to ensure LGBTQ+ acceptance is not only encouraged but celebrated, and where necessary, enforced. In contrast, universities that champion an environment in which it is possible to be, as the activists say, 'Out Loud and Proud', are both valued for creating tolerant places to work and learn, as well as models for others to follow.

Managing disclosure

As we have seen in the sections above, feeling comfortable to disclose their LGBTQ+ identities and to be openly out was important and beneficial to many participants. However, feeling comfortable — and thus freely able to disclose — also includes the freedom to not disclose. For example, there are various reasons why someone might choose to conceal their LGBTQ+ identity at Cambridge other than discomfort. At the same time, freedom to disclose or not might still be highly important to these participants. Comfort to disclose enables the choice to decide how and when to disclose, to whom, and to what extent across different institutional settings. Participants' sense of having genuine freedom and agency to decide for themselves how to disclose, including the choice to be 'strategically closeted' (undergraduate student), was often as important and meaningful as being able to be out.

Most participants who concealed themselves offered the reasoning that their department is a professional space, where topics such as sexuality would not normally be discussed. As a result, these participants questioned whether disclosing their sexuality within this professional space would be appropriate, professional, or relevant.

Being seen to be professional in one's self-presentation and behaviour particularly mattered to early career academics such as PhD students, postdocs and research fellows.

'I would not feel comfortable to disclose my LGBTQ+ identity to supervisors and senior staff within my department. … You want people to see you as an academic and I don't like it when for example older male staff or older male PhD students treat me in a way that marks me as a woman. I really don't like it because you are being de-professionalised, … so I think not wanting to disclose myself within my department is part of that. I would not want them to see me as anything else than a professional person. … The department is very competitive, it is high level and so you really want to do the most that you can to be seen as a professional.'
(postgraduate student)

For others, however, concealment was more circumstantial — the professional environment of work exchanges leaving no room for disclosure of non-heterosexual identities.

'We have several members of staff and administrative staff members who are openly out in my department, so it is not the case that me not being out is because I am afraid of stigmatisation or any sort of discrimination. It is more that I try to be as professional as possible and there is just not a circumstance then to just say 'Oh and by the way, I'm bisexual'.'
(academic staff member)

Another group of participants emphasised the importance of managing their disclosure in order to avoid the negative consequences of becoming visible representatives of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, many interviewees described the exhaustion, burden, and emotional labour associated with the constant process of outing oneself, being asked about LGBTQ+ related terminology, having to explain less well known LGBTQ+ identifications such as 'asexuality', 'intersex', and 'non-binary' when outing themselves, or dealing with people's awkwardness and having to reassure people who had been heteronormative in their assumptions about partners or pronouns. Being able to decide to conceal one's LGBTQ+ identity (from time to time and place to place) was thus in some cases considered an important act of self-preservation.

'Coming out is really tiring. Like, educating people on terminology and … trying to get people to see you as more than just a queer token, it is tiring. … Sometimes, I just want to eat my dinner, I don't want to be explaining why that joke is inappropriate.'
(undergraduate student)

'I try to avoid situations in which I am being asked to inform and educate which I don't mind doing but on my own terms. … That probably comes from experiences where people see you as a walking encyclopaedia … and they only use you for that rather than actually engaging with you as a person. … You have to have your own emotional boundaries in place to be able to deal with that and I don't have those boundaries in place firmly enough — I would struggle to say 'no' — but I would resent it so it's easier to just not disclose at all.'
(staff member)

'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.'
(postgraduate student)

'I don't actually think I am particularly out in my gender queerness … This has been a recent identification for me and … this whole process feels like remembering how hard it was to come out as queer in my sexuality to begin with and how it is this constant process of coming out to everybody again and again and again and honestly, it's just exhausting and that exhaustion can have an impact on your work. I only have three months left in my degree and I came here with a purpose to write my thesis. … 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 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.'
(postgraduate student)

The comments in this latter category of disclosure-avoidance-due-to-equity-fatigue return our attention to the high labour costs involved in being out, visibly LGBTQ+ or non-gender-normative. Although it is often pointed out, as interviewees for this study often did, that it is the solidarity in numbers created through many acts of personal bravery that gradually accelerates culture change, the underside of this formula is that the very people driving the change often pay a high personal price for doing so. Hence, the relief in coming out and freedom to be more open in the context of a wider range of gender and sexual identifications than in the past — although welcomed by individuals and institutions alike — must also be seen in the context of the penalty it can impose on the very people who are its champions.

'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. … 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.'
(undergraduate student)

This message about the costs of being a diversity champion, moreover, is being passed on: students and postdocs, as well as early career academics, can be heard in the extracts above to be taking note that becoming an equity educator carries significant professional risks. Moreover, becoming the 'token queer' is socially awkward: it is tiring, dicult,` emotionally challenging, 'exhausting', and detrimental to health as well as work. Comments such as these reveal an important opportunity for institutions to become more conscious of, and responsive to, the work of driving culture change. The new category of non-disclosure as a defence against the risks of becoming involved in the endless labour of institutional reform ironically reveals the costs of progress in sectors like higher education.

Conclusion

For the time being, we rely on a combination of individual and institutional commitments to ensure that workplaces and professional communities continue to become more welcoming and habitable places for LGBTQ+ people. For educational communities like Cambridge, where research, learning and teaching are the staple activities bringing people together, the challenge is not only to deliver positive changes but to learn everything we can from the difficulties we encounter — including perhaps especially the areas in which we have failed. There is an irony that, especially in the pursuit of excellence, failure is a better teacher than success. But there is also opportunity in this important lesson. Cambridge has every reason to celebrate the positive evaluations of its success in creating an increasingly inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ people. But, like other institutions, it has more to learn from the aspects of its own everyday culture that present the most intractable obstacles to greater inclusivity than those that don't.

It will be increasingly important for universities — especially those that strive to be world-leading — to apply their considerable skills of analysis and critique to themselves in order to become organisations as adept in building social infrastructure as they are in delivering transformative knowledge systems, creative spaces for innovation and dynamic learning environments. We hope this report can contribute to that effort, and that the following recommendations can contribute to more inclusive communities within and beyond the university.

Recommendations

'I think the nice thing about being out in Cambridge particularly is I don't have to worry too much about a bad reaction, I am able to freely think about my happiness rather than my safety. … Being out in the context of Cambridge for me is really wellbeing, happy and comfortable and being treated in the way I want to be.'
(undergraduate student)

'Cambridge University is the place that has felt the most accepting by far I have ever been to because it is so much more liberal than my home town. … I do feel a lot more comfortable in that way. … If I had stayed at home, I wouldn't have come out to anyone and I still wouldn't be out.'
(undergraduate student)

As noted at the outset of this Report, we found that many LGBTQ+ students and staff at Cambridge felt comfortable, able to disclose their identities freely, and appreciative of the acceptance they enjoyed. A smaller group felt less welcome and some did not feel they could disclose their identities at all. In asking people to describe their experiences we also elicited many recommendations for how the university could be improved by creating a more positive climate of acceptance of LGBTQ+ students and staff.

Recommendations for institutional change

An important theme across the findings is the importance of small — or even 'tiny' — gestures, such as using examples in lectures of LGBTQ+ topics, adding pronouns to email signatures, posting LGBTQ+ friendly announcements and posters, and simply acknowledging the existence of LGBTQ+ people' perspectives and experiences.

'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.'
(academic-related staff member)

'If my college tutor said "What pronouns do you use?" I would go 'Oh, well I am non-binary so I use they/them'. This would make things more comfortable. I would feel like my tutor understands who I am better. … I would be more comfortable to tell her about more things as well if she expressed an interest in my gender identification. If I had a problem, I would feel more comfortable talking to my tutor because as it is, … I don't talk to my tutor because I feel that she hardly knows me. … Asking for my pronouns would help her do her job better and it would help me feel more comfortable just generally.'
(undergraduate student)

Equally straightforward suggestions, such as more visibly publicising and promoting existing LGBTQ+ activities and networks, were also offered by interviewees.

'One thing the university should do, and could do, is promote its LGBT support network and what it does for you. … I can give you some specific examples. Mailing lists at the University of Cambridge are mental, because to find out what mailing lists exists, you have to already know what mailing lists exist. To find out, you have to know whom to address to find it, it is absolutely ridiculous. So I didn't know about the LGBT mailing list until someone told me about it, and then I couldn't get on it until they told me what the mailing list address was. That is not a way to promote knowledge about it. What I would want is a page, or a website, or something, that says 'This is the LGBT at the University of Cambridge, these are links, resources and support networks. Here is the mailing list, click here to sign up, these are the events, these are initiatives we do, this is research we have been doing, these are some groups, these are the ambassadors, these are some champions, these are xyz, just one page where you can go to.'
(academic-related staff member)

Students as well as staff participants advised compulsory diversity and inclusion training for university staff, particularly staff who are in any way responsible for students' welfare.

'I think that is a generally flaw with the welfare system at Cambridge, the kind of power that college tutors have but also the lack of training they have. Lots of them are really interesting academics but not necessarily counsellors. … This year we have dealt with tens and tens of students with welfare issues who didn't feel they could go to their tutors in general but … especially with sexual harassment stuff which people don't necessarily feel they can go to their tutors anyway and then when it's LGBT related, it doubles it: two layers of reasons that they wouldn't go to their tutor. It is quite disheartening, and it does kind of make you feel like the college is not working for me.'
(undergraduate student)

'Maybe there should be some kind of education programme for staff that they have to do. So for example, when I did the adoption process, you have to do a diversity and inclusion training element, it is only a half day thing but it is about gender, sexuality, race, religion, disability and that you have to be inclusive and that you have to be respectful and tolerant and all these things. Maybe there needs to be more of that at Cambridge, that would drive a positive change.'
(academic staff member)

As we have seen, visible symbols of support like rainbow flags make more of a difference than might be assumed and were mentioned often in this study. However, it also appears departments and colleges could do more to make clear that disclosure is welcome.

'It would be really nice if my department did things that made it seem like you don't have to disclose but it is fine if you do and it is a professionally acceptable thing to do. … Knowing there is a part of you that would be particularly unprofessional to disclose is a bit of a weight to carry.'

(postgraduate student)

'It is important for the university to show that from top down, that they are open and accepting. I think it makes it easier for people of every level to a) be open about themselves and b) be open for other people, for other people's expressions and lives.'

(postgraduate student)

Another of the simple steps to be taken is to continue ensuring the future presence of LGBTQ+ related lectures, seminars, and workshops which are open for university members of all disciplines. These play an important role in signalling to students as well as (academic) staff that the university considers LGBTQ+ issues important, and intellectually relevant.

Recommendations for future research

This small-scale, factor-finding and exploratory research initiative points to a number of potential future areas for further study. More research is needed on the experiences of underrepresented participant groups, particularly BME students and staff. We also need to understand better how experiences of LGBTQ+ disclosure in university settings intersect with other forms of discrimination. The finding of this study, for example, that both students and staff — and in particular early career scholars — are wary of being drawn into too much equality and diversity work, and that the extra labour involved in this is seen to impose a penalty on them, is an area that needs to be explored.

To the extent this finding is replicated in other studies, the question of how universities reward, support, recognise and compensate both students and staff for 'equity overtime', and the exposure of working as a frontline role model or mentor on equity issues needs to be addressed.

Future research can also productively explore ways in which trans, non-binary, and gender queer participants can be (institutionally) supported in their challenges of managing multiple LGBTQ+ identities.

'This is really important research! I am glad someone is doing it. It is always important that somebody is researching LGBTQ+ identities and especially if that research is going towards creating better support networks for their students. Things are definitely a lot better as they used to be but that doesn't mean you don't have more work to do, so thank you.'

(postgraduate student)

'It is important what you are doing. … If there are people in our university who feel uncomfortable, either the staff, students, or anywhere in between, we should be addressing that, we should be working out why and absolutely doing everything to change it and you can't do that without the research.'

(staff member)

Further research can also productively be undertaken into the best means to integrate LGBTQ+ topics into the curriculum so as not only to create more inclusive learning environments, but to promote new perspectives on familiar problems and develop more dynamic teams that incorporate greater diversity into the knowledge building communities at universities and elsewhere.

Afterword

To me, qualitative research is about connecting: connecting with the people who trust me with their stories (participants), me trying to make sense of these stories through connecting them with each other as well as other people's — including my own — stories, theories, and thoughts (analysis), and finally, connecting the stories and their conclusions with the public — with you, the reader of this report. The depth and multitude of these connections is what makes qualitative research unique and powerful. It is connection that bears the potential to touch people's hearts and to make people feel.

Throughout the research process, I witnessed feelings being evoked and people being touched by the data. As we have seen in the quotes above, disclosure was a meaningful and often very emotional topic for participants. Further, many participants expressed how important research like this is to them, to feel seen, and to witness the university showing interest and care in their experiences.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community myself, listening to these experiences — good and bad — was at times very emotional to me as well and I feel honoured to have been trusted with these stories and with the task to make those voices heard.

I am still in touch with some participants of this study and sometimes get updated on a breakthrough around disclosure in their personal lives. That participants still tell me about their disclosure experiences illustrates not only the great potential of this research for further investigation — a potential we can also see in the richness of the data in this report — but also the need and importance to continue research on this topic for LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. As we have seen in this report, experiences around disclosure can shape, enrich, or complicate people's daily lives. However, the consequences of those respective disclosure experiences, then, impact not only the individual, but also the institution. Thus, it is in the interest of institutions as well to continue research on LGBTQ+ disclosure with the goal to make working and learning environments a safer space where people — whether LGBTQ+ identifying or not — can thrive in, be themselves, and find out what 'being themselves' actually means.

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(she/her)
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Appendix 1.
Information and consent form

Title of Project: "Out" at Cambridge: Investigating students and staff's LGBTQ+ identity disclosure and concealment at the University of Cambridge
Name of Researchers: Prof. Sarah Franklin (PI), Elisabeth Theresa Sandler, MSc, MPhil

Why your participation matters
The 2018 Stonewall Report on discrimination towards LGBTQ+ students at British universities suggests that 42% disguise or conceal their LGBTQ+ identities due to fear of hostile or unwelcome reactions to disclosure. Based on this report, I want to explore how students and staff at the University of Cambridge manage their LGBTQ+ identities within the university community.
The data will be analysed and written up as a report. This report will be used to pursue policy change at the university to make Cambridge a safer space and to keep supporting and enabling resources that already make a difference to LGBTQ+ identifying students and staff.
Further, a publication of this research will make underrepresented voices heard on a broader level and might inspire other universities to equally invest in the wellbeing of their LGBTQ+ students and staff.
As such, your participation in this research project is very much appreciated. In participating, you also have the chance to learn more about yourself and to talk to someone who carefully listens and who is genuinely interested in learning from you.

What this study includes
You will be invited to share your experiences in a qualitative, semi-structured interview. This interview will last between 30 and 45 minutes and will be audio recorded. Moreover, you will have the chance to read through and revise your interview transcript if necessary.

And finally …
The information you share with me will be treated confidentially which includes the changing of your name and of specific information in your interview transcript that could identify you. Before the research will be published, you will be sent the interview transcript to make sure you are happy with the given and anonymised information. I am aware that this topic may involve some affective or intimate issues. If I ask you about something you do not want to talk about, I will not ask further questions. It is important to me that you feel comfortable and that your boundaries are respected. Feel free to ask questions and contact me at any point. I am also happy to tell you more about the research procedure if you are interested. Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any point without giving any reason and without any consequences. Lastly, this research project is being conducted as part of the lgbtQ+@cam programme (School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Cambridge).

Please tick box

1. I confirm that I have understood this information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised and only used for academic research. ☐

4. I consent to being audio recorded and give permission to be quoted directly. ☐

5. I agree to take part in the above project. ☐

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Date   Signature

Appendix 2.
Demographic information form

This information will help me to identify patterns among my research participants and to describe the *overall* sample, not you as an individual participant. Further, knowing your preferred pronoun and preferred new display name will help me to write about you the best I can.

Please feel free to only fill out what you feel comfortable with.

Role or position at the University of Cambridge:

_____

_____

Discipline or subject: _____

Length of time at the University of Cambridge: _____

Age: _____

Nationality: _____

Race: _____

Gender identification: _____

Sexual orientation: _____

Preferred pronoun: _____

Preferred new display names: _____

(Please provide up to three names you would like me to choose from to use as your new name. Your name will be changed for anonymity reasons)

Appendix 3.
Interview topic guide

Thank you so much for taking your time for the interview / As we have already discussed, I want to find out more about your experiences with disclosure and concealment of your LGBTQ+ identity here at Cambridge/ The interview will take between 30 and 45 minutes and is semi-structured, which means that I have some topics I would like to talk about but we don't need to strictly follow my interview guide; the interview is more like a conversation / I am aware that this topic may involve some affective or intimate issues. If you don't want to talk about a question I asked, just let me know. I will be doing my best to be sensitive and to respect your boundaries / Do you have any questions before we start? / Can I now switch on the digital recorder, so that we can begin the interview?

INTRODUCTORY QUESTION

So, tell me a bit more about yourself!

- What is your role here at Cambridge?
- If at all, how do you identify in terms of your gender and sexual orientation?
- How would you rate your 'outness' level here at Cambridge on a scale of 1-10, 10 being 'out everywhere all the time' and 1 being 'no disclosure at all'?

DISCLOSURE & CONCEALMENT

What does 'being out' at Cambridge mean to you?

- PROMPTS: important, irrelevant, safe, dangerous
- Why is that?
- What do you think would happen if you felt you could not _____ (disclose/express, conceal) your LGBTQ+ identity here at Cambridge?

Are you comfortable to be out the way and to the extent you want to be at the University of Cambridge?

- What contributes to you feeling (un)comfortable?
- Which impact does this situation have on you? / How does that situation make you feel?
- What would need to change for you to feel more comfortable?

Can you say a little bit about the spaces you feel more comfortable disclosing or expressing your LGBTQ+ identity at Cambridge?

- PROMPTS: classroom, department, college, residential accommodation, clubs and societies, activities, non-institutional spaces at Cambridge
- Can you name an example for feeling comfortable disclosing or expressing your LGBTQ+ identity at Cambridge? / Can you tell me more about how you felt in these situations?
- What is it about these spaces that makes you feel comfortable?

At which spaces do you feel less comfortable disclosing or expressing your LGBTQ+ identity at Cambridge?

- Can you give me an example when/where you felt uncomfortable disclosing/expressing your LGBTQ+ identity at Cambridge? / How did you feel in these situations?
- What contributes to you feeling uncomfortable disclosing/expressing your LGBTQ+ identity within institutional spaces here at Cambridge?

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you wondered whether someone was homophobic or discriminatory towards you at Cambridge?

- PROMPT: Where you asked yourself "is it because I am gay/queer"?
- If so, can you tell me about this situation?
- My personal experience is that I sometimes find it hard to tell whether someone is explicitly homophobic or discriminatory. What is your experience? / What makes it ___ (hard, easy, …) to tell?

Has your disclosure comfort or discomfort level changed since you arrived in Cambridge?

- In which way has your (dis)comfort level changed? (PROMPTS: gone up, gone down, stayed the same)
- Can you think of an example for when your disclosure (dis)comfort level has changed?
- What contributed to you feeling more/less comfortable to disclose yourself in this situation?
- How did you expect to feel in terms of disclosing and expressing your LGBTQ+ identity here at Cambridge? (PROMPTS: comfortable, uncomfortable, safe, dangerous)

Have there been any specific experiences that have influenced your willingness or unwillingness to be more or less 'out' here at Cambridge?

- What was it exactly about this experience that made you decide to be more/less out?
- How do you decide to come out to someone or somewhere? / What guides or influences your decision to out yourself?
- Is it at all an active decision for you to out yourself?

FINAL QUESTIONS

What made you participate?
Are there any other observations or comments you would like to make?

Thank you so much for this talk and your trust! … (*Say how it was for me*) / I will send you the interview transcript so you can read it through and change information if necessary.

OUT AT CAMBRIDGE

Why LGBTQ+ disclosure matters to individuals and institutions

A report by lgbtQ+@cam
October 2019

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

lgbtQ+@cam

queer bisexual
asexual trans
non-binary
pansexual gay
homosexual
lesbian intersex
gender-queer
finsexual

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