

A vibrant rainbow flag is shown in the background, slightly out of focus, with its colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple) clearly visible. The flag appears to be part of a larger display or event.

LGBTQ+ Student Mental Health:

The challenges and needs of gender, sexual and romantic minorities in Higher Education

To respond to challenges in student mental health, Universities UK published the #StepChange framework in 2017, to support and encourage the sector to adopt a whole-university approach. An effective whole-university approach however, would need to understand and address the experiences of the many different and diverse groups of students. We undertook this piece of work to ensure universities, Students' Unions and other organisations working with students could identify positive policy and practice that would help to specifically support the LGBTQ+ student population. Our research found that LGBTQ+ students are experiencing a number of barriers to seeking help and support and that universities need to do more to respond to the needs of LGBTQ+ students with mental health difficulties.

The research conducted by Student Minds, due to be published on the 31st of July 2018, comprises findings from a survey of 467 participants that ran between the 23rd of November 2017 and the 26th of January 2018. The survey asked a range of questions around involvement in the local and/or university LGBTQ+ community, perceptions of peer support, experiences of mental health difficulties, attitudes and intentions towards help-seeking and perceptions of services and care.

What did we find?

The LGBTQ+ community needs competent professional support. Many respondents noted that they experienced barriers accessing support because they feel misunderstood or judged; they stressed that improving current professional services should be prioritised. Students commented that student support services need to be made more inclusive and culturally competent. This comes with the need for universities to adequately fund support services so they can have the appropriate staffing as well as capacity for staff to receive training and to develop the service to meet the needs of the changing student population.

While the proportion of students reporting mental health difficulties in this survey cannot be used as general prevalence data, reports of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Panic Disorders and Eating Disorders were notably high. More work needs to be done to better understand the need and more specialist support may be required.

Respondents asked for more work raising awareness of the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community and building understanding for LGBTQ+ issues. Many respondents noted that greater social acceptance of LGBTQ+ identity may go some way to reducing the need for additional support. While the LGBTQ+ community can, and do, support each other, the wider community is not currently as inclusive as it could be.

Students in lower year groups were found to be less involved and engaged with both the university and local LGBTQ+ community. These students also sought support for emotional problems from fewer sources.

Respondents suggested that LGBTQ+ societies and representatives were not always warm, friendly and welcoming. The leadership of LGBTQ+ societies can be perceived to be 'cliquey' and exclusive. Where societies are seen as focused on drinking and partying, they were felt to be shutting out those students who are looking for a supportive space.

Students' Unions can play a role in ensuring that all students identifying as LGBTQ+ feel included in, and able to access, the LGBTQ+ community. While half of respondents felt a strong connection with their university LGBTQ+ community, over a quarter (28%) did not feel engaged. Respondents expressed that there were a range of barriers across Students' Union services and activities. Improving sports' inclusivity, providing and

protecting LGBTQ+ social spaces and having more visible LGBTQ+ role models across Students' Union groups may help address these barriers.

The majority (79%) of respondents agreed that there was a need for additional mental health support specifically for LGBTQ+ students. Further, 89% of respondents thought peer support would be beneficial and 77% stated that they would engage with peer support.

Almost all respondents (93%) stated that they had sought help or advice for emotional problems from friends. The survey also found that respondents are likely to seek help and support for emotional problems from their parents. However, while nearly three quarters of respondents (74%) identified that they had sought support from parents, parents were rated as the least helpful source of support, with an average score of 3.05 (on a Likert scale with 5 being very helpful and 1 being very unhelpful). Further, there was considerable variability around students' perception of the helpfulness of parents.

Recommendations from the report:

1. Universities and the NHS need to improve inclusivity and cultural competence in their support. Support services need train staff to be better aware of LGBTQ+ issues and to hire staff who are LGBTQ+ and staff who have specialist knowledge and understanding of gender identity issues. Student support services need to be proactively engaging the LGBTQ+ community so they feel more comfortable accessing university support services.
2. Universities and the NHS need to offer more support for, and better understand, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Panic Disorders and Eating Disorders in the LGBTQ+ student population.
3. Students' Unions and universities need to do more to improve inclusivity, representation and engagement across the university.
4. Universities, Students' Unions and LGBTQ+ societies need to work together and prioritise engaging LGBTQ+ first year students.
5. LGBTQ+ societies need to proactively engage all members and foster welcoming spaces.
6. Students' Unions need to improve inclusivity, representation and engagement across Students' Union services and activities.
7. Student Minds and universities should work together to develop peer support programmes focused on LGBTQ+ students.
8. Resources should be developed and made widely available to provide advice and guidance, for friends and family, on how to support LGBTQ+ individuals.

The full report can be accessed at: www.studentminds.org.uk/lgbtqresearch

Further information

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Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity.

We empower students and members of the university community to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support others and create change. By working collaboratively across sectors, we share best practice and ensure that the student voice influences decisions about student mental health.



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