
EXPERIENCES OF LGBT PEOPLE IN POST 16 EDUCATION



INTRODUCTION

Over the years, a great deal of research has been done, both by Stonewall and other organisations, into the experiences of LGBT young people at school. However, there is little research into LGBT young people's lives once they leave school education. We still know very little about what life is like for LGBT people at college or university in Scotland, or how their school experiences impact on their future education.

With this in mind, we spoke with LGBT learners and staff in Scotland's colleges and universities, running focus groups and interviews to find out more about the barriers that learners face. This report is the result, drawing out some of the key issues faced by LGBT young people in post 16 education. Homophobic language, poor mental health, and a lack of support for trans students are just some of the themes that emerge.

This is not a comprehensive piece of research, but a small scoping study which has value in drawing out key themes around LGBT people's experiences of further and higher education. Now that we have identified these key issues, we need to do more to investigate how common these experiences are, and how they affect the lives of LGBT students.

We are keen to support both individual institutions and education bodies in researching these areas further, and to work with them in supporting LGBT learners; please do get in touch to take us up on our offer of support.



Colin Macfarlane
Director

BACKGROUND

LGBT people in Scotland often have negative experiences of school, where bullying and hostility remain commonplace. More than half of LGB young people in Scotland experience homophobic bullying at school, while 99 per cent hear homophobic language (Stonewall Scotland, 2012). Trans young people often have even more negative experiences of school, with 77 per cent of trans respondents experiencing homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying in school (LGBT Youth Scotland, 2014).

These experiences can impact on LGBT people's attainment – three in five lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils who experience homophobic bullying say that this impacts on their school work (The School Report, Stonewall, 2012). High rates of truancy and high prevalence of depression and self-harming behaviours in LGBT young people may also pose a barrier to attainment and progression in education (Stonewall, 2012; Metro, 2014).

LGBT people's experiences at school can also impact their future education and careers. One in three LGB pupils who experience homophobic bullying change their plans for future education because of it (Stonewall, 2012). Some LGBT people believe they would experience discrimination from other students in further or higher education. This is more common in some courses than others – almost half of LGBT people expect discrimination in construction and engineering, compared to only four per cent expecting to encounter discrimination in the arts (Stonewall Scotland, 2014).

Despite this, there is currently little research specifically looking at the experiences of LGBT students in Scotland, and how their experiences of school impact on their future careers and education. This small scale study aims to draw out key issues faced by LGBT people in further and higher education, in order to inform how institutions can support LGBT students and as a basis for further research.

THE STUDY

Stonewall Scotland undertook focus groups and interviews with LGBT students currently in further and higher education and with staff working in further and higher education.

Between November 2015 and February 2016, researchers interviewed 20 people (seven staff and thirteen LGBT students) recruited from further and higher education institutions across Scotland.

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SUMMARY

The following summary draws out key themes raised by interviewees in the study which would be worth further investigation to understand the prevalence and impact of these issues.

IMPACT OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

- ▶ Negative experiences of school
- ▶ Disrupted learning and educational development
- ▶ Students leaving school early
- ▶ Impact on future careers and prospects, including choice of careers or courses
- ▶ Positive expectations of college or university as a new opportunity to learn in a safer environment
- ▶ Stereotypes about which courses and careers are inclusive for LGBT people

EXPERIENCES OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

- ▶ Varying experiences of college and university environments including culture and student behaviour, even on the same campus
- ▶ A more positive experience of college or university in comparison to school
- ▶ Not all staff were well equipped to challenge discriminatory language and banter when it does occur
- ▶ Perception that trans students have more negative experiences of college and university than LGB students, including experiencing bullying and harassment and having their studies disrupted due to the pressures around transitioning

EXPERIENCES OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION (cont'd)

- ▶ Institutions perceived to provide little proactive or tailored support for LGBT students
- ▶ Institutions perceived as less confident in supporting trans students
- ▶ Students turning to LGBT staff for support, rather than dedicated pastoral staff
- ▶ LGBT student societies or student representatives leading on raising visibility of LGBT issues, rather than the institutions themselves
- ▶ LGBT issues not addressed in many courses
- ▶ Staff concerned that they are actively discouraged from addressing LGBT issues

STUDENT WELFARE

- ▶ LGBT students affected by poor mental health, making it difficult for them to progress or succeed in education
- ▶ Concern that students who live at home or are financially dependent on family may be at risk of being thrown out or losing that support if they come out

IMPACT OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

THE LASTING IMPACT OF SCHOOL

A key theme discussed by participants was the impact of experiences of school on their future education and career plans, and in particular the impact of bullying and hostility. This included experiences which were so difficult or unpleasant that participants chose not to continue in education, or who had their education severely disrupted by bullying.

High school is awful. God, if I think back to my own high school, it's an absolute nightmare. You're trapped in a building for six hours a day where you're not allowed to leave. If you do leave, you can have the police turn up at your door going, you know, 'why weren't you at school today?'. There are often not the support mechanisms in place and teachers aren't well equipped to deal with [homophobic] bullying.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

School was just hell.

Max, university student

I left school six and a half years ago and that was the reason I didn't go on to further education [at the time] because my time there had been so horrible.

Alex, college student

I actually left my high school because I got really bullied, and went to a different high school. But the courses were different so I had to leave because I hadn't done them.

Alex, college student

Students spoke about struggling with the need to remove themselves from a school environment without compromising their prospects or future careers.

I knew that I wanted to leave school ... but I wanted a good career. I know you can still have that, but I just wanted to be able to get my Highers or something ... I feel like that was the most important thing, getting my results.

Max, university student

However, participants felt that college or university was a new opportunity and a chance to start afresh. There was an expectation from participants that further or higher education would be a safer and more fulfilling environment than school, or at least a hope that it couldn't be any worse.

I sort of made a deal with myself when I'd been at High School. I thought, things are awful here, I'm going to go to uni.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

I didn't really put much thought into what I wanted to do. I did a bit of research and found [this college] and thought that sounds a lot better, certainly better than high school, I might get better experiences here. [My experience] is just more about trying to free myself from high school.

Robin, college student

I thought it would be much better than school, I thought everyone is a bit more older. There's going to be different age groups in my class. I thought it would be more comfortable.

Sam, college student

WHERE NOW? – LEAVING SCHOOL

Both participating students and staff were aware of stereotypes about whether courses and careers are inclusive and friendly for LGBT people. Creative industries, including arts and performing arts, were viewed by participants as more LGBT friendly, whilst fields such as engineering that have been historically male dominated were viewed as less inclusive.

I suppose there's a tradition isn't there, arts and creativity is for people who are gay or lesbian.

Ali, university staff

I expected coming into an engineering course a lot of prejudice against my gender identity, as well my sexuality. Because that's what I faced in high school in engineering classes and anything that had an overwhelmingly male population of the class.

Robin, college student

These stereotypes also extended to careers, as well as courses.

I used to want to be a Police Officer actually, but then that was an aspect of like, would they care? Or is there a lot of [LGBT] people, is it generally accepted? ...You don't really get people like me, I'd imagine.

Max, university student

Although students chose courses because of their interest in a subject, stereotypes about careers and reputations for LGBT friendliness also had an impact on course choice.

LGBT people may find themselves attracted to particular subjects because – beyond the subject – when they're in the workplace they're aware that as an environment it's more accepting. I think art and design is probably more [accepting].

James, university staff

I picked the course because I wanted a career in pharmacy. I had the grades to get in. That's probably the first reason why I'd look at it, but it didn't cross my mind to look at how many LGBT people there were. I just felt as if that wasn't really relevant to the course or anything like that, so. Although I believe it's mainly girls and gay men on the course.

Max, university student

Certain courses were felt to be highly populated by LGBT students.

I didn't know any gay people when I was in high school ... but I know a lot of gay biologists, much more so than any other profession that I'm involved with.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

Talking to colleagues in performing arts ...they have a disproportionately high number of students with mental health issues and often there is a correlation there with young people who are LGBT ... who are coming onto these courses because they're seen as being a safe space.

Jenny, college lecturer

WHERE TO GO

When choosing a course, university students prioritised the best available institution for their chosen subject, rather than consciously looking for an especially inclusive institution. For those that had the option, the opportunity to move away from their home environment also influenced their institution choice.

[My university] was the best for my courses ... it was close to me but far away from the sort of life that I was experiencing in the countryside.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

College students felt their choices were dictated by practical concerns, such as availability of public transport, whilst other students may only have the choice of one college in their area since the college merger programme.

The decision breaker for me was actually the distance due to, like, winter ... I was originally going to go up to Edinburgh but then I was thinking the buses and trains and stuff if the weather gets really bad they will stop.

Alex, college student

EXPERIENCES OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

ETHOS, CULTURE AND HARASSMENT

The culture, on paper, is very good at the college ... what's down on paper tends to be quite different from the actual experience.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

Participants' experiences of college and university culture were very varied. Students spoke of positive and inclusive experiences of university and college culture, feeling that the culture was more welcoming than school and that discriminatory language was less common.

I moved to uni in September and so far I feel like everyone's open minded, I've not really experienced any negativity or anything like that.

Max, university student

I wasn't surprised as much at the attitudes of people here, it was more a sense of relief that people were as accepting.

Alex, college student

I'm gay and my classmates don't make fun of me for being gay or bully me or anything. It's more a relaxed environment.

Sam, college student

When I came here I was really surprised because everyone was really accepting. It was actually my classmates from the health and social care group and a lot of the staff that helped me come out to my parents, which was really terrifying at the time but it all worked out. I feel like that would never have happened in high school. It was an amazing change to feel like there are people that accept you.

Alex, college student

However, positive experiences clearly aren't universal. Participants spoke about LGBT students' experiences of bullying and harassment.

I have a couple of students, who have come out to me as LGB or T who have said, that things are getting on top of them. You say, 'do you want to take it any further' and [they say] 'oh, I'm not sure, I don't know if I want to'. I mean, for them it must be a hell of a demoraliser, that they feel that they can tell a lecturer but they don't want the lecturer to do anything about it in case there's a repercussion.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

Trans students in particular still have negative experiences of further and higher education. Previous research has highlighted that one in three trans students experience bullying or harassment, higher than their LGB peers (Beyond the Straight and Narrow, NUS, 2014). This was reflected in the experiences of the staff and students we spoke to:

[A student] had come to me and had come out as trans, and said the reasons she had to tell me that was because ... after she had moved to the front of the class, [another student] had apparently turned to his friend and said, 'well thank f*** that's out the road', whilst pointing to that student.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

There are a few students who I've noticed around [this campus] who I'm not sure if they're trans or if they're non-binary or whether you can put any label on themselves who seem to be more included. I think at this campus, which is still more engineering, construction and trades driven, I think there would be a lot more hostility and staring.

Jenny, college lecturer

Staff felt that culture and ethos varied a great deal within the same institution and different departments, as did the behaviour of students.

I've only attended one university, but my experience from the college sector is, as a member of staff is, I don't think I could be a student.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

The age and mix of students in a class, their background, or the professional background of the staff were all identified by participants as contributing to the culture or ethos of an institution.

HN Social Science, HNC, HND classes – they're mainly school leavers. They've stayed on, they've done Highers, they're looking at going to university ... They tend to come in with fairly, reasonably inclusive attitudes or at least an awareness that it's not appropriate to say it even if you're thinking it. Other classes are much more challenging. Particularly younger learners where the culture is maybe more of an extension of school.

Jenny, college lecturer

[College is] not like high school where everyone is the same age so you're growing up with your age group, you're broadening your horizons of different age groups and probably people of different sexual orientations as well.

Sam, college student

The culture is different in different departments, sometimes even on different degree programs – ... If I just think about acceptance and inclusiveness of being gay in the department I work in, I feel it's actually very welcoming ... But that's a department where all the disciplines involved have very strong ethics codes, they have values of accepting everyone regardless of sexual orientation or any other difference, and all the people who work there are kind of signed up to those ethics codes, signed up to that way of seeing people. So that creates a certain way of being, whereas I guess if you were in another department, maybe a department where people were less understanding of human nature, possibly, you wouldn't necessarily get that same level of acceptance.

Ali, university staff

While students said that discriminatory language was much less common compared to school, it was something that staff were familiar with. Staff said they found it difficult to challenge inappropriate or discriminatory language; 'banter' also emerged as a theme.

Challenging bad language is something that's quite high on our agenda and it is a difficult thing to do sometimes.

Casey, college staff

Some of the things you can hear are quite shocking, you sort of turn round and the only reason that ... I feel that I can turn round and say to someone who's 6ft 5, ... 'I'm sorry, what did you just say?' is because I've got a lanyard on which has got staff written all over it.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

I think it's very hard to challenge banter, you don't want to be the one with light hearted banter, the one that kicks off or gets really heavy.

Ali, university staff

I think in some areas it [challenging language]'s done well but there's not very much training for staff and I think particularly when it comes to issues around sexuality and gender identity, a lot of staff are really nervous about that.

Jenny, college lecturer

COMING OUT AT COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY

LGBT students can be faced with a decision about whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to the other students and staff around them. Stonewall's work on being out in the workplace has shown that LGBT people are more likely to be satisfied with their sense of achievement when they feel comfortable enough to share this information with the people around them (Stonewall Workplace Equality Index 2016).

If you can say, this is who I am, you're going to [do] better, and whether that's just being able to say it quietly but comfortably to, say a member of the staff or being able to sort of very vocally tell your friends in class what you were up to at the weekend, and having to very quickly quiet that down from my perspective!

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

When they were looking for support, students said they felt they would prefer to turn either to staff who are (or who they suspect are) LGBT themselves, rather than necessarily turning to dedicated pastoral staff.

There's a student that I've spoken to and they're actually someone else's student but they came to me for advice and then they ended up disclosing things about not being sure of their gender identity which they hadn't disclosed to the other person.

Casey, college staff

I think students are much more likely to disclose to me, if they know that I'm gay, I think they're much more likely to disclose to me than they are to a straight colleague although sometimes a straight colleague has gone 'that student and that student came and told me that she was gay and I don't know what to do about it'.

Jenny, college lecturer

Students also said they felt more comfortable talking about being LGBT with their peers, including in the form of a student society, than from staff.

They're not sure if they want to go and speak to learning support or student advice about it because they don't know who the people are really ... I think [the LGBT group is] a safety net for them as well because if something does go wrong they know they can speak to us about it and they don't want to speak to the staff.

Alex, college student

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Staff felt that their universities and colleges provided generic pastoral support for LGBT students but little that was targeted, tailored, or proactive.

I suppose there's a conservatism in some aspects of running this university ... I don't think it goes out of its way to support LGBT students, I don't know to what extent it's even on the radar ... but at the same time I think they would give you support that you needed if you asked for it.

Ali, university staff

I suppose we support students, we tend to have a blanket way in which we provide information, support, teaching, accommodation, whatever else it might be, whatever service it is that a student needs and that we provide it. And then if something happens that is problematic, we deal with it. There doesn't seem to be something for any group that is built in before. It becomes a homogenous group.

Sarah, university staff

I'm struggling to think of any sort of LGBT specific support that is available within the college. I don't think there is.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

We have a learner support team and we can refer students to them or students can refer themselves. And that can be if a student identifies that they have a specific disability but it can also be for emotional support. It can also be because a student is experiencing difficulties at home. Perhaps they're in the process of coming out, having mental health problems, they're struggling in terms of coming out to their peers and stuff. So there is that service there.

Jenny, college lecturer

In the experience of our participants, colleges and universities also seemed much less prepared to support trans students than their lesbian, gay and bisexual peers. Previous research has highlighted that trans students tend to have more negative experiences of higher education than their peers, experiencing higher rates of bullying and harassment. Fifty-one per cent of trans students in higher education have considered dropping out, whilst one in seven has had to interrupt their studies because of the pressures around transitioning (NUS (2014)).

She didn't complete the course. She started to transition during the summer break and then came back but then didn't complete, it was just too difficult, too much going on.

Jenny, college lecturer

I said, 'there's been some transphobia in my class. I've got a record of everything that's been said'. 'Oh, I don't know how to deal with this.' The assistant head of faculty, he said this to me.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

Our new campus has unisex toilets and that's all. I think part of that thinking was to make it more comfortable for trans students or non-binary people. We've actually had some [negative] reaction about that from staff and students.

Casey, college staff

STUDENT SOCIETIES

Participants felt that LGBT student societies or student representatives led on raising visibility of LGBT issues and creating a more inclusive and welcoming campus, rather than the institutions themselves.

We have got quite an active student grouping and so the most visible LGBT activities come from the Student Union side.

Sarah, university staff

Students mentioned the positive impact that their LGBT society and LGBT focused elected student reps had on their campus environment.

For a brand new student like myself if I came here and I was going for a January course and came here knowing there was an LGBT group I would instantly know that they support this.

Alex, college student

However, others expressed concerns about the sustainability of this approach.

To what extent [the LGBT society] will continue to function I'm not sure, because the nature of FE is students tend to move on after a year. It makes it very difficult to sustain things like societies.

Jenny, college lecturer

CURRICULUM

Making LGBT people and issues visible in the curriculum contributes to a more inclusive ethos, and can make LGBT students feel more included and welcome. It can also help raise other student's awareness of the diversity of the people around them and about LGBT people's experiences.

It kind of breaks the ice, doesn't it? ...if [LGBT issues are] something that can be brought into the open and discussed, I think you don't feel like 'should I or shouldn't I talk about it?'

Ali, university staff

However, participants felt that not all course curricula made reference to LGBT people, or included LGBT issues. Staff had seen LGBT specific content offered as an optional module, rather than in the bulk of the course or a mandatory module, meaning that it is unlikely to engage students without an existing interest in issues of LGBT equality.

We cover it on ours, but that's really due to working with the children. We don't really cover it in a huge depth – it's just the lecturer will tell you 'be prepared for backlash from parents'.

Sam, college student

We're a technical university focussing mainly on the stems of Science, Technology and Mathematical subjects, but with a textiles school. So the one place where I would expect to see things that are around the visible identity of LGBT groups is in fashion design.

Sarah, university staff

I don't teach on [LGBT issues]. Students can write an essay on it if they want to, and I've seen them handle those essays and they've always been very accepting in terms of language use ... But I personally don't teach on it.

Ali, university staff

Not all staff felt able to discuss LGBT issues as part of their curriculum.

In terms of other lecturers I'm in contact with at the college, they find it very, very, difficult to talk about LGBT issues and LGBT matters. One of the lecturers had the Terence Higgins Trust come in and speak to the students. Terence Higgins Trust is a charity designed specifically for men who have sex with men with HIV and helping them as a charity and also try to prevent [HIV]. The lecturer in question got hauled over the coals, which is the exact phrase that was used, for bringing in a gay charity to speak to students and handing out contraception.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

STUDENT WELFARE

MENTAL HEALTH

Previous research has indicated that many LGBT students experience poor mental health due to experiences of bullying and discrimination, which can lead to them struggling with their course or dropping out of education (NUS (2014), Equality Challenge Unit (2009))

I think from the young people who have struggled at school because of homophobic bullying, the kind of mental health issues that sort of carry-over from school. The struggle to kind of engage in education, to stay in education, often I think is an issue.

Jenny, college lecturer

We have a lot of students with mental health difficulties and a lot of the time it is possibly because they're trans or they are coming out or they are finding it difficult to come out ... I feel that it is important to at least have a basic knowledge of LGBT issues that students might face.

Casey, college staff

One thing I noticed with our HNC, HND Social Sciences was that mental health was probably the single biggest factor for students leaving the course. Often, where students were questioned, sexuality had come out, questions in gender identity, there were mental health issues associated, and the two kind of overlapped.

Jenny, college lecturer

Making sure that existing mental health support is LGBT inclusive, and promoting it as such, could be very beneficial in helping LGBT students to continue their studies.

FINANCIAL DEPENDENCE AND LIVING AT HOME

Not all students have the option of moving away from home as part of their studies, particularly those in further education or those with less income. Students living at home felt a lack of freedom to discover or express their identity as an LGBT person.

I didn't actually move into Glasgow to complete my degree until my fourth year. Going into university, having this fantastic freeing experience and then having to go home and having to be very straight, having to have sort of like two versions of yourself is quite demoralising.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

I think next year [my boyfriend is] moving back home, but he's staying with me half the time ... I thought it would be negative for him, because obviously he would be trying to suppress [our relationship] when he's at home, and I was encouraging him to move out, but I think it's just his financial situation.

Max, university student

Participants also highlighted that living at home, and the financial dependence that students can face, also carries the risk for LGBT students of being thrown out or losing that support if they come out.

Some examples you hear is that students are leaving the course because they've come out at home and family have been put them out, or family are no longer financially supporting them. Or just the sort of emotional turmoil of that process has been too much and their studies have suffered.

Jenny, college lecturer

Whilst perhaps the reason that's recorded in the college system for them leaving is illness or mental health problems, that might be masking that the student left actually because they were having a huge hassle at home, because they'd come out or what have you.

Jenny, college lecturer

My parents divorced when I was 13 and I came out to my dad when I was 15. He picked me up by my collar and threw me out. We didn't speak for 18 months.

Alex, college student

We have data on staff but I don't think we've got anything on students.

Casey, college staff

A LACK OF DATA

Staff believed that some of their LGBT students were dropping out of education for reasons related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Half of my LGBT students who came out say between about August to October time are no longer in education.

Chris, recent graduate and college lecturer

I would say that we probably don't know enough about the experience of LGBT students ... It's a bit of that circular thing, if we can't identify who those students are how can we ask them what their experience has been.

Sarah, university staff

However, they felt that their institution did not collect enough information about students to be able to show this or act on it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this small sample scoping study was to draw out key themes around LGBT people's experiences of further and higher education. Now that we have identified these key issues, more research is needed to look at these in more depth, particularly the experiences of trans learners and LGBT learners in further education. The rates of LGBT young people dropping out of education also require further investigation. Based on the key themes from this study, we would also make the following recommendations.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

- ▶ Colleges and universities should ensure that efforts to support LGBT students and create inclusive environments reach across departments and campuses. Institutions should support and encourage staff to tackle discriminatory language, offering training where needed
- ▶ For institutions to be able to ensure their LGBT students have the same opportunities to progress, it's important to have accurate data on the experiences of LGBT students. Colleges and universities should monitor sexual orientation and trans identity throughout the student journey, particularly on beginning and leaving the course, as well as student satisfaction
- ▶ Institutions should encourage and support lecturers and course leaders to consider where they can appropriately include LGBT content in their curricula

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL LEAVERS AND PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

- ▶ Schools should target particular careers support to LGBT students who have experienced bullying as they leave school to ensure this does not deter or prevent them from accessing further or higher education
- ▶ Schools, colleges and universities should continue to be aware of stereotypes around specific careers and fields of study in order to encourage participation from LGBT students
- ▶ Colleges should continue to promote a positive, inclusive ethos to encourage LGBT learners to continue into further education

STUDENT SERVICES

- ▶ If learners prefer to talk to LGBT staff or students about issues relating to their sexual orientation or gender identity, they may not be making the most of available pastoral support. Institutions should ensure that pastoral staff and student advisors are equipped to support LGBT young people, and proactively signpost these services to LGBT students
- ▶ Students who are transitioning may find it difficult to attend college or university. Institutions should ensure pastoral and practical support is available to students who are transitioning to ensure that they are able to continue their course of study
- ▶ LGBT students may be more likely to need support around mental health and housing, but may not feel able to approach these services. Colleges and universities should look into promoting and tailoring housing services and mental health services towards LGBT students, who may have specific needs
- ▶ Strong LGBT student societies can be invaluable in creating an inclusive atmosphere, but this depends on them running consistently from year to year. Colleges and universities should actively support LGBT student societies, and liaise with them to develop stronger institutional support for LGBT students

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**EXPERIENCES
OF LGBT PEOPLE
IN POST 16
EDUCATION**
