

LGBT+ Societies in FE

NUS LGBT+ Campaign

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Introduction

Introduction

The NUS LGBT+ Campaign exists to defend and promote the rights of LGBT+ students across the UK and beyond. One of the ways that we do this is by supporting students who want to set up LGBT+ groups or societies in their colleges.

We believe that LGBT+ societies often provide much needed support for LGBT+ students, they are a place students feel they can be completely open about who they are and be accepted for it. Although there are hundreds of thousands of LGBT+ students in Further Education (FE) across the UK, not many LGBT+ societies exist in FE colleges. There are many reasons for the lack of LGBT+ societies in FE colleges and setting one up can be a challenge, that's why we've created this guide to help you overcome some of those challenges.

This guide will include: ideas on how to go about setting up an LGBT+ society, solutions to some of the problems you may face and tips for how to keep your society going. It will also include some of the findings from our Pride and Prejudice Research into the experiences of students in FE. We've also provided some case studies from colleges that are at different stages of having set up a society.

If you have any questions about anything that has been suggested or would like someone to come and visit your union to chat to a group of LGBT+ students to help create an action plan for how to move forwards then please get in touch with us on: lgbt@nus.org.uk

In Unity



Melantha Chittenden - NUS LGBT+ Officer (Women's Place)

Glossary

Glossary

Asexual

A person who experiences no sexual feelings or desires.

Bigender

A person who experiences two gender identities, whether simultaneously or distinctly. These could be binary or non-binary identities.

Binary

When used in reference to gender identities, binary refers to man and woman gender identities.

Biphobia

The irrational fear and intolerance of people who are bisexual.

Bisexual

A person who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sexually attracted to members of more than one gender.

Cisgendered

A person whose gender identity matches the social expectations for the physical sex they were assigned at birth.

Coming out

The ongoing process of coming to terms with and telling other people about your sexual orientation or gender identity. Most people assume that you are straight/cisgendered unless you tell them otherwise, which means that coming out is a continuous process for the majority of LGBT+ people.

Discrimination

Unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of prejudice.

Gay

Usually, but not always, refers to men who are emotionally, physically, spiritually and sexually attracted to other men. Also used as an umbrella term for the LGBT+ community. Some lesbian women also refer to themselves as gay.

Genderqueer

Includes a variety of gender identities which do not exist within the gender binary. This includes experiencing multiple genders, having no gender and having a changing gender identity.

Gender identity

The gender that a person sees themselves as, which can include refusing to be labelled with a gender at all. It is not always possible to tell someone's gender identity from their outward appearance.

Heterosexuality

Sexual, emotional, and/or romantic attraction to a sex other than your own. Commonly thought of as attraction to the opposite sex. Heterosexual people are also referred to as straight.

Homophobia

Fear, anger, discomfort, intolerance, or lack of acceptance toward LGBT+ people, or experiencing these feelings about one's own non-heterosexual preference.

Lesbian

A woman who is emotionally, physically, spiritually and sexually attracted to other women.

LGBT+

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans. The '+' includes anyone who self-defines as any other marginalised romantic/sexual orientation or gender identity (such as asexual, pansexual, bigender, and genderqueer), or who choose not to define their romantic/sexual orientation or gender identity.

Non-binary

A person who experiences gender outside of the gender binary.

Out

Refers to a person being open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Pansexual

A person who experiences sexual attraction to people of any sexuality or gender.

Sexual Orientation

To whom a person is attracted. Not to be confused with sexual preference: what a person likes to do sexually.

Trans

Someone whose gender identity does not match the social expectations for the physical sex they were born with. When NUS talks about trans people we use it as an umbrella term for a variety of people who identify as transsexual, genderqueer, transvestite or transgender.

Transphobia

Fear or hatred of trans people; transphobia is manifested in a number of ways, including violence, harassment and discrimination.

Background

Background

In 2016 NUS released *Pride and Prejudice*, our research into the experiences of LGBT+ students and staff in further education. This research revealed that, whilst students and young people have been at the forefront of changing the way we talk about gender and sexuality over recent years, LGBT+ students in further education (FE) are still regularly victims of homophobic and transphobic abuse.

We found that negative behaviour towards learners based on their sexual orientation or gender identity is common. 60% of learners who took part in the *Pride and Prejudice* research reported having witnessed another learner acting negatively towards people because of their sexual orientation at least once. One in 10 respondents had seen or heard this behaviour every day; and more than half of lesbian/gay and non-binary students had experienced homophobic or transphobic name-calling. Non-binary learners were more likely than any other group to have experienced name-calling, harassment, threats or intimidation, physical assault or any other kind of bullying.

Homophobia and transphobia can have a hugely negative impact on LGBT+ learners' ability to engage with and succeed in their education. Almost half of learners who describe their gender as neither male nor female (non-binary) had seriously considered dropping out of education, compared with 35 per cent of respondents on average. What is more, 13% of gay and lesbian and 16% of non-binary respondents were also more than twice as likely than average (6 per cent) to say that they had considered leaving education because of the way they were treated.

It is essential that LGBT+ learners are able to access support throughout their time in FE to enable them to continue onto university or into paid employment. LGBT+ societies are an excellent tool for doing this. Not only do they provide spaces for LGBT+ students to safely discuss the issues they face, they are a great place for making friends and working together to affect change in your college. Unfortunately, our research shows that the existence and visibility of LGBT groups in educational institutions is fairly low; fewer than one in four learners in *Pride and Prejudice* were aware of an officially recognised group in their school or college.

This guidance will provide you with all you need to know in order to set up an LGBT+ society in your institution and support LGBT+ learners to succeed in their education.¹

¹ National Union of Students, 2016, *Pride and Prejudice*, London: National Union of Students.

Making the case for an LGBT+ society

Making the case for an LGBT+ society

It's likely that you'll find supportive people throughout your college, whether it be staff or students, who will help you to set up your LGBT+ society. However it may be that you have to persuade some people who are resistant to the idea first, or who do not understand the need for an LGBT+ group of any kind. Below we have compiled a list of questions which you may get asked in this case and give ideas for answers.

Why do we need to have an LGBT+ society?

Peer Support

Starting college can be quite a daunting experience, and having an LGBT+ society is a great way for students to socialise with other LGBT+ students, have fun and make friends. LGBT+ societies also provide a space for students who are struggling with their sexuality or gender identity to meet other people to talk to who have had similar experiences.

Student Wellbeing

NUS research shows that young LGBT+ people in particular are at risk of violent attacks, harassment and name calling because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In *Pride and Prejudice*, 60% of learners reported having witnessed a learner acting negatively towards people because of their sexual orientation at least once, with 39% having witnessed negative behaviour towards trans people. It is the responsibility of the college to do all it can to prevent such behaviour. Supporting LGBT+ students to set up a society will help raise the profile of LGBT+ issues in the college and educate others about the dangers of homophobic and transphobic attitudes.

Promoting Equality

Colleges are legally bound by the 2010 Equality Act to protect students from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Act makes direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender reassignment illegal. The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) also requires colleges to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different groups.

Representation

LGBT+ students are best placed to describe the reality of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans in your college. If your college is serious about listening to students, an LGBT+ student group is essential for finding out about the issues that LGBT+ students face.

Retention

Homophobic and transphobic bullying have an impact on learners' ability to learn, or willingness to stay in education. In *Pride and Prejudice*, respondents who reported having seriously considered leaving their course or dropping out were asked for the reasons behind this. 13% of gay/lesbian learners and 16% of non-binary respondents say that they had considered leaving because of the way they were treated (e.g. they felt they had been bullied, harassed or discriminated against). This makes them more than twice as likely than average (6%) to do so. An LGBT+ group provides a safe space for learners to discuss these issues and provide support to each other.

There is no homophobia or transphobia at this institution – what is the point of an LGBT group?

NUS evidence shows that homophobia and transphobia are present in most institutions. It is also worth pointing out however that what makes it difficult to be LGBT+ in a college isn't always the obvious kind of discrimination. We already know that bullying and harassment are common, but indirect and institutional prejudice are too. This could be ignoring LGBT+ students' needs, not mentioning sexual orientation in equal opportunities policies or failing to challenge homophobic language. For example, when surveyed by Stonewall, only 10% of LGB learners said 'every time' in answer to the question: how often do teachers and other school staff intervene when they hear homophobic language?² Ultimately only LGBT+ students and staff can tell college leaders whether there is a problem with homophobia or transphobia in the institution. Why not set up an LGBT+ group to find out what they think?

We have lots of religious students here – they might have objections to an LGBT group

This statement rests on an assumption that all religious people are homophobic or transphobic. It is a common misconception that having both religious and LGBT+ student groups necessarily causes conflict. Furthermore lots of LGBT+ people have faith, and there are LGBT+ faith groups who you could invite to talk at your college or to your Board of Governors to address any concerns they might have. Stonewall survey revealed that the majority of people of faith supports laws allowing gay people protection from discrimination and more than 9 in 10 religious people believe that homophobic bullying should be tackled.³

Ultimately it is illegal to discriminate against or fail to protect LGBT+ individuals in educational domains. Colleges should be places where prejudice is challenged and people feel free to express new ideas, rather than somewhere where stereotypes are used to pit groups of students against each other.

² Stonewall (2012) *The School Report* [online]

³ Stonewall (2007) *Living together: British attitudes to lesbian and gay people* [online]

Setting up your LGBT+ society

Setting up your LGBT+ society

It is important to be clear from the very beginning what you are trying to achieve with your LGBT+ group. Making sure your group has a clear function will encourage others to join and will mean that they know what they are joining.

The best way of making this decision is to ask LGBT+ students at your college what they would want from an LGBT+ group. You could try an online anonymous survey so that people who are nervous about coming out can have their say. You could also hold focus groups with different groups of students. Remember, there is really no point in setting up a group that doesn't meet the needs of its members.

The most important thing to remember when you are setting up your LGBT+ group is that not all students will have the same needs and interests as you. Your LGBT+ group must represent the full diversity of LGBT+ students at your college. This means that students who define as lesbian, gay, bi and trans should all be involved in setting up and feeding into the group. It is also important that perspectives from all LGBT+ students across other liberation groups are also represented.

Jargon Buster:

Liberation

Liberation is the seeking of equal status and freedom from all forms of oppression. The word liberation is symbolic for NUS and reflects the groups who face oppression in society today.

The five NUS liberation campaigns are: Women, Black, Disabled, LGBT+ and Trans

The Liberation Campaigns are led by those who self-define into the group facing that collective oppression.

Liberation is important to NUS because discrimination against students' identities can affect their ability to access and succeed in education.

It is usually best to keep a nice balance between socialising, support and campaigning. Social groups can quickly become cliquey and inaccessible to new members, but it is also important to keep the social and support side going if you decide to focus on campaigning.

Alternatively, there is an option to set up separate groups dealing with different things. Some colleges use this model, which is outlined in the next section, very successfully.

Having More Than One Group

Some further education institutions have separate groups dealing with different things for example, a support group and an action group. In this section we explain how this might work and the benefits of using such a model.

Student Support Groups

The point of these groups is to provide an opportunity for LGBT+ students to discuss issues around sexual orientation and gender identity with other students. These groups are ideally student-led and only open to LGBT+ students. It would normally fall under the umbrella of the students' union. It may be that the group receives some support from a staff member or other professional.

Here is a sample terms of reference which you can use to set out the purpose of your support group:

The LGBT+ student group offers support to students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or anyone who self-defines as any other marginalised romantic/sexual orientation or gender identity. It meets in confidence to explore and discuss issues including: sexual health and education; coming out to friends/family/at college; homophobia; bullying and discrimination and any other concerns. The group is supported by an experienced and trained staff member. In the first instance, interested students should contact the student services manager in confidence.

It is important to ensure that the support groups remain confidential (there is more information about this later).

Student-Staff Action Groups

Action groups campaign against homophobia and transphobia and can also act as a consultative group of staff and students to liaise with the institution about sexual orientation and gender identity equality.

Having an action group provides an opportunity for staff and students to swap information about what it is like to be LGBT+ in the college, or simply to discuss the incidence of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in the institution. Student-staff action groups could look at the following:

- Developing sexual orientation and gender identity policies for the institution
- Discussing issues around 14–16 year old LGBT+ students in FE
- Monitoring the institution's progress in relation to legislation i.e. is it complying with the 2010 equality act?
- Working with senior management to establish a system for recording and monitoring incidents of homophobic and transphobic bullying

Type of group	Purpose
Campaigning/action group	To take action against homophobia and transphobia
Social group	To have fun and meet other LGBT+ students
Support group	To provide a space for LGBT+ students to meet and discuss issues around sexual orientation and gender identity

What are the benefits of setting up two groups?

Having an LGBT+ student-only group helps to preserve the autonomy of LGBT+ students in the institution.

Autonomy is key to the campaign and a central principle of NUS. We believe that only LGBT+ students should decide their priorities – that is why events that NUS runs where campaign priorities are decided can only be attended by LGBT+ students.

NUS also believes that it is important to provide a safe space for LGBT+ students where they will be free from homophobia and transphobia and will not have to 'out' themselves to their heterosexual counterparts. This is why it is important to have LGBT+ student-only self-defining groups. At the same time, there are lots of straight people who feel really strongly about homophobia and transphobia and want to get involved in changing things for the better. This is why an action group

is a good idea – it provides a forum for everyone in the college who wants to improve sexual orientation and gender identity equality to do their bit. As long as it is LGBT+ students who decide what the priorities are, when the issues affect LGBT+ students directly, then there is no reason why other people can't help.

Support groups	Action groups
LGBT+ only	Open to non LGBT+ members
Students only	Open to students and staff
Part of the students' union and able to access students' union funds	Official standing within the institution as a consultative group; any costs paid by the institution
Lower-profile	High-profile
Provides a space to discuss what it is like to be LGBT+ in the institution	Takes action against homophobia and transphobia
Organises social events for LGBT+ students	Looks at institutional culture change and makes recommendations

Membership and Support

As we have said above, we believe it can be useful to have an action group composed of staff and students. However, support groups should definitely be student-only to protect both students and staff. If your group is LGBT+ only then you should leave it up to individuals to decide whether or not they should join the group – that is to decide whether or not they are LGBT+.

NUS operates a system of 'self-definition' – meaning we trust people to decide for themselves if they should attend closed LGBT+ events. If you think about it there is no other way of telling if someone is LGBT+ and you should never question someone's decision. At the same time make it clear in your first meeting how important this trust is for the autonomy of the group.

Having an autonomous group doesn't mean that you can't ask for help! It may be that in setting up your group you work with a member of staff in the initial stages. People you may wish to discuss ideas with could include:

- **The Equality and Diversity Manager** at your institution (if you have one)
- **Senior Management Team** member responsible for equality and diversity
- **Trade union equality official** if the staff have an active trade union there may be a member of the union with responsibility for equality. Ask a staff member for information about who this might be. Bear in mind that there may not be an active trade union branch, and even if they are active, they may not have an equality official
- **Students' Union President**
- **Student Governors** ask one of your student governors to submit a paper to the Governors' meeting explaining how an LGBT+ group could benefit the college
- **Board of Governors** information about the college's governing body should be held publicly – ask in your college library for details
- **Student Staff Liaison Officer (SSLO)**
- **Student Services**

People are your most important resource and setting up the group will be easier if you are not doing everything yourself. The best place to start is often with the people you know – do you have other LGBT+ friends in the college who will be able to help you kick start the group? Are there any 'out' LGBT+ tutors or staff that might be supportive? If so, start with them. They may have ideas or experience of doing this before.

How Your Group Fits into the Students' Union

It's important to make sure you follow any rules that your union has when setting up your group. Find out about your constitution from your students' union representatives. The constitution is the document that governs how your students' union works, it should have information about what you need to do when setting up your group. To access students' union funds you may need to follow certain rules such as:

- Having a minimum number of members or interested students.
- Charging a membership fee – this should be minimal to make sure that finances don't stop people becoming involved.
- Having a constitution – this can help lay out the structure of the group and also the main aims.
- Contact your students' union for a model constitution.
- Electing members to positions such as chair, secretary or treasurer.
- Submitting a list of names of members (in this case, you will need to argue that it is not appropriate to submit a named list of members because of confidentiality).

Your First Meeting

Once you have decided what kind of group you are going to set up, found out all the rules you need to follow, and argued the case with the college, you can hold your first meeting.

To try and get people to the first meeting, think about the following:

- Hold the meeting in a room that people can go to inconspicuously (see 'space' section later on).
- Think about different types of students when setting a time. For example, don't have a meeting on a Friday evening (Jewish students may not be able to attend) or in the evening (student parents may not be able to attend). Wednesday afternoon could be your best bet if no lessons are scheduled then.
- Advertise all over your college. You can access resources from the NUS LGBT+ campaign on the NUS Connect website.
- Put posters up on notice boards, classroom doors and in toilets (get permission first!)
- Is there a student newspaper or magazine at your college? If so ask to put an article in about the new group with the date of the first meeting and an e-mail address. Set up an e-mail address for the group on hotmail or another free e-mail service so that you don't give out your personal e-mail address.
- Ask the college to send out an e-mail inviting all students (and staff, if appropriate) to the first meeting.
- Are there lots of people in your college whose first language isn't English? If so make sure you put up posters in that language.

Ideas for the first meeting:

- An icebreaker – this is a good way to get people talking and relaxed.
- Discussion about the aims of the group – what will you focus on as your priorities for action (for an action group)? What will be your first social activity (for a social group)? What issues would you like to discuss (for a support group)?
- Invite someone from a local LGBT+ organisation to come and talk to the group about what they do
- Invite one of the NUS LGBT+ officers to come and talk to the group about the NUS LGBT+ campaign

LGBT+ societies need commitment and some work to keep them going. Don't fall into the trap of leaving all the work to a small number of people, remain flexible and open to suggestions and encourage initiative. There are LGBT+ groups all over the UK so if your group is having problems or needs some help not only can you contact NUS, but there will inevitably be another group nearby that has faced or is facing the same challenge and would be willing to lend a helping hand. We have included case studies in this pack for this reason.

Increasing LGBT+ visibility in your college

It may be that there are no other societies or groups in your college, or that you meet resistance in setting up the group from college authorities. If this is the case, there are other ways to ensure that LGBT+ students are more visible in your college. There may be a well-developed programme of enrichment or Wednesday afternoon activities. In this case it is a good idea to try and tap into what already exists as a way to increase visibility of LGBT+ issues in your college. For example:

- If your union regularly organises trips, suggest they organise a summer trip to your local Pride festival.
- If the college is running prominent anti-violence or anti-bullying campaigns, make sure the LGBT+ perspective is included. You could suggest that your college sets up a hate crime reporting centre, where students who have been victims of hate crime can safely report their experience to a member of staff if they don't want to go to the police. This will have the added advantage of drawing attention to the existence of homophobic and transphobic hate crime.
- Colleges often tap into national events and celebrations. Make sure your college celebrates LGBT+ History Month in February or Trans Day of Remembrance on 20th November. Invite speakers from the local community to talk about LGBT+ life in the past, show LGBT+ films or set up a display of LGBT+ historical events.
- Most students' unions have notice boards where you can display materials. Ask to put up an LGBT+ poster, you can find these on the NUS Connect website.

Other issues to consider

14 –16 Year Olds

NUS strongly recommends that LGBT+ groups should not be open to students under the age of 16. Under 16-year-olds are, in law, children and therefore colleges must uphold child protection legislation in order to protect them. This means that they should not spend unsupervised time with adults, unless they are CRB-checked college employees or volunteers.

14–16 year-olds are in any case not eligible to be members of students' unions and therefore are not eligible to join LGBT+ groups. However this may be difficult to implement, especially in large colleges where further and higher education institutions have merged. We recommend therefore that ID is requested at LGBT+ events to protect yourself and underage students.

If you are approached by someone under 16 for advice, do not attempt to advise the student; you are not qualified to do so. Instead, direct the student to local LGBT+ youth workers or groups. Make sure that you have looked up this information beforehand.

It is likely that you will have group members of different ages over the age of 16. For this reason, it is important to understand the following:

- Child protection legislation defines 'children' as anyone under 18, and 'vulnerable adults' as anyone over 18 who may be especially vulnerable to abuse.
- The age of consent for sexual activity is 16, whether you are heterosexual or LGBT+.

What has this got to do with me?

Any group members under the age of 18 will be classified as 'children' in legal terms; you may also have group members who would be classified as 'vulnerable adults'.

Therefore, the college has a responsibility to ensure their health and safety when taking part in any activities related to the college (for example your LGBT+ group). They should have a policy about student groups and representatives which you should follow. This policy may say for example that students who run groups or societies in the students' union are in positions of trust and responsibility and therefore that it would be inappropriate for them to have relationships with members of the group under the age of 18.

It is important to understand that the responsibility for child protection issues lies with the college, and not with you or the students' union. The college will have a child protection policy and staff member responsible for child protection issues (called a child protection officer). Ask your students' union to clarify this issue with the child protection officer, if they have not done so already, and to provide clear instructions about the rules you need to follow.

Notwithstanding the fact that the college has ultimate responsibility here, and will guide you on this issue, NUS recommends that as a matter of best practice that anyone running the group does not enter into relationships with people under the age of 18 in the group.

Money

Many FE students' unions have very little cash to spare to support activities and societies. It is worth finding out from your students' union president whether there is a budget for societies, and if so how you can access the money. Alternatively you may be able to access funding through the

college enrichment programme. Some colleges fund LGBT+ societies this way. You will need to find out who is responsible for coordinating the programme to find out whether this is a possibility. If you reach a dead-end do not despair! It is possible to run events at little or no cost. Alternatively, you could think about contacting another college or even university LGBT+ group. Not only does this increase the number of people who can get involved in your activities, but you can also share costs.

NUS LGBT+ Campaign can help you with this by putting you in contact with other college or university groups in your area. FE and HE partnerships can have benefits for both sides including increased participation and shared resources. Why not try contacting another group nearby to see how you can work together?

Space

Space can be a problem in many colleges. Common rooms can be located in public areas where LGBT+ students might not feel safe. If you have Wednesday afternoons free for enrichment or sports, you could try booking a classroom for your LGBT+ meeting. If you're unsure who to ask, try your SU President or SSLO to start with, or someone in student services.

If classrooms are being used all the time, or you find it difficult to book a classroom for another reason, you could think about other spaces outside of the college you could use. For example, community centres often have free space which groups can use. However if you do this make sure it is as near the college as possible. Don't forget that some students at your college may have religious beliefs which prevent them from attending events where alcohol is being served, so it is best to avoid holding your meetings in pubs (not to mention that many of your members will be under 18).

Time

It may be difficult to find a time that is suitable for the students at your college who want to come along to your LGBT+ group. It is likely that some students will have caring responsibilities which will prevent them from attending evening activities. For this reason it is a good idea to vary the time of your meeting each week so that different people can come along.

Outing yourself (and others!)

You may be reluctant to talk to staff or students' union representatives if your college is not LGBT+ friendly. If this is the case try approaching someone who you do feel comfortable talking to. There may be a college counsellor who you can talk to in confidence and who may be able to advise you about other staff who could help you. Counsellors are professionally bound not to disclose information that you share with them, so you do not need to worry about them telling anyone else about your sexual orientation or gender identity. There will also be a member of staff who is responsible for equal opportunities (including sexual orientation and gender identity) – this information should be available on your college website.

You also have a responsibility to ensure that you do everything you can to ensure that members of your group who do not wish to come out are not 'outed'. This means keeping details of group members secure, and not telling other people who belongs to the group without their express permission. Make it clear when you are inviting people to join the group if it is going to be in a

public place where they may be seen by other students so that they can make their own decision about whether or not to attend.

Direct or indirect prejudice

It may be that you come up against homophobic, biphobic or transphobic attitudes when you are trying to set up an LGBT+ group, whether this be from staff or other students. The important thing is not to feel discouraged – lots of other colleges have LGBT+ groups and you have every right to set one up. If you're having problems, go back to your learner agreement or equal opportunities policy which should be available on your college website. Both of these should include statements about discrimination and equal opportunities which you can refer back to if you feel you are being unfairly treated because of your sexual orientation or gender identity. It is very hard to argue against something which is written down!

If it gets really bad, you could try presenting your case to the Board of Governors. FE colleges should have two student governors who you can approach to represent your views on the board who control the college. Make sure they are fully briefed before the meeting, and have all the information in this briefing as well as the research mentioned earlier.

If you need any further support, contact the NUS LGBT+ Campaign. We are here to support you to develop your group, and can come to your college and help you out if you are facing problems. We also have FE reps on our committee who you can talk to. Even if it feels like it sometimes, you are not alone!

Case studies

Case Studies

The following two case studies look at two situations where students tried to set up LGBT+ groups in their colleges, with different results. They show the kind of obstacles that students can face and how they managed those difficulties.

The city that my college is in is quite homophobic to say the least. I can't walk alone at night through the town without someone shouting some homophobic abuse at me or trying to start a fight. So I knew trying to set up an LGBT+ society at the college was going to be hard.

At the start of term I got in touch with the lecturer who deals with student clubs and societies and he thought it was a really good idea, so he put it on a list that was to be taken to management so they could see what was going to be set up and if it was covered by insurance etc. I went along to the meeting expecting to have to fight for the society as a few friends at other colleges had told me some colleges don't allow it for different reasons. The lecturer and I went in and all was going well and she said yes to all of the societies but not the LGBT+ one. She completely missed it out, I thought it was a mistake and asked if there could be an LGBT+ society set up. 'No' was the answer that I got. I enquired as to why and her answer was 'Not very many people will attend because they probably don't even know what it is! I know I don't!' I explained what an LGBT+ society was about – she stopped me mid-explanation and said 'Ok, the reason I don't think we should have one of these LGBT+ things is because to be quite frank, I don't think we have any LGBT+ students in this college; also it will probably insult more people than would attend it.'

Since seeing this woman, I've gone through more channels than I knew existed in college but to no avail. I've spoken to other members of the management team, student welfare, lecturers and friends to see if I had missed something that meant that the college had to have an LGBT society because there was a genuine student interest. I've even contacted several different organisations including the students' union, and the last I heard they were trying to sort it out. It came as quite a blow to me and a few others, that management would say such a thing as "I don't think we have any LGBT+ students in this college". A few officers at the student union took it quite personally and its now in their capable hands, so hopefully when I go back either after my exams or to do my final year there may be an LGBT+ society to run.

I realised there was a need to set up an LGBT+ group within the college when I saw a few openly gay students were meeting daily at lunch and I could see other students were looking to join them. I took the initiative to approach the students' union and ask if a group could be set up. This was easy as it fell into the constitution so the SU organised a room and advertising and even gave us a budget of £100 which we used to fund a trip to tenpin bowling and advertising. The group started fairly small with only five or six members but now there are over 20. The college are pleased as we help give good expert advice with the diversity policy (we are the experts at being LGBT+ students within the college). Now we also have a dedicated LGBT+ officer on the Student Representational Council (SRC) who has an automatic place on the diversity forum which feeds directly into the college Board of Management. This has led to us setting up as a hate crime reporting centre with students being able to come to SRC officers as well as staff to report hate related crime.

An important part of establishing the society at our college was to advertise; we used posters, announcements in the Student Union's email and we held a stall at the Fresher's fair with leaflets, advice and we also spoke to one of our local groups Yorkshire Mesmac and gathered leaflets, sexual health tools such as condoms and put these out for people. This promoted sexual health but we also had cards with the contact details of our LGBT+ Officer/Society president which meant that even if they did not wish to speak at that moment I.e. due to not being out to friends or others with them, it would mean they could contact either of us later for either support or to ask any questions they might have about the society. We also made sure to write the location of our weekly meetings and the time on these papers, letting people consider their options with no pressure whilst also meaning they could perhaps meet with the president or LGBT+ officer to begin with and ease themselves into the LGBT+ Community within our college. To maintain our society, we remain active during LGBT+ History month with talks, activities and workshops based around the struggles our students face whilst also offering options for them to seek help but during the year, we focus on our students and improving college/education for them in any way we can. Regular meetings has been essential with this, as has working with the diversity officers within our college.

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