I'm gay
I'm lesbian
I am bisexual
I am transgender
I am like you
I'm human
BORN THIS WAY
‘Flying under the Radar’

The experiences and perceptions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning students and how they differed from heterosexual experiences and perceptions of the campus climate at Unitec Campus in New Zealand in 2012

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International studies have demonstrated that University or Higher Education campus environments for LGBT students are often “chilly” and less than satisfactory in regards to the areas of acceptance, inclusion and safety (Rankin, 2003; Baker, 2008).

Within New Zealand, several studies have been completed on the experiences of LGBTIQ youth at high school (Riches, 2011; Rossen, Lucassen, Denny, & Robinson, 2009; Yep, 2003). These identified that LGBTIQ youth experienced higher levels of alcohol use, drug use and mental health issues. The researchers reported incidences of bullying, victimisation, harassment and assaults, with levels of suicide and self-harm well above and beyond those of their heterosexual peers (Rossen et al., 2009).
This research was based on previous research completed on campus climates for LGBT students by Rankin (2003) in the US.

It aimed to explore and better understand the experiences of current LBGTIQ students on the Unitec Campus in 2012, from both a statistical as well as experiential perspective.

The research was independent of Unitec and funded by the writer.
The research utilised a descriptive research methodology using a survey questionnaire which incorporated quantitative (closed) and qualitative (open-ended) questions.
The population being studied was the entire student population enrolled at Unitec in August 2012 who had an active student email account.

The students were invited via an email to their student email account to participate in an anonymous survey questionnaire exploring the Unitec Campus environment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex or Questioning (LGBTIQ) students.
There was a total number of useable and completed responses from 355 students.

The completed survey represented the following: 195 heterosexual students and 148 Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning students, made up of:
- 30 self-identified Lesbian students,
- 30 self-identified Gay students,
- 57 self-identified Bisexual students,
- 3 self-identified Transgender students,
- 28 self-identified Questioning students and 1 self-identified Intersex student.

Twelve students did not answer the gender or orientation question. One student identified as Intersex gender identity with a Bisexual orientation.
Four themes were revealed from a factor analysis of the quantitative data and thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Overarching all of the themes identified was the concept of heteronormativity.

The four themes were:

**LGBTIQ Data**

**Theme One:** Non-disclosure and Perception of fear by Unitec LGBTIQ students

**Theme Two:** Invisibility and the desire for community for Unitec LGBTIQ students
**Heterosexual Data**

**Theme Three:** Sexuality a non-issue for Unitec heterosexual students

**Institutional Data**

**LGBTIQ and Heterosexual Data**

**Theme Four:** Student uncertainty regarding Institutional Responses and Unitec Policies
I can't recall seeing anything around campus promoting or encouraging people who have a different sexual orientation to the norm so maybe that is why I chose to fly beneath the radar. (Bisexual female, 33-42, FSHS)
Almost 39% (n=57) of LGBTIQ students said they had concealed their sexual orientation/gender identity in the last 12 months to avoid intimidation.

Seventy three percent (n=107) of LGBTIQ students were not out professionally and personally on the Unitec campus, i.e. remained either somewhat closeted, ranging from fully closeted, to out to friends and family, but not out to all professionally and personally on the Unitec campus.
Almost 7% percent of Unitec LGBTIQ students reported fearing for their safety on the Unitec campus over the last 12 months due to sexual orientation/gender identity.

In terms of actual harassment, 10.1% of LGBTIQ Unitec students reported being a victim of harassment in the last 12 months due to sexual orientation/gender identity.
Of note, is that 16.7% (n=3) of the harassment reported by LGBTIQ students at Unitec in the previous 12 months consisted of physical assault or injury.

This is eight times greater than the 2% (n=11) of reported physical assault or injury in Rankin’s (2003) study and double the percentage of harassment reported in Ellis’ (2009) study at 8.8%.
Many students identified a personal ‘Don’t Ask; Don’t Tell’ policy. They chose to conceal their identity unless directly asked, finding silence was the best form of non-disclosure.
I'm not the kind of person who declares my sexual identity to everybody. But if anyone asks, I don't lie. Also, I wouldn't know anyone else who is gay/les/trans because nobody really shows their colours, just like me. I'm not saying whether Unitec is gay friendly or not, but not everybody wants to tell everyone that they are. Some for security reasons, but mostly because nobody wants it thrown in their face like a Mormon on a bicycle on a Saturday morning you know? (Gay male, 23-32, FCIB)
Despite levels of fear and reported harassment in this research being considerably lower than international studies, Unitec LGBTIQ students were much less likely than their international counterparts to be out and proud, or out to all, professionally and personally on the Unitec campus.

The decision to remain somewhat closeted or to conceal sexual orientation appeared to be related to fear of repercussions, stigma, harassment, violence and discomfort, but also because students do not want to be accused of being ‘in your face’. 
I have also felt it hard to come out to all of my classmates as there are a lot of students who on many occasion make jokes which are harmless but in repetition can get to a point of frustration and exclusion. (Gay male, 22 and under, FTBE)

This student identified that it is often easier not to challenge this and explains why many LGBTIQ students find silence is the best solution:

...but in saying so it is expected but then impacts in that I don't want to be the red flag that stops fun and jokes because I'm around leading to further exclusion ... a very complicated game... what can you do!!!! (Gay male, 22 and under, FTBE)
A majority of harassment experienced (56.3%) came from other students. However, there were instances of harassment coming from staff and administrators.

I have been confronted by a particular lecturer ... who has repetitively made jokes about homosexuality ... making it extremely difficult to (1) respect him enough to actually learn from him and (2) made it difficult for me to approach him. (Gay male, under 22, FTBE)
I have had one lecturer who has made at least one joke in a lecture which solicited a laugh from the class, the same lecturer also made a comment on a different occasion about gay men, saying “that’s just wrong”. Although it was a joke in general, not targeted at any one, I guess it made me uncomfortable as I didn’t find it particularly funny but was forced to laugh in case not doing so could reveal my sexual orientation ... I did not report the incident because I felt I might be reading too much into it ... and besides he is a good lecturer and I didn’t want to cause him any professional trouble. (Gay male, 22 and under, FTBE)
Unequivocally, nearly all LGBTIQ students who responded to the open-ended question identified a desire for more visibility, openness and support on the Unitec campus and many said they did not know any other LGBTIQ students.

The most common form of support requested from LGBTIQ students was for a group.
Many students identified that they did not know any other LGBTIQ students or staff and they felt alone and invisible.
Several students identified in particular the lack of services from USU identifying that even within this service, which was there to support all students, LGBTIQ support was totally invisible.

They show everything that Unitec has to offer but there is nothing for gays. For example, the USU at orientation, they gave us information about everything we need to know about what they do, and how they’re here to help every student, from doctors, to seeing a lawyer, studies, where to eat, the gym and the list goes on, if they’re here to help all students they should include the gay and les as well. (Gay male, 23-32, FCIB)
I feel that Unitec does not have a policy of accepting or promoting LGBTIQ people. It would be great if Unitec had a policy like their Maori and Pacific Island policy for LGBTIQ people. Also it would be great if the Unitec Student Union set up a social group for LGBTIQ. (Gay male, 33-42, FCIB)

This level of invisibility, isolation and lack of support groups perpetuates and contributes greatly to choices around non-disclosure and the decision to remain “somewhat closeted”.
Theme Three: Sexuality a non-issue for heterosexual students

This theme was identified from heterosexual data collected from the open-ended question and revealed that 76% of heterosexual students did not believe there was discrimination or issues on campus for LGBTIQ students.
Have no experience of any discrimination for whatever reason on campus or in communication. (Heterosexual male, 53+, FSHS)

I haven’t experienced any circumstances which highlight your concerns although personally I am very accepting of everyone. (Heterosexual female, 23-32, FCIB)

I haven't experienced, witnessed or heard of any form of discrimination towards anyone. (Heterosexual male, 23-32, FTBE)
Some heterosexual students did however acknowledge the lack of support:

I have not been aware of any issues regarding sexual discrimination or harassment, nor have I been aware of any support systems in place by Unitec. (Heterosexual female, 22 and under, FSHS)
Theme Four: Institutional Responses was drawn from both LGBTIQ and heterosexual data and revealed that all students appeared uncertain, or had a lack of faith, regarding the institutional ability to provide adequate responses or leadership, or to adequately teach or provide resources in regard to LGBTIQ concerns.
Both heterosexual and LGBTIQ students were asked to rate the Unitec campus on friendliness, and whether the campus was seen as: communicative, cooperative, respectful, concerned, racist, sexist, homophobic and accessible to people with a disability.

LGBTIQ students rated/viewed Unitec in a less favourable light than their heterosexual peers.
Unitec is heterocentric and avoids discussion about gay people. (Questioning female, 22 and under, FSHS)
Homophobia

Some students expressed blatant homophobia

Gays should hide away and not be shown in public. I’m a homophobe and I’m proud.
(Heterosexual male, 22 and under, FTBE)
I think gays and lesbians should stop being so precious and in your face about their differences. They should accept they are abnormal and that most people find their activities abhorrent. Once they deal with that they can go on living their lives as they please, rather than getting upset about normal behaviour of the majority of people and shouting homophobia as if that makes people scared to call a spade a spade. I think if they are prepared to makes choices then they had best be prepared to live with the consequences. (Heterosexual male, 32-42, FTBE)
Overarching all of the themes was the concept of heteronormativity.

Carpenter and Lee (2010) identify that heteronormativity is, in today’s society, so pervasive that it permeates everyday life and can lead to sexuality issues or non-heterosexual identities being perceived as a non-issue.

Hylton (2005) suggests that the invisibility of LGBTIQ people is an insidious manifestation of heteronormativity.
A multi-pronged holistic approach, with a variety of recommendations and strategies to address LGBTIQ-identified issues has been suggested here as a priority in order to bring about a culture shift towards ‘inclusive excellence’ for LGBTIQ Unitec students.
Future Directions: Transforming the Unitec environment for LGBTIQ students

Recommendations

- Ally Programme
- Safe Space
- Group and Social Events
- USU – Unitec Student Union
- LGBTIQ Celebrate Diversity Day
- Policies and Procedures
- Education – Staff, students and courses
- Recruiting LGBTIQ staff and students
- Additional Research
According to Rankin et al., (2010, p. 5):

It is said we learn the best when we are able to open up and truly listen to others. Through the stories, voices and experiences of others, we find truth – the kind of truth that exposes raw uncensored emotion and reality. In return others learn to do the same. Creating safe, welcoming spaces for students to learn and succeed is the purpose of a college, technical institute or University.


