

# Inclusive and Safe Environment for LGBTI+ in Lithuanian Universities? Reflecting Realities and Challenges<sup>1</sup>

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This paper discusses the results of the international applied research project ‘UniDiversity – Universities Towards Diversity’ that examined what discriminatory attitudes, beliefs and behaviours based on sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics (SOGISC) exist in the Lithuanian, Greek and Italian academic environment. Specifically, this paper analyses how LGBTI+ individuals conceive of different forms of discrimination in the Lithuanian academic environment. The paper fills the knowledge gap in terms of intolerance and discrimination against LGBTI+ individuals at Lithuanian higher education institutions and provides its theoretical explanation. By focusing on the empirical data collected from survey and focus group interviews, the paper interprets them within the framework of both the sociopolitical context and theoretical debates about heteronormative attitudes. The paper argues that there exists a gap between the declarative openness to LGBTI+ people within Lithuanian universities and persisting stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards them.

**Keywords:** social exclusion, LGBTI+, SOGISC, higher education, heteronormativity, homophobia

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## INTRODUCTION

Research on discrimination against minority students and staff at higher education institutions points to a diverse set of questions raised and methodologies employed to address the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, it was found that verbal harassment was more prevalent than physical violence towards LGBTI+ individuals which nevertheless creates a ‘climate of fear’ (Ellis 2009: 727) and places them at increased risk of psychological distress. Other studies demonstrated that discrimination leads to isolation and avoidance of campus and other

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<sup>2</sup> Discrimination in this paper is defined as an inappropriate treatment, behaviour and actions against individuals based on their gender identity, sexual orientation or/and sex characteristics.

students with perpetrators being fellow students from LGBTI+ community (Evans et al. 2017; Papadaki 2017; Smith et al. 2022; Campen et al. 2022). Victims of homo-, bi- or trans-phobic bullying report higher levels of stress and anxiety, lower self-esteem and poorer academic achievements as well as long-term academic success (Maunder, Crafter 2018; Young-Jones et al. 2015, as quoted in Clark et al. 2022: 1).

Research data show that LGBTI+ individuals are among the most disliked social groups in Lithuania and face discrimination. According to the 2019 Eurobarometer, every second Lithuanian agrees that 'gay, lesbian, and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people,' while one in four disagrees. Even more discriminatory views exist regarding same-sex marriages. Only one-third (30%) of Lithuanians agree that 'same-sex marriages should be permitted throughout Europe' (EU average: 69%), while 63% disagree (EU average: 26%). In this regard, Lithuania falls among the countries that are most likely to oppose marriage equality for all.

No studies tackling discrimination against LGBTI+ individuals at higher education institutions in Lithuania have been conducted while other related studies include the research on vulnerable communities and their experiences of multitude violence and harassment in Lithuania. It shows that LGBT+ individuals rarely disclose their sexual orientation and suffer from various types of violence (from verbal to occasional physical assault) because of institutionalized homophobia (Labanauskas 2019: 49). According to the Lithuanian Gay League's survey of 136 schoolteachers and 152 homosexual/bisexual pupils and first-year university students, there exists a widespread denial of bullying by teachers despite pupils and students reporting having experienced bullying (Lithuanian Gay League 2015). 57.4% of teachers stated that homophobic bullying did not occur at their school and only 11% acknowledged that they had witnessed such an incident. While half of the pupils (52%) hide their sexual orientation in the school and only come out to the people they are closest to, 79% still faced bullying because of their sexual orientation. Consistent with other studies, verbal harassment (such as slander, jokes, name-calling and teasing) takes place more frequently than physical violence in Lithuania, as revealed by pupils/students (Lithuanian Gay League 2015).

By using two focus groups with students, teachers, and university administration representatives and an online survey of students, and teaching, research and administrative staff, we analyse the ways how LGBTI+ people conceive of different forms of discrimination in an academic environment. The article fills the gap in the otherwise under researched topic in Lithuania.

## **HETERONORMATIVITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS: THEORETICAL REMARKS**

Heteronormativity remains one of the structuring principles of social life, which makes LGBTI+ people experience inequalities and exclusions based on their identity. Heteronormativity is 'a societal hierarchical system that privileges and sanctions individuals based on presumed binaries of gender and sexuality; as a system, it defines and enforces beliefs and practices about what is "normal" in everyday life' (Toomey et al. 2012: 188). All subjects are viewed as heterosexual within the framework of heteronormativity. The ubiquitous social practices presuppose heterosexuality and hence exclude other identifications from falling under the purview of the normative point to heteronormativity pervasiveness (Lovelock 2019: 554).

Therefore, heteronormativity can be seen as a form of discrimination, oppression and exploitation of LGBTI+ people. Heteronormativity in attitudes, heterosexuality, heterosexual

marriage and family are privileged, and a forced norm of heterosexuality is imposed on everyone (Myers, Raymond 2010). Theories of heteronormativity frequently concentrate on how heterosexual standards tend to affect and, to some extent, possibly even dominate all people at different social levels (Haywood et al. 2018: 99).

Like institutional racism and sexism, heteronormativity pervades the customs and institutions of Western societies. All forms of oppression – racism, xenophobia and sexism – manifest themselves in both overt and covert forms that dominant groups have learned to overlook. Active forms of oppression are characterised by laws and policies that are reflected in people's behaviour and attitudes, which sometimes require legal measures to change, for example, in the areas of civil rights for minorities or women's rights. The hidden forms, which vary from one oppressed group to another, are subtle and hard to see. The category of heteronormativity helps us grasp how more general gender and sexuality structures and oppressive hierarchies are reproduced in our societies not only on a social but also on individual and affective level which burden non-heteronormative people and weight them down in their everyday lives (Warner 1991; Seidman 2004).

Examples of heteronormativity in different countries include the lack of social guarantees for homosexual couples and legal instruments to legalise homosexual partnerships, discrimination against gays and lesbians at work (e.g. in the military), etc. The symbolic use of language is just another instance of heteronormativity's violence and silencing. Derogatory words are frequently used to humiliate and oppress LGBTI+ people while simultaneously bolstering one's position. Additionally, heteronormativity acts as everyday violence against individuals and bodies that do not adhere to widely accepted norms. LGBTI+ people are particularly vulnerable in this regard which is manifested in the prevalence of hate crimes against them (Haywood et al. 2018: 103–104). Moreover, heteronormativity is often enacted through negative effects and emotions that stigmatize non-heteronormative people as outsiders and make them less human.

## UNIDIVERSITY PROJECT RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design of the project 'UniDiversity – Universities Towards Diversity' included three methods – literature and document analysis, online survey and focus group interviews. The research aimed to investigate whether discriminatory attitudes, beliefs and behaviours based on SOGISC exist in the Lithuanian academic environment and to examine the levels of visibility of LGBTI+ individuals, their rights, issues and representation in the academic environment.

An anonymous online survey was distributed to respondents using a random sampling method. The online survey was shared with representatives from Lithuanian universities, who were then asked to share it with the wider academic community, which included students, teaching, research and administrative staff. This online survey was also shared in various LGBTI+ social media groups and sent to organisations that work on LGBTI+ issues. The survey was carried out in Lithuania in March and April 2021.

An online survey elicited 575 complete responses from university students, academic staff, civil society and individuals who did not belong to any of the groups mentioned. According to the results, students (61.4%) and academic staff (35.1%) made up the majority of survey respondents. Respondents from civil society and those who did not belong to any of the groups accounted for 3.5% of the total sample. Most of the respondents belonged to the age group of 17–24 (37%) and the age group of 30–39 (20.3%). It is important to note that 19.1% of respondents identified themselves as LGBTI+ (24.9% of the students' group and 9.4% of the academic staff group).

The project research also included two focus groups with students, teachers and university administration representatives. The main objective of the focus groups was to learn whether the academic environment in Lithuania is safe, open and inclusive for LGBTI+ people and what challenges and incidents of discrimination, if any, they face. To understand this, the focus group participants were asked to 1) express their views on whether the academic environment is safe and inclusive for LGBTI+ people; 2) how safe they perceive it to be for an openly LGBTI+ person in their universities; 3) whether participants have witnessed/experienced incidents of discrimination on the basis of SOGISC in the academic environment. The analysis of the focus group interviews was carried out by pointing out the most frequent responses and thoughts expressed during the discussion and the responses of individual focus group participants who expressed unique examples of discriminatory incidents and their aspects.

The focus groups were attended by 21 participants (10 students and 11 participants from university staff). The first focus group included 10 undergraduate and postgraduate students representing different study areas such as social sciences, technologies and medicine. The second focus group included university administrative staff, researchers and teachers working in their positions from 3 to 18 years. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions for social gatherings, focus groups took place online, they were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The focus groups were conducted in February 2021.

Certain limitations of the research should be noted. Firstly, the online survey did not have a representative sample and rather was aimed at indicating the most important LGBTI+ issues in the academic environment than describing their dissemination. Secondly, the focus groups were conducted online and were limited in number.

## **THE FORMS OF LGBTI+ DISCRIMINATION IN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT: SEARCHING FOR COMMON UNDERSTANDING**

The results of the Lithuanian online survey showed that most respondents believed that discriminatory attitudes or behaviours based on SOGISC never or rarely happened in their academic environment. Only approximately one-third of all respondents thought that various discriminatory incidents sometimes, often, or always happened in academic environments. The majority of respondents have not experienced, witnessed, or heard of any discriminatory incidents against LGBTI+ in an academic environment. However, it is important to note that approximately 56% of respondents, who identified themselves as LGBTI+, stated that the following incidents occurred from time to time in a year: 1) when negative comments against an LGBTI+ person were made because of his/her/theirs SOGISC; 2) when LGBTI+ terms were used in an insulting way against an LGBTI+ person.

Furthermore, it could be stated that the majority of the respondents thought that LGBTI+ individuals were accepted (81.5%) and their rights were promoted (69%) in an academic environment. However, most respondents did not know any open LGBTI+ students (62%) or staff members (72%) in their academic environments. It could be concluded that respondents thought that LGBTI+ rights were accepted and promoted, but data also show that they did not know LGBTI+ people in their academic surroundings.

On the contrary, the focus group data identified gaps that hindered the creation of a safe and inclusive learning and work environment in universities. When the focus group participants were asked to express their opinion about the safety and inclusiveness of the Lithuanian

academic environment for LGBTI+ individuals, only few participants said that they felt safe or that the environment was partially safe. Some participants pointed out that the level of safety depended on study programs, departments, or even teaching staff – some of them were trying to create an inclusive environment, while some of them were not. Therefore, it could be said that the data revealed the LGBTI+ people's sense of insecurity and precariousness:

*'The environment is partially safe, but this security is not even and sufficient' (Participant 2, age 19).*

*'<...> that this is what is being declared, and I like the fact that the university has an LGBT flag in the window, and it seems like a pretty safe place. But, on the other hand, when you look more into what's going on, whether it's research papers or something else, it's just like maybe <...> outwardly declared, but in reality, it's a bit off.' (Participant 6, age 22).*

It could be argued that it was heteronormative attitudes that created the sense of insecurity. They manifested in various forms, including discrimination, oppression and exploitation of LGBTI+ individuals. The research data revealed that LGBTI+ discrimination in the Lithuanian academic environment took many forms. The focus group participants were asked whether they had witnessed or experienced discrimination on the grounds of SOGISC in an academic setting. The participants gave various examples from their own experiences or examples of incidents from their academic environment that they had heard or witnessed: 1) negative comments and jokes about LGBTI+ community, light mocking, uncomfortable glances, inappropriate comments (and, according to some focus group participants, sometimes a person did not even realise it was inappropriate); 2) a negative reaction and different behaviour after a person opened up about sexual orientation (not saying hello, not shaking hands, etc.); 3) the lecturers' insistence on LGBTI+ students' abstaining from writing papers on LGBTI+ topics; 4) homophobic bullying and gossips after coming out as LGBTI+; 5) a transgender person's decision to quit the university because she could not change her new name and surname in the thesis; 6) a decision by the university administration not to allow one to use the university name in the name of the organisation of LGBTI+ students and staff; 7) situations in which lecturers refused to comment on students' statements and questions about homosexuality not being a disease; 8) an active campaign, run by a few lecturers, against LGBTI+ students and staff support group initiated by students; 9) a request to open up about sexual orientation during the lecture; 10) the absence of gender-neutral restrooms as a discriminatory factor.

Also, it is important to share the story-example of a doctoral student getting depressed because of the constant negative comments about LGBTI+ people which led to their quitting studies was shared during the focus groups discussions:

*'<...> it seems to me that this kind of talk at universities is particularly characteristic when quite nasty things are said, but in a very nice way and even with a smile. And it's not even possible, for example, to call it hate speech, but at the same time it's being said in a very real way, that, well, the LGBT people are not human beings and so on, that it's an ideology here, and that there is a conspiracy [related to LGBT people] going on right now and so on and so forth' (Participant 20, age 41).*

As this example shows, in some cases, LGBTI+ people could be dehumanised and turned into enemies of sexual and gender normality. Deeply entrenched everyday heteronormativity is used to silence these individuals and harm them emotionally. LGBTI+ people's anxiety

about their safety in the academic environment could not only damage their professional careers but also lead to serious health problems.

Thus, it can be argued that the focus group research also indicates a certain level of social exclusion of LGBTI+ individuals in an academic environment. Social exclusion of LGBTI+ individuals is more related to social and cultural processes of inequality than to economic exclusion (Monro 2005: 46). Social exclusion is expressed by various actions and judgements which show that certain individuals are not wanted in social relationships or in society in general (Smart Richman, Leary 2009; DeSouza et al. 2019 in Wesselmann et al. 2022: 454). It could be argued that even small details during social interactions, such as the use of certain words and uncomfortable glances, are crucial and can maintain the social exclusion of LGBTI+ individuals.

Additionally, some answers in the survey expressed a very negative view of LGBTI+ in general and showed the existence of social exclusion of LGBTI+ individuals. Some respondents left their comments in an open question section of the survey expressing ideas that 1) the LGBTI+ individuals should be treated as being ill; 2) there were no crucial issues regarding LGBTI+ in academic environments; 3) researchers wasted their time analysing LGBTI+ issues and there were other more important topics. Here are some opinions expressed by the respondents:

*'I don't support the LGBT movement; I find it unacceptable. I find it unacceptable that the [LGBT movement] is increasingly promoted, and the idea that it is normal is accepted. It is not normal. I stand only for the traditional family.'* (Woman, age 17–24, University student).

*'I think there should be training that this is a disease like alcoholism, kleptomania, etc.'* (Man, n/a, University teaching, research, or administrative staff).

Hence, data from the survey and focus groups reveal divisions between the way how LGBTI+ individuals are seen by the members of academia and the way how they feel themselves in the academic environment. Moreover, these results point to the dominance of the ideology of heteronormative silencing and affective humiliation in an academic environment. Non-heterosexual sexual orientation or gender identity is presented as a threat to normality. Our research data shows the gap between declarations about the openness to the LGBTI+ community within universities and prohibition of any forms of discrimination and persisting reality of stereotypical thinking and discriminatory attitudes in the forms of negative opinions, public comments about LGBTI+ and the usage of LGBTI+ terms in an affectively insulting way.

## **SAFETY OF ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT FOR LGBTI+ INDIVIDUALS: PLACES AND PEOPLE**

The various forms of perceived discrimination against LGBTI+ individuals discussed in the previous section raise the question whether there exist safe places in the Lithuanian academic environment.

For the creation of an inclusive society, hegemonic systems of discrimination must be challenged, and an environment nurtured where LGBTI+ individuals do not feel discriminated against but feel a sense of belonging (Wesselmann et al. 2022: 463). Creating and maintaining an inclusive, safe space, therefore, requires consideration of the physical environment, the social environment and the psychological environment (Sindhi 2023: 80–81).

These environments and their elements should cater for academic environment participants with different social characteristics so that they feel safe and accepted, their diversity should be addressed and their needs met.

The focus group data showed that LGBTI+ individuals attempted to create a friendly and safe environment for themselves. Some focus group participants expressed that they mainly spent time in friendly surroundings and communicated with friends and people they knew were tolerant. And this was the reason why they felt safe. Some participants from the student focus group told that they felt safe or thought that LGBTI+ people felt safe because of the 'social bubbles' in which they lived:

*'<...> because I'm in that safe environment, so for me, the whole university seems safer because I have that safe bubble.' (Participant 2, age 19).*

However, as the majority of participants stated, being openly LGBTI+ could provoke unwanted reactions in an academic environment. According to the majority of focus group participants, most LGBTI+ people did not come out and did not talk about it because of their fear; there was a tendency to hide their sexual orientation, because the coming out would have made them feel unsafe:

*'<...> in fact, there are people in my circle who are afraid to come out, and they are afraid to talk about it with lecturers.' (Participant 7, age 22).*

Participant 1 told that her friend, a university lecturer, was afraid to come out about her sexual orientation because of the reactions from her colleagues:

*'I mean, I have a friend who is a lecturer, and she can't come out at work because, well, there's just this fear that it's going to have an impact on her colleagues and the amount of research work.' (Participant 1, age 20).*

According to Participant 8, work experience and belonging to a certain group might ensure the safeness of being openly LGBTI+:

*'It really depends on which clan [group] you belong to. If you're in a clan that supports you, you can [open up]. Or if you have some publications that are already recognised and you are sure about your academic career. Then yes, maybe that doesn't bother [being open LGBTI+]. But if you are somehow, I don't know, a beginner or in a mid-career maybe, or, where, let's say, you have insecure employment contracts, then in that case, well, speaking out [being LGBTI+] can make it even more precarious.' (Participant 8, age 42).*

Thus, contrary to the online survey, the focus group participants agreed that Lithuania's academic environment was not safe enough for LGBTI+ people. According to them, one had to decide whether to be openly LGBTI+ or keep it to oneself. The possibility of coming out depended on the surrounding people, department, or faculty. The participants agreed that in many cases, LGBTI+ individuals chose to be silent:

*'Choose. Whether you are human without any personality, family, or you are a professional <...> It feels that you must hide it all the time' (Participant 20, age 41).*

As our research shows, those who do not conform to the accepted gender and sexuality norms are penalised in the Lithuanian university environment. Therefore, LGBTI+ people must hide their sexual orientation and gender identity to not jeopardise their working relationships and work performance.

Thus, as we have argued, heteronormative attitudes take different forms of expression in the academic environment, and its existence or intensity is determined by various factors. The study program, department, or faculty could make a difference in the level of hostility and affective assaults towards both to LGBTI+ topics and individuals. According to some focus group participants, students and teachers of certain study programs were more tolerant of LGBTI+ topics and people than others. The social sciences academic community is considered more tolerant than others; however, sexual and gender role stereotypes still prevail there:

*'It highly depends on the lecturer and the program. At least at my University. Because before my current studies, I studied in another program, and I see a big difference between these programs. As teachers and students are more tolerant, there are no discriminatory comments. There is a general feeling of openness and willingness to talk about LGBTI+. And in the previous study program, it wasn't something it was talked about, and there were strange comments and jokes from lecturers' (Participant 2, age 19).*

The focus group discussions also showed that differences emerged between students and teachers attitudes towards LGBTI+ topics and people as the students were more tolerant:

*'I can happily say that the tendencies are good within the students' group. Ten to twelve years ago, when I started to give lectures, debates about LGBT were quite negative <...>. Today, the situation has really changed a lot, changed a lot. The students discuss this topic with each other in a very free, open and supportive of LGBT community way' (Participant 14, age 45).*

Additionally, it was stressed that the age of lecturers also had an impact on their attitudes: the senior lecturers and staff members expressed more negative reactions towards LGBTI+ individuals and issues.

The cultural differences in assessing tolerance and acceptance of the LGBTI+ community in academia were also emphasised during the focus group discussions. International and Lithuanian students were compared, and it was concluded that international students were more open to LGBTI+ topics and people than Lithuanians who were more conservative and mainly expressed negative opinions on them:

*'<...> in Lithuanian groups, we still have this more conservative culture.' (Participant 7, age 22).*

To sum up, while some focus group participants evaluated their academic surroundings as safe because of friendly and tolerant departments or LGBTI+ people's entrapment in their 'social bubbles', the majority argued that anti-LGBTI+ attitudes, negative comments, affective assaults and discrimination prevailed in the academic environment. Some focus group participants were victims in discriminatory incidents or at least heard about them, therefore, they suggested that more actions had to be undertaken by universities to guarantee LGBTI+ people's safety.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper analysed the ways how LGBTI+ people conceived of different forms of discrimination, intolerance, negative opinions and affective assaults in the Lithuanian academic environment that affected their health and professional careers. As the survey results demonstrate, the majority of respondents believe that there are no incidents of discrimination against LGBTI+ people in the academic environment, that the academic environment is safe and that the rights of LGBTI+ people are protected. However, the results from the focus group



interviews reveal that LGBTI+ individuals feel insecure and precarious. The majority of focus group participants identified various forms of discrimination and intolerance in the academic environment that they themselves have experienced or witnessed. Pervasive heteronormative attitudes contribute to the social exclusion of LGBTI+ individuals and the ignorance of LGBTI+ topics. It could be argued that these attitudes hinder the creation of a safe and inclusive academic environment that supports sexual differences and nurtures diversity. There also exists a gap between the declarative openness to LGBTI+ people within universities and persisting stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards them. Subsequent research should focus more on the LGBTI+ people's experiential and affective responses to heteronormative attitudes and everyday precariousness in the Lithuanian academic environment. Social policy measures geared towards a safe and inclusive academic environment for LGBTI+ students and academic staff should be also discussed in more detail.

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## Įtrauki ir saugi LGBTI+ aplinka Lietuvos universitetuose? Apmąstant tikrovę ir iššūkius

### *Santrauka*

Šiame straipsnyje aptariami tarptautinio taikomojo mokslinių tyrimų projekto „Universitetai įvairovės link“ rezultatai. Jo metu buvo tiriama, kokios diskriminacinės nuostatos, įsitikinimai ir elgesys dėl seksualinės orientacijos, lytinės tapatybės ar lyties požymių (SOGISC) egzistuoja Lietuvos, Graikijos ir Italijos akademinėje aplinkoje. Analizuojant, kaip LGBTI+ asmenys supranta įvairias diskriminacijos formas Lietuvos akademinėje aplinkoje, straipsnyje pateikiama naujų duomenų ir teorinių išvalgų apie LGBTI+ asmenų netoleranciją ir diskriminaciją Lietuvos aukštosiose mokyklose. Apklausos ir fokus (diskusinės) grupės interviu būdu surinkti duomenys interpretuojami tiek sociopolitinio konteksto, tiek teorinių diskusijų apie heteronormatyvias nuostatas kontekste. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad Lietuvos universitetuose egzistuoja nemažas atotrūkis tarp deklaratyvaus atvirumo LGBTI+ asmenims ir išliekančių stereotipų bei diskriminacinių nuostatų jų atžvilgiu.

**Raktažodžiai:** socialinė atskirtis, LGBTI+, SOGISC, aukštasis mokslas, heteronormatyvumas, homofobija