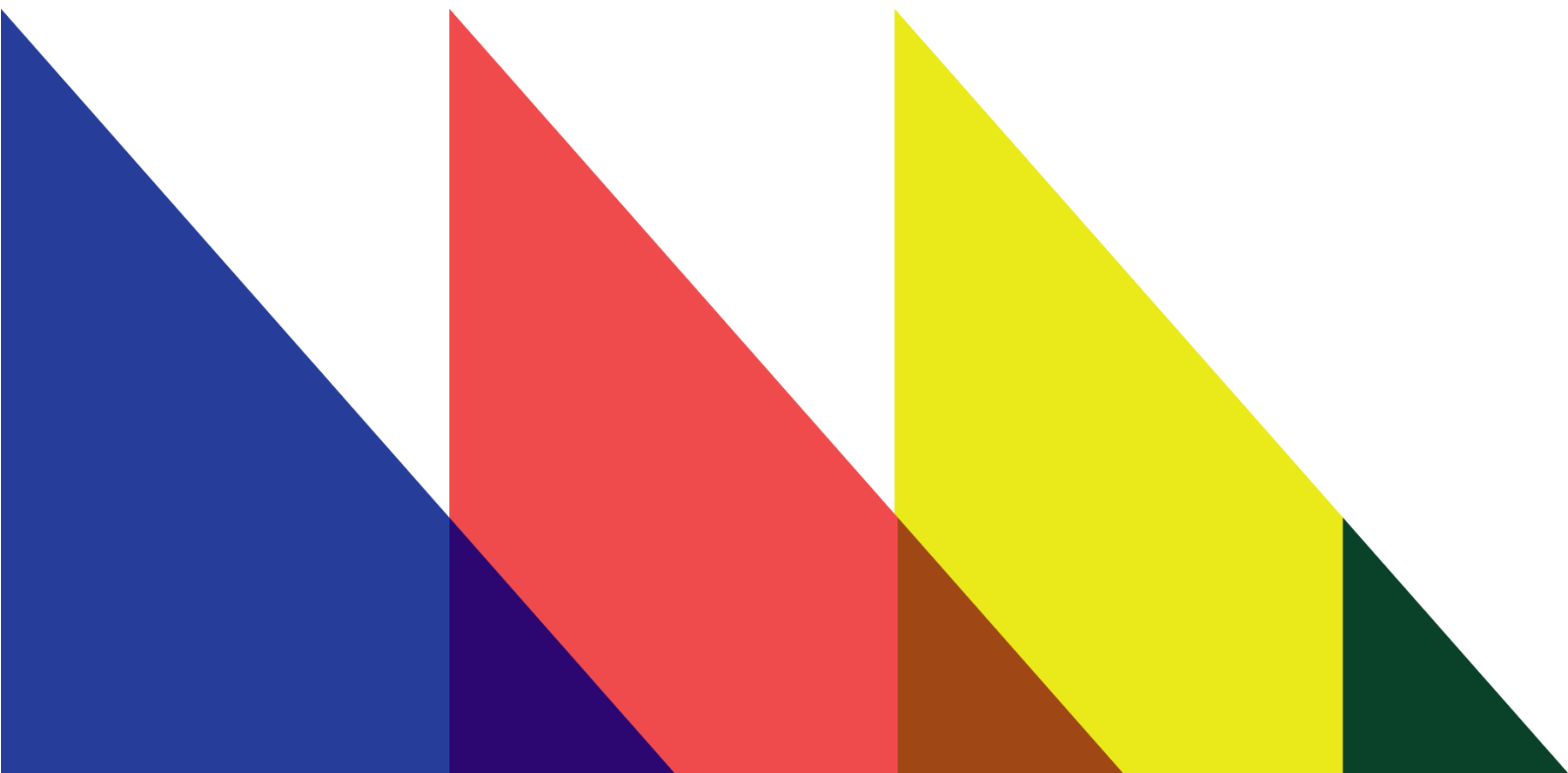




European Network on International Student Mobility
Connecting Research and Practice

The inclusion of LGBTQIA+ students in international student mobility

ENIS Policy Brief 01/2024





1. Snapshot overview

The number of international students in Europe has grown, and the student population diversified. For such opportunities to be inclusive to all backgrounds, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQIA+) students, sending institutions need to ensure that their outreach activities include this group (1). Similarly, receiving institutions need to provide services and support that fit their specific needs and that ensure a safe space for them to live their sexual orientation and gender identity without fear (2). In light of this, the current policy brief provides evidence-based practical recommendations for higher education institutions on how they can ensure a rainbow-friendly approach to international student mobility.

2. Background

Inclusion is high on the agenda of most if not all mobility programmes, and emphasis is placed on outreach to students from diverse backgrounds. While empirical evidence is available on various elements of social inequalities, such as socio-economic status, gender and disability status, rather limited research has been done on the participation and experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in international student mobility.

This policy brief aims to provide a succinct overview of the available empirical evidence and provide recommendations on how institutions can improve LGBTQIA+ students' international experiences. The target group of this brief are administrative and academic staff of higher education institutions as well as student organisations, in particular those that work with incoming or outgoing mobile students.

3. Key findings

Methodologically, this policy brief follows a scoping review approach, which attempts to provide “an initial indication of the potential size and nature of the existing literature on an emerging topic” (3, p.157). This type of review helps identify research gaps in a specific area by analysing the extent, scope, and nature of research activities. Moreover, it may have a practical impact on the area concerned. A total of 11 papers were reviewed. The limited number of references suggests a constrained understanding of the topic.

The search has indicated a gap both in the academic as well as non-academic literature regarding how gender identity and sexual orientation can impact students' opportunities to



access mobility programs. Furthermore, the existing literature indicates how gender identity and sexual orientation can negatively impact their experiences in the receiving country (2,4).

Many of the challenges experienced by LGBTQIA+ students whilst abroad resemble those faced by heterosexual, cisgender international students. However, the sexuality orientation and gender identity dimensions add different layers of complexity to their experience as international students that their peers do not have to confront (5). For instance, in addition to the racist and xenophobic encounters that many international students have during their mobility period abroad (6), these students may also encounter heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination rooted in their sexuality or gender identity (2,7). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are often not fully aware of these challenges and fail in providing adequate support (8). Nevertheless, there is evidence that gay, lesbian and bisexual students are significantly more likely to participate in study abroad programmes compared to their peers (5).

Studying abroad can be a life changing experience for students. It can foster unique self-discovery regarding their sexuality and gender identity or in other cases allow them to 'come out' (9) Hence, during their mobility abroad students may have the chance to explore and embrace their gender and sexual identity enhancing their personal well-being (8).

However, this impact of identity and sexuality discoveries can carry varying significance depending on both the sending and the receiving country (4). For students who originate from more conservative countries regarding sexuality, this experience can have an impact on their social position in their family and within their community (8), but also on their well-being (7). Moreover, disclosing their sexual orientation and sexual identity can also contribute for LGBTQIA+ international students to feel marginalised or isolated by local students which can also hamper their mental health (4).

Stigmas, prejudice and stereotypes associated with LGBTQIA+ individuals increase LGBTQIA+ students' vulnerability to mental health issues (2). The perception of their receiving institutions as unsafe environments, together with exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation experiences by their peers, staff and teachers can also foster apprehension in these students over living their sexuality and gender identity freely (7). However, not disclosing gender identity and sexual orientation, magnifies LGBTQIA+ international students' psychological distress, and can also prevent them from seeking appropriate information on reproductive health (10).



Investigations of the experience of LGBTQIA+ students studying abroad invariably demonstrate that both sending and receiving institutions lack in offering adequate support to attend to these students' specific needs (8). Despite some higher education institutions being aware of the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ students in the context of international mobility, their institutional outreach to encourage the participation of LGBTQIA+ students in study abroad opportunities remains limited in making a significant impact (1). Institutions often employ outdated and non-inclusive language that may make these students feel excluded from the available mobility opportunities (1). Moreover, the protective tone that many sending institutions adopt in their outreach content ends up problematizing LGBTQIA+ international students' sexual orientation and gender identity (1). Furthermore, in many cases teachers in the receiving institutions lack the training necessary to incorporate an inclusive approach in their classes and curriculum, particularly when addressing intersections of diversity where applicable (2).

4. Recommendations

01 | For both sending and receiving institutions

Show campus-wide support to LGBTQIA+ international students

By showing a clear signal that the institution is LGBTQIA+ friendly, they could create a welcoming and inclusive environment for students. Making sure that rainbow flags are visible in different university buildings and across the campus is in most contexts easy to implement.

Inclusive institutions use inclusive and gender-neutral language in any promotional and information material that they produce or distribute, be it online, in printed format and in spoken communication. Because inclusive language is in continuous development, it is necessary to update the material regularly. It also includes ensuring that surveys and questionnaires consider students who identify across the gender spectrum.

The availability of gender-neutral lavatories is strongly recommended. This can be achieved by converting some existing single-occupancy restrooms, which is a cost-effective approach. However, it is crucial to ensure an even distribution of these facilities throughout the campus. This will promote accessibility and provide a supportive environment for all students.

Both academic and administrative staff should be encouraged to state the pronouns that they prefer, creating an environment where students feel invited to do the same. They should also be



encouraged to take part in awareness training on matters related to gender and sexual diversity as part of their professional development.

In order to monitor the progress towards LGBTQIA+ inclusion on campus, institutions are advised to circulate annual surveys among students that target the LGBTQIA+ student community in particular. By collecting such information anonymously, institutions are able to get feedback on how to improve both their sending as well as receiving practices.

02 | For sending institutions

Providing safety-related guidance

Responsible administration of student mobility requires caution and informed guidance. At the same time, it is crucial that international coordinators do not send exclusively discouraging messages to students belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community. Queer identity of students should under no circumstances be problematised.

To strike a good balance between caution and encouragement, international coordinators have a number of ways to promote inclusive mobility. They can highlight study destinations that are known to be LGBTQIA+ friendly and provide a link to the rainbow map of The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) in their material, for example.

It is advisable that higher education institutions check with their partner institutions on how LGBTQIA+ friendly their campuses are. Ideally, the inter-institutional agreements should state in their section on inclusion and accessibility which kind of support is provided to LGBTQIA+ students. This may include the existence of organisations for queer students, availability of gender-neutral lavatories and the approach to name and gender registration. Finally, institutions can also set up LGBTQIA+ Alumni networks to which students who are planning to go abroad can contact and learn about the experience.

03 | For receiving institutions

Creating helpful connections for LGBTQIA+ exchange students and ensuring that the relevant resources are available

Receiving institutions should show clearly where students can find support and guidance, including specific resources for queer students and support relating to mental health issues



provided by professionals. Such information should be available as part of the welcome package for incoming students, which should address a section on LGBTQIA+ students' rights as well.

Student associations need to be able to offer support to the whole student population, as diverse as it is, and specific spaces for LGBTQIA+ students should be ensured. They would also benefit from knowing about any local associations that support the LGBTQIA+ community and safeguard human rights. The channels for reporting homophobic and transphobic crimes and incidents should be transparent and well promoted.

When receiving institutions notify incoming students about activities happening in the local community or makes available brochures promoting events, it is important to include those with LGBTQIA+ focus.

Enhancing mutual respect among students from different cultural backgrounds

Countries and cultures have a different level of openness when it comes to gender and sexual orientation. While the objective of this policy brief is to boost rainbow friendly student mobility, it needs to be kept in mind that some exchange students coming from less open communities may have issues navigating through an LGBTQIA+ friendly environment. Stigmatising these students will not improve this complex situation. Ideally, receiving institutions should work on ways to build bridges between fellow students whose background may cause intercultural challenges, for example through dialogue forums, cultural activities and sports. This can help widen the horizon of those who are not used to celebrating gender-diversity in their society and create the life-changing intercultural learning opportunities that are so valuable and unique to international student mobility.

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