

SCHOOL OF PHYSICS AND ASTRONOMY

REPORT OF POSTGRADUATE LGBT+ FOCUS GROUP – JUNE 26 2017

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As the postgraduate representative of the School of Physics and Astronomy, I organised a focus group to discuss the various LGBT+ topics and issues affecting the postgraduate community. I had valuable advice from Prof. Alfonso Aragon-Salamanca, who had organised a similar event for the undergraduates. The objective of the focus group was to note the postgraduate's experiences, and to relay them back to the School's diversity committee.

Two weeks prior to the event, I had circulated an email to the postgraduates, inviting them to participate in the discussion group. A reminder email was also sent two days before the event. The focus group was held in the George Green Library and a total of six people attended (including myself). I ensured this meeting was a safe space, and that, while I was making notes, all comments will be anonymous. We had a long discussion over a range of issues, lasting for approximately 90 minutes. Overall the students were extremely positive about their experience with the school. There were a few issues that arose, and these are summarised below.

Gender neutral toilets

Some students would like to see a gender neutral toilet in the Physics building. However, I have informed them there is one on the A-floor, but this may not be well signposted. In addition, they would like to see a gender neutral toilet in the Astronomy and Particle Physics building – they are aware that there are both female and male toilets on both floors of the building, so they said it would be good if at least one of them could be converted to gender neutral.

Recommendation: Improved signposting to the gender-neutral toilet in the Physics building may be required. Also, review the possible provision of a gender neutral toilet in the CAPT building.

Diversity committee

At some point in the discussion, I had asked the participants what they know of the diversity committee. Most of them had limited knowledge of the diversity committee, what roles each of the members have, and how they can represent each minority/underprivileged group.

Recommendation: More awareness of the diversity committee is needed. It would be good to have a section in the PG induction handbook, introducing the committee, the members, their roles and relevant contact information. There could also be a page on moodle with the relevant information.

International conferences

There was a lengthy discussion on the issue of international conferences being held in countries where homophobia and transphobia may be prevalent. For example, a conference may be held in an Middle Eastern country, where homosexuality is outlawed. The issue here, is whether an LGBT student could

attend, and if so, how their safety could be guaranteed. I myself would not know how to proceed, except to suggest seeking advice from the relevant member of the diversity committee or their supervisor.

Recommendation: The diversity may review the practicalities of conference attendance in countries where the quality of LGBT rights are poor. Perhaps appoint a dedicated advisor in this case – to research the LGBT rights of the country in question and advice as appropriate.

LGBT role models in academia

The participants thought the idea of public lectures led by LGBT members in academia would be great to have. The more senior students among us highlighted the public lecture given by Tom Welton in 2015, “It's easy being a gay scientist”.

Recommendation: The School could organise these public lectures more often, perhaps once a year or two. May include the possibility of hosting a transgender speaker too.

Incident with biphobic language

While there are no LG-related incidents to report, one participant recalled an incident where biphobic language was used by another postgraduate student. This was not directed at anybody in particular, instead it was presented as an offhand comment. The comment in question was a remark on bisexual people in general, where the offender did not believe people can be attracted to both male and female genders and instead (paraphrasing) “they could not make their mind up and refuse to say that they are actually gay. They have to pick a team”. The participants therefore suggested that postgraduates in general should receive diversity training (LGBT, women, ethnic minorities, disabilities). This can be extended to staff members too.

Recommendation: The diversity committee to emphasise diversity training in PG induction events for new postgraduates. Staff members too could be involved in diversity training and be aware of how to deal with LGBT-related incidents appropriately.