

SCHOOL OF PHYSICS AND ASTRONOMY

LGBT+ Focus Group – May 2 2018

Alfonso Aragón-Salamanca

Background

The School's Diversity committee agreed that a focus group to discuss LGBT+ issues affecting Physics and Astronomy undergraduate students should be organised every other year (a parallel one including postgraduate students is organised on the alternative years). This frequency allows all students to participate at least once during their stay at Nottingham, while avoiding excessive repetition. I was tasked to organise it.

This event provided an informal and relaxed environment for students from all years and courses where they could talk about any LGBT+ issues within the school and the University. The aim was to hear what the student's experiences in the school and the university have been, both positive and negative, to identify any relevant issues, and to discuss any actions the school could take to improve things for all our students.

When organising the event, I got input from a small group of students. This helped me to identify topics for discussion and to make sure that the organisation of the event was carried out in a sensitive manner, ensuring everybody felt comfortable with the arrangements. This worked very well, and I obtained very useful input. A preliminary list of the topics for discussion is included in Appendix 1.

I invited all undergraduate students via e-mail (Appendix 2) and with posters (Appendix 3) distributed in key areas within the School. A discreet location outside the School was chosen so that all participants could feel safe. Tea, coffee, cold drinks and biscuits were provided. I was the only academic present, and 6 students participated (in a similar event two years ago, 11 students participated). The identity (names) of the participants was not requested, and will not be revealed. I took notes.

Discussion and Recommendations

I started by introducing myself and explaining what the purpose of the event was, and asked whether the participants were comfortable with my being there. I offered to leave if they preferred, but they all agreed they preferred me to stay, participate, and take notes. I also explained how the previous event had worked, and distributed copies of the suggested topics for discussion (Appendix 1), indicating that we could follow them or not, it was up to them. An open discussion followed, which I summarise below. This summary doesn't follow a strict chronological order, since some issues were discussed more than once; different topics are grouped by "theme".

- One of the participants asked whether an AI was allowed to attend and participate, but the consensus was that only humans who were members of the School of Physics and Astronomy community were allowed.
- The feeling among the participants was that, within the School and the University, the atmosphere and attitude towards members of the LGBT+ community are generally positive, and problems are rare. One participant reported hearing the term "*faggot*" in a conversation, but not in an aggressive way. I reported that my personal experience as a gay man among the University and School staff had always been very positive, and that I and my partner are included in social events, invitations, conversations, ... so I don't feel at all discriminated. There was the feeling that in the first week of term there should be more explicit mention of the fact that the University and the School are safe, open and friendly places for everybody, including (explicitly, and not just as implied by the term "diversity") of the LGBT+ community, and what acceptable behaviour/language is. This should be mentioned not only in the class-wide introductory sessions, but also by tutors in an early tutorial.

RECOMMENDATION: Diversity committee should recommend that this is implemented, with some (brief!) guidance for tutors.

- There was some discussion on the very broad variety of gender and sexual identities some people identify with, and the resulting problems and misunderstandings that could generate. It was also mentioned that in some languages gender identification and the use of pronouns and other grammatical forms did not cater for this variety of gender identities. However, it was felt that we should discuss potential problems that affected Physics and Astronomy students, and thus concentrate on the English language. The common practice that is being implemented throughout the School and the University of using gender-neutral

language whenever possible (e.g., though the use of the “they” pronoun both in plural and in singular) was viewed as positive.

- It was reported that the University now deals with name changes and gender-identity changes in a sympathetic and reasonably efficient way. One suggestion was that people should be allowed to specify not only their preferred name but also their preferred pronoun in their e-mail names.

RECOMMENDATION: Diversity Committee should consult with the University on whether this is possible, and suggest a change in policy in this direction.

- Another suggestion was that it may be a good idea if people (both staff and students) get in the habit of specifying their preferred pronoun in their e-mail signature. This is becoming common practice in, e.g., scientific telecons. This not only allows people to tell others how they wish to be addressed, but also identifies the gender of your interlocutor when it is not clear from the name or physical appearance, avoiding prejudice and stereotype.

RECOMMENDATION: Diversity Committee to consider suggesting this is implemented on a voluntary basis among staff/students in the School. It was not felt that this should be compulsory, but introduced as good practice in the hope it propagates.

- Progress on the availability of gender-neutral toilets across the University and the School was acknowledged. The fact that in the main Physics building the gender-neutral toilet is well hidden and not very well signposted was mentioned. It was also mentioned that a gender-neutral toilet was planned in CAPT.

RECOMMENDATION: The School should ensure that at least one well-signposted gender-neutral toilet is available in each of its buildings.

- The need for good LGBT+ academic role models was mentioned. Provision of well-advertised lectures given by LGBT+ lecturers was strongly supported. I mentioned that last year there was one in Chemistry, but that it was not very well advertised at all.

RECOMMENDATION: There should be more such lectures, at least one per year, perhaps organised by at Faculty level and advertised very widely.

- Some participants mentioned that they would prefer this focus group to be organised by students, perhaps by the school reps or PhysSoc. The reason is that some people felt that the presence of an academic may deter some students from participating. There was one person who disagreed, saying that having a member of staff there, who knows how the School/University work, what the policies and practice are, is useful. Furthermore, depending on who the reps are it may not happen. Having somebody with authority to chair the meeting who is able to deal with any possible conflicts fairly, and to ensure it is not hijacked by a minority pushing a specific agenda could be useful. Finally, ensuring that good and balanced notes are taken and a report written is important.

RECOMMENDATION: Diversity Committee to consider whether organising this focus group should be left to the student body. A possibility would be to organise it every year, alternating between student-run and staff-run. Diversity Committee should consult with LCF.

- It was felt that students are not very aware of how/to whom report issues (including anonymous reporting). Better awareness/publicity of who-is-who and who to talk to on specific concerns, and of the anonymous online suggestions/reporting box is needed. I pointed out that it was all in the Physics Community moodle page and in the Student Handbook (some people did not know what that was) and on many posters throughout the School. Better publicity should be given to this information. It was suggested that, additionally to the current places where this information is advertised, a copy should be added to the front of the first and second year coursework booklets, which most year 1 and year 2 students use regularly.

RECOMMENDATION: Add this information and the list of who-is-who with photographs to the 1st and 2nd year coursework booklets.

On the issue of support, the group agreed that there should be a named member of staff who is the main contact/support person to discuss/report/seek advice (confidentially) on LGBT+ issues. It should be a member of the LGBT+ community since they would have a better understanding of some of the issues. This person should be listed among the other support/contact persons in the school (together with senior tutor, female tutor, year leaders, exam officers,...), and advertise as above.

RECOMMENDATION: A member of staff should be appointed as contact person to discuss confidentially LGBT+ related issues. If at all possible, they should be a member of the LGBT+ community.

- There was also some discussion on the need for a well-advertised Physics-based student-led LGBT+ network so that people, particularly new arrivals, can establish contact and seek peer support. Participants thought that, although there is such a network at the University level, a Physics-based one is also desirable (e.g., to find people with similar interests). We all agreed that the School should not organise it, but it should be left to the student reps or PhysSoc.

RECOMMENDATION: Diversity Committee should pass this recommendation to the student body, via LCF and PhysSoc.

Appendix 1: Suggested topics for discussion

- Start with my own experience.
- Mention incidents/experiences (good and bad) that you have experienced or witnessed.
- How often does the topic of homosexuality come up in physics? (think about a positive, a benign, and a negative expression heard).
- How often does the topic of gender come up? think non-conformity/non-binary stances. What is the impression given? Does the topic come up and get dismissed because it's too different/"tumblr"?
- If you have come out to other physics students, how long did it take for people who you didn't tell to ask about it or refer to it (if at all)?
- A question focusing on the "+" in LGBT+, i.e. for those who identify other than LGBT, e.g. queer/asexual/gender-queer etc. on whether they feel represented / supported.
- Is being LGBT to be a bit of a "non-issue" in physics, in that it's not something that's ever brought up and there isn't much reaction to for example saying you've got a same-sex partner. Is this good or bad? Do people feel that it being a "non-issue" means it shouldn't be mentioned (which would be bad) or that being LGBT doesn't matter?
- Perhaps a specific question on transgender issues, such as whether there's any support?
- Also with admin issues like gender / names etc. - do people feel confident that they can speak to someone about getting their name or pronoun changed, or be known by a preferred name?
- Are comfortable with the language used by lecturers and your peers?
- Are you aware of the support systems that the University offers, such as the diversity suggestions box and others?
- Are you aware of any good or bad incidents?
- What should the School do about it?
- What can the School do be more welcoming?

Appendix 2: e-mail sent to all Physics and Astronomy undergraduates on 24/4/2018

Re: School of Physics and Astronomy LGBT+ focus group

Hi everyone,

I'd like to invite you to participate in a focus group we are holding to discuss LGBT+ issues affecting UG students from the School of Physics and Astronomy. This event has been organised by the School of Physics and Astronomy Diversity Committee, as part of the School's commitment to an inclusive, safe and friendly environment for all of us.

We are aiming for it to be an informal, confidential and relaxed event for a group of students from all years and courses, where you can talk (and I will listen) about any LGBT+ issues within the school and the University. No register of any kind will be taken, and all feedback will be anonymised. We are eager to hear what your experiences in the school have been, both positive and negative, and to discuss any actions the school could take to improve things for all our students.

I will be the only academic present at the start of the meeting, and I will leave if you ask me to do so. I am inviting any undergraduates from the School of Physics and Astronomy who would like to talk and listen about any LGBT+ related issues. A discrete location has been chosen so that we can all feel safe.

Please join us for a chat. No booking necessary. All welcome. Just turn up!

Date: Wednesday May 2nd.

Time: 14:00 - 15:00

Venue: Room B23 Pope building

Thanks. I hope to see many of you then.

If you cannot come but would like to bring any issue to the School's attention, please feel free to e-mail me (alfonso.aragon@nottingham.ac.uk) or use the anonymous suggestion form <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~ppzphy/staff/suggestions.html>. I assure you that the School will listen and take appropriate action if necessary. Complete confidentiality and anonymity is assured.

Best wishes,

Alfonso

Alfonso Aragón-Salamanca

Professor of Astronomy

School of Physics and Astronomy

University of Nottingham

Room B106, Centre for Astronomy and Particle Theory

University Park

Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK

Appendix 3: poster placed in key locations throughout the School

School of Physics and Astronomy
LGBT+ Focus Group



Date: Wednesday May 2nd

Time: 14:00 - 15:00

Venue: Room B23 Pope building

I'd like to invite you to participate in a focus group we are holding to discuss LGBT+ related issues, good and bad, affecting UG students from the School of Physics and Astronomy. This will be an informal, relaxed and confidential event where you can talk (and I can listen) about any LGBT+ issues within the school and the University.

See my recent e-mail message for more details.

Please join us for a chat. No booking necessary.

All welcome!

Prof. Alfonso Aragón-Salamanca