

# ‘GET OUT, STAY OUT’

A CAREERS MENTORING  
SCHEME FOR LESBIAN, GAY,  
BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER  
(LGBT) STUDENTS

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## Sean Russell highlights the benefits of a mentoring scheme for LGBT students at the University of Birmingham, emphasising that it both complements and enhances the work of counsellors



Counselling services provide a valuable service to LGBT students in so many ways, providing a safe, non-judgmental space for grappling with issues of identity and coming out, for rehearsing coming out conversations to be had with family, friends and tutors, and for helping clients understand the various manifestations of minority stress.<sup>1</sup> These are incredibly helpful conversations, but they are time limited, and we all wonder at the end of a series of sessions: what next for the student? The mentoring scheme I describe in this article pairs LGBT students who are just getting ready to enter working life with 'out' people from a range of organisations and occupations to help them come out and stay out once they enter the world of work. The mentoring scheme provides an opportunity to build on the valuable work and insights of a counselling intervention and to help students make sense of themselves in the context of their next important step after university: the world of work.

Student feedback about the scheme suggests that the most positive outcome for participants has been an increase in confidence which ameliorates some of the issues and pressures that LGBT students potentially face, such as mental

health problems, victimisation, lack of social support, feeling less safe than their non-LGBT counterparts, higher drop-out rates, discrimination and suicidality. And while this scheme is clearly welcomed and valued, student feedback also underscores more widely the importance of LGBT-friendly campuses and inclusive curricula.<sup>2-5</sup>

### Rationale for the scheme

When I was approached by the University of Birmingham's Student Equality and Diversity

Manager in 2011 to set up an employability mentoring scheme for LGBT students, I had two reactions: (a) excellent: I wish I had had something like this when I was a student, and (b) really? Surely the experience of LGBT employees has improved since the 1970s. For a start, there is now legal protection against workplace discrimination. Before setting up such a scheme, I wanted to make sure there was a real need. I spoke to members of LGBT staff networks at some leading graduate recruiters and they confirmed that indeed there were employees they knew of who were still reluctant to come out because they were cautious about how this might affect promotion, relationships with customers and, most commonly, relationships with long-term clients, a marked feature of professional services such as law and accountancy. They also cited examples of staff, who had previously been out at university, returning to the 'work closet', a view endorsed by the ex-CEO of BP, John Browne, in his biography.<sup>6</sup> In universities, academics reported difficulties when travelling for work or publishing abroad in countries where homophobia is unchallenged or enshrined in law. Research by Stonewall about the benefits for both employer and employee of staff feeling safe to come out at work informed the focus and marketing of the scheme.<sup>7</sup>

So far, so good; but would *students* see a need? After all, the majority of students at a university like Birmingham have limited experience of work and even less of the issues around coming out to workmates, managers, clients and customers. Years of running careers events for university students has taught me that, however worthy an activity might be, if students don't 'get it' and participate, we are left looking at empty rooms, and guest speakers with no audience. By contrast, when students do understand the needs and when the benefits of a scheme are clearly explained and communicated, they gain immeasurably and tell other students about it too. I was keen to get the marketing balance right: clear enough about possible challenges students might face

THE MENTORING SCHEME PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD ON THE VALUABLE WORK AND INSIGHTS OF A COUNSELLING INTERVENTION

on entering employment, but not so daunting as to deter them from signing up. Discussions with the University Of Birmingham Guild of Students LGBTQ Association revealed a mixed picture. There were many confident 'out' students who anticipated no issues when they started work, (although most had never worked full time, and possibly didn't know what they didn't know). Then there were those who were finding coming out to friends, family and teachers a struggle and saw future employment presenting yet another challenge over and above

the general uncertainty and confusion of what to do after graduation. For other students there were more subtle situational factors: they might be out to their personal tutor, but not to their supervisor; out to students in their hall or residence, but not to those in their group

project team; out to their community action group, but not to their sports teams, and out in their evening job, but not during their year-long work placement. I also checked out the local situation with the university counselling service, which invited me to speak to the support group it runs for LGBT students. Early consultation with the counselling service helped my understanding of LGBT students and their issues, such as confidence, minority stress, juggling multiple identities and anxiety. This background research and preparation was particularly helpful in appreciating the varied life experiences relating to sexuality, of students who signed up for the new scheme and for briefing the external mentors.

### How the scheme works

Convinced there was a need to support LGBT students, but still cautious, I started with a pilot of just three students. That was in 2011: in 2016, 28 students signed up. The scheme was initially funded by the university, with additional sponsorship from the law firm Gowling WLG and latterly administered by the university's multi award-winning careers service, Careers Network. Every year, mentors are recruited from a range of occupations and jobs in Birmingham, the stipulation being that they are LGBT themselves, out at work, have some mentoring or guidance experience and can build rapport

with students while also understanding the range of personalities they might be talking to. I also aimed to recruit a wide range of mentors in terms of sexual orientation, transgender and cisgender identities. Mentors and students are invited to a 'speed mentoring' evening in October, and afterwards, students are asked to complete an application form and state their preferred mentor. They are matched, asked to contact their mentors and commit to a minimum of three mentoring meetings between November and June. The scheme runs under the strapline 'Get Out, Stay Out' so the initial focus of the mentoring conversation is strategies and tactics for coming out at work and staying out at work. Discussions soon move on to other topics, ranging from looking at CVs and application forms to more general life topics, such as advice on adopting children.

The scheme is primarily about employability, but feedback from students provided some very interesting insights into a much wider variety of issues pertinent to anyone working in student support services. For many new students, university offers the opportunity to be open about sexual and gender identity in a relatively safe and secure environment. The mentoring scheme and the matching evening is a concrete example of this opportunity beyond just encouraging and inclusive words in a prospectus or on a website. The very fact that the university runs and extensively advertises such a scheme indicates an accepting, open, supportive and tolerant community. Indeed, some students cited the scheme as a reason for applying to the university and transferring here mid-course from other institutions. This supportive message was literally writ large in the posters, fliers and webpages which carried details of the scheme. It also featured in a welcome event the counselling service has been running for several years for new LGBT students at the university. It has become clear that more and more staff have been aware of the scheme, mostly due to Careers Network's impressive marketing strategy, especially linking the publicity to the other successful mentoring schemes it runs. There have been examples of academic staff going out of their way to publicise the scheme at the start of the year to set a more supportive tone within their discipline and of new teaching staff wanting to be mentors and then publicising the scheme to their own students. The opportunities for collaborative, supportive work across services afforded by this scheme are large, and growing.

## ACADEMICS REPORTED DIFFICULTIES WHEN TRAVELLING FOR WORK OR PUBLISHING ABROAD IN COUNTRIES WHERE HOMOPHOBIA IS UNCHALLENGED OR ENSHRINED IN LAW

### Student feedback

The first feedback point was after the launch, which incorporated the speed mentoring event. Although well organised and with a clear purpose, it was light-hearted in tone and served as a gentle introduction to having networking-style conversations, which can so often be daunting. The mentors might be in business attire, have impressive titles and be very confident, but the ice-breaking commonality was that they were all LGBT and there to help. For some students, attending this event marked their first public coming out experience. The event had a specific purpose and a structure, which made it easier to just turn up, rather than it being a relatively unstructured student LGBT social event. This was particularly true for some international students whose home countries are not so tolerant. Also, every year LGBT students have attended who were not active in the university Student LGBTQ Association – an encouraging feature which suggests that schemes such as these can reach out to students who might lack the confidence to attend groups with a more purely social focus.

It was clear from the feedback that students valued the opportunity to talk to mentors about their jobs and possible career trajectory. These were the kind of things they could talk to a university careers advisor about, but the difference was that these conversations were unfiltered and open as they didn't need to worry about revealing their LGBT identity. The matching event and then subsequent careers conversations with their mentors eased the transition into engaging with career planning and the world of work. Students spoke of how meeting mentors acted as a rehearsal for discussions with

careers advisors around working life that would suit them and specific topics such as whether to disclose any work or involvement with the LGBT student society on their CV. The rehearsal aspect of the mentoring conversation was also

cited as useful for having future discussions with tutors about work placements and how to approach coming out. Mentors were seen as invaluable in helping students construct a coming out strategy. When I enlisted mentors, I particularly looked for those who were well networked in the LGBT community. Many of the mentors are involved in their organisations' LGBT staff networks, which

organise social activities, provide advice on diversity policy and practice, and support induction of new staff. Students were largely unaware of such staff groups, or of LGBT professional networking groups such as, in Birmingham, Out of Office and the Alliance Network and, nationally, OpenLand, a group for those involved in property. There are many more such groups. Several students commented after the mentoring evening about how it seemed that being LGBT at work was the very opposite of being isolated. A recurring theme has been that coming out is not a once-in-a-lifetime event and that coming out at university is quite different from coming out at work. Mentoring conversations enabled students (and indeed mentors) to not only reflect on their coming out journey so far, but to also explore and anticipate future scenarios. For some, this could lead to planting a rainbow flag on their desk on their first day at work, while for others, a more nuanced approach might be more appropriate. The how, the what, the why and the timing of coming out are very personal and should reflect the needs and confidence of each individual. As does, for many students, deciding how important their sexuality and gender are for them in the context of work and their personal lives.

Students, though generally very well connected to their peers through social networks and university societies, found the opportunity to speak with someone older, and particularly in a structured way, extremely helpful. The mentors range from people only a few years into their first jobs, to senior managers in their 50s. Some students wanted to work with younger mentors because they would have very recent memories of managing the coming out process and of choosing and applying for jobs, while others chose senior managers or partners to get a sense of their career as out employees. And some chose academics, not necessarily from their discipline, to help them explore issues of coming out to their tutors or fellow students and also to think about postgraduate work and careers in academia. Students commented positively on the opportunity to have professional LGBT role models who had been successful in very different ways, to see a range of possible futures and also be given examples of how more and more organisations – MI6 being a recent example – are setting out to actively recruit LGBT graduates.

### Implications for counselling and student support services

The scheme is a good example of many agencies working together from its inception. This is essential if one wants to market the scheme and get buy-in

THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATIVE, SUPPORTIVE WORK ACROSS SERVICES AFFORDED BY THIS SCHEME ARE LARGE, AND GROWING

across an institution consisting of 35,000 students and over 6,000 staff. There are some really useful data about LGBT student experience, some of which I've tried to capture in this article, which could usefully inform student induction, student

THE VERY FACT THAT THE UNIVERSITY RUNS AND EXTENSIVELY ADVERTISES SUCH A SCHEME INDICATES AN ACCEPTING, OPEN, SUPPORTIVE AND TOLERANT COMMUNITY

welfare support, personal tutoring and teaching practice. The mentoring scheme has also fed into another piece of work, the groundbreaking University of Birmingham LGBT Inclusive Curriculum Project, now into its

third year, with the purpose of ensuring that the content and delivery of the curriculum across the institution is inclusive of LGBT students.<sup>8</sup> It has benefitted from the involvement of students and academics who are also mentors and mentees, including personal tutors, heads of department and a range of administrative staff. The mentoring scheme would probably never have taken off so quickly without the active participation of the then student LGBT officers. They endorsed the scheme and made it easy for us to reach their membership.

At the risk of trying to boil the scheme down to a few soundbites, feedback from students essentially centres on two issues. Firstly, balancing being true to oneself and dealing with possible discrimination; and secondly, raising confidence. Students are generally uncertain about the world of work, and wondering about whether to come out or not adds another degree of uncertainty. Once they have the chance to talk to LGBT people who are out, happy and successful, students overwhelmingly come to realise that the anticipation of problems is worse than the reality. Essentially, the scheme exists to give students the opportunity to have a conversation they might not otherwise have had and, once started, those conversations cover some of the most important and challenging issues for LGBT students today. In capturing some of those wider issues, I hope to inform a broader understanding of this client group, the context-driven nature of many of their concerns and anxieties, and to highlight the benefits for university and college counselling services and their clients of collaboration with supportive colleagues. ●



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sean Russell** worked in university careers services, including periods as director at the University of Birmingham and the University of Warwick. He has written on LGBT employability issues for the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services and Stonewall and has spoken at conferences. Sean is currently a consultant on the University of Birmingham LGBT Inclusive Curriculum Project. He is also a qualified executive coach working primarily with university senior managers. Details of his work and the mentoring scheme are at: [www.getoutstayout.org.uk](http://www.getoutstayout.org.uk) and [www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/internships/mentoring/lgbt.aspx](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/internships/mentoring/lgbt.aspx) [sean@getoutstayout.org.uk](mailto:sean@getoutstayout.org.uk)



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#### LGBT MENTORING SCHEME WEB PAGE:

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/internships/mentoring/lgbt.aspx>