

Creating an Inclusive FE Environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Learners

Research findings released today show that the FE Sector has come a long way in how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learners are treated in Further Education.

The *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Equality in Adult Learning* research was commissioned by the Skills Funding Agency, to fill a knowledge gap in the sector as to how well the FE sector meets the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learners, and also how the sexual orientation and gender identity of learners might inform the choices they make.

Early results show that there is much to celebrate in adult learning, with the experience of respondents, including past, current and potential learners, being mostly positive. When asked to rate how welcoming their college or provider is, the average score given by respondents was over seven out of ten. However, there are recommendations for change from the research that should make significant improvements to creating a more equal and inclusive environment.

The last research into this subject was commissioned in 2006, and results painted a bleak picture of what it meant to be lesbian, gay or bisexual in adult learning, with results suggesting then that the experience of adult learning was characterised by widespread discrimination and harassment.

Geoff Russell, chief executive of the Skills Funding Agency, commented:

“I very much endorse the recommendations in this report as an important milestone in realising the vision of a sector in which equality is fully embedded and where all learners feel safe and comfortable to be open about their sexual orientations and gender identities.”

Skills Funding Agency

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A partner organisation of the of the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills

Almost 450 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learners, aged over 19 participated in the research, which also shows that only one third of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learners believe that equality policies in their learning environment are a reality.

Other key findings from the research, which took place on-line, in face-to-face interviews and in focus groups show:

- 30pc of Transgender learners had experienced bullying or harassment in adult learning due to their gender identity;
- Fewer than one in six (14.3pc) lesbian, gay and bisexual learners had experienced bullying and harassment in adult learning due to their sexual orientation;
- The most commonly reported form of bullying and harassment was discrimination in practical work in the classroom or tasks in work-based learning;
- And, the greatest barrier reported for learning was 'insensitive curriculum content'.

The research was commissioned following the publication of the Skills Funding Agency's draft *Single Equality Scheme*, designed to ensure that learning opportunities are open to all. The research was carried out by Babcock and supported by the Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIREs) and the Lesbian and Gay Foundation (LGF). It was promoted through Further Education providers of learning; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learner groups and the National Union of Students (NUS). Representatives from bodies in the sector, including the Association of Colleges, Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), Equality Challenge Unit, Learning and Skills Improvement Service, the University and College Union, and the Forum for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Equality in Post-School Education – all contributed in a research steering group.

Geoff Russell continued:

“Results from this research confirm that as well as clear moral and legal cases for banishing discrimination, those providers that understand equality and take concerted action to ensure their learning environment is fair, will see gains in the future. A welcoming environment is favoured and deemed more attractive to learners who may previously have left an institution due to discrimination.”

Recommendations from the research include encouraging providers who are confident that their provision is truly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender friendly to recruit through attending lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender events, whilst examples of how bullying and harassment are not tolerated by providers and the mechanisms through which they can be reported, should be displayed prominently. It was also recommended that providers may wish to consider setting up a mentoring system, whilst lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learners should be encouraged to take an active role in the learning environment. The sharing of effective practice on how to combat issues is also strongly recommended.

Joy Mercer from the Association of Colleges (AoC) said:

"We are pleased to note that feedback highlights a positive attitude and developing awareness of the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. However, this report also identifies the further work needed and will help managers to enhance their policies, practice, curriculum and continuous professional development in the future."

And there is no room to become complacent. A significant minority of learners continue to report bullying and harassment or other barriers to achievement.

Simon Hurd from the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) commented:

"This is a very informative report that clearly shows the mainly positive experiences from lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learners but highlights that there is still work to be done to remove barriers to enable all learners to fully engage in the learning process. AELP aims to continue supporting members by raising awareness of issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion."

Vicki Baars, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Officer from the NUS concluded:

"This research provides valuable evidence about experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adult learners in further education, an area which has been relatively under-researched. We look forward to working with sector partners in using the findings to develop support and guidance for institutions and students' unions wishing to tackle the

barriers identified, in order to improve the learning environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender learners.”

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Skills Funding Agency

The Skills Funding Agency, a partner organisation of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, funds and regulates adult further education and skills in England.

It is responsible for channelling funding swiftly, efficiently and securely to further education colleges and other providers, primarily in response to customer (employer and learner) choice on programmes.

It operates through customer focused services: National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) and Next Step.

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