

Investigating the Relationship between LGBTQ+ / Queer Subjectivity, Teaching and Learning at UAL

Dr Paul Bench

PgCert Action Research Project, January 2026

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UAL Staff at Pride London, 2025

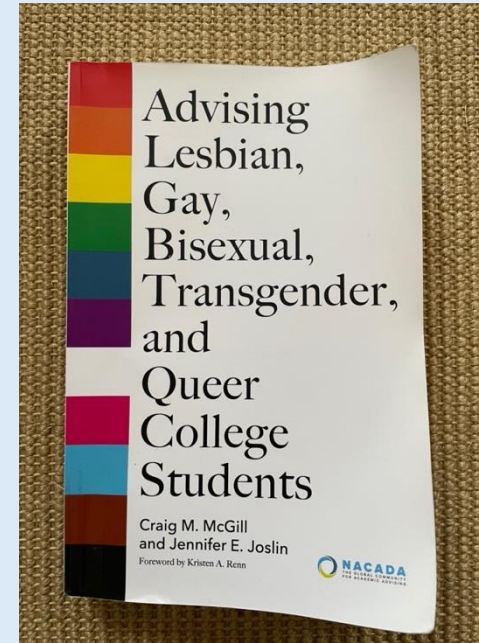
<https://hallslife.arts.ac.uk/story/16049175/highlights-from-pride-in-london-parade>

Research Question

In what ways and to what extent does LGBTQ+ / Queer Subjectivity relate to teaching and learning at UAL?

Background and Context

- 'Sexual Orientation' and 'Gender Reassignment' are protected characteristics.
- The UK supreme court ruling on 'sex' (BBC News, 16th April 2025), and UAL response.
- LGBTQ+ representation and discrimination in HE (Armstrong and Sullivan, 2024).
- Arts Universities as queer spaces.
- The 'dearth of literature on advising LGBTQA+ students' (McGill and Joslin, 2021, p. 4).
- HPL teaching Historical and Cultural Studies at UAL.
- Experience as a student in the UK: Design + Academic.
- Research interests: Queer Histories and Visual Culture.



'Given the pervasiveness of homonegativity and cisgenderism, it is not surprising to find that queer-identified individuals experience disproportionate rates of mental health issues' (Chan, Erby and Ford, 2017, p. 16)

'Despite the sense that discussions of LGBTQA+ issues abound, advisors are not always cognizant of LGBTQA+ students...[and] must be aware of issues unique to LGBTQA+ students, including identity development, campus climate, and restrictive or discriminatory policies at the institutional level' (McGill and Joslin, 2021, p. 3)

Rationale and ARP Development

- Queer identity not substantially covered in the PgCert.
- Queer identity is not necessarily visible or understood in the same way as other protected characteristics.
- Art school regarded as a queer space, but does this mean there is not a problem?
- Interest in the particular challenges and needs associated with specific identities within the LGBTQIA+ initialism.
- My research interests in Queer Histories and teaching research methodologies.

‘Students identifying as transgender were more likely (17%) to report having a bad experience at school or college, most of whom attributed bullying as the main reason. This, coupled with the lower attainment and higher rates of mental health conditions’ (UCAS-Stonewall, 2021, p. 5)

WHERE DO LGBT+ STUDENTS STUDY?

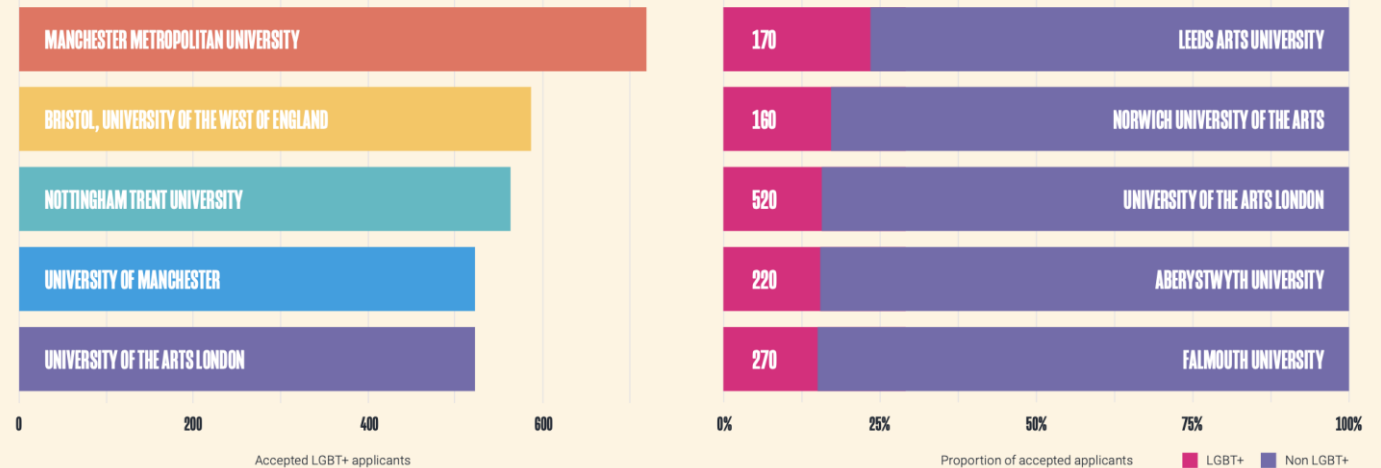


Figure 14: The number of all accepted LGBT+ applicants for the five highest recruiting universities or colleges of LGBT+ applicants in 2020

Figure 15: The top five* universities or colleges with the highest representation of LGBT+ students in their 2020 intake, displayed by the proportional divide of LGBT+/non-LGBT+ acceptances, and the number of acceptances that represents.

Charts for LGBTQ Recruitment at Universities in England and Wales from the UCAS report made in collaboration with Stonewall, 2021, p. 23

‘LGBT+ students are most likely to enter creative courses,’ (UCAS-Stonewall, 2021, p. 4)

‘...it is heartening to see LGBTQ+ applicants so optimistic about their upcoming student experience, and excited about being more open about their identity in higher education’ (Kelley [UCAS-Stonewall], 2021, p. 3)

ARP Development

Original plan

- Focus on specific MA course.
- Focused on gay, male, mature students.
- Responded to observations and the lack of attention to specific gay male experience in art school environments and mature students in HE in general.

Ethical and Practical Challenges and Developments

- 'Reading' student identity.
- Risks targeting specific people, 'mis-reading' identity and potentially 'outing' students.
- Small cohorts limit participants.
- Open call-outs might still seem targeted at particular students.
- Contacting alumni would be difficult and unlikely to be supported by UAL.
- Gay male + Mature Student: too small a minority.
- No active LGBTQ+ student group.

'To begin, identify an issue you wish to investigate; this identification...is methodologically central. It involves a research question.' (McNiff, 2013, p. 92)

'action research is appropriate when it is overtly to do with identifying personal, social and political values, and asking what these values may look like when realised in practice.' (McNiff, 2013, p. 92)

"ethics" relates to matters of harm and benefit, rights and responsibilities...the term "work" in this context [is used] to cover the psychological and bodily processes of noticing, attending, thinking, interacting and performing.' (Banks, 2016, p. 36)

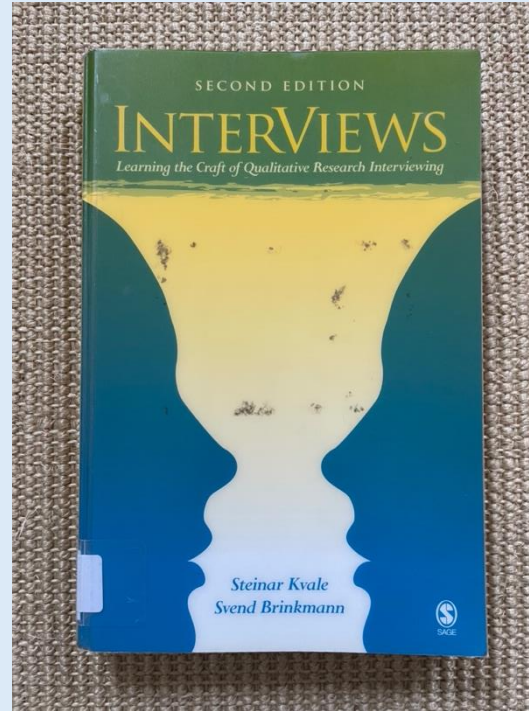
'the term 'ethics work'...[refers] to the effort people...put into seeing ethically salient aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done.' (Banks, 2016, p. 36)

Reflection, Solutions and Progression

- Shift to interviewing staff from the LGBTQ+ Staff Network.
- Open investigation to all identities encompassed by the LGBTQIA+ initialism.
- Discuss experience of teaching, observations of students and memories of HE.
- Offers LGBTQ+ staff an opportunity to be heard.
- Expands my personal-professional network as an HPL.

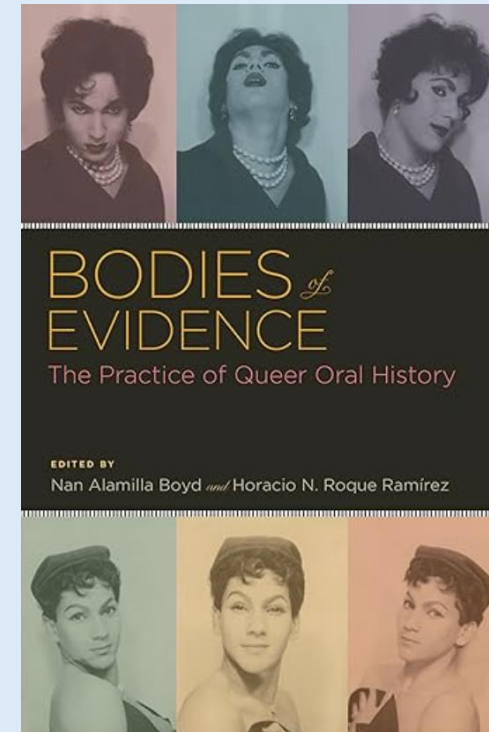
Methods

- 3 Semi-structured online interviews.
- Private and anonymized.
- Relates to my teaching of methods.
- Relates to the establishment of Queer histories through Oral Testimony.



‘in the social space of the queer oral history, something transformative seems to occur as new knowledge is produced.’ (Almilla Boyd and Roque Ramirez, 2012, p. 2)

‘A semi-structured life world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27)



‘Interviews are, by their very nature, social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts’ (Rapley, 2011, p. 16)

Interview Schedule

You are part of the LGBTQ+ Staff Network and agreed to participate in this study about LGBTQ+ / Queer subjectivity, teaching and learning. If you feel comfortable to, could you describe **how you identify** and what your **role is at UAL**?

Do you have any thoughts about how your identity relates to your teaching practice?

In what ways do you think your identity does or doesn't relate to the **style and content of your teaching**?

To what extent and in what ways do you think your identity impacts on your **relationship to students** in diverse circumstances? Can you think of examples?

What observations have you made regarding LGBTQ+ / **Queer students** in your classes?

What **memories** do you have that relate to your identity and your own experience of higher education?

‘Standardized questions do not bring standardized answers, for the same question means different things to different people’ (Kinsey et al, 1948, p. 52)

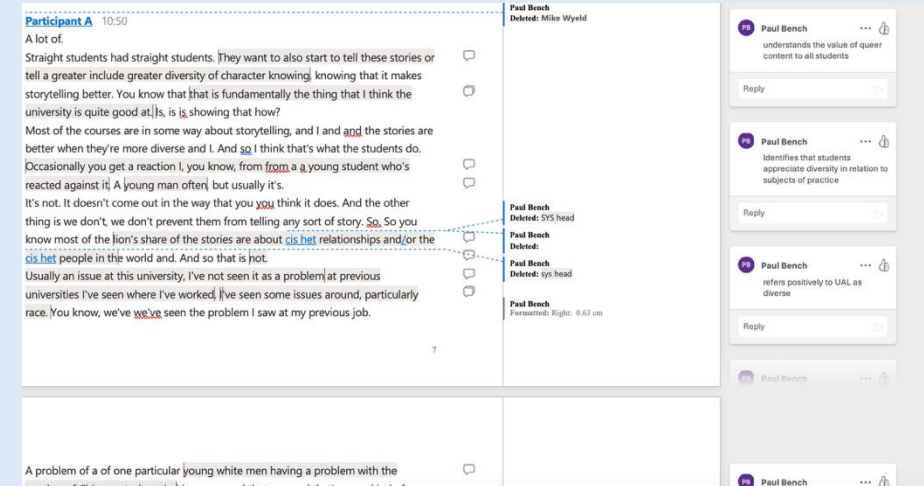
‘A discursive perspective sensitizes the interviewer to differences in the discourses of the research and the subjects’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 156)

‘First, variation in response is as important as consistency. Second, techniques, which allow diversity rather than those which eliminate it are emphasized, resulting in more informal conversational exchanges and third, interviewers are seen as active participants rather than like speaking questionnaires.’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 165)

Process and Reflection on Methods: Interviews and Thematic Analysis

- Automatic transcription + selective ‘cleaning’.
- Guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2022) 6 stage process: Familiarisation; Coding; Theme Generation; Theme Development and Review; Theme Refining, Defining and Naming; Writing Up.
- Coding – abandoned micro-level coding as unfeasible.
- Summarised transcriptions into statements in two stages.
- Separated and disassociated statements.
- Reorganised into themes.
- Recognising that I become the ‘situated interpreter of meaning’, a ‘subjective storyteller’ and that this ‘subjectivity is valued’ as ‘an asset’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 6)

‘the researcher becomes the instrument of analysis’
(Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2)



‘knowledge generation is inherently subjective and situated’, (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 8)

Participant A

‘we are really good networkers, network makers and that is something that I talk to the students about all the time’

Participant A

‘we encourage people to tell those stories and through that we look after a lot of the problems that other parts of culture perhaps don't think about as much.’

Participant C

‘I see it as a parenting role, you know, compassionate pedagogy’

Participant B

‘we were told often that, you know, these are the people that you'll end up then working with...So I think I also felt a bit of pressure to keep the more messy parts of my life slightly away from it ’

Participant B

‘I was trying to de-gender a lot of items in the workroom or ideas about clothing and costume’

Participant B

‘I was quite conscious about keeping boundaries around sharing about my own experience. I was open about my identity, but wanted to keep that boundary clear.’

Participant B

‘I had colleagues and my manager specifically just sort of continued to misgender me all the way through the three years’

Participant A

‘I include...a great deal of LGBTQ content’

Participant C

‘I was ostracised from my classmates...I was struggling to find a friendship group’

Participant A

‘I’m very aware of keeping an arm’s distance from young gay men and providing only the information that I need to.’

Participant C

‘I always bring myself my identity and my community with me, through my ethnicity, my gender, my sexuality.’

Summary of Project Findings

Queer Identity and Student Work

- Queer related personal story telling in student work.
- The frequency and importance of student queer identity expression was unexpected.

Tutor Visibility

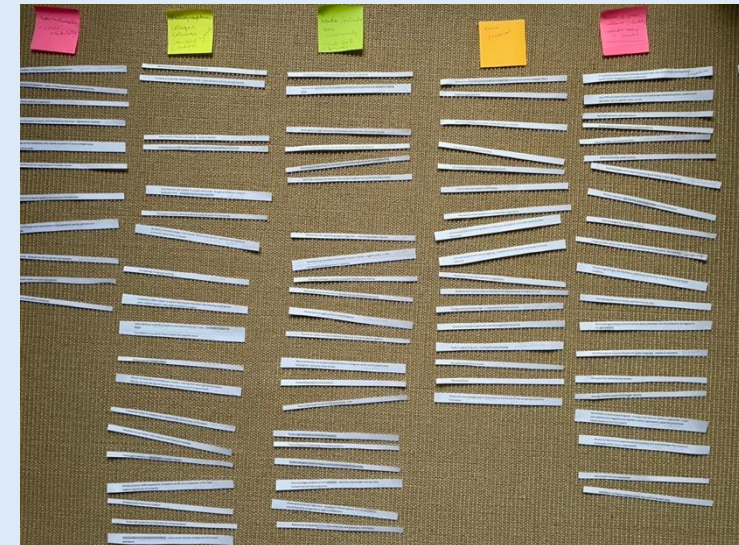
- E-mail signature.
- Verbal notes.
- Discussion of pronouns.
- Self-presentation.
- Queer tutor identity in course materials.

Teaching Strategies

- Compassionate queer elders.
- Position of empathy.
- Listening.
- Understanding identity flux and instability.
- Supplying information.
- Practical interventions, e.g. de-gendering materials.



Featured image: UAL Pride campaign photography, 2022 BA Photography, London College of Communication, UAL | Photography: Emma Martin



Summary of Project Findings (Continued)

Communities and Networks

- Student life is a formative time.
- Social networks support identity development.
- The personal relates to the professional: productive or inhibiting.
- Inside UAL relates to outside the university.

Tutor Identities, Histories and Contexts

- Sexuality and gender is contingent (time/place).
- The culture and politics different age groups live through impacts on their priorities and internalized feelings.
- Queer students and staff may encounter queer identity struggle.
- An apparently stable sexual/gender identity is a privilege.
- Not all identities in the LGBTQIA+ initialism are under exactly the same kinds of duress and they have different histories.



UAL at London Pride, 2025

<https://hallslife.arts.ac.uk/story/16049175/highlights-from-pride-in-london-parade>

Conclusions

- Queer status is significant for tutors and students.
- Queer identity can relate to course content and pastoral care.
- Staff with diverse experience and identities take different approaches.
- Some UAL courses are spaces for queer expression, which draws applicants.
- Queer visibility is important but does not negate queer struggle.
- Queer (or Ally) staff identity can be made visible in multiple ways.
- Trans students are in particular need of support.
- Queer subjectivities are diverse.
- Queer students might experience identity instability, confusion and flux.
- Queer students are potentially vulnerable.
- Supportive communities are significant.



Evaluation

- Skills in interviewing and thematic analysis.
- No access to contemporary queer students.
- Limited number of participants.
- Recruitment obscured less motivated queer staff and cisgendered heteronormative staff.
- Interviewing tutors across the LGBTQ spectrum allowed me to:
 - Examine diverse queer experience across courses and colleges.
 - Address longer lifespan experiences.
 - Understand staff and student queer struggle.
 - Learn from colleagues.

‘Less visible queer women and men...are not as easily reached by even the most ambitious oral historian.’
(Almilla Boyd and Roque Ramirez, 2012, p. 12)

Next Steps

Disseminate Findings

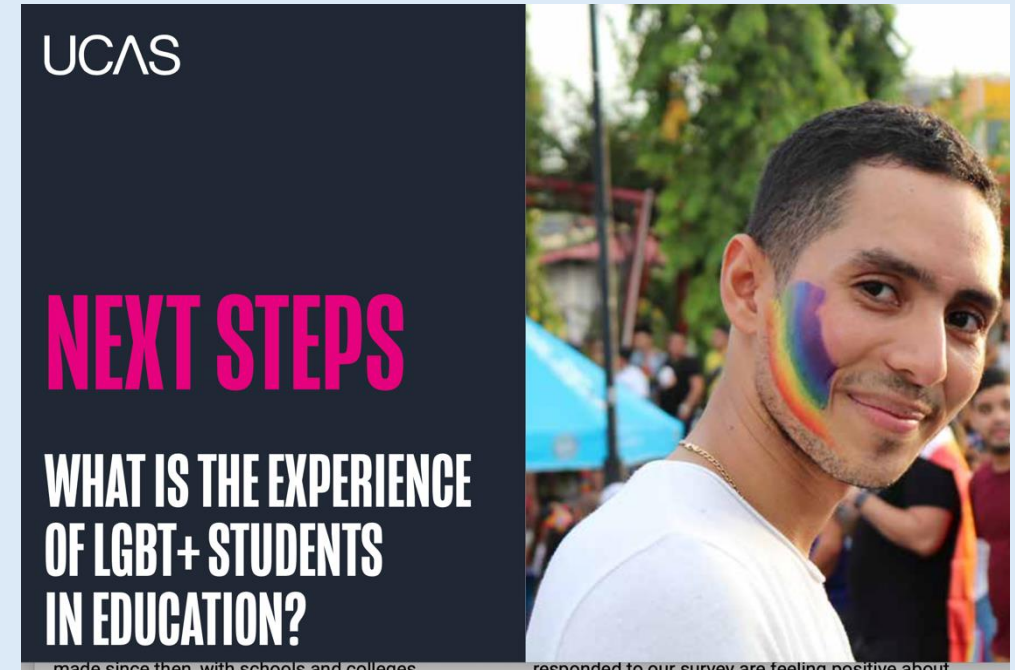
- LGBTQ+ Staff Network
- Reading list.
- Academic paper / Conference presentation
- UAL survey for PgCert reapproval.

Teaching Practice

- Consider queer identity flux and confusion in students, 'meeting students where they are' (Participant C).
- Understand that queer subjectivity may not be visible.
- Feature diverse queer identities.
- Be sensitive to links between personal experience and student work.
- Note student struggle and contact line managers.

Potential Future Research

- Remain aware of queer diversity in historical subjects and contemporary audiences of research.
- Intersectional queer identities.
- Impact of language skills in queer becoming.



‘the act of reporting results is an important part of ethical reflection’
(Tubaro, 2021, p. 71)

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