‘Is my college queer?’

Student experiences in Oxford colleges

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MSc in Education, 2023-2024

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I thank those who try to queer research.

Abstract

‘Is my college queer?’ is a key question asked in this dissertation. What starts as a seemingly simple exploration of students’ queer expectations and experiences at their Oxford colleges is complicated with the application of queer theory. I first highlight the prominence of college reputations and their encouragement by students and college branding. This encompasses historical, societal and social expectations.

I set out on this project seeing my research methods as a means to understand these expectations further and how they interact with student experience. These included self-selective participant survey and interviews with students. Although seemingly ‘straight’-forward in method, I became aware of the tensions I faced in queering my research and began to question any attempt to categorise colleges as queer. This was first through my research of what it means to label something as queer. This relates to my original interest in who queers Oxford colleges: my participants, the colleges or my research? Based on this, I began to reflect on whether a college could ever be ‘queer enough’. By exploring the term ‘queer failure’ as it relates to my research and colleges, I conclude that although queer failure may be inevitable, the reaching for the inclusivity and understanding that is involved in queering a college and research is important.

With this foundation for analysis, I offer insight into student perspectives on their colleges and whether their experiences would lead them to regard their colleges as queer. Queer temporality, engagement with staff and other students, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity are key themes here. Ultimately, this emphasises college’s placemaking and reputations as dynamic and subject to its members. Although, there are areas that colleges could ensure greater inclusivity across cohorts, which are shared in my findings, there is also a clear sentiment that the college is changeable based on those who occupy and use it. I note, tradition of Oxford is an important area that complicates this discussion. Nevertheless, the message that colleges and its members would be more inclusive in its trying and necessarily failing to be queer than its complacency and selective marketing as ‘inclusive’ is present throughout.

Introduction

‘‘Colleges and universities can be sites of progress.’[1]

This dissertation explores how LGBTQ+ students experience Oxford colleges. Before delving into college experiences, Oxford as a university is explored in relation to its LGBTQ+ inclusion that goes beyond college disparities and dissections. Following this, the role of colleges in the University is presented; this is of particular interest, because Oxford is somewhat unique in its establishment and use of colleges as places that marry student personal, social, and academic lives[2]. The marketing of colleges to students is also discussed to understand the projection colleges have about their identities, before considering the actions of those colleges in relation to LGBTQ+ inclusion. If/How that influences expectations and experiences of colleges is presented with reflection on responses to a survey and interview questions of students with LGBTQ+ identities at various colleges. It will break the silence on LGBTQ+ students’ experiences and in doing so highlight the need for further research that challenges the marketed narrative of broad inclusivity at Oxford where, in some cases, there is little.

Hodgson presents contention around the definition of ‘institution’, as sometimes it is used to represent a building and the rules that govern those within it, while other times it is used to describe how those within the institution act. I percieve the institution of Oxford as embodying both of these, but with careful regard to the hierarchies that exist within it. In this way, ‘institutions themselves are the outcomes of human

[1] Garvey, 2024, 65
[2] Similar to Sandler’s (2022) claim about Cambridge colleges

interactions and aspirations, without being consciously designed in every detail by any individual or group, while historically given institutions precede any one individual'[3]. Students have an interesting relationship with their universities. They have power in creating the institution[4], but it may be the first time they negotiate this power with an institution themselves. Universities must protect their students, yet they also hold their students accountable for protecting the institution's reputation, as they are part of the institution[5]. In this way, the responsibilities of the *institution* interlock with those *of the* institution, as shown in figure 1. This follows an ontological framework of institutions as 'agent sensitive', whereby 'the reigning equilibria or conventions can be significantly altered if the preferences or dispositions of some agents are changed, within a feasible set of personality types'[6]. This clarifies that the environment is created by people, which impacts how much other agents can create change. Hence, this understanding of 'institution' acknowledges existing hierarchies.

Oxford concerns itself with numbers[7]. It asks 'how many students are X? Have these numbers increased over the past 5, 10, 15 years?' etc. However, figures for LGBTQ+ students are missing from any public reports created by the institution, let alone their expectations and experiences. The only mention of LGBTQ+ data on students is the reflection on 'collegiate university' events and progress in small pockets of the university that year as proof that they are doing 'enough'[8].

We need to know how LGBTQ+ students experience their colleges, what their expectations are, and move thinking forward in terms of what is considered 'inclusivity' at Oxford colleges. This is important, not only because students' experiences are key to their wellbeing, but the happiness of students has been suggested as a factor in their degree success. Barker et al's study showed, 'generally happy students showed the greatest improvements in academic success over time'[9]. Similar results were found in

[3] Hodgson, 2006, 8
[4] E.g., see HEPI policy recommendations based on student feedback by Neves et al, 2024
[5] See Oxford 'Student Code of Conduct'
[6] Hodgson, 2006, 16
[7] E.g., Equality and Inclusion Report 2022-23
[8] Equality and Inclusion Report 2022-23
[9] 2016, 2026

other studies[10]. However, in a study with first-generation students who shared their understandings of success, 'success was also measured by and relied upon the type and level of validation received within the university'[11]. Hence, the importance of student happiness and positive wellbeing helped by the university cannot be overstated.

As Oxford has been identified as a world-leading university[12], this report is overdue. It is difficult to accept that an institution that is claimed to be at the forefront of its kind has not built in the practices to continue to stably develop LGBTQ+ inclusion at a time when it is politically under attack[13]. In doing this, it leaves this challenge to uphold LGBTQ+ inclusion with those in the community, which seems irresponsible and problematic, as well as contradictory with its claims of inclusivity. 'All too often, the responsibility of change is put upon trans people themselves, therefore reinforcing unequal power relations'[14]. This is in combination with the everyday emotional labour of being transgender[15]. I am thankfully funded to undertake this research, but this is not the case for many students who continue to work on the institution's inclusion of their own identities, departmentally, collegiately and/or otherwise. So, I thank those who let me do this research - for the opportunity to raise the positives, the negatives and the need for change. I hope this helps Oxford senior leaders develop queer inclusivity and understanding more.

I found this work emotional. This is important for me to share, because my ideas and motivations changed throughout the research based on my emotions[16]. Note, I do not think that 'to be emotional is to have one's judgement affected' as Ahmed mimics the voice of the oppressor, but can be used to gain greater understanding of positionality[17]. This research has been difficult and painful at times, but I have always known the importance of continuing[18]. I proposed this project partly before coming to Oxford. I

[10] Langevin, 2013; Antaramian, 2017
[11] O'shea & Delahunty, 2018, 1068
[12] "World University Rankings", 2024
[13] Shaw, 2023
[14] Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021, 230
[15] Miller et al, 2019; Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021; Maritz & Prinsloo, 2015
[16] Brown & Pickerill, 2009
[17] 2004, 2
[18] Not only so I had something to submit, but also so that this research exists

had expectations of what it might be like for me, as a queer, nonbinary student to enter this space. I had hoped it would be somewhat progressive due to its status as a world-leading university. At the same time, I recognised its dedication to tradition and the potential for my high expectations for inclusivity to be unmet. Nevertheless, I started the project from a place of hope. I told my supervisor 'I don't think anger is necessarily useful. If I felt angry, I might not feel like I could change things'. Since then, my anger has grown, and my writing comes from a point of frustration. This has only developed and grown deeper when my questions about LGBTQ+ experience have not been pre-considered by the university[19], despite the number of LGBTQ+ students who were willing to discuss their experiences with me, some of them, in the hope it would lead to progress.

Literature Review

'Queer'

Defining the word 'queer' can be useful in academia, but it can also be difficult and contentious. 'Queer' was originally used as a derogatory slur before the 1980s but has since been reclaimed by many LGBTQ+ people and academics[20]. Nevertheless, 'defining queer is antithetical to what it is. Part of what seems to draw theorists and researchers to queer theory is a promise of 'radical openness''[21]. With this sentiment, it seems potentially more useful to describe queer by what it is not – controlled, censored, cis- and heteronormative, defined[22]. There are more complex debates around the use of queer, which could be a whole dissertation[23]. What is important to understand for this dissertation is that queer is a broad category, which generally defies sexual and gender norms but can mean a lot of things to many people. The use of 'queer' in academia is related, which I will discuss in the 'methodology' section.

[19] Considered in the literature review
[20] Kunzel, 2018; Ryan, 2020; Goldberg et al, 2020
[21] Barad, 2012, 29 in Allen & Rasmussen, 2015, 686
[22] Houlbrook, 2013
[23] See Houlbrook, 2013; Kornak, 2015; Goldberg et al, 2020

Using ‘queer’ to describe a place or space is contentious, as is presented in my findings. Yet, academics across disciplines have explored how queer spaces are/not created and can/not be beneficial to LGBTQ+ people[24]. There has also been a push to recognise queerness throughout history, creating queer discussion for people to relate and understand a more diverse past[25]. While in certain circles this is celebrated, it would be ignorant to ignore the homophobia and transphobia that exists and would deny a queer history or would argue against its sharing[26]. This also creates discussion around who can ‘claim’ someone or something to be queer, which relates back to definitions of ‘queer’ but also motivations for ‘queering’[27]. It is important to note, I have not seen a college describe itself as queer.

LGBTQ+ Students and Universities

There are many reasons for discussing students’ queer student experiences at colleges and universities. One is the common understanding that students will, in many ways, ‘find themselves’ at university – ‘university is often the place in which young people, living away from the family home for the first time, come out as LGBTQ+’[28]. Although, this implies one type of student experience – where students move away from their families and home at 18 and have enough time and resources to explore themselves and engage with students from other backgrounds, which is not the case for all students[29]. Nevertheless, universities can offer this space, and with these opportunities to engage with new ideas and from perspectives previously unencountered, which is present in many of the sub links found on the Oxford website[30]. Furthermore, some[31] see this time as a rite of passage to adulthood.

Research on LGBTQ+ student experience has been conducted before, although it is more frequent in American contexts. Preston and Hoffman class universities as

[24] Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021; Pryor, 2018; Sullivan & Day, 2021
[25] Murphy et al, 2022; Lewis, 2014
[26] Graves, 2012; Freeman, 2023
[27] E.g., Joyce, 2019; Campbell, 2022
[28] Lee, 2022, 1182
[29] E.g., Hubble & Bolton, 2021
[30] E.g., alumni stories on the Oxford website recounting their experiences of Oxford
[31] particularly young undergraduates

heterogendered spaces, despite their presentation of 'a dichotomy between the campus as safe and loving and the external communities as threatening, cold, and potentially violent', their 'discourse works to frame LGBTQ students in a way that suggests they are consistently measured against the majority,' with heterosexuality implied as the 'norm'[32]. Universities then expect LGBTQ+ students to educate others on their experiences[33]. Preston and Hoffman claims that their research is based on a lack of other research around students 'confronted with a conservative community'[34]. However, McClellan seems to build on this; They largely discuss the difficulties LGBTQ+ students face before recognising that 'college and universities can create structural inclusion and the potential to reduce heterosexism by having policies and programming that support and protects LGBTQ students'[35].

Like Preston and Hoffman, Pryor also discusses the heterogendered nature of universities and its impacts on students[36]. Interestingly, they discuss many of the themes I also discuss, while they examine the experiences of students at a Midwest Urban Public institution. Their overriding comment is that 'well-intentioned, campuses often fail to recognize the complexity of LGBTQ student identities'[37], while hoping that 'findings from these studies can provide campuses with necessary information to impact campus practices and policies'[38]. Closer to home, Sandler highlights the testimonies of students as part of 'Out at Cambridge's' nine-month study[39].

These also have similarities with my findings, although the writing is very descriptive and shares the student testimonies at length, with any writing from the author functioning more as a link between these rather than much commentary. At the same time, in closing, Sandler states, 'my hope for LGBTQ+ inclusion – within universities and society at large – is that we develop and structurally embed frameworks around

[32] 2015, 75-77
[33] Preston & Hoffman, 2015
[34] McClellan, 2022, 113
[35] 2022, 127; Newhouse, 2013
[36] 2018
[37] 2018, 35
[38] 2018, 33
[39] 2022

gender and sexuality that are elastic enough to allow flexibility, that value diversity, and that require mutual kindness and respect'[40], which underlies the motivations for much of the research I have read in this area.

Nevertheless, research on current LGBTQ+ student expectations and experiences of Oxford colleges has not been conducted outside of Student Union reports, despite its importance. Much like research at other universities, I hope this research will continue a line of questioning and develop understanding of how universities can become LGBTQ+ safe havens that they sometimes claim, but often fail to be[41].

Being at/in Oxford

It is important to recognise the privilege that we have as Oxford students. This year the UK was ranked 17th out of 49 countries for LGBTQ+ rights[42]. While this has fallen from its number 1 ranking in 2015, it is still in the top half of European countries[43]. Additionally, in many of the rankings cities as LGBTQ+ friendly, Oxford is in the top 10[44]. This is due to its LGBTQ+ nightlife, social groups and mental health services. Additionally, Oxford has an LGBTQ+ campaign and society, LGBTQ+ reps at most, if not all, colleges[45], and many colleges take some measures to show support for LGBTQ+ people, even if it is surface level[46].

This is to say, an LGBTQ+ student's experience of Oxford would have looked very different twenty or so years ago to those of today. Now, being LGBTQ+ friendly is a reputation that colleges seem to care about, if only as a tick box exercise. This is not to take anything away from those who have negative experiences, but progress that has been made must be celebrated and recognised to encourage more LGBTQ+ inclusion. There are many more privileges we have as Oxford students, which may be obvious,

[40] 150
[41] Pryor, 2018
[42] Billson, 2024
[43] Billson, 2024
[44] "LGBTQ+ friendly cities for uni students", 2024; Brocklehurst, The Tab, 2024; Billson, 2024; Morey, 2024
[45] "College LGBTQ+ Reps", u.d.
[46] Sandler, 2022; E.g., giving staff rainbow lanyards

and there is use in recognising those privilege, with the recognition that there are precarities in and contingencies to this.

There are many factors that make Oxford colleges an interesting case study, as discussed throughout this section. Though, one of the aspects that makes this research important is its prestige as 'on most measures one of the best universities in the world'[47]. The stakes are high here. If Oxford is to maintain its place on this pedestal, it must become more inclusive, otherwise those who ascribe to this depiction are at worst celebrating exclusivity and at best overlooking LGBTQ+ student experience. As this work is not being done by Oxford administration, some insight is needed to improve inclusion or at least have more honest marketing/inclusivity data. Hopefully this also questions the measures of universities to include more credits for inclusive practice (not just policy).

Oxford Colleges

Furthermore, colleges are a large part of many students' experiences at the University of Oxford. They encompass much of Oxford history and tradition, sometimes attracting tourists, film crews, and media attention for this reason[48]. Each student is assigned to a college upon their admission, and this is the college they stay at until they finish/leave their course. With 43 of them, students must decide which to apply to or whether they would like the system to decide for them during the application process. Hence, the colleges offer tours of facilities, brochures, open days and have websites, as well as social media presence. Colleges often offer accommodation, study spaces and events for its members.

There is a difference between colleges in personalities, access to spaces, events, and positions among student communities. This means that they build individual reputations, partly dependent on the cohort of students and their activity, but also on

[47] Temple, 2011, 113
[48] See "Prettiest Oxford Colleges To Visit" webpage, u.d.; "Premium Free Oxford Walking Tour…", u.d.

their histories[49]. I am interested in where these reputations come from and how they impact experiences. I focus on stereotypes that relate to LGBTQ+ experiences, as an area that has been under-researched, yet necessary to colleges that might want to improve or maintain their reputations as LGBTQ+ friendly.

The 'college' is branded as students' communities, homes, and welfare bases during their degree[50]. All students are expected to live in or close to Oxford unless they are exempt by the University[51]. The University brands colleges as not necessarily defining the experience of students due to all colleges having similarities – 'our 43 colleges have much in common, but each has its own character and history'[52]. However, the disparity of colleges has recently been investigated by the Students' Union culminating in a report about the differences in their finances and impacts on student experience. The summary of this was, 'disparities disproportionately affect disadvantaged students by limiting their access to resources, while wealthier students can be largely insulated'[53]. Although the report did not mention gender or sexuality, it is important to note the differences between colleges, which impact experience. Additionally, there are facilities owned by each college that are only available to their college members, so students from other colleges are only allowed to use the libraries, gyms, halls (cafeteria) and social areas of their college, unless invited to another college. Hence, a student's college usually has a large impact on their experience of university life.

'Universities typically regard themselves as safe and inclusive spaces for those othered in the rest of society'[54]. Nevertheless, Oxford as an institution was not founded on inclusivity, as shown in Oxford's 'Timeline: 100 years of women's history at Oxford'[55]. It formally started admitting women in 1920, but women were only admitted into the Union in 1963. In 2019, admission numbers were roughly equal between men and women; 62 years after the abolishment of quotas on women. In 1935, the first black

[49] Sen, u.d.
[50] "What is an Oxford college?", u.d.
[51] "Residence Requirements", u.d.
[52] "What is an Oxford college?", u.d.
[53] Hussain, 2024, 4
[54] Lee, 2022, 1182
[55] "School Type", u.d.

African woman, Kofoworola Ademola, was awarded a degree from Oxford. However, the Rhodes statue still stands in Oxford, despite consistent protests for it to be removed[56]. In 2023, only 67.6% of students admitted were from state schools, which fell from 68.1% in 2022[57]. I do not wish to compare these identities as though they are separate. Intersectionality should arguably be researched further and included in institutional documents that separate chapters by marginalised group without recognition that someone who is marginalised by race, class and gender might have a different experience to someone marginalised solely by gender or sexuality[58].

Yet, there is currently very little evidence based on LGBTQ+ students. There is some published on class, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds of students[59], which is important to address. Yet, there is no mention of sexuality or gender. With the lack of reports inclusive of LGBTQ+ student identities, it is difficult to gauge how colleges impact students in this area. Hence, a college naming itself as inclusive is decided by the institution's focus on what it means to be inclusive and what they measure. Without the sharing of evidence, I wonder if a college can call themselves truly inclusive without relying on easy ways to show LGBTQ+ inclusivity at institutions, such as highlighting events students organise[60].

It is difficult to believe colleges' claims of inclusivity without collecting data from students on all protected characteristics. UCAS asks for students to provide their gender and sexuality on application forms and released a report in 2021 on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students across the UK[61]. However, Oxford staff have done nothing like this, and in fact, for the second year in a row have avoided the Stonewall Index Review[62]. While this is a review of staff inclusion, it is still significant in presenting the active retreat from collecting data about LGBTQ+ members of colleges. With this said, the ad

[56] Chigudu, 2020
[57] "School Type", u.d.
[58] Cho et al, 2013
[59] E.g., Oxford's annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusion report dating back to 2015
[60] See Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Report, 2022-23
[61] UCAS, 2021
[62] DeHerrera, 2024

hoc work that students and staff take part in to make the colleges more inclusive and welcoming is significant, as discussed more in subsequent paragraphs.

In 2018, the Oxford SU created a 'Trans Report', featuring data from 52 trans student responses[63]. This highlighted significant issues with trans student experiences, which were generally more negative than cisgender students. Many of the points made in this report still resonate six years later (presented in the findings). Despite this highlighting of issues, there have been no similar reports created by staff since. The report seems to have taken a lot of work, and the burden should not only be on those who might benefit, so they and people like them can feel included, even if they are willing[64]. It is also key to recognise that reliance on students from colleges to undertake such work without pay is problematic in its own ways[65].

This reliance on queer students to exercise emotional and intellectual labour to improve their institution should arguably be challenged[66]. I hope that this essay will contribute to a growing body of literature that persuades colleges and universities to invest in evidencing their claims to inclusion for the individual LGBTQ+ student and their communities. Additionally, as people inevitably join and leave colleges, there is no guarantee that these efforts will be long-lasting[67], which creates a level of instability and precariousness that LGBTQ+ students often already face outside of colleges[68].

Colleges maintain political structures and traditions, which often require student involvement. Systematic organisation is one with maintenance of a GCR, JCR, MCR, student representatives, principles, and presidents prevalent in all colleges[69]. Conversely, they have developed over time and often have slightly different procedures at each college for student voice. The political workings of each college are out of this essay's scope, but it is important to remember they exist in various ways and impact

[63] "2018 Report on Transgender Experience", u.d.
[64] Mearns et al, 2020
[65] Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021
[66] Bonner-Thompson et al, 2021
[67] E.g., lack of trans reports since
[68] Mearns et al, 2020
[69] "What are Oxford colleges?", u.d.

how students interact with their colleges. Furthermore, they are run by different people at each college, which can also impact the reception of student voice in various forms. This will be discussed further in the findings.

Creating Reputation

‘‘Note what has happened: ‘branding’ has suddenly become about ‘reputation’. Now of course, everyone in higher education knows, and most people outside it know, that reputation is everything to universities’[70]. Oxford’s reputation is partly based on its colleges, which distinguishes it from most other UK universities. However, colleges must compete for students by creating their own brands. Some can work less to attract students, as arguably more people know about them than colleges without long histories. Meanwhile, newer, lesser-known colleges might have to work harder to attract applicants. Either way, ‘university heritage impacts (…) reputation, which influences prospective students’ attitudes’[71]. It ‘has been closely associated with the credibility of an organisation’[72].

Diversity and inclusion are presented as key tenets of most (if not all) Oxford colleges. This might be surprising based on the University’s history and student population[73], which are not reflected in their marketing. Bulotaite states, ‘a brand is nothing more than the total impression of images, emotions, experiences, and facts that an organization has created in the public mind’, and creating one for universities means ‘creating a corporate identity in order to promote attraction and loyalty’[74]. An advantage some colleges have is tradition, being extremely old and well-known, which ‘strengthen(s) the feeling of corporate identity’[75]. However, there are tensions in promoting tradition and history, while also stating oneself as valuing inclusivity and diversity. This is mainly due to the largely problematic history of Oxford in those areas,

[70] Temple, 2011, 115
[71] Merchant et al, 2014, 27
[72] Merchant et al, 2014, 28
[73] Mathur, 2024
[74] 2003, 450
[75] Bulotaite, 2003, 453

as discussed. Yet, there are sweeping statements made by multiple colleges who claim to be inclusive[76]. This is sometimes related to a brief history of admissions or alumni. In this way, 'brand heritage draws from the past and relates it to relevant current contexts'[77]. Oxford colleges have a habit of marketizing radical/inclusive histories that could arguably be linked to student protest or notable alumni experiences, even if they were not particularly supportive of these at the time.

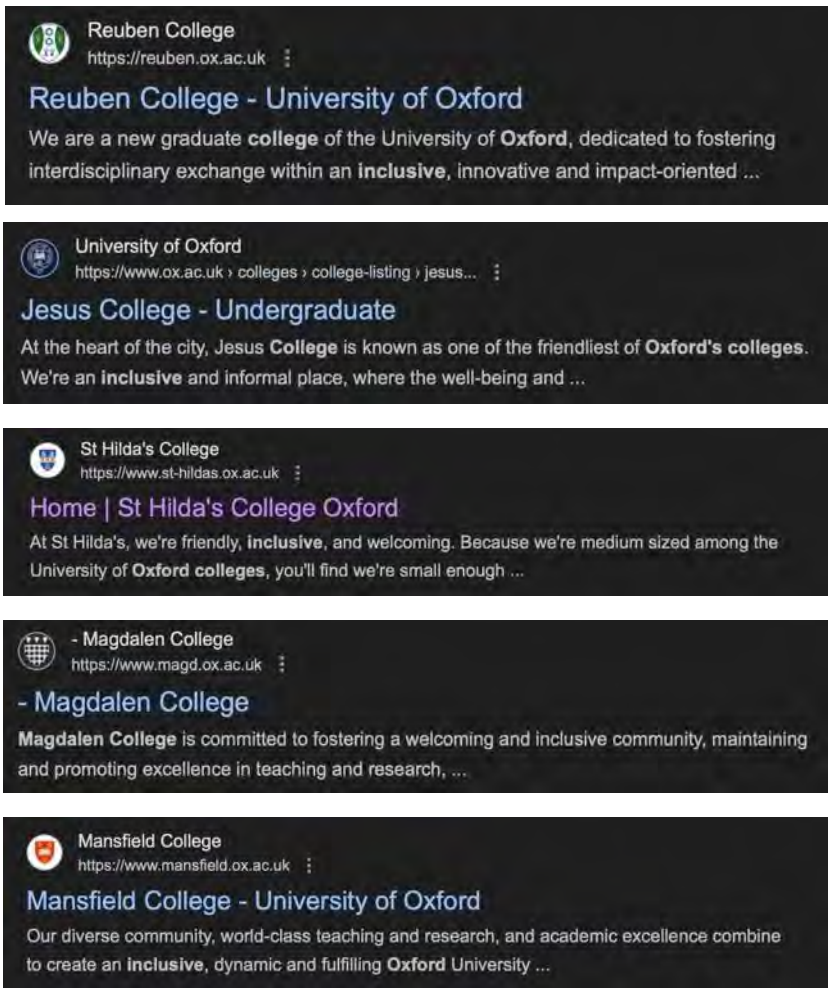


Figure 2 Search results for 'Inclusive Oxford College'

Due to the problematic history of the University, it is interesting that colleges' presentations as inclusive rely on selected histories as part of their marketing. Oscar Wilde is a prominent example of the claim to alumni who furthered queer history, but whose experience at college is largely unquestioned nor evidenced in favour of his academic successes[78]. Hence, this claiming does not seem to signify LGBTQ+ inclusion today,

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.

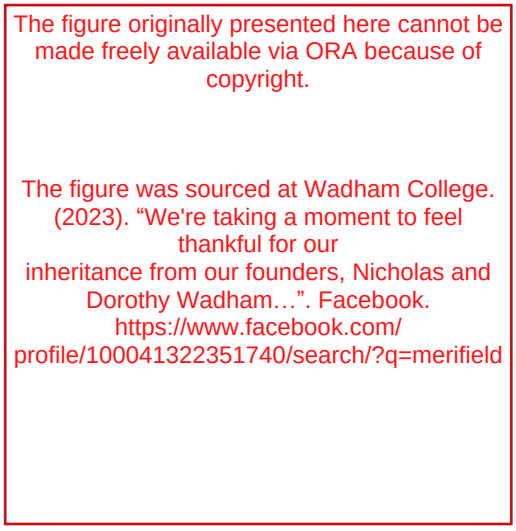
The figure was sourced at A Living Legacy. Somerville College, University of Oxford. Retreived 1/08/2024 from https://www.some.ox.ac.uk/the-margaret-thatcher-scholarship-trust/a-livinglegacy/

[76] As shown in Figure 2
[77] Merchant et al, 2014, 28
[78] Mendelssohn, 2018

apart from the pride of which Magdalen shares this fact and tries to link his life story to the College. It is difficult to find their reactions to his trial or death at the time. Additionally, other alumni, such as Margaret Thatcher, have been highlighted with pride around a 'women's history' of colleges, despite their homophobic rhetoric and oppression of LGBTQ+ groups. I will stress, history is subjective and is particularly susceptible to embellishment when it is used for marketing purposes[79]. Hence, the neatly presented history of colleges does not always support their claims.

This leads me to the inevitable conversation about the college referred to most as an example of a 'queer' college in my research: Wadham. One student stated, 'I would call Wadham a 'queer college', but I don't think I would call any other college a queer college unless it had the same vibe as Wadham.' Another stated in response to the question of why they would call a college queer, 'some just are (Wadham)'. While I appreciate this, I was interested to learn more about what creates this apparently long-standing reputation, which attracts LGBTQ+ applicants – 'I applied to Wadham based off its queer credentials'. This preceding reputation seems to relate to history, tradition and events.

'Queerness is even built into the architecture' of Wadham, as 'queer' - King James VI of Scotland looks over the Front Quad[80]. However, he is also said to be the founder of Pembroke College[81], which has a different reputation to 'queer' college, Wadham. So, we must look to other sources to understand how Wadham has maintained its reputation in a way other colleges have not. Building on this reputation seems to be a list of one 'scandal'



[79] Merchant et al, 2014
[80] Brooks, 2021
[81] Brooks, 2021

after the other, which can be viewed on the page 'Queer Oxford'. Most of these involve wardens of the College, which are remembered through limericks and quotes, such as:

'When they said to a Fellow of Wadham
Who had asked for a ticket to Sodom,
'Oh, sir, we don't care
To send people there',
He said, 'Don't call me Sir, call me Modom'

'[b]uggery was invented to fill that awkward hour between evensong and cocktails.'[SIC][82]

These seem important to the sharing of history across cohorts and students, immortalising these characters in connection with Wadham. Although they use archaic language, they are humorous, memorable, and show Wadham as a queer space, even if at the time, origin events were shrouded in scandal. This, combined with the tradition of Queer Week at Wadham - 'a week of events that celebrates LGBTQ culture of the past, present and future, culminating in the famous Queer Fest party'[83], seems to promote Wadham as a queer college. Wadham appears to embrace it, for example, Queer Fest has been named by Wadham as 'the biggest LGBTQ+ party at Oxford'[84]. Queer Week follows a long history of Wadham's engagement in LGBTQ+ event holding, such as discos in the 1970s highlighting gay oppression and elections for Oxford's Gaysoc[85]. This is all to say, Wadham has broadly maintained its reputation as a queer college amongst students, which is supported by my survey results and interview conversations about the college. Wadham seems to have acted on this. Returning to architecture, it has been highlighted by the Equality and Diversity Unit at Oxford for its implementation of gender-neutral toilets as an example for other colleges[86].

[82] Brooks, 2021
[83] Brooks, 2012
[84] wadhamoxford, 2023
[85] Brooks, 2021
[86] "Toilets and Changing Facilities", u.d.

It is interesting to consider what might happen to/in institutions like Oxford in the next months, years and decades. Reviewing architecture, limericks and protests seem to reflect differing levels of temporality, which provides space to consider how students create lasting reputations and expectations of specific colleges. Hoang suggests their 'interest in queer temporality' stems from a question of 'how queer experience gets transmitted from one generation to the next, a process that exceeds, in innovative ways, the heterosexual kinship/reproductive model'[87]. I explore this more in my findings, as I look to understand expectations of LGBTQ+ students who participated in my research. However, I think about the queer temporalities of the institution: the fixed time that we are students for[88], and then the rest of our lives labelled as alumni – ever- shifting roles between shaping and being shaped by the university or college.

'Performatic'

Some colleges without this generational transmission, partake in performative measures to appear inclusive. I originally used the word 'performative' to describe this section, but its definition is the 'discursive practices that produce what they name'[89]. This could be useful when discussing gender performativity whereby people can use expression and presentation to perform their genders. Nevertheless, I did not want to seemingly conflate the performativity of gender expression, which has considerable meaning and depth to the act of performance that claims to produce what it names but often (negatively) fail to do so. For example, a college might fly the pride flag during pride month but do very little to support their LGBTQ+ students – 'colleges such as

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.

The figure was sourced at Christ Church College. (2024). "The rainbow flag is flying proudly over Christ Church to celebrate LGBT+ History Month. …". Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/profile/100068629898206/search/?q=pride%20flag&locale=en_GB

[87] Dinshaw et al, 2007, 183
[88] Most students have a set time they are at university and then leave
[89] McDonald, 2013 referencing Butler, 2007, 132; Rooke, 2007

Christ Church fly the flag for the whole of February, while failing this year to make freshers' week LGBTQ+ awareness workshops compulsory'[90].

Hence, the word 'performatic' seems most appropriate, as it encompasses a strategic use of tools to create an illusion – 'the performatics of performativity uses cultural performances and the texts of culture as clear and attractive examples of the phenomena it is interested in'[91]. This term makes failure possible. Note, some students care for pride flags, but there is more that needs to be done for colleges to be able to call themselves 'inclusive', and this should not be a checklist activity[92]. According to Mathur, '74% of students think Oxford University is not inclusive'[93], and colleges form the University. Therefore, it is important to question who is calling the university and colleges inclusive and what the evidence is for this.

There is a history of activism to create inclusivity at Oxford colleges. 'Rhodes Must Fall' is just one campaign that was recognised internationally as a student and staff protest of the celebration of a history of slavery connected to the Institution, explicit in the Rhodes statue outside Oriel College, following University of Cape Town's movement in 2015[94]. This is partly responsible for the nickname 'Torie-l'[95]. Connected to LGBTQ+ inclusion, there were protests around Kathleen Stock's invitation to speak at the Oxford Union in May 2023, due to her trans-exclusionary radical feminist rhetoric[96]. It is important to recognise the current context of LGBTQ+

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.

The figure was sourced at Dunkley, E., McSorley, C., & Standley, N. (2023). Kathleen Stock: Protests at Oxford Union as talk goes ahead. BBC. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-65714821

[90] Shirreff, 2020
[91] Kosiński, 2018, 264
[92] Lee, 2022; Sandler, 2022
[93] 2024
[94] Knudson & Anderson, 2019
[95] This nickname was mentioned by a participant, although I had already heard of it in my everyday interactions with Oxford students
[96] Dunkley et al, 2023

student existence at universities and in academia, where transgender identities and rights are openly debated. Universities have platformed speakers who challenge transgender people's rights, meanwhile transphobia has risen across the UK[97]. This relates to a wider politicisation of trans identities, which polarises the nation[98]. This makes safety at Oxford colleges event more pressing. Oxford and its colleges are impacted by political and social movements, as are its students. Students often have the resources, based on their position within the institution and the role of studenthood to protest in ways that sometimes non-students are unable to do[99]. This does not necessarily mean the Institution encourages protest, but several factors make it possible and necessary.

More recently, Oxford encampments for Palestine have called for greater transparency around funders of the University and rejection of funders who monetarily support Israel's weaponization, among other requests[100]. This has involved teach-ins, sharing of literature and meetings about the support of Palestine. Some of the actions of student protestors have been condemned by administrators at the University. Oxford has in some cases reacted strongly against these protests. For example, on May 23rd, 2024, the university called the police after student protestors occupied its admin building on behalf of Oxford Action for Palestine. Sixteen were arrested[101]. I wonder how these protests and students who have taken part of them might be viewed in several years or decades, particularly if one becomes a famous alumnus that the university is then proud to 'claim'[102].

[97] "New data: Rise in hate crime…", 2023; Moss et al, 2023
[98] Hines, 2020
[99] Karter et al, 2021
[100] 'Gaza protests…', 2024
[101] Gudge & Mercer-Kelly, 2024
[102] See Drezner, 2018 for discussion on the importance of marketing to/of alumni for unversities

Methods & Methodology

Methods

I created a survey that I sent to students through WhatsApp groups, by emailing heads of LGBTQ+ societies and groups at Oxford who then posted on their social media pages and in their newsletters, and had interest from friends who decided to participate. This led to thirty-one responses from students. Fifteen of these said they were happy to be contacted about being interviewed. Of these fifteen, I interviewed nine based on level of detail they showed in the survey, diversity of experience, college membership, and identity amongst the group, as well as level of engagement in the question of if a college can be considered queer. These semi-structured interviews lasted from around thirty minutes to an hour depending on the length of responses to questions and depth of conversation determined by participants. Participants answered around fifteen initial questions based on their survey responses, excluding follow-up questions for clarification.

There were several reasons for the selection of method. It is important that people were able to comment with full anonymity on their experience without expectation that I would contact them. This led to potentially more opinionated responses, as well as responses that were short, but offered new perspectives on aspects of experiences. Although the survey was suggested to take ten minutes, timing varied from around three minutes to forty. The higher response times could have been a result of leaving the tab to the survey open. However, this range of response times suggests that students were able to engage with the survey in ways that they could fit into their schedules.

The survey was used to include those with less time or interest in the study, while the interviews provided a space for extended conversation and understanding[103]. The survey may have encouraged people to volunteer to be interviewed, due to the sign-up for the interviews being an optional question at the end of the survey. With this, the participants could determine (to a certain extent) my research interests and what/how

[103] Rickinson, 2005

questions in an interview with me might be asked. Interestingly, those who said they would be open to being contacted for an interview wrote a similar amount to those who did not; I expected them to write less, because they would discuss more in the interview. Hence, I wonder if they participants had not decided they would participate in the interview until the end of the survey, which by that time, they would have completed the survey as if they were not intending to be interviewed.

On a practical note, the survey gave me, as a less experienced interviewer, the opportunity to reflect on what the participants might discuss and tailor my questions to them before the interview. In doing so, I felt more prepared and comfortable in discussion. Even though some participants noted that they did not remember what they had written on the survey, my reminding them or prompting them with the statements they wrote was useful in forwarding a conversation they had already started. It was almost as though I had given them time to think without me being present, so often I would ask a question, and the participant would respond almost immediately or give a long response with examples. There was little need for prompt or repetition of questions.

The interviews took more commitment and planning. Yet, these were crucial to gaining more insight into experiences and asking follow-up questions that might have been missed by the survey. Offering greater nuances in experience, this added a richness and context to the data needed. The interviews also gave students a chance to create their own narratives with lesser limitation created by me in their responses. For example, at the end of every interview, I asked if there was anything I might have missed or anything they would like me to mention specifically in my dissertation. While some suggested I had not missed anything, others took the opportunity to emphasise things we had briefly discussed and/or to reflect on what they had said.

I did not expect how personal some of the responses to interview questions were. I thought that because I was interviewing about students' relationships with institutions, I might be met with discussions similar to those had in a classroom. I was surprised by how casual some of the interviews felt. It was as though we were continuing a

conversation that we had engaged in multiple times. I wonder if this is because some of the students had engaged in conversations like these with students and staff in their roles as representatives, so they had experience talking on these topics with those they had just met. I wonder if my identity as a student[104] and queer person[105] made them feel comfortable discussing their more personal experiences rather than solely reflecting on topics they could conversationally remove those from[106].

There were a couple of moments where I did not feel so comfortable recording and hearing my participants' experiences. Much of the research on emotional labour in research focuses on the researcher[107], and while I experienced this, and it is important to acknowledge, I was more concerned about the amount of emotional labour the participants volunteered in interviews. This was sometimes due to my feeling that I was not worthy of hearing them; as a masters student I thought they were putting in too much emotional labour for me to do justice to, with only my decisions on what to include in my writing, with only one interview to understand them, and one paper that involves several other participants.

I recognise that all methods have pros and cons, and I am confident this was the best decision for my analysis and writing[108]. I brought together common themes throughout the interviews to give more depth to the experiences had by those with similar and differing identities, which had I not interviewed as many students might have been difficult to fully explore. It might also have spotlighted individuals in ways they would not have liked. Therefore, I adjusted expectations for myself to provide in-depth accounts of each participant and realised the potential of using a grounded theory approach with the interviews of nine participants[109].

[104] Similar to Sandler's (2022) experience of being perceived a student
[105] Highlighted in my communications with them
[106] E.g., policies of the institution, general environment of college etc.
[107] E.g., Massoud, 2022; Holland, 2007; Jafari et al, 2013
[108] Vaus et al, 2013
[109] May, 2011

Returning to the interview process, I sometimes struggled with hearing personal stories, because I knew I could not resolve the situation or provide anything in return (apart from my research and sympathy)[110]. I felt bad that they might leave the interview with renewed negative emotions about their experiences. In these moments, I reminded myself about the ethical procedures I went through to limit any participant harm. In hindsight, I also consider participant agency as more important than my anxieties as a new researcher. A lot of the worries I had and sometimes still have over whether they would regret sharing experiences with me comes from a place of not trusting myself, but from another perspective could develop into a lack of trust in my participants. This lack of trust is arguably So, perhaps to be a better researcher, I need to remind myself that my participants are agents who I have a responsibility to care about and in that caring lies a level of trust I must have in them, as they have in me.

Trying to Create Queer Research

With this said, I did not see my participants through the lens of ''our children', innocent and in need of protection'[111]. This is perhaps due to our similarities in positions (all being university students). I did, however, feel a need to protect them and give them the benefit of the doubt more often than I might if I had met them outside of a research context. I was aware that I was asking them to do something, and ethically I should try to see things from their perspectives, while also recognising that memories and interpretations of events can change over time. In this way, I saw my participants in need of some protection, but it was from my own research rather than 'outside' factors. I concluded that how experiences impacted them were more important than the neutrality in the telling of events that took place. At the same time, I am aware that many of the events that were shared are experiences had by LGBTQ+ students across Britain[112], so it made sense that they occurred at Oxford, as participants described.

[110] Aware of Trainor & Bouchard's (2012) work on reciprocity, I tried to focus on what I could offer them, but that did not make me less aware of the progress I felt they/we deserve, but could not enforce
[111] Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010, 3
[112] Bacchman & Gooch, 2018

It is a privilege for Robinson to say, ‘‘as an act of queer refusal, I will not define or explain every queer and trans term I use in this piece’, as ‘I do not want to continue to uphold cisnormative knowledge production’[113]. However, while it is laborious to continuously define and explain terms, I am willing to do this for the benefit of the reader in return for their interest. This is because it is important that those outside of queer studies are exposed to queer ways of thinking, and I want to be part of expanding understanding and accessibility. Therefore, while I recognise the frustrations of Robinson, I take a pragmatic stance with hope for more accessibility to understanding queer methodologies[114].

Similarly, I tried to create research that rejected pain-based narratives, as research with marginalised groups often creates these narratives that reproduce unhelpful rhetoric, creating a destressing echo-chamber for the community[115]. At the same time, ‘this tendency to place woundedness as a foundation in queer research relates to certain paradoxes, which, though we try to resist, are pervasive within queer research’[116]. Ultimately, I realised that trying to push the narrative away from pain was often an aim that was not of interest or relevance to my participants. Although I made space for alternative narratives, pain is still felt widely across the community. Therefore, while some participants had moments of euphoria or positive experiences overall, it would be remiss and unethical of me to ignore the moments and experiences of pain that were shared.

At the same time, I wanted my research to question pain-based narratives that are common in queer history and the re-telling of queer experiences[117]. I wanted to present queer student life as wholly as possible. This would encompass the positive, negative and grey areas that are often overlooked in research. It may be obvious that this was before I became angrier about queerphobia and oppression searing through many

[113] Robinson, 2022, 428
[114] Trying to counter what Ryan calls ‘the complicated jargon used by many queer theorists [that] has rendered its application subject to criticisms of intellectual elitism’ (2020, 90); Garvey, 2023
[115] Tuck & Yang, 2018
[116] Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010, 3
[117] Phipps, 2016; Arondekar et al, 2015

aspects of queer lives. Nevertheless, as my anger grew, I found stories about moments of hope and euphoria even more important to my findings. These highlighted that individuals matter in creating an institution and environment that enables queer people thrive[118]. The students I talk with exist and by their existence and persistence could encourage others to see parts of themselves in the university. There were a few stories where students discussed their interactions with other students who are beginning to figure out their queer identities and they were powerful, meaningful, and emphasised the importance of positive representation.

Meanwhile, I found it difficult asking someone what their positive queer experiences of college are when they had spent half the interview talking about their queerphobic experiences. It might have seemed dismissive, as though I was not listening. I was concerned I might come across as a figure of authority saying, 'stop complaining', replicating negative figures in their recollections. I have also realised that complaint is important[119]. So, a lot of my findings are based on pain with moments of positivity and hope, similar to how my feelings changed while researching. It was important to hear my participants' painful stories, because they wanted to tell them. Additionally, a couple of participants suggested that they had little to say about their experiences or they had not been asked to speak about them before, because they have been positive. Perhaps this emphasises the impact of self-selected participation, where students excluded themselves on account of their perceptions of what the study expected of them.

Conversely, one student was insistent that their experience of the administration staff and students was so 'covertly homophobic' that instead of putting their email (or not) in the box to say if I could contact them, they wrote: 'no! I don't want to be involved in anything regarding the college as I have had such a bad experience with them'. This could present a disassociation with colleges from students who have negative experiences that might lead them to not engage in the survey. As the survey was shared through an LGBTQ+ university newsletter, personal contacts, and unofficial university,

[118] Sandler, 2022
[119] Ahmed, 2021

college, department, and representative WhatsApp groups, those who would have access to the survey are those who actively joined or signed up to voluntary communication. Hence, this might have limited student participation somewhat, unintentionally excluding those who are not engaged in those networks. This is addressed in the findings.

Talburt and Rasmussen state, 'privileged has been a tacit 'strategic essentialism' in which queer educational research needs visible queer subjects to study or regulatory straight spaces to transform in order to understand itself as queer research'[120]. They suggest that 'after-queer' methodology would shift these privileges, but this seems to overlook the work still necessary in this area. So long as there are 'regulatory straight spaces' and 'queer subjects' that in-visible, this work is important. This is not to say this work should be privileged, but queer research needs to be further developed and understood for an 'after-queer' to be applicable. This is further complicated by the recognition of problems with the term 'after-queer', which implies queering can ever be finished – 'the 'queer' project is necessarily incomplete, even unrealizable'[121]. Hence, their perceptions of what should be researched in the after-queer are speculative and based on the binary categories that queer methodology discourages. Hence, my privileging of making visible queer subjects to transform straight spaces is arguably justified.

Additionally, the importance of queer theory's rejection of 'its reliance heteronormative tropes of lineage, succession and generation' and 'prioritization of the present'[122], does not recognise the longstanding hetero- and cis-normative histories that continue to impact reception of queer people. There is still important work to do on these impacts and corrections to be made to improve the present. To deconstruct the past and understand the present, we must recognise its problematic nature in excluding marginalised people. Furthermore, if one of the main distinguishing aspects of queer theory is 'inquiry into "how the lucidity of particular categories gains the appearance

[120] 2010, 4
[121] Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010, 2
[122] Jagose 2009, 160 in Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010, 5

of stability and permanence"[123], and how these illusions of permanence ally with existing power structures to push marginalized human experiences further into the margins'[124], recognising shifts in generations and cohorts is important in destabilising existing rhetoric and power structures that unproductively label to silence.

Is my research queer (enough)?

One could question, and rightly so, whether my research is queer enough or queer at all. In some ways, this supports an idea that there is a hierarchy in 'queer' research and certain checkboxes for what is queer. In other ways, asking this necessarily provokes discourse on what it means to queer research and whether certain practices are actually queer or repeat cycles of oppression towards marginalised groups that are researched *on* rather than *with*[125]. The foundations of queer research were developed by those at elite universities in the Global North, and yet, 'queering' is arguably a tool to be used for all oppressed groups, including lower classes. Jung emphasises that class has often been neglected in relation to queer studies based on the tensions it creates for those who have been platformed in the space[126].

This dissertation could be described as not queer enough based on its creation for a master's at Oxford University on colleges at Oxford. This, in two ways, follows tradition of those at elite universities having the loudest voices in queer studies and the focus on 'rich queer studies', which is over-represented in academia[127]. There are some areas in this text where class is mentioned alongside race and disability. However, due to the length of the dissertation and the covering of this elsewhere, as well as the lack of coverage of LGBTQ+ student experience, I have chosen to focus on sexuality and gender at the cost of other factors, which might intersect and in combination with gender and sexuality impact experience. Here, my research fails to be queer. Additionally, my methods have necessitated some categorisation of gender and

[123] Leap & Lewin, 2009, 6
[124] Erol et al, 2020, 218
[125] Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007
[126] 2024
[127] Brim, 2020

sexuality, which I see as useful to understandings experiences, but some may argue are too rigid[128].

Meanwhile, as a student at Oxford, I have a unique insight into other students' experiences from a foundation of understanding, as a student at the institution. I feel the effects of the many structures of Oxford and bureaucracies some of my participants have faced. At the same time, every student's experience is different and nuanced. This was brought to the forefront when I was caught off guard by participants' experiences or when I had to search a college before my interview to understand its ethos better, as I had not heard of it before. I, like some of my participants, reject the idea that all LGBTQ+ people and their experiences can be 'lumped together'[129]. This is another reason for consciously starting each interview with the same few questions, despite any previous knowledge I had, and then basing all other potential questions on the individual's survey results alone. With the semi-structured nature of the interview, I ensured they had opportunities to shift the interview to their interests and what they thought was important.

Here, I take the role of 'a queer pragmatist'. 'A queer pragmatist not only recognizes violence enacted by the state but also co-opts power through pragmatism to enact positive change'[130]. I see 'state' as a loose term that could be replaced with an institution that enacts power. Queer theory's dynamism can create opportunities to explore and interpret research in ways that can be new and progressive[131]. Conversely, it can limit and become an obstacle to full exploration of a topic if it is used to police[132]. For example, if radical queerness is the only recognised way of queering, which 'requires a distrust of the state and power, understanding that normative relations that represent institutional structures and governance leads to state violence'[133], then I question whether my research can be recognised in queer spaces due to my want to work with

[128] Erol et al, 2020
[129] Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007
[130] Garvey, 2024, 61
[131] See Shahani (2013) for examples
[132] See discussion by Jung, 2024
[133] Garvey, 2024, 60

institutions to create change. I think it is a privilege to say 'f**k the system', which those who want to create change from within their institutions might struggle to gain.

This relates back to my discussion around defining terms for those who may not already have a knowledge of them. Additionally, I wonder if in saying that we lose the possibility of changing the system through the incremental changes that could positively impact everyone to be more tolerant and understanding.
Garvey articulates this well:
'I believe in campus climate studies to enact positive change, yet I have grown cynical and tired of the slow progress at colleges and universities. I envision radical incrementalism and climate studies as subversive techniques to acknowledge the institution's role in promoting change while still embracing queer pragmatism. In doing so, I maintain my own queer agency and hope in higher education as a site for equity and justice'[134].

It is important to note, my research is not queer because I am queer, or because I say it is. My research could be more and less queer in many ways, some of which I have discussed. However, wherever possible, I have tried to create opportunities for my research to be queer and uphold aspects of queer theory that I think are useful to discussions on queer experiences. My commitment to challenging static, generalisable and binary experiences of students is a key part of what makes my research queer[135]. As mentioned, colleges claim to be inclusive and welcome to everyone, while I reflect on student experiences that challenge this. Student voices provide insight into these areas that rarely escape institutional documents and meetings into public discourse. Although I cannot claim that the institution will take note of this dissertation or make changes suggested, I hope that my work will contribute to a growing awareness of queer experiences as unique, which will lead to incremental, positive change.

'Queer Failure', is that you?

[134] Garvey, 2024, 65
[135] Similar to Flint et al's, 2019 approach to research

Returning to the introduction, if I am angry at colleges for not being 'queer enough', then ipso facto I am angry at myself as a researcher. At the same time, there is merit to this writing. 'Queer failure' describes a successful failure. Halberstam highlights Beckett's phrase 'fail again, fail better'[136]. His interpretation of this queers failure by suggesting that there are ways to fail successfully and there is success in failure. This has been noted by many authors on the topic of queer failure[137]. It captures a somewhat simple sentiment that Halberstam demonstrates links closely to lessons of many people's youth, but which can get lost with societal, binary notions of 'success'. Similarly, I take a phrase from my own childhood: 'if at first you don't succeed, try, try again', and note that in this phrase there is no guarantee of 'success', only the imperative to try.

Queer failure in its youth needs to be developed further. I question its adoption of the word 'failure', as it exists naturally in opposition to success, which in its continued use reinforces a binary. While it complicates the binary by saying success and failure can happen simultaneously, it still places 'success' as the pinnacle and in doing so positions failure, again, in opposition. This then unravels much of the argument about queering. At the same time, it pragmatically notes that there is true failure[138] and successful failure[139]. Here, a binary is useful, although, again who draws that line is to be questioned. Hence, there are further philosophical debates to be had outside of this essay about the term 'queer failure' and 'queer success'. Yet, for the sake of this essay, queer failure can be useful in considering how my failure and colleges' failure might always be an act of failing but can simultaneously succeed in progress.

I adopt Halberstam's 'queer failure' to explain my coping if not acceptance of the failure I see in and all around me[140]. Perhaps this is best described with the concept of reaching. I am in the dark and I keep finding small hints to what I am trying to get to, but the obstacles are too great, there is no light switch and my efforts in reaching the

[136] 2011, 185
[137] Burford, 2017; Shahani, 2013; Stępniak, 2019; Mercier, 2023
[138] E.g., being homophobic, transphobic, racist, etc.
[139] Reaching for queerness, full inclusivity, understanding, etc.
[140] 2011

object are never fully over. I am clutching at the hints that those before me have left with a feeling of little support in the present. This reaching is tiring, lonely, annoying, and painful at times. It can also be exciting and interesting.

For so long, I did not write, because I was worried that I would fail to queer. This lack of writing made me feel like a failed student[141]. Being scared to fail on these two competing areas sent me into a spiral of conflict and stress. I only started to write when my fear of being a failed student became larger than my fear of not queering 'correctly' or 'enough', and I continued to write much of this with disappointment in myself and a general feeling of loss. I have written papers throughout my master's on how research 'should be done'. I have critiqued those who I thought had failed to employ suitable methods. I have argued again and again over the importance of queering research. Yet, my writing fell into some of the tropes I argued against. I thought I must be a hypocrite and too much a product of the system to do queer research.

I say this to emphasise that the following shift in perspective does not appear flippant or an easy fix. It took a long time and emotional labour to reach this understanding. However, my perspective has shifted. I now see the act of reaching as the goal, because I realise there are many points of success. I will continue to try and fail, because this failure is still better than not trying. From a perspective of 'queer failure', I am proud of myself and institutions as we continue trying, failing and learning. Failure is, in some ways, inevitable. I still hold myself to account, while giving myself and others a bit of courtesy as we try to reach for inclusivity and queerness in a largely unforgiving space. Note, not all people have the privilege of receiving or giving themselves this courtesy. Still, it is important that where I can that I remind myself to try, even if I fail. It is also funny that even when I fail, I do it queerly!

Queer post-structuralism

Post-structuralism has been a key influencer of feminist and queer research with giants in the field, such as Butler and Foucault developing and emphasising it as a foundation

[141] Burford, 2017

of queer research[142]. I stand by queer post-structuralism. That is, based on context, there are multiple interpretations and complexities of interaction; there is not a single story or way of telling it. So, knowledge is 'always partial', and a text (in its broadest sense) can have 'no single true meaning'[143]. Furthermore, identities have many inextricable dimensions, so there are many ways of being 'queer' – ''differences' are different from each other'[144]. While labelling can offer a way of building an identity that others can interpret to get closer to how we feel and react to circumstances, we can never know what 'queer' means exactly to someone else, or where each understanding of the word comes from completely. This makes valuing subjectivity key to engaging with the following research.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that this research is made better by its necessary subjectivity[145]. If academics conform to traditional ways of valuing research, they might suggest that there is more merit in scientific research that does not do this, and claim objectivity and neutrality[146]. A debate about the quantitative and qualitative advantages and disadvantages are outside of this essay's scope and have frankly been overdone. Similarly, I understand why people debate the use of 'queer' over LGBTQ+ or 'gay', but I have outlined the terms of this essay, and the importance of using a word that intersects between personal and academic[147].

I would like the reader to consider the following section from a perspective of post-structuralism. This is for three reasons. Firstly, it takes the pressure off me to be omnipotent – to have '*the* correct' interpretation, when there is arguably no such thing[148]. Although, I have tried to share narratives as representatively as I can, I cannot be objective on this topic or arguably any other[149]. Secondly, it means the reader is not

[142] King & Cronin, 2010; Roseneil, 2000; Bryson & Castell, 1993
[143] Barker & Scheele, 2016, 56
[144] Roseneil, 2000, 1
[145] Finlay, 2002; Shelton, 2022
[146] Yoon & Uliassi, 2022; Massoud, 2022
[147] Neves, 2022
[148] Warren states, '"any person, without gender, personality, or historical location, who would objectively produce the same findings as any other person," is completely mythical', so my interpretation may never be completely 'correct' by someone else's standard (1988, 7 in England, 1994, 85)
[149] Garvey, 2023

reliant on representation that I could not get and is not the point of this essay. With only 31 responses, I cannot claim to have captured the experiences of all queer students at Oxford and these are not the only voices that can talk on the matter[150]. I did not aim to get a representative sample, because the knowledge would always be partial. Instead, I focused on what I thought might bring the most insight to queer student experiences. That is, hearing from queer students themselves. Thirdly, I do not wish to create any disappointment at the end when I (spoiler) do not uncover a 'grand narrative' and 'attempt to explain all of human experience in terms of one specific structure'[151].

Findings

Introduction

The survey and interviews presented interesting themes. They overlap with one another and are difficult to separate with any authority. I have, however, found three themes that encompass much of the core areas that seem to influence LGBTQ+ students' college experiences.

The first is interactions with staff. I highlight experiences of staff interactions of LGBTQ+ representatives I interviewed, before exploring wider student engagement with (particularly welfare) staff. This covers various experiences and attitudes around student-staff engagement, as well as how representation can influence college environment and expectations.

I then move onto the administrative aspects of students sharing their identities. While, this may seem like a simple process, in which a student 'comes out' and then is 'out', some of my participants noted the time and effort this takes. In this section, I also discuss student motivations for sharing and/or not sharing identities with people in their college. This relates largely to the environment created by students and staff but can also be due to personal reasons or interpretations of what colleges are spaces for.

[150] Similar to Sandler's, 2022 research
[151] Barker & Scheele, 2016, 55

This leads me to discuss student circles and their influence on LGBTQ+ experiences. Here, I present more individual identities to show that experiences can differ, not only within the LGBTQ+ umbrella, but also within identity categories. The types of events and people students know seems to influence their experiences. This is also highlighted by a greater focus on Wadham, as students I interviewed suggested its reputation could be detrimental to perceptions/validation of their experiences. This section considers how students within college influence fellow students' experiences in addition to staff involvement.

There are undoubtedly areas that I have not covered, partly due to not wanting to overly share one experience that might lead to identifying of participants. However, this creates an interesting discussion around the tensions that the question of whether a college is 'queer' present. This is further explored in the 'discussions' section where I try to make sense of the data in relation to my original question.

Participants

The survey had 31 responses of students from 19 mostly modern colleges. The undergraduate to postgraduate ratio was 48/52, although 45% of participants had attended Oxford for less than a year. While this may seem large in scope for the number of participants surveyed and interviewed, it was important to me to not only present undergraduate or postgraduate views or select colleges due to my perceptions of what experiences might be most fruitful for the research. This seemed extractive and leaned too closely to a divine researcher position that I was uncomfortable with[152]. Instead, I have accepted that the experiences might not be representative of the student population, but are still provide important insight. Their responses also gave me

[152] Elliott, 2022

opportunities, as a novice interviewer to delve into conversations I may have struggled to start otherwise.

At the time of responding, 45% of participants were women, 26% were men, and 29% were nonbinary. Of those, 35% identified as transgender. 1 person described themselves as heterosexual, 9 gay, 7 lesbian, 8 bisexual, 6 asexual, 1 aromantic, 5 pansexual and 4 queer. This demographic, again, is quite diverse for the research. It is important to recognising difference in expectations and experiences of those within the LGBTQ+ umbrella[153]. For example, looking at an overview of data from transgender participants, their percentages of comfort talking about sexuality was higher or the same for all categories compared to gender, despite none of the participants labelling themselves as heterosexual. The biggest shift here was for sharing with acquaintances, with 9 students comfortable discussing their sexuality compared to only 4 comfortable discussing their gender. This could be due to the different reactions to/understandings of their gender identity of other students or that they do not feel the need to share, which some students mentioned in their interviews. Hence, there are differences in how students perceive responses to different aspects of their identities. For these reasons, I tried to select students to interview, partly based on my want to be as inclusive as possible and disrupt the precedent of centring cisgender lesbian and gay voices in queer research. Other quantitative results of the survey are presented in the appendix.

One area that was interesting on the survey is that, although students would be most comfortable talking to their friends about their LGBTQ+ identities in general, this is followed by talking with welfare staff[154]. 71% of students would talk about their sexuality and 65% with welfare staff. I think this is promising, as Oxford highlights welfare staff as people to go to if students are struggling. So, particularly with transgender participants who would not feel as comfortable talking with anyone else apart from friends about this, there is a sense that they could speak with someone who is a wellbeing-trained member of staff at their college.

[153] Monro, 2018; Sandler, 2022
[154] Tied with acquaintances for sexuality

On a different note, I was surprised by the 77% of students who did not select their college based on their knowledge of its reputation for inclusivity. This puts into question a lot of the advertising that colleges do to suggest they are inclusive. While some students in interviews mentioned they would not have gone to a college that did not seem inclusive after researching them, perhaps there are other factors that are prioritised in selection of a college or students might assume that they would be welcome in similar ways at all colleges based on their similar marketisation as inclusive, as discussed previously. It is also important to note that some students did not select their college at all, but were placed out of convenience or which college gave the most funding.

A further question: 'do you feel that your college's reputation for LGBTQ+ inclusivity or otherwise is deserved?' had results of 41% of students who said 'yes' and 'not sure/don't know' respectively. This makes me wonder if those who said they were not sure did so because they do not think their college has a reputation. The following question on how their college has or has not built a reputation provides some indication of this, such as the response 'it hasn't' and 'It's built a negative reputation, I think'. One student said they were not sure, due to being a part-time student, which makes me wonder if they perceive the reputation of the college to be based on in-person interaction and environment at their college. This was followed by a question on the survey about whether students would use the term 'queer' to describe a college. In the open answer follow up question, a few students seemed to interpret this as if they would describe *their* college as queer. However, 65% of students said they would and 35% said they would not with interesting reasons about why. These were explained further in the long answer questions and interviews and will be reflected on in the 'discussion' section.

Staff Matters

Representatives seemed to have the most experience interacting with staff on these matters. One student mentioned trying to pass a motion as a rep, and they said, 'I think the issue was it very quickly felt them on that side of the table like us versus them'.

When discussing this experience, they concluded, ‘this the space that people know me by name, like, know all my business if I want to get anything done, I have to go to all these people and now they're kind of telling me that my identity is up for debate and I need, and I've actively, like, gone and asked for that to happen.’ As someone who has been at the college and been engaged as a representative for over five years, the student has a lot of experience, and they said that this ‘has happened so many times in so many different ways where a student comes to the college with a genuine concern and a genuine attitude to, like, try, improve and make it better. And they're shut down. And also like it's made personal to some extent’.

There are concerns about being able to raise things at meetings when not all representatives are allowed to be in attendance. Furthermore, one student representative mentioned the inequality in financial support between colleges, as budgets for LGBTQ+ representatives differ significantly. These interactions with staff and access to the system seem to largely influence how the college develops, and students expectations and experiences of their colleges. It also creates an expectation that ‘everything is on the onus of students to organise’. The difficulty in making a larger impact, due to some of these challenges, led most of my participants to apply for student union roles instead of college ones after their experiences as college representatives. This adds a layer of contingency that is explored further in the ‘Discussion’.

Specific incidents shed light on the need for greater training on interactions with students, specifically on potentially sensitive areas, such as sexuality and gender identities. For example, some students talked about college debates, such as gender expression funds or public opposition to an anti-LGBTQ+ policy, creating space for ‘transphobic attitudes among some members of the administration’, ‘some really horrible transphobic things said’ and ‘blatant transphobia’[155] when discussing the duties of the college. One student stated more generally, ‘support staff are not very good when it comes to sorting out actual issues and I don't feel well supported’.

[155] Although this quote seems to relate to students and staff, Bachmann and Gooch’s study states, ‘one in five trans students (20 per cent) were encouraged by university staff to hide or disguise that they are trans’ in 2018 (2018, 5)

Furthermore, participants suggested when there have been issues, they have not felt like they could go through certain processes or processes that would have been helpful were unavailable to them in part due to the structures of colleges, the lack of development in these areas and/or the lack of transparency about said issues. I recognise this is somewhat vague, as I am prioritising the anonymity and privacy of participants, but some of the personal stories shared in the interviews made this need for something that is deeply lacking clear for the mental health and wellbeing of marginalised students.

Although in the survey, 71% of students said they would discuss their sexuality and 65% their gender with welfare staff, narratives seemed to suggest that interactions with (mainly) other staff members varied. Positive interactions with staff are influential, particularly when LGBTQ+ staff are approachable. One student talked about a non-binary staff member, reflecting 'I could speak to this person. That mattered much, much more - that matters, and it seems much more important to me in terms of feeling comfortable than having an LGBT formal for example.' They emphasised that it was not a 'forced' connection, but they knew that this person might understand more than others about LGBTQ+ experiences and identities. This representation was thought of as important among senior staff as well[156]. One student reflected, 'it should probably be somewhat safe because we do have a woman who's one of the high-ranking people in college showing up with her wife to events and stuff'.

However, the interactions students had with staff were important whether the staff member was LGBTQ+ identifying or not, with one student's feelings that an LGBTQ+ staff member's expectations of their experience was unhelpful at best. Nevertheless, another student stated, about their college that 'the staff are incredibly professional and pastoral, and I would feel safe talking to any of them'; it is other students that they were less likely to discuss their identity with. In this way, interactions with staff seem to be extremely varied, to the point that they might be outside of a college environment. This seems to highlight the need for more training for all college members on LGBTQ+

[156] Lee, 2022

inclusion and awareness. While, Dobbin and Kalev suggest diversity training does not generally have the desired outcome, particularly when it is mandatory, they imply that it could have greater effects when combined with 'a wider program of change'[157]. While this does not happen, representatives were suggested to be 'the first line almost for the queer community in college', which puts great pressure on those individual students.

Some responses came from a place of observation over action, such as students commenting the naming of certain welfare staff roles, such as the 'College Chaplain'. This seems 'ironic' due to the job description and expectations that they are available to support all students, while the title has religious connotations. While one student had heard positive experiences with specific chaplains, others suggested they would be reluctant to seek their support or go to any services without encouragement from someone who invited them to. Other students discussed issues with colleges who offered trans-exclusionary radical feminists membership, which 'does not create a very good reputation among trans people'. This relates back to the protests around Kathleen Stock, but presents a greater cross-over between academic and personal within the college. Overall, engagement with staff highlighted disparity across colleges and students.

The Admin of Sharing

Furthermore, there were differing narratives mentioned about students' understanding and sharing of their sexualities and genders at Oxford, which impacted their experiences of college. For transgender students this seemed to differ based on whether they had transitioned in legal terms[158]. For those who had completed these steps before joining a college, the process of applying with their chosen name seemed easier, with little bureaucracy involved. Yet, for those who wanted to be recognised by their chosen name or by their correct gender label, the process seemed difficult with the onus on students to do a lot of administrative work to ensure the college updated documents[159]. One student said the changing of their name was relatively easy with the required documents

[157] 2018, 52
[158] E.g., legally changing names and gender markers
[159] See Sandler (2022) for the labour of 'coming out'

(deed poll), which was sorted within a week. However, updating a subsequent battel[160] that had featured their deadname and no gender marker took emailing back and forth for six months to be resolved. Here the college created an expectation of being supportive of transition but did not have the administrative capacity or understanding to practice this in a timely manner. In this way, some transgender students are more susceptible to gender burdens than others due to college processes[161].

Those who would share their identity with more people in their colleges often did so on the grounds that they might help someone come to terms with their own sexuality or gender and/or improve experiences for other LGBTQ+ students[162]. For example, one person stated, 'I am not ashamed of it, and if there were need for queer voices (i.e. on a committee) I would be willing. It just would not be my first instinct.' Here, a student who would be less likely to talk about it otherwise is willing to discuss their sexuality for the benefit of others. Another stated, 'I like to be open and for people to understand my and others' identities.' This seemed to be a common theme of being open to sharing and even teaching others as long as they were engaging in 'good faith'. Meanwhile, Henderson's suggestion about staff could be true for students – there are 'two realities' - 'to be the LGBTQ+role model they may have wanted when they were younger, versus being a 'lonely flag bearer' unable to function in the classroom at all'[163]. While this seems over prescriptive, it seems these tensions are present in students who must decide when/if they share their identities, and with whom.

Many participants distinctly remember individuals that shaped their experience of being queer at college. Some attributed them with 'single-handedly' building a reputation of their college as queer-friendly by organising events and being pro-active representatives - 'quite often you can just have one student who can really turn a JCR or MCR around in terms of queer inclusion.' Others talked about moments students took collective action that made a big impression on them, academically, socially and

[160] A financial document to say how much a student owes the college each term
[161] Newhouse, 2013
[162] This could almost be defined as a form of activism, as Karter et al describes an 'ethical calling' or responsibility (2021, 978)
[163] 2019 in Lee, 2022, 1193

personally. Small acts of kindness seemed big when they supported queer identity. Here, queer joy and euphoria seem possible within the college, mainly due to some students and staff that work for it.

Additionally, some students have differing expectations for university and college life that are not be reflected in their college selection. As mentioned, a few students did not get to choose their college; they were placed in a college selected by administration outside of their preferences, or they ultimately attended the college where there was funding available for their studies. Hence, one student noted that their college relationship was mostly a financial one, so they have few expectations from their college socially. This seemed to be the case more across postgraduate students than undergraduates[164], which one student suggested might be related to age, experience and already established social networks of postgraduate students that makes their lives somewhat separate from the college. Although, they recognised this as an overgeneralisation and perhaps not relatable to all postgraduate students, this raises questions about what is expected of the college by different student cohorts in terms of support and social opportunities.

There are interesting dichotomies around who participants choose to share their genders/sexualities with, in college, and why. Some see it as a personal aspect of their life, which they would rather keep private. Those who are less likely to share base this decision on how they perceive the person they are talking to, so share on an individual basis where necessary.

Reasons for this include students who:

1) 'Don't feel the need to discuss it in professional places'[165],
2) 'feel embarrassed' or 'ridiculous' about their gender (despite feeling support),
3) have 'concerns about being mocked or not understood by people at college'
4) 'would anticipate judgement or the need to explain myself, wouldn't feel like there is a given respect'; 'always feels scared to be judged or rejected',

[164] Sandler, 2022
[165] Similar to Sandler's (2022) findings

5) Feel their student cohort's reputation for having religious views impacts their sharing,
6) Say it 'depends (…) on the age or my perception of a visitor'

Although this is also impacted by whether they are sharing their gender or sexuality – one participant stated, they were 'more likely to mention sexual identity to strangers because honestly being non binary usually gets a worse reaction, and [they] don't really care enough to deal with it when speaking to acquaintances or just a brief meeting.'

Here, there are multiple motivations for students being reluctant to talk about their sexuality and gender identities[166]. These experiences seem shared by students at other institutions, as in Bachmann and Gooch's study, as 'one in eight lesbian, gay and bi students (13 per cent) aren't open with anyone at university about their sexual orientation. This number increases to more than 22 per cent of bi students compared to five per cent of gay and lesbian students. Fifteen per cent of trans students aren't open about identifying as trans'[167]. Some of the reasons for this could potentially be eradicated with college action, such as promotion of greater awareness of college members and visitors. This way, students would not feel the expectation on them from others to explain themselves to gain respect. They might also be less concerned about judgement based on students' backgrounds. The comment about feeling embarrassed or ridiculous could potentially be helped by more pro-active access to welfare resources for LGBTQ+ students[168]. The other comments seem more about individual preference.

Still, all these responses suggest students might hesitate to share their identities, which could create an expectation for other students that their colleges might be queer-phobic. This is supported by opposite stories of student experiences of open days, seeing obviously queer students[169], which encouraged them to apply to those colleges, as their expectation was that the college was open to and inclusive of queer students. This links back to the stakes of marketing approaches in providing accurate representation and visions of inclusion.

[166] Sandler, 2022
[167] 2018, 9
[168] Sandler, 2022
[169] Made known by wearing LGBTQ+ symbols or quotes on t-shirts etc.

Student Circles

These expectations were at times unmet for some. Some students reflected on the 'it's who you know' student culture, whereby access to or awareness of certain college events was given through attendance at the more popular events[170]. This does not facilitate all LGBTQ+ people in terms of environment. This was also apparent in spaces that were designed for specific groups. For example, Ace Tea is an event for asexual and aromantic students, but in some cases, these seemed to cater mainly for groups of students who already knew each other, potentially making joining for someone going alone difficult. On a wider scale, Tuesgays was also mentioned as potentially difficult to navigate for a newcomer. Furthermore, students mentioned the assumption, particularly in gay male spaces that there can be some judgement based on physical appearance related to sexual activity –

> 'There is kind of like there's a hyper objectification, hyper sexualization that that can lead to just like these spaces not feeling radically queer, not feeling judgement free and not feeling like they care about me being there as opposed to my body or what my body is or who like I'm with that kind of stuff.'
>
> 'Unfortunately, a lot of it comes down to 'who have you slept with?' Which is often how you meet people.'

This seems to lead to tensions and complex relationships at college events that could be uncomfortable for students whether engaged in this or not. While there is recognition that sex is often a part of sexuality and having space to explore this is a large part of queer and 'university experience' for some[171], this discussion recognises a wider range of experiences of these spaces.

Meanwhile, some identities generally seemed less understood than other LGBTQ+ labels[172]. The lack of awareness around this has led to students deciding not to share

[170] E.g., Tuesgays
[171] Chisholm goes so far as to argue 'queer spaces designate 'an appropriation of space for bodily, especially sexual, pleasure' (2004, 10 in Neves, 2022, 37), although I would suggest this is a narrow definition that could be inappropriate in many spaces.
[172] Sandler, 2022

their identities or uncomfortable situations in which they are expected to explain themselves. One student noted trying to explain pronouns to a friend, but then they realised that 'they just kind of like pretended to understand and then moved on' without using the correct pronouns. The onus was then on the nonbinary person to either address this again or deal with the emotional burden of being misgendered. In this way, gender identities can require greater visibility than sexualities, because of the necessary practices around them[173]. This student said they had a similar issue with their supervisor. While the supervisor might not be part of their college, every member of staff has an affiliation with a college, so this somewhat links to a college's teaching of awareness to staff (or lack thereof) being influential to the university environment. This continues to be an issue, as students face having to teach people themselves[174], which puts them in precarious positions particularly when being the 'expert' to senior staff or people they see often.

One Wadham student was aware of Wadham's history, and the long-standing events held there, which 'made it clear to me like an outsider, 'oh yeah this is quite sort of a queer place to be''. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy in some ways, as 'it probably does have a high percentage of queer people, because queer people apply there, because it is known as a queer college.' This links to Butler's definition of performativity whereby something is spoken into being[175], which contrasts my original critique of college marketing. However, some students reject the sweeping assumptions this makes about student experience, governance and inclusion. A student who is a woman and transgender described her experience attending an event held by Wadham as creating some dysphoria for her when she only felt seen as a *trans* woman. Although, when she told her friend, it was 'brushed off' due to Wadham's reputation as inclusive. They state the college's reputation felt like 'a potentially harmful over generalisation, maybe a little bit also invalidating'.

[173] Sandler, 2022
[174] Karter et al, 2021
[175] McDonald, 2013

Another transgender student, who 'mainly applied (to Wadham) because it sort of had a reputation for being quite a queer college', implied that Wadham's students were the driving force of this reputation, which is potentially unmatched by its senior leadership. At the same time, he noted his experience with people being shocked about his trans identity when he has shared it based on his appearance, which reflects his 'passing' as a man. This suggests that there are multiple experiences of colleges, which are inevitably based on intersectionality of students and their engagement with those colleges, but these discussions in some ways reject the over-simplification of calling a college 'queer'. Furthermore, the latter student suggested that this labelling of Wadham could be viewed as positive ('queer' college) or negative ('woke' college) depending on the level of homo/transphobia they possess. This complicates the narrative of a 'queer college'.

This seemed to be a point of contention among participants. One student noted it was the senior leaders of the college that were promoting inclusivity, but students still hosted events that were heteronormative and hyper-sexualised non-men. This alongside, some well-known 'queer' spaces frequented by Oxford students environments of toxic masculinity where performing 'macho' is celebrated over other traits seems to represent a proportion of non-inclusive students. It seems to exclude those who have nonbinary genders and/or sexualities and have been/felt historically unsafe in these environments. Hence, it is again important to consider who gets to 'claim' 'queer' spaces and what this means. I wonder if some of the spaces that some students might consider queer, others might think of as against what 'queer' stands for.

It is important to note that many of the students I talked to mentioned the student communities they had found or built at their colleges. This was sometimes through LGBTQ+ representative roles, related and unrelated societies, and/or departmental ties.

While a few talked about having to work harder to find this community than cisgender/heterosexual students, others implied that their identity meant they could find friends more easily, based on similarities built on LGBTQ+ identities. Moments of queer euphoria were described within colleges due to the organisation of collectivity. For example, one student noted the attendance of a traditional college event by large numbers of LBGTQ+ students, which made the event special to them. Another student talked about the struggles of being a representative bringing them closer to other representatives. This is to say, many LGBTQ+ students often have positive experiences at their colleges. However, I wonder if this is enough to call those colleges queer.

Discussion

Introduction

In this section, I return to the question of whether a college can be/is queer. It is necessary that some findings drift into this section, as I consistently centre my participants' views and perspectives. Yet, this is where I become more philosophical in my outlook. I link my literature review with the findings and come to a crossroad at whether an institution can be queer/how long can it be queer, whether it should be queer, and whether saying it is queer will ever be fully reflect student experiences. I consider the multiple experiences of colleges and identities and necessarily complicate the question of what it means to queer and institution such as an Oxford college.

Our college is 'Queer'

A question of whether colleges can be/are queer at first seemed central to my findings. This is an important area to explore, as it provides space to queer-ey definitions and explore the contentions with labelling[176]. In response to whether participants would describe a college as 'queer', 65% said yes and 35% said no. Yet, as stated, 'queer' has many meanings, so one might wonder how an institution could be described as queer.

[176] Abbas & Visha, 2024

That said, how/if an institution can be queer was at the heart of some of my participants' responses. If an institution is structured, bureaucratic and hierarchical can its considerations as queer be justified?[177] 'Queer' is a broad term, which invites its application, but just because we can use it, should we? These are just a couple of the questions students raised. For clarification, as far as I am aware, colleges have not yet labelled themselves as queer. However, within discussions on reputations of specific colleges, which will be explored further, the word 'queer' is frequently used. Those who said they would label a college queer largely agreed that it was the students that created an LGBTQ+ inclusive environment, which was sometimes accredited to the number of queer students, making a college queer. Others added it reflects a 'college's ethos'. 'The number of queer students is one aspect, but also how queer students fit into the overall student body, whether queer students are friends with each other and feel a sense of community, whether there are spaces for queer students to gather, the college policies for LGBTQ+ students that make the college more welcoming'.

Nevertheless, the reference to 'we' in the above questions are also open to debate, because *who* claims a college as queer is important to if a college can be described as 'queer' and its meaning[178]. This harks back to questions explored above around what a college is, as students often suggested a college could be queer if the student cohort were largely queer and if the college held many queer events. In this sense, the use of 'queer' seemed to be a label used colloquially by students about students. This is evidenced by the subsequent use of 'vibe' to explain the feeling that students had about certain colleges. Meanwhile, others related queerness to a 'radical inclusivity' that went beyond the student body and extended to all bodies, policies and spaces in and of the college. In this sense, there was more reluctance to label a college as 'queer'. This radical inclusivity was discussed by one participant as a feeling that 'I belong and not because I'm like them, but because I am like me and that's ok'. It was said that this is not the case in all 'queer spaces' yet, let alone traditionally heteronormative spaces.

[177] Stewart, 2007
[178] Abbas & Visha, 2024

Here, I return to the idea of whether radical inclusivity/queerness can be used to describe an institution's practices[179].

The generalised use of 'queer' was questioned here[180]. One student said 'it feels weird to use queer to describe an institution or other entity rather than a person, but despite that, I still tend to call Wadham a queer college when describing it to friends and family. I don't love the terminology though. Maybe queer-friendly would be a better term but then that still others queer people by making the college accepting to "them" rather than just being a space where we exist.' Another student had experience of this othering. There was a sense that 'queer' could be used to isolate those who had faced queer-phobia in their college. For example, if a student were to call their college queer, it was a way of isolating or invalidating those who had not experienced the same inclusivity. This battle between colleges, almost a competition to be the 'queerest', was thought of as harmful[181].

Meanwhile, some related the term to queer theory and suggested the definition of queer theory contradicts with the very nature of the institution – 'Oxford is the system, the colleges are not really breaking down those norms, they enforce them'. Another student seemed to capture these nuances in interview: 'if I went onto a college's website and it said we're a queer college, I would not apply to that college.' They justify this by saying their reaction would be 'like f*** you are like the fact that you have to if you had to label yourself as a queer college…'. Whereas, if a student were to say colloquially that their college is queer, their reaction would be: 'I love that you feel comfortable'. This discussion highlights the importance of nuance in labelling[182]. There is almost a sense of protection over the word and what it can mean, which embodies its history, culture and 'vibe'[183]. In this way, as soon as an institution calls itself 'queer' it seems to

[179] Links to Garvey's (2024) definition of 'radical queerness' in literature review
[180] See Browne, 2006 for an interesting discussion on this; Mercier, 2023
[181] Relates to concerns about neoliberal ideals applied to this topic
[182] See Sandler's (2022) discussion of the importance of universities' intentions when labelling themselves as 'LGBTQ+ inclusive', for example.
[183] Abbas & Visha, 2024

appropriate the term and it makes its promises hollow, having opposite effects from its intended use[184].

This somewhat challenges my original question that in hindsight seems over-simplified, as participants responses emphasise the importance in who is asking about whether a college is queer, who is answering, and why. Furthermore, there is arguably never a one answer to this, as was shown in my discussion of Wadham college for example, as there is never one experience of being LGBTQ+, a student or a college member.

Labelling

Labelling a college as queer, necessarily highlights others as not. In some ways, this takes away perceived agency of students to create a queer experience for themselves in spaces that are not as historically queer. A theme that continued to surface was the general impermanence of queer engagement at colleges, which is attributed largely to the changes between cohorts[185]. Someone highlighted that just one student could change the whole college's reputation by being proactive about holding LGBTQ+ events at their college and pushing for greater support. This was told through recognition of a particular representative that has contributed significantly to their college in this way. Another student who has been at Oxford for over five years discussed a group of LGBTQ+ students being involved in committee meetings that they would generally be able to pass most motions with their majority. These moments of queer action/involvement are '(not) really remembered these days, as the students who experienced this have mostly graduated now'. The temporality of this queer body of students and dissipation of action was described, as students have left or become less engaged, and new cohorts define what is important[186].

This instance of dissipation does not mean students are disengaging from their colleges completely. Instead, it was suggested that there is potentially more tolerance or understanding from other students who are more open to thinking about sexuality and

[184] Abbas & Visha, 2024
[185] See Brown & Kaftl's discussion of 'cohortness' (2019)
[186] Fasinger & Arseneau, 2007

gender in diverse ways. Therefore, not all students see the need to group with other LGBTQ+ students for the same reasons they were five years ago. Additionally, a couple of students countered the assumption that grouping all LGBTQ+ students would lead to friendship based on that singular aspect of identity[187]. This objection to grouping socially, based on labels, might affect collective action on LGBTQ+ matters within colleges.

Here, intersectionality was also emphasised. This leads to a question of whether a space can be labelled queer if it does not recognise multiplicity in identity[188]. One student suggested they did not attend college events as a person of colour because they are largely white spaces. As a graduate student they were also no longer interested in attending college events, as they already have a group of friends outside of those spaces. Another student described attending an event largely attended by college students as uncomfortable, due to the younger population of the space and 'laddie' culture, which seemed 'homophobic' in some ways. This contrasted with LGBTQ+ spaces they had been to elsewhere. Hence, although there are spaces created by colleges for LGBTQ+ people, these are sometimes unrepresentative of the community they are designed to serve, and consequently further marginalise some students, which links back to the idea that 'LGBTQ+' is not a homogenous category[189].

Contingency

Brown and Humphrey's critique the notion of 'organisations as text', whereby 'language, then, is best 'understood as a representational technology that actively organizes, constructs and sustains social reality'. This, again, ties to Butler's concept of performativity[190]. Meanwhile, Brown and Humphrey think of 'organizational identities not as generally static and objectively existing entities, but as extremely fluid discursive constructions constantly being made and re-made'[191]. This implies that it is idealistic to

[187] See Fasinger & Arseneau (2007) for reasons for the countering of this assumption
[188] See Gray & Cook's (2018) discussion and linking of 'intersectionality' and 'queer'
[189] Fasinger & Arseneau, 2007
[190] McDonald, 2013
[191] Brown & Humphreys, 2006, 233

think of organisations taking on whatever labels are presecribed to them. Aspects of both arguments can be true here. Language can be used to encourage representation, but to sustain the social reality it describes, it must consistently strive to practice what it idealises, due to the nature of 'fluid discursive constructions' that take place inside and outside the institution. Hence, labelling a college 'queer' and the realisation of queerness in a college are constantly contingent.

Put simply, there is an ever-changing notion of what is 'queer', due to societal and historical re/constructs. Hence, it is difficult to state what makes a distinct queer student experience or expectation of colleges. On this topic, Browne and Nash state, 'what forms these engagements might take, or how they might be categorised, necessarily remains permanently blurred, contingent and multiple, and following Plummer, nor do we seek to resolve contradictions or tensions'[192]. Furthermore, 'queer' necessarily depends on a recognition of multiplicity, which defies categorisation. Hence, even a determined set of criteria that label a college 'queer' is subject to change based on what is important to the next cohort and their levels of engagement with the college to continue the work needed for desired changes or maintenance. This is not to place any expectations on future cohorts to do this work, but to highlight the contingent nature of institutional change and progress that make labelling contentious.

While talking about Jesus college's recent past reputation as queer, a student said, 'but that could dissipate, and nobody would know that would be Jesus.' Some students seemed concerned about this, while others expected it as a necessary reality. Although, concerns around a lot of the work that reps had done being lost was clear. For example, there was a motion passed to create a transphobia definition in one college, which was discussed at length with senior staff at this college. However, apparently an agreement was not reached before those involved left their representative roles, and as this was a point of contention between the college and reps, it seems this discussion has been slow to continue with new representatives, particularly on the side of the college. These stops and starts can make progress difficult, particularly as the representative system can take

[192] 2010, 10

some time to understand – ‘there's no JCR like ‘this is how the college works’ or at any point you don't get like, a ‘these are all the gates that we have come on in, let me show you what this is. Let’s understand this.’’ One student was trying hard to make the last few weeks of their role impactful, when I interviewed them, by setting up a group to counter this but was uncertain of what might happen after they left.

For some students, experience and reception of representatives seemed to also be contingent on staff, which are subject to change. One student noted that a staff member who recently joined the college was keen to talk with each representative to understand their aims for the role. Meanwhile, another discussed overlapping job titles, which meant it was difficult to make complaints about a member of staff after they had acquired multiple roles in the college. They noted that they would ultimately be complaining about the member of staff’s behaviour to that same staff member to be able to escalate the situation. The creation of more pastoral roles in this instance seems positive from the outset but can create more issues in the college when new people are not employed to take on these roles.

Meanwhile, when staff members are specifically employed in EDI roles, this can have positive impacts, as presented in the first example. In this sense, the staff and role changes can create a sense of uncertainty and temporality around student engagement. By this, I mean progress is often non-linear, and perceptions of time seem to differ for stakeholders, as staff might have a longer-term contract than students who know they have a set amount of time at an institution[193]. Hence, queer temporality and contingency seem to be constants in colleges.

It is Not Only About Being ‘X’

Suggesting a college is inclusive or queer is a generalisation due to the varied experiences had by LGBTQ+ students. Student identities intersect in many ways that are missing from institutional reports. One student talked about their health and how they used their coming out as a tester to see if a person might react well to their ‘coming

[193] For more discussion on this, see Amin, 2014

out' as having a certain health condition. Another described their neurodivergence as a factor in their engagement with students more generally and how this impacted their feelings of inclusion within queer communities at Oxford. These are important to understanding the experiences of students, particularly in this study that only includes the insights of nine students. Even amongst the nine students interviewed, there were different experiences based on a range of factors. One student discussed their rejection of the notion that the college could just put all the queer students in a room, and they would become friends. Linking back to the importance of recognising intersectionality, this emphasises the need to see queer students as not only queer. The potential outcome for not doing this is the exclusion of students based on their identities.

Another example of this comes from a BAME student who stated, 'the Oxford queer scene is very white', which makes them unlikely to want to engage in general events. Although, they continued: 'I don't think there's anything wrong with that, because people who find like the mainstream Oxford's queer scene to be either too cis or too white, like have their own like, you know, communities and networks going on'. This was also noted by another students' mention of a discussion they had with a BAME student who said they would not engage with the queer student community in ways that the white student I was interviewing might. One student said, 'I don't think that like colleges, or the university have necessarily like gone to any lengths to yeah, to address that.' This makes it even more important to emphasise here. A participant stated: 'I think just the intersectionality of identity, I think it's really, really paramount to this. (…) Tension between identities and between labels and personal experiences that needs to be remembered and reflected on'. Data that acknowledges intersectionality seem to be missing from college reports.

A different example of the impacts that factors outside of being queer can have on queer experiences is seen in one students' reflection on the influence his department had on his experience: 'my perspective is coloured by the fact that I'm an English student and that's kind of more obviously kind of progressive and political rather than sort of, I don't know, like maths is'. Hence, even within the university, there are differences in student engagement that are shaped by their contexts. Some choose to engage more or less in

colleges, but they also have departments and societies (with the Union) to engage with. So, the colleges are only a part of in their 'university experience'. Additionally, we must acknowledge that student lives are complex and influenced by factors outside of college control, as 'inclusion is a multilevel process "including the individual, interpersonal, group, organizational and societal"'[194].

Beginning, continuing, never concluding

If at First You Don't Succeed…

I would like to offer pockets of hope, just as I had at the start of this research. I find it upsetting when academics present all the things that are challenging about our society and leave little reassurance that there is any overcoming of these challenges. Instead of doing this, I want to present the idea of micro-progressions. Just as microaggressions are important to acknowledge, as are micro-progressions. These are moments when an individual decides to do something that contributes to a more inclusive institution. Everyone has the capacity to do this in varying measures, whether this is wearing a pronoun badge free from the Union or a college or advocating for said pronoun badges. Like Sandler, I do not want to 'pressure anyone into a role model position', or place the burden on those in the community to do more work[195]. I like to think people generally know if they are doing what they can to be inclusive; I just hope people act on this feeling and actively work towards it in sustainable ways.

At the same time, I recognise how reminiscent this is of neoliberal idealism, which takes the pressure off senior leaders and individuals with the most influence in the institution to not only walk but look towards a queer future. If everyone believed in the statements above, my research might have been unnecessary, and succeeded in being largely joy-based. However, currently, it seems the onus falls on a small few who are overworked and underpaid for the amount they contribute to and validate the label of

[194] Bernardo Ferdman, 2014, 14 in Sandler, 2022, 123
[195] Sandler, 2022, 138-139

college ‘inclusivity’. They contribute a lot to many. Yet, if college staff and students were to truly set a standard for their environments to be thoughtfully queer and celebratory of everything the word encompasses, colleges would arguably be a lot closer to what they advertise themselves as - inclusive, diverse, places for learning about ourselves and others. As much as I wish I could say colleges should do X, Y and Z, which would solve all the issues[196], it seems more realistic to say long-term progress requires trying and failing constantly, continuously, effortfully from all members of every college. While that does not happen, a few people will take on this burden, and challenges will remain for many LGBTQ+ students at Oxford colleges.

Lessons

I have reflected on students’ queer experiences and expectations of their Oxford colleges and how these are impacted by college stakeholders. A constant theme has been whether a college can be considered queer, and by who. This has led to tensions between wanting to have definitive answers for my research and the idea that continues to scupper these hopes – nothing can ever be fully queer. Yet, at the end of this research, I no longer see this as a negative; without a set definition or experience of ‘queer’ comes a possibility that so many scholars before me have described. While this is frustrating at times, it also forces constant progression and renewed interest in what could be.

In some ways, I like that this work will never be ‘complete’, a college will never be ‘queer enough’. To rephrase this, a college can always strive to be queerer, and in the same vein, I can always find new ways to queer my research. This realisation seems more useful than if I had confidently answered my question with a list of queer/not queer colleges.

What is next?

[196] I have suggested some to show that there are concrete areas that could be improved upon; although, these are not nearly ‘enough’.

With this said, there are some solutions to the issues that were raised and would likely improve LGBTQ+ experiences in obvious ways for many. This embodies a kind of 'radical incrementalism' described by Garvey as 'policymaking that utilizes small, incremental changes through focused evaluations'[197]. Suggested developments are:

1) **Extensive gender and sexuality inclusivity training for each college member, which involves direction on pronoun use.** This would hopefully create opportunities for students to share their pronouns. It would also address many of the concerns that participants voiced around sharing of identities and ignorance around what it means to be 'X'. Furthermore, this could make staff feel more comfortable sharing their sexualities and genders at work, ultimately, providing more of the positive representation students voiced as important to creating a safe environment and expectations of acceptance.

2) **A clear definition of transphobia.** Working on this would provoke greater discussion in colleges about how to better support transgender students. It would also offer a clear line on what is un/acceptable behaviour. Making this known across college creates an expectation that transgender people cannot be ignored or dismissed by any member. In reinforcing this definition, questions of wellbeing of transgender students and allies will need to be addressed.

3) **Evidence-based advertising to students by colleges.** This could encourage colleges to work towards greater inclusion and monitoring of this progress. It would help students make a more informed decision about their college, even if that means they prioritise certain factors in their decision-making. Student expectations of colleges would then be closer to the realised experience. While this might create a dissonance between colleges, students would at least know that if they choose a college for its inclusion, that will be practiced.

4) **Greater accountability for administration responses to students.** Administration can sometimes be a 'behind the scenes' operation, but it can

[197] 2023, 57

heavily impact students' experiences, as highlighted. Hence, guidelines and statements about the length of time expected to resolve issues around student identities should be shared. If they are not met, there should be an inquiry into how they can be streamlined or organised better to improve response times. This, in addition to greater staff inclusion training, could develop the administrative aspects of student experiences to reduce the labour of marginalised students.

5) **More employment of staff in Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) roles that are specifically trained for EDI roles.** The creation of EDI roles looks great but can only fully realise their potential with people who have the time, experience and training to fulfil the requirements of those roles. The employment of staff who can represent and work with marginalised students seems invaluable, particularly if they are not already involved in senior leadership roles that might influence how comfortable student feel discussing issues with them. This seems to have been worked towards by some but could still use more implementation from a wider range of colleges.

I understand that some of these solutions might take a long time and would require support from senior leadership who truly care about inclusivity. Some of them are easier to implement than others, yet every college could benefit in some way from reviewing these areas and questioning whether they are doing 'enough' to call themselves inclusive. It is also important to recognise that these solutions will not 'solve' everything but could be useful as a starting/continuing point for colleges, because there will be no conclusion to this work.

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Appendix

'How queer is your college?' survey[198]:

1. Please note that you may only participate in this survey if you are 18 years of age or over. *[199]

   I certify that I am 18 years of age or over
   Withdraw

2. Please note your informed consent is needed to start the questionnaire. *

   If you have read the information above and agree to participate with the understanding that the data (including any personal data) you submit will be processed accordingly, please select this answer to start.
   Withdraw

3. Are you an undergraduate or postgraduate student? *

   Undergraduate student Postgraduate student

4. How many years have you been at Oxford? *

   <1 2 3 4 5<

5. Which college are you a member of? *

   Drop down list of all colleges.

6. What is/are the closest descriptor/s of your gender? *

[198] Please note the question numbers do not match the survey itself, as the number of questions depended on the answers of the participants, due to follow up questions for certain multiple choice selections.
[199] '*' means the question needed to be answered to submit the survey

Woman

Man

Nonbinary

My descriptor is not listed

6b. How would you describe your gender? [200]

Enter your answer

7. Are you transgender?

Yes

No

My descriptor is not listed

7b. How would you choose to answer question 7? [201]

Enter your answer

8. What is/are the closest descriptor/s of your sexuality? *

Heterosexual

Gay

Lesbian

Bisexual

Asexual

Aromantic

Pansexual

My descriptor is not listed

8b. How would you choose to answer question 8? [202]

[200] Contingent on answer 6 being 'my descriptor is not listed'
[201] Contingent on answer 7 being 'my descriptor is not listed'
[202] Contingent on answer 8 being 'my descriptor is not listed'

Enter your answer

9. Who, if at all, would you feel comfortable talking about your sexual identity in college with? *

   Friends
   Acquaintances
   College supervisor
   Committees
   Welfare staff
   College visitors
   I would not discuss with anyone in college

10. Who, if at all, would you feel comfortable talking about your gender identity in college with? *

    Friends
    Acquaintances
    College supervisor
    Committees
    Welfare staff
    College visitors
    I would not discuss with anyone in college

11. What makes you feel this way? Please reflect on your answers to questions 9 and 10.
    Enter your answer

12. Did you choose your college based on your knowledge of its reputation for its queer inclusivity?

Yes

No

Not sure/don't know

13. Do you feel that your college's reputation for LGBTQ+ inclusivity or otherwise is deserved?

    Yes

    No

    Not sure/don't know

14. How, if at all, do you think your college has built its reputation amongst the LGBTQ+ community?

    Enter your answer.

15. Would you use the term 'queer' to describe a college? *

    Yes

    No

16. Why or why not? Please reflect on your answer to question 15.

    Enter your answer

17. What do you think makes a college queer?[203]

    Enter your answer

18. Would you be open to being interviewed about your answers to this survey? If so, please provide an email address. Please note, this will mean you will be identifiable, but your data will still be anonymous in the writeup.

[203] Contingent on answering 'yes' to question 15

Enter your answer

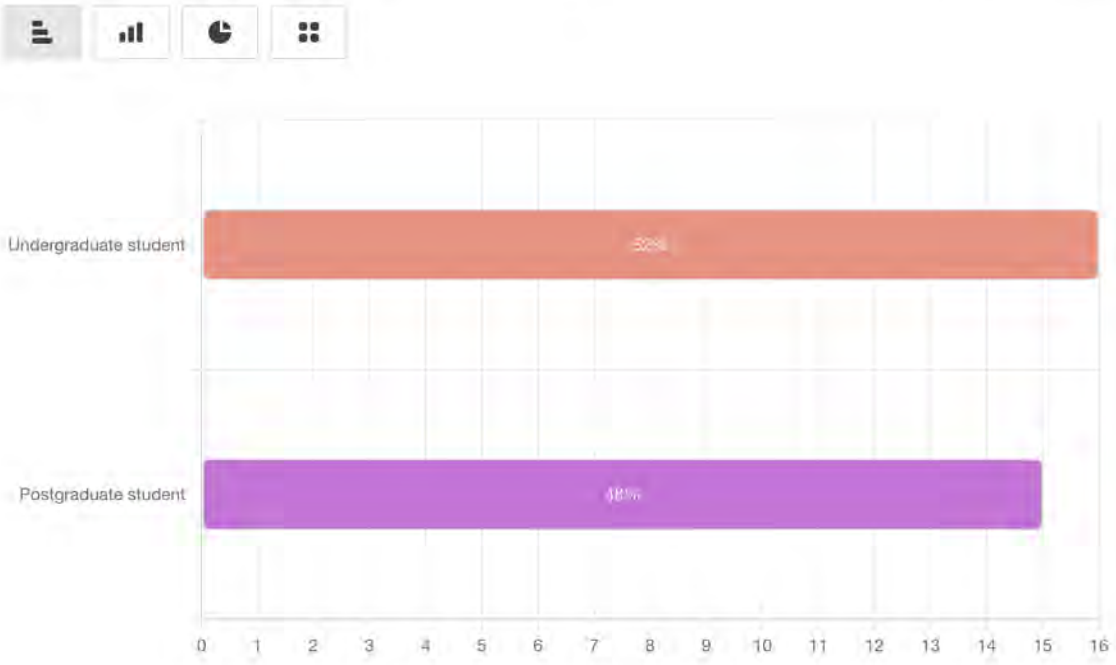
--

Multiple choice answers overview presented in graphs[204]:

[204] Excludes college membership for anonymity purposes

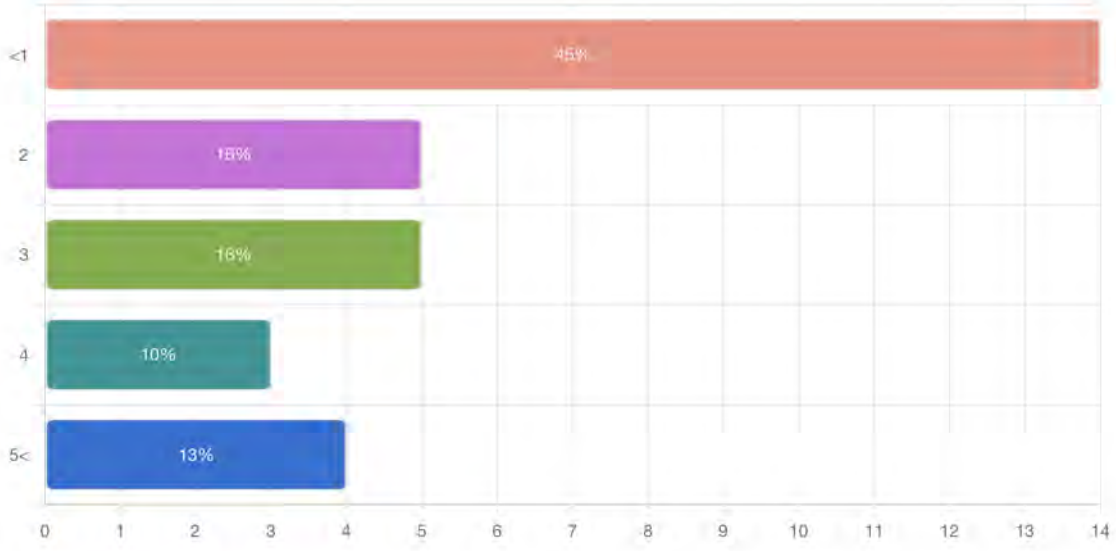
3. Are you an undergraduate or postgraduate student?*

Responses: 31



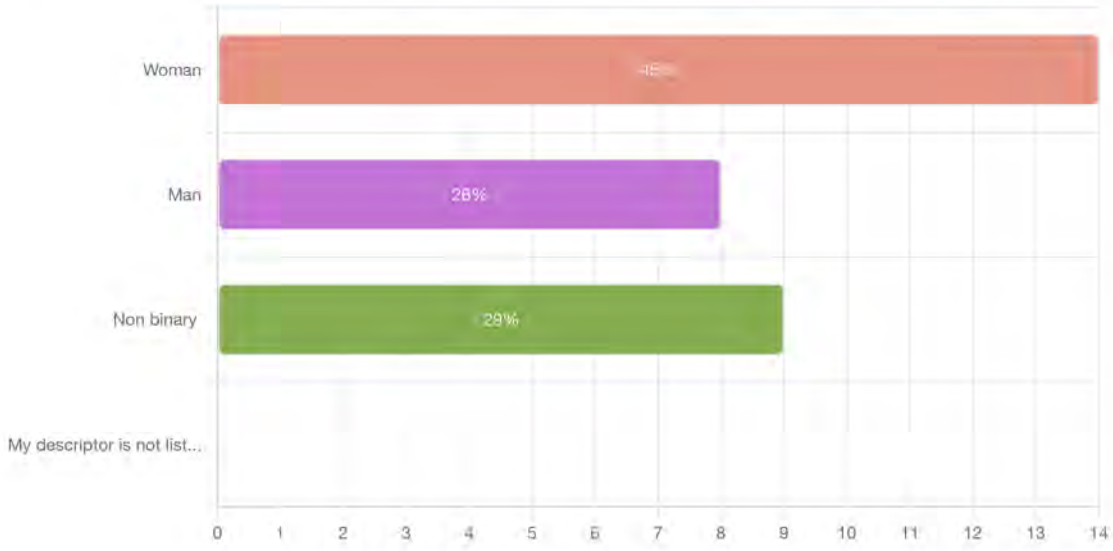
4. How many years have you been at Oxford?*

Responses: 31



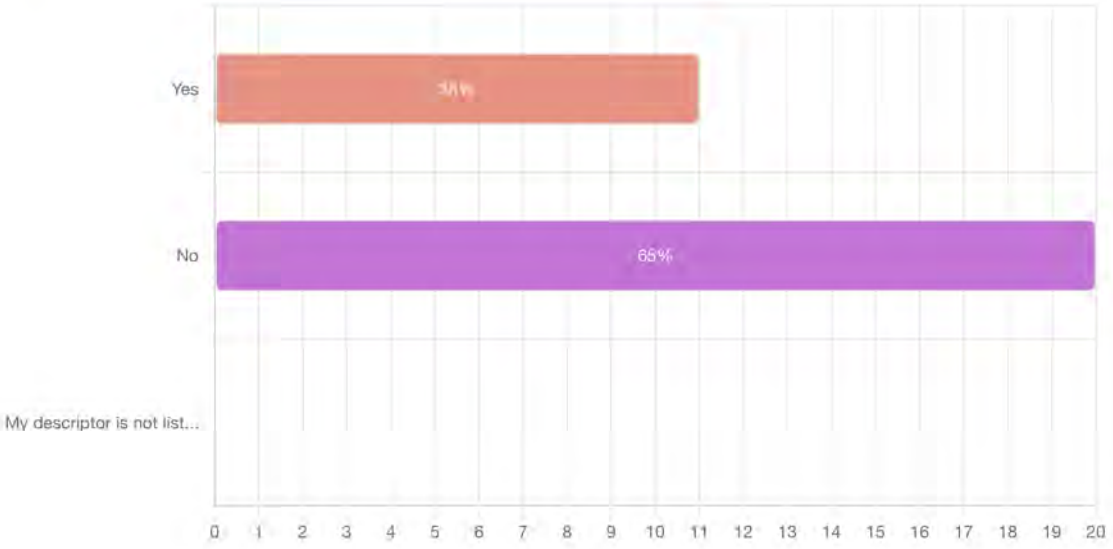
6. What is/are the closest descriptor/s of your gender?*

Responses: 31



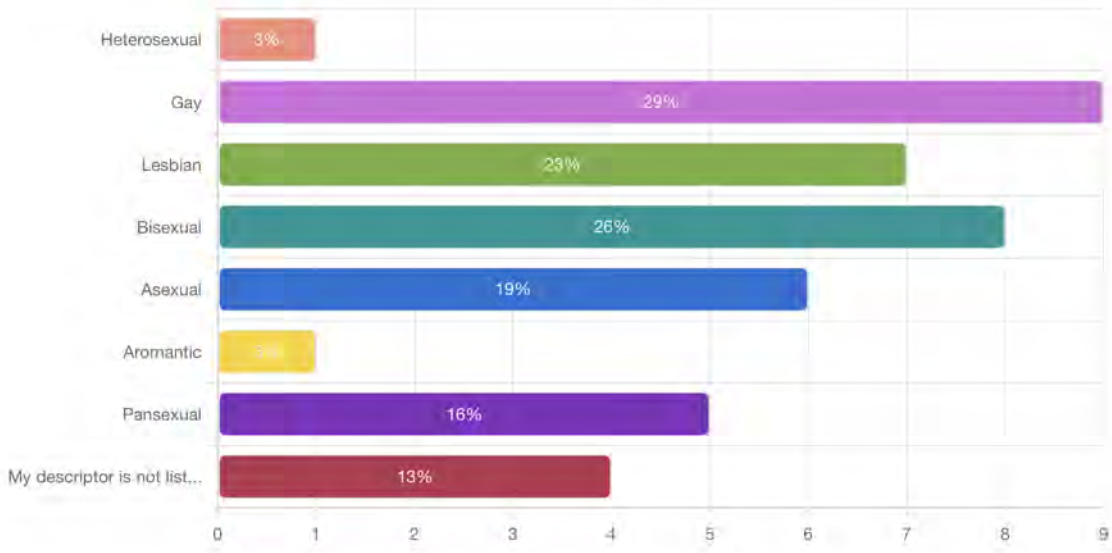
8. Are you transgender?

Responses: 31



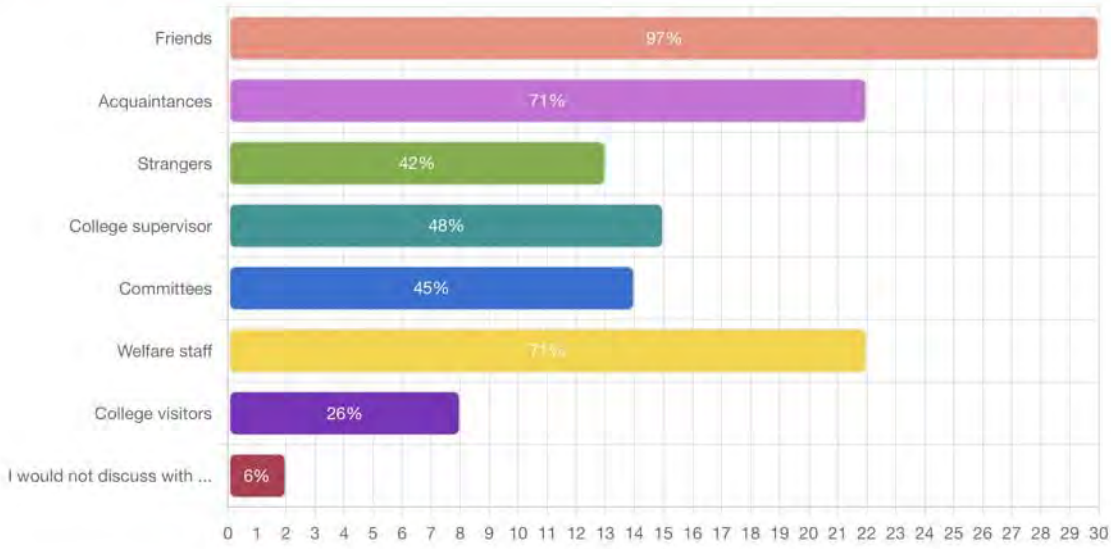
10. What is/are the closest descriptor/s of your sexuality?*

Responses: 31



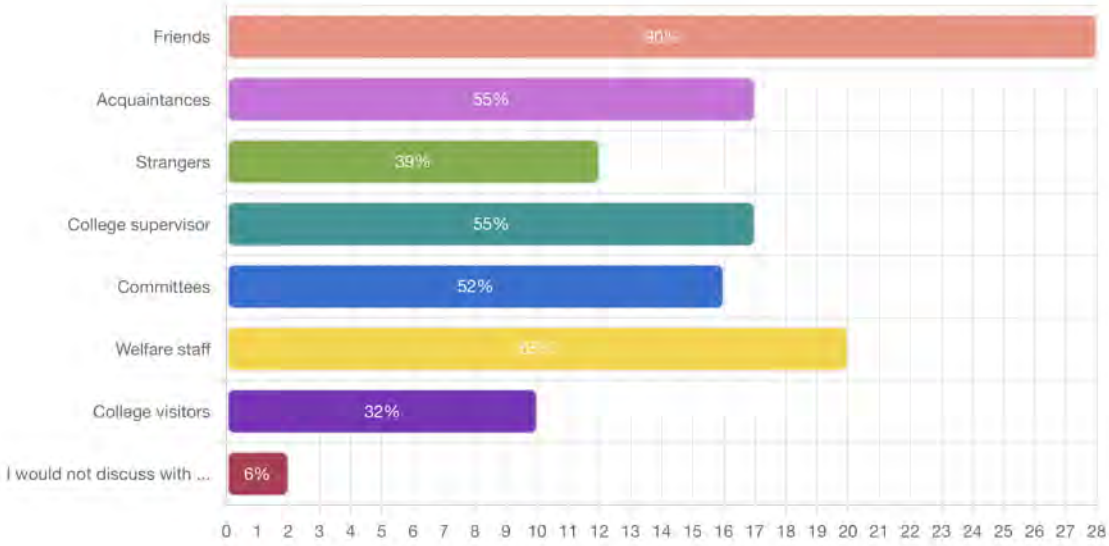
12. Who, if at all, would you feel comfortable talking about your sexual identity in college with?*

Responses: 31



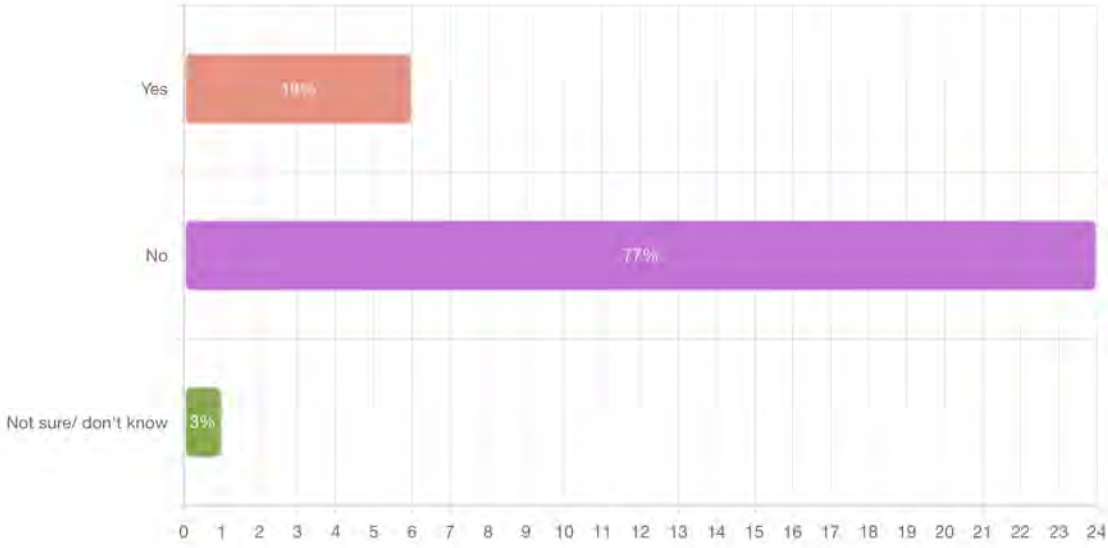
13. Who, if at all, would you feel comfortable talking about your gender identity in college with?*

Responses: 31



15. Did you choose your college based on your knowledge of its reputation for its queer inclusivity?*

Responses: 31

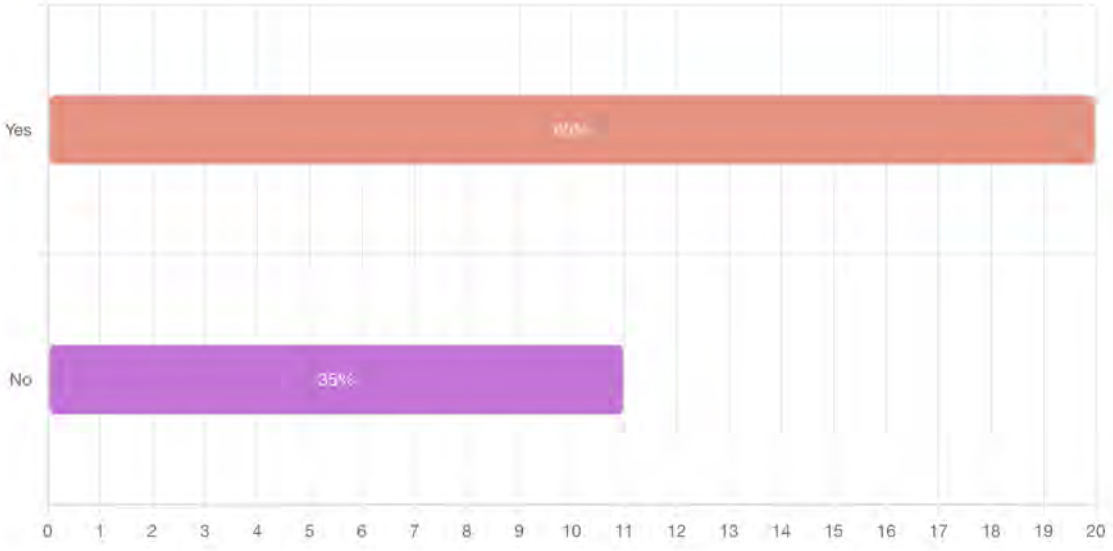


16. Do you feel that your college's reputation for LGBTQ+ inclusivity or otherwise is deserved?

Responses: 29

18. Would you use the term 'queer' to describe a college?*

Responses: 31



CUREC Confirmation and Amendment[205]:

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk

[redacted]
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

28 February 2024

Dear [redacted]

Research ethics approval

Research title: Expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ students at University of Oxford colleges.

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_068

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC
ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available website.

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

James Carroll
DREC member
cc: [redacted]

[205] Note, the title change has been confirmed by the department since CUREC submission

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk

[redacted]

Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

25 April 2024

Dear [redacted]

Research ethics approval

Research title: Expectations and experiences of LGBTQ+ students at University of Oxford colleges.

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_068

Date of amendment: 23/4/2024

Amendment number: 1

The above amendment has been considered on behalf of the Department of Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC
procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this amendment.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

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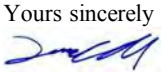
Yours sincerely



James Carroll
DREC member

cc: [redacted]