

The emerging orientation: asexuality in equal opportunities monitoring in UK universities

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1 Introduction

Asexuality is a sexual orientation that is broadly defined as the lack of sexual orientation towards others; however, it encapsulates a broad spectrum of sexualities from which individuals identify. One estimate for the prevalence of asexuals is around 1% of the population (Bogaert, 2015).

It is difficult to establish exactly how many asexual people there are, for many reasons. Asexual awareness is growing, but not to the same extent as other sexual orientations, so some individuals that may be asexual do not necessarily identify themselves in that way. Individuals that do identify themselves as asexual may not be willing to do so publicly; or, indeed, they may not be able to.

This study was conducted to establish the extent to which asexuals could identify themselves in equal opportunities monitoring at universities in the United Kingdom. It also aimed to gather an appreciation of the provisions that these institutions offer to their asexual members of staff.

2 Background

Asexuality lacks the public awareness that other sexual orientations may take for granted, and asexuals encounter dismissive or ignorant retorts regularly (see Decker (2014) for examples). They include assumptions of the individual's state of health or history; denial of the existence of asexuality; an assertion that it is a temporary state; or claims that it is 'not human' or alien. Coming out as asexual is also sometimes greeted with personal questions about an individual's habits, tastes, history and other orientations, which would not normally be asked of a mere acquaintance.

Carrigan (2015) points out that despite growing awareness of asexuality in media and public consciousness, there remains a dearth of research and acknowledgement within higher education.

“One obvious challenge to thinking about asexuality is its continued absence from textbooks and syllabi. While visibility activism by asexual people and their allies has contributed to a greater media profile for asexuality, it is still striking by its absence within academia. This academic invisibility can lend support to a tendency to see asexuality as pathological. It is important to remember that its invisibility does not mean it does not exist.” (p. 12)

While universities should, arguably, aspire to be egalitarian, forward-thinking and accessible, the invisibility of asexuality that pervades the academic literature contributes to the lack of understanding that exists outside of higher education. Without acknowledgement in the world of research, there is a mandate to deny its existence. Carrigan (2015) argues a similar point:

“Though the growth of asexuality as a self-identification is relatively recent... it seems likely that this is not the case for the underlying experience which now leads people to identify as asexual. If this is so, the conspicuous absence of asexuality from the academic literature becomes striking. The belated recognition that asexuality is now receiving has important implications for how sexuality is conceptualised more broadly.” (p. 15)

Although this does not necessarily provide a barrier towards asexuals entering higher education, universities can take a lead towards creating a more tolerant society and provide a model for other institutions. As Decker (2014, pt. 5) requested:

“The single most common and resoundingly consistent answer from asexual communities is that we want you to acknowledge that asexuality exists.

“Maybe this sounds easy, but keep in mind asexual people are a largely unknown population. The discrimination they face isn’t particularly visible; they’re rarely oppressed through deliberate action, but they *are* living every day with little to no acknowledgement of a central aspect of their lives. And yes, *that still*

constitutes living in a prejudicial environment...” (emphasis in original)

Stonewall appreciates that an open working environment has a positive benefit on both the institution and the individuals that work for them:

“At Stonewall we know that when lesbian, gay and bisexual employees are able to be themselves at work, their performance improves. They enjoy going to work, are more loyal, more creative and make greater contributions to the organisation.” (Ashok, 2015, p. 1)

It may well be equally true for asexual individuals, who may feel pressured to acting contrary to their inclinations in order to avoid the assumptions and prejudices that may face them. Without reassurances that they would be protected from harm, it is understandable that individuals would cloak themselves to avoid such difficulties and may not work to their potential.

Indeed, a study by Robbins et al. (2015) suggested that, for asexuals, being asexual was an important part of their identity in many cases. On the other hand, there were fears among some participants of the study of coming out; this was due to the lack of awareness and apprehension of the possible consequences of being open:

“The public’s general lack of knowledge and understanding of asexuality was a major deterrent for those who had not come out. As asexuality is not widely accepted as a sexual orientation, closeted participants chose to avoid the possibility of facing rejection and alienation.” (Robbins et al., 2015, p. 5)

This kind of apprehension was supported by the reactions that some of the participants in the Robbins et al. study experienced when trying to come out. They encountered disbelief, denial and dismissal.

However, coming out was generally a positive development in the participants’ lives, and created some closure: “Coming out as asexual resulted in a deep sense of liberation and increased personal insight for most respondents. There were no reports of regret after coming out. . . . Most participants who came out ultimately reported feeling more comfortable with themselves.” (Robbins et al., 2015, p. 7). This is in accordance with Stonewall’s statement that individuals can work better when content with and open about their identity.

Equality monitoring is, therefore, an important tool for gaining an impression of whether there is a positive environment for any particular group. It may also highlight areas where there may be under-representation or discrimination, whether unlawful or otherwise.

Therefore, with this brief rationale to study the state of equality monitoring in universities for asexual spectrum individuals, the intention of the following study is to examine the extent to which universities provide for their asexual spectrum members of staff.

3 Research questions and methodology

Publicly-run universities from the United Kingdom were selected as the focus of this study for two main reasons. Firstly, they are bound by the Freedom of Information Act 2000 in the United Kingdom (or 2002 in Scotland), which compels publicly-run institutions to accede to reasonable requests for information. Secondly, such institutions are, colloquially, regarded as being progressive and innovative and would, perhaps, represent a best-case scenario for the monitoring and support of asexual employees.

The universities targeted for this study were taken from the Wikipedia page for the “List of universities in the United Kingdom”. The institutions contacted were all those “top-level” (that is, those institutions that are not indented) and which are not privately operated. The sample size was $n = 126$.

Email addresses were obtained for each university via their websites. All of those institutions were emailed on the evening of Thursday 18th June 2015 or on Wednesday 22nd July 2015 with the following questions, which are the research questions for this study:

1. How do you ask (new) staff members about their sexuality/sexual orientation? If this is asked through an equal opportunities monitoring form, what is the question and what options can individuals select?
2. If such information is available, what percentage of employed staff at your institution are asexual?
3. What provisions are there for asexual members of staff at your institution?

4 Results

4.1 Selecting a sexual orientation

Only five universities from the 121 that responded allow individuals to state that they are asexual in their equal opportunities monitoring. Of these five, one — the University of St Andrews — permits its staff members to choose an ‘Asexual’ option. The other four allow individuals to select ‘Other’ and then, optionally, specify.

From the other institutions, 85 allow individuals to state ‘Other’, but with no option to clarify further. Seven institutions stated that they do not collect information on their staff members’ sexual orientation as a routine part of their equality monitoring.

There were 24 institutions that gave no appropriate option for asexual individuals to select. Typically, these options were restricted to heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual orientations and to ‘refuse’ to answer.

Some of the responses gave reasons for the choices that are offered in these equality monitoring questions. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) was mentioned in 22 responses.

Higher Education Statistics Agency offers advice to universities on the data they should collect. In the ‘Sexual Orientation’ question, it suggests that the question asked should be, “What is your sexual orientation?”, following advice from Stonewall. It gives the following options and labels.

- 01 Bisexual
- 02 Gay man
- 03 Gay woman/lesbian
- 04 Heterosexual
- 05 Other
- 98 Information refused

Nonetheless, two institutions that claimed to follow HESA’s advice neglected to offer an ‘Other’ option. Another institution followed HESA’s advice, but offered an additional, optional ‘Specify’ field.

Seven institutions mentioned Stonewall directly as an influence on the wording and response choices of their question.

4.2 Numbers of asexual people in universities

Only the University of St Andrews could report how many asexual people there are working there: none. Thirteen other institutions reported the number of individuals that selected ‘other’ but, aside from the two that had

no individuals that selected ‘Other’, none could state with certainty how many are asexual.

Therefore, it is unclear how well asexual people are represented at UK universities.

4.3 Provisions for asexual staff members

Three universities asked for further clarity on the question so that they could provide a more accurate response. It may be that some of the universities that responded did so without a full appreciation of what was being asked.

Nonetheless, the universities responded to the question.

No specific provision

Thirty-nine universities stated that they did not offer any provision for its asexual staff members. A small number added that any requests for provision would be considered; many noted that all resources and facilities were available to all staff, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Not applicable

A particular concern to the author is that twelve universities reported that this question was not applicable to their institution.

There are many interpretations that can be reached from this response. One is that the institutions have determined that there are zero asexual members of staff in their institution; however, half of these institutions do not give an appropriate option for asexual individuals to select. The other six universities could not have been able to determine how many asexual members of staff are employed at their institution from their questioning.

The most positive interpretation that the author can suggest is that these institutions do not know how they can support their asexual staff members.

Misinterpreting the definition of asexuality

There were also five institutions that appeared to misunderstand the definition of asexuality. They conflated asexuality with non-binary and intersex people, with some making reference to guidelines on gender identity protection and some to gender-neutral toilet facilities. While these protections and facilities are welcome, they are not necessarily pertinent to asexuality.

Commitment to equality and diversity

It is not an expectation for asexual individuals to have extra facilities or privileged access to services. However, it is an expectation that asexual individuals to be able to work at an institution without fear of judgement, harassment, prejudice and discrimination. It is reassuring to know that 54 universities responded with their commitment to a diverse and equal workforce and to affirm that their policies that protect other sexual orientations would apply equally to asexual individuals.

Welcome within the LGBT+ community

Beyond the commitment to equality and diversity, 27 institutions declared that asexual members of staff are welcome within their LGBT+ staff groups.

Indeed, the remit of such groups is developing to include other sexual orientations and some are changing the group name as a result.

Examples of positive responses

In the correspondence between the author and the universities in this study, there were some positive responses to the research questions. They offer examples of what can be done to ensure that asexual spectrum individuals feel welcome to work at higher education institutions.

The following examples are not an exhaustive list of these positive responses; there were others that provided similar answers to the research questions. The quotes used have been taken from the email correspondences.

Cardiff University allows its staff members to select ‘Other’ in its equality monitoring forms. The group set up for LGBT staff members changed their name to show that they welcome other sexual orientations, including those on the asexual spectrum. The group can make representations to the university committee.

“The University’s LGBT+ staff equality network. . . has incorporated the + symbol into its name to denote that it is inclusive of many different sexualities and gender identities. . . [It] also has a representative that sits on the University’s Equality and Diversity Committee, establishing a formal engagement link between the Universitys Committee and the staff network.” (Cardiff University)

Lancaster University has a policy that applies to those sexual orientations covered by the Equality Act 2010, but stated in its reply to the Freedom

of Information request that the policy protects its asexual staff members, too.

“The Equality and Diversity Plan 2013–2016 states that the University will continue to:

- “Ensure equality of opportunity and elimination of discrimination, harassment and victimisation of staff or students whether they are or perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) or heterosexual.
- “Support the right of individuals to choose whether they wish to be open or not about their sexual orientation at work or study.

“The above plan is implemented via a system of Equality and Diversity Priority Objectives, which includes to ‘Develop staff experience’ for all staff. There is also a system used by the University that we call Equality Analysis, to assess the impact of policies and practices on people with different protected characteristics. There is also a bullying and harassment policy which aims to help prevent harassment and victimisation. Whilst there is no support that is specific to asexual staff, *such staff are covered by the above.*” (Lancaster University, emphasis added)

Loughborough University also permits its staff members to declare ‘Other’ on the sexual orientation question of the equality of opportunity monitoring questionnaire. It, too, allows its asexual spectrum members of staff to be part of its LGBT+ group, which can make suggestions to senior management.

“The University’s LGBT+ Staff Support Group... is an inclusive group which offers support to anyone who wishes to be involved. Issues can be raised within the group and progressed and highlighted to the University via the Equality and Diversity Adviser or HR Director.

“The University also offers support to all staff through the Counselling Service and Confide [the university’s harassment reporting and advice service].” (Loughborough University)

Oxford University only recently (since January 2014) began to ask new staff members questions on sexual orientation and religion and belief in

their equal opportunities monitoring form; consequently the data they hold is limited to ‘new starters’. Nonetheless, it offers several services and groups that its asexual staff members can use.

“We do not provide services specifically targeted for asexual people, though they are most welcome to participate in groups and events badged as LGBT. The student LGBTQ Society has recently recognised this apparent omission by identifying its first ever Asexuality Rep.

“[There is] support available to staff, including:

- a. LGBT Advisory Group
- b. LGBT Staff Network
- c. First Thursday drinks at the University Club and other social events
- d. Wider Oxford Area Academic LGBT Staff Network an informal social network for all LGBT staff at Oxford University and colleges, Oxford Brookes and OUP
- e. Annual LGBT lecture and stall at Oxford Pride
- f. Identified LGB harassment advisors
- g. Confidential staff counselling”

(Oxford University)

The University of Bristol expressed that asexual members of staff are welcome in its LGBT+ and LGBTX groups; and that its policies that protects its LGBT staff also apply to asexual people.

“Although asexuality is not mentioned explicitly, the University’s LGBT+ provisions are open to all, including asexual members of staff. . .

“The University is currently finalising an LGBT+ group — the “+” encapsulates anyone who does not identify specifically as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, so this would include asexuality. Alongside this, there is an LGBTX social group which again is open to all sexual orientations. There are also ad hoc events throughout the year which may be specific to sexual orientation.



“As members of Stonewall, the University also looks at its provisions and work from an LGBT+ perspective more generally — although Stonewall do not mention asexuality specifically, the range of sexual orientations are considered in all LGBT+ or LGBTX work such as when we consider new policies, guidance and their wording.” (University of Bristol)

The University of Chichester recently changed the names of its two groups to welcome other sexual orientations and gender.

“We currently have two groups for staff in relation to sexual orientation — our Gender and LGB Equality Group (made up of staff and students) and our LGBT & Allies Staff Network Group. To be more inclusive and to recognise other sexual (and gender) identities, both staff groups will be adding a ‘+’ to their titles (the University of Chichester Students’ Union LGBT+ Society also recently added a ‘+’ to its name).” (University of Chichester)

The University of Edinburgh offers a variety of services to its asexual spectrum members of staff; its LGBT group also welcomes asexual people.

“The university provides a number of support services which staff can access if they are experiencing issues relating to their sexual orientation. These include a free confidential counselling service and the University’s Chaplaincy which welcomes staff of all faiths and none. . .

“The University also has a LGBT staff network which is open to staff of any sexual orientation The purpose of the network is to organise social events, facilitate the sharing of information and support and raise the profile of LGBT staff within and beyond the University.” (University of Edinburgh)

The University of the West of England has provided training on sexual orientation to its staff members. This helps to raise awareness and understanding between colleagues and creates a more welcoming and tolerant workplace.

“UWE is very proud of our commitment to championing equal rights for people of all sexual orientations. We have an

active group of LGBT Allies and have been named the top University in the country by Stonewall, earning 11th place in their 2015 top 100 employer index.

“We strive through many projects and communications to create an inclusive university at UWE so that staff of all sexual orientations, including those who consider themselves to be asexual, can give their best in the workplace, free from discrimination. Training on sexual orientation has been delivered to several entire departments in the last year by an external specialist. We now have a senior management level champion covering sexual orientation.” (University of the West of England)

These quotes have been picked out as examples from the responses to our Freedom of Information request. They demonstrate the good work that some universities are doing to encourage a safe and encouraging workplace for all their staff, and not just asexual people.

Other universities gave similar responses. There are many positive steps towards including asexuals in LGBT+ groups, to educate staff and students about asexuality and other sexual orientations, and to provide asexual members of staff with representation to the university itself. Many institutions asserted that their policies and guidelines that protect its lesbian, gay and bisexual members of staff would also apply to asexuals.

5 Conclusions

There are wide variations in the approaches that universities have towards their asexual staff members. Very few universities allow such individuals to declare their sexual orientation in the same way that individuals with other sexual orientations can. Indeed, there are many cases where there is no appropriate option for them to select.

Recommendation 1 In equality of opportunity monitoring forms, including an option that is appropriate for asexual individuals to select is necessary. Although ‘Other’, as an option, can be construed as ostracising, it is certainly better than there being no appropriate option at all. Ideally, there would be an “asexual spectrum” option, or the option to specify.

Creating an atmosphere where asexual individuals feel able to be themselves without fear of discrimination or judgement is not only beneficial for their well-being: it is also of benefit to the institution in the form of a happy

and productive workforce. This can be achieved in many ways, which include a space for asexual spectrum individuals to discuss the issues that affect them; a statement of protection from the institution; and adequate training that recognises the breadth of human experiences in sexual identity.

Many universities have a group that is primarily aimed to cater for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members of staff. Commonly, they are known as LGBT groups, with variations of this acronym. These spaces provide a safe space for these members of staff. These groups can help to represent asexual spectrum members of staff. Some of these groups, in recent years, have renamed themselves as “Rainbow” or “LGBT+” groups to reflect the diversity of minority gender and sexual identities.

Recommendation 2 Ensure that asexual spectrum members of staff are aware of groups that are willing to listen to and represent them. Renaming to highlight the inclusivity and welcoming of these groups is welcome; although the “+” can be viewed as dismissive, it encompasses asexuality.

Recommendation 3 Include asexuality and the asexual spectrum in equality and diversity training. This would help to create an atmosphere in which asexuals would feel less threatened to open. By sharing an understanding and awareness of the experiences of asexual people, the workplace becomes conducive to asexual employees feeling they can be themselves.

Recommendation 4 Ensure that asexual members of staff are given the same protection from bullying, harassment and discrimination *on the basis of their asexuality* as individuals with other sexual orientations. Although this is not a requirement of the Equality Act 2010, it is a concern that asexual people will not necessarily warrant protection from abuse and mistreatment due to their sexual orientation. Therefore, policy documents should state that sexual orientation is defined beyond merely “straight”, “gay/lesbian” and “bisexual”.

The recommendations listed here emerged from the practices that other institutions are already offering; therefore, it is author’s hope that they will be readily implemented elsewhere.

Notes

The author wishes to thank the institutions and individuals that responded to the Freedom of Information Act requests.

References

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Appendix

List of universities

- Aberdeen University
- Abertay University
- Aberystwyth University
- Anglia Ruskin University
- Arts University Bournemouth
- Bangor University
- Bath Spa University
- Birmingham City University



- Bishop Grosseteste University
- Bournemouth University
- Brunel University London
- Canterbury Christ Church University
- Cardiff Metropolitan University
- Cardiff University
- City University London
- Cranfield University
- De Montfort University
- Durham University
- Edinburgh Napier University
- Falmouth University
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- Glyndŵr University
- Harper Adams University
- Heriot-Watt University
- Imperial College London
- Keele University
- Kingston University
- Lancaster University
- Leeds Beckett University
- Leeds Trinity University
- Liverpool Hope University
- Liverpool John Moores University



- London Metropolitan University
- London South Bank University
- Loughborough University
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Middlesex University
- Newcastle University
- Newman University, Birmingham
- Northumbria University
- Norwich University of the Arts
- Nottingham Trent University
- Open University
- Oxford Brookes University
- Oxford University
- Plymouth University
- Queen Margaret University Edinburgh
- Queen's University Belfast
- Royal Agricultural University
- Royal College of Art
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Southampton Solent University
- St Mary's University
- Staffordshire University
- Swansea University
- Teesside University



- The Robert Gordon University
- The University of Manchester
- The University of Sheffield
- The University of Warwick
- The University of Winchester
- Ulster University
- University Centre at Blackburn College
- University College Birmingham
- University of Bath
- University of Bedfordshire
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bolton
- University of Bradford
- University of Brighton
- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- University of Central Lancashire
- University of Chester
- University of Chichester
- University of Cumbria
- University of Derby
- University of Dundee
- University of East Anglia
- University of East London



- University of Edinburgh
- University of Essex
- University of Exeter
- University of Glasgow
- University of Gloucestershire
- University of Greenwich
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Huddersfield
- University of Hull
- University of Kent
- University of Leeds
- University of Leicester
- University of Lincoln
- University of Liverpool
- University of London
- University of Northampton
- University of Nottingham
- University of Portsmouth
- University of Reading
- University of Roehampton
- University of Salford
- University of South Wales
- University of St Andrews
- University of St Mark and St John

- University of Stirling
- University of Strathclyde
- University of Sunderland
- University of Surrey
- University of Sussex
- University of the Arts London
- University of the Creative Arts
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- University of the West of England
- University of the West of Scotland
- University of Wales Trinity Saint David
- University of West London
- University of Westminster
- University of Wolverhampton
- University of Worcester
- University of York
- York St John University
- Coventry University*
- Aston University*
- Bucks New University*
- Edge Hill University*
- University of Southampton*

*These institutions have not responded to our Freedom of Information request as of 18th October 2015.