



Whose Rainbow?

The gap between symbols and action for LGBTQIA+ staff and students in Higher Education

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Rainbows as tokenism



‘I’ve been asked to co-deliver [staff development training] with a colleague who’s straight. I’d been really trying to make the point that you can’t just say we’re an inclusive space and that be enough. You have to name what you’re doing and there has to be something concrete that sits behind that statement. Then my colleague just starts going ‘you know they must be inclusive because they’ve got rainbows up’. And I’m like, that’s not it.’ (Bethan)

Rainbows as tokenism



‘I think at the moment being rainbow-friendly is a bit more cool – that’s not the right word, but it’s more... they seem to be doing it more, because I reckon they think it gets them more brownie points. The rainbow activism is much more noticed in terms of press or whatever than any disability activism, because [disability activism’s] not glamorous enough. Especially from the start of the pandemic – all these companies were suddenly like, oh yeah sure you can work from home, it’s perfectly fine. We trust you to do your job. And every disabled person ever is like, I’ve been asking for this for the last five years and you just said – oh, ‘needs of the business’. We can’t do it.’ (Aarto)

Rainbows as tokenism



‘There isn’t so much [a symbol of inclusion for disability]. Purple is the colour, isn’t it, but I don’t think that’s well understood outside disability communities and disability activism. I think we’d all challenge the idea of the wheelchair symbol as the symbol for inclusion there. I was also thinking – what is it about queerness that has such specific signifiers in a way that other minority groups may not have? I haven’t really tested that thought but there’s something – yes, there’s something about the rainbow and how easy that is to replicate and recognise and reproduce.’ (Bethan)

Rainbows as tokenism



‘I’ve grown increasingly cynical as I’ve gone through my university career, and perhaps now realise that when the university publishes things with Pride flags on, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re LGBT-inclusive, because, you know, actions speak louder than symbols. If you’re not providing the space for people to be able to access toilets safely, then you can’t really say that you’re inclusive of everyone’s gender and sexuality.’ (Hannah)

Rainbows as tokenism



‘I’m bi, so I quite often feel that I don’t really fit in, in a lot of the more mainstream queer spaces. So my relationship with the rainbow flag is a little bit... it’s there, and I appreciate what it stands for, but I don’t know if I identify with it personally. I don’t feel it particularly identifies me. I tend to associate it with crowds and Pride events where I’ve not really felt comfortable – not just because of my bisexuality but also because of my disability and because I don’t like crowds. So it stands for something that I know people like me are theoretically welcome at but I don’t really feel particularly welcome myself. (Nicole)



Worse than tokenism

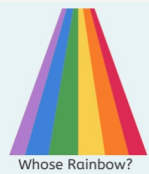
'I think what [HE EDI schemes] are probably trying to do is give enough leeway that you can say we're inclusive without really changing anything. So, just giving enough that you're more immune to criticism – well, we are Stonewall-accredited. I've had that – we are disability confident, we don't discriminate against people. And it's actually used against you when there is a specific issue, particularly when it is...because then it individualises that issue. Institutionally we're obviously great, so it must be an individual issue.' (Ida)

Worse than tokenism



‘I feel like sometimes the Pride flag, and queer people as an extension, has become something like that – that we are objectified in that way. So if people support us, it becomes more about them and how woke they are. And we are just a body which they use to express that.’ (Charlie)

Better than nothing



‘There is, particularly in the Higher Education sector, now more of an aggressive pushback against even fairly basic tokens of LGBT inclusivity – I feel like I have to stand up for even the more bland rainbow stuff on the basis that it’s better than nothing. If we’re getting to the stage where people are actively petitioning universities to take rainbow stuff down, to not signal LGBT inclusivity, I kind of feel I have to back it and have to back the Stonewall lists and all the rest of it, even though I have some critiques, because the other angle on it is even less to my tastes. So, it gets quite convoluted in terms of how you feel about it. I guess in summary I’d say I think rainbows are quite a limited symbol. I think sometimes they’re quite bland and not necessarily very much, but on the other hand there are a lot of contexts still where they’re better than nothing.’ (Thomas)

Better than nothing



‘on the 1st of July I got a reply to an email from someone in the HR of my institution telling me to take the rainbow logo out of my email signature because it was not Pride month anymore. That just really told me what that was all about.... That this was all for show. During June only – only June! – they were using this rainbow logo. And all year round they were undermining trans staff, they were instituting transphobic policies, they were supporting transphobic speech on campus.’



‘So what I would like to see from inclusion efforts in the university, is I’d like to see some more joined-up thinking and solidarity across different networks of marginalised persons. [...] I think we want to work more closely with our black students and representatives and staff. We want to work with more of the anti-racist work that’s going on at the university. We want to hold hands with the new disabled staff network. We want to create a larger base of people who are impacted by this kind of divisive right-wing garbage. Because really at the end of the day there’s more of us who are fucked off about being affected by this than there are people doing it. And I think it’s just a simple issue that they can like throw money-weight but they can’t necessarily throw person-weight. That’s what I’d like to see. I see the maltreatment of trans people in the university. I’ve seen it first-hand. I’ve seen the maltreatment of more difficult-to-swallow queers around the university, and I think hmmm, it’s always the ones on the edges that fall off first, isn’t it. Makes it an all-of-us issue.’ (Nathan)