

Pushing the Boundaries: Setting up a Support Network for LGBT Staff in the Workplace

Seminar, 14 March 2009, University College Cork

Summary Report on seminar for UCC Equality Committee (23 April 2009)

Attendance

The seminar *Pushing the Boundaries* held at UCC on 14 March 2009 was attended by **29 people**, who represented:

- **LGBT staff** in *UCC, DCU, UCD, TCD, UL* and *NUIG*
- Members of the university Equality Network, made up of **equality officers** from *UCC, DCU, UCD, TCD* and *UL*
- **LGBT organisations** in Ireland (*GLEN, BelongTo* and *Labour LGBT*)
- **Trade unions** working on LGBT equality issues (*INTO* and *SIPTU*)

Objectives:

- ❖ To establish a learning network for equality officers to support LGBT staff working in higher education in Ireland
- ❖ To provide an opportunity for LGBT staff to discuss the role and function of a network
- ❖ To examine how best to build an LGBT staff network by learning from the experience of networks in the private sector, in the LGBT community and in secondary level education in Ireland

Conclusions

The seminar highlighted the importance of:

- the **visibility** of LGBT staff
- the need for organisations to recognise the **value of equality** for LGBT staff
- establishing **LGBT networks**
- having **senior level support** for LGBT equality
 - this means that the needs, experiences and rights of LGBT are more likely to be met.

This added-value can be seen in those companies and organisations that have already established LGBT networks and the impact that this has on rights and visibility in the workplace.

The seminar found that **discrimination against LGBT people can be subtle**. There is still homophobia, isolation and invisibility in the workplace and the seminar identified the importance of:

- **networking**
- workplace **equality policies**
- creating an **inclusive working environment**
- enabling LGBT people to be more **confidence in coming out**.

In the universities **invisibility can affect working conditions** and opportunities for promotion.

In schools and the youth service there are problems of visibility and LGBT teachers in particular are prevented from being role models for young people.

Even when organisations / companies have introduced networks and policies a fear of coming out can persist, and in some cases there may not be a knowledge of these policies.

The seminar found that LGBT networks in two companies (*Google* and *EMC*), the *BelongTo* network, the *Labour LGBT* group and the *INTO LGBT* group had had a **positive impact on promoting visibility and rights** for LGBT people.

In *UCC* the LGBT staff network has helped to **enhance visibility and can give both protection and recognition of LGBT equality issues**.

In addition, **the university can act as a promoter of rights** of LGBT people, for example, through training of social workers, teachers and youth workers.

The conclusions of the seminar are that:

- there is a wide **support for a thriving LGBT network** within and between the universities
 - that this should be supported and championed by the **university equality officers**
- It is critically important to gain senior level commitment so that LGBT equality runs through **all levels of the organisation**.
 - this university commitment can also help to lever **resources**.

The participants at **the seminar agreed** that a **follow up meeting, focussed on a university LGBT network, should be organised in Cork in order to progress a national LGBT university staff network that is supported and championed by the university equality officers**.

Seminar evaluation

Participants gave very positive feedback on the seminar, stating that the seminar has been interesting, informative and well-organised. Participants stated the importance of having a follow-up seminar. Evaluation forms were also completed by 18 participants. This shows that participants rated the different aspects of the seminar as excellent in most cases, followed by very good or good, on the evaluation scores. (There were no scores on aspects of the seminar that were fair or that needed improvement).

Report

A second workshop of the *IUA Equality Network* on disability and gender will take place shortly and **a full report will be produced and circulated** on both seminars subsequently.

[**Source:** Cathal Kerrigan / Co-chair / UCC LGBT Staff Network]