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Liveability, environment and policy: Reflections on trans student experience of entering UK higher education

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Abstract
This article examines the intersection of lived experience and equality policy in UK Higher Education (HE), focusing on trans students' experiences of planning for and applying to University. The research is based on participatory research with an lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning (LGBTQ+) youth project in Brighton, UK. We frame the relationship between trans identities and equalities in education in terms of liveability. The article contributes to gender and education research by foregrounding the experience of trans students on the cusp of entering HE, illustrating how they navigate challenges around environment, bureaucracy and policy.

Keywords
Transgender, LGBTQ+, equality, higher education, gender, liveability

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Introduction

This article examines barriers that transgender students face when navigating entry into higher education (HE) in the UK.[1] It contributes to empirical research by foregrounding trans students' lived experience and by articulating these findings through the lens of liveability. It demonstrates that the lived experience of the university environment and its policies intersect as discriminatory factors. Through these findings, we encourage HE practitioners to reflect on students' lived experiences, identify intentional and unintentional discriminatory practices, and centre marginalised student experiences when conducting equality work.

The research is situated in relation to resistances to gender and sexual rights in the UK during the original research period in 2018, and since. UK universities are 'imagined as liberal spaces' (Valentine et al., 2009, 9) implying tolerance towards gender and sexuality diversity. However, from the students' point of view this was put into question due to perceived contradictions in how the sector responded to equalities legislation around gender and sexuality. The 2004 Gender Recognition Act (GRA)[2] established the process through which trans people could receive legal recognition in the UK for the gender with which they identify. By 2018, these processes were considered outdated and bureaucratic (Hines, 2013), and consultation began regarding reform.[3] This consultation precipitated a backlash against both the GRA reform proposals and the UK Equality Act of 2010, which includes gender reassignment as a protected characteristic[4]. During this period, some UK universities became sites where trans rights were contested. Although this only occurred in a few places, media coverage gave these examples disproportionate visibility. In 2020, the UK government proposed a Higher Education (HE) Freedom of Speech Bill, driven in part to protect perceived threats to this discourse. During the same period, from 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) emerged as the new sector regulator for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the UK. It is charged with ensuring that HEI providers are compliant with legislation, including the Equality Act, and Freedom of Speech obligations, as well as a primary duty to protect students' interests.

We conducted our research in 2018 and engaged with a group of LGBTQ+ young people who were considering or had recently entered HE. We collaborated with this group via workshops that culminated in a set of orientation days at two universities, involving creative film production workshops. We conducted subsequent interviews with three of the participants and two HE staff. This article focuses on the experiences of the trans participants in this research. From this data, we have built a case study that identifies and illustrates the range of factors that converge as challenges for trans students entering and studying within HE. These factors include past educational experience, the university environment and location, and the policies that students encounter throughout their educational journey. Elaborating on Susan Marine's (2017) argument that particular junctures in the student journey reveal institutional processes of marginalisation that impact students' choices, we seek to better understand trans students' perspectives on the barriers to entering and thriving within HE and the strategies they employ to overcome or mitigate disadvantages.

Our research converged around the theme of liveability, which we analyse in relation to environment and policy. We break liveability down to these two core aspects to analyse trans students' lived experience within the built environment and to identify the ways in which policy mediates or impacts the students' relationship to this environment. We take liveability from Judith Butler's work on precarity (2004, 2006), where she posits that 'when we ask what makes a life liveable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life' (2004, 39). Butler considers the conditions that govern what lives are recognised as eligible for rights and support to sustain them, through the concepts of precarity, grievability and liveability. A recognizable subject, she argues, lives a life:

> worth sheltering and whose life, when lost, would be worthy of mourning. Precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable. And in this way, precarity is a rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless (2009, xii-xiii).

These concepts can be extrapolated, beyond situations of extreme vulnerability, to demonstrate how in ordinary life, marginalised subjects participate in an ongoing 'negotiation with forms of power that condition whose lives will be more liveable, and whose lives will be less so, if not fully un-liveable' (2009, xi). This conceptual framework allows us to explore LGBTQ+ equalities issues beyond legislation or policy by mobilising liveability as the space between 'surviving' and 'living' (Browne et al., 2021, 47). We extrapolate the concept of liveability to theorise how trans students assess living and working conditions when choosing a university, moving through enrolment, and navigating their programme of study.

Literatures of LGBTQ+ equity in education

Research demonstrates that LGBTQ+ young people risk discrimination in education (Formby 2013; Kosciw et al., 2013, Harris et al. 2021) and questions about support for trans and gender diverese students are debated and contested in the literature. Davy and Cordoba conclude that schools' support for trans students tends to be 'in an ad hoc and reactive way' and that schools in the UK often lack 'clear procedures and strategies' (2020, 364). However, notably, there are trans and non-binary inclusive policies in place in many UK universities, and HE providers are mandated by the sector regulator, the Office for Students, to uphold inclusion in relation to the Equality Act (Mckendry and Lawrence, 2020).

However, the literature on LGBTQ+ equity in education attends less to 'consequences that a hostile climate may have on LGBT students' access to education and ability to learn' (Formby 2013, 46). An unsafe school environment causing poor attainment, increased absenteeism, or other forms of disengagement, negatively impacts access to both secondary and higher education. To better understand trans students' experiences entering UK HE, staff and researchers must consider their whole educational journey rather than focus separately on school or University (Beemyn 2020). For example, if a trans student

experiences discrimination or bullying at school or FE college (post-secondary school education), they could perceive HE negatively because it could prolong or exacerbate the same experience (Singh et al., 2013). For others, HE could be thought of as an opportunity to escape these environments and establish new social contexts in a different location (Taulke-Johnson 2010). To reflect the importance of a more comprehensive approach, this article focuses on the period both before and after entering HE, also addressing the lack of research on trans students' decisions when entering HE (Lange et al., 2021).

Furthermore, research about LGBTQ+ students' lived *experiences of HE* is still relatively limited (Ellis 2008; Formby 2015). The literature reflects students' persistent concerns about social exclusion (Waling and Roffee 2018), personal safety (Tetreault et al., 2013) and lack of LGBTQ+ visibility on campus. This literature is also suggestive of the limited effectiveness of the UK HE equality agenda in terms of the experience of LGBTQ+ students (Ellis 2008) who still encounter high levels of discrimination, exclusion and hostility. We draw on this research to specifically further research on trans students' experiences.

A growing number of studies focus on trans students (Beemyn 2005, 2020; Garvey et al., 2019; Lange et al., 2021; McBride 2020; Nicolazzo and Marine 2015; Pryor et al., 2016; Seelman 2014). This is important because 'trans* individuals and communities have been systematically excluded from full participation in post-secondary education' (Marine 2017, 218) impacting their economic marginalisation, health, and civic participation. Transgender students and cisgender LGB students differently experience discrimination (Bachman and Gooch 2018), precarity (Valentine et al., 2009) and hostility on campus (Legg et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2013). Illustrating trans students' precarity, Valentine et al. (2009) note that over a third of trans students in their survey (34.8%) feared losing financial support from parents, which is a key enabling factor to enter HE in the UK, if they disclosed their trans identity. UK research by the NUS (2014) also illustrates that over half (51%) of trans-identifying respondents have seriously considered discontinuing their course due to minority stress intersecting with complex factors such as lack of familial support and financial and academic concerns (Goldberg et al., 2019). In other words, the university climate is important because it 'directly affects academic experiences and outcomes' (Garvey et al., 2019, 230). This climate includes the on- or off-campus residential settings. Student accommodation often entails cultural and systemic genderism (i.e. the investment in and enforcement of a binary and exclusionary definition of gender underpinning the discrimination of non-conforming individuals), which underpins many trans students' challenges (Bilodeau 2009; Nicolazzo and Marine 2015; Pryor et al., 2016). Also, in relation to the university climate, and student experience, Nanney and Brunsma (2017, 164) call for more research to contest 'the organizational logic and administrative governance' of institutions that affect 'the very livelihood' of trans students, pointing to gaps around the intersection of lived experience and policy that we address. In doing so we also foreground trans students' perspectives, thus addressing a gap in the literature on 'the strategies that trans students themselves employ in order to navigate higher education' (Singh et al., 2013, 212).

Conceptual framework

In this article, we draw on Butler's argument that liveable lives are those that are supported in society (economically, socially and politically), marking a difference between those lives that are 'eligible for rights' and those that are not (Lloyd 2015, 178) to explore an ontological precarity that our trans participants experience in everyday life. Liveability relates to whether a person encounters general affirmation or denial in everyday practices, from access to housing, clothing, and food choices; recognition of kinship relations; acceptance and safety in everyday situations. Butler argues, precarity is linked to gender norms, meaning that those who transgress cisgender norms, are at increased risk for harassment and discrimination (2009). A liveable life, as Butler (2006) conceptualises it in relation to gendered bodies, is contingent on being recognisable and recognised by others. In a context of claims to a reality in which trans lives are de-legitimised, the question of liveability is important both in terms of accounting for experience and as an analytical resource. Drawing on Browne et al. who mobilise Butler's (2006) framework of liveability and precarity, to ask, 'what makes lives liveable for LGBTQ+ people' (2017, 1388), we examine everyday experiences for trans students and demonstrate how policies in HE intersect unevenly.

Methodology

This article is based on research conducted as part of a participatory project exploring young LGBTQ+ people's perceptions of HE and education options beyond school. The research team comprised two white cisgender queer identifying researchers from both UK and international academic backgrounds and a white non-binary queer identifying contributor from a US academic background. The researchers regularly participate in volunteer community youth work and have a longstanding interest in youth empowerment, which has influenced the research design.

We recruited participants through a local community organisation that provides support for LGBTQ+ youth. We also approached HE staff in relevant administrative roles for interviews through our staff networks. We engaged with 30 participants overall. Across the project, activities with young people included creative workshops, the co-creation of a short film, and follow up in-depth interviews with three students who were in the process of applying to HE or held an offer but were yet to start their degree (16–25 years). We also conducted key informant interviews with two staff members involved in equalities work in HE.[5] Approval from the supporting University's Cross School Ethics Committee was obtained for this study. We provided the young people recruited via the partner organisation with information about the research prior to participating, and they had the opportunity to discuss any aspects of it with a researcher. We sought written and oral consent for the interviews, and we included a provision for youth participants to opt in or out of different activities across the project to optimise flexibility and inclusivity. We provided interviewees with transcripts of their interviews to optionally amend.

Young people from the LGBTQ youth organisation were invited to participate in a project about LGBTQ+ people and access to education. The participants were invited to

filmmaking workshops aimed at jointly producing a film. The young people came up with the ideas for the film content and format. The challenges for trans students emerged as a strong theme across the film and the interviews, and it is therefore the focus of this article.

Central to our approach were the creative workshops, and the media production days on campus, during which six young people collaboratively created the short film.[6] These offered participants an opportunity to drive script design, identify the agenda, and provided an orientation to media production. We chose this approach to increase the involvement of the young people via activities they co-designed. This aligns with core principles of participatory action research (PAR) (Wadsworth 1998), to engage participants as co-producers of knowledge. The young people wanted to provide an applicant's perspective for staff in HE in a discussion on 'what makes an LGBTQ-friendly campus'. They collaboratively developed a concept for a journalistic style short film, recording peer interviews, selecting visual materials, and editing in post-production. Through their intent to define a safe and welcoming educational space for themselves, we see them echoing Butler's theories of liveability, specifically in relation to the university environment and policy.

After the filmmaking sessions, we conducted in-depth semi structured interviews with three individuals from the project. Interviews focused on their experiences of applying to and entering HE; their current experiences and plans and hopes for university life. For the purpose of this article, we developed one of the participant interviews together with the film as a case study. The case study combines the film, expressing an amalgamation of the young people's collective voice, with an individual interview that foregrounds the more personal experience of one participant, Alex (pseudonym). Alex (he/him) is a transgender young person in his late teens who, at the point of interview, was choosing a degree programme. He had just accepted a place at a university to begin an Arts and Drama degree within the next academic year, pursuing strongly felt career ambitions. As an out trans student at his current college Alex has experienced negative treatment by some staff. He was looking forward to starting his course but felt ambivalent about leaving his local peer support network.

Liveability operates as the central theme of this research, and we organise our findings around the two aspects of lived campus environment and lived university bureaucracy and policy. We begin each section of the following discussion by establishing the central issues through an analysis of the young peoples' film, and then we examine specific responses to these issues through the case study of Alex's interview. Our analysis, produced jointly and discursively by the authors, is exploratory, reflexive, and framed by a queer feminist theoretical approach. Analysis of the film and the interviews mapped both enabling factors, challenges and students' strategies to navigate entering HE. Presenting the findings as a case study allows us to capture the nuances and complexities of intersecting factors. Focusing on one trans student's experience in combination with the collective voice of the film allowed us to delve into a particular moment for an individual young person as they reflected on their past experience as well as their future expectations and aspirations when entering HE. Our approach concentrates on a particular juncture in the educational journey, and whilst understanding students' choices and experiences as a continuum, the research has not set out to collect comprehensive life stories. We note that

this study is small scale but generative (see Mazetti 2018 for a similar approach), particularly in our aim to capture the often nebulous, complex, and paradoxical nature of lived experience, whilst, following Marine (2017), offering a critique of institutionalised practice.

Liveability and the university Environment

Young LGBTQ+ people who are applying to and preparing for university face many questions. Across the data that we collected from the film and interview, we identified concerns about campus facilities (i.e. toilets), connection with LGBTQ+ community, and housing, along with associated issues of safety and isolation. Heteronormative, gendered, classed, and raced normative values are part of the institutional fabric of universities (Asquith et al., 2019). These values are evident in the built environment (Beemyn 2005), as we discuss in this section, as well as in governing policies, as we discuss in the following section. Our case study contributes to existing literature by foregrounding both collective and individual student perspectives through film and interview analysis respectively.

Liveability and the university Environment: film analysis

In its concern with campus facilities, the film emphasises the importance of trans students' environments. It focuses specifically on gender neutral toilets and LGBTQ+ groups. We evaluate these elements theoretically and practically.

The film begins with a question about toilets, clarifying that universities can designate both 'gender neutral and segregated' versions to cater to the varied needs of their public. Access to gender inclusive toilets on campus is a practical, life-limiting issue in the everyday lives of gender non-conforming people (Doan 2010). The 2014 NUS UK report highlighted the lack of gender-neutral toilets on campus as a major issue (Formby 2017). Facilities relate to basic freedom of movement, well-being, and constitute a dimension of the institution's culture. Provision of gender-neutral toilets not only relates to the question of liveability as a basic human need, it also allows or denies recognition of different gendered bodies.

Butler (2006, XVIII) observes, 'it is possible to see how dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended'. In establishing gender neutral toilets, universities can physically disrupt the dominant representation of bathroom signs and work to deconstruct the gender binary that they reify within the psyche of the public sphere. The ideology of the built environment (Slater et al., 2018) raises critical ontological issues about a gender non-conforming person's ability to exist and function in a space; the designation of gender-neutral toilets introduces a possibility for existence, functioning and ultimately a life that was previously erased by dominant classifying systems.

Once universities publicly acknowledge trans students, they can expand 'the boundaries that constitute what will and will not appear within public life' of the campus as a response (Butler 2006). Reflecting the research on the correlation between campus

gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and student well-being (Kosciw et al., 2013), the film emphasizes the importance of campus LGBTQ+ groups. It names support, guidance, and an escape from trans- and homophobic environments as potential benefits. We can understand these as functions that shelter and make lives less precarious, in Butler's sense. Operating within the larger university public, these groups offer a safe space to trans students and declare the existence of these students within the domain of public appearance. Both practically and symbolically, gender neutral toilets and LGBTQ+ groups contribute to the definition of a liveable university environment. The aspect of liveability that pertains to the environment is echoed in the interview with Alex.

Liveability and the university Environment: interview analysis

In the interview, Alex reiterates the importance of gender neutral toilets, expands on the necessity of LGBTQ+ community, and draws attention to the issues surrounding university student housing.

As the film indicates, gender neutral toilets are a practical concern that is important for the health of trans people. However, some institutions' pragmatic 'solution' of signposting toilets designed for wheelchair users, in lieu of gender inclusive facilities, was seen as an institutional refusal to recognise trans identities. Whilst these are intersecting identities for some individuals, Alex points to an institutional disrespect for both groups:

> …gender neutral toilets is something that should happen and it shouldn't be disabled toilets, that's not ok at all for disabled people or for trans people.

In the UK, gender segregated spaces are often at the heart of transphobic imaginaries as contested spaces (Jones and Slater 2020). Withholding the option to use toilets is an everyday act of aggression against trans people and an indicator of the precarity of trans rights (and of institutional power). Whilst Alex's point is that access to toilets is a reasonable baseline expectation for any student, the universities involved in this study only changed toilet signage after activist campaigns had forced the issue. Institutional power can be harnessed to mobilise sector change, through responses to student experience issues. In addition to considering gender neutral toilets, Alex undertook a significant amount of research into the culture of trans inclusion in and around universities. His research included: living accommodation and toilet facilities; LGBTQ+ student societies; student union provision; mental health services, and anti-bullying policies. It is important to register the amount of detailed and pro-active research involved. Our findings in this respect augment Taulke-Johnson's (2010) conclusion that LGBTQ+ students base university choices upon more than academic concerns and Lange et al.'s (2021) findings that trans students seek to ascertain a HE institution's 'commitment to transgender inclusion' through research. For example, Alex's research into his choice of university raised some real concerns about where it was located.

> …so it's not known for being the best place for trans people, but for me the course and the actual […] school itself is worth putting myself out there.

I did some research in terms of just the [geographical] area to see if there was anything similar to Allsorts [youth project in Brighton], there isn't.

He weighed the safety concerns and lifestyle changes involved in moving from a city with a very visible LGBTQ+ community to a small-town setting against the opportunity to pursue his desired career. After careful deliberation, his career aspirations overrode his apprehension and he decided to apply for a place on the course. To Alex, LGBTQ+ student groups and support services, notably mental health services, indicated liveability potential and informed his decision about applying to a particular university.

Alex also spoke of his considerations around student housing. The majority of UK undergraduate students live in shared accommodation. Gender-inclusive student housing is still relatively rare, and gaining access often involves invasive and demanding bureaucratic processes (Nicolazzo and Maine 2015). Shared accommodation with little control over housemate options presented an area of concern for Alex who had spent time thinking through different potential risk scenarios (e.g. transphobic bullying or harassment) and ways to avoid or mitigate these. For this reason, access to university-run accommodation was important for him to feel safe.

Alex explained that he would prefer university accommodation over the private housing sector: 'it feels a lot less risky than trying to rent privately'. He saw the university as more accountable for mitigating discrimination than private sector housing. In this example, the institution becomes potentially protective. We argue that provision of accommodation to underrepresented groups can be part of widening participation (WP) strategies[7], but it is often overlooked. Universities can support access for students by providing flexible housing options and reduce the bureaucratic burden. They must forge channels for support and mechanisms for dealing with discrimination or bullying that might occur in shared student accommodation. Issues around accommodation cannot effectively be addressed in isolation; they require a 'radical reconfiguration of institutional norms and practices that further marginalize those who are least well served' across the sector (Marine 2017, 220).

Alex significantly researched these factors through multiple sources and site visits. His recent experiences of encountering transphobia from teachers who often challenged his gender (ontology), is an experience shared by many trans youth (Jenzen, 2017). However, receiving support from a youth service trans advocacy worker to report a case of discrimination, made him attuned to assessing both the liveability of the place and the potential recourse to equality policies. The necessity for trans students to build their own safety and support mechanisms further relates to the aspect of liveability in relation to bureaucracy and policy.

Liveability and university policy

This section focuses on how entering HE adds to the bureaucracy of trans students' everyday lives, often causing stress and negatively impacting student experience and well-being. By engaging the liveability aspect of policy, this section teases out the fissures between the institutional organisational structures and how trans students experience these. It captures the nebulous nature of persistent challenges around life administration

relating to a person's (gender) identity. The filmmakers identified concerns around identification documentation and anti-bullying policies and training. Relatedly, Alex illustrated his experiences with these concerns and further discussed the labour involved in self-advocating in the face of discrimination when policy is not embedded. HE involves complex administrative processes for all students. However, for trans youth, administrative procedures can be discriminatory, create risk, and undermine control. In this section, we begin by theoretically establishing these concerns and grounding them in an analysis of the film. We then draw on our interview with Alex to examine in-depth a trans student's process of navigating university bureaucracy and policy.

Liveability and university policy: film analysis

The bulk of the film's recommendations address university bureaucracy and policy. These are the mechanisms that both interpret and implement state policy within the environment of the university and independently delineate the regulations within this environment. They shape the conditions of liveability.

In describing the forces that authorise speech and action within the political realm, Butler claims, 'the limits of the sayable, the limits of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors' (Butler 2006, xvii). The university can recognise trans subjects as viable actors by endorsing the inclusion of students' preferred names and pronouns on ID cards and other official documents. It 'accepts' them, as the film suggests, and gives them the space to enact change within the university public. By connecting liveability to gendered social norms and to infrastructures like these, Butler helps us see that the delineation between liveable and 'unliveable lives', takes place through exclusionary processes, including everyday bureaucracy, confirming or denying marginalised political or legal lives.

The film asserts that university bullying policies should be designed to prevent students from finding themselves in a situation where they must 'put up with abuse'. More broadly, these regulations protect the speech, actions, and existence of trans actors; as these students are more likely than their cisgender peers to be subjected to bullying or hate crimes, such policies seek to literally preserve lives (Brown and Walters 2016).

Liveability and university policy: interview analysis

Echoing the concerns addressed by the filmmakers, Alex discussed his own journey with college bureaucracy and policy. Specifically, he spoke about his experiences with name change procedures, the emotional labour of educating others, bureucratic restrictions and discrimination, the disorientation between written and lived policy, the symbolic work policy does, and his decision to enter HE despite these barriers. While we forefront Alex's testimony in this section, we also draw on interviews with administrators to develop a more holistic representation of the systems that trans students encounter when entering and experiencing HE.

Name changes, identity disclosure negotiation, and parental support assumptions are complicated. For example, Alex's FE college had forced him to come out to his parents at an uncomfortable time:

> …they were quite insistent that I had to come out to my parents before my name was changed there [at college] so they kind of forced that to happen when I wasn't quite ready for that.

Questions about name changing, dead naming (using a person's birth name against their wish), and mechanisms for recognition are interpreted differently at local levels. Some institutions regard name changes as a matter for legal documentation, whilst others allow self-identification. This is confusing and creates additional work as young people often have to provide the expertise to navigate these systems. Alex's experiences of encountering what he saw as ignorance and malice, had prompted him to educate and remind staff about casual transphobic language's impact on trans students in the classroom. Alex engaged in this form of everyday activism to carve a liveable space for himself, but also because he imagined it would benefit other trans students, yet he found it exhausting, and was unsure about how this would play out in a higher education context.

Students may encounter different name recognition interpretations depending on who they are dealing with within the University. In our interviews, an equalities manager in HE discussed the processes she developed to reduce barriers. She confirms that this process often involves inventing work-around solutions to respond to immediate needs in the face of fairly inflexible systems.

> For example […] you can only have your official name on your student record printed on your uni [university] card, that you take to get into buildings and things. […] However, trans and non-binary students have the right to change their uni card even if they haven't changed passport or driving licence, so we have worked around this so students can change their name except on the degree certificate (Joanna, Student Equalities Manager at UK HE institution).

Insisting on the use of an 'official name' in such circumstances is also a form of discrimination. Name change procedures do not occur only once but at many stages throughout trans students' HE experiences. At each of these stages, trans students potentially encounter ignorance, opposition, or discrimination.

UK institutions have limited resources and face practical questions about operationalising policy. The following example illustrates how a staff member tried to make graduation ceremonies accessible. They had developed a work-around for students who would otherwise not attend a graduation ceremony to avoid having their dead name disclosed:

> Because a degree certificate is a formal document it does need to be in the student's official name, however we can look at the graduation ceremony, if they don't want that name read out then we can use another name (Joanna).

Whilst demonstrating possibilities for inclusion, these negotiations rely on the good will of people working with these systems and expressing alternatives to students. They also rely on the social and cultural capital of particular students to have confidence, time and energy to drive this, which creates a situation that arguably furthers intersecting inequalities (Bachmann and Gooch, 2018).

Dealing with university bureaucracy involves high levels of emotional labour for trans youth, particularly when they must challenge the implied message that they are asking for exceptional treatment. Alex often had to become the 'educator' in these processes. He comments:

> I think universities need to be very aware of what the law is around trans people […] I am entitled to those things and they need to be aware that every trans person is entitled to being treated that way.

When universities fail to implement policy, trans students experience the consequences and often must educate others, sometimes risking further discrimination in doing so. This responsibility, in Butler's sense, not only speaks to trans students' vulnerability, but requires them to claim their rights by engendering their vulnerability.

Direct discrimination, implied challenge, and everyday experiences impact access to HE. Some lives encounter restrictions more than others, and the burden of identity proof is stressful and not always possible. These restrictive experiences arise throughout the whole educational journey. Marine (2017) specifically focuses on three critical junctures in trans students' path to HE; she notes that they experience genderism in educational guidance, application processes, and the move to the University. Alex's experiences of micro-aggression and not being recognised illustrates this:

> I think if a young person is stressed out because of […] them not being able to wear what they feel like, or is comfortable, or people being called the right thing, or too much fuss being made over toilets, […] they will get distracted by that sort of stuff and it puts them at a huge disadvantage to non-LGBT young people, and that's something that isn't really addressed […]. They are discriminated against through red tape as well as kind of people's opinions.

The labour and the discriminatory power of these experiences are rarely acknowledged. The quote speaks to the burden of mobilising against both formal and informal forms of oppression, thus directing students' energies away from coursework and reminding them of their precarious status as young trans people. Here, we have emphasised the pressures of negotiation, the skills and expertise needed, and the emotional labour and resilience required (Singh et al., 2013). Universities have the opportunity to positively intervene and improve in these areas.

The UK 2010 Equality Act established, sexual orientation, sex and gender reassignment as protected characteristics. However, young trans people experience disorientation in relation to policy. Marine (2017) and Mazetti (2018) also identify this experience in their research. Disorientation caused by an empty, or, occasionally, cynical adoption of policy cannot be raised because of a prevailing narrative that the issues have

already been addressed. Consequently, individuals internalise the idea that *they*, not systems or environments, are sites of responsibility. Such conditions can exacerbate the very issues that the policy aimed to address. Alex's FE college had a trans inclusive policy, publicly proclaimed by posters in the corridors, yet when he came out, his experience clearly differed. He noted not only the gap between the policy on paper and the staff's transphobic treatment, but the blatant oversight of this incongruity, illustrated by the following image: 'they had the posters up right outside the office where they tried to convince me that I was a lesbian yeah [laughs]'.

Bullying policies and experiences of bullying provide an example of living relationships to policy. Personal safety was at the forefront for Alex, as illustrated in our discussion around university housing and environment. However, in addition to experiencing more bullying, trans youth also feel unprotected by institutions should they report such incidents (Brown and Walters 2016). The Stonewall University Report (Bachmann and Gooch 2018) demonstrates that gender and socio-economic factors impact LGBTQ+ students' confidence in institutional support. Within this group, women (both cisgender and trans) and non-binary students are less likely to report bullying, and students from lower income households are almost 10% less likely to report bullying compared to those from higher income households (2018, 10). Alex's experience again illustrates the gap between policy and lived experience:

> I went to three schools and none of them actually did anything with their anti-bullying policy. They just said oh we have this because it is legally what we have to do and [I think] they need to take a harder stance, in general for LGBT kids.

Instead of protecting trans students, unenforced bullying policies potentially subject them to further harm or duress.

Gender inclusivity cannot be limited to administrative policies and/or the curriculum but needs to be integrated across all aspects of the educational experience. For example, in a context with an explicit inclusion policy, Alex experienced negative career advice, which was both hard to report and had a strong impact on how he thought about university:

> I had quite a few different tutors tell me 'there isn't really any career for you as a transgender actor, apart from maybe like […] weird fringe theatre stuff. […] It put a lot of ideas in my head about how uni [university] might be or drama school might be, or how the theatre industry in general might be towards me as a trans person.

Such informal 'careers advice' clearly reiterates a legacy of genderism, which Marine (2017) has identified in career and college guidance. Formby (2017) also identifies careers services as a facility where trans students may be particularly disadvantaged. Staff may lack awareness around issues such as how a name change may complicate educational and employment history records. As a consequence, students may have very low expectations of such services, and there is a high risk they will self-exclude.

Given his concerns, Alex was never sure about his persistence to pursue HE in the face of discrimination. In fact, he found it exhausting and full of uncertainty. At one point he says, 'I really did feel like my life was kind of over'. Whilst demonstrating agency, he felt that he pursued HE despite his college experience, not thanks to it:

> I did kind of […] do it myself, I've kind of done it in response to the kind of backlash I got from the tutors. It was more just like f**k it I am going to [go to university], rather than oh you've helped me figure this thing out… so I went for it…

When bureaucracy and policy implementation fail, trans people are faced with the burden of self-advocating (Singh et al., 2013). This is not only the case in HE settings, but also in society more broadly.

Conclusion: liveability and UK HE 2018–2021

The relationship between policy and lived experience is a complex terrain and this was articulated by the young people throughout our case study. Many examples of good practice and positive engagement emerged from the film, as well as from the interviews with Alex and the staff. However, the role of HE as a place where people live, and its commitments to equality and inclusion, seemed for these young people, frustratingly disconnected, because of the formulation of trans identity as an abstract and intellectual issue that could be debated. Within our case study, the young people both describe the qualifications of a liveable environment and outline the policies required to protect and maintain this environment. They redefine the limits of what constitutes the university public – and by extension, the national political public – and establish themselves as actors within it.

The film critiques the framing of trans lives as a 'debate', which has been a feature of the discourse surrounding the UK GRA reform consultation and calls out Universities as sites contributing to the tension around this term. The filmmakers responded to this controversy by considering representations of trans identity within and beyond academia. This framing received significant media amplification, and anti-trans voices drew on academia for legitimacy. As previously noted, anti-trans discourses during this period were framed as issues of academic freedom, and the HE Freedom of Speech Bill contributed to this. Thus, HE as a sector, appeared to operate as a platform in the circulation of transphobia at the same time as trans inclusion was being embedded through staff training and the adoption of Stonewall benchmarks. These apparent contradictions were expressed in terms of disorientation and distress in interviews and eloquently articulated in the film:

> It's not a debate; it's our human rights-a debate is 'whether we should be vegan or not?'-or 'is right wing politics better than left wing politics?' That is a controversial debate if you want to be controversial. But 'are trans people really people and do they deserve to have rights?' is not a debate.

In the film, the young people problematised trans debates as intellectual controversies created for the sake of debate itself. They contrasted this theoretical discourse with trans identity and experience in which people's lives are at stake. When HE students advocating for trans rights used the #NotaDebate slogan, detractors, including academics, held it against them as an example of student ignorance, through the assertion that debate per se is foundational to intellectual freedom. This example demonstrates the gap between the profile of the university as LGBTQ+ friendly and the perspective of trans students' lived experience on campus. This disconnect made the students in our project sceptical about trans inclusive policies, which were being introduced at the same time as they perceived HE institutions also appeared to facilitate transphobic discourse.

In this article, we have analysed the barriers that trans students in our research face before, during, and after entering HE in the UK. We have done so by discussing two aspects of liveability: environment and policy. We conclude by reasserting the value of liveability as a theoretical framework, extending policy recommendations, and reflecting on the ways in which the UK political landscape around HE has changed since we conducted the initial research.

Liveability is a useful framework for considering access to HE because it speaks to the trans person's capacity to thrive, thus avoiding the idea of tolerance or minimum standards. Our research asserts that trans rights are human rights, conveys the message that trans rights do not compromise anyone else's rights, and advocates against trans students' current precarity on campus. The young people involved in this research are not looking for special treatment, but everyday access to recognition, public space, and services. Aligned with Butler's (2006) reflections on liveability, trans students claim the right to be intelligible as humans.

We have illustrated the convergence of influential factors and discussed the strategies trans youth employ to navigate risk and assess the liveability of a place. We found that policy (e.g. anti-bullying, inclusivity) without substance is commonplace, and can inhibit change. We also found that the bureaucracy of everyday life is underestimated as a stress factor and entails embedded forms of discrimination. However, we also noted examples of staff mitigating the impact on students and of trans students' own agency. Robust policy is important because it provides mechanisms for recourse when things go wrong, and even when it is not embedded it can act as a powerful symbol. In sum, policy, culture, and practice need to unite to enable meaningful trans inclusion. In order that equalities legislation might have longer term impact and affect cultural change, ongoing intervention is important, as is the consideration of lived policy from young people's viewpoints. We advocate for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ factors in Higher Education and for a better understanding of the specificity of trans experiences in education. Developing inclusive policy often means adapting to the contemporary political moment and contending with difficult tensions. In these instances, it remains crucial to collaborate with and centre the needs of marginalised parties.

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Notes

1. We use LGBTQ+ for people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or questioning. Transgender as used here is inclusive of non-binary and expansive identifications. Readers may find this glossary useful: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/glossary-terms
2. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reform-of-the-gender-recognition-act-2004
3. Discussion around proposals to replace the act's medical model of having to prove diagnosed gender dysphoria with self-identification is an ongoing contested issue.
4. The 2010 Equality Act identified nine protected characteristics, including: sexual orientation; sex; and gender reassignment. Since this act became law, local authorities, councils, education institutions and employers have produced their own interpretations, in which significant areas of contestation have emerged. In these, ambiguity around medical, legal and social forms of identity can become the ground of contestation where different groups are constructed as in opposition.
5. I.e., one Student Equalities Manager and one Deputy Head of widening participation from two different UK HE institutions.
6. Available here: https://vimeo.com/297748058
7. WP criteria and policy vary from institution to institution. In the UK, the predominant category of underrepresentation is socio-economic status, often defined by postcode (i.e. low participation areas). Some further categories include disabled students, care leavers and some ethnicities.

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