# University is where you learn to love your gay self



University often represents a watershed moment for individuals exploring their sexual and gender identities. As freshers disperse across campuses this season, an increasing number of students are embracing or discovering their LGBTQIA+ identities during this transitional phase.

Research published last year by The Times Higher Education reveals that 11.8% of university students identify as LGBTQ+, compared with just 9.4% of their non-university peers aged 16 to 24. This discrepancy prompts two main interpretations: university environments might foster self-discovery and provide a safer space for openness, or alternatively, LGBTQ+ people might be more inclined to attend university in the first place. Yet, UCAS application data complicates this narrative, showing fewer than 8% of applicants identifying as LGBTQ+, considerably lower than university student figures. This suggests that the university experience itself plays a significant role in identity realisation and disclosure.

Interviews highlight the journey many students undertake. Olivia, an undergraduate from a small North Yorkshire village, says she thought she could never be anything other than straight during her school years because her environment lacked visibility for identities like hers. It was only after moving to university and encountering diverse representations of queerness that she recognised and named her asexuality. Similarly, Jenna, raised in London, discovered her queer identity through the exposure to broader communities and conversations at university, despite growing up in a metropolitan area.

For others, such as Georgie, now a PhD student, university provides both physical and emotional distance from family and childhood social circles, creating a 'blank slate' that emboldens experimentation and self-acceptance. Her experience in New York University led her from curiosity to a firm realisation of her lesbian identity—a journey she believes may not have occurred without this newfound freedom. Her fiancé’s lighthearted comment, 'Thank God for girls who experiment at uni!', captures the importance of this period in allowing exploration without the constraints of previous environments.

UK data from UCAS corroborates these personal stories about openness. A survey of 3,000 LGBT+ students found that 82% intend to be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity at university, compared to 62% who were out at school. While optimism about the university experience prevails—with over half expecting it to be 'good' and nearly a quarter 'very good'—there remains a degree of uncertainty. Approximately 13% of students are unsure how open they will be, and more than 10% of applicants reported a negative or neutral experience of being LGBT+ at school or college, indicating lingering challenges outside the university bubble.

Unfortunately, the increased visibility at university does not guarantee a harassment-free environment. Research from the United States reveals that one-third of LGBTQ students at four-year institutions report facing bullying or abuse. Many institutions lack comprehensive data on such incidents, leaving universities ill-equipped to fully understand or address the scope of harassment and discrimination LGBTQ students face. This reflects a wider, ongoing need for improved support mechanisms and inclusive policies within higher education. Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://diva-magazine.com/2025/09/18/the-rise-of-the-queer-fresher/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=the-rise-of-the-queer-fresher> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/lgbt-students-more-open-university> - A study by UK admissions service UCAS found that 82% of LGBT+ students intend to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity when they start university, compared to 62% who were open at school. The survey also revealed that 13% were unsure about how 'out' they would be at university. The majority of the 3,000 LGBT+ students surveyed expect a positive experience in higher education, with 53% anticipating it to be 'good' and 24% expecting it to be 'very good'.
3. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/lgbt-freshers-looking-forward-being-open-and-out-university-new-ucas-research-shows> - UCAS, in collaboration with Stonewall, published a report analysing the experiences and expectations of LGBT+ students entering higher education. The report found that 64% of LGBT+ students are comfortable being open about their identity at school, with 82% confident about being more open at university. The study also highlighted that nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT+ students had a good or neutral experience in education so far, with 75% attributing this to being accepted by their peers.
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/transgender-stonewall-national-union-of-students-ucas-b957035.html> - A survey by UCAS revealed that LGBT+ students feel more comfortable being open about their sexual orientation or gender at university than at school. However, more than one in ten are unsure about how 'out' they can be when they start as freshers. The survey of 3,000 university applicants who identified as LGBT+ found that only 47% said their experience being LGBT+ at school or college was positive, while 41% said it was neutral and 12% said it was negative.
5. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/us-universities-need-better-data-abuse-lgbt-students> - A nationwide analysis found that nearly 33% of LGBTQ students at four-year institutions in the US describe enduring some kind of bullying or abuse in college, compared to nearly 19% among other students. The study highlighted that institutions often lack the data needed to reveal the severity of the problem, with many colleges unaware of the extent of bullying, harassment, or assault experienced by LGBTQ students.
6. <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2005-06/special/11/1.html> - The Cambridge University Reporter provides statistical data on applications and acceptances by type of school/college and gender. It reports that the proportion of men accepted has risen to 51%, with 56% of applications from maintained schools and 44% from independent schools. The statistics also include data on ethnic origin and disability, with 13% of accepted applicants declaring an ethnic minority background and 3% declaring a disability.