Building Belonging: Transforming Library Services and Spaces for LGBTIQA+ Inclusivity and Diversity at Queensland University of Technology (QUT)

Bruce Munro, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia b6.munro@qut.edu.au

Abstract

Libraries are at the heart of knowledge and learning within educational institutions, embodying principles of access and inclusivity. In today's evolving academic landscape, it is essential that libraries consider their services, spaces, and practices to ensure they promote not just inclusion, but a sense of belonging for all members of the community. This paper will explore how the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library services, spaces, and staff profile have been strategically aligned to move from inclusion to belonging, with an emphasis on strengthening diversity and inclusion priorities specifically for the LGBTIQA+ community. This paper will discuss QUT Library practices in collection development that have promoted diversity and inclusion. This has involved using curated online collections on LGBTIQA+ material, connecting both the physical and online resources, and initiatives to increase engagement with these recourses. Library spaces will also be considered, delving into practical suggestions for increasing the visibility of LGBTIQA+ works, such as utilising dedicated spaces and displays. Furthermore, it will be explored how QUT Library spaces provided vibrant, welcoming, and inclusive environments through QUT Library events. The significance of ally networks and partner support services will be highlighted to drive inclusion and belonging. This comprehensive case study will provide an example of better practice for libraries to move beyond inclusion towards fostering a sense of belonging for all individuals, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, gender, sexuality, or disabilities. Through targeted efforts in collection development, spaces, services, and staff diversity, libraries can play an important role in creating truly inclusive and welcoming environments for everyone.

Introduction

Belonging can be considered as an extension of inclusion, through creating sufficient space for the community to explore a comprehensive educational landscape aligned with their lived experiences. It goes beyond physical space, through psychological barriers, aligning expectations of faculty, staff, and students with their real campus encounters. Within postsecondary education, establishing a feeling of belonging across all academic levels enhances a shared connection to the ideological essence (Patterson-Stephens & Jones, 2023, 2). "Libraries are often seen as a quiet, safe space which is particularly valued. It is also seen as a place to find out information safely about LGBTIQA+ issues" (Cox, 2023, 41). Libraries can create safe and inclusive environments for LGBTIQA+ students through supporting ally networks and student groups, incorporating inclusive curriculum and library materials, ensure supportive library staff, and implement comprehensive policies. This includes featuring LGBTIQA+ collections, celebrating relevant events, and providing facilities that are safe and accessible for all users (Betz, 2012). Additionally, libraries can foster a sense of inclusivity and belonging through aligning vision statements and strategic plans, explore user experience through outreach initiatives, evaluating diversity in exhibits, promotional materials, social media, and the website, utilising library materials for community collection building, and offering continuous cultural competency training for staff (Wexelbaum, 2016, 69-71).

QUT Library recognises the key role of libraries as advocates of knowledge and inclusivity within educational institutions. This commitment to diversity and inclusion will be explored further, with a focus on the LGBTIQA+ community. This is evident through efforts to enhance collections, ensuring they reflect the diverse perspectives of the community. QUT Library actively fosters inclusive environments through initiatives, themed events, and recognising the importance of ally networks within the staff profile for creating a sense of belonging. The paper will provide a model for libraries seeking to move beyond inclusion to fostering a sense of belonging through vibrant, welcoming, and inclusive spaces and services. This is in line with University's

strategic value of Inclusiveness with a commitment to expanding the diversity of staff and student community as highlighted in Connections – the QUT Strategy 2023 to 2027 (QUT, 2023).

Collection development

One key aspect of QUT Library's commitment to diversity and inclusion is the enhancement of our collections, both physical and digital, by actively collecting and promoting resources that reflect the diverse perspectives and experiences of our university community. Libraries can achieve a truly inclusive collection by offering a range of resources catering to LGBTIQA+ individuals. This inclusivity should encompass a comprehensive collection with materials of both academic resources and non-academic ones, such as LGBTIQA+ fiction. Careful consideration should be given to the portrayal of LGBTIQA+ individuals in the chosen fiction to ensure a thoughtful representative collection. "Some students may feel comfortable with using an [LGBTIQA+] resource centre (if that is available on their campus) to investigate topics of personal interest. Others desiring more privacy may prefer the more discreet information-seeking experience that a library affords" (Todorinova & Ortiz-Myers, 2019, 69). Additionally, this involves acquiring materials related to all sexualities in various formats, with a focus on health and legal information. Utilising established lists and recommendations for the LGBTIQA+ community is crucial. Explicitly incorporating LGBTIQA+ materials into the collection development policy ensures visibility and commitment to diversity (Turner, 2023, 15-16).

QUT Library acknowledges this significance by incorporating a statement in the Collection Development Manual, articulating it within the general principles. "The Library is committed to reflecting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as values, in its collections" (QUT Library, 2024). As part of this commitment, LGBTIQA+ champion Liaison Librarians are dedicated as part of their collection development brief to ensure that there is breadth and depth of related library material across all campus libraries. This has included evaluation and subscriptions of databases packages focusing on LGBTIQA+ material. Furthermore, within the 2023 Library Strategic Plan a key initiative was identified to actively collect and promote resources that reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion, enhancing access to information. This was achieved through a curated list of resources highlighting LGBTIQA+ issues and perspectives. The online collection was promoted as part of significant annual events such as IDOHBIT Day and Brisbane Pride Month, connecting synergies between the physical with online collections through aligned prominent physical book displays within the library spaces, and promoted more widely through university ally and pride networks. An additional activity resulting in significant impact was through Liaison Librarians partnering with and supporting the Faculty of Science Equity Committee, curating a QUT readings list of queer discipline-based resources. This has resulted in the creation of an invaluable list of resources, highlighting key publications, contacts, organisations, and workplace support, for further education, awareness and increasing access to information. The aim is for this approach to be explored with all faculty discipline areas to have similarly curated lists of resources available.

Library as an inclusive space

As education institutions we should aim to create safe spaces where our students can learn and thrive, these being environments where students can explore ideas and express themselves. "A school or university might create a safe space for [LGBTIQA+] students in which students know they can discuss issues of sexual identity or gender and will not be made to feel marginalised for their perspective or exploration" (Palfrey, 2017, 20). Creating safe spaces for the LGBTIQA+ community on campus is crucial. These environments should be free from heterosexism and homophobia, allowing a diverse range of individuals to feel at ease being their authentic selves. Additionally, these spaces provide opportunities for students to raise awareness about issues affecting the LGBTIQA+ community (Fox, 2010). "The library is supposed to be a safe space for things, ideas, and people. Professional codes of ethics for librarians also charge them with resisting censorship, and providing resources for, by, and about people of all different backgrounds. At the same time, few academic libraries use terminology to identify themselves as safe spaces, nor do they always participate in safe space training programs" (Wexelbaum, 2018, 46). Libraries can reinforce the message of being safe spaces "by being visibly [LGBTIQA+] friendly, libraries can not only give hope to a population that often has very little in terms of support, but can also educate the general public, leading to greater acceptance and tolerance" (Day, p.46).

Best practice suggestions for fostering a safe space include LGBTIQA+ displays highlighting relevant library resources at times of significance, signage indicating locations of LGBTIQA+ material, spine labels increasing visibility of LGBTIQA+ titles, LGBTIQA+ posters, stickers, pins and safe space signage, and facilities such as single-stall gender neutral bathrooms (Turner, 2023; Day, 2013).

QUT Library has strived through strategic priorities to ensure that student experience and engagement through the physical library space is vibrant, safe, welcoming, inclusive, and appropriate for all students. This accomplishment has been realised through various initiatives as emphasized in the literature. Book displays play a crucial role in celebrating significant events related to the LGBTIQA+ community and establishing a connection between library users and the collection. Examples of this include specially curated collections for IDOHOBIT Day, Brisbane Pride Month, Wear it Purple Day, and International Transgender Day of Visibility. Signage and stickers are an important part of ensuring the LGBTIQA+ community has a sense of belonging within the library spaces. QUT Library is committed to offering inclusive resources and secure environments for LGBTIQA+ students and staff. This dedication is emphasised on the QUT Library website's "Inclusive Spaces in the Library" page, which outlines the commitment to ensuring library users feel safe, welcomed, and celebrated. To reinforce this sense of belonging, library entrances feature Welcome Here stickers for users (QUT Library, 2021). Digital screens throughout the library space also incorporate welcoming and inclusive signage, being a busy thoroughfare for student support. This has provided an opportunity to collaborate with student cohorts in designing inclusive images to be featured in the digital signage material, aligning with the theme "Everyone is Welcome Here". In terms of facilities, QUT is committed to providing appropriate restroom facilities and signage to ensure access to safe amenities on campus for individuals who are gender diverse. These all-gender toilet facilities are available at both the Kelvin Grove and Gardens Point campus libraries.

Library events

Consistent LGBTIQA+ events at the library actively establish it as a safe space, demonstrating commitment, fostering interaction among LGBTIQA+ students and allies, enhancing library services and operations in support of LGBTIQA+ inclusion. The library is encouraged to organise regular events for LGBTIQA+ students and actively plan or co-sponsor activities and events related to LGBTIQA+ people, experiences, and issues to foster a more inclusive and supportive community. Additionally, ensuring active senior staff attendance at campus LGBTIQA+ events promotes visibility and ongoing engagement (Todorinova & Ortiz-Myers, 2019, 72). Libraries have a distinct opportunity to celebrate events related to LGBTIQA+, proactively organising annual celebrations that may include discussions with local artists and authors, themed movie screenings, and the integration of relevant material into various events (Day, 2013; Betz, 2012).

QUT Library has contributed to enhancing student experience and engagement through several events and activities with significance to the LGBTIQA+ community. As part of the library's In Conversations series, an initiative highlighting local Indigenous talents and perspectives, over the last three years QUT Library has looked for opportunities to showcase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and artists who identify as LGBTIQA+ during Brisbane Pride Month (September). These events have provided inspiring opportunities to showcase authentic, personal and intersectional experiences. Another example can be seen with the QUT Library LGBTIQA+ Games Night hosted in collaboration with the QUT LGBTIQA+ community. This was the perfect instance of bringing together a variety of diverse students for networking and adding value to their learning experience fostered by the sense of inclusion, the QUT Library space being the perfect place for this. Connections were evident between international Higher Degree Research students, introducing themselves and making ongoing ties beyond that event. Due to its success, games events have been established as a regular semester-based occurrence providing a sense of belonging through connecting students together. The second event was expanded to include two student guild gaming groups with all events to date facilitated by game designer, QUT Alumna and member of the LGBTIQA+ community. Additional to these events, the QUT Library LGBTIQA+ working group identified an opportunity for engaging with student and further fostering a welcoming and inclusive library space for Wear It Purple Day, 2023. A stall event was organised at each campus library with popular pronoun badges making, designs created by library staff, as well as popcorn and chocolates available, proving to draw in students and staff for further discussions on and promoting an awareness of the

day's significance. The event also provided staff that volunteered with expanding their knowledge and understanding of LGBTIQA+ issues. With the success of the event, further collaboration with QUT pride networks and the student guild will be explored for future events.

LGBTIQA+ networks and partner support services

For the promotion of an inclusive and supportive environment, it is proposed that universities provide training initiatives, such as Safe Space, or Ally programs. These programs should aim to educate students, faculty, and staff about LGBTIQA+ issues and concerns. Universities should also prioritise diversity in its recruitment practices, actively seeking a varied representation of staff, including those who openly identify as LGBTIQA+. To foster a visible and sustained commitment to LGBTIQA+ inclusivity, staff should consistently participate in campus LGBTIQA+ events and activities. This proactive involvement helps to create a university culture that embraces diversity and actively supports the LGBTIQA+ community (Todorinova & Ortiz-Myers, 2019, 72). Based on best practice, library staff should have available to them, LGBTIQA+ cultural competency training, including the availability and location of relevant material (Turner, 2023, 20). Furthermore, to the importance of ally training, academic librarians face the task of alleviating library anxiety among students. They collaborate with coordinators, offering discipline-specific sessions, online instruction videos, individual consultations, and library tours. Receiving multiple library instructions helps undergraduates become more familiar with and less anxious about the library, creating a safer space. LGBTIQA+ and ally trained library staff can guide colleagues in enhancing the inclusivity of their library materials (Wexelbaum, 2018, 46).

QUT places importance on cultivating an inclusive culture and enhancing the knowledge of it's staff regarding cultural safety through Indigenous cultural safety and Ally training. As part of QUT Equity training and development, an online LGBTIQA+ Awareness Training resource has been created. Soon to be mandatory for Allies to complete and available for all staff and students, the course was created originally by and for library and other staff working in library spaces (QUT, 2022). In line with this, 27% of QUT Library staff across all teams have successfully completed Ally network training, equipping them to offer support, create safe spaces, provide services, organise events, and disseminate information. This drives inclusion to belonging from within the library staff profile, by creating opportunities for ally networking, cultivating a culture of inclusion and support. Staff ally and advocate visibility is crucial in fostering a sense of belonging for library users. Library leadership have been instrumental in the rollout across the university of LGBTIQA+ lanyards, the inclusion of pronouns on staff name badges being included as an optional addition, and pronoun badge making at staff LGBTIQA+ themed events which has been enthusiastically adopted. Additional to this the Library Leadership Team has continued to hold membership on the QUT LGBTIQA+ Working Party, the QUT Pride Staff Network Executive Team, and taking a lead role in the divisional equity committee. This has resulted in direct involvement in the QUT LGBTIQA+ Action Plan for 2023 to 2025. Engaging at the institutional level ensures that QUT Library takes a leading role in promoting diversity and inclusion, fostering a strong sense of belonging for the LGBTIQA+ community. Initiatives involve representative artwork in the library to enhance visibility of LGBTIQA+ communities, forming institutional partnerships for events that celebrate LGBTIQA+ culture and history, and expanding opportunities for allies through ongoing engagement and training.

Conclusion

QUT Library is actively engaged in creating a truly inclusive and welcoming environment for the LGBTIQA+ community within the university. QUT Library recognises the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, to align with the University's strategic value of Inclusiveness. The commitment to diversity and inclusion is evident in various aspects, starting with collection development. QUT Library actively enhances its collections to reflect the diverse perspectives and experiences of the university community, with a specific focus on LGBTIQA+ materials. This commitment is integrated into the collection development practices, and dedicated library staff ensure the breadth and depth of relevant library materials. The library goes beyond physical spaces, emphasizing the importance of the library as an inclusive space. Efforts include book and digital displays that promote visibility and a sense of belonging. QUT Library actively supports LGBTIQA+ students and staff by providing inclusive resources and secure environments. The library's commitment to inclusivity is emphasized

on its website, reinforcing the message of safety, welcome, and celebration. Events play a crucial role in establishing the library as a safe space, and QUT Library organises various activities and collaborations to enhance student experience and engagement. The library hosts events aligned with significant occasions related to the LGBTIQA+ community, fostering interaction among students and promoting inclusivity. QUT Library recognises the importance of networks and partner support services. Staff undergo training initiatives, including Ally programs, to enhance their cultural competency and for supporting the LGBTIQA+ community. The library is actively involved in institutional initiatives, such as the QUT LGBTIQA+ Action Plan, demonstrating a commitment to diversity and inclusion at the institutional level. In summary, QUT Library serves as a model for libraries seeking to move beyond inclusion and create a sense of belonging for the LGBTIQA+ community. Through strategic initiatives, collection development, inclusive spaces, events, and partnerships, QUT Library actively contributes to fostering a diverse, inclusive, and supportive university environment.

Notes

LGBTIQA+ in this paper is used as a representative acronym associated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse people (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2022).

References

Australian Institute of Family Studies (2022). *LGBTIQA+ glossary of common terms*. https://aifs.gov.au/resources/resource-sheets/lgbtiqa-glossary-common-terms.

Betz, J. (2012). Library as Safe Space-Librarian as Ally. *GLBTRT Newsletter: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgendered Round Rable*, 24(1), 4-4. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=qth&AN=76422900&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Cox, A. (2023). Factors Shaping Future Use and Design of Academic Library Space. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 29(1), 33-50. DOI:10.1080/13614533.2022.2039244

Day, S. (2013). Libraries as LGBTIQ Venues. *Gay & Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, 9(1), 46-50. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=qth&AN=90591572&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Fox, O. C. & Ore, E. T. (2010). (Un)covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in LGBT "Safe Spaces". *Feminist Studies*, 36(3), 629-649. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A248579918/LITF?u=qut&sid=Primo&xid=8d677a2b.

QUT (2023). *Connections – the QUT Strategy 2023 to 2027*. https://www.qut.edu.au/connections.

QUT (2022). *Pride at QUT*. Last modified May 9, 2022. https://www.qut.edu.au/about/pride.

QUT Library (2024). *Collection Development Manual*. Last modified January 15, 2024. https://www.library.qut.edu.au/about/policies/collection-development-manual/.

QUT Library (2021). *Inclusive spaces in the Library.* Last modified September 3, 2021. https://www.library.qut.edu.au/about/rooms/inclusive-spaces/.

Mehra, B. & Braquet, D. (2011). Progressive LGBTQ Reference: Coming out in the 21st Century. *Reference Services Review*, 39(3), 401-422. DOI:10.1108/00907321111161403.

Palfrey, J. G. (2017). *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces : Diversity and Free Expression in Education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. Project MUSE.

Patterson-Stephens, S., & Jones, T. B. (Eds.). (2023). *Advancing inclusive excellence in higher education : practical approaches to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion*. Information Age Publishing, Inc. ProQuest EBook Central.

Todorinova, L. & Ortiz-Myers, M. (2019). The role of the academic library in supporting LGBTQ students: A survey of librarians and library administrators at LGBTQ-friendly colleges and universities. *College & Undergraduate Libraries,* 26(1), 66-87. DOI:10.1080/10691316.2019.1596857.

Turner, M. E. (2023). Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ+ Library Users in the 21st Century. *Practical Academic Librarianship: The International Journal of the SLA Academic Division*, 13(2), 8-46. https://pal-ojs-tamu.tdl.org/pal/article/view/7174.

Wexelbaum, R. S. (2018). Do libraries save LGBT students?. *Library Management*, 39(1/2), 31-58. DOI:10.1108/LM-02-2017-0014

Wexelbaum, R. S. (2016). The Library as Safe Space. *The Future of Library Space (Advances in Library Administration and Organization),* 36, 37-78. DOI:10.1108/S0732-067120160000036002