

Leave No One Behind: LGBTQ+ Visibility, Inclusion and the Sustainable Development Goals in Higher Education

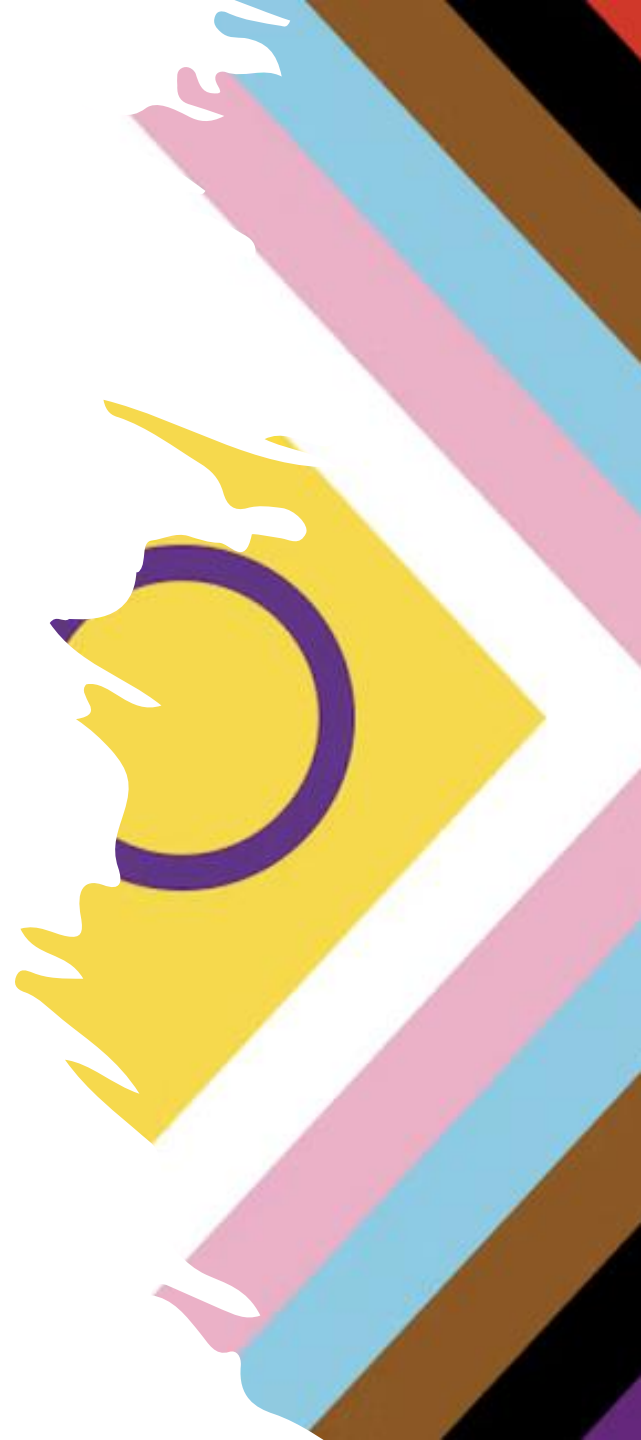


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Relevant Sustainable Development Goals

- SDG 4: Quality Education
- SDG 5: Gender Equality
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities
- SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions



"Leave No One Behind"

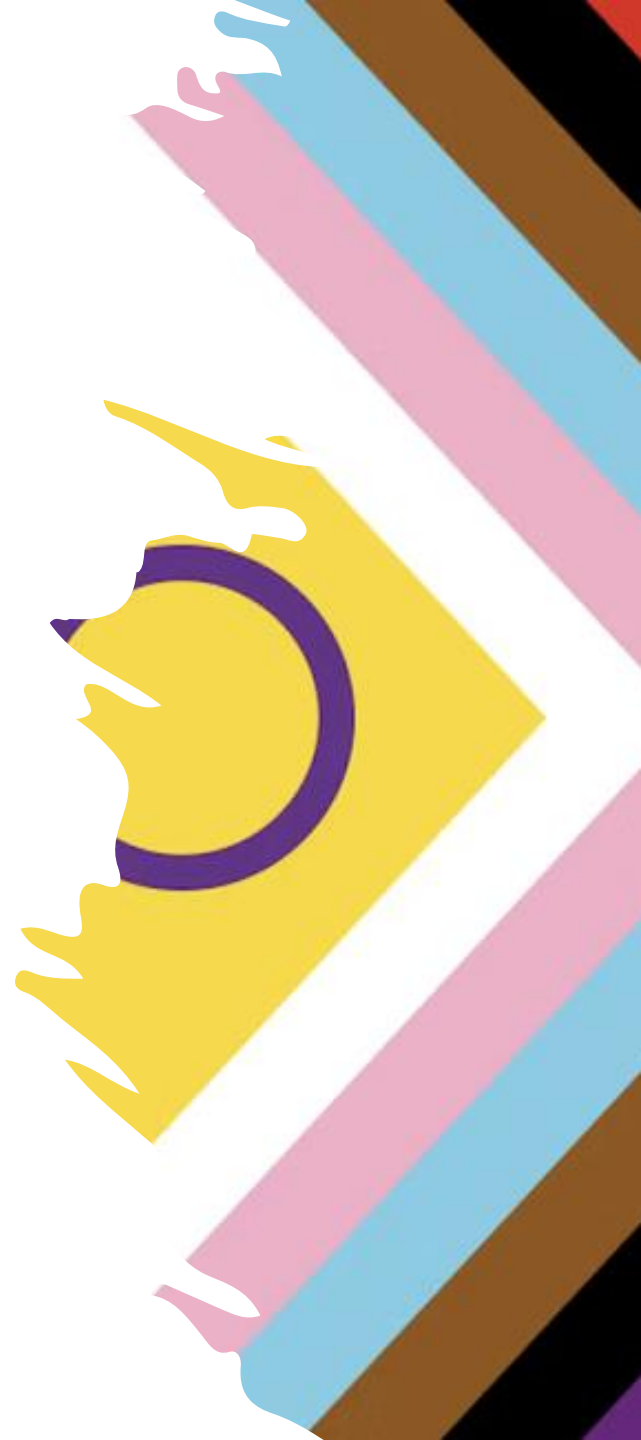
(United Nations 2015)

- The SDGs provide a global framework for social inclusion and sustainable development.
- The four goals previously highlighted are particularly relevant to higher education and LGBTQ+ inclusion. These concern educational quality, gender equality, reducing inequalities, and building inclusive institutions.
- Central to all of them is the principle of **leaving no one behind**.



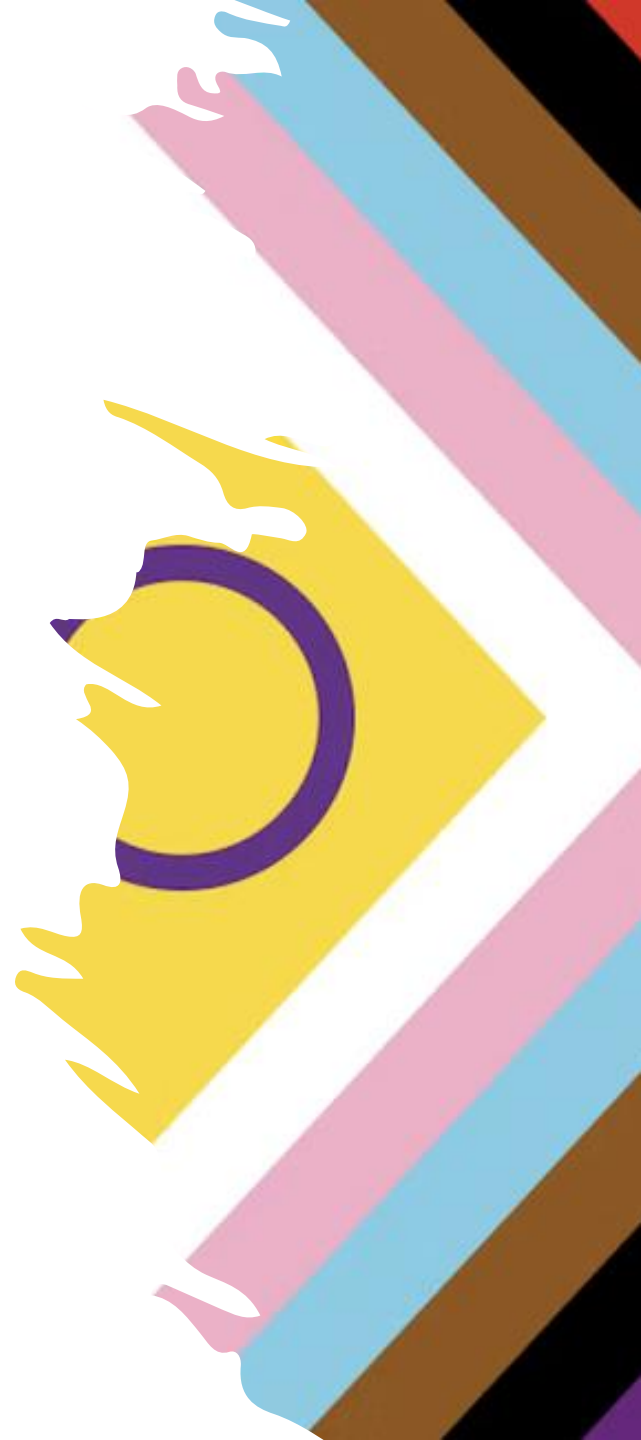
The question I pose today is simple.

**Can universities genuinely claim
to fulfil this commitment if
LGBTQ+ people remain invisible
within institutional life?**



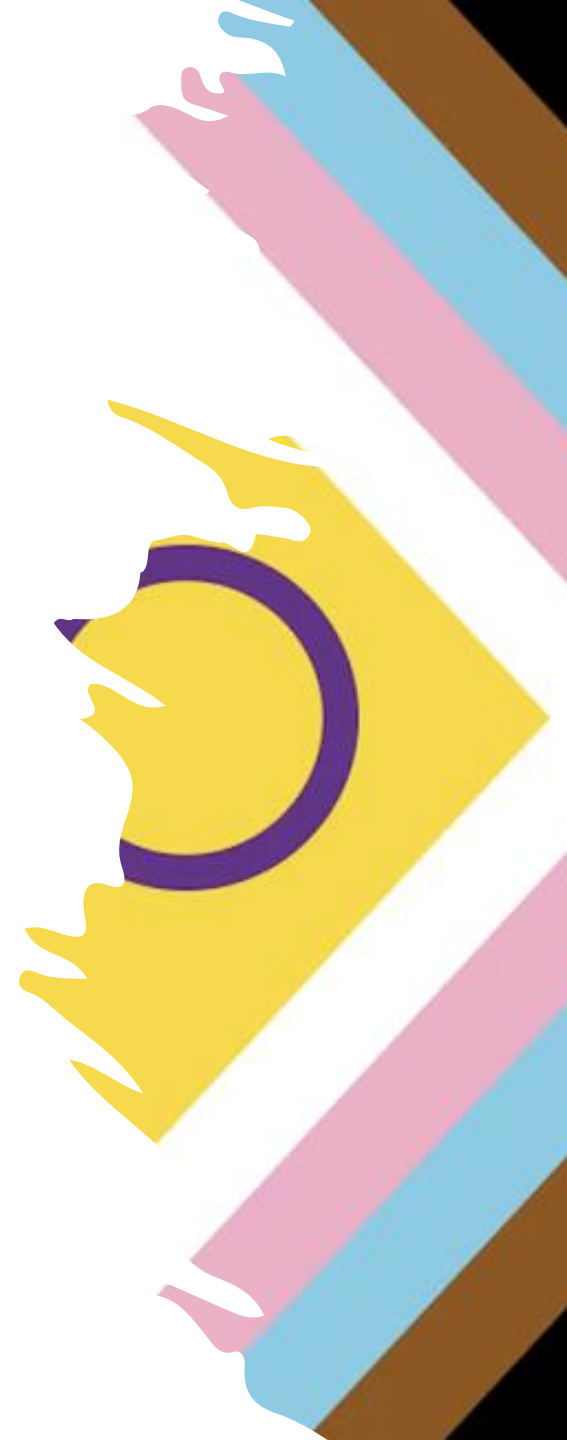
H.E.I.s are NOT neutral spaces

- Oswin (2008) argues that social spaces are actively produced through norms and power relations rather than existing as neutral environments
- Invisibility should not be viewed as a passive absence.
- It is an active social process that shapes who belongs, whose experiences matter, and whose knowledge is considered legitimate.



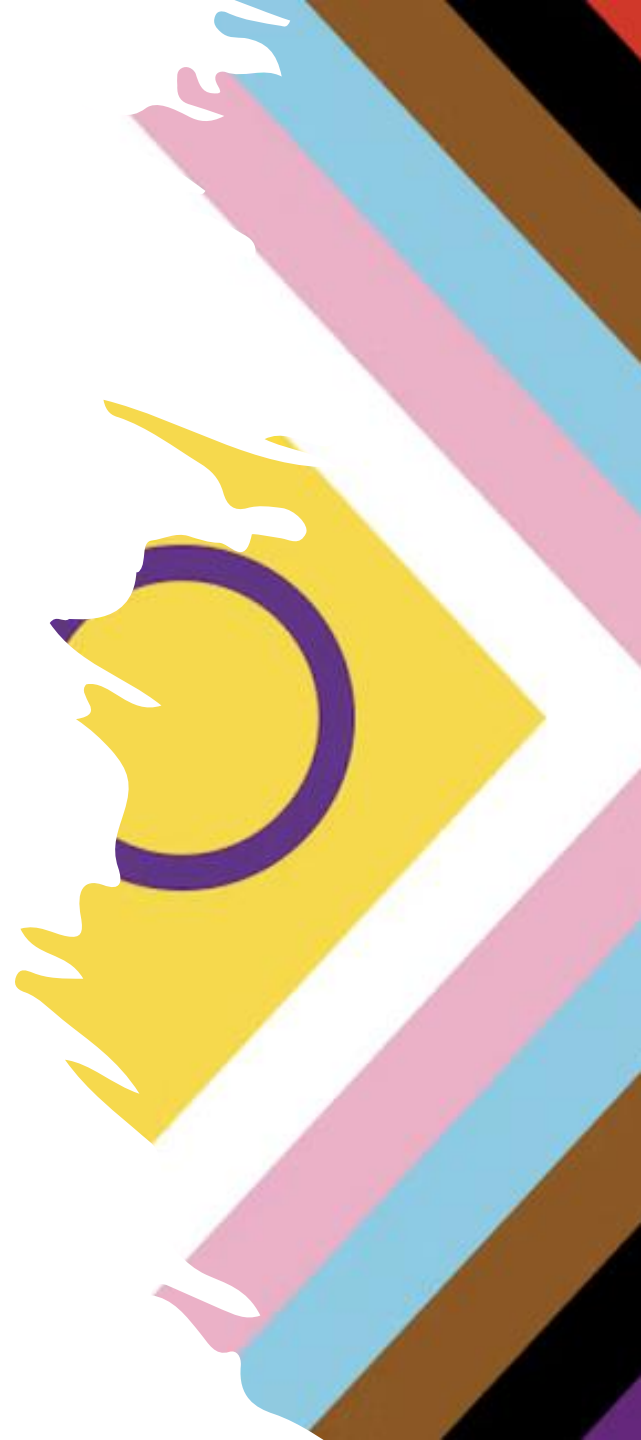
Institutional Culture and the Reproduction of Inequality

- Education institutions have often reproduced existing social hierarchies by legitimising dominant forms of knowledge and culture that privileges heterosexual and cisgender. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990)
- This reinforces heteronormative assumptions and, in some cases, hegemonic masculinity
- This contradicts **SDG 5** and **SDG 10**, both of which seek to dismantle structural inequalities and promote social inclusion
- Institutions that fail to challenge these assumptions risk becoming institutions that reproduce rather than reduce social inequalities.



Understanding Visibility and Invisibility

- Visibility is often discussed in terms of representation.
- Visibility, however, extends beyond simply seeing LGBTQ+ people in institutional spaces.
- It encompasses recognition, acknowledgement, legitimacy, and participation.
- Visibility occurs when LGBTQ+ identities and experiences are reflected in curricula, leadership, research agendas, student support systems, and institutional culture.



LGBTQ+ invisibility

- Invisibility functions as a form of exclusion that has significant consequences for individual wellbeing, educational outcomes, and institutional legitimacy.
- Invisibility happens when LGBTQ+ individuals and issues are omitted, ignored, or rendered marginal.
- Such omissions contribute to what queer theorists identify as heteronormativity.
- The assumption that heterosexuality and cisgender identities constitute the natural and normal standard against which all others are measured.



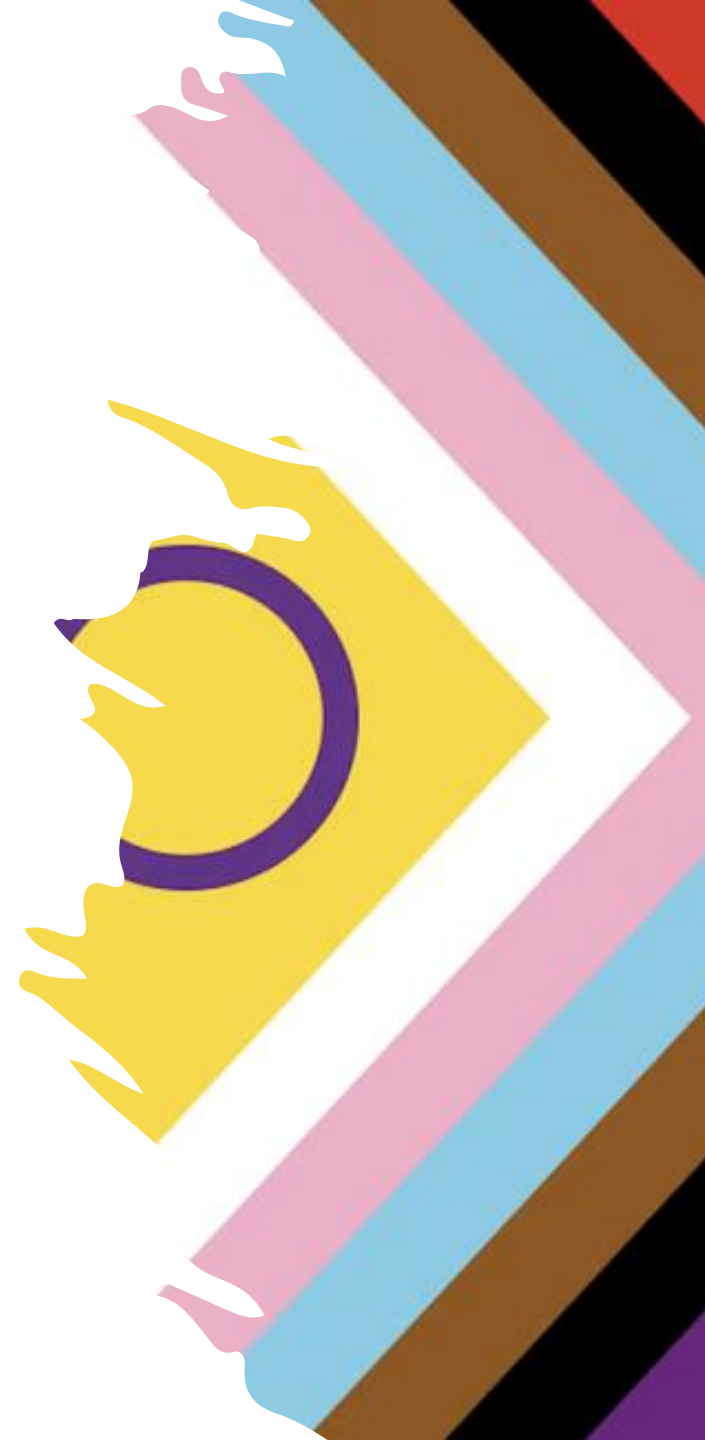
LGBTQ+ invisibility

Occurs through

- Curriculum omissions
- Limited representation (including visible allies)
- Lack of visibility in leadership
- Exclusion from institutional narratives
- Silence around LGBTQ+ experiences
- Lack of institutional insight and understanding

Consequences

- Reduced belonging
- Poorer wellbeing
- Educational disengagement



The Human Cost of Invisibility

- Research consistently demonstrates that invisibility has significant implications for mental health and wellbeing among LGBTQ+ populations.
- Minority Stress Theory offers a useful framework for understanding these effects (Meyer, 2003).
- This suggests that minority individuals experience unique stressors associated with stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion.
- These stressors accumulate over time, increasing vulnerability to anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.



Educational Consequences

Many LGBTQ+ students report:

- Hiding their identity (42%)
 - Fear of discrimination
 - Self-censorship and withdrawal
 - Reduced sense of belonging (Stonewall, 2021)
 - Reduced self-worth (Butler, 2004)
 - Poorer retention (Tinto, 2017)
 - Lower levels of engagement
 - Lower levels of well-being
 - Lower levels of institutional satisfaction
 - Lower levels of well-being
 - Disengagement with academic and support services
- (Rankin et al, 2010)



Inclusive Universities and Sustainable Development

- Harpur (2023) argues that inclusion requires institutions to move beyond compliance-based approaches and redesign systems, cultures, and practices to ensure participation by all members of the university community.
- This perspective aligns closely with **SDG 16**, which calls for effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions.
- Inclusive institutions are characterised not merely by the absence of discrimination but by active commitments to representation, participation, and shared decision-making.



Visibility as a Human Rights Imperative

- The question of visibility ultimately extends beyond institutional effectiveness to issues of human rights and social justice.
- The principles underpinning the SDGs—including dignity, participation, equality, and non-discrimination—are grounded in international human rights frameworks (United Nations, 2015).
- Fraser's (2000) conception of social justice argues that justice requires recognition.
- H.E.I.s committed to sustainable development must therefore address both material inequalities and symbolic forms of exclusion.
- The SDGs challenge institutions to identify those who remain unseen and unheard.
- Visibility is therefore one means through which H.E.I.s can fulfil this obligation.



Full circle

- Can universities genuinely claim to fulfil this commitment, to leave no one behind, if LGBTQ+ people remain invisible within institutional life?
- The persistence of LGBTQ+ invisibility therefore challenges the ambitions of SDG 4 and therefore challenges any claim to leave no one behind



Conclusions

- LGBTQ+ invisibility remains prevalent.
- Invisibility affects wellbeing and belonging.
- Educational outcomes are negatively affected.
- Institutions can reproduce inequality.
- Visibility is essential to achieving the SDGs.



Final Reflection

**Leaving no one behind
requires ensuring that
no one remains unseen.**





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