LGBT BeWell Podcast_mixdown_New.mp3

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah Walker [00:00:08] Hello, welcome back to our BeWell podcast series. Our episode today is being recorded as part of the university's event scheduled for LGBT History Month. And we will discuss the challenges faced by the LGBTQI+ community and education with a particular focus on mental health and wellbeing. Joining me today, I have Ian Robotham, assistant director of Applications Management at the university, and students Mauragh Scott and Rian James. Can we do some quick introductions, so our listeners know who you are and why you have volunteered to take part in the episode today.

Ian Robotham [00:00:39] Hi there. I'm Ian, so I work at the university in IT, but I'm also one of the co-chairs of the staff and postgraduate LGBT network. And in terms of the mental health aspect, I'm also one of the university's mental health first aiders.

Mauragh Scott [00:00:58] Hi there, I'm Mauragh Scott. I'm an anthropology and politics student, I'm in my fourth year and I am nonbinary and a lesbian.

Rian James [00:01:08] Hi, my name is Rian James, I am a third-year geography and international relations student, I am a bisexual transexual man and I also have a disability. And I'm also part of the AUSA Trans Forum.

Bekah Walker [00:01:27] Brilliant. Thanks guys. Thank you so much for joining me today. I'm really looking forward to our discussion. So, identifying as LGBTQI+ can often lead to being discriminated against or being treated unfairly because of who you love and who you are. How does dealing with stigma or facing discrimination, both conscious or unconscious, affect our mental health and wellbeing?

Mauragh Scott [00:01:50] Well, this is something that I have experience with, I'd say probably more than half of the people or my experiences of coming out have been kind of negative. And I say that does really have an impact on your mental health because it's difficult. It's like a lose-lose situation, because, you know, if you don't say to this person and tell them who you genuinely are, then you can't feel comfortable in that relationship. But then when you do come out, even if you know that person will be supportive, it's still really sort of a difficult situation because sometimes people can think that they accept you, but then later on you find out that they don't. So it's a long process. It's not just, um, well, in my case, it's not just been like the Band-Aid has been ripped off and I finally feel OK. And I think it is really hard to lose people in your life as well. That really does take a toll on my mental health.

Rian James [00:02:58] For me personally, I think going on what was just said, um, I really don't like the exclusionism like, for me generally coming out was generally quite a pleasant experience, I have a very supportive family and supportive network around me and which I'm eternally grateful for. Um, but I actually had to come out twice as transexual because of the stigma. When I moved to university, I was always known in the transsexual community as still so nobody knew of my transexual identity. And then I was outed by a doctor in front of one of my university friends, which prompted me to come out again. Um, and that was terrifying for me. Um, I had never been outed before. Um, so, you know, I then tried to come out again. But for me, with exclusionism, people say, oh, you know, I am not all about this transexual person, but I'm always telling people I'm okay with you and that it

upsets me because, you know, we're just saying, oh, you're one of the good ones as well. You know, they don't care about my community or what we go through or the struggle or anything. It's just you are okay, but the rest of you know, my friends, our people who are predominantly a lot of LGBTQ friends. And so when they say, well, you are one of the good ones, they only care about me but know nothing of the people around me that I associate myself with, nothing in the community which I identify with. And that puts an impact on my mental health feeling like I'm not safe to discuss anything I'm going through with the community or anything that the community is collectively going through like right now, in the middle of a pandemic. I feel like with that person I'm not able to discuss anything. It's just like oh I accept you for who you are. But then if I was to discuss something that was related to that, they wouldn't want to know. And I couldn't, you know, disclose that with them and it puts me in an unstable, you know, unsafe position and it affects your mental health. If I have to talk about dysphoria or something like that, it just puts me in a bad place mentally.

Ian Robotham [00:05:23] So I think, you know, within the kind of LGBT community, a lot of the history actually influences this. If we think that in Scotland this year, we celebrate 40 years since there was the decriminalization of homosexuality. That was on the 1st of February of this month celebrating LGBT History Month and there really has been that kind of long-standing issue with discrimination. And, you know, some of that classification for a long, long time homosexuality was kind of classified as a mental disorder. And it's not that long ago that some of that declassification actually took place. So I think there has been that kind of long standing stigma associated with the LGBT+ community, which then kind of has the impact for many people kind of growing up, we've kind of lived through the eras of Section 28 or Section 2A as it was in Scotland. And so, we've had that kind of experience growing up in education where it wasn't deemed acceptable to talk about being LGBT. There wasn't that kind of support network for people in schools. And we've kind of seen that for some people play out. So, you know, they struggle in terms of that family support. We know that some people don't have those structures and that's in some cases been amplified by the pandemic. We know that there's been lots of people that have found life as an LGBT+ person, very difficult because things like the venues and the social activities that people would ordinarily be able to engage in, they can't. I think, touching on the points that my colleagues have made a round coming out, that's not a onetime thing. That is something that as someone of the LGBT+ community, you have to keep doing. And so, you end up doing that when you go to university, maybe in school if you feel comfortable and then throughout your working life. So, in every single situation, you kind of have to judge and determine whether or not you are comfortable. You've got that constant feeling, well, how is that person going to react? So, for me, and kind of in a working environment. I've got that with my colleagues. Fortunately, I'm out at work. All of my colleagues know and they're all really accepting and supportive. But when I come across suppliers or go to conferences, you do have that whole kind of aspect around how are they going to react? Are they going to stop speaking to me? Are they going to react negatively to me? And I think that has a big impact on your mental health because you've constantly got to think about how people are going to react. And so, you've got to kind of judge whether or not you going to hide part of your identity.

Rian James [00:08:35] For me as somebody's growing up with a physical disability, you know, coming out was always a risk because, you know, the people that were around me then were my careers, like, you know, my mum was my career so if she did not accept me, where was I going to go? Because what if my family didn't accept me and they cared for me at the time. And then, you know, at school my support assistants had to be kind of comfortable with me and I had to have a lot of conversations with you know, how do we

approach this when we go for toileting or whatever and school I just voiced what was previously said. They only started the LGBT lunch club after we campaigned for it for years, and my final year. And so there really wasn't a lot safe spaces for LGBT people. There's only one video we watched in class about it and that was all. But we never got any lessons on sexual health or mental health for LGBT people and education ever.

Bekah Walker [00:09:41] Thanks, guys. There seems to be certainly I feel around the younger generation that societal attitudes in general are shifting towards being a little bit more positive to be accepting of the LGBTQI+ community. As we've kind of discussed, things have changed a little bit and I think mostly through the younger generation. And as you kind of touched on, the older generation can sometimes find that a little bit difficult. And there are still a lot of negative stereotypes associated with homophobia biphobia transphobia. I just wondered what your guys thoughts are on why that is and what we can do to go and break the stigma.

Rian James [00:10:24] Well, I mean, I don't know why that is, because, you know, my mum really struggled with the pronouns. For some reason she keeps saying oh, it's a grandma thing. And I keep pointing out to her that actually they / them has been used as a singular pronoun for ages and we use it, maybe not unconsciously but we do. So, my mum keeps making a point where she can't get round they / them pronouns, and I keep pointing it out to her, and it is just a genuine constant battle. Um, but my grandparents are absolutely accepting of me. You know, since the day I come out, sometimes they do mess up my pronouns. And sometimes they call me by different names, not necessarily my gender name. But just, you know, they're in their 80s. So, I just kind of let it slip, but they've been the most supportive and they come from the 30s, you know, 30s, 40s, 50s, and they've been completely supportive. So I really don't know what this generational excuse is because I think it's down to people's teachings and they're kind of background because, my grandparents, like I say are in their 80s, but they call me their grandson. They refer to me as my name most times, you know, um, so they never you know, even when they screw up they realized, you know, they made a mistake, you know, so they've been really supportive of me. So that's why I never grasp around when people say it's a generational thing and it's like people in their 30s or 40s and well, my grandparents are 80. So it's odd you know, and they've you know, they've lived through the Second World War and they, you know, lived in the age when homosexuality was criminal, you know, they went through stonewall, you know, we weren't actually there. But, you know, they lived through that and they still came and accepted me as their grandson and their community. So, I don't even have an answer for what we can do. I think it's just about teaching people, you know, these people exist just like we've always existed for one thing and it's just treat people with respect and it comes down to teaching and that kind of thing, you know, and their background. Some people come from backgrounds where it isn't a thing. I come from a small town and it wasn't really a thing. But still we learned, and you can learn. So, I don't know really what the excuse for it is, for me, a young person, I can't really excuse it anymore because there's an internet and you can learn. I don't really have an answer apart from you've just got to get educated sometimes, you've got to learn that you were previously ignorant. And I think that's a hard thing to do. But you just got to sometimes bite the bullet and do it.

Ian Robotham [00:13:21] Yeah, so I think those are great points and it is around education and visibility. I think, you know, for people of the older generations, a lot of the kind of media portrayals historically were very much negative. You saw all of the kind of police raids that took place and all of that kind of historical convictions. Whereas what we have seen over probably the last kind of 30, 40 years is actually quite a lot of change. And

we've had civil partnerships that's evolved into same sex marriage and the kind of representations in the media have moved. They've become much more positive. We've gone from it rather than necessarily being a kind of a separate thing that, you know, there's an LGBT character in a show too and, you know and that being the only part of their identity to much more well-rounded. And that's also, I would probably say, in the last 18 to 24 months, is also starting to come through in advertising. So we're seeing that much more normalization or usualization of LGBT personalities in that way. And so I think because we are getting more of that education and that visibility rather than it being seen as, you know, this is someone who's, you know, committing a crime, so to speak, because it was seen. Is that's kind of changing the kind of public perceptions. And I think whilst people can say that there is a generational kind of split and we do see that to some extent, it's not exclusively. So, we shouldn't kind of just sit back and think, oh, well, it's all going to be fine because the younger generation are coming through and, you know, they're all going to be nice and kind. That is to some extent the case. But, you know, there is still that minority of people within all kinds of different generations that do have those kind of negative thoughts and feelings.

Mauragh Scott [00:15:35] Um, yeah, just to jump in, I, I want to say that I agree with what both my colleagues have just said and especially the emphasis on that it is sort of a battle because you could go into a situation with a new person and think because of their age that they're not going to accept you or they are going to accept you. And then it could be the complete opposite thing. And that does hold a lot of it as a really emotional experience. And it's almost like the uncertainty of never knowing, because, as was pointed out, there are quite a lot of old people who are accepting. And then there'll be people in my own age group who will be, well, from my experience, I've had really negative experiences with people the same age as me. So, it is I think maybe the solution to that it's just more education, more visibility.

Rian James [00:16:31] I mean, for me, I mean, I like, you know, Ian said, you know, when in TV became a lot more positive, you got shows like Euphoria, and the recent show It's a Sin sort of exploring what it's like to be LGBTQ and the history of it. And, you know, and those are great shows. And they come with great praise and, you know, and you kind of think we are going forward with our media representation. And it's just how we can bring this into an educational setting because it never gets taught widely enough. For a lot of people coming to university, I might be the first transexual person they meet or the first bisexual person you meet. So, you know, how do we navigate the conversations when they have not been taught how to get on the resources, which is why, you know, because sometimes you just want to be like, oh, what if they ask questions that are not OK? But they don't realize they're not OK questions, and you don't know how to answer them because sometimes you just want to scream at them because you will be hearing this all your life. And so, it's time to get that balance within yourself. But also telling people to use google and go look things up, because the energy, the mental energy that goes into educating people is so exhausting sometimes. So it's really just it's hard, you know, it's just hard to be sole educator all year in a way to educate people when they could do it themselves, especially in this digital age.

Bekah Walker [00:18:07] Absolutely, we are in an age where a lot of information is readily available at our fingertips. So, there's no excuse really for people maybe not understanding or, you know, being supportive of others. We all have a right, regardless of how we identify or our sexual orientation to be safe and be part of a welcoming and warm environment where everyone is accepted, and education opportunities are inclusive for all.

What advice would you offer to the university in helping to assist in creating a more inclusive campus? And what challenges do we currently face which is stopping us?

Rian James [00:18:47] If I may be so radical, I think it starts with holding people to account. I think this university needs to learn to hold people accountable when they get things wrong. There are far too many individuals in positions of power that are bigoted if I may be so frank. And, you know, I'm part of the transexual forum and we try to advocate for this. We hold events like Transexual Day Memorial and things like that. But there have been, you know, times where LGBTQ people have been under attack by their fellow students and we raise it up and it never get chased up, and then those people get into positions of power, whether it's in with certain societies or whatever, and we bring it up and raise it up and, they never get held to account. And what really needs to happen is those people need to kind of face some retribution for that because they're fully pushing their, you know, transphobic or homophobic agenda on public forums. And then we point this out and then it gets ignored, it's not good enough. You know, at university it starts with holding people accountable and saying you are doing something wrong. And, you know, it starts with that and then we go on to educate, but to make this place safer and for people to want to share their experience and educate, you need to hold the people who are doing the wrong things to account first, I feel for us to feel safe. And stop giving positions of power to those who are not accepting of students like us, you know, because how are we ever going to feel safe with a lecturer that we know is bigoted or a society president that is bigoted towards a group of people? How are we ever going to feel safe if they are given these positions of power but never held to account for their actions against us, even when we bring it up how is the university going to move forward if we don't hold account and say that we got this wrong and we're fixing it. And then we can educate because we feel we're in a place that we can educate and speak up, but we're not going to want to do that if there are people still in power who are going to stop us, or are going to threaten our lives and they have power and they have backing. And are free to do so because nobody's ever going to punish them or call them out on it.

Mauragh Scott [00:21:31] Yeah, I just want to agree with everything Rian has said as I guess newly joining the LGBTQI+ community, I have been quite unaware of some of the big things that have happened within the university. But hearing that, I agree with it and just going based on my own experience, I don't think the university just pinning up a pride flag every once in a while, is going to fix the issue. And like when I first came here nearly four years ago, I didn't know anything about LGBTQI+ in Aberdeen University, they didn't make it accessible. I felt like I had to go and hunt for that myself, even just in AUSA. And I understand it's really difficult right now because of Covid. So maybe that's why I've just had those experiences. But I do think that it shouldn't just be up to the LGBTQI+ students and faculty to fix this issue and people should be held to account. And because I agree, if that's not going to happen, then it's not going to be a more welcoming campus. And I think that sort of does open up to the city itself. Like maybe the city would be a lot safer for us if the university took more stands.

Ian Robotham [00:22:55] So kind of speaking as a member of staff and obviously someone that's been involved from the kind of university perspective, it's kind of disappointing and saddening to hear that those are the experiences that kind of our students are facing. I think from my perspective, I was a student at the university before I was a member of staff. And kind of I've seen that change over time as to kind of how experiences have changed. And it's quite interesting, really, because when I was a student at the AbFab, as it was back then, was an award-winning society. And so, you know, there was that, you know, really positive feel, at least from the student side around the LGBT+

community. I think from the staff side, we have been on a bit of a journey through my time here. We've joined the kind of Stonewall Diversity Champion scheme. We've seen kind of slow kind of incremental progress in improving things. And I am going to be incredibly biased here because I was quite heavily involved. But through the Aberdeen 2040 strategy, one of the whole strands that we had was around being inclusive. And I think that was really powerful and some of the commitments that the university has made for the future around the different characteristics and making the university a more inclusive environment will hopefully help continue to improve the experiences for our staff, students and in the local community. Just picking back up on one of the earlier points around the kind of rise in hate crime. I think that's something that we have seen. I think it's been to some extent amplified by Covid. But there's also been kind of that undercurrent for a while. And if we look back to some kind of surveys that were done back in 2017, 2018, you know, around two thirds of the LGBT plus community wouldn't feel comfortable holding hands with their partner in public. Two thirds of people, that's too high, that's not acceptable, because just imagine how that makes people feel. So, I think, you know, as a society, there is a lot to do as a university there's equally a lot to do. And hopefully, you know, through the continuous programmes of activity and getting some of this feedback, we can work together to make it safer, a more inclusive environment for everyone.

Bekah Walker [00:25:51] Thanks, guys, that's been really interesting to hear both perspectives from students and staff, and I do concur, and I've not been at the university for a huge amount of time working there. But even in my short time, I have seen that there is progress being made, slow progress, and we've got a long way to go. But I think we are heading in the right direction and doing what we can. And hopefully we can strive to do even more to make it inclusive for everyone. And I think we've had some really great conversations. It's been fantastic to hear your experiences. And I just wondered if we've got some people listening who are maybe struggling with their identity. Is there any advice that you would like to give someone who is struggling right now or who is having a bit of a hard time? Like what would you say to that person?

Rian James [00:26:44] For me, I would just say you're not alone. You're not as alone as you think you are. There are several different organizations that you can go to and you can turn to, you know, such as LGBTQ+ Scotland, I cannot remember the full organization name, or Scottish Transexual Alliance or, you know, even societies, and LGBTQ Forum or the Transexual Forum, you can turn to for support. There are places in the university and on the internet you can turn to and, you know, they have people you can call there's help lines nowadays that you didn't have back then that you can talk to if you need to call them. But you know, finding who you are and finding, you know, your sexuality or identity is a journey and it's a long one. It's never clean cut, it's never just like, oh I am this now, for me, it was a bit of an up-down of what am I? So, if you're struggling, you know, don't suffer alone. You can talk to people, you know, find people, you know, there's always going to be someone there, they are never on your own. And even though you may think it, and I know myself during lockdown, I live alone, I know what it feels like, oh, I'm alone, but you will find that actually there's a lot of people going through similar things. And will listen, you know. I know what I've said in this podcast is mostly, can be quite negative. But the positive thing I would take away from it is that there are people I have found, that are people at university, and I can talk to them if I need them. And there are places in university you can go where people will just, you know, hear you and help you and, you know, without any judgement. And I think that's important that we continue to strive to make an environment that is non-judgmental so you can find yourself. I think that's the only way you're ever going to discover yourself in an area where there's no judgement and you can try different things and different pronouns and different names and whatnot and find yourself, really. So, it's a

long journey and it's tiring, but I think it's worthwhile. But just don't struggle alone, reach out to any of the forums, you know, societies, friends, you know, alliances or whatever, groups out with and in with the university and don't struggle alone. That's just what I would say, you're never alone in this, even if you're wondering how much you might think you are, you're never alone, that is what I've learnt over the years. And best of luck to you.

Ian Robotham [00:29:35] Yes, and kind of just to echo and build on that. Absolutely, you're not alone and there are lots of sources of support either within the university, you know, either the student networks or the staff networks, whilst we are kind of staff focused, absolutely happy and delighted to hear from anyone that wants to talk and lots of organizations available online or by telephone. So, you've got things like switchboard, admittedly, they're based down in London, but have been running a great service and for many, many years. And I think just remember that it does get better. It's a line that we say quite a lot. And, you know, it can feel perhaps a little bit cheesy, but it's true. You know, just in my lifetime, I have seen the changes that have kind of happened both on kind of a personal level, but also on a society level. And I think, you know, we are on that pathway to improving things. So just remember that. And I think what I would also say is don't feel pressured. You know, you might come across people that particularly if this is the first time that you're kind of thinking about exploring things and coming out, you might feel pressured that you've got to come out, you've got to come out in a certain way or, you know, to be part of the LGBT+ community. You've got to act a certain way or dress a certain way or be into a certain kind of thing. The fact that you're LGBT is one small part of your personality. And as we know across society, there are many different things. We all have many different characteristics and, you know, the interplay between these different aspects. So, don't feel pressured to be a particular way or do a certain thing, take your own time, as we've said, and yeah do what's comfortable and what's right for you. And don't be afraid to reach out and ask for help.

Mauragh Scott [00:31:44] Yeah, just to repeat what my colleagues have said, again, because I think personally, I find that advice really comforting and yeah, and I know I have been really hard on Aberdeen as a city, but I have still found a lot of individuals and communities online who are working to help with the situation. So definitely check in on Facebook or Instagram. And, you know, the AUSA forums as well are a really great place. You're definitely not alone. And yeah, I thought Ian's point about feeling comfortable is really essential, especially as we've been talking about mental health. And this can take a toll on your mental health sometimes. And it's important to not feel ashamed by that. And if you need to do something to help your mental health, then do it, you know, because you know, you're the most important person in your life, so, yeah, it does get better even when it feels like it doesn't, even though that is a cheesy thing to say. Sometimes the best advice is the most cheesy. And yeah, just please reach out and please continue to have hope.

Bekah Walker [00:32:58] Thank you, guys. I think that advice has been really inspiring, and if anyone is listening today, and struggling, I think that will have really, really helped them. And if we've helped even just one person with the conversations that we've had in this podcast today, then then it's been a success. I would just like to thank the three of you Ian, Mauragh and Rian for coming along today. It's been great for you guys to use this platform and share your thoughts and your experiences with our listeners. I've certainly learnt a lot myself listening to your guys conversation, and it's been really enlightening and interesting for me. I would just like to reiterate again to our listeners, if you are struggling, as the guys have said, please, please know that you're not alone and that there is support available for you at the university or out with the university. Just speak to someone,

anyone, and get that support that you need. Finally, I'd just like to thank our listeners for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed the episode. Take care and I'll see you next time.

Voiceover [00:34:05] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.