Building inclusion and respect for our LGBTIQA+ communities



In this article inclusive/inclusivity refers to all within our communities receiving equal respect and opportunities regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

The state government has committed to developing WA's first whole-of -government LGBTIQA+ Inclusion Strategy. The aim of the strategy is to "drive inclusion and promote the well-being and full social and economic participation of all LGBTIQA+ people in WA through identifying priority areas and associated actions to foster long-term change."

The SSTUWA consulted with its LGBTIQA+ committee and received broader member feedback for a submission to government. All feedback received covered the lived experiences of LGBTIQA+ members, with support and solidarity from ally members.

Furthermore, the SSTUWA's submission included input from the SSTUWA's Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Policy and the union's work with the Australian Education Union (AEU). This article will contain some of the points made in the submission.

Current support in schools

The SSTUWA acknowledges that the Department of Education (DoE) has an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion plan 2021-2025 that considers the diverse backgrounds of students, staff and families within schools.

The DoE's plan focuses on workplace inclusion and equitable opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. The only specific reference to LGBTIQA+ is noted in the inclusive and equitable workplaces focus area: "Collaborate with organisations representing people with diverse sexualities and genders to build awareness and support."[1] There are a number of general actions in the plan that could be considered as relevant and inclusive of LGBTIQA+.

The DoE offers an optional online professional learning (PL) course for teachers entitled "Creating supportive and inclusive environments for gender diverse students." The PL covers some relevant information on inclusivity, some legal and policy obligations and challenges faced by gender diverse students. The PL, however, misses out on useful strategies that can be

applied to a range of queer issues that arise and also lacks more targeted information and scenarios impacted in primary and secondary settings.

With only the online PL to use, there is an obvious lack in face-to-face support and training. The Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) program was defunded by the state government in October 2020. This program, formally known as Inclusive Education WA, provided schools with tools needed to create a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for LGBTIQA+ students.

The SSTUWA member feedback shows that the gap left by defunding the SSCA has never been filled by the online PL. In fact, Pride WA reported to us that they have received many calls from schools who are desperate for workshops and resources to be provided in a face-to-face manner. The union knows that the SSCA was more than just a mental health stop gap for LGBTIQA+ youth. The online training does not have the same impact or support as provided by the SSCA. We need our government to fund this program as a necessity, rather than an opt-in, like the online PL.

Teachers can also use Equal Opportunity Commission WA's (EOC) Sexual and Gender Diversity Guidelines in supporting schools, though this is not widely shared or known.

In 2022, the DoE established its Diversity Alliance Network (DAN) as a way to support and create inclusive work practices for staff with diverse sexualities and/or genders. Membership includes all LGBTIQA+ staff and allies.

To date, members have reported that progress has been slow, with little or no support strategies being established for LGBTIQA+ staff.

Current support in TAFE

Department of Training and Workforce Development (DTWD) also has a Workforce Diversification and Inclusion Strategy plan 2021-2025. The two priority areas are workforce diversification and workforce inclusion. Unlike the DoE's plan, this plan clearly outlines employment outcomes for people of diverse sexualities and genders (PDSG). The actions highlighted in the plan clearly outline how to "educate and empower" staff, "attract and develop", "lead and build" and hold to "account and celebrate"[2] people of diverse sexualities and genders.

The implementation of this action plan, however, is dependent on the college. Resourcing is a key issue, thus resulting in an inconsistent approach in the delivery of the action items. An example of this is the action to "Implement a PDSG-focused education and awareness workshop as part of the Department's centralised Professional Development Program, delivered by PDSG organisations such as Pride in Diversity, Living Proud WA or Transfolk WA."[3]

It is imperative that any action plan supporting LGBTIQA+ staff and lecturers must be funded and resourced properly; the union appeals to the state government to consider this when creating priority areas within the strategy.

Supporting LGBTIQA+ education communities: clear policies and procedures

In all educational settings, there needs to be clear and explicit policies that outline how LGBTIQA+ staff and students can be supported. This must include:

- Clear procedures on dealing with behaviours of discrimination including hate speech towards LGBTIQA+ people.
- All policies and procedures must use inclusive language to build a culture of respect and safety. This includes, but not limited to, the use of gender-neutral language (where applicable) to remove the assumption of gender.
- Policy on how to handle name changes for students undergoing gender transition. This should outline procedures for chosen names both with and without parent support and legally changed names with and without parent support.
- Processes for ensuring that students undergoing transition at school are accessing some form of appropriate counselling.
- Policy that requires accessible non-gendered bathrooms and change-room options for any student or staff who requires them.
- Clear policy on gendered uniforms. It should be made clearer that all staff and students are permitted to wear any uniform item defined for their cohort. Dresses, skirts, pants, etc. are not to be limited by gender or sex.
- Providing tailored and accessible documentation that makes clear the rights of LGBTIQA+ individuals and the responsibility the whole community has to uphold these rights, especially for parents and community members who come from nations with different values and expectations.
- How to set up and manage an LGBTIQA+ student club.

Supporting LGBTIQA+ staff

Schools and TAFE colleges are microcosms of society. The staff in educational settings are the backbone of our society. Our members reported that LGBTIQA+ staff need to be respected and heard, and this modelling is crucial for students to see.

Member feedback showed that though educational settings tried to combat discrimination, a lack of clarity on how to tackle discrimination is the key issue.

Though there is anti-discrimination legislation based on sexuality and gender for schools and workplaces, there are no laws in Western Australia, protecting LGBTIQA+ people from any hate speech, whether online or in public.

LGBTIQA+ employees are twice as likely to be victims of workplace discrimination compared to their non LGBTIQA+ colleagues.[4] Thirty-one per cent of LGBTIQA+ employee reported that not enough was done to educate all employees on the issues facing LGBTIQA+ communities.[5]

What was most concerning and what our members have also reported: Almost two in three LGBTIQA+ employees who have experienced or witnessed discrimination say these issues are rarely or never resolved.[6]

The SSTUWA recommends that schools and TAFE colleges have a well-structured staff forum for those who identify. We know that the DoE already has DAN as stated earlier in this article; proper consultation on the gaps in the system and how to support staff will be crucial.

Dealing with discrimination and hate speech

All educational settings require in service inclusive practises as a way to deal with the impacts of discrimination on LGBTIQA+ people. The unacceptability of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heterosexism and monosexism must be included in the codes of conduct of departments, schools and colleges.
There must be a zero tolerance policy against homophobic hate speech.

Most educational settings understand this behaviour is unacceptable, but there needs to be explicit instructions on how to deal with perpetrators, and consequences, if necessary. There is a perception in the LGBTIQA+ community that the reason for such hesitation is out of fear that members of the school community who are not sympathetic to the rights of LGBTIQA+ peoples will shun the school, and they will find themselves in trouble for promoting a “woke” agenda.

There is nothing woke when ensuring LGBTIQA+ students and staff are treated with respect, free from any forms of discrimination and hate speech.

All students and staff must have the opportunity to maximise their learning potential and teaching, regardless of their sexual orientation and/or preferred gender identity. Inclusion of days such as IDAHOBIT Day and Wear It Purple Day help to celebrate and recognise people of diverse sex, sexuality and gender, and should be highlighted every year. Schools and TAFE colleges should be provided with funding, resources and support from DoE and DTWD on how to run these days. More information on Wear it Purple Day 2025 can be found on the opposite page.

Leave provisions

Another issue which impacts all workers in WA is the state’s outdated parental leave and surrogacy laws. Under the *Surrogacy Act 2008*, WA permits altruistic surrogacy but imposes strict eligibility criteria.

Eligible parties include heterosexual couples (married or de facto) and single women. Ineligible parties include same-sex male couples and single men.

This makes WA the only Australian jurisdiction where gay couples (and single men) are explicitly excluded from accessing altruistic surrogacy. Such restrictions have compelled many to seek surrogacy arrangements overseas, often at significant personal and financial cost.

Clearly, this affects the whole of Western Australia’s public sector workforce supply. Interestingly, despite being the most backward jurisdiction when it comes to altruistic surrogacy, WA was the first Australian state to allow same-sex couples to adopt.

The SSTUWA urges the state government to change its surrogacy and parental leave laws so that all Western Australians have the same reproductive rights, regardless of sexual orientation.

Finally, gender affirmation/transition leave should be implemented across all sectors. If we want to have a fair and just society, we need this leave entitlement to be implemented across all sectors. This is about providing safety mechanisms for anyone who wants to enter teaching/lecturing.

The cost management of this will be small, as it will only impact a few employees, but the impact of this will be great. It will say to those who want to transition that they are seen and accepted by their employer.

In DoE's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Plan of 2021-2025, it states: "We know that when staff feel included, respected and valued at work, their wellbeing and professional skills flourish, leading to improved learning outcomes for students. Indeed, affirming the identifies of our workforce will support the students of Western Australia to also embrace their identities."[7]

Similarly, in DTWD's Workforce Diversification and Inclusion Strategy plan 2021-2025 it claims "We are committed to increasing the representation of people from diverse backgrounds at all levels, and ensuring our staff experience a sense of belonging and inclusion at work."[8]

The SSTUWA commends the WA government on the development of this strategy to drive inclusion and promote wellbeing for LGBTIQA+ people, and we hope that the SSTUWA's submission will help towards the state government's first LGBTIQA+ inclusive strategy and action plan.

References

1. Department of Education Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Plan 2021-2025, p11.
2. DTWD Workforce Diversification and Inclusion Strategy plan 2021-2025, p9.
3. Ibid., p9.
4. SEEK P.R.I.D.E Report Promoting Real Inclusion, Diversity and Empowerment in the workplace 2021, p9.
5. Ibid., p11.
6. Ibid., p12.
7. Department of Education Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Plan 2021-2025, p2.
8. DTWD Workforce Diversification and Inclusion Strategy plan 2021-2025, p1.



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