# At Least a Rainbow Flag: Queer Students' Perceptions of University Responses to Queerphobic Terrorist Attack

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*Abstract*

*This paper explores how queer students perceived the higher education institutions' responses to a deadly queerphobic terrorist attack which took place on October 12, 2022 in Bratislava, Slovakia. Drawing on data collected after the attack from 34 college students from Slovakia, the study employs thematic analysis to uncover key themes. Symbolic gestures, such as displaying the pride flag, were described by participants as important steps toward inclusion, but the study reveals the need for institutions to move beyond symbolism. The participants emphasize the importance of inclusive policies, training programs, counseling resources, and real systemic changes to create truly safe and inclusive spaces. The paper underscores concerns about institutional reluctance to implement such measures, despite research supporting their positive effects.*

*Keywords: LGBTI+ inclusion; diversity and inclusion in higher education; institutional response to terrorism.*

## 1. Introduction

To promote and support student health and wellbeing, including academic success, it is critical that colleges create safe and inclusive spaces for all students, especially the LGBTI+ minority (Rankin et al., 2010). Both overt and subtle forms of discrimination on campus result in student's worse mental health (Woodford et al., 2014; Amodeo et al., 2020). Positive perceptions and institutional response perceptions significantly influence LGBTI+ student's likelihood of remaining at an educational institution, their academic success (Garvey et al., 2018) and even rates of experiencing sexual assault victimization (Coulter & Rankin, 2020).

In this paper, we examine how LGBTI+ students perceive higher education institutions' responses to a deadly terrorist attack targeting their community. Focusing on LGBTI+ students' perceptions allows us to explore their unique experiences of marginalization, particularly concerning physical violence. Our analysis reveals that symbolic gestures, like displaying the

rainbow pride flag, significantly influence students' sense of inclusion after such attacks. However, both participant feedback and existing research underscore the need for institutions to move beyond symbolic gestures and adopt inclusive policies, training, and counseling to support the LGBTI+ community effectively.

## 2. LGBTI+ Issues in Slovakia

Slovakia has legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender in employment, commerce, healthcare, and education. However, tolerance towards LGBTI+ individuals in Slovakia is among the lowest in the European Union (European Commission, 2019, Poushter & Kent, 2020). The experiences and attitudes of LGBTI+ people in Slovakia were surveyed in a 2017 online survey (Kuruc & Jablonická Zezulová, 2017). More than half of the respondents reported having experienced harassment, violence, or verbal assault related to their LGBTI+ identity with 16 % of the victims having experienced physical violence. Another online survey (FRA, 2020) found that 1 in 10 surveyed LGBQ individuals in Slovakia experienced an attack within the last 5 years. Victims rarely report such incidents to the relevant institutions such as the police, employers or school. Despite the well-documented negative effects of intolerant climate in education (Woodford et al., 2014), educational institutions may be amongst the least safe spaces for Slovak LGBTI+ individuals with a significant portion of the discrimination perpetrated by teachers or staff at schools. Schools are also some of the most likely places where harassment, violence, and verbal assault is experienced by Slovak LGBTI+ individuals (Kuruc & Jablonická Zezulová, 2017).

### 2.1. October 12 Terrorist Attack

On the evening of October 12, 2022 a 19-year-old man shot three people with a handgun in front of *Tepláreň*, an openly queer bar. Two members of the LGBTI+ community, one of them a student of the Faculty of Arts of the Comenius University, succumbed to their wounds. The third wounded person survived. The assailant committed suicide few hours after the attack. Before the attack, the assailant posted a 65-page manifesto on Twitter, outlining ideological reasons for the attack, including antisemitic, homophobic and transphobic conspiracy theories. The manifesto and online comments indicated that he adhered to a militant white supremacist accelerationist ideology. His actions were influenced in part by the acts of past far-right shooters, far-right social media platforms, and the rise of far-right populism (Basha, 2022).

The attack was condemned by political figures and government institutions in Slovakia. Some institutions included displays of LGBTI+ symbols. A bill establishing same-sex partnerships was proposed in the Slovak parliament, but it failed to pass the initial vote. The criminal investigation of the attack was closed in 2024, classifying the act as a terrorist attack. The police opened several cases against individuals publicly supporting the attack.

## 3. Methodology

The goal of our case study was to investigate how LGBTI+ students reflect on the responses of their universities after the terrorist attack. We were interested in how their school responded to this event, how they perceived the response, and what response would they consider appropriate. In the study, we chose a qualitative approach. Data collection took place in the form of a questionnaire consisting of open questions. The questionnaire was anonymous, participants could indicate their gender and preferred pseudonym, which we use when referring to them throughout the paper. To obtain the research set, we used a deliberate selection. The student LGBTI+ club Light* and other individuals helped us distribute the questionnaire. In total, our sample of participants consisted of 34 people. We analyze the data obtained through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used MaxQDA for data analysis. First, we coded the entire set of data, while using an inductive approach - we did not start from predetermined codes, but we identified meaningful segments that the participants pointed to in their answers and subsequently assigned codes. Based on the iteratively obtained resulting codes, we searched for common themes that these codes pointed to.

## 4. Results

Based on the data analysis, we identified five topics, which we present in this section.

### 4.1. Official Statements

Most of the colleges the participants studied at have commented on the terrorist attack. These statements often contained a condemnation of this attack, which several participants perceived as the bare minimum. Participants evaluated more positively if, in addition to condemning the attack, the school also expressed solidarity towards and support for its LGBTI+ students. Some of them also appreciated the support they received from teachers. Matthew said: *"An official statement was issued condemning the attack and a number of lecturers stressed in class that LGBTI people can feel safe on campus and offered us space to talk face-to-face if needed."* and further stated that this reaction of his school has significantly helped. On the contrary, the participants perceived it as insufficient if the school only condemned the attack, but did not specifically express support for LGBTI+ people in any way. Alex described: *"Of course the school condemned the attack. At the same time, however, the faculty management actively prevented various forms of expression of solidarity with the LGBT+ community. I'm not sure if it was due to personal opinions or just trying to "get along with everyone" and maintain the status quo, but solidarity actions and statements at any higher level were (to the best of my knowledge) rejected without exception."* Like other participants who reported the same experience, Alex also felt hurt by this attitude.

Several participants also considered it important that the school, in connection with the attacks, directly condemned queerphobic violence. Contrary to this, some of them had the experience that their school did not mention the affected community at all in its statement. Teo stated: *"...the rector wrote a status condemning this attack. However, in his statement, like many politicians, he avoided naming the community against which this attack was directed"*. Adam had a similar experience when his school responded only after he publicly called for a response. Following his call, *"they subsequently wrote that they condemn various forms of discrimination, without mentioning Queer people"*. However, several participants also had a positive experience. For example, Bea stated that her school: *"Condemned any violence against LGBTI+ [people]"*. This reaction made her feel grateful.

Several participants noted that their school did not react at all or at least they were unaware of any reaction. They mostly took this lack of response quite hard. They were disappointed with their school and felt that it was not interested in them and that they were left alone. Judita described her experience with the words: *"It was terrible, lack of interest and ignorance of the tragedy. The absence of any reaction really shocked me."* It was especially devastating to the students if their school had previously expressed deep condolences for another recent tragic event, and at the same time, did not reflect on the terrorist attack on Tepláreň at all or addressed it to a much lesser extent. Lea attributed her school's lack of response to the fact that it was a religious school. Nevertheless, she was disappointed by the lack of response: *"Even though the school is a christian school, they should have expressed their condolences for this tragedy as part of solidarity. Don't keep quiet."* It confirmed her opinion that *"Dogmatic Christians do not see a problem in such situations because it does not affect them. They are not willing to express even words of sympathy."*

## 4.2. Raising the Pride Flag

The participants also considered the display of the rainbow pride flag to be one of the important expressions of support and belonging. Similar to the condemnation of the attack, some participants even saw this act as the least their school could do. We can find such an attitude in the words of Emil, who said about the reaction of his faculty that it was *"zero, they simply refused to at least raise a rainbow flag to show solidarity."* Similarly, Momo opined that the university should have responded to the attack by *"hanging a rainbow flag on the main building, for starters."* His experience was that the university did not hang the pride flag at all, and the faculty also did not manage to do it in a completely exemplary way: *"I remember that a rainbow flag hung at our faculty for a few days. Upside down, but the gesture probably counts..."*

## 4.3. Provision of Counseling

Several participants perceived that their school should have provided counseling to its LGBTI+ students after the attack. However, based on participants' responses, this was often not the case.

In the data, we found a direct link to only one university that provided counseling to its LGBTI+ students directly after the attack. The students also perceived a lack of general LGBTI+ friendly counseling services provided by their schools.

## 4.4. Education on the LGBTI+ Issues - Lectures, Discussions, Training

Several participants expressed the opinion that the attack should have encouraged universities or individual faculties to organize lectures, discussions, and training on topics related to the LGBTI+ community and thus help eliminate the fear of the unknown. Based on the participants' statements, we conclude that, in this regard, too, most faculties failed to step up. Only Tereza mentioned that her school started organizing supplementary education on the topics of queer students and pupils. She evaluated the experience positively: *"I am very grateful for this training, it also seems to me to be a good tool for connecting the queer community at the faculty."* Lea mentioned her experience, which, however, distressed her at the time: *"One professor discussed [the attack] in lecture from the aspect of terrorism. I left the lecture, since it was fresh after this event and it didn't feel good to listen to it."*

Several participants pointed out that although their school responded to the attack quite well, some teachers made inappropriate remarks. Mish felt that further training of staff could improve the situation. She evaluated: *"Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to organize training for teachers on sensitive expression and handling of similar topics."* The same opinion was reached by Lu, who stated that *"inclusive education courses should be made mandatory for people who teach."*

## 4.5 Steps Towards Real Change

Several participants expressed their conviction that the attack should have motivated their school not only to words and gestures of solidarity, but also to take steps that would lead to real change. Among the expected changes were the use of preferred pronouns and names in student documents, inclusive allocation of dormitories, introduction of inclusive bathrooms, improvement of the process of reporting discriminatory incidents and, last but not least, stronger action against queerphobic expressions and attitudes of teachers. Most of these participants reflected that no real changes had taken place and if the university did promise something, *"mostly it was just empty promises"* (Emil). Even Momo, who was actively involved in challenging his university with specific proposals, eventually got the feeling that it was a futile struggle: *"We had the opportunity to discuss [these issues] with the university management. Some of the demands were completely rejected, others were promised to us, but until this day these promises have not been fulfilled. It was from this meeting that I left even more devastated than when I came there. This fight stopped making sense to me at that point"*, further adding, *"The university should be proactive in this regard. We, as a student body, should not go to the leadership and beg for basic respect. For a little inclusivity. I'm sorry, it annoys me. I believe*

*that the university could have done so much more. It still could. Even though we offered them specific options for change for the better at a meeting, nothing happened. It terrifies me."* Simona also expressed a similar opinion that the school should be more active and take more real steps. In contrast to Momo, she perceived that certain changes are taking place at her school, which she evaluated positively: *"Changes that are gradually made and implemented are important and valued"*, but at the same time she perceived that these changes are happening slowly and the school should have made a more radical shift: *"Listening to excuses like "give us time, we have to get used to it" should have long since passed, because this is how society has been talking since time immemorial, and I don't know how many people still have to die for the majority society to understand."*

In the data, we found only one mention of satisfaction with real changes. In this case, however, the change did not come from the school management, but from the teachers: *"I now perceive a very specific environment through the teachers who appealed to create better conditions for LGBTI people in society, talked to the student body and returned to the topic as positive. I think something has moved forward."* (Matthew)

## 5. Discussion

Our analysis shows that in response to queerphobic terrorism symbolic gestures such as displays of the pride flag or inclusion of LGBTI+ community within official statements were perceived by queer students as meaningful steps towards inclusion. Yet, many colleges failed to provide any response, while in some cases the public debates sparked by the attack were commented on by queerphobic teachers, exacerbating queer students' feelings of exclusion.

Symbolic gestures, such as raising LGBTQ+ flag, can be seen as merely performative (Kultaca & Radke, 2022), especially when they are not followed by more significant steps towards social change. The responses of our participants, as well as previous research indicate that in order to increase perceptions of inclusion for LGBTI+ students, higher education institutions need to go beyond such symbolic gestures and create truly safe and inclusive spaces (Rankin et al., 2010) via inclusive policies (Garvey et al., 2017, Pitcher et al., 2018), LGBTI+ training and resource centers (Garvey et al., 2017, Gilbert et al., 2021). Even small steps can have positive effects on student wellbeing by validating their experiences and increasing their sense of belonging, and signaling inclusive values outwards may have an effect on public opinion by raising awareness. However, such efforts are futile if they're not followed by actionable steps that signal institutional commitment to bringing about social change.

The participants often expressed their concern that the management of their schools fails to implement such policies due to fear of backlash or other negative effects. These apprehensions are not supported by research which shows that such policies have only positive effects (Black et al., 2014) and that college experiences involving interaction with LGBTI+ individuals

(Sevecke et al., 2015; Barbir et al., 2017), *"safe zone"* symbols (Katz et al., 2016) and coursework focusing on related issues (Rogers et al., 2009) contribute to expanded knowledge, reduced stereotypes, and increased acceptance of diversity, particularly in relation to LGBTI+ matters among all students.

It is important to note that our data was collected several months after the attack, which could have been reflected in participants' accounts. Their reflections in retrospect, after little to no changes were made, may have been more shaped by disappointment, especially if the overall climate immediately after the attack was hopeful. Future research should focus on how different institutional gestures and actions are perceived by their students in more detail, and what effect they have on feelings of inclusion and wellbeing.

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