



FROM *HOMO'POLY* TO *OPENUP!* LESSONS LEARNED ON LGB IN EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS ACROSS EUROPE

LOTTE GEUNIS¹ & OLIVER HOLZ²

Potrjeno/Accepted
3. 2. 2020

¹ Maastricht University, UNI-MERIT, Maastricht, Netherlands

² University of Leuven, Faculty of Economics and Business, Brussels, Belgium

Objavljeno/Published
27. 3. 2000

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR/KORESPONDENČNI AVTOR
oliver.holz@kuleuven.be

Keywords:
Education, LGBT+,
Europe, ERASMUS+,
homophobia

Ključne besede:
Izobraževanje, LGBT+,
Evropa, ERASMUS+,
homofobnost

UDK/UDC
316.367.7-057.87(4)

Abstract/Povzetek This paper captures the lessons learned from *Homo'poly*, an ERASMUS+ project on awareness and understanding of homosexuality in schools. *Homo'poly* was implemented between 2016 and 2019 in eight European countries: Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey, Hungary and the United Kingdom. Throughout the project, partner institutions noted that homophobia, a lack of wider community engagement and (notably in Central and Eastern Europe) limited political support proved to be significant stumbling blocks. The authors build on a survey of partner institutions to further explore these challenges and set out proposed directions for future activities and research.

Od *Homo' poly* do *OpenUp!* Spoznanja o LGB v vzgoji in izobraževanju – pridobljena v šolah širom Evrope

Članek zajema spoznanja iz projekta ERASMUS+ *Homo' poly* o zavedanju in razumevanju homoseksualnosti v šolah. Projekt *Homo' poly* je od 2016 do 2019 potekal v osmih evropskih državah: v Belgiji, Nemčiji, na Nizozemskem, na Poljskem, v Španiji, Turčiji, na Madžarskem in v Združenem kraljestvu. Med projektom so partnerske institucije opažale, da so se homofobnost, pomanjkanje angažiranja širše skupnosti ter (zlasti v Srednji in Vzhodni Evropi) omejena politična podpora izkazali kot pomembne ovire. Da bi te izzive še nadalje raziskali ter predstavili predlagane usmeritve za prihodnje dejavnosti in raziskovanje, avtorji gradijo na pregledu partnerskih institucij.

<https://doi.org/10.18690/rei.13.1.41-53.2020>

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Introduction

This paper presents a critical review of *Homo'poly*, an ERASMUS+ project implemented from 2016 to 2019, and shares lessons learned from those involved. *Homo'poly* sought to build awareness and understanding of LGB issues in education across Europe, building partnerships between secondary and tertiary education institutions in eight countries. The project offered a unique opportunity to explore how schools across the continent are engaging on this issue, and what education providers might wish to take on board going forward. This paper first outlines *Homo'poly*'s objectives and key results. It then addresses three key take-aways: 1) persistent homophobia, in particular in Central and Eastern Europe; 2) the need to go beyond the school gates and include the wider community; and 3) the pivotal power of high-level political support. The article further elucidates these findings through the results of a survey conducted by the project's Steering Group. Lastly, the authors propose a draft framework for a follow-up project. While this is not a typical research paper, the authors trust that the findings presented will serve to inform researchers and practitioners alike.

***Homo'poly*: promoting awareness and understanding of homosexuality in education**

The strategic partnership '*Homo'poly*' (ERASMUS+, Key action 2) contributed towards a better understanding of homosexuality in secondary and tertiary education. The project was introduced as a cross-sectoral approach. The project was active in eight countries (14 institutions from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey, Hungary and the United Kingdom), working closely with a participating university and a secondary school in each. *Homo'poly* has target students and lecturers at teaching education in university colleges and universities, teachers in secondary education, and students at secondary schools. Through *Homo'poly* the participating institutions implemented, tested and evaluated the resources created by the project. The project proposal for *Homo'poly* was submitted to the National Agency NUFFIC in the Netherlands in spring 2016. It was one of seven 'strategic partnerships - higher education' - project proposals approved by the Agency, out of a total of 43. The project started in September 2016, finished in August 2019 and was funded at just under 400,000 Euro.

The consortium was inspired by an important European Parliament resolution from March 2016. The parliament asked the European Commission to systematically ensure the equality of and discrimination against LGBTIQ people. In this resolution, the European Parliament demanded“(…) to include ‘the rights, perspectives and well-being of LGBTIQ people’ in all gender mainstreaming activities”. The author of the report, Mlinar, stressed in this context “Women and LGBTIQ people fight the same fight to end violence and discrimination.” (European Parliament, 2016)

Around the same time, the Organizing Bureau of European School Student Unions pointed out: “All curricular materials should include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer perspectives and contain inclusive materials for all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, both as part of generic materials, and if possible, as standalone materials which specifically deal with LGBTIQ issues. Including non-mainstream sexual orientations and gender identities in the classroom and across all curricular materials extends beyond sex and emotional education. All identities should be mentioned in all subjects.” (Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions, 2016)

The project aimed to raise awareness of homosexuality and reduce discrimination, and to promote the acceptance of minorities. With the realization of the project the consortium pursued the following goals:

1. Comprehensive inventory and comparative analysis of the current situation regarding homosexuality in the eight project countries. The purpose of this analysis was to identify the tasks, objectives and content of gender equality in schools as well as extra-curricular initiatives in other educational institutions. The results of this comprehensive inventory were published in 2018 under the title *Somewhere over the rainbow*. The comparative analysis is available in the journal *INTERNATIONAL SOCIOLOGY*. (2019)

2. Development of a curricular module ‘Gender & Homosexuality’ covering aspects such as ‘different ways of living, ‘sexual identities’, ‘coming-out’ as well as ‘sexual health’.

3. Development of a curricular module 'Migration & Homosexuality' covering aspects such as 'leaving and arriving', 'gays and lesbians with a migration background', 'roles, pictures, fears' as well as 'supporting institutions and organisations'.

Both modules can be implemented (partly or as a whole) in the programmes of teacher training curricula. All material is digitally available on the project website www.homopoly.eu and can be used by institutions of higher education or all other interested visitors of the website.

4. Development, implementation and evaluation of didactic materials for and in secondary education. The project team developed 12 didactic materials on gender and homosexuality and migration and homosexuality, accessible on www.homopoly.eu/learning. The implementation of the material was done according to the country-specific conditions.

5. Development of a knowledge portal, www.homopoly.eu, which provides all developed resources at least until 2024.

6. The project consortium organized a multiplier event during the third year of the project. This event was held on 17 and 18 May 2019 in Leuven, Belgium. All project activities and results across all target groups mentioned above were summarized during this 2- day conference.

With the completion of the project in August 2019 scientific and didactic materials was developed and is and will be available. These materials:

- extend the courses of teacher education and/ or other pedagogical disciplines to include gender issues;
- sensitize teachers and other staff of secondary schools;
- sensitize pupils and students of secondary school and university colleges/ universities.

Reflections

As the project came to a close, project partners set out to carefully consider lessons learned and take-aways for future work in this area. Three key lessons are shared below. It is hoped that these inspire reflection and further (academic) engagement on these issues.

Going against the grain: homophobia in Eastern Europe and Turkey

The comprehensive geographical reach of *Homo'poly* was considered a major strength of the project, but the Steering Group fully anticipated challenges. Cultural differences in the 'West' are manifest in gender-specific education and upbringing, in gender-specific interactions and attitudes towards tolerance, diversity, and homosexuality. But unsurprisingly, it was in the participating countries from Central and Eastern Europe and Turkey that *Homo'poly* experienced its most notable challenges.

In Poland, under the persistent influence of the Catholic Church, educational institutions are being directed to remove all references to sexual diversity or LGBT+ from the national curricula. On top of this, strong political pressure along the same lines means that it is nearly impossible for school administrations to protect their LGB students and staff. This made it difficult for our participating schools and teachers to develop and test the project materials – and it is to their great credit that quality results were achieved in such a difficult context. Note the final piece of feedback from the testing phase in Poland: *“Information about my lessons has spread through the word of mouth. In another school where I teach (for 4 months), the pupils themselves suggested that I should teach them a lesson that they have already heard about from their peers from another school, my mother's institution. I was surprised that students from other schools communicate to each other what is happening in their classes. It was a very positive and pleasant experience.”*

In Hungary, results were similarly positive – due in large part to the concerted efforts of the partners, who had been involved in similar projects before and had strong personal commitments to these issues. While *Homo'poly* is proud of the results it has delivered, it remains regrettable that these are due the result of individual efforts, not

systematic or structural changes towards a more positive view or acceptance of LGB. This, it appears, remains a long way off.

In Turkey, collaboration with the tertiary institution was equally agreeable, but no secondary school was willing to participate. Throughout the course of the project, the political context became more difficult. Project partners suspect that engagement on LGB issues in education is unlikely to develop positively in the near future. While our participating institution and staff remain as committed as ever, they have indicated that, in light of these trends, participation in a potential follow-up project is highly unlikely.

Going beyond the school gates: it takes a village

In many ways, significant progress has been made in recent years, in no small part thanks to the tireless efforts of national organisations such as Stonewall (UK), Çavaria (Belgium), COC (The Netherlands) and others. European as well as national guidance, at least in Western Europe, now reflects a commitment to diversity and inclusion for all, and a significant range of tools and resources are available to schools and teachers who choose to make this a priority. All that being said, much work remains to be done to make schools across Europe more socially inclusive. *Homo'poly* believes that schools stand to gain much from working with pupils, not just for them, but for their wider communities in building a more safe, secure and welcoming learning environment for all. This kind of 'co-creation' - mostly with pupils, but also with parents and the wider school community - maximises the potential for schools to meet real needs, pushing the envelope on social inclusion but still staying faithful to their context and culture. This is a tried and tested approach for delivering meaningful and measurable change.

High-level political backing opens doors

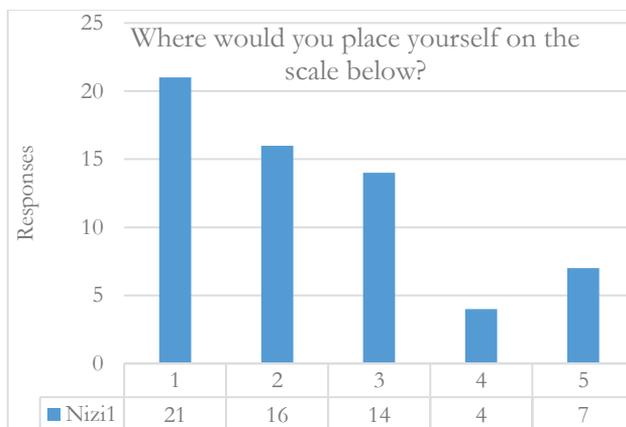
Homo'poly's focus on 'social inclusion' aligns closely with the EU's political priorities. The European Parliament adopted a resolution on 14 February 2019 calling on the Commission to tackle the gender equality backlash targeting LGBTI people across Europe, prioritise LGBTI rights in its work in 2019-2024, and mainstream an intersectional perspective in its work, among others. Reintke MEP, co-chair of the LGBTI Intergroup and shadow rapporteur for the resolution (Greens/EFA)

commented that “We look forward to see the European Commission address the current backlash against gender equality – which impacts LGBTI people directly – in its current and future work. The resolution adopted with a strong majority is a clear mandate for the Commission to present a full-fledged strategy on LGBTI right with an intersectional perspective.” With a topic as sensitive and contested as LGB, having high-level political backing and financial support opens doors. *Homo'poly* would not have achieved its results without the EU stamp of approval – the fact that these issues are supported by European leaders and programs bring people, projects and schools to the table. The rise of populism across the continent is a worrying trend for all of those working on the acceptance of LGB issues – both in schools and beyond. It is hoped that, by showing the significant impact of a relatively small project on the educational institutions, staff and pupils involved, further resources will continue to be dedicated to this important agenda in the future.

What's next? Inputs from Central and Eastern Europe

To build on these reflections, and to further explore the issues that emerged in the project's Central and Eastern European partners in particular, *Homo'poly's* Steering Group conducted a survey between 16 October 2019 and 3 November 2019. The survey targeted the Steering Group's network in this region, inviting teaching professionals and students to share their experiences and insights with regard to LGBT issues in education in their institution and country. A total of 62 responses from eight countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey and Ukraine) were returned. 87 % of respondents are active in tertiary education, 11 % in secondary education and 2 % in primary education.

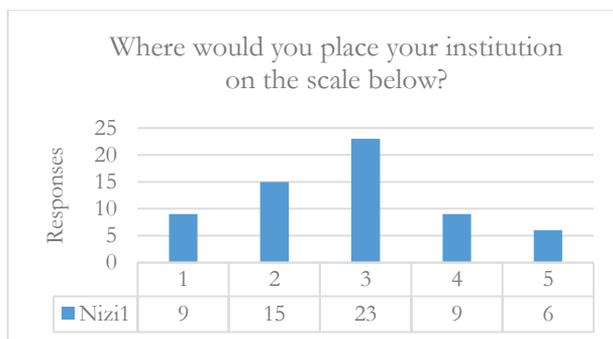
Asked where they would place themselves on a scale from ‘very comfortable with LGBT+ issues’ (1) to ‘very uncomfortable with LGBT+ issues’ (5), just under 40 % consider themselves very comfortable, with just over 11 % indicating they are very uncomfortable:



1 = I am very comfortable with LGBT+ issues; 5 = I am very uncomfortable with LGBT+ issues

Figure 1: How comfortable are you with LGBT+ issues?

These – largely positive – responses are not representative of Central and Eastern Europe as a whole. The 2019 Eurobarometer findings indicated that “In Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, for instance over 50 % of respondents do not believe that LGB people should have the same rights as heterosexuals, while high numbers across 11 member states believe there is something wrong in a sexual relationship between two persons of the same sex” (ILGA Europe, 2019). Additional Eurobarometer findings confirm these trends, with Central and Eastern Europe consistently registering lower levels of acceptance of LGB people (Eurobarometer, 2019). These realities are reflected in the open-ended responses received. 31 respondents (50 %) indicated that they “had never dealt with LGBT+ issues in their educational institutions”, which in itself can be considered indicative of a culture of silence or secrecy. Half a dozen respondents explicitly denied knowing any LGB staff or students. Homophobia was recognized as a persistent problem for both staff and students: one respondent indicated that “I have many students still not admitting they are gay. Homophobia affects more than 80 % of my students.”; another confirmed that “My LGBT students do not come out directly and I haven’t had a chance to deal with this issue.” Even where LGB relations can be discussed, these discussions only go so far. Generic statements that ‘love is love’ are accepted by some – but even where “We can discuss some things, but [we can only discuss] slightly about the real deeds.” Asked to map their institution on a scale from ‘very comfortable with LGBT issues’ to ‘very uncomfortable with LGBT issues’, respondents largely veered towards a middle ground, with outliers at either end:



1 = My institution is very comfortable with LGBT+ issues; 5 = My institution is very uncomfortable with LGBT+ issues

Figure 2: How comfortable is your institution with LGBT+ issues?

Elaborating on what (if any) LGB issues their institution addresses, 25 respondents indicated nothing was being done: “Absolutely nothing is done by the uni. I get the impression that only in creative speaking classes we talk about these issues with students. Nobody teaches the teachers-to- be how to deal with students who could decide to come out in the classroom. Drama.” The remaining respondents note at least a minimal effort to address these issues, with a focus on bullying and related concerns (nine), coming out and sexual health (six respondents), and transgenderism (three). Several respondents note, however, that little is structured, and that much is left to the discretion – and knowledge – of individual teachers: “I don’t know my colleagues’ approach, and there are no official topics. I talk about those issues in connection with respect for human dignity.” The country studies delivered as part of *Homo’poly’s* first phase confirm that structured approaches to the issue still prove elusive, and that integrating LGB issues remains beyond reach: “It would be better to implement these issues to the curricula, but it is not supported by the government.” There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a generational gap as well: “My older students think that LGBT people are not worthy enough to live. In speaking lessons they tend to be too honest about it and not only once did it offend one of my students. Younger people are more likely to be open minded about it.” One respondent notes the progress made across generations: “I had religion and during this lesson teacher told us it's crazy and not acceptable to love the same sex as you have (primary school). Now at my uni, teachers accept it totally and I didn't hear any bad words.”

Respondents affirmed the potential impact of a project like *Homo'poly*, as exposure to LGB issues, people and projects are repeatedly mentioned as a positive influence: "I attended two occasions dealing with these issues. Members and ambassadors of the Hungarian LGBT+ Community talked about the importance of tolerance and their personal experiences and we could ask them about everything. During my studies, most of my professors draw our attention to tolerance and equal treatment regardless of a person's sexual orientation, race, religion, gender etc." Proximity to LGB colleagues, students or pupils is particularly helpful: "I have some homosexual and bisexual friends in the university, I have heard a lot about this topic due to them." Building on this, and on the other lessons emerging from *Homo'poly*, the project's Steering Group outlines its proposed framework for a follow-up project, *OpenUp!*

Moving forward: *OpenUp!*

OpenUp will promote inclusive education by bringing together pupils, (trainee) teachers and the wider school community to build LGBT+ friendly schools. Schools play a critical role in providing pupils - all pupils - with a healthy and encouraging learning environment. Too often, however, pupils who identify as LGBT+ fail to get the support they need for their personal and professional development. Many also still face verbal and even physical harassment because of their sexual orientation or identity. This continues to translate into higher dropout rates, a higher incidence of mental health problems and even higher self-harm and suicide rates. Despite many laudable initiatives, much more needs to be done to build school environments that are safe and secure for all pupils. This is particularly important for transgender, intersex and other pupils who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender, but who also do not identify as homosexual or bisexual (the more commonly known and accepted 'LGB' of the acronym). Little visibility and small numbers mean these young people are particularly vulnerable, and all the more in need of recognition, respect and support. *OpenUp* sets out to shape school environments at secondary and tertiary level that allow all students to thrive, regardless of their sexual orientation or sexual identity. Like *Homo'poly*, *OpenUp!* will take a cross-sectoral approach. The partnership will facilitate cooperation between eight countries, with one university and one secondary school participating from each country. In each country, the participating institutions will co-create a vision for an LGBT+ friendly school, along with pedagogical materials (future) teachers can use to make such

inclusive schools a reality. All outputs will build on original research and peer exchange, to maximise cross-country learning. To successfully develop and deliver these LGBT+ friendly school visions, *OpenUp* will implement carefully calibrated activities that 1) engage all partners throughout the duration of the project 2) facilitate cross-country learning to distill a European vision for LGBT+ friendly schools and 3) deepen cross-sectoral collaboration between secondary schools and teacher training institutions in each country. The project intends to make an active contribution towards establishing intercultural dialogue on gender equality, and, last but not least, will have a significant impact on the acceptance and understanding of sexual diversity and social inclusion. Thanks to the comprehensive geographical reach of the partner countries involved, the project will be able to draw on, and be relevant to, a rich and diverse set of European countries and contexts. An important additional target group is the wider school community, which will consist of parents, community organisations and faith groups. *OpenUp* envisions that these actors, through consistent and carefully considered engagement with the school, will become (more) open to the LGBT+ community, both inside and outside of the school. The identification of these groups will be carried out in the project's first year, and the composition of these groups is likely to vary strongly from school to school. With the support of these actors, *OpenUp* will set out to shape an ambitious vision of LGBT+ friendly schools that educational institutions across Europe can aspire to adapt and adopt.

Conclusion

This paper has captured the results and lessons learned from *Homo'poly*, an ERASMUS+ partnership promoting awareness and understanding of homosexuality in schools across Europe. The lessons learned identified through *Homo'poly* are big challenges that cannot be tackled by schools alone. To secure meaningful gains in social inclusion of LGBT+ pupils and students, it is imperative to go beyond the school gates and include parents, community organisations, faith groups and others in building a more accepting learning and teaching environment. Secondary schools and teacher training institutions will therefore actively involve the wider school community as they set out to shape and implement a strategy for an LGBT+ friendly school, tailored to their specific context and needs. It is also pivotal to secure continued political support at the highest levels, as this gives projects like these, and the people who implement them, the necessary backing. Young people must be

encouraged in their ability to embrace those who are perceived to be different. Bucking the trends towards homophobia must be done at all levels – including in schools.

Abbreviations

LGB: lesbian, gay and bisexual, LGBT: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, LGBTI: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexed, LGBTIQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexed and queer, LGBT+: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender plus

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Authors

Lotte Geunis

PhD student, Maastricht University, UNI-MERIT, Boschastraat 24, 6211 AX Maastricht, Netherlands, e-mail: geunis@merit.unu.edu

Doktorska študentka, Univerza v Maastrichtu, UNI-MERIT, Boschastraat 24, 6211 AX Maastricht, Nizozemska, e-pošta: geunis@merit.unu.edu

Oliver Holz, PhD

Assistant professor, University of Leuven, Faculty of Economics and Business, Education Policy Unit, FEB Campus Brussels, Warmoesberg 26, 1000 Brussel, Belgium, e-mail: oliver.holz@kuleuven.be

Docent, Univerza v Leuvenu, Ekonomska fakulteta, Enota za izobraževalno politiko, FEB Campus Brussels, Warmoesberg 26, 1000 Bruselj, Belgija, e-pošta: oliver.holz@kuleuven.be