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# STUDYING ABROAD

A GUIDE TO SUPPORTING  
LGBT STUDENTS IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION

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# INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad has become an integral part of higher education. Globally, more than 4.5 million students study abroad.<sup>1</sup> More than 27,000 UK students travel abroad as part of their degree each year.<sup>2</sup> Nearly one in five students in the UK is from overseas, paying an estimated £4.8 billion in tuition fees to UK universities.<sup>3</sup>

Studying abroad in higher education can take many forms. From the university's perspective, this falls into two categories:

1. **INCOMING STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS:** receiving international or EU students from another country. This may be to complete a full degree or for a shorter period of study, for example for a term, summer course or research project.
2. **OUTGOING STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS:** sending students to another country. For example, this could be for a term abroad, an exchange programme or field research project.

Most students in the UK believe that the experience they gain from studying abroad increases their employability.<sup>4</sup> But while significant portions of university students are interested in studying abroad, concerns about personal well-being can deter students from doing so.<sup>5</sup>

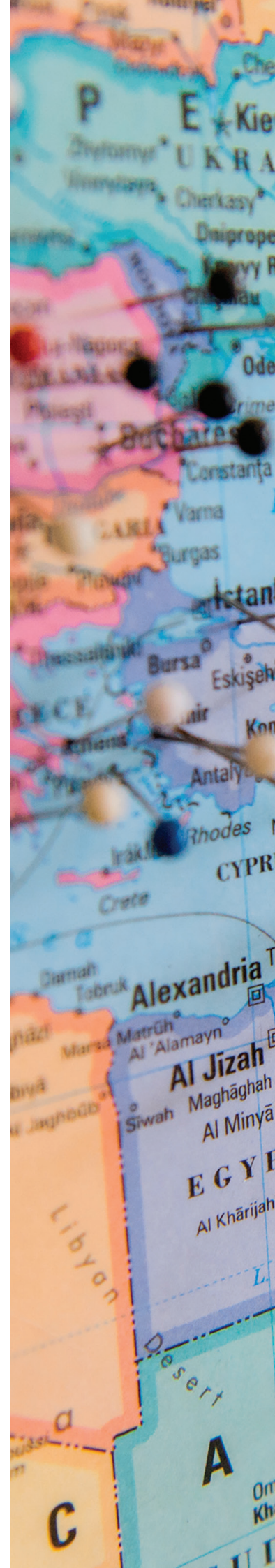
At Stonewall we know these concerns can disproportionately affect lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT) students due to the discrimination and persecution faced by LGBT communities around the world. This guide explores these issues and offers a clear, seven-step roadmap for you to best support incoming and outgoing LGBT students. It also addresses the importance of equipping non-LGBT students with the information they need to avoid putting LGBT peers at risk when travelling together.

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**GLOSSARY OF TERMS:** to learn more about the LGBT-specific terms used in this resource, visit [www.stonewall.org.uk/glossary](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/glossary)

<sup>1</sup> OECD (2014) Indicator C4: *Who studies abroad and where?* - <sup>2</sup> Universities UK International (2017) *International Facts and Figures*

<sup>3</sup> Universities UK (2017) *The Economic Impact of International Students* - <sup>4</sup> British Council (2016) *Broadening Horizons: Maximising the impact of study abroad* - <sup>5</sup> British Council (2015) *Broadening Horizons: The value of the overseas experience*



# THE CASE FOR SUPPORTING LGBT STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

## Importance of supporting LGBT students

LGBT people remain among the most marginalised groups in many countries around the world. Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are often state sponsored. For example, sexual acts between people of the same sex remain illegal in 72 countries and are punishable by death in eight.<sup>6</sup> Globally, LGBT people are subject to physical and sexual violence by both state officials and non-governmental actors, and face discrimination in education, health and social care, and employment. A quarter of the world's population believes that being LGBT should be a crime.<sup>7</sup>

**Both legal and non-legal factors can impact on the safety, achievement and experience of LGBT students who study abroad:**

|                   | FACTORS                                | EXAMPLE  | IMPACT  |
|-------------------|--|--|---|
| LEGAL FACTORS     | CRIMINALISATION                        | Sexual activities between people of the same sex are illegal and may be punishable with imprisonment, corporal punishment or death | LGBT student is at risk of arrest and harassment by authorities   |
|                   | LACK OF PROTECTION                     | LGBT people are not protected by anti-discrimination laws  | LGBT student is refused education, accommodation or other services  |
|                   | LACK OF RECOGNITION                    | Trans people's gender identities are not legally recognised  | Trans student cannot obtain a national ID card reflective of their gender   |
|                   | LACK OF OTHER RIGHTS                   | Trans people are banned from using gender-assigned facilities that correspond to their gender identity                             | Trans student cannot use bathrooms at host university   |
|                   | RESTRICTIONS OF OTHER RIGHTS           | It's illegal to speak about LGBT-related topics in the presence of minors  | LGBT topics are excluded from the curriculum  |
| NON-LEGAL FACTORS | TREATMENT BY STATE AUTHORITIES         | Harassment against LGBT people by police has been reported   | LGBT student is not able to seek help after experiencing a hate crime   |
|                   | SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS LGBT PEOPLE | Attitudes are hostile and LGBT people are frequently attacked in public  | LGBT student is bullied and ostracised for being LGBT, affecting their personal safety, mental health and attainment  |
|                   | LGBT COMMUNITY                         | There are no known LGBT neighbourhoods, venues or support groups   | LGBT student is unable to access support in local LGBT community or engages in risky behaviour, such as going to unlicensed venues, to connect with local community |
|                   | VISIBILITY OF LGBT PEOPLE              | LGBT people are not visible in public life, or are portrayed negatively  | LGBT student feels isolated, affecting self-esteem, mental health and attainment  |
|                   | LGBT-INCLUSIVE SERVICES                | Healthcare professionals are not trained on LGBT-inclusive health services   | Trans student who needs to take hormones is unable to obtain essential medication while abroad  |

There are also legal and non-legal factors that positively influence the experience of LGBT students studying abroad. For example, LGBT students may seek out universities and programmes in countries which have legal protections for LGBT people.

Nevertheless, the above table illustrates that LGBT students face specific challenges that their non-LGBT peers do not. It is therefore vital that LGBT students who study abroad are supported, including incoming study abroad students who may need support adjusting to their new environment, whether it is more or less accepting.

<sup>6</sup> International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association: Carroll, A. and Mendos, L.R. (2017) *State-Sponsored Homophobia 2017: A world survey of sexual orientation laws: criminalisation, protection and recognition* -<sup>7</sup>International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association: Carroll, A. and Robotham G. (2016) *The Personal and the Political: Attitudes to LGBTI People Around the World*



## The benefits of supporting LGBT students

Higher education institutions benefit from providing LGBT-specific support to incoming and outgoing study abroad students. It enables you to:

**SAFEGUARD STUDENTS:** supporting LGBT students to overcome legal and non-legal factors affecting them reduces risks to their health, well-being and safety when studying abroad.

**PROVIDE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES:** LGBT students who cannot access adequate support may not be able to participate in, or successfully complete, study abroad experiences. Supporting LGBT study abroad students therefore ensures equal opportunity and, in some countries, compliance with anti-discrimination laws.

**INCREASE STUDENT ATTAINMENT:** providing support means that LGBT students do not have to spend time and energy overcoming barriers alone. Instead they can focus on academic attainment as well as personal development, and can perform at their best.

**IMPROVE REPUTATION:** supporting LGBT students who study abroad can build an institution's reputation as a university of choice for talented LGBT students and their allies.





# 7 STEPS TO SUPPORTING YOUR LGBT STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

## Step 1: Make sure your promotional activities are inclusive

Your marketing materials, prospectuses and recruitment events should clearly target LGBT students, encouraging them to apply. This applies to both inward and outward study abroad opportunities.

### To ensure your promotional activity is LGBT inclusive:

- Talk about the support offered to LGBT students
- Reiterate the university's commitment to LGBT equality, diversity and inclusion
- Consult LGBT student societies when developing and marketing study abroad opportunities
- Use inclusive imagery showing the diversity of your staff and students
- Promote outward study abroad opportunities through your LGBT student societies

Where promotional activity for incoming students takes place abroad, you need to be mindful of the local context. The safety and security of students and staff is of utmost importance and inclusive marketing may not be possible everywhere. In countries where people could be put at risk by talking about LGBT issues, it might be necessary to use general language and anonymise references that could identify individuals. For example, refer to the university's commitment to diversity and equality instead of mentioning the LGBT student society and its members.

**DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER (DMU):** DMU runs an annual LGBT-specific study trip. The trip is designed to enable LGBT students and their allies to learn about the origins of social and political LGBT movements globally. Annually, it is advertised on #DMUglobal website, specifically targeting LGBT students and allies. In 2016, a study trip to New York Pride was organised for 20 students. During the trip, students volunteered at SAGE, a centre in New York that supports older LGBT communities. The volunteering opportunity allowed the students to learn about the roots of the American LGBT movement from older LGBT people. The students also met with the organisers of New York Pride to learn about more recent developments in the movement. After the trip, an article was published on DMU's Go Global website to celebrate its success and promote it to future applicants.



## Step 2: Provide LGBT-specific information

Providing information about the situation for LGBT people in a particular country can help LGBT students plan ahead and settle in. It is also vital that non-LGBT students know they may need to adjust their behaviour during their time abroad. For example, students need to know the risk of inadvertently disclosing a peer's LGBT identity when travelling together.

**General information and signposting:** put in place general LGBT travel information for your incoming and outgoing study abroad students and their allies, for example through a dedicated webpage or booklet. Signposting to further resources will allow students to research their destination.

Let your students know about:

- Stonewall's Global Workplace Briefings – information about the legal and social situation for LGBT people in specific countries: [www.stonewall.org.uk/briefings](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/briefings)
- The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's (ILGA) annual reports – information on the legal and lived situation for LGBT people globally: [www.ilga.org](http://www.ilga.org)
- ILGA Europe annual reports – information on the legal situation for LGBT people in Europe: [www.ilga-europe.org/rainboweurope](http://www.ilga-europe.org/rainboweurope)
- The university's LGBT initiatives and the support available to study abroad students

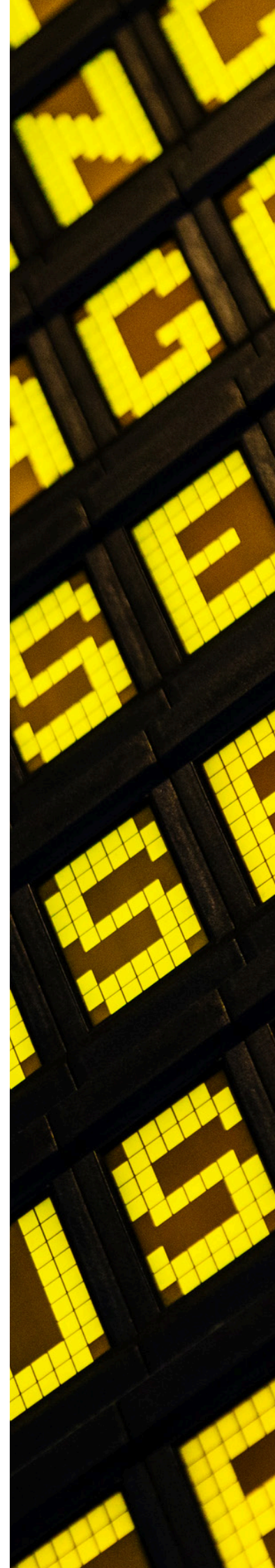
**THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE:** The University of Cambridge published a guide for LGBT students and staff who study or work abroad. 'Thinking Globally' provides information, questions to consider and links to useful resources to find out more about the situation for LGBT people globally. It also gives information on LGBT issues for students and staff visiting Cambridge, such as support networks, points of contact and the University's diversity and inclusion values. Download the guide [www.equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/thinking\\_globally.pdf](http://www.equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/thinking_globally.pdf)

**Specific information:** many universities provide information on specific countries, for example through providing country briefings or culture sessions. Culture sessions for incoming study abroad students often take place post arrival, while those for outgoing study abroad students regularly take place pre departure.

Make sure that culture sessions include LGBT issues, such as:

- Information on the in-country situation for LGBT people
- For incoming students: information on the university's own LGBT diversity and inclusion initiatives. This will give LGBT students and their allies a chance to become engaged members of the university from the beginning. It will also help LGBT students feel welcome and become part of a support network abroad
- For outgoing students: advice on the safe use of social media, as LGBT students may be open about their LGBT identity on their online profiles. Thoughtful advice will be particularly important where communications may be monitored by state authorities

**YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY (YSJU):** As part of their awareness-raising activities, YSJU ran a student-led 'Global Café' event that focused on the experiences of LGBT people around the world. It included educational activities and covered global topics such as laws affecting LGBT people, hate crime reporting and coming out as LGBT. The session also provided specific information on the situation for LGBT people in India, South Africa and Singapore. YSJU students regularly travel to these countries through various study abroad programmes. A panel run by the LGBTQ+ student society also formed part of the Café, focusing on the situation for LGBT people in the UK. This helped international students learn about the UK LGBT community.



## Step 3: Empower your support staff

Many students require some form of individual support from their university before and during their studies abroad. Depending on the study abroad opportunity, this may be provided by someone in the international office, student counselling or the academic faculty.

To make sure the support offered is LGBT inclusive, your staff should be trained on the issues affecting LGBT students who study abroad. They should also be able to ask open-ended questions and create safe spaces for students to address personal concerns.

LGBT students can only access the support they need if they feel comfortable to disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity. Displaying Stonewall resources or LGBT-inclusive merchandise, such as rainbow stickers and lanyards, can help to signal a safe space. Where support services can only be offered remotely, information material should make clear the service is LGBT inclusive.

**SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY:** In partnership with Stonewall, Sheffield Hallam University ran a training workshop for its international team, as well as departmental and student representatives, to explore issues affecting LGBT students globally. The group discussed how the university can better support LGBT students studying abroad. Such support included creating safe spaces for LGBT students to address any concerns about studying abroad. It also included finding practical solutions to any barriers LGBT students may face when travelling internationally. The workshop concluded by discussing ways to embed this approach across the university's student support services.

## Step 4: Help students to prepare

Make sure that students can access individual support to help them prepare for all stages of the study abroad experience. Addressing issues early on and trying to find practical solutions are important to avoid putting the student at risk later.

This support should be offered to both incoming and outgoing study abroad students. It's important you let your students know this support exists and how they can access it. Keep in mind that incoming students may need to access this support remotely.

### Key considerations may include:

**BEING 'OUT':** an LGBT student may be concerned that it's unsafe for them to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity while abroad. Take such concerns seriously and discuss with the student if it's possible or desirable for them to stay closeted during their abroad experience. If so, discuss how and if the risk of accidental disclosure can be mitigated. Note, however, that this conversation needs to be led by the student and by what they feel comfortable with – it is not appropriate to tell someone they should or shouldn't be 'out'.

**IDENTIFICATION DOCUMENTS:** trans students whose gender expression does not match the gender marker on their identity documents may be concerned that this will lead to problems with immigration or border control. Support for the students can involve contacting local LGBT groups to find out more about the likelihood of this, as well as the risks attached.

**ACCOMMODATION:** LGBT students may be concerned that peers in accommodation may hold hostile views, or that they may be housed in accommodation inconsistent with their gender identity. It's important to support students in securing a solution that works for them. For example, this may involve being housed with a friend, regardless of gender.

**HEALTHCARE:** LGBT students may be concerned about being unable to receive adequate and inclusive healthcare locally. Support can involve contacting insurance companies, healthcare providers and local NGOs to find out if and where LGBT-inclusive healthcare is available. Where partnerships with healthcare providers exist, you should work with the provider to enable them to deliver LGBT-inclusive services.

**ALTERNATIVES:** there may be cases in which an LGBT student decides they cannot take up a specific outward study abroad opportunity because of their LGBT identity. Helping students find an alternative study abroad opportunity ensures equal opportunity regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.



## Step 5: Stay in touch

No matter how well prepared a student is, issues can always arise during study abroad experiences. These can range from health problems to relationship breakdowns or threats to personal safety. Such problems can affect mental and physical health, as well as academic attainment. It's therefore important that you offer incoming and outgoing study abroad students ongoing LGBT-inclusive support, which they can access throughout their study abroad experience.

**LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS (LSE):** LSE has one of the highest percentages of international students in the UK. Every member of the counselling team undergoes equality, diversity and inclusion training, which also covers LGBT-specific considerations. This ensures that the diverse student body can access adequate support during their time at LSE.

In cases where the safety or well-being of a student is severely compromised abroad, the student may require support to return safely. Once returned, you should work with the student to enable them to continue their studies.

## Step 6: Make sure students can return safely

Some incoming LGBT study abroad students may require support at the end of their study abroad experience.

For example, a student may have come out as LGBT during their time abroad and is worried about returning to a less accepting country or environment. Providing support can include establishing the current situation for LGBT people in that country, linking up with local groups and signposting to support and information services.

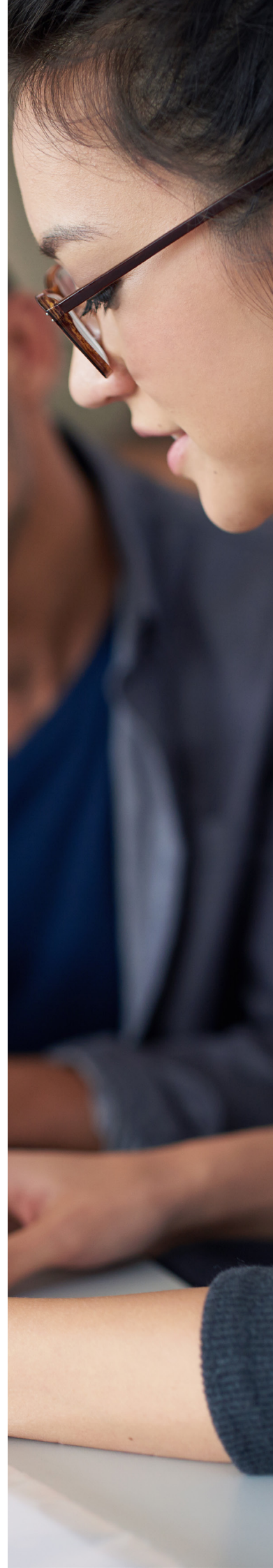
When an LGBT student comes from a country where LGBT people are targeted, it may be unsafe for them to return. In these cases, universities can support students to access different options. This could include finding out about ways to keep the student in the country, for example through extending their studies, finding scholarships or work. In particularly serious cases, universities can signpost students to seek asylum.

It's helpful to keep a list of organisations and support groups that can further support LGBT students seeking asylum.

- In the UK, the UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group is a good first port of call: [www.uklgig.org.uk](http://www.uklgig.org.uk)
- Stonewall also maintains a searchable database for the UK that lets you find LGBT services and community groups that are local to you: [www.stonewall.org.uk/whats-my-area](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/whats-my-area)

## Step 7: Seek feedback

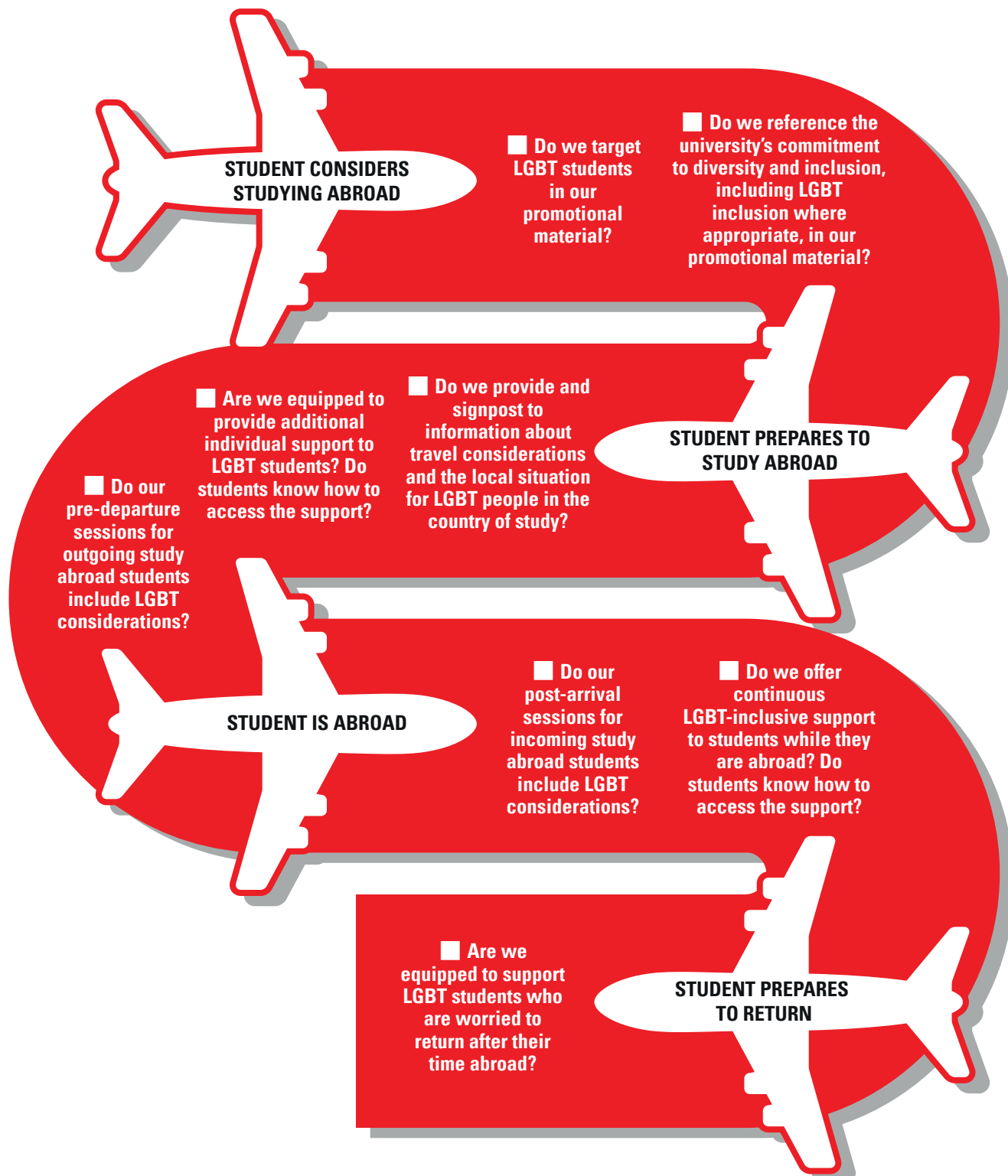
When evaluating inward and outward study abroad opportunities, make sure to find out whether LGBT students were satisfied with the support they were offered. Both positive and negative feedback can help shape future support and processes.





# CHECKLIST FOR SUPPORTING LGBT STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

Use the following checklist to ensure you provide quality support to your LGBT students throughout the four stages of studying abroad:



## Global Diversity Champions programme

The Global Diversity Champions programme is Stonewall's best practice forum for global universities and employers committed to providing inclusive work and educational spaces worldwide. Our team can support you with creating inclusive study abroad programmes and embedding inclusion across your organisation. Members of the programme also have exclusive access to a global LGBT framework for higher education institutions, helping you make and assess progress.

For more information about joining Stonewall's Global Diversity Champions programme visit [www.stonewall.org.uk/GlobalDC](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/GlobalDC)

## Stonewall's resources

Stonewall produces a series of Global Workplace Briefings, shining a spotlight on the situation for LGBT people in different countries. To download your copies, visit [www.stonewall.org.uk/briefings](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/briefings)

This guide is part of a series of Stonewall resources to help you create LGBT-inclusive practices globally. To find out more and to download your copies, visit [www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-resources](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-resources)





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