

‘Homosexuality is not a problem – it doesn’t do you any harm and can be lots of fun’¹: Students and Gay Rights Activism in Irish Universities, 1970s-1980s

Introduction

During the 1980/81 academic year University College Cork (UCC) Students’ Union produced the UCC Welfare Handbook which, for the first time, included a section on homosexuality and contact details for the different gay rights organisations in Ireland. In dismissing what the students’ union believed to be the general stereotypes surrounding homosexuality in Ireland, including that homosexuals were child molesters, the handbook stated that ‘homosexuality is the physical and emotional attraction between members of the same sex. Homosexuality is not a problem – it doesn’t do you any harm and can be lots of fun’.² While the students’ union considered this information important for students, its inclusion in the handbook generated considerable unease amongst college authorities and some parents. According to the *Evening Echo*, a local Cork newspaper, parents believed that ‘their student sons and daughters are being indoctrinated and brainwashed by influences beyond their control, on issues which they feel has nothing to do with student life [...]’.³ One mother, who spoke to the *Evening Echo*, criticised the handbook for assuming that ‘all first year students are lacking in moral responsibilities and are going to be totally promiscuous from the time they enter college, getting their kicks from homosexual activities, sex and drugs’.⁴

The UCC Governing Body received letters of complaint from the Mayor of Waterford, a UCC professor, and the UCC Student Health Officer, who expressed the view that the material on homosexuality was ‘potentially very harmful’.⁵ Such was the ‘adverse publicity’, which the handbook generated, the UCC Governing Body decided to establish a sub-committee

¹ National Library of Ireland (hereafter NLI), 9A 212, UCC Welfare Handbook 1980-1981, p. 36

² Ibid., p. 36.

³ ‘Come as a Shock to Parents’, *Evening Echo*, 30 October 1980, p. 1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ University College Cork Archives (hereafter UCCA), Minutes of UCC Governing Body, Minute Book, no. 54, ‘Letter from Student Health Officer’, 23 June 1981. I was granted permission by the UCCA and University College Dublin Archives to view minutes of their respective governing bodies. However, in granting me access to this archival material both archives requested that I do not name any individuals in my research output. I have respected this request and when using material from both these archives, I have not named any individuals.

to investigate the relationship between the UCC Students' Union and university authorities.⁶ Before this sub-committee presented its findings, however, the UCC Governing Body decided that 'in future any publication intended for distribution by the students' union and which contains material in the areas of Health, Medical Care and Morality shall be submitted for consultation to the Student Health Officer, and College Chaplains, prior to its circulation to the student body'.⁷ The recommendations which emerged from the sub-committee similarly sought to curtail the actions of the students' union, presenting the UCC Governing Body with a 'framework for a regulated students' union' which would encourage it to show 'concern for the good relationship between the College and the community at large'.⁸

Although the new guidelines on acceptable material did include 'human sexuality', the contrast between the information on homosexuality in 1980/81 and 1981/82 is striking. Whereas, in 1980/81 four pages were devoted to homosexuality, in 1981/82 less than a half page was devoted to homosexuality. No positive statement on homosexuality or attempt to dismiss the negative stereotypes was included. Interestingly, while criticism of the 1980/81 handbook had also centred on the inclusion of information on venereal diseases and contraception, the 1981/82 handbook's information on both issues, was practically identical to that of the 1980/81 handbook. In fact, the only significant difference between the two handbooks centred on the section on homosexuality.

The fallout from the 1980/81 UCC Welfare Handbook is symptomatic of a wider pattern which had emerged in Ireland since the mid-1970s; the rise of gay rights activism and with it struggles within Irish universities, both north and south of the border, to promote gay rights.⁹ In recent years scholars have begun to explore the history of queer activism in Ireland.

⁶ UCCA, Minutes of UCC Governing Body, Minute Book, no. 53, 'Students' Union Welfare Book', 18 November 1980. UCCA, Minutes of UCC Governing Body, Minute Book, no. 53, 'Students' Union Welfare Book', 20 January 1981.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UCCA, Minutes of UCC Governing Body, Minute Book, no. 55, 'Students' Union Welfare Book', 19 January 1982.

⁹ I use gay rights to include a broad range of issues that the different gay rights organisations mobilised for in Ireland throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, the decriminalisation of sexual activity between males, the promotion of a better understanding of homosexuality, the right of gay and lesbian individuals to socialise without fear or prejudice, the right of gay and lesbian individuals to protection under the law from being dismissed from their jobs because of their sexual orientation. Therefore, the use of gay rights in this article includes gay men and lesbian women. I use gay and homosexual interchangeably as they were used by activists at this time. Both terms included women who were attracted to other women. However, Irish lesbian women in the late 1970s decided to adopt 'lesbian' to generate greater visibility, believing 'gay' was too commonly associated with men who were attracted to other men. I

In particular, they have sought to expand this history beyond David Norris' legal battle to decriminalise sexual activity between males and beyond activities and spaces confined solely to Dublin. New work explores issues such as LGBT activism in Cork; Irish radical gay activism; the Irish queer media, and the gay community's response to AIDS in 1980s Ireland.¹⁰ This expansion of research into Irish queer history has provided a rare glimpse into how Irish LGBT individuals navigated life during a period in which sexual activity between males was illegal and considerable ignorance and shame surrounded homosexuality. This history, however, is still in its infancy and considerable research is needed in other areas, such as the other spaces and actors involved in queer activism in Ireland; the activities of lesbian women and their efforts to forge a space for lesbian women to socialise in and promote greater visibility; the emergence of transgender activism; and a more widespread focus on provincial queer activism. In particular, one cohort who are noticeably absent in Irish queer history are students. As demonstrated with the UCC Welfare Handbook, however, students were willing to champion an unpopular cause and present a more positive account of homosexuality.

In fact, Irish universities more generally have been overlooked as important spaces of resistance and locations where different forms of queer activism emerged. Anne Enke, in her pioneering account of feminist activism in the twin cities, Detroit and Chicago, has used space and place as a means of understanding the 'emergence, proliferation, and on-the-ground

adopt the use of these terms throughout as they are used in the primary material I am referencing.

¹⁰ Kieran Rose, *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics in Ireland*, (Cork, 1994); Íde O'Carroll and Eoin Collins (eds), *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland towards the Twenty-first Century*, (London, 1995); Paul Ryan, 'Coming Out: Gay Mobilisation, 1970-1980', in Linda Connolly and Niamh Hourigan (eds), *Social Movements and Ireland*, (Manchester, 2006); Brian Lacey, *Terrible Queer Creatures*, (Dublin, 2008); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, (London, 2009); Éibhear Walshe, *Oscar's Shadow: Wilde, Homosexuality and Modern Ireland*, (Cork, 2011); David Kilgannon, 'How to survive a plague': AIDS activism in Ireland, 1983-1989', (MA dissertation, University College Dublin, 2015); Orla Egan, *Queer Republic of Cork*, (Cork, 2016); Patrick James McDonagh, 'Homosexuals are Revolting' – Gay & Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland 1970s-1990s', *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 7 (2017), 65-91; Páraic Kerrigan, 'Out-Ing AIDS: The Irish Civil Gay Rights Movement's Responses to AIDS Crisis, 1984-1988', *Media History*, first published online 23 August 2017, 244-258; Maurice Casey, 'Radical Politics and Gay Activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1974-1990', *Irish Studies Review*, 26:2 (2018), 217-236; Ann Nolan, 'The Gay Community Response to the Emergence of AIDS in Ireland: Activism, Covert Policy, and the Significance of an 'Invisible Minority'', *Journal of Policy History*, 30:1 (2018), 105-127; James Grannell, 'Gay Health Action and the Fight Against AIDS in 1980s Ireland', *History Workshop*, first published online 24 July 2019, <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/gay-health-action-and-the-fight-against-aids-in-1980s-ireland/> (accessed on 6 August 2019).

manifestations of feminist activism during the 1960s and 1970s'.¹¹ Through the use of oral interviews with women who sought the right to claim a space within bars, bookstores, parks, shelters, and coffee houses, Enke argues that we can develop an understanding of, what she labels, the 'collective politicisation of place'; namely the 'struggle over who may occupy ostensibly public spaces'.¹² As Doreen Massey has noted, 'space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation'.¹³ Building on this point, Wayne D. Myslik, argues that 'virtually all such space is heterosexually dominated. [...] In nearly all public spaces, then, there is no tolerance for departure from a heterosexual gender-identity and its attendant patterns of behaviour'.¹⁴ In this article, I consider universities as not only locations where gay rights activists and students sought to promote a greater understanding of homosexuality, but also spaces of symbolic importance. By demanding, and later claiming, their right as gay and lesbian students to a space within Irish universities, these students challenged the status quo which had denied them such a space and recognition in the past. When individuals step-in to 'contested spaces' and claim the right to be there, Enke argues that they change 'public space and public institutions, gaining new stature as participants in the larger political land-scape'.¹⁵ The consequences of these efforts, as will be demonstrated later, were not confined within the university, but rather had a direct impact on the wider campaign for gay rights in Ireland.

While internationally scholars have explored the impact of student activism within and without universities, including the extent to which universities were important locations for the emergence of gay rights organisations and the promotion of gay rights, in Ireland there has been limited research into student activism.¹⁶ Jodi Burkett has argued that 'across Europe and

¹¹ Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*, (Durham, 2007), 2019 Apple Store eBook version, 'Introduction: Locating Feminist Activism', paragraph 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, paragraph 5.

¹³ Doreen Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', *New Left Review*, 196 (November/December, 1992), p. 81.

¹⁴ Wayne D. Myslik, 'Renegotiating the Social/Sexual Identities of Places: Gay Communities as Safe Havens or Sites of Resistance?', in Nancy Duncan (ed.), *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, (London, 1996), p. 160.

¹⁵ Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 'Conclusion: Recognising the Subject of Feminist Activism', paragraph 6.

¹⁶ Robert Rhoads, 'Student Activism as an Agent of Social Change: A Phenomenological Analysis of Contemporary Campus Unrest', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, published online by The Educational Resources Information Centre, March 1997, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED407902.pdf> (accessed on 29 January 2019); Valere Korinek, 'The Most Openly Gay Person for at least a Thousand

internationally, significant work has taken place to map the role and importance of student organisations in creating political change. There is, however, very little work published on student organisations and student unions in Britain and Ireland'.¹⁷ Although, limited research exists on student organisations and student unions, some scholars have sought to place the role of youths/students into the wider historiography of nineteenth and twentieth century Irish history.

Carole Holohan, for example, uses the category of 'youth' as a means to 'shed light on the complexity of social and cultural change in the sixties' in Ireland.¹⁸ While Holohan concludes that Irish society did not undergo a dramatic socio-cultural transformation in the sixties [...], she, nevertheless, asserts that 'young people themselves were significant agents of change [...]'.¹⁹ Looking at the efforts of students in University College Dublin (UCD), Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and Queens University Belfast (QUB), Holohan notes their involvement in campaigns related to housing, social inequality, apartheid, and the war in Vietnam, arguing that some third-level students believed 'it was their patriotic duty to challenge the establishment in order to change society [...]'.²⁰

Similarly, Mary E. Daly has included a discussion on the role of youths/students, noting, in particular, the extent to which late 1960s Dublin 'exhibited the same heady mixture of left-wing organisations – with a strong youth presence – as many other western cities'.²¹ Daly highlights how the Labour Party sought to radicalise Irish students in the hope they would subsequently vote for Labour, while also noting student involvement in protests targeted at the South African cricket and rugby teams over apartheid, along with a TCD protest against the visit of Senator Edward Kennedy and the holding of regular demonstrations outside the US Embassy against the war in Vietnam.²² What both Holohan and Daly's work establishes, in no

Miles': Doug Wilson and the Politicization of a Province, 1975-83', *Canadian Historical Review*, 84:4 (2003), 517-550; Brett Beemyn, 'The Silence is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 12:2 (2003), 205-223; T. Evan Faulkenbury and Aaron Hayworth, 'The Carolina Gay Association, Oral History, and Coming Out at the University of North Carolina', *Oral History Review*, 43:1 (2016), 115-137; P.G. Altbach, 'Politics of Students and Faculty', in B.R. Clark and G. Neave (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Higher Education*, (New York, 1992).

¹⁷ Jodi Burkett (ed.), *Students in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland*, (London, 2018), p. 5.

¹⁸ Carole Holohan, *Reframing Irish Youth in the Sixties*, (Liverpool, 2018), p. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-58.

²¹ Mary E. Daly, *Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society, 1957-1973*, (Cambridge, 2016), p. 278.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 278.

uncertain terms, is the extent to which youth/students were not afraid to confront authorities, but also how the Irish political class and government took a heightened interest in youth/students during the 1960s.

The work of Laura Kelly provides a detailed insight into medical student life and culture from the mid-nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century in Ireland. Through the use of memoirs and the student press, Kelly offers a strong critique of the ‘top-down’ approach to the history of Irish universities which, she rightly argues, has tended to focus on administration, financing and professors at the expense of the voices of students.²³ Kelly gives a strong voice to students, offering an insight into the important role of the student press; the gendered-nature of Irish universities; medical students’ experiences of the dissecting room; along with the changing representation of medical students both inside and outside universities; and the role of students in changing the way medicine was taught in Ireland. In doing so, Kelly’s work makes a strong case for the importance of adopting a ‘bottom-up view of university life’ and the fruits of doing so.

In a similar vein, Tomás Irish explores the impact on university life in TCD during a heightened period of war and revolution in Ireland and the world between 1912 to 1923. What Irish’s research reveals is not only the considerable impact these years had on TCD, but also the extent to which universities themselves were viewed, by some, as important symbolic spaces, often becoming battlegrounds themselves. This was particular evident in Irish’s discussion on a proposed amendment to the Home Rule Bill which would have exempted TCD from its provisions.²⁴ This led to considerable controversy, with Patrick Pease arguing, in a letter to the *Freeman’s Journal*, that the exclusion of a university from the jurisdiction of an Irish parliament would undermine the project’.²⁵ Although the proposed TCD amendment did not pass, the controversy it generated demonstrated the symbolic importance of a university and its role in shaping society. In a preface to Irish’ work, Patrick Prendergast succinctly argues that ‘Trinity’s story forms a significant part of the broader narrative of the emergence and

²³ Laura Kelly, *Irish Medical Education and Student Culture, c. 1850-1950*, (Liverpool, 2017), p. 2.

²⁴ Tomás Irish, *Trinity in War and Revolution, 1912-1923*, (Dublin, 2015), p. 55. Under the 1801 Act of Union Ireland became part of Great Britain, with Irish members of parliament being elected to seats in Westminster. Home Rule sought to return self-government to Ireland.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

growth of modern Ireland'.²⁶ Trinity's story, I would argue, is only one of many others which have helped shape modern Irish society.

Collectively these works affirm the extent to which students and universities are fruitful subjects of research.²⁷ Building on this research, therefore, I want to further encourage a study of Irish students and universities, but beyond the long 1960s. While the 1960s are seen as the high-point of international student protest, in Ireland, students did not suddenly halt their involvement in many different (often controversial) issues, in fact, it was quite the opposite. With this in mind, this article seeks to use the issue of gay rights as a case study to demonstrate the extent to which students were important agents of social and political change, and Irish universities significant spaces of activism, beyond the 1960s. Moreover, this article seeks to add to Irish queer history by further expanding the spaces and forms of queer resistance taking place throughout Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. As this article will highlight, there were many other actors, spaces, and forms of resistance which played a crucial role in undermining the status quo. By focusing on students and universities, this article allows us, as Enke argues, to admit 'a broader set of actors and agendas into the story of the movement', in this case the gay rights movement in Ireland.²⁸ Finally, Robert Rhoads argues that 'it should come as no surprise that college and university settings highlight so much of the cultural tension inherent in our society'.²⁹ It is my contention that Irish universities were also spaces where cultural tensions emerged. Therefore, through exploring events on Irish universities, in this case concerning the campaign for gay rights, we can begin to provide a broader historical contextualisation to the dramatic social and political changes that have occurred in recent years in Ireland. The successful passage of the 2015 Marriage Equality referendum and the 2018 referendum that removed the 8th Amendment from the Irish constitution, which had placed a constitutional ban on abortion, have, for many, signalled the emergence of a new Ireland.³⁰ Much of these changes

²⁶ Ibid., p. X

²⁷ See also John Cunningham, 'Spreading VD all over Connacht: Reproductive Rights and Wrongs in 1970s Galway', *History Ireland*, 19:2 (2011), 44-47; Tomás Irish, *The University at War 1914-25: Britain, France and the United States*, (Basingstoke, 2015); Chris Reynolds, 'The Collective European Memory of 1968: The Case of Northern Ireland', *Études Irlandaises*, 36:1 (2011), 73-90.

²⁸ Enke, *Finding the Movement*, 'Locating Feminist Activism', paragraph 32.

²⁹ Rhoads, 'Student Activism as an Agent of Social Change', p. 29.

³⁰ For more information on the Marriage Equality Referendum see Gráinne Healy, Brian Sheehan and Noel Whelan (eds), *Ireland Says Yes: The Inside Story of How the Vote for Marriage Equality was Won*, (Kildare, 2016); Charlie Bird, *A Day in May*, (Kildare, 2016); Gráinne Healy, *Crossing the Threshold: The Story of the Marriage Equality Movement*, (Kildare, 2017). For more information on the history of the Eighth Amendment in Ireland see

have been driven by grassroots efforts, of which included considerable involvement on the part of Ireland's student movement.

The first section of this article explores the extent to which universities provided the space for the emergence of a campaign on gay rights in Ireland in the mid-1970s. The second section focuses on the efforts of students and the student press to facilitate the promotion of gay rights throughout Irish universities. The final section explores the efforts of gay societies to gain official recognition from university authorities. Focusing specifically on the efforts of the UCC Gay Society and UCD Gay Society, this section provides an insight into how both societies successfully mobilised students and non-student organisations to gain official recognition from their respective university authorities.

This article is built on primary archival material from the Irish Queer Archive (IQA), Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association Archive (NIGRA), the *Irish Times* archive, the Irish Newspaper Archive, minutes of the UCC and UCD university authorities, oral interviews and memoirs. Unfortunately, the archive of the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) remains inaccessible. Using oral interviews and memoirs presents certain challenges; the topics discussed in this article are highly personal and occurred over forty years ago and therefore, the interviews are highly subjective. Moreover, the IQA and NIGRA archives were compiled by individuals directly involved in the campaign for gay rights in Ireland, and much of the material remains uncatalogued or closed-off. This raises issues around what material has been made accessible and how this material shapes the current narrative of Irish queer history. I have, therefore, not restricted my research to memoirs, or material solely from the IQA or NIGRA archives, and instead I have sought to balance this by making use of newspaper archives, both national and local, along with the student press and minutes of the UCC and UCD university authorities. Together, this varied mixture of primary source material allows a glimpse into the activities taking place on Irish universities concerning the campaign for gay rights in Ireland throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Lindsey Earner-Byrne and Diane Urquhart (eds), *The Irish Abortion Journey, 1920-2018*, (London, 2019); Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution*, (Dublin, 2003); Evelyn Mahon, 'Abortion Debates in Ireland: An Ongoing Issue', in Dorothy McBride Stetson (ed.), *Abortion Politics, Women's Movements, and the Democratic State: A Comparative Study of State Feminism*, (Oxford, 2001), pp. 157-178; Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*, (New York, 1999); Tom Hesketh, *The Second Partitioning of Ireland? The Abortion Referendum of 1983*, (Dublin, 1993); Vicky Randall, 'The Politics of Abortion: Ireland in Comparative Perspective', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 18:1 (July 1992), 121-128.

Homosexuality in Ireland

Under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act and the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, introduced while Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, sexual activity between males was a criminal offence in Ireland. Chrystel Hug has noted that between 1962 and 1972 there were 455 convictions in the Republic of Ireland under these laws.³¹ In contrast with other European Economic Community members, Ireland steadfastly defended the criminalisation of sexual activity between males throughout the 1970s and 1980s. It took a thirteen-year long legal battle by David Norris, which ended at the European Court of Human Rights in 1988, before the Republic of Ireland decriminalised sexual activity between males in 1993.³² Norris, a Joycean lecturer in TCD, was a founding member of the Irish Gay Rights Movement in 1974 and the chief litigant in a case against the Irish government in 1980 challenging the constitutionality of the 1861 and 1885 laws.

Coupled with the legal situation was the considerable ignorance about homosexuality in Ireland. One gay man writing in 1986 recalled that:

Growing up gay is very hard, but more so if you happen to be growing up in rural Ireland. You have a very negative attitude all around you and many people would prefer to lose a gay family member rather than have to face the neighbours. [...] People saw stereotypes and most articles which appeared in the papers helped to reinforce these stereotyped images. Two of these that my family believed were that all gays were either screaming queens or else they were child molesters.³³

This was an experience shared by Joe Redmond who recalled growing up in 1970s Ireland. Redmond, born in 1970 in Dublin, recollected that he:

was told gay people were paedophiles, they were effeminate, and they were camp. There was another gay man who lived on my street and he was particularly effeminate, and I was always told by my grandmother or my mother that that's the way I would grow up. I would be like him and that wouldn't have been acceptable.³⁴

³¹ Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*, p. 208.

³² See Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland*, pp. 201-240, for more information on David Norris' legal battle and the European Court of Human Rights judgment in 1988 and decriminalisation in 1993.

³³ Dublin Gay and Lesbian Collective, *Out for Ourselves: The Lives of Irish Lesbians and Gay Men*, (Dublin, 1986), p. 122.

³⁴ Joe Redmond interview with Edmund Lynch, Irish LGBT Oral History Project, 23 February 2013. Copy courtesy of Edmund Lynch, Irish LGBT Oral History Project.

The assumption that homosexuality was a problem and that homosexuals were sinister individuals was often repeated in the mainstream media. In 1969, for example, one reader contacted the *Sunday Independent*, a national newspaper, to ask that it ‘please write all about homosexuality [...] ‘what is the cause of it? Lack of love? Or is it caused by T.B. or cancer?’³⁵

Similarly, a three-part feature on the ‘female homosexual’ in the *Irish Times* noted that:

before we began investigating these articles we had two vague images of what a lesbian was. One was the butch caricature, a mannish female with cropped hair and harsh voice, smoking cigars and wearing ties. The other was something more sinister, a pale creature with evil eyes loitering in women’s cloakrooms to seduce whom and when she might.³⁶

The *Irish Times* had taken up the subject of homosexuality after they received a letter from an Irish lesbian who wrote about the difficulties and loneliness of being a lesbian in Ireland. In a follow-up to the article Mary Maher interviewed Dublin psychiatrist Joe Fernandez about homosexuality. In the interview Fernandez described homosexuality as a ‘problem’, or ‘failure’, noting that ‘homosexuality may persist into adult life as a specific failure of emotional maturation, or reappear under conditions of stress or deprivation’.³⁷ Fernandez warned against ‘other homosexuals’ who ‘have grossly damaged personalities which cause more a problem than their sexual complaint. This group constitutes a social danger and has primarily been responsible for the considerable adverse publicity and antipathy which is directed toward homosexuals in general’.³⁸

There can be no doubt that this cultural climate had a considerable impact on Irish homosexuals. According to Dr. James Quinn, a psychiatrist at Belfast City hospital, and Rev. Sidney Callaghan, director of the Samaritans in Belfast, who both addressed a seminar on homosexuality organised by the Northern Ireland homosexual telephone befriending service, CARA-Friend, ‘Ireland was one of the most difficult societies for homosexuals to live in’.³⁹ This was backed up by statistics from the Samaritans. In its 1977 annual report, which noted that calls for ‘help’ had increased by 17%, the largest increase in calls came from individuals affected by loneliness (up 22%), marital problems (up 25%) and homosexuality (up 50%).⁴⁰ Perhaps most revealing was the Samaritan’s 1978 annual report which noted that the highest

³⁵ ‘Your Child and Homosexuality’, *Sunday Independent*, 13 April 1969, p. 22.

³⁶ *Irish Times*, ‘The Female Homosexual’, 30 November 1970, p. 6.

³⁷ *Irish Times*, ‘The Female Homosexual - 2’, 1 December 1970, p. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁹ *Irish Times*, ‘Seminar on Homosexual Problems’, 19 May 1975, p. 13.

⁴⁰ *Irish Times*, ‘Calls for Help Increase by 17%’, 25 July 1978, p. 11.

proportion of suicidal calls came from individuals affected by extramarital issues, girls with unwanted pregnancies, and homosexuals.⁴¹ In his autobiography, David Norris later recalled the impact the social and legal climate had on his health. After surviving what he believed was a heart attack in the 1960s, Norris' was informed by his doctor that it was an anxiety attack, which he blamed on 'the fact that I was homosexual'.⁴² Dr McCracken, a psychiatrist, advised Norris 'that for the preservation of [his] health and to forestall a nervous breakdown [he] should leave Ireland and go to live in the south of France, where these matters were better understood under the Code Napoléon'.⁴³ At that time there was little political appetite to change the 1861 and 1885 laws, nor the societal attitude towards homosexuals. Responding to a question from Dr. Noel Browne in 1977 on whether the government had any intention of amending the 1861 and 1885 laws, the Minister for Justice, Gerard Collins, stated that 'I am honestly convinced I have other priorities which must be dealt with before I get to this particular one'.⁴⁴ It is in this context then that universities and students became important spaces and actors in the emergence of an Irish gay rights campaign and in exerting pressure through campaigning and organising events to promote gay rights.

The Emergence of Gay Rights Activism in Ireland

In October 1973, *Gay News*, a leading London-based gay magazine, reported that:

for Irish homosexuals the border question has little or no meaning – at least as far as their homosexuality is concerned. For neither the North nor the South allows gay to make love [...] It was in acknowledgement of their common problems that the first ever Gay Rights Conference in Ireland was organised by the Sexual Reform Movement on an all-Ireland basis.⁴⁵

This article was in response to a conference at the New University of Ulster (NUU), Coleraine, and while not exclusively a gay rights conference, but rather a conference which discussed more broadly the whole area of sexual oppression and alternative sexuality, it was a critical juncture in Irish queer history.

⁴¹ *Irish Times*, 'More People Seek Aid from Samaritans', 24 July 1979, p. 11.

⁴² David Norris, *A Kick Against the Pricks: The Autobiography*, (London, 2012), p. 113.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Dáil Éireann Debates, 302:8, 'Homosexuality Laws', 13 December 1977.

⁴⁵ Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association Archive (hereafter NIGRA), D/3762/1/10/1, 'Irish Gay Beginnings: Full Report on First Ever Irish Gay Conference', *Gay News*, (October 1973).

Over fifty individuals, one third of whom were women, attended the NUU conference, coming from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. Of those, two delegates from the Exeter Gay Liberation Society, another from the Society of Friends' Homosexual Fellowship, along with Alastair Stewart of the National Union of Students (NUS), and Fred Broughton of the Scottish Minorities Group (SMG), who happened to be studying at the NUU participated.⁴⁶ Terry Bruton from the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) also contributed and remarked that it 'was important for as many gays as possible to come out into the open boldly, and seek acceptance [...]'.⁴⁷ Similarly, in his address, Alastair Stewart urged delegates 'to treat the problems faced by gays within the wider context of civil rights for all oppressed people, rather than seek change for gays alone'.⁴⁸ While Fred Broughton provided an overview of efforts in Scotland to amend the laws which criminalised sexual activity between males.⁴⁹ The last individual to speak, and the only female to do so, was Pat Knight, a NUU student. Knight used the opportunity to highlight the double oppression of gay women, oppressed both as women and as homosexuals. In what would be a reoccurring criticism of gay male-dominated organisations, Knight noted that 'contrary to what one would expect, and hope, gay men were no less chauvinistic than heterosexual men. Gay men dominated meetings, and placed their sisters in a subordinate role in much the same way as women in general were expected to play a subordinate role in society at large'.⁵⁰ This would be an issue that Irish gay organisations grappled with throughout the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in many lesbian women opting not to join male-dominated organisations, deciding instead to establish lesbian-only groups.⁵¹

It is quite evident that the issue of gay rights dominated the conference, even though it was organised to discuss more broadly the whole area of human sexuality. At the conclusion delegates agreed:

⁴⁶ The National Union of Students (NUS) is a United Kingdom wide organisation representing university student unions. The Union of Students in Ireland is the all-Ireland equivalent of the NUS. Together, they jointly represent student unions in Northern Ireland. <https://nus-usi.org/who-we-are/> (accessed on 21 July 2019).

⁴⁷ PRONI, NIGRA, D/3762/1/10/1, 'Irish Gay Beginnings: Full Report on First Ever Irish Gay Conference', *Gay News*, (October 1973).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Examples included Liberation for Irish Lesbians, Cork Lesbian Collective and Dublin Lesbian Collective. For more information on these organisations see: *Out for Ourselves*; O'Carroll and Collins, *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland*; Egan, *Queer Republic of Cork*.

to work in the future for the establishment of human rights for the sexually oppressed in society, noting that problems exist in all areas of civil liberties, these liberties being continually ignored and rejected by the authorities at present controlling our society[...] We resolve to elect a steering committee of 6 to (a) keep activists aware of developments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, (b) organise future meetings and (c) establish firm links with other groups active in gay rights and civil liberties.⁵²

This was the first time in Ireland that individuals north and south of the border had committed themselves to work for the establishment of human rights for the sexually oppressed and to establish firm links with groups active in gay rights. Crucially, it was also the first time that the issue of homosexuality and gay rights was discussed in a public setting in Ireland and attracted the attention of the mainstream media. Reporting on the conference, the *Irish Times* noted that ‘over the next few months a move is to be made to bring pressure on the Governments, in both the north and south of Ireland, for a change in the law on homosexuality’.⁵³ In a sign of the strong commitment to work on these issues on a cross-border basis, the steering committee consisted of individuals (majority of whom were students) from the north and south of Ireland. Interestingly, and perhaps a reflection of the impact of Pat Knight’s address, the steering committee consisted of four men and four women, (Don Gill, Pat Knight, Margaret McWilliam, Edmund Lynch, Maeve Molloy, Margaret Ward, Peter Bradley and Hugo McManus).⁵⁴

The NUU conference must be understood in the wider context of events which had taken place in universities in Great Britain earlier that year. In April 1973 the NUS met for its annual conference at the University of Exeter, Devon. During the course of this conference a motion was proposed urging the NUS to campaign for an end to sexual inequality and discrimination against homosexuals.⁵⁵ According to the *Irish Times*, the motion was moved by

⁵² PRONI, NIGRA, D/3762/1/10/1, ‘Irish Gay Beginnings’.

⁵³ *Irish Times*, ‘Students Seek Reform of Homosexuality Law’, 5 November 1973, p. 15.

⁵⁴ *Gay News* did not provide detailed biographical information on these individuals. Gill and Pat Knight were students at the NUU and members of the Sexual Reform Movement. Margaret McWilliam was part of Sappho (British lesbian organisation) in Dublin, while Edmund Lynch was a member of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality who worked for the national state broadcaster Raidió Teilifís Éireann. Maeve Molloy was a student at Queen’s University Belfast, while the only information on Margaret Ward noted that she was from Belfast. Both Peter Bradley and Hugo McManus were students at TCD and members of the Sexual Reform Movement.

⁵⁵ *Irish Times*, ‘Students Back Gay Liberation’, 5 April 1973, p. 15.

Jamie Gardiner, an Australian student at University College London, who stated that it was ‘outrageous that it was the first time such a motion had come before the conference’.⁵⁶ Following Gardiner’s criticism, student delegates voted overwhelmingly to commit the NUS to campaign for gay liberation.⁵⁷ The task of implementing this motion fell to Alastair Stewart, who, as we have seen, later addressed delegates at NUU. Within a few short months of the NUS passing the motion, it had presented a 36-page briefing on gay rights to Student Unions across the United Kingdom and almost 60 colleges had established gay societies, which included University of Exeter.⁵⁸ As the NUS was the representational body for Student Unions throughout the United Kingdom we might confidently assume that students in Northern Ireland would have been aware of these developments. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Alastair Stewart and delegates from Exeter Gay Liberation Society were heavily involved in the NUU conference.

One other noteworthy point is the extent to which universities were important locations of transnational mobility. By their nature universities are often composed of students from different countries and it would seem that these transnational networks might also have played a key role in events at NUU; in particular, the presence of Fred Broughton, who as noted earlier was a member of the SMG who was studying at NUU. There are other examples of these transnational connections present at UCD in the late 1970s. *Hermes*, a short-lived gay newsletter, reporting on events at UCD in 1979, noted the presence of two members from the University of Lisbon’s Gay Society at a UCD Gay Society party.⁵⁹ No doubt this was the case at a number of other universities throughout Ireland.

Peter Bradley, a USI delegate to the NUU conference, described it as the ‘first practical step on the road to lifting sexual oppression in Ireland [...]’.⁶⁰ Bradley also expressed his desire that the ‘USI might yet take some kind of stand on behalf of gays [...] to make a statement of support for the Irish Gay Liberation Movement in its campaign’.⁶¹ Within three months Bradley’s hopes were a reality. At the USI’s annual congress, in January 1974, delegates passed

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ David Malcom, ‘A Curious Courage: The Origins of Gay Rights Campaigning in the National Union of Students’, *History of Education*, 47:1 (2018), p. 80.

⁵⁹ ‘What about UCD?’, *Hermes*, 1:5 (October 1979), p. 4.

⁶⁰ PRONI, NIGRA, D/3762/1/10/1, ‘Irish Gay Beginnings’. The USI was the representative body for student unions in the Republic of Ireland and together with NUS also represented student unions in Northern Ireland, <http://usi.ie> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

⁶¹ Ibid.

motions pledging the USI 'to fight against gay oppression as expressed in legislation and social attitudes', and to recognise the 'Irish Gay Movement Steering Committee as set up at the Coleraine Conference'.⁶² In doing so, the USI became the first organisation in the Republic of Ireland to come out publicly in support of gay rights.

Notwithstanding the importance of the motions passed at the USI congress, equally important was the foundation of the Sexual Liberation Movement (SLM) at TCD immediately after the NUU conference.⁶³ Although born in TCD its membership comprised both students and non-students, including, for example, Hugo McManus, Margaret McWilliams, Edmund Lynch, David Norris, and Mary Dorcey. As we have seen earlier, McManus, McWilliams and Lynch were members of the steering committee which had emerged from the NUU conference, while Mary Dorcey had recently returned from living in France and happened upon a notice in TCD advertising a meeting to discuss sexual liberation.⁶⁴ Christina Murphy, writing in the *Irish Times*, noted that by February 1974 the SLM had close to 100 members.⁶⁵

The SLM mobilised around a broad range of issues such as contraception, divorce, abortion, and homosexuality.⁶⁶ This reflected the broad nature of the group which consisted of both homosexual and heterosexual individuals. The broad make-up of this group reflected the cultural climate of 1970s Ireland. Without mainstream support for such issues those championing them could easily have found themselves isolated and therefore had to rely on each other for support. This reality encouraged, in the beginning at least, a broader approach to issues of sexuality, rather than focusing exclusively on one particular issue.

The SLM, encouraged by the success of the NUU conference, organised a two-day symposium on homosexuality at TCD in February 1974. The TCD symposium discussed a broad range of issues including the legal situation facing homosexuals in Ireland, the difficulties of being homosexual as a result of societal attitudes, the support groups which existed for homosexuals in Great Britain and the importance of organising and challenging the

⁶² PRONI, NIGRA, D3762/1/1/1, 'Queens University Belfast delegates report from Union of Students in Ireland Congress', January 1974; Christina Murphy, 'Homosexuals – An Oppressed Minority', *Irish Times*, 16 February 1974, p. 6.

⁶³ PRONI, NIGRA, D/3762/1/10/1, 'Gay rights – History & Emergence of IGRM', *Gay News*, (15 August 1974).

⁶⁴ Mary Dorcey interview with Edmund Lynch, Irish LGBT Oral History Project, 8 June 2013. Copy courtesy of Edmund Lynch, Irish LGBT Oral History Project.

⁶⁵ Murphy, 'Homosexuals – An Oppressed Minority', p. 6.

⁶⁶ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, p. 512; Paul Ryan, 'The Pursuit of Gay and Lesbian Sexual Citizenship Rights, 1980-2011', in Maire Leane and Elizabeth Kiely (eds), *Sexualities and Irish Society: A Reader*, (Dublin, 2013), p. 103; Casey, 'Radical Politics and Gay Activism in the Republic of Ireland', p. 219.

legal and cultural situation.⁶⁷ Whether or not the TCD authorities approved of the symposium taking place on the campus is not known, however, according to Christina Murphy the symposium was held in Trinity because no other place would give them a room for a meeting on homosexuality.⁶⁸ We might surmise, therefore, that the SLM had secured permission to hold the symposium at TCD. This might not be all that surprising considering that TCD had a reputation for being a relatively liberal university. David Norris described it as a ‘tolerant and liberal employer’.⁶⁹

Jeffrey Dudgeon, a founding member of the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association,, described the excitement and significance of the TCD symposium, proclaiming, ‘Fuck it, this was to be the big coming out event in Irish sexual history’.⁷⁰ In many respects Dudgeon’s comment was justified. The TCD symposium attracted over 300 individuals from Ireland and Great Britain, and included speakers such as Dr. Noel Browne, then Senator for TCD,⁷¹ Rose Robertson of Parents Enquiry, a support group for parents of homosexuals in England, Ian Dunn of the SMG and Babs Todd of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. In a rousing speech, Todd urged Irish homosexuals to come out in the open and be honest about themselves, declaring unequivocally that ‘I am gay and I’m proud of it’.⁷²

At a time when Ireland did not have a gay rights organisation the presence of gay organisations from Great Britain was highly significant. Not only did they provide considerable confidence to Irish homosexuals to come out and fight for gay rights, but on a more practical level they also provided guidance and support. Dudgeon recalled that following Todd’s speech the ‘applause and cheering was colossal; at last the audience spoke and it spoke loud. Had Babs continued there could have been an outbreak of straight bashing in Dublin that night’.⁷³ Dudgeon’s reflection on the symposium was shared by Mary Dorcey who remembers it as an

⁶⁷ Jeffrey Dudgeon, ‘Featurette’, *Gay Forum*, (1974), p. 8.

⁶⁸ Christina Murphy, ‘Homosexuals Set Up Organisation’, *Irish Times*, 18 February 1974, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Norris, *A Kick Against the Pricks*, p. 115. TCD also elected two of Ireland’s most progressive twentieth-century politicians to Seanad Éireann in the late 1960s and early 1970s: Dr. Noel Browne and Mary Robinson.

⁷⁰ Dudgeon, ‘Featurette’, p. 8. Dudgeon took a successful court case against the British government challenging the 1861 and 1885 laws in Northern Ireland.

⁷¹ Browne was a former Minister for Health who was forced to resign in 1951 following attempts to introduce the Mother and Child Scheme, which brought him into conflict with the Catholic Church and medical profession. For more information on Noel Browne and the Mother and Child Scheme see Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: Nation and State*, (New York, 2005), pp. 214-219.

⁷² Murphy, ‘Homosexuals Set Up Organisation’, p. 6.

⁷³ Dudgeon, ‘Featurette’, p. 8.

‘extraordinary day [...] it was the start of all the changes that have since happened in Ireland and it was the first time publicly in the South that questions of sexual orientation had ever been addressed’.⁷⁴

The TCD symposium was an important moment not only because it brought a considerable number of Irish homosexuals together in such a public setting, but also because it helped to generate considerable media attention. Journalists from the *Irish Times*, *Farmers Journal* and the *Sunday Independent* attended the symposium and wrote sympathetic articles about homosexuals, helping to present a very different image of homosexuals to Irish society. Conor McAnally in the *Sunday Independent*, for example, stated that:

Five years ago I made the “normal” campy jokes about homosexuals. In jest I asked for protection going to the SLM seminar on homosexuality. [...] I expected to find a bunch of effeminate caricatures of gay men and a collection of equally obvious lesbian women. I was in for a surprise. [...] It’s amazing how much a person’s views can change in five hours. [...] Four hours later I had a clearer picture as one by one gay men and women contributed to the discussion, questioned speakers and spoke seriously and a little angrily about repressive laws and attitudes such as mine. [...] Society is altered by a change of attitude. My attitudes to homosexuality and gay people were changed at the meeting.⁷⁵

The significance of such an article cannot be underestimated. As highlighted earlier, many within Irish society, including McAnally, had been accustomed to negative images of homosexuals, however, what McAnally’s article emphasised, in no uncertain terms, was that such stereotypical images were false and that it was society, rather than the homosexual, that needed to change.

While the conference was certainly a success in drawing greater attention to the difficult position of homosexuals in Ireland, it did, however, lead some, such as Norris and Lynch, to question the extent to which it was wise for a majority of homosexual individuals within the SLM to spend ‘their Monday evenings in a Trinity garret writing letters to the *Irish Times*

⁷⁴ Edmund Lynch, *Did They Notice Us? Gay Visibility in the Irish Media 1973 – 1993*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ik19fvu6dP0> (accessed on 29 January 2019).

⁷⁵ Conor McAnally, ‘I Changed My Mind about Homosexuals’, *Sunday Independent*, 17 February 1974, p. 3. Other sympathetic articles included, Murphy, ‘Homosexuals – An Oppressed Minority’, p. 6; Murphy, ‘Homosexuals Set Up Organisation’, p. 6; Angela Nugent, ‘Different is Not Dangerous’, *Farmers Journal*, 2 March 1974, p. 45.

indignantly demanding unrestricted access to contraceptive devices'.⁷⁶ As a result of what Norris labelled 'stormy SLM meetings', Norris and Lynch split from the SLM and, together with Clement Clancy and Sean Connolly, established the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM) in June 1974 – the first such organisation in the Republic of Ireland.⁷⁷ Casey notes that this split occurred because some 'gay SLM members determined their own sexual liberation "was much more pressing" than other sexualities due to the laws criminalising it'.⁷⁸

By bringing Irish homosexuals together with their counterparts from Great Britain, the NUU conference and TCD symposium laid the foundations for the emergence of a gay rights movement in Ireland. In offering individuals the space and means to meet, Irish students and universities provided an outlet in which a gay rights discourse could and did emerge in Ireland. Crucially, as a result of transnational connections and influences, Irish homosexuals were able to meet, interact with, and develop important connections with gay rights organisations from Great Britain. These were connections which were sustained throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the fact that these events were held in public institutions like TCD and NUU was also significant, particularly in attracting media attention, thereby helping to demonstrate that there was a cohort of Irish homosexuals who were willing to challenge the oppression they were subjected to. Both conferences began the process of breaking the silence and stigma surrounding homosexuality in Ireland, something which students were to the fore in initiating.

Student Press and Gay Rights Activism in Irish Universities

As we have seen with the UCC Welfare Handbook, efforts to promote a more positive rhetoric on homosexuality were curtailed by the UCC Governing Body. This, however, was not a

⁷⁶ David Norris, 'Homosexuals are Revolting: A History of the Gay Movement in Ireland', *In Touch: Journal of National Gay Federation*, 2:7 (August/September 1980), p. 9.

⁷⁷ NLI, Personal Papers of David Norris, Acc 6672, Box 21, 'Edmund Lynch to David Norris', 19 April 1975; NLI, Irish Queer Archive (hereafter IQA), MS 45, 951/2, 'Constitution of the Irish Gay Rights Movement', 1975. The IGRM had six primary objectives, which included the 'achievement of equality under the law with heterosexual congress' and 'the promotion of [a] better understanding of homosexuality by the community at large, by education and example'. The extent to which the IGRM emerged from the efforts of individuals from the north and south of Ireland, of differing religious, political and social backgrounds, was reflected in its constitution which stated unequivocally that the IGRM was a 'non-party-political, non-sectarian, homophile grouping'. Clement Clancy, from Dublin, worked in the supermarket industry, while Sean Connolly, from Roscommon, was a civil engineer. Born in the 1940s they spend the majority of their adult life living and working in Dublin prior to meeting and establishing the IGRM.

⁷⁸ Casey, 'Radical Politics and Gay Activism in the Republic of Ireland', p. 219.

situation confined to universities. In fact, as a result of Ireland's strict censorship laws and the 1861 and 1885 laws, many mainstream publications in Ireland often refused to accept advertisements from gay rights organisations. As a result, the options available to gay rights activists to promote a more positive rhetoric on homosexuality were considerably restricted.⁷⁹ The decision of the USI to support the campaign for gay rights, therefore, was highly significant. With no other organisation publicly supporting gay rights at that time, generating support from a large organisation like the USI was vital in helping gay rights activists to engage with individuals outside the narrow confines of gay rights organisations.

The USI and student bodies worked to ensure that gay rights activists had the opportunity to engage with the student population on gay rights. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s numerous debates on the issue of gay rights were organised at UCD, UCC, TCD, QUB and University College Galway (UCG). Moreover, at popular events throughout term, most notably welfare week, women's week and fresher's week, students' unions ensured that there was a space for a discussion on gay rights. These invitations and events allowed gay rights activists to engage directly with the student population on gay rights. At a November 1977 USI conference on human sexuality at QUB, Edmund Lynch used the opportunity to present homosexuals as an 'oppressed sexual minority' who were denied basic civil rights.⁸⁰ Recognising that this was a student event, Lynch noted that this oppressed minority also included 'students throughout Ireland who had to shoulder a heavy burden because of the social and religious prejudices they faced in Ireland'.⁸¹ Particularly worrying, Lynch argued, was what he described as the attempts by Ian Paisley to prevent civil rights in sexual matters in Northern Ireland'.⁸² Paisley was a protestant evangelical minister, a co-founder of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster and leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).⁸³ He spearheaded the 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' campaign of the late 1970s, which opposed the 'social and legal acceptance of homosexuality as "normal" in Northern Ireland'.⁸⁴ Although Paisley's efforts were directed at attempts to prevent the introduction of homosexual law

⁷⁹ See Egan, *Queer Republic of Cork*, p. 55, for examples of the press refusing to accept advertisements from gay and lesbian organisations.

⁸⁰ NLI, IQA, MS 45, 948/2, 'Paper presented by Edmund Lynch to the conference on Aspects of Human Sexuality at Queen's University Belfast', November 1977.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland*, p. 310.

⁸⁴ Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin*, p. 479.

reform similar to that in England, Lynch argued that those efforts interfered with the privacy rights of the individual noting that:

all dictatorships have discovered the psychological truth that one of the most efficient ways to subdue the individual is to interfere in his privacy by the imposition of rules and taboos on his sexual behaviour. [...] Let us make it quite clear to Mr. Paisley and his cohorts here in Northern Ireland and his like kind in the Republic that there is no place for any kind of dictatorship be it political or spiritual in a multi-dimensional society where both the gay and non-gay community can live and can exist in solidarity allowing people to differ in their outlook, their mental attitudes and their values from the so-called norms of the majority.⁸⁵

A common strategy adopted by gay activists was to situate the position of homosexuals within the wider scheme of individual's rights and privacy; the strategy was to argue that while the laws may now only directly affect homosexuals, in future attempts may be made to curtail the activities of heterosexuals through similar legislation. This was an argument used by David Norris in a speech to the USI annual congress in Wexford in 1978. Norris warned that:

when the government of a country perpetuates a legal system under which the privacy and integrity of the most personal aspect of human relationships are specifically and intentionally violated [...] then a situation obtains where the human dignity not only of the minority involved but of all citizens of the State is diminished.⁸⁶

As a minority Lynch and Norris argued that students, just like homosexuals, had to fight against such oppression.

Later, in 1981, the TCD Women's Week organising committee invited Liz Noonan, a lesbian feminist, to give a talk on the experiences and problems which lesbian women face in their day-to-day lives. According to *Union*, a TCD student newspaper, Noonan's talk 'was certainly thought-provoking, forcing one to widen one's horizons and think of the problems faced by an unpopular minority group'.⁸⁷ While, in 1985, during the UCD Students' Union Welfare Week, the organising committee invited the National Gay Federation (NGF) to 'send

⁸⁵ NLI, IQA, MS 45, 948/2, 'Paper presented by Edmund Lynch to the conference 'Aspects of Human Sexuality'.

⁸⁶ NLI, IQA MS 45, 948/2, 'David Norris speech at the USI annual conference', 14 January 1978.

⁸⁷ 'Lesbianism', *Union*, 2:19 (November 1981), p. 14.

a speaker to talk about gay rights and the difficulties that gay people face in society'.⁸⁸ The NGF was established in 1979 by David Norris and Edmund Lynch after they left the IGRM in 1977 following an acrimonious split over strategy.

These events furthered efforts to generate a public discourse on gay rights in Ireland. At a UCC Philosophical Society debate in November 1980, for example, Charles Kerrigan, a member of the UCC Students' Union, was invited to speak in favour of the motion that 'this house would support the establishment of a gay society in UCC'.⁸⁹ Kerrigan used the opportunity to argue that 'all gay people should be allowed to seek fulfilment and that a step towards this would be the establishment of a gay society by which members could protect themselves from oppression'.⁹⁰ Speaking against the motion, Patrick McCarthy argued that 'homosexuality was against nature'.⁹¹ Remarkably, however, this debate attracted the attention of the local *Cork Examiner* which noted that over 350 students attended the debate and an overwhelming majority voted to support the formation of a gay society at UCC.⁹²

McCarthy's opposition to the motion demonstrated the existence of a cohort who opposed the activities to promote gay rights within Irish universities. At a conference on 'Lesbians and Gays' organised by the NUS at QUB, in October 1983, roughly 150 members of the DUP held a large picket outside carrying placards saying, 'This is Belfast, Not Sodom', 'God Demands Righteousness Not Gay Rights', 'Sodomy is From Satan' and 'Sodomy Emerges from the Pit of Hell'.⁹³ According to the *NGF News*, the Royal Ulster Constabulary had to intervene to prevent an outbreak of violence after a beer glass was thrown at a prominent DUP member.⁹⁴ Later, in 1984, *Out* reported that Tommy Graham, the new editor of *Union*, refused to accept an advertisement for POPPIES, the café in the Hirschfeld Centre, a gay community centre in Temple Bar, Dublin, that was run by the NGF from 1979 to 1987, because he did 'not support the promotion of homosexuality'.⁹⁵ Similarly, in 1988, Dermot Kelly, a UCC student contacted the UCC student magazine, *Gazette*, to state his objection to the paper

⁸⁸ NLI, IQA MS 45, 949/5, 'Niamh Mannion, UCD Welfare Officer, to National Gay Federation', 2 January 1985.

⁸⁹ NLI, UCC LGBT Archive, MS 49, 655/3, 'The UCC Philosophical Society, Main Debates of the 131st Session'.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Maurice Gubbins, 'Gay Society Refused Recognition by UCC', *Cork Examiner*, 10 February 1981, p. 3.

⁹³ NLI, IQA MS 45, 964/6, 'Queens Protest', *NGF News*, (October 1983).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ 'Advertisement Refusal', *Out*, 1 (December 1984/January 1985), p. 7.

promoting the re-establishment of the gay society in UCC, noting that he did so ‘on basic moral principles’, believing that the ‘only connotations derivable from a Gay Society would undoubtedly be sexually based’ and therefore the ‘public advertising of this kind is distasteful to a large body of the student popular [...]’.⁹⁶

Graham’s refusal to accept an advertisement for Poppies, and Kelly’s criticism in the *Gazette*, was in stark contrast to the vast majority of student publications in Ireland which not only worked to promote gay rights, but also a positive rhetoric about homosexuals.⁹⁷ As early as 1976 Maynooth University’s students’ newspaper, *Educational Matters*, provided David Norris with the opportunity to address the issue of homosexuality. In his article Norris asserted that ‘the homosexual is a person, not a freak, monster or even just a statistic, but a human being with a family, friends, job, worries, hopes, fears and joys, just as the rest of society’.⁹⁸ Norris also took the opportunity to condemn the Vatican’s ‘determination to see human relations only in terms of genital acts instead of affection’, and argued that ‘the sexual act, homo or hetero is morally neutral and what give it it’s human and moral value is not determined by some mechanistic, physiological or theological yardstick, but by the quality of mutual love and need it expresses’.⁹⁹ That this type of criticism was printed in a Maynooth University publication was all the more significant because Maynooth University also housed Ireland’s national seminary.

Similarly, UCC student publications such as *The Sage* and *Gazette* publicly expressed their support for gay rights. In one article, the author quipped, ‘people are attracted to members of their own sex as well as to members of the opposite sex and why should there be anything offensive or ‘queer’ about it?’¹⁰⁰ *The Sage* further argued that ‘the stereotype ‘pansies’, fairies’ and porn magazine portrayals of the standard lesbian are almost as common as the stage Irishman wishing the top of the morning to you’.¹⁰¹ This was a sentiment shared in *USI News* which asked its readers ‘if you believe homosexual individuals should have human rights such

⁹⁶ NLI, UCC Cork LGBT Archive, MS 49, 655/4, Dermot Kelly, ‘To UCC Lesbian and Gay Group’, *Gazette*, 3:3 (28 April 1988), p. 3.

⁹⁷ Some of the student publications which published articles on gay rights included: *UCD Welfare Handbook*, *Union*, *USI News*, *Trinity News*, *UCC Welfare Handbook*, *Hermes*, *Gazette*, *Educational Matters*, *Sage*.

⁹⁸ David Norris, ‘The Homosexual in Ireland’, *Educational Matters*, (1976), p. 21

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁰ NLI, UCC Cork LGBT Archive, MS 49, 655/3, ‘Gay Soc’, *The Sage*, 3 (February 1981).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

as the right to dignity, the right to privacy, the right to control over her/his body [...] then you believe in the same rights gay people are demanding'.¹⁰²

One of the key objectives of gay rights activists, since the foundation of the IGRM, was not only to undermine the negative stereotypes of homosexuality, but also to promote the belief that gay rights were human rights. Organisations such as the IGRM and the NGF worked to ensure that what they were demanding was presented not as something unique or special, but rather simply as basic human rights. The NGF's motto was 'gay rights are not extravagant demands. Gay rights are human rights!'¹⁰³ Through the student press and events students worked to promote this rhetoric.

In the context of 1980s Ireland these activities had added significance. Not only was this a period when the Irish High Court and Supreme Court ruled that the laws criminalising sexual activity between males were constitutional, but, nationally and internationally, it was a period in which the gay community was being scapegoated for HIV/AIDS.¹⁰⁴ Rather than distancing themselves from the gay community, the activities discussed here demonstrate the extent to which students remained a key ally to Ireland's gay community. In fact, the student movement supported the efforts of Ireland's gay community to combat HIV/AIDS. In particular, they facilitated interaction between Gay Health Action (GHA) and the wider student movement through the student press and student events. GHA was set up in January 1985 to combat HIV/AIDS and in May 1985 produced Ireland's first AIDS information leaflet.¹⁰⁵ In contrast with the Irish government, which promoted abstinence and fidelity in marriage, GHA advocated for an explicit public education campaign as the best means of combatting

¹⁰² 'Gay Rights Case for Europe?', *USI News*, 10:2 (November 1980), p. 6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ For more information on Ireland's gay community response to AIDS see, Kerrigan, 'Out-Ing AIDS'; Nolan, 'The Gay Community Response to the Emergence of AIDS in Ireland'; Grannell, 'Gay Health Action and the Fight Against AIDS in 1980s Ireland'. See also Janet Weston and Virginia Berridge, 'AIDS Inside and Out: HIV/AIDS and Penal Policy in Ireland and England & Wales in the 1980s and 1990s', *Social History of Medicine*, first published online 25 October 2018. For a wider discussion on the AIDS epidemic see: Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On. Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, (New York, 1987); Virginia Berridge, *AIDS in the UK: The Making of Policy, 1981-1994*, (Oxford, 1996); Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, (Durham, 1999); Anthony Pedro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality and American Religion*, (Oxford, 2015); Benita Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA: Anti-AIDS Activism in Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s*, (New York, 2017); Lukas Engelmann, *Mapping AIDS: Visual Histories of an Enduring Epidemic*, (Cambridge, 2018).

¹⁰⁵ Kerrigan, 'Out-Ing AIDS', p. 248.

HIV/AIDS. From 1985 to 1990 GHA published a number of pioneering information leaflets on safer sex and how to use condoms.¹⁰⁶

On a number of occasions throughout the late 1980s, the USI provided GHA with the opportunity to engage with the wider student population. In April 1987, for example, GHA was afforded the opportunity in *USI News* to promote their message of safer sex, insisting that ‘AIDS is not a gay or I.V. drug user disease but a disease that affects everyone and especially those who are sexually active’.¹⁰⁷ GHA noted that a lot of their talks to young people revolved around safer sex, noting that ‘this is important because many students travel during the summer break and as everyone knows once you get outside Ireland we do tend to let go, which is a good thing, BUT THIS INFORMATION IS NOW RELEVANT IN IRELAND’.¹⁰⁸ Later, in February 1988, at a USI conference on sexuality, the USI provided the space for GHA to hold a workshop on HIV/AIDS.¹⁰⁹ In fact, the student movement, along with the Irish Family Planning Association, GHA and the NGF, became involved in the efforts to bring about greater access to condoms during this period. Together with the Condom Sense campaign, some student unions illegally installed condom vending machines in Irish universities.¹¹⁰ Condom Sense was a short-lived direct action campaign comprising organisations such as the Cork AIDS Alliance and AIDS West Galway which had emerged in 1992 to highlight the importance of condoms in the battle to combat the spread of AIDS.¹¹¹ Enright and Cloatre note that ‘by late 1992, they [Condom Sense] had installed 140 condom machines, to limited police response’.¹¹²

These activities formed a crucial part in helping to move the issue of gay rights outside the narrow confines of gay organisations and to build up alliances. Moreover, through these efforts, in particular articles in the student press on gay rights, students helped the transmission of gay rights throughout Ireland. Lucy Delap, in her study of feminist bookshops, has argued that bookshops contributed to the cultural transmission of feminist ideas.¹¹³ I contend that

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 248.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Talks on AIDS by Gay Health Action Members’, *USI News*, 3:3 (March/April 1987), p. 6.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Sex for Everyone’, *USI News*, (March/April 1988), p. 18.

¹¹⁰ Máiréad Enright and Emilie Cloatre, ‘Transformative Illegality: How Condoms Became Legal in Ireland, 1991-1993’, *Feminist Legal Studies*, 26 (2018), p. 276.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 274.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 274.

¹¹³ Lucy Delap, ‘Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women’s Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974-2000’, *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), p. 172.

universities similarly acted as spaces for the cultural transmission of gay rights in Ireland. Student bodies and universities facilitated gay activists in engaging with students throughout Ireland on gay rights and to present a more positive rhetoric on homosexuality than students had been accustomed to. In this instance then, universities and the student press were important spaces of resisting the accepted negative images of homosexuals. This was all the more important because, while student bodies sought to assist the gay rights campaign, some college authorities were not as disposed to officially acknowledge the right of gay and lesbian individuals to a visible presence on Irish universities.

Gay Societies, College Authorities and Recognition

In June 1980, following a decision to support the establishment of gay societies, the USI circulated a briefing document on how to go about establishing a gay society.¹¹⁴ The document noted that in order to establish a society organisers would firstly need members, the minimum number required being set by the university authorities. In UCC the minimum number was set at fifty before an application for recognition could be presented.¹¹⁵ The society would also require a constitution setting out its aims, composition of committee, and provision for an annual general meeting.¹¹⁶ Finally, it would require approval from their respective university authorities to become an officially recognised society, thereby granting the society certain privileges, such as funding.

In 1980, however, TCD, NUU, QUB and UCD already had gay societies. With the exception of QUB and TCD, the majority of gay societies did not have official recognition.¹¹⁷ Throughout the 1970s QUB's Gay Liberation Society was in the unique position of being the only recognised gay university society in Ireland. This, however, was not a result of university authorities approving of the society, but rather the result of a January 1974 decision which stipulated that a new society did not require approval from university authorities.¹¹⁸ During the academic year of 1982/83, TCD became the second university to formally approve a gay society.¹¹⁹ It is not known why TCD, in contrast with other university authorities, granted

¹¹⁴ NLI, IQA MS 45, 948/2, 'USI: The Need to Form a Gay Society'.

¹¹⁵ 'Cork Pulls It Off', *Gay Community News*, 15 (February 1990), p. 3.

¹¹⁶ NLI, IQA MS 45, 948/2, 'USI: The Need to Form a Gay Society'.

¹¹⁷ NLI, IQA MS 45, 949/5, 'David Norris to UCD Academic Council', 9 November 1982; PRONI, NIGRA, D3762/1/1/1, 'Gay Liberation Society'.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Fionnuala Egan, 'Q Soc on Providing Constant Support for Trinity's LGBT community, in *University Times*, 27 February 2017, <http://www.universitytimes.ie/2017/02/q-soc-on-providing-constant-support-for-trinitys-lgbt-community/> (accessed on 3 June 2019).

official recognition to its gay society, but it might have been a result of, as noted earlier, the more liberal nature of that university. Later, gay societies emerged at UCC, UCG and Maynooth University. In fact, the presence of a gay society at the 1984 UCG societies day caught the attention of the *Connacht Sentinel*.¹²⁰ The journalist, however, was not convinced that the gay society helped the cause of gay rights, noting that:

if the people involved in Gay Soc [...] wished to shake off the traditional image of Gay people, which has been detrimental in the past then they have made a bad start. The dominant hue at their table was of a washed-out pink. Maybe it is the case that the aim of this society is to perpetuate the notion that all male homosexuals are handbag carrying effeminates.¹²¹

While the article was not positive in its treatment of the gay society, the fact that it was reported demonstrated the extent to which such developments were deemed newsworthy.

The primary objective of gay societies was to provide a forum for gay and lesbian students to socialise and meet others.¹²² In an article in *The Sage*, the UCC Gay Society explained that their objective was ‘to promote the social, political, and legal wellbeing of gay people in UCC and in society at large’.¹²³ In their formative years gay societies, due to a lack of resources, limited their activities to weekly coffee gatherings. On very rare occasions gay societies were able to organise other activities, such as discos, as was the case at QUB and UCD. In October 1976, following a reported IRA bombing of the Casanova Club, which had been the hive of activity for Belfast’s gay social scene, the Belfast Gay Liberation Society organised gay discos at the students’ union’s offices at QUB.¹²⁴ These discos proved extremely popular, attracting upwards of 200 gay and lesbian individuals, and continued into late 1977 at a time when no other venue was available.¹²⁵ Similarly, during the academic year of 1982/83, UCD’s Gay Society successfully organised two discos, which, according to one of its members, Tomas Campbell, were thoroughly enjoyable.¹²⁶

One of the more important initiatives of a gay society in the west of Ireland occurred at UCG in 1984. Recognising the desire of many gay and lesbian students to make contact with

¹²⁰ ‘Gay Society a First at UCG’, *Connacht Sentinel*, 16 October 1984, p. 6.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹²² University College Dublin Archives (hereafter UCDA), Minutes of UCD Academic Council Meeting, 13 June 1977.

¹²³ NLI, UCC Cork LGBT Archive, MS 49, 655/3, ‘Gay Soc’, *The Sage*, 3 (February 1981).

¹²⁴ ‘Bombed Casanova Club Closes – Gay Lib Discos Begin’, *NIGRA News*, (September/October 1976), p. 10.

¹²⁵ ‘Gay Lib Discos Continue’, *NIGRA News*, (May 1977), p. 5.

¹²⁶ NLI, IQA, MS 45, 966/5, ‘Gay Soc in UCD’.

other gay and lesbian individuals, the UCG Gay Society established 'Gayline', a telephone befriending service run from the students' union. Gayline was available every Thursday from 7.30pm to 8.30pm and, in contrast with other local press who often refused to accept advertisements from gay organisations, the local *Galway Advertiser* agreed to advertise its contact details.¹²⁷ Although the service only lasted until mid-1985, it, nevertheless, provided a vital service for the many isolated gay and lesbian individuals in that region.¹²⁸ That Gayline lasted as long as it did was remarkable when one considers that UCG's Gay Society did not have official recognition and reportedly came under 'considerable pressure from the guardians of morality' there.¹²⁹

The majority of Irish university authorities were not inclined to grant official recognition to gay societies. In 1987 *Out* reported that Maynooth University's Gay Society was denied official recognition on the basis that it would be 'an embarrassment to the college'.¹³⁰ Attempts at UCD and UCC were similarly denied by their college authorities. Between June 1977 and November 1983 the UCD Gay Society was denied recognition on four occasions.¹³¹ On each occasion no explanation was given as to why recognition was denied. UCD Academic Council minutes from November 1983 noted that there was 'a short discussion on the UCD Gay Society' and the 'Academic Council decided not to grant recognition to the proposed society'.¹³² In contrast, at that same meeting, the Aikido Club, which was also denied recognition, was given a reason; its constitution needed a complete re-drafting. The Aikido Society, therefore, had advice on how to secure recognition in the future, while UCD's Gay Society was afforded no such advice. The extent to which the UCD Academic Council was unafraid to take a stance on moral issues had been evident one year previously when it granted official recognition to the Life: Save the Unborn Child Society, which aimed 'to educate people

¹²⁷ See Egan, *Queer Republic of Cork*, for examples of local press refusing advertisements from gay organisations.

¹²⁸ 'Advertisement for Gayline', *Galway Advertiser*, 29 November 1984, p. 13.

¹²⁹ Rory Murray, 'On-Campus', *Out*, 3 (April/May 1985), p. 5.

¹³⁰ Andrew Jackson, 'Gays are an Embarrassment to Maynooth College', *Out*, 14 (February/March 1988), p. 12.

¹³¹ UCDA, Minutes of the UCD Academic Council Meeting, 5 March 1990.

¹³² UCDA, Minutes of the UCD Academic Council Meeting, 16 November 1983. In UCD a society had to first get approval from the Academic Council, which was responsible for the curriculum and for student discipline and consisted of all the professors, associate professors, deans and heads of departments in the university. Following a vote in favour at the Academic Council a vote was then put to the Governing Body, which made the final decision. The Governing Body managed and controlled the affairs of the university. See Donal McCartney, *UCD: A National Idea: The History of University College, Dublin*, (Dublin, 1999), p. 84.

by all available means about the true nature of abortion: that is the deliberate destruction of human life at any time between fertilization and birth [...]'.¹³³ In UCC, the gay society was subjected to the same treatment. In 1981 the UCC Joint Board denied recognition to the gay society without any explanation; a decision which led to considerable outrage amongst UCC societies.¹³⁴ The *Sunday Tribune* reported that 'many societies within the college passed motions of censure on the joint board [...]'.¹³⁵

The refusal of college authorities to grant official recognition presented many obstacles for gay societies. Firstly, it denied them the opportunity to book rooms within the university. Secondly, it deprived them of the funds necessary to independently run a society.¹³⁶ Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, each refusal sent a clear message to gay and lesbian students that university authorities were not willing to support their right to a space on campus. According to the *UCD Bulletin*, the UCD Gay Society was refused advertising space at the UCD notice board, which 'supposedly offers free space to students and staff'.¹³⁷ While Paul Yeats reported in the *Irish Press* that problems between the gay society and university authorities in UCC escalated in March 1981 after the college barred the gay society from 'having any meetings on the campus as they are not an official college society – even in the students' union offices'.¹³⁸ Both incidents clearly demonstrated the active attempts of both university authorities to thwart the efforts of gay societies and deny gay and lesbian students a space on campus.

Following the decision made in November 1983 to deny recognition to the UCD Gay Society, Tomas Campbell stated that 'GaySoc is tired of politely asking to be recognised, only to face the indignity of repeated rejection'.¹³⁹ From that moment the UCD Gay Society worked

¹³³ UCDA, Minutes of the UCD Academic Council Meeting, 11 June 1982.

¹³⁴ UCCA, University College Cork Minutes of Governing Body, Minute Book, 24 March 1981. In UCC, in order for a society to gain official recognition it had to first be approved by the Joint Board (consisting of four student and four staff representatives which governed the relations between the students' union and the university authorities); then the motion was moved at the Academic Council (this consisted of seventy members comprising, academic staff, clergymen, and county councilors), and then it had to secure final approval from the Governing Body (which consisted of twenty-eight members including the UCC president and vice president, along with academic staff, county councillors, and a student representative). For more information see, 'Cork Pulls It Off', *Gay Community News*, 15 (February 1990), p. 3; John Murphy, *The College: A History of Queen's/University College, Cork, 1845-1995*, (Cork, 1996), pp. 181-183, pp. 322-325.

¹³⁵ 'Gay Society Accuses UCC', *Sunday Tribune*, 15 February 1981, p. 2.

¹³⁶ John Ryan, 'Gays on Campus', *Hermes*, 1:1 (December 1978), p. 11.

¹³⁷ 'Gay Soc', *Bulletin*, (January 1979), p. 9.

¹³⁸ Paul Yeats, 'Election Fever in the Air', *Irish Press*, 4 March 1981, p. 17.

¹³⁹ NLI, IQA MS 45, 964/7, 'UCD Gay Soc Refused Recognition', *NGF News*, (1983).

to mobilise the support of student bodies and outside organisations to put pressure on the university authorities to grant official recognition. While it was not until 1988 that the UCD Gay Society once more attempted to gain official recognition, it was clear that in the interim years they had mobilised considerable support, both inside and outside UCD. Unlike their efforts in 1983 to secure recognition, in 1988 the UCD Gay Society was able to present a petition with 1,730 signatures in support of recognition, while the UCD registrar noted that letters of support had been received from UCD professors, Young Fine Gael, USI, the UCD Students' Union and UCD Chaplains.¹⁴⁰ The UCD Students' Union argued that by refusing recognition in light of the gay society's contribution to college life, the governing body was 'practising blatant discrimination'.¹⁴¹

Although the UCD Academic Council once more denied recognition, the margin between those in favour and those against was only four votes.¹⁴² Moreover, whereas in previous years there had been no discussion on the constitution of the UCD Gay Society – it had simply been dismissed – at this meeting of March 1988 the society's constitution was discussed, with one professor noting that it would require amendments of a drafting nature.¹⁴³ In this regard then, while official recognition was not granted, a considerable shift in support had taken place within the Academic Council. Crucially, in the midst of these efforts the Irish media brought the efforts of gay societies to the attention of the wider Irish society. In 1988, for example, *Hot Press*, a popular fortnightly music and events magazine, printed a detailed article on the efforts of gay societies to gain recognition. *Hot Press* was clearly in sympathy with the efforts of these societies, arguing that 'contrary to their popular image as centres of enlightenment and free expression, many of the country's third level colleges house unsympathetic and sometimes deeply hostile attitudes towards gays in their midst'.¹⁴⁴

At the time of UCD Gay Society's fifth attempt to gain official recognition efforts were also underway in UCC. While the UCC Gay Society had re-emerged in 1987 – following a number of dormant years – it was only after David Norris' success at the European Court of Human Rights that the gay society began a campaign to mobilise support for official recognition, clearly believing this judgement could be used to their advantage. In 1988 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Ireland's laws criminalising the sexual activity

¹⁴⁰ UCDA, Minutes of the UCD Academic Council Meeting, 10 March 1988.

¹⁴¹ NLI, IQA MS 45, 964/7, 'UCD Gay Soc Refused Recognition', *NGF News*, (1983).

¹⁴² UCDA, Minutes of the UCD Academic Council Meeting, 10 March 1988.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Colette Sheridan, 'Campus Crusade', *Hot Press*, 12:5 (24 March 1988), p. 7.

between males were in contravention of Article Eight of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Irish government was required to amend the laws or face expulsion from the Council of Europe.¹⁴⁵ The renewed efforts of UCC's Gay Society included the circulation of fliers in the college library, common room and restaurants; participating in the Law Society's Legal Rights Awareness Week; and circulating a petition. In early 1989, Josephine O'Halloran, Sandra Buckley, Emmett Flynn and Mick Quinlan, members of the UCC Gay Society, wrote to each UCC club and society requesting that they support their campaign, noting that 'now is the time, especially in the light of the Norris decision to upgrade our position to that of other societies in college [...]'.¹⁴⁶ In one letter of support, the Sociological Society's secretary argued that:

the denial of recognition is a vicious oppression on those who need most the energy of university debate. We recall the previous decisions of UCD and Maynooth as petty attempts to climb to a Catholic censorship. As students we deplore any forms of censorship [...] Gays have the right to form their own, even if it is un-traditional, opinions and desires based in their autonomy and intelligence.¹⁴⁷

During the week of 12 March, in advance of the UCC Joint Board and Academic Council meetings to vote on recognition, the gay society organised a gay and lesbian awareness week to highlight the need for the society. The week's events included videos in the UCC common room, a public meeting and a poster campaign. The UCC Joint Board and Academic Council were also presented with a number of letters from other societies stating their firm support for the gay society, along with a letter from a Garrett Barden, a UCC professor, who sought to defuse the argument, in light of the Norris verdict, that it would be illegal to grant official recognition to the society.¹⁴⁸ These efforts proved successful with the UCC Joint Board and UCC Academic Council voting four to two and twenty-seven to seven respectively in favour of granting official recognition.¹⁴⁹ One month later the UCC Governing Body, by thirteen votes

¹⁴⁵ For more information on the European Court of Human Rights ruling see Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality*.

¹⁴⁶ NLI, UCC Cork LGBT Archive, MS 45, 655/4, 'Letter from UCC Gay Society to UCC Clubs and Societies'.

¹⁴⁷ NLI, UCC Cork LGBT Archive, MS 45, 655/4, 'Letter from Secretary of the Sociological Society to UCC Governing Body'.

¹⁴⁸ 'Cork Pulls It Off', *Gay Community News*, Issue 15 (February 1990), p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ UCCA, University College Cork Minutes of Governing Body, Minute Book, no. 68, March/April 1989.

to seven, approved the recommendation of the UCC Academic Council.¹⁵⁰ The decision was headline news in the *Cork Examiner*, which noted that UCC ‘yesterday became the first constituent college of the National University of Ireland to officially recognise a lesbian or gay college group [...]’.¹⁵¹

Within a year of UCC granting official recognition to its gay society, the UCD Academic Council and Governing Body followed suit. In the interim period the UCD Gay Society had increased their efforts. Akin to the actions of those in UCC, the UCD Gay Society sought to take advantage of the Norris verdict, issuing a press release expressing their hope that in light of the Norris verdict the UCD university authorities would grant official recognition. They also continued to circulate petitions and organise awareness weeks, which included a cuddle-in protest outside the UCD administration building.¹⁵² According to a report in *Gay Community News*, the Gay Society’s Awareness Week in 1990 was a considerable success as a high volume of ‘straight students’ offered to do a ‘stint giving out awareness leaflets or staffing the petition table’, while students also ‘happily bought and wore pink triangle badges that had been specially printed for the week. The stock of 500 was sold out by Wednesday afternoon’.¹⁵³

When the UCD Academic Council met in March 1990 to vote on official recognition, over 2,000 students and staff had signed the petition, while letters of support had been received from eighteen organisations, including the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and the Irish Federation of University Teachers. Letters of support were also sent from Senators David Norris, Brendan Ryan, Shane Ross, and John Murphy, and Proinsias de Rossa, T.D.¹⁵⁴ The registrar, in noting the ‘substantial volume of correspondence, together with the petition’, also stated that the society’s constitution ‘appeared to be in order’ and ‘that the provisions therein did not contravene the law’.¹⁵⁵ Crucially, the registrar also noted the decision of UCC to grant official recognition to its gay society in 1989. While a minority of professors did object to supporting recognition, even writing a letter that warned ‘students could become emotionally kidnapped through encounters with an organised homosexual movement’, the UCD Academic Council and Governing Body agreed to recognise the gay

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Pat Brosnan, ‘Gay Group Gets UCC Recognition’, *Cork Examiner*, 26 April 1989, p. 1.

¹⁵² Lance Pettitt, ‘A Positive Success: UCD Week’, *Gay Community News*, 16 (March 1990), p. 3.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ UCDA, Minutes of the UCD Academic Council Meeting, March 1990.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

society.¹⁵⁶ Speaking to the *Sunday Tribune*, Lance Pettit, UCD Gay Society, maintained that the decision was a sign that there was ‘a growing tolerance amongst young people towards homosexuality’.¹⁵⁷

There can be no doubt that the decision to approve both gay societies at UCC and UCD was influenced by Norris’ victory at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and that both societies used this effectively in their campaigning activities. However, it would be unjust to suggest that both university authorities were forced into this decision by the Norris ruling alone. Both decisions might also have reflected the emergence of more tolerant university authorities, who recognised the merits of granting official recognition. As noted by the high volume of letters received, there was considerable support for gay societies and the wider gay rights campaign at that time, including from the Irish Federation of University Teachers. Moreover, it would be fair to argue that these events coincided with a general shift in attitude towards homosexuals in Ireland. In 1987, for example, not only was David Norris elected to Seanad Éireann, the first openly gay individual elected in Ireland, but that same year the Irish Congress of Trade Unions published a highly influential document, *Lesbian and Gay Rights in the Workplace: Guidelines for Negotiators*.¹⁵⁸ In 1988, the Department of Finance issued a circular on civil service policy on AIDS in the workplace which condemned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the workplace, while one year later sexual orientation was included in the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Bill, 1989.¹⁵⁹

The sustained efforts of students and the gay societies in organising gay awareness weeks, petitions, and the numerous other activities discussed above cannot be underestimated. The students’ campaigns ensured that the issue of gay societies remained topical within their respective universities and on the agenda of the university authorities. The Norris judgement complimented such efforts and ensured that the university authorities could not cite the legal situation as justification for their continued denial of official recognition. In the wider

¹⁵⁶ John Walshe, ‘UCD Academics Warn on Gays’, *Irish Independent*, 17 March 1990, p. 3. UCDA, Minutes of the UCD Academic Council Meeting, March 1990.

¹⁵⁷ Anne-Marie Smyth, ‘Gay Students “Come Out” in UCD Victory’, *Sunday Tribune*, 11 March 1990, p. 13. The *Irish Times* also reported on the granting of official recognition to the UCD Gay and Lesbian Society, ‘University Recognises Gay and Lesbian Society’, *Irish Times*, 6 March 1990, p. 6.

¹⁵⁸ NLI, IQA, MS 45, 938/2, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, *Lesbian and Gay Rights in the Workplace: Guidelines for Negotiators*.

¹⁵⁹ Department of Finance Circular 12/1988, Civil Service Policy on AIDS, 22 June 1988, <https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/finance/1988/12.pdf>, (accessed on 4 June 2019). Seanad Éireann Debate, 123:6, ‘Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Bill (1988), Report and Final Stages’, 22 November 1989.

campaign for gay rights in Ireland the granting of official recognition to both gay societies was symbolically very important. Gay and lesbian students had successfully challenged their right to a space within their university, a space that by 1989 and 1990 UCC and UCD university authorities now recognised. This was a public victory for the Irish campaign for gay rights, and one part of a wider process of changing social and political attitudes towards LGBT individuals.

Rather than mark the end of gay and lesbian activism within universities, the granting of official recognition accelerated student involvement in campaigns for gay rights. In 1989 the USI provided funds to its Gay Rights Officer to run gay rights campaigns throughout Irish universities.¹⁶⁰ In September 1990, *Gay Community News* reported that UCD introduced the first Lesbian and Gay Literature course as part of its extra-mural studies series for adults, while Gay Pride weeks also emerged at UCC and UCD in 1991 and 1992 respectively.¹⁶¹ In March 1993 UCG granted official recognition to its gay society, renamed PLUTO (People Like Us Totally Outrageous).¹⁶² Remarkably, these events all took place before the Irish government decriminalised sexual activity between males in June 1993.

Conclusion

Robert Rhoads argues that ‘when students engage in an organised struggle to modify the school setting, their resistance may be envisioned as a form of cultural work. [...] Their actions oppose a normalising society that seeks to reinforce the closet and are designed to reconstitute both the culture of the university and the larger culture of [...] society’.¹⁶³ In this respect, the efforts of Irish students to promote gay rights was an important form of resistance and cultural work. At a time in Ireland when few organisations opted to involve themselves in the gay rights campaign, and successive governments fought to defend the legislation criminalising sexual activity between males, student bodies actively promoted gay rights. They actively worked to dismiss the negative stereotypes surrounding homosexuality, while simultaneously presenting a positive narrative of homosexuality, thereby helping to create a climate in which gay and lesbian students could feel accepted within their universities. While the actions discussed in

¹⁶⁰ ‘Gay Rights to be Funded by Students’ Union’, *Trinity News*, 9:2 (30 November 1989), p. 5.

¹⁶¹ *Gay Community News*, September 1990, March 1991, March 1992.

¹⁶² ‘Gay Priest to Launch Society’, *Galway Observer*, 17 March 1993, p. 2.

¹⁶³ Rhoads, ‘The Cultural Politics of Coming Out in College’, p. 8.

this article may be characterised as lacking militancy, there can be no doubt that the activities of Irish students in promoting gay rights were radical in the context of 1970s and 1980s Ireland.

Moreover, their actions formed an integral part of furthering a public discourse on homosexuality and in helping to change the attitudes of many students and non-students throughout Ireland. In this regard, particularly in the context of the considerable change in attitudes towards homosexuality in recent years in Ireland, students must be acknowledged as having played a key role in making Irish society a more tolerant society for LGBT individuals. This case study will hopefully encourage a greater exploration of other actors and sites of queer resistance and student activism more broadly throughout Ireland beyond the 1960s. Who else and where else were efforts to resist heteronormativity taking place throughout Ireland? What of other campaigns students were involved in and what might these campaigns reveal about social and political change in Ireland?

This article also has the potential to present an alternative narrative on north-south relations during this period, particularly issues surrounding sectarianism and cross-border alliances. Throughout this article there are glimpses of considerable cross-border interaction and efforts to work together, to foster relationships and bring about change. This is particularly significant in the context of 'The Troubles' when tensions between both regions were at an all-time high. Were it not for the interaction of individuals from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland it may well have taken longer for an organised gay rights campaign to emerge in Ireland. The activities discussed in this article may well offer an incentive to further adopt a queer approach to modern Irish history.

Finally, this article only addresses one issue which Irish students campaigned for. There is much to be said for further exploring the other activities of students, but also other grassroots activism taking place in Ireland, during this period. In fact, much of the changes which have taken place in the latter years of twentieth-century Ireland, and even into the twenty-first century, have been the direct result of grassroots mobilisation. In shifting our focus away from a predominant focus on political parties and institutions, this article hopefully will encourage a greater turn in Irish historiography towards exploring the efforts of groups thus far ignored as crucial agents of social and political change in Ireland. Such a turn may provide a more nuanced understanding of Irish society in the twenty-first century.