The Impact of the Pandemic on LGBTI+ Students

Outcome Report of the Meeting of Student Organizations

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Anti-LGBTI+ policies continue to rise during the Covid-19 Pandemic. LGBTI+'s are affected by this process multidimensionally. Another group affected by the epidemic is the students and LGBTI+ student communities at the universities. LGBTI+ students, who have to return to their families or relatives, face many problems not only in terms of their families and relatives but also socially and economically. The student communities have difficulty in sustaining necessary contact with LGBTI+'s during the pandemic and are forced to suspend their activities.

The Kaos GL Association has met with LGBTI+ students and student communities within the scope of the online Pandemic Meetings program to discuss the problems caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic on LGBTI + students and student communities.

Hacettepe University Queer Studies Society, Istanbul Technical University Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Community (Cins Arı), Bahçeşehir University Renkli Çatı, Lavender LGBTIQ+ Ege University Gender Studies Club, Istanbul Kültür University İKUİR, METU LGBTI+ Solidarity, Sabancı University Gender Studies Club, Turkish Medical Students' International Committee (TürkMSIC), Bilgi University Rainbow Club, Koç University Queer Society, UniKuir Association, Young LGBTI+ Association and

students from Marmara, Hacettepe, Dokuz Eylül universities shared the problems experienced by students and communities during the meeting.

What Do LGBTI+ Students Experience During the Pandemic?

LGBTI + students, who had to return to their families and relatives, are facing violence in the places they had to return.

Addressing with their assigned names, the inability to have an open identity, the difficult participation in the activities under these conditions, self-censorship that they are forced to use on the communication channels continue to hurt the daily practices and well-being of LGBTI+ students.

LGBTI+ students describe the houses they return to as unsafe. In addition, negative experiences visibly increase the anxiety of LGBTI + students.

Major problems such as power outages and insufficient capacities of technological devices are among the problems that students experience in accessing the right to education. In the face of these problems, the education system strains students' capacities further, students experience a more intense education process and facilitating alternatives are not offered to students.

Although the self-censorship strategy, which LGBTI + students are forced to implement in the homes they had to return, is a restrictive and compelling option not only in online events organized for LGBTI+'s, but also in online conversations between groups of friends for socializing; individuals are forced to apply this self-censorship. Otherwise, students are exposed to hateful attitudes in houses while not having an alternative place to go. Students who are forced into this cycle of censorship and violence are unable to discharge under these conditions.

During the Covid-19 Pandemic, students experience the following problems in accessing the right to education:

* Considering that the process of gaining independence and self-discovery for LGBTI+'s coincides with the period of university education, this independence and discovery opportunity is taken from the LGBTI+ students who have just started university.

* While having the Internet, computers and other technological tools is essential for students during the pandemic, many students cannot meet these technical needs due to economic inadequacy.

* The panic and inexperience-induced situation during the first stage of the pandemic negatively affect the quality of education. The adaptation process of the lecturers and the system takes a certain time, and during this time, the students are unable to access the necessary education in the departments they study. The option of preparing projects instead of exams, as it is limited with the tools that the student has, eliminates equality.

* While lecturers and students can create opportunities to enable efficient education through alternative applications, many of the universities' managements stated no alternative applications besides the universities' own tools are to be used during the education, despite their own online education systems are inadequate, constantly crashing, and have connection problems. Due to such accessibility problems, the academic calendar is getting delayed, and students struggle with the systems while losing their motivation.

* Students get anxious before the online exams due to the problems faced in accessing the universities' online education systems. The content of prep class exams, which are vital for evaluating the students before moving up, have been reduced and the students who finish the prep class experience drawbacks in the next grade.

* While students are forced to sit on the same seat and solve exam questions for 5-6 hours during the exams, the obligation to turning on the camera and microphone during exams violates students' privacy rights. In systems where cameras and microphones are not supported, lecturers make exam questions difficult and exam durations are kept as short as possible despite difficult questions. Also, not being able to return to previous questions in the exams reduces the quality of education and students' success rate.

* The education system has not created an alternative solution on how to lecture the applied courses online. This situation affects students' education efficiency. The fact that the educational slideshows cannot be downloaded and the students do not see the examples used in the classes of applied courses also make this situation very difficult.

* There is a synchronization problem between lessons. The fact that the lecturers do not finish the classes that started late on their schedule decreases students' opportunity to attend other courses.

* Mail groups, which educational institutions consider as an alternative solution to these problems, let students view each other's video recordings, each other's issues, homeworks and even Covid-19 status.

* Problems such as suspension of scholarships, universities' guidance to those who cannot bear these difficult conditions to suspend their studies, and the cancellation of Erasmus programs seriously affect students' motivation. This situation increases health problems such as anxiety, depression and panic attacks in students.

* While having a scholarship regulates the relationship between the students and their families, the interruption of these scholarships also affects the communication and interaction between the family and the student, and students who are dragged from economic independence to economic

dependence feel the pressure of their families much more under these conditions.

* Students who have positive Covid-19 status or are obliged to look after a positive person cannot enjoy economic opportunities, have difficulties in scheduling their classes, and are devastated under these difficulties.

* These experiences show us that; An education system that does not focus on students continues to victimize them and these hardships takes the form of violence. No alternative psycho-social support and sexual and reproductive health support mechanisms are offered to students by universities to solve these problems and enable students to receive services.

What Do LGBTI+ Communities Experience During the Pandemic?

LGBTI + organizations continue to organize online events for solidarity, motivation, and information purposes during the Covid-19 Pandemic. While these activities can bring positive results, hardships and inadequacies are also experienced.

Students who just started their university education have trust issues due to the uneasiness caused by the lack of first face-to-face contact at online meetings held by LGBTI+ communities.

Online activities that have been going on since the beginning of the pandemic are increasing their frequency. In this mass of events, organizers and attendees are experiencing a digital fatigue. This situation negatively affects the work efficiency of people who continue to work online. Besides, community volunteers, who have to return to their families and close friends' homes, find it challenging to participate in the activities. Shyness and coordination problems are experienced in asking questions, taking the floor or organizing other events.

Student communities are facing the following problems in organizing and creating online activities, due to the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic:

* Communities and participants want to create safe spaces. Online activities are a problem in creating this safe space for both participants and communities.

* While participation in these events is higher due to being online and organizers can get in touch with more participants, there is an explosion of events.

* LGBTI+'s who are forced to live in the homes of their families and relatives cannot always participate in these events. Participants in the events cannot always ask questions, take the floor or express themselves verbally.

* Events organized online cannot create the necessary solidarity environment at things such as coming out processes.

* The increase in the number of events brings along the question of how beneficial these activities are for the LGBTI+'s. LGBTI+'s summarize this situation as; "At the end of the day, I am just looking at a two-dimensional screen".

* University administrations intervene in online activities organized by student communities. For this reason, organizations find it difficult to find speakers for their events. The university administration justifies its anti-LGBTI+ attitudes by citing the pandemic as an excuse.

* Newly established student communities are experiencing organization and motivation problems during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Since they are newly founded, they cannot reach the students.

* As the classes becoming more intense, organizing and holding events becomes much harder for student communities.

* LGBTI + students who have not returned to their families or relatives are becoming isolated as their other friends in the community have left the cities. These events are of great importance for solidarity and motivation, as they can only see their friends through these events.

* Student communities continue to organize activities such as online study groups and coming out meetings to motivate the students in the face of these hardships.

* The campus, which served as a socializing, flirting, getting laid space is now vacated. The absence of this socialization and solidarity space had a negative impact on communities.

Conclusion

The hardships experienced during the Covid-19 Pandemic are not limited to these. While students who have to work try to take their classes and work at their jobs simultaneously, they become targets when the streets are empty due to curfews. Students' problems in internships, prep grade, course intensity, scholarship, access to technology, and access to efficient classes must be resolved. Safe environments should be created for LGBTI+ students. The state should include restorative and monitoring services on its agenda for the psychosocial problems that students have experienced during this period. In addition, student communities should be strengthened in terms of online activities, solutions should be provided to create safe environments in these activities and solidarity should be reinforced. Considering these necessities, it is the responsibility of the state, civil society and organizations to bring the problems of LGBTI+ students and LGBTI+ communities to their agenda to develop constructive and restorative solutions.