

## Positive Inclusion Award Entrant: Unitec Institute of Technology



Video Link <https://vimeo.com/178545455/af2943e742>

“At Unitec we see the value in diversity... That means creating the conditions where staff and students can bring their full ‘selves’ to the workplace. The ALLY Network plays a major role in building an inclusive and equitable environment for diverse genders and sexualities,” says Unitec CE, Dr Rick Ede.

Since launching the ALLY Network in 2012, Unitec has had an “anchor” for conversations and advocacy work focusing on diverse sexualities and genders for students and staff.

The ALLY Network is in place in 33 Australian universities and Unitec is the first New Zealand tertiary institution to utilise the programme. Unitec’s ALLY Network is made up of staff and students with a range of identities including straight, cis, queer, gay and many more who want to support building an equitable and inclusive working and learning environment.

Unitec is New Zealand’s largest institute of technology with close to 20,000 students studying more than 150 work-oriented programmes across three campuses.

Since 2012, 17 ALLY workshops have been run with over 360 staff and students. This resulted in more than 300 participants choosing to become ALLIES. At present there are more than 130 ALLIES who are studying and/or working at Unitec.

ALLY is an initiative that aims to create an equitable and inclusive culture at Unitec by facilitating workshops where participants explore their own personal biases in relation to gender and sexuality and thus feel empowered to contribute to an inclusive environments.

The ALLY workshops are divided into three sections: Sexuality, Gender and ALLY actions. During the day participants share their personal stories relevant to diverse sexuality and diverse gender identities, they listen to multiple perspectives, and deepen the conversation by examining heteronormativity (the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders - man and woman - with natural roles in life. This belief is underpinned by social norms that support heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality). Unitec takes a strengths based approach that does not see Diverse Sexuality and Gender (DSG) people as victims but strong resilient people who face the challenges of heteronormativity and gender norms. Unitec's aim is to create a cultural change so that DSG people can see themselves reflected in every aspect of campus life.

On completion of the workshop attendees are invited to become part of the ALLY Network and on average 90 per cent sign up to become ALLIES. Once a workshop participant has committed to becoming an ALLY, they are given an ALLY sign to place on their office door or locker and for students there are ALLY badges. Their names are added to the ALLY list on the Unitec web site and they are included in ALLY Network's community of practice and invited to regular shared kai and kōrero sessions. These get-togethers have included guest speakers, film showings, and conversations around a selected text or provocation.

As Unitec increases the number of ALLIES across the campuses opportunities arise to transform at a cultural and systemic level of the organisation. By building 'inclusive leadership' staff and students are able to effect change so that everyone is confident to bring their full selves to Unitec – leaving none of their self in the car park. As Sonya Collie, Manager Equity and Diversity says 'I want to be part of creating a culture where conversations about excellence are conversations about equity and where we are encouraged to examine the role and impact of power imbalances and dominant voices across gender and diverse sexualities'.

Unitec's executive leadership team has been highly supportive, enabling a number of achievements including hosting the 'Queers in Tertiary' hui in 2013 attended by staff and student representatives from six NZ tertiaries. Also, in 2014 and 2015 the NXT: 14/ NXT: 15 Youth Leaders Conference was held on campus. It was one of the first times youth from the Pacific Islands were supported to attend such a forum.

In 2014 Unitec established New Zealand's first Trans Scholarship and was the primary sponsor of the Auckland Pride Festival. Unitec ALLIES have participated in the Pride Parade ever since.

This feedback powerfully describes the impact of engaging with and becoming part of the ALLY Network.

"In my first year at Unitec I faced prejudice and discrimination towards my sexuality. Homophobic, bigoted remarks were openly made within class settings and I soon learnt to

internalise my thoughts and experiences in an attempt to keep myself safe and not be abused by others. I contemplated leaving Unitec as a result of this.

It wasn't until the ALLY training ...that this changed for me, I felt an overwhelming sense of support from those in attendance, from both students and faculty staff alike. It was amazing to hear others stories and to experience support from those that didn't identify under the rainbow umbrella as well. I began to realise that the self-imposed punishment that I was inflicting upon myself was only allowing the dominant discourse to be upheld (hetero-normative ideas).

"I feel now I am more willing to challenge these ideas with people, and have recovered my own sense of pride with my sexuality within the tertiary context of my life."

There are also signs Unitec's initiatives are spreading further. They have spoken with other organisations interested in initiating their own ALLY Networks and are currently working with another tertiary provider to support them as they start an ALLY Network on their campus.