



Coming Out @ Work Guidance for staff



ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

Many LGBT+ staff members may have come out as LGBT+ in their personal lives already, but if you haven't yet or are still questioning, that's fine too. Don't feel pressured to come out, it is a personal choice you have to feel comfortable with and ready to make.

There are plenty of resources from organisations, such as Stonewall, who can offer support and guidance, and the LGBT Staff Network at our College is here to support you too.

Remember that coming out is not necessarily a 'one-off' and you may have to come out many times throughout your (working) life. The guidance in this booklet is designed to help LGBT staff manage the coming out process in a professional environment, if you choose to do so.

Why?

So, why come out at work? You may be comfortable enough to be out and open in your personal life, but not at work, or not see the need to be out, if you don't think it's relevant to your work.

Many people are concerned about negative reactions from colleagues or managers but remember that sexual orientation is a protected characteristic and employers have a legal obligation to comply with the Equality Act (2010) and treat all staff fairly. If you do decide to come out and experience difficulties as a result, this should be raised with the Human Resources (HR) team who can offer you support.



Furthermore, a 2008 study by Stonewall and IBM found that employees who are open about their sexuality are more likely to enjoy going to work, feel more able to be themselves, form honest relationships with colleagues, and are more confident. The overall result of this is that staff are ultimately more productive, so there are benefits for both employees and employer.

Royal Holloway aims to provide an inclusive environment, and a culture amongst employees where you can be open about your orientation without discrimination. The energy spent hiding this aspect of yourself can have a negative impact on your ability to perform in the workplace, and hinder your relationships with colleagues, which can make work more difficult. If you're open there is less of a distraction and you will feel more confident and comfortable interacting with colleagues.

When?

As with coming out in your personal life, there is no right time. It is a personal choice, when you feel ready. Also make your own judgement about when it is appropriate to come out depending on who you intend coming out to – you don't

need to tell every person you meet at work your sexual orientation as soon as you meet them! Use common sense, if you think your work life and relationships would be improved by being open, then go for it, just remember that it is your choice, and it is perfectly fine not to share something personal with everyone you may interact with at work if it's not relevant.

How?

Consider what's appropriate – it's probably not something that you would stand up and blurt out in a team meeting, but there are many ways to casually make it obvious, such as when discussing weekend or holiday plans, or referring to a partner. You can 'test the water' by raising topics relating to sexuality and mention something related to your own experiences. Ultimately, it is completely up to you – just know that Royal Holloway is putting into place organisational policies to support LGBT staff and that there is support available from both HR and the LGBT Staff Network.



What happens if...?

Many LGBT staff feel reluctant to come out due to their perception (real or imagined) that the reaction they will get from colleagues may be negative.

A big factor in this is often the casual use of homophobic language, or using words such as 'gay' in a derogatory way. This behaviour can be tackled in a number of ways – overarching all of them is having a zero-tolerance approach to homophobic and transphobic language and bullying, which we have in place at Royal Holloway. This means that when such examples occur, you can challenge them directly and explain why the language is homophobic, what effect it can have on people and what the consequences will be, for example if it escalates to become a bullying/harassment issue.

Sometimes people are not aware of how they are coming across, so highlighting it to them in a civil way can help them understand why it isn't acceptable. Remember, it does not need to be an LGBT person to challenge it though – straight 'allies' are equally capable of reminding colleagues of the policies we have in place and ensuring that the working environment is inclusive. These policies will be presented to all staff as part of the induction process, so everyone should be aware of them.



We have prepared a number of scenarios that you could encounter at work, and how you could deal with them.

Case study

1

Case study: work social with external guest

Stephen has invited a collaborator from another university to visit the department, and after work he arranges to go out for a social with his working group and his guest. At dinner, the conversation moves to relationship issues and family related topics and Stephen's guest makes a homophobic remark on same-sex marriage. While most of the people do not seem to be bothered too much, Stephen does not like the remark and also notices that two other junior people in his group who identify themselves as LGBT are clearly uncomfortable. What should Stephen do?

A Assessing severity of the incident

A homophobic remark can have different levels of inappropriateness depending on the context and this must be evaluated quickly enough when it occurs. Having a clear knowledge of inappropriate expressions that are not acceptable (see blacklist, glossary etc.) will help in performing the assessment. In general however, this type of behaviour is always a form of micro-aggression even when it is not explicitly directed at a specific individual.

B Taking action

The micro-aggression of a homophobic remark should be challenged, preferably by explaining that it was not appropriate. It is better to adopt a non-aggressive approach at first with the individual responsible for the remark, as we cannot assume that their intentions were bad. Most likely they will understand the inappropriateness of their behaviour and apologise. It is the responsibility of the senior people in the group to make sure that the working environment is kept safe even during socials that happen out of campus.

C Prevention

The only way to possibly prevent these episodes is to clearly show that Royal Holloway is a LGBT supportive environment and that homophobic behaviour is not tolerated. For example, having this message on university or personal website pages can create awareness among external individuals that are planning to visit.



Case study

2

Case study: interviewing prospective candidates

Elizabeth is interviewing prospective candidates for a job position in her group. There are few candidates that are from foreign, extra-European countries and she is not familiar at all with their cultural background. Elizabeth has always been out at work but she does not disclaim her sexual orientation during the interview as this is not a standard procedure. However, when the interview process is over and she has selected one of the international candidates for the position in her group, she realises that this person feels uncomfortable having an openly out LGBT supervisor because this is not accepted in their home country. How should the situation be handled?

A Assessing severity of the incident

The outcomes of a situation like this are many. In the best scenario, the feeling of uneasiness of the new employee will quickly disappear as they get to know their supervisor better. The outcome could be worse if the subject decides to take action and files a complaint to the College. Any personality clash may exacerbate the situation and mask any homophobic attitude on the part of the individual.

B Taking action

As a general rule it is recommended that employers try to engage as much as possible with new group members even when there are initial difficulties. All new Royal Holloway members are asked to participate in Equality and Diversity (E&D) training after being hired and this could be the chance for the employer to support the new group member and help them to go beyond their cultural and religious barriers. If the new hire decides to take concrete action like quitting the group, that could make the affected supervisor feel very uncomfortable. It would be important that the line manager is able to intervene to remind the subject of the College's E&D policies, and to support the affected group leader who may face losing a valuable group member. A

more likely scenario is that the subject, aware of College E&D policy, does not offer LGBT status as a reason for seeking a supervisor change, but might rather cite a clash of personalities. Here, even if it is suspected that the grounds for dissatisfaction are discriminatory, there is nothing that could be done about it practically unless the individual actually cites a reason that goes against College policy.

C Prevention

It is important to raise awareness of all equality and diversity issues with all applicants and with staff who may be recruiting from a diverse applicant body. Thus, it is important that all staff should engage in Equality and Diversity training. In addition to this, applicants should be naturally exposed to E&D information through the university website, communications etc., both before and during the application process. Finally, during the interview process, though not appropriate for the supervisor to discuss their own personal circumstances with potential hires, awareness could be raised by reading an anti-discriminatory statement at the start of the interview followed by an informal description of examples of what is meant by diversity in the workplace.

Case study

3

Case study: public event on campus

Andrea is participating in the organisation of an event where members of the general public have a chance to visit Royal Holloway's campus and engage in conversations with College members. Since the event occurs on a weekend, Andrea also invited her partner (who is not a Royal Holloway employee) who wanted to share the experience with Andrea. Most of the visitors are families with little kids and Andrea and her partner engage with them happily. At some point one of the parents makes a homophobic remark saying that it is inappropriate to openly disclose one's sexual orientation during a public event on campus in the presence of young crowds. How to react in this situation?

A Assessing severity of the incident

In this type of scenario, the severity of the incident depends on the gravity of the homophobic comment and on the specific dynamics of the situation (i.e. who is around when the remark is made).

B Taking action

Mildly serious comments might probably be addressed directly in discussion with the member of the public concerned. Royal Holloway staff should try to normalise the situation to make the speaker feel more comfortable and, at the same time, they can educate the public about the meaning of being in a gay relationship. Offensive comments or verbal aggression on the other hand should be handled with caution. In this case, there is not much to discuss as the person responsible for the aggression is not likely to be interested in any meaningful dialogue. The person should be asked to leave. Action can be taken by the Royal Holloway staff member/s themselves or, with the support of security staff, if possible. The incident should be logged and somebody at a higher level informed. The affected staff member should risk assess the situation and take into consideration whether there are other

Royal Holloway staff members around or other members of the public before taking any action. If there are other Royal Holloway staff members around, it may be appropriate to seek their help and support as allies. If the venue is very crowded, it would make more sense to have a follow-up discussion with the aggressor somewhere else if it is safe to do so. This is particularly relevant in the presence of young crowds or families with children: the worst consequence is that somebody's inappropriate remark spoils everybody's experience of the event.

C Prevention

Everybody working at the College should be prepared to face potential issues of this kind. This applies not only to LGBT staff members but to everybody. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness in all staff members, in particular employees at higher levels of responsibility or people who foresee themselves involved in the organisation of public events. Staff members should also make an effort to bring along family during public events, in order to show that Royal Holloway is an inclusive environment and all families are welcome with no discrimination on the sexual orientation of family members.

Case study

4

Case study: the committee meeting

Patrick is part of a recruitment and selection panel interviewing for a position at the College. When the panel are discussing the candidates, one of the panel members makes an inappropriate remark about one of the candidates. Despite being offered as a joke, the remark sounds homophobic to Patrick. Surprisingly, nobody seems to care about the gravity of this episode: on the contrary, all panel members (but Patrick) laugh at the joke – including the chair of the panel. What could be done in this type of situation?

A Assessing severity of the incident

Although this situation looks at a homophobic case, it could easily be transferred to many of the other protected minorities. Non-visible minorities are, by nature, difficult to identify. Someone who falls in the 'norm' may easily make the assumption that everyone else around them does, too. Therefore, there is first a problem of perception in assessing the gravity of this episode: what one person might perceive as offensive might not even raise an eyebrow for another. Second, it is difficult in any professional environment to be confrontational. Universities are strongly hierarchical, and confronting these issues may appear to be attacking the institution at its core. On top of that, there is the question of personality: not everyone might feel comfortable confronting someone in a group. Despite this, it is essential to move the discussion and focus on minimising such situations.

B Taking action

As the purpose of the meeting is to select the best candidate for the position, it is absolutely fundamental that the focus stays on the candidates and not on the homophobic remark. This is essential to prevent such an unfortunate

episode from affecting the final decision of the committee. To achieve this goal one option is to remind the committee of the purpose of the meeting (i.e. recruitment) and to re-focus people's attention on the process itself, by pointing out that the relevant aspects to be discussed are the candidate's research/teaching/administrative profile. In addition to this, one could also actively involve the chair and ask them to remind everybody of the recruitment criteria for the position.

C Prevention

These type of situations could be minimised simply by reading a diversity statement at the beginning of the meeting, preferably by the chair.



Case study

5

Case study: post-coming out complications

Gillian has decided to come out at work and the majority of people have been supportive, but one of her colleagues is very religious and their attitude towards Gillian has changed. When Gillian asks why they are behaving differently, they say that her lifestyle is against their beliefs. This situation makes working with them awkward for Gillian and it affects her morale. Is there anything that Gillian could do to feel better?

A Assessing severity of the incident

As a first step, it is recommended to speak to the person concerned and investigate their willingness to put differences to one side at work and establish a professional relationship. Unfortunately this is not always possible and the gravity of the situation may reach the point where working together is impossible. In extreme cases, situations like this can develop into harassment. There are degrees of severity with harassment and these should be discussed with other parties before taking action.

B Taking action

It often happens that after coming out it becomes impossible to maintain the same relationships as before. However, it is very important to try as much as possible to maintain a harmonious working environment where there is mutual respect. In difficult situations, where working together has become impossible, mediation may help. Initially this can be informal with a line manager (if they are not the individual involved) but it is important that they have had or have access to mediation training so they are competent at managing the process. If this is not possible or does not work, HR will offer a more formal mediation process to resolve the issues.

One way to tackle it initially is to keep a record of comments and behaviour over a short period and then approach HR in confidence to take it forward.

C Prevention

Working with people from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles should be seen as a positive not a negative. Encouraging an environment that celebrates diversity rather than highlighting differences between people in a negative way will increase morale and productivity. Diversity champions and organisations can be sought to find methods to achieve this. Part of creating a welcoming and diverse environment also includes allies, i.e. people who are not directly affected by the prejudice/discrimination but can provide support.



Useful resources and contacts

LGBT.Staff@rhul.ac.uk

LGBT web pages



@RHULGBTStaff



facebook.com/rhulgbtstaff

Human Resources contacts

Employee Assistance Programme

Stonewall

Equality Challenge Unit

Equality and Human Rights Commission

LGBT Helpline



Royal Holloway, University of London

Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX

T: +44 (0)1784 434455

royalholloway.ac.uk