

Professor Frances Bowen

*Dean,
School of
Business
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Other Roles: Professor of Innovation Studies, Council Member and Trustee for Chartered Association of Business School (CABS)

Identity(ies): Lesbian

About Frances: Soon to be Pro-Vice Chancellor for Social Sciences at University of East Anglia. Member of many LGBT+ choirs over the years, including London based Pink Singers.

Interviewer: Jane Smith, Diversity & Inclusion Adviser, QMUL

Can you tell us a bit about you time at QMUL and what initially drew you here?

I've been at Queen Mary for 7 years now. I came as a professor, then was Director of Research, and then Deputy Head of School (HoS), before becoming Dean. Before coming here, I'd been living in Canada for 8 years where I met my partner, who I'm now married to. I've got two step-daughters and at the time they're were just finishing up university so that gave us the freedom to move to somewhere else. Calgary is a great place for skiing and mountains, but is quite straight-laced by Canadian standards. When I first arrived in Canada I always described to people the sense of physical and psychic space with the opportunities that brings, and in terms of career I got promoted very quickly and it went very well. But after a while the cultural space

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started feel a little thin, so we wanted to move to somewhere that was more socially complex with a few more layers. London definitely has a lot of layers!

After deciding on London, I was attracted to Queen Mary because of the Queen Mary Values. It sounds cheesy, but they were really important for me and the fact that these values were embedded into the School of Business Management (SBM). Most of my research is in environmental issues, but in the early part of my career I published some research on lesbians and gay men in the workplace. As part of my portfolio of research it was very much welcomed in SBM and not something that I had to hide.

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SBM also has the Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity (CRED), and inside that group that are several colleagues who work on LGBT+ issues, including some really contemporary areas like trans issues in the workplace. So I knew from when I joined that Queen Mary was very open and that SBM in particular was open from a research perspective.

Was this different from other institutions?

When I lived in Calgary, it was a bit more controversial to have this identity, plus it was an earlier time. The initiatives were more obvious, for examples stickers on doors to mark 'this is a safe space' and that type of thing. At Queen Mary, it was easy to fit in, and from day one I never had to hide. I never gave it a second thought that I'd be welcomed!

What could QMUL be doing to improve support for the LGBT+ community?

Personally, I haven't faced any challenges because of my LGBT+ identity, so it's been a bit of a non-event for me. This is a good thing. However, there are some challenges from an organisational point of view, as there is danger of becoming complacent. If we want to help LGBT+ staff we need to make a point of it. In the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) this year one third of our Heads of School (HoS) identify as LGBT+, which is fantastic, but this is probably something that not that many people know. QMUL could be working harder to make role models more visible to reinforce the message that colleagues can progress here regardless of their identity. This is especially true for both LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ women, as there is a lack of women in senior academic leadership roles such as head of school vice principal.

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For LGBT+ students, I think that we do sometimes forget that we're in a highly international environment, and that we have a lot of students who come here from a different social context. In a lot of ways, being LGBT+ at Queen Mary is a non-issue, though this isn't the case for everybody. As soon as you start intersecting being LGBT+ with other

characteristics, for example, many of our students are from local Bangladeshi families, it's an entirely different set of challenges. In a mainstream, London, British context- LGBT+ issues are around, and people know that these identities exist.

If you're coming from a different context, it may not be that obvious and you need more visible support. I think that we need to focus on the experiences of our international students, and students with diverse backgrounds, where it's not acceptable, or even illegal to be LGBT+. Especially where students are coming to our wonderful open environment, and then going home again. I think it's something that we have to be more aware of, that not everyone takes it for granted that it's OK to be LGBT+. Helping LGBT+ students to cope with their re-entry into a more conservative social context could be an important thing that the university could do for students.

How do you think that QMUL can ensure that the students returning home supported?

I think one way to support students could be to develop an LGBT+ alumni network. It would be particularly important to be an international initiative, as we tend to think of alumni as being local, but we have a lot of international students who could benefit from this.

Can you tell us about your experience of being an LGBT+ Role Model?

Being a lesbian is old news for me, so I regularly forget that I'm seen by others as a member of the LGBT+ group, and how important that can be for other people. The process of getting ready to leave QMUL has been very interesting because people thank you or tell you what they'll remember of you.



“people thank you or tell you what they’ll remember of you, so being an LGBT+ Role Model is something that you see through other people’s eyes.”

Being an LGBT+ Role Model is something that you see through other people’s eyes. There was a time when it was a really big deal for me to come out at work, and I was really cautious about pronouns and all of those sorts of things. However, the more senior and older I’ve become, the more my LGBT+ identity has become important to other people rather than to me.

We’re sad to see you leave QMUL, especially as you’ve had such a positive impact for our LGBT+ community. Do you have any advice for early career LGBT+ staff?

Do your best at your job, and publish the best work that you can. In this university environment, your identity doesn’t have to be foregrounded unless you want it to be. It can be useful for early career staff to talk with more senior LGBT+ colleagues if they are facing challenges, but I’m a bit wary of putting too narrow a focus on identity.

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I never felt that I was held back because of my identity, especially at Queen Mary. I feel that in this environment, it’s not a factor so don’t worry about. If you are worrying about being LGBT+ here, you don’t need to be. If you’re still worrying, go and talk to other LGBT+ staff.

Is there anything else that you’d like to share with us about your LGBT+ life outside work?

I’ve been in six different LGBT+ choirs in different cities over the last 20 years. But something that not many people know is that I can actually conduct choirs. A few years ago, I went to Taiwan to take part in the first LGBT+ Choir festival in Asia. I ended up conducting the massed choir in the festival- 14 different choirs from across Asia! That was quite an experience because at that time there was only one LGBT+ choir in China and they had never been to a country where it was legal to be LGBT+. The choir from Singapore had to practice in secret, and in South Korea it’s not illegal, but the choir had experienced a lot of public opposition from traditional Christian groups. Homosexuality is still illegal in India, but hopefully soon to change as they are currently reviewing their laws.

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Thinking again about our international environment, something for Queen Mary to remember is that while the dominant culture at the university and in London is very open, some of our students have to go home at the end of their studies. We need to ask how we can prepare both LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ students for life after university.

Thank you to Frances for all of you fantastic work at QMUL, best of luck in your new role at UEA.

