

Dr Helen Bintley

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Department: Bart's and The London, School of Medicine and Dentistry (BLSMD), Institute of Health Sciences Education (ISHE)

Identity(ies): bisexual

About Helen: Left handed, vegetarian knitter with a dry sense of humour & a knack for gardening!

Interviewer: Jane Smith, Diversity & Inclusion Adviser, QMUL

Photographer: Christian Dametto

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today

Helen. Can you start by telling us what initially drew you to Barts/QMUL?

I was attracted by the quality of the teaching and research at the institution, as well as the diversity of the staff and students. I went to the University of Manchester for my UG degree for the same reasons. Again, it's a diverse city and institution, and there is a thriving LGBTQ+ community.

So being in a diverse environment was really important to you from the start. How did the reality match up to your expectations when you arrived?

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as an academic, and I am grateful for the support that I received. However, when I first arrived, I'd expected to see rainbows in every corner. I thought that there would be workshops and discussion groups about diversity issues, but this didn't appear to be the case at the time.

And do you feel that's changed now?

You tend to find that the more visible you are, the more things become available. I have found that there are lots of events, research and discussions occurring with respect to diversity issues- I just didn't know about them when I started! I think that there could be more done to advertise these initiatives, especially to new staff.

BLSMD have also been great with support. For instance, if I want to implement an initiative that will benefit the institution, I will be given the tools to realise that initiative. An example of this is the BRAIDE (Bringing Resources and Awareness In Diversity Education) project. BRAIDE is an online platform exploring areas of diversity and is a staff-student partnership at BLSMD. Myself and my colleague Riya George, who created BRAIDE and who continues to run the project, have been supported by the institution in terms of funding application support, sourcing information and technical support.

The only downside is that these projects are often in addendum to my job, and it's not always clear who to talk to about starting initiatives.

What do you think we should be doing to improve this support?

Without funding or time allocated to staff supporting LGBTQ+ initiatives, we are relying on enthusiastic individuals to implement, promote and sustain diversity initiatives. Therefore, I think that more mentoring and senior support would be really helpful in guiding this process.

As an LGBTQ+ champion for BLSMD, a role I enjoy and take very seriously, I am also receiving increasing numbers of requests from staff and students for support. I am more than happy to support these individuals, and signpost to other services as appropriate, but would like more training in this area.

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We also need to develop the culture around disclosure for LGBTQ+ staff. You’re either “out” at work or not at all. It would be nice to have a middle ground where LGBTQ+ staff can be visible but protected.

As you know, QMUL is taking steps to improve LGBTQ+ support, and have recently funded you to attend Stonewall’s Role Model training. Can you tell us a bit about your experience and what you learned?

The programme was brilliant, I really have nothing negative to say about it! It provided me with a safe space to talk openly about my LGBTQ+ identity in a large group, and seeing the variety of life and work experiences related to LGBTQ+ identity was extremely empowering.

The facilitators talked very openly about their own experiences, which was very valuable

and added to the group discussion. I realise that it’s important to be out and proud, and to have the confidence to be visible but this is often not easy. Through this course, I’ve found a language to explain my own experiences. I also feel better able to represent the community as a whole, without assuming that I know everything there is to know about another LGBTQ+ person’s lived experience.

That sounds like a fantastic experience! How will you use what you’ve learnt as a Role Model here at QMUL?

I intend to be more visible as an LGBTQ+ employee, and will work with the LGBTQ+ community in the university and the wider community to better represent them in my role as champion.

I’m also one of the co-chairs of QMOUT, QMUL’s LGBTQ+ staff network, and I want to continue developing the network. I intend to work with others to increase the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community in our institution, and to develop mentoring and research collaborations to better represent the issues affecting LGBTQ+ people.

“My aim is to stop people from feeling that they can’t use their voice, and that they’re silenced.”

Overall, my aim is to stop people from feeling that they can’t use their voice, and that they’re silenced.

Can you tell us about any project(s) you’re working on now?

My research turns the spot light back on to academics, exploring how we think about LGBTQ+ identity and what this means for the curriculum we create. Using feminist post-



structural discourse analysis, I am considering the ways in which we perceive and teach LGBTQ+ issues in medical education and how an awareness of this could help us develop curriculum in the future. I am in the closing stages of the project and aim to disseminate my results this coming academic year.

I am also involved with two other research groups at BLSMD, GEnRE (GENder REsearch group) and (the aforementioned) BRAIDE (Bringing Resources and Awareness In Diversity Education). Both of these projects use research and teaching to promote discussion about diversity issues, and BRAIDE was recently successful in gaining a Westfield and Elearning Production Scheme grant for its work on ELearning resources for diversity teaching.

Those are all great projects, and I'm especially looking forward to hearing the results of your research. Thinking now about QMUL's LGBTQ+ community, what would be your advice to staff wanting to be more visible or active?

The good thing is that the support is there, there is an active community, and I would encourage staff to join the LGBTQ+ staff network, QMOUT. It's a safe space with like-minded people who can also give you advice on how to be more involved.

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I'd also say that staff should get involved with advising HR policies and representing on committees. Bringing your lived experience is

vitaly important as you can provide another perspective on what it's like to be LGBTQ+ in 2018. I'm happy to be an ally and represent staff who feel unable to speak out, so feel free to come and talk to me.

Some great advice there and fantastic that you're able to both empower and represent staff. Do you have a take home message or anything else that you would like to add?

Firstly, I'd like to big up BLSMD. They're very forward thinking and have always been really accepting- I've never been held back.

The take home message I'd like to give is that visibility is important and valuable, but I recognise that it can be intimidating. I want to represent the LGBTQ+ community appropriately, not talk for them, and I recognise my ignorance for some parts of the lived experience of LGBTQ+ people. I want to work with people to make change.

Thank you to Helen for sharing your story with us, and for your continued work as an LGBTQ+ Role Model.

