

Professor David Adger

Head of School, Languages, Linguistics and Film



Other Roles: Professor of Linguistics, President of the Linguistics Association of Great Britain (LAGB)

Identity(ies): Gay

Interviewer: Jane Smith, Diversity & Inclusion Adviser, QMUL

What initially drew you to QMUL, and what were your expectations before you arrived?

The location was a big draw, back in 2002. Before Queen Mary, I was working in York, but my partner was already in London and we'd had a commuting relationship for 13 years. It's quite common amongst academics for one partner to be in one place, and the other to be somewhere else, so there was a big motivation to live in the same city.

“I did have some LGBTQ+ friends in York but found myself spending a lot of time in London”

Thinking about being LGBTQ+, I must admit after moving from Edinburgh I felt a bit de-gayified for the first couple of years in York. Partly that was no longer being a student, and partly York was just smaller than Edinburgh. I did have some LGBTQ+ friends there, but I

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found myself spending a lot of time in London. Moving to London was what I really wanted - it's very much a world-city.

In terms of my academic expectations, I was a little worried about moving, as the Department of Linguistics then was so small, just me and two other people. I was the only person that was going to be doing formal linguistics, so I wasn't sure I would be able to attract PhD students. But it was also very exciting as it was a chance to build something from scratch. My colleagues were amazing from the start, so the worries came more from myself thinking, 'What will I do if this doesn't work out?'. The three of us worked really hard to build the department, and now, we've really grown. We have around 15 academic staff and a big graduate population. It's an amazing department to work in.

So you had a hand in creating department as it is today- what was that experience like?

Linguistics departments are often sliced in two, you get formal linguistics people like me, and then more sociolinguistics people. The two groups tend not to talk to each other. We decided that we wouldn't do that, and that we would make both subareas strong and able to support each other and work together. We achieved it: we published papers together, co-supervised PhDs, and built the connection between the two areas as a special strength of the department. That worked really well. We have one of the highest-powered linguistics department in the

country, but, at the same time, I think it's one of the nicest to work in.

It's great that you have such a positive working environment. Can you describe what it's like being LGBTQ+ at QMUL?

Linguistics is quite queer as a discipline. When I was a PhD student in 1991, I went to the Linguistics Society of America Summer Institute and they started 'Out in Linguistics', which was an electronic mailing list that existed before the internet was around. People would sign up to the list to say that they were LGBTQ+, or that they were allies, though we didn't have the word 'allies' at the time. It was just amazing to see that list with all of the famous people that had signed up to it. At that point I thought 'Wow, we've got a really gay discipline!'

"I gave my first conference talk in the late 1980s, in a t-shirt bearing a big pink triangle"

Linguistics is still a very welcoming discipline for LGBTQ+ people, at least in my experience. There's a lot of openness amongst staff in my School about sexual orientation, which creates a welcoming atmosphere for LGBTQ+ students. As a School, we have a strong queer studies group, and within the Linguistics department, one of our research foci is on sexual identity and language. On a personal level, I find it difficult not to be out at work, but as a gay man, I recognise it may be easier for me than for others. So as Head of School, I try to help support a culture, which I think we have, of valuing diversity.

What's your experience of being a Role Model for the LGBTQ+ community?

My identity as a gay man is certainly not secondary, but it's not necessarily my first identity at work. I probably identify more as a

teacher, researcher, colleague, adviser, mentor, and, theoretical syntactician!

"Our School should be a space for students to feel it's perfectly fine to be who they really are."

I've been out since I was 18, and I gave my first conference talk, in the late eighties, in a t-shirt bearing a big pink triangle. I think it's important, if I'm to be any kind of a role model, to support other people who might not find being out so easy. I'm beginning to feel more and more that we need to provide that for LGBTQ+ students too. Our School should be a space for them to feel they can explore who they really are. This could be by putting rainbow stickers on doors to show students that there are LGBTQ+ people and allies around them, or some other visible sign. A lot of our students do feel comfortable and are openly out, but just because some people are, that doesn't mean that that's true for everyone.

Is there anything else that QMUL could do to further support our LGBTQ+ community?

I think that Queen Mary could be more engaged with LGBTQ+ academic initiatives. For example, there's the LGBTSTEMinar which I went to with my partner last year in Sheffield. I really enjoyed that conference, though I was slightly sceptical at first, as it seemed weird that it was held together by the fact that everyone was LGBTQ+. Going there though, it was actually fantastic to hear people talk about their work and their experiences. There was a trans woman from an astronomy department who mentioned how she felt that the conference was a really supportive way to talk about the stuff that she really loved. There was also a mathematician who explained higher dimensional geometry

through Ru-Paul's Drag Race, which was amazing.

QMUL could also get involved in community projects. For example, there's a new LGBT+ community centre that's being set up in East London. It would be nice to have Queen Mary as an institutional donor for that. A Pride Float would also be good!

What advice do you have for early career researchers who are LGBTQ+?

Some general advice would be to find other people within your discipline who are LGBTQ+ and create a network. You already have two things in common, and it can give you a sense that you're not alone. If you feel comfortable doing so, I'd also advise coming out earlier rather than later at work. If you can be yourself at work, it allows you to feel more valued, and to be more creative. It also means that people are less likely to make wrong assumptions.

There's also social media: there are networks there which connect LGBTQ+ identity with disciplinary interests. Social media has its issues but it can really help create networks with people who have shared interests and experiences as academics.

In terms of LGBTQ+ identity, I have done work in some of parts of the world where it's more difficult to be out than it is in London. It's part of academia to go out of the university, but it can be challenging (or even unsafe) for LGBTQ+ people and that's something that you have to think about.

Are there any other projects that you're working on at the moment that you'd like to share with us?

I'm currently writing a popular science book on language. I also have some grant projects running: one is a huge online atlas on the complexities of the dialects of Scottish English and in the other we're using a technique

where we teach people artificial languages to explore what's possible for the human mind in language learning. I'm also involved in a lots of PhD training summer schools and I'm working on a project to use constructed languages (like Dothraki from Game of Thrones) to develop early reading skills in primary school children.

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I think it can be really beneficial for students, whatever their own orientation, to see academics who are openly out. When I was at a summer school in the Himalayas, one of the students on the trip told me that I was the first openly gay person he'd met. He said if it hadn't been for his teachers, he'd have had a very different understanding of gay people. I'd encourage academics to be out if it feels right for them. We are often in a privileged position, and it can make a huge difference to people.

Thanks David for sharing your experiences with us, and for being a visible Role model for our LGBTQ+ community.

