



## **Martin Barge**

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**What initially drew you to Queen Mary, and what were your expectations before you arrived?**

In 2007, about year after completing a Master's in Educational Technology and English Language Teaching, I saw the position for Technical Director of the Language Centre at Queen Mary. My previous experience was in teaching English as a foreign language, which I enjoyed immensely. I taught English to people from all over the world, and spent time working in Istanbul, Madrid and London. When I first started teaching, we didn't use computers in the classroom, as these were perceived as machines for office work and mathematical and scientific disciplines. But as my career progressed, affordable desktop microcomputers began to proliferate, and we realised their potential for language learning. This inspired me to pursue my Master's. In short, I was drawn here by the job, but I also knew that Queen Mary had

an excellent reputation. In fact, a few years previously, I'd visited the university with a group of prospective International Foundation students, who were taking IELTS at the school where I worked. I was impressed by the campus, the quality of the facilities and the demonstration lecture the students received. So, I expected a modern, forward-looking university, with a diverse, international student body, and a stimulating intellectual ethos. I haven't been disappointed.

#### **Your experience of Queen Mary as an LGBTQ+ staff member**

As a gay man, I'm what might be termed 'straight-acting', which means I believe it's probable that people don't perceive that

I'm gay, unless I say or don't say something to reveal my gay identity.

Whether or not I appear to be straight, I'm in fact a happily married gay man. I met my husband almost thirty years ago, while we were training to teach English. At Queen Mary, I haven't experienced any negative reactions to my sexual orientation, but I'm cautious about who I tell. My approach is that I don't tell people I'm gay unless I trust them, unless they ask, or unless a particular event or comment obliges me to. Occasionally, I've been asked about my wife; more recently, in an email to a colleague, my husband mentioned me as his 'partner'. In response, the colleague wrote back, 'it's very kind of you and your wife.' So, I suddenly became a wife, which amuses me; but such comments do reveal heteronormative assumptions. As a result of such assumptions I've sometimes been obliged to 'out' myself by stating that I'm gay. As I've said, I've never experienced a negative reaction to this. In fact, I know a lot of people here who are kind, warm-hearted and friendly.

I've had one or two unsettling experiences, though. On one occasion, not long after I'd joined, a colleague showed me an orange-coloured external storage drive, made a limp-wristed gesture and said, 'Have you seen this? It's a bit gay!' I was so surprised that I retorted, 'It isn't gay enough! It should be pink!' He looked completely taken-aback. I thought about making a complaint about that person's remarks but decided it would start an official process that might worsen the situation.

On another occasion, a student was talking about her place of work, when she suddenly remarked that two of her male managers were 'bum chums'. I was

shocked to hear this use of such offensive language, but I wasn't sure how to react or deal with it, so I did nothing.

Recently, though, I took Active Bystander awareness training at Queen Mary, so I now feel better informed about how to approach such situations.

### **How you feel supported by Queen Mary and what we should be doing to improve this - Is there anything else that QMUL could do to further support our LGBTQ+ community?**

I'm a member of the QMOut LGBTQ+ Network, which provides a way for LGBTQ+ people to meet and share experiences and ideas for making the LGBTQ+ community more visible and supported. A colleague, newly arrived at QMUL, recently remarked that they felt very welcomed here when they saw people wearing rainbow lanyards. So, I think this example of discreet, yet visible, symbolism can help. Lots of small, daily, normalised gestures can be just as effective, if not more so, than large, one-off, grand gestures.

### **Something interesting about yourself**

In 1979, at the age of sixteen, I left school and home to join the Royal Air Force, where I trained as an aircraft mechanic. I grew up in the 1970s, in a small town with no gay scene; in those days, television and the media tended to stereotype gay men as 'camp' (e.g. Larry Grayson, John Inman, Kenneth Williams, and Danny La Rue). As I didn't see myself as fitting those stereotypes, I couldn't identify with those portrayals of gay men. I was a stereotypical boy, who enjoyed watching war and cowboy films. War films portray glamorous, handsome war heroes, and I

wanted to become one; I wanted to wear a uniform, drive around in a jeep and smoke, just like they did in the movies. As I was hungry for adventure and to be amongst men in uniform, I joined the forces (becoming a cowboy wasn't a viable option). But I was struggling with my feelings: I'd had crushes on boys at school, and in the Air Force I felt attracted to other males. But I didn't think of my feelings as 'gay' - I just thought of them as normal and natural. Then, a few weeks into my first posting, at an operational Air Force base in Lincolnshire, a corporal was caught having sex with an airman. The corporal was arrested, locked in the guardroom and marched under military police escort to the mess for breakfast, lunch and dinner, where he had to sit at a separate table, so that everyone could see him and talk about his offence. He was court marshalled, sent to the military prison at Colchester and given a dishonourable discharge. Witnessing that systematic shaming and humiliation of a gay man resulted in me repressing my own nature. These days, the Navy, Army and Air Force march on Gay Pride Parades and it's okay to be gay in the military. But it wasn't the case when I was there. As a result, I became depressed and developed a drink problem. I spent three years trapped in the RAF and by the time I got out I was almost twenty.

**Why do you want to be an LGBTQ+ role model? Why is it important? Why is visibility important?**

Because, as I've already mentioned, I felt the lack of LGBTQ+ role models when I was young. Had I known that there are many kinds of gay men, ranging from butch rugby champions (like Gareth Thomas) to stellar drag queens (like Ru Paul), and everything

in between, then I might have realised my own gay identity sooner.

Visibility is important because it normalises LGBTQ+ people. Being visible is being alive and a recognised member of society.

**Thinking now about Queen Mary's LGBTQ+ community, what would be your advice to staff wanting to be more visible or active?**

Joining QMOut, the LGBTQ+ Staff network, is one way of becoming more active. The mailing list is at <https://www.lists.qmul.ac.uk/sympa/info/lgbt-staffnet>. Another way to increase one's visibility is to become a Queen Mary LGBTQ+ role model.