



UCL



Guidance for managers: supporting lesbian, gay and bisexual staff at work

Why do UCL managers need specialist guidance?

Sexual orientation can be a complex area, especially for managers who are not lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) themselves, do not know any LGB people or who have little experience of managing diverse teams. This guidance is intended to equip managers with the understanding and expertise they need to meet the needs of LGB people and create an inclusive, high-performing team.

What is the definition of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)?

Sexual orientation is an enduring sexual, emotional and/or romantic attraction towards others. Heterosexuals are attracted to members of the opposite sex while homosexuals are attracted to members of their own sex.

Lesbian - describes women who are attracted to women

Gay - describes men who are attracted to men

Bisexual - describes people attracted to both men and women

Some people are sexually attracted to their own sex but don't identify as LGB. Stonewall estimates that 5-7% of the population in the UK is lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Being out at work

“People perform better when they can be themselves.”

- Stonewall

Many UCL staff may regard a colleague's or their own sexual orientation as a private matter. However whether a staff member is 'out' at work or not (open about their sexual orientation) can impact on their performance. Research by Stonewall has demonstrated that staff who are out at work are overwhelmingly more content at work and consider that their performance improves too. Moreover, UCL's 2009 staff survey showed that staff who were out at work were generally more satisfied in the workplace.

LGB people who are not out are unlikely to complain about harassment at work for fear that if they do, their sexual orientation will become widely known. They may need to behave differently at home and at work and to live in public or at work with a social appearance which is inconsistent with their own feelings, or self image. They may therefore experience loneliness, isolation and invisibility because their true self is not known to colleagues.

LGB members of staff are vulnerable to being 'outed' against their will by students or colleagues, perhaps inadvertently. This may have consequences where some staff or students are strongly opposed to homosexuality or bisexuality.

LGB staff should be in control about who they are out to and when. Some staff may be comfortable for some colleagues to know and not others – partially out - so it is not appropriate to assume that others know about a colleague's sexual orientation. Deliberately outing a colleague or student is considered harassment under UCL's anti-harassment policies and, if proven, will be considered a disciplinary matter.

Harassment of lesbian, gay and bisexual people at work

LGB people, and those perceived to be LGB, sometimes experience homophobia, hostility, harassment or prejudice at work which can go unrecognised and unchallenged.

One of the most common manifestation of this is 'jokes' and banter in the workplace, which managers need to 'nip in the bud' where it promotes negative stereotypes of LGB people or uses offensive language e.g. the word 'gay' in a pejorative sense.

There is a growing body of employment case law dealing with this issue:

Whitfield vs. Cleanaway – a manager was taunted about his sexual orientation by senior colleagues. Mr Whitfield, who never made reference to his sexuality at work, was nicknamed 'Sebastian' after the Little Britain character. He was also called 'dear' after he ordered a 'feminine' drink at a business conference, as well as 'abnormal', a 'queer', a 'queen' and someone who liked 'poofy drinks and handbags'. He was awarded £35,000 in compensation.

Bielak vs. Next - Ms Bielak, a lesbian shop assistant, suffered months of harassment by colleague Katrina Davies - a Jehovah's Witness - who played the Morrissey song 'All the lazy dykes' each time she entered the stockroom. Davies and her husband, also an employee at the store, openly questioned whether Bielak and her partner were fit to raise their seven-year old son. After an incident where she was shoved and sworn at by Davies, Bielak lodged a complaint and went on sick leave. Next failed to deal with the complaint for 14 months leading to Bielak's resignation.

Banter can be fun, team-building, reduce stress and raise morale. However, managers or colleagues should intervene if they think someone is feeling uncomfortable and try to stop only the offensive banter. It is important to differentiate between harmful and harmless banter, and if in doubt seek the views of lesbian, gay and bisexual staff or outside advice from the Equalities and Diversity Team. Managers who do not take firm action to curtail inappropriate banter and jokes could be viewed as complicit in the harassment and risk low team morale, reduced productivity and complaints from staff.

The experience of being lesbian, gay or bisexual

LGB people can face particular issues in the wider society, where they are seen by many as deviating from the norm. For example:

- ◆ They may experience pressure to conform with the 'norm' and have to acquire coping strategies to confront bias and hostility. Knowing that being out can make them more vulnerable to prejudice, and deciding who to trust can be stressful;
- ◆ Where an LGB person is not out, they may be concerned about work events and social gatherings where there is an expectation of being accompanied by a partner;
- ◆ According to research by Stonewall, some lesbians and bisexual women consider that being a woman is a bigger barrier at work than being gay, and so will be wary about being out at work to avoid double discrimination;
- ◆ There is a conflict for some people between their faith and sexual orientation. A number of religions are hostile to homosexuality, which can alienate LGB people of faith;
- ◆ LGB staff may be seen by colleagues as role models for LGB students and thus it may be assumed that they will undertake all the pastoral care of LGB students, which may be burdensome. There may also be assumptions that an out LGB staff member will take responsibility for LGB issues in the workplace;
- ◆ Bisexuals may face a struggle for acceptance with either lesbians or gay men, as well as with heterosexual colleagues;
- ◆ Black and minority ethnic LGB staff sometimes feel they have to choose whether to identify with their ethnicity or sexual orientation, rather than both. They may face racism from other LGB people or homophobia from people from the same cultural or ethnic background.



Equal status of same-sex partners

UCL's policies and benefits package are inclusive of same-sex partners, and managers should advertise this to staff where appropriate. In particular:

- ◆ Same-sex partners are considered in the same way as opposite-sex partners
- ◆ LGB staff with dependents have the same rights under UCL employment policies as other staff and students
- ◆ UCL's pension schemes have the discretion of paying a pension to same sex partners if there is a proven financial interdependence.

Top tips for supportive managers

- ◆ Do not assume that everyone is heterosexual
- ◆ Take prompt action against homophobic banter, even if you are not aware that you have any LGB staff
- ◆ Make LGB staff aware of UCL's policies, benefits and LGBT network 'Out@UCL';
- ◆ Make sure that social invitations use inclusive language e.g. use the word 'partner' as a catch-all term for husband/wife/civil partner/girlfriend/boyfriend
- ◆ Encourage all staff to learn more about LGBT issues by organising training or attending e.g. LGBT History Month events

Useful information:

UCL

For further advice contact the Equalities and Diversity Team

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/equalities/contacts/index.php>

UCL LGBT pages

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/equalities/lgbt/index.php>

LGB

Advancing LGB equality in Higher Education – Equality Challenge Unit 2010

<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/advancing-lgb-equality>

Stonewall

<http://www.stonewall.org.uk/>



Pictured: Max Hill, Chair of UCL's LGBT Equality Group and Out@UCL

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www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/equalities