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Decolonising & Diversifying Higher Education | 22 June 2026

KING'S College LONDON
KING'S BUSINESS SCHOOL

"IT JUST WOULDN'T BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY"
LGBTQ+ STUDENTS & PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

— Queer voices are markedly absent from business and management education (Graham & MacFarlane, 2021; Rumens, 2023; Steyaert, 2022) - prompting calls to address their "hidden vulnerability" (Hibbert, 2025).

— There is evidence of "diversity backlash" when historically excluded voices are centred (Dorion & Picard, 2025).

— The hidden curriculum - the norms and modes of self-presentation a school rewards without ever stating them on a syllabus (Høgdal et al., 2021; Hibbert & Wright, 2023).

— In management education that hidden curriculum is heteronormative - it treats the credible "professional" as straight and cisgender, and presents that as neutral.

— **So decolonising and diversifying must go beyond content (Woods et al., 2022): diversifying the reading list does not reach norms that live in conduct.**

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: QUEER THEORY

— "Queering" means deliberately stepping outside the majority viewpoint to make visible the norms that usually pass unquestioned (Parker, 2016).

— Queer students feel the hidden curriculum of "professionalism" especially sharply - slightly outside the norm, they see it more clearly than those it already fits.

— Professionalism, in our sense: the tacit, socially-learned standard of self-presentation - how you speak, dress and carry yourself - that marks you as credible. A norm, not a skill.

Research question: How is heteronormativity produced, sustained, or resisted within business school environments?

How do LGBTQ+ students experience belonging, professionalism, and access to opportunity?

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Approach

- Qualitative, exploratory design
- Grounded in critical queer perspectives

Data Collection

- 3 focus groups + 23 individual interviews (~1 hour each)
- Participants are diverse in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, and cultural background
- Sites include 8 Russell Group business schools; recruitment now across all 24
- Semi-structured interview focused on identity work, professionalism, belonging, and institutional culture

Data Analysis

- Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022)
- Iterative coding using Dedoose

Ethics & Positionality

- Ethical approval secured
- Participants anonymised; pseudonyms used
- Insider research team (3 out of 4 are queer-identifying); interviews carried out by queer students / alumni

Scope

- Presenting the cross-site pattern - not an institution-by-institution comparison

THEMES

Theme 1

Navigating (In)Visibility

— Absence in the curriculum

— Emotional impact of erasure

— Institutional neutrality

Theme 2

Performing Professionalism

— “Finance Bro” & “Tech Bro” culture

— The mask & being taken seriously

— Conformity & access

Theme 3

Conditional Inclusion & Joy

— Spaces of safety

— Intersectional limits

— The limits of allyship

— Hope & future orientation

THEME 1: NAVIGATING (IN)VISIBILITY

Absence in Curriculum

- “Aside from the odd guest speaker brought in from outside the school, I don't recall anything related to queer topics." (Participant 019)
- "I do think one of my professors may be in a queer relationship, but he has never brought that to class..." (Participant 018)

Emotional Impact of Erasure

- "I felt, in the beginning, that I don't belong, that I don't understand the lingo..." (Participant 028)
- "That sort of makes me feel sometimes that I'm a bit out of place... I just can't relate." (Participant 013)

Institutional Neutrality

- “I definitely want to see more openly queer like lecturers and staff members. I feel like just seeing people that you can relate to just make such a positive change, and I know like sometimes it's not professional to be super open about like your personal life.” (Participant 003)
- "There's a lot of neutrality here... the worst support are the ones that remain neutral; the worst people are the ones who don't voice anything." (Participant 007)

THEME 2: PERFORMING PROFESSIONALISM

‘Finance Bro” & “Tech Bro” Culture

- “Part of your professionalism is also to tone down your character, and I kind of lost that part of me that was a bit more flamboyant. I was performing, like acting or pretending to be someone I’m not.” (Participant 009)
- "Straight presenting white men, like your typical finance bros... I just remember thinking, I will never show up there." (Participant 001)
- "Every other finance bro has this very same Patagonia's vest on." (Participant 020)

The Mask & Being Taken Seriously

- "I'm used to putting on a kind of mask. This is the me you're seeing — but it's not the actual me. And, ironically, that's really helped with all the professionalism, the networking. It just gets tiring.” (Participant 020)
- "If I told anyone I'm actually not really straight... it just wouldn't be taken seriously." (Participant 009)

Conformity & Access

- “I didn’t tell anyone I was part of the community... I thought it would do me a disservice.” (Participant 009)
- "There are lecturers who are very... straight-acting, and therefore I have to conform to that... I do have to dim myself down." (Participant 014)
- "[In an interview,] that reaction... would then dictate what my work experience there is going to be like." (Participant 012)

THEME 3: CONDITIONAL INCLUSION & JOY

Spaces of Safety

- “I was part of the intersectional feminist society… in there, I was quite open about it. It made me feel empowered and it made me feel like I could present myself how I want.” (Participant 009)
- “Outside of university, I definitely explored much more than in university. At uni, it sometimes felt like I actually had to hide parts of me.” (Participant 009)
- ”A time I did feel like I [belong]…probably during Pride Month… So that's probably when I would feel most inclusive. The other 11 months of the year… maybe not so much." (Participant 014)

Intersectional Limits

- "In the LGBTQ+ society, I feel welcome — but not quite as a brown woman. In the South Asian society… not quite as a queer one… that's where they really drop the ball." (Participant 003)
- "I feel a bit more free over here… back home you had to dress a bit more conservatively, so you could be safer." (Participant 025)

The Limits of Allyship

- “Sometimes the support is just rainbow flags and nothing deeper. Like, thanks but…?” (Participant 003)
- “Like, we had Pride Month and I didn’t see anything on the [university] homepage. It’s just not really acknowledged, unless you go looking for it.” (Participant 006)

Hope & Future Orientation

- “I do think it’s getting better. Like, just being able to have these conversations - that wasn’t even possible a few years ago.” (Participant 003)
- “I do think things will change. Maybe not fast, but I’m hopeful.” (Participant 009)

PROFESSIONALISM AS THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

— "Professionalism" is an ostensibly neutral standard of credibility that is, in practice, heteronormative - exclusion that lives in conduct, classroom culture and careers practice, not on any reading list. This is the "beyond content" territory

— Offered for discussion, not asserted: students tied professionalism to race and nationality - *"They can understand me being gay, but it's easier for them to pretend I'm not Asian" (Participant 001)* - raising whether "professional" is also bound up with the coloniality of knowledge (Bhambra et al., 2018)

— Transferable: law's "credible advocate," medicine's "safe pair of hands," the sciences' "objective" observer. Queer students may be an early indicator of the norm - not a niche case

WHAT I'D SUGGEST - AN INSIDER'S VIEW

1. Make queer life visible in the formal curriculum

Woven into the cases, examples and assessments we already use, not a single special lecture.

2. Treat careers & networking provision as inclusion-critical

That is where professionalism bites hardest. Brief careers staff; signal students need not leave parts of themselves at the door to be employable.

3. Move from neutrality to position

Visible queer staff, named support, and an institutional voice that goes beyond a flag in June.

4. Build it with queer students, not only for them

Genuine co-creation, not consultation (Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Fast, low-hierarchy partnership - as modelled by Abbie King's student–staff work at King's - turns ideas into visible change rather than slow committee.

FROM FORMAL COMMITMENTS TO EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE

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Across eight universities: invisibility in the curriculum; pressure to perform a heteronormative professionalism to be taken seriously and to access opportunity; and a belonging that remains conditional.

Decolonising higher education, **beyond content**: naming and addressing the norms we transmit without noticing.

Thank you.

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Collaborations and host-site partnerships welcome.

BE PART OF THE CONVO

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