

## COMMUNITY CORNER

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## In conversation with the 'LGBT+ in STEM' panellists

'LGBT+ in STEM' Community Corner panel from left to right: Lucky Cullen, James Williamson, Dukas Jurenas and Clare Taylor (Chair).

### About the panellists

#### James Williamson

James is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Warwick. His research focuses on engineering environmental bacteria for the utilisation of waste plant material, with an aim to produce high-value products. James is also the secretary of the SfAM ECS committee.

#### Lucky Cullen

Lucky has recently completed her PhD at Kingston University London. Her research focused on characterising the emergence of antimicrobial resistance in *Escherichia coli* through mutation mapping of the resistome. Lucky is also lead policy and diversity and inclusion officer of the SfAM ECS committee.

#### Dukas Jurenas

Dukas is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institut de Microbiologie de la Méditerranée. His research is mostly focused on bacterial toxins from toxin-antitoxin systems and type VI secretion systems. Dukas is also a member of the Belgian and Lithuanian Societies for Microbiology.

#### Q1 How did you feel being asked to sit on the panel of the 'LGBT+ in STEM' Community Corner discussion?

**James:** I was definitely apprehensive about being asked to sit on the panel for this discussion; the thought of standing up in front of a whole conference and saying 'Hi, here's this aspect of my personality, please don't judge me too harshly' was daunting for several reasons. Firstly, I've only been 'out' to my family very recently, and at that time there were still family members who didn't know.

Secondly, I often feel like a fraud when talking about LGBTQ+ issues, mainly because I've had very few negative experiences. It's almost as if I haven't suffered enough to be an advocate, which is clearly ridiculous.

**Lucky:** It was a complete honour to be asked to participate in the LGBT+ panel discussion. Clare has always been somebody I have looked up to and admired within the Society, and she was fundamental to me being so open about my sexuality when joining SfAM in 2013. However, during the days leading up to the panel discussion I became increasingly nervous, as it dawned on me that I was outing myself at FEMS, the largest gathering of microbiologists in Europe.

**Dukas:** I contacted Clare and proposed myself as a participant, so in a sense it was my choice to show up on the panel. I wasn't entirely aware of the format, but I assumed it would be public. I found that the atmosphere was well created, open and cosy enough for anyone interested to pass by, but not standing out too much.

**Q2 What did you hope to achieve from participating in the discussion?**

**James:** My main objective from the event was to not make a fool of myself and try and not feel like a fraud. I knew that the experiences I had to share could be a lot less extreme than of other people on the panel, but I hope that my slightly less serious stories helped to highlight how ridiculous some of the situations we find ourselves in are, and how if we were not LGBTQ+ they wouldn't even be considered worthy of retelling.

**Lucky:** Going into the panel discussion I was really unsure about what I wanted to achieve. A part of me was of the opinion that we shouldn't even be having an 'LGBT+ in STEM' discussion, as I want to be judged solely for my scientific capabilities (my sexuality is completely irrelevant). Yet, I have been in a position both personally and professionally where I have hidden my sexuality, and it is truly exhausting. Therefore, I felt if sharing my experiences and raising the visibility of 'LGBT+ in STEM' at FEMS could help individuals in similar circumstances, I would do it all again in a heartbeat.

**Q3 How did you feel the session was received by the audience at FEMS?**

**James:** Most of all I got over a fear of being put centre-stage and talking about a personal and sometimes polarising subject. I also now feel less of a fraud than when I was asked to be on the panel. Finally, afterwards I was able to meet some lovely people, and got to discuss their adventures as an LGBTQ+ person in microbiology.

**Lucky:** I was honestly shocked at the number of people who turned up to the Community Corner for the 'LGBT+ in STEM' discussion. The audience was not only engaged during the discussion, but they were extremely understanding of the anxiety of the panel and the courage it had taken to sit on stages and speak out about such personal experiences. It was also extremely encouraging to hear some stories from the audience, and it provided a real sense of community spirit.

**Dukas:** I felt that the session was received with great interest and comprehension. The crowd was responsive, and some people came by after the session to share their story or express their sympathy.

**Q4 What did you take away from this experience?**

**James:** Honestly, it was all such a blur. However, following the panel I had some great conversations with people, and it seemed to go down well. If nothing else, it was a great way to bring this portion of the microbiology community together so we could meet each other. The issue of visibility was raised during the panel. Should we all raise our hands and say, 'Here we are'? Probably not (for a long list of reasons), but there's certainly something to be said for subtle ways of making ourselves known to each other.

**Lucky:** I found the session very rewarding and I was very happy to play my part in such an engaging discussion. Following the panel, it was also very humbling to see the responses on social media. I think this experience has given me the confidence to be an LGBT+ ambassador in whatever role I embark on following the completion of my PhD.

**Dukas:** I took away an overall good feeling and realised the importance of speaking out. I rarely do; however, I feel that in the professional community it can make a difference. Taking into account that not all people dared to speak up, and preferred to talk personally, I feel that LGBT+ is still sort of a stigma - probably due to real phobias but also due to our internalised phobias. I felt that speaking up, openly and honestly, despite the presence of my colleagues in the crowd that didn't know about my identity, had an overall very positive return for myself and for others.

