

Opening the Closet Door: A Queer International Student's Decisions at Graduation

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Partnerships; University/Higher Education

Setting

More than 60 countries either criminalize homosexuality or do not have laws protecting LGBTQ+ rights. Many international students come to the U.S. and face a number of barriers, including those who are just learning to navigate their queer identities. In the case being analyzed, Mohammed is an international student from Bangladesh, a country where homosexuality is outlawed.

Mohammed is attending a large, public four-year university on the west coast of the U.S. that has strong protections for LGBTQ+ rights and codified same-sex marriage. The institute is known for its dedication to diversity, equity and inclusion, and is currently working on increasing enrollment numbers and scholarship opportunities for BIPOC, LGBTQ+ and international students.

As an international student advisor, Mohammed comes to you and expresses his concerns about his future trajectories. He is preoccupied about navigating his queer identity and his path following graduation. Your

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university has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the company that is sponsoring Mohammed's scholarship, which states that Mohammed will return to work for the company for two years after finishing his studies in the U.S. Your university and the company have a mutually beneficial partnership that sponsors three students every academic year. However, during your conversation with Mohammed, he shares that he is unsure if he wants to return to Bangladesh upon graduation.

Case

Mohammed (he/him) is in his final year of a two-year master's degree in chemical engineering at your university. An international student from Bangladesh, Mohammed came to your university on a F-1 visa. He is sponsored by a large, international chemical company and has signed a contract with the company to return to his home country of Bangladesh and work for the national corporate office when he finishes his degree in May.

Mohammed has been a star student during his studies. He is earning a high GPA, has been an international student ambassador for your office, and is the secretary of the university's South Asian Students Organization. Mohammed has also developed a relationship with an American classmate, Steven. While you consider yourself friendly with Mohammed, you were not aware of Mohammed's sexual orientation. Moreover, it seems to you that Mohammed and Steven have kept their relationship fairly private.

One day in March – two months before Mohammed's intended graduation date – he comes to an appointment with you and shares that he'd like advice on how to stay in the United States after graduation. He says he's been applying for U.S. jobs and has had a few interviews with two different companies in the area. He intends to pay his company back for the price of his scholarship over time. He begins by asking for visa advice on what to expect if he does not get employment before graduation.

As you talk, you realize that Mohammed is also concerned about what will happen to his relationship with Steven if he returns home to Bangladesh. He confides that he has never spoken with his parents about his queer identity. Moreover, while he has told his parents that he's in a relationship with an American, he has not given Steven's name or specified Steven's gender. He admits that he's uncertain how his parents will react when he shares that he is in a same-sex relationship.

He also confides that he has been researching his chances of getting married in the U.S. He said he's heard from another international student about a Supreme Court case (*Obergefell vs. Hodges*) which recognizes same sex marriages. He is wondering if he could marry Steven and stay in the U.S. He believes that if he proposed, Steven would say yes and want a big wedding. Mohammed is worried about whether he will be able to invite his family or other members of the South Asian diaspora community in your university's city, how he will inform his family about the marriage, and how he will manage this information about his wedding on social media.

He said that he's thought about whether he and Steven could move together to Bangladesh. He noted that it's likely not possible for him and Steven to be in a public relationship in Bangladesh given the government's lack of recognition or protection of LGBTQ+ rights. Mohammed recalls a time in Bangladesh in 2016 during the

Bengali New Year, when four members of the LGBTQ+ community were arrested due to participating in a pride celebration. Their request for this celebration had been previously denied by local authorities and resulted in all participants being arrested, although they were later released¹. Homosexuality is a crime that can lead to a maximum life term in prison, and Mohammed isn't sure he wants to go back and risk his chance of living openly queer with his partner.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What cross-cultural skills would you use in order to address Mohammed's concerns?
- As an international student advisor, how would you navigate this conversation? From a professional perspective, do you feel equipped to advise on personal topics?
- Based on the information provided in the case study, what questions would you have for Mohammed? What are the next steps you would advise Mohammed to take with regard to his immigration status?
- Would you need to take action to preserve the relationship with the company sponsoring Mohammed's degree? If so, what would those actions be?

¹ "Four revelers held after Bangladesh bans 'rainbow rally'", Daily Mail, 14 April 2016.