

Name of collection
BME Staff Network

Katherine Jegede, Mary Shek, Ola Fadoju, Roberta Davies:

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Hello, and welcome to the Open University, an institution that has earned a global reputation for making education accessible to all, no matter our background, personal circumstances, or educational or career ambitions. Now, while it's no secret that students are at the heart of the OU's mission, the university also places a strong focus on supporting the staff who play a crucial role in its success.

One example of this commitment is the BME staff network, an independent group of OU staff dedicated to supporting, connecting, and empowering Black and minority ethnic staff members. The network also serves as a friendly, approachable resource for anyone wanting to learn more about BME issues, while it helps to promote understanding and inclusivity right across the university population.

I'll be speaking with the co-chairs of the BME staff network, Mary Shek, Ola Fadoju, and Roberta Davies, to hear their thoughts on the network's future, goals, and aspirations. I first caught up with Mary and asked her about her vision for the network and the opportunities it provides. So Mary, as one of the co-chairs, what is your vision for the network, and what opportunities should we be focusing on to help the network thrive?

MARY SHEK: Thank you, Katherine. I strongly believe that a network can only be as strong as its membership, and so we need to really engage with our members so that they are able to raise concerns, discuss matters of concern to them, and also contribute to the EDI work. The network is about building a community where members can feel a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, and solidarity. It's also about creating a safe space where members can discuss issues and discuss matters of concern within the Open University.

To give a representative voice for the members, we as co-chairs, we engage with the senior leaders and managers of the university to report to them matters of concern or to ask difficult questions and challenge their decision-making. At times, also, we contribute by helping the Open University to consult on draft policies and any initiatives-- example, the student charter, EDI plans, et cetera.

Also, I think there is opportunity for us to influence and advocate for career development for our members. As we know, there is a gap in senior representation at higher bands at the Open University. Lastly, I think it's really important as our staff network to collaborate with other staff networks because we have matters that are of common interest and concern to all the staff networks regarding EDI. And so I think by collaborating, we will have a much stronger voice.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Thank you. Let's continue the conversation with you, Ola. You're one of the co-chairs. What would you say are the key priorities for the network at the moment?

OLA FADOJU: There are a few priorities. One of them is about the increased engagement of the network itself and the members within the network itself. We do have formal meetings once every five weeks on a Tuesday morning between 10:00 and 11:15, and they are well attended. But it would be nice to see more members coming to those meetings. I'm sure the issues is about time capacity-- when do they get that? And I think that's an issue.

But at the same time, can they engage in other areas that the network has? So we have a forum on the Engage. It's used, but could be used a bit more. We do get a lot of traffic into our BME matters inbox, and that's great as well. And we've raised a few issues that our members have queried regarding issues at the OU, based on the emails that have come through. So that's been great as well.

It would be nice. Again, I keep on saying it. One of the things about the OU being this distance of learning is that not all of us are working in the same offices, in the same regions. But we do have the benefit of the online platforms such as Teams-- or Business Skype is about to get rolled out. So it will be Teams that people can just go, oh, Ola, Roberta, Mary, is one of them free today? Oh, yeah, they are. Let me give him a quick call, have a chat about something, and raise whatever they want to raise at that time. So we would like to see more of that from our members.

Engagement-- and you move that on into what you call professional development. We would like to see how we as a network can advocate for the needs of our members in terms of development, because they need to be tailored towards BME staff. I would make an observation that the OU haven't been able to find that balance yet, and so I think we need to do more.

Recently, there was the-- I did a piece of work with Suki Haider with the AL's professional development team, and that was about equality, diversity, inclusion, accessibility cards. And it was a great session. But actually, why it was great is because we had the network chairs of other networks being involved in it. And I think that's one of-- and I will mention that in a minute when we move on-- but it's about how do we work across the sphere within our networks to improve the ability of our networks to move forward.

But going back to that development session, it was really great. Suki has now gone back to her line manager, and hopefully, that will then become something that the OU will now roll out to other members of staff. So that's one of the priorities that we want to work on.

And then moving on to staff networks about collaboration, the networks themselves on their own are great. I think the more we collaborate, the better we get, the more empowered we will be, and the more transparent we will be to other people and other members of staff at the OU. Recently, the Trans Network and the Neurodivergent Network at the OU worked.

We all worked together with the BME network on trying to produce a framework for VCE and Senate about how the OU should be using social media to promote themselves to staff, to students, and specifically on Twitter-- so Twitter, which is now X. And that was brought up by, I think, the chair from the Trans Network. And we've decided to collaborate together, put this framework together with Lucy Brown, and I think it will be presented very shortly, just to make OU will be aware that social media is great, but not all platforms should OU be advocating for if the ethos of that platform doesn't meet the ethos of the OU.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: So, Ola, we've heard about the vision for the network. We've heard about your key priorities. How do you see those things coming together and being brought to life?

OLA FADOJU: So earlier, I mentioned one of our key priorities about the increased engagement within the network. And in the vision of that is that when you have increased engagement, that means things most likely will change. So we need to be prepared for that. When our members say we like this, we like that, we need to be able to change with the needs of our network members. And that is something, I think that's a vision we need to be ready for.

So for example, we've had the peer mentoring network that's now in its third year. We've had a few points made about that and how that can now move on to the next stage. So how do we help our members when they ask for a change? So that's one vision that we need to focus on. The second vision is about not so much aligning ourselves with senior leadership, but supporting senior leadership in delivering either the EDI strategies or, again, the improvement of relations for BME staff at the university.

So the OU have recently appointed a Pro-Vice-Chancellor for EDI. His name is Alan, but prefers to be called Al. And I was part of the recruitment process, myself and Rohana. So we have met him. So we would like to invite him to one of our meetings and get to know him better and let the network speak to him and ask him questions and, again, increase our collaboration with senior management.

But that's not just AI. It should also be other VCs as well. And we want to do more of that. I want to name-drop somebody who I think has been a great ally for the network-- Jo Dyer. She is the director of LDS-- Learning Discovery Center. So those are the kind of people we want to work with, but not necessarily to align ourselves so we fit into the OU. No. It's so that we know where we need to go to if we want things and we need things.

But also, the biggest thing is that we want to be able to critique the OU when they're not doing things right. And that will be the last bit. That's the vision. We will align ourselves with leadership. But critique when we feel they're not meeting the standards and expectations of their staff.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Thank you.

OLA FADOJU: Thank you, Katherine.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: I also had the opportunity to speak to the co-chair, Roberta Davis, to gain her insights into the role of the network as part of the wider university. I'm joined by Roberta Davis, who is one of the co-chairs of the OU BME staff network.

Now, Roberta, it's absolutely lovely to be speaking with you. I've spoken to Ola, and I've spoken to Mary, so it's only right that we get your thoughts on the network. So the first thing I want to ask you is, how do you see the network changing?

ROBERTA DAVIES: Interesting question. So I think we are quite lucky. I think the work of our previous co-chairs has been brilliant, so we are in a good position. But that's not to say that there isn't room for progress and change.

So I think-- I would see boosting the network's role in supporting our Black and minority ethnic staff community at the OU should be something that we seek to always improve and look for more opportunities to support. So for example, we have just relaunched our drop-in sessions for members. So just to create more opportunities for people to come together, I think that's quite important. And we're also going to be relaunching the peer mentoring scheme, so with the idea of supporting the career development of our community.

So I guess there's always more opportunity. So it's being on the lookout for those opportunities. I think for me personally, I would like to really see more of an increased communication between the co-chairs, the committee, with steering group, as we normally call ourselves, and the wider community. We do meet regularly, and I think a little bit more communication with the wider community to let them know what we're doing, what we're discussing is something that probably should be welcomed.

Another thing that I think you'd be really great to see is the increased participation of professional services staff in the work that we do. So that's something that I think at the moment we are lacking a little bit, and I would like to see more involvement of this community.

And finally, I think strengthening our collaboration with other staff networks. I think the more we realize and acknowledge that our experiences are shaped by overlapping identities, the more we are aware of the intersectionality of our experiences. So I think it's important that we support each other, and we acknowledge that the work that other networks are doing is important for the work that we are doing as well. So it's standing in solidarity, I think. Yeah, that's some of my thoughts.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: You made some really interesting points about other networks and input from professional services and things like that. So that really speaks to the importance of the network within the OU as an institution. And with that in mind, how do you think the network aligns with the OU's EDI mission?

ROBERTA DAVIES: I think, to be honest, I think everything that we do is in alignment with that mission. So I feel like we create space for belonging for our community. We represent our community views by serving the OU as a collective voice to challenge discrimination. We also

seek to promote social and cultural awareness of our communities. And I think it's really important an element of celebrating the contribution that we bring because we are different, and that's a richness in that.

So I think that we actively support the agenda. So for example, we are regularly invited to share our perspectives on policies, initiatives, and projects. So by doing that, we are informing decision-making and promoting best practices at the university. We also act as critical friends. So sometimes we know that we will raise things or provide perspectives that sometimes might be controversial or might be not what people want to hear. But I think it's our job to raise awareness of our community's needs, and we are not afraid to do that and also hold the university accountable.

So I think as the role of the staff networks become more valued and recognized-- which I think that's where we are at the moment. I think there's an increased recognition that we bring, an amazing value for the university-- I think we're just going to have more opportunities to do this. So I think we are quite well aligned. Yeah, but I think there will always be more opportunities to contribute more.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Thank you, Roberta. A lot to think about there. So if you're a BME staff member at the OU, or you're interested in learning more about the network and how you can get involved, please reach out to the chairs at the contact information below.