

## **Black History Month 2020**

Dr Liz Marr message

### **Dr Liz Marr:**

Good morning, everybody and welcome to this Open University Black History Month event. I'm incredibly impressed at the effort, which has gone into the planning for this whole month, as well as today. The level of commitment from staff and students has been amazing and just shows how much we can do when we really want to. A little while ago, I wrote a piece for snow bowl the associate lecturer newsletter reflecting on the incidents, which have given rise to the Black lives massive campaigns, and what that might mean for us as a University.

As the Open University, we pride ourselves on our mission of openness and inclusion. And it's tempting to think that racial harassment, discrimination, abuse just doesn't happen. Yet we know that in holding up a mirror to ourselves in our sadly failed attempt to achieve a race equality charter mark that this is very far from true. Many very brave colleagues both staff and students reported examples ranging from daily microaggressions to all out abuse.

This is shocking for us, and those of us involved. We knew we must do something about it. But I don't believe we reacted quite as quickly as we should. We can be full of good intentions, but it seems to have taken a judicial murder and a global pandemic, which disproportionately impacts some Black Asian and minority ethnic people to really make us sit up and think.

There are lots of things we need to do within our own University community. We need to be aware that we are not as attracted to Black and Asian students understand why that is, and how we need to change to address this. Currently, the proportion of students reporting ethnicity as Black is 3.8% and Asian is 3.6%. That is woefully low. We need to look closely at our awarding gaps on marginal tax rates for Black students are showing a gap of 13.9%. And good marginal passes, which we use as a proxy for classification outcome. The gap is 31.1% for Black students and 16.6% for Asian students. In terms of progression to highly skilled employment or further study, the gap for Black students is 11%. So, we really need to scrutinize our curriculum and our support processes for students.

We have plans and stretching targets in our access participation and success strategy and in our access and participation plan. We need to look at our staff body and consider why it is so unrepresentative as the wider population we serve. Why people of colour are not getting promoted or appointed to senior roles, and we really need to think about what we should do about that. So, I've been doing a lot of reading, a lot of watching and listening to try and understand what it is we need to do.

I know we can't put everything right overnight, but we do have to try. I have to be honest and admit it is not easy to find answers. But there are some things we can do as a community. Firstly, we have to listen, and we have to reflect. As a white person, I have to hear what is meant by white privilege and white fragility and understand and accept it.

And we all need to acknowledge that social, political, and economic structures and gender and perpetuate inequalities. And we need to face up to our own part in maintaining those. And

we have to engage in open dialogue to establish ways to address them. Yes, it is hard and it's scary to expose ourselves being afraid of saying the wrong thing or saying it in the wrong way. But how much harder and scarier is it to go out in the street knowing that the odds of you being stopped and searched by police for being tased or being arrested are hugely higher for Black people and white people.

It's shocking that driving while being Black is increasingly being seen as a cause for suspicion. When I first discuss with colleagues the idea of doing something for Black History Month, my primary motivation was to bring all these issues out of the shadows and start a conversation. I am truly hopeful that we don't end here today. We need to work collaboratively and collegiately to create an environment where trust can flourish, and we can start to make a difference.

Bernadine Evanesta, one of the few Black women professors in this country recently said that she was no longer prepared to join diversity panels, as we shouldn't be relying on people of colour to solve the problems that white people created. So, at the start of our conversation, I would urge you all to do as I have done to listen, to reflect and to keep the conversation going until it results in actions and change. Thank you to everyone who's made this month and this day happen. And I hope that I will see you in some of the sessions later on today.

And I hope that you have a really great day.

Thank you.