

## **Black History Month 2020**

*Marcia Wilson*

### **Marcia Wilson:**

I'd like to also say thank you so much for the invitation to contribute to the conference today. It's a real privilege to be able to join you. And as I said this last week, I'm really looking forward to joining you on the 1st of December as a new staff member, dean of the DTI. OK, so for the next 40 minutes or so, I'd like to talk about the race equality journey at the UEL. And a little bit about the process, but also focus on the lessons that we learned along the way.

So, the whole process started back in December 2016, and I remember it well. It was at the staff Christmas party and the vice chancellor pulled me to one side and asked me if I would be willing to lead on the race equality charter mark, and I asked him what does that actually involve what is it. And he said, oh, it's a charter mark that we're applying for. I signed up to it. And all you'll have to do is just chair a few meetings. And so, I said, yeah, absolutely. I can chair a few meetings. That that's not a problem.

For those of you who have been involved in the race equality charter mark, you know that it's not just a matter of chairing a few meetings. You are looking at transforming the institution, the culture of the institution. So, it's much, much bigger than that. So, what we did early in 2017 was put a call out across the University for staff and students to join our REC self-assessment team. And when we held our first meeting, this is something I referred to last Thursday when I spoke at the learning and teaching day.

And unfortunately, everyone but one person in that meeting was a person of colour. As I looked around the room, we had just Black and brown colleagues and some students join us to be part of the race equality self-assessment team. There was one white colleague and she was our charters manager, and so she had to be there, but she wanted to be there anyway. She would have been there anyway. One of the questions that I was asking, that I was constantly asked my colleagues was, is this a tick box exercise? Why now? Why are you looking to change the institution?

Do we have senior management behind this? Why would senior management want to engage in this? Because it means giving up some power if you are talking about really changing the

institution because our senior management was white. And we were talking about a complete change in having representation of Black and brown colleagues at every single level. So, the question was why would senior management want to give up some of their power? And also, some colleagues were asking, why do we need the REC?

And so, one of the things that I showed them and, unfortunately, I can't show you that link. But please in your own time, take a look at that area if you haven't seen it. Well, the colour of power. The colour of power shows images of who actually holds the power in our society. So, it will show you images of vice chancellors, politicians, heads of organizations. And although, the website is a few years out of date, the images remain the same. Because we had a largely Black and brown self-assessment team, one of the things that I said to colleagues was, you need to go and get a friend, bring a friend to our next meeting. But that friend must be white, OK?

Go and get some white people to join in in this work. And I went and handpicked some people as well. And one of the things that I heard from colleagues and my white colleagues when I talked to them about this work was, well, I'm not sure if I have the skills to do this. I'm really scared of making mistakes and saying the wrong thing. So is there something I can do kind of at the side-lines and it was like, no, you have to join in and work towards this with all the people who want to make a change at the University.

So, we formed our main REC team and we had 27 members staff and students as part of our REC team, our main REC team. And within that REC team, we had three subgroups. So, we had a group that responsible for data. So, analysing the data from the surveys, but also organizing the focus groups and analysing the themes that came out of the focus group. We had a comms group. And the responsibility of the comms group was to really communicate with the University community about the data and about the events that we were having. And just put out posters and engage in social media so that everyone was aware of what we were doing.

And then we had a consultation stroke event group. Throughout the process, we hosted many events and I'll talk about those in the moment. We hosted many events. And that subgroup had responsibility for organizing those events with our main events team within the University. But we also made sure that we constantly engaged in consultation with staff and students. And so that group was responsible for that area as well. And you can see the tweet on the left from me. We actually became from friends.

We formed a really close-knit bond and we spoke about the importance of this work on a regular basis, and we celebrated small achievements along the way. And so we worked, eat out together, we would drink, we would have lunch together, and we found some really close

knit bonds between the people that were part of the race assessment-- sorry, the self-assessment team. So, it took about 2 and 1/2 years for us to work towards getting our wreck.

And we facilitated 19 events, including the inside the Ivory Tower book launch, talked to Jenny Douglas as part of that she graced us with her presence back in 2017. And that was the most successful event that we hosted. We had over 200 people attend that book launch. And our vice chancellor at the time Professor Nora Colton was so moved by what she read in that book. That she bought a copy for each of the Board of Governors and urged them to read it.

So, we hosted the inside the Ivory Tower book launch. There were lots of school events and also team presentations. I said a moment ago, it's important that we consult with staff as well as students throughout the process. And so we hosted REC workshops whereby we were able to just continually update colleagues on the progress that we were making. We hosted the REC workshops and shared the data that we found. We had three workshops on the action plan.

The action plan was crucial, and we needed to make sure that we heard the voices from every single corner of the institution. So, we hosted three different workshops for staff and students, and also, we held a student EDI conference. This was the Student Union really getting involved in this process. And they hosted a conference that was incredibly well attended. So, across the events, we engaged approximately 700 students and staff, and also, we had a very good response to our student and staff survey. So, it was over 1,200 responses.

And as you can see at the very bottom there, the self-assessment team and its various subgroups met over 30 times within that two-year period. So, one of the things that we found important and it is still important is having a dialogue creating an open and appropriate space for colleagues to have conversations about race and racism within the institution. This is absolutely crucial because we have colleagues who have never really engaged in these conversations before. And my thoughts are it is really important that we ensure we meet people where they are at this moment in time.

People at different points in the journey and we have to meet them where they are. So we have to listen to what they are saying to understand so that middle section men listen to understand is absolutely crucial. So, moving on to the events. These were the kinds of events that we hosted over the two-year period. You can see in the top left-hand corner, we hosted a BME early career research conference and that was the third one. And Dr. Bernadine establish this conference to feed the pipeline from undergrad to post grad to lecture a professor and so on and so forth.

And that was hugely successful. It was a sold-out conference, and perhaps the OU you can think about hosting a conference like this next year. So far, all four conferences have been held in London, and Dr. Bernadine would like to host the conference outside of London. So that's a consideration for the Open University for next year. We were fortunate. We had baroness Shami Chakrabarti join us and she talked about her book it was new at that point of women. And so that was an evening with baroness Shami Chakrabarti we hosted. Professor Kevin Hylton one of our conferences.

And in the middle there, you can see Afua Hirsch. She joined us for an evening and a discussion around racism in journalism, but also in higher education. You can see BAME staff network, I apologize for using that acronym. But that's what it's called at this moment in time, bottom right hand corner. And also, one of the events was just simply having a conversation about what we can do to change the institution. And we invited colleagues and students to just put their ideas down on post-it notes, and we collected the post-it notes, and we included a lot of that information in our action plan.

I know you probably can't see the small writing and that's OK. What I want to show you is this is the response from one of the staff surveys that we did during the consultation process. And what you will see is in the blue shaded area, you have the responses from ethnic minority staff from Black and brown staff. And in the pink shaded area, you have the responses from non-ethnic minority staff. And for me, this really illustrates that Black and brown staff experience higher education of a University very, very different to white staff.

And I'm hoping that you get to see this particular slide in a little more detail. It doesn't have all of the items, but you will see that there are certain areas that are more important to Black and brown staff compared to white counterparts. So, the diversity of UEL impacts on my sense of belonging. The diversity of UEL impacts on my desire to stay. Also, you will see that Black and brown staff have experienced racial discrimination on campus and also in the local area compared to what staff. OK. Sorry, moving on.

So, one of the things that I had to ask. When I spoke to senior management about the work that we're doing was we have to be serious about doing this work and we have to be serious about creating change at UEL. Because what I'm sharing with you is a lot of information about the way staff experience the University. And so, this information came out of our focus group. Black staff saying, I would not recommend UEL go to a Black academic friend who is trying to gain promotion as there isn't any within.

And although, I'm saying this is what we found at UEL. I don't think this is unique to UEL. These are issues that we see across the sector. At UEL, there are sound bites and not real

appreciation of its diverse student population. A racial ethnic mix of different grades of staff and attainment of students makes me realize that there is a level of institutional racism at UEL as in many other organizations. These are difficult questions and action around power and voice and who is heard and who can act. And this next one, the fourth one down is something that I have seen on more than one occasion, unfortunately.

I have reported an incident in the past and suffered further abuse from my manager when I reported it. Unfortunately, we all too often. We hear that when you do report these incidents. It makes you the problem because people don't know how to address the issues of microaggression of racist comments. And so, it makes you the problem for actually reporting it and wanting to take it further or wanting it addressed.

My immediate line manager has more than once made racist comments about the student body suggesting that if they are not white and middle class, they are not as well equipped the University as those who are. Unfortunately, when we hear comments like this is problematic because it feeds into one of the big problems that we have in higher education, and that is in relation to the degree award gap. And we have that degree award gap across the sector.

And if we have managers who feel that students who are not white and who are not middle class are not well equipped for University. Then they are essentially saying that, you know what? We are looking at this from a deficit perspective. These individuals are not well enough equipped to actually be here. And then also white staff at UEL can see this. I am white and suspect I'm treated better than some of my colleagues because of this as there is plenty of racism in the UK.

As a white person, I can see that my colleagues of colour are not necessarily treated the same as me. All profs are white, all management is white in our school. And then also, Omar Khan's tweet, and Omar Khan was the director of the Runnymede Trust up until, I think it was last year. And he highlights the importance of representation and the issues around that in higher education in the UK.

So, there are roughly 2,000 Black female students that every Black female professor. And there are around 50 white male students for every white male professor. You're 40 times more likely to see a professor who looks like you if you're white and male than if you're black and female. And we know the importance of role models. We know the importance of representation. And I truly believe in this popular saying of, you can't be what you can't see. It is so important for students and for staff who are starting out who want to progress to see people who look like them in senior positions in higher education.

So, with regard to our survey, we had six themes emerged. And you can see on the left-hand side University culture and organization, so a sense of belonging and having discussions on race bullying and harassment. Once again, right the way across the sector, these are not just unique to UEL. Teaching and learning. So, the curriculum what are we actually teaching our students degree award gaps and the progression of students were key as well under the umbrella.

Employability. So graduate level outcomes, staff career progression and recruitment and selections. So, including the transparency of that process. And so, we decided to organize our action plan around these six themes. I know that some of you have our rights equality charter mark submission. And you will see that we've organized the action plan is quite a comprehensive action plan instead of 30 pages long. But each of the actions that we decided to include relate to one of the six themes.

And so, it was really important as I said earlier that we consulted widely on what those actions should be. So we organized three workshops and we invited staff and students, we invited senior managers, as well to be part of the workshop to talk about-- let's flesh out these actions, what do we actually need to do to change the culture and generate a more equal UEL? And those three workshops were really well attended, and we also had an email account. So, if people couldn't make the workshops, they were more than welcome to email some ideas or meet with me or any of the set members and talk about what these actions should be.

As I said, we wanted to make sure that we reached as many people as we possibly could. So, 2 and 1/2 years in the making. We had many challenges along the way. Let me give you one example. For those of you who know anything about the University of East London, it's an institution that over the years has been in a constant state of change. We started the race equality charter mark with one vice chancellor. And I referred to Professor Nora Colton a moment ago. She wasn't the vice chancellor at that point, it was Professor John Jogin. So, we started with Professor John Jogin vice chancellor.

And then halfway through Nora Colton was our acting vice chancellor. And then by the time we finished the race equality charter mark. By the time we actually got the award, we had a third vice chancellor. So, we were in a constant state of change at senior management level, and you know what it's like when you get a new vice chancellor. My background is in sport, so I always like a new vice chancellor to having a new football manager. The bottom line is you get a new vice chancellor, you get a new strategy and you get a complete new senior management team.

So, when a football manager gets sick, he or she goes, and they bring in their own team. So, it's all systems change again. But the positive thing about this is that all three vice chancellors were fully supportive of the work that we were doing. So that was one of the challenges that we had at senior management level. Interestingly, there were many challenges along the way when we were interacting with colleagues and trying to get colleagues on board with some of the work that we were doing. And I'm not going to go-- there were lots of issues that came up.

But one of the things that I constantly heard from so many different people was, we need more data. How do we know that this data is correct? How do we know that these gaps exist in this area? We need more data. And in actual fact, we don't need more data, we have more data than we could possibly use. What we need is action. We need to make sure that we use the data, that we have qualitative and we have quantitative data. We need to ensure that we use that data and form actions that will work, and we implement them.

And another challenge from staff was around the way they were looking at in particular the degree award gap. And this came up last week Thursday. One of our colleagues here at the OU talked about the way we look at racism in regard to the degree award gap, and people not wanting to look at this from a non-deficit perspective. So, all too often when I talk about gaps in degree awards, I am hearing things like the students-- our first-generation University students, or they come from working class backgrounds. So that is why there are gaps.

It's got nothing else to do with anything. That is why there are gaps in degree awards. And part of the reason why we change the terminology from attainment to degree awards is so that the University takes responsibility for these gaps. When we talk about attainment, we are saying this is the level that we are awarding all, that we are marking the student at. When we talk about University degree award gaps, the University has to own the problem rather than saying it's a deficit issue. Therefore, it is with the student, so therefore there is nothing we can do about it. We have to take responsibility for what is going on and for these inequalities that exist within the institution.

So, one of the key areas that I have been working on is making sure that there is leadership buying and there is accountability. Accountability is key. You can have the greatest of action plans. But if you don't hold people accountable for implementing the various actions, then you are not going to get anywhere because this work is difficult. And it can be very, very messy at times and the conversations can be very uncomfortable and very difficult.

And so, I have regular meetings with the senior leadership team, and we focus on race. So, we've got two groups that have come out of a race equality charter mark. We have our wreck implementation group, and that is largely the senior leaders who have taken on a various part

of the action plan. So, our pro-vice chancellor for education and experience is responsible for the area of learning and teaching, and I obviously work with him on those areas.

The PVC for innovation and impact, which is PVC from research is responsible to equity in career progression. And that's crucial because it's things like sabbaticals and making sure that junior members of staff Black and brown members of staff experience equality in that process. When you are applying for sabbaticals and get the help that you need when you are applying from research grants and so on and so forth.

The director of HR responsible for bullying and harassment, and also the transparency within staff recruitment so that whole selection and recruitment process. The PVC for careers and enterprise, responsible for graduate outcomes student employability and closing the gap. Because at the moment, a lot of what we're seeing is making sure that the students have graduate level jobs. But that is a 10% gap between white students and Black and brown students with regards to student employability.

And my role as dean of the office for Institutional Equity, I have a special focus on organizational culture but really, I work with the senior management in all of these areas. And the dean of all six schools are responsible for implementing the EDI plans at a local level, and also, they are held accountable by making sure that the actions are part of their performance and development review on an annual basis.

So, as I said a moment ago, there are two groups that came out of race equality charter mark. We've got the senior management group that's responsible for the various areas of the action plan. And the second group is really to continue the conversations across the institution on race and racism. So that group is called the Equity Collective, and that's open to all staff and students who want to participate in these conversations. And it's the forum and we meet every two weeks and we continue the anti-racism conversations.

And also, there are actions that come out of the Equity Collective. We have different themes that we talk about so more recently, we were talking about the acronym BAME. We talk about academic misconduct. That feeds into the degree of world gaps because when we look at the students who experience the allegations of academic misconduct. I don't know what it's like at the OU, but at UEL and indeed across many of those London universities. The majority of the students compared to white students are Black and brown students.

We also spent a lot of time talking about racial bias in assessment and marking. And we believe that once again, contributes to the gaps that we see integrate awards. And some of the other projects that have come out of our action plan, you can see in the boxes there, so



we have a reading group. And the poster that you see on the right-hand side of your screen is just shows you the kind of books that we have been reading in our reading group.

And they are books that generally our students-- we've got a lot of students in the reading group. Our students are reading all sorts of color for the first time when they attend our reading group. So, you know, the Audre Lorde's, the Roxane Gay, James Baldwin. We also have body quality and athletic therapy so the beat group. Once again, that's very, very similar but the readings that they focus on are largely cultural studies in sport readings. So once again, underrepresented authors focused in that group.

We have a project whereby we are focusing on decolonizing in the library resources. We have some projects that have come out of the wreck because of some research that a couple of our librarians undertook and found that the majority of the resources, so the reading lists were white men. And so, there was a push for us to highlight that across all six schools. But also, the challenges there for colleagues to look beyond authors who are white who were male.

And then we also formed our anti-racist affinity group across the institution. So, we have that group for staff and for students, that's a group for white staff and who are racialized as white for all who get white privilege, white benefits if you like. That is a group for white staff to talk about whiteness within the institution and to focus on what they can do to be allies if you like. And so questions that they post, how confident are you in addressing racism?

If a student came to you and gave you an example of something that happened in class, what would you do? And they support each other to figure out what they would do to address that issue. Also, with the white anti-racist affinity group, we give students the opportunity to be accountable. So, they can link him with the group, and they can hold that group accountable for change. So, one year on, I think we've accomplished a lot at the institution. There's a lot to be proud of. But there's an awful lot more work to be done.

So, over a five-year period, our degree gap has hovered between 19.4% through to 25.4%. Last year, it was 20%. Now when we looked at our degree award data, we found that we have a gap of 14%. So, within the space of a year, this energy that we have used to focus on this is a really important issue within our institution has resulted in a decrease by 6%. And our degree of world gap at UEL has never been so low. I mean, there's still a lot of work to be done. 14% is still not OK. It's not OK. But we're heading in the right direction. So that's great.

As I said before, we have the equity collective so we're having open conversations about dismantling institutional racism. And those conversations are happening with not just staff of color or Black and brown staff but are happening with white staff as well. And I think more and more white staff are getting involved, especially, given the events of the summer and the

horrific murder of George Floyd. Lots of white staff recognize that they need to join in this process. They need to be part of the process because this cannot rest on the shoulders of those individuals who are the most marginalized.

Last year one of my colleagues Lorraine Jones established the Black Academy. I said earlier, representation and role models were absolutely key all of our students. And I'm not just talking about Black and brown students, I'm talking about all of our students need to see Black and brown individuals in the academy. And Lorraine always talks about this by way of making the invisible visible. So, what we have done over the course of the year is come together and host events, whereby all of us are in front of our students. So last November, we held an event whereby we had 20 Black members of staff sat in the lecture theatre, just at the front all of us at the same time.

And students were amazed because some of those students in some of those departments there are no Black staff. And they did not realize that the University actually had so many Black staff. So, we all came together and saw the Black Academy as something that is ongoing for all of our students, so that they can see that there is representation. As I said a moment ago, there's still a lot of work to be done around academic misconduct, the progression of students, employability, and retention. It's all there and it needs constant attention because when we look at the data with regards to these various areas, it is always Black students. Black and brown students that are at the bottom of the pile and it's an issue of equality of experience.

So, I will leave you with a final thought from Nikki Giovanni. "As long as higher education remains all white, the message we send is in our actions, not in our words. As long as higher education considers itself higher with all the privileges, but none of the attendant responsibilities then hypocrisy is the lesson our students learn. We in the universities and colleges must close the gap between what we say and what we do."

Now that's a quote from 1994, so what? 26 years ago. And it still holds true today and it's a quote from her essay, a theory of patience and that is in her book *Racism* 101.

Thank you so much for listening.