

## **Black History Month 2020**

*Tim Blackman*

### **Tim Blackman:**

Hello, everyone. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. This is a very welcome conference, of course, to be having at the OU. And I'm looking forward to learning from the feedback from your sessions.

Race equality is a priority at the OU, with a clear target to increase the proportion of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic colleagues in senior roles and are on track to meet our target of 11% by next year. We have ambitious targets to increase the proportion of Black and Asian undergraduate students, who choose to study at the OU, and to reduce gaps in study success and outcomes. And those targets are backed up by plans and by resources.

But there's much more to do. There's much more to do if we are to be a truly anti-racist university. And not just see these issues as about a few targets and plans. They're about lived experiences. Shared experiences of racism or quite problematic categories, like BAME, are used in this arena, because that category does actually reflect a shared experience of discrimination of racism but also helps build anti-racist solidarity. But it only goes so far.

We also need to recognize differences at the particularly vicious and insulting racism, for example, that people who are ethnically Black experience and the significance of a shared history of slavery, and that's why Black History Month is so important. We also, I think, need to understand the intersectionalities-- and I know there's been some chat about this earlier in the day between race and gender, for example-- and how this can create very different experiences of discrimination and subordination. And this is much more than an academic exercise.

Understanding these can help us respond to fears and experiences about COVID, for example, or how we develop our promotion criteria here at the OU. And I was listening to Jenny Douglass on a recent Black women podcast, where she made such a strong point about how Black women are homogenized and stereotyped and linked that to the appalling lack of progress that's been made with the fact that Black British women are five times more

likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than white women. But I thought I'd just start with some personal reflections on my own experiences.

My first memory of an encounter with someone whose colour was not similar to my own was as a small boy, holding my mom's hand, walking along the street in my hometown, Gravesend. I was probably about-- what the date was probably about 1961, 1962, which ages me a bit. I was a little boy, holding my mom's hand. And I was frightened by someone that I saw, and I burst out crying. And my mom consoled me saying, it's just a man sweeping the street.

The man was a Sikh with a turban, a beard, and a large moustache, quite old. I can see him now with his broom looking up to see why this little boy was crying. It frightened me, because he was very other. And then about 15 years after that encounter, I chose to write my undergraduate dissertation about Gravesend's Sikh community.

And my focus was on racial disadvantage. Why that Sikh man was a road sweeper? Why his extended family was almost certainly then crowded into private rented accommodation? And why despite intense housing need his family would not have been eligible for social housing? A lot has improved since then. But the sad thing is that my conclusion written back in 1978 could be the same now. My focus was on housing. But I wrote in my conclusion that-- this is what I wrote. "In addition to the new race relations legislation-- which at that time was in 1976, Race Relations Act. "In addition to the new race relations legislation, a much broader range of policies is needed to combat racial disadvantage. In recognition of the fact, that race is a central rather than peripheral importance to the development of a just society."

I've got a good mark for that dissertation but-- by the way, my tutor said that it was over a one third over the word length. And I said, didn't that count that's my mark? And he said, no, we thought it was all good stuff. So those were the days. I hope you'll forgive me for sharing briefly another second student memory, because I want to link the two.

The last essay of OU degree program was to answer the question we were set. Are there too many university students in Britain, particularly, in the soft option courses? That was 1979 by the way. The higher education participation rate was little more than 10%.

I enjoyed writing an essay. I still have it. And here's what I wrote as my conclusion. I said, "Universities are important, but they are institutions that are slow to respond to social and economic change. There are large numbers of full-time degree students deprive society of resources, which could be used to provide a more accessible and flexible system of adult education. Social and technological changes may soon demand such a system."

In the final tutorial of my undergraduate career, all those years ago, Professor Bill Fisher, who I remember well, was passing our essays back. I looked at mine with that conclusion, and there were no comments and no mark. I said, I don't think you've marked my essay. And he said, I don't mark polemics.

I, still, today argue that the resources going into residential full-time higher education privilege that provision compared to flexible part-time higher and further education and that's wrong. Personally, I didn't like very much all the claustrophobic college system I experienced at University. But it's true that the education I got made me think, taught me how to think, and, in the case of that tutorial, Professor Fisher let me argue my case in the tutorial discussion. I said, I did that well, despite the fact that he thought I was badly misguided and, no, I wouldn't get a mark for my essay,

I spent time at University working in the local community as a volunteer running adventure play projects for some very deprived kids. And then when I graduated, I went to work as a community volunteer in Northern Ireland, when there were troops patrolling the streets. So, I was curious, which all academics are, and I was drawn to difference because differences pose questions that need to be answered.

What my undergraduate education taught me is that difference can be an important question of social justice, because differences are created by what we do and, particularly, how we relate to others. I touched on this in a talk I gave last Tuesday. I think, it was for the APS webinar recalling John Irvine's book, *Demystifying Social Statistics*, which shows how categories, such as Black and White, don't exist in isolation but in relationship to each other. And it's the relationships that define what the categories mean. So it's not say having less people in the statistical category Black, who are also in the statistical category senior manager, that really matters but what this says about how I as a white person might relate to you as a Black person and doing something about that.

Alexandra Wilson is a Black barrister. She was in the news recently, because three times in the same morning, she was mistaken for a defendant in a British Magistrates' Court. I hope I wouldn't have done that. But to be honest, I'm not sure. I'm probably less likely to do it after having done my mandatory OU equality essentials training online, just a few weeks ago. But the evidence is that training has very limited efficacy in this area.

At the APS webinar, I also talked about Iris Bohnet book, *What Works Gender Equality by Design*. It's really important read. She says that there's little evidence that diversity training works. The evidence on coaching and mentoring is also mixed. There's strong evidence that role models work. And there's strong evidence that redesigning processes works, like, anonymized recruitment or interviewing candidates in a series of one to one interview rather

than with a panel. And works doesn't just mean equitable outcomes but more successful outcomes, more successful appointments, which is also why there's growing evidence on team diversity that points to diverse teams being better at solving complex non-routine problems.

I'm not denying that there aren't specific positive actions that we need to take. Black History Month is, certainly, one of those, but we need many more. Or that groups within the University, such as, our postgraduate students, can wrongly get bypassed by targets and plans that focus on staff or on undergraduates. But I am proposing that we embrace this agenda in a positive way that recognizes and uses diversity as a resource. And, therefore, welcomes more diversity, because it adds to the resources that we have as a University.

Jennie Lee, the minister who oversaw the creation of the OU, shaped what we are today, and that's a respected public research University but with a radical, open-access mission. Later, in the House of Lords, Jennie Lee reiterated her vision. When asked about whether the OU was just a university for the working class, she said in the Lords-- this is what she said, the very essence of the OU is it should not be a university for the rich, or the poor, for black, or white, for men, or for women, but it should be judged on its academic standards and be available to all.

We're still working to realize that mission at the OU. And being open isn't enough. If openness means anything, it should mean diversity and inclusion, diversity among our staff and our students and inclusion in a common mission where we hear and respect all voices at every level. Diversity is a terrific resource for the University. It enriches ideas. It helps find better solutions. We've worked hard recently to achieve more diversity, especially, on our governing body recently, the Council. And we showed it can be done.

This commitment makes me think back to the work I commissioned, when last at the OU as a pro-vice chancellor, in 2014, before I went to Middlesex. There were some very challenging feedback from black colleagues. One commented that, to quote, "Managers need to be seen to be doing the right things, but they have no commitment beyond that. There are lots of Black faces in the course materials, but it's all lip service." Another quoted in that report noted, "OU people are good at writing about race and diversity, but they are not self-aware. They don't connect to the day to day experience with what they're writing."

We also received some very challenging feedback from the unsuccessful race equality charter submission that we made last year, including, poor data, a lack of specifics, and a lack of ambition. That feedback is being acted on with initiatives underway, such as, safe reporting spaces, EDI factored into our exit surveys, our staff exit surveys, learning lessons from

casework, monitoring our ethnicity pay gap, rolling out anonymous recruitment, and diverse interview panels, and reform of our promotion processes. But we need to do more.

And I'm determined to empower our new dean for equality, diversity, and inclusion, Professor Marcia Wilson, who I know you've heard from today. I'm determined to empower her to do that, to consult on what more we need to do, to work out what our priorities really should be, and to get it done. I'm told that students from BAME backgrounds often don't declare their ethnicity because of a fear of judgment and wanting anonymity. I want that to change so that a Black student coming to the EU is proud to say they're Black, because they know they're bringing something we welcome, that we want, and that will make us a better university, where open is our mission but diversity is really our strength.

So those are some thoughts from me. Thank you again for giving me the chance to reflect. I hope I'm sending some messages about what I am committed to. But we have to do it together. And I look forward to working with all of you on this with Marcia, our new colleague, and taking forward some of the great work that's already been done, but the considerable additional work that there is yet to do.

Thank you very much.