

## **Black History Month 2020**

*Patrice Belton*

### **Patrice Belton:**

Thank you so much, everyone, just for participating, just for being present today because it's such an important event for me. And I am just empowered to see or hear, see all participants. I just want to get that part out because I've got different people to thank at the end.

My name is Patrice Belton, and I am the Vice President-- just a bit nervous-- but yes, I'm the Vice President for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and also a student. I've just finished my degree for design and innovation, which is in the STEM department, and I'm a female and I'm BAME, just to get that one out there, too. And I'm just really excited to be here.

And my presentation today for Black History Month is "You can't be what you can't see." And I heard Marcia mention it, and I was just like, her mind's in the same place. And I'm so grateful to have heard that earlier. And this is a presentation by myself and following a series of focus groups that I did with the BAME Students Group. So, it's Open University Students Association BAME Group is the correct name for it, but we just call it the BAME Students Group as a shorthand to make it a little bit easier for people to enunciate. So, I will begin.

So, the context or the inspiration for this presentation was, obviously, yes, we needed to do something for Black History Month. But also, we had a really big event happen in June, where a lot of both negative and positive things were being said and being heard across the cohort for the Open University, but also the wider UK. And in the midst of that, here at the Open University, we are having a lot of negative challenges where students were hearing a lot of things, but then weren't necessarily feeling like they were supported in that time.

So, I thought I needed to do something. And I wasn't quite sure where I was going to go with it. But I wanted to challenge the rhetoric that they should be invisible, or that they are invisible and not being seen, and nobody's listening to them right now when things are really heavy and impacted for them. So, I will just carry on.

We wanted to find out what it was like to be a student at the OU from a BAME background. We also wanted to gain approval from the student research panel because we didn't just want

to do it as another tick box thing. We wanted to make sure that the procedure that we enforced upon students-- not necessarily enforced. Let me change that word because that word sounds a little bit too structured-- but what we wanted to take to students was one that is monitored, understood, academically sound in its warrant, so that that way, we're both getting something effective from students, but also offering something positive to them.

All students were members of the Students Association BAME group, so they had to have joined in order for them to take part. So then again, that might mean that not every single student in the university would have had their voice heard. But in the process of it all, I made sure to select a very wide, diverse group of students so that that way, we heard from different categories.

So that meant we went to Colombia, we went to China. We didn't just want to hear from the ones who were loudest, which tend to be a lot of our Black and Asian students, because the quieter ones also need to be seen and need to be heard. And that's something I don't see here a lot at the university. So, I personally wanted to do that, or target that just to hear their voices as well.

We ran three focus groups which included 10 students in total. Students were really empowered by the whole process, and they were really engaged. So, they made sure that they pushed themselves to attend. So, whenever they were running behind, they were emailing to ask me where the links were. They were emailing me to ask how they get on there, and when they do get on there, apologizing.

They were just very much in tuned and very much looking forward to participating. So, I've heard across the university in the past a lot of dialogue where they're saying students don't seem to want to take part. So, I think it depends on the opportunity being given to these students because these students were just a diverse group of students. It wasn't anybody who were my friends. These are all people I had to meet, and I had to get engaged with. But yet they were really empowered to participate. And so that really made a difference to me to see that.

We also had a student who was on his way from work, so he was trying to do the whole meeting whilst trying to get on a train, trying to get on a bus. So, he was literally on the go the whole time, having trouble with network. But he didn't cut off. He kept going. And that was really empowering for me. We had a new mom in the midst of us as well who had just had a baby a couple of weeks. But she stayed, too, and she was right there front and centre in the first one. And that, again, like I said, is empowering and really, really powerful things for me.

So, each focus group, they ran for an hour. They had a lot to say. Really-- oh my gosh, they had so much to say. We couldn't really possibly get it all inside of this presentation because I'd be here for years, d an hour. Or even no, it's not even an hour. Half an hour. It wouldn't even be that time, but yeah.

Each student, they were sent a voucher because we didn't want them to just come and offer something, and we not be here to be effective role models. We wanted to be here to give them something as well so that they feel they're partnering with us, not just coming here for us to take away from them. So, we gave them vouchers. Yes, we did, and it wasn't a payment or a token for what we wanted from them. It was an empowerment to say, you know what? You should be rewarded for this hard work that you have just done.

So, I just want you all to know why I thought it was necessary and why Joan supported me on that. And I'm just grateful that that happened because the students were so empowered to have even gotten that. And you're going to hear the word empowered because I'm so happy and so just vibrant. Don't mind me. This is me.

OK, I'll just go into the next slide.

So, in terms of questions, what we wanted to ask the focus group was about to match up with the teams for what we did for Black History Month, which is surrounding the talk about race. We wanted to understand how they feel valued in terms of how their race, their equality, their attributes, et cetera, were valued here in terms of their own vision, their own experiences. And so we modelled the focus group to question their inclusion, their feeling valued as a student at the university, how they feel they belong here at the university, their representation in relation to module content, as well as the culture and background and the things that they experience here at the university.

And we also wanted to see their experience, as students in general from a BAME background, whether it's interacting with each other or interacting with other students from non-BAME backgrounds. And non-BAME usually refers to whites or anyone else who is European who don't really attribute or acknowledge themselves as BAME. So that's pretty much what we mean when we say that.

All right. So, first topic was the good. And these are going to be really empowering things for you, as in the OU community so staff, students, volunteers, everyone who's involved. This is what the students really think in terms of how you make them feel. So this is what we know about the university.

They were really happy and empowered to see a BAME group. They were really happy and empowered. So, I know a lot of people think, well, we're isolating the students and putting them into a little category by themselves. We don't know if that's the correct thing to do because it's not diversity group. It's a BAME-specific one. But our target right here at this university is to improve the awarding gap for BAME students because that's where it's most challenged.

So, we need to take out those students and make sure we're giving them direct focus support. If we're not doing so, then we kind of wishy-washy our way to helping them get support, and it will take a longer period, I reckon, in my opinion, to get things to them. So, if we're isolating them, not because they have-- let me just say this-- they have access to every group.

So inside of this BAME group, I share every single thing with them. They can go into other groups as much as they like. It's not a space where they feel locked down. It's definitely not a prison. It's a place where they can come and feel like if something major is happening, or if they need to ask those questions that are really difficult around the topic of race that other students are not yet prepared to hear, it can make things really difficult for them.

So, for me, I was really grateful to have helped set up this group, and the students are just as equally grateful to see it. Students felt they were included in a WhatsApp group which they have developed for themselves. So, having the BAME group helped them feel empowered to set up more groups for themselves and to feel like it's OK for them to represent themselves in BAME-specific groups. And it's not causing a problem, it's not making things difficult. It was difficult.

So, during lockdown, the group really bonded, like the discussion about different parts of the world. So as an incentive to get students talking, to get students interacting with each other, I thought a great incentive would be to get a world map and to put my flag inside of the chat box, and to get students to tell me about themselves, and to tell me about where they're from and how they do things differently to where I'm from.

And that just really made them feel empowered because again, it's something they don't really see very often inside of the student community at present. And other students felt that they were never undervalued here at the Open University in terms of representation that they felt from this whole BAME group, BAME cohort so far.

So, for me, that's empowering because obviously, I play a big role inside of that. So, for them to not feel like they're undervalued makes me feel empowered. So, I hope those of you who participate in supporting BAME students also feel like that, too.

OK. Sorry. I've got this chat bot here. OK, there we go.

So, what we know continuing—

SPEAKER 1: Sorry. Don't worry about the chat. We're monitoring as well.

PATRICE BELTON: Thank you so much. OK. So, this is now I'm going to use the student's voice, so the students' responses to things rather than it being just a little snippets, the things that they feel that the university should know.

So, having a degree from the OU gave me a real positive view of myself. Diversity in psychology was good. We love all our students. We know you want to improve your lives. We are proud of you all.

Tutors really guided me and assisted me through my current modules.

As you can see, these things were things that mattered to these students. They wanted to feel like they're empowered by their tutors, by the university, that people are giving them feedback that made them feel like they're welcome and that they're wanted here.

I felt this is a university that will accept me. I only had my phone it has changed my life.

I love the OU. Really proud of everyone at the OU.

The most important thing is to value yourself.

So what these students here are saying is that although it's university, because it's a different model, which I have always really sung about to wherever I go, just having that flexibility here at the OU, be able to go from different places and study is so empowering. It's so powerful. It's so cool. It's excellent. So, I really love it because I can do it from my phone. I can do it from my devices. I can do it at work. I can do it in the toilet. I'm sorry. I'm being real, OK? I can do it anywhere and still feel really empowered.

So other students appreciate that. They're really like the business model that the OU brings. So, harness that and use it to help them rather than to exclude them is what I'm saying. And it's what I think they're also saying. But they also want other students to know the most important thing, no matter what negativity or what challenges come your way, is to value yourself.

OK, the not so good. So, this is where it gets a little bit hairy. So, the not so good. It's what we do not know here at the OU, or what we should be really looking out for, but we don't seem to have a clue about, as in, it's going on in our environment but no one's taking note of it.

I was the only person of colour. The students are white. The teachers are white. The authors are white.

I'm not valued that much. I think perhaps the university wasn't quite prepared for a person of colour.

I've come to accept that my cultural side has to stay separate from my western side. It has worked so far.

Imagine being a student who came here being excited to go to university. People like me haven't had opportunity. I was the first from my family to go to university, so I haven't had the opportunity to see it, to experience it, to have a role model in place of me. And then now I'm here, I wanted to feel really, really encouraged, and really like, come on, oh my god, I'm so happy you're here, wow-- and instead is met with, oh, are you sure you can do this?

That type of voice can be so debilitating. It's just a quick slur. And it can be so debilitating for somebody who don't really have this experience. And that's what we want the university to be mindful of, not just the university as in the uni, but the community to be mindful of.

Those little slurs, those microaggressions that don't mean anything to you because you've had a really clear-- and that's not just somebody like me, who's from the Caribbean. It could be anybody. So, it could be somebody within the BAME cohort or outside. But this is something you need to be mindful of how we speak to and treat each other with our words.

What we do not know, continued. A lot of examples of case studies don't reflect people like me.

It makes it more difficult to put this in an assignment.

The OU could do more to help. Students clearly are finding the materials really difficult to engage with. It's really difficult to feel like it's representative of themselves. So, for me, when I have to look at my work, I speak Creole English, which is a dialect English from the Caribbean. And when I look at my work, I speak really good English and articulate here when I'm in the UK.

But to look at the work and to read it and to really understand what's being written and said and put myself into the context, it takes a whole process before I could even get to writing a TMA. So, for other students, they might just go, oh, I understand what's happening. I'll write, write, write, finish.

For me, I have to translate it, read it in my language, tell myself what it's saying, then re-translate it back into English, then start processing it and working on it. So, it takes a little while for me to even get into gear, let alone get myself up to speed. And a lot of people, ALs, students, take that for granted.

So, we would say, OK you get an extension, there you go, it's fine, move on. But it's not as simple as that. It's difficult for students who speak a different language and have to then come into an English-speaking country and adapt. Adaptation takes time. And we have to be adaptable, as a university who says we're flexible, to encourage and empower those students, too.

What we do not know, continued.

All white. All-male. You just let it and move on.

I'm written off as an angry Black woman.

And as you can see, I'm passionate. It really matters to me. So, I can imagine there are people out there going, she's just being pushy already. I can imagine.

People expect me to be argumentative.

When you feel ambitious, negativity will come.

I've had to defend myself as a woman of colour, and I've had to defend myself as a woman of colour on several different occasions, not just here at the university, at my workplace, wherever I go. I cannot hide it. I cannot-- you know like some people, if you speak a different language, you could easily come in, cover your voice, and put on a British accent and get away with it, especially if you look like what everybody else looks like.

But me, I have to wake up like this. I have to go to work like this. I have to go to sleep like this. This is who I am. I'm BAME. I'm Black. I'm a Black woman. I cannot hide that, so nor can the students. We have to embrace that. We have to embrace that.

There was a little bit of imagery, which was great, but it was just photography. The curriculum doesn't reflect it.

I see a lot of superficial ads of the OU. We want you here. But I never had a Black or BAME tutor. And I think Ola was reflecting that earlier. It's very difficult to see representation in the AL department. I was here for six years. Well, I've just finished, and I hadn't had one.

Emails are like mass emails, impersonal.

So, they feel like it never really addresses them. It's just all everybody embodied, but their situations don't necessarily reflect the full student cohort.

There are little podcasts. It's so rare, you celebrate it when you see it, basically.

It is a really deep-seated issue that students have to deal with only parts of themselves. So, students can only come to the OU in portions, in segments, because they feel like they can't bring their whole selves here.

I felt excluded on the forums. I would respond to a question and no one would respond to me. And I've seen this even myself. Being a student rep at the time, when I was the rep for STEM- - when I was the Faculty Association representative, sorry-- I wrote things in different places in different forums, and I got nothing. And I've seen other students write, and they're fine.

And I get it. It might be because I'm new and people haven't met me, so they're not sure how to take it. But even when I was ingrained and I was a part of the system, when I was a part of the community, certain comments I make, if it's all empowering, fine. But if it's something where I'm asking for support or asking for help, it wouldn't get anything at all. And I noted that.

But perhaps things will change as we go forward. I don't know if I ever felt included. You have to drop your home heritage at the OU. There is a culture shock both ways. I don't feel I can be my whole self. I'm used to being excluded. And that's really powerful. That touched me.

So here are the challenges. What we need to know. You're non-white. You're not good enough. You need to be open to diverse learners so that they don't become silent learners.

I didn't have role models. I want to find my people.

We need to have people who look like us to feel represented. We need more people of colour elected to the Students Association. Why are these people not more visible?



We need to see people we feel that we can relate to.

And here's a lovely quote from Ola. So, I'm thankful, Ola, for your really just empowering work that you've been doing already.

The BAME terminology. We find such a problem with it because just like when we send mass emails, it houses all of the BAME students under one category. And as you heard earlier, I was mentioning Chinese. I was mentioning somebody from Colombia, but you can't see that with the terminology. Ola stated my issue with the term BAME. Most people don't understand what the acronym means. And secondly, it's use as a collective term for all minority ethnic groups. Why should all Black, Asian, and minority ethnic group sit under one umbrella when we're clearly not all the same?

And I think it's because it's the governmental thing to do. And I get it. We have standards that we have to keep. We have policies and procedures that we have to follow. But because we're so strict with structures when it comes to policy, but then we're inviting people in as a flexibility, it confuses things. It confuses people. It makes things very difficult for people to come in and feel that they can adapt to.

So now we're going to take action, and these are the things we should do. This is what we should do next to address these challenges. Students have said, I want to see increased diversity in the student body representatives, not just those who are retired or can go to Milton Keynes. Not just the, well, I'm here, I can do it, but people who are really important to this role, who can really fill it and be representative in that role.

They want to see ambassadors, things like Student Hub Live, elected reps, CCRs, other volunteers, et cetera. They want to see people of colour in that space so that they feel they're represented.

Students also would like to see a sign saying you're welcome here. What help do you need? And I smile at that because you wouldn't think that that was going to be so powerful. And it's that simple. Making students feel as if they're welcome from the get-go, not just getting them to sign up, getting them to go through the process as it normally was, but to start it off on the right foot.

There's a need for students to feel more connected. Having more meetings like this, as in the focus groups, would help. Students want you to bring them into spaces and talk to them. They don't want you to make just consultations where it's really cold, and just them answering your questions that's shaped around you only. And I get that this focus group was shaped around questions, but it was very open questions so that students can then divert it and direct it to

themselves. That's what we need here, not just structures. But we need a very diverse and complex conversation.

Get more people involved. Make more noise. And that goes for you, students. You have the power to do what I'm doing. I'm a student. I'm just passionate. Come in. Talk to us. All of us need to come in here, speak, fight, stand, because if we stand for nothing, we fall for everything, and they won't represent us just as much as we don't represent ourselves.

But others, we do need you, too. We need you to be here to make more noise for us. We need you to stand up. And I'm thankful, by the way, Darren. I have noted earlier you were putting some quotes in there to say students should be involved, too, so thank you for that.

Ideally, it should be second nature, not an afterthought. It makes me really excited that things are happening, however. We need a safe space and I am aware that we have a safe space working group, or task and finish group being developed. I'm a part of that because it matters to me. They want to see a video montage. I figured that would work really well in student voice. So, this is something I would speak to my team in the association about.

It's all about reaching out and not making assumption that everyone knows. A lot of the times, we assume that because somebody can make it to university, that they would understand the structures and every complex situation a university would have. But they won't because if it's from a whole background where the culture is entirely different, the learning processes are going to be different. We have to treat everyone as if they're young and juvenile and they need coaching. They need mentoring to get to where they need to be.

Start a careers consultancy group or hub with students from different cultural backgrounds. And as you can see here, they didn't say start it so it's just about BAME. They didn't say they start it so it's just about Black. They said cultural backgrounds. They want everybody to be involved, but they want you to put specific things in place so that these cultural backgrounds are also celebrated and supported in terms of careers.

So, feedback from the group. The focus group have given these students an opportunity to voice their experience. What they had to say was powerful. They were delighted that they had an opportunity to be heard. Their collective voice asked for more visual storytelling, representation, celebration, and credibility for their contributions as students, along with sustainable, unwavering OU community and student partnerships. The onus now is on the university to respond.

So as a take home message, it's really difficult for students-- and I get it. It's really difficult for teachers and for everyone else. But the students are the heartbeat of the university for me.

And I feel like the university and all of the academic staff, the ALs, et cetera, they're the head. But we students, we are the body. You cannot have a head without a body. We need to work together in order for things to be fruitful, in order for us to have a sustainable future. So, for us, remember that students feel empowered by you emboldening them. And you can't be what you can't see.

Thank you.