OU BME podcast
Rehana Awan and Sas Amoah - OU BME podcast interview by Katherine Jegede

Katherine Jegede, Rehana Awan, Sas Amoah:

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Hello and welcome. You're listening to the BME Network Podcast, home of the stories, issues, and news that matter most to the BME community here inside The Open University and beyond. That's to say we live in wider BME communities. I'm your host, Katherine Jegede.

And in this episode, I'm joined by not one, but two of the co-chairs of The Open University BME Staff Network. That's Rehana Awan and Sas Amoah. Rehana, I'm going to ask you to say a bit about yourself in a moment. But I'm really excited to have you, because every time I've heard your name mentioned, it was followed by Rehana is so amazing. She's so incredible. So Rehana, welcome to the podcast.

REHANA AWAN: Hello there. Thank you so much, and it's great to be here. And I don't know about exciting and amazing, but it's great to be working with Sas as a co-chair on the network.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Fantastic, and you mentioned Sas Amoah. And if you've not heard of Sas Amoah, I really don't know what to tell you. I think I heard about Sas before I learned about anything else at the OU, and I'm a huge fan of his documentaries as well. So Sas, welcome to the podcast.

SAS AMOAH: Well, thank you very much. That was an absolutely fantastic introduction. And it cost me five pounds, so great value for money.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: [LAUGHS] Perfect. I feel really lucky to have both of you. But if we could start with you, Rehana, by asking, could you say a bit about what you do at the OU, and how you came to be a co-chair of the BME Staff Network?

REHANA AWAN: Certainly, so I've worked for the OU for about 13 years now. I started life as a regional coordinator in one of the regions, which of course, they closed about six years ago.

I then worked very hard to get a promotion, and it took me quite a long time. And that was one of the ways that I started to engage with the network.

And so, I did the ASPIRE and the ASPIRE Plus programs, which were career development programs that the network offered. And so now, I'm a staff tutor working on the Open program and Access programs. So, I've moved over from an academic, related to an academic role, so that's been quite a major change and crossover.

And I think definitely, it's through the support of the network that I've been able to do that. And I'm also doing some doctoral research. I mean, I've just finished my first year of doctoral research, where I'm looking at the awarding gap for Black and Brown students at the OU with a view to sort of looking at how an Access program can support reducing that awarding gap.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's so amazing. Congratulations on your doctoral research and all your achievements. And you bring such a wealth of experience on both sides, if you like, from academic, sort of related to an academic role. And we'll talk a bit more about that and in just a moment. But Rehana, why does the BME Staff Network matter to you on a personal level? And what are your priorities for the network as chair?

REHANA AWAN: Firstly, I'm really honoured that Sas asked me to be a co-chair, because it is such an important network in terms of community, but also the lobbying work that the network does. And I'm not sure people are aware of how much Sas and colleagues do in relation to putting pressure on senior managers and the VCA about important, around important issues for Black and Brown staff in the OU.

So, in terms of why it matters to me, so I mentioned a little bit about being kind of an ASPIRE and ASPIRE Plus alumni. And I think the career development support that was available from network is really key as well. And that's one of my priorities to work with sort of HR or people services, and hopefully get a reintroduction of a career development and support system to enable Black and Brown staff to progress through the University.

And I think also something around building community is really important. So having been in a region where there was literally only two people. I was one of them who was Black and Brown. So, connecting with other people across the locations that are left, so Manchester, Milton Keynes, and Nottingham, and bringing people into the network. I mean, it's great that-- since we've moved online during the pandemic, I think there's been greater engagement from people from different locations. And I'd really like to kind of foster and grow that a little bit more.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's absolutely fantastic. I think one of the things that happens with the BME Network is that staff aren't aware that there is this wealth of support available to them. And you've spoken about ASPIRE and other programs. Speaking more generally, Rehana, what sorts of issues are you seeing from BME staff or students in terms of the support that they're looking for in addition to what you've already described?

REHANA AWAN: So, I think there is definitely something around people wanting to progress careers but are struggling to do that or aren't sure how to go about doing that and needing some support. I think that's definitely one thing. I think we saw with Black Lives Matters as well, thinking about how we present ourselves externally and internally to staff and to students. And representation of Black and Brown staff within the University is really important, really key issue.

But then I think there are then the more personal issues, so people having comments made or grievances that they want to talk through with someone. And I'm just starting to kind of be exposed to that and seeing how we can support people with that as well. So, there's different levels within the network, if you like.

So, we've got a more of a formal structure with different pillars, which are very much about lobbying. We've then got this layer of supporting staff to develop. And then you've got this other layer, which is very much about supporting staff with their personal issues and helping them through sort of navigating how they can get through those and come out of those intact so that they still feel OK about themselves.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's really tremendous, I have to say. I mean, I'm learning so much more about the network even through this conversation. And I'd also like to mention to our listeners that we spoke in our pilot episode to Khadija Patel, who is part of the health and well-being pillar. You mentioned some of the pillars there, Rehana.

So, and I will let people know how they can contact Khadija talking about that well-being support. So, lots of people ready and willing to support us all in really meaningful ways. And I think that that's why it's important that we have these sorts of conversations.

Another such helpful person is the inimitable Sas Amoah. Sas, I want to bring you in on the conversation now. Could you say a little bit about what you do as co-chair working with Rehana and the rest of the team, and what your vision for the network is for the immediate future?

SAS AMOAH: I suppose I've been I think chair for about 10 years now, and I kind of inadvertently found myself in this position, which I wouldn't have necessarily put myself in

initially when I joined the OU. But I ended up preparing a piece of research, in which I got the opportunity to speak to people about the experiences at the OU particularly Black and Brown stuff.

And it was a real eye-opener to me personally, because even though I'm aware of lots of structural issues, I hadn't really contended on a one-to-one basis. A lot of the things that they were talking about and discuss, and it really surprised me. So, I kind of put together a short paper, and I submitted it to the then EDIA office. And out of that report, a few initiatives came out of that. So, ASPIRE, which Rehana mentioned was one of those initiatives.

And what would you-- while working on the ASPIRE, kind of working group, dimension group, I was then asked if I wanted to kind of take on the position as chair. So very far from being kind of a traditional activist. And I'm not sure if that kind of feeds into the way I try to work as chair as the network as well. And it's a semi, fairly semi-informal kind of structure we have. But it seems I think fairly fit for purpose and works for us.

So, I mean, I guess broadly speaking, we try to celebrate topical events and anniversaries where we can. We try to support staff, particularly with career development when we can and give support in terms of grievances, but also advice on race and race policy. So those are the things that tend to take most of our attention. But I think looking forward, we are going to do a lot of work in terms of hopefully kind of just growing our numbers, but also the race equality charter as well.

I think the network is going to play a very key role in trying to achieve that charter mark. So, I think broadly speaking, those are the objectives. However, I've found in my experience that when you try to dictate policy, you have a very specific idea of strategy and where you want to go.

That might not happen. You tend to-- we tend to be fairly reactionary as well. And priorities tend to change based on conversations we have with the steering group, and conversations that we have with staff. So, we generally try not to be too prescriptive. We found it actually quite better to wait out, get a lay of the land, and then try to respond appropriately. So, we just to be quite flexible and agile.

I mean, this podcast is a good example, isn't it? It wasn't on the agenda a few months ago. And then you had a conversation, and it looked like it was something that was practical. And then now, we're doing it. So yeah, that's the general gist, I think.

But I suppose in an ideal world, where the networks don't necessarily neatly fall into a kind of formal structure within the OU in some ways when we're never here with that. But actually, we

plug-in a lot of gaps that the OU's official structures don't kind of address. So, we have lots of people coming to us for support in lots of areas that they don't necessarily feel they feel comfortable taking it to official channels.

So, I guess we're hoping over the next few months that the networks then start to have something that resembles a formal structure. And then that will acknowledge just a lot of the work that a lot of the steering group members do huge amounts of work in addition to that traditional job role. So yeah, we're working towards a model where we can just really start to recognize all the additional work that staff members put in.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: It's incredible, Sas, and you really are supported by an incredible team of talented people. And what the network offers, what I'm hearing from you is really substantial. But I love this idea of flexibility while you're working towards that more sort of formalized structured framework, if you like.

At the moment, here is a real opportunity for people to get in touch with you with ideas they have, whether they have sort of leadership competencies, or they're creative in some way. As you're saying, like, we're offering that space. And I love that think outside the box thing.

What I find surprising though, Sas, is that sometimes when I talk to people about the network, obviously, I'm excited about it. I get a sense that they feel they don't need to be a part of it, which is fine. It's their prerogative. But what could they potentially gain from being a part of that? I know you've said so much already. Rehana has also said so much already about the way in which the network supports people. But how could you sort of reach people on that personal level? How as perhaps the network changed the working life of staff and students? Do you have any stories to share or anything like that?

SAS AMOAH: I suppose lots of different members of the steering group who are involved in a number of different committees even outside of the pillars but usually like the pillar though and might align with a particular initiative or working group which is happening within The Open University. So, there's lots of work going down, and it's maybe just making that more visible and seeing how it really starts to trickle down. I mean, for my sense, I'm involved with the governance and strategy pillar, and we're very heavily involved with lots of pilots we run within learning and discovery services over the years.

I mean, so far at the moment, we're working with the other networks and the EDIA office on creating new interactive EDIA workshops that are going to be trialled within LDS. And the workshops will be piloted I think later in the summer. And if that's successful, the idea is to have them be rolled out across different departments. But we've already had the

conversations with training and development and all the key stakeholders at The Open University in the very key.

So that's examples of stuff that we do that will benefit staff, even if they're not directly part of the network. We also last week launched the reverse mentioned pilot within LDS as well, which is only just started. And the initial focus of that as well is on Black, Asian, and minority ethnic staff. And that pilot will run from May to October.

And then again, that's been signed off. We took the idea to senior leadership team, and they all seem very keen and supportive. So, the idea being that if that's successful, or we make the necessary adjustments, that's something as well that can be duplicated across different units. And just in terms of earlier projects we've done, we did an anonymized recruitment trial within LDS. And during the time this trial was on, there was a marked increase in the number of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic staff that had been hired. So, in addition to that, we also started pushing forward with diversity interview panels. So, these are two ideas which started off within the network within LDS, but now, we're actually being pulled in more centrally. And elements of both those pilots are part of the people services now, which is fantastic.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: I mean, what you've described really, Sas, should put paid to any idea about this network just being about creating agency for grievances. It's a real creative space. It has a real vibe, and it works in a really holistic way. Rehana, I want to bring you back into the conversation now as co-chair. What's your message to people about getting involved? How can you inspire people to get involved? Or even if they're not going to be involved in the network itself, to make use of what the network has to offer.

REHANA AWAN: So, I think what's really nice about the network is you can be as involved as you want to be. So, if you just want to be on the e-mailing list, then you can just do that and just see what kind of conversations and discussions happen. If you just want to access the Yammer site, you can do that as well.

But then there is also an opportunity to get involved and give some time if you've got some to doing some of this really important work that's taking place. And we can also support you with how you can negotiate time to do that through the CDSA process as well. So again, like I said before, there's lots of levels within the network.

So, you can just be a member of the network, or you can participate more fully and sign up to one of the pillars. So, if there's one particular pillar that particularly interests you, or one that you feel you can really add value to, then please get in touch. And we can work with you to work out how we can get you involved.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Fantastic. And Sas, just to finish with you, you were so easy to talk to. That sounds slightly bizarre. I mean, you were really approachable. When I came to you with this idea for this podcast, and you were really supportive. I didn't know that going in. I was a little bit nervous. But you made that process very, very easy. If do you want to add anything about people coming to you as co-chairs with ideas.

SAS AMOAH: Literally, I think you're a good case study. I think if there's an idea, and we're in a position to support it in any way, we absolutely will. Unfortunately, not all ideas-- I happen to work in a media department, so it was probably a slightly easier for me to get it sorted. But yeah, if you come with an idea, and it might not be a department I work with, we'll certainly touch base with people and see if there's any support there that we can give to you. It's quite a supportive group, the steering group.

And we cut across quite a lot of different donations. We cut across a number of different grades. We cut across a number of different departments and units. And you will probably find there's a good likelihood that someone that can support you in some way, or give you an idea, or let you know what the experience was like for them.

So hopefully, in the best-case scenario, we can support directly like we've done with you. Or we can signpost you to someone else that might be able to help. But everyone's completely understands that. There's lots of work going on, and we don't expect you to dedicate huge amounts of time. But where you can, and you've got the willingness, and you're really eager, excited to help in some way, but always really keen to support.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Fantastic. Well, that wraps it up. I think we fit so much in. I've been talking to Rehana Awan and Sas Amoah, who are co-chairs of the BME Staff Network here at The Open University. If you want to learn more about the network, even more than they've told us in this conversation-- it's been absolutely fantastic, guys-- then please do get in contact. Read the description to this video, where you'll get my email address, and certainly, further details about how you can get involved. I have to say thank you again, Rehana Awan.

REHANA AWAN: Thank you so much for having me, Katherine. It's been great. Thank you.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Thank you. And Sas Amoah?

SAS AMOAH: It's been absolutely brilliant, so thank you very much. We'll get in touch.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: So, there you are. Thank you very much for tuning in. Do tune into the next episode. Until we're together again, peace.