OU BME podcast interview by Katherine Jegede
Kate Hawkins

Kate Hawkins, Katherine Jegede:

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Hello, and welcome to the BME Network Podcast. I'm your host, Katherine Jegede, and our studio producer is Claudia Torres. Now today on this episode, I'm very excited to be joined by Kate Hawkins, who's an insight manager here at the Open University. And Kate will say a bit more about what she does in just a second.

As you know, the name of the podcast is the BME Network Podcast. But of course, we don't exist in a vacuum. So, we want a plethora of voices here on the podcast sharing different perspectives and sharing their expertise on the issues that do impact the BME community here at the OU and beyond.

Now I mention this because Kate is not a BME person. She's actually a White person. But it's really important, as I say, that we hear from all manner of people to get that nice, healthy mix of perspectives. And I think, Kate, if you're happy with that intro, I'll hand over to you to say a bit more about what you do at the Open University.

KATE HAWKINS: Brilliant. Thank you very much, Katherine. And thank you for having me on the podcast. So, as you've introduced me, I am Kate Hawkins. I work in the marketing and communications unit at the Open University, otherwise known as MarComs for short. And as you said, I'm an insight manager by profession. So that means I manage research projects to find out more about our key audiences at the Open University and inform the decisions that we make about our campaigns.

So, I've been at the OU for about seven years. And when I first joined, I worked in a team that focused on widening participation research. And then I moved to MarComs in about 2018. Before I joined the OU, I worked at the BBC. And before that, I was in government communications. I led audience research projects relating to health topics for the government.

So, as you can probably tell from those jobs, through my working life and my personal life, I've had a really strong focus on social justice and particularly on race equality. So when I was asked to lead some research into barriers to considering the Open University among Black

and Asian students, I was really excited to take on that piece of work and really jumped at the chance to get involved in that work.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's a really impressive background, Kate, and it's just flooding my mind with so many questions. But one of the things I found interesting about what you were saying was about this idea of barriers. When you think about the Open University, one of the things that attracted me to this organization, this institution was the fact that it was widening access. So, if you think about your experience at the Open University, what sort of barriers have you identified through your research?

KATE HAWKINS: So, the piece of research that we carried out back in 2019, the first thing that we found, we were speaking to potential students of the OU. So, people who wanted to study, but weren't quite sure where they were going to study yet and were considering a number of different universities.

So, the first thing that we found is we know that Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic people are not a homogeneous group. And that applies to experiences, opinions, and preferences for education as well. So, our first learning was that we may need different strategies and messages for individual segments based on specific ethnicities and also on life stage.

So having said that though, we did also find some key overarching findings, which did apply and was shared among different Black and Asian groups. So, in relation to education, in general, for many Black and Asian potential students, family and community expectations in relation to education are really, really important, particularly so compared to White potential students.

We also found that lots of our Black and Asian potential students see educational attainment as a part of their strategy to combat and overcome societal racism. And an example of that is that many of our participants in our research spoke about having to work twice as hard as their White peers to succeed in life. And so that really emphasized the importance of education for employment, for status within communities, et cetera.

So, in relation to the OU in particular, we found that there tended to be a lower familiarity with the OU model and what it involves, so the distance learning model basically. We found there was a less favourable perception of the quality and reputation of the Open University compared to what we find among White potential students. There was a large preference for face-to-face study and quite a strong preference for full time study as well, which is perhaps not the typical profile of an IOU student in the past.

And that was really driven by a perception that part time study is considered less suitable for career-motivated students, and it may be less favourably viewed by employers. So that was really a key finding that the AU needs to address in order to attract more Black and Asian students.

We also found that at the time of doing that research in 2019, that Black and Asian audiences hadn't responded as positively to our previous marketing campaigns compared to White audiences. So, we identified quite a few areas that we needed to change in order to improve things.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: I think one of the things that came out from what you were saying is, certainly for me, because I didn't have those sorts of experiences. I had a very favourable experience and impression and perception of the Open University. It seems like culture is playing a key role. Did you find in your research that these barriers actually existed? Of course, they existed because you identified them. But what I mean is were they really issues with the Open University or perhaps just a mismatch, a cultural mismatch? And so, on that basis, how much work does the OU have to do to overcome that do you think?

KATE HAWKINS: I think it's a mix. I think there are some misconceptions about the Open University that might be more strongly held in particular communities compared to others. So that is I guess a communications job. And we are embarking on that with enthusiasm to kind of bust some of those myths, I guess, about distance learning in particular. So about being lonely, being isolated, not having contact with other students, and so on. So those are areas that I think we can do a lot to kind of correct the misconceptions.

I think there's also a kind of a sense, particularly for younger people from Black and Asian communities, that because they are operating in a kind of education market, if you like where the most selective universities are considered to be the best and the most prestigious, and that's kind of drummed into people all the way through school and so on through UCAS process.

I think there's perhaps a perception that because the Open University is open to everyone, that's maybe what leads to the questioning of quality for some people. And for a lot of people, it wasn't that they themselves thought that the Open University might be a lower quality. It really was for Black and Asian students in particular that they thought employers might think that or that other people in their community might think that, that it was a lesser option.

So that's fed into our strategy that we really need to focus on employability and to make it clear that employers do value OU graduates. And that also, we need to work with influences and community leaders to ensure that not just the students that we're trying to attract but

perhaps elders or community leaders also have a positive perception of the OU. So, I think it's definitely possible for us to change those perceptions.

However, some of them are quite kind of long held beliefs and quite linked to, as I mentioned, the sort of focus on getting on and needing to work harder. And a lot of students, potential students just said, I don't want to give an employer any excuse not to consider my CV when I'm applying for a job because I'm already facing the hurdles and barriers of structural racism in the UK.

So that was really the kind of key thought. But yeah. I think we can work to try and overcome some of those barriers, but I think it is going to be a kind of slow burn to improve those perceptions of the OU. And it's really kind of behaviour change type challenge. So having worked in government, quite familiar with that sort of approach that really focuses on the underlying perceptions that people have within a particular community and needing to work on those in quite a granular way before you then see changes in behaviour, i.e., applying to study at the OU in the longer term.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Certainly, the audience listening to this, Kate, will understand that the OU is very clear about what the issues are. You've certainly laid them out for us in the conversation so far. So what work are you doing now to overcome the barriers that you've identified?

KATE HAWKINS: Sure. So, I'm happy to say that I'm following the research. I was asked to lead the development of a Black and Asian student recruitment strategy, and that was given huge energy by two things really within the university. The first one was the agreement of our targets within the access and participation plan, which is a document that is set for us by the Office for Students, our regulator. And that asked us to increase the proportions of Black and Asian students within a five-year period to almost 150% of where they are now. So quite a steep target.

So that really can put some energy behind the work that we were doing. But also, the arrival in marketing and communications of our new director, Kerry Rhodes, a couple of years ago, who has a very strong personal focus on reaching Black and Asian audiences and also builds on that from her previous career where she worked at NHS Blood and Transplant, where they faced similar challenges around the recruitment of blood donors and organ donors from Black and Asian communities.

So those two things kind of came together and really gave some energy to our strategy. So, we worked with an external specialist agency called Multicultural Marketing Consultancy to develop our strategy in conjunction with our stakeholders all around the Open University,

really importantly including both the staff, BME network, and the students of BME network. So, it was hugely important to us to incorporate those perspectives from the start of our work.

We delivered this strategy and launched it in 2020. And some of the aspects of it, I won't go into the whole strategy, but it can be found on the marketing and communications internet page for staff who are interested. And really focused on building on that insight that we'd gathered and working to address those barriers in a number of different ways.

So, we didn't find that one advertising campaign was going to change things. We needed to work in a multi-pronged approach. So going across everything that we're doing. So our core activities that we use to attract new students. So, for example, our TV advertising, radio, online representation, et cetera. So, we have activities across all of that core campaign.

But then we've also supplemented that with really targeted work. So specific advertising that is bespoke for Black or Asian audiences that features in media spaces where those communities are much more likely to be. And also working in terms of PR projects as well. So not just paid media, but also trying to bolster the OU's reputation in media outlets that are heavily consumed by Black and Asian audiences.

So just a couple of examples. We've done some paid advertising that features out of home posters. So, we have used census data to select postcode areas that have high proportions of either Black or Asian residents, and we've designed specific posters that feature photography of Black or Asian students and messaging that meets the insight that we found. So, some messaging around employability, quality, et cetera.

We've also done door dropped leaflets on a postcode basis. We've done online partnerships. And we've done some editorial partnerships as well. So, two channels in the last year that we've worked with our Islam Channel and also Yanga TV. So, we've done a bespoke OU program, so a half hour show, where we have a panel of students and staff from the OU who are from relevant ethnic backgrounds, to talk about overcoming some of these barriers that we know from the research.

So really wide range of things. We've also looked at new staffing within the unit as part of our strategy. So, we have a new program director for marketing and outreach to Black and Asian audiences. So, her name is Melissa Thermidor. She joined us about a year ago now, and she's leading all of this work at a senior level. So, we have a new dedicated post. And obviously, I work closely with Melissa on that. And we also work with other teams in MarComs who carry out the detail of those campaigns. So, the advertising team and so on.

So, through all of that, we have a kind of underpinning ethos, which is around positive, authentic, relatable, and inspirational representation and portrayal of Black and Asian people. So, we worked on a set of guidance, which can also be found on the MarComs intranet site about how to communicate authentically.

So, one of the areas that we found through our strategy development was that we didn't have either enough visual representation of Black and Asian people, for example, in our website, prospectuses, and so on. But also, that a lot of the representation that we did have was not particularly authentic in a number of ways. We've got a whole set of guidance that covers that.

And the other aspect of our approach is to be led by kind of lived experience. So, we really value working with both the staff and student networks, as I mentioned, to feed in that lived experience, to get expertise as well. So, working with specialist agencies, like MMC, who I mentioned earlier. Not just our kind of general advertising agencies that we work with for our core campaigns.

And we're also starting to explore ideas around kind of co-creation with students or potential students. And eventually, although this has been somewhat impacted by COVID, we want to introduce into our approach community outreach as well. So actually taking the OU into community spaces, working with other organizations and partnering to rich people, on the ground, as well as kind of through the media.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: So that's really wide. Yeah. I mean, you've given us so much information. Actually one of the things I wanted to do with this conversation, Kate, was not have so much of a back and forth conversation or any pushback or anything, but actually give you an opportunity to explain in detail the sorts of things that the Open University are doing.

I have a question for you in just a moment, but the comment I want to make is that for those listening to it, it's a sense of actually, yeah, the OU does care, and it's really trying all of these different things, all of these different approaches to address these issues. And you did answer one of the questions I had, which is how much input does the BME community have into these projects.

I think sometimes, it's frustrating as a BME person, although I don't pigeonhole myself. But I do know it's frustrating to some people to sort of-- I think it was Lenny Henry was complaining about something going on in the media recently about even though there's all of this programming and content coming out, it's still very White-led, viewed through a White lens.

So, it's interesting to hear how you've approached tackling these barriers.

What I wanted to ask you, Kate, was we know what you're doing for students. How does the Open University deal with this in-house, if you like, in terms of how we train the staff, equip the staff to be able to deliver all of these wonderful things that you've described?

KATE HAWKINS: Sure. So that is a really important aspect to us. I mean, I'd also like to say that essentially, we don't see this as a kind of project involving only getting people through the door. We are really mindful that to attract students and to retain students, we need to be offering them the student experience that reflects what we're saying publicly in our advertising. It can't be a kind of just on the front page of the prospectus or just a very superficial thing in terms of our communications. It has to actually become the reality of being part of the OU community. And so, experiences when students arrive are really important to us as well.

So, in terms of the staffing side of things, I mean separately, we have a staffing plan within MarComs, which is to try to attract more Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic staff to work in our unit. Not necessarily just in areas that are related to attracting students from those backgrounds, but in all our roles across the unit.

But one really important thing that we did when we launched the strategy was to actually set up a program of staff training for every member of staff within MarComs, to take part in a race equity workshop that was delivered by external trainers. So, we worked with an organization called minds of people of colour who came in and provided that training for us.

It was online due to everyone working at home at the time. However, it was interactive, and it wasn't a kind of online tick box type training. It was discursive and really reflective. And that kind of covered some key themes around antiracism, so becoming an anti-racist institution at the OU. More broadly focused on particular aspects, such as micro-aggressions, and really honed in on the idea of allyship and what we can all do in our everyday jobs and our everyday working lives to be better allies to Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic colleagues. So that really helped us to kind of take a bit of a cultural step change in MarComs to really focus a lot more on how we work, as well as the outputs of the work that we're trying to deliver.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's really exciting. I think one of the things that stuck out to me from the conversation was your background and all the various things that you've done. Something that I'm excited about when it comes to the OU is that it's quite innovative in the way that it approaches different challenges. Would you say that the OU's approach, to what you've described, is unique or special in some way? And if so, how?

KATE HAWKINS: Yes. I mean, different universities, for example, if we compare ourselves to the rest of the higher education sector, have really different challenges. So, a lot of universities don't have the same challenge as us in terms of recruiting high proportions of Black and Asian students. So, in fact, at age 18, so kind of straight from school, the Black and Asian communities are the most likely to go straight to university more so than white communities.

So, a lot of universities attract a lot of Black and Asian students. And we have that different challenge, which is due to some of the reasons that I spoke about around perhaps distance learning. We typically attracted an older student body on average. And so, I think we've got different challenge in that way.

I think what we're doing with our approach is trying to build on what we know and from our experience in the public sector for some of us working on this challenge around behaviour change as we discussed. And the other difference I think is that we're a national organization. So, we have students from across the whole of the UK and also internationally.

And the focus of this work is UK-based because that's where we have our target set and so on. But we do also want to build in the strengths that OU students internationally bring to the experience of studying with us. We know that our international students are more likely to be from Black and Asian, Minority Ethnic backgrounds compared to our UK base at the moment. And so, the experience of being in a tutorial or being in a shared project working group for our students with students from international Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds is also really important. We want to start to build on that as a kind of additional thing that the OU can offer. So yeah. Some differences and some similarities I think for us and trying to build that together in terms of approaches from different sectors as well.

We're also a much bigger advertiser than most other universities. And again, that is because of our national and international reach. We don't have an automatic process where students are coming to us through UCAS, for example, which a lot of other unis would have. And then finally, the other thing to say is that as well as a recruitment challenge, we know that at the Open University, we also have an awarding gap for Black students in particular, but also to some extent, for Asian students.

So again, I just want to emphasize that we're really mindful that our work isn't done in a vacuum just to get people through the door, but we also work together with other parts of the University to try and address the experience of students of colour when they join the Open University as well because obviously, we have an ethical responsibility to deliver the experience to students that we're promising and also to enhance the kind of reputation of the

University through what actually happens to our students and through word of mouth within communities as well.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: It will be interesting actually to think perhaps. It's something we can think about, Claudia, I've just talked to my producer about having on the podcast, how these communities that you're reaching out to, these barriers you're trying to address, how these communities are tackling it from their end, and how they've identified how they can mitigate some of the issues and bridge that gap.

It's been a fantastic conversation. Thank you, Kate, for explaining in such wonderful detail the sort of work that you're doing. This is a very, very important area. And this is a very important episode. And I'm glad that you had the opportunity to come on and to give us these insights indeed. We've been talking to Kate Hawkins of MarComs. She's an insight manager here at the Open University. You've been listening to the BME Network Podcast with me, your host, Katherine Jegede. Kate, all that remains to say is thank you very much. I hope we can call on you again if we have any questions in future.

KATE HAWKINS: You absolutely can. Thank you so much, Katherine, and thank you to the network for inviting me to take part in the podcast. I'd just like to say that if any of the members of the network would like to kind of make contact with me and to talk about the work or to talk about joint working in other areas of the University, I'd be absolutely delighted to hear from you.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Fantastic. And we'll put some information about how you can reach Kate in the blurb below the podcast. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you again soon.