

OU BME podcast interview by Katherine Jegede
Khadija Patel

Khadija Patel, Katherine Jegede:

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Hello, and welcome. You are listening to the BME Network podcast. I'm your host, Katherine Jegede. And today, I am joined by the wonderful, inimitable Khadija Patel, who's going to tell you a bit about what she does in just a second.

If you're new to the podcast, as I say, I'm your host. And our producer in the studio is Claudia Torres. So as I said, I'm joined today by Khadija Patel. I'd like you, Khadija, if you don't mind, to start by telling me a bit about what it is that you do here at the Open University.

KHADIJA PATEL: Katherine, that is such a warm welcome you've given me. I almost want to clap. But I'll save that till the end. Thank you. Thank you very much for inviting me. It's great to be here to talk about the health and well-being network or the health and well-being pillar. My name is Khadija Patel. I'm based in the External Engagement and Partnerships team at the Open University in Scotland. And I'm also an associate lecturer with the OU.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: So, Khadija, you mentioned that you work with the External Engagement and Partnerships team. Can you tell me a bit about what that is and what it does?

KHADIJA PATEL: OK. I'll start off by telling you I'll give you an overview of the team itself. The External Engagements and Partnerships team work with external stakeholders and partners in Scotland. We work with employers to design innovative workforce solutions, with colleges and schools, enabling more students to study at HE level. And with the public and third sector, we work with trade unions. And we're building partnerships that support a wide range of communities accessing higher education.

And in terms of my own role, my title is partnerships officer and involves maintaining, nurturing, and developing external partnership with colleges, unions, and employers. So I work with colleges on their HNs and learning pathways and articulation routes from HN to OU study, supporting and managing programs where we have or on campus delivery.

And I try and implement innovative ways by using the OU curriculum to address workforce skills development and lifelong learning with unions and employees. In essence, in a nutshell, I identify the learning needs or opportunities through articulation and skills development for our partners.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's so interesting. The OU does so many different things.

KHADIJA PATEL: Certainly.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: And I work at one of the faculties. And so, people who are not familiar with The Open University, I know mostly the audience will be-- but for anyone listening who isn't familiar, it's really fascinating to think about how all of these different sections and departments work together. It's really interesting.

So today, Khadija, we really want to talk about-- or one of the things we want to focus on is health and well-being. It's such an important issue still for so many people. We're coming out of this pandemic. It looks as if that's certainly the case. I mean, at the time of recording, that's what's happening here in the UK. So, we want to talk about the health and well-being at the OU and how it benefits us as staff. So, can you tell me a bit about the Health and Wellbeing group at OU first? And then we'll talk about that a bit more.

KHADIJA PATEL: Certainly. OK. The BME Network Health and Wellbeing group is made of myself, Khadija Patel, Grace, Roberta, Sharon, and Raj. Members of the group come from different teams at OU, which is absolutely fantastic to get a wide calibre of staff from different disciplines, different backgrounds. So we have colleagues from EDI, the faculty. We've got academics and myself coming from Partnership. As I said, the strength is to work with a wide range of colleagues across the OU.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's so interesting. I mean, I remember when I first joined the OU, that was one of the first-- first meetings I went to was a health and well-being meeting. And it was fascinating to hear people talk about their experiences and how much support that they got from being a part of the group. So can you just tell our listeners, Khadija, what it is that this group offers? I know you said what it is. But how does it support its members?

KHADIJA PATEL: I think it's probably a good time to introduce, a good point to introduce what our focus is. Our focus is to provide a safe space really for BME staff voice to be brought together, a place for BME students safe voices or safe place for BME students to be brought together. And what we do is provide practical advice through signposting resources. And we look at research opportunities for our colleagues. And what we're doing is influencing and providing direction to the OU's policies and guidance.

So let me just bring it down to a particular level. So our work involves continuing to offer the monthly BME well-being over a catch up, which you attended. Out of curiosity, Katherine, how did you find that? I know you're meant to be asking me questions. Let me ask you a question. How did you find that?

KATHERINE JEGEDE: This is a conversation. I found it so interesting. I was, I think, very new to the OU then. And so it was incredible to know that people could come together in that way and talk about things with confidence without sort of fear of retribution or being nervous about how their grievances or their issues might be received by colleagues. So I found it really encouraging and actually quite inspirational. And being at that meeting, Khadija, was the thing that inspired me to get involved with the staff network itself.

KHADIJA PATEL: That's absolutely fantastic to hear, Katherine, because the whole thing about that group is to provide a safe confidential space. And I can't stress that enough because we all need to feel safe in our workplaces and feel that whatever we're saying doesn't go outside of the area that we're in. And our conversations hopefully are helpful and support our BME staff to open up.

So, thinking about some of the things we've looked at. We looked at COVID. And I'm sure you're going to come back to that in a second. And it's all about looking after your mental health, your well-being. But it's also about making connections. It's a cross nation delivery. It's a cross nation group. And that's one of the joys. You're making connections with people from Wales, England.

There are so many colleagues down in England that I don't know about or hear about. And it was great to make that connection. And all along, as I say, I think the whole thing is about making it safe and comfortable and confident and hand and heart, Katherine. It was good to meet fellow BME peers. There's a sense of feeling at home being part of a BME OU family. And we often talk about the OU family. This is a BME OU family we were talking about where we were all connected.

And I want to give you an example. I mean, I speak several languages. And what was great about the group is that in your head when you're having a conversation, we all know this. We've all been there. I've got my Indian language. And I've got my English language. And sometimes we struggle with we're sort of thinking, oh, was that an English word? Is it Gujarati? Or have I just made that up?

And the joy of that group is that you can say things. You can spill over your words. But somebody somewhere or quite a number of people, maybe not even somebody somewhere,

somebody in that group will sort of say, yeah, I know what that person is talking about. And you start thinking, did that make sense? Whereas if you're somewhere else-- I think that is the word. I'm jumbling my words up here, as you can see or you can hear.

The thing is that it's taken for granted that it's OK to trip over your words. No one's going to sort of scratch your or say that didn't make sense because they can make that connection without us having to explain what we're talking about. So that's one of the initiatives that we've done. And it's been very successful.

And the group started in March 2020. And our monthly meetings have been fantastic. Sometimes we get those same people turning up. And that's fantastic because that brings the strength in itself, brings a commitment. But other times we'll get new people joining us. And it doesn't matter you drop in five minutes, or you drop in for the hour. And I'll explain a bit more about the other initiatives. But I'll let you ask me another question at this point.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Fantastic. I can really listen to you all day, Khadija. So, I know there are lots of focal points and priorities. What are some of your priorities going forward perhaps for the future?

KHADIJA PATEL: In terms of the future, our work is going to be centred around creating bespoke materials. We drew up a BME mental health and well-being resource publication. And the good thing about that publication, we weren't ready to launch it ourselves. But we found another opportunity to launch that publication, which was to do with the APP, Black declarations of mental health.

So that work that we created in the BME Health and Wellbeing group has contributed to another OU-wide initiative. And that publication is going to be going on to our OU systems to support our student registrations and student support side of things. If they've got queries or concerns or want to help Black students, this resource is there.

So, you're asking me what the future holds for us. We're also considering having a buddy system where no matter where you are in the UK, people can volunteer to speak to anyone at a time. That can range between myself and-- we, in the group, are not going to be involved in this as such, except just to draw up a list of names for colleagues to contact each other.

Just this morning, we were talking about refreshing our BME network page. We want to put our resources up there. We talk about health and well-being quite a lot in our groups obviously because that's the title of the group and because we're all passionate about it. But we also want to highlight the differences between BME communities and white communities.

What is it that makes the support that we require slightly different from our mainstream colleagues? And how do we go about doing that? So, it's about tapping into research, conferences that anyone can attend for everyone to enhance their learning together. I suppose those are the main points, Katherine.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That is so rich. Certainly, for anybody who's interested in getting involved, there is so much to look forward to. So, thank you, Khadija, for sharing that. You mentioned COVID and mental health. And COVID, it levelled the playing field in a horrible way.

People who perhaps didn't realize they had certain vulnerabilities or issues around mental health would have found that those things were exacerbated over this very, very difficult time that we've all been a part of. And of course, it's impacted people differently.

But generally speaking, Khadija, how can we take care of our mental health and well-being, particularly as we're emerging now? I don't like to use that phrase new normal, but I know people are familiar with it. But how do we come out stronger or as strong as we possibly can as we emerge out of this situation, we've all been in?

KHADIJA PATEL: I suppose this is-- I'm going to make this general and specific response at the same time. I don't know if you can do that. But I'm going to go for both angles here, both perspectives here. I think the main thing is that if you're from a BME background, we do have to be quite clear in stating to our white colleagues, we're the same. But there's also a difference. Our experiences have been different. And it's important to stress that.

And there's a reason for that because I always think out of sight, out of mind. We'll move on six months and say, what was that thing about BME communities having larger or higher incidences of hospital admissions and death? What was that about? People forget.

And I'm not sort of saying to remind people. But we're sort of saying that we need to feel safe when we're going out, have the right checks being done, have our OU guidelines. How are they reflecting the difference between us and our white colleagues? And what support do we need?

And we need to keep those conversations open. But we also need to have these conversations within ourselves as a BME group, within our Health and Wellbeing group and other groups to talk about, OK, what are our experiences? And with those experiences, whether they be positive or negative, we need to communicate with our OU managers, our support system saying, yes, this is what we need. This might be different.

And it's keeping not one step ahead but keeping that communication going because when we're not-- you mentioned the new normal, whatever that is. I mean, what is the new normal? I hear that word. But is it the new normal? Are we going to keep using that word new normal for the next two years or one year?

So we all have a contribution to make. But I think our starting point is to work together as a BME group and say, what is it that we want? Let's start from that. And we've not had that discussion yet with our colleagues in the Health Wellbeing group but is well due.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: So it sounds a bit to me, Khadija, like you're talking a bit about community care. We are a community. While we are looking after ourselves, we can think about innovative ways to look after each other. What are your views on community care? Do you think it's achievable? Do you think it's necessary?

KHADIJA PATEL: Really, Katherine, I'm going to ask you a question. Are you talking about work? Or are you talking about their connections with our local communities?

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's a really good question and I think probably a bit of both. But I think it's the kind of thing that can translate. We think because we're talking about the BME's network, let's stick to that community. But I think whatever it is that you say people can think about that within their wider community. So yeah, if you stick to the BME community, that'll be perfect within the OU context.

KHADIJA PATEL: Thank you. I was waiting wait for that bit to come through. And yes, you said it.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Yeah, you keep me on my toes, Khadija. I knew I had to interview you.

KHADIJA PATEL: I'm trying not to challenge you, Kathy.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: No, please do.

KHADIJA PATEL: Yeah, I think in the workplace, we've got still a lot of work to do because there will be-- I mean, we have the Health and Wellbeing group. We're getting, as I say, regular attendees, new attendees joining, which is also fantastic. But that's only one approach.

And we're only attracting this-- if we look at the number of BME colleagues, the number of BME students we have at the OU, we're not connecting with everyone. We're connecting with

those that want us to connect with them. So, my question to myself-- and I'm not sure if I have to answer-- is, how do we connect with everyone?

What is it that we need to do to spread the message that we're there to support them? But we also want to have the opportunity to engage with them. So, I suppose one of the things that we could look at-- and I'm just throwing this out there-- is plenty of health and well-being days that sprout out here for all types of health issue, which is absolutely fantastic.

Should we be engaging with all different areas of disability, and especially hidden disability? And I'm bringing disabilities in this because one of the things we've talked about is-- well, we've been talking about COVID. But we haven't touched on long COVID. That is still going to be around.

How do we connect with our employees and get those discussions going about long COVID? Have we gone into that area? And I'm not sure if we have. I don't think we're there yet. Those conversations are very much about-- I started about going back to work. But what about the longer picture, the long COVID picture? I'm not sure if I've answered your question, Katherine, or whether I've just—

KATHERINE JEGEDE: It's fine. I mean—

KHADIJA PATEL: I'm just reflecting.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: It's fine. It's given me some food for thought. One of the things I was thinking about is when I see colleagues who may be struggling to be empathetic and that sort of thing, there's lots of different approaches.

But you make some really interesting points about the after effects, how people are going to cope in the long term. It's all well and good this is all wrapping up. And we're moving from pandemic to endemic. And everybody's going to get back to "normal," quote end quote. But at the same time, as you already identified, Khadija, the needs of the community are different. There needs to be some work done, a lot more work done in terms of looking at how these communities are supported going forward.

And it's something to think about. Maybe our listeners have ideas that they can share. There's a newsletter that they can contribute to or they can get in touch with us here at the podcast. And we can pick it up at a later date. I'm certainly going to have to have you back on. But yeah, you said some really interesting things. Speaking about our listeners or people wanting to get involved, how do they get involved with the Health and Wellbeing group?

KHADIJA PATEL: We're looking out for people to join us. This is something that the four or five of us have started, which is absolutely great. We need to do a bit more work. It's an informal group. We're not asking for much time. So, I'll stress the pluses. And there are no negatives because, as you know, people from BME back homework together really well. We don't think about time. We're thinking, OK, how do we get the best out of each other?

So, in terms of contact, they can contact me. I'll give you my email address. It's khadija.patel@open.ac.uk. I'm the only Khadija Patel at the OU, so it's not that hard to track me down. So yeah, get in touch. It'd be lovely to hear from you and to work with you. And don't forget, you'll have ideas that will enhance what we're doing. So, it's not just us with our agenda. We want to do a lot more. And we want you to-- we want to have you on board to join us, to help us do a lot more, and support us.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Well, thank you, Khadija. I have to say, I can attest to just how supportive and valuable the Health and Wellbeing group has been for me as a staff member at the OU. So I certainly do encourage people to get in touch. We will put a little bit of blurb under the video so they can see your email there and also my email, if they want to get in touch with the podcast.

I've been talking this afternoon. And it's a shame to have to end the conversation with our Partnerships officer, Khadija Patel, who is a part of the External Engagement and Partnership team. It's been a wide ranging but really fascinating conversation. Khadija, it's been an absolute pleasure speaking to you. And as I say, we have to speak again soon.

KHADIJA PATEL: Thank you very much, Katherine. Thank you very much for inviting me and take care.