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INTERVIEWER: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live. In this session, I'm joined by Cherry Day who is the Vice President of Equality at the University Student's Association. You've got your lovely badge on, Cherry. Thank you for joining us today. I wondered if you could describe what to value diversity means for you as both a student and in your role as Vice President of Equality.

CHERRY: I think you know me best from previous things I've done here, representing students with health issues. In my role as VP of Equal Opportunities, this is a very broad brief. And the reason I value it is encompassed in a part of a statement I can give you from the OU website, which is signed by Peter Horricks, by Baroness Martha Lane Fox.

And it says, "discrimination arising from individual characteristics and circumstances is not only unlawful, but a waste of talent and a denial of opportunity preventing individuals, organisations, and societies from achieving their growth potential." That brief paragraph, for me, says everything, because there is something called the Equalities Act 2010 with amendments 2011. I think there are links to that on the site.

And the OU has their own equality, diversity, inclusion pages on their website. And they are very conscious of making sure the EDI, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, is part of the package of the student experience. And that is my job.

Simplistically, in my job remit, I have something called protecting characteristics. And again, in the Equalities Act, they listed-- and the OU has 11 listed themselves. I can read them if you'd like me to.

OK, "pieces of protected characteristics are age, disability, race, religion and belief, political opinion, pregnancy and maternity, caring and dependency, sex, gender that means, gender reassignment, identity, sexual orientation, and marriage and civil partnerships." Now, as Equal Ops, I'm alert across all the forms of social media and the student's daily life to any obstacles they might face in their studies that I can take on board for them as their representative and take it to the association, and to OU, as well. I work closely in partnership with them. Somebody called Jiten Patel is the Head of Equality and Diversity Information Rights. So he's got that protected characteristics as well.

So we work very closely together. So OU and the association are certainly in partnership. And all that is written into the student charter as well. So the brief, the template, is there, but it is a very broad brief, very broad brief indeed.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to attend to some of the things that you are doing in your role, but I also wondered if you could tell us about your perspective as a student, because you are studying as well, and what valuing diversity means for you as an individual.

CHERRY: It's buried in those protected characteristics comes disability. I can't personally identify with the race and cultural diversity side other than what's reported to me. But as a student, you know I've been around for nine years now. And I've never personally met any obstacle to study that's being created by any breach of those protected characteristics. I can only speak secondhand on most of them.

But disability, I've only, as a student, found the OU to be totally supportive and helpful. And being able to signpost students, as Linda was saying, and they widened the access and services team was where she is. Their team are wonderful with helping students gain the information they need to remove any obstacles to study.

I have about six of them, because I use loads of assistive software and have to go to places to get help with my tutor, with the student support team, with the disability support team. But the OU does have that in place. So as a student, my experience is excellent.

INTERVIEWER: And you are involved with the Disabled Students Group, or you were chairing that for a long time, weren't you? Which is a student support group, where, again, there's a lot of diversity, but again, this is focusing on disability, which as you point out, are only some of their protective characteristics involved in here. I wonder if you can tell us about that student to student support and why that's been so powerful for you and also for others who've engaged with it.

CHERRY: From the association's side or from the OU's side?

INTERVIEWER: Both, Cherry, I think, because there's two different perspectives here, isn't there?

CHERRY: There is, yeah. Again, I'm not involved as much with the DSG now, although that group does come within my remit, as does PLEXUS, the LGBT+ group. We're in the process of getting up a carer's group. We're looking at BME as well. So we're beginning to get groups into the association to deal with that.

The help and support, there's so much of it, both in the OU and on the association website as well, that if a student can be signposted to any of those groups, like Nightline, peer support, and PLEXUS and DSG, that's all on the association website. Can I do an advert please?

INTERVIEWER: You can do an advert, and we've got a prepared slide for you showing the DSG website that we can show people.

CHERRY: Well, there's DSG website. There's PLEXUS. And the new association website--

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, this is the one I have.

CHERRY: --goes live on Thursday. Now, the link I sent you, I think the screenshot was the old page. But if people go into OUstudents.com, that will take them to the new association web site where all those tabs of help and support and volunteer, everything's there. And that is going live this Thursday, OUstudents.com.

INTERVIEWER: HJ is putting the link in our chat box.

CHERRY: Brilliant. Excellent.

INTERVIEWER: So if you aren't on the chat box, and you've just joined us, there is a little bubble icon on the live screen. And you can click on that, and then you can chat and see what other people are talking about also.

CHERRY: Under Help and Support, you'll find all the DSG, PLEXUS, Nightline, Peer Support, all the links are there, and they're working I've been told.

INTERVIEWER: Now, we know, Cherry that the students supporting students is a very powerful thing.

CHERRY: Oh, it is.

INTERVIEWER: And indeed, part of the Student Hub Live ethos is that we facilitate these academic communities because it is so valuable, irrespective of diversity. But these specific groups that you're setting up, why are they so useful for students, and how can they help? What is the point of setting them up and students joining them?

CHERRY: Well, we've got very good evidence, obviously, from the DSG group, which was 200 people back in 2011 on Facebook. It's now over 1,500 if you're in the Facebook group, which is a

closed group.

PLEXUS is new. It started a year ago. And that is becoming hugely successful. They've done Manchester Pride. They've done the London Pride. And that came into the students supporting students is evidence from the Association website, where you've got to student communities, student voice, where it's all about students talking to students. So that one-to-one interaction is very important.

INTERVIEWER: And students can find some of these forums and spaces to engage. There's lots of use of forums, and other forums, indeed. And we've got a screenshot of one of the student home websites. At the bottom, we can see the link to all of these areas. So briefly, you can see under OU Community that there are links there to all those various places that students can go. There's lots of support out there for students, isn't there?

CHERRY: Yeah, I think students are often surprised how much support there is. The problem with that is knowing where to go. Being clearly, I would say, well, click on the Help and Support tab. Then you'll find the groups that can help you. And then if you need to drill down a bit further, you can.

You can explore. But bread crumb trails can become too long, so it needs to be very simple. Click on the Association website. Tabs on top which clearly explain where you want. If you want to go to Student Community or events or whatever, news, Association committee papers, they're there as well. But it's keeping it simple, stupid.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, no, absolutely. And especially things like Facebook, they can be overwhelming for students. So what would your advice be about how students choose which aspects are right for them to engage with?

CHERRY: Certainly if you have a health obstacle, I can only say join the DSG, Disabled Students Group, Association's Disabled Students Group. First of all, it is closed. You have to ask to join. If you're association with the OU is not evident on your public profile, on Facebook, which a lot of people who don't show, one of the admins will write.

Send a message. Not to ask whether you're disabled, but just to ask whether you're studying with the OU. And if you are, nobody asks whether you're disabled or not, you can come into the group. And it is vibrant and busy 24 hours a day.

INTERVIEWER: And very supportive.

CHERRY: Oh, very, yes. There are lots of experienced people in there, both the admins and the chair of the DSG, Sheila Cameron, who I know you know, and other people. I think like 20 are in there. And although we can't help students individually with any problem they have, we can't give that sort of advice.

We do frequently signpost them to the Student Support Team who will triage their question through to Linda's, Disabled Students Team, and we can share experiences and signpost. But we can't say, you must do this, and you must do that. But the experiences are 365 days, 7 days a week.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely. Excellent. Well, we've put those links in the chat. So do make sure that you follow them up and see what's right for you. But as Cherry says, there's plenty of support out there for OU students. So do make sure that you engage with that in your studies, and get what's right for you. Cherry, thank you so much for coming along today. It's been a pleasure as usual.

CHERRY: Pleasure, it always is. Thank you.

INTERVIEWER: And we've got lots more events from the Students Association at our Freshers event which is on the 3rd and 4th of October. So do make sure that you come and join us there when we'll be talking a lot more about these various groups and opportunities for OU students. Thank you very much, Cherry.

We're going to have a short video now, and we're going to show the Legacy Garden in full bloom. And then I'm going to be joined by Kim Walker to talk about diversity in primary. So don't go away. We'll see you in a minute.

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