The Open University Business School: The Art of Being Exceptional AND Inclusive...

Social mobility has long partnered excellence and impact to provide the backbone of the agenda at OUBS

Sarah Hardcastle explores the new Black Leadership Empowerment Programme (BLEP) at Open University Business School, created through a need for real action to address identified specific leadership challenges faced by black and minority ethnic communities.

The OUBS is a pioneer in flexible, supportive and responsive online learning. It balances being triple-accredited and having a focus on socially responsible research-led teaching while remaining open to all, fulfilling the Open University's unique social mission to:

"Be open to people, places, methods and ideas. To promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential."

Social mobility has long partnered excellence and impact to provide the backbone of the agenda at OUBS. It is through this sense of purpose and commitment to making the world a better place and the desire to level the playing field in many different areas that the Black Leadership Empowerment Programme (BLEP) grew.

The programme was developed in the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership (CVSL), for which the Head of School, Professor Siv Vangen was the founding director and is currently the Chair. The Centre works collaboratively with stakeholder groups across academic, practitioner and policy communities to advance understanding of the complexity of the problems organisations are facing, the ambiguities pertaining to stakeholders' responsibilities and accountabilities, and the dynamics caused by ever-changing public policies on matters that affect the work of voluntary organisations. Set up from a philanthropic donation, they support individuals and voluntary organisations with free access to relevant research, teaching and knowledge on leadership in a complex and fast-changing environment. Their aim is to offer support to make things happen through collaboration and by leading together.

The need for this new programme became evident to the Centre from issues exposed by the Black Lives Matter movement and during COVID-19. These issues include under-representation in leadership positions due to a lack of opportunities, discrimination and significant structural barriers that create an ongoing cycle of inequality and lack of diversity in leadership practices and roles. This leads to a significant and detrimental effect on an organisation's ability to innovate and attract the required talent to successfully achieve its objectives.

Issues that were also discussed further and championed by Paul Sesay CEO and Founder of Inclusive Companies: "The inspiration behind the Black Leadership Empowerment Programme came from a personal experience of my own. Having left secondary school with very little in the way of qualifications and then having to do my GCSEs at a later stage, I subsequently went on to attend a local black college based in Liverpool. This was a crucial stepping stone for my personal development as a young black man, leading me down the road to a professional career. The Black Leadership Empowerment Programme is a huge step in helping individuals believe in themselves, helping to empower the next generation of leaders."

The team strongly believe that by facilitating quality, tailored leadership learning based on reflective practice in the workplace and communities, they can support black people to lead impactful change. Through connecting individuals into a network of powerful black leadership learners, they will build communities of learning capable of achieving systems change.

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Straightforward to define, their aims are listed below, but they were under no illusion as to the challenge that participants would face, the resilience they would have to develop and the support they would need to facilitate future positive societal change:

- Establish a high-quality leadership programme to enhance the leadership skills and agency of black learners
- Improve commitment to equality in practice, including increased representation, influence and voice of black people in workplaces and society
- Enable black leaders around the UK to connect and collectively work on solutions to racial justice issues
- Offer clear pathways into the Open University Business School's formal curriculum through bespoke, accredited learning
- Build leadership capacity and agency of black professionals and community workers by subsidising as many learners as possible to study for free or at a reduced rate to generate a ripple effect by increasing the numbers of black leaders and role models in the workplace and society.

Taking the decision to develop this programme was straightforward because their values - to be inclusive, innovative and responsive - are engrained in everything they do

Identifying the need for a programme such as this was one thing, making the case for funding to design the programme was the next challenge, but being based at a university that is driven by its social mission was encouraging. Add to this, the fact that social mobility and access and participation plans are a priority for the University, the Office for Students and to the Business School and its accrediting bodies, and the case begins to write itself. Taking the decision to develop this programme was straightforward because their values - to be inclusive, innovative and responsive - are engrained in everything they do.

Designed to support learning and agency through quality leadership education and training, this innovative programme was developed by Professor Owain Smolovic-Jones and Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo who is a work-based learning academic at the Business School. The first of its kind in the UK, the programme is delivered in three parts.

Part 1: Introducing and Advancing Black Leadership

Two bespoke badged courses with 24 hours of learning offered free of charge, that teach key leadership practices within a context of black experience in the UK:

1. Introducing Empowered Black Leadership - focused on building knowledge of leadership concepts in relation to black lived experience and developing key practices to support effective self and team growth.
2. Advancing Black Leadership – focused on developing skills to help learners analyse, influence and change the systems they operate within, be they workplaces or communities.

Free additional learning resources support general skills in social marketing, communication, project management and other perspectives on leadership. Packaged together, learners will access 150 hours of free learning and support from their tutors and the very comprehensive support services available to all Open University students.

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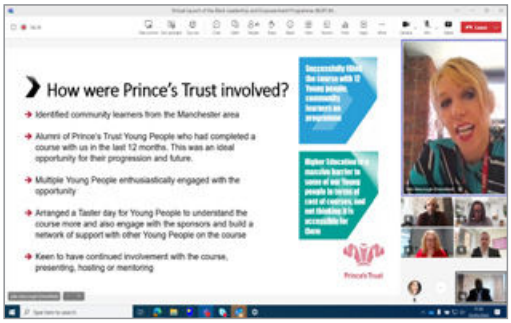
Part 2: Learning Hub in the Community

In partnership with local stakeholders, learners will participate in community-specific learning hubs in five key sites across the UK. The hubs will focus on supporting the application of learning in workplaces and communities. Delivered at key points throughout the programme, participants will learn from one another by reflecting on their actions in practice and from guest speakers, helping the students to build confidence and become inspirational leaders themselves.

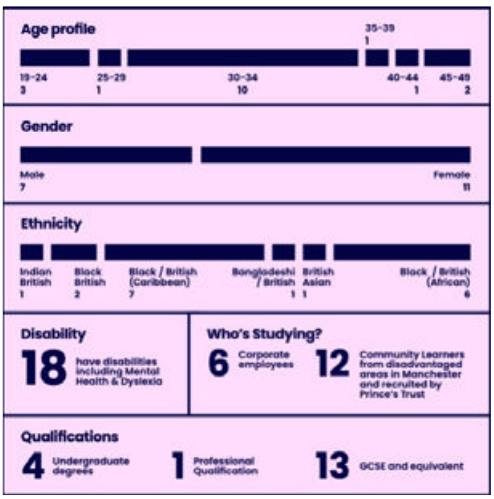
Each learner will work alone or with others on a leadership change project planned and supported through the hub. At the programme's culmination, a conference of learning hubs will be held at the University's Milton Keynes campus so that learners from around the UK can work and share knowledge face-to-face.



Part 3: Making Your Learning Count at Work

This is a new 30-credit module in which participants, supported by experienced tutors, reflect on their experiences applying leadership learning to real-world problems.

After design, came the challenge of identifying partners, and Dr. Mutwarasibo has been working relentlessly to secure funding from external partners, whose mission is to increase inclusion, impact and representation to sponsor the first cohort of students.



"Observing tensions between the leadership of established racialised networks and the black leadership that emerged during the Black Lives Matter social movement in 2020, coupled with my frustration with service providers who claimed that they had difficulties engaging with some 'hard-to-reach' racialised minority communities, left me frustrated and triggered a soul-searching experience on how to address the challenges at hand. An invitation by the Open University to contribute to the Black Leadership and Empowerment Programme (BLEP) was an excellent window to engage in what the late US Congressman John Lewis called good trouble. The last four years have been a rewarding time in my career and have enabled me to connect with many unusual allies to develop a bespoke course that will help to build and enhance the leadership capacity of racialised minority communities and networks. BLEP will also offer a window of opportunity to have difficult conversations on race, racism, and discrimination and dispel the myth that any community is hard to reach. Some communities and some of the leaders I have met in the last four years are easy to ignore. I am glad to be on the right side of history."

The first diverse cohort for this one-year programme is now live. It is being run in Manchester in partnership with Auto Trader, Manchester Airport Group and the Prince's Trust.

Manchester Airport Group and Auto Trader have generously donated the funds for 18 learners living and working in and around Manchester to join the programme for free: six are Manchester Airport Group employees and 12 are Prince's Trust Young People, selected from the local community after a recruitment day.

"Auto Trader are proud supporters of the Black Leadership Empowerment Programme this year, working in collaboration with the Open University, and a number of other organisations across Greater Manchester. Diversity and inclusion are key priorities at Auto Trader, and so this programme is not only a fantastic opportunity to support the development of black individuals in our local communities, but also a great way to support and engage with our own black colleagues throughout the programme"

***Helen Robinson**, Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement Manager at Auto Trader*

Students and partners will all come together for three face-to-face Learning Hubs. Students will also have the opportunity to meet mentors from corporates, discuss career opportunities and hear from motivational guest speakers providing both support and inspirational role models for them.

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What of the future:

The team are ambitious, citing growth plans in the UK and overseas. They will monitor the impact from the first cohort onwards, adapting the programme as necessary from the feedback of students, faculty and partners alike.

Since the two-year pilot launched in February 2024, the team has been fundraising to expand beyond the Manchester Hub to other cities across the four UK nations.

"At the end of the pilot, the team will explore developing:

- *BLEP-inspired initiatives for other disadvantaged groups*
- *new OpenLearn resources to address cross-cultural and intercultural communications challenges in leadership practice.*

Our team will gather information on participants' ambitions through research on the project and explore how to support learners interested in joining the formal curriculum, setting up or scaling up their businesses, and taking up leadership roles at work or in the community."
Professor Siv Vangen, Head of the Business School

For further information, please contact the author or Professor Siv Vangen at Open University Business School.

About the Author

Sarah Hardcastle is founder of Hardcastle & Associates.