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# Staff Equality Networks – Guidelines for operation

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## Introduction

The University values the contribution of its staff equality networks, which are developed by communities of staff who share an affiliation with a protected characteristic. Staff networks provide a safe and practical space where generating and sharing new ideas, and exchanging information can be expressed in an informal environment. They also provide peer support, networking opportunities and social activities. Their activities can help to open the door to changing the culture of our organisation.

Staff networks are self-governed, and their terms of reference, leadership and membership arrangements are determined by their own members. However, these networks must operate within the terms set out within this University Guidance document so there is clarity, coherence and consistency of approach in the operation of all network groups. It is also important that networks work in partnership with the Equality Policy Unit (EPU) to advance the University’s equality and inclusion aims. Any practice not in line with the Framework will result in intervention by the University.

Note: The principles below are not exhaustive. **Colleagues are encouraged to contact EPU (email: equality@leeds.ac.uk) to discuss any further areas or practicalities.**

## Purpose of staff equality networks

Staff networks provide an invaluable space for mutual peer support, personal and professional networking, and development opportunities for members, and are a resource for suggesting good practice to the University to advance our equality and inclusion aims.

For network members, they are complementary to the professional services that the University already provides, such as the advice, guidance and resources available through the EPU, HR colleagues and/or other specialist services such as Occupational Health or Staff Counselling and Psychological Support Services.

## Terms of Reference

Staff networks are responsible for developing and annually reviewing their own terms of reference. It is expected that a network and its members will:

* Operate within this Framework set out by the University;
* Abide by the wider set of University’s policies in the running of the network, such as Dignity and Mutual Respect Policy, IT use, Social Media, GDPR, etc.;
* Raise and escalate any required matters with the EPU in a timely manner;
* Protect the University’s good reputation on equality and inclusion matters internally and externally; and
* Advise the EPU if there are any concerns about the network, its activities or any aspect of its membership or leadership.

## Establishing a staff equality network

Any staff member or group of colleagues can formulate a proposal to establish and lead a staff equality network. Colleagues are advised to contact the EPU in the first instance to position this within the context of wider University work. The EPU will advise how to take the network establishment forward and will seek necessary approvals. Further information about existing staff network groups that are already established can be viewed on the [EPU website](https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/staff-networks/).

## Leading a staff equality network

Leadership of a staff network is determined by the staff community, or by formal application if the role of chair / co-chair has been advertised by the University. A 3-year term of office is usually advised for this role. Leadership of a network is a voluntary role. The University may consider an opportunity for workload remission for network chairs where there is a clear and demonstrable commitment to outputs or outcomes that contribute to the delivery of the University’s E&I Framework.

Leadership is open to staff from any professional group and at any level of the University, as described by the role outline determined by its members. Network chairs are responsible for ensuring that the network’s voice is reflective of the broader network membership.

Leadership skills are often useful in ensuring the success of a staff network, for example in the organisation of events and meetings, liaising with colleagues across the University and/or beyond, ensuring that the voices and experiences of all members are heard, and for the discussion and development of network actions. Opportunities for professional and personal development for the network chairs are available from: [Organisational Development & Professional Learning](https://peopledevelopment.leeds.ac.uk/) (OD&PL).

Chairs are asked to liaise with their line managers for time off from regular duties to attend events related to their network role and activities. This should be managed in line with the business need and individual workload. Support for individual case-related issues should be signposted and guided to line managers, HR managers and/or the University’s specialist services.

Staff networks are encouraged to annually review their leadership arrangements. Networks are welcome to seek the contribution of a senior champion for advice and direction, as guided by the EPU.

## Network structure

Staff networks are responsible for determining their own administrative structure. A steering group structure often works well to support the chair(s) with the organisation of meetings and events, ensuring that a representative voice is held, and to enable the network to respond to the intersectional elements of equality. It can also help with sharing contacts and taking shared responsibility, e.g. for event organisation or liaison with guest speakers.

The EPU will arrange a meeting with network chairs at least once a year to discuss and progress any issues raised. Where the needs of staff networks change, or if significant exceptions arise, EPU encourages chairs to discuss their requirements with EPU at any point.

Networks are encouraged to annually review their management arrangements.

## Network membership

Staff network membership is drawn from the University’s staff community. The University encourages network membership to be inclusive of all groups, to respond to sensitivities such as ‘not being out’ in the workplace, or non-disclosure of other equality information. However, the University recognises that safe space is occasionally needed to discuss certain issues, and therefore permits exclusive sessions if these are deemed necessary. Chairs should make clear the accessibility of the events and meetings. Networks should also maintain self-responsibility for the openness or confidentiality of their network membership.

The EPU and HR encourage line managers to offer flexibility around working hours to enable staff to attend network meetings where possible. Support staff delivering frontline services may have less time management flexibility in their roles to attend and consideration should be given to this. A staff member should not feel obliged to disclose to their manager which staff network they wish to attend.

## Arranging network meetings

Staff networks are responsible for the organisation of their meetings, and are expected to meet at least once per term. To ensure the inclusion of staff with various working patterns, networks are encouraged to offer meetings on alternate days during the week, time slots during lunch hours (12-1pm and 1-2pm) or after normal working hours, and to use the breadth of campus. Networks are expected to book their own meeting rooms on campus through the University’s online room booking service. Alternatively, you can contact EPU for support.

Please contact EPU if you would like the details of your meetings to be published on the [Staff Network webpages](https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/staff-networks/).

## Network communications

Staff networks are encouraged to have a visible University presence through the EPU’s staff equality network webpages, and are encouraged to make their own links with other network chairs. Each network is responsible for establishing its own peer communication channels, such as email groups or use of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Yammer, etc.), abiding by all the University’s standard policies (e.g. Dignity and Mutual Respect, IT use, GDPR regulations, use of Social Media, etc.). Networks are welcome to raise their profile and highlight their positive contribution to the University (e.g. through including information in e-newsletters and University communications).

## Network activities

Examples of staff network activity may include:

* **Awareness raising:** networks can help to increase knowledge and understanding to the wider University staff community of their inclusivity issues through information sharing events and news stories.
* **Development opportunities:** networks may arrange dedicated development opportunities for their members on topics such as coaching and mentoring or career development, drawing on the skills and expertise of members or other University resources.
* **Discussion:** creating a safe space for network members to discuss the challenges they face by sharing personal experiences and developing positive ideas and solutions.
* **Partnership working:** a network can raise collective concerns of members and offer ideas and solutions to the EPU, who will work with the HR Leadership Team and other senior staff as appropriate to effect change. Individual staff cases should progress through the normal University channels for resolution. A network may also be invited to input to policy and guidance development, complementing the usual University consultation processes.
* **Signposting:** networks can provide good peer advice and guidance to members and signpost them to relevant University services or external organisations.
* **Internal networking:** network members are an excellent resource for developing working relationships, learning about different work areas and the types of roles that colleagues with a shared characteristic are engaged with across the University. Colleagues may also agree to mentor others based on their shared characteristic.
* **External networking:** chairs may consider additional external networking opportunities such as developing links with equality networks at other HEIs, in the Leeds City region, the LUU student equality societies, and local community or national networks, to share information and good practice.

## Governance & Budget

The University supports staff networks at the nine protected characteristic level (as determined by the Equality Act 2010). These are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. For example, Women’s Network, LGBT+ Network, BAME Network.

A limited budget may be available to support network activity such as events, meetings and materials, in addition to the national awareness months and days such as Disability History Month, LGBT+ History Month and Black History Month, which the University funds separately. Networks should contact EPU to seek approval, and assistance with booking and payment for required items/services.

Staff networks are welcome to mark and hold other events and activities appropriate to their area – however management of this will need to be primarily led by the staff networks, and any associated costs agreed in advance with the EPU.

Budget may also be available to support the activity of any ‘sub-networks’ or groups that sit within one of the nine characteristics mentioned above (e.g. Muslim network, Autism network). Sub-network leads should discuss financial requirements with their ‘parent’ network lead(s). In cases where sub-networks require financial support in the absence of a ‘parent’ network at the characteristic level, the EPU will discuss budget directly with the sub-network. This recognises the activity of the sub-network and allows them to further their activities in the absence of a ‘parent’ network.

Staff networks are encouraged to consider planning joint events with other internal or external networks to further understand and highlight intersectional issues and maximise the impact of associated costs.

## Support from the Equality Policy Unit

The EPU has established that their own attendance or involvement with any of the staff networks will be in the capacity as a UoL staff member rather than a member of EPU. This sets the professional boundaries of involvement very clearly for both parties and minimises any opportunity for conflict of interest. Similarly, network chairs should refrain from using any EPU staff attendance (if attending as a staff member) to assume flow of any relevant information back to EPU. This remains the responsibility of the network chair.

For any formal involvement from EPU, for example, to attend to advise on an issue or charter mark application, requests should be channelled through the EPU contact for that network. The contact details are on the [EPU website](https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/profiles/).

The EPU offers staff networks the following:

* Advice on establishment of a network, including the practical considerations;
* Publicity of the network and its activities through the EPU website, staff fairs and other equality and inclusion communication channels;
* Partnership working opportunities, such as contribution to policy development, event organisation and/or discussion of equality charter marks;
* Brokerage of relationships with other internal and external equality networks and/or key internal or external colleagues, to support with sharing experiences and establishing best practice;
* Leadership support to progress issues causing network concern, and/or to discuss progress or suggestions;
* Support in respect of any challenges being faced by chairs, with their respective line managers, or to support any issues relating to involvement with staff network(s);
* Suggestion of external opportunities where UoL presence may be valuable;
* Consideration of proposals for additional financial support (e.g. for initiatives and/or training where it is anticipated that the impact will further the University’s equality and inclusion aims).

## Closing a staff equality network

If an existing staff network wishes to close, the chair(s) should contact the EPU to support this and to oversee and advise on any required communications.

## University intervention

It is expected that all staff networks will operate in accordance with the Framework and these guidelines. Any practice not in line with the Framework reported by any member of staff will result in appropriate University intervention by the Head of the Equality and Inclusion in the first instance.

**Equality Policy Unit
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