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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 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 and Inclusion Unit (EIU) to advance the University’s equality, diversity and inclusion aims.

The principles below are not exhaustive and colleagues are encouraged to contact EIU – [equality@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:equality@leeds.ac.uk) – to discuss any further questions 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 EIU, HR colleagues and/or other specialist services such as Occupational Health or Staff Counselling and Psychological Support Services.

Staff networks are expected to send one representative – usually a chair – to meetings of the University’s [Equality & Inclusion Delivery Group](https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/governance_strategy_policy/governance/), a cross-institutional group which helps ensure the delivery of the E&I priorities set by the E&I Board. The meetings provide a direct route for networks to contribute to and comment on the University’s E&I activities.

## 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 guidance set out by the University
* Abide by the wider set of University’s policies in the running of the network, such as the Dignity and Mutual Respect Policy, IT use, social media, GDPR, etc
* Raise and escalate any required matters with the EIU in a timely manner
* Protect the University’s good reputation on equality and inclusion matters, internally and externally
* Advise the EIU 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 asked to contact the EIU in the first instance to position their proposal within the context of wider University work. The EIU will advise how to take forward the establishment of the network and will seek necessary approvals. Further information about existing staff network groups can be found on the [EIU website](https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/staff-networks/).

## Leading a staff equality network

It is advisable for all networks to have at least two chairs or co-chairs. This ensures that responsibilities can be shared, helps manage attendance at meetings, and maintains continuity when a chair steps down or is absent.

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 three-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](https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/governance_strategy_policy/equality-and-inclusion-frameworks/e-and-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 reflects 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. Other skills that may be useful are the ability to manage challenging conversations, and strategies for maintaining personal resilience and wellbeing. 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 dealt with by line managers, working with HR managers and/or the University’s specialist services, as appropriate.

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 EIU.

## 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, eg, for event organisation or liaison with guest speakers.

The EIU 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, chairs can discuss their requirements with EIU 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 EIU 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 is not, and 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 (if appropriate), and to use the breadth of campus or online meeting provisions. Networks are expected to book their own meeting rooms on campus through the University’s online room booking service. Alternatively, they can contact EIU for support.

Please contact EIU 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 should have a visible University presence through the EIU’s staff equality network webpages. Each network is responsible for establishing its own peer communication channels, such as email groups or use of social media platforms (eg, Facebook, LinkedIn, Yammer, etc), abiding by all the University’s standard policies (eg, 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 (eg, through including information in e-newsletters and University communications).

Network chairs are encouraged to make their own links with other network chairs.

## 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 EIU, 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 and 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 at Leeds network, LGBT+ network, Leeds 11 network.

A 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 EIU to request 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 needs to be primarily led by the staff networks and any associated costs agreed in advance with HR via the EIU.

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 (eg, Muslim network, Chronic Pain & Fatigue network). Sub-network leads should discuss financial requirements with their ‘parent’ network lead(s), where possible. In cases where sub-networks require financial support in the absence of a ‘parent’ network at the characteristic level, the EIU will discuss budget directly with the sub-network. This allows the sub-network to carry out 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 and Inclusion Unit

The EIU 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 EIU. 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 EIU staff attendance (if attending as a staff member) to assume flow of any relevant information back to EIU. This remains the responsibility of the network chairs.

For any formal involvement from EIU, requests should be channelled through the [equality@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:equality@leeds.ac.uk) address.

The EIU offers staff networks the following:

* Advice on establishment of a network, including the practical considerations
* Publicity of the network and its activities through the EIU 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 (eg, 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 chairs should contact the EIU 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 these guidelines. Any practice not in line with the guidance may result in intervention by the EIU team.

**Equality & Inclusion Unit**   
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