**Investigating the careers of Staff Tutors in STEM**

**Rachel Hilliam:**

Staff tutors have got a particular sort of contract where half of their job is to do with managerial aspects. So looking after our associate lecturers and looking after their career development. Whilst the other half of the job is the same as central academics. So looking after course production, presentation and also their research and scholarship. But because it’s only half of their job they don’t get the same amount of time to really engage in those activities and it’s those activities that are really important for the promotions criteria. And being able to ensure that they fulfil all of the different parts of that promotion criteria.

So we were wanting to look at way that we could really free up time for staff tutors, whether that be in terms of administration support, or just more people, better ways of covering for each other. Just a variety of ways to be able to free up that time. And these people are distributed right throughout the country. So part of it is to do with time that it takes people to travel. But also it’s about being able to make sure that those people are visible in meetings as well.

We asked lots of different staff tutors about this and not only did we have a questionnaire for all of them but we also did some focus groups. And it became very clear that the travel time was really important. I worked in an office in Nottingham and we used to have lots of remote meetings there where we invited people from Milton Keynes and we used devices such as this roundtable device. And everyone used to feel connected because you could see all of the different people in the room. So it actually was the next best thing to sitting in the room with everybody else.

So through this research we identified that this would be a really good bit of equipment and we just needed more of these on central campus because we had hardly any of them in rooms on central campus. So we lobbied various people throughout the university. So we now do have a number of rooms with this technology in there which means that staff tutors don’t have to travel in order to be part of those meetings. But I think it’s actually more important than just freeing up their travel time. As I said before it was something very much about they felt they were invisible so when opportunities arose because they weren’t visible within the departments and schools people didn’t automatically think of them as being there.

So now that they can be part of those meetings they’re much more visible and therefore able to engage in different projects and activities. So feel that they now have the opportunities that they didn’t have before.

Thank you very much for joining us Mark. There’s about 200 ALs that have responded to this survey. We’ve done quite a lot of work in the OU at the moment in getting new ways of being able to make sure that people are involved with remote working. So using this sort of technology how has that changed your perception of being an AL and the way that you can deliver tutorials and also just be involved with the department more?

**Mark Hobbs:**

OK. I teach as I say five modules now. If this technology wasn’t available I really wouldn’t be able to do that because every weekend would be taken up and every night in the week I’ll have to try to travel to venues and so on and it wouldn’t really be possible. So I think with the advent of this type of technology for online tutorials I think that’s made a really big difference to the study experience for students. I mean everything’s going that way now. All technology is moving to kind of on demand and when it suits you and things like that. So the students are not going to be able to more and more just go to a venue at 7 o’clock, 8 o’clock at night, that type of thing.

**Rachel Hilliam:**

And the other thing is in terms of the way that you’re supported. So I know we’ve done things like your career appraisal using this sort of technology as well rather than you having to travel and do CDSAs face-to-face. Has that made a difference to you rather than just doing it over the telephone?

**Mark Hobbs:**

Yeah. It’s much better than over ... I think there’s a place for face-to-face now and then, I don’t think it could completely replace that but it’s a lot better than telephone work because you do feel as if there’s a situation where there’s two of you kind of in a room to some extent and you can interact that way. And it is just convenience really, I guess, with this type of thing.

**Rachel Hilliam:**

Have you participated in any of the online staff development events using this sort of technology?

**Mark Hobbs:**

Yeah. I have, a couple of events. One particular springs to mind was the Higher Education Academy event where ALs were being encouraged to participate in that to become Fellows those that weren’t already to become Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. And there was a couple of tutorial type events that I went to just to outline what that process was and how to go about doing it.

And that was very helpful for me because I had some ideas of how to do that but then it kind of cemented the ideas and encouraged me to go ahead and do that which I subsequently did do.

**Rachel Hilliam:**

So would you say that this technology has just made you feel more part of the OU family rather than just being a tutor added on to the side?

**Mark Hobbs:**

Yeah, I guess it would be. The problem you’ve got with ALs is that they are by the nature of the OU is that they are kind of to a large extent remote workers. And they do get to feel isolated more than other staff because you haven’t got like a building to go to. You can’t really have chats with your colleagues on a day-to-day basis. So to have rooms like this where than can happen that certainly does help. I think perhaps some people would be a bit more reticent to speak than others in a room. But it does make a difference, I think, to connections through the AL network.

**Rachel Hilliam:**

Excellent. Well it certainly makes a difference for us with connections as well being able to see you. So Mark thanks every so much for joining us and giving your thoughts about this. That’s been really interesting and helpful.

**Mark Hobbs:**

Ok. Well no trouble at all. Thank you very much for having me.

**Rachel Hilliam:**

Thank you Mark, goodbye.