

AD Knowledge Landscapes - Praxis - Rehana

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 00:41

Right. Well, Rehana, thank you so much for joining us. And I'm really delighted to be able to talk together this morning, I wonder if you could start perhaps by just introducing yourself. And a little bit about your research, if you would

Rehana Awan 00:56

I'm Rehana Awan, I am now in my third year of my Ed D, my professional doctorate, and I am researching the awarding gaps for black and brown students at the Open University, and in a view with a with a view to gathering their narratives. So I'm using narrative inquiry or storytelling, to really understand what the barriers are for students to hopefully impact what we do at the OU and how we do things to better support students in the long term.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 01:28

Thank you so much a really important research topic. And I wonder if you could talk me through a little bit about your professional knowledge that you're bringing to your research in the professional context of your research, and how that relates to the academic knowledge that you've been developing through your research journey so far.

Rehana Awan 01:47

So when I started my research, I had a very different job. So I work at the Open University, and I was a staff tutor. So I was looking after associate lecturers. And part of my job included some equality and diversity and inclusion, but but it wasn't sort of the central part of my role. And I was able to engage myself in some elements of scholarship relating to my research interests. So I looked at Black students and mental health as a view to increasing mental health declarations by black students to which would then help to reduce the awarding gap. So it was I kind of was in the fringes if you like linking my research to my practice, since starting the doctorate within the last four months, actually, so four months ago, I've then taken up a new role. And it's a secondment, and I'm working as an a lecturer in EDI implementation. And so my primary focus in this new role is to close the awarding gaps in the School of Computing and communications now, I say is to work towards closing the awarding gaps, because one of the things I have certainly learned from my research is that it's rewarding apps are really complex, and there is kind of lots of issues around why they exist. And there are a number of things that you can do to try and reduce them. And the school, excuse me, needs support with initiating some of those, and I don't call them interventions anymore, because intervention suggests they're one off, whereas student support suggests that it's much more longitudinal. So I'm here really within the school to support the development of the student journey, and to sort of act as a bit of a lobbyist at times as well. So again, drawing on the research, I was in a meeting on last week, which was a Board of Studies meeting where we were talking about student co creation, and I know from reading in the research how important student Cocreation is, and I was able to direct them to a piece of literature that I'd read. So I've directed them to the universities, UK and NUS report that lists the ways that other institutions have been closing, awarding gaps. So I'm very much turning my research, if you like are

applying my research in a very practical role now, which is which is really rewarding, actually, and hopefully will help my research as well to a two parts a two way dynamic going on then.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 04:29

You talked there a moment ago about using your some of your academic knowledge in a professional context. And can you talk me through a little bit any examples of the other way around where your professional role has made you approach the academic space or literature in a particular way?

Rehana Awan 04:48

I guess it probably is more from the position that it hurts or my my professional role will highlight areas that I think okay, maybe I should go and have a look at that. that, or maybe that's a particular area of interest that I should dig a bit deeper into, or I might have touched on it in my research, but not actually sort of gone into more depth and and actually student co creation. And student engagement is one of those areas that sort of has that had that two way. And relationships. So I've kind of gone back to the literature and going, Okay, I need to do more reading in this area, because not only will it inform my professional practice, I think it will also have an impact on my research. And it might be something that I explore then when I start to do my data collection with with the students around the value of student cocreation. And also the understanding of it. Because there's quite a disconnect, I think between what the literature says and the experiences of some face to face universities, and how we might apply that in a distance learning context.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 05:59

Oh, that's really interesting. I was going to ask you about that. That particular dynamic about whether you feel there is a friction between professional knowledge and academic knowledge or whether you find they're generally aligning or whether one unframes or reframes the other. What kind of experience are you finding there in that relationship?

Rehana Awan 06:18

I think it's a reframing one. And sometimes it can be challenging. So particularly with an area like awarding gaps, which is a really, it's an emerging field of a body of knowledge. So we're learning more and more about it as the time progresses. And that's if you're particularly looking at it. So if you're not looking at it on a day to day basis, then some of the some of the things that you come across can be quite challenging for others, so so not only am I having to reframe it for myself, and then having to sort of pass that reframing on to others, to support their knowledge and development of the area as well. I think I think that's and you know, in short, there is pushed back to some of the initiatives, which means that then I need to then go back. And so that's a professional tension, that means that I then need to go back into my academic research, to look at ways of managing that push back, and look to see if there's other evidence out there that I can draw on to support my response to the push back.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 07:34

And that sort of touches very slightly on the different kinds of audience that the research has both within the both during the process of carrying out the research. And then one day further ahead, when the research is completed, as if research is ever fully completed, I don't know. But can you just talk me

through your thinking about the kind of potential audiences that you have for the research along the journey.

Rehana Awan 08:00

So I see, I see very much one of the outputs, if you like from, from my research, being around staff development, and empowering staff to understand the context and the history behind awarding gaps, but also to empower them to make or to find solutions. And so I think staff development for central academic staff will call them for support staff, but also for associate lecturers as well. And so extending that to basically all staff so that there's a so that you take them on a journey. But then I also think that there is something around my research for students as well. So students aren't aware of awarding gaps. And there is obviously an ethical consideration around making them aware. You know, it could become a self fulfilling prophecy, for example. Or it could be that, you know, it causes distress and detriment to their studies, or damages, confidence. So there are ethical considerations around making students aware of awarding gaps. However, the research does suggest that if you are able to make students aware of the situation, they're better informed, and therefore are more likely to seek support, which I know is a bit of a depth deficit model and you're putting the responsibility on the on the student there. However, it again, it's about empowering, empowering students to be able to make choices that better that mean they're better supported. And then there's also I think, the sector so there's a lot of literature out there that looks at the experiences of students in face to face environments and the experiences of staff and face to face environment. But distance learning is is unique in that we don't see our students on a daily basis. So, you know, the body of knowledge around supporting students over a distance should need to be increased, as well as you know what the different issues which I'm hoping will Aileen cover with my research that what that you know what are the issues that are specific to a distant learning distance learning environment. But also, as the sector's has moved more to what they call this hybrid model of learning where they've got some face to face and some online learning, you know, my research will be applicable in those institutions and those situations in the sector as well.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 10:45

Definitely a post pandemic, if we can call it that considerations, and that makes us even more important than it already was. Anyway, Rehana, thank you so much for sharing with us those insights. I wonder, before we finish, perhaps you could share with us any top tips you have for current or prospective, professional doctorate researchers

Rehana Awan 11:08

Carve out time. Time is really important and being organised I think, particularly around your literature review, and really getting to grips with the themes that you want to develop or find out more about. But also not to be so hard on yourself because I think I think doctoral research is a marathon rather than a sprint. And, you know, getting to each of a milestone should be celebrated. I think more than anything else. And yeah, keep going. Keep going. That's what I keep telling myself anyway to just keep going.

Fiona Aubrey-Smith 11:52

That definitely resonates rather thank you so much for your time. It's been really, really insightful. Thank you so much.