

PLEASE DO INTRODUCE YOURSELF: WHO YOU ARE, WITH A BRIEF SUMMARY OF YOUR CAREER?

I'm Alison Brown, and I'm Director of Communities and External Engagement at the Open University. This is the third university I've worked in, and before that I spent 10 years working in central government.

CAN YOU TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT THE WORK YOU'RE DOING CURRENTLY?

I see my role as helping the OU to be more externally facing. I really enjoy the variety of working across different functions, and building bridges across boundaries to collaborate with internal and external partners. This has been the best role of my career: the OU's powerful social mission is very energising, and I enjoy spotting synergies across our complex stakeholder landscape.

WHAT STRENGTHS DO YOU BRING TO YOUR WORK?

I have lots of partnerships expertise but I'm not a specialist. I think this is linked to me being neurodivergent: I don't like specialising, I prefer variety, drawing on the best of comms, external affairs, policy, and income generation. I create coherence across multiple functions, which helps when navigating complexity. External partners appreciate when I can explain the whole organisational offer.

But that approach can make it tough for me to search for a job. Vacancies often focus on one specialism, but I don't fit neatly into a little box. It's such a missed opportunity when teams work in silos.

I NOTICED YOU'VE SPLIT YOUR TIME BETWEEN PERMANENT AND NON-EXECUTIVE WORK, IS THIS A CHALLENGE TO BALANCE?

Another example of me finding ways to stretch myself. I was careful to choose roles that don't require a huge time commitment. Whereas some people might find these different roles a distraction, I actually perform better at the OU because I am building my network, learning about myself, and capturing ideas that I can apply in my day job. I love spotting connections and bringing wider learning from my non-executive roles back to the OU.

You state publicly on your LinkedIn profile that you proudly neurodivergent and an advocate for neurodiversity. Can you tell us a bit more about your own neurodiversity?

I was diagnosed with ADHD about 3 years ago - up until that point I had no idea. I remember going to a presentation about neurodiversity with a previous employer and came out none the wiser. The presentation focused on the medical definitions, but I had learned how to fit into a neurotypical world in my life so I couldn't recognise any of it.