

## **Transcript – UHI STEM Femmes**

**Host:** John McLuckie

**Guest Speakers:** Stuart Hall, Bryony Beck, Kirstie Miller, Ramona Petrig

**John McLuckie:** 0:16

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability centre. In this episode we'll be talking to champions from the UHI STEM Femmes group and UHI's Equality and Diversity Adviser, on how the university is supporting and encouraging more women to engage with STEM subjects. I'm John McLuckie and I'm joined on this podcast by Stuart Hall, Bryony Beck, Kirstie Miller and Ramona Petrig. I started by asking Stuart about his route into becoming an Equality and Diversity Adviser.

**Stuart Hall:** 0:45

Well I've had a few reasons, really, for choosing equality and diversity, from my own personal experiences and those of the people who are close to me. You know for a start, a lot of the friends I made initially when I started out working in Higher Education are from international backgrounds, so whether from Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and many of my friends have faced particular challenges in society in the UK, and some of them were shared challenges like racism or nationalism and stereotyping, and others were more culture-specific, some of the stereotyping was culture-specific as well actually. This got me interested in the complexity between culture, identity and society, and how this might affect our experiences of the world around us, particularly in relation to social exclusion and micro-incivilities, which you might have heard described as casual isms, if you will, like casual sexism, casual racism, or the acceptable face of transphobia, or any of the above. Another factor which influenced me was around about the time I was made redundant, I started to lose my eyesight from diabetic retinopathy, so I found it firstly very difficult to keep up with the job I was doing at the time, and then latterly found it difficult to get back into work, so I guess I wanted to start working towards a situation where institutions can have more of an approachable feel in these situations and can know how to engage in these dialogues. I also worked in care from a young age, which gave me a real sense of many of the more bespoke or individual challenges that members of the community face. And I guess the final reason that just springs to mind, off the tip of my tongue, for choosing to go into equality and diversity, is that as someone who has probably had more influential women in my life, I've got quite a heightened awareness of some of the more subtle ways that differentiation can play out, between genders, maybe in tone of voice, body language or assumptions about who in the house hold bears the title of Professor, for example.

In terms of my pathway into my career, when I decided to go into equality and diversity, I realised very quickly that there weren't that many job openings in that particular field in the northeast of Scotland, where I was living at the time, so I applied to universities all over the country and found myself in a Russell Group environment at Exeter University. So Russell Group universities are very well funded, generally quite a lot of money for staff development and things, so I was allowed loads of professional development opportunities when I was there, I worked really hard and just took every opportunity I could get, read every article I could read and just networked really widely. So that allowed me the acumen that I needed to join the UHI partnership in 2018 and I moved full time to Ness Walk in a more strategic role at Executive Office in 2019.

**John McLuckie: 3:16**

Fantastic. So what are your responsibilities as UHI's Equality and Diversity Adviser?

**Stuart Hall: 3:22**

I guess in order to answer that I should maybe give a little bit more context about what equality and diversity advisors actually do. Basically, all functions of a university relate to people, and as we know, different factors can affect different people in different ways. So when we look at our policies, and our environments, courses, processes, methods, it's my job to try and find out where these are potentially experienced differently by different groups of people and different individuals, and to come up with suggestions for how we can do things differently or new things that we can do, or things that we're doing well already that we can replicate, and I do this in order to ensure that everyone has the best possible chance to succeed, and feel fulfilled and satisfied at their university experience which I think really is one of the most basic level things that we have to offer as an institution.

In terms of some of the specific ways that I have to think about people and things in order to do my job well, these would span the areas that I mentioned, policies, practices, environments, the curriculum. But then further, the Equality Act has nine protected characteristics, I suppose you could say eleven if you counted socio-economic disadvantage and care experience, and each of these characteristics has different memberships, across different races, different genders, different religions, and each of whom have their own very specific and complex identities, whether as individuals or groups. A large part of what I'm doing currently is trying to find ways to divide my time in such a way that all partners can have some level of support for equality duties. Obviously, there aren't that many hours in a day, so I spend a lot of time developing processes to either work smarter, or in big groups, or get small time-commitment from a large number of people and divvying up tasks based on people's particular skills and interests. And it's also really important so that you can have a range of voices contributing to your equality objectives because no one experienced group can really have a monopoly on what a university needs to do in order to be able to serve its whole population. So for example our data might tell us that we need to increase applications, retention and degree classifications for women in STEM subjects. So then I'd look at why these shortfalls maybe exist in the first place, and would have the necessary conversations to draw up a plan like the STEM Femmes, make a case to the university to run with it and market it in such a way as to maximise the number of skilled and enthusiastic people who are going to be able to see it and participate in it, whether that's actually people who are participating as STEM Femmes or whether it's staff champions who are getting involved or people from external bodies.

To return to the question you asked me initially about what my job is at the university, I've basically got a very broad role which involves working together with all of the academic partners to ensure that we meet our legal requirements and our funding duties in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion.

**John McLuckie: 6:03**

How does your role align with careers and employability in STEM subjects?

**Stuart Hall: 6:07**

So I suppose the first answer is really that my job is important to generate the breadth of engagement and support necessary for careers and employability work relating to STEM, and to ensure that people are aware of the work that we're doing. The second answer would be that I need to do this in a way that draws on existing goals, staff and resources, and in a way that can compete with the rest of the sector and larger universities and colleges who are often much better funded.

Basically, it's about building the sorts of relationships and networks that the region needs, because we're in really remote and often isolated settings. It's really crucial for us to foster a UHI wide community to ensure that women with a proclivity to STEM subjects always have access to other women who they can find inspiration in and look up to, to ask questions of, and for these to be women who have a flair for the specific things that only a scientist or an engineer or a mathematician can do.

**John McLuckie: 06:56**

That leads really neatly into asking you about how the STEM Femmes project came about.

**Stuart Hall: 07:00**

If we look at the STEM Femmes and staff champions initiative and how that came to fruition, one would analyse course statistics and patterns across the sector, and the data might lead to us setting a goal of increasing aspirations, retention and degree classifications from women in STEM subjects, for example. So I would then look at why these shortfalls existed in the first place, I'd look at what it was that we needed to do differently internally but also what it was that society needed to do differently, and how we could go about achieving some of these things, and then draw up a programme like the STEM-Femmes, make a case to the university to run with it, and then market it in such a way as to maximise the number of diverse applicants but also of diverse and enthusiastic people who are going to be able to see and participate in the project.

**John McLuckie: 07:43**

So, who are the diverse and enthusiastic people that make up the STEM Femmes group? I spoke to three of the student champions.

**John McLuckie: 07:49**

Bryony Beck

**Bryony Beck: 07:50**

I'm studying Rural Sustainable Development Masters with Lews Castle College online through distance learning. Before that I did study at UHI in my undergrad in Geography, I did the accelerated

degree at Inverness College, so I kind of consider myself to be a bit of a geographer and I enjoy going out and about Scotland, I just love it.

**John McLuckie:** 08:12

Kirstie Miller

**Kirstie Miller:** 08:14

I am a third year BSc Computer Science student at Perth College at the University of the Highlands and Islands, and I started my computing course because I really just loved computing. I did it in High School and I had a really great teacher who was quite inspiring and that's kind of what got me started in computing and sort of made me start to really enjoy it.

**John McLuckie:** 08:34

Ramona Petrig

**Ramona Petrig:** 08:36

I'm a marine science undergraduate student, I'm just entering the third year after summer. I grew up in Switzerland where I did all of my education actually. I never had amazing science or maths grades in High School, so I didn't go off to do any STEM-related things earlier. And yeah, I was really interested in doing Marine Science and I just decided to enrol on a course and I saw the course they have at SAMS and it just sounded really great and I applied and got in and here I am.

**John McLuckie:** 09:07

So what interested you in the UHI STEM Femmes group?

**Ramona Petrig:** 09:11

Yeah, so it was through the UHI and the Equate Scotland student network that I think all of us got into the STEM Femmes project and yeah, it just sounded like a really nice opportunity to connect with people and support each other and inspire each other to pursue our interests in STEM and it was really nice to meet all the other girls involved and it's such a nice network to be in, and kind of help each other make your way through, which is really nice I think.

**Kirstie Miller:** 9:46

In all of my classes in my time at University, there have been hardly any women in the classes and it's been OK because it's like a very welcoming environment, so it's not felt like we were the odd ones out or anything like that, but it does make you think why isn't there more women in computing

and I kind of feel quite passionately about making sure that young girls know that they have these options, because when I first left High School I didn't go into Computing, I went to University to study a different subject, because I felt like I shouldn't be doing Computing, I didn't feel like it was a viable option for me, and then I ended up not enjoying the subject that I went to study and left and thought, why don't I do Computing? And I kind of just wanted to encourage young girls to think of these things as options and not like they can't do them, the same way that I did.

**Bryony Beck: 10:31**

One of the sustainable development goals for 2030 is actually gender equality. So I'm very interested in the gender equality side of the STEM subjects and I do believe that women's rights and pay should be equal as to what they are for men. So that's basically what drove me to the role was I wanted to be involved in promoting gender equality and I think one great way of doing this is through the STEM role.

**John McLuckie: 10:57**

And are you working on any specific projects at the moment?

**Kirstie Miller: 11:00**

I have been working on the social media for the group along with Ramona and Bryony on Facebook and with Ruth on Twitter. So we've been putting quite a lot of work into that, making sure that we can find new content relevant to women and relevant to STEM. So that's been really interesting and quite challenging as well because it's kind of a new thing for me anyway, managing a Facebook page like that. So that's been really good and it's nice that we're starting to get some engagement as well and hopefully spreading the message a bit wider.

**Ramona Petrig: 11:29**

My main focus at the moment is helping design a service for UHI to better understand the people's motivations and perceptions and also what they perceive as barriers or obstacles towards STEM education and work in STEM subjects and to try and get a picture of that and come up with suggestions on how we could improve those. So that's the main thing that I'm focusing on at the moment and then all of us we're collectively also involved in different activities like connecting with others through STEM-related events at our local universities to build network opportunities, for example organising little sessions on campus, career development like CVs, or internship talks and then also to being involved in public outreach, so for example we have this Girl Guides event which is really cool, to go out with the Girl Guides and do different tasks with them in robotics or engineering or science. Yeah, so that's a really nice part to it as well and then we're also promoting STEM education with online articles and blogs and social media.

**Bryony Beck: 12:48**

I am helping out with our Facebook page at the moment, so what I've been doing is, there's three of us and we post about twice in one week, so we're posting six out of seven days on our Facebook page, please do follow us on UHI STEM Femmes. So, over the last month we've worked on World Environment Day where we did some quizzes and we hosted things on the Facebook page there as well as the Endangered Species Day as well. It was World Oceans Day last Monday there, and we were promoting the oceans and SAMS UHI you know, with the work that they do and how obviously women then play into that. Any articles or that, that we feel is appropriate for women in STEM to be reading we try and promote through our Facebook page. I'm also going to be working on, we're going to have an online module so that women in STEM across the entire UHI network can get in contact with us. Through the UHI module we'll be having discussion boards, you know, we'll have topics probably once a week where we'll invite people to come on and speak about various things, but at the moment that's still being set up so I'm looking forward for that to all come together and get that all launched and link it in with our social media as well.

**John McLuckie:** 14:01

In terms of STEM careers and employability, why do you think the work of the group is so important?

**Ramona Petrig:** 14:07

I think on the one hand all these little activities we do, for example, that the Equate network does as well, where they have CV writing or how to apply for something and to learn about these things, I think that's really valuable to become more confident as well, and to know who you could ask for advice and to build this community of people and contacts, and also just to get ideas of what you could do, what there is, for example that you could go on to do internships and maybe meet someone who did something cool and you could ask them for advice. And then I think from my perspective, since Marine Science is not really an obvious lack of women topic in a way, it might be slightly different compared to for example maritime operations or if you do a very gender separated subject. In terms of my personal career development, I think these are the most meaningful things to just gain confidence and know what there is, get a view of all the opportunities there are to progress in your career in a way, beyond just the things you learn in Uni.

**Bryony Beck:** 15:20

I think obviously it does give us that chance to have that networking, you know once things get back to normal, and we can have face to face events and things. I think it would be very good that we can get a lot of women across science, technology, engineering and maths and I think some people don't realise sometimes that they can all be connected and I think it would be great for that to just be sharing our opportunities and things like that.

**Kirstie Miller:** 15:44

Well I think just the fact that it's a group of women that we can network with each other helps with having connections and stuff like that for possibly getting into companies for jobs. But as well I think

even being part of the group is a good benefit for when you're looking for jobs because it shows that you're really interested and you're really keen in what you're doing and you're enthusiastic about STEM and I think in the future we're looking to try and work with some organisations on a few projects and stuff like that, so it will be great to make those connections with the companies as well.

**John McLuckie:** 16:15

How do you see the group evolving over the next few months?

**Bryony Beck:** 16:19

I think the expectation is just to get the whole UHI network on board I think because it would be quite an achievement, because obviously we are very widespread but I think through the online and through all of our own individual connections, you know there's eight champions and I think as a group we work really, really well, and we can just get out there and promote, and in that sense, I think it would be great really, that everything we've worked up to will, obviously when we all move on, I think it will be great to see how the future groups of the STEM champions get on as well. And just how our influence influences the other groups I think will be quite an achievement as well.

**Kirstie Miller:** 16:58

Well, hopefully in this coming academic year, we'll be able to do a lot more than we did last year because the group was formed later on in the year. Hopefully this year we'll be able to go to Fresher's, maybe have a stall for the new students coming in and hopefully encourage the brand new students coming in to be joining the group and be interested in things like that, because I think it could be quite attractive to them, being that it's kind of a support group and they're coming to a college and it's like a new place and they might be a bit concerned or feel a bit lost. It can kind of be a place for them to come to be able to speak to people and have that kind of support network, so hopefully if we get started earlier in the year, and just try as much as we can raise awareness of the fact that we exist and that we're here. That will hopefully help with getting people involved.

**Ramona Petrig:** 17:41

At the beginning definitely there was slightly more focus on trying to do events on campus in person but obviously we had to reconsider and see if we can do them online and as lockdown persisted I think most of us switched to what we can do on social media and blogs and try to come up with ways of making the presence more online as well and engage with other events that are happening online. I hope that as the restrictions are being eased a bit we'll be able to take up some of those projects again that we've not been able to do now during lockdown.

**John McLuckie:** 18:19

How have you enjoyed your experience as a STEM Femme?

**Kirstie Miller:** 18:22

I've really loved it, I have. At the start, it was funny because you kind of came into it not really knowing much about it at all because it hadn't existed before, so I didn't really have any specific expectations of it, but it's been really great, just being involved and meeting all these new people and just working together to try and boost women in STEM really because it affects all of us. So yeah, it's been really, really good.

**John McLuckie:** 18:45

How do you think the experience of being a STEM Femme will help with whatever you go on and do next?

**Bryony Beck:** 18:50

What I want to do next is actually I'm very interested in community development, so I think as I've already said, the sustainable development goals, you know, with the gender equality and that, and it's funny that I always kind of think if there's one thing I want to do in my life, I want to contribute to at least one sustainable development goal and that's what the STEM Femmes are doing for me at the moment and I think it will do that for me in the future as well and I think it's just great that even though we're all across Scotland, I think one great thing that we can take away from this is that we can work remotely, we can work as a team even though we don't have to see each other face to face all the time, because our Facebook group, the three of us, we meet on a monthly basis and we plan out what we're going to do for the month and we just do that through Skype, and it works, and because it works we're using it as a model for the future. So I think it's just, all the experience that we have, we're going to be able to use for our future careers and it's going to make us a better person to employ than maybe somebody else, you know, so it's that sort of thing.

**John McLuckie:** 19:51

And if people are interested in finding out more about the STEM Femmes group, where can they go for more information?

**Ramona Petrig:** 19:57

So we have a Facebook and Twitter page of the STEM Femmes group. It's just UHI STEM Femme-written and that's where you can contact any of us through that page or also through the Equate Scotland page, that has all of our profiles and contacts. And then obviously through UHI you could reach out as well if you're a student.

**John McLuckie:** 20:21

Bryony, Kirsty and Ramona, thanks very much for taking part in the podcast.

**Ramona Petrig:** 20:25

Yeah, thanks very much for having me.

**Kirstie Miller:** 20:27

Thankyou for having me.

**Bryony Beck:** 20:29

No problem, thankyou.

**John McLuckie:** 20:30

I finished off by asking Stuart what's next for the UHI STEM Femmes group?

**Stuart Hall:** 20:35

We will be making a case to continue the STEM Femmes programme indefinitely. We have a number of senior figures on side already and I'm hoping to look at how we can essentially regionalise our model, and present development opportunities to a wider number of people across the Highlands and Islands, and really show our region competing with bigger cities and older universities. If you'd like to get in contact with us, either as a member of UHI staff who wants to get involved in supporting the programme or wants to know how we can support you. Maybe you're someone working in STEM industries, or in employability, in schools, for public bodies or maybe feminism, social theory, these might be areas that are of interest to you and anyone who falls into these categories or anyone who considers themselves to be an ally to women in STEM subjects, we'd love to hear from you and see how we can work together. It would be fantastic to meet you so please do get in contact with me. Also, we realise that if you are student looking to get involved, then there's maybe stuff that you're looking to do during lockdown, so you can always feel free to get in contact with our STEM Femmes who are great fun, have fantastic ideas and work ethic and are always happy to accept help. And we hope to undergo the next round of recruitment for next year's STEM Femmes in Autumn 2020, so if you just keep an eye out, then you'll see advertising related to that nearer the time with some luck. As long as we're able to continue in the same way as we were able to pre-COVID then we hope to see you then.

**John McLuckie:** 21:51

Thanks very much Stuart for taking part in the podcast. Good to talk to you.

**Stuart Hall:** 21:55

Good to talk to you too John, thanks for taking the time.

**John McLuckie: 21:57**

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