



Race equality in academia: time to establish black studies in the UK?

With just 85 black professors in the UK, **Deborah Gabriel** says we need a more diverse curriculum for real change



Currently there are no accredited black studies programmes in the UK – is it time for a curriculum rethink? Photograph: Elliot Elliot/Getty Images/Johner RF

If the same vigour and commitment that drive gender equality in higher education were directed towards race equality then better progress could be made in addressing the institutionalised racism that pervades the higher education sector.

While women now account for 44% of all academics within UK universities (2011/12 HESA Staff Record), the percentage of black academics (combining black Caribbean, black African and black other) stands at just 12.5%.

In a survey among the Black British Academics network, 81% of respondents said they were in favour of positive action targeted towards the groups most adversely impacted by race. The issue is not just that black academics are under-represented, says member Cecily Jones, an independent researcher, but also relates to "the conditions under which we work; the opaque pay negotiations and promotions structures".

There are just 85 black professors out of a total of 18,510 in the UK. However, the strategy adopted by most universities aimed at increasing black staff representation in senior posts remains problematic. Too often it is limited to mentoring programmes that are based on the presumption that black staff lack the confidence, knowledge, skills and experience for progression, rather than acknowledging other factors at play.

"It's the tap on the shoulder that can disempower and disenfranchise those that don't get a tap on the shoulder," says Mark Cleary. Or as Jones puts it: "Senior colleagues decide who is fit for promotion and if your face or research doesn't fit their model of what constitutes worthwhile or valuable research then, you simply don't get put forward for promotion".

Jones believes that cultural bias lies at the heart of the institutionalised racism that limits the recruitment and progression of black academics. "It is not enough to bring in more black faces," she says. "The knowledge that we bring in must be validated."

According to Jones, full racial equality within academia will not be reached until we see studies that are relevant and pertinent to our lives, our histories and our communities within university prospectuses being offered as valid, credible degrees. Currently there

are no accredited black studies programmes in the UK.

There is growing frustration over the absence of black studies across the UK higher education sector and concern that where courses do exist, the framing of discourses are somewhat problematic. As Adam Elliott-Cooper, a PhD student at the University of Oxford, explains: "There are few if any mainstream institutions which engage in black studies in any meaningful way. Slavery, civil rights and anti-racism is all the mainstream can generally stomach."

Elliott-Cooper believes that black studies should not be confined to the context of racism but should extend to the contribution of ancient African histories to world civilisations including African cultures, literature and arts. His view is shared by Ornette Clennon, lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, who says that academia is still dominated by a Eurocentricity "that excludes other cultural presentations of knowledge while masquerading as being neutral, objective and unbiased".

Challenging this paradigm, according to Sonia Davis, senior lecturer in education at De Montfort University, requires black scholars to "raise the presence and impact" of their academic output as a means of developing black cultural capital. Black academics must seek "to make a positive contribution to the lives and opportunity of black communities through research and academic inquiry," says Josephine Kwali, senior lecturer in social work at the University of Coventry.

In particular, Kwali says black academics could undertake more detailed research into our own career paths and experiences to inform race equality policy and practice. It is a view shared by Kevin Hylton, professor at Leeds Metropolitan University, who says that most universities lack "a critical understanding of the black experience. I would encourage the practice of garnering these voices from within and across institutions to share with all colleagues."

According to Hylton, using [critical race theory](#) as a methodological approach "to share these stories, counter-stories, strategies, wealth of experience and critique[can uncover] the practices and progress that both enable and frustrate progress on the ground," and better inform the race equality agenda in the process.

Several black academics are actively involved in creating inclusive spaces for research on black studies. They include Kehinde Andrews, lecturer at Newman University, who has helped organise a conference in November 2012 exploring the theme, "Blackness in Britain", and Gil Robinson, lecturer at the University of East London, who has been organising annual colloquiums centred on race and ethnicity for many years.

Robinson says: "Establishing black studies programmes will increase our visibility within universities and make the statement that our presence is worth studying, our presence is worth understanding and our contribution to this society, to academic life, to British life and to world life, is worth studying."

Many black academics in the UK take inspiration from the US, where there are hundreds of journals dedicated to black studies in every discipline. In the UK, there is one: [Black Theology](#).

Its editor for the past 12 years, Anthony Reddie, argues for its importance in "centring the black religious experience across the world and critiquing the Eurocentricity of mainstream theology and philosophy". Theology and religious studies in the UK, says Reddie, "largely ignores the legacy of slavery [and] the role of Christianity and the church in the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and racism". The journal also plays a role in the development of emerging black academics by providing "a critical space for radical scholarship", he adds.

According to Robert Beckford, this is key to supporting the progression of black students through higher education into academia. Beckford has mentored and supervised more than 20 black PhD students, many of whom have sought him out because "they want to be developed by someone who gets it. What they mean by this is an academic who is in critical solidarity with black communities and committed to action research."

Deborah Gabriel is a lecturer in journalism and media at the University of Salford and founder of [Black British Academics](#) – follow her on Twitter [@deborahgabriel](#)

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