

Black academics ready to tear down the racist walls of British universities

22 May 2006 Deborah Gabriel

Black Colloquium cancels annual conference at Sheffield Hallam University

The victimisation of a black lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University over her use of pioneering teaching methods has united black academics across the country in her defence and reignited their determination to fight racism in higher education (HE). When the Black Colloquium heard that one of their fellow members was told to 'take leave' so that an investigation could be conducted into her teaching methods following 'external complaints', they were both outraged and angered.

Their colleague, Yvonne Channer, a well-respected academic in the area of social work had introduced pedagogical methods into one of the units on a three year course involving group work. The approach involves dividing students into groups so that minorities are not on their own and therefore feel more relaxed about exploring issues in a safe environment. Channer and her colleagues on the course introduced the method this year, taking account of the needs of minorities on the course which included both white men and black students and groups were not strictly divided on a black-white basis.

At the beginning of April a local newspaper contacted the university to say that somebody had made a complaint about Channer's teaching methods but once Channer explained her methods fully, the newspaper was no longer interested in the story. But a week ago Channer was hauled into a meeting where she was told that her teaching methods could be construed as 'racist' and that she could therefore be bringing the university into disrepute and could be guilty of gross misconduct.

The reason that Channer's colleagues at the Black Colloquium were so incensed is that their annual conference was due to be held at Sheffield Hallam University this summer. Dr Perry Stanislas, a specialist in social anthropology told Black Britain:

"The Black Colloquium is about developing innovative research and trying to inject a black perspective into mainstream academia. To hold a conference at the same place where a colleague has been victimised for using innovative techniques is a fundamental contradiction."

Gil Robinson, a senior lecturer and co-founder of the Black Colloquium told Black Britain that a letter has been sent to Sheffield Hallam University advising them that the Black Colloquium: **"Cannot collude with behaviour that is racist and in total opposition to what the Black Colloquium aspires to."**

The event has now been moved to a London university, but as the row wages on, Dr Gurnam Singh, a teaching fellow and senior lecturer at Coventry University explained more about the teaching method Channer is being chastised for:

"The idea of working with students according to their racial-ethnic background is a well-established pedagogical procedure, not just in social work but in disciplines that look at professional and personal development."

Dr Singh used to be a training and staff development officer for a local authority prior to academia where developmental workshops for black workers were run and where a fully accredited black practice teacher's course which was for black social work practitioners was developed. Much of that work has been published.

He told Black Britain: **“If you are looking at the particular needs of the students at that moment in time to create space for them to explore – and in some subjects like social work where your own self-identity is critical to be able to work with vulnerable service users, you can only do that if there is a safe environment.”**

Gender-specific or race-specific groups are legitimate methods of creating a safe environment that conform to the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) which provides for the separation of students where there is an educational need.

Dr Singh has been an academic for the last 13 years and before that was a staff development officer for six years. He told Black Britain: **“In all my professional career from the age of 22 and I am now 46 – I have seen this practice used throughout that period and never has anyone ever questioned it. It’s really quite astounding.”**

HE establishments hostile to black perspectives in mainstream academia

Gil Robinson told Black Britain that HE establishments **“feel that they are at liberty to treat black academics in whatever way they wish because we are scattered very thinly across academia.”**

Robinson said that racism is still **“rampant”** in HE, but it is the intention of black academics to break down this racism. This is reflected in the Black Colloquium’s decision to publish a journal of African-centred discourse and practice:

“What we want to show is that there is an alternative view of seeing the world in academia and presently that is not being portrayed in the discourse that British academia is propagating at this moment in time.”

Referring to Channer’s attempts for teaching methods to reflect the interests and experience of minorities, Robinson told Black Britain that British universities are: **“petrified of opening Pandora’s Box, because they will be forced to confront the fact that there is a different experience.”**

This is why HE establishments do not wish to look at the experiences of black people from an academic standpoint and this is what forces a lot of black PHDs such as Dr Mekada Graham, Mark Christian and others to head for the USA, Robinson added.

Giving an example of this, Robinson referred to an instance where along with a white colleague he did some research for a local authority and approached a journal to publish the work. But the journal said it was not interested in the views of the employees – who they knew to be black because the research indicated as much. They wanted to know the views of the managers because they took a perception that the managers would be white.

The woman leading the article had published two books and at least 50 academic papers. She was white, but because she was writing about black employees’ perceptions of industrial relations within a public sector organisation, this journal did not want to know.

She said it was the first time a journal had ever rejected one of her articles: **“But she was able to appreciate what it is like to get academic papers based around research from a black perspective published in academic journals,”** said Robinson.

If an academic wants to teach, especially from an opposing viewpoint that challenges the system there are two choices, said Robinson: **“keep the status quo, or leave.”** He told Black Britain that the answer is to challenge institutions:

“This is pretty much what the Black Colloquium is all about. Our journal which will be peer-reviewed is basically saying that there is another view, there is another experience and it must be taken into account.”

Dr Perry Stanislas told Black Britain that Channer’s case is a perfect example of how black academics are treated in British universities, that are less interested in the interests of students and delivering high performance than in maintaining the status quo, but warned:

“The environment must be there for black people or any other ethnic group or even women, to do things in new and interesting ways, which is essentially what learning is about.”

Dr Stanislas believes that the experiences of black academics are not unique to them: **“It’s just a symptom of the experience of working black people across the board.”**

The solution, he believes is the same in all cases, which is for blacks to organise themselves into collective action: **“It’s ironic, but racism forces black people to segregate.”** Referring to the Black Colloquium, Dr Stanislas said: **“We don’t speak for all black academics but we are speaking for a growing number.”**

Individual cases of racism make up a bigger picture of inequalities in HE

Dr Lez Henry, a former lecturer and now teaching fellow at Goldsmiths University, sociologist and cultural historian told Black Britain that he is frustrated by the fact that: **“Cases like Channer’s are often not framed into the bigger picture.”**

Speaking of his own experience at Goldsmiths University, he said: **“I couldn’t even get short-listed for the job I was doing. I had a similar publication and a better teaching record than people who were employed on exactly the same lecturer scale as me.”**

Despite this, Dr Henry’s less experienced white colleagues were all short-listed for interviews, one of them who made a short-list three times but failed to get a job eventually had a position created for her. These are some of the oppressive tactics used by universities with black academics on the receiving end of blatant racism, charged Dr Henry.

“When you put all these cases together, that will explain why, for example, there are only a handful of black women professors,” he said.

As Black Britain reported in August last year following a study in academic recruitment, black academics, whether teaching in colleges or universities fail to secure full-time contracts in HE. Dr Henry said: **“Why are we always the ones who are in part-time positions?”**

The problem when black academics get fed up and leave the UK to teach abroad, is that they keep quiet about their negative experiences of teaching in the UK: **“They only tell their stories when they are gone, because they fear repercussions. But how is that going to help our situation?”** asked Dr Henry.

Professor Cecile Wright is Professor of Sociology at Nottingham Trent University and one of about five female professors of black African and Caribbean origin in the UK. She told Black Britain:

“Any right-thinking black academic in a UK institution whether they admit it or not is involved in a daily struggle. Some of them like myself have got to the point now where I am overt about the struggle.”

Professor Wright told Black Britain that the experience of black academics is characterised by isolation in institutions that are meant to hold **“liberal values and liberal principals.”** But far from being progressive, British HE institutions are the perpetrators of the **“marginalisation”** of black academics who experience a lack of support, lack of resources and both indirect and overt racism on a daily basis.

Professor Wright continued: **“Universities are places where the cultural and social values of society are imparted to those who participate whether they are lecturers or students,”** and these institutions should be **“honest”** about their treatment of people who are not white.

Speaking of the fact that schools have had to address issues of racism in terms of young black pupils who are excluded at alarming rates and fail to reach their full potential, the experience of black teachers has been examined and further education has also acknowledged issues of racism: **“But HE has not done so,”** said Professor Wright.

Professor Wright suggested that the resistance to change on the part of HE institutions was **“insidious”** given that a large chunk of the £14 billion annual revenue earned in HE came from overseas – mainly students who are not white – from India, China, Africa, the Caribbean and other parts of the world.

“There are huge contradictions, there is huge hypocrisy and there is blatant racism in the system and the system needs to engage in an open, serious and concerted way with these underlying ways of working with and treating those that are not white.”

Professor Wright warned that HE institutions should be mindful of the fact that they are publicly funded institutions, with some of the taxpayer’s money coming from black citizens of this country, to whom these institutions are accountable. All universities are meant to be involved in widening participation for traditionally under-represented groups which include black people.

“This widening participation should not just stop at customers bringing in money. The agenda should also be extended to those who are there to deliver the knowledge,” said Professor Wright.

“The universities need to be accountable to us because we are contributing to this sector and this is where we can demand some political answers.”

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