

THE EARLY HOUR

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What it's like to be a black female academic



“To be a black female academic is challenging, rewarding and fulfilling,” says Dr Deborah Gabriel, who lectures at Bournemouth University in politics, media and marketing communication. She talks us through her career journey...

Dr Deborah Gabriel is in her 40s and lives on the south-east coast of England.

“I started out as a journalist, as I felt the need to use journalism to claim representation spaces in the media for people of colour, as a way of challenging marginalization and misrepresentation.

In my thirties I reflected on my ambitions when I was at college (becoming a journalist and being involved in the empowerment of women) and I realised I had not pursued

them at all, so felt unfulfilled. Higher education seemed to provide the opportunity to achieve these ambitions.

I was a 'very mature student' when I embarked on a foundation degree in journalism at London College of Communication. But I found this to be a positive. I was focused, determined and really enjoyed the course and the diverse mix of students in the cohort. We were very close and socialised a lot and supported each other.

The main challenge I encountered was the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity in the curriculum. But I raised this issue with the former associate dean of the school of media, Gary Naylor, who was extremely supportive and helped me to articulate this with some suggested solutions at a high-level meeting. Some positives came out of that, which was very rewarding.

It was Gary Naylor who suggested I consider becoming an academic at my book launch. I had started to gain a real interest in research when I was working on my undergraduate dissertation, which became the book: *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora*.

I thought that in terms of trying to affect social change in the media in terms of news reporting, I could have just as much impact by training the next generation of journalists. To be a black female academic is challenging, rewarding and fulfilling.

As a woman of colour who has experienced raced and gendered discrimination, I understand what it is to be marginalized and invisible. Hence my aim is to examine and challenge marginalization where I encounter it.

The main driver behind Black British Academics, which I founded, was isolation. I had moved from London to Manchester to do my PhD, where I knew no one. I felt lonely and isolated and since I had set up a network for Black Bloggers to support my PhD research, I decided to do the same to support my role as a developing academic.

The original vision was of a network to help students and staff feel a sense of belonging within an institutional culture dominated by white, European, middle and upper-class able-bodied, heterosexual males. Of course three years later it has evolved to be so much more than that.

My philosophy is built on the principle of cultural democracy. For me this means that all ethnic and cultural identities are of equal value, they co-exist and are interdependent. As a human family we are all different to each other. Hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, culture, gender, religion, sexuality, socio-economic status, a person's level of physical or mental ability – which always results in social and

economic disparities and unequal distribution of power – must be challenged until cultural democracy becomes the norm.

When you consider the slaying of African Americans by police and the rise of Islamophobia in the US; the rise of far right political leaders in Europe; the domination of the UK Brexit campaign by divisive, right-wing politicians and the resulting rise in racist incidents post-Brexit; the ongoing conflict in the Middle East – and the list goes on. I think it is clear that there needs to be a seismic shift in the discourses and values that dominate the media and shape public opinion.

If journalistic values included culturally democratic principles, then we would get a much broader range of perspectives and people would see the world as it really is – not how dominant groups want us to see it in order to preserve the status quo.

I think alternative media forms and citizen journalism has a role to play in effecting social change. At one time “professional” journalists were very dismissive of this, until blogs and social media became so popular among the public. But ultimately the mainstream media has most influence on public opinion so this is where the change needs to be.

There are few politicians that I believe have either an interest in or the capacity to bring about social change. Personally I believe that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is the only true culturally democratic leader among all of the political parties. We need a Prime Minister with culturally democratic values to acknowledge that our vibrant society benefits socially, culturally and economically from the contribution that the ethnically diverse people who have made Britain their home, bring to this nation.

Race, ethnicity and culture impacts the experiences and outcomes of students, with students of colour having less favourable journeys and lower degree attainment that cannot be explained by ability. Race, ethnicity and culture also significantly shapes the experiences and progression of staff of colour. There is an under-representation of staff of colour in higher education for most ethnic groups and extremely low numbers at senior management and professorial levels.

There has been far greater progress in terms of gender equality – but that success has largely been for white women. It irks me that higher education institutions with dismal records on race equality boast that they are progressive because they have so many white women in their institutions and at senior levels (though none of colour). Gender equality initiatives are woefully lacking in an intersectional approach and fail to tackle the needs and interests of women of colour.

To other women who are thinking about furthering their education, or pursuing a career at a later age, I would say: go for it! Later in life we tend to have a clearer idea

about what is meaningful and I think we tend to seek meaning, purpose and fulfilment in life. That was certainly the case for me and learning feeds the soul – there will never be a time when I think there is nothing more to learn – every day is a new experience.”

Are you a black female academic? What has your experience in academia been like? We'd love to hear from you in the comments below...

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Reflections of a Black female academic | Teaching for Social Change on 10th June 2017 at 11:32 am Reply

[...] In January 2017, the US online magazine Early Hour, published my interview on what it's like being a Black female academic. You can read it [HERE](#) [...]

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