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Search

[Multimedia](#)
[Dating](#)
[Jobs](#)
[Apprenticeship](#)

Category: -Any-
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Custom Search 1

-Any Category-

Black Female Academics Share Their Experiences

New book shines a light on race and gender inequality in UK higher education as some of Britain's brightest black female minds speak about their lives and work

Written by **Rianna Raymond-Williams**

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PICTURED: Deborah Gabriel - Ivory Tower Publication Launch at UAL

IF YOU went looking for black academics in British institutions across the country, you would probably have a tough time finding them.

Not because they do not exist, but because British institutions fail to employ them. According to employment records published in January of this year, there has been no black academics working in senior management positions in a British university for the last three years.

Figures published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) based on employment during 2015 - 2016 highlight that among the 535 senior staff who confirmed their ethnicity in the report, 510 identified as white, 15 as Asian and 10 as "other including mixed".

The figures also demonstrate universities employ more black staff as cleaners, receptionists or porters than as lecturers or professors, highlighting 5,735 black staff in non-academic roles, in comparison to the 3,205 who exist as academics in higher education institutions.

Yet, despite this disparity, it is safe to say that Britain has a long history of powerful black intellectuals, such as Francis Barber, who assisted with revising the Dictionary of the English Language; Ignatius Sancho, who played a key role in the abolition of the slave trade in the 18th century, in addition to being the first known black person to vote in a British Election.

In addition, Marcus Garvey, was a key influencer within the Pan African movement and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL).

More recently, the late Professor Stuart Hall, Jamaican born cultural theorist and founder of The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, was described as: "A giant of cultural theory and sociology" by Professor Peter Golding, former Pro Vice Chancellor of Northumbria University.

Data for the 2014/2015 academic year supplied by HESA, reveal 19,630 professors, of which 110 are black, 80 of whom are male and 30 females.

In a new book, *Inside the Ivory Towers: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia*, details the experiences of black British female academics.

Those featured each tell a story of struggle, triumph, pain and resilience. The book not only aims to shine a light on their experiences but to critically analyse them with a view to informing race and gender equality initiatives.

Inside the Ivory Tower is an ongoing research project, led Dr Deborah Gabriel as the principal investigator, who is a Senior Academic at Bournemouth University in the faculty of Media and Communication and is the founder of Black British Academics.

The book is the key output for Phase 1 of the project, edited by Dr Deborah Gabriel and Prof Shirley Anne Tate, which features first-hand accounts of black women in academia.

Alongside Dr Gabriel and Professor Tate, eight other black female academics share their stories: Prof Claudia Bernard, Dr Jenny Douglas, Dr Ima Jackson, Dr Josephine Khwali, Dr Heidi Safia Mirza, Dr Elizabeth Opara, Ms Aisha Richards and Dr Marcia Wilson.

Speaking at a launch of the book in central London last month, Dr Gabriel said: "White privilege is so normalised within everyday practice in higher education that those who benefit from it rarely question or reflect on it. However, those of us who experience racial disadvantage daily are acutely aware of it."

"Understanding how race shapes privilege and disadvantage is a crucial step towards developing strategies to address inequalities. I hope that the book helps readers to develop a critical consciousness, so that colleagues and the students we teach have a more sophisticated understanding of racism and their relationship to it. The book is important as it highlights experiences of discrimination in academia by women of colour that are not captured elsewhere in a UK context."

"Women of colour have suffered raced and gendered discrimination and abuse for a very long time – yet our voices are routinely dismissed or ignored. Our book speaks for those whose experiences have long been marginalised within discourse, policy and practice around gender equality in higher education."

Dr Gabriel, argues that the book should be used to critically examines white privilege, embed intersectionality and cultural democracy and utilise knowledge gained from lived experiences to inform policy and practice around race and gender equality to enhance the experience of black women in academia now and in years to come.



The underrepresentation of black academics throughout the British educational establishment has been an ongoing battle, which led to the formation of Black British Academics (BBA) by Dr Gabriel, in 2013. As a collective platform, BBA aims to enhance the voice and visibility of black academics in higher education.

"Black academics are extremely under-represented in higher education and for many of us we are generally one of a handful of academics of colour within our institutions" she said. "Being in the minority often renders us voiceless and invisible within a space dominated by whiteness, patriarchy and Eurocentricity."

"At my university, there is no dedicated support for academics of colour - and in the 10 years I have been working in higher education there never has been. That's one of the reasons why I established Black British Academics.

"We focus on tackling racial inequality in higher education, but as a community we benefit from solidarity and support. There is a need for Black British Academics as a network that represents staff and students of colour, since racial inequality is not an individual problem, but speaks to a longstanding societal issue that requires a collective response."

She continued: "While some organisations in the higher education sector may have race on their agenda, it tends to be marginalised by competing interests and organisations fail to prioritise the interrogation of whiteness and White privilege. One of our key principles at Black British Academics is that people of colour have an important role to play in defining the key issues around racial inequality and advancing effective solutions."

The 2014 debate "Why Isn't my professor black?" and the 2015 campaign "Why is my curriculum white?" demonstrates the changing tide that has emerged political and socially to challenge the structural and institutional racism that fails to recognise, celebrate and attribute power to black history and culture.

For centuries, the British mainstream education has been fundamentally taught from a Eurocentric perspective that has been largely shaped by colonialism. Across every discipline in the academy one would struggle to find variation of voices that represent people from other continents in the world.

However, now, more than ever before, black students are challenging dominant discourses that present them as recipients of academic knowledge, demanding acknowledgement of historical prominent black women and men who came before them, as creators of knowledge.

"At Black British Academics, we focus on collaboration and our work is largely project-oriented and consultancy-based. One of our key areas of focus is in democratizing, and de-colonising educational practice.

Since 2014, myself and Aisha Richards - one of the book's contributors and founder of Shades of Noir - have been working collaboratively through our respective organisations on a programme of curriculum diversification and inclusive teaching practice across University of the Arts London.

"I have also been embedding the same practices in a media and communications context at my own institution. This year, one of my students graduated with a first-class degree and I was extremely proud of her, and in 2015 one of my final year dissertation students won the top award at the Student Dissertation conference for Best Overall Paper. Last year was a turning point for me as it was the first time that a course I designed that focuses on media inequalities linked to race, ethnicity and culture was run.

"I enjoyed every minute of teaching it because the students were so engaged - and I could see their transformation week by week. But what touched me most was that they nominated me for an award for the unit, 'Media Inequality', 'for its contribution towards meaningful social change.'

That really moved me because 21st century struggles are largely ideological battles. Academia is a way that I can contribute towards equality and social justice, so I hope to continue using the talents that God bestowed upon me to facilitate change."

Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia is now available to purchase through Trentham Books and Amazon. For more information on Black British Academics visit www.blackbritishacademics.co.uk

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