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Payback time: academic's plan to launch Free Black University in UK

Melz Owusu has crowdfunded £60,000 to start a decolonised institution. Will existing universities agree to help fund it?

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Melz Owusu has addressed research seminars, given a TED Talk and performed raps at academic conferences to try to decolonise higher education.

But eventually the Phd student and former sabbatical officer at the Leeds University union came to a realisation: “I was like, hmm, this idea of transforming the university from the inside and having a decolonised curriculum isn’t going to happen with the way the structures of the university are.”

After listening to the experiences of black students, Owusu began to see the problem was that universities are “built on colonisation - the money, buildings, architecture - everything is colonial”.

This sparked the idea of a Free Black University to “redistribute knowledge” and place black students and a decolonised curriculum at its heart, rather than as an add-on. A GoFundMe campaign launched to finance the project has raised more than £60,000 since being set up this

month, and won backing from both the University and College Union and National Union of Students.

Owusu, who studied politics and philosophy at Leeds and will start a PhD in epistemic justice at the University of Cambridge in October, is “super-excited” at the success of the fundraising campaign, which aims to raise £250,000 to get the project up and running by the autumn.

Most of the money so far has come from large numbers of individual donations, ranging from £5 up to a few hundred pounds, with larger sums gathered through fundraising events.

A key aim, however, is to persuade universities to “redistribute” money to the initiative by making an annual donation. The Free Black University will benefit their students and the community as a whole, says Owusu. Campaigns along these lines by student activists have already started at Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan, Leeds, Exeter and UCL.

Owusu sees this as a way not only for institutions to fulfil their promises to current black students, but as payback for the role they have played in the progress of racism, from benefiting from donations by slave owners to developing the study of eugenics.

“A lot of universities we have seen with Black Lives Matter have been putting out statements about ‘we’re in support of black lives’ but we hear from black students all the time that they leave university traumatised,” says Owusu. “They fail. They experience racism all the time and the university doesn’t necessarily deal with that in the best way, or deal with it at all.”

The idea for the free university had been brewing for a while but the recent surge of interest in Black Lives Matter, following the death of George Floyd, has brought it to a head, says Owusu. “It feels like there is a growth of collective understanding of how deeply racism is entrenched in our society and realising how little has been done to challenge that at the core.

“We decided to launch it at this moment because, one, it was ready to be launched and, two, the world’s eyes are on how do we actually make black lives matter, and one of the ways I think that will happen is through transformative education.”

A small team of PhD students, recent graduates and student activists is putting together the project with the aim of having a legal structure in place before October. The plan is to deliver open-access online lectures exploring radical and transformational topics, build an online library of radical readings, develop a journal and podcast, provide a members’ space for black academics who need support, and hold an annual conference bringing together black radical thinkers.

The curriculum will be centred around sociological, historical and philosophical approaches to black liberation but could move into more scientific and creative areas. Eventually, applying for degree-awarding powers may be an option, so long as those involved feel it is possible to do without becoming institutionalised.

An important element of the project will be a space of community and care for black students, connecting them with black therapists, counsellors and community healers to offer a range of support. Members of black and minority-ethnic communities are at greater risk of developing mental health conditions, with some research suggesting that experiencing racism can increase the chances of developing depression.

In the longer term, with enough money, the aim is to have a physical hub including teaching rooms, a bookshop, restaurant and healing areas in one of London’s most diverse neighbourhoods, such as Brixton or Lewisham.

While other races will be able to benefit from the open-access resources provided, the main focus of the project will be the black community, to make up for the fact, Owusu says, that “black students and the black community in general have not been able to access the current spaces that are within academia in a fair and consistent and safe way”.

There is plenty of evidence to back this up. Figures published last year by the Office for Students showed white students were much more likely to be awarded first class or upper second class degrees than black students, with the gap between the two groups 20 percentage points or more in nearly half the universities in England. Earlier this month, freedom of information requests revealed that only a fifth of UK universities had committed to decolonising their curriculum and only 1% of professors at UK universities are black.

Jo Grady, general secretary of UCU, says: “The reason this campaign is really important and has received so much support, particularly from black scholars and students in academia, is they know how difficult it is and how damaging it is for your own sense of self worth to navigate through a university system that is at best ambivalent towards you, and at worst openly hostile.”

Fope Olaleye, NUS black students officer, says: “We welcome the Free Black University as it will fill a gap for black students within a sector in urgent need of change.

“We would invite higher and further education providers to put their money where their mouth is and financially support it.”

But Deborah Gabriel, founder of Black British Academics, a network of scholars committed to enhancing racial equity in higher education, is not convinced it is the answer. “While there is certainly merit in finding solutions to the prevalence of white privilege and systemic racism outside the present system, I think that the notion of a ‘free’ university is perhaps overly optimistic,” she says. “Sadly, nothing is free and therefore such a model would be unsustainable.”

A more realistic response, she says, would be to establish partnerships between UK higher education institutions and the historically black colleges and universities in the US, which, although founded as a result of segregation, now tend to produce black graduates who do better than those from mainstream institutions “because of the sense of worth, value and belonging”.

A spokesman for Universities UK says many institutions are already developing a more inclusive programme of learning, which includes reviewing their curriculums and reassessing reading lists, as well as conducting liberation or decolonisation activities.

But Owusu argues a more radical approach is needed - a “reprieve” and a space where the black community can find “access to a curriculum and teaching staff where everyone looks like them”.

Topics

- Race in education
- Higher education
- Universities
- Race
- Black Lives Matter movement
- Academics
- Students
- features