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BLACK ACADEMICS STRIVE TO ORGANISE BUT FACE DAUNTING OBSTACLES

By Thomas L Blair, Chronicleworld 03 July 2013 ©

This article explores the issues and guidelines for Black British academics in or intending careers in higher education and research.

Britain's first generation of Black Academics is online. Founder Deborah Gabriel, a PhD student and lecturer in journalism and media at the University of Salford, aims to create "a positive online space to promote interaction, collaboration and support". The site will aid "Black intellectuals committed to self-empowerment, social justice and equality".



Deborah Gabriel

Furthermore, Gabriel pledges that despite the marginalisation "I hope that this website serves to acknowledge and celebrate the contribution of African Caribbean academics to British society and the wider global academic community".

However, Black Academics must mobilise their ranks. They need greater strength and depth to achieve their logo-branded mission. If equality is the key word, then understanding the facts, combating problems and forging solutions to "marginalisation" are of extreme importance.

SMASH THE IVY COVERED CEILING.

Expert observers say Black scholars are noticeably scarce in the olive groves of British academe. Of about 14,000 British professors in the whole of the UK, only approximately 75 are black.

Like hard-pressed low wage Black workers, ethnic minority academics are a *précarariat* working on fixed short-term contracts, easily dismissed and on average earn less than their white counterparts, despite being better qualified in many cases.

New figures reveal stark variations in employment practices across the education sector, according to the authoritative Times Higher Education Supplement.

The variations fuel concerns that university managers are still not doing enough to ensure racial equality on the academic career ladder. This despite a gradual improvement in participation of ethnic minorities in professorial and principal lecturer positions across the sector.

DEMYSTIFY THE ACADEMIC JOB MARKET

That University lecturers from ethnic minorities are the victims of racist attitudes is old news. Years ago, Sir Herman Ouseley, Chief Executive of the Commission for Racial Equality confirmed that Policy Studies/University of Bristol inequalities study was “uncomfortable reading,” the BBC News reported. Ethnic minority lecturers are less likely to be promoted than their white counterparts and many have faced racial harassment. Furthermore, the researchers found that “After nine years of service, white lecturers were twice as likely as non-white lecturers to have been promoted to the level of professor.”



Herman Ouseley

Therefore, to grow and groom their members, Black Academics must tackle the causes of their marginalisation. Lord Parekh, of Asian background and author of major studies of racial inequalities in education, has put this point bluntly. Based on the evidence, he believes university educators should tackle racism in their midst, just as political and judicial institutions are required to do.

HEAL YOURSELVES



Robert Beckford

Gabriel and the Black Academics must strengthen the quality, status and skills of their members to make a difference.

Notably, prominent Black Liberation Theologists are listed. They are Dr Robert Beckford, Reader in Theology and Religious Studies, Canterbury, Christ Church University, and Dr Anthony Reddie, visiting lecturer and independent scholar in education.

Dr Laila Haidarali, lecturer, Department of History, University of Essex adds her skills gained studying US Black women in the pre-civil rights period, 1920-1954.

Also on board is Oxford-educated Dr Rob Berkeley, equality and diversity expert and director of the Runnymede Trust, one of the UK's leading independent race equality think-tanks.

However, a problem with the Black Academics focus is that the majority of members are junior level graduate students or casual lecturers. The majority are not tenured or published, and are as yet unproven academicians.



Rob Berkeley

University vice-chancellors and the research directors can seize on this to confirm their biases, and say, “Alas, there are no Blacks that match our high standards”. Some dismiss the fears of Black academics as overblown special pleading. They strongly oppose US-style affirmative action that would give less qualified Blacks unfair advantage over talented scholars chosen on merit.

Still, Black Academics can strive to create learning communities to realise their vision. This means launching local, as well as online, independent professional development training, upskilling and mentoring centres for graduate students, post-doctoral candidates, and tenure-track faculty.

They could combine their vision with Rob Berkeley’s Runnymede pledge to “generate intelligence for a multi-ethnic Britain through research, network building, leading debate, and policy engagement”. This will help Black Academics make successful transitions throughout their careers.

DECOLONISE EUROCENTRIC KNOWLEDGE WITH YOUR INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE TO

Well trained, critical minds are needed to cleanse the cobwebbed halls of academe. Black Academics in every discipline must accept the constant struggle to decolonise the Eurocentric “objectivity” that masks negrophobia.



Stuart Hall, professor

This is their heritage of scholarly, active intervention. Black abolitionists galvanised London politics in the rough days of the 1870s. Rhodes scholars of today at Oxford University plan the future of their independent African and Caribbean nations. Through rational thought and action, Black intellectuals helped people speak truth to oppressive power, a legacy that carries on down the centuries.

Therefore, the new Black Academics have a special historic task. They must become an analogy for transformational learning that enables them to survive and thrive. As university Prof David Dabydeen, of Guyanese heritage, has wisely advised, they must provide “a critical lens through which to appreciate better the complex legacies that shape both the global order and multi-racial societies such as Britain.”

Thomas L Blair writes for the creative renewal of Black Britain and Afro-Europe, see The Chronicleworld at <http://www.chronicleworld.org> and <http://chronicleworld.wordpress.com>

Print sources include

Thomas L Blair, *Decolonising Knowledge: Expanding the Black Experience in Britain's Heritage*, available through Amazon Kindle E-books.

David Dabydeen, *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (co-editor, with John Gilmore and Cecily Jones), Oxford University Press, 2007

See also the following websites articles and reports:

Prof Blair's web sites, <http://chronicleworld.org>, and <http://chronicleworld.wordpress.com>;

Black Academics association <http://blackbritishacademics.co.uk/>

Black academics strive to smash 'ivory ceiling' THES 18 November 2005
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/199781.article>

Black lecturers: Victims of racism: BBC News Pasted from
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/371809.stm>

Report Reveal Pay Bias against black lecturers: The Guardian newspaper
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2005/oct/14/raceineducation.race>

<http://www.ethnicnow.com/channels/schools-education/press-release/30/7390/a-new-online-network-for-black-british-academics.html>

For Lord Parekh's remarks, see Pasted from
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/22/racism-institutional-british-society-report-parekh>, the Guardian online, Monday 22 November 2010 18.43 GMT.

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