

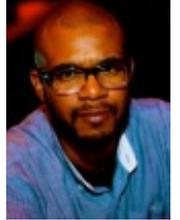
Absent from the Academy: The lack of black academics in the UK limits the wider impact of universities.

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A conversation within UK universities is in order to address the lack of representation of black professors.

Nathan Richards discusses his new film which explores the intellectual deficit within academia and how the marginalization of certain groups negatively impacts the university's role within society. Wider inclusion of experiences in academia will offer frameworks of enquiry that can be utilised to more effectively engage with students and local communities.



The film and digital project 'Absent from the Academy', below, came about after my interactions with Trinidadian/American professor, Selwyn Cudjoe. As a research assistant for him during much of 2012 and 2013, I had the great pleasure of engaging with him on both a formal and informal basis. During this time I learnt more about the world of academia than I had done in the previous 5 years of my academic career. Now I don't attribute this to his blackness, per se, but more his ability to recognize in me, something familiar to his own early career, something reminiscent of his younger self. I know this to be the case because he told me so himself, and in doing so he validated my intellectual pursuits.

This got me wondering about a number of my previous professors and lecturers – and the numerous occasions when I engaged with them during my undergraduate degree. Very often during these interactions I found myself censoring my thoughts on a given topic, generally related to African culture and history, or worse, I struggled to articulate my thoughts against the backdrop of their indifferent facial expressions, that only further alienated my intellectual musings and perspective.

For example, there was a time during my undergraduate degree at SOAS university when I was migrating away from my Afrocentric approach to African culture, but I was conflicted by this – I went to speak with my professor about the lack of Africans on the reading lists, explaining that I understood we were in the UK, but I was really struggling with the absence of black writers and perspectives on the course. Now I liked this professor, I assumed this was a topic I could approach him with – I was wrong. He looked at me from the other side of his desk, said very little, and in fact seemed to go blank as if I had somehow hit the off switch inside his head. He sat there and watched me intellectually squirm trying to articulate how this absence negatively impacted my capacity to engage.

Thinking back on this experience now I realize I have concocted a mental image that sees me moving around erratically in my seat, stuttering and flustered, with him looking at me in a dispassionate gaze. In reality it wasn't that bad, and I don't necessarily believe his near silence was through a lack of concern, it seems to me now he was ill equipped to have this type of conversation, as much as I was. For one thing, this line of inquiry calls into question his own legitimacy in the teaching of African culture and history as a white male.

A conversation within UK universities is in order, not because I want a job within the academy, but because at present we are currently running an intellectual deficit within UK academia – we are not effectively engaging the vast perspectives and experiences of the communities within this country or from the people roaming the halls of our universities; and this marginalization of certain groups negatively impacts social and political policy, policing, law, media, the arts and pretty much ever facet within our society – it is this kind of deficit that is going to ensure Britain continues to fade into obscurity on the international stage. As a country we are not effectively using the tools at our disposal. The 'old boys network' appears more interested in maintaining the same old structures it always has and the same old hegemonic perspectives primarily because they have a vested interest in doing so. This was the primary motivation for me exploring the absence of black academics in the UK on film.

There are a number of disparities within UK universities that need addressing; such as gender, ethnicity, and class

inequalities, as well as the impact of the internationalization of UK academia on local communities.

There are currently [18,550 professors in the UK](#), 2.5 million UK national and non UK students, of the 165 Universities in the UK the 24 that make up The Russell Group account for one fifth of the student population, around 550,000, there are 121,000 Black students in the UK, that's around 5.9% (UK national 4.7%), 1 in 14 professors are from BME backgrounds, 36% of black academic staff are on temporary contracts, compared to 26% of white staff, the Russell Group should have around 25,000 black students, if they were being true to the ethnic make up of the country. They have around 11,000 instead – and the most potent result from the data I gathered for my research and film – only 85 Black professors exist in the UK, that's 0.4%. Of the 85 Black professors in this country, only 17 are Black women, a situation that highlights the way gender and race collide within academia.

With a UK population of 3.3% it is clear that black Britons are faced with a very problematic situation, there is an overrepresentation of black students and a massive under representation of Black professors. These students end up overwhelmingly as recipients and not participants of knowledge creation in this country.

There are 4,450 black UK national academic staff members, and 2,690 black non-UK national staff member – this means over a third of the academics that work within UK institutions are not born and possibly not educated in the UK. There is a very particular type of subtle social injustice that takes place when institutions overlook local populations and point to black non-UK academics and professors when searching for proof that they are in fact actively employing black people. Through no fault of their own these black academics come from a different environment, often without the connection or knowledge necessary to become assets to black populations in the UK.

Universities in this country are not engaging with their local black communities, as they should be. Dr Robbie Shilliam says in the film – “people bring their concerns into the institutions”, to make sense of them, to alleviate the severity of them on their communities – we cannot expect people born, raised and educated outside of the UK to understand those concerns as intrinsically as the local populations, and so we should not allow universities to use these statistics as proof of their engagement with marginal groups.

Take for example Goldsmiths University situated in the heart of New Cross with a massive black and brown local population – when you look at the ethnic make-up of the students and the academic staff, you would never know that they are located in one of the most dense ethnic communities in the UK.

Institutions speak on paper about social inclusion, community outreach – and yet according to a [2010 study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) – less than half of the 140 universities that took part in the study reported having a codified strategy for engaging the local community, whether they do or not is another question, the rest are either talking about doing something or not doing anything at all.

I did not have the time nor space to pursue all these lines of inquiry within the film and the impact they have, but I mention them to highlight other social and economic factors distorting the racial and gender demography of UK universities.

I now understand that my previous awkward and problematic undergraduate experience was symptomatic of the statistics above and the topics explored in the film. Having come to understand these issues in greater detail I feel ever more galvanised to pursue an academic career. I have come to see that my experience and perspective feeds into a very important body of knowledge that is currently lacking from UK universities. It is not explicitly about black and brown bodies, more so it is about the experiences that can often, though not always, exist within these bodies – these experiences and perspectives can offer frameworks of enquiry that can be utilised for other non-racially specific processes within society. CLR James best explains this idea in his essay “[Black Studies and the Contemporary Student](#)”, in which he outlines the merits of Blacks Studies as offering alternative narratives to humanities development.

Absent from the Academy is available to watch for free on [Vimeo here](#), please [make a small donation](#) to facilitate

further work on these issues.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Nathan Richards is a freelance digital journalist specialising in digital video production for the web. He is currently a doctoral researcher at Goldsmiths University with a focus on Digital History, and online communities.

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