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the black professoriate: assessing the landscape within British higher education

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The paucity of Black higher education professors within the United Kingdom (UK) illuminates the systemic inequity of the higher education system within Britain. The dearth of Black Professors within the professoriate in UK Higher Education (HE) is reflective of the racially discriminatory landscape. This paper offers a succinct synthesis of recent evidence in relation to assessing how the Academy systemically marginalizes Black academics from the professoriate in the UK. This paper highlights the need for the sector to mobilize greater opportunities for Black academics to progress throughout the Academy to the professoriate, in addition to challenging the sector and HE policy-makers to play more of a pivotal role in advancing ethnic equality in UK universities.

Keywords: higher education, mental health, professoriate, race, racism

Introduction

The paucity of Black higher education professors within the United Kingdom (UK) illuminates the systemic inequity of the higher education system within Britain. This pandemic continues to blight the sector within a UK context and raises legitimate concerns for the next generation of Black academics traversing the academy. The enduring nature of this problem has been widely publicised by the groundbreaking Leading Routes Report entitled *The Broken Pipeline: Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding*, which illuminates the systemic difficulties experienced by Black early-career academics attempting to secure PhD studentship funding in establishing the first step on the academic ladder. Data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in January 2022 revealed that the number of Black professors in the UK currently stands at 160 out of 22,855. The professoriate is perhaps one of the biggest indicators of how racism within the sector has paralysed the professional ambitions of many Black senior academics. This directly correlates with the habitual practice of Black staff being less likely than White staff to be on open-ended or permanent contracts, in senior management positions, in professorial roles and on higher salary bands (Arday et al., 2022).

While data has pointed towards an increase in ethnic diversity and representation over the last 15 years within the UK higher education landscape, this has inevitably masked the complexity of existing inequalities within the sector that continually disadvantage faculty of colour (Arday & Mirza, 2018). Caution must be exercised when considering what appears to be a shift in participatory patterns regarding the percentage HE staff that are Black, Asian and minority ethnic (DeSante, 2013). The percentage of HE staff that are Black, Asian and minority ethnic has doubled from 8.6% to 15.4% over the last decade and a half. Importantly, despite this steady rise, Black HE

staff remain statistically underrepresented in comparison to the UK Black population, with only 2.8% of staff identifying as Black compared to 3.3% of the general UK population (UCU, 2021).

For Black academics visibility in the academy is something that remains a challenge, and consequently there has been an absence of a blueprint for aspiring academics of colour to follow. The difficulty facing Black scholars is the absence of opportunity to progress and realise academic ambitions. Understanding the impact of this for academics of colour coming through the pipeline is important due to the ever-changing arc of racism that has a paralysing effect on the professional and academic ambitions of Black scholars (Arday, 2022).

Impact of racism in higher education on mental health

The racially discriminatory landscape of higher education has often left many causalities within its wake. For many Black academics, particularly those that have carefully circumnavigated the treacherous landmines of inequality, there is a fatigue, and a battle-weariness that erodes impetus consequently compromising mental and psychological wellbeing (Carter et al., 2013). The trauma inflicted invariably causes varying levels of psychological distress for Black individuals continuously encountering violent racial episodes within the academy. Rollock (2012) states that these episodes can involve racial stereotyping, continuous undermining or questioning of academics of colour' professional capabilities in the workplace. The lasting impact of these residual, post-traumatic effects significantly compromises and exhausts mental wellbeing (Arday, 2022).

While all mental health is undeniably important, a context that receives little attention is how Black and minority ethnic staff experience mental illness in the face of continuous overt and covert racial inequality and discrimination within the academy. The use of talking and behavioural therapies has been influential in steering individuals away from treatments and interventions that rely solely on medication. Recent research (Arday, 2018; Arday, 2022) suggests Black academics and professional staff continue to experience differential mental health support and psychological intervention concerning successfully navigating altered mental states, particularly in relation to the trauma experienced when facing and navigating racism (Carter et al., 2013). The lack of understanding concerning the nuances of discrimination and racism that invariably affect mental wellbeing has huge implications for the professorial pipeline, which is considerably more difficult for Black people in the academy. These experiences are heightened and triggered by exclusionary and marginalizing cultures within the sector. Sadly, the academic landscape continually reflects an absence of Black academics in senior positions, particularly the professoriate. Such optics point towards the centrality of racism within our institutional and societal structures more generally (Law, 2017).

Attempts to recognise the varying contextual wellbeing needs of an ever-broadening university populace have meant a reconceptualisation and adjustment in psychological healthcare resources and provision throughout the sector (Law, 2017). The inextricable link between the residual traumatic effects of racism and the connection to destabilised mental wellness is undeniable particularly for the paucity of Black professors within UK higher education.

Black women in professoriate

The glacial pace of change within universities has severely affected the progression of Black women within the academy who historically have been, and remain, at the sharper end of intersectional

inequality and disadvantage. There exists a long history of Black women employing juxtapositions as resistance strategies within and outside of the academy as a means to survive (Benjamin, 1997; Collins, 2000; Evans, 2007; Hine, 1995; John, 1997). Sulé (2009) states that this becomes useful in disarming people who would subvert any obvious attempts to dismantle a system that creates inequitable access to power.

The dearth of Black female professors in the UK is reflective of the hegemony that is both practiced and legitimated, within the sector representing a long tradition of systemic exclusion regarding structural access and scholarship for women and people of colour (Sulé, 2009). As the antithesis to the white male norm, Black women residing in these spaces are forced to determine how to negotiate constrictive assumptions and practices (Sulé, 2009). The implications of this are particularly significant for Black women in UK higher education because as it stands there are currently only 38 Black female professors in comparison to 23% of the professoriate being white women. The deployment of varying juxtapositions becomes unreasonably imperative as a safeguarding mechanism that attempts to disrupt and decentre whiteness (Arday, 2019). Understanding the plight Black women face in attempting to progress through academia is essential in attempting to discern how the intersectional dynamics at play that often force many women of colour out of the academy (Rollock, 2016).

Conclusion

It is important for institutional members to recognize that there are embedded practices that marginalize certain groups and to provide a space for people to enact scholarship that challenges institutions to live up to and broaden their missions. Strategic agency within universities as well as policy-driven intervention are immediately required if Black academics are to be given fair and equitable access to progress through the academic ranks to the professoriate (Shepherd, 2017). University diversity agendas and interventions must endeavour to change organizational cultures that exclude Black academics from becoming professors and senior leaders more generally.

The current inequitable terrain requires universities to become more transparent about academic career progression opportunities, in addition to recognising that gatekeepers have sometimes consciously become complicit in processes of marginalisation and exclusion by not actively challenging the monopoly often associated with promotion and progression (Adams, 2017; Rollock, 2016). The absence of Black senior academics also becomes consequential for the consideration of other intersectional perspectives aligned to racial discrimination and victimization (Kezar & Eckel, 2008).

The sector must be more diligent and responsive to some of the persistent challenges that undermine the promise of diversification and greater representation within the professoriate: (1) the value of diversity is often conflated within a shallow definition of inclusion; (2) Black and minority ethnic individuals are not a homogenous group and will therefore have differing experiences of racial discrimination; (3) a holistic and integrated approach is required regarding the nurturing and mentoring of aspiring Black academics; (4) conceptualizing diversified senior academic staff against a backdrop of whiteness is increasingly complex and challenging due to insidious nature of racism and the power dynamics that transpire at the expense of ethnic minorities within the academy; and finally (5) diversity continues to be a barometer for either organizational adaptability or resistance to racial and intersectional equality.

Such endeavour pivots on creating diverse workforces as a reflection of a diverse professoriate particularly within UK higher education given the extremely low number of Black professors. Therefore, it is opportune to not only develop scholarship but to use both mainstream and action research to grow a process of systematic action and reflection among scholars, practitioners, their institutions, stakeholders, policymakers, and other constituents to ensure the active support and installation of Black professors within higher education institutions.

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