PROFESSORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Conference Report

Improving Access in Higher Education: How to Dismantle Barriers Faced by Black Talent in Academia

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

On 28th August, 2020, Professors Without Borders held the online conference, 'Improving Access to Higher Education: How to Dismantle Barriers Faced By Black Talent in Academia.' The conference was composed of two panels: 'Black In The Ivory: Understanding the Black Experience in Academia', and 'Intersectionality: The Dual Barriers of Racism and Sexism'.

In the UK, fewer than one percent of university professors are Black. In the United States, about ten percent of academics are Black, with the numbers thinning as you travel up the academic ladder. The numerical minority of Black academics has led to consistent exclusion, marginalisation, and a signal that their ideas are not equally valuable in academia. Such pervasive marginalisation of any group is detrimental to research and the academic experience, for educators and students.

This conference invited Black members of the academic community to shine a light on their experience in higher education and share the impact of under-representation and discrimination on their research and career aspirations. The goal was to add perspective on how academia can become more inclusive for Black academics and how students of colour can thrive within a university setting.

The panels were composed of activists, entrepreneurs, professors, and other faculty in academia from across the world. **A total of eight guest speakers explored challenges faced by Black academics and what solutions may arise.** Majeks Walker, co-founder of Professors Without Borders and lead of the Access Initiative, opened with a speech highlighting the need to have a fair and equitable environment in higher education for people of colour.

2.0 OPENING REMARKS

Majeks Walker, co-founder at Professor Without Borders began by introducing the mission of Professors Without Borders. This organisation was created to bridge the gap in higher education, prioritise higher education and ensure equity in education. Mr Walker explained the need to focus on how Black academics in the Western world can create a fair environment in academia. Black academics are severely underrepresented in the UK and the US. A difficult hierarchy structure further inhibits academics from minority backgrounds from reaching chancellor or head of department positions in universities. **Mr Walker stressed the importance of this conference in understanding why there are fewer opportunities for certain academics and why systemic discrimination is still prevalent in universities.**

3.0 PANEL 1. Black In The Ivory: Understanding the Black Experience in Higher Education

The first panel, 'Black In The Ivory: Understanding the Black Experience in Higher Education' bridged three continents with Charlie Dove-Edwin from Richmond the American International University in

London, Dauda Abubakar from the University of Michigan-Flint, and Faith Musyoka-Gahamanyi, an Education Coordinator at a tertiary-level institution in Rwanda. The panel explored four main questions:

1. How does the disproportionately small number of Black academics affect higher education as a whole?
2. At your current/previous institution, were there any measures or initiatives in place to ensure inclusivity or combat institutional whiteness?
3. What inclusivity measures or initiatives have you heard of that could serve as models of best practice or a roadmap of lessons learned?
4. Black academics are often marginalised and obstructed within higher education. How can we best help combat this, as supporters to the community of Black academics?

Dr Abubakar began by relating his experience of being a minority in a large American university. While the city where his university is based, Flint, Michigan, is predominantly African American, the student population and faculty are disproportionately underrepresented in terms of race and identity. Dr Abubakar posited that when a scholar of colour wants to move up in the hierarchy of a predominantly white institution, there is no clear path on how to do so. This is because of institutionalised racism, which can take the form of a lack of mentorship to scholars from a minority background. **Bureaucratic structures in universities cause a sense of exclusion for faculty and scholars from minority backgrounds.** Dr Abubakar addressed the second question, stating that the first chancellor of minority background for the University of Flint Michigan was just appointed and created a 'Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiative' (DEI) for the students and faculty. The DEI Initiative set up a council composed of staff, which investigated and combated issues of non-inclusion. Dr Abubakar acknowledged the fragility of the DEI reforms due to the stakeholders' reluctance to shift the power to the faculty.

He further reflected on the challenges Black academics face when publishing research and articles. He explained that publishing in high-level journals within an academic field becomes a major challenge due to the networking structure in journals. There are certain gatekeepers to the publishing industry who allow particular academics to gain notoriety sooner, and minorities tend to have a harder time publishing in these journals. If an academic is referred to the 'gatekeepers' by another scholar, then it is easier to get published. Dr Abubakar noted that even if the point of academic jobs is to be objective scholars, there is a lot of politics in career progression and publishing. The solution presented is to create journals specifically for minorities to be published in and promote conferences that spread discourse on the issue.

Charlie Dove-Edwin followed up on the first question with an emphasis on the lack of Black British people who want to become professors. Through personal experience from his A-Levels, he conveyed that many Black British people did not see a plausible career path in academia and would instead go into different career paths. In Richmond, the American University in London, where Mr Dove-Edwin works, he highlighted that there is equal representation and that Black academics are overrepresented among the faculty. **However, although the issue of representation is not a problem at Richmond University, he noted that Blacks are at the bottom of the academic hierarchy and payscale.** While there is a moral reason to argue for more representation and better positions for minorities, there is a school of thought that believes university professors of African backgrounds should move back to Africa to teach for the next generation of students and create a more prosperous home. Mr Dove-Edwin refuted this point with

another suggestion for Africans to develop the capacity to publish their work. He stated that publications by Black academic's may be more appreciated in African universities. **There is an emphasis to be self-sufficient in academia amongst the Black community across the globe.** Mr Dove-Edwin concluded that Black academics should put pressure on publishing companies to meet a certain quota of articles and research published by this minority group.

Ms Musyoka-Gahamanyi reflected on the first question with regards to her own experiences as an educator in Rwanda and Kenya. In the first institution where she worked, there were very few issues with discrimination, and faculty were paid based on academic research and experience. The white population was the minority, which was reflective of the environment. However, in the second institution, there was still an equal representation of the white minority, but the Black faculty faced a lot of inequality. There was a sense of superiority within the white faculty due to most of the management being white and the payscale was disproportionately favourable towards the white members of faculty. Ms Musyoka-Gahamanyi noted that white faculty would be paid in dollars, but the Black staff would be paid in the local currency. There was also an issue of progression in the hierarchy, and if you were Black in the institution, you could not progress beyond junior manager and were unable to create any policy changes. In her experience at the second institution, she was made to feel marginalised in her homeland. Ms Musyoka-Gahamanyi concluded by reflecting on narratives shared by the other panelists. She stated that few students want to become academics because there are few incentives to the job, and there is a lack of role models from minority backgrounds. **Her final thought was that making academia more accessible and mentoring the next generation of students will promote higher involvement of minorities in academia.**

4.0 PANEL 1. Q&A

Professor George Richards began the Q&A session by relating the panel's experiences to his observations in academia. **Through his experience as a professor in the United States, he has noticed that the working relationships in academia are essential to thrive in the field.** However, the US environment creates few opportunities for students and faculty of colour to enjoy these relationships with professors, senior professors, or those located higher in the chain of command. Professor Richards expanded on the need to hire people of colour in managerial positions. He hypothesized that provost deans have more power than chancellors, and believes that to see policy change, members from minority communities must hold these positions. He noted that provost deans can change hiring policies, set equity targets, and ensure implementation. Professor Richards concluded by referring to his personal experience to explain that in the US, there are few minorities in provost dean positions.

Dr Abubakar explained that collaboration is extremely important. Senior members of staff should mentor new scholars as the senior members provide professional resources. He noted, however, that there is a barrier of systematic racism of colour within the academic institutions, which does not allow people of colour to rise to higher positions, and in turn, does not allow for mentorship within the minority community. Dr Abubakar explained that the production of knowledge should happen regardless of the colour of an academic and that the Western world had not come to this point yet. He suggested initiatives that could be taken in universities to lessen discrimination. He explained that the shift of power in

institutions from those who have it now to minorities is a struggle, as **those who hold power do not want to relinquish it.** He noted that minorities would have to challenge themselves by developing networks and becoming engaged in the governing system within their institutions. **Dr Abubakar pointed out that minorities have to find allies of any colour within a university setting and that allies must be involved and engaged to combat this challenge.** He agreed and expanded on the point that appointing people of colour or other minorities to a position of power is a mechanism, yet the articulation of power within social spaces creates a hegemony of set people in power. While there may be the representation, the person has to be willing to promote change and fix injustices regardless of colour, gender, or other characteristics. He noted that filling positions of power by minorities is a first step but not an end solution. To bring change to an institution, the university leaders must be committed to the change. At the University of Flint, Michigan, the leadership became committed because the student body did not reflect the demographics of the surrounding community. Dr Abubakar noted that **organisations like PROWIBO are a mechanism for change because they draw media attention to issues of diversity.**

Dr Loreen Chikwira followed with a comment on the effectiveness and challenges of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives (DEI). Dr Chikwira pointed to her own experiences with DEI both inside and out of university, and noted that there is a tendency to rely on the team that heads the DEI initiative. However, the DEI team often includes academics of minority backgrounds who disproportionately take on the responsibility of DEI initiatives. Dr Chikwira explained that **although there may be a DEI team, it does not mean that the university management will take on initiatives or strategies that the team recommends, and the faculty believes the issue to be addressed.** She noted that there needs to be a discussion on how to make DEI successful. Dr Chikwira highlighted that universities operate like corporations, and professors are expected to bring in money through different avenues, notably research publications and teaching. She concluded that more money needs to be allocated to research funding for minorities to achieve positions of power in academia.

Rachel Warnick stressed the importance for young people of colour to have role models who reflect their identity. **According to Ms Warnick, supporting fellow academics of minority will help inspire young people of colour who may not otherwise consider a career in academia because the students see a role model.** Ms Warnick then raised the question 'which scenario would be more ideal: having minority students only mentored by minority academics, or having minority students mentored by the white academics too'. She also asked whether white academics could provide full and holistic support for the minority students, as the academics may not understand the full experiences of the students.

Dr Beronda Montgomery responded to the earlier discussion point that there needs to be more Black individuals in administration to implement change. Dr Montgomery reflected on her personal experience as an administrator at Michigan State University. She noted that there are 'gatekeepers' who will only let certain people into higher bureaucratic positions. **When the universities do decide to promote a person of colour, most of the time the person of colour will have to share the same ideals and ideas as those in power.** Dr Montgomery noted that while there might be a person of colour in this position, they may be contributing to the 'gatekeeping'. These fellow faculty maintain the status quo, as people in leadership positions can fear losing their status or power if they behave in a non-conforming manner.

Majeks Walker responded to the question about mentorship and noted that he was mentored by a white gentleman who gave him his first job as a lecturer and was his dissertation supervisor. Mr Walker concluded with the sentiment that mentorship could come from anywhere.

5.0 PANEL 2. Intersectionality: The Dual Barriers of Racism and Sexism

Panel Two, 'Intersectionality: The Dual Barriers of Racism and Sexism' was moderated by Mandy Sanghera, a Philanthropist, Community Consultant, and International Human Rights Activist, on the topic of Black women and discrimination in academia. The panel included Yanoh Jalloh, Senior Project Officer at NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; Lorna Mae Johnson, Democratic National Committee Assistant Treasurer; Dr Loreen Chikwira, Sociology Lecturer at Birmingham City University; and Shirley Hills, Executive Management Consultant.

Yanoh Jalloh stated that being Black and a woman in academia is a double challenge, as it is in the corporate world. **Ms Jalloh noted that while there may be a diverse staff, these people are not in positions of power or utilised to create a more inclusive environment.** She explained that socioeconomic status is another important factor, and in her experience, there are many adjuncts, such as herself, who do not have the job security needed. Another challenge of being an adjunct and a woman is exemplified when Ms Jalloh took time off for maternity leave; there was a concern that she may not have her classes when she returned. Ms Jalloh highlighted that women need to break through the status quo of how they are supposed to act and defend themselves and their rights in order to make a change. She stressed the salary negotiations and the challenges she faced in her career in academia. In theory, women should be able to stand up and demand better pay; however, in practice, many women don't have that privilege because they don't have the economic safety net if they had to leave said job. Without the economic safety net, women cannot demand a salary and threaten to leave if the salary isn't matched.

Dr Loreen Chikwira noted that intersectionality for Black women is not just about race and gender, but that women also face discrimination due to social class and immigration status. Dr Chikwira underlined the inequality she has experienced in the UK working under fixed-term contracts. She received a very low wage as a part-time lecturer. However, in her current institution, the manager and a colleague fought to get her a better salary due to her work outside of academia. In Dr Chikwira's experience in academia, she did not have the support of a mentor, which made her situation more difficult. Her experience reflected the intersectionality of gender, class, immigration status, and being a single mother. She did not have the time flexibility of many men because she could not stay at university after hours and network as she had a child at home. She explained that the lack of networking and support had hindered her progression in academia. Dr Chikwira reflected on her experience with women as 'allies'. While there may be women present in a board meeting with her, the fact that they are women does not automatically mean they support her to improve DEI. While there may be women in positions of power, they sometimes do not work as allies to improve the rights of other minorities. On another note, Dr Chikwira pointed to the statistic that 61.3% of Black staff in academia are on fixed-term contracts. **Pointing to this statistic, Dr Chikwira argued that before even thinking about negotiating salary in academia, there needs to be more emphasis on mentoring and training to build up skills and development.** This is because Black women face an extraordinary amount of challenges even to reach a position of power. Dr Chikwira

concluded with a call for action to look at alternative ways in which we can introduce skills after COVID and continue to influence policy as well as work with organisations for marginalised communities.

Lorna Mae Johnson started by saying the experience in academia for Black women is reflective in the corporate structure. Ms Johnson highlighted the political sector, where many women are running for political positions and openly showing deep interest in getting the job, whereas in previous years, the women would be more diplomatic about their approach. These women are called too ambitious. Women who make their ambition known are judged in all sectors of society. While men can get a position and then present their worth, women have to show they are qualified before entering the role. **Ms Johnson stated that COVID is offering an opportunity for change because the pandemic is bringing out all the inequalities in society.** She believes now is the time for women to demand their worth and create change. Regarding the inability to receive a pay raise or more senior position, **Ms Johnson suggested that there may be other creative alternatives for women to take, rather than sticking to a career path that hinders growth.** She stated that maybe women need to find alternative jobs then come back to their old careers after gaining more experience. She subsequently pointed out that instead of women seeing themselves as better when they are in a position of power while other women are not, there **needs to be more cooperation and mentorship.** She stressed that mentorship could come from a different race or gender and concluded with a call for women to create opportunities, continue creating networks around themselves, and make themselves indispensable before transferring their skills to the younger generation through mentoring.

Shirley Hills opened by relating to her own experiences in Africa, explaining that it was different from that of women in the Western world. Her company strives for gender equality, as she believes that women need to 'rise' to prosper. Ms Hills explained that discrimination in her area is especially bad, but women are demanding better rights. Ms Hills suggested that women should build their brain and their confidence. Along with this, they have to be extremely durable through adverse situations and challenges. **Subsequently when women reach positions of power, they need to make recommendations and changes to promote diversity.** On a different note, Ms Hills stressed the need for mentorship; however, she noted that mentors and mentees must be ready and able to take on these positions. She then reflected on the need for networking and building professional connections. To become increasingly competitive in their career, women must participate widely and contribute to different conversations. Ms Hill's call to action was to lead by example and offered her mentoring services to the other women participating in the conference.

Mandy Sanghera explained that there are white British women in positions of power in academia who seem to have not overcome the same challenges as their Black counterparts. For this reason, women seem to be less concerned with issues of diversity. Ms Sanghera indicated that the pandemic had pushed women to take on greater responsibilities of acting as caretakers and teachers to their children, thereby increasing inequality. This added to the stress of being on a fixed-term contract, so there was not the security of furlough. Ms Sanghera referred to her friends who are in high positions in their professional fields yet do not mentor or help other younger women striving for that position. She believes that there needs to be more cooperation and mentorship among women to stop this level of struggle. **Ms Sanghera concluded the panel with a note that men must be part of the conversation of gender inequality in order to create lasting change. She invited men to be part of the solution.**

6.0 CONCLUSION

The conference ended with remarks by Mariam Radi, the Thinktank Manager of Professors Without Borders. She noted the importance of expanding the 'Access to Higher Education Initiative' at PROWIBO to support Black minorities in their academic careers. **By adding the panelists' experiences about their own experiences to the public discourse, further initiatives can be taken to improve access and equality in academia.**

Professors Without Borders would like to thank all panelists for sharing their time and experience with our audiences and helping improve the quality of higher education for everyone.