

## Words without Actions: University statements and the Black Lives Matter movement

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Fighting for e/equality: Comparative ethnographies of new students movements

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On the heels of the past few weeks of global Black Lives Matter demonstrations against anti-Black racism and police violence, several universities have issued statements expressing solidarity with protestors. One example comes from Goldsmiths, University of London, where management issued a [statement on Twitter](#) claiming to stand “shoulder to shoulder with our Black students, graduates and friends”, and linking to a letter sent by the University’s Warden to the US Ambassador, condemning the murder of George Floyd. Following the tweet, Goldsmiths has been met with backlash from staff and students, pointing to how the University has actively silenced Black students protesting anti-racism, put their Black staff at health risk during the pandemic, and made many fixed term staff members of colour redundant during the lockdown, before subsequently announcing the employment of Dominic Grieve, a former Tory cabinet minister whose voting record consistently demonstrates hostility towards marginalised populations.

The attempts from Goldsmiths and other universities to speak to and about the current protests, aligning themselves with stands that increasingly enjoy broader public resonance, render visible some central tensions and dilemmas related to the role of activism in academia. How can institutions be actively anti-racist in periods where activism does not result in the mobilisation of thousands of people? Do they actively work to create democratic and experimental space(s) for alternative imaginations of what a new and more just university could look like? Or are activist agendas ignored, silenced or coopted in order to promote other institutional agendas?

To be an institution which promotes equality and social change requires more than symbolic tokenism and performative statements. Black academics are sharing experiences of racism in Higher Education under the hashtag [#BlackInTheIvory](#) (created by Shardé M. Davis and Joy Melody Woods). These experiences range from silencing, alienation and othering to the burden of having to serve on committees for universities diversity strategies and now also aid in the production of these statements in support of the BLM movement. Thus, once again, creating more unpaid work for Black staff. At the bare minimum, solidarity must involve recognition of own complicity and long-term, tangible commitment beyond ‘inclusion’ and diversity groups; without this, a statement such as Goldsmiths is at best hollow posturing and at worst cynical exploitation.

If universities are to be actively anti-racist, supporting Black lives, then it is imperative to recognise their own embeddedness in systematic racism and political powers. Centering the experiences of racialised students and staff is crucial for co-creating spaces for otherwise marginalised voices. If institutions openly reckon with the many loyalties which continue to shape the current university, this could create transparency about the possibilities and limitations of the spaces universities are able to hold. However, universities have to go beyond just preparing grounds for critical thinking, but act with vigilance, respect and accountability to the communities in and around their campuses. There is no arrival point for this; rather, it is a continuous engagement and sensitivity that must be cultivated. This could perhaps allow for imagining academic spaces which are not known yet - ones which inhabit many social worlds, bodies, and knowledges.

## References

Goldsmiths, University of London. [@GoldsmithsUoL]. (June 02, 2020). We stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our Black students, colleagues, graduates and friends. We condemn racism in all its forms. We admit our failings and know we are all responsible for making change. Today we will be taking part in [#blackoutuesday](#). [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/GoldsmithsUoL/status/1267809448560439297?s=20> [Accessed July 15, 2020]

The Chronicle of Higher Education (June 09, 2020). *'I Was Fed Up': How #BlackInTheIvory Got Started, and What Its Founders Want to See Next*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/I-Was-Fed-Up-How/248955> [Accessed July 15, 2020]