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The Struggles of Black and African History in Britain



Image by Debby Hudson.

The University of Chichester has unilaterally announced that it will suspend the important MRes (Master by Research) on ‘The History of Africa and the African Diaspora’. This decision was abruptly taken overnight without consulting its course leader, the world-renowned academic Professor Hakim Adi, currently the only Professor of the History of Africa and the African diaspora in Britain. More than that, Professor Adi is actually the first person of African heritage to become a history professor in Britain – but despite this accolade, he is not being celebrated, but rather threatened with redundancy. What does this move signal for the broader study of Africa and its diaspora in the United Kingdom? What consequences can Black British people expect?

In a country where “only 6% believe the empire is something to be more ashamed of than proud”, I cannot stress enough why the British public must have access to courses, modules, and degree programmes excavating the history of the British Empire on the African continent and its spawning of the African diaspora in Britain. Access to such knowledge and research is already poor – a report by the Institute of Race Relations, citing analysis from The Guardian, found that “just 11% of GCSE students studied modules that referred to the presence of black people in British history, and just 9% of GCSE students ... opted for modules that make specific reference to the British Empire”. Stemming from the neglect of these histories in British schools, Black people in Britain have subsequently faced the all too familiar struggles of exclusion and underrepresentation in the realm of university education.

For example, a Royal Historical Society 2018 research report on ‘Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History’ found that only “11% of history university students” were from ethnic minority backgrounds. In the same year, the Higher Education Statistics Agency found “that 0.7% of UK’s professors were Black. There are 75 Black people on university governing bodies, out of 3,600 – it was zero the previous year”. Again, this is the direct consequence of disregarding the histories of Africa and the African diaspora, in schools. Students who cannot learn about themselves, their families, their communities, and their immediate and ancestral histories are unlikely to progress in the study of ‘History’ that has proven to be hostile and neglectful of them. Elements of history are also essential for other studies, such as politics, philosophy, sociology, and more.

Today, only a handful of research centres and advanced university degrees are offered on Black and African history in the United Kingdom. This includes a course at Goldsmiths, University of London – MA Black British History, which has since been cancelled along with 52 staff members. Along with Professor Adi’s under-siege MRes History of Africa and the African Diaspora, there are not many university programmes on the Black presence in Britain. While there are indeed undergraduate and postgraduate modules, and degree programmes, offered by various institutions such as The University of Oxford’s MSc African Studies, it is vital to make a distinction between Black/African ‘history’ from the broader ‘Black Studies’ or ‘African Studies’, which may not always include historical components.

For example, the University of Bristol offers a brilliant MA in Black Humanities. However, this may not suit students seeking an explicit historical focus on Black/African struggles and lifeworlds as ‘humanities’ and ‘Black/African studies’ (as offered by SOAS,

Birmingham, and elsewhere) includes everything from culture and literature to art. Again, history is foundational to the study of these other disciplines, and so the need for a clear focus on Black/African history is clear. The Complete University Guide, used by countless prospective students seeking to further their education, yields just five courses for Black ‘history’ degrees in the UK, but only one of which is an explicit history course (the now cancelled Goldsmiths degree). The University of Chichester’s decision to suspend Professor Adi’s MRes is significant given the fact of there being a small nationwide body of faculty dedicated to researching and teaching Black/African histories. The MRes is the only course across the entire country, possibly even throughout all of Europe, that is dedicated to training historians and researchers on the history of Africa and the African diaspora.

Fewer trained professionals mean fewer studies, fewer degree programmes, and significantly less research output that can be used to tackle the neglect of Black history at its root – in schools. Without historical researchers at the university level, how can we seek to improve the national curriculum to offer a more diverse and inclusive education to our children, in line with Recommendation 67 of the Macpherson Report and the Ajegbo Report? This is where Professor Adi’s MRes makes its impactful intervention. It is worth repeating that Professor Adi is the only professor of the History of Africa and the African diaspora in Britain – if he is made redundant and the MRes scrapped, then who is to guide the many minds yearning to learn how to research (and hopefully one day, teach) Black and African history? The MRes History of Africa and the African Diaspora has produced six PhD students so far, training scholars who can go on to address the worrying statistics concerning the lack of Black and African diaspora representation in Higher Education.

The University has suspended recruitment, citing a “lack of recruitment” – despite having already attracted interested students for the now-closed upcoming enrolment – “pending a review of its marketability”. Furthermore, they have shockingly tied Professor Adi’s employment to the course, putting him at risk of redundancy despite his employment predating the course. It appears that this is the latest assault on knowledge amid a wider wave of the neoliberalisation of universities and educational institutions in the United Kingdom. Across the pond in the United States, this has been tied into a “culture war” effort to politicise and censor Critical Race Theory and curtail other attempts to teach about race and the history of the African diaspora in America.

By sacrificing this course and Professor Adi, who has loyally worked at the University of Chichester for many years, rather than consulting their long-time employee and

constructively discussing methods of better advertising the course, the University of Chichester is choosing not to stand firmly against a global tide of conservative and racist reaction against the teaching of Black and African history. According to Professor Adi, the MRes was “one of the recommendations of the History Matters conference in 2015 supported by the University of Chichester”, out of which the Young Historians Project was also born – “a non-profit organisation formed by young people encouraging the development of young historians of African and Caribbean heritage in Britain”. The University of Chichester should not abandon the recommendations it supported; it should stand by Professor Adi (a co-founder and consultant historian for the Young Historians Project) and the MRes. Similarly, Goldsmiths should stand by its “publicly stated goals on diversity and inclusion and aim to recruit a more diverse student body” and reverse its decision to axe the MA Black British History course.

For the more than 2.4 million Black Brits or British people of African descent – many of whom had their immediate and familial histories directly impacted by the British Empire – the teaching of their history and the adequate training of researchers to conduct investigations into these past and present lives, is of paramount importance. This is a robust and millions-strong market and pool of potential teachers, researchers, and students, who need not broken commitments and cancelled courses by Chichester and Goldsmiths – but instead, more marketing! More advertising! More of a serious effort made by university institutions to recruit and curate a diverse body of students, academics, courses, and research. The decision taken by Goldsmiths two years ago sadly seems to have passed by; meanwhile, the struggle to save the MRes and the employment of the UK’s first and only Black professor of the History of Africa and the African diaspora is gaining momentum. You can support the campaign by signing this petition here. A few comments from the Petition have been selected to indicate the shockwave that is rippling through the Black British and African diaspora academic community:

“The news is shocking and an absolute disgrace. This is a world renowned scholar and an incredible programme we are talking about. We are not asking, we are demanding that the university reconsider its plans.” – Prof. Olivette Otele

“Only a few years ago institutions around the UK were proclaiming “Black Lives Matter” and promising to do better. Many within the higher education sector acknowledged the sectors practice of erasing the histories and progression of marginalised communities in academia needed to stop. Professor Hakim Adi is a world renown scholar whose excellent work directly addresses many of the concerns faced by people of African heritage with

deeds and action, instead of vacuous words adorned with terms like diversity. He is literally mentoring, developing and training the next generational of scholars to address a social injustice which the University of Chichester's planned action risk further entrenching." – Toyin Agbetu

Returning to the questions outlined at the start, what does this move signal for the broader study of Africa and its diaspora in the United Kingdom? What consequences can Black Brits expect? If the university successfully abandons the course and makes a world-renowned scholar unemployed, we can expect this to be the start of a worrying domino effect. The shockingly poor number of institutions around the UK offering modules or programmes in Black/African history may follow the examples set by Goldsmiths and Chichester in similarly subjecting their commitments to fostering an inclusive education and recruiting a diverse faculty and study body to vague and often irrational "market demands".

African and Black Brits, students, and scholars alike must unite and take a stand together at this early tide before it becomes an insurmountable wave sweeping away the progress made thus far to address the institutional neglect and epistemic exclusion of Black and African history. We must only look across the pond towards the assault on teaching Black history in America to see where Chichester's decision today will lead us tomorrow.

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