Community accountability for racial justice – an organising agenda for colleges and universities

Overview: Universities and colleges are vitally important institutions within our society. However, if they are to truly serve the interests of the whole populace rather than simply reinforcing existing privilege and inequality, education institutions must be fully accountable to their communities, and abandon their collaboration and complicity in the violent, structural racism that perpetuates systemic injustice within our society.

The University and College Union's Black Members' Standing Committee has prepared this programme and list of priority actions to help identify key areas of concern within further, higher and adult education, and serve as a statement of intent. We believe no university or college can claim antiracist credentials without adequately addressing the points identified in the programme.

An antiracism for abolitionist times

The global protests in solidarity with those struggling against police violence have re-opened debates about the role of universities, colleges, and other education institutions in perpetuating racism.

Education currently forms part of the network of carceral structures which underpin state racism and systemic injustice within our society. The marketisation of education has intensified the punitive practices of capitalist education, leading to greater surveillance and ever increasing pressure on staff and students to cooperate with systems of state violence including policing and border control.

We cannot dismantle the racist underpinnings of UK educational institutions without dismantling these punitive systems. Our solidarity with Black Lives Matter and other movements against state violence and racism is empty unless we move against the incursion of policing and punitive logics within our own sectors.

To be clear, we stand against the distractions of awareness training (which provides another business opportunity for some while diverting resources away from action for tangible change and those most in need), role models (who imply that we face racism due to our own lack, and are too easily wheeled out against movements for justice) and the co-option of the language of antiracism as a management technique.

Instead, our solidarity demands a re-imagination of education. We must ask how we can return the resources and benefits of education to the wider community, and ensure that institutions are accountable to the community. That means working with staff, students and communities to dismantle racism and a pursue a different approach to education that can make us all free.

Community Accountability Programme for Racial Justice

Universities and colleges cannot dismantle our carceral structures without opening up to community accountability. Educational institutions operate as an integral

component of systems of state racism. We must transform education from acting as yet another punitive arm of the state to become a community resource held in common by all.

Making community accountability a reality will depend upon institutions engaging openly and meaningfully with those they are there to benefit. Ideally this should be centred around a panel or forum which includes representation from local residents, local organisations, sister organisations, students and all campus trade unions to undertake scrutiny of work towards dismantling racist structures and practices.

Employment

Universities and colleges perpetuate racism through their employment practices. To be accountable to the community, education institutions must:

- end the use of precarious and outsourced contracts. Institutions should work with a community accountability panel to develop a just employment framework, including appointment and retention of those from the local community;

- open systems of recruitment, appointment, progression, promotion and access to training and resources to community scrutiny and re-imagination, dismantling all aspects which perpetuate racism and state violence, including the incorporation of immigration checks;

- regularly share anonymised testimony from racially minoritised staff, including exit interviews, to improve institutional understanding of continuing barriers to retention, progression, inclusion and equality.

Communities of learning:

Universities and colleges are failing to provide a safe space against racist brutality for students. This must change.

- Students must feel safe and supported in every space of the institution. This demands an end to racial profiling, and meaningful responses to racist harassment based in transformative justice;

- Systems of assessment, marking and penalties too often perform a punitive function. Institutions must work with the community panel to develop non-punitive approaches to learning;

- Too often educational institutions act as 'missionaries' (saving the less fortunate) and/or 'police' (civilising the 'uncivilised' by force and intimidation). We must abolish this colonial heritage and work with others to develop communities of learning that value our multiple experiences and knowledge resources;

- The burden of explicating and progressing work against racism falls disproportionately on racialised minorities. We must create spaces of debate and exchange that ensure the safety and intellectual growth of all participants, including

when addressing controversial or sensitive topics of enquiry, and reinforce this work as a shared responsibility for all staff and students;

- Universities and colleges must monitor applications, offers, conversion rates, participation, attainment and retention of students from diverse backgrounds and work with the community panel to develop strategies to achieve, maintain and support a diverse student body.

Intellectual resources

Universities and colleges reproduce the interests of the state. Solidarity against state racism demands we open up access to our shared intellectual resources.

- Universities and colleges must offer and maintain courses that enable a broad and critical understanding of histories of violence, expansionism and oppression. Institutions must defend and promote courses valued by communities in struggle against racism;

- Solidarity demands a reclaiming of decolonial thought and practice. Institutions must become accountable and accessible to the wider community by sharing intellectual resources, including examination of diverse traditions of learning and an understanding of the contribution of diverse regions and communities to our shared knowledge of the world.

Becoming spaces of solidarity

Universities and colleges have acted as collaborators in a system which has consistently persecuted Black, racially minoritised and poor communities. To turn the tide we must abolish education for punishment to create and encourage education for solidarity.

- The work of community accountability demands we increase access to meaningful non-punitive education and spaces for civic debate;

- Our commitment to solidarity against racist violence demands that we open access to our spaces and resources to those struggling for justice.

There is no middle ground. We must dismantle the complicity of our institutions in racist violence. Anything less is a failure of solidarity.