

All ah we is one: international Caribbean students' identity, social justice and equity activism in a UK university

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Research Domains

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Abstract

“All ah we is one”: international Caribbean students' identity, social justice and equity activism in a UK university

International Caribbean students were recruited by the University of Kent to travel thousands of miles to come and study at the Canterbury campus. This small group of undergraduates had high expectations of studying and living in the UK. This qualitative study identifies a range of positive and unexpected experiences focusing on; sense of belonging, curricula engagement, inclusivity on campus and the formation of a Caribbean cultural society - Kent Caribbean Union (KCU). Some members of the KCU became student activists challenging systemic racism in higher education, became more critically conscious about race and identity and participated in the Decolonising the University Kent Law School collective movement. This paper tells their stories through a Critical Race Theory lens.

Keywords: Identity, Critical Race Theory, Student activism, Racism, Decolonising

Full paper

This paper explores international Caribbean students' unique experiences and expectations whilst studying in a UK university. A group of international Caribbean students gained a sense of belonging, involved in community work and enhanced their academic achievement through their participation as a member of the Kent Caribbean Union - a student lead society at the University of Kent. The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the daily lives of international Caribbean students by investigating personal successes and challenges and learn more about their coping mechanisms used to form a sense of belonging, agency and empowerment during their student journey. Drawing on rich qualitative interview data from eight in-depth undergraduates, the paper foregrounds the specific challenges and struggles faced by these eight Black and Black-mixed students during their three years of studying at the University of Kent. The study analyses the transition from being part of the Black majority among the Caribbean islands to being marginalised within a very white space in Kent.

The research investigated the role and influence of the Kent Caribbean Union (which operates as a student cultural society) among the lives of international Caribbean student's unique experience in higher education, pertaining to sense of belonging, academic achievement, and any forms of activism on campus and community work such as during Black History Month which takes place every October in the UK. These Caribbean students were invited to comment and reflect on their lived experiences and involvement in race-based activism on campus. In 2019 all of these students played an active role in a unique movement at the university known as the Decolonising the University student collective inspired by the Kent Law School, (Thomas and Jivraj, 2020).

The paper explored their lived experiences through the lens of race, as they reflect on their personal successes and challenges and focuses on their coping mechanisms used to form a sense of belonging, agency and empowerment through their development of critical knowledge and self-realisation. International Caribbean students are a group of people whose experience are marginalised and short-lived, illustrating political and social ideologies shaped during their three-to-four-year degree in higher education in Britain. Having made the strategic decision to travel thousands of miles from the Caribbean to study in the UK, this paper discusses to what extent issues concerning race particularly relating to the Black Lives Matter student protests, the Rhodes Must Fall movements (Bambra et al, 2018) and the British government Windrush scandal (Wardle and Obermuller, 2019) has had on their expectations and academic experience whilst living and studying in the UK.

This study explored the following questions; Did you have any particular expectations of what university life would be like before you arrived here? Has the reality matched your expectations? What persuaded you to travel thousands of miles from the Caribbean to come and study at the University of Kent? When and why did you decide to join Kent Caribbean Union (KCU)? In your opinion, how can students of colour/international students most effectively influence university policy relating to racial equity and inclusivity on campus? Caribbeans have played quite a historical activist role in Britain during the 60s and 70s, What role, if any, can international students from KCU play in all of this?

Using a framing derived from Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017), the research addresses the significance of students' sense of belonging, valuing of social justice and equity in higher education and the need for race-based activism as a call for diversity and decolonising of the curricula and for more inclusive representation among staff and student society leadership. For example, many became acutely aware that their variety of interests in academic learning, sense of belonging and engagement was affected by a lack of diversity and reference to global authors (Agyeman and Konadu-Mensah, 2020).

The experience of being a student activist empowered our interviewees to be more aware of the value and benefit of being more critically aware of their educational environment and not to merely accept the status quo because they were outsiders looking inside the institution, they, just like home student have the right to question and challenge systemic racism that is reproduced through Eurocentric perceptions of the curricula.

The presence of international Caribbean students remains small in proportion to other international students in UK universities, but over recent years their collective voice has gone on to establish a platform for representation within their international Caribbean community that was worthy of further investigation in this study.

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