

Anti-Blackness and Racism in International Higher Education

Gerardo Blanco, Philip G. Altbach, and Hans de Wit

COVID-19 is not the only disruptive force currently affecting higher education. 2020 has proven to be a year of awakening to the reality of racism, particularly regarding the worst extremes of anti-Black racism. World headlines about the poor response to COVID-19 in the United States were quickly followed by news of civil unrest in major cities responding to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black Americans at the hands of police. The movement, which started narrowly as a response to police brutality in the United States, has become a global movement bringing attention to systematic manifestations of exclusion, discrimination, and mistreatment—and the underlying sentiment of anti-Blackness—not only in the United States, but around the world.

Available data illustrate the scope of the problem in higher education internationalization. According to *Open Doors* data, out of more than 340,000 US students abroad, roughly 17,000 or 5 percent chose destinations in sub-Saharan Africa or Caribbean countries with Black-majority populations. Students from these regions are roughly 47,000 or 4 percent of the nearly 1.1 million international students in the United States. Data from NAFSA (Association of International Educators) for the academic year 2017–2018 reveals that Black students comprise 6 percent of US students abroad, even though they represent 13 percent of enrollments of US institutions. Accordingly, Black individuals are underrepresented in every aspect of US internationalization. This crisis should be treated as an opportunity to examine the potential complicities and oversights by international higher education, and to explore how internationalization professionals can also become allies for racial justice.

Global Anti-Blackness

Black Lives Matter has emerged as a global phenomenon, and university students around the world—often a significant contingent in youth movements—are on the frontlines. In the United States and worldwide, students have turned against the complicity of universities that have honored prominent donors and historical figures with ties to slavery and colonialism—as well as against racist policies of all kinds.

Calls to remove Confederate monuments and names from US campuses have reignited movements like the ones calling to remove Cecil Rhodes references from South African and British institutions and across Commonwealth nations. In Latin America, the legacies of colonialism and racism are intertwined. Throughout the region, racial classifications emerged during the Spanish colonial period based on people's racial composition, or their proportion of Spanish-European, indigenous, or African-enslaved heritage—and of course this hierarchy was reflected in the small higher education sector. Not surprisingly, Black or mostly Black groups were at the base of the social pyramid. While this system was abolished with the independence movements in the region, this perceived social structure remains influential. Black Lives Matter in the region has also brought into question the role of prominent colonists, such as Columbus and Pizarro, and their legacy, which is often publicly memorialized, especially in educational settings.

Brazil presents a significant example, where the Black Lives Matter/*Vidas Negras Importam* has resonated deeply. This country was colonized by the Portuguese, who incidentally were also among the first European powers to settle in West Africa, and were key in the transatlantic slave trade. It was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. The contemporary, very controversial quota system for admission to public universities illustrates how complicated it is to address the legacy of racism.

Abstract

Racism has negative impacts on all aspects of international higher education. Anti-Blackness is a global and historical phenomenon, but the current racial awakening provides an important opportunity for higher education worldwide. Internationalization scholars and professionals should actively participate in global movements for racial justice.

Not unexpectedly, international authorship links tend to be inversely related to population size. Countries with large scholarly communities are in less need of collaborators from other countries.

There is much to be done to interrupt anti-Blackness, but a necessary step is to recognize how deeply entrenched racism is in higher education in the United States and elsewhere.

Gerardo Blanco is associate director of the Center for International Higher Education (CIHE) at Boston College, US. E-mail: gerardo.blanco@bc.edu. Philip G. Altbach is research professor and founding director of CIHE. E-mail: altbach@bc.edu. Hans de Wit is the director of CIHE. E-mail: dewit@bc.edu.

Unfortunately, anti-Black racism is widespread today. In the midst of COVID-19 in China, misinformation suggesting that Black migrant workers were quickly spreading the disease turned into bans from businesses and restaurants against Black individuals. There have also been reports of discrimination against Black students from Africa on Chinese university campuses. Similar examples of anti-African discrimination have taken place in India.

Racism is not limited to anti-Blackness. One has only to recall the anti-Chinese and -Asian reactions in Europe and the United States, also in higher education, at the start of the pandemic. There has been discrimination against Latino immigrants and refugees in the United States and against Muslim immigrants and refugees in Europe—largely concerning restricting access to higher education and to the academic workforce. And these are only recent examples of racism in higher education.

The role of universities in supporting and buttressing colonialism throughout the colonized regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America cannot be overlooked and in many instances was linked to racism. The universities established by the colonial governments trained civil servants for colonial administration—and of course designed a curriculum and ethos that supported the colonial idea. It is not surprising that Cecil Rhodes himself donated the land where the University of Cape Town is located. In the end, however, those colonial universities educated a generation of young people who eventually overthrew the colonial order.

A Local and Global Issue

There is much to be done to interrupt anti-Blackness, but a necessary step is to recognize how deeply entrenched racism is in higher education in the United States and elsewhere. Many have acknowledged and criticized it, but in reality, the higher education system has grown accustomed to its presence without taking action against it. Racism and internationalization have been treated in higher education research and policy as two different issues, one national and the other international. We have to challenge this divide: Both are local and global, as made clear in this issue by other contributions.

It is important to address how anti-Blackness and racism impact all aspects of our work, from student recruitment to education abroad, the experience we provide to Black international students and scholars, our scholarly work, and our policies. ▲