

Abstract

In the wake of the global outcry against police brutality and systemic injustice, university students globally are offering support and solidarity through activism. This builds on a history of students raising public consciousness about social issues and seeding policy change. These current events present an opportunity for global universities to catalyze public action by both addressing institutionalized racism themselves, and resourcing local efforts.

#BlackLivesMatter: A New Age of Student Activism

Dana Downey

In May 2020, the world erupted in anguish over the killing of black American George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Beyond the borders of the United States, the tragic murder sparked peaceful protests in Amsterdam, Auckland, Berlin, Paris, Sao Paulo, and Tokyo—raising public consciousness about ingrained oppression and injustice. The #BlackLivesMatter movement is steeped with students as founders, mobilizers, and facilitators. On campus, students are petitioning their institutions to raise racial consciousness and combat systemic injustices. They are calling for greater representation in the faculty and senior administration, inclusive communications in digital and print, and an institutional commitment to addressing microaggressions, among other things.

The Role of Student Activism

Historically, student activism has played a key role in mobilizing the masses for social change. While students may not be central figures in these movements, they have shaped the messaging and ideology, from the 1928 Youth Pledge (*Sumpah Pemuda*) in Indonesia, where students were among the first to formally voice anticolonial sentiments, to the peaceful student demonstrations in the streets of Budapest in 1956, which preceded the Hungarian revolution. More recently, student voices were influential in the Orange

Revolution of Ukraine. While there is a plethora of examples of student activism that has been civil and orderly, this has not always been the case. Some student-led uprisings of the mid-twentieth century were more violent in nature, including Thai student protests overthrowing leader Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn in 1973 and militant students taking hostages in Iran in 1979. Despite the fragmented history of student activism, there is a persistent historical theme of student involvement in social change.

Given the massification of higher education, with less elite students, more flexible learning, and less place-centric content, some had predicted the decline of student activism. Indeed, it has not. The recent demonstrations have reverberated from Minneapolis, where students have demanded that their institution sever its ties with the local police department, across the Atlantic to the University of Oxford, where critical conversations about the roots and history of the Rhodes Scholarship have been reignited. At New York University Abu Dhabi, a liberal arts college in the United Arab Emirates with no majority culture, students are calling for an institutional acknowledgement that racial inequities are a global problem, not just an American one.

Globally, the antiracism movement is intimately connected with campuses. The Brazilian version of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, *Vidas Negras Importam*, advocates on campuses and is actively organizing protests in Brazil. #BlackLivesMatter Nottingham was initiated as an activist-academic partnership between the city and university community, and #BlackLivesMatter was even awarded the 2017 Sydney Peace Prize by the University of Sydney in Australia.

It is noteworthy that most of the student activism is localized, connected to a similar local issue with police brutality or anti-Blackness, and occurring in the Global North. This is resonant of colonial and neocolonial influences, an undercurrent in these contexts widely observed in academic literature. Students are speaking truth to power.

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The University Response

With campuses' internationalization and global mobility, student demographics are more eclectic than ever. This lends itself to minimizing racial differences, even as diversity narratives are amplified as a sort of utopian prospect. Recent events have put words to the lived experiences of many, and students are demanding a response from global higher education.

As student masses seek to confront institutionalized inequity and the complicit behavior of universities, institutions are aware that silence is a powerful statement that could jeopardize their internationalization aims. The pipeline of underrepresented groups and international students is delicate, and even more so in this pandemic era.

University responses have been both public and personal. In the United Kingdom, the University of Manchester issued an open letter to students reaffirming its commitment to diversity and encouraging active reporting of embedded racism. The Rhodes Trust of the University of Oxford has issued a statement recounting previous prejudices as well as progress, and announcing new commitments to specific actions as next steps. The University of Western Australia issued a statement calling for an end to Black deaths in custody (including of Aboriginal people), where police brutality is widely documented. New York University Abu Dhabi has shifted its messaging to new students to introduce racial inequities as a potent reality of higher education that will be actively confronted during their time as students. These commitments to action and public messages mark intention more than measurable change, but they embed accountability.

Precipitating Change

The trail of injustice on campuses and the disparities amplified by globalization and massification have long been documented by higher education scholars. At the same time, the university has been cited as a vehicle for public good, producing both social and public benefits like increased quality of civic life, social cohesion, and an appreciation of diversity. With their capacity for research, their role as knowledge brokers and creators, and their tremendous influence on students, they are uniquely positioned to fuel movements like this one.

With burgeoning global racial consciousness, higher educational institutions have a crucial role to play in building local relevance and exploring internal inequities. The

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activism to date evidences a deep persistent concern, but research can provide infrastructure and inform policy change, where systemic change often begins. Thus, universities are also compelled to take a long and hard look inward, critically evaluating how they have been complicit contributors and how they can do better.

Why is all this crystallizing now? Perhaps it was that the incident was caught on video, or the inhumane ignorance of the police involved, or their affiliation with the state? Perhaps it is the pandemic era provoking hypervigilance? Either way, inclusion is the need of the hour, a key concern of the decade, and tightly wound up in the future of education. Global higher education cannot afford to miss this window. ▲