

**Topic 5: Education and enterprise;
black agency and achievements.
Speech: Sonita Alleyne**

I would like to thank the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent for the opportunity to address this subject.

I believe in education. In the 1960s, my parents travelled 6,767 km from Barbados to London to make a more prosperous life for themselves and to give me and my siblings the chance for a better economic future through education, access to jobs and finance for housing. They saw educational attainment as the primary key to unlocking that future.

I started in the UK school system in 1971. Due to my Bajan accent, I was put in a remedial group and forced to have speech lessons, despite having been taught to read before going to school. My mother fought and got me put back into the mainstream class, where I thrived. In 1985, I won a place at Cambridge University, where there were very few academics or students of African descent.

At the age of 24, three years after graduating, I set up a media production company and was CEO for 18 years. Afterwards, I moved on to a portfolio career working in the private and public sectors, operating nationally and internationally. I have been Master at Jesus College, Cambridge since October 2019. Through my experiences, I have been able to observe how education, enterprise, agency and achievement intersect.

Agency - the ability to feel, shape or control one's present and future - has been a key driver all my life. I learnt agency from my parents. Along with many black parents, they told us we had to work harder, be seen, be heard and finish what we started. We had to use our common sense and figure out what to do next. Agency was built into my upbringing.

It was there when I put my hand up in class to answer the questions, despite the teacher in my primary school asking me not to so that the boys could have a chance to answer. It was there when I made my university decision, and my sense of agency was definitely there when I decided to found my own business. I believe it's still guiding me through the opportunities now and yet to come.

Agency powers transitions from primary school to secondary and tertiary education and beyond into the workplace. The barriers faced by my parents' generation and those before it, significantly blocked their own sense of agency. The legacies of colonialism, slavery and prejudice led to a situation in the UK of endemic inequality in outcomes. Recent statistics show that these inequalities still persist.

The English and Welsh census of 2021 highlighted that whilst 16% of white British people lived in social housing, 44% of black Britons, including Africans and Caribbeans, and 27% of people of dual heritage live in social housing.

40% of households in the Black Caribbean and 37% of Black other people owned their own home as opposed to 68% for White British.

In measures of jobs and income, black people had the highest unemployment rate of all ethnic groups; and were most likely to have a household income below £400 a week. Only 8% of black pensioner families drew any income from a personal pension.

Because of their worse outcomes in the labour market, people of African descent tend to have fewer savings and are less likely to inherit property or financial assets from family members.

I'd like to thank the Runnymede Trust for assistance with these statistics. They show how under-invested the UK Black economic empowerment space has been for decades.

So, how might we change these outcomes? We have to start right at the beginning of each child's life with decent pre-school support targeted to those on the lowest incomes and proper funding for quality childcare. From such a springboard, education can become a huge driver of agency, attainment and good economic futures.

However, attainment in schools can be an issue. Statistics in 2019 showed 59% of the black ethnic group in UK schools attained a standard pass in English and maths GCSE. This is the lowest rate for any major ethnic group.

Agency needs a direction to aim at. I believe part of the solution is to foster aspiration by showing young people that their learning links to careers they may never have heard of. This should start at primary school. In addition, more life skills should be taught on self-organisation, financial awareness, resilience and agency. The curriculum should also value and illustrate the contribution of black achievers. I think it is important to normalise role models as early as possible.

Institutions must continue to play their part too. In 2019, whilst 45% of black 18 year olds entered higher education, only 8% went to a "so called" higher tariff institutions. This was the lowest rate of any ethnic group.

At Jesus College, Cambridge, we are part of a collegiate system that is striving to increase the number of students of colour who apply. Schemes such as Target Oxbridge and Get in Cambridge are reaching out to widen participation. I am delighted that we attract undergraduates and postgraduates from around the world. In the last three years nearly one third (29.5%) of students applying to Cambridge from UK schools or colleges identified as 'other than white'. These students, along with all our students, have been able to build contacts and networks from the global talent mix at Jesus College.

Students need advice and support before and during university. Financial concerns are a reality. I am encouraged that Cambridge University and Jesus College have good hardship schemes, as well as other generous bursaries and scholarships for students coming from financially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Funding is also being directed towards students of African descent to enable them to pursue Masters, PhDs and post-doctoral studies. However, the Higher Education Statistics Agency showed that in 2022 there were only 160 black professors in the UK. 160 out of 22,855. 0.7%. It is imperative we see Black people as academics - intellectually gifted, talented and respected. It will inspire the next generation. Every higher education establishment in the UK has its part to play in redressing this appalling statistic. Governments across the globe whose Higher Education establishments have a similar lack of visible Black academics should also put resources into tackling this issue.

For Black students who graduate from university, experiencing a good transition into the workplace is fundamental to further economic empowerment. The UK Office for Students (OfS) is exhorting Universities to not just get students in through the door but also to focus on delivering outcomes, tackling dropout rates and supporting them to graduate into high skilled, highly paid jobs.

As Master of Jesus College, I am not only passionate about our students' academic achievement, but also how we help them develop their agency in order to prepare them for the world beyond university. Since I arrived, the College has tackled the issue of how we help all our students, particularly the approximately 20% of our undergraduate population who start College disadvantaged by socio-economic factors. I have introduced a number of careers initiatives such as "Jesus Connect". Hundreds of previous Jesuans have signed up to mentor current students. The College also now runs skills workshops, peer-to-peer learning and invites speakers on an almost weekly basis to share their pathways to success.

In the UK, institutions such as the civil service, judiciary, media, finance, banking, consultancy, teaching, politics and health have traditionally drawn their leadership from a mono-cultural pool of Oxbridge students drawn from a more privileged socio-economic background. These institutions are changing, expanding the pool they recruit from. However, access to universities like Cambridge and Oxford does help propel people into positions from which they can influence change. That is why it is important that higher tariff universities widen participation. It is imperative that people of African Descent are fully represented at all levels throughout these professions, especially in leadership roles.

Of course, one of the major drivers of economic empowerment is the creation of new businesses and entrepreneurship. I have personal experience of how transformative this can be. As I previously mentioned, I set up my own production company when I was twenty-four. I know that becoming an entrepreneur can be one of the most rewarding pursuits in life. It's exciting, uncharted territory driven by one's agency.

Recently, the Federation of Small Businesses said that ethnic minority businesses contribute £25bn to the UK economy.

Whilst not all entrepreneurs are grown and nurtured at universities, places of education do have their part to play in levelling the playing field for students of African descent.

In order to encourage young black people to consider enterprise and business, schools should highlight the achievements of Black entrepreneurs where possible. In higher education or at business school, faculties should be diversified and classroom cultures invigorated by inviting in Black entrepreneurs to share their best practices and how they overcame barriers.

Many corporate entities provide funds for employees to enhance their skill set with MBA qualifications. If they targeted their resources at people of African descent that would make a lasting difference in the workplace and I would suggest an increase to their profitability.

I advocate more funding support for black entrepreneurs at every level: funding for youth schemes, freelance training and access to start-up capital.

At the moment there is something of a vicious cycle. A lack of black entrepreneurs in the UK, whose businesses have reached a large scale, leads to less faith and understanding in the next generation of black business start-ups. We need to reverse this cycle.

Another barrier to business growth can be that banks require securitized assets to lend money against. The lack of built up or inherited family wealth can be a stumbling block. This is where living in social or rented accommodation can entrench black disadvantage.

Of course, not everyone wishes to be an entrepreneur. Many want to progress through their chosen careers, whether in private or public/government funded sectors.

But how can we measure progress or success? One existing measure of equality in the UK is the analysis of pay gaps. Every company in the UK with more than 250 employees must report annually on its gender pay gap. Some firms report on their ethnicity pay gap too. However, this is voluntary. There is no such mandatory legal requirement. I believe there should be. By focusing on what we can count we get to measure progress and spotlight areas of failure.

I said at the start that my parents travelled from Barbados to London to make a more prosperous life for themselves. Though my father had big ambitions he worked at the same level in the civil service for over thirty years. In giving the eulogy at his funeral, I said that he was part of a lost generation of talented black people who had so many dreams, but whose agency was not enough to overcome the racism and prejudice they encountered. My mother, the smartest person I know, worked numerous jobs, day and night, so that her children could exercise their agency through education, entrepreneurship and the world of work.

The statistics I gave earlier show where we are in terms of social mobility and economic wealth. With proactive policies, imaginative leadership and sustained effort we can reduce and then eliminate inequalities for people of African descent.

Throughout my life, I have seen what good things happen when agency meets equal opportunity. I believe that when people of African descent flourish, all of global society will benefit as a consequence. We may have a way to go but the hard work and effort will be worth it.

Thank you for this opportunity.