

Dear Vice-Chancellor Brady,

I, Oscar Wollen, write to you on behalf of the committee of the University's Politics Society and our affiliating community with sincerity concerning the recent events of the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. The moral injustices experienced by many in today's world are detestable, it is outrageous that one's identity is a factor in determining one's quality of life, yet tragically it is for so many.

I mean only to support my student community as president of the politics society and seek a positive response from you and the university. I am writing with genuine humility and sensitivity, acknowledging my limited experience and awareness of the many ingrained social issues. I intend not to present myself nor ideas construed within this letter to be effective solutions. I am writing with key concerns in relations to some ambiguity of your recent email. These are: one, if you support the university moving to a more 'anti-racist' position, does that mean prior to the BLM movement we were not? Two, why is the university therefore taking a neutral position in terms of the renaming of buildings that glorify slave owners and profiteers? and three, exactly how do you intend to review and debate, in terms of the process, regarding renaming of university buildings? Admittedly, your personal address to the students provides the much-needed substance that was lacking from the first email. As a university with the ability to extensively research systematic racism, a wealth of resources, and a wide range of staff who have the knowledge and experience to take the appropriate steps, you confidently expressed in having the ability to do so. Everyone has a different approach to these issues, so it is hard to know what the best one is. Crucially, however, we all have the same goal, of equal rights and a fairer community. I was pleased when reading you, 'will be developing a programme of activity to position the University of Bristol as an anti-racist organisation,' and I then explored the educational tools you provided within the said email. One author you suggest, Ibram X. Kendi, in his book *How to be an antiracist*, states,

“One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of “not racist.” The claim of “not racist” neutrality is a mask for racism.”

Vice-Chancellor, what do you mean when you state, 'an anti-racist organisation'? I am aware from reading some of Kendi's book that you suggested, one who allows racial inequalities to persevere is a racist. What are your thoughts therefore on the renaming of the Wills Memorial building? Adding to this you mention 'we must debate' and 'we must review' the names of student accommodation, research facilities and study centres. Is this an anti-racist position, or is the university acting as a neutral mediator when you 'welcome this debate and will work with staff, students and alumni to consider the arguments for and against.' Substantially, the email provided us students with a general direction you plan to head in. A number of your initiatives provide clarity in relation to their objectives, and some do not. Your second initiative seems clear, but provokes concern, stating 'funding research internships which provide paid experience in research for new graduates, in order to increase the number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students progressing to postgraduate study.' So, what would be your stance if the university provides someone who identifies as BME with the Colston Travel Research Scholarship? Why are you taking such a desultory, and arguably, contradictory manner in terms of anti-racism if you are allowing people to travel through the means of a scholarship glorifying a slave trader and profiteer? Moreover, you acknowledge your understanding behind many people's anger towards the Edward Colston statue, do you share the same anger?

Thankfully you have recognised and addressed these issues since the last email sent (2nd June 2020). I am sure you were already aware of these issues

considering within your email (11th June 2020) you sent you provided a link to your Race Equality Statement which was published in March 2020. This response may or may not have been a direct result, from the Student Union sending a letter saying they were ‘concerned about the “inaction” of the university amid rising cases of racial aggression on campus, in class and in student halls,’ sent only six months ago in December 2019. So significant in fact, the BBC supported the student disapproval in an article that month.

When a mistake is made we must acknowledge it, learn from it, and never repeat it, as implied by your statement ‘This work [groups set up to discuss renaming university buildings] was framed by a determination to interrogate rather than hide our historical links.’ Many mistakes have occurred on many occasions, and so why I ask, are people still experiencing racial inequality at our university today? This racism is still evident and illustrated through the experiences shared when reading @Bristruths (Facebook) and the @makeitknownbristol (Instagram) social media pages. Like you stated in your email ‘We expect all members of our University community - students, staff, visitors, and stakeholders - to support us in this endeavour.’ Students have taken a stand, through countless petitions supporting the renaming of the building (<http://chng.it/tsYn6yG8> and <http://chng.it/MwcJtq2W92>); they have been activating their democratic consciousness through the means of protests and shared online extremely personal and horrific stories, which reflect clear student indignation for the racism experienced within and around our university’s community. Attached is a petition which demands the university approach these issues earnestly with considerably more intent (<http://chng.it/rZMFbRPm>).

I ask you these questions not in provocation, as I am sure your answers would support the student communities. I ask you them so we as students may get a clear and well-informed justification in terms of the steps taken by our senior management team and how we shall approach the university’s amoral past. I am aware of the many mistakes that have created the problems of today, many being ingrained within the institutions that manage our lives, universities being one of them. But, now is the time to admit mistakes, a time where we all listen to the injustices faced by many, a time to diagnose these problems so they are fixed and never repeated. I was pleased to hear you in 2016 speaking at the Widening Participation Research Seminar, quoting ‘it is the responsibility of everybody, vice-chancellors included, to ensure that students from all backgrounds feel welcome and supported in their education’, and reiterate this point in your recent email.

So, Vice-Chancellor Brady, the student body desperately wants change. Bristol wants change. I hope you want change too. I do hope you understand the reason behind this letter and I would enjoy participating in a virtual meeting with you to further discuss the issues addressed in this letter. I eagerly await your reply.

Kind regards,



Oscar Wollen

University of Bristol Politics Society President

*Point of interest: both this letter and your subsequent reply shall be accessible to our student community