

## **Statement from GARA (Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action)**

GARA (Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action), a Black + PoC led student protest group, began organising in March 2019 in response to racist attacks on a student. This proved a lightning rod for students to share experiences of racism on campus, and on the 12th of March, GARA began an occupation of Deptford Town Hall in protest over the failure of senior management to demonstrate a meaningful commitment in tackling institutional racism on campus. The occupation lasted for 137 days (four-and-a-half months), GARA had a list of demands to make to the College, (Ex: Mandatory anti-racism training for ALL staff, including the Goldsmiths Senior Management team, for local residents of Lewisham borough to have access to Deptford Town Hall, Removal of the slave trader statues, Overhaul of curriculum, alongside a race audit on how best to decolonize the curriculum amongst others. For a more in-depth look at the occupation, the [original GARA manifesto](#) (with initial and revised demands clearly marked) is available to read.

Members of GARA were supported by University College Union (UCU), Justice for Cleaners and Goldsmiths SU. More than 300 staff members at the university also supported the occupation, as did local Lewisham MP Vicky Foxcroft.

During the occupation, Deptford Town Hall was a hub not just for activism but for the local community. Crucially GARA strived to cultivate a community beyond the institution that included the local community, so they held many events that were open to the public as well as to students. It also became a place where students, staff and members of the public came together and felt united.

Deptford Town Hall was originally owned by the local authority and was sold to Goldsmiths University (1990s) under the agreement that the Town Hall would be accessible for use to the local community as it was previously used for. The agreement was never fulfilled and instead was used to house senior staff offices and elitist events. Deptford Town Hall's

colonial history can be seen in the slave trader statues that still adorn this building, a history that is inherently tied to violence, displacement and exploitation of black bodies. These statues stand as a daily reminder of the racial violence that was inflicted on the ancestors of the local Afro-Caribbean residents.

*“Statues, such as those of slave traders, are not useful ways of teaching history or explaining the values of previous eras, instead they are a continuing public "validation" of people who did "terrible things"*

(Historian, Professor Olusoga 2019)