

Social Work Case Studies

Experiences of students from the Global Ethnic Majority

Three former students share their experiences and give their views on driving forward change to address the ethnicity degree awarding gap

November 2022

Three former Brookes Social Work students from the Global Ethnic Majority share their experiences of studying during the evolution of anti-racism work, a big shift that the Social Work team, led by Jill Childs, has been making since 2017. The students speak openly about their experiences of learning and teaching, discuss initiatives they were involved in to develop anti-racist practice, and also provide advice for lecturers and institutions wanting to address ethnicity awarding gaps. Speaking to one of their lecturers at the time, Dr Louise Taylor-Bunce, they shared their experiences of the curriculum, discussed their sense of belonging, and use of terminology to identify ethnic groups. They also discussed the Global Majority Collective (GMC), a highly successful, student-led group, which developed from research that Louise led with former social work students into their experiences ([Bunce, Talib et al., 2021](#)). Since the inception of this work, the social work team have created an anti-racist strategy to address degree-awarding gaps, including curriculum design, student and staff recruitment, and creating partnerships with East Africa. The Social Work team are now recognised nationally for their efforts, with awards including the [Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence from Advance HE \(2022\)](#). For more information about their work, visit [here](#).

In the following case studies, students have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Aarna

Aarna began studying for a Master's degree in Social Work in 2015, and now works as a Registered Social Worker for an immigration organisation.

She felt like the curriculum was a barrier to her feeling included and that it didn't cover topics that concerned people from minoritised backgrounds. "Ideas about what it means to work with people from minoritised backgrounds wasn't covered much at all. Social work as a profession doesn't engage with these topics which I am interested in, and I believe

statutory social work is structurally racist. It baffled me that we didn't cover this. I felt I had to go above and beyond by doing my own exploration and research”.

She also felt that some terminology was problematic, instead preferring the term 'Global Majority' while recognising that anything which groups together a heterogeneous group of people is problematic. “‘Global majority’ creates a sense of solidarity because there’s so much anti-blackness, however, any term that lumps people together can be problematic. The language used needs to be meaningful. We need to look at where the problem lies and label specifically, not generally.”

Aarna recommends that more training should be available for lecturers because her experience was that when lecturers tried to tackle these topics, it sometimes ‘made things worse’: “If all staff could have a sound understanding of what racism is and then go on to implement it in their teaching, that would help so much.”

The Global Majority Collective (GMC)

When the opportunity came for Aarna to take part in research in 2017 to understand experiences of students from the Global Ethnic Majority, she didn't hesitate to get involved. The [research](#) highlighted three aspects of their experiences that were missing: a lack of autonomy; lack of feeling competent; and lack of feeling like they belonged. As a result of the research, Aarna then led a series of student discussion groups which later became the GMC. “Although at first only a handful of students came, over time it grew to over 20 students meeting on a Thursday night. It’s an open space where they can raise anything they want to. I bring issues raised back to the course leader.” The team listened to Aarna’s feedback and as a result of the wider work, the team were inspired to develop an anti-racist action plan. Students have now seen tangible changes to course content, assessment and staff representation.

Jennifer

Jennifer was a Master’s student at Brookes, graduating in 2018, and is currently working as a Social Worker in an adoption team.

Similarly to Aarna, she also felt that the curriculum was too restrictive and that this affected her ability to express her autonomy: “Nothing outside the British curriculum was really covered. I couldn’t really be myself; generally, I am open, but I felt like who I was or who I could be was not reflected in the class at all. I didn’t feel able to challenge it. On a daily basis we have to be so careful about what we want to project. I was so anxious to not reinforce that stereotype, so I just stayed quiet. I did challenge one incident that felt explicitly racist outside of the lecture, but regret not doing it in the moment.”

Terminology

In her experience, Jennifer felt that there should be a change in terminology used to refer to people from the global majority, and that this could have the power to change the nature of the conversation for the positive: “Globally, it’s the *majority* of people. Seeing the differences in terms of degree awards for different ethnic groups is important, but referring to us as ‘minority’ makes you shut down and feel stigmatised. You can still talk about the

same things, but terminology must change, and this would help change the nature of the conversation itself”.

Representation

Jennifer also suggested that recruiting more teaching from staff and guest lecturers to represent the global majority would be beneficial: “I know it’s not easy to get the staff body to be more representative because there’s a lot of other factors at play. But there are others (like myself) who would come in and help – this would help not just Global Majority students, but white students too.” She felt that if her lecturers had been more representative of her ethnic heritage, that would have been valuable. “We could teach each other about each other”.

What needs to change?

“We should bring people into conversations about anti-racist practice. We could support them to support others. There should be a focus on anti-oppressive practice and solid foundations should be set. This could be done through workshops, case studies etc.”

Janelle

Janelle was an undergraduate on the BA in Social Work programme and graduated in 2021. She now works part-time as a Social Worker and as a part-time lecturer in Social Work. Like Aarna, she felt that some of the course content was not inclusive, although she recognised the efforts that had been taken recently to move towards anti-racist practice: “I feel lecturers have moved on in their anti-racist teaching, but some case studies used were very stereotypical”. While on her placement in social work, she felt that the people she was working with didn’t represent her Afro-Caribbean cultural heritage. She questioned: “Who will advocate for me? If I do have issues within my journey, who is going to stand up for me?” She also felt that this was reflected in her university experience: “At the time of the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter being in the news, it was very quiet at the university – I wasn’t aware that any reference was made to it. I emailed a tutor to ask what was going on in the programme regarding this. At that time, I felt no one was advocating for me and I felt undervalued. I thought to myself, I need to do something or just be quiet.” After Janelle spoke out, the programme leadership mentored and supported Janelle and Aarna to develop the Global Majority Collective, which was resourced by the faculty”

We need more representation

Again, similarly to Aarna and Jennifer, Janelle felt that the key to feeling a greater sense of mattering and belonging is all about “representation, and having dedicated modules on anti-racism, really embedding it into the curriculum. Include placements suitable for people so they can thrive.”

Recommendations for further action

Janelle feels that representation is key: “Overall, it’s about being represented and having someone who understands your needs. Universities all need a collective, for example, the Students Union should have a dedicated collective. There’s nowhere for Global Majority students to go to have that proper supervision or Academic Advising that they need. The

GMC itself, at the beginning, it was really optimistic. We are now looking at providing more appropriate case studies and challenging racist elements in the course.”