

# Lessons learned from how we teach anti- racism on a social work course in the East of England

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# Background to the Research

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- Commitment to anti-racist practice
- Developing anti-racist practitioners working in an increasingly complex and changing environment
- Existing literature

# The knowledge base

- Research and knowledge production – qualitative approach seeking depth and detail about the lived experiences of students
- Critical Race Theory
- Whiteness studies and white privilege
- Difficulties and barriers for global majority students
- De-politicisation of Social Work

# Research Title

How much do BAME students on the social work programme at UoS feel able to explore their different ethnicities within the teaching, learning and assessment opportunities?





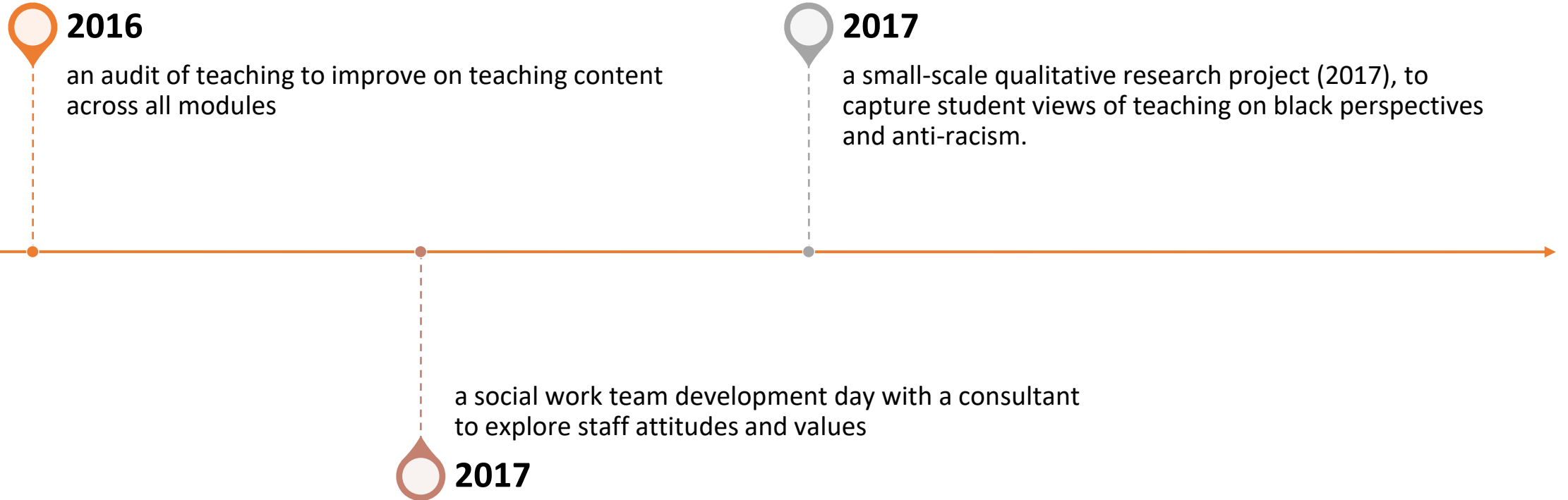
# Research Aims

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- To teach more effectively across difference and better manage the integration of black perspectives into the social work curriculum, involving the student experience more closely.
- Increase the confidence of BAME students to consider their cultural heritage and experiences within academic and practice learning.
- Positively encourage teaching staff to actively engage in these processes and improve teaching practice and student experience of this.

# Research stages - phase 1

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# Research stages - phase 2

**2021**

Decision to move to phase 2 of the research, funding application and recruitment of a research associate

**2022**

a small-scale qualitative research project to evaluate changes/any progress made from last research project and capture student and PE/tutor views of teaching on black perspectives and anti-racism at UoS and within the teaching partnership.

# Findings from 1st phase

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## ***1) Whiteness and white privilege poorly understood by some white students.***

*'I have always been of the mind that they are no different to me'.*

*'She makes me look at things in a different way sometimes'.*

## ***2) Students' confidence in discussing their own culture and identity.***

- *Unsafe spaces for black students*
- *White students' responses – fear and uncertainty*
- *Handling difficult conversations*





# Findings from the 1<sup>st</sup> phase

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## **3) Areas of tension for global majority students on practice placement that need addressing.**

- *'I don't know what other people are going to be there, and that is something on my mind, which other students, you know, white students, it probably won't even cross their minds.'*

## **4) Improving the student experience of teaching black perspectives and anti-racism on the course.**

- *More teaching across modules on anti-racism, black history etc.*
- *Discussing white privilege more on the course*
- *Safe spaces*
- *More balance and focus on differences and similarities to promote coalition*
- *Whose responsibility?*



# Learning and changes

- Practice Educators and the Mandela Model (Tedam 2012).
- Impact on workforce development
- Increased exploration of 'whiteness' within the curriculum (and structural and hegemonic challenges).
- Safe spaces – tutor and lecturer competence to 'contain' emotional aspects of learning.
- Training for members of Social Work Voices
- Reflexivity – understanding of one's own cultural location-past and present contexts.
- Scrutiny of our Practice Learning Processes



# 2nd Phase of Research

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- Includes Practice Educators (from within the Teaching Partnership + Independents) and tutors at UoS.
- Questionnaire for PEs and Tutors - potential of over 100 respondents - 18 responses.
- Questionnaire sent out in February 2022.
- Focus groups and individual interviews for the three cohorts of undergraduate students.
- Interviews and focus groups carried out in February/March 2022.

# Findings

## Qualitative findings

### Thematic analysis of focus groups and interviews

#### 1) What's working well?

#### Teaching on anti-racism, CRT and experiences of racism.

*'I think it's taught quite well. The anti-racism is brilliant. It made me realise that I have the right to feel the way I feel.'*

*'so I already know the history of it, but feedback from other students in my class suggests they were never taught it and it was an eye-opener for many of them.'*

*'I've learnt stuff I never thought about before, and stuff I should have been thinking about. It does open your eyes.'*

#### Diversifying/decolonising the curriculum

Students recognised there had been a move to a more diverse curriculum which was appreciated.





# Findings

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**And there were examples of change -**

- *'I felt quite isolated in a class of mostly white people until that lecture, but afterwards found that white students actually made an effort to hang out at lunchtimes. So, I think it helped in lots of ways'*

# Findings

## **Increasing confidence for some students (global majority)**

*'I didn't feel comfortable before we had the modules. I thought, oh, what I say might be weird to other people, but then I became more at ease with my identity and culture after that, er, the lecture on anti-racism and black perspectives. So, I do now feel quite comfortable.'*

*'I think I would be quite confident, yeah. The lecturers have made me feel confident that I can do this. I'm going to go back and say it's the empowerment we got from that lecture.'*

## **Increasing anxiety for others (white)**

*'Sometimes you can leave the lectures, I don't know, maybe feeling a little down and like you're in the wrong a bit. I don't know, I just leave the lectures feeling a bit disempowered I suppose.'*

*'I struggle to know how to put some things into words, in a way that's not going to offend people. I think that's my struggle. I'm curious, and I want to be curious, but I equally don't want to upset or offend.'*



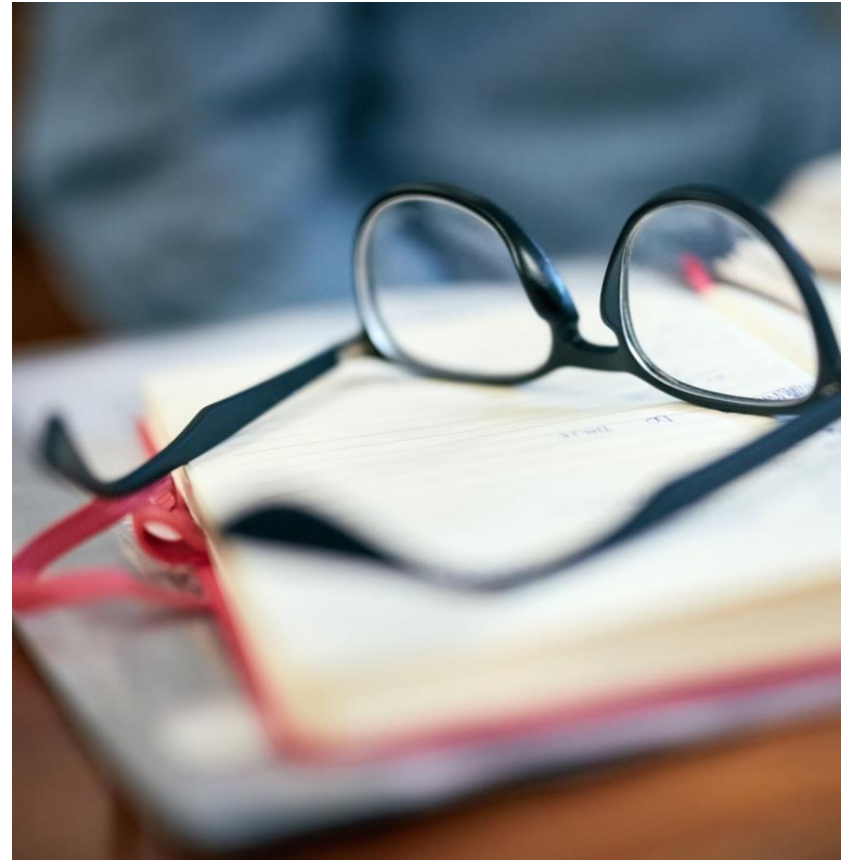
# Findings

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## 2) What requires improvement?

**Group dynamics and micro aggressions leading to the isolation and silencing of black students -**

- *There were always little cliques (of white students)'*
- *'You are not going to be allowed into the clique, and you are left alone.'*
- *... 'this is the area of most discrimination. In the group work you'll be surprised, most times, the black or the minority people end up doing their own presentation alone'.*
- *'There are many ways you see it, like when you come to the class, you take a seat, nobody wants to sit next to you. Then they sit two seats away. This is so glaring.'*





# Findings

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## **Silencing of black students without safety in numbers -**

*'I do think the tutors try to create a safe environment, and they do say at the start of each lecture that we can voice any problems. Personally, I've never really done so, but then I've not felt the need to. I guess being the only person of non-white heritage might make it a bit weird for me. I don't know if that makes sense?....I think if there was a more diverse student population, then I would feel more comfortable in sharing my own identity in class.'*

***'I'm just talking generally. So, because of that, you're always careful about what you say or what you do. As a minority, you always have to be careful.'***

## **And an anticipation of racism in placement -**

The prevailing 'whiteness' of the county led one global majority student to say that they anticipated potential racism in their practice placement;

*'but also, because of my skin colour too, I don't know, I just think there would be, you know, some perception that I wasn't up to the job.'*





## Recruitment, retention and diversity

***'I just think, if there was more diversity, and they made an effort to look into why people of different ethnicities were not signing up to the course, then this would be a good thing.'***

**Geography influencing lack of diversity**

Findings



# Findings

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Safe spaces still not safe enough -

- *'I'm more confident to discuss my own cultural background in individual tutorials because I feel this is a safe space to talk about it. However, in group tutorials, because I'm the only black student it's not so easy. ....I would not feel confident in a group setting because the other students cannot relate to me.'*
- *'But I don't think that (being uncomfortable) should stop us. It's important that we learn about these kinds of issues so I would always write about it, or talk about it, because even if I was marked down, then at least I would have learnt about it.'*

And this resulted in some white students 'managing' their learning - "

*'You are encouraged to include your own identity but I think you have to be careful about how you do this.'*



# Findings

- **Whiteness and white privilege**
- *'It's not in political favour to talk about white oppression, it's all about Black Lives Matter at the moment, so I think that does make it difficult for some of us to bring in our own experiences.'*
- *'There was a feeling of being stereotyped for being white, and we fell into the category of being racist.'*
- *'Sometimes you can leave the lectures, I don't know, maybe feeling a little down and like you're in the wrong a bit. I don't know, I just leave the lectures feeling a bit disempowered, I suppose.'*
- *'I struggle to know how to put some things into words, in a way that's not going to offend people. I think that's my struggle. I'm curious, and I want to be curious, but I equally don't want to upset or offend the oppressed.'*
- *'You get to learn about white privilege, and there are situations where you realise you've not conducted yourself, as a white person, very well.'*
- *'I do it but I hate it'.*

# Practice Educators - Findings



## **1. Better connections/collaboration between university teaching and practice learning**

*'It would be useful to know what is covered at university - this would help to gauge student knowledge and plan supervisions accordingly.'*

## **2. Need for greater continuous professional development opportunities for social work educators**

*'I have not received any training around this but I would really like to have some. I'm not sure if this is available for PEs? Something around White Privilege and other cultural perspectives and how best to include this in my teaching in placement'.*



# Practice Educators - Findings

## 3) Organisational culture and leadership

- **Need for visible leadership**

*'At team, management, and higher levels there needs to be more belief in anti-racism'.*



# Practice Educators - Findings

## **4) Team responsibility**

*'...a lot of particularly older white people are very stuck in their ways - they then engage in good discussions but just to comply. They then slip into their usual ways very quickly and especially if there are only white people in the office - proving that racism is present'.*



# Summary of Key Findings

**From the second phase of the research:**

- **White privilege requires more attention - possibly separate groups initially.**
- **Group dynamics need more attention from lecturers to support safer spaces and challenge and eliminate micro-aggressions and isolation of global majority students.**
- **Invest more effort to create safe spaces and increase effectiveness of small group work – (see Tam Cane, 2022)**
- **Develop more supportive group cultures and safer spaces with tighter tutor collaboration.**
- **Recruitment and retention issues need more attention to increase the number of global majority students on the course.**
- **More lived experience of racism in the curriculum.**



# Summary of Key Findings

From the second phase of the research:

- **Establishing more positive group norms and expectations starting with Induction to reduce micro aggressions.**
- **Anti-racism and black perspectives are taught well but more diversity of 'culture', ethnicity and experiences need to be included in the curriculum.**
- **Continue to de-colonise the curriculum.**
- **More PE training on anti-racism.**
- **More collaboration required between the university, practice placements and PEs to bridge the learning.**
- **The wider organisation and practice learning settings need to embrace anti-racism more visibly.**



# Reference

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- Singh, S. (2019) What do we know (of) the experiences and outcomes of anti-racist social work education? An empirical case study evidencing contested engagement and transformative learning, *Social Work Education*, 38 (5) pp. 631-653.