Exploring the Experiences of Black Ethnic Group Applicants to Social Work Degree Programmes at Goldsmiths, University of London: A Research and Policy Report

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Introduction

As part of the South-East London (Social Work) Teaching Partnership's (SELTP) successful sustainability bid, the Department for Education awarded funding to undertake a small-scale research project to investigate the barriers and opportunities which social work applicants from the black ethnic group experience in terms of their journey to become social work students at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Students from the black ethnic group constitute the majority of students on the BA and MA Social Work programmes at Goldsmiths. SELTP was interested in investigating the obstacles and affordances for applicants from this group to become social work students. The project focused on interviewing current social work students or social work graduates to understand their pre-enrolment experiences to become social work students at Goldsmiths, University of London.

As part of the funding agreement, the study's findings are being shared with stakeholders with a view to improving the preparatory, admissions and enrolment experience of black applicants wanting to train to become social workers at Goldsmiths, University of London. It is hoped that these findings will support more applicants from diverse backgrounds to train them to become social workers.

Note on terminology.

Similar to previous studies, we recognise the importance of examining the influence of language and terminology on contemporary social work education and practice (Hollinrake et al., 2019). In this study, the term ethnicity was used in line with government guidance (UK Government, 2021). This is also the current practice in UK research and higher education, where students' ethnicity is usually determined by how they identify themselves, often by selecting from a list of categories that mirrors those used in the national census (Richardson et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we understand the difficulties stemming from using a generic term to refer to a highly diverse group of people. We purposefully chose this terminology to acknowledge the unsettled social discourse regarding the use of specific words to describe elements of diversity. No single term can fully describe the identities of those who are vulnerable to discrimination (Jeyasingham & Morton, 2019). As Masocha (2015) noted, the black ethnic group is not a homogeneous entity, as there are significant variations within it. Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge how subgroups, cultures, and classes contribute to diversity within the group. By using ethnicity, we aim to recognise diverse cultural, historical, and geographic backgrounds.

Finally, it is important to recognise that the language and terminology surrounding identity are dynamic and continuously evolving. We remain open to criticism in that we have not used language in ways that others find fully appropriate or acceptable. If we have, we apologise for our remiss, but we want to reassure readers that our intention is to remain sensitive to how others use language to identify themselves. The terminology adopted aims to reflect an understanding of the nuances and

sensitivity inherent in discussing identity within academic discourse while also acknowledging the ongoing dialogue and changes in language within academic and broader societal contexts.

Setting the Recent Policy Context for Recruiting Social Workers in Universities

The introduction of the Social Work Degree in 2003 is widely considered to be the catalyst for major changes in social work education in England (Holmström, 2010). The move to degree-level qualification was accompanied by prominent changes to the social work education admissions regulatory framework (Department of Health, 2002). New standards were introduced in relation to the selection and professional entry requirements. As a result, universities have had to adapt and develop more complex admission processes in order to meet the new statutory requirements (Holmström & Taylor, 2008b).

Furthermore, over the last two decades, there has been a centrally driven expansion of standards aimed at improving social work education and practice. This generated confusing terrain for the profession (Worsley, 2023). For example, multiple regulatory requirements shape the decision-making process at the point of entry into social work education (Holmström, 2014). These requirements not only affect social work admission teams in universities but also everyone considering a career in social work.

In December 2019, Social Work England (SWE) assumed responsibility for regulating entry into the social work profession. Similar to its predecessors (GSCC, HCPC), the regulator has established a set of education and training standards (ETS). These are the standards against which SWE evaluates and approves social work programmes (SWE, 2021). Accredited courses within England must meet all ETS, including Standard 1, which relates to admissions. ETS 1.1 requires that providers have a 'holistic/multidimensional assessment process' in place for students starting a social work training programme. Before they are enrolled on to a programme, social work students need to demonstrate that they

- have the potential to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the professional standards;
- have a good command of English;
- have the capability to meet academic standards; and
- have the capability to use information and communication technology (ICT) methods and techniques to achieve course outcomes (SWE, 2021).

As Holmström (2010) observed, it is relatively straightforward to assess the entry requirement for most school leavers in relation to A-level grades or corresponding qualifications. However, these students represented only a small proportion of those studying social work. Most social work students are mature students, and it is more challenging for admissions staff to assess their 'equivalence'. In addition, further attention needs to be given to the diverse nature and needs of these mature students, many of whom have had little or no previous experience in Higher Education Institutions.

SWE expects education and training providers to ensure that an assessment of the applicants' previous relevant experience is included in the admissions procedures, and this informs the decision-making process (ETS 1.2). There is also a clear focus on stakeholder involvement (ETS 1.3), with the expectation that employers, placement providers, and people with lived experience of social work participate in admissions activities.

Degree providers are required to 'assess the suitability of applicants, in relation to their conduct, health and character'(ETS 1.4). Undertaking a criminal convictions check is also part of this requirement.

HEIs need to ensure that admissions processes are in line with equality, diversity and inclusion principles (ETS 1.5). Equality and diversity policies related to applicants should be effectively applied and routinely monitored.

Finally, ETS 1.6 requires that the admissions process ensures that applicants receive all the necessary information to make informed decisions about whether to accept an offer of a place on the course. In addition to admissions standards, training providers must enable students who successfully complete an approved course to meet SWE professional standards and therefore become eligible to apply to join the register.

Along with the SWE statutory framework, several other social work standards have an impact on admissions. Noting the instability in the area of social work professional standards, Worsley (2023) draws our attention to the considerable changes in what has been described as a 'soft' regulatory landscape. These so-called 'soft' standards are not legally binding, but they still play a significant role and influence key decisions. One such example discussed by the author relates to the Social Work Teaching Partnership (SWTP) programme. SWTPs were introduced by central government to improve the quality of education in England (Cocker, 2023; Taylor et al., 2023). They are considered to be the government's main response to the recommendations made by two influential reviews (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014) on the quality of social work education in England (Baginsky et al., 2019a). The SWTP programme generated a set of 'soft' regulation requirements through its approval process. These requirements focus on entry standards, curriculum, and practice placements.

Another example of 'soft' regulation is the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) introduced by the Social Work Reform Board during an improvement programme that started in 2009. The PCF is described as the profession-owned pillar of social work education and professional development in England (BASW, 2018). According to Higgins (2016), the PCF has transformed social work education. It has shaped various national, governmental and sector-led post-qualifying initiatives (Allen, 2022). The framework has an influence on admissions activity, as it specifies the set of knowledge, skills, and values that prospective students should demonstrate at the point of entry to social work qualifying programmes.

Given this complex policy environment, we can hypothesise that central government efforts to gatekeep or influence the type of applicant admitted to social work training programmes are likely to result in HEIs developing intricate admission processes to comply with central government requirements. However, the effects of these

processes on social work applicants are not yet well understood. The State is correct to insist that safeguards must be put in place to ensure that the social work profession attracts appropriate trainees. At the same time, a complex and time-consuming application journey may be difficult and off-putting for some applicants to navigate, especially for those with limited time and resources or for those with limited or poor experience of communicating with complex HEI organisations.

Who should be recruited into social work programmes - Conflicting Discourses. Widening participation or improving the calibre of entrants?

It has been noted that the intersection of widening participation initiatives and the imperative to maintain rigorous entry standards presents a complex policy conundrum for social work programmes, notably for those tasked with admissions decisions (Dillon, 2007). This dilemma highlights a fundamental tension within the field: while there is a pressing need to promote inclusivity and diversity through proactive strategies, there is also a concurrent demand to uphold academic and professional excellence by admitting candidates with requisite levels of knowledge, skills, and experience.

As discussed by several authors, balancing these competing policy priorities poses significant challenges for social work programmes, as they navigate the delicate balance between promoting accessibility and ensuring the readiness of incoming students for the demands of the profession (Manthorpe et al., 2010a; Holmström, 2010; Dillon, 2011). Admissions staff need to reconcile multiple policy imperatives. In its final report, the GSCC (cited in Narey, 2014) acknowledged that

A tension exists in the sector between the desire to ensure that social work is open to those from all backgrounds, particularly backgrounds where attendance at university has not been common, and a desire to see entrants to the degree with high levels of previous educational attainment.

On one hand, there is the widening participation (WP) in Higher Education (HE) discourse. Recent changes to the state regulation of higher education in the UK have put pressure on universities to develop effective plans to reduce inequalities in access to higher education. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) introduced national strategies for access and student success (Moore et al., 2013). A key concern is the persistent under-representation of non-traditional students in higher education. The policy aims to increase participation by encouraging HEIs to attract more students from underrepresented communities. Funding was allocated to universities according to the number of places offered to students from these groups.

Widening participation encompasses groups which have not traditionally attended university. WP students come from various backgrounds and embrace a range of identities and diverse social characteristics (Moore et al., 2013). Key target groups include applicants from lower socioeconomic groups, mature students, learners from ethnic minority groups, disabled students, and those with experience of care. Consequently, the effective implementation of any widening participation policy is complex, as there is a need to acknowledge the intersectional dimensions of every student's journey to university.

Impact of widening participation

Given the resources allocated to supporting WP initiatives, a crucial question is whether these initiatives promote access to higher education. In this section, we consider the existing literature to explore WP outcomes in higher education. Initially, we examined studies addressing the general effects of WP strategies on undergraduate education, encompassing various disciplines and HEI contexts. From there, we focus on the literature specifically concerning WP efforts in social work education.

While the debate continues about the effectiveness of WP initiatives in addressing inequalities, there are only a limited number of studies which have focused on the impact of various WP programmes to identify what works. The evidence base remains weak, and there is still a lack of robust evaluations of UK-based interventions (Younger et al., 2019). To fill this gap, a recent emphasis has been placed on undertaking systematic literature reviews of WP research. However, these reviews have been limited by their reliance on a small number of quantitative studies that adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs (Sanderson & Spacey, 2021).

However, these systematic reviews have revealed positive developments. Moore et al (2013) reviewed the research evidence on WP and reported increasing participation rates for students from ethnic minority groups. A recent review of the literature (Richardson et al., 2020) found that children from all ethnic minority groups were more likely than white children to progress from secondary education to higher education. A study included in this review (Crawford and Greaves, 2015) noted that the participation rates of all ethnic minority groups improved more than those of White British children between 2003 and 2008. In terms of what works to increase participation, research evidence points to a number of approaches, such as regular and sustained outreach activities, strong cross-sector and inter-sector partnerships, summer schools and mentoring (Moore et al., 2013). Other authors identified 'black box' programmes, which incorporate multiple elements within a single plan, as well as financial incentives like scholarships, as successful strategies (Younger et al., 2019).

While there is agreement that progress has been made in recent years in terms of widening participation, it is clear that social inequalities persist in access to universities in the UK (Younger et al., 2019). For example, applicants from ethnic minority groups are less likely to study at 'high tariff', research-intensive and prestigious universities such as Russell Group institutions (Richardson et al., 2020).

Research has also highlighted variations between different ethnic minority groups. Wakeling (2009, discussed in Moore et al, 2013) found that Black students and Bangladeshi students were more likely to study at 'new', post-1992 universities. Furthermore, intersectional analysis suggests that for many ethnic minority students, factors such as lower socioeconomic status and gender—specifically, being male—are linked to lower aspirations (Richardson et al., 2020) and poor progression rates within higher education (Sanderson & Spacey, 2021). Similarly, Hoskins & Ilie (2017) found that social identity and the local context play a significant role in shaping opportunities for accessing WP initiatives. The authors contend that some WP programmes across the country better serve certain student identities. Therefore,

the authors make the case for the development and implementation of more equitable and contextualised WP strategies.

The widening participation agenda has been central to social work education in England. In his seminal report, Croisdale-Appleby (2014) suggested two main perspectives regarding WP in social work. First, the social work service user population is becoming increasingly diverse, and this diversity must therefore be adequately represented in the profile of the social work workforce. Second, WP corporate responsibilities are placed on universities. Consequently, all programmes, including social work, are expected to contribute to the implementation of these overarching objectives. Croisdale-Appleby emphasises the delineation between corporate management requirements and the recruitment policies specific to social work. He posits that while HEIs are mandated to address diversity and WP agendas, such initiatives should not unduly impact recruitment processes within social work education.

The literature shows that social work education has traditionally had a strong track record in widening participation (Hanley, 2021) and has been hailed as a success story of the WP agenda (Jones, 2006). Fletcher et al (2015) identified numerous examples of innovative, effective practice developed by social work programmes to promote inclusion. For example, one programme introduced an initiative which aimed to offer black and ethnic minority social work students from overseas additional support with social policy and language skills. It has also been suggested that the success of WP initiatives is reflected in the above-average proportion of social work students who join a course without tariff points (Holmström, 2010). Therefore, social work education is considered a champion of WP.

However, as Hanley (2021) observed, despite previous accomplishments, these achievements have been redefined as a barrier hindering the recruitment of high-calibre candidates (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). For instance, Narey (2014) reported concerns shared by employers and academics that attempts to widen participation may have resulted in lower entry requirements. This influential review recommended that the minimum UCAS requirement of 240 points for A-level students be firmly applied to all HEIs.

This takes us to the second discourse, which asserts that more emphasis should be placed on selecting and training high calibre social workers, irrespective of their background. This discourse has manifested itself by tightening recruitment procedures and raising the educational requirements for those applying to train to become social workers. This policy direction has created a complex admissions process that must be understood within a wider regulatory and political context.

Since the introduction of the social work degree, the calibre of entrants to social work programmes has continued to be a subject of debate (Narey, 2014). The Social Work Task Force recommended stronger collaboration between employers and universities to enhance social work education and maintain high standards for those entering the profession (SWTF, 2009). Similarly, the Social Work Reform Board recommended that HEIs raise the minimum entry requirements for students applying with A-levels.

In 2014, there were two influential reviews of social work education (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). Both reports highlighted the need for increased

consistency in the criteria applied for admission to social work qualifying programmes. Both advocate social work education to become more stringent, admitting only those with strong academic achievements. Teaching Partnerships were introduced in response to these two reviews, and they were expected to implement their respective key recommendations (Baginsky et al., 2019b).

Taking a more critical view, Holmström & Taylor (2008a) argue that this focus on recruitment of social work students by the regulatory bodies and various government departments can be seen as an effort to 'front-load' selection of suitable candidates with the aim of tackling three distinct, but interrelated issues:

- Ongoing national challenges linked to staff shortages, including the recruitment and retention of social work practitioners;
- Professional suitability assessment panels were introduced as one of the levers to improve social work practice following a number of high-profile serious case reviews;
- There is a need to meet multiple expectations from an expanding range of stakeholders.

As discussed above, the idea that higher entry requirements would increase the calibre of entrants to social work education and consequently improve the quality of practice has gradually become part of the accepted wisdom. Admissions staff therefore have turned into 'gatekeepers' to the profession, with a specific task to develop processes to assess applicants' 'suitability' to become social workers (Manthorpe et al., 2010b).

The two debates considered in this section should be understood within the recent neoliberal policy context of austerity, increased student fees, and pressure on many students to work part-time. There is also pressure on HEIs to generate income through student fees, which places a challenge on social work teams to recruit additional students.

Policymakers and academics are tasked with a complex challenge in navigating the tension between promoting inclusion and diversity while upholding professional standards in social work education. It is important to learn from what works and develop strategies to reconcile these competing agendas. By adopting a nuanced approach and engaging in ongoing dialogue, stakeholders can work towards a future where social work education not only reflects the diverse communities it serves but also maintains the highest standards of quality and professionalism.

Literature Review

This section reviews the effects of these policy changes in several ways. First, we review the impact of the new requirements on promoting inclusivity at the admissions stage. Second, we discuss theories and concepts used in the literature to explore the experiences of social work students in social work training programmes. Third, previous findings from relevant studies are also explored.

Impact of social work entry requirements on promoting inclusivity

Holmström (2010) identified a growing academic interest in issues related to selection, suitability, and retention within social work education. As the author noted, this growth in the research base was largely driven by an increase in small-scale research projects. Most of these studies focused on specific areas such as criminal convictions, disability, mental health, and student selection methods.

As discussed earlier, SWE standards, particularly the requirement for criminal record checks, can play a significant role in shaping the educational landscape for prospective social work students. A key responsibility of the gatekeeping role is to develop methods for assessing applicants' suitability for the profession (Manthorpe et al., 2010a). A crucial question in this context is whether people with criminal records should be encouraged or discouraged to study social work. However, it appears that discussing this topic still seems taboo (Bald *et al.*, 2022). The available literature on this issue points to the complex ethical and practical considerations involved in the admission of individuals with criminal convictions into social work training (Cowburn & Nelson, 2008). It is a significant challenge to ensure a fair and just assessment process while prioritising public protection and social justice.

In a later paper Nelson and Cowburn (2010) highlight the tension between tackling social exclusion and protecting service users from potential risks. The authors provide a case study which illustrates the ethical and moral dilemmas faced in decision making regarding individuals with criminal convictions, highlighting the need to balance the assessment of risk with ethical considerations and social justice principles. On the one hand, these criminal checks serve as a means of safeguarding vulnerable groups by ensuring that individuals who have committed an offence are appropriately assessed for their suitability for social work practice. However, the introduction of such checks raises concerns about potential barriers to entry for those with previous criminal offences, potentially limiting access to social work training and the profession. Finding the right balance between safeguarding the welfare of service users and providing equal opportunities for those with criminal records presents a complex challenge for the education of future social workers in England.

Bramley *et al* (2021) conducted a scoping review to explore current practices and the potential to recruit people with criminal records to the social work profession in England. The review identified a lack of formalised, consistent policies and resources to assist HEIs in making decisions in relation to applicants with a previous conviction. The review highlights the need for more guidance and clarity from the social work professional body, suggesting a need for policy improvements and support for individuals with criminal records interested in social work. The authors highlight the importance of exploring the experiences of individuals with criminal

records and their interactions with the social work education and employment systems to understand the potential discrimination they may face.

The extent to which criminal records act as a barrier to entering the profession and potential demographic trends cannot be fully established, as neither universities nor Social Work England are required to provide data on rejected applicants or first-time post-qualifying registrants who were rejected (Bald *et al.*, 2022).

However, studies published on this topic indicate that criminal record checks can be a significant barrier for those aspiring to study social work in England. Since the introduction of the requirement for social work applicants to disclose past criminal offences, there has been a noticeable decrease in the number of individuals with criminal records pursuing social work training (Manthorpe et al., 2010b). The fear of being asked about previous offences can discourage people from entering the profession (Bald *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, Bald et al. (2022) argue that the current practice of relying on a person's criminal record check to assess their suitability fails to acknowledge the structural inequalities generated by the criminal justice system, and therefore potentially perpetuating racism, sexism, and classism instead of confronting them. This is a significant and relevant point given that particular groups, such as men, people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, and those from deprived communities are overrepresented in the population of people with a criminal record.

Turning to the experiences of applicants with additional needs, research evidence shows that regulatory fitness requirements generate several barriers for this group. The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) (2007, cited in Manthorpe et al., 2010a) conducted a formal investigation of the impact of regulatory fitness requirements set for entry into nursing, teaching and social work training. This highlights the potential for discrimination in admission processes, as HEIs employ various gatekeeping methods.

Stanley *et al* (2011) conducted research commissioned by the DRC to inform its investigation. This study aimed to examine the experience of disability disclosure in professional higher education training and employment settings. The research sample consisted of 60 participants, most of whom had unseen disabilities, including practitioners and students from social work, nursing, and teaching. Participants reported fear of exclusion from the profession, concerns about stigma associated with disabilities, and perceived risks and potential consequences of disclosure. Furthermore, ambiguity and lack of transparency in relation to fitness standards contribute to the difficulties faced by disabled individuals in navigating the disclosure process and accessing professional training opportunities.

Sin and Fong (2009) discussed the DRC investigation and focused on the findings pertaining to the impact of regulatory requirements on disabled social work students. The authors identified barriers relating to unclear expectations for disclosure, a lack of information on the purpose of requiring such information, and challenges in handling the process of disclosure and accessing necessary support. Specifically, the request for disability disclosure can be perceived as a barrier to entering social work training, with disabled applicants having to make judgments about what is and is not relevant to disclose. Additionally, this paper also highlights the lack of clear

policies and procedures at various key stages, including the application stage, ultimately delaying the effective sharing of relevant information between universities and placement providers.

Theories, concepts and evidence from previous research

The first section highlights the key theoretical concepts used in the literature to understand the experiences of black social work students. The second section explores the relevant findings from previous research.

Theories and concepts

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework used in the literature in the context of social work education and particularly to discuss the experiences of black social work students (Tedam, 2014; Masocha, 2015; Dillon & Pritchard, 2022; Coxshall, 2020; Sangha, 2022).

CRT emerged in the USA in the late 20th century within the field of legal studies, and has since been applied across various disciplines (Tedam, 2014). However, there is still limited literature discussing its usefulness in the field of social work education (Coxshall, 2020), and its application in the UK has a short history (Tedam, 2014). CRT contends that racism is not solely derived from individual bias or prejudice but is rather deeply ingrained in the structure of society, embedded in practice, institutions, laws, and policies. This theory recognises race as a social construct (Stephens & Rock-Vanloo, 2022) and emphasises the impact of power dynamics, privileges, and inequalities based on race in perpetuating systemic racism (Coxshall, 2020).

CRT was developed in a specific context, and the uncritical application of the theory in places outside the United States may present challenges. Therefore, it is important to adapt this framework to historical and cultural factors specific to or within different national contexts (Masocha, 2015).

Tedam (2014) analysed the results of a small-scale empirical investigation conducted as a pilot study to better understand the learning experiences of Black African social work students in England. The author employs CRT elements to conceptualise the narratives generated from participant interviews and uncover issues such as discrimination, disrespect, lack of support, and racism faced by participants during their social work placement.

Using key CRT concepts, Masocha (2015) examines the existing literature on the experiences of black social work students in higher education environments to highlight the profound impact of race and racism on the negative academic experiences of this group. The author argues that understanding the unique social, cultural, economic, and political factors shaping the experiences of this student group and acknowledging the pervasive influence of racism are essential steps towards challenging the conventional views of the perceived academic failures of black students in higher education.

Intersectionality is another concept widely recognised by researchers as crucial for gaining insight into the diverse experiences of different groups within society (Richardson *et al*., 2020). This concept originated in CRT and was first introduced by Crenshaw (1989, discussed in Richardson *et al*., 2020). Intersectionality argues that social identities such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability are interconnected and cannot be understood in isolation from one another. This means that individuals experience multiple forms of oppression and privilege simultaneously, and that these intersecting identities shape their experiences and opportunities. Bernard et al. (2011) and Tedam (2014) used an intersectional framework. The findings of these studies will be discussed in the next section.

Dillon (2011) also employs CRT alongside social reproduction and life course theories and argues that these can offer potential explanations for the educational inequalities affecting marginalised social groups. Furthermore, these theories provide valuable insights to support efforts to improve social work education.

Social reproduction refers to the processes and mechanisms through which social inequalities and structures are perpetuated and replicated across generations. It encompasses the ways in which social, economic, and cultural advantages and disadvantages are passed down through social institutions such as families, schools, and broader society. Social reproduction theory, developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998, cited in Dillon, 2011), examines how access to resources, opportunities, and power is unequally distributed and maintained within society. It emphasises the role of social and cultural capital in shaping individuals' life trajectories and opportunities.

Social reproduction theory is particularly relevant for understanding how systemic inequalities endure and impact individuals' educational and career outcomes, including those who are interested in studying social work. Dillon (ibid) explores the challenges faced by students that migrated to the UK and for whom English was their second language. Most participants juggled both studying and working in low-paying and low-status jobs. One Black African male student talked about the difficulties in securing a job as an immigrant with no qualifications. The best job he could find over several years was cleaning at different train stations in London.

Credentialism is another relevant concept discussed in this study. This refers to a phenomenon in which the required academic credentials and qualifications for a certain profession or role are more extensive or advanced than the actual skills and competencies needed to perform the job effectively. This can lead to a mismatch between the educational requirements and practical demands of the profession. Credentialism is also described as "qualification inflation", which is commonly linked to a surplus of available workers in the job market.

Sangha (2022) employed the lens of self-concept to explore how Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) social work students in England understand and evaluate their self-concept during their educational journey. Self-concept is a broad term that incorporates an individual's understanding and beliefs about themselves (Baumeister, 2009, cited in Sangha, 2022). The concept describes the awareness and evaluation that individuals have of themselves, which includes cognitive processes, emotions, behaviours, values, attitudes, and perceptions shaped by their self-esteem and self-image (Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014, cited in Sangha, 2022). Therefore, self-

concept clarity is crucial. It refers to how clearly and confidently an individual describes elements of their self-concept, including their perceived personal attributes, and whether this self-evaluation is consistent and stable over time. This study indicates that students continuously strive to construct a clear and confident self-concept by integrating their personal and cultural attributes, such as ethnicity, culture, and language, into their identity. Participants described their ethnicity using various terms related to continent, country, and colour, reflecting the multilayered nature of their self-concept.

Findings from previous research.

Generally, very little research has focused on admissions and selection within social work education (Holmström & Taylor, 2008b, 2008a). Previous research has mainly focused on the educational experiences of black social work students post-enrolment and found that they face unique challenges and disproportionately experience progression difficulties (Bernard *et al.*, 2011; Bernard *et al.*, 2014; Fairtlough *et al.*, 2014).

Bernard *et al.*, (2011) examined the specific circumstances of black and ethnic minority, disabled, and lesbian, gay and bisexual students to understand the factors that impact their experiences on social work programmes. This study identifies areas of inequality in social work education. Black and ethnic minority students reported a sense of alienation, invisibility, exclusion, and devaluation in the learning environment. For example, participants shared their experiences of being discriminated against based on their accent, with some reporting negative comments regarding their accents, affecting how they were perceived and treated. Furthermore, the study highlighted perceptions of differential expectations for black students, leading to the need to perform better than their white counterparts to be recognised as capable.

The researchers found that black and ethnic minority and disabled students were more likely to report that feelings of marginalisation, division and a sense of "otherness" had a detrimental impact on their academic confidence. Talking about divisions within student groups, participants observed a tendency to associate with peers whom they perceived as similar to themselves, leading students to position themselves closer or further away from others in student networks and classroom spaces.

By analysing the findings of Bernard et al. (2011), Fairtlough et al., (2014) reported that black and ethnic minority students progress more slowly in their social work programmes in England than their white counterparts. Several contributing factors were identified, including disadvantaged educational backgrounds, financial pressures, caring responsibilities and experiences of racism and discrimination. This study discusses examples of racism and discrimination faced by black and ethnic minority social work students in placement settings. For example, participants in this study reported discriminatory responses from service users, such as not wanting to engage with them once they heard their accents. Black students felt that they were subject to closer critical scrutiny and made to work harder to prove themselves, which had the potential to generate higher levels of anxiety regarding their assessments. Students also felt isolated or hyper visible in agencies with predominantly white staff, leading to feelings of alienation.

Similarly, the study undertaken by Sangha (2022) highlights that BAME students face significant challenges in attaining self-concept clarity due to racial discrimination and the struggle to navigate between their cultural background and dominant British culture. This struggle negatively affects psychological and emotional well-being, often leading to lower self-esteem and confidence. For instance, some participants felt that their knowledge and abilities were undermined because of perceived deficiencies in their English fluency, which adversely affected their self-concept clarity and academic performance.

Perhaps one of the most relevant studies examined the experiences of primarily black and ethnic minority students navigating the move from further education (FE) college Access courses to undergraduate social work programmes (Dillon, 2011). The author also calls attention to the tension between the two competing policy imperatives discussed earlier. On the one hand, there is a duty placed on HEIs to apply academic and professional entry requirements for social work education. On the other hand, there is a need to uphold the values of social justice and implement policies to widen participation in higher education for those from less privileged social backgrounds.

The main argument in Dillon (2011) is that the introduction of entry requirements for social work education, coupled with the high demand for places, has generated increased credentialism and, potentially, new forms of educational inequality. Overemphasis on academic qualifications can raise additional barriers for applicants from less privileged backgrounds who may already be competing on unequal economic, social, and cultural playing fields. The college course tutors interviewed by the researcher talked about an increase in entry standards as universities became more selective, in the context of heightened competition for places on social work programmes. Consequently, many applicants were not even short-listed for interviews. The author calls for a new national social work admission criterion which gives equal weighting to academic and non-academic skills acquired through life experience.

Methodology

This small-scale study aimed to investigate the barriers and opportunities which social work applicants from the Black Ethnic Group experience in their journey to become social work students. Given the aims of this study, it was decided that a qualitative approach would be the most suitable. Qualitative methods offer an effective way of gathering specific and contextually rich data that can offer insights into the perspectives of participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2022). They also provided a more supportive framework for discussing personal experiences and sensitive topics.

Methods	Why method was selected	How the data was analysed
Interviews	This method is used in qualitative research to understand the perspectives and experiences of	The project management group reviewed interview transcripts exploring

	respondents. A topic guide was used by researchers.	themes related to constraints and opportunities highlighted by respondents.
Focus Groups	Focus groups are especially useful as a complement to other methods of data collection. They also provide an opportunity for respondents to explore themes in-depth and open the conversation in new directions. A number of structured questions were used to explore themes using a topic guide.	The project management group reviewed focus group transcripts exploring themes related to constraints and opportunities highlighted by respondents.

Interviews and focus groups took place virtually and were recorded. Audio portions of the recordings were transcribed. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Goldsmiths, University of London.

Information about the project was sent to all students from the social work training programmes at Goldsmiths, University of London. Prospective participants were offered an interview, a focus group or both. 20 students expressed an interest, and 15 students from both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes participated. 11 (5 BA and 6 MA) attended an interview and 4 (2 BA and 2 MA) attended the focus group. All students were offered a £25 voucher for their participation.

Collaborative thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the data. Initial codes were derived from the data by analysing the interview transcripts for significant keywords that described a particular experience. Each member of the research team read a selection of transcripts and contributed to their analysis and relevant quotes related to the main themes.

An obvious limitation of this study was the small sample size. Furthermore, the sample only represents those who were offered a place in one of the social work courses. Consequently, the experiences of applicants who did not secure a place were excluded. Finally, the participants were self-selected.

Findings

The study identified four key themes which are important in explaining the experiences of social work applicants from the black ethnic group:
- Impact of entry requirements
- Intersectionality
- Background of feeling discriminated – the impact of previous experiences.
- Experience of the admission process

Impact of the entry requirements for social work programmes.

Opinions varied depending on whether the entry requirements created barriers. Most respondents acknowledged the need for entry requirements and did not report particular difficulties in meeting these requirements.

As discussed earlier, research evidence suggests that social work programmes have a strong track record of widening participation and promoting inclusivity. This point was echoed by one MA student, who stated:

*I don't think they [applicants from the black ethnic group] experience barriers because when you look at the demographics in my course, most of us are from the black and ethnic minority (***Harry, male MA student***).*

However, as the quote below illustrates, some respondents felt that qualification requirements could be an obstacle and that more weight should be given to previous experience and skills, an argument put forward by Dillon (2011).

People that have had worked extensively in a related field, and I'm not saying that they should have an easier path, but certainly I couldn't understand, you know, the need for entry level Maths and English. [...] I was working with the local authority Youth Services. So when I wanted to try and join to change over, to do social work, my major barrier was that I didn't have the GCSE or A levels. [...] But the main, the major obstacle was the GCSE Maths and English and my frustration that my prior work experience just didn't account for any of that. **(Theo, male MA student)**

Furthermore, some respondents reported difficulties in providing evidence of their qualifications which prolonged their admissions experience. The issues of credentialism and overemphasis on qualifications have been identified in previous research (Dillon, 2011). However, recent times have arguably seen an opening up or possibly a reduction in academic standards for entry into social work programmes. For example, there has been the emergence of other qualification routes, such as social work apprenticeships. The maths requirement for applicants has been removed and the academic bar for the latest Step Up Cohort has been lowered.

Understanding Applicants' Voices Through an Intersectional Lens

The views shared by participants highlight the need for an admissions process that considers the intersection of multiple social identities. Similar to participants in previous studies (e.g. Bernard et al., 2011), respondents talked about needs related to disability, being a single parent or a carer, being care experienced, or a mature student.

Reflecting on our identities as researchers, we are reminded to embrace an intersectional lens, not least as Malik (2023) declares the limitations of primarily viewing discrimination through a "White Privilege" prism. He suggests that while the concept of "White Privilege" provides an interpretive framework to understand the experience of discrimination, it may be insufficient to inform a praxis to aid black communities to navigate a more challenging path to enter social work education. Our respondents illustrated some of the additional challenges they encountered, pointing

to the benefits of adopting an intersectional perspective to understand and overcome the challenges of becoming social work students at Goldsmiths.

Chloe and Kate highlighted the Social Graces of Family Life and Ability (Burnham & Nolte, 2019) to organise their reflections on their complex journeys to become social work students. Social Graces provide a vehicle for us to reflect on the different elements of our social identities and how these elements shape our differential power relations within different contexts in terms of affordances or constraints on our capacity to participate. Bernard *et al* (2011) point out the persistence and resilience demonstrated by participants in their research. They had to overcome the cumulative impact of intersecting disadvantages and challenges, making them well equipped for the demands of social work practice. Critical race theorists (Banks, 1995, cited in Dillon, 2011) have pointed out that the resilience and determination prevalent among black and minority ethnic students are crucial qualities that can greatly benefit social work. Similarly, it may be relevant to speculate on the development and presence of resilience in Chloe and Kate's lives. Being a black social work applicant constitutes part of their identities, but both also draw attention to other constituents such as wider family responsibilities and additional physical needs. Chloe, for example, zooms out of her college experience, reflecting on the juggling act she needs to execute to keep personal and student life balls up in the air to keep on going. For Chloe, self-identity is more than just becoming a social work student. Chloe's process of reflection considers several social identities, such as race and ability.

I know it doesn't just necessarily impact like black and other minorities, but it's like the whole, I guess just considering that, like the life pressures **(Chloe, care experienced MA student and single parent)**

Intersectional elements are also significant in Kate's life, especially as she must address structural challenges that obstruct her from navigating and fulfilling different needs. Kate primarily sees the constraints in terms of the structural difficulties encountered by her and by other students with additional physical needs.

*Most of my challenges I found was being a disabled student as opposed to being a black student. [...]For disabled students a lot more clarity and a lot more help and support will be needed. **(Kate, MA student)***

From a neoliberal perspective, it would be reasonably easy to shoulder Kate and Chloe with the responsibility of successfully navigating constraints in their lives to become social work students. In contrast, Malik (2023) invites us to challenge the interpretative lens to foreground the neoliberal context which restricts cash-strapped HEI admissions teams from reaching out to support applicants with intersectional disadvantages. The effects of neoliberal policies are felt by members from across society, but the effects may be especially felt by applicants experiencing cumulative intersectional disadvantages (Fairtlough *et al.*, 2014). These include additional physical and learning needs, caring responsibilities, poverty, family composition, trauma, mental health and age. Everybody should have an equal opportunity to be treated in the same way, but for this to happen, organisations must remain vigilant about relational and power dynamics to foster change to prioritise opportunities for black social work applicants to enrol in social work programmes.

Background of feeling discriminated - previous experiences and impact on confidence

Participants talked about their previous hurtful experiences of racism and exclusion. They described significant prejudice before applying to Goldsmiths. It is important to consider how this experience might frame somebody's approach to Goldsmiths Admissions Process. For example, if somebody has experienced previous rejection or hostility, might this frame how they interact with Goldsmiths' staff? Might they, for example, be wary or defended if they previously experienced the absence of empathy from similar organisations?

Another way, perhaps, to interpret some of our respondents' previous experiences is to acknowledge the presence and effects of race-based trauma. Here, we refer to the cumulative effects of racism on mental and physical health (Taylor, 2024). The effects of racism and discrimination are experienced in contexts before many students come to Goldsmiths. Without due sensitivity, race-based trauma can be relived through the admissions process if one feels overlooked, unsupported or marginalised, generating psychological and/or physiological distress.

Margo's quote illustrates the intersection of racial and gender biases that black women often face. The reference to hair, particularly "locks", highlights how physical appearance can be a focal point for discriminatory attitudes. Margo's need to be "highly assertive and forceful" in communication suggests a defensive position adopted to respond to disrespect or marginalisation. This can be emotionally taxing and can generate feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, frustration, and isolation (Masocha, 2015). Regarding race-based trauma, has Margo previously experienced and embodied discomfort from situations in which she found herself?

A middle-aged black woman as well with longer hair. Yeah, come look at locks. So there was that biased having to deal with them in those meetings as well. So I've had to be kind of like, highly assertive and forceful in terms of how I was spoken **(Margo, MA Student)**

Similarly, the following quote highlights the pervasive nature of implicit bias and how easily stereotypes can influence perceptions. Amelia's observation that people "create an assumption based on how you look" speaks to shallow judgments that can lead to misunderstanding and prejudice. Such assumptions can manifest in various forms, from microaggressions to more overt discriminatory actions, and they contribute to a hostile environment where black students may feel undervalued, hyper-visible, and constantly scrutinised (Fairtlough et al., 2014). This experience of being misjudged based on appearance alone can significantly impact one's self-esteem and sense of belonging, creating barriers to the academic journey.

*Sometimes people don't know you. They might just look on you and just create a picture or just create an assumption based on how you look. (**Amelia, BA student**)*

Reflections from other participants revealed the profound impact of previous experiences and the lack of opportunities on their self-concept and confidence.

*As a black student, I guess you know coming from <district in London> or like, […], like kind of living on an estate. Single mom of two. You have to. You know, I didn't think I was gonna get into Goldsmiths because I thought, all right I wouldn't be enough, even though I knew I had to, like I met the academic requirements. (**Chloe, MA student**)*

*However, maybe the confidence and lack of like academic writing and maybe going to that next high level educational stage. The system is not necessarily set up to provide women of colour with the same opportunities as other counterparts in regards to giving them confidence to go on to higher education (**Lisa, BA student**)*

The narratives provided by Chloe and Lisa offer a poignant lens through which to examine the intersection between identity, education, and self-concept. The experiences described by these participants reflect findings from previous research on the impact of discrimination on one's self-concept (Sangha, 2022).

Chloe's response highlights internalised doubt and diminished self-concept that can arise from societal and environmental cues. Despite meeting academic requirements, Chloe doubted her self-worth of attending what she described as a prestigious university. This illustrates how external factors such as socioeconomic background and systemic biases can negatively shape self-perceptions and diminish self-confidence.

Similarly, Lisa's statement points to systemic factors that contribute to a low self-concept. The lack of opportunities, support, and encouragement within the educational system reinforces a narrative of inadequacy that can deter applicants from pursuing higher education despite their potential.

Baumeister's notion of self-concept provides a helpful lens to understand these experiences. Self-concept involves not only an individual's self-assessment but also the influence of societal responses. When groups from marginalised backgrounds continuously encounter discriminatory practices and biases, their self-concept clarity is inevitably impacted (Sangha, 2022). The internalisation of negative stereotypes and the absence of affirming support structures can erode applicants' confidence and sense of self-worth, making academic and personal achievements feel unattainable. The negative impact of discrimination on self-concept can be reduced by improving support systems, creating inclusive environments, and offering tailored resources.

Interestingly, those who experience obstacles in social work programmes may also experience similar obstacles in advancing their careers as social workers after graduation. For example, black social workers reported in another recent SELTP project that they experienced obstacles which prevented them from progressing into management or specialist roles (e.g. insufficient mentoring opportunities, typecast to work with certain families, feeling overlooked for promotion opportunities, and witnessing other social workers getting greater opportunities to advance their careers) (Moseley et al., 2024).

Experience of the admissions process.

The participants on the whole described the admissions process as rigorous. As the quotes below show, several strengths were identified.

- A diverse group of students was recruited.
  And also, because of the diversity - Goldsmith is more diverse compared to other universities. (**Patience, BA student**)

- The decision to make an offer was promptly communicated.
  I think pretty much at the end of the interview, I think I've got an email to confirm that I'd been accepted onto the course (**Caroline, BA student**)

- Offer holder events were valued
  The offer holder day was a good experience. (**Patience, BA student**)

- The participants welcomed the opportunity to speak to the social work team members.
- It was helpful to meet and get to know the other applicants.
  This is the first time I am studying in the UK, and to be honest, I felt very supported. (**Brooke, MA student**)

However, other parts of the process were less straightforward. Several issues were identified in relation to the admissions process after an offer was made. The participants talked about difficulties communicating with the admissions team. The process was described as confusing, disorganised, and beset-by-delay.
As can be seen from the quote below, there is a view that this process took too long, with too many emails and documents to read. The involvement of several staff members compounded these issues.

It's a lot of separate documentation, a lot of separate information, one email sent for DBS, one email sent for timetable, one email sent for anything else.

Another concern expressed by participants was the delay in receiving a response to emails or finding out the decision made in relation to suitability. Some participants reported that they had received incorrect information or were asked to submit the same document again.

One student commented:
I remember receiving emails as well from [staff name], like you need to send this document on after I sent those documents after a week another person asking me to do the same.

Experiences of online admission process - impact of lockdown during the pandemic

There were mixed views in relation to the move to an online admissions process during the COVID-19 pandemic. This transition to online platforms has generated both opportunities and challenges.

Many participants appreciated the flexibility afforded by the online admissions process. For many, the opportunity to participate in interviews and complete admission requirements from the comfort of their homes was a substantial advantage. This arrangement allowed them to manage their time more effectively, balancing their personal commitments and academic ambitions without the need for travel. As one of the quotes below illustrates, the home environment provided a sense of security and familiarity, potentially reducing anxiety associated with the interviews.

I was less nervous […]I could really express myself because I knew I was on familiar ground. I was in my territory

The online process also improved accessibility for some applicants, particularly those residing in areas outside London and those with limited financial resources. Eliminating the need for physical travel reduced both logistical and economic barriers, making the admissions process more inclusive.

Conversely, other applicants faced considerable difficulties with the online admissions process. Technical issues, such as unstable internet connections, unfamiliarity with digital platforms, and lack of adequate technological resources, generated significant difficulties. The absence of face-to-face interaction also detracted from the personal connection and the opportunity to get to know prospective colleagues.

During the pandemic, everything was online and I don't remember actually speaking to anyone. I'm not really good with technology.

Yeah, basically I found it a bit confusing as well because everything was online

The mixed experiences of applicants during the pandemic highlight the need for a more balanced approach to the online admissions process. Those involved in admissions activities need to recognise the diverse circumstances of applicants and provide robust support. This may include offering technical assistance, ensuring clear and accessible communication, and maintaining the flexibility to adapt to varying needs. One respondent suggested that written tests could be submitted online, but that interviews should be conducted in person.

Recommendations

Practical support

- Provide an applicant handbook with all the information in one place: roles, responsibilities, tasks, and timescales.
- A named Goldsmiths admissions officer to engage with applicants to reduce confusion.
- Less reliance on email and more face-to-face or virtual face-to-face interactions between applicants and the Goldsmiths admissions team. Consider offering a live chat facility.

- Using assistive technology during the admissions process for applicants with additional needs.
- Create a video to explain the admissions process and a welcome video for those who apply late/missed the offer holder events.
- Remind applicants at an early stage that it can take time to corroborate proof of their academic qualifications.

Promoting an intersectional understanding of applicants' previous and current life experiences

- **Training**: Develop and deliver training for admissions and academic staff to ensure that they understand and apply an intersectional approach. This includes recognising how various identities intersect and impact applicants' experiences.
- **Mentorship and peer support networks**: In accordance with previous research (Moriarty et al., 2009), we recommend that the university considers introducing mentorship schemes linking black applicants with current students or academics who share similar intersectional identities. This can ensure applicants receive guidance and support throughout the application and study journey.

Balancing the risk of credentialism with regulatory requirements

- **Policy review and change**: Echoing suggestions put forward by Dillon (2011), we recommend that Social Work England should consider reviewing current admissions standards and requirements to identify and eliminate potential barriers for applicants from diverse backgrounds. This could include considering a broader range of qualifications and assigning equal weighting to academic and non-academic skills. In line with the recommendations of Sangha (2022), the University should review current processes to identify and address institutional and cultural barriers that may lead to discriminatory practices.
- **Holistic admissions process**: The regulator could take the lead in supporting HEIs to adopt a consistent, holistic admissions process that considers the full range of an applicant's experiences and qualifications.
- **Alternative pathways**: Develop alternative pathways to entry that recognise relevant life and work experiences in lieu of traditional academic credentials. This could involve creating bridging programmes (e.g. from Access courses) or offering pre-entry foundation courses.
- **Outreach and support**: The university should consider targeted outreach initiatives aimed at raising awareness about social work programmes and provide support for applicants through the application process.

Awareness of applicants' previous experiences of discrimination

- **Bias awareness training**: Training for those involved in Admissions activity to include issues around bias. They need to be aware of previous experiences of racism and discrimination and how these might frame applicants' perceptions of Goldsmiths Admissions Process.

- **Interview panels**: Ensure diverse interview panels, as recommended by previous research (Dillon, 2011)

Building confidence and encouraging black applicants

- **Positive representation**: Increase the visibility of black social workers, academics and students within the university through guest lectures, seminars, and outreach events. Representation can help to challenge negative stereotypes and build confidence.
- **Peer support networks**: Create peer support networks (see Masocha, 2015) where black applicants can connect with current students and alumni who can provide encouragement, share experiences, and offer practical advice.
- **Support and training**: Providing support specifically tailored for black applicants to address challenges related to disadvantaged educational backgrounds, economic pressures, and caring responsibilities (Fairtlough *et al.*, 2014). There should be more specific and personalised feedback after a decision is made, with suggestions on what to improve, read, etc.

Continuous monitoring and improvement

- **Feedback mechanisms**: Establish mechanisms for ongoing feedback from applicants and students to continually assess and improve the admissions process and support systems.
- **Regular reporting**: Recommendations from previous research (Dillon, 2011; Fairtlough *et al.*, 2014) have highlighted the importance of monitoring systems. HEIs should consistently evaluate the results of their admissions procedures to uphold fairness and prevent the unfair treatment of particular groups of applicants. The university should regularly share reports with the stakeholders on the progress of these initiatives, highlighting achievements and areas for improvement.

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