

PARTICIPANT REVIEW

Spaces of radical possibility: Student voices on partnership and social justice

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In June, we were delighted to host part 1 of the 2025 Students as Partners Roundtable at the University of Westminster in London. We gathered as colleagues, friends, students, teachers, and members of the public to converse around the theme of *exploring the possibilities and tensions in student-staff partnerships and social justice work in higher education*. We imagined the roundtable as a space where we could come together to reflect, be in dialogue, and grapple with the complexities of working collaboratively across different roles, experiences, and power dynamics within the university.

At Westminster, student partnership is not only about co-creation or co-design. It's about imagining new atmospheres of learning, whether they be decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, or relational, that challenge the dominant logics of the university and make space for different ways of knowing, relating, and being (Tuck & Yang, 2018; Stein et al., 2021). We also recognize that partnership work does not take place in a vacuum. Who we are, where we are situated, and the institutional, social, and political contexts we move through all shape how we enter partnerships and relate to one another (Memon & Jivraj, 2020). The roundtable invited us to acknowledge those contexts—however complex or uncomfortable—and consider how they inform both the possibilities and tensions that come with working together toward more just and inclusive higher education futures. We engaged in open, critical conversations about the changing nature of student partnership, particularly as it intersects with the principles and practices of social justice. The process, while sometimes uncomfortable, was also deeply generative and offered opportunities for connection and growth.

Over the three days, we made new connections and friendships, developed insights and recognized challenges, all without the seduction of easy answers or quick solutions. We wanted to find a way to capture some of what happened at the roundtable so that we could all continue to build connections and engage with the challenges. So, in *Student Partnership at Westminster* style, we commissioned independent artist [Raquel Durán](#) to illustrate the conversations, ideas, and connections that came out of the roundtable (Durán, n.d.). The illustrations are available on

the [roundtable website](#) (University of Westminster, n.d.-b). More information is also available on our [home page](#) (University of Westminster, n.d.-a).

The roundtable took place in two parts: part 1 in June in the United Kingdom and part 2 in October in South Africa. Between part 1 and part 2, we also asked the students and early-career scholars from the University of Westminster who were involved in organising the roundtable to reflect on a question or conundrum they were left with. As editors, we have intentionally stepped back from adding our own reflections to center the voices of the students that make our work at Westminster possible. Carrying the roundtable's spirit of playful inquiry, creativity, and reflection, these contributions begin with a meditation and close with a poem. The space in between offers glimpses into their joys, questions, doubts, and commitments to reimagining what learning can be like. Some have chosen to title their contributions, others have not, but each ends with their name, discipline, and contact details. Reading their reflections, we hope you feel moved to imagine partnership as less of an end goal and more of an ongoing journey of becoming together.

Living between two clocks

There are two clocks hanging on the same wall. One ticks quickly, its hands racing around, reminding us of deadlines, funding windows, and "quick wins." The other moves slowly, almost lazily, its gentle ticking matching the pace of building trust, sharing stories, and truly understanding one another.

In higher education, both clocks matter. The fast clock pushes us to act before opportunities slip away or harm deepens. The slow clock reminds us that real change often happens in conversations that unfold over months or even years. However, it is always hard to find the balance between these two clocks when we are in the university. Sometimes, we only focus on the effective work and ignore the communication, or we communicate a lot and lose the best time for working.

The tension comes when we try to live by both clocks at once. If we listen only to the fast one, we risk rushing through voices we should be hearing more carefully. If we follow only the slow one, urgent needs may go unanswered.

Perhaps the question is not which clock is "right," but how to let them guide different parts of the same journey. The fast clock can help us respond to immediate concerns, while the slow clock ensures that our actions remain grounded in relationships and care.

Both clocks hang there, side by side, reminding me that in partnership, time is not a single rhythm—it's a layered one.

—Yumeng Yang, doctoral researcher, School of Social Sciences, Y.Yang2@westminster.ac.uk

While chairing one of the sessions at the roundtable, I was struck by how differently student-staff partnership (SSP) was understood and practised across the three presentations. These offered valuable insights into diverse practices, as well as the underlying tensions and unresolved issues within such collaborations.

The first presentation highlighted the multiplicity, contradictions, and tensions of SSP. The presenters' reflections clarified a kind of discomfort that I have felt in SSP and social justice-oriented practices in higher education. When the aims of a partnership meet the complexity of the university environment, tensions arise. The dual identities of teachers and students, their layered and shifting power relations, and the institutional constraints all contribute to a gap

between aspiration and reality. How do we narrow this gap under the weight of these intersecting university logics?

This reflection led me to the second presentation, which explored curriculum co-creation from a student's perspective. It revealed how different expectations of co-creation between students and staff can create misunderstandings that language alone cannot easily resolve.

The third presentation, exploring coffee shops and colonial routes, adopted a creative format while engaging with serious decolonial themes. It prompted me to reflect on how co-creation operates in layered contexts, and whether more accessible formats sometimes shape opportunities to confront power-laden issues within SSP.

As someone who was once a student and now works within academia, I have witnessed these differences unfold and remain uncertain: are we expanding student agency, or are we simply enacting a "safe simulation" within institutional limits? If student-staff partnership is inevitably embedded in existing power structures, can it continue to function as a lever for real change?

—Dr. Huanyu Huang, visiting scholar, The Communication and Media Research Institute,
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The role of social media in social justice and partnership continues to resonate deeply with me. The session *Click, Share, and Change—Social Media for Social Justice and Building Partnership* wasn't just another workshop; it was the project I felt most connected to during the roundtable.

We explored how platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), which are often seen as superficial, can be powerful tools for activism, visibility, and community-building. These digital spaces allow marginalized voices to be heard, movements to grow, and partnerships to form across boundaries.

The topic merges two of my interests: equity in education and the digital world of students. Social media, when used for the right purposes and with the right intentions, can transcend being a communication tool and become a space for empowering students and reimagining the power structures that exist between students and educational institutions.

What strikes me most is how it challenges traditional academic hierarchies. In these digital spaces, a student's tweet about systemic barriers can reach thousands and influence policy discussions in ways that a formal paper submitted to a professor never could.

But this digital landscape also presents new challenges. Recently, a video of a kangaroo went viral, with many viewers initially believing it was AI-generated content. The fact that people couldn't distinguish between reality and artificial creation speaks volumes about how profoundly the digital world has shifted our perception of truth. This incident illuminates a critical dimension of digital literacy we must address in our educational partnerships.

The topic lives in the tension between potential and pitfall, between authentic and artificial. It's this complexity that keeps pulling me back, making me wonder, "Will I be able to continue exploring this intersection in ways that truly serve the students and communities I'm meant to partner with?"

—Khimkala Gurung, BSc Biomedical Science student, w1909112@my.westminster.ac.uk

Over the past year, working with the Student Partnership Team, I've had the opportunity to engage in conversations around decolonization and social justice in higher education. It has been

a privilege to have the time, space, and tools to reflect on these complex issues; these are resources that not everyone has access to. This experience has shaped how I approach my study, and it has made me more aware of the many unanswered questions that remain. One that continues to trouble me is: how do we meaningfully address the intersections between environmental and social injustices in the higher education context?

Climate change disproportionately affects Indigenous communities, especially those dependent on land-based practices like farming and animal husbandry. These vulnerabilities are not accidental; they are rooted in colonial histories that reshaped landscapes and disrupted traditional ecological knowledge systems. In education, Western scientific frameworks often dominate, marginalizing Indigenous ways of knowing and living with the land.

This raises complex tensions for me as a PhD student in architecture, a field deeply implicated in environmental harm through construction and energy use. What responsibilities do we carry as partners in higher education when our disciplines are part of extractive systems? How can we center the voices of students and communities directly affected by environmental degradation, while also confronting our own complicities? These questions are not only academic; they are emotional, uncomfortable, and at times overwhelming. Grappling with them involves significant emotional labour, and it's not always possible to hold every injustice in mind in an increasingly unequal world. Still, I hope we can approach this work with patience, creating space for conversations and partnerships that address these interconnected injustices not in isolation, but through shared responsibility and care.

—Özge Süvari, doctoral researcher, School of Architecture and Cities,
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There's a growing tension that I've been struggling to make sense of—something that came into sharper focus during the roundtable conversation. Hearing the many voices reflect on systems of power and partnership made me think about how the establishment continues to take advantage of those outside the elite 1%, all while claiming to be their savior. It's a cycle that feeds on inequality, cloaked in the language of progress and reform. The very structures that perpetuate wealth hoarding, poor working conditions, and social injustice are now marketing themselves as the remedy to the problems they helped create.

I've been told to trust in institutions—banks, politicians, corporate giants—who promise “change,” yet seem to benefit most from the status quo. I feel like I am offered token gestures: slightly higher wages, promises of trickle-down prosperity, and social media campaigns filled with empathy. But beneath the surface, the power dynamics remain unchanged. Worse still, when I question this, I'm often branded as naïve, radical, or ungrateful.

There's something especially manipulative in how establishment figures—media personalities, CEOs, even some politicians—position themselves as allies of the people. They speak of unity and reform, yet continue to funnel power and resources upward. Their solutions are often just rebranded versions of the same systems that failed us before.

This tension leaves me feeling conflicted—caught between distrust and resignation. How do we move forward when those with the loudest voices and the deepest pockets are controlling the narrative? How do we spark meaningful change when even the language of justice is co-opted by those who benefit most from injustice?

It's not just a question of economic disparity—it's about the illusion of choice, of progress, of democracy. And until we confront the hypocrisy at the heart of the establishment, I fear we risk mistaking their performance for actual change.

—Jay Chantre Gomes, MA Diplomacy and Global Politics student,
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After the roundtable, I was left reflecting on a question I had asked during a plenary. It stems from recent experiences in academia and conferences. Sometimes senior researchers present work that does not engage with colonial histories or their ongoing impacts, or generalizes their work universally without considering cultural contexts. In such cases, students and early-career researchers are advised to be critical of their work. But this makes me wonder, do students have the power to question such academics? What kind of responsibility should a university take for the research it showcases on its platforms or at its events?

As emerging researchers, how do we question senior academics? Does the university create space and give enough power to young researchers to challenge established voices? Or are we still working within rigid hierarchical systems where junior scholars are discouraged, either implicitly or explicitly, from questioning senior ones?

This leads me to think more deeply about how cultural knowledge is valued in these academic settings. How can senior researchers and educators ensure that students' lived and cultural knowledge is respected? How do we challenge the idea that knowledge only belongs to those who have studied a subject formally, while overlooking those who have lived and experienced that knowledge through their lives?

These questions reflect tensions I continue to sit with, between academic authority and lived experience, between hierarchy and inclusion. I don't yet have answers, but it's important that we keep asking.

—Aysha Ali, doctoral researcher, School of Media and Communication,
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During the roundtable, I was interested to hear about the different approaches adopted by students and faculty around the world to co-create and embed social justice initiatives in their universities. In keeping with the conference theme of tensions, discussions on the integration of social justice into higher education were juxtaposed with conversations on the challenges of power imbalances in institutional hierarchies and their hegemonic ways of learning and knowing.

The importance of SSPs in making a more socially just institution cannot be overstated. However, once social justice is incorporated into the university, is it at risk of becoming constrained by the institution's structures, the existence of which social justice work sets out to challenge? As universities face increasing financial pressure, social justice can become a commodity and a tool for marketing in a world where social injustice is on the rise. Furthermore, if the university has control of resource allocation in social justice initiatives, this inherently politicized work could become depoliticized, leading to the continued lack of subjugated and marginalized voices.

Following the roundtable, I am grappling with the idea of the inclusion of social justice into all aspects of the university, from curricula to research, whilst ensuring that students remain

as co-creators in this work. Would it be possible to have centralized support from the university for social justice, whilst retaining the decision-making power of the SSP?

—Lara Pownall, BSc Biomedical Science student, w1838536@my.westminster.ac.uk

How can SSPs keep their power to create real change without becoming just another part of the system? This tension between making partnerships a normal part of university life and keeping them genuinely transformative feels especially challenging.

Partnerships can drive meaningful policy change and amplify marginalised voices, especially when intersectionality is intentionally centered. Yet, as institutions increasingly adopt the language of partnership, I wonder whether there is a risk that these collaborations could become box-ticking exercises—performed but stripped of their political urgency. The transformative ethos of partnership lies precisely in its ability to challenge power hierarchies and redistribute authority in knowledge production. If partnership becomes a buzzword or a checklist item, does it lose its ability to truly challenge power and bring about social justice?

This leaves me thinking about how we might preserve the *reflexive, critical, and often uncomfortable* aspects of partnership work—those moments when students and staff are genuinely negotiating tensions and confronting privilege. Can institutions support this without neutralising it? This leaves me thinking about how we can hold onto the deep, sometimes uncomfortable work of partnership—where students and staff are honestly questioning structures, sharing authority, and rethinking what counts as knowledge. Can universities support this kind of work without making it too safe or controlled?

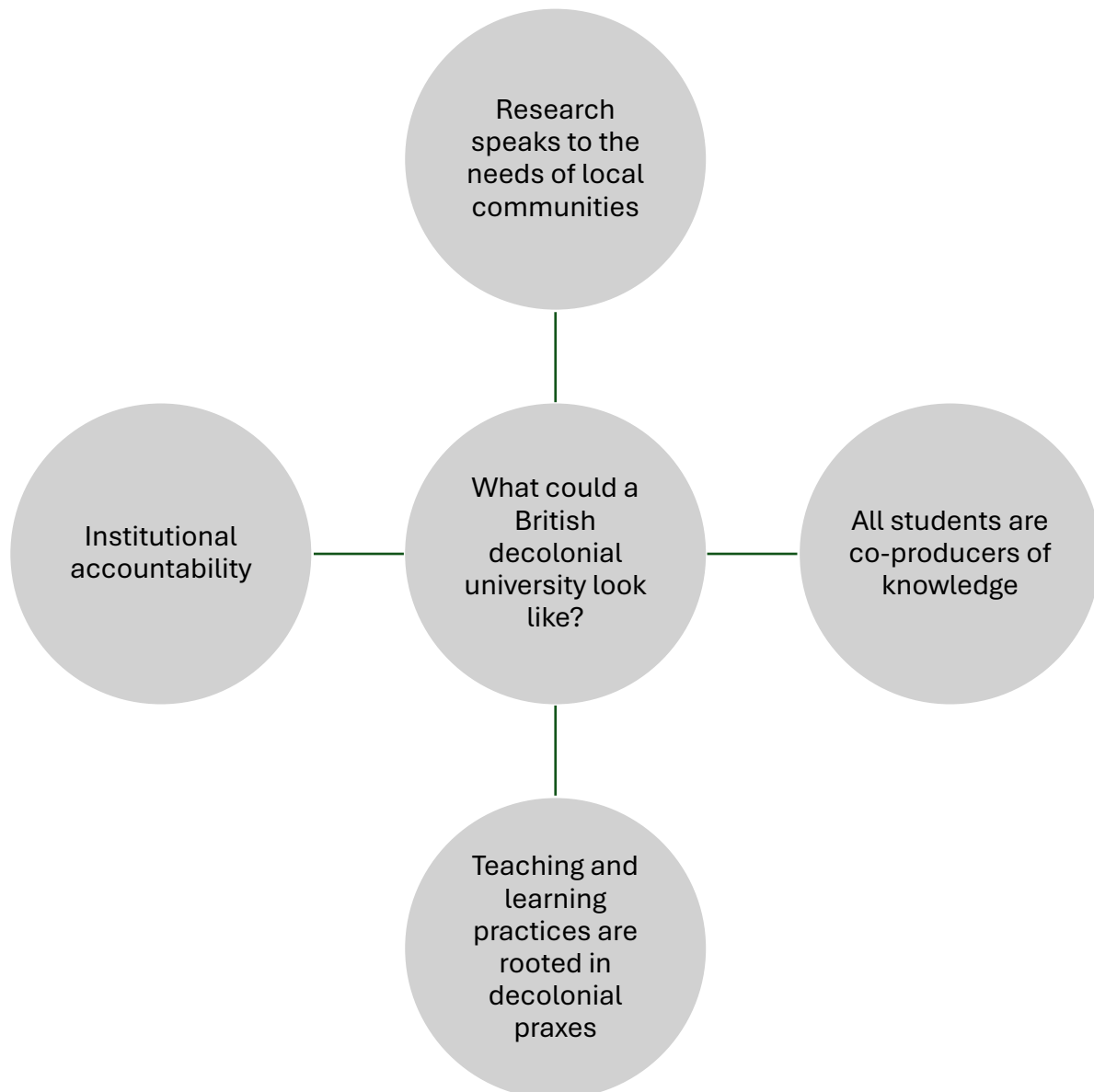
There is no simple answer here. Institutional support is necessary for sustainability, yet too much formalization may undermine the radical possibilities of partnership. Perhaps the key lies in fostering cultures of *ongoing critical reflexivity*, where discomfort is not smoothed over but embraced as part of the process. An emphasis on mutual accountability and centring marginalized voices offers a hopeful direction—but it leaves me wondering how these values can be continually protected from the pull of institutional convenience.

—Zacharay Omitowoju, MA AI, Data and Communication student, w2079949@westminster.ac.uk

Part one of the 2025 roundtable brought together students and scholars from various parts of the world to connect and engage in layered conversations about SSPs, our academic climates, and social justice work in our unique contexts and institutions. The mind map below explores a question that I have been thinking about since: What could a decolonial British university look like? This question first arose for me in a plenary I led with my colleague and friend Yahlnaaw on redistributing power in the university, in which we discussed the importance of forming ethical student-staff and community-based partnerships within and between our own colonizing frameworks of colonially known Canada and the UK. While our discussion centered on connections between knowledge production, decolonial work, relationality, and SSPs, we also spoke about our lived experiences of doing decolonial work in partnership inside and outside of the university, and the tensions and barriers we have faced along the way, especially as racialized students operating within the colonial structures of the university.

The emerging themes of tokenism, transparency, and accountability have further prompted me to think about how decolonial initiatives and relational partnership frameworks can

transform our teaching, learning, and research practices in the British context to reflect the needs of everyone in our educational community, including those who have been historically marginalized and silenced from dominant academic narratives. The map below highlights my aspirations for what a decolonial British university could look like. Through a widespread commitment to co-creation between students, staff, and the local community, and institutional accountability for colonial histories, structures, and historical inequalities, I believe that the university can be a place of liberation. We must remember to prioritize, platform, and value marginalized experiences, and fund more partnership projects that enable us to build this vision.



—Kelsea Costin, research assistant, Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation,
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Within the frames of social justice practices and research, there is so much going on and so many people, groups, and communities that things can be seemingly left behind without notice. This is not because there is a lack of empathy for what is missing, or even a lack of attention. It is because we have so much to work on that not everyone can focus on everything. There has never been, and never will be, a perfect activist. However, instead of harping on about what is being left out, we must shift focus. This being said, there are a couple of key things I think are still missing in social justice work generally: grace and indigenization.

We must practice grace. Grace to ourselves as well as to others. Trying to hold yourself, or others, to perfect standards will prove impossible. The work we are doing as a global community can be very heavy to carry. Often, many feel alone or believe they are alone in their work. We must help each other and ourselves when we make a mistake or are not quite as knowledgeable as others. We're only human, we're not perfect. If we ridicule people who are only trying their best, how can we expect them to continue their work, feel motivated, or want to still be involved? We must allow for breaks, communication, emotion, and mistakes.

Finally, decolonization is increasingly making its way to the forefront of many conversations involving social justice work. This is great news to my ears; however, we are missing something key to the healing process within decolonization and social justice: indigenization. While we are aiming to decolonize, we cannot forget to dismantle the system of colonialism and reintroduce the practices of the original landowners. Without this, what are we left with after decolonization?

—Jess Bollinger, MA International Relations and Democratic Politics student,
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What stayed with me most from the roundtable was how deeply the conversations about student partnership connected to social justice and how heavy that can sometimes feel. When we watch something on the news or see what's happening around the world, it's hard not to feel the weight and carry it with you. I often find myself wondering how to hold on to hope when I feel so powerless and helpless.

At the roundtable, I heard like-minded people speak openly about that same feeling, the moments of being overwhelmed, the uncertainty about where even to begin. But what struck me most was the shared commitment to doing something, even if it's small: one conversation, one action, one gesture of care at a time.

That reminder that change doesn't always come from big gestures but from these quieter, consistent efforts stayed with me. It made me feel like I wasn't alone in how I've been feeling, and more importantly, that I belonged here, at this table, with people who are showing up even with the heaviness.

The roundtable didn't offer straight answers, and now I feel like it wasn't supposed to. Instead, it created a space where it felt okay to sit with those heavy feelings, question, hope, and imagine better ways of learning and relating to each other. I felt lighter, knowing that partnership isn't just about creating policies or projects. It's about creating the space where that shared hope can take root and realizing that even the smallest acts of listening and care can ripple outward and make a difference.

—Shifa Afzal, MSc Business and Organisational Psychology student,
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An unfinished work

Across latitudinal lines,
we sit together in the same classroom,
imagining the future of higher education.
This scene feels like imagining peace in times of war.

We are filled with anger, exhaustion, and despair;
hope can only squeeze itself into the narrowest of spaces.

Who profits from the systems that already exist?
Who speaks of diversity, yet clings to a single truth?
Who is afraid of decolonising higher education?

We still cannot hear non-English languages in the classroom.
What's missing from the reading list is not just an entire Global South.

Indigenous professors, professors of colour, disabled professors—
rarely have the chance to stand at the podium.
Ethnic-minority students, seated in the back row,
read theories about the “Other,”
yet their most familiar stories
never make it into classroom discussions.

Fear and hatred are shaping this era.
But we sit down,
and around those deliberately excluded narratives,
we begin to speak.

Some are taking action.
Some are calling out.
Some, in places unseen,
are slowly reconstructing the structures and mechanisms of the world.

Decolonising is not only a modality of resistance against the spectre of coloniality
but also an anchor,
holding space for those who have been exiled,
and those who are ready to unlearn and undo,
to depart and return.

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