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Social Justice Work in the University: Understanding Student and Staff Perceptions and Aspirations for Decolonising the Curriculum from a University-Wide Survey

Kyra Araneta [1], Kelsea Costin [1], Jennifer Fraser [1,*], Fatima Maatwk [1], Özge Süvari [2] and Esra Tahir [3]

[1] Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation, University of Westminster, London W1B 2HW, UK; k.araneta@westminster.ac.uk (K.A.); k.costin1@westminster.ac.uk (K.C.); f.maatwk1@westminster.ac.uk (F.M.)
[2] School of Architecture and Cities, University of Westminster, London NW1 5LS, UK; o.suvari@westminster.ac.uk
[3] School of Life Sciences, University of Westminster, London W1W 6UW, UK; w1899233@my.westminster.ac.uk
* Correspondence: j.fraser@westminster.ac.uk

Abstract: In recent years, we have seen social movement-based calls for social justice and decolonisation in universities around the world. Some of these have been in response to specific events such as the murder of George Floyd in 2020, while others are rooted in longer standing social movements such as Rhodes Must Fall. These movements have served as catalysts for universities to rethink their commitments to social justice. This article presents the preliminary findings of a university-wide research initiative focused on understanding student and staff perceptions of decolonisation and their aspirations for decolonial work within a post-1992 institution in the United Kingdom. Positioned within the university's broader commitments to anti-racism and as part of a student–staff partnership project focused on interrogating contemporary coloniality, this research investigates how participants understand and experience decolonial initiatives as well as the perceived impact of these efforts on curriculum, relationships, and institutional culture. By conducting a survey, we sought to unravel the complexities surrounding how students and staff conceptualise decolonisation, articulate their aspirations for decolonial initiatives, and envision the potential of student–staff partnerships as catalysts for transformative social justice work within the university. This study aims to enrich the discourse on social justice work in higher education by offering a critical lens on decolonial efforts and highlighting opportunities for collective action to rethink knowledge production and pedagogical practices. Grounded in the belief that decolonial research partnerships between students and staff are essential, the survey and article were developed by six researchers—three staff members and three students.

Keywords: student–staff partnership; co-creation; decolonial relationality; decolonizing the curriculum; coloniality; social justice work; universities; decolonial aspirations

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the movement to decolonise curricula within higher education has gained significant traction, as institutions strive to dismantle the entrenched colonial structures that continue to shape academic spaces and teaching itself. Aimed at addressing the deep-rooted Eurocentric perspectives that pervade academic content, pedagogy, and institutional frameworks (Bhambra et al. 2018), this push is a recognition of both the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism on knowledge production, which have led to

the marginalisation and erasure of diverse voices, epistemologies, and ways of knowing (Tuck and Yang 2018). While critiques of whiteness, Eurocentrism, and the colonial legacies of British universities predate recent efforts—such as the "Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford" campaign in 2016 and the "Why isn't my Professor Black?" campaign at University College London in 2014—the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent global protests accelerated these conversations, leading to a renewed focus on racism and coloniality within UK higher education institutions (HEIs) (Elliott-Cooper 2018; James et al. 2021).

Our own institution, the University of Westminster, is situated in the heart of London, and is among the most diverse universities in the UK with a population of approximately 20,000 students from 169 nationalities. A total of 65 percent of the student body comes from racially minoritised backgrounds, making it a minority-majority institution. In 2020, the university demonstrated its commitment to fostering an actively anti-racist, inclusive and safe environment by releasing fifteen specific pledges (University of Westminster 2020). Decolonial and social justice aspirations also feature in our Education Strategy 2023–2029, in which partnership has been acknowledged as crucial 'to construct powerful knowledge and to decolonise the curriculum' (p. 13). This institutional commitment thus supports our work and reflects a collective responsibility to foster meaningful change. However, while Westminster strives to evolve, its historical structures still reflect those of a traditional post-1992 institution and, like many UK universities, it faces challenges such as degree-awarding gaps, a non-representative staff structure, and a curriculum that inconsistently engages with anti-racist and decolonial efforts. In terms of existing social justice initiatives, decolonial work at the University of Westminster typically focuses on revising historical narratives, institutional practices, and curriculum content to reflect a more inclusive and accurate understanding of colonial history. Unlike in settler colonial contexts such as Canada and the US, where decolonising often involves addressing issues related to land restitution and Indigenous sovereignty (Grande 2018; Patel 2021), efforts generally seek to address the contemporary forms of coloniality that are specific to the metropole, through actions such as dismantling Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies, diversifying reading lists, implementing anti-racist pedagogies, and interrogating the structures of power embedded in the institution.

In this context and in the survey, we understand decoloniality as any effort directed at challenging and reshaping the colonial and Euro/Western-centric biases in our educational systems (Maldonado-Torres 2016). It is a continuous process (Dennis 2018; Stein et al. 2021) that involves not only acknowledging and critiquing embedded forms of coloniality in curriculum content and delivery but also actively transforming the power dynamics and affective atmospheres that influence our teaching and learning environments (Bell 2018; Gopal 2021). Existing studies on decolonising the curriculum have focused on student and staff perceptions, frequently drawing on the lived experiences of those directly involved in decolonial initiatives (Hall et al. 2023; Jivraj 2020; Shain et al. 2023). Other research highlights the complexities of undertaking decolonial work within the academy, particularly the risk of such projects being co-opted into performative, managerial efforts that fail to tackle the deeper structural inequalities embedded in academic institutions (Abu Moghli and Kadiwal 2021; Doharty et al. 2021). Partnerships between students and staff have also emerged as a key theme in discussions of generating decolonial spaces, tools, and practices in the university (Fraser and Usman 2021). Memon and Jivraj (2020) emphasise the importance of fostering student–staff relationality that is rooted in trust and mutual respect so that we can create new conditions for learning and teaching, and support both resistance and re-existence within the neoliberal colonial university. Ethical pedagogical partnership has also been discussed as a way of challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge and power while creating spaces for marginalised voices and experiences to reshape educational

practices (de Bie et al. 2023). Such partnerships can serve as catalysts of institutional change, advancing equity and social justice by repositioning students (particularly those from historically marginalised groups) as legitimate knowledge producers and agents of change (Atkins et al. 2022; Gibson and Cook-Sather 2020). These studies begin to demonstrate how thinking in relational terms can go beyond interpersonal connections and explore the broader systemic relationships within the institution, such as the power dynamics shaping how knowledge is produced, which histories are taught, and whose voices are heard (Tuck and Yang 2018).

Understanding how coloniality operates through a relational lens is largely rooted in the works of Indigenous and postcolonial scholars, who have long studied and articulated the intricate entanglements between communities, land, knowledge, and the colonial–capitalistic structures of society (Grande 2018; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Simpson 2017). Therefore, when we refer to relationships, we refer to the interconnectedness of individuals and systems (Tynan 2021) and are concerned with how education perpetuates or challenges unequal relational dynamics. This perspective compels us to acknowledge that decolonial efforts must not only focus on interpersonal interactions but also engage with the broader socio-political contexts in which they occur (Ríos and Patel 2023; Stein et al. 2021). Furthermore, it highlights the importance of approaching this work both collectively and collaboratively. Studies of relational pedagogies further aid our understanding as their focus goes beyond human relationships to include non-human actors—such as books, archival materials, libraries, technologies, and classrooms (Gravett 2022)—highlighting how these elements influence learning experiences, knowledge production, and relationality in academic settings.

In addition to this body of existing work, there is an increasing need for research that considers how decolonial initiatives and praxes are perceived by different stakeholders within academic institutions. For instance, understanding whether people experience these initiatives as genuinely addressing injustices and power imbalances is crucial for assessing their impact. Insights into how different groups interpret the goals and outcomes of decolonising can also inform strategies for enhancing engagement and support. This study aims to contribute to these discourses by analysing data collected through a survey dedicated to investigating how students and staff experience and perceive decolonial initiatives and praxes, and their aspirations for decolonising the curriculum. By analysing 345 survey responses through a qualitative thematic analysis, we examine how participants perceive the relationships between students, staff, and institutional structures, and how these relational dynamics act as facilitators or barriers to decolonial change within the university.

Our analysis adopts the approach to relational writing outlined by Tynan and Bishop (2023), which emphasises grounding the work in personal connections to people, places, and knowledge. This encourages us to move beyond traditional academic boundaries that often prioritise disciplinary and theoretical gaps and instead focus on the lived experiences and relationships that shape our understandings. The survey study was developed through a collaborative process that engaged a team of six researchers—three staff members and three students—all involved in a student–staff partnership project. As part of a broader student partnership initiative—the Pedagogies for Social Justice Project—our praxis is rooted in the belief that student–staff partnership can become transformative when intentionally framed through anti-racist and decolonial practices (Fraser and Usman 2021). Co-creation also lies at the heart of the project, shaping partnership as a relational process that values and honours the contributions and expertise of students and staff alike (Healey 2024). For example, coming from diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, we aimed to create a research environment and way of working that transcended normative research practices and acknowledged our positionalities as student and staff co-researchers. This collaborative

spirit informed every aspect of our work, from survey design and analysis to manuscript preparation, with decisions made collectively through open dialogue and mutual learning. Some of us have collaborated for years, during which our collective understandings of decoloniality and partnership have evolved and deepened, while others were new to the group and partnership processes. It is important to note that our survey aimed to capture the diverse ways in which students and staff understand and envision decolonial work, rather than assess their alignment with our own. We believe that meaningful partnerships can nurture environments where multiple meanings and understandings of decolonial work can coexist and evolve together. Therefore, this research, among everything else, is experimentation for understanding relationality in our efforts towards decolonising.

2. Materials and Methods

To explore student and staff perceptions and aspirations for decolonial work at our institution, we conducted a university-wide survey that included all 12 academic schools, as well as the Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation and professional services departments. We chose a survey as our method for collecting qualitative data to ensure a comprehensive exploration of perspectives, capturing both the depth of individual experiences and the breadth of institutional engagements. By allowing respondents to provide open-ended, freely written answers instead of selecting pre-determined options, the survey produced in-depth data that highlight the sense-making process of participants in a similar way to qualitative interviews (Braun et al. 2020). The method also allowed us to reach a wide range of voices (Toerien and Wilkinson 2004) across departments and disciplines, aligning with our goal of exploring a broad spectrum of perspectives.

The survey was conducted online and was open for six weeks from the start of April 2024. To recruit participants, we relied on a combination of reaching out to students and staff via email announcements, social media, and in-person participant recruitment on our various campuses. Acknowledging the sensitive nature of social justice topics and work, all survey questions were optional, with the exception of a mandatory consent question. This resulted in variable numbers of responses to each question, as participants were at liberty to skip any questions they did not wish or feel able to respond to. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Westminster prior to data collection. Data collected were stored securely in accordance with the university's data protection guidelines. To conduct data analysis, we used NVivo 14 software, adopting an inductive approach, and following Braun and Clark's thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012, 2013). This analytical approach allowed themes and sub-themes to emerge freely from the data. In the next section, we present the survey results and discuss the key themes and subthemes identified from our analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

This section is divided into four parts. First, to contextualise the results of the survey, we provide participant background information which situates the data in the context of the University. This is followed by detailed discussion of the three themes that emerged through data analysis. The first theme showcases the importance of decolonial and social justice work to survey participants. The second theme centres the necessity of decolonising knowledge and knowledge production processes. Finally, the third theme highlights the role of student–staff relationships for conducting decolonising and social justice work.

3.1. Our Participants

To situate the insights from our data in the context of this study and the context of the University of Westminster, in this section, we provide background data from the survey and

key figures that contextualise our findings. A total of 345 participants took part in the survey with 57% (n = 198) students, 36% (n = 125) academic staff, and 6% (n = 22) professional services staff. Participants were from all areas of the University including all disciplinary and administrative areas. The highest participation levels were from the Schools of Social Sciences 17% (n = 57), Architecture and Cities 16% (n = 54), Life Sciences 15% (n = 49), and Humanities 10% (n = 32). Student participants were from all levels of study from foundation year 3% (n = 5) through undergraduate 66% (n = 130), taught postgraduate 21% (n = 42), and doctoral researchers 10% (n = 20). Among student participants, 66% (n = 130) were classified as home fee-paying students (British nationals or UK residents), while 34% (n = 66) of student participants were international fee-paying students.

Furthermore, we also asked participants general demographic questions including age, gender, and ethnic background: 22% (n = 74) of participants were aged 20 years and under; 20% (n = 69) were aged 21–24 years; 11% (n = 38) were aged 25–29 years; and 47% (n = 162) were aged 30 years and older. Participants reported that they understood their gender as 60% (n = 203) women; 36% (n = 123) men; 1% (n = 5) questioning or unsure; 1% (n = 4) non-binary; 1% (n = 4) a different gender; and 1% (n = 2) agender. As noted in the introduction, Westminster is among the most ethnically diverse institutions in the UK and is considered a minority-majority institution based on its student population. This was reflected in our survey and is shown in Figures 1 and 2 which illustrate the ethnic backgrounds of students and staff. However, it is important to highlight the disparity in ethnic diversity between students and staff, with the student population exhibiting a significantly higher degree of diversity. We asked participants to indicate their ethnic background using the categories defined by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency.

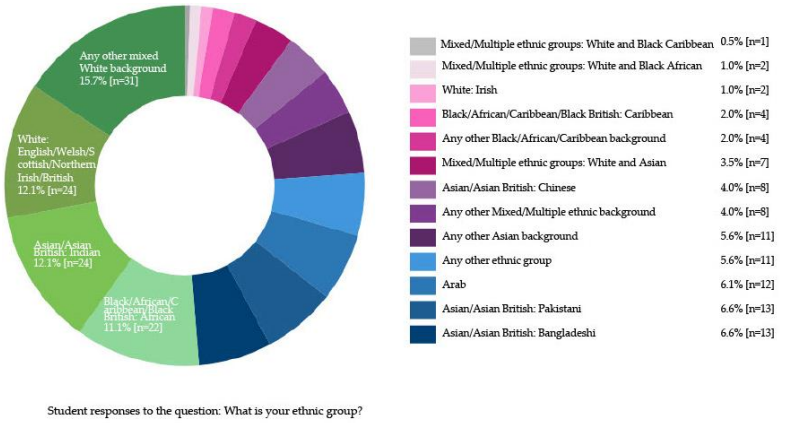

Figure 1. Student participants by ethnic group.

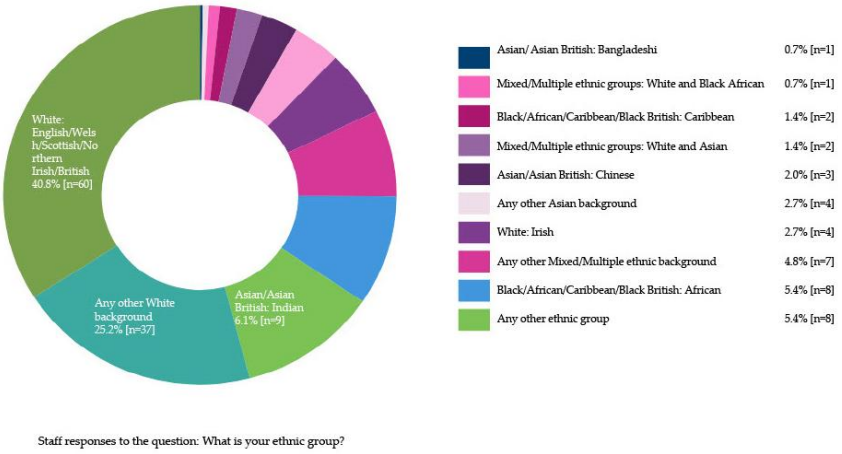

Figure 2. Staff participants by ethnic group.

3.2. Understanding the Importance of Decolonial Work for Students and Staff

Our survey included a variety of questions that explored the aspirations of students and staff relating to decolonial and social justice work. To understand the importance of this work for our participants, we included several questions to gauge their levels of engagement with decolonisation and social justice. Our survey results show that there is generally a high level of engagement with the work but also reveals some differences between student and staff perceptions.

A slightly different perception between participant groups was evident in responses to the question: Is decolonising the university something that you are concerned about? Staff were much clearer that this is something that concerns them with 83% (n = 122) indicating a positive response: 50% (n = 73) yes, a great deal, and 33% (n = 49) yes, a little. Only 17% (n = 25) of staff indicated that they were not sure (3% (n = 5)) or did not think that it is important to them (10% (n = 20)). In comparison, 65% (n = 128) of students responded that decolonising is in some way important to them (30% (n = 59) yes, a great deal, and 37% (n = 69) yes, a little), while 35% (n = 68) of students were unsure (18% (n = 35)) or did not think that it is important to them (17% (n = 34)).

A stark contrast emerges when comparing student and staff perceptions of their involvement in discussions or actions related to decolonising at the university. We asked participants: Have you engaged in discussions or actions related to decolonisation at Westminster? Staff were considerably more likely to have engaged than student participants. Only 32% (n = 63) of students reported that they had engaged in discussions or actions (10% (n = 19) yes, a great deal, and 22% (n = 44) yes, a little), while 76% (n = 112) of staff reported this (24% (n = 36) yes, a great deal, and 52% (n = 76) yes, a little). At 58% (n = 114) students were far more likely than staff to indicate that they had little to no participation (29% (n = 57) no, not very much, and 29% (n = 57) no, not at all). In comparison, only 28% (n = 32) staff reported much lower levels of little or no engagement (14% (n = 16) no, not very much, and 14% (n = 16) no, not at all). While this difference warrants further exploration through in-depth qualitative methods, it can perhaps be attributed to staff being more likely to participate in the survey if they were already engaged in some form of decolonial work, while students may have participated regardless of their prior engagement.

Furthermore, we also explored the importance participants placed on the university community being engaged in decolonial scholarship and activism through the question: How important is it to you that the University community is engaged in decolonial scholarship and activism? Interestingly, while student participants may be less involved in discussions or actions, they heavily agreed that decolonial scholarship and activism is important for the university community with 80% (n = 157) of students stating it is either very important (50% (n = 98)) or somewhat important (30% (n = 59)). A similar, though less surprising, picture emerged from staff participant responses with 87% (n = 128) reporting that this was important (60% (n = 88) very important and 27% (n = 40) somewhat important).

Finally, to understand how important participants consider the future of decolonial work at Westminster we asked: Is it important to you that decolonial initiatives are actively shaping the future of the educational community at Westminster? Here, both student and staff participants agreed that it is of significant importance. A total of 83% (n = 157) (48% (n = 91) very important and 35% (n = 66) somewhat important) of student participants indicated that this was important, while 86% (n = 126) (55% (n = 81) very important and 31% (n = 45) somewhat important) of staff participants indicated that this was important. Therefore, although students may not be having discussions or be as involved in actions related to decolonising as staff, our survey results indicate that this is an important area that students want to see shaping the university community.

In the next sections, we explore the qualitative data gathered from our survey, starting with participants' insights on decolonising knowledge production, student–staff relationships, and finally, partnerships and co-creation. Staff responded more frequently and in greater detail than students to the open-ended questions, resulting in more text-based data from this group in our findings.

3.3. Relationships to Knowledge: Decolonising Dominant Knowledge Production

The survey responses regarding decolonial change in the curriculum reveal a strong emphasis on transforming the foundations of knowledge production and dissemination within educational settings. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of challenging systems of knowledge production and dissemination as fundamental aspects of decolonising curricula. This theme manifested in various calls for action, primarily centred on developing curricula that foster critical consciousness and empower learners to question dominant ways of thinking and the power dynamics shaping them. Challenging Eurocentric perspectives was also a recurring focus throughout the survey responses, with respondents advocating for more diverse and inclusive curricula. They stressed the need to reevaluate educational resources and classroom content, including a critical examination of reading lists and archives. These aspirations reflect a vision for curricula that confronts colonial legacies in education and allows students to question historical and cultural biases, explore diverse epistemologies, and critically examine the power structures shaping what is considered valid knowledge in the classroom.

3.3.1. Challenging Eurocentrism in the Curriculum

We explored participant perceptions around the extent to which curricula acknowledge the legacies of coloniality. Responses to these questions revealed significant disparities between staff and student perceptions regarding their curricula's engagement with the impact of coloniality and non-Western perspectives. We asked: Does the curriculum on your course(s) acknowledge the impact of colonialism on contemporary social structures and power dynamics? Here, 65% (n = 92) of staff reported their courses addressed this topic (22% (n = 31) yes, a great deal, and 43% (n = 61) yes, a little). In contrast, student responses were more evenly distributed, with only 41% (n = 81) perceiving such acknowledgment (17% (n = 33) yes, a great deal, and 24% (n = 48) yes, a little). Notably, 59% (n = 115) of students were either unsure or believed their courses inadequately addressed this subject.

A similar pattern emerged in response to the question: Does the curriculum on your course(s) address the contributions and perspectives of non-Western cultures and histories? While 70% (n = 101) of staff believed their courses covered this topic (23% (n = 33) yes, a great deal, and 47% (n = 68) yes, a little), only 51% (n = 101) of students shared this perception (15% (n = 30) yes, a great deal, and 36% (n = 71) yes, a little). Again, a significant proportion (49% (n = 95)) of students were either unsure or felt their courses lacked adequate coverage. This stark contrast in perceptions highlights a potential disconnect between intended curricular content and student comprehension or recognition of these themes. This gap may indicate a need for the more explicit integration of discussions about the impacts of coloniality into course materials as well as improved communication of these concepts and approaches to students.

Contrastingly, in response to a question which asked about biases or gaps in the curriculum that reinforce colonial narratives or cultural stereotypes, students were more likely than staff to recognise such issues. While 43% (n = 83) of students indicated that they believed there were biases or gaps (9% (n = 18) yes, a great deal, and 34% (n = 67) yes, a little), only 31% (n = 46) of staff agreed (7% (n = 10) yes, a great deal, and 24% (n = 36) yes, a little). A significant proportion of both groups were uncertain, with 26% (n = 52)

of students and 37% (n = 53) of staff responding 'I'm not sure.' While these responses reveal that there is awareness of colonial narratives and cultural stereotypes, particularly among students, they highlight significant differences in awareness levels between students and staff. Students (43% (n = 83)) are more likely than staff (31% (n = 46)) to recognise curricular biases and gaps, suggesting that students may be more directly impacted by or sensitive to the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum. Furthermore, the high level of uncertainty—26% (n = 52) of students and 37% (n = 53) of staff not being sure if such biases exist—suggests a possible lack of critical decolonial engagement with the contents of the curriculum, particularly among staff. This ultimately poses a challenge to efforts aimed at decolonising the curriculum, as the awareness necessary to drive this work is uneven across the university.

Generally, respondents' critiques of Eurocentrism indicate deeper concerns about epistemic violence, ontological marginalisation, and the paradigmatic structure of the university. Some responses, for instance, called for a curriculum that is '. . .deeply untied from its Eurocentric roots' (staff member) and encourages '. . .in-depth questioning of modernist Western ways of thinking and acting, epistemologies, ontologies' (staff member). These critiques show that Eurocentrism in the curriculum is not just viewed as a content issue but concerns the coloniality of knowledge and the culture of the institution itself (Shain et al. 2023). Several of our participants thus advocated for liberatory pedagogies rooted in critical traditions such as feminist, queer, and Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies that reflect the diversity in students and staff.

> *Centring Indigenous Studies!! Indigenous voices!! Queering the curriculum!!* (post-graduate research student)

> *I also feel like the efforts to decolonise the curriculum could be more explicitly joined up with thinking about feminist and queer pedagogies and other intersections with (for example) disability.* (staff member)

> *Ideally, such initiatives will help create more diverse curricula that challenge dominant epistemologies and disciplinary paradigms, and help develop more liberatory pedagogies.* (staff member)

Echoing Freire's theory of critical pedagogy (Freire 2000) and education as a tool for liberation, incorporating such pedagogies could potentially contribute to disrupting oppressive knowledge hierarchies across the curriculum, as well as the banking model influencing knowledge dissemination. However, while addressing these gaps was viewed as requiring more than superficial adjustments, this also created scepticism among some participants, particularly regarding the plausibility of revising their courses through a decolonial lens. Some participants argued that decolonising course material is more complicated for certain disciplines:

> *. . .but there are limits. For example, I teach Islamic law and to fully decolonise my module, I would have to use non English speaking sources, which isn't feasible. I circumvent the issue by finding sources in history, for example.* (staff member)

> *While it's an aim I am 100% on board with, there are some areas of my discipline where it's just not realistic, because the subject material itself is deeply embedded in and derives from a Eurocentric perspective. The best we can do is bring in work from practitioners in other parts of the world, but the scope for real decolonisation is limited.* (staff member)

Based on this reasoning, it becomes clear that such arguments—that we cannot decolonise because knowledge is deeply rooted in Eurocentrism and coloniality—tend to perpetuate the very coloniality we are seeking to dismantle. This perceived difficulty and, in turn, reluctance to challenge entrenched narratives can reinforce existing power dynamics,

suggesting that barriers to decolonising are not only structural but also ideological (Icaza and Vázquez 2018). This demands a commitment to not only the fundamental rethinking of how knowledge is constructed but the foundational principles of disciplines themselves.

3.3.2. Disrupting Academic Resources and Classroom Content

In response to open questions about where they see the most promising possibilities for change, and what is missing from the university's efforts to decolonise the curriculum, respondents expressed a need to reassess current material resources and course content to represent a more diverse range of voices and to challenge bias. A recurring theme emerged where participants consistently challenged reading lists, emphasising the insufficient inclusion of works by non-Western and non-white authors. For example:

> *There needs to be clear teaching on the impact of colonialism on all of the disciplines at the University, as it is very rarely talked about. Research and reading lists need to include a more diverse range of authors; my reading list is made up entirely of British and American authors.* (undergraduate student)

> *Changes to the reading lists and topics of study would be effective in decolonising the curriculum.* (undergraduate student)

> *I remain pragmatic, in the sense that I know not everyone is interested in the topic. But I'd be delighted if my colleagues simply began by changing their reading list. It might help them realise how biased we are. I recently saw a ranking of the most influential international law scholars: 9 of them were men, all white! The only female was white as well.* (staff member)

These responses reveal how decolonising needs to take place at multiple levels and through different approaches. Students acknowledge that decolonising the curriculum requires examining and intervening with regard to the overrepresentation of Western authors, diversifying materials, and including colonial history and contexts. Additionally, one staff member pointed out that 'some students do end up finding such readings themselves eventually,' (staff member) although this further highlights the problematic shift in responsibility onto students to seek out diverse perspectives (Ali 2022), rather than having these voices integrated into core course materials from the outset. Coinciding with this argument, student responses highlighted that revising material resources should primarily be the responsibility of those in positions of academic authority, i.e., lecturers and course leaders. Student responses identified that, as agents of change, staff must actively engage in examining their own biases and make conscious decisions to centre marginalised voices in course materials. Staff recognised this problem too, reflecting on systemic bias in academic influence and suggesting reading list diversification as a practical first step.

While diversifying reading lists represents a necessary step towards decolonising, participants viewed it as an insufficient measure in isolation. As one staff member noted, '. . . it is "easy" to add new case studies and reading materials. . . It's much harder to address our teaching, learning and assessment styles' (staff member). This insight suggests that merely changing course materials risks becoming a superficial solution that fails to address deeper institutional inequalities (Doharty et al. 2021). One respondent pointed out that 'decolonising the curricula is more than just a reading list,' (staff member) calling for creative approaches to teaching that reflect global perspectives. Moreover, as another participant argued, 'we need to consistently recognise the colonial histories of the world' (staff member) to understand current power dynamics. These responses suggest that decolonial work involves reimagining pedagogical spaces themselves, from how students and staff interact, to how discussions are facilitated, and to the different forms of knowledge that are valued. Beyond curricular changes, participants advocated for regular workshops

and events, though cautioned against these becoming mere 'tick box exercises' (multiple staff members). Furthermore, staff members were clear that decolonial efforts need to be understood on their own terms and not wrapped up in equality, diversity, and inclusion initiatives: '"Decolonization" references a serious intellectual project that is undermined by its reduction to "EDI". To decolonize in 2024 is to say loud and clear that EDI is not enough' (staff member). Participants also emphasised the importance of extending education beyond university walls through 'collaboration with local communities to co-create educational resources' (staff member). This approach of engaging with community knowledge and voices not only enriches the curriculum but creates what Jivraj (2020) describes as possibilities of re-existence for local communities within academic spaces. Collaborations between universities and local communities can also generate new forms of knowledge and foster liberating spaces for knowledge production without excluding voices that have traditionally been marginalised from academic discourse (Hart and Wolff 2007).

3.4. Student–Staff Relationships: Dismantling Social Hierarchies

This section considers the power dynamics between students and staff in the context of curriculum development. By analysing perceptions of responsibility and engagement, the survey revealed the complex social hierarchies that shape educational change. Responses to the question 'Who do you think is responsible for bringing about change in the curriculum?' revealed notable patterns across different groups, with academic staff consistently viewed as primary agents of change. Here, 95.2% (n = 119) of academic staff identified their own group as responsible, with 79.3% (n = 157) of students and 81.8% (n = 18) of professional staff sharing the same view. University management was also widely recognised as possible change agents by 76.8% (n = 152) of students, 76.8% (n = 96) of academic staff, and 81.8% (n = 18) of professional staff. The high level of consensus regarding academic staff responsibility reflects a traditional view of curriculum development as primarily faculty driven. However, the substantial attributing of responsibility to university management suggests there is also recognition of the institutional and political structures that shape curriculum change. What is even more revealing is the discrepancy in perceptions of student responsibility—while only 54% (n = 107) of students viewed themselves as responsible for curriculum change, both academic staff (65.6%, n = 82) and professional staff (63.6%, n = 14) attributed greater responsibility to students. This difference may point to student disempowerment or a lack of awareness about their potential role in curriculum development and change. It also reflects how students may internalise traditional academic hierarchies, seeing themselves more as passive learners than active knowledge creators. These views could potentially be shaped by the messages they receive from the institution, highlighting a disconnect between the university's rhetoric on student partnership and students' actual experiences of it.

When we asked participants who is actively making changes to the curriculum, a different pattern emerged. For example, students reported higher levels of active engagement (58.6%, n = 116) than either academic staff (39.2%, n = 49) or professional staff (40.9%, n = 9) attributed to them. The nearly 20-point difference suggests a few possible explanations: students may be contributing to curriculum development in ways that staff do not easily see or recognise; students and staff may have different ideas about what counts as "active" participation in curriculum changes; or there could be communication gaps between them about what is happening in curriculum development. Nevertheless, this disconnect highlights the need for better ways to document and communicate student contributions and suggests that clearer guidelines could help recognise and value student involvement more effectively. A further difference emerged in perceptions about academic staff activity in making curricular changes. 90.4% (n = 163) of academic staff indicated that

their group is making active changes while only 57.6% (n = 114) of the student respondents felt academic staff were doing this. This discrepancy could be explained by the likelihood of staff survey participants being more likely to be involved in decolonial or social justice work. Nonetheless, it is clear that there are real discrepancies in perceptions between students and staff about who is actively engaged in this work.

Some of these contrasts in perceptions are particularly noticeable when comparing who participants thought is responsible versus who is actively making change. The most striking discrepancy was in regard to the role of university management. While university management was widely regarded as responsible for bringing about change, they were not perceived to be actively making that change. Only 29.3% (n = 58) of students, 33.6% (n = 42) of academic staff, and 59.1% (n = 13) of professional staff indicated that university management were making active changes.

3.4.1. Unequal Power Dynamics

The survey revealed that both students and staff are eager for changes in classroom power dynamics to foster more collaborative and dialogic environments. Staff respondents expressed a desire to move away from traditional, authority-centred teaching approaches. They also expressed concern that hierarchical structures can create intimidation rather than engagement.

> *Breaking down the staff/student barriers more as we are a learning community. We need to remove the last remnants of sage on the stage and also to alter the power dynamics. We cannot have students intimidated by staff.* (staff member)

> *We need to consistently recognise the colonial histories of the world in order to understand uneven power dynamics today and I do think that this acknowledgment and foundation needs to be ever present in the classroom. This then filters through naturally to assessments, the relationship between staff & students, reading lists, classroom spaces.* (staff member)

> *I think more work needs to be done around the social relationships and practices, as well as material/structural conditions through which coloniality is reproduced. There is a lot of focus on the content of the curriculum and the importance of discourses and narratives but I think there need to be more conversations between students and staff around what a decolonial classroom might look like and what we need to do to achieve that.* (staff member)

The survey responses show that generally, staff participants demonstrate an awareness of unequal power dynamics and recognise their connection to colonial hierarchies. Students, meanwhile, shared experiences of feeling dismissed when discussing issues such as colonialism, revealing a shared frustration with dismissive attitudes toward decolonisation efforts. One respondent notes that these discussions are sometimes brushed off and labelled as 'jumping on the wokeness bandwagon' (undergraduate student). This reaction suggests a resistance within the institution to fully embrace discussions around coloniality, which ultimately undermines efforts to decolonise. Furthermore, even when some staff are aware of structural issues and may desire to change them, students still struggle to be heard on these topics, indicating a gap in how critical discussions are received within academic settings. Nevertheless, both groups express a desire for an environment where students feel comfortable engaging and contributing without fear of judgement, and where traditional hierarchies are reimagined to create a more balanced, dialogic space for learning.

> *There have been some instances of dismissal when students have spoken in challenge of colonialism. If it was in a debate, that'd be fine, but there's a sense of "you think this because you're jumping on the wokeness bandwagon" that I found personally upsetting.*

We are autonomous beings able to form our own critical opinions and are not sheep because those opinions happen to align with the sentiment of the day. (undergraduate student)

Changed power dynamics between students and staff to encourage students to ask questions and feel comfortable engaging in discussions with staff. (undergraduate student)

That students feel comfortable sharing their lived experience, that more perspectives (other than Euro-Western centric) become integrated into learning and teaching materials, that we're able to discuss racism openly. (staff member)

Developing new pedagogies, having more time to engage in deeper thinking and work to build less hierarchical and more collaborative relationships. (staff member)

A further factor that can reinforce the unequal power dynamic participants describe above relates to a lack of diversity in staff.

3.4.2. Lack of Diversity in Staff

An area of clear concern for survey participants was the lack of diversity among academic staff and the impact that this has on both the curriculum and student experiences.

I am an English Literature & History student, so colonialism is a topic that came up a lot in my studies so far. Though we've had lectures from people from multiple backgrounds, they've all been European. I think it would be beneficial to hear from non-European (and perhaps non-Western) voices to broaden the perspectives on such topics. (undergraduate student)

We have an incredibly diverse student body but a real lack of diversity in our academic staff body. (staff member)

I'd like to see a much greater diversity within the teaching teams I work with. I work with great people, many of whom are in support of the aims of decolonisation. But we're still mostly white, and in some cases, mostly male, within module and course teams. (staff member)

. . .most of the staff are white and so their attempts to decolonise the curriculum might be limited to their own understanding and experiences. (staff member)

There should be more women of colour and general diversity within the cohort of lecturers and students to provide different perspectives and outlooks. (taught postgraduate student)

The more diversity we have in our recruitment, the more it will appear in the curriculum. (staff member)

Some of these participant perspectives directly link diversity in the curriculum to staff demographics, noting how a predominantly white and UK-born teaching body can foster a biassed and non-representative curriculum. These responses suggest that more inclusive approaches and a 'joined up effort' to creating and designing materials and course content could contribute towards developing a curriculum which will 'challenge the bias and gaps in our curricula' (staff member).

Other participants also argued that the intention behind increasing the diversity of staff is not to make those same staff responsible for decolonising the curriculum.

I don't want the university community to use Black and ethnic minority staff or students to teach the [white] staff what to do—[. . .] just [for] the [white staff] to have all the work and the power, as it has always been. We must see a massive increase in the number of non-[white] staff in the UoW, in management and in academic posts. (staff member)

Other scholars have noted that despite efforts to integrate diverse perspectives into academic programmes through initiatives like inclusive curriculum frameworks and diversity audits these measures often fall short due to the persistent underrepresentation of racially

minoritised staff (McDuff et al. 2020). As Jivraj (2020) argues, systemic barriers in recruitment and promotion processes contribute to this underrepresentation, and these barriers persist despite interventions. This aligns with Rollock's (2019) findings that despite decolonial movements, the representation of Black professors in the UK is only 0.6%. The latest report from AdvanceHE (2024) suggests that five years later the number of Black Professors remains critically low at 0.8%.

Our participants' responses demonstrate a tension that occurs in UK higher education around how people navigate the often incommensurable (Tuck and Yang 2018) priorities and discourses of decolonising work and more policy-driven equality, diversity and inclusion agendas (Jivraj 2020). One participant noted that 'the discussion [on decolonisation] seems to have fallen off now, and I feel the boundaries are more blurred with general areas, such as implementing equality, inclusivity and diversity as well' (staff member). Even when institutions make pledges towards equality, diversity, and inclusion work, these do not always ensure that transformation takes place (Ahmed 2007). In this context, we understand our participants' comments around the lack of diversity in staff as an indicator of their concerns about the unequal power relations that exist in UK universities. As such, addressing these disparities needs to be part of larger more complex efforts toward decolonising to avoid the issues that the scholars above have highlighted.

3.4.3. Partnership and Co-Creation

Engaging more in partnership and co-creation was a clear aspiration for participants throughout the survey. Some participants asked for:

> *Staff and student partnership to co-design the curriculum.* (undergraduate student)

> *More spaces and opportunities to create those relationships and take part in further partnership projects.* (staff member)

> *Allowing more time for mini-projects and staff & student collaborations.* (staff member)

Echoing Healey et al. (2014), some responses emphasised that student–staff partnerships can strengthen a sense of belonging and community at the university. Unlike traditional forms of learning, partnership is formed through reciprocal learning and places value on relationships built on 'trust, risk, inter-dependence, and agency' (Healey et al. 2014, p. 7). Moreover, participants' responses reiterated Bovill's (2020) argument that co-creation promotes relational pedagogy through building relationships and conversations on mutual respect.

Some participants delved more deeply into partnership as a form of relationship which holds the potential to address power imbalances. When asked the question, 'Where do you see the most promising possibilities for decolonial change within the curriculum?' many participants referenced partnership and co-creation as crucial for driving change.

> *I think more work can always be done, and this requires constant evaluation in partnership. It is important that there are more partnerships to disrupt those traditional power dynamics within the classroom and tackle areas of racism within each School. It should be an ongoing theme throughout the curriculum. I think the only way to do this properly is with the students and to share their lived experiences, but also to hear their voices of what works and what does not so that the sessions can be tailored to their needs.* (staff member)

> *It's important that the process of decolonisation of the curriculum is not tokenistic [. . .] More flexible, cool structures and forms of assessment which incorporate students as producers seem to me, likely routes to advance decolonial change within the curriculum.* (staff member)

> *Sometimes the conversations are very uncomfortable and perhaps students feel the power imbalance between themselves and staff and so don't speak to advise us when they could. I would like us to have more space for respectful dialogue. Co-creators projects can help with this because they flatten the hierarchy.* (staff member)

Our participants clearly see co-creation as an important tool for changing universities and the unequal power dynamics between students and staff that contribute to the perpetuation of coloniality. Others have made these arguments. For example, hooks (1994) argues, co-production can unsettle the banking of privileged knowledge. It has the potential to disrupt reproducing cultures of whiteness in higher education and make visible the histories and narratives of students and staff of colour. The changed relationships between students and staff that co-creation, co-production, and partnership can enable make space for transforming teaching praxes.

3.4.4. Flipping Teaching Praxes

The survey data reveal that staff often perceive the curriculum as inadequate for addressing deep-rooted colonial legacies within education, which has subsequently impacted teaching praxes and pedagogies. Participants expressed a strong desire for classrooms to become spaces that disrupt traditional notions of where and who knowledge comes from, as they envision classrooms as liberating environments where students are empowered to co-create their learning and bring in their perspectives. For instance, one staff respondent who teaches Fashion highlighted the ongoing coloniality within global supply chains, noting that students from the affected regions bring unique insights that could deepen the curriculum's engagement with these systems. By 'flipping the way we teach' to actively incorporate students' lived experiences, they suggested, classrooms could challenge dominant narratives and engage critically with contemporary inequities in society (staff member). Similarly, another respondent pointed out that a flipped classroom approach, guided by student choices, could encourage participation without the 'fear of being judged' (undergraduate student).

Flipped approaches, or pedagogies that aim to subvert knowledge hierarchies within academia, challenge the traditional authority of the academic as the sole knowledge provider. This shift not only validates the experiences and insights of all students but also creates opportunities for socially just and relational praxes. Freire (1970) defines 'praxis' in education as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (cited in Bajaj 2022, p. 7). By embracing students' cultural knowledges in the contents of the curriculum and the ways we teach it, we can foster a learning environment that is not only more representative but actively challenges knowledge hierarchies in Western academia which have historically marginalised the voices and narratives of underrepresented communities (Bhambra et al. 2018). This approach could also enhance student–staff relationships as students feel more valued and recognised for their contributions, fostering a sense of trust and collaboration within academic settings.

However, participant responses also indicated that despite the recognition of the need for decolonising the curriculum, efforts have often been reduced to bureaucratic processes that lack genuine engagement.

> *A lot of the work done has meant that decolonising the curriculum has been of some importance at the university, but this has now gone from active workshops & participation to bureaucratising. For example, while I agree that all courses should be actively consider how to [decolonise] their curriculum, the validation/revalidation exercises are now more of a tick box exercise where the course team generate some wording about how EDI is important in their courses, so it's become more of a hoop to jump through for people and less as a really meaningful exercise.* (staff member)

> *Sometimes I feel there is more effort in our uni recording evidence of our performing decolonisation rather than investing more time in understanding the deeper and more complex machinations of how colonization is present in existing systems of education.* (staff member)

This shift has transformed what should be meaningful discourse and action into a "tick box exercise", undermining the potential for substantial change. Another way to approach this is through thinking about the type of work that remains to be done. As a participant shared,

> *Not enough work is being done at Westminster to decolonise the self. We seem to have taken on an arm's length approach because that might feel more comfortable for people and "raise" the number of people getting involved in this work. But until this essential reflexive work is undergone by everyone, we will continue to tap at the surface of decoloniality, where it is treated more as an adjective than a verb.* (staff member)

One of the staff participants above also argued for '. . . more visibility of projects (co-created by students) with decolonisation at the core' to shape future changes. From participant responses it is clear that to cultivate an academic environment that can support decolonial work, it is crucial to move beyond bureaucratic formalities and actively engage both students and staff in a shared journey toward decolonising, thereby enhancing student–staff relationships and fostering a more participatory learning culture.

4. Conclusions

Our findings reveal a landscape where systemic barriers, tokenistic initiatives, and a lack of meaningful structural reforms often hinder aspirations for decolonial futures. In our analysis the concept of relationality emerged as a pivotal framework for understanding and dismantling these barriers, suggesting that transformative change is about not only altering curricula but also about reshaping the relationships and power dynamics that define the academic environment. The insights from our survey underscore the need for a more committed, resource-intensive approach to decolonisation—one that addresses both the overt and subtle ways in which coloniality persists within the academy. This approach to decolonisation must be grounded in the social, political, and historical contexts of each institution. Our findings suggest that decolonial change should not only focus on institutional or individual agents but rather on relations and connections or lack thereof. The work should grow through student–staff partnership, co-creation, and shared accountability to mitigate the unequal power dynamics that exist within universities. Grounded in the data of our study, we understand three primary relations that need to be rebuilt: relationships to structures, relationships to knowledge, and relationships between students and staff in the decolonisation of the curriculum in higher education.

Embarking on this project, we understood decolonial work in the university as something which cannot be decontextualised or universalised, and which can create spaces which honour the different understandings and meanings we attribute to decolonising our institutions. Our findings emphasise this point and highlight the transformative potential of working side-by-side in pedagogic partnership not only for decolonising the curriculum but also for strengthening our relationships, fostering student–staff relationality (Memon and Jivraj 2020) and generating decolonial spaces in the university (Fraser and Usman 2021). We are also reminded that different educational communities require support, strategies, and conversations which are tailored to their different needs and speak to their own socio-political contexts (Stein et al. 2021). While we acknowledge that our deepened understandings of decoloniality and partnership have been shaped by a collaborative vision, due in part to a partnership-based collaboration spanning years, we also recognise that this spirit of collaboration is not yet reflected throughout the university, highlighting a

limitation of our study. Overall, recognising that how we do research matters as much as what we study, we wanted our research process to embody decolonial principles through challenging traditional hierarchies and power structures, and honing our mutual understanding of one another as individuals who bring our diverse positionalities and roles in the university to our team. This approach helped us to better understand the relationships and power dynamics we were examining, while also showing how academic research itself can model new ways of being and doing in higher education.

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