

The Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast

Zahra Butt

Transcribed by www.premiertyping.com, alison.mcpherson@premiertyping.com

Interviewer – Italics

Interviewee – Normal

[?/word] – denotes audio inaudible/unclear

Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kyra, and, for this episode, I'll be in conversation with Zahra Butt, President of the Westminster Students' Union. In this interview, we discuss Zahra's academic journey at Westminster, her involvement in the Union, leading up to her campaign, as well as unpacking the points of her manifesto. If you wish to get involved or find out more about the Student Union, feel free to visit the link in the description.

Hi Zahra, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast – it's so good to have you as a special guest. How are you doing?

I'm good! I mean, currently, yeah, [...], amazing, like the [film] is going really well.

So I thought we could begin with talking just a little bit about yourself. So, first things first, where are you from?

So, like I was born here in London, West London to be specific, in Hounslow, but my Mum is from India and my dad is from Pakistan, so basically Asian really.

Nice. And how would you describe your upbringing in terms of how race was kind of seen and felt in your household?

Yeah. I think it's always been a difficult topic. I mean, for me, like I live in quite an Asian area, if you want to call it, so, em, you know, there were certain like expectations and things that you are warned about before you leave the house, you know, like, you know, make sure like you dress okay, make sure you come across [?] – like I do a lot of [?], by accident, it's just something I picked up when I was growing up, so, em, yeah, it's just one of those things. And especially in an Asian household, like I've noticed as I've grown up and as I've moved away from like home a lot more, like that anti-blackness is so rife in Asian communities and it's something that like people don't like to talk about because it's uncomfortable and like – but it's good that it's uncomfortable because you have to like really unpack that, and it's like...there's so much anti-blackness, like homophobia, like sexism, in those communities, and it's like... And, for me, it's all a product of colonisation but...and all of the underpinning points of that, but it's still quite prevalent. And my sister, who is my half-sister, you know, she looks completely different to me. She's got, you know, curly hair, darker skin tone, like, you know, and was always put like next to her as like a "Oh, you're more acceptable to be outside [with people]." So, that's really harsh to put on two young kids, like growing up, like... I mean, she's older than me, but like generally, like it's just full of weird dynamics [to live with].

And did kind of your racial identity or your sense of belonging racially change for you like entering higher education specifically?

Oh, 100%. Like, I mean, there's lots of intersectional points there because like I come from a working-class background and, you know, education was the thing that people like – especially in Asian

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families, like I don't know...I mean, maybe I'm being stereotypical, but in terms of like my Asian family anyway, would push for like "Go to university!" go to this, di-di-di, but they never really prepped you for what you're going into [laughing], and neither did the schools I went to. So, when I came into higher education, I was like, first of all, all this terminology is all new to me, like I never grew up with understanding what any of these words meant. Over time, yeah, I've gotten used to it because I work in HE now so it's kind of different, but that was the first barrier, was like the language, and also the content – like I was expected to know so much about British culture and values in my course, where... Like you know these books from ages ago, like I don't really know, because I've come here with immigrant parents and I don't really understand that culture bit – like even though I've grown up here and I live here, like I'm still like a Londoner, so like there's still a difference in like what you really get in terms of culture. So, higher education was really difficult for me to like adapt to, in the beginning, but like the Students Union made that really...like easy for me actually [laughing].

Okay. And just to get like an idea of kind of your academic journey, just for some background, what did you study at Westminster?

Yeah. So, I did an undergraduate, a BA in Creative Writing & English Literature, which is something I didn't think I would be doing, but it was the first thing – I was like, oh, I'm good at [?], [let me just do that], and I liked writing, so it was that em... And I think you can tell now, like there's so many barriers in that subject in terms of like what kind of...what kind of books to read, what kind of things you look at and explore, but, em, yeah, that's how I got here.

And what would you say your favourite thing was about kind of studying your degree at Westminster?

Oh. My favourite thing... I think that...I really liked the fact that the people I met at university had such like...very...if you want to call it...radical views [laughing], which align with mine, in terms of like establishment and looking at - like decolonising, for example, is a big point, mental health... Like I met some people in different sort of elements within my course, and we could really...I felt like, together, we could challenge – like individually, it's different, but together, like if we pushed forward like, oh, this concept doesn't fit with something that we wanted to learn, like we had the adaptability to be like "Can we do something else?" and that's not really...that's not really common in a lot of courses, but, em, with my course at Westminster, that was something that was like actually alright to do.

What advice would you give to perspective students who are looking to study Creative Writing with English Literature?

I mean, the first thing I'd do is don't buy your books – it is a waste of money! I'm telling you now, save your money, save your coin, and just...you know, all of the stuff is online, if anything – I know that I'm going to get in so much trouble, oh my god [laughing]! No, but, so save your money, is the first thing. Also, like, with Creative Writing, just feel free to do what you feel comfortable writing about – like a lot of people get stuck into "I need to write like..." a certain person, or "I need to write like..." you know, some great poet, and it's like, no, you have your individual style and individual way of telling a story, and just really hone in on that. I found that out too late, if you want to call it, like I found that out in my third year, and by that point, I was just trying to pick up the pace and finish my essays. So, just take that advice, I guess – that's my first...my first gift to you!

Thank you for that. No, that's some really good advice. And can I just say, as we move onto the next segment, congratulations on becoming President of the Westminster Student Union – what an achievement!

Thank you!

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I hope you're settling well into your leadership role. But I thought that maybe we could begin with talking a little bit about the beginning of your Student Union journey. So, what societies or groups in the Union were you a part of during your undergrad, and like where did your kind of involvement in the Union actually start?

Mm, that's really interesting. It's going to sound [?] and it's not, I promise – like I just got really... I was really like engaged as a student anyway, like back in like 6th Form as well, like I wanted to do so much, and I guess that comes from me seeing like so much injustice, like I wanted to do something. So like I started actually working in the Labour Party when I was really young, and when I came into university, I was like, oh, like I've heard about like these societies, em... So, the first club I joined was taekwondo because that's something I'd been doing since I was about five years old. I'm doing an instructor course in taekwondo now. That's the first thing I did... was like sport, and then the second thing I did was, I guess – I bumped into Lubaba, imagine! So, she was the BAME Officer at the time, and I bumped into Lubaba and she went, "Do you want to come to [a black history month event]?" and I was like okay, and she took me to a black history [month event] and I was like this is amazing, like how do I get involved, how do I help?! And, yeah, and then, from then, I ran in the election for NUS, for NUS delegate, and when I got that, you know, I went to conference with one of the other sabbatical officers who works for [?], [?] Welfare, now.

And then... yeah, then I just got introduced to a lot of people, but I still knew that like I had like [issues that I wanted to work into], so I started a [Spoken Word] Society at Westminster. It's something that, you know, got involved with like a lot of projects, like our Democratic Education Network, and I got to do [loads of spoken words] and like talk about culture and race, actually – that was a big part of my poetry.

And then, after that, I moved – I was like, oh, you know, me, wanting to do like everything, I was like, oh you know what, let me just start a dodge-ball club. So, out of nowhere, I started a dodge-ball club, and I got really like excited about all these opportunities.

And then there was an opportunity to run for BAME Officer, em, and I was like... First of all, my best friend, Jordan, she was like, you know, she was, "I want to run for it!" and I was like, "Go for it!" and then she was like, "Actually, I don't want to run for it," like halfway through, like she was like, "Never mind, like I've got a lot of other stuff to do." So, I was like, you know what, I'll run in the by-election for it. So, I ran in the by-election, became BAME Officer in 2019 – sorry, this is a bit of a long story!

And then, after that, like we went into lockdown, but I still continued all of the work that I was doing, that [?] work. Like I got involved in like every different sector – like you've got sports, you've got societies, you've got representation, and then like you look at like academic representation. So, I really got involved in all spheres, which kind of makes sense to why I'm kind of here now because I get to do the same kind of things of like looking broader and like strategy-building. A lot of my work is around like looking ahead, like not just this year but five years ahead, and that's how I always thought – like if something's not sustainable, what's the point in doing it? But yeah, that was my journey really!

So what kind of made you think like, you know what, President is where I need to be, like President is what I need to run for next, that has to be my next thing – what made you kind of like think that?

Do you know what's funny, that wasn't my next thought. My next thought was, actually, let me run for VP Welfare, and the reason I wanted to run for VP Welfare was because like, em, originally, I was like, oh, you know, I used to work in the NHS a lot, in CAMHS, like in the [...], and I was like, oh, em, like it

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kind of aligns with the work I'd been doing and the challenges that I'd faced in my own life, so I was like, oh, I'll do that! And then, I really thought about it because I had schoolwork and all the other avenues, and I was like I feel like I want to do more like development work – like, as much as I want to run campaigns, like I also want to make something, like a policy, or I want to do like a review of something and change the way that we look at education, like especially [...] other sectors, like I really wanted to change the direction that we were going in, and I think that's why I was like, you know what, President is the place for me to be able to do that because, not only do I sit on a lot of committees, but also, you know, I can spend a lot of my time building up the policies that actually help our students in the long run, and that's what I really care about. So, that's the first step that I took.

Amazing! And could you just talk us through some of the points in your manifesto?

Yeah, of course. So, the first one that I'm always excited about is around [critical/principle and civic] engagement. What I really mean by that is, you know, I want to partner with more Students' Unions because we're not – typically, Westminster as a union is not a political union. We tend to step out of a lot of London activism, especially like SOAS and LSE and UCL. All of those ones are so active. I wanted to change that narrative - and it's a difficult narrative to change really if you haven't done anything like that before. So, that's the first I wanted to do, was actually collaborate with Students' Unions and organisations outside of here.

And the second thing I wanted to do was actually push our student groups, the ones that are...you know, the ones that want to create change, push them, like fund them a bit more so they can actually do that, because, if anything, if I do an event or whatever, [...] whatever, it's not going to actually influence or help anyone, but if I get the student voice to do that, because that's their student experience, that's so much more valuable for them and also the community in general. So, I wanted to elevate those people to be able to do what they want to do. So, that was like my first point.

I'm working on something called an engagement strategy and a democracy review, so what I'm doing is...we know that, sector-wide, [...] trying to get engagement from our students, and I think one of the main barriers to that is that we don't listen to our students. I think that we think we listen, based on previous feedback, but we never continually get feedback on different areas of like...of the Students' Union. We kind of take it all as a holistic, oh, like NSS, em, and all of those like big surveys. So, you know, that's one thing. So, we did a couple of [voice weeks] for this manifesto [point], one on wellbeing, one on academic, and like [then a continued themes] one so we can really tailor that information we're getting, em, and, you know, we've got some insight data as well [in] that, so we can find out where the biggest gaps are, and, actually, [students with disabilities] is the biggest gap, and our BAME students, much as I hate saying that – I hate the term "BAME". But, you know, that's one of the things also that I will be challenging in terms of how we look at stuff like that.

So, yeah, that's that engagement strategy, and then we've got the democracy review that I'm doing that really backs that up. It's basically looking at every single position in the Union and saying, "Does this work or not?" And that's really scary because that could even mean that my position won't exist next year, or the year after, but I think it's really important so that we get proper representation.

So, that's the two main manifesto points I've been working on. There's a third one that is around wellbeing. So, we're working on a joint wellbeing framework with the uni and the Union, and that basically sets out [a couple of] commitments that say, "[Listen], do we care about student wellbeing?" Yes or no, you know? And then it follows that with a strategy and loads of different things. And, as part of that, my role in that is doing the proactive and preventative campaign work with [Samira], who's our Welfare Officer. So, she'll be doing all the campaign stuff, I'll be doing like the policy and [big] stuff around that to [prevent all things learned], especially because Covid is like...here and is new and is changing, constantly, so that's something to look at.

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And I guess the other big...like really big piece of work that underpins all of this is supporting our [sports club societies] and really honing in on that, and being able to like help them with anything that they need, especially with [our VP] activities, but, yeah – sorry, that was quite long [laughing]!

No, not at all! Thank you so much for taking us through those in-depth, yeah, thank you for that. Just revisiting your point on kind of like political activism, because I know that's something that you really advocate for, what do you feel like is the most important thing for students to feel empowered to partake or participate in political activism?

Mm...for me, it is about making sure you create a community that actually cares about one sole issue. I think...I think the problem is, right, we have so many different issues in the world, you know, em [laughing], and...as [bad] as it sounds, you know, there are not enough people to solve all of those issues all at once, right? So, it's about – if a student group, for example, is interested in looking at, for example, Palestine, and activism around state violence, [like] 100% support that, and that work, you know, you have to give those resources to that place to push forward for student feedback and push forward for student direction. So, I think that's my initial thoughts on it, but it is something that I think about a lot actually in terms of what...what can we do, and what actually...what difference can we make, and I think that the only thing – like I see it in the Labour Party as well, and I know this is quite...this is quite external of Westminster, but you see it in real-life politics, you know, people haven't got [themselves in groups] and they can't agree on something – they can't agree on one tiny element of something, and then a whole direction doesn't go forward and you lose that momentum. I feel like politics is a momentous activity. For political activism to work, for me, (a) you have to have everyone on the same page and sharing out that resource so no one is burnt out in that process – so, for example, if someone is in charge of going posters, [if you're] going to do that, someone's in charge of writing up a policy, like you have delegation like accurately given out, and equally given out, and you have to understand that a lot of the things people are fighting for is something that they've lived with, that lived experience is so, so important to understand. So, you know, you have to care about people's wellbeing as well as pushing forward for what...what you want, and I think that getting that right balance is always tricky. I was actually taught this a long time ago. So, my grandfather was one of the first unionists in like India, like a very long time ago, for em...so it's like I feel like that...people look at me and they're like, "Oh yeah, that's where you get your activism from," and I was like, oh [laughing], you know, but like... a lot of the things that were said, em, from him and his colleagues and things like that, was like...if you can't give everyone a reason to fight for something, then there's no point in fighting for it. Like, for example, in a room, like if four people are unsure, and six people are like, "Yeah, let's go forward!" those four people will drag you down, do you know what I mean, like those four people will stop you from doing what you need to do. So, you need to make sure that they convinced that this is what they want to fight for. If they don't, they can [?] it, like...do you know what I mean? I think you have to make people care about the things that are happening. Sorry, that was a very long-winded answer!

No, I completely agree, and I think, in my...the work that I do as well, I've found that it's not even...it's not so much kind of the things that we have in common that kind of...that we should be able to build a community from, but it's also kind of having...understanding our differences and just having like a mutual respect for them, and I think, you know, we're not going to agree on everything, like to be realistic, but the things that we do agree on is what is going to bring us closer and bring us towards kind of like the important change that needs to happen. So, I completely agree with you.

Yeah. And I think...I think, when it comes to empowering students, like, you know, the best thing that you can do to empower students is actually sit and understand what their needs are – like what do you want from this and what do you need from this, and is there any way in which we can navigate the conversation? And you're so right, you're not going to agree on everything – like no one is going to agree on everything, but if you can generally agree in one direction, it's so helpful. But yeah...

Yeah, absolutely. And I think, for some students, especially maybe in their first and second year, like they're still kind of getting like a feel for kind of the University and higher education and kind of like

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thinking about their future, so sometimes they just even need that guidance as well, like to understand like these are some of the things that are in...like within your interests. So, I think it's also about like helping students and educating them as well, because I'm looking back and thinking about like me in first year, and just thinking like, yeah, I would have definitely benefited from like being more involved in the Student Union and having like kind of role-models to kind of help me understand like the things that I should demand from the University, and the things that I should want.

Yeah, and I feel like, with that as well, like...and I also reflected a lot on this stuff, right, and I'd say like being able to be political is a privilege. Being able to stand up for whatever you believe in is a privilege that a lot of people don't have, and that's something I always bear in mind when I talk about political activism because I'm saying that like, you know, [...]. What if someone has a space that is so uncomfortable that they can't speak what their opinion is on that? And higher education tends to do that sometimes, you know – I'm not saying always, but I am saying that, for example, if someone in their course is saying that, you know, their teacher doesn't get it, you know, like the lecturer doesn't understand where their point is coming from, and it's something to do with race or it's something to do with gender, like where do you go from there because that's their own point of call in terms of like challenging that, you know? So, that's why I always think like, I mean, as a Students' Union, we need to be better at, you know, accepting that there are structures that we even have in our own Students' Union that might stop students from coming to us, and like we need to adapt to our student body, and it changes every year. Like, I mean, generally speaking, yeah, students get nervous when they come to like university, and like students struggle to make friends, things like that – we know that data. But what we don't know is what's coming up next because the next cohort of students might have a completely different outlook on what they want to do with their activism, and you have to adapt to that, because we can't be stuck in old ways, you know what I mean? You have to always constantly adapt. So, yeah, that's my take!

Thank you. And I think that kind of goes nicely into this last kind of area of our chat, but one of the key...another key element of your presidential campaign was focused on decolonising the curriculum, I'm aware, and, you know, you're probably already aware that, you know, the project is kind of situated within that kind of work as well, on top of anti-racism, but it would be great to hear from you, who's kind of...takes a different kind of approach but is still on a very kind of similar journey. What makes decolonising the curriculum particularly important to you?

Yeah. So, this year, I'll just give some context as well, so this year, we decided that decolonising the curriculum shouldn't be one person in the Students' Union like priority, so we've made it a team goal, which is...which is a [different change], but like it's because it's so underpinning for loads of different aspects. So, yeah, for me, decolonising actually looks at different ways and different like histories of understanding education, and I think that's so important because, a lot of the time, you get a very biased look at history, you get a very biased look at education, in general, in any aspect, and I think, to be able to unpack that (a) gives you reality, gives you different things to challenge and understand, is inclusive – first of all, if you actually care about inclusivity or diversity or equality in any sort of matter, you must decolonise at the same time because decolonising really re-frames and moves the lens to something that's, you know, going on now, and like, you know, what's happened for years and years and years is history has been covered over because it doesn't...because it's uncomfortable. And I always say this: if it's uncomfortable, you should be looking into it and you should be addressing it, like you shouldn't be hiding from that, and decolonising does that, [where we] unpack all the things that we need to really examine and look at. But I understand like sometimes that's such a...its such a broad thing, and it's been going on for years – people say, "We want to decolonise this, we want to decolonise this..." but with no actual like understanding of what that looks like, and I think that, you know, for academics especially, like the word "decolonising" is scary because it's like, "Oh my god, I've got to change my whole practice, I've got to change the way that I've been learning," and people just don't want to do that really. You know, when you're in that position, a lot of people don't. And even for students, you've grown up and you've said like, oh, this is the way things are supposed to be, and it's like – and then you go on TikTok or something and all of that is expanded and you're like oh my god, you're sitting there for hours, like really [?] what's been happening, and I think... But that's the beauty of decolonising, is that you sit there and you realise, oh my god, my feelings are so valid about that...like when I felt uncomfortable about this in my education system, and it was so inaccurate, you know, especially [if you're talking about] your background. You know, if, for example, if

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you're a black trans woman, history doesn't really tell you exactly what's happened. If you're a black person in general, you know, history is so inaccurate in, you know, how black people tend to...you know, [...], like there are so many other things in that. Especially when I talk to like my Asian heritage and I think about like that side of my own identity, and I think about, oh, they talked about how the British Empire was amazing and it brought like railways to India – to take stuff out! Like they forgot that bit in the textbooks, you know, and that's the reason why decolonising really put that perspective, em, in education, and I think that's why it's important to me.

And what kind of specific forms of like coloniality can you think of, and that you've noticed during your time in higher education? So, that could be in your undergrad or like in your position as President, like, yeah, what are your thoughts?

I think there's like two elements to it that I've seen. In my course, I remember like...you know, some of the lecturers I had were really, really good at acknowledging privilege and taking a step back on certain topics and saying, "Listen, I am so uninformed about this – and I'm saying that now and I'm doing my own learning," and that was so great to hear, but I think, on the flip-side, there are other academics who are saying to me like, "Oh..." – I was writing about [Harlem], right, in one of my assignments, and obviously like talking about black liberation and things like that, and that's quite difficult for a lot of white scholars to read and look at because it challenges your [start/stance] as white person. And I think that's one of the barriers that I found in my course, is that there were a couple of topics, em, not so much in Creative Writing, more so towards English Literature, because of the tradition of English Literature, and because...because you learn everything from Shakespeare to, you know, Jane Eyre, and I'm naming two white people [laughing], so, you know, when you really think about it and you go back and you're like I'm learning the tradition...like you were learning English Literature from the perspective on Britain, when, actually, a lot of the stuff isn't actually British in the first place, and some of these ideas and thoughts have [gone/come] back, like way before. Like if you go back to storytelling, you know, a lot of that stuff has changed over the years, and, you know, in a sense, been colonised in my education [laughing]. So, that's why...that's like an example of something that like I would say showed that to me.

In terms of like services, student services, and looking at like...just in general, the way we look at mental health, I think that was a big thing. I think, when I was at therapy and I was talking about like, you know, I'm really struggling with something, and I couldn't...I couldn't express to them how or why, and it was like because my culture has allowed this to happen for years and years and years, you know? And they just couldn't get it. Like to a certain degree, you can be like "I'm so sorry", but [...], you know, you can't unpack it any further because you don't have the lived experience, and also you can't really relate it to culture. And I think those are the two...two main points that really like stuck out to me.

I mean, in my time as President, that makes...that comes...becomes clearer and clearer. I think, as my time as a student, I was a bit naïve and I thought, oh, you know, it's okay, and I let a lot of things go as a student...I think because you're scared as well. As a student, you're scared. You're like, well, these are people that are like authoritarian and like, you know, they determine what my degree looks like, and I think that's quite uncomfortable as well.

And just...you're kind of talking about like the barrier between, I guess, students and lecturers, and then students and kind of like the people who give the services at universities. Do you feel like we can mediate those barriers through education, or do we actually need more kind of people of colour in those positions – like is it a matter of kind of education or is it a matter of like diversifying?

I think it's a balance of both. I think the problem that we always find is that we've put people of colour in these positions and say, "You need to take the brunt of all of this work," with no extra pay, no extra support, and like...and to be frank, like if we're talking about EDI work and we're talking about decolonising, you know, you put a bunch of brown people together and you go, "Hey, you know, can

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you do this work because you have a lived experience?" but with no kind of support around the fact that this lived experience – just because you've been through it doesn't mean you want to spend your entire life like unpacking that constantly, and I think that like there is a balance between that. I think that, if we're going to put people of colour in those positions, we need to be able to allow them to progress through the ranks as well. If we're looking at the hierarchy that is the education system, you know, we need to let those people go to senior level. We can't keep them at, you know, like a coordinator level, and we can't just keep them there, just like, "Oh, you'll do all the grunt-work," do you know what I mean? And I think...and that's why I say it's a balance of both because all that management, it is typically white, and I think those people need to start challenging the way that they think about, first of all, their own skin colour and where they stand, and the fact that, you know, what they're doing is they're talking about inclusivity, you know – are you really?! You know, like really unpack it and, you know, "think before you speak" kind of stuff. And all that training and guidance is great, but, yeah, as I said, balance of both.

Yeah. No, thank you. And I think, just coming off what you've said there as well, I think there's definitely like that tension between EDI work and then like other kind of forms of social justice work, like decolonial anti-racist work, and how...they're very like two separate kind of things – like as much as they cross over, like we can't diversify and call it decolonisation, because it's a matter of...it's not just diversifying, it's very much like thinking from the ground up and rethinking and unlearning, and I think, yeah, there's definitely that tension. And I think a lot of people in managerial positions, I think they...it's hard to communicate kind of that tension, and I think...I think even... It's hard to even really articulate I think, but, yeah, it's definitely that something needs to be addressed.

Yeah. And there's stuff around that, like, for example, like people need to accept privilege, first of all, own up to it, and then to understand what it is like to be in an underprivileged position, and on top of that [laughing] – and then you've got things like, for example, you've got...you've got...and you said something so...like that just struck with me, and I'm going to bring it up next time I go into a meeting now because it's really, really important. EDI work should never be separate from decolonising work because they're both intersectional, and I think people think of EDI as one of those tick-box exercises to kind of get through to like fill in in big institutions – and oh my god, I have first-hand experience of that. You know, I used to work in Diversity & Inclusion in like [?] for a little bit, and, you know, a lot of the stuff that I found, like, yeah, great concepts, but like there's no...there's no support, there's no fruition of those...those ideas, and, you know, you want to listen to people but you're not. You want to listen to people and say you've got a place for that to happen, but is it reflected through your hierarchy, is it reflected to your student body? Because if I went around and asked the students, "Do you know what EDI is?" they'd be like, "Mm, not really..." and isn't that supposed to be your living like...and dying like [best] of concept, like are you not supposed to be inclusive, are you not supposed to be, you know, in any way having that equality and diversity...? But that's just my opinion [laughing]!

I guess that kind of leads nicely into my next question: do you kind of find it challenging to have conversations about like race and coloniality and kind of the tensions between like EDI and decolonisation with like the students – well, I guess it's a two-part question, so with your colleagues, so like other people in positions in the Student Union, and like other students as well?

Yeah. I think, em, I think, because I sit on a lot of university committees, I think the narrative is changing slowly, and I say that as a positive actually because – I'm not sure I've talked about, you know, privilege and coloniality, like there are people in the institution that have been actively working really, really hard to challenge that, at that high level actually, and wanting to be invited to board meetings, so that's one thing I've seen.

Within my own team, like we all have the same kind of voice [?] about it – you know, we all care so much, and also want to do the best for our students. So, in terms of the Students' Union, I think that like, you know [sighing]...it takes a lot of unlearning. We do a lot of allyship training as well, which is like embedded in our practice. We have a lot of new initiatives in terms of like an EDI partner that we

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have, [Helen ?] – she’s amazing, and she really challenges us on stuff. You know, she’s like, “Mm, is this really what we want to be doing?” And I think that retrospective like aspect [of] the Students’ Union really helps that direction.

With students, I feel like that’s the difficulty. I feel that, for me, em, first of all, there’s about 20,000 students – that’s the biggest challenge. You’ve got a large amount of students, and some students have come in, want to get on with their degree and leave, right? There’s no kind of...there’s no kind of “I want to change the world” or “I want to change the way that education looks like for me”, and I think...and I don’t think that’s up to the student really. I think that the University and the Students’ Union need to do better at really explaining that to students and saying, “You know what, the stuff we’re talking about affects your education, it affects your graduate outcomes – forget that even, it affects your life!” Because I think that’s the gap. I think people think of it as like, “Oh, that sounds really intense...” And like, again, the language I’m using, you know, even the language I’m using right now about it, it’s intense, and it’s something that not everyone grew up learning, and I’ve had to learn it, and I wish people didn’t have to learn terminology to be able to stand up for something that they care about and think about. So, I think...I think, yeah, like really addressing that there are barriers in the way that we communicate with students, and that’s something that I’m looking into like because I – as you can tell, it’s something that like I care about a lot because I’ve had to change the way I am as a person to be able to fit into higher education, and that should never be the case. And I don’t know if that’s a widespread problem – you know, I can’t give you that information if that’s a widespread problem, but I’m assuming [laughing], I’m assuming that a lot of people have to change their tone, have to change the way that they talk about certain things, and it’s like...should we really be doing that, or should we support students to understand what’s going on? Like across the board, like not just because of decolonising, but in anything, in anything we do, you know...? Health Service, is that all clear, does that make sense to people? Like, really and truly, half of these things are all anagrams of something else so like it’s really hard to understand, so I think that’s the first step and something that we struggle with really.

Thank you for that. What are some of the things that lecturers can do to kind of like decolonise their pedagogy and practice? I mean, there’s probably so many things, and I’m sure you have like a long list, but what do you feel like is one of the most important things that lecturers need to do?

Em...I’m going to say this again: they have to accept that coloniality has shaped their education and knowledge. I think that, once you know that about yourself, then you are fit to teach something, I think, and that’s the bit that’s the hardest. To say, “Yeah, actually, yeah, I’m a white woman, or I’m a white man, and, yeah, fair enough...” – that’s not accepting, I’m sorry, that’s not. To accept it means to really look at everything that you learnt for your entire time at Westminster, prior to that, wherever you studied, and say, “Actually, I see the gap now.” That...that is acknowledging. That is acknowledging and accepting. And then, from that point on, I guess also creating a comfortable environment for students to actually challenge you. I think a lot of people, em, a lot of academics go in with the hat of “I know all of the things because I’ve studied all of them”, and they might be right, you know what I mean, in some topics, yeah, you probably know a lot more than me, you know, but you can’t tell me about my own lived experience – the same that I can’t tell another person about their own lived experience, and that’s something that they need to be able to be comfortable with in education. It’s supposed to be a collective and collaborative learning environment, and if a student can’t feel comfortable to be able to be like, “You know what, I disagree with you,” like no...what’s the point? We’re also meant to be learning together. So, I think that’s...the way that we look at learning styles needs to change too. So, learning styles, acceptance of your privilege and your knowledge and where that comes from, and I think creating a comfortable environment for students to be able to challenge you like in your own educational environment, because not only are you all learning together, but you’re also progressing and thinking about, actually, “Am I right...am I wrong?” you know, and like... and you might not be right or wrong, you know, there’s different – as you said, earlier, you said there’s different sides to different things, and there’s different perspectives, and you might not all agree, but to put that in a pot and say, “Actually, yeah, that is a perspective to add to this”, that’s really important.

I know that was...that’s a very summed-up three-tier approach of looking at it, but I think that...I think that...that can be added to any topic because I think, a lot of the time, decolonising is focused on like,

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you know, LAS, in terms of like all of the Humanities and Social Sciences, but actually, take it to Maths, take it to Biomed, because the same principles work there – if you don't feel comfortable with someone challenging you... Like there's a whole thing around like medicine, oh my god, the inaccuracies in medicine around black people and what skin conditions look like... I saw an amazing film on Twitter about it, you know, looking at, you know, these are different conditions but on black skin, so here's something – and that's something that's not talked about, you know, and higher mortality rates. How can that happen in...? That's all down to education. You look at [...] and you're like, oh, people are dying because of like medical malpractice or something like they've been mis-prescribed something, and you're like, actually, that goes back to the educational establishment not addressing the fact that there are different types of people in the world, right, and that you have to look out for different types of symptoms because they show up differently on people. But yeah, that's...that's that [laughing]! I was about to go on a whole different rant!

No, honestly, thank you so much for those points, honestly. And I think what you're kind of alluding to there as well is kind of like the importance of having like student-staff partnership, which we really advocate for here on our projects. So, my next question is just kind of: in what ways do you feel like students...in what ways can students help their lecturers to kind of like decolonise or...like do you feel like students should be helping their lecturers?

Personally, I don't think it's the responsibility of a student who's come in there to learn [laughing] to... to keep challenging that. However, I do think that, if you want to say something and you feel comfortable to say something, please do. You know, there are so many societies and clubs as well that have actually started tackling this issue and started to like unpack it a little bit – like we have an amazing society, [the Sisterhood] Society, and that's literally, it's just come out now, in partnership with ACS, and a lot of the work that they do as well is like having those debates, even just within yourselves, like have those debates and challenge like the narrative that you lot are putting out, like in terms of students - like what do you want really from us? And I think the Students' Union is a really good bet to come and really say that. And, as you've just said, that student-like-academic partnership like also works really well, if you feel comfortable, and that's the most important thing for me. But, yeah, I don't necessarily believe that students should be the people always outreaching to us. You know, we're the service, and we're supposed to be providing to students, you know, if we're looking at it like that. They're coming here, paying £9,000 – like, you know, they're not trying to do extra work for that £9,000. So, I would rather create the environment for someone to be able to come and be like, yeah, this is okay for me to do, so yeah.

Amazing – thank you, Zarah. Unfortunately, we're coming to the end of this interview. As a question I like to end on: what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop in higher education in the next 10 years?

I think, in the next 10 years, I'd like to see different learning styles being taken into consideration and different types of assessment being used because not – you know, I don't want that “all size fits one” approach.

I think the next thing I'd love to see is I'd love to see a decolonised education system [laughing], you know, if that wasn't clear enough from before.

I think I'd also love to see academics play an active role in shaping student experience. You know, the Students' Union does a lot to say, you know – and the other manifesto point I forgot to mention actually is that I want...I'm building that relationship with academics to be able to make them champions of the Union and champions of helping us like pushing forward. So, that's what I would wish for, is that that's an automatic response, you know, an automatic thing of “Yeah, we care about student experience”, rather than money, rather than any of the other factors that come into education.

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And, honestly, I would love to see education be free. I know that's such a [big] perspective – that might not happen in 10 years. You know, we don't know what the [climate] looks like. But I would love for everyone to have equal and open access to education. But yeah, I think that's...that's my vision [laughing] – maybe [?], maybe too optimistic, but you know...!

No, not at all! Thank you so, so much, Zarah, what a nice way to just bring the interview to a close. I just want to thank you again for joining me on this episode. It's been nice getting to know a little bit more about yourself and also having the opportunity to discuss your role in the Student Union as well as your ideas on decolonising the curriculum, so, yeah, thank you so much again.

Thank you for having me – anytime!

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[End of Recording]