



STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS

A Learning & Teaching Research Collaboration

Does Douyin Work? Exploring social media as a pathway to work for Chinese students

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Executive Summary

This project sought to address ***an institutional knowledge and awareness gap around employability for Chinese students*** at University of Westminster. Employability is now a key point of differentiation for these applicants, given a particularly difficult job market at home. Yet while Chinese students often report valuing career services, they face a number of barriers to UK work experience, including unfamiliar educational and media systems, different socio-cultural norms and recruitment systems, language constraints, visa conditions restricting working hours and entrepreneurship.

This project explored ways of using Chinese social media platforms (Xiaohongshu/RedNote; Douyin) to support Chinese students' understanding of UK employability. It centred both ***the reception and production of social media content*** in building meaningful work skills and experiences. We used survey, interview and participatory methods to develop institutional understanding of how Chinese students – particularly those in media and creative disciplines – seek early-career work opportunities while navigating the transition from China to London. We also developed a student-led Chinese language social media channel as a culturally-specific form of employability support and experiential learning.

Our findings visibilise a story that should be self-evident but can be overlooked: "Chinese students" are not a single, homogeneous category.

We differentiate between two primary groups:

1. Students who approach their degree in largely instrumental terms tailor their experiences for a home market that is markedly different from that of the UK, often feeling underserved by the institution.
2. Students who wish to stay in the UK (or another Western context), or who are open to exploration, are much more favourable – but still often feel lost until it is too late.

There is also considerable overlap, movement, and emerging opportunities bridging these broad groups. Social media can provide a useful strategic tool, if not a silver bullet: all students benefit from clear communication and navigation aids. What appears to be most useful are highly-structured guides to "how it works", alongside records of "lived experience" – documenting frustration and lack of understanding alongside realisations and successes.

University career support professionals can consider ways to explain and communicate available support in a native language and medium, reaching students before they think to seek help.

Course leaders and academics should consider how China-focused content creation projects can be embedded as credited coursework.

Students should be encouraged to recognise early on that UK and Chinese systems run on genuinely different logics (recruitment calendars, the role of internships, what "career support" even means)

Background and Aims

This project sought to address an institutional knowledge and awareness gap around employability for Chinese students at University of Westminster. Chinese nationals constitute 25% of the UK's international students (the largest ethnic group) (Ebel 2024, 9) and, according to internal analytics, roughly 12% of all international students at the University of Westminster (the second largest ethnic group). Employability is now a key point of differentiation for these applicants, given a particularly difficult job market at home.

Yet while Chinese students often report valuing career services, they face a number of barriers to UK work experience: unfamiliar educational and media systems, different socio-cultural norms and recruitment systems, language constraints, visa conditions restricting working hours and entrepreneurship, etc (Nurmamat 2025; Zhao and Cox 2022). While careers and enterprise teams actively develop support programmes for this cohort, institutional resourcing is driven by sector metrics – e.g. Graduate Outcomes survey – that prioritise home students and undergraduates (Modhvadiya 2025).

The Higher Education Policy Institute recently highlighted specific barriers this group faces, related to language, social clustering, employability and, significantly, digital adaptation (Ebel 2024). Nonetheless, social media remains the standard tool for Chinese students to integrate into UK HE, becoming “digital transnationals” (Sun and Xu 2023; Zhao and Fang 2022). Students use social media to help bridge divides between Chinese and UK academic and social environments, maintain contact with “home” and support well-being (Guo 2024), and to address the “hidden curriculum” of learning, integration and professional network development (Machado et al. 2024, 5; cf. Wei 2024), at transnational scale.

This project therefore explored ways of using Chinese social media platforms (Xiaohongshu/RedNote; Douyin) to support Chinese students' understanding of UK employability. It aimed to develop institutional understanding of how Chinese students – particularly those in media and creative disciplines – seek early-career work opportunities while navigating the transition from China to London. In doing so, we sought to develop a student led Chinese language social media channel as a culturally-specific form of employability support and experiential learning.

This built on a previous SCC project (Feb-July 2025) in which a different student group developed and maintained a new account on the platform xiaohongshu (a loose equivalent to Instagram). The purpose of this earlier project was to find ways to support transnational student community-building at course-level – bridging the transition from China to the UK.

The prior project was successful and continues. However our work also identified a dearth of attention to questions of employment, post-graduation life and alumni networks. This project seeks to address these issues directly – while extending to the wider population of Chinese students at Westminster, and potentially beyond, by developing a presence on Douyin (direct equivalent to TikTok).

Methods

Core RQ: How can social media help generate meaningful work experience opportunities for Chinese international students?

Sub-Q1: What kind of career-oriented content is most useful to Chinese students studying in the UK?

Here we canvassed two groups:

Group 1: students on MA Global Media Business (a 1+1 PGT course with students currently both in China and in the UK); Chinese students based in Harrow campus (Schools of Media and Arts); alumni.

For this group, we produced a short survey (N=46) and follow-up semi-structured interviews with a small number of respondents (N=8). Student researchers designed, translated and administered both the survey and interview questions, in dialogue with the academic partner. Questions explored: prior expectations and understanding; awareness of university support and other information sources; subsequent experiences of looking for work in the UK. A particular emphasis was placed on before/after comparisons and moments of perspectival change during study.



Our survey sample consists of:

- 31 current students
 - o 4x undergraduate
 - o 25x MA
 - o 2x PhD
- 9 applicants to the MA Global Media Business (currently in China)
- 6 alumni

23 respondents identified their school as Media and Communications. The remaining 23 were from the School of Arts or unsure. At the time of completion, 28 students identified themselves as based in the UK and 17 in Mainland China.

Of the alumni:

- 3 respondents reported now working in a large organisation (over 100 employees):
 - o 2x Marketing
 - o 1 Legal
- 1 respondent was working in a small organisation (under 100 employees)
 - o Director of Department
- 1 was teaching in a university
- 1 was studying in further education

Finally, of all our respondents, over 70% reported arriving at university with no work experience behind them. Thirteen students came with some experience (1x undergraduate, 10x MA, 2x PhD), of which five came with less than one year of experience, four between one and three years, and four came with more than three years.

NB. Our decision to focus on arts, media and creative industries students was deliberate, since the landscape and available support here is particularly uncertain and complex. However, within this sample the population is small and self-selecting. Our findings and recommendations are indicative and should not be generalised to students in other schools – particularly those with distinct career logics, such as engineering, finance or law.

Group 2: Industry professionals; Westminster support professionals.

This group were addressed through informal conversations and workshops, including with social media industry specialists, exploring their experiences of supporting and working with international students, at Westminster and elsewhere, to develop a strong understanding of key skills, barriers and resources.

Sub-Q2: How can a university social media management project itself build meaningful work skills and experiences?

We reflexively developed creative content, seeking to address some of the needs identified in the first question. This built from the previous SCC project, while extending from RedNote to include Douyin – a social app with a slightly different reach and dynamic – to seek cross-platform comparison.

We monitored internal account metrics. However, here the SCC student team are themselves the primary “research subjects”. We followed the earlier project’s model of participatory action research: regular minuted team meetings, discussing progress; reflective end-of-project write-ups. The research focus here centred on creative decision-making and co-working.

Results

Our first question considered the extent to which Chinese students consider their career planning and what kinds of information might be helpful for them when doing so.

To answer this question, we sought to learn more about different students' experiences of employment search, how they sought support, and what challenges they faced, in order to consider what topics might be most appropriate and helpful for them.

(i) **Headline survey findings**

Current and incoming students were geographically split in their post-graduation aspirations.

Future aspirations (current/incoming students, N=40; select one):

By far the dominant intention is "Returning to China to seek work" (23/40)

Nonetheless, a significant number (13) expressed a desire not to do this, instead anticipating:

- "remaining in the UK" (4)
- "working in another international context" (5)
- "travelling/exploring options" (4).

A minority expressed interest in "further study" (4).

Students tended to expect the university to provide direct work experience and personal career planning advice, rather than skills training or access to events.

Expectations of Westminster's career support (N=46; select all that apply):

When asked what support mechanisms they anticipated the university to provide on arrival, respondents prioritised:

- a formal internship (17)
- unpaid/paid work experience (15)
- career planning advice (12)
- support developing a career specifically in China (12)

11 respondents selected "meeting a mentor" – however it is worth noting that *dǎoshī* (导师) may imply an academic supervisor rather than industry/professional mentor.

"Support developing a career in the UK" trailed well behind (6), as did development of "softer" skills through "networking support" (2), and relational opportunities like "industry social events" (2) or "recruitment fairs" (1).

Perceived barriers to success are those familiar to all students; fewer raised the specific issues caused by international study.

Barriers to employment preparation (N=46; select all that apply):

All respondents were asked about the challenges they faced in jobseeking, particularly highlighting:

- a lack of information about relevant job opportunities (23)
- uncertainty about future career direction (21)
- language or communication difficulties (16)
- lack of confidence in professional ability or competitiveness (14)

Less prominent, but worth mentioning:

- visa/work eligibility restrictions (9)
- limited understanding of UK recruitment processes (8)
- uncertainty about which country/region to work in (8)

Other responses included "lack of relevant work experience" (7), and "family/personal factors" (3).

A majority of students were aware of careers services but used them infrequently.

Use of university career services (N=37; select one):

Those who were currently studying or had completed studies were asked about their experiences of institutional career support. Most:

- were aware of the services but have not used them (15)
- had used them once or twice and found them helpful (14)

A small number (5) had “used them several times and found them very helpful”, while very few (3) were “not aware of these services”.

Nearly all students seek or prepare for work during their studies, using a range of methods – but digital networking is not popular.

Employment preparation activities already undertaken (N=46, select all that apply):

All students were asked how they typically prepared for employment, with the most commonly selected responses being:

- applying for internships/jobs (26)
- completing internships or practical activities (22)
- attending career events (18)
- seeking advice from tutors (15)
- using university careers services (14)
- building networks through friends/family/alumni (13).

A small minority reported “using LinkedIn or other professional networking platforms” (4). Only 3 said they had made no preparation at all.

Students’ university experiences have generally changed their expectations of what the institution provides, rather than their career aspirations – but they may still help students to navigate uncertainty and formulate plans.

Impact of studying on career plans (N=37; select one):

All students who had studied at the university were asked whether their experience of UK study had impacted their career plans.

Most students reported “no significant change” (23).

Of those who did report a change in their plans, very few felt those plans had been clear when they had arrived (2), suggesting that most had been able to formulate or solidify an emergent set of ideas.

However, there was a major indication that their studies had diminished their expectation of the university as a helpful resource – recalibrating away from an expectation that the university would provide a placement of some kind (17) and deciding that the advice on offer was not helpful, particularly with careers in China (12).

(ii) Follow-up interviews

Survey respondents who indicated willingness to interview were contacted and eight interviewees are included here: three applicants; and five MA students approaching graduation. They support but provide considerable nuance to the above headlines from the survey.

Three interviews were carried out with incoming students to the university – all students currently based in China, who had successfully completed the first year of the MA Global Media Business.

There is remarkable consistency across their accounts:

- All three self-identified as *hǎiguī* (海归), studying overseas with the explicit instrumental intention to become more competitive in their local region. The UK was not considered attractive to settle in for a range of reasons, including visa restrictions, living costs, perceptions of a more stable job market in China, family wishes, and concerns about food.
- All have completed internships in China, which they found valuable, but lamented the Chinese university's lack of diverse provision and reliance on "traditional" jobs and sectors. They indicated an aspiration to complete an internship in the UK during their degree, in areas like film and television.
- None expect the university to provide internships in a simple way; all indicated awareness that the UK system works differently to that in China – citing an expectation of student "initiative". Nonetheless, they do expect to be made aware of sector-appropriate work experience opportunities and to receive tailored CV help and interview training.
- They appeared particularly anxious around softer skills concerning networking and attendance at events, personal branding (in an online context), and use of platforms like LinkedIn. None discussed cultural awareness or language difficulties.

There is greater variation in the **accounts of existing MA students**: two students always planned to return to China; two had intended to look for work in the UK; one had considered staying in the UK but changed their mind halfway through.

Of these:

- The two students with clear plans to return home both took a very instrumental approach to their studies, considering their qualification a stepping-stone to an application to a state-owned enterprise, or to the civil service entrance exam, showing little interest in their precise subject of study. Neither made any use of Westminster's careers services and considered them irrelevant to their plans: their primary concerns involved strict application deadlines and eligibility criteria.
- The student who had changed course did so having found that their language skills were not adequate in a similarly competitive job market. Nonetheless, they had discussed their CV with an advisor and explored job opportunities, reporting a good experience. They now intend to look for work at an international firm based in China.
- The two interviewees with intentions to remain in the UK had also sought advice on their CV and cover letters, attended training workshops, and one-to-one coaching sessions. Of these, one had learned to target smaller employers, not just major enterprises, and described enjoying the more flexible and open work culture; the other is seeking graduate visa sponsorship, while aware of continued language difficulties, and keeping a return to China open as a fallback.
- All three students who had used career services appreciated a more personalised approach than they had been used to – but struggled with taking initiative to search out jobs or resources in an unfamiliar environment.

Our second question concerned the extent to which a social media project could help students with their career development.

(i) Social media as an information source

Social media services appear marginal as sources of trusted career advice – far outweighed by “traditional” sources of career advice.

Sources of career-information (N=46, ranked order)

All survey respondents were asked to rank sources of career-related information and advice, beyond the university, in order of importance.

Clearly top-ranked:

- Recruitment websites or company websites
- Classmates, friends or family

Mid-range

- University careers services
- Course lecturers or tutors

Clearly bottom-ranked

- Alumni
- LinkedIn
- Rednote / xiaohongshu
- Douyin / TikTok
- WeChat

Qualitative responses:

Our interviewees complicate this picture: all included Rednote or Douyin alongside recruitment websites, WeChat, and personal networks – regardless of whether they were based in the UK or mainland China, and regardless of intended destination. One current student explicitly described searching for work on Rednote; applicants also described the necessity of developing a public social media profile as an important skill they were lacking.

This is echoed by open-ended survey responses to the question "what else could the university do?" Of roughly 30 free-text suggestions, none independently proposed social media as a mechanism; requests centred on tangible opportunities (internships, employer visits, one-to-one coaching, targeted information). Even though the vast majority of respondents, if not all, will be using these platforms, very few considered this to be relevant to the university support services.

This suggests that, while digital social platforms are a part of habitual ambient use for developing understanding of employment expectations, they are currently not considered as part of a formal framework for career development or illegible to “official” sources of employment. They may be treated as lacking authority, perhaps outwardly distrusted.

While an account could be useful, its potential value isn't yet visible to students, based on what currently exists in this space.

(ii) Social media as part of professional development practice

The final – and most time-intensive – component of our study was content creation across two platforms (RedNote; Douyin), alongside group and individual reflection.

The group spent some considerable time brainstorming possible content that would be attractive and useful. A substantive split emerged among those who wished to focus on “quick wins” with immediate practical advice for all students, predominantly focused on navigation, and those who wished to develop more ambitious and slickly-produced guides to UK job market. These discussions ranged across the difference between text, images and videos, length of videos, use of voiceovers, subtitles and effects, ensuring consistency across posts, differences between the two platforms and how to “game” the platforms’ algorithms. In other words, the team had serious material discussions that would be familiar from professional content-development contexts.

Ultimately, student partners produced a number of simple guides to the university using “carousel” style images and text explainers, as well as some photo-driven overviews of visits to media company headquarters, alongside two lengthy in-depth video interviews: one with the course leader; one with another student who had recently amassed a major following as a Douyin creator. Planned interviews with professional services staff, an employee at an influencer marketing agency, and with a brand consultant did not take place – due to logistical issues, unwillingness from interviewees, as well as technical and interpersonal difficulties within the team, encountered when filming the first two interviews.

Taken together, the account's actual output over this pilot did not generate substantial traction or engagement: reach, follower growth, and post interaction stayed low, particularly on the RedNote account (see fig.1). Only the Douyin interview with the student influencer gained significant engagement (see fig.2) – an achievement considering this was a new channel, although likely due to the interviewee's established name recognition.

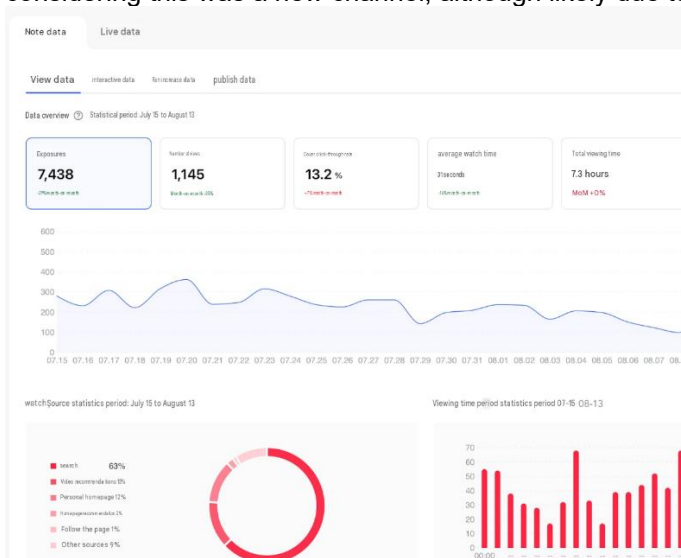


Figure 1. Internal RedNote metrics showing relatively flat engagement with posts over one month (translation via Google Translate).

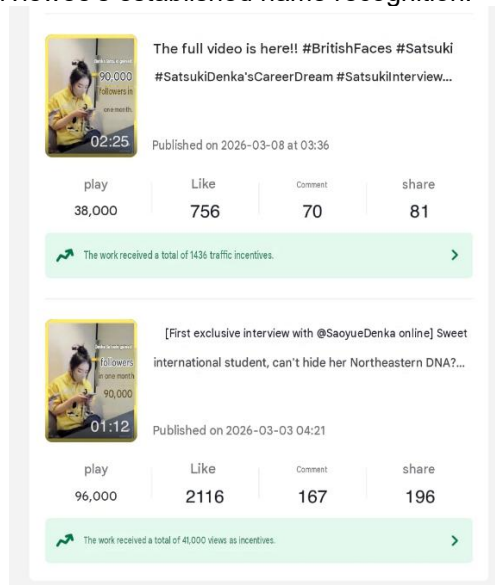


Figure 2. Internal metrics from Douyin account, showing significant engagement for two videos with a student creator (translation via Google Translate)

Individual student reflections converge on the same instinct: that the account's value lies less in repeating information available elsewhere, however targeted, and more in authentic, lived student experiences – concerning management of workload, assessment stress, part-time work, cultural adjustment, gaps between expectation and reality. This is the register that a static university website and employability material struggles to explain.

The reflections also echo a finding from the previous SCC project: producing this kind of content is genuinely difficult to do well, due to teamwork issues and workload capacity. Students reported an uneven level of existing skill/talent and willingness, a dependence on a few confident members, and difficulty in delivering in the absence of formal hierarchy. Also echoing the previous year, they reported this being a valuable experience in itself, leading to considerable self-discovery and personal growth. More instrumentally, their certificated experience on the project was deemed a valuable asset in their home job market.

Discussion

In sum, our findings visibilise a story that should be self-evident but can perhaps be overlooked: "Chinese students" are not a single, homogeneous category.

Our respondents share some broad starting conditions: a secondary/undergraduate education system; a domestic labour market with a distinct logic and calendar; English as an additional working language. Despite this, there is real and consequential variation in aspiration, ability (especially spoken English), prior work experience, and (though not explored directly here) socio-economic background.

While it is true that this category represents a body of students who typically engage less with university career services, the danger is that this leads to the institution de-prioritising such students. Instead, this category should be differentiated more carefully and catered to accordingly, using a range of strategies – among which social media platforms can provide some (but not the only) powerful tools.

In particular, our findings suggest a major split into two significant groups.

1. Students who approach their degree in largely instrumental terms: as a means of increasing chances within a standardised, tightly-regulated and highly-competitive Chinese job market, often in a state-owned enterprise or civil service position in their home region.

This route is far more common in China than the UK and does not match the profile of other international students. This group is clearly mismatched with existing employability provision and students continually register dismay that they are poorly supported by a system not attuned to its specific needs. Likely, the university can do more to address their concerns. However, communication efforts might focus on simply reminding students of timelines, advertising relevant recruitment fairs, or explaining the differences between the two systems (particularly around the role of internships) in order to avoid confusion and effectively manage early expectations.

2. Students who wish to stay in the UK (or another Western context); or who are currently uncertain and open to exploration.

This group is closer to the wider international student profile, with ambitions to adapt to an unfamiliar employment situation, reporting greater take-up and satisfaction with the services on offer. They would likely respond well to provision focusing on job-search basics, networking, self-branding and professional communication skills. Yet deep systemic differences with Chinese norms make the fundamental "why" and "how" of UK work cultures and structures appear particularly opaque to such students. They may over-value the transactional side of credentials and other eligibility markers, while undervaluing the softer skills of social and cultural capital. Effective communication can render a landscape of "unknown unknowns" into a more navigable one of "known unknowns" – and targeted social media content may be especially valuable here.

Clearly there are overlaps between these groups. Students may experiment with overseas work experience before deciding to return home. A considerable market exists for students looking for work at international firms within their home context; or perhaps working in export or overseas communication roles within smaller or family-run businesses. Such individuals will need to develop competences and understanding relevant to both contexts – again, a complex hard/soft skillset for which they will benefit from navigation aids. Moreover, they may not realise this at first sight: a social media campaign can potentially reach those who did not know they needed to develop such skills and may not think to access support until it is too late.

Finally, by focusing exclusively on official routes to develop employability, all students may not recognise the value of the experience they have often already accumulated through their own passion projects – often including online creative content development of different kinds – since they are not always legible through official discourses or valued by family members. Such experiences are often sought out by employers, in China as well as the UK, who look for individuals with demonstrable practical skills and a self-driven mentality, who understand a range of new technologies and everyday consumption contexts, and can translate this. In this way, simple student-led accounts such as the ones this project developed can be powerful engines of realisation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Social media can be a genuinely useful strategic tool but not a silver bullet.

This project shows real, specific value can be achieved. What appears to be most useful are clearly structured guides to “how it works” as well as records of “lived experience” – documenting frustration and lack of understanding alongside realisations and successes,

However, the study also suggests that this needs to be backed by proper attention to differentiated student needs and resourcing. On its own, a student-led channel cannot substitute for the structural fixes that students actually need, of timely information, differentiated advice and genuine skills provision. This needs to be two-way process: listening to where students lack understanding and need wayfinding tools, as much as offering and communicating resources.

1. University career support professionals

...can consider ways to explain and communicate available support in a native language and medium, to reach students before they think to seek help.

- Instrumentally-focused, China-bound students would benefit from timely, practical content (deadlines, recruitment fairs, structural differences around internships), rather than deep skills training
- Where Chinese students are more UK/internationally-oriented, they still often need direct signposting to resources which they report valuing: understanding an unfamiliar job market and career structure, job-search basics, networking, self-branding, cultural intelligence, and professional communication.

Social media content can be one tool among several to achieve this.

2. Course leaders and academics

...should consider how China-focused content creation projects can be embedded as credited coursework:

- This needs clear structure: define roles, produce a style guide/brief, discuss accountability and coordination difficulties
- And students will benefit from institutional certification or letters of support to evidence their practical achievements.

Explore and discuss with students specific structural and cultural differences between subject- and sector-specific job markets in China and elsewhere. This is particularly the case in arts, media, creative and entrepreneurial contexts.

Encourage students to recognise their own “passion projects” and prior platform experience as legitimate, employable experience in international contexts, not just extracurricular activity.

3. Students

...should be encouraged to recognise early on that UK and Chinese systems run on genuinely different logics (recruitment calendars, the role of internships, what “career support” even means)

They should be encouraged to be proactive rather than waiting. While many students default to waiting for things to be explained or provided, this works far less well in the UK system than in China. It is important to actively seek out advice, ask direct questions of tutors and careers staff, and treat confusion as a signal to act, not a reason to disengage.

Recognising a knowledge gap could itself be valuable content. Working something out the hard way could produce exactly the kind of authentic, lived material that social media users value and which is the hardest for the university to produce itself. Posting videos or guides about what you've learned not only helps name your own confusion, and what you've learned, it also produces a resource for the next student facing the same gap.

Dissemination

This report is of primary relevance to course leaders and teams of courses with high representation of international – and especially Chinese – students, who may be considering ways to bridge different communities (and spatial divides) and to embed social media in teaching.

It will also be useful for professional services staff with responsibility for student experience.

Finally, it should be useful for students themselves – and may inform the production of future materials and resources.

Reflection

This project has addressed a real need. But this has not been simple. While a need for mutual listening and curiosity is self-evident, there are real systemic, institutional and cultural barriers that can prevent this from occurring naturally. Student partners all reported facing difficulties and, at times, a form of exhaustion in trying to sit at the nexus between a large team, a diverse student cohort, and a large, complex, often opaque institution. We have reflected on this in the course of pursuing the research, and this has itself informed our findings.

Nonetheless, the process has been generative, fostering significant internal discussions within the project team, shining light on – and finding solutions for – material problems: particularly those of motivation and the balance of intrinsic and instrumental value in participating in a project like this. In future, we would – and would recommend others – reflect carefully on the ambitions of doing so. We would recommend a smaller team and a clear hierarchy and sense of responsibility in advance, noting that this can give better shape to values of open participation, rather than working against them.

The findings produced, while not generalisable, are rich and provide much food for thought. We hope that they can be useful to a range of institutional actors, as well as future students, providing a spur for thought or a resource for the creation of new materials and initiatives, as well as impetus for more systematic research in future. This prospect is itself a genuine motivation and we extend gratitude to the SCC team for enabling this opportunity.

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