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Partnership as Counter-Practice: Theorising a Staff–Student Climate-Justice Coalition in a Neoliberal University

Nurul Azhar[1], Mona El-hachem[2], Yilin Hong[3], Chen Lu[4], Francis Rhoen Morelos[5], Aksam Ali Raza[6], Shravankumar Guntuku[7*]

[1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6] Student, School of Social Sciences.

[7] Field Supervisor, School of Social Sciences

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***Corresponding author:** Shravankumar Guntuku
Field Supervisor, School of Social Sciences

Abstract

Higher education is an important space to utilise student potential for the facilitation of climate justice initiatives; however, they fail to effectively employ student creativity. Consequently, administration-led environmental justice is often performative – working within the confines of neoliberal structures which leaves students unchallenged in their critical approach towards environmental sustainability and theoretical application. The need to remain viable under neoliberalism prompts academic institutions to undervalue students as decision-makers, rather students remain limited in their creative output. Not only are students underutilised as decision-makers, but they are often confronted with repression when they engage in climate activism and request participation. This paper examines a staff-student climate-justice coalition as counter-practice within neoliberal parameters using a social justice and human rights theoretical conception. It argues that staff-student partnerships can increase equitable participation, foster transferable skills for future practice, and can lobby administrators for better sustainable policies. It utilises a design phase approach – desk mapping, stakeholder matrix, surveys and focus groups. It maintains caution to safeguard anonymity and co-option, critique power dynamics and explores the politicisation of climate activism. The paper presents recommendations for governance, communication strategies, and resource accessibility while maintaining the university's anonymity. As students belong to the generation most impacted by climate change, developing the skills and capacity necessary must be a priority for academic institutions.

Keywords: *students-as-partners; climate justice; human rights; neoliberal higher education; coalition governance*

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Introduction

Nowadays, all educational institutions claim to support climate justice, but these claims often aim to boost their reputation and maintain a positive community image. Many are more focused on appearing responsible than on taking real action. This makes climate justice seem more like a public exercise rather than an impactful practice. Staff-student coalitions exist at the surface level without the power to influence decision-making.

We argue that staff-student coalitions can focus on justice and fair actions instead of just being a publicity stunt. When staff and students work together, they can challenge the neoliberal system and political forces. They can bring in different perspectives and make climate actions fairer and more accountable. These coalitions are not just about completing individual tasks. They focus on sharing ideas, fostering understanding, and pushing universities to take climate justice seriously.

Our contribution has two main points: Firstly, we propose a model of staff-student partnership that centres on justice and empowerment in climate work within higher education. Secondly, we emphasise the safeguards necessary to make these partnerships fair and safe, such as protecting anonymity, addressing power imbalances, and ensuring that student voices are not drowned out by university priorities.

This article reviews literature on climate action in higher education and then presents the conceptual framework, methods, case study, and findings. Furthermore, it concludes with implications for building justice-based staff and student coalitions.

Materials and Methods

The initiative began as part of a student cooperative placement and evolved into a design-phase collaboration involving undergraduate and postgraduate students, academic staff, and professional stakeholders. The coalition explores how student-staff partnerships can act as a counter-practice to the dominant neoliberal logic of higher education, particularly in how climate justice is understood, enacted and institutionalised.

We conducted a desk review of climate related: initiatives both within the anonymised Australian university and in selected global higher institutions. This process aimed to surface existing efforts, underlying assumptions, and gaps in relation to climate justice. Within the university, most documented initiatives were framed under the language of sustainability, carbon reduction, green campus, and emission targets. It lacked connections to justice, equity or participatory governance. One student-staff initiative of clothing sustainability event included diverse participation, but these activities were rarely integrated into broader institutional processes.

Global examples offered further insight. At Harvard, the president explicitly rejected fossil fuel divestment to preserve institutional neutrality and shield the endowment from political influence (Rimmer, 2014). This highlights how climate action is often depoliticised in elite academic settings. In Romania, Institutional Learning for Climate Action (ILCA) project (Bordeianu, Nastase & Morosan-Danila, 2024) promoted awareness through behaviour change activities. While participatory in form, its focus on individual actions left structural power relations and justice concerns largely unaddressed.

We use stakeholder landscape maps to better understand the institutional terrain of climate justice engagement. This tool identifies and categorises relevant actors within and beyond the university according to their levels of power and interest in climate justice initiatives. Stakeholders are mapped using a power-interest matrix to visualise who holds decision-making influence e.g. university executives, sustainability officers and who is most impacted by climate policies but often excluded e.g. international students, First Nations students, and casual academic staff. These insights came from internal meetings, peer discussion, and guided reflection.

The importance of student participation in sustainability efforts has been consistently emphasised in the literature. Shriberg and Harris (2012) emphasise the crucial role of student leadership and bottom-up pressure in driving institutional transformation toward sustainability in higher education. This idea aligns with the foundation of our coalition, which seeks to centre student-staff partnership as a pathway to deeper, more justice-oriented organisational change.

We reviewed two university governance documents that outline how student conduct, activism, and public discourse are regulated. One grants the university power to set rules while the other defines who creates those rules and the need for transparency. These form the base for managing protests and student-staff advocacy.

Our scan showed that while these frameworks exist, they lack clear guidance on how students can safely engage in climate justice action. The strategy to respond to the gaps is to develop a governance one-pager, which outlines rules and safe pathways for action, transparency that encourages clear, accessible conduct policies and decision making, justice tools which is to create surveys and tools to highlight equity concerns, and benchmarking which is drawing lessons from peer institutions' stronger climate governance.

Finally, we developed several prototype tools, including a draft survey, a focus group discussion guide, and a governance one-pager, to support inclusive consultation and explore co-leadership structures for the coalition's next phase.

The purpose of the design phase is to examine early institutional and relational dynamics shaping a staff-student climate justice partnership. This stage enables exploratory thinking, co-creation, and tool development such as stakeholder maps, governance prototypes before institutional constraints take hold. It allows for critical reflection on power, participation gaps, and the coalition's potential for structural change. However, it also limits insight into actual outcomes as implementation has not occurred, findings remain speculative, and data is drawn only from internal reflection and observed material.

In our project, "students-as-partners" meant that we move beyond a token consultation model towards shared responsibility for inquiry, design, and reflection in the coalition. Students contributed frontline perspectives from their lived experience of university life, especially around how activism is constrained by institutional policy and culture. University/administrative staff supported with institutional knowledge, project coordination, and access to resources. Academic staff provided theoretical framing and ensured the work aligned with wider scholarly insights. Therefore, decision-making was collaborative: students proposed directions, such as mapping policies or trialling prototypes, staff tested feasibility, and academics worked to connect these practices to researchable concepts.

Meanwhile, the student-staff partnership was shaped by restrictions of time and precarity. Firstly, students, particularly international and

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postgraduate students, faced heavy workloads, financial pressures, and uncertainty about visa status. They limited their ability to take risks or devote unlimited hours. Secondly, staff partners were concerned with employment precarity within universities. It influenced how outspoken they could be about institutional politics. These realities made it necessary to constantly negotiate what was possible, balancing ambition with sustainability.

Reflexive vignette:

Student voice: "I realised how different my position was: as a student, I could raise critiques more boldly, yet my visa status made me cautious about how far I could push. Partnering gave me a sense that my voice mattered but also reminded me of the risks that shape our activism."

Staff voice: "I noticed how my relative security within the institution meant I could sometimes amplify students' ideas, but I also had to confront my own hesitations—wondering how much resistance was possible from within a neoliberal university." Taken together, this partnership stance emphasised that positionality was not static but continually negotiated. Recognising these asymmetries helped create a more reflexive coalition, attentive to both opportunities and limits of working for climate justice within a neoliberal university setting.

Results and Discussion

Consequences of Neoliberalism in the Higher Education

Wendy Brown (2015) argues that when universities are run as corporations, it undermines their social purpose, which is to cultivate critical thinkers. When universities prioritise achieving higher rankings, it often comes at the expense of pursuing studies that focus on positive social impact. Giroux (2014) discusses how the managerial class prioritises profit and efficiency over academic freedom. He argues that audits and other key performance indicators commodify education, undermining the goal of producing civically engaged citizens. Stephen Ball (2003) explains how some universities engage in risk management by fabricating the work of their teachers to meet key performance metrics. Due to neoliberalism, teachers adopt a performative approach to their pedagogy, prioritising their professional careers over the academic success of their students.

Using Justice Claims

We argue that justice claims are more important than acceptable frames in our case. Acceptable frames, such as behavioural ones, focus solely on how individual actions can help address climate change. They emphasise personal lifestyle changes rather than addressing climate change. They do not recognise climate change as a systemic issue that requires systemic solutions. Reputational frames concentrate on how institutions brand themselves to attract potential stakeholders. This is evident in how some universities heavily promote their sustainability rankings. Justice claims, on the other hand, focus on the power structures that hinder climate action. Issues of class, labour rights, and racial justice are deeply intertwined with climate justice. For instance, calls for government action on climate change should be linked to demands for a just transition for workers from the fossil fuel industry to the green economy, investments in marginalized communities disproportionately affected by climate change, and climate reparations from top fossil fuel companies.

Redefining Coalition Purpose Through Social Justice and Human Rights

When social justice and human rights are examined through the principles of redistribution, recognition, and participation, coalitions serve not only as advocacy groups but also as catalysts for broad structural change. Redistribution emphasises the need to ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities for all. Recognition highlights the importance of acknowledging historical injustices and the social marginalisation of certain groups. Participation underscores the significance of including the voices of marginalised groups in decision-making processes. It is also essential to guarantee and protect everyone's rights to voice and accountability. Upholding these principles transforms the role of coalitions from merely promoting advocacy to fostering positive social transformation. In the following section, we will explore the following questions: How does the coalition transition from managing individual projects to developing a unified platform? How do discourses on risk and reputation limit actions? How are participation rights operationalised?

Defining Legitimacy in Coalition Governance

Questions of legitimacy quickly surfaced in our coalition design: who is recognised, whose knowledge is valued, and who can claim to represent "students" or "staff." In a university environment that is shaped by audit and branding logics, representation is never neutral. Pre-existing governance structures are often recognised by the legitimacy that is aligned with institutional image rather than inclusivity, including student unions, committees, and marketing-approved campaigns. Such an arrangement limits the opportunity for the stakeholders who are most affected by climate justice but benefits those who are already legible within the university. Therefore, this dynamic is critiqued because such institutional logics of quality assurance and branding can restrain an authentic governance framework in creative coalition (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Conversely, our co-op tried to include multiple forms of legitimacy into our coalition, which is representational, procedural, and epistemic. Representatively, we are aware that no individual could "speak for all." Hence, legitimacy should be shared through rotating roles and co-authored outputs, which can signal collective voice over individual authority. Procedurally, we designed to trial rotating chairs and distributed notetaking, ensuring that agenda-setting and discussion-framing circulated across the governance. Epistemically, we affirmed both lived experiences. For example, international students navigate visa restrictions while staff negotiate employment insecurity. Meanwhile, disciplinary expertise, such as social work, policy studies, and environmental science, facilitates the development of valid forms of knowledge. This plural approach reflects the value diversity of acknowledgement of partnerships, rather than privileging only "auditable" expertise (Bovill et al., 2016; Healey et al., 2016). By treating legitimacy as something to be actively designed rather than assumed, the coalition created broader recognition and accountability. In doing so, it resisted narrowing pressures of audit culture and offered a more democratic model of representation.

Navigating Boundaries Within Neoliberal Universities:

Coalitions also need to pay attention to boundaries. They must figure out when to work with the university and when to fight it. If they don't listen, they risk having their work co-opted and used solely for university branding. Risk and reputation affect discourses which in turn frequently prevent universities from making bold and ethical decisions, for instance to divest in fossil fuels. In the Harvard case, we see that one of the reasons that the university refused to divest

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from fossil fuels was to remain 'neutral' and to keep its funding (Rimmer 2014). At the Australian university, most of the sustainability noticed emissions and rankings, not justice or equity. In response, the coalition developed governance charters, anonymous surveys and declarations of independence. They were intended to shield members from job or visa risks, and to provide safe channels for sharing critiques.

Neoliberal universities often make protest riskier, Giroux (2014), also contends that in the era of neoliberalism the university is a site that offers "contemporary students a pedagogical relation to neoliberal institutions which are often designed to either absorb or silence dissent". Ball (2003) also claims that performativity forces academics to conform to measures, rather than striving to create genuine change. These are the reasons why coalitions are at risk of looking more like a show of strength as evidence of inclusivity without any real power. They do this by having checks in place that include independence, clear lines, and transparent rules.

Coalitions ought to prepare for independence from management, even while cooperating where they must. This may involve small self-funded projects, shared leadership to avoid capture, and governance mechanisms that delimit the parameters. These are steps that can help coalitions avoid being used for reputational purposes, while maintaining their credibility.

Building Coalitions Through Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation

When coalitions build themselves up, they must move from small projects on the street to this broad platform where points of justice are at stake. This means making sure that all members have the right to participate and construct different modes of action such as learning in action, affecting policies together, mutual support and curricular change. The coalition also produced the materials necessary for organizing student focus groups, questionnaires and one page governance summaries. These were not just technical tools, but tools of justice because they enabled the voices of marginalised students to be heard. For example, initial mapping work presented above shows that climate policies have a major effect on the lives of international and First Nations students. However, these groupings are often excluded from decision making. As a result, the coalition hopes alternative forms can be found for the voices of these peoples and shaping governance.

The justice framework includes redistribution, recognition, and participation. Redistribution means that resources are distributed more fairly. Recognition means not only acknowledging past injustices but also acknowledging present ones. Participation means students and staff have real rights to make decisions. Brown (2015) describes how neoliberalism in effect disarms these principles. Coalitions should design with justice as the core of all their work. We can achieve this by presenting a charter which guarantees student duties, curriculum linked to climate justice issues and building care networks for welfare. To move from single projects onto a rights-based platform demands combining inquiry, critical learning, influencing policies, advocacy, mutual aid, solidarity and care, and awareness. Together, these factors make the coalition more powerful and capable of systemic changes.

The leading question that links these variables together – What impacts the survival of a staff-student climate justice coalition in university settings? This is to highlight the variables that are most likely to support the success and longevity of a climate justice coalition between staff and students. The variables influence the success of initiatives, and thus, the success can be seen through the acquisition of resources to invest in initiatives that lead to outer student participation in the initiative and beyond.

Modes of Action

As this is a student-staff partnership, pedagogical and inquiry cooperation encouraged in learning spaces – classes, workshops, study groups – helps foster critical thinking and its intersection with theoretical framings. The usefulness of exploring the interconnectedness of inquiry and pedagogy facilitates creative awareness-raising methods to improve stakeholder engagement with the curriculum and develop communication skills for communication with management.

Advocacy for climate justice can be impeded by neoliberal policies leading to some withdrawal from staff participation and repression from universities. The mobilisation of students – student clubs, student unions, SRC, etc. – can be a form of mutual aid that safeguards against reductionist university policies that undermine the sustainability transition.

Legitimacy

For the project to have legitimacy as staff and student as partners, the project had to be democratised, demoting a hierarchical exchange and implementation of ideas and facilitating a safe environment where power imbalances are negated.

To do so, there needs to be an understanding of the power dynamics in a coalition between staff and students. Students need to be represented by materially contributing to the discourse. This is made possible by staff purporting a safe, comfortable and democratic environment that reshapes how students view staff positionality in comparison to themselves. However, students are not a monolith, and all come with different perspectives on climate justice; therefore, to comply with the democratisation of the coalition, students are all welcome to share their ideas, even though in anonymous ways unnamed surveys, opinion pieces in case they do not feel comfortable in that moment. In doing this, students can be involved in the procedures and leadership to neutralise the power dynamic. This will place staff and students on equal footing and satisfy stakeholder commitment. There is value in incorporating lived experience epistemologically. By integrating lived experience as knowledge, we amplify our reach and inclusivity which encourages more students to raise awareness through sharing their personal experience.

Boundary-Work

Collaboration is amplified when working to decide on the action/activity that is taken. However, conflict can arise here when being too ambitious as this risks undermining staff capacity to engage, which can disrupt communication channels between staff and students. Here, neoliberal policies impact the modes of action and can create tension within the coalition. Solidarity can combat this as this amplifies resilience. The risk of upsetting the institution will lead to actions being modified to satisfy institutions. This will narrow the action and reduce commitments from students as students want to be responsible for radical change within universities. Hence, this requires independence from management which is where students become leaders for radical change rather than the staff. Management risks alienating students; by delivering success from initiatives by proving its possible through independence, it can limit higher control. This helps maintain internal autonomy. Resisting performative participation from administration and being resilient through self-funding can safeguard against co-optation from them.

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Care & Safety

There needs to be solidarity amongst members to unify against external factors and facilitate resistance – collective care and knowledge sharing. This can help promote psychological safety and enhance knowledge to confront conflict from members and administrators.

Through this enhanced emotional engagement from members to produce a sense of belonging, it contributes to reshaping epistemological perspectives to implement creative advocacy for policy change in university policies. This is made possible through solidarity amongst the membership. This solidarity can help advocate for curricula changes which we have seen from student activism through engagement with literature.

In doing so, participation can become operationalised. These components need to be thought through to motivate and bring a personal connection to the action which can help oppose management intrusion to amplify resilience.

In the governance system of the university, the leadership generally manages students' public behaviours such as assembly and demonstration activities through rules and regulations. In recent years, many schools have imposed more detailed restrictions on protest activities on campus, such as banning demonstrations indoors, disrupting traffic and causing unwarranted disruption. These measures are often justified by maintaining order, but scholars and Human Rights groups warn that such practices tend to pressure the room for expression and lack a sense of proportionality and rationality (Human Rights Law Centre et al., 2025). Universities should therefore balance order and expression through institutionalised procedures such as the mandatory provision of prior notice, the clarification of the scope of activities, the restriction of the use of dangerous goods and the conduct of safety assessments. This not only protects freedom of speech but also avoids its effects on the public psyche.

Research shows that at the staff level; students are often confronted with the dual role of the need to enforce discipline and the desire to support student expression and behavior. If there is no clear regulation, the teaching staff may be in a dilemma of 'silence or punishment'. Relevant policy research suggests that there is a need to establish a consultation mechanism in the management of protest activities, provide faculty members with opportunities to participate in rulemaking and clarify reasonable boundaries in support of student actions. This not only helps to reduce career risks but also helps to build trust and cooperation between teachers and students (CAIR, 2025).

A system that is unclear to students is easy to mistake public behaviour for violation. Investigations have shown that some institutions may automatically be considered non-compliant because protest activities have not been registered or applied for in advance, increasing the risk of the doer (CAIR, 2025). Some universities are seeking more mature practices, such as the location available, the method of advanced reporting, the norms of the order to be followed during events, and the formulation of specific protest guidelines that clarify the route of complaints in the event of a dispute (University of Edinburgh, 2025). This approach makes students feel more relieved when expressing their needs and helps the school maintain order and safety.

In summary, a clear and transparent framework is equally important to ensure freedom of expression and public safety. Institutionalised processes enable us to avoid protest activities being arbitrarily characterised as violations and to build the university space truly into an arena of democracy and dialogue.

Acknowledgment

Of partnerships, rather than privileging only “auditable” expertise (Bovill et al., 2016; Healey et al., 2016). By treating legitimacy as something to be actively designed rather than assumed, the coalition created broader recognition and accountability. In doing so, it resisted narrowing pressures of audit culture and offered a more democratic model of representation.

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