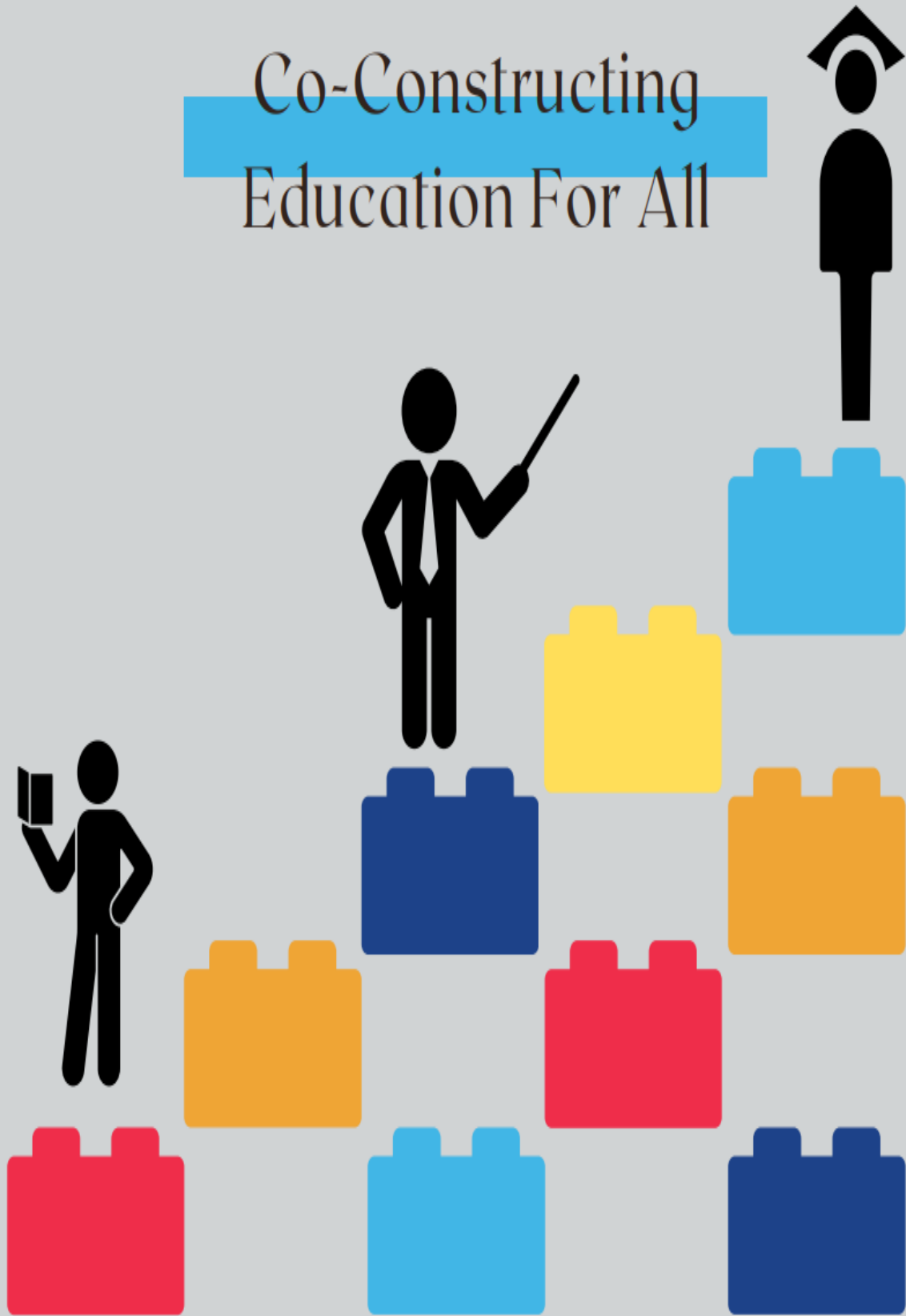


Co-Constructing Education For All



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About the reviewers, FACE chair and president

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Deirdre Lynskey has extensive experience in the widening participation arena, including strategic and operational planning and delivery on local and national levels, and is Chair of FACE. As Assistant Director of Aimhigher Greater Merseyside, she led the strategy for care-experienced students establishing the Care Leavers Network. As Student Development Manager, Deirdre leads a dynamic team of careers professionals supporting students to be future-ready, and in developing and delivering innovative and engaging programmes that guarantee students have the awareness, skills, and knowledge to enter competitive graduate job markets.

Andrew Rawson is Treasurer to, and Executive Member of FACE. He has worked to increase access, participation and the success of students since 1980 through national careers guidance services and the many incarnations of the nationally working and respected widening participation organisation *Action on Access Information Hub and Email Briefing Services*, and as a consultant is an eminently experienced practitioner, manager, action-researcher and thought leader.

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Joe Hickinbottom has been a Widening Participation and Outreach (WPO) practitioner at the University of Surrey since 2018. He obtained his PhD in Film from the University of Exeter in 2017, with a focus on cult Japanese cinema and film authorship, and co-edited a publication of academic writing on horror in 2021 with the University of Wales Press. As a WPO practitioner Joe has developed interests in working with families, the transformative power of creative writing, and supporting the education of vulnerable incarcerated adults.

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Karla Lopez-Murillo is currently the Impact and Evaluation Officer at LSBU. She is an experienced Widening Participation (WP) evaluator in the Higher Education (HE) sector. In 2020, she obtained her PhD in Education from the IOE, UCL. In 2023, she published a paper in the Higher Education Journal based on her doctoral research, exploring the contribution of scholarships to the democratisation of international student mobility and its implications for social change. Karla's current interests include ethical practices in WP work, student outcomes, student experiences and engagement in HE and intersections with gender, race, identities, and migration.

Lucy Mallinson is a Research Assistant within the Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching (LALT) at the University of Lincoln specialising in quantitative evaluation. Lucy works within the team providing both university wide evaluation and the local evaluation for LiNCHigher, part of the Office for Students' Uni Connect programme. Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching (LALT), University of Lincoln

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Clare Merivale is a Widening Participation Coordinator in the Access Team within the University of Southampton's Widening Participation and Social Mobility directorate, first working with the team as a Student Ambassador alongside her undergraduate and post-graduate studies. Clare has a particular interest in developing widening participation projects that promote and prioritise the experiences and voices of underrepresented students, and is currently developing co-creation projects within the Access Team. Clare was recently awarded her PhD, also at the University of Southampton.

Shauna-Aine O'Brien has worked in outreach and widening participation for the last five years at University of Kent. She is currently a Targeted Outreach Manager, leading on programmes for care experienced students, and supporting programmes for disabled and neurodivergent students, and LGBTQ+ students. Having worked in education for fifteen years (in youth participation in museums and art galleries, and teaching English in Japan), Shauna's practice focuses on participation and working with audiences as co-creators.

Nathan Robertson is a Senior Widening Access Officer at the University of Derby and has worked in widening participation and outreach for almost a decade. His key role is ensuring long term, productive working relationships with partners and stakeholders, as well as developing effective outreach programmes with disadvantaged students in the region.

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Kelly Self is a passionate project coordinator, leading work with learners who face additional barriers to HE progression on behalf of the Higher Education Progression Partnership, funded by the two Sheffield Universities. With over ten years' experience in the field, Kelly possesses well-honed skills in leading multiple engagement programmes and the evaluation of them as interventions.

Roshana Wickremasinghe is the Head of Student Success in the University of Southampton's Widening Participation and Social Mobility directorate. Before a career in higher education covering policy and the WP agenda, Roshana trained to teach with Teach First, teaching English in a small secondary school in Poole. Alongside her full-time role, Roshana is a PhD candidate at Southampton, examining policy implementation in multi-academy trusts.

About the cover artists

Comfort Karim and Gabriel Huke-Jenner have been working as student ambassadors with the Widening Participation department at the University of Sussex throughout their time at the university. They regularly support events for children and young people from under-represented backgrounds, providing guidance, support and inspiration to the next generation of learners. Guided by the theme of *Co-constructing education for all*, Comfort and Gabriel worked together to create the cover design, which was inspired by building blocks and their journey into higher education

Foreword

For three decades, the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) has held a prominent position as a network for practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders with an interest in continuing education, lifelong learning, and widening participation in higher education (HE). FACE serves as a welcoming and invaluable platform for exchanging ideas, disseminating innovative practice, and actively shaping the future landscape of educational policy.

As an inclusive and member-driven organisation, FACE draws strength from its diverse membership, spanning both the United Kingdom and across the globe. Our members benefit from a wealth of resources, including regular e-bulletins, podcasts, webinars, conferences, and our special interest groups. They also contribute to our annual publication which has continued to thrive with new ideas and innovative practitioner research.

As we celebrate 30 years, we reflect on the significant change within the higher education sector and the role FACE has played to influence policy and practice. In the last three years, our organisation has experienced a period of renewal, reaffirming our commitment to advancing policy, research and practice. This renewed focus is evident in our ambitious strategy and operational plans.

The 2023 conference, *Co-constructing Education for All*, explored the profound impact of co-construction in shaping, implementing and evaluating programmes, activities, and research within higher education. Over the course of three days, the conference provided valuable insights from influential stakeholders who actively shape students' lives, support their aspirations and foster positive outcomes throughout their journeys.

We wish for this publication to serve as a catalyst for thought-provoking discussions and debates, drawing on the latest evaluation and research shared by contributors to the conference. We encourage you to use the collected papers to inform your practice and engage in conversations about the future trajectory of educational policies.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all the contributing authors. We also acknowledge the diligent work of the reviewers and, in particular, commend the outstanding contribution of Dr Neil Raven, our editor.

We firmly believe that the work outlined in this publication has the potential to transform lives and create new opportunities for those seeking to continue their education. We invite you to share your reflections on the impact of this book and join our welcoming FACE community by becoming a member or attending our next conference.



Professor Ross Renton
FACE President



Deirdre Lynskey
FACE Chair

Editorial

Neil Raven (*neil.d.raven@gmail.com*)

This new edition of the FACE annual publication features 12 chapters. As with our previous editions, these chapters have been informed and inspired by our 2023 summer conference, which was held at the University of Derby. Whilst the keynotes, presentations and workshops that featured at the conference considered a rich array of subjects, many addressed the main conference theme of *co-constructing education for all*. Accordingly, a number of the chapters featured in this publication also explore this theme. They do so by adopting a range of perspectives, from the theoretical to the practical, including in relation to understanding the HE progression challenges faced by key groups of under-represented students, and the development and delivery of outreach initiatives, as well as providing insights into issues associated with retention and success, and how these can be addressed. Later chapters draw on the feedback provided by student participants in profiling and evaluating new and innovative approaches to outreach, whilst our final chapter underpins FACE's international remit.

However, this collection begins with an opening chapter that marks somewhat of a departure from our usual contributions in providing a review of some of the key works featured in past editions of the publication. This chapter is included to mark the 30th anniversary of FACE. Whilst the selected chapters necessarily represent a small sample, what is included should provide a sense of the wealth of knowledge and insights that our members have provided over the years. Those interested to learn more can do so by visiting the new FACE website which provides members with access to all previous editions of this publication.

Our opening chapter is followed by the first of two contributions from Lewis Mates. This one is co-authored by Lucy Grimshaw. Drawing on the health, social care and community development literatures, it considers the origins and meanings of the various ways in which we might address practices that recognise and respond to those we seek to support. Here, the argument is made for adopting the term co-construction, as opposed to co-creation or co-production (both of which have been deployed in different contexts). This chapter also reminds us of the challenges of co-construction, including those relating to engagement, ensuring access to and fairness in the allocation of roles and responsibilities, as well as the potential benefits for all involved.

The next chapter by Kelly Self discusses a co-construction approach in developing an outreach intervention tailored to support young carers and those from care backgrounds: two groups that remain very significantly under-represented in HE. Prominent in this study are the challenges to progression these participants reveal through the focus groups and interviews used to gather their insights, as well as the importance of a sense of belonging and in seeing people like them progress. The evidence presented also highlights the importance of enabling these young people to experience HE first-hand and of the value in providing tailored and sustained support.

Outreach activities for those in and leaving care is also the subject of Shauna-Aine O'Brien's chapter. This emphasises the importance of 'inside information' provided by those who come from the 'same community or background.' In this context, the chapter discusses an intervention based upon the insights of student ambassadors with care experience who were from the author's own university, and who were also involved in the delivery of this initiative. The 'authentic voice' provided by current students can, it is argued, 'legitimise the positive experiences of university life [and] demystify the journey from school and college to higher education'. Informed by the success of the initiative profiled, more interventions based upon the principles of co-construction have been developed.

The use of co-construction to improve an outreach activity is also the subject of Jess Lawton-Hunt's chapter. Here, the intervention is aimed at another under-presented group: Black students. Key to the developmental process was a creative workshop in which current HE students from the same background took on the role of experts and guides in walking outreach staff 'through their own journeys to HE.' The insights provided, it is observed, resulted in revisions being made to the intervention, whilst plans are now afoot for using creative workshops to capture the voices of those in school years 12 and 13.

The role that learners can play in evaluating outreach activities is explored in the chapter by Anthea Rose and Lucy Mallinson. The authors discuss a student researcher project in which groups of students took on the role of evaluating outreach initiatives that had been delivered to their schools and colleges. This involved gathering evidence from their peers, and then reporting and presenting their findings to the Uni Connect partnership that had delivered the interventions. Whilst the authors report on the challenges encountered in overseeing this initiative, they also highlight the benefits for the young people involved, including in terms of teamworking and confidence, as well as communication and time management skills. They also emphasise the importance of ensuring 'the student voice [is] not only heard and considered but acted upon.'

Two approaches to co-construction, one concerned with outreach, the other with success, are the subjects of Clare Merivale and Roshana Wickremasinghe's chapter. In the former, the authors discuss how year 10 school students took on the role of consultants in informing the design and development of outreach activities. In the latter, a group of undergraduates from the authors' university acted as advisors in the development of initiatives aimed at supporting the success of undergraduates from underrepresented groups. In discussing these two initiatives emphasis is placed on the importance of ensuring students' input as co-designers is sought from the planning phase onwards. The chapter concludes by highlighting the value of this approach and providing a set of recommendations for the wider sector.

Success at HE and the role that undergraduates from 'marginalised backgrounds' can play as curriculum consultants is the subject explored in Claire Ashdown's chapter. Dating back to 2019 and driven by the aim of reducing the race awarding gap at the author's institution, this chapter discusses how this initiative has developed and considers what has been learnt from it. In its current form the scheme involves members of staff 'identifying' needs and projects for the consultants to investigate and lead. In recognising that awarding outcomes are also influenced by factors beyond the curriculum, it is observed that projects are also welcomed on issues relating to wider aspects of university life. Whilst the evaluation process is an on-going one, early feedback highlights participants' support for this scheme and the research skills gained by those involved in it.

The same broad theme is also the subject of Lewis Mates' second chapter. This provides a critical review of a project that drew on the insights and learning experiences of a group of first generation students at the author's university. The co-creation discussed in this contribution took the form of adjusting the curriculum to better meet the needs and concerns of these students at a time when much of what was being delivered had gone online due to the pandemic. The findings reflect on the challenges encountered in developing and delivering the project, the value of targeting those from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate, rather than adopting a 'whole class' approach, and what was learned from this initiative by the author - as researcher and teacher - as well as what the students gained, in terms skills and increased levels of confidence.

The next two chapters profile innovative outreach projects. The first of these, by Nathan Robertson and Krishna Bainham, is a response to calls from the government for more outreach work to be directed towards supporting schools in raising the attainment of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The initiative explored in this chapter is aimed at developing reflective practices, as well as 'critical think and research

skills' amongst year 10 and 12 students. The evaluation, based on feedback from the learners and their teachers, highlights the project's positive impact, whilst also indicating areas where the project could be further developed.

Written by Karka Lopez-Murillo, Ivana Doncheva, Joe Hickinbottom and Alicia Holloway, our penultimate contribution provides an account of a creative writing outreach programme with prisoners, aimed at 'breaking down the barriers separating the 'inside' and 'outside' worlds.' This was delivered through a series of workshops, some led by outreach staff, some by library staff at the prison, and others by the prisoners themselves. Although acknowledged to be based upon short-term outcomes, evaluation of the programme showed increased levels of confidence amongst participants in their writing abilities, along with a desire to develop their literary skills further and to support 'others within the prison community to do the same.' The final sections of the chapter discuss the challenges of delivering an outreach programme in such a setting, whilst also recognising the potential of such schemes to transform incarcerated lives.

The final chapter is by Johannes Schmees. This widens our scope by providing an international and comparative perspective on efforts to bridge the divide between vocational and academic pathways, via the provision of higher level 'hybrid qualifications.' Based on the literature, four case studies from across Europe are presented. The Scottish study considers the role played by HNCs and HNDs, and the German one dual studies, whilst associate degrees and higher apprentices feature in those for the Netherlands and England respectively. The latter provides the greatest degree of permeability between vocational and academic education, which, the author argues, is a necessary precondition in order to truly co-construct education at HE level of all, since those taking the vocational route are often from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet, barriers to transferring from the vocational to the academic are found in all four case studies, including the often limited engagement from more traditional universities.

Each of these chapters is certain to provide a fascinating read. In combination, they add to the rich resource represented by our annual published collection of papers. It is hoped that this and previous editions will inspire other members of our FACE community to contribute to future editions of this valuable publication.

A review of FACE's annual publication: 2009-2023

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Abstract

This chapter has been included to mark FACE's thirtieth anniversary. Since the inaugural edition, this annual collection of papers written by FACE members has become an established and important part of what FACE does. Conducted by a panel of reviewers from the FACE executive, this chapter provides an insight into the breadth of subjects covered in the thirteen editions that have been published, and the range of authors that have contributed to this series, based both in the UK and in other parts of the world. It also offers a more in-depth consideration of some of the key contributions made over the years. Whilst reflecting the dynamic nature of the field we work in, the review also reveals that many of the challenges our authors discuss in seeking to support equality of access and success, and many of the approaches they describe for responding to these same challenges, retain their relevance. The conclusion argues that this annual collection of papers represents an important repository of knowledge and expertise, and a valuable resource for FACE members and those working in the sector more widely.

Key words: thirtieth anniversary, chapter reviews, practitioner perspective.

Introduction

This review chapter has been included to mark FACE's thirtieth anniversary. It provides one way in which we can look back at what FACE has achieved over the years, although the first edition of this publication that we have been able to find dates back to 2009, so a little after FACE's establishment. However, since then this annual collection of papers has become an important element of what FACE does, and in many respects it is one of the things that distinguishes FACE from most other collaborative organisations working in the FE and HE sectors.

Rather like the British constitution, the reasons for the publication's development remain unwritten. However, a glance at any of the past editions will provide a clear sense of what these intentions are. Notably, to:

- Promote collaboration and co-operation

- Capture the practitioner's perspective on all matters associated with access and continuing education, not just within the UK but internationally
- Afford a medium for sharing insights and discoveries with FACE's membership and those working in the sector more widely
- Provide a lasting record of the work, practices, endeavours, challenges and achievements of our community
- Support the professional development of FACE members, and
- Present an opportunity for early researchers, as well as others engaged in access and success, to have their work published.

In regard to the latter, whilst securing a chapter involves a process comparable to peer review used by academic journals, it is based on FACE's philosophy of being supportive and encouraging, especially to those new to writing for publication. (Something that certainly reflects my own experience of contributing to this publication over the years).

Moreover, from the outset this publication has been shaped and inspired by FACE's annual conference. The official launch of each edition has always taken place at this event, and many of the contributions are from those who have presented conference papers, facilitated workshops, or given keynote talks.

Whilst it has become an established part of what FACE does, the content of each edition reflects and addresses themes of concern at the time of publication. And it has also moved with the times in terms of how it is delivered to readers. Initially, it was a purely paper-based publication. More recently, e-versions have been developed and we are now fully digital. You will be able to access this edition online (<https://face.ac.uk/publications/>). We have also made all previous editions available on the new FACE website, which can be accessed by members.

This review aims to whet readers' appetites to look back and explore what this series of publications has to offer. As one of the panel members responsible for selecting the chapters featured in this review, I certainly found it an interesting and illuminating experience, and learnt a great deal in the process. Whilst this review will show that much has changed in our field of work, including in terms of the learner groups we work with, the interventions we provide, and how we capture and report on the findings from our evaluations and research, it will also highlight considerable levels of continuity. Many of the insights and discoveries reported in early editions retain their relevance for us as a community as we strive for equality of access and success in higher education, and in championing continuing and lifelong learning. This chapter begins by outlining our approach to the review before presenting our findings.

Approach

This review was conducted by a panel of five members of the FACE executive. Each member was allocated two to three editions of the publication to consider. The first phase in the review process was an auditing exercise. Each reviewer captured on a shared spreadsheet key features of the chapters comprising the editions of the publication they were assigned. This involved recording the names, institutional affiliations and countries of authors, along with the titles of their chapters and page numbers, as well as a short summary of each chapter's contents and a list of key words, where these had been provided. The information captured in this spreadsheet is used in the first part of this review which provides a quantitative overview of this series of publications.

In the second phase, reviewers returned to their allocated editions in order to select a sample of chapters (between 5-10 each) that would enable a more in-depth look at what has featured in this publication over the years. A set of criteria were drawn up to guide chapter selection. Those chapters to be chosen:

- Were the first, or amongst the first to address a particular theme, or to look at a key topic in a new way, either in terms of the approach adopted and methods applied, or in the insights offered
- Explored a subject, or provided a perspective, that remains relevant today. This inevitably required reviewers to make a judgment call, and we recognise that another group of reviewers may have selected a different collection of chapters
- Moreover, as a panel our shared aim was to identify a sample of chapters that, in combination, would provide a sense of the range of authors that have contributed to this publication over the years, including in terms of the institutions and organisations they represent, whilst also reflecting the wealth of subjects that have been explored.

Thirty-six chapters were selected. All are referenced in this review, although for practical reasons, and to enable an exploration of contributions, some are discussed in more detail than others.

A quantitative perspective

Scale

In total, thirteen editions of this annual collection of authored chapters have been published since 2009. The series was temporarily interrupted by the pandemic, with no editions appearing in 2021 and 2022. Although the number of chapters comprising each edition varies, a total of 195 chapters featured in the reviewed volumes (from 2009-2023).

Contributors

Whilst some FACE members have been involved in writing more than one chapter (some might even be described as regular contributors), 279 different authors have been involved in the chapters that comprise these thirteen volumes. Between them, these contributors represent 132 different institutions and organisations, including universities, other providers of HE, further education colleges and collaborative outreach partnerships, as well as third sector bodies, government agencies and those working independently. Whilst many authors are UK based, including from Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England, a range of international perspectives have also been offered over the years from colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, South Africa, Sweden, Hong Kong and Japan.

Scope

A broad range of themes have been covered in these thirteen volumes. A number of subjects that attracted the attention of our contributors in the first two years of the publication have continued to feature in later editions. These include chapters exploring the experiences of key student groups. Notably, care leavers (2009, 2010, 2018 and 2024), students from working class and lower socio-economic backgrounds (2010, 2014, 2017, 2018 and 2019), adult and mature learners, and those involved in lifelong learning (2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020), vocational and work-based learners (2009, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019), prisoners (2009 and in the current 2024 edition), those with disabilities (2010, 2012, 2013 and 2016), Black students (2009, 2011 and 2023), and young people with no family history in HE (2015 and 2024). A number of other perennial topics made their appearance during the early years of publication. These included contributions exploring HE progression from FE colleges (2010, 2012, 2013,

2014, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2023), and widening participation at post-graduate level (2011, 2013, 2015 and 2020), as well as employability and careers (2009, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2023).

Chapters aimed at providing guidance to readers have also been a constant theme from the earliest editions, including those informing readers about targeting and tracking (2010, 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2017), alongside contributions profiling and evaluating new practices and interventions relating to access and success (2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2023). Similarly, a number of chapters have explored the role played by undergraduates in the delivery of interventions and in the development of initiatives aimed at outreach, as well as supporting retention and success (2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2019 and 2023). Perhaps a little more surprisingly, contributions concerned with online learning date back to 2010 and were to reappear in 2012, 2014 and 2016.

However, over the years the scope has also widened. In terms of learner groups, later editions included chapters on NEETs (not in employment, education or training) (2014), deaf students (2016), and, from a New Zealand (2012) and Australian perspective (2017), indigenous students, as well as contributions considering the paucity in HE of women in engineering (2017), estranged students (2020), and young people entitled to free school meals (2023). Similarly, new issues and concerns, including mental health (2014, 2017 and 2019), the expectations of the 'new' HE regulator for England (Office for Students [OfS]) (2020), and the impact of the digital divide (2023) have been amongst the topics addressed more recently.

This said, some subject areas that appeared in earlier editions have not returned. Their appearance - and subsequent disappearance - are a reminder (if one were needed) that our area of work is heavily influenced by policy and policy change. Accordingly, early editions featured chapters concerned with progression agreements (2010), Lifelong learning Networks (2011), Aimhigher (2011 and 2012, 2013), and NCOPs (National Collaborative Outreach Partnerships) (2017). The initiatives these chapters describe have gone. However, as discussed in the next section, the key message contained in these contributions retains its relevance: that much can be achieved by adopting a collaborative and shared approach to tackling inequality in educational access and success.

The qualitative view

Learner groups that made their first appearance in early editions

As indicated, chapters dedicated to better understanding groups of learners that are under-represented in post-compulsory education have featured throughout the thirteen editions of the publication, including care experienced students. Clews and Davis (2009) provided the first chapter to consider this group by exploring an institutional response to breaking the cycle of low progression associated with care leavers. Their findings retain their significance. The outcomes for this group of young people have not improved significantly in the fifteen intervening years. Working class students (however defined) have also been discussed by a number of contributors, including McKeever (2010) and Grant (2014). Drawing on the accounts of four students, the first of these chapters explores the relationship between the challenging educational and economic circumstances that these young people encountered in their formative years, with their subsequent HE experiences. Grant's chapter also adopts a qualitative perspective to explore the educational attitudes and aspirations of young white working-class learners living in Leicester, England. As many readers will be only too aware, young people from these backgrounds continue to be amongst those least likely to progress onto and benefit from higher education.

Chapters considering the challenges to HE access and success encountered by Black students have also been a regular feature, dating back to Crooks' (2011) chapter on Black Caribbean males. This considers the approach adopted by a pre-1992 London-based university in supporting the progression of these students.

A big supporter of FACE, Beverley Crooks sadly passed away in 2017. More recently, Astley and West's (2023) chapter explores the degree awarding gap between Black and white undergraduates: an equity challenge that, it is noted, is shared by many other English HE providers. Their findings highlight the importance of recognising intersectionality and the potential impact of the socio-economic circumstances encountered by those they surveyed. Students with disabilities have also featured from early in the publication's history, including in a study by Thorley (2013). This discusses five concurrent pilot schemes aimed at ascertaining the kinds of access support preferred by disabled and diverse students. This chapter also provides an early example of work that recognises and responds to the learner voice.

Chapters dedicated to adult learners have also appeared regularly, starting in 2009 with Al-Afandi and Chapel's exploration of two outreach programmes developed through community and partnership working. Both initiatives were linked to Islamic studies and had the shared aim of empowering learners. The 2012 edition of the publication included chapters by Brown, Smith and Kuit, and by Cousins and Slevin. The former group of authors discuss the findings from a literature review covering the period 2000-2010, which revealed the limited number of studies that have considered adults with intellectual disabilities, and the consequent need for more insights. However, they also show from the research that has been conducted that these students face a range of barriers in accessing HE. Their chapter concludes by considering the institutional support needed to address these. In many ways, this study foreshadows the current focus on neurodiversity and higher education. Meanwhile, Brown, Smith and Kuit's chapter reflects on the role that a social enterprise played in enabling unemployed graduates to develop entrepreneurial skills. Once again, the subject of working with third sector partners retains its relevance.

Two further chapters dedicated to mature students were identified by the review panel. The first is by Butcher and Fowle (2018). Framed by concerns over the fall in the number of adult learners in HE, and drawing on the findings of two case studies, the authors discuss the approaches that English HE providers should take to widening participation for these learners. The second by Hudson, Burnell and Murray (2020) argues for the need to recognise that students classified as mature (aged over twenty-one) are far from a homogeneous group. Accordingly, this study considers those who return to learning, whether by embarking on an access course or progressing onto HE, after the age of thirty, with attention given to their motivations for taking this step. The findings highlight a multitude of drivers, including the desire to be role models for their children and the importance participants attach to lifelong learning. The continued relevance of all five of these studies is evident in the OfS's recognition that mature students represent a priority group for those working in widening participation (WP).

Contributions exploring vocational and work-based learning have also been a regular presence, starting with Elliot's (2009) chapter. This explores how a work-based learning framework for HE qualifications developed by one HE institution seeks to address the needs of isolated workers (in small and micro business). Whilst a more recent contribution by Bryant (2019) considers the HE transition of vocational students who have previously worked as healthcare assistants. In particular, this study looks at the role of prior qualifications and knowledge in determining outcomes in HE. This subject continues to be important with much policy focus now directed towards alternative pathways into HE. First generation students have also been the subject of various contributions. One early and international study was provided by O'Shea (2015). This chapter discusses the findings from an Australian project concerned with gathering the insights of twenty-five students with no family histories in HE. The work of Bourdieu and notions of family capital are a key feature of O'Shea's analysis.

Learner groups considered in more recent editions

More recent contributions to the range of learner groups considered in these volumes include Sims and Kettlewell's (2014) report on two programmes aimed at supporting those not in education, employment or

training (NEET). Readers will find that many of the issues raised in this chapter remain highly salient. Bunn's (2017) chapter discusses a large-scale study of historical cohorts completing the University of Newcastle's (Australia) Open Foundation Programme. The focus is on assessing the pre-entry programme's impact on indigenous Australians, early school leavers and disabled students, and provides a valuable international case study, as well as an example of utilising a large dataset. Most recently, Lawson and Roberts (2023) examine the school attainment gap found in the county of Surrey, England, between those entitled to free school meals and their non-eligible counterparts. Whilst the gap has long been recognised, the authors describe how an understanding of the 'beyond the school gates' experiences of these young people remains limited amongst the headteachers and other stakeholders interviewed for this study, and call for this to be addressed.

Widening participation in further education colleges

Whilst a current topic of interest, and one that has been covered in more recent editions of the publication, two earlier contributions addressing WP in FE colleges (FECs) were identified by the review panel. The first by Finch (2010) considers the narratives of young people in an FEC on their 'identity' as learners and the lack of confidence they feel. Going onto university, mainly to pursue vocational courses at post-92 institutions, is seen by these students as a way to escape. Meanwhile, Baldwin and Webber-Jones' (2016) chapter provides an important discussion from the perspective of college managers into widening access in an FE setting and, in particular, amongst FE colleges that also offer HE provision.

Widening participation at post-graduate level

Widening access at post-graduate (PG) level represents a further area of current interest that the contributors to the annual publication were early in exploring. Back, Zurn, Berard and Spittle's (2015) chapter offers a US perspective on the topic. Having acknowledged a gap in provision, and the challenges encountered in accessing PG study, the authors report on the success of a college support programme aimed at first generation students, those from low-income backgrounds and under-represented ethnic groups. A more recent contribution comes from Marvell (2020) who considers how those who were the first in their families to enter higher education negotiate the route onto taught master's programmes. The findings challenge prevailing accounts on the pathways taken, which, in reality, are often non-linear. The study also draws attention to how levels of mobility are linked to place, as well as highlighting the continuities of class distinctions.

Online learning

One of the contributions to this subject area identified by the review panel was Davies and Harris' (2016) chapter. This provides a quantitative assessment of the use of a virtual learning environment by distance learners. In particular, it discusses how to raise student engagement. Another is Gilbert and Parkes's (2023) study which considers the digital divide that has been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. Here, the focus is on the challenge that unequal access to technology and connectivity pose to students at a small English HE provider who come from under-represented backgrounds. The authors report on the action their institution has taken to address this through the provision of a small grant to these students, and the positive impact this measure has had. In light of this finding, other HE providers are encouraged to consider similar forms of support, although it is argued that discreet approaches to determining digital access needs are required.

Tracking and evaluation

Tracking and evaluation have been the concern of several authors over the years, including an early contribution by Raven (2013). This discusses an approach to evaluating outreach interventions that draws on the insights of the undergraduate students who support these initiatives, rather than the more usual sources of evidence from participants, teaching professionals and practitioners. The study highlights the

distinct perspective offered by those acting as chaperons, role models and tour guides, and provides guidance to practitioners in adopting similar approaches. Another contribution in this field comes from Church and Raven (2016) who discuss how large datasets can be used to trace the impact of WP interventions. Whilst the limitations of this approach are also discussed, the chapter's findings remain highly relevant given the focus now placed on monitoring and tracking those who have engaged in outreach activity. The same volume also saw another contribution in this area. This time from an Australian perspective. Having established the important role that feedback and feedforward can play in HE teaching and learning, Wyborn (2016) discusses a tool that has proved effective in supporting and improving the process.

Innovative practices and interventions

Chapters reporting on innovative practices and interventions have also been a staple of this publication. A sample of these were highlighted by the review panel. Whilst they are a popular outreach intervention, Richardson and Hunt (2013) claim that summer schools often fail to attend to intergenerational learning, which, it is argued, is key to achieving longer-term widening participation objectives. In response, their chapter reports on the evaluation of a summer school initiative that engaged students and their parents. This study should also be of interest to readers in highlighting the value of combining qualitative and quantitative sources of evidence. A further chapter, this time by Brost (2016), discusses an approach to programme design involving students at Malmö University, Sweden. The personal and reflective approach adopted is a distinct one and highlights the value and importance of FACE's international membership. Meanwhile, Richardson, Wallace, Williams, Jones and Mawson (2017) discuss an innovative approach to addressing issues around student mental health – an important subject area that is attracting much current sector and regulatory attention. O'Donnell, Murphy and Hunter's (2018) study offers a less generally considered institution-wide perspective in discussing the development of WP learner and data analytics at Ulster University – a strategic approach to WP that remains highly relevant.

Two more recent contributions on innovative practices are provided by Seymour (2020) and Harder-Collins (2023). The former reports on the findings of an evaluation of a week-long novel writing initiative for year 10 students (typically aged 14-15) from WP backgrounds. Based on the theory of possible selves, this intervention encouraged students to recognise the range of options and opportunities open to them. The findings reveal the intervention's positive impact in enhancing levels of motivation to work in school, and cultivating a greater sense of being in control of their own learner journeys, including opening up possibilities of progressing onto higher level study. Harder-Collins (2023) chapter concerns employability. Here, the attention is on exploring the impact of a new approach to improving access to graduate-level opportunities for students from under-represented backgrounds. The reported intervention, implemented in one English university, involved providing four online workshops informed by positive psychology and strengths-based education. The findings reveal the impact of this intervention, notably in relation to career planning.

Policy and practice

The other broad theme that has been addressed by a number of contributors over the years relates to policy and practice. Four chapters were highlighted by the review panel. The first, by Atherton (2010), considers how to best allocate resources to widen participation in England. This chapter provides a substantial and accessible overview of WP at the time of publication. Acland's (2011) study examines the key principles and benefits of sustained partnership working in promoting access for all. This was written in the context of the challenges the sector was anticipating it would face as a consequence of a funding review and the cessation of the English Aimhigher regional outreach programme. However, readers will find that many of the themes that both Atherton and Acland explore remain current. Tony Acland, a very committed and respected member of the FACE community, sadly passed away during the pandemic.

The two other chapters in this category are by Kendall (2012) and Raven (2017). The first of these considers the idea of an Aimhigher legacy. Whilst the introduction of university access agreements in England led in many instances to the rise of one-to-one relationships between higher education providers and learners (rather than a many-to-many relationship between HE providers, and schools and colleges, that had been the hallmark of Aimhigher), funding for collaborative outreach has continued. This chapter underpins the importance of such partnership working. Meanwhile, the second chapter draws on evidence gathered from a consultation of WP professionals. The findings consider both the WP challenges and opportunities reported by those surveyed. The study concludes by identifying sector priorities in the context of the then recently announced National Collaborative Outreach Programme (a successor to Aimhigher and a forerunner to the Uni Connect programme). The approach and insights offered seem especially timely, given current discussions about the future direction of a country-wide collaborative outreach programme.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the chapters highlighted in this review, and indeed on all the 195 chapters that have appeared in these volumes since 2009, certain shared characteristics emerge, which makes this a rather unique publication. Most notably, these volumes offer a practitioner perspective which, in this context, means the insights of those who work with students, are directly involved in the development, delivery and assessment of support, and who are often found at the interface between policy and practice. Their accounts capture the reality of what inequality in access, success and progression means, and how these challenges have and can be met.

Readers are encouraged to visit the section of the new FACE website where all previous editions of this publication can be accessed. In fact, this recommendation aligns with one of the principal aims of this review: to guide FACE members to this repository of knowledge and expertise. The other key objective is to inspire readers to add to this rich resource by submitting a paper for consideration in the next edition of this publication.

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‘Ideology, pedagogy and terminology: Interdisciplinary insights into the “co-paradigm” in Higher Education’

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Abstract

While co-creation as a practice and a subject for study in HE has become increasingly popular in recent years, there remain problems with terminology and, relatedly, with underlying ideo-pedagogic understandings. The term co-creation has been used interchangeably with ‘co-design’, ‘co-production’, and/or ‘co-construction’. Furthermore, there is complexity in terms of the varying understandings of students’ roles in this process; as partners, as change agents, as consultants or as producers. This chapter explores the health, social care and community development literatures that have pioneered the techniques deployed in the co-paradigm practices, of which co-creation is one. Bringing to bear elements of political theory, it argues for the need for more conceptual and practical clarity in defining co-creation and similar terms used in HE. It argues that terminology needs to reflect and differentiate the diametrically opposed ideo-pedagogic foundations that support practices currently dubbed ‘co-creation’ and suggests three viable alternative terms for those who use co-paradigm practices to enact radical pedagogies.

Key words: Freire, neo-liberalism, co-construction, co-production, co-creation, power.

Introduction

This chapter explores the implications of three observations about the voluminous HE ‘co-creation’ literature. The first is a degree of imprecision around terminology used to denote these practices. While the term ‘co-creation’ dominates, it is on occasion used interchangeably with ‘co-design’, ‘co-production’, and/or ‘co-construction’. We ask: are these practices, labelled the ‘co-paradigm’ (Dudau et.al., 2019), the same? And does it particularly matter either way? The second observation – regarding the highly polarised ideological underpinnings of approaches to co-creation in HE – offers a tentative answer to these two questions. On one hand, a sizeable portion of the literature validates co-creation in terms of its instrumental effectiveness in improving a university’s brand in a competitive global environment. On the other hand, practitioners like Bovill (2013) regard co-creation as an approach in critical pedagogy that can, in fact, powerfully counteract neo-classical liberal trends of commodification in HE. While some research recognises – to a degree – the existence of this ideological divide (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019), its potential significance for understandings around the practices of co-creation, and, indeed, the very use of the term ‘co-creation’ itself, requires more focussed attention. Specificity and clarity in use of terminology is ordinarily a useful aim. The third observation is the relative novelty of co-creation in HE. The practice only really developed in the early 2000s, with interest increasing more rapidly after 2018 (Zarandi et.al., 2022).

Therefore, to understand and develop clarity over terminology, practices and the ideologies underpinning the co-paradigm in HE, we present an argument based on our knowledge of the of literature beyond the sector.

We offer an exploratory discussion of the diverse and complex ‘co-paradigm’ literatures in various disciplines, and argue for the importance of insights from political theory in this topic. The next section (one) develops our first two observations. Section two details the historical origins and development of the ‘co-paradigms’ in other disciplines, and grapples with specific issues around participation and power. Section three discusses themes considered in the first two sections, building our overall argument and noting some of its specific implications. We demonstrate, firstly, that various literatures outside HE can help us better understand the contradictions and complexities of motivation, practice and terminology of ‘co-paradigm’ practices in HE. Secondly, we show that these wider literatures can help to tackle specific challenges that HE practitioners encounter – namely actively involving the most disengaged students in co-creation projects. We also identify a second area that HE needs to consider more – issues of accountability. Our main argument, however, relates to terminology: that neo-classical liberal ideology has is indelibly tainted the term ‘co-creation’ and that practitioners of radical, liberatory pedagogies that represent the neo-classicals’ very antithesis should consider deploying a different term to describe their practice. We explore three viable alternative terms: ‘co-production’, ‘co-construction’ or simply using ‘critical co-creation’.

1. Two critical observations of the HE ‘co-creation’ literature

1.1 HE Terminology

‘Co-creation’ is by far the most used of the ‘co-paradigm’ terms in the HE literature. On occasion, however, ‘co-creation’ is used interchangeably with ‘co-design’, ‘co-production’, and/or ‘co-construction’. Bovill et.al. (2016:197), for example, writing on co-creation, quote Little and Williams (2010:117) discussing ‘co-production’. The lack of comment on the different terms here implies they are interchangeable, though Bovill et.al (2016) are clear that they regard ‘co-design’ as one constitutive part of the broader co-creation process. In a second example, Halász’s (2022) engaging exploration of education research and impact uses the term ‘co-production’ in the chapter title, ‘co-construction’ once (in the chapter abstract) and then ‘co-production’ and ‘co-creation’ interchangeably and often together throughout the substantive chapter itself, with no sense that they are differentiable.

In a third important example, Bilous et.al. (2018) conflate ‘co-creation’ with ‘co-construction’ (they mention the latter only in the abstract). In this case, however, there is internal consistency as Bilous et.al. (2018) is a rare example of an exploration of the terminology itself in the HE ‘co-creation’ literature. Bilous et.al. (2018) suggest that the differing terminology relates to specific contexts of practice; they argue that healthcare research for example, deploys ‘co-design’, while education and wider social research literatures are more likely to use the terms ‘co-production’ and ‘co-construction’, as well as ‘co-creation’. That there are various terms in use is unimportant for Bilous et.al. as all these co-practices are united by ‘the desire for genuine and meaningful engagement with and participation of key people, perspectives, and ideas in developing various projects, priorities, and solutions’ (2018:166). The general sense offered here is that ‘co-creation’ is ambitious, involving multiple stakeholders engaging in horizontal, democratic ways over an extended period. Bilous et.al. describe a ‘messy’ (2018:168) process of co-creation involving international partner organisations, meeting and communicating by various means over a project’s two-year duration. This chapter, dissatisfied that conflation of the co-paradigm terms is the only or best solution, takes Bilious et.al’s important sojourn into other literatures a little further and deeper, and concludes rather differently.

In terms of delineating the various forms of co-creation in HE, there is Bovill’s (2019) useful typology, although the definition it employs is all-encompassing: there is no mention of the other ‘co-terms’ and how they might relate to co-creation in HE. Bovill et.al. argue that co-creation occurs ‘when staff and students

work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches’ (2016: 196). Again, this seems rather broad. Developing wider agreement on what the specific ‘co-terms’ can mean and entail in terms of HE practices promises helpful conceptual and procedural clarity. This argument becomes more self-evident as we now develop a second observation about the HE ‘co-creation’ literature.

1.2 Ideology

According to Freeden (2003), ideology informs – consciously or unknowingly – how we all engage with the political world. Ideologies thus offer the theoretical foundations for all forms of pedagogy, radical or otherwise. But there is seldom explicit recognition of this and its significant implications in the education literature outside of the research into governmental education policy. This broad observation broadly holds for HE literatures, even though co-creation is championed by practitioners with antithetical ideological underpinnings. That the ‘I’ word seldom appears in the education literature relating specifically to pedagogy is surely due, at least in part, to its negative connotations: as Eagleton pithily remarks: ‘nobody would claim that their own thinking was ideological, just as nobody would habitually refer to themselves as Fatso. Ideology, like halitosis, is in this sense what the other person has (1991:2). We use the term ‘ideo-pedagogical’ here firstly, to recognise explicitly the intimate relationship between ideology and all pedagogical practice, and, secondly, to underscore the importance of this relationship in general and for our argument here in particular. Ideo-pedagogic offers more specificity than the currently used term politico-pedagogic.

Ostensibly, the broad aims and practices of co-creation suggest that its practitioners regard it as a vehicle for Freirian (1972) liberatory/radical democratic pedagogies. In curriculum design, where co-creation in HE is most deployed, it necessitates a move away from traditional hierarchical pedagogical processes towards staff embracing an ‘ethic of reciprocity’ and developing collaborations and partnerships with students to design courses (including assessments) and, more generally, improve teaching approaches. Co-creation aims to blur the teacher/learner divide, thereby enhancing appreciation of learning and teaching, boosting student motivation, engagement, and self-understanding. Practitioners celebrate co-creation as it offers improved, more authentic educational experiences (Bovill et.al., 2016; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). Similarly, in public management literature discussions of co-paradigm practices in education, there are obvious (albeit ordinarily unstated), links with critical pedagogies (Bransden and Honingh, 2018).

Recognising the self-criticality and specific problems and obstacles that animate many practitioners’ research into how co-creation processes can be as effective as possible bolsters this impression. Bilous et.al. for example, explore hitherto neglected ‘cross-cultural complexity’ in co-creating a tertiary curriculum, which was ‘not simply about being able to “work together”, but is also about being open to de-centring Western priorities, knowledges, traditions, and ways of doing things’ (2018:167). Using feminist, and post-colonial theories, they draw on northern Australian Indigenous knowledge to argue that ‘the co-creation process must occur within an evolving conceptual framework, open to revision during the course of collaboration’ (Bilous et.al., 2018:167). They also remark on the skewing effects on co-creation projects that funding body requirements can have.

Similarly, there is recent exploration of other issues in co-creation around institutional norms and resistance to co-created change, the heavy time demands that it can bring on students and staff and other risks it can involve (Bovill et.al., 2016). Thirdly, many have explored the challenges to achieving inclusivity and the dangers of co-creation involving the already most engaged students; the privilege and elitism that this stems from and can exacerbate, and the concomitant reinforced exclusion of the most marginalised students (Marquis et.al., 2018; Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2020). Finally, there are questions, too, around potential

imbalances of power in co-created working, the accompanying resistance and the recognition that co-creation does not necessarily empower all involved, when it should (Bovill et.al., 2016).

Catalysing co-creation processes that scrutinise and problematise power structures and encourage students to exercise agency in their learning is surely more profoundly ‘political’ than it is ‘moral’ (Ashwin and McVitty, 2015: 351). Yet most of the literature at best *implies* a radical approach rather than spells out the underlying ideo-pedagogy informing its understanding of co-creation. Important exceptions are Bovill and Woolmer who locate their approaches in the influence of critical pedagogy which ‘challenges the continued teaching of accepted forms of knowledge and encourages students and staff to collaborate in creating new forms of knowledge from their own experiences, in order to question existing views of the world’ (2019:408). Bovill (2013) helpfully traces ideas around democratising the curriculum back to Dewey in the early twentieth century, with critical pedagogy (initially operating in school education) coming to inform approaches in HE that include co-creation. Such approaches can powerfully counteract neo-classical liberal commodification of learning in HE. In this vein, Stuart (2019) discusses how a Marginalisation and Co-created Education research project involving staff and students from three European nations allowed for challenging neoliberal discourses as ‘nasty little theories’.

A sizeable proportion of the HE literature, however, approaches co-creation entirely differently. Co-creation is thus a ‘marketing trend’ among universities competing for ‘customers’ (students). Co-creation is for adding ‘value’ to a ‘customer’s’ experience through engaging them as ‘consultants’ (Zarandi et.al., 2022:1; Dean et.al., 2016). In the British context co-creation is instrumentalised as a mechanism to help universities raise their National Student Survey scores and therefore their marketability, to ‘home’ and international students alike. Given the Office for Students’ (OfS) control over and freezing of home tuition fees, this is of particular importance in the potentially highly lucrative international student market, where, unregulated, universities charge much higher fees. In essence, this is a neo-classical liberal approach that seeks to monetise or instrumentalise co-creation.

Mutual unrecognition, however, prevails in the HE literature. For example, Dean et.al (2016), who apply concepts of ‘service logic’ and ‘value’ to the ‘customer’ (student) experience in co-creation, neither cite nor are cited in the leading ‘critical’ (Freirean) co-creation literature. Zarandi et.al.’s (2022) recent literature review for, appropriately enough, the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, could hardly ignore the copious critical pedagogy-informed co-creation literature in its entirety. Nevertheless, its ideo-pedagogical underpinnings mean it is concerned with the increasing ‘competition for student enrolment and funding among universities’, the consequent need for HE institutions to ‘implement and offer high quality service experiences’ and how co-creation ‘may contribute to creating mutual value for institutions and students’ (Zarandi et.al., 2022:1). On the other (‘critical’) side of the divide, there is some acknowledgement of instrumental motives for engaging in co-creation (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019) and a recognition of the practical problems that may arise. For example, instrumentalising co-creation can render staff understandably sceptical and resistant to involvement in it (Bovill et.al, 2016:201). There is, however, little overt problematisation of the deep ideo-pedagogical divisions around understandings and uses of co-creation, and what, if anything, this could or should mean for various practices and the terms we use to denote them.

2. Development of the ‘co-paradigms’ in other disciplines

This section subdivides into four parts. The first explores the origins of the various co-paradigm terms and their developing meanings over time and in various disciplines. Parts two and three draw on political theory to discuss power and participation (who participates, and on what terms)? Part four briefly concludes.

2.1 Development of terms in the ‘co-paradigm’

Co-creation, co-production, and co-design are terms and processes used across a range of disciplines and fields; public management and administration, urban planning, public policy, health, social care, software engineering, disability studies, and social research. These terms denote a type of public engagement, participation or involvement; a partnership or collaboration between the public and professionals within the private and public sectors, civil society and citizens. Unlike the bulk of education literature, the public management literature overtly discusses meanings and outcomes of these potentially different processes.

Dudau et.al (2019) suggest co-creation, co-production and co-design constitute a ‘co-paradigm’ which has innate appeal and apparent ‘goodness’, meaning that no one can oppose them. The lack of conceptual clarity, and their imprecise use across multiple disciplines has hampered the theory building necessary to enable comparison of approaches across disciplines and countries (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018). The co-paradigm therefore means different things to different people (Dudau et.al., 2019).

The historical development of the various co-paradigm terms illuminates relevant complexities. Of the three major terms, ‘co-production’ has the longest history, originating in the public sector in the context of growing interest in more participatory forms of democracy emerging in the New Left (Pateman, 1970) and in similar developments in pedagogy (Freire, 1972). Specifically, economist Elinor Ostrom (et.al, 1978) and a group of researchers coined the term ‘co-production’ in the later 1970s to explain collaboration between public service departments and citizens. Sometimes public producers were ‘increasing consumer involvement in service production’ while ‘in other areas, consumers are demanding an increased role’ (Parks et.al., 1981)

In the 2000s, co-production resurged through third sector organisations and then British public services, local government and health and social care as a way of understanding relationships between professionals and patients (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Needham and Carr, 2009). Co-production developed through the recognition that the service user appears twice in policy processes; once as customer and again as part of the delivery system (originating with Normann, 1984), i.e., sometimes the professional performs the ‘service’ (e.g. a lecturer delivers a traditional ‘passive learning’ lecture) and sometimes they play an ‘enabling’ role; so the service user performs the task (e.g. a student finds relevant materials to help write an essay) (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012). In the private sector, the ‘cunning’ approach was to play more of an ‘enabler’ role; Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) point to supermarket self-checkouts that reduce the need for paid employees. As customers do the work for free, supermarkets maximise profits. With austerity and public sector expenditure cuts post-2008 global recession, co-production represented an alternative, cheaper way of delivering services and ‘even rescuing services, which might entirely be cut’ (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012:1123).

Although the aim of cheaper, more efficient services pre-existed 2008, there was another framing of co-production as part of a communitarian movement aiming to encourage direct participation in socially valuable activities, to increase responsibility for self-help and mutual support networks that could complement state provision of services (Pestoff, 2018). Co-production came to emphasise that people have assets as well as needs, and that the former can improve public services. Furthermore, involving people in producing and implementing services might also help reinvigorate trust in institutions, political processes, and democracy (where trust was low or declining) to help people make informed decisions about their needs and to strengthen their ownership and commitment (Grimshaw and Lever, 2008).

Renewed interest was also the consequence, as Parks et.al. (1981) highlight above, of people’s demands for more say in the services they use. For example, the disability movement’s slogan ‘nothing about us, without us’, (Charlton, 1998) was a demand to end discrimination, for equitable access to services and to a voice to

influence and improve services for disabled people. Another example is the involvement of ‘service users’ or ‘experts by experience’ in health and social care services, co-producing and improving the knowledge and training of health and social care professionals (Beresford, 2019).

The term ‘co-creation’, on the other hand, originated in marketing in the private sector as a mechanism to produce goods more efficiently. This involves customers taking over specific activities in the production chain and creating additional value, e.g. users of Apple iPhones developing and marketing apps (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012) and, more recently, social media ‘influencers’ creating content on platforms like TikTok, both of which increase the revenues/value of the respective companies. Co-creation is specifically about adding value and innovation and only emerged in the business management literature through Prahalad and Ramaswamy's work in the early 2000s (Alves et.al., 2016:1626). More recently, co-creation transferred to the public sector in a modified form. Voorberg et.al suggest that citizens can be co-implementers, co-designers or co-initiators in public services and that the term co-creation denotes involvement of citizens as (co)-initiators or co-designers, while co-production is for citizens involved in ‘(co-)implementation of public services’ (2015:1347). Brandsen and Honingh (2018), who suggest that co-creation in public services leads to social innovation, concur.

‘Co-design’ is a more recent response in public policy to foster innovation and address weaknesses in policy-making processes. Specifically, ‘design thinking’ approaches address so-called ‘wicked issues’ – a term taken from planning and urban studies to encapsulate intractable issues such as poverty which defy collectively agreed solutions (Bowman et.al., 2022) – by reframing policy and then generating and testing new policy solutions (Lewis et.al., 2020). Attempts to define the relationship and/or differences between the main co-paradigm processes can result in confusion. For example, Dudau et.al. (2019) suggest that co-design is the first step towards co-production in public administration, meaning that co-production is sometimes referred to as co-creation. As these co-paradigm terms are often used interchangeably, their precise meanings can be obscured, even in the public administration literature (Voorberg et.al., 2015; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012).

Recent medical research literature similarly grapples with co-paradigm terminology. Though not including the term ‘co-construction’ itself, Vargas et.al (2022), for example, do offer fairly clear definitions of the other three terms, with greatest and ongoing involvement in partnership in medical research encapsulated by ‘co-creation’ and the least by ‘co-production’. Even here, however, there is contestation over where precisely the dividing lines between these specific practices are and even whether it is useful to differentiate them at all. Locock and Boaz (2019) suggest that the nature and extent of different stakeholders’ involvement differentiate co-design and co-production (among other collaborative practices like participatory research). They argue, however, for more collaboration between all these still marginalised approaches, as the differences between them are not as great as their respective practitioners claim.

A further level of complexity arises in that the three ‘co’ terms are often used in conjunction with or to replace related terms such as ‘collaborative governance’, ‘community involvement’, ‘service user/patient involvement’, ‘participation and civic engagement’, and ‘participatory research’ (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018). Arguing that terminological clarity matters, Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) suggest eschewing generic terms like co-production, and instead setting out the process used directly. They contend that co-production is all-encompassing, as it includes co-planning of policy; and co-design, co-prioritisation, co-financing, co-managing, co-delivery and co-assessment (all) of services.

To summarise, our exploration of numerous diverse disciplines’ literatures and their usage of the co-paradigm terms over time establishes, firstly (and unsurprisingly) that there is considerable contestation among them all, about quite what the differences between the terms might be and whether it is useful to

aim for clearer conceptual dividing lines between them. Some suggest that we should even embrace the current fuzziness of boundaries in accepting that all the co-paradigm approaches, at heart, have similar aims and comparable processes (albeit practiced in rather different contexts). Second, however, co-production clearly predates co-creation as a concept. As important, the former emerged from the public sector, which naturally informs its values. Co-creation, by contrast, first emerged in marketing in the private sector, and is associated with a rather distinct set of values. There is a broader and more developed literature around the co-production, public sector-based experience that we can draw on to better understand HE in the UK (formerly part of the public sector), and particularly the strong focus on different forms of citizen involvement. We turn now to consider in more depth issues relating to participation and power; who participates, how and under what terms?

2.2 Power, participation and accountability in the wider literatures

In (public sector) co-production, citizens participate in numerous ways that can improve the effectiveness of an organisation’s services (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018). Indeed, Osborne and Stokosch (2013) view co-production as integral to effective service delivery because of the interdependence between producer and citizen. Understandings of co-production tend to include at their heart notions of equality and reciprocity in relationships between professionals and service users (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012). Furthermore, there is a broad emphasis on the need for active rather than passive input or participation from citizens. Brandsen and Honingh (2018) argue that co-production needs freely given participation, which they suggest it is a subset of volunteering. They stress, however, that citizens can be coerced into participating, giving an example of pupils having no choice but to attend schools, where a more collaborative approach to learning may then manifest as co-production.

The literature also explores multiple practical issues around participation. The complexity of co-produced services delivered within the public sector, involving networks of actors working to develop and deliver services, mean that various tensions may exist or develop between professionals and service-users (Dudau et.al., 2019). Local knowledge and needs, shaped by perceptions of what people think, is realistically deliverable, are also structured by often complex planning processes and outcomes, rather than determining them. In effect, institutional contexts can significantly constrain service users participating in co-production (Mosse, 2001).

Given the practical complexities, it is unsurprising that researchers in the field of development studies like Cooke and Kothari (2001) drew attention to the potential for tyranny in participatory development, warning that the term ‘participation’, like the co-paradigm, is seductive and requires critique. As meanings of ‘participation’ vary and are often vague, it is important to be clear about participation *in what*, and fundamentally for our argument, *for whose benefit* (Cornwall, 2008). ‘Participation’ is often viewed as interchangeable with terms such as ‘involvement’ and ‘engagement’, though the differences between ‘participation’ and ‘involvement’ in particular, are sometimes asserted (Cornwall, 2008). Indeed, some researchers deliberately use ‘engagement’ and others ‘involvement’, in preference to the term ‘participation’ (Slotterback and Lauria, 2019).

The exercise of power and power relations within collaboration between community practitioners and professionals can reinforce rather than diminish existing inequalities, unless recognised and rigorously examined (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). In this connection, Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation serves as a foundational model for advancing, evaluating and critiquing participation processes and the power underlying them. Arnstein (1969), an urban redevelopment planner, social worker and then academic, delineates a participation process illustrated with eight rungs on a ladder. These rank participation levels ranging from non-participation at the bottom to tokenism and then citizen control at the top. While this influential model has been adapted for working with young people, and in healthcare and international

development, critics regard it as linear and simplistic (Tritter and McCallum, 2006). Indeed, Arnstein herself acknowledged that there might be potentially ‘150 rungs’ (1969:217). Nevertheless, the key for Arnstein is power redistribution from ‘haves’/powerholders (the government, agencies and experts) to ‘have nots’ (marginalised, under-represented groups); ‘Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless’ (1969:216).

Arnstein (1969) also recognised the complexity of the term ‘community’; the heterogeneity within the groups of ‘have nots’ and ‘haves’; and that questions of participation and power are therefore complicated and challenging. Nevertheless, critics have dubbed Arnstein’s conceptualisation of power partial and simplistic, wanting in its grasp of the complexities of power relations and understandings of justice (Slotterback and Lauria, 2019; Tritter and McCallum, 2006). Writing from a health perspective, Tritter and McCallum (2006) offer a more nuanced discussion around power within collaborations. To develop Tritter and McCallum’s (2006) approach, we draw attention here to political theorists such as Foucault (2019) and Lukes (1974) who himself draws on Arendt (1970). All examine power as networked, consensual, shared and fluid, changing over time and context dependent. For example, Lukes’ three dimensional view of power explores conflict and its absence, allowing for ‘consideration of the many ways in which potential issues are kept out of politics, whether through the operation of social forces and institutional practices or through individuals’ decisions’ (1974:24). The collaborative governance literature widely discusses networks of power and, as Arnstein (1969) also suggested, the ways in which different knowledges are developed, used, valued and shared also determine how power is distributed and who has power to influence outcomes.

Finally, and related intimately to the distribution and exercise of power, is the issue of accountability in co-production. Processes involving collaborative decision-making, service design and implementation can blur lines of accountability and allow agencies to shed responsibilities (Steen et.al., 2018). There are important questions over who service-users can hold accountable when they are an integral part of the production process. Szescilo (2018) suggests that legislation prevents a blame-game and public agencies are still accountable. As suggested in the above discussion about power and participation, the reality is rather more complex. Collaborative processes aim at better outcomes and improved practices but what if, for example, outcomes actually reduce satisfaction amongst HE students? Only staff take the blame and are responsible for those outcomes. Transparent, open and ongoing discussions around accountability and its implications are therefore an integral aspect of collaboration processes. Yet important issues around accountability and the co-paradigm practices in HE remain largely unexplored in the literature.

2.3 Who participates/is represented; who is excluded? Issues from the wider literatures

Deep historical, structurally reinforced societal inequalities relating to social class, gender, race/ ethnicity, and others can mean that even giving marginalised groups – for example, women from minoritised ethnic groups (Beebejaun and Grimshaw, 2011) – a seat at the table does not automatically offer them power. Investment in capacity building and skills development are necessary to address this. Yet, some groups are not even provided with a ‘seat at the table’, as problems around representation play out in co-production of public services. Those with assets such as the skills to participate and from higher socio-economic groups can dominate (Verschuere et.al., 2012). Co-production therefore may even be a factor in discrimination in public service access. If dominant groups control the process, a range of important minoritised perspectives could be ignored (Beresford, 2019). Emejulu and Bassel (2015), for example, highlight the reduction in spending power of Black and minoritised women, which reduces their power to provide services to this group, resulting in diminished access to vital services for this often discriminated against and marginalised group of women.

While discrimination in relation to co-production processes and services is possible and actual, there are, on the other hand, possibilities for including marginalised and under-represented groups. Sometimes described as ‘hard to reach’, community work recognises the importance of meeting people where they are; where they live and feel comfortable. A sense of belonging is important, place matters (Grimshaw and Mates, 2022), so spaces can be opened up in, for example, local community centres, schools, mosques or churches.

It is important to acknowledge that not everyone *wants* to participate. Too much targeting can result in the most marginalised doing the most work in co-production. There are clearly problems in effectively asking individuals or groups affected by a problem to take responsibility to solve it; so doing can also make an individual or marginalised group the problem, rather than the structural issue. Long-term economic problems generally weaken motivation for social engagement, which becomes seen as a luxury good (Szescilo, 2018). This issue is highlighted in community literature (Grimshaw et.al, 2020) and specifically in relation to marginalised groups such as Black and minoritised women (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015) bearing the brunt of austerity in the voluntary and community sector. Offering a material incentive to marginalised individuals or groups to participate is one way of potentially addressing at least elements of this issue, though doing so brings its own theoretical and practical problems; we revisit these below in section three.

2.4 Conclusion

To conclude this section, we emphasise again the necessity for clarity in terms, which should accompany a detailed explanation of processes and outcomes in co-paradigm practices. The two are, of course, intimately related; clearer definitions enable a better understanding of processes and outcomes, thereby enabling comparability (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018). We need to draw a further lesson from the public management and community governance/development literature: specifically, Dudau et.al’s (2019) call for disenchantment with, and critical reflection and analysis of, the co-paradigm concepts in spite (or perhaps because) of their intuitive appeal. We require a similar degree of healthy scepticism about the aims of these processes in HE: why are we involving students and how, precisely? And what are our goals? Are we expecting innovation in services, in teaching, research and other support services offered to students? Are we asking students to fix HE and develop policy solutions? Is it demanding too much from students to encourage them to work on the ‘wicked’ problems they are confronting now in their universities or will confront in the future? And, particularly, how do we involve marginalised individuals or groups of students without compelling their participation or foisting a heavy burden of work onto them?

Certainly, there is widespread recognition in the literature of the need to intentionally include people from marginalised and under-represented groups. This helps ensure representation of a range of perspectives, rather than simply further validating dominant understandings. The wider literatures remind us that participation in co-paradigm processes can lead to exploitation, and facilitate (as well as illuminate) unjust, unaccountable or arbitrary exercises of power. It is therefore essential that minimum expectations are set for collaborations between staff and students in HE, which acknowledge the time and resource commitments required. Important, too, is provision of relevant training to staff and students to develop skills and capacity, as well as recognition that a potential shift in values of the participants and the institutions they operate in may be necessary for success (depending, naturally, on how we define ‘success’).

3. Discussion

This section discusses themes explored in the first two sections, developing the argument about the utility of bringing insights from the wider literatures to bear more directly on problems in HE. We do this by first exploring the specific issues in HE around actively involving the most disengaged students in co-paradigm projects. The second subsection develops our main argument about terminology; the third then moves back into specifics of theory and practice in the light of our terminological argument.

3.1 Actively involving the most disengaged students; wider lessons applied

As demonstrated above, the co-creation in HE literature has undoubtedly drawn from experiences of co-paradigm practices in other disciplines. This, of course, includes discussion around engaging the most marginalised students in co-creation (Marquis et.al., 2018; Bovill et.al, 2016; Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). The current solution to potential exclusion of ‘hard to reach’ students in HE proffered in the literature is ‘whole-class’ co-creation, albeit accompanied by the recognition that some students remain disinclined to participate (Bovill et.al., 2016). Wider literatures, however, suggest another approach; targeting disadvantaged ‘hard to reach’ students by going to where they are. This might involve coming out of intimidating classrooms where students may have experienced classism, racism or other forms of discriminatory behaviour from their peers, into geographical spaces outside where they may feel more relaxed. Recognising that student groups with little sense of belonging do not feel comfortable or included on campus, in classrooms, is also an argument for developing and providing more inclusive and welcoming spaces on campus to transform their experiences and foster a sense of belonging. Practical ways to do this could easily form part of ‘co-paradigm’ processes in HE. Going to where excluded students are could also involve online spaces or spaces where disadvantaged students gather; specific groups organised around an element of their identity, such as first-generation scholars. Mates (2024) explores this approach, its challenges, benefits and outcomes, in terms of first-generation scholars at a British university.

3.2 What term *should* we use for co-paradigm critical pedagogy in HE?

We return now to the terminology argument. Section one demonstrated firstly that there is opacity in terminology used to describe ‘co-paradigm’ practices in HE and, secondly, that there is an ideo-pedagogical gulf between practitioners. Some adopt neo-classical liberal understandings of HE as a ‘business’ that can use students as ‘consultants’ to improve services and therefore boost marketability and profitability. Conversely, most of the HE co-paradigm literature, in some cases explicitly, adopts perspectives of critical pedagogy and the radical ideologies that underlie it. Section two then showed that different co-paradigm terms originated in different sectors, with co-production emerging first, and in the public sector. We saw how various literatures discuss meanings and conflation of terms and that there remains a debate over whether this matters, and, if it does, what specific terms should mean.

First, we argue that it *does matter* that practitioners coming from diametrically opposed ideo-pedagogical starting points advocate co-paradigm practices in HE. It matters, simply and fundamentally, because underlying assumptions about the political world in general (Freedon, 2003) and, more specifically, the nature of the HE sector (and of practitioners’ and students’ roles within it), determine how we approach and execute co-paradigm projects. Of course, ideo-pedagogic assumptions determine how we value who benefits, and what, indeed, ‘benefitting’ itself means. Freirian (1972) approaches aim for (and most value) student participants benefitting, and in ways that cannot possibly be measured in financial terms (Cornwall, 2008).

We establish that there is an essential relationship between underlying assumptions, processes and outcomes; and that motivation, means and ends are all intimately connected if we ask ourselves the following questions. Are the students simply consultants with whom we have an entirely transactional relationship and who we must therefore reward materially (and due to the rules of the ‘market’ rather than moral imperative) for their insights? Is our aim solely to improve the delivery of our educational services so our department, schools or institutions can attract higher paying international students, thereby raising institutional profits? Or, alternatively, are we looking for mechanisms to undermine the neo-classical liberal paradigm as it operates in HE by facilitating the self-knowledge and empowerment of our students? Do we aim to equip students with critical tools and support mechanisms to enable them to develop intellectually and personally further and fuller when they are studying with us? And, in arming our students with critical skills and intellectual confidence for their adult lives, do we have zero regard for whether so doing will allow

our institution to sell its product more successfully and for more money? Put another way, are our students a means to our institution’s profit-driven ends, their insights (harvested through co-paradigm processes) enhancing the marketability of a product? Or are our students ends in themselves, i.e. individuals and groups who we, as educators, can help to self-realise in profound and ‘human’ ways? Our answers to these questions, corresponding with our ideo-pedagogy, necessarily determine how we approach co-paradigm processes, how and on what terms we engage with students and how we understand and validate the outcomes of such processes.

These considerations are of even more importance when it comes to the so-called ‘hard to reach’, often socio-economically disadvantaged students. Putting it bluntly; if approaching co-paradigm processes from a neo-classical liberal (transactional) perspective, why would practitioners try to improve the pedagogic environment of students who are likely to offer institutions the bare minimum of resources, but require the most institutional resources in return? Of course, in Britain there are OfS set widening participation targets that universities must hit to charge the highest fees for home students. Beyond that, however, there are only material disincentives for ‘elite’ universities to become more attractive and accommodating to so-called ‘non-traditional’ students. It is only basic tenets of social justice – informed by radical ideologies and critical pedagogies – that suggest otherwise.

Secondly, and because these fundamental ideological divisions do matter – as does terminological clarity – we argue that at least one side of the ideo-pedagogical divide requires a different co-paradigm term to apply to and differentiate its practices. Given its origins in and ongoing association with private sector understandings and concerns (and notwithstanding its jump across to the public and third sectors), we should discard ‘co-creation’ as a term denoting critical pedagogical approaches to co-paradigm processes. As those who see radical liberatory (rather than money-making) potential in co-paradigm practices in HE tend to also offer the most self-reflective and (self)critical insights in the literature, we see no obvious obstacles to critical pedagogues abandoning the problematic ‘co-creation’ term in HE.

What term, then, should those approaching co-paradigm practices from radical ideo-pedagogical positions consider adopting? ‘Co-design’ is ruled out as HE practitioners and others tend to regard it as merely a constitutive part of wider co-paradigm processes (Bovill et.al, 2016; Voorberg et.al., 2015). This leaves three alternatives. The first is to adopt the term ‘co-production’, which originated first, and from the public sector, which surely has more in common with public universities than the private sector. Of course, some forms of radical pedagogy will problematise this; anarchist pedagogies (Haworth, 2012), for example, reject any validation of the state (and all forms of hierarchy and institutionalised power) and instead encourage mutuality between individuals and groups outside it. Further, the term ‘co-production’ has become more complex with the increasing use of private sector ‘market’ mechanisms, resources and terminology into all sectors of the state that took on a self-proclaimed social democratic form in the 1990s, via the Frankenstein’s monster ideology of the ‘Third way’ (Giddens, 2000; Mouffe, 2005). Governance International (2024), for example, currently defines co-production as ‘The public sector and citizens making best use of each other’s assets and resources to achieve better outcomes or improved efficiency’. The instrumentality and transactional underpinnings of this definition are far from nascent co-production understandings.

Perhaps then a second option is preferable – adoption of the term ‘co-construction’. This term remains relatively unused in the HE sector. Consequently, it does not come with the same baggage as either ‘co-creation’ or, to a lesser extent, ‘co-production’. The third option is to offer clarity to the ‘co-creation’ term itself by adding the prefix ‘critical’ to denote clearly the ideo-pedagogical underpinnings of practitioners. At the very least, we call for a broader debate on terminology, and its importance for indicating underlying

ideological assumptions and their implications for what we do as practitioners in HE, why and how we do it, and how we understand its outcomes.

3.3 Paying disadvantaged students to participate in co-construction

Finally, we return to a specific problem arising from the tension between our rejection of ‘co-creation’ (understood as informed by neo-classical liberal ideology and a transactional, profit-driven approach) and what we will now call co-construction (a term we understand as interchangeable with ‘critical co-creation’) and our pursuit of effective co-construction practices with disadvantaged students. This is the thorny practical issue of remunerating student participation. Payment of co-researchers in participatory research is suggested as good practice in the wider literatures and there are examples of HE institutions of paying students (the national living wage) during short internships (Coté, 2023).

As a rule, this is surely better and fairer than expecting unpaid work from students. There is, of course, the danger that only more advantaged students with the capacity to undertake such contracts can apply, and we must therefore ask ourselves who may be excluded from participation. There may also be concerns about students doing what would have been academics’ work, thereby contributing to the undermining and devaluing of university staff. Furthermore, paying students for co-construction involvement risks feeding into more transactional/ profit-gearred discourses, even if we approach the process from radical perspectives. Payment for student involvement should surely not be the norm, but we can waive this rule of thumb if doing so supports the most materially disadvantaged students.

Even then, however, potential problems remain. Short-term, zero-hour contracts that students might find themselves on contribute to the precarious labour market and can result in ill health (Standing, 2014). Involvement in co-construction is highly problematic for students already experiencing poverty, perhaps reliant on food banks and working low paid part-time jobs to make ends meet, who might now be expected to fit in extra precarious co-construction work. In such cases, co-construction practitioners must be sensitive to all these possibilities, and find ways to minimise time and resource demands on disadvantaged students, while maximising the resources for impactful participation. We also need to be clear to all involved that the allocating of resources like payments to students for their involvement is not the result of a transactional, cost-benefit approach, but rather a pure matter of actual social justice (rather than Third way ‘capital appeasement’ social justice) (Hay, 1999:159); an effort to divert resources from the (rich) institution to individuals and groups who will benefit from such support.

Conclusion

We have explored the wider co-paradigm and political theory literatures and debates to better understand both terminology and specific practices in HE. In terms of the latter, we argue that these literatures offer us pointers in how to engage so called ‘hard to reach’ students (explored further in relation to first generation students in Mates (2024)). In terms of the former, we argue, in contrast to many, that clarity of terminology matters in the HE literature. Furthermore, ideology matters because it underpins all pedagogies; our term ‘ideo-pedagogical’ conveys this. Using this framework, we have described two opposed ideo-pedagogical approaches to ‘co-creation’ in HE that seem, at best, to notice each other in passing. The neo-classical liberal approach deploys ‘co-creation’ to instrumentalise, transactionalise, marketise and monetise, while critical pedagogy seeks to collaborate, emancipate and liberate. The curious paradox of the co-paradigm is that it implies partnership and collaboration instead of competition; yet competition is integral to the neo-classical liberal university, and necessarily impacts on the ways staff and students engage, participate, and feel in terms of a sense of belonging. Does it matter if our ideo-pedagogical starting points are oppositional and our goals are entirely different, if we engage in the same co-paradigm processes? We argue it does, because where we start from and where we want to end up necessarily

conditions in fundamental ways how we (staff and students) approach the processes themselves: means and ends are intimately related.

From mining the wider co-paradigm literatures, we argue that co-creation’s origins in marketing in the private sector render it the most suitable term for those interested in using students as means to their ends of better marketing their institutions. Those of us drawing inspiration from radical critical pedagogies looking to democratise the sector, generate resistance to dominant discourses and offer counter-hegemonic narratives, need a better and clearer label for what we do. ‘Co-production’, with its origins in the state sector, seems apposite. But its more recent instrumentalization, the function of neo-classical liberal ideas infiltrating deeper into social democracy through Trojan horses like the ‘Third way’, render it problematic (though this process has allowed radicals in HE to embrace the term ‘co-creation’ unproblematically too). Our preferred term is thus co-construction, which simply has less baggage attached to it in HE than any of the other co-paradigm terms. Thus, we can adopt and define this term more closely. At the very least we should be using the term ‘critical co-creation’ and, at a time of massive and growing global inequalities and impending human-created climate catastrophe, maintaining a robust rejection of ideo-pedagogies that are anathema to critical thinking and true liberation.

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Supporting young carers and care experienced young people: Hepp Activity Development

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Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp)

Abstract

This chapter will demonstrate how Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp) used the student voice of care experienced (CE) and young (YC) students, and the supporters (teachers, virtual heads and YC support workers) of each cohort to inform the development of their ‘Go Further Go Higher (GFGH)’ outreach programme for underrepresented groups: Power, Investigation, Explore (PIE). Hepp conducted its research, drawing on the perspectives of experts by experience (the young people and supporters of each cohort) to understand the barriers faced when thinking about higher education as an option. The primary research and the Theory of Change (ToC) informed the decision to develop Hepp’s ‘GFGH’ programme by implementing the sustained programme ‘PIE’ (a programme for Year 8s – Year 10s with three interventions each year over three-years). The primary and secondary research enabled Hepp to devise an evaluation plan to inform decision making for future years following the pilot in 2023/24.

Key words: care experienced, young carers, higher education.

Introduction

‘Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp) works across South Yorkshire (SY) and Northeast Derbyshire (NED) to encourage more children, young people, and adults to consider higher education (HE) opportunities. Hepp is jointly funded by Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and the University of Sheffield (UoS), working closely with a sister project, HeppSY, which is part of the Uni Connect Programme, funded by the Office for Students (OfS). Hepp and HeppSY provide impartial advice and guidance about HE to all schools in SY and NED.’ (HeppHUB, n.d: About Hepp).

Following Covid-19, Hepp reflected on its approach to delivering outreach programmes to CE and YC students. In agreement with its funding partners SHU and the UoS, it was decided that Hepp would use the student voice of CE and YC students. The aim would be to inform the development of an outreach programme, which provided activity that addressed the barriers each cohort faces when thinking about HE.

This chapter will discuss how Hepp approached the research, drawing on the perspectives of experts by experience, how the research was used to inform and develop Hepp’s ‘Go Further Go Higher (GFGH)’ programme, including the development of a ToC and concluding with the steps taken to implement and evaluate the programme. The chapter will provide best practice for practitioners and widening participation teams, currently or aspiring to work with CE and YC students.

Policy context

Hepp is directed by its funding partners SHU and the UoS in respect to the underrepresented groups it supports. Both partners adhere to their own Access and Participation Plans (APP) and recently, the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR). Although our funding institutions differ their ethos for underrepresented groups aligns. This alignment allows Hepp to support groups of CE and YC students who historically may not be targeted by other provision due to their low demographic representation.

Care experienced students

The OfS (2022) identifies that CES have significantly poorer educational and life outcomes than the general student population and are underrepresented in HE. Access to HE is much lower for young people who have been in care. 'In 2018-19, only 13 per cent of pupils who were looked after continuously for 12 months or more entered HE compared to 43 per cent of all other pupils and 'New data shows that for 2017-18 entrants, the continuation rate of CES was 5.6 percentage points lower than for students who had not been in care' (OfS, 2022). OfS state that 'all universities and colleges must consider care leavers in their APP' with an expectation that providers will consider supporting all students who have experienced care at any stage of their lives, including those who have been adopted.

Young carer students

According to the Carers Trust (n.d.: About young carers), a YC 'is an individual aged 25 and under who is caring for a friend or family member, who due to disability, illness, a mental health problem or an addiction requires the support of that individual'. A report produced by the Carers Trust (2021), found that YCs, compared with their peers who do not have a caring role, are on average likely to achieve one grade lower at GCSE. This is due to the difficulty of balancing school or college with their caring role, as reported by 27 percent of YCs (Carers Trust, 2022). YCs are less likely to be in education, employment, or training (NEET) than their peers without a caring role between the ages of 16 and 19 (Carers Trust, 2021). Not all YCs disclose their caring responsibilities and so there is no national data on how many YCs are studying in HE (OfS, 2020). The number of carers is fluid as people can become a YC for short periods, people do not always see themselves in a caring role and others shy away from having a label attached to them.

Access and participation plans (APPs)

APPs are put in place by HE institutions to look at how they will improve upon their equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups, specifically in the areas of access, success, and progression from HE. APPs are reviewed every four years so institutions can look at where improvement in these areas would benefit the most. Both SHU's and the UoS's APPs demonstrate the support and guidance given for CE and YCs from access to success.

The Equality of Opportunity Risk Register

In Autumn 2022, the OfS consulted on the equality of opportunity for students in HE (OfS, 2023). Following intensive research, the EORR was developed in 2023 and recognises that the equality of opportunity in HE is not experienced by many students. The register is set out to identify twelve sector-wide risks relating to a student's opportunity to access and succeed in HE. Surprisingly, being a YC is not recognised as an at-risk student characteristic on the EORR, whereas this is contradicted by the research conducted by Applied Inspiration (AI)/Specialist Evidence, Evaluation & Research Collaborative HE (2022). This research reported that YCs are a cohort who may lack support, confidence, and knowledge in the context of HE, thus making them an underrepresented group that would benefit from support to navigate into further education (FE) and HE. CE is recognised and relates to ten of the twelve sector-wide risks, with the following access risks being areas Hepp aims to address through its delivery of outreach activities.

Risk 1: Knowledge and skills

Risk 2: Information and guidance

Risk 3: Perception of HE

Risk 4: Application success rate.

Methodology

Hepp gathered evidence by a variety of methods to understand the barriers CE and YC students face when thinking about HE. The methodology used informs the development of Hepp's outreach programmes for underrepresented groups.

Focus groups

The research conducted was qualitative, using the voices of CE and YC students (aged 11 – 19) and their supporters who know them best. Student voice was important to the design of activities that reflect the views of students who are CE or YCs. Listening to and showing the importance of the student voice facilitates learner ownership in the development of a bespoke and sustained programme.

- Young people attended the focus groups as part of their support groups organised by local authorities and charities in SY. Hepp and AI led activities with the support of student ambassadors (SA) with lived experience of care/being a young carer or a staff member with experience of being estranged. In total, there were four focus groups: two CE and two YC. The focus groups were attended with the support of seven staff, thirteen YCs and thirteen CE students. During the focus groups, the students were asked to participate in four activities and heard from the SA or staff member with lived experience about their journey to and throughout HE.

Activity One - To understand what the students associated with university

Each student received post it notes to write down their thoughts and add to a board to discuss.

Activity Two/Three – Making a Decision

In small groups, the students heard about a fictitious character to discuss and make decisions about their future. In activity three, the students received additional information to make further decisions.

Activity Four – Group Discussions

The final activity brought the students back together to discuss the thoughts and views of the group.

- Two online focus groups were conducted with support staff from the region. One specific to CE and one for YC students, with four support staff in attendance at each.
- Two online interviews took place, with one CES attending the care leavers interview and two YCs for the YC interview. The students were currently studying at UoS or SHU.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed (with permission and where appropriate), anonymising the details of the respondents. AI analysed the recordings thematically, alongside the materials produced during the workshops (drawings, concept maps and lists).

Theory of change/Literature review

Hepp completed a ToC for CE and YC students (Self, 2023a; Self, 2023b) to enable the planning, implementing and evaluation of the development of the sustained programme. In completing a ToC, Hepp identified its long-term goals and worked backwards to identify outcomes to achieve those goals. Figure 1 shows the visual of the ToC for CE and Figure 2 for YC students.

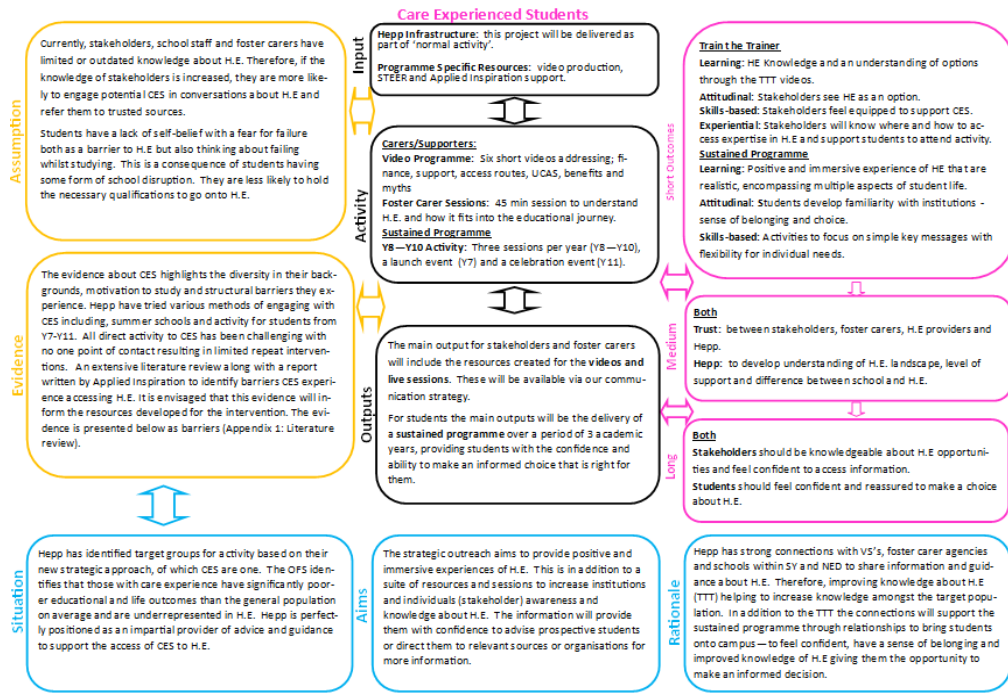


Figure 1. Theory of Change Narrative: Care Experienced Sustained Programme for Students and Train the Trainer Programme for Supporters and Influencers (Self, 2023a)

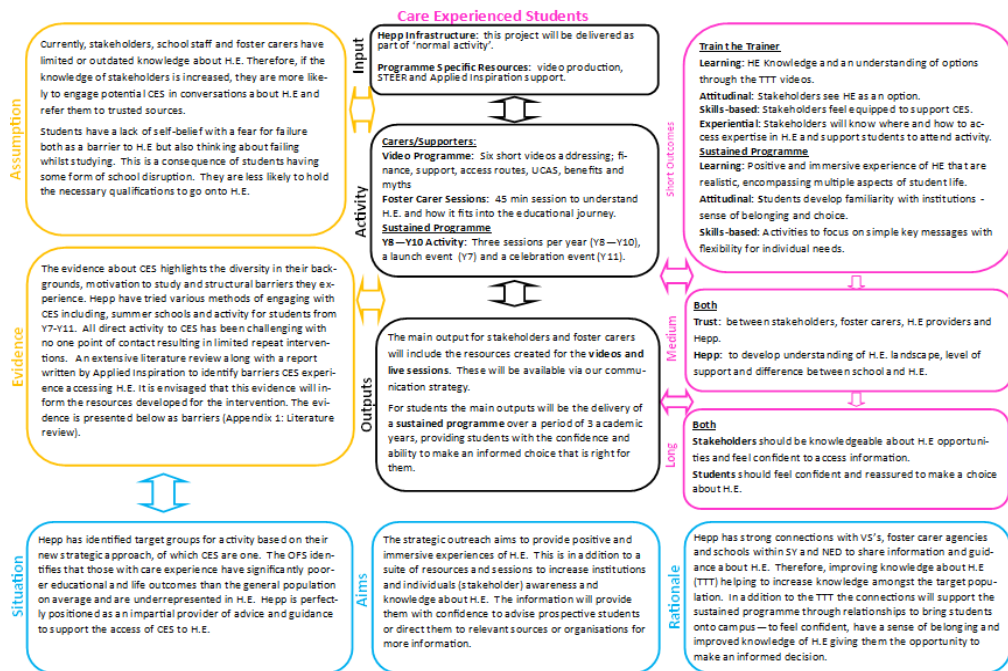


Figure 2. Theory of Change: Young Carer Sustained Programme for Students and Train the Trainer Programme for Supporters and Influencers (Self, 2023b)

For the research, it was important Hepp completed an academic literature review evaluating the knowledge and understanding of the barriers CE or YC students face when thinking about HE. Evaluating the literature enabled Hepp to understand key themes, helping to explain the findings that fed into the development of the sustained programme.

Findings

Following the research conducted, Hepp found the barriers CE and YC students faced to be similar.

Focus groups

The findings reported from the focus groups and detailed in the full report ‘Supporting Young Carers and Care Experienced Young People: Hepp Activity Development’ by AI (2022) were analysed under six topic areas.

1. Awareness and interest in higher education

Students who attended the sessions had mixed understanding around what studying in HE might look like. For some there was an awareness, some did not feel it relevant to them, and for others it felt too distant a thought. The young people had several misconceptions, with financial support being a prime misconception. Overall, HE was seen positively, with students using words like ‘freedom’ and ‘opportunities’ with interest. Although, there were some concerns with the use of words ‘homesick,’ ‘stress’ and ‘boring’ and that they might not cope due to anxiety or not being good with change. The support staff felt that their own and foster carers’ lack of knowledge around HE was a barrier.

2. Choices and sources of support

There was a consensus that the best advice was to base their education choices on their own interests and passions. Where students had some work or course experience, this helped with their decision-making process. Having supporters who were knowledgeable was felt to be a useful source of information, although some of the current HE students had felt they had received misguidance. The students did not view friends’ and peers’ thoughts as useful due to their limited personal experience. Although, staff felt the sharing of experiences informally took place following outreach activities. Amongst the young people there was pressure felt, causing stress and anxiety that they needed to make the ‘right’ decision about their future. There was a difference of opinion about whether young people thinking about university prior to GCSEs was helpful or another potential added stress. The anxieties linked to their own personal circumstances included the stress of how they could financially support themselves and the impact on their caring role.

3. Finding the right stage

Amongst the young people there was no ‘right’ time to think about HE as an option due to the differences in their life experiences. It was daunting to start to look too far ahead, and they needed to focus on their next steps, which for some limited their interest in engaging in outreach activities.

The young people had a mix of opinion on whether Key Stage 4 (KS4) or post-16 was a relevant time to be aware of HE. Current HE students felt that during, or post GCSEs was more meaningful to them. The consensus amongst staff and current HE students was that raising awareness of HE should start from a young age, however, it required simple messages more than detailed information. The key message was around ‘belonging’, with students understanding the support offered and seeing that there are students ‘like them.’

Practically for the delivery of the activity and as the students were used to attending groups with mixed ages, it was felt that mixing year groups was an option. This would help with workload for schools/organisations when bringing students to activities. Consideration to the academic level would need to be factored to make the outreach activity effective.

4. Impactful activity

The young people had attended some outreach activity, but they were unsure of what and where they had attended. The experience had not been negative, but it had also not motivated them to contemplate applying to HE. Staff were positive about encouraging HE and the impact sustained outreach activity had. There was a keen interest in Hepp visiting them in their settings and connecting with the young people between activities, in particular visiting them in their usual settings. The young people were keen to support Hepp in the development of workshops/activities. To increase the comfort of the young people engaging, staff felt having regular staff/SA's delivering each intervention would be beneficial. They also felt that deciding on their lunch option would 'elevate' the experience of visiting institutions that the usual school visit did not. For students to understand all aspects of life as a student – a realistic experience, the staff felt it would be valuable for them to see where they might live, or what they might do outside of study. SA's were noted as a powerful resource to the young people and students from similar backgrounds helped with the feeling of being genuine and realistic.

5. Differences between groups

There are specific and distinctive additional challenges each cohort face when progressing within education. The report found similarities around experiences, particularly the difficulty to engage with an education system that struggled to understand and adapt to their needs. However, in the discussions it was highlighted that they have several differences. Both groups highlighted stigma and expectations, however CE young people expecting education failure, and their future being homeless or in prison, whereas for YCs, it was the fear of being misunderstood and different. Examples of the key elements specific to each group are:

YCs:

- There was an ambition to progress in education, but school experiences could be negative, as they felt their caring role was misunderstood and the impact it has on their study. There was an inconsistency of approaches between staff in schools, with rigid rules and processes a concern.
- In most cases, YCs do not want to tell people they are a YC. For the students taking part in the research, they had disclosed their caring role to staff, but this had not resulted in consistent improvements.
- The staff supporting them felt informed and were positive about HE, but due to the way they were funded they could only work with young people for short periods. This potentially resulted in not being able to offer advice at crucial points.
- YCs had the difficult decision on whether to leave home and this made YCs question if HE was the right option for them.
- The students spoken to had support from their family, school, and support groups.

CE Young People:

- They had a mix of interest in HE, with more interest around vocational routes.
- They did not see themselves as students studying at a HE institution due to their attainment and interruption of study.
- Staff felt some of the young people had a fear of failure, with failure in HE potentially leading to their financial security and living situations.
- Lifestyle and where they might live was more of a consideration to them than YCs, with the majority requiring accommodation.
- Queries around disability, mental health, and gender/sexual identity raised questions amongst the students about other support.

Mental health, wellbeing and future security was a priority for both groups. This was highlighted in the UCAS (2023) webinar ‘How to Influence the class of 2024’, with career choice being driven by earning potential and the quality of career but the driving desire for the class of 2024 is to have a career that makes them happy. Having events for specific cohorts would allow students to feel comfortable in asking and exploring questions about their needs. However, the groups were diverse so a need to adapt activities was important.

6. Challenges and opportunities

Teachers, virtual heads (a statutory role within a local authority, having responsibility of ensuring children in care have improved educational experiences and outcomes), and YC support workers (staff) were asked to provide their views on how Hepp could support the young people and the practical side of a long-term programme. The staff were positive towards Hepp and the activities delivered. They wanted to support Hepp in finding ways to engage the young people and make sure that the activity delivered was effective. They emphasised challenges, solutions, and opportunities in a sustained programme.

Key Challenges

- *Staffing capacity* – having staff members in attendance at events was a challenge. This, on top of heavy workloads, meant Hepp was not a priority.
- *Different structures of schools and organisations* – challenges regarding scheduling of activity. Having regular contact and dates in advance would help.
- *Direct and consistent contact with young people* – due to their funding some organisations allowed only short periods of support, meaning they might not be best placed to help with visits.
- *Lack of staff awareness* – particularly due to impact of Covid-19, staff felt unclear on the offer Hepp and other HE institutions offered for CE and YCs.

Opportunities

- *Training and awareness raising for supporters* – staff wanted to raise awareness of training and activity to foster carers, families and staff who supported young people.
- *Development of relationships between young people and students/staff from Hepp* – could help encourage the young students to attend, lessening the burden on staff.
- *Potential to explore one or more dates outside of term time* – if staff delivered activity outside of school, the potential of holidays or weekends could be an opportunity to explore, especially for YCs.
- *Charities and local authorities deliver training to university staff and SA's* - to help outreach staff to understand the needs and circumstances specifically to YCs.

Theory of change/Literature review

In addition to the barriers identified through focus groups, our comprehensive literature review (Self, 2023) revealed further barriers:

1. Finance

CE and YC students:

- Not aware of the financial support available to them e.g., bursaries
- Terminology used is confusing for those not officially in care (kinship, estranged)
- YCs were concerned about part-time work when they have a caring role, as this can be the income supplementing the household.

2. Demographics

CE and YC students:

- Likely to have the characteristic of more than one underrepresented group in HE.
- More likely to be a mature student.

3. Access to higher education

CE and YC students:

- Access to HE is generally via vocational routes and as mature students, with YCs more likely to access part-time courses.

4. Imposter syndrome

- CE and YC students lack a sense of belonging in further education (FE) and HE, not having a network of peers.
- They fear that they will be judged/stigmatised because of their background.
- CE students are concerned about their own abilities due to disruption in education.
- YCs are not always able to take part in extracurricular social activities, thus making them feel estranged from peers.

5. Higher education knowledge

- CE and YC students were not always provided with the knowledge on the process of applying to HE.
- CE and YC students were unaware of the generic support provided by all HE institutions e.g., finance, support, accommodation.
- For YCs, there is the feeling that HE institutions have a lack of knowledge about their needs, creating a feeling that they are not flexible around course structure, timetabling, signposting etc.

6. Context

CE:

- Likely to withdraw from HE.
- Unprepared for HE due to lack of knowledge.
- Lack of knowledge around Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) from local authorities and supporters.
- Worry about where they will live during holidays.

YC:

- Are 38 per cent less likely than their peers (who do not care for anyone) to have a degree, according to Patrick (2023). This can be increased depending on the hours a young person takes on the caring role.

Recommendations

As a result of the clear similarities between the conclusions of our research and focus groups, Hepp actioned three areas of focus for a sustained programme.

1. Intervention design

- *Positive and immersive experiences of HE:*
 - Create activity that is authentic and realistic.
 - Ensure activity that provides the opportunity to experience potential courses and careers.
 - Creating activities to experience what life is like within the university campus i.e., accommodation and canteens.

- Allow activities to enable the students to have autonomy over their experience – let them make decisions of where to eat and how to move around campus.
- Ensuring content overlaps with other lived experiences i.e., support for disabled students.
- Provide activities that allow students to learn new skills to build self-confidence. AI recommended the Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017). This looks at autonomy as a motivation.
- *Opportunities for exploration of HE in a relaxed setting:*
 - Visit the students in a familiar setting as well as at HE institutions.
 - Make sure activities do not put emphasis on decision making.
 - Provide the information to address support for mental health.
- *Role models to help learners to see how students 'like them' can succeed in HE.*
 - Hepp already use role models – the possibility of the students working over the sustained programme, or for interim communications.
- *Early awareness and later information, thinking about individual need.*
- *Provide tools to the students to enable them to find relevant HE information.*
- *Simple messages, key information all about HE:*
 - KS3 was too early for detailed information.
 - Develop skills for students to actively seek accurate information on their own.
- *Providing up-to-date information and regular signposting to supporters and advisors:*
 - Keeping them up to date with knowledge about HE and alleviating misconception.
 - Engaging with the students regularly will help to engage with the supporters.

2. Programme delivery

It is important to have a programme that is flexible with the option of catching up. The following were suggestions to help Hepp explore a best fit programme:

- Provide separate events for CE and YCs could help students to ask questions. Although their barriers are similar, they might not recognise this and cause them not to feel comfortable when asking questions.
- Look to have activity days for all year groups – relieve the burden on staff.
- Have a welcome pack/E-mail for students who join the programme at a different time.
- Maintain communication with students, staff, parents, and carers between activities.
- Try to use the same staff/SA's for events to enable students to feel comfortable in the setting. Having the same staff visit their natural setting can be supportive to the students.
- Provide staff with the dates early on to enable planning.
- Look into a holiday date, avoiding times around exams and starts of term.

3. Wrap-around support

During the research some of the issues raised may be difficult for Hepp to address. However, there could be ways to support the students beyond the interventions which could include:

- Regular catch ups through newsletters.
- Using the time to communicate any updates with staff attending the activity days, having useful resources available for staff to take away.
- Providing information on the local HE institutions' offers for CE and YCs.
- Support to apply for other outreach programmes.

Programme

With the policy context, the research conducted by AI (2022), the ToC (2023a; 2023b) for each cohort and the literature reviews, Hepp were able to plan a sustained programme for CE and YC students. PIE launched in November 2023 and is part of Hepp's 'GFGH' sustained intervention programme for learners who face additional barriers and will run as a pilot for the academic year 2023/24.

Following the recommendations, the programme has been developed to deliver activities separately to CE and YC students. PIE was designed for students to attend a virtual launch event in the summer term of Year 7, where the students, parents, carers, and supporters will learn all about Hepp, the aims and objectives of the programme and have any questions they may have answered. This will be followed by three activities, one per term in each year from Y8 to Y10 (PIE), with a finale of a face-to-face celebration event where the parents, carers and supporters will come together to acknowledge the achievements of the students over the lifecycle of the programme.

Each term, the students will be invited to attend a full day of workshops/sessions at a HE. The activities are designed to consider the recommendations, providing the students with new skills, simple messages to understand HE and the support offered, along with a sense of belonging. Each year, the students will attend three interactive sessions.

1. **POWER** = A workshop to learn and develop soft and transferrable skills.
2. **INVESTIGATION** = A taster session to learn more about subjects that would be different to those taught in school.
3. **EXPLORE** = A workshop to find out more about the facilities, societies, support, and what the surrounding area has to offer.

For the potential of more students being able to participate in a sustained programme, Hepp agreed with the recommendation that it would benefit from working directly with the Designated Teachers and YC contacts within the schools in SY and NED. Working with schools will potentially increase the likelihood that students will be able to fulfil the duration of the sustained programme, it will gain more buy-in from parents and carers and also build communities within the schools for the students.

Choice was voiced by the staff and young people as something that the young people do not always have. Throughout the programme Hepp will offer choice where possible i.e., where there is an opportunity to choose between activities or by providing lunch vouchers, to enable a choice of food options.

The activities will be delivered, where possible, with familiar staff and SA's with lived experience of being in care or being a YC.

Communication between activities will be delivered in the format of a termly newsletter. This will include a run-down of the previous session, what is coming up and any useful HE information for the parents, carers, students, and supporters.

Hepp have a parent and carer programme, which runs termly. The 30/45-minute twilight sessions on different topics related to HE provides key information to help support the young people to understand all about HE. Hepp have just launched a suite of videos providing three to ten-minute videos on key information in several topic areas. These are a quick and easy option for individuals to find out more about HE and where further information is required, there is the option to visit Hepp's website (HeppHUB, n.d.) or E-mail (hepp@shu.ac.uk) to ask any questions they might have.

Evaluation

In the first year of the PIE programme, Hepp will be evaluating through the following means to focus on the recommendations of the report (AI, 2022) and the short, medium, and long-term outcomes of the ToC (Self, 2023):

- *Pre-event survey* – to understand what knowledge the students have about HE, their future choices, expectations and understanding around HE. Doing this pre-event survey will enable Hepp to understand a baseline of where the students are at this stage in their journey.
- *Exit survey* – understand how the students' thoughts have developed after taking part in the three sessions of each year. This survey will include how the students feel about themselves and what they have gained from being part of the programme.
- *Questions during the sessions* – the lead presenter will ask students questions throughout the day, to discover what they have taken from each session, what skills they have learnt and what benefit each session may have to them.
- *Reflective journals* – at the end of each workshop the students will be given their reflective journals to reflect on the activities they have previously taken part in and that day's activities. This will provide them with some familiarity and show their progression throughout the sustained programme. The reflective journals will enable the students to answer questions relating to the themed areas, for example the Investigation Day (subject taster) will include 'What subjects did you learn about today?' and 'What skills do you think you will need to study this subject?'
- *End of year parent/carer/supporter survey* – to understand what the parents/carers of the young people feel the students have gained from their experience.

Ways to evaluate are always evolving. Throughout the programme Hepp will continually review how it evaluates its programme and adapt accordingly.

Conclusion

Throughout this report Hepp have demonstrated the approach it took:

- In conducting research, through the perspectives of the experts by experience.
- In how the research has been used to inform and develop Hepp's sustained programme for underrepresented groups with the addition of a ToC.
- In how the programme has been implemented, and its proposed evaluation for 2023/24 and beyond.

All of this was made possible through the voice of CE and YC students, and staff who support both cohorts. These individuals know themselves and the cohorts best, understanding the barriers that they face when considering HE. In conclusion of the research, it has confirmed that it is important to provide these students with a sustained programme to encourage conversation and questions. Students need to build confidence and resilience (Power), be provided with the basic knowledge about HE and the ability to navigate the 1000s of subject choices (INVESTIGATION) and familiarise themselves in a HE setting (EXPLORE).

It is paramount for Hepp to review the 'GFGH – PIE' sustained programme on an annual basis to validate its impact on underrepresented students. Hepp have initiated an evaluation model to encourage feedback in different forms to make sure it enables all students taking part to have their voice heard.

It is important to understand that what we design and implement now is perfect. Hepp need to review and

reflect throughout the longevity of the programme. This will enable Hepp as an organisation to ensure the students are given the best opportunities to make informed decisions.

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Amplifying the Voices of Care Experienced Students in Outreach

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Abstract

Care Experienced students are underrepresented in higher education (HE) and have significantly poorer educational outcomes (Office for Students, 2022b). Research findings indicate that care experienced students are less likely to progress to HE, are more likely to drop-out of their degree (if they do progress), and less likely to achieve a 1st or a 2.1 qualification (Office for Students, 2022b).

Inspired by previous projects working with student ambassadors with shared lived experiences to specific audiences, the University of Kent's Outreach and Widening Participation (OWP) team have worked closely with care experienced ambassadors over the last two years. This has led to a greater understanding of the barriers care experienced students face and most appropriate interventions and support we can offer. This chapter focuses on the importance of co-construction and collaboration in outreach work, and the impact on co-creators, institutions, and audiences.

Key words: outreach, co-creation, student ambassadors, care experience.

Introduction

The barriers for those with care experience who choose to progress on to higher education are numerous. Students with care experience are likely to have highly disrupted childhoods, with a significant impact on their education. Care experienced young people are more likely to have adverse childhood experiences, defined as instances that have a lasting impact on psychological, social and neurodevelopmental systems (Lacey and Minnis, 2019). Evidence suggests that those with two or more adverse childhood experiences, compared to those with none, are more likely to be disengaged in school, and have lower academic success, and experience higher rates of absenteeism (Crouch *et al.*, 2019). The disruption to their childhood development and education, along with a lack of belief in their educational success and university as an attainable goal for care leavers (Ellis and Johnston, 2019), all add up to create lower rates of participation in higher education for those with care experience.

There are more children in care than ever before, with around one in every 240 children currently looked after (The Children's Commissioner, 2023). Research findings indicate that care experienced students are less likely to progress to HE, with 14 per cent of pupils who were looked after continuously for 12 months or more at progressing to HE by age 19 by 2021/22, compared to 47 per cent of all other pupils (Department for Education, 2023). Care experienced students are also more likely to drop out of their degree if they do progress, and less likely to achieve a first or an upper second class qualification (Office for Students, 2022b). Young people who have, at some point, been in the care of their local authority face

numerous barriers that have a significant impact on their ability to get a degree, and these are the young people we are working with every day in our outreach provisions.

Every care experienced student's journey is unique, and the data relating to educational attainment, progression, retention and success, does not explore the plethora of barriers young people are overcoming to access education and succeed. The data tells us about the issues young people face, but has not told us what we need to do to make a change. We need to ask those who are most affected. In the University of Kent's Outreach and Widening Participation (OWP) team, we encourage student ambassadors to be 'ambassadors of your own experience' (a phrase we use in our training), valuing each individual journey to higher education, to share in outreach and recruitment activity. This has been particularly important for those who share the living experience of the outreach learners that we prioritise in our work.

The OWP team works with approximately 250 student ambassadors, studying a wide range of subjects at all stages, and from all across the world, who bring a wealth of experience with them. In some of their work opportunities, they work to support the running of a session, helping with activities, handing out resources, engaging students and sharing their insights into what it is to *be* a university student and how they got there. For many audiences, there is not enough representation and 'inside information' about what it could be like to go to university from their community or background. Amplifying the voices of the ambassadors who young people do not associate with being a university student, is paramount to the work we do. Going beyond just representation, is co-creation. Not only inviting them to share their experiences in an outreach session, but inviting them to have an impact on the content and delivery of a session.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, the OWP invited Black student ambassadors to get together and share their insights into higher education to support Black sixth form students' post-18 choices. These conversations about what to look for when researching university, things to consider in choosing a university, and how to include your culture and heritage in your studies, developed into a programme of activity, The Mentoring and University Insights Project. The development and delivery of the programme had an impact on the ambassadors as much as the students, who completed a research project exploring how co-creation impacted their sense of ownership and belonging to the OWP (O'Brien et al., 2021). Based on this model, we looked to see who else's voices were not being represented in outreach, and if co-creation could be a tool for understanding the issues and bridging the gaps between targeted outreach audiences and HE.

In 2021, the University of Kent's OWP were invited by Virtual School Kent to work with Canterbury Christ Church University, University for the Creative Arts and Kent and Medway Progression Federation to create a training programme for foster carers to help them support the young people they work with, in increasing the numbers of care leavers going into higher education. Learning more from Virtual School Kent about what they felt the carers needed, and what topics to cover, we sought to consult with care experienced university students, to understand what information, advice and guidance (IAG) they felt it was important to share, and to ensure that this offer was not just a generic IAG talk.

Using the same methodology as our work with Black students, we looked to repeat this for care experienced audiences, beginning with inviting those with care experience to work with us on a programme and centring their experiences as a way to see what foster carers needed most. The series of three online sessions was created with three care experienced student ambassadors at the heart of all that we did. They were consulted, invited to share ideas, review the sessions, and support the delivery. So much of what we were telling the foster carers were things that they could find online with a bit of searching, but having three current university students, who had insights on what support they needed, what foster carers could be doing, and

a window into what it is like to be a university student, were invaluable and the number one thing we received positive feedback on.

Since this project, we have worked together to create programmes for children in care and care leavers, foster carers and professionals who work with care experienced young people. Working together as co-creators has allowed our work to be authentic, responsive, and impactful.

In this chapter, we will share the impact co-creation in outreach can have on the young people taking part in outreach activities, the supporters (foster carers and professionals), the OWP, and to the co-creating ambassadors themselves. We are advocating that work for care experienced young people is carried out in collaboration with those with shared living experiences to ensure it is fit for purpose, and impactful.

Methodology

This research has been carried out in collaboration with three care experienced student ambassadors: OWP's targeted outreach ambassadors. They were already part of OWP's student ambassador scheme, supporting outreach and recruitment activities on the University of Kent's campuses and in partner schools and colleges. In light of the request from Virtual Schools Kent to develop an outreach programme for their foster carers, an invitation was sent to all ambassadors to see if any had care experience and would like to support the programme development. What began as a meeting in 2021 has become a whole programme of activity and consistent collaboration since.

The targeted outreach ambassadors shared their experiences as co-creators in a focus group with the OWP in 2023. In addition, they fed into *Amplifying the Voices of Care Experienced Students*, presented at Medway Teaching and Learning Conference, and the 2023 FACE conference: *Co-constructing education for all*. Two of the ambassadors co-presented at Medway, with all three making voice notes about the benefit of the work on the audiences, including themselves, to share at the FACE conference. This chapter will focus on their perspective of our collaborative outreach work.

Findings and discussion: the benefits of co-creation on care experienced young people

CFE Research findings recommend that outreach work is tailored to the age and circumstances of learners (CFE Research, 2019) in order to have the greatest impact. Research from UCAS and the Unite Foundation found that 60% of care experienced UCAS applicants did not receive support specific to going to university or college as a care-experienced student (UCAS, 2022). Clearly, there was a gap in resource for care experienced students and their supporters, who were not receiving the recommended tailored outreach activity. We knew that it was important that our work with the students themselves was holistic, and responsive to their needs and situation, without focusing on the personal experience of being in care. The OWP worked with the targeted outreach ambassadors to develop Plan My Path, a programme designed to encourage pre-16 students in care to reflect on their next steps. Plan My Path is a progressive programme, giving students the opportunity to explore university life, take part in interactive, creative, and inspiring sessions in school and on the University of Kent's campuses (Canterbury and Medway), to think about their future and consider if higher education could help them get to where they want to go. Our prime concern was that it was tailored to the age and circumstances of the learners, and gave timely insights on the journey to university from being in care.

Working with targeted outreach ambassadors on the development and delivery of our outreach offer for children in care has meant that our offer is holistic and centred on the students. Gartland writes about learning taking place 'as a consequence of undertaking the task and through unplanned conversation with ambassadors' (Gartland, 2015), an effect that we have seen time and time again. Knowing that everyone in

the room 'gets it', frees everyone up to be more themselves. Making time for ambassadors and students to work on activities together, and create chatty moments where they can connect, is at the centre of the work we do. Gartland (2015) also explores the nature of sharing the experience of being a student, be it in school or at university, helping create a connection. For children in care to see other students with care experience may extend that connection and cement the possibility that care leaver university students are not so different to them. Students see new possible ways of being, and can identify with those who may have been on a similar pathway.

One of the Targeted Outreach Ambassadors reflects on the benefits of co-creation to the young people themselves:

Being able to speak with current students who are care experienced and have progressed to higher education has allowed these students to feel empowered. This is because they can see that it is possible for a student with similar experiences to progress to and continue in higher education. Therefore, we are not only empowering these students to be their best selves, but also combatting and disproving the negative stereotypes that are associated with being a care experienced young person.

Markus and Nurius (1987) shared the idea of possible selves as what people may become, along with what they hope to and hope to not become (Markus and Nurius, 1986). We hope that exposure to students who have gone from care to university, and are succeeding and flourishing, provides a very clear role model and link to a possible future self. Markus and Nurius (1986) comment on the importance of the individual's sociocultural and historical context, but also their social experiences (Markus and Nurius, 1986). If we can increase their access to role models, we hope that it will create a vision of a possible journey to become a university student. One school designated member of staff emailed after a recent Plan My Path visit day with their pre-16 students to say:

It was so lovely to see my students enjoying a day which they can see themselves doing in the future. It has clearly had an impact on many if not all of them regarding their want to now go to university. One even wants to start now and another was asking me a lot of questions about what they need to do next to get into university which is great!

One of our main goals with the work we do, is to create these conversations with trusted adults and facilitate curiosity about the future. The ambassadors are real life examples of what is possible, and challenge the stigma that those with care experience will not be successful, and being in care is something to be ashamed of. One of the targeted outreach ambassadors has talked about the importance in taking ownership of your experiences, as they are what have made you who you are today. Another shared the impact of children in care seeing care leavers thriving and succeeding:

I think that it is, also, really nice for the students we work with to see that we're actually very open about our experiences and we don't see it as shameful. There are times where [...] you are stereotyped as a child in care and I think this work stops you actually believing in those stereotypes because you see three ambassadors in front of you who have done it, who have gone through it and have come out of it and are confident about it.

As well as seeing a possible future self in the ambassadors, it is also important to acknowledge that the ambassadors can reflect on their living experience to create an inclusive learning space. This space is populated by students who are supportive, who listen, and have an understanding of their experiences. One of the ambassadors reflects:

As ambassadors, we are able to create a more comfortable and trusting environment. That is because we are viewed as being the young person's peers rather than professionals that they interact with on a day-to-day basis...This not only helps them with their confidence, but to feel understood and accepted.

This is something that we would not have been able to do without the ambassadors' collaboration.

The benefits of co-creation on supporters

In the work the OWP has done with the targeted outreach ambassadors, the carers and professionals that work with care experienced young people have been identified as a key audience to engage. The pool of adults in a position of trust can be quite small for these young people, who have been let down by the adults in their lives. We cannot expect there to be unearned trust of the OWP and ambassadors when working with children in care in outreach programmes. Therefore, we needed to consider which adults have the biggest influence on children in care, and what resources were available to support them in having more conversations about higher education as a realistic and attainable post-18 option. In all our sessions with supporters, the targeted outreach ambassadors are the most valued and most important aspect of the programme. To share feedback from a senior colleague from Virtual School Kent, following on from work with foster carers:

I think from my perspective, the ambassadors who have been involved in your projects have added validity through their lived experience.... In the feedback which we received ...the ambassadors were identified as being a great asset to the workshops and they appreciated the insight they provided... in short, they are fantastic.

The targeted outreach ambassadors also highlight the importance of their involvement to improve the work of the supporters. One of them shares:

By sharing our first-hand experiences, we offer professionals a deeper understanding of what care experienced children experience. This understanding enables them to create supportive strategies that are not only well intentioned, but also well informed and effectively tailored to our needs. Our unique insight, drawn from real lived experiences, add authenticity to outreach efforts... bridging the gap between professionals and the young people they aim to support. We serve as a continued source of insight, keeping professionals informed about the challenges and opportunities we care experienced students encounter on a daily basis.

In the programmes for supporters, the OWP makes time for the ambassadors to share what support made the biggest difference for them when growing up, and what they should do more of in their work with children in care and care leavers. Each ambassador has shared the powerful impact of adults who believed in them, saw their potential and did not give up. We know the importance of working with this audience and believe that the benefits of including those with living experience to be core to this impact.

The benefits of co-creation to the targeted outreach ambassadors

Our goal of increasing the numbers of young people with care experience going into higher education cannot be the only end goal. We work to support them throughout their university experience too, and ensure they are able to stay on their course and succeed. We believe our work with care experienced students in the university, that provides them with the opportunity to work as targeted outreach ambassadors, is a way to continue to support them, giving them professional and transferrable skills, a community of colleagues and peers, and regular income. Care experience is living experience and continues to impact the lives of the ambassadors. Transitioning to university can be a very stressful time for many students, but for care leavers who may not have strong networks of support, a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, a feeling of not belonging, and worries about supporting themselves financially, it can be completely overwhelming. The most recent OfS date shows that, in 2017/18, 79.3 per cent of students with care

experience, completed their undergraduate course of study, compared to 89.1 per cent of students without care experience (Office for Students, 2022a). Having an ongoing network of support in the OWP and feeling valued has led to an increase in confidence and sense of belonging with the ambassadors. These are things we know are essential for student retention and success. As one ambassador reflected:

I really do think that doing this kind of work gives you the empowerment that you need, basically.

Coram Voice (2020) found, from consulting with 13,500 care experienced young people, that young people want to be listened to in decision making and feel confident that their voice will be heard (Coram Voice, 2020). This does not come as a surprise, as this would be a universal desire. What is notable is that this is addressed as a recommendation in a report, and therefore suggests that more needs to be done to ensure that their voices are heard and that their views count. We have heard regularly from designated members of staff and from virtual school teams about the importance of amplifying the voices of those in care. As a result of time spent in the care system, they may have had their autonomy significantly impacted. Our work not only creates a space to listen, but completely centre the voices of care experienced university students. It validates their authority on the topic of supporting the educational aspirations of those with care experience, and goes further than listening by enabling them to see the impact of their work first-hand in the sessions we co-deliver. As one of the targeted outreach ambassadors shared:

It hasn't felt tokenistic at all, really, in a way of using our lived experience just for using it. It hasn't felt like that at all. It's felt like we've been listened to.

In feedback opportunities about the targeted outreach ambassador work, the targeted outreach ambassadors have also touched on the benefits of this work for their own wellbeing and personal development. One ambassador shared:

The most I can say about it is how it has helped me. It has helped me a lot because this has been a very touchy area for me to speak about if I had not been engaged with the Outreach programme. It has helped me become more confident about who I am in terms of my care background. It has empowered me, if that makes sense. I use my experience as a strength rather than something that I have to hide and become more assertive about what I like and don't like. Here's my story and I decide how I want to tell so it has been very empowering for me.

In the targeted outreach programme, the OWP has sought to create a supportive and responsive environment where the ambassadors are confident critical collaborators, advising on what we should be doing and where there are gaps. The more we have worked together, the more the trust has increased, which has led to a more productive and authentic collaboration. Not only has this benefitted the work, but also has had an impact on the ambassadors' sense of belonging. As one of the targeted outreach ambassadors shares:

Co-creation...creates a shared and trusting space for all of us by collaborating to create opportunities for young people in care, we send a powerful message that their experiences are valued and respected. This inclusive approach fosters acceptance and reassurance that no-one is alone in their journey. As someone who has experienced the feeling of isolation that often accompanies being in care, co-creation has provided me with a sense of belonging to a community of individuals who have navigated the care system.

The benefits of co-creation to outreach and widening participation

Most universities will have student ambassadors, working on recruitment and outreach programmes. Having a pool of current students to add an authentic voice to the programmes legitimises the positive experiences of university life, demystifying the journey from school and college to higher education. The

benefit of ambassadors being ‘ambassadors of their own experience’ is not only for the audiences we work with, but also for the OWP team.

Working closely with our targeted outreach ambassadors has encouraged us to reflect on our outreach programmes. It has created a platform for important voices, which adds huge value to the work we do with pre-entry care experienced young people. It has been helpful for us as practitioners to decentre ourselves from Outreach work. It has kept us agile, flexible, and responsive. The ambassadors have noticed a shift in the team since they have started working with us:

I quite enjoyed seeing the perspectives of staff moving as well and actually seeing that they’re more accommodating in language they use. [...] It’s been great to see them become more inclusive in the language they use and I feel like that’s been quite a good experience.

Reverse mentoring has been explored in areas such as technology, where an intergenerational exchange occurs between digital native millennials and the older generations (Gündüz, Ş. and Akşit, B., 2018). In this case, rather than bridging a generational gap, a gap of understanding of living experience is being addressed. Approaching an outreach programme with a trauma informed lens is not enough. To achieve authenticity in the work we do, it had to put care experienced students at the centre and truly listen to their advice. The learning is continuous as we have created a feedback loop, constantly shifting and adjusting, improving and finding more appropriate approaches and routes to inclusion that we may not have seen before. As we have developed trust, the ambassadors are more comfortable to speak up when something is not working and needs changing. Their confidence and self-assurance have grown in the three years we have worked together, to take charge, to trust that we will listen, support, and back them up.

The work with targeted outreach ambassadors has had a ripple effect in the rest of the ambassador pool; those who get to work with the confident and brilliant team of targeted outreach ambassadors can also learn how to become the best ‘ambassadors of their own experience’, too.

Conclusion

Co-creation benefits all involved. Advance HE (2022) refers to partnerships between education professionals and students as, ‘Applying well-evidenced and effective approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, with a commitment to open, constructive and continuous dialogue.’ (Advance HE, 2022). It is person-centred and requires everyone to become a learner and listen actively and reflectively. It is only through this that we are able to make a difference to all stakeholders. It needs to be a genuinely open exchange, where creative thinking and collaboration are at the heart of what we do.

Exploring the impact of co-creation with care experienced students has shown how far reaching the benefits go. This is a model that we will continue to develop and explore. The targeted outreach ambassadors have recently taken the lead in this area of work, presenting on the targeted outreach programme, in addition to supporting. We are in the process of recruiting more care experienced university students to widen our programme. The future of co-creation with those with living experience is looking bright for all those involved.

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Unlocking Creativity in Co-Creation

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Abstract

A creative approach affords richer results.

Creativity engages the mind. Creativity enables alternative ways of thinking. Creativity connects us to ourselves.
(Carsen, 2023)

This chapter explores how a creative approach helps harness the power of co-creation and student voice by building trust, empowering participants, and unlocking joy.

The Access Development team (ADT) at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) have completed a series of creative workshops co-created with students, for students to co-create an access programme for Black British students. As part of the workshops, participants took part in a series of individual and group exercises, including improvisation, visualisation, and mapping techniques. By drawing on skills from other sectors and creative industries, the students walked us through their own journeys to Higher Education (HE) to enable us to better support and encourage future cohorts.

In the case of our co-creation workshops described in this chapter, participants became active partners and felt a sense of ownership and pride over what we were creating together, rather than being passive knowledge-holders alone. We do not believe the participants would have been as engaged, nor as open with their experiences, if we had not used creativity in devising our workshops.

This is a great approach; I hope it achieves great things. It has allowed me to make new friends! Especially in my field of study. It has been fun and engaging. (Co-Creation Participant)

Key words: creativity, co-creation, student voice.

Introduction: putting things into context

Whilst our co-creation workshops were with current Black British students, we believe these methods are adaptable to any target group and a creative approach could and should be used throughout our work as HE practitioners.

Access and participation plans (APP) set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education. (Office for Students, 2024)

The Access Development team at SHU have been improving our offer for Black British applicants and students.

Our focus on Black British students was underpinned by the University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) access target to increase the proportion of new entrants who are Black by 40 per cent so that Black British entrants (BBE) represent 6 per cent of all new entrants by 2024/25. This was from the baseline of 4 per cent in 2017/18.

When we began this work, the percentage of BBE in our undergraduate UK, full-time population was 5.1 per cent and the sector average was 10.5 per cent. As you can see from these statistics, SHU sits far below the national average for BBE however, given that we are predominately a local recruiting university, our regional statistics offer greater context.

In 2019, at the time of writing our last APP, the number of Black British 18–19-year-olds was 3.8 per cent in Sheffield, 2.5 per cent in South Yorkshire and only 2.2% in the Sheffield City Region (2011 Census). Whilst these figures are important to give greater understanding of the context in which we are working, as a university we strive for 'An inclusive community that stands up for equality and speaks up for diversity' (SHU values, 2023), and whilst low numbers of potential BBS in the region makes our work harder, it also underlines some of the reasons why this work is worthwhile. In 2021, 42 per cent of SHU's graduates stayed in Sheffield on completion of their course (SHU APP 20-21 to 24-25), and by this metric we can see the positive impact that diversifying our student population has on the local population.

Low levels of diversity and representation have serious implications for BAME students' sense of belonging, and their perceptions of the possibility of pursuing a career in academia. (NUS 2019: 12)

Before we go any further, it might be useful to explain some of the terminology we are using as refers to Black British. When using the term 'Black British', we are referring to British groups of the following descent: Caribbean, African, Mixed White/Black Caribbean, Mixed White/Black African. These groups were chosen to align with the Office for Students HESA Student Return groups and reporting metrics. When we use the term 'Black British Entrants' (BBE), we are referring to students enrolling at SHU, whereas 'Black British applicants' (BBA) refers to students applying to SHU. 'Black British students' (BBS) refers to pre-HE school/college students and finally 'current Black British students' (CBBS) refers to students who are currently studying at SHU.

Methodology

To achieve the above aim, we started our research into Black British students. We initially looked at research conducted by SHU through a listening rooms project and external sources like the Unite Living Black report, both of which SHU colleagues had fed into. A literature review was then commissioned and completed by our Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research team (STEER) alongside the ADT. The literature review and research evidenced that a university that fosters a sense of mattering and belonging enables students to see themselves there, and this approach should be targeted at specific groups and their needs (Austin et al., 2021; Stevenson et al., 2019).

A sense of belonging is intrinsically linked to a students' ability to succeed in higher education (NUS, 2019)

A theory of change (ToC) and evaluation plan were developed, and the following objectives were devised to support our overarching target:

1. Increase applications from BBS
2. Increase the rate at which BBA are offered places
3. Increase the conversion rate from offer to enrolment of BBS
4. Increase the sense of belonging and mattering to help support conversion and to ensure entrants have the best start in HE to enable positive outcomes.

Our ToC sets out the theme that representation and belonging during the pre-application and application stages is key, and that forging a relationship with and connections to SHU needs to be at the heart of our outreach. Involving relevant students in the creation of activities and starting to build these connections was our next step.

Our hope was to also support the wider university APP target of closing the degree awarding gap that exists at SHU by ensuring entrants have the best possible start; that they're familiar with their surroundings, have built connections with current students and other applicants and that they have early access to learning communities.

When looking for evidence based 'what works', we were unable to find anything significant in the area of HE outreach. More literature can be found, however, in the area of student teaching and learning, including in an HE setting. For example, Bovill discusses 'a typology of four roles that students adopt in co-creation work: representative, consultant, co-researcher, and pedagogical co-designer' (2019: 1025). A pedagogical co-designer shares the responsibility of designing learning, (Bovill et al., 2016: 198). Our aim was to work with CBBS as pedagogical co-designers trying to create meaningful and authentic content for future Black British students.

We have always sought feedback from students, though previously it may have been a simple post-activity questionnaire. Fortunately, this has progressed and where feasible, we try and gain input from a broad range of students prior to and throughout an activity, or process and adapt to their feedback in cycle. Student voice underpins all the work we do as a team but never more so than with this area of work. Currently in our team none of the staff are Black British, so do not share this lived experience and this is an ongoing challenge. We can be well-researched and respected in this area, but we will never have that intrinsic link with the students. It was imperative we sought the voices of those who do. We decided against running a focus group or creating a survey to access student voice, as although these methods have their place 'careful consideration of the volume and frequency of requests for student participation must be considered to avoid research fatigue and unethical practice' (Austin, 2018). We were acutely aware that given the small number of CBBS at SHU, we would likely be working with students who had already been asked for their opinions by several teams across the university.

There is also a danger of misinterpreting what participants mean, i.e., they tell us that they would like more support around Year 13 (Y13) exams, and we create a guide to revision, when actually what they want is more around wellbeing and mental health. When you are asked a question about something that has happened to you in the past, it can often be quite difficult to recall, and you also might not want to initially divulge too much of yourself in your response. We decided to try a new approach, one that would feel like an activity in itself. One that alleviated the aforementioned issues, and hopefully offered greater depth of responses. We decided to devise a space where students could become active participants in the co-creation of this project.

As our intention was to create interactive co-creation workshops, we wanted to make sure that our voices did not dominate in this space. We ensured student voice took the lead throughout the design and build of two levels of workshops. Current research students supported the creation of workshops in which current students co-created a programme for future applicants. We appreciate this is a little confusing, so we have tried to demonstrate it in Figure 1 below.

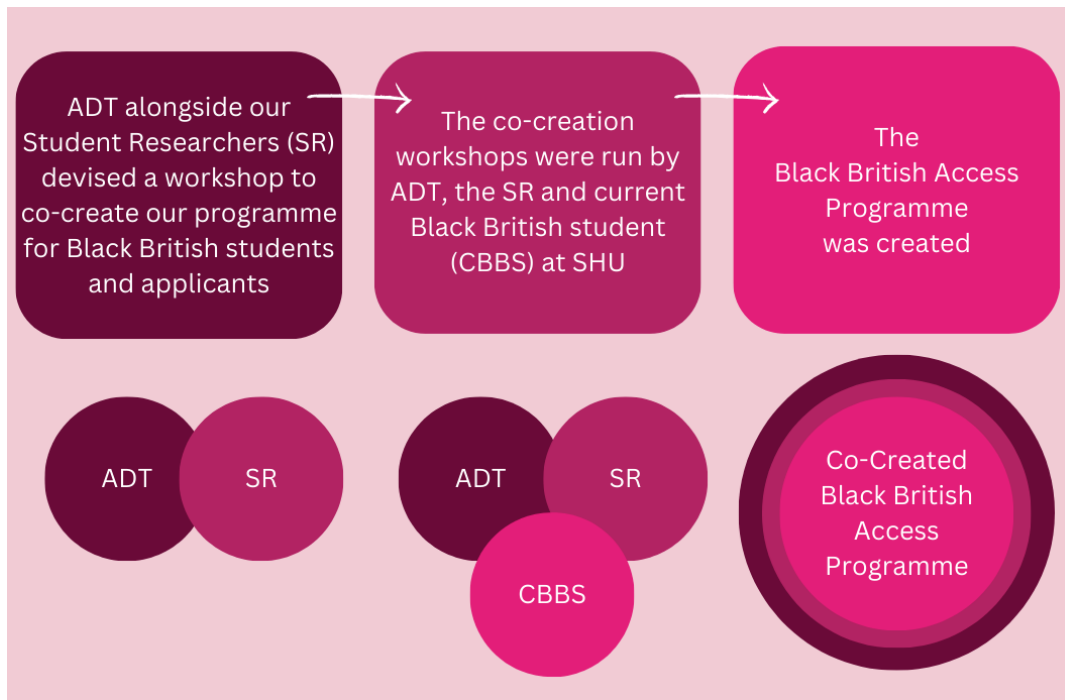


Figure 1: Co-Creation of The Black British Access Programme

Devising the workshops

We recruited two current research experienced third year students via a STEER Bursary Scheme, a Psychology student and an International Business Studies student, to assist in creating, delivering, and evaluating the co-creation workshops.

Working alongside our student researchers, we set the following aims:

Create an environment where participants:

- Feel safe and comfortable sharing their own experiences
- Think creatively about what future BBS might need and want from this programme
- Recall their own feelings of going from Further Education (FE) to HE.

We also wanted:

- To come away with tangible ideas to develop a programme that meets the needs of as many BBS as possible, specifically taking intersectionality into consideration
- To record feedback throughout
- For the workshop to be useful for the participants as experience of work and co-creation
- Everyone to enjoy the experience!

Methods that were considered and devised by the project team included setting up a timeline of a UK home student's educational journey from Year 12 (Y12) to HE, student personas, icebreaker introductions and an end-of-workshop demographic survey to track participant information. We discussed staff experience outside of education; what members of the group had learnt from their own life experiences, such as faith, sports, business and coaching, and investigated where these areas might enrich the workshops.

Recruiting the participants

We then began to recruit students to take part, which was one of the larger challenges we faced. The original plan was to work directly with Y12/Y13 students from the offset, but it was challenging to get time in with schools/colleges solely for the purpose of the students sharing their opinions. We made the decision to try and gain their feedback, once we had laid out an initial offer and could ensure they were also benefitting from our interaction.

Up to this point we had been building relationships with groups within university departments called Minoritised Student Groups (MSG) where students and academic staff met to discuss any issues pertaining to race, share best practice and offer career development opportunities, amongst other things. We wanted to learn about what worked within those groups, how we could connect; we wanted to offer applicants early access to learning communities, and this seemed like a positive avenue to explore. We also wanted to promote the great work of these groups to a wider audience and offered our help to do so.

We wanted to co-create the programme with students who were closest to those whom it was being designed for, so we put out a general recruitment ad for students who were Black British. We asked staff within the MSGs to discuss and promote the workshops amongst their groups and were open to whichever level of study they were on. Without the personal connections we had built, or the students not receiving it from staff they knew, I think we would have struggled with recruitment to these workshops, as numbers were still relatively small.

Participants were paid for their time and understood how they were supporting the creation of the BB Access programme and contributing to the evaluation of this work. We were initially focussing on hearing solely from current Black British students, but initial interest in the first workshop was low, so we extended the invite to include Black international students too. Whilst their journey to SHU was vastly different, we did record some similarity in experiences from being in a minority ethnic group at the university and in the city, which fed into our questions around belonging and mattering.

Prior to the workshops, E-mails were sent out to all participants with full disclosure of what it would entail, given that we were asking people to share their own individual experiences, up to a level they were comfortable with, we wanted everyone to understand what they were signing up for. We also laid out that, as we were actively trying to improve our offer, we encouraged them to be honest about their experience at SHU and reassured them it would have no bearing on their course or be held against them in any way. Due to availability, two workshops were organised. Both workshops had the same structure, the second was made up of solely CBBS.

The workshops themselves

The workshop started with our expectations and guidelines for the session: that this was a space to be respectful, to listen to the perspectives of others and allow those who might not be the first to share, the opportunity to do so. We explicitly said that if topics came up that they were not comfortable with or they wanted a minute to themselves, that they were welcome to take a break at any time. We also shared details of where they could access support, should they need it, if the workshop brought up any issues for them.

The work of our team, including this project, has been reviewed and approved by an ethics committee and we are committed to ensuring the safety and welfare of the students we work with.

An honest approach

As the student participants were to be our co-creators, we wanted them to understand the context in which this work was set, we shared SHU's demographic and enrolment data and gave an overview of some of the

current issues in the education sector. First, we had to look at the power dynamic in the room.

Getting the right relationship

A huge part of the success of running this type of co-creation workshop is creating the right atmosphere and putting participants at ease. Whilst staff are facilitating the session, participants need to feel like valued active partners. We are not their boss nor their lecturers. In this instance, *they* are the knowledge holders, and we are here to listen and support. Dolinger and Lodge (2020: 538) cite Cook-Sather and Luz (2015) when discussing the barriers to co-creation: ‘the partnership between students and staff often causes students to act within a liminal state, which partly shifts them from student to staff. This state can also support student partnership through a transformational process of moving from being a passive learner to an active learner.’

To build trust and put participants at ease, we did several things, such as lowering our own status and being honest from the start. We told the group that we are not perfect, we will make mistakes, we do not have all the answers, and we do not have the lived experience. We told them that we were keeping the workshop loose so we can be adaptable; that things might go awry but that we would hold that space, so they did not need to worry about that. We used humour wherever possible (we give examples of this later on) and often made ourselves the object of the joke.

From my own background (acting), I know the benefits that improvisation (improv) and improv games can have on a group dynamic. I am also aware that, for a lot of people, the idea of ‘improv’ can leave them in a cold sweat, so it is important to choose activities that feel non-threatening and that are inclusive. First, we got the group to form a circle facing one another, with everyone preferably standing but this can easily be adapted depending on the needs of the group. Everyone in the room should be taking part and there should be no onlookers – only active participants. Then, we each take it in turn to give our first name, our pronouns, course and year of study and a boring fact. All these can be adapted based on the group or desired outcomes. After each person gives their name, the group as a collective then greet them by their first name. It is important to individually welcome each participant, which will immediately help the group to feel connected and valued. The information about the course they are on helps participants learn a little about each other and is a straightforward way to get people talking. If you have ever been asked to share an interesting fact about yourself, you may know the instant panic that can ensue in finding something that seems appropriate, and you will often hear ‘I don’t have any interesting facts’ by asking for something boring, it relieves this pressure. You can have a fair bit of easy banter with this too. If someone offers something like ‘I have a dog called Bob’, you can tell them that is far too interesting, they are too interesting a person, next person please be more boring, etc. You are building people up whilst hopefully making them laugh. You can start to build connections. ‘My birthday is in October’, ‘My birthday is in October!’. You get my point.

Throughout the workshops, we considered different learning styles. Participants were offered a range of ways to feedback, for example, we had solo activities, partner working and group discussions. As expected, different students had different comfort levels in speaking in front of the group, even though workshop sizes were kept purposely small. Having this mix and a combination of both written and verbal input enabled us to collect as much feedback as possible.

One priority activity was ‘the washing line’ – we asked participants to map out their personal journey to HE. We asked them to do this quite literally by pegging events such as ‘attend open days’ and ‘Y12 exams’ in chronological order on to a piece of string we had strung across the room. Whilst this might seem a little ‘low-tech’, this method gets everyone physically involved in an activity that is non-threatening, helps them recall their own experiences and enables us to delve into these further. The physicality of an activity helps

participants engage and increases energy. With the hubbub of people moving around, it also takes the pressure off what participants are contributing, as attention is not solely focussed on them.

There was some lively debate and clearly not everyone's journey followed the same order or indeed path. After the mapping task, participants were asked to reflect on these stages and note down their feelings around their experiences during this time.

We then discussed whether an intervention by the university or someone else (their school, for example) would have been helpful at this stage. Examples of their feedback are that after Y12 exams, students need well-being support. They think motivational and self-esteem sessions are also needed and Q&As with current university students to get advice on achievement and support. This was extended and we had further discussion of their feelings towards barriers and the support that was necessary. These ideas were written on a piece of paper and pegged up next to the event as a suggested intervention. Participants enjoyed that they were actively creating 'solutions' to 'problems'.

Intersectionality

As Stuart, Lido and Morgan state 'in our classrooms we have students with very different backgrounds, living in very different social circumstances with different life expectations, which can create a very different context for learning and teaching' (2011: 490). Whilst we were collaborating specifically with students of shared ethnicity to our participants, no two peoples' experiences are the same and it was important for us to acknowledge this from the offset; we are not talking about one homogenous group of people. In the wider work we do as a team, AD supports students from an array of backgrounds who may face additional barriers to accessing HE, such as care experienced students, young carers, mature students, and LGBTQ+ students. We were very keen to ensure we were creating a programme that would be inclusive of and actively support students with a whole myriad of circumstances in their lives.

To do this, as a collective we created 'student personas' to try and, as much as is possible, encourage participants to think into others' shoes. Rather than draft the student personas prior to the session, we decided to take a more creative approach and gamify it slightly. One participant called out a number 1-3, another participant then pulled out the correlating number of slips of paper from a box. On these slips of paper, we had written circumstances that cover a range of under-represented groups and protected characteristics that are included across our student population at SHU. At this point, it was imperative that we reiterated that the circumstances in that box were not to be seen as negative. These were just things that might potentially mean additional consideration for the students in those circumstances. Once we had our student persona, someone called out a name and we added them to a piece of paper. Participants were then asked to imagine if this student might have any additional barriers to accessing HE. They did this individually on post-it notes, then added them to the sheet. We discussed what they thought as a group and then asked: if this student also happened to be Black, would it change anything?

For example, in the first workshop, student persona C (Sheila) is a trans woman, has financial hardship and has completed an Access Course. Feedback from the participants noted the barriers student C could face are worries about representation at university, society judging sexual orientation and feeling alienated due to education. The support they could find from the university could be bursaries for being in a minority group, a financial advisor and joining a LGBTQ+ group. Some conversations from both workshops specified that mental health was not a 'thing' in Black communities and being trans was taboo as well.

In the remaining part of the sessions, participants engaged in the final exercise about creating a community at university; we asked the question – what does belonging and mattering feel like? An example of this from the participants was visual representation, seeing other Black students and Black staff. We then asked them

to share a final piece of advice that they would give their younger selves or a future Black British student in similar circumstances.

At the end of the session, participants completed a demographic survey and their feedback on the approach we took with the workshop.

Participant feedback

We received overwhelmingly positive feedback from all of the students who took part in the co-creation workshops, with a particular appreciation of our creative co-creation approach:

A really good approach for getting their (the participants') views.

It's a really good workshop for Black students.

It's an absolutely amazing approach as this is a time many Black British students do not want to get into uni because of various reasons and some that are in are not confident to pull through.

I think the workshop helped people to come round and share ideas. During the break, there were further conversations being made by the participants which shows how impactful the tasks and its questions were.

When asked whether there was anything they had particularly liked about the session, these were some of the responses:

Talking about issues that affect Black people.

Interactive and kinetic energy helped participants loosen up and become more engaged and had others out of their shell.

Every bit of the session was awesome. I see the passion and desire to increase the representation of Black British in higher education and at Sheffield Hallam University.

Conclusion and things to do differently

Feedback we have received from these workshops has led to direct changes to our programme. Participants on the workshops told us they wanted earlier connection with current students and for university staff to come into schools and colleges to talk about support for Black students; from this academic year, we will be doing just that. We are currently in the process of arranging dates to go into schools/colleges to meet with current Y12 students, and some of the CBBS who took part in these workshops will be joining us. We want to hear from more students. We will repeat this exercise, once we have enough students to do so.

We would also like to hear from younger years, so that students are not thinking retrospectively about their experiences but are going through them in that moment. Getting time in with schools/colleges is perennially challenging though, particularly when you are working with older years (Y12 and Y13). You need to prove to the schools/colleges that it is worth pulling students out of lessons, but they need to see sessions in action to be able to do that. When there are particularly small numbers of Black British students in a school/college, getting them out of a lesson can make them feel singled out at a time when they just want to blend in. Ultimately, how we work through this is by asking the students themselves whether they want to participate. It is up to us and the schools/colleges to help them appreciate the benefits of doing so.

As part of the conversations we are having with schools/colleges, we are hoping to arrange to run an adapted version of the co-creation workshop we ran with CBBS for Y12 and Y13 students. These would

be jointly facilitated by some of the CBBS who took part. We all know how quickly the world is changing. The issues current Y12/13 are facing may be completely different in a year or two, which makes it imperative we keep getting feedback from the students we are trying to support and wherever use creative methods to enable them to co-create this programme with us. This is the only way it will stay relevant and impactful.

Practically speaking, I would add an extra 30 minutes to the workshop; students were extremely generous with sharing their experiences and certain activities consequently took longer than planned and we were adapting in the moment. I would lengthen the workshop to allow for this. At times, we were surprised by how honest and open the participants were, which is undoubtedly in part down to the types of people they were, but I am immensely proud that we created a space they felt able to be that vulnerable. It is without doubt that we gained insights and learnt more around the questions than we would have done if we had asked them in a questionnaire or led a focus group.

Whilst all the exercises brought out some incredible conversations, some of the richest discussions we had, were over the biscuits and juice we had two thirds of the way through the session, and yes, the fact we served biscuits and juice to adults did make for amusing conversation. However, we know firsthand that, had we just tried to put in a ‘coffee chat’ with these students instead of this workshop, we would not have built up the trust that we did, and they would not have shared as openly. Or, we would have no take up at all, which is what had happened when we had previously tried the idea of a paid ‘coffee chat’.

As Dollinger and Lodge confirm ‘in addition to the co-creation activity resulting in co-production, participants also created value for themselves through their experiences’ (2020: 541). We hoped that the session would be useful for the students in experiencing this type of co-creation, but we were not expecting them to forge connections and budding friendships.

Whilst the number of students we worked with is small, we have gained invaluable insights for our programme. Whilst we cannot say outright that a creative approach has had a greater impact (as we did not do a comparative study to compare the insights, for example) I am confident that, not only have we received richer insights from the students, but that they feel a renewed affinity to their university. They have seen firsthand that staff care. They understand that we are trying to make improvements and we are actively seeking out their voices. They know that they are valued, they know that they matter, they know that they belong.

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Student Researchers: A co-construction approach to evaluating outreach activities in schools and colleges aimed at raising post-16/18 higher education participation

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Abstract

The role of students in co-construction and as co-collaborators to assess the effectiveness of school-based initiatives is a growing area of research. This chapter is based on a small-scale student researcher pilot undertaken in Lincolnshire, England, in the academic year 2021-22, as part of the local evaluation of the Uni Connect project. The article explores the value and challenges of using a co-construction approach to gather peer feedback to evaluate aspiration-raising outreach activities delivered in secondary schools and colleges. The aim of the initiative was to encourage student voice, student engagement and to improve the quality and impact of delivery. The pilot resulted in two guidance documents being produced to help schools and colleges establish and run their own student researcher groups. The article will also consider how this approach can be used in schools and colleges to assess the impact of other initiatives and interventions.

Key words: co-construction, student researchers, student voice, Uni Connect.

Introduction

The Office for Students (OfS) has an ongoing, and strengthening, requirement that all Uni Connect (UC) programmes should be fully and properly evaluated to establish what works and what does not (OfS, 2021). At the same time, there have been year-on-year reductions to programme funding which has impacted the staffing levels of the regional educational partnerships tasked with delivering the programme, and subsequently the amount of evaluation that can realistically be undertaken. It would, therefore, seem inevitable that in the future schools and colleges will need to have both the capacity and ability to self-evaluate such initiatives. This provided a timely opportunity to explore how the student voice, through co-construction, could be effectively utilised in the UC context to gather feedback on aspiration-raising outreach activities and, at the same time, help inform the future design of the programme.

Funded by the OfS, the government regulator of Higher Education (HE) in England, the UC programme has been running since 2017 and is currently due to finish in 2025. At the time of the pilot, the UC programme aim was to deliver targeted HE outreach activities, such as study skill workshops, campus visits and motivational speakers, to Year 9 to 13 (Levels 2 and 3, aged 13 – 18) students, in schools and colleges in England through 29 regional education partnerships. The partnerships focused specifically on the 997 wards in England where the HE participation of young people had been shown to be lower than expected, based on attainment levels achieved in the national examinations – the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) – taken at the end of Year 11. Students living in these wards, identified by their postcode,

were eligible to participate in the UC programme.

Based on a small-scale pilot in Lincolnshire, the East Midlands, that took place in the academic year 2021-22 as part of the UC evaluation (Rose and Mallinson, 2022a), this chapter explores the value and challenges of using a co-construction approach to gather peer feedback to evaluate aspiration-raising outreach activities delivered by LiNCHigher, the local UC consortia partnership, in secondary schools and colleges. The main aim of the pilot was to enhance student engagement, encourage student voice, and improve the quality and impact of the local partnership's delivery (Rose and Mallinson, 2022a). This chapter first provides a brief overview of the policy context in which the pilot was undertaken, followed by the rationale for setting up student researchers (SRs) before outlining the methodological approach taken. The findings section focuses on the student workshops and conference as well as the challenges reported by the SRs, learning gained and suggested improvements to the UC programme made by the SRs. The final section discusses the findings before drawing out what can be learnt from the pilot in relation to co-construction and co-collaboration in student research.

Policy context

The importance of co-construction and the student voice has grown considerably in recent years and is largely attributed to the legally binding Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which came into effect in 1989. The Article decrees:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UNICEF, 1990: 5)

The Article applies to all aspects of a child's life, including educational settings. However, according to Lundy (2007), the UNCRC has, in the past, criticised the United Kingdom's (UK) implementation of the Article. In 2002, the Committee raised concerns that children in schools were not:

...systematically consulted in matters that affect them and recommended that the UK Government should "take further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor systematic, meaningful and effective participation of all groups of children in society, including in school, for example, through school councils". (Lundy, 2007: 928)

Whilst those 'further steps' were written into the English Education Act in 2002, making it a statutory requirement for state schools to ensure children are actively involved in all decision making that affects them (DfE, 2014), the process of translating involvement into positive action has been slow.

Lundy suggests a four-pronged model of child participation consisting of space, voice, audience and influence to help meet the obligations set out in Article 12. The model states:

Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.

Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views.

Audience: The view must be listened to.

Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate. (Lundy 2007: 933)

Lundy's four prongs are interlinked and aim to do more than simply pay lip service to capturing the student's voice, they enable their views to be expressed, listened to and acted upon as appropriate. However, some (i.e., Cuevas-Parra, 2023; Kennan et al., 2021; Tisdall, 2015), and including Lundy herself (2018), have been

critical of this model mainly because of its simplicity. For example, Cuevas-Parra argues the original, and other early models, ‘do not fully capture the complexities of children’s social identities, relationships and diversity of childhoods’ (2023: 365). Therefore, Cuevas-Parra recently proposed an expanded typology of children participation rights which includes three new dimensions: ‘intersecting identities’, ‘enabling environments’ and ‘dimension factors’ (2023: 363). Lundy (2018) urges factors such as adult gatekeeping and specifically the risk of tokenism, to be carefully considered when engaging the student voice, pointing out that tokenism can be, but should never be, used as an excuse to do nothing. James (2007) also advocates that student voice should be acted on and result in meaningful change. Whilst other models of student voice have been proposed, for example Hart’s (1992) *Ladder of Participation* and Shier’s (2001) *Pathways to Participation*, it was Lundy’s that formed the main rationale for the student researcher pilot.

Although Article 12 (UNICEF, 1990:5) has been in existence for some years now, there is little research in the area of student voice in the UK context that goes beyond the impact of such initiatives as student councils or, in HE, course representatives (Young and Jerome, 2020) and takes it into the realm of audience and influence. Many of the more recent studies come from the United States, for example the work of Mitra 2003-2018 who has written extensively on the use and impact of student voice in schools (Mitra and Serriere, 2012; Mitra 2006 and 2007), and most are based on Youth Participation Action Research (YPAR) initiatives. Those in the UK context tend to have a focus on HE and often refer to student surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) (Young and Jerome, 2020) or rely on secondary data sets (Matthews and Dollinger, 2023; Zaitseva et al., 2022).

YPAR projects encourage young people to engage in ‘inquiry alongside supportive adults’ (Cammarota and Fine, 2008) and have been extensively and systematically reviewed (Anderson 2020; Mitra and McCormick 2017). Anderson’s (2020) review considered research projects that were conducted either *with* high school students or *within* high school settings, had been published via peer review and included at least 80 per cent of high school students. A total of 38 papers met the search criteria, the majority of which (30) were qualitative, the remaining eight were mixed methods. Anderson found that two key themes emerged: pedagogical strategies and stakeholder dynamics and needs concluding ‘YPAR is a worthwhile mode of inquiry in school settings... [and that] ...YPAR projects provide a meaningful avenue for sharing power within high school settings’ (Anderson 2020:255).

Whilst many YPAR projects centre around the concerns young people have i.e., about the environment, bullying, and social justice, some do have an educational focus; for example, the Central City Youth co-researcher project (Warren and Marciano, 2018) with 14–19-year-olds. A primary objective of this project was that ‘all students regardless of race, gender, or socio-economic background, will be successful in pursuing careers and life paths that lead to their economic stability’ (Warren and Marciano, 2018: 658) and is therefore comparable with UC aims. Their project went beyond simply soliciting the views of young people and trained them to carry out their own research through a series of workshops over a period of time. They were given the tools to generate their own research questions, choose appropriate data collection methods, analyse data and report their research findings. This approach, pared-down to fit the time and resources available, formed the basis of the student researcher pilot presented in this article.

Rationale for the pilot

The student researcher pilot project aimed to take a new approach to gathering student feedback to assess the effectiveness of LiNCHigher’s outreach activities and an alternative way of assessing the programme’s impact. Previously, impact had been assessed through a student outcome survey sent to all LiNCHigher’s target schools and colleges at the end of the academic year in conjunction with a limited number of one-off student focus groups, usually carried out in the summer term once the delivery of activities was completed. However, feedback from both could, at times, be sparse and difficult to solicit, as students

frequently did not remember the activities they were being asked about, especially those delivered earlier in the school year. In addition, accessing schools was challenging, especially post COVID-19. The evaluation team sought to use the student researcher pilot to both increase the number of students that had the opportunity to provide feedback and ensure that feedback was gathered in a timely fashion.

Methodology

The initial intention of this qualitative pilot was to set up student researcher groups (SRGs) with Year 9 and 10 students in schools and colleges and to work with the same group of students over one academic year. The SRs were tasked with carrying out peer evaluation of LiNCHigher's outreach activities delivered in their school or college, to their year group, which they would then feed back to the evaluation team at regular, termly workshops. Whilst the SRs were provided with the core questions that they were asked to gather peer feedback on, they were encouraged to collect the data in the way that suited them best, as those involved in YPAR projects were (Anderson 2020). This gave them autonomy over how and when they generated their data, as well as the format they used to document their findings; an approach that has become increasingly popular, especially in educational research where the student voice is key (Kellett, 2004 and 2005; Hacking, et al., 2012). At the end of the year, the students would be invited to attend a student researcher conference at one of the local universities where they would meet with other SRGs and present their findings to the LiNCHigher team. This was to ensure the student voice was not only heard and considered but acted upon appropriately, in accordance with Lundy's (2007) child participation model.

The approach was designed to provide in-depth rich qualitative data and insights into how students and their peers engaged with UC activities, what impact they have and to help improve the delivery of the programme for future cohorts. In addition, the pilot had the potential to identify other factors that influence students in terms of their knowledge, understanding and aspirations to study further at post-16/18.

The pilot was originally designed to involve 40 students from four of LiNCHigher's target schools and one of the colleges. Schools were asked to identify eight students, four from Year 9 and four from Year 10, to take part in the pilot. The college was asked to select eight AS-level students to participate. In each case, a gender mix and UC and non-UC students were also requested.

For the selection process, students at one school were chosen by their respective Heads of Year for their confidence and ability to make the most of the task set. Students at another school had previously registered their interest to be a Careers Champion with the Careers Lead (CL) who then selected a cross-section of students they felt would engage most readily with the research activity. In the remaining two schools, it was unclear how the students had been selected to take part.

Unfortunately, not all schools recruited fully, some students did not attend the workshop when asked to do so and some dropped out after the first session. This was probably because they were 'assigned but not informed' of what being involved entailed (Hart, 1992). Therefore, the final number of SRs that took part in the pilot was 33: 21 males and 12 females. Of these, 16 were Year 9 students, 11 Year 10 students, three Level 3 Year 1 and three Level 3 Year 2 students.

The intention was to establish the SRGs in each school/college before October half-term (2021) with a 90-minute introductory and evaluation skills training workshop, followed by visits in January and April (2022), with a student researcher conference scheduled to take place late in June or early July. Unfortunately, due to constraints and challenges in the schools, largely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which was still causing schools difficulties in the Autumn term of 2021, the evaluation team were unable to access schools until early December 2021. The late start resulted in a reduced number of visits to the schools. The timetable of visits for each school/college is detailed as follows (Table 1).

School / College	Visits
The College	3 visits plus the conference – December, February, April and June
School 1	1 visit plus one phone call with the Careers Lead – December and March
School 2	2 visits – February and May
School 3	2 visits – December and March
School 4	2 visits plus the conference – February, March and July

Table 1: Timetable of visits

Findings

The initial workshops

The first set of workshops aimed to inform the students about the pilot and provide them with the skills and knowledge they would need to carry out the task of gathering peer feedback. The workshop format, which included an icebreaker activity, naming the group, a section on what questions students could ask their peers and how they would collect and collate the information they gathered, generally worked well.

Each group of SRs were keen to choose a name by which they could be identified. Students were provided with question parameters and came up with some excellent questions of their own. They were encouraged to ask the questions in their own words, as long as they retained the essence of the original question set. Most of the SRGs elected to provide their feedback at the next session in a word document or as a PowerPoint presentation. Whilst more innovative options were offered, such as a blog, recording a podcast or a tweet, they all elected to use more conventional feedback methods.

Apart from the late start, the main challenges were students not turning up to the session or not knowing why they had been asked to attend. The latter led to several students feeling they would not be able to carry out the tasks required of them, and they subsequently withdrew after the first session. The lack of an ‘enabling environment’ (Cuevas-Parra, 2023) hampered student engagement from the start.

Subsequent workshops

The second, and in the case of the college, the third visit to the SRGs was largely successful with students having gathered feedback from their peers on LiNCHigher’s activities they had participated in. Most SRGs favoured an informal approach to gathering peer feedback through friendship or tutor groups and by asking the evaluation questions in their own way. Some noted responses afterwards, rather than at the time. One of the college SRs, who was very shy, asked her questions via text. Students found they gained the most information when they had the opportunity to ask questions shortly after the activity had been delivered. The message from students was ‘the sooner you can gather feedback, the better’. Three of the groups (School 2, School 4 and the college) set up an online forum where they were able to communicate with each other and arrange meetings. The SRs in school 2 used their private Instagram accounts, School 4 SRs communicated via school email and the College SRs had a designated group on Teams, which was set up by their CL. The College SRs found this very helpful as it allowed them to post any queries in the chat and helped them to be organised, especially in the latter stages of the pilot when they were compiling their PowerPoint for the student researchers’ conference. They found it particularly helpful to have the peer feedback questions posted into the forum. All groups, except one (School 4), gave their findings to the evaluation team verbally from handwritten notes or, in the case of the college SRs, from notes they had made on their mobile phones.

The most successful follow-up visit was to school 4 where the Year 9 and 10 SRs had been effectively working together as a cohesive group with the support of the CL. This group of students - known as the Young Researchers - had taken it upon themselves to meet regularly to help, support and motivate each other and feedback their findings in a timely fashion. The CL commented: *'they were really self-motivated as a group. I've not had to do any chasing around. Everyone was on board'*.

The CL at school 4 arranged badges to be made with the group's name so that they could be easily identified throughout the school whilst carrying out their research: most reported wearing their badge with pride. The name gave the group an identity and something for their fellow students to ask them about; many were said to be 'curious' about what it meant. The Year 10 students had divided their year group into sections, by tutor groups, to ensure feedback was collected from as many of their peers as possible, systematically and without duplication. The Year 9 students had mainly solicited feedback from their friendship groups. Whilst they found it 'quite easy' to ask the feedback questions, they found obtaining in-depth and varied responses from their peers more problematic - something other groups also reported.

For the evaluation team's second visit, the Young Researchers in school 4 had put together, with the help of the CL, a full PowerPoint presentation detailing their evaluation activity and their findings, which they presented to the evaluation team; they were the only SRG to do so.

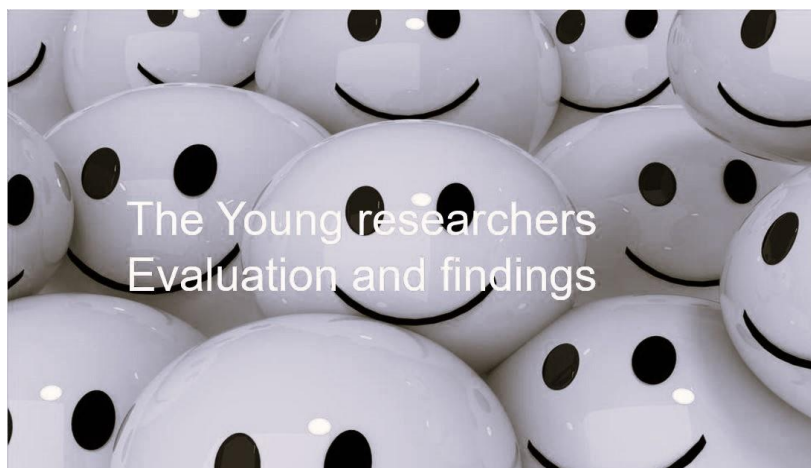


Image 1: Title slide from School 4 students' feedback PowerPoint presentation

Each member of the group played a role in putting together the presentation and the CL was so impressed by their work that she recommended they all be awarded extra points and hot chocolate rewards by their form tutors. Even without the rewards the group were highly motivated, with the students regularly attending their self-arranged meetings. They were also inclusive and respectful of the different talents each had to bring to the group. They divided tasks and allocated roles according to each member's particular strengths, especially when it came to compiling and delivering the presentation. For example, they elected one student to lead the group and another to put the presentations together. Overall, they had a good working relationship with the CL and with each other, despite coming from different friendship and year groups.

There were a number of operational issues at some of the participating schools which unfortunately impacted on the students' ability to take part in the pilot. For example, it was not possible to re-visit school 1 due to unexpected changes at the school. This led to the senior leadership team (SLT) re-prioritising careers provision and effectively putting it on hold until late in the summer term, leaving the SRs with little activity to gather feedback on. Subsequently, in May, the school withdrew from the pilot altogether. Similarly, whilst the evaluation team did revisit school 3 and the SRs had gathered some (if limited) peer

feedback, unfortunately, due to staffing issues, the school was unable to fully support them. This meant the group were unable to operate collaboratively, found it difficult to carry out tasks and maintain focus and motivation.

Not all SRs returned for the second or third workshop; in some cases (especially with the college) this was largely due to the challenges students faced by timetabling.

Challenges reported by the student researchers

The SRs reported several challenges in gathering peer feedback on LiNCHigher's outreach activities. They felt their fellow students did not always take them seriously and they were not willing to talk to them in their own, free time, i.e., lunchtime. They particularly struggled to elicit answers from their peers to the questions about future career options and the benefits of HE. Some, particularly the school 4 SRs, reported a lack of support from their form tutors, who did not always appear to understand what they were doing or why. This also meant that they were not always able to find a suitable time or space to talk to their peers to gather the feedback they sought. One school 4 SR explained the issue:

We can't go into an English lesson or a lesson like that and impede on their lesson to ask [about LiNCHigher activity] whilst they are doing serious working. But if we try and go at a time when it's supposed to be theirs, for example breaktime, they are not going to take it seriously because they just want to go. So, it's hard to get proper feedback because they don't listen in the sessions and after that they mess about when you question them.

Finally, some SRs, especially the Level 3 Year 2 college students, reported having conflicting priorities, specifically around exams and assignment deadlines, which made it difficult to find the time to gather peer feedback.

The student researcher conferences

An important aspect of the pilot was providing an opportunity for the SRs to feed back their findings directly to LiNCHigher, as the organisation that delivered the outreach activities. Two conferences were planned, one for the college SRs at the end of June and one for the school SRs in mid-July. The college and the three actively participating schools were invited to their respective event. Both days involved a presentation by the SRs to LiNCHigher staff on what they had been doing and their findings, as well as a campus tour, a student life talk (in the case of the college SRs) and lunch. Students were presented with a certificate and a small reward in the form of a £10 Amazon voucher as a thank you for the work they had carried out during the year.

Unfortunately, just one of the three schools were able to attend their event, with the other two cancelling at short notice; one due to staffing shortages and the other because, in the absence of a CL, the students had not been able to fully undertake the required tasks.

Both student researcher conferences went exceptionally well. The school 4 SRs were very excited to attend the conference; most had not visited Lincoln or the university before. Both the college and school 4 SRs' presentations were delivered to LiNCHigher staff, the evaluation team, and their teachers/CLs.



Image 2: School 4 students presenting at the conference

The LiNCHigher staff took the opportunity to ask the SRs questions about their findings and their experience of the activities they had been gathering feedback on. Presentations were well received by LiNCHigher staff, with one commenting afterwards that *'the students were inspiring and a true credit to their school'*.

At the end of each of the conferences, the SRs were asked to complete a short questionnaire to capture their experience of the event. Students' responses indicated that they felt their feedback would help LiNCHigher with the future delivery of their programme and that their presentation had been well received.

This was the key point of the exercise, as one member of LiNCHigher's staff later acknowledged, stating:

Now to put what we have learned into future activity and project delivery planning.

The students enjoyed all aspects of the day, with one Year 10 SR commenting: *'I loved it and would love to do it all again next year if I could'*. They particularly enjoyed the campus tour and delivering their presentation. Other student comments included:

I enjoyed speaking my mind and having conversations with others in the room, it was a friendly environment (Yr 10)

All the different views we got back from the PowerPoint. (Yr 10)

The tour of a smaller university. It's made me rethink where I want to go. (L3/Yr1)

It was fun and interesting. I'm glad that I participated in this :) (L3/Y2)

Great for building confidence/getting to know new people. (L3/Y1)

It was really fun, and I enjoyed it a lot. (L3/Y1)

It has been a pleasure working with you and I do it again any day. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this. (Yr 10)

It was fun and I felt really comfortable being myself there and more comfortable moving on from secondary school (Yr 10)

Overall, the students believed that sharing their findings and experience of the programme would lead to improvements, with one commenting: *'the improvements suggested at the end of the presentation will make activities better in the future for students'* (L3/Yr1). Another stated: *'I would say that during the presentation our team raised good problems with LiNCHigher activities which will help them to improve with such feedback'* (L3/Yr2).

What the students learnt from being a student researcher

Students reported numerous benefits and learning as a result of taking part in the student researcher pilot, including teamwork, a growth in confidence and improved communication and time management skills. Some made new friends outside of their usual friendship groups and some found it helped to clarify their next steps by giving them a greater understanding of the options open to them post-16/18.

Overall, school 2, school 4 and the college SRs felt very supported by their CL. The college SRs said their CL had been *'brilliant, really helpful and had made them more aware of the opportunities available after college'*. All of the school 4 and college SRs said they would like to see other students given the opportunity to be SRs as they had found it very beneficial. The school 4 SRs felt it would encourage others to be more excited about moving onto college or university, as it had for them.

The school 4 and college SRs would have liked to continue to do more peer research in the following school year, if their timetables and workloads allowed. All said they would be willing ambassadors to future SRGs.

The school 4 CL felt the pilot had been of great benefit to both the students that had taken part and the school as a whole. The student researcher conference and the campus tour were particularly welcomed. At the end of the pilot, the CL commented on the whole experience:

I feel that the main benefit [of taking part] has been that it has helped to raise aspirations, as many of the pupils in the group have not seen what is on offer at a university.

All of these pupils are the ones that are sometimes not recognised for their hard work in school and I feel that this has given them some recognition and has enabled them to bond. As a school, I feel we need to be promoting more of these activities.

More recently, the CL at school 4 reported longer-term impact on the students that had taken part:

The students really benefitted from taking part in the student researchers' pilot and even now, over a year later, they still talk about it. One of the students that took part, when she left us this summer, told me that it was the student researchers that had given her the most confidence during her time at the school.

Suggested improvements to the programme

Whilst both the school 4 and the college SRs felt the pilot worked well and that they had been fully prepared to carry out the tasks asked of them, they made some helpful suggestions as to how the programme could be improved.

The college SRs suggested inviting more students to the first meeting to allow for attrition. They also suggested making sure the students taking part are willing, informed volunteers with a good level of confidence and the ability to talk to others. They pointed out the reason some students had attended the first session but subsequently dropped out was almost certainly because they had been *told* to go to the session as they had a free period in their timetable. This is important as students have a right *not* to participate as much as they do to be included (Singer, 2014). They suggested running an information session during the college induction week to talk about LiNCHigher's activities and becoming a SR. Another suggestion was to have student representatives from all departments across the college, ideally one from

each course. This would provide LiNCHigher with a more rounded view of how their programmes are being received by different types of students.

The SRGs worked best where students were self-motivated and had an assigned or named, and informed, member of staff as a point of contact. Having a designated shared online forum for the group, such as Teams, school email or personal social media, helped the SRs to work effectively and collaboratively. It helped them organise their time, acted as a prompt and provided them with peer and teacher support. Whilst they appreciated having a question framework, they also liked the freedom to rephrase the questions into their own words.

A further suggestion was to incentivise students to take part by explaining that it would be a good addition to their CV or material for their personal statement. Students felt this would be a '*big draw*'. Gathering peer feedback worked best when students were asked to concentrate on just one or two specific activities, for example, a campus visit or a particular speaker.

Level 3/Year 2 college SRs found it challenging to find the time to participate and complete the tasks, largely due to the pressure of exams. Internal school/college factors also affected the success of the SRGs, for example, a change in SLT priorities.

Overall, the SRs that attended the conferences appreciated and valued the opportunity to give their feedback directly to LiNCHigher as the organisation in a position to put their findings and recommendations into action; they felt listened to.

Discussion

The pilot had a tangible and positive effect on the students that took part, particularly those at the college and school 4. The student researcher conference was particularly impactful on those that attended. The students felt they had provided valuable feedback for LiNCHigher to consider when delivering future programmes that would enhance the student experience and better equip them for their next steps. It was important that the students felt listened to as this was a key aim of the pilot and a critical aspect of student voice. However, the student voice should not only be heard by those directly responsible for delivering local outreach programmes in schools and colleges, i.e., LiNCHigher, in line with Lundy's model of child participation, but acted upon. The feedback from the SRs shows they felt strongly that this would be the case.

In terms of developing the ability of schools and colleges to self-evaluate the impact of UC outreach delivery, the pilot demonstrated it is possible to do so successfully where conditions are favourable. For example, where the CL and SLT are fully supportive of the principle of student voice and are willing to give students time and space to carry out peer feedback, as was the case at school 4 where the pilot was most successful. The pilot was also effective at the college where they had a full-time dedicated CL.

The pilot demonstrated that there is the potential for student voice to provide SLTs with honest feedback in a sustainable manner, on what is working and what is not, as well as how delivery can be improved. There is also the potential for the model to be used to gather students' views on the impact and effectiveness of other school and colleges activities, such as general careers provision, and for students to provide feedback directly to their SLT.

Conclusion

Some of the students that turned up to the initial workshops often did so, especially those at the college, because they had been told to, with little choice afforded to them. Therefore, the students were not,

understandably, invested in the activity. This lack of an ‘enabling environment’, which Cuevas-Parra (2023) suggests is essential for effective student engagement, led to a high level of attrition in the early stages of the pilot. Arguably, this is not what Lundy (2007) envisaged in her child participation model and is more in line with tokenism (Riley and Docking, 2004; Lundy, 2018). Opportunity to participate is only meaningful if students and young people are fully informed and aware of what it is they are signing up to.

However, subsequent workshops were more successful with students more engaged and invested in the activity, especially at school 4. The SRs in school 4 represented an exemplar of how successful and rewarding such initiatives can be and how students are capable of carrying out the research with minimal adult intervention – but only once they understand what is required of them and received the appropriate level of training that gives them the confidence to execute the task in hand. Whilst the students still encountered some difficulties, such as lack of support from some members of staff, they did not let this deter them. The student conferences were arguably the most successful element of the activity for the students that attended.

Many lessons were learnt from the pilot in terms of what does and does not work when setting up and running SRGs, and these lessons are detailed in the ‘Do and Don’t’ section of the guidance documents that were developed as a result of the pilot study (Rose and Mallinson, 2022b and 2022c). One of the main learnings was that establishing SRGs in colleges is very different to schools.

To conclude, co-construction takes the student voice to the next level. It goes beyond the usual, often tokenistic (Lundy 2018), nod to student engagement such as school councils, course reps or survey feedback (Riley and Docking, 2004), and arguably goes a long way to fulfilling Lundy’s original model of child participation. In the context of UC, SRs were not only given an opportunity to express their views and those of their fellow students and the tools to help them to do so; they were also listened to and felt heard by those who had the power to make meaningful changes.

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Beyond the focus group: Two approaches to widening participation co-creation

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Abstract

This chapter explores the extensive complications that arise from a lack of clear direction regarding a co-creative way of working, before attempting to provide a much-needed definition. By exploring the literature and evidence that surrounds co-creation, several clear gaps have been identified, including within a school or professional services environment, which helps situate our two projects – the Student Advisory Board and Youth Consultant Project – within the wider field of co-creation. With our experiences of managing these projects, we offer our perspective on the benefits of tailoring co-creative methods to specific projects and offer examples of best practice for working in this way, while acknowledging existing challenges and barriers and suggesting ways to overcome these. We finish with a series of tiered recommendations – for the sector, for institutions, and for practitioners – that will allow this way of working to become more than just a tokenistic box-ticking exercise, and for student experiences to truly become the centre of how we all work.

Key words: co-creation, partnership, dialogue, feedback, remuneration.

Introduction

What is co-creation?

Co-creation and student voice have become buzzwords in the widening participation sector over the past few years, perceived as best practice in delivering a high-quality student experience (Matthews and Dollinger, 2023). In part, this can be pinpointed to the regulatory expectation from the Office for Students, the English higher education regulator, who have outlined that providers should work with students as partners and participants in co-creation, in both the design and implementation of widening participation activities (Office for Students, 2023). However, the phrase ‘co-creation’ evokes many different meanings and methods, encompassing short-term survey work and long-term student panels, with a lack of clear definition across the sector (Adams, 2023). This regulatory expectation from the Office for Students, combined with the lack of clear parameters for co-creation work, has led to the occasional tokenistic approach to student voice (Adams, 2023), with providers failing to carefully consider the varying levels of student voice alongside the nuances of individual approaches (Bishop, 2018).

Student voice leads to a natural assumption that the opinions and ideas of students should be collected and listened to. But what then? What do we do once we’ve collected student voice? Can we tick that box and move on, patting ourselves on the back for the passive action of listening to student feedback? Co-creation

ensures the transition from listening to enacting, from passive to active, highlighting that student voice is merely the starting point.

So, what is co-creation? Co-creation can be divided into four key areas: dialogue with students, co-design with students, partnership with students, and student-led initiatives, and involves working with students to solve problems and make decisions. This non-hierarchical structure contrasts with other traditional approaches, further demonstrating that co-creative working is not necessarily better practice than dialogue with students, nor worse than student-led activity. There is consensus that non-participation or one-way communication is not necessarily best practice, and the University's Toolkit (USSVT) (University of Southampton, 2023) advocates for all staff to consider aims, outcomes, and resources when aligning their project to a type of co-creation.

Benefits of co-creation

The benefits of co-creation are clear to anyone who has engaged in such practices. A tiered system of benefits should motivate the engagement in co-creative practice, if aligning our work with what students need is not motivation enough. Significant benefits exist for the students involved in this type of work, the practitioners facilitating such work, the institution or organisation, and by extension, the wider sector.

The most obvious benefits arise from the work produced by the students involved. However, we posit that the benefits of co-creation, when planned and organised in an appropriate manner, can and should go far beyond the outputs produced by the students involved. As a result of the sector's pre-occupation with student voice as orthodoxy (Mendes and Hammett, 2023), a reminder is sometimes required that students should be at the heart of access and participation work. Student benefits can and should be vast, and the value of our projects – as are introduced later in this chapter – is that they centre around maximising student benefits. Our projects prioritise the intended beneficiaries, ensuring that students feel listened to and valued, and through the practice of employing students, aim to develop transferable workplace skills, build a strong community between the students, and connect the participants with the wider university community.

On an institutional level, engagement with students supports a real understanding of lived experiences throughout the student lifecycle. Furthermore, engagement with under-represented student groups is particularly essential to understand, amplify, and implement the voices of those traditionally marginalised within the sector (Cook-Sather, 2020). For many practitioners in the widening participation sector, and even those with lived experience in certain target areas, there exists a lack of understanding of the current experiences of the students we work with, or certainly a lack of lived current experience that manifests in programme and service design (Skerritt, Brown, and O'Hara, 2023). In addition, there are ethical concerns of implementing deficit-based approach within the paradigm of typically middle-class educated practitioners, implementing what they think is best practice for the students they work with (Lumb and Burke, 2019). Therefore, this student engagement, particularly with those from backgrounds currently under-represented in higher education, is essential to inform and develop effective access and participation practice (Office for Students, 2020).

Research context

On surveying the available literature on student voice and co-creation in education, there are two noticeable absences. Firstly, co-creation is often confined to the contexts of curriculum and pedagogy (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019). There are multiple studies exploring the impact of co-creation on curriculum design, with the specific lens of decolonisation (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019), as well as reviews of assessment practices (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019). Whilst teaching and learning is a crucial aspect of the university experience, with students attending with the primary aim of achieving a degree with good honours, co-creation must be similarly embedded within university professional services, including widening participation, careers and

wellbeing, and co-curricular programmes. Therefore, the need is presented for a greater level of research into the impact of co-creation in activities external to teaching and learning.

Secondly, whilst there is significant evidence on the importance of co-creation in higher education, there is very little research for its potential in primary and secondary schools. This has been explored by Bovill (2020), who states these environments are perfect for co-creation due to the smaller institution sizes when compared with the higher education sector, and that there could be valuable knowledge exchange between education phases. Furthermore, as explored above, co-creation within the primary and secondary phases would be extremely beneficial within the context of widening participation activity, given the majority of university access work is aimed at school pupils.

These absences in the research landscape are further compounded by the lack of a standardised and universally applicable model for co-creation, particularly within the UK context. Whilst different models already exist, including Gunuc and Kuzu's (2014) which is specific to the university context, the Lundy Model (Lundy, 2007) which is too simplistic for transferability across multiple phases of education, and Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992) which is a hierarchical model of engagement with young people, there is an emerging argument to establish a clear and standardised model that outlines the different methods of student voice, including co-creation, in a non-hierarchical format. Ideally, this model would be adopted by the regulator, the Office for Students, with guidance about selecting appropriate methods based on context and outcomes, which would further bolster and clearly define their regulatory notice to work with students as 'active partners and co-creators' (Office for Students, 2020).

Occupying the identified gaps in literature, we present two separate and seemingly distinct projects based within the Widening Participation and Social Mobility (WPSM) directorate at the University of Southampton: one emerging outreach activity with a target audience of key stage four pupils, and one established success activity for current UK undergraduate students at the University. Both activities are further rooted in a lack of practitioner and wider institution understanding of the under-represented student voice, as well as the historic lack of student representation in development and planning stages of professional services work. Both activities centralise the student experience; an aim that aligns them more than initial differences – due to target audience – would suggest. Furthermore, both activities adhere to the USSVT (2023) as they are embedded within an institution-wide understanding of student voice mechanisms.

Overview of projects

The Youth Consultants project was established in 2022 by the Access department of the University of Southampton's WPSM directorate. Through the project, staff who work on pre-entry programmes can work with a panel of Youth Consultants to inform the design and development of activities such as residential trips and campus visits. One of few higher education projects based in the arena of pre-entry student voice, the Youth Consultants project arose from a need to understand whether our activities meet the needs of the young people we work with. As highlighted by the Office for Students (Blake, 2022), much pre-entry work in the wider sector has remained static for decades with minimal questioning or re-designing, naturally prompting questions around whether ongoing activity is both fit for purpose and impactful. In the pilot stage of this project, members of the Access department are collaborating with local Year 10 pupils to redesign a Year 10 residential activity. Selecting this residential, stand-alone activity for this phase supported the student experience being at the heart of the activity and enabled changes and alterations, as suggested by the young people employed on the project.

The Student Advisory Board (SAB) was established in 2021 by the Success department of the WPSM directorate. Now in its fourth year, the SAB currently consists of 30 student advisors, all from backgrounds

currently under-represented at the University. The represented demographics correspond with target groups identified in our Access and Participation Plan - required documents that outline how higher education providers will improve the equality of opportunity for under-represented students to access, succeed, and progress from higher education (University of Southampton, 2023). Participating students complete a competitive recruitment process, with staff assessing students' comfort and willingness to discuss their lived experience as this is essential in shaping projects and processes at the University to ensure they are fit for all students. The SAB was established as the student arm of the Widening Participation Operations Group (WPOG), which is part of the governance structure for widening participation activity across the University. The SAB meets five times during an academic year and provides feedback and consultation on emerging projects from across the University. Previous projects include the University's response to the cost of living crisis, a student shadowing scheme, and the redevelopment of the Academic Skills Hub. The project is run in collaboration with the Students' Union, with a sabbatical officer co-chairing alongside a member of staff.

Methodology

Application of Student Voice Toolkit

As stated, both the Youth Consultants project and SAB adhere to the guidance provided by the USSVT (2023), developed in collaboration with University of Southampton Students' Union (SUSU). The USSVT is designed to support all staff, both academic and professional services, in identifying different methods of student voice and how best to embed this method of working as standard practice. The USSVT outlines four types of student voice: dialogue with students, co-design with students, partnership with students, and student-led initiatives. The non-hierarchical structure contrasts with Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation, further demonstrating that co-creative working is not necessarily better practice than dialogue with students, nor worse than student-led activity. Whilst there is consensus that non-participation, or one-way communication, is not necessarily best practice, the USSVT advocates for staff to consider aims, outcomes, and resource when aligning their project to one of the four outlined types.

The four types of student voice outlined in the USSVT are structured to demonstrate an increase in student autonomy and control; engagement is typically lower if students are simply asked to provide feedback and have no continued voice in how their feedback is implemented to change or improve a service. With this in mind, if student engagement is higher when student voice activity uses partnership or student-led activity, why do we not always position activity here? Working at this level is significantly more time and resource-consuming and will cost significantly more – something that is not always possible. Furthermore, it may not be the best fit for the intended outcome, especially if feedback is needed rapidly for a quick timescale on a project. By advocating for a non-hierarchical model such as the USSVT (2023), best practice can be interpreted more broadly as generating a two-way dialogue with students, rather than solely as student-led activity which is not always attainable nor appropriate.

Both the Youth Consultants project and SAB follow the co-design definition outlined in the USSVT as they work 'with students close to the start of a new or developing project to ensure their ideas, thoughts and concerns are a part of the initial planning process' (2023: 6). This is in line with the resource and time available within WPSM, with staff leads balancing a portfolio of other projects in addition to Youth Consultants and the SAB. Furthermore, by positioning the projects as co-design, a broader group of students and pupils can engage, as the time intensity and frequency of meetings is less intensive than partnership or student-led activity. Each SAB advisor only needs to commit three hours a month which ensures that students with caring responsibilities, jobs, or placements can also participate. For Youth Consultants, while the time commitment amounts to three hours a week, the project runs for a maximum of twelve weeks. By ensuring that projects adopt the language used by the wider institution when discussing

student voice, progress is made in ensuring a standardised and non-hierarchical model is used. Furthermore, the use of the USSVT in the projects' design ensures that the use of student voice is carefully considered, fit for purpose and devoid of tokenism.

Value of long-term interaction

In addition to the use of co-design, one of the key commonalities between the Youth Consultants project and the SAB is that both engage participants in long-term interactions with staff. The SAB was initially conceived as a way of transcending the focus group model, ensuring that participating students can build a community across the academic year and see the impact of their voice. As the SAB meet five times a year, with an additional training meeting, students can build a rapport supporting staff and other advisors, enhancing the quality of their contributions, as students feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences. Furthermore, five places each year are ring-fenced for returning advisors to allow for longer term professional relationships to develop.

In contrast, the Youth Consultants project is a more intensive programme that runs over twelve weeks within an academic year, again designed to develop a community between the pupils and supporting staff/student ambassadors. Whilst working with children is more restrictive than working with current students within a university community, long-term interaction is still possible through strong relationships with any gatekeepers, including senior school staff. Even though this model is less intensive than the SAB and breaks away from the more traditional model of a one-off focus group, meeting across twelve weeks has proved sufficient to allow for co-design. Despite this pilot phase, thoughts to extend the long-term nature of this include the development of a Consultant Community where young people are approached with further opportunities in the future, as well as the potential for Youth Consultants to shadow SAB advisors and staff.

Application of theory of change

To ensure that both the Youth Consultants project and the SAB remain robust in their approach to better amplify and embed under-represented student voice, a Theory of Change was developed by staff to consolidate the aims of each project and plan robust evaluation activities. A Theory of Change is a diagram that outlines a programme's inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and underlying causal mechanisms, primarily used for predicting how an interaction brings about the desired change (TASO, 2020). This process was the starting point for developing and initiating both the Youth Consultants project and the SAB.

However, creating a Theory of Change is not enough; as a document, it should be frequently re-evaluated by staff, adjusted, and widely shared to ensure that it remains an accurate depiction of the mechanisms for change used. Furthermore, it should not be written by staff to retrospectively fit a pre-existing project, as this can impact whether the aims of the project can be suitably met. When working in a co-creative way, this method is particularly important to ensure that the work meets the initial aims and objectives set out.

Whilst the Youth Consultant project and SAB are two different activities within different departments in WPSM, there has been immense value in going further with the Theory of Change model and identifying alignment between the two documents. Although both initiatives have different intended activities and outputs, the two projects have fundamental similarities, demonstrated by an alignment of the aims and desired outcomes of each project (Table 1). Whilst activities across large widening participation directorates may be carried out largely independently, especially across pre-entry and post-entry, there is immense value in ensuring that there are common approaches to student voice.

Theory of Change Outcomes	Student Advisory Board	Youth Consultants
Sense of belonging	✓	✓
Sense of community	✓	✓
Feeling listened to and valued	✓	✓
Understanding of diversity and inclusion work	✓	
Understanding of lived experience	✓	
Skill development		✓
Staff understanding of co-creative working	✓	✓
Embedding student voice as standard practice	✓	✓

Table 1. The aims and outcomes of both projects, as outlined in each Theory of Change.

Value of remuneration

One of the fundamental principles underpinning both the Youth Consultants project and the SAB is the payment and remuneration of all participants. Whilst paying students to provide their views has been presented as a way of both providing recognition for their time (Neary, 2016), and for increasing engagement (USSVT, 2023), both projects are guided by the principle that students are acting as staff, due to the intended purpose of students co-designing our projects and processes. Whilst there has been a tendency in the sector to reward students for their time through transcript recommendations or gift vouchers, across both the Youth Consultants project and the SAB students are paid in line with our staff pay-scale, with a rate that is above our minimum ambassador wage. This practice reflects and recognises the quality and standard of the work completed, and the contributions made by those participating. While this pay level is not significantly higher than a student ambassador pay rate in monetary value, and possible congruent with the value of vouchers historically used, we believe that paying participants as staff is symbolic of the equal relationship we strive towards under the principles of co-design.

Whilst paying undergraduate students is accessible due to the commonplace nature of employing students across the university, there are some challenges with paying children, stemming from the challenge of employing those under the age of sixteen. These barriers include navigating institutional processes, aligning with youth employment regulations, and the potential lack of bank accounts. However, we must emphasise that it is possible – proven by the Youth Consultant project – and should be a priority for all those wanting to benefit from a co-creative method of working with children. Through developing the Youth Consultant project, and working alongside university colleagues, the distinct lack of sector guidance about engaging with children in paid student voice opportunities became clear. Subsequently, a guidebook that provides guidance about the process of employing young people is being developed in collaboration with colleagues in the University’s LifeLab project, to ensure other widening participation directorates and institutions are empowered and educated when organising employment opportunities for young people.

Findings and Discussion

Evaluation – a need for standardisation?

With both the Youth Consultant project and SAB fully implemented at the University, several emergent findings and challenges are important considerations in the design and application of similar student voice activities. Under the new guidance for Access and Participation plans, delivered by the Office for Students (2023), there is a distinct focus on the need for robust evaluation. This was further compounded by the assertion made by the Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, that his top priority is ‘evaluation, evaluation, evaluation’ (Blake, 2022). Despite this declaration, however, there remains little standardised guidance on what to evaluate, and how to evaluate student voice activities.

For both projects discussed here, robust evaluation remains challenging due to small, unrepresentative sample sizes – 30 SAB members and 6 Youth Consultants. Whilst co-design, partnership and student-led activity are student voice methods that facilitate the highest degrees of student autonomy, there is an argument that this increase aligns with a decrease in the number of students engaged, as smaller sizes are necessary for deeper insight. Consequently, demonstrating strong impact of the activity, particularly on wider targets around university access and degree awarding, becomes extremely challenging.

A further challenge lies in that young people self-select through an application process for involvement in both the Youth Consultants project and the SAB. This removes the possibility of identifying a causal link between participation and access or success, and additionally raises questions around whether this allows for greatest impact on individuals. This is a necessary consideration within widening participation where we are purposefully attempting to engage with marginalised or under-represented voices.

Despite these challenges, we propose that the possibility of engagement in these projects increasing either likelihood of attending university or of achieving a good honours degree, should not be considered as an ultimate impact. Rather, co-creation activity should exist as standard practice for the development and design of processes and programmes across the University, and alternative individual-level impacts of participation for students can be considered. These include a sense of belonging within the University community, and development of identified skillset. For the Youth Consultants project, this skillset was identified alongside the learners, embodying true co-creation where student voice was incorporated at every stage of the project. Further iterations of the project look to continue this effective approach. An important consideration is that theorising any possible impact on access to higher education or success should not be attached to student voice activity, and rather these boards should be embedded within programme design. Validated outcomes relating to this, with guidance on how to evaluate, would ensure practitioners follow robust evaluation practices when developing and delivering student voice activities.

Wider embedding into university governance structures

An additional challenge that emerged in the implementation of both projects was ensuring they were fully embedded into university structures and systems. From its conception, the SAB was positioned as the student arm of the WPOG, one of the main staff groups that form the widening participation governance structure. This ensured that the board did not exist in isolation from other work happening across the University and provided accountability and a reporting structure for any activity. Furthermore, students from the SAB are invited to attend the WPOG, giving an additional opportunity to provide student voice in a different setting, and the opportunity for SAB activity to be reported on directly by participating students, rather than being filtered through a member of staff.

However, there have been additional challenges with embedding the SAB outside of the widening participation governance structure. At the University, there are many different student voice opportunities

for students to get involved with, including positions at the students' union, a Co-Design Panel of 125 students, and an internship programme. Whilst the development of the USSVT (2023) has ensured information on these opportunities is now listed centrally, communications between different methods should be improved through a reporting structure or working group. There are now an overwhelming number of opportunities for students to provide student voice – some salaried and some not – and with contrasting intensity. Whilst there are institutional benefits to having a wide variety of options, this presents challenges for students to appropriately identify the right opportunity for them. As the USSVT (2023) is staff-facing, there is an opportunity to provide students with similar, centralised information to ensure they can make informed decisions.

As the Youth Consultants project is still in a pilot phase, there are still considerations needed as to how it is embedded into reporting mechanisms. There are significant challenges, not least being the age of the participants and the suitability of their attending groups such as the WPOG. There have been initial conversations around allowing pupils involved to shadow the SAB and moving towards a mentoring model between students and pupils. There are fewer student voice opportunities for pupils to participate in, in part due to the challenges, not limited to the age and experience of participants. However, there is potential for greater upskilling of the young people involved if they were able to interact with other initiatives.

Improvement and development: practitioner expertise

As both the Youth Consultants project and the SAB are designed as annual, business as usual activity for the WPSM directorate, there are questions around ensuring continual and consistent improvement, and allocating the correct resourcing. Whilst evaluation might not be able to demonstrate causal links with increased attainment or access rates, there is immense value in ensuring participants can provide feedback on the structure of the boards themselves to ensure ongoing development. In addition, staff insight and feedback are a valid and useful form of evaluation which are considered when refining delivery. These forms of feedback demonstrate clear value in this work; practitioners have the responsibility to disseminate findings based on their work and expertise to encourage institutional buy-in to effective student voice activities.

As the SAB is now entering its 4th year, several changes have ensured the board remains an effective platform for co-design and student voice. Changes include increasing board membership from 10 to 30, refining the application process to ensure that students can apply their lived experience to co-design, and introducing regular updates at the start of each meeting which highlight how student voice has been implemented. Despite these changes, the SAB has remained consistent as an example of co-design, without transitioning to a partnership or student-led model despite increasing resource. As a result of the Theory of Change and clearly defined objectives, staff leading the project have maintained that this approach is suitable for the identified need of providing student input into process and programme design. This has also prevented the continued increasing of board size to better obtain a more representative sample of our student population or to meet student demand evident in the number of applications outstripping places available. Creating an environment where students feel comfortable and confident in sharing their lived experience to inform co-design is a continued priority, therefore increasing size would potentially jeopardise the ability to build rapport amongst advisors. When designing student voice activity, while obtaining a representative sample is tempting, if this contradicts the primary aim and intentions then it is acceptable to prioritise quality over quantity.

Unlike the SAB, the Youth Consultants project is still in its initial pilot phase and therefore recommendations for refinement are still rudimentary. Furthermore, the flexibility needed to work with young people in the Access space ensures each iteration will likely be different from the last; tailoring a standard model is crucial to achieve the best outcomes. However, key areas of success have been identified,

including the ways in which the participants engage with each other and university staff and ambassadors when in person. While online sessions have also been successful, with participants receptive and engaged, discussions have been more practitioner-led when compared with the in-person launch. While the decision for a hybrid programme was designed for accessibility reasons – online sessions allow young people to attend who are not living in the immediate University vicinity – the quality of interactions must be considered. Other approaches are in consideration for future project phases, with flexibility being prioritised to ensure a wide intake of participants. Another success has been group size – with six participants all voices and contributions can be widely heard. The group size was not determined before the project – between 5 and 12 participants was the aim – but instead confirmed based on application merit. Going forward, retaining this approach would be prioritised as it ensures participants are chosen for the right reasons rather than to fill spaces. Increasing the number of participants would allow for a greater variety of responses and perspectives, however the quality of the programme is not guaranteed by simply increasing panel size. The recruitment process for Youth Consultants will also likely change to include an informal interview ahead of acceptance; due to time restrictions in the pilot phase this could not happen.

Conclusions and recommendations

Co-creation is the practice of working with young people to obtain, understand, and use their experiences and perspectives to design, improve, and refine new and existing interactions and processes across the university. The SAB and Youth Consultants projects have provided first-hand experience that demonstrates the importance of working in a co-creative way with not just university students but also young people who have not yet applied for university. Both projects contribute to a gap in the extant literature that surrounds co-creation; despite the Office for Students’ regulatory guidance encouraging wide-spread co-creative work (2023), there is little evidence for this within widening participation, and within pre-entry activities specifically, and within the Professional Services domain. With this in mind, we suggest several recommendations that would allow these practices work to become not only more widespread, but also robustly implemented to ensure non-participation and tokenism remain firmly in the past.

Firstly, we advocate for a sector-wide standardised definition of co-creation. Without this, universities and practitioners cannot be held accountable for their working methods which we believe is more likely to lead to tokenism. To accompany a sector-wide definition, we suggest the provision of standardised – and validated – measures and outcomes that practitioners could choose from when designing evaluations for co-creation initiatives. Secondly, universities must adopt any clear definitions provided and take responsibility for integrating these methods of working into their governance structures. There are often significant challenges when working in this way, but ensuring correct categorisation of projects, rather than shoehorning into sub-categories at worst to tick a box and at best as an attempt at best practice, ensures a better chance of success. Specificity of language is important, and training must be undertaken to ensure projects are correctly described. Universities – and departments and directorates within universities – must direct this by allocating the adequate time and resources required to do this. Finally, practitioners too must engage with this way of working, not only because they have been directed to do so, but because of the clear value that lies within this work. Practitioners should be lobbying universities for the correct resources to undertake high-value co-creative work; this includes financial and temporal resources to ensure adequate staff time to commit to long-term interactions, and enough financial resource to pay the young people for their work.

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"Ultimately proved to be an invaluable learning experience": the development of inclusive student partnerships at the University of Leicester

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Abstract

The University of Leicester’s ‘Curriculum Consultants’ initiative aims to make our students’ academic experiences more inclusive, representative and relevant to the lives of those from marginalised backgrounds, through working with current students. The Initiative has taken different forms since its initial pilot in 2019, and there have been challenges within each phase in making it work and in proving success.

Now in our fourth phase, we have a consistent structure that has evaluation built in throughout the process. This article summarises the different structures and challenges we faced in trying to make this a balanced collaboration between staff and students, and have our students’ voices truly shaping changes within their curricula, teaching, and other aspects of student support. While our current structure is working for us, this article is not to suggest this format will work for everyone, but to share our learning process and contribute to the conversation on student staff partnerships.

Key words: student partnership, inclusive curriculum, student experience.

Introduction

The University of Leicester has been running the Curriculum Consultants Initiative since its pilot in academic year 2019/20, paying students to work with staff to identify opportunities for more inclusive and representative practice. The format of the initiative has changed through the years, with us taking influence from Kingston University’s Inclusive Curriculum Consultants (Kingston University, no date) and their Inclusive Curriculum Framework throughout each phase. However, it was a challenge to figure out an approach that worked for us.

It is important to note that the University of Leicester has a ‘superdiverse’ student body, with no single ethnicity representing more than half of our students (Canagarajah, 2023). This is reflective of the city of Leicester, which was officially considered a superdiverse city following the 2021 Census, though it was only 1% short of being considered superdiverse in the 2011 Census (Office for National Statistics, 2023). However, as proud as we are of this diversity, it makes matters like awarding gaps feel much more urgent and pressing.

Like many other UK higher education institutions, the University of Leicester is currently working to reduce the awarding gaps experienced by our historically minoritised student groups. For clarity, Leicester follows the use of the term ‘awarding’ gap in place of ‘attainment’ gap. Both terms refer to the difference between undergraduate student groups graduating with a first or upper-second class degree, but ‘awarding’ does not

identify students as the underlying cause of the issue, instead suggesting systemic barriers are creating an imbalanced outcome in degree awarding. There are, of course, awarding gaps between other student groups, but the awarding gap between Black and white students is the most substantial for us. We have managed to reduce this and other gaps such as the gaps between students with and without declared disabilities, and mature and young students, but there is still a way to go. The Curriculum Consultants Initiative sits within a wider inclusive education framework at Leicester, as we are working to correct imbalances that cause awarding gaps rather than simply target numbers, and we will not succeed without students helping us to identify opportunities for change.

The Curriculum Consultant Initiative at Leicester has transformed from a group collaboration to student-led investigations, to students being paired with members of staff, to its current phase of staff identifying projects or needs for the Consultants to shape and lead. With this article, we want to contribute to the conversation other colleagues before us have shaped. We continue to benefit from external students and colleagues sharing their ideas and experiences, and hopefully, if any readers are going through a challenging journey with making their student partnership programme work, they might benefit from our contribution.

Theoretical context: wellbeing and awarding

The initial pilot in 2019/20 was funded by the Centre for Ethnic Health Research (known as the Centre for Black and Minority Ethnic Health at the time), which was looking to fund a project that contributed towards reducing the race awarding gap. This was taken as an opportunity to support a project that considered a link between structural inequality in the curriculum and mental wellbeing.

This was not the first initiative at Leicester that focused on students' mental wellbeing and the impact of operating within a university environment. It was a development influenced by other student support projects and external research taking place. Preceding this project, the department of Modern Languages ran a programme relating to wellbeing which had expanded into a broader support programme. This later influenced a university-wide programme of 'student support workshops' to address issues of students feeling disconnected from their cohort community, and not necessarily knowing where or how to access support for their studies. The pilot phase did not focus as much on mental wellbeing in the project activities, but this background underpinned the intentions behind the changes the pilot would influence.

In running this pilot, we were conscious about resisting assumptions made around the awarding gap, or more specifically, the 'attainment' gap. Using the term 'attainment' implies that the student is seen as the fault or cause of not attaining the same degree outcome as a peer from another demographic. Consequently, assumptions are made about students' abilities and preparedness when it comes to studying at university. There are many issues with these expectations, one of which is how awarding outcomes are not exclusively influenced by skills. Multiple factors affect students' understanding, engagement and success, which may be exacerbated by systemic barriers, such as availability and access to support, economic disadvantage, and implicit bias, that students may have encountered long before arriving at university (Department for Education, 2022). Our longer-term aim from the pilot was to create changes in the curriculum and other aspects of their course that recognised students' skills, backgrounds and interests. We theorised that in embedding this recognition, students' sense of community, empowerment and purpose within the university would increase, which would then translate into reduced awarding gaps.

This interrelation between students' experience and identifying with curriculum content was explored in a separate project at Leicester around this time. The Racially Inclusive Curricula Toolkit was created to provide teaching staff with a resource for understanding how to make their course content more racially inclusive and relatable for students (Campbell et al, 2021). The students recruited for the pilot utilised the toolkit while reviewing module material, which was tested wider in academic year 2020/21. The toolkit was

later evaluated to show that using it helps to improve the course satisfaction for students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (Campbell et al, 2022).

The approach of the pilot involved the recruited students working as a group to review programme materials and content. Their objective was to suggest revisions and approaches for more diverse representation, inclusive language, and ways for students to relate their interests to the content. Working with students in this format to identify these opportunities was crucial to ensure the development of a learning community that authentically considered students’ experiences and interests in the curriculum design (Williams et al, 2021). The group and the overall pilot were led by Dr Emma Staniland, who had been involved in the Modern Languages student support programme mentioned earlier, and Dr Karol Valderrama Burgos. Emma and Karol worked with the students to understand the project’s objective, utilise the toolkit, and develop recommendations for the departments that provided their programme content to be critiqued. While the students and staff found the group discussions to be engaging and insightful, the approach to upscaling was unclear. It was difficult to schedule group meetings suitable for everyone, and time was lost in each meeting to reiterating objectives and plans to the students who had not attended previously. There were also limited responses to the request to submit course material for critique. At this time, conversations around the awarding gap and racial inclusion felt new and unfamiliar to a lot of colleagues, so they may not have understood or felt confident about what the feedback could suggest. In considering how to move forward from the pilot, there were discussions of training colleagues within departments to lead a group of students within their own subjects in a similar format to the pilot group. Unfortunately, these conversations took place in early March 2020, and the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic affected our priorities, and we could not progress with the training.

The next phase: partnership and awarding

The second phase of the Initiative took a different approach to the pilot, under the management of a different team, and in partnership with the Students’ Union. With the logistical challenges of larger group work in mind, the structure changed to the students, or Curriculum Consultants herein, working in smaller groups of two or three to identify opportunities within their departments. This format allowed the Consultants to engage with a much larger number of departments within one academic year, which was a great opportunity for student voice, and promoting students as partners in the matter of revising the curriculum (Hughes et al, 2019).

However, this format was not without its challenges either; while student voice was certainly at the centre of the approach, it lacked the organisation necessary to maximise the opportunity. As the Consultants were free to choose their focus, a lot of time was lost in defining the scope of their projects. Where projects concluded with a set of recommendations to the department, they were not always suitable. This was typically due to the Consultants making recommendations for provisions or materials that were already available that they had not been aware of. As a result, most of the recommendations had not been put in place, so it was not possible to evaluate the impact. This had the additional consequence of affecting confidence in colleagues who had unwittingly received their recommendations; most of the projects had been conducted by the Curriculum Consultants in isolation of staff members within the department. The intention behind this approach was likely to ensure the prioritisation of the student voice, but resulted in confusion and dismissal when staff were asked to embed these unexpected changes.

We learned this format was slightly more effective when the Consultants were paired with a member of staff who could anticipate their recommendations and advise on existing provisions. In 2021/22, the Initiative came under new management of the Student and Education Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team who worked closely with the Students’ Union to try and bridge the gap between the Consultants and their departments. The format did not change too significantly, but this time Consultants were matched

with an academic colleague within the department who would act as their key contact throughout the project. Consultants met with their contacts at the start of their projects to discuss what they wanted to focus on. Staff provided suggestions where applicable, for instance, if they were aware of a significant awarding gap within a module or knew of an issue that received consistently negative feedback from students. This guidance led to the project scope being defined sooner, though there was still some delay while they settled on specific objectives, and as staff had not expected to become a key contact (essentially a project supervisor), they were not always available to support their Consultant, which caused some projects to end before they were completed as time simply ran out. It was exam season, and the Curriculum Consultants' contracts had ended.

We took stock at the end of the 2021/22 phase and reflected on the challenges of each iteration to inform our approach for 2022/23, though the shift truly began in February 2022, before the projects had ended. Tamara Reid, Kingston's Inclusive Curriculum Consultant Programme Lead, presented on lessons learned from student partnership during an online seminar hosted by the University of Westminster's Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation. Reid discussed the training Kingston's Consultants receive, partnership agreements with departments which included a project plan, and working to shift students' mindsets from 'student' to 'project partner' through utilising their experiences (Westminster Students as Co-Creators, 2022). In learning about this structured and consistent approach, the seeds of change were planted for revitalising Leicester's Curriculum Consultants.

Current approach

The first step in the 2022/23 overhaul was to tackle the main difficulties: sufficient support and delayed projects. Previous Consultants had suggested a need for help or training in areas they may not have developed as part of their course and so they did not know what to expect. We started delivering training throughout their roles, starting with what inclusivity in the curriculum and wider university can look like, and moving to more practical training at relevant stages in data collection, data analysis, and reporting requirements. We also needed to mitigate the inconsistent support from staff who had not previously planned the project into their workload. Support from staff within the department was essential for accessing resources and learning what already existed, to result in more suitable and relevant recommendations. For this, we revised our planning approach, which had the additional benefit of reducing the time lost to scoping project objectives; staff who were interested in engaging with the initiative were to submit project proposals ahead of the Consultants being recruited. The proposals provided an outline of a priority concern or area for exploration, which was then fully developed and delivered in partnership with a Consultant.

With this change, projects were now determined by where the proposals came from, rather than the Consultants simply working with the department they were based in. To support this change, recruited Consultants (a total of 12) were 'pooled' and then assigned to projects that were most relevant to them. We understand that awarding outcomes are affected by more than the taught curriculum, so we actively welcomed projects that were not tied directly to the curriculum but other aspects of their academic lives. As a result, we received proposals from professional services teams, and so the department could no longer be the primary criteria for assigning Consultants. Assigning was based on a hierarchy of components: projects aligning with existing research or experience, personal interests the Consultants shared, existing skills, and then the subject in which they are based. For a few examples, a Consultant interested in neurodiversity from their experience as a young carer investigated potential barriers and support needs for participating in seminars. A PhD student with teaching experience investigated engaging teaching practices to inform materials for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice programme for new academics. A humanities-based Consultant already engaged in promoting equity for Black students worked in a technical subject to identify gaps in support for ethnically minoritised students. The final key change to this

makeover was to approach an issue that had been present since the pilot phase: an evaluation framework for the Curriculum Consultants initiative.

Evaluating student partnerships

Over the past few years, there have been countless in-person and online conferences and seminars where colleagues across the UK higher education sector have come together, shared best practice and discussed challenges focused on inclusive practice and student partnerships. Many of the partnerships had varied names for their student roles, such as Consultants, Advocates, Champions, Partners, though they share the same principles. Many of them also share the concern of how to evaluate; a sentiment reflected by the audience, always keenly listening and ready to ask the same question about how the presenter evaluates it. The answer is more often than not a hesitant admission of how difficult it is to evaluate small pieces of work within the bigger picture of other changes made to the curriculum, teaching style, skill support or other aspects of student life. Similar to the matter of the awarding gap, these issues and activities do not occur in a vacuum. There are other factors within a students' environment that will influence the level of success, and so it is difficult to attribute results to any one factor. There may even be intangible, indirect impacts from changes, where a student does not directly benefit but it makes them aware of some other form of help.

While it certainly is a genuine challenge to evaluate the outcomes of student partnerships, it may be that we are starting with the wrong question and losing confidence at the first hurdle. Here, we are asking 'how' we can evaluate Curriculum Consultants, or similar programmes. But there is another question, which could be more challenging, that should be asked first - 'why?' If you know why you are evaluating (what you want to find out), you will know what you are looking for, and you can then consider the best method of collecting the evidence. As the Initiative changed format and management multiple times, there had not been a formal reflection on what the Initiative was intended to achieve and therefore we had not effectively evaluated whether it was successful. In order to revise the approach ahead of the 2022/23 cycle, we produced the Theory of Change behind the Curriculum Consultants Initiative.

For anyone unfamiliar with the Theory of Change, it is important to clarify that it is not 'a' theory you can define through a Google search. It is *your* theory of what will happen as a result of your changes. Producing a Theory of Change involves specifying the intended outcomes, and the activities that will theoretically deliver that change (United Nations, 2018). It requires clarifying assumptions and justifying actions, which should be based on existing evidence. In the case of curriculum or university-based projects, evidence can include feedback, previous work, or research. A robust Theory of Change should lead to the development of an evaluation plan, detailing how the success of the outcomes will be proved.

The issue of insufficient evaluation is not unique to student partnership work, but widespread across the higher education sector, despite ongoing investments in projects (Blake, 2022). The Office for Students (2023) hopes to change this by requiring higher education providers to use the Theory of Change in Access and Participation Plans submitted in 2023-24, to build evidence of effective practices. At Leicester, we have embedded Theory of Change-based planning into all activities that will be reported in our Access and Participation Plan, which includes the Curriculum Consultant Initiative.

Ideally, a Theory of Change would be completed ahead of an initiative: when a need (objective) has been identified, a team can consider what success will look like, to inform the best approach to take. However, producing a Theory of Change for an established project is still beneficial for informing planning activities (Andrews et al., 2024); the process is instrumental for challenging and articulating the logic between activities, intended impacts, and the overall objective. Consequently, we produced an evaluation plan documenting where we will look, and our chosen methodologies, to demonstrate the impact of the

Initiative. Having the Theory of Change and evaluation plan offers the added advantage of facilitating informed decision-making and avoiding irrelevant process changes.

Developing a Theory of Change does not have to be a difficult process, unless you have an identity crisis on behalf of the project, asking the room ‘but what are we actually *trying* to do?’. After a long and challenging day with our Evaluation Analyst, we now have a Theory of Change, so we can answer why we are looking to evaluate the Initiative (what we want to learn from evaluating), and therefore how we can go about it.

Our Theory of Change

In creating our Theory of Change, it was important to clarify that our evaluation plan looks at the broader Initiative, rather than the individual projects taking place underneath it, which will come later. Having this clear view of the Initiative’s purpose helps to ensure we are developing a more inclusive environment, and helps to maintain focus when assigning Consultants to projects that contribute towards this aim. Our Theory of Change is summarised below:

Situation

Across the university, our most substantial awarding gap exists between white and Black undergraduate students. We believe partnering with students to explore ways to make the curriculum and other aspects of their academic environment more inclusive and representative will contribute towards reducing the awarding gap.

Aim

By creating a more inclusive academic environment in collaboration with the student community, we aim to make students feel represented and recognised, and make staff more aware of limited diversity and inclusion in their practice.

For this, we invite students of all levels (from Foundation Year to Postgraduate Researchers, campus-based and distance-learning) to apply for one of 12 paid roles, earning National Living Wage for up to six hours per week. They will collaborate with a member of staff to research specific inclusion issues or execute a project to improve the inclusion within a teaching or professional service department.

We will evaluate continuously with data collection being executed at key stages of the project lifespan, with reports due every year to the appropriate committee.

Outputs

The evidence of our activities will be identified through the numbers of applicants, submitted projects, training sessions delivered and attended, completed projects and their executed recommendations (or reasons for any non-executed recommendations).

Outcomes (medium-term success)

We will look for changes through qualitative investigations on how gaining skills, experience and knowledge impacts individual Consultants’ confidence in their academic and professional pursuits, identifying the impact of the executed recommendations, and an increase in submitted project proposals as more staff see the benefits of involvement.

Impact (long-term success)

Through qualitative investigations and quantitative measures, we expect to show that involvement in the Curriculum Consultant Initiative partnership has led to diversified curricula, increased employment skills

for the Consultants, and increased staff confidence in student partnerships and developing inclusive curricula representative of their students.

Evaluation to date

At the time of writing, we are in our second year of operating within our current approach. We are striving for consistency to ensure an effective evaluation, so we have only made small changes to our 2023/24 processes in response to feedback, lessons learned, and for process efficiencies. From 2022/23, we embedded pre-, mid- and post-process evaluation points, combining Likert scale and qualitative questioning. Early analysis suggests we can already see benefits from our more structured approach and it appears to be the most successful format for Leicester’s Curriculum Consultants so far.

Having better defined processes has enabled smoother operation. The job description was revised to better reflect the role with examples, which increased the number of student applicants. Defining objectives early meant project activity started sooner. The training provided throughout the projects meant Consultants understood what was expected of them. Clear reporting processes and supervisions ensured Consultants raised issues early. Formal staff and Consultant partnerships led to regular communication and informed decisions. This has resulted in a higher number of recommendations from Consultants, though more importantly, recommendations that were accepted or required slight amendment increased from 59% (13 of 22) in 2021/22, to 85% (56 of 66) in 2022/23.

Due to the cyclical nature of university, at least one semester or academic year needs to pass before students experience many of the changes, so only then we can evaluate the individual changes recommended by the Consultants. The Initiative’s Theory of Change does not list specific projects as they have varied goals and differ each year, though the broad delivery of recommendations and subsequent changes are considered long-term measures of success. To support the evaluation of individual projects, the project proposal form for staff and final report template for Consultants were designed with Theory of Change-based questions. These tools help track the original purpose of the project, and relate recommendations to the intended impact, which can be evaluated against longer-term.

Staff experience

Early staff involvement has improved their workload planning and their support of Consultants. It also had the unintended benefit of better student engagement in projects that involved working with current cohorts to learn about their experiences, as the involved members of staff were able to promote these opportunities and encourage participants.

More staff are becoming aware of the Initiative through the promotion of completed projects and colleague discussions. In 2023/24, our evaluation plan will assess staff experiences of support, communication, impact on practice, and confidence in student partnerships. For 2022/23, we received feedback about positive experiences, which led to additional project proposals and interest in publishing articles about their projects in relevant journals.

There's no other way we'd have been able to do it and get student perspective. (professional services colleague)

Really appreciate that [the Initiative] gave us the opportunity to work on this kind of project. (academic colleague)

Really valuable experience. (academic colleague)

Self-reported impact on consultants

We conducted semi-structured, informal interviews with the Curriculum Consultants at the end of their roles to find what they gained through being involved in their projects. The Consultants were overall happy

with the organisation of the Initiative. Most mentioned learning new skills, or applying research skills to real-world scenarios for the first time; this was less typical for postgraduate and mature student Consultants who referred more to strengthening existing skills. A few Consultants mentioned the initial challenge of independence and leadership, though they felt it increased their drive to learn and explore different experiences. They appreciated the opportunity to have an insight into how the university works, and getting to work with staff members as peers, with one commenting on how they felt staff were truly invested in their students’ opinions and success. The Curriculum Consultant experience resulted in a couple of Consultants looking for further opportunities for involvement and personal development beyond their projects. We were grateful to hear about their positive experiences with us:

Through this project, I feel more integrated to the [department] community (taught postgraduate international student)

I really enjoyed the independent working and flexibility... this allowed me to work on the projects and fit it in my schedule (undergraduate Home student)

This experience has sparked a desire to pursue this area further and integrate it into my future professional pursuits (undergraduate international student)

This was one of the things that kept me going... It ultimately proved to be an invaluable learning experience (undergraduate international student)

Conclusion

Throughout the different phases, we prioritised making students’ voices central to our work, though without a supportive structure managing the activity, we struggled to identify what we were trying to achieve beyond an insubstantial reference to the race awarding gap. We have regained clarity on purpose and method through developing a Theory of Change; the process itself required reflection on what we really wanted to see from the Curriculum Consultants Initiative, and in recognising that, considering whether our plans supported those goals. Now, this framework will keep us centred so if a decision is made to change direction, it will be with purpose.

It is problematic to suggest one project or piece of work will impact on an issue as systemic as the race awarding gap; systemic issues change when the system changes. That is why our more abstract aim is to see Curriculum Consultants, and consequently other students, contribute towards cultural change. We want to see more staff engaging in student partnerships to achieve goals, and learning from students and each other about engaging and inclusive practices. We will start to see it in module-level awarding gaps reducing, more students benefitting from available support, and fewer students feeling out of place in university, instead knowing their department wants them to succeed. Staff buy-in to student partnerships is essential to ensure longevity in the changes, embedding the change to make a difference, even after the student graduates or the member of staff leaves.

It is not our intention to suggest we have found *the* answer to student partnerships or race awarding gaps when we present our progress with the Curriculum Consultants Initiative, least of all because there is no single approach to take. We are optimistic about the current set up and upcoming evaluation of recommendations, though we know it was not a smooth or linear progression to this position and we still have improvements to make. It can be inspiring to watch presentations on creative and successful initiatives, though it seems less common to share when things do not go as well as intended. There is just as much to learn from the less glamorous in-between stages too, so we hope in sharing our journey, we have provided a few ideas to others, and contributed to this ongoing discussion on collaborating with students.

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“It’s not really fair to put that burden on the university”: co-construction with first-generation scholars in an ‘elite’ British university

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Abstract

‘Whole class’ co-construction is proffered as a solution to the problem of involving the most disengaged students in pedagogical processes. Building on the arguments of Mates and Grimshaw (2024), this chapter suggests another approach, specifically targeting the most disadvantaged students themselves. It explores this by critically reflecting on a co-construction project with first-generation (first-gen, ‘first-in-family’) students at an ‘elite’ British university and the specific problems they experienced at the time of the COVID-induced online pivot. The chapter argues that co-construction remains highly effective in two key ways: first, in terms of substantive outputs, i.e. generating ideas about how to reform universities in egalitarian ways. Second, the process itself can offer disadvantaged student participants a degree of catharsis, a forum for self-reflection and understanding, a sense (and a reality) that their ‘voice’ is valued and the self-confidence resulting from this. Co-construction offers staff participants the chance to better know these students as individuals and therefore improve individual working relationships with them, as well as an opportunity to bolster disadvantaged students’ self-belief.

Key words: first-generation scholars, first-in-family, COVID-19, online pivot, student partnerships.

1. Introduction

Co-construction of teaching and learning between staff and students is now a well-established practice in higher education (HE) across the globe, though imprecise terminology remains a problem. (The use of the term ‘co-construction’ here – denoting ‘critical’ co-creation – is explained in the previous chapter, on which this one builds) (Mates and Grimshaw, 2024)). This chapter reflects on the processes, concerns, challenges, and benefits of a co-construction project with first-gen students (or ‘first-in-family’) at an elite British university during the period of COVID-19 from March 2020, and especially the academic year 2020-21. The literature review (section 2) briefly locates this project and establishes its contribution, placing disadvantaged and ordinarily less connected ‘first-gens’ at the very centre of the process. Section 3 deploys an amended form of Bovill’s (2019) typology, which offers both an effective mechanism to describe the research design, but also to reflect critically on elements of the processes. The following section 4 offers self-critical discussion around the complexities of the processes to garner and then render effective first-gen student engagement in co-construction, while section 5 explores some of the important implications of first-gen involvement for co-construction itself, and how they might be tackled. The final substantive section 6 considers what the co-construction process itself might offer first-gens participating in it. Overall, the chapter contends that placing disadvantaged groups like first-gens at the centre of co-construction is both desirable and possible, notwithstanding certain integral challenges and operational difficulties. It

argues that doing so can reveal practical measures to improve teaching and learning support and experiences for first-gens (and, indeed, non-first-gens too). Furthermore, it suggests that involvement in co-construction itself can play important roles in validating first-gens, their insights and experiences, engendering self-knowledge and self-confidence in them, and in building stronger working relationships with staff involved.

2. Literature review

This chapter builds on the extensive HE co-paradigm literature (comprehensively assessed in Mates and Grimshaw (2024)), by offering a case study of the experiences and reflections of first-generation scholars studying at an ‘elite’ British university during the time of COVID-19 and the pivot to online teaching and learning. ‘Elite’ here means that the university is among the Russell Group and thus one of Britain’s most prestigious universities. The Russell Group’s twenty-four members claim to be ‘world-class, research-intensive universities’, that ‘produce more than two-thirds of the world-leading research produced in UK universities’ (2024). They also tend to have an overrepresentation of privately educated students, which can generate a culture of class privilege that alienates disadvantaged students (Mates et.al, 2022).

This research focus is novel: while some of the literature does examine more disadvantaged students in co-construction, and some practitioners situate their approaches towards co-construction in relation to their first-generation student and academic statuses (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2020), there is nevertheless little focus specifically on using co-construction with first-gens. (as a structurally disadvantaged demographic) to understand and address their specific needs. When first-gens are mentioned, this tends to be in passing, as one element of a group of disadvantaged students who could benefit tremendously from co-construction but who it often by-passes (Bovill et.al, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2020; Fovet, 2020; Kiester and Holowko, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023; Marquis et.al., 2018).

3. Research design: co-construction typology

We now turn to using Bovill’s (2019) typology (albeit critically) to categorise the project to explore first-gen scholars’ suggestions to mitigate their experiences of COVID-19 lockdowns and online teaching and learning at an elite British university. As shown, while Bovill’s (2019) typology is useful for pointing to the essential features of any co-construction project, there are overlaps and complexities in responses within some of Bovill’s suggested categories. I have conflated some of Bovill’s (2019) specific categories and altered the suggested order to render this project more comprehensible. For example, the ‘why’ question seems more useful coming first rather than last, as Bovill (2019) has it. I have also added a final category around funding. Using this typology also demonstrates some of the complexities in specific projects that, perhaps, no typology can fully accommodate. This observation speaks to Bilous et.al.’s emphasis on the ‘messiness’ of co-construction (2018:168).

3.1 Why co-construct?

Bovill suggests we employ co-construction to ‘enhance student engagement’ and ‘aiming for a socially just higher education’, and to include ‘student perspectives’ (2019:93). The second reason of ‘aiming for a socially just higher education’ is this project’s driving ideo-pedagogic rationale and explains my use of the term co-construction rather than ‘co-creation’; the latter is too tainted by neo-classical liberal conceptualisations that monetise or instrumentalise the process (Mates and Grimshaw, 2024). The term ‘co-construction’ underscores the project’s inspiration in critical and anarchist pedagogies, and the sense that such processes offer opportunities to recognise and break down power structures between teacher and learner in HE, thereby democratising knowledge production and liberating student and staff creativity (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994; Haworth, 2012).

3.2 Focus

The project’s focus is wider student experience and learning and teaching support; identifying first-gen related problems during the online learning experience and asking about ways to mitigate them. Suggested mitigations could then constitute ‘co-construction in the curriculum’ (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019). This would, however, necessarily depend on the precise suggestions offered. Students might, for example, recommend a specific pedagogic tool for a particular module. At the other extreme, they could, for example, demand an entirely new university-wide approach to financial support. In this latter case, co-construction goes beyond the curriculum altogether and encompasses ways to render the wider learning and teaching environment more accommodating to first-gens. Not placing limits on what students can request is surely a key component of co-construction, even though actioning such demands may be beyond staff/departmental capacities (see section 5).

3.3 Initiator

The co-construction initiators in this case were staff members. However, Bovill (2019) conflates initiation with who then leads on the co-construction, which seem to be two separate categories. It is quite plausible (although arguably difficult to effect) that staff might act as an initial catalyst for a process that is then handed over for students to lead on. Indeed, in my own work with first-gens, I have tried to hand over the running of the departmental first-gen group to its student members (albeit with no long-term success hitherto; see section 5).

3.4 Context and scale of the co-construction

This was fundamentally a departmental initiative, drawing largely on input from first-gen students who studied at least some modules in the department, but recognising that many experiences, and suggested mitigations, would have much wider relevance throughout the university and, indeed, HE more generally.

3.5 Number of students involved

The project’s initial phase involved quantitative analysis of a questionnaire that elicited 309 respondents (first-gens and non) (Mates et.al., 2022). The most focussed efforts to identify first-gens’ suggested solutions to the issues that they had encountered (which we identified quantitatively in the survey) occurred with the semi-structured interviews. There were two rounds of interviews: seventeen in summer 2020 and twenty-four in summer 2021. Six students interviewed twice for the project, meaning that in total thirty-five first-gen students were most fully involved in the project. The majority of first-gen interviewees were current undergraduate students from all years, though graduating students also took part (five in summer 2020 and a further nine in 2021).

All the examples discussed below are from the summer 2021 interviews that I conducted and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews using NVivo when working with first-gens specifically is a standard approach (Kirton, 2023). The analysis of the first-gens’ interviews used here proved to be a challenging iterative, reflective and, indeed, ‘messy’ process (Bilous et.al., 2018:168). Yet it resulted in a deep and rich understanding of experiences during the COVID-19 marred academic year and of the complexity of perspectives on what needed improvement and how.

3.6 Student: selection processes

All departmental students received the initial survey about their experiences during online learning via email. A prize draw incentivised participation. Eighty students on the departmental first-gen scholars email list received invitations to do semi-structured interviews. All first-gen participants volunteered for semi-structured interviews; there were no incentives (discussed further in section 4).

3.7 Nature of student involvement

The nature of student involvement in this project was complex. In one respect, students were essentially consulted. Hence, they effectively acted as consultants though the transactional relationship this term conveys is troubling, *ideo-pedagogically* speaking (Mates and Grimshaw, 2024). The first tranche of interviews in summer 2020 was to explore initial student experiences and use that qualitative data to inform the survey data in formulating departmental policies to mitigate problems first-gens might encounter with online teaching and learning (Mates et.al., 2022). The second tranche of interviews came in summer 2021 after a year of these mitigation policies (supposedly) being in place. The interviews were partly to determine if the department had implemented the policies and, if so, their effectiveness. A second equally important aim was to gather experiences and, given the extra academic year that students had engaging with online learning, to see if any more mitigation ideas emerged that might be applicable to a post COVID-19 normality or relevant for similar future crises.

The immediate complexities regarding the nature of student involvement in this project arise in two ways. First, one of the first-gens, finalist Erin Hanson, also acted as a co-researcher in summer 2020, interviewing eleven fellow students, as well being an interviewee herself. A second broader complexity arises in so far as a detailed mitigation suggested by a student could have been adopted and applied; that would then potentially elevate the student participant from ‘consultant’ status to qualifying them as something like a pedagogical (co)-designer or ‘representative’ (‘student voices contributing to decisions in a range of university settings’) (Bovill et.al., 2016:198). Helpfully, Bovill et.al. recognise that these student participant roles ‘are not mutually exclusive’ (2016:198).

3.8 Duration

Again, this does not have a simple answer. For individual students, it might be that the co-construction only lasted for the duration of their individual interviews (typically between sixty and ninety minutes long), where they explicitly addressed questions around what mitigations they would like to see to deal with the problems they faced. The findings and suggested mitigations from phase one constituted proposed policies for the academic year 2020-21. The findings from the second phase are not yet fully processed. In that respect this co-construction project is dynamic, on-going and open ended; ‘messy’, in other words (Bilous et.al., 2018:168).

3.9 Implications of funding

This is an important question not appearing separately in Bovill’s (2019) typology. As Bilous et.al., (2018:168) suggest, formal funding can bring restrictive issues around funding body requirements. The first-gen research discussed here did not receive external funding, thereby avoiding any such potential restrictions or limitations. We now turn to the first of two sections of self-critical reflection around the complexities of the processes to garner first-gen student participation in co-construction.

4. Challenges around first-gen involvement and roles

A good deal of the recent literature on co-construction explores concerns around precisely which students participate and on what terms. Marquis et.al. (2018:76) name first-gens among the ‘less connected’ groups who, alongside part-time students, tend to be the least likely to engage in co-construction. By contrast, ‘connected’ students – more accustomed to interacting with staff, more involved in student clubs and societies, and benefitting from more developed university networks – are more aware of opportunities available to them. Several argue that student inclusivity is thus best achieved by adopting ‘whole-class’ co-construction, though this necessarily brings challenges around engaging students who, for various complex reasons, remain disinclined to participate (Bovill et.al., 2016; Bovill, 2020; Moore-Cherry et.al., 2016). To address this problem, Marquis et.al. (2018) suggest information campaigns targeted at students feeling

unconfident about what they might be able to bring to co-construction, or doubtful of their chances of selection for involvement.

As suggested by the literatures in other fields that co-construction in HE developed from, exclusion can also be tackled by specifically targeting a disadvantaged group – in the case of this project, first-gens, though there is little sense in the literature that any co-construction is conducted this way (Mates and Grimshaw, 2024). Even then, however, exclusion can remain. Clearly all first-gens had direct and recent experience as learners’ of the harsh times of COVID-19 (Bovill et.al, 2016:199). In that respect, they all had the potential to contribute meaningfully to the co-construction. All the first-gens participating in interviews were, however, drawn from among those on the departmental first-gen email list or students connected to those on this list (see section 4. There were two main ways students would get added to this email list: either by responding positively to a departmental email to all students inviting first-gens to join it; or, by me approaching students who I thought might be first-gens in my own teaching and asking them if they were interested. Either way, it was not possible to have all first-gens on a contact list without them first making themselves known to staff. Being on the email list brought no expectation of further involvement in any of the activities of the first-gen group, but it also means that there was no explicit invitation to all first-gens in the department to be involved in the co-construction. In other words, in this case, first-gens themselves did not have the equality of opportunity to participate (Cook-Sather et.al., 2014). This co-construction project was effectively not open to all first-gens. as it should have been (Bovill, 2020).

My approach working with the first-gen group, as in my teaching in general, is to seek ways to break down barriers and power structures between teacher and learner. One simple but effective mechanism recognised as such in the literature was to ask that all students use my first name (and never use ‘sir!’) (McDowell and Westman, 2005). Being staff lead for the first-gen group helped me to build what I hoped would be an ‘environment of shared trust, respect, and responsibility’ (Bovill, 2019: 93). The significant numbers of first-gens who were willing to give considerable time and speak with the utmost candour about their experiences in the interviews for this project evidence the partial (at least) success of my efforts.

Looking back, however, there was a second dimension of ‘elitism’ involved in the student self-selection process. The majority of those (already on the first-gen email list) who did participate in the project were already known to me; often because they were among the most active in the departmental first-gen group. Naturally, I had not been able to build up similar levels of trust with all those on the first-gen email list, not least as many had not attended any optional group meetings. Participants were thus, by definition, those most ‘connected’ among first-gens. (Marquis et.al., 2018:76). The only exceptions were a small number of first-gens who had already been interviewed by Erin Hanson for her own undergraduate dissertation research. A first-gen herself, Erin then acted as (paid) researcher on the first phase of the co-construction project. As a fellow student, she was able to facilitate detailed and insightful interviews.

As involvement in the project was entirely voluntary, there was no selection process and therefore no need for me to clearly communicate selection criteria to students (Bovill et.al, 2016; Bell, 2016). Everyone on the departmental first-gen email list who wanted to participate could, assuming they knew about the opportunity in the first place. Doing this obviated a degree of student scepticism (Bovill et.al, 2016:199). Our quantitative data showed that first-gens were likely to be materially disadvantaged, making the case for financial or similar incentives for participation stronger (Mates et.al., 2022). On the other hand, such incentives would surely render co-construction much more transactional, feeding into notions of a marketised HE (Mates and Grimshaw, 2024). For the participants in this project, the ‘reward’ (if we can call it that) was a chance to discuss experiences and offer ideas about improving institutional support for first-gens like themselves. Only those graduating in summer 2020 and not taking further study at the university could be certain that their input could only possibly benefit their peers and not themselves.

Nevertheless, several of those seemed pleased with the notion that their insights might help those in similar situations coming along after them, suggesting that first-gens themselves had mutualistic or altruistic rather than instrumental motives for participation.

There was also a sense that interviews in both summers offered interviewees a degree of catharsis in just being able to talk about their experiences and struggles (see section 6). We now turn to discuss other challenges encountered in the co-construction process itself relating to the first-gens’ sense of what insights they could offer, who or what they thought was responsible for addressing their problems and how, and the complex power dynamics between interviewer and participant in co-construction.

5. Challenges, potential solutions and outcomes of co-creating with first-gens

While encountering challenges during the co-construction process, I was nevertheless conscious from the outset that I was working with highly intelligent, self-reflective, resourceful people and that it was a privilege to be able to do so. Returning to the interview transcripts, I realised this once more, though the degree of insight and complexity they contained rendered thematic analysis highly challenging. Before the interviews, I sent all interviewees a set of questions that included, in all areas of experience, an invitation to offer workable solutions to problems encountered. During the interviews, I adopted a conversational approach, sharing my experiences where relevant (and sometimes when not obviously so!) This approach aimed at rendering the interviews as enjoyable for the interviewees as for me, as well as relaxing, and to explore as many facets of problems and solutions as possible. The approach certainly ensured lengthy and thorough discussions.

This interview with Ed (all participant names are anonymised) exemplified this:

LM: *Obviously we've covered a huge amount of stuff. Is there anything that occurs that we've missed?*

Ed: *No, I think you probably know my personal life better than some of my friends at this point.*

Naturally, this approach also generated a considerable amount of data to process, and necessitated deletion of my own often considerable input. The other important preliminary point is that first-gens, while a definable disadvantaged category, are also individual people with varying and complex backgrounds, perspectives and experiences. The following discussion explores some of the potential obstacles in co-construction with first-gens, as well as some of the things the process itself might offer them. It draws on data provided by a selection of the project’s participants to do so, while accepting that the characteristics explored cannot be generalisable among all first-gens.

There was no sense from any of the participants that they doubted the good intentions of the project as we embarked on it, or that nothing could be done at all in terms of mitigating aspects of their university experience in those trying times (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). While all had ‘direct and recent experience as learners’ and were therefore entirely qualified to participate, there remained doubt in their minds about their ‘qualifications’ (Bovill et.al, 2016:199). Marquis et.al. discuss the ‘widespread sense of students doubting their capacities in our data [which] makes clear that considerations of power figure significantly into partnership even before it begins [...]’ (2018:76); Bob most powerfully expressed this aspect.

After a long discussion about his experiences, I asked Bob if there was anything that the university might do to support cases like his in the future.

Bob: *Um. Not that I can think of. It's kind of tricky because you're asking someone who's just come in. [and not] really had the opportunity to have anything that you'd be asking for, basically. So I can't really know what I'd like without having it, if that makes sense.*

In this response, it seems Bob’s sense of his status as a first year, who started university in the online COVID-19 year (2020-21), perhaps counterintuitively disqualifies him from commenting. On pushing Bob a little on this, there was a clear moment where he switched from not asking for anything, to embracing the project’s co-construction aims.

LM: assuming that we may be back online next year [...] what lessons can be learnt from this year that we can think about applying for next year? Does anything occur?

Bob: I don't think so.

I think; I don't really know.

I guess one of the issues could be about equipment and stuff.

Like, the university seems to just assume that everyone had the right equipment. And when my laptop was falling apart in early October [in Bob’s first term at university] they [the University IT service] ignored my request. [for urgent support]

Yet, at the end of a lengthy, in-depth and highly insightful interview, Bob remained doubtful about his qualifications to participate, asking me:

Was it [the interview] actually helpful?

Bob’s question was a function of the imposter syndrome that he (as many first-gens) feel, especially at so-called ‘elite’ institutions (Holden et.al, 2024). Many interviewees reported specific incidents where they were, for example, quizzed by their privately educated peers about how they managed to get into an elite university, perhaps being given contextual grade offers (lower grade requirements than normal and usually determined by low levels of HE participation in the applicants’ neighbourhood). Understandably, such experiences can strongly militate against first-gens developing a sense of belonging at university.

Second, there was the delicate question of navigating the interviewees’ experiences that directly related to the researcher’s (my) own teaching and roles. ‘Co-construction’ demands democratic approaches, though the complexities of power balances are always there. We need to recognise them, so we can navigate them. (Bilous et.al., 2018). As staff, I was in a position of power; I had also initiated the project. I was conscious of the need to ‘respect voices’ of all, and be ‘responsive to the multiple and diverse voices and experiences [...]’. (Cook-Sather, 2020:898). I recognised, too that, in asking about the teaching and learning experiences of students I had taught, or who I had worked with in the first-gen group, that I was inviting students to comment critically on my direct input into their teaching and learning experience during COVID-19.

Endeavouring to optimise the environment conducive to critical feedback, and to break down power structures between myself as interviewer and students, I began every interview by urging participants not to hold back or sugar-coat comments they might have had in relation to my direct input in their year. I also stressed that constructive criticism is as important for us as staff to improve what we do as it is for students. Efforts to generate an atmosphere in the interview that was conducive to all criticality involved me making self-critical remarks too. I told Barbara, for example:

LM: This is the third of these interviews I've done today. So, if I say something and you think “hang on a second, I didn't say that”, could you please, like, alert me to it? Because what it would be is I've kind of messed up a memory of something that someone else said earlier in the day [in an interview] and not you.

I was also deliberately and overtly self-critical in the interviews if, for example, I worded a question badly. I also realised, once I had embarked on the interviews, that my interview schedule itself could have been better structured to avoid overlaps, and I remarked as such a few times when I found myself inadvertently going over old ground with interviewees. The aim was to break down barriers with participants,

demonstrate a self-awareness of fallibility and show that I would use feedback to improve not only what the wider university does, but also my practice as an individual member of staff.

While several interviewees were positive about their experience of my online teaching there were criticisms too. Some, for example, did not favour my speedy lecture style and information-packed PowerPoint slides. The strongest single criticism was from an interviewee who criticised me asking about her possible first-gen status by remarking (albeit positively) on her slight regional accent at the end of a seminar. The co-construction interview gave me the chance to apologise immediately and resolve to be more sensitive in how I initiated such conversations in future.

At the end of the interview, I apologised again. Amy generously replied:

It didn't bother me because you're asking as a first-generation scholar leader. So, like, you had a valid point for asking, it's just probably not the most tactful thing, but, like, it didn't offend me.

While Amy offered a remarkably insightful, frank and full interview, some of her comments problematised elements of the co-construction project’s aims. After fifty minutes’ discussion I asked her again about what the university might do better in terms of support for first-gens. She replied:

Nothing springs to mind, like, unless they're gonna find some extra funding, which is highly unlikely, to give all students who have technical problems. [...] Again, it was just something you have to, like, overcome. Then I don't think it's fair to say that the university has had the burden of making sure everyone has the resources. [...] It's not really fair to put that burden on the university.

There are several things going on here. First, Amy expresses understandable scepticism about the likelihood of the project helping secure any wider financial support from the university. Then there is a keen sense of the need for individual resourcefulness; that students simply had to find ways to cope, regardless of the disadvantages they might individually experience (and that they recognised as such, when comparing themselves with their more affluent peers). Amy had already described in some detail the impressive ingenuity she had needed to manage her online learning with suboptimal and sometimes malfunctioning equipment and poor internet access. (Bob relayed similar experiences).

Third, there is the sense that it is not the university’s place to mitigate these structural inequalities in any case, which of course runs entirely contrary to the co-construction project’s rationale. This attitude was in some regards widespread among first-gen participants. The majority tended not to seek help from their tutors, for example, even to the point of not attending office hours where they could raise specific questions about teaching. There was a sense that staff were too busy or had better things to do than to help them and that they therefore needed to get through it themselves, unaided. Amy was far from unusual in finding novel coping mechanisms. I spent a lot of time in the co-construction interviews attempting to persuade participants that it was a key part of members of staff’s job to offer individual learning support for those who asked for it. Follow-up conversations suggested that some participants had accepted this and begun to access more of the learning and teaching support available as a matter of course. The deepened rapport I was able to develop with participants through the co-construction process itself surely rendered some first-gens more likely to come to me directly for advice and academic support.

Overall, the first stage of the co-construction recommended a raft of measures to support first-gens at departmental level (Mates et.al, 2022). It also found that many first-gens did not know about the support that was already in place such as a means tested scheme to help pay for new laptops. Here we could recommend simpler and better means of communicating this support, including a first-gen handbook that brings all this institutional support (and advice from fellow first-gens) together in one document. Even when first-gens did know about the support, however, there often remained a reluctance to access it for

various institutional and cultural reasons. The co-construction project offered a sense of the complexities of these reasons, but, in some cases at least, less of an idea of how to deal with them.

Even with her scepticism and admirable self-reliance, Amy still offered one suggestion. This was related to the problems engendered by inferior quality Wi-Fi and the lockdown of January 2021, when the government ruled that only students in ‘extreme circumstances’ could return to university.

I think maybe in terms of, like, the college saying you can't come back. [in January 2021] I know Wi-Fi isn't the greatest excuse to come back. [...] but also when your Wi-Fi is a bit iffy and you can't really work. I do think that should have been considered as an extreme situation, not just [...] if you don't have a place to live or if your mental health is completely deteriorated at home.

Asked later about what might be done to improve in-person teaching with the extra COVID-19 restrictions (necessitating social distancing in larger rooms and the wearing of facemasks), Amy again made a practical point that, while completely valid, rendered the aims of the co-construction redundant:

Because everyone is so used to the COVID environment now, it's not as new as it was. It's not as unknown. [...] it was just the unknown that made everyone really wary, and I think that's another factor that wouldn't have to be considered anymore because a lot of people are quite used to it or accustomed to it now.

The above discussion covers some of the complex cultural and attitudinal issues we could explore during co-construction, even if they offered obstacles to generating mitigative measures. In approaching the interviews, I had wanted participants to be bold and creative; to make demands of the institution, but some participants, entirely understandably, offered reasons why demands could not or should not be made. The opposite problem also emerged: that, like French protestors in 1968, some first-gens were demanding ‘the impossible’ in their co-construction input (Levitas, 2008). Continuing with the Situationist slogan, the demands should have been seen as ‘realistic’. It should, for example, be possible to provide decent, abundant, mould-free and affordable accommodation for all students, let alone first-gens. The ongoing student housing crisis that afflicts many British university cities suggests the impossibility of this aim; or, perhaps, the indifference or incompetence of senior decision makers in the sector and the government. Even with an issue like adequate broadband – essential for any online learner – there was no simple option. We suggested that the university offer a means tested scheme to pay specifically for good broadband for the academic year 2020-21, which did not happen. Even with such a scheme in place, there were cases of students in private housing contractually bound into low-quality broadband. Yet, even some colleges did not offer students a consistently good broadband service.

Overall, some of the problems interviewees raised required university-level action that did not (as Amy anticipated) happen. Others required national policy changes which, given the ideology and incompetence of the government of the time (see the revelatory findings of the UK COVID-19 enquiry (2024), would never happen. Some participant suggestions seemed to necessitate a social revolution. Naturally, there were limits to what the project could reasonably ask the department and its staff to do. For example, the project’s academic leads in the first phase did not feel able even to suggest that staff offer more contact hours during the COVID-19 academic year – a suggestion that came out of the phase one survey and not later interviews (Mates et.al., 2022). Learning how to teach successfully online (often for the first time) and adapting all teaching materials to doing so, along with the childcare, mental health and numerous other problems that lockdowns and associated COVID-19 disruption brought staff as much as students (as well as the ongoing industrial dispute that was suspended but not dropped for that academic year), was enough for colleagues to be getting on with.

Contrasting strongly with various obstacles – practical, attitudinal, cultural and theoretical – to effective outcomes from co-construction were specific and immediate actions that sprang from the process, and that

involved participants directly. Amy, for example, suggested that I use Instagram to advertise departmental first-gen group events:

If I was gonna create a [student] society, I'd go for Instagram all the way.

LM: *OK, I'll look into that then. Did you [...] kind of volunteer then? It tentatively sounded like you had volunteered, but I don't know.*

Amy: *So, I mean [...] I actually would volunteer if, 'cause I was thinking to myself and you could actually put like “Social Media Director” or something like [...] if you gave me a title and then [its] something you can add [to a CV] my mind revolves around CVs and job applications [...]*

We then had a successful departmental first-gen group face-to-face (pizza-based) meeting and it did for a while after that seem as though the group would self-organise, and become truly student-led for the first time. More generally, the first phase of the co-construction project produced a set of departmental, faculty and university-wide suggestions to support first-gens., many of which would be equally beneficial to non-first-gens (Mates et.al., 2022). In the next and final substantive section, we turn to considering what the co-construction process itself might offer first-gens participating in it.

6. Discussion and implications for practice: what can co-construction do for first-gens?

At its best, participating in co-construction can help to increase students’ self-confidence and a sense of the value of their knowledge (Cook-Sather and Luz, 2015). To take the latter first, this sense of the institution valuing first-gen students’ knowledge came through strongly in Roger’s interview:

LM: *but thank you very much for, you know, loads of brilliant stuff there. It's going to be really useful.*

Roger: *I enjoyed it. It's been nice to [...] actually, like, talk about my experiences because it's nice to be listened to. [...] there's these things that really need to change [...] It's nice that the university [...] is starting to listen to people, you know, learn from things like this [...] I've actually enjoyed the last two hours, being able to chat and get stuff out.*

Roger’s ‘get stuff out’ remark hints at something else that co-construction could offer participant first-gens. Roger then commented:

Because it's not something I've, like, massively thought about myself before reading these few questions so it's nice to process my own thoughts and think, like, “What, what's going on?”

Co-construction thus not only offered participants an opportunity to have their voices heard (and in Roger’s case, to feel it would make a difference); the process also offered some catharsis. Thirdly, it provided a way for some participants to begin to understand and reflect on their experiences over that challenging academic year. Not only was there the sense that first-gens’ knowledge was valuable and valued (and validated); they could also further define and hone that knowledge in their own minds.

What of the co-construction developing participants’ self-confidence? In some respects, and notwithstanding the imposter syndrome evident, a degree of participant self-confidence was evident in many of the interviews. In the case of Kate, self-confidence was evident in how the co-construction interview developed. It became so conversational that the structure provided by the interview questions vanished. One hundred and twenty-eight minutes into the interview, and conscious that we had several questions still to cover, I remarked:

You've totally like taken control of this interview, haven't you? But that's good. There's nothing wrong with that. You've got to be prepared for this as an interviewer, don't you? You know, it's all part of the thing.

I had worked closely with Kate (who had just graduated), in her final year and we had a good rapport. Even with the absence of the actual questions structuring large parts of the interview, it still offered lots of co-construction ideas and intelligent insights.

The co-construction also offered me as interviewer opportunities to try more overtly to build some participants’ self-confidence. Returning to the interview with Bob discussed above; his incredulity that what he had said could be of utility offered such an opportunity. In replying to his question ‘Was it actually helpful?’ I tried to reassure him:

LM: *Yeah, everything. [...] you've just talked at length about all elements of it and as I say, said some things that no one else has said [...] do you not believe me when I tell you, though?*

Bob: *It's not that. [...] I was thinking, “Oh, I don't know, that's going to be a quick call [interview]. I don't, I don't know anything; I don't know what to say”.*

LM: *[it is] part of that self-perception thing as well, isn't it? And about just having a bit more, you know, trying [to have] more confidence in yourself; about how you present and how you come across. [...]*

Bob, contrary to his own expectations, told me earlier in the interview that he had performed well in his end of first year assessments, so I continued:

Take the confidence from the really good marks that you've got and just, just go for it, but fundamentally enjoy it as well, you know?

Naturally, affirming remarks in one conversation cannot be expected to work wonders, but the co-construction process at least offered the opportunity for that dialogue, creating spaces for these interventions and further developing my working relationship with Bob.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has developed an element of the argument (explored in Mates and Grimshaw, 2024) that drawing from wider literatures on the co-paradigm offers an overlooked way of ensuring that ‘less connected’ groups are involved in co-construction – by targeting them specifically. It explored how even this type of targeting still means that those likely to become involved will necessarily be the ‘more connected’ among the ‘less connected’ students and that overcoming this dynamic is difficult. We have also seen how staff can adopt various self-critical mechanisms to overcome, at least to some degree, obstacles to breaking down power structures integral to the project’s main form of data generation (semi-structured interviews). In any case, the co-construction process was much more than just the interviews, involving, for example, developing trust and building working relationships over some time. Power relations were complex too (Arendt, 1970; Lukes, 1974; Foucault, 2019); on the one hand, a student taking charge of the interview itself; but on the other hand, of staff deciding which ‘demands’ to take to management at various levels. Finally, it argued that the process of co-construction itself can, despite the imposter syndrome and lack of self-confidence among first-gen participants, produce concrete, practical suggestions for improving teaching and learning practices at various institutional levels. Importantly, co-construction offers a space for catharsis and self-understanding of first-gen participants, as well as a chance for staff to validate the knowledge and insights of such students and their struggles, and to help build their personal and intellectual self-confidence. Furthermore, the process itself helps those working closely with first-gens or other disadvantaged students to get to know them and their learning and teaching needs better, rendering staff better able as individuals to support them as they go through university. For all these reasons, the ‘messy’ processes of co-construction are an invaluable tool to attempt to understand and address structural disadvantages for first-gens and other disadvantaged students, even though some of what we end up demanding may constitute ‘the impossible’.

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Think, Reflect, Succeed: Analysis of the University of Derby's approach to effective attainment raising outreach with secondary-age learners

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Abstract

The University of Derby's (UoD) Think, Reflect, Succeed (TRS) programme has been developed in response to drivers to support young learners to raise attainment. The programme offers a new approach for UoD's Widening Access (WA) team in the provision of raising attainment outreach and is a move away from its traditional offer of revision technique activities. The teams' own reflections, research into best practice, and 'what works' evidence informs TRS, which is delivered to up to 200 local learners from under-represented groups per year. TRS takes metacognitive and self-regulated learning strategies as the basis for sessions on reflection, critical thinking, and researching skills. Evaluation is mapped using a Theory of Change (ToC), and evaluated through a mixed methods approach, giving both quantitative and qualitative data against which outcomes and impact measures are tracked.

This chapter reviews the development of TRS and the emerging findings within the context of institutional, local, and political drivers, with a further analysis of socio-economic, demographic and geographic factors. It puts forward the view that metacognitive and self-regulated learning strategies have a positive impact on raising attainment, and that the use of theories of change and mixed evaluation methods are highly beneficial for measuring success, outcomes and impact.

Key words: raising attainment, cognition, metacognition, self-regulated learning.

Introduction

This chapter will review the development, implementation and evaluation of UoD's TRS programme, a raising attainment programme delivered to Year 10 (ages 14-15) and Year 12 (ages 16-17) pupils in Derby City and areas of disadvantage in Derbyshire. It will outline the implementation and emerging findings of the programme within the context of institutional, local, and political drivers, with an analysis of the socio-economic, demographic and geographic factors which have influenced its development.

The programme was first piloted in the academic year (AY) 2019-20 in response to an emerging government agenda for universities to better support schools in raising the attainment of under-represented target groups (OfS, 2018a). This has further formalised into an expectation for universities to engage in this work as part of their Access and Participation (APP) plans (OfS, 2023).

Alongside this agenda, UoD's attainment raising support programme, Raising the Grade, focusing on teaching revision technique strategies, was being reviewed. The outcome of the review was that it was hard to show impact, needing significant buy-in from schools to provide predicted and actual grades, and hard

to deliver, having to take into account numerous exam boards curricula and not playing to the delivery strengths of UoD's WA team.

Research into effective learning strategies (for example, Schraw et al., 2006; Crawford and Skipp, 2014; Fleming and Lau, 2014) led the WA team to develop the TRS programme, with a focus on the use of cognitive, metacognitive and self-regulation approaches.

The programme has been further refined during successive years and this chapter provides an overview and analysis of the findings from AY 2022-23, the first year a fully developed programme has been delivered.

The discussion has three foci – the use of metacognitive and self-regulated learning strategies in raising attainment programmes; the use and effective implementation of ToC and mixed methods evaluation; and the challenges and limitations of UoD's approach to both delivery and evaluation. The concluding argument asserts that the use of metacognitive and self-regulated learning strategies has value, and its impact is best measured through the use of a mixed methods evaluation and, whilst there are challenges, the positives of both outweigh these.

Context

Local and policy context

The WA team's goal – to increase participation and equitable outcomes for under-represented groups – has been developed to ensure a focus on the needs of local cohorts, working collaboratively with local schools and other organisations, to address very challenging, entrenched, social mobility issues. To do this, it has been pertinent for us to understand the local and policy contexts within which the UoD operates. The Social Mobility Commission's *State of the Nation Report* (2017) mapped outcomes by 324 local authorities (LAs) in England. Their findings identified the East Midlands region as providing some of the worst opportunities in England for social progress for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission). As identified in Bainham (2019), 'The picture is particularly acute in Derby, which sees the city ranked 316th out of 324 LAs with General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) attainment well below the national average' (Bainham, 2019). However, this low progression and opportunity is not just confined to the city, and we see this within other areas of Derbyshire where we are committing resource, with all but one of the Derbyshire LAs in the bottom third of the social mobility rankings, and six specifically highlighted as amongst the worst social mobility cold spots in the country (Social Mobility Commission, 2017).

As a response, the Department for Education made Derby City one of the first opportunity areas in October 2017 (DfE, 2017). Following five years of funding through the Derby Opportunity Area, GCSE attainment has shown some increase, however, this progress has been slow and when taking GCSE and average attainment 8 scores into account, Derbyshire and Derby City continue to rank among the lowest performing areas in the country (Gov.uk, 2023). This is reflective of a progressive issue within the whole of the East Midlands which was the lowest ranked area for GCSE results in the country in 2016 (Weale, 2016), and the second lowest performer in 2019 (Jones, 2019), with Derbyshire remaining one of the lowest performing counties in achieving a grade 7 and above at GCSE in 2023 (McHardy, 2023). Both the social immobility and GCSE performance are key challenges which were considered when developing the TRS programme.

Further compounding the geographic issue with the attainment of learners at school level in the region alongside the challenge of socially mobile students, was the effect of the disadvantage attainment gap which persists and continues to affect learners from a widening participation (WP) background throughout higher education (HE) (Wainwright et al., 2019). This also affects the continuation rates of WP students, with

significant numbers dropping out of university in their first year compared to students from more advantaged backgrounds (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013). Ultimately then, low attainment at school level, particularly for those universities where a high percentage of students meet at least one WP criteria, creates a domino effect and continually impacts students who eventually go on to attend HE.

National government policy was also an important factor in our decision-making, as this ultimately drives the work of all outreach teams concerned with WP and outreach. The Office for Students (OfS) outlined key insights into how universities should be working with their local schools to improve attainment levels of learners from widening participation backgrounds (Office for Students, 2022). However, it does not specifically detail what universities need to do to close these gaps. It is, therefore, down to interpretation in how to address supporting schools to raise attainment.

University of Derby widening access drivers

It is important to provide further institutional context to the outreach work of the WA team. We were conscious in our planning of UoD's 2020-25 APP (University of Derby, 2019), and although UoD did not have any specific access stage targets, the WA team committed to supporting a longer-term, strategic focus to improve equality of opportunity for under-represented groups to access, succeed and progress through HE. The APP reflected UoD's ambition for change, targets, and key performance measures, and put focus on the work at the access stage to improve attainment as well as influence, reduce and eliminate gaps for on course students.

UoD's APP targets focus on current students and continue to reflect the nature of UoD's student body, where 49 percent of undergraduate entrants in AY 2021-22 were from low participation neighbourhoods, 21 percentage points higher than the sector average. From both a local and institutional context, we needed to ensure that our attainment related outreach programmes are designed to increase the skills and confidence in our local school and college learners, not only to support progression to university, but to give under-represented students the best possible chance to continue and succeed in their HE studies.

UoD widening access programmes are offered wholly, or in part, to 39 local secondary schools, and several local primaries. The approach was developed following a literature review, scoping exercise of sector research, and our own evaluation of what works. Widening access activities form long-term outreach programmes aimed at raising awareness and attainment, and supporting the realisation of ambitions of under-represented and target learners through a multi-intervention approach creating 'drip feed' touchpoints for cohorts of learners. Evidence shows this approach has proven impacts on learners in attainment, motivation and understanding; and promotes sustainable change (Causeway, 2022; Harding and Bowes, 2022; OfS, 2021; Patel and Bowes, 2021; TASO, 2021; Bainham, 2019; OfS, 2018b). TRS was embedded as a key element of these programmes.

Combining the challenges of socially immobile students, GCSE performance and progression at university, we were presented with a key issue - disadvantaged and under - equipped learners continue to be disadvantaged even if they do go on to attend university. It was, therefore, simply not enough to support our local learners with their attainment and GCSE results - we had to better prepare them for HE and ensure they developed the key skills that not only enable them to attain the grades, but ensure they have the capabilities to succeed within a HE setting. In order for this to be achieved, we identified the key skills that learners need to apply at all stages of their education.

Methodology

TRS programme development

The TRS programme was initially proposed and developed in the AY 2019-20 because of the difficulties of measuring the impact of previous attempts by the WA team to increase attainment in local schools. In

previous years, the team had delivered a programme of revision skills sessions, Raising the Grade, which were aimed at increasing revision skills in English and Maths for Year 11 learners (15/16 years old) to enable them to achieve a level 5 grade (classed as 'strong' pass grade) in both English and Maths at GCSE.

Reflections on the data and evidence from the Raising the Grade programme indicated that attainment raising via delivering revision skills sessions simply did not have the desired impact and was hard to measure, too reliant on provision of predicted and actual grades from already stretched school staff, and unable to draw a meaningful conclusion of impact on the final grade accomplishment due to wider influencing factors. Our learning was that we, as a HE institution, are better placed and better equipped to deliver programmes that build key skills through focus on self-regulation, reflection, critical thinking, and building self-efficacy that will enable learners to be better prepared for learning in a HE setting.

The TRS programme was therefore developed and adapted with our current skillset, local context, OfS guidance and current research in mind. If learners are to successfully transition into HE, it is vital that they not only achieve the correct grades but can reflect on and understand their learning processes throughout their educational journeys (Cromley and Kunze, 2020). Research indicates that learners who reflect on their learning have high levels of self-efficacy and are able to develop cognitive critical thinking skills and therefore learn more successfully and adapt better to academic environments than those who are unable to self-regulate their learning (Urban and Urban 2023; Fleming and Lau, 2014; Schraw et al., 2006). In the context of TRS, the WA team used this research to develop three main components: critical thinking, reflection and research.

Schools from Derby City and Derbyshire were targeted for TRS, with a maximum of 50 learners per programme, and three delivery events offered in AY 2022-23, giving a maximum of 150 places across the year. For both year groups, critical thinking approaches related to realistic situations, their ability to determine facts and opinions in news stories, and how they articulate their own thoughts and opinions in a concise and critical manner. To build reflection skills, learners watched a video around a topic that interests them and were then asked a series of questions to prompt reflection on what they saw. Learners then applied the critical thinking and reflection skills to develop a research-based question of their own using the UoD's online library and open access resources.

TRS methodology

There was a robust evaluation structure within TRS, and reflection for the WA team was embedded throughout using ToCs and logic models to map out success and impact measures and ensure effectiveness. A mixed methodology was employed, including individual activity feedback and teacher evaluation within TRS specifically. The use of ToCs logic models is now widespread within the public sector, with, for instance, all Uni Connect Partnerships being encouraged to adopt a logic model approach to evaluation (OfS, 2018b). As UoD's widening access work has many complex strands, employing a ToC ensured we gave systematic consideration to TRS alongside all our programmes of activity, plus UoD's strategic aims and the APP.

TRS evaluation consists of pre and post surveys collected in person to determine progress in the learners' attitudes to HE, confidence, and self-reflection on their understanding of all three topics that make up TRS. These surveys were measured on a Likert scale (Likert, 1932). We also collected other information post event, including learners' knowledge of university, how they feel they would fit in at university, and if they feel that the skills learnt would help them in their current and future studies. In the longer-term, this will be further underpinned by tracking outcomes for the learners into and through HE.

For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on the evaluation of the critical thinking, reflection and research sessions, and learners' and teachers' qualitative responses.

Findings

In AY 2022-23, Think, Reflect, Succeed was delivered over three separate events to 107 learners in total: 53 learners in Year 12 and 54 learners in Year 10. All these events were delivered either at UoD's Kedleston Road site or in school. Five schools attended the events, all of which are high priority schools in both Derby City and Derbyshire due to the number of pupils meeting WP background criteria, such as, above average free school meal (FSM) percentages and low attainment levels at GCSE. Students who met at least one WP criteria, whether that be socio-economic or ethnic background, were chosen to take part in the programme. One hundred learners in total filled out the surveys, 47 learners in Year 12 and 53 learners in Year 10. Seven teachers also completed a post event survey.

The data, detailed as follows, indicates the responses that learners gave when asked a series of questions. The first three questions relate to the content of the sessions and were measured in pre and post question on the response scale. All the data and graphs are taken from a combination of both Year 10 and Year 12 evaluation data that were collected over the three TRS events.

Critical thinking

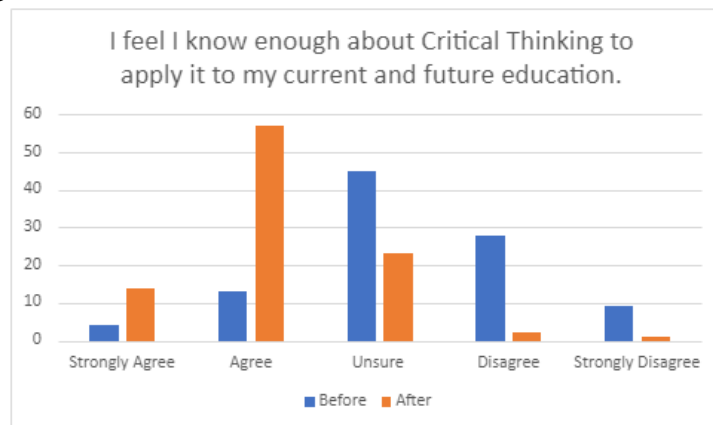


Figure 1. Critical thinking evaluation responses.

Figure 1 shows a significant increase in learners either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt more confident in their abilities in applying Critical Thinking to their current and future studies. Initially, 17 percent of learners felt confident in their critical thinking skills pre event. After the event, however, this had increased to 71 percent of learners. There were also decreases in students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, dropping from 37 percent to just 3 percent of learners post event. Those that answered 'Unsure' also dropped from 45 percent to 23 percent.

Reflection

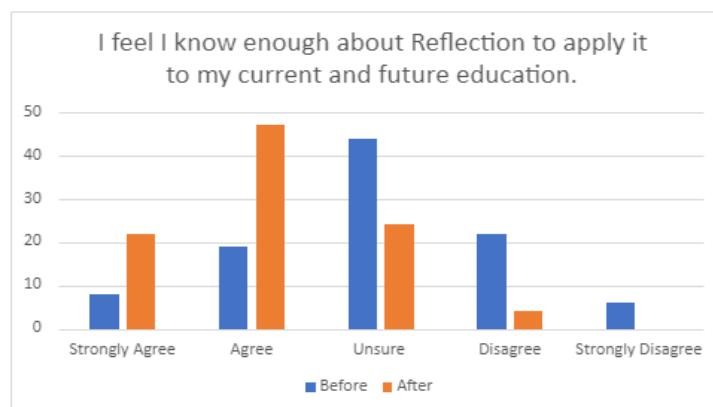


Figure 2. Reflection evaluation responses.

In figure 2, there was a significant increase in learners indicating that they felt more confident in their abilities to apply reflection to their current and future studies. While 27 percent of learners initially agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, this had increased to 69 percent of learners post event. There were also decreases in those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement pre and post event, decreasing from 28 percent to just 4 percent. It is also important to note that no learners strongly disagreed with the statement post event.

Research

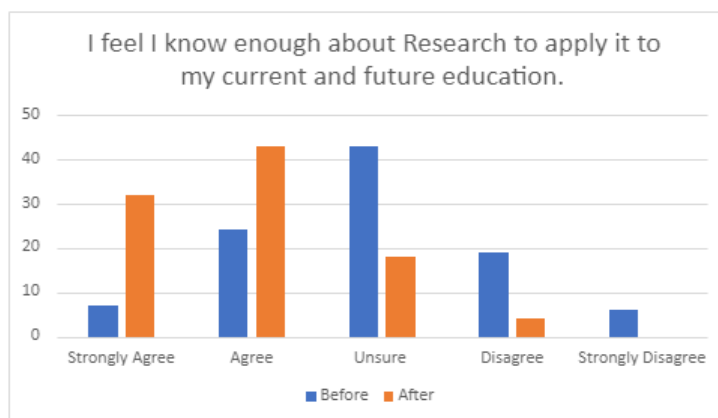


Figure 3. Research evaluation responses.

There are some differences to mention initially in figure 3, as a high percentage of learners already felt confident in their research abilities. However, this may be due to almost half the learners being in Year 12 and perhaps already familiar with research skills linking to their current studies.

Despite the high pre event positive response, there were still clear improvements in the learners' confidence in applying research skills to their current and future studies with 75 percent of learners agreeing or strongly agreeing post event they felt more confident - the highest out of the three sessions. There were also decreases in those who disagreed or strongly disagreed pre event, dropping from 25 percent to just 4 percent of learners post event. Again, as in the Reflection session (see figure 2), no learners strongly disagreed with the statement.

Application of skills

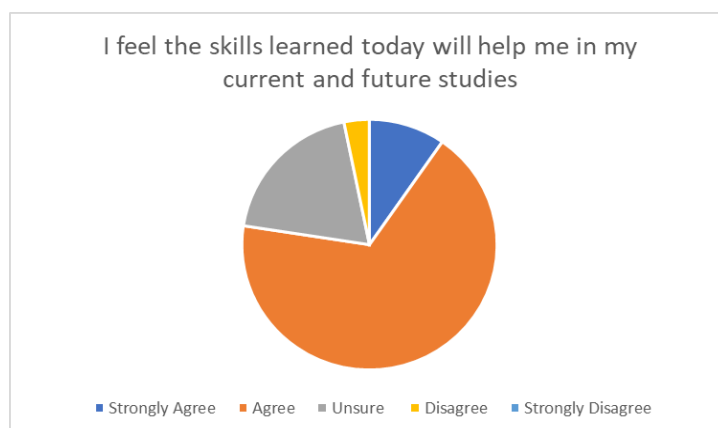


Figure 4. Skills evaluation responses

Figure 4 relates to the learners' reflections on whether TRS had increased their overall confidence in their skills and applying them in current and future studies. The learners responded positively to this question, with 77 percent of learners agreeing or strongly agreeing, and only 3 percent of learners disagreeing or

strongly disagreeing. These responses also directly link to the positive responses from the response scale questions. This is a strong indication that TRS did increase learners' confidence in their abilities to apply these skills in both their current and future studies.

As part of the evaluation process, we also collected qualitative data from both the learners and the teachers. This provided the team with contextual information which further underpins the impact of the programme as well as helps us to understand which elements work particularly well. Responses from the learners showed that they understood not only what they learned, but also how they can apply it:

I have learnt how to research and reflect on my learning in school. (Year 10 student)

I have learnt how to discuss my contextual knowledge in research responses. (Year 12 student)

(I can) differ between bias and unbiased information. (Year 10 student)

This was further backed by qualitative data collected from the teachers:

Thank you for offering them the opportunity to work independently, think for themselves, choose their own areas of interest. They are SO dictated to by teachers trying to get through prescribed specifications, this gave them some much needed autonomy and freedom.

Really good info for students to gain different ways of thinking and using information.

The learners did, however, raise concerns about the structure of the delivery of TRS, as well as some content additions they may have found useful and engaging:

Could provide some additional things that we could take home to further build on those skills.

Some information sheets/activity sheets to take home.

More time to visit parts of the university.

Show us around the university more.

The teachers who provided responses also reflected on what could improve the learners' experience:

Similar session design in all three sessions, was not appropriate for some pupils who lost concentration at times.

More opportunities to move around the campus.

As shown, evaluation of the programme is based upon robust data, providing clear evidence of the impact. The use of a mixed methods approach has given rich quantitative but also qualitative data and a voice to the learners to illustrate how the programme has benefitted them. These learners are local young people, many of whom face multiple barriers and challenges to learning and attainment which has been further exacerbated by the period of lockdown, and it has been clear to see the positive impact this programme has had on their confidence and ability to self-regulate their learning.

Discussion

Although the TRS programme is still in the early stages of development, there is already emerging strong evidence for the positive impact of the programme on supporting learners to develop self-regulation and independent learning skills and build confidence in applying those skills to current and future studies. This supports the view that university widening access teams' expertise and skills are better suited to developing outreach programmes focused on cognitive and metacognitive approaches than on revision skills style activity due to the difficulties in evaluating the impact of revision skills activities on final grades. Instead, our focus is concerned with supporting learners to put in place the building blocks of metacognitive

thinking and to build their confidence in the application of metacognitive thought strategies. The effectiveness of metacognitive strategies is supported by research such as Muhid et al. (2020) whose study of the effect of these strategies on 16-17 year olds in secondary education found they 'promoted students' reading performance as well as their ability to maximize their reading effectively' they concluded that the bulk of the evidence suggests that 'improving SRL (*self-regulated learning*) and metacognition can lead to improved attainment' and that this evidence is 'quite strong' (Miujs and Bokhove, 2020).

Further, in terms of evaluation we can also provide emerging evidence for the strength of employing a mixed methods approach, including a ToC model, pre and post questionnaire, teacher evaluation and long-term tracking of outcomes through the East Midlands Widening Participation and Evaluation Partnership (EMWPREP) tracker database. EMWPREP is a collaborative partnership database through which UoD monitors and tracks learners through their educational lifecycle, including learners' degree outcomes and their progression into graduate employment.

The development of the ToC, in particular, gave us the opportunity to think through what we wanted to investigate and understand the impact of our metacognitive approach to attainment raising in both the short-term and long-term. The ToC has given structure to our analysis of findings and has made the process of mapping against expected outcomes and short-term success measures much more effective and efficient. As mentioned previously, the use of ToCs is becoming more widespread in the public sector and is something which the OfS see as a vital stage of evaluating outreach activity, as can be seen in the latest guidance for universities completing Access and Participation Plan, where inclusion of a ToC is a necessary element of the submission (OfS, 2023). The importance of utilising a ToC is further backed by TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education), an independent charity, who state that, a ToC 'allows you to describe the need you are trying to address, the changes you want to make (your outcomes) and how you plan to achieve these changes (your activities). It also allows you to answer key questions around your intervention' (TASO, 2023). However, the positive evidential use of ToCs goes far beyond the evaluation of a small outreach programme, and so can be used as we scale up activity or collaborate with partners on a much more substantive programme. Such can be seen in a number of evaluative applications from complex, national initiatives in the USA (DuBow and Litzler, 2019) to supporting environmental decision making in Australia (Allen et al., 2017). The use of ToCs is therefore an evaluation tool which we intend to continue to use as our attainment raising work develops.

Challenges and limitations

Despite the overwhelming positive responses from the evaluation forms which indicate that the learners have increased confidence in their skills and applying them in their current future studies, there are some limitations to our evaluation methods and constructive contextual feedback. For example, we do not employ quasi-experimental methods such as randomised control trials (RCTs). This may be something for us to consider in the future, however, due to it being both a time and resource costly activity, this is not something we could practically include at this point. The use of RCTs can also be problematic in a social science setting as it raises both ethical and practical questions, particularly when it comes to limiting external factors to be able to properly conduct the trial. The challenges of RCT use is well documented (Gale, 2018; Hayton and Stevenson, 2018) and supports our decision to not employ this method to this outreach programme. The programme would also benefit from comparative analysis of other programmes concerned with attainment raising. The WA team have shown that we are able to evaluate more effectively the benefits of attainment raising via self-regulated learning and metacognitive approaches, compared to previous attempts via revision skills in the Raising the Grade programme. However, a longer-term analysis of the programme, as well as comparative analysis of other programmes delivered by other university outreach teams, or of learners from similar backgrounds but who do not take part in the activities, is needed to measure the true impact of the programme on longer-term attainment raising.

Additionally, due to TRS being a relatively new programme, if we are to confidently state that it provides long-term improvements for the learners and their metacognitive development, we need to revisit longer-term outcomes via our use of the EMWPREP tracking database. Tracking both progression into HE and outcomes beyond HE is a long-term commitment but will further strengthen our assumptions that supporting the development of metacognitive strategies does indeed lead to improved outcomes. The WA team are currently working with the Student Engagement and Enhancement Team at UoD on a transition project that is designed to run focus groups with current UoD students around the effectiveness of WA interventions they received in primary, secondary and sixth form. TRS will form part of this process for learners who begin year 10 and year 12 in AY 2023-24. This will enable us to provide more robust evidence of the effectiveness of the TRS programme on those learners who have engaged in the programme and who do progress to university.

In terms of the activity itself, we need to ensure we manage expectations of what the activity is for and how it will benefit learners. Qualitative constructive responses indicated that learners' experience of university was hindered by the sessions being information heavy. This was consistent with the constructive feedback provided by the teachers who attended.

To improve the learner's experience, we should consider implementing more group work and discussions, provide longer breaks between sessions, provide a reflective journal that the learners can use after every session, and access to further information which they can use post event. The use of reflective journals has been positively used as both an evaluation method and a way to improve metacognitive strategies (Girgin, 2020; Yadav, 2022; Dorit and Nirit, 2020) and would also provide us with another qualitative method which we could utilise to effectively evaluate the sessions and further strengthen our mixed methodology approach.

Finally, we have been limited by the number of staff available to deliver the programme, due to the size of the team. We have therefore considered and sought ways to extend the programme to reach more learners beyond Derbyshire. To expand the programme, we have collaborated with our local Uni Connect partnership, the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Collaborative Outreach Partnership (DANCOP), to deliver additional TRS sessions in AY 2023-24 to schools in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire.

Conclusion

This chapter has put forward the emerging findings from the UoDs, TRS programme, a raising attainment programme delivered to Year 10 and Year 12 pupils in Derby City and areas of disadvantage in Derbyshire. This programme has been discussed within the context of institutional, local, and political drivers, with an analysis of the socio-economic, demographic and geographic factors which have influenced its development.

The emerging findings have shown a positive impact on the learner's higher order thinking skills, evidenced through significant increases in confidence by attending learners in their critical thinking, reflection, and research abilities across both year groups. There were also positive reflections by the learners, further indicating that they had understood the content and felt confident to apply the necessary skills both in their current and future studies. These outcomes support a growing research evidence base that metacognitive and self-regulation strategies have a positive impact on attainment.

However, the chapter has also highlighted challenges in the currently short-term nature of evidence collection. The WA team would benefit from additional evaluation methods to enable them to evidence, more robustly, that learners understand the cognitive processes involved in TRS and have applied these to positive effect in the classroom. This can be achieved by ensuring that the team constantly review the ToC and embed further evaluation methods, such as focus groups and long-term tracking into the mixed methods framework for this programme.

There are also elements of the sessions which require improvement such as increasing the amount of group work which, alongside the constructive feedback, has been shown to improve independent thinking and motivation in the classroom (Vaca et al., 2011). Finally, in terms of delivery, due to the emerging positive findings of the effect on attainment raising, and the government driver for universities to support raising attainment in schools, the team would do well to further explore opportunities to collaborate, such as with DANCOP, to increase the reach of the programme beyond Derby City and Derbyshire.

Overall, this chapter has been able to address the question of where and how universities can support schools with attainment raising and it can be asserted that the benefits of supporting learners to develop metacognitive and self-regulated learning strategies far outweighs the presented challenges, for both university delivery staff and the learners themselves. The programme has also shown that approaching attainment raising by focusing on reflective, critical thinking and self-regulated learning has been far more effective than previous attempts by the University of Derby's WA team at attainment raising via revision skills sessions.

Finally, to further build the sector evidence base of what works, the following areas for further research are proposed: the long-term impact of metacognitive and self-regulated learning on attainment; measuring success and impact through a mixed methods approach; the use of effective evaluation methodologies in social science research; and the impact of government policy on university outreach activity.

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Creativity Unbound: The pedagogical power of prison-university partnerships

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Abstract

Alternative education provision in prisons has a positive impact on recidivism and employment opportunities. The Inside-Out model (King et al., 2019) has shown to increase confidence in prisoners' oral and written skills, ignite a broader desire to learn, and benefit the wider prison community.

In 2021, researchers from the Universities of Surrey (UoS) and Cardiff delivered a creative writing project at HMP Downview, a women's prison in Sutton, inspired by the Latin American model of community writing (*cartonera*). This project culminated in the publication of a collection of the participants' writing, giving these marginalised learners a voice. The programme created a space for communal learning and expression, enabling the participants 'to break down barriers and perceived individual differences' (Bell and Dodds, 2021: 7).

In 2022, the WP&O team at UoS extended this publishing project through a partnership with Downview. The *Creativity Unbound* programme was developed using the Inside-Out model. Through a transformative learning lens, this chapter presents findings from 25 evaluation respondents and focus groups carried out with 14 participants. The findings show participants' increased confidence, positive mental health, and interest in further education. This chapter contributes to the evidence of the value of prison-university partnerships providing prisoners with non-traditional modes of education engagement and opportunities to connect with the community and society—inside and out.

Key words: prison-university partnerships, creative writing, evaluation.

1. Context

Widening participation and outreach initiatives within the higher education (HE) sector are, at their heart, about social mobility. Such work endeavours to create an equitable society in which the conditions required for fair access, success, and progression within HE are available to all capable learners, regardless of background, personal experience, or socio-economic status. To this end, the University of Surrey's (UoS) Widening Participation and Outreach (WPO) team works closely with schools, colleges, and voluntary and public-sector partners to deliver a programme of targeted outreach. The three key aims of this activity are to minimise educational barriers, develop aspirations and attainment, and foster a sense of belonging and empowerment among learners and their supporters.

Borne out in the existing limitations to educational opportunities identified in this work are a range of wide-reaching socio-economic inequities that, accordingly, shape the strategies employed by sector policy-makers and practitioners. Within this context, the establishing of prison-university partnerships intends to address a specific proven area of inequity, namely the barriers to education faced by those in custody or with criminal convictions. The Office for Students (OfS) have identified such partnerships—along with the announcement of governmental policy initiatives to advance prison education (UK Parliament, 2022) — as key initiatives in its effective practice advice for supporting individuals with criminal convictions. With 60 per cent of prisoners leaving custody without identified employment, education, or training outcomes (OfS, 2020), it is clear why work in this area is necessary.

This chapter offers an overview of *Creativity Unbound*, a creative writing programme delivered by the WPO Team at UoS inside His Majesty's Prison (HMP) Downview, detailing key findings that we hope will inform strategies for supporting marginalised learners moving forward. We examine the transformative power of this programme as a non-traditional mode of education, positing its potential to promote wider benefits for prisoners (including skills development, improvement of mental health and wellbeing, and enactment of social change) as integral to increased engagement in education. In doing so, we put forward the fundamental role of evaluation as a collaborative social practice that should be embedded in the design of such programmes, to provide robust supporting evidence of their impact and value.

1.1 Prison-university partnerships

Partnerships between prisons and universities operate on the basis of bringing the 'outside' (the university) into the prison, and vice versa, to reach mutually beneficial outcomes through education. There is a growing body of research that demonstrates the transformative potential of prison-university partnerships in tackling a range of crime-related educational challenges, such as their capacity to improve in-prison education provision, increase prisoner participation in educational opportunities, and contribute to wider social change (Gray et al., 2019; O'Grady, 2019). The significance of access to education is sharply apparent here. Individuals with criminal convictions who are exposed to formal (and informal) education while incarcerated are better equipped to 'survive prison' (Behan, 2014 cited in Darke and Aresti, 2016), are more likely to develop constructive skills and less likely to reoffend (McCue, 2010), and are more capable of remodelling their perception of themselves and the world in a positive way (Darke and Aresti, 2016).

Prison-university partnerships should — if these outcomes are to be actualised through their collaborative projects — aim to bolster, rather than challenge or replace, existing in-prison education provision. One approach is to break down the barriers (real or imagined), separating the 'inside' of the prison system and the opportunities the 'outside' presents. O'Grady (2019) has highlighted how these partnerships promote cooperation and understanding between prisoners and the wider society, helping to foster empowerment and agency, encourage social citizenship, and provide pathways to employment for prisoners. A key term here is *agency* — one's ability to recognise one's own goals and outcomes, and to work toward realising them. In the prison context, agency is closely tied to desistance from criminal behaviour (Schmidt et al., 2021; Vaughan, 2007), and so is wrought by the myriad contextual factors at play in offender rehabilitation; encompassing, but certainly not limited to, socialisation, addiction, housing, mental health, employment, training, and, pertinently, education.

Whether in a direct or ancillary manner, an important contribution to heightening the agency of prisoners in these areas—and, by extension, the likelihood of them refraining from reoffending — can be made by the education-focused interventions delivered by prison-university partnerships. Central to this is the act of bringing university representatives inside prison walls to work directly with those incarcerated to support their development. For prisoners, such contact facilitates the building of positive individual, social, and institutional connections (Wolff and Draine, 2004), expands their social spaces, and promotes a broader sense of belonging, helping to equip them with the ability to recognise and pursue the opportunities

available to them (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). The wider social benefits are plain to see. There is a recognised association between positive experiences of education in prison and reduced recidivism (Ellison et al., 2017) and meaningful contact between diverse social groups across prison boundaries has been known to reduce stigma and change attitudes toward prisoners (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016); two necessary elements in the productive reintegration of offenders into society and the reduction of further crime.

Another key factor in rehabilitation and positive prisoner agency — and one that will feature later in our findings — is that of mental health. The current situation in prisons is stark. Mental health disorders continue to be highly prevalent among imprisoned communities, with rates of disorders within prison being 4.5–5 times higher than those found in the general population (Tyler et al., 2019). Particularly pertinent to this case (our partner, HMP Downview, houses women) is that, as Tyler et al. (2019) have identified, the prevalence of personality, mood, psychotic and eating disorders, drug dependence, and risk of suicidal behaviour is higher in female prison populations than in their male counterparts. While it is outside the scope of this chapter to robustly investigate the issue of mental health in the prison system, what we do consider is the potential role to be played by educational interventions in improving the mental health of those who participate in them. For instance, as we discuss later, positive engagement in education can be linked to reduced motivation to self-harm —Hawton et al. (2014) have shown that inmates often resort to self-harm as a mechanism to cope with stress and emotional distress — even when the improvement of mental health is not a direct outcome of the activity.

Ahead of closing this section, a question: which approach, if any, is most effective in achieving such outcomes? While we cannot offer here a survey of all possible modes of delivery and their potential impact, what we do provide is a case study of one approach—that of educational engagement via creativity, more specifically creative writing and storytelling. Evidence suggests that poor literacy levels are linked to negative attitudes toward education, decreased writing skills, poor mental health and civil engagement, and can increase susceptibility to unemployment and poverty (Dugdale and Clark, 2008). The restrictive impact of poor literacy skills is particularly prevalent among vulnerable communities, including those who are imprisoned (an issue recognised by the Government in its awarding of £1.8 million to boost literacy in prisons in 2023). As Cohen (2009) demonstrated in an examination of an in-prison choral choir, inmates who engage in self-expression activities display increased positive social interaction and report improved wellbeing. With *Creativity Unbound*, we intended to tap into this transformative potential through the promotion of creative writing as an accessible means of self-expression that empowers its participants to play an active role in the development of their literacy — and, in turn, their agency to make positive changes.

1.2 Project origins

Before discussing the delivery and findings of *Creativity Unbound*, it is first important to outline its origins and recognise the key figures involved in paving the way for the prison-university partnership in question to flourish. The *Creativity Unbound* programme, as it is today, is rooted in the *Prisoner Publishing* project (Bell and Whitfield, 2020), led by Dr Lucy Bell (then of UoS, now Sapienza University of Rome) and Dr Joey Whitfield and funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Launched in 2019, Bell and Whitfield's project was inspired by the work of grassroots publishing collectives in imprisoned communities in Mexico; in particular, those involved in the *cartonera* movement of artisanal handmade book production.

In autumn 2021, Bell and Charlotte Dodds (UoS) took this Latin American model into HMP Downview, a category C prison and young offender institute for women in Sutton, Surrey. Category C prisons focus on training and resettlement, aiming to provide prisoners with skills development opportunities that prepare them for resettling back into society upon release. Over two months, Bell and Dodds delivered weekly writing and art workshops with seven participants. The sessions were based on 'Creative Writing in Prison', a coursebook and accompanying DVD produced by Bell and Whitfield over the period of the 2020

COVID-19 lockdowns. Reflecting its later implementation by the WPO team, the coursebook was used to spark productive conversation and inspiration, and to encourage participants to write freely, with the aim of the project culminating in the publication of a book of the group's work.

Prior to Bell and Dodd's workshops at Downview coming to a close, Bell reached out to the WPO team at UoS seeking support. Having discerned among the participants a keen interest to further their education, Bell was at first consulting for sources of information and signposting that could be provided to the participants — yet, as it progressed, conversation turned to our interest in, and capacity to, continue the work rooted in the *Prisoner Publishing* project (Bell and Dodds, 2021) as it reached the end of its funding. Recognising prisoners as important and often overlooked under-represented learners, our team committed to moving the project forward, with Bell sharing her valuable knowledge and outcomes to aid in our shaping of the new programme's structure, aims, and approach.

1.3 Creating *Creativity Unbound*

Building on the important work of the *Prisoner Publishing* project (Bell and Dodds, 2021), in April 2022 the WPO team began collaborating with library staff at Downview to launch *Creativity Unbound* — a continuation and expansion of the preceding creative initiative — with the goal of embedding it into Downview's wider education and rehabilitation provision, as a sustainable and enriching opportunity for its prisoners. Promotion of the programme was carried out by library staff, whose targeting was informed by their knowledge of prisoners' interests, performance in education, and existing engagement in enrichment activity. Over 30 prisoners registered their interest in the programme, with thirteen being selected to take part in the inaugural run of the programme.

For the pilot run (spring/summer 2022), we constructed a seven-week timetable of weekly workshops to alternate between staff-led and prisoner-led sessions: comprising an introductory session delivered by WPO staff; two sessions led by previous participants of the *Prisoner Publishing Project* (Bell and Dodds, 2021); another session by WPO staff; a session led by prison library staff; and two concluding sessions by WPO staff. The opening workshop offered a broad introduction to creative writing and its many applications, with the following four sessions intended to focus on specific creative writing forms more closely (for example, poetry, rap, and visual storytelling), and the final two serving as opportunities for participants to finalise and share the written pieces they had produced across the programme.

A key aim of the proposed structure was to establish a sense of community via the bringing together of people from both inside and outside the prison walls, in line with an intended outcome of increasing participants' sense of belonging. Following a positive first workshop, feedback received from library staff indicated that the participants were less receptive to peer-delivered content, the common thread being that the complexities of status and relations within the prison community led to feelings among the group that they were being 'taught' by their peers—a notion that many were resistant to. With this knowledge, we adapted our plan for the second half of the programme to shift the focus of content of the remaining workshops (delivered by the WPO team and library staff) away from what the participants could learn from each other and more toward what they could learn from the 'outside' and how they could empower themselves to further this learning. This change was met with high levels of positivity and engagement from the group.

Following the programme's pilot run, and the subsequent feedback collected from its participants, we modified the programme's format to implement a six-week timetable of weekly workshops, delivered exclusively by WPO staff, in autumn 2022. We also invited two previous participants to return and join the new cohort in the capacity of 'mentors' to contribute informally to the sessions and act as ambassadors for the programme with the aim of broadening the programme's profile within the prison community in between sessions and future runs. As we demonstrate later in our findings, this revised format was well

received by both new participants and returning mentors, with participants attending week-on-week to attend the workshops and consistent visits from WPO staff helping foster a greater sense of community and allowing for a stronger rapport to be built between visitors and participants. This format was to be carried forward for the next two runs of the programme, in winter/spring 2023 and summer/autumn 2023.

2. Methodology

Central to how the WPO team develop and deliver interventions is the productive collaboration between our practitioners and the UoS Research and Evaluation Team, through the entire process of design, planning, and impact evaluation. This practice is shaped by our adoption of a Theory of Change (ToC) model — which facilitates ongoing reflection about how change takes place (Thomas, 2020) — in all our programmes, to map the rationale, proposed activities, and intended outcomes of each intervention.

Based on the ToC constructed for *Creativity Unbound*, we put in place a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection to measure programme impact. From a practitioner point of view, periodic review of the ToC was particularly effective in presenting the opportunity to assess the extent to which the intermediate outcomes of the programme were being met, leading to the informed implementation of modifications in delivery and structure to work toward the intended short-term and long-term outcomes.

The short-term outcomes of the programme identified were:

- Increased subject-specific confidence (improved writing abilities).
- Increased commitment to learning.
- Increased sense of community belonging.

We also identified the long-term outcome of the programme:

- Increased enrolment to Higher Education.

2.1 Questionnaire and focus groups

Based on the short-term outcomes, an evaluation was designed with a mix of: open-ended questions; ‘yes’ and ‘no’ questions; and questions using a five-point Likert scale rating (Joshi, A. et al., 2015) the extent to which participants agreed with each statement. Survey instruments are one of the most common methods of data collection for impact evaluation purposes (Solans-Domènech et al., 2019). The questionnaire included questions regarding: participants’ confidence in expressing themselves; if they felt able to express themselves freely; if the programme had inspired them to continue writing; and their thoughts about whether the programme helped bringing people together in the community. Finally, the participants were asked what creative writing means to them in an open-ended question. Some of these five-scale questions were adapted from the evaluation previously used in the *Prisoner Publishing Project* (Bell and Dodds, 2021). Another key mode of evaluation of the programme was focus groups (FGs). Research has demonstrated that FGs are received as less threatening than other methods of qualitative data collection and can provide a productive environment for participants to discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts (Krueger, 2014). Moreover, FGs can help participants develop a sense of belonging to a group, reflect on collective experiences, and feel safe to share information with others (Acocella, 2012; Abbott et al., 2018).

Two semi-structured FG interview schedules were designed to be administered at the end of the third run of the programme (winter/spring 2023), one with those who had previously engaged in *Creativity Unbound* and the other with participants of that current run. Both schedules asked questions regarding their views and experiences about participating in the workshops. The questions posed to the previous participants covered: motivation for their decision to enrol; any aspects of the course that they did, and did not enjoy; if, and in what ways, the programme had helped them at a personal level; and if they had been involved in other work or educational opportunities before taking part in *Creativity Unbound*. The FG for the spring run

participants included additional questions to determine whether what they had learned in the programme was helping them in any way, with other educational activities in which they were involved concurrently.

2.2 Implementation

The questionnaire, which was presented at the end of each six-week programme, was completed by a total of 25 participants from the three runs delivered between autumn 2022 and spring 2023 (a 58 per cent response rate from a total of 43 participants in *Creativity Unbound*). Responses to the qualitative questions were interpreted by means of a thematic analysis approach and the quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics with pivot tables in Excel.

The two FGs were conducted with a total of 14 participants in a single visit to Downview in March 2023, led by an evaluator and supported by a co-evaluator (members of the UoS Research and Evaluation Team) and the delivery leads (from the WPO team). The presence of the WPO team was essential, since they had undergone safeguarding training and had already good rapport with the participants. The FG with six previous participants lasted approximately 40 minutes, and the one with eight current participants lasted approximately 20 minutes. Audio recordings of both FGs were made, with consent of the participants and an assurance that their contributions would be anonymous. The recordings were transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis.

All the projects carried out by the Research and Evaluation team are covered by a blanket approach to ethics approved by the UoS ethical committee. These include fully informing participants about the objectives of the study, obtaining explicit consent, participants' awareness of anonymisation, right to withdraw and risk assessment. Additionally, the evaluation team discussed practices to ensure their emotional safety while dealing with difficult issues raised by the interviewees and were aware of their own positionality throughout the interviews.

3. Findings

This section presents quantitative analysis from the questionnaires, along with qualitative findings from the FGs conducted with participants. Taken together, these findings shed light on the transformative power of the *Creativity Unbound* initiative within the challenging context of Downview's prison infrastructure. The qualitative analysis explores several key themes that emerged from the interviews. Placing these in dialogue with existing scholarship on the topic highlights, we propose, the programme's impact in a range of key areas, including personal transformation, community-building, educational engagement, literacy, mental health, breaking barriers, agency, and social change.

Analysis of evaluation questions showed that 100 per cent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more confident in their writing abilities after taking part in the programme. Moreover, as can be seen in Figure 1, it is notable that for the rest of the questions that used a five-point Likert scale (Joshi, A. et al., 2015), the percentage of 'agree' or 'strongly agree' responses was higher than 76 per cent for all the items.

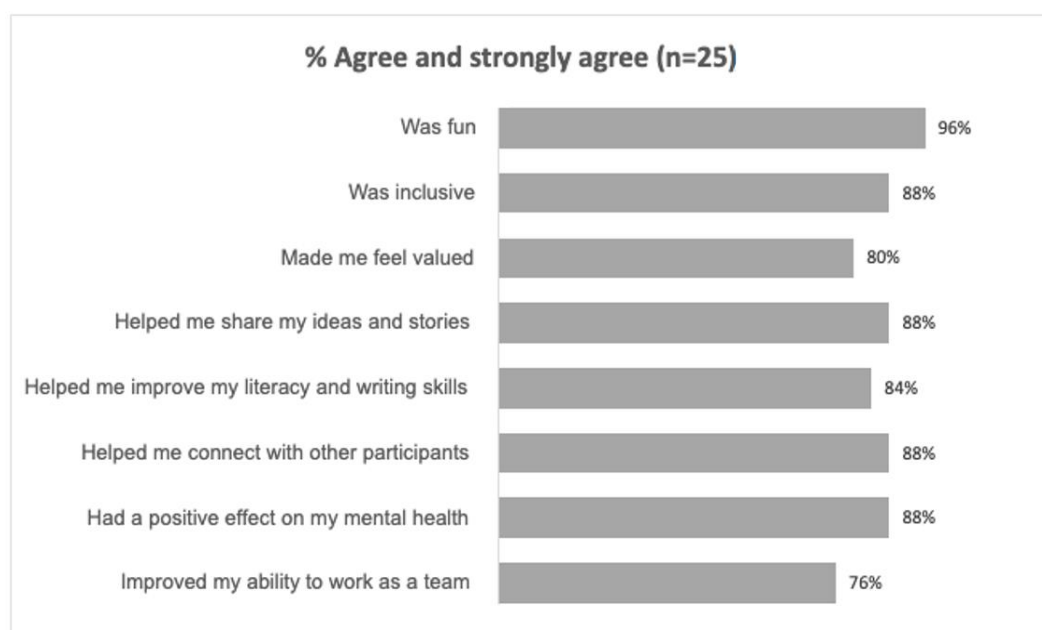


Figure 1. *Creativity Unbound* at HMP Downview: evaluation items and percentage of agreement (n=25)

UoS uses a traffic-light system to determine whether the intermediate outcomes set in a ToC are being met. If more than 75 per cent of the participants respond positively to the questions from the evaluation, it is considered an indication that the programme is meeting the desired outcomes. The positive responses found in the above quantitative data are further supported by the qualitative findings outlined next – which we present thematically.

3.1 Education and literacy

One key recurring theme in our findings was the programme’s impact on participants’ levels of engagement in education, shown particularly in an increased interest in further developing their own literacy skills and supporting others within the prison community to do the same.

It has long been evident that prison population literacy levels are substantially below average —according to Dugdale and Clark (2008), half of the prison population has a reading age below what is expected of an eleven-year-old — posing significant limitations on life chances upon release. Based on these figures, one of *Creativity Unbound*’s key short-term outcomes was the enhancement of prisoners’ existing writing and reading abilities. The programme’s individual and collaborative writing activities had a significant impact on raising the functional literacy rates of participants, as reported by both current and former respondents. Findings demonstrate that participants felt that they had developed their writing skills through their participation in the programme, and also expressed higher self-confidence in their reading and writing abilities. One participant shared:

I have never done any writing before. I always wanted to write a book, so I was able to start without worrying what anyone was going to think about it, which gave me the confidence to do so.

The improvement of participants’ literacy skills—which was also evidenced by 84 per cent of positive responses to the related evaluation question—opened new opportunities for self-expression and personal growth among the prisoners, which for some participants manifested in their concurrent and/or subsequent studies. The *Creativity Unbound* cohorts came from diverse educational backgrounds, with some previously or currently engaged in HE opportunities. Some of those undertaking HE courses at the time of interview shared that participation in the programme helped raise their attainment in their studies:

'I know how to do this' and I think that came through in my essay and yes, I got the highest score so far and I think if I had not done this course, I think even though I would've enjoyed it, I wouldn't had that motivation behind me, that sort of pushing me like 'I can do this, I know what I am talking about'.

The sentiments shared by participants additionally give credence to the philosophy advocated by the Council of Europe (1990) that the outside community should be as fully as possible involved in prisoners' education if meaningful change is to occur, as demonstrated in the next response:

See, express, accept, understand! Very helpful emotionally, people to come from outside, inside and help prisoners – I feel more normal!

Indeed, many participants stressed the importance of the connection between the inside and outside worlds through education. Interviewees shared that bringing creative writing education inside the prison walls had not only motivated them to continue to further develop their own reading and writing skills but also encouraged them to support their fellow inmates in pursuing similar opportunities, as the response below indicates:

. . . inspired me to help other women within the prison – sometimes you go onto the landing and there are some really unhappy ladies that haven't got the confidence to join programmes like this one that could really help them.

It is notable that some *Creativity Unbound* participants have, following the programme, gone on to engage with the Shannon Trust—a charity that helps disadvantaged people develop their reading and writing—supporting fellow prisoners with their literacy in their capacity as “mentors”. Without claiming a direct causal link in the case of *Creativity Unbound*, this continued engagement in educational opportunities in itself points toward the value of education inside prison walls and its potential to promote positive relationships between inmates and improve personal development. The enhancement of prisoners' self-confidence (Cohen, 2009) and of their communication and social skills (McCue, 2010), which, in this case, is signified by a commitment to supporting others' literacy, can indeed be transformative.

3.2 Mental health

Another notable theme that emerged from the qualitative findings was *Creativity Unbound's* positive impact in addressing participants' challenges with their mental health and wellbeing. Although improving mental health was not a key intended outcome (our team are not mental health professionals), during the workshops many participants freely shared their personal experiences in relation to mental (and often physical) health, both in conversation and through their writing. In the FGs, participants expressed that *Creativity Unbound* provided them with a safe and supportive environment to openly express their varying needs and struggles. For instance, one interviewee said: *'I've proper opened up on paper'*. Speaking to the same point, another participant commented:

It was not just about learning how to put words onto a paper in a poem style, it was more than that – it was something much deeper and meaningful that could help people with their confidence, and self-esteem.

These findings are consistent with the high proportion of participants who agreed or strongly agreed in quantitative feedback that the programme had a positive effect on their mental health. The link here between education and improved mental health is not without standing. In a recent paper, the House of Commons, Parliament (2022) emphasised the positive effects education has on inmate behaviour, mental health in isolation, and the ability for prisoners to acquire self-confidence. The overall culture and environment of prisons can benefit from education, it proposes, in many ways; according to Clinks, an association that supports non-profits working in the criminal justice system, education improves inmates'

mental and physical health in a demanding and isolating environment and reduces conflict within the prison by ‘encouraging a sense of collaboration and community’ (Dr. Rod cited in Parliament, 2022).

Significantly, engaging in creative writing was seen by participants as a healthy mechanism for coping with mental health struggles that can mitigate the motivation to self-harm:

Putting things on paper helped me stop self-harming.

In another powerful statement, one participant said:

Personally, it's helped me to stop self-harming 'cause instead of wanting to pick up a blade to cut myself I just pick up my book and write in it.

These findings show the programme’s potential to improve the mental health of participants by offering an alternative to harmful behaviours through creativity and self-expression. Establishing programmes like this could therefore meaningfully contribute to efforts to prevent self-harm among prisoners that could be more beneficial than simply identifying risks and initiating preventive measures in prisons (Hawton et al., 2014).

3.3 Breaking barriers

Participants also highlighted the programme’s ability to break down social barriers within the prison environment, which was further indicated by the 88 per cent of the evaluation respondents who agreed that it helped them connect with their peers. Some interviewees shared that being part of the programme helped them improve their outlook on life in prison, facilitated their communication with others, and made them feel part of a community. This view was echoed by a participant who said:

There were no barriers for anything (cultural, age barriers), it was interactive. I learned loads about how things are now, how things have moved along, how things are still the same. I learned a lot about myself.

These findings resonate with the points put forward by Armstrong and Ludlow (2016), who argue that by connecting prisons to the outside community and bringing the outside into prison communities —the essence of educational delivery that extends beyond the prison walls — can, as an act of wider social responsibility, enhance societal awareness and acceptance of prisoner rehabilitation and accordingly contribute to productive reintegration.

This theme of breaking barriers was also present in how some participants defined the programme as a lifeline enabling them to revert a process of dehumanisation felt upon entering custody:

The thing I tell all the girls that now enter prison, we go through a process of dehumanisation at reception where every sense of yourself is removed and you are put into this environment – sink or swim. When groups come in, for me, the way I say it is like ‘you allow us to peel back some of that grey and see the rainbow still exists’, that’s how important these groups are, to remind us our rainbow is still there and it can come out.

On this point of dehumanisation, O’Grady (2019) has found that prison learners share a thirst for a culture of ‘normality’—to be able to talk and interact with others as they would on the outside. *Creativity Unbound* participants were no different, openly expressing a desire to reclaim their sense of feeling normal: ‘It’s a bit of normality, and a way of connecting with people’. Moreover, we discovered that *Creativity Unbound* participants learned about themselves and others through their writing, giving them the confidence of self-expression and to engage in more self-help groups, both inside and outside prison:

Even when we come from different walks of life, we are all in the same situation, as in being in prison, so it’s like a shared experience, and I think that comes across in a lot of our writing.

Reflecting on their own prison-university partnership, Darke and Aresti (2016) argue that in-prison education delivered by outside parties ‘not only provides an enriching educational experience but transcends social barriers and changes the ways that participants can view themselves and the world around them’ (2016: 31). Overall, *Creativity Unbound* enabled participants to challenge preconceived stereotypes and perceptions of *otherness* and provided a space for cultural transformation, aligning with previous research on the transformative effects of educational initiatives in prisons (O’Grady, 2019).

3.4 Agency and social change

It has been argued that individuals who believe they can change and take control of their lives are more likely to disengage from criminal activities (Schmidt et al., 2021). By enhancing participants’ self-confidence and belief in their capabilities, the *Creativity Unbound* programme was found to have contributed to participants’ sense of agency. This was highlighted by one participant: *‘Creativity is expression, expression is individuality, individuality is personal power’*.

The community (both in actuality and in essence) that was formed across the programme was found to be a significant contributing factor in enhancing participants’ sense of agency. Agency development through the formation of bonds between prison learners has been previously observed by O’Grady (2019). The support and inspiration participants provided one another through *Creativity Unbound* fostered a sense of belonging and empowerment, with peer support during the staff-led sessions seen to heighten participants’ belief in their own capabilities, further promoting agency. To illustrate, one interviewee shared:

Especially if you are a VP (vulnerable person) in here and quite a few VPs have been on the course, and it gives you that contact that you can make with someone that you would never really look at usually . . . and it does break walls and barriers within the course . . . I still say hi to people that I would have run a mile from before this course. But they heard me, and I’ve heard them and that is huge.

It is important to note here that the positive development of agency within the context of the *Creativity Unbound* programme is a multifaceted process. It encompasses personal growth, creative expression, exposure to diverse perspectives, and the supportive community that forms among participants through their engagement in the programme. The development of agency can therefore be considered an essential outcome in its own right, as a significant contributor to reducing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration into society (Vaughan, 2007).

Reflecting the importance of social bonds in the rehabilitation and reintegration process (Wolff and Draine, 2004), participants also shared their feelings of a transformation from a group of individuals into a supportive community. As mentioned previously, the programme’s impact on social change can be found not just in participants helping one another but also in the encouragement of personal responsibility. By taking mentor roles and supporting each other’s growth, participants embraced a sense of responsibility for both their own development and the wellbeing of their peers.

To summarise, *Creativity Unbound*’s capacity to promote social change is embodied by a profound shift in the lives of participants and the prison community. As Wolff and Draine (2004) have noted, higher levels of social support in prisons have been linked to wide-reaching benefits, including improved mental health outcomes, lower recidivism rates, and better in-prison adjustment. The collective transformation, extended support networks, and personal responsibility facilitated by *Creativity Unbound* have worked in synergy to reduce stigma, promote reintegration, and inspire others. By fostering personal and wider social growth, this programme clearly has the potential to play a pivotal role in reducing recidivism and advancing the overarching goals of prisoner rehabilitation and community reintegration.

4. Discussion

While we hope the findings presented demonstrate *Creativity Unbound* to be a valuable and impactful intervention, we do wish to outline below some of this study's limitations in the interest of laying the groundwork for similar interventions and research in the future. As with the findings, we discuss these recognised limitations thematically.

4.1 Delivery

Delivering outreach activity in prison is, in many ways, more challenging than delivering in schools or colleges. While this may seem a self-evidential (or indeed obvious) statement to make, it is worth unpicking here some of the limitations our practitioners observed during the programme to shed light on how these issues may be mitigated in the planning and delivery of future interventions.

One difficulty we faced in working with a prison community was the unpredictable nature of prison life. Contrary to the relative consistency of involvement that can be achieved when working with groups of school or college students and the structures within which they operate, sustained programmes inside a prison cannot always—for a variety of reasons—rely on continual engagement from participants. The progressive nature of sustained activity invariably necessitates consistent (and ideally complete) participant engagement in the regular touchpoints that comprise the programme; in a prison, absence is a common feature due to the nature of the environment. To navigate this issue, we built into *Creativity Unbound's* structure a mutually agreed fluidity (on the part of the deliverers and the participants) that allowed participants to shape the content covered in each week and engage in the manner that suited them. The aim was to foster an environment in which participants felt part of a community, could progress at their own pace, and exercise a level of agency they may lack elsewhere during their time in prison, whether they were able to attend some or all of the weekly sessions.

Another limitation of prison outreach is the heightened level of confidentiality that—unlike with outreach work delivered in collaboration with school staff and parents/carers—poses greater restrictions on collecting information on participants to aid in the assessment of any additional needs to be considered during delivery. Nevertheless, our practitioners found that the skillset required for delivering effective differential learning with school groups is certainly transferable to the prison context. For *Creativity Unbound*, we implemented the same flexible and tailored approach we adopt in our work with students, which was well received by the participants. On this point, from the third run of the programme onwards, we began working closely with Downview's library and education staff to collect anonymised information on the participants' additional needs and education/work history—which, moving forward, would play an increasingly important role in programme design and delivery, to more effectively cater to participants' learning needs.

4.2 Self-reporting

Dependence on participant self-reporting should be considered when evaluating any qualitative results. Although useful in revealing participants' personal experiences and perspectives at the time of collection, data obtained through interviews and participant statements is open to subjectivity and self-report bias (Rosenman et al., 2011). Incarcerated individuals, like anyone, may present themselves and their experiences in ways they deem socially desirable or expected by the researchers (Brenner and Delamater, 2016). This may result in, for instance, an under-representation of any difficulties or unpleasant encounters and an overemphasis on favourable results.

When discussing a programme like *Creativity Unbound*, where members have formed friendships and a sense of community, one must be diligent in considering the possibility of a greater desire among respondents to cast the programme in a positive light. Nevertheless, the pleasant experiences shared by many interviewees do indicate that the programme has had a significant positive impact on the participants, with the self-

reported outcomes — such as improved mental health and reduced self-harming behaviours — aligning with the body of research that demonstrates the advantages of creative programmes in prison environments.

While self-reporting does serve as a valuable source of data, it is essential to acknowledge its inherent limitations in providing a balanced interpretation of findings and ascertaining deep understanding of any given programme's impact. Further research on *Creativity Unbound's* impact could benefit from the application of a wider variety of research methodologies to evaluate the efficacy of rehabilitation programmes in criminal justice environments.

4.3 Short-term outcomes

Another underlying limitation in this study is its short-term focus, which primarily captured the immediate impact of the *Creativity Unbound* programme on its participants. Literature in the field of prisoner education and rehabilitation highlights the significance of examining *both* short-term and long-term outcomes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the efficacy of such programmes within and beyond the prison environment.

To address the limitation of a short-term focus in such studies, it is essential to also consider the long-term impact of the programme, particularly in the context of prisoners' reintegration into society. Studies on recidivism and rehabilitation, such as the work of Davis et al. (2013), emphasise the need for a more extended research perspective to assess a programme's contribution to reducing reoffending rates and promoting successful community reintegration. The transformative potential of a programme like *Creativity Unbound* may extend far beyond the immediate prison environment and have lasting effects on participants' lives; however, due to necessary safeguarding and confidentiality matters, it has not been possible to track participants after release. The potential for long-term changes — particularly in reducing recidivism, supporting successful post-release reintegration, and entry into HE — and the logistics of data collection to measure this impact, are crucial areas for future investigation.

4.4 Generalisability

Finally, the possible limitation of generalisability should be considered when assessing this study's findings. Participants in *Creativity Unbound* may not, merely through their enrolment on the programme, be entirely representative of the overall prison population, but rather of a particular subset of incarcerated people at a particular time.

The issue of generalisability is frequently encountered in research within this sphere. For instance, Gaes et al. (1999) call attention to the inherent diversity of prison populations, which manifests variances in individual needs, criminal histories, and demographic characteristics. These individual variations can impact the efficacy of rehabilitative programmes in reaching their intended outcomes — something that is certainly applicable to creative initiatives such as *Creativity Unbound*. We must therefore be mindful of the possibility that, although the study's positive results are encouraging, repeat implementation of the programme may not yield similar results for all prisoners across all prison environments.

Indeed, to address the limitation of generalisability, it is imperative to acknowledge that the efficacy of the programme in question may differ among different criminal justice settings. Future research could investigate the many factors that may affect similar programmes' success, as well as whether the positive outcomes of the programme can be replicated in other facilities. This would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how educational programmes like *Creativity Unbound* can be tailored to specific prison populations.

5. Conclusion

In examining the transformative power of the *Creativity Unbound* programme within the prison system, this study has illuminated the significant positive impact it has had on participants' educational engagement, literacy, mental health, and personal empowerment. While it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations, including a reliance on self-reporting, its short-term focus, and the challenge of generalisability, we propose that this does not diminish the programme's achievements. The findings presented underscore the need for continued research efforts, collaboratively produced programmes, and evaluation embedded in design. As the participants of *Creativity Unbound* have shown, the potential for change and rehabilitation within the prison environment is vast, and creative education serves as a powerful catalyst for personal growth and community-building. This programme exemplifies the possibilities for fostering meaningful transformation in the lives of incarcerated individuals, reducing recidivism, and advancing the goals of prisoner rehabilitation and community reintegration.

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Hybrid qualifications in the United Kingdom and continental Europe – a step towards more permeability in education systems?

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the question of permeability between vocational education and training and higher education. More specifically, it is analysed whether hybrid qualifications in different education systems in Europe can play a vital role in facilitating a bridge between vocational and higher education. To this end hybrid qualifications in England, Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland are investigated whether they allow a transfer from the vocational system to hybrid qualifications understood as hybrid system, and then to the academic system. Specifically, I focus on the pathways from vocational qualifications to hybrid programmes, the possible educational progression within a hybrid education subsystem and the transition from hybrid qualifications to academic programmes. As a tendency, it can be stated that hybrid qualifications do not lead to a more permeable system but rather reinforce existing borders between vocational and higher education. Depending on the case, either the transfer to the hybrid system is blocked or the transfer to the academic system.

Key words: permeability; comparison; hybrid qualification; vocational education and training; higher education.

1. Introduction ¹

This article examines the question of the extent to which hybrid qualifications contribute to overcoming barriers between vocational and academic qualifications. This will be answered by drawing on four case studies from different countries (Frommberger, 2019b), which were produced during a research project on permeability of vocational into academic education.

Hybrid qualifications are understood to be types of qualifications in which education subsystems are combined (Graf, 2013). On the one side is vocational education and training (VET), on the other, either general or academic education. In the former case, it is usually a matter of linking VET with higher education entrance qualifications (contributions in Deissinger, 2013), in the latter, it is a matter of linking VET with academic qualifications (Frommberger 2019b: 39–51). However, two separate qualifications on the same level, for example, one in general education and one in VET (Edeling and Pilz, 2017), would not account as a hybrid qualification, according to the used definition.

Hybrid qualifications are about a complementary and connecting understanding of vocational and academic education. The respective other subsystem contributes independently and originally to the hybrid qualification. However, hybrid qualifications can also be understood as a separate education subsystem,

which lies between VET and general/academic education (Figure 1). Such a system would offer the possibility of building up an independent qualification profile. For those with prior VET qualifications in particular, a hybrid education system would also open up, or at least smoothen transitions from vocational to academic education – whether this is the case is the central question of this chapter.

Here, I focus on the combination of VET with academic qualifications and, accordingly, on tertiary education. This applies exclusively to those qualifications that are classified at level 5 and higher in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and level 4 and higher for the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). Within this group, a distinction can be made with regard to the cooperation partner: cooperations between higher education institutions and higher VET schools are just as possible as between higher education institutions and practice partners (Frommberger & Schmees, 2022). For the case selection, two examples of each of the categories mentioned were used from different countries: Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma from Scotland and the Associate Degree in the Netherlands as examples for cooperation of (higher) VET schools and universities and the Higher Apprenticeship in England and the Dual Study Programme in Germany as examples for cooperation of companies and universities. It should be pointed out that, although hybrid qualifications are examined in this article with particular regard to their permeability, other aspects, such as didactical features or skills development, remain underexposed.

The chapter is structured in five sections. First, the theoretical premises are presented (section 2), where it is shown how the question of the competitive relationship between vocational and academic qualifications can be operationalised with the question of the permeability of vocational qualifications into academic education (section 2.1). This is followed by a neo-institutionalist perspective that clears the way for reform ruptures by assuming that reforms in education systems satisfy not only a functional but also an institutional need (section 2.2). Afterwards, the methodological approach is described briefly (section 3), four examples are presented as secondary analyses of case studies on permeability in different education systems (section 4): Scotland (Pilz, 2019), the Netherlands (Busse, 2019), England (Schmees *et al.*, 2019a) and Germany (Frommberger, 2019a). The results of the four cases are summarised and related to the theoretical explanations at the end (section 5).

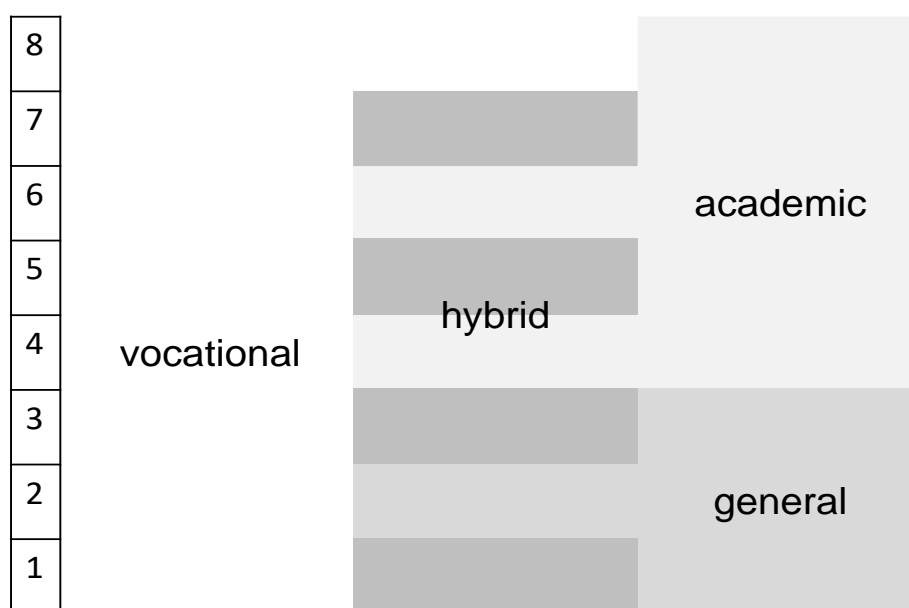


Figure 1: Representation of hybrid qualifications as a separate education subsystem along the levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF); Source: based on Schmees (2022)

2. Theoretical approach

In this chapter, two theoretical concepts and their counterparts are introduced – permeability/non-permeability and institutionalism/functionality – to prepare two arguments. Firstly, this chapter will show that despite the focus on permeability, in practise, non-permeability is performed. In other words, vocational qualifications are, by and large, not recognised in the academic sphere. Secondly, I argue that the development of hybrid qualifications in different countries fulfil not only a functional but also an institutionalist aim. This means that educational reforms also respond to public expectations, the satisfaction of which must be guaranteed first and foremost, regardless of the actual functionality of the respective reform. Therefore, reform talk and contradicting actions go hand in hand.

2.1 Permeability and non-permeability

With regard to Germany, internationally known for its high reputation of VET, the gap between VET and general and academic education has once again become quite clear in the context of the development of the German Qualifications Framework (DQR). During the implementation, organisations representing general education opposed the proposal to place the higher education entrance qualification at the same level as three-year apprenticeship qualifications (Eckelt 2016: 221–222). While both qualifications were eventually placed at DQF level 4, the formula ‘equivalent, not equal’ (Eckelt, 2016: 299–328) is used in the documentation, explaining why transitions from one level to the next level are usually prohibited, if moving from VET to general/higher education. When transferring from level 5 (VET) to level 6 (higher education), a state-specific access system applies, which sometimes requires several years of practice, a restriction of the type of higher education or the field of study. On the other hand, transfer with a general higher education entrance qualification (level 4) to higher education is possible without further ado, even though this means skipping level 5 in the DQR.

In this sense, there is a gap between the educational subsystems. Hybrid formats, as explained in the previous section, are designed to cross gaps, which is why it is worth taking a closer look at these formats in particular to see whether this also entails a dismantling of barriers leading to more permeable systems. From a structural perspective, three potential barriers can be named that need to be examined in relation to hybrid qualifications. Firstly, the access requirements to the hybrid qualification are decisive (Bernhard, 2017: 44–45). The criterion ‘access’ accordingly records whether the hybrid qualifications offer possibilities for vocationally qualified persons. Hybrid qualifications in particular would be suitable for a corresponding seamless transition because vocational competences would also be highly relevant in the subsequent qualification level. Secondly, it is decisive which qualification level can be achieved with hybrid qualifications. As a rule, it can be observed that general and academic qualifications occupy more and higher qualification levels than vocational qualifications. In Germany, and also in many other European countries, the highest qualification level is usually reserved for the doctorate alone. Hybrid qualifications could offer an opportunity here for qualifications in the system itself up to a ‘dual doctorate’ level. This implicitly raises the demand that hybrid qualifications would have to cover as wide a qualification space as possible in order to be able to take an egalitarian position to academic education. Thirdly, it would be pivotal to establish which further qualification options are possible in the academic subsystem following hybrid qualifications. In this context, the question of which academic connections a hybrid qualification opens up is particularly relevant. The three categories ‘access’, ‘advancement’ and ‘transition’ form the basis for the analysis underlying this article (Figure 1).

Beyond the three criteria mentioned here, others are conceivable and useful. Bernhard, for example, also defines the recognition of prior learning, organisational links or the heterogeneity of learners, as well as the recognition of qualifications in other social subsystems as criteria of permeability (Bernhard, 2017: 39–68).

However, due to the focus on hybrid qualifications, these play a subordinate role in some cases and would, in any case, go beyond the scope of this article.

2.2 Institutional vs functional aims

Educational reforms can be viewed from both functionalist and institutionalist perspectives. The former perspective assumes in principle that reforms are intended to improve prevailing practice. From an institutionalist perspective, on the other hand, reforms are viewed with scepticism insofar as they are not seen primarily as a reaction to a practical problem – of whatever kind. Instead, reforms are seen as a reaction to institutions, i.e. structures of expectations (Krücken, 2005:5) – regardless of the actual impact of the reforms. An example in the field of education would be the implementation of the Bologna reforms in teacher education, which ultimately led, contrary to the original pronouncements, to longer study times (Schmees, 2020) and recognition hurdles even within federal states (Feierabend and Schmees, 2020).

Accordingly, from an institutionalist perspective, reforms can be classified first and foremost as political self-references that serve to counter the pressure of expectations from outside. The solution to the problem is secondary, quite the opposite in fact: these reforms can be exposed by their dysfunctionality (Jakobi, 2009:174). Thus, it would have to be examined, in particular, to what extent the old barriers are maintained within these new, hybrid structures. In the case of maintained barriers, one could speak of a loose coupling where formal structures are adapted suggesting permeability, and the everyday practice remains unchanged and therefore barriers persist (Weick, 1976). The persisting barriers would, in this sense, not be a side effect of the reform, but a calculated way out to reconcile societal expectation structures on the one hand and functional logics in the education system on the other hand – for example, when politically, the opening of universities is propagated, but the ‘closure’ or the focus on ‘excellence’ is rewarded (Pilz, 2019). This theoretical positioning has the consequence that the reforms for permeability in the education system are viewed with scepticism in principle. Without denying their possible functioning, it is assumed that rather a decoupling of structures that suggest permeability and practices that prevent permeability can be observed.

3. Methodological notes

The analysis is based on a research project (Frommberger, 2019b) in which case studies by different authors were prepared on individual aspects of permeability in a total of eight education systems. Each of these case studies focuses on one or more educational provisions that are intended to strengthen permeability between the education subsystems. The individual case studies were selected by the project partners of the Bertelsmann Foundation and Osnabrück University, Germany, before the start of the project. In total, the following case studies were prepared: The Australian Qualifications Framework (Schmees *et al.*, 2019b); Dual Study Programmes in Germany (Frommberger, 2019a); Higher Apprenticeships in England (Schmees *et al.*, 2019a); Cooperative Education in Canada (Deissinger, 2019); Transition options from VET to higher education in the Netherlands (Busse, 2019); The VET college in Austria (Frommberger and Schmees, 2019b); Modularisation, qualification framework and credit point system in Scotland (Pilz, 2019) as well as Vocational baccalaureate and higher VET in Switzerland (Frommberger and Schmees, 2019a).

The case studies are characterised by heterogeneous methodological approaches. As a rule, however, they are based on the evaluation of literature with regard to the respective research question. This method was sometimes supplemented by interviews (Pilz, 2019) or the second evaluation of an existing evaluation report (Busse, 2019). The selection of case studies for this chapter differs from the selection made above in two ways. Firstly, only hybrid qualifications, as defined in the context of this chapter, were used (cf. section 2). In addition, a geographical limitation to Europe was made. Finally, four case studies were selected and prepared for this chapter with their own focus. In essence, the following meta-analysis is based on the results of the authors of the respective case studies on Scotland (Pilz, 2019), the Netherlands (Busse, 2019),

England (Schmees *et al.*, 2019a) and Germany (Frommberger, 2019a). For the meta-analysis, the results of the case studies were taken as a basis and re-evaluated in relation to the subject of hybrid qualifications negotiated here, and the conceptualisation of permeability in the form of access, advancement and transitions introduced in section 3.1.

4. Meta-analysis of the case studies

In the following, four hybrid qualifications are presented as examples ²: the Higher National Certificate and the Higher National Diploma in Scotland (section 5.1), the Associate Degree in the Netherlands (section 5.2), the Higher Apprenticeship in England (section 5.3) and the Dual Study Programme in Germany (section 5.4). The first step is a brief classification in the respective education system in order to be able to locate the hybrid qualifications. Subsequently, the hybrid qualifications, including their objectives in the respective education system, are presented, before finally challenges and problems with regard to permeability under the three criteria described above ('access', 'advancement' and 'transition') are discussed. The case studies are all based on a meta-analysis of the country studies presented in endnote 3, which have been strongly condensed and sometimes supplemented.

4.1 Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma in Scotland

The Scottish education system has a relatively clear structure ³. After seven years in primary education, pupils transfer to the General Secondary School, where they complete lower secondary education. Afterwards, there is the option of either completing upper secondary education at the General Secondary School or transferring to a further education college. In both cases, the higher education entrance qualification can be obtained. However, these colleges not only serve to complete upper secondary education, but also offer the possibility of obtaining further tertiary qualifications. At the universities, which can (unofficially) be subdivided into post-1992 universities and traditional universities, the tertiary qualifications 'bachelor', 'master' and 'PhD' are offered after transfer from upper secondary level. In addition, there is a differentiated system of vocational qualifications, the Scottish Vocational Qualifications, which are offered at five levels and can be achieved within the framework of various educational measures (Pilz, 2010: 40).

In addition, the Higher Education Colleges offer the one-year Higher National Certificate and the two-year Higher National Diploma below the bachelor's degree. These are hybrid qualifications insofar as both qualifications enable transfer to a higher education institution, where the qualifications can be credited to a bachelor's degree programme. The corresponding bachelor's degree would thus be classified as a cooperative qualification by higher education institutions and higher vocational schools, whereby the cooperation is not parallel but sequential. Both qualifications have a vocational focus. The qualifications thus fulfil both a bridging function and a function of vocational qualification in the tertiary sector.

Access to the Higher National Certificate and the Higher National Diploma is possible in principle via a higher education entrance qualification or via part-time completion of modules within the framework of *National Courses and Units* ⁴. This hybrid pathway is offered up to and including the bachelor's degree. However, transfer to traditional universities is rather difficult. On the one hand, traditional universities should strive for excellence in order to attract third-party funding and compete for the world's brightest minds. On the other hand, they are supposed to be 'open to all' and participate accordingly in programmes to widening participation. Therefore, traditional universities are supposed to be selective and open at the same time. These contradictory demands are met by the universities insofar as they formally adapt those programmes, but informally create barriers for professionally qualified applicants when it comes to concrete access decisions, which are up to the universities themselves (Pilz 2019, case 1). Thus, renowned universities

generally remain closed to those with vocational qualifications – both in the context of offering hybrid qualifications and in the transition from a hybrid qualification to a bachelor's degree.

4.2 Associate Degrees in the Netherlands

After a total of seven years of primary school, Dutch pupils have three options⁵. They can choose the pre-scientific course of education lasting a total of six years. This path leads directly to higher education studies at a university. The alternative to this is the higher general education pathway, which lasts five years and opens the way to vocational higher education (HBO). An alternative pathway to HBO is provided by vocational secondary education (MBO). MBO can be chosen at four different levels, which can, however, also be completed consecutively. Completion of the previous level equates to access to the following level. Completion of the highest level of MBO (level 4) also paves the way to HBO.

To facilitate the transition from MBO to HBO, the Associate Degree was implemented according to the US-American model. On the one hand, the qualification is to be regarded as a fully-fledged higher education qualification below the bachelor's degree and, on the other hand, as a preliminary or intermediate stage on the way to an HBO bachelor's degree. The Associate Degree is hybrid, in that it can be offered jointly in a cooperation between MBO and HBO. In the classification introduced here, it would thus be a cooperative offer of higher education institutions and higher VET schools. However, the final examination always takes place at the HBO, as does a subsequent bachelor's degree programme.

Access to the *associate degree* is only possible via MBO. Following the Associate Degree, however, no further hybrid qualification is possible. The transition to the bachelor's degree at HBOs is unproblematic. The Associate Degree can be fully credited. The following qualifications are exclusively anchored at HBOs or traditional universities. However, transfer to a traditional university requires a first HBO qualification in combination with one bridge year (Busse *et al.*, 2016; 33).

4.3 Higher Apprenticeships in England

The English education system is divided into six years of primary school followed by secondary school, where lower secondary education is completed⁶. Upper secondary education, also known as the Sixth Form, can be completed either at the secondary school, at a sixth form or a further education college. The latter offers both upper secondary and further qualifications at the tertiary level. England also has a highly stratified university system, ranging between post-1992 universities and traditional universities. After completing lower secondary school, students also have the opportunity to switch to the apprenticeship system. In this system, vocational training takes place in the company, supplemented with school-based elements and classified in a hierarchical system – from Intermediate to Advanced to Higher Apprenticeship.

The Higher Apprenticeship is offered by companies in cooperation with education providers, usually further education colleges or former Polytechnics, but private education providers can also act as cooperation partners. They enable a tertiary qualification through VET. The application is usually made to a company, and at the same time a contract is concluded with a participating educational institution. Apprenticeship offers can be viewed on a central database⁷. The Higher Apprenticeship can thus be classified as a cooperative qualification of higher education institutions and practice partners. Attendance at the higher education institutions is free of charge, as the tuition fees are paid by the practice partner. Higher Apprenticeships are possible at the level below the bachelor's qualification, at the bachelor's level and at the master's level. The latter two levels can also be completed, if offered, with a Degree Apprenticeship, with the completion of which one also acquires a full university qualification. The qualification thus makes it possible to increase the number of academically qualified people via the

vocational pathway. From an individual perspective, it is attractive to obtain such a qualification without having to go through the traditional university route.

A regular higher education entrance qualification or the completion of an Intermediate Apprenticeship is necessary for admission to the Higher Apprenticeship. The Higher Apprenticeship is currently offered up to and including the master's level. Plans to establish apprenticeships at doctoral level have recently been abandoned (Camden, 2020). However, the majority of actual offerings are located at the level below the bachelor's degree. By analysing different offers, it becomes also clear that Higher Apprenticeships are usually located at post-92 universities. Only few traditional universities offer Higher Apprenticeships. And the number of prestigious traditional universities participating in the system is marginal. Moreover, in the Higher Apprenticeship system, unlike the Degree Apprenticeship system, there is no possibility of obtaining a university degree qualification, but only a qualification at 'university level' is awarded. Academic connections are then not possible.

4.4 Dual Study Programmes in Germany

In the German education system, which has a federal structure, and about which therefore only limited general statements can be made, the transition to a multi-tier school system at secondary level takes place after four years of primary school⁸. A distinction can be made between three types of education which are offered at different types of schools, depending on the federal state. The *Hauptschule* ends after nine years and, with the basic qualification, offers the opportunity to acquire further qualifications or to start training in the dual apprenticeship system. The middle school (*Realschule*) ends with the intermediate school leaving certificate and, in addition to the basic qualification, opens up the possibility of changing to full-time school-based VET, for example, in the health sector. The *Gymnasium* as a third option leads to the general higher education entrance qualification which opens up access to all higher education institutions in Germany. In addition, there are different options for acquiring a higher education entrance qualification which can be (1) subject-specific, (2) for universities of applied sciences only, or (3) subject-specific for universities of applied sciences only. These options are regulated on a state specific basis. Bachelor's and master's programmes are offered at universities and universities of applied sciences, while doctorates are only offered at universities. In addition to the courses offered by the universities, the tertiary education sector also includes further VET qualifications, some of which are also at master's level. A doctoral equivalent in VET (EQD/DQR level 8) is not offered in Germany.

The Dual Study Programme is a cooperative qualification between higher education institutions and practice partners. In close cooperation with a company, higher education institutions, usually universities of applied sciences or dual universities, offer study programmes that combine practical experience and academic qualifications. This prolongs the dual apprenticeship system into the tertiary education sector. Admission to the study programme takes place via the company. After a successful application, students are enrolled at the university cooperating with the company.

In contrast to a regular course of study at a university of applied sciences, no facilitated access conditions were created here (Branscherus, Bernhard and Graf, 2016: 38–39). Regarding the range of offers, it can be stated that most offers are anchored at the bachelor's level, and there are also some dual master's programmes, however, a dual doctorate is not possible. So far, there are no separate figures on transitions to universities for doctoral studies. However, a survey conducted regularly by the German Rectors' Conference on doctorates with a qualification from universities of applied sciences currently comes to a figure of 2.5 per cent. In addition, only slightly more than half of the university professors surveyed consider their colleagues from the universities of applied sciences to be suitable for participating in doctoral procedures (HRK, 2019:5). Both may indicate institutional discrimination.

5. The perpetuation of the pillars through hybrid qualifications

As a result, it can be stated that the theoretical framework in combination with the case selection can provide an initial answer to the question posed at the outset as to whether hybrid qualifications contribute to overcoming the competition between vocational and academic education. In the horizontal comparison of the four case studies, this must tend to be answered in the negative. In only one of the four cases examined access routes for vocationally qualified persons into higher education could be expanded. Only for the Higher Apprenticeship it can be claimed that an additional access option was created. Advancement within the ‘hybrid system’ ends at the latest with the master’s degree, in two of the four types examined already with the bachelor’s degree or the associate degree. When transferring to the academic system, it can be observed across all cases that traditional higher education institutions create barriers against graduates of hybrid qualifications in the education systems studied. These observations are summarised in Table 1.

	Scotland	Netherlands	England	Germany
Access with vocational qualification	Yes, on completion of suitable modules	Yes, similar compared to directly accessing HBO	Yes, via the <i>Intermediate Apprenticeship</i>	Not possible
Advancements within the hybrid system	Hybrid qualification up to bachelor’s degree	Hybrid qualification up to the <i>associate degree</i>	Hybrid qualification up to master’s degree	Hybrid qualification usually up to bachelor’s degree, rarely also master’s
Transitions from hybrid to (traditional) higher education	Entry into traditional universities is more difficult	Entry to traditional universities only with one bridge year	Only a degree-level qualification, therefore no transitions possible	Institutional barriers to transitioning to a doctorate very likely

Table 1. Permeability in international comparison

Finally, it must be noted that institutional barriers, operationalised via the absence of permeability, can also be observed in hybrid qualifications. By analysing access, advancement and transfer, it was possible in all four cases to identify breaches in reform insofar as no permeability could be attested.

It is precisely here that the neo-institutionalist view becomes relevant, with which precisely these reform breaks are focussed. Accordingly, the hybrid qualifications offer the possibility to demonstrate reform activity in the field of permeability without having to question the system as a whole. The reforms are integrated or fitted into the existing logic and thus counteract a (at least predetermined) reason for their introduction. At the same time, the reform activity can always be brought into the field when, for example, the problem of permeability is admonished in the discourse. The mere existence of this reform activity thus, at least, offers the potential to prevent far-reaching demands. Under the guise of reforms to increase ‘permeability’, ‘non-permeability’ is then *de facto* created.

Notes

¹ The chapter is based on an earlier German paper I published before (Schmees, 2022). For this publication, I translated the paper from German to English, adapted it to a readership outside Germany and updated the references.

² The case studies presented here are part of the project ‘Pathways between vocational and higher education. An international comparison’. The cases on Scotland, the Netherlands, England and Germany were developed by the authors Pilz (2019), Busse (2019), Schmees *et al.* (2019a) and Frommberger (2019a). These case studies form the basis of the meta-analysis presented in this article.

³ The results presented here are a condensed and sometimes expanded representation from Pilz (2019).

⁴ See https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/Design_of_National_Courses_and_Units.pdf (as of 08.05.2024).

⁵ The results presented here are a condensed and sometimes expanded representation from Busse (2019).

⁶ The results presented here are a condensed and sometimes expanded representation from Schmees *et al.* (2019a).

⁷ see <https://www.findapprenticeship.service.gov.uk/apprenticeshipsearch> (as of 08.05.2024)

⁸ The results presented here are a condensed and sometimes expanded representation from Frommberger (2019a).

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