

Redefining Co-Creation to Transform and Empower Higher Education Communities

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Abstract

Co-creation in higher education (HE) has a focus on the student-lecturer partnership and promotes student engagement in the classroom. It represents a different way of working that disrupts traditional staff-student relationships. However, relationship-building requires a change in attitudes in order to promote trust and cooperation, not only between lecturers and students but among other stakeholders in the community of practice. Using thematic analysis, this paper presents a triangular perspective on the experience of co-creation, explored through narrative collective autoethnography, drawing insights from the learning community of practice that was engaged to co-create a product of digital educational resources that mattered to the participants and their HE context.

Keywords: co-creation, higher education, inclusivity, community of practice

1 Introduction: conceptualisation of the co-creation learning hubs

Co-creation in higher education (HE) has mostly focused on student-lecturer partnership (Bovill, 2020) and has been adopted by Advance HE (Healy and Healy, 2019) as a means of promoting student engagement. Bovill (2020), in this sense, recommends approaching co-creation as a spectrum through which both staff and students can build their confidence in different ways of working that disrupt traditional staff/student relationships, asking both students and staff to occupy new roles in and adapt to a learning process that may feel unfamiliar. While Bovill (ibid.) critiques selective partnership models – such as student representative boards, moving the level of participation from informing and consulting towards involving and collaborating (International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)) – co-creation in this sense is still directed at involving students. Our model goes beyond partnership with students (Thomas et al., 2017) to empowering the whole community.

From our perspective, co-creation is not an intervention to improve student engagement, but rather a whole-community approach that respects the lived experience of professional and academic staff and promotes mutual understanding of needs and realities between a variety of stakeholders in HE context (Lessner Listiakova et al., 2024). It drives community learning and wellbeing through trust, respect and relationality. It is part of lived and embodied critical

pedagogies (Freire, 1996), defined as “the relationships between direct bodily knowing and scientific knowledge about the body” (Johnson, 1995 in Johnson 2007, p.55), encouraging stakeholders to develop critical stances (Blignaut and Koopman, 2020) and pedagogies of care (Noddings, 2013), acknowledging mutual responsibility for members of the university community. It also involves overcoming the binaries of student-lecturer relationships by broadening the conversations and collaborations to a variety of actors involved in its processes and everyday functioning. This conceptualisation of collaboration and co-creation chimes with Fitzpatrick’s (2021) ideas of generosity as a value and practice that can transform HE institutions by moving away from competitive academic judgement to collaborative sharing and creating supportive communities. Relationship-building requires a change in attitudes to promote trust and cooperation (hooks, 1994), not only between lecturers and students but among other stakeholders. Similarly, McIntosh and May (2025) emphasised a common purpose and shared ownership as conditions for successful co-creation. People care about a purpose that matters to them and, as a result, they matter to and care about each other: the purpose builds relationships and those caring relationships co-create in response. This echoes Gravett, Taylor and Fairchild’s (2024) pedagogies of mattering, specifically considering offering opportunities that serve students’ own understanding of belonging and as a result are more inclusive. Co-creation, we believe, extends pedagogies of mattering beyond lecturers’ work with students to the lives and functioning of the university as a community of practice.

Such participation extends beyond project methodology and delivery to policy design and enactment. Co-creation represents transparent collaboration grounded in the principles of the IAP2, aimed at fostering innovation in policymaking by empowering participants to have a central role. It extends beyond traditional stakeholder consultation, offering a strategic mechanism for generating policies that enhance institutional effectiveness (Nelson et al., 2009; Gouillart and Hallett, 2015; Atenas et al., 2020). Building on Jamil and Howard-Matthews’ (2025) summary definition of co-creation that integrates co-design and co-production, our conceptualisation similarly acknowledges the construction of common values. We expand on McIntosh and May’s (2025) ‘3C Model of Co-creation’, bringing further into play the community, collaboration and cohesion elements of co-creation and involving all stakeholders. ‘Belonging’ is still seen as an outcome, a condition and a mechanism for engagement, for both students and staff. Our intention is not an intervention to involve students in the community, but the establishment of a community to foster a sense of belonging and mattering for all.

This paper presents the evolution of a project on digital resources and blended pedagogies that became a meaningful and intellectually engaging experience within a learning community of practice. What began as an initiative to support wider university learning ultimately enhanced the participants’ own professional and personal development. Through a shared commitment to investigating how to increase student engagement with skills development, the project team discovered the transformative potential of collaborative problem-solving. In doing so, participants grew as leaders, researchers, presenters, educators and individuals.

‘Co-Creating Learning Hubs’ was developed at the University of Suffolk, United Kingdom. The project focused on the co-design and co-production of interactive online resources aimed at supporting the development of academic, transferable and employability skills. Its primary

objective was to identify the pedagogical principles underpinning effective blended learning practices capable of engaging diverse learners and enabling educators to implement sustainable ways to develop skills.

The learning hubs were developed to respond to individual learning needs in skills acquisition and enhancement. This focus was of particular significance for the University of Suffolk, a post-1992 institution committed to widening participation. The university's student population includes a substantial proportion of mature, first-generation and disabled students, as well as an increasingly international cohort with diverse educational backgrounds and experiences. Gravett et al. (2024) advocate flexible connections with students in order to achieve more equal access to the physical and digital tools used in HE. The learning hubs community offered security, in order to encourage – within an empathetic atmosphere of shared vulnerability – open and honest exploration of sensitive topics, such as whose concepts of belonging are prioritised (Ajjawi, Gravett and O'Shea, 2023). Co-creators acknowledged how engagement in HE is driven by utilitarian, market-driven forces and not always by motivation for personal or professional growth. Moreover, the hubs, expanding the meaning of co-creation beyond individual interests, fostered a sense of belonging and mattering larger than the institution and the immediate community of co-creators. It was a sense of belonging strong enough for the co-creators to believe in the power of learning and excellent inclusive education as a right (United Nations, 2015).

The paper showcases the collective experience of twenty-six contributors who were part of the project in its various phases and contributed to data collected about co-creation. The data and the experience were reflected upon and articulated by the voices of seven representatives of the co-creating community, authors of this paper. These are presented as a case study, re-conceptualising co-creation from a three-dimensional perspective inspired by collective autoethnographic narrative (Karalis, Minematsu and Bosca, 2023). Encompassing both project outcomes and research insights, this account integrates the converging and diverging perspectives of two academics, two learning designers, two students/alumni and a policy expert.

2 Literature review: co-creation from three perspectives

A crucial element of this co-creation project was the involvement of various members of the university community, including professional staff, such as learning designers, librarians and academic skills advisers. A new, deeper sense of belonging and empowerment was established through: 1) being invited; 2) having the opportunity to be creative and to contribute constructively; 3) feeling valued. Focus on the community meant diffusing and overcoming the student-lecturer binary and disrupting existing hierarchies by means of a focus on community.

Thus, three perspectives – academics', educational developers' and students' (now alumni) (Dollinger, Lodge and Coates 2018; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019) – tell the story. The community of practice and the community of learners (Lave and Wenger, 1991), focusing on a commission (a shared purpose of collaborative communities (Trowsdale and Davies, 2024)), were created by a collaboration process which may be replicated in any project. The paper aims to re-conceptualise

co-creation in HE in order to identify guiding principles towards building communities of practice that can be used by other departments and courses.

2.1 Academics' perspective

Co-creation is what King and Swartz (2018) would call affirming and acknowledging everyone's heritage knowledge. Everyone has areas of excellence that may not be personally apparent, but the collaborative environment brings them out – we argue that co-creation is a complex and multidimensional construct that extends beyond participatory curriculum design. It also encompasses shared processes of decision-making, mutual learning and institutional development (Omland et al., 2025; Geurts et al., 2024). From our perspective, co-creation functions as both an ethos and a practice through which traditional power dynamics in education are reconfigured, enabling more inclusive and dialogical forms of engagement.

Pedagogically, co-creation represents a relational practice grounded in reciprocity, respect and shared meaning-making. It acknowledges that: 1) all participants bring valuable heritage knowledge and lived experience to the educational encounter; 2) learning emerges through the interplay of these diverse perspectives. Therefore, we refrain from using the expression co-creating 'with' students, as to do so marginalises a group through labelling before integrating. The co-creating learning hubs invited, as equals, students, academic and professional staff to enter a space of shared vulnerability where everyone was learning from each other. More confident members of the group, by asking questions, embracing uncertainty and revealing their own limitations, led the way. Rather than a linear or predetermined process, co-creation is characterised by openness and exploration: it may be guided by specific objectives, yet it remains responsive to emergent insights that arise from the collaborative process. It is in keeping with a Deweyan understanding of education as an experiential and social process, through which communities continuously learn and progressively build shared knowledge over time (Dewey, 1938).

Such a conception mirrors critical pedagogical traditions that view learning as a collective and emancipatory act. Co-creation, in this sense, builds on and values everyone's knowledge and understanding, creating vibrant and intellectually stimulating spaces where curiosity, dialogue, and creativity thrive (hooks, 1994). It affirms the belief that, while no individual possesses complete knowledge, everyone has valuable insights to contribute – a principle central to dialogic education and the co-construction of understanding (Freire, 1996). By fostering spaces of shared agency and reflective practice, co-creation cultivates a culture of inclusivity and empowerment that extends beyond instrumental outcomes. It reimagines HE as a collaborative endeavour in which learning, teaching and community-building are interdependent processes, continually shaped through interaction, reflection and care.

2.2 Educational developers' perspective

From a pedagogical perspective, the shift towards co-creation is in tune with constructivist and sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Vespone, 2023) that value learning as a collaborative, dialogic process. Co-creation is the practice of these theories in action, in order to enhance students' confidence, learning ownership and self-esteem (Geurts et al., 2024). We argue that,

when students, academics and professional services collaborate, they bring a wealth of diverse perspectives that can challenge assumptions and enrich the learning design process.

Co-creation and co-construction between students, academics and professional services are increasingly shaping the future of HE and, for educational developers, this collaborative model is not only transformative but deeply empowering. Working closely with professional services, such as library staff and accessibility specialists, also enhances the quality of resources and streamlines production (Geurts *et al.*, 2024). This integrated approach allows educational developers to focus on what they do best – designing relevant, engaging learning experiences that foster deep understanding – for, beyond technical outcomes, co-creation fosters a culture of shared responsibility and reflective practice (Dickerson, 2024).

Crucially, co-creation breaks down traditional hierarchies: students become knowledgeable partners, not passive recipients; academics are encouraged to step into facilitating roles (Wakerly, Wilson-Rochford and Dales, 2024); educational developers guide the pedagogical and technological dimensions of the work. In this dynamic, learning designers help bridge the gap between institutional priorities, academic vision and student needs. Their role evolves from support to co-leading, shaping not only the outputs but also the process itself. However, co-creation per se does not automatically dismantle traditional hierarchies; rather, democratic participation depends on institutional cultures that intentionally encourage trust, shared power and inclusive dialogue, while recognising that co-destruction and tensions may also emerge within interdependent relationships. Although certain forms of creative tension can positively stimulate innovation and critical reflection, exploration of alternative means of achieving improved educational outcomes is a must (Järvi, Kähkönen and Torvinen, 2018; Tóth *et al.*, 2018). In the establishment of co-creating communities, the examination of what matters and who matters (Gravett *et al.*, 2024) remains a central question of potential empowerment.

Traditionally, educational developers have often worked behind the scenes (Gray *et al.*, 2015), translating academic content into engaging, accessible learning experiences (Cumming and Rose, 2022). But in a co-creation environment, their role becomes far more strategic and visible. Rather than acting solely as facilitators, designers become active contributors to a shared vision, where learning resources are created and made accessible, not exclusively for students, but for everyone, and are designed with everyone's collaborative input, expertise and needs in mind.

Co-created resources tend to have greater buy-in from students and staff alike (Campbell, 2020). They reflect real learner needs and are often more sustainable, as stakeholders feel a sense of ownership and pride in what they have built together. Through iterative design and feedback loops, educational developers gain sharper insights into what works and why, improving their practice with every collaboration.

2.3 Students' perspective

From the students' perspective, experiencing co-creation transforms how learning happens and is thus a mutually beneficial process (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill, 2023). Students actively shape their education and pick up skills along the way, equipping them with greater skill development and self-efficacy (Dollinger, Lodge and Coates, 2022). It changes how students understand by being actively involved, by constructing and co-constructing their understanding (Dewey, 1938) of the content and the process.

Co-design of activities builds real connections: students learn from other co-creators' experiences, broadening their outlook, for co-creation builds a learning community where every student's voice has value. A certain amount of negotiation is necessary, to balance responsibilities and scaffold participation, so that expertise is maximised (Dollinger, Lodge and Coates, 2022). Being allowed to have ideas, to express them and to have the ideas accepted by the community results in students' having a voice about their learning, feeling competent in contributions and sensing that they belong to a positive group.

However, from the students' perspective, co-creation is not always mutually beneficial, as it can shift responsibility and workload to them without sufficient clarity, support or influence over outcomes. Although it is often described as enhancing engagement, students may experience it as an additional burden when expectations are ambiguous or when their input has little real impact on decision-making (Dollinger, Lodge and Coates, 2018; Geurts *et al.*, 2024). In some cases, poorly structured co-creation can make learning less effective and create frustration (Järvi, Kähkönen and Torvinen, 2018). Even when students are actively involved, they may be uncertain about the boundaries between being a learner providing feedback and their role as a co-designer and this may complicate rather than enhance their educational experience (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019). More broadly, evidence suggests that outcomes of co-creation are highly context-dependent, meaning that benefits are uneven and not guaranteed across settings (Omeland *et al.*, 2025).

3 Methodology

The initial goal of the co-creating community of practice was to develop high-quality resources and collaboratively explore how to increase student engagement with these. Co-creation was selected as a participatory research design choice in this project. However, as things unfolded, it became apparent that co-creation needed to become an integral part of the resources themselves. Therefore what began as a design principle became a pedagogical principle of the co-created educational resources that are live and require continuing co-creation. The project group thus embraced the role of re-defining co-creation, exploring its benefits and the conditions necessary for its successful enactment.

The Learning Hubs project consisted of a total of twenty-six individuals involved in co-creation of the product; seventeen of them became participants in a reflective study on conceptualising co-

creation. The paper draws on the findings from this study in the format of a critical reflection of seven co-creators, authors of the paper.

Ethical approval from the University of Suffolk was gained for the project RD23038 'Co-Creating Learning Hubs' in two stages, with the main project approval for the co-creation study – RETH(S)22/037 – approved on 20 January 2023 and the additional study co-created with the team – engagement evaluation study RETH(S) 22/058 – approved on 21 April 2023. The research study followed BERA (2018, 2024) guidelines assuring no harm, together with: transparency; confidentiality and anonymisation of data; informed consent at each stage. Co-creators who wanted to contribute to the data about student engagement with the learning hubs and to the study about co-creation signed informed consents and could decide at each stage of the project whether to participate in co-creating the product only, or whether to also reflect on this work by submitting anonymous reflective logs and/or contributing to shared notes.

Our paper is a reflective case study incorporating autoethnographic elements to explore the evolving experiences and meanings of co-creation within a HE community of practice. Drawing on the autoethnographic principles outlined by Karalis, Minematsu and Bosca (2023), the study gives prominence to reflective, relational and experiential accounts of participants involved in the co-creative process and to their critical analysis of the data from seventeen members of the co-creating community of practice.

The reflective case study documents an iterative process of defining, conceptualising and critically reflecting on experiences of co-creation across a multi-disciplinary community of practice comprising undergraduate students (n=6), postgraduate students (n=2), academics (n=5), learning designers (n=3) and an academic skills adviser (n=1). The study draws on reflective log entries produced following group meetings (n=50), written notes from collaborative online discussions and workshop annotations captured in shared documents. Consistent with the evolving nature of co-creation, the participatory design remained intentionally flexible and iterative, allowing conceptual understandings to develop as new participants joined and additional perspectives emerged. Through this process, the study adopted a participatory and reflective analytic approach, integrating thematic interpretation with collective narrative reflection to present an autoethnographically informed account of the community's shared experiences of co-creation.

The analysis employed an iterative thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2019), alongside the conceptual work of Lawless and Chen (2019) and Cernasev and Axon (2023), to examine how participants collectively understood and redefined co-creation as a shared community effort and lived experience. Rather than making broad phenomenological claims, the paper engages with phenomenological sensibilities through reflective interpretation and philosophical grounding related to lived experience, relationality and meaning-making within collaborative educational practice.

We acknowledge that, while the findings highlight selected participant voices to exemplify key themes and illustrate the collaborative work undertaken, these perspectives represent only part of a much wider collective contribution. We therefore recognise and value the broader 'orchestra'

of participants whose insights, engagement and expertise shaped and gave meaning to the community of practice and the development of this study.

4 Findings

The results of the thematic analysis of individual and collective reflections of the lived experience of co-creative encounters led to a continuing re-evaluation of the concept of co-creation. Co-creative encounters allowed participants to experience a deep sense of belonging, connection and mattering. Discovering and affirming ourselves as creative, competent, valued, trusted and relied on powerfully transforms us. Co-creative encounters thus facilitated inclusive practice and simultaneously required it, informing the conditions necessary for co-creation as a participatory design approach and pedagogy, in addition to being a focus of exploration.

After several iterations, this learning community of practice defined co-creation as:

a demonstration of an inclusive space and as a tool for creating inclusive spaces. It is characterised by a strengths-based approach related to members' individual qualities and experience originating from their role without generalising them as representatives of coherent groups.

The community of practice concluded that co-creation involves democratic leadership, transparency and active de-construction of hierarchies, using physical space, a variety of creative engagements and good communication channels within a partnership signalled by trust in accountability, shared problem-solving, humour and nourishing comforts, such as hot drinks and snacks.

It is about being allowed to have ideas, to express them and to have the ideas accepted by the community. Multiple people actively work together in an open environment, sharing their ideas and experiences with each other. In this process they collaboratively develop a particular thing which prioritises learning with and from others who have diverse perspectives and expertise.

The analysis of the reflective accounts brings to the fore participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attributed to co-creation within a blended pedagogical context. The qualitative data revealed a series of inter-related themes that evidence the skills, insights and personal transformations emerging from the collaborative process, leading to identification of core practice of co-creation (appendix 1).

4.1 Evolving pedagogical practice and digital innovation

Co-creators' reflections indicate a shift in learning design through the integration of digital tools and blended learning strategies. Academic 1's account emphasises sustainability and contextualisation in resource design by creating "online resources specific to [...] students" that address individual learning needs efficiently. This represents an applied digital competence and adaptability, in accordance with the HE sector's priorities in technology-enhanced learning.

Similarly, Academic 2's narrative demonstrates the intersection of disciplinary innovation and constructivist pedagogy through the *"co-creation of interactive digital resources for skill development tailored and curated to specific cohorts."* These reflections reveal enhanced capacity for curriculum design, digital resource development and adaptive teaching, underscoring the creativity fostered by co-creation.

4.2 Co-creation as relational and transformative practice

A recurring theme concerns the relational nature of co-creation and its transformative potential for both individuals and communities. Academic 1's reflections show the importance of trust, relationality and emotional investment, asserting that *"being relational helps to overcome hierarchies, but relational and non-hierarchical are not the same thing."* This nuanced understanding of collaborative dynamics strongly suggests that co-creation involves both structural and interpersonal dimensions. Academic 2 further expands on this by identifying key affective and ethical competencies: *"courage, honesty and trust, as well as accountability and respect."* These statements exemplify the cultivation of emotional intelligence, ethical awareness and collective responsibility, vital attributes in collaborative academic work.

4.3 Creativity, play and wellbeing in academic practice

Creativity and playfulness emerge as significant drivers of engagement and wellbeing within the co-creation process. Academic 1's description of *"deep creative flow"* and the *"joy, the fun"* of collaboration points to a re-humanisation of academic labour through shared creative practice. The recognition that such experiences *"support staff wellbeing at work"* suggests that co-creation functions as a form of professional renewal, stimulating intrinsic motivation and community connection. This theme evokes the ideas of playful learning and affective pedagogies, emphasising the interdependence of creativity, belonging and wellbeing in HE contexts.

4.4 Shifting identities, professional growth and empowerment of the community members

The voices of students and alumni articulate the transformative effect of co-creation on personal and professional identity. Student 1's reflections chart a movement from self-doubt to empowerment: feeling initially *"overwhelmed"* among academics yet soon realising that *"everyone matters and is heard."* This narrative evidences the development of confidence, voice and agency, key dimensions of learner empowerment. Similarly, the experience of a mature international student confirms the erosion of hierarchical *"student-teacher"* binaries and the emergence of a *"co-creator"* identity. Both accounts celebrate collaborative authorship, inter-cultural competence and reflexive learning, demonstrating how co-creation transforms learning relationships into equitable, dialogic partnerships.

From the educational designers' perspective, co-creation fosters professional reflexivity and epistemic humility. Academic developer 2 says that student perspectives *"challenge and broaden my thinking,"* while academic developer 1 describes a shift from *"translating ideas to shaping them from the start alongside students."* Such reflections illustrate the development of critical reflexivity, dialogic communication and co-design literacy. These competencies are indicative of a broader

professional learning trajectory in which educators reconceptualise their roles as facilitators of shared knowledge production.

In the Learning Hubs project, academics learned from students about their motivations to study and priorities within engagement. They were provided with a mirror for their own engagement with skill development and online learning when students said that academic engagement drives student engagement and learning designers pointed out the broad willingness to engage with new technologies and limitations in collaborative curriculum innovations. While co-creation is often seen as an intervention for student engagement, it becomes as much an intervention for academic engagement that encourages tolerating discomfort in the re-configuration of the academic role. It also has the significant potential to support academics' wellbeing and their sense of real fulfilment, by placing a genuine value on learning despite the highly marketised HE context.

4.5 Co-creation as inclusive policy and systemic practice

The policy expert perspective places co-creation within a broader institutional and policy framework. Her assertion that "*co-creation is not merely a method... but a strategic approach to policy development*" reframes the practice as a mechanism for embedding inclusivity, transparency and collective intelligence in HE governance. This insight extends co-creation beyond pedagogy into organisational learning, highlighting its potential as a framework for participatory and ethically grounded institutional development (Atenas *et al.*, 2020).

4.6 Skills

The process of co-creating resources, practices and policies in education cultivates a wide range of transferable and transformative skills in all community members involved (appendix 2). By engaging in inclusive, participatory processes, co-creators enhance their collaborative, communication and decision-making capacities. The university community develops an understanding of democratic engagement and social responsibility, gaining the ability to anticipate challenges and shape policy solutions that reflect collective intelligence (knowledge generated from co-creation encounters that is richer than the sum of its parts). The co-creation process encourages critical thinking, active listening, negotiation and facilitation skills, especially as stakeholders contribute constructively to policy formulation, enactment and review.

5 Discussion and implications for practice

As a practice demonstrated in the Learning Hubs project, co-creation produced unique encounters between people, helped by creative prompts. In addition to explicit, verbally expressed, non-hierarchical and inclusive ways of working, values of mutual care and shared responsibility were readily apparent from the communication and engagement options offered, helped by a variety of analogue and digital note-taking methods, circular arrangement of seating around the table, shared food and drinks and meeting agendas that made regular check-ins with individuals easy. Such attention to the physical meeting spaces as well as the option to join remotely confirmed the post-human view of pedagogies of mattering as expressed by Gravett *et al.* (2024). Objects matter as much as people in interactions and members of the community may want to

belong in a variety of ways. Co-creators became immersed in their own experience of playfulness, collaboration and the demonstration of respect for each other's contributions. The implementation of co-creation in the Learning Hubs project was not accidental, but it might not be fully replicable. Co-creators as individuals and as a collective were committed to the shared responsibility for the product and for each other. In Ahenkorah's (2020) conceptualisation of communities, this group of co-creators was able to shift from feeling safe to being brave and accountable for the co-creating process. Such encounters had a profound impact on individuals' sense of being valued and valuing – feeling that they mattered and that what they cared about mattered, very like the Freirean (1996) notion that no one knows everything, and no one is void of knowledge. Co-creation means building on and valuing everyone's knowledge and understanding, creating exciting places that generate interest in people and their ideas (hooks, 1994).

In terms of strengths, we consider that co-creation can re-generate and invigorate the sense of purpose. Through co-creative encounters, those involved in our project experienced a deep sense of belonging and connection, as well as an awareness that discovering and affirming oneself as creative, competent, valued, trusted and relied on is powerfully transformative. We therefore posit that co-creative encounters facilitate inclusive practice and simultaneously require it. Self-experience of inclusion generates trust in such practices and re-establishes hope through mattering. Even small pockets of co-creative practices matter. They embrace generosity and carry the potential to heal disengaged, competitive, stressed and over-worked campus communities (Fitzpatrick, 2021, 2024).

However, returning to the contention of Ajjawi et al. (2023), viz., that simplistic constructs of belonging may hinder it, we need to remain cautious about assuming and/or imposing co-creation as a solution for a sector with a multitude of competing demands and the potential to disadvantage those whom we were trying to empower.

As the team explored what co-creation meant, it became apparent that we wanted to share our experience and our excitement for meaningful collaborative methodologies and pedagogies. We thought about creative ways to provide opportunities for capacity building and embedding co-creating in a research-informed community of practice. The Policy Playbook for Co-Creation of Educational Resources (Lessner Listiakova et al., 2024) outlines a roadmap for institutional change and guides co-creators with flexible interactive tools. We argue that, to establish a robust framework for the co-creation of policies within the HE sector, it is essential to embed the principles of inclusivity, transparency and accountability, alongside clear guidelines for stakeholder engagement throughout the policy development process.

HE institutions seeking to adopt a co-creation model in policymaking must consider the basic principles of public participation to ensure the development of inclusive and enabling policies that are responsive to the diverse cultural contexts of their institutions. By exploiting their own scholarly expertise and engaging members of their academic communities in the co-development of policy, universities may not only strengthen institutional governance but also create opportunities for professional development. Participation in co-creation forums may serve as a pathway for career progression by cultivating leadership skills and experiential knowledge among contributors.

By anticipating potential challenges and fostering shared ownership and responsibility, co-creation may enhance institutional resilience and stakeholder buy-in. Crucially, it requires the recognition of diverse actors in decision-making, a genuine commitment to ensuring their input informs outcomes and the promotion of sustainable decisions that reflect the interests of all stakeholders, including decision-makers. Effective co-creation also entails actively facilitating inclusive participation, tailoring engagement methods to stakeholder needs, providing relevant information to support informed contributions and maintaining transparency regarding how input influences final decisions.

Through inclusive dialogues and multi-stakeholder engagement, participants in our study also cultivated leadership, strategic planning and systems thinking. Educators and students became proficient in translating complex institutional needs into practical and equitable policies, while navigating institutional cultures and aligning initiatives with broader visions and strategies. On the basis of our experience in this project, we conform to the necessity to use accessible, clear language and engage with diverse perspectives, for that promotes skills in inclusive communication, empathy and ethical reasoning

Moreover, all participants could co-create institutional policies – clearer, better integrated with practice, flexible and accountable – giving them not only insight into procedures and their implications but also the confidence to apply personal lived experience to the shaping of what might be readily implemented, sustainable and culturally responsive (Atenas et al., 2020).

Ultimately, co-creation is not just good for students, it is transformative for all involved. It elevates their role, enriches their practice and makes them essential partners in shaping relevant, future-facing education. It opens rich opportunities for data collection, impact evaluation and continuous improvement, all of which demonstrate value and argue for strategic investment in educational development.

6 Conclusion: co-creating relevant transformation

By embedding co-creation into the fabric of educational development, universities may enhance the quality and relevance of educational resources and cultivate a culture of partnership, innovation and mutual respect. For institutions, this collaborative approach can strengthen student satisfaction, deepen academic engagement and demonstrate a forward-thinking commitment to authentic, learner-centred education without sacrificing staff wellbeing, so acknowledging the university as a community. Co-creation, therefore, is not just a method, it is a strategic asset for the university's growth and success.

From our experience and the data from our research, the concept of co-creation evolves as the community gains experience with co-creating; that in turn shapes the way co-creation is further enacted. Such iterative practice prompts continuing reflection upon what we do in education and why we do it, always questioning the status quo, as well as appreciating and cherishing its existing strengths. It is a relational (Noddings, 2013) and progressive (Dewey, 1938) pedagogical approach practised throughout all encounters in the university community (McIntosh and May,

2025), activities and environments (Gravett *et al.*, 2024), including educational policy development.

In our community of practice, co-creation has been defined as a process of being actively involved, having a say in things that matter to us and our community. It is about being listened to by those in charge and sharing credit for products as well as responsibility for process. Co-creating is about feeling the impacts of our decisions. Such lived experience with co-creating and co-creation as a pedagogical practice strongly reflects the democratic principles of critical pedagogies (Freire, 1996), recognising the structural, systemic and possible individual barriers to participation.

Co-creation felt authentic and natural, almost as if it did not require any effort. Underneath the playful and fluid encounters that very effectively led to high-quality products, lay a powerful system of practices deeply rooted in values-driven pedagogies and leadership, iteratively enhanced through experience with each new enactment. Mechanisms of co-creation (figure 1) turned conditions such as diversity, relationality, creativity, community, engagement, participation and contribution into identifiable impacts. Self-experience of these mechanisms was key to understanding their profound transformational effects. Thus, we encourage university communities to experiment, play and discover their own ways of co-creating. Leading co-creation begins with trust in the process, trust in people and respect of what we can learn from each other.

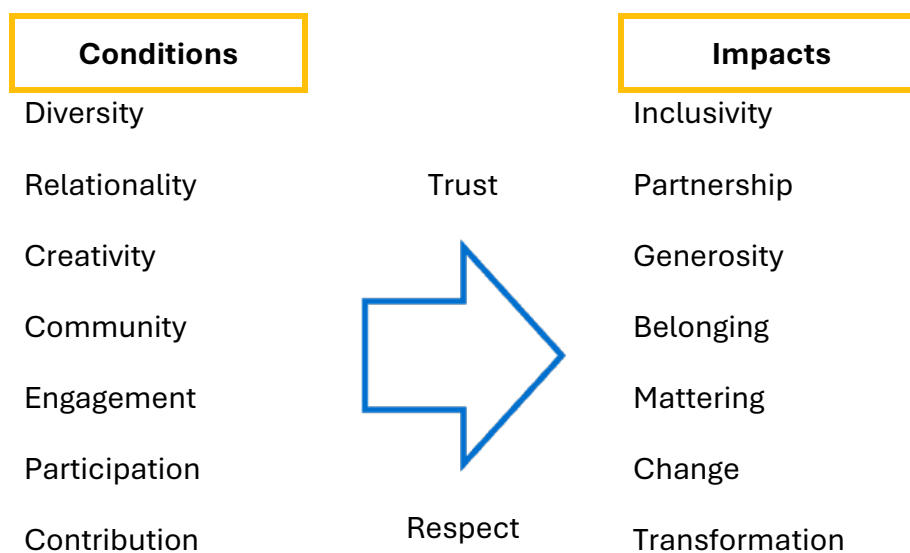


Figure 1: Mechanisms of co-creation

Co-creating as a practice involved the community in continuous transformation of the university via the transformation of its members. Those changes enhanced individual strengths and co-created opportunity and a context for the individuals to shine, develop and feel that they were in

the right place. Co-creation was enacted as a practice of sustainable and effective use of resources, empowering both individuals and the community.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Core practices of co-creation

Criterion	Core Practice	Emergent Competencies & Outcomes
1. Evolving Pedagogical Practice and Digital Innovation	Integrating digital tools and blended approaches to support contextualised learning.	Pedagogical adaptability; digital literacy; curriculum innovation; applied creativity in teaching design.

Case Study

2. Co-Creation as Relational and Transformative Practice	Building trust-based, ethical and emotionally intelligent collaboration.	Ethical awareness; collective responsibility; capacity to navigate power dynamics.
3. Creativity, Play, and Wellbeing in Academic Practice	Embedding creativity and playfulness to enhance engagement and wellbeing.	Enhanced engagement; sense of belonging; wellbeing; re-humanisation of academic practice through shared creativity.
4. Shifting Identities, Professional Growth, and Empowerment of Community Members	Empowering students, alumni and staff through equitable co-creation.	Confidence and voice; learner agency; intercultural competence; professional reflexivity and growth; co-design literacy.
5. Co-Creation as Inclusive Policy and Systemic Practice	Embedding co-creation as a strategic framework for institutional development.	Institutional inclusivity; ethical leadership; systems thinking; participatory policy competence.

Appendix 2 Transferable and transformative skills developed through co-creating

Skill Area	Description
Collaborative Working	Working with diverse stakeholders towards shared goals; developing co-ownership and consensus.
Communication Skills	Engaging in inclusive, accessible, and transparent dialogue with clarity and intent.
Critical Thinking	Analysing policy issues, anticipating consequences and crafting evidence-informed responses.
Leadership and Facilitation	Leading co-creation forums, facilitating discussions and motivating collective participation.
Strategic Planning	Aligning policy development with institutional goals and stakeholder needs.
Empathy and Ethical Reasoning	Understanding diverse perspectives and prioritising equity, inclusion and fairness.
Negotiation and Decision-Making	Reconciling competing interests and making informed, democratic decisions.

Case Study

Policy Literacy	Understanding policy content, formulation processes, legal frameworks and institutional contexts.
Procedural and Systems Thinking	Connecting various institutional processes and policies through integrated approaches.
Information Management	Synthesising relevant data and input to inform meaningful participation and policy outcomes.