

CASE STUDY

Curriculum enhancement through co-creation: Fostering student-educator partnerships in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This case study presents an institutional approach to curriculum enhancement and co-creation. It explores how these two elements of a university's strategy interlink through institutional values, curriculum development initiatives, and the advent of a new recognition scheme for student co-creators at Queen Mary University of London in the UK. It explores how the delivery of curriculum enhancement projects has been made possible through co-creation with students and discusses its outcomes: curriculum enhancement resources for staff and students, recognition for students, and joint presentations and publications. This case study also reflects on the experience of student co-creators and the benefits and challenges for staff and the institution, considers the specific contexts required to promote a shift in institutional culture towards co-creation, and shares successes and recommendations for implementing this approach.

KEYWORDS

co-creation, curriculum, recognition, students as partners, enhancement

This case study presents an approach to curriculum enhancement and co-creation developed at the institutional level. The approach was based on four key pillars that inform Queen Mary University of London's strategy in terms of education and student experience (i.e., excellence in education, student engagement, student employability, and the learning environment). These four pillars have led to the creation of several strategic projects. At the same time, the institutional values (i.e. inclusive, proud, ambitious, collegial, ethical) express the institution's commitment to delivering an outstanding, inclusive, world-class education and

student experience, co-created with its diverse student body and enhanced by its world-leading research and latest technological developments (Queen Mary University of London, 2019).

In parallel with the co-created curriculum enhancement projects, the university has established a new recognition scheme for student co-creators called the Student Enhanced Engagement and Development (SEED) award. This case study will reflect on the intersection of co-creation and curriculum enhancement to consider the specific contexts required to promote a shift in institutional culture towards co-creation. It will also set out successes, lessons learned, and recommendations for others implementing this approach.

This work was carried out in a UK Russell Group university at an institutional level, across all disciplines and levels of taught programmes. The curriculum enhancement projects were designed and delivered by cross-disciplinary and cross-functional groups of university staff, students' union representatives, and student interns. This case study has been written collaboratively by the staff and student project team and presents both perspectives on the process and outcomes of this work.

OUR CO-CREATION APPROACH

The adoption of a co-creation approach in processes of designing curricula allows staff and students to gain a deeper understanding of learning, to experience enhanced engagement, motivation and enthusiasm, and to relate differently (Bovill et al., 2011). In terms of values, co-creation fosters shared responsibility, respect, and trust. It creates the conditions for partners to learn from each other within a collaborative learning community and enhances individuals' satisfaction and personal development within higher education (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018).

Engaging students in curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy is perhaps the least developed of the main areas for co-creation as defined in the Advance HE Student Engagement through Partnership Framework (Healey et al., 2014; Healey & Healey, 2019). By engaging students as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-designers, institutions can promote the development of partnership learning communities.

As argued by Healey et al. (2016), if "partnership is to extend beyond individual projects and initiatives, it makes sense to approach this holistically, with an eye on institutional culture and ethos" (p. 13). In our context, the development of this sense of community and belonging was fostered through the creation of structures and processes that support partnership relationships. This led to the development of shared values and enactment of these through attitudes and behaviours (Healey et al., 2014).

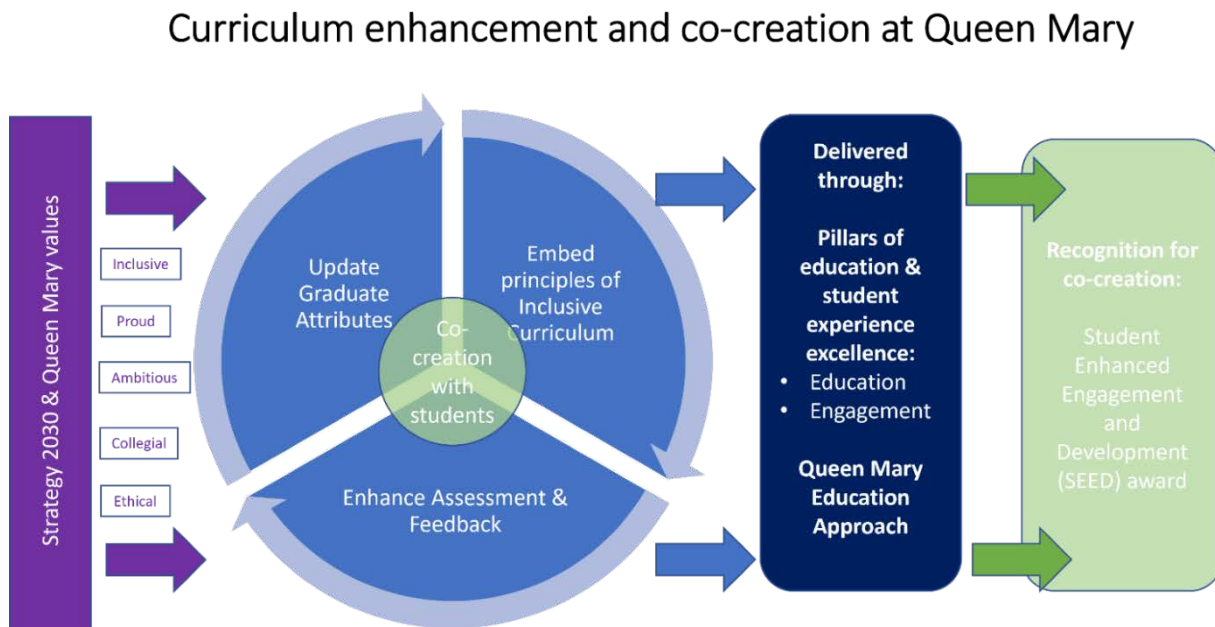
Academic developers took on coordinating roles within the co-creation projects. The role of the academic developers was, as recommended by Bovill et al. (2011), to invite students, academic, and professional services staff to act as partners (i.e., active and authoritative collaborators), support dialogue across differences (of position and perspective), foster collaboration, and serve as intermediaries facilitating new relationships. Together, we intended to promote a team-based approach where no individual was perceived as the expert (Owen & Wasiuk, 2021) and adopted a reflective and inclusive perspective to align with the values and principles of student partnerships and co-creation (Healey et al., 2014).

Adopting a co-creation approach

The co-creation of curriculum enhancement can take place at the levels of individual practice, at the course/programme level, and at the institutional level (Bovill et al., 2016). In our case, we worked at an institutional level in terms of adopting a co-creation of the curriculum approach, where student team members (i.e., paid interns and students' union representatives) worked in a distributed leadership environment with the opportunity to give direction to their learning and practice democratic citizenship and shared decision-making (Bron et al., 2018). Student team members worked as pedagogical co-designers and representatives of student voice. However, these roles were not mutually exclusive; indeed, significant overlap occurred (Bovill et al., 2016, 2020^{a,b}).

The project team created a framework for curriculum enhancement which was representative of the views of staff across disciplines and functions as well as student team members. The key pillars of this approach are aligned with the institution's strategy and values. The curriculum enhancement framework consists of three core areas: inclusive curriculum, assessment and feedback, and graduate attributes, with co-creation as a fourth theme threading through this work. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the institutional values, the curriculum enhancement work, and co-creation.

Figure 1: Curriculum enhancement and co-creation framework



The institutional values (inclusive, proud, ambitious, collegial, ethical) inform and are embedded within each of the four core areas of educational enhancement. The values underpin the principles of inclusive curriculum, provide a guiding framework for graduate attributes, and inform the university's approach to assessment and feedback. Co-creation with students sits at the heart of the curriculum enhancement projects and itself directly leads from the value

“collegial.” In the institutional *Strategy 2030* (Queen Mary University of London, 2019), it is stated that the institution “will be collegial and promote a strong collegial community through openness, listening, understanding, co-operation and co-creation.” Our work is therefore delivered through the specific goals and methods outlined in the *Strategy 2030*. It is also supported by the university’s “Education Approach” (Queen Mary University of London, 2021) which places central importance on collaboration and co-creation with students in order to enhance education and the student experience.

From the initiation of these projects, direct student input into the planning and set up was crucial. The institutional aims were to not just consult students for their views, but for students to be part of all planning and delivery processes. Students’ union student representatives were involved in each of the project areas, as well as paid student interns. Ensuring that student input into the projects was properly remunerated was a priority, and therefore a job profile was developed and interviews held in order to select students who best met the person specification for the internships.

Across the co-created projects, all partners, including student team members, directly contributed to project activities such as researching practice at other institutions, organising and running a pilot study, collecting and analysing student views, developing case studies of good practice, developing guidance for staff and students, and developing, running, and analysing a survey.

Recognition of student engagement through co-creation: SEED award

In line with the institutional priority around this area, 2020 saw the introduction of a new award scheme (SEED) for recognising student contributions to education development at the university. The SEED award was established so that student contributions to this area could be formally recognised and rewarded. SEED recognises students’ contributions to shaping education, specifically students who have worked alongside staff and co-created ideas and solutions which have a significant impact on education. Applicants need to have spent a minimum of 10 hours on activity relating to teaching or learning.

Applying for SEED mirrors the Advance HE UK Professional Standards Framework -PSF (AdvanceHE, 2023, a globally-recognised framework for benchmarking success within higher education teaching and learning support. Students write reflective accounts of their collaboration and contribution, drawing on four of the five areas of activity within the professional standards framework: (a) design and plan learning activities and/or programmes of study, (b) teach and/or support learning, (c) assess and give feedback to learners, and (d) develop effective learning environments and approaches to student support and guidance. Applicants reflect on their experiences and make recommendations, and this is accompanied by an endorsement from the staff member they have worked closely with. Successful applicants receive a certificate, and the award is recorded on their Higher Education Achievement Record.

THE OUTCOMES OF OUR CO-CREATION

Our experience has demonstrated that staff-student collaboration in pedagogical design and curriculum enhancement projects is a significant step in deepening engaged learning. As argued by Cook-Sather and Matthews (2021), we consider that these partnership approaches foster “shared responsibility and ownership and new forms of student and

teacher agency, making all of them more democratic, inclusive, and dynamic” (p. 243). Below we discuss a range of outcomes of our co-creation across these areas.

Curriculum enhancement resources for staff

The most obvious outputs of the curriculum enhancement projects are the resources created for staff. The fact these were co-designed and developed by students and staff has, we believe, significantly increased their impact and effectiveness.

Within the graduate attributes project, the research carried out by student team members provided vital information about student views, which was key for engaging academics outside the project team in updating their course attributes. Student scenarios were developed in order to promote initial discussions with course teams, and this student-focused approach prompted a wide range of ideas for updating, embedding, and communicating graduate attributes. One academic who attended a workshop as part of the project commented that “student views were very useful input” to their discussions. Partnership working was also instrumental in the development of staff toolkits for assessment and feedback. Content was created collaboratively and helped ensure that student perspectives were addressed, and student team members also led the technical development and design of the resource.

Across all areas of the curriculum enhancement project, student team members were engaged in developing case studies of innovative and effective practice in collaboration with staff. This activity provided a valuable opportunity to build connections with a diverse range of colleagues and to develop spoken and written communication skills. The invitation to meet and talk to a student intern was also met enthusiastically by academics who otherwise would not have had the time to write up a case study themselves. Having a student as the interface between the project team and other staff was also crucial in increasing staff engagement and support for the projects overall.

Curriculum enhancement resources for students

In the assessment and feedback project, another significant output was the co-creation of three resources to support students in understanding assessments. These resources were designed to be showcased online and include a set of tips for approaching assessment tasks (i.e., “Unpacking Assessment: Top Tips”), a list of the type of information and resources on assessment and feedback students can find in the institutional virtual learning environment (e.g., “Unpacking Assessment: Tools Available on our VLE”), and a checklist to help students approach assessment as learning (i.e., “Assessment as Learning: Checklist”).

Recognition: SEED award

Early evaluation of the SEED programme demonstrated the development of student agency, belonging, and transformation (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill, 2021). There is also evidence of positive developments both for curricula and educators. In the first year, 44 students have received a SEED award. These award winners have developed work in the following professional standards framework areas: (a) design and plan learning activities and/or programmes; (b) teaching and/or support of learning, assessment and feedback; and (c) development of effective learning environments and approaches to support (Appendix A). Some of the students involved in the projects described in this case study have already achieved SEED recognition.

Joint presentations and publications

Our co-creation work has resulted in several presentations and publications, of which student interns and student representatives are co-authors—one case study that has been published online, two poster presentations, and six presentations (Appendix B).

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of student co-creators

While many academic institutions incorporate students as silent partners (Holen et al., 2021), our institution has been intentional about embracing the student voice and participation in education development activities. One student team member commented: “it has allowed myself and many other student co-creators to sit at decision making tables and platforms to influence the very decisions that stand to impact on the holistic academic experience of the student community” (student team member A, 2022). Many of the student team members felt they walked into the experience as “student interns” and walked out as partners and leaders, as the following comment shows: “I found myself leading and shaping the direction in which the assessment and feedback workstream was heading” (student team member A, 2022). Student team members particularly valued the opportunity to engage academics in reflective conversations that not only contributed to education development but also bridged hierarchical student-academic interactions.

True to the concept of student partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), this project has afforded all parties an equal opportunity to contribute to pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, and implementation processes within the university. It has also been a powerful reminder that, even in traditionally closed spaces like academia, all members of the community have a voice that can be used to influence change and contribute to the common good. The university’s efforts in cultivating a conducive environment for student-educator collaborations is indicative of its commitment to promoting student partnerships and speaks to the idea that there is “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 2000).

What did student team members gain and learn?

Student team members learned to work with staff as equal partners, prepared for their transition to the labour market, experienced personal growth and engagement, and encountered opportunities to reflect.

Work with staff as equal partners

One curriculum enhancement student team member (A, 2022) highlighted the benefits of a co-creation approach: “This opportunity affords students a first-hand experience of participating in decision making platforms, working with and engaging academics as partners.” According to this same student team member, working as an equal partner with staff had “moulded [them] into a better leader, a competent communicator and a skilful collaborator.”

Prepare for their transition to the labour market

These projects gave student team members an opportunity to prepare for their transition to the labour market. Providing an opportunity to work as equals with educators and professional service staff enabled the development of a range of professional skills. One student team member reflected, “I got to be creative, improve my communication and team working skills, and got to meet many talented students and academics!” (student team member B, 2022). Similarly, another student team member commented: “the placement is ideal for developing practical professional and soft skills that include time management, organisational skills, and independence. Overall, the support that student co-creators receive from educators is unmatched and indispensable for career development” (student team member A, 2022).

Personal growth and engagement

A SEED award winner (student team member A; the award was awarded by the December 2021 SEED panel) emphasised the fact that “the programme allowed for personal growth, providing a platform for students to engage their peers as well as provid[ing] a space to work with their teachers in developing a learning environment that is engaging.” They expanded on this, observing that

the project’s design encouraged [me] to take ownership and lead in the workstream I was involved in while simultaneously learning from the experience and expertise of fellow co-creators. . . . It has been empowering being a member of a team that seeks to transform teaching and learning practices for the better. (student team member A, 2022)

Opportunity to reflect

The SEED award represents an opportunity to reflect on the experience of co-creating and learning from collaborative work with others. This is highlighted by another SEED award winner:

the award is a great initiative that not only recognises students for their contributions but also offers them an opportunity to reflect on the work they have done, how it will/has impacted those around them and the institution’s community at large. It also provides a platform to reflect on the lessons learned from the experience of working collaboratively with educators. This is important because we hardly ever stop and take time to reflect on our work and progress. (student C, February 2022 SEED panel)

Challenges for student co-creators

The challenges identified for the student co-creators were navigating institutional structures, practices, and norms and time and resources.

Navigating institutional structures, practices, and norms

Students who received a SEED award mentioned they struggled with institutional structures, practices, and norms and reflecting on their experience from a co-creation approach. Bovill et al. (2016) argue that overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms, and ensuring

inclusivity in student-staff partnerships are some of the common challenges faced by student co-creators. Resistance and inclusivity did not seem to be particularly relevant in our context because it was an institutional initiative well sustained by our institutional values. However, work needs to be developed in terms of adapting the institutional structures, practices, and norms.

Time and resources needed to foster change and transformation

With curriculum enhancement work still being in development within the university, student team members had to put in a lot of time and effort navigating their roles because there were not a lot of resources to rely on. The resources and materials being designed as part of the curriculum enhancement project introduced what may have been unfamiliar concepts and approaches to teaching and learning, including co-creation and the promotion of student perspectives. Therefore, encouraging educators to participate in building and adopting these resources and approaches has not been (and will not be) a smooth task as it may require a culture shift from the practices they have known.

Staff and institutional experiences, benefits and challenges

Staff experiences with the project were generally very positive. There were logistical benefits of co-creation and partnership working seen through the enhanced outputs and processes which were developed by the team together. However, there was also a positive impact on staff perceptions of co-creation and particularly of student involvement in institution-level change projects such as this. Co-creation had not been explicitly integrated into this level of work at the university before. As the projects came to a close, staff team members reflected on the experience in very positive ways. For example, one staff member reported: “Working with students is absolutely valuable. The knowledge they have, the insight they have into aspects and the way we understand how they receive, process, and use information from their own words is invaluable” (academic team member, 2022). Another commented:

The co-creation experience with students on the GA [Graduate Attributes] Worksteam has provided two distinctive advantages. Firstly, it has helped steer the group on designing a more effective engagement strategy with students. Secondly, student co-creation has offered a unique insight into what is important and relevant to students, and this has helped to inform the development of a more effective GA framework. (professional services team member, 2023)

Through co-creating and close collaboration with students, staff from across the university in a range of different roles came to recognise and strongly value the input of students into the development of this primarily staff-facing curriculum enhancement work.

Inviting opportunities for co-creation can drive innovation and development for students, educators, and the curriculum. However, developing an institutional culture where such innovation and change is welcomed can be challenging. Following Dunbar-Morris et al. (2019), as a project team we tried to tackle this by developing a sense of shared purpose to create institutional buy-in to the change proposed. We tried to promote ongoing reflection (by individuals and teams) in our partnership practices and to remain mindful of our conscious and unconscious habits and behaviours (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020).

The wider impact of the enhancement projects will be felt across the institution over the next few years, as it will take some time for colleagues to engage with the resources developed and embed principles, frameworks, and approaches into their practice. However, early examples of co-creation in action are now starting to emerge, where educators are spontaneously working with their students in the co-creation of teaching and learning resources.

Lessons learned so far and recommendations

A key lesson we have learned from this experience is the need to promote a shift in institutional culture towards co-creation. Staff need to be made aware of ways in which they can share power appropriately with students and that hierarchies can be disrupted because staff and student partners contribute in different ways. The diverse profiles, backgrounds, and experiences of students at our institution complement academics' knowledge and expertise in the learning content and institutional context.

Actions should be tailored to meet the needs and expectations of all partners. Co-creation happens within the intersection of these different identities and perspectives. All partners become more aware of their identity and role and, at the same time, much more accountable because responsibilities are shared and change is a common endeavour.

For co-creation projects to be successful, it is important that the students feel their contributions have a direct impact and don't feel their involvement is tokenistic. In recognising students' involvement in co-creation, we have learned that it is vital to acknowledge the pedagogical value of co-creation across the whole of the institution. It is also very important to support students to make applications for recognition and to further engage and support educators towards co-creative pedagogical approaches.

Ethical approval for student consultation and research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee prior to the research being carried out.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR/S

Ana Cabral is currently an Academic Practice and Student Engagement Manager within the Queen Mary Academy. She leads on work on co-creation, student engagement and recognition of students' contribution to co-creation through the SEED award (Student Enhanced Engagement and Development).

Stephanie Fuller is Academic Practice Taught Programmes Manager within the Queen Mary Academy. She leads educational development programmes for new academics, as well as an institution-wide project to update Queen Mary Graduate Attributes through which she has collaborated with a range of students and student representatives.

Janet De Wilde is the Director of the Queen Mary Academy at Queen Mary University of London. Janet leads on university wide Curriculum Enhancement and the embedding of co-creation. She is a Principal Fellow of the HEA and is currently Vice Chair of the UK Council for Graduate Education and Chair of the EUA Transnational Education peer-group.

Khaliso Amelia Khama is a practicing lawyer specialising in public international law and corporate law transactions. She holds a Bachelor of Arts (BA) and a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) from South Africa as well as a Master of Laws (LLM) from Queen Mary University of London where she recently graduated cum laude. She is an advocate for quality and inclusive education.

Marianne Melsen is the Head of Student Voice and Insights at Queen Mary Students' Union and specialises in facilitating student-led change-making, supporting student representatives and developing student voice initiatives.

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APPENDIX A: SEED AWARD WINNERS: AREAS OF WORK AND EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS/ ACTIVITIES

AREAS OF WORK	EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS/ ACTIVITIES	NUMBER (44)	%
A1: Design and plan learning activities and/or programmes of study	Creation and adaptation of resources and designing learning activities	8	18%
A2: Teaching and/or support of learning	Mentoring Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) leadership Near-peer teaching facilitation	14	32%
A3: Assessment and feedback	Internship work (writing case studies) and evaluation of processes	3	7%
A4: Development of effective learning environments	Participation in committees, consult programmes' representative, ambassador work, design of tools to facilitate processes and improve learning environments	19	43%

APPENDIX B: JOINT PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS

(2023, January 26). *Engaging students as co-creators in curriculum enhancement: institutional strategy, values and culture* [Conference presentation]. AdvanceHE Students as Co-Creators Symposium: Beyond Engagement: the emerging role of students as co-creators of their learning experience, Manchester, UK <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/events/symposia/students-as-co-creators-symposium>

(2022, May 11-13). *Recognition of students' contribution to co-creation* [Case study presented asynchronously]. *Change Agent Network (CAN) Conference - Sustaining Partnerships in Transformative Times* (London, UK. <https://reflect.ucl.ac.uk/canconference2022/>

(2022, July 5-7). *SEED award – a step towards recognition of students' contribution to co-creation* [Poster presentation] AdvanceHE Teaching and Learning Conference, Newcastle, UK. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/conferences/teaching-and-learning-conference-2022>

(2022, June 16). *Contribution and recognition of the role of peer leaders in promoting student engagement (SEED award)*[Conference presentation]. OnlineInternational Forum for

Peer Learning and Peer Support 2022 Online. <https://www.si-pass.lu.se/online-international-forum-peer-learning-2022>

(2022, March 8-11) *Enhanced Engagement and Development Award* [Poster presentation]. Queen Mary Festival of Education. Queen Mary Academy, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK. <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/queenmaryacademy/educators/events-and-workshops/festival-of-education/festival-of-education-2022/>

(2022, June 29) *Updating Graduate Attributes at Queen Mary: A Co-Created Approach* [Conference presentation]. UK-China Transnational Education (TNE) Conference 2022., University of Posts and Telecommunications and Queen Mary University of London. Beijing, China <http://eecs.qmul.ac.uk/bupt/jtlc/events/items/uk-china-stem-transnational-education-tne-conference-2022-technology-enhanced-teaching-and-learning.html>

(2022, April 26) *Updating Graduate Attributes at Queen Mary: A Co-Created Approach* [Conference presentation]. Advance HE Employability Symposium 2022. Birmingham, UK. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/events/employability-symposium-2022>

(2022, March 8-11) *How can graduate attributes prepare students for today and tomorrow's workplace?* [Conference presentation]. Queen Mary Festival of Education 2022. Queen Mary University of London, London, UK. <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/queenmaryacademy/educators/events-and-workshops/festival-of-education/festival-of-education-2022/>

(2022, March 8-11) *Launch of the Assessment and Feedback Toolkits* [Conference presentation]. Queen Mary Festival of Education 2022. Queen Mary University of London, London, UK <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/queenmaryacademy/educators/events-and-workshops/festival-of-education/festival-of-education-2022/>