

Bridging the Gap: Reflecting on the Role of Advancing Assessment Interns in Co-Designing Inclusive Assessment and Feedback Practices

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Abstract

This case study explores the role of Advancing Assessment (AA) interns at the University of Southampton in enhancing assessment and feedback practices through co-design. Drawing on our experiences of reflective practice relating to the project principles and of co-working with the AA interns, this case study looks at the tangible and intangible contributions of student interns to institutional change. A reflective workshop highlighted the AA interns dual role as contributors to assessment enhancement and to the building of cultural bridges between students and staff in developing assessment practices, and examined how they feel about their role and involvement in co-design. The findings reveal a tension between visibility and impact: AA interns valued collaborative working and visible contributions, but feeling disconnected from the project when they are not kept informed about how their work has been used, and what it achieved. The case study concludes with recommendations for embedding iterative evaluative practice to ensure that the student voice is more meaningfully embedded as part of institutional change processes and that co-creation initiatives are impactful.

Key words: student partnerships, reflexivity, identity, student voice

Introduction

Assessment and feedback continue to pose significant challenges across United Kingdom (UK) higher education (HE). Students often report feeling disconnected from assessment processes, while staff cite increasing workloads and competing research priorities as barriers to providing meaningful feedback (Evans, 2013). Sector-wide, there is growing recognition of the need to redesign assessment practices to be more inclusive, compassionate and aligned with real-world contexts. Emerging trends include a shift toward programme-level assessment, the integration of digital tools and consideration of the impact of Generative AI, and the adoption of alternative formats such as oral assessments and portfolios (Walker, 2025).

The University of Southampton has established a five-year strategic major (SMP) project to enhance assessment. Central to this project is an ethos of student co-design and partnership. Staff work in partnership with students from specific programmes to enhance assessment locally, but also directly with around thirteen Advancing Assessment (AA) interns from diverse disciplines who have been recruited as core members of the project team. Whilst staff-student partnership and co-design have long been central to the work of the Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP), the AA project has further enhanced the CHEP student intern

programme with investment and resources. This has enabled greater opportunities for collaboration and co-design, with AA interns working in partnership with academic staff to shape assessment practices, as well as acting as change agents across programmes and the wider institution.

Cook-Sather et al. (2014) see partnership as ‘a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis.’ While there are well-documented benefits to working with students as partners, Matthews (2017) highlights that some of the challenges are often overlooked. This case study seeks to reframe the model of partnership as an interactive and evolving purposeful conversation between university staff and students.

Literature review

Student-staff partnerships and co-design have become increasingly prominent in HE, particularly in curriculum development and assessment. These approaches challenge traditional hierarchies by positioning students as active contributors to their educational experience (Healey *et al.*, 2014).

Both Matthews (2017) and Mercer-Mapstone *et al.* (2017) explore the affective dimensions of partnership, noting that students often experience uncertainty about their legitimacy as experts in their experience of assessment in academic spaces. While partnerships can enhance motivation and belonging, they also risk reinforcing power imbalances if student contributions are undervalued or tokenistic (Rasa *et al.*, 2025). This tension is particularly evident in assessment co-design, where students may feel ill-equipped to critique or shape academic standards, despite being the primary participants of HE. The project here described has sought to challenge these concerns in a number of ways, including upskilling and providing scaffolded support to the AA interns so that they feel equipped to effectively engage in evaluating and critiquing their experiences to support enhancement. However, this caused some unexpected discussion as to the role of the interns within the AA project. The interns were keen to retain their ‘student’ identity and be positioned as such with colleagues and academic staff, rather than be seen fully as ‘equal partners’.

Cabral *et al.* (2023) emphasise the importance of recognising students’ lived experiences in co-creation. Their work shows that when students are positioned as experts in their own learning journeys, they develop a stronger sense of agency and belonging. However, the authors caution that without clear frameworks for inclusion and recognition, co-creation may inadvertently reproduce existing inequalities, for example, with staff being ‘*dismissive of student contributions and expertise about how teaching and learning should be conducted*’ (Matthews *et al.*, 2018). This is one reason to disrupt the traditional power dynamics of student-staff communication by using alternative and creative methods. Owen and Wasiuk (2021) outline that in partnership work, no individual should be perceived as the ‘expert’. However, this can devalue the experience of students, and academic staff, as experts in their own experience and with particular expertise and agency to contribute. In our experience, ‘expertise’ is a valuable and important tool for positioning the contributions of students and the

AA interns. It is the quality of the relationships and engagement that matters more than the equality of the partnership between staff and students (Walton 2013).

Matthews *et al.* (2018) explore the creation of new identities within the student-partnership working, suggesting that it can 'dissolve deep-seated hierarchical boundaries that traditionally separate and designate the roles of 'staff' and 'student''. As we explore in this case study, this delineation between roles can be an important one, and help students understand the value of their role as an expert 'student' in particular. Though it is important to recognise students as co-creators of content and policy, it is also vital that they are supported as individuals whose identities and emotional experiences shape their engagement *as students*, if that is the role and perspective they are bringing to a project. While it is through partnership work that students can reimagine themselves and staff members as both teachers and students (Cook-Sather and Luz 2015), reflecting upon this reconceptualisation can help student interns fully value their role as 'student', and enabling them to hold to this differentiation as their area of expertise.

Methods

In the final term of the 2024/5 academic year, a creative reflective workshop was facilitated by a member of the CHEP Assessment Consultancy, with experience in utilising creative methods, at the University of Southampton. The session invited participation from AA interns and staff from both the core consultancy and wider project team. In total, six participants attended: three AA interns, two members of the CHEP Assessment Consultancy, and one representative from the broader Advancing Assessment initiative. The facilitator was also a member of the CHEP Assessment Consultancy, but one that with whom the AA interns had not previously worked closely.

The session was designed to foster an environment where individuals could openly and equally engage in reflection and discussion. We thus adopted the creative method of model-making, in which participants were given materials to create an artefact based on their reflections, interpretations, and experiences. Gauntlett (2007) argues that creative tool, in this case the use of LEGO, enable participants to express complex ideas through metaphor and narrative, facilitating deeper reflection and engagement. This approach is particularly effective in partnership contexts, where traditional power hierarchies may inhibit open discussion.

The workshop had two phases:

The first was designed to focus the participants on the activities that AA interns were involved in, and how they felt about these. AA interns and staff worked in separate groups to reflect on the nature and impact of the AA interns' contributions to the project. AA interns were asked to identify what their job tasks were, and identify the most and least rewarding aspects of their roles. Participants were prompted to explain *why* areas of their role were most / least rewarding to help develop a collective understanding of their motivations for involvement in tasks and projects, and perceptions of the personal and professional value of activities undertaken.

The facilitator then:

- 1) briefly reminded participants of the SMP principle of co-design (having been initially introduced to it as part of their induction into their roles), defined as an activity or intentional approach aimed '*to combine the views, input and skills of people with many different perspectives to address a specific problem*' (Bradwell and Marr 2008, p. 17).
- 2) outlined the concept of 'making' as reflection, helping the participants to understand the rationale behind the use of a creative method (utilising LEGO) and the process of meaning-making to allow for '*deep, reflective engagement with individual experience*' (Culshaw 2019, p. 269).

The second phase engaged all participants in a creative task using LEGO to construct models representing their understanding of co-design and their role within it. This activity served as a prompt for a facilitated discussion on how co-design is conceptualised and enacted within the project. The facilitator encouraged participants to spend the whole time – thirty minutes – building their model. If they appeared to have finished before the end of the time, the facilitator prompted them to ask if there was any more to add, or change. After the 'making', participants shared their interpretations of their models and the choices made in construction. The facilitator probed the explanations with open questions ("what else?"), sought clarification and further elaboration to ensure clarity in understanding the outputs. Participants were also invited to make a note of the key features of their models on paper to ensure core meanings were captured. This also led to a broader conversation about the structures, relationships, and motivations underpinning collaborative work.

A final discussion allowed the interns to articulate areas of work with which they wished to engage with more deeply. Staff participants responded by exploring practical strategies to support these aspirations and enhance the visibility and impact of intern contributions.

The outputs of the workshop were captured (photos of the models made, and participant notes collected), and were written up in the form of a short report, along with thematic analysis following Brown and Collins (2021). This report was circulated to participants to ensure that interpretations and discussions were representative of the workshop discussions and the participants expressions of their reflections, before wider circulation.

In the context of this case study, the decision to use creative methods was grounded in evidence that such approaches can support identity exploration and relational understanding. James and Brookfield (2014) highlight that arts-based methods are particularly effective in surfacing emotional and experiential dimensions of learning, which are often overlooked in traditional evaluation frameworks. Further, Lubicz-Nawrocka and Simoni (2018) demonstrate how creative co-enquiry and reflection methods can democratise participation and encourage diverse voices in sensemaking. As such, the use of creative reflection in this study is intended to foreground both the relational dynamics of co-design and the diverse ways in which participants understand and articulate their roles within it.

The workshop and data collection and analysis have the ethical approval under the Centre for Higher Education Practice at the University of Southampton, ERGO id 94406.

Analysis

From the first phase of the reflective workshop, qualitative data revealed contrasting perspectives of co-design between AA interns and project staff. While not presented here, staff participants emphasised the value of AA interns' insights, particularly in informing ongoing work across the project. The AA interns, meanwhile, found the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of institutional processes relating to assessment design and strategic project management as a key benefit of their involvement. In this, they reported being able to '*discern and analyse [their] professors' pedagogical intentions*' (Cook-Sather and Luz 2015). This prompts a significant question about engagement and students' understanding of HE: How can we democratise this 'insider' knowledge for all students, so that it is made explicit not just to a selected group of student interns?

The AA interns consistently identified collaboration with peers, both within the Intern cohort and across the wider student body, as the most rewarding aspect of their role. This engagement fostered a sense of community and belonging, which they viewed as central to their contribution. When asked to reflect on the AA interns' work, staff predominantly focused on tangible outputs, such as data collection, analysis, and event organisation and management. The AA interns, by contrast, emphasised the more intangible contributions they make to the project. These included acting as a bridge between students and staff, facilitating engagement, and offering real-time student perspectives in assessment-related discussions with academic staff engaging in professional development workshops.

These themes continued into the second phase of the reflective workshop, where participants were asked to reflect on what they understood by co-design, and their role within it.

From the second phase of the workshop, we present three of the AA interns' LEGO models, alongside further discussion as part of the reflective workshop. Each model represents one of the AA interns understanding of, and their role within, the use of co-design within the project.



Figure 1. Model created by AA intern 1

Case Study

In figure 1, AA intern 1 described wanting to be able to engage in the development of, and have access to as part of their own studies, improved assessment practices, but they did not feel the need to be immersed in all things 'Advancing Assessment' to enjoy those benefits. This intern described the AA project – in contrast to the current student assessment experience – as the 'greener, innovative pastures', visible through a narrow window in the centre of the model. These good practices are accessible, but (currently) only with difficulty, and they have needed to find 'workarounds' to access them, using the 'pole' that the figure is holding.



Figure 2. Model created by AA intern 2

In figure 2, AA intern 2 described the university environment as a vehicle, with different and distinct 'sides' – students (in blue) and staff (in red). They work collaboratively but from different perspectives to 'drive' the university forward, and there needs to be balance between the two in order to be successful.



Figure 3. Model created by AA intern 3

With another vehicle model (figure 3) AA intern 3 discussed the university as the base, with the students on top adding the 'colour' to the institution. The plant represents the need for students to be nurtured in this environment in order to thrive. They discussed the need for collaboration between both groups for the university to be successful. Like AA intern 1, this intern's self is represented by the ladder, which acts a 'bridge' between students and staff, and, because of their role within the intern team, between the AA interns and other members of AA staff.

Through their LEGO models, all three AA interns created deliberate distinctions between staff and students within the university as part of the co-design process; they differentiated their own role from that of *other* students in the co-design process, identifying that, in some ways, they were neither student nor staff, but had 'access' to both roles as an AA intern (the 'window' in figure 1, the 'bridge' in figure 2, and the 'ladder' in figure 3).

In discussing their models, they revealed that they saw the value in their expertise and role as 'student' as opposed to 'staff' (Owen and Wasiuk 2021) and that, while the traditional hierarchies of the university were less prominent (Matthews *et al.*, 2018), they felt the distinction was important to protect their identities within co-design. They wanted to act as a 'bridge' (figure 2) between other students and university staff and offer an 'insiders' experience of being a student. One intern (figure 3) specifically described this as being the 'naïve voice' or 'semi-naïve voice' in discussions with staff – something they felt would be lost if they were 'fully part of' the AA project and the barriers between staff and student were fully broken down.

Through their work as AA interns, and their growing understanding of the pedagogies that underpin their university experience as students, they were themselves able to recognise the importance of their lived experiences and the worth and expertise it brings to co-design (Cabral *et al.*, 2023). Interestingly, they reflected on the different motivations for being involved in the work of co-design between staff and students. They understood the role of students as being part of, but not *immersed* in it, whereas for staff, working towards the advancement of assessment is part of their everyday, ongoing work. This is visualised within the models as

staff and students being distinct and separate ‘groups’ – staff on one side, or in one area, and students on the other.

By contrast, in the models made by staff (not presented here), this distinction was not present – staff and students working on AA were part of the same ‘side’ or area, whereas the colleagues and structures they are supporting in that change are positioned as the ‘opposite’. This represents a differing understanding of co-design, and the relationship in working with students as partners, that we – as a staff team – needed to reflect upon in order to support the AA interns in developing identities that they were comfortable with, and creating a stronger sense of belonging to the project (Cabral *et al.*, 2023).

Evaluation and concluding remarks

While this study draws on a small, context-specific sample within a single institutional initiative, so constraining the transferability of findings, the findings and insights gathered are consistent with themes and conclusions found in the wider literature. This case study underscores the value of student-staff partnerships in assessment co-design, particularly when students are positioned not only as contributors but as change agents within the institution. Our AA interns demonstrate that students bring unique perspectives that enrich curriculum development, especially when their lived experiences and disciplinary diversity are actively acknowledged. The interns’ emphasis on intangible contributions highlights the importance of relational labour in co-creation, such as building, negotiating and maintaining relationships in the collaborative processes, which is often overlooked in traditional evaluation frameworks that focus on what is produced, rather than on how collaboration and co-design are enacted.

Further limitations include the use of paid AA interns as participants. This may introduce dynamics distinct from those in voluntary partnership models; while remuneration may widen access, it may also position students within employer-employee relationships, shaping how they engage. While the insights offer a useful account of co-design within this setting, they may not be readily generalised across other institutional, disciplinary, or partnership contexts. As such, our findings should be interpreted as situated and exploratory, rather than broadly representative.

For practitioners and institutions seeking to implement or refine partnership models, this study may, however, offer some recommendations to be adaptable to further contexts. First, institutions must recognise and respond to the emotional and identity-related dimensions of partnership. Matthews (2017) argues that students frequently feel uncertain about their legitimacy as contributors alongside academic staff, which can constrain their participation unless partnership practices explicitly foreground relational care and ethical attentiveness. Facilitating students’ recognition of the epistemic value of their position as students can support the development of identities that both preserve their position as ‘student’ while helping them to understand that standpoint as a legitimate form of expertise.

Second, a key implication of this research is the need for regular reflective practice within partnership work. Reflection should not be a one-off exercise but a continuous process that informs both the design and evolution of co-creation initiatives. This includes creating structured opportunities for students and staff to revisit their roles, expectations, and

experiences over time. Creative methods enable participants to surface tacit knowledge and reframe their understanding of partnership dynamics. The use of LEGO in this study exemplifies how such methods may facilitate deeper dialogue and shared meaning-making, surfacing otherwise hidden aspects of the relationship between co-creation participants, and allowing students to articulate what they want and value from the partnership work.

Moreover, iterative reflection supports the development of trust and mutual recognition, both essential for sustaining authentic partnerships. As Omland *et al.* (2025) emphasise, co-creation is not a static interaction, but a dynamic process shaped by dialogue, positioning, agency, and voice. Embedding reflective cycles into partnership work allows these dimensions to be continually negotiated and realigned, ensuring that co-design remains responsive to both student and institutional needs. It also creates structured opportunities for staff and interns to collaboratively to examine experiences, expectations, and contributions, supporting interns to recognise their role and develop confidence in their expertise. Working in partnership through reflection enables staff not only to facilitate engagement, but also to co-construct understanding with interns, fostering deeper, more meaningful participation over time.

In conclusion, the AA interns initiative offers a compelling model for inclusive and relational co-design in assessment. Its success lies not only in the outputs produced but in the processes that foster belonging, agency, and shared ownership. For others working in this space, the challenge is to move beyond tokenistic involvement and towards sustained, reflective, and ethically grounded partnership practice which may only be fully achieved in co-design with students.

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