

Curriculum Co-Creation in Vocational Higher Education: a Case Study From a Micro Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

Student engagement and ownership are persistent challenges in higher education (HE), particularly in small, vocationally led institutions. This study investigates how curriculum co-creation can address these challenges within a United Kingdom (UK) micro higher education institution (HEI) specialising in live events education. The institution has a diverse student body, comprising a high proportion of neurodivergent and non-traditional learners. Students reported limited influence over curriculum decisions and a sense of tokenism in existing feedback mechanisms.

Eleven undergraduate students participated in semi-structured interviews, analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed a strong interest in co-creation, with students identifying benefits such as increased motivation, confidence and a sense of community. Participants also highlighted the need for clear structures, scaffolding and inclusivity, alongside concerns about academic standards and readiness.

The study emphasises the importance of staged implementation, dialogue-based feedback and harnessing relational strengths in small cohorts. It contributes to the literature by providing insights from a vocational micro HEI – an under-represented context – and offers practical recommendations for institutions seeking to move from consultation to genuine partnership in curriculum design.

Key Words: co-creation, vocational higher education, student engagement, student voice, micro institutions

Introduction

Co-creation has become increasingly discussed in higher education (HE) as an approach intended to strengthen engagement, ownership and student experience by positioning students as partners in shaping their learning (Bovill *et al.*, 2016; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018); its benefits, such as increased independence, critical thinking and deeper learning, have been documented in large universities (Dunne and Owen, 2013). However, its application in small, specialist, vocationally led institutions remains underexplored. This study examines how co-creation in curriculum design can enhance engagement, ownership and learning experiences at a United Kingdom (UK) micro higher education institution (HEI). For the purpose of this study 'micro HEI' refers to a small specialist HE provider characterised by low student numbers

(under 300 undergraduates) offering a limited specialist portfolio of vocationally focused programmes.

The growth of consumerism in UK HE has intensified since tuition fees rose to £9,000 in 2012 (Brown and Hillman, 2023). Students are increasingly positioned as customers, with education seen as a product purchased for career advancement (Tomlinson, 2018). While this marketised model has shaped student expectations, it risks reducing participation to satisfaction measures and weakening student ownership of learning (Pham *et al.*, 2022). These challenges are especially pronounced in vocational HEIs, where emphasis on industry-focused skills may sideline student voice and critical engagement (Davis and Parmenter, 2021).

This project takes place in a specialist micro HEI offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in live events education. The institution operates from an industrial site with active live events businesses, embedding employability at the centre of its provision. While this practice-led model aligns well with industry needs, it presents challenges for student engagement and ownership. To date, the institution has not formally integrated co-creation at the modular level; this study presents an opportunity to explore how collaborative curriculum design might improve learning experiences in this context.

Student engagement is defined here as active participation, investment and emotional commitment to learning (Owusu-Agyeman and Moroeroe, 2023). Ownership, on the other hand, denotes agency, control and a personal connection to the educational journey (Shukla and Arora, 2023). 'Co-creation', as used in this study, refers to students and staff working in partnership to shape curricula, thereby redistributing power in pedagogical relationships (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). By developing agency and collaboration, co-creation may help students move from passive consumers to active participants, developing transferable skills and taking greater ownership of their learning.

This study explores how these concepts can be applied in a micro HEI context, where research into co-creation may be scarce, but the potential benefits of the method merit scrutiny.

Literature review

Achieving full student engagement and ownership are persistent challenges in HE, especially in smaller institutions delivering vocational provision. Co-creation in curriculum design has been presented as a response (Omland *et al.*, 2025), yet its practice is uneven and under-researched. This review considers the theoretical foundations, models, challenges, and gaps in the literature, with a focus on the implications for micro-HEIs.

Neoliberalism and the Student Role

Market reforms have placed students as consumers, so commodifying HE (Brown and Hillman, 2023), undermining student ownership and creating transactional relationships with staff (Tomlinson, 2018). Although students demand excellent teaching and resources, their

role in shaping curricula often remains marginal. Such dynamics complicate efforts to encourage active partnership.

Theoretical foundations

Constructivism situates students as co-constructors of knowledge, emphasising agency and context (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). Co-creation extends this principle by inviting students into curricular decisions, situating learning in authentic, participatory processes (Trinidad, 2019). Relational pedagogy strengthens this foundation by highlighting trust, care and shared power as essential conditions for meaningful engagement (Bovill, 2020; Gravett *et al.*, 2021; Bell, 2021). By these collective means, curriculum design becomes a collaborative and ethical practice, rather than a transactional one based on pre-existing hierarchical structures.

Models of partnership

Ladder frameworks, such as those theorised by Arnstein (1969), Hart (1992) and Bovill and Bulley (2011), conceptualise student participation hierarchically, ranging from tokenistic to genuine partnership. Critics argue that such models oversimplify fluid dynamics and imply linear progress. More recent approaches, including those by Advance HE (2016) and Killam *et al.* (2023), emphasise reciprocity and contextual flexibility. These models recognise partnership as negotiated rather than fixed, taking various forms across disciplines and institutional settings.

Barriers to co-creation

Authentic co-creation faces recurring barriers. Tokenism persists when consultation replaces genuine influence (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Patrick, 2023; Carey, 2013). Student readiness varies, as some students lack the confidence, skills or motivation to engage, especially in vocational settings characterised by educational inequality (Bergmark and Westman, 2016; Killam *et al.*, 2016). Staff workload, institutional inertia and entrenched hierarchies further constrain practice (Bovill *et al.*, 2016). Without addressing these conditions, co-creation risks reinforcing the very inequities it seeks to disrupt.

Gaps in the literature

Three gaps stand out:

First, existing co-creation research has mostly focused on large, research-intensive universities where institutional structures, funding and staff capacity facilitate student-staff partnerships (Bovill, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018).

Second, vocational and practice-based contexts remain under-represented in co-creation research, which is often focused on traditional disciplines, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), the humanities and the social sciences (Bovill, 2020;

Abegglen, 2024). There is limited research on co-creation in practice-based and vocational disciplines – such as live events, performance, and the arts – where learning is experiential, collaborative and closely aligned with industry standards (Fletcher *et al.*, 2022).

Third, co-creation research is often driven by large-scale, institutionally funded initiatives (Healey *et al.*, 2014), which may not be feasible in micro HEIs. Few studies explore small-scale, relational approaches to co-creation embedded within cohesive teaching teams.

Co-creation in curriculum design challenges consumerist models by drawing on constructivist and relational pedagogies. It may improve engagement and ownership, but this depends on navigating tokenism, readiness and structural barriers. The fact that current scholarship under-represents vocational contexts and smaller institutions instead points to the need for research that develops context-sensitive, relationally grounded practices of co-creation.

Method

A qualitative case study design was adopted to explore student perceptions of curriculum co-creation within a vocational micro HEI in the UK. This institution specialises in live events education, with close staff-student relationships and a diverse student body, including high proportions of neurodivergent and non-traditional learners. Its small size and vocational focus provided a useful context for examining co-creation.

Convenience-sampling recruited undergraduate participants. Initial email invitations generated no responses, so in-class invitations were used, resulting in eleven volunteers aged from nineteen to thirty-two (seven female, three male, one non-binary). The group represented a range of courses and year groups and included both neurodiverse and neurotypical individuals. The institution currently enrolls approximately 250 undergraduate students across four programmes focused on live events education. Cohort sizes range from ten to seventy students depending on course focus, with the largest cohort representing a broad-based programme covering many backstage disciplines within the live events sector. Though modest, the sample aligns with guidance that between six and twelve interviews are typically sufficient for thematic analysis (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams in June 2025 generated the data. Each interview – transcribed using Teams' automatic transcription feature and manually checked for accuracy – lasted from thirty to forty minutes. Colleagues' and supervisors' feedback refined the fifteen open-ended questions to make them clear and accessible. The interviews explored students' experiences of engagement, their perceptions of current curriculum design and their understanding of co-creation. Questions aimed to move responses from descriptive to reflective; for example: "Can you describe how much input you feel you currently have in shaping your course?" and "What do you think co-creation in curriculum design might look like in your course?" Follow-up prompts explored responses in greater depth. Providing questions in advance supported transparency and reduced participant anxiety.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. This six-phase process – familiarisation, coding, theme development, reviewing, refining and reporting – was applied inductively, with codes developed directly from the data. Transcripts were manually

coded, and themes were actively constructed by clustering related codes to capture both shared and divergent perspectives.

The researcher occupied a dual role, as both lecturer and interviewer – viz., as an insider within the research context – thus possibly influencing participant responses, particularly where students felt inclined to align their answers with perceived expectations. Safeguards – confirmation that participation was voluntary and assurances that involvement would be anonymised and have no effect on academic outcomes – aimed to counter this possibility.

The researcher, recognising that personal position could shape both data generation and interpretation, maintained a reflexive approach throughout the research process and kept reflective notes during analysis to identify assumptions, interrogate interpretations and support transparency in theme development.

The University of Hull granted ethical approval. In line with British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2024) guidelines, participants provided written and verbal consent; pseudonyms guaranteed their anonymity and participants fully understood their withdrawal rights. The researcher stored data securely on institutional systems, to be subsequently destroyed in line with university policy.

Analysis

Semi-structured interviews with eleven undergraduate students highlighted both the potential benefits of co-creation and the structural and relational challenges inherent in this context. Analysis generated four overarching themes: contextual constraints on engagement; relational strengths and trust; student perceptions of co-creation benefits; conditions and barriers for effective co-creation.

Contextual constraints on engagement

Students described the curriculum as largely fixed and predetermined, with decisions made at hierarchical levels beyond their reach. While some modules offered a degree of agency, participants perceived most feedback mechanisms – such as end-of-module surveys and course committees – as symbolic, rarely resulting in visible change. They reported tutor responsiveness as inconsistent and larger class sizes as limiting participation, so reducing confidence in institutional processes: *“There’s been a couple of cases... where we’ve given feedback and feel like it’s just gone into this big black hole”* (Participant 10). These findings suggest that structural rigidity and unclear feedback loops limit meaningful engagement, reinforcing prior literature on student tokenism in curriculum processes (Bovill *et al.*, 2016; Davis and Parmenter, 2021).

Relational strengths and trust

Despite these constraints, students consistently drew attention to the value of strong, approachable staff-student relationships and small cohort sizes. These relational strengths

allowed dialogue and concerns to be voiced and promoted a sense of inclusion: “*With it being a small group... we all feel heard and that we can kind of speak to the tutors*” (Participant 6). The findings support the notion that micro HEIs’ smaller, vocationally focused environments offer conditions conducive to partnership and co-creation, in accordance with theories of relational pedagogy and the importance of trust and reciprocity in student engagement (Gravett *et al.*, 2021; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017).

Perceived benefits of co-creation

Participants expressed a strong interest in co-creation, identifying several potential benefits, including increased motivation, a stronger sense of ownership, confidence and preparation for collaborative, real-world professional environments. Students emphasised that contributing to curriculum decisions could foster agency and engagement while bridging academic learning with employability skills: “*I think you'd be a lot more motivated... because you like you've done it. You can't not want to do it*” (Participant 8). These reflections are consistent with constructivist perspectives on student-centred learning and the empowerment potential of co-creation (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978).

Conditions and barriers for effective co-creation

While students valued co-creation, they stressed the importance of scaffolding, preparation and clearly defined roles. They raised concerns about readiness, academic standards, workload and equitable participation, particularly for neurodivergent or less confident students. Dialogue-based approaches, such as small group discussions or focus groups, were suggested as more effective than impersonal online surveys. Participants emphasised that staff should retain responsibility for core academic content, while students could contribute productively to such aspects as content delivery and assessment design: “*It should... be like rearranged so that the students respect the lecturer's authority and their expertise*” (Participant 2). These insights confirm the importance of structured, transparent and scaffolded co-creation processes, in tune with Bovill's (2020) emphasis on shared responsibility and Advance HE's (2016) flexible partnership frameworks.

The findings suggest that small, vocationally focused HEIs can exploit relational and structural advantages to implement co-creation incrementally, starting with module-level initiatives or project-based assessments. Close staff-student relationships, combined with scaffolded preparation and clear communication, create an environment encouraging informed and relevant student contributions while maintaining high academic standards. Nevertheless, institutions and their staff must, to guarantee sustainability and inclusivity, be prepared to acknowledge barriers related to curriculum inflexibility, institutional hierarchies and student workload.

In summary, analysis of student perceptions reveals a strong appetite for co-creation, tempered by awareness of the skills, structures and support required for it to be effective. Students' insights demonstrate that co-creation is not about removing staff authority but redistributing power within negotiated boundaries. The micro HEI context, with its small

cohorts and vocational focus, offers a promising environment for piloting co-creation initiatives that can enhance engagement, ownership and learning outcomes, thereby laying the groundwork for evidence-informed practices tailored to small specialist institutions.

Evaluation

This case study provides empirical evidence of how co-creation in curriculum design can enhance student engagement, ownership and learning experiences within a small, vocationally focused micro HEI. Findings from eleven student interviews indicate strong interest in co-creation, tempered by awareness of structural constraints, the need for scaffolding and concerns about inclusivity and academic standards. Evaluation of these findings identifies several key implications for practice, barriers that must be addressed and recommendations made for implementing co-creation in similar institutional contexts.

Implications for practice

Students said that co-creation could increase motivation, engagement and a sense of ownership over their learning, particularly when applied to module-level projects or assessments. However, effective implementation requires clear frameworks, role negotiation and pre-engagement preparation to support knowledgeable and confident contributions. Pilot initiatives using pre-existing, flexible modules – such as project-based assessments – could provide a manageable starting point for introducing co-creation while limiting staff and student workload. These small-scale pilots allow for iterative refinement, embed reflective practices and provide a basis for broader institutional adoption.

Strong staff-student relationships and small cohort sizes emerged as critical enablers of meaningful co-creation. Close relational dynamics foster dialogue, trust, and inclusivity, supporting students to contribute their perspectives safely. Taking advantage of these relational strengths, micro HEIs can scaffold co-creation through structured workshops, focus groups or guided co-review sessions. Inclusive communication strategies are essential, particularly to ensure equitable participation for neurodivergent or less confident students. Maintaining transparency about decision-making responsibilities and boundaries of influence further supports trust and prevents tokenistic engagement.

Barriers and considerations

Despite clear enthusiasm for co-creation, students identified persistent obstacles: rigid curriculum structures, inconsistent responsiveness to feedback and hierarchical decision-making processes. These challenges resonate with critiques of tokenistic participation in the broader literature (Bovill et al., 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2014), suggesting that institutional culture must also change alongside practice. Concerns about readiness, workload and inclusivity – particularly for neurodivergent or less confident students – strongly suggest the value of scaffolding, role negotiation and explicit alignment with academic standards. Without these safeguards, co-creation risks reproducing inequalities rather than reducing them.

Generalisability and contextual relevance

As a single-case study in a small, specialist HEI, findings are context-specific and may not be directly generalisable to larger institutions or those with less vocational focus. Nevertheless, insights regarding the importance of relational dynamics, scaffolding, flexible frameworks and inclusive engagement are transferable to other small or vocationally led HEIs. Incremental implementation, module-level piloting and careful alignment with institutional policies represent strategies that can inform co-creation practices beyond this case study.

Recommendations for future implementation

Practical steps for micro HEIs include:

1. Starting small with pilot modules or project-based assessments.
2. Embedding scaffolding workshops and preparatory sessions for students.
3. Developing clear guidelines on roles, responsibilities and decision-making boundaries.
4. Utilising dialogue-based feedback and co-review mechanisms to ensure inclusivity.
5. Reflecting on and iteratively refining co-creation processes to align with both student learning needs and institutional constraints.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that co-creation may enhance engagement, ownership and learning in a small, vocational HE context if implemented incrementally and with appropriate scaffolding. The findings contribute to continuing debates about the possibilities and limits of partnership in HE through scrutiny of a micro HEI context that is largely absent from existing scholarship. By focusing on the relational strengths and structural challenges of small, vocational institutions, this case study shows how co-creation may work beyond large, research-intensive universities. Importantly, it suggests that co-creation is not simply an optional activity but a practice that can reshape power relations, strengthen inclusivity and challenge consumerist framings of HE. Future research should build on these insights by examining co-creation longitudinally, across disciplines and institutional types, to deepen understanding of its transformative potential within an increasingly marketised sector.

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