

Co-Creation in Higher Education: a Pedagogic Approach for Developing Employability Skills

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Abstract

This paper critically reflects on a student–staff co-creation initiative to enhance employability in the BSc (Hons) Public Health programme at the University of Greenwich. Held once annually in both 2024 and 2025 (and, now, from 2026, twice-yearly), the ‘Employability Gala’ is an extra-curricular event taking the form of an online webinar, with guest speakers from the public health sector. This study deals with the 2024 and 2025 galas, when fourteen undergraduate public health students and six members of staff were involved across both events. The primary purpose of the gala is to broaden students’ perspectives of the range of possible pathways and roles within public health. Implementing a co-creation approach to deliver each gala also seeks to support students’ professional skills development and enhance career readiness. Collaborating with students and industry professionals to co-design and co-deliver aspects of the curriculum supports the University’s strategy to create an inclusive and collaborative learning experience that develops competent and capable professionals.

Adopting an autoethnographic approach, this paper reflects the lived experiences of two staff members and two students who participated in the 2024 and 2025 galas.

Keywords: curriculum co-creation, student-staff partnerships, employability

Introduction

Co-creation in higher education (HE) is a collaborative approach that involves students in shaping their learning alongside educators (Bovill, 2019). This inclusive pedagogy is increasingly recognised for enhancing engagement, strengthening ownership and developing key employability skills (Carbone *et al.*, 2025). Traditionally, HE institutions (HEIs) have assumed responsibility for graduate outcomes (GOs), with HE policies using GOs as key performance indicators and marketing tools in an increasingly competitive sector (Olo and Correia, 2021). More recently, policy directions in the United Kingdom (UK) emphasise the importance of collaboration between HE, students and industry to embed within the curriculum authentic employability opportunities to enhance career readiness (Chapman, Emambocus and Obembe, 2023).

In alignment with this policy direction, the University of Greenwich ‘*This is our time Strategy 2030*’ outlines its commitment to working in partnership with students and industry professionals to develop career-ready graduates (UoG, 2024). The focus is on delivering an inclusive curriculum, scaffolding students to become independent learners and competent professionals. This includes co-creating the learning experience within and beyond the curriculum, to enhance student experience and improve GOs.

The University of Greenwich measures GOs through the 'Graduate Outcomes Survey' (GOS) and reports this data annually to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (UoG, 2026). The GOS is a key metric in university league tables, which play a significant role in attracting prospective students. The local faculty target is 88% and GOs for the BSc Public Health programme stand currently at 67%. To address this gap and in line with '*This is our time Strategy*', employability is embedded across the core curriculum, with skills' mapping against the 'Public Health Skills and Knowledge Framework' (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, 2023) at level 4, industry engagement via guest speakers in class and a forty-hour work experience at level 6. Engagement with real-world experiences enables the application of theory, develops practical skills and strengthens learner engagement, ownership and academic progression (Khan *et al.*, 2025; Zeivots *et al.*, 2025).

Alongside this, extra-curricular employability activities are embedded within the wider non-credit-bearing curriculum, extending learning beyond the formal curriculum into extra-curricular contexts. Such activities include student debates, conferences and targeted employability events, such as the Employability Gala. Extra-curricular activities form an important part of the student experience and support learning, wellbeing, networking and employability (Swinger, 2022; Chapman *et al.*, 2023).

Conceptualising co-creation in HE

Co-creation encompasses overlapping concepts, such as co-design, co-production and student–staff partnership, all of which emphasise collaborative learning processes (Omland *et al.*, 2025). Emphasising collaboration, a definition offered by Bovill *et al.* (2016, p.196) states that “co-creation of learning and teaching occurs when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches”.

With the shift towards embedding employability within the curriculum, the integration of industry is often conceptualised as 'industry partnered learning' (IPL). Carbone *et al.* (2025, p.126) define IPL as “...industry engagement and professional connections into curricula”, leading to “authentic, industry-ready pedagogy”. This approach aligns discipline knowledge with real-world application, thus allowing students to make connections between theory and practice, creating an authentic learning environment reflecting real-world problems (Carbone *et al.*, 2025).

HE professional sector context

The focus on enhancing student success is underpinned by best practice set out by Advance HE (2026). Their framework '*Essential Frameworks for Student Success*' is designed to support HEIs to deliver an inclusive education, by fostering a culture of engagement to improve GOs. The framework outlines principles for embedding employability within the curriculum through work experience, extra-curricular activities and wider career development opportunities. The emphasis is on working in partnership with students to enhance engagement by creating a collaborative and reciprocal learning environment.

Case study context

This paper presents a critical reflection on two co-created employability galas (Galas, 2024/5) on the BSc Public Health Programme at the University of Greenwich in 2024 and 2025.

When delivered only by staff in 2022 and 2023, the galas attracted low attendance among students. In 2024, in response to this, the co-authoring staff members instituted delivery of the gala by means of a co-created and inclusive approach involving students and industry professionals, thus eschewing the traditional hierarchical, staff-led extra-curricular events and empowering students to become active participants in their learning (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023).

The authors include two staff members and two students who participated in designing and delivering both galas in our study. Each gala featured about seven industry speakers, including a keynote talk, who mapped out career pathways, summarised sector trends and offered employability advice. Undergraduate public health students – five in 2024 and nine in 2025 – took part in planning and delivery, with the support of six staff members.

The Public Health programme has approximately 350 students across levels 3-6; the galas were also accessible to the wider Public Health Portfolio cohort of around 260 students (including two MSc programmes).

Literature review

Research demonstrates that many graduates enter the workforce with a lack of career readiness, thus illustrating the persistent divide between theoretical learning and practical application (Olo and Correia, 2021; Carbone *et al.*, 2025). This challenges the long-held perception of HEIs as the sole producers of knowledge and reinforces the case for stronger collaboration with industry and links with real-world practice (Carbone *et al.*, 2025; Khan *et al.*, 2025).

Curriculum co-creation is conceptualised as a collaborative process in which students and staff jointly shape aspects of teaching and learning (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). It is underpinned by such values as shared responsibility, reciprocity, trust and mutual respect, positioning both students and staff as active contributors to knowledge production (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023).

Evidence shows that co-creation can be implemented with structured participatory processes. For example, values-led approaches identify shared priorities, such as autonomy, fairness and trust, which then informs the wider curriculum (Galpin *et al.*, 2022). These values shape both learning experiences and social dynamics, although tensions have been identified in relation to power, participation and deep-rooted hierarchies in academia (Abbott and Cook-Sather, 2020).

Research demonstrates that co-creation fosters dialogue, agency and voice, challenging traditional hierarchies and enabling more inclusive pedagogical practices (Omeland *et al.*, 2025). Expected outcomes include improved relationships, better engagement and greater student empowerment, all in turn contributing to student success.

Importantly, co-creation is not without limitations. Participation is often uneven, and institutional constraints, including the time pressures, workload and uncertainties involved the process, can limit its efficacy (Galpin *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, the literature consistently frames co-creation as a transformative but context-dependent strategy.

A central theme across the literature is the integration of employability within and beyond the curriculum (Carbone *et al.*, 2025). Research points out that GOs are shaped by a combination of curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. These contribute to skill development

and professional identity formation, with co-curricular and extra-curricular activities playing a significant role in graduate skills development (Swingler, 2022).

Nevertheless, research confirms a persistent gap between academic curricula and labour market expectations, despite institutional efforts to embed employability skills (Olo and Correia, 2021; Carbone *et al.*, 2025). In response, concepts such as IPL advocate a whole-programme, scaffolded approach linking theory with real-world practice to enhance career readiness (Carbone *et al.*, 2025). Overall, the literature supports a holistic view of employability, where learning extends across multiple domains and is strengthened by authentic and real-world application.

In the context of the BSc Public Health programme, the emphasis on improving GOs aligns with the need to prepare students for real-world practice. When students share responsibility and are given a sense of purpose through co-creation, they can develop the transferable skills that they need to translate theories into effective health policies and interventions in future practice (Thompson, 2023).

Methodology

The lead authors adopt an autoethnographic approach to explore the lived experiences of co-creation in relation to the galas (Bochner and Ellis, 2022) and examine the 'doing' of co-creation and the perceived benefits and challenges (Elliott *et al.*, 2020) of implementing it in an extra-curricular context, offering insight into how collaborative practices may support employability development in HE. Autoethnography values lived experience as informative data for understanding social and organisational processes (Bochner and Ellis, 2022). This is particularly relevant as both co-authoring staff members are alumni of this programme and so have a dual positionality. In the context of this paper, our role as staff was to guide and support students in co-creation practices for designing and delivering the galas.

The two members of staff, following co-creation principles that promote authentic student-staff partnership, sought to weaken the grip of traditional hierarchies in HE by empowering students via shared decision-making processes (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill, 2023). Co-creating the galas aimed to enhance student learning, build confidence and agency and develop employability skills (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill, 2023). These principles are in tune with the University's values: inclusivity, collaboration and measurable positive effects (UoG, 2024). This means more collaborative opportunities involving students and industry partners to facilitate links with real-world practice. Thus, the galas presented an ideal opportunity to apply co-creation principles by engaging students in roles that would contribute to shaping and hosting the delivery.

The students participating in gala delivery

The co-authoring staff members recruited students to participate in the galas via lectures, Moodle communications and the active promotion of module and programme leaders. Students from across the year groups participated: five in 2024 and nine in 2025. The co-authoring students took part in both galas. The staff members held a series of capacity-building meetings with the recruits, offering insights into and experiences of delivering a webinar and drawing into the discussion these students' prior experiences. Thus, people with

diverse roles, perspectives and experiences helped to develop innovative ideas for the galas and so were representative of the core values of co-creation (Omland *et al.*, 2025). Significant aspects of their contribution were agreeing the gala format, sourcing the speakers and allocating event-planning and delivery roles.

Students were able to volunteer for roles and responsibilities according to their personal interests and sense of their own capacity to fulfil them. Between them, the students covered all outward-facing roles, which included: chairing the Gala, presenting and interviewing guest speakers and facilitating the question and answer (Q&A) session. The degree of participation by students enhanced engagement and strengthened student-staff work in partnership (Galpin *et al.*, 2022). The co-authoring students took a lead role in both galas. Both students were active members of the student-led Green Public Health Society (GPH Society), with one student holding the society's chair post.

All participating students were involved in planning and delivery of all aspects of the galas, supported by the co-authoring staff members and two other members of the teaching team.

Engaging industry professionals

Working collaboratively involved integrating guest speakers into the planning of the galas, in keeping with authentic co-creation practices in which participants share responsibility and ownership (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). Speakers were primarily sourced from staff professional networks across local government, public health, environmental health and the National Health Service (NHS). Keynote speakers included directors of public health, who outlined current sector trends and employability requirements; this, too, accorded with the principles of IPL, which places knowledge production as a shared endeavour between HEIs and industry professionals, who bring sector priorities and contextualised learning into the student experience (Carbone *et al.*, 2025). Alumni speakers from organisations such as the UK Health Security Agency and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) further illustrated diverse career pathways, so inspiring current students. Students collaborated with speakers to co-develop content, presentation styles and discussion points, so fulfilling gala expectations. Opportunities to draw on the experiences of alumni are recognised as fundamental to building students' professional confidence; they also encourage a shared sense of responsibility among industry professionals for supporting the development of the future workforce (Olo and Correia, 2021).

Self-reflection on co-creation practices

Perceived benefits of co-creation by co-authoring students:

Curriculum co-creation is widely recognised within HE for its capacity to generate both personal and professional benefits (Khan *et al.*, 2025). For us as the co-authoring students, participation in the galas provided opportunities to develop key competencies and attributes closely aligned with employability, including confidence, communication, teamwork, public speaking, stakeholder engagement and event coordination. Evidence of our skills development is demonstrated through our critical reflections, guided by Gibbs' Reflective

Cycle (1988). We and the co-authoring staff members presented our reflections at a lightning talk on 'student-staff work in partnership' at the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) symposium on 'Students and Staff Working in Partnership: co-creation in higher education; hosted by the UoG in June 2025.

During the lightning talk, we explained how co-creation functioned as a pedagogical approach to enhancing our employability skills. We both experienced increased confidence in communication and public-speaking, alongside the development of practical competencies such as planning and delivering a webinar, chairing sessions and managing Q&A discussions. Reflecting on our participation across two galas, we identified a shift, during the second gala, towards greater responsibility and autonomy, alongside a deeper appreciation of collaborative working. This confirms the development of a shared sense of ownership, a key outcome associated with co-creation (Hall *et al.*, 2022).

Our reflections demonstrate that participating in the galas contributed to hands-on leadership experience: we led aspects of the galas and helped peers to engage in subsequent events, such as managing effective timekeeping, addressing technical challenges (e.g., poor Wi-Fi connectivity) and implementing – and recognising the importance of so doing – contingency plans. Beyond skills development, we particularly valued the opportunity to engage with industry professionals, as these interactions provided insight into real-world public health practice and enabled us to build our professional networks, including connections via LinkedIn, thereby enhancing our employability prospects (Carbone *et al.*, 2025).

Challenges of translating co-creation into practice

Despite the overall positive perception of co-creation as a pedagogical approach to develop employability skills, practical implementation remains challenging. We, the co-authoring staff members and students, reflected on the challenges inherent in embedding co-creation in the context of traditional hierarchies and power dynamics within academia (Abbott and Cook-Sather, 2020). We acknowledged that co-creation principles and student-staff partnerships dependent on reciprocity and mutual trust may not sit comfortably with established institutional culture (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill, 2023).

We considered that agency and confidence varied across tasks and among students. For example, we, the co-authoring students, felt confident about taking ownership of promotional flyer development and event promotion, as well as of management of the registration process via Eventbrite. As active members of the GPH Society, we had prior experience of delivering student events and were therefore self-assured about undertaking tasks for the galas (Hall *et al.*, 2022). By contrast, as students, we both recalled that we had initially lacked experience in and confidence about chairing a webinar, facilitating Q&A and delivering all technical functions, such as muting people and overseeing the chat function. However, supportive scaffolding by staff members significantly improved our self-reliance in those leading roles. These reflections demonstrate how co-creation practices can nurture and enhance constructive relationships between students and staff to boost both learning and self-esteem (Bovill, 2019).

During the planning process, we, the co-authoring staff members, reflected on how some participating students appeared to lack confidence and autonomy to carry out their tasks, such as drafting interview questions and adhering to deadlines. Students relied on staff to give their

work a stamp of approval and to set deadlines, mirroring the traditional hierarchical roles within academia (Abbott and Cook-Sather, 2020). We, staff members, reflected on how we continued to assume main ownership of the galas, keeping track of deadlines and tasks, with students relying on us for guidance and support, thus reflecting existing power dynamics within academia (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). As staff members, we also reflected on feeling anxiety when relinquishing responsibility for tasks for the galas to students: the very epitome of academics who hold a deficit view of students as partners in HE and so have resistance to power sharing (Bovill, 2013).

For co-authoring staff members and students, our experience does evidence some of the challenges in achieving co-creation, including 1) a lack of shared understanding of that very concept (Lubicz Nawrocka, 2023) and 2) the powerful influence of institutional pressures (Zeivots *et al.*, 2025). Clear expectations and responsibilities from the outset are essential to avoid confusion in co-creation (Elliott, Robson and Dudau, 2020). As for the relentless awareness of institutional reputation, worries about competing deadlines, student workload, core curriculum demands, all these are likely to constrain authentic co-creation. Navigating these pressures requires careful negotiation, particularly when roles are shifted, but to achieve that may ultimately strengthen the pedagogical partnership (Abbott and Cook-Sather, 2020).

Emerging outcomes

Applying co-creation in the galas has led to clear positive outcomes. Firstly, attendance increased to around 100 students per event, compared to thirty and thirty-five in 2022 and 2023. Secondly, the gala is now recognised as best practice within the wider faculty, with the Head of School implementing the principles in other portfolios. The gala is also scheduled to be showcased at the local faculty event 'Sharing Good Practice for Employability'. Thirdly, it is now delivered twice annually, strengthening students' employability opportunities, experience and skills.

As noted, student participation in delivering the gala increased from five to nine year-on-year. Returning students in 2025 demonstrated greater agency and autonomy, as reflected in student co-authored critical reflections. This indicates the need for additional support when co-creation is unfamiliar, consistent with the wider literature (Abbott and Cook-Sather, 2020).

Conclusion and implications for practice

Embedding structured scaffolding in early co-creation stages can strengthen student agency by providing clear guidance, frameworks and staged responsibility, particularly when processes are unfamiliar. Establishing shared decision-making mechanisms, such as co-designed timelines and joint accountability, may help challenge hierarchical norms and promote more equitable partnerships. In parallel, strengthening institutional support through recognised workload allocation, guidance and risk-sharing may alleviate staff concerns and enable more confident engagement with co-creation.

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