

Transforming higher education: co-creation with students, staff, and external partners

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1. Co-creation as a transformative approach to higher education

Co-creation has emerged as a significant approach for transforming higher education by challenging traditional distinctions between those who teach, those who learn, and those who contribute expertise from beyond the university. Rather than positioning knowledge as something transmitted from staff to students, co-creation foregrounds collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual learning among participants. By doing so, it also provides a vehicle for reflecting on what counts as academic knowledge and how such knowledge is negotiated, constructed, and developed within contemporary higher education, thereby pushing the boundaries between theory and practice. Across the literature, co-creation is understood as a process through which students, staff, and increasingly external partners work together to shape learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment, research, and broader educational experiences (Bovill, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023; Omland et al., 2025).

The construction of co-creation adopted to guide the selection of contributions for this special issue is intentionally broad, encompassing diverse approaches and interpretations. This breadth recognises that co-creation can take many forms, from student–staff partnerships to collaborations with employers, professional bodies, and wider communities beyond the university. In this sense, co-creation refers to processes through which diverse contributors jointly design, develop, deliver, evaluate, or enhance educational practices and outcomes, drawing on their different forms of expertise and experience. Such an understanding recognises that valuable knowledge resides not only within academic disciplines but also within student experience and professional and community contexts (Dollinger and Lodge, 2020; Ruskin and Bilous, 2020; Laundon et al., 2024). Recent scholarship has also highlighted the potential of co-creation to function as an equity-oriented approach to higher education. By recognising students' identities, lived experiences, and perspectives as forms of expertise, co-creation can challenge traditional hierarchies and create more inclusive and democratic learning environments (Cook-Sather and Edelstein, 2026).

Emerging literature highlights the potential of co-creation to foster active learning, strengthen student engagement, support assessment and curriculum innovation, enhance employability, and build more inclusive and responsive educational environments (Chan and Chen, 2023; Ko et al., 2024). At the same time, conceptual reviews emphasise the diversity of co-creation practices across disciplines and institutional settings, calling for continued dialogue about how partnerships are enacted and sustained (Omland et al., 2025).

The contributions in this special issue respond to these developments by exploring how co-creation can transform higher education through productive partnerships among students, staff, and external collaborators. Together, they demonstrate the breadth of co-creative

practice and its potential to generate educational, professional, and societal value. This special issue also invites reflection on how co-creation, alongside increasingly porous boundaries between traditional roles, spheres of influence and domains of activity, and can provide a lens through which to reconsider the role of higher education in contemporary society. Although rooted in the UK experience, the issue speaks to international debates about the purpose of the university in an age of technological transformation and widespread access to knowledge. From this perspective, the value of higher education lies not simply in the transmission of information, but in its capacity to cultivate relationships, facilitate meaningful exchange, and support the collaborative construction of knowledge through engagement with practice.

2. Co-creation in action: overview of the special issue

Rather than presenting a series of isolated case studies, this special issue offers insights into how co-creation can be enacted across diverse disciplinary, institutional, and partnership contexts. The papers examine different models of collaboration, illuminate the conditions that support meaningful partnership, and explore the ways in which co-creation can enhance learning, belonging, employability, and engagement. Together, they contribute to ongoing conversations about how higher education can become more inclusive, participatory, and responsive through partnerships that place collaboration at the centre of educational practice (Bovill, 2020; Ko et al., 2024; Omland et al., 2025). Spanning disciplines as varied as physics, animation, live events, public health, nursing, business, and institution-wide educational development, the contributions demonstrate both the adaptability of co-creation and its capacity to generate meaningful educational, professional, and community outcomes. The case studies presented in this special issue are all situated within the UK higher education context, where policy and practice have been strongly influenced by discourses surrounding value for money and graduate outcomes (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2023). The contributions illustrate a variety of constructive approaches to engaging with these pressures, highlighting the potential of co-creative practices to enrich educational experiences and foster productive relationships between universities and their wider communities.

These five papers collectively demonstrate the broad potential of co-creation in higher education as a transformative approach to learning, teaching, and institutional development. Across diverse disciplinary and institutional contexts, they show how students can move beyond passive participation to become active partners, contributors, and leaders in educational innovation.

Whittaker, Breeds and Szczerba illustrate how interdisciplinary collaboration between animation students and physics academics enabled the creation of high-quality teaching resources while simultaneously developing students' communication, teamwork, project management, and problem-solving skills. **Nahar and colleagues** similarly position students as partners, showing how postgraduate students contributed to the co-design of an AI literacy framework and tutorial, bringing valuable insights into the ethical and practical use of generative AI in higher education.

Hackett and colleagues focus on the co-creation of employability events, demonstrating how student involvement in the planning and delivery of employability galas enhanced confidence, leadership, networking abilities, and professional identity, while also highlighting the challenges of negotiating power relationships within partnership work. Expanding on this,

through a case study of a UK micro higher education institution, **Snart** demonstrates how curriculum co-creation can enhance student engagement and agency, highlighting students' desire for genuine partnership in shaping their educational experiences.

Finally, **Lessner Listiakova and colleagues** broaden the concept of co-creation beyond student–staff partnerships, presenting it as a whole-community endeavour that includes alumni, professional services staff, learning designers, and other stakeholders. Their work emphasises the role of co-creation in fostering trust, belonging, inclusion, and institutional change.

Taken together, the papers suggest that co-creation is more than a pedagogical technique; it is a value-driven approach that promotes authentic learning, employability, collaboration, and empowerment while contributing to more inclusive and engaged higher education communities.

Collectively, the studies reinforce the view that co-creation is not a single method but a flexible and relational approach that can be adapted to a wide range of educational goals, from curriculum enhancement and digital innovation to employability development, authentic assessment, and institutional change.

3. What can we learn from these cases?

Taken together, the papers in this special issue reveal both the diversity of co-creative practice and the common principles that underpin it. While the projects vary considerably in scale, discipline, purpose, and participant groups, they share a commitment to collaboration and a recognition that valuable knowledge exists beyond traditional academic hierarchies. Consistent with contemporary scholarship, the papers present co-creation not simply as a set of techniques, but as a relational process through which students, staff, and external partners work together to shape educational experiences and outcomes (Bovill, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023; Omland et al., 2025).

A particularly strong theme emerging across the collection is the importance of relationships. In different ways, all five papers demonstrate that learning is enriched when diverse forms of expertise are brought into dialogue and when meaningful connections are established between individuals, groups, and communities that might not otherwise interact. Animation students and physics academics combine disciplinary perspectives to create teaching resources; students, academics, and professional services staff collaborate to develop institutional AI literacy resources; public health students, lecturers, alumni, and employers jointly create employability events; live events students work with academics on curriculum design; and members of a university-wide community contribute to the development of inclusive learning spaces. Although these initiatives differ in scope and purpose, each illustrates how educational value is generated through collaboration, mutual exchange, and shared endeavour rather than through the transmission of knowledge alone.

The papers also demonstrate how co-creation can bridge boundaries that have traditionally structured higher education. These boundaries may be disciplinary, organisational, professional, or civic, bringing together students, academics, professional services staff, employers, alumni, and community partners in shared activities. Viewed collectively, the

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studies suggest that co-creation enables different forms of knowledge and experience to converge in productive ways, creating opportunities for participation that extend beyond formal curricula and institutional structures. This finding resonates with scholarship that positions co-creation as a means of fostering more connected and inclusive educational environments in which expertise is distributed rather than concentrated (Dollinger and Lodge, 2020; Omland et al., 2025).

At the same time, the collection highlights a significant challenge facing the co-creation movement: translating aspirations into sustainable practice. Across the higher education sector, partnership, student voice and co-creation, have become increasingly prominent within institutional strategies and policy discussions. Yet, the papers reveal that meaningful collaboration is neither straightforward nor automatic. Successful co-creation requires more than inviting participation; it depends upon trust, shared ownership, ongoing communication, and the negotiation of different expectations, perspectives, and forms of expertise. Nahar et al.'s AI literacy project required students to be recognised as legitimate contributors whose experiences informed institutional responses to generative AI. Hackett et al.'s employability gala depended upon sustained collaboration between students, staff, alumni, and employers, while Snart highlights the challenge of translating the potential of curriculum co-creation into practice, ensuring that student–staff partnerships are meaningful, inclusive, and supported by structures that maintain academic standards. Similarly, the Learning Hubs project described by Lessner Listiakova et al. was built upon collective participation, openness, and shared ownership.

These examples reinforce an important insight from the partnership literature: co-creation is fundamentally relational work (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Its success depends upon participants' willingness to accommodate different perspectives, share responsibility, and invest in sustained collaboration. Consequently, the collection reminds us that co-creation is not simply an educational technique that can be adopted and replicated independent of context. Rather, it is a process through which relationships are built, knowledge is generated, and participants develop capabilities such as communication, adaptability, and openness to difference. These qualities not only enhance learning, but also support the resilience and interpersonal understanding needed to navigate increasingly complex professional and social environments.

A further theme concerns the dual nature of partnership itself. Much of the co-creation literature highlights the empowering potential of partnership through concepts such as agency, student voice, shared decision-making, and democratic participation (Bovill, 2020; Chan and Chen, 2023; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). The papers in this special issue provide substantial evidence of these benefits. Students emerge throughout the collection as contributors, leaders, designers, facilitators, researchers, and change agents. They help create teaching materials, design institutional frameworks, lead employability initiatives, contribute to professional practice, and shape learning environments. Across the studies, participants report increased confidence, stronger professional identities, enhanced communication and leadership skills, and a greater sense of ownership over their learning.

At the same time, the papers remind us that partnership involves work. Co-creation requires coordination, facilitation, emotional investment, and the ongoing maintenance of relationships. Participants must negotiate differing expectations and expertise while operating within institutional structures that do not always support collaboration. Hackett et al. acknowledge

the continuing influence of traditional power dynamics even within a highly successful partnership initiative, while Lessner Listiakova et al. demonstrate that inclusive and democratic communities require active efforts to challenge hierarchy rather than assuming that it disappears through participation alone. Snart's paper highlights the risk of additional workload for students, especially those from more vulnerable or underrepresented groups. The authors advocate for a gradual and carefully structured implementation of co-creative practices, grounded in dialogue and relational engagement.

Co-creation should therefore be understood as both empowering and demanding: it creates opportunities for influence and development, but it also requires sustained commitment from all involved.

Although none of the papers explicitly adopts a learning ecosystem framework, collectively they invite us to think about co-creation in these terms. Rather than portraying co-creation as a series of isolated projects, the collection highlights the interconnected relationships through which educational experiences are shaped. This interpretation aligns with broader conceptual developments that emphasise the relational and networked nature of co-creation and advocate moving beyond individual initiatives towards more collaborative cultures (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Omland et al., 2025). Viewed through this lens, learning can be understood as co-produced through interactions among students, academics, professional services staff, employers, alumni, and community partners.

Such an ecosystem perspective illuminates several broader developments within higher education. It aligns with growing interest in authentic learning, where students engage with real-world challenges and contribute to meaningful outputs. Hackett et al. paper provides particularly strong examples of this, positioning students as active participants in professional contexts rather than passive recipients of knowledge. It also resonates with increasing institutional commitments to civic engagement and community partnership and it connects with contemporary understandings of employability. The Learning Hubs initiative discussed in Lessner Listiakova et al. in particular, demonstrates how co-creation can contribute to cultures of belonging, inclusion, and collective responsibility. Across the collection, students develop capabilities such as communication, collaboration, leadership, adaptability, and problem-solving through participation in authentic partnership activities.

Consequently, the papers encourage a shift in how co-creation is conceptualised. Rather than asking simply, "What difference did this co-creation project make?", institutions might ask a broader question: "How can we create the conditions for enduring communities, relationships, and partnerships through which learning can flourish?" Viewed in this way, the value of co-creation lies not only in the outcomes of individual projects but also in its capacity to strengthen connections between people, disciplines, professions, and communities. Collectively, the contributions point towards a more integrated vision of higher education in which the university acts as a hub for collaboration, exchange, and shared learning within a wider social and professional ecosystem.

4. The future of co-creation

While the papers in this special issue demonstrate the value of co-creation across a range of disciplinary and institutional contexts, they also raise important questions about its future

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development within higher education. If co-creation is to move beyond successful local initiatives and become a defining feature of educational practice, institutions must consider how partnership can be embedded within organisational structures, cultures, and systems.

Meaningful co-creation requires time, trust, and relationship-building. It depends upon staff who possess the confidence and skills to facilitate partnership, students who are appropriately supported to participate, and institutional cultures that value collaboration and shared ownership. Universities seeking to expand co-creative practice should therefore consider issues such as workload allocation, recognition and reward systems, staff development opportunities, and the sustainability of partnership initiatives. In many cases, student partnership work may also require appropriate resourcing and compensation, particularly where students contribute substantial expertise, leadership, or project work.

Perhaps most importantly, the papers suggest that the challenge facing higher education is no longer establishing whether co-creation is worthwhile. The evidence presented throughout this special issue provides compelling illustrations of its value across diverse contexts. The more significant challenge is whether institutions are willing to create the cultural, structural, and organisational conditions in which meaningful co-creation can flourish. If co-creation is to realise its transformative potential, it must be supported not only through individual projects, but through institutional systems that recognise partnership as a core feature of higher education practice, where partnership becomes an ordinary and expected part of learning, teaching and institutional life.

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We hope these papers inspire further dialogue, research, and innovation, and encourage readers to continue exploring how co-creation can contribute to the transformation of higher education.

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