

REPOSITIONING STUDENTS AS PARTNERS: BUILDING SUSTAINABLE STUDENT–STAFF PARTNERSHIPS FOR EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

Enhancing student engagement and graduate employability remains a pressing concern in higher education, particularly within increasingly competitive environments. For example, declining attendance, graduate underemployment, and persistent skills gaps highlight the need for pedagogies that actively engage students while developing transferable skills. Although active learning and authentic assessment are widely adopted, research suggests that the quality of interaction, rather than participation alone, determines meaningful outcomes. Co-creation has therefore emerged as a pedagogical approach that repositions students from passive recipients to active partners in curriculum design, pedagogical innovation and research. Evidence indicates that co-creation enhances motivation, confidence, collaboration skills and inclusive practice while strengthening student–staff relationships.

Student–staff partnerships, also termed Students as Partners (SaP), co-production or curriculum co-design, are underpinned by processes characterised by dialogue, voice and agency. Conceptually, co-creation operates across two interrelated dimensions: co-production (shared design and implementation) and value-in-use (personal and professional development outcomes). However, persistent barriers remain, including power imbalances, limited inclusivity, institutional constraints, and difficulties sustaining student participation. In addition, limited attention has been given to how co-created outputs are strategically disseminated and scaled to generate impact beyond the immediate partnership.

For that reason, this presentation aims to: examine the advantages and challenges of co-creation projects; share a practical framework for sustaining participation in co-creation projects; and explore how dissemination strategies can extend the impact of student–staff partnerships. The study draws on five Students-as-Co-Creators projects developed at Westminster Business School since 2021. These projects were designed and implemented using a structured framework that includes expectation alignment, team formation, transparent decision-making, training, continuous feedback, and planned dissemination pathways. This approach enabled the development of diverse outputs, including co-authored reports, blogs, conference papers and academic publications. The impact of these initiatives was evaluated through participation in international webinars, download metrics, conference dissemination, and evidence of enhanced student agency, research literacy, and professional confidence.

Building on these findings, the session presents practical strategies for embedding sustainable co-creation in higher education. A key insight is that sustaining participation depends on students' perceived value of involvement. This requires clearly communicating employability gains, confidence development and networking opportunities, alongside formal recognition through bursaries or paid roles. Participants will therefore gain a clear framework for designing and managing co-creation projects; practical strategies to sustain student engagement; and approaches to maximise employability outcomes and scale impact beyond the classroom. By conceptualising co-creation as both a pedagogical practice and an impact infrastructure, this session demonstrates how student partnership can enhance engagement, strengthen employability and extend global educational innovation.

Keywords: Students as Co-Creators, student–staff partnerships, employability skills, authentic learning, scholarship of teaching and learning, higher education innovation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education is experiencing a profound pedagogical shift, moving from traditional teacher-centred approaches toward participatory, student-centred models of learning. This transformation reflects growing recognition that students should develop not only disciplinary knowledge but also cognitive and interpersonal competencies such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration and problem-solving as essential for effective workplace performance in the 21st century [1]. At the same time, institutions face increasing pressure to demonstrate the "value-added" of a degree through employability outcomes and societal impact. Within this context, the Students as Partners (SaP) has emerged as a powerful framework that reimagines the student role from a passive position to one that

emphasises collaboration, agency, and shared responsibility in the learning process. Therefore, SaP bridges the gap between academic theory and professional practice [2].

Despite its transformative potential, the implementation of Students as Partners (SaP) initiatives remains uneven across higher education institutions. Although there is increasing recognition of the pedagogical value of partnership approaches, hierarchical and institutional barriers constrain their widespread adoption. In response, this paper critically examines the application of SaP in higher education. In particular, it argues that sustainable student–staff partnerships generate reciprocal benefits for both student and academic partners. For students, participation in co-creation projects can strengthen key competencies and employability skills. For academic staff, SaP initiatives provide opportunities to enhance the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) through collaborative pedagogical research, curriculum innovation aligned with students' experiences and learning needs. To illustrate these impacts, the paper presents a case study of co-creation projects developed at Westminster Business School (WBS) since 2022, demonstrating how sustained partnership practices can simultaneously enhance graduate development, pedagogical innovation and scholarly academic practice.

1.1 Students as Partners (SaP)

SaP builds upon the concept of co-creation, defined as the collaborative generation of knowledge and value through reciprocal engagement between students and staff to enhance learning design and outcomes [3]. This approach positions students as active contributors to decision-making in areas traditionally led by faculty, such as curriculum design, assessment planning, pedagogical innovation, and educational research [4]. Importantly, co-creation within SaP emphasises the iterative and processual nature of partnership, where students and staff engage in continuous cycles of dialogue, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving to generate mutually beneficial outcomes [5].

The SaP framework is distinguished by its focus on reciprocity and the redistribution of power within educational settings [6]. By recognising students as agents with legitimate voice and agency, SaP challenges hierarchical structures in higher education and encourages staff to move from knowledge transmission toward facilitation and mentorship. This shift is particularly relevant in preparing students for the labour market, where collaboration, problem-solving and adaptability are essential skills.

1.1.1 Key Characteristics of Students as Partners

SaP initiatives are characterised by relational and experiential features. SaP are inherently relational and dialogical, relying on sustained interactions between students, staff and external groups such as employers and communities in which knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and mutual exploration [6]. These interactions reinforce the relevance of co-creation for employability and societal impact. These interactions are not a one-off activity; rather, they represent continuous cycles of engagement, reflection, and adaptation. The relational nature of SaP ensures that students' perspectives are valued, while also fostering reflective practice and pedagogical growth among staff [7].

This partnership requires a deliberate redistribution of power within learning environments. Traditional hierarchical models, in which staff control curriculum and assessment, are replaced by collaborative decision-making processes that empower students to actively shape their educational experiences [4]. This shift transforms the educator's role from knowledge provider to facilitator, supporting students' agency while maintaining academic standards, which helps cultivate a more democratic and inclusive learning culture [8].

1.1.2 Advantages of students as partners

The literature demonstrates that SaP generates reciprocal benefits for students, academic staff, and institutions. At the student level, participation in co-creation enhances critical thinking, communication and teamwork [3]. Beyond skill development, students often report increased confidence, self-efficacy, motivation, and a sense of ownership over their learning [4], all of which contribute to employability and the formation of professional identity.

For academic staff, SaP initiatives provide opportunities to enhance pedagogical practice and engage more deeply with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Collaboration with students offers unique insights into learners' perspectives, enabling staff to design curricula and teaching methods that are more relevant, inclusive, and engaging [9]. Staff also benefit from professional development through co-produced research outputs, innovative teaching practices, and enhanced reflective practice, fostering both motivation and scholarly productivity.

At the institutional level, SaP improved student satisfaction, strengthened relationships, and enhanced reputation [10]. By embedding partnership practices into curricula and institutional processes, universities can enhance graduate employability and demonstrate a commitment to participatory and responsive education. Overall, SaP offers a mechanism to align institutional priorities with student needs while cultivating skills and practices that extend beyond the classroom.

1.1.3 Challenges and barriers

Despite its benefits, SaP implementation faces several interrelated challenges. Persistent hierarchical structures and traditional power dynamics within higher education can limit meaningful student engagement. Academics may be hesitant to share decision-making authority, while students may initially struggle to transition from passive recipients to active partners [4]. A successful partnership requires intentional cultural and structural change to support collaboration and empower students.

Resource and workload constraints are another significant barrier. Co-creation demands sustained time, effort, and commitment from both staff and students to build trust and maintain engagement, which can be particularly challenging in large cohorts or resource-limited contexts [3]. Additionally, both students and staff may lack the skills necessary for effective partnership, including communication, negotiation, facilitation, and collaborative research skills [9].

Finally, evaluating the impact of SaP is inherently complex. Outcomes such as confidence, agency, identity formation, relational development, and employability are often qualitative, context-dependent, and long-term, making them difficult to capture through traditional metrics such as course grades or standard student satisfaction surveys [5]. This highlights the need for robust, multidimensional, and longitudinal assessment approaches to evaluate the value of co-creation.

2 METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that integrates personal experience with broader cultural and social contexts, allowing the researcher to examine self-experience as a lens for understanding complex phenomena [11]. Unlike traditional ethnography, which primarily observes others, autoethnography positions the researcher as both participant and investigator, drawing on their lived experiences to generate insights about practical and ethical issues within a socio-cultural environment [12]. In the context of SaP projects, this approach is particularly suitable because it captures the nuances of the academic partner's reflections and observations, including shifts in identity, agency, and power relations that emerge during collaborative activities with students. By systematically documenting and analysing these experiences, the researcher can understand how student-staff partnerships operate in practice, how roles are negotiated, and how shared understanding and mutual value develop [13].

Combining autoethnography with a case study approach enhances its empirical robustness by situating personal reflections within a defined institutional context, providing a richer, evidence-informed account [14]. This dual approach allows the researcher to draw on multiple sources of data, including personal narratives, project artefacts, meeting notes, and student feedback, thereby supporting triangulation and strengthening the credibility of co-creation initiatives conducted at Westminster Business School since 2022. It allows for an in-depth examination of how SaP operates in practice, providing transferable insights for similar higher education settings. For this reason, this methodology offers a unique lens for understanding and communicating how sustainable SaP initiatives contribute to student development, employability, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

3 CASE STUDY: STUDENTS AS PARTNERS AT WESTMINSTER BUSINESS SCHOOL

Since 2022, the author has been an academic partner on a series of Students as Partners (SaP) and co-creation projects at Westminster Business School (WBS). These initiatives were designed to enhance student engagement, strengthen employability, and foster pedagogical innovation through collaborative research and educational development. The projects brought together undergraduate, postgraduate, and academic partners to explore issues such as artificial intelligence in business education, blended learning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and personal tutoring practices. As shown in Table 1, the projects generated a wide range of outputs, including conference presentations, webinars, blogs, teaching resources, videos, and conference proceedings, demonstrating how student voice can extend beyond the classroom into the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Table 1. SaP projects from 2022/23 to 2024/25.

Year	Project	Student partner	Academic partner	Output
2022/23	A Student led exploration of productive and ethical use of AI in Business Education	Zarah Mohmed (MBA) Maharshi – Tejas Vyas (MBA) Harpreet Mann (MBA)	Rachel Lander Kamala Balu Gustavo R. Espinoza-Ramos	UoW Teaching and Learning Symposium 2023 SEDA article
2022/23	Promotional video about personal tutoring sessions	Aadharsh Jeyavel Pandiyan (3 rd year UG) Vignesh Amundhu-Mohan (3 rd year UG) Marin Munsoo (3 rd year UG) Vicky Valenti (3 rd year UG)	Setenday Dilek Fidler Gustavo R. Espinoza-Ramos	Personal tutoring Video (>160 views) UoW Teaching and Learning Symposium 2023
2023/24	Understanding Students' preferences for Blended Learning approaches at WBS	Drilena Ukperaj (2 nd year UG) Diya Chhillar (2 nd year UG) Mahima Singh (2 nd year UG)	Gustavo R. Espinoza-Ramos	Times Higher Education blog Webinar - CETI (>800 views, >200 downloads) Conference proceeding
2024/25	Student perceptions of UDL effectiveness in enhancing learning and engagement at WBS	Noor Ghumran (2 nd year UG) Marta Dermaku Hajdini (2 nd year UG) Pattarika Sae Wang (2 nd year UG) Alejandro Noriega (2 nd year UG)	Gustavo R. Espinoza-Ramos	Times Higher Education blog Webinar - CETI Conference proceeding

The case study illustrates how SaP can function not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a framework for employability and research. Students were not positioned as passive contributors or research assistants; instead, they participated in decision-making, dissemination activities, and the co-production of knowledge. These experiences enabled students to develop transferable competencies, including communication, critical thinking [3], but also teamwork, digital literacy, leadership, and research skills, which are increasingly valued in graduate employment contexts. At the same time, academic partners gained deeper insights into students' lived experiences, enabling the development of more responsive pedagogical approaches and research projects aligned with students' needs and priorities. This reciprocal relationship reflects the central principles of SaP, in which value is collaboratively generated through sustained interaction and shared responsibility [10].

Drawing on reflections from these projects, this paper proposes a five-stage framework for developing and sustaining SaP initiatives in higher education. The findings suggest that successful SaP initiatives require deliberate structures, clear communication, and continuous negotiation between partners. The framework, therefore, aims to provide practical guidance for educators seeking to implement sustainable student–staff partnerships while balancing student agency and inclusivity.

3.1 Stage 1: Establishing shared expectations and partnership culture

The first stage involves establishing a shared understanding of the project's aims, expectations, responsibilities, and potential outcomes. Students often enter SaP projects with varying levels of confidence, experience, and understanding of academic research processes, while academic partners may have different expectations regarding student autonomy and contribution. Consequently, it is essential to negotiate expectations collaboratively and recognise that partnership development is an evolving process rather than a fixed arrangement.

An important aspect of this stage is acknowledging that student participation may change over time due to employment, personal commitments, and academic workload. Previous studies indicate that students involved in SaP initiatives may experience uncertainty when transitioning from traditional learner roles to partnership roles [15]. Therefore, academic partners should create supportive environments where students feel comfortable expressing concerns, asking questions, and negotiating their involvement. Expectations regarding outputs and dissemination activities should be openly discussed. Some students may initially wish to contribute only to a report or presentation, while others may later decide to engage in blogs, webinars, conference presentations, or academic publications. The Westminster Business School projects demonstrated that dissemination pathways frequently evolve during the collaboration process and should therefore remain flexible and negotiated rather than predetermined.

3.2 Stage 2: Strategic and inclusive team formation

The second stage focuses on developing diverse and balanced partnership teams. Effective co-creation depends not only on academic capabilities but also on the combination of complementary skills, experiences, and perspectives within the group. Before selecting team members, it is important to identify the competencies and resources required for the project, including research skills, communication abilities, digital capabilities, creative design skills, and organisational skills.

The findings suggest that student partner recruitment should combine open and targeted approaches. Open invitations help promote inclusivity and broaden participation opportunities, while targeted invitations can encourage students who have demonstrated engagement, leadership, or interest in specific topics to participate. This balance enhances the diversity and inclusivity in partnership [9]. The Westminster Business School projects intentionally involved students from different academic levels and backgrounds, enabling collaboration between students with varying experiences and strengths. Such diversity strengthened peer learning and distributed leadership within the projects.

Importantly, the findings also indicate that students contribute value beyond academic performance. Students with strengths in social media, digital editing, communication, graphic design, or public speaking played critical roles in disseminating content through webinars, podcasts, blogs, and videos. Therefore, co-creation should recognise students' broader capabilities and lived experiences rather than valuing only conventional academic expertise.

3.3 Stage 3: Transparent Decision-Making

One of the most significant challenges in SaP initiatives concerns power distribution and ensuring that students genuinely participate in shaping project activities rather than merely executing staff-directed tasks [4]. To address this issue, the SaP team should identify all activities required to complete the project, including research design, data collection, analysis, dissemination, and administrative tasks. Student partners are then encouraged to propose additional activities and select areas where they wish to contribute. The ability to choose tasks based on personal interests and strengths was found to enhance ownership, motivation, and accountability among student partners.

Transparency also extends to communication and access to information. Project documentation, meeting notes, literature resources, and report drafts were shared through digital tools such as Microsoft Teams, the virtual learning environment (e.g. Blackboard), and cloud-based storage systems (e.g., OneDrive). These shared environments enhanced accountability and reduced hierarchical barriers by ensuring that all members had equal access to project information and decision-making processes.

3.4 Stage 4: Capacity building and continuous feedback

Successful co-creation projects require structured support systems that help students develop the competencies necessary to participate confidently and effectively. Training should be customised according to project requirements and participants' existing skills. For example, some projects required support in research methods, literature searching, academic writing, or presentation skills, while others involved training in digital tools, webinar delivery, podcast production, or social media dissemination. Capacity-building activities were delivered through a combination of workshops, informal mentoring, online tutorials, institutional training opportunities, and external micro-credentials, such as LinkedIn Learning courses.

It is important to establish multiple communication and feedback channels. Because students have different schedules, learning preferences, and communication styles, partnership projects benefited from adopting hybrid and flexible working arrangements. Meetings were held both online and in person, with recordings provided for students unable to attend synchronously. Feedback was delivered through live meetings, emails, discussion boards, MS Teams chats, and collaborative document editing. This multimodal communication environment supported accessibility, continuity, and inclusivity within the partnership process. Students reported feeling more confident when feedback was constructive, timely, and dialogic rather than evaluative. Similarly, academic partners benefited from ongoing student feedback on project direction, communication practices, and dissemination strategies.

3.5 Stage 5: Dissemination, employability and measuring impact

A distinctive feature of SaP projects at the Westminster Business School was the emphasis on extending student voice beyond the immediate classroom context through public dissemination activities. Rather than limiting outputs to internal reports, SaP projects generated blogs (Times Higher Education), webinars, teaching materials, videos, and conference proceedings. These dissemination activities enabled students to develop professional identities and demonstrate evidence of impact, both of which are increasingly important for employability.

The dissemination outputs generated through SaP projects can be organised across different timescales. Short-term outputs may include reports, presentations, podcasts, or teaching materials that can be produced and shared during the project's initial stages. Medium-term outputs often involve blogs, conference papers, toolkits, or dissertation projects that require further development and collaboration. Long-term outputs may include academic publications, policy recommendations, curriculum changes, or books. Establishing a clear timeline for these outputs enables student partners to select dissemination activities that align with their interests, confidence levels, academic commitments, and availability.

The employability value of these projects was further evidenced in 2025, when three student partners received the SEDA Jisc Student Partnership Impact Award for their contributions to blended learning and educational development at the University of Westminster [16]. This international recognition illustrates how SaP initiatives can strengthen students' professional profiles and enhance graduate employability through authentic, publicly visible achievements.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that Students as Partners (SaP) can operate as a strategic approach for connecting student engagement, employability development and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The case study demonstrates that, when co-creation is intentionally structured, student partners can develop transferable competencies such as communication, teamwork, leadership, digital literacy and research skills, while academic partners gain deeper insights into student experiences and generate pedagogical outputs that extend beyond the classroom.

The proposed five-stage framework highlights that sustainable SaP initiatives require shared expectations, inclusive team formation, transparent decision-making, capacity building, continuous feedback and planned dissemination. These elements help address common barriers in partnership work, including power imbalances, inconsistent participation, limited confidence and workload pressures. The case study also shows that dissemination outputs, such as blogs, webinars, podcasts, conference papers and academic publications, can strengthen students' professional profiles while encouraging academic partners to engage more confidently in SoTL.

However, important gaps remain in the evidence base. More longitudinal research is needed to examine the long-term impact of SaP on student employability, career progression [17] and professional identity beyond university. Further research is also required on practitioner perspectives and institutional strategies for embedding SaP at scale, including how leadership, funding, workload recognition and policy can support sustainable co-creation [15]. Overall, SaP should be understood not as a one-off project, but as an evolving partnership model that can enhance graduate development, pedagogical innovation and institutional learning.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most important recommendations emerging from this case study is to clearly communicate the benefits of participation to student partners. Although many students may initially express interest in co-creation, sustaining participation often depends on whether they perceive tangible value from their participation. Universities and academic partners should therefore articulate the potential financial, academic, and employability-related benefits associated with SaP initiatives. Financial incentives, such as bursaries or paid partnership opportunities, can help recognise students' time and effort, particularly for students balancing academic studies with paid employment or caring responsibilities. However, this may depend on university resources. Previous research has shown that financial incentives are a positive outcome of partnership projects [9].

At the academic level, students should be supported in understanding how co-creation outputs can contribute to their academic development. For example, findings generated through interviews, surveys,

or focus groups conducted within SaP projects may later inform dissertation topics, research proposals or postgraduate applications. Importantly, dissemination activities provide students with opportunities to demonstrate publicly visible achievements that extend beyond formal assessment. Blogs, podcasts, conference presentations, and webinars can be shared through professional platforms such as LinkedIn to demonstrate their contributions with educational innovation. Demonstrating impact through metrics such as webinar registrations, views, downloads, or social media engagement can further strengthen students' professional profiles and employability narratives.

Importantly, these dissemination activities can also encourage academic partners to engage more actively in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Collaborative dissemination processes often provide academics with opportunities to develop confidence and experience in pedagogical research, conference presentations, and academic writing alongside students. Consequently, SaP projects can function as a supportive entry point for both students and staff to participate in SoTL activities, generating outputs that extend the impact of educational innovation beyond the classroom while strengthening a collaborative research culture within higher education.

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