

# **‘It’s like what we have to do at work’ – The student perspective on encouraging part-time students to engage in co-designing academic skills courses**

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## **Summary**

This case study explores the student perspective of ways in which one Academic Support Department within a University can encourage part-time working professional students to engage in structured activities focused on curriculum co-design of an Academic Skills Course. Qualitative data were collected in focus groups to explore the motivations and barriers for engagement in such activities. Initial findings showed the students perceived partnership working as beneficial to them personally, academically and professionally. Respondents’ enthusiasm for co-designed approaches suggest that being less connected than ‘traditional’ students does not necessarily mean less engaged. Students made many recommendations for how the University can offer partnership activities to give them and their peers the opportunity to participate.

## **Description of project**

The quote in the title of this paper comes from a student who is both part-time at university and in full time employment. The received wisdom of staff-student partnership working is that part-time students struggle to engage or may not be interested because of other commitments. Drawing upon data from two business courses at a medium-sized post-1992 university, this case study aims to show that by working in partnership with such students in the design of engagement opportunities, they are more able to participate and have a wealth of experience to contribute. The landscape of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is changing with part-time students constituting “a significant proportion of the total student population in the UK” (McLinden, 2017, p. 373). In 2018/19 40% of students on undergraduate designated courses were 30 years old and over (HESA, 2020). Evidence suggests that adult learners tend to be more academically engaged than the younger students (Rabourn et al 2018; Davies, 2012) highlighting the need for the HEIs to view these students as a resource. Student engagement is a core aim for HEIs (Healey et al., 2014) which include a growing number of less connected non-traditional students such as part-time adult learners.

The aim of this project was to identify methods specifically to encourage part-time students who are working full time, to engage in activities to co-design an Academic Skills Curriculum for their courses. This would entail co-designing, co-creating and engaging in delivery of resources including workshops, videos, podcasts and handouts for future cohorts. These would be for new Level 4 students starting their HE journeys and would include topics such as critical thinking, time management and group working.

Such activities involve academic staff working with students to develop course content and curriculum design (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). This “ideally destabilizes hierarchies

and is connected to critical pedagogy” and staff have suggested that the outcomes of these projects can produce better designs than they could have achieved on their own (Marquis et al, 2019).

Karen (the Project Lead) is an Academic Support Tutor (AST) and a key aspect of the AST role is to teach skills “such as note-taking, being reflective, team working, writing and presenting” (Curran, 2014, p. 4). As a recent part-time student herself, having completed a first degree and a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, empathy with the experience of these students and making them feel part of the student community and have a voice was a prime motivation. After attending a workshop by Stuart, lecturer on the Academic Professional Apprenticeship, about Staff-Student Partnership, which shared evidence around the effectiveness of co-designed approaches on a range of skills, the two authors discussed approaches that could be tailored to Karen’s distinctive cohort with a shared belief that other practices could not be applied ‘off the shelf’. Karen suggested that engaging current students in a co-created approach could be beneficial for understanding how to more effectively develop study skills resources for the students in the following cohort. Marquis et al (2018, p. 65) suggest “more study is needed of when and why students... might want to engage in partnership where opportunities exist”. This seems particularly true for part-time learners who are less connected. To better understand how a co-design approach would work for this particular group, it was decided that gaining feedback from the current cohort about the shape of any future co-design activities could identify their specific needs as well as suggest ways to engage these future students in co-creation.

To achieve this, two focus groups of part-time students in the Faculty of Business and Law, were recruited by a purposive sampling method (Clever. et al., 2018)

#### Project Aims

1. Engage with current Business Management and Chartered Management students to explore what barriers they anticipate to engaging in co-creation activities relating to their Academic Skills Support
2. Develop ideas of how to encourage or incentivise participation by future cohorts in the co-creation of Academic Skills Support activities
3. Identify specific needs based upon the participants’ identities as mature, professional and part-time learners

The students were studying one of two courses see Table 1 below for details:

	<b>Business and Management Foundation Degree</b>	<b>Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship</b>
<b>Duration on Course</b>	1 Academic Year	
<b>Attendance</b>	1 evening a week at Partner College	1 day a fortnight on University Campus
<b>Number in the Cohort</b>	6	31
<b>Invited to Participate</b>	6	5
<b>Participated</b>	2	5

Table 1: Participants and course details

The participants were selected because they had previously engaged with the AST team. They were all UK/EU working students with an age range of 20-50, four were men and three were women.

Karen invited students in person, during a classroom session, to join the focus group later that day. The focus groups were managed to ensure that they did not become focused on criticism (Carey, 2013). Karen explained that this wasn't an opportunity to moan about their course. If they wanted to do that they need to follow the appropriate procedure, just as they do at work, which in this case is talk to their course rep who would take it to the Student Voice Committee. She monitored the conversations to ensure that all students present had an opportunity to voice their opinions.

Initial discussions showed that none of the participants were aware of partnership or co-design approaches. Participants were informed about the various ways in which partnership activities are used across the sector. They were informed that the University is looking to introduce similar activities and that this research was to understand what methods the University could use to encourage part-time, mature students to engage. The groups were asked as individuals to say what they thought were the pros and cons of co-creation and what approaches they believed would encourage them (and others like them) to participate. During data collection, Karen focused upon encouraging the group to work together to agree on a consensus. A note taker was present, another member of the AST team, along with recording equipment to assist in clarifying any important points that were made that were at risk of being missed.

## Findings

The following section will outline the key ideas generated from the group during the discussion that were used to shape plans for co-creating an Academic Skills Course. This will outline participants' perceptions of what could motivate students to participate, barriers to their participation, the structure and the focus of such co-creation activities (e.g. within taught sessions or extra-curricular)

### *Motivations & Benefits*

When discussing the potential benefits and draw-backs of developing co-creative approaches for a group of professional part-time students, the comments focused on the positives as the following quotes indicate:

*I think we can all see the benefit of it. Being able to shape and create the future of the course. (C)*

*I think, yeah, it is a very good idea because both sides can benefit from it. (G)*

Contribution and ownership were seen as essential to both draw upon the extensive experience of these mature professionals, but also to provide them with different perspectives, for example:

*Attacking education with a more broadened and widened mind-set and with a lot more wisdom. (A)*

These comments concur with the idea that co-creation can help students to understand and own their learning experience (Bovill & Bulley, 2011).

Many participants agreed that as part-time students, co-creation would allow them all to combine their different industry backgrounds and jobs with the AST's academic knowledge. Hearing other people's experiences can enable them to learn new things and utilise people's strengths.

*We all learn from each other new things and getting to know each other. And we have like an overview of different industries now. Theory and practice all together. (G)*

While empowering diverse voices is consistent with existing principles and practice around staff-student partnership, this was emphasised strongly by this particular cohort given their diverse professional experience. The participants concurred with Marquis et al (2019) suggestion that engaging in co-creation activities could help them in their workplace. They suggested that it could help them develop their skills in interacting with people on different levels, help with their Continuous Professional Development, work-based learning and act as evidence of mentoring and development:

*Education gives you choices and it opens up doors. (D)*

The consistency by which this idea was embraced by the participants perhaps overlooks the contributions of full-time students without such experience, which might need to be explored when implementing any activities based on these plans. Comments which distinguished themselves from other students were common in this group but seen as a positive for engagement in co-creation:

*The fact that we're doing this course part-time means that actually we want to be here. We're not 17 years old who have to be in education. (F)*

This is consistent with the work of Rabourn et al (2018) who suggest that adult learners tend to be more academically engaged. These participants agreed that this would extend over to co-creative, partnership activities whether they were extra-curricular or embedded in the curriculum. They also highlighted the connection between engagement and postgraduate studies:

*I think you'd get people interested if they wanted to go on with their studies.*  
(F)

Which concurs with Lowe et al (2017) research suggesting that engagement in partnership practices can encourage undergraduate students to go onto postgraduate study. This could help encourage part-time adult learners who it has been suggested have been less inclined to go onto further study (Rabourn et al., 2018).

Sims et al (2017) suggest that part-time students may be more motivated than full time students to engage as they want to change things for others. This was a view echoed by the participants here;

*It's not about what do we want as it's not for me.* (D)

A common theme in the discussion was how that co-creation could help the next cohort get the most out of their learning experience.

### *Structure & Focus*

A potential benefit of co-creating any aspect of their support is that it can provide clarity of aims of the curriculum and removal or potential hurdles (Bovill et al., 2009; Curran, 2014). The participants concurred with this idea highlighting the frustrations that can occur when trying to get clarification between their study days.

*I think for me that communication is paramount.* (D)

They could see how developing content with Module Leaders and the AST could clarify the connection between the Academic Standards and the Academics, personal choice, assignment requirements of the Module Coursework. At times the Academic Standards such as the layout of essays and reports which are provided by the AST do not match the bespoke requirement as set by the Academics setting the assignments. Participants indicated that this could help remove confusion and frustrating differences as the AST could connect directly with the Course Structure. By being involved in planning support and the curriculum, students can ensure they use their time as efficiently as possible as this quote demonstrates:

*Have a set of the learning objectives for that part of the course. Ask questions such as where are you taking me? Where do you want me to go? How are you going to get me there?* (D)

This deeper collaborative involvement was seen as addressing issues that plague part-time and professional students, namely balancing their home life, work-load and issues around travel to campus. The participants were clear that their involvement in developing the curriculum and their support would increase this connection by

clarifying the most effective areas to focus their attention and bridge gaps when they are away from campus.

While these discussions were intended to outline how engagement could be facilitated for future cohorts in future co-creation activities, this group also had a number of suggestions of how to improve the course and engagement with it. For example, the participants suggested the creation of 'Module Refresher Days' that do not conflict with teaching times and gives them the opportunity to be on campus without back-to-back classes. This additional time would provide the opportunity for those that wanted to be involved to be able to do that in person.

*Some people are better face to face and some people are not and it's all about getting that balance. (F)*

This removes travel issues and for those that wish to attend but can't then it should also be available on-line. Throughout the discussion these ideas took more specific shape around particular areas of learning and teaching;

*Something I'd like to see if I got involved in a change project would be just on feedback. (A)*

The participants believed it would provide an organised and professional opportunity for theory and practice to work together and for them to feedback to the academics. There was a plurality of viewpoints about this specific focus, again emphasising the importance of involving students in developing such approaches. The specific substantive aspects may change over time so partnership needs to be on-going rather than something that is achieved once and then applied as if it benefits all students.

#### *Incentives*

Of course, there is as much heterogeneity amongst part-time, professional students as in any other group and what would work as an incentive is a personal decision or as one participant put it;

*That's the million-dollar question as it all depends on what flavour bubble-gum you like. (D)*

Contrary to research suggesting money as an incentive (Marquis et al., 2018) the participants didn't seem to agree that it should be money with comments such as:

*Not talking about like, you know, 20K salary for being a part-time support for academic. (G)*

*Sometimes it's not about the actual physical money, is it. (F)*

The participants were asked the question of if it is not money, then what do they want in return for engaging in co-creation activities and the responses were indeed as myriad as the proverbial flavours of bubble-gum, but a key theme was academic credit;

*I think more people are driven by credit in our group, because they want to succeed. (E)*

*Credit scores high, it does score high whether you agree with it or not, it does score high. (C)*

Davies (2012) highlighted that students have received credits towards their courses for similar activities. The participants concurred that credits for their course or CPD that they can use for work could be effective.

### *Accessibility*

Accessibility was mentioned by all participants which reiterates Sims et al (2017) point that those organising partnership activities need to ensure that those part-time students that want to be involved have an opportunity to do so. While this is referring to co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, similar principles may apply here. While a number of models of engaging in co-creation were discussed, it was explained to the participants that many other universities incorporate these activities into their curriculum (Marquis et al., 2018). One participant highlighted the benefit of this by saying:

*I don't think unless you are putting it into the curriculum, I don't know if you're gonna get any volunteers or participation. (B)*

While this view was shared by many in the groups, it was also argued that being voluntary was important, as being part of the curriculum would reduce the authenticity of suggestions and other benefits. Participants suggested that Module Leaders and AST could not guarantee that everyone was fully invested with comments such as:

*If you force answers then evaluation and evidence won't be true. (A)*

This demonstrates the centrality of both inclusivity and honesty to partnerships (Healey et al., 2014) but further highlights the challenges of developing a form of partnership which satisfies all students' needs, even when it is developed in partnership. An interesting theme emerged from discussions that challenged these assumptions of inclusivity and raised their potential conflict with managing these activities effectively;

*I don't think you would just sit there half arsed in that hour you would want to get your view point across. (E)*

*If it was part of your course and you were going to get marks for it that might make you stressed, but if you know you're doing it voluntarily and just for the sake of it, because you want to that might be more kind of motivating. (G)*

These quotes were part of a discussion which suggested that if all students had to participate in a partnership activity that the level and quality of engagement would be lower. Essentially arguing that voluntary participation is more meaningful or authentic. However, this raises the question as to whether we can ensure co-creation is inclusive and representative if only those able to volunteer can participate (Moore-Cherry et al., 2016).

Being part-time students and often commuting may suggest that they are less likely to get involved in extra-curricular or co-curricular activities. Certainly, time emerged as a common challenge for engagement, particularly around other commitments;

*The University doesn't have half term holidays, but we are parents as well. (E)*

*If it's towards the end of term then you want all of that time for your studies.  
(C)*

However, these discussions were usually constructive around potential solutions or alternatives to facilitate engagement;

*We can tell you when not to have the days like year-end. (B)*

This indicates that the benefits of being able to shape their own support is clear to these students. This also emphasises the importance of dialogue with students in developing such opportunities. We cannot assume a one-size-fits-all approach will work. We also cannot develop and apply 'partnership' as a solution that is solely driven from the staff side at its initial stages, as we may already be limiting engagement, even with the best of intentions.

The participants were keen to ensure that any activities would be meaningful and effective. To achieve this the structures supporting the co-creation activities would need to be monitored closely to ensure it was a worthwhile activity with comments such as:

*Are you making changes for the sake of change? (D)*

*If there is no change or you can't reasonably do it, then we'd have a discussion. It doesn't all have to be accepted, it may only take two of the ideas out for the whole year or whatever, but actually actions did come to fruition.  
(B)*

Collaborating with professionals on work of this nature seems to suggest a good awareness of practical and institutional barriers and speaks to the significance of honest and effective communication.

## **Conclusion**

The concept of partnership and co-creation was unknown by the participants and after a brief description of the concepts and examples of how this can work the enthusiasm was clear. The participants highlighted the motivations and benefits to themselves and to future students. They did not identify any specific negatives for being involved in co-creating their Academic Skills Support, but rather could see the benefits they could bring because of their wealth of knowledge and experience and that they could demonstrate how that relates to academia. The hurdles that would need to be addressed were accessibility, ensuring that everyone's voice would be heard and the quality of the output warranted the time spent. The ways to encourage students to



participate identified by the participants included suggestions on connecting them to accredited modules, CIPD credits and/or gift vouchers.

These findings have encouraged the AST (Karen) to try co-creating support directly with current students for the first time. She will now use these findings to encourage buy in from the Senior Faculty team and the course team to run a pilot project in 2021-22. It is hoped that through this pilot the specific requirements for running successful co-creation activities with part-time students will be identified and shared across the University and the wider academic community.

### Recommendations

- Agree objectives, plan and timescale of participation requirements
- Confirm that every participants voice will be heard for opinions and expertise
- Ensure that participants/academics contribution is split 50/50
- Make co-creation meetings available online and in person
- Enable attendance by avoiding school holidays and business end of year
- Where possible provide additional HE credits for participation and/or a CIPD credit or similar that could go on their CV and/or gift vouchers

### Follow up and future plans

This project set out to explore how engagement in partnership and co-creation approaches could be encouraged amongst a group typically seen as less likely to get involved with such developmental co-curricular practice. From focus groups with participants who are part-time students, and full-time workers, the most important finding is that they believe there is inherent value in engaging in partnership with staff. The participants believe the skills they could develop in through doing so could help them directly through their workplace and further study. They agreed that they could bring experience and wisdom to these activities. It would give them an opportunity to genuinely connect with the Module Leaders and AST through which their feedback could be used to create clarity when communicating the future plans. The participants could see the benefits to them and others like them engaging in co-creation and how they could be used to benefit future students. They felt that it was important to make it voluntary to ensure that any outcomes would be honest. Perhaps what is less clear is what the substantive focus of what this partnership would be. While there was enthusiasm for a collaborative, partnership approach to academic support this was quite broad. This breadth of focus is perhaps an inherent part of the partnership process and reinforces the need for on-going dialogue and constant refreshing of the partnership with students. This continuing partnership approach ensures continued relevance but also inclusivity and authenticity. The aim of this research was to provide a window into the ways to encourage part-time students to participate in co-creation, as suggested by students. It is hoped that this data will be used by institutions to understand how to engage with this growing body of students and how to encourage them to work alongside us so that all parties benefit from their breadth of knowledge

and experience. This understanding can then be used to encourage future research into how to engage the entire population of students.

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