

# The Co-production of Knowledge: Working Together to Tackle Sustainability

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## Abstract

“The lesson for progressive education is that it requires in an urgent degree, a degree more pressing than was incumbent upon former innovators, a philosophy of education based on a philosophy of experience” (Dewey, 1938, p.10).

This article evaluates the impact of co-producing a community project between a university lecturer, a group of social science and humanities students, and a local Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisation, along with their service users. The project was part of a collaborative initiative called SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities, Arts for the People and the Economy/Environment) between The British Academy and Students Organising for Sustainability (SoS) “which uses a ‘living laboratory’ model to demonstrate the importance of arts, humanities and social sciences in tackling sustainability challenges” (<https://www.sos-uk.org/post/shape-sustainability-impact-projects-22-23>). The students who volunteered (including 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years from Sociology, History and Social Policy degree programmes) worked with Base 25, a local VCFSE organisation providing support services to disadvantaged young people and families in the Wolverhampton area (<https://base25.org/>), to identify a project that could support the Mental Health and Wellbeing of young people – one of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. Working co-productively with staff and young service users at Base 25, the students, supported by a Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Social Policy and a keen advocate of Service Learning, produced a ‘Recipe for Life’ website for the organisation, freely available for anyone to use and circulated to local schools. By engaging in a project that responded to a real need in their local community, working across disciplines and organisational boundaries, the students gained critical skills, values and competencies that move beyond a narrow understanding of ‘employability’ (Booth, 2023). Instead, it provided an opportunity to nurture graduates better equipped to engage in ‘wicked problems’ (Brown et al., 2010). In addition, by the University participating in a more community-centric approach to research and pedagogy, it was able to widen the impact of its practice and knowledge through the softening of boundaries between academic and “local” community knowledge.

## Introduction

“To alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (Friere, 1972, p.85).

The climate crisis is a ‘wicked problem’, a complex and multi-dimensional problem that “cannot be addressed effectively through traditional bureaucracies” alone (McGuire, 2006, p. 34). Thus, finding solutions to the complexity of the climate crisis, such as changing patterns of consumption and addressing global poverty, demands a “new approach to the conduct of research and to the decision-making based on that research” (Brown et al., 2010, p. 4) that includes the perspectives of ordinary citizens. It is this recognition that underpins the multi-disciplinarity of the SHAPE programme. Such programmes not only engage undergraduates in designing solutions to ‘wicked problems’ but also support the development of more reflexive and critical citizens – both within and outside of the University walls - capable of imaging a more sustainable future. In addition, valuing the lived experience of those most affected by the costs of the climate crisis in the generation of social solutions can lead to more effective decision making by empowering the communities affected by that disadvantage to co-produce those solutions (Rees et al., 2024).

### **The Opportunity for Co-production: The SHAPE Project**

The SHAPE project organised by Students Organising for Sustainability<sup>i</sup> (SOS) and The British Academy encourages students to take leadership in making their universities and communities better places to live in, reflecting the Sustainable Development Goals set out by the United Nations, with the declared intent of ending world poverty, encouraging equality, encouraging economic growth, and tackling climate change (United Nations, 2015). SOS-UK wrote in their Impact Report from 2020-2021, “Education should be the central mechanism for transitioning society onto a sustainable footing” (SOS, 2021). Purcell et al (2019), drawing on case studies of three universities, discuss the importance of universities becoming ‘Living Labs’ for sustainability. This approach argues that with all their resources and expertise, universities are uniquely placed to engage academics, students, local government, stakeholders and their local communities to co-create sustainable solutions to problems both within the university and in the wider community. Reflecting the multidisciplinary, multi-organisational and ‘bottom up’ approach needed to tackle ‘wicked problems’, the ‘Living Lab’ approach advocates “a practical methodology for improving sustainability...by facilitating both collaborative learning and innovation by responding directly to the needs of users” (Compagnucci, et al., 2021, p.2).

The University of Wolverhampton has a history of community-based learning and research (Booth & Green, 2023). The SHAPE project, with its focus on “a local and hands-on context” to research, therefore resonated with the University (<https://www.sos-uk.org/project/shape-sustainability-impact-projects>). Not only that, but the main author of this article - the lecturer co-ordinating this project - is committed to a community-centred approach to both research and pedagogy (Booth, 2025). Therefore, the University of Wolverhampton applied to join the programme in 2023, to offer students the chance to form a ‘Living Lab’ and engage in a project aimed at promoting a more sustainable society.

## **Our SHAPE Project: Identifying “the problem”**

As of July 2025, 4.5 million children and young people are living in poverty in the United Kingdom (UK), with the Child Poverty Action Group reporting that children living in poverty are more likely to experience poor physical health and “to have poor mental health and are at higher risk of psychological distress” (<https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/effects-poverty>). As Young Minds reports, the mental health and wellbeing of young people is a policy concern, with ‘one in five children and young people aged eight to 25 had a probable mental health condition. This number has been rising since 2017, most notably in the 17-19 age group’ (<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/mental-health-statistics/>). These links between poverty and poor wellbeing were confirmed by the Head of Service at Base 25. Therefore, as the SHAPE team, which included parents and individuals who had experienced mental health and socio-economic challenges in the past, we were motivated to focus the project on the current mental health crisis and poor health outcomes of children and young people in the UK and to work co-productively with Base 25 to focus our project on the mental health and wellbeing needs of young people in Wolverhampton. The project set out to engage co-productively with the organisation, valuing the professional experience of those working with vulnerable young people as well as the lived experience of the young people themselves, recognising the right of young people “to participate in research and policy decisions that impact on their lives” (Booth et al., 2023, p.233).

Base 25 is a local organisation which provides support services to help vulnerable young people under the age of 25 and their families ([www.base25.org](http://www.base25.org)). Base 25 is a safe and welcoming space offering support for young people struggling with loneliness, poor mental health and financial issues. Base 25 works with approximately 9000 children and young people and 1000 adults every year, where support is individualised, depending on the specific situation and needs of the young person. Initial conversations with their Head of Services confirmed the challenges that young people face within contemporary UK society. It was after these conversations that we came up with the idea to work with the young people at the organisation to co-produce an online resource that could support young people and help them navigate the many choices and hurdles they will face in their transition to adulthood, with a particular emphasis on maintaining good mental health and wellbeing in order to be able to live a happy and healthy life.

## **Working as Co-producers**

The SHAPE project directs participants to engage with at least one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). These seventeen goals reflect the United Nation’s recognition that,

“Ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests” (United Nations, 2015).

Reflecting the work of Base 25, three of the UN Goals were prioritised:

Goal 1: No Poverty

Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing

Goal 4: Quality Education (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>)

Central to the project was to draw on the experience of young people living with disadvantage to shape the project outputs and ensure it reflected their worldviews about how to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of other young people. Working with Base 25, the project design aimed to capture the voices of young people who were experiencing mental health and wellbeing issues, as well as support staff working with those young people. In this way, as a group of individuals from the University and young people living in the local Wolverhampton community, we were generating knowledge together on the project, which we called 'Project Future Focus: Mental Health and Wellbeing in Wolverhampton'.

The project ran from approximately January 2023 until June 2023. Over the 5 months our research was divided into 4 phases.

### ***Phase 1 – meeting and planning***

This phase centred on group formation, meeting up regularly, getting to know each other, outlining our strengths and weaknesses, and identifying what we wanted to achieve within the SHAPE programme. We then spent time at Base 25, meeting with staff to start the initial planning of the project, and co-creating a project focus with the organisation, to help their community of young service users. We met with the Head of Service to get a better understanding of the work of the organisation and the needs of young people living in Wolverhampton, an area with some of the most deprived areas in the UK (See below). Reflecting on his experiences working with young people, he highlighted a gap in service provision: a resource where young people could access important knowledge to support transition into adulthood. He proposed a 'Recipe for Life' online resource, which could include practical information on issues like money management, as well as knowledge on how to maintain positive mental health and wellbeing through the life course. We felt this 'gap' could support young people in the organisation, meeting the SHAPE criteria as well as our selected UN Sustainable Goals.

### ***Phase 2 – The Research Phase***

Given our commitment to the principles of co-production, we wanted to capture the voices of the young people in our research, to strengthen the design of the resource. Therefore, we needed to do primary research and decided that questionnaires, interviews and focus groups were the best way of capturing those voices. We also wanted to carry out interviews with support staff at Base 25, to draw on their professional knowledge of the challenges young people face in Wolverhampton today. Ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee was required to conduct such primary research, however, the Ethics Committee could not

grant approval to carry out interviews or focus groups with young people under the age of 18 years as some of the student team were only in their 1<sup>st</sup> year of study. Therefore, to ensure the safeguarding of the young people, we adapted our methodology, with Base 25 staff agreeing to run 2 focus groups with the young service users for us. This allowed us to access the voices of the young people without disregarding the guidance from the Ethics Committee. We were granted ethical approval to circulate the questionnaires to University of Wolverhampton students, with assurances of anonymity and data protection.

Firstly, we carried out a literature search to identify academic and professional research data on the mental health crisis facing young people in the UK today and demographic data on the area of Wolverhampton.

Secondly, we co-designed a focus group schedule, with our lecturer and staff at Base 25, with the staff conducting the focus groups at their premises whilst we took notes. The two focus groups included young people aged between 12 and 15 years old. The focus groups took place in the Base 25 premises, as we knew the young people would feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings, and being led by Base 25 staff. Before the focus group we provided icebreakers, pizza and fizzy drinks to help nurture a less formal, welcoming environment.

Thirdly, we circulated an online questionnaire to University of Wolverhampton students to identify problems they faced in relation to their transition to adulthood<sup>ii</sup>. Drawing on the expertise of staff at Base 25, the questionnaire also asked participants to identify factors that they felt were crucial in achieving and maintaining positive mental health. Whilst University students might, on the face of it, seem a more advantaged group of individuals, the University is located in areas of high material deprivation<sup>iii</sup>, with the student body being made up of:

- 51% from global majority backgrounds;
- 2/3 of new students are the first in their family to go to university

(<https://www.wlv.ac.uk/university-life/key-facts/>).

In fact, the Head of Base 25 revealed that during term time, students from the University of Wolverhampton were amongst some of their service users. Therefore, we distributed the questionnaire electronically through internal University networks. The Head of Service of Base 25 also distributed the questionnaire to their own young service users, having gained parental/ carer consent. We were given access to an anonymised version of this data.

Fourthly, with ethical approval, we carried out interviews with support staff at Base 25, drawing on their professional knowledge of the challenges young people living in Wolverhampton face. We also interviewed members of Base 25 staff, including counsellors, youth workers and support staff, totalling 150 minutes of individual interviews.

### ***Phase 3 – Data analysis and creation of resource***

In this phase we analysed the data to identify gaps in knowledge in life skills that could form the basis for the 'Recipe for Life' resources, based on our primary and secondary research.

In 2022, it was discovered that Wolverhampton had nearly 21,000 children living in poverty (Smith, 2022). From the interviews, we discovered that children in poverty were more at risk

of sexual, criminal and financial exploitation (<https://base25.org/empower/>). These young people are likely to go on to develop mental health issues when processing their past trauma and experiences. In 2020, Wolverhampton had the worst rate of alcohol-related deaths in the country, where 70 people died due to alcohol consumption (BBC, 2023). Other research revealed that:

- A survey conducted in 2022 found that people of all ages living in Wolverhampton have higher rates of anxiety and low mental wellbeing compared to the rest of the UK.
- A third of children and young people in Wolverhampton live in families with a low-income.
- In Wolverhampton, there is a higher proportion of under-age pregnancies.
- It is suggested that 30% of children have a parent who has a mental health condition.

(City of Wolverhampton Council, 2024)

Many of the young people who use Base 25's services come from deprived backgrounds of Wolverhampton who need support in most aspects in their lives. Indeed, Wolverhampton is one of the most deprived areas in the UK, scoring 24 out of 317 local authorities in relation to deprivation and is ranked 11th most income-deprived in the UK (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1371/#/E08000031>). Such deprivation can lead to other social, emotional, educational and health issues. Luckily, services such as Base 25 in the VCFSE sector are there to support young people, especially considering the impact of austerity on youth provision, with "Local Authority expenditure on youth services has fallen 73% in England" since 2010 (YMCA, 2025).

### **Results from Semi-structured interviews with Base 25 Practitioners**

Four semi-structured interviews with Base 25's Sanctuary Team were conducted. This team are on the front line of Base 25, working directly with disadvantaged young people in Wolverhampton. The common themes from the interviews confirmed that young people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, often lacked access to information and resources to help them navigate their transition into adulthood, with specific concerns around poverty, domestic abuse, grooming and exploitation, anger management, cost of living stresses and substance misuse.

Given the loss of youth services because of austerity, it was not surprising that these interviews highlighted that there had been a rise in young people using the support services at Base 25, particularly those seeking help regarding their poor mental health and wellbeing. There had also been an increase in young adults seeking help due to financial issues resulting from the cost-of-living crisis. One staff member explained that depression and anxiety had increased since the Covid lockdown, with the increasing use of social media have playing a role. Staff had also noticed an increase in numbers of young adults who have substance abuse issues and gambling addictions, which increases financial stress and poor mental health. Alcoholism and drug use in Wolverhampton are part of the consequences of poverty and poor

mental health. A common belief of the staff at Base 25 is that austerity and welfare cuts have played a major role in the increase of poverty and deprivation.

### Focus groups with Base 25 Service Users

The conversations emerging from the focus groups confirmed that many young people living with disadvantage struggled to develop important life skills, such as budgeting, dealing with financial issues and relationships (Table 1). Other issues seen as important to young people were forming healthy relationships, including worries about ‘life at home and abuse’.

Category	Young people’s feedback
Cooking/Housekeeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to cook a good recipe</li> <li>• Budgeting</li> </ul>
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to friends</li> <li>• Anti-suicide</li> </ul>
Money and Forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping money safe</li> <li>• Saving money</li> <li>• Budgeting</li> </ul>
Social skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooking</li> <li>• Making friends</li> <li>• How to be more active</li> <li>• Online safety</li> </ul>
Hobbies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making friends</li> <li>• Cooking</li> <li>• Sports</li> </ul>

*Table 1: Service user feedback on areas they identified as being important when asked about how to live a ‘happy and healthy life’.*

### Results from the Questionnaires

103 young people from Base 25 and 72 people from the University of Wolverhampton completed the questionnaire. The data from these questionnaires revealed that both respondents from Base 25 (aged 11-17) and University of Wolverhampton (aged 18 years +) prioritised good mental health as being critical to living a happy and healthy life, with 66% and 65% respectively, putting this as ‘most important’ for participants. For 11–17-year-olds, hobbies, social skills and then money management were ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> in relation to ‘importance to living a happy and healthy life’, whilst over 18-year-olds ranked social skills, housekeeping and money management as 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> in importance. In relation to life skills, there was more variability, with 83% of over 18-year-olds feeling confident or very



confident with money management, 75% feeling confident or very confident when filling out important forms (such as for income benefits), and 66% feeling confident or very confident preparing a healthy meal. In contrast, for 11-17 year olds 59% felt confident or very confident with money management, 55% felt confident or very confident filling out important forms, but only 45% felt confident or very confident preparing a healthy meal. Therefore, it confirmed that the young people from Base 25, many of whom were from more disadvantaged backgrounds, would benefit from resources that could support development of important life skills to achieve and maintain positive mental health and wellbeing as they entered adulthood<sup>iv</sup>.

#### **Phase 4 – Co-designing the Digital Resource**

The resource was developed around the main issues affecting the mental health and wellbeing of young people, gleaned from the questionnaires, the interviews, the focus groups and insights from the secondary research. Overall, the results revealed five overarching themes which were the important ingredients to living a happy and healthy life: Cooking and Housekeeping, Money and Forms, Mental Health and Wellbeing, Hobbies, and Social Skills. Reflecting on these findings, a final meeting with the Head of Services, the lecturer and the students, it was agreed that these themes could increase the efficacy of these young people to navigate their transition into adulthood, to support their mental health and wellbeing, to facilitate confidence in their own ability to overcome challenges and to allow them to access financial information, such as welfare benefit entitlement. This formed the basis of an accessible digital resource for young people, donated to Base 25 to support their service users ([How to: The Guide to Life. - Life sorted](#)).

#### **What Were the Challenges we Faced?**

Reflecting the principles of peer research, our project aimed to harness the voices of young people, recognising the potential of including the lived experience of vulnerable young people in the co-design of the resource. It was crucial that for our final resource to be attractive and accessible to young people to help with the issues that they face, the voices of those young people should be at the centre of the research. For those young people under the age of 18 years this raised the issue of ethical approval. With many of Base 25's service users seeking help with mental health and wellbeing challenges, it was appropriate that ethical approval was not granted for aspects of this project and that Base 25 staff, who had training in youth work and the regular contact with these often vulnerable young people, would instead take responsibility for the questionnaires and focus groups with young people, having gained consent from the parents and carers. Such a period of reflection and problem-solving actually served to enhance the process of co-production – and the skills of the student team.

Time was also an issue. It was often difficult to find mutually convenient times to set up Focus Groups and to interview staff due to conflicting University timetables, demands on personal lives and work responsibilities. What is more, when working with a crucial service with high demand for support from young people in the face of growing child poverty and mental health issues, it was important that we were mindful of the workloads of the support staff and the availability of them to do, what was essentially, additional tasks (the Focus groups and



questionnaires). This sometimes required a great deal of communication, compromise and compassion.

### **What did the Students Learn from Engaging in a Community-based Project?**

‘I think we all chose SHAPE to prove that, when permitted, students of the social sciences can help and bring a change into society’ (Kyla, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

As a team, it was felt that the research conducted with Base 25 was incredibly successful. Throughout the research process, the needs of the organisation and its service users, were a priority. By talking to the community, the project was able to reflect what the community felt they needed. This would not have been possible without the opportunity to work alongside the Base 25 team and their service users. Through Base 25 we were able to gather insights from individuals of all different ages, life experiences and backgrounds. We were able to talk to service providers and service users who contributed ideas and insights that the University team may not have considered. The voices we gathered from Base 25 remained at the centre of our research from the very first conversation with the Head of Service, through to the co-design of questionnaires and focus group questions, to the development of the online resource.

‘On reflection, I am so grateful for my incredibly driven and dedicated group which allowed me to finish my degree with some hands-on community-based social research. The SHAPE research process has been the highlight of my University experience due to the personal growth I have seen in myself and my group’ (Dan, 3<sup>rd</sup> year).

All students reflected the sentiment above – that they had volunteered to ‘step out of the comfort zone’ and work as a group to solve a social problem, despite competing academic pressures, personal circumstances and the blend of 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students at different stages of their degree programmes. Megan (1<sup>st</sup> year), said:

‘I have thoroughly enjoyed working with this group and have learnt things about group work, research, ethics surrounding research and working with the community...that I strongly believe will stay with me and help me achieve more in my next two years of my degree’.

Likewise, Kyla (1<sup>st</sup> year student):

‘I learnt a lot from the SHAPE 2023 experience. Doing a project like this helped me develop both professional and personal skills better. I feel now that I understand how to work in a team better and lead a team more effectively. If I had the chance to do it again having experienced the project in its entirety, I would have perhaps approached different situations differently, particularly around delegation and having trust in your

team. I have previously struggled working in a team because of this. Therefore, what the SHAPE project taught me was the importance of trust and co-production to the development of an effective team and to the overall project outcomes. Since finishing the project, I have made a conscious effort to make sure I am exercising these skills in my subsequent academic and professional projects’.

Such reflections reveal the meaningful nature and lasting impact of experiential learning.

### **The Reflections of a Critical Pedagogue and Advocate of Experiential Learning Theory**

“Cataclysmic human-made climate change—hurricanes, melting ice caps, raging wildfires and deforestation, rising oceans, the shredding of the Earth’s protective shield, and more—driven by unchecked extraction, reckless acquisitiveness, and the everyday operations of predatory capitalism” (Ayers, 2016, p.22).

How do we, as educators, prepare our graduates, the future workforce, to solve ‘wicked problems’? Higher Education Institutions, encouraged by the Office for Students, put a high premium on measuring the ‘value’ of a degree programme with a “skills-based definition” of employability, the prime measure of which is the “monetary benefits associated with acquired or matched skills” (Suleman, 2021, pp.550-558). However, to even begin to address ‘wicked problems’ we cannot rely on graduates that simply ‘fit into’ the current (neoliberal) orthodoxy about society and the economy. Rather we need graduates who have been encouraged and enabled to think innovatively, finding solutions that challenge the status quo rather than reproducing it; that bring about social transformation, rather than social reproduction. Experiential Learning Theory, as well as Critical Pedagogy, advocate a cycle of learning that puts an emphasis on learning experience outside of the classroom, in a ‘real’ learning space capable of not only enhancing “teaching effectiveness and...student engagement and learning” (Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p.40), but also one that engages ordinary citizens who sit outside of academia, so that students can reflect on “how these complex bodies of knowledge fit together” (Weelahan, 2007, p.648). Only then will we nurture students who “have the capacity to transcend the present to imagine the future” (ibid). Even if employability is a priority, experiential learning is still an optimal approach to enhancing learning and future career opportunities, with Selingo finding that, “79% of the most successful college graduates had at least one college internship as well as other out of the classroom projects” (Selingo 2016, in Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p.7).

This community-centric approach to the learning environment echoes the growing momentum for the inclusion of citizens in the policymaking process, with advocates professing that the design and delivery of welfare services can be enhanced – and policy intervention more effective – if citizens are engaged through the process of co-production (Brandsen et al., 2018; Pestoff, 2019). Co-production has, however, become a buzz word which is often overused, not helped by the different definitions and the various contexts in which it is applied (Brandsen et al., 2018; Booth, 2023). What is more, it can be difficult to put co-production into practice, as it challenges established relationships between the service

provider and service user; the researcher and the researched; the policymaker and the citizen, demanding less hierarchical ways of working.

Nonetheless, the principles of co-production have increasingly been adopted by social researchers (Rees et al., 2024). This approach to social research requires a repositioning of what constitutes knowledge and expertise. Indeed Kotzee (2012, p.175) frames academic knowledge as only one source of expertise, arguing that there are many sources of expertise - what he calls the “differentiatedness of expertise” - that are needed to solve social problems. From this perspective, academic knowledge should not be privileged over the lived experience of the communities living with a social issue. Instead, they should hold an equal value in the research process. Otherwise, the priorities of academics, whilst valuable, may ignore the “knowledge from” – and indeed the priorities of – “the community perspective” (Sandemann & Kliever, 2012, p.23). Young (2010) describes the difference between academic knowledge and community knowledge as a difference between “knowledge of the powerful” and “powerful knowledge”. ‘Powerful knowledge’ refers to indigenous ‘knowing’ embedded in communities, which is often undermined by ‘Knowledge of the powerful’, which tends to “limit the capacity of the less privileged to develop informed and critical understanding of society’s power structures and their own relation to them” (Beck, 2013, p.182). ‘Powerful knowledge’ encourages the seeking of evidence and experience, so that individuals can move “beyond their everyday experience” (Beck, 2013, p.179) and embrace the range of expertise that are available. In this way, “co-producing research challenges the conventional ideas about what is considered ‘research’” (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016, p.7). Taking this a step further, critical pedagogy advocates “pedagogies of resistance” (Giroux, 2022, p.181) in a learning space that brings together students, academics and local citizens. Such a space is needed to nurture,

“critical thinking, collective resistance, and a notion of hope that inspires and energizes opportunities and to rethink the connection between education and social change, and to deepen our understanding of politics as part of a broader attempt to redefine and struggle for a future that does not repeat the present” (Giroux, 2022, p.186).

SHAPE was an opportunity to engage students in such a learning space, one that valued the powerful knowledge within the community, drawing on the experience of those living with the ‘bads’ of neoliberal capitalism (Booth, 2023) and the wickedness of the climate crisis which requires a multi-organisational and multi-disciplinary approach to finding solutions (Brown et al., 2010). As the UN Sustainable Development Goals indicate, sustainability is not only about ecological damage, but social issues related to climate change and the need for a more sustainable approach to the economy and society: notably, interventions to address the rising health and wealth inequalities and the mental health crisis facing young people. In addition, our project wanted to co-create a learning space that would help to, “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>) - reaching beyond the walls of the University.

In relation to the SHAPE project, we employed the concept of “collective co-production”, where we, as academics, chose to “work directly and simultaneously” with young people from

the local community “to generate social benefits” as well as “personal benefits” (Nabatchi et al., 2017, p.773). It was deemed important by both lecturer and students that Base 25 should be involved from the inception of the project, “at the problem definition stage”, in order to ensure that the organisation and its service users were involved in a project that could “actively alter the social conditions in which they find themselves” (Robinson and Tansey, 2006, p.152, in Beebejuan et al., 2015, p.553). We wanted to use a participatory method in order to ensure that knowledge generation and learning was a shared activity between students, lecturer, professionals at Base 25 and young people. We felt that this collaborative approach would enhance the ‘realness’ of the research. Through allowing the young people using support services at Base 25 to have a voice in the project as co-producers, their lived experience influencing the design of the resources, we felt it would be a more empowering process for all involved. As the Disability Activist, James Charleston (1998) would say, ‘nothing about us, without us’. In other words, our project aimed to empower young people to highlight the challenges that they faced and support the co-design of the online resources. In this way we hoped that the young people would feel some ownership of the resources, not be reduced to ‘research subjects’, and that the result would be resources that are more likely to be impactful.

Not only that, but by engaging students in a reciprocal process of knowledge exchange, co-producing a project with the young people and support staff at Base 25, the students were able to enhance the learning and citizenship of themselves, as well as the citizenship and learning of the young people involved in the project. This project offered the space to explore a more critical pedagogy, where students could have the opportunity to question dominant neoliberal narratives which support an unsustainable and unjust economic system. This would allow students to develop skills and attributes beyond those recognised as enhancing ‘employability’, a concept that encourages students to simply “fit into” the capitalist society and maintain the inequalities and ecological damage that it produces. Instead, the students could question how the current organisation of society and the economy promotes an unequal and unsustainable system that erodes social citizenship and devolves responsibility for poverty and ill health to individual responsibility. As Giroux (2022) states, the current neoliberal society undermines the pursuit of the “common good”, reducing citizenship to selfishness and consumption.

As a result, the students developed a more critical approach to the social world:

‘The SHAPE experience was eye opening. To have had the opportunity to work with a fantastic organisation and collaborate with both the service providers and service users was incredible and provided me with a new world of insight into the voluntary sector and support services provided to those most in need. It also highlighted the inequalities and challenges young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face that is not of their own doing. I heard from the young people about the impact of poverty on their confidence, education and mental health. It showed me that when young people are born poor they struggle throughout their childhood – and often don’t have the opportunities to change their lives. I learned so much about how social processes impact on individuals – which I had encountered in my lectures – but this really hit home’. (Kyla: 1<sup>st</sup> year).

SHAPE gave the students the opportunity to problem-solve in real time, having to engage with the range of knowledge and experience in the research process to co-design a resource that would be more likely to support young people's mental health and wellbeing needs. Kolb and Kolb (2017) argued that learning activities in Higher Education Institutions often only engaged students in "part of the learning cycle; for example, experiencing, reflecting, and thinking, but not acting" limiting the transformative potential of experiential learning (Patrie & Gironella, 2025, p.9). In contrast, the SHAPE students were able to benefit from the full cycle of experiential learning, as described by Kolb & Kolb (2017). Here students had to immerse themselves in the organisation (concrete experience), use that experience to reflect on how to engage the voices and experience of the service providers and service users (reflective observation), identify ways to access the voices of the organisation and extract the main themes from that primary research (abstract conceptualisation) and turn those themes into a resource that could be used by young people (active experimentation). As Berling (3<sup>rd</sup> year) stated,

'Working in collaboration with the local community was also a chance to gain practical experience. By including community members and members of the charity we worked with in the planning and decision-making process of the project, we were able to ensure that our project was relevant and driven by shared goals. Co-creation with the local community ultimately leads to more effective outcomes. Not only did it benefit the local community, but it also gave us students a chance to engage in the local community in a way that is normally not possible as part of a university degree. It gave us hands-on experience of collaborating with a different demographic than we normally interacted with on a day-to-day basis'.

Research that embodies community knowledge and reflects community priorities requires a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship between the University and the local community. An increasing body of research has documented the importance of including the individuals and communities living with a social problem in generating the solutions to that social problem. Indeed, if universities are to produce graduates capable of tackling 'wicked problems', then they need to engage those most affected by those 'wicked problems'.

This project reinforced the belief that the business of universities - teaching, learning and research – should have a greater regard for the needs of the VCFSE organisations and the local communities that they serve. As Brown et al (2010) argue, complex social problems require a multi-disciplinary, multi-organisational and multi-actor approach. What is more, a community-centric approach to learning and research is more likely to nurture graduates with the skills, values and attributes to address complex social problems, rather than simply producing graduates that are employable in the capitalist system. The importance of co-production and working *with* communities not *on them* not only provides a powerful learning environment but it also empowers the disadvantaged communities to help generate the range of knowledge needed for them to truly understand the aetiology of social problems and what is needed to solve them.

Indeed, Critical Pedagogy advocates a "democratisation of knowledge" (Levac et al., 2022, p.404) where knowledge generation and learning are not confined within the walls of the

university. Instead, the process of generating knowledge should facilitate dialogue “between the university and community where knowledge and learning can flow” (Booth, 2023, p. 202) with both the university and community benefitting. This has shown to have a number of advantages:

Firstly, the power relationship between the researched and the researcher is diminished, from which a more reciprocal relationship can emerge. A more community-facing university can not only provide meaningful learning opportunities for its students, through the benefits of experiential learning. It can also become more relevant and responsive to the local community.

Secondly, as this project revealed, students’ own experiences of mental health issues – or any other social issue - does not have to be framed as a disadvantage. Such lived experience – expertise through experience – can be an asset in experiential learning, helping to build understanding and connections between students and disadvantaged groups in the community, adding empathy to the research – and learning - process. In relation to the SHAPE team, their lived experience of mental health issues was used as “powerful knowledge”. In this way the SHAPE team was able to empathise with the young service users, creating an inclusive and positive research environment, one which valued the expertise of the organisation and the young people they support. This lack of hierarchy supported the building of resource that reflected the voices of all, and therefore one more likely to be accessible to other young people.

Thirdly, by taking a more community-facing approach to research the University can play a role in driving “social action and social change for the purpose of achieving social justice” (Warren et al., 2018, p.446, in Levac et al., 2022, p.404). For as Giroux states, education should be “a form of political intervention in the world” that “can create the possibilities for individual and social transformation” (2022, p.150). As Berlind (3<sup>rd</sup> Year) said, ‘having seen how theories studied in university apply to real life gave me an opportunity to see the bigger picture outside of university and develop a deeper understanding of how society functions and what can and should be done to improve the lives of those who are disadvantaged’.

Fourthly, students develop important skills for the workplace, fulfilling either the limited condition of ‘employability’ or nurturing skills, values and attributes to push for social change, as illustrated by Dan (3<sup>rd</sup> Year), who stated, ‘being able to speak about our project to a room full of people helped me to fully understand the importance of practising public speaking and presentation skills...Additionally, working with the third sector and the local community inspired me to find a career in this sector’.

## **Conclusion:**

‘The SHAPE experience was fantastic and will remain one of my proudest and fondest moments of my undergraduate degree, I feel its impact is permanent’ (Megan, 1<sup>st</sup> year)

Experiential learning programmes like SHAPE are crucial. Such programmes act as brokers in the process of engaging with the wider community – encouraging students to draw on their own experiences as members of that community in order to connect with - and not patronise – citizens outside of the university. Experiential (Service) learning also supports reflexive and

inclusive practice. By making visible the social, economic, cultural and political barriers that some communities face, and challenging those barriers, such programmes are more likely to facilitate social change. However, even in relation to employability in its limited conceptualisation as economic benefit, this programme provided opportunities for team working, communication and problem-solving skills that comes from having “real world experience” (Selingo, 2016, p.9).

By taking a community-centric approach to learning, Higher Education Institutions are in a position to engage in dialogue to challenge the injustice of the current political and economic system, champion social transformation and move towards addressing ‘wicked problems’. As our project reveals, by co-producing with a local VCFSE organisation this dialogue can be inclusive, engaging the local community in conversations about how to bring about social change. For education should have an ethical and political dimension (Heybach & Luminacci, 2024) otherwise social change will not happen, leaving us with continuing environmental damage, growing inequalities and a mental health crisis. This paper therefore hopes to promote the need for universities, in relation to teaching, learning and research, to “have a greater regard for the local community and the VCFSE sector if they are to play a role in bringing about radical social change” (Booth, 2023, p.168) and produce graduates motivated to challenge the status quo. Our thanks go to the SHAPE initiative for promoting innovation and social change.

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<sup>i</sup> SOS is an educational charity aimed at educating university students on sustainability through projects that support students and wider society to learn, act and lead for environmental justice (<https://www.sos-uk.org/>)

<sup>ii</sup> The interviews, questionnaires and focus groups were accompanied by an Information Sheet letting the participants know what the study was for and what their contributions would be used for. The sheets reassured participants that all contributions would be anonymised and participants could withdraw from the study at any time – or choose not to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable with.

<sup>iii</sup> Statistics from the City of Wolverhampton Council available here: <https://insight.wolverhampton.gov.uk/Home/Report/8ce971cf-f973-4148-9f98-abac58b27f7a>

<sup>iv</sup> The results of the primary research, reflecting the voices of the young people, were important to the co-production of project resources. However, a full review of the findings is not included in this paper as the primary focus of this paper is the role of the student voice. A full table of results is available on request