How might we grow co-creation in our institution? The value of student recognition

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Organisational and historical context

Queen Mary University of London is one of the most diverse higher education institutions in the world, and one whose student profile is distinctive among the Russell Group. Queen Mary has its main campuses in East London and many of its students are from the local community. More than 90 per cent of home students come from state schools, 75% are BAME and 49% are the first in their family to enter higher education. In 2022, QM won the 'University of the Year' award at the annual UK Social Mobility Awards. This follows a 2021 report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that named the University as the best in the country for social mobility.

The Queen Mary 2030 Strategy aims to facilitate 'an outstanding, inclusive, world-class education and learner experience, co-created with our diverse learner body' (QMUL, 2019). However, the Strategy highlights the need to enable and promote co-creative approaches to curriculum development and to develop the student learning experience. To address this drive in QMUL strategy for co-creation, a new award scheme was created in 2021. The SEED award – Student Enhanced Engagement and Development – recognises student contribution to any co-creative work and is one answer to the current challenge of how to reward student co-creative contribution across higher education (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2016).

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Specifications of the project

The SEED award is housed within the Queen Mary Academy (QMA), which aims to inspire excellence and innovation in educational and research practice across the institution. The SEED team extends beyond QMA, drawing upon the wisdom of academics, professional services staff and students from across the university. The award scheme aligns with the AdvanceHE Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), a globally recognised framework for benchmarking success within HE teaching and learning.

Students are invited to submit a reflection on their co-creative work, evidencing a minimum of 10 hours of activity as well as their learning and recommendations offered to the educator they have been co-creating with. The application is endorsed by this educator who has worked with the students. Applications are reviewed by a panel which aligns processes with our HEA Teaching Recognition Processes for staff. Successful applicants receive a certificate, and the award is recorded on their Higher Education Achievement Record.

Pedagogy and practice

We believe co-creation is a key driver of promoting students' engagement (Bovill 2020). It has the potential to lead to more human and meaningful forms of learning and teaching in higher education. However, enabling co-creation is ground that is hard won and challenges involve developing ways to support and value the student input, dealing with power differentials and resistance from staff (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten 2016).

At Queen Mary, there is a clear call for co-creation, but the question has been how do we make it happen? As a team that has come together from different parts of the university to develop and promote co-creation, we are often reminded of the forces influencing our decisions and their (un)intended consequences: the institutional push for developing co-creation, individual practices of academics and their professional judgement, (real) outcomes for students and the power of SEED as a recognition (but also as a political tool). We believe higher education should be about nurturing curiosity, risk taking and, ultimately, emancipation and liberation (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovill 2023; Freire 1972).

Our first challenge was dealing with issues involving awareness of co-creation (Matthews et al, 2019). Although co-creation forms part of our values and culture, focus groups we conducted with students who had never been involved in SEED application revealed that students were not fully aware of the meaning of co-creation and had not heard of the SEED award. Furthermore, a survey conducted with education managers across faculties revealed that they unanimously knew about the SEED award but had limited awareness of projects involving co-creation. This highlighted the need for greater awareness of both what co-creation is and the potential opportunity to apply for a recognition award at Queen Mary. In terms of awareness of co-creation, it is also important to note that it may be happening without being labelled as this. For example, one educator described a co-creative approach before knowing the term: 'And so it just came out of what students needed. And that's very much how all of the co-creation stuff I do arises ... and it was only later that I realised it was called co-creation' (Interview: Educator 3).

Implementation

Since June 2021, we have run six review panels and 99 students have received the SEED award. The projects that SEED award winners participated in can be grouped into four of the areas of activity aligned with the UKPSF (AdvanceHE), with the majority (58%) of students focussing on A2 (Teaching and/or support of learning), for example drawing on student near-peer teaching approaches and peer-led team teaching. Students have addressed other areas of activity within the UKPSF: 24% of students focussed on A4 (Development of effective learning environments), 14% submitted an application relating to A1 (Design and plan learning activities/programmes of study) and, perhaps not surprisingly, only 3% addressed A3 (Assessment and Feedback).

Evaluation

'To have gained the SEED award is a huge point of pride. I can't think of a better way to have all the work of the past year recognised, and I feel lucky to have had the chance to shape and improve my course' (Evaluation survey - June 2021 panel).

Although we have continually evaluated the SEED award, in 2022 we undertook to research the potential impact of co-creative working for students and staff supported or highlighted in our institution through the SEED award. We worked with two Learner Interns (Vice-Principals for Education's internship programme) and the research project was approved by the university's Research Ethics Committee. We used qualitative and quantitative methodologies drawing on survey, interview and creative enquiry[2]. A total of 54 students and the 26 educators they worked with were invited to complete surveys to get a broad feeling from across these populations[3]. 8 students and 11 educators responded to our survey (14.8% and 42.3% respectively). 4 students and 4 educators (7% and 15% respectively) also agreed to engage with semi-structured interviews to enable further exploration of emerging themes. The creative enquiry activity consisted of choosing a postcard from a website and adding a written reflection anonymously on a Padlet, explaining their choice in relation to their co-creative and SEED application experience. 6 students and 7 educators participated in the creative enquiry activity (9% and 27% respectively).

Analysis of data followed an interpretivist approach integrating the human dimension into the study to work with the voices of participants, their individual experiences, ideas and views. Core themes emerging from across the data address co-creation itself as well as the impact of the SEED award.

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[2] Creative enquiry in education or research is the exploring of lived experience through the arts (Younie and Swinglehurst, 2019)

[3] Number of award winners before the research project started.

Co-creation joys and challenges

Both students and educators believed that co-creation led to the enhancement of the curriculum and learning experience. For example, one of the students described being 'happy that my work made an impact and is helping students like me to get better support from their university' (Interview: Student 4).

Students and educators described enhanced understanding of each other, students of the choices made by educators and educators of students' views and experiences. They also described the joy of connection across hierarchies and the satisfaction of engaging in meaningful work. Students mentioned the experience involved sharing responsibility, being given freedom, being listened to and feeling empowered and supported. Students also mentioned opening up and sharing, gaining confidence, developing critical and creative thinking and a sense of accomplishment and gratitude.

In terms of challenges, students highlighted issues of time, managing schoolwork, balance and dealing with resistance from senior management. Educators also referred to the time needed to develop and manage the project, balancing the time available, and learner autonomy. Although educators demonstrated clear awareness of the expertise of the students in terms of their experience, they reflected on the complexity of facilitating co-creative working and the need to find balance between protection, growth and empowerment. Co-creation was potentially perceived as a risky balancing act of power and hierarchy, with educators having to redraw boundaries, identify red lines and deal with pitfalls.

Application for the SEED award

Application for the SEED award was believed to support career opportunities with educators describing the award as potentially 'boost[ing] academic career[s]', or 'showcase[ing] contributions and skillsets' for employers (Survey). Students agreed '[it] looks good on CV' and it is a 'great achievement to talk about in future interviews or discussions' (Survey).

One student evidenced this being the case: 'I actually included the SEED award stuff in my job application and … I think even in the personal statement' (Interview: Student 3). The process of the SEED award was found to invite greater student reflection on their co-creative experience. For example, one student wrote that it 'made me think a lot…about different points of view, planning, strategy, execution, and the impact that it created' (Interview: Student 1). Beyond this, results from our mirrored survey with students and staff indicated that both groups agreed the value of applying for the award is associated with recognition of student voice and engagement: '[It is] useful to have the student voice, [highlight] topics which are obviously affecting students and the student experience' (Padlet: Student 3). Inviting student voice is possibly also leading to greater inclusivity and a sense of belonging. For example, one student described that through applying they were inspired 'to do more in terms of contributing to the creation of a conducive and inclusive culture at QMUL and beyond' (Survey: Student).

Belonging and mattering through SEED application were key themes emerging from across the creative enquiry data for students: 'being recognised for it made me feel like I did something that actually matters' (Student 5). Educators also described an important sense of belonging through co-creative working: 'I can say it's probably the most influential thing I have done on sort of belonging to the university' (Interview: Educator 4). Educators regarded their experience of co-creation as authentic, meaningful and enjoyable. The heightened understanding, relationship, connection and growth described in the data in relation to co-creative engagement perhaps supports human flourishing[4], a concept mentioned by both students and educators: 'being able to reflect on how I was taught my module and how I could bring my coaching skills to improve it for future students really allowed me to flourish as a person' and 'improve as a professional individual' (Padlet: Student 6). This aligns with research on thriving organisations where meaningful engagement, equal voice and reflection are proposed as key organisational features (Park et al, 2020).

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[4] Philosophically, flourishing has been approximated with Aristotle's term 'eudaimonia' which is wellbeing through meaning making, finding purpose, mastery and personal growth. Flourishing moves the conversation beyond 'resilience' (bouncing back and toughing it out alone) towards not only meaning-making and growth but also connection with difficult parts of our lives/selves/teams and the interconnected nature of our wellbeing (Kahn, 2017; Younie, 2020).

Beyond individual growth and development, the award was seen as challenging institutional culture and traditional hierarchies: 'The co-creation award … is a win-win for me and the students. I think it empowers me as much as it empowers them to challenge the status quo and bring about change in the practices we are all engaged in' (Educator 3). These findings confirm the idea advocated by Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot, that partnerships have power for 'revolutionising Higher Education' (2020, p 121).

Lessons learned

From our evaluation we have seen that, although not widespread, co-creation is already part of the institutional culture and exists in pockets which SEED has helped to recognise and surface. Key ideas regarding the impact of the award included development of curriculum and the learning experience, enhanced reflection, enabling student voice and enhancing career opportunities. Challenges related to, among other things, power dynamics and time pressures and this resonates with the literature (Cook-Sather and Kaur, 2022). We also found that involvement in co-creation recognised by the SEED award enabled high quality connection and collaboration, potentially enhancing intuitional belonging and human flourishing (Younie, 2020). The joy reported by educators involved in meaningful co-creative work was particularly surprising and a dimension that needs further research. At a time when burnout, loneliness and disconnection are rife in higher education, the potential for co-creation and our SEED award to enhance belonging and inclusion on top of developing educational spaces and curricula is a significant finding.

While promoting the award, we have been keen to enhance equity, diversity and inclusion so that not only the most confident students apply for the award (Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill 2020). As stated by Mercer-Mapstone, Islam and Reid, we need to ensure that are we not just engaging and recognising 'the usual suspects' (2021, p 227). So far, in terms of gender and ethnicity[5] we have a good spread of students applying. This feels like an achievement even if

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[5] 67% female and 33% male and in terms of ethnicity: White - 28%; Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) - 28%; Asian (Chinese and other) - 17%; Black African and Caribbean - 9%; Arab - 8%; Mixed - 7%; Other - 5%.

it may just be generally reflecting the diversity of our institution. We are also aware that we do not have data on widening participation students.

Since June 2021, over 100 students have already gained recognition for their role in enhancing teaching and learning across Queen Mary. Based on our experience, we would recommend that other institutions looking to adopt similar recognition schemes:

- invest in the creation of platforms for engagement and support for those students already involved in co-creation projects and those willing to start.
- work in partnership with the team responsible for recognition (HEA fellowships) to learn from their experience - processes and quality assurance mechanisms and administrative support.
- establish a steering committee (including student and educator representatives) to oversee the development of the award, ideally adopting a co-creation approach.
- gather evidence of impact including impact stories as early in the process as feasible.

The challenge now is to reach out to those parts of the institution and groups of students who have not yet got involved. We have recently started presenting the award at student welcome fairs and staff induction events, and promotional materials have been published to facilitate this effort (as part of the introduction to the institutional culture and values). SEED prize winners – an additional layer of recognition for the most well-written reflective award applications - have also started receiving support to apply for international recognition (SEDA/ JISC - Student Partnership Impact Award) and there are plans to support award winners to apply for Associate HEA Fellowships. However, more work needs to be done in terms of creating platforms for engagement, ensuring inclusivity, enhancing outcomes and recognising achievements, while developing strategies to support educators and students alike in developing co-creation.

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