How can student-staff partnership in curriculum design impact upon learning experience and engagement?

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Abstract

While the concept of embedding the student voice into the student learning experience is well established, in many Higher Education Institutions this is limited to hearing students' opinions for the purpose of improving teaching and assessment. Recent research has also established that hearing the student voice work did not bring about the changes expressed by students and may be limited to a listening exercise rather than becoming actionable objectives. This article reports on a participatory research study which investigates how a student-staff partnership in curriculum design impacts upon the student learning experience by seeing students as co-creators. This paper highlights that student are likely to feel more motivated, engaged and attend lectures when given the opportunity to co-design their own curriculum. However, several practical challenges were reported in the study, including tutors' views on the beliefs and values of pedagogic work, their perception of the role of teachers, and the students' place in the learning and teaching process. For student voice to have a real impact on the students' learning experience it is recommended that students need to take on a more knowledgeable active role in the learning and teaching process, and for academics to re-consider their opinions of the place and importance of students in the educational process. This can then facilitate the planning and implementation of student voice work in universities and make the curriculum more meaningful for students.

Key words: Student voice, Co-creation, Curriculum, Higher Education, Empowerment

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Introduction

Higher Education (HE) in the UK has undergone considerable change in the last decade (AdvanceHE, 2014). These include, in particular, changes in government funding implemented in 2012 which resulted in the introduction of a new tuition fee system in England, a reduction in teaching grants to universities, and the removal of students' maintenance grants (BIS, 2011). These changes to UK Higher Education have led to a greater significance being placed on the student experience and are concordant with the government's higher education policies which focus on the 'student-as-consumer'. Consequently, the government supported a number of initiatives which focus on the student experience. These include the National Student Survey (NSS, 2019), annual census on undergraduate student experience and the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) guidance on the rights of students and consumer law obligations to universities. Because of policy changes implemented through these initiatives, students' expectations of attending university have also changed. In a report by Universities UK (2017) approximately half of undergraduates now consider themselves as 'customers' of their university. This marketisation of higher education, along with a shift in the expectations of students, has resulted in an increased valorisation of the student experience in higher education institutions across the country.

One criticism of the UK higher education policy's discourse on student experience is that '..it (discourse) homogenises students and deprives them of agency' (Sabri, 2011, p. 657). Agency in this case is the ability of students to feel they have the knowledge and ability to act independently and to feel confident enough to make their own inputs into the university educational processes. The 'student-as-consumer' approach gives the impression that all students are capable of making rationale choices from a shared starting point regardless of differentiated socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. However, not all students are demographically homogeneous, nor are their expectations of attending university. This was confirmed by Sabri (2011) who highlighted that there are students with low levels of social and cultural capital. These

students often have fewer resources to help them make an informed choice and are likely to feel more anxious about future debt from attending university. By presuming homogeneity within the student population this consumer-centric policy risks depriving individuals of agency, whilst trying to provide students with their choice of university and the experience they desire.

One of the key elements in the UK Higher Education sector since the introduction of a new tuition fee system in England is student engagement. Education researchers and policy-makers recognised that student engagement is a part of the industry's good practice (Ashwin and McVitty, 2015). This was further confirmed in the publication of a report on engagement through partnership in higher education in 2014. In its report, the UK Higher Education Academy ('AdvanceHE') emphasised that '…engaging students and staff as partners in learning and teaching is one of the most important issues facing higher education' (Advance HE, 2014, p.7). For researchers, policy-makers and education practitioners the challenge now is to ensure that students from every socioeconomic background can and do play an active role in their own higher education, whilst maintaining their student experience and engagement as a result of the government's policy that now perceives the student as a consumer' in the higher education market.

This paper is a qualitative study which uses a participatory research approach to focus on and to explore students as partners in the learning and teaching process in UK higher education. The aim is to determine, 'how can the student-staff partnership in curriculum design influence the learning experience and the students' engagement?' This question is intended to create a dialogue in which students can become genuine partners with academics in developing curriculum and teaching approaches to enhance their own learning experience through engagement in partnership with their university.

Literature review

In academic literature within the context of Higher Education, student voice has not been addressed to the same degree as it has within school and college environments (Cook-Sather 2014; Seale, 2010). In the literature concerning primary and secondary schools the student voice is defined as '…listening to and valuing the views that

students express regarding their learning experience' (Seale, 2010, p. 995). However, in the Higher Education context, student voice is broadly defined as students becoming involved with and having greater control over the learning process (Bovill *et al.*, 2011). This student involvement also implicitly means that students become engaged in their own learning experience. Despite this, Seale (2010) identified that in this definition there was no mention of transformation or empowerment in the process. These elements are important in the definition of student voice because in practice previous research has demonstrated that, although students are invited to express their opinions, it does not ultimately result in any changes being implemented. For example, in a study on student voice work in UK universities, Freeman (2016) demonstrated that student voice initiatives fail to empower students as they only allow them to engage in discussions, but do not actually initiate any of the changes suggested by the students. Similarly, Seale *et al.* (2015) also highlight that student voice initiatives often ignore the issue of power relations and thus fall short of fully engaging and participating in truly collaborative partnerships with members of staff in learning and teaching activities. These examples show that student voice projects in higher education may have limitations stemming from their conceptualisation and implementation. Student voice is based on the notion that students should have a knowledgeable view of teaching and learning, and those insights can be shared with educators and responded to, resulting in the empowerment of the students (Fielding, 2001; Rudduck, 2007). The following section gives a brief overview of student voice and student engagement in education.

In the early 1990s, student voices were largely excluded from the learning and teaching discourse. Scholars such as Cook-Sather (2003) and Bullough and Gitlin (1994) argued that, at the time, students were only perceived as silent and passive recipients of education. Numerous educators and critics have called for action to redress the issue. For example, in the UK, student voice supporters (Stenhouse, 1983; Rudduck *et al.*, 1996) were advocating a dialogue with students on school improvements. In Canada, Levin (1994) argued for involving students in determining their own goals and learning methods. Towards the end of this period, several vocabularies on students' voice began to emerge. Words such as 'opinion', 'capable', 'listen actively' and 'involved' now appeared in the research on learning and teaching literature (Hill, 2003).

By the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, the term 'student voice' became embedded in the learning and teaching discourse. Many education research articles began to incorporate some form of discussion and/or dialogue concerning students (Fielding and McGregor, 2005). In this sense, the 'student voice' began to involve students expressing their opinions and having a more active role in their own education experience. This is what Holdsworth (2000) called the relationship between 'voice', 'agency' and 'action'. The relationships between these terms are not straightforward.

'Having a voice' generally means the ability to express oneself and to participate in decisions that matters to them. Agency, on the other hand, can be understood as the capacity to act independently and to make one's own decisions (Manyukhina and Wyse, 2019). In his work on Australian youth, Holdsworth (2000) identified that by focusing on the hearing of young people's voice alone has the limitation that those who give voices may appear as active participants. But, in practice, there may not be any real changes happening because of that voice. This aligns with a criticism in the literature regarding the relationship between student voice, agency and action, with the assumption that student feedback (voice) actually leads to actions or improvement in educational experience (Seale (2010); Shah and Nair (2009)). In reality, Freeman (2016) found students may be able to voice their opinions on teaching practices and curriculum development, but they could still end up with no real change in their educational experience. Thus, having a voice may not necessarily lead to the desired outcome from the students' perspective.

Despite this complex relationship between voice, agency and action, having a voice may help to bring about the desired transformation by the students. Fielding (2004) argued that having a voice can also engage students in a power dynamic. This means that not only can students participate in having conversations or express their opinions, they can also challenge issues that affect their learning and teaching experience. Ryan and Tilbury (2013) called this new pedagogical idea that focuses on student empowerment 'co-creation'.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research focusing on co-creation in student voice work in UK HE and this had led to some changes in practice. Co-creation has been utilised in a number of learning and teaching processes, such as involving

students in curriculum development (Hakkinen and Latva-Korpela, 2020), the design of assessment questions, choice of assessment methods and the grading of their own and others' work (Barry, 2021; Cook-Sather *et al*., 2014; Doyle, 2019). Billett and Martin (2018) defined co-creation as a pedagogical method that focuses on the relationship between students and teachers. This new model of learning and teaching provides space for contribution by the students and changes the dynamic between students and staff by recognising the issue of power relations between both parties. The focus on power and dialogic interaction in learning and teaching has been discussed in the work of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. Freire's pedagogic work shifted the focus from teachers to students and encouraged students to engage in a culture of questioning in the classroom. It offers 'students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life and critical agency' (Giroux, 2010a, p.336). For instance, students are given a voice to participate in setting assessments and developing their own curriculum. This view is supported by Bain (2010) who argued for a model of student assessment where students work with academics to become independent and empowered learners. Overall, the literature regarding co-creation in student voice initiatives supports the notion that students should be given the opportunity to participate in setting their own assessments and developing the curriculum alongside academic staff. These voices in turn empower students to become involved in their own agency through questioning and engaging with their own learning experience.

One criticism of much of the literature involving students in learning and teaching practices is that the process is perceived as being 'teacher-centric' (Hurlimann *et al*., 2013; Bovill *et al*., 2011; Seale, 2010).Co-creation work in higher education often emphasises asking questions about student experience, seeing and understanding the student experience and listening to previously ignored voices. The central purpose of all these activities is to reflect on what it means for academics to improve their teaching based on students' opinions. A number of studies have investigated this (Zhao and Gallant, 2012; Chen and Hoshower, 2003 and Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000). These studies solicited students' opinions to provide improvement in lecturers' teaching practice. In addition to being focused on the needs of teachers, they also relied on teachers' understanding of the benefits of student voice work and empowering students. Based on their study of three Australian primary schools that

engage in student voice work, Black and Mayes (2020) found that student voice may also be associated with teachers' feelings of 'fear', 'resistance' or 'uncertainly' about students challenging existing power relationships between themselves and students. This lack of understanding works to reduce the effectiveness of the use of student voice in co-creation in educational institutions.

The student-staff partnership involved in the co-creation of curriculum and teaching involves addressing students' opinions and can bring with it several challenges. Perhaps the most critical challenge is the complicated traditional power dynamic in higher education where staff have been traditionally responsible for curriculum design and teaching related tasks (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014). Other authors (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2017; Bovill *et al.*, 2011) have pointed out that students have only been consulted on the curriculum during the last decade. The content of the curriculum has always been the responsibility of the teacher or university. Brooker and Macdonald (1999, p.14) emphasised that the challenge is '…to embrace curriculum-making practices that are inclusive and valuing of student voice'. This requires a commitment of authorities '…both to challenge the dualistic acceptance of 'educator' and 'student' and also to recognise power relations to ensure that student voice informs curriculum making' (Brooker and Macdonald, 1999, p.14). The inclusion of students 'might serve to enable them to overcome the institutional barriers that operate against an emancipatory view of students as active curriculum makers' (Macanghaill, 1992, p. 231). In participatory development studies, Kothari (2001, p. 152) points out that participatory approaches '…simplify highly complicated social relations and in certain circumstances reify on them'. By inviting students to co-design curriculum and assessments, academics may complicate traditional power relations where teaching and course design is traditionally viewed as the role of academics, and where students are passive learners in this relationship. Along the same lines, Shor (1992) has argued that by extending student participation in teaching planning, it may be a threatening experience to students who are used to teachers dominating the classroom, and they may be resistant to deviating from this norm. Hence, it is important to note that '…enhancing student participation in pedagogical planning does not replace teachers' expertise and their key role in facilitating learning' (Bovill *et al.*, 2011, p.135).

To overcome the issue of power dynamics, Cook-Sather *et al.*, (2014) suggest that universities should strive to find a balance between student participation, power and

perspective where contributions made by both staff and students are valued and respected.

Other concerns raised in relation to co-creation work include how sustainable student-staff partnerships in learning and teaching are, and how to ensure that student-staff partnership is inclusive of all students and doesn't just focus on a small number of students (Bovill, 2019). These issues are currently being explored and many more questions remain to be answered (Bovill, 2019; Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014). Thus, further work is needed to answer these practical challenges in implementing co-creation work.

For co-creation work in higher education to progress and deliver its focus on student agency, participation, and empowerment, we may need to approach student participation in pedagogic planning with caution and to learn from the examples of teaching approaches that promote student empowerment (Bovill, 2019). Prominent student voice researchers such as Seale *et al.* (2015) and Fielding (2004) have been utilising a 'participatory method' in their student voice work. Participatory methods attempt to engage students in the whole process, from designing their curriculum through to its evaluation at validation and review events (Seale, 2010). The participatory method of student voice research is to work 'with', rather than 'for' students. A participatory approach to student voice is a collaborative approach which perceives students as partners to teachers with equal status and power. Given these benefits, student voice work should adopt a participatory approach to encourage students to take action by expressing their concerns and challenging the issues which impact upon the student learning experience and engagement.

In addition to the participatory method mentioned above, other examples of student participation in pedagogical planning that perceive students as equal partners include the three methods suggested by Bovill *et al.* (2011): students as co-creators of teaching approaches, students as co-creators of course design and students as co-creators of their curricula.

Firstly, students as co-creators of teaching approaches. This is where students are invited to serve as consultants on courses that they are not enrolled in. Each student consultant then meets with the faculty member to set up goals and plans for the semester, visits class sessions on a weekly basis to take notes on teaching issues

and provides feedback and discusses implications with faculty members. This method perceives the student as a collaborator and challenges the role of students in college classrooms (Cook-Sather, 2010).

Secondly, students as co-creators of course design. In this approach, students are invited as partners in 'course design teams' that co-create, or re-create, a course syllabus (Bovill *et al.*, 2011). According to Fink (2003), course design might be the most important barrier to quality teaching and learning in higher education.

Thirdly, students as co-creators of their curricula. In this approach, students and university staff work in partnership to create some or all elements of planning, implementation and evaluation of the teaching and learning experience. These approaches provide several potential opportunities for student involvement in designing their own learning and teaching experience. It also covers various levels of student involvement from teaching approaches and course design through to changing curricula to fit in with their own needs.

In conclusion, UK higher education institutions have undergone dramatic changes in the past two decades. Student voice has now been embedded in the student learning experience and engagement. In academic literature, student voice has moved away from the last century perception of students as passive learners into co-creation where students are encouraged to participate and partner with academics in designing curriculum and setting assessments. Despite this change, scholars have found that student voice work in higher education still has many challenges such as the work being perceived as teacher-centric, the traditional power dynamic between teacher and students where staff are responsible for curriculum design, the issue of inclusivity and sustainability of curriculum design and assessment setting. Further work is needed to solve existing challenges in the student-staff partnership for curriculum design and assignment setting. There is a need to have an open dialogue with students regarding their teaching and learning experiences and the development of their curriculum. Students should be seen as equal partners who are involved in the designing of their own curriculum. As a result, this paper aims to answer, 'How can student-staff partnership in curriculum design impact upon learning experience and engagement?'

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Methodology

This research to the form of a pilot study which evaluated the learning experience and engagement of students in a public university in the Northwest of England. The presentation of results from the study will illustrate an open dialogue with students where they will be perceived as partners with academics to enhance their own learning experience through engagement in designing their own curriculum. Given the aim of the study, participatory research approach is both a practical and effective way of engaging with students. In Seale's early study on participatory approaches to conducting student voice work in higher education, he found that this method has the potential to '…empower and increase the possibility that teachers will respond to student voices' (Seale, 2010, p.18).

Participatory research helps to focus on collaborative partnership where researcher and participant have equal status and power (Seale, 2010). It is a method that researches *with* people, rather *on* them (Reason and Heron, 1986). This focus aligns with the aim of this paper, which allows students to have equal status and power with the academics at their institution. In the present study, the researcher is not the instructor of participants. Participants were chosen from a module where the researcher was not their instructor, thus mitigating the risk of power over participants.

Participatory research methods in higher education have been supported by a number of scholars, Seale (2010) and Fielding (2004). The latter conceptualised student voice as a form of empowerment and called for an alternative method to have a dialogue with students. Fielding (2004 p.296) also argued that we should '…speak *with* rather than *for* students in order to empower them'. Thus, students are seen as collaborators, instead of data source or respondents. Along with Fielding (2001), this study on student voice work perceives students as collaborators. Given the aim of this study, student as co-creators of curricular is adopted as our method.

The main question this paper sets out to answer is '*How can student-staff partnership in curriculum design impact their learning experience and engagement?'*. The main objectives of this pilot study are to 1) invite and solicit students' experience and perception of co-creation of curriculum and 2) use these voices to evaluate whether this collaborative project has the potential to impact students' learning experience and engagement.

To address the above question, focus groups were used to discuss aspects of student voice with the students. In educational research, the application of focus groups has been used to evaluate the effectiveness of education, the potential impact of education and the results of student voice programme implementation (Gilflores and Alonso, 1995). This approach is well founded in academic studies; for example, Clifford (2019) utilised focus group study in her student voice work on non-traditional learners in a higher education setting, whilst Agboma (2018) relied on focus groups as part of his qualitative study on curriculum design and delivery on entrepreneurship. According to Thomas *et al.* (1995 cited in Rabiee, 2004, p.655), a focus group is '…a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being 'focused' on a given topic'. Unlike a group interview, focus group research is about establishing and facilitating a discussion among group members. In the last three decades, focus groups have been frequently used as a market research tool to solicit feelings and opinions of consumers' attitudes toward a product prior to product launch (Gilflores and Alonso, 1995). Focus groups began to be adopted by education researchers in the 1970s (Buttram, 1990; McMillan, 1989; Miller, 1987; Lee, 1982). The main drawback of focus groups is that the time and event is context-specific and therefore not generalisable to other contexts (Breen, 2006). Additionally, some participants may dominate over others, another potential concern because it generates those individuals' opinions, rather than those of the whole group. Whilst the issue of generalisability may be the main limitation of this approach, dominant participants can be minimised by the researcher becoming an effective moderator during the interview. This means that the moderator will need to exercise influence over the interview by ensuring that all each member of the group has an equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). Some researchers believe that focus groups are a complementary method to be used alongside other data gathering techniques such as interviews, participant observation and surveys (Cohen and Engleberg, 1989; Morgan, 1988). However, for the purpose of this study, focus groups are the sole data-gathering method.

Focus groups are used as part of a pilot study on student voice work. Little is known about how students perceive student-staff co-creation on curriculum design as this issue has been only recently explored in student voice literature. There are many

challenges that remain to be answered on this issue. The results from this pilot study will form a basis for the development of future co-creation of curriculum to enhance students learning experience within the Business School at the university in question.

This pilot study consisted of five focus groups with each group composed of four to six students aged between 18 and 23. Each group was selected randomly from a first-year Business Start-up module in which the researcher was not involved in teaching or assessment. First year students were chosen due to the opportunity for changes to be implemented in subsequent years following their participation. The module was chosen for logistical reasons: students had already formed their own groups and were available to participate in the study. Thus, the researcher selected groups at random and brought them to a separate classroom to conduct the focus group interviews. Due to the small number of participants and the limitation of participatory research, the result from this pilot study does not support or propose generalisation.

Once each focus group had settled in their chairs around a table chaired by the researcher/moderator, participants were given the Participants Information Sheet and informed consent was obtained from each participant before discussion began. Each focus group lasted between 15 and 45 minutes, and students were asked several semi-structured interview questions. Topics of the questioning included: experience to co-create curriculum and assessments; perceptions and experience on designing own curriculum; advantages and disadvantages of designing own curriculum; and potential impact on co-creation on learning and teaching experience.

Data resulting from all focus groups consisted of oral discussions on the above themes. Audio recordings of the interviews were used in this study, which had received the students' consent for the recordings to take place. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, by categorising data into predetermined themes identified from the literature such as student agency, voice, participation/engagement, power dynamic, co-creation and empowerment. Organised information was presented in the form of quotations taken from the recorded interviews. The quotations captured the main ideas expressed by the participants. The researcher identified common themes (see themes mentioned above) and formed a conclusion made by connecting those themes together. The study also discovered an emergent theme of emotional experience relating to co-creation. It is worth noting that data was analysed manually and that the

main purpose of the focus group is to provide opinions and experiences of participants, rather than to advocate the generalisation of the findings to the population.

Formal ethical approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee. Key ethical issues that were identified and minimised included processes for gaining access to the students, the use of informed consent, maintaining students' anonymity and data confidentiality after information had been collected. Data collected and analysed for this study was stored on the University network and was password protected to ensure access was permitted only by the researcher. The risk of inappropriately disclosure of personal data was minimised by storing of participant records separately from the research data in a different location on the University network. All files in both locations were password protected.

Findings and discussion

The purpose of this pilot study was to solicit 'student voices' regarding learning experiences within the school and to use these voices to evaluate whether this collaborative project has a potential to enhance the students' learning experience and engagement.

When asked: "Have you been given the opportunity to participate in your teaching and learning prior to university?", all respondents reported that they had never been asked for their views about learning and teaching at college level. One interviewee replied that "I was only given the choice about the order of topic, but not to choose the topic itself". This view was echoed by another participant who said that "all topics were already set (by the teachers)". Some interviewees felt that they could only be heard during group presentations. In their accounts, interviewees recalled that "We could participate (express their opinions and be heard) in group work" in front of our classes. It was also suggested that "There were options that you could choose your subjects as part of your A levels. But that was about it.". Overall, these results suggest that students had previously only had the opportunity to participate in their teaching and learning activities through selecting their A-level subjects, degree modules or as part of group work in classes. But, when it came to choosing the content of those subjects, they were already established and formed a part of the curriculum. Therefore, students were not given a choice about what they wanted to study. The closest form of participation in the context of curriculum design was through input regarding the order

of topics which have already formed a part of the set curriculum. However, students did not have the choice to choose the topics by themselves.

This result supports previous research in student-voice literature, which suggest that students are rarely consulted in curriculum design (Brooker and Macdonald, 1999). A possible explanation for why students have been excluded from designing the curriculum may be that this task has always been the responsibility of teachers. The finding above confirms that students have never been included in the construction of curriculum throughout their educational experience. Another possible explanation for this exclusion is that teachers might be reluctant to include students in the curriculum-making process and as a result have silenced the student voice. This could be a result of teachers' perceptions of 'fear', 'resistance' or 'uncertainty' about students making curricula, which could be understood as students challenging existing power relations (Black and Mayes, 2020). As a result, student voice work in this context might possibly lead to ineffective results.

Turning now to the second question, students were asked "If given an opportunity, how do you feel about co-designing your own module? Would you be willing to design your own module at university?" In response to this question, most of those interviewed (22 out of 25 participants) indicated that they were "definitely interested" in designing their own module at university. However, concerns were expressed about a fear of disagreement on suitable topics for everyone, and a fear of missing out on important themes. One interviewee argued that "I think it is good to get people's input, but it needs to be agreed for by the university as well as the students. Maybe there needs to be a middle ground". Some felt that other students might not agree on what topics to cover or what activity to be included because different students might want to do different things, while others considered that this practice might not be fair to everyone as some students would pick easier topics, whilst others might want to include topics that are more challenging. The majority of participants (20 out of 25 students) agreed that people might only pick topics that they want to cover, such as issues that they enjoy, or topics that are easy. Because of students selecting only topics that they enjoy, or choosing easier topics, important theories or concepts might have been left out from the curriculum. This view surfaced amongst many students who showed their concern about choosing their own topics.

The findings above on fear of disagreement over curriculum design and the fear of omitting important concepts from curriculum may be a reason for concern for students who are asked to participate in pedagogic planning. This is in line with a work by Shor (1992) on education empowerment which suggests that students who are used to teachers dominating the classroom may find it threatening to deviate from the pre-existing norm. Thus, it is important to note that engaging students in curriculum design does not replace teachers' expertise in facilitating learning (Bovill *et al.*, 2011). More importantly, existing work on engaging students as partners in learning and teaching by Cook-Sather *et al.* (2014) warns that not all students will embrace co-creation: 'Some may have their own reservations……..others might be hesitant or even resistant, expressing discomfort with the new demands that partnership places on them' (p. 141.). This co-creation idea may take some time for students to accept and to become involved in because of existing norms relating to the teaching role. In this study, students are a diverse group of adults, thus bringing different levels of experience and motivation to classes. This is evident in their concern pointed out above. This finding, while preliminary, suggests that bringing student voice to promote an empowered view of students requires further work: for instance, to considering how students feel about co-creation of curriculum. The study that supports this finding on the emotional side of co-creation is by Black and Mayes (2020) who call for the emotional experience of teaching and learning to be included in student-voice work. For instance, how teachers feel about students co-designing curriculums and the challenges in changing the long-held view that teachers are solely responsible for curriculum design.

Returning to the same question, the majority of students who voiced their concern about designing their own curriculum also felt that, if given the opportunity to co-design their own modules, they might be more engaged and more likely to attend lectures. For instance, some participants felt that more people might be encouraged to come into class, whilst others considered that they might do more reading as part of the work required. Another participant argued there was "…no excuse like waking up and cannot be bothered going to class because he chose it". As expected, many respondents felt that learning might be more enjoyable when they have co-designed their own curriculum. One respondent replied that this opportunity would have "…made it (learning) more enjoyable". Another went further to predict that "…you will

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receive a higher mark because you are bound to do better when you want to do it". These results suggest that when students have the opportunity to co-design their own curriculum, they are likely to include topics that they are interested in, or topics that they like, and, as a result, are likely to become more motivated to learn and to attend classes.

This finding was also reported by the Higher Education Academy (AdvanceHE, 2014) report on engaging students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. They found that partnership working can engage students with their learning and enhance their motivation level, thus improving their learning experience and academic achievement. Along the same lines, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) found that when educators give students choice, control and collaborative opportunities, the more motivated and engaged they are likely to become. Similar results were also reported by Bovill (2019) and Rudduck and Flutter (2000) who found that student agency can lead to greater classroom participation and can inspire higher academic achievement. One possible explanation for this might be from a developmental perspective. That is when young adults are being given opportunities to construct their own learning environment they can see the range of possibilities around them, and they simultaneously reinvent themselves (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). This view was also shared by Bovill (2019) that when students collaborated with faculty in developing pedagogical approaches it re-energised and renewed their commitment to learning.

Despite the potential for increased motivation and education outcomes in terms of attendance and academic results advocated in this pilot study, a note of caution is due since there are many practical challenges in implementing student voice. There is a need to change a number of traditional views, beliefs and values, as students who have never previously been asked to fully participate in their learning and teaching activities may not have the knowledge to contribute to educational processes and then may not feel confident in promoting their views during university deliberations. In addition, teachers are responsible for curriculum design and may be concerned about losing power in student voice work, and so inhibiting the effect of student contributions. Because of these challenges, co-creation in curriculum may take some time to be fully accepted and embraced by students and staff in higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This pilot study on student voice sets out to answer the question "How can student-staff partnership in curriculum design impact upon learning experience and engagement?" Based on the findings in this study, students are likely to be more motivated, better engaged, and more likely to attend lectures when given the opportunity to co-design their own curriculum. However, this finding should be taken with caution as there are several practical challenges found in this empirical work, such as the challenging views on the long-held beliefs and values on pedagogic work with students, and the role of teachers and the place of students in the process of pedagogic planning and approaches. In addition, due to the participatory nature of this study and small sample size, it is worth noting that findings do not claim generalisation.

This research has shown that whilst literature on student voice work in the context of higher education can be understood as student agency, participation, and empowerment, empirical work shows that co-creation in curriculum design is still in its infancy and is yet to be fully adopted as a common teaching and learning practice by students and staff in higher education institutions. This pilot study has shown that co-creation has yet to result in any changes in students' educational experience, as argued in the literature. To date, students are only beginning to be consulted on the pedagogic planning process through the invitation to participate in and to express their opinions on curriculum and assessment design. Further work is still needed to explore the issues of student and staff emotions in co-creation, student agency and its role in empowering students.

This study lays a groundwork for future research into improving student voice in UK higher education. For student voice work to have a real impact on students' learning experience and engagement, and for students to take on a more active part as co-creators of pedagogic planning and as equal co-creators in the process of curriculum design, academics may need to work on the issues of student agency and participation. Two key questions remain unanswered: What is the real role of students in their education? How do students view themselves in this process of learning and teaching? More importantly, we also need to include and deal with the opinions and feelings of all those involved in the student learning experience and engagement. This should include an understanding of student agency and power relations in the co-

creation of curriculum. These important issues need to be considered to further the work of co-creation in the context of higher education.

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