

**AdvanceHE**

# **+ Students as Co-creators of Peer Learning and Support**

**Case study collection**

Edited by Carly Garratt, Carly Jones and Dr Catherine  
McConnell

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# **Introduction**

The power of peer learning and support has become increasingly evident, with ample examples of different approaches to in-curricular and extra-curricular peer-to-peer activities (Andreanoff et al, 2024; Emsley-Jones et al, 2024; Emsley-Jones, 2024; Lochtie and McConnell, 2024; Keenan, 2014). Student involvement, more specifically in the co-creation of peer learning and support, from design through to delivery, is an emerging area of practice that draws on the breadth of scholarship found in students as partners in higher education (Peart et al, 2023; Healey, 2023; Healey et al, 2014; Cook-Sather et al, 2014).

This collection of case studies examines the innovative theme of student-to-student co-creation, showcasing how collaborative efforts among students can enhance their learning and foster a supportive and collegial environment. Each case study highlights unique approaches and strategies employed by students and staff to co-create learning experiences, share resources, and provide mutual support.

From designing online learning materials to structured peer tutoring programmes, these case studies illustrate the diverse ways in which students can take an active role in their own and their peers' education. The examples within this collection demonstrate the benefits that can arise through students working together in partnership, including improved academic performance, increased motivation, and the development of essential skills and attributes such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving.

By examining these examples, educators and students alike can gain valuable insights into the potential of peer-to-peer co-creation. This publication sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how student-driven initiatives can transform higher education experiences, making those more engaging, inclusive, and effective. Whether you are an educator or policy maker looking to implement co-creation strategies, or a student seeking inspiration, these case studies offer a wealth of examples and practical ideas that could be utilised in many educational contexts.

This publication is informed and underpinned by two frameworks: the Framework for Student Engagement through Partnership and the Framework for Embedding Peer Learning and Support in Higher Education, and builds on the case studies cited in the 2013 Students as Partners Change Programme (HEA, 2014).

# 1 Case studies of practice

These practice-based case studies were originally submitted in response to a call for contributions to the [Student-Led Peer Learning and Support Compendium](#) (Andreanoff et al., 2024; Emsley-Jones et al., 2024; Emsley-Jones, 2024; Lochtie and McConnell, 2024). The significant number of submissions centred on co-creation within peer learning and support highlighted the importance of showcasing them separately. This allows the sharing of best practices and offers valuable insights to other practitioners in the sector who may be exploring these concepts.

## 2 Curriculum-embedded co-creation

### 2.1 Biwei Cong, University of Liverpool Students as co-creators of a filmmaking course

Aiming to enhance the student-centred education models, this scheme supported students to reach their full potential by providing a transformative and enriching learning experience in an international education environment. Students were encouraged to advance their knowledge, improve their skills, and develop a mindset for lifelong learning and global citizenship.

Working as a group, students produced a five-to-eight-minute short narrative film in groups of five or six, with each student taking a leading role following the film industry model (including Director, Screenwriter, Producer, Director of Photography, Production Designer, Sound Designer, and Editor). They held pre-production planning meetings, pitching their plans in class to gain feedback and inspiration. Filming and post-production were completed afterwards. Throughout the process, students actively engaged with and led the learning and teaching. They taught and learned from each other both within and across groups.

When they had finished filming, students participated in group tutorials. Together, they watched, reviewed, and gave suggestions on each group's work in progress. During the whole process, the teacher served as both facilitator and mentor. This involved outlining the overall timeline and expectations for the project, and ensuring students understood the scope of both their roles and the production. The teacher was also involved in offering advice during the process, helping students when they faced challenges, encouraging them to teach and learn from one other within their groups, as well as fostering collaboration and problem solving. During the peer review sessions, the teacher also moderated discussions, helping students critically reflect on their own and other students' work, ultimately ensuring the feedback process was constructive.

Qualitative research methodology was applied. Students who enrolled in the class were invited for an online open-answered, text-based questionnaire. 13 students participated. Participants highlighted that the 'learn by doing' approach enhances their knowledge on filmmaking and offers them crucial skills, such as collaboration, communication, and problem solving, which are highly valued in the filmmaking industry. They expressed how it helped them to develop their ability to articulate their thoughts effectively, actively listen to others, and engage in meaningful discussion. Constant communication among team members allowed them to align their visions, make informed decisions, and ensure everyone was 'on the same page'. Participants also noted that the process created an environment where individuals could learn from their peers' experiences and expertise. By collaborating and sharing knowledge, individuals broadened their understanding of different aspects of filmmaking, discovered new techniques and approaches, and were able to observe and learn from their team members' strengths.

It became evident that giving students ownership in their learning led to deeper engagement and responsibility. It also transformed the students' role in learning and teaching, approaching active learning. Likewise, peer learning played a crucial role as students benefitted from teaching and supporting one another. It also enhanced students' collaboration, communication, problem solving, and critical thinking skills, and fostered a sense of community where students contribute to one another's growth. Therefore, in the future, peer nominations, rankings, and ratings can be included in such practice to remind students to be aware of their responsibility.

If implementing such a scheme, it is important to define clear expectations and set clear expectations for students from the beginning. Establishing expectations early creates a framework that supports autonomy while ensuring accountability. Additionally, facilitate; don't direct. Provide structure and guidance where needed, but step back to let students lead their own learning and explore their own solutions and ideas.

## **2.2 Dr Gary F. Fisher & Rachel Tulloch, University of Derby Interdisciplinary student-led co-creation of online content**

The University of Derby set out to innovate in online and distance learning by actively involving students in the creation of online learning materials. This initiative aimed to enhance the relevance and quality of online content by leveraging the unique insights and expertise of their students. Specifically, the project focused on developing a credit-bearing mental health module within an online allied health programme. The aim was to bridge a knowledge gap identified within the programme by collaborating with a postgraduate Health Psychology student with extensive experience in online learning and student representation. This co-creation effort sought to combine her current subject matter expertise with the practical needs of online learners, fostering a model of interdisciplinary, student-led content

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development that augments academic capacity and enriches the student learning experience.

The online postgraduate Health Psychology student was identified by her tutor as an ideal candidate for a student co-creation opportunity due to her academic performance and involvement as the Online Student Officer and Student Representative. Initially, she collaborated with the university's Learning Design and Online Practice Manager to update an existing Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in her field of study. Building on this success, she was then contracted to develop a credit-bearing module for an online allied health programme that lacked specific expertise in mental health. Becoming the primary author, she was responsible for writing content and designing learning activities informed by her own experiences as an online student. The allied health programme team provided a peer reviewer to ensure her contributions were contextually relevant for practitioners in the field. This partnership resulted in an ergonomic activity design that aligned with the practical needs of online students, integrated student-informed workload planning, and facilitated cross-disciplinary knowledge sharing. Her involvement provided a unique student perspective, addressing interdisciplinary gaps and enhancing the overall quality of the module.

The collaboration led to the successful creation of a mental health module that incorporated both academic and student perspectives, making the content more engaging and relevant for online learners. Qualitative feedback from staff and students highlighted the value of including student-led insights in the learning design, noting improved alignment with practical student needs. Her role as a co-creator also enhanced her career prospects, providing valuable paid experience that supports potential future roles in academia or education. She has since consolidated her successful experience in this initial role into a further professional role as an associate lecturer. Additionally, this approach helped the university address workload challenges by augmenting academic capacity in online content production. The co-creation initiative served as a prototype for future interdisciplinary projects, demonstrating how student involvement can enrich educational resources and fill critical knowledge gaps.

This case study highlights the benefits of student-led co-creation, offering a new perspective on module design that enriches both the student experience and academic content. Key learning includes the value of selecting students with relevant subject expertise and the importance of structured, collaborative processes that clearly define roles and expectations. For practitioners looking to adopt similar approaches, it is advisable to provide robust support and mentorship to student co-creators to ensure a productive and meaningful partnership. This initiative has shown that students can be valuable contributors to content development, enhancing the quality of learning materials while gaining practical skills. The University of Derby plans to explore methods of formalising this process by establishing a framework for identifying, recruiting, and supporting professional student co-creators to ensure continued integration of student perspectives in online learning design.

### 2.3 Dr Tom Ritchie, University of Warwick

#### **Learning Circles: A collaborative approach to improving attainment, employability, and wellbeing**

Learning Circles are a form of peer support and peer learning that have been implemented in several modules and courses across Warwick and beyond. This approach was used and developed on the Innovation 101 module to create a supportive and engaging environment for students. The module is delivered online via Microsoft Teams, with content released each week on Moodle for students to work on asynchronously. Initially introduced as communities of practice to help foster critical thinking and teamwork skills during the Covid-19 pandemic, work has continued to co-create enhancements that increase the utility of the Learning Circles. The primary aim of this co-creation work has been to improve the quality of student work and understanding of assessment criteria, foster a sense of community and belonging among students, develop essential employability skills, such as teamwork and communication, and provide a platform for students to receive timely feedback and support.

Current and former students have been engaged with the module, working to co-create an ecosystem approach to the student-learning experience. Students have been key to this work, using their experiences to help to improve the quality of module assessments, and to develop and refine assessment tasks, including proposing new methods of assessment. This means students have developed a better understanding of the assessment criteria and produce higher quality work. It has also helped to support individual learners with neurodiversity and other needs. Taking an ecosystem approach has presented the opportunity to integrate wellbeing components into the module. Compared to traditional office hours, the co-created Learning Circles have given students access to dedicated staff throughout the week, as they can participate and be supported asynchronously. The use of co-created Learning Circles has also allowed prompt responses to questions and supported students to crowdsource answers from each other. With regards to providing feedback, wellbeing, and employability support, students give each other feedback on their writing, presentations, and problem-solving skills. Regular check-ins on student wellbeing are also incorporated, along with a specific 'Fill Up Your Cup' channel where students can share their challenges and support each other. Beyond their direct involvement, Learning Circles serve as a central hub for module information, feedback, and community building. By fostering peer support and learning, a more equitable and supportive space for students has been created to share ideas and experiences.

The co-created approach to using module and Learning Circle design has yielded significant positive outcomes. Since including these, students have reported a 100% satisfaction rate with the module design, delivery, and support. Qualitative feedback consistently highlights the module's effectiveness in improving academic performance, enhancing student engagement and developing employability skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving. These positive results have led to the module being nominated and highly



commended for two teaching awards at Warwick in the past two years. The success of co-created Learning Circles has also prompted their incorporation into departmental curriculum redesign, demonstrating their value as a pedagogical tool. By providing opportunities for peer feedback, skill development, and community building, they have contributed to a more engaging, supportive, and successful learning environment. This approach has not only improved student outcomes but has also set a new standard for innovative and effective co-created teaching practices.

Working with students to co-create their module design has been a valuable tool for enhancing the student learning experience. From these experiences, suggestions for those considering similar approaches include actively involving students in the co-creation process to build trust and ensure what is created is relevant, engaging, and responsive to their lived experiences. Other recommendations are to (i) foster a supportive and inclusive environment for students on the module by creating a safe and welcoming space for them to share their ideas, experiences and challenges; (ii) encourage students to provide and receive constructive feedback, promoting a collaborative and supportive learning culture, (iii) address students' mental health, and (iv) develop essential employability skills to ensure a holistic and successful learning experience. Lastly, measure and evaluate outcomes by regularly assessing the impact of the initiative on student learning, engagement, and satisfaction to inform ongoing improvements. This goes beyond simple module feedback mechanisms. Don't second guess students' perspectives; react to them appropriately to improve their experience.

## **3 Co-curricular co-creation**

### **3.1 Angela Kubacki, Dr Jennifer Collom & Dr Leo Hudson, St George's University of London**

#### **Co-creating a clinical communication skills peer tutor programme within medical education**

Peer tutoring has been successfully implemented, benefiting tutees, peer tutors (PTs), and universities alike. In undergraduate medical education, PTs primarily teach clinical and examination skills, often with detailed instructions. However, Clinical Communication Skills (CCS) teaching requires creativity and nuanced facilitation, typically provided by expert teachers.

Existing programmes mainly recruit PTs voluntarily, with limited documentation on the selection process. Ideally, PT selection should align with the content taught and the necessary skills. The rationale for this staff-student partnership project was threefold: to enhance the quality of the student experience in learning CCS, improve the relevance of

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feedback provided to students during experiential classroom-based teaching sessions, and increase teaching opportunities for students to build their portfolios for future careers in medical education.

This collaboration began in 2020 when two penultimate-year medical students proposed a peer tutor programme for Clinical Communication Skills (CCS) teaching to the Clinical Communication Team. By combining student enthusiasm and knowledge with the expertise of medical educators, this project was funded by a staff-student partnership grant. Working together, we co-designed a tailored process for recruiting, selecting, and training senior students (penultimate and final year) to teach CCS sessions to Year 1 and Year 2 students, co-facilitating with CCS lecturers. Led by our students, we defined the role description and person specification to align with our values for the first cohort of CCS peer tutors. We adopted an inclusive selection approach to widen access and enhance diversity among applicants.

The PT role was paid, and we encouraged applications by not solely considering academic achievement and examination grades. Our values-based selection included an application detailing interest in CCS, prior teaching experience, and feedback utilisation. A 'Selection Day' was organised with three interview stations to assess feedback skills, empathic communication, and a micro-teaching group station where candidates were required to teach a skill of their choice and facilitate a group discussion. An assessment rubric was created for each station, and all assessors were trained. Additionally, two new resources were co-developed to support PTs in skill development: a Handbook for CCS PTs and a 27-page booklet entitled 'A Guide to Taking a Full Patient-Centred History'. The programme was launched in 2021, shortlisting 75 applicants for the first 'Selection Day'. From this group, 46 candidates were invited to a training day, forming our inaugural cohort of CCS PTs.

Survey data from both applicants and trained PTs was overwhelmingly positive (>98%), highlighting the programme's inclusivity and its role in enhancing teaching skills and confidence. Qualitative analysis from qualified tutors (n=8), Peer Tutors (n=21), and tutees (n=182) indicated that the programme was well received. It indicated that early-year students benefit from relatable peer role models, while PTs develop as effective mentors to meet General Medical Council Outcomes (2018). Qualified tutors commented, "Peer tutors work really well, supporting those quieter individuals who may need more help." These results suggest the university will see a more satisfied and integrated student body. However, identified risks include PT preparedness, consistency, and the ability to manage challenging situations.

In co-creating a new CCS Peer Tutor programme with two dedicated and enthusiastic medical students, we learned to value the student perspective and the significance of peer feedback in experiential learning. Since launching the CCS Peer Tutor programme in 2021, we have witnessed a steady increase in applications each year, successfully recruiting and training 103 senior students to co-facilitate small group sessions with early-year medical students. This initiative has contributed to a noticeable reduction in students failing the

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Clinical Competency Assessment at the end of Year 2, indicating that early-year students are meeting the required competency levels in clinical and communication skills. We take pride in our CCS PTs, who have received teaching awards and secured Academic Foundation programme posts, which offer further training in research, teaching and leadership skills. Our experience highlights the importance of embracing student peer tutors as valuable extensions of the teaching team. We encourage practitioners to collaborate closely with peer tutors, recognising the significant value they bring to experiential learning and feedback.

By fostering staff-student partnerships such as this, educational institutions can create a more effective learning environment that benefits both students and peer tutors, ultimately enhancing the training and preparation of future healthcare professionals.

### **3.2 Dr Helen Hull, Simon Archer & Dr Marta Roldo, University of Portsmouth**

#### **Co-creation of Moodle for a single 120-credit module**

Following reaccreditation of the Pharmacy degree, we needed to create a Moodle page for a 120-credit single module. We recognised the importance of student involvement in shaping their learning experience. Therefore, we adopted a collaborative and student-centric approach to create the page.

The first step was the initial involvement of Year 1 and Year 2 students, some of whom were Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) leaders, in creating a workable and easy-to-navigate Moodle page. The students' opinions and ideas were invaluable to help us understand expectations and preferences for the page. Following these initial discussions, we wanted to seek feedback about the Moodle page they had previously been accessing. We conducted open discussions, gathering feedback on the existing Moodle pages, and suggestions for improvement. Valuable insights were provided by the students, highlighting the importance of content organisation, interactive tools and consistency.

The feedback gathered enabled us to collaborate with the Science and Health Faculty learning technologists to action and implement the students' suggestions, for example, restructuring the content, incorporating weekly formative quizzes, and clear labelling. After the changes were made, we sought further feedback from the students, and PAL leaders reached out to their peers, to enable us to fine-tune the page based on their requirements. We implemented the changes, recorded a short video and shared this with all students for further feedback, which was positive. The final step was to launch the Moodle page and to constantly develop and improve it by continuing to collaborate and co-design the page, which has been invaluable. It was launched in September 2023, and we continue to encourage feedback from our students, and PAL leaders, to identify ongoing improvements.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that students enjoyed being part of the co-creation process and felt valued and listened to. Students using the new Moodle page said it was easy to navigate and could find all the information they were looking for. Actively involving PAL leaders ensured they could support our new students with navigating the Moodle page. At the same time, by actioning their feedback and seeking continuous input, the page is a dynamic and student-friendly platform to cater to their learning needs. This student-centric approach fostered positive learning experiences and reinforced our commitment to empowering our students and PAL leaders in shaping their education.

### 3.3 Dr Karen Angus-Cole, University of Bath Co-creating embedded peer feedback opportunities

Co-creating solutions can be a very powerful way of addressing assessment and feedback issues. This case study pertains to the co-creation of feedback opportunities within a Science Education unit, forming part of a [wider university teaching project](#). The student co-creators were final-year undergraduates from the university's Science Faculty, studying a Department of Education unit in the Humanities Faculty. The unit was taught purely online due to the pandemic. The cohort comprised 20 students, with four volunteering as co-creators.

The project began with a joint lecturer-student workshop to uncover the variety of ways that students had received feedback during their studies. The workshop probed the impact these feedback methods have on student learning, but also the time needed to implement them, ensuring both stakeholders recognised the balance required. Reflecting on the workshop led students to choose to incorporate a peer feedback session into the unit. This session replaced a whole seminar, with students opting to embed it to ensure the opportunity was available to all students, rather than it being outside of timetabled hours. The students felt that peer feedback would positively impact student learning but also be sustainable to implement.

A Microsoft Teams Peer Feedback space enabled easy group correspondence through the Team's chat, with folders for organising documents. Students were given advance notice to sign up for the session, with 11 out of 20 doing so. Students were put into groups of 3 or 4. The co-creators designed clear instructions for participation in the session and determined the Teams space design to be easy to navigate. Deadlines were set to enable peers to look at each other's work before the timetabled session, with each participant submitting one page of writing to their group's Teams folder. Peers could comment on work asynchronously before the session, then discuss it further in the live session.

The co-creator students also decided to provide a scaffold to help guide students to act on the feedback they had received. A survey revealed participants strongly benefited from engaging, with positive feedback, such as: "it was ironically more helpful for my own

assignment to look through other people's and unpick it than it was to have people unpick mine!" and "the discussions also helped to bring up points that I wouldn't have thought of on my own". Peer feedback continues to be embedded into this unit as well as implemented out to other units, and the session has been successful in person. Colleagues in the Department have also introduced peer feedback sessions into their units because of this work.

The outcomes of this project made it very clear that it is important to establish shared understanding and expectations of feedback by working with students. There is huge value in students helping staff to work out the best way to provide feedback – a learning community is developed, and mutual respect and understanding manifests. Even small changes can lead to big impact in the world of assessment and feedback.

## **4 Extra-curricular co-creation**

### **4.1 Hannah Gibson and Holly Dyer, University of Derby Students' Union Creative writing co-creation to foster belonging**

At the University of Derby, the Student Engagement and Enhancement (SE&E) Team aimed to foster a deeper sense of student belonging and community through a co-creation initiative. By engaging BA (Hons) and MA Creative Writing students in a live brief, the team sought to give students the opportunity to contribute creatively to the University Induction (UI) platform. This platform, accessed by both new and returning students, provides vital information about student life, academic support, and opportunities. The goal was not only to showcase student work but to enhance peer support by encouraging students to reflect on the theme of student belonging. Through discussions and writing submissions, students could share their experiences and insights, contributing to a welcoming environment for new students. Ultimately, the project aimed to amplify student voices, demonstrating the value of peer learning while laying the foundation for future co-creation opportunities.

The collaboration began with SE&E hosting discussions with students to explore their ideas and experiences related to student belonging. These sessions were designed to encourage open dialogue, where students could share their perspectives on what belonging meant to them and discuss both the barriers and benefits of fostering it. The discussions helped generate valuable insights, which allowed students to reflect and gather their thoughts before beginning the writing process. Out of 20 students who participated in the sessions, six submitted their work for consideration. All students who submitted received individualised feedback from the SE&E team, which they could later include in their course portfolios.

Feedback was highly appreciated, with one student mentioning it was “really helpful” for their ongoing studies. In addition, feedback was collected via an anonymous survey, with three students responding, one of whom had submitted their work.

The co-creation project yielded both quantitative and qualitative data, demonstrating its success and potential for future initiatives. Out of 20 students who attended the initial discussions on student belonging, six submitted their work. Feedback was collected anonymously through a Microsoft Form survey, with three students responding. Of these, one had submitted work, while the others cited “competing priorities” as their reason for not participating. Qualitatively, students appreciated the feedback provided, and the winning student expressed how the project made them “feel part of a larger university community” and that they were “glad to be the welcoming voice to new students”. Quantitative data from university app polls also showed strong interest in future co-creation efforts. Out of 177 students who participated, 73% indicated they believed the university should offer more co-creation opportunities, highlighting the broader appeal of such initiatives.

Through the co-creation project, we learned that students value opportunities to engage in authentic, meaningful work that directly impacts their peers. The process of facilitating discussions prior to submissions allowed students to reflect deeply on the topic, generating richer, more thoughtful contributions. However, competing priorities for the students’ time must be considered as this was a key barrier to participation. Offering flexibility and integrating co-creation into course structures could increase engagement.

For other practitioners, it is essential to create a supportive, collaborative environment that fosters open dialogue. Clear communication of expectations and the benefit to students is crucial, along with providing constructive feedback to encourage development. Additionally, anonymous surveys and app polls can offer useful insights into student interest and the success of initiatives. Finally, we would recommend considering scaling such projects by embedding them into curricula and offering toolkits for colleagues to replicate and adapt co-creation work across different areas.

### **4.2 Heather Johnston, Dr Bryony Parsons & Dr Lisa Hawksworth, University of Liverpool Co-creating an academic writing masterclass**

Alongside the popular open programme of academic skills sessions available to students at all levels, the Learning Development and Academic Liaison team is developing a subject-specific offer of sessions embedded within the curriculum. We find that student engagement with these sessions tends to be higher as they can be tailored towards specific assignments, so students can see the value in their attendance and the relevance of the learning outcome. Each year in the Learning Development and Academic Liaison team, we employ

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three students to work four hours a week to be involved in various projects throughout the academic year and provide a valuable student perspective, which can be extremely helpful when developing bespoke embedded content.

In the spring of 2022, a Law academic approached the team to request a session on academic writing. As Law is not a specialist subject of the learning developers in the team, we worked closely with the academic to develop the content and involved a member of our student team who was a second year Law student at the time. They added subject-specific examples from their own assignments to the slides and provided their own tips and advice on how to interpret questions, create essay plans and be critical when writing. The academic added insights into what a marker is looking for, and how to use an assignment brief effectively. On the day, each contributor delivered sections of the content and answered questions matching their areas of expertise.

The session was hugely popular, with 156 students attending, exceeding the room capacity. Feedback from the session was positive, with one student commenting “the way each part of the essay was broken down and explained by the presenters was really helpful.” The student member also gained valuable experience in teaching a session. They stated that

“peer-to-peer delivery presents a unique opportunity for skills to be gained, or enhanced, by both parties. I was able to impart advice based on my own experiences of the essay writing process, whilst co-delivering the session has improved my public speaking skills and, as I apply to graduate opportunities, I can cite this session as evidence of my ability to communicate clearly and effectively, both orally and in writing, to a large audience.”

The academic commented that

“developing the session through a collaborative approach not only helped inform the content but also helped us understand how we could capture the challenges students face through lived experience. The design of the session facilitated peer learning through shared experiences, breaking down teacher and learner barriers.”

Having student input into sessions was so valuable and allowed students to share their experiences with their peers and provide real-life examples of techniques and practices that have worked well for them. We will continue to involve students as co-creators and co-deliverers of academic skills sessions as we receive further requests from academics in the future. Our advice to others would be to take advantage of the student perspective wherever possible and to involve students throughout the whole process, from planning to delivery, to allow them to feel ownership of the session and develop their own skills and confidence.

### **4.3 Kate Wrigglesworth, Dr Lisa Nowak, Michael Traynor, Alison Boyle and Ian McLean, Scotland's Rural College Peer support: co-creation from the beginning**

We set out to achieve a programme of high-quality, sustainable, student-led peer support at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), where students were involved in co-creation throughout the project, all the way from design through to implementation and evaluation. SRUC is a small specialist, tertiary, multi-campus institution, with a diverse student profile, including many students on one-year courses, and so our challenge was to work with our students to identify how the models often used in higher education could be adapted to fit our context and needs. We also needed to raise student and staff awareness of peer support, including its boundaries, value and function.

Students were involved from the outset. When establishing peer support groups, we sought ideas from both staff and students, and so students could request a group to be set up, or volunteer to help run it. Once we had a range of interested students and staff members, we facilitated a meeting where all participants were able to discuss what structure the group should have (e.g. what subject/skills it should focus on, what the mode of delivery should be, location, timing, etc.). During this meeting, the views of students were actively sought. Then we worked with our students to distil this into a premise for the group, and to support them to create their first session.

Whilst staff were available to support and facilitate, the students had ownership of what they wanted to deliver. Sessions were also run and evaluated by students, using metrics they helped to create (as well as some standardised measures). SRUC staff collaborated with the students by meeting them regularly, offering advice and guidance, supporting them to identify how to enhance and develop their group, and how to ensure that it continued into the next year. We linked students in with SRUC's communications teams, who were able to collaborate on the promotion, advertising and branding of groups. We also supported students by working with them on their CVs, and by running a facilitated session on how to articulate their experiences effectively for future study or employment.

In total, we had 15 volunteers across four groups in 2022-23. For each group, students collaborated with a member of staff from the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT), as well as subject staff. Approximately 30 students were interested initially, with five students dropping out. We had feedback from our Peer Support Leaders that they had enjoyed being part of the process right from the beginning, but that it could sometimes be intimidating to work out what sessions should cover. When this happened, they valued support from staff, who they felt offered useful guidance whilst listening to their views. Leaders also fed back they had gained a range of skills from taking part, including confidence, facilitation and digital skills. Student attendees valued the opportunity to connect with our students who led the groups.



Doing active, meaningful co-creation activities requires time, support and trust. Many of our students are on one-year courses, and so we often do not have as much time to build a relationship with them and support them to get involved in wider initiatives. Likewise, many have additional responsibilities such as family, employment or caring. To support students to take part, it is important to identify, minimise and remove barriers to participation wherever possible, recognising that students' time needs to be properly recognised and reimbursed. To this end, we have moved away from our voluntary model and have implemented a paid model, which was trialled in 2023-24 and is now being taken forward. Although we have fewer Peer Support Leaders, we can better support them, and pay them for their efforts, time and creativity. This has allowed us to provide more consistent and sustainable peer support.

#### **4.4 Katie Smith & Nicholas Glover, University of York** **Co-creating learning communities at University of York**

At York, we introduced Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) in 2018 and have subsequently run programmes in twenty different departments, providing training for leaders and support for staff establishing, maintaining, and evaluating PAL projects. From 2018 to 2022, we worked with twelve departments per year on PAL programmes, predominantly focusing on the SI-PASS (Supplemental Instruction-Peer Assisted Study Sessions) method. As with most SI-PASS approaches, the key aim of our model has been to work with student leaders to help first-year students (via collaborative sessions) with different components of courses. Whilst co-creation has been central to this approach – for example, through our emphasis on PAL Leaders co-creating and leading sessions – since 2022, we have strengthened our commitment to partnership by paying our PAL Leaders and Coordinators.

Paying PAL Leaders is part of a wider roadmap to recognise, reward, and embed 'students-as-partners' approaches across the university, which this year (2023-24) has culminated in the launching of our [Student-led Learning Communities \(SLLC\) Fund](#). The core purpose of the fund is to support a diversity of learning community projects at York, underpinned by the work of paid student partners. We wanted a fund that gave departments more ownership and space to innovate (in collaboration with students) approaches to community building and peer learning. The fund has enabled the development of a range of projects, including PAL, [Department Community Coordinators](#), intercultural learning and language sharing, and innovative new approaches to fostering learning communities. One new approach, developed in our Department of English and Related Literature, is built around staff working with student partners to investigate the barriers to discussing challenging themes, particularly in relation to protected characteristics, in an open, constructive and respectful, but also ambitious manner. Next semester, the student partners will work with staff to create collaborative learning spaces to test out approaches to difficult topics.

Engaging students as paid partners in our SLLC projects is about sharing power and responsibility and creating opportunities for them to contribute knowledge and experiences to support the enhancement of learning and belonging for other students. We see a connection between the sense of agency students getting from paid partnership work and feeling part of a community (belonging). Belonging is particularly important for traditionally marginalised students in HE, which is why at York we use strategies such as payment to make partnership roles as accessible and attractive as possible. Flexibility and choice help to engage students from different backgrounds and, at the heart of our partnership approach, is the aspiration that students feel respected as colleagues and trusted to work on projects that rely on their expertise and insights. Specifically, we have seen positive outcomes across our PAL projects that speak to students feeling valued, for example, better attendance at planning and debrief sessions, and leaders engaging until the end of PAL schemes.

We encourage all institutions to pay their PAL leaders but acknowledge that in challenging financial times this can be tricky. If financial reimbursement is not possible at your institution, we would recommend considering other ways of incentivising, recognising and rewarding student partners in a meaningful manner.

## 5 Conclusion

The case studies presented in this collection emphasise the collaborative potential of student-led peer learning and support. These examples illustrate how collective efforts between students can lead to enhanced academic outcomes, stronger community bonds, and a more inclusive learning environment. By actively engaging in the co-creation process, students deepen their own understanding and contribute to knowledge, offering opportunities for reciprocity and compassion among students.

The diverse approaches highlighted in these case studies demonstrate the versatility and adaptability of co-created peer learning and support strategies. They reveal that when students take ownership of their learning and support each other, they develop critical skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving, which are essential for their future professional lives.

Moreover, these case studies provide valuable insights for educators and institutions looking to foster a culture of collaboration and mutual support. By recognising, resourcing and facilitating student-led initiatives, educational institutions can create a more dynamic and responsive learning environment that meets the needs of more students. They inspire a vision of education where students are not just passive recipients of the activities and

programmes devised for them by staff, but instead, can be active participants in the design and delivery of their own exciting educational initiatives.

## 6 Acknowledgements

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## **Students as Co-creators of Peer Learning and Support**

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