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Safe Spaces to Discuss Wicked Problems: A Staff and Student Co-Creation Project on Addressing the Awarding Gap

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Abstract: This article discusses the impact of a staff and student co-creation project embedded within a core module, which worked to both explore and seek ways to address the awarding gap. The project established safe spaces for students to share difficult lived experiences at the university, spanning an academic year, and included students in their final year of undergraduate study from a range of disciplines. Student experiences were gathered to inform policy and, with staff, co-created resources were developed and delivered for universities (at both our institution and two external universities) to address the awarding gap, adopting a decolonised and anti-racist approach. The project was vast and, therefore, this article presents only one part of the conducted research, which explored the project's impact on co-creation students through a participatory evaluation approach known as the world café. The findings highlighted the positive effect of co-creation on students' sense of belonging, friendships, and connection with faculty, and for the co-creation project to be embedded in the curriculum at all levels of study. Additionally, the students provided clear actionable recommendations for universities to improve student outcomes and address the wickedness of the awarding gap.

Keywords: student–staff co-creation; safe spaces; decolonising; anti-racism; the awarding gap; universities taking action

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1. Introduction

The wicked problems.

The awarding disparity is a complex issue that has persisted since at least 2005, as highlighted in the first statistical report by Advance HE, with only slow progress made toward closing this gap (Advance HE 2020, ethnicity awarding gaps in UK HE). Described as a "wicked problem", it encompasses multifaceted social and socio-ecological challenges that are hard to define and involve a variety of stakeholders in outlining and solving the issue. These problems are controversial, unique, intricate, and, by nature, insoluble, with dynamic components that render the effects of any solutions unpredictable (Rittel and Webber 1973; Danken et al. 2016).

A substantial and expanding volume of research, including studies by Arday and Mirza (2018), Bhopal (2018) and Bhopal and Pitkin (2020), have examined the obstacles hindering the success of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students in higher education. These studies point to significant issues such as lower progression and retention rates, a notable awarding gap, and subpar employment outcomes for graduates. There are ongoing concerns about BAME students feeling alienated and not being integrated into the academic community, which is exacerbated by the persistent awarding gap.

Focusing on the specific challenges faced by students of colour in higher education, their academic and social experiences are influenced by several factors. Research by Bunce et al. (2021) and Bernard et al. (2014) highlights issues such as a lack of diversity in the curriculum and an academic environment predominantly tailored to benefit white students. This setting often does not reflect the diversity of marginalised communities, which may

result in feelings of exclusion and a lack of belonging among ethnic minority students, potentially leading to higher dropout rates (Whatworks? Thomas 2012; EHRC 2019).

Data continue to reveal disparities in continuation rates between ethnic groups. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), around 90% of white students continue their studies or graduate compared to 86.6% of BAME students. The continuation rate drops even further among Black Caribbean students, at approximately 82.8% (Advance HE 2021). The degree awarding gap is also stark, with 86% of white students earning top degrees as opposed to 75.2% of BAME students, a gap of 10.8 percentage points (Advance HE 2021). Despite ongoing efforts, this significant issue, documented since Advance HE's initial 2005 report, has seen little progress.

There is a pressing need for a transformative approach to addressing these disparities, particularly through curriculum reform. Especially noteworthy are studies by De Montfort University (Ansley and Hall 2019) and the University of Brighton (Hall et al. 2021), which adopted student co-creation or students-as-partners approaches to decolonise learning and teaching practice. They also provide insights into BAME student experiences of the curriculum and addressing differential outcomes such as the awarding gap. These two studies involved staff and students from white and BAME backgrounds working together to co-design various curriculum activities and running discussion spaces, and they provided paid opportunities and changes to learning and teaching materials. One of the highlights of these studies is the significance placed upon partnerships through which students are paid for their time. Students were also provided with opportunities to dissect, challenge, and change some aspects of their programme areas.

The curriculum is an area where I have found that I can exercise greater creativity and initiate change, forming the foundation of my co-creation approach. In this article, my aim is to share the research findings of how using co-creation embedded in the curriculum impacted the participating students. First, I will present my approach to co-creation and how it can be adopted through a decolonised and anti-racist lens to build safety and trust, to dismantle power dynamics, and to foster connectedness with students. I will then discuss the research questions and data collection methods used to explore the impact of co-creation on the participating students. Then, I will share the research findings with a discussion before presenting student recommendations for universities to actionably tackle the awarding gap.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Co-Creation

Co-creation was used to establish safe spaces for students to share difficult experiences and co-create learning and teaching resources to be used to address the awarding gap. This article shares research findings exploring the impact of using co-creation on the students who participated in the project through a data gathering approach called the world café, which I go on to discuss later. I will now outline what co-creation means and how it was adopted in the project.

Co-creation in education involves students and staff collaboratively designing the curriculum and fostering meaningful, supportive relationships through relational pedagogy (Bovill 2020a). This approach is gaining traction and has been linked to enhanced student achievement and engagement (Bovill 2019; Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017; Shakir and Siddiquee 2023 cited in Jamil et al. 2023).

My approach to co-creation challenges traditional educational structures that position the teacher as the sole bearer of knowledge who imparts wisdom to passive students (Cates et al. 2018; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2019). Instead, we embrace a shift in power dynamics (Shakir and Siddiquee 2023 cited in Jamil et al. 2023), where the roles of educator and learner are interchangeable, fostering a reciprocal, genuine, and authentic exchange of knowledge. This approach empowers students to become custodians of their own insights, sharing them not just with staff but also with their peers through peer teaching and mentoring.

This project was embedded in a final year undergraduate core module—a dissertation research project or professional learning through work—for 11 students from a range of disciplines, including working with families, film studies, media, digital marketing, policing, and criminology. The tasks involved both co-created teaching and learning designed and delivered to other students (and staff) about the awarding gap, as well as co-created research undertaken to explore the impact of the teaching and learning on student recipients. There were field trips and excursions around the UK, and, for these additional commitments, the students were renumerated. It also involved the co-creation students presenting their lived experiences to faculty members and to the Board of Governors, both at the institution and externally at other universities in England. The project was aligned with students' interests and concerns, aiming to provide a space to share narratives and to effect meaningful changes in their educational experiences. The project looked to tackle issues such as addressing the awarding gap, fostering a sense of belonging, combating inequalities, decolonising the curriculum, celebrating diversity, and embracing a full identity at the university. These efforts aimed to contribute to institutional change and to have a lasting impact on both current and future students. As agents of change within a community of practice, my students and I were (and still are) committed to cultural and institutional transformation, embodying the spirit of Malcolm X's call: "*The future belongs to those who prepare for it today*" (Malcolm X 1964). Co-creation represents a socially just strategy that aligns with my commitment to enhancing student connections, success, and overall educational experience. I am deeply committed to the notion of education as a public good that not only benefits the individual (Rowan 2019) but also extends its impact within and beyond our institution.

2.2. Safe Spaces Including Psychological Safety and Trauma-Informed Practice

Establishing safe spaces that provide psychological safety (Edmondson 2019) for students to share the difficulties and challenges they have experienced is the key to successful co-creation projects in my experience (Shakir 2024). Such spaces within staff–student co-creation have also been described as 'brave' (Cook-Sather 2016), a fitting term for creating the right conditions for students to speak out. The classroom environment openly discussed that honesty and vulnerability were not just encouraged but essential. This was led by myself as the staff member, and aimed to nurture an atmosphere where everyone felt that they could express their authentic selves. I led by example, sharing my own lived experiences whilst encouraging students to do the same, attempting to build strong, personal connections with students, and allowing them to feel comfortable and true to themselves. The students must feel they are heard, respected, and responded to appropriately without the fear of negative repercussions from staff or the institution, which involves feeling brave enough to do so. At the same time, given the nature of such a space, the approaches taken by staff must be trauma-informed and reflective (Shakir 2024), working to avoid re-traumatisation. It is important that the staff involved in such initiatives have some level of training in this area so to appropriately support the students and signpost them to relevant services, if required, and to positively maintain their own mental health (Shakir 2024). My advanced professional practice background in social work and substantial teaching experience has enabled me to establish such spaces. I would highlight, though, that hearing recurrent traumatic stories from my students is a real challenge and can take a toll on one's own mental health. It is very important to acknowledge this reality and to practice self-care.

2.3. Racial Harassment in Higher Education

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) monitors UK Higher Education (HE) providers, including the Office for Students (OfS), and, in 2019, published the report '*Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged*'. In summary, this report highlighted that racial harassment is a common experience for a wide range of students and staff at universities across England, Scotland, and Wales.

It could be suggested that racism may not appear to directly impact nor affect so many because the vast majority of students in HE in the United Kingdom are White. According to HESA data published in 2022, 72.6% of people starting undergraduate study in the 2019 to 2020 academic year were White, 12.2% were Asian, 8.7% were Black, 4.5% had a mixed ethnicity, and 2.0% were from the Other ethnic group. According to Universities UK (UUK), in 2019–2020, there were 409,055 staff at UUK member institutions and, of these, 14.4% were BAME staff (UUK 2020). Therefore, it could be suggested that prioritising the needs of those with whom one cannot necessarily relate or even empathise (Ryde 2019) may not always happen.

The results of the EHRC report raise significant concerns for universities regarding the safety and engagement of minority students within their communities. The report underscores the relevance of the research discussed within this article, which outlines effective curriculum interventions to enhance the sense of belonging and community integration for minority students. There is evidence indicating the presence of institutional and structural racism in higher education settings, with universities failing to adequately address these issues through effective reporting systems or by maintaining a culture that tends to dismiss complaints (EHRC 2019). Changing an institution's culture requires assessing how to dismantle the structures that support racism (Sian 2019). Much of this effort also depends on altering individual mindsets and viewpoints, as people constitute the system and drive initiatives and actions (Shakir and Barker 2021). The co-creation project described in this article aimed to create safe spaces (Holley and Steiner 2005) where students could share their experiences, including those of racial discrimination, and formulate recommendations that encourage the university community to take meaningful action.

2.4. Decolonised and Anti-Racist Methodological Approaches

A decolonised and anti-racist approach formed the backbone of the co-creation project. Decolonising education refers to the process of challenging and rethinking existing education systems that are rooted in colonial legacies and practices, and the higher education environment is an example of this (Arday and Mirza 2018; Sian 2019). Decolonisation involves critically examining and altering the curriculum, teaching methodologies, assessments, academic support, and structural racism within the educational system so to address and rectify the biases, inequalities, and Eurocentric perspectives that dominate education. This process aims to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and voices that have been historically marginalised or erased, fostering an inclusive, equitable, and diverse educational environment.

Co-creation and decolonisation are inextricably linked in my work, working in a seamless partnership almost by default. Several factors support this linking, including dismantling the power dynamics and traditional hierarchies that exists in the university between staff and students. An understanding of diversity and how to address the individual needs of our students are pertinent to student experiences in the university. Furthermore, by taking conscious and directed action in incorporating marginalised people and perspectives, we can begin to rethink the existing system of education.

My educational and research philosophy is rooted in my experience as a racialised minority academic, but also, more importantly, the experiences of my students. I extensively employ Critical Pedagogy (Freire 1970, 1978) as well as Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell 2018; Delgado and Stefancic 2023). I do this by co-creating with my students, recognising that only by fully immersing ourselves in emancipatory teaching and learning methods can we challenge dominant, oppressive social structures and practices, and that, by wholeheartedly committing to a pedagogy of hope (Freire 2021), positive change is possible for everyone (Brookfield 2007; Giroux 2010; Walton 2012). I draw on the CRT framework to understand the pernicious issue of racism in my co-created pedagogic approach. CRT, which emerged in legal scholarship in the late 20th century, seeks to analyse and challenge the intersectionality of race, power, and systemic racism within society (Gillborn 2008; Delgado and Stefancic

2023). According to CRT principles, to understand the pernicious nature of racial disparities and act, we must listen to those affected, their voices and lived experiences (Gillborn 2008; Delgado and Stefancic 2023; Walton 2021), in order to effect positive change within the system. It is this group within higher education who are most negatively impacted in relation to belonging, retention, progression, degree awards, and graduate outcomes (Bhopal 2018; Arday and Mirza 2018; Ryde 2019).

My co-creation students have shared their lived experiences with me, other students, staff, and the public through story telling as a method and key tenet of CRT (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). The university environment must not be free from critique, despite the position of the researcher employed within this institution, nor should the participants be at the mercy of the system. Dockery (2000) is not afraid to say that he feels it is necessary to 'take sides' if participants gain some advantage from his research, by which I am inspired and encouraged. His aim to reduce inequitable practices and racial hierarchies are in line with the ontological perspective of many CRT researchers, such as Tyson (2003), Parker et al. (1999), and Lopez and Parker (2003), aligning with both my co-creation pedagogical approach and commitment to anti-racism (Wilson and Cook-Sather 2022).

2.5. Co-Creation Students (Participants)

The participants included 11 undergraduate (UG) students in their final year of study from a variety of disciplines across the university who had been working on the co-creation project spanning the academic year. An open call was advertised to final-year students to become involved in the project by visiting lectures and sharing information through digital online sites. The participants were of female and male identities. In terms of ethnicity, the participants were White British, mixed White British and Polish, British Pakistani, and British Black, and all were UK home students. Their ages were 21–22 years old. Full ethical approval was obtained for this study from the university's ethics committee and consent was provided by all of the participants.

2.6. Research Questions and Data Collection

The research presented within this article explores the impact of the co-creation project on the co-creation students. A participatory method called the 'world café' was used to collect qualitative data to evaluate the impact of the project. The 'world café' method is a cooperative research technique designed to move away from traditional hierarchical models of evaluation and knowledge creation, where the outcomes are often determined by external 'experts'. Instead, this method fosters knowledge and insights through constructive dialogue and progressive rounds of discussion (Fouché and Light 2011). A fundamental tenet of the world café is the belief that all participants possess the necessary knowledge and skills to address the issues at hand, and are considered experts in their own capacities (Schiele et al. 2022). This approach encourages everyone to engage in active listening and reflection, helping to uncover patterns and deeper inquiries. Using four tables and chairs, with a question and facilitator as well as an audio recording device assigned to each table, the participants moved systematically to each table until all had been visited during the 1.5-h session. Facilitation support was provided by 3 members of the staff, including a data and impact evaluation manager who had not been involved in the project but had previously met with the group on two occasions, where she had established their trust. Special emphasis was placed on creating an inviting and exciting environment, so we each wore clothing matched to the colour of pens we used to make notes and provided personalised gifts to thank all of the students.

We explored the following questions:

1. Did co-creation achieve its aims?
2. How could co-creation have a greater impact?
3. What difference do you think co-creation has made (to you, to other students, and to the university)?

4. *How* does co-creation make a difference? (What happened as part of the co-creation that made a difference?)

2.7. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is well-suited for my research, where experiences, attitudes, and perceptions are complex and nuanced, and provides a framework for situating individual experiences within broader educational, social, and cultural contexts (Braun and Clarke 2022). This approach prioritises student voices, ensuring that their experiences, opinions, and suggestions are heard and valued, which is fundamental to the Critical Race Theory paradigm (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). Analysis can reveal themes related to empowerment, agency, and ownership, shedding light on how co-creation projects can enhance or hinder these aspects. By understanding student experiences on a thematic level, educators and institutions can identify effective strategies and common pitfalls in co-creation, leading to improved pedagogical approaches (Cook-Sather and Cook-Sather 2023). The coding process revealed student experiences with co-creation closely concerned their feelings and how it made them feel, with the terms *belonging, confidence, respect, feeling heard, power, power dynamics*, and *being supported* featuring significantly across all of the themes that were generated. Four 1.5-h long transcripts were coded and themes were drawn up with the assistance of an online data analysis software platform, which transcribed and provided some preliminary data analysis of key themes from the audio recordings. This helped tremendously for the initial stages of the six-step process for the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) given the volume of transcription that needed to be coded and thematically analysed. The full process was applied once all of the transcripts and initial data analysis summaries were exported into Microsoft Word.

3. Results

A significant amount of data was generated from the world cafe. The findings will be thematically presented on the impact of co-creation on the participating students. This will then followed by a discussion of key areas, including recommendations for universities to actionably address the awarding gap.

The students shared their overall pre- and post-project experiences, and there was overlap between the questions. The students contributed their reflections with great fluency, owing, in my view, to their increased self-confidence in speaking openly. The co-creation space created psychological safety, and the students spoke 'their own mind' without limitations or parameters. For me, this is testament to the success of the co-creation project; my students were empowered to be their authentic selves and speak out without fear of repercussions or restrictions. I also note here that I have chosen to include only minimal direct quotes from the participants, relevant to each heading, to ensure their anonymity due to the highly sensitive nature of the content and the small number of participants.

Across the four questions, thematic analysis has enabled me to identify several themes, which I have grouped and analysed together as the following:

- Relationships, friendships, and mental health;
- Safe spaces, trust, and sharing lived experiences;
- Classroom conditions, participation, and support from staff;
- Negative experiences, including issues pertaining to race and racism;
- Changes needed for a better future for students.

3.1. Relationships, Friendships, and Mental Health

> *"It's crazy to think that we've built better connections with these people than we have with the people within our degree course over the past few years".*
>
> (co-creation student)

Several students discussed how their university experience felt isolating and impersonal, which was also reflected in other research with students (Christie et al. 2008).

However, through the lens of the co-creation project, a different narrative unfolded, revealing how such initiatives can significantly alter student life, fostering inclusivity, friendships, and a deeper sense of belonging to peers and the university (Cates et al. 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). The students highlighted the profound impact of collaboration and shared efforts as a team of friends within co-creation. For many, the project transformed the university into a more welcoming and interactive environment. It became a personal journey where teamwork and bonding were not just the byproducts but the highlights. The students noted how their involvement in the project built confidence, reduced feelings of isolation, and helped them connect with peers on a deeper level. Friendships, as many participants echoed, often sprout from shared experiences and bonding moments, which were plentiful in the co-creation endeavours. One student commented that "*. . .one of the I think a thing that comes up to me so strongly is that sense of belonging and building friendships and connecting with people. . .*" (co-creation student). Some shared poignant revelations about their pre-project loneliness, a feeling that only became apparent after they joined the project and finally experienced genuine connections, with one student referring to their mental health and the impact of co-creation, saying "*. . . I feel like it's just made my experience much more better with the co-creation project*" (co-creation student).

The project was not just about making friends; it was about changing the dynamics within the university setting. Group dynamics, especially in such a diverse and transient environment as a university, can be challenging (Wilcox et al. 2005). Yet, the participants found that co-creation projects provided a platform that valued everyone's opinions, promoting fairness and inclusivity. This shift was particularly significant for some students, who admitted to only really speaking to the same one or two people since their first year, until the project opened new avenues for friendships. Passing fellow co-creation members in the corridor and being met with happiness and connection was something completely new to many in the group. Several students commented that, even for the one or two students in their programme of study that they did speak to within class, they would not necessarily have a connection with them outside of the classroom. Quite the opposite was the case for the co-creation group and classroom. The students expressed the impact of loneliness or not feeling wanted at the university by staff prior to the project on their mental health, the consequence of which was them considering leaving the university altogether before they started their final year (Willcoxson et al. 2011).

The reflections also touched on broader issues such as the quality of teaching and the overarching sense of belonging, or the lack thereof, that some students felt. Not feeling valued by staff in the classroom, or having little or no connections with peers, adversely affected their mental health and consequently made them abscond from lectures repeatedly (Strayhorn 2018). Students shared their struggle with feeling isolated and unsupported, which is a stark contrast to the independence, life skills, and friendships they had hoped to gain from university life. To this issue, one student stated the following: "*Whereas with the co creation project, I feel like it has it's had a more positive impact on people's mental health as well. Yeah, I feel like more people feel more welcomed when they come into the co creation project and they feel like like, they can speak about what they feel. Yeah. Whereas in a classroom setting it's not really . . .where you can speak about how you feel. You just go in and you just do your work and go. . .*" (co-creation student).

In summary, the co-creation projects were described as significantly enriching the university experience, bringing students together, alleviating feelings of isolation, and creating a nurturing social environment. The findings also highlighted the nuanced experiences of students navigating their paths through higher education. The shared stories underscored a vital aspect of university life: the need for a supportive, inclusive community that reaches beyond academic achievements to address the emotional and social well-being of its students. Such assertions have also been reflected in other co-creation studies (Lubicz-Nawrocka 2019; Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Cates et al. 2018). The connection between friendships and positive mental health, or, indeed, the lack thereof, and students success-

fully engaging with their study was asserted. This has also been revealed through several other studies in the UK higher education sector (Thomas et al. 2017; Hurtado et al. 2012).

3.2. Safe Spaces, Trust, and Sharing Lived Experiences

> *"It's made me more confident. It's made me like it's given me the ability to speak my mind very openly. And express my feelings that I've been having from like first year onwards so it's like a safe space. Like we've all come together, we'll have obviously different opinions. And we've heard each other and it's like a massive weight lifted off my shoulder. Expressing our feelings and thoughts with obviously being felt left out, throughout the whole year".* (co-creation student)

The students described the project space as a classroom transformed by the power of co-creation, and being on a journey that would reshape their educational and personal landscapes. As they delved into projects that required them to share and create together, the room buzzed with the energy of newfound collaboration and creativity. The participants discussed feeling strength in numbers and having a collective voice that could make a tangible difference to practice at the university. The students talked about coming together, with everyone playing a part. The importance of being open and honest was stressed by the students. This transparency was not just for the sake of personal growth but was aimed at fostering real change through shared experiences and insights.

Trust became a cornerstone of their discussions. The group collectively recognised the need for trust in the classroom environment, a critical element that facilitated not only co-creation but also the building of self-esteem and mutual respect. This trust was crucial for the students, who found a positive shift in their university life by having a space to share their stories and learn from others, not only other students but also trusted staff, who demonstrated genuine understanding and care. Such issues have also been revealed through other studies in the UK HE sector (Archer et al. 2020). The importance of feeling safe enough to speak out and share experiences was highlighted by one participant, who stated "*You know what? I just love how diverse it is and I love the fact that I just say anything without feeling judged*" (co-creation student).

The benefits of co-creation shone through. The students enjoyed the experience, highlighting how the co-creation project provided a safe space to express feelings and opinions without fear. This environment boosted their confidence significantly, a sentiment echoed by many participants, who noted enhanced confidence and a stronger sense of belonging. The importance of lived experiences in creating this sense of belonging was emphasised repeatedly. The students talked about how personal stories and experiences contributed deeply to fostering empathy and understanding among peers (Balslev et al. 2020). Participants pointed out the profound impact that these shared stories had on listeners, enhancing their understanding and evoking empathy.

Yet, co-creation was more than just sharing and empathy; it was about practical steps towards inclusivity and success. The participants advised on the necessity of promoting awareness and involvement among both students and staff to ensure the success of such initiatives. Similarly, the participants discussed how to effectively implement co-creation projects more widely across the university, with the suggestions focusing on awareness, involvement, and teamwork. The students stated feeling isolated despite being part of a family and community outside of the university, but within the co-creation project, they found a platform where they could truly belong and thrive. The narrative of the classroom was rewritten from a place of solitary learning to one of communal growth and shared successes in the co-creation space. The students stated that the co-creation project not only transformed their learning experience but also left a lasting impression of connection and creative collaboration with their peers and the staff involved.

3.3. Classroom Conditions, Participation, and Support from Staff

> *"I just feel like in this class I'm a person, not a number".* (co-creation student)

At the heart of the academic experience, student voices revealed a deep-seated desire for connection, understanding, and support within the classroom. It became clear that the traditional lecture halls and rigid teaching methods often leave students feeling disconnected and under-represented (Howard 2015). One participant self-described transforming from being a "baby" to a fast learner in just six months of being involved in the co-creation project, epitomising the potential for personal growth when educational environments evolve to meet the diverse needs of students. Alongside this, another student discussed the transformative power of co-creation, suggesting that it turns ordinary academic engagements into something truly special. The analogy that one participant used, comparing the co-creation experience to a Jenga-like structure, underscored the delicate balance required in educational initiatives. Removing key elements such as support from staff, having a sense of belonging in the classroom, or a space to share experiences can destabilise the whole system, emphasising the need for a holistic approach to student engagement and learning (Parsons and Taylor 2011).

Not only were significant shifts in perspective reported, but students also shared some of the changes they began to observe in faculty staff. One participant noted how the project changed the practices of both staff and students, moving forward to foster a more inclusive and responsive educational environment. As reported by some students, lecturers, by involving themselves more collaboratively and by encouraging open questioning, have begun breaking down the walls of anxiety and building up student confidence. Within the classroom, the value of understanding individual needs was paramount, as highlighted by one participant who stressed the importance of recognising students' unique backgrounds to truly motivate them (Johansson and Felten 2014). This sentiment was echoed by another participant who argued that, without engaging students actively, educational systems fail to reach students' potentials (Harper 2009). In the classroom where the co-creation took root, the environment shifted dramatically. What was once a hierarchy became an equal playing field, allowing for free expression and making students feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts openly. The participants praised the staff in the co-creation for their understanding and supportive nature, which significantly enhanced student well-being and engagement.

Discussions on co-creation extend to its impact on group dynamics and decision making. The participants criticised the traditional staff–student hierarchies that lead to disconnect for students in the classroom and create barriers for conversations (Crowder 2023). The students appreciated those lecturers who understood and related to their individual needs and perspectives, who were more open-minded and caring, and who advocated for a collective learning approach to simplify and enrich educational exchanges (Nash and Manning 1996). To this point, one student shared the following: "*I am pretty quiet individual but... Syra, she's paying attention to me to make sure that I feel heard*" (co-creation student).

The students advocated that universities must treat students as young adults deserving of respect, a change that one participant found particularly effective when combined with the right mix of professionalism and banter. The students stated that small gestures, such as simply checking in with them in the classroom, asking how they are, and showing a genuine interest in them as individuals, made them feel welcomed and valued, thereby fostering better connections. One participant suggested the following: "*I just feel like if lecturers brought more enthusiasm, you know, to the classroom, to engage with the students to not only see them as a number, but as a human being. It's be nice*" (co-creation student).

The participants shared their discomfort with existing and traditional classroom dynamics, which is the very opposite to the co-creation space. Things such as raising their hand in class, feeling unheard, and being uncomfortable speaking up were all due to a lack of trust and belonging in normal classes. Such experiences spotlight the need for conditions that foster safe spaces and smaller class sizes, which are crucial for nurturing the confidence and belonging that are essential to a fulfilling university experience (Felten et al. 2016). One

student described this by saying "*I think it's just, everyone feeling like a sense of belonging*" (co-creation student).

This collective narrative, rich with individual stories and shared challenges, paints a vivid picture of the current state and potential future of university education, one where every student feels connected, supported, and empowered to speak freely and to grow personally.

3.4. Negative Experiences Including Issues Pertaining to Race and Racism

> "*I would say, like the loneliness that was the institutional racism that was here. . .they're all white, there's no one who I can relate with experiences. Like, no one's been through something that I might go through. . .like Asian or like ethnic minorities who are doing journalism, and I feel like also within the media aspect, it is very white dominated, especially in the UK. So I feel like I didn't realise that maybe that was why I felt demotivated until I started this project*". (co-creation student)

In the landscape of a university that aspires to foster growth and inclusivity, a concerning narrative has emerged, one marked by the challenges of loneliness, not being able to share experiences, and what was described by one participant as institutional racism. Through the experiences shared by the participants, the deep-seated issues of discrimination and marginalisation came to light, revealing the urgent need for change and reflection. The environment at the university was described as hostile at times, particularly noted by ethnic minority students, which is mirrored by the national research (EHRC 2019). One participant described this as follows: "*I'm saying this in the nicest way possible I think the favouritism over white students but then you.. the way I see it is something me and **** are the Asian students that are just all white so I do think it is white privilege and then even say like let's say for example if I miss a few lectures and stuff because I think second year I did have so much going on anyway you almost feel like you're not even there anymore because they probably point is that you don't even come in so why should we but they don't realise that they should have time to actually ask you, are you okay? but they're not considerate at all*" (co-creation student).

One participant pointed out that these conditions were not just isolated incidents but were indicative of broader inequalities that affect students' learning outcomes overall; furthermore, that this is experienced by several students, and the co-creation project provided the space to hear from others going through the same thing. As one participant explained: "*Again, like not knowing other people are going through the similar stuff that I am going. . . so I felt like I needed to be quiet and not talk about it. Because if I share my problems. People might perceive me as someone like negative or in a bad sense. So I stayed quiet, until now, like, I know how like other people, experience similar stuff like me, so I'm more confident to talk about my experience*" (co-creation student).

Repeatedly highlighted by students of all ethnicities was the call to address these disparities through co-creation by involving students in shaping their educational experiences (Bovill et al. 2016). Students of non-BAME backgrounds were significantly aware of existing disparities and discrimination, although they had not experienced it directly. This motivated their ambition to be part of the project; they also felt responsibility for their work and the need to contribute to effecting urgent change within the institution.

Some of the participants shared distressing pre-higher education experiences of discrimination, which, to some extent, set a precedent for their perceptions and interactions in higher education (Greenbank 2004). One participant reflected on the root of these issues being racial bias in the system, and acknowledged how the co-creation project opened their eyes to this as a broader issue. Another participant reflected that the co-creation project provided a crucial space for reflection and growth about such issues, which they had not been able to talk about before.

The responsibility of educators was underscored by participants who insisted that the staff at the university must take an active role in supporting all students to feel included, and that diverse identities must be properly welcomed and acknowledged in classrooms. The students also discussed the role of university staff in addressing issues pertaining to institutional racism, how the staff frame topics of race, and, indeed, the awarding gap in the

classroom. A student discussed the glaring omissions in the university curriculum, which often overlooked the specific issues affecting ethnic minority students. One participant relayed what could be described as the 'whiteness' of the curriculum (Utt 2018), whereby only white, male Eurocentric theorists are referred to and recommended to use within assignments, with no inclusion of theorists from the Global South (Peters 2018). This also led to the student feeling alienated and really disconnected from their learning, emphasising the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives within the curriculum (Archer et al. 2020). The students argued that the potential of co-creation research of student voices could be used to bridge these gaps.

One participant shared a poignant reflection on their racialised experiences during work placements and its impact on their mental health, as highlighted by Warner (2022). The student recounted the following: "*I was doing a placement, at a school, was going through a couple of mental health problems at the same time. . . school didn't really understand that I was bullied quite a lot. I feel like the university didn't really do much about it pretty much. Well, first time around the kind of did, second time they pretty much kind of dismissed and I just got to the point where I kind of had to leave that place because it was just taking a toll on my mental health*" (co-creation student). The experience made them feel that they could never pursue their intended career, as they had been made to feel that they were not good enough. The co-creation project provided a pivotal moment of solidarity, helping them to feel less isolated, and re-ignited their desire to continue studying and to go on to purse their original career dreams.

One participant shared their struggles with marginalisation in their degree programme due to their religious beliefs and outward appearance; they were the only student of such a background in the course, which is the same issue noted decades ago by Loo and Rolison (1986). The student discussed the potential benefits that better representation and diversity could bring for students, as well as spaces for minoritised students to develop friendships and to feel less alone (Harpalani 2017). One participant delved into the complexities of race and identity, highlighting the importance of understanding and embracing one's own experiences and perspectives. This understanding is crucial not only for personal affirmation but also for fostering a broader culture of empathy and inclusivity when given a space through co-creation to share this with others.

Through these shared experiences, the narrative woven by the participants painted a vivid picture of the current state of academia, a place where the promise of education is often overshadowed by the persistent shadows of racial discrimination, as documented across the HE sector by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC 2019). It is these experiences which can collectively lead to feelings of ostracisation from the wider university community and the reduced sense of belonging for students of ethnic minority backgrounds, which can then lead to drop out, thereby impacting retention rates and the awarding gap (Whatworks? Thomas 2012; EHRC 2019). The co-creation project emerged not only as a tool for academic engagement but as a vital platform for advocacy, healing, and structural change, urging a re-evaluation of the values and practices that define the educational landscape and working towards addressing the awarding gap.

3.5. Changes Needed for a Better Future for Students

> "*. . .for example, anti-racist practice. You might say, as in Syra was saying, you might say that you're not racist, but it's not enough to show that so you need to kind of. . .demonstrate. . .*".
>
> (co-creation student)

At a university grappling with challenges and on the brink of transformation, the story of change began to unfold through the voices of students united by a common goal, improving the academic and social environment through the principles of co-creation. The university-wide initiative on social justice and equity has set the stage for this transformation. The leadership team, as one participant noted, bears the responsibility to address the awarding gap, a task met with mixed reactions from the student body (Bauman et al.

2005). The same participant also remarked on the university culture that creates a hostile environment, suggesting the need for a significant cultural shift.

Amid these conversations, one participant stated that, by sharing personal experiences and knowledge aimed at educating students, they hoped their resources will leave a legacy. One participant cherished the co-creation environment, aspiring to see its principles applied more broadly across classrooms to foster friendship and collaboration. The students highlighted a lack of connection among peers, especially for first-year students, and that co-creation is needed to foster belonging and to build connections between students at this crucial early stage (Bovill 2020b; Araújo et al. 2014). One student recommended the following: *"I feel like in the beginning of your first few weeks, the university really needs to work on building those bonds within people in courses"* (co-creation student). Another participant reflected on building connections with peers and said the following: *"the structure of the classroom. . .there's not much like getting to know each other, icebreakers, friendly faces, everyone just goes in the classroom put their head down and leave. So that's kind of just the vibe throughout the whole three years hasn't really changed. Whereas in this group we do stuff to actually get to know each other. . ..it creates bonds. . ."* (co-creation student).

One participant expressed frustration with a perceived lack of creativity and resistance to change within the system. The broader student body echoed these sentiments, expressing frustration with poor academic experiences and a disconnect between university practices and student experiences. Students not feeling as though they belong to key aspects of their higher education journey, including the institution itself, their programme of study, support services, or peer networks, are intrinsically connected to student progression, retention, and outcomes (Masika and Jones 2015; Thomas et al. 2017; Wonkhe 2022). One student relayed their experience by saying the following: *"All lectures are all white. Well, there's no problem with that I've never had any problems with them all. They've all been very helpful in everything. I feel like to me as Asian, female hijabi, especially in the media sector in the UK, it's very white dominated. And for me, there's no one to look up to I feel like they don't know the experiences that I go through. And that's why I never spoke about anything. And I'm just thinking, imagine if like, Syra taught me how different my experiences would have been. And how do you do you? So. . . representation matters. . ."* (co-creation student).

The call for the inclusion of student voices in decision making was strong, with participants advocating for direct engagement with the executive team to share their recommendations (Caetano et al. 2020). The power of co-creation was recognised by several participants, who highlighted its potential to share knowledge and catalyse change. Social dynamics at the university were also a point of concern, with students yearning for more opportunities to bond and connect. Initiatives like organising icebreakers and social events during the first weeks of university were suggested to help form these essential connections. Furthermore, the provision of spaces on campus for students to socialise beyond the classroom was seen as a key factor in enhancing the university experience (Matthews et al. 2011).

As the narrative unfolded, the need for improved teaching methods and more inclusive curriculum initiatives were evident, as highlighted through other studies (Wilson et al. 2022). The participants emphasised a new curriculum focus on race equity and co-creation, similar to a study by Hall et al. (2021), while another participant advocated for cross-disciplinary co-creation so to deepen student connections and understanding for students. Staff needing to be anti-racist through their actions and behaviours with students was highlighted as critical in demonstrating commitment (Jankowski 2022). One student referred to university staff, saying: *"Make them become anti racist in a sense, and just kind of like, implement that practice wherever they can. Especially departments and stuff. . ."* (co-creation student).

The importance of maintaining personalised learning in a growing institution, enhancing student engagement in small classes, and addressing social inequity in larger group settings were discussed as strategies to overcome these barriers. The participants recognised that co-creation has the potential to address racial inequities and transform the university environment, urging action beyond mere conversation (Kwofie et al. 2024). As

the discussions culminated, the group contemplated the broad impacts of co-creation, from individual departments to the Board of Governors, setting a vision for a university that not only educates but also empowers its community to enact meaningful change.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Importance of Safe Spaces

A common theme raised by my students is the need for such spaces to be embedded at every level of study and held frequently throughout the academic year. There are several reasons for this that my students shared. The university can be a challenging environment, and students often face pressures related to academic work, social integration, and personal development. Safe spaces provide a nurturing environment where students can express vulnerabilities without fear of judgment or reprisal, and can significantly enhance their mental health and overall well-being (Arday 2018). The co-creation group was small, comprising 11 students and 3 core staff members, so it could be said that the safety described by those participating was due to the intimate size of the group. However, the subject areas for each of the students were also relatively small in size, so they had the prior experience (for 2 years) of working in smaller cohorts. Despite this, however, it was reported by the students that they still did not know fellow students in their subject programmes and had only spoken with one or two others since they enrolled. Therefore, it could be suggested that the intimate nature of the co-creation group is not the primary reason for the creation of safety. It is, rather, the conditions created within the group that develop safe spaces.

These spaces acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and experiences that students bring to the university through an intersectional understanding (Crenshaw 1989). By allowing students to share their unique perspectives and challenges, safe spaces foster a more inclusive campus culture that respects and values diversity, paying attention to intersecting identifies and how these are experienced by students (Samatar et al. 2021). When students feel secure, wanted, and cared for, they are more likely to engage actively in learning and to participate in discussions, particularly on sensitive or controversial topics. This can lead to better engagement in learning and the commitment to attendance, which raises the attainment, as students are deeply invested in the project's ethos and their own contributions. These are essential if universities want to address the awarding gap. Safe spaces can help forge stronger relationships among students, faculty, and staff, including the development of friendships (Thomas 2012). They encourage a sense of community and support, which can be particularly beneficial for students who may feel isolated or marginalised, regardless of their background (Read et al. 2003). Students of White and BAME backgrounds have all reported this issue; it is not exclusive to students of colour.

Discussing difficult experiences in a supportive environment can be a powerful catalyst for personal growth. It helps students develop coping skills, resilience, and a stronger sense of self, empowering them to navigate challenges both within and beyond the university setting (Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2017). The same can be said for staff, who are often left traumatised from hearing recurrent negative narratives. Although I have prior training in trauma-informed practice, I have also developed further resilience and coping mechanisms. By bringing to light the real issues that students face, safe spaces can inform and inspire changes in university policies, practices, and cultures The results have generally highlighted that belongingness is key to both the retention and success of students in HE, such as results highlighted by Thomas (2012) and Thomas et al. (2017), and that belonging begins at induction and very early upon arriving at the university. This proactive approach can lead to a more supportive and responsive educational environment, which is one of the key intended outcomes of this project and its recommendations for universities to consider if they truly want to address the awarding gap. In summary, creating safe spaces at universities is crucial for fostering a supportive academic and social environment that nurtures students' well-being, encourages their active participation, and prepares them to contribute positively to society.

4.2. Relationships and Mental Health

The students reported significantly enhanced connections, contrasting sharply with their usual university experiences, which many found isolating. In subject programmes, limited input by staff to support friendship-making was reported by the students; consequently, they hardly knew many fellow students despite being in their final year of study at the university. In contrast, co-creation facilitated a sense of belonging and fostered genuine friendships, which were critical to improving students' overall mental health. Activities, peer bonding, feeling heard and cared for, sharing stories, and open discussion featured as unique aspects of the co-creation experience. The students discussed the importance of developing connections with peers and staff, and those positive relationships supported their motivation and engagement with their learning, as documented by Thomas (2012), who reviewed interventions across several UK-based universities. Such projects converted academic environments into spaces of personal and communal growth, where students felt valued and heard, thus countering the feelings of loneliness and isolation often prevalent in traditional academic settings. The negative impact of loneliness and poor mental health on academic engagement and success is profound (Singh et al. 2021; Hammoudi et al. 2023). If universities are committed to addressing the awarding gap, more work is needed to support students to develop meaningful connections with peers, staff, and services.

4.3. Classroom Environments

The discussion highlighted a stark contrast between the dynamics of co-creation projects and regular classroom settings. Co-creation led to environments where the students felt recognised as individuals rather than just part of a student body. This individual attention improved the engagement and allowed the students to feel that they were an integral part of their educational journey, underscoring the necessity for academic institutions to adopt more inclusive and responsive teaching methods where every student feels valued (Guberina 2023; Benabid et al. 2025).

4.4. Race and Racism

Racial harassment has long-term negative effects on individuals' mental health, educational achievements, and career prospects. It leads to isolation, diminished self-esteem, and severe mental health issues (EHRC 2019), as well as a weakened sense of belonging and detachment from the community (Bhopal 2018). Victims of racial harassment often report feelings of anger, sadness, depression, anxiety, and vulnerability, with 8% even experiencing suicidal thoughts. The report further indicates that students frequently withdraw from university activities to protect their safety, confidence, and well-being. However, such withdrawals negatively affect their academic performance and outcomes. The findings also reveal that approximately one in twenty students cited racial harassment as the reason for abandoning their studies.

A significant and troubling theme that emerged was the impact of institutional racism. Students of ethnic minority backgrounds shared experiences of feeling unrepresented and marginalised, which not only affected their academic engagement but also their personal well-being (Arday 2018; Wong et al. 2022). The co-creation projects, however, provided a platform for these students to voice their experiences, have their stories validated by people who understood and genuinely empathised, as well as provided a forum to seek systemic change, highlighting the need for universities to address racial disparities actively and inclusively.

4.5. Actionable Recommendations for Universities

The findings culminated in a call for systemic change across university policies and practices. The students expressed a desire for a curriculum that includes anti-racist practices, more integrated and cross-disciplinary approaches, and a teaching environment that fosters true engagement and representation (Reddick 2023). They advocated for an educational framework where student voices are not only heard but are instrumental in shaping the

academic and social environment (Bauman et al. 2005). Co-creation embedded in core modules across all levels of study could be a way forward to tackle the wicked problems of the awarding gap.

The narrative painted by the data analysis and research results is clear: universities must evolve to become more inclusive, responsive, and supportive environments that reflect the diverse needs and identities of their students (Milem et al. 2005). This change is not only necessary for fostering academic success but is crucial for ensuring the mental and emotional well-being of the student body. Co-creation emerges as a powerful tool in this transformative process, suggesting a path forward where education is collaborative, inclusive, and empowering. Central to these proposals is the encouragement for faculty members to recognise and responsibly wield their influence without exploiting their power (Maher and Tetreault 2013). This initiative aims to foster mutual respect and build a community of practice within academic environments (Li et al. 2009) through regular interactions and check-ins with students.

A pivotal aspect of the reform is the transformation of the curriculum to not only incorporate interdisciplinary collaboration but also to actively include anti-racist theories, decolonising both curricula and assessment processes (Inertia 2023; Fox and Shanahan 2023). This approach requires faculty to adopt relational and critical pedagogical methods that allow for a more inclusive and reflective educational experience. Moreover, the implementation of co-creation in teaching strategies across all degree programs and study levels is advocated. This includes the integration of icebreaking and peer-bonding activities early in the academic year, which are crucial for easing first-year students into university life, helping them forge lasting relationships and break down social barriers (Nunn 2021).

Group work is also emphasised, with strategies to ensure dynamic classroom interactions by frequently changing seating arrangements so to encourage students to engage with a diverse range of peers (Rands and Gansemer-Topf 2017). Furthermore, the establishment of safe spaces across all levels of study, where students can openly discuss their experiences with faculty, is recommended. The university environment itself must evolve to become more welcoming and secure, with dedicated spaces for both study and social interaction (Cunningham 2015). An end to the profiling of students, a responsive system for addressing grievances about discrimination (Beeman and Adjetey 2024), and the implementation of restorative justice practices, where suitable, are also crucial elements of the proposed changes.

Finally, to support these transformative efforts, mandatory equity training for all university staff is suggested (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2021). This should be coupled with ongoing reflective practices and regular reviews of staff engagement and the commitment to addressing educational inequalities, ensuring that equitable values are both embraced and demonstrated in their daily interactions.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article has explored the transformative potential of co-creation in addressing systemic educational inequalities, specifically the awarding gap that disproportionately affects BAME students in higher education. Through a year-long co-creation project that prioritised safe spaces, the integration of decolonised and anti-racist pedagogies, and an ethos of empathy and psychological safety, significant strides were made towards enhancing student engagement, belonging, and academic success, as evidenced through my students' voices.

The findings underscore the critical importance of beginning co-creation practices early in a student's academic journey, ideally from the foundation or first year, to maximise its impact on student belonging and engagement. This project not only facilitated a shift in how students interacted with one another and with faculty but also empowered them to contribute meaningfully to institutional change. Students' recommendations and reflections revealed a profound appreciation for the project's approach to fostering an inclusive and

supportive educational environment, which they believe should be a standard practice across the university.

Furthermore, this project highlighted the necessity for universities to take seriously the lived experiences and voices of students. It is essential for educational institutions to commit to continuous, structured dialogues that not only address but actively work to dismantle the pervasive racial and educational inequities that remain entrenched within higher education systems (Bhopal and Pitkin 2020; Sian 2019; Arday and Mirza 2018; Arday 2019).

The co-creation project serves as a compelling example of how universities can use collaborative approaches to reform educational practices and curricula. By engaging with students as co-creators of their educational experiences, institutions can foster environments that are not only inclusive but also responsive to the needs of all students, thereby bridging gaps in equity and achievement. This initiative calls on all stakeholders in higher education, administrators, faculty, and students to embrace co-creation as a critical tool for educational equity. It is a call to move beyond traditional pedagogies and to innovate continuously in pursuit of a more just and equitable educational landscape. As such, universities are encouraged to consider these findings and recommendations as a blueprint for fostering deep, structural changes that extend far beyond the classroom and into the broader fabric of institutional practice and culture. I will finish with one of my greatest loves, the dearest Malik El- Shabaaz, commonly known as Malcom X: "We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience and patience creates unity" (cited in Clarke et al. 1990).

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