

Research Methods through Co-Design with International Students

Samridhi Gupta¹, Thuy-Anh Nguyen², Mollie Dollinger¹

¹Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. ²The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The complexities of providing appropriate and equitable support for international students has grown even more challenging since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, by employing participatory design methodologies, academics can research with international student partners to enable students to become co-decision makers and co-creators of research involving them. In this paper, we will provide an overview of participatory design, highlighting specific approaches such as CoLabs and cognitive interviews that researchers can use to engage in co-research with international students. We refer to how utilising ‘students as partners’ staff can better co-create experiences and support for students. We will conclude with practical suggestions to encourage academics to take on participatory design approaches in future research projects.

Full paper

One of the approaches to research within academia is the use of participatory co-design methods where *students* are repositioned as *partners*. Students as partners is “a collaborative and shared approach to pedagogical conceptualisation, decision-making,

implementation, investigation or analysis where all participants contribute equally in various ways” (Cook-Sather et al. 2014, pp. 6-7). We propose that students as partners (SaP) can be an accessible, dynamic, and flexible co-design process, and especially relevant for co-creation between staff and international students. Through the process, students and staff can facilitate the decolonisation of the curriculum, diversify the experiences of those involved, invoke important reflections, and challenge deficit narratives by prompting researchers to break out of an entrenched stereotype.

The inclusion of perspectives from different sides of academia can help identify, highlight, and challenge pre-existing power dynamics between academics and students. Such designs break down the binary of student-teacher, emphasising a synergetic relationship over a didactic one. Co-designing opportunities brings in individuals from diverse areas with varying experiences, shifting the educational culture towards that of growth, introspection, and collaboration. This cooperative paradigm provides students a platform to share their voices making teaching processes more efficient, inclusive, and responsive to diverse needs of those involved.

One form of participatory research design is CoLabs which are design-thinking workshops where facilitators “use a range of activities such as storyboarding, mind maps, and role playing to build empathy or explore ongoing issues or topics with participants” (Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2021, p. 43). While CoLabs are useful in generating ideas or solutions from student participants, they are particularly impactful when students are invited to help design the CoLab activities, facilitate the workshop, and/or help interpret the results. As an example, international students can be involved in facilitating workshops to discuss the mental health challenges they face in a new culture and the changes needed in the system to support their transition to the new country. What is crucial to challenge deficit narratives and stereotypes is that these workshops should be designed bearing international students, their experiences and diversity, the unvoiced challenges, and the resilience they bring to the system.

Another form of co-design is cognitive interviews. Cognitive interviews enable researchers to explore and evaluate the utility of learning resources, teaching practices, or student services by

encouraging students to verbalise their feedback by answering questions (Nápoles-Springer et al., 2006). Cognitive interviews can be a powerful tool for researchers seeking to understand how English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) students may interpret resources or text. They can do more than test the instrument validity – in that, they can help researchers understand how culturally diverse respondents process feelings and experiences prompted by research methods (Wildy & Clarke, 2009). For instance, international students from diverse backgrounds might be invited to participate in a cognitive interview to critically evaluate how materials for a research project on university students' mental health have taken the international student perspective into consideration.

Beyond these experiences, we recognise the potential challenges of student-staff co-authorship and co-research. Researchers interested in this process are encouraged to start small – hiring students to help facilitate focus groups or help analyse data as a first step. Although there are challenges to co-design, we advocate for more students to be included in research that is about – or impacts – them. This is particularly true for studies that relate to international students, as there are potential cultural differences and implications when researchers interpret and speak for others. It is equally critical to consistently question the traditionality of research that poses obstacles to such innovations that aim to support everyone involved. We invite researchers to consider some key questions:

1. How can I design my research to be inclusive of student-partners rather than have them conform to traditional research methods? What alternative formats can I harness to let them contribute authentically?
2. What learning experiences am I offering to participating students? How will this project enhance relevant skills?
3. What collaborative structure can I set up to ensure students' authentic (rather than superficial) contribution, whilst also providing supportive guidance throughout?
4. What provoking conversations do I want to have with students? What do I hope to learn or unlearn?
5. How can I approach the student voice in a way that identifies and supports the needs of diverse cohorts involved?
6. Students come from different backgrounds and are seldom

isolated from their experiences. What culturally relevant/diversity knowledge do I need to consider when approaching co-designing with students?

References

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning & teaching: a guide for faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dollinger, M., & Vanderlelie, J. (2021). Closing the loop: co-designing with students for greater market orientation. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 31(1), 41-57.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2020.1757557>

Nápoles-Springer, A. M., Santoyo-Olsson, J., O'Brien, H., & Stewart, A. L. (2006). Using cognitive interviews to develop surveys in diverse populations. *Medical Care*, S21-S30.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41219501>

Wildy, H., & Clarke, S. (2009). Using cognitive interviews to pilot an international survey of principal preparation: A Western Australian perspective. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(2), 105-117. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-009-9073-3>