Co-Producing Ideas, Leaders and Learning – Teaching Participatory Activism in Stoke on Trent

**Abstract**

This paper will critically analyse a University-funded Centre of Learning and Pedagogic Practice (SCoLPP) project. The project was designed to integrate the co-produced learning from the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree steering group, which was made up of local and national VCS leaders and low-income students on the course. The project was directly aligned with the University Academic Strategy, designed to integrate academic integrity into innovative curriculum design.

This article will critically discuss how the project, in its co-produced place-based approach, aligned its curriculum design to external engagement within Stoke on Trent. The Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree team worked over the course of eighteen months with a steering group of local and national voluntary sector employers to actively recruit and support students from low-income backgrounds to become engaged in anti-poverty activism. This article will critically discuss how the voices of students with lived experience of poverty engaged to co-produce learning with local and national voluntary sector leaders. The paper will critically reflect on best practice in co-produced curriculum development.

## 1. Introduction

This paper will critically analyse the conclusions of a University-funded Centre of Learning and Pedagogic Practice project (SCoLPP) at Staffordshire University. Staffordshire University is situated in the Midlands of England. It is a post-1992 institution, a member of the Civic University Network, that was rated Gold Standard in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) rankings when the course was being developed (Gratton, 2020). The project was designed to integrate the co-produced learning from the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree steering group, which is made up of local and national VCS leaders and students on the course. The SCoLPP project was called *co-producing leaders and learning*. The project was directly aligned with the University Academic Strategy (Staffordshire University, 2022), designed to integrate academic integrity into innovative curriculum design.

The University is committed to building real world learning collaborations between students and the VCS (Staffordshire University, 2022). Recognising the increased levels of poverty created by the pandemic (Etherington et al., 2021), the University sought to develop a degree that directly responded to this increased need. Developing from good working relationships with local and national voluntary sector organisations and a strong participatory research skill set (Gratton, 2020), the degree emerged as a co-produced conversation with the wider anti-poverty sector and student community with lived experience of poverty. The need to develop students with a strong commitment to activism and anti-oppressive practice and to frame the degree around the expertise of lived poverty experience was expressed strongly by voluntary sector groups. These values were woven into modules and a new degree was developed. The new degree reflected the wider University commitment to offer a study environment with authentic learning experiences and an opportunity for transformative learning within communities (Staffordshire University, 2022).

This article will critically discuss how the project, in its collaborative place-based approach, aligned its co-produced curriculum design to external engagement within Stoke on Trent. The Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree team worked over the course of eighteen months with a steering group of local and national voluntary sector employers to actively recruit and support students from low-income backgrounds to become engaged in anti-poverty activism. In *co-creating ideas, leaders and learning* as a SCoLPP project, the steering group were enacting a form of epistemological street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010), grounding the curriculum in VCS sector knowledge and the lived knowledge of low-income students. Street-level bureaucracy can be defined as ‘places where citizens experience directly the government they have implicitly constructed’ (Lipsky 2010; xi). As such, a street-level epistemology (Hardin, 1993) emerged, using participatory approaches to collaboratively develop curriculum at the frontline. Street-level epistemology can be defined in this sense as an approach to collaboration that prioritizes reflective conversation, allowing co-produced group discussion to develop regarding learning and teaching approaches (Hardin, 2006).

This micro level curriculum development work sat within the broader meso system of the University and the much wider socio-political pandemic context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), actively seeking to decolonise the curriculum (hooks, 1994; Smith, 2013) framed in a commitment to epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007). Decolonising the curriculum here can be understood as an ideological commitment to value knowledge in all its forms: embodied, experiential, academic with the aim at achieving epistemological equality and ultimately epistemic justice (ibid). Epistemic justice can defined as epistemic equality; it is about valuing a person’s voice, beyond contributing anecdotes but as an active agent in their interpretation (ibid). This article will critically discuss how students with lived experience of poverty engaged to co-produce learning with local and national voluntary sector leaders. The paper will critically reflect on best practice in co-produced curriculum development.

## 2. The Co-Producing Leaders and Learning Project. Aims and Objectives.

The aim of SCoLPP at Staffordshire University is to ‘develop evidence-informed pedagogic practice in a collegial manner which connects learning and teaching to enhanced social mobility’ (SCoLPP, 2022). As part of SCoLPP’s evidence-informed pedagogic practice connecting the University’s commitment to innovative learning and teaching to enhanced social mobility, the *co-producing leaders and learning* project was developed. The co-producing leaders and learning project was developed as part of a small grant SCoLPP funded innovator award. The Award Scheme was developed to promote a culture in which evidencing effective learning and teaching was nurtured within the University pedagogy and to enable the dissemination of research impact, best practice and innovation within the institution (SCoLPP, 2022).

The *co-producing ideas, leaders and learning* project aimed to directly reflect the aims of SCoLPP, to create effective evidence-based pedagogic practice which connects learning to enhanced social mobility. Social mobility is a contested term and can be defined as ‘the movement in time of individuals, families, or other social units between positions of varying advantage in the system of [social stratification](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/social-stratification) of a society’ (Müller and Pollack, 2015: 640). The project aimed to work in partnership with low-income students through learning and teaching innovation, holding three objectives. The first objective was to identify how the voices of students with lived experience of poverty could co-produce learning with local and national voluntary sector leaders. The second objective was to identify how the work experience that was integrated into the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree impacts on student employability skills. The third objective was to co-produce a learning and teaching toolkit that shared best practice in co-produced curriculum development.

## 3. The Background to the Co-Producing Leaders and Learning Project

### 3.1 The Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree

The Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree was launched in September 2021. The new degree was centred around practical activism with voluntary and community sector partners, offering a unique combination of activism and knowledge sharing, learning and teaching in collaboration with students in anti-poverty projects. Students were offered the opportunity to undertake practical work-based learning challenges, develop reflective portfolios on their trauma-informed anti-oppressive practice and learn about poverty from a mix of experts by experience and academic activists. Modules in the first year of study included addressing hardship in practice, activism and change, defining poverty, and careers skills. Modules in the second and third years included community organising, comparative politics of poverty, human rights and activism, governance and leadership, and a final year collaborative project. Each academic year combined theoretical underpinning with training in activism and practical work-based learning.

Following recruitment of the first cohort of students onto the new Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree, the course was moved from the School of Health Science and Wellbeing into the School of Justice Security and Sustainability due to a University faculty re-structure. The social justice values on which it sat remained at the heart of the work, and the relocation to a new faculty allowed greater collaboration with a social justice specialists. The Civic University values that sat behind the degree development remained at the heart of the work (Gratton, 2020).

### 3.2 The Steering Group

The steering group was an informally constituted collaboration of willing individuals. Initially advertised through local VCS networks and by word of mouth, the steering group had core members made up of students and local and national VCS groups. The learning and teaching approach was embedded within the steering group made up of large national charities with policy making goals, policy think tanks and local voluntary sector anchor institutions. Key issues discussed in the steering group sat around including the voices of people with lived experience, building employability opportunities and developing a best practice toolkit for co-produced curriculum design. There were several steering group meetings in the run-up to the degree launch, working with voluntary sector leaders from local and national anti-poverty organisations and students from a sister welfare rights undergraduate course. Steering group discussions focused on the module and learning needs of the voluntary sector and accessibility of the course to mature students with lived experience of poverty.

Once the course was validated by the University in May 2021 the advertising for it began. The steering group discussion turned to recruitment and how the steering group might influence ongoing curriculum development, how they might host work placements and become involved in learning and teaching activities via guest lectures, leading on module teaching and / or developing learning themes such as opportunities to meet and interview anti-poverty authors. From May 2021 onwards it was agreed that the steering group would meet quarterly. Students were invited from September 2021 when the Action on Poverty and Hardship course commenced. In these quarterly steering group meetings, discussions were devoted to what was working on the course and what might members of the steering group contribute to supporting the course. Steering group members were involved in both curriculum design and development from before the degree was validated. They delivered teaching sessions and led a ‘meet the author’ webinar prior to the announcement of course closure and spoke at the Action on Poverty conference in June 2022 following the announcement. The conference provided a platform for consultation with the sector on further course developments.

Following a University wide course review, the University announced that the course was to be closed due to low student numbers. The University’s desire to translate the course into a masters degree aimed at professionals working in the voluntary and community sector was presented to the teaching team. As such steering group conversations turned to how best to support current students to complete their studies and how to consult with the sector concerning the development of the proposed masters degree.

### 3.3 Anti-Poverty Activism

It is important to note that the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree was developed in the midst of the Covid-19 Pandemic which had implications on student recruitment and poverty. As lockdowns continued and poverty increased it became clear that poverty and experiences of Covid-19 were linked and the social determinants of health had and continue to have a tangible effect on community Covid rates (Patrick et al., 2022). The project sat within Stoke, which is defined as the sixteenth most deprived city in England, with over a third of working people living below the poverty threshold (Etherington et al., 2021). Staffordshire University, a Civic University with a strong track record of anti-poverty research and community engagement (Gratton and Murrinas, 2021) began to think through how it might seek to offer learning that addressed this.

Poverty and hardship are interconnected yet have different definitions. Academics have spent centuries defining poverty. Indeed, Plato in *The Republic* discussed wealth and inequality as damaging to society (Lötter, 2011). Townsend (1979) notably defined poverty in relative and absolute terms. Measures of absolute poverty include living on less than a dollar a day or living on less than sixty percent of a society’s median income (Goldstraw, 2016). Measures of relative poverty are often described in terms of inequality (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1992). Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2006) discuss poverty in relation to deprivation of freedoms, an inability to participate fully in modern society. In recent times poverty has been discussed in terms of the political structures which create unequal systems and the agential powers or otherwise of the individual to overcome the poverty in which they find themselves (Bunyan and Diamond, 2016). Poverty is a human rights issue (Lister, 2020) and arguably a political choice by those in power (Lansley, 2022). Poverty understood as a political choice is a motivation for activism. In seeing poverty as political, activism can seek to challenge the political status quo (Goldstraw et al., 2021).

Hardship is a word used often to refer to poverty, perhaps chosen by the Stoke on Trent Hardship Commission because is potentially carries less stigma than the word poverty. Hardship is often discussed in terms of material hardship and income poverty (Beverly, 2001). Financial hardship is, however, very clearly linked to broader societal hardships such as reduced social support and experiences of stress (Park et al., 2017). Recognising the diverse range of definitions of poverty and hardship, the degree sought to foreground the voices of lived experience of poverty in co-producing its curriculum development.

### 3.4 Co-Production and Education

Co-production can be defined here as a way of working where academics and the community work in partnership towards a collective outcome; 'the approach is value-driven and built on the principle that those who are affected by a service are best placed to help design it' (Involve, 2023). In essence the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree was co-producing its curriculum. Co-production can be described as happening

“…in those spaces where you fuse the two together, the university and the community, that produces interesting work … we need to interrogate how power works within those contexts. There are specific issues within universities, and these issues need addressing if community researchers and academics are to work in equitable ways.” (Brown et al., 2020)

Co-production methods are developed and inspired by a range of theoretical perspectives, drawing on critical race theories, feminisms, queer theories, Marxist theories and critical disability theories (Bell and Pahl, 2018).

Co-production recognises diverse epistemology (Pahl, 2014) in its valuing and collaboration with those who have lived embodied and experiential and academic knowledge. This is reflected in the co-created Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree’s approach to listening (Back, 2007; Foster, 2016) and the development of spaces of unknowing (Vasudevan, 2011). In taking a co-produced approach the steering group foregrounded a commitment to decolonising curriculum design (Smith, 2013) framed in a commitment to anti-poverty activism aimed at teaching to transgress (Hooks, 1994). In co-creating its epistemology the degree sought to ‘destabilise academia as a privileged site for the production and dissemination of knowledge’ (Bell and Pahl, 2018:3).

### 3.5 Lived Experience and Learning

Lived experience is a contested term. It can be defined as ‘the experience(s) of people on whom a social issue, or combination of issues, has had a direct impact’ (Sandu, 2017:2). However, it is a term that has arguably been used tokenistically (Goldstraw et al., 2021) and it could be accused of being the ‘emperor’s new clothes’ of funder buzz words (Goldstraw et al., 2019), where its meaning and the value of its voice are arguably lost. The term lived experience cannot become another version of ‘service user’ or ‘client’ (McLaughlin, 2009) that becomes contested in and of itself, rather than the knowledge held by experience being valued. Valuing lived expertise and collaboratively working with, not alongside or on behalf of, requires an epistemic shift by VCS leaders and academics alike. Valuing the expertise gained from lived experience seeks to decolonise knowledge hierarchies (Smith, 2013) and to achieve epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007).

Recognising the power that embodied knowledge holds is an important part of de-stabilising power and re-claiming voice-space for those with lived experience of poverty (Lister, 2020). It is important to recognise the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) of lived experience and to recognise the power dynamics that play within intersectionality’s of oppression (Rasool and Ahmed, 2020). In listening and developing spaces of unknowing with the degree steering group, the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree sought to reclaim power and voice, foregrounding lived expertise.

In valuing lived experience as a knowledge form, people with lived experience must be involved in the design, development, delivery and analysis of knowledge formation (Goldstraw et al., 2021). It is only when people with lived experience contribute to the phenomenology and the hermeneutics of knowledge creation that knowledge hierarchies are truly challenged and decolonised (Smith, 2013). In the sharing of knowledge and in the analysis of it, as part of an iterative process of knowledge development (Williams and Pierce, 2016), lived experience can be given the respect, dignity and ‘voice-space’ (Lister, 2020) it deserves.

The *co-created ideas, leaders and learning* project was actively designed to value the lived experience of students on low incomes, recognising the epistemic necessity (Fricker, 2007) foregrounding the knowledge held within that lived experience. Ensuring epistemic justice (ibid) in learning and teaching is key to the University Equality and Diversity (Staffordshire University, 2022) commitment as well as the Student Employability Agenda (Staffordshire University, 2022). The Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree sought to develop an innovative curriculum design, co-producing the curriculum with a steering group of local and national voluntary sector leaders. The degree actively sought to recruit students from low-income backgrounds and developed a bursary linked to supporting students from these backgrounds. Low income is a term that can be defined as living on less than sixty percent of the median income (Lister, 2020). The new degree sought to frame its understanding of poverty and activism within the knowledge held within lived experience (Goldstraw et al., 2021) and reflected the University’s commitment to being a Civic University (Gratton, 2020).

### 3.6 The Learning and Teaching Approach

The learning and teaching approach was framed in pastoral care and built around valuing the lived experiences of students in developing spaces of listening and knowing as core elements of its approach. Framing the learning with students from non-traditional backgrounds, care leavers, mature students and students living on a low income around acknowledging their lived experience actively sought to decolonise the academic agenda (Smith, 2013) and value the variety of knowledge forms. In so doing, the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree sought to address epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007).

Students with lived experience of poverty were involved in co-producing the curriculum, attending and contributing to the steering group from the start of the degree. Students took part in anti-poverty activism throughout the degree. Reimbursement for student involvement in co-production was vital to support the additional costs of participation and to recognise the value of student knowledge sharing. When attending extra curricular events, students were paid via UniTemps, a recruitment organisation with a branch on the University campus. Steering group sessions were organised during class time to facilitate student availability.

Recognising the barriers that students on a low-income experience, a senior lecturer on the course (the author) led on the creation of a bursary for students on the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree. The bursary was funded by Joseph Rowntree Foundation in partnership with the University Alumni office. The importance of investing in students was recognised by the funder of the bursary, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, as this quote illustrates;

*At JRF we understand the difficulties of accessing qualifications, and how living and study costs can be a massive barrier to people who want to take the time out to retrain. It’s important to have sufficient time to concentrate on your studies, and we hope that our bursaries will make a big difference for students.* *[Social Action Bursary, 2023]*

The bursaries made a significant difference to student finances; however, it did not cover the full expenses of studying. The bursary was valued by the students who received it, as this quote below evidences:

*“My goals and aspirations during this course are to gain more knowledge around poverty and hardship, enabling me to go into full-time employment within the social welfare sector. I am extremely passionate about making a difference to the world we live in and the daily hardships within families that live in the community. The support I have already received from Staffordshire University has been amazing; they have already supplied me with a loan laptop which makes my studies easier. The bursary will help to buy books I may need, and as a single parent it will also allow me to drop a day at work and spend more time on my studies or volunteering in the social sector.” Student, Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree* [Social Action Bursary, Funder Feedback PDF]

Developing an emergent process of curriculum design, a street-level epistemology (Hardin, 1993), led to a series of innovative learning opportunities for students. The course leader applied for local Healthwatch funding to conduct and deliver some mental health and poverty awareness and research sessions in the community and on campus. This offered students real-life research skills development and experience for students, offering an opportunity for work-based learning and a practical application of a Civic University in action. As a result, modules being delivered reflected VCS needs as sector employers. A steering group member used his social connections to develop a ‘meet the author’ webinar with an eminent anti-poverty author. This was set up as an online webinar where students interviewed the author on the core themes of his analysis supported by a lecturer and senior lecturer (the author) from the course. A senior lecturer seconded from Criminology onto the course teaching team drew on connections with the steering group to convene a national anti-poverty conference, inviting speakers from across the UK to address how we act on poverty and hardship.

The political context in which this work was taking place was challenging (Pringle et al., 2022). With government statements regarding reduced funding to the University sector, and the post-1992 University sector in the summer of 2022 more specifically (Pringle et al., 2022), difficult decisions were made by Staffordshire University, linked to student recruitment numbers. In the summer of 2022, the University informed staff teaching on the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree that it was not going to recruit for the following academic year. The co-creation steering group was to come to an end. The students originally on the Action on Poverty and Hardship course transferred into another social justice focused course, their bursaries continued and the anti-poverty work within the University continued, linked to the Connected Communities strategy (Gratton, 2020).

## 4. Methodological Approach; How did the Steering Group and Co-Created Curriculum Development Work?

Methods and Research Ethics The *co-creating ideas, leaders and learning* project was led by the author and took a participatory and mixed methods approach to its methodology (Lincoln and Guba, 2005). Ethical approval was sought and received from the University Ethics Committee and the project worked to British Sociological Association (BSA) ethical guidelines (BSA, 2017). The learning from the project was drawn from semi-structured interviews. The co-production took place in Steering Group Webinars.

The co-produced mixed methods approach included the creation of a padlet, an online web resource. The padlet was developed during online reflective sessions (Dean, 2017). Reflective workshops developed ideas and the co-produced approach. Towards the end of the first year of the project a reflective webinar was held, inviting local and national VCS leaders, teaching staff on the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree and students. This reflective webinar sought to draw the learning from the co-created curriculum work to date, sharing best practice in co-produced curriculum design and a toolkit which published this learning. Following this online group reflective space individual reflective interviews were held with two VCS members of the steering group and one academic staff member. Another interview was arranged with a student but did not eventually take place.

A thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2012) where key themes were collectively analysed within the final reflective webinar. Taking an ontological position from Jasanoff (2005), who discusses co-production in terms of creating 'civic epistemologies’, the findings from the project were collectively analysed by the steering group. Taking a reflexive (Dean, 2017) and iterative (Williams and Pierce, 2016) approach to the research methodology was important. Co-produced research needs to share the decision-making power (Facer and Pahl, 2017), and in working collaboratively with VCS groups the steering group responded and adapted its approach (Kagan et al., 2017).

## 5. Findings; Reflecting and Analysing the Co-creation of Ideas, Leaders and Learning

Developing a safe space for discussion and networking, where an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) could be taken, to linking micro, meso and macro approaches to tackling poverty was essential to the curriculum design. Integrating strategic local anti-poverty knowledge with the broader national policy expertise held by national charities opened up spaces for knowledge exchange and development. Key themes emerged around creating safe spaces of unknowing, spaces for listening and the importance of flexibility and of the development of a liminal street-level epistemological space.

### 5.1 Creating Safe Spaces of Unknowing

Creating a supportive, reflective space for innovative curriculum development was very much valued. Helping and supporting students to have the confidence to engage within the steering group was a learning journey in itself. Developing an approach where the lecturer sat with the students in a classroom, supporting them to contribute to the online steering groups, helped confidence levels, in contrast to students joining the online meeting alone from home.

Ensuring and developing meaningful involvement with the right support is vital to building lived experience voices (Patrick et al., 2022). Accessing training in representation and leadership from the Students’ Union was the next step in student empowerment that was planned, had the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree and therefore the steering group continued.

The opportunity to engage in creative approaches with opportunities to co-create visual representations of steering group conversations were an important part of valuing the diverse knowledge sets within the steering group (Goldstraw, 2018). The author worked with an artist to create a visual representation of steering group discussions.

Staff, students and VCS leaders were able to input into modules and change modules, as illustrated by the steering group member’s comment below:

*“Developing the [co-created curriculum design] strategy was at times emergent; it happened as a happy accident to co-deliver a lecture session with a steering group member who was visiting the University in person.” Senior Lecturer, Steering Group Member*

Co-developing the modules moved the co-created curriculum design beyond a guest lecture format into co-design of the modules for the degree pre-validation and co-design of the modules for a re-validation process (a cross-University exercise in January 2022 to move modules from a 30/15 credit system to a 40/20 credit system). Being open to emergent curriculum design and open to co-creating opportunities were key to the organic nature of the degree development process and the co-creation of street-level epistemology (Hardin, 1993; Lipsky, 2010; Rowe, 2022).

### 5.2 A Space for Listening and Being Heard

Creating a safe space for creative discussion (Vaughn, 2014), where all in the online space were working to support the Action on Poverty and Hardship course and could share ideas and ways of working with this ethos of curriculum design, offered the opportunity to develop an innovative learning discussion that recognised the variety of epistemic approaches and valued them (Facer and Pahl, 2017).

The variety of groups involved in the steering group over the course of its development led to a diverse range of voices co-creating the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree curriculum. In co-creating emergent strategy, a street-level epistemology (Hardin, 1993) was created. The informal connections developed within the steering group led to new connections, developing work together and joint delivery of work within Stoke on Trent (Lipsky, 2010; Rowe, 2022).

The value of the networks created to develop the Action on Poverty and Hardship curriculum overflowed into other opportunities, with networks emerging from the steering group and partnership work being developed in the wider Stoke on Trent area between national and local VCS groups as a result of them having met in the steering group, as illustrated by the steering group member’s comments below,

*“one thing that has been good in the sessions is the way that people have worked hard to understand the different constraints that people are under .. wading through University bureaucracy informants. A lot of care has been taken to understand what different organisations can do to be involved … it’s really quite important [to try and understand VCS group capacity].” National VCS Organisation, Steering Group Member.*

The integrated working and creative partnerships that developed from the steering group created opportunities for sustainable University–community partnerships (Kagan et al., 2017). Examples include content delivery, an honorary doctorate awarded to a steering group member and bursary funding offered by a steering group member.

### 5.3 Taking Time and Allowing for Flexibility

The changing requirements of pandemic restrictions, lockdowns and opening up affected steering group meeting times and capacity, as did funding cuts and political turmoil as the eighteen months of the steering group’s existence unfolded (Patrick et al., 2022). The time needed to reach out and to build and maintain relationships with both local and national VCS groups was significant. Developing the ideas discussed within the steering group meetings into practical action involved significant additional unpaid hours of dedication from VCS leaders and academic staff.

The Healthwatch; mental health and poverty research funding achieved by the Action on Poverty and Hardship course leader allowed work-based learning opportunities and reflective skill development for students as well as real time learning for the sector. It cross connected learning from two modules that were led by the course leader and the seconded senior lecturer from Criminology, who worked together to co-design with the students the awareness raising and research events. However, the time needed to arrange world café events across the city centre, manage a minor Covid-19 outbreak among staff and students within public health restrictions at the time and support students who had not got the bus fare or childcare to travel to the community venues held its challenges. Despite these challenges, the awareness raising sessions and associated research successfully fed back lived experience knowledge to the funder, Healthwatch. Due to COVID illness impacting academic staff leading the project, the University employed the paid support of a local steering group member, to support with facilitation at one of the community events and arranged for cover from the wider Action on Poverty teaching team. Student feedback on the work was positive and the work-based learning a valued addition to the curriculum, as the quote from a steering group member illustrates below:

*“This [Healthwatch-funded research project] gives us the perfect opportunity to do what we wanted to do with this course; we wanted to have real impact right from the start of course and this gives us the opportunity to do just that.” Senior Lecturer, Steering Group Member*

The time taken to develop relationships for the *‘*meet the author*’* series was also impacted by student lived experiences of a low income. The book, a recent anti-poverty release (Lansley, 2022) was not yet in the library and students could not afford to purchase a copy. Lecturers bought copies and offered a verbal book review in lieu of students being able to read the full publication. The author, a lecturer, a VCS steering group leader and the students gave up part of their holiday to do a dress rehearsal for the ‘meet the author’ webinar. The event was a success in terms of student empowerment and the extensive preparation time worthwhile, with the interview format building student confidence and a webinar hosting skillset.

The time that it takes to reach, recruit and support students from non-traditional backgrounds is significant; to recruit from non-traditional groups requires an alternative, more person-centred recruitment strategy (Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenbach, 2012). Valuing lived experience in a meaningful way and supporting students from low-income communities as an epistemic necessity (Fricker, 2007) requires high-level pastoral support (Gratton and Murrinas, 2021). Accessing University support services with students, building IT skills so that students can access the University digital resources and building confidence in students that have had long gaps in formal learning involves dedication and person-centred academic mentoring from a skilled staff team, as the quotes below from students illustrate;

*"The bursary money I got helped me a lot in purchasing my work station, which included my desk, chair, stationery and a top of the range desktop. This work station has been of a great help, it helped me to focus and study better and not relying on the local library one or having to share the one I had with my kids which kept on crashing most of the times. This was such a great relief the day I purchased it, once again thank you so much." [Social Action Bursary, 2023]*

*"Thank you so much for the bursary. It has helped get me started on the first semester. I purchased a laptop and saved some for parking & food expenses at uni. The first semester has been great. I have learned so much about how poverty is more an issue than people realise. I think it's vital that we raise awareness to stop the stigma attached to people in poverty. Next year I want to focus on finding a voluntary placement to support my studies, meeting people with real-life stories, and helping them to become heard."* *Student, [Social Action Bursary, 2023]*

Actively seeking to decolonise the curriculum (Smith, 2013) and teaching to transgress (hooks, 1994) involves time intensive pastoral work with students from non-traditional backgrounds. University systems which have set timings to mark student work, to deliver and prepare learning and to academically mentor students, do not reflect the additional time involved in working with students from non-traditional backgrounds (Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenbach, 2012). Time was a significant challenge: academia and the voluntary sector are busy sectors where any addition to workloads can feel difficult to manage.

### 5.4 The Liminal Interstices of Passion, Activism and Change Making

Developing the Action on Poverty and Hardship Conference was a labour of love for the teaching team. It was led by one senior lecturer seconded from the Criminology team, who pulled in social capital (Putnam, 2000) ties from her extensive University, Public Sector and VCS career to draw together a complex conference agenda. Steering Group members supported development and delivery activities of the conference. Feedback from the conference was excellent and it further developed the University’s civic reputation, as this quote from a twitter feed on the day of the conference illustrates:

*“#arts and #creativity is featuring such a big part of envisioning, agreeing and #coproducing needed models for the future! Brilliant and thought-provoking morning!” Tweet from Attendee, Action on Poverty and Hardship Conference*

The conference was a strong networking opportunity linking learning and good practice from local and national anti-poverty work. It offered VCS groups locally an opportunity to build partnerships with national organisations, building the bridging capital (Putnam, 2000) that linked locally based Stoke on Trent VCS groups to national charities. The opportunity to develop bridging capital (Putnam, 2000) created space to link the emergent street-level epistemology (Hardin, 1993) of the Action on Poverty and Hardship steering group to the meso and macro level sectors within the anti-poverty field (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Co-creating within a University environment involved creative thinking, and ensuring that participation was accessible, especially for low-income students and small VCS groups, was a challenge. Universities are typically bureaucratic environments due to the layers of administration and quality standards required. As such a non-traditional course and approach to course development required creative thinking and a pioneering approach. Participation in learning and also the steering group, needed to be accessible for low income students and small VCS groups. VCS groups were initially offered an opportunity to access a guest lecturer payment for participation in the steering group; however, registering as a guest lecturer at the University involves several detailed forms and a right to work check, which proved prohibitive for organisations who are capacity and resource challenged. None of the VCS groups accessed this payment. The learning from this is that more accessible forms of payment should be sought, as inaccessible payment equates in reality to no payment at all. However, the opportunity to be paid was appreciated, as illustrated by the steering group member’s comment below:

*“Universities are notorious for not paying for things or under paying people for things so the offer of the guest lecturer payment of involvement in the steering group was good.” National VCS Organisation, Steering Group Member*

Working within existing University and VCS structures and recognising the variety of organisational structures held within the VCS were challenges to the work. This supports findings from the author (Goldstraw, 2018) who shares that integrated working across sectors requires high levels of goodwill and trust.

Core learning from the *co-producing ideas leaders and learning* project was that finding the passion, commitment and drive to knit in extra time and creativity was key. Co-production is time and commitment intensive work (Goldstraw, 2018) and this project was no different; it would not have worked without the flexibility and good will of the academic staff, students and VCS leaders.

Decolonising the curriculum (Smith, 2013) involves teaching to transgress (hooks, 1994) in ways that actively foreground community knowledge and seek out ways to weave this knowledge into bureaucratic academic systems. The steering group worked because it innovatively utilised a creative participatory approach to co-creating a shared safe space, based on good will and respect for the diversity of epistemic approaches. This approach facilitated the steering group in creating a space of collaborative anti-poverty activism, intent on taking action on poverty and hardship. In choosing to knit time, work in the liminal interstices of passion and activism, the steering co-created the curriculum as street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010; Rowe, 2022) intent on change making.

## 6. Conclusions and Connected Communities

The Action on Poverty and Hardship *co-creating ideas, leaders and learning* project had many elements of success. The project aimed to build social mobility with low-income students through learning and teaching innovation. In engaging students in a creative space where they could develop social capital beyond bonding (Putnam, 2000) into bridging (Putnam, 2000) with VCS professionals that built meeting skills, webinar hosting skills, conference presentation and research skills, the project created a space where learning could be developed in a variety of real world settings.

The first objective of the project was to identify how the voices of students with lived experience of poverty could co-produce learning with local and national voluntary sector leaders. In engaging in the steering group the students actively participated in this learning process, supported by academic staff. The second objective of the project was to identify how the work experience that is integrated into the Action on Poverty and Hardship Degree impacts on student employability skills. This objective was partially realised in that the work-based learning as part of the local Healthwatch-funded project, woven into the curriculum, was successfully developed, building student research skills in a work-based environment. The students as yet have not graduated so this objective cannot be fully realised. One key aspect of learning is that students with lived experience of poverty, benefit from additional financial and academic mentoring support to thrive in HE. The third objective was to co-produce a learning and teaching toolkit that shares best practice in co-produced curriculum development. This toolkit (see Appendix) has been produced and published as part of the SCoLPP outcomes (SCoLPP, 2022).

Staffordshire University describes itself as a ‘catalyst for change’ – a force for social good that transforms the lives of people who will transform our society and the places in which we live. In directly acting to take action on poverty and hardship the University holds the potential to enact its stated values and places itself in a key position to enact its Strategic Plan (Staffordshire University, 2022). The planned masters degree will continue to support the sector and learning from the undergraduate course has a legacy. The action on poverty and hardship work goes on, linked to the Connected Communities work (Gratton, 2020) and as part of the University commitment to actively engage within the community as a genuinely Civic University. The Action on Poverty conference is also planned as an ongoing annual event with members from the steering group remaining engaged in co-creating a space for learning.

In conclusion, the learning from this work reinforces the importance of seeking epistemic justice in curriculum development which seeks to authentically tackle global challenges such as poverty. Best practice recommendations that can be drawn from this research sit around the importance of developing safe spaces of unknowing, developing spaces where people can listen and be heard, recognising the time and flexibility that co-creation requires and the importance of creating liminal spaces for co-creation where institutional bureaucracy does not have the opportunity to create barriers to creative thinking.

Policy and Practice Recommendations:

* **Ensure financial support is available**: It is vital that funds are available to support low-income students to participate; bursaries, payment for additional knowledge sharing and reimbursement for expenses are key.
* **Allow time for relationships to develop**: Co-produced curriculum development requires a long-term commitment.
* **Build strong partnerships**: Relationship-based practice, working across sectors with a variety of stakeholders, involves a commitment to maintaining strong partnerships.

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# Appendix One