STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS

A Curriculum Design Collaboration

Co-creating a "Mini-Hackathon" with students

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1. Where did the inspiration to do this project come from?

The Mini-Hackathon emerged from a wider initiative, "Next-Gen Leaders – Empowering Students Through Engagement and Experience," born out of a clear need to bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world business. We really wanted to boost our postgraduate students' experience, especially when it came to feeling part of a community and getting chances to connect with others on their courses. A key driver for the Mini-Hackathon itself came from the challenges many students, particularly our international cohort, new to the UK, faced in connecting with British professionals and applying their academic learning in practical scenarios.

So, the Mini-Hackathon, along with another planned event, the student-led Business Conference, was designed as a hands-on solution. It's all about empowering our students by giving them active roles, allowing them to apply what they've learned in the classroom to tangible scenarios and also create a connection with professionals/experts in the UK. This not only develops vital skills like leadership and teamwork but also fosters a more integrated and practical learning environment, truly preparing them for the dynamic business world.

2. What did you set out to achieve?

With the "Mini-Hackathon," as the culminating event of our Next-Gen Business Leaders: Empowering Students through Engagement and Experience project, we set out to achieve several key objectives, all geared towards providing a truly impactful and practical learning experience for our students.

Firstly, a core aim was to bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world business challenges. We wanted to move beyond the classroom and offer students a hands-on opportunity to apply their knowledge to a live case study, such as the one from Serpentine Accounting. This was about fostering a deeper, more applied understanding of contemporary business issues, including technological advancements, and encouraging innovative problem-solving.

Secondly, we sought to cultivate essential professional skills that are highly valued in today's workforce. The hackathon format specifically encouraged teamwork, strategic thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication through the pitching process. By having students devise and present solutions under time pressure, we aimed to develop their resilience, adaptability, and presentation skills – all vital for future careers.

Finally, a significant goal was to empower students through experiential learning and industry collaboration. By co-creating the event with our postgraduate student co-creators and bringing in an experienced mentor like Dr. John Mahoney-Phillips, we aimed to provide a unique platform for professional networking and invaluable insights. We also wanted to inspire students by showcasing the calibre of ideas they could generate, as demonstrated by the winning teams and their innovative solutions like SCALED. Ultimately, our ambition was to provide an event that not only enhanced their academic journey but also significantly boosted their confidence and readiness for the dynamic professional landscape, directly contributing to quality education and preparing them for a more sustainable and equitable society.

3. How did students and staff work together on this project?

An initial meeting via MS Teams was arranged on 14th February 2025 with the students' partners, where we discussed clarifying the objectives. Students' partners created a WhatsApp group where they can openly discuss and share important information, documents, and answer queries/questions. The timeline for the group meeting, including ideas, task allocations, and deadlines, was discussed among students and staff during the initial meeting.

As a student co-creator who has been working on many other co-creating projects, we did not necessarily need to arrange a series of meetings this time, as everything has been communicated via emails and calls as necessary. During March 2025, staff confirmed to support students with room booking and event arrangements, especially for dealing with the university approval and administration process and confirmation of inviting the external professional. John Mahoney-Phillips to lead the Mini-Hackathon. Other tasks were clearly allocated among students, such as creating a poster, marketing content, and channels to advertise the event. A few weeks before the event, the event details were confirmed, and staff checked and supported students with last-minute ad hoc tasks as required.

The mini hackathon was on the 11th of June 2025. During the event, student co-creators and staff worked together in dealing with event management activities such as room, IT set up, time keeping, meet and greet speakers, meal arrangements, etc. All students' partners were involved during the event, supporting each other as required.

4. What kind of impact do you anticipate that your work may have on learning and teaching going forward (specific to your course module or in a broader context)?
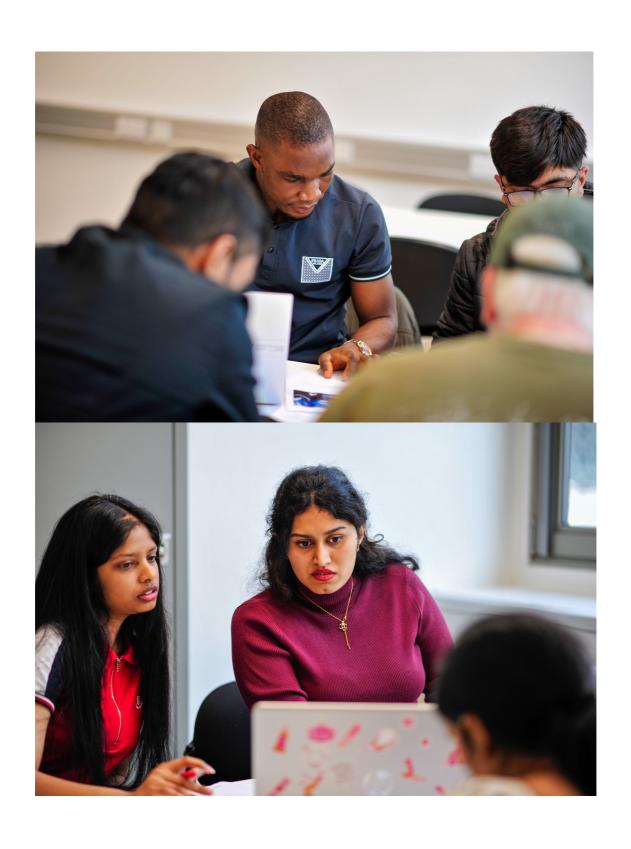
The "Mini-Hackathon," as a flagship event within the Next-Gen Business Leaders project, is anticipated to have a profound and lasting impact on learning and teaching, both within specific course modules and across the broader academic landscape at Westminster Business School.

Firstly, we foresee a significant shift towards more experiential and applied learning. The hackathon's success in directly bridging academic theory with real-world business challenges – through the engagement with a live case study like Serpentine Accounting – provides a compelling blueprint for future teaching. This model encourages educators to integrate more problem-based and challenge-led approaches, moving beyond traditional lectures to foster deeper understanding and practical application of knowledge.

Secondly, the event's focus on cultivating essential professional skills will undoubtedly influence pedagogical practices. The explicit development of teamwork, strategic thinking, innovative problem-solving, and effective communication through the pitching process highlights the need for curricula that actively embed and assess these competencies. We anticipate a greater emphasis on collaborative projects, real-time decision-making exercises, and opportunities for students to articulate their solutions, thereby preparing them more robustly for the complexities of the modern workplace.

Furthermore, the co-creation aspect and student empowerment demonstrated in the Mini-Hackathon will inspire more student-centred approaches to teaching. By involving students as active partners in designing and delivering such initiatives, we foster a stronger sense of ownership and engagement. This model can lead to more dynamic and relevant learning experiences, with students playing a greater role in shaping their educational journey.

Finally, the successful integration of industry collaboration and the positive impact on student confidence and networking abilities will likely encourage more robust partnerships between academia and the professional world. Featuring experienced mentors and successful alumni, as seen with Dr. John Mahoney-Phillips and the impactful ideas presented, underlines the value of bringing external expertise directly into the learning environment. This not only enriches the student experience but also ensures our teaching remains current, relevant, and directly aligned with the evolving demands of industry. Ultimately, the Mini-Hackathon sets a new standard for engaged learning, driving us towards a teaching ethos that champions practical application, skill development, and empowered, confident graduates ready to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable society, directly supporting UN SDG 4: Quality Education.

5. Any lessons learned from working in partnership?

Working in partnership to co-create the Mini-Hackathon with our postgraduate students offered invaluable lessons, truly highlighting the power of collaborative effort. A significant takeaway was the immense benefit of student ownership and empowerment. Our student co-creators were incredibly proactive, constantly communicating via WhatsApp to catch up on discussions and work closely with staff.

The partnership also underscored the crucial importance of flexible structures and clear communication. Successfully bringing together academic staff, an external industry mentor like Dr. John Mahoney-Phillips, and our student team required consistent, open dialogue to ensure everyone was aligned. This co-creator project also provided a fantastic opportunity for our student partners to use their diverse talents and improve vital skills such as public speaking, people management, event planning, and problem-solving. This collaborative synergy, blending academic rigour with practical insights and student innovation, clearly demonstrated that the combined effort yielded a far richer and more impactful event than any single party could have achieved alone. These lessons will

certainly shape how we approach future projects, reinforcing our commitment to co-creation and empowering our student community.

Please follow below link for more information about our event, Mini-Hackathon

https://www.westminster.ac.uk/news/students-tackle-real-world-business-challenges-at-mini-hackathon