

CASE STUDY

Co-selecting students for more democratic co-creation: A case study from the Create a Subject Challenge

***Ger Post**, Department of Anatomy and Physiology, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Lily Denise Tuong Vi Nguyen, Public Health Graduate, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Jiang-Li Tan, Department of Medical Education, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Saw Hoon Lim, Department of Biochemistry and Pharmacology, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Sophie Paquet-Fifield, Department of Microbiology & Immunology, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Michele Barrese, Doctor of Medicine student, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Charlotte Clark, Department of Anatomy and Physiology, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Contact: ger.post@unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Democratic processes are at the foundation of the students-as-partners (SaP) framework. Student selection for SaP projects however, is typically in the hands of staff, which is undemocratic and faculty assumptions and practice exclude particular students from co-creation projects. We describe a case study in which students and staff jointly select students for a co-creation project in the School of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Our reflections suggest that co-selection, compared to selection of students by staff alone, further realizes the democratic ideal of SaP by integrating the student perspective early in the co-creation process. We reflect on the democratic processes in our case study through the lens of deliberative democracy and share prospects and perils of voting and deliberation to embed the student voice in student selection for co-creation.

KEYWORDS

co-creation, deliberative democracy, co-selection, students as partners, create a subject challenge

The students-as-partners (SaP) framework, in which students and staff collaboratively create components of curricula or pedagogical approaches, has a long tradition in giving students a voice through democratic processes (Dewey, 1903, 1997). Others have highlighted that enacting democratic values can reignite the social purposes of the university (Wijaya Mulya, 2019) and that when students and staff jointly deliberate on the purpose and implementation of education, this can shift the focus of learning from the individual to the collective (Bryson et al., 2015; Wenstone, 2012). Reviving social purposes may be particularly beneficial for student learning and engagement in competitive learning environments such as the School of Biomedical Sciences (SBS) at the University of Melbourne (UoM) where, as is our experience, many undergraduate students are focused on their individual marks to obtain one of the coveted spots in competitive graduate programs such as the Doctor of Medicine.

Another driver for SaP projects is the potential benefits for students engaging in co-creation. It has been reported that co-designing curricula promotes student engagement, motivation, and enhances metacognitive awareness, as well as strengthening learner identity, fostering student-staff relationships, and developing a broad range of graduate attributes (Felten et al., 2014). These potential benefits for students stress the importance of which students are selected for co-creation.

Selection of students has been the Achilles' heel of SaP projects (Bovill et al., 2016; Felten et al., 2013). In typical selection procedures, staff invite students individually or in a class through open enrollment (Felten et al., 2013), and this is usually based on whether students meet prerequisites for a class or match staff assumptions or selection criteria such as a track record of academic achievements (Gutman et al., 2010). As a consequence, students who would arguably benefit the most from SaP activities (Kuh et al., 2017; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2021) are disadvantaged because they often do not meet the prerequisites for a class, do not match staff selection criteria, lack confidence or networks to self-select or be selected, and do not have time and resources to engage with SaP projects (Felten et al., 2013; Marquis et al., 2018).

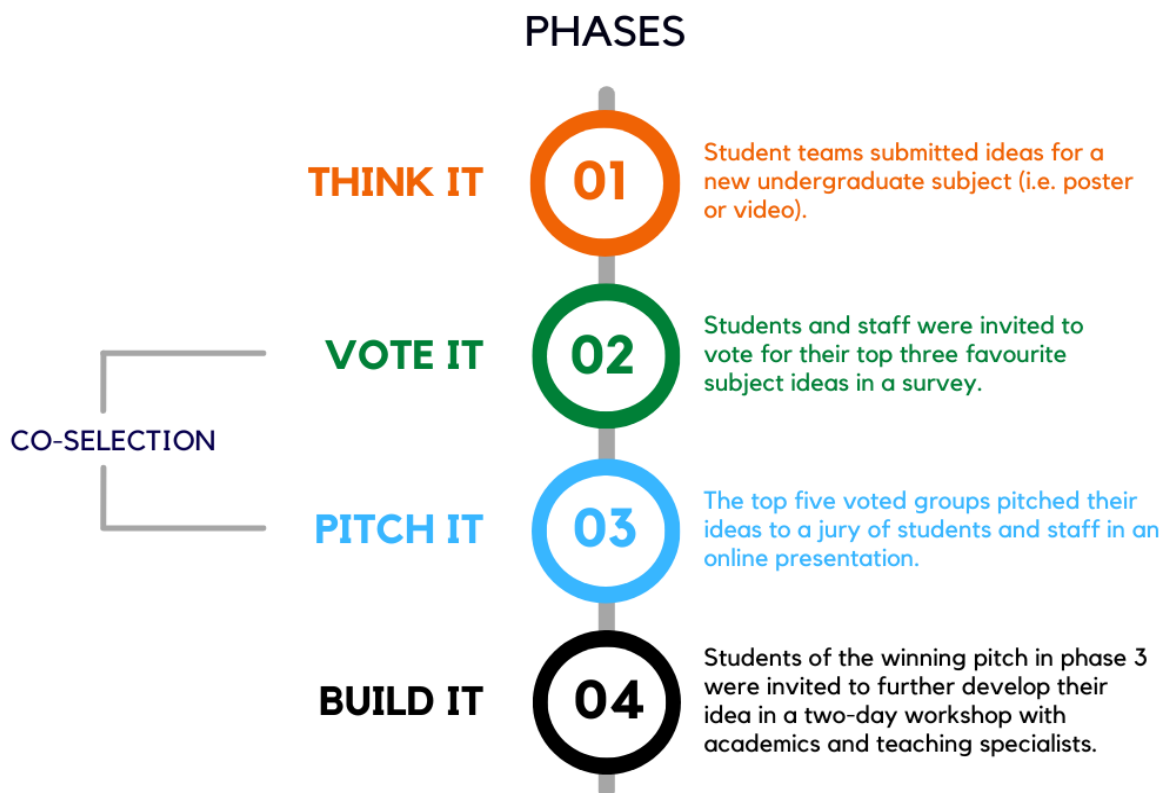
Staff selecting students for co-creation is problematic in principle because it enforces the traditional power relationship separating students (who are more like hired consultants) from the staff (who have the decisional and executive power). Moreover, these traditional selection processes for SaP are undemocratic, not solely because the student voice is excluded from selection into staff-student projects, but also because such selection processes typically result in the exclusion of specific student groups from co-creation (i.e., lower-achieving students). A recent study reflected on under-represented student groups in staff-student projects and described a representative democratic process to address this problem by engaging delegates from a student union's representational network in co-creation (Islam et al., 2021). We build on this work and explore how the student voice can be incorporated during the selection of students for co-creation projects.

THE CREATE A SUBJECT CHALLENGE

Student engagement has been a pressing concern in many universities. At the UoM, enabling undergraduate students to feel more connected to the academic community has been identified as an area of urgent need of development (University of Melbourne, 2019). Between 2009 and 2014, for example, there was an increase in students who reported that they kept to themselves at the university and a decrease in students who said they were confident that at least one of their teachers knew their name (Baik et al., 2015). To prototype an approach to improve student engagement at the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Sciences (MDHS) within the university, the staff authors of this paper initiated the Create a Subject Challenge (CaSC) project.

The CaSC was inspired by an initiative at the University of Amsterdam to enable students and staff to co-create interdisciplinary subjects (de Greef et al., 2017). Our project consisted of four phases to co-select student candidates for the co-creation of a breadth subject in the SBS curriculum (Figure 1). A breadth subject is a subject that undergraduate students take to explore a different area of study from the degree they are enrolled in. The objective of breadth subjects is to broaden students' knowledge and skills beyond their chosen major specialization.

Figure 1. Phases of the Create a Subject Challenge



Note: In Phase 1 students created their idea based on documentation provided by staff. In Phases 2 and 3, students and staff co-selected the students for co-creation. In Phase 2 students and staff voted for the best subject idea, while in Phase 3 a jury of students and staff selected the best subject idea. The students with the best idea would then proceed to Phase 4, where student candidates and staff co-created the breadth subject.

In the project's first phase, students were invited to think of an idea for a new subject. As we advertised through various channels, including student union social media accounts, and we did not put any restrictions or recommendations on which students could participate, we envision that this approach was more inclusive for lower-achieving students than staff selecting students. We are aware that this approach was not more inclusive for other students typically excluded from co-creation, including students who lack time and funds. It also didn't overcome the challenges of self-selection for co-creation (see also the Discussion). Fourteen self-selected teams of three to five students with varying levels of education (from bachelor to PhD) and studying in a range of disciplines (from mathematics to business management and genetics) developed an idea for a new subject and presented this either in a poster, a 1-minute video, or a 300-word text (refer to Table 1 for ideas presented). They were encouraged to use resources provided on the CaSC website on how to pitch an idea, how to write learning objectives and align them to activities and assessments, and how the proposed subject would fit in the SBS curriculum (Post, 2020).

In the second phase, students and staff from the University of Melbourne voted for their three favorite ideas. By using their staff or student UoM credentials, they accessed a Qualtrics form where the ideas were presented. In total, 539 students and 44 staff voted (this is about 20% of total full-time students enrolled in the School of Biomedical Sciences, but this percentage is probably lower as many students from other schools and faculties voted), and each subject proposal in a voter's top three was assigned one point. The five ideas with the most points were shortlisted for the third phase (Figure 2, p.157).

Table 1. Submissions to the Create a Subject Challenge

RANK	SUBJECT IDEA	TOTAL VOTES	TOTAL STUDENT VOTES	TOTAL STAFF VOTES
1	The Future of Medicine	192	179	13
2	Principles of Public Health	177	168	9
3	Global Health Challenges of Humanity	168	153	15
4	Cancer: Causes and Consequences	162	156	6
5	From Womb to Tomb: A Clinical Perspective	154	146	8
6	Outbreak: Preparing for a Pandemic	134	123	11
7	Foundational Concepts of Public Health	122	113	9
8	Pathways in Health	119	112	7
9	Science Communication & Crowd Psychology	106	88	18
10	General Practice: Diagnosis	106	103	3
11	Decoding the Epigenome	104	98	6
12	Almonds and Alzheimer's: the Olfactory System	77	73	4
13	Interdisciplinary Tools in Biomedicine	67	55	12
14	Principles of Synthetic Biology	61	50	11
	Total	1749	1617	132

Note: Subject ideas ranked according to total votes. The total votes by student and staff for each subject idea are also presented. A total of 539 students and 44 staff voted. Each participant cast three votes, one for each of their favourite three subject ideas (total votes 1749). Students with the top five ideas overall were invited to pitch their idea to a jury of students and staff at an online event.

The third phase consisted of an online event in which student groups of the five top-voted ideas pitched their proposals and elaborated on subject learning intentions and structures to a jury made up of three students (representatives from the Biomedicine Student Society) and three staff (a SaP expert from an external university, a teaching academic, and a learning and teaching academic development fellow from UoM). The jury was provided with a rubric describing several criteria for judgment, including how well students explained their ideas for learning outcomes, assessments, and activities and the quality of reasoning to support the proposed ideas (Appendix A). After each group's presentation, the jury members and the audience had 5 minutes to ask the presenters for more clarification and elaboration.

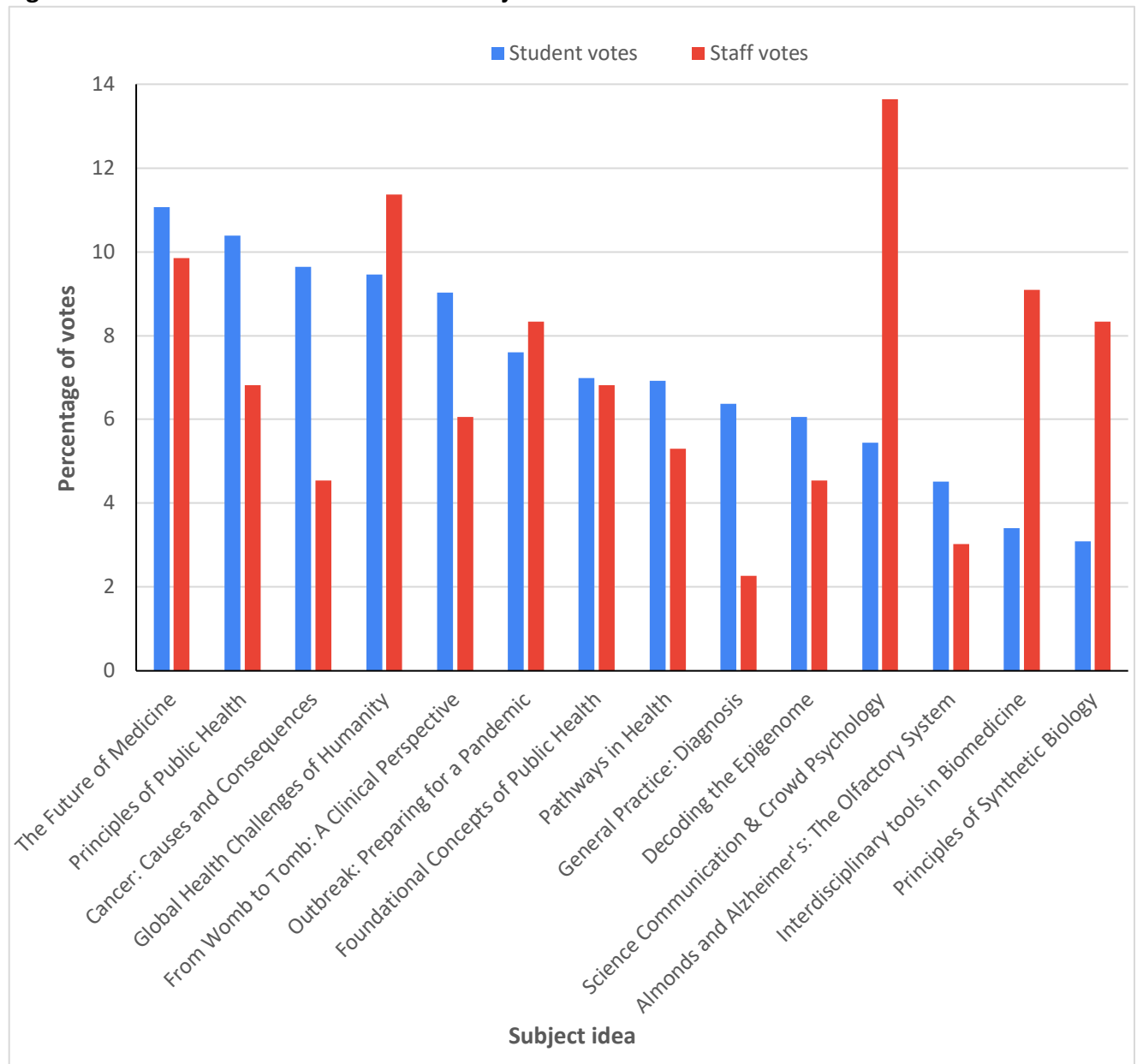
The jury then deliberated on the winning idea. Students of the winning idea became the student co-creators who jointly worked with SBS academics in a 2-day workshop (Figure 1, Phase 4) to further develop the idea into a formal new subject proposal document that was submitted for consideration by the School of Biomedical Sciences. Unfortunately, the subject proposal did not eventuate into a subject in the SBS curriculum, as the university paused the development of new subjects due to uncertainties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the student candidates were engaged to consult on the development of another subject in a postgraduate school within MDHS.

DISCUSSION

We reflect on the co-selection processes in the CaSC (Figure 1, Phase 2 and 3) through the lens of deliberative democracy, which has been argued by many to be the ideal form of democracy (Moshman, 2020). Fundamental to deliberative democracy is the reasoned exchange in which every voice is heard, and these deliberations ideally lead to consensus—in practice, deliberations are often followed by a vote. It has been argued that through the process of deliberation a decision can be more rational and enlightened, and that the deliberation has a developmental participatory effect in that participants develop more sophisticated views and make more democratic decisions considering other perspectives (Knappe, 2017). Deliberative democracy is also increasingly based on epistemic findings that this form of democracy can harness the wisdom of the crowd (Landmore, 2013) and that people reason better when they engage in dialogue than when they reason on their own (Mercier & Claidière, 2021; Mercier & Landmore, 2012).

Although deliberative democracy is by no means easy and may present challenges in educational practice, it does provide useful guidance in identifying shortcomings in deliberation and voice representation (Moshman, 2020). Activities that foster deliberative exchange—from town halls to surveys, to student-staff workgroups collecting feedback on policies—strengthen democracy. Based on this framework, we asked the questions: compared to staff selecting students, did the co-selection process allow every voice to be heard? And did the co-selection process facilitate a deliberative exchange between students and staff? We raised these questions for both phases in co-selection.

In Phase 2, student groups presented ideas in a poster, text, or video, followed by a vote by staff and students. Capturing the student voice in this process is a major advancement from selection processes by staff alone. The large number of students voting for their favorite idea speaks to the appetite to participate in co-selection (after the challenge, hundreds more students found their way to the voting form—despite it being taken off the website). Student votes had a clear effect on which groups were selected for co-creation. When all the votes were counted, three projects—including the subject idea that was eventually selected for the final co-creation process by the student and staff jury members—were not in the staff's top five but made it into the final round based on the student votes (Figure 2). Remarkably, the subject ideas that received the least votes from students, Interdisciplinary Tools in Biomedicine and Principles of Synthetic Biology, were in the top five of most staff votes.

Figure 2. Student and staff votes for the subject ideas

Note: Percentage of student (n = 1617, in blue) and staff (n = 132, in red) votes per subject proposal.

When reviewing this voting process in the context of deliberative democracy, however, there are important considerations. One is that if majority rule is all there is to democracy, then the minority views are at risk of being voted into silence (Moshman, 2020). Evidence for this can be distilled from Table 1 and Figure 2, where the student vote determined which 5 ideas were selected (adding staff votes only changed the ranking of number 3 and number 4 in the overall top five). Staff voice was a minority view as 12 times more students than staff voted, which shifted the decisional power from staff to students to determine who was selected for co-creation. Also, since deliberation between staff and students was confined in this phase, the voting process was unlikely to be informed by arguments put forward by minority groups,

including staff and students who couldn't shoulder the extra workload of developing a subject idea (Dwyer, 2018). We did see the effects of what happens when staff become a minority in the decision-making process and their experience gets lost in curriculum co-creation. What staff considered important topics for a new subject differed from those of students. Each of the top subject ideas considered by staff can be regarded as multi-disciplinary and/or interdisciplinary in nature (Figure 2), which is not as apparent in the top five among students. Another aspect, though not apparent in our data, is loss of insights in curriculum design; for example, how proposed subjects would fit (or not) into existing curriculum, anticipating the practical constraints a new subject would present (i.e., availability of expertise and staff to teach topics), and whether resources are available to address such challenges and workloads.

There was more room for exchanging arguments during Phase 3, where the top five student groups presented their subject ideas to a jury consisting of student and staff representatives. Furthermore, the votes of staff ($n = 3$) and student ($n = 3$) representatives were equal in numbers. Members of the jury and the audience asked clarifying questions about the subject ideas after each 15-minute presentation. After the final presentation, the jury took 30 minutes in a Zoom break-out room to deliberate and come to a decision. During the jury deliberations, all members of the jury put their favorite idea forward, which resulted in two ideas favored by all members. After further deliberation, the jury selected one subject proposal. Although this representative democratic process of co-selection, where members of the jury represented students and staff, may be less ideal compared to participative democratic processes (Bryson et al., 2015), this process did provide more opportunities for deliberations between students and staff than Phase 2.

To conclude, we argue that student-staff co-selection improved co-creation in several ways. In addition to students being included in a decision process that is typically exclusive to staff, co-selection provided students (and staff) with opportunities to engage with co-creation that suited their circumstances. To engage in co-selection, students voted on ideas (in Phase 2) and/or contributed to discussions during the online event (via the chat function in Zoom or using their microphone and camera). This process limited the factors that have been identified to exclude the voice of some students—including lacking confidence or networks to self-select or be selected, not meeting class prerequisites, and not having the time and resources to engage in the co-creation projects (Felten et al., 2013; Marquis et al., 2018). For example, a student with time constraints and who lacked the confidence or networks to find peers to write a subject idea could still engage in co-selection as voting was anonymous and generally took no more than 10 minutes. The academic diversity of students (their level of education and the discipline they were studying in) who engaged with the challenge, either by proposing a subject idea or voting, is an indication of the inclusivity of the CaSC. As the CaSC was open to everyone at the UoM, students from other disciplines outside of SBS submitted and voted on ideas.

To provide students (and staff) with more opportunities to engage in co-selection deliberations—and to bring the process closer to the ideal of deliberative democracy—we next discuss recommendations for co-selection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further improving connections and discussions between students and staff key to co-selection would bring the CaSC closer to the ideal of deliberative democracy and harness the benefits of dialogic reasoning. Previous research has shown that the exchange of ideas can counter individual biases (Mercier & Sperber, 2017) and that increasing interaction is critical for improvement in group reasoning and decision-making (Besedeš et al., 2014; Mercier, 2016; Woolley et al., 2015). Essential to this is to ensure all voices are heard. Even when staff hold a minority view—at the UoM the student/staff ratio is 6:1 (University of Melbourne, 2023)—their arguments, if sound and convincing, should inform consensus in deliberative democratic processes.

To make co-selection more deliberative, we suggest practical improvements for future iterations of the CaSC. Engaging voters in discussions of the ideas, for example, by giving them the opportunity to provide feedback on ideas on the voting form or direct them to a forum where subject proposals are discussed, would further facilitate deliberative and participatory democratic processes. Facilitating discourse would not only make co-selection and co-creation more democratic by drawing from students' and staff's social and cultural contexts (Wijaya Mulya, 2019), but would also provide opportunities for deliberations to improve co-selection through the wisdom of the crowd (Landemore, 2013; Mercier & Claidière, 2021) and dialogic reasoning (Mercier & Landemore, 2012).

Another, more ambitious improvement would be to not only co-select students for co-creation, but also to co-select staff. During the co-creation process (Phase 4), it became apparent that staff—teaching academics who initiated the CaSC—lacked important expertise in the content of the subject proposal. Students made connections with other staff in the faculty to invite them into the co-creation process and to help develop the subject idea further. In future iterations, we would look for ways to embed this co-selection of staff in the CaSC. Students could, for example, nominate staff they would like to collaborate with in designing the subject, or groups consisting of students and staff would be invited to present their ideas. Having student-staff teams participate would also improve opportunities for staff's voice to be represented in discussing subject proposals early in the CaSC.

We argue that the CaSC process provides a good template for students and staff to practice a more deliberative democratic process of co-creation, as two student authors reflected elsewhere:

From the outset, this was a fun and exciting project where we could use our experiences as undergraduate students as a platform to create something that would benefit other students and ultimately leave an impact on our peers. . . . Based on our practice, we strongly advocate for greater democratization of the curriculum development for breadth and core subjects at undergraduate university levels. (Nguyen & Barrese, 2022)

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Ger Post is a teaching and learning academic specialised in neuroscience and interdisciplinary education at the University of Melbourne. As a PhD student at the same university he researches collaborative reasoning, particularly how teams can outperform individuals in critical thinking. Together with Jiang-Li Tan, Saw Hoon Lim, Sophie Paquet-Fifield, and Charlotte Clark he initiated the CaSC, and they were later joined by Lily Denise Tuong Vi Nguyen and Michael Barrese who won the Challenge.

Lily Denise Tuong Vi Nguyen received a Master of Public Health from the University of Melbourne. The subject idea 'Principles of Public Health' that she developed with Michael Barrese and three other students to address an undergraduate knowledge gap, won the CaSC. She now works as the Coordinator, Office for Research at The Royal Melbourne Hospital, facilitating research activities.

Jiang-Li Tan is a teaching specialist within the School of Biomedical Sciences and Melbourne Medical School at the University of Melbourne. He is involved in various educational activities, from curriculum development and learning design to tutor training. He specialises in developing assessment rubrics in interdisciplinary education and working with students to advance their metacognitive skills.

Saw Hoon Lim develops and delivers education in the Department of Biochemistry and Pharmacology at the University of Melbourne. She teaches biochemistry to undergraduate students and coordinates a University Breadth Subject called Designer Humans, exploring with students and colleagues, the biomedical advancements that are continually shaping the human species and examining the ethical, social and philosophical impacts of such advancements.

Sophie Paquet-Fifield is a senior lecturer in the Department of Microbiology & Immunology at the University of Melbourne. Her research spans undergraduate students' engagement, the impact of Digital Learning Tools in deep learning in biomedical sciences, effective 21st century assessment in higher education & quality of teaching and learning in the discipline of Pathology.

Michele Barrese was a student in the Bachelor of Biomedicine when he developed the subject idea 'Principles of Public Health' with his peers. Their proposed subject focused on contemporary Australian public health issues, such as the pandemic and First Nations Australian healthcare. He is now a Doctor of Medicine student at the University of Melbourne, and is passionate about amplifying the student voice in curriculum design to improve student wellbeing and their learning experience.

Charlotte Clark is a senior lecturer and teaching fellow in the Department of Anatomy and Physiology. She has extensive experience in curriculum review and curriculum design with a focus on constructive alignment of intended learning outcomes to best practice teaching, learning and assessment strategies and incorporation of evidence-based educational innovation and technologies.

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APPENDIX A

Create a Subject Challenge Final Event—Presentation Judging Rubric

Group Name/Number:

Criteria	Description	Score	
Subject focus/theme	Clearly defined	3	
	Identified, but direction/objective diffused	2	
	Not clearly identified	1	
Details of subject components explained <i>Consider the ideas proposed for:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcome(s) • Learning and teaching activities • Assessment activities 	Clearly and completely (all 3)	3	
	Clearly but incomplete (<u>not</u> all 3 covered)	2	
	Ambiguous overall	1	
Ideas proposed are creative <i>Consider originality of the proposed ideas in relation to:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcome(s) • Learning and teaching activities • Assessment activities 	Originality evident in all 3	3	
	Originality evident, but <u>not</u> in all 3	2	
	Not evident	1	
Arguments/reasoning <i>Consider how well thought out the reasoning/justification is for:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcome(s) • Learning and teaching activities • Assessment activities 	Convincing/well justified for all 3	3	
	Can be improved (<u>not</u> convincing for all 3)	2	
	Not convincing or , Not clearly connected to proposed ideas	1	
Presentation evidence of teamwork <i>Consider how well parts of presentation are integrated and whether they are contributions by each member of the group.</i>	Strongly evident	3	
	Moderately evident	2	
	Not evident	1	
Handling of questions <i>Consider how meaningful responses to questions were.</i>	Thoughtful	3	
	Can be improved	2	
	Unclear or does not relate to question	1	
Total presentation score			