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Introduction

There is increasing interest in participatory methods in research and evaluation, which can be defined as professional researchers and people from marginalised groups working together on an equal basis throughout the research process (Lambert and Carr 2018; Beresford 2020; Jones et al. 2020). This has encouraged a growing interest in utilising participatory and inclusive approaches within PhD programmes and while examples exist, they are limited and often remain unpublished, with researchers noting the research environment influence, enrichment of data and outputs, and a need for more support and awareness for PhD candidates (Coupe & Mathieson, 2020; Palmer-Cooper, 2018; Tanay et al., 2023). However, barriers are apparent for example the traditional interpretation of PhDs as an individual pursuit and therefore raising issues of shared and joint authorship and ownership where participatory approaches are used. This approach seems to conflict with the core philosophy of PhDs, insomuch as the assessment and recognition of different contributions, with the potential risk of diluting the required skills and competencies of the researcher. How can diverse contributions be valued without compromising rigour, and how might evolving research and practice reshape participatory methods and their evaluation?

Public and service user involvement in health, social care and research has longstanding roots, including within feminist, participatory and emancipatory approaches to research and practice (Beresford 2020; Reason and Rowan 1981). However, terminology used to describe those who engage with health and care systems is contested; terms such as ‘service user’ and ‘patient’ may be viewed as positioning people primarily through their relationship with services or healthcare. In this paper, we use the term patient and public involvement (PPI) because it reflects established terminology within health research policy and governance, while recognising the importance of using language that respects people's identities, experiences and expertise. In recent years, there has been increased formalisation and embedding of PPI within public policy, professional practice and research governance. In the United Kingdom (UK), there are requirements for such involvement in health and care legislation, professional education, and training and from funders and research commissioners. There are similar trends internationally; for example, in the USA, the Patient-Centred Outcomes Research Institute encourages PPI in funded research (Sheridan et al. 2017). Similar emphasis on research PPI exists in Canada (Canadian Institute of Health Research 2023) and Australia (National Health and Medical Research Council 2016).

PhDs are often considered a type of researcher or academic training programme (Wilkins 2021), therefore provisions and requirements should be in place to enable PhDs to keep up with these developments (Flores 2011), and obstacles to fulfilling such approaches are sometimes apparent in existing arrangements concerning the authorship, regulations, funding, and assessment of participatory PhDs. However, as Mason-Angelow (2019) argues, the positioning of people who use health and social care services as knowers challenges long-standing power asymmetries in research and exposes the conservatism of academic institutions in embracing pluralistic epistemologies. This links with decolonial paradigms with seek to deconstruct patriarchal systems, share power, recognise alternative epistemologies and ontologies erased by European colonialism, and rehumanise research and practice (Jones et al., 2025; Meghji, 2021; Mirza, 2014; Quijano et al., 2025; Vergés, 2019). Furthermore, these participatory ideologies are congruent with the values of caring professions such as social work, education and nursing (International Federation of Social Workers 2018; General Teaching Council for Scotland 2021; The Nursing and Midwifery Council 2018)

The Participatory PhD Network was established to create a collaborative environment that empowers those engaged in participatory approaches by providing opportunities to share, understand, and refine participatory PhD research methods. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on our experiences, share learning, invite other researchers into the discussion, and explore ways to address the challenges, rather than to be prescriptive or to impose limits or restrictions on what it means to undertake a participatory PhD. This international network recognises the value of PPI, participatory and user-led research approaches and provides space for doctoral researchers engaged in all of these to share challenges, learning, and strategies for navigating institutional structures that were not designed with these models in mind. Eight of the members have contributed their participatory PhD reflections to support this paper, shown in Examples 1-8 in Table 1. These are referenced throughout the paper to highlight models of working in practice. Author contributions were defined using the CRediT taxonomy. All authors contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, drafting, and revision of the manuscript. Project coordination, supervision, and visualisation roles were shared across the team, reflecting the collaborative and participatory nature of the work.

From the outset, we noted uncertainty among some members about what participatory research is. Whilst some may be cautious about describing their project as participatory for fear of making misleading claims (a fear of it not being quite good enough), others may be hesitant to describe it in

their work at all. For example, some researchers introduced participatory approaches after their study had commenced rather than in the proposal stage. Like PPI, participatory research operates along a spectrum, influenced by factors such as how people can and want to participate, as well as individual skills, interests, confidence, and institutional constraints (Examples 1 – 7), thus defying a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead of trying to rigidly define what participation should look like, we believe in contradicting academic norms of strict criteria in favour of flexibility, allowing for bespoke approaches depending on time and available resource and aligning these with individual interests.

This paper highlights the value of participatory research in a changing research landscape, arguing that inclusive PhDs recognizing diverse experiences and knowledge can lead to more meaningful and actionable outcomes. We discuss the complexities of this approach and conclude with suggested actions and recommendations for future practice.

Participatory Approaches

Terms such as participatory research, PPI, and co-production are often used interchangeably but represent distinct traditions and expectations.

- Participatory research is grounded in critical and emancipatory traditions. It aims to redistribute power in the research process, often involving people with lived experience as co-researchers and decision-makers across all stages of the project (Fals-Borda 1987; Fine and Torre 2021; Rose 2018; Vaughn and Jacquez 2020). Consequently, it invokes a richer layer of insight and direction to a project by enabling it to have more relevance and impact on the area of study.
- PPI refers to structured involvement of lay contributors in the research process, most commonly in health and social care. While PPI can include consultation and co-design, it does not necessarily entail shared epistemic authority or co-production of knowledge (Beresford 2021; National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) 2021).
- Co-production overlaps with both but is typically used as a broader concept, spanning research, service design, and evaluation. It implies joint ownership and decision-making but may vary widely in practice depending on context and institutional support (Pettican et al. 2023).

Although these approaches share commitments to inclusion and collaboration, they operate along a spectrum, reflected in the diverse participatory approaches described in Examples 1-7 (Table 1);

the extent and nature of involvement are shaped by participants' capacities and interests, as well as by institutional constraints (Brown 2022; Call-Cummings and Ross 2022; Fine and Torre 2021). Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) provide a definition which highlights the methodological implications for researchers:

"Participatory research (PR) encompasses research designs, methods, and frameworks that use systematic inquiry in direct collaboration with those affected by an issue being studied for the purpose of action or change. PR engages those who are not necessarily trained in research but belong to or represent the interests of the people who are the focus of the research. Researchers utilizing a PR approach often choose research methods and tools that can be conducted in a participatory, democratic manner that values genuine and meaningful participation in the research process." (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020, p1)

Whilst there is overlap between participatory approaches and other methods to support inclusion, such as co-production and PPI, participatory approaches move beyond engagement 'phases' and aim to embed collaboration within the entirety of a project. It can be useful to distinguish participatory research and co-production, with co-production being used more broadly in evaluation, policy making, service development and provision, as well as within research processes (Beresford 2021; Pettican et al. 2023). Participatory research involves deep collaboration and power-sharing, where people with lived experience may be co-researchers, engage in shared decision-making, and contribute extensively throughout the research process, often with a focus on social change (Rose 2018).

In this paper we use the term PhD as a universally understood programme of work that includes a final substantial independent research project. Doctoral programmes and PhDs awarded globally often differ, for example professional doctorates and US PhDs include a programme of assessed modules in addition to a research thesis that is commensurate with doctoral level education (Fell et al., 2011; Jung, 2018; Lee et al., 2009; Panta & Thapaliya, 2025). Whilst there is much critique in the literature and within the Participatory PhD Network on professional doctorates versus PhDs, this is outside the scope of this paper. As they both represent the highest academic degree qualification and have requirements for research output at equivalent level (UNESCO Institute for Statistics et al., 2015), For the purpose of this paper, level 8 qualifications refer to doctoral or equivalent level qualifications as defined within the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Eurostat and OECD, 2015).

Position and Purpose

This paper emerges from the work of the Participatory PhD Network, an international group of doctoral researchers, supervisors, co-researchers, and academics committed to supporting participatory approaches within doctoral study by:

- Advocating for systemic change to enable participatory PhDs
- Sharing the challenges and innovations experienced by members of our network
- Offering practical guidance and reflections for students, supervisors, and institutions
- Proposing a vision of doctoral research that values pluralism, reflexivity, and justice.

The experiences and reflections we present are informed by doctoral education contexts within the UK and other international settings represented within the network. While doctoral structures and requirements vary internationally and across institutions, many systems continue to emphasise individual scholarly contribution, independent knowledge production and conventional measures of doctoral achievement (Kadioglu and Valli 2025).

Our collective experiences highlight that while legal and policy requirements have shifted the norms of research practice in certain fields, its impact on doctoral education has been limited. Within these contexts, the PhD remains influenced by academic structures that may sit in tension with the collaborative and situated nature of participatory knowledge production. We argue for a reimagining of the PhD that affirms diverse forms of knowledge, values co-produced inquiry, and centres relational and ethical considerations.

Aim

Our paper aims to support the empowerment of people undertaking participatory research, inspire those who may like to approach their PhD through participatory methodologies, advocate for innovative methods of collaboration, and provide evidence for updating PhD processes and procedures in line with increasing participation.

Motivations for Change

The Participatory PhD Network includes more than 50 individuals from the UK and internationally, with an interest and a role in participatory PhDs. They span roles of aspiring PhD students, full or part-time PhD students at all stages of the process, those who have completed their PhD, PhD

supervisors, examiners, and those who contribute their lived experience to PhD research. We came together following a social media post from one of the authors:

"PhDs are essentially one-person approaches to the production of knowledge. Now this has been changed by recognition of the importance of participatory approaches to research, when will the rules of PhDs change truly to recognise such collective endeavour??" (Peter Beresford, 01/04/2023)

This attracted interest, leading to our first online meeting in July 2023, with the subsequent formation of various subgroups. We share a collective interest in participatory and PPI approaches, recognizing their value and the challenges in the current academic context.

There was a shared sense that current approaches to participatory PhDs frequently depend on the will of individual researchers and PPI contributors, rather than systems that embrace collective models. Furthermore, researchers have highlighted the challenges of participatory PhD approaches, emphasizing that participatory research exists on a continuum of involvement rather than fitting into binary 'participatory' and 'non-participatory' categories (Southby 2017). Southby (2017) notes that participatory research can sometimes be at odds with the institutional structures of a PhD, creating practical barriers.

It is challenging to see how co-produced research could be recognised as a joint PhD collaborative contribution. Ascribing even aspects of the research methods and learnings to individuals can be problematic, as during participatory research, members of the research team can dip in and out according to health, family, work, community needs and other competing priorities. Participatory research needs to be responsive to the needs and preferences of those involved, and methods to involve people often change during the lifetime of a project.

A Spectrum of Participation

Earlier work of Arnstein (1969) and Hart (1992) describes participation as a ladder, whereby lower rungs indicate a lower level or tokenistic approach, and higher rungs resulting in more meaningful participation. With further adaptations adding 'co-production' which encourages a continual relationship (Think Local Act Personal, 2021), like cyclical design approaches (Herrington et al., 2007) which encourage an approach which sees people being involved at concept, then again reviewing the product, and so on. As argued by others (Brown 2022; Call-Cummings and Ross 2022), we suggest that participatory research, and indeed participatory PhDs, occur on a spectrum. Such a conceptualisation accommodates studies being negotiated to include various points at which a

participatory approach might be utilised within the research process, and studies in which participatory approaches were introduced after the research had commenced. Drawing on Mason-Angelow's (2019) concept of 'epistemic labour' and Call-Cummings' (2017) idea of communicative validity, participatory research must be understood as dynamic, with roles and relationships negotiated over time rather than fixed in a priori designs. The spectrum is non-hierarchical, encompassing approaches ranging from advisory models (such as examples 1-3 (Table 1)) through to inclusive research and participatory action research approaches (such as examples 4, 5 and 7), in terms of constructing a 'more' participatory approach as somehow 'better', but instead acknowledges the diversity of such approaches and how they might be applied differently at different points. Participatory research does not mean all co-researchers do everything together (Phillips et al. 2022), with contributors often taking different roles according to availability, interest and expertise (such as examples 2, 4 and 7). Importantly, research leads should take a flexible approach to this spectrum, with consideration for people willing and able to participate and have health limiting or life limiting conductions (Bangiri et al., 2025).

We used an analogy of a football match when considering the question, 'Whose knowledge is it?' Before the match, we knew the event would take place, and afterwards, we knew the result. The result itself is not up for debate, but what matters is understanding *how* we got there. What were the contributing factors? Who and what influenced the outcome? Can we only attribute the scoreline to the goalscorer, the players on the field or does the result span broader this?

Similarly, in our discussions on participatory PhDs, we are not searching for a single truth, fixed definition, or definitive answers. Social research and practice are not binary or linear (Call-Cummings and Ross, 2022; (Human Learning Systems, 2020). Consequently, we are exploring different perspectives and bringing together collective knowledge to support new ways of thinking about these concerns. We aim to create progressive change - both within this group and through our individual research projects, as well as those of our readers.

Navigating Enthusiasm and Obstacles in Participatory PhDs

Among doctoral students, there is growing enthusiasm for involving the public, reflected in examples of co-analysis, co-authoring, participatory dissemination and shared decision-making described in Examples 1-7 (Table 1), and a rise in published reflections where public contributors played an active role in the research process (Troya et al. 2019; Dawson et al. 2020; Manikandan et al. 2022;

Hensman-Crook et al. 2024), or were a part of the supervisory team (Jones and Hunt 2022). Some institutions incorporate training for doctoral researchers on how to meaningfully involve members of the public in research (Pierce et al. 2023), and there are examples of specific training in participatory approaches for doctoral students (Anderson and and Sankofa 2025).

Some research topics lend themselves more to collaborative enquiry. For example, those that explore different viewpoints on issues such as poverty, discrimination, and access to services and how society should respond to these challenges (Beresford and Trevillion 1995; Beresford et al. 2011). Where power is shared across those carrying out research, and research questions and methods are co-produced, learnings can also be shared (Lambley 2025), as illustrated in Examples 4 and 5 (Table 1). The complex interplay of individual voices within the research team and the collaborative dialogue that shapes the conclusions can be hard to disentangle, with aspects of learning being nearly impossible to ascribe to any singular person. For research that attempts to inform how social problems are addressed, co-production from formulation of questions, of methods, through to fieldwork analysis and beyond is a foundational method.

In the UK, regulations for doctoral awards require research students to demonstrate an independent and original contribution to knowledge as part of the requirements for a doctoral award. Although doctoral requirements and terminology vary across institutions and countries, individual researchers' contribution to knowledge is fundamental. At one Scottish university, there are no specific participatory guidelines available that outline how a student could work with others, for example, members of the public, on their research, other than in a professional capacity. This includes collaboration with external organisations such as relevant industries, other commercial, professional, or research establishments. In such a case, the university requires a formal letter of engagement to be submitted and the collaborative partners to be named on the student's thesis. As one of us said:

"There is no mention of participatory PhD regulations in any format, but I know that several PhD students at the university, me included, are working in participatory ways during their research. I have, however, heard reports of excessive university bureaucracy having to be overcome to facilitate this. University guidance, while supportive in theory, does not seem to be set up to manage participatory PhD work in practice. That said, several PhD students at the university are using participatory methods, and co-production is central to several students' work." (Participatory PhD network member)

Tensions exist between the independent nature of PhD research and the collaborative ethos of participatory approaches. Nevertheless, PPI is increasingly recognized as essential, with expectations for its inclusion in grant applications and project proposals. (National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) 2024). This change of direction is promising within the field of participatory PhD projects as systems are beginning to be in place to recognise the importance of dynamic approaches to research.

"In my thesis, I co-authored a chapter with co-researchers with lived experience. While I had to adapt this into a single-voiced academic format for submission, the collaborative writing process itself was a radical act of epistemic justice—centring the co-researcher's narrative and analysis as integral, not supplementary to the thesis." (Victoria Mason-Angelow, recent PhD candidate)

From the perspective of a PhD student, supervisors and funders must recognise the complexities and extra time commitments necessary to conduct a participatory PhD and the need to be flexible with approaches within the complex university system. Whilst all PhDs are unique, participatory PhDs may face additional complexities (Lambley 2025). Milestones and goals help ensure PhD progression but may need adapting for participatory projects. Comparing progress appears to be on a case-by-case basis and relies heavily on individual expertise and experience rather than universal guidance. At another English university, a peer group of participatory PhD students has formed to share learning and reflections. This highlights the value of informal networks in the absence of university-level guidance.

Challenges and Opportunities

Ethics/Ethical approval

We need clear, consistent ethical guidelines for PhD students, across universities that align with existing Health Research Authority (2025) guidance and international equivalents. Having to apply for ethical approval for co-researchers/public involvement reinforces the solo author nature of a PhD and the expectation for co-researchers to contribute anonymously. Ethical processes often assume research is extractive and researcher-led, making co-production seem risky or anomalous and undermining efforts to share power or shift epistemic authority (Mason-Angelow 2019).

We are unaware of widespread structures and systems in place to support participatory PhDs. In our experience, issues often arise around ethical approval and the use of reference groups, despite examples of participatory approaches successfully operating within formal ethical review processes (e.g. Example 4, Table 1). The Health Research Authority (2025) guidance states ethics approval is not required when involving people in the planning or design stage of research, even if these people are NHS patients. However, in our experience, it is not unusual for supervisors to misinterpret the requirements for ethical approval and to be apprehensive about the ethical approval process, which can prevent clear differentiation between a research participant, co-researcher and reference group member.

PhD Examinations and the Way They Differ from Participatory Approaches

An essential part of the PhD examination process is the VIVA, an oral examination, in which doctoral students are expected to 'defend' their work. This use of unhelpful language demonstrates the exclusive nature of PhDs. It is argued elsewhere that the VIVA examination continues to focus on the product – the thesis (Denicolo 2003) rather than the process. This may be particularly problematic in the context of a participatory PhD, whereby the students' solo-authored thesis is unlikely to reflect the collaborative aspects of the project. It is unclear the extent (if at all) that co-researchers can be involved in the co-authoring of the thesis and the participation in the VIVA, which continues to undermine the contributions of the co-researchers and reinforce unhelpful power dynamics. We have come across examples, but there is no clear rule here, and thus the thesis and VIVA are not accessible by nature, making them antagonistic to the nature of participatory approaches. *"I asked to have a public contributor at my PhD viva and was told that it may not be possible due to the academic hoops I'd have to jump through, the qualifications of the public contributor and the academic regulations for a PhD viva!" (Participatory PhD Network member)*

Training

PPI is increasingly acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of good research practices (National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) 2021; Schilling and Gerhardus 2024). However, current training resources are aimed more at early career researchers and others further on in their research career, with more experience in involving people in their research. There appears to be a lack of training designed for PhD students to effectively engage with external interest holders for research partnerships. There are few specific training resources for participatory PhDs despite researchers reporting the use of participatory methods across multiple stages of their doctoral

projects (Examples 1-7, Table 1), or master's or undergraduate students seeking to engage in collaborative research.

An example of good practice is at Bournemouth University (UK), where postgraduate researchers can undertake a Master's unit in Public Involvement in Research. This co-designed, co-produced and co-delivered unit supports students to explore inclusive approaches across the research cycle. In the USA, Anderson and Sankofa (2025) report on training for doctoral students undertaking participatory action research, highlighting that there is a shift towards support for those engaging in participatory approaches. We advocate for co-researchers to have opportunities for research training, enabling meaningful contributions and supporting a shared learning approach that helps to level power dynamics.

Funding

Anecdotally, PhD students have limited budgets, particularly when self-funded or not embedded within a larger-scale project. The additional resources associated with participatory PhDs (such as reimbursing those involved) can be expensive and often unattainable (Lambley 2025), limiting the extent of involvement that can be supported in some projects (Example 2, Table 1). To mitigate this, we propose that universities must budget for PPI or participatory research when setting out their strategic aims. A facilitating research fund at (one English university) has successfully been used to pay co-researchers for their time. However, even within this process, co-researchers needed to be recognised as consultants (within a PPI framework), rather than researchers in a participatory project. This exemplifies that, even if appropriate funding has been secured, the processes to pay or reimburse co-researchers can be difficult.

Earlier Involvement of Co-Researchers in Higher Education

We suggest that involving co-researchers and public contributors throughout the higher education journey and not just at the PhD level would benefit all concerned. If researchers are to involve people throughout the research process, universities must ensure students (starting at undergraduate level) understand the value and principles of participatory approaches, particularly approaches supporting autonomy and inclusive participation such as those described in Examples 5 and 7 (Table 1). The opportunities for participatory and inclusive research should be embedded within research method education, including undergraduate and master's levels. This creates a positive research culture from an early stage of a researcher's career.

Contextual Drivers

The Research and Evaluation Framework

Recent changes to the UK's Research and Evaluation Framework (REF), which assesses research quality and informs public funding, reflect a shift toward more open, collaborative, and participatory research (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement 2024). Initially focused solely on research outputs, REF introduced impact assessment in 2014 and added research environment in 2021. The upcoming REF2029 brings further changes, including new terminology and weightings. "Research Environment" becomes "People, Culture and Environment," with its weighting rising from 15% to 25%. "Impact" is now "Engagement and Impact," reflecting a broader range of impactful activities. Notably, REF2029 removes the requirement for underpinning research in impact case studies to be rated at least 2*, allowing for a wider evidence base.

Such shifts have been accompanied by calls from research funders for more participatory research approaches, in pursuit of reducing research wastage, increasing impact, and addressing inequities (Graham et al. 2019). This is particularly relevant to participatory PhDs, which aim to train researchers equipped with the skills and experience to carry out impactful, inclusive research.

The Care Act (2014)

Adding further impetus to the notion of participatory PhDs, is the legislative framework of the Care Act (2014) and the Social Services and Well-being Act (2014) in Wales. Both position co-production as one of their main principles, emphasising that it should be a key part of both implementing the Act itself, as well as being a way in which related services are developed and evaluated, thus acknowledging the vital role that citizens play in achieving positive outcomes from public services. This powerful and broader adoption of co-production and participatory approaches beyond the realms of research and academia provides further momentum for participatory PhDs and related knowledge production and learning opportunities within universities, as part of academia's contribution to developing and evaluating democratic public services and processes.

The Logic Model

The Participatory PhDs Network co-created a logic model (Figure 1) to illustrate how participatory PhDs could influence contemporary research. In doing so, PhD students, supervisors, community members, funding bodies and universities can better visualise the flexibility within participatory approaches, enabling them to incrementally challenge their skills and abilities wherever practicable.

This model's fluidity provides practical guidance, flexibility and ideas to support research design planning, critical reflection, and discussion points at any PhD stage.

The logic model aimed to present how participatory activities could occur, recognising the current possibilities during the doctoral research process. The iterative development occurred over several months, with the initial draft devised and shared with the wider network for further iterations. The established PhD timeline outlined by Sheppard (2020) guided discussion, capturing all distinctive stages of doctoral researchers' journey. Based on existing literature and our experiences, the subgroup discussed existing or recent doctoral researchers' projects where the public was actively involved. Examples as presented in Table 1, illustrating participation across activities including question formulation, literature reviewing, data analysis, dissemination, co-authorship and participatory action research. During the initial meeting, members mapped whether and how participatory activities are possible throughout the PhD process. That debate identified limitations of what is currently possible during a PhD and the key principles required for a meaningful participatory PhD. Further alterations were made during subsequent meetings and email exchanges, as the model was maintained as a living document for all authors to edit.

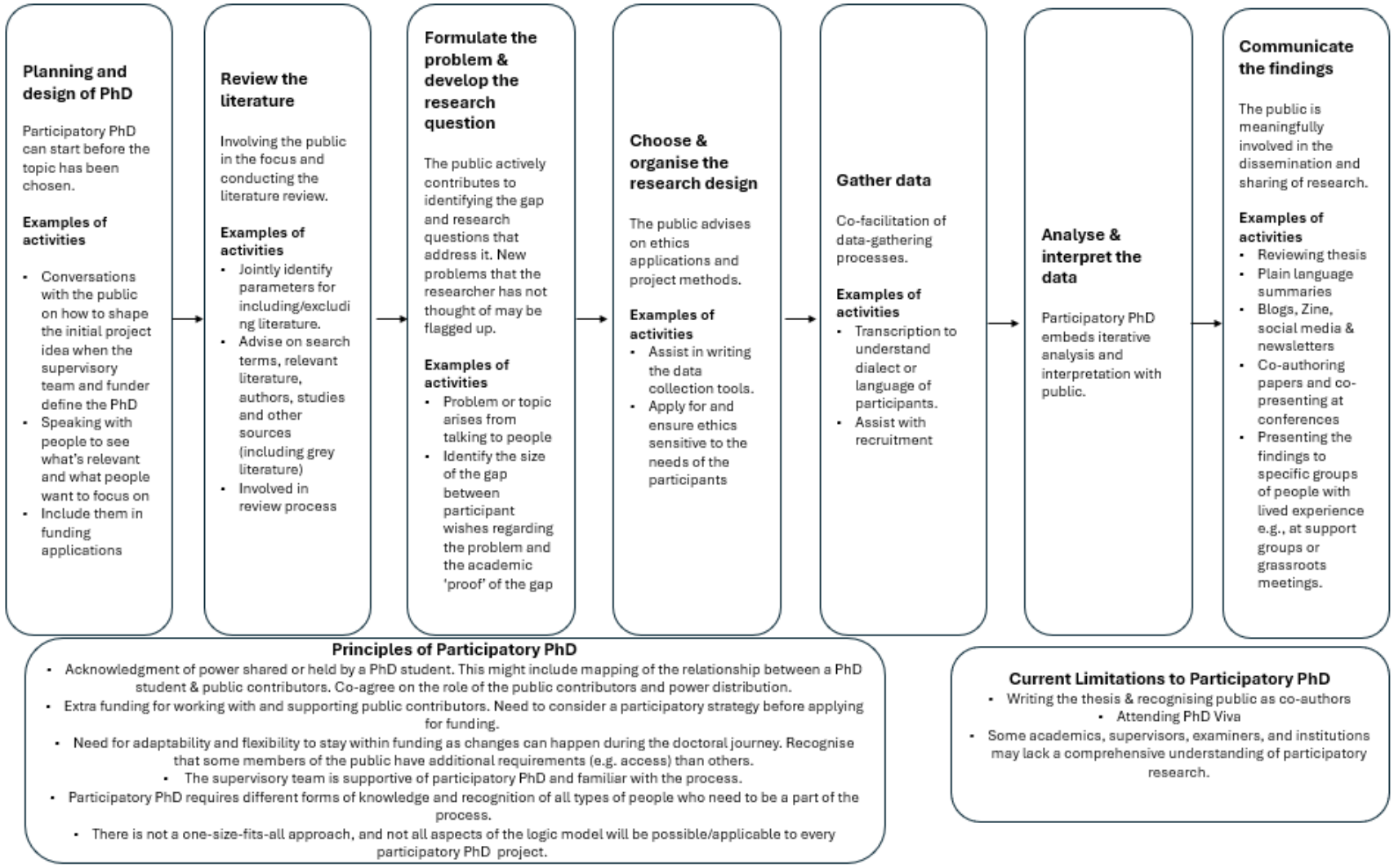

Figure 1. Logic model for participatory PhDs

The model consists of three main sections. First, it captures distinctive PhD stages and provides examples of participatory activities, but these are not exhaustive lists as they are based on the authors' experiences and literature. For example, the previous literature in this paper such as on PPI but also design-based research (Herrington et al. 2007), which encourages collaborations with practitioners to put their priorities at the front of the research. Our model brings strengths from these other areas, though involving public voice and carefully planning collaboration from the start throughout the whole PhD. Second, it recognises the principles of a participatory PhD that doctoral students, supervisors, universities, and funders should consider when pursuing a participatory approach. Third, existing limitations are recognised, indicating what is currently impossible to do as part of a participatory PhD. We encourage PhD students and supervisors to use the model to identify where and how members of the public can become involved in PhD.

Perspectives and Missing Voices

We bring varied perspectives to this work, including academics, PhD students, aspiring PhD students, independent researchers, experts by experience and third-sector organisations involved in participatory research. Reflecting the research world itself, we bring some intersectionality but not the diversity that is needed for research to be participatory in its fullest sense. The voices missing from this group reflect those missing from research. People drawing on care and support services, their carers, loved ones, family, people with lived experience and those from minoritised groups are still under-represented in research, and even more so if you are also black, an abuse survivor, working class, learning disabled, or homeless (Montgomery et al. 2022; Hughes et al. 2025; Pardhan et al. 2025).

Developing participatory PhDs requires acknowledging inequalities in who can apply, access funding, and receive appropriate supervision and assessment, as well as how to enable meaningful public and lived experience involvement. A social justice approach to participation addresses these structural barriers, particularly evident within inclusive research projects involving people with learning disabilities (Examples 5 and 7, Table 1) and aims to amplify marginalised and underrepresented voices within broader societal, political, and research contexts.

Table 1 presents reflections from current and former PhD students on how they sought to make their PhD participatory. These are presented in a diverse style to capture the various insights represented within the group.

Table 1. Participatory PhDs: reflections – numbered as examples throughout the paper

1	*Experiences of Care in Advanced Liver Disease* Cathy Beresford, Nurse and researcher, Bournemouth University. In my PhD, I aimed for a participatory and collaborative approach. After undertaking PPI training, I developed my strategy. Throughout the project, the participatory approach included: • A PPI group of individuals with lived experience. The group met regularly and contributed to all stages of research, including the systematic literature review (Beresford et al. 2024a), recruitment, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. • Co-authoring journal papers with individuals with liver disease, including one published (Beresford et al. 2024b), and one under review. • Regular newsletters kept the PPI group and research participants informed and engaged with the project's progress. • Engaging with healthcare professionals to incorporate their insights and ground the research in clinical realities. • Presenting at a patient support group to share insights and gather feedback. These steps enriched the research by ensuring that the perspectives of those directly affected by liver disease shaped every stage of the study.
2	*Public involvement and engagement of seldom-heard communities in big data research* Piotr Teodorowski, Research Fellow at the University of Stirling. My participatory research journey started during year one of my PhD when I involved two public advisors. My research topic was pre-defined, so they had limited scope to influence it. However, since the topic was about improving public involvement in research, I felt that a participatory approach would be appropriate. Public advisors were involved in the review and

	in two out of the three studies. It was impossible to include them in the third study due to the limited reimbursement budget. They contributed to formulating research questions and research design, helping with participant recruitment, analysing data, and communicating the findings. Including them in the writing process was important to me; therefore, throughout my PhD, we wrote papers, conference abstracts, and blogs that they could co-author. This helped me ensure that lay views were incorporated in the findings and recommendations arising from my PhD. Afterwards, we jointly evaluated their involvement in doctoral research (Teodorowski et al. 2024). The findings showed that public advisors perceived themselves as having a stronger voice in doctoral research than I sometimes thought. This suggests that those involved in participatory PhDs might see different power relations, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach.
3	*Start with people! The development of a meaningful public involvement toolkit for use within university-led health and care research* Jay Webster, PhD candidate at Glasgow Caledonian University. When I started my PhD on public involvement in health and care research, I advertised for people to be involved and am currently working with fourteen contributors. They have been involved in so many ways, including helping me to formulate my questions (related to the pre-determined topic), discussions around methods and how to approach the research, ethics and funding applications, writing and reviewing protocols and plain language summaries, developing scoping review search terms, screening review literature and piloting data extraction tools. They have also contributed to developing the cross-sectional study and are looking to review results, co-author papers and be involved in presentations. Following my progression, we're onto the next two planned studies, including a qualitative study and a systematic review. All have expressed an interest in being involved in both studies. I was worried when I began working with the public contributors that we were not being very participatory in our approach, rather it was involvement only, but I am coming around to thinking that we *are* working in a participatory way and I enjoy working with the contributors at different times over different projects.

4	*Transforming integrated care through co-production, a meta-ethnography and multi-case study using participatory action research (PAR) (Conquer 2025).* Susan Conquer, Co-production Lead at Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board. When the opportunity to do a PhD exploring coproduction within integrated care systems came about, because of my background with Healthwatch, there was no other way I could think of approaching a PhD than participatory. There was little guidance. I recruited a Co-production Advisory Group (CAG) - equally representing lived experience as service users, family carers, and healthcare professionals. We discussed the aims of the research, devised the questions and concept definitions. The members were part of the systematic literature review, most importantly in the evidence synthesis. Together, we translated findings to develop the Ladder of Co-production (Conquer et al. 2024). Then, members helped to design the multi-case study using participatory action research, supporting the production of materials for full NHS ethical review. The PAR processes empowered different groups of co-researchers to explore their practice over six months. Finally, the CAG and co-researchers discussed the case study findings and recommendations in a deliberative workshop. My experience of a participatory PhD was rewarding. I would like to see future PhD students upskilled in participatory methods because it strengthens the process, connects research to the real world, upskills people with lived experience, and supports the findings to be taken to improve practice within the field.
5	*Scaffolding activities to support student-participants to initiate their own research theme* Helen A. Evans, PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham. My PhD looks at the value of an Inclusive Students as Researchers (iSaR) model of Student Voice. I supported my student participants (all 18 to 24 years old and diagnosed with a learning disability) to initiate their own research and follow cycles of action research with as much autonomy as possible and appropriate.

	To achieve this, I adapted the '*Rivers of Life*' (Moussa 2009) mapping method. They were instructed to draw a river and plot their college experiences within it, using a key, wherein a spiral (a whirlpool) indicated a difficult experience, and wavy lines (waves) represented a fun experience. Participants shared their '*rivers*,' and the group's experiences were collated, forming a list of potential research themes to discuss and vote on. Disregarding any lacking commonality amongst the group, they explored the potential of the remaining themes to become an interesting research focus. When reduced to just four themes, participants tangibly ranked Makaton-symbolled cards representing each theme and calculated the winning vote. Thus, through supportive scaffolding activities, the student participants were able to initiate their own research study autonomously.
6	*Involving participants in interpretation of findings and critique of resource outputs* Stephen Bahooshy, PhD candidate at the University of Suffolk. Reflecting on my experience of studying a part-time PhD in Social Policy & Social Work, I embarked on my journey as a mature student. Additionally, I work in local government adult social care departments in England, where co-production with residents and carers is enshrined in the Care Act (2014). This approach led me to pursue these activities during my PhD, when in 2020 I formed a reference group with four carers to advise my research. The group provided feedback on methods, interview questions and vignettes. Moreover, they supported my thematic analysis via two sessions of code theming. This better engaged the group with the research and led one member to thank me for allowing them to be involved, helping them to understand the research process. Indicating a wider level of reciprocity. Another member enthusiastically approached the task and came prepared with annotated printouts. Towards the end of my PhD, I held a final reference group meeting at a local carers centre. During this session, I shared and discussed my findings (which I noted for my discussion section). Furthermore, I developed a workshop structure to share these findings with social care practitioners. The group were slightly anxious about this; however, once the discussion commenced, I had priorities noted and key themes to share with practitioners and how to

	engage with them. I then ended the session by sharing my appreciation for their time and a bouquet of flowers each. I also had a volunteer to co-present with at a conference in June 2024.
7	*Exploring barriers and enablers to participation in physical activity with people with a learning disability* Ellie Rossiter, PhD candidate at the University of Essex. I used an inclusive research approach to explore the barriers and enablers to participation in physical activity with people with a learning disability, reflecting on the role of supporting people and how this relates to health inequalities. Different advisory groups were formed for different strands of the project, and co-researchers had unique involvement, based on preference, resource, and availability. Efforts were made to increase the accessibility of the research, from identifying the research problem, developing methods, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. I intentionally engaged in and reported on both my own and co-researchers' reflections of being involved in an inclusive PhD project, as there were many learning points throughout. This included, but was not limited to, the practicalities (i.e., of meetings and accessing content), the content itself (how broad/narrow the focus should be) and the level of engagement and commitment expected.
8	*This section isn't intended to be a 'normal' academic piece. It's a snapshot of what I found in my own research journey.* Robert Gough BSc (Hons) My direct experience has been working in a sector that tends to be less, rather than more participatory and has sometimes talked about participatory approaches in a collective attitude of some curiosity. However, it has been embedded - by organisational hierarchy - into a very different approach, driven by different - and sometimes incompatible - top-down priorities. Whilst in the sector, I studied these approaches in many examples, where I saw them as potentially compatible - or not - with a participatory approach. In my view, they are very different. The principal factors that would 1) allow and 2) maintain participation weren't prioritised. Indeed, some by coincidence actually worked *against* participatory approaches.

	The best we had were isolated examples from those who naturally and deliberately worked that way. Those went well but were very limited. A set of very different prioritised drivers excluded it. I read widely about how some organisations in other fields were working to encourage and develop more participatory approaches. That was fascinating and led me to a much deeper understanding of what's happening - and the potential solutions. Space limitations prevent me from expanding. In my view, it is doable. We need to prioritise the approaches of participatory research and *proceed*. Bibliography available on request.

Principles of a Participatory PhD

Our collective experiences led to the development of the following desirable principles of participatory PhDs:

- PhD students feel supported in developing and applying participatory approaches.
- Supervisors are supportive of and experienced in participatory PhDs.
- There is an acknowledgement of power shared or held by a PhD student. This might include mapping the relationship between a PhD student and public contributors.
- Ways are found to include diverse knowledge based on the lived experience of research participants, based on equalising relations with them.
- There is co-agreement on the role of public contributors and power distribution.
- Extra funding is required for working with and supporting public contributors. Consider a participatory strategy before applying for funding.
- There is a need for adaptability and flexibility to stay within funding, as changes can happen during the doctoral journey. Some members of the public have additional requirements (e.g., access).
- Participatory PhDs require different forms of knowledge and recognition of all types of people who need to be part of the process.

- There is no one-size-fits-all approach: not all aspects of the logic model will be possible/applicable to every participatory PhD project.

Epistemological and Ontological Implications

As previously noted, Mason-Angelow (2019) and others such as Bilgen et al., (2021) argue that participatory methods require a shift in ontological and epistemological paradigms and hierarchies. Congruent within decolonial critiques of academia societal structures, this requires a reconstruction of ontologies and epistemologies to better enable power-sharing in decision making and accepting and recognising the approaches erased by coloniality (Bilgen et al., 2021; Lugones, 2010; Mirza, 2014; Vergés, 2019). Key to its acceptance is consideration of the criticisms of participatory approaches on scientific rigour that exists within the literature (Warren et al., 2018). Criticisms range from bias due to non-random samples in identifying participants which may result in erroneous results (Keeble et al., 2013), to issues of replicability of studies and findings (Davies & Dodd, 2002).

However, it is important to remember that societies are not homogenous, and people do not exist within randomised controlled environments. Indeed, this positivist approach to research is often unable to identify the nuances within societies due to its focus on large trends (Park et al., 2020). Conversely, social constructivism considers knowledge within the social sciences as diverse and dependent on time and place – with few absolute truths, thus people's perceptions are fundamental to this paradigm (Ali, 2012; David & Sutton, 2004; Taylor et al., 2015). Consequently, what might work as a research or practice idea in one community, may not work in another. Thus, large-scale generalisability is not always a goal of social research, instead researchers should use social research aa a foundation to build on within different contexts (Payne & Williams, 2005), with different population groups experiencing generalisability in different ways (Gabo, 2008).

Furthermore, scholars argue that participatory approaches can be more rigorous than traditional academic exploration (Warren et al., 2018), for example, Balazs & Morello-Frosch (2013) argue that the three Rs of science (rigour, relevance and reach) can be strengthened by participatory methods. The describe how by employing participatory approaches in their environmental study they were able focus on what mattered to local people (relevance), gained more media attention when disseminating the findings (reach), and benefited from increased innovation and rigour through community discussion and negotiation (ibid, 2013). Meanwhile Davies & Dodd (2002) argue that

rigour is different in qualitative research, focusing on rich information, trustworthiness, engagement and ethics. Leading to the importance of reflexivity in research to reduce bias and improve rigour (Barusch et al., 2011; Darawsheh, 2014), in addition to researcher authenticity with participants to breakdown traditional structures of power and enable meaningful collaboration (Johnson & Flynn, 2021).

Academia is not devoid of bias even through traditional methods (Milner, 2007). Indeed, there are many examples of research conducted in the last century that have been inherently biased, lacked rigour and even fraudulent. The negative implications of some of these studies still impacts society today. Well known examples include Andrew Wakefield's study on the MMR vaccine (measles, mumps and rubella) which led to what some have called the worst medical fraud in 100 years (Flaherty, 2011; Rao & Andrade, 2011), and a study by Fang et al., (2012) found that of 2,047 retracted biomedical and life sciences studies, 67% were revoked for potential or actual academic misconduct. Scholars therefore argue that understanding and being explicit about positionality, in addition to rethinking rigour qualitative constructions of knowledge, are important steps in increasing transparency, reducing bias and enabling the co-creation of knowledge with (rather than on) people from groups of interest (Bilgen et al., 2021; Breen, 2007; Davies & Dodd, 2002).

Conclusion

While PPI has changed the nature of health and social care research, it has impacted less on our collective understanding of a PhD and how it is achieved. The PhD remains an artefact of older systems of knowledge production, with some minor adjustments within individual studies, but without a substantive change in communities' understanding of the concept and practice of knowledge generation. We now wish to create a new vision of a participatory PhD that embraces the values and principles of co-production and offers our community a collective understanding that can be implemented nationally and internationally. The barriers are many and varied, but by recognising them, we can address each one and collectively find solutions. One key barrier remains the recognition that different forms of knowledge can be relevant to a PhD and can be created in a range of ways, sometimes that sit outside of formal academic processes. This recognition challenges the very notion of academic practice and lies at the heart of the challenge. We need to find ways forward for including diverse knowledge (experiential) of subjects/participants of research based on equalising relations and power within the research.

While how to formally recognise participants and the value of their lived experience is still debated among those affected by participatory PhDs, the need to avoid tokenistic involvement is clear. Research shows that some PhD candidates want to conduct their research in this way, however barriers including misunderstandings and the research culture in their institution can impact their study design. More evidence of the benefits and value of participatory research would help embed it more effectively in practice. Logistical challenges still exist, such as a lack of funding, complex payment systems, access for people with lived experience in PhD-level research opportunities, a lack of encouragement as best practice, and inflexible university policies. Influenced by Liberation Psychology and other post and decolonial ideologies, those impacted by a problem hold the solutions to it and therefore, reconstructing knowledge from that perspective, which locates difficulties/knowledge in their historical and socio-political contexts, feels essential. Participatory approaches to PhDs are a key part of the response to this challenge, ensuring that research remains relevant, rigorous and reaches the required audience(s).

Next Steps

In this paper, we discussed developments in participatory approaches, what is possible and the limitations, thus calling for further support for people who undertake or want to participate in doctoral research. We hope that this paper has inspired readers and convinced those who did not previously consider working in such ways to explore participatory approaches in doctoral research.

We emphasise that participatory PhDs will evolve as an approach. We call on academic institutions and funders to create environments conducive to participatory approaches, reducing unnecessary bureaucratic processes where possible. By adapting their policies, ringfencing appropriate funding, actively supporting doctoral researchers, their supervisors and members of the public involved, we believe doctoral education can increase its relevance and better align with emancipatory and decolonial approaches, and further the discussions on contemporary academic rigour, that is respectful of other ontological and epistemological approaches, many of which were erased through European colonialism (Meghji, 2021; Mirza, 2014; Quijano et al., 2025) The International Participatory PhD Network will continue focusing on this emerging area of research, and we encourage others to join the discussion.

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