

# **Decoded: A Translational Framework for Institutional Legibility, Student Co-Creation, and Equity-Oriented Transformation in Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

Across higher education, there is increasing recognition that addressing inequities in student experience, attainment, and belonging requires more substantive forms of student engagement. However, institutional responses often remain constrained by consultative models of “student voice” that fail to produce meaningful structural change. This paper argues that a critical, yet under-theorised, barrier to transformation is **institutional illegibility**, the inability of students and staff to meaningfully access, interpret, and engage with institutional systems, language, and power structures.

In response, this paper introduces **Decoded**, a conceptual framework that positions *translation* as a necessary precondition for effective student co-creation and institutional change. Drawing on scholarship in student partnership, critical pedagogy, and institutional theory, Decoded conceptualises transformation as a three-stage process: **translation**, **dialogue**, and **co-creation**. The framework reframes student engagement as a process of building shared institutional understanding, enabling critical participation, and embedding collaborative knowledge production within curriculum and governance structures.

The paper situates Decoded within the broader *Disrupt the Discourse (DtD)* framework and related practice-based initiatives such as *Visualising Justice*, arguing that translation-oriented approaches can bridge the gap between institutional strategy and lived experience. In doing so, the paper contributes a novel conceptual model for understanding how universities might move beyond extractive engagement practices toward more participatory and equitable forms of institutional learning.

## **1. Introduction**

Within contemporary higher education, the language of student partnership, co-creation, and inclusion has become increasingly prominent. Institutions are under growing pressure to address disparities in attainment, improve student belonging, and demonstrate meaningful commitment to equity and inclusion agendas. Despite this, many institutional interventions remain limited in scope and impact, often relying on consultative mechanisms that position students as respondents rather than collaborators in institutional change processes.

This paper argues that such limitations are not solely the result of insufficient engagement practices, but rather reflect a deeper structural issue: the **illegibility of institutional systems**. For many students, and indeed for many staff, universities operate as complex, opaque environments in which key concepts, processes, and decision-making structures are difficult to access or interpret. As a result, opportunities for meaningful participation are unevenly distributed, and efforts toward co-creation risk reproducing existing inequalities.

In response, this paper introduces **Decoded**, a conceptual framework designed to address this gap by positioning *translation* as a foundational component of institutional transformation. Rather than beginning with co-creation, Decoded argues that institutions must first become legible, capable of being understood, interrogated, and engaged with by those within them.

The paper situates Decoded within the broader *Disrupt the Discourse (DtD)* framework (Brazant, 2024), which draws on critical race theory and participatory pedagogies to challenge dominant assumptions about knowledge, authority, and participation in higher education. It also connects to emerging practice-based work, including the *Visualising Justice* initiative, which explores creative co-creation as a mechanism for institutional learning.

## 2. Conceptual Background

### 2.1 Student Partnership and Co-Creation

Student partnership has been widely discussed as a means of enhancing engagement and transforming teaching and learning practices (Bovill, 2020). However, critiques of partnership approaches highlight the risk of superficial implementation, where participation is limited to consultation or feedback without meaningful redistribution of power (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Decoded builds on this critique by suggesting that partnership cannot function effectively where participants lack a shared understanding of the systems they are seeking to influence.

### 2.2 Critical Pedagogy and Institutional Power

Drawing on traditions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), Decoded recognises that education is inherently shaped by power relations. Institutional language, structures, and norms can function to obscure these dynamics, limiting the capacity for critical engagement.

From this perspective, making institutions *legible* is not a neutral act but a political one, enabling individuals to recognise and challenge structural inequalities embedded within educational systems.

### 2.3 Institutional Learning and Knowledge Translation

Universities generate significant amounts of data and insight relating to student experience, attainment, and inclusion. However, there is often a disconnect between knowledge production and institutional practice. The concept of **knowledge translation** highlights the importance of converting insight into forms that are accessible and actionable (Nutley et al., 2007).

Decoded extends this idea by focusing not only on translating data, but on translating the institution itself.

### 3. The Problem of Institutional Illegibility

This paper introduces **institutional illegibility** as a key barrier to transformation. This manifests in three interrelated ways:

- **Conceptual opacity:** Key institutional terms (e.g. “attainment gap,” “inclusion,” “curriculum design”) lack shared meaning
- **Structural opacity:** Decision-making processes and governance structures are difficult to navigate
- **Experiential disconnection:** Lived experiences of students are insufficiently integrated into institutional knowledge systems

Together, these conditions limit the effectiveness of co-creation and contribute to the persistence of inequities.

### 4. The Decoded Framework

Decoded proposes that institutional transformation occurs through three interconnected stages:

#### 4.1 Translation

Translation involves making institutional systems, language, and assumptions accessible and interpretable.

This may include:

- development of shared glossaries
- narrative and storytelling approaches
- critical examination of policy and curriculum

Translation enables participants to move from passive engagement toward informed participation.

#### 4.2 Dialogue

Dialogue creates structured spaces for collective sense-making.

Through facilitated conversations, creative inquiry, and cross-role engagement, participants are able to:

- surface hidden assumptions
- share diverse perspectives
- build shared understanding

Dialogue operates as a bridge between understanding and action.

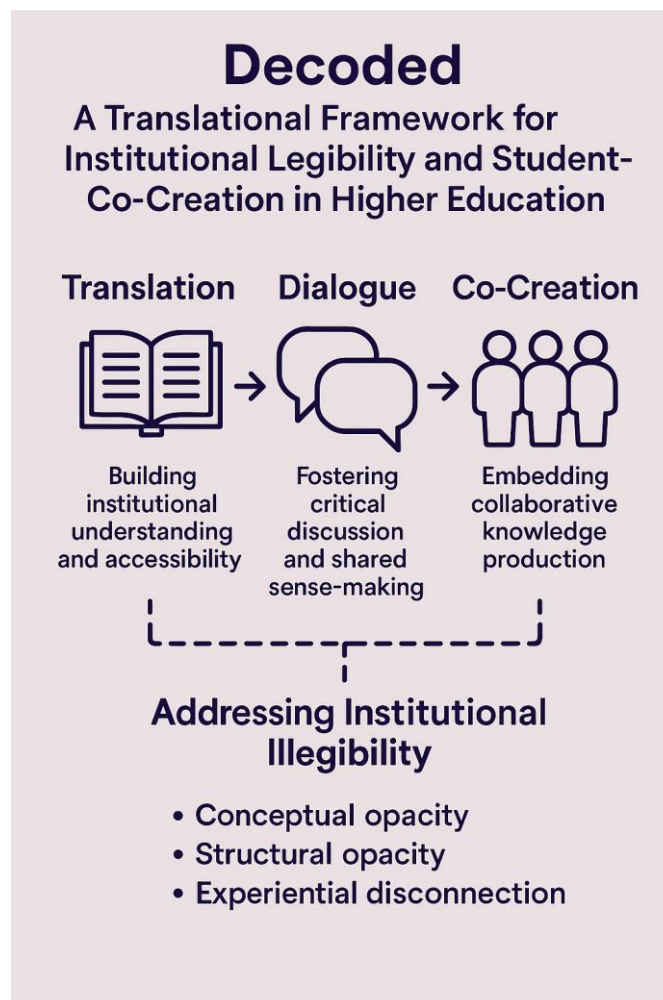
### 4.3 Co-Creation

Co-creation represents the integration of shared understanding into institutional practice.

This includes:

- collaborative curriculum design
- co-authored outputs
- participation in governance and decision-making

Within Decoded, co-creation is not an entry point but an outcome of prior translation and dialogue. See infographic below:



## 5. Relationship to Practice-Based Models

Decoded is not intended to operate in isolation but as part of a broader ecosystem of practice.

In particular, it provides a conceptual foundation for initiatives such as *Visualising Justice*, which operationalise co-creation through creative practice and participatory evaluation (Brazant & Baek, 2025). While *Visualising Justice* demonstrates how co-creation can function in practice, Decoded explains the conditions under which such practices can be effective and scalable.

## 6. Discussion: From Engagement to Institutional Legibility

The Decoded framework reframes student engagement as a problem of **access to institutional meaning**, rather than simply participation in institutional processes.

This has several implications:

- Co-creation must be preceded by efforts to build shared understanding
- Institutional change requires cultural as well as structural transformation
- Students must be positioned as contributors to institutional knowledge, not simply sources of feedback

By foregrounding translation, Decoded offers a way to move beyond extractive models of engagement toward more collaborative and equitable approaches.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has introduced Decoded as a conceptual framework for addressing institutional illegibility in higher education. By positioning translation as a precondition for dialogue and co-creation, the framework provides a structured approach to embedding student partnership within institutional systems.

In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in the role of students in shaping higher education and offers a pathway for institutions seeking to align equity ambitions with meaningful practice (Portinari, 2026).

Future research should explore the application of the framework across different institutional contexts and examine its relationship to measurable outcomes such as student attainment, retention, and belonging.

## References

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## Appendices:

The following appendices present the strategic application of the research framework described in this paper, demonstrating how conceptual insights were translated into institutional practice.

### Appendix A – Decoded Strategy Framework

#### A Translational Approach to Institutional Legibility, Student Co-Creation, and Equity-Oriented Transformation at a UAL.

**Author:** Kevin J. Brazant

**Context:** Internal Strategy Document – University of the Arts London (UAL)

**Alignment:** Disrupt the Discourse (DtD) | Disruptive Humanism | Access & Participation | Educational Enhancement

### 1. Strategic Overview

Across UAL, there is a strong institutional commitment to equity, inclusion, and student partnership. However, current engagement models often remain consultative, limiting the depth of impact on student experience, attainment, and belonging.

**Decoded** responds to this challenge by identifying a critical but under-recognised barrier:

**Institutional illegibility** — the inability of students and staff to meaningfully access, interpret, and influence institutional systems, language, and power structures.

This strategy reframes student engagement not as a participation issue, but as an **access-to-meaning issue**.

## 2. Strategic Proposition

### Decoded as Institutional Infrastructure

Decoded is not a standalone initiative. It is a **translational framework** that enables UAL to:

- Move from **student voice** → **student agency**
- Move from **consultation** → **co-creation**
- Move from **policy** → **lived institutional understanding**

It operates as the **missing link between institutional strategy and lived experience**.

## 3. The Core Problem: Institutional Illegibility at UAL

Institutional illegibility manifests in three critical ways:

### 3.1 Conceptual Opacity

- Key terms (e.g. *attainment gap*, *belonging*, *inclusive curriculum*) lack shared meaning across students and staff
- Strategic language is often inaccessible or inconsistently interpreted

### 3.2 Structural Opacity

- Governance, decision-making, and curriculum processes are difficult to navigate
- Students are invited into systems they do not fully understand

### 3.3 Experiential Disconnection

- Student lived experience is collected but not meaningfully integrated into institutional decision-making
- Insight remains extractive rather than transformative

### Impact:

- Limits meaningful participation
- Reproduces inequity
- Undermines trust and engagement

## 4. Strategic Framework: The Decoded Model

Decoded introduces a **three-stage transformation model**:

### **Stage 1: Translation (Precondition)**

**Objective:** Make the institution legible

**Key Actions:**

- Develop **shared institutional glossaries** (student-facing, discipline-specific)
- Translate policy, strategy, and data into **accessible narratives**
- Use **storytelling, creative methods, and visualisation** (e.g. Visualising Justice)
- Embed **critical interrogation of curriculum and policy**

**Strategic Outcome:**

Students and staff move from passive recipients → informed participants

### **Stage 2: Dialogue (Sense-Making Layer)**

**Objective:** Build shared understanding across roles

**Key Actions:**

- Facilitate **cross-role dialogues** (students, academics, professional services)
- Use **creative and participatory methods** to surface hidden assumptions
- Establish **structured spaces for disagreement and critique**
- Embed dialogue into curriculum and co-curricular spaces

**Strategic Outcome:**

Collective understanding replaces fragmented perspectives

### **Stage 3: Co-Creation (Embedded Practice)**

**Objective:** Institutionalise shared knowledge into practice

**Key Actions:**

- Co-design **curriculum, assessments, and learning experiences**
- Support **co-authored outputs** (research, exhibitions, policy contributions)
- Embed student participation in **governance and decision-making structures**
- Align co-creation with **Access & Participation Plan priorities**

**Strategic Outcome:**

Students become **co-producers of institutional knowledge and change**

## 5. Strategic Integration at UAL

### 5.1 Alignment with Institutional Priorities

Decoded directly supports:

- Access & Participation Plan (APP)
- Awarding Gap Reduction Strategies
- Inclusive Curriculum Frameworks
- Student Engagement & Belonging agendas
- Decolonising and Anti-Racist commitments

### 5.2 Relationship to Existing Practice

Decoded provides the **conceptual architecture** for existing and emerging initiatives:

- **Disrupt the Discourse (DtD):** Critical and participatory foundation
- **Visualising Justice:** Practice-based operationalisation of co-creation
- **Student Partner Schemes:** Scalable implementation pathways

Decoded ensures these initiatives are not isolated interventions, but part of a **coherent institutional transformation model**.

## 6. Strategic Value Proposition

### 6.1 For Senior Leadership

- Provides **institutional legibility as a strategic lever**
- Aligns equity goals with **measurable transformation**
- Reduces reputational risk linked to performative engagement

### 6.2 For Academic Staff

- Enhances curriculum design through **shared understanding**
- Reduces resistance to co-creation by scaffolding participation
- Supports pedagogic innovation

### 6.3 For Students

- Moves from **voice** → **power** → **authorship**
- Builds capacity to navigate and influence the institution

- Enhances belonging and agency

## 7. Implementation Model

### Phase 1: Diagnostic (0–6 months)

- Map areas of institutional illegibility across UAL
- Identify key pressure points (curriculum, governance, policy language)
- Pilot translation interventions in selected courses or programmes

### Phase 2: Pilot & Prototype (6–18 months)

- Embed translation-dialogue-co-creation cycles in:
  - Course design
  - Student partnership projects
  - Institutional initiatives (e.g. awarding gap work, course review, enhancement and annual course monitoring.)
- Develop **toolkits and frameworks** for scaling

### Phase 3: Institutional Embedding (18–36 months)

- Integrate Decoded into:
  - Curriculum frameworks
  - Staff development programmes
  - Governance structures
- Position UAL as a **sector leader in institutional legibility and co-creation**

## 8. Measures of Success

### Quantitative Indicators

- Reduction in awarding gaps
- Increased student retention and progression
- Uptake of co-creation initiatives

### Qualitative Indicators

- Evidence of shared understanding in curriculum design
- Student perception of agency and belonging

- Staff confidence in co-creation practices

## 9. Strategic Insight

Decoded reframes a fundamental assumption:

The issue is not that students are not engaged.

The issue is that **the institution is not fully accessible as a system of meaning.**

## 10. Conclusion: A Shift in Institutional Logic

Decoded represents a shift from:

- Engagement → **Legibility**
- Participation → **Understanding**
- Feedback → **Knowledge Production**

It positions UAL not just as an institution that listens to students, but as one that:

**enables students to understand, shape, and transform it.**