



Relevance, Social Inclusion, and Recognition of Status Passage: How Master's Students Find Value in Co-Badged and Dual-Listed Curricula

Khristine Grace Valdellon^a, Lauren J. Carpenter^a, Russell L. Taylor^b, and Susan L. Rowland^{a,b}

^a The University of Queensland, Australia; ^b The University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Worldwide, universities face pressure to ensure that master's education provides value for students, while also contending with the intricate demands of sustaining such programs. One common but under-examined structural response to master's delivery is the co-badged (dual-listed) course, in which undergraduate and master's students share the same teaching and learning environment under separate course codes. This paper examines how master's students experience value in co-badged courses.

We used Appreciative Inquiry and the Determinants of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education (DSSHE) framework as a deductive analytical lens to analyse interviews with 16 master's students in science coursework programs at an Australian university. Participants described value as a combined academic and relational experience, valuing practical, industry-relevant learning activities, inclusive classroom dynamics, and opportunities to benchmark their progress and identity against undergraduate peers. Their accounts suggest that educational value in co-badged courses is shaped not only by curriculum design and assessment, but also by belonging, recognition, and developing self-efficacy as an advanced learner. We offer an adapted version of the DSSHE framework for master's students, alongside guidance for designing co-badged courses that better meet the academic and emotional needs of postgraduate students.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Clarify the co-badged structure early: Communicate the nature and expectations of co-badged courses before and during enrolment so students understand their learning environment.
2. Facilitate cohort connection: Use structured introductions and inclusive activities to foster mutual respect and co-learning between undergraduate and master's students.
3. Design postgraduate-specific learning moments: Include at least one dedicated activity or space where master's students work at an explicitly advanced level.
4. Tailor assessment to postgraduate goals: Ensure assessment tasks reflect postgraduate learning outcomes and offer depth, autonomy, or complexity—not just more work.
5. Support status passage through reflection: Help master's students reflect on their growth and identity by constructively comparing their experiences, skills, and perspectives with undergraduate peers.

Keywords

co-badged courses, dual-listed courses, taught postgraduate, master's curriculum, belonging

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Introduction

Across many higher education systems, master's-level enrolments have become increasingly important, driven by intensifying credential competition in labour markets and shifting university funding models (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Smith & Frankland, 2000; Xu & Norton, 2026). Despite this focus, taught postgraduate students have been described as an overlooked cohort whose academic transition, belonging, and wellbeing are shaped by distinctive pressures that institutions have been slow to recognise (Coneyworth et al., 2020; Macleod et al., 2019).

In Australia, where this study was conducted, postgraduate coursework enrolments increased by 64% over the decade to 2019 (Universities Australia, 2020), and around 50% of these students are from overseas. National student experience data show that postgraduate coursework students are significantly less engaged than undergraduates and question whether their programs offer meaningfully better skill development (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2018–2024). International students face additional pressures: financial investment is substantial (full-time fees frequently exceed \$50,000 per year), and growing political rhetoric has left many international students feeling less welcome in Australia (ABC News Radio, 2024; Bodis, 2021; Hong et al., 2023). These conditions make the quality of the postgraduate teaching and learning experience especially consequential.

One common structural response to the complexity of delivering master's programs is the co-badged course: a course in which undergraduate and master's students are taught together with highly similar curricula, under two separate course codes. Co-badged courses are found across many higher education systems, known variously as dual-listed, cross-listed, stacked, mirrored, or mixed-level classes (Ehnberg & Lundgren, 2025; Gubala, 2021). In this paper, we use the term co-badged to describe this arrangement. We use course to mean a credit-bearing unit within a program of study.

Co-badged courses can provide important practical and pedagogical benefits: by serving small master's cohorts alongside larger undergraduate cohorts, they enable course viability, and students in mixed-level courses often report benefits from encountering diverse perspectives (Balassiano et al., 2014; Dodd, 2012; Ehnberg & Lundgren, 2025). Yet the research on co-badged courses has focused overwhelmingly on undergraduate outcomes and experiences or has treated the co-badged structure as incidental context rather than as a phenomenon warranting investigation in its own right (Coppit, 2006; Etzkorn et al., 2004; Witherow et al., 2012). The master's student's experience of co-badged courses is rarely the subject of study, and when it is examined, master's students are frequently positioned as a resource for the undergraduate learning environment rather than as learners with their own distinct needs and value judgements (Duncan et al., 2015).

Master's students have also reported concerns about co-badged courses: the surprise of finding undergraduates in a course they expected to be postgraduate-only, assessment they perceive as inappropriate, and content that does not match their needs or interests (Balassiano et al., 2014; Dodd, 2012). In systems where master's education is increasingly positioned as a premium product, these concerns have both educational and reputational significance. Understanding what master's students experience as valuable in co-badged courses, and what conditions produce that experience, is therefore both practically and theoretically important.

Research Question

This study addresses the question: What teaching and learning practices do master's students experience as valuable in co-badged courses, and through what dimensions of satisfaction is that value expressed?

We approach this question through a framework of student satisfaction with educational services and a deductive analysis of semi-structured interviews with 16 master's students who had recently completed co-badged courses. We first review relevant scholarship on educational value, postgraduate experience, and student belonging. We then describe our methodology, report our findings, and discuss implications for educators and institutions designing co-badged courses.

Literature

Value in Postgraduate Education

Zeithaml (1988) describes perceived value as the consumer's overall assessment of a product's utility based on perceptions of what is received relative to what is given. In an educational context, students experience a course as valuable when the perceived benefits of study justify the costs of fees, time, and effort. Tomlinson (2022) divides these benefits into three domains of value for higher education: economic value (access to meaningful work and career success), personal value (cognitive gain, identity formation, and extended agency), and social value (improved social ties and increased ability to engage in society). We use these three domains as an interpretive frame for understanding what master's students find worthwhile in co-badged courses.

Master's students typically enrol with strong career-instrumental motivations, expecting their study to produce concrete professional or academic advantages (Cook et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2023; Zmas & Sipitanou, 2009). Yet the return on this investment is not guaranteed, and master's students who perceive their education as failing to deliver economic, personal, or social value are likely to disengage or report dissatisfaction. Understanding the conditions that support perceived value for students in master's programs is therefore of direct practical importance to universities, educators, and the master's students themselves.

The Taught Postgraduate Experience

Taught postgraduate students face distinctive challenges that differ from both undergraduate and research-postgraduate students. Macleod et al. (2019) found that master's students frequently do not see themselves as expert, highly confident learners, and they navigate significant uncertainty about their legitimacy and capabilities as advanced students. Coneyworth et al. (2020) describe taught postgraduate students as an "overlooked cohort": students with specific academic, social, and emotional needs that institutions are often poorly positioned to recognise or address.

Recent scholarship emphasises that this emotional texture is central, not peripheral, to taught postgraduate experience. White and Ingram argue that student emotion matters in postgraduate contexts (White & Ingram, 2020), proposing a multifaceted model of taught postgraduate experience in which emotion and wellbeing are constitutive of learning quality (White & Ingram, 2023).

For international students, these pressures are compounded. International master's students frequently experience higher rates of social isolation and encounter greater barriers to classroom participation than domestic counterparts (Kivelä et al., 2022). For the predominantly international cohort in our study, set within an Australian political climate that has made some students feel unwelcome (ABC News Radio, 2024; Hong et al., 2023), these dynamics are especially salient.

Belonging in the Postgraduate Classroom

Belonging is increasingly understood as a fundamental human need with direct implications for academic engagement and persistence. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need to belong is a basic psychological motivation, and Strayhorn (2018) identifies sense of belonging as a key determinant of educational success across student populations. Ajjawi et al. (2020) and Gravett et al. (2020) extend this into higher education contexts, arguing that belonging is not a fixed trait but a relational and contextually constructed experience that can be shaped by pedagogy, assessment design, and classroom culture.

For postgraduate students specifically, belonging is not automatically conferred by enrolment. Graham (2022) finds that master's students' sense of belonging depends on dialogic, participatory pedagogy that positions them as legitimate contributors. Allen et al. (2021) identify both cognitive and affective dimensions of belonging, both of which must be present for students to feel genuinely included. In co-badged courses, where the master's student is sharing a classroom with a cohort at a formally different level, the conditions that support or undermine belonging warrant particular attention.

Co-badged Courses: What We Know

The literature on mixed-level courses is limited and predominantly undergraduate focused. Studies that have disaggregated performance by student level generally find that undergraduates are not disadvantaged by co-enrolment with graduate students and in some cases benefit modestly from their presence (Etzkorn et al., 2004; Witherow et al., 2012). Pedagogical studies of dual-listed courses have examined how active learning techniques might better involve undergraduates in discussion alongside graduate students (Duncan et al., 2015) and have noted that awareness of the co-badged structure is often low among students before a course begins (Dodd, 2012; Milligan et al., 2018).

What is essentially absent from this literature is systematic examination of how master's students experience co-badged courses: what they find valuable, what builds (or undermines) their sense of the course being worth their investment, and how the mixed-cohort structure shapes their developing scholarly identity. This study addresses that gap.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

Appreciative Inquiry

This exploratory project was conducted using a qualitative Appreciative Inquiry methodology. Appreciative Inquiry is an investigative model often used in action research and evaluation contexts, with a focus on identifying the strengths and positive conditions present within a practice or experience (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Rogers & Fraser, 2003).

We used Appreciative Inquiry to elicit master's students' accounts of "what worked well" and what they experienced as "valuable" in co-badged courses.

Value Embodied in Satisfaction With Service

Responses were analysed deductively using the Determinants of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education (DSSHE) framework (Douglas et al., 2008, 2015) as a coding lens. This framework identifies the observable dimensions of university teaching, learning, and service environments that students experience as satisfying or dissatisfying. We chose it because it operationalises Zeithaml's (1988) notion of perceived value into concrete, analysable features of the student experience. In the analysis, we align these determinants with Tomlinson's (2022) three domains of educational value. The DSSHE determinants are: (a) Access; (b) Achievement, Praise, and Motivation; (c) Attentiveness, Availability, and Friendliness; (d) Communication; (e) Social Inclusion; (f) Usefulness; and (g) Value for Money (see Appendix A).

We used the DSSHE as the starting point for first-cycle deductive coding then applied inductive second-cycle coding to capture dimensions of master's students' experience not fully captured by the existing framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). The result is an adapted DSSHE framework for Postgraduate Coursework that is Co-badged (DSSHE-PGCW Co-badged), presented in Appendix B.

Method

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from The University of Queensland Science Low and Negligible Risk Committee (2022/HE000618). All aspects of the project were conducted accordingly, with informed consent from the participants.

Participants

Participants were master's students who had recently completed a Faculty of Science-owned co-badged course at the University of Queensland, a large research-intensive Australian university, and who had attended in person while residing in Australia. Forty students submitted expressions of interest; 16 were selected through purposeful sampling to represent diversity of gender, age, nationality, academic progression, and program. Participants were enrolled in 10 different master's programs and drew on experiences across more than 25 different co-badged courses (Table 1).

Participants are identified throughout this paper using 16 pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Marshall, 2022). Participants were asked to describe specific examples of valuable teaching and learning practices in co-badged courses that worked well for them. Questions were framed positively, consistent with Appreciative Inquiry, and avoided pedagogical jargon (such as "meaningful" or "transformational" experience), which students can interpret inconsistently (Reid et al., 2020;

Zeivots et al., 2024). Recordings were transcribed using an intelligent verbatim approach (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006), and participants were invited to member check their de-identified transcripts before analysis (Birt et al., 2016).

Analytical Procedures and Trustworthiness

Coding was done by two researchers in collaboration with regular discussion to support intercoder consistency and reflexive decision-making (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Disagreements in coding were resolved through discussion and reference to DSSHE framework definitions. Saturation was assessed by tracking whether new coded references continued to populate framework nodes across successive interviews; by the 13th interview, no new nodes were opening, and minor additions in the final three interviews fell within existing categories. All 16 transcripts were included in analysis.

Trustworthiness was supported through multiple strategies: member checking of transcripts, two-coder collaboration, and a deductive-coding structure anchored in an established theoretical framework. Deviant cases (responses that did not fit the DSSHE framework cleanly) were noted and informed the adaptations reflected in the DSSHE-PGCW Co-badged.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The research team included two students—an honours student who was completing a year-long research project for credit working under the supervision of academic staff and a PhD student who provided coding help to the honours student. The team also included an academic and a professional staff member at Australian universities; these team members have experience in co-badged postgraduate course teaching, curriculum design, and higher education research. All research team members have experience as postgraduate students. This proximity to the research context strengthens contextual sensitivity but may also risk over-identification with participants' experiences. We addressed this through explicit reflexive discussion in the team, by using Appreciative Inquiry to foreground participants' own accounts rather than our assumptions and experiences, and by grounding interpretation in the DSSHE framework as an external analytical scaffold.

Methodological Limitations

Almost all participants were from within one faculty and university, which limits broad applicability. Only one pilot interview was conducted, which constrained opportunities to refine questions for participants with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Although Appreciative Inquiry foregrounds positive experiences, some responses addressed “what didn’t work.” These disclosures were not coded, but they form part of the research process, as people may need to “unpack” the bad before they can recognise functional elements of an experience (Griggs & Crain-Dorough, 2021).

Table 1*Student Participant Demographics (N = 16)*

Participant pseudonym	Master's program of enrolment	# of semesters completed by the participant	International/Domestic student status
Ajay	Entrepreneurship and Innovation	1–2	International
Jun	Agricultural Sciences	1–2	International
Yihan	Environmental Management	3–4	International
Muhammad	Urban and Regional Planning	4+	International
Adira	Food Science and Technology	4+	International
Diya	Biotechnology Research Extensive	1–2	International
Haoyu	Environmental Management	4+	International
Jacob	Geospatial Information Science	1–2	Domestic
Li	Molecular Biology	1–2	International
Oliver	Biotechnology	1–2	Domestic
Wei	Food Science and Technology	1–2	International
Janina	Science (Mathematics)	1–2	Domestic
Tama	Urban and Regional Planning	3–4	Domestic
Euston	Environmental Management	3–4	Domestic
Carus	Science (Mathematics)	4+	Domestic
Bulan	Food Science and Technology	1–2	International

Note. Pseudonyms are not matched to participant gender.

Results

Participants' accounts were coded against the DSSHE framework. In total, 153 coded references were generated across the 16 participants; all framework nodes were populated. Three determinants were each cited by more than 80% of participants: (a) Usefulness; (b) Achievement, Praise, and Motivation; and (c) Social Inclusion. These correspond broadly to Tomlinson's (2022) economic, personal, and social value domains respectively, and are the focus of this section. We then present observations on the dynamics specific to the co-badged context.

Usefulness

"Usefulness" was the most articulated theme (73 references from all 16 participants). Participants described the importance of the industry-relevant knowledge or skills they gained in their co-badged units, as well as "realistic," "hands on," or "practical" activities in the curriculum (see quotes below). They referred to many practices (e.g., laboratory exercises, field trips, reports, quizzes, and workshops) that they felt offered deep and independent learning, flexibility to pursue their interests, and real-life relevance. They frequently cited activities that mimicked professional interactions and behaviours, including those that helped them understand the research process.

We had to develop a “disease collection.” It really helped my learning—I could identify the diseases much better. It was a skill that you can only develop by practising in the field. (Jun)

One course was ... trying to mimic how your interactions might go with clients. Say you're a provider, and you've got a client. The lecturer sends you a text for a piece of work, and you do it and submit it, and then they come back with another request, like a real client. We had to communicate via [video conference platform] frequently. I wish more places would use the model—it really related to real-world examples. (Janina)

Another cool learning experience was a visit to a laboratory. We had stations, like a circuit in order of the process of conducting an experiment. It was reinforcing things that we've been learning and researching, so I'm able to see it occurring in the environment. It made it less theoretical. (Oliver)

Twelve participants described how the co-badged arrangement was convenient and helpful, because they could co-learn and/or exchange knowledge with other students.

You have a mixture of postgraduate and undergraduate students. There could be postgrads with ten years of work experience, but undergraduates are mostly newer in the field. You see a broad range of different people with different experience levels, and you can see how they think about a topic, which gives you insight. (Haoyu)

I was doing my literature review and you discuss about it and some people actually have experience on those topics and they exchange information with you about their experience. So, you learn from others' experience. (Ajay)

Some participants noted the value of a larger cohort provided by the undergraduate students.

If you just did a postgraduate course, and there was only four or five of you, that's a pretty limited pool. Co-badged where [you've] got an extra 30 people—even if the content is slightly less advanced it's still 99% there so it's [a] good way to communicate and help your learning. (Janina)

Many participants described learning activities that were master's-only and/or physically separated from undergraduates, and where they had more freedom and responsibility than the undergraduates.

We are given free range to choose whichever topic we want to do, compared to an undergraduate student, where you can only choose from [a] few options of topics. It's not so much the professor having a way of doing things that they want you to follow. It's [them] recognising that you have that ability and that knowledge to do something, rather than just guiding you. (Haoyu)

Not all participants, however, wanted to be treated differently from the undergraduates; some were reassured when all members of the class were supported at the same foundational level.

It wasn't that “Oh you are master's students. You have to know everything at a much higher level,” but these [were] things that we were not taught before. So, they were like, “Okay we will cater to your needs, and we will provide the

information you require, at the same level as the undergraduates,” which was nice.
(Adira)

Achievement, Praise, and Motivation

Fourteen participants (36 coded references) described the importance of verbal encouragement, praise, and advice in their co-badged course. Participants explicitly talked about how the “feel” of the delivered curriculum (learning environment, subject matter, people present, and instructor’s words) impacted their willingness to engage in learning.

It was a large class—a big room. People sometimes got to sit with who they did a group assignment with, and then just meet other people as well. That was quite an enjoyable learning environment, and it could easily not be! That strategy worked well. (Oliver)

Some participants were motivated and/or challenged by seeing the way undergraduate students worked. Others compared themselves and the other master’s students with undergraduates and, consequently, they were motivated to work with PG peers.

I see undergraduate[s] are very competitive when they’re doing presentations. They have something I want to learn—I feel they are more confident. Even if I have better citation skills than them, it doesn’t matter. I think they have very good time management and teamwork skills. (Muhammad)

I feel like I get a lot back from other postgraduates, because some of them might be already in the role, or in a field, or you can share more knowledge and network better with them. (Tama)

Participants also found value in being acknowledged as important members of their cohort. They described being motivated by a welcoming atmosphere (facilitated by peers, staff and the university) and by specific events where they received praise and recognition from staff, or when they felt they were intentionally given an opportunity to contribute something. They quoted encouraging and appreciative words from staff, like “Thank you for answering questions and being responsive in class” (Jacob) and “You’re gonna make a difference in this field” (Ajay). Ajay said that hearing this made him “feel really good, actually.” Participants also highlighted inclusive treatment and “keeping the status quo” (Carus) (i.e., being treated equally to the undergraduates in class). Overall, besides being good practice, the inclusive attitudes and approaches of staff had an important emotional impact on participants.

Participants also described a sense of familiarity and acceptance within the academic environment as they exercised higher-level ways of thinking, learning practices, and knowledge. The participants described how drawing on their prior experience, knowledge, and skills in classes helped them to find their place in the space, room, or cohort. These accounts were characterised by personal revelations like, “I do belong” and “I can remember something practical” (Bulan), “Oh, at least I know that part of it ... it’s good that I’m in master’s” (Diya), “You’re not someone who’s brand new. You are someone with prior knowledge” (Haoyu), and “I feel like I know it. It’s about being familiar with the way they do things” (Tama). Jun particularly described their pleasure in sharing knowledge with undergraduates.

If there was a topic that was being discussed that I had studied in my undergraduate, I would know what this is about. That felt nice. Since you have this information – you can help someone out. (Jun)

Overall, these thoughts appeared to stem from the participants' personal narratives around developing and understanding their identities as legitimate postgraduate students.

Consistent with this idea of belonging to a group of people who are thinking and working at a higher level than undergraduates, the participants also described their developing sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1978). There were several ways in which this growing self-efficacy was expressed and valued by participants.

Participants described becoming confident of their deep understanding of content and its applications.

In the course we have workshops where we practise what we studied in the lecture. Sometimes you think, "Oh, I understood the whole lecture. I know the subject." But when you start the workshop, you start thinking [a] whole lot differently, because that is application-based. You can actually assess your learning and understanding and take it to a different level. (Diya)

Other participants experienced a sense of relief knowing that their course aims, assessment criteria, or learning outcomes, met their expectations of master's-level standard.

Participants found value in personal successes and the encouragement and/or reinforcement they received from instructors whom they respected. Opportunities for practice and receiving positive feedback help students develop self-efficacy (van Dinther et al., 2011), and this well-established principle was evident from the participants' statements.

It was definitely worth it. It was really serious knowledge we were given in this course. I think I will be proud of having this course in my diploma when I'm looking for a job and having this experience with regulatory frameworks. It was a new level of difficulty for me. I'm proud I finished it. (Tama)

As part of your assessment, you need to go and ask other people questions and ... review and critique their questions. I thought that was a very effective learning methodology. I went from knowing nothing about building databases to being reasonably comfortable that I could build a fairly basic one for a research project, or for something at work. (Jacob)

My lecturer said, "That's a great idea, give these guys some money!" as in, sponsor our idea. So, it did feel realistic. I had that approach from both my lecturers—"This could actually be something that could be done!" The classes gave us the skills and tools to do it. (Oliver)

While these examples fit the DSSHE "Useful" determinant, they also carry an additional affective component, where participants' emotions about their experiences and personal development impacted their learning. Participants reflected on their experiences using phrases like, "I'm glad...", "I'm happy...", "I like...", and "It makes me feel more..."

This affective dimension of achievement—closely related to wellbeing and identity development—aligns with White and Ingram’s (2020) argument that emotion is constitutive, not peripheral, to taught postgraduate experience.

Social Inclusion

Thirteen participants (19 coded references) described belonging and social connection as sources of value in co-badged courses. Participants described comfort in not being alone in class, the value of expanded friendship groups through the larger cohort, and the importance of feeling understood.

Participants cited learning tools that facilitated open and frequent digital communication with their classmates, noting the importance of being able to “speak to all people in the course” (Janina) about assignments and difficult content. They valued “just being included in everything that’s going on—getting emails about different opportunities even if they might not necessarily suit us” (Tama).

Participants also valued studying with students from different backgrounds and degrees. Muhammad noted, “it really benefits me to negotiate and work with those different background students—it is a really interesting experience.” Adira described how “it was nice to see them [undergraduates] talk about their career paths, or what they plan to do with their major”, noting it gave her “ideas of what I could do with my degree as well.”

Several participants indicated they preferred to learn alongside peers who respected them, contributed to their learning experience, and shared aspects of their identity and/or interests. The participants often pointed out the similarities and differences between themselves—or master’s students in general—and undergraduates. Participants who appreciated having master’s-only assignments or workshops spoke about the perceived ease of learning, reliability, and inherent relatability that comes with their peers.

I think Bachelor students know less in theory than master’s [students], so it’s easier to talk to and discuss with my fellow master’s students. (Bulan)

I did like having the separate tutorials... [The postgraduates] were in a similar position to me, in that they worked. We could do [assignments] in times that suited us after hours. (Euston)

In these quotes, participants describe feeling understood and establishing rapport with classmates. Some participants did not express a preference for working with postgraduate peers, but they still indicated that belonging was important. They embraced the undergraduates because they believed that belonging to the cohort meant “blending in” (Yihan) with the other students.

The master’s participants were often acutely aware that they were “different,” and they expressed some reticence around integrating with the undergraduates (but not necessarily because they did not want to interact with them). While some wanted separation from undergraduates, others expressed no cohort preference. Some also expressed curiosity, shyness, or difficulty around interacting with undergraduates, and would have appreciated more formal introductions or icebreakers.

The diversity of drivers behind social inclusion—some participants seeking postgraduate-specific community, others seeking integration with the whole cohort—suggests that belonging in co-badged courses is not a single experience but a contextually and individually shaped one. Designing a co-badged course to respect students' varied needs to belong is both complex and crucial.

Observations Specific to the Co-badged Cohort

While several participants expressed a preference for learning only with postgraduate peers, the mixed cohort provided some positive educational experiences. The larger cohort in the co-badged course made attendance more appealing.

“Since there was a larger audience, it was easier for me to attend. If the Zoom meeting is empty, you don’t feel a need to be there. If there are already more people in the class, it’s an invitation to stay.” (Jun)

Participants frequently benchmarked themselves against undergraduates—comparing their work habits, confidence levels, and prior knowledge with undergraduate classmates. Some described admiration for undergraduates’ presentation confidence and time management skills; others described quiet satisfaction in knowing they had mastery of material the undergraduates were still working to understand.

Participants also compared the postgraduate and undergraduate streams of the co-badged curriculum. Where postgraduate assessment was more complex or more autonomous, they experienced satisfaction. Where it felt identical to the undergraduate stream, some felt their investment was not being acknowledged, while others valued the opportunity to revise and consolidate:

If I could have more coursework and a deeper level of coursework, I would feel more appreciated as a master’s student. (Wei)

For one of the courses, the professor had a part just for the postgraduate students. It was nice—it felt like, “oh, we are being cared about”. If we’re learning the same things, there should be something extra for the master’s students to feel like it was worth it. (Li)

I think that is really good as a refreshment, because four years of doing nothing related to the lab work is bad for me. I need to step inside the laboratory and do all the chemistry things. But thank God they are co-badged; I need to act like I’m a bachelor’s student again. (Bulan)

Participants also noted that unexplained separation from the undergraduate cohort could create confusion and resentment:

If the tutorials are all the same, why would you say a master’s student has to go to a particular tutor? Why did you make this arbitrary distinction to begin with? (Janina)

This observation underscores that differentiation within co-badged courses is valued not as a default but as a design choice that needs to be transparent and purposeful.

Discussion

This study asked what master's students experience as valuable in co-badged courses and through what dimensions of satisfaction that value is expressed. Our findings show that value in co-badged courses is not reducible to any single feature of curriculum design. Instead, it is experienced across three intertwined domains: economic value through practical and professionally applicable learning (Usefulness); personal value through recognition, self-efficacy, and developing advanced learner identity (Achievement, Praise, and Motivation); and social value through belonging and connectedness (Social Inclusion) (Tomlinson, 2022; Zeithaml, 1988). This intermingling suggests that co-badged course design cannot and should not optimise for one dimension of value alone.

Benchmarking, Identity, and Status Passage

A distinctive feature of co-badged courses in our data was the practice of benchmarking; participants regularly compared their knowledge, attitudes, performance, and aspirations with those of undergraduate classmates and curriculum. Where their curriculum felt more complex or autonomous, they experienced satisfaction and scholarly confidence. Where it felt identical, some experienced frustration and questioned the value of their investment.

At the same time, apparently foundational curricula could also provide reassurance. Macleod et al. (2019) and Coneyworth et al. (2020) found that most master's students did not see themselves as expert, highly confident learners. Our participants were similar—they frequently referred to their (secret) feelings of inadequacy and were appreciative of the opportunity to encounter, revise, or re-learn basic disciplinary material alongside the undergraduates. In such cases, both the master's and the undergraduate students were new learners, struggling with the material together, and the participants took comfort in the idea that they could be vulnerable, and accompanied by undergraduates, as learners.

Participants also described the confidence produced by successfully navigating material that was new to them, confirming the well-established relationship between mastery experiences and self-efficacy development (Bandura, 1978; van Dinther et al., 2011). This means the affective experience of an “easy” curriculum can be ambivalent: frustrating from a value-for-investment perspective, reassuring from a competence-building perspective. We suggest that helping master's students recognise and articulate this ambivalence—rather than leaving them to experience it as evidence of possible institutional neglect—may be an important pedagogical intervention.

The benchmarking behaviour participants described is consistent with what is known about status passages: transitions in which an individual moves from one well-defined social category to another (Burton, 2020; Glaser & Strauss, 1971). Entering a master's program is one such passage, and the co-badged classroom provides an unusual opportunity for master's students to enact and rehearse that passage publicly by comparing themselves to students at the prior level. This comparison can consolidate the identity transition, but it requires design support. Without structured opportunities for reflection, the comparison may remain implicit or lead to discomfort rather than growth.

Research on graduate and professional identity development reinforces that these processes are context sensitive. Classroom experiences and social dynamics can support or undermine the

development of a scholarly identity (Corrales & Komperda, 2022; Liddell et al., 2014). In a co-badged course, where the master's student's advanced status is structurally visible but sometimes pedagogically invisible, the risk is that students feel simultaneously marked as different and inadequately recognised for that difference.

Belonging and Its Implications for Co-Badged Curricula

One observation that emerged in the analysis is that belonging underlies experiences coded across all three main themes, not only Social Inclusion. Statements like "I do belong," "at least I know that part of it," and "you are someone with prior knowledge" appeared within the Achievement, Praise, and Motivation section and carry both a belonging and an achievement quality. Participants were not just reporting competence but expressing relief at feeling legitimate. This is worth acknowledging as a limitation of the DSSHE framework; its categories attempt to separate what are, in lived experience, deeply interconnected dimensions of the postgraduate classroom.

It also suggests that Allen et al.'s (2021) distinction between cognitive belonging (knowing one fits) and affective belonging (feeling one fits) may be more entangled than the literature implies. In a co-badged course, a master's student who draws on prior knowledge in front of an undergraduate cohort simultaneously confirms their cognitive fit (I know this material) and their affective fit (I belong here, at this master's level). Achievement and belonging are co-produced in the co-badged environment in ways that may not operate as visibly in single-level cohorts, where advanced status is simply assumed rather than made visible through contrast.

This entanglement has direct implications for course design. When participants said they wanted "something extra" or to feel "more appreciated," they were not only describing an absence of academic challenge—they were describing an absence of acknowledgement that they belong to the more senior cohort. Ajjawi et al. (2020) find that exclusion from legitimate academic practice can undermine belonging even without overt rejection; participants who could not identify a distinctively postgraduate dimension to their learning were experiencing exactly this. They were also describing the hopeful, emotional journey that accompanied their search for acceptance. As educators, we must keep this in mind as we design co-badged curricula that support student wellbeing (White & Ingram, 2020, 2023).

Gravett et al. (2020) argue that belonging is constructed through everyday academic practices rather than conferred by enrolment, and our data show what those practices need to include: explicitly acknowledging the master's cohort as advanced, ensuring any separation from undergraduates is purposeful and explained, and providing at least one curriculum space where master's knowledge and experience are visibly of a different order. When these practices are absent, the only available belonging strategy is blending in, which participants described. Blending in produced a form of social inclusion, but by suspending rather than affirming the master's identity, it is a temporary comfort that may not sustain engagement over a full semester.

Graham (2022) and Matheson and Sutcliffe (2017) both find that belonging in postgraduate classrooms is cultivated through dialogic, participatory pedagogy that positions students as contributors; co-badged course design that includes such moments addresses cognitive and affective belonging simultaneously. Dialogic pedagogy in a co-badged classroom can be straightforward to include. For example, students might engage in a structured discussion activity

where master's students are explicitly invited to bring their prior professional or disciplinary experience to a problem that undergraduate students are approaching for the first time. When the activity is framed to need (rather than just permit) the master's student's contribution, the moment does double work: it both affirms advanced status and produces the reciprocal exchange that our study participants valued in their co-badged courses.

The Distinct Offering of the Co-Badged Course

Not all the valued practices participants described are unique to co-badged courses. Applied learning, instructor encouragement, and social connection can be present in any master's course. What is distinctive about co-badged courses—when they are designed intentionally—is the presence of a structurally different peer group that creates unique conditions for benchmarking, social learning (Bandura, 1977), and identity work.

Participants valued observing how undergraduates worked: their confidence, their teamwork habits, their different ways of thinking. Again, these dynamics reflect a form of co-learning that does not occur in single-level cohorts, consistent with McEwen et al.'s (2008) argument that co-learning communities that foreground student diversity can enrich and enliven educational experience.

Mixed-level cohorts can also, as our data show, provide larger social pools and greater diversity of background and experience than master's-only cohorts, which in Australia are often dominated by students from specific international markets. This diversity is both a social resource and a potential cultural learning opportunity, though it requires structured facilitation to fully realise the benefits. Prior research suggests that without transparent communication about the course structure, students may experience the co-badged arrangement as a surprise that signals institutional corner-cutting rather than deliberate design (Dodd, 2012; Milligan et al., 2018). The practical implication is straightforward: students need to know, before a course begins, that it is co-badged, why it is co-badged, and what that means for their learning experience.

The DSSHE-PGCW Co-Badged: An Adapted Framework for Master's Students in Co-Badged Courses

All components of the DSSHE framework were populated by participants' accounts, validating its utility as a tool for understanding what master's students find valuable. The adapted version, DSSHE-Postgraduate Coursework Co-badged (DSSHE-PGCW Co-badged, Appendix B) is refined to better capture the postgraduate experience and demonstrate the interconnectedness of the DSSHE determinants, particularly with respect to belonging. In Appendix B the revised framework is accompanied by notes for users.

The Usefulness determinant is validated without significant amendment, but our data show it carries explicit future-orientation for master's students: usefulness is assessed not just by whether content is interesting or relevant now, but by whether it will translate into professional or research advantage in the future. The usefulness of the larger cohort in a co-badged course is also noted here.

The Achievement, Praise, and Motivation determinant is expanded to encompass the development of self-efficacy as an advanced learner and the belonging and identity work associated with status passage. The revised Social Inclusion determinant encompasses the

formation of friendships and a sense of belonging within a course, alongside belonging to the university as a whole and belonging to an intellectual community of postgraduate learners—three forms of belonging that our participants described as distinct.

The Communication determinant is expanded to include communication of the structure and assessment of the classes in advance, reflecting the importance of framing and clear explanations of why and how the co-badged class will function.

The value for money determinant is modified to reflect the significant need of master's students to feel seen and acknowledged as belonging to an advanced group through the design and delivery of their course.

Some adaptations reflect modernisation of university practices that accompany technological improvements (e.g., expanding the Access determinant to include flexible scheduling and online availability). The data for this paper were collected before the widespread use of AI in coursework, and we assume that further refinement of the framework would include AI-related materials.

The DSSHE-PGCW Co-badged framework aligns more closely with postgraduate realities than the DSSHE, and we offer it as a tool for educators to use in designing valuable co-badged and single-cohort courses for master's students.

Conclusion

This study reveals that master's students in co-badged courses experience value through a complex blend of applied learning, emotional and intellectual connection, social recognition, and belonging. Co-badged courses are not inherently valuable or detrimental to master's students; their educational worth for students is shaped by design decisions. When designed intentionally, they can offer unique conditions for benchmarking, reciprocal co-learning, and identity development. When designed by administrative default, they risk leaving master's students feeling neither recognised nor adequately served.

To enhance the value of co-badged courses for master's students, educators should consider several key strategies:

1. Communicate the co-badged structure transparently before enrolment.
2. Facilitate introductions and structured connection between cohorts.
3. Design at least one explicitly postgraduate-level learning moment.
4. Differentiate assessment by depth and autonomy rather than workload.
5. Incorporate structured reflection that helps students interpret benchmarking experiences as part of developing competence and identity.

These principles are applicable wherever universities bring undergraduate and postgraduate students into the same classroom.

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The authors list the following CRediT contributions:

Khristine Grace Valdellon: Data curation, formal analysis, investigation, project administration, visualisation, writing – original draft; writing – review & editing

Lauren J. Carpenter: Formal analysis; writing – review & editing

Russell L. Taylor: Writing – review & editing

Susan L. Rowland: Conceptualisation, methodology, project administration, resources, supervision, validation, visualisation, writing – original draft; writing – review & editing

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Appendix A

The Determinants of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education (DSSHE)

Determinant	Definition (from Douglas et al., 2008, 2015)
Access	The service location is easy to navigate; staff are easy to contact.
Achievement, Praise, and Motivation	Students feel a sense of achievement and motivation, usually regarding something they have learned or achieved; includes positive, supportive comments and praise from staff.
Attentiveness (helpfulness), Availability, and Friendliness	Staff willingly provide help and support; they are interested in students and their learning needs.
Communication	The university communicates with students in a language they understand with clarity, completeness, and accuracy; staff listen to and understand the student; staff explain the service, costs, service/cost trade-off; students' problems are handled.
Social Inclusion	Students meet new friends and feel a sense of belonging on campus/to the cohort; includes social aspects of university.
Usefulness	The material stimulates student interest and is applicable at work or in real life; industry-based learning; students perceive their course/program as designed and delivered with an understanding of students' (customers') goals and needs.
Value for Money	Students feel the cost of their program, goods sold as part of the service, and any required extracurricular activities, are fair.

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Appendix B

DSSHE-PGCW Co-badged

Determinant	Definition	Notes
Access	The service location is easy to navigate. Staff are easy to contact. Learning activities are scheduled with flexibility. Learning materials and/or classes are available online. Postgraduate-specific resources and spaces are accessible.	Expanded to include flexible scheduling and online and/or asynchronous availability, which is especially important for master's students who may be working alongside their study. Also includes access to postgraduate-specific resources and spaces.
Achievement, Praise, and Motivation	Students feel a sense of achievement and motivation, usually regarding something they have learned or achieved. Staff provide positive, supportive comments and praise. Staff recognise the master's students' status as a cohort with distinct knowledge and experience. Students feel they are developing self-efficacy as a masters-level scholar and/or graduate.	Expanded to encompass the development of self-efficacy as a master's-level scholar and the identity work associated with status passage. Includes recognition of prior knowledge and professional experience as well as in-course achievement. Also encompasses the emotional and motivational dimensions of becoming an advanced learner—the felt sense of 'I do belong here' and 'I am capable of this.'
Attentiveness (helpfulness), Availability, and Friendliness	Staff willingly provide help and support. Staff are interested in students and their learning needs.	Unchanged in definition, but particularly salient for master's students who may feel uncertain about their legitimacy or worry about taking up staff time. Inclusive staff attitudes have a demonstrable emotional impact on this cohort.
Communication	The university communicates with students in a language they understand with clarity, completeness, and accuracy. Staff listen to and understand the student. The service, costs, service/cost trade-off are explained to the student. Students' problems are handled. Students are informed about the structure of classes in advance (including co-badging and	Expanded to include explicit communication about the co-badged structure itself—what it means, why it is used, and how master's and undergraduate assessment differs. Lack of this communication is a significant source of dissatisfaction.

Citation:

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differentiated pedagogy and assessment for cohorts within the class).

Social Inclusion	Students meet new friends and feel a sense of belonging on campus. Students feel a sense of belonging to the mixed undergraduate/postgraduate cohort. Students feel a sense of belonging to the University. Students feel they are legitimate intellectual members of the master's cohort.	Substantially expanded and refined to encompass three distinct dimensions of belonging identified in the data: 1. belonging within the course cohort (forming connections with both master's and undergraduate peers); 2. belonging at the university as an institution; and 3. belonging to an intellectual community of postgraduate scholars.
Usefulness	The material stimulates student interest and is applicable at work or in real life (may include industry-based learning). Students perceive their course/program as designed and delivered with an understanding of students' goals and needs, particularly as it pertains to their future study or employment. The course design helps students derive value from the presence of an additional cohort and/or large peer group.	Validated without substantive amendment. Particularly prominent for master's students, for whom usefulness is assessed not only in the present ("is this interesting?") but in a future-oriented way ("will this give me a professional or career advantage?"). Also encompasses the usefulness of co-learning with undergraduate and other postgraduate peers as a source of professional insight and network.
Value for money	Overall sense that the cost of the program is justified. Sense that the program offers something "extra" beyond the experience available in an undergraduate program.	Refined to reflect master's students' concern about whether co-badged study offers something "extra" relative to what an undergraduate student receives—a distinct postgraduate experience that justifies the significant financial investment. Includes the perceived value of postgraduate-specific assessment complexity and autonomy.
