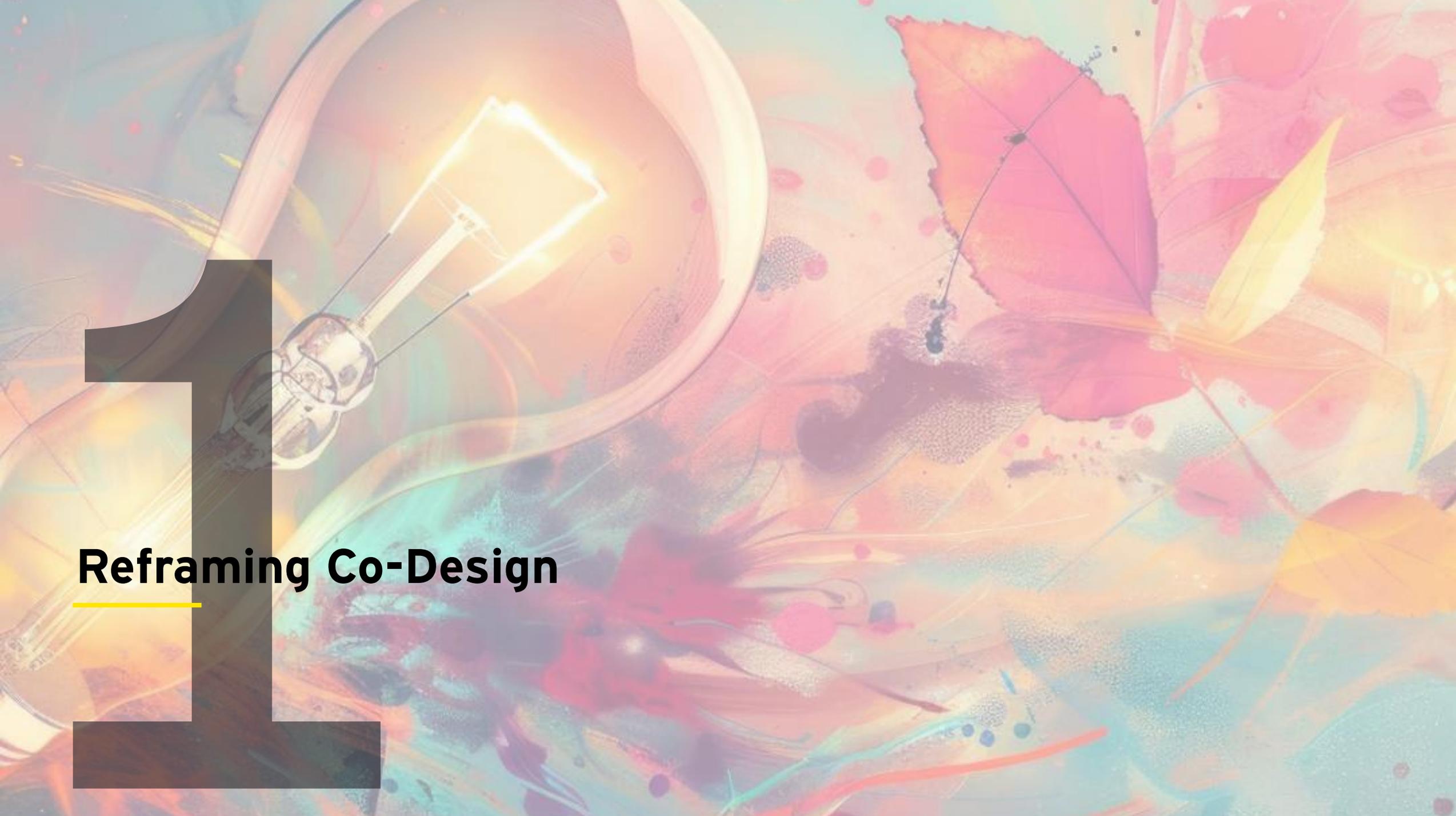# Co-design as a driver of adaptive and learning-oriented institutions

A capability for institutional transformation in complex environments

December 11, 2025

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Reframing Co-Design

The Complexity Challenge

Traditional approaches fail because:

Institutional challenges now emerge at the **intersections of multiple domains**
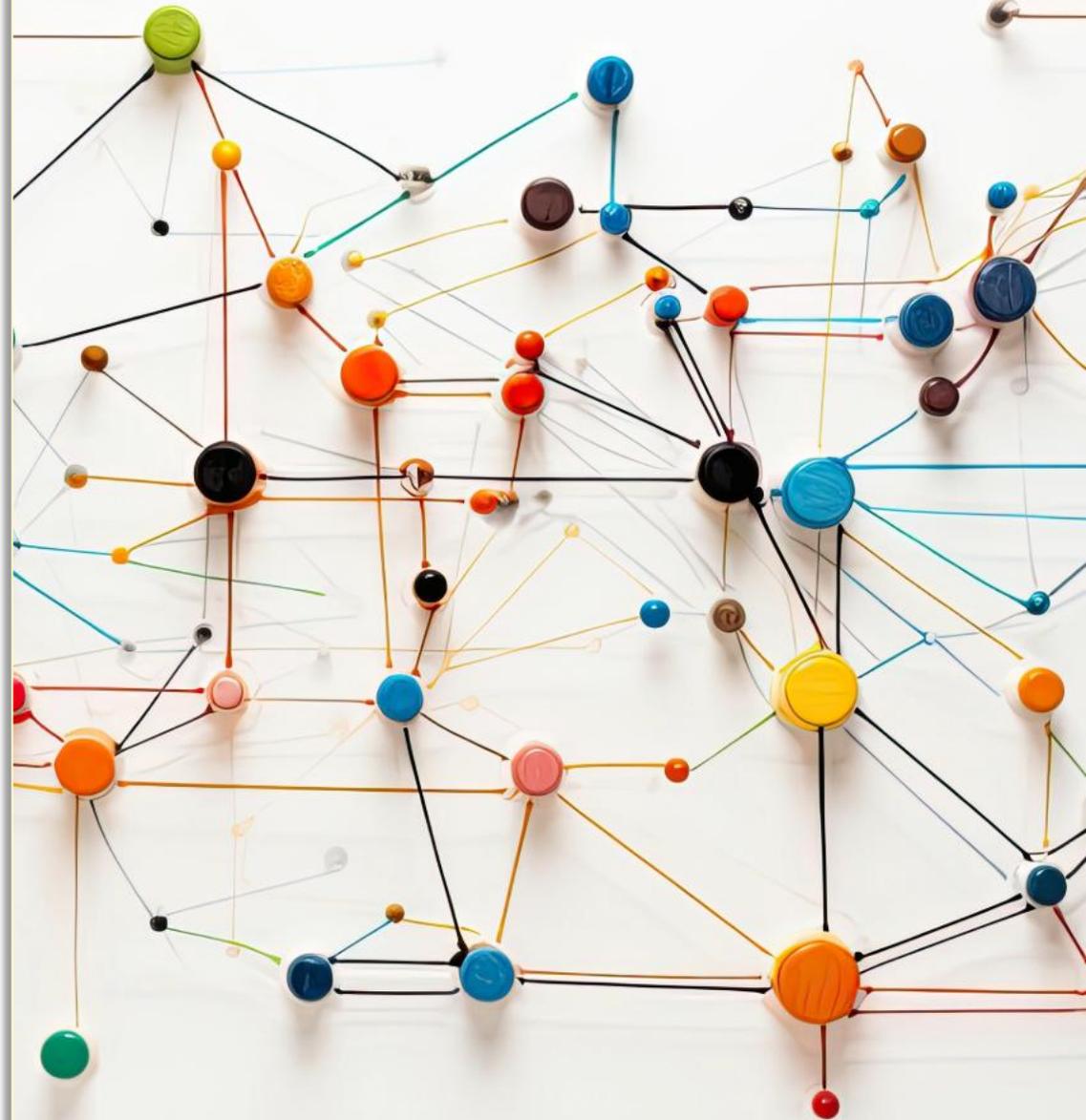
Problems are shaped by **interdependence** and rapidly shifting expectations

Linear planning and top-down coordination **cannot engage with this complexity**

*In environments where **problems** evolve through **interactions** between **actors, systems** and **constraints**, the key bottleneck is rarely the lack of expertise. It is the **lack of shared sense-making**.*

What do we mean by co-design?

Structured interpretation

Co-design structures how diverse actors participate in shaping the meaning of a problem; how it is framed, how constraints are understood, and how realistic possibilities are explored collectively.

Deliberative nature

It is a process built around thoughtful, shared inquiry rather than the episodic collection of inputs. What matters is not gathering opinions, but cultivating a deeper, more accurate understanding.

Iterative Sense-making

Co-design unfolds through cycles of interpretation and refinement. Understanding evolves as assumptions are challenged, perspectives compared, and implications tested together.

Systemic awareness

Because institutions are interdependent systems, co-design makes visible how problems are experienced across layers, how decisions reverberate elsewhere, and where hidden tensions or disconnects emerge.

Beyond Openness

Co-design goes further than welcoming diverse voices: it enables institutions to understand why perspectives differ, what each actor sees from their position, and how these views can be integrated into a coherent picture.
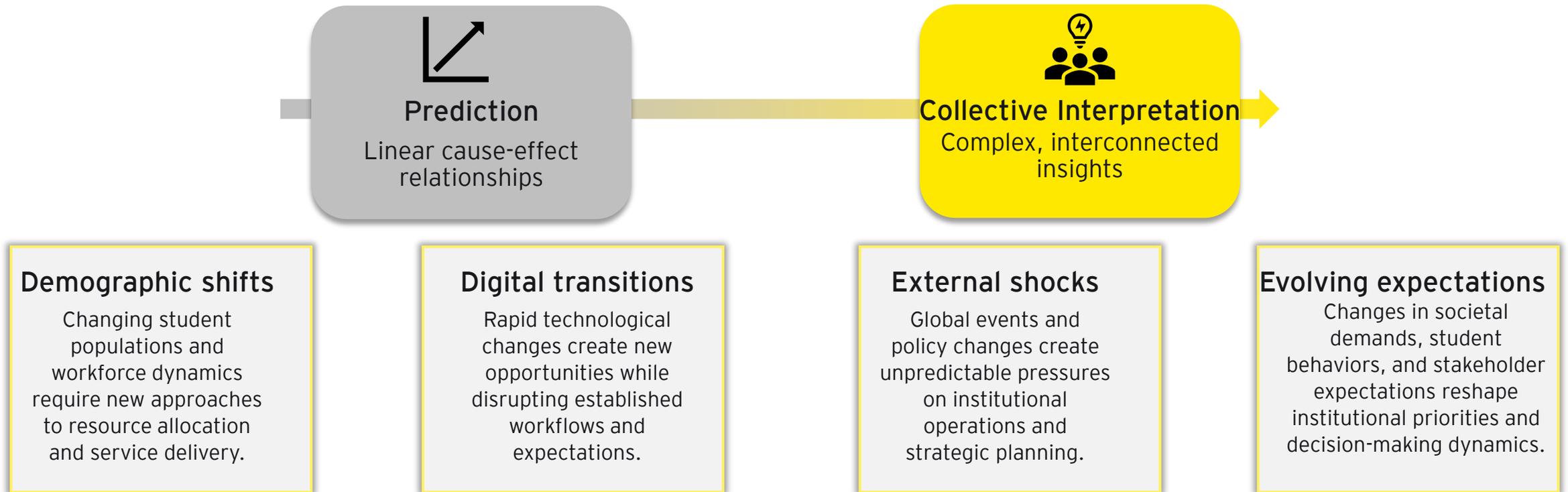
Co-Ownership of meaning

Rather than involving people in a pre-defined process, co-design invites them to take responsibility for shaping the shared interpretation that will anchor future decisions, strengthening alignment and legitimacy.
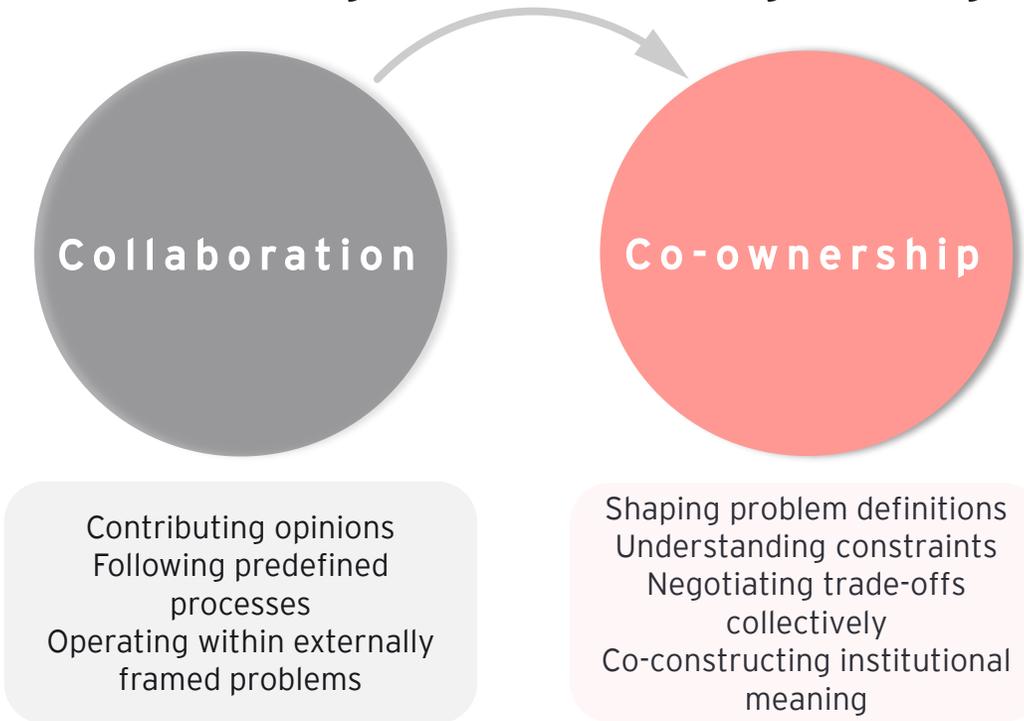
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Why Now?

Institutional environments face conditions where multiple factors interact in unpredictable ways, shifting decision-making focus from **prediction** to **collective interpretation**.

Prediction
Linear cause-effect relationships

Collective Interpretation
Complex, interconnected insights

Demographic shifts
Changing student populations and workforce dynamics require new approaches to resource allocation and service delivery.

Digital transitions
Rapid technological changes create new opportunities while disrupting established workflows and expectations.

External shocks
Global events and policy changes create unpredictable pressures on institutional operations and strategic planning.

Evolving expectations
Changes in societal demands, student behaviors, and stakeholder expectations reshape institutional priorities and decision-making dynamics.

In such dynamic contexts, decision-making relies less on prediction and more on collective interpretation. Co-design provides the necessary interpretative infrastructure, revealing hidden tensions, friction points, and opportunities.

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From Collaboration to Co-ownership

Redistribution of agency: from contributing to co-constructing meaning

Collaboration

Co-ownership

Contributing opinions
Following predefined processes
Operating within externally framed problems

Shaping problem definitions
Understanding constraints
Negotiating trade-offs collectively
Co-constructing institutional meaning

The Shift

Collaboration asks people to contribute to a process defined elsewhere.

Co-ownership asks them to participate in how the problem is understood, not only how solutions are generated.

Benefits of Co-Ownership:

- Enhances **legitimacy** through shared understanding

- Improves **alignment** on complex challenges

- Strengthens **implementation** through collective ownership

When people participate in constructing the meaning of an issue, their commitment to the decisions that follow is not only higher – it is more resilient, because it is anchored in shared understanding rather than compliance.

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Co-Design as strategic lever

🔄 **Replaces sequential analysis with perspective interaction**, where clarity emerges from the encounter between academic, administrative, operational and community-facing viewpoints

🔍 **Surfaces latent structural tensions** (e.g., ambition vs resources, desired experience vs operational capacity) before they solidify into decisions

🧩 **Challenges inherited assumptions and expectations**, revealing what the institution believes versus what it can sustain

🧠 **Reshapes the cognitive architecture** from which strategy emerges, making institutional priorities more grounded, coherent and resilient to uncertainty

Co-design does not deliver a more participatory version of the same strategy. It reshapes the cognitive architecture from which strategy emerges.

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Co-design & adaptive institutions

Co-design becomes organizational metabolism for exploring uncertainties and sustaining transformation through collective adaptability.

Interpreting emerging signals collectively

Co-design enables groups across the institution to read emerging behaviours, tensions and patterns together, transforming scattered observations into shared insight.

Making assumptions and routines visible

Institutions surface the implicit theories of action that shape daily work. Misalignments between formal processes and lived practice become visible, enabling more accurate understanding of how the system really functions.

Transforming friction into insight

Inconsistencies and tensions are not treated as anomalies to be corrected but as indicators of institutional evolution. Co-design turns these frictions into shared insights about what is changing and why.

Building distributed interpretative capacity

Interpretation is no longer concentrated at the top of the organisation but becomes a shared activity. This distributed sense-making strengthens the institution's ability to update its understanding of itself and to adapt with coherence over time.

The real reframing: co-design as a capability, not a moment

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EMERGING PARADIGMS

From decision-making to consequence-making

## Decision-Making Focus

Single-point decisions

Focused on final decisions or immediate impacts

Linear Logic

Assumes that cause–effect relationships are predictable and controllable from a single vantage point.

Implementation as afterthought

Consequences across organisational layers, stakeholder groups and cultural expectations are considered too late or only when problems emerge.
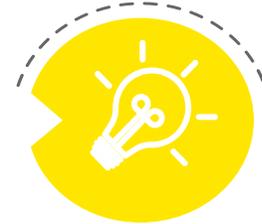
Consequence-Making

Distributed interpretations

Consequences are understood as emerging across roles, layers and expectations, requiring multiple perspectives to fully anticipate them.

Ripple-aware foresight

Attention shifts from the decision itself to its second-order effects, which propagate in ways not visible from one position alone.

Co-design as early visibility

Those who will live the consequences participate early, surfacing friction points and revealing hidden interdependencies before implementation.

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From consensus to coherence

In contemporary institutional environments:

- ⊗ **Consensus** is often unrealistic and leads to mere accommodation

- ⊘ **Coherence** aligns strategic priorities with operational constraints

- 💡 **Co-design** constructs **shared comprehension** rather than forcing agreement

Studies on international organizations, such as Gould's 2016 analysis of 219 Intergovernmental Organizations, highlight how **coherence is now more critical for success than unanimity.**

Consensus
Seeking agreement on decisions

Coherence
Aligning interpretations across the system

Interdependence as a structural condition

Institutional systems are **porous** - decisions create ripple effects across domains

Interdependencies are not **anomalies** but a structural condition of the environment

Co-design **makes hidden dependencies visible** rather than eliminating them

In complex systems, decisions do not conclude a process, they begin one. Their consequences propagate across organizational layers, stakeholder groups and cultural expectations in ways that are often difficult to anticipate.

Research: Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) on policy implementation

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Expanding the knowledge base
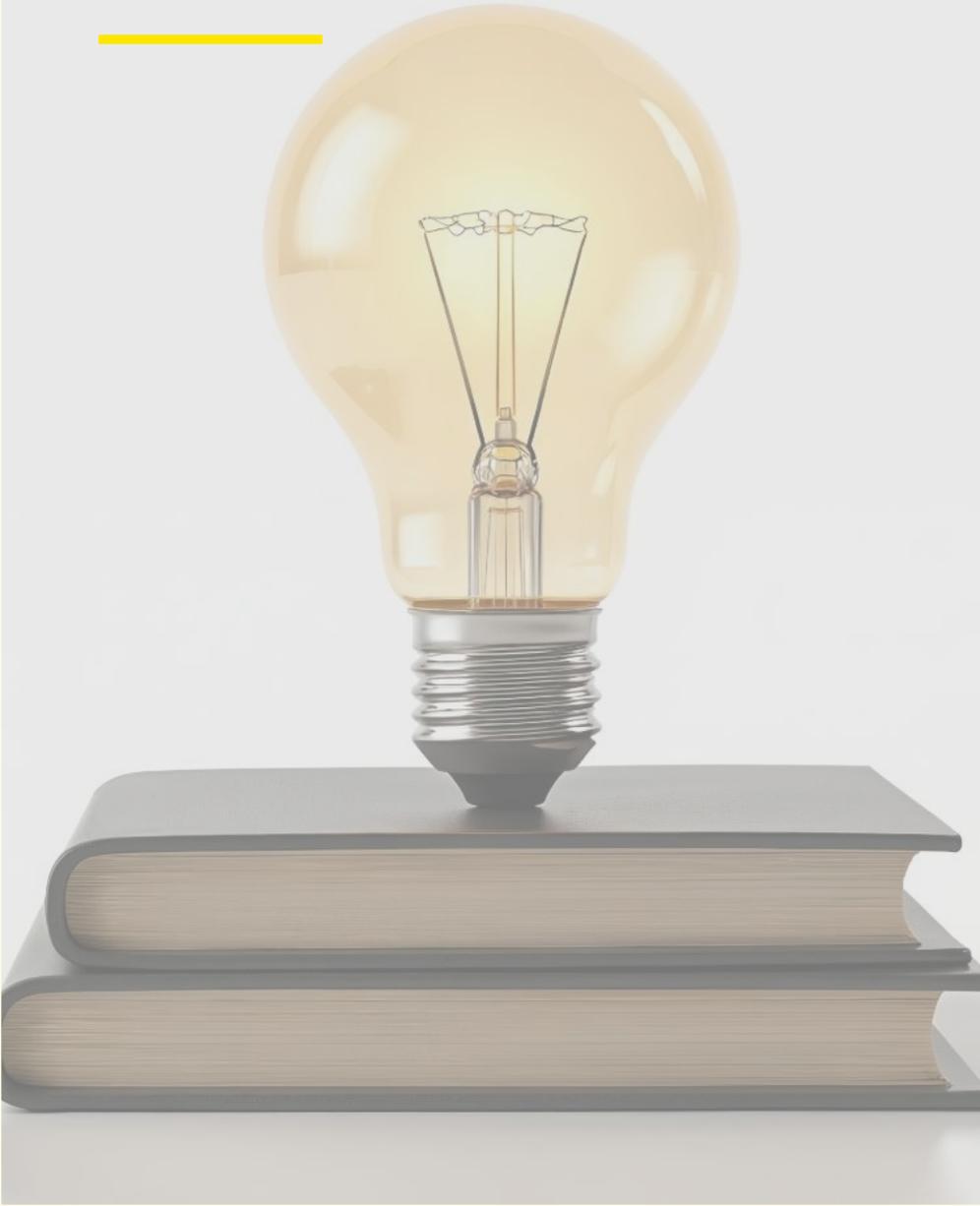
Integrating diverse knowledge forms:

Co-design integrates **technical expertise** with experiential, operational, and interpretive knowledge

Brings together diverse perspectives from **multiple system layers**

Strengthens expertise by **testing assumptions** and exposing blind spots

*This approach allows institutions to **ground decisions in operational reality**, thereby **strengthening expertise** by embedding it within a **broader constellation of knowledge**.*

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AI-Augmented Co-Design

Expanding Interpretative Space

AI as **generative partner** in early-stage sensemaking

Produces **alternative visualizations** and counterfactual ideas

Helps challenge assumptions and explore **multiple interpretations**

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS
- Risk of over-trusting algorithmic suggestions
- Models may reproduce dominant patterns over minority perspectives
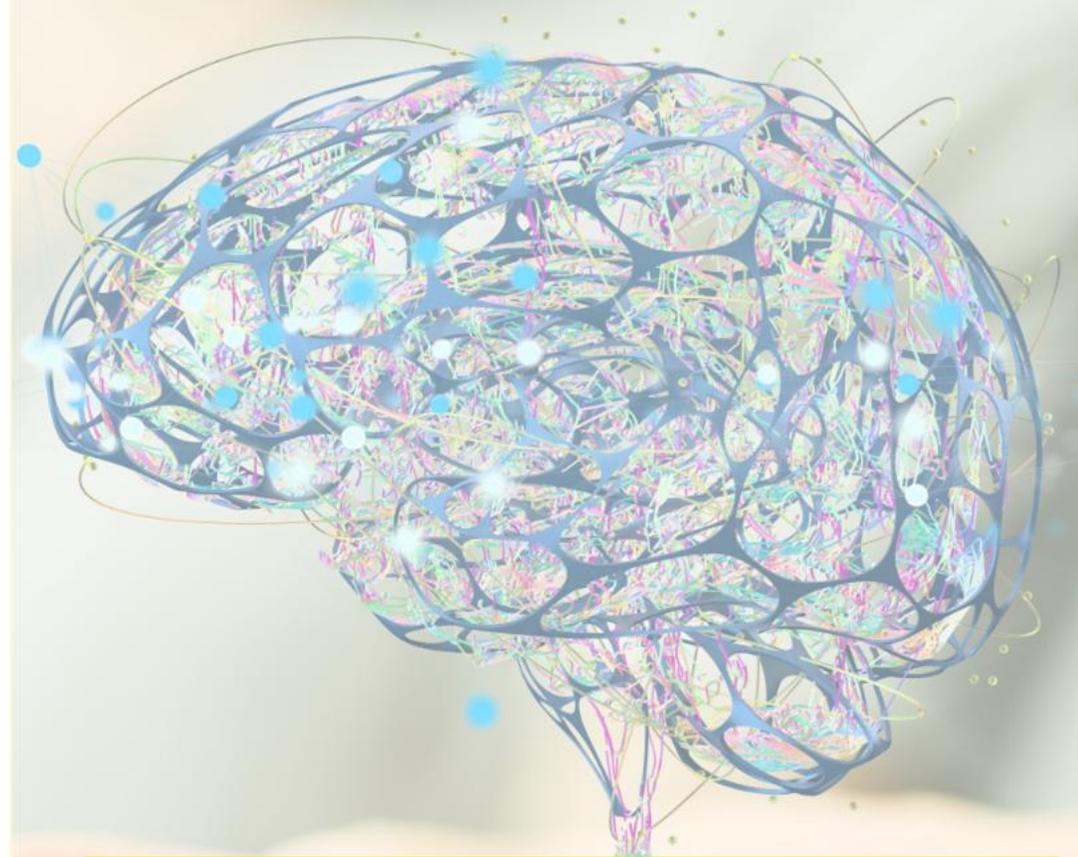
AI-augmented co-design does not simplify complexity but makes more of it visible, strengthening reflexive dimensions by expanding what an institution can see, question, and learn from

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Systemic co-design across boundaries and inclusive design ecosystems
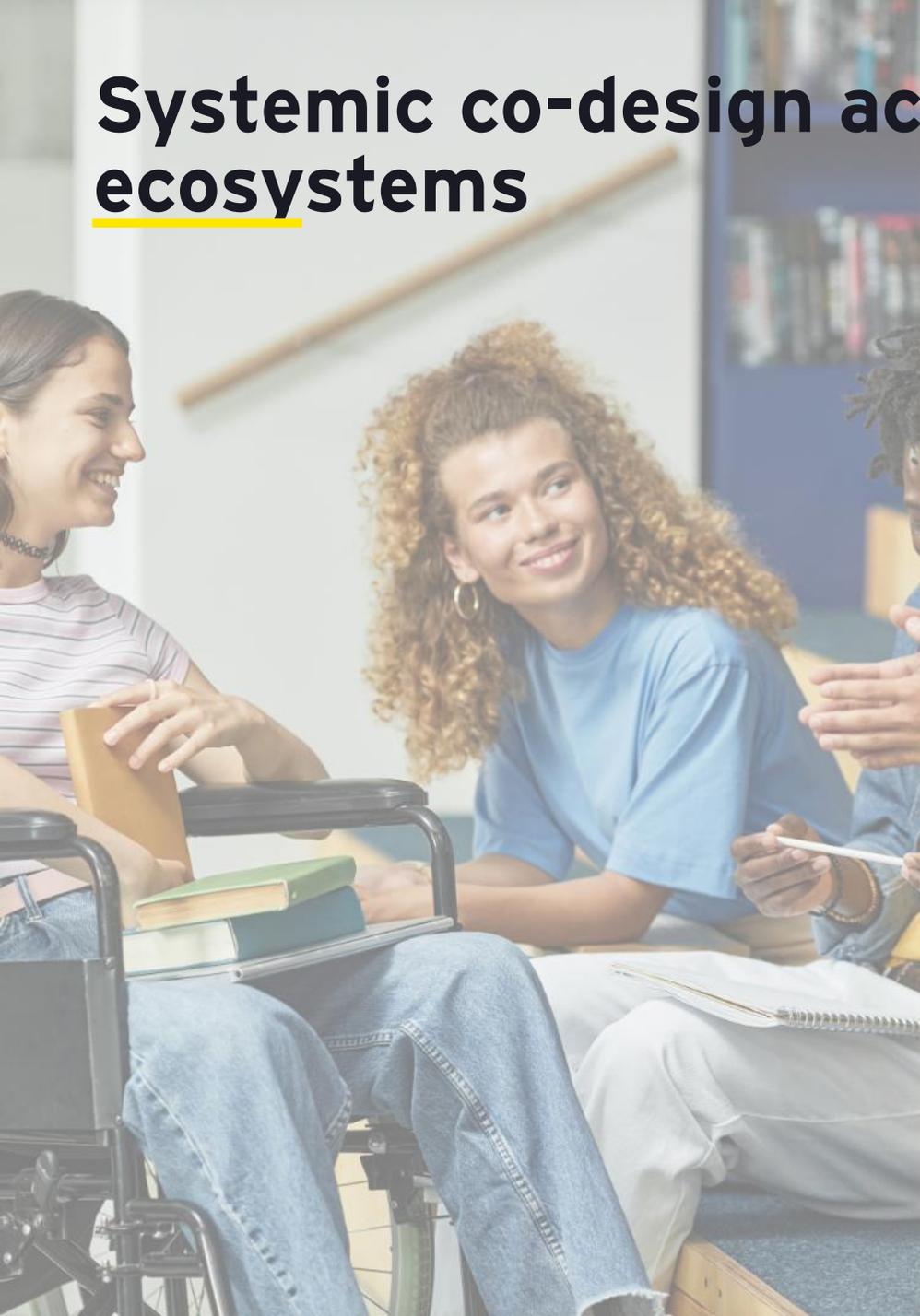
KEY INSIGHTS

Institutional challenges emerge at the boundaries of different systems and contexts.

Systems become difficult to govern when those who experience their frictions are absent from decision-making.

Systemic co-design reframes these interfaces as design environments, not consultation points.

Inclusion is not an ethical add-on but a condition for interpretive accuracy.

Systemic and inclusive co-design work together: one makes system interconnections visible, the other ensures they are interpreted through the full diversity of lived experiences.

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INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND CASES

University of Edinburgh

An institutional attempt at co-design and curriculum rethinking

Curriculum Transformation - Strategy 2030 Development

KEY ELEMENTS

Co-design explicitly used to shape the Student Vision, curriculum design principles and curricular architecture

Cross-role engagement involving academic staff, students, professional services and external partners

Recognition that the curriculum carries institutional, disciplinary and social meanings that need to be interpreted collectively

Co-design gives institutions a way to observe the implications of their choices before these choices are stabilised as decisions.

What this makes visible about co-design

- Co-design becomes a way to surface how different groups experience and interpret inclusivity, access and representation within the curriculum

- The relationship between design and DEIB becomes explicit: decisions about structure and purpose have distributive consequences

- Engaging multiple voices reveals where existing practices constrain equity or reinforce implicit norms

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University of Leeds

Institutional re-examination of programmes and curricular architecture

Curriculum Redefined

CASE

KEY ELEMENTS

Facilitated design days involving Heads of School, programme leads, academic staff and students, working with shared data packs (enrolment, NSS, institutional frameworks) to examine how programmes function.

A dedicated Learning Design Team uses people-centred design and co-creation methods to guide programme teams.

Co-design creates the conditions for distributing interpretative work across roles, allowing programme decisions to emerge from collective rather than individual reasoning.

What this makes visible about co-design

- Co-design becomes a way for institutions to work with multiple forms of evidence—data, lived experience and disciplinary expectations.

- Engaging contributions at scale shows the need for institutional mechanisms able to translate heterogeneous inputs into choices that can travel across layers of decision-making.

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Cross-case insights

What these cases collectively show is that co-design reveals deeper insights about institutional challenges and solutions

Strengthens interpretative capacity
Provides institutions with a more accurate understanding of the *real* problems they face, moving beyond formal definitions to the complex realities on the ground

Surfaces systemic consequences
Makes visible the ripple effects that decisions will trigger across various roles, units, processes, and constraints within the system

Builds coherence through shared comprehension
Highlights divergent interpretations and facilitates the construction of a coherent understanding among diverse stakeholders, rather than simply reaching consensus

### Integrates separated forms of knowledge
Brings together technical expertise, operational insight, experiential knowledge, and institutional memory, expanding what counts as relevant knowledge

Co-design gives institutions the ability to see themselves more clearly.
And in complex environments, that clarity is what enables coherent, deliberate and sustainable change.

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INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The institutional mind
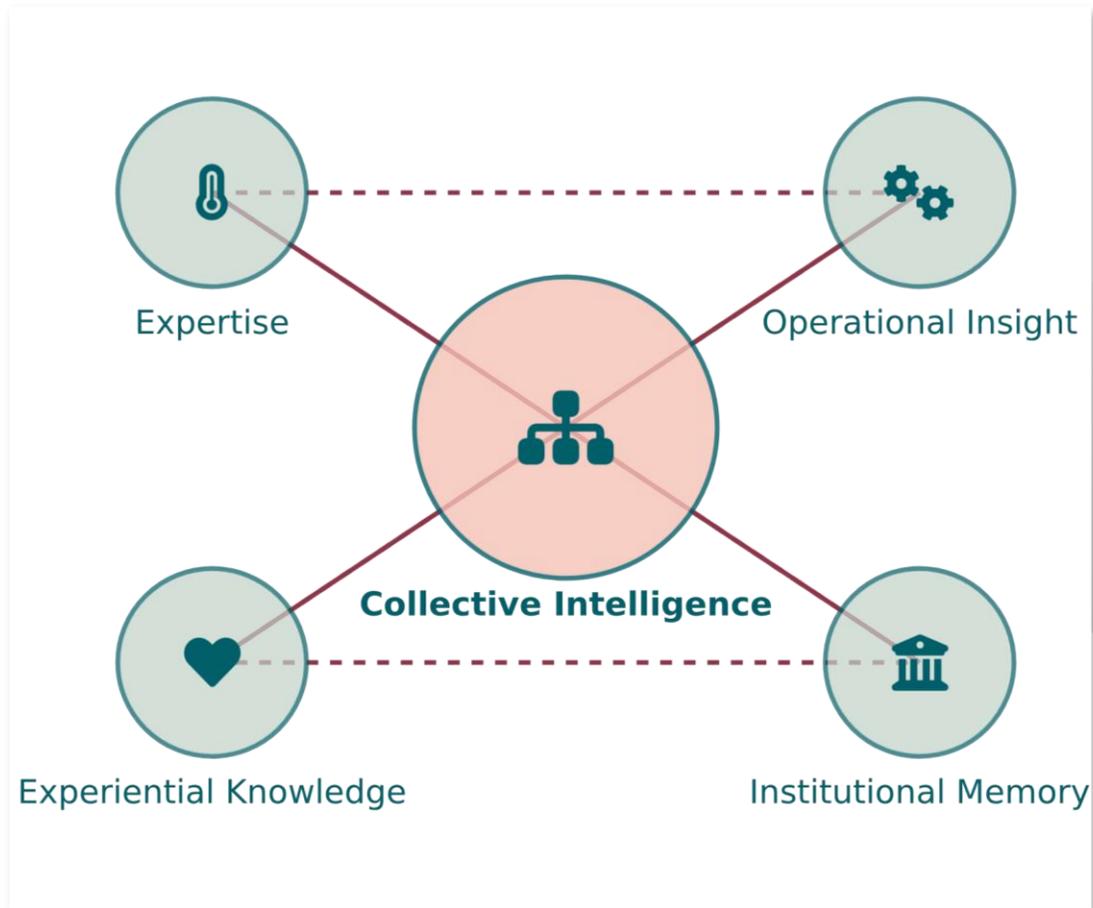
Co-design as collective intelligence

Equips institutions with a **more comprehensive, collective intelligence** for interpreting complex systems

Transforms **shared capacity to interpret** into clarity, coherence, and responsibility

Enables **purposeful action** in environments of interdependence and uncertainty

Strengthens **institutional cognitive resilience** by enabling shared interpretation even beyond the co-design moment.

Co-design is not about giving people a voice; it is about giving the institution a more complete mind. In environments defined by interdependence and uncertainty, this collective mind becomes the foundation for acting with clarity, coherence and responsibility.

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THANK YOU!

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