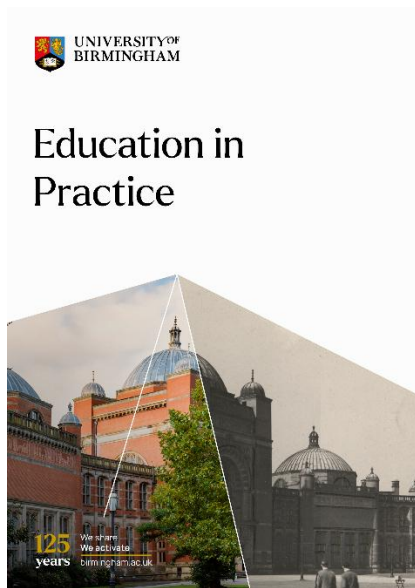




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Inclusion in higher education and a role for stakeholder co-production in assessment and feedback: a neurodiversity example

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Abstract

Higher education institutions face many demands in providing inclusive, well-rounded educational environments that positively impact students from diverse backgrounds and with varied lived experiences. Examples of this include representing diverse perspectives and under-represented scholars in the materials they provide (Tsourapas, 2020), and following principles of diversity and inclusion in their workforce recruitment (Fradella, 2018). Such practices ensure that students from all backgrounds feel represented by key figures in their higher education environment. Another demand is embedding regular formative assessment and feedback, allowing teachers to gather information about current student performance and identify provisions for furthering learning (Morris et al., 2021). Whilst both have become education ‘hot topics’ in recent years, more work is needed to feed principles of inclusivity and representation into the design and implementation of assessment and feedback – an emerging focus in recent research (e.g., Tai et al., 2023a, 2023b). In this piece, I argue that these two areas of practice can work in parallel to provide learning and assessment environments that are rigorous, inclusive and promote equity in student development. A worked example will be presented for stakeholder co-production in formative assessment design and delivery, for a course on neurodiversity.

The higher education teaching and learning context

Higher education (HE) contexts for students in the 21st century aim to go beyond simple acquisition of knowledge and student academic achievement. They provide scientific and cultural environments in which students learn to critically appraise societal challenges and their solutions within a specific discipline, whilst developing transferable skills required to meet the rapidly evolving job market (UNESCO, 2023). In doing this, HE teaching should provide up-to-date, unbiased evaluation of historical and contemporary evidence, recognising a diversity of perspectives and solutions to problems. Psychology is a discipline in which this is becoming increasingly common practice, with growing involvement of community stakeholders (e.g., those with lived

experience of mental health difficulties or forms of neurodivergence¹, such as autism and ADHD).

This shift reflects the changing demographics of the UK HE student body: over a quarter of students are from Global Majority² backgrounds (Higher Education Students Statistics Agency, 2026), and an estimated one in seven prospective students consider themselves to be autistic and/or have ADHD (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024). The University of Birmingham's student body reflects this diversity and growing internationalisation. In 2022/23, 41% of students were non-UK domiciled, positioning Birmingham mid-range among Russell Group providers, and around 35% were from Global Majority backgrounds — above the 25% national average and among the highest of non-London Russell Group institutions, with the largest share from Asian communities. The proportion of Overseas students has since risen, peaking at 45% in 2024. Given this, it is important that principles of inclusion and diverse voices are embedded in HE teaching and assessment design that reflects this growing diversity.

Representation of, and co-production with, stakeholders in HE

Co-production describes activities in which public service agents (e.g., HE teachers) and citizens (e.g., HE students) jointly contribute to the development of public services such as HE teaching. In the HE context, academics act as professionals and students or community stakeholders as volunteers in improving academic services (Ostrom, 1999; Parks et al., 1981). In psychology and applied health, this has included the co-production of academic research on mental health and applied health (Green, 2016; Lambert & Carr, 2018), psychosis (Jakobsson et al., 2023), autism (Pickard et al., 2021; Stark et al., 2021) and ADHD (Shimabukuro, 2023). In these examples, stakeholders engage in shared decision-making with researchers on the conceptualisation, implementation and interpretation of the research that ultimately impacts their community. Given the historical trauma and resulting mistrust in academic settings experienced by many marginalised communities (e.g., the autism community; den Houting et al., 2021), such involvement pushes power away from academics towards the community (see Figure 1), improving research quality, relevance and impact (Forsythe et al., 2019). In some contexts, this has even led to co-produced best practice guidelines for participatory research with specific stakeholder groups (e.g., den Houting, 2021; see also the [University of Birmingham, School of Psychology Autism Research Best Practice Guidelines](#) (Davis and Sowden-Carvalho, 2024)).

¹ Neurodivergence refers to individuals differing in neural or cognitive function from what is considered typical or normal. Neurodivergent conditions include Autism/Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia and Tourette's Syndrome (TS) as well as others.

² The term Global Majority refers to people who are Black, Asian, brown, dual-heritage, or indigenous, making up roughly 80% to 85% of the total human population. It is used as an empowering alternative to phrases like "ethnic minority" or "non-white".

In the HE *teaching* context, this power balance between academics and students is similarly vital for student belonging, learning and development. For example, inspired by UK student-led online campaigns such as ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ (Peters, 2015) and ‘Why isn’t my Professor Black?’ (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018), there are now calls for decolonising university curricula (Bhambra et al., 2018; Elhinnawy, 2022). This involves not only adapted curriculum content that reflects more diverse academic and lived experience perspectives, but also actively challenging prevailing ideological positions that privilege just a handful of voices. Without this, students from marginalised backgrounds report feeling isolated or alienated in their own learning environment (Elhinnawy, 2022).

There are, however, successful examples of university curricula being reshaped through co-production with student stakeholders (e.g., Crilly et al., 2020, Hall et al., 2021). Examples from the University of Birmingham include the co-production of a [best practice guide for LGBTQ inclusivity in HE](#) (Ward and Gale, 2016); the School of Education’s [Decolonising the Curriculum Toolkit](#) (Levett and Naseem, 2023); and an intervention to increase Black, Asian and Global Majority representation in children’s literature within HE teacher training (O’Leary et al., 2024). These examples demonstrate the potential of professional-stakeholder partnerships across HE.

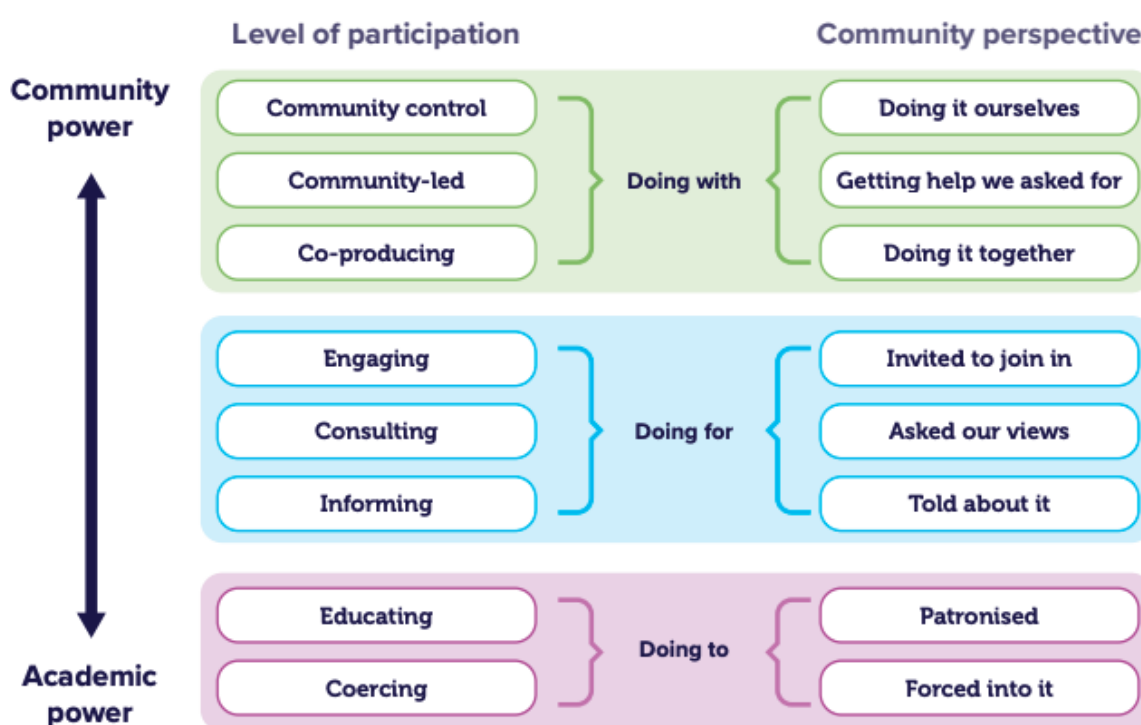


Figure 1: The hierarchy of community participation in academic research (taken from den Houting, 2021). Community power and involvement in the research process increases from bottom to top.

A further example concerns accommodations for neurodivergent individuals (e.g., those with diagnosed or self-identified autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia

and more) in HE. Neurodivergent students often face difficulties accessing or remaining in HE because academic environments, staff, and teaching/assessment styles are insufficiently flexible or accommodating, or because professionals lack understanding of their needs (Cage & Howes, 2020; Sarrett, 2018). Many autistic students and researchers are, however, capable of advocating for their own support needs. University of Birmingham academics, for example, have produced video resources on supporting autistic students in HE through extensive community consultation (MacLeod et al., 2020). Moreover, a report by autistic academics (Dwyer et al., 2023) similarly recommends viewing neurodivergence through an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion lens, appointing neurodivergent people into leadership positions, and consulting autistic people directly on their accessibility requirements.

Similar co-design efforts are emerging at earlier stages of education, with autistic-co-designed curricular beginning to appear in primary schools (Zahir et al., 2024). Within HE teaching specifically, one accessible step is to spotlight the work of neurodivergent researchers/contributors and to challenge historical ideologies developed without insight from the autism community (e.g., Dwyer et al., 2021). This could be by teaching content derived from journals that require reporting on community consultation and neurodivergent contribution throughout the publication process (e.g., *Autism and Autism in Adulthood*), or referencing scholars who identify openly as autistic in their work and via social media initiatives such as '#ActuallyAutistic'. Finally, lessons can also be drawn from initiatives to represent diverse voices of the autistic community in public-facing educational materials, such as the U21 Autism Research Network's '[How to talk about autism](#)' guidelines (Keating et al., 2023) and the [U21 Autism Research Network engagement event](#).

In sum, it is essential that students feel included, represented and respected in their HE environment. Whilst inclusive assessment is becoming more of a HE focus (e.g., [QAA Inclusive Assessment Toolkit](#), 2022), university curriculum co-creation has been more focused on curriculum content and delivery. This piece will now consider the importance of stakeholder engagement in HE assessment and feedback.

Inclusivity of HE assessment and feedback

The UK Equality Act (2010) provides a legal framework to eliminate discrimination and promote equality across society, including HE, where it holds that all students should have equal access to academic achievement. One route to this is through inclusive assessment: *“the design and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential what they know, understand and can do”* (Higher Education Academy; Hockings, 2010, p.2). However, Nieminen (2022) cautions that this framing treats inclusion narrowly, as simply “enhanced academic outcomes”. He instead proposed “assessment for inclusion” – positioning assessment as a tool for promoting marginalised students’ full, agentic inclusion in the academic community, not just improved grades. This framing speaks directly to the co-production approach advocated in this piece.

Formative assessments – whereby students submit work that allows their teacher to assess current knowledge without a numerical grade, ahead of a later summative assessment – has become a popular way of providing constructive feedback in HE (Morris et al., 2021). These low-stakes, ungraded assessments allow students to exert autonomy in the learning process (Freire, 2000), seemingly making the overall assessment process more inclusive. However, UK National Student Survey data continues to show discrepancies in reported fairness of HE assessment and feedback between white students and those from Global Majority backgrounds, and lower positivity scores around assessment for disabled compared to non-disabled students (Office for Students (OfS), 2025).

Crucially, research also suggests formative assessment can lack inclusivity for neurodivergent learners specifically (Ravet, 2012). This is because formative assessment relies on an interactive process whereby students demonstrate understanding for teachers to identify each learner's next steps – a process which makes what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) termed 'majoritarian' assumptions about the learning style of the average student. Students who learn or demonstrate understanding differently are consequently excluded from the benefits of formative assessment. HE courses, which will likely see high rates of neurodivergence (and other minoritised identities) among their student population, may therefore need to take active steps (e.g., MacLeod et al., 2020) to ensure their formative assessment and feedback are designed to benefit all students equally. For example, co-design with student stakeholders which builds choice, flexibility and shared authorship directly into assessment design rather than relying on individual accommodations afterwards (Tai et al., 2023b).

Call to action: Educational enhancement to boost inclusivity of assessment and feedback

The challenge

As identified above, HE institutions are under increasing pressure to (1) ensure assessment processes are accessible and inclusive of all students, and (2) promote equity in access to academic achievement through formative feedback. So far, however, few HE programmes have created formative feedback opportunities co-designed with key stakeholders. This is particularly true for neurodivergent experiences of HE; incorporating lived experience into assessment design, marking criteria and feedback would take one more step towards neurodiversity-inclusive practices that may ultimately benefit all students.

The solution

A suggested solution, addressing the challenges identified above, is to carry out an education enhancement activity within a UK HE setting, whereby community stakeholders (e.g., those with lived experience of neurodivergence – autism, ADHD,

dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and/or Tourette's syndrome) co-design and help implement formative assessment and feedback suited to their community's needs. Through an iterative process, teachers share and adapt learning goals and summative assessment requirements alongside student stakeholders, developing formative assessment and feedback processes that meet the needs of both learners and teachers. Non-academic, lived experience community members can also be trained to evaluate formative submissions and deliver feedback, closing this assessment co-delivery loop. This approach aligns with Tai et al.'s (2023a) characterisation of inclusive assessment design as embedding choice, flexibility and co-design directly into assessment structures, rather than relying on case-by-case accommodations. It also builds on existing institutional precedents, such as the University of Plymouth's "Seven Steps to Inclusive Assessment" (University of Plymouth, n.d.), which similarly calls for early, systematic consideration of diverse student needs in assessment design.

A worked example

An ideal testbed for this initiative is the University of Birmingham's School of Psychology Master's course in *Developmental Science and Neurodiversity*. The *Neurodiversity* module, which welcomed its first cohort of students in October 2023, teaches the changing landscape of neurodiversity research in the UK and internationally, drawing on a range of perspectives from academics, service-providers and individuals with lived experience of neurodivergence. Having attracted a high number of neurodivergent students since launch, the programme has an increased need for transparent, accessible and inclusive teaching and assessment to enable all students to succeed. Teachers have already taken steps to decolonise the curriculum and to spotlight the voices of historically marginalised, intersectional neurodivergent scholars (e.g., [Dr Monique Botha](#), [Dr Morénike Giwa Onaiwu](#) and [Tumi Sotire](#)) in course content, and students can draw on their own lived experience through anonymous discussion boards.

University lived experience panels, now seen at a number of institutions, offer an ideal means of bringing in the voices of those with lived experience to co-design assessment procedures and deliver formative feedback that is endorsed by these traditionally underrepresented individuals. The aforementioned Master's programme draws on expertise from the University of Birmingham's *Birmingham Psychology Autism Research Team (B-PART) Consultancy Committee* – a panel of experts by experience comprising individuals with lived experience of autism from the UK (e.g., individuals with an autism diagnosis and/or experience as the main carer of an autistic individual, as well as other intersecting neurodivergent identities). The panel provides invaluable input on the design, implementation and dissemination of research carried out within the School of Psychology, much of which has made it into the course curriculum, taught by academics leading that research. Beyond this, many panel members have personal lived experience studying in HE, which has recently informed

co-design of academic teaching practices to be inclusive and accessible for neurodivergent learners.

Lived experience community members contributed to the design of the *Neurodiversity* end of module assessment. Each year, two lived experience community members evaluate formative submissions and provide written feedback for students. The assignment invites students to write a research project proposal, including an accessible community summary, stakeholder impact assessment and timeline of stakeholder engagement. Lived experience markers focus their feedback on each proposal's accessibility for the community concerned by the research, the suitability and depth of the impact assessment, and the value of the engagement activities presented. Students then meet with a course lead to discuss implementing this feedback into their summative end-of-module assignment.

The assignment allows students' own lived experience to feed into assignment content, levelling the playing field for those often penalised for not meeting 'neuronormative'³ expectations of assignment style and content – echoing the majoritarian assumptions discussed earlier (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). The process overall facilitates an accessible assessment enhancement opportunity for neurodivergent students, allowing the voices of the neurodivergent community, as well as the (often) neurotypical teaching staff, to feed into the evaluation of student work. This process has been successfully implemented across two cohorts of the MSc Developmental Science and Neurodiversity programme.

Measuring success

To evaluate whether such an initiative improves neurodivergent students' experiences of assessment and feedback, success would ideally be measured via pre- and post-intervention changes in end-of-module ratings. As these were unavailable for the current course, given it was a new module entirely, we instead compared formative feedback experiences across modules with and without co-produced formative assessment. We also compared a small group of neurodivergent and neurotypical students' experiences, to confirm the initiative creates equity without disadvantaging either group — reflecting evidence that inclusive assessment benefits all students (Tai et al., 2023a, 2023b). Qualitative feedback was also considered. These measures align with QAA benchmarked guidelines for assessing effectiveness in HE (QAA, 2024).

Initial feedback from 2 neurodivergent and 2 neurotypical students supports the initiative's success. All students rated formative feedback on the *Neurodiversity* module highly (4.0/4.0 for "*helped me to learn*"), while neurodivergent students rated their experience of formative feedback on other modules lower (2.5/4.0) than their neurotypical peers (3.0/4.0). Neurodivergent students described the co-produced

³ Neuronormative refers to the socially accepted and expected neurological and cognitive functioning patterns. It refers to how individuals process information, communicate, and interact with the world.

feedback as helping them understand *"the nuance around what is meant by neurodiversity"* and that it was *"useful to hear others' experiences of lived experience"*. Neurotypical students found the feedback *"more purposeful"* than other assessments. One noted it was *"a different style of feedback and tone"* to what they were accustomed to, but this student felt it *"became completely clear after going over this with one of the module team"* — suggesting any initial disadvantage for neurotypical students can be easily mitigated through scaffolding from teaching staff.

As a secondary measure of success, it was assessed whether performance on the Neurodiversity module (Mean = 71.38) exceeded that on comparable optional modules which did not include lived experience co-production in their formative assessment. Figure 2 shows higher average grades for Neurodiversity than for three other modules — Translational Cognitive Neuroscience (Mean = 65.44; similar assessment type: 2,500-word grant proposal), Clinical Psychology and Developmental Diversity (Mean = 65.93; similar emphasis on clinical lived-experience perspectives), and Youth Mental Health (Mean = 69.70; similar focus on service users and understanding of co-production). Moreover, students appeared to have greater access to the top mark of 93 for the Neurodiversity module.

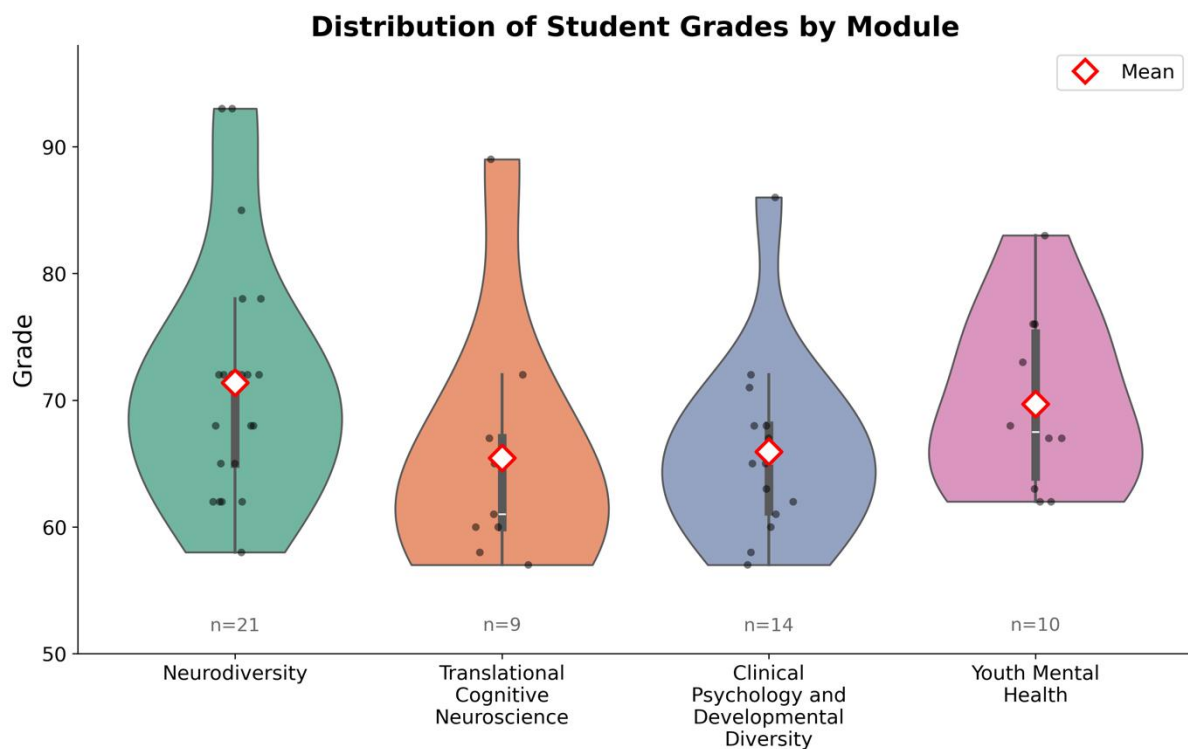


Figure 2: Violin plots to show distribution of student grades by module for MSc Developmental Science and Neurodiversity students during one academic teaching year. Dots represent individual student grades and diamonds represent the mean grades.

Conclusion

The QAA's benchmark statement for Psychology (September 2023) recognises that the discipline has historically privileged some students' experiences while marginalising others, including Global Majority students and those with learning disabilities or other forms of disability. Addressing this requires placing inclusivity and stakeholder voices at the centre of how we teach and assess — particularly through professional-stakeholder co-design of formative assessment and feedback. This means giving students autonomy in how they demonstrate knowledge, and building flexibility into how feedback is constructed. This paper has outlined one such initiative: an educational enhancement project within a UK HE setting, in which community stakeholders co-design and help deliver formative assessment and feedback. Specifically, individuals with lived experience of neurodivergence co-designed assessment topics and contributed to feedback delivery on the University of Birmingham's MSc in Developmental Science and Neurodiversity. Whilst the cohort sampled is small at this time, end-of-module student satisfaction and performance evaluations supports the initiative's initial success, in line with QAA UK Quality Code and Psychology benchmark guidelines.

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