Beyond voice: Re-imagining inclusion through a co-created project led by an autistic student

Kate Coldrick, University College London & Anna Freud, kate.coldrick.23@ucl.ac.uk
Lili Ly, University College London & Anna Freud, l.ly@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

Co-creation is increasingly promoted in higher education as a way to develop inclusive, collaborative practices (Bovill, 2013). Yet many co-creation initiatives remain staff-led, reinforcing existing power hierarchies and privileging dominant norms of participation. These dynamics can marginalise neurodivergent students, particularly when co-creation relies on verbal fluency, emotional reflection, or rapid response. This article examines a student-led co-created project in which an autistic postgraduate student initiated and directed the redesign of a university's postgraduate admissions interview. Centring lived experience, the project reconfigured institutional roles, shared decision-making power and authority, and developed inclusive interview practices now adopted on a number of postgraduate programmes. Drawing on principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and equity-focused collaboration, the project challenges assumptions about communication, leadership, and inclusion. It offers a model of co-creation as a relational and transformative process that positions neurodivergent knowledge not as feedback, but as leadership, and reframes inclusion as structural redesign rather than accommodation.

Introduction

Co-creation has gained increasing prominence in higher education as a practice that positions students as active partners in shaping teaching, curricula, and institutional cultures (Bovill, 2013; Bovill et al., 2014). Rooted in the ideals of partnership, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, co-creation is often presented as a means to enhance student engagement, democratise educational processes, and improve institutional responsiveness (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019).

These aims reflect a hopeful vision: that through co-creation, students can exercise greater agency, bring lived experience into institutional processes, and contribute meaningfully to decision-making. In practice, however, the implementation of co-creation often falls short of its transformative potential. Staff frequently retain control over the terms and scope of collaboration, and projects may remain within the confines of consultation or curricular enhancement rather than challenging deeper institutional norms (Cook-Sather et al., 2018). As Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2019) note, co-creation efforts can unintentionally reproduce existing hierarchies unless they are intentionally and explicitly designed to redistribute power. A growing body of critique also highlights how normative expectations around communication, professionalism, and participation shape who is recognised as a legitimate partner in these initiatives (Ahmed, 2012; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). For neurodivergent students, including those who are autistic, dyslexic, or have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), these expectations may conflict with their preferred ways of expressing

ideas or engaging with institutions (Crompton et al., 2020b; Desaunay et al., 2020; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021). When co-creation assumes fluent speech, quick thinking, and ease with emotional self-disclosure, it risks excluding those whose strengths lie elsewhere. Even well-intentioned projects can thus reinforce barriers, despite aiming for inclusion.

This article contributes to a call to reframe co-creation not simply as partnership, but as a process of power redistribution. While this principle applies broadly, its urgency is particularly relevant in the context of autism. For autistic students, assumptions about communication, confidence, and participation often create invisible barriers to recognition and leadership (Milton, 2012; Winstone & Carless, 2019). Shifting power, in this context, means enabling students to define both the purpose and method of collaboration, rather than asking them to adapt to pre-set agendas (Bovill, 2013). It builds on critiques that highlight how structural inequalities can persist within co-creation unless efforts are deliberately structured to redistribute authority, not merely share tasks (Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019).

The project discussed in this article offers one such example. Staff began by asking the student what mattered most to them and what they would like to lead. In response, an autistic postgraduate student defined the focus for change and led the work from inception, inviting staff to collaborate. Supported through a ChangeMakers programme (University College London, n.d.), the project sought to redesign postgraduate intake interviews to make them more inclusive of neurodivergent applicants. Rather than functioning as a staff-led consultation, the process was rooted in lived experience and student leadership, challenging dominant assumptions about who defines value, potential, and institutional belonging. This approach resonates with Neary and Winn's (2009) *student as producer* model, which reimagines students not as consumers of education but as co-creators of knowledge and institutional meaning. It challenges the passive framing of student experience and calls for structural participation in academic and institutional production.

While aligning with broader co-creation literature, the project reimagines its core premises. It challenges the view that staff must initiate, define, or guide collaboration and instead proposes an approach grounded in recognising lived experience as a form of knowledge and in meaningful institutional change. This article begins by reviewing literature on co-creation and partnership, then situates the project in its institutional context, outlines its development, and reflects on what it means to centre neurodivergent authorship in inclusive practice. Through this case, this article explores how co-creation, when led by autistic students, can evolve into a relational and power-conscious practice that challenges neurotypical assumptions and informs broader institutional norms around inclusion and equity. As Dollinger et al. (2018) argue, transformation occurs when students participate in shaping the very systems that shape them. This project exemplifies that shift from inclusion to institutional redesign.

Reframing Co-Creation: Models, Assumptions, and Challenges

Co-creation has been widely adopted in higher education as a response to the limitations of traditional student engagement approaches. Typically defined as a collaborative process where students and staff work together to shape learning and institutional practices (Bovill,

2013; Healey et al., 2014), co-creation offers more inclusive, reciprocal relationships than consultation or feedback-led models.

However, co-creation is not inherently equitable. Many initiatives retain existing hierarchies, with staff determining goals, timelines, and outcomes. As Kahu (2013) notes, student engagement is a complex and contested concept, shaped by institutional assumptions about what participation looks like and how it should be measured. Co-creation is often proposed as a more relational alternative, but it too can fall short unless underlying power dynamics are addressed. Students may be invited into processes already defined, leaving little scope for shared authorship or structural change (Bovill et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019). Bovill et al. (2016) emphasise that meaningful co-creation must involve students from the outset, not merely at the point of implementation. Without this, co-creation may replicate existing hierarchies under the language of partnership (Cook-Sather, 2018).

These concerns are especially pressing in the context of autism. Common co-creation formats, often experienced by autistic students as fast-paced meetings, open verbal discussion, or emotionally framed reflection, tend to reflect neurotypical communication preferences (Ballantine et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2020a). When staff define not only the content but also the format and process of collaboration, autistic students may not just be excluded, they may be silenced. Modes of engagement that rely on spontaneous speech or social fluency can prevent autistic students from expressing their ideas or being recognised as legitimate contributors, even when present.

These dynamics also affect other neurodivergent students, such as those with ADHD, dyslexia, or sensory processing differences, whose communication strengths may not align with conventional models of participation. While the specific barriers vary, the underlying problem remains: co-creation often privileges certain ways of engaging and devalues others, unless its structures are consciously reimagined.

The project discussed in this article responds to these dynamics by rethinking co-creation as more than collaboration: as a way to redistribute power, challenge dominant assumptions, and redesign the conditions under which participation occurs. It shifts the focus from inviting student feedback to sharing authorship and shaping institutional change.

Originating from the lived experience of an autistic postgraduate student, this project was not a response to a staff-led initiative, but a student-led challenge to existing institutional practice. Through a ChangeMakers programme (University College London, n.d.), the redesign of the postgraduate intake interview was initiated by a student following an invitation from staff to lead the work. This staff receptiveness enabled the student to guide the research focus and lead collaboration on inclusive alternatives.

This approach to co-creation, in which staff acted as scaffolders rather than directors, aligns with Bovill et al.'s (2014) emphasis on the transformative potential of partnership - a reshaping of relationships, roles, and institutional practices. It challenges dominant assumptions about who sets the agenda, whose knowledge counts, and what institutional inclusion requires.

Moving from Participation to Shared Responsibility

Co-creation has been promoted as a way to move beyond engagement-as-consultation, offering students a more active role in shaping higher education (Healey et al., 2014). Yet most co-creation efforts still operate within staff-led frameworks, where student involvement is limited to contributing ideas, not shaping direction (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019). As Cook-Sather (2018) points out, without a shift in authority, such initiatives risk reproducing symbolic forms of partnership.

Assumptions about what "good" participation looks like (quick responses, verbal fluency, emotional reflection) can marginalise those who engage differently (Ballantine et al., 2023; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021). When neurodivergent students are not involved in designing participation itself, co-creation risks excluding the very perspectives it claims to centre.

Some projects have begun to adopt more flexible and strengths-based methods. White et al. (2023), for instance, advocate for multimodal participation using visual tools, written contributions, and asynchronous collaboration to widen access. But as Cook-Sather et al. (2018) argue, accessibility must be paired with equity. The key question is not only who is included, but who sets the terms.

Projects such as *Autism&Uni* (Fabri et al., 2016) and *Navigating University* (Brownlow et al., 2023), while expanding representation, often remain within staff-defined parameters. They offer valuable resources but may not challenge how institutions conceptualise leadership, communication, or capacity for change.

In contrast, the project at the heart of this article reversed these dynamics. The autistic student did not join a pre-existing initiative; she initiated the work, defined its focus, and led its direction. Staff were invited in as collaborators, supporting rather than steering. This shift exemplifies equity-conscious partnership (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019), where redistribution of power, not just of responsibilities, becomes the foundation for co-creation.

Autistic Student-Led Co-Creation

When co-creation begins with lived experience, particularly from students historically marginalised in higher education, it opens new possibilities for institutional critique and transformation. Autistic-led co-creation does not ask how students can adapt to existing systems, but what needs to change. Lived experience becomes not an add-on, but a source of institutional knowledge and leadership (Nind, 2014; Bovill et al., 2014).

This approach unsettles dominant models. Many Students as Partners (SaP) initiatives, even when framed as partnership, retain staff control over process, pace, and communication style. As Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill (2019) note, equity in co-creation requires attention not only to who participates, but to how participation is structured.

Autistic-led co-creation brings these assumptions into focus. Milton's (2012) 'Double Empathy Problem' reminds us that communication challenges between autistic and non-autistic people are relational, not one-sided. Inclusion, then, requires institutions to adapt, not just students.

Equity is achieved not by offering access to pre-defined processes, but by reimagining those processes from the ground up.

This project exemplifies this approach through an autistic student's leadership in redesigning postgraduate interviews. The autistic student identified a structural problem (the design of postgraduate interviews) and led a collaborative redesign grounded in neurodivergent experience. Staff supported the work relationally and practically, without overriding the student's leadership.

This is co-creation not as inclusion into existing systems, but as a challenge to them. As Bovill et al. (2016) argue, genuine co-creation builds new systems in partnership rather than simply accommodating students within old ones.

Project background and foundations

Identifying the problem: Interview barriers and neurodivergent experience

The project began when an autistic postgraduate student found that the university's intake interview process was poorly aligned with her strengths. The student lead was a mature home student with a relatively recent formal autism diagnosis, drawing on both personal and parenting experiences of neurodivergence. The interview format relied heavily on spontaneous verbal responses, confident self-presentation, and emotionally framed questions. These features made the experience particularly challenging. In conversations with other students and through her work with the Student–Staff Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (SSEDI) group, she realised that many neurodivergent students, including those with ADHD or sensory sensitivities had faced similar barriers.

The student wanted to understand how differences in communication style, sensory experience, and thinking processes affect students' ability to take part in interviews. Drawing on her own experience and insights from earlier ChangeMakers (University College London, n.d.) and SSEDI work, she proposed a collaborative redesign of the interview process. With staff support, the team explored how traditional interview practices might unintentionally exclude students whose communication styles differ from institutional expectations.

The project adopted a strengths-based approach, moving away from assumptions that verbal fluency or confidence are indicators of ability (White et al., 2023). Instead, it raised broader questions about how fairness is defined in admissions and how institutions can recognise potential through a wider range of qualities and ways of communicating. Kahu and Nelson (2017) argue that student success depends not only on individual attributes but on the alignment between institutional environments and students' ways of engaging. The interview redesign sought to improve this alignment by reducing cognitive load and affirming diverse communication styles. These concerns are reflected in wider research on employment interviews. Norris et al. (2020), for example, found that autistic candidates were often judged negatively because of how they communicated. Reduced eye contact and longer response times led to lower ratings, even when answers were accurate and thoughtful. Their findings suggest that judgments are often shaped not only by content but by delivery style. The project therefore adds to a growing body of evidence (e.g. Maras et al., 2021; Norris et al., 2020) that

urges institutions to critically examine how unspoken norms around communication shape outcomes and to consider more carefully who is enabled to succeed and who is disadvantaged by existing practices.

Rethinking inclusion as systemic change

While the project began with the specific barriers faced by autistic and neurodivergent students, its implications extend to broader questions of how institutional systems approach inclusion. In the UK, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategies are often shaped by legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 which requires institutions to provide reasonable adjustments for disabled students (Equality Act, 2010). In practice, however, this often results in support being offered only after a student discloses a need (Hockings, 2010). As a consequence, accessibility is treated as an additional layer rather than a fundamental part of the system.

The interview process reflected this reactive approach. It assumed all applicants could perform well without preparation. Questions were not shared in advance, and many were framed in emotionally loaded ways, for example "Tell us about a time you overcame adversity." These types of questions rely on unspoken social expectations and require candidates to produce fluent and confident responses in a high-pressure environment. For many neurodivergent students, this creates additional anxiety and reduces their ability to perform at their best (Desaunay et al., 2020; Maras et al., 2021).

Students were also expected to identify their own needs and request adjustments, often without clear information about what support was available. This placed the responsibility for inclusion on the individual. Drawing on the work of Rosqvist, Chown and Stenning (2020), the project challenged the assumption that these expectations are neutral. Instead, they reflect dominant cultural norms that systematically disadvantage those who do not conform. Building on Hockings (2010), the project shifted the focus from requiring students to adapt, to rethinking the design of the interview process itself.

Rethinking inclusion after the pandemic

Although this project did not directly respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, it took place during a period when institutions were re-evaluating many of their established practices. The shift to remote learning significantly altered the way teaching, communication, and participation were structured (Koh & Daniel, 2022). For neurodivergent students, this moment exposed long-standing challenges while also highlighting new possibilities for more flexible and responsive approaches (Madaus et al., 2022).

As Ballantine et al. (2023) observe, the pandemic unsettled traditional expectations about what engagement should look like. Autistic students reported mixed experiences. Some benefitted from reduced sensory demands and greater control over communication. Others found the lack of routine, inconsistent expectations, and reduced informal support more difficult. These contrasting outcomes reinforced the need for systems that anticipate a range of needs, rather than relying on individual requests for support after difficulties arise

This broader context shaped how the project was understood and supported. The postgraduate interview process it sought to revise rested on assumptions that had rarely been questioned, such as the value placed on quick responses and confident self-presentation. The disruption caused by the pandemic created space to revisit these norms and to consider how inclusion might be more meaningfully embedded in institutional processes. Rather than treating the pandemic as a temporary interruption, the project used it as a prompt to reimagine how engagement could be supported more comprehensively.

Crucially, this rethinking of engagement was not only conceptual but practical. The project translated its critique of dominant norms into a collaborative method of working that redefined how roles, responsibilities, and decision-making were shared.

A relational approach

The project provides a concrete example of how institutional change can be led by students. Rather than treating students as sources of feedback or their experiences as supplementary data, it placed the autistic student lead's perspective at the centre of both the project's purpose and its method. The collaboration moved away from formal hierarchies and predefined roles. Staff and the autistic student worked together through shared planning and flexible approaches, adapting responsibilities as the project progressed. This way of working showed that inclusion is not only about outcomes, but also about how decisions are made and whose contributions are valued throughout the process (Nind, 2014). By recognising lived experience as a valid foundation for informing institutional practice, and by actively sharing responsibility, the project demonstrated that engagement can function as a collaborative process grounded in trust and guided by deliberate attention to power and decision-making authority.

Co-creation in practice: Redesigning the interview process

This section describes how the co-creation process developed from the initial identification of the problem to collaborative implementation. It focuses on the project's distinctive features (particularly its inversion of typical staff–student dynamics) and demonstrates how power was consciously shared to support student leadership.

Challenging traditional co-creation norms

The project began with a proposal from an autistic postgraduate student through a ChangeMakers programme (University College London, n.d.). Drawing on her own experience of the intake interview and on conversations with neurodivergent peers, she identified specific structural barriers embedded in the interview format. These included the demand for quick verbal responses, emotionally framed prompts, and implicit expectations around confident self-presentation. While these features might seem neutral, they reflect normative assumptions about communication, cognition, and performance that can disadvantage neurodivergent applicants (Desaunay et al., 2020; Maras et al., 2021).

Importantly, the student did not enter a pre-defined partnership project. She defined the problem space, set the scope of the work, and led the formation of the team. Staff were invited to join the process only after the core focus had been determined. This represents a

reversal of most SaP dynamics, where staff initiate the work and then seek student involvement (Bovill et al., 2016; Cook-Sather, 2018). The student's observation that "this is engagement that emerges from the student, not invited by the institution" marked a deliberate shift toward student-led change.

This aligns with Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill's (2019) equity-focused co-creation model, which emphasises leadership by those most affected by exclusion. By centring the autistic student's experiential knowledge and enabling her to define the agenda, the project broke from tokenistic consultation models and created space for institutional learning grounded in lived expertise.

Scaffolded autonomy and relational collaboration

Once the project was underway, staff took on responsive roles designed to support rather than steer. They assisted with administrative tasks such as ethics approval and documentation, but also adapted their communication styles and planning tools to meet the student lead's preferences. For example, they used visual timelines and scheduled regular meetings to reduce executive functioning load and maintain momentum without overwhelming pressure (Brown, 2006).

This working style reflects key principles of "scaffolded autonomy" in trauma-informed education (Perry and Daniels, 2016) where autonomy and support are not treated as opposites but as interdependent. As Brake et al. (2024) note, inflexible systems can increase stress and reduce participation. Staff recognised that enabling leadership sometimes required stepping back and sometimes required stepping in. This fluid, relational model of collaboration aligns with Bovill et al.'s (2014) call for co-creation processes to be continually re-negotiated in light of power, context, and capacity.

Crucially, staff did not treat accessibility strategies as supplementary accommodations. Instead, these practices were embedded into the core design of the project. This reflects Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2018) which advocates for inclusive structures that anticipate diverse needs rather than retrofitting support after barriers arise. The project thus became an experiment in modelling inclusive practice through its own methods of working, not only its outcomes.

Co-creating knowledge: Survey design and analysis

To inform the redesign of the interview process, the team developed a survey to explore students' experiences of postgraduate interviews. Rather than staff designing the research tool and inviting student input, the survey was co-created from the outset. The autistic student lead played a central role in shaping the questions, structure, and language, ensuring the tool reflected neurodivergent priorities. This approach exemplifies Bovill's (2016) model of early-stage partnership, where students are involved in defining not only content but also methodology.

The survey included both scaled and open-ended questions, with a focus on five areas identified through the student lead's reflections and relevant literature related to memory

recall (Desaunay et al., 2020; Gaigg et al., 2008), emotional reasoning (Crompton et al., 2020a), interview communication barriers (Norris & Maras, 2022), and sensory issues (MacLellan et al., 2022). Rather than framing these as deficits, the survey adopted a strengths-based perspective (White et al., 2023), asking students how they process information and what supports their ability to communicate effectively. One student described the challenge as follows: *"I have to think of events and then feelings if that makes sense… slower to answer, difficult pinning down a memory of an emotion before working out if it's relevant to the question."* This response exemplifies how emotionally framed questions can create additional cognitive load, not because of a lack of insight, but because of how memory and emotion are processed differently (Crompton et al., 2020a; Desaunay et al., 2020; Gaigg et al., 2008). It highlights the importance of allowing time, clarity, and alternative formats to access students' full capacities.

This design choice reflects principles of UDL (CAST, 2018) which prioritise flexible formats and multiple modes of expression. It also challenges traditional research hierarchies, positioning the autistic student not as a respondent or assistant, but as a co-creator of institutional knowledge.

Shared authority in data interpretation

The analysis phase continued this commitment to power-sharing. The team used a structured qualitative approach (open, axial, and selective coding) to examine over sixty themes related to communication, stress, masking, and sensory experiences. Throughout this process, the autistic student lead co-developed the coding framework, shaped the narrative structure, and influenced which themes were prioritised for institutional action.

This level of involvement goes beyond consultation. As Cook-Sather (2018) emphasises, partnership must include shared epistemic authority: deciding what counts as evidence, how findings are interpreted, and what meanings are drawn. In this project, for example, behaviours like pausing before answering or avoiding eye contact were not treated as signs of disengagement, but understood as valid and typical responses within certain neurotypes. This marks an interpretive shift grounded in the student lead's lived experience.

The team also gave particular attention to the theme of masking: the often-invisible labour neurodivergent students perform to appear more "typical" in high-pressure settings that do not accommodate their needs (Miller et al., 2021). The student lead identified this as a central issue and insisted it be treated not just as an individual coping mechanism but as an institutional equity concern. The analysis made clear that masking is not simply a short-term strategy for fitting in. It carries a significant emotional and cognitive cost, often resulting in exhaustion, reduced performance, and long-term impacts on wellbeing (Bargiela et al., 2016; Livingston et al., 2019). By foregrounding this issue, the autistic student lead helped the team recognise that interview conditions which reward masking are not only inequitable but also ethically problematic.

The analysis thus positioned masking not as an individual trait but as a response to structural exclusion - an interpretation that may not have surfaced without the leadership of someone with lived autistic experience.

Quantitative alignment and participatory synthesis

The survey's quantitative data, including descriptive statistics (e.g. frequency counts and percentage preferences) and correlations, reinforced the qualitative findings. Adaptations such as advance access to questions, written response options, and interviewer training were strongly preferred by both neurodivergent and neurotypical respondents. These preferences aligned with the inclusive strategies proposed in the project and supported the case for institutional change.

What made this analysis distinctive was not only its content, but its process. The student lead helped decide how findings were synthesised and presented to staff. Her leadership shaped not only the themes chosen, but the ethical framing of their implications. This aligns with Nind's (2014) model of inclusive research, where those most affected are positioned as co-analysts and co-authors of change.

From data to practice: Co-creating institutional change

The final phase of the project focused on translating research findings into institutional practice. This was not treated as a dissemination exercise, but as a continuation of co-creation by extending shared authorship into implementation. The autistic student lead and staff partners jointly designed and facilitated a workshop for fifteen members of the university's Postgraduate Studies staff team, including Programme Directors and interview leads.

The session opened with a presentation of the survey findings delivered by the student lead who also shared personal reflections on her interview experience. These insights grounded the subsequent collaborative discussions in which staff explored practical adaptations and considered how institutional norms could be reimagined. The facilitation model reflected scaffolded autonomy: while the student lead guided the session's content and framing, staff co-facilitated to manage logistical demands and create space for relational safety. This collaborative format ensured that leadership was centred on lived expertise without placing unsustainable pressure on the student.

Staff contributions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed - again through a collaborative process. Staff reflections on language, feasibility, and equity were incorporated into a co-authored guidance leaflet now in use across relevant departments. Crucially, the leaflet does not position adaptations as optional or compensatory. Instead, it frames them as examples of inclusive design: these are practices that benefit all candidates, align with UDL (CAST, 2018) and challenge narrow definitions of performance.

The leaflet's core recommendations include:

- Share interview questions in advance;
- Clarify emotional language in prompts;
- Allow written responses or notes during interview;
- Make structure and expectations explicit;
- Provide breaks and reduce sensory stressors where possible.

These are not simply procedural tips; they reflect a broader shift in how the institution understands fairness, communication, and potential. As one staff member reflected: “What does student-led mean? It means the student’s voice is centred, but it also means we take joint responsibility, that the onus of the labour or work does not fall to the student .”

Additional reflections from staff attending the workshop highlighted the deeper institutional impact of this collaborative approach. One participant shared, *“Thank you so much for all the work you've put into this, it has given me a lot to think about... it has shown me the things that I don't do, that didn't occur for me to do.”* Another noted, *“[The session] has been really eye-opening... I can see now how the way we work may disadvantage people who are neurodivergent... it's making me think now about teaching and how some of the practical tips you've mentioned could be applied there also.”* A third reflected, *“It's been really helpful to have practical things I could take forward and share with my team.”*

These comments reflect not only an increase in awareness but a willingness to engage in structural reflection and change. By positioning the student as the lead in both research and facilitation, the project modelled co-creation as a method of institutional learning and responsiveness. This ethos captures the project’s central contribution: a redefinition of co-creation as a relational, power-conscious approach that treats students’ experiences as a legitimate basis for change.

Discussion

The project began with a focused aim: to address a specific barrier in the university’s admissions process that excluded some neurodivergent applicants. Its implications, however, reach beyond the redesign of a single interview format. The project invites a wider examination of how co-creation is typically approached in higher education: who sets the terms, who holds authority, and what inclusion looks like in practice. This section explores how the project challenged prevailing assumptions about leadership, expertise, and institutional roles through a student-led, collaborative model.

From involvement to leadership and shared authority

In many universities, co-creation initiatives remain constrained by institutional norms. Students are often invited to contribute to staff-led processes with limited influence over the agenda or scope of change. Projects are typically framed around improving existing structures rather than rethinking them. National policy frameworks such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), while not co-creation initiatives themselves, have reinforced models in which students are positioned as respondents rather than as co-authors of institutional practice (Trowler, 2010; Darwin, 2021). Kandiko Howson and Matos (2021) note that national surveys like the NSS often conflate satisfaction with engagement, reducing students' roles to that of evaluators rather than collaborators in institutional development. As Langan and Harris (2019) argue, the NSS incentivises surface-level improvements aligned with satisfaction metrics, leaving limited room for deeper, student-led transformations.

This project took a different approach. The autistic student lead did not respond to an existing agenda. She defined the issue, proposed changes, and led the redesign. Staff supported her by adapting their roles, providing strategic scaffolding, and sharing decision-making authority. This was not symbolic involvement. It was a deliberate and shared process of redistributing power, leadership and co-authoring change.

The structure of collaboration was key. As Healey et al. (2014) and Bovill et al. (2016) argue, co-creation needs to be intentionally structured to build genuine partnership. Staff actively adjusted timelines, expectations, and responsibilities to enable leadership by the student. These adjustments were not incidental but central to creating a collaborative environment. This shift aligns with Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill's (2019) call for equity-focused co-creation in which authority and epistemic recognition are shared with those most impacted by exclusion. To clarify this distinction, Table 1, below, summarises the key differences between dominant co-creation models and the approach developed in this project.

Traditional Co-Creation	**This Project's Approach**
Staff initiate the project and define the focus	Student initiates the project and defines the agenda
Students respond to staff-designed processes	Staff respond to student leadership with adaptive support
Lived experience is used as feedback	Lived experience is positioned as epistemic authority
Verbal fluency and emotional reflection are assumed norms	Multimodal, flexible formats accommodate diverse processing styles
Participation shaped by existing institutional norms	Institutional norms are challenged and reconfigured
Inclusion means individual adjustments on request	Inclusion is built into the structure from the outset (UDL)
Co-creation occurs late in the process (e.g. implementation)	Co-creation begins at agenda-setting and continues through implementation
Focus on improving existing systems	Focus on reimagining systems through lived experience and equity

Table 1. Redefining Co-Creation: From Traditional Models to Autistic-Led Practice

This shift not only reconfigures roles but redefines the nature of inclusion itself.

Lived experience as a way of knowing

Building on this foundation, the project moved beyond embedding lived experience in leadership dynamics to positioning it as a primary epistemic resource. The student lead co-shaped the research questions, led the thematic analysis, and participated in decisions about how findings were communicated. This reflects Nind's (2014) model of inclusive research, where those with lived experience help define both what is studied and how.

Milton's (2012) 'Double Empathy Problem' also shaped the project's framing. Rather than viewing communication challenges as individual shortcomings, it highlighted how institutional practices create barriers. Fast-paced interviews, emotionally framed questions, and pressure to respond quickly were identified as practices that misaligned with how some students process and express information.

Survey responses and staff reflections confirmed this misalignment. Autistic candidates were often disadvantaged not only by how their responses were evaluated, but also by difficulty recalling personal information under pressure. These challenges could obscure ability, even when relevant knowledge or experience was present. Verbal fluency, speed, and emotional expressiveness were often assumed to indicate capability, even though they do not represent the full range of ways potential can be demonstrated. These expectations were not neutral and they were systemic.

The findings challenged assumptions about communication and ability, raising broader questions about how inclusion is conceptualised and operationalised, especially in processes like admissions interviews, where unexamined norms determine who succeeds and who is excluded.

Co-creation as inclusive praxis

This project not only challenged a specific institutional process but also the assumptions underpinning much of the co-creation literature. Despite growing interest in SaP models, many co-creation initiatives remain limited by staff-defined structures, narrow definitions of participation, and insufficient attention to power (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019; Cook-Sather et al., 2018). Inclusion, in these cases, often means inviting students into existing systems rather than transforming those systems to recognise a wider range of communication styles and cognitive approaches. Schmitt (2019) argues for a relational concept of inclusion that moves beyond individual adaptation to examine how institutional structures and relationships shape who can participate, contribute, and lead. From this perspective, inclusion requires not only access but a redistribution of recognition and influence within the system.

The approach taken here suggests a different model: one in which co-creation is explicitly designed for institutional transformation. This requires more than enabling participation, it involves sharing epistemic authority and structural control. Bovill et al. (2016) emphasise that partnership is most meaningful when students shape not only content but also purpose and framing. This project demonstrates that principle: the student lead defined the agenda, shaped the analysis, and co-authored the institutional response.

The model also draws from Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), which advocates for proactive, flexible design that anticipates variability. By embedding inclusive practices into the co-creation process through scaffolded collaboration, flexible timelines, and multimodal communication, the project demonstrated how change can be driven by neurodivergent leadership.

Questions about fairness surfaced repeatedly in the staff workshop, particularly whether adaptations such as sharing questions in advance or allowing notes offered unfair advantage. This reflects a common misconception: that equal treatment is the same as equitable treatment (CAST, 2018). In practice, offering all candidates the same format can systematically disadvantage those whose needs differ.

The project showed that standard interviews, especially those reliant on spontaneous speech, emotional interpretation, and confident presentation, can create barriers for neurodivergent applicants. These formats are not universal; they reflect assumptions about what ability looks like (Crabtree et al., 2021; Maras et al., 2021). For example, slower speech or reduced eye contact may be misread as lack of preparation, even when responses are thoughtful and accurate.

Equity means enabling candidates to demonstrate capability in different ways. Advance access to questions, the option to use notes, and interviewer training do not lower standards. They reduce unnecessary stress and support more effective communication. These adaptations benefit a wide range of candidates: structured questions support clarity; notes reduce anxiety; accessible language supports linguistic and cultural diversity (Maras et al., 2021; Norris & Maras, 2022).

Co-creation, in this context, is not a method but a reconfiguration of institutional relationships. It centres lived experience as leadership, not testimony. It treats inclusion not as accommodation, but as structural redesign. It asks institutions not simply to listen to students, but to be shaped by them.

Implications for practice and policy

Building on the collaborative approach developed through this work, this section highlights how inclusive, student-led co-creation can shift not just outcomes, but the processes and power structures that shape them.

Redefining staff–student collaboration

Traditional models of co-creation often retain staff control over timelines, goals, and methods. Students may be invited to contribute but remain constrained by institutional frames (Cook-Sather, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019). Although initiatives like SaP (Healey et al., 2014) have created more opportunities for collaboration, decision-making power often remains with staff.

This project demonstrates that authentic co-creation requires an intentional redistribution of power. The student lead shaped the agenda, set priorities, and guided institutional critique. Staff adapted their roles, acting as scaffolders rather than facilitators, responding to the student's leadership style and communication needs. Such role redefinition does not diminish staff expertise. It reframes it as relational and context-sensitive and aligns with Bovill's (2016) call for staff to create enabling structures without overdetermining them. This requires staff

development that includes not only partnership theory, but reflection on power, neurodivergence, and relational dynamics.

Building scaffolded autonomy through inclusive design

The collaboration model used in this project illustrates the value of scaffolded autonomy: structured flexibility that supports, rather than replaces, student leadership. Regular planning meetings, flexible timelines, visual tools, and shared task management enabled the student lead to direct the project while being supported in ways that reduced cognitive and emotional load.

These strategies were not retrofitted accommodations; they were integral to the project's success. As UDL (CAST, 2018) suggests, inclusion is most effective when it is embedded from the start rather than added in response to barriers. This approach can inform a wide range of student-staff collaborations, especially where students face barriers related to executive functioning, sensory environments, or communication processing.

Recognising lived experience as leadership

The project invites a rethinking of how leadership is recognised and supported. Leadership is often coded through visibility, confidence, and verbal fluency (Winstone & Carless, 2019), norms that may marginalise neurodivergent students. The student lead exercised leadership through lived knowledge, structural critique, agenda-setting, and collaborative decision-making. Her role was not to speak for others, but to reframe the conditions under which institutional knowledge is created.

Recognising lived experience as leadership requires rethinking what counts as expertise. As Bovill et al. (2014) argue, students are not only 'knowers' of their experiences but potential re-designers of systems. Staff must therefore move beyond symbolic inclusion and support the development of inclusive spaces, where different forms of knowing are validated and centred.

Embedding equity into co-creation frameworks

This project affirms Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill's (2019) argument that co-creation must attend to equity, not only in who is involved, but in how structures are reshaped. Equity here means more than fairness in process; it involves identifying and addressing systemic exclusions. It asks whether dominant methods, assumptions, or formats prevent certain students from leading or contributing meaningfully.

Equity-conscious co-creation must anticipate the need for structural adaptation, not rely on individual students to request it. Staff must develop the confidence to work flexibly, question traditional academic norms, and reflect on how power flows through co-creation processes. This includes embedding UDL principles, trauma-informed strategies, and accessible communication practices as standard components of collaborative work.

Strategies *for sustainable inclusive co-creation*

The following strategies are offered as practical tools for inclusive co-creation across contexts:

- Co-create flexible timelines and phased planning at the project's outset;
- Provide written agendas and visual tools (e.g. checklists, flowcharts) to support planning and focus;
- Replace open-ended questions with specific prompts to reduce cognitive ambiguity;
- Normalise written and asynchronous communication, including editable documents and messaging platforms;
- Anticipate executive functioning support needs (e.g. shared scheduling, task tracking) without requiring disclosure;
- Share leadership and administrative responsibilities to prevent cognitive overload on student leads.

These practices are not exclusive to neurodivergent students. They create more sustainable, flexible collaborations for all participants and shift institutional norms toward more equitable models of engagement.

Conclusion

Although this project focused on one specific institutional process (the postgraduate admissions interview), its implications extend far beyond. It offers a working model of co-creation as inclusive, student-led institutional redesign. By centring lived experience, redistributing power and leadership, and embedding flexibility into the collaborative process, the project reimagined not only what inclusion looks like, but how it is made possible.
Crucially, the project did not invite neurodivergent students into a pre-existing engagement framework. It questioned that framework itself in terms of its norms, assumptions, and definitions of ability. In doing so, it responded to calls from Bovill et al. (2016), Cook-Sather (2018), and Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2019) for co-creation that addresses power, recognises diverse epistemologies, and reshapes institutional structures rather than merely diversifying participation.

Grounded in scaffolded autonomy and inclusive communication, the collaborative method exemplified the very practices it advocated. This coherence between process and outcome was central to the project's legitimacy and impact. It demonstrated that inclusion is not a matter of consultation, but of co-authorship; not a matter of access, but of agency.

In a time when higher education seeks to become more inclusive, this project offers a transferable approach: one that challenges assumptions, foregrounds lived knowledge, and builds institutional responsiveness into both the design and delivery of change. Co-creation, when led by those most affected, becomes not just a tool for engagement but a practice of justice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Elizabeth Li, Rojan Akturan, Linda Larbi, and the Student Staff Equity, Diversity, Inclusion (SSEDI) group at UCL and Anna Freud Postgraduate Studies Department, whose support was instrumental in making this project

possible. Our thanks also go to the UCL ChangeMakers programme, with special recognition to Fiona Wilkie for their funding, guidance, and continued support throughout the project. We are also grateful to Thomas Langston at UCL Arena, Higher Education & Development Support (HEDS) for his invaluable encouragement.

Ethical Approval

Ethics approval (ID Number: 19825/001) was received from the institution's Research Ethics Committee.

References

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131d2g

Ballantine, J., Rocheleau, J., Macarios, J., Ross, G., & Artemeva, N. (2023). "Change isn't exactly easy": Autistic university students' lived learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Autism in Adulthood: Challenges and Management, 5*(3), 325–334. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2022.0032

Bargiela, S., Steward, R., & Mandy, W. (2016). The experiences of late-diagnosed women with autism spectrum conditions: An investigation of the female autism phenotype. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 46*(10), 3281–3294. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2872-8

Bovill, C. (2013). An investigation of co-created curricula within higher education in the UK, Ireland and the USA. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 51*(1), 15–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2013.770264

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., Felten, P., Millard, L., & Moore-Cherry, N. (2016). Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: Overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student–staff partnerships. *Higher Education, 71*(2), 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4

Bovill, C., Felten, P., & Cook-Sather, A. (2014). Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching (2): Practical guidance for academic staff and academic developers. In *International Consortium on Educational Development Conference, Stockholm, Sweden, 16-18 June* (pp. 1-6) http://iced2014.se/proceedings/1146_BovillFeltenCook-Sather%20.pdf

Brake, J., Cox, S., & Palmer, P. (2024). Recognizing past and present experiences: Toward a person-oriented and trauma-informed approach to autism research. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 26*(1), 477–491. https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.1102

Brown, T. E. (2006). Executive functions and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: Implications of two conflicting views. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 53*(1), 35–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/10349120500510024

Brownlow, C., Martin, N., Thompson, D.-M., Dowe, A., Abawi, D., Harrison, J., & March, S. (2023). Navigating university: The design and evaluation of a holistic support programme for

autistic students in higher education. *Education Sciences, 13*(5), 521. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13050521

CAST. (2018). *Universal Design for Learning guidelines version 2.2*. https://udlguidelines.cast.org/

Cook-Sather, A. (2018). Listening to equity-seeking perspectives: How students' experiences of pedagogical partnership can inform wider discussions of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(5), 923–936. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1457629

Crabtree, R. M., Briggs, P., & Woratschek, H. (2021). Student engagement and barriers to implementation: The view of professional and academic staff. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 25*(4), 144–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2021.1946446

Crompton, C. J., Hallett, S., Ropar, D., Flynn, E., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020a). 'I never realised everybody felt as happy as I do when I am around autistic people': A thematic analysis of autistic adults' relationships with autistic and neurotypical friends and family. *Autism, 24*(6), 1438–1448. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320908976

Crompton, C. J., Ropar, D., Evans-Williams, C. V., Flynn, E. G., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020b). Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective. *Autism, 24*(7), 1704–1712. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320919286

Darwin, S. (2020). More effectively harnessing student voices in higher education (especially in pandemic times). Paper presented at Encuentro Virtual sobre Enseñanza, Aprendizaje y Evaluación en Educación Superior, Santiago, Chile. https://cuadernosdeeducacion.uahurtado.cl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Articulo-SDarwin-final-English.pdf

Desaunay, P., Briant, A. R., Bowler, D. M., Ring, M., Gérardin, P., Baleyte, J. M., Guénolé, F., Eustache, F., Parienti, J. J., & Guillery-Girard, B. (2020). Memory in autism spectrum disorder: A meta-analysis of experimental studies. *Psychological Bulletin, 146*(5), 377–410. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000225

Dollinger, M., Lodge, J. M., & Coates, H. (2018). Co-creation in higher education: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 28*(2), 210–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2018.1466756

Equality Act 2010, c. 15. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15

Fabri, M., Andrews, P. C. S., & Pukki, H. K. (2016). Using design thinking to engage autistic students in the creation of an online toolkit to help with transition into higher education. *Journal of Assistive Technologies, 10*(2), 102–114. https://doi.org/10.1108/JAT-02-2016-0008

Gaigg, S. B., Gardiner, J. M., & Bowler, D. M. (2008). Free recall in autism spectrum disorder: The role of relational and item-specific encoding. *Neuropsychologia, 46*(4), 983–992. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2007.11.011

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/engagement_through_partnership.pdf

Hockings, C. (2010). Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: A synthesis of research. Higher Education Academy. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/13164/1/InclusiveLearningandTeachinginHigherEducation.pdf

Howard, P. L., & Sedgewick, F. (2021). "Anything but the phone!": Communication mode preferences in the autism community. *Autism, 25*(8), 2265–2278. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211014995

Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(5), 758–773. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.598505

Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2017). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development, 36*(1), 58–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197

Kandiko Howson, C., & Matos, F. (2021). Student surveys: Measuring the relationship between satisfaction and engagement. *Education Sciences, 11*(6), 297. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11060297

Koh, J. H. L., & Daniel, B. K. (2022). Shifting online during COVID-19: A systematic review of teaching and learning strategies and their outcomes. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 19*(1), 56. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-022-00361-7

Langan, A. M., & Harris, W. E. (2019). National Student Survey metrics: Where is the room for improvement? *Higher Education, 78*(6), 1075–1089. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00389-1

Livingston, L. A., Shah, P., & Happé, F. (2019). Compensatory strategies below the behavioural surface in autism: A qualitative study. *The Lancet Psychiatry, 6*(9), 766–777. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30224-X

Lubicz-Nawrocka, T. M. (2018). Students as partners in learning and teaching: The benefits of co-creation of the curriculum. *International Journal for Students as Partners, 2*(1), 47–63. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v2i1.3207

MacLennan, K., O'Brien, S., & Tavassoli, T. (2022). In our own words: The complex sensory experiences of autistic adults. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 52*(7), 3061–3075. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05186-3

Madaus, J., Cascio, A., & Gelbar, N. W. (2022). Perceptions of college students with autism spectrum disorder on the transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Developmental Disabilities Network Journal, 2*(2), Article 5. https://doi.org/10.59620/2694-1104.1042

Maras, K., Norris, J. E., Nicholson, J., Heasman, B., Remington, A., & Crane, L. (2021). Ameliorating the disadvantage for autistic job seekers: An initial evaluation of adapted

employment interview questions. *Autism, 25*(4), 1060–1075. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320981319

Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Bovill, C. (2019). Equity and diversity in institutional approaches to student–staff partnership schemes in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(12), 2541–2557. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1620721

Miller, D., Rees, J., & Pearson, A. (2021). "Masking is life": Experiences of masking in autistic and nonautistic adults. *Autism in Adulthood: Challenges and Management, 3*(4), 330–338. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0083

Milton, D. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: The 'double empathy problem'. *Disability & Society, 27*(6), 883–887. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008

Neary, M., & Winn, J. (2009). The student as producer: Reinventing the student experience in higher education. In L. Bell, H. Stevenson, & M. Neary (Eds.), *The future of higher education: Policy, pedagogy and the student experience* (pp. 192–210). Continuum.

Nind, M. (2014). *What is inclusive research?* Bloomsbury Academic.

Norris, J. E., Crane, L., & Maras, K. (2020). Interviewing autistic adults: Adaptations to support recall in police, employment, and healthcare interviews. *Autism, 24*(6), 1506–1520. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320909174

Norris, J. E., & Maras, K. (2022). Supporting autistic adults' episodic memory recall in interviews: The role of executive functions, theory of mind, and language abilities. *Autism, 26*(2), 513–524. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211030772

Perry, D. L., & Daniels, M. L. (2016). Implementing trauma-informed practices in the school setting: A pilot study. *School Mental Health, 8*(2), 177–188. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-016-9182-3

Rosqvist, H., Chown, N., & Stenning, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Neurodiversity studies: A new critical paradigm*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429322297

Schmitt, C. (2019). A relational concept of inclusion: Critical perspectives. *Papers of Social Pedagogy, 11*(1), 60–76. https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0013.3092

Trowler, V. (2010). *Student engagement literature review*. Higher Education Academy.

University College London (n.d.). *ChangeMakers*. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers/

White, J., McGarry, S., Falkmer, M., Scott, M., Williams, P. J., & Black, M. H. (2023). Creating inclusive schools for autistic students: A scoping review on elements contributing to strengths-based approaches. *Education Sciences, 13*(7), 709. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13070709

Winstone, N., & Carless, D. (2019). *Designing effective feedback processes in higher education: A learning-focused approach* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351115940