

# Co-developing a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year BSc Psychology Unit on Autism

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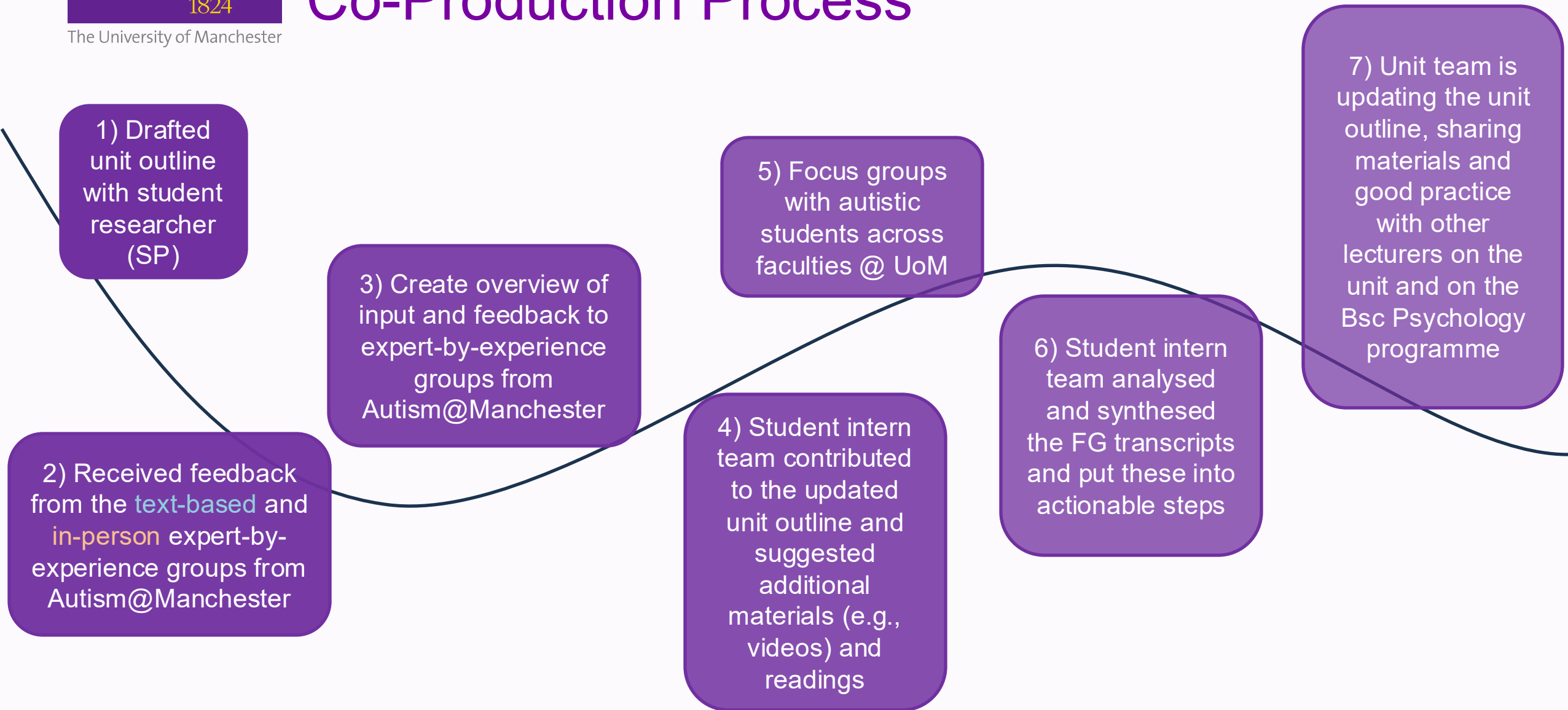
# Co-Production in Research and Scholarship

- Shift towards increase in participatory research practices in the field of autism research (Fletcher-Watson, et al., 2019; Gowen, et al., 2019)
- Extension to Scholarship
  - Neuro-affirmative Approach
  - Co-Production at various levels
- New approach: some co-production of teaching materials or participatory practices in mental health education and therapies/support programmes but no unit co-production so far (Bradley, et al., 2025; Bell, et al., 2021; Kerry et al., 2023)

# Co-Production Aims

1. Provide a safe and inclusive learning environment that is beneficial for neurodivergent people.
2. Ensure the topic and content reflect the values of autistic people, challenging common myths around autism and autistic people.

# Co-Production Process



# Co-Production Reflections

- More confident that we would be able to provide a safe environment for all students to engage with the unit
- More confident that the unit content aligns with important topics highlighted by the autistic community
- More confident that we will be able to deliver a unit that incorporates the autistic community's voice throughout
- Excited and grateful to have been able to go through this process together to create a unit that is meaningful to the community and for students

# Lack of Public and Professional Understanding

- **General public:** 84% of autistic people and their families feel the public does not understand autism. 79% of autistic people feel socially isolated due to the lack of public autism understanding (National Autistic Society; 2015).
  - Lack of general public understanding supported by additional research (Golsen et al., 2022; Hargreaves et al., 2022; John et al., 2018).
- **Healthcare professionals:** lacking autism knowledge and confidence supporting autistic patients (Corden et al., 2022; Mason et al., 2019; Radev et al., 2024; Unigwe et al., 2017; Zerbo et al., 2015).

# Lack of Professional Understanding

## Professional understanding:



# An Opportunity to Improve Understanding

- UK autistic university students report peers lacking knowledge of autism and instead relying on stereotypes (e.g., autistic people do not desire friendships; Goddard & Cooke, 2021), and feeling pressured to mask around peers (Scott & Sedgewick, 2021). Masking closely relates to fear of being discriminated against due to autism stigma (Botha et al., 2020; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Khudiakova et al., 2024; Turnock et al., 2022).

- The unit addresses stereotypes, stigma and myths. A range of learning materials provide lived experience insights. Psychology students will have a more informed view of autism (autism-informed future psychologists) and potentially more understanding interactions with autistic people.

- Sharing our co-production methodology for embedding neurodiversity education into university programmes, providing a framework for other academics. This co-production allows for a far richer curriculum: “[autism] is judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced” (Williams, 1996).



# My Experience Co-Producing a Year 2 Autism Unit

*Lorna Brown*

BSc Psychology, Year 2 Student

(Extra) Mature Student

Currently awaiting an AuDHD diagnosis

80% of autistic females remain undiagnosed at 18 years old:

McCrossin, R. (2022). Finding the true number of females with autistic spectrum disorder by estimating the biases in initial recognition and clinical diagnosis. *Children*, 9(2), 272. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9020272>

# Finding my Voice in Co-Production

- “Am I worthy to be here?” even in co-production I questioned myself
  - Not diagnosed, just starting to learn about autism
  - Learning correct terminology, what part of me *is* autism?
  - “I’m only an undergraduate” – *how can I advise unit leads?*
  - Unsure how much to say/contribute or if my experience is valid
- Our Method: Focus Groups
  - Listened to experiences of other autistic students
  - Reviewed proposed autism unit content: lectures, structure, labs, assessments, resources
  - Also asked: What would create a better learning experience?
    - *Lectures? Breakout rooms? Lab? Think Pair Share? Openness of staff?*
    - Felt validation and relatability

# Focus Group Synthesis and Personal Reflections

- Created a document (table) to capture participant feedback
  - Identified key themes and quotes
  - Included space for personal reflections: *Co-production squared!*
  - Our voices as student interns were truly included
  - Collection of sources including intern feedback
- Personal Reflections
  - The project brought together a diverse range of autistic voices
  - I learned from others, and learned more about myself through their experiences.
  - I thought my experiences/struggles were unique – they weren't
  - *Validating, belonging* and *empowering* - influence others' learning experiences
  - Genuine contribution to (1) creating a safe, inclusive learning environment for neurodivergent students, and (2) ensuring content reflects the values of autistic people and challenges common myths.

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