

Frequently asked questions

1. Who can apply for funding?

During the transition period from 1 April 2018 to 31 July 2019 before the Office for Students' (OfS's) Regulatory framework takes full effect, eligibility to submit bids through the OfS Challenge Competition must correspond with the current funding powers of the OfS, which reflect those that previously applied to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This means that for the academic year 2018-19 the OfS Challenge Competition can fund projects at higher education providers previously funded by HEFCE, and projects related to the provision of prescribed courses of higher education in further education colleges and sixth form colleges.

2. Can mission groups and sector bodies apply for funding?

Mission groups and other sector bodies can be partners in proposals but the project lead must be an OfS-funded, eligible higher education provider. Bids will be assessed on merit and therefore proposals will need to demonstrate clearly what all partners will contribute to the project, the nature and scope of their involvement, the investment they are contributing and how the collaborations will work successfully to support English higher education. Proposals must also clearly indicate how activity will be robustly monitored and evaluated.

3. We are in receipt of Research England's Strength in Places Fund – can we still apply?

Yes. In these instances, bidders should make clear how the funding requested provides genuine additionality and does not duplicate any of the activity funded by the Strength in Places Fund.

4. Is there a minimum level of funding a provider can apply for?

Funding should be based on the needs of the project. However, given the scale of work anticipated through this competition, we are not expecting bids for less than £100,000.

5. What is the maximum funding a provider can apply for?

For individual proposals, higher education providers can bid for between £100,000 and £300,000.

For collaborative bids, providers can bid for a maximum of £500,000.

6. Will the OfS offer a lower amount of funding than has been requested?

No.

7. Is matched funding a requirement?

No. However, bids will be assessed against the extent to which proposals are supported by external investment and funding from partners, particularly employers. We expect to see a proportionate funding contribution from all the partners involved in the proposal.

8. Is there a maximum amount of funding or number of projects that will be funded?

There are currently no formal restrictions on how much of the OfS Challenge Competition budget will be spent on the competition, and therefore no set limit on how many projects will be funded. We are seeking high-quality proposals providing additional activity to address the priority areas.

9. When will successful projects receive funding?

Funding will become available in April 2019.

10. What is the minimum amount of collaborators?

There is no minimum number of collaborators.

11. Who might be defined as a strategic partner?

A strategic partner would be an organisation that is participating in the project to deliver its strategic aims and objectives. For example, a strategic partner might have a role in project governance, or in working with local labour market stakeholders (employers, local enterprise partnerships, etc.).

12. How do you demonstrate someone is a strategic partner?

It is up to bidders to demonstrate how any partner is involved strategically in the project or its aims.

13. Can you lead on an individual and on a collaborative bid or just one?

Providers may only lead one bid (individual or collaboration), but may be involved in more than one bid as a partner.

14. Where can I find my local enterprise partnership careers hub?

For a full list, see <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/schools-colleges/careers-hubs>.

15. How many bids can be submitted by a provider?

Eligible higher education providers can be involved in multiple bids, but may only act as lead institution on one bid.

16. What type of evidence are you expecting in relation to the funding and resource that all partners and stakeholders are committing to the project?

Where projects involve partners, letters of support clearly demonstrating their investment and commitment should be provided in one collated document.

17. Will you accept applications after the deadline of 1700 on 26 November?

Bids will not be accepted after the deadline without the prior agreement of the OfS.

18. My bid has exceeded the page limit. What are the consequences?

While due regard will be given to all applications submitted in the timeframe, the OfS reserves the right not to read any text beyond the set limit.

19. Will any weighting be given to regional coverage to ensure the whole country is covered?

No. However, we will seek as far as it is possible a spread of regional activity to test interventions and innovations for different types of students and graduates and in different types of regions.

20. What monitoring requirements will be involved?

The interim project monitoring report will focus on progress against key objectives and milestones, financial accountability and risk management. The end of project report will also seek information on the key outcomes derived from the project, even if these are beyond the three-year funding period.

As indicated in the competition documentation, all funded projects must be involved in evaluation and dissemination activities undertaken by the OfS. Further information on monitoring requirements will be set out in award letters.

21. How will providers be informed of outcomes?

We will inform bidders by email whether they have been successful in March 2019 and will agree award letters with all successful bidders at that point.

22. I have contacted the OfS with a query on the call and not yet received a response. Is there a problem?

We will respond to all queries as quickly as possible. Should you have any difficulties in contacting a specific member of staff, contact OfS customer services on 0117 931 7317.

23. What data has the OfS been using when creating this competition?

We have used the following sources of data:

- 2015-16 Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey Housing affordability data (www.centreforcities.org/reader/cities-outlook-2018/city-monitor/#table-16—housing-affordability-ratio)
- Labour productivity data (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/articles/regionalandsubregionalproductivityintheuk/february2018>)
- 'Loyals, stayers, returners and incomers: Graduate migration patterns' (Charlie Ball, 2015; available at <https://www.hecsu.ac.uk/index.htm>).

24. When do projects have to complete by?

Projects must not run beyond three years and must be completed by 31 March 2022. To capture the full impact of this funding, successful projects must continue to measure graduate outcomes beyond the life of the funding.

25. The guidance emphasises the government Industrial Strategy's priority of 'place' but 'place' is not covered by the criteria in paragraph 21. Will 'place' be an aspect of assessment or an important part of proposals?

We want to receive proposals that are focused on home-domiciled students or graduates who work in the local area, can demonstrate a local demand for certain graduate skills, and aim to improve graduate outcomes into the longer term. We are not seeking a full place-based strategy, and of course UK Research and Innovation's Strength in Places Fund is delivering in this space, although reference to existing university strategies, local enterprise partnership strategies, etc., could be helpful depending upon the focus of a proposal.

We are also not simply seeking the creation of more graduate job opportunities. We are interested in more imaginative and practical solutions – such as stretching mobility comfort zones and levels of expectation among students, joining up data better on supply and demand and making use of it, or designing interventions with employers which will repurpose and redirect underemployed or unemployed graduates into existing local vacancies.

26. Where the documentation refers to 'graduates' from higher education providers, does this include graduates from higher education courses other than bachelors' degree courses, such as foundation degrees, Higher National Degrees and Certificates of Higher Education?

No, it refers to bachelors' degree graduates only.

27. If we are applying for the maximum funding for collaborative projects, does the collaboration have to include more than one higher education provider?

To apply for the upper limit of £500,000, collaborations must include more than one higher education provider. Proposals may consist of a single higher education provider and any number of other partners, but if so they may only bid for the limit of £300,000.

28. Are institutions encouraged to focus on all graduates working in their local area or just their own graduates?

This fund is not intended to enable institutions to focus on any graduate seeking work in the institution's local area. Rather, it is intended for institutions to support the outcomes of their own students and graduates who have both come from that local area and remained in that local area for post-study work. We expect bids to clearly define the local areas targeted, and support their definitions of local areas with credible evidence-based rationales.

29. How does the OfS define a graduate's home region?

Preliminary OfS analysis used Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS1) levels (as used by the Office for National Statistics) to indicate graduates' home regions. We do not require proposals to use these levels specifically when identifying the home-domiciled regions for students. All bids should identify the specific local region in which they will work and submit a compelling, evidence-based rationale as part of the submission.

30. Could we use the funding to target recent alumni?

Yes, if projects can provide a clear rationale as to why those recent graduates are included in this targeted work and how the impact of the project will be demonstrated through their inclusion. By 'recent alumni' we mean graduates who completed their degrees up to three years ago.

31. Could an institution from a devolved nation be included as a strategic partner?

Yes. However, Challenge Competition funding can only be used to benefit those students who study and stay in their home domicile region within England. Therefore any institution from a devolved nation involved in the bid could not receive any Challenge Competition funding, and would have to fund any commissioned activity separately.

32. Could we commission an organisation outside the higher education sector to deliver part of our bid?

Organisations outside the higher education sector could receive funding, but must provide a compelling case on how their involvement benefits those English students who study and stay in the home region.