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Evaluation of the Mental Health Challenge Competition

Final Report to the Office for Students (2022)

Executive Summary



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Introduction

The Office for Students (OfS) developed the Mental Health Challenge Competition (MHCC) programme to provide funding to higher education (HE) providers to support the development and testing of interventions to improve mental health and wellbeing among students. The programme, which ran from June 2019 to July 2022, sought to achieve a 'step change in mental health outcomes for all students.

The evaluation of the programme was carried out by Wavehill. This executive summary gives an introduction to the programme and an overview of the key findings and recommendations. Further information on the MHCC programme is available in the full final evaluation report, which can be accessed [here](#).

A companion report has also been produced which explores the impacts of individual projects funded through the MHCC.¹ This separate report provides an overview of each of the funded projects, evidence of their impact, and information on how they could be scaled up or transferred across the HE sector.

Background to the Programme

The programme sought collaborative proposals that would bring together HE providers and other organisations involved in student support to address issues around 'connectivity' and 'complexity' in support for student mental health.

The OfS provided £6 million of funding for the programme. This attracted £8.5 million in match funding from providers and partners, bringing the total value of the programme to £14.5 million. HE providers were invited to make bids for funding of between £250,000 and £750,000 (with match funding) in October 2018. A total of 49 full bids were submitted, with 10 successfully securing funding. The 10 funded projects involved 25 HE providers and over 35 external partners, including health care providers, local services, and mental health organisations.

Funding was granted in June 2019 and projects were originally expected to run until December 2021. Subsequently, projects were granted extensions due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. This resulted in all projects coming to an end between December 2021 and July 2022.

Details of the funded approaches are available on the [OfS website](#).

¹ The 'What Works in Supporting Student Mental Health' Report can be found [here](#).

Programme Aims

The MHCC programme sought to achieve a step change in support for student mental health through the following specific aims:

1. Development of strategic partnerships between HE providers, services and sectors in cities, regions, or other clearly defined localities to address geographical issues of connectivity and complexity in mental health provision.
2. Development of inclusive co-creation approaches where students and staff working in the sector are together involved at every stage of the journey to improve mental health outcomes.
3. Demonstrable positive impact on students at participating institutions, with impact identified, measured, and evaluated as part of all funded projects.
4. Development of tools for more effective evaluation of interventions and approaches across different HE contexts that can be shared and disseminated across the sector to achieve greater critical mass to support students.
5. Development of a robust and sound evidence base including a clear evaluation framework to support knowledge development and models of effective practice that can inform future policy and practice across the sector.
6. Development and evaluation of whole-institution approaches, including pedagogy, curriculum and assessment design to support students and facilitate better mental health while improving educational outcomes.
7. Clear commitment from senior leaders across the sector to make student wellbeing and mental health a strategic priority underpinned by a whole-institution response.

Key Findings

This section explores how the MHCC has performed against the programme aims.

The programme has been well received by project staff, wider stakeholders and students. Staff and stakeholders in particular credit the programme with helping to drive innovation and enable HE staff to trial new approaches to support student mental health.

Since its launch the programme has supported 10 HE providers in England to deliver projects that have reached over 19,000 students. This includes:



373 students who have been involved in co-creation activities that have helped to shape the design and implementation of projects



Over 2,300 students who have benefited from access to new forms of mental health support not previously available through their HE provider



Over 16,700 students across FE and HE benefitting from support to help them manage transitions

A step change in support for student mental health

There is evidence that the programme has achieved a step change in relation to the following areas:

- Strengthening strategic partnerships, resulting in improved connectivity between HE providers and other providers involved in supporting student mental health, including the NHS and community mental health providers
- Improving access to services for students and supporting students to receive the right support at the right time
- Improving the range of preventative and proactive mental health support available to students

Further impacts of the programme are outlined in greater detail below.

The MHCC projects have had a demonstrable impact on students

The projects have brought about tangible benefits for students. Newly developed support services, such as **Pause@UoB**,² the new cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) clinic at **Newcastle University**,³ **U-COPE**⁴ and the **Student Liaison Service**, are credited with providing more 'accessible' support compared with the pre-existing and alternative support available to students. The **Student Mental Health Analytics** project⁵ also appears to have created a successful model for identifying students who may need additional support and 'nudging' them to access support. This could help to improve early access, which may reduce the number of students reaching services at crisis point where more intensive support may be required. It represents a shift from 'reactive' support to a more 'proactive' approach.

² Enhancing Student Mental Health through Innovation and Partnership, led by the University of Birmingham.

³ BRIGHTER, led by Newcastle University.

⁴ Both form part of the Liverpool Liaison Model, which formed part of Working in Partnership to Improve Student Mental Health led by the University of Liverpool, and was also one of the partnership models included within Student Mental Health Partnerships, led by UWE Bristol.

⁵ Led by Northumbria University.

Projects with a focus on student transitions – such as **Transitioning Students Effectively**,⁶ **Start to Success**⁷ and **SITUATE**⁸ – also appear to have driven improvements in mental health awareness and support services among potential students making the transition from further education (FE) to HE.

Evidence collected through **Transitioning Students Effectively** suggests this is leading to wider impacts, including easing student concerns and improving their confidence about their ability to manage the transition. More longitudinal research would be beneficial to understand how – if at all – this impacts upon student behaviours once they reach HE. More work is also needed nationally to drive forward sector-wide improvements in student transitions to ensure that all learners moving from FE or sixth form to HE are able to benefit from support.

Further details on the impact of each funded project are provided in ‘What Works: Lessons from the Mental Health Challenge Competition’.

The MHCC has strengthened senior management commitment to student mental health

Eighty per cent of management and delivery staff reported that their involvement in the MHCC programme has helped to ensure that student mental health is an organisational priority. There is evidence that involvement in the MHCC helped some projects to secure continued funding to further develop their approaches.

At the sector level, however, is it more challenging to assess the extent to which the programme has resulted in a clear commitment from senior leaders to make mental health a strategic priority. This appears to be compounded by two key issues.

1. There is a difficulty attributing this kind of outcome to the programme at a time when considerable other effort is being delivered across the HE sector to improve support for student mental health.
2. Student mental health has been further spotlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes it challenging to identify where changes have been catalysed by the programme and where they have been catalysed by the pandemic.

Nevertheless, sector stakeholders were positive about the MHCC programme and emphasised that it had helped to further signal the importance of work to support transitions, early intervention, and support in student mental health.

⁶ Led by the University of Lincoln.

⁷ Led by the University of Keele.

⁸ Led by the University of Sussex.

The MHCC has supported the development and strengthening of strategic partnerships, resulting in reduced complexity and improved connectivity in student mental health provision

This is an area where the MHCC funding appears to have been particularly impactful, by providing the capacity and resource needed to help drive forward partnership development. This has led to wider impacts that contribute to a step change in support, such as reducing ‘gaps’ in support and promoting improved collaborative working to help discuss student cases and agree appropriate support.

Whilst the implementation of partnerships is not a ‘one size fits all’ process and depends on local context, the MHCC has also provided a range of examples of partnership working which might act as a useful starting point for HE providers and NHS staff looking to improve collaboration and connectivity. Some of these examples are already being utilised by other HE providers. For example, a handful of providers are considering adopting approaches informed by the **Liverpool Liaison Model**.⁹

There remain, however, outstanding challenges related to data sharing between HE providers and NHS services. This area would benefit from increased attention at sector level to reduce the risks of students falling through gaps between service providers.

The MHCC has boosted co-creation in student mental health

Across the programme, almost 400 students were provided with opportunities to co-create mental health support. This has brought about benefits for participating students including improved mental health awareness and increased confidence accessing university services. A lasting legacy has also been created as several projects reported that they had extended their use of co-creation in student mental health as a result of their experiences as part of the MHCC programme.

Male students were underrepresented amongst student co-creators suggesting further work is needed to ensure co-creators represent all student demographics.

The MHCC has resulted in a suite of tools and approaches that can be shared and disseminated across the HE sector

The MHCC has supported the development of a wide range of resources, including toolkits and how-to guides, which may help other HE providers to shape their practice or adopt new support models.¹⁰

However, it is not clear to what extent these resources and the new knowledge resulting from the MHCC is reaching other organisations across the sector. Dissemination of these resources is key if the MHCC is to achieve the desired ‘step change’ at the sector level and this needs to be a key focus going forward in

⁹ The Liverpool Liaison Model was a new partnership model developed as part of ‘Working in Partnership to Improve Student Mental Health’ led by the University of Liverpool.

¹⁰ [Mental health Challenge Competition: Improving mental health outcomes - Office for Students](#)

order to maximise opportunities to extend the reach and impact of the MHCC programme. We hope the release and dissemination of the programme evaluation report, and associated briefing documents, will contribute to this wider outcome.

Recommendations

Below we set out the key recommendations stemming from this evaluation.

Recommendations for HE professionals & the HE sector

The recommendations for HE professionals and the HE sector are detailed below. Senior HE leaders and practitioners are also encouraged to read the accompanying companion report ‘What Works in Supporting Student Mental Health: Lessons from the Mental Health Challenge Competition Projects’, which offers further detail regarding the 10 funded projects.

Theme	Recommendation
Developing effective strategic partnerships in student mental health	HE providers & NHS colleagues should work together to agree local approaches for addressing connectivity issues. To support this work we recommend that HE providers: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Put in place dedicated resource to drive forward strategic partnerships. Make use of the extensive learnings developed by the MHCC projects to inform their approaches.
	Effective data sharing is key to ensuring students are properly supported. Collaborative working regarding data sharing between HE providers and the NHS should be taken forward to prevent students slipping through gaps between service providers.
Co-creating mental health initiatives with students	Co-creation of mental health initiatives should be encouraged. However, this should complement, not replace, other activities that ensure students have a voice in the delivery of student mental health provision.
	Developing strategies to improve participation rates among male students in co-creation should be a priority for HE providers to ensure that male students are able to access appropriate support.
	Higher education providers should monitor the profile of students participating in co-creation opportunities, to ensure they can identify where particular student groups are over or underrepresented.

	<p>Co-creation is encouraged when considering adopting new approaches, including those piloted through the MHCC. This will ensure that HE providers are able to take account of how the context of their own students may differ from students in other HE settings.</p>
<p>Designing and implementing innovative mental health projects</p>	<p>HE providers should provide dedicated resource to drive forward innovations in their approach to student mental health.</p> <p>HE providers should explore the evidence and learnings resulting from the MHCC projects, and use these to support improvements to their student mental health provision.</p>
<p>Next steps for the Sector</p>	<p>Work around student transitions from FE to HE would benefit from a national approach to avoid a 'postcode' lottery emerging. We encourage the sector to consider approaches for driving this work forward.</p> <p>Greater collaboration between HE providers is encouraged. This will help to maximise opportunities for shared learning.</p> <p>The MHCC piloted several new models of student support that go beyond traditional university counselling services. We encourage providers to explore these approaches and adopt models which may help to address challenges faced within their own setting.</p> <p>Further work is needed still to drive forward early intervention. We encourage the sector to continue to develop and test innovative approaches that support preventative efforts in student mental health.</p>

Recommendations for the Office for Students

Theme	Recommendations
Developing effective strategic partnerships in student mental health	Providing dedicated resource is essential for building effective partnerships between HE providers and NHS services. We welcome the action that has already been taken by the OfS through the distribution of £15million funding from the DfE to support student mental health, which covers support for student transitions and joint partnership working with the NHS. ¹¹
Designing and implementing innovative mental health projects	The OfS should continue to make funding available to the sector to drive forward innovation at a sector level, recognising that this external funding is particularly valuable in enabling providers to try new ideas without this coming at the cost of losing crucial resource in existing student support services.
Opportunities for maximising the long-term value of the programme	The OfS should continue to raise the profile of the resources that have been developed by the MHCC projects, to ensure that opportunities for shared learning are maximised.
Evaluation	In order to better understand the wider impact and value of innovation funds like the MHCC, in future programmes the OfS should extend evaluation timescales to ensure that impact on the wider sector can be measured. This would enable evaluators to identify whether funded approaches have become more widely adopted.

¹¹ Details on the relevant funding announcement are available here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/joint-working-between-providers-and-the-nhs-to-support-student-mental-health/what-were-doing/>

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