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Social and economic research

Co-creating mental health initiatives with students

Final Report to the Office for Students (2022)

1. Introduction

Background

The Mental Health Challenge Competition (MHCC) programme was launched by the Office for Students in 2018. The programme ran from June 2019 until June 2022 and funded a range of projects that aimed to deliver a 'step change in support for student mental health'.[1]

As part of the guidance for bidders, the OfS specified that all projects were expected to work with students in the development and embedding of their initiatives to improve the co-creation of student mental health initiatives. This report draws on the experiences of project staff and students involved in delivering projects through the MHCC. It is hoped these findings will help higher education providers to develop or refine their own approaches for working in co-creation with students.

What is co-creation?

Co-creation in this context refers to the process of involving students in the development of university mental health initiatives. There are various definitions of what constitutes co-creation, and the related approach of coproduction.[2] However in this context the term is used as a more general term to capture the continuum of student involvement, including consultation approaches, providing opportunities for students within projects, student participation, and coproduction.

Student involvement in the development of mental health support is championed by a range of organisations. For example, Student Minds[3] advocate for higher education providers to adopt coproduction approaches in student mental health. They argue that it can improve health outcomes and mental health literacy and result in more relevant mental health support (Piper & Emmanuel, n.d.). The Universities UK Mentally Healthy Universities Framework also establishes co-production as a core part of the whole university approach to student mental health (Universities UK, 2022).

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[1] Details of the 10 funded projects can be found here: Mental health Challenge Competition: Improving mental health outcomes - Office for Students
[2] Coproduction refers to a 'collaboration between institutions and students, involving joint decision-making on both process and outcomes' (Piper & Emmanuel, n.d.)
[3] Student Minds is a student mental health charity.

2. Benefits of co-creating mental health initiatives

Benefits for higher education providers

Across the MHCC programme there was evidence that student involvement had informed project delivery, and generated benefits for higher education providers. These benefits are summarised below.

Student involvement has helped to ensure student mental health support is more relevant to student needs and priorities

When reflecting on what impact student involvement had on the direction of their project, delivery staff frequently reported that student involvement had helped to capture student experience and ensure the service or support developed was more relevant to student need because it was based on their lived experience at university.

> *'The co-creation to date has given us a greater sense of the reality students face and the ways in which they want help and how best to reach them. It's obviously making it [the project] much more tailored to them.' (Project delivery staff, End of First Year Interviews)*

Project staff reported that working in co-creation with students had helped them to better understand student needs, and how they were likely to engage with services. Their involvement had also helped to challenge assumptions held by staff. For example, one staff member reported that student involvement helped them to design service hours – they had previously assumed that students would want a late opening service, but students fed back that they were unlikely to access the service outside of teaching hours as that was when they tended to be on campus. Students had also shared their experience of the transition to university to help inform the development of relevant workshops for other students.

Student involvement has helped to shape the direction of implementation of mental health initiatives

Across the programme there were many examples of how student involvement had shaped the development on the projects. For example:

- Students had helped to shape operational considerations for new services;
- Students have used their expertise to shape approaches to engaging the wider student population in activity;
- Within projects that had developed workshops for students as part of their interventions, co-creation work with other students had shaped the content drawing on student experiences to set topics for exploration. The case study below illustrates this approach.

Case Study

Project: BRIGHTER, Newcastle University

Newcastle University developed a set of mind management workshops for students[4]. These workshops are based on CBT principles and aim to equip students with the skills to manage common challenges associated with university life. To support the development of the workshops the university held focus groups with 42 students, this included two workshops with postgraduate sessions and two with undergraduate sessions. The issues raised shaped the content of the resulting mind management sessions, and resulted in topics being developed that were bespoke to each cohort. For example postgraduate mind management workshops focused on: managing self-critical thoughts, imposter syndrome, and dealing with setbacks. Whilst undergraduate sessions instead focused on living a balanced life, adjusting to university life, and dealing with social comparison. These topics emerged based on the challenges identified by students who attended the co-creation workshops.

Staff reported that students had sometimes operated as 'critical friends' helping them to identify aspects of the approach that were or were not working.

Student involvement in co-creation may help to build trust between students and their higher education provider

Feedback from students also suggests that co-creation can help to ensure students feel that they are listened to when it comes to mental health. This can help to build positive relationships between students and their higher education provider. This is important as some students previously had negative perspectives, for example where they felt their institution did not listen to students. Through co-creation opportunities higher education providers can challenge these perceptions, and build more positive relationships with their student body by showing them their voices are valued.

'[The project team were] open minded and flexible, and didn't have a fixed way of how they wanted things to go, letting our experiences guide that […Co-creation is] often overlooked in academia in general. Having a team that generally wanted our feedback made a huge difference.' (Student co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

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[4] Workshop plans are available here: [Workshops | BRIGHTER | Newcastle University (ncl.ac.uk)](#)

Benefits of involving students in co-creation

Involvement in co-creation can also bring about a range of benefits for students, for example:

Co-creation can play a role in proactive mental health support, by equipping students with the tools to manage their own mental health

61% of students who participated in the Co-Creation Survey or an interview[5] reported that their understanding of student mental health and the issues affecting it has improved. Qualitative feedback gathered through Co-Creation Interviews suggested this had been driven by co-creation opportunities providing open spaces for students to talk about their experiences and share their views. This had helped students to gather an understanding of student mental health issues that went beyond their own experiences.

'I only really spoke to my friends about what they felt, but [being involved in the project] gave me an insight into how other students were feeling and what they thought of the wellbeing services and the improvements they wanted to see. It was good to get a view that wasn't just based on my inner circle.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

'I learnt a lot - nice to be able to see things from another person's perspective. It shows you new ways to cope with things that you haven't thought of or tried.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

Additionally, 52% of students who took part in an interview or survey reported that they had learnt new ways to manage or support their own mental health through involvement in the project.

'I've learned a lot of strategies around dealing with anxiety, things I'd never been told for, dealing with anxiety triggers, dealing with supporting friends or family members who might be struggling. I feel more equipped to deal with those situations now.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

'I suffer from depression and it has helped us understand my own depression and what methods and strategies I could use in a learning environment as well.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

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[5] Student co-creators were invited to provide their feedback either through a self-completed online survey, or through an interview with the programme evaluation team. Both research approaches explored the same themes, and responses have been drawn together for analysis purposes.

This suggests that co-creation has a role to play in educating students about mental health issues, which could support preventative work in student mental health.

Co-creation can bolster student confidence in university support processes

Involvement in co-creation also appeared to be supporting confidence in university support. Indeed, 60% of students who participated in interviews and surveys reported that they feel more comfortable approaching university support services for help after participating in co-creation opportunities.

'I think I've always struggled with mental health but this has helped me understand what services there are as we have to signpost people so now I've been able to seek help from uni. Looking at the posts and things has made me think it's okay to seek support. I don't know if I'd have done it without this, I would have just thought "oh it'll be fine".'
(Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

'It's made it more available as I think students became more aware of what support they had and what they could do. I feel like now if I required help I would feel comfortable going to the university for this.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Survey)

This suggests that co-creation activities may be able to play some role in supporting prevention efforts at university, by improving student confidence when it comes to accessing support.

Co-creation can play a valuable role in student development

Within surveys and interviews, 58% of students reported that they had learned new skills through their involvement in co-creation. This included soft-skills, such as increased confidence and listening skills.

'I think it's helped me in terms of my leadership skills and being more confident taking the lead. I was quite shy, and its given me confidence to feel valued making a contribution.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

Additionally, several students reported that their involvement had helped them to develop leadership skills or other skills that could support them in their career, such as project management skills, research skills, and presenting skills.

3. Delivering co-creation

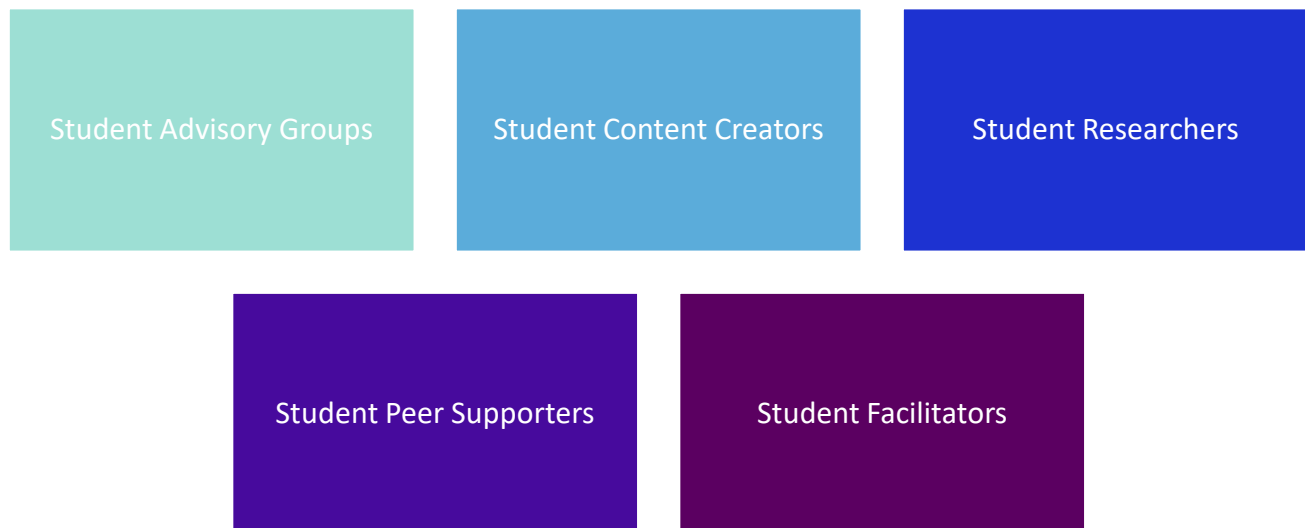## Co-creation in the Mental Health Challenge Competition

More than 300 students participated in MHCC co-creation opportunities.

The range of methods used to involve students varied across projects. Some using more consultative methods, for example inviting students to attend workshops or focus groups to share their experiences and shape content for an initiative.

In other projects, students were involved in delivery roles. For example:

- as part of **Transitioning Students Effectively**, led by the **University of Lincoln**, students were employed as content creators who produced digital content to support students moving through transition points.
- The **Mental Health Analytics** project led by the **University of Northumbria**, and the **Student Mental Health Partnerships** project, led by **the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol)** involved students in their project evaluations, with students taking responsibility for evaluating a part of the programme, either within the context of their course (Mental Health Analytics), or employed as peer researchers (Student Mental Health Partnership).

Figure 1: Type of student involvement used within the Mental Health Challenge Competition

Student Advisory Groups	Student Content Creators	Student Researchers
Student Peer Supporters	Student Facilitators	

Delivering co-creation effectively

Staff perspectives

A few projects had involved student researchers in the projects. In these examples students had typically been involved with carrying out a research project to inform the evaluation of the project. This was usually linked to their studies, for example through a dissertation project or PhD programme. This was felt to be an effective approach as it provides students with autonomy and the link with their studies helps to embed long-term commitment.

> *'You have the benefit of real enthusiasm and they challenge our conceptions because they are closer to it than us […] we deliberately pick quite confident candidates because we need them to challenge us. That has been really important for us.' (Management & delivery staff)*

In all projects that used these approaches the students work was a key part of the project evaluation, and students were invited to share their feedback with the project team.

A small number of projects reported that they had paid students for their contributions, and reported that they felt this was part of delivering effective practice as it ensured students could participate equally and were recognised for their contributions. However, it was recognised that this can come with trade-offs as it limits the number of students who can be involved to how many students you can afford to involve. Other projects had incorporated non-financial incentives, for example providing students with references to reflect their involvement.

Challenges faced by staff in delivering co-creation

Staff from four of the 10 projects reported that they had experienced challenges working in co-creation with students. The challenges reported included:

- Ensuring students are not at risk of being overwhelmed due to the other burdens on their time, which was overcome by setting clear roles
- Capacity for sessions being filled
- Staff having to respond to at times critical feedback, which they may not be used to if they haven't previously delivered work in this way
- Students raising problems that were out of their control, which staff were unable to act on.

Student perspectives

Whilst a wide variety of approaches were used to involve students across MHCC projects, most student co-creators (78%) reported that they felt methods used to involve them in the project were effective. Sometimes this was a reflection on a particular approach used to involve them. For example, a student who had been involved as a researcher was positive about this approach:

> *'It gives such a different dataset from getting a peer researcher to interview other students. I think the data is much more honest and rich, whereas if it was someone else the data might not be as honest and raw. The students felt they could be quite honest. I think it's so beneficial. Student mental health is about students.' (Student Researcher, Co-Creation Interviews)*

Similarly, several students involved in more consultative projects, where they had shared their lived experience to help shape project design were positive about these opportunities.

> *'I really liked the idea that we were basically talking about our own experience, the interviews we had were completely student led, it was always us talking and it was a great opportunity to hear about other students experience on different courses and in different unis, the only thing I didn't like was that there wasn't a lot of meetings.' (Student co-creator, Co-creation Interviews)*

More commonly, positive feedback on involvement seemed to relate less to the specific methods used to involve students but more to features of working practice that could be embedded in a variety of co-creation methods. For example, students were positive about their involvement where they felt they had been listened to and given a genuine voice. This was aided by good communication from project delivery staff to help students understand the impact of their contributions and how they had been acted on. Students were also positive about their involvement where they had been given a good degree of flexibility or control, for example being involved in creating project content or resources.

> *'I definitely think it was a good model for involving student voice. Sometimes it feels like student feedback isn't listened to and this was very refreshing. Especially in a peer support model where the idea is we're students supporting other students.' (Student co-creator, Co-creation Interviews)*

> *'improvements we suggested were taken on board. They always worked hard to make sure it was smooth sailing and worked with you to make things the best they could. Constant stream of comms - they would help whatever the problem was.' (Student co-creator, Co-creation Interviews)*

Only one interviewee was negative about their involvement in co-creation (quoted below).

'We were asked about our opinions, but not really involved as coproducers. You felt like it wasn't a really genuine call for new ideas. It was more like this is the structure and this is how you can do it.' (Student co-creator, Co-creation Interviews)

This emphasises the importance of ensuring that students have a genuine role in shaping content and approach, and are not just sense-checking decisions that have already been made.

Figure 2: Features of effective co-creation approaches, drawn from the Mental Health Challenge Competition programme evaluation

There are genuine opportunities for students to share their ideas.

Students are listened to, and action is taken on their feedback.

Project staff provide regular feedback on how student contributions have shaped delivery.

Student involvement is not a tick-box exercise, and students have genuine opportunities to shape the direction of projects.

Students engaged in co-creation as part of the MHCC, also suggested improvements that included:

Tips from students on delivering effective co-creation work in mental health projects

Use a wide range of promotion approaches

Students emphasised the importance of using a diverse range of approaches to promote co-creation opportunities, and encouraged universities to go broader than email or social media communications. Whilst some students recommended email and social media communications, a small number of students reported that they were more likely to disengage from these platforms if they were facing difficulties with their mental health. Students therefore encouraged staff to consider using posters and word of mouth approaches, including communications through student representatives and tutors, which would help projects to meet students where they are.

'When you have [poor] mental health you disengage from your emails whereas seeing a poster may be a little more likely. That is just my perspective. Emails I may consult a bit less if I am feeling anxious but I may go for a walk around campus or go to the cafe and I would be more likely to see things.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

Be mindful of students' lives

Avoid obligations, especially where working with students with lived experience of mental health problems to ensure that students are welcome to engage to the extent where they can, and not made to feel guilty if their capacity to be involved changes.

'I think the fact that email correspondence didn't obligate a response helped. It was nice to know I could respond if I wanted to, but I could be involved on a casual level without letting the service down. It wasn't made to feel compulsory and that's important especially if someone is dealing with their own responsibilities. You can feel quite guilty if you don't feel able to participate, but the project team was really good in the sense they let us know it's all up to us. They're always willing to have us.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

Provide a range of opportunities, including ways for confidential or anonymous feedback

A small number of students suggested that projects should include more opportunities for confidential or one-to-one feedback, to ensure that students who may be less confident in group settings are not prevented from involvement in shaping initiatives. This may be particularly important in the context of mental health initiatives, as some students with anxiety may be deterred from attending large group sessions, which could limit the extent to which this group is represented in developed services.

Give students leadership opportunities

Students were interested in opportunities that enabled them to lead, and felt this could help students to be more invested in projects.

'Give students the bulk of the responsibility - pass it on to them [...] if the students don't have input into what goes into the content they'll want to be less involved. Let them make the message relevant to their audience.' (Student Co-creator, Co-Creation Interviews)

Close the feedback loop

When reflecting on what worked well in co-creation approaches, students frequently emphasised the role of good communication with project delivery staff, who kept them aware of what was going on and fed back on how students had helped shape development. It was therefore not surprising that in their tips for providers developing co-creation approaches, students frequently emphasised the importance of relationship building and closing the feedback loop.

4. Co-creation: Current challenges & further developments

This final section draws on the learning from the MHCC to highlight areas of co-creation that need further development. These are detailed below.

Male students are underrepresented in Co-Creation initiatives

Whilst not all projects collected demographic data for all students involved in co-creation, where this was collected male students were consistently underrepresented in comparison to female students. Female students made up 83% of students engaged in co-creation activities where data was available, whilst male students accounted for just 17%.

This gap may in part be explained by the differing levels of engagement with mental health services among male and female students. Indeed, male students are less likely to engage with mental health support than female students (Sagar-Ouriaghli, et al., 2020). However, levels of male students engaged in co-creation activities were lower than the proportion of male students who were supported by the projects, which may suggest that there are additional barriers that prevent male students from engaging in co-creation. Lower engagement of male students in co-creation could have knock-on implications for the services that are developed that might be as relevant to the needs of male students. Developing strategies to improve participation rates among male students should therefore be a priority area of consideration for higher education providers working in co-creation with students to inform student mental health provision.

Researchers from King's College London (Sagar-Ouriaghli, et al., 2020) and Student Minds (Maggs, 2021) have both undertaken research to understand how to better engage male students with mental health support. Both emphasise the importance of male only spaces to facilitate openness indicating a specific approach that institutions should consider.

The picture around incentives is unclear and requires further interrogation to understand how this influences student engagement

The projects took differing approaches when it came to incentivising student participation in co-creation activities. For example, some projects provided students with payment or vouchers as part of their participation, whilst some roles were not incentivised. It was unclear what impact this had on the level of engagement.

Whilst 25% of students who participated in the Co-creation Survey reported that incentives were one of the reasons they choose to get involved in the project, students were most commonly motivated to get involved because they were interested in improving student mental health support at their university

(reported by 90% of students), to develop their skills (reported by 45% of students), or to learn more about what their university is doing to support student mental health (40%). Additionally, several interviewees who reported that they received incentives reported that they would still have engaged with the project in the absence of these as it was not the main reason they had chosen to take part.

However, a small number of students reported that they felt it was important to pay students as part of showing their time was valued. This is likely to be particularly key in projects where students are taking on an enhanced role that requires a significant time commitment or higher level of responsibility, for example peer supporter roles or content creators.

This is an area that would benefit from further exploration, to help higher education providers understand best practice for incentivisation.

References

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