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Co-creating intersectional student mental health initiatives

Lessons from the Mental Health Funding Competition

A report for the Office for Students

November 2022



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Executive Summary

The Mental Health Funding Competition: *Using innovation and intersectional approaches to target mental health support for students* was launched in October 2020, with the aim of funding innovative projects that focused on:

- Developing preventative strategies for students who might be considered particularly at risk of developing mental ill health.
- Driving improvements in access to support among students who may face additional barriers (for example, because of their course, mode of study, or other factors such as structural, personal or cultural differences or other inequalities).

The programme has funded 18 projects that seek to improve support for targeted groups of students (for example Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, LGBT+ students, mature students etc). As a condition of funding, all projects were required to work in co-creation with students in the development of their project. Over its first year of delivery, the MHFC programme has therefore led to the development of a rich body of knowledge in relation to how to involve targeted student groups in co-creation.

This report reflects on insights from project staff and students to identify areas of effective practice for involving specific student groups in co-creation and the challenges encountered. It is intended to support higher educational professionals with developing improved strategies to diversify the groups of students involved in their existing co-creation approaches, or to support them to develop new targeted approaches.

Key findings from the report are outlined below.

Key Findings

Engaging students in co-creation

1. The MHFC has reached high numbers of students from groups who are typically underrepresented in support services or who face additional barriers to accessing support at university/college. This appears to have been driven by the targeted approach of the programme, which has resulted in the development of co-creation spaces that are open to students with shared demographic backgrounds or similar lived experience. Qualitative responses from students and staff suggest these “closed spaces” have been highly valued by students, and may contribute to mitigating concerns about stigma that can prevent students from speaking up in front of peers who are not from a similar background.
2. There are a range of barriers that prevent students from accessing mental health and wellbeing support. These may in turn prevent students from engaging with opportunities to participate in

co-creation of projects related to mental health. In particular, concerns around confidentiality, stigma and staff who will not understand their needs may mean students are reluctant to put themselves forward for projects with a mental health focus, as students may fear that their participation identifies them as someone who has experienced mental health difficulties.

3. Some barriers are more prevalent among particular target groups, for example:
 - Concerns about stigma are more prevalent among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students.
 - Concerns around confidentiality are more prevalent among placement students (particularly health care students), disabled students, international students and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students.
 - Beliefs that their problems are “not serious enough” are more heightened among first generation students.
 - Concerns that staff will not understand their support needs are more prevalent among LGBT+ students, disabled students and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students.

Accordingly, higher education providers (HEPs) should consider putting in place targeted mitigations against these barriers to support the engagement of target groups in co-creation opportunities.

The involvement of staff who share a background with the target group was found to be an effective way of involving students in co-creation opportunities. Whilst this was not important to all students, some reported that the absence of a facilitator who shared their background would deter them from getting involved in co-creation activities. This is likely to be particularly important where staff are seeking to involve LGBT+ students or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students in co-creation, as these students may have faced prejudice that they may not feel comfortable discussing with a staff member who has not had similar lived experience.

4. Students may have other preferences in relation to facilitation that staff should take in to account to reduce barriers to involvement. For example, where a co-creation opportunity is targeting students from particular courses, students may prefer that staff who teach those courses are not in attendance to ensure that they feel able to discuss concerns openly. It is suggested that higher education (HE) staff should actively involve students from the target group in discussions about how best to facilitate sessions to ensure opportunities do not inadvertently create barriers to participation.
5. Incentives appear to be of greater importance for enabling the participation of first generation students, international students and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students. However, incentives remain just one aspect of an attractive opportunity, and should be part of a range of benefits students can obtain from participating in co-creation activities, including opportunities for personal development.

6. Rates of participation of male students were low across the programme. This suggests further work is still needed to ensure that male students feel able to participate in co-creation opportunities. A more intersectional approach to student involvement may be beneficial to boost engagement of male students, for example splitting co-creation groups by gender.

How involvement in co-creation can benefit students from target groups

1. Involvement in co-creation can bring about a range of benefits for participating students from target groups, including:
 - o Improving levels of mental health awareness among students.
 - o Helping students to feel more confident accessing support.
 - o Promoting a sense of belonging.
2. Feedback from both students and staff suggests that co-creation work is also improving staff knowledge of the barriers faced by students from target groups. It is hoped that this will result in improved support for students in target groups, and more relevant services/initiatives being developed to meet the needs of students from groups that face additional barriers to accessing mental health support or who are at increased risk of experiencing a mental health problem.

It is still early days in the MHFC programme to understand how the benefits derived from co-creation work will result in impacts on the wider target group (i.e. those who have not participated directly in co-creation opportunities, but who stand to benefit from the initiatives developed). However, early indications suggest that co-creation with target groups could lead to more relevant support being put in place for target groups. This will be a key focus for the Final Evaluation of the Mental Health Funding Competition.

1. Introduction

Co-creation is increasingly recommended as part of best practice approaches in the development of strategies and support for student mental health. There are various definitions regarding what should be described as co-creation, and the related approach of co-production.¹ Co-creation in this context refers to the process of involving students in the development of university mental health initiatives as active partners, and is used as an umbrella term to capture the continuum of approaches for involving students, including consultation approaches, student participation and co-production.

Co-creation has been a central feature of the mental health funding programmes launched by the Office for Students (OfS). This includes the Mental Health Funding Competition (MHFC), and the earlier Mental Health Challenge Competition (MHCC) programme.² Co-creation is also recommended as best practice within Student Mind's University Mental Health Charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019) and the Universities UK Stepchange framework (Universities UK, 2022).

Previous reports have provided strong coverage of how to effectively deliver co-creation with students (Piper & Emmanuel, n.d.) (Maggs, 2021). However, less has been reported in relation to how to effectively co-create mental health initiatives with underrepresented communities who 'can experience specific health inequalities, where power dynamics can prevent authentic collaboration' (Piper & Emmanuel, n.d.). The MHFC has provided focus on this area by funding a range of projects that involve co-creation with students from the following target groups:

- Particular groups of students with characteristics identified as increasing the risk of poor mental health (e.g. on the basis of ethnicity or socioeconomic background)
- Groups of students who might experience barriers to accessing support due to their course, mode of study or other characteristics (e.g. those on placements as part of their course, commuters, mature students, part-time students, postgraduate taught students, international students, first generation higher education students,³ carers, care leavers or LGBT+).

This report draws on the experiences of the MHFC projects, and identifies effective practice and common challenges encountered involving these target groups in co-creation. It is intended to assist staff working in higher education settings who are seeking to engage with specific student groups or seeking to make their existing co-creation opportunities more inclusive.

¹ Coproduction refers to a 'collaboration between institutions and students, involving joint decision-making on both process and outcomes' (Piper & Emmanuel, n.d.)

² The MHCC ran from June 2019 until July 2022. Full details on the programme are available here: [Improving mental health outcomes – Office for Students](#)

³ This term refers to students whose parents did not obtain a higher education degree.

Background to the Mental Health Funding Competition

The Mental Health Funding Competition: *Using innovation and intersectional approaches to target mental health support for students* was launched in October 2020. The programme was supported by investment from the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, and has provided £3 million of funding to support the development of innovative and intersectional approaches to student mental health. The programme has funded 18 projects across England, which target a diverse range of student cohorts who face either increased risk of poor mental health or increased barriers to accessing support⁴. Section 2 provides greater detail on how students have been involved in co-creation within the programme and the reach of these activities.

Research aims & methods

This report is for higher education professionals, to support them in improving their own approaches to collaborating with students from target groups in relation to student mental health. Its focus relates to students who may show lower levels of engagement with university/college support on the basis of demographic characteristics or mode of study.

This report addresses the following research questions:

1. What factors may higher education providers (HEPs) need to consider when involving students from target groups in co-creation? This includes exploring what strategies have been effective in recruiting students from target groups, and barriers to engaging these students. This is explored in Section 3.
2. What strategies have been effective for delivering co-creation with groups who face multiple barriers to accessing support in co-creation activity, and what have been the barriers? This is explored in Section 4.
3. How does involvement in co-creation benefit students from target groups? This is explored in Section 5.
4. What impact has co-creation had on the support for students from target groups? This is explored in Section 6.

To provide additional context, Section 2 of the report explores the reach of co-creation activities across the programme. Conclusions and recommendations are explored in Section 7.

⁴ Full details of the successful projects are included here: [Mental Health Funding Competition: Using innovation and intersectional approaches to target mental health support for students – Office for Students](#)

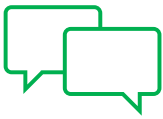
Research methods

The findings of this report are based on the following data collection approaches:



An online survey of students involved in co-creation through the MHFC (n = 110, response rate 21%)

The online survey was shared with students by project delivery staff. A detailed breakdown of respondent characteristics is provided in [Appendix 1](#).



In-depth interviews with management & delivery staff (n=41)

Interviews were conducted, by telephone or video call, with key staff members and partners identified by project teams. Representatives were included from all 18 projects funded by the MHFC programme.



Analysis of monitoring data collected by the projects

This included exploring the number of students engaged in co-creation, and analysis of profile characteristics, in addition to reviewing project evaluation reports and monitoring reports to identify effective practice and challenges.

Limitations

Readers should note that the following limitations affect the evidence in this report:

- The relatively low number of students who participated in the co-creation survey prevents demographic analysis where sample sizes are particularly low. As a result, whilst segmented analysis has been performed in relation to some student groups, this has not been possible in relation to all. In particular this report has omissions in relation to care leavers and autistic students. Further research would be beneficial to understand what barriers may impact upon the levels of engagement from these student groups, and to better understand strategies to facilitate their engagement in co-creation.
- In Section 5 charts are included from the co-creation survey in which students were asked to reflect on their feelings before and after participating in co-creation activities. It should be noted that all data had to be collected after students had participated. This is, therefore, a retrospective baseline, rather than a pre-intervention baseline. Accordingly the data may be impacted by recall bias.

2. Co-creation in the Mental Health Funding Competition

This section explores how students have been involved in co-creation within the projects funded by the MHFC programme.

Level of student involvement

Over the course of the first year of the programme, 533 students were involved in co-creation activities. The number of students engaged in co-creation varied considerably between projects, with a range of 4-99 students engaged.⁵

Tables 1 and 2 provide breakdowns of the students involved in co-creation related to different demographic groups. As highlighted in this data, female students accounted for 70 per cent of participants involved in co-creation activity.

Table 1: Students involved in co-creation activity by sex

| Sex | Percentage |
|--------|------------|
| Female | 70% |
| Male | 30% |
| Other | <1% |

Source: Project Reports (Base = 502)⁶

As illustrated by Table 2, the programme had had high levels of engagement from Black and Asian students, who represent 46 per cent and 22 per cent of students engaged respectively.

Table 2: Students involved in co-creation activity by ethnicity

| Ethnicity | Percentage |
|-----------|------------|
| Black | 46% |
| White | 27% |
| Asian | 23% |
| Mixed | 1% |
| Other | 3% |

Source: Project Reports (Base = 410)

⁵ These numbers exclude large student surveys, which were not felt to include the level of involvement required to be considered co-creation.

⁶ Demographic data was not recorded for all students involved in co-creation.

These high levels of engagement from Black and Asian students appear to have been influenced by the programme's focus on projects that are providing targeted support for Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnic groups. These figures also show that the MHFC programme has helped to diversify the students involved in co-creation of mental health support initiatives compared to the levels of ethnic diversity found among students who contributed to the earlier MHCC programme. For example, 37 per cent of student co-creators who participated in the MHCC reported their ethnicity as Black, Asian, Mixed or Other, in comparison to 70 per cent of students who have participated in co-creation opportunities as part of the MHFC programme.

The programme has also involved high levels of mature students. For example 46 per cent of students engaged in co-creation activities were aged 25 or over.⁷ This suggests that the MHFC is successfully achieving its aim of reaching students who are likely to experience additional barriers to accessing mental health support, as mature students are more likely than their peers to be working while studying, have caring responsibilities or be managing significant financial responsibilities (Hunter, 2021).

Table 3: Students involved in co-creation by age

| Age | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|
| 20 and under | 23% |
| 21-24 years | 31% |
| 25-29 years | 21% |
| 30 years and over | 25% |

Source: Project Reports (Base = 308)

The programme has also involved projects that have provided support for smaller target groups, for example:

- Two projects are exploring improved support for autistic students. Together these projects have involved 16 autistic students in co-creation opportunities.
- Two projects are exploring support for placement students. These projects have involved 62 placement students in co-creation opportunities.
- Across the programme 17 LGBT+ students have been involved in co-creation. However it should be noted that most projects did not include monitoring of sexual orientation and as a result we anticipate that this figure is an underestimate.

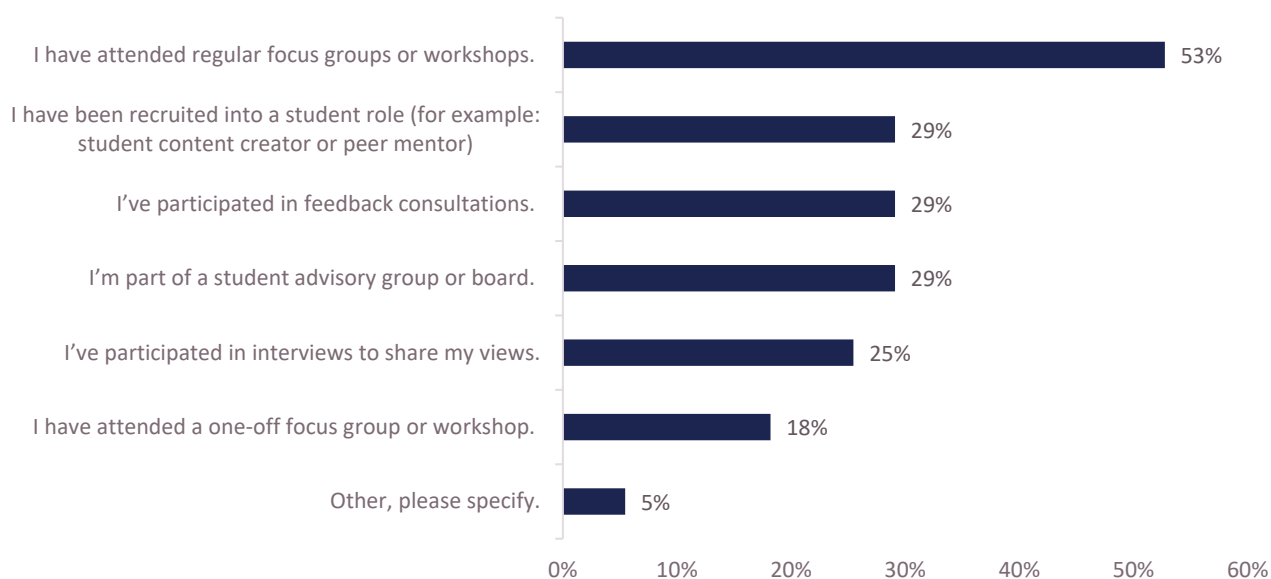
It is not possible to provide more thorough breakdowns of the above groups, as most projects only captured these demographics where they were the focus of their project. However, in future we would encourage HEPs to collect a wider range of demographic categories – where it is ethical for them to do so – to ensure that opportunities to identify underrepresented groups within their target group are not missed.

⁷ Please note that age data was not recorded by all projects, so this is based on data from just 308/533 co-creators.

Models of involvement

A broad range of approaches have been used for involving students in co-creation, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: How have you been involved in the project?



Source: Co-creators Survey (Base = 110)

Most students who participated in the co-creator's survey, reported that they had been invited to participate in focus groups or workshops. These were usually "closed" spaces that had been created for a specific target group of students (for example first generation students), to provide them with spaces to share their experiences and shape project initiatives. Qualitative feedback from students and staff suggested that these spaces had been strongly welcomed by students as places where they could share their experiences with people with similar lived experience.

Several projects had also involved specific roles for students, such as:

- **Student content creators**, who were involved with designing and creating resources or outputs as part of an initiative, such as self-help resources or toolkits, for other students to access.
- **Student researchers**, who were involved in developing or delivering research approaches within the project.
- **Student fellows**, who were responsible for devising mental health and wellbeing activities to be delivered as part of the intervention.
- **Student Mental Health Advisors and other peer supporter roles** – whilst these roles were often also one of the initiatives projects had developed to improve the support available for their target group, peer supporters were typically involved in co-creation of the role and remit.

Some projects had also provided more private opportunities for students to be involved, for example providing opportunities for students to share their views through interviews.

In addition to these approaches several projects also carried out wider consultation exercises, such as surveys to gather student perspectives from a broader audience than might be possible to include in co-creation activities.

3. Factors HEPs may need to consider when involving students from target groups in co-creation

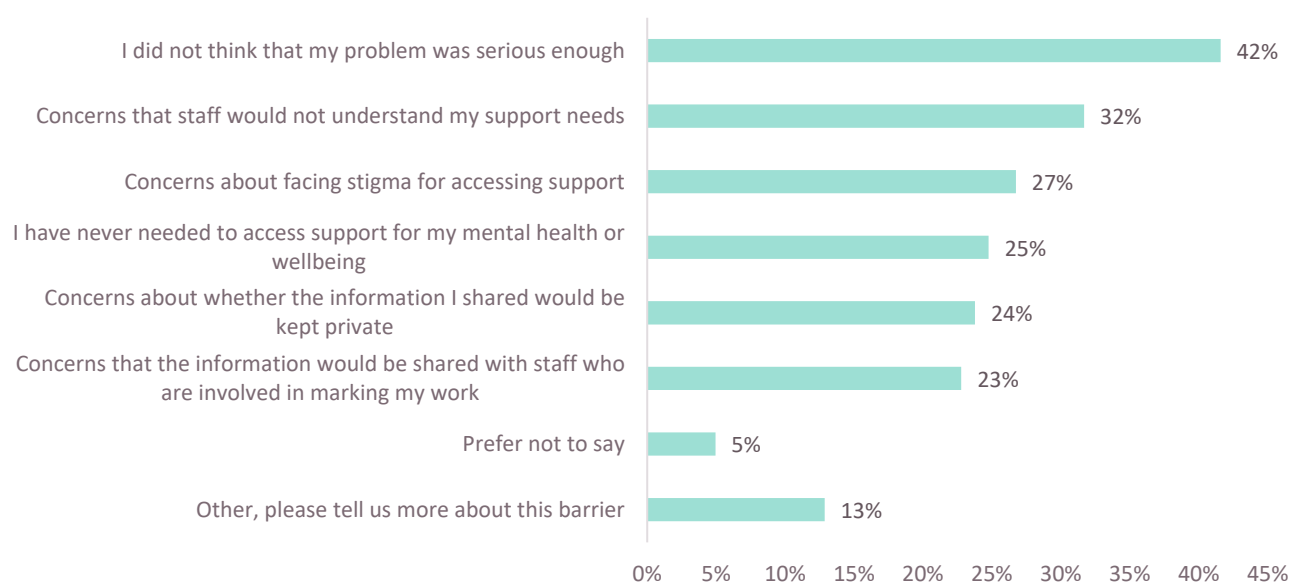
This section explores factors HEPs may need to consider when looking to effectively involve students from target groups in co-creation. It explores:

- Barriers that may prevent students from engaging in co-creation.
- Factors that motivate students to participate in co-creation.
- Effective practice and challenges in recruiting students from target groups, identified in interviews with delivery staff and in student feedback.

Barriers that may prevent students from engaging in co-creation

A range of barriers prevent students from accessing mental health support at university, including concerns over confidentiality, concerns that their problems are not serious enough or concerns that staff will not understand their support needs. These are detailed in Figure 2 below. These barriers in turn may impact students' decisions about whether to participate in co-creation activities related to mental health.

Figure 2: Before you participated in the project had any of the following barriers prevented you from accessing support for your mental health or wellbeing when you needed to?



Source: Student co-creation survey (Base = 101)

When aiming to involve students from target groups in co-creation, higher education staff should be aware that some of these barriers are more prevalent among specific target groups, which may require

specific mitigation strategies to support students to access support and participate in co-creation opportunities.

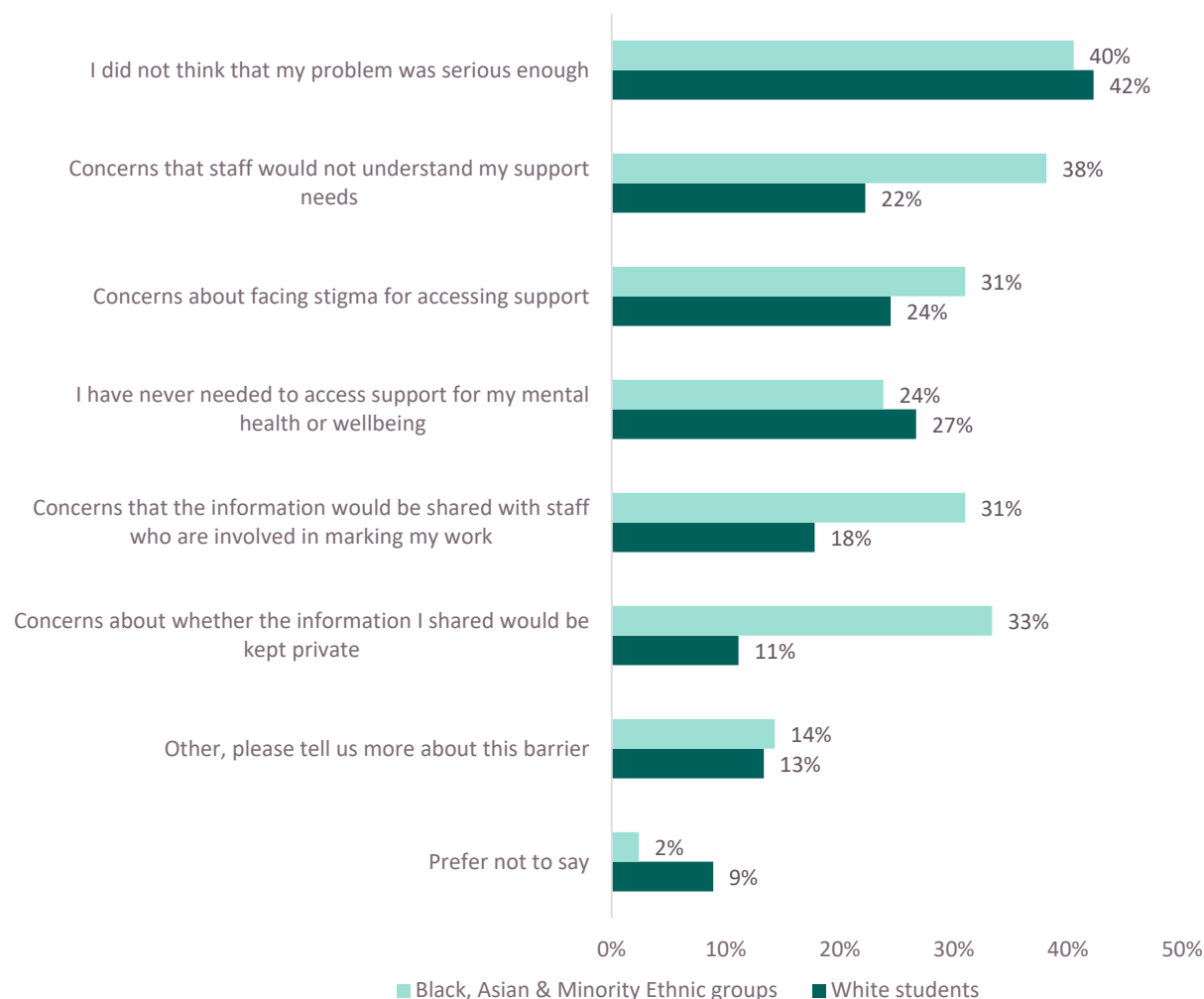
For example, segmented data (Figure 3) from the student co-creation survey showed that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students were more likely to report concerns regarding whether the information they shared would be kept private. This concern was reported by 33 per cent of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, compared to 11 per cent of white students. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students were also more likely to report concerns that staff would not understand their support needs (38 per cent, compared with 22 per cent of White students). The latter in particular may be influenced by the demographics of support staff, particularly where there are low levels of ethnic diversity, as previous research has highlighted that many Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students feel they would benefit from accessing support from a counsellor who is also black or minority ethnic (Frazer-Carroll, 2018). Similarly, some project staff found that some students had shown a preference for co-creation work being delivered by staff from the same cultural identify. Although this was not important to all students, some students reported that the absence of a facilitator with a shared background to them would prevent them from participating. Staff also reported that having staff from similar backgrounds involved in the work had been beneficial, by putting students at ease or providing a platform to talk about shared issues that could help students to open up. In one project, where there was not an ethnically diverse staff team in place, a student reported that this had been an initial deterrent among some of their peers from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, as they were not sure that white facilitators would understand their experiences.

As a result, when seeking to engage Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students in co-creation activities, higher education staff should:

- Set out confidentiality and privacy information clearly to allay student concerns.
- Involve staff from relevant communities in delivery/facilitation.

LGBT+ students were also more likely to report that concerns about staff not understanding their support needs had been a barrier to accessing mental health support (reported by 38 per cent of LGBT+ students, compared to 28 per cent of heterosexual students). Whilst the number of students included in this sample is small, data collected in a large-scale UK university survey provide a useful source of triangulation that supports this finding. Indeed, a survey of over 2000 students at the University of Bristol showed that LGBTQ+ students were more likely to report that ‘concerns no one will understand my problem’ had prevented them from accessing support (Bennett, et al., 2021). When involving this group in co-creation it is therefore suggested that HEPs consider developing LGBT+ only spaces to provide a platform where students may feel more able to share their experiences, as meeting with other students with similar lived experience may help students to see that there are people who will understand what they are going through.

Figure 3: Before you participated in the project had any of the following barriers prevented you from accessing support for your mental health or wellbeing when you needed to? Comparisons in responses between White students and students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups⁸



Source: Student co-creation survey (Base = 45 (White students), 42 (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students)).

The following barriers were more prevalent among disabled students than students with no disability:

- Concerns that staff would not understand my support needs (reported by 44 per cent of disabled students, compared to 17 per cent of students with no disability).
- Concerns about whether the information they shared will be kept private (reported by 33 per cent of disabled students, compared to 14 per cent of students with no disability).
- Concerns that the information would be shared with staff who are involved in marking my work (reported by 41 per cent of disabled students, compared with 14 per cent of students with no disability).

However, it should be noted that the overall number of students with a disability included within the sample is small (n= 27).

⁸ Note: More detailed ethnicity breakdowns are not possible due to the low numbers of respondents included in analysis.

A higher proportion of international students were also concerned about the privacy of the information they shared (30 per cent, compared to 22 per cent of home students). However, just 20 international students participated in the co-creation survey, so further exploration of the barriers faced by this group would be beneficial.

In contrast, the dominant barrier that prevented first generation students from accessing support was a concern that their problem was ‘not serious enough’. This barrier was reported by 50 per cent of first generation students, compared to 27 per cent of non-first generation students. We anticipate that this might be related to feelings of “imposter syndrome” among first-generation students, which could lead to students perceiving poor mental health as part of the university experience. To mitigate this barrier when seeking to involve students in co-creation, it is suggested that higher education staff should:

- Avoid medicalised language, as this may deter students from getting involved who don’t view their issues as “serious” or of a “clinical” level.

Students from courses with placements also showed heightened concerns around confidentiality and who the information they shared would be shared with. In some cases this resulted in students showing a preference for academic staff from their course not being involved in co-creation delivery. It is therefore suggested that when higher education staff are working with this group of students they:

- Clearly articulate confidentiality information at the advertising stage and include details of the staff who will be present so students can make informed decisions about whether to participate.
- Work with students to agree who they would be comfortable sharing their views with.

What motivates students to get involved in co-creation activities?

Across the projects a range of strategies were used to invite students to participate in co-creation activities. This often included sending out emails to students, advertising opportunities on social media, sharing opportunities with staff or students who may be able to spread the word, or speaking to students on campus. Most projects took a targeted approach to engagement where only students who fell into a specific target group (for example first generation students or autistic students) were eligible to take part in these activities. However, a small number of projects were open to a wider student audience. For example some institutions were supporting commuter students or mature students, but as these students made up a considerable proportion of their cohort they had not needed to target invitations.

Students have diverse motivations for choosing to participate in co-creation activities. Understanding common motivations may assist HEPs in advertising opportunities to students and the evaluation findings show that some motivations to participate are more common than others.

An interest in mental health was one of the key reasons students chose to get involved in co-creation activities as part of the MHFC. For example:

- 77 per cent (85/110) of students reported they chose to get involved because they are interested in improving student mental health.

- 46 per cent (50/110) wanted to learn more about what their HEP is doing to support student mental health.
- 45 per cent (49/110) wanted to learn more about student mental health.
- 31 per cent (34/110) wanted to learn strategies to improve their own mental health.

These motivations were highly prevalent across all target groups. However wanting to learn more about what their HEP is doing to support student mental health was more prevalent among mature students, LGBT+ students and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students. It is unclear why this is, however it is suggested that it may relate to these groups feeling that their needs are overlooked in relation to student mental health and therefore being interested in hearing what targeted support is available.

33 per cent (36/110) of student co-creators reported that they were motivated to take part in the projects as they wanted to share their experiences of accessing support services. This influence was more prevalent among LGBT+ students (65 per cent of LGBT+ students reported that this had been a motivator, compared to 27 per cent of heterosexual respondents). This may suggest that spaces to share lived experience are particularly highly valued among this cohort of students.

As demonstrated above, an interest in mental health and lived experience of a mental health issue are key motivators for students getting involved in co-creation of support initiatives. Students were also commonly motivated to get involved because they:

- Wanted an opportunity to develop their skills (48 per cent; 53/110).
- Wanted the chance to give back to the student community (46 per cent; 50/110) – this was more commonly reported as a motivator by female students and LGBT+ students.
- Thought the project would support their professional development (42 per cent; 46/110).
- Wanted a chance to meet other students (18 per cent; 20/110).

A further 17 per cent (19/110) reported they chose to get involved because there were good incentives on offer. Those who reported that incentives were a motivator were more likely to report that they had not previously taken part in co-creation opportunities at their university/college.

This shows that there are a range of motivators that can support students to engage in co-creation. When designing co-creation opportunities and recruitment materials, practitioners should think about how they can hook into these different interests to ensure their opportunities have broad appeal. To boost their approaches we would encourage HEPs to work with students from their target group to identify what motivated them to participate and use this knowledge to enable them to tailor future engagement efforts.

Effective approaches to recruiting student co-creators & challenges encountered

This sub-section explores effective practice and common challenges that were identified in recruiting students to participate in co-creation opportunities. The findings are drawn from feedback gathered from students through the co-creation survey and from qualitative insights gathered through in-depth interviews with project staff.

Effective approaches

Involve trusted individuals

Some students showed reluctance to engage in co-creation activities in part due to concerns regarding stigma or confidentiality. As outlined on page 13, these concerns were particularly heightened among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students. Concerns around confidentiality or also heightened among students whose courses involved Fitness to Practise requirements. Project staff, therefore, emphasised the importance of trusted individuals being involved in supporting recruitment activities. This could include staff who had a strong reputation among the student body and/or involvement of trusted students like Student Representatives or Course Representatives, who may be able to use word of mouth to help develop trust in the process. For example, one project working with autistic students found that advertising opportunities through Disability Services had been successful, as this service was well respected and trusted by their students.

As part of this, some project staff emphasised the importance of putting a face to a name in recruitment. One project reported that as part of this they had used video tools as part of recruitment to help students to connect with the project team.

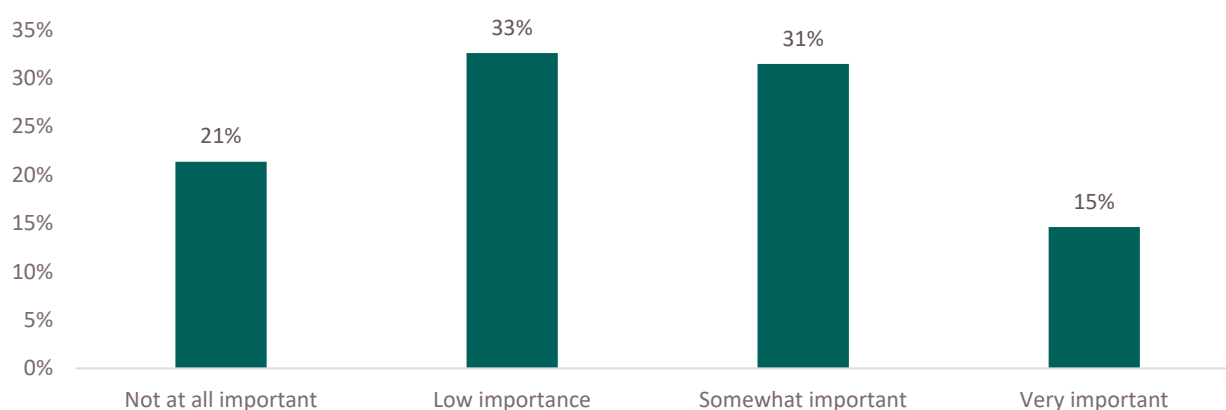
Providing financial incentives

Many projects (7 of 18) reported that they included paid student roles within their project, whilst in others student roles were voluntary. Where cash incentives or vouchers were provided, management and delivery staff frequently reported they felt it was important to compensate students for their time. Several members of staff also reported that they felt provision of incentives had helped to ensure their recruitment was effective.

‘The added value of the financial reward has helped to deliver things a bit quicker and made sure that motivation has stayed. They are not motivated solely by the money but it helps to give that cherry on the top. There have still been some who dropped out, or got busy with coursework, but from my experience working with student volunteers previously [...] I think being able to say to them you will get paid for that time really has given it the edge.’ (Management & Delivery Staff)

Student perspectives on the importance of incentives were mixed, however, as shown in Figure 4. Indeed, 46 per cent (41/89) of students who were offered an incentive said this was ‘somewhat important’ or ‘very important’ in their decision to take part in co-creation. In contrast, 54 per cent (48/89) reported it was of ‘low importance’ or ‘not at all important’.

Figure 4: How important was the offer of an incentive in your decision to take part in the project?



Source: Student co-creation survey (Base = 89, students offered an incentive)

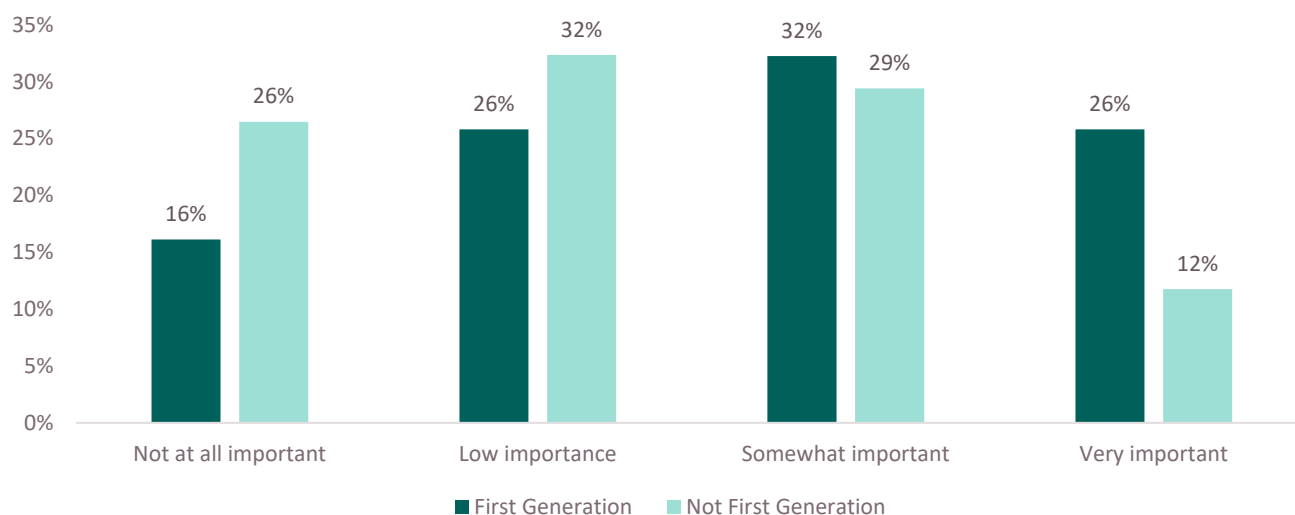
For first generation students, incentives appear to be a more important factor in the decision to take part, however readers should be mindful of the relatively small number of first generation students in the sample ($n = 34$). Of this group 58 per cent reported that incentives were ‘somewhat important’ or ‘very important’, as shown in Figure 5. This is potentially due to the intersection between first generation students and working class/low-income students. These students may, therefore, be more reliant than their peers on part-time work to assist in meeting their living costs. Consequently, when seeking to involve first generation students, HEPs may need to consider offering incentives to ensure students can participate freely and are not having to make decisions between paid work and involvement in co-creation activities.

Incentives also appeared to be of higher importance to Black, Asian and minority ethnic students⁹, and international students¹⁰. The available data does not enable us to provide stratified analysis exploring the importance of incentives to commuter students, part-time students, or care experienced students who may also experience higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage. This is, therefore an area that would benefit from further exploration in the future.

⁹ Incentives were reported as “important” or “very important” by 56 per cent of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, compared to 34 per cent of white students.

¹⁰ Incentives were reported as “important” or “very important” by 77 per cent of international students, compared to 41 per cent of home students. Please note that international students only accounted for 20 students within the sample.

Figure 5: How important was the offer of an incentive in your decision to take part in the project? Comparison of first generation and non-first generation students.



Source: Student co-creation survey (Base = 89, students offered an incentive)

As illustrated in the following quote from a student, incentives are just one factor that may influence student involvement, and staff should, therefore, consider them as just part of a package of factors that will make an opportunity attractive to students. This emphasises the need for staff to take a multi-pronged approach to student recruitment, ensuring that the opportunities provide a range of benefits to students.

‘Incentives are important, but it's also important to tailor incentives towards students’ motivations for getting involved in co-production work. Opportunities to advance skills and professional development are highly sought after incentives but many cannot afford to devote a lot of time to a project without monetary support.’ (Student)

HE staff should also consider where student contributions may move beyond what can reasonably be expected from students volunteering their time, and where contributions should be considered as work. Where it is the latter, staff should ensure that students are receiving appropriate compensation for their time. For example, where students are being asked to create resources or other outputs, projects should ensure that they receive payment for their work.

Involving students in decisions about what co-creation opportunities involve

It is also important that students are involved in the design of co-creation events and activities to ensure that they meet student need. For example, one project had developed a plan for students to develop videos but reported that they had to cancel this activity as most of their student co-creators did not want to participate in this due to a lack of confidence and concerns about stigma.

Targeted approaches

Several projects had delivered targeted recruitment approaches and had found these approaches to be effective. For example, one project reported that they had found efficacy in taking a more individualistic approach to recruitment, as set out in the below quote:

‘I believe a key strength of the project and the approach we took was making a point of having one-to-one conversations with students initially to connect with them on a personal level rather than just sending out blanket emails or having big open forums. This allows students to be more open and explore support and what’s going on for them more easily.’ (Management & delivery staff)

However, this might only be practicable where the target group is very small, or the HEP already has strong links with target groups in place (such as relevant student networks or societies).

Another project found that splitting out opportunities to advertise towards students with similar experiences, such as students on the same course, was effective. This ensured that students had a common experience that they could use to connect. This recruitment approach was supported by liaising with course staff and student course representatives.

‘How they split everyone up was a really good approach because it enabled people with a common link to come together [...] With co-production it’s about everyone being in the same boat, everyone understanding and validating. If they had done an open session I don’t think it would have worked [...]’ (Management & delivery staff)

Common challenges

Whilst most projects reported that their recruitment had been effective, projects did have to overcome a range of challenges as discussed below.

Overcoming concerns around box ticking

Whilst interest has grown in involving students in co-creation opportunities, an unintended consequence of this has been that some students have been invited to have their voices heard, but have not seen change take place. As a result students may perceive some feedback opportunities as “box ticking”, rather than a genuine commitment to student voice. This can also occur where students are asked to take part in co-creation activities, but find that the opportunity only enables them to feed in to a very narrow brief, where a large part of the work has already been predetermined by a staff team. As a result of this,

some project staff reported that they had to overcome these concerns in order to engage students in their project.

Feedback from one project team highlights that the following are crucial to overcoming this:

- A genuine commitment to student voice, which involves acting on student feedback and providing regular updates/feedback on progress.
- Word of mouth from other students – this can be valuable in helping to get the message out to other students that opportunities are genuine and worth their time.
- Working with staff who have a strong reputation for their commitment to student experience.

The former requires continual strategic commitment to ensure that organisational practice does not undermine co-creation efforts. This can be supported by HEPs having a wider student voice or student engagement framework that ensures good practice is adhered to across the organisation.

Overcoming concerns about stigma

Stigma was identified as one of the key barriers that had prevented students from accessing mental health and wellbeing support at their university/college. Indeed, 27 per cent of students (27/101) who participated in the co-creation survey reported that concerns around stigma for accessing support has prevented them from accessing support from their university/college.

This was a key challenge reported by projects who were delivering targeted support for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students and data from the co-creation survey shows that concerns about stigma are more prevalent among these groups compared to White students.

‘It was the stigma. People weren’t willing to come forward to discuss culturally sensitive issues from their communities and didn’t want to be seen to go to this type of event.’
(Management & delivery staff)

There are a range of steps projects may be able to take to overcome these concerns:

- Not requiring students to declare that they have a mental health issue to participate, and potentially framing opportunities around improving support for students or learning how to support others.
- Offering individual opportunities, to ensure students can feed in to opportunities where they may not be comfortable attending group sessions.
- Providing “closed” sessions for particular student groups (i.e. workshops for students from particular backgrounds), which may help students to speak up, as they may feel that their peers will understand their experiences.

Overcoming concerns about confidentiality

Projects also encountered challenges in recruiting students because of concerns around confidentiality and how information would be shared. These are also concerns that prevent students from accessing mental health support at university/college, so it is key that projects inviting students to share their lived experiences of mental health consider how they will manage these concerns, so that these barriers do not prevent students from getting involved.

This was a particular concern among students whose courses involve Fitness to Practise regulations. These students may be particularly concerned about potential negative ‘repercussions’ from speaking up about issues or sharing that they have experienced a mental health difficulty. This issue is also evidenced in academic literature. For example, a cross-sectional survey of over 1000 students studying professional health courses at one English university found that Fitness to Practise was often mentioned by students in free-text comments as an area that required improvement as students were concerned about how concerns would be documented on their academic record (Knipe, et al., 2018).

Consequently, staff reported that it was important to consider who was in the room when planning co-creation opportunities. For example, as part of the PACE project led by the University of Wolverhampton it was agreed that senior members of staff would not attend sessions focused on capturing nursing students’ experiences to ensure students could openly and honestly share their experiences in a confidential setting, without fear of repercussions. It is important that staff arranging these opportunities discuss confidentiality clearly from the start.

Previous work with international students, such as work delivered by the International Student Mental Health project as part of the MHCC, has also highlighted that some international students may be concerned that information can be shared more widely than is typically the case, fearing for example information about their mental health being shared with family and visa certifiers.¹¹ This, again, highlights the importance of HEPs being clear about confidentiality requirements, as this can help them to bust myths that may help to put student concerns at ease.

¹¹ See ‘What Works in supporting student mental health’, available here: [Evaluation of the Mental Health Challenge Competition: Final reports – Office for Students](#)

4. Delivering co-creation: effective strategies and barriers

The following sub-section explores effective practice and common challenges encountered in relation to delivering co-creation approaches with target groups.

Effective practice

Key themes identified are presented in the infographic below and described in greater detail under the relevant headings in this section.



Ensure students and staff are placed on an even footing



Ensure there is support for staff



Embed student support staff in co-creation opportunities



Use an experiential focus



Avoid clinical language



Review delivery

Ensure students and staff are placed on an even footing

Both students and staff emphasised the importance of students and staff working together as equals. Without this, opportunities were less likely to be considered as “co-creation”, and more likely to be seen as students being consulted.

‘It’s been good to be treated as an equal rather than a student providing support – the ‘co’ production element of co-production is very important.’ (Student)

This requires staff to show that student voices hold as much significance as suggestions made by staff. One project partner also reported that this may require a shift in approach from academic staff, particularly those who may have experience as researchers, as co-creation may require them to be more emotionally responsive and less neutral than may be considered appropriate in traditional research approaches.

‘By being you as a person and being open and honest and acknowledging what you’ve heard, and taking the academic level away makes that balance of power equal. With co-production you have to take yourself out of that [academic] way of thinking. That [student] has to feel safe. They can’t see you as an academic. They need to see you as a person, and an equal [...] be silly, open and honest.’ (Management & Delivery Staff)

The involvement of staff with similar lived experience who can draw on their own experiences is one potential way of breaking down barriers between staff and students.

Embed student support staff in co-creation opportunities

Several staff members reported that involving student support staff at meetings had been helpful, to ensure they could respond if students raised issues that require support. In two projects this had included involving staff from the student wellbeing team. This enabled them to ensure that students received timely access to staff who could provide help, which project staff were not always the most appropriate staff to deliver.

‘It can go into a therapy space rather than co-production. It’s great that people want to share but it also can impact the co-production and you don’t want to cut them off when they are being vulnerable. It highlights the need of students as they need to talk to someone within that realm.’ (Management & delivery staff)

Student support will be important in the context of any projects working in co-creation relating to mental health. However, embedding support may be particularly beneficial in the context of projects like those funded by the MHFC which are targeting students who typically have lower levels of engagement with support services, as the project may be a student’s first touch-point disclosing mental health challenges.

Ensure there is appropriate support in place for staff delivering co-creation opportunities

Particularly in the context of projects targeting student mental health there is some possibility that staff may find themselves affected by some of the experiences that students share with them. As a result, it is important that projects ensure there is appropriate support in place for staff. This could involve debriefing opportunities with colleagues, or conversations with managers.

‘It’s been a learning curve, a wake-up call for the staff. I think that they potentially knew a little bit of it [...] I don’t think it was a full shock but the full detail I think was a shock for them, but I think that made the university determined to make change and that upped the passion. Definitely they wanted to hear, however painful it was to hear.’
(Management & delivery staff)

Project staff also reported that they had sometimes felt ‘guilty’ about issues that students had raised, where they worried they had played a role in cultures, behaviours or systems that had exacerbated issues students were experiencing. This further highlights the importance of spaces for staff to debrief.

Avoiding clinical language

HE staff should be considerate of the language used when designing projects, as overly clinical terms could feel stigmatising, which may harm student engagement. This is particularly important in the context of target groups who face heightened concerns about stigma, who may be more reluctant to identify with the language of mental illness.

‘[We are making a] change in the language we're using around intervention and mental health. A wake up call for me was in meeting with students, as something they raised was “please don't use [the] word intervention as [it] sounds like there's something wrong with us”. They've reviewed every word we use to make sure it's not something that could have negative connotations.’ (Management & delivery staff)

Avoiding clinical terms may also be beneficial in ensuring that co-creation opportunities are open to students who may not have a formal mental health diagnosis. This is likely to be of benefit in relation to several of the student groups targeted by the MHFC programme, as students who belong to groups that have lower engagement with traditional mental health services are less likely to have a formal diagnosis. Avoiding clinical language may also be beneficial given the concerns around stigma among target groups, as students may be deterred from getting involved in projects where they feel this labels them as having a mental health problem.

Use an experiential focus

Both project staff and students reported that a strong focus on lived experience and enabling students to share was helpful for facilitating engagement. From a student perspective this was also valued as creating a “safe space” in which they could talk about their experiences and influence improvements. As discussed in the previous section this may be particularly valuable in projects that are targeting students who may be concerned about stigma (i.e. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, and placement students) or who may feel that no one will understand their problems (i.e. LGBT+ students and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students) as this can help to show students that they are not alone in the experiences.

Review delivery

One project has included a project partner who was able to provide feedback on their delivery of co-creation opportunities. This was felt to be valuable in providing a kind of “critical friend” who could provide feedback on their approach and how it can be improved. This may be particularly beneficial where project staff are new to delivering a co-creation approach. Co-creation can differ substantially from other student engagement or consultation work, such as delivery of traditional focus groups, as it requires a shifting of power dynamics and placing students and staff on an even footing. This may mean

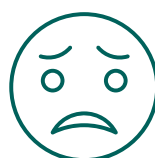
that staff have to step outside of their comfort zone or work in a new way. For example, a staff member highlighted that, to deliver effective co-creation, you may need to be more collaborative in your approach, and more responsive to student comments, particularly in making space to validate the issues students are raising. This represents a paradigm shift from delivering consultation work – which staff may be more used to – where good practice might instead require staff to take a more impartial approach. Involving a partner with experience delivering co-creation approaches can help to ensure staff have the opportunity to learn how to do this effectively, and do not fall into a more consultative approach.

Common challenges

This section explores some of the common challenges experienced by staff working in co-creation with students. These are summarised in the infographic below, with further detail provided under the relevant headings.



Students are time poor



Overcoming student anxiety



Involving male students

Students are time poor

One of the key challenges raised by staff related to the time that students had available to dedicate to co-creation due to the other priorities competing for their time.

‘Even the really eager ones are extremely time poor between studies, jobs and having a life. They don’t check their emails regularly. That can be tricky to coordinate.’
(Management & delivery staff)

This challenge may be elevated among some student groups, for example students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may have to balance work alongside their studies; students with caring responsibilities; or students on courses that involve placements.

‘Nursing is not a typical degree [...] Some weeks we might be doing 40 hour weeks plus assignments. Time is the biggest barrier. It is a difficult enough role anyway and then if you add in family life or caring, there are only so many hours in the day.’ (Student)

Additionally, courses like nursing tend to attract a more diverse student cohort, with a greater proportion of mature students, and students with caring responsibilities than other undergraduate programmes. This can create additional challenges engaging students from courses such as nursing due to the range of priorities competing for their attention. These barriers are also likely to be more prevalent at institutions offering courses that tend to attract a more diverse student cohort.

To overcome these barriers, HEPs may need to consider:

- Provision of incentives to reduce competition with paid work.
- The timing of opportunities to minimise potential clashes.

Involving more male students

Male students accounted for just 30 per cent of the students engaged in co-creation activities over the first year of the MHFC. This shows a slight improvement on the level of involvement of male students since the MHCC programme, where only 17 per cent of co-creators were male.¹² However it suggests progress is still needed to improve participation rates among male students. Where male students are underrepresented in co-creation work there is a risk that developed initiatives may not meet the needs of these students.

This issue was reflected in feedback from both staff and students.

‘Involve more male participants. In our current student panel, out of 10 for example, just one is a male.’ (Student)

Some projects reported that they were taking steps to explore how they could broaden their reach, as highlighted in the below quote.

‘Significantly fewer males have taken part in the survey, which is congruent with what happens more widely in mental health, but I’m looking into how I can tie into men’s mental health week and what the university is doing more widely.’ (Management & delivery staff)

All projects should be encouraged to consider approaches for broadening the involvement of male students. Previous research from Student Minds has suggested that it may be beneficial to create male-only support spaces, and use activities as a hook for male students (Maggs, 2021). This could involve using a creative activity or sport as a primary hook for engagement. This might help to create a platform

¹² For further information see ‘Co-creating mental health initiatives with students – Insights from the Mental Health Challenge Competition (2019-2022)’, available here: [Evaluation of the Mental Health Challenge Competition: Final reports - Office for Students](#)

for male students to open up, by creating an environment in which they can build trust before turning to mental health topics. This also might help to encourage students with concerns about mental health stigma to participate, as the alternate focus of the event may help to reduce concerns that attending it means they are labelling themselves as someone who has experienced a mental health concern.

Overcoming student anxiety

The nature of co-creating mental health initiatives with students who have lived experience of mental health challenges means that this can itself act as an additional barrier to student involvement. This may require projects to reconsider their approaches for involvement to ensure that opportunities remain inclusive of students for whom a mental health issue (such as social anxiety) may act as an additional barrier. Management and delivery staff reported that this barrier may be more prevalent among first generation students as this group may be more likely to experience social anxiety than their peers. This is corroborated by research literature from the US, which suggests that there is a relationship between first generation student status and anxiety (Noel, et al., 2021).

As a result, management and delivery staff reported that it was important to offer flexibility within the methods used to involve first generation students, including offering both online and face-to-face opportunities to ensure students could participate in a way that best suited them. Staff reported concerns that students with high levels of social anxiety may be put off by the idea of attending face-to-face sessions with individuals they had never met before, however online approaches could offer participants control over their space.

‘These are students experiencing social anxiety, so attending groups is quite a big deal. I don’t know we have any specific feedback that it has been difficult to join but some students do prefer to join online and keep their cameras off.’ (Management & delivery staff)

Staff working with autistic students also reported that one-to-one approaches had worked well to include students who were less comfortable in group environments, and had found that group sessions and activities had been unpopular — though this may also have been influenced by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. How involvement in co-creation can benefit students from target groups

This section explores how participation in co-creation activity can support participating students.

Involvement in co-creation can improve levels of mental health awareness among students

For example:

- 73 per cent (73/100) of students reported that their understanding of student mental health and the issues affecting it has improved.
- 65 per cent (65/100) reported their understanding of support services available for students has improved.
- 41 per cent (41/100) reported that they have learnt new ways to manage or support their own mental health.

These benefits may help students involved in co-creation by helping them to access relevant services or use strategies to support their own wellbeing. This also has the potential to benefit other students, as 50 per cent of co-creators (50/100) reported that they feel more equipped to support a friend who is struggling with their mental health.

‘I was not really aware about my university's mental health services before my involvement in the project, I knew, as a university, such services would surely be present but I had no specific information on going about it. After my involvement, I found out about different avenues to access mental health services in the university and showed others who needed those services, how to.’ (Student)

Involvement in co-creation can help improve student confidence accessing support

Responding to a retrospective baseline question 54 per cent (54/100) of students reported they felt comfortable accessing mental health and wellbeing support through their university/college before their involvement in co-creation, as shown in Figure 6. Following their involvement, 86 per cent (85/99) of student co-creators reported that they feel comfortable accessing mental health and wellbeing support through their university/college. This suggests that involving targeted student groups in co-creation activities may help to reduce equality gaps in service access and help-seeking behaviours.

Figure 6: To what extent do you agree with the following statement? “I felt/feel comfortable accessing mental health and wellbeing support through my university/college.”



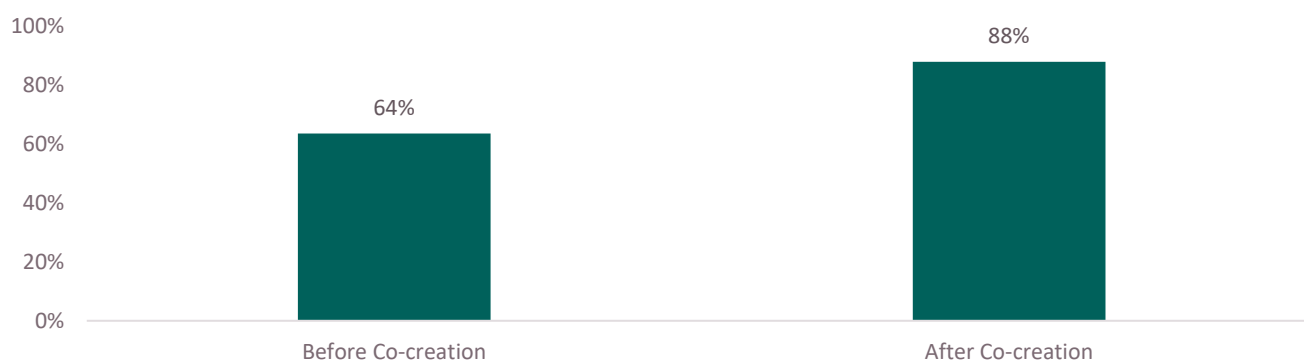
Source: student co-creation survey (Base = 99-100)

This is particularly important in the context of students who face additional barriers to accessing support. For example, before participating in co-creation activities, 23 per cent of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students reported that they did not feel comfortable accessing mental health and wellbeing support through their university/college. Following participation in co-creation activity this had fallen to 5 per cent.

More appropriate support is available to students

Responding to a retrospective baseline question, 64 per cent of students reported that they agreed that they could access mental health and wellbeing support that is appropriate to their needs before they participated in co-creation activities, as shown in Figure 7. Following involvement co-creating projects through the MHFC this had increased to 88 per cent.

Figure 7: To what extent do you agree with the following statement? “I could access mental health and wellbeing support that was appropriate to my needs.”



Source: Student co-creation survey (Base = 100)

Qualitative evidence suggests that this is likely to partially be the result of co-creation leading to the development of new support or approaches that feel more relevant to students from target groups. In addition to this, co-creation can help students to understand the existing support that is available, which

may help them to identify already existing services that could support them. This may help to reduce the numbers of students who are prevented from accessing services because they do not feel their needs will be understood.

Involvement in co-creation supports students' wider development

For example:

- 46 per cent (46/100) of students report that they are more confident since participating in co-creation.
- 42 per cent (42/100) report that they have learned new skills.
- 31 per cent (21/100) report that they have made new friends.

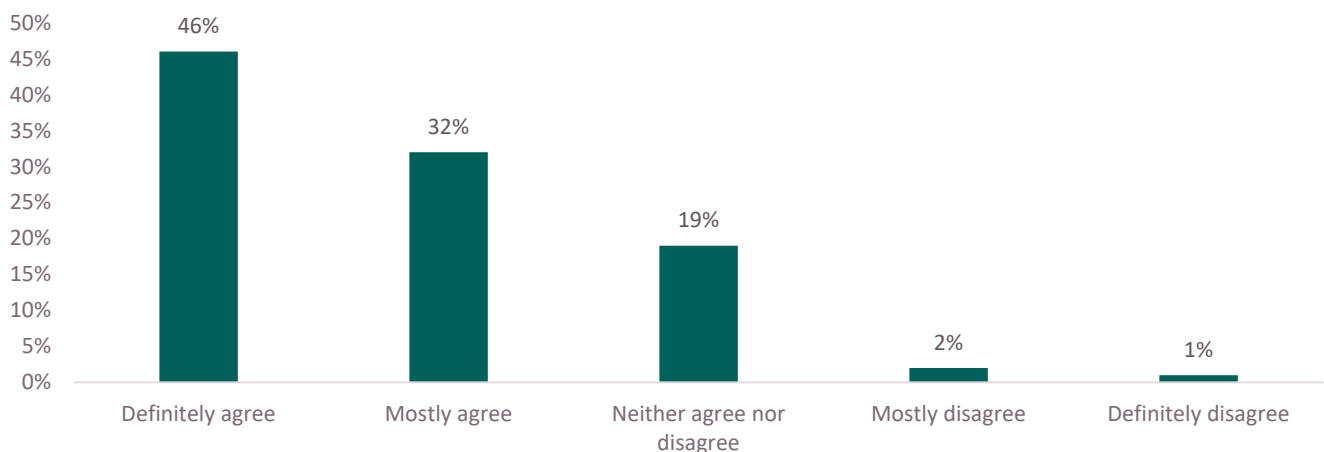
‘For the students it has boosted their confidence. It’s made them feel heard and appreciated, and it’s really helped to boost their self-worth. On a wider front we have had projects at our university that have been top down, not student co-creation but consultation, and I think having student co-creation every step of the way shows how much it means to the project team and it makes it more valid, more hard-hitting, more relevant.’ (Interview, Student)

These aspects are important, as they may help to facilitate continued student engagement by fostering direct benefits for participating students.

Involvement in co-creation can promote a sense of belonging

As shown in Figure 8, 78 per cent (78/100) of students agreed that the project they were involved in has had a positive impact on their sense of belonging to their university/college.

Figure 8: To what extent do you agree with the following? “This project has had a positive impact on my sense of belonging to the university or college.”



Source: Student co-creation survey (Base = 100)

Qualitative feedback from students suggests that this is a particular strength of targeted approaches that bring together students with similar lived experience, as these opportunities can help students to see that they are “not alone”.

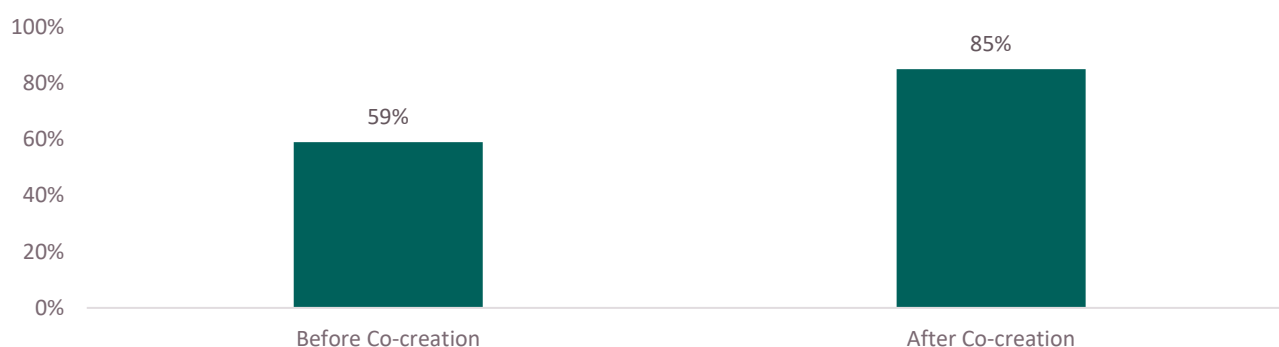
‘I thought I was alone, when it came to concerns about being a black student at [my university], but to see those concerns being shared with other black student made me realise, even though we didn’t all know each other, we had something common.’
(Student)

This may also promote positive wellbeing and improved mental health outcomes for students, as belonging is positively associated with wellbeing and mental health (Fletcher, 2015).

Involving students in co-creation can help to ensure they feel heard

As shown in Figure 9, 59 per cent (59/100) of students reported that before they participated in co-creation they agreed that their university/college listens to the needs of students when it comes to mental health. Following their involvement this had risen to 85 per cent (85/100) of students. This shows that involving students in co-creation can help universities/colleges to demonstrate that they value student voice.

Figure 9: To what extent do you agree with the following statement? “My university/college listens to the needs of students when it comes to mental health.”



Source: Student co-creation survey (Base = 100)

This can help to ensure students feel better supported by showing them that their HEP is there to listen, and by validating their concerns or challenges.

6. What impact has co-creation had on improving support for target groups?

Early indications from the MHFC suggest that co-creation is beginning to have, or will have, a positive impact on the support for students from target groups.

Most students reported that they felt involvement in co-creation was resulting in staff developing an improved and more nuanced understanding of student mental health needs. For example:

- 61 per cent (61/99) of student co-creators reported that they felt involvement in co-creation was helping staff to develop a better understanding of student need.
- 67 per cent (66/99) reported that co-creation was helping staff to develop a better understanding of the barriers that prevent students from seeking support.

Qualitative data from staff also substantiates these findings, with staff reporting improvements in their own knowledge of the needs of the students from their target group.

‘The students are amazing. For me – not having worked with this group much before – a lot of my knowledge of the target group was from literature, so much more complexity and nuance from having conversations. A lot of intersectionality lost when literature talks about students in a homogeneous way. University settings are also different and for us knowing when to approach students (time of year and settings) that will make intervention more powerful.’ (Management & Delivery Staff)

It is anticipated that this will result in improvements in the quality of support available to students over time, in part through the adoption of new targeted initiatives and through improvements in staff practice. However, to fully realise these benefits project staff will need to ensure that this learning is widely disseminated among key staff at their institutions, and not simply retained among project staff.

61 per cent of student co-creators (61/99) reported that they felt the co-creation project they were involved in had resulted in support being available that is more relevant to student needs. When interpreting this figure, it should be noted that most projects were still in a development phase at the time of this evaluation, and therefore this figure may rise over the second year of the MHFC programme as the projects move into delivery.

‘Students have felt more confident to come forward with concerns or issues, whether that be directly to the mental health services or other avenues of support. Students feel that something is being done for them based on the experiences they shared and their ideas for improvements. We continue to work on the output resources, and these will be available on a wide platform for easy access, so I look forward to seeing the further impact it has in the future.’ (Student)

‘I think it made students feel safer and heard. It also made mental health services feel more accessible for everyone and better designed for students’ needs, since it was actual students and their experiences involved in the making.’ (Student)

Additionally, in response to an open text question about the impact of the funded projects, 85 per cent of student co-creators (60/71) reported that the funded project was having a positive impact on support for student mental health at their HEP. Students described the following impacts:

- Improved services and support from their HEP (discussed in 23/60 responses to this question).
- Support had become easier to access (13/60).
- Improved insight into student perspectives among staff (13/60).
- Improved confidence to come forward among students (9/60).
- Improved student wellbeing (8/60).
- Reduction of stigma around mental health (5/60).
- Better support from staff (5/60).
- An improvement in their own mental health (5/60).

Only a small number of students (3/71) reported that their project had had none or a minimal impact, though several students (16/71) reported that they were unsure or that it was ‘too soon to say’ what impact their project was having on support for students, though many of these students (10/16) were optimistic that the project would benefit students from target groups. This appeared to be influenced by the projects being in their early stages, with many of the funded projects focusing on development over the first year of the MHFC and planning to roll out their initiatives over the second year of the programme.

The next phase of the MHFC programme will see projects rolling out their interventions, which will enable a future evaluation to further understand how co-creation may have impacted on the support available to other students within the target groups. This will be a focus of the Final Evaluation for the MHFC programme.

7. Conclusions & recommendations

Evidence from the first year of the MHFC programme further highlights the benefits of involving students in co-creation of mental health initiatives. Involvement in co-creation can help in the following areas:

- Boosting student mental health awareness.
- Ensure students feel listened to.
- Improving student confidence accessing support through their institution.
- Improving the relevance of support to specific student groups.

The targeted approach adopted by MHFC projects also appears to be bringing about additional benefits through promoting high levels of engagement among student groups that were less involved in previous programmes like the MHCC. The targeted approach, therefore, appears to be diversifying the profile of students involved in co-creation of mental health initiatives, which it is anticipated will result in improved service access for student groups who have previously had lower levels of engagement with student support. This approach is also helping to promote a sense of belonging among students from target groups.

Early evidence suggests that co-creation with target groups is resulting in HE staff developing a better understanding of the needs of specific student groups. As the projects roll out their initiatives to a wider student cohort it is anticipated that this will result in improvements in the support available to students from target groups.

This report highlights a range of factors that HE staff should consider when seeking to involve students from target groups in co-creation of mental health initiatives. It is anticipated that these will be of relevance to projects targeting a specific group of students as well as projects aiming to make their co-creation initiatives for wider audiences more inclusive. In line with the findings from this research, we would recommend that staff seeking to engage targeted students in co-creation take the actions laid out in the sections below.

Recommendations for recruiting & engaging students in co-creation

1. **Be clear about confidentiality at the advertising stage and subsequent sessions**, to allay student concerns about how their information will be shared. When working with student groups that face increased concerns about confidentiality (such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, and placement students), HEPs may also want to consider how students can contribute their ideas anonymously, or arrange closed sessions with independent staff or student representatives.
2. **Work with students to agree which staff it is appropriate to include in co-creation activities**, to ensure students feel able to speak openly and honestly about their experiences. This is particularly

important in the context of academic staff who may be involved in marking students work or delivering placements.

3. **Consider where “closed” approaches (i.e. opportunities open to only a specific student group) may be beneficial.** In particular, when working with student groups who face specific concerns or barriers around mental health stigma these approaches may be preferred. This may include breaking groups down to more specific intersections (such as groups separated by both gender and ethnicity), if this helps students to speak up. Working closely with students at the design stage will help staff to identify what group structures will best enable participation.
4. **Ensure that opportunities are accessible to students with high levels of social anxiety.** This could include providing opportunities for individual contributions or offering a mixture of face-to-face, online and hybrid options for students to get involved in co-creation opportunities. A good starting point is working with students from the relevant representative groups to agree preferred approaches for participating in co-creation. This is particularly important in the context of projects seeking to involve autistic students or first generation students, as social anxiety is highly prevalent among these groups (Noel, et al., 2021).
5. **Consider how mental health stigma can be mitigated in recruitment materials.** This could include:
 - a. Avoiding clinical language.
 - b. Not requiring students to declare that they have a mental health condition or diagnosis as a pre-requisite for participating.
 - c. Offering “closed sessions” for specific student communities (see point 3 above).
6. **Provide financial incentives to ensure that students who would otherwise have to forgo paid work opportunities can participate in co-creation.** This is particularly important when seeking to engage specific student groups who may face greater levels of socio-economic disadvantage, such as first generation students.

Recommendations for effectively delivering co-creation activities

7. **Involve staff from relevant backgrounds in the delivery/facilitation of co-creation activities.** This is particularly important in the context of involving students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, as students may not feel comfortable discussing some aspects of their experience with staff who do not have similar lived experiences or cultural backgrounds.
8. **Work with trusted individuals to deliver and advertise co-creation activities.** This could involve:
 - a. Working with relevant student representatives, societies or networks.
 - b. Identifying trusted members of staff or departments to help co-deliver or advertise opportunities.
9. **Embed student support in co-creation opportunities.** This could be the first time a student comes forward with an issue or concern, and is therefore a pivotal opportunity for an HEP to link students up with relevant support.

10. **Take proactive steps to boost participation of male students.** In line with guidance from Student Minds, this could involve actions such as:
 - a. Delivering male only sessions.
 - b. Centring opportunities around an activity to provide an alternative hook beyond mental health. This could include a focus on sport, creative activities etc.
 - c. Working with student groups to involve male students.
11. **Ensure staff delivering co-creation have opportunities to debrief and access support.** Involvement in co-creation activities may mean that staff are hearing challenging disclosures from students. It is, therefore, essential that staff have access to a space that enables them to respond to the impact these disclosures may have on them. This may also have an intersectional dimension, as risks of distress to staff may be heightened where they are working on topics related to their own lived experience.

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Appendix 1

This report is based on feedback gathered from students and staff following the first year of delivery of the MHFC, including from the student co-creation survey. The response rate to the student co-creation survey was around 21% (110/533). Table 1 below shows the characteristics of students who responded to the survey.

Table 1: Profile of responders – student co-creation survey

| Demographic characteristics | Proportion of respondents (%) |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Sex | |
| Female | 62% |
| Male | 25% |
| Other | 1% |
| Not Specified | 0% |
| Ethnicity* | |
| White | 45% |
| Black | 15% |
| Asian | 20% |
| Mixed | 6% |
| Other | 9% |
| Disability Status | |
| Known disability | 25% |
| No known disability | 57% |
| Mental Health | |
| Diagnosed mental health | 24% |
| No diagnosed mental health | 55% |
| Domicile | |
| UK home student | 71% |
| International student | 18% |
| Level of Study | |
| Undergraduate student | 62% |
| Postgraduate taught student | 22% |
| Postgraduate research student | 6% |
| Sexual Orientation | |
| Heterosexual/straight | 67% |
| Lesbian or gay woman | 1% |
| Gay man | 4% |
| Bisexual | 9% |
| Other | 5% |
| Other Student Groups | |
| Mature Student | 39% |
| First generation | 31% |
| Placement | 24% |

*Due to the relatively small sample sizes involved in this survey ethnicity comparisons have been made between White students and students belonging to all remaining ethnic groups, this includes students who recorded their ethnicity as Black, Asian, Mixed or Other (where enough detail was provided in free-text responses to identify an ethnicity). Throughout the report this grouping is referred to as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic for conciseness. In future research it would be preferable to be able to provide segmentation across groups, however this was not possible due to the sample sizes included in this research.

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