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Social and economic research

Evaluation of the Mental Health Funding Competition:
Using innovation and intersectional approaches to target mental health support for students.
Briefing Paper: Sector leaders, researchers and organisations working to improve student mental health support.

Background

With investment from the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Department for Education (DfE), the OfS awarded more than £3 million to higher education providers (providers) through the Mental Health Funding Competition (MHFC) programme to identify innovative and collaborative support for student mental health. The funding supported 18 provider-led projects across England with most delivery commencing at the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic year and all projects completed by September 2023.

All funded projects targeted at least one of the following priority groups:

- Groups of students with characteristics identified as increasing the risk of poor mental health (e.g. ethnicity, socioeconomic background, disability).;
- Groups of students who might experience barriers to accessing support due to their mode of study or other characteristics (e.g. placement students, mature students, part-time students, first- generation students, care-experienced students leavers, LGBT+ students).

Key strategic conclusions identified by the evaluation included:

- Dedicated time and resource is needed to understand specific barriers faced by students in accessing mental health support in their institutional context, building on wealth of MHFC learning/resources.
- Diversify staff teams, for some students the lack of counsellors or GPs with a similar background to them remains a key barrier to support.
- Ensure core mental health services are adequately funded to address barriers arising from limited service capacity.
- Offer high-quality intersectional cultural competency training to all staff, including mental health practitioners, academic staff and support staff aligned with best practice examples and research around intersectional targeting.

This briefing paper provides a one-page summary of learning from the MHFC programme for sector leaders, researchers and other organisations involved in student mental health. It aims to provide insight from the evaluation of funded projects that highlights the strategic importance of action in this area highlighting the principles and practice that will underpin effective practice by providers and their partners and stakeholders (internal and external).

More information on the findings of the MHFC evaluation covered in this briefing paper, including the 18 funded projects, can be found on the OfS website.

Why tackle these issues?

- OfS' Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) identifies mental health as a sector-wide risk that may affect a student's opportunity to access and succeed in HE. It's critical to recognise that no demographic group will be homogenous in their experiences, or in their support needs
- Cultural norms and perceptions around mental health may pose challenges for students as associated stigma may discourage students from seeking help, or fuel belief that their problem isn't serious enough, or exacerbate confidentiality concerns, or student mistrust of services.
- Administrative challenges, service fragmentation, self-advocacy needs, and location and timing of support remain as barriers to support access.

What impact has the MHFC programme had?

- Engaged over **3,200 students** with strong participation from Black, Asian and minority ethnic, and female students, involved **1,057 in co-creation activities and trained over 300 staff.**
- Supported students reported **improved understanding of support services, their mental health needs**, and **increased confidence to disclose experiences** of poor mental health.
- Staff and partner organisations report **improved knowledge of the support needs** of students, changes to data collection processes, new and improved **partnership working**, and increased **commitments to support student mental health.**

How can my organisation adopt these approaches?

- Resourcing decisions need to consider demand for the interventions, the needs of the target group, the existing status of partnerships and the feasibility of co-creation activity in the round.
- Ensure sufficient lead-in time, resource and support for students in co-creation activities which are critical for delivery development.
- Ensure delivery models are integrated with local provider contexts.
- Sufficient time should be dedicated to building relationships and ensuring partnerships are resilient and formalised, and not contingent on individual members of staff.

What effective practice helps tackle these issues?

- Innovative approaches to mental health support should complement the effective delivery of core services.
- Establishing the specific nature and causes of these barriers within the local and institutional context is crucial to design the right intervention.
- Consistent delivery with early student expectation agreement is key.
- Impacts are likely to be greatest where delivery is focused on one intervention type targeting one barrier or one target group.
- Expect delivery over a 2–3-year timescale to adequately support project development, implementation, and delivery.
- Establish evaluation and monitoring at the outset of delivery.

Key conclusions

- Innovative approaches to mental health support are important, they should complement the effective delivery of core services.
- Understanding the barriers students face in accessing mental health support is the first step to addressing them.
- Interventions such as those piloted through the MHFC must be delivered consistently, with clear expectation-setting for students from the outset.
- The projects which appear to have had the greatest impact on students were those which delivered one intervention type focused on one specific barrier or target group.
- Two academic years is not long enough to pilot such interventions.

What barriers remain to effective support?

- There is still work to be done in relation to staff diversity within student support services to better reflect the range of groups supported.
- For autistic students, staff suggested that some providers have disability policies that aren't designed with them in mind, and which don't meet their needs.
- Many students face challenges around financial hardship and independent living which are exacerbating student mental health issues.
- Cultural competency development and training should be truly intersectional including factors such as religion, language, or nationality.

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