

Office for Students Challenge Competition

**Achieving a step change in mental health
outcomes for all students**

Reference OfS 2018.41

Enquiries to Julia.Moss@officeforstudents.org.uk

Publication date 11 October 2018

Introduction

1. The Office for Students (OfS), through this new competition, invites higher education providers to deliver new and innovative collaborative approaches to improving mental health outcomes for students. We are seeking collaborative proposals which will support students to thrive and flourish, particularly when experiencing mental health issues and will identify in advance whole student population approaches that may help to mitigate against the causes of mental ill-health, prevent students becoming unwell and thereby enhance their higher education outcomes. This competition forms part of the approach set out in our business plan for 2018-19, to incentivise positive student experiences alongside our aim to support student welfare and wellbeing¹.
2. Mental health is currently a significant issue affecting the student population and young people generally, with the demand for and costs of support services rising sharply. In September 2017 Universities UK (UUK) published a framework to improve mental health outcomes in the higher education sector, which aims to enable providers to adopt a strategic, evidence-based approach to their mental health support for students². It makes the case for why mental health should be treated as a strategic priority to help all students thrive and succeed, and realise their potential, during their time in higher education. The framework sets out a strategic approach for senior management teams to adopt in the context of their own higher education provision. It also makes clear the reputational and risk issues of not making mental health for students a strategic priority.
3. Working with other relevant stakeholders and sector agencies, the OfS aims to create a long-term, shared vision for health, inclusivity and safety in higher education which will deliver on our strategic intent that 'all students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education'. A key part of this is the OfS's role in encouraging providers to establish action plans to support positive mental health for all students. Ensuring a joined-up approach between higher education providers and the various external organisations and services involved in mental health support is a significant challenge, compounded by the complexity of each student's journey through higher education. This competition aims to provide opportunities to enhance and improve collaborative working that will have a real impact on students' wellbeing.
4. Providers already have a duty of care, including legal requirements under the Equalities Act 2010, to take all reasonable steps to protect the health and safety and welfare of students to prevent harm. This competition will therefore **not** supplement the essential support services that higher education providers should already be offering their students.

The Office for Students Challenge Competitions

5. The OfS will run Challenge Competitions to respond to different types of priorities for and issues affecting students, where clear benefits can be derived from a targeted funding intervention. The bids we fund must have a positive impact on students, enable a clear understanding of 'what works' in different contexts, and deliver self-sustaining solutions. This

¹ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-business-plan/ (see page 7).

² See <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange>.

funding forms a significant part of achieving our business plan for 2018-19 and our longer-term strategy through to 2021.

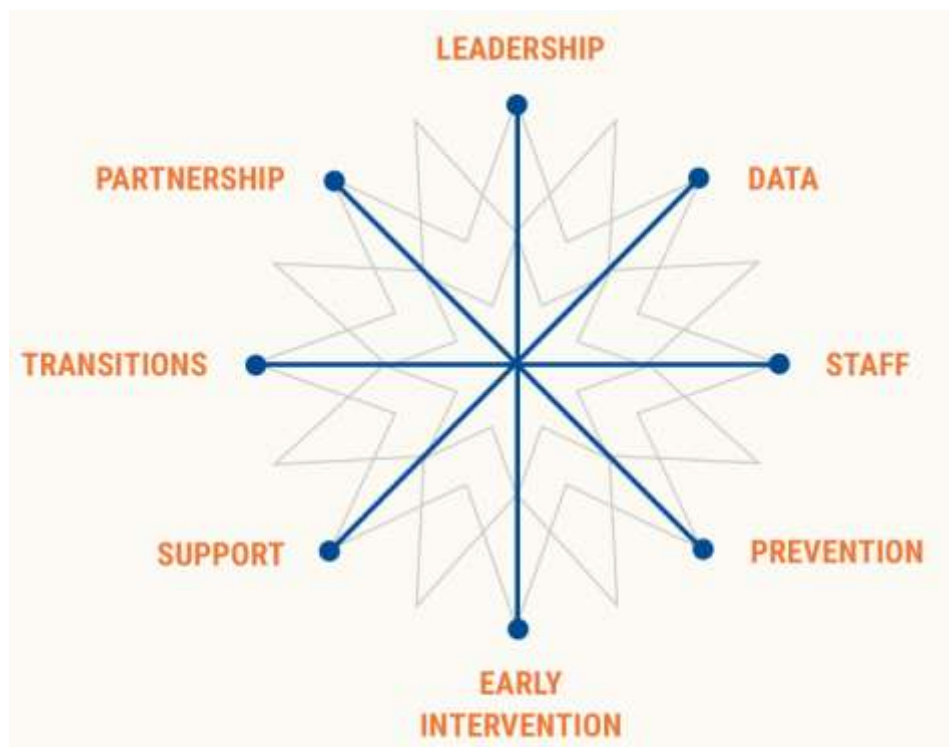
6. We will invest in bids led by eligible higher education providers, determined through competitive processes to ensure we are investing in the highest-quality activities. Our funding must deliver innovative developments, which must be sustained and embedded by the successful bidders to ensure that long-term value is secured for the benefit of students. We will require and facilitate robust evaluation and dissemination of results and best practice, to realise and promote the benefits of our investments for all students. More information is available on our website³.
7. During the transition period from 1 April 2018 to 31 July 2019, before the OfS's regulatory framework takes full effect, eligibility to submit bids must correspond with the current funding powers of the OfS, which reflect those that previously applied to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This means that for the academic year 2018-19, we can fund bids at higher education providers previously funded by HEFCE, and bids related to the provision of prescribed courses of higher education in further education colleges and sixth form colleges.

Purpose and objectives of this competition

8. This competition challenges providers to develop and implement new and innovative collaborative proposals which will deliver a step change in mental health outcomes for students. We are inviting expressions of interest from providers in the first instance.
9. This competition aims to build on the recommendations from UUK's step change framework, and deliver on our own strategic objective to champion a safe, healthy and inclusive higher education sector for all students. We want to fund innovative proposals across all the factors set out in the UUK framework, covering all types of students through the full higher education lifecycle.
10. Figure 1 sets out the key areas from the framework: Leadership, data, staff, prevention, early intervention, support, transitions and partnership.

³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/funding-for-providers/ofs-challenge-competitions/.

Figure 1: Purpose and objectives of this competition



Note: Diagram taken from <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange> and used with permission.

Priorities and criteria

11. Proposals must be collaborative and underpinned by a strategic approach and firm evidence base, with the aims of developing more effective practice and accelerating the pace of change in higher education.
12. These are our three key priorities:
 - a. Proposals that focus on **transitions** for all types of students: from school or college into higher education including innovative approaches to pre-entry support and outreach activity, and into postgraduate study or employment, with a focus on susceptible or vulnerable groups.
 - b. Programmes of **early intervention** such as: providing new forms of mental health literacy training to staff and students; or developing student analytics to inform improved and enhanced interventions.
 - c. Proposals which will provide a step change in **support**, for example: developing an integrated approach between provider-level support services and those of local primary care and mental health services; or addressing barriers to accessing support across services and sectors.
13. We intend to select successful projects by way of an initial workshop, followed by a further selection process. The criteria for participation in the workshop and for deciding the final funded projects are:

- a. Clear evidence of a strategic approach to mental health outcomes underpinned by active and effective senior leadership and governance, for **all** the higher education providers named in the bid.
- b. Demonstration of clear commitment from collaborative partners and the active engagement of **all** senior leaders.
- c. Evidence of how the proposal will deliver a whole-provider approach to supporting positive mental health outcomes for all students.
- d. Demonstration of strategic, collaborative partnerships, for example between higher education providers, other education providers such as schools and colleges, health agencies, third sector organisations, and other stakeholders that play an important role in improving mental health. We are interested in new ways in which risks and cross-cutting support can be managed for all students both on and off campus.
- e. Evidence of enhanced and improved student engagement to improve the co-creation of solutions for key mental health issues.
- f. Evidence of intersectional approaches, e.g. providing targeted support for different groups of students with different vulnerabilities.
- g. Demonstration of how the proposal meets one or more of the priorities set out in paragraph 12.
- h. Clear evidence that the impact of current student support and interventions is being effectively monitored, to determine whether the new activities will achieve a step change.
- i. Provision of a credible methodology to scale the approach if appropriate.
- j. Demonstration of a rigorous approach to the design of the project and the evaluation of its success.
- k. Identification of potential barriers and solutions anticipated in the approach.
- l. Commitment to be involved in the OfS's coordination of a network of projects and the evaluation and dissemination of results.
- m. The level of co-investment that the collaboration brings to the project on a risk-sharing basis.
- n. The ability to evidence the impact and outcomes of the approach.

Outcomes

14. We have identified a number of outcomes that we want to achieve through this competition:

- a. Demonstrable impact on students, which will be identified, measured and evaluated as part of all funded projects.

- b. Clear commitment from senior leaders across the sector to make student wellbeing and mental health a strategic priority underpinned by a whole institutional response.
- c. Development of strategic partnerships between higher education providers, services and sectors in cities, regions or other clearly defined localities to address geographical issues of connectivity and complexity in mental health provision.
- d. Development and evaluation of whole university approaches, including pedagogy, curriculum and assessment design to support students, facilitating better mental health while improving educational outcomes.
- e. Development of a robust and sound evidence base including a clear evaluation framework to support knowledge development around 'what works' and models of effective practice that can inform future policy and practice across the sector.
- f. Development of tools for more effective evaluation of interventions and approaches that can be shared and disseminated across the sector to achieve greater critical mass to support students.
- g. To support an inclusive co-creation approach where students and staff working in the sector are involved at every stage of the journey to improve mental health outcomes.

Bidding process

15. The process for this competition is as follows:

- a. Expressions of interest to be submitted with a 'pre-condition test' (see paragraph 16) that must be met before a proposal can proceed any further.
- b. Invitation to a workshop involving key partners and experts in mental health support to consider further and test the selected proposals.
- c. Following the workshop, selected participants will be asked to develop and submit full bids, which will be subject to a further assessment process involving an expert panel.

16. The pre-condition test is that all higher education providers involved in an expression of interest must provide evidence of an existing strategic approach to mental health support which is clearly underpinned by active and effective senior leadership and governance. This is designed to ensure that bidders are already fully committed to improving mental health outcomes, and are seeking additional investment to develop new or innovative approaches that build upon their current activities. We will, however, welcome collaborative proposals involving higher education providers at different stages of advancement in their mental health support for students, where commitment can be demonstrated and where strategic developments and new innovations can be shared for mutual benefit. We will share successful approaches and lessons learnt across the higher education sector, to benefit all students.

17. We will not fund the essential support services which providers should already be making available for their students. We are seeking proposals which will achieve a step change above and beyond existing commitments and the provision of associated student support. There will be an expectation that existing approaches to mental health will already have robust reporting

mechanisms in place to test whether they are achieving their objectives, and hence provide a firm baseline against which to pilot new innovations and initiatives. Providers must already have the resources and strategic approaches to deliver their duty of care and other legal obligations for their students in this vitally important area.

18. We are using expressions of interest and a workshop process to better understand and examine the types of activities and interventions that could be delivered, in order to secure the most impact for students. As well as the shortlisted bidders and their key partners, we will also invite to the workshop sector bodies, student representatives and mental health experts to enable further detailed discussion of and feedback on the selected proposals. Following the workshop, we will then invite selected bidders only to submit full proposals. The final funded projects will be focused on areas where the greatest impact can be achieved, to deliver positive outcomes for all types of students across the full lifecycle of their higher education experience.

Funding

19. Funding will be awarded to the successful bidders on the following basis:
 - a. Individual awards will be made at a minimum of £250,000 and up to a maximum of £750,000.
 - b. Funding will be provided during the period from April 2019 to December 2021. The activities must commence by September 2019 and span two full academic years, 2019-20 and 2020-21, with time in autumn 2021 for final evaluation and reporting.
 - c. As part of risk-sharing and to provide evidence of clear commitment to this important area of student support, bidders must provide a minimum of one-to-one matched funding against the proposed OfS funding contribution. This means that, for every pound requested, at least one additional pound should be invested. This can be as cash or in kind (any contributions in kind will need a monetary value and to be clearly evidenced as part of the proposal).
 - d. Providers may apply as the lead for one bid and as a partner for an additional bid (a maximum of two bids per provider). Providers not yet eligible for OfS funding can be partners in bids. Awards will provide revenue funding only for the successful projects. Capital funding is not available.
 - e. Our final decision on the number of funded projects will be subject to the quality of proposals received and the level of engagement from providers.

Workshop and next steps

20. Shortlisted applicants (including their collaborative partners) will be invited to an initial workshop in December where the outline proposals will be further developed with facilitation from the OfS and the involvement of other stakeholders. The date and venue (likely to be in Bristol) will be confirmed with the shortlisted applicants in November.
21. Following the workshop, selected applicants will be invited to submit a full bid by February 2019, from which the final projects will be selected. Not all teams who attend the workshop may be asked to submit full bids. The final successful bidders will be expected to attend further

workshops and events over the duration of this scheme to share and develop their emerging findings and outcomes, for the benefit of all students.

22. We will bring together all the funded projects through a facilitated network to share ideas, progress and insights, and to support evaluation activity. Robust evaluation and information sharing will be a cross-cutting, centrally organised theme across all of the projects. It will be a condition of funding that all projects undertake a formative evaluation of their own activity, which will feed into an overall evaluation co-ordinated and commissioned by the OfS.

Timescales

23. Expressions of interest should be submitted by email to mentalhealthCC@officeforstudents.org.uk by **1700 on Friday 9 November 2018**, using the template at Annex A.

Date	Activity
1700 on 9 November 2018	Deadline for expressions of interest
November 2018	Assessment process and outcomes to bidders
December 2018	Workshop to develop the selected expressions of interest
1700 on 7 February 2019	Deadline for submission of final bids
February and March 2019	Assessment process and panel meeting to review and recommend bids for funding Decisions communicated to bidders and public announcements made
April 2019	Funding available
May 2019	Formal launch event for project network
September 2019	Activities must have commenced
Autumn 2021	Closing conference

Monitoring

24. Funded bids will be subject to individual monitoring arrangements depending on the level of funding awarded and risk assessment. We will issue award letters setting out the terms and conditions of the funding, which must be formally agreed before payments start. We will take a risk-based, proportionate approach to monitoring, to ensure value for money and the delivery of targets, objectives, outputs and outcomes. We will undertake visits to and meetings with projects to better understand the activities, impacts and outcomes and to support analysis and dissemination.
25. The funded projects will be required to form a network, to share information and learning between themselves and with the OfS. We will also commission an independent evaluation of the overall competition, and will notify the successful bidders of this work accordingly. We expect all funded bidders to work with us and the evaluators in an open and transparent way throughout, to share expertise, learning and best practice for the benefit of students and the

wider higher education sector, and to provide detailed analysis of successful and unsuccessful activities to understand lessons learnt.

Next steps

26. Eligible higher education providers are invited to complete the expression of interest template at Annex A and email it to mentalhealthCC@officeforstudents.org.uk **by 1700 on Friday 9 November 2018**. The template is available to download on our website at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/ofs-challenge-competition-achieving-a-step-change-in-mental-health-outcomes-for-all-students/.



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