

Office for
Students



Equality in Higher Education Innovation Fund

Guidance for bidders

Reference OfS 2024.45

Enquiries to equalityofopportunityinnovation@officeforstudents.org.uk

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Summary

1. This document sets out how the Office for Students (OfS) will distribute funding through a competitive bidding process that will support new ideas and innovation in supporting equality of opportunity in higher education. It also explains how we will prioritise funding proposals that meet the aims and objectives of the funding scheme. The deadline for submitting bids is **25 October 2024**.
2. Up to £2 million is available to allocate through a competitive bidding process over the academic years 2024-25 through to 2026-27. Projects will need to complete their OfS-funded work by 31 July 2027.
3. The competition is open to all organisations that provide services in connection with higher education but must include (either as lead bidder or as a partner) higher education providers that are registered, or have applied to register, with the OfS in the Approved (fee cap) category.¹

Action required

4. Eligible bidders are invited to submit a bid for funding following the information in this document. Specific assessment criteria and guidance can be found in paragraphs 32 to 61. We have also published the template that bidders will need to complete at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/equality-in-higher-education-innovation-fund-guidance-for-bidders/.
5. The timeframe for this scheme is set out in Table A below. Proposals from eligible bidders should be submitted by emailing completed templates to equalityofopportunityinnovation@officeforstudents.org.uk

Table A: Timeframe for scheme

Activity	Date
Guidance published	5 September 2024
Deadline for bids	25 October 2024
Assessment process	November 2024
Outcomes announced	December 2024
Funding available	From January 2025
Funding concludes	31 July 2027

¹ For more about our categories of registration, see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/registering-with-the-ofs/registration-with-the-ofs-a-guide/.

Introduction

Background

6. In 2022 the OfS consulted on a new approach to the regulation of equality of opportunity in English higher education. This refreshed approach emphasises a focus on identifying and reducing risks to equality of opportunity in higher education, as well as increased expectations to evaluate this activity.
7. The Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) is a national risk register that identifies 12 sector-wide risks that may affect a student's opportunity to access and succeed in higher education.²
8. To reduce sector-wide risks to equality of opportunity, we have a 'presumption to partnership', whereby providers should consider designing and delivering in partnership with others, such as with other providers, other educational phases and with the third sector.
9. Therefore, this new funding scheme will fund collaborative proposals. It aims to support the sector in addressing risks to equality of opportunity and contribute to our objective 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.

Our strategic aims

10. The OfS's primary regulatory objectives are:³
 - a. Participation: 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.
 - b. Experience: All students, from all backgrounds, receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure.
 - c. Outcomes: All students, from all backgrounds, can progress into employment, further study, and lead fulfilling lives, in which their qualifications hold their value over time.
 - d. Value for money: All students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money.
11. We set out below how this funding competition intends to support the delivery of these objectives.
12. By providing this funding we aim to:
 - a. Support organisations to undertake new collaborative activities or projects that will reduce risks to equality of opportunity.

² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/equality-of-opportunity-risk-register/.

³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/.

- b. Catalyse new practices and innovations that will involve higher risk but will benefit the sector.
 - c. Provide opportunities for learning and knowledge dissemination on 'what works'.
 - d. Increase the sector's capacity and capability to address risks to equality of opportunity.
 - e. Support insights and learning that can be shared across the sector.
13. We have established this funding competition to attract collaborative bids that are most likely to achieve these aims. The funding should lead to impacts that can be shared across the sector.
14. We want collaborations to have the freedom to propose and test higher risk activities which may lead to a range of benefits if successful, but also produce high value learning and outcomes if they are unsuccessful. We encourage ambition and will seek to support this through our assessment and monitoring processes – providing bids are credible and our rules and regulations are met.

Scope of this fund

15. We want to fund new and innovative activity related to improving equality of opportunity at any stage of the student lifecycle and with any students that are not experiencing equality of opportunity. The lifecycle stages are:
- **access** to higher education
 - **continuation** in the study of higher education qualifications
 - **completion** of the study of higher education qualifications
 - **attainment**: achievement and the awards made to higher education students at the end of their studies
 - **progression** into the labour market, further study and other destinations after leaving higher education.
16. The following items of expenditure and activity are out of scope for this funding:
- recruitment and marketing activity
 - programmes or initiatives already funded, or which could be funded, by the OfS through other funding methods
 - capital projects and expenditure. Capital expenditure in this context means money used to acquire or maintain physical infrastructure and fixed assets, such as land, buildings and equipment, which is normally capitalised in the provider's audited annual accounts
 - initiatives that do not directly relate to equality of opportunity in higher education
 - collaborations that do not involve an eligible higher education provider, or individual bids
 - grants or loans to students

- collaborative bids including only higher education providers and students' unions.⁴

⁴ We use 'students' unions' as shorthand for students' unions, associations, and guilds in England.

Bidding competition

17. This section provides guidance on timescales for submitting collaborative bids to the competition, our approach to scoring proposals, and the general terms and conditions which should apply for the successful projects.
18. We expect to distribute up to £2 million to be spent between January 2025 and July 2027. The timescales for submitting bids are outlined in Table A, page 2. Bidders can lead one proposal but can be involved in other collaborative bids if they wish to do so. If so, they must have the appropriate capacity and capability to deliver multiple projects (if successful with more than one bid).
19. All funding allocated through this competition must be spent in accordance with terms and conditions. Successful bidders will be issued with an award letter which will set out the specific terms and conditions of this funding. Our general terms and conditions of funding for each academic year will also apply.⁵ OfS funding will need to have been spent by 31 July 2027.
20. We will monitor progress, risk and spend during our funding period. In exceptional circumstances, if our monitoring does not give us confidence that a collaboration will be able to use the funding in the time available, we may withdraw the offer of funding in whole or part. Such exceptional circumstances may include:
 - significant delays in delivery (for whatever reason) compared with the timetable set out in the bid
 - failure to engage to our satisfaction in our reporting, monitoring and evaluation requirements.
21. The bidding competition is open to all bidders that meet the criteria outlined in paragraph 25. Bids should demonstrate that they can deliver their project aims from January 2025 at the earliest and complete the activities by 31 July 2027 at the latest. There is no minimum timescale for the projects to be delivered in.
22. We have set a minimum funding threshold of £50,000 and maximum funding threshold of £200,000 for bids. This will ensure that funding is prioritised towards more significant proposals that are likely to deliver progress against programme aims within the funding period, while also allowing for a good range and scale of projects to be funded.
23. In developing this approach, we have had regard to our general duties in section 2 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, in particular to:
 - a. the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English higher education providers (2(1)(e))
 - b. the need to encourage competition between English higher education providers in connection with the provision of higher education where that competition is in the interests

⁵ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/terms-and-conditions-of-funding-for-2024-25/.

of students and employers, while also having regard to the benefits for students and employers resulting from collaboration between such providers, (2(1)(c))

- c. The need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers (2(1)(d)).
- d. The need to use the OfS's resources in an efficient, effective, and economic way (2(1)(f)).

Summary of bidding competition

- bids must be submitted by **25 October 2024**
- funding available from January 2025 and must be spent by 31 July 2027
- bids should be for a minimum total funding of £50,000
- bids should be for a maximum total funding of £200,000
- collaborative bids only will be accepted.

Eligibility

24. We will only fund collaborative proposals. Each collaborative bid requires an eligible higher education provider for funding purposes.

25. To be eligible to be involved in a collaboration, you must either:

- Be a registered provider with the OfS in the Approved (fee cap) category. Providers must be registered in the Approved (fee cap) category by the time OfS decisions on which bids to support are taken – December 2024. This reflects our funding powers under section 39 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.
- Be an organisation that provides services in connection with higher education. This reflects the limit of our funding powers under section 39(2) of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

26. In addition to this, Uni Connect partnerships are eligible to bid but proposals must demonstrate how this innovation funding will be used for new, additional projects separate from the delivery of the Uni Connect programme as defined in the Uni Connect guidance and operating plans. We will also need assurance that Uni Connect partnerships have the capacity to deliver new activities alongside their regular work.

27. Those organisations leading bids are eligible to lead a maximum of one bid but may be involved in additional bids through collaboration. There is no limit to how many collaborative bids a provider or other organisation is named as a partner on, provided that it is named as the lead bidder on no more than one proposal.

28. Through our assessment process we will aim to determine whether providers and organisations involved in multiple bids can feasibly deliver a range of activities at the same time and give due priority and focus to them as required.
29. To submit a bid for funding, bidders will need to complete the bidding template found at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/equality-in-higher-education-innovation-fund-guidance-for-bidders/.
30. OfS will assess each bid against the criteria set out in paragraphs 32 to 61.
31. We will prioritise bids that we consider overall best meet the aims for this funding competition, as set out in paragraph 12. The criteria are designed to achieve this. To be successful, a bid must explain how it meets our criteria through the appropriate use of evidence.

Bid requirements and assessment criteria

Considerations for submitting a bid

32. Bidders must be able to demonstrate that they can deliver the funding aims and incur the associated costs by 31 July 2027.
33. Proposals should demonstrate that funding requested will deliver new ideas and innovations to support equality of opportunity for students in higher education.
34. We expect that bids for this competition may include the following activities, as set out below, within their collaborations. However, this is a non-exhaustive list and we will consider any activity that will contribute to the programme aims and which is not specified as out of scope for funding in paragraph 16:
 - a. The collection, use or interrogation of data on equality of opportunity.
 - b. Facilitating partnerships across the sector and with relevant organisations.
 - c. Innovative approaches to addressing risks to equality of opportunity.
35. A focus on evaluation, what works and knowledge dissemination.
36. Bidders should note that we will not commit any OfS funding beyond 31 July 2027 through this scheme. All funding allocated must be spent in full, and in accordance with the terms and conditions, by this date.
37. Collaborations intending to bid must do so by downloading and completing the bidding template. One organisation must be the lead bidder, and will be responsible for distributing information among the collaboration. Bidders must complete all sections of the template.
38. We require signed letters of support from the accountable officer of the higher education provider and the accountable officers or relevant decision-makers of the other organisations involved in the collaboration. These letters should be submitted in PDF format and included alongside the bidding template.

Assessment criteria

39. The OfS will assess each bid against the criteria set out below.

Criterion 1: Collaboration

40. Bids should set out what the project will deliver and how this is collaborative. This should state how the different partners will work together to deliver the project.
41. It should be clear why the collaboration has been formed, the role of each partner, and the contributions they are making to the project.
42. Bids will make it clear why the partners are the best placed to achieve the project aims.

Criterion 2: Innovation

43. We expect bidders to set out why the proposal is new or innovative – we encourage higher risk activity which may deliver higher impact.
44. Where possible, this should include a summary of the evidence used to inform the proposal and how it fills any gaps in the evidence base. Where there is limited or no evidence to inform the bid design, then we would expect to see a more robust evaluation plan that will demonstrate impact.
45. We accept within innovation there will be a higher risk of failure but the learning generated for the sector will be important to capture and understand, if activities do not work as intended.

Criterion 3: Credibility and objectives

46. We expect bids to target risks to equality of opportunity, as set out in the EORR or as locally identified. The intended aim of the activity and its impact should be clear in the bid.
47. We will also expect proposals to consider how the activities will lead to practical outcomes.
48. To demonstrate this, bids should include a logic model or theory of change which shows the outcomes and impacts for the proposal. A preferred model has been included in the bidding template, but bidders may use or design their own version.
49. We will be looking to fund a range of bids that represent an appropriate variation in aims and objectives, so that we can test different approaches.

Criterion 4: Evaluation

50. We expect bidders to include a robust evaluation plan, setting out how they will:
 - collect data
 - track progress
 - measure impact
 - share findings externally.

Criterion 5: Value for money and project and risk management

51. Bids should demonstrate there is a need for the proposal and that the collaboration has realistic plans in place to address this need, and is ready to deliver the activities for which funding is sought.
52. We expect the funding requested to reflect the activities, ambitions, and outcomes of the proposed project. Unrealistic or unviable bids will not be funded.
53. Bids should demonstrate clear and robust project, governance and risk management, proportionate to the funding requested and the number of organisations involved in the collaboration.
54. Proposals should set out how the funding requested will provide additionality and is not duplicating existing activities.

55. We are unlikely to consider that simply subcontracting activities to partners or other third party agencies will deliver value for money. Bids that include such activity will need to demonstrate that the collaboration would not otherwise be able to deliver the project outcomes without this type of arrangement.

Approach to scoring and prioritisation for funding

56. Bids will be assessed by OfS officers according to the scoring criteria outlined in paragraphs 58 to 60. We will then finalise recommendations for funding.
57. Final decisions will be made by the Director for Fair Access and Participation according to the OfS Scheme of Delegation (Part 8, row 11).⁶ Bidders should be aware that, in reaching final decisions, we may seek to ensure we are able to offer an overall package of support across a broad group of collaborations that we consider best meets the programme aims and objectives. Final scores will inform recommendations to, and decisions by, the Director for Fair Access and Participation. The final number of funded projects will depend on the quality of bids received, available funding, and the judgements and recommendations made through the assessment process.
58. We will score each criterion on a scale from 0 to 4 according to the scale set out in Table B below. The maximum score for a bid is therefore 20.

Table B: Scoring bids

Score		Description
4	Excellent	Clear, well-reasoned and evidenced explanation of how the bid meets the criteria. No material weaknesses in explanation or the evidence referred to or provided.
3	Very good	Clear, well-reasoned and evidenced explanation of how the bid meets the criteria. Some gaps in explanation or the evidence referred to or provided, but not material.
2	Satisfactory	Basic explanation and evidence provided for how the bid meets the criteria. Substantial gaps in evidence referred to or provided, but not material.
1	Poor	Minimal explanation of how the bid meets the criteria and/or minimal evidence to support the bid. Bid contains material inconsistencies or weaknesses in the explanation or evidence referred to.
0	No score	No explanation of how the bid meets the criteria and/or no evidence to support the bid. Bid contains significant material inconsistencies or weaknesses in the explanation or evidence referred to.

59. Bids that score zero on any of the criteria will not be considered for funding.
60. Bids that score less than a two for criteria 1 and 2 will not be considered for funding.
61. In reaching decisions on which bids to support, we may offer a collaboration an allocation that is less than the sum it has bid for and/or ask it to adjust activities accordingly. If so, the collaboration will be asked to consider whether it could progress its project under these circumstances. If a collaboration is unable to progress its project because reduced funding is

⁶ See 'Scheme of delegation', available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/who-we-are/our-board-and-committees/.

offered, or it cannot deliver amended activities, we will need to withdraw the offer of funding. We may also withdraw the offer of funding if, in response, the collaboration proposes to significantly reduce the scope of the project further, such that the reduced scope would not have been prioritised for funding.

Monitoring and evaluation

62. We will take a risk-based, proportionate approach to monitoring the successful projects, to ensure they offer value for money and meet the delivery of targets, objectives, outputs and outcomes. We may undertake meetings with, and visits to, projects to better understand their delivery, impacts and outcomes, and to support our analysis and dissemination work.
63. We will issue confirmation letters to all successful projects setting out the terms and conditions of the funding. All funding confirmation letters must also be formally agreed by the collaboration before any grant payments can begin.
64. Our funding is usually provided on an academic year basis and must be used for the purposes intended within each year, in accordance with the terms and conditions that apply. The OfS will not make payments to projects before funds are needed.
65. In addition, any funding awarded through this bidding competition must be used:
 - a. On activity and expenditure items as set out in the bid.
 - b. In accordance with any other terms and conditions that we may specify when we award the grants – these will be set out in our confirmation letter.
66. If our monitoring of the delivery of a project does not give us confidence that it will be able to use all the funding awarded through this competition within the funding period, and in line with the terms and conditions that apply, we may withdraw the offer of funding in whole or part. The circumstances in which we might do this may include significant delays in delivery (for whatever reason) compared with the timetable set out in the bid or failure of the project to engage to our satisfaction in any reporting and monitoring requirements.
67. If we are not satisfied that a project has used our funds in accordance with our terms and conditions, we may also reclaim some or all the funding provided.
68. Successful projects will be expected to report on their delivery at least once in each academic year of the scheme. Our monitoring will be proportionate to the funding provided and alongside the work of the external evaluators.

Evaluation

69. We intend to commission an independent evaluation of the overall scheme. We require all funded projects to:
 - work with the OfS and the evaluators in an open and transparent way
 - share learning and best practice for the benefit of students and the wider higher education sector
 - provide detailed analysis of successful and unsuccessful activities to understand lessons learnt.

70. In addition to this, funded projects must work with the evaluators on the planning and delivery of their evaluations, where appropriate.
71. We will consider what other monitoring or evaluation data may be collected to understand impact and outcomes. This may include collection of this data via regular project monitoring reporting or where data is available to us from the designated data body or the Education and Skills Funding Agency. Details of any further monitoring, evaluation or data collection requirements will be outlined in the terms and conditions of funding.

Further information

72. Interested and eligible collaborations are invited to download and complete the bidding template (see Annex A) and email it to equalityofopportunityinnovation@officeforstudents.org.uk by the deadline of **25 October 2024**.
73. If you have any questions about this competition, please email equalityofopportunityinnovation@officeforstudents.org.uk.



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