Annex B: Evaluation principles for OfS funding competition: using innovation and intersectional approaches to target mental health support for students

Aims and objectives of evaluation

1. The key aim of evaluation is to explore and assess 'what works, why and in what context'. As part of this funding competition, projects are required to embed robust evaluation into their bid and project development. Evaluation is crucial for an evidence-led, strategic approach, and fundamental to understanding the impact of your activities on outcomes for students. There are many benefits to evaluating, including to:

   - understand what works well and what could be improved

   - develop your knowledge of whether and how activities are effective

   - test new and innovative approaches

   - inform future practice

   - demonstrate the value of any impact at individual, provider, project and national levels

   - demonstrate value for money

   - develop and contribute to the sector's knowledge.

2. Therefore, evaluation should:

   - identify good practice for wider adoption

   - validate good practice interventions and the necessary conditions and practices to facilitate them

   - identify whether and how good practice can be replicated, transmitted and embedded across a diverse range of providers.

Mental health funding competition – project-level evaluation

Summary of evaluation objectives at project level

Evaluation at project level	- Evaluate the success of the project against the wider aims of the programme - Evaluate the progress, outputs and outcomes of each project strand against its individual aims and success criteria - Capture challenges faced by the project, and the conditions and contexts within which it operates - Identify emerging themes and particular issues as they arise - Identify knowledge gaps across the project for which further investigation is required - Identify challenges and opportunities of partnering across sectors - Disseminate findings amongst the other projects and wider external audience

Mental health funding competition criteria

3. The priority for this funding competition (as set out in paragraph 18 of the bidding guidance) is a focus on intersectional approaches to providing targeted support for:

   a. particular groups of students with characteristics identified as increasing the risk of poor mental health (e.g. ethnicity, socioeconomic background)

   b. 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 in family, carers, care leavers, LGBT+).

4. The key criteria of this mental health funding competition (as set out in paragraph 19 of the bidding guidance) are:

   a. Clear evidence of a strategic approach across the whole provider to improving mental health outcomes, underpinned by active and effective senior leadership and governance. This is an essential underpinning for all the higher education providers named in the bid.

   b. Delivery of value for money, demonstrated by:

      i. appropriate level of co-investment provided

      ii. scale of deliverables and intended outcomes

      iii. anticipated effectiveness of the proposed approach

      iv. potential learning for the wider higher education sector and our policy development.

c. 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. By the launch of the project, all partners must have formal arrangements in place that set out the responsibilities of each partner and ownership of any outputs developed as part of the project.

d. Development and testing of new and innovative approaches. This could be by significantly extending a small research project. The ambition should be underpinned by appropriate risk management and must be delivered within the programme timeframe.

e. Extent of inclusive student engagement in genuine co-production of initiatives. We would expect projects to involve students throughout the entirety of the project, including the bid, design, implementation and evaluation phases.

f. Demonstration of a rigorous approach to the design of the project and the evaluation of its success, including the ability to evidence the impact and outcomes. We want to see the ambition and likelihood that the activities will secure a significant change in current practice and continue to sustain improved outcomes over the medium to long term.

g. A clear focus on addressing issues around the lack of integration and connectivity between health agencies and higher education.

Evaluation approach

5. Your bid should include a description of how your project will be evidenced and evaluated. The evaluation should run throughout lifetime of the project and be proportionate in time and resource to the overall activities proposed.

6. You must specify meaningful and measurable outcomes that your project can deliver and identify its long-term impact on students. As part of your evaluation you must include:

- any current evaluation, research, reporting mechanisms and monitoring already in place to test existing approaches and how these can be enhanced or scaled up for new activities

- the baseline data you will use to determine whether your project has been successful in meeting your identified outcomes

- appropriate methodologies you will use to carry out your evaluation

- the mechanisms you have in place to learn from your evaluation, including how you will share evidence generated through your project.

7. The type of evaluation you choose will depend on your project, the questions you want to answer, and the time and resource you allocate. Effective evaluation should include both formative and summative lines of enquiry, embedded into the evaluation approach.

- **Formative/process evaluations** explore the implementation and early learning of a project while the programme activities are in progress and seek to understand how a project works

throughout its delivery. With this type of evaluation, activities can be adapted in real time and in response to the findings.

- **Summative/outcome or impact evaluations** identify whether a project has worked and what impact your project has had. These types of evaluations help to review outcomes and objectives and can help inform the development of future work.

8. A simple way of setting out your outcomes, and understanding the progress of their delivery, is through a logic model or theory of change. The principle of this is to understand what change you are seeking to achieve and the steps you will take to deliver and measure this change. There are five key components:

   a. Inputs: the resources required for the intervention

   b. Activities: what you will do to deliver the intervention

   c. Outputs: what is delivered or produced through the intervention

   d. Outcomes: the results of the intervention; these are likely to be in the short or medium term

   e. Impacts: the longer-term results.

9. Further information on approaches to designing an evaluation is available through the Better Evaluation website[1].

Sample key considerations

10. We have selected two criteria from the above list (paragraphs 3 and 4c) and have developed these as examples below, including key considerations. This represents a starting point to support you in the development of your own evaluation plans which you will need to adapt and further develop for your project.

Mental health outcomes through intersectional approaches to providing targeted support for particular groups of students (paragraph 3 above)
Projects should consider how successfully they are: • understanding the impacts on students with different characteristics, including how intersections of characteristics interact to affect the outcomes   • assessing the extent to which project activity is delivering a step change in student mental health outcomes and the benefits of the whole provider and whole student lifecycle approach   • evidencing the impact of innovative activity beyond business as usual   • developing a sound evidence base to support knowledge development around 'what works' and effective practice.

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[1] See www.betterevaluation.org

Issues to explore could include:

- How the outcomes for students and the success of interventions are impacted by different student characteristics, including intersections of different characteristics

- The challenges of targeting interventions towards specific student groups

- The benefits of engaging different student groups as active partners in the creation of solutions for key mental health issues

- How improved outcomes in mental health and wellbeing have impacted on broader outcomes and the wider student experience, e.g. continuation, attainment, progression to further study or employment

- The rationale for choosing particular outcome measures (for example, why are the chosen outcomes valid and appropriate for the funded project?)

- Identifying an appropriate tested health outcome measure and its benefits for your project.

Demonstration of strategic, collaborative partnerships (paragraph 4c above)

Projects should consider how successfully they are driving or have been driven by collaborations and partnerships that have:

- developed systematic and strategic approaches to improving student mental health outcomes

- supported collaborations that have scaled up successful whole provider approaches

- met specific project aims, objectives and success criteria

- invested funds according to plan

- achieved overall project objectives.

Key issues which might be explored during the evaluation include:

- The rationale for working in partnership

- How the aims of the project have been enhanced by collaboration with partners such as health agencies, third sector organisations, higher education providers and schools and colleges

- What works well in the partnerships and why – how learning is integrated and taken forward through the life of the project

- What the challenges have been and how solutions have been identified and implemented for the benefit of partnerships.