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Evaluation of the Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange Competition

Final Report by SQW to Office for Students and Research England

SQW

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Executive Summary

1. The Office for Students (OfS) and Research England (RE) launched the 'Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange' Competition to develop the evidence base on the nature of, and benefits from, student engagement in Knowledge Exchange (KE) activities. The Competition funded 20 projects led by Higher Education (HE) providers across England to develop and share understanding of effective practice in student engagement, and to inform on-going KE policy and investment.

2. In 2020, SQW was appointed to conduct an evaluation of the Competition. Evaluation data collection and analysis was undertaken via two key strands: meta-analysis of projects' self-evaluation reports, and in-depth case studies focused on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Running parallel to this activity was the delivery of on-going evaluation support, including three workshops to facilitate the sharing of learning and good practice.

Objectives and targeting

3. The three aims of the Competition were to:

   - Provide evidence of the ways in which KE activities involve or benefit students or graduates directly, or demonstrate approaches that optimise student benefit.
   - Demonstrate effective practice in KE that benefits students and to make such knowledge available to the wider HE sector.
   - Address evidenced issues of EDI within existing KE activities that create barriers to students from all backgrounds benefiting.

4. The aims and objectives identified by the 20 funded projects aligned well with those set at the Competition level. A consistent overarching objective across the projects was to increase the number of students engaged in KE, including engaging underrepresented students. Projects also sought to generate material benefits for students, and improve the way in which KE activities are delivered, both within individual HE institutions (HEIs) and across the sector as a whole.

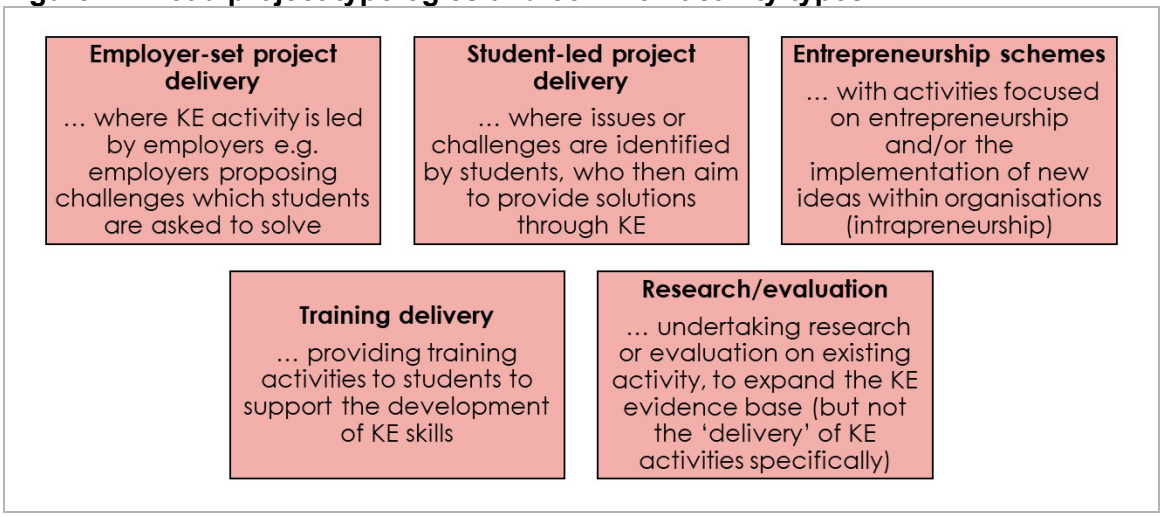
5. Projects adopted different mechanisms to target and engage students. There was a broadly even balance across the projects between those that were explicitly 'open and accessible to all' and those that sought to emphasise engagement from particular groups, notably students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. The evaluation suggests there is no 'right' or 'wrong' here; the approach should be tailored to the project's rationale and objectives, and its delivery context.

Competition delivery

Project activity

6. The Competition was purposefully open in encouraging applications from a wide range of projects. This meant each project supported by the Competition was distinct and unique. Although high-level and illustrative only, this breadth can be summarised in a range of broad 'typologies' which reflected different ways of involving students, as presented in Figure 1. However, some of the projects aligned with more than one typology model.

Figure 1: Broad project typologies and common activity types



Source: SQW

7. The varied delivery models resulted in variations in the activity delivered by projects. Projects tended to deliver a mix of student-focused and learning-generation activities to provide a holistic offer of KE for students and partners to engage with. Activity included:

- Delivery of enterprise challenges and events.
- Work placements or internships, often to undertake 'real-world' targeted projects within partner organisations.
- Consultancy activities delivered by students to support local partners, including businesses, to solve issues.
- Student support to wider beneficiaries e.g. delivering curriculum-focused activities in schools, clinics open to the public (e.g. law advice, health and wellbeing).
- Development and facilitation of student networks, to enhance peer-to-peer support and share learning.
- Delivery of mentorship, coaching, and advice.
- Provision of training activities and skills development workshops.

8. In addition to the student-focused KE, projects also delivered activity to support the generation and dissemination of learning. This included research and evaluation on existing KE activity (with some projects including students as researchers); the development of toolkits, resources/e-resources, articles, and other materials; and the delivery of, and attendance at, conferences and events. Some projects held their own conferences specifically to disseminate learning (to students, partners, local stakeholders, and other HEIs), and others attended national and international KE conferences.

9. Overall, the scope of projects did not change significantly over time, and projects generally delivered what they planned to, although some adapted *how* they delivered activities. Changes to planned delivery were predominantly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, and to address issues of EDI. The latter were a result of emerging learning around the barriers to engaging underrepresented groups, or emerging gaps in participant demographics.

Project evaluation

10. Projects were required to undertake evaluation on their activity and its impacts. There was no set or single approach to evaluation required. Reflecting this variety in approach, a core focus of the Competition-level evaluation was to assess the quality of this evaluation evidence.

11. The assessment suggested that the quality of the evaluation evidence was good overall, with generally a high/fair level of clarity, credibility, and consistency in planning, delivery, and reporting. No projects were assessed as of a 'low' standard across all three stages of evaluation, which supported the use of evidence from across the projects.

12. Key strengths of the evaluation evidence included clarity on the rationale/case and aim and objectives of the project, and how this informed the evaluation approach; understanding of the project context, and how this could influence activity/evaluation; and the identification of relevant stakeholders to be involved in evaluation activity including students, external partners, and internal stakeholders. However, across the projects, greater detail on how the effects would be assessed, and the analytical techniques used to interpret the evidence, would have been possible; this would have helped to strengthen, and demonstrate more fully the strength of, the evidence base.

13. Given the range of methods and analytical techniques applied, some care is needed in interpreting the evidence. It is noted that the evidence base was stronger generally in relation to outcomes for students relative to other groups, which is not unexpected given the intent of the Competition. Further, there is a need to recognise the variation in context and complexity of the delivery landscape for student KE, and challenges related to time-paths to benefits – which can be lengthy – and capturing fully the range of

benefits generated, many of which are qualitative in nature and related to behaviours, aspirations, and attitudes.

Competition reach

14. The scale of KE activity delivered by the Competition was significant and notable. The projects reported in aggregate:

- Over 20,000 students were engaged in activities (achieving 118% of the total targeted student engagement, as identified by the projects). The number of students engaged, and achievement against targets, varied across projects.
- Over 3,600 partners were engaged in activities, including businesses, HEIs, and others (e.g. schools and colleges, NHS trusts).
- Over 1,500 events were delivered and over 300 KE toolkits/materials produced.

Competition benefits

For students

15. The project evaluation evidence suggests that a range of benefits for students have been realised. Key benefits for students have included:

- The development of skills and knowledge, including employability skills, entrepreneurial skills, professional inter-personal skills, and practical, technical, and research skills. Some projects saw a greater change in skills and knowledge for those from underrepresented groups.
- Enhanced knowledge and awareness of available career pathways, particularly when activity involved direct engagement with partner organisations.
- Improved confidence in delivering KE activities, and enhanced self-awareness of skills and abilities and the value they are able to bring to partnerships and employment opportunities.
- Enhanced access to KE for students from underrepresented groups.

16. There is also emerging evidence of subsequent impacts for students. This has included securing employment, establishing businesses, continuing on to post-graduate study, and accessing other opportunities (e.g. internships) which could support students' future careers. Projects that had been delivering similar activities prior to the Competition were better able to capture this evidence.

For partners

17. In addition to benefits for students of engagement in KE, benefits have been delivered *by* students, including for partner organisations engaged with projects. These included:

- Changes experienced by partners which had, or had the potential to, lead to improvements within partner organisations. In some cases, this had resulted in follow-on business outcomes (e.g. funding awards as a direct result of student KE activity).
- Improvements in staff capacity within partner organisations, in addition to organisational capacity, through increased access to student time and skills (enabling acceleration of activity).
- An enhanced appreciation of the value students can bring to organisations. Some projects reflected that this had potential implications for organisations' openness to employing recent graduates, including those with specific needs, which could contribute to the talent pipeline.

18. Additional benefits experienced by partners, as a result of their engagement with projects, included the development of new or enhanced partnerships (both with the HEI and with other organisations engaged with the project), and an increased understanding of how the HEI and the research it delivers can support partner organisations.

19. Some of the benefits described above are cultural in nature. This may be particularly important, especially given the challenges of generating culture change, but it is difficult to quantify at this stage what the impact of this might be.

For HE institutions

20. Institutions have benefited from student engagement in KE, with evidence that the Competition has:

- Enabled models of KE to be tested and/or scaled, generating valuable learning.
- Helped demonstrate the value of KE across HEIs.
- Supported the establishment and development of partnerships (including with other HEIs and local partners).
- Generated knowledge and skills benefits for staff.

21. Some projects have been able to sustain delivery beyond the Competition funding, continuing their activities to varying degrees. This provides the potential to generate evidence on the long-term benefits of student KE.

22. Projects' increasing focus on delivering dissemination activity towards the later stages of delivery has enabled knowledge to be shared with others in the HE sector. Encouragingly, greater dissemination activity has occurred than initially expected by projects, with over-delivery on targets for events and toolkits. Further, the Competition has established a community of HEIs with a shared interest in good practice in student KE, facilitating shared learning and engagement between projects lead and partners; this has mostly been where there were similar subject matters or activities being delivered.

Competition learning

23. Given the range of contexts, approaches, and activities delivered by projects, no single, or 'off the shelf' solution emerged from this Competition-level evaluation as 'most effective' in supporting student engagement in KE or which optimised student benefit more effectively than others. Each approach has been contextually specific and appropriate to the needs of the particular HEI, its students, and its partners. However, there are several key factors that may be generally transferrable and represent 'good practice' that contributes to the optimisation of student benefit. These factors were present in many of the projects' design, delivery, and recruitment/engagement processes, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Competition learning

Project design	
Project foundations	Establishing a clear purpose and an underpinning 'theory of change', and clarity on the assumptions underlying planned activities and routes to impact Leveraging existing 'assets' (e.g. building on existing models of KE activity, strong track records in delivering KE, existing partnerships) which meant foundations were in place for delivery to gain early traction
Co-production	Involving the student voice in the project design process, including to identify and enable the project to meaningfully overcome barriers (leading to increased engagement with students who may not typically have accessed KE activity otherwise) Drawing on the expertise of partners and understanding their needs. Projects which did so were more likely to report positive outcomes for partner organisations
Design elements	Ensuring focused consideration at the design stage of the extent to which aims and objectives are more closely aligned to extra-curricular or intra-curricular delivery (or a combination of both) Providing interdisciplinary approaches to bring together student experiences and insights from across the HEI. This was reported to have a particular effect on increasing student confidence and enabling partner access to fresh insights The provision of a range and combination of activities with which students could engage and balancing structure and flexibility of the model (e.g. through a wrap-around approach). These were seen as important in maximising student knowledge and skills development outcomes

	Building in training and development support to enhance the quality of KE activity, through strengthening students' knowledge and skills
Project delivery	
Project management and staffing	Implementing clear governance and management structures, including the involvement of students in governance processes (providing another mechanism for professional and employability skills development) Building a delivery team of committed management and delivery staff with the right expertise and skills mix and which, where possible, reflected the experiences of the target student cohort Having a stable and consistent delivery team in place with appropriate capacity
Monitoring and evaluation	Establishing clear monitoring and data collection processes, including for collecting data on EDI characteristics (to ensure specific groups were able to leverage fully the benefits of their participation) Establishing clear evaluation plans and delivery processes to evidence the generation of key outcomes
Flexibility and adaptation	Delivering a flexible and responsive approach, including based on emerging student needs (identified through data/feedback), enabling tailoring of approaches to maximise student benefit, and bespoke support if required Delivering an agile approach in the context of Covid-19, to enable compatibility with virtual delivery (although this did not work as effectively for some projects)
Project features	Providing opportunities for students to engage in activities in 'real-world' contexts and environments, which helps to secure and retain engagement. This was seen to offer the potential to deliver material positive societal and economic outcomes Providing payment or financial support to students who participated in the KE. This was reported to be particularly beneficial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have been able to engage otherwise For projects which involved KE between students and businesses, ensuring that these were effectively 'matched' (e.g. in terms of priorities, experiences), strengthening outcomes for both students and partners
Recruitment and retention	
Recruitment	Working with departments/academics to promote the opportunity directly to students Offering long application windows and strategically timing application deadlines Developing a clear brand identity and social media presence Providing inclusive application routes to make participation in projects more accessible Leveraging existing networks and communities to reach target groups (including students' own networks)
Retention	Clearly articulating the value of engagement Developing student 'readiness' to engage, by ensuring adequate resource was given to induction processes Providing a range of ways students could engage with the project, so they could determine their own intensity of engagement

> Reviewing monitoring/engagement data, to explore patterns of engagement
> Building a 'sense of community' (where this is consistent with the wider activity offer and model) that students felt a part of, and a sense of loyalty to
> Implementing incentive and reward schemes (e.g. digital badges)

24. Recruitment and engagement methods developed were often in response to learning around the barriers to engagement in KE. This included student capacity (including when balancing with study and other responsibilities) and emotional barriers to KE (including low confidence and a lack of understanding of KE). Evidence from across the Competition indicates that students from underrepresented backgrounds are often disproportionately affected by these issues.

25. There is also learning on contextual pre-conditions or enablers required for effective student KE. These included:

- Leveraging additional investment and resourcing, including from the HEI and external partners, and both financial and in-kind resources.
- Buy-in from HEI, partners, and academic staff. Effective alignment and links with wider HE structures, systems, and priorities was crucial in ensuring buy-in from senior staff and the institution more broadly.
- Strong relationships with partner organisations. Where projects recruited new partners, it was important to implement ongoing and proactive partner engagement, seek partners who aligned with project values, and clearly articulate project benefits and anticipated commitment.

26. Some of these are within projects' control e.g. building strong relationships with partners, but others are not e.g. availability of resource. Considering and seeking to ensure the pre-conditions are in place to enable effective models of student KE is crucial.

Going forward

27. Overall, the findings are positive on the benefits generated by projects, on dissemination activities, and on addressing (or seeking to address) issues of EDI, which suggests that the Competition has performed well against its objectives. That said, it is important to caveat this finding in light of the project-level evaluation evidence.

28. While the project-level evaluation evidence was reasonable overall, there was an opportunity for greater consideration of key assumptions, further clarity on the analytical techniques employed, and (generally) a more detailed approach to establishing how benefits would be monitored and assessed. This learning can helpfully inform future evaluation planning and practice.

29. Based on evaluation evidence and experiences, four reflections for the future are highlighted:

- The Competition has established a well-developed 'community of interest' across the projects supported, with strong buy-in to the Competition-level evaluation. This could provide a valuable resource to support on-going sector development on student KE. OfS and RE may wish to consider how this group could be sustained and leveraged going forward to promote, share, and develop professional capacity and knowledge.

- The projects have generated a significant volume of evidence on the benefits and delivery of student KE, and more can be expected to be produced in future, including publications, conference presentations, and other materials. To support on-going dissemination and knowledge sharing, OfS and RE may wish to consider how this evidence can be collected, curated, and shared across the sector to help leverage and maximise the value from this evidence base developed via the Competition.

- The Competition-level evaluation highlighted the complementary role of student KE within the broader KE landscape. There may be scope to further consider the relationship between student-focused KE and wider KE activity in the future, and the implications for KE policy and funding.

- The Competition-level evaluation secured strong engagement from projects and was able to collate both a broad and largely consistent evidence base. However, the evaluation framework was developed early in project implementation. Those involved in planning for evaluation should consider the sequencing and timing of any future evaluation on student KE to help facilitate the evaluation process.

1. Introduction

The Competition

1.1 The Office for Students (OfS) and Research England (RE) launched the 'Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange' Competition to develop the evidence base on the nature of, and benefits from, student engagement in Knowledge Exchange (KE) activities. The process of KE is intended to contribute (directly or indirectly) to economic or social benefits. In the context of higher education institutions (HEIs), KE seeks to deliver benefits to external partners. Where students are involved, they may also derive benefits from their involvement.

1.2 The Competition funded 20 projects led by HEIs across England to develop and share understanding of effective practice in student engagement, and to inform on-going KE policy and investment.

The evaluation

1.3 In 2020, SQW was appointed to conduct an evaluation of the Competition. The broad aims of the evaluation were to:

- Identify, extract, interrogate, and evaluate project-level and Competition-level evidence on the benefits to students and external partners of engaging in KE activities.
- Work with projects to ensure the quality and effectiveness of project-level monitoring and evaluation, so that robust evidence of benefits and effective practice is available to the HE sector and wider industrial groups and communities.
- Present the learning in different ways to inform the higher education (HE) sector, share good practice, and provide evidence to support new partnerships and interventions.

Evaluation approach

1.4 Data collection and analysis for the evaluation was undertaken via two key strands:

- Meta-analysis of projects' self-evaluation reports as a source of information on the quality, coverage and credibility of the evidence generated. To inform this, SQW developed an Evaluation Reporting Template for projects to provide data on activities, outputs, outcomes, plans for evaluation, and key learning. The template was designed to provide robust and consistent monitoring and evaluation evidence.

Projects submitted five Evaluation Reporting Templates during the lifetime of the Competition.

- In-depth case studies focused on EDI that were undertaken with eight of the 20 projects. Completed via two waves of research in 2021 and 2022, the case studies involved interviews with project leads and beneficiaries of KE, including external partners and students.

1.5 Running parallel to this activity was the delivery of on-going evaluation support to projects. This included regular evaluation and data quality reviews with individual projects, and the delivery of three workshops, which aimed to support the sharing of learning and good practice across all projects, both from the evaluation evidence and focused on project delivery.

1.6 The first four Evaluation Reporting Templates fed into three formative reports. The reports (from June 2021, February 2022, and August 2022[1]) synthesised learning on project progress, activity, outputs and outcomes. The third (and latest) formative report found that:

- There had been steady and encouraging progress in project delivery, with most of the projects on track or ahead of expected delivery at that point. Projects had not made any material changes in delivery scope or scale since the previous formative report, but more than half had agreed time extensions to their project with RE.

- Projects had increased levels of marketing and dissemination activity, although changes in staffing experienced by projects were reported to have potential implications for learning and dissemination. Projects were also delivering activities intended to enable the sustainability of their activities.

- Overall programme reach with students and partners had continued to increase, as well as the number of projects reporting they had achieved at least some of their anticipated outcomes. However, projects were also experiencing challenges which had the potential to affect delivery against outcomes; these related to partnership engagement and relationships, maintaining student engagement, and staff workloads.

This report

1.7 This report is the fourth and final evaluation report for the Student Engagement in KE Competition. The report should be read with the following considerations in mind:

[1] Summaries of the reports are available here: Evaluation of the student engagement in knowledge exchange programme - Office for Students

- Projects applied for funding and set out their proposed activities and timelines in 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 significantly affected project delivery, with projects often needing to pivot to online delivery mechanisms, and meant that some project timelines were extended. At the time of this report, two projects were still being delivered. This means that the final meta-analysis has been delivered on 18 projects' final self-evaluation reports, although learning from previous reports for the final two projects is drawn on in this report.

- This evaluation predominantly relies on self-reported evidence. While this has enabled the evaluators to collect a richer dataset, it does risk the introduction of bias into the evidence. The evaluation has sought to mitigate this through assessing and reviewing projects' own evaluation plans and approaches to determine the strength of the evidence provided. Overall, the strength of evidence drawn on in this report is good, although this varies between projects. Section 3 of this report explores the implications of this further.

- This report seeks to build on rather than duplicate the evidence presented in the earlier formative reports. This means the findings in this report are predominantly drawn from projects' most recent Evaluation Reporting Template, alongside case study evidence and learning drawn from the most recent learning workshop (in June 2023).

1.8 The report sets out findings from the evaluation in five sections:

- Objectives and targeting, considering Competition level objectives, project-level objectives, and the groups targeted by projects.

- Competition delivery, including the activities delivered by projects and their evaluation activity.

- Competition benefits, in terms of its reach, key outputs delivered by projects, and outcomes generated.

- Competition learning, summarising the main learning themes experienced by projects.

- Conclusions, including implications for both Competition funders and HEIs delivering projects.

1.9 The report is supplemented by five annexes. Annex A presents a glossary of acronyms and abbreviations used in this report. Annex B presents details of the projects funded by the Competition as per their original applications. Annex C presents the Competition logic model developed by the evaluators. Annex D presents the eight case study summaries. Annex E presents the evaluation assessment scores across projects.

Acknowledgements

1.10 Our thanks go to the project leads and delivery staff at the 20 Competition funded projects who have taken part in the evaluation through the submission of self-evaluation reports, participation in interviews, and attendance at workshops. Further thanks go to case study participants, including project leads and delivery staff, partner organisations, and students. Without the input of these individuals, this evaluation would not have been possible.

2. Objectives and targeting

2.1 This section summarises the objectives of the Competition and considers the alignment of project aims and objectives with these overall aims. It also discusses approaches taken by projects to the targeting of prospective students and partners.

Objectives

For the Competition…

2.2 The Competition aimed to deliver against three objectives:

- To provide evidence of the ways in which KE activities involve or benefit students or graduates directly, or demonstrate approaches that optimise student benefit for a given activity.
- To demonstrate effective practice in KE that benefits students and to make such knowledge available to the wider HE sector.
- To address evidenced issues of EDI within existing KE activities that create barriers to students from all backgrounds benefiting from them.

2.3 These objectives reflected a recognition by RE and OfS that whilst the evidence base on the nature of and benefits from knowledge exchange activities generally is well-established (including through long-term evidence on the impacts of Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) and time-series data from the Higher Education Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) survey the evidence on student-focused KE was more limited. Further, although there was a headline understanding of the types of activity that involved students (including student enterprise, business engagement activities, etc.), details of this were limited, and there was very limited evidence on the benefits derived for students (and others). In turn, there was also limited knowledge of good practice to inform activity across the sector.

2.4 In this context, it is important to recognise that the Competition was seeking principally to support funded HEIs to build-on existing student-KE activity, including expanding, scaling-up, and/or innovating existing practice in order to develop the evidence-base. This is important in the context for evaluation: the expectation was not that the Competition would lead to fundamentally 'new' types of student-KE, rather that it would enable the delivery of more, larger, and potentially adjusted activity to better understand, measure, and articulate effective practice in KE that delivers positive student benefits.

…and the supported projects

2.5 Looking across the full portfolio, the aims and objectives identified by the 20 funded projects aligned well with those set at the Competition level. However, as may be expected, projects also identified aims and objectives specific to the context, rationale, and priorities of their individual projects. The objectives also reflected that many projects contained multiple strands, with specific objectives identified relevant to these different strands: this complementary and reinforcing activity and focus is an important characteristic of the projects supported by the Competition.

2.6 Several notable themes emerged in relation to the project-level objectives:

- First, a consistent objective was to increase the number of students engaged in KE, with the Competition funding providing the mechanism to scale-up existing activities. This was not relevant to all projects, but it was common, and in some cases this was associated with an ambitious level of scale-up. For example, one project aimed to "*quadruple the number of students who benefit from knowledge exchange through placements from 35 to 140 over two years*". By scaling-up, projects sought to attract individuals that had not previously been able/willing to engage in KE.

- Second, and related but distinct to this, for some projects engaging underrepresented students in KE activities was an important objective. This took a variety of forms and sought to engage different groups, but is consistent with the Competition's objective to address issues of EDI within existing KE activities. Projects commonly sought to deliver activity that would remove or mitigate the barriers that may prevent underrepresented groups from engaging in KE. This was a particular focus of several of our case study projects, with an example set out below.

> The 'Student Knowledge Exchange Reimagined – Removing the Barriers, Engaging Communities' project was delivered as a partnership between Keele and Birmingham universities. The project aimed to scale up existing KE provision by targeting new civic businesses and organisations for partnership and student-mediated KE, multiplying and diversifying civic internships, creating a suite of virtual internships and exploring new and broader student cohorts for participation. Activities included virtual internships, consultancies, enterprise challenges and the development of enterprise modules for the curriculum.
>
> One of the project's objectives was to prioritise underrepresented groups. As set out in the project's Logic Model, "*underrepresented students are put at the heart of our activity*". Reflecting this, the project explicitly chose to include the phrases "removing the barriers" and "engaging communities" in its title to reinforce and highlight the focus on addressing issues of EDI to students and partners.
>
> ***Keele University case study excerpt***

- Third, consistent with the Competition's overall aim to evidence the benefits of KE activities for students, projects were consistently focused on generating material benefits for students, with several themes common, including:
  - exposing students to experiences they would not typically secure in their degree/academic studies, including through working on real-world projects and in real-world work environments with external partners;
  - supporting students to collaborate and engage with students outside of their degree cohort, including on projects with an interdisciplinary focus and/or which were not framed by specific academic disciplines or subject areas;
  - facilitating students' development of skills and capabilities in areas such as entrepreneurship and leadership.
- Fourth, alongside aiming to generate direct, long-term benefits for students, projects also aimed to improve the way in which KE activities are delivered, both within individual HEIs and across the sector as a whole. Indeed, the Competition-level objective to demonstrate effective practice that benefits students and to make such knowledge available to the wider HE sector was consistently reflected in project-level objectives; building a strong evidence base was central to this. Across the portfolio, projects aimed to:
  - understand 'what works' and the 'success factors' that drive benefits for all involved, including students, universities, and external partners;
  - identify and address barriers to engagement in KE for students, universities, and external partners;
  - enable the development of a transferable model of KE with which evidence can be disseminated to enable the adoption of good practice across the sector;
  - establish new partnerships with external organisations, and through this generate benefits both for the institution itself, and for those organisations and their communities and service users.

Target groups

2.7 Approaches to targeting specific cohorts of groups of students varied across the Competition. Some projects also considered target groups of partners they aimed to engage. Key findings related to these approaches are set out below.

Students

2.8 As may be expected across the 20 projects, there was a range of approaches adopted. Although each individual case was different – including differences within as well as across projects – projects generally aimed to be accessible and open to all students

eligible and interested in activity, to maximise opportunities for student KE and the resulting benefits.

2.9 That said, whilst most projects were in principle open to all relevant students, and did not target specific groups exclusively, it was common for projects to place an *emphasis* on engaging students from particular groups or several groups. The balance across the 18 completed projects is set out in Table 2-1, highlighting that fully open models, those with an emphasis on groups, and those that more explicitly targeted groups were common.

Table 2-1: Approaches to targeting across the project portfolio

Approach	Projects	Examples (not exhaustive)
No	8	N/A
Yes – emphasis	6	Carers, black and minority ethnic (BME) students, disabled students; traditionally underrepresented groups; students from widening participation backgrounds
Yes – targeted	4	Students with self-declared/defined experience of mental health challenges; students from widening participation backgrounds; postgraduates

Source: SQW analysis of project documentation

2.10 Where an 'emphasis' was placed on groups, this was most commonly students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds in university or from widening participation categories. This included, but was not limited to, disabled and neurodivergent students; students from disadvantaged backgrounds; students with caring responsibilities; and students from ethnic minority backgrounds. An example of this emphasis – which included identifying targets for participation – is set out below from one of our project case studies.

Gre Hacks, led by the Generator at the University of Greenwich, delivered a series of two-day student 'hacks' – short programmes where people come together to solve problems – run with partner organisations from the private and voluntary/community sector. Ten hacks were delivered, both online and in-person. Following each hack, students were able to apply for a short paid internship with the hack partner organisation. The project aimed to engage with 400 students, providing consultancy and enterprise experience to improve skills, enhance CVs, and improve employability outcomes. Gre Hacks sought to remove barriers to participation in KE from students from all backgrounds, and provide partners with ideas, insights, and solutions.

> Within the planned 400 students, three priority target groups were established: BME students, students with caring responsibilities, and disabled students. The aim was to ensure at least 40% of students participating were from these target groups to address the attainment gap and lower levels of engagement in KE activities delivered by the Generator previously.
>
> *University of Greenwich case study excerpt*

2.11 Two other points are noted in relation to the targeting of students:

- Projects tended to target both undergraduate and postgraduate students, where this was consistent with the implementation model. Postgraduate students were often involved in a paid capacity, for example by facilitating the delivery activities with groups of undergraduate students. However, as suggested above, in some cases activity was focused on specific groups e.g. undergraduates, taught postgraduates, doctoral candidates, etc.

- A number of projects encouraged interdisciplinary collaboration and, therefore, did not target students from specific disciplines, although this was not the case in projects where activities required students to have specialist subject knowledge.

Partners

2.12 A wide range of partners were targeted for engagement in project activity. This reflected the nature of activity to be delivered, and also in some cases sought to develop existing relationships further. Partners targeted for engagement included:

- Public sector organisations, such as local authorities, schools, care homes, and hospitals.

- Businesses of varying scales, ranging from large firms to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

- Community and third sector organisations, including charities, local community development organisations, and social enterprises.

2.13 The organisations targeted were very varied (a very large number of partners have been involved across the projects, as discussed in the next section), and the scope and scale of partnership activity was highly project and context specific.

2.14 However, one consistent message that emerges from across this variation was the importance of projects seeking to engage with partners where there was both a strong alignment and fit to the activities of the project, and where there were shared priorities and attitudes, particularly in relation to social value and societal imperatives around EDI. This was seen as important by projects, and reported to be important for student

engagement and buy-in to activity. We return to this issue in Section 5 on Competition learning.

3. Competition delivery

3.1 This section outlines the delivery models used by projects and the different KE activities this involved, including related to dissemination activities and sharing. The section also presents an assessment of project-level evaluation activity, and the resulting implications for this Competition-level evaluation and the sector more generally.

Delivery models

3.2 The Competition did not specify the type of delivery models or activities projects should involve. It was purposefully open in encouraging applications for funding from a wide-ranging portfolio of projects to deliver and demonstrate learning across different types of providers, places, subjects, sectors, student groups, and KE activities.

3.3 For this reason, each of the projects supported by the Competition was distinct and unique. The projects also commonly included a range of different activity types. However, across this range, the 20 funded projects can be broadly characterised into five typologies (see Annex B). These typologies are:

- Employer-set project delivery: where KE activity is led by employers; for example, employers proposing challenges which students are asked to solve.
- Student-led project delivery: where issues or challenges are identified by students, who then aim to provide solutions through KE.
- Entrepreneurship schemes: where activities are focused on entrepreneurship and/or the implementation of new ideas within existing organisations (intrapreneurship).
- Training delivery: where training activities are provided to students to support the development of KE skills.
- Research/evaluation: where research projects or evaluation projects, undertaken on existing activity, seek to expand the KE evidence base (but do not involve the 'delivery' of KE activities specifically).

3.4 However, in practice, some project activities have aligned with more than one model outlined above, and therefore projects should not be seen as existing in 'exclusive' and 'fixed' typologies, rather they should be considered to have characteristics which broadly align within these thematic areas. While these typologies are helpful in understanding the focus of project delivery, limited significance has been placed on these typologies when evaluating the outcomes and learning that emerges from this evaluation for this reason.

Project activities

3.5 The variation in delivery models and overall approaches has led to some variations in the types of activities delivered by projects, reflecting the aims of the Competition to generate diverse and robust evidence in relation to the benefits for students in engaging in KE activities. The student-focused KE activities delivered by the projects included:

- Delivery of enterprise challenges and events, often involving students working in groups to identify solutions to challenges. These challenges tended to be set by employers, and involved developing new or improved products or services, or progressing concepts from design through to delivery. These were often delivered in a competition style, with prizes on offer (e.g. a placement with the employer who set the challenge).

- Work placements or internships, often to undertake 'real-world' targeted projects within partner organisations. Projects offered varying lengths of placements, from a few days to delivery over a few months.

- Consultancy activities delivered by students to support local partners, including businesses, to solve issues. Consultancy activity tended to be more placement-based in nature when compared with enterprise challenges, but was less intensive than internship activities.

- Student support to wider beneficiaries, for example delivering curriculum-focused activities in schools, delivering clinics open to the public (e.g. law advice, health and wellbeing clinics), or delivering workshops to support patients with health and social care partners.

- Development and facilitation of student networks, to enhance peer-to-peer support and share learning.

- Delivery of mentorship, coaching and advice. For some projects, this was delivered by delivery teams or external specialists. Other projects involved students as mentors. These tended to be students further on in their studies (e.g. third year undergraduate students or postgraduate students).

- Provision of training activities and skills development workshops. For students, training was often delivered prior to engaging in partner-facing activities to support student 'readiness'. Some training was delivered to support students with greater responsibilities (e.g. student mentors or supervisors), whereas other training was more generalised (and sometimes open to students outside of projects; e.g. mental health training). Some projects also provided training sessions for partner organisations.

3.6 In addition to the student-focused KE activity outlined above, projects also delivered activity to support the generation and dissemination of learning. This included:

- Research and evaluation activity to support the development of an evidence base. Mixed methods approaches were often used to collect evidence, including literature reviews, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and the analysis of monitoring data. Some projects included students as researchers.

- Development of dissemination materials, including toolkits, resources/e-resources, peer-reviewed articles and think pieces, reports, case studies, podcasts, and promotional videos. One project focused on developing creative dissemination materials, including artwork.

- Delivery of, and attendance at, conferences and events. Some projects held their own conferences specifically to disseminate learning (to students, partners, local stakeholders, and other HEIs). Others attended national and international conferences, creating conference papers and sharing learning (e.g. European Conference on Service-Learning in Higher Education).

3.7 Importantly, projects tended to deliver a mix of the above student-focused and learning generation activities to provide a holistic offer of KE activities for students and partners to engage with. There are four points of note when considering the delivery of the above activities.

- Projects often built on existing activities ongoing within the institution, focusing on scaling-up rather than delivering new activities. That said, some projects implemented new activities they had not directly delivered before in relation to KE (particularly around learning generation).

- For more intensive student-focused activities, such as work placements or student mentor roles, some projects offered financial support for both students and partners. However, this was not universal, particularly in terms of partner payments.

- There was an emphasis throughout most of the activity described above on co-creation or co-development processes with both students and partners.

- Some activities were embedded in the curriculum, whereas other activities were offered extra-curricular. The approach varied by project, with some projects seeking to deliver both inter- and extra-curricular activities.

3.8 The implications and learning emerging from some of the above points are explored further in Section 5.

Fidelity to planned delivery

3.9 Overall, the scope of projects did not change significantly over the course of the Competition. Projects generally delivered the activities they originally planned to, although some projects adapted *how* they delivered activities. Predominantly, changes to planned delivery were as a result of two key factors:

- The Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions meant that in-person delivery (which most projects had planned) was no longer possible from mid-2020 onwards. This meant that projects needed to pivot quickly to digital modes of delivery. Most projects were able to adapt and deliver their models and similar (if not the same) activities virtually.

- Issues of EDI. Some projects reported developing their project to better support equality of opportunity, diversity, and inclusion. This was as a result of emerging learning around the barriers to engaging underrepresented groups, or emerging gaps in participant demographics. An example of this is presented in the case study box below.

3.10 In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic affected project timescales. Some projects were unable to begin their delivery at the time originally expected, due to the need to implement new digital systems and processes, or due to restrictions. This means that the end date of projects varied (see Annex B for more information). Most projects delivered over two years as planned, but some received no-cost extensions due to underspend (mainly as a result of the move to digital delivery, which is a cheaper mode than in-person). As of July 2023, two projects had not yet been completed. These projects experienced significant delays to project start.

The StART Entrepreneurship project was delivered by the Royal Northern College of Music in collaboration with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and University of the Arts London. The project aimed to fill the gap in enterprise education for creative industries HE students. There were three main areas of activity: growth and development of existing intra- and extra-curricular initiatives at each of the three institutions; testing and development of new activities at each institution; and two cross-institution events: (i) KickStART Creative Lab (online weekend entrepreneurship bootcamp) and (ii) StART Linking Up (a series of 14 online and in-person workshops with industry professionals).

EDI considerations evolved and gained greater prominence over time in the project for two reasons. First, following analysis of the characteristics of students engaging with StART's activities, the team became increasingly interested in understanding why some groups were not engaging. Second, and linked, the project completed a re-budget, reallocating monies to EDI-focused activities:

- Appointing a consultant to develop learning plans for applicants to the KickStART Creative Lab bootcamp with additional learning needs.
- Appointing a researcher specialising in EDI and entrepreneurship to undertake a research study on how successfully EDI initiatives were incorporated into the KickStART Creative Lab.
- The delivery of a large-scale survey project across all three institutions focused on barriers to access to knowledge exchange for students.

Royal Northern College of Music case study excerpt

Project evaluation

Approach

3.11 As part of the original application process for the Competition, projects were asked to identify how the project and its impacts on students and graduates would be evaluated. Subsequently, and following project approval, details of project-level evaluation frameworks were covered in the Evaluation Reporting Templates, and projects were asked to develop a Logic Model and Theory of Change to help inform this project-level activity and support the Competition-level evaluation. This captured the following information for each project (as identified by the project leads): the context, rationale and objectives; inputs; activities and processes; and outputs, intermediate outcomes, and longer-term outcomes. It also covered assumptions and limitations i.e. what was needed to happen for the project to deliver as expected, and the key assumptions underpinning the links between inputs, activities, outputs, intermediate outcomes, and final outcomes (assumptions) and anything that may prevent the project from delivering as expected (limitations).

3.12 Consistent with the breadth and variation of activity as discussed above, there was no set or single approach to project evaluation required by OfS/RE. Rather the focus was on ensuring that evaluation was built into the project activity (which in some cases itself was focused on evaluating existing KE activity) and reported in order to deliver against the objective of the Competition to develop the evidence base on the nature of, and benefits from, student engagement in KE activities.

3.13 Reflecting this variation in approach, a core focus of the Competition-level evaluation was to consider the quality of this evaluation evidence, which could help to (i) inform wider and future evaluation practice, (ii) consider whether the Competition has been successful in generating 'good' evidence on student KE, and (iii) based on this, identify the extent to which this evidence can be used to understand the benefits of student KE and generate learning.

3.14 To inform this assessment, the evaluation evidence developed by projects as set out in the Evaluation Reporting Templates has been assessed against a set of evaluation standards.[2] The assessment considered three stages of the evaluation:

- Set-up, including consideration of the context for delivery and the assumptions guiding the design and implementation of the evaluation.
- Conduct, including consideration of stakeholder engagement (in both planning and implementation) and data collection (in both planning and implementation, including how any necessary changes were managed).
- Reporting, including consideration of the analytical techniques adopted and the clarity and consistency of reporting.

Findings of the assessment

3.15 The assessment suggested that the quality of the evaluation evidence was good overall, with generally a high/fair level of clarity, credibility, and consistency against the standards. As set out in the Table 3-1 below, across the 18 projects reviewed, the clarity, credibility, and consistency of the set-up and conduct stages of evaluation was the highest, with only one project in each case being assessed as of a 'low' standard. The assessment was less positive in relation to reporting, although most project evaluation was still assessed to be reasonable, and five of the 18 projects scored higher on these standards. No projects were assessed as of a 'low' standard across all stages of evaluation, which supports the use of evidence from across the projects for the Competition-level analysis.

Table 3-1: Assessment of the clarity/credibility/consistency of evaluation evidence

	High	Medium	Low
Set-up	10	7	1
Conduct	10	7	1
Reporting	5	9	4

Source: SQW analysis of project evaluation evidence

Strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation evidence base

3.16 Drawing on this data (with further information at Annex E), key strengths of the evaluation evidence included:

[2] The framework used is guided by the approach initially developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation based at the University of Iowa.

- Clarity on the rationale/case and aim/objectives of the project, and how this informed the evaluation approach, which may reflect the emphasis placed on evaluation in the original project selection process. The specific rationales varied across the projects, however where this was set out well there was consideration of how and why specific groups of students (e.g. those with particular characteristics, or in particular disciplines or subject areas) were not able/willing to engage in KE activity, and/or of the barriers, challenges or evidence gaps within the relevant institutions that needed to be addressed

- Clarity on the project context, and how this could influence activity/evaluation; this included considering the institutional context and ensuring there was consistency between the treatment and consideration of the context throughout the stages of reporting and between the Logic Model/Theory of Change and Evaluation Reporting Template. Given the variation in KE activity and complex delivery landscape, a strong understanding of the context within which projects are being delivered is an important component in providing robust evidence. This helps to highlight that activities that work well in one context may not work in another.

- Identification of relevant stakeholders to be involved in the evaluation activity. In the set-up of the evaluation, the different groups to be involved in evaluation activity were generally well considered, including students, external partners, internal stakeholders, etc. Importantly, in most cases the assessment of the evaluation evidence suggested that there were no key gaps in the proposed planned coverage.

- Linked to this, the collation of data/evidence in practice from stakeholders, via a wider range of methods and approaches. The specific methods varied to reflect the nature of activity, however across the projects this included a wide range of surveys (including both pre- and post-activity) and qualitative research including workshops and in-depth interviews. In some cases, the actual data collection was not fully aligned with the planned activity. However, in some of these, this was addressed via adopting different approaches and techniques, which suggests an effective and responsive approach. It is noted that approaches to data collection were generally more robust and substantive in relation to outcomes for students, which is consistent with the overall focus of the Competition, including surveys and in-depth engagement. The evidence collected on other groups (e.g. external partners, internal stakeholders) was generally qualitative and less extensive/systematic in scope.

3.17 However, the assessment also indicated several areas of weakness across the 18 projects (note this is not relevant to all projects).

- There could have been greater consideration of the assumptions underpinning the project, and use of this to inform/influence the evaluation. The Logic Model/Theory of Change included a specific component on assumptions, and this was a challenge for

projects to complete, which may reflect that some of the assumptions (for example between student engagement and outcomes) are seen as implicit. However, a greater focus on why the links between the logic model are expected to be realised, and how this can inform evaluation planning was possible generally.

- There could have been greater clarity on how the effects of the project would be assessed in the evaluation. This included in relation to the collection/use of monitoring and administrative data; the balance between the use of quantitative and qualitative evidence (and what these different sources may tell the project about outcomes); and consideration of 'additionality', including through the use of counterfactuals, which was limited. This final point is not unexpected given the challenges in identifying control/comparison groups and the tight delivery timescales, however, this does limit the extent to which the projects – and in turn the Competition overall – can be seen to have generated 'stronger' evaluation evidence in line with Government evaluation guidance.[3]

- There could have been greater detail on the analytical techniques used to interpret the evidence. This was found to be the weakest area across the evaluations, with in some cases no or very little information provided on the analytical techniques that had been employed. In most cases, the evidence collected had been analysed and synthesised without a clear analytical framework and the techniques employed were not explained. This may reflect in part both the timing of the evaluation activity and reporting (with analysis on-going in some cases), and the scale of resource available. This does not mean that the findings are not valid. However, greater clarity on the analytical methods used and a more consistent approach to implementing these techniques in practice would have helped to strengthen, and demonstrate more fully the strength of, the evidence base.

3.18 This said, it is noted there were some examples of good practice in this context, with some projects identifying well-developed analytical techniques. For example, one project set out an approach based on 'inductive reasoning' and applying 'reflective thematic analysis' for qualitative evidence, and the use of descriptive statistics and regression analysis and statistical tests for quantitative data. A second project included statistical analysis on matched pre- and post- intervention surveys, complemented by the use of descriptive statistics analysis on monitoring data and a literature review to provide the underpinning theoretical framework for the analysis.

[3] For example, the Magenta Book HMT_Magenta_Book.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Implications

…for the Competition-level evaluation

3.19 The review of the project level evaluations suggests this evidence base from across the projects can be used with a reasonable level of confidence in considering the benefits of the Competition, and in helping to draw out key learning. This said, some care is needed in interpretation, given the range of methods and analytical techniques applied, and the varied level/nature of data collected on students and other groups respectively. Further, there is a need to recognise the variation in context and complexity of the delivery landscape for student KE, and challenges related to time-paths to benefits – which can be lengthy – and capturing fully the range of benefits generated, many of which are qualitative in nature related to behaviours, aspirations, and attitudes.

…for future evaluation across the sector

3.20 More broadly, the review of the evaluation evidence from the projects and the wider experience generated through the support to projects throughout the Competition provides useful learning for evaluation practitioners across the sector. Three points are noted:

- First, the Competition highlights the importance of ensuring that there is clarity on the assumptions in project design (including in the form of a formal Theory of Change) and how this can be used to inform the evaluation approach, research method, and analysis. Where the assumptions are well understood, this can provide a strong foundation for the evaluation activity, and this should be seen as a key element of the evaluation planning process.

- Second, there is a need for those responsible for evaluation of KE activity, as well as funders, to place a greater emphasis on considering and identifying the analytical techniques to be adopted in evaluation to provide greater rigour/confidence in methods. There were some positive examples of good practice from this Competition, however in many cases the analytical method was unclear. The risk is that important evidence and learning has not been captured and/or the findings are not as robust as they could be. Embedding and disseminating good practice in evaluation methods and analytical techniques – both quantitative and qualitative – and ensuring this is built into evaluation planning from the outset should be seen as a priority.

- Third, the Competition has highlighted the challenges inherent in seeking to robustly assess the counterfactual in student KE, particularly at an individual project level. This is a particular issue given the engagement and recruitment methods that are common for student KE, where there is often an emphasis on ensuring broad access and providing flexibility and tailored mechanisms which preclude the use of quasi-experimental (and experimental) methods. Time-paths to impacts, the nature of

outcomes (including emergent outcomes), and practical issues related to access to data are also important factors. However, this emphasises the points above regarding ensuring there is a well-developed understanding of context and the analytical techniques to be employed to provide greater certainty over the robustness of evaluation, and the use of theory-based techniques where counterfactual approaches are not possible.

4. Competition benefits

4.1 This section provides an overview of Competition reach and engagement, as reported by the funded projects. It also summarises the main outcomes and impacts *for* students engaged in KE, as well as the main benefits delivered *by* students involved in KE activities. It also comments on broader outcomes for HEIs. Overall project sustainability and progress made against the Competition aims are also covered (as described in Section 2).

Competition reach

4.2 The Competition has supported and enabled considerable reach of KE activity, with students and with wider partners from across sectors and disciplines.

4.3 Projects were asked to submit data to reflect delivery against 'core outputs' at project close (see Table 4-1). The data presented in the table are based on final data from the 18 completed projects, with two of the 20 remaining in delivery as already explained[4]. This includes both 'actual' data and performance against 'targets'. It is noted that the targets were identified by projects, not by OfS/RE or SQW, and they did not represent formal key performance indicators (KPIs) or contractual targets. Rather they were requested in the Competition-level evaluation to help provide evidence on project progress, reach, and delivery effectiveness.

4.4 The data present a positive overview of Competition engagement. In total, over 22,000 students have engaged with Competition-funded KE activity. This was 118% of the total targeted student engagement as identified by the projects (with further reach anticipated from the two projects that have not yet been completed). The Competition also supported engagement of over 3,600 partners in KE activities, against a target of around 1,400[5]. This included over 2,500 business partners, about 140 departments in participating HEIs, and about 100 other HEIs. It also included approximately 900 other partners, with examples given including schools and colleges, NHS trusts, housing associations, community organisations, and public health agencies.

4.5 Project self-reported data also indicates that over 1,500 events have been delivered, and over 300 KE toolkits/materials produced. Notably, the volume of events delivered increased substantially in the final period of activity. Given a key objective of the

[4] The targets detailed in the table vary slightly to those set out in previous Formative Evaluation Reports. This is because some projects have modified their targets over time, both upwards (to reflect more ambitious aims) and downwards (without explanation).
[5] From 17 completed projects. One project did not have formal targets/engagement numbers for partners, and one of the 17 did not propose a target. Therefore, the target is based on 16 projects.

Competition was to share learning with others beyond the project partners across the wider KE and HE sector, these outputs are very encouraging.

Table 4-1: Core outputs (based on 18 completed projects)

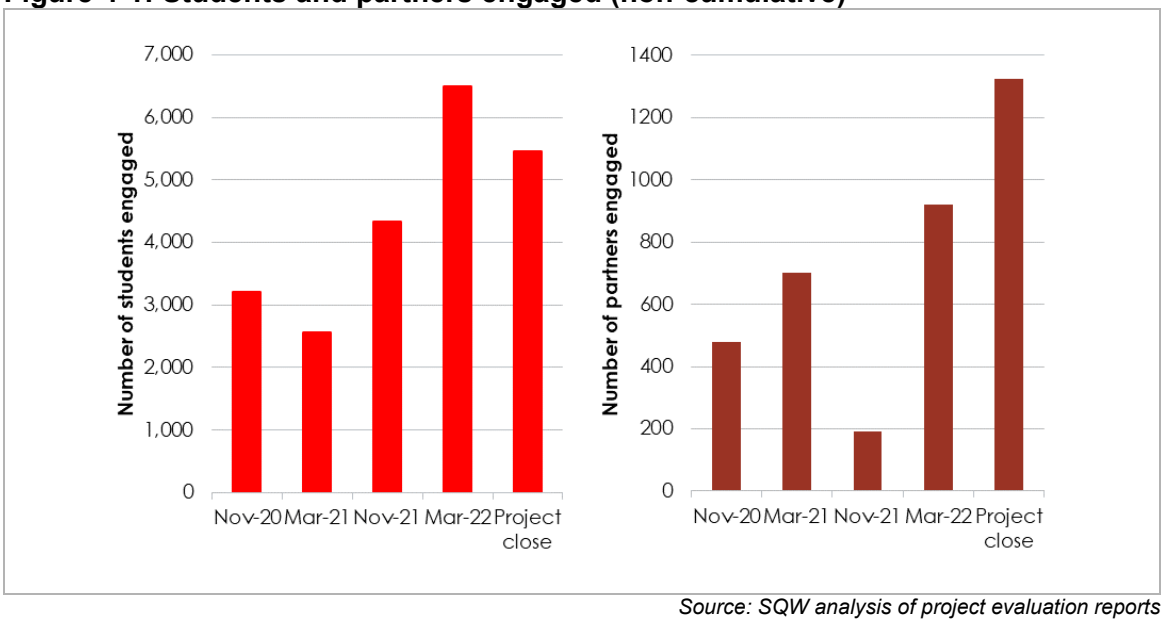
Core output	Target	Achieved (by project finish)
Students engaged	18,598	**22,038**
Partners engaged	1,414	**3,613**
Events delivered	289	**1,563**
Toolkits/materials produced	55	**323**

Source: SQW review on final project evaluation reports

4.6 Figure 4-1 provides an overview of student and partner engagement over time, based on the 18 completed projects. It illustrates the progress made in terms of Competition reach since November 2020 (when projects' first self-evaluation reports were issued). In the first year of delivery, progress was slower. This is unsurprising given that the first year of delivery was focused on set-up and design, and therefore the levels of reach and engagement was limited. At this time, projects were also considering how to respond to the challenges experienced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, from November 2021 onwards the number of students engaged in projects began to increase, and while a slight dip was seen at project close, has remained high. In contrast, partner engagement experienced a decrease in the period from March to November 2021. It is not clear why, but it could be as a result of limited partner engagement over the summer period. Following this, partner engagement also continued to increase to the end of the Competition.

4.7 Overall, progress over time is positive. While projects have experienced challenges in recruiting and engaging both students and partners (explored in Section 5), this does not seem to have greatly affected the consistency in the growth of Competition reach.

Figure 4-1: Students and partners engaged (non-cumulative)



Source: SQW analysis of project evaluation reports

4.8 While in aggregate the projects reached more students than planned, the numbers of students engaged by project closure has varied considerably. This variation is not unexpected given the different scale, focus, and intensity of activities delivered by individual projects, in addition to the differing levels of funding received (see Annex B); whilst the number of students engaged is a useful indicator of the reach of the Competition, for many projects the intention was not to engage high volumes of students, but rather to provide tailored and relevant support that aligned with the underpinning rationale and project aims.

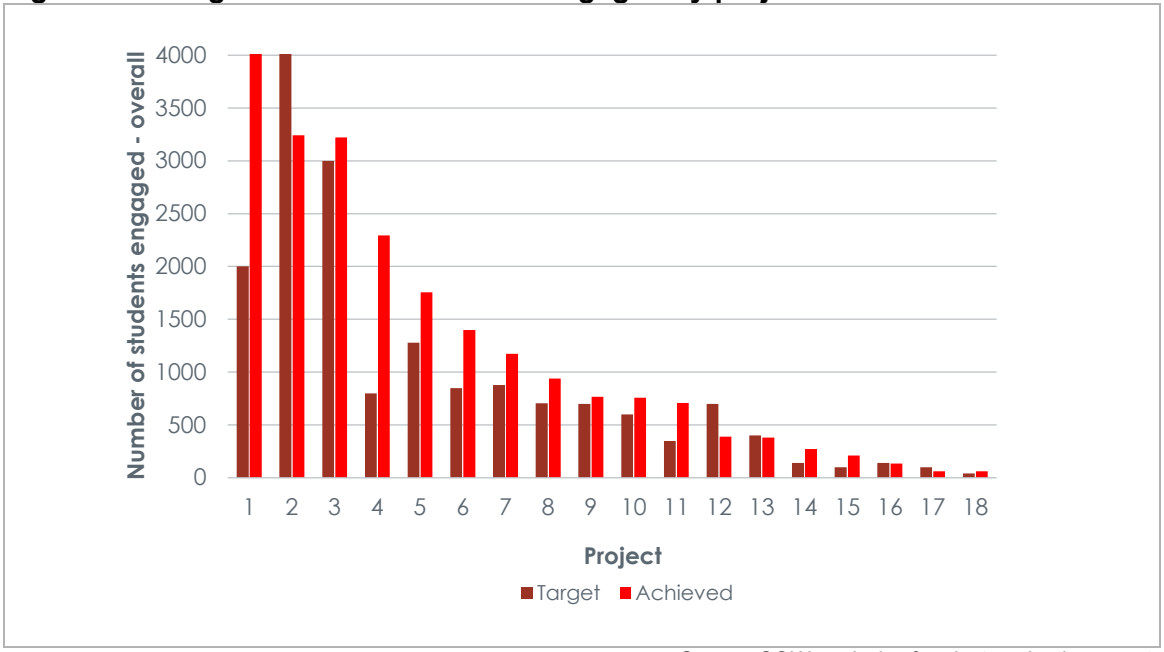
4.9 However, when considering actual students engaged against individual targets, there was some variation (see Figure 4-2). Positively, 13 of the 18 projects met or exceeded their targets by project end. Of those projects that did not meet their targets, two were close, achieving around 95% of their target.

4.10 Four projects overachieved considerably, reaching over 200% of their target. These projects' self-evaluation reports did not identify any specific reasons why they had exceeded their targets so far, and the areas of good practice identified, as well as the challenges experienced, were similar to other projects. However, one project did note that they had delivered a greater volume of activity than expected. It may be, therefore, that these projects underestimated their targets from the outset.

4.11 Three projects experienced considerably lower engagement than intended (achieving 56%-63% of their targeted student engagement). These projects attributed this to less effective recruitment methods (e.g. relying on open call recruitment at the beginning of the project) and barriers to engagement they had not considered (including the language used not aligning with student values and delivering unpaid extracurricular activities).

One project also noted that they did not meet their target as the scope of their activity changed, noting they delivered more in-depth activity with a smaller number of students.

Figure 4-2: Target and actual students engaged by project close



Source: SQW analysis of project evaluation reports

4.12 At project close, some projects reported on engagement from students from underrepresented groups. Across the six projects which reported both target and achieved engagement, over 2,000 students from underrepresented groups were reached, totalling 143% of reported targets (1.4k). One additional project reported engagement with an additional approximately 1,150 students from underrepresented groups (albeit no target was identified).

4.13 However, these data should be interpreted with caution. Underrepresented groups were broadly defined using the OfS definition[6], but the definitions used varied across projects due to both the project focus as well as data collection and access challenges. The latter issue was a challenge more broadly for projects, evidenced by the low number of projects reporting data on these groups.

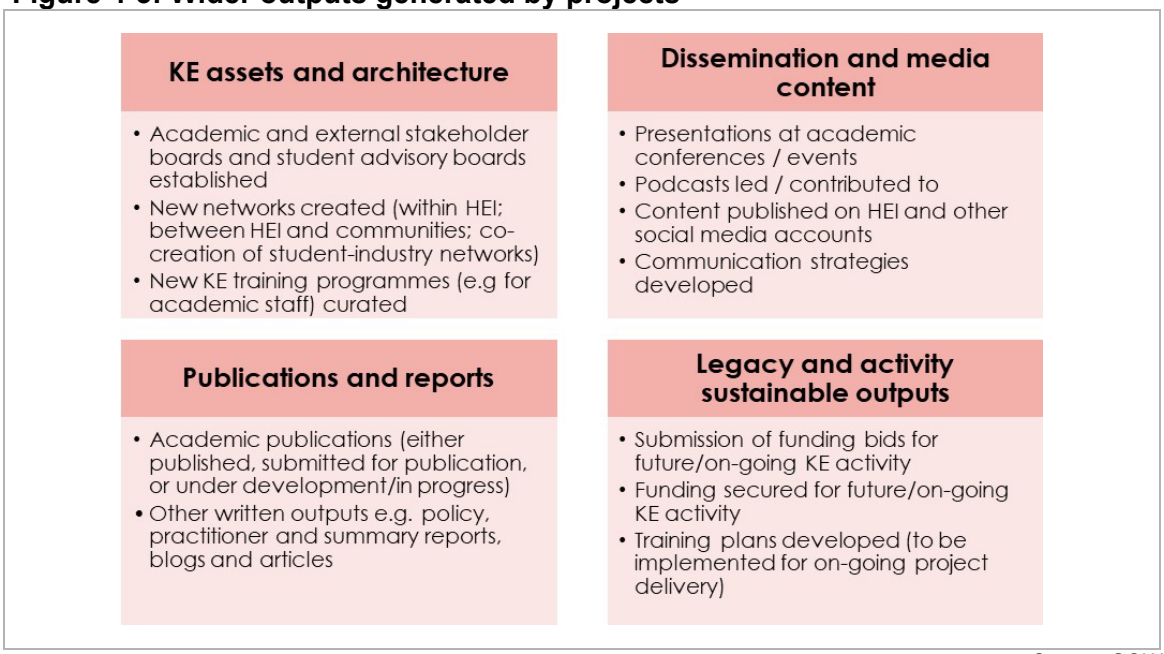
Other outputs

4.14 Projects delivered a range of broader outputs in addition to the core outputs identified above, as described in their Evaluation Reporting Templates. It is challenging to

[6] Groups of students who share the following particular characteristics where data shows gaps in equality of opportunity in relation to access, success, or progression (students from areas of low HE participation, low household income or low socioeconomic status; some BME students; mature students; disabled students; care leavers) and additional groups of students with particular equality gaps and support needs that can be addressed in an access and participation plan (carers, people estranged from their families, people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, refugees, children from military families).

generalise the evidence on these outputs as they were unique to each project. However, they can be grouped into four broad areas, as set out in Figure 4-3.

Figure 4-3: Wider outputs generated by projects



Source: SQW

4.15 Overall, these outputs demonstrate the breadth of KE activity that has been delivered by the Competition, and is particularly reflective of the wide range of activity focused on dissemination and sharing of knowledge, as discussed in Section 3.

4.16 The outputs described also provide an indication of successful programme delivery. Project activities have established, generated, and disseminated outputs which are likely to support and enhance systems and processes for ongoing/future KE activity internally, and can also be used by other HEIs to benefit the sector more widely.

Outcomes and impacts

4.17 This section presents a summary of outcomes and impacts achieved through the Competition. It considers outcomes achieved *for* students realised via KE activity, and the benefits for partner organisations, HEIs, and local communities, including where these have been delivered *by* students. The findings are drawn from projects' self-evaluation reports (including the final reports for the 18 completed projects, and the most recent reports of the two projects that have not yet finished) and case study evidence.

4.18 It is important to note that the focus is on drawing out the evidence on the ways in which KE can and has benefited students through the projects, and where relevant where these benefits are more common across projects. This does *not* mean that all projects delivered all the benefits for all students engaged; the context within which activity was delivered was crucial, and the activity itself varied markedly.

4.19 Positively, the outcomes achieved are broadly consistent with the expected outcomes of the Competition (as presented in the logic model, see Annex C). While the routes to outcome achievement have varied between projects, given the diverse range of delivery methods, focus, scope, and size, the overarching outcome themes were generally similar. These overarching outcome themes are presented below. Further, as noted above, the evidence on outcomes for students was generally stronger (in terms of the scale and nature of data collection) than those related to partners and other groups; this should be taken into account when considering the evidence.

For students

4.20 Projects' self-evaluation reports suggest that a key benefit for students in engaging with the KE activity delivered (or in some cases reviewed/assessed) by the projects has been the development of their key skills and knowledge. This is not unexpected, but the range and variation of knowledge and skills developed is particularly notable. Examples of knowledge and skills developed by students have included:

- Employability skills, such as project management; application writing, interview practice, and CV development skills; understanding of office procedures, etiquette, and professional ethics; and pitching and presenting skills. These were experienced primarily by students involved in projects which involved employer-led activities, e.g. competitions or internships.
- Entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial skills, particularly for those involved in projects focused specifically on entrepreneurship activities.
- Professional inter-personal and behavioural skills, including teamwork, networking, decision making, problem solving, communication skills, empathy, and resilience.
- Practical or technical skills, for example video editing, database development, enhanced mental health literacy, and an improved understanding of co-production, which reflected the particular focus and discipline of the KE activities of specific projects.
- Research skills and knowledge, including knowledge of conducting primary research, critical thinking, and evaluation skills. The development of these skills was experienced mostly by students involved in projects where activity focused on delivering research and evaluation of existing KE activities and practices within the institution or elsewhere.
- Enhanced academic knowledge. For projects delivering interdisciplinary activity, there was a reported enhancement of students' learning from other academic disciplines as a result of KE between peers.

4.21 Although this was not a consistent finding, some projects noted that, based on their evaluation evidence, they had seen greater change in the skills and knowledge among those from underrepresented groups. For example, one of the projects noted in their final Evaluation Reporting Template:

"When looking at changes in skills between pre- and post-survey questionnaires the biggest change in skills came from the lowest POLAR 4 quintile. Changes in skills in areas like networking skills, resilience, motivation, and other areas were highlighted as improving the most in students from POLAR4 quintile 1 compared to the average."
Project self-evaluation report

4.22 Several projects identified ways in which skills and knowledge developed through projects have translated to students' academic careers. While this was anecdotal (and very early at this point), some projects highlighted examples of improved academic engagement (as evidenced by an increase in academic attendance) and applications by students to present at conferences or academic placements.

4.23 A further benefit from student engagement in KE suggested by the evidence is an enhanced knowledge and awareness of available career pathways. Projects highlighted that where the KE activity involved engagement with partners, this had helped to increase student awareness of job roles they did not know existed or had not previously considered, including entrepreneurial roles, with some students reportedly more likely to consider starting their own business. It was also noted that students were more aware of organisations operating within areas local to HEIs.

4.24 Improved knowledge of career pathways was also reflected by students involved in the case studies, who reported that they had considered job roles they previously "did not think were for them". Interestingly, one project also reflected that participation in their project had led to students being *less* confident about their chosen career pathways, following an enhanced understanding of the potential risks. Whilst this may not appear to be an explicit 'benefit' in the short-term, it suggests that engagement in KE activities can help to clarify career choices and help potentially to avoid individual students choosing paths which in the long run may not be appropriate for them.

4.25 Projects noted that students have been supported to develop their knowledge and skills via an alternative pathway to traditional academic knowledge development. Projects gave examples of KE activity supporting student learning through the expansion of their experiences in real-world contexts (including learning from partners and clients) and through opportunities for both collective and individual reflection. This had reportedly led to the generation of new ideas and perspectives by students. An example of this from the case study research is set out below.

The 'Student Knowledge Exchange Through Community Hubs' project delivered by Queen Mary University aimed to increase the number and range of students engaged in KE, by bringing together existing 'pillars' of activity with a new pillar and a Social Impact Unit to monitor and evaluate the activity and stimulate collective impact across the pillars. The pillars included pro bono law clinics; a student-led venture providing free financial guidance to local tech start-ups and entrepreneurs; student-led consultancy activity in inter-disciplinary teams to SMEs/charities; and a student-led social venture fund, providing start-up capital/investment services to local, socially responsible SMEs.

Students involved in consultancy projects worked directly with the client (an external organisation) to co-create and define the work to be delivered. Through this design process and the subsequent completion of the activity, they were exposed to the client, who could be a potential future employer, and gained valuable professional skills. It was noted that through this activity, often students are exposed to organisations they would not typically be able to access, helping to provide new opportunities and aspirations.

Queen Mary University London case study excerpt

4.26 Improved confidence was also a key outcome experienced by students, as identified by both projects and students involved in the case studies. Project self-evaluation reports and case study evidence highlighted improvements in confidence in delivering KE activities, and enhanced self-awareness of their skills and abilities and the value they are able to bring to partnerships and employment opportunities.

4.27 Four other benefits emerged from the evidence base. Whilst these were not as common as the benefits identified above, they were seen as important for individual projects and highlight the different ways in which student KE can potentially benefit students:

- First, some projects described how students were empowered and enabled to 'find their voice', presenting and sharing their own ideas/views. This was reportedly enabled by projects' facilitating a sense of belonging and community, and the facilitation of a 'safe' but real-life working environment with access to guidance/support.

- Second, several projects identified wellbeing outcomes for the students involved in KE activity. While this was anticipated for some of these projects, for others it was unexpected. Projects commented on the improved sense of belonging and 'cohort identity' experienced by students, which was reported to have been missing as a result of 'lockdown' measures in response to COVID-19 which had contributed to a reported sense of isolation.

- Third, improved networking opportunities was also highlighted by some projects as a key benefit of student engagement in KE. This enabled students to be exposed to different opportunities, views, and perspectives they may not have come across otherwise. This included networking with partners, including local businesses, organisations, and academic staff, which was recognised as beneficial to their employability. Students were also reported to have valued networking with peers, which enabled them to share learning, particularly across disciplines.

- Fourth, a small number of projects stated that engagement in KE activity had led to students' improved engagement with local communities and places. These projects tended to have had a specific focus on placemaking, or active engagement with community groups as part of project activity. Improved engagement was reported to have led to key benefits for students, including improved knowledge of local places and communities, increased exposure to diverse communities and views, and a sense of pride in the area in which they live.

4.28 Many projects specifically targeted their activity towards students from underrepresented groups (see Section 2), and others worked hard to reduce barriers to participation in KE activity. As a result, it was reported that students from underrepresented groups had been able to access KE when they may not have done otherwise.

Impacts for students

4.29 While the timescales of the project and this evaluation mean that many of the expected impacts of the Competition for students have not yet been achieved, some projects did highlight examples of where anticipated impacts had been realised. This included:

- Securing employment, including in related fields to project focus. Projects and participants attributed this employment to enhanced employability, both in terms of the development of relevant skills and knowledge and through having the project experience on CVs and applications. A few projects and case study interviewees also highlighted that students had secured employment with partner organisations as a direct result of the student working with the partner through the programme.

- Establishment of student businesses. In some cases, this was as a direct result of the work they had completed on the project:

"We now have heard back that several of our placement students, now graduates, are working in arts and health within other trusts or care home settings and a new company has arisen from the project formed by two of our graduates who we allocated funded mentorship support for business and digital skill development."
Project self-evaluation report

- Continuing to post-graduate study, as a result of their experience of the project. One project noted that successful entry into further study was attributed to referencing the project in applications.

- Accessing broader opportunities which could support students' future careers. This included achieving follow-on placements or internships (both with partner and non-partner organisations), having their work showcased to prospective employers (e.g. through publications), or presenting their work at competitions (which was reported to have led to cash prizes and business start-up support).

4.30 It should be noted that some impacts identified by projects were experienced by students who participated in project activity prior to Competition funding. Further, given the reach of the projects (as noted in Section 3, over 2,000 students were engaged) it is not unexpected that there will be some examples of positive impacts even at this early stage, and as noted previously in most cases formal counterfactual evidence is not yet available to provide clear evidence that these impacts may not have been realised anyway. This said, the evidence provided by projects does suggest that students who have engaged with the projects during the Competition funding period may experience key impacts around employment, enterprise, and graduate outcomes over the longer-term.

For partners

4.31 The most common outcome experienced by partners, according to projects' self-evaluation reports, was the development of new or enhanced partnerships. Predominantly, this was identified as partnerships between the HEI and partner organisations. Some projects noted that the development of these partnerships had resulted in broader engagement from the partner with the institution, for example increased collaboration in further enterprise projects. It was also noted that these partnerships were expected to be sustained post-Competition in some cases.

4.32 Further, some project self-evaluation reports noted that enhanced partnerships between institutions and partners had led to an increased understanding of how the HEI and the research it delivers can support partner organisations. While there was limited elaboration from projects on what outcomes this had led to, one project did highlight a potential benefit of this increased awareness:

"Typically, over a 2-5 year period, 20% of [project] partner businesses engage more deeply with the university after [engagement], including applying for funded research."
Project self-evaluation report

4.33 In addition to partnership development between the HEI and partners, some projects highlighted that engagement had led to the development of partnerships *between* partner organisations. Some projects described their activity as an opportunity for businesses to network, resulting in closer ties between local organisations.

4.34 As well as the benefits experienced by partners as a result of engaging with the HEI, self-evaluation reports also explored the benefits for partners delivered *by* students. These benefits were realised in a number of ways, as summarised below.

4.35 Many projects and case study interviewees identified changes experienced by partners as a result of their engagement with Competition activity which had, or had the potential to, lead to improvements within the partner organisations. This was primarily as a result of student contributions which had supported partners to improve or develop operational aspects of their organisation (e.g. product or brand development, social media marketing, technical design), or supported them more strategically (e.g. by sharing views, ideas, and research with organisations' boards or senior leadership).

4.36 While some projects felt it was too early to assess the impact of these benefits for partners, in some cases, engagement in the project had resulted in follow-on business outcomes. For example:

"[One organisation] was awarded £500,000 in a bid to combat digital exclusion as a result of a research report completed by two of our students. [Another organisation] that supports families with legal support was awarded funding of £360,000 – again because of a research report two students completed via our scheme."
Project self-evaluation report

4.37 Some projects also highlighted that the activity their students had delivered had contributed to partners' corporate social responsibility strategies or social value. As one project commented:

"Our project was independently assessed to have contributed just under £8m of social value to [one of our partner organisations], which equates to around 10% of the charity's total social value."
Project self-evaluation report

4.38 More broadly, engagement in projects has resulted in improvements in staff capabilities in partner organisations. Project self-evaluation reports described a range of ways this was experienced:

- Skills and knowledge transferred from students to staff was reported to have enhanced staff capabilities and skills (from using new technologies to delivering evaluation).
- Through engaging with students from underrepresented backgrounds, partners have reportedly improved their capabilities in accommodating the needs of a diverse potential workforce (including carers, the neurodiverse, and people with disabilities).

- Some partners were said to be newer to KE activity. Participation in the programme therefore led to improved capabilities in delivering KE activity (e.g. how to manage internships).

- Project partners also benefited from access to training from the HEIs which has led to improvements in partner staff skills and capabilities.

4.39 As a result of activity delivered by students, partners have also benefited from enhanced organisational capacity. Access to student time and skills meant that organisations could resource and accelerate activity they may not have had the capacity to deliver otherwise. Interestingly, there were examples of this occurring across projects, not just those which took an 'employer-led' approach to activity. One project self-evaluation report highlighted the benefit of long-term engagement on partner capacity:

"Our evaluation with community partners has demonstrated (although with a limited pool of participants) that partnering with us on student knowledge exchange projects has a beneficial impact on their capacity, particularly when working with us over the long-term, as this allows partners to think more strategically about how students might contribute to their overall strategic plans."
Project self-evaluation report

4.40 Positively, a key outcome for partners facilitated by students was an enhanced appreciation of the value students can bring to their organisations. Many projects highlighted (including through case study interviewees) that partners appreciated the 'fresh perspectives', energy, and passion that students bought to the organisation. It was noted this was often unexpected for partners, with one project noting there has been an "increased estimation of what university students have to offer" amongst partners, particularly of students from underrepresented groups. Some projects reflected that this had potential implications for organisations' openness to employing recent graduates, including those with specific needs, which could contribute to the talent pipeline. An example of how the Competition supported activities that enabled students to bring fresh perspectives to partners is set out below.

The Transforming and Activating Places project delivered by University of Sheffield aimed to build on cross-disciplinary expertise in place and placemaking within the faculties of Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences to make a positive impact on communities and places, build students' graduate prospects, and enable students from underrepresented backgrounds to bring fresh perspectives to local businesses. Activity included work placements for widening participation students with external partner organisations; supporting activity for students and partner organisations around place, placemaking, careers, personal and professional development, and EDI; assignment of students to 'project assistant' roles, which involved delivering an advocacy function, or providing mentoring support for their

project peers; and the provision of funding for placemaking projects designed and delivered by students and partner organisations during and following on from the work placements.

The case study suggested encouraging students to draw on their own lived experience brings different perspectives to placements. This has a dual benefit. For partners, it can bring a fresh perspective into their business and projects which their own staff may not have considered. For students, it has improved their confidence and self-esteem, using their experience to benefit others.

University of Sheffield case study excerpt

For HEIs

4.41 Interestingly, the evidence on the outcomes experienced by HEIs was more limited than for students and partners. However, one common outcome that emerged from Evaluation Reporting Templates was that the Competition had enabled models of KE to be tested and/or scaled, which had generated valuable learning. This learning was seen to support implementation of KE activity going forward, and some projects had already secured funding or institutional agreement to continue their activity (explored further below). Some projects also reflect that the testing of KE models had enabled them to explore how they could improve access for students from underrepresented groups to KE, and share and disseminate this learning within their institution.

4.42 As a result of the scaling/testing of KE activity, it was expected that longer-term outcomes would be realised, including an enhanced offer of KE activity and an increased number of students able to be involved in KE (due to an expanded number of places). Given the development of publicly available resources and toolkits generated by the project, it was also hoped that KE activity could be scaled to other institutions or organisations.

4.43 Some projects reported that the value of KE was better recognised across their institution. For example, a few projects reported that they had been invited to present on their project at institution-wide committees and senior leadership meetings, and one project said that their activity provided a key focus at their institution's open day. In addition, projects reflected that their activity had raised the profile of KE within their institution, and both staff and students were now "recognising they're doing KE".

4.44 Consistent with the evidence on partners, a key benefit for HEIs was reported to have been the establishment and development of partnerships. Where projects were delivered in partnership with other institutions, there was some evidence that these partnerships were likely to be sustained going forward. Project reports also highlighted the impact on partnerships with local organisations. It was noted that many existing relationships

between institutions and partners had been strengthened and new ones had been generated, which may increase engagement in future.

4.45 The Competition has also led to knowledge and skills benefits for staff involved in project delivery. This has included the development of knowledge on 'what works' in delivering KE, and ways of engaging students and partners in KE. It has also led to the development of practical skills, including evaluation skills, supervision and line management skills, and relationship management. In this context, it is noted that in some institutions the Competition led to the appointment of new delivery staff. While not all roles have been sustained as projects have come to a close, this did provide enhanced capacity for KE and it is notable that some roles were created specifically to further enhance engagement with underrepresented students.

4.46 Outcomes from the student KE supported through the Competition which have not yet been realised but are anticipated to emerge over the longer-term include:

- Enhancement to the curriculum, both in related departments and across the institution.
- Improved institutional reputation, establishing institutions as 'key players' in delivering student KE, both locally and with other institutions.
- Improved student satisfaction with their experience of university.
- Securing additional investment from institutions to support on-going project delivery.

For local communities

4.47 Some projects involved 'community' organisations as project partners and/or participants. This included schools, care homes and NHS organisations. The benefits experienced for these organisations and their own community/service users were inherently project and context specific, with the activity tailored to their specific needs and contexts. However, across this diversity some themes emerged in relation to the ways in which student KE can lead to positive outcomes:

- Improvements in mental health and wellbeing. Student engagement with local communities had reportedly led to positive relationships (e.g. role models for pupils), reduced social isolation and improved mood (e.g. for patients), and reduced anxiety.
- Supporting local communities to access new experiences. This included supporting local schools to engage with the arts or sports activities in different ways.
- Supporting individuals in local communities to access services they may not have been able to otherwise. This included providing pro bono legal advice via students.

- Contributing to the improvement of skills and knowledge for individuals within local communities through their direct engagement with students participating in the activity, both formally and informally.

4.48 These benefits are specific to projects, and the evidence base is in most cases anecdotal, drawing on the experience and perspectives of those involved in project delivery. However, this does highlight the range of benefits that can be supported via student KE and the different groups and communities that can be potentially affected.

Project sustainability

4.49 The Competition enabled projects to pilot, scale, and test KE activities. As a result of this experience, some projects are continuing delivery of those activities post-funding. There were a range of different legacy pathways described by projects, including:

- Securing funding from their institution to continue their delivery. For example, one project received financial support for a further three years and another secured £185k from a combination of internal funding sources to continue delivery to November 2023.

- Scaling up and expanding their project, based on evidence generated through the Competition. This included bringing in new partners and drawing on additional resource from their institution to fund key roles within the project team.

- Embedding activities into the curriculum, to support their continued delivery.

4.50 Some projects planned to continue delivering specific elements of their activity. For example, one project stated they would continue to offer workshops and short courses developed during the project, and another had secured funding to extend the reach of a key element of their work.

4.51 While other projects have not continued delivery post-Competition funding, many reported that the learning they have generated through the project will be embedded in other institutional KE projects (as well as new projects created as follow-on projects to Competition delivery), creating a legacy impact. In addition, it was noted that many of the partnerships generated through projects would be sustained, generating opportunities to deliver KE activity with these partners going forward.

4.52 More broadly, as a result of promoting the value of student KE, some projects reported that KE had been embedded more strongly into institutional strategies. For example:

"Through raising the profile of student KE and its value, and demonstrating success, buy-in from staff at all levels has been secured, including senior management. This has

resulted in student KE being embedded with the faculty's five-year plan, and thus is a key priority going forward."
Project self-evaluation report

4.53 It is also important to note that some projects were always intended to be delivered as discrete, time-limited activity. In particular, projects which were focused on delivering research and/or evaluation projects based on student KE were always intended to be one-off projects. That said, these projects were also felt to have generated a legacy impact as they have created an evidence base of the value of student KE delivery, and in some cases, have made the case for existing KE activity within the institution to be scaled up.

Progress against aims

4.54 Overall, the Evaluation Reporting Templates suggest that projects funded through the Competition have been largely successful in achieving their original aims and objectives.

4.55 To provide insight into this question, an analysis of project effectiveness in meeting stated aims and objectives was undertaken for the Competition level evaluation. Specifically, project activities and achieved outcomes set out in the Evaluation Reporting Templates were mapped against each specific aim/objective identified by the project at the outset (as captured in the Logic Model/Theory of Change), and assessed using the following four-point scale (based on the evidence provided in the Evaluation Reporting Templates and supporting documentation where available): 3 – The project appears to have been highly effective in achieving this aim/objective; 2 – The project appears to have been moderately effective in achieving this aim/objective; 1 – The project appears to have been ineffective in achieving this aim/objective; and 0 – Unable to answer, based on the information provided.

4.56 For each project, the scores for each aim/objective were then averaged to provide an overall 'effectiveness' score. As shown in Table 4-2, for the majority (17) of completed projects, this score was at least 2.0, suggesting projects had been moderately to highly effective in meeting their aims and objectives. As described in Section 2, these aims varied, reflecting the diversity and breadth of activity across the Competition, but aligned well with the overarching objectives of the Competition overall; this suggests the Competition overall has delivered well against its aims.

Table 4-2: Average effectiveness score for 18 completed projects

1.9 or below	1
2.0 to 2.4	9
2.5 to 2.9	7
3	1

Source: SQW analysis of project self-evaluation reports

4.57 The types of aims that were judged to be highly effective based on the evidence provided were wide ranging and reflected the Competition aims. However, there was a greater proportion of output driven aims, including the development of an evidence base through the development of learning tools, and delivering evaluation. While there was some evidence of outcomes associated with removing barriers to EDI being highly effective, these tended to be more commonly judged as moderately effective. However, this may be due to challenges in evidencing this outcome based on the data available, or the longer-term nature of achieving these aims.

4.58 Two projects stated aims that were allocated an effectiveness score of 1.

- One project aimed to address evidenced issues of EDI within existing KE activities. However, challenges with data-sharing within their HEI on the demographics of students meant that they could not evidence issues within existing activities, and therefore did not know whether issues were being addressed. Towards the end of the project, this had been remedied, and the project was planning to evaluate outcomes for underrepresented groups within the next academic year.

- Another project aimed to increase awareness of the positive benefits of their approach with local businesses and organisations. While the self-evaluation report discussed the potential of the project to achieve this aim, they had not provided evidence to suggest this had been achieved.

4.59 However, effectiveness against similar aims by other projects was more positive, suggesting these challenges may have been principally project- and context-related.

4.60 There were also a very limited number of aims where there was not enough information shared by projects within their reports to be able to assess progress. These tended to be very project specific, but common themes included developing specific student skills, developing specific outputs, or generating networks. While these aims could have been achieved by projects, the lack of evidence supplied by projects meant that no assessment could be made.

5. Competition learning

Project design

5.1 As outlined in Section 2, the approaches to student engagement in KE varied. While some broad project typologies are evident, in practice the structure, scope, and focus of projects have varied considerably. This means learning on what works well and less well is often project- and context-specific. That said, there are several thematic factors on project design that appear to have contributed to both project effectiveness and sustainability. Likewise, when these factors were not in place, this has created challenges.

Project foundations

5.2 Having a clear purpose and an underpinning theory of change provided a strong basis for projects' approaches. Projects which had a clear purpose and aims were able to translate this effectively into project design. Clarity of purpose and the underpinning theory of change also provided a strong basis for evaluation activity.

5.3 Consistent with the remit of the Competition to support expanded, scaled up, or modified existing practice, many projects leveraged their existing 'assets'. This included building and scaling of existing models of KE, which meant the foundations were in place for delivery to gain early traction. Other projects built on 'strong track records' in delivering related and complementary KE, providing a solid basis for the project. This meant that experienced staff, clear processes, and existing partnerships were already in place. For projects where the design and development of new intervention models were required, they described developing their model to align with other ongoing KE activities at their institution or to capitalise on existing processes/structures.

Co-production

5.4 Involving the student voice in the project design process and building in opportunities for student voice to be drawn throughout subsequent delivery was highlighted by many projects as an important element of their approach. Some projects implemented a co-creation process during project design which was noted to be 'fundamental' for identifying and enabling the project to meaningfully overcome barriers preventing students from engaging in KE (including in relation to addressing issues of EDI). This often led to an increase in engagement with students who may not typically have accessed KE activity otherwise. An example from the case study research is set out below.

5.5 Involving partners in project design processes was also considered a critical success factor. Drawing on partner expertise and understanding their needs was often important

for projects in supporting them to shape approaches which would add value for both students and partner organisations. Projects which drew on partner expertise were more likely to report positive outcomes for partner organisations, because projects then aligned with their needs (in terms of capacity, capabilities, or specific business outcomes). Approaches which were less successful tended to involve little or no consultation with partners, and did not align with their needs or values.

> EDI considerations were considered during project design from a student perspective and in relation to the types of organisations the project sought to work with. Organisations offering opportunities to students were carefully selected and given support from the project in order to co-create unique KE opportunities that fit both their requirements and students. This allowed for agility and flexibility, which the team were keen to embed in project design.
>
> ***Keele University case study excerpt***

Design elements

5.6 Projects varied as to whether they were extra- or intra-curricular, with some taking a dual approach (i.e. with some elements extra-curricular and some elements within the curriculum). Projects that designed their model to be embedded within the curriculum highlighted that this approach was particularly beneficial for supporting student engagement and participation. In some cases, dual-approach projects reported that embedding interventions within the curriculum was more effective in engaging and recruiting students than the activity they delivered outside of the curriculum. Further, one project that took a 'dual approach' reflected that embedding opportunities into the curriculum stimulated students' interest to engage in other KE activities. That said, some projects that were extra-curricular reported this was an important enabler, providing the flexibility to deliver activity without the limitations (as they were perceived) of the academic structure (e.g. related to timing, focus, coverage). There is no 'right' or 'wrong' here, with pros and cons of both mechanisms. The key learning is that there needs to be a focused consideration at the design stage of the extent to which the aims and objective of activities are more closely aligned to extra-curricular or intra-curricular delivery (or a combination of both).

5.7 Projects which were inter-disciplinary in nature were felt to work particularly well in facilitating broader engagement in KE. The design of interdisciplinary approaches brought together student experiences and insights from across institutions to maximise KE opportunities through cross-discipline learning. It was seen to have improved outcomes such as student confidence by providing a forum for students to engage with others with different interests/perspectives. Projects also suggested an interdisciplinary model enhanced KE for partners, as they were able to access fresh insights into societal

and business problems from outside their sector and from students with varied perspectives.

5.8 Offering a range and combination of activities with which students could engage strengthened project effectiveness, and maximised opportunities for KE. Projects reported that the provision of a choice of activities increased student engagement in KE, and meant that students could explore different methods and approaches for KE in ways which met their needs, leading to enhanced knowledge and skills development. However, projects stressed the importance of designing well-sequenced models if approaches involved a combination of activities. This would ensure engagement routes are clear and reinforcing, and create a considered model of KE.

5.9 Projects' self-evaluation reports highlighted the need to design models of KE which balanced structure and flexibility. For many, this took the form of stand-alone KE activities (e.g. events, placements) with the addition of 'wrap-around' support. Wrap-around support was used to refer to activities which supported preparation, on-boarding, reflection, and pastoral care, and was often more bespoke and flexible to the needs of individual students. It was noted that the value of wrap-around support should not be underestimated and is essential for the student experience and the quality of KE. An example from the case study research is set out below.

> Transforming and Activating Places was designed to provide a holistic approach to work placements, with 'wrap-around' support for students undertaking a work placement to ensure that students, regardless of their background, were able to engage. This included the delivery of an extensive pre-placement phase, involving workshops and training activities, in addition to dedicated coaching support (including from project assistants, providing peer-to-peer support). Consultees reported the aim was to offer a package of support tailored to the specific needs of widening participations students (aligned with their learning and support plans).
>
> *University of Sheffield case study excerpt*

5.10 The evidence also suggests the value of providing training and development support to enhance the quality of KE activity by ensuring students, regardless of their ability, could access learning and develop their skills. Often, training was used to support students to develop skills of value for follow-on activities, for example preparing them for placements, delivering research activity, or supporting specific roles (e.g. student ambassadors). As noted in the case study example below, quality training enhanced the benefits of KE for both students, and for partners/beneficiaries they engaged with.

The Tackling the Blues project delivered by Edge Hill University aimed to provide opportunities for more students to become involved in KE, develop a transferrable student-focused model of KE which can be implemented and scaled-up in other institutions, and contribute positively to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Activity included: recruitment of students as lead or support mentors to deliver mental health themed workshops alongside practical sports and arts activities to children aged 6-16; a training package for student mentors, including Ambassador of Hope mental health training delivered by Chasing the Stigma, and training on Youth Mental Health First Aid, Safeguarding, Children's Rights, health and safety, and GDPR; and delivery of KE, research, and graduate employability workshops.

The project included providing complementary training and development alongside the core offer to facilitate knowledge exchange activity. Having dedicated mental health training to improve mental health literacy enabled students to better deliver activities to young people. It was also highlighted that this led to wider direct benefits over and above KE, by supporting students' own mental health. Interviewees noted several times that men's engagement with mental health was typically poor before the project, so this training gave them a good understanding of the issue and took them out of their comfort zone.

Edge Hill case study excerpt

5.11 Overall, the evidence suggests there is not one model of student engagement in KE that 'works well'. Rather, the learning provided by a wide range of projects with different design characteristics indicates that what works is very contextually specific. Projects broadly identified the most appropriate model or approach which would best meet the intended aims and expected outcomes of the particular project and which would align with the context of the HEI. The latter was also evident within projects. For example, one project, which involved three institution partners, had to adapt the design of the model implemented in each case to meet each institution's own culture, student body, approach, and perspectives; there was no one single approach appropriate across all three institutions.

5.12 This does mean that care is needed in seeking to transfer or replicate activities in other institutions, when introducing the model in different contexts and at different scales. This said, the learning from the supported projects in relation to considering the curriculum context at the outset, the benefits of inter-disciplinary activity, combinations of activity, and complementary wrap-around support, provide useful insights for other institutions.

Project delivery

5.13 The specific activities delivered by projects varied substantially; what works well here is inherently project specific. However, the evaluation suggests that, looking across the projects, there are some consistent factors that have supported effective delivery which

span different activities and forms of KE, including in relation to structures, monitoring, and the ways in which activities are implemented and adapted.

Project management and staffing

5.14 The implementation of clear governance and management structures strengthened project delivery. Some projects described having access to steering committees or advisory groups to steer delivery through providing feedback, and sometimes to co-create key materials. It was highlighted that involving students in these governance groups was particularly beneficial in ensuring meaningful decisions were made, and aligning activity to anticipated student needs and expectations. This also provided another mechanism for students to enhance key skills, including employability skills and professionalism. Many projects also indicated that a transparent management structure, which involved a single point of coordination or communication – whether that be an individual or central team – to streamline delivery processes and avoid confusion for project participants, was important.

5.15 The commitment and expertise of both management and delivery staff was a critical success factor for many projects. Key skills contributed by staff included technical skills, project management skills, and theoretical knowledge. In addition, some projects highlighted the importance of the skills mix of the delivery team, which enabled the team as a whole to maximise their expertise.

5.16 Projects also reported that having a team which reflected (as far as possible and practical) the experiences of the target student cohort was valuable. This included where staff members had similar experiences and backgrounds, ensuring they could relate to some of the challenges faced by students, and enabled potential issues which other delivery team members may not have considered to be identified. The inclusion of current or recently graduated students within the project team was one mechanism by which some projects sought to ensure that this alignment could be maximised. This alignment was also seen to be important in relation to project partners, including external businesses, public sector organisations, and third sector organisations that may be involved as speakers, mentors etc. An example from the case study research that highlighted this message is set out below.

> When delivering KE activities, there needs to be an explicit focus on ensuring that any speakers, mentors, panellists, etc. are representative of the (current and future) student body. This includes considering characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background.
>
> ***Royal Northern College of Music case study excerpt***

5.17 Continuity in the project delivery team also supported project effectiveness. Some projects which experienced changes in key personnel or challenges in recruitment reported that the readjustment period or associated delays impacted on timescales and capacity, and therefore their ability to maximise on achieving outcomes for students and partners. Projects faced similar capacity challenges where delivery teams were small, or where core delivery staff had multiple other roles in parallel (e.g. other institutional positions). However, some projects mitigated against this issue by establishing a small and dedicated core team whilst drawing on support from staff in professional services and the academic community to provide delivery capacity. Fundamentally, as may be expected, the key learning is that delivery capacity matters and, where practical, systems should be established to seek to maintain continuity and manage and mitigate risks related to individual roles and responsibilities.

Monitoring and evaluation

5.18 The establishment of clear monitoring and data collection processes supported project effectiveness. The accurate and consistent collection of monitoring data, particularly on EDI characteristics, enabled projects to plan delivery more effectively for students with various needs, in addition to identifying key gaps in representation. For example, one project was enabled to identify a gap in engaging part-time students through the robust collection of, and access to, monitoring data. However, projects experienced significant challenges in accessing existing monitoring data on student participants collected by their institution, particularly data on EDI characteristics. It was felt that for some projects this limited project effectiveness, as EDI data was required to ensure that specific groups were able to leverage fully the benefits from their participation. Some projects noted that key issues were subsequently not identified until partway through delivery, affecting student experiences of projects.

5.19 In addition, clear evaluation plans and delivery processes enabled projects to effectively evidence the generation of key outcomes. However, some projects highlighted that evaluation plans were hampered by Covid-19, which limited the scope of evaluation and therefore their ability to evidence outcomes achieved. Some projects also found it difficult to engage students in evaluation activity (e.g. engagement in surveys), which limited response rates and impacted on the strength of evidence. This said, some projects recruited students to participate in the design and delivery of data collection activity, which was reported to have enabled engagement and is a useful learning lesson for future activity. This is also consistent with the learning noted above regarding the value of ensuring that the ‘student voice’ is embedded across student KE activities.

Flexibility and adaptation

5.20 Flexibility and responsiveness was highlighted by many projects as a key strength of their delivery processes. In some cases, this was in relation to Covid-19, with the

evidence from across the Competition-level evaluation suggesting that projects were able to be flexible to reduce disruption, which was supported and facilitated by technology solutions. Projects also described adapting their delivery processes based on emerging student needs and data and feedback they collected from students throughout delivery. This included responding to the needs of underrepresented groups to support widening participation, enabling projects to maximise the benefits of engagement for these groups. An example of this from the case study research is set out below.

Students at the Heart of Knowledge Exchange was led by Anglia Ruskin University in collaboration with Essex County Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, Essex Police, and Nous Group. The project aimed to engage students in meaningful KE with partners to solve real societal problems. This involved five interventions: 24-hour 'challenge events' involving multidisciplinary undergraduate/postgraduate student teams coming together to identify potential solutions to societal challenges; four-week consultancy activities delivered by teams of postgraduate students with an academic mentor to work on 'live briefs' or 'real world' problems experienced by partner organisations; an expansion of 'sandpit' events, which bring academics, external partners, and students together to co-create potential collaborative research opportunities; 'Spotlight On' activity, which runs over several months and involves an ideas generator event open to all students who submit their ideas in a short video, with partners selecting the best ideas for further development by Student Consult teams; and engaging students beyond the life of project events in KE events, opportunities, and project promotion.

Both the delivery team and partner organisations were open and flexible with regards to ways of working. This was highlighted by a student who explained that because of their autism they had difficulties presenting live and thus preferred to share their findings through a narrated PowerPoint: "*Students at the Heart of Knowledge Exchange were very accommodating and happy for us to present in a different way… something I really liked about the team is they're so open to understanding new ways working.*"

Anglia Ruskin University case study excerpt

5.21 Several projects changed the language they used in project communications and messaging as a result of feedback received from students. The use of less formal language, for example, was said to be more relatable and accessible and was reported by some projects to have enabled student engagement. Some projects also highlighted the importance of responding to feedback around language to reduce barriers to engagement from underrepresented groups, as outlined in the case study excerpt below.

The 'Creative Students Creating Business' project delivered by the University of Portsmouth aimed to evaluate current student engagement KE activities in two faculties (Business and Law, and Creative and Cultural Industries) and to develop a structured toolkit to disseminate and share best practice on delivering student engagement in KE, both at Portsmouth and with the wider HE sector.

The project team were keen to ensure the communications around the project were engaging to a range of individuals, as their aim was to attract students from two distinct faculties. For example, the project originally used the term 'hard to reach' students, referring to those who often do not put themselves forward for student engagement in KE activity. However, this term was challenged by a stakeholder as it implied that it was student behaviour that was the reason for the issue. As a result, the project team reflected on how they approached student engagement, stopped using this specific term and focused on designing appropriate means for reaching students from underrepresented groups.

University of Portsmouth case study excerpt

5.22 There was also evidence that the provision of bespoke support as a key delivery mechanism supported project effectiveness. This included tailoring approaches where necessary and appropriate so that students, particularly those who face significant barriers to participation in KE, were able to engage with project activities. Examples included providing additional support or resources to neurodiverse students and allowing students to engage in different activities in different ways, based on their capacity and ability to contribute meaningfully. There are potential trade-offs here, with the risk that this tailoring could lead to disbenefits for other participants (e.g. where individuals are not able to engage in a full range of activities which may affect team-based activities), and/or different levels or types of support being received which may affect outcomes.

5.23 As outlined in Section 3, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that many projects pivoted delivery to be fully virtual. Overall, this process was seen to have been successful. Projects described being agile in how they delivered activities to enable compatibility with virtual delivery, and some projects found that this approach opened new opportunities. For example:

- One project noted that the programme had enabled them to build networks and partnerships beyond the 'local' and into the 'region' through offering virtual delivery.
- One project reported that holding events online allowed them to trial new types of events more easily, which were tested and taken forward.
- The success of digital approaches resulted in some projects continuing to use a hybrid model of delivery beyond the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions.

5.24 However, it should be noted that digital delivery did *not* work as well for all projects. Several projects highlighted the challenge of 'zoom fatigue', with some evidence that students who engaged in online activities found it more challenging to apply their knowledge, reducing the effectiveness of activities. The types of activities which were more challenging to deliver tended to be, perhaps unsurprisingly, activities which involved technical skills delivery and those which required extensive peer-to-peer engagement and group work.

Project features

5.25 Reflecting the breadth of activity, it is not possible to identify specific activities across the 20 projects that worked well overall. Further, individual projects themselves often involved a range of different strands which were varied and involved a variety of ways in which students engaged and were supported. However, across this diversity, three 'features' of projects did emerge as important and these may be useful for learning. These features are not relevant for all types of KE, but they are common.

5.26 First, where relevant, ensuring that students were able to apply their skills to 'real-world' contexts e.g. in working with partner organisations to identify solutions, support and enhance service delivery, or develop new ideas and concepts. Projects' self-evaluation reports suggest this can be motivating and beneficial for students (notably for developing key professional and employability skills), and of tangible benefit to local partners, businesses, and communities, meaning that the KE activity is seen as 'purposeful' and 'meaningful'. However, there are some factors that need to be considered, and it is recognised that 'real-world' contexts carry greater risks for the institution e.g. in relation to the quality and consistency of student inputs, reputational risks, etc. Further, projects that drew-on real-world situations which were particularly complex or sensitive highlighted the need to be mindful of the potential impact on students' mental health.

> The project aimed to ensure its delivery was as close to 'real-world' situations as possible, e.g. delivering written and interview application stages, requiring students to get to schools themselves, manage their time, claim expenses, etc. To ensure these activities were accessible to all, they provided support for those who may not have experienced (or seen their parents/family experience) these processes beforehand. Consultees highlighted that the project aimed to provide graduate-level employability skills and experiences to all students, regardless of their background.
>
> ***Edge Hill case study excerpt***

5.27 Second, some projects provided payment or financial support to students who participated in the KE. The approach to this varied. A few projects paid all of those who were involved in more intensive activity (e.g. internships), others provided payments to students in roles of responsibility, for example in mentoring or supervisory positions.

Others ensured that students had access to expenses budgets. While not all projects provided financial support to students, those that did highlighted it as a critical success factor to student engagement, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have been able to engage otherwise.

5.28 Third, for projects which involved KE between students and businesses, ensuring that these were effectively 'matched' was considered to strengthen project delivery, and leading to the potential for greater outcomes to be realised for both students and the relevant business given the alignment and shared commitment this enabled. Some projects committed resource at the beginning of project delivery to support alignment of students and partner expectations, needs and personalities, to mitigate against dissatisfaction from either party, and to ensure each party got the most out of their experience.

Recruitment and engagement

5.29 There are a range of barriers to effective student recruitment and engagement in KE. This includes student capacity and the ability to respond to the varying levels of commitment required, including when balancing study and other responsibilities. Projects also reported that students can experience 'emotional barriers' to engagement in KE. This includes low confidence and insecurities, in addition to a broader lack of understanding of what KE is and the benefits that it can generate. The evidence from across the Competition indicates that students from underrepresented backgrounds are often disproportionately affected by these issues. This has traditionally led to lower levels of engagement in KE from these groups and continued to be an influencing factor for projects supported by the Competition.

5.30 In the context of this Competition, all students have also experienced barriers in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has further exacerbated these issues. To mitigate these barriers, projects trialled and tested a range of recruitment methods and routes to sustained engagement. This has generated learning on what works well, and what works less well, in supporting engagement with KE.

5.31 Projects highlighted a range of approaches they had implemented that had supported recruitment. Some of these approaches were aimed at increasing participation numbers for all students, whereas others were targeted specifically to improve engagement from students from underrepresented groups.

5.32 Most commonly, projects use multiple methods of recruitment to maximise their potential reach. Approaches which were seen to have worked well in recruiting students included:

- Working with departments and academics (e.g. lecturers, tutors) to promote the opportunity directly to students, highlighting the added value and the support they would receive through the activity. Where links with departments and academics

were less well-developed and this channel was not utilised as fully, projects reported challenges with recruitment.

- Offering long application windows and strategically timing application deadlines around the academic calendar to maximise the number of applications received.
- Developing a clear brand identity and social media presence. Some projects utilised the skills of existing student participants in supporting marketing and social media activity, which also offered an additional route to KE.
- Providing inclusive application routes to make participation in projects more accessible for students who may struggle with traditional written applications.
- Leveraging existing networks and communities to reach target groups. This included students' own existing networks, which enabled access to different groups that projects may not have been able to reach otherwise.

5.33 Two examples from the case study research which reflect approaches taken to support recruitment to maximise reach are set out below.

> Alongside general communications and marketing activities targeted at all students, engagement with relevant societies and groups to help promote the project was used. For example, the project engaged with the Asian and Caribbean Society and were able to help promote the project through existing social media channels. As one consultee noted: "It's about identifying communities and getting into their own networks rather than trying to get them to come to us".
>
> ***University of Greenwich case study excerpt***

> One consultee noted: "Our approach to recruitment was to say, "you don't have to be anything in particular… you are all that we need". It was a statement of confidence from us when they don't have confidence in themselves"
>
> ***Anglia Ruskin University case study excerpt***

5.34 There was less evidence on recruitment methods which were less effective (although self-evaluation reports tended to reflect less on what did not work as well). However, one project indicated that a shortlisting of students was undertaken by employer partners, but this was seen to have introduced bias to the selection process. There was also some feedback that reliance on e-mail communications is not effective, given changing behaviours related to social media and the perception of e-mail as a channel for 'formal/official' communication.

5.35 Following the onset of delivery, projects implemented a range of approaches which worked well to support on-going retention. This included:

- Clearly articulating the value of engagement (both in terms of what students can 'get' from participation and what they can 'offer').
- Developing student 'readiness' to engage by ensuring adequate resource was given to induction processes, leaving students feeling ready and confident to continue their participation.
- Providing a range of ways students could engage with the project, so they could determine their own intensity of engagement. This appears to work particularly well for students with demanding academic calendars or competing priorities (e.g. caring responsibilities).
- Reviewing monitoring and engagement data to explore patterns of engagement. This enabled a greater understanding of which activities were more popular and which engagement approaches were more effective.
- Building a 'sense of community' (where this is consistent with the wider activity offer and model) that students felt a part of, and a sense of loyalty to.
- Implementing incentive and reward schemes. For example, awarding 'digital badges' to students participating in several activities, which was felt to sustain engagement.

5.36 While these approaches were considered to improve engagement and retention, many projects still faced challenges to retention (to varying degrees). It was noted that students became increasingly selective regarding what they could, or wanted to, engage with as they progressed in their studies and throughout the academic year, resulting in inconsistent engagement from students. Some of the approaches outlined above seemed to alleviate this to some extent (e.g. offering flexibility for engagement), but this was sometimes challenging to do without reducing the effectiveness of the project overall.

Enabling contextual factors

5.37 The evaluation evidence suggests three main contextual pre-conditions that were central to the effective implementation of projects. These factors, which are not mutually exclusive, focused on investment and resources, buy-in from stakeholders, and strong relationships with partners. However, the extent to which these enabling factors were put in place by projects varied, with impacts relating to the Covid-19 pandemic posing particular challenges. Each enabling factor is discussed in turn below.

Investment and resourcing

5.38 Project self-evaluation reports provided strong qualitative evidence of the importance of the Competition funding from OfS/RE in enabling project delivery. Without the funding, many projects implied they would have found it challenging to scale-up and/or deliver or innovate KE activities. However, leveraging additional investment and resourcing was commonly considered a critical factor in enabling the effective delivery of projects (and KE activities more broadly). This related to both the co-investment that was set out in the original bid and that complemented the OfS/RE funding, as well as wider supporting investment.

5.39 The source of this additional investment/resourcing varied, but included the HEI and external partners, and both financial and in-kind resources (e.g. support from central services, including student services, with student engagement).

5.40 In some cases, the Covid-19 pandemic directly impacted the ability of projects to secure additional investment and resourcing. For example, one project reported that some external organisations could not fulfil the paid requirement for short-term placements due to the impact of the pandemic on finances.

Buy-in from HEI, partners, and academic staff

5.41 Securing buy-in from the HEI, partners, and academic staff, was critical in ensuring effective project delivery. In particular, evidence from the self-evaluation reports highlighted the importance of commitment from the HEI and academics in maximising student and partner engagement, knowledge transfer, and long-term sustained benefits from KE activities. In contrast, a lack of commitment from stakeholders can have detrimental impacts on delivery and outcomes. For example, one project noted that without a greater number of academics demonstrating a commitment to civic engagement, the implementation model cannot be scaled-up further.

5.42 It was widely reported by projects that effective alignment and links with wider HE structures and systems was crucial in ensuring buy-in from senior staff and the institution more broadly. This included strong alignment with the HEI's strategic priorities (for example, community engagement and EDI), as well existing KE activities and support infrastructure. On the latter, scaling up existing KE activity was particularly beneficial for guaranteeing the commitment of all stakeholders due to the demonstratable success of the activity prior to the Competition, and to ensure that clear signposting and referral mechanisms were in place. Recognising student KE as part of the broader KE landscape was an important theme that emerged from across the projects. An example from the case study research that highlighted this message is set out below.

> For a culture of SEKE to grow, it needs infrastructure, leadership, commitment, support, and resources. In this context, buy-in from senior staff members at the university, e.g. university board level, Vice Chancellors, is crucial.
>
> ***University of Portsmouth case study excerpt***

5.43 In some instances, strong stakeholder buy-in translated into the leverage of additional internal and/or external resources to support project delivery, including from university departments and central services, as well as external organisations.

5.44 The extent to which buy-in was impacted by Covid-19 varied by intervention model and implementation. Projects focused on sectors most severely impacted by the pandemic and associated restrictions experienced significant pressures in sustaining partner commitment. For example, one project was based in healthcare settings so the pandemic led to a marked shift in priorities, whilst another focused on the creative industries sector. Despite challenges, both projects were able to secure and maintain strong engagement from partners, which is testament to the strength of the intervention models and delivery.

Strong relationships with partner organisations

5.45 Strong relationships with partner organisations were crucial in enabling the effective implementation of projects and the realisation of intended benefits for all groups involved. In particular, the self-evaluation reports highlighted the benefits of utilising existing, well-established relationships with partner organisations. Intervention models based on partnerships with prior experience of delivering KE activities benefitted from existing strong commitment from partners and enabled the timely mobilisation of projects. This was considered particularly beneficial given the challenging delivery context for the Competition. Further the evidence suggests that existing relationships were strengthened through the project, providing an additional positive legacy.

5.46 Where projects recruited new partners, the following were important:

- Ongoing, proactive partner engagement (e.g. dedicated business development roles), which required time and resources.
- Seeking out partners who aligned with project values.
- Articulating the project clearly, including the nature of the commitment and the support available, and the potential benefits for partners.

5.47 Projects co-delivered with other HEIs provided unique opportunities for collaboration and cross-institutional learning. However, feedback highlights the importance of aligning

expectations between HEIs and a recognition that universities have different processes and operating procedures.

5.48 The pandemic forced some projects to change their stakeholder engagement strategies, which often required additional time and resourcing to gain and maintain partner engagement. In addition, partner engagement with project development, delivery, and/or dissemination transitioned online which had both negative and positive impacts on levels of engagement.

6. Conclusions

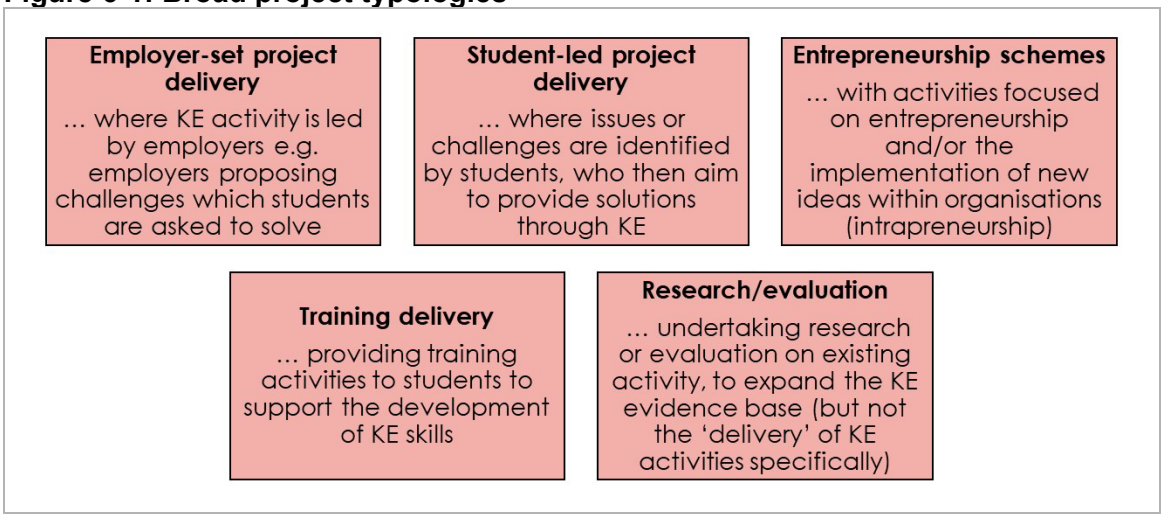
The Competition context

6.1 The Student Engagement with KE Competition funded 20 projects that implemented a wide range of approaches which sought to:

- Provide evidence of the ways in which KE activities involve or benefit students or graduates directly, or demonstrate approaches that optimise student benefit.
- Demonstrate effective practice in KE that benefits students and make such knowledge available to the wider HE sector.
- Address evidenced issues of EDI within existing KE activities that create barriers to students from all backgrounds benefiting.

6.2 The scale of activity delivered was significant and notable: the projects reported that, in aggregate, over 20,000 students have been engaged in activities. The ways in which this activity was realised were wide-ranging across – and in some cases within – the projects. Although high-level and illustrative only, this breadth can be summarised in a range of broad 'typologies' which reflect different ways of involving students, as shown in Figure 6-1.

Figure 6-1: Broad project typologies



Source: SQW

6.3 Projects adopted different mechanisms to target and engage students. For students, there was a broadly even balance across the projects between those that were explicitly 'open and accessible to all', and those that sought to emphasise engagement from particular groups, notably students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. The

evaluation suggests there is no 'right or wrong' here; the approach should be tailored to the project's rationale and objectives, and its delivery context.

Key findings

…on the benefits of student KE

6.4 Positively, the project evaluation evidence suggests that a range of benefits for students have been realised and these were well captured through project evaluation activity. Key benefits for students included: the development of skills and knowledge, including employability skills, entrepreneurial skills, professional inter-personal skills, and practical, technical, and research skills; enhanced knowledge and awareness of available career pathways; improved confidence; and enhanced access to KE for students from underrepresented groups. This is not to say that all outcomes will have been achieved across all projects, and by all students. However, encouragingly, the evidence indicates that implementing effective KE activity generates a wide range of student benefits.

6.5 There is emerging evidence of impacts for students. This has included students engaged in KE activity going on to secure employment and establish businesses. Projects delivering similar activities prior to the Competition were better able to capture this evidence. In this context, a positive result is that some projects with established evaluation approaches have been able to sustain delivery. This provides the potential to generate evidence on the long-term benefits of student KE.

6.6 In addition to benefits *for* students, benefits have been delivered *by* students, including for partners and other beneficiaries. Some of these benefits are cultural in nature; for example, changing the perceptions of partners in engaging with KE and working with students. This may be particularly important, especially given the challenges of generating culture change. However, it is difficult to quantify at this stage what the impact of this might be.

6.7 The ability of students to bring 'fresh perspectives', 'energy', and 'passion' to partner organisations is a notable finding. Some projects reflected that this had potential implications for organisations' openness to employing recent graduates, including those with specific needs, which could contribute to the talent pipeline.

6.8 HEIs have also benefited from student engagement in KE, with some evidence that the Competition helped to demonstrate the value of KE, which was now better recognised across institutions. Partnerships established through student KE, which can be sustained and leveraged for wider activities, are also an important benefit for participating institutions.

…on optimising student benefit and effective practice

6.9 Given the range of contexts and approaches implemented through the Competition, no single or 'off the shelf' solution emerged from this evaluation as 'most effective' in supporting student engagement in KE or which optimised student benefit more effectively than others. Each approach has been contextually specific and appropriate to the needs of the HEI, its students and its partners.

6.10 However, there are several key factors that may be generally transferrable and represent 'good practice' that contributes to the optimisation of student benefit. These factors were present in many of the projects' design, delivery, and recruitment/engagement processes:

- The establishment of a clear purpose and an underpinning 'theory of change', and clarity on the assumptions underlying planned activities and routes to impact.
- The provision of a range and combination of activities with which students could engage, and where appropriate/possible, maintaining a flexible and tailored approach.
- The involvement of students and partners in all aspects of project design and delivery: this is key to generating an effective model which meets the needs of students and partners, and therefore maximises the quality of knowledge exchange.
- Aligning project, student, and partner values, priorities, and principles, particularly in relation to seeking to address issues of EDI in KE.
- Providing opportunities for students to engage in activities in 'real-world' contexts and environments, which helps to secure and retain engagement, and offers the potential to deliver material positive societal and economic outcomes.
- Effectively leveraging existing assets and building on existing activity where possible: this is not unexpected, and can enable projects to mobilise quickly, but this has implications for transferability and the time required to embed activities.

6.11 There is also learning on contextual pre-conditions or enablers required for effective student KE. Some of these are within projects' control e.g. building strong relationships with partners, but others are not e.g. availability of resource. Considering and seeking to ensure the pre-conditions are in place to enable effective models of student KE is crucial.

…on addressing evidenced issues of EDI

6.12 The Competition has encouraged a focus on removing barriers to student engagement in KE for underrepresented groups. Addressing issues of EDI was embedded into the aims and activities of many projects, and some chose to target recruitment on

underrepresented groups. Projects also acted and adapted according to emerging evidence around barriers to engagement, for example by adapting their recruitment activities. Some projects were also innovative in the ways they addressed EDI, for example working with partners whose values closely aligned with these issues, or ensuring their delivery teams reflected the student population. However, while some projects have made headway in reducing barriers, the barriers remain, and some projects found this easier than others. A key issue was accessing data, impacting both on the evidence base and the ability to respond in real-time to engagement patterns and challenges.

…on disseminating learning across the sector

6.13 Projects' increasing focus on delivering dissemination activity towards the later stages of delivery has enabled knowledge to be shared with others in the HE sector. Encouragingly, greater dissemination activity has occurred than initially expected by projects, with over-delivery on targets for events and toolkits. Further, the Competition has established a community of HEIs with a shared interest in good practice in student KE, facilitating shared learning and engagement between project leads and partners; this has mostly been where there were similar subject matters or activities being delivered.

6.14 Overall, the findings are positive on the benefits generated by projects, on dissemination activities, and on addressing (or seeking to address) issues of EDI, which suggests that the Competition has performed well against its objectives. That said, it is important to caveat this finding in light of the project-level evaluation evidence. While the project-level evaluation evidence was reasonable overall, there was an opportunity for greater consideration of key assumptions, further clarity on the analytical techniques employed, and (generally) a more detailed approach to establishing how benefits would be monitored and assessed. This learning can helpfully inform future evaluation planning and practice.

Reflections for the future

6.15 The Competition has established a well-developed 'community of interest' across the projects supported, with strong buy-in to the Competition-level evaluation. This could provide a valuable resource to support on-going sector development on student KE. OfS/RE may wish to consider how this group could be sustained and leveraged going forward to promote, share, and develop professional capacity and knowledge.

6.16 Linked to this, the projects have generated a significant volume of evidence on the benefits and delivery of student KE, and more can be expected to be produced in future, including publications, conference presentations, and other materials. To support on-going dissemination and knowledge sharing, OfS/RE may wish to consider how this

evidence can be collected, curated, and shared across the sector to help leverage and maximise the value from this evidence base developed via the Competition.

6.17 The Competition-level evaluation highlighted the complementary role of student KE within the broader KE landscape. There may be scope to further consider the relationship between student-focused KE and wider KE activity in the future, and the implications for KE policy and funding.

6.18 The Competition-level evaluation secured strong engagement from projects, and was able to collate both a broad and largely consistent evidence base. However, the evaluation framework was developed early in the implementation. Those involved in planning for evaluation should consider the sequencing and timing of any future evaluation of student KE to help facilitate the evaluation process.

Annex A: Glossary

A.1 This glossary provides a reference to the acronyms and abbreviations used throughout this report. It does not include acronyms of abbreviations used only in the Annex portion of this report.

Table A-1: Glossary of acronyms and abbreviations

Acronym/abbreviation	Meaning
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
HE	Higher Education
HE-BCI	Higher Education Business and Community Interaction
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEIF	Higher Education Innovation Funding
KE	Knowledge Exchange
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
OfS	Office for Students
RE	Research England
SEKE	Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange
SME	Small or Medium-size Enterprise

Annex B: List of Competition-funded projects

Table B-1: Competition-funded projects and descriptions

Institution	Project description	Main project typology	End date	Funding allocated
Anglia Ruskin University	**Students at the Heart of Knowledge Exchange (SHoKE)** This project will scale up and enhance existing employability initiatives and will introduce new interventions which are designed with the specific composition of the provider's student body in mind. It will engage students in team-based knowledge exchange activities through a range of interventions which provide opportunities for students from all backgrounds to find an entry point that suits them; it will also provide students with relevant, real world opportunities to make a difference through projects that create societal impact.	Project delivery: student-led	Jun 22	£400,000
Brunel University London	**Evaluating Student Knowledge Exchanges: What is effective practice? (ESKE)** This project aims to develop and disseminate an adaptable and effective knowledge exchange model of practice based on students' immersive international experiences. The international experiences will provide the opportunity to learn from communities, gain appreciation of indigenous knowledge, and engage in discussions that allow cultural, knowledge, and skill sharing across students and local communities	Research/ evaluation	Dec 23	£326,224
Edge Hill University	**Tackling the Blues** This project involves engaging students in knowledge exchange through a focus on the promotion of mental health through sport and the arts. It will do this by providing opportunities for more students to become involved in activities which improve their knowledge, understanding, and experiences of mental health in education in local communities.	Project delivery: student-led	Sep 22	£527,000

Institution	Project description	Main project typology	End date	Funding allocated
Keele University	**Student Knowledge Exchange Re-Imagined – Removing the barriers, engaging communities** This project aims to develop and expand student-mediated knowledge exchange activities. It will work with overseas providers to consider how the programme can be embedded in curriculum design and will create a tool which will calculate the impact of these activities. The project will prioritise disadvantaged students and will use virtual environments to address barriers that stop time-poor students from participating in more traditional knowledge exchange activities. Students will participate in employer-set challenges and consultancy projects agreed with domestic and international partners.	Project delivery: employer-set	Aug 22	£928,050
Pearson College	**Work Integrated Learning: Sustainable models for student-industry engagement** This project aims to identify effective knowledge exchange practice and seeks to create a comprehensive and sustainable framework that would provide opportunities for the integration of work and learning in degree study. It will do this by analysing and comparing current approaches to knowledge exchange involving student engagement with industry in order to identify the key strengths and weaknesses of the methods in terms of benefit to students.	Research/ evaluation	Nov 22	£251,800
Plymouth Marjon University	**Developing a model of Student-led Knowledge Exchange (SLKE) using Transformative Evaluation** This project will explore the conditions which allow a student-led knowledge exchange culture to flourish in undergraduate teaching and learning and to develop a model for wider use. It aims to enhance student reflection and learning through transformative, participant-led evaluation, to explore the drivers and barriers for knowledge exchange from the perspective of students, academics, and partners. The project will undertake a stakeholder analysis and pilot a train-the-trainers approach to explore and promote how knowledge exchange can be scaled up and rolled out across the sector.	Research/ evaluation	Aug 22	£250,098

Institution	Project description	Main project typology	End date	Funding allocated
Queen Mary University of London	**Student Knowledge Exchange Through Community Hubs (SKETCH)** This project will establish a new, student-driven, multi-disciplinary professional services organisation, combining law, management, economics, and digital, to provide pro bono, social impact-driven consultancy and venture capital services to external partners. This will be accompanied by a new unit that integrates the university's current student-led knowledge exchange programmes with new innovative programmes.	Project delivery: student-led	Feb 23	£650,000
Royal Northern College of Music	**Start Entrepreneurship Scheme** This project aims to develop a collaboration between three arts higher education providers to support the development of the next generation of freelancers, start-ups, and enterprising employees within the creative industries. It will do this by exploring which activity best supports and develops enterprising behaviours, attitudes and competencies in undergraduate and postgraduate students.	Entrepreneurship scheme	Aug 22	£902,153
The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama	**Innovating Knowledge Exchange: Student Involvement in Delivering Better Patient Experience in the NHS** This project will scale up work that exchanges knowledge between students and NHS staff to improve patients' experiences. Students will be involved as co-creators in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects that combine applied theatre and technology.	Project delivery: employer-set	Feb 23	£566,262
University College London	**Increasing and Evaluating Student Impact in Knowledge and Learning Exchange (ISIKLE)** The project aims to demonstrate and evaluate effective practices in student engagement in knowledge exchange to assess their economic and social benefits to individual students, external partners, and communities. This project will enable more inclusive participation of diverse groups of students and developing and evaluating initiatives where students participate in knowledge exchange activities. Project activities include conducting collaborative research, developing business ideas and start-ups, and contributing research	Project delivery: student-led	Nov 23	£828,755

Institution	Project description	Main project typology	End date	Funding allocated
	skills to external partners to address an evaluation or impact challenge crucial to service delivery or organisational sustainability.			
University of Birmingham	**PGT Knowledge Exchange Pathway** This project will develop and test a new model for postgraduate taught students that will benefit their learning and transition to employment, and the local and regional organisations they engage with. It will consist of the identification and root-cause analysis of a real-life organisational challenge, and the development of a solution grounded in the provider's research strengths.	Project delivery: student-led	Sep 23	£300,000
University of Bristol	**The Bristol Model: putting students at the heart of knowledge exchange to address social and economic challenges** This project aims to scale up existing knowledge exchange activities and create a sustainable framework of student-led knowledge exchange embedded in the curriculum. Projects will place students at the heart of co-produced social science research with external partners and aim to address specific social and/or economic challenges. These will be followed by an evaluative element that will analyse and evidence the direct benefits of knowledge exchange activity on students, recent graduates, and external organisations.	Project delivery: student-led	Feb 23	£435,776
University of Exeter	**SETsquared Student Enterprise Programme – evaluation and expansion with a new Intrapreneurial Path** This project will measure, evaluate, and expand the reach of an established student enterprise programme by introducing a new 'intrapreneurial path'. This opens up knowledge exchange opportunities for students who want to develop new enterprise and subject-specific applied skills within a company or organisation, rather than start one. Students will attend training workshops and then compete in teams to deliver a short, client-led knowledge exchange project, providing a report of value to the external partner	Entrepreneurship scheme	Dec 22	£1,000,000

Institution	Project description	Main project typology	End date	Funding allocated
	and creating new connections between the universities, their students, and the local innovation ecosystem.			
University of Greenwich	**GREHacks** This project intends to scale up knowledge exchange activity in a format that removes barriers to participation from students from all backgrounds. Student participants will be recruited in line with partner needs to provide insight from characteristics that might be underrepresented in the host organisations. The project will develop a new series of short programmes, initially delivered by a new enterprise hub that houses entrepreneurial teaching, learning, and practice, where students will work in teams to solve problems and find solutions to live briefs set by the partner organisation.	Project delivery: employer-set	Nov 22	£321,353
University of Huddersfield	**Innovation Creative Exchange Plus (ICE+)** Through facilitated innovation and mentoring, teams of students will develop and pitch solutions to business-related or complex global challenges set by external partner organisations. Winning teams will then be offered short internships or placements to implement ideas which may lead to future employment, possible partnerships, or student start-up companies.	Project delivery: employer-set	Aug 22	£256,885
University of Plymouth	**Engaging University of Plymouth Students in Knowledge Exchange** As part of this project, knowledge exchange activities will be evaluated to understand the benefits to students and organisations and to understand, evidence, and address issues of equality of opportunity, diversity, and inclusion both for students and partners. The project will establish a new academy designed to prepare, train, and equip students with the professional skills and behaviours required to deliver knowledge exchange effectively in a variety of settings, working with a range of partners to co-create training content, including an accessible e-learning package and face-to-face masterclasses.	Training delivery	Oct 22	£499,621

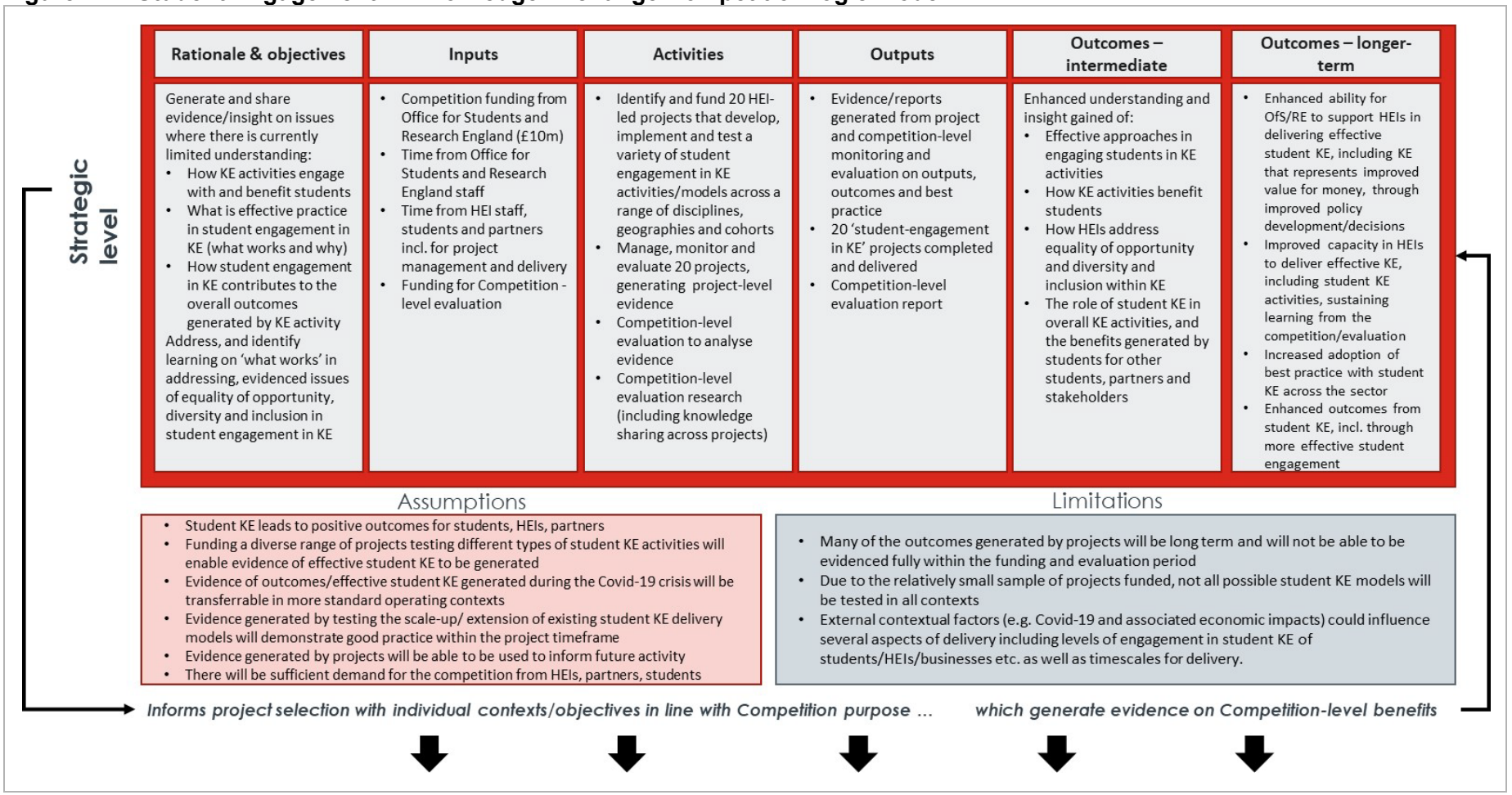
Institution	Project description	Main project typology	End date	Funding allocated
University of Portsmouth	**Creative Students, Creating Business** This project aims to increase the number and diversity of students that are involved in knowledge exchange and to develop their enterprise skills and commercial awareness, as well as attributes such as leadership and teamwork. The project will undertake a work package-based approach to evaluate the university's current activity of student engagement in knowledge exchange from an educator, student, and external partner perspective. From this thorough evaluation the project will determine the key components and models that deliver maximum value for knowledge exchange and begin active testing of those components and models through cohort-based test phases.	Research/ evaluation	Jul 22	£537,580
University of Sheffield	**Transforming and Activating Places: Enhancing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion In Interdisciplinary Placemaking** This project will create enhanced work placement opportunities with a range of existing and new cross-sector external organisations. The placements will lead to a series of follow-on projects, which will enable the students to apply what they have learnt from their placement in a programme of ongoing activity and development. The learning from these projects will be used to inform curriculum development and empower the students to engage creatively and proactively with so-called 'left behind places'.	Project delivery: employer-set	Jan 23	£532,347
University of York	**York Projects – Students Applying Leading Edge Research in Community Projects** This project aims to bring together students, research, and regional voluntary, cultural, and statutory organisations to deliver student team-based projects as a method for knowledge exchange. The project will work collaboratively with partners to connect community needs with the provider's research strengths in order to design projects which will help to build long-term capacity for community groups to deliver their core activities. Students from across all disciplines will work as teams and be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to tackle the projects and facilitate knowledge exchange. Following evaluation,	Project delivery: student-led	Feb 23	£259,456

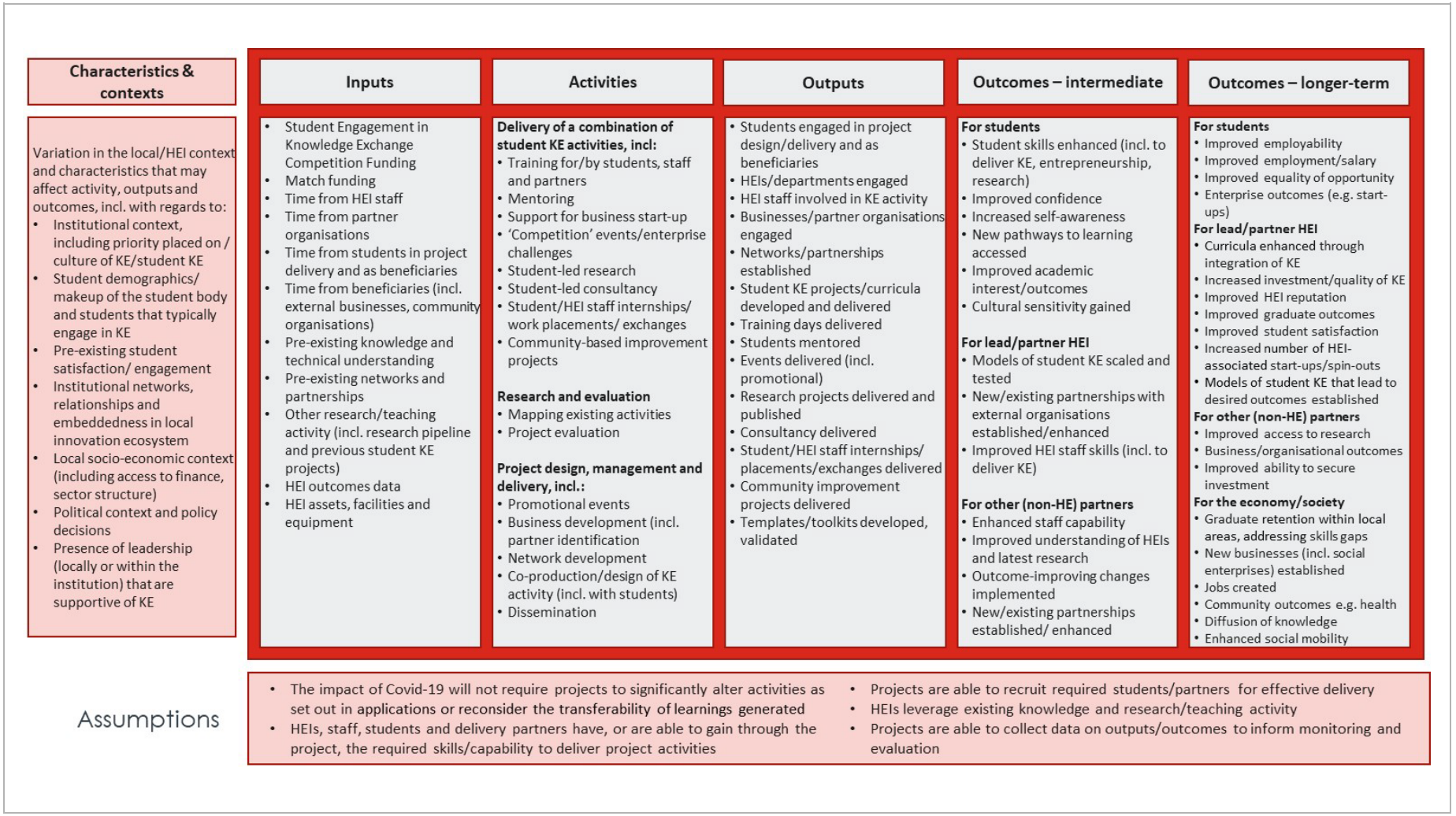
Institution	Project description	Main project typology	End date	Funding allocated
	key elements of transferable good practice underlying this process will be identified and disseminated to the wider sector.			
York St John University	**Evaluating Converge: placing students and education at the heart of improving community mental health** This project aims to evaluate the benefits and effectiveness of a partnership between two universities and the NHS. Through this partnership, local people who use mental health services will participate in free courses run by staff and students at each of the universities. The project will identify the benefits for students and NHS staff of developing and running these courses in partnership; the benefits of students working directly with mental health service patients over an extended period; and the benefits for mental health service patients participating in the courses.	Research/ evaluation	Sep 22	£355,983

Source: Project summaries and funding allocation available at: https://www.ukri.org/publications/student-engagement-in-knowledge-exchange-ke/

Annex C: Logic model

Figure C-1: Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange Competition logic model




Characteristics & contexts
Variation in the local/HEI context and characteristics that may affect activity, outputs and outcomes, incl. with regards to:
• Institutional context, including priority placed on / culture of KE/student KE
• Student demographics/ makeup of the student body and students that typically engage in KE
• Pre-existing student satisfaction/ engagement
• Institutional networks, relationships and embeddedness in local innovation ecosystem
• Local socio-economic context (including access to finance, sector structure)
• Political context and policy decisions
• Presence of leadership (locally or within the institution) that are supportive of KE
Inputs
• Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange Competition Funding
• Match funding
• Time from HEI staff
• Time from partner organisations
• Time from students in project delivery and as beneficiaries
• Time from beneficiaries (incl. external businesses, community organisations)
• Pre-existing knowledge and technical understanding
• Pre-existing networks and partnerships
• Other research/teaching activity (incl. research pipeline and previous student KE projects)
• HEI outcomes data
• HEI assets, facilities and equipment
Activities
Delivery of a combination of student KE activities, incl:
• Training for/by students, staff and partners
• Mentoring
• Support for business start-up
• 'Competition' events/enterprise challenges
• Student-led research
• Student-led consultancy
• Student/HEI staff internships/ work placements/ exchanges
• Community-based improvement projects
Research and evaluation
• Mapping existing activities
• Project evaluation
Project design, management and delivery, incl.:
• Promotional events
• Business development (incl. partner identification
• Network development
• Co-production/design of KE activity (incl. with students)
• Dissemination
Outputs
• Students engaged in project design/delivery and as beneficiaries
• HEIs/departments engaged
• HEI staff involved in KE activity
• Businesses/partner organisations engaged
• Networks/partnerships established
• Student KE projects/curricula developed and delivered
• Training days delivered
• Students mentored
• Events delivered (incl. promotional)
• Research projects delivered and published
• Consultancy delivered
• Student/HEI staff internships/ placements/exchanges delivered
• Community improvement projects delivered
• Templates/toolkits developed, validated
Outcomes – intermediate
For students
• Student skills enhanced (incl. to deliver KE, entrepreneurship, research)
• Improved confidence
• Increased self-awareness
• New pathways to learning accessed
• Improved academic interest/outcomes
• Cultural sensitivity gained
For lead/partner HEI
• Models of student KE scaled and tested
• New/existing partnerships with external organisations established/enhanced
• Improved HEI staff skills (incl. to deliver KE)
For other (non-HE) partners
• Enhanced staff capability
• Improved understanding of HEIs and latest research
• Outcome-improving changes implemented
• New/existing partnerships established/ enhanced
Outcomes – longer-term
For students
• Improved employability
• Improved employment/salary
• Improved equality of opportunity
• Enterprise outcomes (e.g. start-ups)
For lead/partner HEI
• Curricula enhanced through integration of KE
• Increased investment/quality of KE
• Improved HEI reputation
• Improved graduate outcomes
• Improved student satisfaction
• Increased number of HEI-associated start-ups/spin-outs
• Models of student KE that lead to desired outcomes established
For other (non-HE) partners
• Improved access to research
• Business/organisational outcomes
• Improved ability to secure investment
For the economy/society
• Graduate retention within local areas, addressing skills gaps
• New businesses (incl. social enterprises) established
• Jobs created
• Community outcomes e.g. health
• Diffusion of knowledge
• Enhanced social mobility
Assumptions
• The impact of Covid-19 will not require projects to significantly alter activities as set out in applications or reconsider the transferability of learnings generated
• HEIs, staff, students and delivery partners have, or are able to gain through the project, the required skills/capability to deliver project activities
• Projects are able to recruit required students/partners for effective delivery
• HEIs leverage existing knowledge and research/teaching activity
• Projects are able to collect data on outputs/outcomes to inform monitoring and evaluation

Source: SQW

Annex D: Equality, diversity and inclusion case studies

Anglia Ruskin University

Students at the Heart of Knowledge Exchange (SHoKE) was a project led by Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) in collaboration with Essex County Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, Essex Police and Nous Group. The project ran for two years between August 2020 and July 2022. It aimed to engage students in meaningful knowledge exchange with local county councils to solve real societal problems. Knowledge exchange activities were delivered through five distinct interventions:

- Impact 24: 24-hour 'challenge events' which involve multidisciplinary undergraduate and postgraduate student teams coming together for an intensive period to identify potential solutions to societal challenges.
- Student Consult: four-week consultancy activities delivered by teams of postgraduate students, with an academic mentor, to work on 'live briefs' or 'real world' problems experienced by partner organisations.
- Open Innovation Workshop: expansion of 'sandpit' events, which bring academics and external partners together, to include students, to co-create potential collaborative research opportunities.
- Spotlight On: Running over several months, the project begins with an ideas generator event that is open to all students, who submit their ideas in a two minute video. Partners then chose the best ideas for further development by Student Consult teams.
- KE Community: engaging students beyond the life of SHoKE events in KE events, opportunities, and promoting the project.

This case study presents key findings around how the project incorporated EDI into its design and delivery. It has been developed based on consultations with two representatives from the delivery team at ARU, one representative from a partner organisation, and two students involved in the knowledge exchange activity.

Project context

ARU has an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group Student Success Steering Group (SSSG) and Access and Participation Steering Group which promote inclusion and respect for diversity among staff and students. The groups develop EDI objectives (the currently objectives run from 2021 to 2025), run university-wide EDI programmes,

and conduct research across the university that shapes their understanding and development of equality, diversity, and inclusion policies and practices.

Many students at ARU fit into multiple widening participation categories and were described by consultees as having 'complex lives'. The university has the second highest number of care leavers out of all HEIs in England, and a considerable proportion of students who have jobs and caring responsibilities and travel from areas of high deprivation in London and surrounding areas to study at one of ARU's campuses. It was reported that students from these backgrounds can experience issues relating to low self-confidence and anxiety in the academic environment. This can prevent them from taking part in knowledge exchange activities, often because they are not comfortable working in groups. This was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, as young people were less likely to have been exposed to group interactions compared to previous years. Students with work or caring responsibilities also face practical challenges regarding the amount of time and availability they have to engage in extra-curricular activities.

Influence of EDI on project design and delivery

Design

SHoKE was designed with EDI in mind. This is evidenced through the project's focus from the outset on removing barriers to participation in knowledge exchange for students from underrepresented groups. One consultee explained:

"We fundamentally wanted to open opportunities to students who weren't seeing or accessing those opportunities… it was always firmly about making sure that the project was accessible and visible to as many students as possible."
Consultee, delivery team

However, from initial engagement between the delivery team and students in the design of the project, an important message was that students were not comfortable with being 'labelled' as belonging to a particular group or category. Further, some students did not react well to certain types of pressure, which they reported could make them feel overwhelmed and anxious, and therefore may limit their participation in knowledge exchange activities. As a result, SHoKE's approach to ensuring access and inclusion was to lower the boundaries to accessing knowledge exchange activities for all students.

Aside from having an understanding of research methodologies (which was required to be compliant with the university's research code of practice) there were no other restrictions placed on who could apply to participate in SHoKE. Promotional material was not targeted at specific groups, rather it emphasised what all students could gain from participation. The team tailored the language of the project after students said they responded better to more informal language, such as *'community'* as opposed to *'network'*. The team also emphasised that participation in SHoKE was "not a test" and

that students would not be assessed or scored as part of the project. One consultee from the delivery team stated:

"Our approach to recruitment was to say, "you don't have to be anything in particular… you are all that we need". It was a statement of confidence from us when they don't have confidence in themselves."
Consultee, delivery team

Delivery

EDI was also a key consideration in project delivery. One amendment the delivery team made after SHoKE began was to ensure that no element of the project was mandatory. For example, students were encouraged but not required to attend onboarding training, and if a student had to leave a session early for any reason the team made it clear that this would not impact on their ability to participate in future activities. This approach helped to accommodate students with caring responsibilities, those with part-time jobs, and those with learning difficulties. This was different to how the project operated when it first started: attendance at the onboarding training, for example, was mandatory but the delivery team quickly found that this was not suitable for all students.

With regards to the influence of EDI on partner engagement, consultees from the delivery team explained that SHoKE was promoted to partners on the basis of EDI. The project's promotional materials emphasised the diversity of the university's student population and included phrases such as "*co-create with diverse student minds*" and "*diverse perspectives generate creative ideas*". Although this was not mentioned explicitly with regards to EDI, a representative from a partner organisation said their motivation for being involved in SHoKE was because the organisation recognised the benefit of working with students who could generate fresh ideas and think outside of the box.

Consultees explained that for students with complex lives it can often be difficult to maintain engagement in extra-curricular activities and therefore high dropout rates was a challenge. To address this, the project adopted a 'no foul' approach whereby if a student withdrew from the project it was not "the end of the road". Instead the delivery team took it on good faith that the student had a legitimate reason for dropping out and allowed them to re-join the project at a later point should they so wish. This approach proved effective, with one consultee stating:

"We've had students come back after several attempts and successfully participate in the project."
Consultee, delivery team

The delivery team also recorded events so that students who were unable to attend due to work or childcare commitments could catch up at a later date. Furthermore, both the

delivery team and partner organisations were open and flexible with regards to ways of working. This was highlighted by one student who explained that because of their autism they had difficulties presenting live and thus preferred to share their findings through a narrated PowerPoint:

"SHoKE were very accommodating and happy for us to present in a different way. And that's something I really liked about the SHoKE team is they're so open to understanding new ways working. We've been bouncing things around ever since."
Consultee, student

As ARU has a highly diverse student body, some might assume that SHoKE would have wide participation by default. However the final engagement data show the project engaged a greater proportion of disabled students, undergraduate students from minority ethnic backgrounds and undergraduate students from low participation neighbourhoods and minority ethnic backgrounds[7] compared to the university as a whole. The representative from Essex County Council also remarked on the diversity of the participants:

"We worked with a variety of students from a range of different backgrounds, including mature students and international students."
Consultee, partner organisation

Lessons learned in addressing issues of EDI

Consultees identified several lessons with regards to what works well when addressing issues of EDI in knowledge exchange:

- Remove barriers to participation for all students rather than targeting specific demographics. As outlined above, the evidence collected in the design of this project indicated that students do not like to be identified as belonging to a particular category.
- Be open in terms of student engagement. Being flexible with regards to participation can accommodate different groups who may not be able to attend every session or may find some activity overwhelming. Utilising 'no foul' scenarios (i.e. allowing students who drop out of the project to re-join at a later date) can support students with other commitments to engage with knowledge exchange activity.
- Be open to new ways of working. For example, narrated presentations (when you record what you are going to say and play it back the audience as opposed to presenting it live) can be less stressful and anxiety inducing for people with autism.

[7] Note this is a combined measure.

- Avoid having 'winners or losers' (e.g., activity which involves scoring teams). For students with low self-confidence any competitive activity can act as a barrier.
- Provide positive encouragement and support and be non-judgemental. This can help foster a sense of belonging for students who may feel isolated or marginalised, and create a safe environment in which they can take risks and explore:

"It's about challenging people's preconceptions and ideas of what is possible, challenging assumptions and bias, it's about being flexible, supportive, accommodating, having an open mind, trying new things, listening to people."
Consultee, delivery team

"I felt really at ease with them [the project team] because I knew that they wouldn't judge me. That allowed me then to apply myself more, it allowed me to feel confident, to share my sometimes outlandish ideas. They respected the fact that I have different angles rather than dismissing it because nobody else has thought about it."
Consultee, student

Dissemination and knowledge sharing

The delivery team at the university have shared the knowledge and learning they gleaned through delivering SHoKE with the partner organisations. Academics at the university are currently undertaking research into the effectiveness of the SHoKE model and once the findings become available later on in the year these will be disseminated.

Owing to the success of the project, SHoKE has received financial support from the university for a further three years of delivery. SHoKe has become embedded into the university's strategic planning process, supporting many other activities such as ARU continuing professional development, the Vice Chancellor's Student Leadership Awards, and ARU's Civic Mission.

Edge Hill University

The Tackling the Blues (TtB) project was delivered by Edge Hill University between September 2020 and September 2022. The project aimed to provide opportunities for more students to become involved in KE activity, develop a transferrable student-focused model of KE which can be implemented and scaled-up in other institutions, and contribute positively to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Project activity included:

- Recruitment of students as lead or support mentors to deliver mental health themed workshops alongside practical sports and arts activities to children aged 6-16.

- A training package for student mentors, including Ambassador of Hope mental health training delivered by Chasing the Stigma; and training on Youth Mental Health First Aid, Safeguarding, Children's Rights, health and safety, and GDPR.
- Delivery of knowledge exchange, research, and graduate employability workshops.

This case study presents key findings around how the project has incorporated EDI into its design and delivery. The case study has been developed based on consultations with four members of the delivery and research team at Edge Hill University, three representatives from the two partner organisations (Everton in the Community and Tate Liverpool) and three students involved in project activities. The case study also draws on a review of the project's Final Report.

Project context

Edge Hill University has a diverse student body, with over 70% of its students having one or more widening participation characteristics[8]. The university typically attracts high a proportion of 'first-generation' students (who are the first in their family to attend university) and in the education and health faculties, there are a higher proportion of mature students when compared with the overall university population. While the student body is seen to reflect a mix of social backgrounds, it was reported there is a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds than other universities. Many of the students also have additional caring responsibilities.

Whilst the student body is broadly diverse, Edge Hill was reported by consultees to have lower rates of ethnic diversity than other universities. It was felt that this was reflective of the local geography; consultees stated that Edge Hill's main campus is situated in Ormskirk, Lancashire, which has a traditionally 'white working class' demographic, and a high proportion of its student body is drawn from the local area.

The context in which Edge Hill operates brings specific challenges for students engaging with KE activities. Many students have paid jobs alongside their studies, or have caring responsibilities, and therefore face barriers to engaging with KE activities, even though they may wish to engage. It was also noted that some students may have low confidence and self-esteem, and some come with the mindset that they do not have the social capital to engage with KE activity, providing an additional barrier to participation.

Influence of EDI on project design and delivery

Design

The project's original rationale, aims and objectives focused on the mental health and wellbeing of all young people involved in the project. They did not explicitly incorporate

[8] Edge Hill University (2021) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

issues of EDI for students engaged in the project prior to the funding period. However, with the support of funding from the OfS and RE, it was noted that EDI increasingly 'underpinned' the project's design, given its institutional context and its core objectives to contribute positively to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. In addition, the project's delivery team included two researchers who deliver continuous evaluation of the project, which was reported to have resulted in adaptations to project design which have reflected issues related to EDI (as discussed in more detail below).

Delivery

In addition to project design, EDI considerations influenced project delivery throughout the two-year funding period. Many of these considerations were in relation to student recruitment and retention, including:

- Students on the project are representative of the university in terms of its EDI composition, including many first-generation students, carers, care-experienced, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds whose parents typically have lower skilled jobs. A key challenge for these cohorts is accessibility. To engage these cohorts, the project provided paid roles for 'lead mentors' (students who lead on delivery in a school). 'Support mentors' (who support delivery in a school) were volunteers, but travel costs were paid for, as well as planning time. It was noted that some students may not have engaged if this was not offered.
- Early on in delivery, the project recognised challenges in recruiting and engaging men in project delivery, often as a result of the stigma associated with male mental health and especially for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or who are first generation students. Therefore, the project delivered targeted recruitment activity, for example around international men's day, or engaging with sports societies or academic programmes with high male participation.
- The project has utilised existing student mentors to help with delivery, recruitment, and engagement activity, as they were felt to be best placed to understand what challenges students are facing, and what might enable them to participate. The project has given mentors responsibility for marketing and social media delivery. Giving students ownership of this process has resulted in innovative student-led recruitment activity, for example an event with the LGBTQ+ society which focused on art and mental health, in conjunction with TATE Liverpool. This was reported to have led to additional recruitment.

Consultees also commented on other aspects of the project's delivery which they felt had been influenced by EDI considerations.

- The project aimed to ensure its delivery was as close to 'real-world' situations as possible, e.g. delivering written and interview application stages, requiring students to get to schools themselves, manage their time, claim expenses, etc. To ensure these

activities were accessible to all, they provided support for those who may not have experienced (or seen their parents/family experience) these processes beforehand. Consultees highlighted that the project aimed to provide graduate-level employability skills and experiences to all students, regardless of their background.

- The project prides itself on being flexible in how activity was delivered, with a range of models delivered based on student needs. For example, if students with other responsibilities (e.g. carers) could not commit to participating in a six- or 12-week project, they were able to participate in one-off delivery days in schools or attend project events (e.g. mental health training) The project also worked with schools to timetable sessions for when students could engage.
- The project also delivered Ambassador of Hope certified mental health training to students involved in project delivery. Whilst the key purpose of delivering this training was to expand the skills and knowledge of students working directly with young people experiencing, or at risk of developing, poor mental health, the training also aimed to improve the wellbeing and resilience of students who also have poor mental health.
- Consultees involved in project delivery reported that they make clear to students that they are an inclusive programme, with opportunities for all to engage and shape the programme based on their lived experiences. Students have talked about their own identity in relation to mental health when delivering activities to young people. As one delivery team consultee explained:

"[The project is] led by students. It is their programme. We encourage [their] voice… if one child can relate to a mentor being open, it is [all] worth it."
Consultee

EDI considerations for the young people within schools involved were also considered in project delivery. Students reported that they were given a full overview of EDI characteristics of the students they delivered activities to, which enabled them to adapt activities accordingly (e.g. supporting physically disabled young people to participate in sports activities, or not using scissors in activities if a student is unable to use them).

Lessons learned in addressing issues of EDI

Consultees identified a range of lessons learned about what works well when addressing issues of EDI in knowledge exchange, including:

- Having a hands-on, supported approach from the partner organisations with all students. This included regular meetings, and bringing together students to share learning and challenges.

- Working with partners whose values and strategic goals align with the project. Partners were fully invested in ensuring that the project was inclusive and supported a diverse range of young people.
- Providing complementary training and development alongside the core offer to facilitate knowledge exchange activity. Having dedicated mental health training to improve mental health literacy enabled students to better deliver activities to young people. It was also highlighted that this led to wider direct benefits over and above KE, by supporting students' own mental health. Interviewees noted several times that men's engagement with mental health was typically poor before the project, so this training gave them a good understanding of the issue and took them out of their comfort zone.

"Males who wouldn't typically talk about mental health, we got a lot staying involved with the programme, sharing their own experiences [around] how to look after their own mental health".
Consultee

- Bringing together students from different courses, to support sharing of skills, experience and knowledge (e.g. sports coaches, management students, education students, etc.). This allows students to learn from each other, and also brings together different characteristics e.g. gender, age, disability, etc.
- Offering flexibility, including hybrid options and the opportunity to engage as little or as much as students would like. However, it was noted that this could sometimes be challenging for partners and schools to accommodate.
- Targeting recruitment activities at groups of students who have traditionally been harder to engage through the project, specifically men who typically have not engaged with conversations around mental health.
- Delivering a 'real world' application experience which was flexible and inclusive, yet gave students an idea of the expectations of the project. The application process involved a written application, an interview, and then, for some, an example lesson plan and delivery. A student noted that this process had prepared them for other job interviews they had subsequently completed.
- Giving students ownership of activity delivery, which meant that they could apply their own lived experience, and enable young people to view them as 'relatable' and a 'role model', particularly those who grew up in disadvantaged areas similar to the young people involved. However, it was also noted that partners offered a lot of support for students at the same time, supporting them to develop and build on their ideas and sharing resources. Partners were also in tune with students' capabilities. For example, they would 'phase out' when students gained confidence, or attend all sessions in challenging schools.

Lessons from the project have also informed post-Competition delivery, specifically regarding the involvement of student voice in the design of the project. For 2022-2023 activity, the design team co-designed the project with students, including around what the student role should look like, and how the project can maximise its inclusivity. It is expected this will ensure that the right support systems are in place for those that need them.

EDI considerations of young people as beneficiaries have also been considered in designing the next year of delivery. At the point of the case study research, the project was working with schools and young people to understand what topics they want to cover, what they already know, and what is most important to them. This stage of the process is focused on understanding the mental health literacy of beneficiaries, and tailoring activity delivered by students to the needs of young people, with a key focus on neurodiverse young people (including in SEND[9] specialist settings).

Dissemination and knowledge sharing

The TtB project has developed an online toolkit[10] to support others seeking to implement similar projects. It provides a blueprint for other institutions to set up collaborations to address mental health and support student engagement in KE. It was noted that Competition funding had enabled the project to have a greater focus on KE than it had previously, and the project was more focused on measuring KE and understanding how it enriched opportunities for students. The toolkit enabled them to articulate this.

Learning from TtB may also impact on mental health support nationally. The project is currently sharing learning with the UK government, who are using learning from the project to support the development of mental health hubs, addressing community need where people need it.

The project will continue to be delivered post-Competition funding. The project is well established, both within the university, with its partners, and within local communities. It was noted that the university had since provided funding for both project researchers in full time positions. It was expected that this would enable the project to further understand its impact, including on students from EDI backgrounds.

Keele University

The ‘Student Knowledge Exchange Reimagined – Removing the Barriers, Engaging Communities’ project was delivered as a partnership between Keele University and the University of Birmingham, over September 2020-August 2022. The project aimed to scale up existing KE provision by targeting new civic businesses and organisations for partnership and student-mediated KE, multiplying and diversifying civic internships,

[9] Special educational needs and disability
[10] https://sites.edgehill.ac.uk/tacklingtheblues/toolkit/

creating a suite of virtual internships, and exploring new and broader student cohorts for participation. Activities delivered by the project included virtual internships, consultancies, enterprise challenges and, the development of enterprise modules for the curriculum.

This case study presents key findings around how the project incorporated EDI into its design and delivery. The case study is based on consultations with members of the project team and wider staff involved in delivery, a student, and a partner organisation.

Project context

Both universities are fully committed to EDI, and were active in this space prior to the project. This was reflected in their access and participation plans (APPs). EDI was considered by both institutions to encompass the full student journey, from access, to participation, success, and progression.

Both institutions had a variety of policies in this space, including decolonising the curriculum initiatives, APPs, Athena Swan Charter, and Race Equality Charter. At Keele University, key elements included a disability staff forum, EDI committees and champions, and mentoring programmes for the most disadvantaged students. There were similar initiatives at Birmingham and an impetus to improve both staff and student representation. EDI issues were also championed at Birmingham via a Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor whose remit is Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

A number of barriers that prevent students from engaging in and benefiting from KE were cited by both universities. These included a lack of confidence, networks, and work experience for some students, and challenges for some students in committing to a 9am-5pm work schedule for internships or similar opportunities owing to other commitments. Other barriers included students being time-poor due to part-time work and childcare/caring responsibilities, and tech poverty where students do not have access to technology to engage in some experiential learning opportunities.

Influence of EDI on project design and delivery

Design

EDI considerations and broadening student access to KE influenced project design from the outset. One of the project's ambitions was to prioritise underrepresented groups, and the project's logic model states that "*underrepresented students are put at the heart of our activity*". Further, the project explicitly chose to include the phrases "removing the barriers" and "engaging communities" in its title to reinforce and highlight the focus on addressing issues of EDI to students and partners.

During project design, the project team developed a widening participation paper to describe the context of the project and outline a list of groups to be targeted/prioritised for engagement. Group selection was influenced by the two institutions' APPs, student data, and the project team's experience of working in this space. However, the project team were conscious that categorisations can be imperfect and using broad groups can be misleading. For example, considering BME students as a single group can fail to reflect the considerable diversity of experience and range of backgrounds within this category.

Further to this, there were several ways in which considerations of EDI influenced project design:

- A virtual mode of delivery for the internships was chosen (pre-pandemic) to increase accessibility, flexibility and to help address time and financial barriers that underrepresented groups may face. The model chosen was 55 hours over 10 weeks, with a conversation about availability/working patterns at the start of the internship. A financial bursary was also provided to the students with payment purposefully provided upfront.
- For the enterprise activities, a bursary was provided to address financial barriers.
- EDI considerations were considered during project design not just from a student perspective, but also in relation to the types of organisations the project chose to work with. Organisations who were offering opportunities to students were carefully selected and were given support from the project in order to co-create unique KE opportunities that fit both the requirements of the organisation and the student. This allowed for agility and flexibility, which the project team were keen to embed in the design of the project.

Delivery

EDI considerations directly influenced project delivery. Careful consideration was given to how the project was delivered so that it was seen to be accessible to all groups of students or the community. At all stages of project delivery, underrepresented groups were taken into consideration and supported. A number of approaches were taken by both institutions to recruit students from underrepresented groups onto the project:

- Creating a student talent pool. This was a database of students who had expressed interest in the KE activities. Students completed a simple form on their skills, which fed into a matching process when new projects were uploaded. This process enabled the project to effectively target students to opportunities that matched their skillset.
- Building a rapport with students. The project team made sure that communications with students were personal, clear, and friendly, and avoided the use of standard/boilerplate and formal emails. Students were also offered one-to-one

support throughout the whole process of engagement. The project team would also provide tailored feedback on CVs and interviews when students were unsuccessful in their applications for the virtual internship opportunities, and help these students prepare for other opportunities.

- Diversity throughout the project. The project team made sure that there was diversity in the types of programmes and internship roles on offer, the language that was used, who was invited to take part in the support, and whose stories were shared with the university as case studies and role models.
- Using a number of different communication channels and stakeholder groups within the university. The project team built relationships with and promoted the activities through relevant student societies, programme leaders, the disability support team, networks (e.g., LGBT community, BME community), and the Birmingham Scholars group[11]. Birmingham University have professional service staff members who look after different groups of widening participation students and organise coffee mornings so that they can meet other like-minded students with similar experiences. One staff member from the project team would attend these coffee mornings to get to know the students and invite them along to the enterprise events. As this same staff member would present at the enterprise events, this helped the students feel more comfortable attending and participating in the sessions.
- Breaking down the barriers to entry. For the internships, the project offered paid, flexible opportunities, e.g., virtual and flexible hours. For the enterprise activities, the project offered seed funding and financial support. On both aspects, participating in the activities involved the completion of 'light touch' application forms and straightforward/simple selection procedures.
- Using accessible language. The team ensured that the use of language around the enterprise events and activities was accessible to students, e.g., changing and simplifying 'entrepreneurial skills' to 'team building skills' or 'communication skills'.

Towards the beginning of their engagement, the project team would brief the employer to help them understand what the project was trying to achieve in terms of engaging underrepresented students and why they were taking this approach. Consultees reported that this helped to ensure that students were supported effectively throughout the internship.

The project also created an impact tool to measure the impact of KE, including the use of widening participation data. The tool considers impact on students, the university, opportunity providers (i.e., businesses, charities), and place.

[11] The Birmingham Scholars group works with a certain group of widening participation students.

Lessons learned in addressing issues of EDI

Overall, the project was viewed positively by the project team in terms of addressing issues of EDI. Data analysis had shown that there was a higher proportion of underrepresented students on this project than in the university as a whole (e.g., more mature students, more disabled students). Outcomes for students included positive graduate outcomes, skills development, and increased confidence. The project was also seen to have effectively addressed issues of access to KE related to employers, for example, one consultee noted:

"I think, for some employers, there's no lack of willingness to engage with different groups of students. But there was maybe a lack in knowing how to do it. I think what this project has really demonstrated is that with some flexibility and with the willingness to work together, those barriers have really been broken down."

Case study consultees

Consultees identified six lessons with regard to what works well and less well when addressing issues of EDI in knowledge exchange:

- Offer wrap-around support to students – the case study research suggests that students valued having someone "touch base" with them and someone to share concerns with. The project team offered a substantial level of personal contact with the students which helped to develop personal relationships and anticipate and mitigate any issues that could impact on on-going engagement. It was reported that students also appreciated the other support mechanisms in place, e.g., the flexibility and the finance.
- Offer flexible internships to support inclusion – the project suggests that students benefit from a variety of engagement mechanisms and pathways. By introducing virtual internships, the project was able to offer opportunities that were better suited to certain students, particularly those who needed to fit the internship around part-time jobs or family commitments.
- Working with SMEs may offer more opportunities for influencing business practices – the project team found that certain organisations, often SMEs who had not previously offered internships, were more open to discussing how issues of EDI might affect the recruitment stage. To add to this, they were also more open to learning from the project team on how to implement a fair and inclusive recruitment process. The project team found that SMEs were more willing to be guided on these issues than large firms.
- The value of early and detailed employer engagement and briefing – the project team found that it is important to engage early with partners in the design of the activity to ensure it meets both student and employer expectations.

- Working in partnership – despite some differences in their operational context and student characteristics, the two universities involved in this project found that there are often consistent issues in addressing EDI and approaches that can be effective. A partnership model can help through sharing of insight and best practice.
- Consider communication channels carefully – emails and the use of social media channels to promote the project did not work as well as the project team expected. Students received an oversaturation of emails, especially during the Covid pandemic, which meant invitations to participate could get lost.

Dissemination and knowledge sharing

There were several examples of dissemination and knowledge sharing linked to the project:

- Project partners Keele University and the University of Birmingham shared learning internally, including on issues relating to EDI. For example, changing the wording of the evaluation questions or offering advice on how to run bootcamps. The universities would like to continue working together in the future and are exploring what form this might take. Partners are also using the learning from this project to inform their wider internship activity, to ensure internship opportunities are accessible to all students going forward. For example, introducing a question-based application form and a confirmed interview scheme, and emphasising in internship job description issues related to skills and qualities, rather than experience.
- Externally, there is a website that sets out reflections on the project and examples of best practice. The project team have also attended and presented at conferences, which also helped to support continuous improvement in delivery. Further, the project organised a symposium in May 2022 which brought together different universities in the UK to present on their activity in related/similar KE activities and to share key learning on what works well and less well.
- The impact tool, which includes guidance on approaches that include underrepresented groups, has been shared and piloted with nine other universities. The project team have also delivered presentations on the toolkit at several KE-focused conferences.

Queen Mary University of London

The ‘Student Knowledge Exchange Through Community Hubs’ or SKETCH project was delivered by Queen Mary University London (QMUL) between September 2020 and February 2023. The project aimed to increase the number and range of students engaged in knowledge exchange activities by bringing together four existing ‘pillars’ of

activity, with a new fifth pillar and a Social Impact Unit to monitor and evaluate the activity and stimulate collective impact across the pillars. The five pillars were:

- Queen Mary Legal Advice Centre (LAC): a student-led pro bono law clinic within the School of Law, supporting individuals and social groups who fall below an income threshold and would not otherwise be able to access legal support.
- qLegal: a student-led pro bono law clinic within the School of Law, supporting local social enterprises and start-ups who would not otherwise be able to access legal support.
- qNomics: QMUL's student-led venture (established in 2015) within the School of Economics and Finance, providing free financial guidance to local tech start-ups and entrepreneurs.
- Student Consultancy Project (formerly 'qConsult'): delivering student-led general business consulting in inter-disciplinary teams to small businesses and charities in East London.
- Social Venture Fund (new): a student-led fund, providing start-up capital and investment services to local, socially responsible SMEs.

This case study presents key findings around how the project has incorporated EDI into its design and delivery. The case study has been developed based on interviews with seven project delivery team representatives and two student participants.

Project context

Inclusivity is at the heart of QMUL. This is clearly represented in the university's Strategy 2030[12], which includes the goal to be '*the most inclusive university of its kind, anywhere*'. The student body is diverse, with a mix of home students who often come from the areas surrounding the university in East London (itself a very socially and economically diverse area), and a significant international student population. A member of the Russell Group of research-intensive universities, QMUL has a home students that is distinctive for a Russell Group institution, with the latest data indicating 91% attending from state school, 60% from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, 42% first generation into HE, and 27% from households considered low income. QMUL actively seeks out and recruits students from backgrounds underrepresented at Russell Group institutions and offers support to students to successfully transition to university life.

In Strategy 2030, there is recognition that often '*students do not have networks and in-built confidence to enable them to aspire to the careers they deserve… they do not always have the support they need to manage the many conflicting demands of their lives whilst at university*'. The university is therefore dedicated to ensuring students

[12] https://www.qmul.ac.uk/media/strategy/docs/QMUL-Strategy2030.pdf

receive support, tailored to each individual, and opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities and engage in peer-to-peer learning. Key to this is ensuring students understand the opportunities available to them and the value these experiences provide.

Issues of EDI have been reflected in changes to teaching and learning, through the decolonisation of the curriculum and the encouraged use of inclusive pedagogical techniques. What is seen as equally important is the inclusion of the student voice in decision-making processes, initiatives and programmes across the university. Ensuring student voices are heard is seen as a way to empower students and give them agency as well as ensuring decisions and strategies are inclusive.

QMUL has a strong track record of KE activities, particularly those involving the local community in East London, one of the UK's most economically deprived and multi-cultural areas. Reflecting the values of the university, issues of EDI are core to these KE activities, in relation to students involved, the projects undertaken, and the organisations and businesses engaged.

Influence of EDI on project design and delivery

Design

The SKETCH project aimed to support all student groups. However, given the diversity of the student population at the university, there naturally is considerable diversity amongst participants in KE activities. Further, the project did support students who typically may be underrepresented in such KE activities, such as home students and those from low-income backgrounds. This ties back to the idea that often these students may not have networks of their own and/or may not be as aware of such opportunities.

Further, all of the five pillars covered by SKETCH were focused on student-led activity, to give students agency, and there was a consistent imperative to ensure a diverse range of views and backgrounds were included amongst participants. The pillar activities are all also focused on helping those in the local community – both in terms of individuals and organisations – who may not otherwise receive the support they need.

Delivery

SKETCH activities were designed to provide students with interdisciplinary skills, to increase cultural and social capital, and to improve employability. The project also focused on bringing students from different backgrounds and academic disciplines together to learn from one another. Through the projects students were:

- Exposed to businesses and organisations they may not have traditionally engaged with, and the businesses and organisations are introduced to and receive support from a diverse range of students.

- Able to 'give back' to the community around them, while also gaining important skills.

Issues of EDI were core to the delivery of the project. Given the range of activity across the five pillars covered by SKETCH, this was realised in different ways in practice, which reflected the specific nature and coverage of the KE activity supported by the pillar. However, some examples of how EDI considerations influenced delivery of project activity across this range of activity included:

- Ring-fencing places for particular student groups. For example, the Student Consultancy Project pillar allocated 50% of available places to students holding bursaries (and therefore from low-income backgrounds).
- Direct recruitment efforts towards targeted groups. For example, through using existing e-mail lists (e.g. bursary holders) and using the Careers and Enterprise team to help identify and target students that may be interested in participating.
- Ensuring representation in project delivery and governance functions. For example, the Social Venture Fund ensure the Advisory Board that was set-up to help shape and steer the activity included individuals from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences
- Engaging local organisations and businesses, which supported EDI issues given the diversity of the local area.
- Engaging the Careers and Enterprise team before and after activities. For example, to help students prepare an application for one of the activities or to help them articulate the skills they have developed on their CV
- Creating environments that make students feel comfortable, by stressing the importance of respecting one another and learning from each other from the outset.
- Where possible, making activities flexible, to make it easier for students with responsibilities outside of university to take part. For example the Student Consultancy Projects were part-time and involved flexible hours.

Lessons learned in addressing issues of EDI

Several key lessons were identified in the case study in relation to 'what works' in addressing issues of EDI in relation to KE:

- The importance of a 'student-led' approach. Students were able to shape the activity and their experience, gaining important skills through the process. For example:
  - Students working on consultancy projects worked directly with the client, to co-create and define the work to be delivered. Through this process, and by completing the work, they were exposed to the client, who could be a potential

future employer, and gained professional skills. Often students are exposed to organisations they would not typically be exposed to.

  - The Social Venture Fund was fully student-led, as the students are the investors. Students identify potential investee organisations, and manage the investment process, with support from project staff and the Advisory Board (which is itself diverse). This involved two rounds of funding, to support learning. The fund aims to have student investors from a diverse range of backgrounds and to invest in organisations that also reflect this diversity.

- Providing the opportunity for students from different backgrounds and disciplines to work together. Where possible, conscious efforts were made to create groups that included a mix of academic disciplines, undergraduate and postgraduate students, home and international students, and a mix of genders and races/ethnicities. This was seen to provide students with the opportunity to learn from others, both academically and in terms of soft skills. As one consultee stated, a benefit of this is that they "*learn how to negotiate with each other, and navigate people*".

- Engaging with the Careers and Enterprise Team, which proved to be effective for multiple pillars. For example:

  - For the consultancy projects, Careers Consultants were engaged to help recruit students, support applications, and integrate the activity/new skills developed on their CV post-activity. This was seen as particularly especially important for students who do not typically engage with KE. Students were also provided with training on topics such as teamwork and professional communication and received coaching support.

  - The Social Venture Fund specifically engaged the Careers and Enterprise Team to help identify suitable and diverse students to become investors. The team successfully identified participants who met both the skills/experience requirements and diversity requirements (BME, disabled students, females, etc.)

Dissemination and knowledge sharing

The overall objective of the SKETCH project was to develop a new model of 'SKETCH learning' and embed it within QMUL and the wider East London KE community, and share it with other HEIs. Learning from SKETCH will directly input into this model. 'SKETCH learning' is seen by QMUL to represent a new, values-driven model of authentic learning, which is interdisciplinary, locally rooted, and socially responsible.

Royal Northern College of Music

The StART Entrepreneurship project was delivered by the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in collaboration with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD) and University of the Arts London (UAL) between September 2020 and August

2022. The project aimed to fill the gap in enterprise education for creative industries HE students. There were three main areas of activity:

- Growth and development of existing intra- and extra-curricular initiatives at each of the three institutions.
- Testing and development of new activities at each institution.
- Two cross-institution events: (i) KickStART Creative Lab (an online weekend entrepreneurship bootcamp) and (ii) StART Linking Up (a series of 14 online and in-person workshops with industry professionals).

This case study presents key findings around how the project incorporated EDI into its design and delivery. The case study draws on consultations with the Principal Investigator (PI), two Co-Principal Investigators (Co-PIs), a member of the Advisory Board, and three students (across two institutions) who participated in the KE activities. The case study also draws on a review of the project's Final Report for the Competition-level evaluation.

Project context

Issues of EDI are a key priority for the three institutions. For RNCM, a key facet of the Access and Participation Plan is supporting potential students from low income families to build the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to be successful at audition to a conservatoire programme. The Access and Participation Plan outlines active measures that the college is taking to address this, including bespoke tailored support through the Pathfinder Programme, audition preparation support, and financial support to remove financial barriers to the audition process.

Further, the college's Belonging, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (BEDI) Report 2021-22 acknowledges that the challenge of increasing the number of BME home students remains[13]. Actions taken by RNCM include establishing an EDI Working Group and Underrepresented Working Group (the latter involving the Principal Investigator (PI) of StART). In addition, each of the institutional sub-strategies (particularly Learning and Teaching, Research and Knowledge Exchange, and the Artistic Strategy) includes key aims, objectives and KPIs relating to the BEDI Strategy. Each Strategy leader reports to the BEDI Forum termly with respect to progress on the EDI KPIs. Both of the RNCM's project partner institutions have relatively recently published anti-racism action plans. RCSSD acknowledged that they had been complicit in systemic and institutional racism,

[13] In 2020/21, 61.5% of the college's student population identified as white, 1.4% identified as Asian, 0.4% identified as black, 4.3% identified as mixed, and 0.8% identified as 'other'. The unknown ethnicity category was relatively high at 31.4%. For further information see the report at BEDI_Report-2021-22-FINAL.pdf (rncm.ac.uk).

so an anti-racism action plan was developed to generate meaningful change[14]. Actions have included a change of senior team (including the Principal), changes in working practices, and changes to the recruitment of staff. UAL's anti-racism action plan also sets objectives and expectations to tackle racial inequality, including the aim that '30% of staff will be BME by 2024'. UAL's BME staff population is currently 23%, which compares well to HE in general (14.5% of all staff), but less well to HEIs in London (28% of all staff).

At the outset, the project team understood that extra-curriculum KE activities exclude certain groups of students, such as those with jobs or caring responsibilities or those without a family history of entrepreneurship. Therefore, a key focus for the project was identifying and reducing barriers to participation.

Influence of EDI on project design and delivery

Design

Issues of EDI were considered at the outset of StART. The original application for support from the Competition set out its objective to address barriers in uptake and inclusion in enterprise education, and *"to ensure diversity, both in the external partners and the HEIs, in order to inspire all students".* Further, two of the project's success criteria were specifically EDI-focused, by targeting underrepresented groups: (i) 50% increase in applications from minority groups, including BME students (UAL only, in relation to student engagement over the course of the project.), and (ii) 50% increase in applications from minority groups, including BME students, carers, and students with disabilities (RNCM and RCSSD, in relation to applications for Entrepreneurship Awards schemes).

However, EDI considerations evolved and gained greater prominence over time for two reasons. First, following analysis of the characteristics of students engaging with StART's activities, the team became increasingly interested in understanding *why* some groups were not engaging. Second, and linked, the project completed a re-budget[15], reallocating monies to the following EDI-focused activities:

- Appointing a consultant to develop learning plans for applicants to the KickStART Creative Lab bootcamp[16] with additional learning needs.
- Appointing a researcher specialising in EDI and entrepreneurship to undertake a research study on how successfully EDI initiatives were incorporated into the 'Kickstart Creative Lab'.

[14] The anti-racism action plan is available at Anti-Racism at Central | The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (cssd.ac.uk).
[15] Reallocation of expenditure, such as travel costs, because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
[16] Open to all students across all three institutions.

- The delivery of a large-scale survey project across all three institutions focused on barriers to KE access for students.

Delivery

Throughout StART's delivery the three HEIs actively shared knowledge and experiences of what works well and less well in addressing EDI-related issues. Examples of how project activity was influenced in practice included:

- The design and delivery of the two cross-institution events (KickStART Creative Lab and StART Linking Up). For example:
  - Both events included a diverse range of speakers.
  - During the KickStART Creative Lab, the keynotes were live signed and captioned, and students were asked in advance whether they had any additional learning needs and were then offered a 30-minute one-on-one session with a specialist in personal learning needs.
  - Following feedback on the KickStART Creative Lab regarding accessibility/inclusivity (for example, it was delivered over a weekend making it difficult for students who work to attend), the project actively revised the planned approach for the second event and delivered StART Linking Up as a series of workshops on weekdays instead, ranging in length and delivery approach (online and in-person).
- RCSSD revised their Entrepreneurship Award application process to enhance accessibility. Changes included altering the terminology around enterprise to make it more accessible, asking for a short video (rather than a business plan) at the initial application stage, then subsequently supporting applicants with developing a business plan so that individuals are not disadvantaged by a lack of social capital (i.e. a lack of personal connections or networks which they can draw on when completing a business plan).
- Diversity in the speakers, panel members for the entrepreneurship awards, and mentors for students. When engaging external partners, the importance of EDI was mentioned upfront.
- A large-scale survey was completed across all three institutions at the end of the project (see above) to identify what barriers may have existed for students who: (i) were aware of StART and (ii) did not engage in its activities. The survey has made an important contribution to the evidence base because there was no existing empirical data on barriers to accessing intra- and extra-curricular activities for creative industries students.
- Diverse membership on the Advisory Board, including a member focused on diversity and a member who supports female entrepreneurs. Feedback from a board member

indicated that discussions were meaningful, and the StART team was receptive to advice/feedback on EDI.

Lessons learned in addressing issues of EDI

Consultees identified a range of lessons learned with regard to what works well when addressing issues of EDI in KE, including:

- To ensure that EDI is at the forefront of project design and delivery, it is critical that EDI is embedded into programme design from the outset, for example, by including specific EDI targets which individual projects must report against.
- The delivery team were "driven by the [EDI] agenda", thus EDI was a priority. The whole ethos of the project was to focus on the individual student, and in doing so that helped the project address issues of EDI.
- Robust EDI data collection is critical because it forms a very persuasive narrative regarding the challenges and effective approaches to addressing issues related to EDI. However, the approach to data collection must not act as a barrier to participation (e.g. due to the amount of data being collected, the types of questions asked, and/or individuals feeling they are being treated differently to others due to their background).
- There were some positive implications from shifting delivery online due to COVID-19 related restrictions, including improved accessibility (e.g. no travel required, transcription of recordings), greater opportunities for students across the three HEIs to collaborate, and greater access to a more diverse range of professionals from around the world (e.g. Australia). However online delivery resulted in some challenges, for example, with instigating meaningful connections between stakeholders (tutors, students, industry partners). Overall, the project found a hybrid delivery approach is the most effective.
- In general, KE activities delivered intra- and co-curricular were found to be more inclusive and accessible by helping to remove some of the barriers that exist with extra-curricular activity (e.g. part time work, caring responsibilities). However, it was noted that extra-curricular activities are often more easily implemented and agile.
- Listening to the 'student voice' is critical in addressing issues relating to EDI. StART engaged students in project design and delivery, such as via (paid) student representation on the Advisory Board. This said, the team acknowledged scope to engage students further.
- The "language that is used is really important" in ensuring that a diverse range of students engage with KE activities focused on enterprise. For instance, a balance must be struck between making entrepreneurship as attractive as possible by ensuring the financial aspects do not deter students who are less financially literate

and/or motivated, but equally, promoting the importance of securing finance and financial stability to ensure entrepreneurship is not the preserve of students from wealthier backgrounds.

- When delivering KE activities, there needs to be an explicit focus on ensuring that any speakers, mentors, panellists etc. are representative of the (current and future) student body. This includes considering characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background.
- One-on-one conversations/sessions with students are important, alongside group-based activities. This helps ensure the learning needs/preferences of individuals are considered, and to dispel stereotypes/self-perceptions of who can or cannot be an entrepreneur.
- There was some feedback that there could have been greater diversity within the StART team (although it is hard to fully ascertain the degree of diversity e.g. in relation to disabilities) as this would have provided greater lived experiences within the team.

Dissemination and knowledge sharing

The project has, and continues to, disseminate learning on addressing issues of EDI through various forms including keynotes, panel talks, and presentations. For example:

- A joint talk (PI and Co-PIs) at the International Entrepreneurship Educators Conference 2022 (IEEC2022) conference solely focused on barriers to engagement with entrepreneurship and enterprise education. According to the advisory board member, interest in this talk has initiated further research/interest in this area.
- Internal learning sharing with colleagues within the lead and partner institutions. For example, UAL shared project learning with colleagues at their annual Education Conference.
- The PI delivered a presentation at the Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ISBE) conference 2022 focused on improving access to enterprise education, spoke at the NERUPI[17] event on 'Access and Widening Participation in the Creative and Performing Arts Programme' in February 2022, and in December 2022 was invited to speak as part of a series of lecturers at Sibelius Academy in Finland focused on musicians' employability and careers.
- At the time of writing, the PI was in the process of writing several publications on EDI, including '*How do specialist creative arts higher education institutions conceive of equality, diversity and inclusivity, and plan activities with students in light of these?'*

[17] NERUPI is a partnership of over 70 higher education organisations working together to create a new approach to evaluation

and '*What are the barriers to engagement with entrepreneurship and enterprise education? A case study with students from three creative industries HEIs'.*

- At the time of writing, the project was in the process of developing a project report to share online, which will include the findings/evidence on EDI.

University of Greenwich

Gre Hacks, led by the Generator at the University of Greenwich, delivered a series of two-day student 'hacks' – short programmes where people come together to solve problems – run with partner organisations from the private and voluntary/community sector. Ten hacks were delivered between 2020 and 2022, including both online and in-person hacks. Following each hack, students were able to apply for a 10-12 week paid internship with the hack partner organisation. The project aimed to engage with around 400 students, providing consultancy and enterprise experience to improve skills, enhance CVs, and improve employability outcomes. With each hack delivered over a two-day period, Gre Hacks sought to remove barriers to participation in KE from students from all backgrounds. The project also sought to promote the concept of KE to academic staff, and provide partner organisations with ideas, insights, and solutions to challenges.

This case study presents key findings around how the project has incorporated EDI into its design and delivery, the key lessons learned, and plans for dissemination and knowledge sharing. The case study is based on consultations with the Gre Hacks team, two partner organisations, three academics at the university, and four students involved in hacks.

Project context

The university has a diverse student body: in 2020, 51% of the student body identified as BME students, a higher than sector proportion of students were mature (36%), and over half of students had long commutes to the university (45 minutes or more), had caring responsibilities, and/or needed to work to support their family[18]. In this context, supporting EDI is a priority for the university, which aims to become a sector leader for EDI, with key objectives and actions set out in the EDI Strategy 2019-22.[19] Reducing the attainment and employability gaps between BME and white students and those from protected groups is a priority for the university. This is also reflected in the university's Strategic Plan[20], which places a high priority on issues related to EDI in its values, principles, and strategic priorities, and across its teaching and student experience, research, and knowledge exchange activities.

[18] access-and-participation-plan-202122-202425.pdf (gre.ac.uk)
[19] EDI-Strategy-and-Action-Plan-2019-2022-February-2021.pdf (gre.ac.uk)
[20] uog-strategy.pdf (gre.ac.uk)

Influence of EDI on project design and delivery

Design

Core to the underpinning rationale for the project was to design an intervention that addressed barriers to engagement in KE activities for students including those related to the anticipated level of time involved, and managing this around other commitments both in study and more widely (e.g. employment, caring responsibilities). The hack approach would provide the opportunity for students to engage in a discrete and focused activity completed over a short period of time (two days over a weekend), while gaining valuable experience and skills, and the potential to apply for a more substantive engagement via an internship. As one consultee for the case study described it: the "*hack provides a short burst of experience, which is more accessible for students"*.

Within this context, and while participation in the hacks was open to all students at the university, the project was designed to specifically address issues of EDI. Notably, within the planned 400 students to be engaged in the project, three priority target groups were established: BME students, students with caring responsibilities, and disabled students. The project aimed to ensure that at least 40% of students participating were from these target groups to deliver against the aim to seek to address the attainment gap and lower levels of engagement in KE activities delivered by the Generator previously from these groups.

Further, a key element of the design of the project – both at the outset and on-going during delivery – was to seek to support EDI through the selection of partner organisations involved in the hacks. There was a focus on seeking to identify and engage with partner organisations where there was a strong alignment to the EDI ethos and principles of the project. This included considering the mission and purpose of the organisation and/or the characteristics and backgrounds of its leaders and managers/owners. This alignment of the partner organisations to the project's aims and objectives was seen as crucial by consultees to securing student interest, engagement, and commitment to the hacks. As one consultee for the case study noted: "*We aim to find employers who are inclusive… so projects naturally become focused on EDI issues*".

Delivery

EDI has influenced project delivery, from initial recruitment and engagement via marketing and communications, to the development of individual hacks, and securing engagement and retention during delivery. Crucially, given high levels of demand, with the number of applications generally exceeding the number of places, the project team has been able to deliver against the target of at least 40% of students participating coming from target groups; at the time of the fourth reporting point to the Competition Evaluation in May 2022, 44% of hack participants has been from the target groups, reflecting the success of recruitment and marketing strategies.

These strategies included, alongside general communications and marketing activities targeted at all students, engagement with relevant societies and groups to help promote the project. For example, the project engaged with the Asian and Caribbean Society and were able to help promote the project through existing social media channels. As one consultee noted: "*It's about identifying communities and getting into their own networks rather than trying to get them to come to us*".

The project team also used a range of other mechanisms of engagement including 'lecture shout outs' on relevant courses to attract students, and promotion/awareness raising at a range of university events and locations. This complemented e-mail promotions, although it was noted by both project partners and several students consulted that an e-mail approach alone would have been unlikely to be successful. The range of different promotion and engagement mechanisms was therefore important as one student consulted noted: "*It's difficult to reach students with regular communications given how many e-mails we are bombarded with*".

Lessons learned in addressing issues of EDI

Several key lessons were identified in the case study in relation to 'what works' in addressing issues of EDI in relation to KE:

- The characteristics and make-up of the delivery team matters. The Gre Hacks team included several individuals that were/had recently been students at the university, which was seen to have helped in student recruitment and retention, particular amongst students from harder-to-reach/underrepresented groups; e.g. they were more comfortable asking questions about the project, particularly taking into account the significant level of engagement and contact that was put into the recruitment process pre-hack. The diversity of the project team and its commitment to EDI issues was also noted by consultees.
- It is important to clearly demonstrate the importance and commitment to EDI through the engagement of diverse communities in partners, project activities, and delivery agents. As noted above, the choice of business partners was seen as key to engaging students. Several hacks also included a particular focus on addressing challenges that considered issues related to EDI, and this was seen as important in attracting target groups and wider study cohorts, and in retention across the two-day hack. Further, the project included the use of facilitators to support the hacks drawn from diverse communities. This combination was seen to provide an 'authentic' demonstration of the importance of EDI in the project.
- Leveraging existing networks and communities to reach target groups is important. As noted above, the project successful engaged with student societies and groups, helping to leverage the existing social media challenges and networks that had been established.

- Multiple engagement and promotion mechanisms are crucial, alongside targeted recruitment. There is no single mechanism that works alone; the case study suggests using a mix of communication channels is important to attract a diverse range of students.
- Substantial and one-to-one pre-activity engagement can secure commitment and retention. Following an initial application process, the project supported students throughout the process including regular e-mails, contacts, and meetings to discuss the hack and what it will involve, including to address any issues related to confidence or perceived ability to engage. This included brief phone-based interviews to check the motivations of students and to boost their potential attendance. As a member of the project team noted: "*The first rush of applications comes from email, but that doesn't mean you'll get students through the door… reminders and further engagement and speaking to people n person is important*".

The project experienced some challenges in engaging certain target groups, notably students with caring responsibilities and disabled students (including neurodivergent students), which provided a range of broader lessons to inform ongoing and future delivery. Considering these groups in turn:

- Students with caring responsibilities. The project found it hard to engage with this group in part because they may be 'hidden' with less well-established networks, reflecting the inherent challenge of engaging students with caring responsibilities over a two-day period. The project sought to address this by providing the offer of money towards childcare for students with young children; however, the take up of this offer was low (and this did not cover individuals with adult caring responsibilities). Notably, take-up amongst students with caring responsibilities was higher for online compared to in-person hacks. This is likely to reflect the greater flexibility, reduced time required for travel, and ability to 'multi-task' alongside the hack at home via an online mechanism. This may suggest that a more targeted approach for students with caring responsibilities, involving online hacks, may be appropriate going forward.
- Disabled students. The project identified that they were not attracting a sufficient number of applicants from this target group through existing communication and promotion channels. This may have reflected concerns from students regarding the hack process, including the need to be present and working with a broad group of other students. In response, as one key action, the project engaged with a national autism charity to discuss the issue and how this could be addressed. This led to an agreement to deliver a hack specifically with the charity (following the end of the OfS project period), and the project will seek to engage with the university Wellbeing Team to enable targeting of relevant students. This demonstrates how the project has effectively pivoted and responded to address issues of engagement with student groups.

Dissemination and knowledge sharing

The project has developed a toolkit – "*The Generator's guide to running a successful KE hackathon*" – which was launched in September 2022 and is publicly available[21]. This includes a range of lessons and advice in relation to engaging students, including those from diverse backgrounds. The toolkit highlights the importance of empathy in the promotion, awareness raising, and delivery of the hacks, as well as the importance of targeted recruitment activities. The project has also published details of all of its completed and upcoming hacks online[22], helping to spread awareness and understanding of the project.

Notably, and reflecting the commitment to EDI demonstrated though the project, the Generator team delivering Gre Hacks won the "Inclusivity Champion Award" at the university's "This is Our Time Staff Awards 2022".

University of Portsmouth

The 'Creative Students Creating Business' project was delivered by the University of Portsmouth between September 2020 and July 2022. The project aimed to evaluate current Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange (SEKE) activities in two faculties (Business and Law, and Creative and Cultural Industries) and to develop a structured toolkit to disseminate and share best practice on delivering SEKE projects, both internally at Portsmouth and with the wider HE sector.

This case study presents key findings around how the project incorporated EDI into its design and delivery. It has been developed based on interviews with the project team and wider staff involved in delivery at the university.

Project context

The University of Portsmouth has an Equality and Diversity Team which supports staff and students, and helps the university meet its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The Equality and Diversity Team also engages with external organisations to help inform EDI practice and planning, including Stonewall Diversity Champions, Working Families, Time to Change, Mindful Employer, AccessAble, and Disability Confident. The university has also signed up to two national HE equality charters – Athena SWAN, which focuses on gender equality, and the Race Equality Charter, run by Advance Higher Education. These charters enable the university to apply for awards recognising progress on equality and diversity. The aim is to encourage cultural and systemic changes to ensure the university is an equal and diverse organisation.

[21] The Generator's guide to running a successful KE hackathon | Documents | University of Greenwich
[22] #GreHacks | Generator | University of Greenwich

Across the university, about 25% of students are from economically disadvantaged areas and around 7% of students have a disability[23]. The project is targeted at two faculties, with different characteristics. The Faculty of Business and Law has a high proportion of international students (particularly African, Chinese and South East Asian students) relative to the university overall; it also has a higher share of male students than overall. By contrast, the Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries has a lower proportion of international students, and a high proportion of female students. This faculty also has a higher reported level of neurodiverse students than the university overall, including student with dyslexia and mental health conditions.

Influence of EDI on project design and delivery

Design

The project's rationale and aims were informed by EDI from the application stage through to planning and the early stages of delivery. As stated in the application form, the project aimed to "*increase the number and diversity of students that are involved in knowledge exchange across the institution and to develop their enterprise skills, commercial awareness, as well as attributes such as leadership and teamwork*". As stated in the project reporting form, the intended outcomes were to improve the employability of students from underrepresented groups, and to increase the university's awareness of how KE activities can impact student employability and diversity.

The project team drew on learning from EDI professionals and resources to inform the project. A colleague who was an expert in EDI worked with the steering group and research team to ensure the project considered and sensitively approached EDI. For example, this included delivering a training session on 'privilege and disadvantage' to the research team. The project team also liaised with the Department of Curriculum and Quality Enhancement which had expertise in EDI and gave advice to the SEKE project, for example in relation to 'intersectional characteristics and privilege', as well as how to sensitively approach EDI issues. Further, the project team also applied learning from a past project that had reviewed the barriers and enablers to engaging disadvantaged students in enterprise. The project's perspective on EDI also evolved over time, influenced by the wider institutional context, with an increasing interest among senior leadership in the university on issues related to EDI, and the establishment of several committees focused on EDI.

Overall, during the design phase, the project team sought to ensure they had a good level of understanding of EDI issues and agendas which could be used to inform delivery. The design did not include a specific focus on particular EDI issues or groups of students; instead, EDI issues were considered throughout delivery.

[23] As reported by the Academic Lead.

Delivery

The project involved direct engagement with students via two mechanisms. First, students that had engaged in the SEKE activities considered by the project were involved as participants in the project's research activity. Second, a student stakeholder group was established to provide steer and insight to the project, and in the co-creation of the toolkit, alongside academics and external organisations.

The project specifically sought to recruit students from underrepresented groups to be part of these activities. A range of methods were used including the use of 'gatekeepers' and peer recruitment through those involved in the student stakeholder group. Gatekeepers were course or module leaders who would identify students and encourage them to come forward. In terms of maintaining engagement, the project found that it was important to make it as easy as possible for students to engage and to let them engage during the day or at times that suited them.

Another way in which EDI influenced project delivery was through reviewing and refining the use of language over time in order to engage a diverse range of students. The project team were keen to ensure that communications around the project were engaging to a range of individuals, as their aim was to attract students from two distinct faculties. For example, the project originally used the term 'hard to reach' students, referring to those who often do not put themselves forward for SEKE activity. However, this term was challenged by a stakeholder as it implied that it was student behaviour that was the reason for the issue. As a result, the project team reflected on how they approached student engagement, stopped using this specific term, and focused on designing appropriate means for reaching students from underrepresented groups.

The team's engagement with the student stakeholder group that was set up to provide steer and insight to the project was also influenced by EDI. As part of the project, the research team engaged with this group to gain feedback on the student experience and EDI issues related to student engagement in KE. The project team were keen to understand the barriers that students from certain backgrounds faced in terms of engaging fully in KE activities; this engagement was informed by guidance from the EDI expert.

The project also involved the student stakeholder group in the development of the toolkit and student input had a direct impact on the language used in the tool, which was simplified wherever possible, and images and videos used. For example, the students were keen to ensure a diverse set of students were included in the images in the toolkit and students from the stakeholder group were involved in presenting the introductory video that accompanied the toolkit.

The project faced several challenges related to collecting EDI data on the SEKE projects they were reviewing. This included seeking to navigate a set of ethics issues in relation

to data access. Ultimately the project was not able to access data related to EDI issues from the university database due to the limitations of their ethics permission. There were also ethics restrictions on the questions they could ask to research participants as part of the evaluation of existing SEKE projects.

Lessons learned in addressing issues of EDI

Consultees identified five lessons with regard to what works well when addressing issues of EDI in KE:

- The value of seeking to use 'gatekeepers' as a mechanism for engagement in KE. Module or course leaders can be a useful way of identifying students who might want to be involved and encouraging them to take part.
- For a culture of SEKE to grow, it needs infrastructure, leadership, commitment, support, and resources. In this context, buy-in from senior staff members at the university, e.g. university board level, Vice Chancellors, is crucial.
- Dedicated and focused resource on evaluation activity is important. The ability to dedicate sufficient time and attention to evaluation via the project was seen as important. The project lead was offered a sabbatical from existing commitments to lead the project, minimising the risk of other priorities and providing the project with a dedicated and focused lead to facilitate effective delivery. Linked to the previous lesson, the project lead also benefited from support from the senior management team.
- Students can be reluctant or uncomfortable to discuss issues around EDI. This proved challenging for the project, and there was variation in the level of feedback in relation to EDI issues provided by students in the research activity completed. As such, the coverage of data was not consistent, with implications for the findings, and identification of learning to inform future delivery.
- Focus on practical learning and actions. The findings from the project have been explicitly 'practical', rather than theoretical, which has helped with dissemination. Feedback suggests the message/findings of the project have resonated with university staff and influenced perceptions on student engagement in KE, including on how activities can be adjusted to promote inclusion.

Dissemination and knowledge sharing

There were several examples of dissemination and knowledge sharing linked to the project:

- The university created a new role, a Placement Lead, to work on issues related to the project, including engaging students from underrepresented groups. This was the

result of the Dean of Learning & Teaching attending one of the project's workshops. The project has also led to internal, high-level discussions on the long-term strategic focus and emphasis placed by the university on EDI and SEKE as a research theme.

- A cross-university employment group has been established to consider best practice in SEKE, and to identify activity that could be scaled-up potentially across the university. This will draw and build on the learning and insight from the Creative Students Creating Business project.
- The SEKE toolkit developed by the project has been published and is being used to inform SEKE activity within the university and in external organisations. This includes suggestions on how to promote engagement and accessibility to students from underrepresented groups. The toolkit also includes resources for tutors with guidance on team formation, and resources for external organisations on supporting students who are neurodiverse or struggle with English.
- The project team hosted a conference to disseminate the findings from the project, and they have also attended other conferences to understand experiences and learning from other competition projects, including in relation to issues of EDI.

University of Sheffield

The Transforming and Activating Places (TAP) project was delivered by University of Sheffield over the period September 2020-January 2023. The project aimed to build on cross-disciplinary expertise in place and placemaking within the faculties of Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences to make a positive impact on communities and places, build students' graduate prospects, and enable students from underrepresented backgrounds to bring fresh perspectives to local businesses. Activity included:

- The creation of work placements for widening participation students (from the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences faculties) with external partner organisations engaged with placemaking.
- A programme of supporting activity for students and partner organisations around place, placemaking, careers, personal and professional development, and equality, diversity, and inclusion. This included a mentoring and coaching programme for students, delivered by project partner Northern Value Create.
- Assignment of students to 'project assistant' roles, which involved delivering an advocacy function (e.g. talking to others about their experience), or providing mentoring support for their project peers (supported by Northern Value Create).
- The provision of funding for placemaking projects designed and delivered by students and partner organisations during and following on from the work placements.

This case study presents key findings around how the project has incorporated EDI into its design and delivery. The case study has been developed based on consultations with two members of the delivery team at the University of Sheffield, one partner organisation and six students involved in project activities.

Project context

The University of Sheffield 'champions' diversity and inclusion; the 2020-25 Strategic Plan[24] highlights improving EDI as one of its key priorities in order to achieve its vision and values. As a result, the university has sought to embed EDI through a variety of mechanisms, including appointing faculty EDI reps and ensuring the student voice is 'at the heart' of university activity. The university also aim to ensure all students can 'see themselves' within the teaching curriculum, through working to decolonise the curriculum, encouraging 'inclusive classrooms'[25], and ensuring access and participation underpins curriculum design.

However, the university has faced challenges related to EDI. The university's Access and Participation Plan sets out its performance in terms of access, success, and progression for underrepresented groups. This suggests that access and success gaps are particularly prevalent for students from low participation backgrounds (POLAR 4 Q1) and black and Asian students.

This context brings specific challenges for students engaging with KE activities. It was reported by consultees that students may have had limited experience or understanding of applying for/participating in KE activity. Feedback also indicated that often students from low participation backgrounds felt that KE activities/programmes were 'not for them'. It was also noted there has been a lack of diversity amongst partner organisations offering work placements, which may have deterred students from diverse backgrounds from engagement.

Influence of EDI on project design and delivery

Design

EDI was built into the design of TAP from the outset, which is underpinned by principles of 'equity and equality'. The project's rationale highlighted the barriers faced by students from widening participation (i.e. underrepresented) backgrounds, and the role that work

[24] University of Sheffield (2020) One University: A vision for our future. Available at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/media/19686/download

[25] Inclusive classrooms ensure all students feel a sense of belonging and feel able to participate in the classroom. This includes practically (for example, implementing accessibility guidance), as well as through challenging assumptions of normative students and working towards a culture which recognises, celebrates, and learns from difference and sees diversity as a resource within the classroom.

placements can play in addressing the gaps in access and continuation rates. Related to EDI, the project sought to:

- Demonstrate to employers the value of students from widening participation backgrounds, creating an uplift in graduate opportunities.
- Dismantle barriers to social mobility in work and broaden career horizons.
- Address partner needs to diversify their workforce, embed more diverse perspectives in placemaking, and develop partners' intercultural competency to work better with diverse communities.
- Embed the principles of co-production and universal design to ensure relevance and accessibility for the greatest number of students.

To ensure it addressed these issues, TAP was designed to provide a holistic approach to work placements, with 'wrap-around' support for students undertaking a work placement to ensure that, regardless of their background, they were able to engage. This included the delivery of an extensive pre-placement phase, involving workshops and training activities, in addition to dedicated coaching support (including from project assistants, providing peer-to-peer support). Consultees reported the aim of this approach was to offer a package of support tailored to the specific needs of widening participation students (aligned with their learning and support plans).

The project was selective in student recruitment, with eligibility focused on those students from a widening participation background only. There were discussions around broadening the eligibility criteria to 'universalise' the project. However, ultimately, it was recognised by consultees that a dedicated focus on widening participation students meant the project could alleviate specific challenges and barriers faced by this cohort; this approach was therefore consistent through the project delivery period.

Delivery

Consultations indicate that, further to the overall design, in delivery EDI considerations influenced TAP in several ways:

- Throughout delivery, there was a 'reflexive and flexible' approach based on the needs of the students involved. The project worked to ensure that there were multiple models of internship available for students with different needs. The content of the supporting programme of workshops and events was also developed and adapted throughout, based on student feedback around issues and needs.
- Some of the events and workshops delivered focused specifically on supporting students and partner organisations to address issues of EDI. This included the delivery of anti-racism training, which was made available to all students and partner

organisations. Going forward, the project team is planning to expand the range of EDI issues covered by training, for example on gender and disability.

- The project team provided pastoral support to students where required. This support did not end on completion of the work placement; student consultees noted that while they had finished their placement they had continued to be involved in TAP, including access to project team support.

"We got so much support. We had regular meetings with [the project team] to talk about things, and we got [access to] coaching as extra support."
Student consultee

- The project considered EDI when seeking partner organisations to deliver placements, placing great importance on ensuring that partner values aligned with the ethos of the project. In addition, TAP involved workshops and events where partners could engage with each other and share challenges in relation to delivering work placements for widening participation students, supporting them to share learning.
- TAP implemented a matching process to ensure that the interests and specific needs of students could be appropriately supported by partner organisations.
- Participation from both students and partners was encouraged through providing monetary support. It was noted that, for some cohorts, paid placements are essential to remove barriers to accessibility. Therefore, all work placements involve standard/consistent payments to the individual student and host organisation.

The second year of TAP was delivered in person, as originally intended. However, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, delivery had to adapt in its first year. The project team aimed to ensure mechanisms were still in place to support students involved. This included providing additional opportunities for students to raise concerns (e.g. through online drop-ins) and creating a variety of placement models for students to engage with. The team also worked with Northern Value Creators to model what online placements look like, to support students who have anxiety or who are neurodiverse to build their confidence in engaging with placements delivered online. Student consultees valued the opportunity to engage online, which was particularly beneficial for international students who had to remain in their home country.

Lessons learned in addressing issues of EDI

Several key lessons were identified in the case study in relation to 'what works' in addressing issues of EDI in relation to KE:

- Delivering a holistic and bespoke approach for individual students, including a tailored matching process. The case study suggests that 'one size doesn't fit all' for

participating students, given their varying needs and experiences. A tailored approach gave students agency, and empowered them to be active in their own learning and engagement.

"Some partners were working with students that had bunch of extra needs. We worked specifically with students from marginalised communities, disabled students – we worked with them to find out where they [felt that they] fit and what they wanted to do."
Project team consultee

- Focusing on building relationships with student participants to enhance the bespoke support based on each student's individual need. It was reported by project team, partner, and student consultees that the focus on building relationships had developed trust between the project and the student, breaking down some of the key barriers (around confidence and access), and created a culture of support.
- Embedding principles of co-production to encourage students to articulate their needs early on. The project asked students to consider their learning and support plans to shape their work placement. This helped students to identify what issues they might face in work placements, and how to address this in the context and expectations of the workplace. It was reported that the co-production element of developing an action plan was empowering for students. However, it was noted that there were still challenges with students not disclosing issues in their learning and support plan, which meant that not all needs were addressed.
- Encouraging students to draw on their own lived experience to bring different perspectives to their placements. This has a dual benefit. For partners, it can bring a fresh perspective into their business and placemaking projects which their own staff may not have considered; this is noted to be a fundamental principle of this type of KE. For students, it has improved their confidence and self-esteem, as they are able to use their own experience to benefit others.
- Ensuring diverse representation of those delivering workshops and events. Project team consultees reported that involving individuals with similar backgrounds as the student cohort in delivering workshops and events made the content more relatable to students who had similar experiences.
- Working with partners whose values and ethos aligned with the project. This meant that partner organisations were fully invested in ensuring the project was inclusive and work placements met the needs of students. It was noted that half of the organisations (16) that offered placements in year one were also involved in year two. The alignment of values (specifically around EDI) was reported to be a key contributing factor in retaining partner participation.
- Empowering widening participation through involving students in project delivery. Students were involved in delivery as 'project assistants', with an advocacy role to

support recruitment, learning, and dissemination of project learning, and a mentoring role, where they were encouraged to mentor their peers. Both of these roles gave students additional opportunities to develop key skills.

- Linked to this, project assistants also modelled successful placements to support other students to get the most from their placement. Project assistants were supported to model their experiences to new cohorts of students and partners to ensure they had a realistic and pragmatic understanding of expectations, and for students, an understanding of what they were expected to deliver (e.g. what tasks they may be expected to do, etiquette required).
- Introducing students and partners early, to support the development of a relationship before the work placement officially starts. This was introduced in the second year of project delivery, to mitigate some issues experienced in matching partners and students in the project's first year. While most of the time this was successful, it was reported that difficult conversations have had to be had with partners who did not fully understand the needs of the student, particularly neurodiverse students.
- Drawing on existing faculty and university structures to support project design and delivery. It was reported that liaising with EDI representatives within faculties, faculty run programmes (e.g. faculty First Generation programmes), and university-based societies (e.g. Student Union, Disabled Student Society, LGBTQ+ Society) had framed the narrative for the programme, ensuring EDI was fully embedded. This process also supported recruitment, as TAP was able to be promoted through structures designed for students from underrepresented backgrounds.
- The development of EDI outputs. For example, the project worked with Northern Value Creators to develop a toolkit of best practice for delivering placements with students from underrepresented backgrounds. This has been shared with both students and partners to support placement delivery.

Dissemination and knowledge sharing

The TAP project delivered a symposium to share learning from the project, attended by local and national academics involved in KE, partners, and students. Students and partners both presented at the symposium to share their learning around KE, and how students were able to apply their lived experiences to their work placement. Several articles and papers focused on KE with widening participation students were also produced by those involved in TAP.

Internally, project learning has been shared through cross-institution steering group involving key university leaders in employability, KE, widening participation, and teaching and learning. This has involved presentations (including by students) and the development of a collaborative paper to illustrate the project as a key example of knowledge exchange within the university.

Further dissemination and knowledge sharing activity is planned going forward, including:

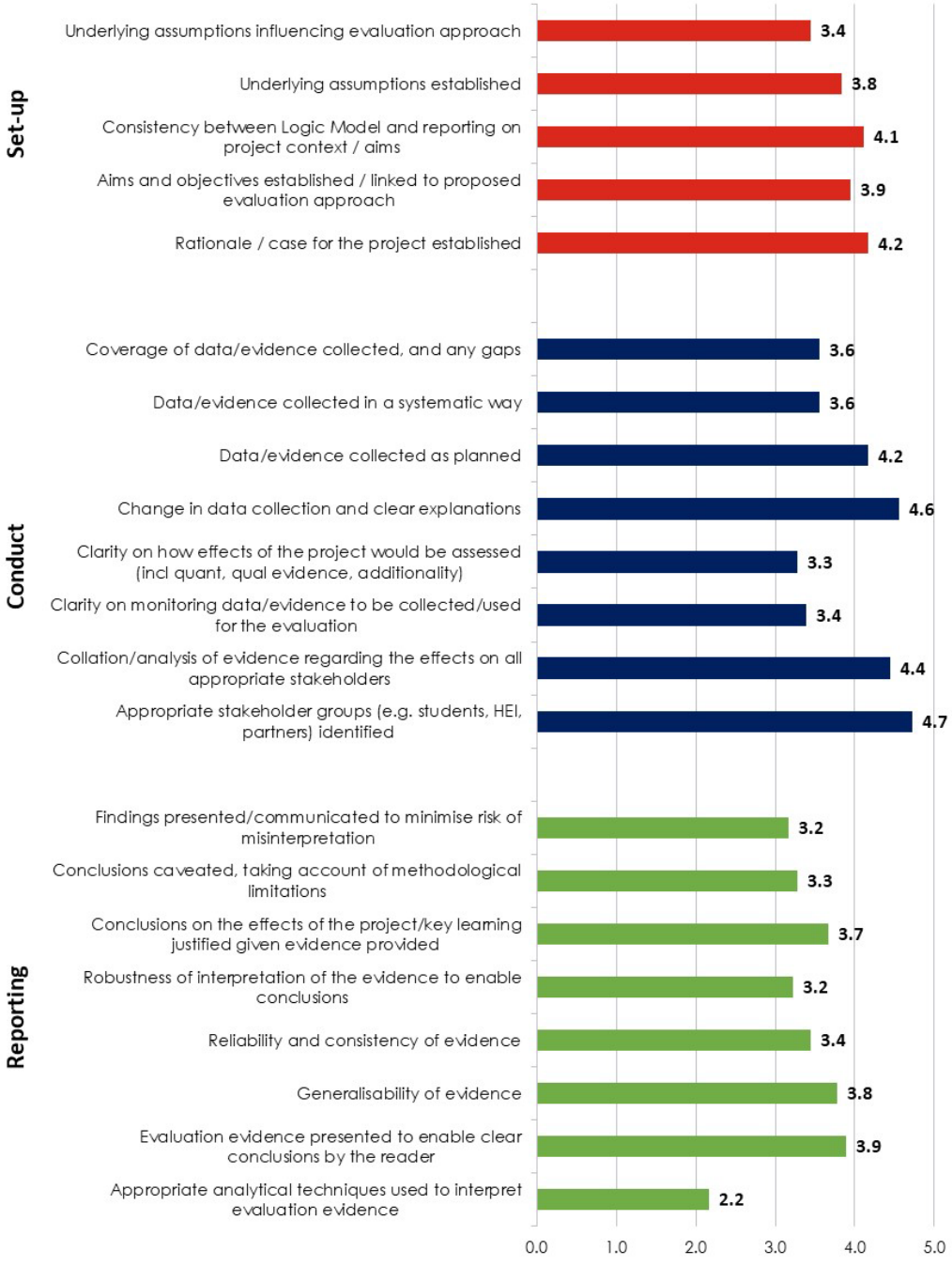
- Sharing learning from their co-production work with students on learning and support plans with disability services within the university.
- Disseminating case studies and resources developed through the project via a dedicated webpage on the university website.
- Delivering a workshop for the British Academy focused on placemaking and KE (involving student assistants as advocates).

The university has also encouraged the project to apply for an Advance HE Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE). If successful, consultees noted that this would provide a good opportunity to take learning from TAP to share with others.

Annex E: Evaluation standard assessment

E.1 The average scores across the 18 projects for the standards covered by the assessment of project-level evaluation evidence are set out below. It is highlighted these are average (mean) scores across 18 projects and they do not reflect individual project-level evaluations.

Figure E-1: Evaluation standard assessment: average scores



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