Co-producing Mental Health Strategies with Students:
A Guide for the Higher Education Sector

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student
minds

Foreword

Dear colleagues,

I'm delighted to introduce you to this toolkit, which has been developed in the spirit of the values it promotes - bringing together the insights of students and the expertise of professionals from across the Higher Education and Health sectors. Thank you both to those who have formally contributed to this toolkit and those who have role-modelled student engagement for decades before Student Minds began exploring this in the context of student mental health.

This toolkit was initially exclusively a summary of approaches to engaging students in mental health strategy at three universities. However, with recent developments in student mental health bringing increased attention to the issue and many universities announcing they will be developing strategies, we decided to create something more practical and comprehensive.

With this guide we hope to support Higher Education Institutions to empower students and value their experiences as being central to improving mental health at universities and colleges. Whether you're a senior leader of a university, a Students' Union (SU) staff member or officer, Student Support Service staff member, an accommodation manager or an external partner, you should find something in this toolkit that will assist you. Although this guide is designed for strategy work, these techniques should be applied in day-to-day practice, where even the smallest idea can make the biggest difference.

The publication of this toolkit comes at a timely moment. Strategic action from HEIs, with student voice at the heart, is needed, and a collaborative programme of change is emerging. The Step Change framework (published by UUK), the development of the University Mental Health Charter (led by Student Minds) and a range of research and policy guides are making the case for a whole-university approach. The Student Mental Health Network (SMaRTeN) are also setting the tone for co-production in research by placing a Student Led Research Team at its core. This is something the NHS has a great deal of practice in, and indeed most commissioning in the health system must involve co-production - and we believe our universities could do even better than that.

As you'll see in this report, before we even get onto how engaging students will improve relevance of a university's strategy to those it will affect- one of the incredible things about co-production is that in and of itself it has the potential to improve the health outcomes of our university communities!

Some of this work is difficult - it takes time, resources and commitment. But it is worth it. Collaborative working, where we truly listen and understand the lived experiences of both students and staff, can create innovative and powerful solutions to the challenge of improving mental health in our university communities. We are on a journey to discover what works best, particularly in relation to evaluation, and there is much more we could have included in this report. We want to hear your experiences - please share your work with us at studentvoice@studentminds.org.uk so we can keep learning together.

Rosie Tressler
CEO, Student Minds

About Student Minds:

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity. We empower students and members of the university community to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support others and create change. We train students and staff in universities across the UK to deliver student-led peer support interventions as well as research-driven campaigns and workshops. By working collaboratively across sectors, we share best practice and ensure that the student voice influences decisions about student mental health.

Together we will transform the state of student mental health so that all in higher education can thrive.

To find out more please visit:

- www.studentminds.org.uk
- @StudentMindsOrg
- facebook.com/studentminds.org.uk
- @studentmindsorg
- studentmindsorg.blogspot.co.uk
- Or email – studentvoice@studentminds.org.uk

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Contents

Introduction

Introduction: Why have we developed this guide?

Recent research has highlighted growing numbers of students accessing support services, an increase in the severity of distress and mental illness in young people[1], a rise in the number of students leaving university due to mental health difficulties and, tragically, an increase in suicides in the student population. We believe it doesn't need to be like this and that all students and members of the university community should be able to thrive at university. Effective early- intervention, increasing health literacy and other preventative approaches, as well as providing ongoing support for both those with and those supporting someone with mental health difficulties could improve the futures of millions of people.

Strategic action is needed and a collaborative programme of change is emerging in response. The Step Change framework (published by Universities UK)[2], the development of the University Mental Health Charter (led by Student Minds) and a range of research and policy guides are making the case for a whole-university approach.

At Student Minds, we recognise that **people with lived experience of mental health difficulties are experts by experience.** We know from our work that professionals often worry that students may not fully understand

the complexity of these issues and that therefore their requests and insights may not be valid. In recent years there has been a media narrative describing students as either 'generation snowflake' or 'vulnerable youngsters in crisis', neither of which acknowledges the complexity of the current issues or recognises that students vary in terms of their identities, varying ages and needs. However, without fully including the perspective of students, universities could neglect the reality of student mental health. We know that in mental health different things work for different people, and that recovery and well supported mental health is often context dependent. To support good mental health in students we therefore have to understand that context and their direct experiences. In order to identify the full range of work necessary to improve mental health and wellbeing at our Higher Education institutions (HEI's), **we must listen to students.**

To change the narrative of student mental health, we have to ask the right questions to understand it and move forward - and to do this, we have to engage meaningfully with students.

If conducted effectively, practicing meaningful student engagement and co-production can bring about a number of benefits for both students and universities.

For the university community, it can improve relevance of strategy, policy and practice and therefore increase the success of this work. It can also help to ensure that the university community is working to a shared set of outcomes, in partnership with local health care.

For students, one of the outstanding benefits of co-production is its capacity to improve health outcomes and mental health literacy. Furthermore, being a part of high-level strategy development can lead to improvement in almost every aspect related to their university experience. Their education, extracurricular activities, and the steps they take to into their careers, and futures as effective leaders and changemakers, all benefit from the skills they develop through co-production.

Whilst co-production is a new way of working in education, the health sector has long engaged with service users and achieved positive outcomes. HEIs could benefit from good practice examples in this field.

Universities must develop their work of listening to and engaging with students and make this central to the design and implementation of health and wellbeing strategies.

This guide is intended to support Higher Education Institutions to empower and value students' experiences as central to the solution to improving mental health at our universities and colleges. The intended audience is those leading on mental health and wellbeing strategies at universities, senior leadership, Students' Union (SU) staff, SU officers, Student Support Service staff, Accommodation management, and other stakeholders in this space. It may also be of use to NHS and third sector staff working with universities on student mental health. In working with external partners such as the NHS, universities can contribute to supporting students in a way that is embedded in the local offer.

We hope this guide has a positive impact on mental health strategy, and broadly enables a culture of developing strategies with students.

Our guide explores:
- Why co-production is so powerful in developing mental health and wellbeing strategies.
- The ways in which student engagement benefits both students and senior decision makers.
- How to successfully engage students in the development or mental health and wellbeing strategies in HEIs.
- The current enablers and barriers to student engagement in this area.
- When students can be engaged with co-producing university mental health and wellbeing strategies.
- How staff can work alongside students to achieve the best possible impact in strategic decision making.
- The tools available for leading co-production work at universities.
- How universities can best engage different groups and communities of students.

This guide is not about the delivery of peer support (see Student Minds' Peer Support report)[3], peer led health promotion, campaigning, or how to engage staff in consultation, although the principles we outline here may be applicable to all work in HE mental health and wellbeing, as co-production should be a central way of working in all provision and practice.

If you are interested in this report in the context of working in or with a Students' Union - please contact susupport@studentminds.org.uk for further information on our developing Students' Union Support Programme.

Key Recommendations

Invest in co-production as a core way of working in strategy development, through building it into your process and ensuring staff are resourced to develop this work.

Audit your current student engagement methods. Working with students, reflect on where your University/SU currently succeeds at engaging students in developing university strategy, and build on this work. You can find tools for this in the guide here.

Collect and review any data from previous consultations, prior to embarking on a series of student engagement activities. This will help to ensure that any additional consultation explores new areas.

Review any existing student participation policies, in partnership between the University and the Students' Union. These may already exist in terms of recruitment of student ambassadors, curriculum and academic course reps. Update or create a policy that provides rationale and expectations for student participation in strategy design.

Design an impact measurement framework to evaluate your student engagement activity from the start.

Work with students to think about how you can take students from one level of engagement to the next, building capacity and confidence. Co-design a model and strategy specifically for co-production and student engagement.

This toolkit should enable you to start developing (1) A shared vision of achievable goals, (2) An agreed set of values that always underpin pathways and processes, and (3) A feasible framework that allows embedding of the co-produced strategy.

Be transparent about your co-production processes to students - making it clear the levels of engagement and any limitations. Be flexible in supporting different levels of participation. Student workloads mean that their ability to join in may be greater at different times of the university calendar.

Set clear parameters and scope at the start of any engagement activity - which will mitigate potential tensions about managing expectations and 'not getting hopes up'. That being said, idealism should be encouraged as it is where some of the best solution-oriented thinking happens.

Ensure all staff are trained and supported to value student experience. This will enable co-production work that is attentive to students' perceptions which go against held beliefs. Inquire into what experiences they have had that led to that understanding. This information is essential for understanding the students' experiences, perceptions and realities. It may support the development of clearer communications of existing offers, as well as improving the offer of support to suit students.

Assess the accessibility of all your co-production and engagement event activities.

Develop a strategy to involve a range of students in your co-production work for strategy development.

Share your co-production journey with the staff and students in order to galvanise support, and support the sector to learn from your progress.

Work with externals partners, such as local NHS partners to ensure co-production is a key tenant to the development of any strategic commissioning plans.

Co-production and models of mental health: Why is co-production powerful in mental health?

Our research with students shows that they conceptualise their mental health, and the role of the university, in a variety of different ways[4], which is often driven by individual context[5]. For example, students may use medical language in some settings and employ a social understandings in others. Students' expectations of their university, in regards to their mental health, is also varied.[6] Using co-production, we encourage leaders in this work to engage across the whole student population to understand specific experience.

In order to meaningfully engage students in strategic initiatives regarding mental health and wellbeing, universities must recognise that students will be enrolling, and living with a mental health disorder or problem, mental distress, mental health problems and mental illness to varying and fluctuating degrees. For the purposes of engaging students in strategic development, we can assume that students with all levels of experience will be interacting with the university at different times, and to varying degrees will expect and seek support from their university.

Equally, the university environment - culturally, socially and materially - will have an impact on the way in which a student experiences their mental health and may impact on the extent to which it affects their day to day life. Whilst maximising resilience, significantly more work must be done on minimising vulnerabilities and risk.[7]

Historically, those receiving mental health care have been denied their agency and their rights in terms of patient engagement.[8] They have been viewed as recipients, as opposed to active partners in their care. One of four key components of empowering people with mental health problems, as set out by the World Health Organisation, is "participation in decisions". This paper advocates that universities, as settings in which students receive support, empower students to become partners in decision making. Although universities are not expected to provide the same level of treatment as the NHS or other health care providers, wellbeing services are provided on site and can often be the first place where students interact with mental health support. Universities have an opportunity to set high standards in terms of service user engagement in this area.

The Five Year Forward View for mental health states that "every person with a mental health problem should be able to say: I am confident that the services I may use have been designed in partnership with people who have relevant lived experience."

It's important for us to acknowledge the language we will be using in this guide. We know that different words are used to talk about mental health depending on context and personal choice. For decades different professional groups and different advocacy groups have debated how 'medicalised' society's approach to mental health should be, and whether more of a social theory for mental health should be prioritised. Language that can help one person access help, may feel disempowering to another. We recognise the readership is likely to be looking for a simple understanding of mental health. For the purposes of clarity in this report, we present one model, the definitions set out by Professor Stan Kutcher as part of a suite of materials to improve mental health literacy, which you may wish to draw on.

States of mental health

A mental illness occurs when a person is unable to function in their everyday life due to the way their brain is controlling their thoughts, emotions and behaviours. It is diagnosed the same way all illnesses are diagnosed and if you have a mental illness, rapid access to effective evidence-based treatment delivered by a qualified health care provider is what you need.

A mental health problem is a substantial emotional, thought, or behavioural difficulty (or all three) that causes you significant life challenges and that usually requires you to get help from friends, family or people you trust. An example is the grief that you experience if someone close to you dies, or the period of adjustment following moving to an unfamiliar place. A mental health problem is not an illness. It is a sign that you are having difficulty adapting, but that is to be expected given the magnitude of the stressor. You will need more support from family and friends and may find additional help from a counsellor or religious/spiritual leader useful.

Mental distress is normal, expected, and happens to everyone - usually daily! It is a signal that you need to solve the problem causing the distress; so you adapt by changing yourself or your surroundings. For example: you are late for your morning class so you take a bus instead of walking and next time you get up a half hour earlier. Mental distress is not an illness. It is your adaptation signal. You don't need treatment for mental distress.
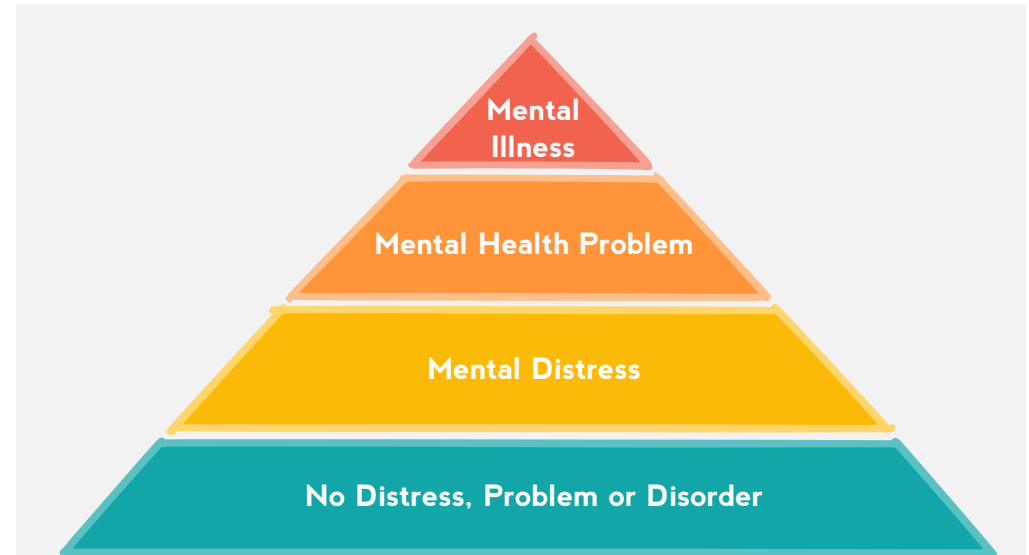
Figure 1 - States of Mental Health

As you can see in the diagram, these four categories are separate components and are all part of experiencing mental health. They are not mutually exclusive. A person can experience mental distress, a mental health problem, and a mental illness all at the same time. A person can have good mental health and a mental health problem at the same time! A person can have good mental health and a mental illness at the same time, just as a person can have good physical health and an illness at the same time.[9] As such it is essential to engage students with a range of mental health experiences.

Project Background and Methodology

Since 2009 Student Minds has delivered a range of student engagement activities across the UK to explore student and staff experiences around their mental health and supporting others.

Funded by a successful partnership bid to HEFCE's (now Office for Students) Catalyst Fund on addressing barriers to student success,[10] three universities in the process of developing mental health strategies, partnered with Student Minds and UUK to explore the process of developing a university-wide approach to mental health, and to develop tools and learning of use to the wider HE sector. Alongside this, UUK is developing a validated mental health and wellbeing audit, and creating a knowledge and practice exchange platform.[11] This particular report is an output of this partnership project, informed by piloting different ideas for co-producing strategy with students at The University of the West of England (UWE Bristol), Cardiff University, and the University of York.

In preparation for this project, we also organised a 'student listening project' pilot at the University of Birmingham and Student Guild in Spring 2017 whereby we equipped a group of students to lead a small research project about their students' views on the university's mental health provision and approach.

We have undertaken a number of other student voice initiatives as an organisation, such as our Student Voice Forum, Policy Panel and Steering Group.

We conducted a literature review on models and definitions of co-production in mental health and HE spaces. We have learnt from UK and international case studies, and have consulted with a range of individuals engaged with mental health policy and co-production across the HE and health sectors.

What is co-production?

What is co-production?

At Student Minds, we use the term co-production[12] to advocate for increasing levels of student engagement in transforming the state of mental health within our university communities. Co-production is treatment of service users and service providers as equal stakeholders to develop strategies and create solutions.

Co-production is based on the principle that people who use, may use, or refer others to mental health services have valuable **knowledge through experience and individual context**[13]. When we extend co-production to create a **whole university approach** to mental health and wellbeing, students are listened to and empowered across all aspects of the university. As you will see in the 'ways of working' section, it is essential to create a clear purpose and to be transparent about what areas student voice will have meaningful influence.

People with the experience of being current students, both with and without the experience of mental illness, should be part of **every stage of developing** mental health and wellbeing strategies, including commissioning, planning, delivery, and evaluation.[14] In our context, we are focusing on co-production in the development, implementation and evaluation of mental health and wellbeing strategies.

[12] Several definitions related to student engagement were found across the literature for the following terms: co-production, youth engagement, and co-design. We are presenting these under the general heading of 'co-production' for simplicity. These definitions have been adapted to the context of student mental health strategy development.

Models of co-production and student engagement

Here, we set out various levels of student engagement, of which we see co-production as the highest level. We hope that this report will allow universities to engage students at all levels, and to increase the role of student voice by improving the quality and depth of engagement.

We anticipate that this toolkit will enable you to increase the role of student voice at your university in terms of strategy development:
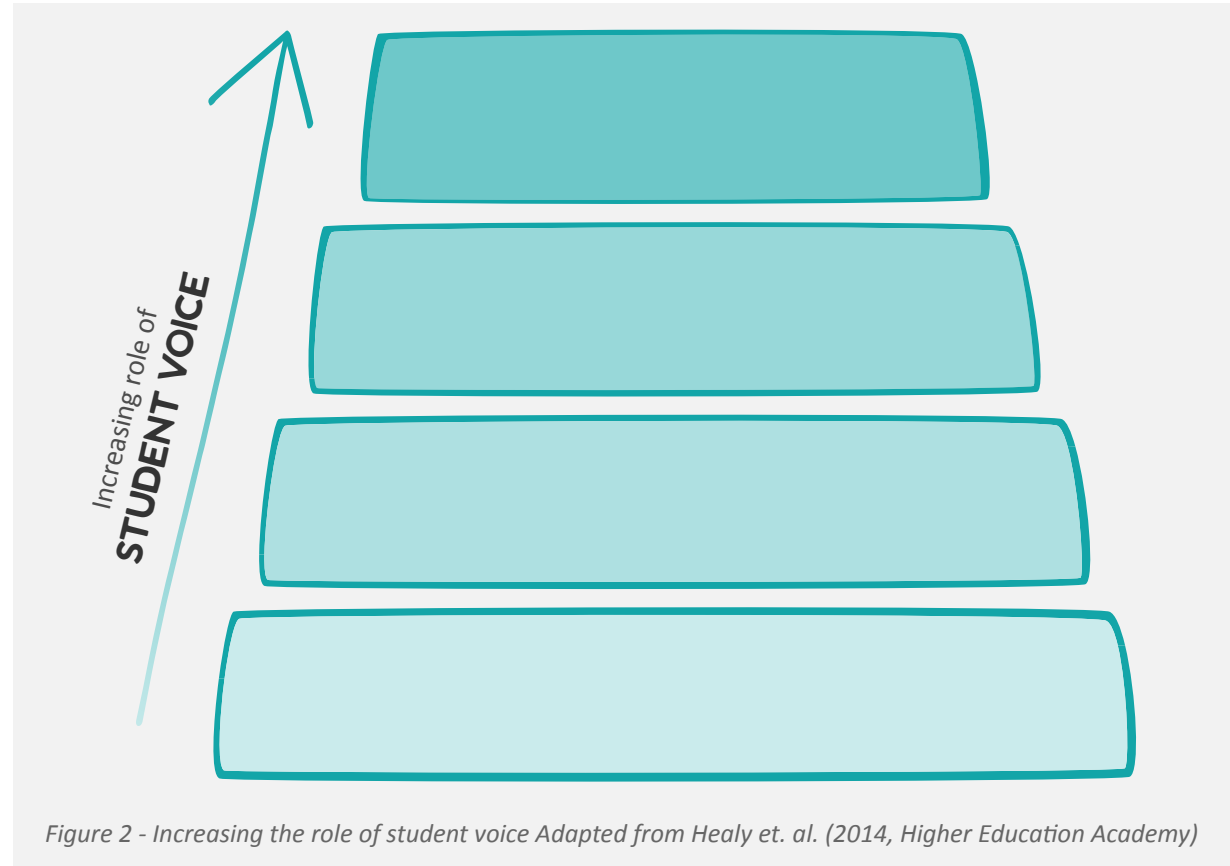

Figure 2 - Increasing the role of student voice Adapted from Healy et. al. (2014, Higher Education Academy)

Consultation

"Opportunities are provided for students to provide individual opinions, perspectives, experiences, ideas, concerns"

These differ from formal public consultation processes. By listening to and understanding what students require in terms of service support across all aspects of the university (e.g. academic, extracurricular, and careers services) HEIs can create strategies to support their learning communities.

Examples of tools and techniques:
- Questionnaires/surveys about students' perceptions and experiences (as opposed to data gathering about prevalence of mental health difficulties)
- Large scale data gathering
- Focus groups
- Gathering and processing student feedback data
- Online consultation /opportunity to feedback on documents and plans
- Individual, Social, Material Model

Note that the collection of data about the prevalence of mental health difficulties or conditions is not consultation - as it does not necessarily give space for the expression of opinions or ideas.

Involvement

"Opportunities are provided to students as individuals to take active roles"

Involvement is having more of an input on decision-making than consultation, with the agenda and method of engagement still being largely determined by the university staff leading the project.

This may involve students participating in pre-determined engagement events,for example having a role in organising or recruiting.

Examples of tools and techniques:
- Students being trained to deliver a Problem Solving Booth
- Participants in a Student Voice Forum
- Problem based learning

Participation

"Decisions are taken by students to take part, or have a more active role, in a defined activity"

In our context, the defined activity is the development of the university's mental health and wellbeing strategy.

When a student is participating at this level, their role will be more active in terms of organising the event and making some decisions about the design of the engagement. Participation is giving students greater ability to set the agenda and figure out how they want to work/ engage.

Examples of tools and techniques:
- Participatory Action Research
- Student Committee or Panel

Co-production

"There is collaboration between institution and students, involving joint decision making on both process and outcomes"

When students are co-producing as partners in strategic development, the university works with the students to design the process of co-production, determining the process and the outcomes. [15]
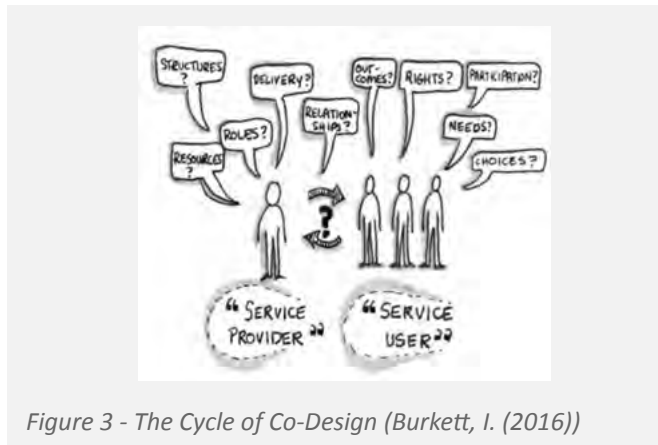
Figure 3 - The Cycle of Co-Design (Burkett, I. (2016))

This may be through principles of co-design: co-design highlights the importance of treating students as partners in all stages of strategy design. Co-design goes beyond traditional consultation by treating all stakeholders (including students) equitably and utilizing their knowledge and experience in the initial design of mental health strategies.[16]

The cycle of co-design demonstrates a range of considerations that must go into a co-design or co-production process (See the ways of working section for more detail on this).

This could involve elements such as how student support services are offered to students, what are the most effective methods of signposting, how mental health literacy and health promotion campaigns can be more impactful, and what students expect from their universities compared to NHS services. Figure 3 demonstrates that co-design is not a one-off stage of strategy development, but rather a process that must continue to ensure that needs are met fairly.

Examples of tools and techniques:
- Student-Led Listening Project
- Co-design/co-production of mental health and and wellbeing strategies

There are also ways to achieve higher levels of engagement and project leadership, where students are "change agents"[17]- controlling all aspects of the project (i.e. having a greater role than staff).

Why should you co-produce? The benefits of co-production

If conducted effectively, practicing meaningful student participation, engagement and co-production can bring about a number of benefits for both students and universities when this is central to the implementation of 'whole university' mental health policies.

Minding Our Future, sets out co-production as one of the essential ways of working to improve mental health for our university communities. "The services should be user-centred and co-produced with students. Health care and educational objectives are addressed together."[18]

Co-production benefits students

For students, being a part of high-level strategy development can lead to improvement in almost every aspect related to their university experience. Their education, extracurricular activities, and the steps they take to have successful careers after graduation have the potential to benefit from the skills they develop through co-production.

Involvement in the process of co-production can be an empowering experience, with positive outcomes both personally and for the community. It can:

Increase students' knowledge of their own experiences and encourage greater appreciation of the experiences of others - taking part in co-production of strategy involves self-awareness and articulating their experiences in safe and purpose-driven spaces which can be empowering. For many, hearing from others can reduce isolation, and strengthen peer networks. [19]

Increase students' knowledge of Higher Education policy & the mental health sector and equip them to be active contributors to both areas.

Support students to develop, through training, a range of transferable skills including:

- **Conducting and applying research to 'real world' situations**, which can equip students to be the leaders of the future.
- **Analytical skills, enhanced critical thinking**[20] - when students are empowered to have meaningful engagement with complex issues such as mental health and wellbeing, they develop further skills around approaching a topic from a variety of lenses and perspectives.
- **Communication skills**, such as how to communicate their experiences, problems and solutions to a range of stakeholders and audiences.
- **Organisation & project management:** when students are empowered to take leadership roles in co-production they have the potential to develop further capacity to organise and manage projects, build interpersonal skills and leadership abilities.
- **Community building:** involvement in this kind of activity can increase students' capacity to value and build community.

These skills can be useful and transferable to a range of vocations, increasing students' employability and the skills they need to be active citizens. Co-production promotes positive academic, social and cultural outcomes as being involved in decision making can encourage motivation, connection and commitment with their course.

Co-production as a core way of working can:

- **Improve health outcomes and mental health literacy** - research suggests that involvement in co-production supports the improvement of health outcomes.[23] This is in part due to the services being more suitable for their users, as a result of co-production. In addition the process itself can provides a sense of self-efficacy and motivation to seek support, as well as increasing mental health literacy. Students can also benefit from feeling that they are meaningfully contributing to an important subject, which increases self-worth and purpose. The experience of an HEI as a healthy and supportive environment can support improvement in health outcomes in itself.[24]

- **Develop effective change makers and leaders**-

  'Where activities are co-produced...both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change'[25]

  Enabling students to be leaders and to shape their university experience means they are able to find their voice, increase their decision-making capabilities, and gain an understanding of their responsibilities as active citizens whilst at university and beyond.[25][26] Positive engagement in the development of a university wide strategy can increase a sense of self-efficacy, students' advocacy skills, and civic activism.

- **Build community** - co-production enables a community building capacity,[28] in both individuals and in the student body more broadly. Both students and staff build a deepened understanding and connection to the student body.[29][30]

And give a voice to students who may otherwise be overlooked (see the ways of working section on using fair and open approaches recruiting a range of students).

Co-production benefits the university community

Improving students' connectedness with the university community gives a richer student experience and facilitates positive relationships between students, faculty, future employers, and other parties[31]. Student involvement in co-production can also develop meaningful connections between the university administration and students.[32]

Improving relevance to the university community and increases the likelihood of success of strategy, policy and practice - Policies can be created to be relevant to students - especially when the needs of marginalised communities, and specific groups are considered. The implementation of these strategies are more likely to succeed as they have been uniquely tailored to lived experience and expertise of students.

Ensuring that the university community is working to a shared set of outcomes, in partnership with local health care - Minding Our Future[33], notes that implementing meaningful change "should start with conversations between students, higher education institutions and local care services to describe strategic relationships, working together on the basis of agreed values to achieve a shared set of outcomes".[34]

Increasing transparency between students and their institutions through an improved responsiveness to issues specifically identified by student community.

Managing and meeting expectations - A common concern from university mental health service providers is that there is a gap between what is expected by students (in terms of service provision) and what can be feasibly provided by the university. Students have also identified that there is a discrepancy between what they think universities should provide and what they perceive to be most helpful[35]. Involving students in strategy development may help mitigate this issue.

Altering power dynamics - Co-production must consider existing power dynamics between university staff and students. For example, students may not disclose their opinions or experience for fear of adverse consequences on their grades. Participants in co-production should feel able to provide constructive criticism and voice opinions without stigma or the fear of being adverse consequence.

Strengthening leadership support - If the university is supporting co-production as part of strategy development then this should further enable support for the Students' Union (SU) to carry out co-production. If you work with students and staff about whom the decisions are being made, they are more likely to feel engaged and support the work. Strong support and buy-in is key for changing the culture, which is at the heart of a whole university approach.

Furthering student engagement - During focus group research, many SU officers revealed that the 'representative' function (i.e. representing the views and concerns of the whole student body) of students' unions was rapidly becoming a chief priority[36]. Co-production benefits SUs and universities by creating well-defined pathways for student body engagement/representation and by enhancing the SU's liaison role.

Making co-production a reality

Myth-busting about co-production!

We recognise that there are a number of barriers that may be present when co-producing strategy. The ways of working section below addresses how some of these can be addressed through your planning:

What staff might say or think	Our challenge
"Students are a transient population- they are only at uni for a short time before moving back home, they aren't worth engaging"	Students engaged in co-production can be encouraged to engage in wider civic society. They may be at the university for a short time, but it is a significant period for the majority of students. They are your users, therefore it makes sense to engage them as it improves the relevance of strategy, policy and practice, and the implementation.
"Students don't understand mental health like clinicians might and may not be 'knowledgeable enough' to contribute" Student: "I'm not expert enough"	Co-production is about bringing together clinical expertise with lived expertise to produce more effective interventions and support. Students are experts in their own experience. It is from understanding their experiences that we can design a whole university approach that meets students' needs. Any co-production activities need to reiterate the value of learning from lived experience as an essential form of knowledge.
"Student led research is less 'valid', I'm worried leadership may not take the work seriously"	In our work at Student Minds, we often find that the stories of students are a key factor in changing perceptions about the importance of taking university mental health seriously. Student-Led Research (see tools) can be carried out with as much methodological vigour as any other research. Our co-production work has enabled university staff to use the learning to challenge or supplement and add richness to pre-existing data. If co-production work is properly supported it can be an important opportunity for student learning and development.

What staff might say or think	Our challenge
"The university will have less control over the research process and we will have to hand over decision making power"[37].	It is quite common that co-production and similar projects need to demonstrate stakeholder involvement to be accepted for funding or for publication now.
"There is likely to be a power imbalance"[38].	Meaningful student engagement always involves an investment of time and effort by students and staff. In particular the co-production of mental health strategies requires a particular focus on trust, honesty, communication, and transparency between all parties involved. Draw on the experience of people who have used this methodology before.
"This work will raise students' expectations that we then won't be able to meet"	Involving students in strategy development may help mitigate this issue; the required communication channels between students and university administration for effective co-production will result in clarification of the responsibilities of both parties. Students have also identified that there is a discrepancy between what they think universities should provide and what they perceive to be most helpful.[39]
"We're opening ourselves up to criticism and negative feedback"	Accountability, vulnerability in working relationships and a culture of open feedback shows true leadership![40] Involving students in the process of strategy develop can help universities to listen and respond to criticism in-house.
"It's a high resource input for an uncertain output"	We accept that there is a risk in taking this approach, however, involving students in the process is worth more than just the output. Any outputs have the potential to be highly impactful, providing rich data for large or small scale change. The more considerable your investment, the more value you'll get from the process. Developing a strategy that ignores the experiences of students, is an expensive use of resources that may well land without any positive impact.

What staff might say or think	Our challenge
"Will students have enough time in a busy academic calendar?"	It is important to be mindful to the best time to embark on co-production, and adapt the timeline to students' needs as you go. In our work we found that recruitment for activities during exam periods was limited. Generally, the availability of students can vary significantly between course, year groups, levels of study, assessment type etc. We would encourage you to map out pressure points and keep these in mind in your planning.
Students: "I'm worried that I'll be stigmatised, and won't be listened to because of my mental health and because I am young"	There can be a "Double stigma" of both experiencing mental health difficulties and being young[41] (majority of students) however there is a consistent theme in literature about co-production in mental health that there is a reduced sense of stigma to participants in co-production.[42] Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that involvement in co-production supports the improvement of health outcomes.[43]
"How can we manage the gap between what we learn from students and how to implement it"	The 'Know-do' gap can be a barrier for researchers.[44] This can be supported through further training, and by making co-production a valued way of working. (See the ways of working section below)

Who to engage with these tools?

It is important that student voice work engages a representative range of students reflecting the diversity of your student population, and is situated within an understanding of oppressions, prejudice and cultural differences which may affect a student's experience. This should also consider the specific university and the broader national context of the political, social and economic climate.

Students can be understood in a number of groups, although many students will identify as more than one of these categories, different engagement activities will suit different students:

- All students (across the whole university population) - with the recognition that all of us have mental health, and the experience of being a student is valuable insight for the development of strategy
- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation /International students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university & NHS services)
- Student Representatives (Through Students' Unions, Student Minds groups, welfare sabbs etc.)

In line with the 'whole university' approach to mental health, strategy development with students should include the expertise of frequently underrepresented student communities, such as cultural minorities, members of the LGBTQ+ community[45], postgraduate students, international students, and mature students.

It is important to involve students who are services users, and potential service users, who may recommend services to others, and who may benefit from all aspects of the whole university approach. You may wish to define the purpose of each engagement event or co-production work stream according to the type of experiences that you would like to focus on- ensuring that you have a range of students engaged whose experiences of mental health vary.

How to make co-production a reality by embedding it into your ways of working

Here we explore the steps that are necessary for practical co-production of mental health strategies.

Figure 4 - Making co-production a reality (Adapted from NHS England & Coalition for CollaborativeCare, 2016)
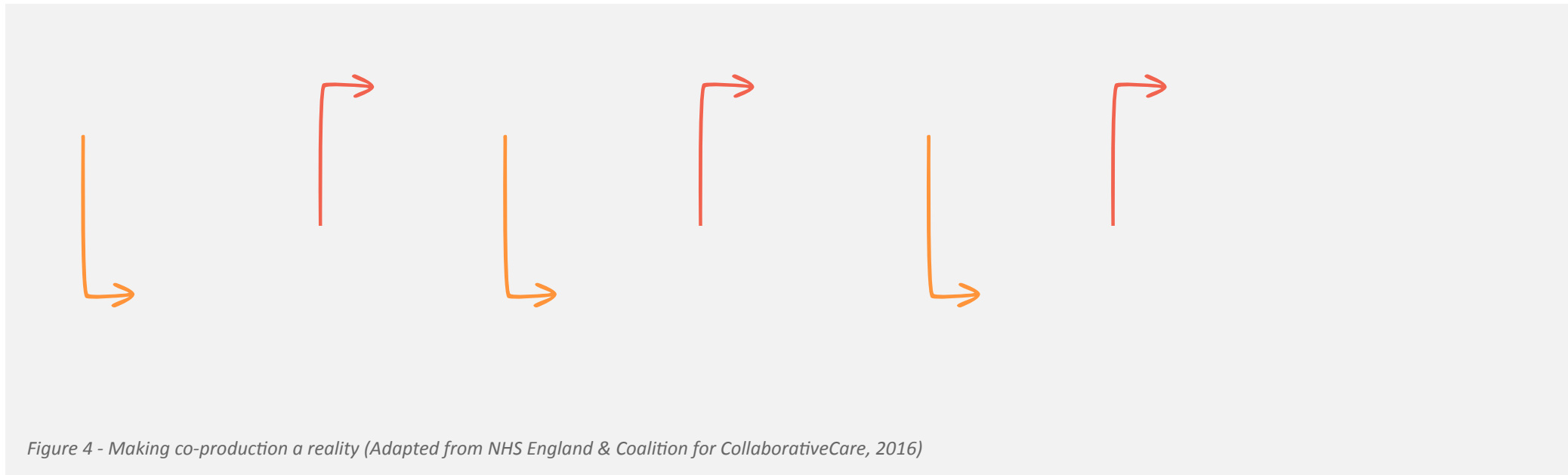
Leadership - Encourage university leaders to champion co-production

Those implementing a strategic approach to improving mental health and wellbeing across the university community, may be following the Step Change framework, of which leadership is a key pillar. In discussing leadership, here we are referring to Vice Chancellors, Senior Management Teams, Deputy VCs, Deans, Heads of Departments, Heads of Support Services and those leading the development of a strategic approach to mental health and wellbeing. A core tenant of leadership in creating strategy development is to galvanise student and staff support:

"Leadership is required at all levels with engagement from all members of staff, including heads of departments and faculties, deans, and other senior management team members. This encourages wider understanding, engagement and participation to ensure that barriers are identified and removed. Everyone engaged in higher education and in the organisation – students, academic staff, tutors, students' unions, security and accommodation as well as professional services – has a role to play to contribute to the change and improve the outcomes." – UUK Step Change Framework

It is important to establish co-production as a valued way of working as this will further enable support and engagement. When student engagement is done effectively universities provide all of the necessary resources and opportunities for students, faculty and staff to ensure engagement is appropriate, and that students' invested time and efforts highly correlate with positive and meaningful outcomes[46].

To secure resources, it may necessary to make a case of how the potential barriers will be addressed, and weighing these against the benefits of co-production, in order to build a compelling case that is appropriate to your setting.

To show leadership in co-production:

- **Make co-production a priority** in designing your strategy, by making it a core principle and way of working
- **Form strong partnerships** with the Students' Union, to ensure that those with expertise in student engagement are supportive of the work.
- **Consider the ability to support co-production work as a key competency** in recruiting the role of the strategy development lead. Include supporting co-production in the role descriptions of the staff leading on the development of the mental health and wellbeing strategy. This may also involve a dedicated member of staff and a team to support students. How this role is structured will vary in accordance to your university - it may be an SU based role, it may be a strategic role in the university. Alternatively,
- **consider what training you can provide staff**, or what partnerships they can make with leading expertise on co-production or participatory research at your institution.
- **Review and share your progress** internally, and externally with the HE sector.
- **Make partnerships and learn from other organisations.** Make co-production a part of improving partnerships with the NHS. Minding Our Future argues that co-production is a key way of working in improving the links between local NHS services and the support that universities provide. "The services should be user-centred and co-produced with students. Health care and educational objectives are addressed together." Meaningful student engagement and successful co-production should also be open to the influence of other institutions and organisations; it is important to look to other universities for their ideas, strategies, and examples of good practice. Working with local NHS Mental Health Trusts, Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) or Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STPs) - in particular with NHS Patient and Public engagement teams - can lend a range of expertise to your work.

Recruitment - Use fair and open approaches recruiting a range of students:

Meeting people where they are at is essential, we must challenge traditional forms of consultation which privilege the representation of majority groups, and active members of the university community, and think about opening up the conversation further. It is key that you involve underrepresented groups by customising your methods of recruiting students to various student groups, such as differing faculties, undergraduates, postgraduates, international students, etc.

Involvement of underrepresented groups - It is vital to plan out the steps you will take to meaningfully include underrepresented groups.

1. **Understand your student cohort population**
- **Start by defining the underrepresented groups at your university** - This means both the underrepresented, but also groups with less privilege or power in broader society, and those who may struggle to access services and programmes, or may engage less or differently with university activities. If you're unsure about where to start...
- **Undertake initial research into health inequalities** - Explore the unique student experience of underrepresented groups and how that may intersect with their health, risk and protective factors. Research into health inequalities - both nationally, and by looking at your student support service data on access, retention, and data from Widening Participation and other areas of the university. This enables you to start the discussions with some knowledge of the experiences of the group, allowing students to sense check your assumptions and to get into more depth than if you started with no understanding whatsoever.
- **Explore any assumptions about representation in services** - Firstly, define your services. This may be a part of the Step Change audit of provision that is happening at your university. It may be that the co-production activities enable you to define your services, programmes and areas where students engage with wellbeing initiatives. You may then find it helpful to look at Student Support Service engagement data in order to understand trends. For example, you may find that more women show help seeking behaviours than men, but there is particular demand from men on a particular service. Ensure that you consult the data to check all assumptions.

- **Develop an approach to mental health accessibility** - Beyond the recruitment, retention in the engagement events is essential. This work must also be linked with the removal of barriers to participation; empowerment is only possible with the removal of structural barriers to participation[48]. Consider that some students living with mental health difficulties may be isolated, and not participants in groups or societies. Consider how else may you get them involved, and keep them engaged - see our tools section.

- **Reaching and recruiting underrepresented students**
  - Consider engaging with social leaders in specific groups
  - Consider the role of supporters and friends as a group with valuable insight
  - Co-produce recruitment and publicity of opportunities
  - Be proactive and reach out[49] for example by going out and listening to existing groups[50]
  - Consider the role of third party organisations to help with any sensitive communications
  - Use social media, and other common communication channels to promote your good work
  - In order to have diverse representation ensure students can nominate themselves to participate rather than wait to be referred by staff or through a committee and that you actively see out diverse voices.

Tool Example: Cascade Consultation - This is a model of consultation whereby an individual from a formal group or society is empowered to reach out to others in spaces in which they frequent. These can be done through various methods - from prearranged leaflets to advertising a specific engagement opportunity, through word of mouth in personal networks, or through social media.

See more tools in tools section!

Recognition and Reward - Put systems in place that recognise and reward contribution:

- **Make co-production part of appraisal and performance reviews:** Your university could review its appraisal processes and develop a policy to ensure co-production is recognised in relevant role reviews.
- **Include co-production in relevant job descriptions:** Student Minds would recommend review staff roles to ensure that job descriptions recognise the co-production aspect of staff roles and set clear expectations on deliverables, as research shows that a lack of clarity regarding who should be responsible can cause barriers in supporting student mental health.
- **Include co-production in promotions criteria for relevant roles:** co-production could be an explicit part of the promotions criteria at your institution, and recognised as a legitimate career pathway.
- **Celebrate co-production:** Your university and Students' Union could celebrate co-production with high profile awards; formal and informal recognition could be offered at school, department or research group level.
- **Encourage and incentivise co-production activity:** You could encourage co-production activity by offering incentives to staff, for example to research teams. These could be as simple as small bursaries. More profound change can be affected by ensuring that co-production is a legitimate activity in workload planning.
- **Share your co-production work:** We would recommend sharing examples of your work across the institution to role model to others, you may also share in regional and national forums.

Further Reading - The guidance above has been adapted from The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement.[51] The NCCPE have useful resources that you can download and adapt to your setting such as their recognition and reward resource pack.

Purpose, Mission, and Outcomes - Collectively identify areas that could benefit from co-production

In the implementation of student co-production, the following are required: (1) A shared vision of achievable goals, (2) An agreed set of values that always underpin pathways and processes, and (3) A feasible framework that allows embedding of the co-produced strategy.[52] It may be helpful to initially reflect on your practice.

Reflecting on your practice of engaging with students:
- **Understanding the compelling case** - What is the compelling case for engaging students in the development of your university's mental health and wellbeing strategy?
- **Identifying current needs and opportunities** - What is the current need to engage students, where do opportunities lie within your HEI?
- **Review current practice** - What does the HEI do already, is it effective, how might it be built upon/ not duplicated?
- **Develop a strategic plan** - How do you at the HEI intend to engage students regularly and meaningfully, how is it built into strategy?
- **Identify Priorities** - What can you do immediately to improve engagement, which students are your priority? (who do you hear from less) What do you need them for?
- **Measure Outcomes** - How can you measure the outputs, impacts and outcomes of student engagement work?

To ensure that student engagement is being done effectively, universities should set priorities that are consistent with their mission, values, as well as student beliefs. These priorities should be funded to the furthest extent possible[53].

The service user or student will likely be considering:
What will the outcomes be for us?
How can we participate?
What are our rights?
What choices will we have?
How will this meet our needs?
Will by input make any difference?

The service provider or student will likely to be considering:
What resources do we have for this/ what are the limitations?
What roles will we all play?
What are the structures?
How will we deliver according to co-design/ co-production?

The relationship between the service user and provider will have to be consciously designed from the start of the process. All of these questions will need to be explored.

It is important that those leading the co-production and engagement activities are transparent about what aspects are open to co-production. There should be clear outlining of what is expected from the institution and what is expected from the students; open and continuous dialogue is key[54].

As these priorities may change over time and between different student cohorts, good student engagement requires continuous support from universities.

Training - Develop students and staff so that everyone understands what co-production is and how it should be carried out

These activities require careful training and support to ensure this is a positive and empowering experience for those taking part and set within the wider national context about student wellbeing. Once you have established your initial ways of working (note that reiteration is an expected and welcomed part of the process), you can develop training on the value of co-production for those initially leading the work - which can then be delivered for and with students. Training will differ depending on what tools you use (see tools section). Training can also be a way to engage with students and agree on a way of working, co-production can be built into the ground rules. This may be best supplemented with training on strategy development, and training to build mental health literacy.

Recommendation - Hold meetings and events at accessible times & make it fun[55]. Ensure that you access the best times, and provide a variety of options to students to enable a range of students to get involved.

Establish clear ways of working for student engagement and co-production

Establishing clear ways of working is essential, as one study found "Participants felt that for youth participation to be genuine, effective, and safe for everyone involved, the organisation needed to have formal processes and procedures in place. This would also help to reduce feelings of anxiety and uncertainty for researchers, who were used to a structured way of working."[56] Figure 4 demonstrates some clear-cut steps that can be taken by universities to improve student engagement, particularly in the context of recruiting and working with students during strategy development.

In the tools section of this report, we list a number of different methodologies for carrying out co-production or student engagement. Here we suggest an overarching model with some principles that can apply for the organisation of co-production activities, and work across the majority of tools.

Figure 5 - Steps for Good Student Engagement. Adapted from Weimer, M. (2016, Faculty Focus)

LEAD

At Student Minds, we have adopted a model titled "LEAD" to consider how we can equip students to be change makers in student mental health. This model can be extended into designing student engagement and co-production work.

Listen

Empower

Action

Debrief

Listen - Broad term for the work that is done to understand the student experience and the specific issues. It can be primary research, it can be students carrying out research or listening exercises on campus. You will need to listen at all stages - first in establishing the purpose of your work, through to recruitment, reiterating the purpose with students, carrying out co-production activities, and implementing findings.

Empower - This refers to the ongoing training, support, coaching and resources that the university should provide for student partners, and giving them the skills and ability to empower others. Empowerment is about going away from tokenistic involvement, and ensuring that there is follow up that their inputs have been addressed. Empowerment is about the leadership of the process and design of the sessions too. We would recommend appointing Student Ambassadors, and student board members to relevant groups.[57]

Action - This refers to (1) the planning of a particular action, or engagement activity and (2) the implementation/delivery of that action or activity. This could be a particular engagement event, but also the opportunities for taking what is learnt to those developing strategy. Important that is based from the listening and the desired impact.

Debrief - This is being sure to debrief individual events and overall student engagement strategy throughout in order to learn and improve.

Recommendation – In partnership between the University and the Students' Union, review any existing student participation policies (this may already exist in terms of recruitment of student ambassadors, curriculum and academic course reps). Or create one that provides rationale and expectations for student participation in strategy design.

Recommendation – Update the Terms of Reference of the university's mental health strategic working group to include co-production with students as a core principle AND way of working from the start. The TORs should also set out how students will be represented in the group.

Reviewing - regularly review your co-production strategy

It is important to deploy an impact measurement framework to evaluate your student engagement activity from the start. At the time of writing, there isn't a specific framework designed for co-production with students on mental health and wellbeing strategies. Student Minds adapted various of our feedback tools for the activities listed in the tools section.

However, we would invite readers to adapt existing frameworks and design frameworks fit for your particular purpose. These can be based off aligning measurements to your mission and purpose, as well as measuring the benefits of co-production to the students and broader university community.

The TSEP framework for Evaluating Student Engagement activity may be a good starting point.

See also this blog on developing an "Evaluative mindset" within your co-production work.

When to use these tools: Involving students at every stage of strategy development

In our previous research, we found that in order for a university to foster a collaborative and compassionate approach, it must enable students with lived experience to contribute to strategy development and execution[58].

When students are fully engaged in the context of strategy development, they are treated as partners in making decisions that will ultimately affect them or their peers[59]. Students are regarded as assets with a great capacity for change, rather than 'problems' that require fixing[60]. (See the 'Benefits of Co-production' section for more detail.)

Those leading on this work may wish to consider the development of the whole university approach in accordance to the Step Change framework. Step Change is a framework for sustained quality improvement within organisations. It provides guidance as to the process that universities can undertake to work towards a whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Co-production with students is essential from the start of this process.

This section of our guide outlines a number of tools that you may use at each of the following stages.

Overall, student engagement work must be intertwined throughout the strategic work, in terms of complementing other data such as local needs assessment data, national research as well as professional expertise.

Figure 6 - Whole Organisation Approach, Step Change Framework

1. Understanding the compelling case

This early stage of strategy development is about understanding the compelling case - in other words, why is the university undergoing this new programme of change? At many universities this has taken the form of auditing the current provision and state of affairs regarding mental health and wellbeing in the university community, locally and nationally.

The direction of strategic decisions is inherently relevant and important to the lives of all students. You cannot understand mental health and wellbeing without learning from the whole student community. Students understand the culture of the university as participants in it. It is empowering for individuals to use their experiences in a positive way.

In some cases, universities will have been lobbied by their SUs to undertake student engagement work in terms of mental health and wellbeing strategies.

How to engage students at this stage?
- Make use of the tools set out in this guide.
- It is worth considering how your research and engagement can connect with the broader student community, beyond those in strictly representative roles.
- Student led recruitment can improve retention and engagement in co-production activities.
- What existing research conducted with students could you draw upon to help develop your case for action.

2. Identify current needs and opportunities

An important stage of implementing a strategic approach to mental health in the university community is to identify the current needs and opportunities the community and university present. In addition to staff expertise, students, as those experiencing the university environment, are best placed to identify needs and potential new areas for growth or change.

How to engage students at this stage?
When undertaking this stage through co-production, you can break this down into needs (and/or demands) and opportunities, and ask these questions using the majority of tools set out in this toolkit.

Some questions you could ask to understand needs (and/or demands):
- What needs exist in terms of student and staff mental health difficulties?
- What language are students using to identify their own mental health? (See Student Voices report[61], Open University report[62])
- What do students say that they need from a service?
- How do students describe existing services?
- What do students feel they need in order to thrive whilst at university?

Some questions you could ask to understand opportunities:
- What are the strengths in your university community?
- What areas of the university do students already engage in?
- Who do students seek support from in the university community?
- What do students identify as supportive to their mental health?

Recommendation - Before initial engagement, it is worthwhile auditing your current situation, this may be through feedback data from university counselling/services sessions .Feedback data will indicate current levels of satisfaction and engagement with existing services

Recommendation - You may wish to further break down your research questions into four different areas, the domains set out in the Step Change report: Community, Living, Learning and Support. In the project that kickstarted this toolkit, one of the universities we worked with broke down their lines of inquiry into these four areas, when developing their strategy.

3. Review current practice

A review of current practice must go beyond the current student support service practice and into other areas across the domains of Community, Living, Learning and Support. This audit process intends to account for all the current work that contributes to supporting wellbeing, or conversely mental health difficulties at the university.

How to engage students at this stage

Here are some example of questions that may be helpful to explore, and can be adapted to your context:
- What are students' perceptions and understandings of current practice?
- What are the expectations that students have of student support services?
- How do students perceive other aspects of the university in supporting their mental health?
- Where is support that is not explicit, that may not be officially captured as a part of existing support networks- e.g. academic tutors, accommodation, friends, family etc, taking place?
- How students engage with these support networks currently?
- What initiatives do students know about?
- How are students currently using community building initiatives?
- What do students perceive the role of university to be in building community
- How does accommodation help or hinder students' ability to thrive at university?
- What do students expect when coming to university in terms of their lifestyle?
- How do students understand the impact of learning and teaching on their wellbeing?

4. Developing a strategic plan

The gap between the need and the current practice can be addressed by a strategic plan. Co-production is essential in the development of the strategic plan. As such, students should be present in the team of those writing the plan.

How to engage students at this stage?
As set out in our Ways of Working section it is important to collectively identify areas that could benefit from co-production – in practice at this stage this means considering what training and background information students might need in order to be involved.

Areas of the strategy should be communicated:
- In broad terms to all of student population, with opportunity to give feedback on the specifics and the general.
- To representative samples of students with specific experience/backgrounds
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Service users (university and NHS services)

To engage representative samples of students with specific experience/backgrounds you may wish to:
- Engage students through existing university societies
- Engage students in Student Listening Projects with focus on their specific community's challenge
- Run a Student Voice Forum (SVF)
- Engage students in close reading of a draft strategy.

5. Identifying priorities

In terms of implementing the strategic plans, priorities must be identified. There are various methods for priority setting in general, but here we list those that could be used in co-production.

How to engage students at this stage?
- Priority Setting Partnership
- Student Voice Forums
- Student Listening Project.

Recommendation - Ensure that priorities are not only determined by dominant or majority groups but by what will be most impactful for groups experiencing health inequalities.

Recommendation - You may wish to ask students for their ideas for priorities in each of the four domains of the Step Change framework (Learning, Living, Community, Support).

Once your strategy has been published…
To ensure that the dissemination of your findings reaches students, focus on using appropriate and appealing language, communicating with clarity the next steps and potential impact. You may wish to engage students in your dissemination strategy.

How to engage students at this stage?
- Invite students to blog in response to the strategy
- Invite students to be social media champions of mental health and wellbeing promoting work of the university.
- Involve students in press opportunities - ensuring the student voice is included in the narrative of change at your university.
- Engage students in conversations about implementation - engaging students in implementation from an early stage enables it to be shaped and co-created from the start.
- Consider how you may engage a range of students (See the recruitment section in ways of working)

Recommendation - It is really important that the university communicates what they have done as a result of engaging students, this will mean that students know that their voice is heard and has impact, and if student views haven't been incorporated the rationale should be shared for transparency and maintenance of trust.

6. Measuring Outcomes

Co-production can also support the stage of measuring outcomes. Students can be involved in reviewing your measurement tools, and designing the criteria for success.

For example, the Student Mental Health Research Network - SMaRteN, has established a Student Research Team, one of their projects, at the time of writing is looking into auditing and reviewing national measures for student mental health. The findings of their work will be shared at SMaRteN's events and available on the website.

Tools and techniques to engage students in strategy development

This section shares examples of co-production and engagement activities which can be utilised in order to empower and engage students in the development of a university's mental health strategy and/or service provision.

Problem Solving Booths

What

A Problem Solving Booth (PSB) is a tool is used for enabling conversations between people in an informal setting. Problem Solving Booths were the idea of a young man that Charlie Howard met on the streets in Camden. The idea was tested and developed by her social enterprise OWLS[63]. She also founded a youth organisation MAC UK. Run in a public place, a PSB allows individuals who would not usually be asked for their opinions to be consulted. Two chairs are placed opposite one another, with volunteers around the area encouraging passers-by to take part. The person in the "helped seat" asks some questions, sometimes pre-determined by the theme of the booth. PSBs have been used to consult, but also for stranger to stranger conversations, peer support, to re-design services and left empty in public places for anyone to use.

Who

A Problem Solving Booth has the potential to reach a wide range of students, including those with specific experiences and characteristics. It has the potential to reach students who identify as having experienced a mental health difficulty, as well as those who do not. It can be tailored to specific groups, such as postgraduate students, if set up in locations that they frequent.

It can reach:
- All students (across the whole university population) - with the recognition that all of us have mental health, and the experience of being a student is valuable insight for the development of strategy
- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation /international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university & NHS services)
- Student Representatives (Through Students' Unions, Student Minds groups, welfare sabbs etc.)

Why

To empower people who wouldn't usually be asked for their opinions. Creating a booth is simple to do, and by engaging with people one-on-one you can draw out solutions to difficult problems directly from the people being affected. This can be used at all stages of drafting strategy. One example would be to develop the questions in response to a range of statements in the draft.

Pros

- PSBs can be arranged with a relatively quick turnaround of a few weeks, if there are student representatives who can receive quickfire training.
- They can be completed in a few hours if you have some student volunteers and basic resources – it's about getting out there and having conversations.
- They engage students that may not usually volunteer.
- They are eye catching and intriguing, and therefore may draw students' attention.
- They allow students to take ownership over what they choose to express about the university, prompted by open questions.

Cons

- The 'helper' may not have all the answers to the 'helped' questions - however, this is ok, they can be there to listen and learn, to express that ideas may be passed on.
- There is no guarantee that you will involve the whole population - indeed, numbers could be quite low. It can therefore be helpful to set a target number.
- It is not necessarily clear what the purpose is to students walking by.

How To

1. Set up the booth in a public place where people are likely to walk past. Place two chairs facing each other, each next to a sign saying 'Helper' and 'Helped'. Have a larger sign up close-by saying 'Problem Solving Booth'.
2. The facilitators take turns to sit in the Helped chair, waiting for someone to sit opposite them. You'll have a set of open questions to follow about mental health, such as:
   - What have you found most helpful from your university in terms of support for your mental health?
   - What have been your barriers to seeking support at university?
   - What about the university environment is supportive or challenging for your mental health?
   - What would you do to increase, decrease, remove or mitigate these challenges?
3. Other facilitators can support by approaching passers-by, in whatever way feels most comfortable, to ask them to try the booth.
4. Record the student's ideas on a questionnaire sheet, and ask for their name, subject, year, and contact details for asking any follow-up questions.
5. After the discussion, you can recommend the student to take away our signposting list for university and local support services.
6. Repeat! Conversations should be quick (no more than 10 minutes) and facilitators can swap every 3-4 times.

Recommendation

A Problem Solving Booth can be delivered through the Student Listening Project. In our pilot we had one term of setting up and training, and one term for the delivery and the analysis.

Recommendation

If time is limited, staff can run the booth - however, be aware that engagement may then be limited as students are likely to be less open in their response.

Recommendation

Be sure to debrief. During our pilot of the Problem Solving Booth, we had a Student Minds team member present to supervise the session, to answer any questions and support during the session. After the booth, the team debriefed to talk about the process and to summarise the key ideas which stood out from the conversations.

Further resources

Problemsolvingbooths.com and here's a video of a booth in action.

Traditional Focus Groups

What

Focus groups are small groups of people with relevant experience, who are gathered to share ideas, experience or feedback through conversation. Usually focus groups are made up of approximately 5-12 people. The discussion will usually be steered by key themes or questions from the facilitator. They are facilitated by a research or project lead, however we would also recommend equipping students to lead on the delivery and write up of focus groups (see our Student Listening Project). Student attendees to the focus group can also be supported to set the topics of the groups through an initial discussion, although in our experience the Student Voice Forum lends itself better to this sort of empowered participation.

Who

A traditional focus has the potential to reach representative samples of:

- Students with specific experience/ background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation /international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university and NHS services)
- Student Representatives (Through Students' Unions, Student Minds groups, welfare sabbs etc.)

Why

Focus groups are a good way to get to know the experiences of students, and to follow meaningful lines of inquiry live with students.

Pros

- Focus groups encourage the flow of ideas.
- They can be used to challenge some common perceptions and dig deeper into key issues. For example, if a respondent believed a solution was 'more money for services,' follow-up questions might explore what this money should be spent on, and the perceived utility of this for students who do not engage with services. They thus provide an opportunity to understand students' beliefs and priorities.

Cons

- Focus groups often only involve a small group, which may not be representative.
- They may not be diverse enough in their representation.
- They are resource intensive.
- Students can be influenced by what others are saying rather than speak from their own experiences - although this can be mitigated through consideration facilitation.

How To:

We would recommend working with researchers with relevant experience at your university to design focus groups.

We attended and assisted with a focus group at Cardiff University, as a part of their student engagement work.

From our observations this was well done because:

- The facilitator started the focus group by setting the purpose and direction of the strategic work at the university and outlining the scope and parameters of what was being discussed. This gave the context briefly, and explained why the students were there, keeping everyone on board with the journey of the project up until that point, laying out where they were going next and ensuring the impact of the work was shown through phrases such as, 'what we discuss in this session will go to this board on this date and impact this'. This meant students knew why they were involved and it wasn't tokenistic. It also removed some of the fear of 'strategy' as something perceived as inaccessible.
- The facilitators set ground rules such as 'do feel welcome to disagree' and 'challenge ideas not people.'
- The discussion started with specific questions from the facilitators and participants were given 10-15 minutes to write down their ideas in response. This meant that later in the session the facilitators could bring discussion back to its original intentions.
- The focus group was brief; it lasted two hours.
- The focus group was held in a physical space which was fun and engaging.
- For recruitment, the university used their intranet and internal jobs page. Students were paid to attend, as the university had the systems in place to support small one off payments.
- The focus group had a specific topic, in this case 'transitions' one of the key areas of the Step Change framework. Discussions approached this topic holistically across school, university, postgraduate studies, employment, home to halls, Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services (AMHS).

Recommendation

When facilitating a focus group, ensure that you record students' perceptions which go against what you see as true. For example, if a student says 'there are really long waiting lists for counselling' but you know that the service the university offers has reduced its waiting lists it can be really tempting to feel you need to respond to what was said straight away, and 'correct' students. This is a 'fixing' not a 'supportive listening' position and shuts down a potentially rich line of inquiry. Instead we would suggest that you inquire about what experiences they have had that led to that understanding. This information is essential for understanding the students' experiences, perceptions and realities. It may support the development of clearer communications of existing offers, as well as improving the offer of support to suit students.

Recommendation

Build-in breaks to your focus groups, and ensure that you keep to them or communicate when they will happen if the schedule changes.

Recommendation

There is often a tension about managing expectations and 'not getting hopes up' - this can be helped by setting clear parameters and scope at the start of any engagement activity.

Idealism should be encouraged as it is where some of the best solution-oriented thinking happens.

Student Voice Forum (Approach Designed by Student Minds)

What

The Student Voice Forum (SVF), designed by Student Minds, guides student attendees to discuss their experiences of mental health at university. It is usually a one-off workshop, but can be adapted into a series. The Student Voice Forum guides student attendees to discuss their experiences of mental health at university, and collectively come up with ideas for how to improve mental health on campus. Facilitators will take turns to lead sessions and record the topics covered in discussion,ensuring that these notes are checked with the student attendees.

Who

A Student Voice Forum can reach:
- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation / international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university and NHS services)
- Student Representatives (Through Students' Unions, Student Minds groups, welfare sabbs etc.)

Why

To collectively produce ideas of how to improve mental health at our universities. Feedback showed that the sessions improved the confidence of the Student Voice Forum members, who felt they could now make their voice heard and influence the state of student mental health.

Cons:

- SVFs work well with smaller number of students, meaning that multiple sessions should be run to gather a range of students' opinions.
- SVFs ask for a time commitment of at least 2 hours for meaningful involvement. This involves careful scheduling and finding sufficiently committed students. They can thus be hard to recruit for due to time commitments. However, this can be combated with reward or incentives, such as free food, as well as intrinsic motivations such as personal development and making a difference.

Pros

Due to the intensive structure, and small group:
- SVFs enable in-depth discussions of particular topics, themes or research questions.
- They enable participants to feel as if they are heard.
- They are easy to recruit for in terms of small numbers.
- Logistically, it is easier to book a room for SVFs than for a larger event.
- Small groups with peers can mean a better flow of ideas, and are more open.

According to analysis of quantitative feedback from attendees, a Student Voice Forum:
- Improves participants' knowledge of student mental health.
- Empowers participants to influence transforming the state of student mental health.
- Improves the student's confidence in discussing their story and their views on student mental health.

We asked on the feedback forms, "do you feel that you have gained any skills from attending this meeting of the Student Voice Forum?" A selection of the responses were:

Builds communication skills
"Every time I feel more able to advocate and express ideas and concepts."

Increases students knowledge of their own experiences and that of others:
- "I feel like I am more confident talking about my own experiences and able to talk about possibilities."
- "To be more open with people about my experiences."
- "Different perspectives of other experiences - I'm used to only my experiences at university."
- "I have learnt a lot about the mental health and disability experiences of others at uni."
- "Definitely more awareness in other experiences of students, not just for me or at my uni."

Builds self awareness and confidence:
"A more cemented view of my own skills."

Develops analytical skills and enhanced critical thinking
"Looking at things more critically - analysing ideas. Thinking quickly."

Builds hope
"I feel very hopeful for future progress :)"

☑ How To:

- A Student Voice Forum can be composed of a range of interactive activities that take the traditional focus group and make it more interactive and empowering.
- The activities require careful training and support to ensure it is a positive and empowering experience for those taking part. As we set out in the ways of working section, it can be helpful to set the forum within the wider national context of student wellbeing, and to build a sense of purpose.

When Student Minds ran Student Voice Forums, the sessions followed a 'Problem Based Learning' also known as 'Design Thinking' approach. The sessions were facilitated using the first three of these stages.

One technique is called "Creative Ideation" - this can be used to facilitate the group coming up with multiple ideas, to source a range of opinions on specific or broad areas. Methods of creative ideation involve brainstorming, drawing and other visual methodologies.

In creative ideation, it is essential to allow all ideas to be contributed, to encourage students to think of all possibilities and not limit contributions according to what is deemed 'currently possible'. It is important not to linger on any one idea for too long, as at this stage it is about gathering a large quantity of ideas rather than going into depth.

(See the Problem Based Learning/ Design Thinking section of this report.)
Further Reading on Creative Ideation[64]

We looked to use similar approaches with the university partners when implementing Step Change. The Student Voice Forum meetings were facilitated by members of the Student Minds staff team, with input from the NUS and IPPR on structure and questions. The members were encouraged to focus on themes that they wanted to develop.

Findings can be read in our Student Voices report.

Example session plan:
- Arrival (Time 1 feedback)
- 14:00-14:05 Introduction
- 14:05-14:15 Ground rules and ice breakers
- 14:15-14:40 Sharing experiences 1 – the student journey
- 14:40-15:10 Sharing experiences 2 – experiences of support, help-seeking and provision
- 15:10-15:15 Break
- 15:15-15:50 Creative ideation – overcoming barriers and mental health expectations
- 15:50-16:00 Next steps
- Feedback forms (Time 2 feedback)

Recommendation

SVFs require thematic analysis afterwards for meaningful engagement. Ensure that this is built into your process, if possible equipping other students to be a part of this process.

Surveys and Questionnaires

What

University and Students' Union communities already undertake a range of surveys, both those that are explicitly and exclusively about mental health and wellbeing, and general surveys with additional mental health question modules, or measurements included in other regular student facing surveys.

Who

Surveys can be used to begin to reach:

- All students (whole university) - with the recognition that all of us have mental health
- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation / international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university and NHS services)
- Student Representatives (Through Students' Unions, Student Minds groups, welfare sabbs etc.)

What we did and why

In the development of 'Step Change', and the Student Voice Forum, an additional 137 students with personal experience of mental health difficulties also took part in a questionnaire about students' perceptions of mental health at university. We wanted to find out about as wide as possible a range of students' various experiences of mental health at university, barriers to support, and what they need to thrive.

How To

- Work with researchers at your university, your Students' Unions and students to develop relevant and insightful question sets
- This can be used in response to a draft version of a strategy: As a form of consultation, choose headlines and ask for response on a scale, with some text questions. For example, you could take the headlines or contentious points from the draft and ask students to what extent they agree or it applies to them (other angles can be designed). There needs to be data analysis capacity on receiving answers

Pros:

- The potential for large data sets means it is good for understanding student population/ cohort level trends.
- Surveys can support the measurement of impact or change after an intervention.
- They are inclusive in that the person doing the consultation isn't choosing who takes part, as individuals opt in.
- People can fill them in at their own pace and in their own time.
- They are more accessible for those living with chronic illness, disability.

Cons:

- Surveys are only 'consultation' and isn't meaningful co-production, though it can be used as a tool, part of the listening to the student community.
- There is a risk of 'over surveying' the student population. This is especially problematic if there is no clear follow through and communication of the purpose and impact of participating.
- New surveys have to fit into the cycles of surveys that are already going out.
- They can be difficult to get the best measures of student mental health because of varying types of screenings etc.
- Consider your approach to student disclosure via the survey, signposting etc
- Risk of duplication - to counter this, ensure that you first 'data mine' what is available in existing data sets at your university - to ensure new questions are filling knowledge gaps.
- Risk of only surface level learning.

Further reading

Findings from The University Mental Health: Student Perspectives Questionnaire can be found in our Student Voices report.

Recommendation

Ensure the purpose of the survey is clearly communicated to students, and that students receive an update on how what they have shaped strategy.

Recommendation

Audit and review the surveys that the university already undertakes to see what data you already have, and what questions you need to iterate or ask again.

Recommendation

If the research study is set up by academics, set up clear processes as to how students may be involved in putting forward the research questions for your data collection. (See the Student Research Panels section)

Recommendation

Surveys about mental health and wellbeing that are optional tend to be self-selective, meaning that those with lived experience of mental health difficulties are more likely to participate than those who do not identify as such. This bias can be counteracted by framing surveys or questionnaires with language such as 'your experiences at university' and 'wellbeing'.

Having said that, survey responses from those with lived experience of mental health difficulties are extremely valuable to the formation of strategy design, and their voices should be valued equally to that of those without lived experience. Sometimes it is important to directly talk about mental health and illness in order to ensure the explicit inclusion of those living with the experience, and to avoid stigma and taboo around the topic.

Recommendation

Work with students to find the best time to distribute the survey in the academic year.

Recommendation

Work with students to consider the signposting that you include in survey.

Recommendation

Work with students to ask questions about how they would feel about any data linkage, or other ethical questions in terms of what would be appropriate and acceptable to the study body.

Engaging students in close reading of draft strategy

What

Engaging students in close reading of draft strategy through online consultation.

This involves engaging a students in representative or leadership roles, and equipping them to read through any plans for the strategy and provide in-depth feedback.

Who

- All students (whole university) - with the recognition that all of us have mental health
- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation / international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university & NHS services)
- Student Representatives (Through Students' Unions, Student Minds groups, welfare sabbs etc.)

Pros

- Clear outcome and task - this could be easier for some students to engage in as they can clearly plan this around other commitments.
- Accessibility - online opportunities mean they can be accessed at any time, anywhere which can further widen participation to those living with mental health difficulties, chronic illness or disability.

Cons

- Could be a bit difficult to manage, if there is not a clear process set up as to how feedback will be incorporated.

How to

- Ensure draft of strategy is available online with accessible versions - including audio, include consultation form with specific and general questions.
- Ensure that students are given the full context of the strategy.
- Build motivation by explaining that this is an opportunity to use their voice.
- Provide 3-5 general questions in response to the entire strategy
- Provide 3-5 specific questions based on most relevant areas to their role (for example for Student Representatives)
- Allow students to submit responses in creative formats, such as videos, recordings, text etc. This can result in a thematic analysis of content received. How it is presented can be flexible.
- Set a time expectation for the task. Give students sufficient time to input - at least a month, over term time ideally.
- Give a specific word limit for written feedback or time arranged for verbal feedback (this could be through an informal meeting). Ensure that students are given opportunity to have a pre-meet prior to any related engagement with senior staff to support them to feel prepared
- It should be promoted through university and SU comms channels.
- Ensure that you reward and compensate students for their time

Recommendation

Set out the purpose and expectations of what you require from the consultation and their feedback from the beginning. For example - set clear questions you would like answered. You can also divide up any documents into sections, set a time expectation, and invite students to sign up to respond to different sections.

Recommendation

Ensure that all documents are published in accessible formats at the point of access, as opposed to relying on the student to translate it into an accessible form. Your Disability Service or Student Support Service should be able to support with this work.

Student - Led Peer Research

What

There are a number of methodologies to engage students with the process of carrying out research. This not a definitive list of techniques, but gives an indication of the variety of ways to approach student led peer research.

Who

Any students can become a peer researcher - this can be an opportunity open to students on any degree course. It is a really powerful way to engage students from a range of backgrounds that increases the likelihood of diverse and representative research participants, and strengthens the range of perspectives represented. In terms of research participants, the student peer researchers can choose to focus on any students, or those from specific groups such as:

- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation / international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university & NHS services)

Why

Universities that value the importance of high quality and innovative research can utilise their research expertise, and build skills in their student population.

Pros

- Students develop advanced analytical skills and enhanced critical thinking
- Responses could be more open and genuine if they are with a peer, more willing to engage
- Skills that the student researchers could gain - development opportunity

Cons

- Potential concerns about reliability of research findings, but these can be countered with good support and training.
- Only engages a small number of students.

Recommendation

When undertaking a research study on the student population, consider how to involve students in the management of the study from the outset. For example, what should the management structure be and what should the role and responsibilities of students be in that?

How to

There are various tools that could be used:

1. Student Journey Mapping
This is an exercise that can be facilitated with or by students to map out students' experiences - noting how different aspects of their university life interact with their mental health and wellbeing. This may include noting explicit 'touchpoints' with support services and the university, but can also give room to discuss 'pressure points' such as assessments or transition periods.

For example, in our Student Voice Forum, we used the Student Journey mapping to facilitate students reflecting on their own experience with the exercise by asking "A day in the life of a student, where does mental health interact?" - The student would then map a typical day for them. This can also be used across the academic year or the course of a degree.

There is then the option to use this tool to map potential interventions, improvements or programming that could enable positive change.

Further resources
The Open University has developed a tool for Student Journey mapping[65].

2. A Priority Setting Partnership (PSPs)
PSPs enable staff and students to work together to identify and prioritise questions that could be answered through further research, or problems which could be addressed through strategy.

The steps and principles set out by the James Lind Alliance can be adapted, with the support of researchers at your university, to your setting.[66]

Examples:
- Open University - Priority setting with disabled students[67]
- James Lind Alliance - Mental Health in Children and Young People[68]
- Youth Access - All Together Better Charter[69]

3. Setting up a student research council, or advisory council
Examples:
- Orygen - Youth Research Council.[70]
- The Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRTeN)[71] has a Student Led Research Team at its heart to support the network's activities and help ensure that the student voice is fully represented across its work. The Student Team will be involved in research projects to support the network, as well as providing advice and insight for the network and network events. You can read more on the SMaRTeN website
- Student Minds' - Policy Panel - "The Policy Panel exists to further ensure that student voices are central to Student Minds policy, research and campaigning work. The Policy Panel sessions are made up of three interlinked components.
  - Consultations and discussions about Student Minds policy, research and campaigning work.
  - Policy Panel Member led research projects as peer researchers.
  - Personal development for the Policy Panel members.
    - Read more about the Policy Panel in the PAR section

4. Student Consultancy societies or programmes
Examples:
- Student Minds worked with an LSE's Consultancy Society on a scoping report on the mental health and wellbeing of international students, carried out by students.
- Student Minds has also worked with Queen Mary's 'QConsult' programme to work with a group of students to commission a research report on the mental health and wellbeing of women students.

Individual, Social, Material Model

What

The Individual, Social, Material Model was designed by the Scottish Government.[72] It is a tool for policy makers and practitioners whose work ultimately aims at engaging people and influencing their behaviours.

Figure 7 - Factors that individual behaviour in the Individual Social Material Model (Scottish Government, 2013)

Who

This model can be facilitated by staff or students (peer researchers for example) or Student Representatives such as Welfare Officers - if they are equipped to use it effectively. It can be helpful to focus those attending specific groups, or it can be a broad representation of students.

It can reach:
- All students (across the whole university population) - with the recognition that all of us have mental health, and the experience of being a student is valuable insight for the development of strategy
- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation /international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university & NHS services)
- Student Representatives (Through Students' Unions, Student Minds groups, welfare sabbs etc.)

Why

At Student Minds, we have used this model to help understand aspects of the student experience that impact on mental health, extending beyond an individualised understanding and into understanding various levels of influence on behaviour. We recognise that change at a university level mostly involves structural change, and we find that this model helps to disentangle and categorise ideas about what influences student mental health, feeding into various strands of strategy development.

Pros

- It is potentially quite empowering for students.
- It helps students to give a broad overview/ perspective of their experience
- Students without explicit mental health difficulties/ experiences can still contribute.

Cons

- It can be a complex model to explain, and time needs to be built in for this. It could also be difficult to manage and relies on understanding of the model by the person who does it.
- The categories do blur.
- There may not be as much depth on personal experience (but this is better in terms of ensuring it isn't a therapeutic space)

How to

Student Minds facilitated a discussion with our Policy Panel about "Observations & Solutions – Causing & Preventing Loneliness"

The Policy Panel members captured their observations of what contributes to, and could prevent loneliness, breaking down their ideas into Individual, Social and Material areas.

You could use this model to look at the different protective and risk factors to students' mental health at your university.

A full guide of how to facilitate a similar exercise can be found here.

Problem based learning

What

'Problem Based Learning', also known as the 'Design Thinking' approach. It is made up of 5 stages - Discovery/ exploration, Interpretation, Ideation, Experiment, and Evolution. It can be used to structure a Student Voice Forum, or individual techniques across its 5 stages can be used across a series of workshops.

Who

It has the potential to reach:

- Samples of all students (whole university) - with the recognition that all of us have mental health
- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation / international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
- Current service users (university & NHS services)
- Student Representatives (Through Students' Unions, Student Minds groups, welfare sabbs etc.)

Why

The Student Voice Forum meetings were facilitated by members of the Student Minds staff team, with input from the NUS and IPPR on structure and questions. The session followed a 'Problem Based Learning'. This approach is made up of 5 stages - Discovery/ exploration, Interpretation, Ideation, Experiment, Evolution. The sessions were facilitated using the first three of these stages. Members were encouraged to focus on themes that they wanted to develop.

In the co-production of strategy, facilitators may use all of these stages as the strategy is trialled and reiterated.

Pros

Empowers students to be at the heart of defining problems and coming up with solutions - from the beginning to end of the process.
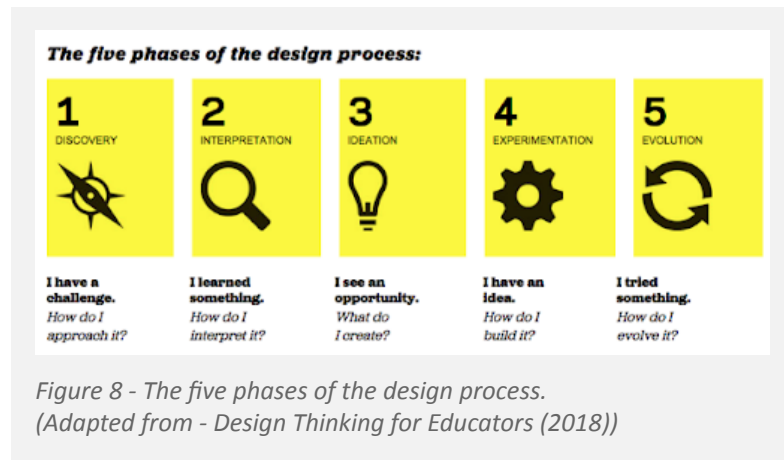
Cons

Following this approach asks students for a time commitment across more than one intensive session to ensure meaningful involvement, this involves careful scheduling and committed students.

How to

Figure 8 - The five phases of the design process.
(Adapted from - Design Thinking for Educators (2018))

1. Discovery: "I have a challenge. How do I approach it?"
-   A principle at the heart of design thinking is that the answer to a problem lies with the user
-   This stage is about understanding the needs of the university community - both student and staff populations
-   Look at your pre-existing data before launching into new areas of research. Then co-produce with students to check if prior research needs updating, and to better understand the challenges that are presented.
-   Talk to external partners/ learning from other HEIs - learning from other models in other settings.
-   Facilitate engagement events with students to think about approaches to the problems that are presented.

2. Interpretation: "I learned something. How do I interpret it?"
-   Work with students to interpret the findings of any student engagement events of research
-   Make sense of the data
-   Engage with students to work out and articulate opportunities that may exist
-   Understanding the student journey - where do students identify opportunity, threat, concern, worry.
-   By the end of this, you may articulate further research questions and exploration questions - these can be big questions!

3. Ideation: "I see an opportunity. What do I create?"
-   Thinking about how to develop the ideas from the first two stages
-   Various ways to do this - 'creative ideation', 'blue sky thinking'

4. Experimentation: "I have an idea. How do I build it?"
-   Partner with students to build their ideas into strategy, and programmes of change

5. Evolution: "I tried something. How do I evolve it?"
-   Reflecting, reiterating
-   Fine tuning ideas from stage 3

The above has been adapted from a generic model.[73] You can download the toolkit here.[74]

Participatory Action Research

What

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to research that, in our context, will involve students as partners at all stages, ensuring that they are valued and recognised for the strengths they bring to the research. It begins with a research topic that is of importance and relevance to the university community, and combines that knowledge by experience, reflection[75] and collective inquiry with action for social change.[76]

Who

Any students can become a peer researcher - this can be an opportunity open to students on any degree course. It is important that the students who are engaged want to support change in their community, as this one of PAR's essential features. It is really powerful to engage students from a range of backgrounds, as this increases the likelihood of diverse and representative research participants, and strengthens the range of perspectives represented. In terms of research participants, the student peer researchers can choose to focus on any students, or those from specific groups, such as:

- Representative samples of students with specific experience/background (e.g. postgraduate/ undergraduate/ Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)/ Widening Participation /international students/ students who stay at home/ and other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation)
- Students with lived-experience of mental health difficulties
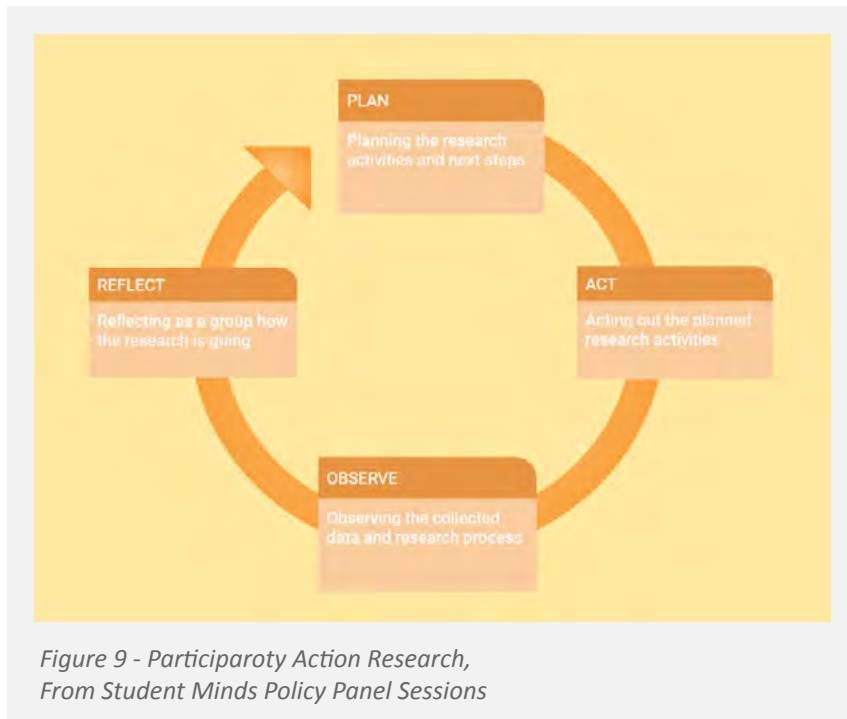- Current service users (university & NHS services)

Why

This methodology can allow students who are potentially experiencing health inequalities to question the status quo, and challenge intersecting systems of privilege and oppressions.[77] It is empowering for those with lived experience to be able to use their experience, through self reflective inquiry, to improve on university practices that they partake in - this can result in increased control over their own lives. [78][79]

How To

Figure 9 - Participaroty Action Research,
From Student Minds Policy Panel Sessions

At our Policy Panel Sessions at Student Minds we supported a small team of students and recent graduates to undertake a peer research project, using the PAR methodology across 3 in person sessions.

1. <u>Plan</u> **- Planning the research activities and the next steps.** In our first and second session, the student & graduate researchers came up with their research questions and deciding on the method by which they would reach their peers. They assigned tasks within the team.
2. <u>Act</u> **- Acting out the planned research activities.** In between the sessions the Policy Panel members carried out interviews with peers.
3. <u>Observe</u> **- Observing the collected data and the research process.** In a final session, the Policy Panel undertook a thematic analysis of their findings. They observed the challenges of the research process.
4. <u>Reflect</u> **- Reflecting as a group on how the research is going.** We facilitated space for reflection with The Policy Panel, through which the members discussed any obstacles they had come across in their research and how they overcame them, and this provided an opportunity to consider an altered approach in the future.

Pros

- Students have ownership over the research process.
- A variety of research methods can be used in the process of PAR (see the list above).

Cons

It is resource intensive for those organising and leading (See 'Co-production Ways of Working' for how this can be supported)

Recommendation

Draw on the knowledge of researchers at your university who may be able to inform your ways of working, in terms of researching with students. During our Policy Panel session we had a 'Researcher on Tap' (as opposed to the researcher being at the 'top') who was able to support with any questions, and provide guidance - for example with ethics.

Recommendation

Ensure that you are clear about roles and responsibilities.

Recommendation

Create a guide for student researchers. For example for our Policy Panel we created a guide which included the agreed project timeline, research objectives and steps to carrying out their research method.

Further reading

Think local act personal
A full report of the Policy Panel's research findings will be available soon on Student Minds Website.

Combining techniques

Student-led Listening Projects

What

Student-led listening projects (SLP) are an approach to co-production designed by Student Minds to combine a number of tools we understood to work well together. An SLP is a research project looking into students' views on their university's mental health approach.

Why

We did this to test a belief that students are in the best position to consult fellow students, as familiar peers can speak to students in a relatable and approachable way.

Student Listening Project at Birmingham

What we did and why

In Spring 2017 we organised a 'student-led listening project' (SLP) pilot at the University of Birmingham and Student Guild, which we equipped a group of students to lead.

The SLP group consisted of four students from the University of Birmingham. These students ran student engagement events to gather student opinions about mental health at the university.

How we did it

Two varieties of student engagement events - Problem Solving Booth (PSB) and Student Voice Forum (SVF) - were run by the SLP group to consult students about various topics related to mental health at university.

At the start of the project a series of questions was set based on recommendations from the Students' Guild and Student Services, and from previous experience of Student Minds consultations. These questions were:

- What do students find is most helpful from the university in terms of support for their mental health?
- What are students' barriers to seeking or continuing with support for a mental health difficulty?
- What do students expect the university to provide in terms of support for mental health and wellbeing?
- Do students use the Student Hub (Aston Webb building)? What would encourage students to use the services in the Hub if they required them?

The SLP group ran two PSBs based in the Guild of Students Reception. Over two sessions, the group interviewed 32 students.

The Student Voice Forum guided students to discuss their experiences of mental health at university in a group discussion session. The SLP group took the role of facilitators to lead sessions about the following topics:

- Mapping of students' personal mental health journeys through university
- Discussion of experiences of support, help-seeking and provision of support
- Discussion to suggest ideas for 1) how to overcome barriers to getting university support, and 2) the minimum expectations of what a university should provide to support students' mental health

The SVF was held in the Students' Guild Council Chambers room. Students were asked to register in advance of the event with their personal details. Five students attended the event.
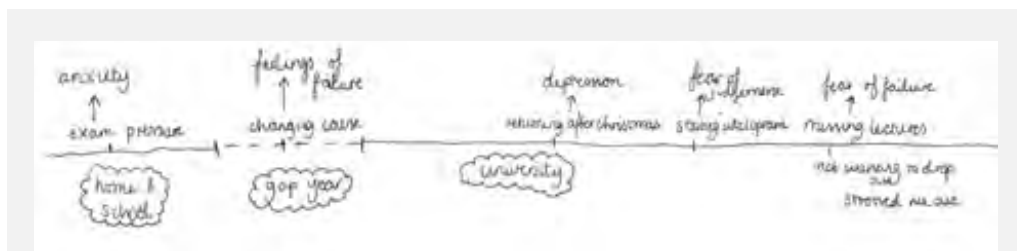

Figure 10 - Students were asked to create a student journey map, explaining their experiences of mental health throughout university.

We then presented the findings to the Student Support Services and the Birmingham University Guild.

What worked/ What did we learn:
- The data collected was considered to supplement existing data from previous work the Student Support Service and SU had undertook - for example by adding the weight of students' stories to existing knowledge. As such, the PSB was a good sense check for the Student Support Services strategy.
- We received feedback from the staff using the findings that in terms of interpreting the information,lots of points are not university specific - so having context of which problems are national would have been helpful.

- Students' Union / Student Guild representatives that we worked with said that the PSB reached students that they wouldn't usually reach in surveys. The PSB reaches a wider group that the Student Support service we wouldn't usually access, and that adds value.

The limitations of the PSB were:
- Demographic information about the students was not measured, such as level of study or subject, which could have highlighted differences in mental health experiences for different groups of students.
- Due to the time of year the events took place, students were interviewed during the university exam period which may have yielded different answers to the rest of the year.

Testimonies from students

"Throughout the Student Listening Project (SLP), I have learnt practical inter-personal skills and I have learnt about the way that mental health and wellbeing is thought about in the general student community. I would love for the information we have gathered to be used to improve services within the university as it is clear that while some students are able to benefit from the current systems, many students are not getting the support they need" - Student Listening Project Volunteer

"I really enjoyed working on the Student Listening Project! I have learned a lot about the different services that our university provides for dealing with mental health issues and about the stigma around those problems. I hope the university takes into account the different opinions that we have gathered and improve the awareness and the quality of the services in the different departments. I believe that SLP was very useful for engaging students as they had the ability to share their personal experiences in an informal way which resulted in some very good ideas for improvement of the services." - Student Listening Project Volunteer

"Taking part in the Student Listening Project has taught me that there is still a stigma attached to mental health issues at university and this creates a huge barrier for students wanting help. It is important universities ensure this stigma is reduced (through campaigns, workshops, etc.) so students wanting help are reassured they aren't alone and it's okay to need help. [...] I think the Student Listening Project is a good idea for getting students to open up and talk about mental health at university, as this is the only way the stigma is going to be reduced.

So many students came forward and spoke to us, as well as making really interesting points, so I think the project is really effective for getting information about how students view mental health at their university.

Overall, I think it is a really useful project and is helpful for universities to look at how they deal with mental health and adjust their system where necessary." - Student Listening Project Volunteer.

How to run your own Student Listening Project:

1. **Initial meeting with University/SU and other relevant partners:** Decide on the timeline for a project, the support needed from the university and the key information wanted by the university or Students' Union. Make sure the university involves relevant departments i.e. counselling service/advice centre. Undertake purpose setting - e.g. What sorts of research questions do we want to address through the engagement activity? Consider the training content, the best way to reach students, and set actions and a timeline for the project.

2. **Recruit SLP group volunteers:** Do this with publicity through the university or students' union. Have a Google form application to sign up. The decision-making for the team could be done by either Student Minds or the university.

   The application form should set out what the participant is committing to - e.g. the number of sessions, the dates, and any work that may need to be completed outside of sessions. It should also set out what training the participant will receive.

   Application questions could include:
   - Q1: Why are you interested in taking part in the Student Listening Project?
   - Q2: What relevant experience do you have that would help you complete this project?
   - Q3: How do we best encourage students to speak about their experiences of mental health services?

3. **Training for SLP group:** The activities require careful training and support to ensure this is a positive and empowering experience for those taking part and that it is set within the wider national context of student wellbeing. This training can be co-delivered by various staff from the university and the students' union. It may be helpful to run through an introduction to student mental health. Training may include:
   - Meeting the team - Everyone introducing themselves, e.g. "why did we all volunteer?", "what are our hopes and fears in being involved?"
   - Contextualising and building purpose - "What's going on at the university, what strategy is being developed and why are we here?"
   - Confirming the research aims or learning objectives of the project - "What is it that we are trying to find out?"
   - Training in how to run the engagement method and/or co-design of the engagement methods.
   - Deciding on roles within the group.
   - Boundaries when running the project.
   - Listening and signposting - Useful links or resources for signposting.

   Recommendation - Create a volunteer training pack in which useful information is conveyed, and which students can use to make notes.

4. **Logistics for student engagement events:** You will need to book rooms and decide on session plans.

   In our experience at Student Minds, it was helpful to be supported by the Students' Guild (Students' Union) in these sorts of logistics. Working closely with the SU can ensure that the events are held in spaces that students frequent.

5. **Running events**: In our pilot, the engagement events (**Problem Solving Booth and Student Voice Forum**) were facilitated by the SLP group, and Student Minds provided supervision and guidance for the SLP volunteers. It was vital to ensure that there was clear signposting and clarity on the confidentiality

of students' information, such as consent for taking photos of participants and/or storing information. The SLP group took written notes, which a Student Minds team member collected at the end of each session and scanned into digital form.

6. In the co-production of strategy, facilitators may use all of these stages as the strategy is trialled and reiterated.

7. **Undertake a Thematic analysis of findings:** Student Minds held a session based at a university after events to bring together findings into key themes. We found it helpful to remind SLP group of the research questions, and to group findings into these themes.

   This session consisted of:
   - **Introductions** - Explain the plan for the session, and remind the group of the need for a research report and the aims for the SLP. Remind the group that the purpose of the report is to pass on the findings, rather than infer solutions from the findings.
   - **Re-familiarising** - This is an opportunity for the group to re-read their notes from student engagement events. Look for key themes

(groupings of topics which come up regularly). Give highlighters and paper for notes.
   - **What key themes have we found?** -Suggestions of what the key themes are, writing these bits onto A3 paper. Give answers to each of the main research questions.
   - **Add detail to key themes** - Return to the notes from the sessions, add details/quotes to post-it notes, and then add these to the key theme pages in the middle of the room. Offer suggestions for grouping of findings in each theme - i.e. group various post-it notes together that are similar. We found that this session took a substantial amount of time to complete (around 50 minutes).On reflection, we could had either allotted more time, or asked the group to complete in advance.
   - **Discussion about each topic, adding detail** - Each person to take a key theme page and explain what's on there to the rest of the group, then lead a discussion to draw out any extra findings which can go into the SLP learnings.
   - **Writing up** - Decide on who will write up each section of the report based on the key themes. Give out sheets with the recommended format for writing.
   - **Summary of project and feedback** - Ask the

group to write a personal summary (what they have learned, how they would like the information to be regarded) for reporting and feedback of the SLP project.
   - **What next? Closing up** - Complete the report, sending it to the SU/Guild and Student Services by a given date. Ask for each student/ small group to give a quote and summary to be added to this final report.

8. **Writing up final report:** We produced a final report. This was consolidated by the Student Minds staff team, using the SLP group's work - their write-ups of the findings and personal thoughts about the SLP project.

9. **Submit report to University/SU:** We sent our report to the relevant University and SU partners and asked for feedback. We received feedback that the report could be used alongside other data that the university and SU have on similar research questions.

Recommendation - We would recommend, if you do a similar project, that members of the SLP group present the report, their process and their findings to the university's Mental Health Strategic Working Group.

Further examples of where we have employed co-production:

Our work at York, UWE Bristol, Cardiff on co-producing strategy:

This section of the guide summarises learning from our work with The University of the West of England (UWE Bristol), Cardiff University, and the University of York, as part of a Office for Students (and its predecessor HEFCE) funded project to develop university strategies, in which we supported each university to build student engagement and co-production into the development of their mental health and wellbeing strategies. (See the methodology for further information).

Our work at Cardiff University

What we did and why we did it

Student Minds and Cardiff University colleagues chose our research questions together, to support the co-writing (between staff and students) of Cardiff's mental health and wellbeing strategy. We based the questions on some key strands of the draft of the universities' strategy.

- How do you expect to be supported, with your mental health and wellbeing, by the university?
- How do you expect to be supported with your mental health and wellbeing, by others outside of university? E.g. Peers, Students' Union, NHS, etc
- What helps, or would help, you realise your full potential during your time at Cardiff? What aspects of your university experience have helped you thrive, grow, and build new skills?
- Be imaginative: If you could change, or improve, anything, what would be your vision of a university that promotes mental health and wellbeing?

Student participants were given the option to respond to any number of these questions.

How we did it: What happened at the engagement event?

The engagement event consisted of training a small core team of volunteers to go out onto campus and talk to students asking the research questions to support the development of the strategy.

10:30- The Student Minds team were met by Wellbeing Champions from Student Support. We linked up with student peer supporters, they helped us to set up in the space, and familiarised us with the building and areas that students often went to.

11:00-12.00 - Facilitated training with the volunteers
This session included:
- An icebreaker to build team working
- Hopes and fears for the session
- Introduction to Student Minds & why we were at Cardiff
- A briefing on the purpose of the day and the power of engaging student voice
- Introduction to quickfire consultation methods
- Guidance on how to start and hold conversations using the research questions
- Facilitating a safe space
- Examining the questions
- Signposting to further support.

12.00 - 14.00 -The group completed the engagement activity

Our group was present in the SU building, in areas that students regularly frequented and that seemed to have quite regular footfall (downstairs area, canteen)

We approached students, and on doing so:
- The volunteers/ Student Mind staff introduced themselves and summarised why we were there;
- When the students showed interested, we asked 'are you aware of the mental health and wellbeing strategy?' - 'Cardiff are writing a mental health strategy, they want your input - this is a unique opportunity to influence university life. This can include anything from academic work to support services. We guarantee that the answers are anonymous.';
- Students had the option to either a. Go through the questions (see next section) verbally or b. complete a form to short form and leave it with the group.
- If there were any safeguarding concerns, we planned to signpost students to the relevant services. Student Support provided materials. (We had no such concerns during the event);
- We also had leaflets to offer students to volunteer for a future training event.

14.00-15.30 - Feedback session
In this part of the session, we discussed how the engagement activity had gone and how it may be improved in the future. We were joined by the Wellbeing Champions.

Our work at UWE Bristol

What we did and why we did it:
We used a problem solving booth/ quick fire consultation method
A space was booked (including table and chairs) for 23rd Jan 10:30-14:30 outside "OneZone" café in the centre of campus. We set up and ran the event from approx. 11.00-14.30.

Student Minds staff team members, Rachel and Dominic were present outside the OneZone cafe, an area that students regularly frequented and that seemed to have quite regular footfall.

We approached students, and on doing so:

- The Student Minds staff facilitators gave an introduction to why we were there:
- When the students showed interested, we asked 'are you aware of the mental health and wellbeing strategy/ 'mental wealth'? - 'The University are writing a mental health strategy, they want your input - this is a unique opportunity to influence university life. This can include anything from academic work to support services. We guarantee that the answers are anonymous.'

- Students had the option to a. Go through the questions verbally or b. we gave people a form to write in and submit to box we are providing
- If there are any safeguarding concerns we planned to signpost students to the relevant services. Staff from the Students' Union provided materials should we have had any concerns.
- We also had leaflets to offer the students to volunteer for the training in February.

We then undertook a thematic analysis of the answers students gave.

Our research questions:
We chose our research questions to relate to the key areas of UWE Bristol's Mental Wealth First Initiative and strategy.

1. General question:
   What is the one main thing the university could do that would support your wellbeing?

2. Area of strategy: Transitions (Students transitioning into and out of the university)
   How did you find moving from school to university, and what did the university do to support that? How could the university have supported you? (prompt: what do you wish you'd known?)
3. Area of strategy: Community Life (Student experience outside of the curriculum/work)
   What helps you, or would support you to feel involved and active in university life/ the university community?
4. Area of strategy: Achievement and Development (Academic experience)
   What would help you realise your full potential during your time at UWE Bristol?

Recommendation: The specificity of research questions will differ depending on what stage of strategy development your university is at. However, allow for a range of broad and specific questions at all stages, to allow for students to shape the structure and priorities of the strategy, not just approve an already established strategy.

Our work at The University of York

When we embarked on this project, The University of York were at a progressed stage of development with their Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
York had engaged students in their strategy development through inviting Students' Union representatives to their Mental Health Strategy Forum, and want to build on their student engagement approach in the implementation stage and in academic research.

As a part of this project, Student Minds have been working to advise researchers at York who are leading on a cohort study which intends to inform future strategy.

We are working with York to advise on how co-production can be utilised in the design of the study in terms of its management, measurement, engagement and ethical issues. This involves supporting the researchers to design a co-production approach suitable for their study.

What did we learn from our strategy engagement events?

For each university we wrote up the findings of the engagement events in a form of a report, thematically analysing the students' inputs, which we shared with the strategic leads, in order to inform the development of strategies.

Attendance

We would have liked to have had more students trained as facilitators to deliver the engagement event, in order to have facilitators across campus and engage more students.
We had quite a low attendance for students as volunteers for running the engagement events.
A few factors affected this:
Advertisement of the opportunity
Timing of the opportunity
Notice prior to the session

Recommendation: To improve attendance ensure that your co-production opportunities are advertised by the Students' Union, The University and specific academic departments in a range of mediums (social media, newsletters etc)

Recommendation: Ensure all students that have registered their interest are informed with the key details of the session in advance (location, timings etc), and then reminded closer to the time.

Recommendation: Ensure that your engagement activities are taking place at times in the term in which students have more time to engage (e.g. not during exam season).

Publicity

In one case, when we asked the participating Wellbeing Champions what their expectations of the activity and training were, they expressed that they were expecting to perform the Wellbeing Champion role by publicising the Student Support Services to their peers - therefore the nature of the activity may not have been clearly expressed in the communications as an experience and opinion gathering exercise.

Recommendation: Ensure that you communicate the parameters of what to expect at an engagement event.

Question design

Volunteers gave feedback that the questions could have been reworded to be easier to understand, as some participants didn't understand the questions. One way around this is to develop questions with the students. We also discussed how the questions could be made more specific and address things such as 'what does a good day look like for a student', but found it difficult to settle on wording. Designing the wording of the research questions with students allows for the questions to be accessible to students.

Recommendation: To ensure that research questions are both relevant and accessible to students, involve students in co-creating research questions, for example through setting up a student steering group.

Language of the text

Providing versions of the text in various languages would allow for greater international student participation.

Recommendation: Where possible, translate research questions into a variety of languages that are present in your student population.

Methods of questioning

The option to speak to a facilitator improves accessibility, e.g. for visually impaired students and those that prefer to express themselves verbally than in written form, e.g. some international students.

Recommendation: Assess the accessibility of all your co-production and engagement event activities.

Branding

It may not have been apparent to students if the facilitators were from the University Support Services, the SU, the University itself, a society, or an external charity.

Recommendation: Ensure that your co-production work has a clear brand of its own, that may be co-produced with a student steering group, to ensure that students understand how it sits within the university.

Conclusion & areas of further inquiry

We hope that this guide provides a grounding in the rationale, principles and tools necessary for co-producing mental health strategies with those they will impact. This toolkit should further encourage you to increase the role of student voice in strategy development.

If conducted effectively, practicing meaningful student engagement and co-production can bring about a number of benefits for both students and universities. Amongst other benefits, it can improve relevance of strategy, policy and practice to the university community and therefore increase the success of this work. It can also help to ensure that the university community is working to a shared set of outcomes, in partnership with local health care.

There are a few areas of further inquiry about which we would welcome discussion and ongoing work. For example, at Student Minds we are constantly exploring the best impact measurement frameworks and evaluative tools to ensure our work is constantly improving and aligning best to students' needs. We have been working with our Clinical Advisory Group and student networks to explore our feedback tools. We would welcome further work on exploring the best evaluation mechanisms and tools on the intersection between mental health and wellbeing and student engagement.

We would also encourage further work to explore effective co-production approaches with underrepresented communities who can experience specific health inequalities, where power dynamics can prevent authentic collaboration. This may include the experiences of groups such as international students, Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) students and students with other protected characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation.

We welcome further collaboration and partnership in co-production in student mental health – please contact studentvoice@studentminds.org.uk.

Further Reading and Resources

Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement Network - RAISE

A NHS Employer's guide to involving children and young people in the recruitment process.

The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement have useful resources that you can download and adapt to your setting such as their recognition and reward resource pack.

The TSEP framework for 'Evaluating student engagement activity'.

We welcome further suggestions - please contact studentvoice@studentminds.org.uk.

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