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HOW TO GET ENGAGEMENT RIGHT IN MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

LESSONS FROM THE HIGHER
EDUCATION SECTOR



The Student
Mental Health
Research Network

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1. Foreword

An introduction to SMaRteN

SMaRteN was funded by UKRI between 2018 and 2023 to focus on the mental health and well-being of students in Higher Education. The network has been led by Dr Nicola Byrom at King's College London, who had previously founded the Student Minds charity. SMaRteN brought together a multidisciplinary leadership team from across the Higher Education sector, and student-led research teams, to tackle our aim to improve the understanding of student mental health in three key areas:

- 1 What is distinctive about student mental health?
- 2 What factors influence student mental health?
- 3 How can we enhance the mental well-being of students across a whole institution?

We have funded a range of projects to address these questions, with student involvement a key criterion for awarding funding. Each funding panel included student representation in decision-making.

SMaRteN has been dedicated to ensuring the student voice is front and centre across our activities. Alongside our funded research, student engagement has come in many different forms, including leading and contributing to:

- A 'Priority Setting Exercise' to create our framework for student mental health research
- Special Interest Groups
- A podcast series
- Blogs
- Discussion panels at events
- Funding workshops and panels
- Co-creation workshops
- Organisation of and contributions to bespoke events and a SMaRteN conferences
- Student Working Groups, including a and a Media Team
- Student peer-researchers, co-authored on internal projects

As a network, SMaRteN has members from across the UK and across roles in Higher Education. Across our three funding rounds, we have funded 19 projects at 14 different universities, and these projects also bring in third sector partners and NGOs.

Within our network membership we strive to create an inclusive community for knowledge exchange and are made up of a diverse group including students, researchers/academics, university student services and counselling staff, policy-makers, and the voluntary sector.



'As a researcher I draw on my own lived experience. My lived experience of mental health problems allows me to reflect with care and compassion on the research questions I address. I fought for funding for SMaRteN, to support researchers across the UK to come together to improve our understanding of student mental health and the factors that support good mental health for all students. I fought for this because my lived experience has roots in my own time as a student. For me, placing students at the centre of research activities is fundamental. Students are vital partners as we try to make sense of the mental health challenges facing our university communities. As partners, their voice matters right across the research life-cycle. It is often most important to engage lived experience at the start of research, so that the focus and direction of a study is guided by lived experience. For this reason, SMaRteN concentrated on a priority setting exercise, working with students to identify their priorities for future research. Responding to the priorities of students and doing so in continual conversation with students will be game changing, facilitating research insights and discoveries that have real relevance to students.' **Dr Nicola Byrom, SMaRteN Network Lead**

This wide-ranging input from stakeholders allowed us to reach a diverse audience but has also led to collaborative working including large-scale combined research projects and supportive cross-sector networks with shared ambitions and messages.

We have engaged with key stakeholders to co-produce resources aimed at guiding researchers focused on mental health and well-being in universities, for example:

Measuring well-being in the student population: A resource based on a scoping review and stakeholder consultation to give an overview of well-being measures used in the student population, stakeholder priorities for measurement, and how existing measures hold up in line with these priorities as well as further strengths/weaknesses.

Key questions: Research priorities for student mental health: A large student consultation to uncover what students think researchers should be focusing on moving forwards.

Alongside these formal outputs, our network members have supported broader activities including bespoke webinars, regular discussion groups, and a successful podcast series.

What is the purpose of this toolkit?

This resource pack outlines the benefits of engagement with students and other key stakeholders in the Higher Education sector. It also discusses the challenges, how these might be navigated, and resources and practices that would support engagement. This is based on what we have learned as a network, and will complement and signpost to existing resources. There are lots of different ways to involve non-research stakeholders, and we have provided case examples to showcase all the different things we have done during SMArteN as well as provide guidance for the sector.

This guidance is also aimed at students and other key stakeholders who are interested in getting involved in research.



2. Guide for students

Foreword by Michael Priestley

Mobilising student experience of university and/or mental health difficulties is imperative to understanding and addressing student needs across student mental health research, policy, and practice. It is crucial that all students feel confident and supported to become involved in research so that we can understand the specific challenges and barriers to mental health that different students experience and drive change aligned to diverse student needs.

Throughout all of its work, SMArteN has committed to providing inclusive opportunities for student voice and participation in research. Across research design, delivery, and dissemination, SMArteN has innovated creative approaches to student involvement, harnessing insights from diverse voices, perspectives, and skills. Going forward, this approach can provide a template for an impactful student mental health research agenda. I am delighted to introduce this toolkit which showcases a range of different ways in which students can get involved in mental health research and is designed to support researchers to embed student involvement in their work.

In this section, students who worked with SMArteN share their insights and experiences of getting involved with research!

Tips for students who want to get involved from past members of our SMArteN student-led research team



MICHAEL

'It can be hard to balance research commitments around your studies, especially if you have to travel long distances to meetings or events; try to

understand and plan the time commitments in advance so that you don't get any nasty surprises! And if you struggle to find the balance, speak up! People can be very supportive and accommodating if they know.'

'As a student working on a research project with academic staff, the imposter syndrome is real! I felt a lot of anxiety about getting things wrong and whether I would be able to contribute. Don't let these worries stop you from asking questions, getting stuck in, and making the most of the experience. And if you feel a bit lost or confused, don't be afraid to ask for help.'

'Enjoy it! It's a great chance to meet some amazing people, learn new things, and have fun!'



MARTA

'Set a shared language (I think this should be guided by the students and how they like to discuss topics, but it is important that everyone has a shared

understanding of how key constructs in the project are defined and the language that team should use to communicate about it on the same page)'



KATIE

'Don't be afraid to reach out to the project team, irrespective of where you are in your journey as a student, you will have incredibly valuable insights

to reflect upon as part of a research team, don't undervalue your experience.'

Tips for students by our SMArteN leadership team



ALYSON

'Get as much information as possible so you know what you are signing up for – this can avoid future disappointment about the scope for

your involvement. Don't be afraid to share ideas, ask for clarification, or seek out opportunities that line up with your own goals – we don't know everything and we want your views, and your involvement is for your development, not just the project!'



NICOLA

'If you are looking at getting involved in a project based on your lived experience of mental health difficulties, you want to check a few things. Will

the team you are working with respect your experience? Do they have a dedicated point of contact to support your engagement? Will they formally recognise your contribution to the work? Most importantly, you want to think carefully about what you want to share from your personal experiences, what you are comfortable sharing, and how you would like the information you share to be used. As well as the tips above, the case examples from SMArteN give some examples about the ways in which students have got involved with a range of research projects. This should give you a flavour of what student engagement in research can look like!'



3. Case studies of engagement from the SMArteN network

Funded SMArteN projects

Alongside contributing to central SMArteN activities, within our wider funded research projects a key funding criteria was co-creation with students. When reviewing applications, we prioritised projects embedding students right from the start as part of co-designing and establishing project priorities and looked to see how they would continue to engage and collaborate with students throughout.

For many, this was particularly valuable during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic as it created mutual, supportive, working relationships and ensured research and interventions could adapt to suit unforeseen challenges.

As we emerged from the pandemic, the continued focus on embedding the student voice ensured our work was supporting emerging challenges and that project learnings would help to establish future key priorities facing student mental health in the current landscape.

Overall, our co-creative research work has yielded insightful, interdisciplinary ways of conceptualising and supporting student mental health and so the following case studies demonstrate a wide range of good practice which we hope might inspire your own future way of working.



CASE STUDY 1

Time, space, belonging and mental health: participatory explorations of Black and minority ethnic doctoral student experiences

Kavita Ramakrishnan (Project Lead), Esther Priyadarshini (Project Co-Lead) & Farhana Ghaffar (Research Assistant)

What did you do?

We undertook a research project in which a group of Postgraduate Research Students from Black, and ethnic minority groups worked with the research team as **partners** to explore and document their experiences of belonging. We have **co-produced a zine** with them and are currently **co-writing a research paper** on this process. We will also present some findings at an academic **conference**, and have also presented interim **findings to a research group** both within the university and beyond, at the SMaRteN Early Career Research Lab.

We had a **public event** to launch the zine to which a **select audience** were invited. These were people from different departments and holding a range of roles within the university as well as members of our advisory board. This worked well as the launch was more intimate, allowing a genuine exchange of ideas rather than a mass dissemination event. This also enabled more meaningful follow-up conversations and connection-building after the workshop.

Strengths

Embedding students within each stage of the project from design to delivery played a key role in shaping our project and has enabled for meaningful engagement with our student stakeholders.

- ♦ Scoping conversations with Postgraduate Research Students of colour explored their everyday lived experiences of belonging at the university. These conversations gave us new ideas to investigate, including the key focus of how time and space can affect a sense of belonging and involving multi-disciplinary researchers with the right expertise – something that we wouldn't have thought of ourselves!
- ♦ Postgraduate Research Students of colour were also invited to be on our multi-disciplinary advisory board, along with other stakeholders including student support staff and academics with an interest in student welfare and mental health. They were also interested in participatory and creative methods being used to conduct research that facilitates learning with PGRs (not about them). Their past experiences in all of these areas helped shape the project particularly in the early stages.

Challenges

Recruiting Postgraduate Research Students from across different disciplines

- ♦ Despite our efforts to recruit broadly (including Sciences), the majority of students we recruited were from the Social Sciences department. Possible reasons for this may have included a lack of confidence/familiarity with using creative methods and a lack of time to dedicate to the project given the constraints of practical lab work.

Time pressures

- ♦ We asked key administrative and academic staff in different departments to help us recruit harder-to-reach students, but could have factored in more time to explore alternative methods such as snowballing.
- ♦ While we wanted to engage other stakeholders more closely at every stage of the project, this was too onerous for many so short sessions at 2 key points through the project were all that was possible. We would simply acknowledge this reality and factor this in from the beginning, next time.

CASE STUDY 2

Pilot study of a student-led peer support wellbeing programme

Margaret McLafferty (Project Lead)

What did you do?

The aim of the pilot study was to design, develop, implement and evaluate a 12-week student-led peer wellbeing programme for first year undergraduate students attending the Peer Assisted Study Session PASS programme in the School of Psychology, Ulster University. These sessions which were delivered by second year students (mentors) focused on enhancing the wellbeing and resilience of first year students (mentees) during semester two. Student mentors and mentees were surveyed, and the top 12 wellbeing topics were included in the programme. Trained PASS mentors delivered the programme online due to the ongoing pandemic at the time. Each session lasted approximately 1 hour – this included time for presentation delivery, videos, activities and questions and answers.

A mixed-methods approach was used, including pre- and post-session questionnaires, online weekly evaluations by both mentors and mentees, and qualitative interviews/ focus groups after the 12-week implementation period with mentors and mentees to gain feedback on the wellbeing programme. Overall, all those involved reported that they had benefited from the programme and recommended that it should be continued. It is hoped that the findings from this pilot study will lead to the wellbeing sessions being rolled out within the university and other institutions.

Strengths

Students and other stakeholders were engaged in all aspects of the study.

- ♦ This project was a student-led initiative, designed by students, for students. Following consultation with students and Student Wellbeing, a list of potential topics were collated. Peer mentors and mentees were then surveyed to determine which wellbeing strategies were most important to them, with the 12 highest ranked topics included in the Wellbeing sessions.
- ♦ The sessions themselves were delivered by trained student PASS mentors.
- ♦ Each week, mentors reviewed session materials and had the opportunity to provide feedback prior to, and following, each session taking place. Mentees also completed evaluation forms each week and materials were amended on their recommendations.

Challenges

Relevance to all students

Mentors were 2nd year Psychology students and mostly not mature students. We tried to make sessions as inclusive as possible through amendments as we progressed through the programme but it is good to be mindful of the overall audience from the onset. In particular, mature students found some of the material difficult to relate to. It is important to consider the diversity of the mentors to ensure representation of multiple groups.

CASE STUDY 3

Emotional educations: students' views of the history of belonging and the lessons that can be learned from the history of student mental health

Sarah Crook (Project Lead)

What did you do?

Research for this project entailed recruiting students and holding workshops to explore if, and how, knowing more about past students' experiences of loneliness at university might be helpful in the present. The workshops were structured around time to read and sign consent forms, then a brief summary from me, introducing them to the material (and to the purposes of the research), before students were given time to read some brief pieces written by students in the 1960s and 1970s. We then had a conversation about what they found interesting in the articles (I had some prompt questions, but I tried to let the students guide the discussions). Students were given time to write or draw some brief summaries of their reflections before the end of the session.

Strengths

Small things make a difference

I was unbelievably impressed by the thoughtfulness of all the students I engaged with. They were so good at following up each other's ideas. Before workshops started I ensured that tables allowed students to face one another, rather than facing me. I also encouraged students I knew well to attend the sessions, as I knew they'd help put other students at ease.

Draw on wider initiatives

One of my sessions was timed to coincide with a broader 'student engagement week' at the university, which helped to draw a larger group of students than I might otherwise have expected.

Challenges

The awkwardness of silence

I struggled with this when students read the various information and ethical consent forms – by my third session I was braced for it, but certainly in the first couple I was worried that the period of quiet reading diffused the conversational energy in the room. This is something I'd encourage other researchers to be mindful of. Maybe bring snacks to share to keep the friendly atmosphere, even in the midst of this more formal part?

CASE STUDY 4

Who Cares?

Rachel Spacey (Project Lead), Rebecca Sanderson (Research Associate) & Amy Zile (Research Assistant)

What did you do?

Our project has followed participatory action research principles which means we have involved stakeholders at every stage of the research process right from when we were writing the bid to thinking about how we can best disseminate our findings and recommendations to make sure the right audiences are reached when we finish.

Our stakeholders include students with caring responsibilities studying in UK Higher Education, professional services and academic staff who support or engage students with caring responsibilities in Higher Education in some way and third sector organisations who work with young adult carers, student carers and student parents. Students with caring responsibilities make up the majority of our steering group members which meets every other month.

We asked stakeholders for feedback on the funding application eg, developing key terms we used for a shared understanding of what we mean by students with caring responsibilities and their studies, work, life balance; developing and refining our data collection instruments; helping us recruit to the survey and letting stakeholders determine appropriate dissemination routes and priorities to make sure we reach the right audiences and make the most impact. We will also be involving stakeholders in the analysis and interpretation of the data we have collected and the messages and recommendations we will share with the higher education sector and beyond.

Strengths

We had co-production principles at the heart of what we are doing

- ♦ We paused and reflected on how best we can ensure the research is truly co-produced whilst being mindful of the practicalities of undertaking research in this way. Using an iterative process where we have asked for feedback as we went along – on the bid, on the definitions we use, on the steering group’s terms of reference, on the survey and the questions it uses, on the interview questions and on ways in which we can recruit to the study and disseminate it effectively.
- ♦ We value the voices of students with caring responsibilities and explain why we try to amplify them.
- ♦ We understand terminology from the view point of students with caring responsibilities to help develop new ways of defining their experience.

Challenges

Overcoming barriers to engagement

- ♦ We wanted to provide asynchronous participation options, for example, through digital tools and platforms. We tried using MS Teams but this hasn’t proved to be as effective with engaging stakeholders at a number of higher education institutions due to accessibility issues. Email has been the most effective means of communication.
- ♦ We would like to engage with students who have English as an additional language and on reflection the ways to do this and the support required for this could have been factored into the original bid.

Central SMaRteN projects

Alongside ensuring that the student voice was centred within our funded research, we have also embedded students in centralised SMaRteN projects and activities. This has included a variety of roles, such as developing our strategic priorities in our Steering Group, working on sector-wide reviews as Peer Researchers, contributing to Focus Groups for our Co-Creation project, and student media roles across our podcasts and comms projects. Their involvement means we are towards student priorities and the challenges impacting their Lived Experiences, but they have also been invaluable in helping us 'break down' our work to make it more accessible and useful to other members of the student community.

CASE STUDY 5

Initial training of student-led research team for SMaRteN project on defining and measuring student mental health

Laura Beswick (SMaRteN network co-ordinator), Alyson Dodd, Neil Armstrong & Nicola Byrom (SMaRteN leadership team)

What did you do?

We have had three different student-led research teams across our lifecycle. Students were recruited from universities across the UK and we aimed to include a range of different subject areas and student backgrounds. These roles were underpinned by robust training and development opportunities as we wanted this to be a mutually rewarding process for all involved and for students to feel know their contributions were valued and professionalised.

Our first student-led research team split into two groups. One worked on our Measuring Outcomes resource alongside Leadership Team member Alyson Dodd and the other developed an Ethnography research group looking at mental health labels, with Leadership Team member Neil Armstrong.

Alongside these research contributions, students worked together as a whole team to organise the inaugural SMaRteN Conference, assisted by the Network Coordinator at the time, Laura Beswick. The SMaRteN conference was a large-scale event held in London and the students came together as a collective to work on this.

Training for the team started with two full face-to-face days, facilitated by project leads and Nicola Byrom, our Network Lead, before they progressed to their smaller group, working on specific projects. It was important for us to have network leadership at the training event, committing to student engagement being a shared responsibility, recognised and appreciated across the team.

Within this initial training we took considerable time to talk about the language we were using to discuss mental health and to explore the different theoretical framings to understand mental health. We talked about biological, social and psychological models of mental health and invited students to reflect on how they viewed mental health and what they thought about the different theoretical models. These activities provided our team with a shared understanding and language to work together.

Strengths

Building team relationships and committing to personal development – Alyson (SMaRteN Leadership Team)

None of us had worked with a national student research team before. A lot of time and effort went into developing a project pack for the student team ahead of the training days, to introduce them to the network, the specific projects, and encourage reflection on the goals of the network as well as self-reflection about their own motivations, existing skills, and personal development goals. This helped to set expectations and

prepare students. The training sessions started with discussion of motivations and goals from students and project leads, which helped everyone to understand and connect with each other better. There was dedicated time for discussion about the best way to tackle projects aims, drawing on the lived experience of the students (and their specific disciplines and universities). This ensured that the student voice was represented from an early stage.

Challenges

Underestimation of training needs for student researchers

Intentionally most of the students were outside of the project leads' discipline. We sought to recruit students from a range of disciplines. This however meant that a lot of content needed to be covered in our training. For example, was a lot of didactic explanation of concepts (eg, what is a core outcome set?) and methods (eg, systematic search and screening of the literature).

Several student ethnographers had difficulties navigating university ethics process. Progress through the system was often very slow and in some cases required considerable patience and tact. The team ultimately published a co-authored paper in a leading academic journal, but it took a long time to get there.

While it was a strength that much time was invested in the initial training, it was challenging to continue to provide support and maintain relationships due to geographical spread. Some students remained more engaged than others, and it would have been good to understand why and support this. Saying that, the student team rose to the challenge and genuine collaborations were forged (including this toolkit!)

The extent to which it was student-led

While we tweaked projects with student input and supported students to lead aspects of the work, we did largely go in with a plan and 'told' the students what to do. More co-production of the aims of the projects from the outset would have strengthened these.

The ethnography project was coproduced, much more inclusive and equitable than mainstream ethnographic working, but not wholly democratic. Neil's prior training and experience as an ethnographer guided the research process and the writing process.

It can be challenging to find the balance between presenting students with enough of a plan to ensure the task they are connecting with does not feel overwhelming, while allowing space for students to shape the project.

The balance of contribution could continue to feel more towards the project leads. For example, the voice of the more experienced researcher often comes through more strongly, especially when written as an academic paper.

SMArteN inaugural student mental health conference – student experiences



SEB (STUDENT-LED RESEARCH TEAM)

'Organising the SMArteN conference opened my eyes to the behind the scenes of conferences. I loved aiding the conference as it meant meeting people I usually wouldn't have.'

KATIE (STUDENT-LED RESEARCH TEAM)

'Organising the SMArteN conference was a fantastic opportunity, it enabled me to engage with other students from across the UK and shape a national event to fit ours and many other students' perceptions of what key priorities needed to be discussed around student mental health. The SMArteN Leadership Team was extremely accommodating in giving us agency to engage with this process, involving and supporting us at every step, from conceptualisation to organisation. The opportunity to present and chair sessions was extremely valuable, I felt supported by the SMArteN Leadership Team and my peer student researchers to extend myself out of my comfort zone and immerse myself in debate and conversation with academics and students from across the UK.'



SMaRteN co-creation project

Co-creation workshops – Early Career Researcher perspective

The Co-Creation Workshops were part of a project aiming to bring together researchers and students interested in mental health, to collaborate on the development of future research projects. To support researchers to centre their work around student ideas, we organised Co-Creation workshops to bring together researchers and students interested in mental health, to collaborate on the development of future research projects. Here we focused our support on Early Career Researchers (ECRs), academics starting out in their careers, including PhD students and researchers who had recently completed their PhDs. We took expressions of interest from ECRs who wanted student engagement to help the refine their project objectives and ways of working, to ensure they would be addressing real student concerns and in a way that would be accessible to students further down the line. We then recruited two groups of students to attend a series of virtual workshops with researchers to contribute their thoughts. Students were reimbursed for their time.

CASE STUDY 6

Seeking help for mental wellbeing as an undergraduate student

Nat Wilde (ECR lead of co-creation workshop)

What did you do?

With the support of the SMaRteN network, I developed and ran a pilot of a number of co-creation workshops. This pilot was really important to me as a researcher to ensure that the workshops collected the appropriate data, whilst also being a beneficial and inclusive experience for the students taking part. There were over 100 students who attended the initial presentation – it was inspiring to see so many students interested in this type of research.

The workshops covered a range of material around the concept of seeking help for mental distress as a university student, including the barriers currently faced and the perceived suitability of different help sources. The students also provided insight into the potential of utilising social media as a method of seeking help and obtaining mental health information.

Any interested students were invited to an initial online presentation, where the aims of the research and an overview of the workshops were given. If any students were still interested in taking part, they were then asked to complete an online sign-up form. For those taking part, there were a series of three online workshops that were conducted on Zoom on a weekly basis. During these workshops, students worked collaboratively on a Google slides document to complete a number of set tasks throughout the session. At the end of workshops, students were offered a shopping voucher to thank them for their time.

Strengths

Piloting the sessions

This highlighted a number of issues that could have been missed – for example, many students use their mobile phones for learning, something I had not considered at all up until this point. It made me reflect on how better the material could be presented to ensure it's accessible for all students and allows them to provide insight and responses in a method that is most comfortable for them.

Building confidence as a researcher and with the research

- ♦ As an individual with no formal teaching qualifications, I was really anxious before

starting the workshops. But completing these workshops allowed me to develop my own confidence as a researcher and this is invaluable for when I run the full workshops later this year.

- ♦ Working students was really insightful to me as a researcher – I certainly worry that I'm a bit 'out of touch' with the student generation, but by working with them and hearing their responses I feel like I have a better idea of how to approach students appropriately moving forward.
- ♦ Feedback forms conducted after each session suggested workshops were beneficial and informative for students which was great!

Challenges

Engaging students online

- ♦ As I was providing information and guiding the session, I felt 'teacher-like' and I wonder if the students in the session felt comfortable disclosing information to me?
- ♦ Many students kept their cameras off so it was difficult to gauge their feedback like you would in a f2f setting. All of the responses provided were solely on the Google slides document and students didn't have the chance to speak vocally
- ♦ Jumping between multiple platforms was difficult (eg, Zoom and Google slides) and I lost some of the students at this point in the session.
- ♦ Some students were faster than others at providing responses and I worried that they felt like they were just waiting for others to catch up.

CASE STUDY 7

Curating with (In)Tangible Contexts

Luke Sellers (ECR lead of co-creation workshop)

What did you do?

Four online workshop sessions exploring my area of interest; access, engagement with mental health services for students, digital approaches and experience.

Sessions ran weekly for one hour. Participants could engage via a variety of platforms/tools eg, Jamboard, Mentimeter, Zoom chatbox. One week involved short video clips that we could watch together – this was advantageous as everyone then knew what we were specifically talking about.

Strengths

Allowing for discussion of personal lived experience

- ♦ Although sessions did not ask or look to explore personal experiences of mental health – sessions were designed to include scenarios and persona instead of individual accounts – participants freely spoke about their own experiences of mental health in relation to Higher Education.
- ♦ Ideas that I presented were critically discussed. In some cases this highlighted potential issues, and students also put forward their own ideas and suggestions.

Challenges

Engaging students online

- ♦ Activities that I had planned often didn't happen, partly due to tech and the difficulties of engaging online eg, using different platforms and moving across screens. On occasion I completed post-it note tasks for students as it was quicker

than them trying to follow links. From my limited experience tasks involving ‘doing’ something eg, moving images/making notes work better f2f.

- ♦ On average two students attended each workshop. Obviously, this limited the diversity of voices, however if this had been a bigger number the discussion may not have been as developed.

Co-creation workshops – student perspective

‘I volunteered to take part in SMArteN’s workshops for two reasons. I had struggled with my mental health and accessing services while studying at university. I felt like I had ideas and suggestions for development and services that could have improved this process for me, and I wanted to make sure other students would have a better time. I was also interested in being involved to collaborate with experienced researchers and build my professional networks.

The research that SMArteN does really recognises the value that collaborating with students can offer. During the workshops I felt like my input and perspectives were valued, and that I was really a part of the research process, as opposed to just being a participant. The SMArteN researchers created a supportive and inclusive environment for conversation and collaboration, using different online tools like Jamboard to collect information in creative ways.

I feel like taking part in the SMArteN workshops really helped with my own growth and development as a postgrad researcher myself. I understand the value of co-production and what this looks like in practice. I attended the SMArteN showcase and it was really exciting to see the outcomes of their research work and the meaningful and impactful things that the network are doing. I was particularly interested in seeing how research is being translated into action, shaping mental health services and support for students.’ **Charlotte Taylor-Page**

Our SMArteN student podcast – Keeping students in mind: Understanding student mental health research



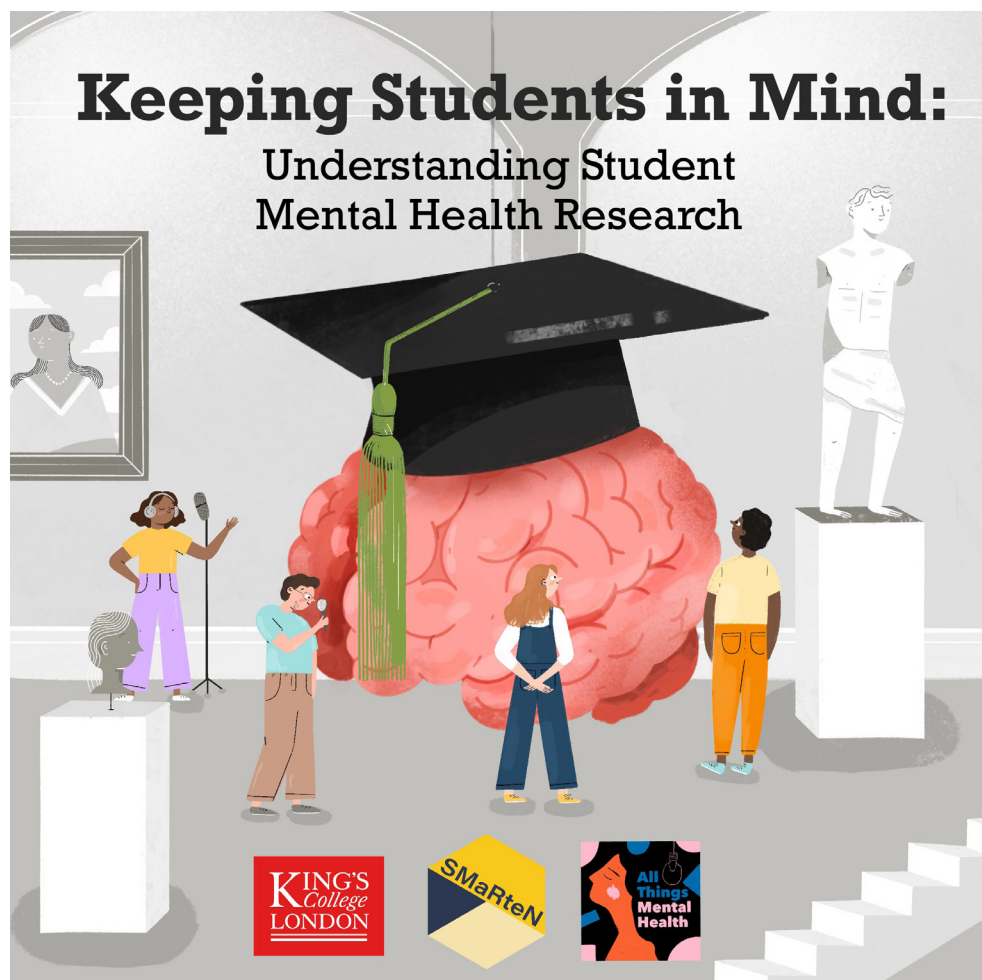
Podcast project overview by Jo Ward, Network Co-ordinator

‘Our podcast project is a way to amplify the voices and lived experiences of students in the UK, ensuring that the research and conversations around student mental health are actually responding to their priorities.

We launched our first series to coincide with University Mental Health Day 2022 and were delighted with the response, so worked to develop a second series in 2023. Our student hosts never needed to have prior experience – just passion! We worked with them build on their vision for their episode, by providing them with the training, support, and sector connectivity they needed to record their own episode in conversation with a mental health researcher. Our aim was for this to be a true collaborative partnership where we were able to showcase some important work, but through an activity that was a fulfilling learning and development opportunity for the students involved – where they were paid for their time and contributions.

Not only was this a collaborative project with students, aware of our own lack of experience in the ‘podcast arena’ we partnered with the teams behind the existing podcasts All Things Mental Health and PhDeets. This meant that rather than competing for attention withing a crowded online space, we were working together to communicate the same key messages, share our own expertise in different areas, and broaden our student and cross-sector audience.

We asked our student and sector partners for their thoughts on the project and how a collaborative approach enhanced our final outputs, and asked them for some ‘Top Tips’ to help inspire others.’



Student hosts

'My own neurodivergence means I learn, study and express myself in different ways to many students. This made navigating university tricky, and I did face some discrimination and barriers along the way, but there were also things that helped me succeed. So, I wanted to use my podcast episode to share these and explore other positive interventions which can help ease the university journey and make academic culture more inclusive; ensuring all types of neurodivergence are seen as opportunities, rather than challenges.

The researcher I worked with on my episode specialises in ADHD, neurodivergence and other learning differences. It was incredibly empowering to feel my lived experience was valued by an expert in the field, who found me just as interesting as I found them! It felt like we were on the same page, both fighting for change and inclusion. Sometimes, it's easy to advocate for others, whilst putting yourself at the bottom on the list. Working with SMaRteN has enabled me to stop feeling ashamed and instead use my lived experience in a positive way: as education, advocacy and empowerment for all.' **Elizabeth Mullenger, student host 2.4 – From Neuroscience to Neuroinclusion, via Pedagogical Partnerships, in conversation with Anne-Laure Le Cunff**

'I started following SMaRteN on Twitter about 3 years ago. At the time I was in India in a role that was supporting young people's mental health. The insights from SMaRteN's early research played an important role in shaping my work with students. I remember talking to one of my colleagues and telling them 'We need something like this in India'. Interestingly enough, when I decided to take a break from work and start studying again, that became the main focus of my SOPs for scholarships. It gave me a chance to do my MPH in Nottingham. The opportunity for the SMaRteN podcast came soon after I arrived. I was thrilled!! Doing the podcasts just validated the struggles of moving to university as a mature

student. It helped me believe that it's possible to build something like this in India. We need more student voices in research – if only just for students like me to just say...' yeah I'm so glad to hear that I'm not alone in what I'm going through.' **Titus Joseph, student host 2.2 – Finding a Sense of Belonging: Supporting Mature Students, in conversation with Trish Jackman**

Sector collaborators – All Things Mental Health

Twitter: @atmhpodcast

Instagram: @allthings.mentalhealth

'The All Things Mental Health Podcast have been working in collaboration with SMaRteN since 2021. Recognising the gap between students' lived experience as they navigate higher education with that of research, we set out to be 'the bridge in action', by producing podcast episodes that bring together the voice of both students and researchers. Rooted in both lived experience and leading research in student mental health, these podcast spaces have been led by and for students. Our new student team each series lead and design the conversations, ensuring the lived experience of students is amplified in emerging research. Researchers bring to life key findings and students align this with pressing everyday experiences they are navigating, to centre the human in student mental health research. The fusion of voices creates space for new ideas to emerge, fresh challenges, and differing perspectives, encouraging listeners to be curious about their mental health and wellbeing.

Together with SMaRteN, we have created episodes that act as a window into time, tracking the most pressing issues arising in student mental health during the pandemic and beyond. Our collaboration with SMaRteN has been one of true co-authorship, spanning from design, production, to delivery. Together, we have utilised the powerfully accessible form of podcast-making to spread learning on the ground, helping student communities in the here and now as they navigate their mental health during this tumultuous time. True co-production is underpinned by trust, honesty, growth, power-sharing, and a deep sense of wanting to do better together. To practice our values in action, we have fostered a real relational way of working together, one that enables us to bring our own lived experience to the table. In turn, creating safe spaces for students to harness their lived experience leadership too. We have been able to create something new for the sector, and in turn the world at large. Our podcast with SMaRteN is now in the top 15 per cent most shared globally, and we're in the top 20 per cent most followed podcast (Spotify Wrapped, December 2022).' **Aneeska Sohal, All Things Mental Health Project Manager**

Top tips for co-creation with students and partners

Our podcast project was part of our broader commitment to embedding students within knowledge sharing and impact generation around our work, as part of a 'whole project lifecycle' approach to co-creative activities. We have pulled together some tips organisations might want to consider to include students in their impact generation and help them develop their reach:

- Providing payment and reimbursing expenses. If you expect professional levels of engagement – then make this a formalised paid role.
- Building in personalised student inductions and long-term, supported training and developments so that students benefit from being involved and to empower them to be able to progress their passion further in the future.
- As part of induction, consider mentoring opportunities to help students gain valuable sector connections.
- Make sure to actively engage students in decision making and ensure they feel able to express their opinion. Don't take silence as agreement, as it often means they feel the opposite but are reluctant to speak up.
- When working with external project partners, consider practical issues such as shared access to online work spaces and secure data sharing.

4. Key tips for researchers

We spoke to those who have been involved in engagement across our network activities, including our leadership team, student-led research teams, and funded researchers. The following key tips are based on their advice, learned through the experience of engaging students (or being a student engaged in research).

Practical considerations

- Projects often don't stick on track and students can't just stick around, they move on – this is something to bear in mind
- This is also the case with sessions – be realistic about timing!
- Engaging students online may need extra preparation, particularly thinking about how to use different platforms effectively
- With all of this in mind, consider a trial run or pilot of the session beforehand
- Maintain good record-keeping to ensure you don't lose any important contributions (eg, audio recording sessions or taking detailed notes)

NAT WILDE (GO-CREATION WORKSHOPS)

'Become friends with silence – silent pauses can feel awkward at first, but they give individuals a chance to think about responses.'



Ensure engagement is meaningful

- Is the role clearly defined and has the student had the opportunity to co-develop?
- Right student at the right time – think carefully about who you would like to involve, when, what you need from them, and what you can offer
- Try to involve students from the very beginning if possible so they can shape your project aims before it is underway
- Make an effort to include students from a diverse range of backgrounds to gain multiple perspectives, and particularly those with lived experience of what you are specifically exploring
- Offer flexibility about ways of getting involved to allow for students from different locations, backgrounds – and of course their studies!
- Keeping the student voice front and centre from the start means their priorities are addressed and different views are included
- Don't doubt your abilities (researchers and students) – but also be open and realistic about what they are
- Set realistic expectations for yourself and stakeholders about the scope for involvement and change, and opportunities for skills development – revisit these regularly
- Be open and flexible to students' ideas – after all, this is why you have asked them to get involved!

MARGARET MCLAFFERTY
(FUNDED RESEARCHER)

'Engaging students in all aspects of the study enhanced the project greatly.'

RACHEL SPACEY
(FUNDED RESEARCHER)

'Don't be afraid to ask for feedback – even if it calls into question some of your ideas and assumptions. Stakeholders are the experts and their input is vital. Be open about your own limitations of knowledge and practice!'

Trust and respect

- Factor in time to build trust, confidence and skills
- Make sure communication is clear, including letting students know what will happen after their input
- Treat students like the members of the team they are
- Compensate people for their time and effort
- Recognise student involvement and contributions in research outputs
- Provide ongoing support and contact

RACHEL SPACEY
(FUNDED RESEARCHER)

'Compensate people for their valuable time and expertise! – whether through e-vouchers, payments, opportunities or references. Their time is valuable and this needs to be acknowledged.'

ESTHER PRIYADHARSHINI
(FUNDED RESEARCHER)

'Building connections and partnerships with students can take time in terms of building trust and meaningful relationships – factor this into your planning of activities to maximise student engagement with your project.'

Engagement in sessions and over time

- Be creative about ways to involve students...
- ...but keep it simple – too many different activities and platforms can be tricky!
- Know your audience and design materials and tasks with them in mind
- Virtual sessions can be great, but think carefully about whether this will work for you
- Ensure there is enough to do to keep students meaningfully involved
- Students might work at a different pace on tasks so have something up your sleeve to keep them engaged while waiting for others
- Consider check-ins and activities between sessions to help students to prepare and facilitate ongoing engagement
- A clear engagement lead to support students is a good idea!

ESTHER PRIYADHARSHINI
(FUNDED RESEARCHER)

'Being a bit adventurous/original – format of zine for example – helps to draw in stakeholders and engage in deeper conversations with student partners.'

SARAH CROOK
(FUNDED RESEARCHER)

'Make small changes to put students at ease: how you set out the room, who you involve, snacks!'



Tips from our student-led research team

MARTA ORTEGA VEGA

'Openness/flexibility to change project aims and outputs (true co-creation involves being led by the student experiences, while this usually aligns with original project aims if these had been co-created, where new directions or challenges are raised it can be difficult to address within the confines of project funding sometimes.'



SEB CYGAN

'Ensuring all students of all backgrounds are heard is a big factor in co-creation, developing resources and continuing research can only be good research when we consider all backgrounds, so including students in this means a greater chance of reaching those in 'hidden' backgrounds and hearing what others have to say who usually wouldn't be given a voice.'

Working with other students was amazing but the best part for me was that throughout all of the organisation despite being a student I was treated like the rest of the team, involved in all the big decisions and having my input heard, this same advice should be carried over through all research in my opinion. If you are asking students to aid your research, treat them as fellow researchers and in my experience you have a much higher chance of receiving well produced and thorough research.

I think that regular online meetings or even just check-ins are key to ensure co-creation is successful. Don't take 2 hours every week to ask how things are going but drop an email once or twice a month to check that progress is being made and ensure those involved feel comfortable to express any difficulties they may be having.

Aim to provide tangible evidence of the co-creation, whether this be a name on a paper, or photos from a conference, my favourite part of SMArteN is the fact I can look back so many years on and back up my memories with evidence of those times.'

KATIE TYRRELL

'Students are experts by experience, make sure that you value their time by outlining the benefits of being involved in your research, be it the possibility of publishing, opportunity to work alongside leading academics in the field or financial support for participation.'

Ensure there are a multitude of ways to be involved that are flexible around students' studies, for example, plan project meetings for breaks in the semester and use online platforms to keep in touch, connect, meet and collaborate.

Seeking a diversity of voices is so important to research involving students, making an active effort to seek those voices is pivotal to future research, for example, you might want to work closely with your SU's and Liberation Officers to reach students from diverse backgrounds.'

MICHAEL PRIESTLEY

'Try to be clear about shared expectations and principles for working together from the start; what will students be expected to contribute, what support can they expect, how can they expect to work with other students, and what should they expect the research team to do without their input.'

Think carefully about ways that you can include a diverse range of student perspectives in a way that everyone feels valued and heard.

A bit of reassurance and ongoing support goes a long way in helping students have the confidence to contribute!'

5. External resources for stakeholder engagement

Partner UKRI mental health networks

The following mental health networks were funded by UKRI at the same time as SMArteN. Like SMArteN, all had stakeholder engagement at the core of their activities.

Young peoples' mental health

Emerging Minds – children and young peoples' mental health

eNurture – promoting Young People's Mental Health in a Digital World

TRIUMPH – Transdisciplinary Research for the Improvement of Youth Mental Public Health

Risk factors for poor mental health that may impact students

Loneliness and Social Isolation

Closing the Gap – improve physical health and reduce health inequalities in people with mental health difficulties

Violence, Abuse and Mental Health

MARCH – social, cultural and community assets for supporting mental health



Sector organisations

Student Minds – Co-producing Mental Health Initiatives With Student Volunteers – this guide has useful tips and activities but with a wider reach than research (eg, co-producing practical solutions and policies within Higher Education)

Office for Students – Evaluation of the student engagement in knowledge exchange programme

Research organisations

European Young Persons Advisory Group Network – toolkit for setting up and running your own Young Person's Advisory Group

National Institute for Health Research – guidance for payment for public and patient involvement

National Institute for Health Research – resources for involving children and young people in research



ABOUT SMaRteN

SMaRteN was a national research network funded by UK Research and Innovation, led by King's College London, focusing on student mental health in higher education. Working with researchers with a range of expertise and key stakeholders across the higher education sector, we aim to improve the understanding of student mental health.

smarten.org.uk