

2 April 2020

Project monitoring: An update from the Office for Students

Universities and colleges are facing huge pressures and uncertainties in responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We want to support your efforts to minimise its impact on your student mental health project and to avoid placing any unnecessary burdens on you.

Our letter to accountable officers, published on our website on 26 March¹, explained that we are adapting our regulatory requirements to support providers and protect students during this time. I am writing to you and to other project leads to set out how we will be applying this approach to the projects we fund and monitor. To summarise:

- **Monitoring** – We will be contacting you in the next two weeks to arrange a call with you or another key contact for the project. We want to understand the approach you are taking to revising your aims, objectives and delivery activity, and to identify any ways we can help. We will use future monitoring and final reports to understand your approach during this period. In line with our broader approach to regulation, we will take into account the circumstances and assess whether you have made reasonable decisions that take into account the needs of students.
- **Funding** – Please advise us if we should reprofile or stop the current payment profile for the project, to ensure funds keep pace with revised delivery plans.
- **Evaluation** – We are following the Government Social Research professional guidance that on grounds of personal safety to both researchers and participants, all face-to-face evaluation and research activity should stop until it is safe and ethically appropriate to

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-requirements-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic/

proceed. This may have an impact on the evaluation of your project and the wider funding programme.

Project monitoring

We are grateful to those projects which have already contacted us to tell us about the measures they are taking in response to the pandemic. We recognise that you will be working in a very different – and difficult – environment for the duration of the coronavirus outbreak. We want to understand more about your approach to revising your activities and delivery plans during this period, and to identify any ways in which we can help with this.

We will contact you in the next two weeks to arrange a call with you or another key contact for the project. In the meantime, we expect you to continue to be proactive in letting us know if significant issues develop which may affect the delivery of your project.

We understand that delivery of activities may reduce significantly and could, in some cases, cease completely whilst this situation is ongoing. However, we are also aware that most projects will be able to continue delivering in a different way.

We will be flexible regarding events, deliverables and deadlines, and can work with you to agree appropriately amended timelines on a case-by-case basis. We recognise that different providers, parts of the country and individuals may be impacted in different ways.

We are still able to process project monitoring reports as planned, so if you do intend to submit an upcoming report, please do so in the usual way. However, we are mindful of creating additional burden during this period. If your project is unable to report to us formally or in the same way as usual, we can discuss options with you.

We will use future monitoring and final reports to understand your approach during this period. In line with our broader approach to regulation, we will take into account the circumstances and assess whether you have made reasonable decisions that take into account the needs of students.

Funding

As you are aware, under normal circumstances the OfS is unable to pay in advance of need. We can be flexible during this period, but we also need to ensure that the funding we provide is used appropriately and is in the public and student interest.

Please advise us if changes to your activities mean that we should reprofile or stop the current payment profile for your project. This means that we can check that funds keep pace with the delivery of the project. We do, however, want to make sure that project staff continue to receive their salaries. To this end, we can be flexible in order to ensure your project's essential cashflow is not adversely affected during this period. We also want to maintain your project's capacity to increase or resume delivering activity once the crisis is over.

Evaluation

We are working with all our evaluators to understand the impact on their planned activities for external programme evaluations. In particular, we are considering where evaluation activity may not be ethically appropriate or feasible at this point. We are following the Government's Social

Research professional guidance that on grounds of personal safety to both researchers and participants, all face-to-face evaluation and research activity should stop until it is safe and ethically appropriate to proceed. This may have an impact on the evaluation of your programme.

If you have any concerns or questions about your own evaluation of your project, please do let us know.

Further information

General information on the OfS's response to the coronavirus outbreak is on our website.² These pages are updated regularly.

If you have not already done so, please sign up for our regular email alerts, which include a weekly roundup of events, deadlines, publications and news stories, and a monthly update of key publications and announcements: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/sign-up-for-email-alerts/. You can also follow us on Twitter: @officestudents

Next steps

We will be in touch with you or another key project contact within the next two weeks to discuss:

- significant issues which will affect delivery of activities, staffing, finance and spend, and partnership working
- whether you wish to revise or pause formal project reporting during this period
- the impact on your own project evaluation activities.

This will enable us to provide appropriate advice and guidance, and support you as required to ensure the successful delivery of our shared aims and objectives.

During this period, we are also looking for ways to bring projects together virtually, to exchange useful information and provide mutual support. We will keep you updated about this. We also hope projects can share innovative models of delivery and engagement.

If you have any questions about this letter, please email the mental health challenge competition team at mentalhealthcc@officeforstudents.org.uk. This inbox is monitored throughout the working day, and a member of the team will respond to your query as soon as they are able to.

Yours sincerely,

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² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/coronavirus/