
Co-producing Mental Health Initiatives With Student Volunteers: What We Learnt

Acknowledgements

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Context

Well Lads was a three-year project on men's mental health in higher education run by Student Minds, the UK's student mental health charity, and supported by funding from Comic Relief between 2018 and 2021. The project's main aims were to encourage male students to look for help with their mental health when they need it, and to improve male students' understanding of mental health. The project took a co-production approach, where male student volunteers worked together to decide what different activities they could run at their universities. Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the volunteers chose to work remotely, focussing on podcasting and social media. Student Minds provided training and support to enable the volunteers to make informed choices about the shape their work would take.

This guide has been made from the volunteers' training and the learnings they have taken from running their own podcast on men's mental health: Changing MENTality.

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity

Our goal is to transform the state of student mental health so that all in higher education can thrive. We support students to develop the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health, support their peers and create change. We also work collaboratively with institutions, students' unions and other organisations involved in higher education, supporting them to take a whole-university approach to mental health. In addition to providing well-resourced mental health services, a whole-university approach recognises that all aspects of university life should support and promote positive mental health and well-being.

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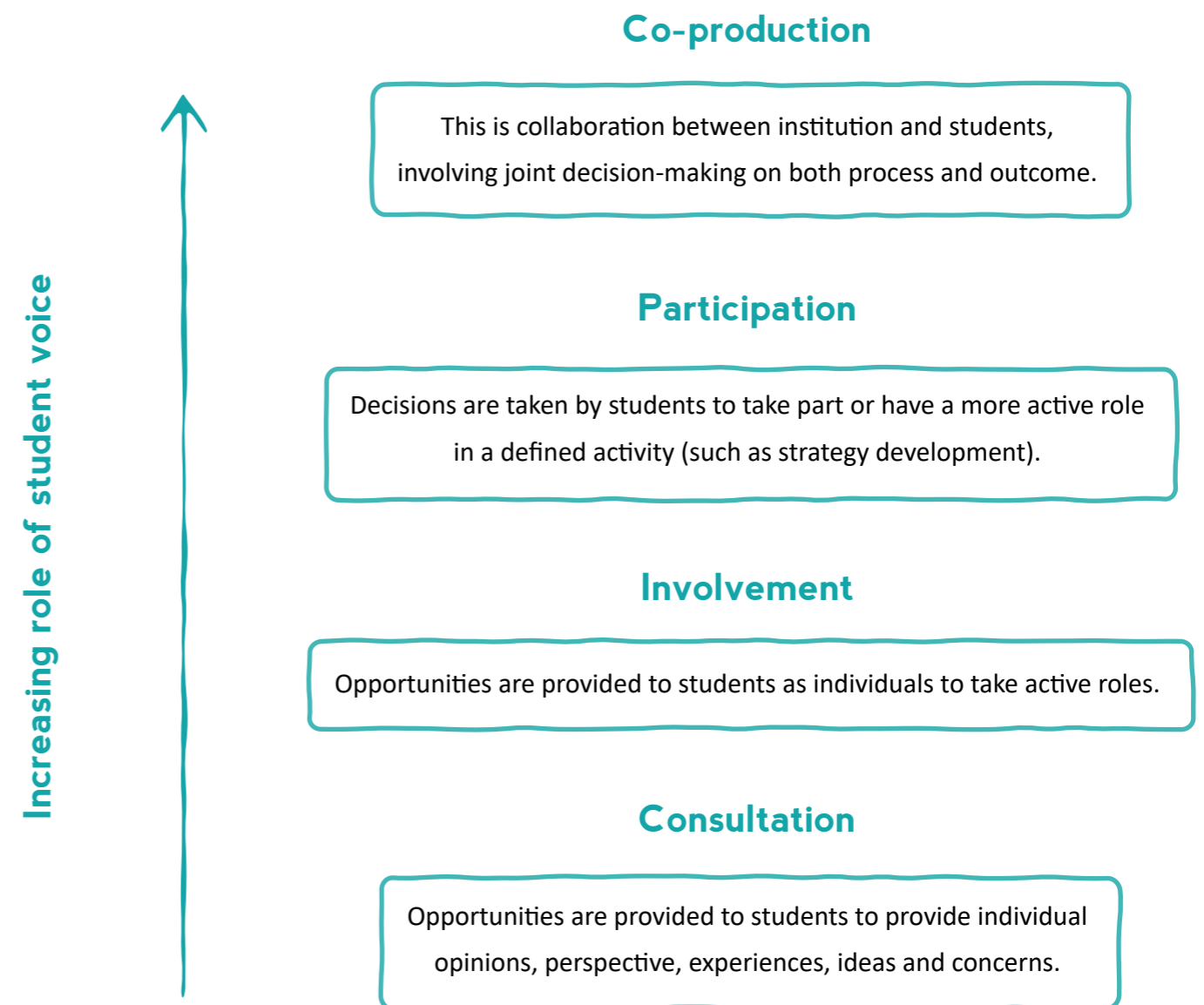
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What is co-production?

Co-production is a way of working with, rather than doing to, people and communities to achieve meaningful changes. Co-production sees people as agents of change, and builds on their existing knowledge, capabilities and experiences as a source of expertise in making decisions on how to achieve the outcomes they want to see.

There are many ways of engaging with students to create meaningful change, and co-production is not always the best way of doing this (see the 'What We Learnt' section below). You will need to think carefully about the kind of engagement that is appropriate and most meaningful.

Here, we set out various levels of student engagement, of which we see co-production as the highest level. Explore more about Co-Production in our [Co-producing Mental Health Strategies with Students: A Guide for the Higher Education Sector](#).



Why co-produce?

Taking a co-production approach can help you build trust with the audience you are trying to reach. This can be especially important when working with marginalised communities and/or those affected by inequalities, leading to more meaningful and sustainable outcomes that genuinely speak to their lived experiences. Helping to ensure that outcomes are more meaningful and sustainable means this approach can also be more cost-effective in the longer term, despite requiring some initial investment. Those taking part in co-production experience an increased sense of agency and ownership over the importance of their lived experience and their voices, feeling more able to be vocal about issues affecting them in the longer-term (Mind, 2013).

“One of the things that volunteers valued most was the ability to decide for themselves, or as a group; which topics to cover, the way the episode will be presented and the length of the episode. They felt it was important that there wasn’t a ‘one size fits all’ approach and that whilst they valued the support provided by Student Minds ownership of the podcast sits with them”
(Independent evaluator for the Well Lads project).

“I’ve found that volunteering with Student Minds on the Mental Health Project has been incredibly beneficial for me. It’s allowed me to have a large degree of control over how I present my own experiences and perspectives and has provided me with the training to do this in an appropriate and effective way” (Well Lads Volunteer).

Why co-produce with students on mental health?

Universities are ideal settings for co-producing mental health initiatives, because:

- Half of all young people go to university and 75% of mental health difficulties arise before the age of 24 (Mental Health Foundation, 2015).
- Students often look for volunteering experience when at university - they are in a position to engage with you on mental health.
- Co-production gives voice to people who have been marginalised in the past - university can be the first experience of freedom for many young people in terms of talking about their identities.
- The student population is diverse - co-production will help you create content, services and initiatives that are genuinely culturally competent and responsive to community needs.
- Students may be used to a pedagogic approach to engagement as they transition from school. The university setting is a great opportunity to encourage students to develop agency and critical thinking through co-production.

What we learnt

Top ten things we learnt from running 'Well Lads':

1. Consider if co-production is the right approach
2. Training may be needed
3. Be clear about what you mean by co-production
4. Inclusive co-production takes time
5. Creating genuine relationships is central to co-production
6. Clear channels of communication are essential
7. Communicate effectively
8. Consider power dynamics
9. Consider the impact of co-production on those involved
10. Be aware of and engage with gaps in sociocultural understandings

1. Consider if co-production is the right approach

It's important to recognise that not all students will want to be involved at a co-production level and some may need additional support to get there. Sometimes it's about demonstrating what's possible and valuing the opportunities for participation at all these levels. This empowers people to make an informed decision about what is right for them. If, after explaining the co-production model, students you work with don't want to use it, it's important to understand why and to help them to consider what approach would be beneficial to them. This is the essence of co-production.

2. Training may be needed

For co-production to work well, those taking part may need to be trained in how to co-produce. If you are coming from a professional context, it is easy to assume that students you plan to co-produce with will have pre-existing experience of teamwork, and that they will feel comfortable in voicing their opinions and seeing themselves as having meaningful contributions to discussions. This may not be the case, especially when working with marginalized groups and students. When entering higher education, many students are coming from an educational setting that emphasises pedagogy. Concepts such as critical thinking and forming opinion through discussion and debate may be relatively new to them, and it's important that you don't make assumptions about their comfort level and abilities in this area. Experiences of marginalisation can lead to a lack of confidence and there may be some work to do in order to support individuals from marginalised communities to trust that you are really going to listen to them. There may be a need for you and your colleagues to be trained in cultural competency so that you can co-produce with diverse groups effectively. It can also be helpful to do a training needs analysis with those you hope to co-produce with, in order to test some of your assumptions about their experiences of team working and co production. During this process, bear in mind that people often don't know what they don't know, so you might need to give clear suggestions to help them work through this needs analysis and work out where further support may be required for meaningful co-production to happen.

For example, some areas our Well Lads volunteers asked for more guidance on:

- Organising their time
- Tracking the status of tasks as a team
- Delegating out tasks/roles
- Giving and taking constructive feedback
- What is appropriate to share in terms of personal experience in a co-production space

“Although I know that it's very much a volunteer-centred process, perhaps more scheduled deadlines might help keep the pace of the project up more.” (Well Lads Volunteer)

“It felt a bit like no-one was in charge at first, but also like everyone was in charge. It's hard to see how you can move forward when it's like that. It would've been good to have a chat as a group about how we could organise who will be doing what, and whether we wanted to rotate this in shifts, for example.” (Well Lads volunteer)

3. Be clear about what you mean by co-production

Many are familiar with traditional or hierarchical models of volunteering, where individuals are given a role, trained and told how to apply that training, often to the benefit of an organisation, or an organisation's beneficiaries. Co-production values the opinions and learnings that can be created by working with the people who are affected by an issue or experience, and freedom is given for those individuals to decide how changes can be made, and what training, support and resources they may need to make these changes happen. The freedom and flexibility of co-production can seem overwhelming for individuals who enjoy structure. Being given the freedom as a respected voice of expertise by experience can also feel like holding a lot of responsibility, and this can lead to worries for volunteers that they will do co-production 'wrong'.

"Getting my head around co-production was hard at first. I like to know what's going to happen before I do it, so to be told 'it's all yours, make it your own and there's no such thing as a wrong way of doing it' was quite overwhelming. You don't want to take the leap and then realise that your ideas are way off the mark" (Well Lads Volunteer)

You may need to 'translate' what you mean by co-production for individuals to feel truly empowered. It is helpful to do this using simple, clear language, and by using things like diagrams or videos if you can. For example, during the Well Lads project, the volunteers were introduced to co-production through the phrase:

'Nothing about us without us is for us'

This demonstrates that for real change to happen in terms of men's mental health, men themselves must be at the centre of deciding what that change looks like, and how it is achieved. This phrase was embedded at the end of every single training session and recorded video used during training, to remind volunteers that their voices were central to the project.

"I was glad that you used that phrase - nothing about us without us is for us. It made me feel like my struggles and my experiences are important, when often, and especially recently, there is a vibe on campus that men are all privileged and don't have issues in life. It was just really good to hear someone tell me I do matter" (Well Lads Volunteer)

4. Inclusive co-production takes time

Meaningful engagement takes time. In comparison to a top-down approach where one or several people make decisions, and then delegate others to do things, co-production takes time, because you are supporting people to make decisions for themselves, to work with each other on deciding how to affect change. You also need to ensure that you are co-producing inclusively, taking into account the needs of your volunteers.

Things to consider:

- Factor in more time to design resources and training to be accessible for everyone you are working with, especially in terms of disability. This may look like booking rooms that are accessible by wheelchair, or making sure that videos have captions.
- Be mindful of the wider commitments your volunteers may have, such as caring responsibilities and jobs. Maybe they'd benefit from dialing into a meeting rather than being there in person, or being able to watch it back afterwards.
- Consider faith calendars and how you will make sure that co-production sessions and training are delivered around key dates and events.
- Students who have had long breaks from study may need support with things like using digital collaboration tools or technology - make time to explain any tools that will be used.
- Consider any 'hidden costs' of co-production for students from low-income backgrounds. For example, if you are running a session on a day that a student doesn't have scheduled classes, they may pay for transport specifically to attend.

It is good practice to design co-production opportunities with accessibility, diversity of volunteers and their inclusion in mind by default. Central to achieving inclusion will be asking your volunteers about any access needs and wider commitments they may have, getting a sense of their circumstances, and working with them to find supportive solutions. Be aware also that some students may need help in identifying barriers they face.

On the Well Lads project, we consulted with the volunteers to understand what their existing commitments were and to see if there were certain times of day or days of the week that would be more suitable for them to take part in our co-production.

"Given my role as an informal carer and a demanding academic schedule, flexibility was crucial before signing onto any project." (Well Lads Volunteer)

5. Creating genuine relationships is central to co-production

It is important that individuals involved in co-production feel seen and understood. As a professional facilitating a co-production space, or supporting individuals to co-produce, it is important that you take the time to get to know the individuals involved.

- Ask them about their lives and their 'stories'; be genuinely interested in them
- Offer one main point of contact, and introduce them to a secondary person early-on for when that contact is away
- Offer a regular time where they can 'drop by' to talk with you
- Make time for 'team building' or ice-breaking exercises where co-production groups can build familiarity with each other

"Being quite a private individual in my personal life, the potential sharing of intimate details related to my own mental health was daunting at first. However, after training and encouragement from the Student Minds team, I felt prepared to write, produce and record my own podcast episode." (Well Lads Volunteer)

"Volunteers felt that having one person within Student Minds as their main contact and support was particularly important as it gave them the opportunity to get to know them and provided continuity as she was familiar with all aspects of the project and had taken time to establish a relationship with them." (Independent Evaluator for the Well Lads project)

6. Clear channels of communication are essential

It is important that when you are co-producing with a group or several groups of individuals that you all have a transparent and accessible way of communicating with each other. The best way of making communication accessible is by using a platform that is familiar for those you are co-producing with. This can be helpful in terms of reducing any initial learning curves and confusion over how to navigate the space. For example, many people are familiar with social media platforms, and while there may be some reservations about the appropriateness or privacy of these platforms, there are many online workspaces that use a similar format with enhanced security. Some people also may prefer to keep their volunteer work separate from their social media profiles.

For example, during the Well Lads Project, a virtual work space called Slack was set up by one of the volunteers:

"Using the Slack space was a great way to keep all of our team connected and informed through the duration of the project. Slack allowed us to easily message each other, post updates on the progress of episodes, share opportunities and celebrate our achievements. Setting up the account was simple but, as is the case with using new work platforms, it did take time to adjust to some of the features. However, Slack has proved to be an incredibly valuable resource for the team and has had a fundamental role in keeping us connected during various lockdowns and long-distance working." (Well Lads Volunteer)

7. Communicate effectively

The way you communicate with your co-production group is just as important as the channels you use. It's important that you think about accessibility needs both in terms of health conditions but also in terms of personal preference. Try to be accommodating by asking your group how they would prefer to receive updates, and be open to creating videos, voice notes or PowerPoint slides, for example. Sometimes non-written communication can be more engaging and accessible, especially when working with students, as it is likely that they will already be spending much of their time comprehending and summarising large amounts of information in written form for their studies.

It is also important that you try to keep a regularity in terms of your communication with your co-production group. For example, picking a day of the week and time of day when you will regularly post a video update for them. This can increase engagement and avoid individuals feeling overwhelmed by sudden influxes of updates they need to manage and organise themselves to consider or reply to.

Example: the Well Lads project offered volunteers three live remote weekly drop-ins where they could come to discuss any successes or challenges they were facing within their volunteering. During these sessions, the Programme Officer would take notes, and the headlines from these notes would be announced via a monthly two-minute video into the Slack space so that volunteers knew what had been discussed, and the full notes would be attached.

“Being able to access notes from the weekly drop ins provides useful information for volunteers who either weren't able to attend or as a reminder of the issues discussed.”

(Independent Evaluator for the Well Lads project)

8. Consider power dynamics and work out ways to make sure everyone's voice is heard

During co-production, power dynamics may exist. These may be explicit or implicit, and it is important to consider if some individuals may feel more confident in sharing their ideas than others. An imbalance can be caused by a number of factors, including identity-based influences, things such as a professional leading the sessions, or the topics and issues being discussed having social or cultural sensitivity. There may also be other factors that are less detectable, such as individuals having had negative past experiences with professionals in your area of work. It is unlikely that you will be able to eradicate power dynamics entirely, especially because some of them are not explicit. Things that can help:

- Encouraging individuals to develop ground rules they want to stick to
- Creating an inclusive and non-judgmental environment
- Ensuring diversity of representation within the group where appropriate
- Emphasizing and valuing the importance of individuals' opinions as the experts by experience
- Showing humility and using humour
- Allowing anonymous input

“Using anonymous online whiteboards in training was good for me because I shared that I am not sure about my level of English and I worry that listeners to the podcast will not understand me. I was not wanting to share this with peers out loud in case they were not understanding of my struggles”
(Well Lads Volunteer)

9. Consider the impact of co-production on those involved: time, capacity and wellbeing

Often co-production takes place through supporting groups of volunteers. Whilst it can be a positive gesture to pay individuals for their time, this may not always be possible due to limits on resources. It is also important to note that offering payment could complicate the understanding of co-production, leading those involved to assume a more hierarchical relationship with facilitators, mirroring employment contexts and expecting to be told what to do rather than feeding their voice into decisions that will lead to the change they want to see. Offering training and the chance to gain genuinely transferable knowledge and skills can be an equally important form of 'payment'.

Whether individuals are paid or not, it is important to help them consider the level of time commitment they can give to co-production, especially if they are planning future activities they want to be involved with. Supporting individuals in setting realistic expectations early on can help to make sure that they don't experience burnout or become disengaged from the co-production process later down the line.

It is also important to be clear from the beginning about what your role is and what they can expect from you so that they understand what support they can ask for. Co-producing on social justice issues can have an impact on the wellbeing of those involved. It is important to check-in with volunteers to understand how they are feeling about the role they are playing in co-production and affecting change, and to see if they may benefit from accessing more support.

"The Programme Officer checks in regularly making sure volunteers get what they need and want from volunteering, keeps people engaged even when they're not working on an episode and provides clear and helpful feedback. Volunteers were offered a wellbeing check each term, this was carried out during a 30-minute conversation that focussed on; any areas of concern in either their academic or personal life, how their volunteering role is going and whether they are still finding it rewarding...These sessions also provided an opportunity to reflect on whether they have overcommitted themselves."

(Independent Evaluator for the Well Lads project)

10. Be aware of and engage with gaps in sociocultural understandings

The individuals that you co-produce with may seem to have a shared language that feels different from your own as a professional. This may be because you are from different disciplines, or perhaps you are co-producing with people who are not coming from a professional context. Even if you are working with individuals from a shared demographic group or working background, it is important to avoid making assumptions about their shared social and cultural understandings of key topics during co-production. Be curious about what individual perspectives may be within the 'room'.

For example, during the Well Lads Project, the concepts of masculinity and gender were explored openly with the volunteers, and this demonstrated a diversity of opinions. These exercises enabled the volunteers to have rich discussions about what they felt the barriers may be for men in terms of seeking help for mental health difficulties, with some saying that masculinity in itself was a barrier, being **"constraining"** and **"equivalent to chains"**, while others highlighted positive elements to the concept such as **"brotherhood"** and **"responsibility"**.

Summary

We hope that our key learnings and our Well Lads project case study provides a good example of the rationale, principles and tools necessary for co-producing in mental health with students. A core message that we hope you take from this resource is that when co-producing with any group, you should try to avoid making assumptions about their needs, and take a person-centered approach to finding out how you can best empower and support their engagement. This is a fundamental stage in designing meaningful co-production sessions for volunteers to take part in.

We're open to further collaboration and partnerships

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 the relevance of strategy, policy and practice to the university community and therefore increase the success of this work.

There are a few areas of further inquiry about which we would welcome discussion and ongoing work. 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.

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

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