SMaRteN funding call: Coordinating longitudinal studies into student mental health.

SMaRteN are inviting proposals for research coordination to support universities to collaborate in collecting data to improve our understanding of student mental health. Funding is available as part of the UKRI ‘plus’ funding scheme for Mental Health Networks.

We will fund a coordination project that can provide national support. As more universities look to develop cohorts to better understand the mental health of their students, there is a need for coordination. Being able to pool data across institutions or draw comparisons between institutions has multiple benefits including improving generalisability of findings, exploring topics relevant to minority student groups, and creating the opportunity to test the impact of institutional interventions. To achieve this, the sector needs guidance, agreement around standardised protocols and support developing protocols for storing and linking anonymised data for combined analysis.

The total funding available through this call is £50,000. We expect to award funding to a single project, to run for up to two years.

**Applicants should submit proposals by 17.00 on Wednesday 2nd September 2020.**

Projects must be completed by October 2022.

## Background

The factors influencing mental health are diverse, complex and dynamically inter-related. Small-scale surveys, looking at factors in isolation can only develop a piecemeal understanding. A more comprehensive understanding of the interacting factors requires the establishment of a large longitudinal study with a diverse student cohort. This requires cooperation across multiple universities. Large scale coordinated data collection in the USA has provided a valuable platform for research to explore different interacting factors influencing student mental health. A similar approach in the UK could enable us to develop a more robust understanding of the relative factors influencing student mental health and universal interventions that might reduce risk for mental health problems.

Student consultation echoes the findings of previous studies; attrition is likely to be a substantive problem. Data collection approaches that require minimal student engagement, capitalising on opportunities for data linkage, are important. Large scale student engagement requires robust institutional support.

## Call Details

SMaRteN is aware of 10 large scale longitudinal studies that are currently established in the UK to look at student mental health. We are aware that there is interest in adopting a similar approach at a further 15 – 20 institutions. We aim to provide funding to support a coalition of the willing, providing support and coordination for researchers interested in learning from each other and aligning strategy to facilitate data sharing.

We wish to support coordination activities that are flexible, collaborative and inclusive. Work in this space needs to find the balance between having enough flexibility to accommodate divergence in approaches to encourage broad collaboration and data sharing, while retaining sufficient coherence and alignment to render an amalgamated data set meaningful and useful. Achieving this balance is likely to require additional work and attention to be directed towards protocols for storages of data and agreements for data sharing, such that individual institutions retain ownership of data, while making this available to be shared.

We are looking for a coordination project that will meet the following objectives:

1. Provide guidance for universities looking to establish student mental health and wellbeing cohorts, including how approach data linkage with university student records and address ethical and data security issues related to collecting, storing and analysing data both within a single institution and shared between institutions.
2. Develop standardised protocols and ethics proformas, to be openly accessible to share with universities looking to establish cohorts.
3. Establish, through national consultation, cross-sector adaptation of standardised procedures for university psychological wellbeing cohorts
4. Establish, through national consultation, a small core battery of demographics, mental health and psychological wellbeing measures, to allow comparison between universities.
5. Explore the opportunities for data-linkage between student reported data and sensor or social media data and provide national guidance relating to these opportunities.
6. Develop flexible and sustainable protocols to facilitate storage and linkage of anonymised data from across the sector for combined analysis.

We expect successful applications to set out objectives for a project that can be completed within 24 months and provides a strong sustainable framework that will continue to support research in this beyond the funding period.

Applications should explain how they will involve students in the coordination activities, ensuring that the student voice is represented in decisions around data collection.

We are happy to consider proposals from a single researcher or team. As the objective of this work is to support collaboration, experience establishing and supporting collaboration in this area is important.

## Eligibility and costs covered

This grant follows the broad terms and conditions of the ESRC – for full details on eligibility and costs, please see ESRC guidelines: <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide/>

In brief:

* Applications must be from individuals working within a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI).
* Awards will not be made retrospectively: this means that the work for which support is requested must not have commenced before the award is announced.
* An award of up to £50,000 will be granted. In line with UKRI funding policies, funding will be provided to meet 80% of the full economic costs on proposals submitted.
* We expect to be providing funding primarily for an administrators / coordinators time.
* For this coordination project, it is not expected that funding will cover research expenses.
* Funding can be used to cover direct expenses including investigators time (as necessary to support the coordination), administrative costs including estates and indirect costs (calculated according to TRAC).

## How to apply

All applications must be submitted as a single document, on the SMaRteN funding application form <https://www.smarten.org.uk/funding.html>. Applications must be emailed to Laura.Beswick@kcl.ac.uk before the closing submission date.

Emails should carry the subject line: Funding Proposal [applicant surname].

Care and attention must be given to completing the application correctly. We may reject proposals that are not completed correctly, or ask them to amend parts of the proposal as a condition of accepting the proposal for processing.

## Assessment

Proposals will be reviewed by a panel made up of members of the SMaRteN leadership team and student team, during September 2020. Funding decisions will be communicated to applicants by October 2020.

## **Assessment criteria**

Proposals will be assessed against the following criteria:

* Does the proposal meet the 6 coordination objectives (see call details)?
* Feasibility and ambition: We are looking for an ambitious project that is realistic, given the funding and time constraints.
* Team: does the team have the expertise, skills and experience to provide successful national coordination?
* Institutional support: is there adequate institutional support for this project?
* Student engagement: will students be involved in the coordination activities?
* Value for money:
	+ Are the funds requested essential for the work and appropriately justified?
	+ Does the proposal demonstrate value for money in terms of the resources requested?

## **Additional award conditions**

Successful applicants will be expected to:

* Engage with relevant meetings planned by SMaRteN through the duration of the award.
* Work with SMaRteN to communicate their plans and process to students.
* Liaise with UK Research and Innovation and the SMaRteN Network Coordinator as appropriate.

## Timetable

* Call closes - 17:00 on Wednesday 2nd September 2020
* Applicant outcomes communicated – Late September 2020
* Projects must be completed by October 2022.

## Contacts

If you have any queries regarding this call, please email Laura.Beswick@kcl.ac.uk.

We will include all queries and answers within an FAQ document. This FAQ document will be updated every few days and added to the SMaRteN website for applicants to view. Queries will be added to the document anonymously, however please do keep this in mind if your query is specific to your individual research. Please check the FAQ document prior to submitting a query – queries already addressed in the FAQ will not be answered.