Involving young people in research funding decision-making

December 2020

TRIUMPH

Transdisciplinary Research for the Improvement of Youth Mental Public Health

Despite a wealth of funding going into research to support young people's mental health and an increased focus from funders on participatory research, young people's participation in decisions around research funding is still relatively uncommon. This briefing paper describes the process and provides feedback from young people and adult reviewers involved in the TRIUMPH funding application review process.

In March 2020 the TRIUMPH Network launched a plus-funding call to support transdisciplinary research that takes a public health approach to improving young people's mental health. The funding call was widely advertised to researchers and non-academic partners across the UK, with awards announced in September 2020. From the 34 applications received, four projects were funded by the TRIUMPH Network, with a total grant value of £116,478 and each project receiving up to £30,000. You can find out more about our funded projects here:

http://triumph.sphsu.gla.ac.uk/research/funded-projects/

As a key focus of our activities, it was important to ensure all of the network stakeholder groups were involved in decision-making about the research projects that should be funded by TRIUMPH, including young people themselves. As such, we appointed a panel of young people as reviewers from the TRIUMPH Youth Advisory Group and a panel of professional reviewers that included members of the TRIUMPH management group alongside external experts from research, policy and practice.

Why it is important to involve young people in decisions about funding?

Young people are a key group of stakeholders in TRIUMPH because we believe that young people have unique knowledge and experience that can strengthen research about youth public mental health. Involving young people in assessing the funding proposals submitted to TRIUMPH provided us with insight into how young people might view the projects and ensured our focus on meaningful young people's involvement in all of the funded projects.

Here are some thoughts from our reviewers about why young people's involvement in funding decisions is important:

"[The proposals] are meant to benefit young people and young people know what would work best and in what situation – it is best to have a young person's voice to know what they want and what is affecting them in the present moment." (Youth Advisor)

"If funding is to be used to support anything to do with young people it's really important to ensure that young people are involved in the decision making process so that their views and perspectives are taken into consideration when making decisions. This ensures that the decisions that are made actually work in practice and are needed/wanted by young people too." (Professional reviewer)

"[young people's] responses give a good indication of the level of engagement from young people that can be anticipated with the various projects" (Professional reviewer)

How young people were involved in assessing TRIUMPH plus-funding call applications

1. The scope of the funding call was determined based on a research priority-setting exercise involving a range of different stakeholders across the UK including young people.

2. Youth Advisors gave feedback on the application content, which included a lay summary and a section on young people's involvement.

3. Youth Advisors received training on assessing funding proposals including an introduction to the key funding criteria and an opportunity to practice grading example dummy proposals and see how other people graded them.

4. After the deadline each young person received the lay summary and young people's involvement sections of five or six proposals to assess and a feedback form to complete for each proposal. Each proposal was assessed by at least two Youth Advisors. The full proposal was available to all reviewers on request.

5. Each Youth Advisor met, virtually, with a member of TRIUMPH staff to talk through the proposals they had assessed and their reasons for their conclusions.

6. Individual scores from each young person were combined by the TRIUMPH team and results displayed visually.

7. In an online meeting with all of the Youth Advisors we discussed the proposals that had scored the highest and came up with a list of eight proposals that we highly recommended for funding along with several more that we recommended.

8. Two members of TRIUMPH staff represented the Youth Advisors' views at the funding review panel meeting (made up of academics, policy makers and practitioners) where the final decisions were made. Youth Advisors were invited to that meeting but most were either unable to or didn't want to attend. One Youth Advisor attended as an observer and didn't choose to speak in the meeting but kept in contact with the staff representing young people's views by Whatsapp throughout the meeting.

9. TRIUMPH funded four projects, three of which were highly recommended by young people and one of which was recommended.

10. A follow-up meeting was held with the Youth Advisors to discuss how the final funding decision was reached and how their views had been represented in the decision-making process.

TRIUMPH's Youth Advisory Group are a group of 16 young people age 16-24 from across the UK who are involved in the strategic development of the network and in supporting wider youth participation in the network s activities. You can find out more about the TRIUMPH's Youth Advisory Group here: **http://triumph.sphsu.gla.ac.uk/young-people/**

One of our recent online meetings showing some of the Youth Advisory Group (YAG) members.

For further details about how TRIUMPH involved young people in our funding decision-making, or if you would like to discuss ideas about how to involve young people in your research or funding process get in touch with the TRIUMPH team: **sphsu-triumph@glasgow.ac.uk**

Reflecting on the decision-making process

Involving young people in research funding decision making is relatively new, and there is no set process for how this should work. Here we reflect on what worked well and the challenges identified by our reviewers.

Young people, TRIUMPH staff and members of the professional panel were extremely positive about their involvement in assessing funding proposals submitted to TRIUMPH. They thought the following worked particularly well:

- The training before assessing the applications, especially getting to practice rating proposals and having all of the information provided in slides that they could refer back to when they were assessing proposals on their own.

- Each application being assessed by at least two young people meant that the responsibility was shared and talking through their assessments with TRIUMPH staff provided an opportunity to reflect on their assessment.

- Applications were reviewed by TRIUMPH staff and assigned to Youth Advisors with relevant experiences. This was particularly important for applications focused on key groups of young people, such as LGBTQ+ young people and care-experienced young people.

- Young people involved in the process felt that their views were taken seriously and that they were meaningfully involved in the decision-making process:

  "My feedback and scores on proposals were directly used to rank proposals and decide which ones would be recommended for funding, and none of my opinions were written off just because one or more people disagreed with them." (Youth Advisor)

  "In the zoom call with the [professional] panel, our points seemed to be the main thing looked at whilst considering the final decisions." (Youth Advisor)

- Professional reviewers involved in the process felt that young people's views were appropriately represented and that the process was inclusive of all stakeholder groups:

  "a lot of thought had obviously gone into how to share the information and involve the young people." (Professional reviewer)

  "I really felt your process was considered, inclusive, carefully planned and supported." (Professional reviewer)

However, some areas for improvement and future learning were identified:

- Youth Advisors were only provided with specific sections of the applications to review (lay summary; youth participation plans), although they could request the full application. Some young people appreciated not having to read the full proposal, while others would have like more detail –particularly around how the budget would be spent. Professional reviewers also reflected on this:

  "It might be tempting to provide young people with a little more information about research design and funding in advance to support a more rounded response to the projects. However, this would take away from the fact that the target groups of young people who will be asked to participate in the actual projects will not have this knowledge and, therefore, the advisory youth groups' responses are very useful to the academics in gauging potential engagement rate." (Professional reviewer)

- We hosted a separate review panel meeting for the Youth Advisors and Professional reviewers, with young people's views represented by staff members at the professional review panel meeting. Ideally young people would have attended and played an equal role in the professional review panel meeting. However, it may have been challenging for young people to feel comfortable expressing their views in these circumstances, particularly in an online environment. Using a range of methods including more creative approaches might facilitate this for future funding decisions, particularly if longer, face-to-face meetings are an option.

UK Research and Innovation

TRIUMPH is part of Cross-Disciplinary Mental Health Network Plus initiative supported by UK Research and Innovation.

Find out more about the TRIUMPH network
Website: http://triumph.sphsu.gla.ac.uk
Twitter: @TRIUMPHnetwork
Instagram: @triumphnetwork
Email: sphsu-triumph@glasgow.ac.uk