Widening Participation Innovation Initiative Grants 2024/25

Guide for applicants

1. Introduction

The term 'widening participation' refers to the drive to improve access and outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or from groups traditionally under-represented in Higher Education. The OfS has challenged all HEIs to reduce and eliminate any gaps in participation, retention, attainment and progression to further study between different minority groups and the wider population, within the next 5-10 years. To this end St Mary's, like every other university, is required to produce an Access and Participation Plan, which outlines our targets, strategies and the actions we will take and as such, is our main vehicle for demonstrating how we will develop, improve and sustain our practice in this area.

The OfS also expects universities to seek and make use of evidence, focus on what works best and carefully evaluate outcomes of policies, practices and initiatives in relation to key target groups of students. Therefore, the Widening Participation Innovation Initiatives Grants have been designed to enable academic and professional service staff at St Mary's to respond to this challenge in ways that might be different to their normal working practice.

These grants are designed to support initiatives which are expected to benefit widening participation learners. These might include:

- Students from low-income backgrounds or from neighbourhoods with low participation in HE
- Students who have been in local authority care or students estranged from their families
- Students living with a disability (including mental ill-health)

- Students from a Black, Asian or any other minority ethnic background (including Gypsy, Traveller, Roma)
- Mature students returning to learning
- Young carers
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Military families
- Students with other protected characteristics under the Equality Act (2010) eg LGBT+

In addition, under-representation can occur when gender is considered in conjunction with other characteristics (e.g. white working-class males). Students in the above categories can form large parts of other student groups (e.g. commuting students and students with some BTEC qualifications), therefore, projects may also be directed towards these groups.

2. Overview of the WP Innovation Initiatives Grant Scheme

The WP Innovation Initiatives Grant Scheme provides structure, support and funding to enable staff to develop and trial Widening Participation initiatives and activities that can contribute to the delivery of our Access and Participation Plan.

The fund for grants totals £25,000 in 2024/25 and individual grants are expected to be awarded of up to approximately £1000 for each initiative.

Proposals are invited from St Mary's academics, professional services and student support staff (or any combinations) and can cover any stage of the WP student lifecycle (outreach, recruitment, retention, achievement or progression to further study or graduate level employment).

In addition to financial support, grant holders can receive support from the Head of Widening Participation and the WP Research and Impact Evaluation Officer (as appropriate) including support with:

- Designing the initiative
- Aligning the project with our key WP targets and our APP
- Aligning the project with other WP activities (e.g. Outreach, staff development or student engagement activities or initiatives being delivered across the university)
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Staff development activity, including final project dissemination

Funding will usually be granted for one academic year and all costs must be paid before the end of the financial year (end of July). Projects awarded funding will be required to produce a short final report on their outcomes (and expenditure) and will also be requested to contribute either a poster or a short presentation at a St Mary's staff development event in the following academic year.

3. Funding Outline

Applicants are welcome to apply for any amount of funding up to £1,000. Larger requests may be considered in exceptional circumstances, where there is evidence of larger scale cross-departmental collaborations, with student involvement. Proposals should explain, as accurately as possible, how the funding will be spent, with approximate costs of different elements indicated.

Examples of what the funding could be used for:

- Payment of student ambassadors, reps or volunteers who are working on the initiative
- Payment or expenses for external speakers
- Venue hire
- Purchase, hire or creation of equipment/resources
- Catering
- Promotional materials
- Production of materials, reports, resources etc.

Funding should not be used for St Mary's staff time, unless it can be demonstrated that the work falls outside of their contracted role or time and cannot be undertaken in a different way.

If the total grant fund (£25,000) has **not** been allocated to projects in one year, an opportunity will be given to existing grant holders to apply for additional funds in semester two.

4. Project Essentials

This Grants scheme is intended to encourage innovation and to support staff in responding to challenges that may be specific to their subject, programme or area of interest, or to a cross-university issue. Grants could be used to fund a range of activities including development of resources, running activities, undertaking small-scale research, supporting new outreach or recruitment activities or staff training. Proposals must include an indication of the issue that the initiative is hoping to address and any expected impact outcomes. Funding should **not** be used as direct financial support for students.

Essential Project Criteria:

- The activity should benefit widening participation students. They may not be the exclusive beneficiaries but their needs should be central to the project
- There should be evidence of need or demand for the activity and the activity should be clearly aligned with our APP ambitions and strategy
- The activity should not duplicate activity already taking place, either centrally or within programmes or services, but extension or evaluation of existing projects may be considered
- The funding should not replace other funding available or previously used to support similar activities
- Where possible, activities should include students as partners, experts or collaborators to ensure that the student voice is considered
- Activity can include collaboration with external parties, but the expertise and engagement of St Mary's staff should be central in the design and delivery (ie the funding should not simply 'buy-in' a service)
- A clear impact evaluation process must be evident in all proposals which aligns with central WP impact evaluation
- There should be sufficient support and planning to deliver the activity to a high standard

Here are some examples of WP projects/activities that have been funded in the past by WP Innovation Initiative Grants:

- Equivalency test support to enable Education UGs to progress to QTS
- First in Family project
- BAME Student Experience Project
- SpLD Student Experience Project
- Mature Student Experience Project
- Diversity in Children's Literature initiative
- Black History Month Activities
- Programme level mentoring projects
- Stalking awareness project
- Sunflower Scheme Launch

- Monthly Values Talks throughout academic year (from Induction). Wide variety of topics and speakers but all with WP/EDI theme

Ethical considerations

Please be aware, that projects involving research with students and/or intended for external publication or presentation, may be required to go through the university ethics processes and time must be built in to ensure this can happen before delivery starts. Research Services can provide further guidance.

Please also be aware that projects involving Outreach activity with under-18s may be subject to DBS requirements.

5. Awarding of Grants and Key Dates

Proposals will be assessed within 28 days of receipt and will be examined in relation to the criteria above. The outcome of each proposal will be communicated to the proposal lead within 48 hours of the decision.

Each proposal will be considered on its own merit but, if demand is high, priority will be given to proposals which are sufficiently different, to ensure that resources are spread across categories of students, Faculty/Institutes, services or types of initiatives.

Key Dates	
9th September 2024	Grant scheme launches (Application form available online)
July 2025	Final deadline for all payments
October 2025	Final reports submitted
Interim follow-up at approximately 2-monthly intervals throughout the life of the project	