

TOOLKIT FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN POST-SECONDARY MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH



CITING THIS RESOURCE

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Inlight is an Institutional Strategic Initiative of the University of Toronto committed to improving student mental health and wellness outcomes by investing in high-quality, impactful research and driving scalable research innovations.

This resource was developed through an Inlight Studentship project by Joanna Roy, with support from Emma McCann, Amanda Uliaszek, and the Inlight Student Advisory Committee. It is designed to help researchers engage students in mental health research projects, providing practical tools and strategies for collaborations.

Before beginning this workbook, we recommend completing a training on the importance of student engagement and the theoretical frameworks underpinning it. [Click here to access the Post-Secondary Student Mental Health Research Training Series.](#)

If you have any questions or feedback on this resource, please don't hesitate to contact the Inlight Engagement Team at studentmh.research@utoronto.ca.



INLIGHT Student Mental Health Research

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1 INTRODUCTION

Facilitating meaningful engagement in student mental health research requires careful planning and execution.

As a researcher, you will need to:

- Identify the areas of the project that would most benefit from student expertise and determine which students are best suited to provide it.
- Create an environment where students feel safe and comfortable contributing, ensuring they remain actively engaged throughout the project's duration.
- Provide meaningful support to students in return for their contributions.

This toolkit will guide you through the steps to effectively engage students in your research project (ie. in project decision-making, priority setting, and knowledge translation - rather than as research participants), ensuring their engagement is both meaningful and mutually beneficial.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

- Each section of this workbook builds on the previous one, providing a step-by-step approach to student engagement.
- Additional resources, such as email and document templates, are linked throughout.
- Some sections may be more relevant to your work than others. Feel free to pick the most useful aspects and/or modify templates to best suit your project.

Engagement Best Practices are highlighted in green boxes

Relevant Templates & Documents are highlighted in dark blue boxes

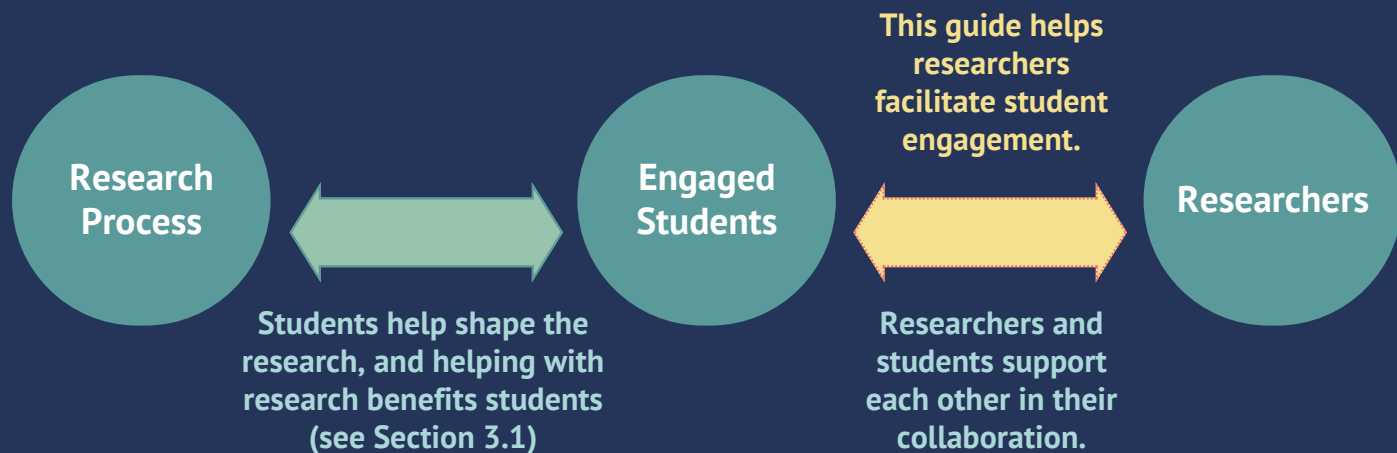
Frequently Asked Questions are highlighted in turquoise boxes

According to Canadian Institutes of Health Research, patient engagement is:

“meaningful and active collaboration in governance, priority setting, conducting research and knowledge translation.” (Government of Canada, 2019)

Note that “student engagement”, in the context of this toolkit, refers to student involvement in the project itself (ie. via a student advisory committee, informing project goals), rather than as participants in the research (ie. via interviews and focus groups).

The purpose of this guidebook is to provide you with strategies for engaging students in your research projects, while allowing you the flexibility to tailor your approach to the specific project and context. It is not meant to be a rigid framework, but rather a collection of tools and recommendations that you can adapt for your project. Feel free to explore the sections that resonate most with your work, and modify them according to your needs.



Adapted from McCabe et. al., 2022

MORE ABOUT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:

[Inlight Student Engagement Training Series](#)

[Eight Best Practices for Student Engagement](#)

[Principles for Student Engagement](#)

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

When engaging students in mental health research projects, it is important to be mindful of secondary trauma, triggers, stigma, and cultural sensitivities during meetings and asynchronous communications. Be aware of and accommodate students' physical, mental and emotional needs (McCabe et al., 2022).

Students may have experienced stigma related to mental health in their community or within healthcare settings which may create issues of trust between youth and health researchers (Knaak et al., 2017). An important part of engaging students in any project is ensuring that students have resources they can turn to in case they are uncomfortable - for example, a 'quiet room' to step away from meetings, and easily accessible mental health support resources.

2 PLANNING FOR ENGAGEMENT

Section Goals:

- Understand and articulate how students can contribute to your project.
 - Don't just involve students for the sake of it – ensure they know they are experts in their lived experiences, and that their feedback is being used to improve the project.
- Plan how students can fit into current project structures.
- Anticipate potential challenges and develop proactive support measures to ensure the engagement process is beneficial for both students and the project team.



BENEFITS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. More **relevant and impactful** research questions and interventions.

2. Ensures student mental health **needs are being met**, increasing the **relevance of developed treatments**.

3. Improves **transparency and trust** between students and post-secondary institutions.

4. Increases **funding opportunities, and credibility** of claims related to student needs.

5. **Empowers and instills hope** within students who contribute.

(Inlight Student Mental Health Research, 2024; Healy et. al., 2014)

PLANNING QUESTIONS

This section provides a series of questions designed to help you plan for effective student engagement in your project. For example, to identify areas where students can make meaningful contributions, anticipate potential challenges, and develop strategies to support their involvement.

While answering these questions is optional, they can be particularly valuable if you are new to student engagement - Investing time in this planning stage can streamline the next steps in the process, both for yourself and for the students involved.

MOTIVATIONS

Why do you want to involve students in your research project?

What unique perspectives or skills do you think students can bring to the project?

What perspectives are you looking for? Think of students who:

- Have firsthand knowledge or experience in this area
- May be affected by the project outcomes

Of the people who will be impacted by this project's objectives and outcomes:

- Whose needs are unmet (disproportionately so)?
- Whose voices have not been heard, historically or in the scope of this research?

How can you reach these students? (see Section 3.1 Outreach for more)

Best practice:
Engage the right students at the right time.

WHO TO ENGAGE

How will the rest of the team be involved? Is there anyone on your team who would be particularly well-suited to support student engagement in this project?

Best practice:
Make student engagement a team responsibility.

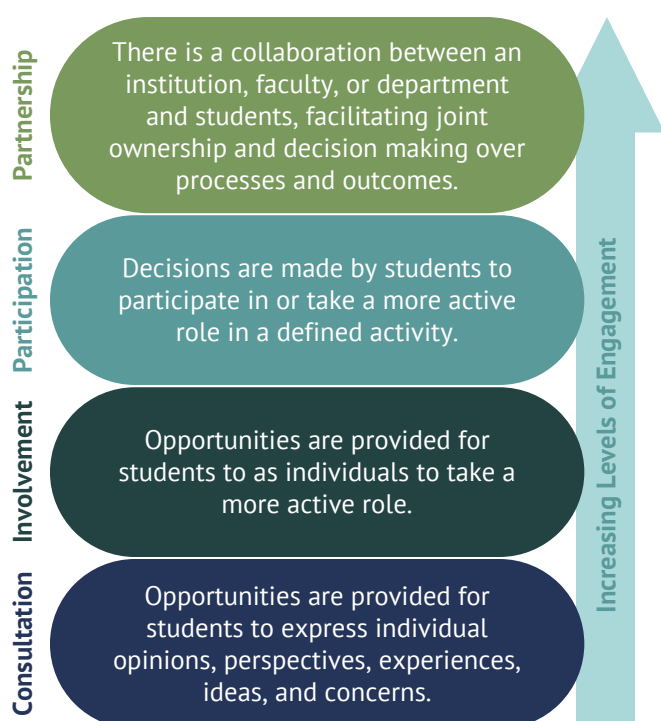
Best practice:
Identify an engagement lead.

Some characteristics of a strong engagement lead include:

- *Strong communication and empathy*
- *Organizational skills and strategic thinking*
- *Leadership and conflict resolution*
- *Cultural competence and flexibility in response to feedback*
- *Passion for student development*

What past experiences do you have with engagement? What have you learned from them that you could apply here?

What type and frequency of engagement are you hoping for? With how many students?



FAQ: How many students should be involved in a project?

- Stay realistic with how many you can support, the environment you are trying to create, and how many perspectives you can meaningfully incorporate into the project.
- Be careful about asking a small number of student(s) to speak for entire groups of people.
- Limiting the number of students involved allows you to create more intimacy in the group and provide them with more 1-1 support.

**FAQ: How can students be compensated for their time and contributions?
How much is appropriate?**

There are various ways to compensate students for their time and contributions, with monetary compensation being one common option. It's important to have an open discussion with students about what they consider fair compensation and how it may interact with other funding sources they receive (e.g. it should not jeopardize scholarships or other grants).

Consider the following examples:

- **Monetary Compensation:** Offering an hourly rate or a stipend, which should be determined based on the time commitment and responsibilities.
- **Professional Development Opportunities:** Offering workshops, training sessions, or networking opportunities that add value to their future career prospects.
- **Non-Monetary Rewards:** This could include gift cards, certificates of appreciation, reference letters, or public recognition of their contributions in project reports or presentations.
- **Progress Updates:** Keeping the students up-to-date on the research/program development, and communicating the impact of their contributions.

Ultimately, the appropriate form and amount of compensation should be tailored to the project and discussed in advance with students to determine what is fair.

How will the students be compensated?

How will the students benefit from this experience?

Engaging students in research projects can be incredibly rewarding, but it also comes with its own set of challenges. This section outlines common obstacles you might encounter and offers strategies to effectively address them, based on insights from researchers involved in student engagement within mental health research projects.

Anticipated challenge: Sustained commitment and task engagement from students involved.

Addressing It:

- Give continual updates and reminders for tasks
- Support students and show you care about them as humans. This will help them feel more valued as contributors, and want to support the project in return.

Anticipated challenge: Researchers' busy schedules can make it challenging to maintain frequent contact with students.

Addressing It:

- Send regular project updates, even when there is less relevant work to the students; it shows them how the project is progressing. Seeing progress in the project can be inspiring and help students feel like they are contributing to something bigger than themselves.

Anticipated challenge: Student recommendations aren't always feasible to implement in the project.

Addressing It:

- Students may have less knowledge about academic research – be open and honest about the limitations of research, and why their recommendation can or can't be used.

How many hours do you expect to devote to this? How will you ensure the facilitator has adequate bandwidth to properly support those who are involved?

How will student engagement be integrated into the project frameworks (eg. timelines, goals, etc)? When will each stage (recruitment, onboarding, engagement, follow-up) happen relative to the rest of the project?

Note: It is generally more effective to involve students in the project as early as possible - similar to how other researchers and contributors to the project are onboarded. Whether students' role is as active co-researchers, contributors to service design, or as student advisors for the project more broadly, early involvement allows them to make more meaningful and impactful contributions.

How will you support the students involved? What resources can you make available?

- ☐ Campus health and wellness resources:
- ☐ Extra “quiet room” available during meetings:
- ☐ Designated team member or counsellor who students can talk to if needed:
- ☐ Form for students to anonymously give feedback or raise concerns:
- ☐ Other:

This concludes the planning questions section. If certain areas are particularly relevant to your project, consider spending additional time expanding upon them or refining your answers to those questions.

**Relevant
Template:
Terms of
Reference**

The answers from this section can be a useful starting point to a Terms of Reference (ToR) document - a more formal outline of the purpose, scope, roles, responsibilities, and expectations for student engagement in your project.

The ToR should set clear expectations and provide structure to the collaboration. It should be shared with students when they are onboarded to your project. They should have an opportunity to review, and ideally co-create it with your team.

3 FACILITATING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

- 3.1 Outreach
- 3.2 Onboarding
- 3.3 Engagement
- 3.4 Follow-up and Debrief

3.1 OUTREACH

After planning, you can start the outreach and recruitment process. In your outreach, it's important to convey that previous research experience is not always necessary; instead, **the focus should be on the unique perspectives, lived experiences, and contributions that students can bring to the project.**

Highlight how students can gain valuable skills, insights, and professional development from their involvement, while also contributing meaningfully to the research. This approach ensures that the recruitment process is inclusive and inviting, which can encourage a more diverse range of students to participate.

Section Goals

- Connect with students who can contribute to your project.
- Communicate their potential impact on your project, and how participating in it will be beneficial to them.

FAQ: How can I find students who have relevant lived experience to my research topic?

- Talk to other researchers who have done student engagement work
- Some student leaders may be able to disseminate recruitment materials or connect you to relevant student groups

OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Reach out to student group leads.

This can be done, for example, over email - many student unions maintain a current list of club contact information.

Class presentations.

Making class presentations allows you to speak directly with students and answer any immediate questions they may have.

Tabling in student areas.

This can help to 'put a face' to the project and give students a better sense of what to expect.

Social media, posters, and newsletters.

These strategies have a large reach, and give students an option to look further into the opportunity independently.

BENEFITS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT FOR PARTICIPATING STUDENTS

These can be emphasized in marketing materials to highlight the benefits of participating in the project.

1. Opportunity to **provoke meaningful change** in one's community.

2. Enhances **awareness of grassroots challenges** that are facing students.

3. Supports **professional growth** (eg. in research, knowledge mobilization skills)

5. Supports **future career goals** through the development of a professional network and relevant outputs.

6. Fosters a **safe space** where students feel **heard and respected**

7. Supports students' **living and education expenses**, where compensation or honorarium is provided.

4. Fosters a greater **sense of belonging**.

(Inlight Student Mental Health Research, 2024)

Outreach is a critical stage in student engagement, in order to reach the students who can best contribute to your project. Keep in mind, the goal is not *just* to inform students about opportunities - but to inspire them to see

- (1) the value they can bring to the research, *and*
- (2) how the opportunity will be valuable for them.

By highlighting the mutual value—how students can make meaningful contributions and how their skills and perspectives will grow—you're more likely to attract engaged, motivated participants who are invested in the project's success.

3.2 ONBOARDING

Once you have recruited a team of students to support your project, you need to onboard them into their roles. This stage is critical for ‘setting the tone’ for the collaboration going forward.

Best practice:
Prioritize clear, effective, consistent communication and follow-up.

In this stage, it’s important to recognize that students come from diverse backgrounds and bring unique perspectives to the table - their experiences and ways of interacting with mental health supports may differ significantly from your own. It is therefore important to keep an open mind and try to ‘meet students where they are. For example, by:

- Communicating via platforms that they use frequently,
- Limiting meetings during busy academic periods
- Holding meetings in locations where students are comfortable, etc).

This adaptability allows you to create an environment where students feel valued and understood, improving their engagement and contributions to your project.

Section goals

- Clearly communicating expectations, and co-creating norms *with* students.
- Setting a positive tone and building trust for future meetings and interactions. Creating a safe space, where students feel comfortable contributing feedback.
- Ensuring students understand the importance of their engagement in the project, and how they will fit into the research team overall.

KEY MILESTONES IN THIS STAGE

This section outlines some key milestones in onboarding. Milestones 2 through 4 have associated templates - these can act as starting points, but should be modified according to your project needs. The Terms of Reference document will also be helpful during this phase, to ensure expectations and responsibilities are clearly communicated and agreed upon by everyone involved.

Relevant Template:
[Terms of Reference](#)

1.

Full-team meeting.

The entire research team should be ‘on-board’ with the student engagement aspect of the project. Share how students’ work will intersect with other team members’ responsibilities, ensure everyone understands the value of student involvement, and establish a mechanism for identifying additional engagement opportunities.

**Relevant
Template:**
1-1 Meeting
Outline

2.

Plan 1-on-1 onboarding meetings.

1-1 meetings are an opportunity to get to know students, their interests, and how you can best support them individually throughout their engagement.

3.

Plan a group onboarding meeting.

The first group onboarding meeting can be heavily structured around the Terms of Reference document.

Planning and debriefing this meeting well are essential, as this meeting will set the tone for future project interactions - students should feel comfortable contributing to the conversations, and understand how their contributions will be used to advance the project overall.

**Relevant
Template:**
Onboarding
Meeting
Presentation

**Relevant
Template:**
Meeting
Agenda

**Relevant
Template:**
Follow-up
Email

4.

Send follow-up messages on an agreed-upon communication platform.

Start communication early and maintain it regularly.

Asynchronous communication is another opportunity to set the tone with the group - follow-up on key action items and expectations, collect feedback, and highlight your team's priorities and hopes for the collaboration.

Best practice:
Define and
co-develop the
student role

Best practice: Treat the students who are being engaged as *full human beings* – multifaceted with unique perspectives and experiences to contribute.

Best practice:
Set expectations
and revisit them
often.

A well-planned onboarding process sets the tone for effective student engagement. Investing time in this stage shows students you value their time and contributions, and encourages deeper involvement. When students understand their roles and feel supported from the beginning, it creates a collaborative environment that improves both the research outcomes and students' overall engagement experience.

3.3 ENGAGEMENT

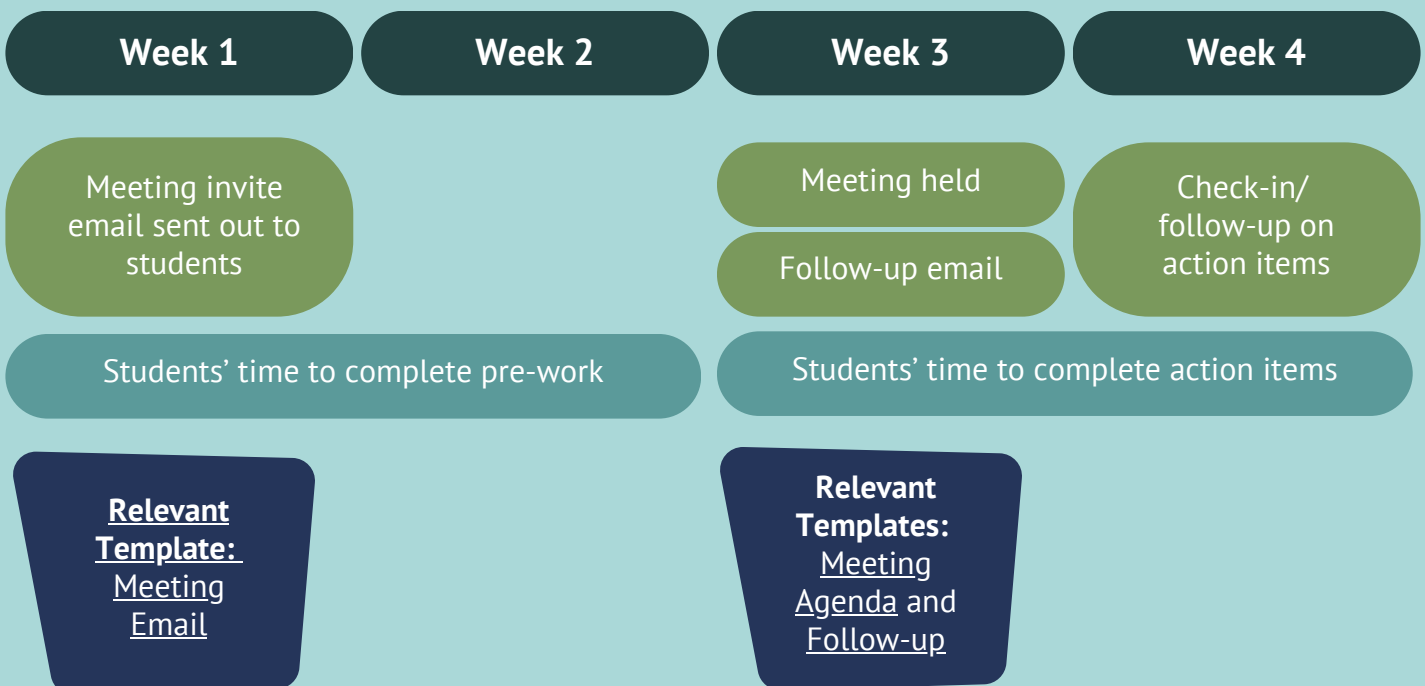
Beyond initial onboarding, effective student engagement requires consistent communication and support throughout the project's duration. **Treat the project as a collaborative effort where both you and the students can learn from each other, co-designing the process with your respective expertise.** Based on what students have highlighted in the onboarding meetings, identify areas that students would be particularly well-suited to work on. Collecting feedback throughout the project and adapting your processes accordingly shows that you care and are committed to their involvement in the project.

Section Goals

- Students feel empowered and supported as advisors. They are also having positive takeaways from this experience, and feel comfortable contributing to group conversations.
- You (the facilitator) get to know students and identify relevant opportunities for them to contribute and grow in their roles.
- You revisit the goals and expectations set during the onboarding meeting. Do this often and update them as necessary.

Best practice:
Recognize
student
contributions.

SAMPLE MONTH: TIMELINE



ENGAGEMENT CHECKPOINT

Below is a series of questions to check in on how well the collaboration is progressing and to identify any areas that could be improved for the future. This should be completed a couple months after first onboarding students, and can be revisited regularly throughout the project.

How frequently do students participate in your project activities?

1 = (low participation/high dropoff,
limited to very few aspects of the project)

1 2 3 4 5

5 = (consistent engagement
in all aspects of the project)

In which areas have students contributed most to the project so far?

What strategies can you implement to increase the intensity and frequency of student participation?

What supports are currently being offered, how often are they being used?

GUESTS IN MEETINGS

It often makes sense to have guests present in student meetings. For example, project members may join a meeting to present their findings, or an expert may come in to brief students with background information on a topic. When inviting guests to meetings, it's important to be mindful of who you invite, how long they stay in the meeting, and how their presence might influence the group dynamics. Ensure that the guest's contribution aligns with the meeting's objectives and that students feel comfortable with them joining.

Examples of Potential Meeting Guests

Members of the research team

can provide updates on specific aspects of the project, share results/insights from their work, or discuss how student contributions fit into their specific research goals.

Experts on a topic can offer specialized knowledge, brief students on relevant background information, or provide additional context about the subject matter being researched.

Community or university representatives

who have experience related to the research topic can provide valuable real-world perspectives (eg. a health and wellness counsellor giving context on intake processes).

Other student researchers, such as peers working on similar projects, can encourage collaboration and provide students with insights from others who have gone through similar processes.

Best Practices

- Meet with the guest in advance of the meeting to align on expectations and ensure mutual understanding.
- Ensure the guest recognizes the importance of student engagement and values student perspectives.
- Provide student advisors with any relevant materials the guest plans to present ahead of time, enabling them to prepare and contribute meaningfully to the discussion.
- After the guest has left the meeting, debrief with the students to gather additional questions or comments that were not addressed during the presentation.

FAQ: What kinds of tasks can students take on?

Think about parts of the project that could most benefit from students' unique perspectives - meeting students where they are means recognizing their strengths and interests (e.g. from the 1-1 meetings you do with them) and aligning these with the needs of your project.

Below are examples of concrete tasks students can take on:

Co-developing...

- Research protocols
- Funding proposals
- Participant recruitment strategies
- Data collection tools
- Manuscripts, reports, and presentations
- Recommendations for actions based on research
- Knowledge translation materials
- and co-facilitating focus groups

(McCabe et al., 2022)

Advising on...

- Scope of research
- Environmental factors for participant interactions (e.g. creating comfortable spaces in interviews)
- Reviewing themes and analysis/interpretations of findings
- Information dissemination strategies to stakeholders

(McCabe et al., 2022)

FAQ: How do I know if I am doing engagement well?

- **Retention:** A strong indicator of successful engagement is high retention. If students remain actively involved, it's a good sign that they feel valued and invested.
- **Feedback:** Use feedback mechanisms (see Section 3.4) to gauge how students feel about their involvement and whether any adjustments are needed.
- **Productive, Insightful Meetings:** Engaged students will actively contribute and help drive the project forward - productive discussions and valuable insights are a promising sign that students feel comfortable and engaged.

As you continue to engage students, remember that consistent communication, flexibility, and mutual respect are important for sustaining meaningful involvement. Regularly revisit the engagement strategies you've put in place, best practices throughout this guide, and be open to adapting based on student feedback and evolving project needs. By getting to know the students you're working with, and maintaining an environment where students feel supported, you ensure that their contributions remain impactful and that the partnership remains strong from start to finish.

3.4 DEBRIEF AND FOLLOW-UP

Debriefing and follow-up (messages, check-ins) should occur regularly throughout the project, not just at the end. **Consistent feedback** allows you to address any issues quickly, assess how the collaboration is progressing, and to keep students engaged. **Effective follow-up** ensures that students leave meetings feeling valued and motivated, which can improve their ongoing interest in the project and experiences with research overall. Follow-up take many forms, including a clear post-meeting message or a quick check-in on how someone is doing after a difficult conversation.

Best practice:
Prioritize clear, effective, consistent communication and follow-up.

Section goals

- Continuously gather feedback from students to improve the engagement process.
- Share with students how their contributions have impacted the project. If it was not possible to integrate a piece of feedback, explain why.

KEY TOOLS IN THIS STAGE

Collecting Feedback

WHEN: Ask for feedback often - even if students have nothing to add at the time you ask, doing this shows you are open to feedback and may make them more likely to give it in the future.

HOW: Feedback should be collected in a variety ways throughout the project.

- Some examples include surveys (see the linked document for sample questions), group feedback during meetings, or regular 1-1 check-ins. Sometimes the most valuable feedback can come from informal conversations.
- Consider checking in on the group norms at various points in the project - this can be a good starting place for offering feedback. As a group, try to come up with 1-2 things that you (the facilitator) and they (the group) can work on going forward.

WHO: When collecting feedback, be aware of power dynamics between yourself and the person giving the feedback - consider having an intermediary who students can speak to, and/or anonymous place for them to give their feedback.

Relevant Document:
[Survey questions](#)

FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Surveys

Group
Meetings

1-1 Meetings

Through a
third party

Informal
Discussions

Following-up

WHEN: Follow-ups can be done at various points. For example, after:

- A meeting, to summarize what was discussed and what the next steps are.
- Bumping a message politely as a reminder to complete action items.
- A difficult conversation, or a meeting/session where you noticed someone looked at all uncomfortable and/or stressed.
- Checking in with someone who hasn't been engaging as much with the project recently, to see if something is going on, whether they can continue to contribute to the project, or how to best support them moving forward.

HOW: Follow-ups can happen over your agreed-upon communication platform or in-person. Consider what format is best for a given situation (eg. post-meeting emails are helpful to keep track of action items, but a quick conversation might make more sense to touch base after a difficult meeting depending on the nature of the discussion). Consider becoming Identify Assist Refer trained (see training link here: [IAR Training](#)) - this module has helpful strategies to notice when someone might be struggling, and how to facilitate a conversation while connecting them to appropriate resources.

WHO: Follow-ups can be done by you, a third party (eg. if collecting feedback), or it may make sense to let students send follow-ups (eg. with action items related to the sub-project they are leading). Communication norms will differ from project to project, but staying relatively consistent (eg. always sending a post-meeting email with action items, checking in at regular intervals) is helpful to maintain consistent engagement.

**Relevant
Template:
Follow-up
Email**

That concludes the Student Engagement Toolkit. This guide has discussed various phases of engaging students in mental health research: key questions to consider while planning for student engagement, onboarding students into engagement roles, potential tasks and opportunities to engage students within your project, and mechanisms for collecting feedback and debriefing to improve engagement in the future. Remember, the purpose of this guide is not to prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach but to offer resources that you can adapt to your specific project needs. Hopefully, after working through this guide, you feel better equipped to continue engaging students in your current and future projects.

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Key:

CAMH = Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

ILeAd = Troost Institute for Leadership Education in Engineering

ISTEP = Institute for Studies in Transdisciplinary Engineering Education and Practice

OISE = Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

UTM = University of Toronto Mississauga

UTSC = University of Toronto Scarborough

UTSG = University of Toronto St George

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APPENDIX

Document Links:

- [Terms of Reference Template](#)
- [Email Templates](#)
- [Feedback Questions](#)
- [1-1 Meeting Agenda Template](#)
- [Group Meeting Agenda Template](#)
- [Onboarding Presentation Template](#)

