

Commission on Students in Higher Education: Call for Evidence

APPG on Students, April 2025

Written evidence submitted by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) in Higher Education on 1 May 2025

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Commission: Commission on Students in Higher Education

Who we are

- The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) aims to close equality gaps in higher education by building evidence on what works and by driving the use of evidence-informed practice.
- We are an independent hub enabling higher education professionals to access research, toolkits and evaluation guidance to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to access, succeed and thrive in higher education.
- TASO is an affiliate What Works Centre, and part of the UK Government's What Works Movement. This means that TASO is committed to the generation, synthesis, and dissemination of high-quality evidence about effective practice in widening participation and student outcomes.

This submission draws on the following TASO work:

- Our [Evidence toolkit](#)
- [Student mental health in 2024: How the situation is changing for LGBTQ+ students](#)
- [Online teaching and learning in the time of COVID-19](#)
- [Pathways into and through higher education for young people with experience of children's social care](#)

As well as these external publications:

- [Care and Learning in Higher Education](#), Social Market Foundation
- [The mismatch earnings penalty](#), Centre for Vocational Education Research's paper

Access and Student Outcomes

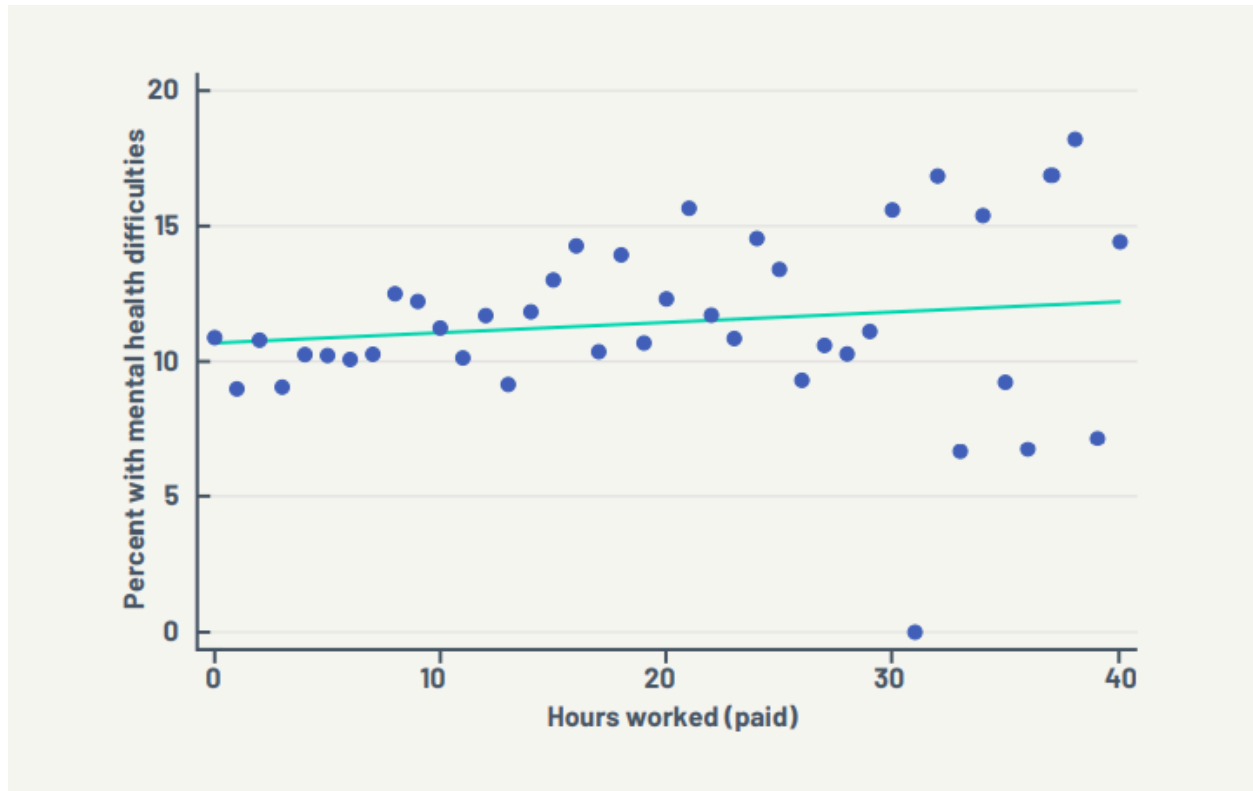
Widening participation and student outcomes

- Higher education providers across the country are using a wide variety of initiatives to widen participation and improve student outcomes. However, there is currently a lack of evidence on which approaches are most effective.
- At TASO we have summarised the existing evidence on approaches to widening participation and student success for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in our [Evidence toolkit](#).
- We have found some promising evidence that suggests a number of initiatives have a positive impact on student behaviour and outcomes. It should be noted that for many interventions, evidence is still sparse, but the findings so far should be used by providers to help guide ongoing work, and to inform where further evidence is needed.
- There is also evidence that contextualised admissions may be an effective, direct way to enable students from underrepresented backgrounds to attend higher education, and particularly higher tariff institutions. A paper by Centre for Vocational Education Research (CVER) on '[The mismatch earnings penalty](#)' found that:
 - high attaining students attending 'low quality' courses (which CVER define as courses where entrants have low GCSE qualifications) earn significantly less than their 'well-matched' counterparts (i.e. those attending courses where the entrants have higher GCSE qualifications on average)
 - by contrast, the study found no evidence that lower attaining students that 'overmatch' to 'high quality' courses go on to earn any less than well-matched students
 - this is evidence that affirmative action is unlikely to have a detrimental effect on students' future earnings.

Work and mental health

- In our report on [Student Mental Health in 2024](#) we saw a gradual increase in the rate at which people experience mental health difficulties as they work more hours, although this curve is fairly flat, and may be skewed by the small number of people who work large numbers of hours.
- Given the relationship between working hours and mental health difficulties, and considering the potential benefits of working some hours in reducing financial stressors and potentially preparing students for the workplace, it may be worth exploring what the optimal number of work hours might be for students using these data.

Figure 1: Relationship between average number of hours engaged in paid work during term time and reported mental health difficulties among UK undergraduates.



Retention

- Student mental health is also a key consideration for student retention.
- Over [one in four students](#) have considered dropping out of university over the past four years (2021-24).
- The most common reason for students considering dropping out of their course is mental health difficulties. This reason far outstrips all other reasons for considering dropping out, including financial difficulties.
- Higher education providers should therefore consider mental health support in their retention practices. Providers should measure mental health when evaluating these activities, as well as measure retention and progression outcomes when evaluating mental health support services.

Teaching standards

- In March 2023, we published the findings of both a [rapid evidence review](#) and [analysis report](#) considering [online teaching and learning in the time of COVID-19](#).
- The findings, outlined in the [executive summary](#) should be used by higher education providers to ensure online and blended learning does not negatively impact student outcomes.

Recommendations:

1. The design of online courses is important: A concerted effort should be made to design online courses rather than simply moving face-to-face materials into the online environment. Effective design features include:
 - a. Coordinated student-to-student interaction via discussion boards and chat rooms.
 - b. Feedback between teaching staff and students.
 - c. Appropriate frequency and timing of online teaching and assessment to avoid student fatigue.
2. Higher education providers should make use of their institutional data and differing pedagogical approaches to design and conduct evaluations that allow us to draw strong conclusions about what works in the UK context. Our data analysis provides a foundation and blueprint for future work of this sort.
3. As students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more likely to be adversely impacted by the shift to online teaching, learning and assessment, future research should focus on their experiences and outcomes.

Student funding

- There is currently a risk that, given financial constraints, providers will not further expand their number of UK undergraduates. This would likely lead to a stagnation or a decline in the proportion of disadvantaged students attending higher education. The poorest students are likely to be most affected by any cost-driven reduction in higher education provision:
 - The alternative scenario is that participation rates for better off students decline. In a zero-sum world, where places are frozen due to financial constraints, merely sustaining (never mind increasing) current participation rates for poorer students would necessitate universities admitting fewer better-off students. A deliberate targeted reduction in higher education participation rates for some young people because of their parents' incomes looks hard to justify, but it would also generate significant opposition.
 - Poorer children often require additional funding or bursaries to cover their living costs whilst attending higher education. With maintenance grants and loans lagging inflation, disadvantaged students require even greater support from universities to escape poverty. In a cost-savings approach, universities would be incentivised to enrol students who can pay their own way over those who cannot.
- Those who grow up in poverty and attend university are more than 20 percentage points more likely to be employed and to [earn up to £20,000 more each year than their peers without further qualifications](#). Therefore the funding crisis in higher education is also an access and opportunity crisis.
- Any change to student funding should be accompanied by commitments and accountability to ensure providers improve their widening participation efforts. At TASO we have helped the sector in providing evidence of what works best to increase participation, and all providers are held accountable through their access and participation plans.

- There are particular groups of students who are currently underrepresented in higher education and require greater support. For example, any change to student funding should ensure those in households with low income are able to attend - not just those who are able to pay increased fees. 29% of children eligible for free school meals attend higher education, compared to about 49% of those not eligible for free school meals.
- Higher education providers should also be encouraged to support the entry and progression of those with experience of children's social care. Our recent report, [Pathways into and through higher education for young people with experience of children's social care](#), found that young people with experience of children's social care are less likely to enter higher education by age 22:
 - Care leavers and those who have ever been in care have the lowest rates of entry to higher education by age 22 (14% in each group). This is nearly three times lower than the free school meals group and four times lower than the general population.
 - While care leavers have the lowest higher education participation rate, all those with experience of the children's care system have lower participation rates and greater inequalities in their student experience than both the general population and those on free school meals who have not experienced the care system.
 - One possibility is additional funding in the form of a student premium, for example an extra £1,000 for each care leaver that providers recruit. As [suggested by the Social Market Foundation](#), any additional funding should focus on and be evaluated in terms of delivering better access and outcomes for these students.