**Evaluation support for HEPs to develop theories of change for attainment-raising activities/interventions**

June 2022

# Open call for HEPs

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) is offering to match HE providers (HEPs) with members of our evaluation panel and fund independent evaluation support to develop theories of change (TOCs) for attainment-raising activities/interventions. These activities should be targeted towards primary or secondary age school pupils and closely align with the types of activities set out in TASO’s [attainment-raising evidence review and typology](https://taso.org.uk/news-item/taso-launches-report-on-attainment-raising/).

TASO will publish these TOCs as prototypes for the sector to use. It is an opportunity for participating HEPs to build internal evaluation expertise specifically in relation to designing high-quality TOCs, and contribute towards TASO’s ambition to support better evaluation of attainment-raising activities.

**Introduction to TASO**

TASO aims to improve lives through evidence-based practice in higher education (HE). Our vision is to eliminate equality gaps for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, allowing all students to have the same chance to enter HE, get a good degree and progress into further study or employment.

TASO is an affiliate ‘What Works’ centre and is part of the [UK Government’s What Works Movement.](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network) This means that TASO is committed to the generation, synthesis and dissemination of high-quality evidence about effective practice in widening participation and student success. Our role is to help the sector produce more [Type 3 evidence](https://taso.org.uk/evidence/toolkit/what-is-causal-evidence/) as this provides us with the best possible understanding of which activities and approaches are most effective.

**Background**

Earlier this year, the Office for Students’ (OfS) called for universities and other HEPs to do more to raise the academic attainment of school students through widening participation (WP) activities. Evidence shows that academic achievement is the most important predictor of university progression[[1]](#footnote-0). Yet there are persistent equality gaps in GCSE attainment. What’s more, many working within the sector are unclear about what attainment-raising activities should be prioritised and where efforts should be focused.

TASO recently published a working draft of an evidence review and typology of attainment-raising interventions (available [here](https://taso.org.uk/news-item/taso-launches-report-on-attainment-raising/)), assessing the strength and limitations of the evidence base. It is intended to help the sector understand:

* What interventions HEPs are currently delivering to support improvements in attainment for school-aged students (both primary and secondary);
* The extent to which these interventions have been evaluated and the quality of this evaluation;
* How TASO and the HE sector could enhance the evidence-base in future to help reduce attainment gaps.

In this report, we state that few attainment-raising interventions currently set out how they are expected to facilitate improvements in attainment. We therefore recommend that HEPs develop theories of change for any planned attainment-raising activities. The project outlined in this open call is designed to directly support this objective.

**Scope**

TASO will fund members of our independent Panel of Evaluators to work with HEPs and develop TOCs on attainment-raising activities/interventions. Once developed, these TOCs will be published and accessible for the wider sector to use.

We are particularly interested in supporting proposals that relate to activities/interventions that are:

* Targeted towards primary or secondary age school pupils;
* Specifically designed to reduce equality gaps, whether delivered as part of a universal offer or through more targeted support to disadvantaged or underrepresented groups;
* Commonly used by the sector (see examples below).

Drawing on the findings from the aforementioned report, we identified four main categories of attainment-raising activities. Examples of corresponding interventions/activities are set out in the table below. We would welcome submissions for interventions that are not mentioned but will prioritise widely used interventions.

| **Type of intervention** | **What do interventions involve?** | **How do they work?** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Aspiration-raising activities | Common activities include open days, campus visits, subject tasters, and pastoral mentoring.  Interventions tend to be combined in a package (black box) | Activities tend to focus on developing knowledge of HE; awareness of degree subjects; and building confidence.  Attainment is considered a by-product of raising aspirations. |
| **Activities to develop study / soft skills** | Practical activities or support - often delivered in a group format - designed to enhance attitudes and technique to improve learning. | Activities focus on improving study skills - such as reading, critical thinking, essay writing, metacognitive strategies - or attitudes to learning, to equip and motivate students to achieve higher attainment. |
| **Teaching of the national curriculum** | Academic tutoring, revision or booster classes, and project work. | The focus is on raising attainment through teaching of the national curriculum. |
| **School governance** | Partnerships between schools and HE providers are typically formed through university sponsorship of schools, professional development opportunities for teachers, and placing university staff as governors of schools. | The mediating mechanisms between the intervention and attainment-raising as an outcome are not clear. The assumption is that interventions focus on enhancing institutional-level factors that contribute to improved attainment. |

**Expectations for participating HEPs**

* TASO will select up to 6 proposals.
* Selected proposals will be shared with our independent Panel of Evaluators who will be invited to bid for the provision of evaluation support (funded by TASO).
* Evaluation support from independent evaluators will take place over a 3 month period from September to November 2022).
* Successful HEPs will work directly with TASO and a member of the Panel of Evaluators to develop the TOC. Table 2 details how project activities and responsibilities will be split across the three organisations involved in the project. NB. We anticipate evaluation support from the independent evaluator to be in place from August 2022.

**Table 2. Partner responsibilities**

|  | **HEP** | **Independent evaluator** | **TASO** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Contract management |  |  | Lead |
| Project management | Lead |  | Advise |
| Expert, technical advice |  | Lead |  |
| Conduct TOC workshops | Lead | Advise |  |
| Review and QA TOC | Advise | Lead | Advise |

**Project timeline**

Using the expression of interest form below, please submit your examples of interventions by **midday on Friday 15 July 2022**. If you have any questions regarding the open call, please get in touch and we can arrange an informal conversation - research@taso.org.uk. You will be informed of the outcome of your submission in the **w/c 25 July 2022**.

**Assessment of applications**

Your application will be assessed by the TASO Research and Evaluation team. The strength of applications will be assessed on the below criteria (please note the weighting of each section):

* *Intervention/activity (40%)*
  + How the intervention maps onto the attainment-raising typology.
  + Background information of how the intervention has been designed/delivered previously.
  + How the intervention aims to reduce equality gaps for disadvantaged or underrepresented groups.
* *Relevance/impact of the project (20%)*
  + Relevance of the intervention that the TOC would be developed for.
  + The HEP’s plan to use and implement the TOC beyond the lifecycle of this project.
* Team (*40*%)
  + The relevant experience of the project team.
  + The team’s commitment to evidence-informed practice.
  + The team’s approach to transparency and accountability.

**Expression of Interest Form**

Please note that hyperlinks to web-based information will not be accepted, and, if included, will not be evaluated.

| **Data Protection Notice** | Please read the [Data Protection Notice](https://taso.org.uk/taso-privacy-notice/) for this project before submitting your evidence. |
| --- | --- |
| **Data Protection Notice** | Do you confirm that you have read and understood the [Data Protection Notice](https://taso.org.uk/taso-privacy-notice/)?  Yes  No |
| **Lead organisation** |  |
| **Contact name** |  |
| **Contact email** |  |
| **Contact telephone** |  |
| **Where did you hear about this open call?** |  |
| **SECTION A: Intervention/activity**  *Please provide details on the intervention/activity that you would like to develop the TOC for:*   * *Intervention name/description* * *Aim of the intervention* * *Target group*   *[700 words max]* | |
|  | |
| **SECTION B: Relevance/impact**  *Please provide details on:*   * *The relevance of the intervention/activity for your provider and the wider sector* * *Future plans for use/implementation of the TOC*   *[500 words max]* | |
|  | |
| **SECTION C: Team**  *Please provide details of the team who will be involved in delivering / supporting the development of the TOC:*   * *Details of key staff who will be involved with the TOC development, including relevant knowledge and skills (of both the topic area and evaluation)* * *The team’s commitment to evidence-informed practice* * *The team’s approach to transparency and accountability when working with independent evaluators* * *Capacity to meet key responsibilities in Table 2*   *[500 words max]* | |
|  | |

*Additional guidance*

* TASO reserves the right, acting reasonably, to:
  + Discontinue the award procedure in the absence of appropriate applications;
  + Change the timetable for the procurement of the Contract, and in such circumstances TASO will notify all applicants of any change by the fastest means possible;
  + Terminate discussions with organisations which apply;
  + Discontinue the procedure leading to the award of the Contract;
  + Not to award any Contract at all as a result of this process
* Under no circumstances shall TASO incur any liability in respect of any of these actions.
* No publicity regarding the project will be permitted until TASO has given express written consent to the relevant communication. No statements may be made to any part of the media regarding the nature of this application, its contents or any proposals relating to it without the prior written consent of TASO.
* TASO will not reimburse any costs incurred by organisations in connection with preparation of their applications.
* If you are unsure of the meaning of a question or anything in this call for applications then it is your responsibility to ask TASO to clarify in writing via email.
* TASO will aim to answer clarification questions within five (5) working days, but does not undertake to do so. TASO may also decline to answer a question if it deems the question to be inappropriate. If TASO is unable to answer a question, this will be communicated.

1. Crawford, C. (2014). The link between secondary school characteristics and university participation and outcomes, London: Department for Education: The link between secondary school characteristics and university participation and outcomes: CAYT research report.

   Crawford, C., Gregg, P., Macmillan, L., Vignoles, A. and Wyness, G., 2016. Higher education, career opportunities, and intergenerational inequality. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, *32*(4), pp.553-575. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)