**Exploring the mechanisms through which sandwich courses impact student employment outcomes**

August 2022

**Objective**

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) is seeking to commission a supplier to explore the mechanisms through which sandwich courses have an impact on students’ outcomes. As part of this exploratory research, we would like the selected supplier to identify the barriers Widening Participation (WP) students face in accessing and benefiting from courses that involve a work experience placement - “sandwich courses”. Furthermore, we want to assess the potential for interventions that could address the barriers observed.

TASO is looking to commission a supplier to:

* deliver primary research to a) explore equality gaps in uptake of sandwich courses and placements within sandwich courses; b) assess how messaging on sandwich courses (information about course structure, benefits etc.) influences decisions made by WP students’ about whether or not to pursue these courses.
* build a theory of change (TOC) that sets out the mechanisms through which sandwich courses can be used to improve employability outcomes for WP students.
* make recommendations as to which approaches are promising to increase uptake of sandwich courses among WP students.

**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 was set up in 2019, by a consortium of King’s College London, Nottingham Trent University, and the Behavioural Insights Team.

We are an independent hub for HE professionals to access research, toolkits, and evaluation guidance to eliminate equality gaps. We inform practitioners of the best available evidence and produce new evidence on the most effective approaches.

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**

In July 2021, TASO launched two new research themes following a sector consultation and a prioritisation exercise. These new themes will guide TASO’s future research priorities. One of the new themes is focussed on [Employment and Employability](https://taso.org.uk/research/what-works-for-employment-employability/).

In July 2022, TASO published a report on [what works to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability](https://s33320.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/TASO_Main-Report_What-works-to-reduce-equality-gaps-in-employment-and-employability.pdf). The evidence review explores the existing evidence of what works to reduce employment and employability inequalities, and where gaps lie in the existing research.

In this report, 12 papers on work experience were reviewed, four of which examined sandwich courses as an intervention. This category of intervention was the most well-evidenced, with multiple papers showing a positive impact on perceived employability and employment outcomes, in terms of securing work upon graduation as well as employment in a role that draws on graduate level skills.

Based on this emerging evidence, TASO produced a [briefing note](https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Briefing_note_sandwich-courses-June_22.doc) focused primarily on sandwich courses. It appears that sandwich course participation can support better employment outcomes for WP students and contribute to the elimination of equality gaps, however WP students are less likely to undertake these courses.

So far, only a small number of exploratory interviews have been conducted to investigate the reasons why disadvantaged and underrepresented students do not participate in sandwich courses at the same rate as their more advantaged peers. There is also a lack of evidence on the mechanisms through which sandwich courses affect employment outcomes.

Having identified ‘sandwich courses’ as a promising area of interest where evidence gaps remain, TASO is now aiming to commission this project that will contribute to building a richer picture of what works.

**Scope**

This project will contain the following elements:

* Exploratory qualitative research:
  + Conducting semi-structured interviews with WP students and representatives from Higher Education Providers (HEPs). We are also interested in hearing about suppliers' suggestions for other qualitative methodologies that may be appropriate.
  + First aim of qualitative research: understanding WP students’ perspectives and experiences of sandwich courses. This would involved gathering qualitative insights from at least 15 to 20 WP and non-WP students who:
    - Are/are not considering sandwich courses.
    - Have undertaken sandwich courses or decided not to.
  + Second aim of qualitative research: understanding how HEPs promote and organise sandwich courses, and what they perceive as barriers to participation in sandwich courses for WP students within their institution. This would involve gathering insights from 8 to 10 HEPs, including those who are known for delivering sandwich courses (e.g., Aston University and University of Bath).
* Exploratory user testing:
  + After a first round of interviews, we ask that the supplier compile a set of evidence-informed solutions (including but not limited to communications/messages) potentially effective at lifting the barriers identified by WP students.
  + This set of solutions should be presented to at least 15 to 20 WP students in a second set of qualitative semi-structured interviews. The objective of this phase is to explore how students navigate different types of communication/information about sandwich courses, as well as other identified solutions.
* A theory of change to map out:
  + The rationale/evidence base for delivering the sandwich courses.
  + The expected outcomes (intermediate and long-term) and relevant indicators (drawing on TASO’s evaluation framework and outcomes).
  + Change mechanisms to understand the barriers to participation in sandwich courses, particularly for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.
  + Possible solutions to address the barriers.

Drawing from this list of requirements outlined above, TASO will be flexible in considering alternative approaches to effectively fulfil the following three objectives:

* Mapping out and understanding barriers for WP students participating in sandwich courses;
* Developing evidence-informed solutions that could be implemented to overcome the barriers identified.
* Developing an evidence informed theory of change for the delivery of sandwich courses.

**Requirements**

**Project deliverables**

* List of interviewees and recruitment strategy.
* Sampling criteria.
* Interview guides.
* Interim report including:
  + Introduction – outlining the format and content of the report.
  + Methodology - description of the research strategy adopted.
  + Summary of key insights from the first round of interviews.
  + Set of evidence-based solutions that will be taken to students
  + Conclusion - summarising the findings.
  + Harvard style references provided for the evidence cited.
* Theory of change
* Final report including:
  + Executive Summary - outlining the key findings from the report.
  + Introduction – outlining the format and content of the report.
  + Methodology - description of the research strategy adopted.
  + Summary of key iInsights from both rounds of interviews.
  + Recommendations for further research and evaluation.
  + Conclusion - summarising the findings and recommendations.
  + Harvard style references provided for the evidence cited.
  + The final report will reflect TASO’s strong commitment to, and support for, the What Works movement and use of causal impact evaluation.
* Presentation and Q&A session with the TASO Theme 3 Working Group.
* The report and TOC will be provided in a format which is ready for external publication. A comprehensive outline of publication requirements will be distributed to the successful supplier.

Each deliverable should be informed by the evidence gathered in the Theme 3 report [[found here](https://s33320.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/TASO_Main-Report_What-works-to-reduce-equality-gaps-in-employment-and-employability.pdf)] and the [briefing note](https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Briefing_note_sandwich-courses-June_22.doc) on sandwich courses.

**Project timeline**

| Activity | 09/22 | 10/22 | 11/22 | 12/22 | 01/23 | 02/23 | 03/23 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Inception meeting & kick-off |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Conduct students and HEPs interviews |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Build the ToC |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Deliver interim report |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Conduct ‘user testing’ interviews with students |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Bi-weekly catch-ups with TASO |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Deliver final outputs |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Project implementation**

The supplier will be responsible for end-to-end project management, including:

* Ensuring data protection standards are met.
* Securing ethical approval for the research.
* Risk management.
* Ensuring that the project is effectively managed in a timely way, with advance notice of any challenges in delivering the project to the timeline specified.
* Ensuring that the final report fulfils the methodological and pre-specified criteria in the tender document, and providing suitable quality assurance.
* Presenting a draft final report to, and collecting feedback from, TASO’s advisory groups.
* Reporting to, and engaging with, the TASO team. This will include bi-weekly catch-ups and a mid-point presentation on project progress.

In addition to financial support, TASO will:

* Provide advice throughout the project where required.
* Meet (virtually for the foreseeable future) with the contractor as per the project timeline to offer insight and feedback on the project progress.
* Support the partner in shaping outputs and framing the final report and resources. Please note, TASO will maintain final editorial control of the content and final outputs.
* Manage the contract.

**Ethics and data protection**

The supplier will be responsible for seeking ethics approval (if necessary) and ensuring data protection standards are met.

**Funding**

This project is funded by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO).

**The budget is £50,000 (inclusive of VAT).**

Responses to this invitation to tender should include accurate pricing, inclusive of expenses and VAT. Please note that assessment of responses to this tender invitation will be on perceived quality of service and demonstrable ability to meet the brief, rather than the lowest cost, but value for money is a selection criterion.

**Application and timelines**

* We invite you to submit an application using the form below.
* Please save the form using the **name of your organisation and add the project title** to the subject line.
* Submit the completed form to research@taso.org.uk by **midday on Monday 26th September 2022**.
* We anticipate the project will start **w/c 3 October 2022** with final reporting in March 2023.

| Call for applications opens | | 26th August |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Deadline for submitting questions | 9th September | |
| Deadline for applications | 23rd September | |
| Clarification/negotiation with preferred suppliers and contracts signed | w/c 26 September | |
| Project kick off | w/c 3 October | |

**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):

* *The team (40%)*
  + The relevant experience of the project team.
  + Evidence of success on similar projects.
  + The team’s approach to transparency and accountability.
* *The application (40%)*
  + How well the application answers the brief.
  + How well it articulates the ability of the team to deliver all requirements and deliverables.
  + Approach to recruitment and sampling.
  + Approach and experience applying qualitative insights to develop intervention ideas.
  + How well it articulates the ability of the team to be responsive and flexible in delivering the brief.
* *Budget (20%)*
  + Feasibility based on the budget submitted.
  + Value for money.
  + Financial stability and long-term viability of the organisation, including detail of the organisations’ last set of accounts and current year budget. Please note this criterion will receive a binary score of pass/fail and if not met the application will not be considered further.

**Expression of Interest Form**

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

| **Lead organisation** |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Contact name** |  |
| **Contact email** |  |
| **Contact telephone** |  |
| **Where did you hear about this ITT?** |  |
| **SECTION A: Relevant experience**  *Please provide details of the team who would be involved in this project. Describe their proposed roles and how their skills and experience are relevant to delivering the work.*  *[500 words max]* | |
|  | |
| **SECTION B: Meeting the project brief**  *Please provide an overview of how you would meet the project brief. Please cover:*   * *How you would approach each part of the project* * *A brief summary of key challenges/risks and you would address them* * *A project timeline*   *[2000 words max (but please do not feel you need to meet this limit)]* | |
|  | |
| **SECTION C: Project budget**  *You may apply for funding to the value of £50,000 (inclusive of VAT)to deliver this project. Provide a budget showing how you propose to use the funding provided.* | |
|  | |
| **SECTION D: Financial stability**  *Financial stability and long-term viability of the organisation is an essential criteria for this application. Please provide:*   * *Your organisation's last set of accounts* * *Your organisation's current year budget.*   ***You may also provide this as a pdf document alongside your completed application form.*** | |
|  | |

*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.