Evaluation support for mental health and wellbeing interventions in higher education with small cohorts

May 2024

# Open call for Higher Education Providers (HEPs)

**TASO is offering to match HE providers (HEPs) with an independent evaluator to evaluate the impact of their mental health and wellbeing interventions with small cohorts. In addition, HEPs will receive a research grant of up to £5,000 to help facilitate the evaluation process.**

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) is seeking an HE provider (HEP) to work with an evaluator to explore the impact of their mental health and wellbeing interventions designed for small cohorts. We are therefore inviting applications from larger HEPs that deliver targeted interventions to targeted groups of students, or from small and specialist providers that, for example, deliver a whole institution approach.

The evaluation will use small n methods, which are often described as theory based methods, and will aim to establish whether and how an intervention has brought about change, explore assumptions and identify the contributions to change. The length of the project will depend on the interventions being tested but could run for about one academic year from June 2024, with interim reporting in March 2025 and final reporting in autumn 2025.

### Introduction

TASO aims to improve lives through evidence-based practice in HE. Our vision is to eliminate equality gaps for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, allowing all students to have the same chance to enter HE, gain 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 HE sector produce morerobust evidence of what works so that we have the best possible understanding of which activities and approaches are most effective.

### Background

[A report from the Policy Institute at King’s College London and TASO](https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/student-mental-health-in-2023.pdf) shows that between the 2016-17 and 2022-23 academic years, the percentage of undergraduate students at HEPs across the UK who said they had experienced mental health difficulties rose from 6% to 16%. This means that around one in six HE students now report mental health challenges.

Despite the growing need to support the mental health of HE students, there is a lack of evidence on what interventions and approaches with small cohorts work to effectively do this. TASO’s recently published [Student Mental Health Evidence Hub](https://taso.org.uk/student-mental-health-hub/toolkit/) shows an absence of robust evidence for the majority of intervention types, and there is also almost no evidence which shows the impact of mental health and wellbeing interventions on other student outcomes such as attendance, continuation and attainment.

It is important that the mental health and wellbeing interventions being delivered in the HE sector are sufficiently evaluated in order to provide evidence of what works. We want HEPs to continue with the interventions that work – and identify those that don’t work – so that, as a sector, we can focus resources and funds effectively. To this end, TASO has separately tendered for a series of quantitative RCT and QED evaluations, in addition to this ITT which focuses on small-n methodologies .

### Scope of the evaluation

This project will aim to provide robust evidence on mental health and wellbeing interventions delivered in the HE sector to small cohorts of students. We are seeking applications from larger HEPs that deliver targeted interventions to targeted groups of students, or from small and specialist providers that, for example, deliver a whole institution approach.

**Depending on the selected intervention and the eventual evaluation approach, the research questions the project might answer include:**

* To what extent did the intervention bring about change, or did the intervention make an important contribution to a change?
* What difference has the intervention made?
* How and why did a change occur?
* What role did the intervention play in bringing the change about?
* What conditions are needed to make this kind of intervention succeed in the future?
* What conditions are necessary to make a positive impact?
* What barriers / enablers can be identified?

TASO is seeking to appoint a higher education provider to work with an evaluator to explore the changes brought about by their mental health and wellbeing interventions. Appropriate interventions will be those that aim to support student mental health and wellbeing but may also aim to improve other student outcomes such as continuation and attainment.

Interventions could include, but are not limited to:

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| --- | --- |
| Peer support interventions for small, targeted groups such as student from a particular group, or students at a particular stage in their course, such as nursing placements | Recreational interventions such as writing, creative therapies, outdoor activities and animal therapies for small, targeted groups |
| Targeted transition interventions such as transition support for students with a declared difficulty or diagnosis | Psychoeducation interventions for small, targeted groups. |
| Support programmes that are delivered by trained professionals and tailored to the needs of individual students or a small, targeted group, such as students living with a particular disability. | Interventions that are designed around the particular needs of students on courses in small and specialist institutions such as students on dance or arts courses |
| Interventions that use innovative ways of providing holistic, whole-university support to particular groups of students | Targeted interventions to support the mental health and/or wellbeing of distinct student groups, for example Black students, care experienced students, mature students, part-time students |

**We are seeking applications both from large HEPs that provide targeted support to targeted groups of students, as well applications from small and specialist providers.**

The above table is illustrative of the types of intervention that may be evaluated. However, we are also interested in hearing from HEPs who are delivering other types of interventions designed to support student mental health and wellbeing. Interventions that are out of scope for this evaluation include light touch Information Advice and Guidance interventions or automated email support.

The exact interventions to be tested will be decided via an open commissioning process. TASO will select partner HEPs based on factors including feasibility of the intervention for evaluation, the relevance of the intervention for impacting student mental health and wellbeing outcomes, experience of the project team to assist with data collection and help deliver the project. and how transferable the approach is.

***Evaluation design and methods considerations***

[Table 1](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hyfCsDp8Y96t9iFea7EjooGe1ADt66qQ/edit?pli=1" \l "bookmark=id.6q6p0hlpnqt) sets out examples to illustrate how a small-*n* design might work in practice for different intervention types. You can find more information about TASO’s guidance on small *n* methods vias [our website](https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/impact-evaluation-with-small-cohorts/).

*Table 1. Example small n designs*

| **Small-*n* method** | **Explanation** | **Example** | **Considerations** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Process tracing** | A qualitative method for assessing causal inference within a causal case. Process tracing does not include a defined series of steps, and can be applied in different ways in different circumstances to systematically analyse a single case study which explicitly recognises complexity.  Process tracing is based on a set of formal tests designed to assess causation. They are applied to all the different possible explanations for how a particular change might have come about in order to confirm some and/or eliminate others. | First year outcome data shows that continuation rates are higher for students who elect to participate in recreational activities designed to support mental health and wellbeing.  Process tracing seeks to answer the questions ‘how, why and under what circumstances’, a cause or causes influenced the specified change. | This method can only be applied ex post, meaning certain data needs to be available to be able to establish any differences in outcomes between particular student groups. |
| **Contribution Analysis** | Contribution analysis employs a step-by-step approach. It is a method for reducing uncertainty and providing a plausible narrative for the contribution a particular intervention has made to a change. | There has been an increase in the attainment of care experienced students who have participated in a new intervention designed to improve their wellbeing, compared with care experienced students from previous years. The evaluation would seek to answer questions such as:   * Did the intervention make an important contribution to change? * How and why did change occur? | Evidence needs to be collected and analysed repeatedly, and the narrative refined over time, which can prove challenging.  It is of most use where an intervention is not experimental and is founded on a well-defined theory of change. |
| **Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)** | QCA is a case-based approach and enables the analysis of multiple cases in complex situations. This method may involve the collection of new data, or it can be applied to data already held.  QCA assists in looking for patterns across cases to help explain why change happens in some cases and not in others.  These different explanations are known as hypotheses. | To understand the combination of factors that contribute to a rise in self-reported sense of wellbeing in mature students who participated in a targeted wellbeing intervention.  Hypotheses developed and tested in order to explain the impact of the intervention might include:   * The intervention taking place during the summer when the weather was warm and sunny. * Changes in course assessment methods * The intervention provided a safe space for students to connect. * The intervention equipped students with tools and techniques for dealing with stress. | There is debate about whether QCA requires a minimum number of cases before it can be used. Ten cases is often quoted as a minimum.  QCA cannot cope with missing data.  The scoring process can become too subjective as it requires quite complex judgements.  It can be hard to predict how much time it will take. |
| **Realist evaluation** | Realist evaluation aims to identify the underlying generative mechanisms to explain ‘how’ the outcomes were caused. Realist evaluations are based on the assumption that interventions work under certain conditions and are influenced by the way different stakeholders respond. ‘Generative mechanism’ refers to the underlying drivers that ‘cause’ the reasoning of stakeholders. | A peer mentoring intervention for students from a BAME background with a mental health difficulty or diagnosis. The intervention appears to work better from some students than others with progression rates improving for Black students but not students from other Minority Ethnic backgrounds.  Research questions might be:   * What are the mechanisms by which the peer mentoring intervention achieves the outcomes it does? * In what conditions does it work? * How and why does it work? | There needs to be sufficient time for assessing the interactions between interventions, actors and context. |

The above are examples of evaluation methods the evaluator might employ. The design of the evaluation will be led by the independent evaluator in discussion with TASO and the participating HEP and will depend on the specific intervention to be evaluated (to be discussed, refined, and confirmed as part of the inception and scoping phase). We expect the HEP to work with the independent evaluator to ensure they fully understand the intervention in order that a suitable evaluation design can be scoped out and developed, and to facilitate data collection.

**Due to the timeline of the project, we will be evaluating interventions that start being delivered during the summer (such as transition support) or in the 2024 autumn term.** The exact timeline will be scoped out at an inception meeting involving all parties.

The exact student outcomes and changes to be measured will again be chosen in collaboration with the partner HEP and the evaluator based on the intervention to be explored. Interventions will aim to improve student wellbeing outcomes, and we are also interested in student mental health interventions that also measure attendance, continuation and attainment. Wellbeing outcomes could include:

* Reduction in stress and anxiety
* Improvement to sleep quality
* Increased self esteem
* Student engagement with their studies

### Requirements for HEPs

The length of the project will depend on the intervention being evaluated but could run for one academic year, with inception and scoping from July 2024, intervention delivery and data collection from September 2024 (or earlier if a transition support intervention), interim reporting in March 2025 and final reporting in autumn 2025. The successful HEPs will work with the independent evaluator and TASO to deliver all elements of the project outlined in this brief. TASO has procured over 15 projects in a similar way and has established systems and processes in place for successfully administering commissioning rounds.

* **Ethics**
  + HEPs will be responsible for securing ethical approval (e.g. from their institution’s research ethics committee) for the evaluation. The independent evaluator and TASO will support this process as appropriate, such as through advising on what type of data is to be collected, for what purposes, how it will be protected, and when it will be destroyed.
* **Data protection** 
  + TASO will manage and organise contracting for data protection and sharing, however, it will be the HEPs responsibility to have an agreement in place with the independent evaluator in order to share data for the evaluation – e.g. student contact details for qualitative fieldwork, student related admin data, intervention related MI data – and with TASO for sharing data as appropriate for quality assurance.
* **Workshops**
  + The independent evaluator will deliver a collaborative inception workshop (preferably in person at TASO’s London office) with participating HEPs, to discuss common evaluation challenges, outcome measures, and an introduction to theories of change.
  + As part of the initial scoping phase, the evaluator will also run individual in-person workshops with each HEP as appropriate to produce a theory of change for each intervention that will inform the evaluation design.
* **Small-n impact evaluation**
  + The independent evaluator will be responsible for the design, data collection, data analysis and reporting for the small-n impact evaluation. This includes working closely with the HEP to understand the intervention, the data available and opportunities for data collection in order to scope out a suitable design.
  + The HEPs will be responsible for collecting (anonymised) data relating to student outcomes (including collaborating with the evaluator on facilitating survey-based outcome data if applicable), as appropriate, and sharing this data with the evaluator in a secure way.
  + HEPs will facilitate qualitative data collection (for example through contacting students and helping to set up interviews and focus groups).
  + Where appropriate HEPs may also support with data collection, for example through the recruitment of PhD students to conduct interviews.
* A summary of the envisaged roles and responsibility of TASO and the project partners is given in [Table 2](#bookmark=id.fr21lk9aaxcj) below.
* TASO staff will manage the overall contracts with partner HEPs and independent evaluators. This will entail a minimum of bi-weekly project meetings for monitoring purposes.

*Table 2. Project responsibilities.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Partner HEP** | **Independent evaluator** | **TASO** |
| Overall project/contract management |  |  | Lead |
| Collaborative workshops | Input | Lead | Advise |
| Theory of change development | Input | Lead | Advise |
| Ethical approval | Lead | Advise | Advise |
| Data sharing agreement | Advise | Advise | Lead |
| Evaluation design | Input | Lead | Advise |
| Evaluation protocol development |  | Lead | Advise |
| Admin data collection for evaluation | Lead | Lead | Advise |
| Qualitative data collection | Support | Lead | Advise |
| Data analysis |  | Lead | Advise |
| Final reporting | Input | Lead | Lead |

### Deliverables

**Please refer to the table above for a more detailed breakdown of the responsibilities for each of the project elements.** The key project deliverables will include:

* A theory of change for the HEP.
* An evaluation protocol for the HEP
* An interim report for the HEP to be delivered ahead of the break clause by the end of March 2025.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* An evaluation report for the HEP, to include:
  + Executive Summary - outlining the key findings from the report.
  + Introduction - outlining the format and content of the report.
  + Methodology - description of the evaluation strategy and design.
  + Findings - with any charts included adhering to TASO’s data visualisation guidelines.
  + Discussion - of findings, limitations of the research and recommendations for future research.
  + Conclusion - to include reflections on the feasibility of the use of small nmethods in the HE sector.
  + Harvard style references provided for the evidence cited.
* Any summary data used to generate figures.
* Interview schedules etc included as appendices.
* Presentation of findings to TASO and the HEP partner.
* The report will be provided in a format which is ready for external publication (on TASO’s website). A comprehensive outline of publication requirements will be distributed to the successful supplier.
* Provide timely information as to the progress of the evaluation so TASO can fulfil reporting requirements to its funders.

### Quality assurance

Throughout all stages of this evaluation, TASO will seek assurance from both HEPs and the independent evaluator that the highest quality standards have been met. We expect to see draft copies of all the key deliverables including analytical strategies, data specifications, questionnaires and topic guides, sampling and recruitment plans, a selection of qualitative interview transcripts, and interim and final reporting outputs. For selected evaluation outputs, we may facilitate peer review by external experts, for example to quality assure the evaluation protocol which we will publish (pre-register) in line with Open Science principles.

### Project timeline

An indicative timeline for the project is provided in [Table 3](#bookmark=id.p726jcficw0p) below. We expect to receive interim results and an interim report by March 2025, therefore fieldwork and data analysis needs to be completed within this timeframe.

**Due to the nature of TASO’s core funding agreements, we have to implement a contractual break clause for the end of March 2025. After this date, the continuation of the project is very much anticipated, however, TASO reserve the right to terminate the contract at this point.**

*Table 3. Project timeline.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Milestone** | **Date** |
| Invitation to tenders (ITTs) open | 28 May 2024 |
| ITT information session webinar | 11 June 2024 |
| Deadline for submitting ITT related clarification questions | 21 June 2024 |
| ITTs close | **12:00 BST, Tuesday 2 July 2024** |
| Shortlisting completed | Mid July 2024 |
| Contracting | End of July 2024 |
| Theory of change | Beginning of August 2024 |
| Evaluation Protocols | August 2024 |
| Ethics/Data-sharing | August 2024 |
| Data collection starts | September–October 2024 |
| Interim data shared | January 2025 |
| Interim data analysed | February 2025 |
| Interim report | March 2025 |
| *Contractual break clause* | March 2025 |
| Final data collected and analysed | July 2025 |
| Draft final report | August 2025 |
| Final report | September 2025 |

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### Funding

**Participating HEPs will receive up to £5,000 (excluding VAT) per evaluation** to support the resourcing of the project and should set out in the application how this will be allocated (e.g., to participate in the inception and scoping phase, to facilitate data collection, and to collect and share outcome data with the appointed evaluator).

Responses to this invitation to tender should include accurate pricing, inclusive of expenses, and provide a detailed breakdown by project requirements and number of days allocated to each team member. Please note that assessment of responses to this invitation to tender will be on perceived quality of service and demonstrable ability to meet the brief, rather than the lowest cost, however, value for money is a selection criterion.

### How to apply

* We invite you to submit an application using the **associated application form**.
* Please save the form using the name of your organisation.
* **Clarification questions can be emailed to** [**research@taso.org.uk**](mailto:research@taso.org.uk) **up until 21st June**. TASO will endeavour to circulate a response to these queries within 3-4 working days.
* **Please submit the completed application form to** [**research@taso.org.uk**](mailto:research@taso.org.uk) **by midday Tuesday 2 July.** You will be informed of the outcome of your submission by 11 July.
* We anticipate that the project will start at the end of July/beginning of August.

If you have any questions regarding the open call, please get in touch over email via [research@taso.org.uk](mailto:research@taso.org.uk).

### Eligibility

* The lead applicant must be a registered English higher education provider in the approved (fee cap) category.
* Applications involving programmes that are delivered collaboratively across multiple HEPs, or with other organisations, are welcome.

### 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 and project team (40%)*
  + How clearly the intervention is outlined and its relevance to the project.
  + How feasible it would be to test the intervention outlined within the timeframe.
  + The relevant experience of the project team, including experience of working with the delivery or evaluation of post-entry HE interventions/programmes. *Please include examples of interventions.*
  + How useful the evidence produced will be to the HE sector (for example, in terms of scalability/generalisability)
* *Meeting the project requirements (40%)*
  + How well it articulates the ability of the team to deliver all project requirements and deliverables.
  + That you have access to and, in principle, can share with the evaluator student contact details for the purposes of conducting qualitative research. *Budget (20%)*
  + Feasibility based on the budget submitted.
  + Value for money.
  + Financial stability and long-term viability of the organisation, including detail of the organisation's 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.
* *Data Protection compliance (binary - compliant/non-compliant)*
  + Security of the measures taken to ensure data compliance.

### 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 anything in this invitation to tender, then it is your responsibility to ask TASO to clarify in writing via email.
* TASO will endeavour to circulate a response to these queries within 3-4 working days. 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. Due to the nature of TASO’s core funding agreements, we have to implement a contractual break clause for the end of March 2025. After this date, the continuation of the project is very much anticipated, but TASO must reserve the right to terminate the contract at this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)