Open call: Evaluations of interventions designed to support student success (TASO/38)

February 2025

# Open call for higher education providers

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) is seeking to appoint higher education (HE) providers to work with an independent evaluator to test the impact of student success interventions using randomised controlled trials (RCTs) or quasi-experimental methods with an associated implementation and process evaluation. The provider can opt to carry out the implementation and process evaluation themselves, in close collaboration with the independent evaluator, for which funding would be provided. The project will run from June 2025 with interim reporting in March 2026 and final reporting in early 2027.

### 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, 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.

In recent years progress has been made in improving the access and participation to HE of under-represented groups, however less progress has been made in the student success space. While OfS data indicates that students with declared disabilities are matching or outperforming their peers in continuation, attainment and completion, the picture is less rosy elsewhere.

Relative to their peers, students who were previously eligible for free school meals have lower continuation rates (6 percentage points lower), completion rates (8 pp) and attainment (12 pp fewer upper-second and first-class degrees). The statistics tell similar stories for students from ethnic minorities and for mature students ([OfS access and participation data dashboard, July 2024](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/)).

### Scope of the evaluation

This project will aim to provide robust causal evidence on the effectiveness of strategies designed to improve student success and narrow equality gaps.

TASO is seeking to appoint at least 2 HEPs to work with an independent evaluator who will use RCTs or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate the impact of student success activities.

The successful providers will also have the option of conducting an associated implementation and process evaluation (IPE), working closely with the independent evaluator and with TASO. Whilst the impact evaluation will tell us whether or not the intervention worked, the implementation and process evaluation will tell us how and why it did or did not work. For instance, the implementation and process evaluation can combine quantitative and qualitative data to help us to understand whether the intervention was implemented as planned, and what the students and delivery staff felt about the intervention and its impact.

The design of the evaluation will be determined by the independent evaluator in discussion with TASO and the participating providers and will depend on the intervention to be evaluated (to be discussed and confirmed as part of the inception and scoping phase). The precise sample would be determined by power calculations conducted by the independent evaluator.

**Due to the timeline of the project, we will be evaluating interventions that are delivered over the 2025-26 academic year, from September 2025 to June 2026**.

### Example interventions

Suitable interventions - all within the broader student success space - could include but are not limited to:

* Curriculum-based interventions such as changes to teaching, assessment or content.
* Support for students’ transition into higher education and between stages within HE.
* Interventions prompted by learning analytics systems.
* Financial support such as income-contingent bursaries.
* Mentoring, coaching, or personal academic tutoring.
* Work experience or placements.

Relevant outcome measures could include but are not limited to:

* Student engagement in their studies (for example, such as whether students are attending lectures, or accessing online material).
* Continuation to the next term/semester/year.
* Completion of their studies.
* Module / end of year grades.
* Academic self-efficacy or belonging.

### Overview of the application process

The exact interventions to be evaluated will be decided via an open commissioning process. This year, TASO will carry out a two-stage application process (in contrast with the single round of previous years).

The first stage will be a light-touch information gathering exercise, so we can understand the purpose of the intervention, the sample population, the intended outcomes and associated outcome measures, and what data is or will be available.

Based on the information provided in the first stage, TASO will compile a shortlist of the interventions that we believe to be feasible to evaluate using causal methods.

As part of the second stage, we will invite those selected providers to create a full tender, which will include more details of the intervention, details of the team who would run it, and a project budget.

TASO will then select partner HEPs based on factors including feasibility of the intervention for testing, how widespread/scalable the approach is, and the availability of data for quantitative impact evaluation.

We are using this model to encourage as many providers as possible to submit examples of their student success initiatives. If you have a student success intervention that you believe may be suitable for evaluation, then please consider submitting an application.

### Requirements for HEPs

The project will take place from May 2025 (when HEPs and the evaluator are appointed), with data collection expected from September 2025, interim reporting in March 2026 and final reporting in early 2027. The successful HEPs will work directly 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.

* **Ethical approval**
	+ HEPs will be responsible for securing ethical approval (e.g. from their institution’s research ethics committee) for both the impact evaluation and the implementation and process 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 evaluator in order to share data for the impact evaluation, 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.
* **Impact evaluation**
	+ The independent evaluator will be responsible for the design, randomisation, data analysis and reporting for the causal impact evaluation.
	+ The HEPs will be responsible for collecting (anonymised) data relating to student engagement, student outcomes (including collaborating with the evaluator on facilitating survey-based outcome data if applicable) and whether or not students interact with the support services, and sharing this data with the evaluator in a secure way.
	+ The evaluator will share interim results and key findings throughout the project and the HEPs will be supported to integrate these into their implementation and process evaluation reporting (in case HEPs are conducting their own local implementation and process evaluations; see below).
* **Implementation and process evaluation**
	+ HEPs will have the option to work collaboratively with the independent evaluator to design a robust implementation and process evaluation that complements the impact evaluation adhering to TASO’s implementation and process evaluation guidance.
	+ HEPs conducting this locally will be responsible for all elements of the implementation and process evaluation (data collection, analysis and reporting as per the design) and will receive funding as part of this tender to recruit one or more research assistants (RAs). It is important that the RAs have experience conducting implementation and process evaluations and/or qualitative research, as their responsibilities will include:
		- Designing the implementation and process evaluation with support from the independent evaluator and TASO, adhering to TASO’s implementation and process evaluation guidance.
		- Collecting appropriate data for the implementation and process evaluation via methods such as observations, focus groups or interviews, as determined by the design.
		- Analysing the resulting transcripts, such as through thematic analysis.
		- Sharing anonymised transcripts with TASO for quality assurance purposes.
		- Producing an implementation and process evaluation report which integrates findings from the impact evaluation (RCT).

A summary of the envisaged roles and responsibility of TASO and the project partners is given in [Table 1](#l5mpdpz5y5vp) 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 1. 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 |
| Impact evaluation design (RCT) | Input | Lead | Advise |
| Implementation and process evaluation design  | Lead**1** | Lead | Advise |
| Evaluation protocol development | Lead | Lead | Advise |
| Data collection for impact evaluation and implementation and process evaluation | Lead | Advise | Advise |
| Randomisation and data analysis for impact evaluation  |  | Lead | Advise |
| Analysis for implementation and process evaluation | Lead | Advise | Advise |
| Impact evaluation reporting |  | Lead | Advise |
| Implementation and process evaluation reporting  | Lead**1** | Advise | Advise |
| Final reporting (combining impact evaluation and implementation and process evaluation)  | Input | Lead | Advise |

**1***While we invite and encourage HEPs to conduct their own implementation and process evaluations, we also recognise that there may be HEPs who want to come forward with suitable interventions and appropriate data sources for impact evaluation but who may not have the required capacity or skills to deliver an implementation and process evaluation (IPE) on their own. In these cases, TASO still invites HEPs to engage with this invitation to tender by clearly stating in their applications that they will not be able to deliver an IPE (which can then be conducted by the independent evaluator instead).*

### Deliverables (if conducting the implementation and process evaluation)

* A comprehensive implementation and process evaluation design, co-created with the independent evaluator, which can be integrated into the evaluation protocol. This will be based on TASO’s upcoming implementation and process evaluation guidance and should include:
	+ Core dimensions of intervention design - fidelity, dosage and reach
	+ Sampling and recruitment
	+ Data collection methods
	+ Analysis of qualitative data
* An implementation and process evaluation report to include:
	+ 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.
	+ Findings - by key themes
	+ Discussion - of the implementation and process evaluation findings and how they support or challenge those from the impact evaluation, limitations of the implementation and process evaluation design and future research directions.
	+ Harvard style references provided for any evidence cited.
	+ Interview schedules etc to be included as appendices.
* Provide timely information as to the progress of the trial 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 depth interview transcripts, RCT analysis code, regression tables, and interim and final reporting outputs.

For selected evaluation outputs, TASO will review and quality assure reports and facilitate an external peer review using sector and methodological experts. Key outputs that will be peer reviewed include the evaluation protocol (plan), which should combine descriptions of the impact evaluation and implementation approaches, and the final evaluation findings report. Both the evaluation protocol and final report will be published (pre-registered) in line with open science principles.

### Timeline

An indicative timeline for the application process is provided in [Table 2](#4v7dm3rmgh3u), and a tentative project timeline is in [Table 3](#kix.mhknkwwie80s).

*Table 2. Application timeline.*

| **Milestone** | **Date** |
| --- | --- |
| Stage 1 Invitation to tenders (ITTs) open | 3 February 2025 |
| ITT information session webinar | 11:00-12:00 on 11 February 2025  |
| Deadline for submitting ITT-related clarification questions | 24 February 2025 |
| Stage 1 ITT closes | 13:00 on 7 March 2025 |
| Stage 1 shortlisting completed | 14 March 2025 |
| Stage 2 ITT opens for selected applicants from stage 1 | 17 March 2025 |
| Stage 2 ITT closes | 13:00 on 6 May 2025 |
| Stage 2 shortlisting and decision | 6 May - 23 May 2025 |

*Table 3. Tentative project timeline.*

| **Milestone** | **Date** |
| --- | --- |
| Contracting | 2 - 30 June 2025 |
| Theory of change models developed | End of August 2025 |
| Evaluation Protocols finalised | End of August 2025 |
| Ethics/Data-sharing | End of August 2025 |
| Data collection starts | September 2025 |
| Interim data shared | January 2026 |
| Interim data analysed | February 2026 |
| Interim report1 | March 2026 |
| Final outcome data shared1 | September - November 2026 |
| Final outcome data analysed1 | November - December 2026 |
| Final report1 | January - February 2027 |
| 1*TASO’s current funding cycle lasts until March 2026. The project will be subject to a break clause in March 2026 should TASO’s funding not be extended.* |

### Funding for selected HEP partners

Funding up to £35,000 (excluding VAT) split into two parts:

1. **Resourcing for data collection:** Participating HEPs will receive up to £10,000 (excluding VAT) to support the resourcing of the data collection for the impact evaluation.
2. **Implementation and process evaluation:** HEPs who wish to conduct the implementation and process evaluation will be eligible to receive up to an additional £25,000 (excluding VAT) to support the resourcing of the project and should set out in the application how this will be allocated (e.g., to fund a dedicated research assistant).

We welcome applicants from individual HEPs or from a group of HEPs (who would then share the grant funding).

Please note that we will not ask for funding requirements in the first stage of the application process.

### 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.

### How to apply

As stated above, in order to encourage more applications we are carrying out a two-stage application process.

**Stage 1**

* In the first instance please collate the required information about your intervention (see [Appendix](#_96r3azqsrs71)) and enter it into the [**online application form**](https://forms.gle/EaeUb9rB2AmePrCt9) **(deadline for submission is 13:00 on 7 March 2025)**.
* There will be an **Information Webinar** on **11 February 2025** with a Q&A session.
* **Clarification questions can be emailed to** **research@taso.org.uk** **up until 28 February 2025**. TASO will endeavour to circulate a response to these queries within 3-4 working days.
* TASO will use the applications to create a shortlist of those that we believe are most suitable for evaluation using RCTs or QEDs.
* Please note, we will not be able to provide specific feedback for unsuccessful applications from stage 1.

**Stage 2**

* **From 17 March 2025** we will invite those on the shortlist to submit a full application.
* Full details of this stage and the associated application form will be sent to providers who have made the shortlist but briefly this stage of the application will allow those on the shortlist to provide
	+ Details of the provider’s team who will be leading the delivery of the intervention, data collection and, where applicable, the implementation and process evaluation (up to 500 words)
	+ A more thorough description of the intervention (up to 750 words)
	+ How you will meet the project brief (up to 1500 words)
	+ A budget for how you will use the grant funding.
* We expect stage 2 of the process to open on **17 March 2025** and close on **6** **May 2025.**

If you have any questions regarding the open call, please get in touch over email via research@taso.org.uk.

# Appendix: Stage 1 Application Form - Open call to test the impact of activities designed to support student success in higher education (TASO/38)

We have provided this appendix to help you gather the required information for this stage of the application. **Once you have the required information in Section A and Section B please enter it into this** [**online form on the TASO website**](https://forms.gle/EaeUb9rB2AmePrCt9) **by 13.00 on Friday 28 February 2025**. Please note that hyperlinks to web-based information will not be accepted, and, if included, will not be evaluated. Please ***do not*** email us a copy of this document**.**

## Section A: Submitter information

| **Lead organisation** |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Contact name** |  |
| **Contact email** |  |
| **Contact telephone** |  |
| **Where did you hear about this invitation to tender?**  |  |

## Section B: Intervention details

| 1. **Intervention Title**
 |
| --- |
|  |
| 1. **Intervention Aim** [up to 300 characters]
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|  |
| 1. **Brief description of the intervention** [up to 1800 characters] *(describe the procedures, activities, and/or processes used in the intervention, including any enabling or support activities. What is the mode of delivery? Is it provided individually or in a group setting? How often is it delivered?*
 |
|  |
| 1. **Time-period of the intervention** *(When does delivery of the intervention begin? If students need to sign up first please indicate when they sign up and when the intervention begins.)*
 |
| **Date from** *(month/year)* |  |
| **Date to** *(month/year)* |  |
| 1. **Who is the intervention targeted at?** *For example, first-year students, mature students, students with attendance below a threshold, or the entire student body.*
 |
|  |
| 1. **How many individuals are expected to be in the group that the intervention is targeted at?** *For example, the total number of first-year students or mature students, or, for an intervention where a threshold determines eligibility, how many individuals are expected to be eligible.*
 |
|  |
| 1. **How many individuals do you expect to take part in the intervention?** *This accounts for instances where you expect the total number of eligible students to be larger than the final number that actually participate in the intervention.*
 |
|  |
| 1. **How will individuals be selected to take part in the intervention?** *For example, randomly selected from an eligible pool of students, or all students below an attendance threshold, or students on particular courses, or if not known please indicate this too*
 |
|  |
| 1. **What is business as usual for those in the target group who do not take part in the intervention?** *For example, what would students have experienced if the intervention had not been introduced? Or, if the intervention is only rolling out to a subset of individuals, what do non-participants experience?*
 |
|  |
| 1. **Outcomes** *(What are the main outcomes – up to 4 – and when will the outcome data be available?)*
 |
| **Outcome***Example: Improved Attainment* | **When available***Example: June 2026* |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
| 1. **If you have historical** *outcome data* **for students from the target group prior to the intervention taking place please indicate the period of time prior to the intervention for which this data exists.** *For example, 3 months, 1 semester, 2 academic years, and so on*
 |
|  |
| 1. **Please indicate if you wish to carry out the implementation and process evaluation?** *Your answer to this question will have no bearing on whether or not we decide to proceed with your application but will help us when deciding a suitable evaluator*
 |
|  |

Remember, please submit the requested information about your intervention using the online form linked at the top of this appendix.