**Supporting disabled students: Developing evidence-based transitions support and improving data use**

June 2023

# Open call for higher education (HE) providers

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) is

calling for higher education providers (HEPs) to collaborate to:

* Design an evidence-based intervention to improve the transition of disabled students into higher education (HE).
* Map the particular barriers and opportunities relating to use of disability data in HE in relation to evaluation.

**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. 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 TASO published a [report on ‘What works to reduce equality gaps for disabled students’](https://taso.org.uk/news-item/report-disabled-students/). This report summarises the evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to address inequalities in HE among disabled students in the UK. It also indicates some priorities for future research and evaluation, to ensure that disabled students are more fully included in HE.

The existing evidence suggests that transitions support can be effective for enabling disability inclusion. This evidence, particularly Type 3 research, was often based on experiences in the US, where there is a legal or statutory requirement for HEPs to focus on delivering support during transition into HE. In the UK context, there is some evidence on the importance of transitions, and the Disabled Student Commitment has suggested ways of improving information, access and guidance in accessing HE, focusing on HEPs but also UCAS, the OfS and funders of HE access and participation programmes. As transitions support is improved and expanded, it will be more feasible and important to evaluate what is working best to deliver on disabled student inclusion.

In-line with the Disabled Students Commission, our recent report also made a number of recommendations on how the use of disability data in HE requires improvement. Better collection and use of data for tracking how disabled students engage and succeed in HE is a vital prerequisite for better evaluation of how to support this group.

**Scope**

This new project seeks to encourage collaboration between HEPs to work on two key topics:

* **Transitions support:** HEPs will develop a blueprint for a model of evidence-based transitions support which offers potential for adaptation, implementation and evaluation across the HE sector to provide more consistent support for disabled students. Note, we encourage applications from a range of HEPs including post-92 providers, high and low-tariff providers, small and specialist providers.
* **Use of data:** HEPs will map the particular barriers and opportunities relating to use of disability data in HE in evaluation.

***Transitions support***

TASO will appoint an independent evaluator from the [Panel of Evaluators](https://taso.org.uk/get-involved/panelofevaluators/) to work with HEPs to:

* Facilitate engagement with the existing evidence on transitions support (including TASO’s recent report), and their own local evidence, to build a Theory of Change for this support using TASO’s [Enhanced Theory of Change tool](https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/toc/#:~:text=The%20Enhanced%20ToC%20guidance%20provides,and%20assumptions%20and%20change%20mechanisms.).
* Collaboratively develop a model intervention which aids the successful transition of disabled students into HE:
  + The intervention design will be clearly underpinned by the existing evidence and thoroughly referenced using existing sources.
  + This intervention is likely to combine multiple approaches/sub-interventions which may be drawn from the existing literature or from HEPs own practice.
  + This model intervention does not need to reflect what is already taking place, rather it should be a roadmap for what support should be offered in an ideal scenario.
* Based on this Theory of Change, devise a ‘blueprint’ for the intervention which outlines how it could be adopted/adapted at other HEPs and potentially scaled across the HE sector.

The independent evaluator will then engage with other HEPs to test the feasibility of this scaling and provide recommendations about how any further roll-out/scaling could be implemented and evaluated to develop [Type 3](https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evidence-standards/) evidence of impact.

***Use of data***

HEPs will also feed into another TASO project ([**Institutional Data Use: building better evaluation**](https://taso.org.uk/invitation-to-tender-institutional-data-use/)**)** to help map the particular barriers and opportunities relating to use of disability data in HE. This will require HEPs to participate in interviews, focus groups and workshops with TASO staff and/or commissioned evaluators to help us understand how data is used in their local institution and how this could be improved.

Finally, HEPs will be invited to participate in a sector engagement exercise to understand the use of reasonable adjustments and transition support in HE. Please see more information in our [linked invitation to tender](https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/TASO_ITT_PofE_June-23.docx).

**Expectations for participating HEPs**

* TASO will select up to three proposals from HEPs.
* We are simultaneously issuing a call to our independent Panel of Evaluators who will be invited to bid for the provision of evaluation support (funded by TASO).
* Support from independent evaluators will take place over a six-month period from September 2023 to February 2024. Work will include the following:
  + Collaborative workshops to review and discuss the existing evidence on transitions support, including sharing evidence from your local context.
  + Each HEP will develop their own Theory of Change for the transitions support in their institution, using the TASO [Enhanced Theory of Change template](https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/toc/). This will be shared with, and published by TASO as an example of evaluation practice.
  + With facilitation from the evaluator, HEPs will collaborate to design the evidence-based model for transition support and the blueprint for how this could be scaled across the HE sector. This will involve a programme of workshops/meetings.
  + Each HEP will contribute to the mapping of activities, outcomes and data collected for post-entry work in our [Institutional Data Use project](https://taso.org.uk/invitation-to-tender-institutional-data-use/).
* Successful HEPs will work directly with TASO and an independent evaluator from the panel.
* Successful HEPs will be expected to commit time and resourcing to the project, including through meetings, workshops and reviewing of outputs. The table below details how project activities and responsibilities will be split across the three organisations involved in the project.

*Table 1: Partner responsibilities*

|  | **HEP** | **Independent evaluator** | **TASO** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Contract management |  |  | Lead |
| Project management | Lead | Lead | Advise |
| Expert, technical advice |  | Lead | Support |
| Developing local Theories of Change | Lead | Support | Support |
| Workshops, interviews and other sessions to develop the intervention blueprint and map data use | Participate | Lead | Support |
| Intervention blueprint development | Participate | Lead | Support |
| Review and QA outputs | Review | Lead | Review |

**Ethics and data protection**

The HEP will be responsible for seeking ethics approval and ensuring data protection standards are met.

**Funding**

TASO will select up to three HEPs to participate in this project.

Participating HEPs will receive up to **£20,000** to support the resourcing of the project and should set out in the application how this will be allocated (e.g. to funding a dedicated research assistant).

Responses to this invitation to tender should include accurate pricing, inclusive of expenses. 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, however, value for money is a selection criterion.

**Project timeline**

* We invite you to submit an application using the form below.
* Please save the form using the name of your organisation.
* Submit the completed form to research@taso.org.uk by **5pm on Friday 4 August.**
* You will be informed of the outcome of your submission in the **w/c 14 August 2023**.
* We anticipate the project will startin **September 2023** with final reporting in **February 2024**.

If you have any questions regarding the open call, please join us on **5 July 2023** for an information session ([sign-up here](https://taso.org.uk/event/exploring-tasos-new-invitations-to-tender-in-higher-education/)) dedicated to unpacking TASO’s open invitations to tender.

The project timeline is outlined in the table below.

*Table 2. Project milestones and key dates*

| **Milestone** | **Date** |
| --- | --- |
| Call for applications opens (HEPs and Panel of Evaluators) | Thursday 15 June 2023 |
| ‘ITT information session’ webinar | Wednesday 5 July 2023 |
| Deadline for applications | Friday 4 August 2023 (5pm) |
| Project kick off | September 2023 |
| Final outputs | February 2024 |

### **Eligibility**

* The lead applicant must be a registered English higher education provider in the approved (fee cap) category.
* The primary focus of the intervention must be to support the transition of disabled students into HE.

**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, including experience of transitions. support for disabled students and Theory of Change development.
  + The team’s commitment to evidence-informed practice
  + The team’s approach to transparency and accountability when working with independent evaluators.
* *Institutional practice on support for disabled students (40%)*
  + How well developed your support for disabled students is and/or how well you are using evidence/evaluation to try and improve this support.
  + Why your institution should be involved in developing a blueprint for transitions support.
* *Value for money (20%)*
  + Your approach to allocating the £20,000 grant and the extent to which this offers 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.

**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 TASO’s [Data Protection Notice](https://taso.org.uk/taso-privacy-notice/) before submitting your application. |
| --- | --- |
| **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 |
| **Organisation/**  **provider name** |  |
| **Contact name** |  |
| **Contact email** |  |
| **Contact telephone** |  |
| **Where did you hear about this open call?** |  |
| **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.*  *[750 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* * *How well developed your support for disabled students is and/or how well you are using evidence/evaluation to try and improve this support* * *Why your institution should be involved in developing a blueprint for transitions support*   *[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 £20,000 to deliver this project. Provide a budget showing how you propose to use the funding provided. A maximum overhead rate of 25% on staff costs will be considered.* | |
|  | |
| **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 communicate