

# TASO Research Priorities

Consulting the HE sector to inform our activity

May 2021

## Executive summary

- TASO is committed to generating and disseminating robust, high-quality research which can contribute to and help facilitate the elimination of equality gaps in higher education.
- We are focused on developing more rigorous, causal evidence on the most effective approaches to improving access and outcomes for disadvantaged and underrepresented students in higher education - as there currently isn't enough to fully understand what works, in which contexts, and for whom.
- Currently [TASO has two broad research themes](#):
  - **Theme 1: Effectiveness of Widening Participation Outreach**
  - **Theme 2: Gaps in the Student Experience**
- Through our work on these themes, our advisory groups identified employment and employability as an area in which there is a clear need to provide more support and better understanding of the evidence. Therefore, TASO plans to launch this as a discrete theme in 2021:
  - **Theme 3: Employability and employment**
- In addition, in autumn 2020 we ran an exercise to help us identify possible future research priorities for TASO. This report provides a summary of that prioritisation exercise.
- Based on the results of the prioritisation exercise, TASO will launch work on an additional new theme in 2021:
  - **Theme 4: Disability and Mental Health**
- All TASO themes are guided by a [group of representatives from the sector](#) to help us decide which research projects we should commission. This is a key part of our collaborative approach to working with the sector, ensuring all of the research projects we undertake and commission are relevant, useful and informed by a wide variety of stakeholders.
- TASO is seeking members for new working groups on each new theme to help shape our programme of work in each area. For more information on the theme working groups and details on how to get involved, click here: [insert link]

## Process

- We ran our prioritisation exercise between September 2020 and December 2020.
- The exercise was a modified version of the Delphi method and used a series of iterative surveys to help narrow down the research areas with the greatest support.<sup>1</sup>
- The process had three distinct steps:
  - Condense a list of possible future research areas
  - Allocate priority scores to the list
  - Build consensus on the highest rated areas
- We ran three surveys:
  - Survey 1 was targeted solely at the [Sector Network](#). The Sector Network brings together researchers, practitioners and evaluators with an interest in widening participation and student success.
  - Survey 2 was also open to the broader sector and students.
  - Survey 3 engaged respondent groups for surveys one and two.
- To help build consensus following the second survey, we held two workshops with representatives from the Sector Network.

## Results

### Survey 1

- An initial scoping exercise was conducted to determine a long list of possible future research areas for TASO.
- The long list was informed by the gaps in the evidence base identified in the [Theme 1](#) and [Theme 2](#) evidence synthesis reports.
- By reviewing both reports, we identified a list of 56 possible research areas which had been identified as possible avenues for further investigation by TASO.<sup>2</sup>
- The areas naturally fell into four groups based on the stage of the education journey and whether the focus was on activities or the type of individual targeted, as shown below.

	Focus on activity	Focus on group	TOTAL
Pre-entry to HE	8	16	24

<sup>1</sup> This process was inspired by a similar exercise undertaken by What Works for Children's Social Care, please see for more details: <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research/research-priorities/>

<sup>2</sup> Note: because we had already identified Employment and Employability as a future research theme for TASO we removed this from the list, although we retained 'Institution-led interventions to build employability' as a specific activity which arose as a possible research area from our existing evidence reviews.

<b>Post-entry to HE</b>	19	13	32
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>56</b>

- We then ran a survey with our Sector Network to help us narrow down this longlist.
- We received 31 responses from a pool of 79 potential respondents (a response rate of 39%).
- Participants were asked to vote for potential areas to remove from the list for the second survey.
- We dropped any items which scored 10 or more votes for removal.
- As a result, we removed 11 items in total (see Annex A for more detail).

### Survey 2

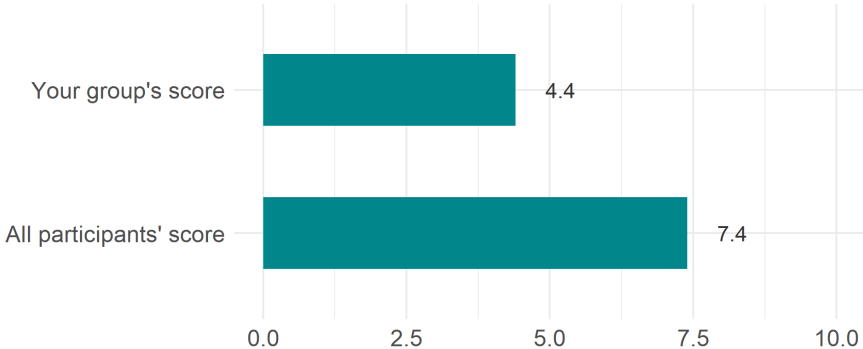
- We took forward our reduced list of research areas to Survey 2.
- To boost our sample, we opened the second survey to the wider sector (beyond the Sector Network) by sending it out through our mailing list and on social media. A total of 108 individuals completed the second survey.
- Participants could score each group/activity from 1 (low) to 10 (high). For the purpose of analysing these responses, we categorised the participants according to whether they self-declared themselves an evaluator, practitioner, researcher or as holding some other role.
- A summary of the mean response by participant group is given below.

Participant type	N	% of total	Mean score			
			Pre-entry target groups	Pre-entry activities	Post-entry target groups	Post-entry activities
Evaluator	24	22%	7.0	7.4	7.2	6.8
Other	23	21%	6.6	7.8	7.0	7.0
Practitioner	32	30%	6.9	7.3	7.3	6.9
Researcher	14	13%	6.4	7.3	7.3	6.9
Students	15	14%	6.8	8.2	6.6	6.9
<b>Overall</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>6.9</b>

- To compare the areas to one another, we calculated a ‘score’ using the lower 95% confidence interval. We use this approach to take into account the spread in the data.
- Using these scores, we ranked our full list. A full breakdown is given in Annex B.
- Based on this analysis we identified 22 items (which all had scores above the median) as our priority areas to be carried forward to the third survey.

**Survey 3**

- In Survey 3, the priority areas were reflected back to Survey 2 respondents alongside their group score for that theme, see Figure below.
- Participants were then invited to re-score based on the new information presented to them. The aim of this step was to build consensus.



- We received 60 responses from a pool of 108 potential respondents (a response rate of 55%).
- A summary of the mean response by participant group is given below.

Participant type	N	% of total	Mean score			
			Pre-entry target groups	Pre-entry activities	Post-entry target groups	Post-entry activities
Evaluator	17	28%	7.9	6.4	8.2	6.9
Other	13	22%	7.9	7.2	7.8	7.4
Practitioner	15	25%	7.4	6.5	8.2	7.3
Researcher	9	15%	6.8	6.7	7.6	6.7
Student	6	10%	7.8	7.7	7.6	7.3
<b>Overall</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>7.1</b>

- Again, to compare the areas to one another, we calculated a 'score' using the lower 95% confidence interval. A full breakdown is given in Annex C.

**Workshops**

- To help build consensus following the surveys, we held two workshops with representatives from the Sector Network.
- 'Belonging' in HE was a key discussion point at both workshops with attendees reflecting on the need for a standardised way of measuring it.

- Discussions also focused on the difficulty of evaluating 'employment' outcomes. In particular, the link between improving the student experience and the impact this has on attainment - and in turn on progression to employment. This issue may be reflected in the relatively lower score for this potential theme in our final results.
- Attendees also discussed the imperfect umbrella categories for measuring socio-economic status and the need to focus more on characteristics relating to individual circumstances.

## Final results and next steps

We identified a list of potential priority research areas by selecting items which scored above the median and were the highest rated overall. Some brief notes on each and TASO's next steps are provided below.

### ***Socioeconomically disadvantaged learners***

- The high-level of support for a general focus on learners from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds (both pre- and post-entry) may reflect broad consensus and awareness of this issue in the HE community (versus some smaller subgroups of learners, for example).
- Identifying the best ways of supporting this group is a key priority for TASO. Work on this issue includes our projects on specific outreach activities, such as our evaluation of university summer schools and multi-intervention outreach and mentoring.
- **There is scope to do more work on other activities to support this group and we will seek to do so under our existing themes over the coming years. This area also aligns with work under our new theme of Employment and Employability which will explore the particular challenges around identifying the most effective approaches to narrowing equality gaps relating to employment.**

### ***Post-entry group: race equality gaps***

- TASO has already identified race equality gaps as a key focus area under our Theme 2 programme of work.
- We are working with the University of Kent and the University of Leicester, to explore whether reforming the curriculum to make it more diverse will help close race equality gaps. We also aim to understand whether reforming the curriculum improves the experience of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in terms of their engagement with module content and satisfaction with their course. **We will seek to build on our existing work on race equality gaps as it develops.**

### ***Post-entry activity: Belonging activities***

- A sense of 'belonging' is often identified as key to ensuring students see HE as an option for them and flourish after they enter.
- The qualitative feedback from our workshops suggested that belonging was a key outcome for student support activities but also touched on the challenges of measuring and capturing this construct.
- **TASO will explore how best to capture 'sense of belonging' as an outcome in our funded projects and invite partners to explore this question in more**

**detail. Based on what we learn, we will seek to build evaluation guidance which can help others in the sector do the same in their local context.**

***Post-entry group: Disabled individuals (including mental health)***

- The results of this exercise show that disability and mental health is a clear priority area for the sector which is not currently being met under TASO's research activities.
- **We propose to launch a new theme to help us better understand how to support learners with disabilities and mental health concerns to succeed in the HE environment.**

***Post-entry group: Students from deprived areas***

- Evidence gaps in the significant variation in HE participation rates by area is widely agreed to be a priority concern by the sector. It also overlaps with wider research and policy focus on 'levelling up' areas that have had poorer economic performance and opportunity over many years.
- **As with socio-economically disadvantaged learners, TASO will address these students in our Employment theme, including by looking at local labour markets.**
- **TASO is also a part of the [Civic University network](#), in which we share findings on area-level HE inequalities, and provide learning opportunities for the other members, including universities as well as government, funders and local employer groups.**

***Post-entry activities: Institutional policies to support student success and interventions which identify at risk students/targeting***

- Education in the UK has been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic which led to widespread change to institutional policies over the 2020/21 academic year.
- For this reason, TASO has been focusing on how to understand the response of different HE providers, and different courses, to the pandemic – the technological choices they've made, the way that they've adapted their examinations/grading, and the extent to which they have made use of synchronous (live) vs asynchronous (non-live) learning.
- **TASO is currently working on a project to tell us more about what effect such changes have had in the short-term, and how they might apply in the longer-term too. As part of this work, we have conducted a rapid evidence review online teaching and learning, we are working with university partners to explore what lessons can be learnt from institutional data and**

**we are seeking case studies of best practice in using such data. The project will report in autumn 2021.**

- **With learners entering HE under such difficult conditions, systems which can effectively identify struggling students will be more important than ever. That’s why we’re also conducting a rapid evidence review on the role of learner analytics, to help the sector understand if and how these systems can be used effectively.**

***Pre-entry activities: Tutoring and skills development***

- Our stakeholders are clearly interested in how tutoring and skills development can support learners to access HE. Prior attainment is highly predictive of HE entry, so interventions designed to raise grades are likely to be an important piece of the puzzle in terms of closing equality gaps at entry.
- Our sister What Works centre is the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) focuses on evidence-based approaches to raising attainment of 3-18 year olds, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The EEF provides extensive evidence-based advice on the efficacy of tutoring interventions on attainment, which can be accessed on their [Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#).
- **Rather than seeking to duplicate work in this space, TASO will consider how best to draw on and complement the activity of other What Works centres, like the EEF, to showcase findings which may be of interest to the HE community.**

**Annex A: More detail on results of Survey 1**

- The following themes were dropped in Survey 1. For a list of the remaining themes please see Annexes B and C.

Pre/post entry	Activity/group	Item
Pre-entry	Group	Primary school learners
Pre-entry	Group	Learners with a criminal record
Pre-entry	Group	Learners from military families
Pre-entry	Activity	Conferences and workshops
Pre-entry	Activity	Sponsored schools
Post-entry	Group	Students from military families
Post-entry	Group	Students with a criminal record
Post-entry	Activity	Admissions policy
Post-entry	Activity	Extra-curricular activities
Post-entry	Activity	Fee waivers
Post-entry	Activity	Links to professional bodies



## Annex B: More detail on results of Survey 2

Rank	Pre/post entry	Activity/group	Field	Score	Above median
1	Pre-entry	Group	Socio-economically disadvantaged learners	8.4	Y
2	Post-entry	Group	Socio-economically disadvantaged learners	8.2	Y
3	Post-entry	Activity	Belonging activities	8.2	Y
4	Post-entry	Group	BAME learners	8.2	Y
5	Pre-entry	Activity	Tutoring and skills development	7.7	Y
6	Post-entry	Group	Disabled individuals (including mental health)	7.8	Y
7	Post-entry	Activity	Interventions which identify at risk students/targeting	7.4	Y
8	Pre-entry	Group	Deprived areas	7.4	Y
9	Post-entry	Activity	Institutional policies to support student success	7.3	Y
10	Pre-entry	Group	Disabled individuals (including mental health)	7.2	Y
11	Pre-entry	Activity	Admissions policy	7.1	Y
12	Post-entry	Group	Deprived areas	7.1	Y
13	Post-entry	Activity	Interventions to build social interaction and learning communities	7.2	Y
14	Pre-entry	Group	BAME learners (access to top-third providers)	6.9	Y
15	Pre-entry	Activity	Financial support (pre-entry)	6.9	Y
16	Post-entry	Activity	Contextual admissions	6.9	Y
17	Post-entry	Activity	Institution-led interventions to build employability	6.8	Y
18	Post-entry	Activity	Mentoring, counselling and role model interventions	6.7	Y
19	Pre-entry	Activity	Information, advice and guidance (IAG)	6.7	Y
20	Post-entry	Activity	Interventions to build skills (e	6.6	Y
21	Post-entry	Activity	Online learning courses/support	6.5	Y
22	Post-entry	Activity	Teaching and learning practice	6.3	Y
23	Post-entry	Group	Estranged students	6.3	N
24	Post-entry	Group	Commuter students	6.3	N
25	Post-entry	Activity	Scholarships and bursaries	6.2	N
26	Post-entry	Activity	Learner analytics	6.2	N
27	Pre-entry	Group	Estranged students	6	N
28	Pre-entry	Group	Refugees	6.1	N
29	Post-entry	Group	Refugees	6.1	N
30	Post-entry	Group	Vocational students, including BTEC students	6.1	N
31	Post-entry	Activity	Support from academics	6.1	N
32	Pre-entry	Group	Vocational students, including BTEC students	5.9	N
33	Post-entry	Activity	Foundation years	5.9	N
34	Post-entry	Activity	Student-led activities	5.8	N
35	Post-entry	Group	LGBTQ+	5.6	N

36	Post-entry	Group	Part time/ flexible learners	5.7	N
37	Pre-entry	Group	Part time/ flexible learners	5.5	N
38	Post-entry	Activity	Induction/welcome week activities	5.5	N
39	Post-entry	Group	Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT)	5.5	N
40	Pre-entry	Group	College students	5.4	N
41	Post-entry	Activity	Interventions designed to promote progression to postgraduate study	5.4	N
42	Post-entry	Activity	Work experience (excluding sandwich courses and industrial placements)	5.3	N
43	Pre-entry	Group	Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT)	5.3	N
44	Pre-entry	Group	LGBTQ+	5.1	N
45	Post-entry	Activity	Sandwich courses and industrial placements	4.9	N

### Annex C: More detail on results of Survey 3

Rank	Pre/post entry	Activity/group	Field	Score	Above median
1	Pre-entry	Group	Socio-economically disadvantaged learners	8.6	Y
2	Post-entry	Group	Socio-economically disadvantaged learners	8.3	Y
3	Post-entry	Group	BAME learners	8.3	Y
4	Post-entry	Activity	Belonging activities	8.2	Y
5	Post-entry	Group	Disabled individuals (including mental health)	7.9	Y
6	Pre-entry	Group	Deprived areas	7.6	Y
7	Post-entry	Activity	Institutional policies to support student success	7.5	Y
8	Post-entry	Activity	Interventions which identify at risk students/targeting	7.5	Y
9	Pre-entry	Activity	Tutoring and skills development	7.4	Y
10	Post-entry	Group	Deprived areas	7.3	N
11	Post-entry	Activity	Interventions to build social interaction and learning communities	7.3	N
12	Post-entry	Activity	Contextual admissions	7.2	N
13	Pre-entry	Group	Disabled individuals (including mental health)	7.1	N
14	Pre-entry	Group	BAME learners	7	N
15	Post-entry	Activity	Institution-led interventions to build employability	7	N
16	Pre-entry	Activity	Admissions policy	6.9	N
17	Post-entry	Activity	Interventions to build skills	6.9	N
18	Post-entry	Activity	Mentoring, counselling and role model interventions	6.8	N
19	Pre-entry	Activity	Financial support (pre-entry)	6.7	N
20	Post-entry	Activity	Teaching and learning practice	6.5	N
21	Pre-entry	Activity	Information, advice and guidance (IAG)	6.2	N
22	Post-entry	Activity	Online learning courses/support	6.2	N