

Evidence submission: Skills 2030

Submission to Policy Connect and the Skills Commission: *'Skills 2030: A World-Class Skills System.'*

November 2023

Written evidence submitted by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education on 3 November 2023
Policy Connect and Skills Commission
Inquiry: Skills 2030: A World-Class Skills System

Who we are

- The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) aims to eliminate equality gaps in higher education.
- We are an independent hub for higher education professionals to access research, toolkits, and evaluation guidance.
- TASO is an affiliate What Works Centre, and part of the UK Government's What Works Movement. This means that TASO is committed to the generation, synthesis, and dissemination of high-quality evidence about effective practice in widening participation and student outcomes.

Submission Permissions

Kindly let us know whether we have your permission for the following:

1. Do you give permission for the report to quote your submission? **Yes**
2. May we attribute the submission to the organisation you belong to? **Yes**
3. May we attribute the submission to you personally, listing your job role? **Yes**

The evidence in this submission is drawn from key TASO reports:

- [What works to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability](#)
- [Addressing gaps in the participation of sandwich courses](#)
- [Supporting access and student success for mature learners](#)
- [Phase 1 report: The value of higher education](#)

Lifelong learning

Individuals must be able to adapt to changes in the economy and their personal lives by taking opportunities to skill, upskill and reskill across their life course. What policy changes could improve the uptake and success of education and training amongst learners over 30?

- The decline in mature student numbers and the small body of existing research relating to this student group suggests the post-2012 funding changes in England have made higher education less attractive for mature students.
- Where success has occurred, it appears to be happening more often in environments tailored to the unique needs of mature learners, like higher education access courses, further education partnerships, and institutions like the Open University and Birkbeck where flexible, remote, and night-time teaching is common.¹
- A key part of increasing higher education uptake for mature learners is to provide programmes that meet this group's needs. Positive approaches to supporting mature learners may include financial support, flexible scheduling and support for those with caring responsibilities.
- In terms of what works for widening participation for mature students in higher education, there is some limited evidence that transition programmes and information, advice and guidance interventions may help mature students navigate the less familiar world of higher education.²
- Transition programmes, pre-entry modules, and foundation years appear to be common tools for preparing mature learners for the academic expectations and practices of the higher education environment, as well as providing a path for mature learners without qualifications.³
- Transition interventions focus on helping mature students catch-up on certain academic skills they may have missed in time away from education. Evidence suggests these interventions appear positive for mature learners, especially when delivered in a flexible manner that helps balance study with other responsibilities.
- However, a lack of good evaluation of the attainment of mature learners once they have started their main programme of study in some of these studies makes it hard to understand the true impact. The main downside of this intervention type is that these programmes tend to be fairly resource-intensive to run.⁴
- TASO's focus is on higher education, but we recognise there are other ways of providing skills and knowledge, but that the evidence base for this is somewhat weaker for lower-income earners.

¹ Gongadze, S, Hume S and Styrnol M, [Literature Review: Supporting access and student success for mature learners](#), 2021, p.3

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid, p.7

Recommendations:

- A key part of increasing higher education uptake among mature learners is to provide programme offers that meet this group's needs. It is emphasised throughout the literature that the disconnect between these needs and the typical higher education programme can be a barrier to mature student recruitment and success.
- Positive approaches to supporting mature learners may include, not only financial support, but also other institutional changes like flexible scheduling and support for those with caring responsibilities. There could be more research into the impact of these benefits for mature students or how institutions can utilise them to recruit students.

A skills system that works for all learners

What forms of education and training post-16 are the most successful at promoting social mobility and reducing socio-economic inequality?

- There is strong evidence that disadvantaged young people who attend higher education have higher future earnings than disadvantaged young people who do not. For example, Anderson and Nelson (2021) find this average earnings difference is around £8,300 at 15 years after Key Stage 4.⁵
- However, there is also evidence that disadvantaged graduates earn less than non-disadvantaged graduates, with one paper estimating that this earnings gap is around 10%, even when controlling for other factors, such as the specific university attended.⁶
- Higher education graduates from low socioeconomic backgrounds appear to benefit from higher levels of measures linked to wellbeing, such as perceived financial prosperity.
- There is evidence that higher education can increase social and geographical mobility for disadvantaged young people. For example, Britton, Drayton & Van der Erve (2021) found that 22% of Free School Meal (FSM) graduates were in the top quintile of earners at age 30, compared to only 6% of FSM non-graduates, suggesting that attending university is associated with social mobility.⁷
- Evidence suggests that graduates who take part in a university course with some time in employment earn £6,000 more than average full-time students after graduation. However, disadvantaged students are less likely to take part in on-course industry work placements - known as 'sandwich courses' - due to low or unpaid work placements and inadequate financial support.⁸

⁵ Anderson, O. & Nelson, M. (2021) Post-16 education and labour market activities, pathways and outcomes (LEO). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-education-and-labour-market-activitiespathways-and-outcomes-leo>

⁶ Britton, J., Dearden, L., Shephard, N. & Vignoles, A. (2019) Is Improving Access to University Enough? Socio-Economic Gaps in the Earnings of English Graduates. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*. 81 (2), 328–368. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/obes.12261>.

⁷ Britton, J., Drayton, E. & Van der Erve, L. (2021) Which university degrees are best for intergenerational mobility? <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/whichuniversity-degrees-are-best-intergenerational-mobility>.

⁸ TASO, [Addressing gaps in the participation of sandwich courses](#), August 2023

- Our sister What Works Centre the Youth Futures Foundation has recently produced a [toolkit on youth employment](#) that outlines the evidence base outside the higher education context.

Recommendations:

- To address the remaining gaps which exist between more and less advantaged graduates, higher education providers must take a strategic approach to employability support, developing and evaluating programmes specifically designed for disadvantaged students.
- Pre-entry information, advice and guidance may help students enter courses which are a better match for their long-term earning potential based on prior attainment.
- Higher education providers could make more use of their institutional data and administrative datasets, such as the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset, to track students into the labour market and evaluate employment outcomes.
- Higher education providers should consider implementing specific support on student finances for learners intending to take part in a sandwich course. This relies on building strong relationships between providers and the professional sector to agree collective action to address barriers and challenges that disadvantaged students face.

How can we better support individuals who face barriers to progression – such as socio-economic disadvantage, regional inequalities, and mental health issues – to fulfil their potential and have a successful educational journey?

- Higher education and further education play a crucial role in ensuring that graduates fare well in the labour market. Yet existing evidence shows persistent equality gaps in employment outcomes and earning potential for students from widening participation backgrounds compared to their more advantaged peers.
- A 2022 [TASO report](#) looks at the measures education providers in the UK are currently taking to close employability gaps for disadvantaged students as well as success, challenges and delivery consideration for education providers when engaging in this work.⁹
- We conducted a consultation with 27 relevant leaders across further education and higher education – adopting a mixed-method approach, using surveys and focus groups.
- The respondents to our consultation were most likely to target careers and employment interventions at learners who are Black, Asian, minority ethnic (BAME), care leavers, socioeconomically disadvantaged or disabled.¹⁰
- Several providers flagged that the students they most want to reach are frequently the hardest to engage. Five providers reported a low uptake for programmes targeted at learners with caring responsibilities, mature students and disabled students because these individuals often had commitments outside education that made it difficult for them to participate in extracurricular activities generally.

⁹ Ramaiah B and Robinson, D, [What works to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability](#), 2023, p.45

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 47

- As summarised in Figure 1 below, internships and work experience, employability skills and information, advice and guidance were the most common interventions targeted at the disadvantaged groups highlighted.

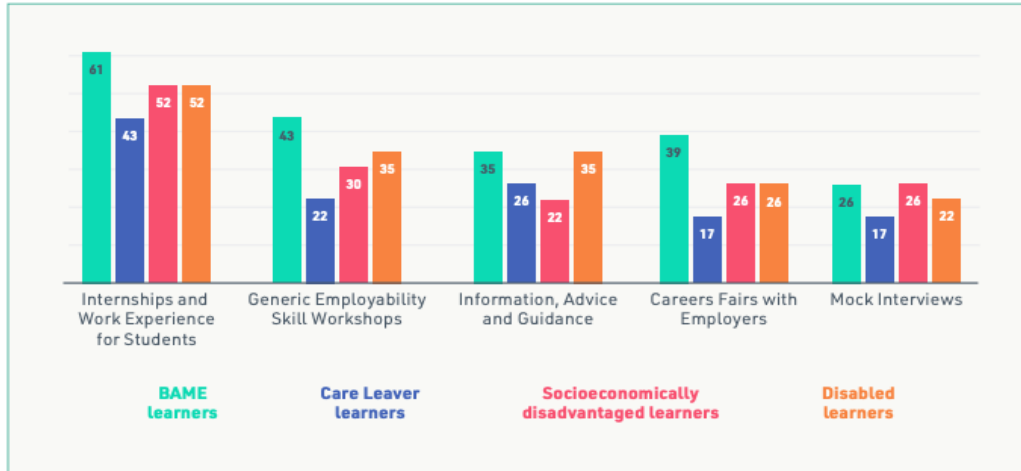


Figure 1: Interventions by percentage of consultees who offer them to certain disadvantaged groups

- Figure 2 below shows that consultees generally found internships and work experience to be the most impactful targeted interventions. They viewed mock interviews as another high-impact intervention but tended to feel that information, advice and guidance, employability skills training and careers fairs had less impact.

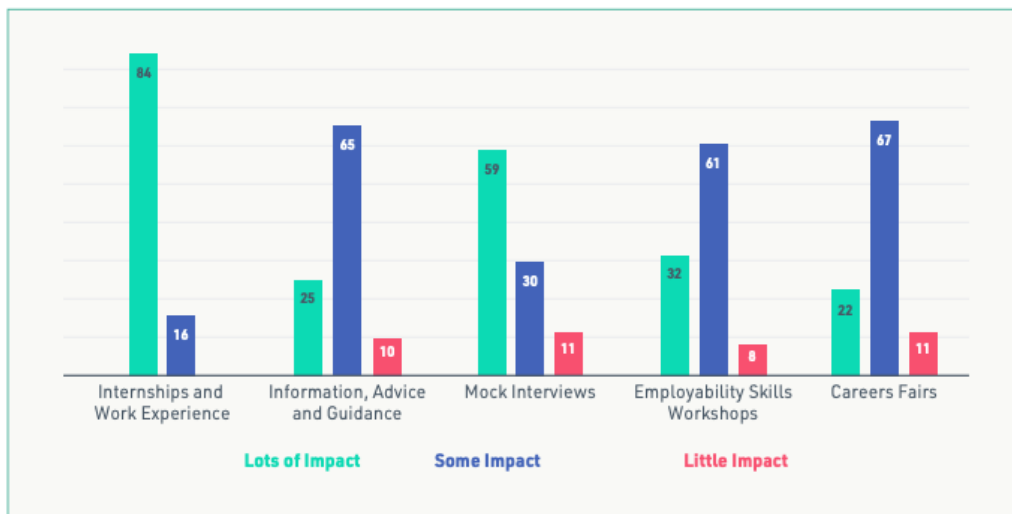


Figure 2: Targeted interventions by percentage of consultees reporting levels of impact

- Looking at the broader literature on the topic, the report finds strong evidence to support the impact of internships and sandwich courses - alternating between classroom instructions and industry placements - on students' employment outcomes. These outcomes include a higher

probability of being invited to interview, a higher salary and a lower likelihood of unemployment from at least six months after graduation.¹¹

- While there is little direct research on the positive impact of work experience on outcomes for disadvantaged students, there is emerging evidence in this direction. There is also research suggesting that disadvantaged students may face unique challenges during internships that need to be considered during the design and delivery of work experience programmes.
- Some evidence suggests that one-to-one and small group career counselling is effective at improving attributes related to employability, such as students' knowledge and readiness to navigate the job market.¹²
- Evidence also suggests that effective information, advice and guidance delivered by individuals from a similar background to recipients and aimed to provide personalised advice or support relating to key concerns can aid the progression of disadvantaged students into further study.
- Work simulations can help students accrue some of the benefits of work experience in a controlled environment and at a low cost. E-Portfolios also offer promise.¹³
- Evidence suggests that transitions support can be effective for enabling disability inclusion. More UK research is needed on this support. [TASO and Advance HE](#) are currently mapping the kinds of transition support and reasonable adjustments used in the higher education (HE) sector.

Recommendations:

- Higher education providers should develop and evaluate employment and careers programmes (work experience, information, advice and guidance, mock interviews and careers fairs) specifically targeted at reducing gaps in employment outcomes between students from widening participation backgrounds and their more advantaged peers.
- Higher education providers should develop and evaluate alumni or peer mentoring opportunities for disadvantaged and underrepresented students.

¹¹ Ibid, p.25

¹² Ibid, p.31

¹³ Ibid, p.35