



Evaluating the delivery of the OfS investment in the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO)

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prepared by Technopolis Ltd.

Introduction

The mid-term evaluation of the delivery of the Office for Students (OfS) investment in the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) focuses on TASO's delivery model, operations and activities, addressing the following evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and external coherence.

The evaluation method included primary and secondary data collection, including a benchmarking with three other What Works Centres (WWCs) in the UK: What Works Centre for Crime reduction (WWCCR), Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Youth Endowment Fund (YEF). This note provides an overview of the main findings of the mid-term evaluation, along with recommendations.

Alignment of TASO's proposed and initial activities with the existing practice in the sector (relevance)

Research and evaluation activities

- TASO's activities (past, ongoing and planned) are well aligned with its stated hierarchy of objectives and the Theory of Change developed for the evaluation. As TASO progresses it will, however, be important to revisit the Theory of Change to ensure its ongoing fitness for purpose.
- The evidence cycle adopted and followed by TASO is aligned with both the needs of the higher education sector and the general practice of other WWCs in the UK and beyond. It covers all the necessary steps to be taken in order to provide useful evidence for the sector and can, therefore, be commended.
- The priority themes selected by TASO for 2020 and those planned for 2021 are in line with the needs of the sector (with providers considering TASO's planned themes and activities very pertinent overall) and the OfS (in particular with OfS's priority around the promotion of the use of evidence in access and participation).
- The priority themes are, therefore, set to fill the evidence gap in access and participation. The themes have been chosen following consultation with the sector and focus on those areas where there is a good likelihood that interventions currently happen or may happen in the future. TASO has also reacted flexibly to the Covid-19 pandemic and has started working on the implications of online teaching and learning for access and participation.
- There is a range of activities through which TASO has been providing further support for its target audience in order to stimulate take up of evaluation evidence by the sector.
- TASO focuses strongly on high-quality evidence, which is in line with the practice across the WWCs, and follows the OfS Standards of Evidence.



Stakeholder engagement

- TASO has adopted an approach to stakeholder engagement as part of its communication strategy. The engagement has continued over the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit in a modified way.
- There are a number of ways in which stakeholders have been involved in the co-design of TASO activities (such as Thematic Working Groups, advisory groups etc.). There are some sets of stakeholders which are less represented in the co-design of activities, such as some of the academic research centres traditionally working around social mobility and widening participation, in the UK and beyond. This is not necessarily a point for concern as long as there is still a critical mass of providers willing to engage.
- TASO also has to speak to a multitude of other stakeholders including the public sector, higher education partnerships and research centres. Some of these stakeholder types are already involved as members of TASO's advisory bodies. TASO has also collaborated with a few of them on joint research projects.

TASO's resources and delivery model (effectiveness and efficiency)

Buy-in from the higher education sector and regulator

- There is a good level of optimism that TASO will secure the necessary buy-in from the higher education sector and providers. However, the evaluation has identified three major conditions for this:
 - TASO has to ensure it speaks to all types of providers in the sector, and that providers are able to engage with TASO and its activities and outputs, regardless of type, size, mission and location.
 - TASO has to be cautious about the way its position is perceived in the sector, between the regulator and the sector.
 - Caution is necessary in cases where TASO's evaluations highlight interventions which are not working. This will present a communication challenge for TASO in the future.
- TASO has secured a good level of recognition and commitment from the sector's regulator (OfS). The relationship between the OfS and TASO is established and working well. There is a variety of communication platforms and feedback-providing fora in place which help cement this relationship further. The relationship between the OfS and TASO will change as TASO progresses, diversifying its funding and operating as an independent charity. However, it is crucial, both for the OfS and TASO, to maintain close linkages in the future, whilst ensuring TASO's independence.

Human and financial resourcing

- Currently, the OfS is the sole funder of TASO, with plans to start introducing other funding sources, alongside the OfS grant, from 2021 onwards. Several scenarios on how additional funding can be raised are currently being discussed.
- In the establishment phase, TASO's staff was mainly composed of secondees from its delivery partners. With development of TASO progressing, recruitment is now underway, but is slightly delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. TASO has reacted flexibly and secured additional support from What Works Children and Social Care. TASO will also be able to



benefit from its location in the Evidence Quarter¹ where other WWCs have their headquarters.

Governance and operations

- The Covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected the schedule of TASO's activities. On the research side, activities have been postponed. The providers themselves face pressures, including financial ones. The risk for TASO is that engagement might become less of a priority for providers. However, TASO has shown flexibility in its approach by raising new research topics, such as the effects of blended learning. The Covid-19 pandemic could, therefore, be turned into an important opportunity, especially if TASO could identify and adopt new themes in access and participation that are emerging during the pandemic and are of relevance both to providers and the OfS.
- TASO has the necessary governance structures in place. The appointment of four trustees in the second half of 2020 to complement the four previously appointed means that the Trustees has now a good diversity of profiles and expertise among its members.
- TASO management, up until April 2020, was in a transition period towards the status of a fully independent charity. Now that this process has been completed, the roles and responsibility of the management will become more important, as will those of the members of the Board
- TASO has been successfully registered as an independent charity. The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment), known as TUPE, consultation process is ongoing, following which TASO's assets and staff will be transferred from King's College London to the newly established independent organisation.
- Although the influence of the OfS is expected to decline over time as TASO diversifies its sources of funding, the experience from other WWCs shows that it is important to ensure that the funder(s) is/are represented on governance bodies.
- TASO is implementing its communication strategy, which is comprehensive in its messages, activities and communication channels. The current performance of the communication activities allows for a good degree of optimism that TASO has been reaching the sector. There are, however, several communication challenges ahead: TASO's location in London, its alignment of communication with that of the OfS, limited awareness of TASO in some parts of the sector, a need to prioritise communication about policy over politics, and a need to demonstrate strong evidence early in order to establish reputation.

Alignment of TASO's monitoring and evaluation practices with other WWCs (external coherence)

- TASO is highly aligned with the other WWCs in terms of the way it chooses research themes and synthesises evidence. TASO is also well aligned in relation to its governance structures and benefits from a more extensive system for incorporating expert advice which should be commended. It is also well aligned in the way it uses standards of evidence.
- There are some areas where differences were noted. In terms of its main activities, TASO does not have the funds to pursue the same scale of evidence generation as EEF and YEF and is not yet at a stage where it is realistic for it to influence high-level standards and guidance (although this could be a focus in the future). TASO's challenges, in terms of needing to achieve a very carefully calibrated level of independence from its funder and

¹ The Evidence Quarter, located in Westminster, London, is home to nine WWCs.



also to become sustainable in a much shorter timeframe than the other WWCs, are caused by its particular context.

- There are four areas that we have identified where there are more significant differences between TASO and its comparators:
 - **Delivery partners.** Working with one main evaluator (currently, TASO has a contract with Behavioural Insights Team (BIT)) does not seem to be an established practice across the What Works Network. Although it may be an efficient way to operate, it means that TASO might be missing an opportunity to build relationships with a wider pool of delivery partners. It is important to note, however, that TASO anticipates assembling a panel of evaluators for future evaluations. In addition, the current contract between TASO and BIT allows TASO to contract a different evaluator on an ad-hoc basis.
 - **Research: mechanisms for producing new evidence.** TASO has a distinctive mechanism for calls for evidence and the thematic evidence cycles are also distinctive. TASO also has less elaborate mechanisms to select winning projects than WWCCR and EEF.
 - **Capacity building.** TASO provides modest capacity building at present, compared with WWCCR and EEF. TASO currently focuses on synthesis and evidence generation. However, going forward, capacity-building activity will become more important for TASO and there is good practice across the What Works Network, which TASO could use. Capacity building requires significant effort, so peer-to-peer training through networks could be one of the effective methods employed. There may be ways for TASO to further incorporate peer-to-peer type capacity-building approaches in its training activities, even if just in a modest way.
 - **Stakeholder engagement and communications.** The other WWCs make more use of content generated by its community, compared to TASO. The "Going Equipped" magazine produced by WWCCR, which features content generated by members of the police, is a good example.

Recommendations for the remainder of the OfS grant funding period

- **Recommendation 1:** TASO should have representatives from across the entire sector (which consists of providers of a variety of types, sizes and England locations). Currently, the different segments of the sector are represented in TASO's governance structures by King's College London and Nottingham Trent University. It will be important that there is a diversity of voices when TASO has become an independent charity and when the OfS grant has been complemented by other sources of funding. TASO should continuously monitor the diversity of providers that it engages with, for example via the work of TASO's advisory bodies and/or events organised for the sector.
- **Recommendation 2:** There is a need to maintain the fine balance between the roles of the regulator (OfS) and the evidence centre (TASO). Over time, there is a risk that TASO might start to be perceived by the sector as part of the regulator. This would harm TASO's reputation and the buy-in from the sector. Instead, TASO should be consistently clear in its activities and communication towards the sector and other stakeholders that it has been established to offer help and support to providers in their efforts to fulfil their regulatory obligations. This could be used as one of TASO's selling points.
- **Recommendation 3:** In order for TASO to establish its reputation, it may want to first focus on areas where "quicker wins" are possible. In this respect, the proactive approach TASO has taken during the Covid-19, by, for example, focusing on the effect of blended learning, is a step in the right direction. It is important in the short- to mid-term that it produces impactful

and useful evidence for the sector. This could resonate positively with the providers, the public sector and other stakeholders.

- **Recommendation 4:** It is also important for TASO to maintain its apolitical character. As one of the WWCs, TASO is linked to the civil service via the Cabinet Office. TASO is expected to engage in public debate, but participation should be underpinned by evidence, whilst maintaining a good degree of alignment with government priorities in access and participation. This is a challenging position to take, but TASO can follow the pathways of other WWCs that have found their way previously.
- **Recommendation 5:** In order to strengthen the academic profile of TASO's work and to contribute to buy-in from the sector, TASO could consider developing closer linkages with the leading academic research centres in social mobility, such as with Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit (WPREU, University of Sheffield), Centre for Social Mobility (University of Exeter) and East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership (EMWPREP, hosted by Loughborough University). Individuals from these centres are members of TASO's advisory bodies, however the full potential of these relationships remains to be explored, for example, via joint research projects. Furthermore, TASO should consider developing relationships with similar bodies outside the UK, for example in the USA, in order to get a richer international perspective.
- **Recommendation 6:** TASO could also consider publishing (in a magazine, online etc.) content generated by members of staff of higher education providers. This will perhaps be of a less academic nature than the recommendation above, however, it could also positively contribute to building stronger linkages with the sector.
- **Recommendation 7:** The TASO fundraising strategy is currently scheduled for presentation to the Board of Trustees in late 2021. If the strategy is approved by the Board by the end of 2021, this leaves 2022 to implement it. There is a certain risk of delays linked to this timeline, which could make the transition from the OfS grant to a more diversified funding base more difficult. TASO's plans to start diversifying its funding base in 2021 would benefit from having an approved strategy already in place. Furthermore, it would be beneficial for TASO to consult the sector more widely on the fundraising strategy, including providers, regulators, research councils etc.
- **Recommendation 8:** TASO plans to engage more closely with the other WWCs, either via its physical proximity in the Evidence Quarter or via planned joint research. In any case, keeping and/or initiating regular contact with other members of the What Works Network can provide invaluable learning and peer-to-peer capacity-building opportunities across a variety of TASO's operations, ranging from research to stakeholder engagement, governance and communication strategy.
- **Recommendation 9:** Key performance indicators (KPIs) are an important tool for monitoring performance, both for the OfS and for TASO. There is a set of approved KPIs for TASO, however the evaluator is not aware of any target values set for each KPI and/or values to be associated with milestones. It is recommended that the OfS, jointly with TASO, sets the target values for the various milestones, for example, annually, and at the end of the grant funding period, for each KPI. This could be complemented with arrangements on the monitoring of progress. Furthermore, the last KPI ("cumulative benefit of interventions") is particularly crucial, given that the remaining ones are focused mainly on outputs and some outcomes. In this respect it is recommended that TASO/OfS focus further on the development of this indicator, perhaps by linking it to the OfS participation performance measures.



- **Recommendation 10:** TASO has adopted a research programme and has processes in place in order to implement it. Given its size (TASO is a smaller-size WWC), there is a clear advantage of working with a smaller number of partners on pre-selected research topics. However, it is recommended that TASO provides more transparency around the criteria used for the selection of its research partners.
- **Recommendation 11:** There is a clear advantage in working with only one evaluator across more TASO research projects. Nevertheless, TASO might be missing an opportunity to build relationships with a wider pool of delivery partners if it continued to work with one contractor only. It is, therefore, recommended to go ahead with the planned establishment of a panel of evaluators and work with them on future evaluations.
- **Recommendation 12:** The research undertaken for this evaluation has shown that there are almost as many standards of evidence as there are WWCs. It would be beneficial for the strengthening of the cohesion of the What Works Network to initiate work towards a consolidation of the different standards of evidence, especially on identifying a core which would be common for all the standards. This could also have indirect positive effects on each WWC, including TASO. TASO could initiate a debate on this topic via its membership in the network.

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