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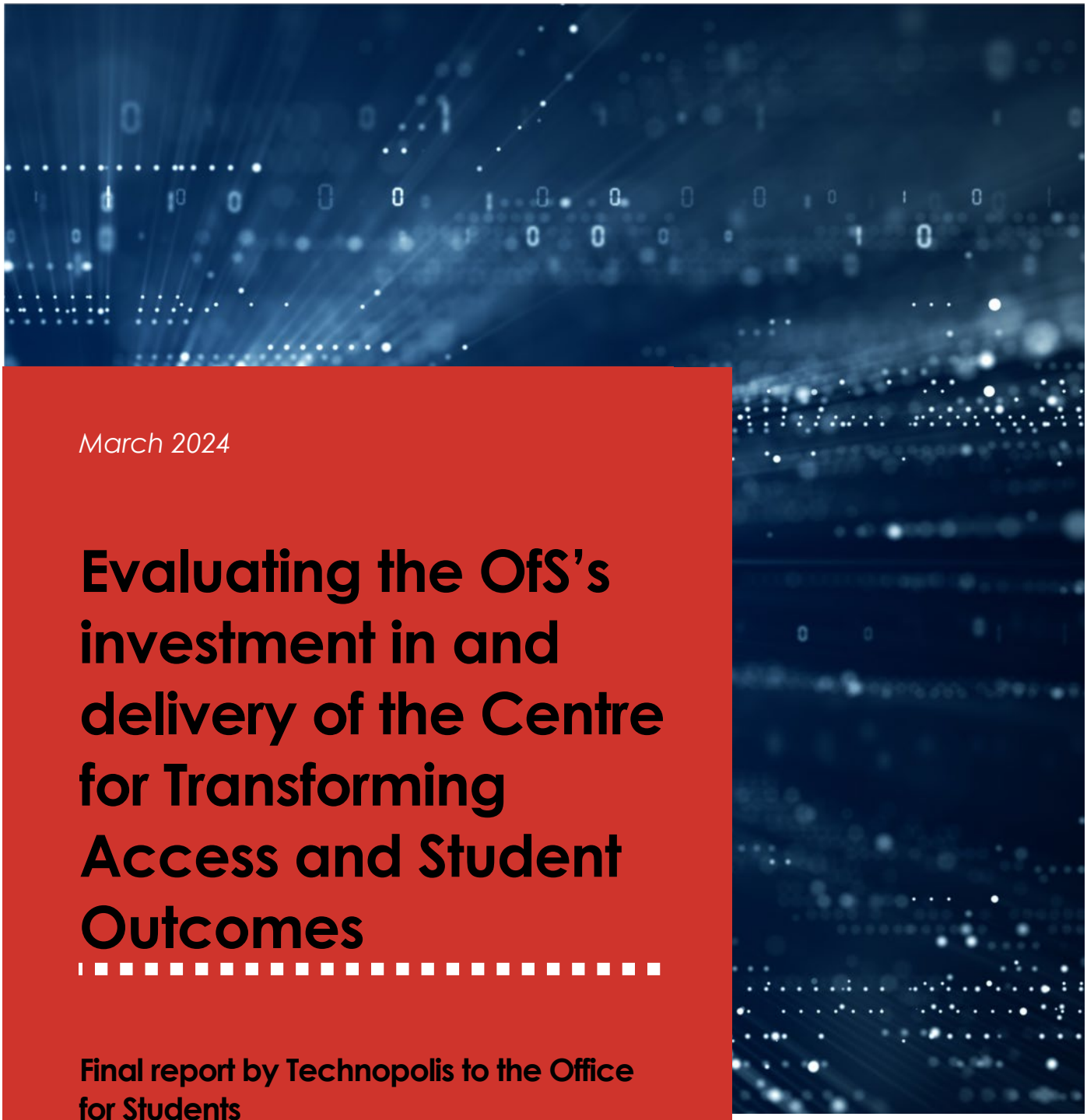

March 2024

Evaluating the OfS's investment in and delivery of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes

Final report by Technopolis to the Office for Students

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Final report by Technopolis to the Office for Students

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1 Glossary

APP	Access and participation plan
APPG	All-Party Parliamentary Group
BAME	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
BIT	Behavioural Insights Team
DfE	Department for Education
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EMWPREP	East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership
EORR	Equality of Opportunity Risk Register
EPPI	Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FEC	Further education college
HEAT	Higher Education Access Tracker
HE	Higher education
HEP	Higher education provider
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
ITT	Invitation to tender
KCL	King's College London
KPI	Key performance indicator
KPM	Key performance measure
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme (currently known as 'Uni Connect')
NEON	National Education Opportunities Network
NERUPI	Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Intervention
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NTU	Nottingham Trent University
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QED	Quasi-experimental design
RCT	Randomised controlled trial

TASO	Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
TEF	The Teaching Excellence Framework
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UUK	Universities UK
WP	Widening participation
WWC	What Works Centre
WWCCR	What Works Centre for Crime Reduction
YEF	Youth Endowment Fund

2 Executive summary

The evaluation of TASO

The Office for Students (OfS) commissioned Technopolis Ltd. to conduct an independent evaluation of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). The evaluation was carried out between October 2019 and March 2024.

TASO is an independent hub for higher education professionals to access research, toolkits and evaluation guidance to eliminate equality gaps within 20 years. TASO was originally set up by a partnership of King's College London, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT). Currently operating as an independent charitable organisation, TASO is an evidence centre and a member of the UK What Works Network. TASO is a core part of the OfS's strategy to improve equality of opportunity. Its role is to provide support and guidance to higher education providers to help them learn and adapt their practices.

TASO's research activities are concentrated into four themes:

- Theme 1: Effectiveness of Widening Participation Outreach
- Theme 2: Gaps in the Student Experience
- Theme 3: Employment and employability
- Theme 4: Mental health and disability

The evaluation was a mixed methods study, covering the period of the OfS's grant funding, from April 2018 up to October 2023. The performance assessment was linked to the Theory of Change for TASO. As part of the **baseline phase**, in the first half of 2020, the team undertook a literature and documentation review, an online survey of providers, and qualitative follow-up research.

As part of the **mid-term phase**, in the second half of 2020, a review of additional TASO documents was conducted. The evaluation team conducted bilateral interviews with TASO staff, with the representatives of NTU, BIT and the OfS. TASO was benchmarked with three selected What Works Centres: Education Endowment Foundation, the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction, and the Youth Endowment Fund.

In February 2021, an additional survey of higher education providers was launched. This mid-term survey built on the previous baseline survey and aimed at assessing any change within the higher education sector, such as increased use of evidence in access and participation activities and awareness of TASO and its activities.

The **impact phase** started in early 2023 with desk research and a systematic review of the outputs produced by TASO. This was complemented by a review of the latest relevant policy documents, reports and other publications in order to keep abreast of wider progress on access and participation and the regulatory situation with providers. In addition, a review of the developments within the What Works Network and the three comparator centres was performed.

The impact phase also included an evaluation visit to TASO, a survey of higher education providers, impact case studies, and interviews with the OfS, higher education providers and wider sector stakeholders.

Relevance of TASO for the higher education sector

The results of the evaluation show that TASO's activities have been, and continue to be, well aligned with its objectives. TASO's evidence cycle meets the needs of the higher education sector and is consistent with the approaches taken by other What Works Centres to evaluate and address gaps in the evidence base. TASO is providing a range of activities to support higher education providers in improving their use of evaluation and increasing the generation of evidence across the sector. While the pandemic limited TASO's ability to offer certain kinds of activities, the number and range of activities has steadily increased.

The co-design of activities, through for example TASO's thematic Working Groups and advisory groups, is in line with the practice of other What Works Centres. TASO has made progress in engaging with a wide range of stakeholders. However, there are still

opportunities to develop collaborations with, for example, research centres focusing on social mobility and widening participation, and other organisations focusing on the development and/or evaluation of widening participation activities (e.g., Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI), National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)).

The four priority themes TASO has selected are in line with the needs of the sector and are helping to focus TASO's approach to filling evidence gaps in access and participation.

Developing relationships across the higher education sector

While TASO is now well embedded within the higher education sector, its exact remit is not always clearly understood. The sector lacks clarity about whether TASO is a service provider for the sector, or whether it is an organisation predominantly conducting research.

TASO has developed long-term working and professional relationships with a range of important stakeholders, such as mission groups, service providers and the third sector (the charity sector).

The pro-active engagement of the higher education sector with TASO has been growing since TASO was established in 2019/2020. However, a lot of the engagement depends on the enthusiasm of individuals within providers, which raises some concerns about the extent to which the relationships between providers and TASO has been institutionalised. Furthermore, TASO appears not to be fully reaching out to all parts of the sector. There continues to be a relatively lower level of awareness of TASO in the further education sector, compared with universities. This is exacerbated by the lack of capacity within further education colleges to engage with evaluation.

Evidence-sharing across the sector remains limited, which can in turn discourage providers from contributing their own findings. As one of TASO's core functions is to collect and synthesise evidence on what works, there is a need for stronger support and clearer mechanisms to encourage and facilitate sharing among providers.

Producing high quality evidence

TASO has published research reports across all four of its priority themes. The majority of TASO's early outputs were evidence reviews, but the number of reports arising from TASO's research and evaluation projects has steadily increased. TASO has delivered a range of other activities, including producing evaluation guidance; adding to its Evaluation Toolkit; organising webinars, events and coherences; providing more bespoke support to providers.

Considerable progress has been made in reviewing the evidence on a range of themes and topics relating to widening participation and access. TASO has shared its findings through a combination of detailed reports and via shorter reviews in its Evidence Toolkit. The research and evaluation projects that TASO has commissioned seek to address gaps in evidence and address the needs of the sector. While these projects have so far made only a modest contribution to the evidence base, they have nevertheless enabled TASO to share information on methodologies and offer some preliminary insights.

TASO has made progress in relation to knowledge mobilisation. The outputs it has produced on Theories of Change, for example, have been well-received by providers. However, there is still a considerable need for more accessible, practical guidance to support widening participation practitioners and smaller providers, who often lack the capacity to engage with TASO's research outputs fully, alongside greater emphasis on demonstrating the value for money of widening participation interventions.

Securing the necessary resources and buy-in

TASO has secured the support and commitment of the OfS, and both organisations continue to have a close and productive working relationship. TASO has maintained a sufficient level of institutional buy-in for its activities to make it sustainable and has engaged the sector in the co-

creation of activities and collaborative projects. However, there are still some areas where TASO faces challenges, most notably in meeting the diverse needs of the higher education sector, clarifying its future relationship with the OfS, and addressing the difficulties that arise when evidence of positive impact is limited or inconclusive.

TASO has encountered some issues with staffing levels, which appear to have affected the smooth running of some research projects and, more recently, the progress made in evidence synthesis. However, increases in staffing (following resumption of recruitment activities since the end of the pandemic) are likely to address these problems, provided that TASO is realistic about staffing when designing projects and activities.

Impact of TASO on the higher education sector

The most visible impact of TASO has been on the evaluation culture within providers who have made investments into professionalising and growing their evaluation practices. TASO has significantly contributed to this professionalisation by providing guidance, templates, toolkits and platforms for sharing learning and experience among providers.

The OfS's increased regulatory expectations for evaluation have taken place in parallel with TASO's activities and has also contributed to this impact. TASO has been a critical resource helping providers to comply with the regulatory requirements of the OfS, and the OfS has been steering providers to use TASO's outputs.

Since its inception, TASO has been continuously advocating for the use of higher quality and more robust evidence in the higher education sector. There has been a (self-reported) significant increase in the frequency of the use of evidence in access and participation in the past three years across the sector. The sector continues to use mostly Type 1 Narrative and Type 2 Empirical Enquiry evidence. There is strong scepticism in the sector about using Type 3 Causality evidence and associated randomised controlled trials (RCTs). The main reasons include practicality and logistics around implementation, costliness and ethical concerns.

There are two main ways in which providers engage with TASO's projects and outputs: As an audience for the outputs, reports and participants in TASO's events, and as participants in TASO's research projects. The latter option is not accessible to all providers, for example it often requires submission of a competitive proposal.

The Theory of Change and Evaluation Toolkits are seen as very practical resources, widely known across the sector, and with a growing number of users. TASO research and evaluation reports are widely regarded for their high quality and are regularly accessed online by many providers. However, some of the reports do not include recommendations for providers on possible improvements in the methodology, instead concluding that further research is necessary. Overall, TASO reports tend to be targeted at a more academic audience, making them less comprehensible for – and useable by – many practitioners.

Contributing to strategic objectives and policymaking of the OfS

TASO remains aligned, and contributes to, the realisation of the OfS's broad strategic objectives relating to equality of opportunity. It is likely that use of good evidence will become more important as policymakers look for more value for money and impact.

Efficiency of TASO's delivery model

Changes made to the structure, since TASO became an independent charity in April 2022, are appropriate and appear to be functioning well. TASO submits regular written reports to the OfS regarding activities related to the grant. The number of trustees has increased to ten and there is a range of experience among the board members.

TASO's management team has assumed greater levels of responsibility and control, following the spin-out from KCL. Under its leadership, TASO has developed its own processes and ways of operating in line with its strategic goals.

TASO continues to undertake a wide range of communication activities, using a variety of channels. While overall awareness of TASO has increased since the mid-term report in November 2020, several communication challenges remain, including limited visibility in parts of the sector and a lack of clarity around the mechanisms for disseminating and mobilising evidence.

Sustainability

TASO has established strong relationships within the What Works Network and has become a 'go-to' organisation for higher education providers. Sustainability continues to be a live issue for TASO and will remain so for the future. Without long-term funding it will continue to need to devote attention to the diversification of funding streams.

Considering sustainability in terms of how evidence is used and how behaviours change offers a positive outlook on the sector's approach to access and participation.

TASO and the What Works Network

The Evaluation Task Force's new strategy for the What Works Network may be beneficial to TASO. Increased support for collaboration with other What Works Centres and greater recognition of funding issues would help TASO to address some of the challenges it faces. However, there are risks related to the Task Force's proposals for increased monitoring of performance and progress of newer, affiliate centres, which TASO needs to be mindful of.

TASO demonstrates good levels of alignment with the comparator What Works Centres included in this study, especially in the areas of research themes selection, evidence synthesis, governance, standards of evidence and delivery partners. The creation of a Panel of Evaluators has brought its delivery model more in line with the other centres.

However, there remains a lack of alignment between TASO and the comparator centres in certain areas. These differences are often related to TASO's current funding model but also relate to knowledge mobilisation, capacity building and the use of peer-to-peer networks and communications.

TASO is still building its relationships with members of the What Works Network. While it has worked successfully with What Works Wellbeing on the Student Mental Health project, and has made some progress in discussing future collaborations, there is potential to make further progress in this area.

Recommendations

Recommendations were formulated for the OfS, TASO and higher education providers.

The OfS should clarify TASO's mission to the higher education sector; remain a strong promoter of TASO; continue to maintain close cooperation with TASO; and consider providing funding to TASO after the current grant has come to its end.

TASO should consider producing more evaluations focusing on value-for-money assessments. Additionally, it could deprioritise its focus on RCTs and put more emphasis on robust qualitative evidence. Furthermore, TASO should consider putting more emphasis on the practicability of its reports; taking the results of its research further towards application of its research findings; and continue making all efforts to reach out to all parts of the higher education sector, particularly to smaller providers and further education colleges.

Higher education providers should continue to engage with TASO and continue to use TASO's outputs; consider creating more opportunities for their own widening participation practitioners, evaluation specialists in access and participation on the one side, and their own academics in the area of social mobility on the other side, to work together; and share more evaluation evidence across the sector on what works and what does not work in access and participation.

The findings in this report relate specifically to the evaluation period (October 2019 to March 2024), and it should be noted that internal developments have taken place at TASO since then, including changes in ways of working.

3 Introduction

This evaluation report represents the final deliverable of the study on 'Evaluating the OfS's investment in and delivery of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO)'. The study was commissioned by the Office for Students (OfS), and undertaken by Technopolis Ltd.

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO)[1] is an independent hub for higher education professionals to access research, toolkits and evaluation guidance to eliminate equality gaps within 20 years. Originally set up by a partnership of King's College London (KCL), Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), TASO is an evidence centre and a member of the UK What Works Network. Currently, TASO operates as an independent charitable organisation. TASO is a crucial part of the OfS's strategy to improve equality of opportunity[2] and part of its approach is to signal the importance of evidence-informed approaches and interventions. Its role is to provide support and guidance to higher education providers to help them learn and adapt their practices. TASO was established in response to the 2016 Social Mobility Advisory Group final report[3] which found that 'there is currently no vehicle for individual institutions to share the outcomes of evaluations of activities or to share any kind of good practice or to grow shared knowledge in the sector.' The report recommended the establishment of an independent body to systematically evaluate and promote the use of high-quality evidence, following the model of the What Works Network.[4] This recommendation was taken forward into the government's Social Mobility Action Plan 2017, and subsequently into the 2018 business plan of the newly established OfS, leading to the creation of TASO in spring 2019.

TASO's research activities are concentrated into four themes:

- Theme 1: Effectiveness of Widening Participation Outreach
- Theme 2: Gaps in the Student Experience
- Theme 3: What works for employment and employability (previously titled 'Employment outcomes')
- Theme 4: What works for mental health and disability

Each theme follows an evidence cycle of Phases 1–3. In Phase 1, gaps are identified through a synthesis of current evidence which is systematically collated and considered. Phase 2 is the generation phase where original research is commissioned/conducted in-house to fill gaps in current knowledge base. Phase 3 is the review and dissemination phase. A Theme Working Group, including representatives of the higher education sector, has been established for each theme.

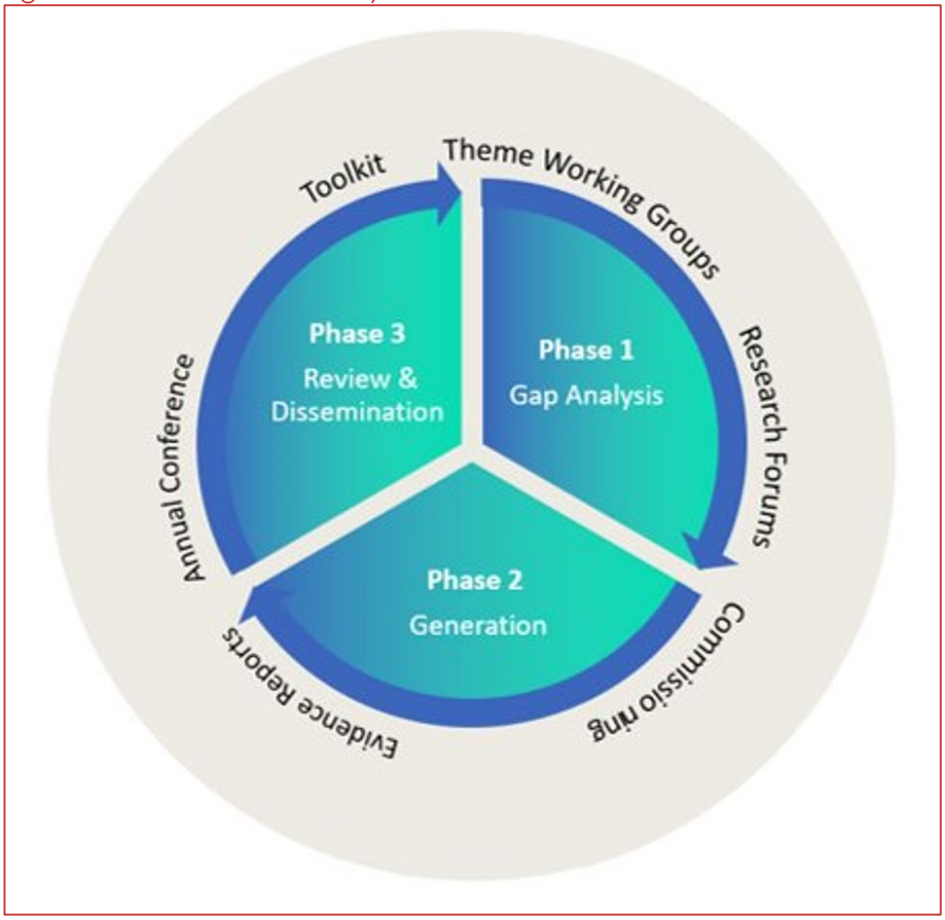
[1] The official website available at: https://taso.org.uk/.

[2] Office for Students: 'Our approach to equality of opportunity', available online at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/our-approach-to-equality-of-opportunity/.

[3] Available online at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/working-in-partnership-final.pdf

[4] The official website is available online at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network.

Figure 1 – TASO's evidence cycle



Source: TASO

The main aim of this report is to review and synthesise the available evidence against a set of evaluation questions. The report also provides a set of recommendations to the OfS, TASO and higher education providers.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 3 is this introduction
- Section 4 details the design and conduct of the evaluation
- Section 0 includes the findings around the evaluation questions
- Section 6 presents the recommendations.

There are annexes to this report:

- Annex A: Survey analysis (published as a separate file)
- Annex B: Impact case studies (supplied to the OfS, but not published).

3.1 Purpose of this evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation was to:

- Understand how effectively the OfS investment in TASO has delivered against its objectives over the course of the OfS grant funding
- Understand how effectively TASO has achieved its outcomes as identified by the OfS and TASO

- Determine the impact of the OfS investment in TASO in terms of its identified aims and outcomes
- Understand TASO's role in contributing to realisation of the OfS's broad strategic objectives relating to access and participation, evidence and evaluation, and effective practice
- Align TASO's evaluation methodology with approaches taken by other What Works Centres
- Engage with other What Works Centres to ensure that approaches to impact evaluation align. This could include exploring approaches to determining the impact of these centres for improving policy and practice.

3.2 Scope of the evaluation

The original scope of the study covered the activities of TASO from April 2018 up to the end of the original OfS's grant funding period (March 2021) (this was extended by one year, within the same budgetary envelope). However, TASO has since then received an additional grant from the OfS, covering the 2023/2024 period. The evaluation, therefore, also covers this additional grant (until the third quarter of 2023).

4 Design and conduct of the evaluation

4.1 Design of the evaluation

The evaluation was designed in line with the invitation to tender. The performance assessment was linked to the Theory of Change for TASO (Figure 2). The evaluation questions addressed under this assignment are presented in the table below (Table 1).

To address the evaluation questions, we took a pragmatic, mixed methods approach, making use of evidence from both primary and secondary (qualitative and quantitative) sources to arrive at robust and transparent evaluation findings.

We combined a participatory approach with a theory-based method. This means that we based our evaluation on the TASO's Theory of Change. The Theory of Change, refined during the evaluation, together with TASO teams, also provided the basis for identifying relevant evidence and defining some of the evaluation indicators. For this evaluation, we sought engagement of a wide range of stakeholders. Successful stakeholder engagement and communication were crucial to a successful delivery on the objectives of this evaluation, and stakeholder engagement represented a major emphasis throughout our methodology. A variety of stakeholders were engaged at various parts of this evaluation via surveys, interviews, benchmarking and case studies. Consultations were conducted with an attitude that was open-minded and left room to explore emerging topics of importance to the stakeholders.

The evaluation was delivered in several phases:

- The inception report was submitted in January 2020
- The baseline report was submitted in August 2020
- The mid-term report was submitted in September 2020
- The mid-term survey report was submitted in August 2021.

Table 1 – Evaluation questions

	Evaluation questions	Sub-questions
	Relevance	
1	What has been the alignment of TASO's proposed and initial activities with the existing needs in the sector?	Are the proposed activities of TASO aligned with the objectives of TASO? Are there other choices which could have been considered (in terms of type and content of activities)?
		To what extent has TASO involved its stakeholders (practitioners, evaluators, academics, senior stakeholders, regulating bodies, sector stakeholders, including across Theme Working Groups and other What Works Centres) in co-design of its activities?
		To what extent have the Standards of Evidence been aligned with the work of the OfS?
	Effectiveness	
2	Has TASO produced outputs (in terms of case studies, reports, training events, online toolkits, grants, awards and prizes and organisation of the Annual Evidence Forum) in line with its plans and expectations?	
3	How effective has TASO been in establishing a robust collaboration with a wide range of higher education providers to collate evidence across the sector?	To what extent has TASO been effective in establishing partnerships with selected high-quality higher education providers? (those with whom they will do research)
		To what extent have the stakeholders acknowledged TASO as a salient channel of useful information?
		To what extent has TASO established itself as an authoritative voice for research on access, student success and progression in higher education?
4	Has TASO been effective in developing rigorous, independent and high-quality evidence from across the UK and internationally?	To what extent has TASO succeeded in identifying gaps in evidence?
		To what extent has TASO been effective in promoting Standards of Evidence?
		To what extent has TASO used research from the national and the international environment in order to fill the gaps in evidence?
5	To what extent has TASO secured the necessary resources?	To what extent has TASO secured institutional buy-in for its activities?
		Have the regulating bodies publicly committed to recognition of TASO's activities and outputs?
		Have the staff teams of TASO been fully established?
	Impact	
6	What has been the impact of TASO on higher education providers in terms of their motivation, capability, skills and opportunity to use evidence?	To what extent has evidence been embedded in business as usual? What are the barriers related to this? (utility)
		What has been the knowledge gained by higher education providers through TASO via training and case studies?
		To what extent has the evidence produced been used in influencing institutional plans/roadmaps of activities of higher education providers?

	Evaluation questions	Sub-questions
		Has there been any increase of awareness of opportunities to use evidence across the sector as a result of TASO's activities?
		Have there been any financial benefits for institutional budget holders as a result of TASO's activities (efficiency gains)?
		To what extent has TASO facilitated the reporting on access and participation plan requirements and on their impact reports/monitoring returns?
		What has been the impact of TASO on students (access, success and progression)?
7	What has been the impact of TASO on the other sector stakeholders (such as other organisations that produce research and analysis of relevance to access, student success and progression in higher education) and regulators?	
8	How has TASO contributed to realisation of the OfS's broad strategic objectives and key performance measures (relating to access and participation, evidence and evaluation, effective practice and student engagement)?	
9	What has been the impact of TASO on policymaking in terms of interventions and initiatives to support access, student success and progression using high-quality evidence?	
	Efficiency	
10	How efficient has TASO's delivery model been?	To what extent have TASO's governance structures and internal processes, including monitoring and involvement of sector stakeholders, been conducive to achieving the desired effects of TASO activities?
		To what extent have TASO's dissemination channels contributed to achieving the desired effect of TASO activities?
	Sustainability	
11	To what extent is sustainability of TASO's impact ensured and what are conditions for that?	Is continued effort necessary to sustain the achieved effects of TASO?
		To what extent is the established collaboration and sector engagement in capacity building sustainable?
		Has TASO secured sustainable funding?
	External coherence	
12	How can the degree of alignment of practices on evidence and evaluation generation, translation and dissemination of TASO with the rest of What Works Centres be improved?	What are the practices on evidence and evaluation generation, translation and dissemination across the other What Works Centres?
		What elements of practices on evidence and evaluation generation, translation and dissemination of the other What Works Centres could be applied to TASO?
		What has been the current degree of alignment?
		To what degree do the other What Works Centres robustly provide evidence which can be cross-analysed?

The 2020 mid-term evaluation report covered four evaluation questions focusing on TASO's delivery model, operations and activities (see Table 2). These four evaluation questions are still part of the final report. However, given that these evaluation questions were answered as part of the mid-term report, a decision has been made to provide an update of the completed analysis and synthesis, rather than conduct an analysis and synthesis again.

Table 2 – Evaluation questions for mid-term stage

	Evaluation questions	Sub-questions
	Relevance	
1	What has been the alignment of TASO's proposed and initial activities with the existing practice in the sector?	Are the proposed activities of TASO coherent with the objectives of TASO? Are there other choices which could have been considered (in terms of type and content of activities)?
		To what extent has TASO involved its stakeholders (practitioners, evaluators, academics, senior stakeholders, regulating bodies, sector stakeholders, including across Theme Working Groups and other What Works Centres) in co-design of its activities?
		To what extent have the Standards of Evidence been aligned with the work of the OfS?
	Effectiveness and efficiency	
5	To what extent has TASO secured the necessary resources?	To what extent has TASO secured institutional buy-in for its activities?
		Has the TASO secured sustainable funding?
		Have the regulating bodies publicly committed to recognition of TASO's activities and outputs?
		Have the staff teams of TASO been fully established?
10	How efficient is the TASO's delivery model?	To what extent are the TASO's governance structures and internal processes, including monitoring and involvement of sector stakeholders, conducive to achieving the desired effects of TASO activities?
		To what extent are TASO's dissemination channels contributing to achieving the desired effect of TASO's activities?
	External coherence	
12	How can the degree of alignment of monitoring and evaluation practices of TASO with the rest of What Works Centres be improved?	What are the practices in evidence and evaluation generation, translation and dissemination across the other What Works Centres?
		What elements of practices on evidence and evaluation generation, translation and dissemination of the other What Works Centres could be applied to TASO?
		What has been the current degree of alignment?
		To what degree do the other What Works Centres robustly provide evidence which can be cross analysed?

4.2 Conduct of the evaluation

The study was conducted between October 2019 and December 2023 across the following phases:

4.2.1 Inception phase

The initiation meeting took place on 23 October 2019 between the OfS and Technopolis. Immediately after the initiation meeting, Technopolis started working on the tasks that are part of the inception phase of the study. In addition to the review of the relevant documentation and the initial interviews, Technopolis undertook the following tasks during the inception phase:

- Review of TASO's Theory of Change
- Review of the evaluation questions and finalisation of the evaluation matrix
- Finalisation of the baseline indicators
- Finalisation of the benchmarking indicators
- Drafting of the baseline survey with higher education providers
- Devising a strategy for interviews with various stakeholders, including drafting of the topic guides/finalisation of the main lines of enquiry.

The inception report was submitted in January 2020.

4.2.2 Baseline phase

As part of the baseline phase, in the first half of 2020, the team undertook a literature and documentation review, an online survey of providers, and qualitative follow-up research. In addition, Technopolis organised an hour-long online session focusing on TASO's Theory of Change.

The baseline report was submitted in August 2020.

4.2.3 Mid-term phase

As part of the mid-term phase, in the second half of 2020, a review of additional TASO documents was conducted. This built on the documents reviewed during the inception and baseline phases. The mid-term evaluation phase provided an opportunity for the evaluation team and TASO staff to engage more closely with each other. The members of the evaluation team conducted bilateral interviews with TASO staff. In total, five online interviews were conducted.

The evaluation team conducted interviews with the representatives of Nottingham Trent University (NTU), the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and the OfS, in order to complement the interview programme with TASO.

As part of the mid-term phase, we performed a benchmarking of TASO with a selection of other What Works Centres. Data was collected to benchmark TASO with the three selected What Works Centres: Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WWCCR) and the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF). This involved desk research and populating a template developed by the evaluation team for this exercise.

The mid-term report was submitted in November 2020.

4.2.4 *Mid-term survey*

In February 2021 Technopolis was commissioned by the OfS to design, run and analyse an additional survey of higher education providers in England. This mid-term survey built on the previous baseline survey launched in spring 2020, and the results were presented in August 2020 as part of the baseline report. The aim of the mid-term survey was to compare the baseline survey results with the mid-term survey results, to assess any change within the higher education sector, such as increased use of evidence in access and participation activities and awareness of TASO and its activities.

4.2.5 *Impact phase*

Desk research

The impact phase of the evaluation started with desk research. First, we systematically updated our overview of the outputs produced by TASO (in relation to its research themes and beyond) and assessed whether they were in line with those planned and expected by both OfS and TASO itself. We built on the information collected during the previous phases of the evaluation. In our output review, we undertook a composition analysis, looking at the types of activities, how many various activities have been implemented and how many outputs of a certain type have been produced to date, what dissemination channels have been used and what results have occurred to date.

We reviewed the latest TASO documentation to better understand the development within TASO as an organisation and any changes to its structure, teams, management, funding, communications etc. In addition to the review of TASO outputs, we reviewed the latest relevant policy documents, reports and other publications in order to keep abreast of wider progress on access and participation and the regulatory situation with providers.

We also performed another scan of both the What Works Network and the three comparator centres considered in the benchmarking exercise in the mid-term evaluation report.

Visit to TASO

The visit to TASO, organised in March 2023, provided an opportunity for Technopolis and TASO to meet face to face and to collect valuable evidence for the impact phase of the evaluation of TASO. The visit was structured into a series of individual/group interviews with various TASO teams. Interviews had a semi-structured format. Based on the TASO team structure, we organised several interviews with various TASO team members, including the CEO, Director of Operations, and senior research managers. A few online follow-up interviews were conducted later in March/April 2023, including with the Director of Research and communications manager.

Survey of higher education providers

A survey capturing evidence on the impact of TASO on higher education providers was one of the crucial components in data collection for the impact assessment. This was a third round of the survey of providers (after the baseline survey in 2020 and mid-term survey in 2021). We followed a very similar approach to implementation in this round. The survey was launched on an online platform (managed by Technopolis). The OfS provided details of contact persons within higher education providers to Technopolis, which were used for personalised invitations to the survey. The survey was open between mid-March 2023 and mid-May 2023.

In order to allow for cross-comparison between the baseline, mid-term and impact surveys (and to gather evidence on 'distance travelled' by providers in their progress in access and participation), we kept as many survey questions unchanged as possible. Nevertheless, this was a survey aimed at measuring impact (i.e. part of a summative evaluation). Therefore, we have made necessary adaptations relating to the following areas:

- Impact of TASO on providers (specific questions were added in order to collect evidence on which TASO outputs were used by higher education providers, with linkages to TASO research themes)
- Views of higher education providers on sustainability of observed effects
- Retrospective assessment of TASO activities with which providers have engaged

The analysis was based on descriptive statistics incorporating all the results collected through the survey by the cut-off date. The structure of the survey analysis followed the structure of the two previous surveys. The full survey results are attached to this report.

Impact case studies

Another main component of our methodology was a series of ten case studies of specific impacts achieved through use of the outputs produced by TASO. The case studies were undertaken at the level of higher education providers. Each of the ten case studies was conducted by means of desk research and additional interviews.

To frame this task, a methodological file (case study protocol) was developed, outlining the work requirements and describing the main procedures, including:

- An overview of the case study describing the aims and objectives of the case, the work plan and timetable for case study research and the resources allocated, case study team structures established
- Data collection methods and procedures, including an overview of the main data collection proposed in this study with further guidance e.g. initial contacts, draft email text with request for participation in the study, authorisation letter (signed by the OfS)
- Data collection tools with draft interview guides for the case studies
- Instructions regarding the case study write-up, with a case study template that provided guidance on length, outline, format and presentation style

Each case study was presented in a similar format. The case studies were supplied to OfS, but were not published.

Interviews with the OfS, providers and wider sector stakeholders

We interviewed representatives of the OfS, selected higher education providers, and other sector stakeholders to seek evidence on TASO's progress and impact from their perspective by means of online/telephone interviews (approximately ten in total). We aimed to speak with the same individuals as during the baseline.

Analysis and final report drafting

In this task, we summarised in a clear and user-friendly way all the work, findings and recommendations within the evaluation. We conducted the final analysis of the information gathered and formulated findings for all evaluation questions. We formulated associated conclusions and recommendations.

5 Findings

This chapter provides the findings and conclusions, which take the form of discussions around, and answers to, each of the evaluation questions. If there were particular differences observed between the various groups of stakeholders and/or data sources, these are mentioned in the discussion for each of the evaluation questions.

The findings in this report relate specifically to the evaluation period (October 2019 to March 2024), and it should be noted that internal developments have taken place at TASO since then, including changes in ways of working.

Relevance

5.1 Evaluation question 1: What has been the alignment of TASO's proposed and initial activities with the existing needs in the sector?

This evaluation question looks at the extent to which TASO is relevant to the higher education sector and is meeting the needs of stakeholders. To answer this question, we have focused on the following areas:

- Alignment of TASO's activities with
  - Its objectives
  - The needs in the higher education sector
- Stakeholder engagement and involvement of stakeholders in co-design of TASO's activities
- Alignment of the Standards of Evidence with the work of the OfS

5.1.1 Alignment of TASO's activities with its objectives

TASO's objectives and activities, and their alignment with the needs of the sector, were discussed in detail in the mid-term report (November 2020). Consequently, this section of the final report provides a more concise overview of these areas and focuses primarily on providing updates on TASO's engagement with the sector and stakeholders during the past three years. There are also updates on areas identified in the mid-term report where further evidence was needed to draw stronger conclusions about TASO's progress.

TASO's activities (past, present and future) continue to be suitably aligned with its hierarchy of objectives. The objectives of TASO (Table 3) also map well to the Theory of Change (Figure 2).

Table 3 – TASO's objectives

TASO's objectives
Strategic objectives
Broader policy landscape: More support provided for systems and policies which are designed to address inequality in HE – and this support to be focused on the most effective approaches
Within HEPs: HE activities, systems and policies are more impactful because they are informed by evidence and evaluation
Interim objectives
HEPs can easily access the existing evidence
More/better impact evaluation skills in HEPs
More/better critical evidence consumption skills in HEPs

TASO's objectives
Culture of evidence-informed practice within HEPs
Senior support evidence-informed practice in HEPs
Sustained policy support for reducing inequality in HE
Evidence is used and understood by policymakers and senior HE leaders
WP/student success practitioners and HE administrators use evidence to inform the choice and design of activities, systems and policies at their institution
Robust impact evaluation adopted by HEPs to understand effect of activities, systems and policies on inequality in HE

Source: TASO; presentation by Technopolis

TASO's two strategic objectives focus on achieving a system-level impact, by supporting policies and practices to combat inequalities in HE, and having an impact on higher education providers' (HEPs') activities, systems and policies through the development of skills and practice around the use of evidence and evaluation.

A set of nine interim objectives underpin the two strategic objectives, which align well with the outcomes in TASO's Theory of Change.[5]

At present, the Theory of Change covers all main ongoing and planned activities and outputs of TASO. Throughout the evaluation process, we have revisited the Theory of Change and tested its fitness for purpose. In future, TASO will need to continue to review and, if relevant, further adapt the Theory of Change to ensure it remains relevant to its activities and objectives.

Four assumptions were presented alongside the Theory of Change:

- Providers commit to a culture of evidence to support their work to eliminate inequalities in higher education
- TASO continues to be a priority for the OfS
- Providers use evidence to understand local and national inequalities and to inform the design of impactful programmes
- Providers use evaluation to understand impact, improve practice and share high-quality evidence.

Based on the evidence gathered throughout the evaluation, these assumptions are generally realistic.[6] The impact survey (conducted in March – June 2023) shows that HEPs have maintained or increased their focus on embedding evidence in their practices and investing in understanding evidence.

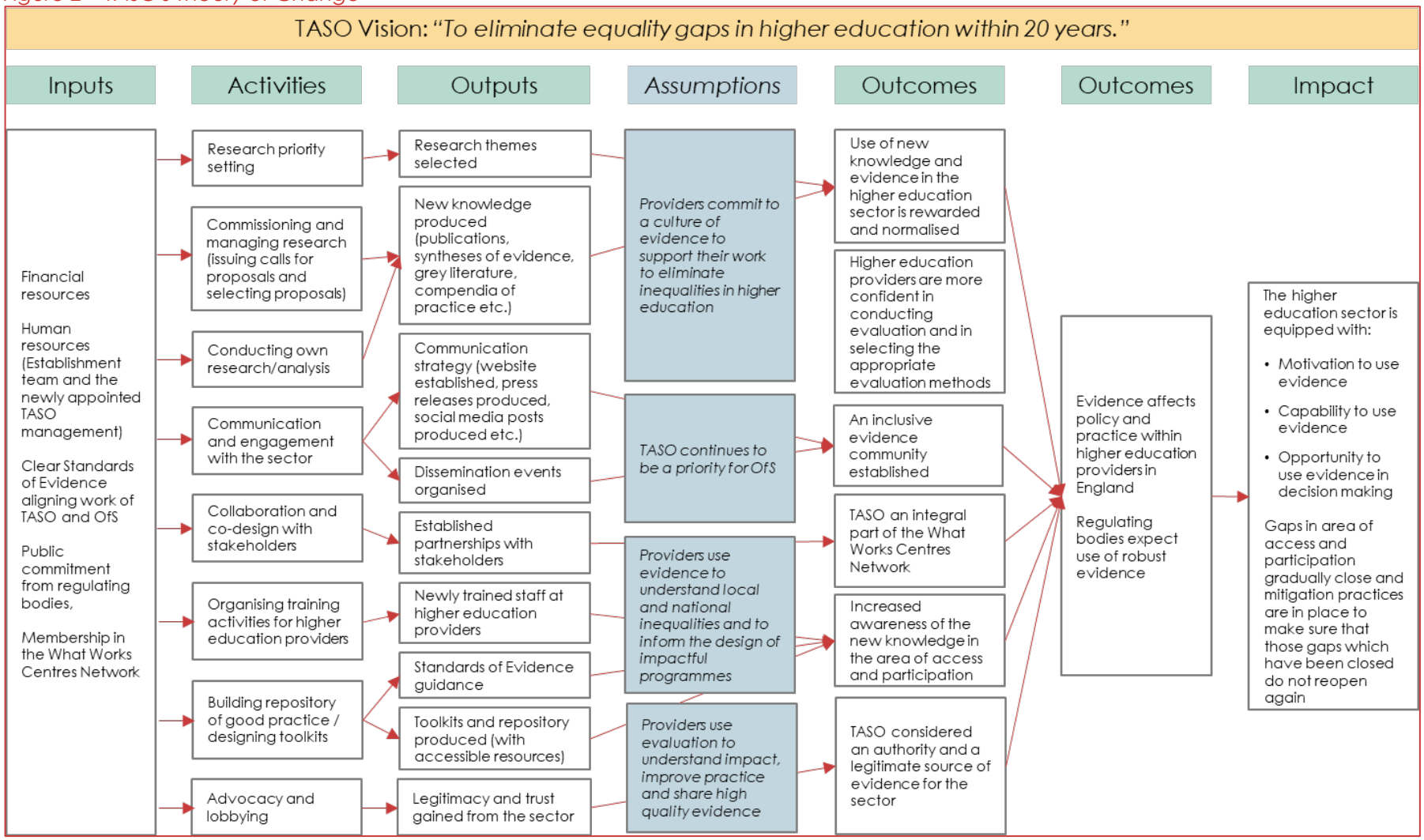
- In the 2023 impact survey (n=85), over three-quarters of respondents (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that 'Use of evidence is embedded in our business as usual', which is the same proportion of respondents as in the baseline survey (April/May 2020)

[5] The Theory of Change was developed collaboratively by the evaluator, the OfS and TASO. It was originally presented in the evaluation inception report (January 2020) and refined after a workshop with the relevant parties in June 2020.

[6] In the mid-term report (November 2020), it was still too early to fully test the assumptions underpinning the Theory of Change.

- There has been a small increase (from 83% in 2020 to 87% in 2023) in the percentage of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that their provider invests time and resource in understanding evidence in their context.

Figure 2 – TASO's Theory of Change



Source: Technopolis

While interviews and other qualitative research conducted during the impact stage suggest that the extent to which HEPs are using evidence and how they are gathering and mobilising evidence varies, we are nonetheless confident that the majority of HE providers remain open to and, in many cases, are committed to the use of evidence and evaluation.

The OfS, as discussed in more detail in Section 5.5.1, continues to see TASO as performing an important role within the sector. In fact, an increased emphasis on evaluation in access and participation plans (APPs) means that TASO's activities and outputs are of greater relevance to the OfS's work.

5.1.2 Alignment of TASO's activities with the needs and priorities in the HE sector

Responses to the impact survey show that HEPs continue to view TASO's activities as important. In the 2020 and 2023 surveys, respondents were asked to score the following activities on a scale of one to five (low importance to very high importance):

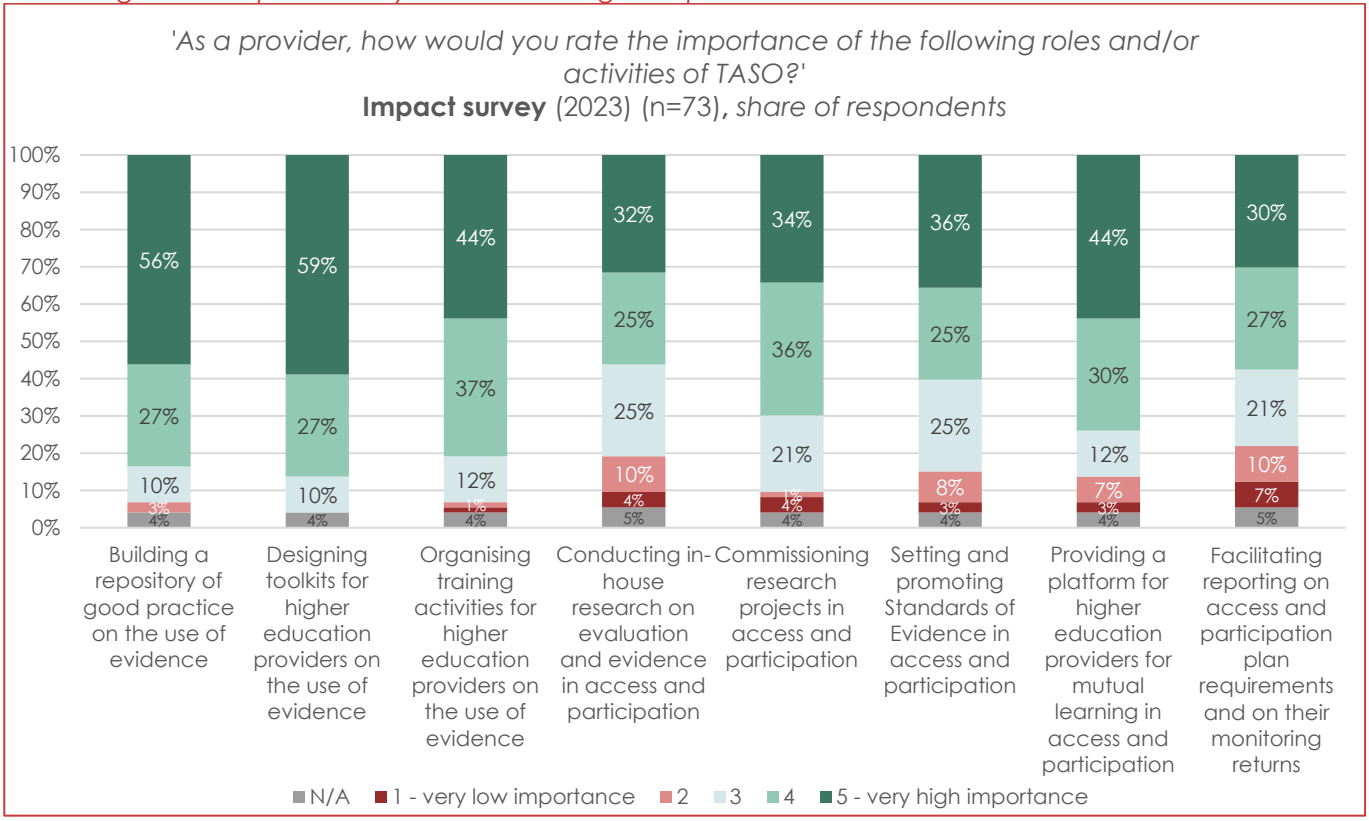
- Building a repository of good practice on the use of evidence
- Designing toolkits for higher education providers on the use of evidence
- Organising training activities for higher education providers on the use of evidence
- Providing a platform for higher education providers for mutual learning in access and participation
- Facilitating reporting on access and participation plan requirements and on their impact reports/monitoring returns
- Setting and promoting Standards of Evidence in access and participation
- Commissioning research projects in access and participation
- Conducting in-house research on evaluation and evidence in access and participation.

The impact survey results (Figure 3) were fairly consistent with the baseline survey results, which suggests that HEPs' needs and expectations have not significantly changed during the past three years. However, there were some noticeable variations. There was a significant increase in the proportion of respondents who felt that 'Designing toolkits for higher education providers on the use of evidence' was of very high importance, increasing from 47% in the baseline to 59% in the impact survey. This indicates a growing appetite for practical tools and a need for TASO to help mobilise knowledge. At the same time, the percentage of respondents who felt it was important for TASO to conduct in-house research has declined, with 57% saying it was of high or very high importance, compared to 66% in the baseline.

Despite HEPs' renewed focus on APPs in 2023, due to the OfS's new approach to regulating equality of opportunity and the subsequent overhaul of APPs, the impact survey suggested providers feel that TASO's work in this area is less important than it was several years ago. The OfS consulted closely with the sector on APPs and provided detailed guidance to HEPs. There is, therefore, less of a need for an external body, such as TASO, to develop additional support for APPs. However, our impact interviews suggest that many providers still use TASO's resources to help them prepare elements of their new APPs. As discussed in Section 0, 114 providers (49.4%) referenced TASO in the APPs with variations (valid until 2024/25) and 28 of the 32 new Wave 1 APPs[7] submitted in 2023 (87.5%) mentioned TASO and its resources.

[7] Wave 1 plans covered the period of 2024/2025 – 2027/2028.

Figure 3 – Impact survey results on rating of importance of TASO's roles and activities



Source: 2023 impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

5.1.3 Stakeholder engagement and involvement in the co-design of TASO's activities

TASO has a range of stakeholders, with whom it has to engage to achieve its strategic goals. Inevitably, the closeness and strength of these relationships varies. These stakeholders include:

- **Higher education providers (HEPs).** TASO has to engage with HEPs from across the sector, including specialist providers and further education colleges (FECs), as well as universities.
- **Office for Students (OfS).** It is crucial that TASO sustains a close working relationship with the OfS. As well as being the HE regulator for England, the OfS has continued to be TASO's main source of funding.
- **Department for Education (DfE)**. It is important that TASO maintains a good relationship with DfE, which is the sponsor department of the OfS.
- **Members of TASO Board of Trustees, Grant Governing Sub-Committee members** (previously Establishment Steering Board).
- **Advocacy/membership organisations for HEPs**: Universities UK, MillionPlus (formerly Million+), University Alliance, GuildHE, Russell Group, Association of Colleges, Independent Higher Education.
- **Organisations working in widening participation (WP) and social mobility**: Brilliant Club, Brightside, Ark, The Sutton Trust, Youth Futures Foundation.
- **Data services and trackers**: University Colleges and Admissions Service (UCAS), Jisc, Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership (EMWPREP).
- **WP and social mobility evaluation organisations and research centres**: NERUPI, NEON, Centre for Social Mobility (University of Exeter), Widening Participation Research and

Evaluation Unit (University of Sheffield), Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Youth Futures Foundation.

TASO has developed relationships, both formal and informal, with these stakeholder organisations. For example, individuals from a number of these organisations are members of TASO's advisory bodies. The Sutton Trust co-hosted a conference with TASO in January 2022 and several other stakeholder organisations have collaborated on projects with TASO. TASO has been working with HEAT and liaising with other HE data trackers to secure integration of the Mapping Outcomes and Activities Tool in Autumn 2023.[8] TASO is also working with HEAT, Aimhigher and EMWPREP to develop a way to map attainment-raising activities.

While progress has been made since the mid-term report, there remains potential to explore further opportunities for cooperation and partnerships with stakeholders in the future. For instance, based on TASO's projects to date and our impact interviews, links with other organisations researching WP and social mobility and/or focusing on the design and delivery of WP activities could be strengthened.

TASO has made progress in relation to its stakeholder engagement plan. The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly delayed progress in this area. As discussed in the mid-term report, the majority of activity in 2020 moved online and this continued through to 2021. However, since restrictions related to the pandemic have been removed, TASO has started to hold some in-person events, in addition to continuing to hold online webinars. TASO has moved beyond Phase 1: Foundation and made significant progress with regards to Phase 2: Momentum. It has undertaken a number of activities designed to engage HEPs and increase its visibility within the sector. TASO's CEO and other staff members have also undertaken outreach and promotional activities.

The extent to which TASO has achieved 'Influence' within the HE sector and accomplished the goals outlined in its stakeholder engagement plan is more provisional. The impact of TASO's activities and influence within the sector is discussed in more detail throughout this report.

TASO has also continued to build its networks involving HE stakeholders. TASO's **Sector Network** has continued to grow and now has 136 members, including practitioners, administrators, evaluators and academics.[9] It remains an integral part of TASO's approach to stakeholder engagement and continues to provide the 'voice of the sector', acting as a first port-of-call when TASO needs to consult on the needs of stakeholders. The TASO mailing list, another key method used by TASO to engage the sector and to publicise its activities, also continues to grow steadily and now has 2,262 members.[10]

There are now **Working Groups** for all four research themes, with 27 members in total. Each group consists of 6–8 members from a range of different HEPs and organisations linked to WP and HE. The Working Groups meet every 2–3 months, to support completion of milestones for TASO's programmes. They help review reports on the group's theme, review applications for commissioning rounds, make funding recommendations and monitor the progress of funded projects.

[8] The Mapping Outcomes and Activities Tool maps the relationships between activity types, sub-activities and outcomes associated with those activities.

[9] TASO, September 2023 Analytics Overview (20 June 2023 – 28 September 2023)

[10] Ibid.

The **Evaluation Advisory Group** consists of 10 people with extensive experience of evaluation within HE. The group's overall role is to assess TASO's research and evaluation activities and to make recommendations concerning the dissemination of evidence. Most recently, in summer 2023, it advised on TASO's approach to improving its evaluation resources support and training. The **Academic Advisory Panel** has 12 members, who are all experts in evaluation and methodology. The panel's main function is to provide peer review and guidance on TASO's evaluations.

TASO also launched a **Student Panel**, as part of the OfS-funded Student Mental Health project, in January 2023. While this panel has been disbanded due to the end of the project, it suggests TASO has identified a need to engage with students directly on certain topics.

TASO's team is still building the connections and capacity needed to influence **policymakers and politicians**. The team has, nonetheless, made some progress in establishing TASO's visibility and credibility as a What Works Centre within Whitehall. For example, in 2023, the CEO of TASO gave evidence at two All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) hearings, on Creative Diversity and A Career Guidance Guarantee for England (APPG for Skills, Careers and Employment). While APPGs do not have an official status within parliament, participation in their events provides TASO with an opportunity to develop its network and address individuals who are involved in shaping the policy landscape.

TASO has also continued to engage stakeholders through research and evaluation projects. It has maintained the same model for the delivery of research projects during the past three years. TASO commissions and manages the projects. Its team typically collaborates with delivery partners (usually HEPs or other organisations involved in delivery of activities) who receive funding and support to implement interventions and/or conduct evaluation of activities. Grant funding from TASO helps HEPs to cover the cost of employing a research assistant or of buy-out of staff time so they can focus on the project.

Opportunities to become delivery partners on research projects are via invitations to tender (ITTs), which are launched via the TASO website and shared via mailing lists and social media. In response to feedback from HEPs, TASO has refined the ITT process and provided additional support for applications. In July 2023, TASO hosted a webinar on ITTs, which helped potential applicants to develop understanding of the three ITTs at that time and provided an overview of the ITT guidelines and submission process. TASO has also started to provide longer lead times in the ITT process, so that providers have more time to prepare bids and organise contracts etc.

Each research project commissioned by TASO has an external evaluator. Originally, BIT was the main external evaluator for TASO's projects, working under a subcontractual agreement. Alongside KCL and NTU, BIT was one of the original TASO partners. The team's strong commitment to RCTs and behavioural science aligned well with TASO's priorities. If BIT declined a project, TASO could appoint other evaluators on an ad hoc basis.

To support growth in its research activities, TASO has recruited a new Panel of Evaluators, which was launched in January 2023. The panel was selected by TASO's Research and Evaluation team, who assessed applications following an open call. It currently consists of five higher education providers and five research organisations:

- Behavioural Insights Team (BIT)
- Centre for Evidence and Implementation
- Ipsos MORI
- King's College London (KCL)

- London Economics
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- National Foundation for Education Research
- Sheffield Hallam University
- University of Cambridge
- University of Warwick

The evaluation panel designs and conducts evaluations for TASO's research projects, working collaboratively with research partners. The organisations selected for the panel represent a variety of research interests and expertise in evaluation of access and student success. Therefore, as well as increasing TASO's research and evaluation capacity, the new panel has the ability to evaluate projects on a wide range of topics which use various methodologies.

5.1.4 Standards of Evidence

TASO has been very consistent in its emphasis on causal evidence, both in its research project design and its approach to reviewing current evidence. This focus aligns with the What Works Network's commitment to the generation of robust evidence through experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies. TASO continues to link its work to the OfS Standards of Evidence, which defines three types of evidence, as detailed below.

Figure 4 – OfS Standards of Evidence

	Description	**Evidence**	**Claims you can make**
Type 1: Narrative	The impact evaluation provides a narrative or a coherent theory of change to motivate its selection of activities in the context of a coherent strategy	Evidence of impact elsewhere and/or in the research literature on access and participation activity effectiveness or from your existing evaluation results	We have a coherent explanation of what we do and why Our claims are research-based
Type 2: Empirical Enquiry	The impact evaluation collects data on impact and reports evidence that those receiving an intervention have better outcomes, though does not establish any direct causal effect	Quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of a pre/post intervention change, or a difference compared to what might otherwise have happened	We can demonstrate that our interventions are associated with beneficial results
Type 3: Causality	The impact evaluation methodology provides evidence of a causal effect of an intervention	Quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of a pre/post treatment change on participants relative to an appropriate control or comparison group who did not take part in the intervention	We believe our intervention causes improvement and can demonstrate the difference using a control or comparison group

Source: OfS, https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/

The OfS states that 'no hierarchy is implied in the different types' of evidence and 'what matters is the quality of the evidence'.[11] This is a viewpoint echoed by John Blake, the Director for Fair Access and Participation, who has also stated[12] that the quality of evidence is what is important and that Empirical Enquiry and Narrative evidence has its place. However, based on our impact interviews, TASO's emphasis on causal evidence and promotion of causal research methods, such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs), has led some sector stakeholders to infer that TASO views Type 3 Causality evidence as superior to other types of evidence, particularly qualitative research.

5.1.5 Conclusions

- TASO's activities have been, and continue to be, well aligned with its hierarchy of objectives. TASO's objectives also correspond well with the Theory of Change developed and refined by the evaluator. Moreover, based on evidence gathered through the evaluation period, the assumptions underpinning the Theory of Change are generally reasonable. However, it will be important for TASO to monitor the Theory of Change's continued relevance in the future, to ensure it remains fit for purpose.
- TASO's evidence cycle meets the needs of the higher education sector and is consistent with the approaches taken by other What Works Centres to evaluate and address gaps in the evidence base. The cycle covers all of the necessary steps required to provide useful evidence for the sector. There are now a number of examples of where TASO has used this framework to evaluate evidence relating to specific topics and themes, and then used the findings to inform decisions on the commissioning of research and evaluation projects.
- TASO is providing a range of activities to support HEPs in improving their use of evaluation and increasing the generation of evidence across the sector. While the pandemic limited TASO's ability to offer certain kinds of activities, the number and range of activities has steadily increased.
- TASO has developed various mechanisms for engaging with stakeholders, in order to pursue the aims of its stakeholder engagement strategy.
- The co-design of activities, through thematic Working Groups, advisory groups etc, is in line with the practice of other What Works Centres. Since the mid-term report, TASO has made progress in engaging with a wider range of stakeholders. However, there are still opportunities to develop collaborations with, for example, research centres focusing on social mobility and widening participation, and other organisations focusing on the development and/or evaluation of WP activities (e.g. NERUPI, NEON).
- While it has continued to engage with the What Works Network, facilitated by its physical location in an office building shared with other WWCs, TASO is still identifying opportunities for collaboration with WWCs on specific projects. Moreover, although some progress has been made, TASO is also still building connections with relevant personnel and departments in the UK government.
- TASO's approach to evaluating and generating evidence is robust and broadly consistent with the approach used by other WWCs. While it follows, and helps to promote, the OfS's

[11] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/6971cf8f-985b-4c67-8ee2-4c99e53c4ea2/access-and-participation-standards-of-evidence.pdf

[12] Interview with Technopolis in September 2023

Standards of Evidence, it is primarily concerned with Type 3 (causal) evidence, which is currently lacking across the evidence base.

Effectiveness

5.2 Evaluation question 2: Has TASO produced outputs (in terms of case studies, reports, training events, online toolkits, grants, award and prizes and organisation of the Annual Evidence Forum) in line with its plans and expectations?

TASO has considerable autonomy in the planning of its outputs. While TASO has a close relationship with its funder, the OfS does not directly set the agenda for TASO's activities. Based on our qualitative research, TASO has set its own strategy and targets in relation to the production of outputs. This evaluation question focuses on the extent to which TASO has produced outputs and delivered activities as planned. It focuses on two main areas:

- Progress on the development of TASO's priority themes
- Overview of TASO's outputs and activities

As well as reviewing the nature and volume of outputs, this section of the report also briefly discusses how these outputs aim to address TASO's stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement has already been discussed in Section 5.1.3 and will be discussed further in relation to TASO's communications strategy in Section 5.10.2. TASO's research projects and related outputs are discussed in more detail in Sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.3.

5.2.1 Progress on the development of TASO's priority themes

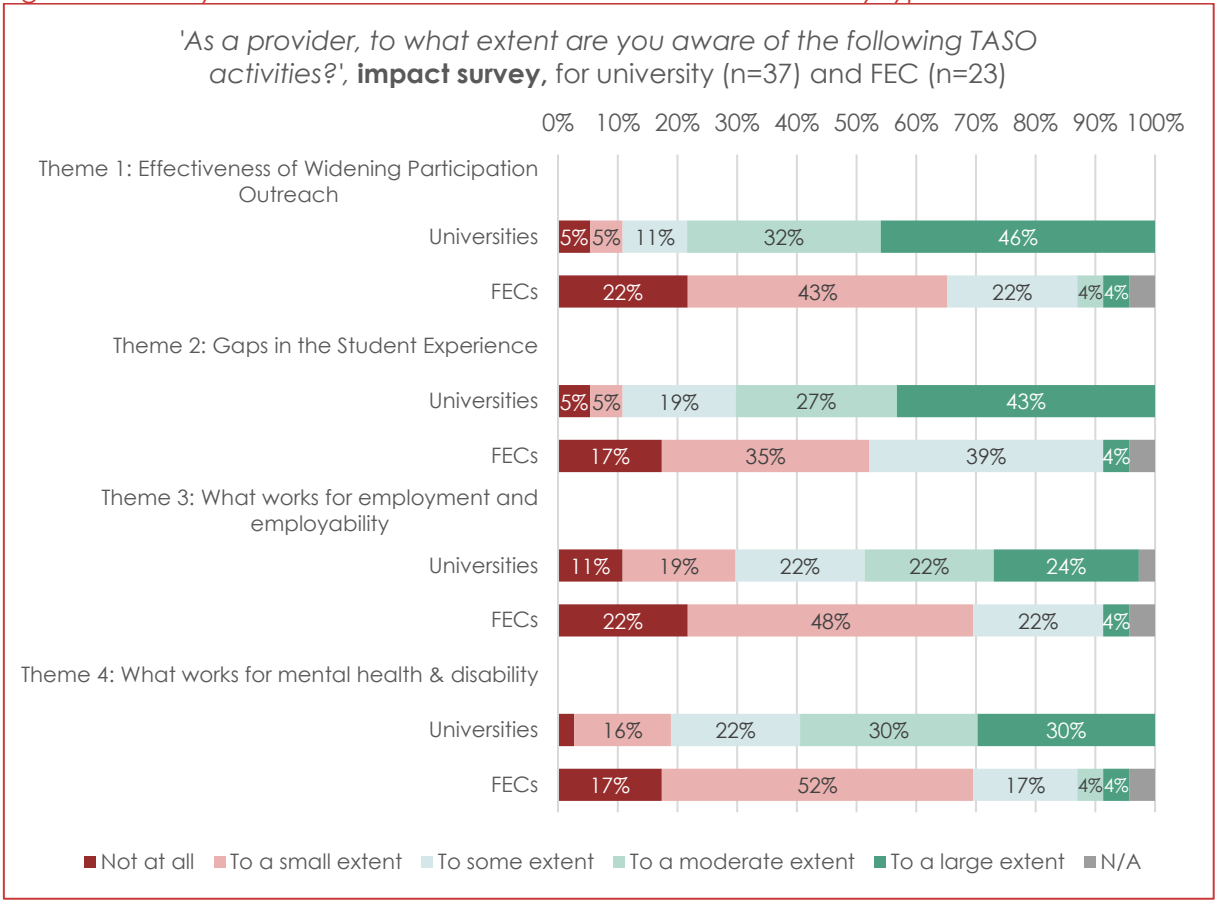
TASO now has four priority themes (official titles from TASO website):

- Theme 1: Effectiveness of Widening Participation Outreach
- Theme 2: Gaps in the Student Experience
- Theme 3: What works for employment and employability (previously titled 'Employment outcomes')
- Theme 4: What works for mental health and disability

The original two themes (1 and 2) were selected in 2019 following consultation with the sector. Theme 3 emerged from discussion with TASO's Advisory Groups. Theme 4 was chosen via an adapted DELPHI method, in consultation with TASO's Sector Network in late 2020. Both Theme 3 and Theme 4 were announced externally on 21 July 2021. In our impact survey, participants' awareness of TASO's themes varied. The greatest levels of awareness were in relation to Theme 1 and Theme 2. Participants were least aware of Theme 3, but over half (54%) were aware to at least some extent of the newest theme, Theme 4. Overall, awareness of TASO's themes is markedly lower in FECs, compared to universities, as shown in Figure 5.

While awareness levels vary, TASO's priority themes nonetheless continue to be aligned with the needs of the sector, as well as supporting current policy agendas and the priorities of the regulator (OfS). They have also enabled TASO to focus on addressing specific gaps in evidence concerning access and participation. As already noted, TASO's own assessment of the quality of evidence in the sector suggests a wide range of avenues for further research and so having a set of central themes is particularly beneficial.

Figure 5 – Survey results on awareness of TASO's research themes by type of HEP

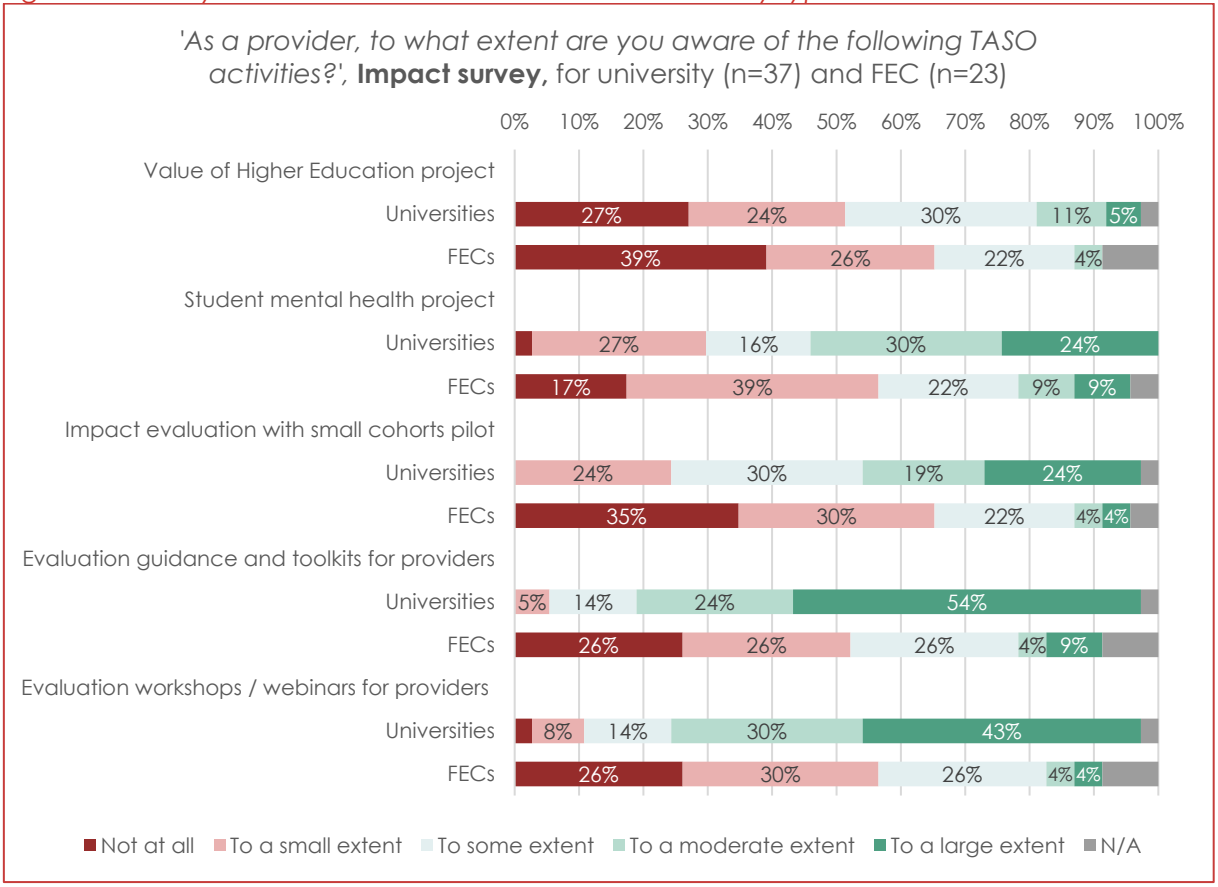


Source: 2023 impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Compared to FECs, universities also showed considerably higher awareness of TASO's activities beyond their research themes. In our sample, 78% of respondents working in universities wereaware to a moderate or large extent of TASO's guidance and toolkits and 73% of university-based respondents were aware to a moderate or large extent of workshops and/or webinars. In comparison, amongst FECs, just 13% of respondents were aware to a moderate or large extent of guidance and toolkits and only 8% of respondents were aware to a moderate or large extent of workshops/webinars. The TASO activity FECs were most aware of is the OfS-funded Student Mental Health project, with 18% of respondents reporting moderate or large levels of awareness. FE college respondents indicating moderate or large awareness of TASO's impact evaluation with small cohorts' pilot was just 8%, compared to 43% of university-based respondents. This finding indicates that further engagement with FECs is needed to in order to promote the findings of the small *n* project, which is TASO's main research activity related to the needs of small providers.[13]

[13] TASO has produced guidance and has commissioned a project on impact evaluation with small cohorts (also referred to as the 'small *n*' project).

Figure 6 – Survey results on awareness of TASO's activities by type of HEP



Source: 2023 impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

5.2.2 *Overview of TASO's outputs and activities*

The following table summarises the reports published by TASO since January 2020. The volume of outputs published by TASO has increased year on year. The majority of publications from 2020 and 2021 are reviews of the existing literature and/or secondary data. As the research and evaluation projects commissioned by TASO have started to produce results, there has been an uplift in the number of reports based on original research and the generation of new evidence. As noted, not all the findings of studies developed by TASO during its first grant period have been published, presumably due to the timescales required for data collection, analysis and quality assurance.

Table 4 – TASO's research reports, January 2020 – November 2023

Theme	Project/Activity	Co-author	Report(s) published
1	The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education	Education Policy Institute	Jan 2020
2	Understanding the impact of interventions to address inequality in the student experience	Bridge Group, Coventry University	Nov 2020
1	Supporting access and student success for learners with experience of children's social care	-	Jan 2021

Theme	Project/Activity	Co-author	Report(s) published
1	An investigation into the relationship between outreach participation and key stage 4 attainment/HE progression (Analysis of HEAT data)	HEAT	Mar 2021
1	Supporting access and student success for mature learners	-	Apr 2021
4	What works to tackle mental health inequalities in higher education?	Centre for Education and Youth	May 2022
1	Typology of attainment-raising activities conducted by HEPs	-	Jun 2022
Evaluation	Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodology Guidance	Manchester Metropolitan University	Jun 2022
4	The Wellbeing of LGBTQ+ Students	KCL	Jun 2022
1	Summer schools in the time of COVID-19	Behavioural Insights Team	Jul 2022 (interim)
3	What works to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability?	Centre for Education and Youth, Education Policy Institute	Jul 2022
1	Intermediate outcomes for higher education access and success	-	Nov 2022
2	The impact of curriculum reform on the ethnicity degree awarding gap • University of Kent Impact Evaluation Analysis • University of Leicester Impact Evaluation Analysis	BIT	Nov 2022
4	What works to reduce equality gaps for disabled students	University of Lincoln	Feb 2023
2	The relationship between teaching and assessment methods and student outcomes during COVID-19	-	Mar 2023
3	The Value of Higher Education	State of Life	May 2023 (Phase 1)
1	Theories of Change for attainment-raising	Ipsos	Apr 2023
1	Understanding online mentoring delivered as part of multi-Intervention outreach	-	May 2023
2	Approaches to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gaps	Staffordshire University	Jun 2023
4	Student wellbeing over time: analysing Student Academic Experience Survey data for undergraduates and taught postgraduates	What Works Wellbeing	Jul 2023
3	Addressing gaps in the participation of Sandwich Courses	-	Aug 2023
4	Student Mental Health in 2023	KCL	Sep 2023

Theme	Project/Activity	Co-author	Report(s) published
Evaluation	Evaluating complex interventions using RCTs	KCL	Sep 2023
2	Piloting methods to develop better evidence on student support	SQW, University of Cambridge	Nov 2023
1	Interim findings of the impact of summer schools	BIT	Nov 2023 (interim)

Source: TASO's website

As can be seen in Table 4, these research projects have linked to TASO's four core themes and focused on specific activities/engagements. TASO has also developed horizontal projects on impact evaluation with small cohorts ('small n evaluation') and evaluating complex interventions using RCTs, for example. In doing so, they have aimed to address gaps in existing knowledge (discussed in more detail in Section 5.4.1). However, many of TASO's reports have emphasised that the findings of the research are preliminary and/or limited (e.g. the Summer Schools and Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap projects) and that further research is needed. Moreover, given the lack of conclusive evidence, many of TASO's reports have focused on discussions of evaluation methods and approaches to evidence generation, in addition to the findings.

In addition to their research projects, TASO has delivered a range of other activities since the mid-term report:

- **Producing evaluation guidance.** TASO has continued to extend the range of evaluation guidance resources, including methods guides and templates, on their website.
- **Developing the Evidence Toolkit.** TASO has added to its Evidence Toolkit, which summarises the existing evidence on specific types of interventions and provides top-level information on cost, impact on students' aspirations/attitudes, impact on behaviour/outcomes and current strength of evidence.
- **Organising webinars, workshops, Q&A sessions and conferences.** TASO has delivered a range of events that aim to inform and upskill evaluators, widening participation practitioners and administrators at HEPs and other organisations.
- **Providing more tailored support to providers.** TASO has approached several providers with proposals for more bespoke training and support. In August 2023, TASO delivered its first revenue generating whole-date workshop on evaluation support.

To date, TASO has held three annual conferences, in 2021, 2022 and 2023. The 2021 conference, which was held online on 21–22 April, was on the theme of 'Evidence and Evaluation'. The first day focused on the evidence landscape and the second day on methodologies. TASO's first in-person conference was in London on 28 April 2022 and the theme was 'Highlighting evidence & evaluation in HE'. Alongside the main event, which included a keynote by John Blake (OfS Director for Fair Access and Participation), there was a week-long programme of online events. The theme for the 2023 conference, which took place in London from 2–3 May, was 'How to Evaluate' and included sessions on Developing Theories of Change, how to conduct a high-quality implementation and process evaluation, and Type 3 Causality evidence, consistent with TASO's prioritisation of these areas. While the themes across the conferences and sessions have been fairly similar, each event has provided opportunities to share updates on TASO and the progress made through its projects.

TASO has also held a number of other online and in-person events. Typically, these events focused on providing guidance on specific methodologies or approaches to evaluation and/or support for the implementation of evaluation activities (e.g. 'An introduction to quasi-experimental designs', 'An introduction to TASO's ethics guidance', 'Question time: Addressing Common Challenges'). TASO's online events (which have attracted 80–180 participants per session) have generally been free to attend and recordings are often shared via YouTube, whereas in-person events are paid for. This model means that TASO can ensure that it continues to provide free support across the sector, while offering additional income-generating events.

TASO has continued to review and refine its activities, drawing on a range of sources to inform decision making. For example, its planning of events and activities targeted at the sector is informed by feedback gathered, via questionnaires, at its in-person events. Recently, TASO has conducted a more holistic assessment of its offer. In summer 2023, TASO completed a review of its existing evaluation resources, support and training and, in consultation with the Evaluation Advisory Group, has developed a list of priorities for ways to improve its offering.

TASO had an initial set of key performance indicators (KPIs), the overview of which is presented in Table 5. All but two KPIs have been met or exceeded. The 'policy responses/interventions' KPI and the 'applications for research funding' KPI have been partially met.

Table 5 – Initial KPIs for TASO

No.	Type	KPI area	Target	Result (and comments by TASO)
1	Research and Evaluation	Number of reports launched	4 per year	Exceeded
2	Research and Evaluation	New projects launched	4 per year	Exceeded
3	Research and Evaluation	Online training sessions and/or packs of supporting resources	8 new webinars and/or packs of supporting resources per year	Exceeded
4	Communications	Number TASO events, training sessions or workshops held, number of attendees and post-event feedback	1 large conference	Met
5	Communications	Number of website visits, including views of TASO's evaluation guidance and Evidence Toolkit	Ongoing tracker	This is monitored and reported on quarterly
6	Communications	Subscriptions to TASO's mailing list and follower growth across our social media channels	Ongoing tracker; Targets for December 2021: • Twitter: 2,500–3,000 (25–35% increase) • LinkedIn: 500–600 followers (92–130% increase)	Exceeded

No.	Type	KPI area	Target	Result (and comments by TASO)
			• YouTube: 100% increase in subscribes, 30% increase in views	
7	Communications	Media coverage and approaches for comments from sector press	6–10 per year	Met
8	Research and Evaluation	Evidence synthesis and toolkit	4 new pages and all existing pages updated	Exceeded
9	Research and Evaluation	Sector relationships	Build relationships with key sector groups to help achieve TASO's aims and objectives. Such groups to include: • NEON • The Centre for Social Mobility (University of Exeter)	Met
10	Research and Evaluation	Partnership with other What Works Centres	Build and/or sustain relationships with other What Works Centres via activities which help TASO achieve its aims and objectives including: • What Works Wellbeing • What Works for Children's Social Care • EEF	Met
11	Policy	Policy responses/interventions	3–4 per year	Partially met TASO submitted one response to a consultation on post qualifications admissions
12	Policy/ Communications	Influential meetings/citation	Meetings with • Ministers • Senior civil servants • Vice Chancellors • Key influencers And/or	Met

No.	Type	KPI area	Target	Result (and comments by TASO)
			• Speaking at key events • Membership on influential commissions/boards etc. • Collaborations with key academics/researchers	
13	Organisational	Applications for research funding	Minimum of two (and of three if both of first two unsuccessful) in 2021–22	Partially met One application submitted, which was not accepted. TASO has had to change strategy on research funding, following an external review on fundraising, which indicated limited scope for funding from trusts and foundations and related sources
14	Organisational	Advisory groups	All advisory groups to have met three times per year	Met
15	Organisational/ Communications	Consistency of messages with OfS	Binary yes/no	Met
16	Internal	Staff satisfaction/ affirmation of TASO values	Staff survey in June	Met Positive scores each year of the staff survey

5.2.3 Conclusions

- The four priority themes TASO has selected are in line with the needs of the sector and are helping to focus TASO's approach to filling evidence gaps in access and participation. The themes were chosen in consultation with sector stakeholders and have a good level of relevance to HEPs' WP activities, which have now resumed following considerable disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that TASO has commissioned some projects that sit across or outside of themes, but which are relevant to the needs of the sector, shows that there is sufficient flexibility in its use of themes to guide future work. As noted in the mid-term report, TASO should continue to be mindful that innovation may exist beyond areas where interventions are currently focused and well-established.
- Based on the findings of the impact survey, there are now reasonable levels of awareness of TASO's themes and activities at universities. However, awareness of TASO's activities is significantly higher amongst universities than FECs. Notably, levels of awareness amongst

FECs were very low for the evaluation of small cohorts' pilot, which is TASO's main project aiming to address the needs of small providers. TASO therefore needs to reflect on how it communicates with and engages stakeholders in FECs.

- TASO has published research reports across all four of its priority themes. The majority of TASO's early outputs were evidence reviews, but the number of reports arising from TASO's research and evaluation projects has steadily increased. This research activity is discussed in more detail in evaluation questions 3 and 4.
- Since the mid-term report, TASO has delivered a range of other activities, including: producing evaluation guidance; adding to its Evaluation Toolkit; organising webinars, events and coherences; providing more bespoke support to providers. The activities are, broadly speaking, aligned with needs within the sector.
- TASO has continued to review its offer, in consultation with stakeholders and the Evaluation Advisory Group, in an effort to ensure its activities continue to serve the needs of the sector and to identify areas of improvement or potential growth.

5.3 Evaluation question 3: How effective has TASO been in establishing a robust collaboration with a wide range of higher education providers to collate evidence across the sector?

In this section, we present and synthesise the evidence on the position of TASO within the higher education sector in the UK. We structure this section in two parts:

- Role of TASO in the higher education sector
- Engagement of the higher education sector with TASO

5.3.1 Role of TASO in the higher education sector

Evidence shows that TASO has established itself as an integral part of the higher education sector. Practically all stakeholders welcomed the work TASO has been doing and the fact that it helps providers align their own activities better to the requirements of the OfS. Some explicitly welcomed the free-of-charge principle on which TASO operates.

However, in the consultation, there still seems to be some confusion about the specific role of TASO in the sector. The sector lacks clarity about whether TASO is a service provider for the sector or whether it is more of a research centre. The following two roles have been mentioned repeatedly:

- **TASO as a service provider for the sector**. TASO is funded by the higher education regulator and supports providers and the whole higher education sector to comply with the regulatory reforms of the OfS in the area of access and participation.
- **TASO as a research centre**. TASO produces research reports which are considered to be of a high academic quality. Some stakeholders expressed hesitation whether academic research is what TASO should produce, and if it produces academic research, why it is funded by the higher education regulator, and why it is not funded in ways similar to other research centres in the UK?

This confusion was expressed by providers themselves, but also by wider sector stakeholders. Some interviewees added that the high academic quality of TASO reports is often at the expense of their direct applicability in the context of a range of providers and that it limits their practical use. This may further exacerbate the perceived issue of lower relevance of TASO to widening participation practitioners. For example, the continued focus on RCTs is seen as something that is very difficult for practitioners to engage with. At the same time,

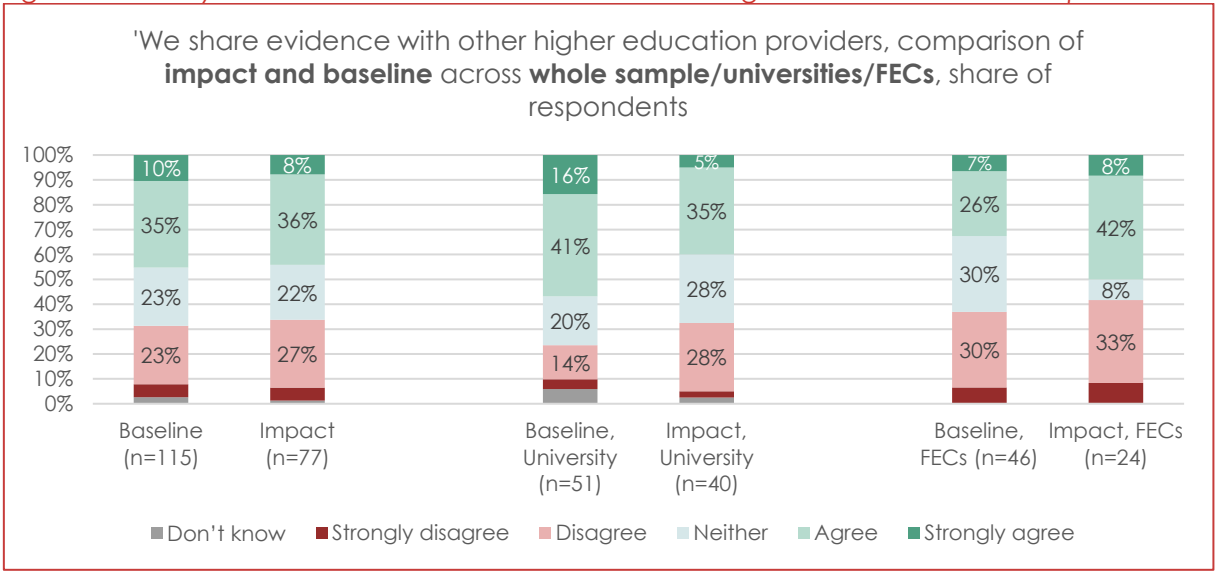
there was a broad consensus that for TASO to achieve a sustained impact, the practitioners need to be onboard and need to become an integral part of TASO's ecosystem.

As evidenced in Section 5.2.1, some activities of TASO are better known and seen as more important across the sector than others. For example, there are higher level of awareness of TASO's evaluation guidance and toolkit in the sector, than those of some of the specific TASO's research themes.

A recurring conclusion in our previous reports was the relatively lower awareness of the further education sector, compared to universities. This is still the case in 2023. FECs struggle to learn about TASO's research. Our qualitative consultation confirms that the visibility of TASO's activities and outputs continues to be uneven across the various types of providers. This was explicitly mentioned by a number of our interviewees. The evidence also suggests that one of the main reasons for this unbalanced awareness level is the lack of capacity within FECs. Given that many of FECs are smaller institutions, compared to universities, they are less likely to be able to invest the same resources to developing their internal evaluation structures. This relates to another point resonating strongly in the consultation. Across the higher education sector (including both universities and FECs), there is a perception that TASO speaks more to evaluation specialists and academics, rather than widening participation practitioners. Capitalising on their size and available resources, universities are more likely to have evaluation specialists among their access and participation staff, which is not the case for FECs. This means that FECs often simply do not have the necessary capability to engage with TASO.

One of the major roles of TASO in relation to the sector is to collect, collate and generate evidence on what works in access and participation. This role is only possible to fulfil if providers themselves are willing and able to share their evidence with others across the sector. Yet, this remains an issue for many, as evidenced in the results of our survey of providers. Figure 7 presents the results for the statement 'We share evidence with other higher education providers'. This is the statement that has consistently received the lowest level of support across the baseline (2020), mid-term (2021) and impact (2023) surveys and among universities and FECs. For universities, the proportion agreeing or strongly agreeing has actually decreased, from 57% to only 40%. This further exacerbates the finding from the previous phases of the evaluation project, pointing to deficits in the degree of sharing of evidence across the university sector. On the other hand, in the further education sector, the proportion has significantly increased from 33% to 50%.

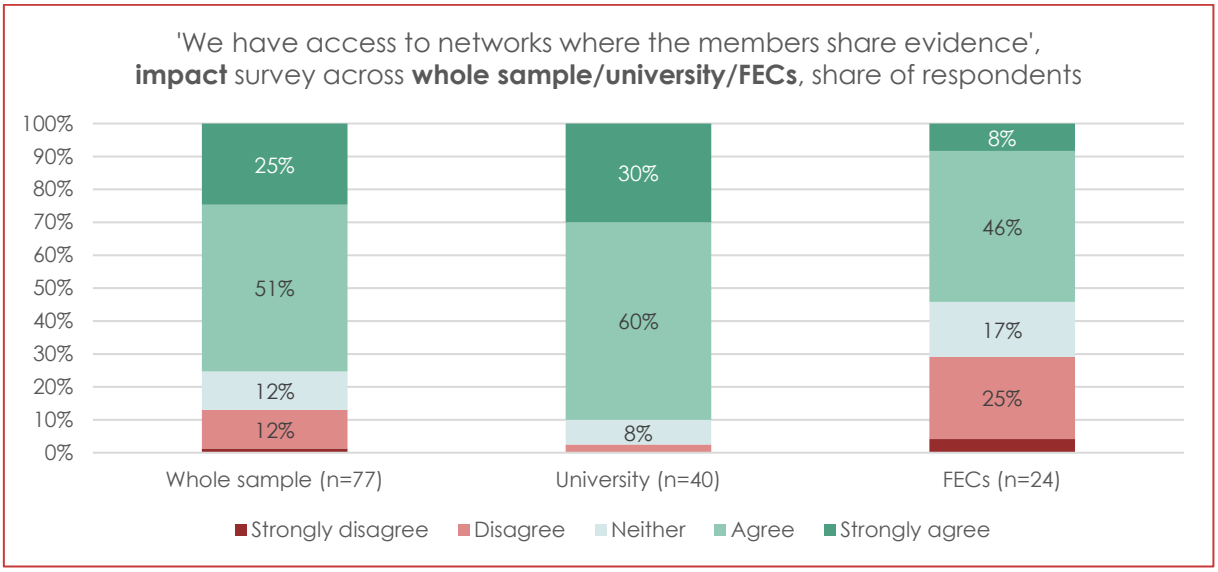
Figure 7 – Survey results about statement related to sharing of evidence with other providers



Source: Baseline and impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Figure 8 shows that around two-thirds of the impact survey respondents (this question was not asked in the previous survey rounds) had access to networks where the members share evidence. While this was the case for 90% of universities, only 54% FECs strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.

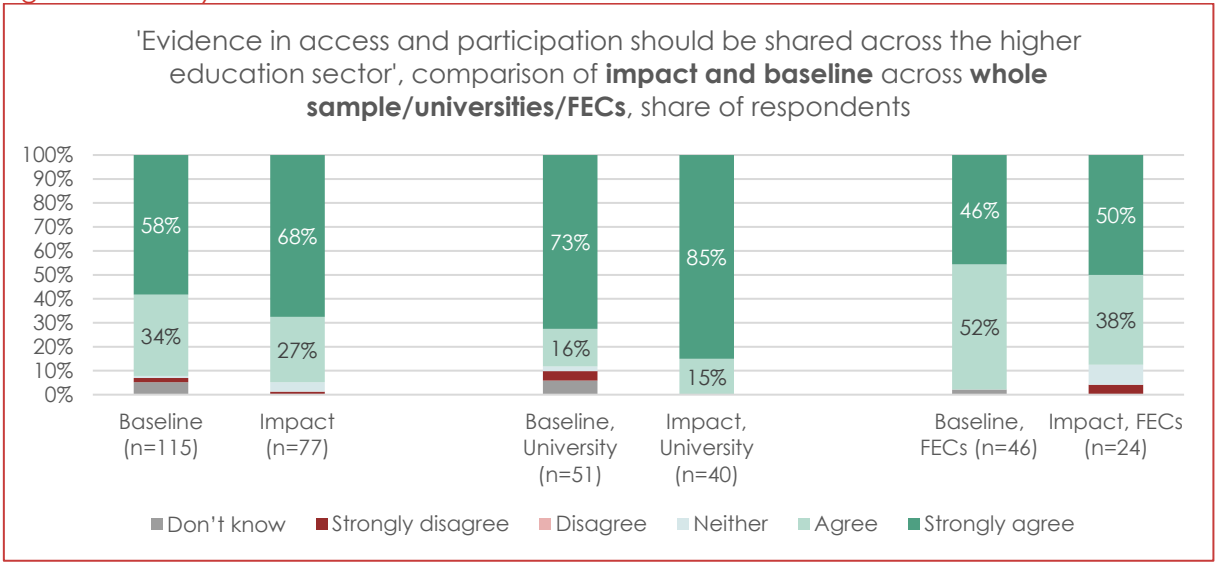
Figure 8 – Survey results about statement related to having access to networks where the members share evidence



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Figure 9 below presents the results for statements on whether evidence and best practice should be collated and shared across the higher education sector. The share of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with these statements has remained high and stable. For FECs, the number of those strongly agreeing has slightly increased.

Figure 9 – Survey results about statement related to whether evidence should be shared

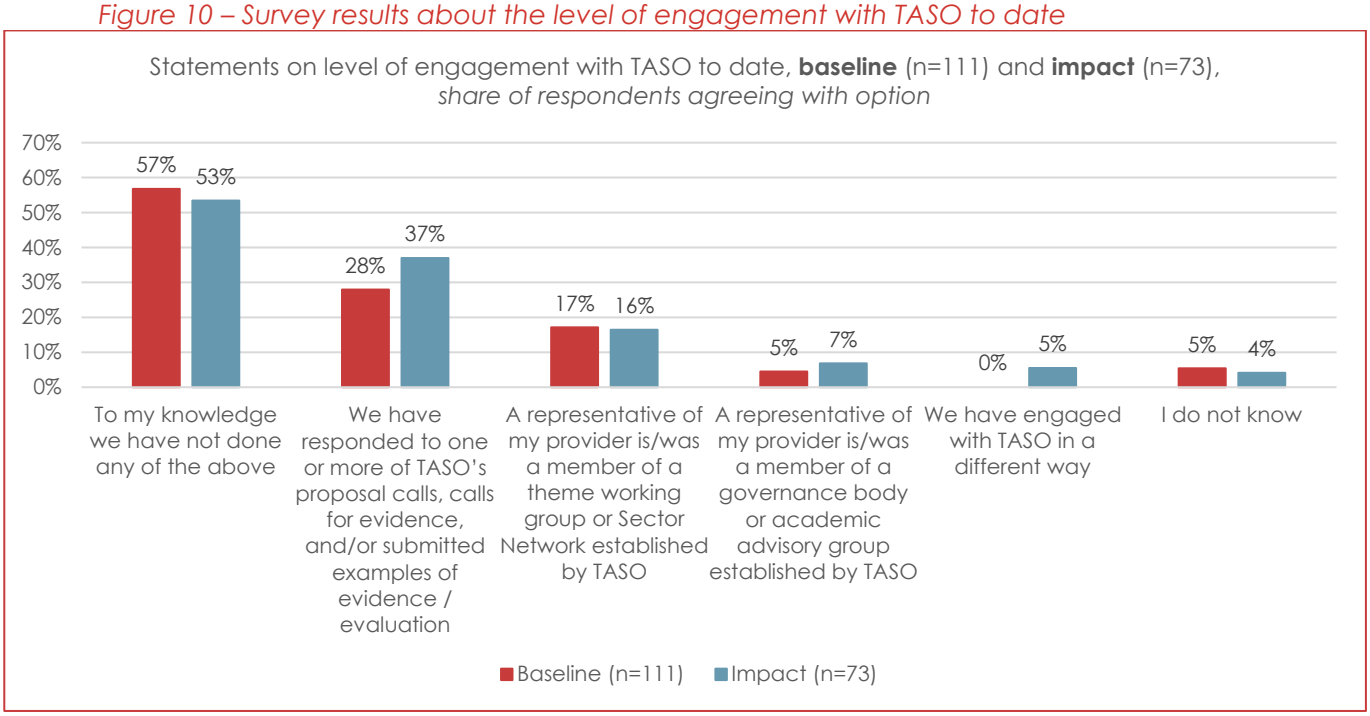


Source: Baseline and impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

5.3.2 *Engagement of the higher education sector with TASO*

The engagement of the higher education sector with TASO has been growing since TASO was established in 2019/2020. This was confirmed both in the survey of providers and in interviews with providers and wider sector stakeholders.

Figure 10 – Survey results about the level of engagement with TASO to date

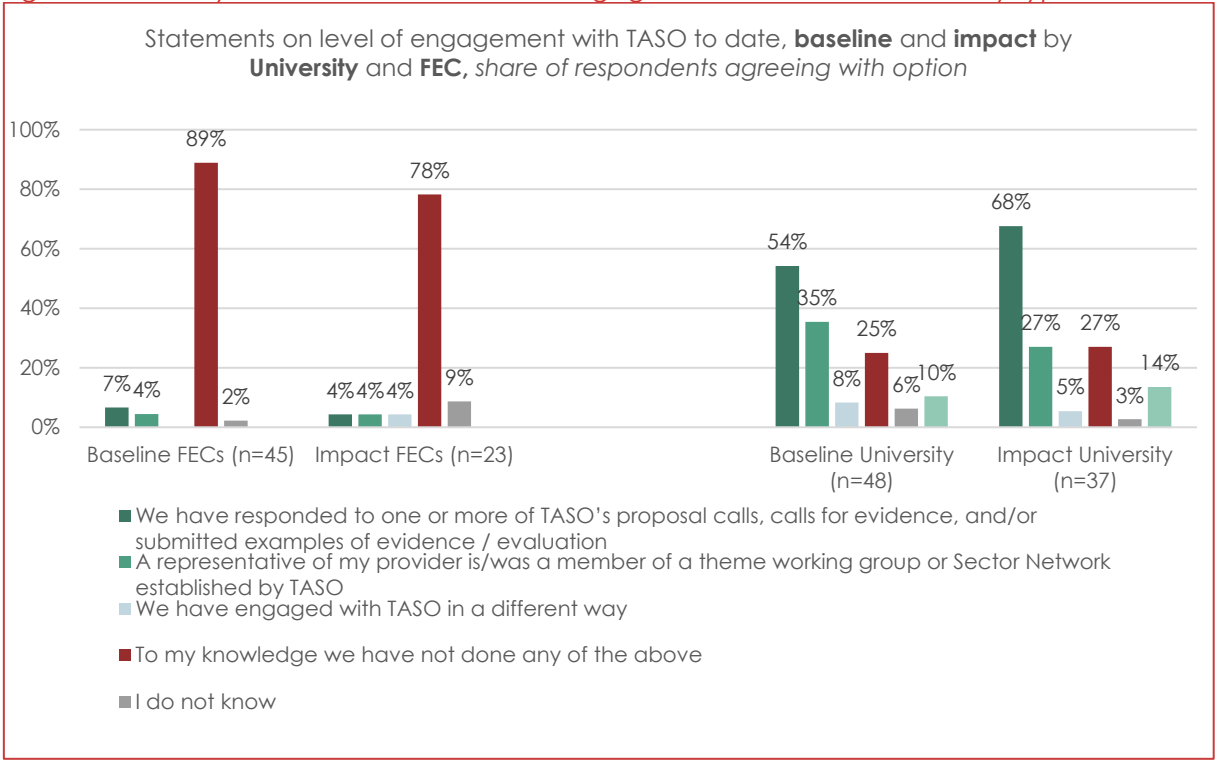


Source: Baseline and impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Figure 10 shows levels of engagement with TASO to date from HEPs across the baseline and impact surveys. The results indicate there has been an overall improvement in engagement between 2020 and 2023. More than a third of providers (37%) mentioned in 2023 that they had responded to one of more of TASO's proposal calls, calls for evidence, and/or submitted examples of evidence/evaluation. This is higher than in 2020 (28%).

Figure 11 shows that a high proportion of FECs have not pro-actively engaged with TASO. However, the proportion of FEC respondents indicating they have not pro-actively engaged has decreased from 89% to 78%. This is still a very high proportion, but is, at least, a positive sign that more pro-active engagement is perhaps now taking place. In addition, it appears that the OfS itself has been encouraging Vice Chancellors to work with TASO, so this then makes it easier for evaluators within providers to advocate for the need to further engage with it. It is important to add that Figure 11 evidences only pro-active engagement. Providers engage with TASO in a more passive way as well, e.g. by using TASO's outputs.

Figure 11 – Survey results about the level of engagement with TASO to date by type of HEP



Source: Baseline and impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

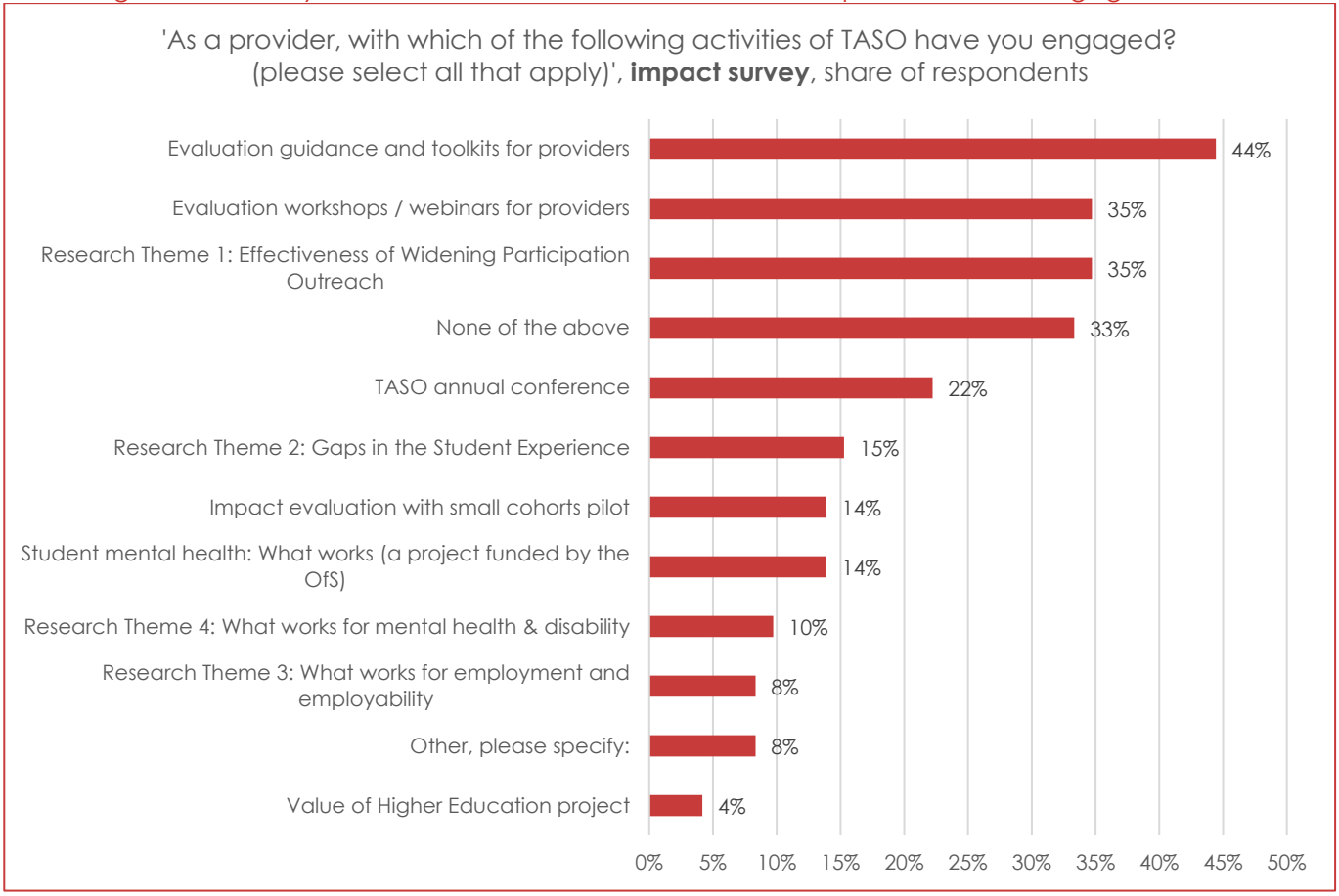
In the qualitative follow-up consultation, we dug deeper into some of the aspects of engagement. A number of providers and wider stakeholders agreed that a lot of the engagement depends on the enthusiasm of individuals within providers. This is also an observation made by TASO itself, raising some concerns about the extent to which the relationships between providers and TASO has been institutionalised. Costs of any form of closer engagement seems to be prohibitive for some providers. Although this will not be an issue for all, multiple providers told us that they have to think carefully about how to spend their widening participation budgets, and most prioritise their interventions and programmes over engagement with TASO. As one consultee put it:

> *'Currently, the cost to attend conferences [related to access and participation] across the sector, including TASO conferences, is extremely high. There is a risk that [access and participation] teams will not have the budget to attend good practice sharing conferences.'* A survey respondent.

In terms of the specific activities with which providers have engaged, Figure 12 shows that 44% of respondents have engaged with TASO's evaluation guidance and toolkits. Evaluation workshops/webinars and Research Theme 1 were both selected by 35% of respondents (respondents were able to select more than one option). Research Theme 3 and Research

Theme 4, as well as the Value of Higher Education project were selected only by 8%, 10% and 4% of respondents, respectively. These results corroborate the findings presented in Section 4.2.1 about the awareness of TASO in the sector.

Figure 12 – Survey results about TASO's activities with which providers have engaged



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

The TASO Sector Network[14] (presented in Section 5.1.3) is an important platform for TASO to communicate with the sector. Our research shows that the Sector Network has become more active since 2020 and continues to grow. The Sector Network works as a convener for evaluators affiliated with providers, who often do not have a peer group within their own organisation. For TASO itself, the Sector Network allows it to maintain and build relationships with those providers that wish to become more active.

In Section 5.3.1, we describe the two main roles played by providers that engage in TASO's projects. They either act as target audiences for reports, or they play a more active role by becoming partners in TASO's projects. Yet, the latter does not seem to be an option which many providers would feel comfortable with. There were respondents from providers in the consultation who expressed the challenges linked to becoming a project partner with TASO. These challenges included lack of time, and – above all – lack of expertise, to prepare a proposal for TASO.

[14] More information available online at: https://taso.org.uk/get-involved/sector-network/.

Our review of TASO's projects and reports[15] shows that, in total, 34 different providers have, so far, been engaged in TASO's projects and/or co-authoring TASO's publications. Out of this number, 20 providers have participated only in one project/co-authored one publication. KCL has participated in multiple projects (more than any other provider), followed by the University of Kent, Aston University, the University of Birmingham and NTU.[16] It is important to make sure that TASO pro-actively creates a level playing field for all providers to be able to work with TASO on research projects. Furthermore, among the 34 providers that participated, there is only one further education college, City College Norwich. Some interviewees told us that small providers, such as FECs, felt 'locked out' of TASO's projects because they would never be able to produce big enough samples. Although it is understandable that universities are natural partners for research projects, it further demonstrates the struggle for TASO to become more relevant to other parts of the sector, FECs in particular.

5.3.3 Conclusions

- TASO has established itself as an integral part of the higher education sector.
- There still seems to be some confusion about the specific role of TASO in the sector. The sector lacks clarity about whether TASO is a service provider for the sector or whether it is more a research centre.
- There continues to be a relatively lower awareness of TASO in the further education sector, compared to universities. This is coupled with the lack of capacity within FECs to engage with evaluation.
- TASO continues to speak more to evaluation specialists and academics, rather than widening participation practitioners.
- Providers continue to be hesitant in sharing evidence across the sector. Given that collecting and collating evidence on what works is among the major roles of TASO, it is crucial that providers share this evidence with others.
- The pro-active engagement of the higher education sector with TASO has been growing since TASO was established in 2019/2020. However, a lot of the engagement depends on the enthusiasm of individuals within providers, which raises some concerns about the extent to which the relationships between providers and TASO have been institutionalised.
- Providers have particularly engaged with TASO's evaluation guidance and toolkits, and with workshops, webinars and reports published on Research Theme 1.
- The Sector Network has become more active since 2020 and continues to grow. For TASO itself, the Sector Network allows it to maintain and build relationships with those providers that wish to become more active.
- Cost of any form of closer engagement seems to be prohibitive for some providers. Furthermore, some small providers, such as FECs, felt 'locked out' of TASO's projects because they would never be able to produce large enough samples.

5.4 Evaluation question 4: Has TASO been effective in developing rigorous independent and high-quality evidence from across the UK and internationally?

This section focuses on TASO's approach to reviewing and adding to the evidence base on widening participation and access in higher education:

- TASO's approach to identifying gaps in the evidence

[15] As published on TASO's website online at: https://taso.org.uk/.

[16] Both KCL and NTU were members of the partnership which set up TASO.

- TASO's research and evaluation projects (2019–2023)
- Knowledge mobilisation and the usability of TASO's outputs
- TASO's research and evaluation projects (2023–2024)

It discusses how evidence synthesis and promotion play a central role in TASO's research and evaluation strategy, as well as the challenges that exist in relation to translating research into useable outputs.

5.4.1 TASO's approach to identifying gaps in the evidence

TASO adopts a systematic approach to developing new research and evaluation projects, which is broadly in line with the approach taken by other What Works Centres. With regards to the choice of research topics, TASO combines a pragmatic approach, which responds to funding opportunities and external changes, and an approach based on the identification of gaps in the evidence. Its four priority themes, which were chosen in consultation with the sector, also help to focus its project development.

TASO has stated that evidence synthesis and promotion should be at the core of its research and evaluation strategy. The two main sources of evidence are TASO's own research projects, and evaluation work external to the organisation. Its commissioned research projects and evaluation support activities are, therefore, designed to feed into its synthesis of evidence on 'What Works' in improving student access and participation. Based on this, the original research is expected to be complemented by an ongoing systemic review of studies relevant to TASO's remit, which are then used to inform evaluation support and develop the evidence base.

TASO's evidence cycle (Figure 1) has three phases. The identification of gaps in evidence (Phase 1) is through systemic reviewing of existing evidence on specific topics. In addition to reviewing published literature, TASO has also used a 'call for evidence' mechanism in certain instances:

- Support for care-experienced young people and mature students – launched July 2020
- Online teaching and learning in the time of COVID – launched June 2021
- Case studies for support of mental health – launched October 2022
- Risks to equality of opportunity – launched November 2022

TASO's evidence reviews, alongside considerations such as needs in the sector and HE policy priorities, then form the basis of commissioning decisions for new research and evaluation projects (Phase 2). Once the research project is completed, TASO reviews its findings and disseminates these to the sector (Phase 3). As noted in the mid-term report, TASO's evidence cycle covers all the necessary steps to develop useful evidence for the sector and is therefore suitable for its needs.

Consistent with this evidence cycle model, reviews of the existing evidence have been a core part of TASO's outputs since 2020. The evidence gaps identified through a number of these reviews have then formed the basis for research projects led by TASO.

- The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: A review of the evidence (January 2020)
- Evidence review: Supporting access and student success for learners with experience of children's social care (January 2021)

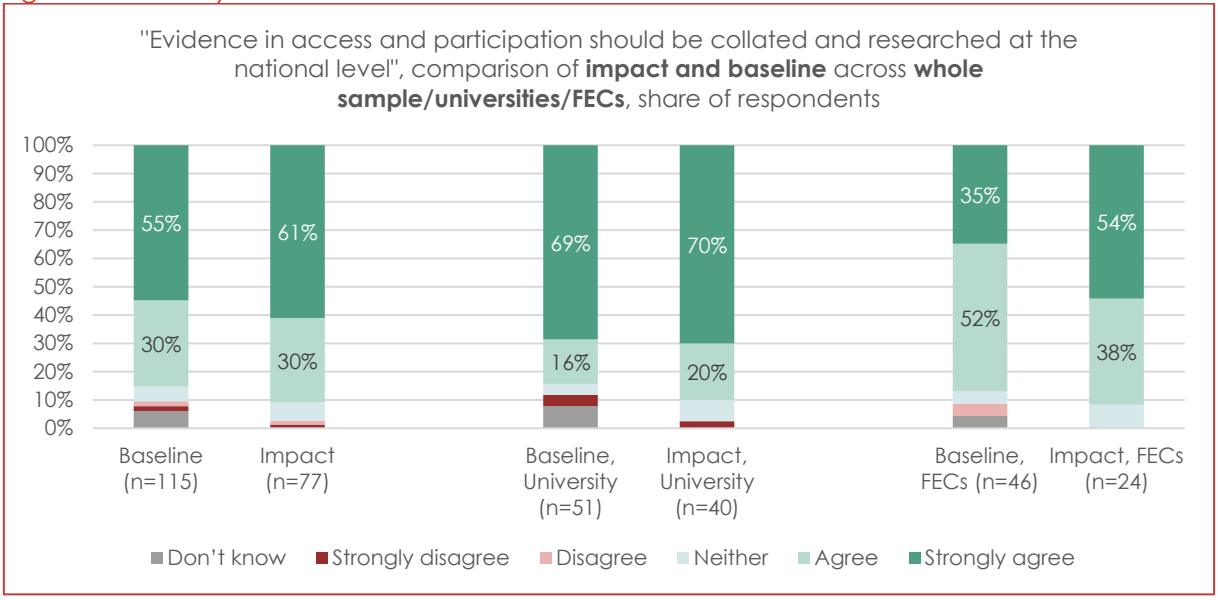
- Evidence review: Supporting access and student success for mature learners (April 2021)
- Report: What works to tackle mental health inequalities in higher education? (May 2022)
- Typology of attainment-raising activities conducted by HEPs: Rapid evidence review (June 2022)
- Report: What works to reduce equality gaps in employment and employability? (July 2022)
- Rapid review: Intermediate outcome for higher education access and success (November 2022)
- Summary report: What works to reduce equality gaps for disabled students (February 2023)
- Report: Online teaching and learning in the time of COVID-19: Rapid evidence review (March 2023)
- Phase 1 report: The value of higher education: Rapid evidence review and initial data analysis (May 2023)
- Report: Approaches to addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap: Contextualising the landscape and developing a typology (June 2023)

These reviews focus on identifying and synthesising relevant sources, typically using a rapid evidence review methodology. To do so, they adopt a systemic reviewing approach, which hinges on the principle that only studies that pass strict tests of quality can be used as evidence. Crucially, this method should be based on a transparent process and clearly articulated criteria for including and excluding studies for the review.[17] The methodology sections of TASO's evidence reviews typically outline the scope of the reviews, including the number of sources consulted, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. Overall, there is a high level of transparency in how these reviews have been conducted and how they have developed criteria for 'What Works'.

TASO's Evidence Toolkit also reviews the evidence and compiles sources on specific topics. TASO has steadily added to the toolkit, which now covers 22 different interventions. The toolkit is consistently, and by a significant margin, the most viewed page on TASO's website. This reflects the growing demand for evidence to be collated and researched indicated in our impact survey. As Figure 13 shows, in our impact survey, 91% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'Evidence in access and participation should be collated and researched at the national level', compared to 85% in the baseline survey.

[17] Torrance, H. (2018) 'Evidence, Criteria, Policy and Politics: the debate about quality and utility in educational and social research,' in Denzin N. & Lincoln Y. (Eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* 5th edition.

Figure 13 – Survey results on statement related to whether evidence should be collated



Source: Baseline and Impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

The Evidence Toolkit developed by TASO adopts a similar approach to other WWCs, such as EEF, YEF and WWCCR, where the strength of evidence is assessed according to a scale. TASO uses a star rating system of 1–4, with weak, emerging, medium and strong as the corresponding categories. However, they also have separate ratings (-, -/+, + or N/A) for 'Impact on aspirations/attitudes' and 'Impact on behaviour/outcomes' for some types of intervention. The toolkit also includes ratings for 'Cost', using a scale of 1–3 (low, medium, high). However, what is meant by these categories, and how they have been calculated, is not explained on TASO's website.

At present, TASO's Evidence Toolkit suggests a lack of evidence for the effectiveness of a wide range of interventions in access and participation. As shown in Table 6, TASO has judged that 20 out of the 22 interventions reviewed for its toolkit have either weak or emerging evidence. There is medium evidence for two interventions and, currently, no interventions that have achieved a 4* rating. Some of our interviewees noted that it is difficult to know what this means in practical terms, with regards to whether they should continue to deliver certain activities and how those activities should be designed, especially if a follow-on TASO project had produced inconclusive results or not yet come to fruition.

Table 6 – Overview of TASO's Evidence Toolkit

Evidence intervention	Cost	Impact on aspirations/ attitudes	Impact on behaviour/ outcomes	Strength of evidence
Aspiration-raising interventions (pre-entry)	2/3	+	N/A	1/4
Foundation year programmes (post-entry)	3/3	N/A	N/A	1/4
Programmes of student support (post-entry)	2/3	+	+	1/4
Raising attainment through school governance and teacher training	3/3	N/A	N/A	1/4
Reasonable adjustments for disabled students	2/3	N/A	N/A	1/4
Teaching employability skills (post-HE)	2/3	N/A	N/A	1/4

Evidence intervention	Cost	Impact on aspirations/ attitudes	Impact on behaviour/ outcomes	Strength of evidence
Technology-based solutions to improve employability/employment outcomes (post-HE)	1/3	N/A	N/A	1/4
Transition support into HE for disabled students (pre-entry)	2/3	N/A	N/A	1/4
Financial support (post-entry)	2/3	+	+	2/4
Financial support (pre-entry)	3/3	+	+	2/4
Information, advice and guidance for employment and employability	1/3	N/A	-/+	2/4
Learning analytics	2/3	-/+	+	2/4
Mentoring, counselling, coaching and role models (post-entry)	2/3	+	+	2/4
Mentoring, counselling, coaching and role models (pre-entry)	2/3	+	N/A	2/4
Multi-intervention outreach	3/3	+	-/+	2/4
Online teaching and learning (post-entry)	2/3	N/A	-/+	2/4
Promoting self-advocacy for disabled students (post-entry)	2/3	+	-/+	2/4
Study and soft skills support (pre-entry)	2/3	+	+	2/4
Summer schools	3/3	+	N/A	2/4
Work experience (post-HE)	1/3	N/A	+	2/4
Information, advice and guidance (pre-entry)	1/3	-/+	-/+	3/4
Tutoring (pre-entry)	3/3	+	++	3/4

Source: TASO's Evidence Toolkit

The Evidence Toolkit entries for each intervention give an overview of each of these areas:

- What is this intervention?
- What is the target group?
- How effective is it?
- What features seem to be important?
- What don't we know?
- Where does the evidence come from?
- Key references

Each entry gives an indication of the sources consulted, and includes a list of key references, but the quantity and types of evidence varies. In some cases, this may be due to a greater volume of evidence and research on the topic. Unlike in the evidence reviews, which clearly document the selection criteria used, TASO is not always clear about the criteria used to select sources in the Evidence Toolkit. Moreover, the overall method used to evaluate the strength of evidence, the impact and the cost could be more transparent. Outlining the process more clearly would be beneficial for the sector, as it would increase their understanding of, and trust in, the metrics. It would also help to support the rationale more

fully for TASO's research projects, especially where full evidence reviews have not been published.

When reviewing evidence, the approach TASO has adopted to using sources from the international environment has varied. In some instances, TASO's Evidence Toolkit and evidence reviews cite international evidence (e.g. financial support; Information, advice and guidance pre-entry). However, in other instances, international evidence is not drawn on. In many cases, this may be attributed to issues of relevance due to significant differences in national contexts, although the exact reasons are not always easy to discern.

Several interviewees suggested that TASO seems to disregard sources and projects that do not align with 'positivist' approaches to research. They noted that this situation was probably due to philosophical differences, although whether stakeholders felt this was problematic varied. Some interviewees, especially those with backgrounds in evaluation, could understand the rationale for focusing on Type 3 Causality evidence and causal methodologies and supported TASO's position. However, several stakeholders raised concerns that TASO's work was devaluing qualitative research and overlooking relevant expertise within the sector. These views echo concerns about the creation of 'hierarchies of evidence' in HE evaluation, voiced by groups such as the Evaluation Collective[18] and discussed in HE publications such as WonkHE.[19]

TASO faces challenges arising from the fact that a significant proportion of its stakeholders are academic researchers and/or possess postgraduate qualifications. These stakeholders are, therefore, well-versed in research methods and more inclined to align with particular schools of thought on research. Consequently, as our impact interviews showed, they are also more likely to question the assumptions underpinning TASO's research and evaluation work and TASO's position on Standards of Evidence. In light of this context, is important that TASO communicates the rationale for its decisions and acknowledges the conceptual basis for their methods.

Irrespective of conceptual debates, interviewees suggested that TASO could engage more with academics researching access and participation and related issues such as social mobility in the UK. They felt that drawing on existing knowledge would be a more pragmatic approach to building the evidence base in the sector, as TASO's focus on generating primary research was resource-intensive and will take time to produce useful findings. This call for pragmatism echoes a January 2022 evaluation of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s investment in What Works Centres, which recommended that WWCs could better serve stakeholders by focusing more on presenting the 'best available' evidence to answer questions, rather than simply concluding that there was a lack of 'evidence of sufficient quality'.[20]

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[18] https://evaluationcollective.wordpress.com

[19] See, for example: Liz Austen (2023), 'Evaluation should be an empowering tool for social justice', WonkHE, 26 May, https://wonkhe.com/blogs/evaluation-should-be-an-empowering-tool-for-social-justice/; Rachel Carr (2023), 'Why we cannot afford to undervalue soft interventions in widening access', WonkHE, 17 January, https://wonkhe.com/blogs/why-we-cannot-afford-to-undervalue-soft-interventions/

[20] *Evaluation of ESRC Investment in What Works Centres*, Frontier Economics, January 2022, https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-investment-in-what-works-centres/

5.4.2 *TASO's research and evaluation projects (2019–2023)*

In March 2023, TASO compiled an overview of the projects undertaken under the first grant (2019–2023).[21] As can be seen in Table 7, the majority of projects have been either Synthesis projects (reviews to synthesise the existing literature) or Primary research intervention studies (examining whether specific interventions are effective). TASO's literature reviews have covered all of its priority themes. Overall, the largest volume of research has been on Theme 1: Effectiveness of Widening Participation Outreach.

Table 7 – Mapping of TASO's research activities under the first grant

Theme[22]	**Synthesis**	**Primary research – Not on intervention**	**Primary research – Intervention study**	**Support for evaluation**
Theme 1: Effectiveness of Widening Participation Outreach	3	1	6	1
Theme 2: Gaps in the Student Experience	2	0	3	0
Theme 3: What works for employment and employability	2	2	0	0
Theme 4: What works for mental health and disability	3	0	1	0
Theme 3/Theme 4	0	0	1	0
Evaluation	0	0	0	3
TOTAL	**10**	**3**	**11**	**4**

Source: TASO commissioning planning for the OfS, March 2023

As well as addressing gaps in the existing evidence, TASO has focused its strategy on increasing the volume of Type 3 Causality evidence in the sector. In March 2023, TASO produced a breakdown of the intervention studies commissioned during the first OfS grant by type (Table 8). Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental designs (QEDs) were the most common types of intervention study under the original grant.

In interviews, sector stakeholders expressed a variety of perspectives on TASO's research outputs (i.e. reports and evaluation guidance) to date. Broadly speaking, TASO's attempts to address gaps in knowledge on the effectiveness of activities and interventions were welcomed. The majority of interviewees acknowledged that more evidence was needed to justify continued investment in specific activities related to access and progression. A few stakeholders, typically those with academic or professional backgrounds in evaluation, said that TASO is developing a reputation for producing robust research.

[21] The grant was originally 2019–2022, but was extended to 2023. TASO is now on a new one-year grant.

[22] Projects may engage with more than one Theme. The classifications used were devised by TASO.

Table 8 – Breakdown of TASO's intervention studies by type

	Intervention study type [23]				
Theme	**RCT**	**QED**	**Online experiment**	**IPE**	**Data analysis**
Theme 1: Effectiveness of Widening Participation Outreach	4	1	1	2	0
Theme 2: Gaps in the Student Experience	1	1	0	2	1
Theme 3: What works for employment and employability	0	0	0	0	0
Theme 4: What works for mental health and disability	1	0	0	0	0
Theme 3/Theme 4	0	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	**6**	**3**	**1**	**4**	**2**

Source: TASO commissioning planning for the OfS, March 2023

Several interviewees felt that TASO had yet to develop a sufficient evidence base, through their own research, in relation to many interventions. Moreover, some stakeholders expressed disappointment that certain TASO reports had, in their opinion, suggested that particular interventions were not worthwhile on the basis of a short-term, small-scale study. One interviewee pointed to the press coverage of TASO's report on summer schools, published in July 2022, which had focused on the 'failure' of summer schools to improve access. Similarly, there were some concerns raised in interviews about the weight given to TASO's reports and whether their research projects would be viewed by the OfS as the final word on 'What Works'. Given the pressures on funding in many HEPs, and for organisations working in areas related to access, a few stakeholders also had concerns that projects might have their funding cut because of TASO's findings. These stakeholders had not participated directly in TASO's projects, although some had provided input into other research and activities associated with other bodies associated with widening participation and access. Their concerns were linked to wider anxieties around TASO's level of influence and whether emerging findings, that had yet to be fully proven and scrutinised more widely, would influence their organisation's policy and/or wider sector policy.

The emphasis placed on evaluation and research methods in TASO's reports is consistent with its commitment to increasing the generation of Type 3 Causality evidence. However, a number of stakeholders observed that the content of some TASO reports, especially those which discussed methodology in depth, were difficult to interpret and potentially alienating for people who do not have a relevant academic background or the professional experience to engage fully with the concepts under discussion. Consequently, they felt that TASO could improve its approach to addressing the variety of stakeholders it serves, especially those who deliver widening participation activities.

The other issue with TASO's promotion of causal methods, based on our impact interviews, is feasibility. Part of TASO's role is to support HEPs to conduct robust evaluations, so they can

[23] RCT = Randomised controlled trial, QED = Quasi-experimental Design, IPE = Implementation and process evaluation

generate evidence to support their own approach to access and participation. However, in addition to the conceptual issues surrounding these methods, a number of stakeholders highlighted the practical challenges around implementation. Interviewees who had participated in TASO projects using RCTs highlighted the difficulties involved in data collection and processing. One interviewee also noted that, while they had developed a better understanding of the RCT methodology through the project, their HEP would not necessarily be able to implement an RCT without external evaluation support. While the OfS's guidance suggests that only HEPs with the skill, capacity and capability should conduct RCTs, our interviews with sector stakeholders suggest that many stakeholders have interpreted TASO's focus on RCTs and work in this area as implying this evaluation approach should be adopted across a wide range of HEPs. Four interviewees at different HEPs, including providers with the expertise and capacity to conduct RCTs, also noted that their participation in an RCT had raised ethical issues. Primarily, these issues centred on the sampling process and the appropriateness of removing access to support for young people from underrepresented groups. These concerns about RCTs were also expressed more generally by sector stakeholders.

In order for TASO to achieve its objectives, its outputs need to have relevance across the whole HE sector. As our survey data and qualitative research has shown, small providers (such as further education colleges and specialist institutions) face particular challenges in relation to evaluation. Responding to this need, TASO has produced guidance and has commissioned a project on impact evaluation with small cohorts (also referred to as the 'small *n*' project). However, in our impact survey, awareness amongst FECs was low, with only 8% of those respondents saying that they were aware of the project to a moderate or large extent. Moreover, in an interview, a participant in one of the 'small *n*' pilots said it would be extremely challenging for smaller providers to implement the methodologies developed as part of the small *n* project without additional support, in terms of both staff time and expertise. Given this context, TASO should continue to reflect on how to address the needs of smaller providers.

5.4.3 Knowledge mobilisation and the usability of TASO's outputs

Both our impact survey and interviews suggest there is a strong appetite for practical guidance on how to plan and evaluate activities related to access and participation. Recent changes to the regulatory environment, particularly the requirements around reporting and evaluation in the new access and participation plans (to be submitted in 2023 and 2024), are fuelling this need. The impact survey indicates that the TASO outputs that had generated the greatest levels of engagement were evaluation guidance and toolkits for providers, with 44% of respondents reporting they had engaged with these outputs.

There are areas where TASO has successfully mobilised knowledge and engaged stakeholders to increase the adoption of certain evaluation methods. In particular, a number of interviewees stated that they had found TASO's materials on Theory of Change useful and reported that they were being used within their HEP. This finding was replicated in the impact survey, in which one of the most common examples of TASO outputs used by providers was its guidance and templates on Theory of Change. In our review of the Wave 1 APPs, seven out of 32 HEPs stated that they were using TASO's Theory of Change resources.

Despite some strong examples of knowledge mobilisation, several interviewees suggested that TASO could improve how it translates many of its research outputs into practical guidance for individuals delivering and evaluating widening participation activities. Our impact survey suggests that practitioners/officers working in access and participation at HEPs are frequently expected to evaluate activities. Moreover, evaluation capacity at providers

varies significantly, with FECs reporting less specialist evaluation capacity for access and participation than universities. Overall, this suggests that many HEPs are likely to need additional guidance and support for their evaluation activities related to access and participation, which TASO is in a strong position to provide through both free, sector-wide guidance and more targeted, paid-for support to providers.

Recognising the importance of evidence mobilisation, TASO has set up a strategic working group to ensure a smooth process for working across its research and evaluation, communications, and evidence mobilisation activities. TASO is also planning to review and improve the use of evidence in strategic communications, with a view to ensuring that evidence reaches a wider audience of stakeholders and that it is easy for them to access, understand and use the evidence base.

In order to better understand and map the needs of its stakeholders, TASO has commissioned a 'knowledge mobilisation' research project focused on improving understanding of the challenges HEPs encounter when generating Type 3 Causality evidence and utilising causal evaluation methods, included quasi-experimental methods and RCTs. Running from September to December 2023, the project has explored barriers to robust evaluation and develop understanding of how to provide effective support to stakeholders, including paid-for services. This study will provide an opportunity for stakeholders across the sector to provide feedback to TASO, via survey and qualitative research methods. The findings will then shape TASO's future strategy.

5.4.4 Positioning of TASO among the landscape of other organisations operating in the access and participation area with missions similar to TASO

TASO is not the only organisation working to build the evidence base or provide guidance to the sector. There are a number of organisations and groups that are also working in the area of evaluation of widening participation and access. They are also contributing to research on interventions and offering practical guidance on how to improve the design and evaluation of activities. However, their approach is often different from that of TASO.

The Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) describes itself as 'a community of practice for those seeking to reduce inequalities in higher education access, participation and progression.'[24] Its network consists of 70 members, including HEPs and organisations delivering and evaluating WP activities. NERUPI's Academic Advisory Board contains many leading academic researchers working in the area of WP and social mobility. As well as providing theoretically grounded resources and hosting events to increase evaluation capacity in the sector, NERUPI explores different approaches to evaluation and supports collaborative research and evaluation projects. The organisation aims to support practitioners, as well as evaluators, through resources such as NERUPI's Framework, which is used by a range of HEPs to guide outreach and WP work. However, as an organisation reliant on income from membership fees and income from training events, they lack the funding and resource to undertake research projects of the same scale as TASO and rely primarily on a model where partners plan and conduct the research and analyse the findings. NERUPI's research outputs, such as its April 2022 report on Uni Connect,[25] tend to

[24] https://www.nerupi.co.uk/about/overview

[25] https://www.nerupi.co.uk/assets/files/UniConnect-Delivery-in-the-pandemic.-Exec-Summary.NERUPI-3.2022.pdf

use mixed methods to help support the case for sustaining and improving interventions. It also includes clear sets of recommendations addressed to different stakeholder groups.

The Evaluation Collective is a group that seeks to build confidence and capacity in the sector in relation to evaluation. Significantly, it positions itself as advocating for the 'democratisation' of evaluation and its manifesto explicitly states that 'all types of evidence can have value' and 'hierarchical assumptions about evaluation methods should be disrupted'.[26] Members of the Evaluation Collective have been at the forefront of the current debate around types of evidence and approaches to evaluation. As well as offering an implicit critique of the conceptual underpinnings of TASO's work, the Collective has also directly challenged TASO's approach. For example, in a March 2023 article in WonkHE, co-chair Liz Austen questioned the value of TASO reports that have concluded that there is a lack of evidence of casual impact for interventions and argues that 'the positivist focus on collating causal evidence is too restrictive.'[27]

Evaluation Collective's first research outputs are for its QAA-funded project on 'wicked issues' which exist within evaluation practices. They consulted HEPs on evaluation issues and solutions and have published several issues of a digital zine. These outputs provide accessible, brief introductions to issues arising from the research, and direct readers to additional resources. They do not assume any prior knowledge of evaluation.

Through its Collaborative Enhancement Projects, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) provides funding for small groups of HEPs to work together on projects to improve students' learning experience. QAA is supporting several projects that are specifically concerned with 'Evaluation and evidence-based decision-making', as well as projects linked to supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds.[28] The projects tend to focus on addressing immediate issues with the sector. The methods used in these projects tend to be empirical enquiries (OfS Type 2 evidence), although some projects discuss elements of causality (Type 3).

In addition to QAA, there are a number of other bodies funding research projects relating to student access and success, which involve HEP partners or use data supplied by HEPs. For example, WonkHE has co-authored reports on Building Belonging in Higher Education with Pearson (October 2022)[29] and Using Data to Better Support Students with Solutionpath (November 2022).[30] These projects are more policy-focused and timely than TASO's outputs. They are also methodologically simpler, using methods such as Action Research (where practitioners systematically research their own practice) and surveys. The reports summarise the research findings, but also provide recommendations and examples for how interventions can be developed. Compared to TASO's projects and outputs, there is less of an emphasis on critically interrogating 'what works' and, instead, a greater focus on practical guidance.

As well as more policy-led reports aimed at professionals working in HEPs and organisations delivering WP activities, there is a large body of academic research concerning access and participation in the UK and related topics, such as social mobility. While it is not possible to

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[26] https://evaluationcollective.wordpress.com/evaluation-manifesto/

[27] https://wonkhe.com/blogs/solving-gaps-in-evaluation-needs-wicked-solutions/

[28] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/collaborative-enhancement-projects

[29] https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf

[30] https://landing.solutionpath.co.uk/Action-Research-Report/Action%20research%20Using%20data%20to%20better%20support%20students.pdf

provide a literature review in this context, some recent publications that directly engage with OfS policy on evaluation and TASO include:

- Mountford-Zimdars A, Burke C and Dent S (eds.) (2022) *Theory of Change: Debates and Applications to Access and Participation in Higher Education*
- Moores E, Summers RJ, Horton M, Woodfield L, Austen L and Crockford J (2023) 'Evaluation of access and participation plans: Understanding what works.' *Frontiers in Education*, 8:1002934
- Naomi Clements (2023) Widening Participation, Evaluation and Performance: Using critical discourse analysis to explore performativity within English higher education access and participation plan (2020–2025), regulatory guidance and accompanying texts**,** *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 24:3.

These examples all acknowledge the importance of evaluation in higher education, but argue for a more 'realist', accessible approach to evaluation in HE and question the emphasis on RCTs and QEDs.

5.4.5 TASO's research and evaluation activities for 2023–2024

Consistent with its role as a What Works Centre, TASO retains an ambition to continue producing original research and evaluations, in order to address gaps in the current evidence. Several factors have shaped TASO's strategy for commissioning projects in 2023–24:

- **The policy landscape and OfS priorities.** In particular, there is a strong focus on helping HEPs to improve their evaluation for APPs
- **Recommendations from existing reports**. Ensuring value for money, by building on existing work
- **The range of projects in TASO's portfolio.** Retaining a broad portfolio across the themes
- **An ambition to use a range of methods**. Exploring a variety of topics and methods, including causal methods and Type 3 Causality evidence
- **The length of TASO's grant.** The current grant from the OfS is for one year, which means projects have been designed to generate date in a one-year window while providing potential for longer-term data generation
- **TASO's current staff resource.** TASO continues to have a small team and needs to be realistic about its capacity, while retaining an ambitious programme of research.

Given that TASO is still in the process of establishing its research and evaluation credentials in the UK, it is unsurprising that it has yet to have an international impact. Although, some more established WWCs have developed an international footprint. For example, EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit has been translated into several other languages; EEF works with other international governments to support the utilisation of EEF resources; and its researchers actively engage with policymakers and stakeholders in other countries.

5.4.6 Conclusions

- TASO has made considerable progress in reviewing the evidence on a range of themes and topics relating to widening participation and access, sharing its findings through a combination of detailed reports and via shorter reviews in its Evidence Toolkit. Through this process, TASO has identified gaps in the evidence across a variety of areas and used this knowledge to inform its commissioning activity.
- TASO has consulted a wide range of sources to map the current evidence and used a 'call for evidence' mechanism to gather examples of evidence from HEPs. While data

from the UK context features most prominently in TASO's evidence reviews, international sources are consulted and cited where relevant. Generally, reports provide a rationale for the selection of sources, but the methods used for the Evidence Toolkit could be more transparent.

- The research and evaluation projects that TASO has commissioned seek to address gaps in the evidence and address the needs of the sector. These projects have only made a modest contribution to the evidence base so far. However, they have provided TASO with opportunities to share information on methodologies and offer some preliminary insights.
- While TASO's focus on Type 3 Causality evidence and causal methodologies seeks to address the lack of causal evidence in relation to access and participation interventions and is broadly consistent with the approach taken by other WWCs, it has created challenges in terms of stakeholder engagement.
- TASO has disseminated its research findings through reports published on its website. However, some stakeholders feel the level of technical detail can make them less accessible for individuals who do not have a background in evaluation and/or causal methodologies. Our survey data and qualitative research suggest that there is a strong appetite for practical guidance relating to evaluation, which encompasses a range of approaches and evidence types.
- TASO has made some progress in relation to knowledge mobilisation. The outputs it has produced on Theories of Change, for example, have been well-received by HEPs. However, there is still a significant need for more practical guidance, especially to support the evaluation work of WP practitioners and smaller providers who lack the time and/or expertise to interpret TASO's research outputs. The current project on knowledge mobilisation should provide further insights into the challenges faced by providers.
- In future, TASO must be realistic in how it approaches its ambition to continue producing robust, causal research on a range of projects. Key considerations are what can be achieved within funding periods, the level of staff resource required and how best to allocate resources, in order to meet the sector's need for robust and useable research.

5.5 Evaluation question 5: To what extent has TASO secured the necessary resources?

This evaluation question concerns whether TASO has secured the resources needed to establish itself as a fully functioning What Works Centre and to achieve its strategic objectives. Given that it focuses on the inception and early development of TASO, the majority of reporting on this question is in the mid-term report. Consequently, there are brief updates on two key areas:

- Securing the commitment of the regulator
- Securing institutional buy-in for TASO's activities.

Other evaluation questions in this impact report examine aspects of TASO's relationship with the OfS and HEPs since the inception of TASO in more detail.

This section also provides an update on TASO's staffing, and whether it has been able to achieve adequate levels of staffing in relation to its objectives and activities.

5.5.1 Securing the commitment of the regulator

As discussed in the mid-term report, TASO has successfully secured the recognition and support of the English HE sector's regulator, the OfS. Moreover, the regulator continues to be TASO's main source of funding. However, this is viewed on all sides as not the most sustainable

model. While the OfS does not set strict objectives for TASO, it has increased its monitoring of TASO during 2023, through more consistent and frequent reporting. TASO, nonetheless, enjoys considerable autonomy over its operations, setting its own priorities and goals.

Based on our impact interviews, both the OfS and TASO continue to view their relationship as positive. TASO's staff maintain close links with their counterparts within the OfS. The CEO has regular meetings with the OfS's Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake. TASO's communications team, for example, also has regular meetings with the OfS's communications team and increase contact when reports are published.

The OfS takes an active role in promoting TASO's outputs and encouraging the sector to engage with its work. TASO resources and reports feature on the OfS website, helping to increase their visibility in the sector. Significantly, the regulator has included more references to TASO's work in their refreshed guidance to HEPs. For example, the regulatory advice on how to prepare the new access and participation plans (APPs), published in March and May 2023, includes a number of references to TASO resources.

Although it has fostered a close relationship with the OfS, TASO is aware of its need to appear and be independent from the regulator, in order to secure the confidence of the sector. TASO is also conscious of the risks related to its reliance on the OfS, in terms of the sustainability of funding and in relation to questions around the longevity of the OfS as the regulator.

5.5.2 Securing institutional buy-in for TASO's activities

Securing institutional buy-in for its activities has always been an important condition for TASO's sustainability and success. As noted in both the baseline and mid-term reports, sector stakeholders felt this was important, but would be a challenge for TASO. Our impact survey indicated that securing buy-in from the higher education sector remains one of the main challenges that TASO faces, in the view of HEPs. 35% of respondents from universities and 22% of respondents from FECs identified it as an issue.

The mid-term report identified several issues that TASO needed to address, in relation to securing buy-in from the sector. TASO has made progress across these areas, since November 2020, but there is still an ongoing need to be mindful of the challenges:

- **Ensuring TASO speaks to all types of providers in the sector**. TASO has made some progress in trying to address the needs of smaller and specialist providers, which face particular challenges in relation to evaluation. Elements of TASO's evaluation guidance, such as questionnaires and Theory of Change resources, are relevant to all providers. Moreover, the 'small *n*' project has focused on exploring methods suitable for evaluating small cohorts. However, in interviews, smaller and specialist providers said that they still lack the expertise and staff resource to conduct these kinds of evaluations and need more practical, targeted support.
- **Perception of TASO's position by the providers**. Many stakeholders suggested in impact interviews that TASO had managed to position itself as working at arm's length from the OfS, despite their close relationship. The high level of independence in research was cited by several interviewees as demonstrating TASO's credibility and independence. However, some interviewees expressed concerns that TASO now has a privileged position, compared to other organisations (e.g. NERUPI, NEON, HEAT) and researchers working in the same space. For example, the OfS's regulatory advice on how to prepare the new access and participation plans (APPs), published in May 2023, references TASO throughout due to their status as the publicly-funded WWC whose research focuses on this area. Moreover, several of our interviewees felt that there was a strong incentive to cite

TASO's work in APPs, given their connection to the regulator. This situation reinforces the importance of TASO acknowledging the role that other organisations and researchers play in the access and participation evaluation landscape.

- **Being very cautious about the risk of not finding positive impact**. By design, TASO's research and evaluation activities challenge orthodoxies and may question the value of certain interventions. However, this carries the risk of pushback from stakeholders, especially where there is a chance of project funding being cut. As already discussed, some stakeholders expressed concerns along these lines in our impact interviews and felt that, in the absence of strong positive results, TASO had drawn negative conclusions. TASO, therefore, needs to focus on how it communicates its evaluation findings with HEPs and other stakeholders and ensure that it is transparent about the basis for its conclusions.

5.5.3 Securing adequate staff resource and establishing teams

Another key area that TASO was still making progress on, when the mid-term report was published, was securing stable and sustainable staffing. Given TASO's continued reliance on grant funding from the OfS, and relative uncertainty concerning future funding streams, staffing levels have had to be realistic and sustainable based on its current financial situation.

TASO has managed to maintain continuity in its senior leadership team for several years, although some role titles have changed. This consistency has contributed to TASO's stability since it became an independent charity in April 2021. It has also facilitated the development of valuable professional relationships between senior staff and external partners.

- Chief Executive Officer: Omar Khan (joined June 2020)
- Deputy Chief Executive Officer: Eliza Kozman (joined January 2020)
- Chief Operating Officer: Rachael Firth (joined July 2021)
- Head of Evaluation: Rain Sherlock (joined December 2020)
- Head of Communications and Engagement: Zoe Arthur (joined October 2019)

TASO now administers its own recruitment processes. When TASO was formally managed by KCL, recruitment happened through the university. As discussed in the mid-term report, following TASO's spin-out as a charity, the majority of staff who were seconded to TASO from the original consortium – KCL, NTU and the BIT – moved on and were replaced by new staff. There were some delays, though, to the recruitment process, due to KCL postponing all recruitment activities during the pandemic, which created workload pressures on staff.

TASO's team has grown since the mid-term report, although, there has also been some normal staff turnover during the past three years. The current composition of TASO's staff team is as follows:

- Communications Manager (joined November 2023)
- Research Programmes Manager (joined September 2020)
- Research Managers x 2 (joined October 2022 and October 2023)
- Research Officers x 2 (joined October 2022 and June 2023)
- Evaluation Officer (joined June 2023)
- Communication and Engagement Coordinator (joined January 2022)
- Project and Communications Assistant (joined July 2023)
- Office Administrator (joined August 2022)

TASO has also participated in the Evidence Quarter's paid internship programme, which aims to provide opportunities for undergraduate students from non-traditional backgrounds to undertake research work experiences at one of the WWCs based in the Quarter. TASO is one of four centres involved and has offered internships in its research and evaluation team. During summer 2022 and summer 2023, TASO recruited two interns for eight weeks. On completion of their internships, the participants wrote short blog posts for the TASO website, which reflected on their experience and included a link to the Evidence Quarter's website.[31]

Although TASO has increased its staffing levels during the past three years, since the mid-term report there appear to have been some issues relating to staff capacity. In our impact interviews, HEP staff who had participated in evaluation projects suggested that TASO had perhaps been too ambitious in its activities, based on its current staffing levels. They observed that there were some delays within projects, which appeared to be due to TASO's staff having too many different projects and responsibilities to juggle. As well as affecting the smooth running of specific project activities, project participants also felt staff being overstretched was responsible for delays to the publication of reports, which they found frustrating.

OfS staff have also suggested, in impact interviews, that TASO's capacity issues have limited their activities in certain areas. TASO also reported that its evidence synthesis activities were affected in 2023 due to a lack of staff resource. The recruitment of a new Evaluation Officer in mid-2023, whose role will include evidence synthesis and collation of good practice, should help to address this issue in the latter part of 2023 into 2024. Given that stakeholders have reported that TASO could improve its work in this area, this is a positive development.

Despite reporting challenges related to resourcing, interviewees from HEPs were generally positive about TASO's staff, stating that they were helpful and knowledgeable. Views on TASO's evaluation partners, such as BIT, were slightly more mixed, however. A couple of interviewees felt that the evaluators could have communicated better and been more receptive to the input of the HEPs collaborating on projects.

TASO staff have been positive about working conditions when speaking to the evaluation team. Moreover, it is taking steps to support its staff and offering them opportunities to provide feedback. There are regular staff meetings and one-to-one meetings. TASO also conducts satisfaction surveys with staff, which can help identify issues impacting staff morale. There has also been an increase in training and development opportunities for staff.

While this section has focused on the creation of TASO and the establishment of its staff team, the longer-term picture and the sustainability of TASO's funding model is discussed in more detail in Section 5.11.1.

5.5.4 Conclusions

- TASO has secured the support and commitment of the OfS, the higher education regulator for England, as discussed in more detail in the mid-term report. TASO and the OfS continue to have a close and productive working relationship.
- TASO has maintained a sufficient level of institutional buy-in for its activities to make it sustainable and has engaged the sector in the co-creation of activities and collaborative projects. However, there are still some areas where TASO faces challenges, most notably

[31] https://taso.org.uk/news-item/reflections-on-a-taso-internship/ ; https://taso.org.uk/news-item/reflections-on-a-research-internship/

in relation to meeting needs across the higher education sector, its role in the higher education regulatory system and issues arising from not finding positive impact or adequate evidence.

- TASO has had some issues with staffing levels, which appear to have affected the smooth running of certain research projects and, more recently, the progress made in evidence synthesis. However, increases in staffing, following resumption of recruitment activities since the end of the pandemic, are likely to address these problems, provided that TASO is realistic about staffing when designing projects and activities.

Impact

5.6 Evaluation question 6: What has been the impact of TASO on higher education providers in terms of their motivation, capability, skills and opportunity to use evidence?

In this section, we present the evidence of the impact TASO has had on higher education providers. The section builds on a range of sources, including a comparison of baseline data (collected and analysed in 2020) with datasets collected in 2023.

The evidence shows that TASO has achieved impact on higher education providers and this impact manifests at different levels within providers. The main areas of impact include the following:

- Overall change of evaluation culture within providers and embeddedness of evaluation in providers' business as usual
- Move towards higher quality and more robust evaluation
- Direct effects on access and participation plans

5.6.1 Impacting the evaluation culture within providers

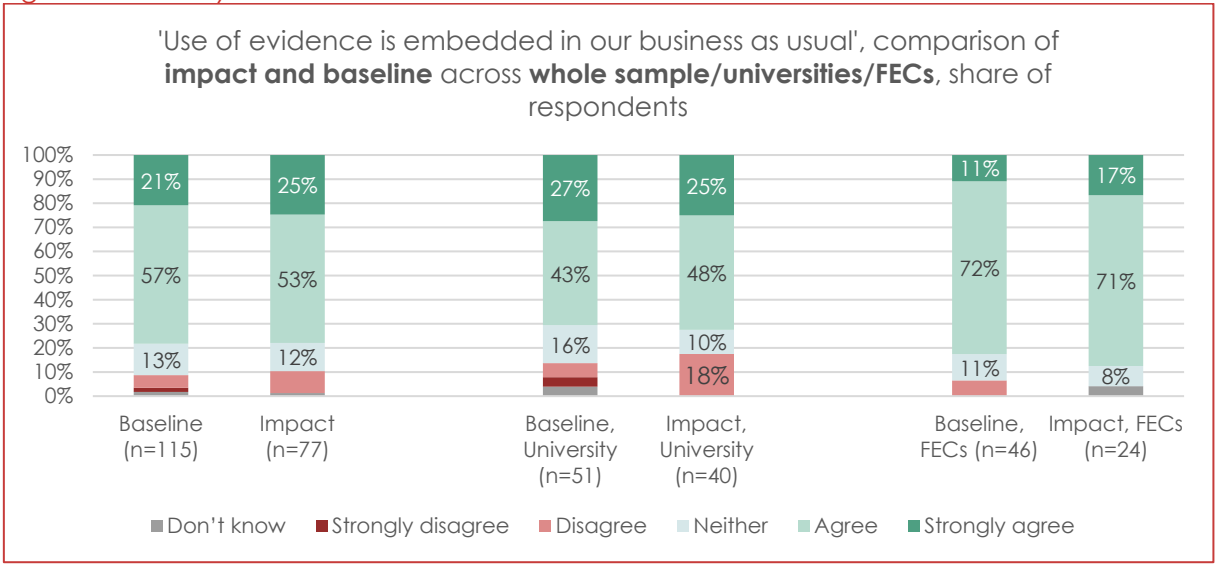
Perhaps the most visible impact of TASO has been on the evaluation culture within providers. All types of collected evidence corroborate our findings that TASO has positively contributed to improving evaluation culture and practices in the higher education sector in England. Although some interviewees added that the change has been slow, there are very clear indications of an overall cultural shift across the sector.

We approached evaluation culture from several different perspectives:

- Embeddedness of evaluation in business as usual by providers
- Investment into evaluation by providers
- Use of theory-based approaches by providers
- Organisational structures within providers with remit over evaluation

Figure 14 presents survey results focusing on the embeddedness of the use of evidence in providers' business as usual. The baseline results showed that a high proportion (78%) of providers agreed or strongly agreed that the use of evidence was embedded in their business as usual. In the impact survey, this share remained the same (but the share of those who strongly agreed has increased by four percentage points). The share of universities strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement in the impact survey (73%) was higher than in the baseline (70%); however, so was the share of universities that disagreed (an increase from 6% to 18%). This suggests there is a more polarised view in the university sector. The share of FECs agreeing or strongly agreeing increased as well (from 83% to 88%).

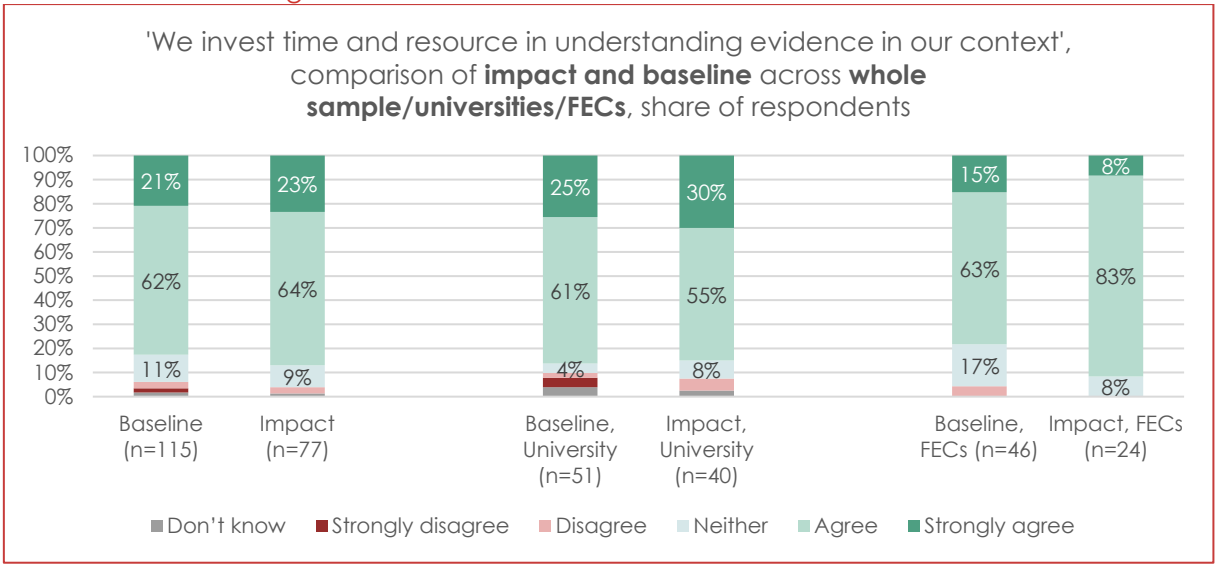
Figure 14 – Survey results about statement related to embeddedness of evidence



Source: Baseline and impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Figure 15 presents the survey results for the statement 'We invest time and resource in understanding evidence in our context'. The figures for strongly agreeing or agreeing were slightly higher in 2023 (87%), compared to 2020 (83%). Universities, in particular, showed some increase in the share of respondents strongly agreeing (30% in 2023, compared to 25% in 2020).

Figure 15 – Survey results about statement related to investment of time and resources in understanding evidence



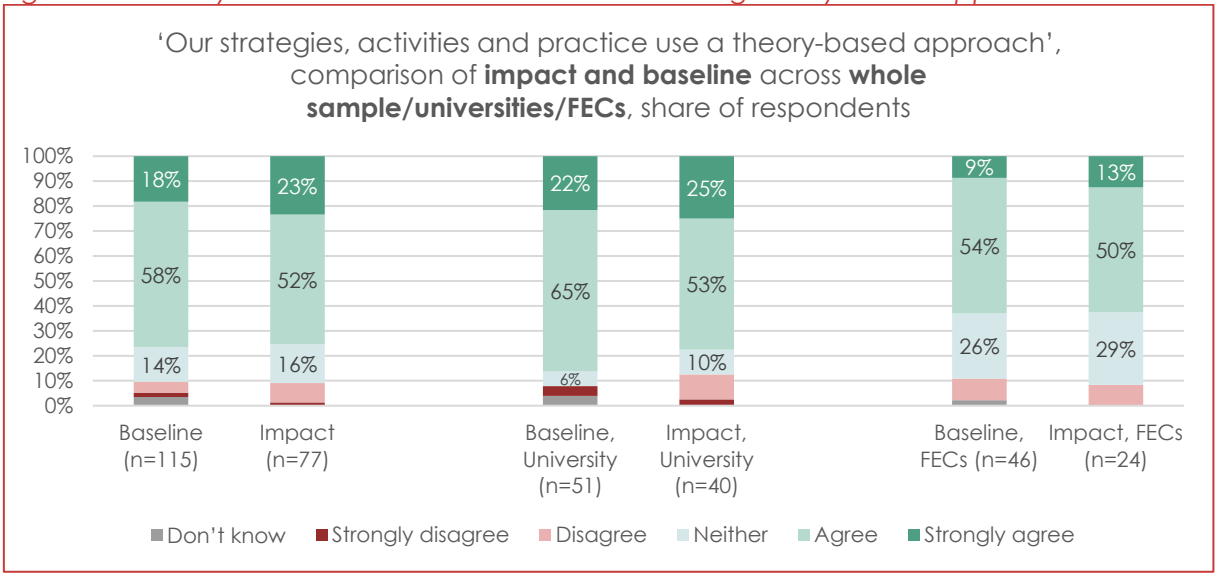
Source: Baseline and Impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Interviews with the OfS, wider sector stakeholders and providers confirmed that providers have become, overall, more conscious of evaluation. Within providers, investments have been made into professionalising and growing their evaluation practices. TASO has significantly contributed to this professionalisation by providing guidance, template, toolkits and platforms for sharing learning and experience among providers. Interviews with providers (particularly with evaluation managers/access and participation managers) pointed to the importance of continuous support for evaluation provided by providers' leadership teams.

Currently, this does not seem to be an issue. Leadership is aware of the importance of evaluation and its explicit place in access and participation plans. The OfS's Director for Fair Access and Participation has been a strong and visible advocate of evaluation and leadership teams of higher education providers have received this message. This, in turn, makes it easier for evaluation teams/access and participation teams within providers, to advocate internally for increased engagement with TASO and its outputs, because the leadership is aware of their usefulness for regulatory compliance.

Figure 16 shows a mixed picture of the use of a theory-based approach by providers. While, overall, the share of those who strongly agreed that this was their providers' practice increased from 18% in 2020 to 23% in 2023, the share of those who agreed decreased from 58% to 52% over the same period. It is important, however, to interpret these results carefully. In the baseline reports, we concluded that the baseline results should not be overstated because some of the evaluation terminology, such as 'theory of change', might have been confusing for some providers during the baseline. Therefore, the baseline results may have been overestimated.

Figure 16 – Survey results about statement related to using theory-based approach



Source: Baseline and impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

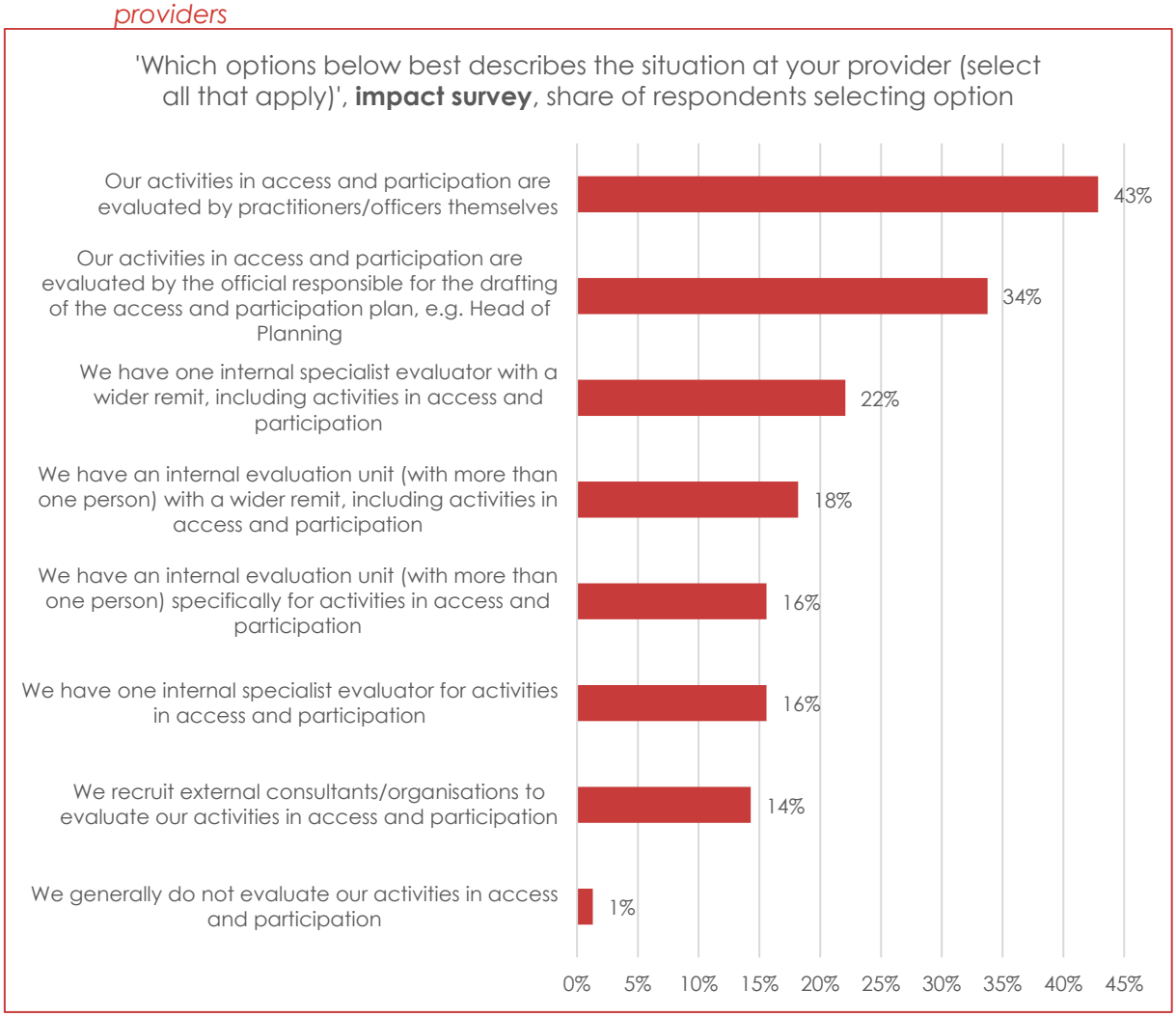
The survey results (Figure 17) document that evaluation conducted by practitioners/officers themselves is the most frequently applied evaluation practice across the sector. In total, 43% of the survey respondents said that this was their evaluation model. Just over a third (34%) of respondents said that evaluations were conducted by those in charge of drafting their APPs. More than a fifth (22%) of responding providers have one internal specialist evaluator with a wider remit, including activities in access and participation.

In the baseline report, we concluded that the interaction between evaluators and/or WP practitioners on one side and academics on the other side within providers was an issue negatively affecting the evaluation culture. Evidence collected in 2023 suggests that structural barriers preventing both groups from engaging in a sustained dialogue and cooperation persist. There is potential for more evaluators and WP practitioners benefiting from the vast academic knowledge around social mobility, but also making use of research methods in evaluation. Academics, in turn, could benefit from accessing valuable access and participation data for their research. The baseline report concluded that the lack of cooperation could be caused by a lack of incentives on both sides.

Throughout the evaluation study, the evaluation team was repeatedly faced with the issue of attribution of observed effects in the higher education sector to TASO. As this report at hand demonstrates, there have been positive measurable developments in the access and participation area, such as around the improvements in evaluation culture within providers and the use of evaluation evidence by them.

Nevertheless, our extensive consultations with the sector show that attributing these effects to TASO only would be incorrect. The OfS, as the higher education regulator, enjoys considerable competence and influence over the sector. At the same time, the OfS has been taking a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in higher education, including updated expectations and guidance on evidence use and evaluation, as well as the very recently updated guidance on access and participation plans.[32] The OfS's increased regulatory effort has taken place in parallel with TASO's activities, which operates in the same area.

Figure 17 – Survey results about options describing evaluation situation at higher education providers



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

[32] Available online at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/.

From our sector consultation, it is apparent that if the OfS had not been as active in this area, the observed effects would not have materialised, or at least not to the current extent. The regulatory pressure exercised by the OfS has been the most powerful driver for the changes in the sector. However, this is not to say that TASO has not played a major supporting role. There was an almost unanimous consensus that TASO has been a critical resource helping providers to comply with regulatory requirements of the OfS. As a representative of one provider put it: *'If TASO had not existed, the necessary changes would have taken us significantly longer and would have required considerably more resources'*. TASO has facilitated the process and provided tools to providers to become compliant with the new regulation.

From the consultation with stakeholders, it has transpired that TASO is seen as having gravitas in the sector. Given the alignment between the OfS's and TASO's priorities, TASO is perceived as focusing on issues that matter to the OfS. It is also considered to provide reassurance to providers that the steps they take are satisfactory for the OfS. However, many stakeholders also mentioned that the speed of change required by the OfS was rather unrealistic.

Our evidence also shows that there is currently a high appetite in the sector for more evidence. Yet, there is a clear hesitation in the sector whether TASO, with its current resources, can satisfy this demand. Several interviewees mentioned that TASO could and should produce more evidence and provide more support to the sector, even with the current amount of available resources.

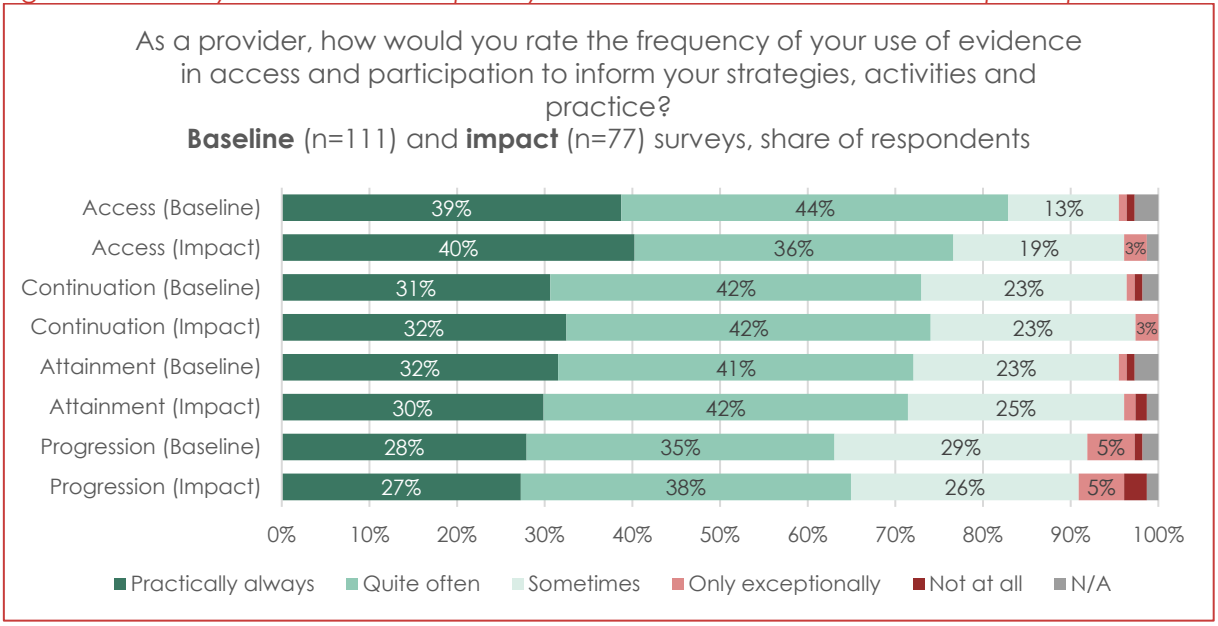
5.6.2 Moving towards higher quality and more robust evaluation evidence

Since its inception, TASO has been continuously advocating for using higher quality and more robust evidence in the higher education sector. We explored this area from the following perspectives:

- The main purpose of the use of evidence by providers
- Frequency of use of evidence in access and participation by providers
- Types of evidence generated and used by providers
- Barriers to using evidence by providers

Survey results indicate that providers continue to use evidence in access and participation across all stages of the student journey. There has been an increase in the use of evidence across three out of four stages of the student journey between 2020 and 2023. Progression was the only stage where the share of respondents who used evidence practically always, quite often or sometimes, decreased from 92% to 91%. However, the share of respondents who used evidence in this stage practically always or quite often increased from 63% to 65%. Activities around access continue to enjoy the highest frequency of use of evidence, compared to the other three stages (continuation, attainment and progression). The results are summarised in Figure 18.

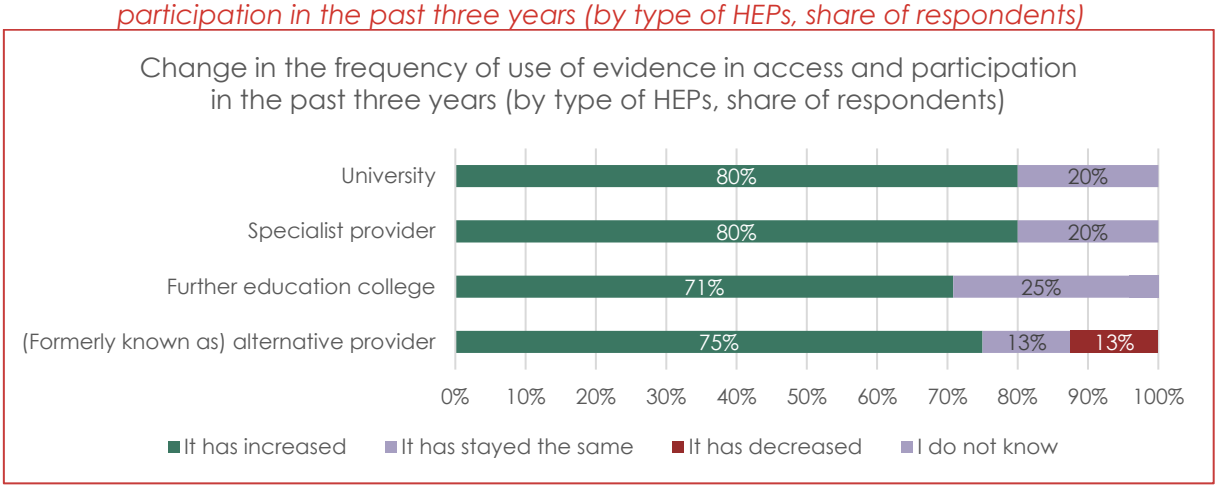
Figure 18 – Survey results about frequency of use of evidence in access and participation



Source: Baseline and impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

On a more positive side, providers self-reported, in spring 2023, a significant increase in the frequency of the use of evidence in access and participation in the past three years. Figure 19 shows there is a very clear increase across all four types of providers (universities, specialist providers, FECs and providers formerly known as alternative providers), and these are very positive results. This is a little bit contradictory to the results presented in Figure 18 and the explanation may be found around a further calibration on the side of providers in terms of their understanding of 'evidence' in access and participation over the past three years.

Figure 19 – Survey results about change in the frequency of use of evidence in access and participation in the past three years (by type of HEPs, share of respondents)

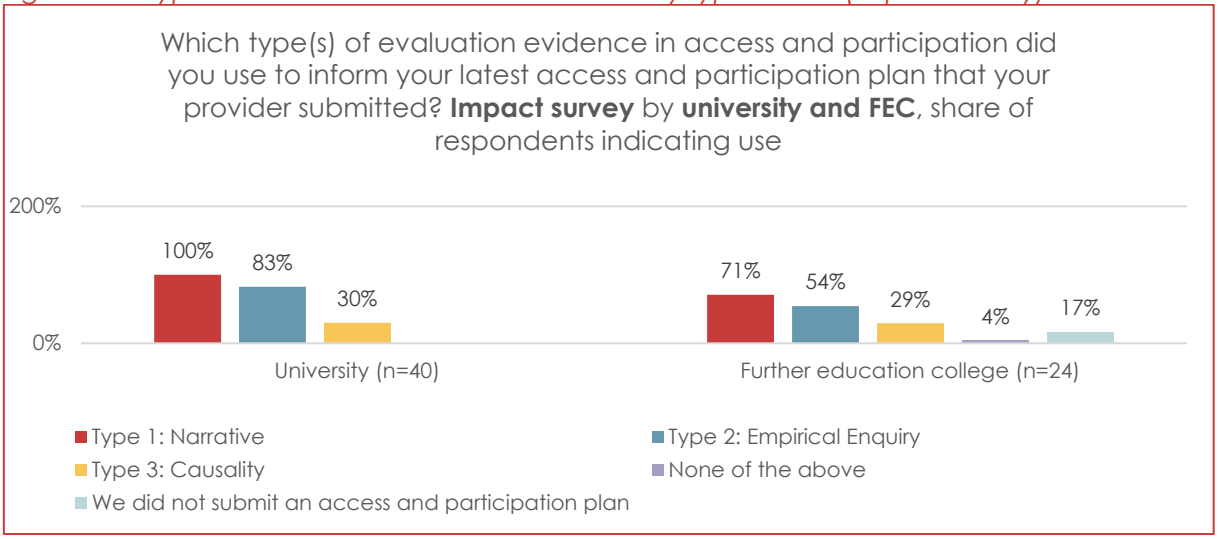


Source: Baseline and impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

In Section 5.1 (evaluation question 1), we presented the OfS types of evidence. The same typology was used in the survey of providers. The survey results presented in Figure 20 indicate that the sector continues to use mostly Type 1 Narrative and Type 2 Empirical Enquiry. The overall levels of the use of the types of evidence recognised by the OfS were higher at universities, compared to FECs. All universities responding to this question indicated they had used Narrative evidence. In total, 83% of the universities responding to the survey used

Empirical Enquiry evidence and 30% used Type 3 (Causality). The picture is different for FECs. Just over 70% of FECs used Narrative evidence, 54% used Empirical Enquiry evidence and 29% used Causality evidence. Although the share of FECs indicating having used Causality evidence is one percentage point smaller than the corresponding share of universities, this is still a surprisingly high share, given the overall lower levels of the use of evidence.

Figure 20 – Types of evidence used to inform APPs by type of HEP (impact survey)



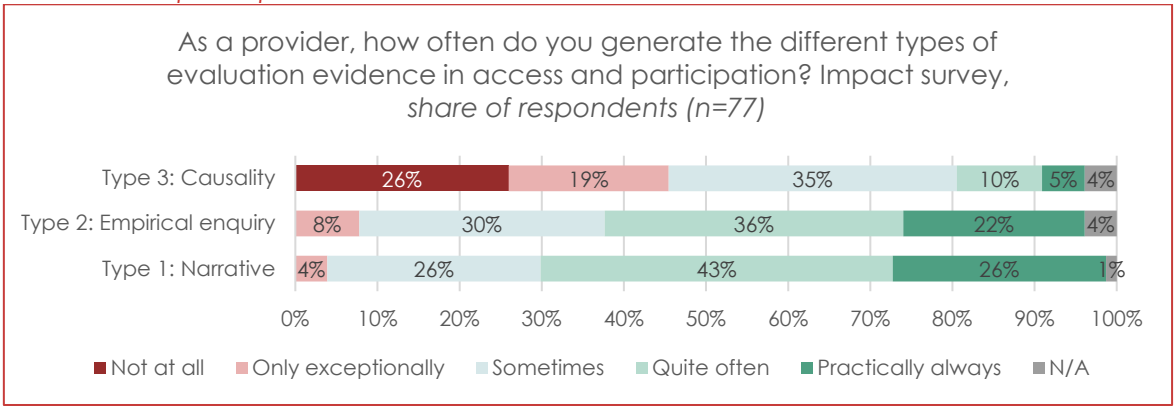
Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis; note: respondents were allowed to select multiple options, therefore the totals do not add up to 100%.

It transpired strongly from interviews with wider sector stakeholders and with providers, that there is a strong scepticism in the sector about generating and using Type 3 Causality evidence and associated randomised controlled trials (RCTs). The main reasons include practicality and logistics around implementation, costliness and ethical concerns. As a result, the sector is not certain that the strong emphasis placed on RCTs by TASO is appropriate and necessary. They also added that the results produced by TASO around RCTs to date have been rather underwhelming due to the challenges outlined above.

Figure 21 complements the picture by an overview of the types of evidence generated by providers. Narrative evidence is generated 'practically always' or 'quite often' by more than two-thirds of respondents (69%). The figure is significantly less for empirical enquiry (58%) and falls to a small minority of respondents (15%) for causality evidence.

It transpired strongly from interviews with wider sector stakeholders and with providers, that there is a strong scepticism in the sector about generating and using Type 3 Causality evidence and associated randomised controlled trials (RCTs). The main reasons include practicality and logistics around implementation, costliness and ethical concerns. As a result, the sector is not certain that the strong emphasis placed on RCTs by TASO is appropriate and necessary. They also added that the results produced by TASO around RCTs to date have been rather underwhelming due to the challenges outlined above.

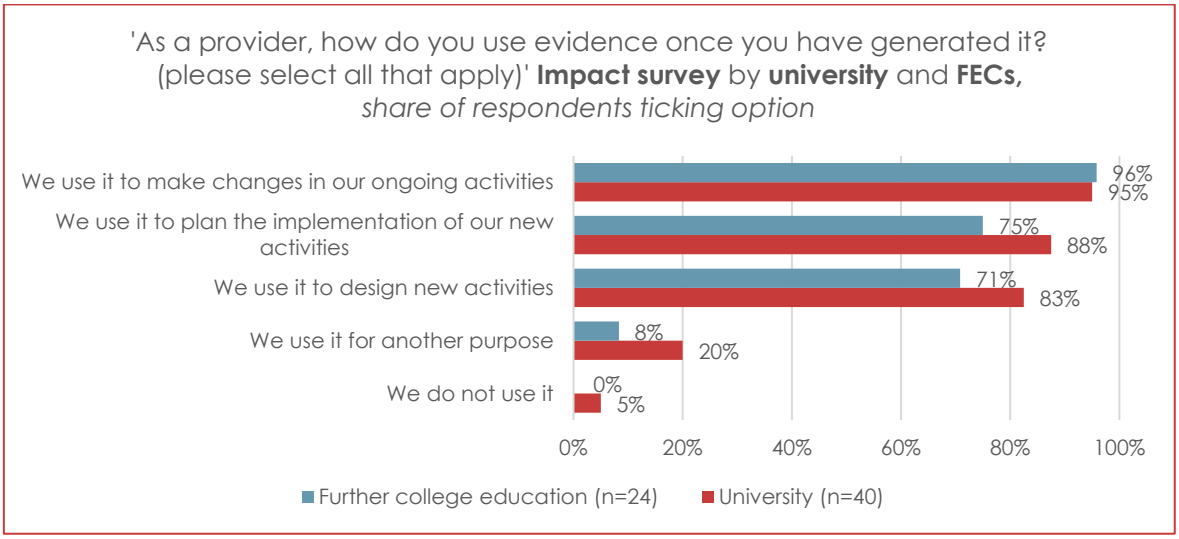
Figure 21 – Survey results about HEPs' generation of types of evaluation evidence in access and participation



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Figure 22 presents survey results about what happens with evidence once it has been generated. Almost all universities and FECs that responded to this question said they use it to make changes in their ongoing activities. Large numbers of them also use it to plan the implementation of their new activities (three-quarters of FECs and 88% of universities).

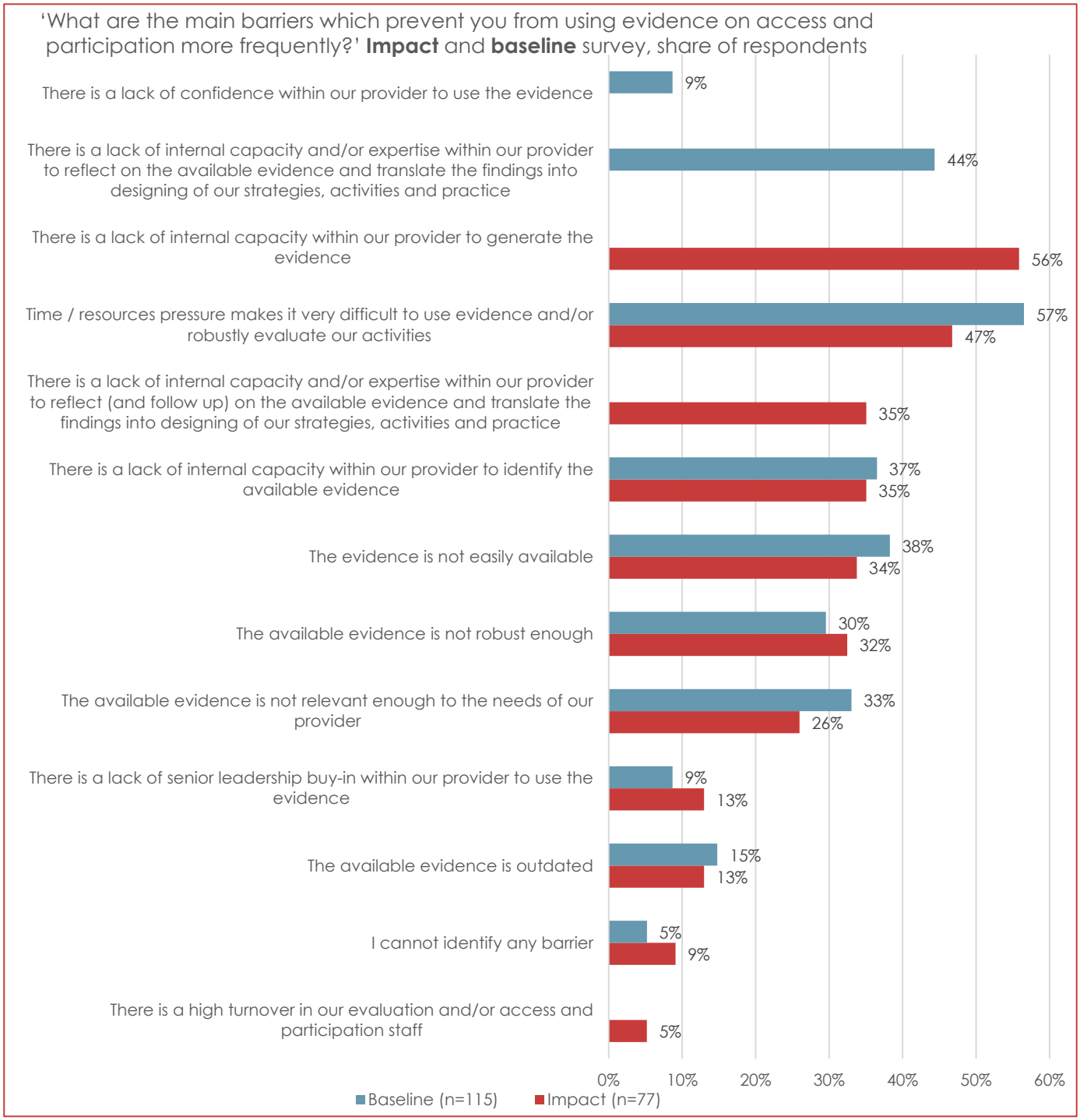
Figure 22 – Survey about what happens with evidence once it has been generated, by type of HEP



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Figure 23 compares the results in relation to common barriers to using evidence and the changes between 2020 and 2023. The results show that, overall, providers faced fewer barriers in 2023, compared to 2020, and these barriers appeared to have been less serious. The importance of availability, relevance and the recentness of evidence as barriers has decreased. In addition, time/resources pressure seems to have been less important barriers in 2023, compared to 2020. Conversely, the robustness of evidence and the lack of senior leadership buy-in appear to have risen in importance over the last three years.

Figure 23 – Survey results about common barriers to using evidence



Source: Baseline and impact surveys of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis; note: a small number of questions were only asked in the baseline / mid-term phase, so no comparison was possible.

5.6.3 *Achieving direct effects on access and participation plan*

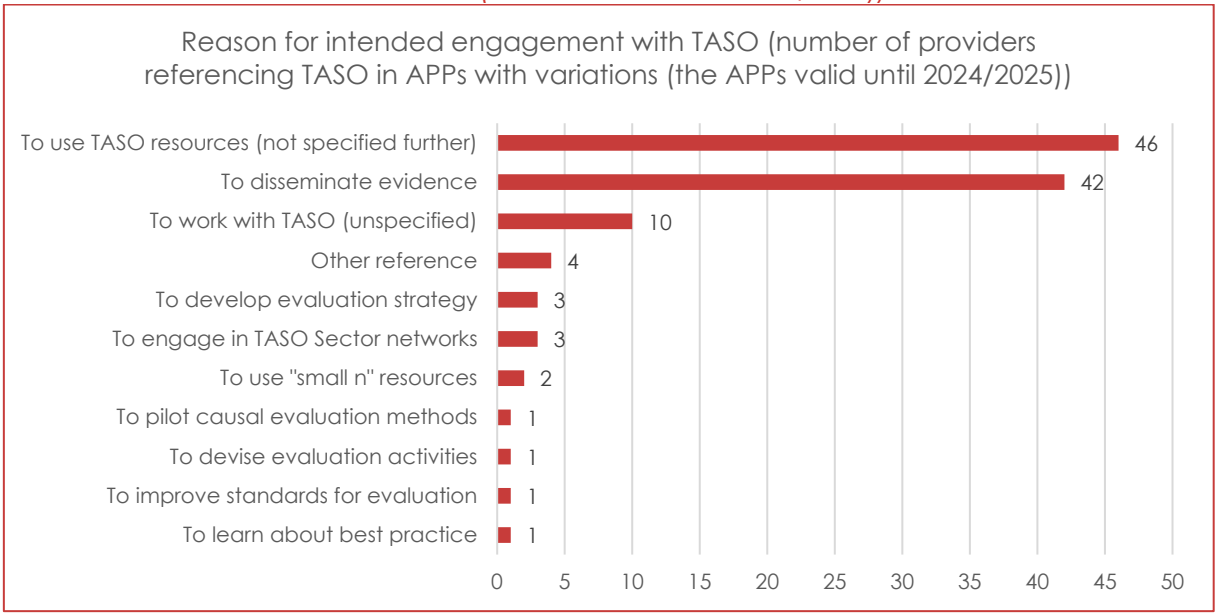
Mentions of TASO in APPs

The acknowledgement of the role of TASO has been explicitly made by providers in their access and participation plans (APPs). We have reviewed mentions of TASO in the following two sets of APPs:

- Variations made to APPs which remain valid until 2024/2025
- 'Wave 1' of new APPs (covering the period of 2024/2025 – 2027/2028). In total, we reviewed mentions in 32 APPs approved at that time by the OfS

Out of 231 APPs with variations (the APPs valid until 2024/2025), 114 providers made references to TASO (49.4%), as illustrated in Figure 24. In total, 15 providers (6.5%) mentioned explicitly they have already been using TASO resources. A number of providers referred to TASO as 'Evidence and Impact Exchange' (EIX), which was a title used in the very early stages of TASO operations. This is understandable because the content of the original 'pre-2024–25' APPs had pre-dated the establishment of TASO as an independent entity.

Figure 24 – Reason for intended engagement with TASO (number of providers referencing TASO in APPs with variations (the APPs valid until 2024/2025))



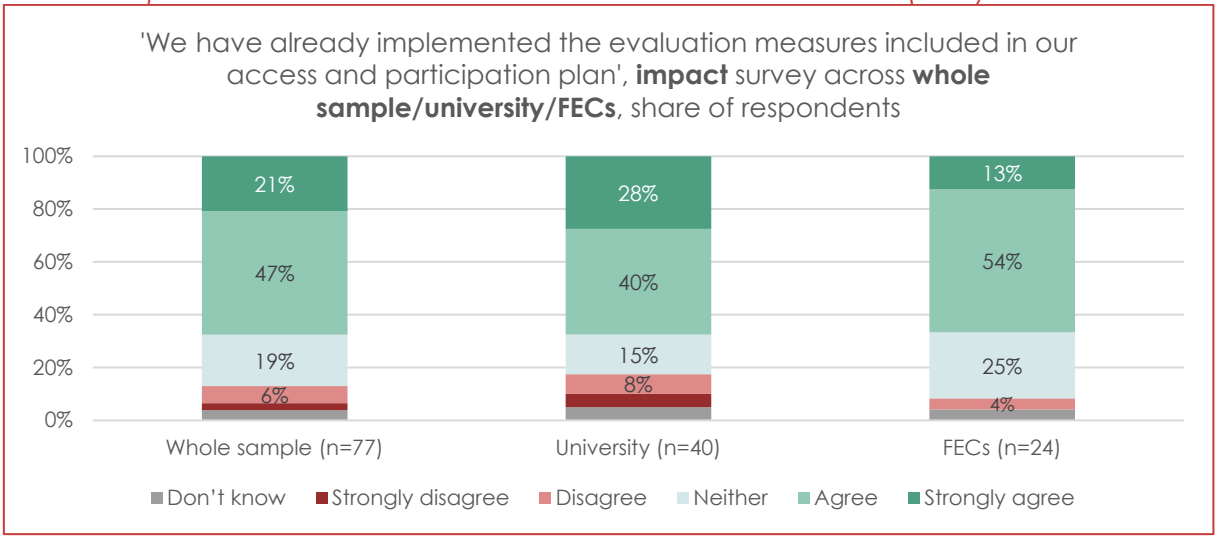
Source: Access and participation plans, data provided by OfS

The analysis of the 'pre-2024–2025' APPs with variations shows that if providers mentioned their past engagement, or intentions for future engagement, with TASO in their APP, this was mostly without specific detail. Out of the 114 providers referencing TASO, 46 were not specific about the (future intended) use of TASO resources, and a further ten providers mentioned that they would work with TASO without further information. A relatively high number of providers (42) committed to disseminating evidence with the help of TASO.

Only a small minority of providers specified that they intended to use TASO resources to help with development of their evaluation strategies, to engage with TASO Sector Networks, to use 'small *n*' resources, to pilot causal evaluation methods, to devise evaluation activities, to improve standards for evaluation, and to learn about best practice.

The results of the survey of providers (Figure 25) shows that 68% of the survey respondents in 2023 have already implemented the evaluation measures included in their APPs. This share is very similar for both universities and FECs.

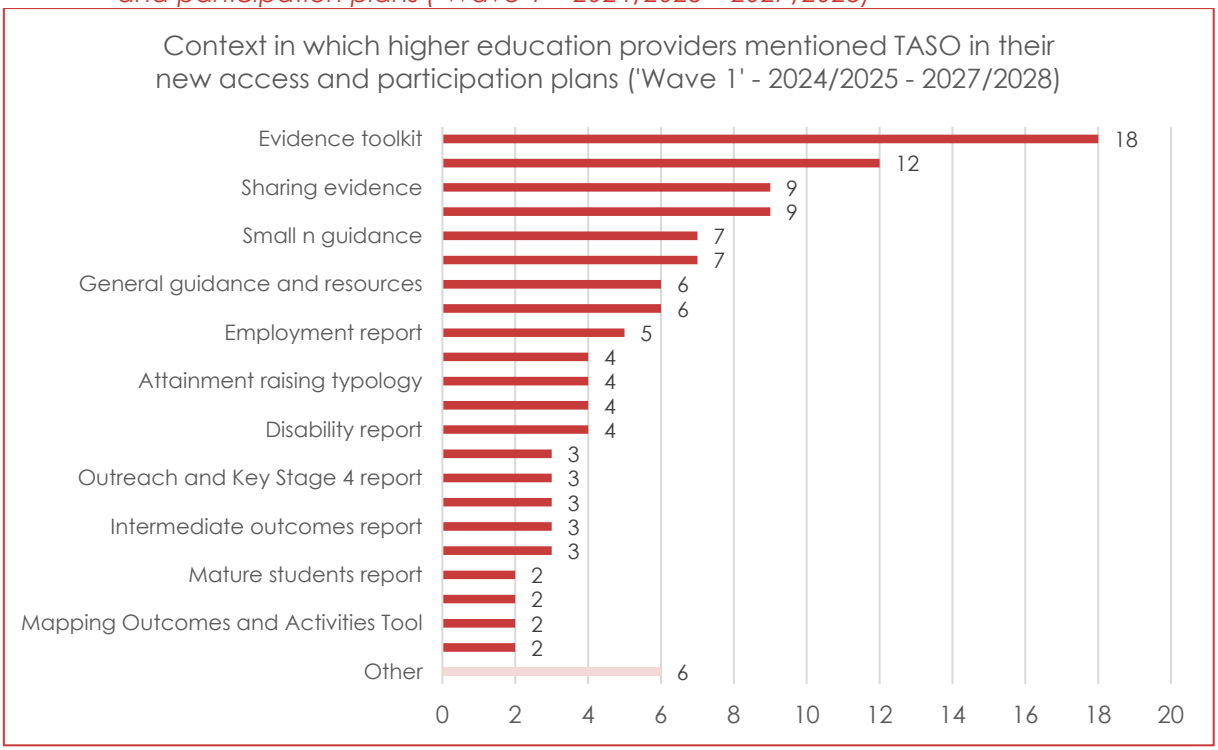
Figure 25 – Survey results about statement related to whether providers have already implemented the evaluation measures included in their APPs (2023)



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Looking at the new APPs, the review of 'Wave 1' (Figure 26), 28 out of 32 APPs mention TASO (87.5%). The largest number of mentions (14) have been made in relation to TASO's Evaluation Toolkit, followed by the curriculum reform report (12).

Figure 26 – Context in which higher education providers mentioned TASO in their new access and participation plans ('Wave 1'– 2024/2025 – 2027/2028)

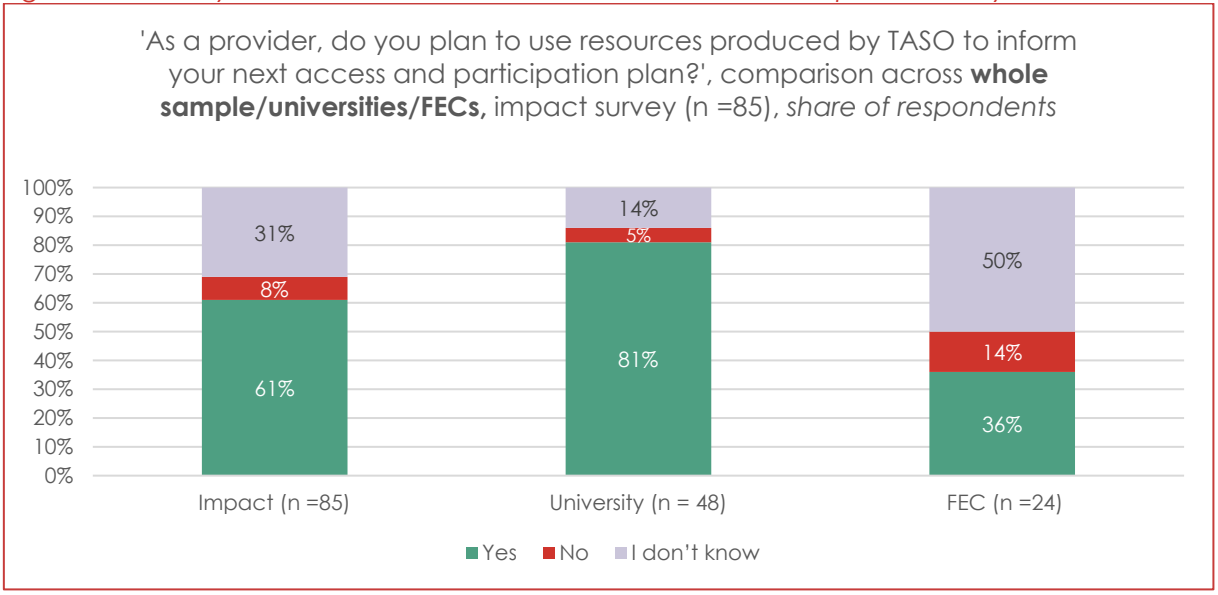


Source: Access and participation plans, data provided by the OfS

Qualitative research broadly confirms the review of APPs. The most frequently mentioned outputs used by providers were those around Theory of Change (there was no single negative piece of feedback on this output), Evaluation Toolkit, and the 'small *n*' guidance. Although a majority of consultees were positive about the usefulness of the 'small *n*' guidance, there were several stakeholders, who can be considered to be 'small' providers, who found it difficult to fully engage with the guidance and use it in their context. This was mostly because the methodology was seen as too complex and difficult to understand, with limited advice on applicability in the context of different providers.

In terms of informing APPs in the future, there is hesitation in the FEC sector about using TASO's outputs for this purpose. Figure 27 shows that 61% of survey respondents plan to use resources produced by TASO to inform their next APP, whilst only 8% do not. There are significant differences between the two main provider types. A vast majority of universities (81%) plan to use TASO resources; only 36% of FECs plan to do so. This, again, highlights the importance of TASO's continuous engagement and work with the FEC sector.

Figure 27 – Survey results about future intentions to use resources produced by TASO



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Engagement with TASO's projects and outputs

There are two main ways in which providers engage with TASO's projects and outputs:

- **As an audience for the outputs, reports and participants in TASO's events**. This is more a one-way relationship where providers are on the receiving side of TASO's outputs. Typically, TASO publishes its outputs and reports on its website and disseminates via various channels.
- **As participants in TASO's research projects**. This is qualitatively a different relationship, and it is closer to a partnership where the provider collaborates with TASO (and potentially other providers) on a specific research project. In addition to having access to the published output (like in the previous case), engagement with the TASO team allows the participating providers to gain more practical advice, which is more relevant to their own context, and to have a first-hand opportunity to speak with TASO's evaluation specialists. However, this option is not accessible to all providers, and it often requires submission of a proposal which needs to be successful in competition with other providers. Furthermore, we have observed distinct levels of participation in TASO projects. Some participants have

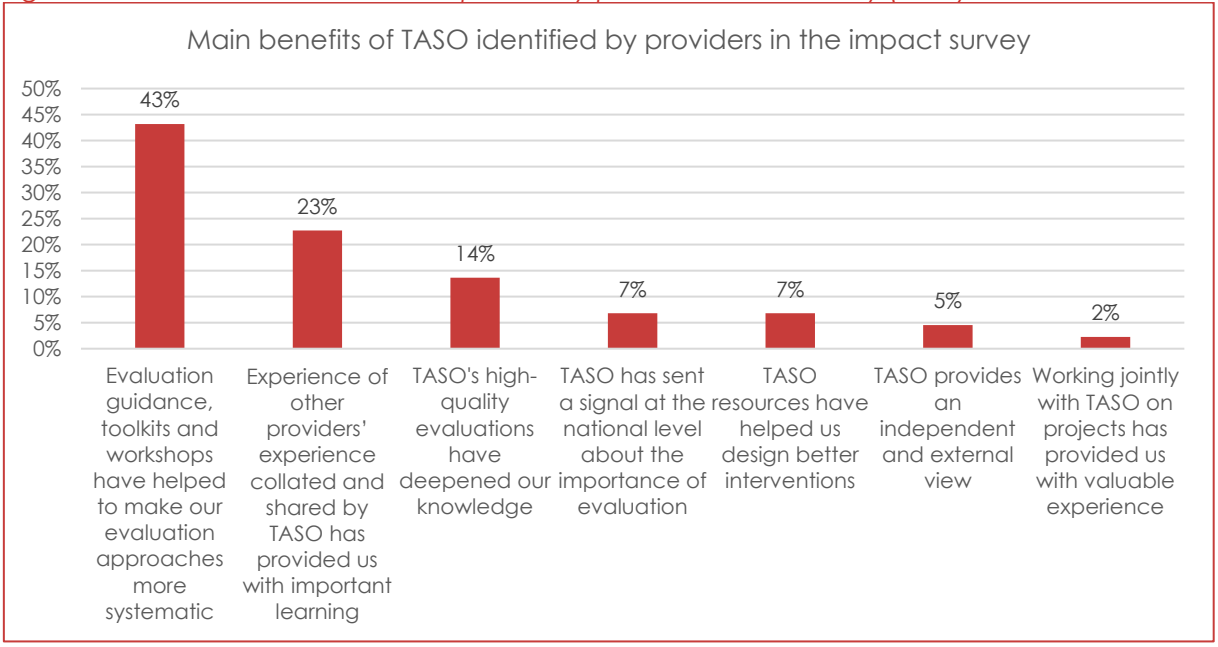
played more active roles than others. While some have taken up some co-creation roles, other participating providers have been less active, often limiting their engagement to supplying the project team with data.

Looking at TASO outputs more generally, we can draw the following observations from our review and feedback from the sector:

- The Theory of Change and Evaluation Toolkits are seen as very practical sources, widely known across the sector, and with a growing number of users.
- TASO research and evaluation reports are seen as of a very high quality and are regularly accessed online by many providers. However, we note some of the reports do not include recommendations for providers advising them on possible improvements in the methodology, and conclude that further research is necessary. In addition, some of TASO's reports do not offer recommendations advising providers how access and participation interventions could be improved based on the conducted research, therefore limiting the practicability of such reports for providers.
- The feedback from widening participation practitioners was that TASO reports tend to be targeted at a more academic audience, making them less comprehensible for and useable by many practitioners. Furthermore, several voices pointed to the necessity to contextualise TASO reports carefully, which is not always properly performed.

Figure 28 provides an overview of the main benefits of TASO for providers identified in the survey. The most frequently mentioned benefits confirm the findings formulated so far. They stemmed from the use of TASO's evaluation guidance, toolkits and workshops, which have been helping providers make their internal evaluation approaches more systematic.

Figure 28 – Main benefits of TASO reported by providers in the survey (2023)



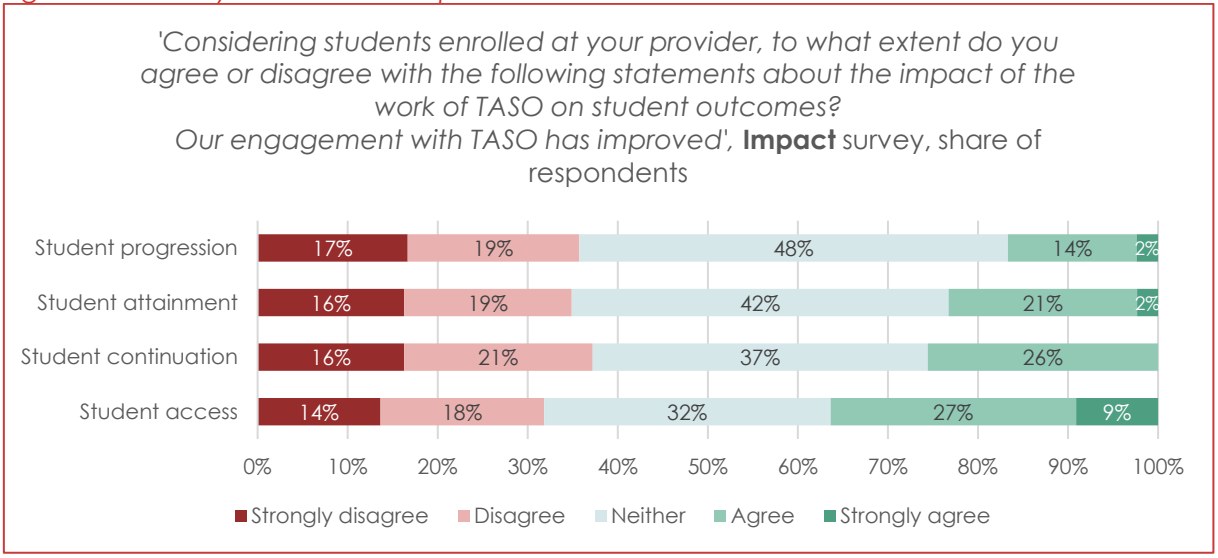
Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

Impact of TASO on students

As part of the evaluation, we have explored whether any signs of impact on students can be identified. There was a general consensus among interviewees that it is too soon for such impact to materialise. This is in line with the results of the survey (Figure 29). In total, 36% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that TASO had improved student access.

However, these results should be interpreted with caution because of the early stages of this impact.

Figure 29 – Survey results about impact of TASO on student outcomes



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

We have collected further qualitative evidence on the impact of TASO on student outcomes. Around half of the comments were generally positive about its impact in the future. Providers were positive about applying the lessons learnt in their next APPs.

> *'We have applied what we have learned through TASO (theories of change, small n pilot) to our access work, which we believe can only improve what we offer through this work. Through learning how other institutions are evaluating their student success (continuation and attainment) work, we have begun thinking differently about how we capture our impact in this area, which is likely to result in impact that has not yet materialised through how this is formalised in our new APP.'* – A survey respondent

5.6.4 Conclusions

- The most visible impact of TASO has been on the evaluation culture within providers. Within providers, investments have been made into professionalising and growing their evaluation practices. TASO has significantly contributed to this professionalisation by providing guidance, template, toolkits and platforms for sharing learning and experience among providers.
- Evaluation conducted by practitioners/officers themselves is the most frequently applied evaluation practice across the sector.
- The interaction between evaluators and/or WP practitioners on one side and academics on the other side within providers continues to be an issue negatively affecting the evaluation culture. Structural barriers preventing both groups from engaging in a sustained dialogue and cooperation persist.
- It would not be correct to attribute all the positive effects and trends reported above to TASO only. The OfS's increased regulatory effort has taken place in parallel with TASO's activities, which operates in the same area. TASO has been a critical resource helping providers to comply with regulatory requirements of the OfS, and the OfS has been steering providers to use TASO's outputs.

- There is currently a high appetite in the sector for more evidence. Yet, there is a clear hesitation in the sector whether TASO, with its current resources, can satisfy this demand.
- Since its inception, TASO has been continuously advocating for using higher quality and more robust evidence in the higher education sector. There has been a (self-reported) significant increase in the frequency of the use of evidence in access and participation in the past three years across all four types of providers (universities, specialist providers, FECs and alternative providers), and these are very positive results.
- The sector continues to use mostly Type 1 Narrative and Type 2 Empirical Enquiry evidence. There is a strong scepticism in the sector about using Type 3 (Causality) evidence and associated randomised controlled trials (RCTs). The main reasons include practicality and logistics around implementation, costliness and ethical concerns.
- Providers faced fewer barriers to using evidence in 2023, compared to 2020, and these barriers appeared to have been less serious. The importance of availability, relevance and the recentness of evidence as barriers has decreased.
- A vast majority of universities (81%) plan to use TASO resources, but only 36% of FECs plan to do so. This, again, highlights the importance of TASO's continuous engagement and work with the FEC sector.
- There are two main ways in which providers engage with TASO's projects and outputs: As an audience for the outputs, reports and participants in TASO's events, and as participants in TASO's research projects. The latter option is not accessible to all providers, and it often requires submission of a proposal which needs to be successful in competition with other providers.
- The Theory of Change and Evaluation Toolkits are seen as very practical sources, widely known across the sector, and with a growing number of users. TASO research and evaluation reports are seen as of a very high quality, and are regularly accessed online by many providers. However, we note some of the reports do not include recommendations for providers advising them on possible improvements in the methodology, and conclude that further research is necessary. Overall, TASO reports tend to be targeted at a more academic audience, making them less comprehensible for and useable by many practitioners.

5.7 Evaluation question 7: What has been the impact of TASO on the other sector stakeholders?

5.7.1 Findings

In this section, we synthesise the available evidence on the impact TASO has achieved on the other sector stakeholders. For the purpose of this report, 'the other sector stakeholders' are considered to be other organisations that produce research and analysis of relevance to access, student success and progression in higher education. This section, therefore, does not cover the impact on providers themselves (see Section 5.6, above), and effects of TASO on the higher education regulator and policymaking (see Section 5.9, below). In comparison with the assessment of impact of TASO on providers, there is less evidence available about the impact on the other sector stakeholders, and the evidence comes mostly from qualitative research conducted with wider sector stakeholders, as well as with providers, TASO and the OfS.

Several interviewees mentioned that TASO is seen as the 'gold standard' in the sector, and one interviewee even compared TASO to being 'the objective truth'. There was also a general agreement that TASO has provided a structure to providers to robustly respond to the

OfS's requirements. The evidence shows that TASO has developed long-term working and professional relationships with a range of important stakeholders, such as with mission groups, service providers and the third sector. We have identified some specific pieces of impact. For example, Figure 30 below shows the outcome of the joint work on a new student questionnaire.

Figure 30 – New survey questionnaire for evaluating access and student success programmes

New survey questionnaire for evaluating access and student success programmes

TASO worked together with HEAT and the Brilliant Club on new survey questionnaires helping providers evaluate their access and student success programmes. Importantly, the questionnaire scales have been embedded into the HEAT database, allowing HEAT members (and the whole sector) to build up national data on intermediate outcomes, by using consistent measures across the sector.

Source: Technopolis based on interviews and https://taso.org.uk/news-item/launching-our-access-and-success-questionnaire-asq/.

Overall, based on our consultation of wider sector stakeholders, it appears that TASO enjoys a relatively high level of reputation. However, certain hesitation has been shared which relates to the following:

- **TASO being agnostic about qualitative research**. The consultees felt that qualitative evidence in access and participation is very important to consider and use in evaluation. One of the main reasons provided was its relative abundance, in comparison with highly robust quantitative evidence, such as QED and RCT. Examples of where qualitative evidence could be of use are included in the quote from an interviewee below.

  'I would like to see it [TASO] take a broader approach, valuing qualitative evidence, respecting the evidence of demand. Typical examples might be the more general widening participation work, advising on the choice of GCSE and A levels, working with primary schools, working with younger pupils at secondary level, doing finance talks. Realistically, it is very difficult to provide the evidence which TASO would respect for issues such as these.' – A wider sector interviewee

- **TASO not reaching out to all parts of the sector and to all important levels of hierarchy within providers**. Wider sector stakeholders, once again, emphasised the need for TASO to reach out to small providers more effectively than it is the current case. Furthermore, they made a point about the necessity to reach to senior leadership within providers.
- **TASO's outputs seen as too technical**. Confirming the findings in Section 5.6 (previous evaluation question), wider sector stakeholders were in agreement about TASO often producing too technical outputs.

More specific feedback was shared by two wider sector stakeholders. The first one was an organisation with its own approach to assessing the quality of evaluation evidence in the area of access and participation. Their engagement with TASO has been less close than they would have hoped, and currently the relationship does not seem to be working well, despite both TASO and this organisation working in the same area. Suggestions on how TASO might work together with this organisation and other relevant actors in the sector have not been acted upon. The second organisation represents a specific type of providers, and their main point of feedback was about the usefulness of TASO's outputs for this specific type of providers.

Quasi-experimental designs (QEDs) were perceived as a missed opportunity for the sector by a few interviewees. The interviewees pointed to an abundance of data available to

universities. However, this is coupled with the lack of capacity and capability to analyse it and use it to improve access and participation interventions. Furthermore, members of staff at providers who have the expertise to implement QEDs are in high demand for their quantitative skills, and often take up better paid positions in the private sector.

5.7.2 Conclusions

- TASO is generally seen as an authoritative voice in the sector.
- TASO has developed long-term working and professional relationships with a range of important stakeholders, such as with mission groups, service providers and third sector.
- TASO demonstrates a certain level of agnosticism about qualitative research.
- TASO appears not to be fully reaching out to all parts of the sector and to all important levels of hierarchy within providers.
- TASO's outputs are seen as too technical.

5.8 Evaluation question 8: How has TASO contributed to realisation of the OfS's broad strategic objectives and key performance measures?

5.8.1 TASO and alignment to the strategy objectives of the OfS

As the independent regulator for higher education in England, the OfS has four regulatory objectives[33] which are that all students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake higher education:

- are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education
- receive a high-quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure
- are able to progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold their value over time
- receive value for money

Access and participation plans (APPs) represent one of the regulatory tools the OfS uses to support its objectives as they set out how HE providers will provide equality of opportunity for students to access, success in and progress from higher education. In October 2022 the OfS published an updated Regulatory notice on access and participation plan guidance which included information on what is needed within the plans. Although this will not come into force until the 2024/2025 academic year, a first set of volunteers submitted new plans, using this new guidance (referred to as 'Wave 1'). The guidance sets out a requirement to outline evidence-informed intervention strategies as well as plans to evaluate. In addition, the guidance includes reference to the expectation of providers to share its evaluation evidence and thus links clearly to the intended outcomes of TASO (see Theory of Change, Figure 2).

According to the TASO commissioning plan for the OfS (March 2023), all the projects and work undertaken by TASO are relevant to APPs and the OfS's approach to regulating inequality of opportunity in higher education. In particular, TASO's work aims to help higher education providers to do better evaluation. This includes, but is not limited to, some of the more complex work undertaken by TASO with RCTs and supporting smaller providers.

[33] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/

A recent evaluation of this first wave of APPs[34] referenced TASO as a source of evidence for their intervention strategies and as a source of guidance for how to evaluate strategies. TASO is indicated as one way in which providers have improved the quality of evaluation and this is corroborated by the inclusion of references in the APPs. There are clear signs that the evaluation culture is changing in higher education providers – the interviews with stakeholders showcase the increase in evaluation capacity, particularly in the larger higher education providers. In addition, there is a growing buy-in from senior personnel (although less so with the leadership). (As referenced in the evaluation question on sustainability.)

The Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (the EORR) is also supporting the OfS's regulatory function through the identification of 12 sector-wide risks that may affect a student's opportunity to access and succeed in higher education. Providers are expected to consider the EORR in their APPs (access and participation plans): to undertake ongoing analysis of their own context and missions to identify the most serious risks to equality of opportunity, and outline measures to mitigate these risks. TASO has also supported this through producing a rapid evidence review to inform the development of the EORR. There was also reference, in the recent evaluation of the first wave of APPs, to a missed opportunity for TASO's findings to be more incorporated into the EORR, including reasoning around why risks are linked to certain groups (through the outputs of a rapid literature review).

Overall, according to interviews with the OfS, TASO has found acceptance in the sector, and future plans to ensure that more evidence is made available to the sector endorses the role that TASO plays. A potential question is whether, going forward, this role needs to be played by TASO or could equally be fulfilled by other bodies or networks (such as NERUPI). The relationship between the OfS and TASO, and its independence from the regulator, is discussed in more detail in Section 5.5.

5.8.2 TASO's contribution to the realisation of the key performance measures (KPMs)

With respect to the KPMs, there have been changes over time. In 2021, as part of the evaluation, data was collected for a previous KPM '*The proportion of access and participation plans that contain robust evaluation methods, focused on impact and leading to improved practice*.' This indicator was removed in 2022 by the OfS when the number of KPMs was reduced from 26 to 11. At the time it was removed, there was no target set for the indicator and it was still seen as 'in development'. In principle, the collection of data on this indicator only gave a snapshot in time of the state of the use of evidence for the OfS and thus did not materially support its performance measurements. However, this evaluation asked a question in the mid-term evaluation (2021), and again at the impact evaluation (2023), on the type of evaluation evidence used to inform the latest access and participation plans.

Both evaluations reported on the use of three different types of evidence (Type 1 Narrative; Type 2 Empirical Enquiry; Type 3 Causality). In both 2021 and 2023, almost every higher education provider was using narrative evidence in their plans and the vast majority also used empirical enquiry. Only a small proportion were using causality type evidence. There is little change in the type of evidence used from 2021 to 2023. This is discussed in Section 5.6.2 on the impact.

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[34] Office for Students, Access and Participation Evaluation Report, December 2023, Shift Learning: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/evaluation-of-ofs-reforms-to-regulating-equality-of-opportunity-wave-one-interviews-research-report/

There are new KPMs for the OfS which include four on equality of opportunity, but none related to the use of evidence. The new KPMs in theory can be influenced by the work of TASO since the use of good evidence should, in the longer term, lead to better equality of opportunity, access, success and progression. This is not something for which evidence can be collected as part of this evaluation.

Looking more recently at the OfS under its current Director for Fair Access and Participation, there is a commitment to regulating equality of opportunity and thus impetus to use good evidence to support fair access, participation and success. The OfS strategy for 2022–2025 has two main areas for focus: quality and standards and equality of opportunity.[35] However, at the same time as focusing on raising attainment, there has been a cut in Uni Connect's funding from £60 million in 2021–2022 to £30 million in 2023–2024. The OfS has also come under scrutiny with respect to its relationship with the higher education sector, both providers and students[36] – recommendations have been made to improve communication, consider the burden placed on higher education providers, and to engage more in the context around data and share good practice.

5.8.3 Conclusions

- TASO remains aligned, and contributes to, the realisation of OfS's broad strategic objectives. However, the contribution to the KPMs is less relevant for this final impact stage due to changes implemented since the start of the evaluation.
- TASO only contributes indirectly to KPMs focused on equality of opportunity.

5.9 Evaluation question 9: What has been the impact of TASO on policymaking in terms of interventions and initiatives to support access, student success and progression using high-quality evidence?

The Theory of Change for TASO indicates a role in advocacy and lobbying which leads to legitimacy and trust in the sector and ultimately an ability to affect policy. Currently there is little evidence to suggest that TASO has had a direct impact on policymaking, in what has been a relatively unsettled period in UK politics.

In the last four years there has been an unusually high level of turnover in the Cabinet. As well as three UK Prime Ministers, there have been several cabinet reshuffles. Since July 2019, there have been six Education Secretaries and five Universities Ministers. A lack of continuity in these roles has had an impact on the development and implementation of education policy.

The Education Secretary, at the time of this research, Gillian Keegan, in her March 2023 guidance to the OfS, emphasised the importance of skills and employability, stating 'A three-year degree is not the only route to success'. She highlighted Higher Technical Qualifications (including Level 4 and Level 5 courses) and degree apprenticeships. Although there was an agreement that widening participation access remains a priority, she linked success for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to a variety of pathways, including vocational education, rather than just university.

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[35] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/our-strategy/

[36] House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee: Must do better: the Office for Students and the looming crisis facing higher education, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldindreg/246/24602.htm

Widening participation was considered in relation to the expectation that universities continue working with schools to raise attainment and aspiration. In addition, the government is still committed to the roll out of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement[37] from 2025 (an outcome from the Augar Review of 2019).[38] The government has also lowered the fees cap for 'classroom based' foundation years (humanities, business, social sciences) to £5,760 from 2025–6, to bring fees in line with Access to HE Diplomas taught at FECs.[39] At the same time, universities are predicted to cut their foundation year offer which could disproportionality impact students from underrepresented backgrounds.

In November 2021, the government announced a new approach to access and participation[40] which considers streamlining in the planning of monitoring and evaluation through access and participation plans. This led to the OfS setting out priorities in February 2022 which included 'improving the quality and volume of evaluation of access and participation plan activity'. This is also referenced in the House of Commons research briefing (31 January 2023) on 'Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England'.[41]

In the OfS's Business Plan 2023–2024,[42] there is an expectation for universities and colleges to evaluate their activity to establish what works to improve equality of opportunity for all students. TASO's own research and evaluation strategic plan sets out a theory of change for how it will impact on the broader policy landscape. Through the evidence synthesis and research projects there is a direct route to policy advocacy, which in turn can support the use of evidence by policymakers and thus the system as a whole. This is not necessarily enacted as a primary function of TASO but nevertheless remains an important component of its remit as a What Works Centre.

With regard to activity in the area of policy influence, TASO has KPIs which include policy and communication (meeting with Ministers and senior civil servants, speaking at conferences and being present on influential commissions or boards). There was a bespoke communication strategy for the CEO of TASO (Director Outreach programme, Omar Khan) when he was first appointed, with objectives to:

- Develop a respected and authoritative voice in the sector
- Become the 'go to' media spokesperson on evidence-driven insights on equality in higher education
- Increase awareness of TASO's activities and recommendations for evidence-based policy and practice.

This communication strategy involved podcasts and Omar Khan also gave evidence at two All-Party Parliamentary Group hearings on Creative Diversity and a Career Guidance Guarantee for England (see Section 5.1.3).

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[37] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview

[38] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report

[39] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-tuition-fee-limits/tuition-fee-limits-in-the-lifelong-learning-entitlement

[40] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1ceabbe1-2d49-41db-9795-068f37c23631/dfe-new-dfap.pdf

[41] https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9195/CBP-9195.pdf

[42] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/business-plan-2023-24/

As discussed in Section 5.1.3, TASO has made progress in working with stakeholders and is focusing on building relationships with relevant government departments and policymakers.

Looking for specific influences on policy from TASO is challenging but the interviews provide evidence to suggest that, given the current policy landscape – even if there is a change of government, efficiency cuts and spending cuts will affect higher education in the next few years and providing value for money will become even more important. Therefore, ensuring that higher education providers are choosing interventions which work, as well as increasing the body of evidence in evaluation is in line with the policy drive. This may mean more robust impact and value for money evaluations.

The recent report from the Evaluation Task Force on the What Works Network strategy[43] recognises the challenge for WWCs in responding to requests for advice or support from government departments, with no funding. This could be solved through a cross-government call off framework for these types of situations in order to encourage links with policy advice more formally, according to the report.

5.9.1 Conclusions

- There is little evidence to suggest that TASO, with its current capacity, is yet to have a direct impact on policymaking, in what has been a relatively unsettled period in UK politics.
- It is likely that use of good evidence will become more important as policymakers look for more value for money and impact.

Efficiency

5.10 Evaluation question 10: How efficient has TASO's delivery model been?

This section focuses on whether TASO's delivery model has supported it to deliver its activities and achieve its objectives. There are two main areas of focus:

- Governance structures, internal processes and becoming an independent charity
- Communication strategy and dissemination channels.

The mid-term report focused on the set-up of TASO, and progress made towards becoming an independent charity. Consequently, this report focuses on developments in these areas since November 2020.

5.10.1 Governance structures and internal processes

TASO officially became an independent charity on 1 April 2022. TASO originally submitted its application to become a charity to the Charity Commission in October 2020. However, a number of steps had to be completed, such as preparation of local policy and procedures for the transfer of staff and assets, before TASO could achieve independence from KCL and operate independently. Throughout this process, TASO received support from a number of organisations, including What Works for Children's Social Care.

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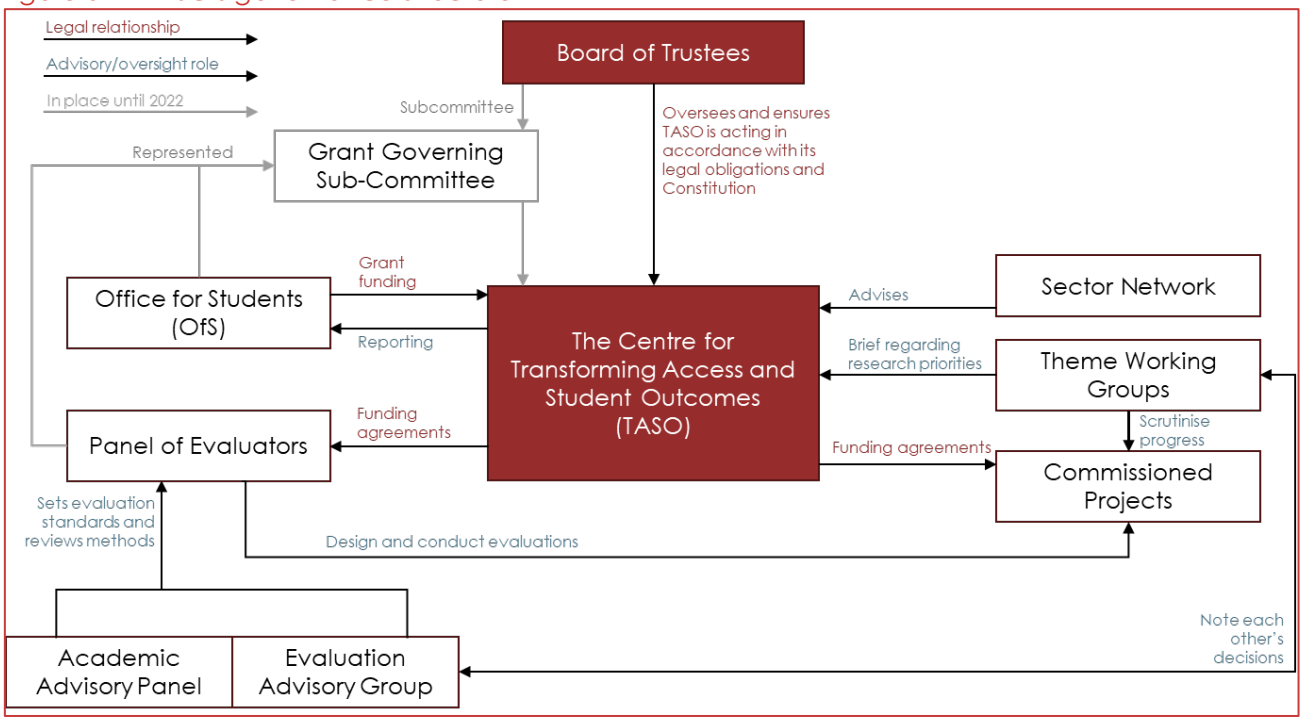
43 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6565ed1462180b0012ce8318/What_Works_Network_Strategy_November_2023.pdf

TASO had established an appropriate governance structure and set up relevant bodies by the mid-term report. The roles of the Sector Network, Academic Advisory Panel, Evaluation Advisory Group and Theme Working Groups have already been discussed in Section 5.1.3.

Figure 31 – TASO's governance structure



Source: TASO, desk research

TASO Management. Since TASO became a charity in April 2022, the management team has been able to operate independently and has considerable autonomy over decision making. Previously, when TASO was still managed by KCL, it had to comply with all of KCL's systems and processes. Omar Khan, formerly the Director of TASO, is now the CEO of TASO and has greater decision-making powers. There has been a high level of continuity in the composition of TASO's leadership team, as discussed in Section 5.5.3, which has helped facilitate the transition away from KCL.

Board of Trustees. Now that TASO is a registered charity, the board are formal trustees. The board's role is similar to that of other organisations and primarily focuses on ensuring that TASO's CEO and leadership team are held to account for their decisions. The total number of trustees is ten. The current members are the following individuals:

- Professor Eunice Simmons, Vice-Chancellor, University of Chester (Chair)
- Heather Hodge, Chartered accountant with over 30 years of experience
- Jane McNeil, Pro Vice-Chancellor Education, Nottingham Trent University
- Maddalaine Ansell, Director Education, British Council
- Ryan Shorthouse, Founder and Chief Executive of Bright Blue think tank
- Tahmid Chowdhury, Account Director at M&C Saatchi World Services and Co-founder of Here for Good
- Hamir Patel, Head of Communications, Russell Group

- Professor Charlotte Croffie, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Loughborough University
- Rebecca Hollington, Director of External Engagement and Communications, University College Birmingham
- Christal Kihm, Social Policy PhD student, London School of Economics

Five members, including the Chair, have served on the board for over three years and been present for TASO's transition to charitable status. The trustees have a variety of profiles and backgrounds, which ensures that the board has expertise in a variety of research methods, policy areas, sectors and stakeholder groups.

- **Grant Governing Sub-Committee.** Until 2022, the Grant Governing Sub-Committee ensured that TASO's activities and spending were aligned with the conditions of the OfS funding grant. TASO's management team had to submit reports to the board on activities and spending. In the mid-term report, it was assumed that the role of the Grant Governance Board would decline, as TASO diversified its funding sources. While the OfS remains TASO's primary source of funding, TASO no longer has a Grant Governance Board as part of its governance structure. Instead, TASO has to submit regular written reports to the OfS in relation to activities funded by the grant and provide updates at regular touch-point meetings.
- **Panel of Evaluators.** Originally, BIT was TASO's sole evaluator. However, since January 2023, TASO has had a Panel of Evaluators, as discussed in Section 5.1.3. The panel was selected following an open call, with applications assessed by TASO's Research and Evaluation Team. Its members design and conduct evaluations of TASO's research projects and work with research partners to build the evidence base on the impact of interventions.

Overall, TASO's governance structures continue to be fit for purpose. As TASO continues to develop, there may need to be further revisions to its governance structure, roles and procedures.

5.10.2 Communication strategy and dissemination channels

The communication strategy and communication activities are core elements of TASO's delivery model. Communication targeted at HE stakeholders aims to increase awareness of TASO's activities and outputs. Communicating with other stakeholders helps to build TASO's credibility and increases trust. In Section 5.1.3, we focused on TASO's approach to stakeholder engagement, in relation to the co-design of TASO's activities. This section focuses on general communication activities and channels used.

As discussed in the mid-term report, TASO adopted a comprehensive communication strategy in January 2020 (as part of its Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy). This strategy focused on establishing TASO as a respected voice in the HE sector.

TASO produces quarterly and annual reports on its communications activities, which are shared with the Board of Trustees. The communications team monitors mentions of TASO on a daily basis (e.g. via Google alerts) and regularly monitors social media using a customisable dashboard. As well as feeding into reporting, this monitoring activity aims to limit risks to the reputation of TASO (including members of its senior team, and/or the OfS), by enabling TASO to take further action, such as requesting a correction from a journalist.

The following is a brief overview of TASO's main communication channels:

- **TASO's website.** The website uses TASO branding adopted in January 2020. A website refresh and brand development, due in 2023, has been delayed due to staff changes

and resourcing challenges. It provides the main information about TASO and its advisory bodies. The website contains areas for: Research, Evidence & Evaluation (including Evaluation Guidance, Evidence Toolkit, Research Ethics Guidance, Resource Hub and Evidence Ratings), Get Involved (with information on panels, advisory groups and the Sector Network), News & Blog and About.

- **Social media**. TASO has an official online presence on X (formerly Twitter) (@taso_he) and a page on LinkedIn. TASO's X and LinkedIn posts perform a variety of functions, including: signposting TASO resources, announcing new ITTs, promoting new outputs, and updating stakeholders on events.
- **Video.** TASO created its YouTube channel in May 2020. Videos uploaded to the channel include recordings of webinars and presentations; brief overviews of TASO, its research themes, particular projects; and short videos related to interventions on the Evidence Toolkit. These videos are also circulated via social media.
- **Conferences and events**. TASO's annual conference not only provides opportunities for direct engagement with stakeholders, it also helps to generate content for dissemination via social media and email. TASO also holds national and regional events throughout the year. Attendees at TASO events are asked to complete satisfaction surveys and to provide optional qualitative feedback. Data is also collected on attendees' job titles and fields of work.
- **PR activity.** Senior members of TASO's staff and the CEO engage in various outreach activities, including articles in HE-related publications and appearances at events. TASO developed a specific outreach programme for the Director (now CEO) for late 2020. While this programme has now ended, the CEO continues to play a key role in communications and outreach activities.
- **News and media mentions.** TASO monitors its mentions in news media, blogs and other online media, in order to track whether its activities are generating coverage. However, it does not appear to report on the content or sentiment of articles/mentions.
- **Newsletter.** This is sent out bi-monthly to subscribers.

The following update focuses on TASO's communications activities across different channels during the past two years (2022–2023).

Table 9 – Overview of TASO's communication activities and channels

Channel	Key performance metrics	Value / Comment
Website[44]	Website traffic, time on page and engagement with evidence	• In 2022, there were over 86,000 pageviews of the website. • TASO website data for 2023 Q1 to Q3: – Q1, 18 December 2022–22 March 2023: 5,720 unique users, 26,629 pageviews – Q2, 22 March–20 June 2023: 7,142 unique users, 41,389 pageviews – Q3, 20 June–28 September 2023: 7,045 unique users, 40,993 pageviews • The Evidence Toolkit is the most viewed page on TASO's website, generating close to 6,000 views in 2022.

[44] Available online at: https://taso.org.uk/.

Channel	Key performance metrics	Value / Comment
Social media	Social media followers and engagement	• During 2022, TASO's Twitter followers increased 22% to 2,973 (representing a 22% increase across the year) and LinkedIn followers increased to 984 (a 122% increase across the year). • As of 8 December 2023, TASO had 3,200 followers on X and 1,860 followers on LinkedIn. • During 2022, TASO's Tweets generated 317,500 impressions. • In 2023, TASO's X account generated: – Q1, 18 December 2022–22 March 2023: 86.8k impressions, 2k engagements – Q2, 22 March–20 June 2023: 132.8k impressions, 3.2k engagements – Q3, 20 June–28 September 2023: 62.8k impressions, 1.5k engagements • In addition to the official @taso_he X account, TASO's CEO and senior staff members post TASO-related content on their personal X accounts.
Videos	Number of views of videos and multi-media content	– As of 11 December 2023, there were 98 videos uploaded and 2,4399 total views on YouTube. – The most popular video, a recording of a presentation on 'Small n evaluation' from Day 2 of the TASO 2021 conference, had 16,000 views. For comparison, the second most popular video had 954 views. – 8 YouTube videos had attracted over 200 views. – 14 videos had 100–200 views. – The remaining 76 videos had under 100 views.
Newsletter	Number of subscribers	• As of 28 September 2023, 2,262 people had signed up for TASO's newsletter.
Events	TASO Conferences	• TASO 2022 Conference: Highlighting evidence & evaluation in HE – Over 300 attendees[45] • TASO 2023 Conference: How to evaluate – Day 1, 115 attendees – Day 2, 109 attendees – 60 HEPs and organisations
	Other events organised by TASO	• In 2022, there were 15 national events, 7 training sessions and 6 regional events. – 1,552 attendees from over 100 HEPs or other organisations – 29% of attendees were managers and 23% worked in evaluation • From 18 December 2022 to 28 September 2023, there were 8 national events, with 1,096 attendees.[46]
	Engagement results from post-event surveys	• In 2022, 95% of attendees surveyed were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the event they attended.

[45] https://taso.org.uk/news-item/evaluating-taso-2022/ More detailed reporting data was not available for the 2022 conference in TASO's annual report.

[46] Data for training and regional events is not included in TASO's quarterly communications reports.

Channel	Key performance metrics	Value / Comment
		• In 2023, % of event attendees surveyed who were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the event they attended: – Q1, 18 December 2022–22 March 2023: 100% of attendees – Q2, 22 March–20 June 2023: 96% of attendees – Q3, 20 June–28 September 2023: 97% of attendees
PR activity	Number of articles in HE-related journals and on HE-related online platforms	• 6 WonkHE articles by Omar Khan (Director) published from 2020–23 • 3 WonkHE articles by Eliza Kozman (Deputy Director Research) published from 2020–23 • 1 WonkHE article by Sarah Chappell (Senior Research Officer) published in 2022 • 1 opinion piece in Research Professional News by Omar Khan
	External speaking engagements	• According to TASO's operational plan (August 2023), external speaking engagements in 2022–23 included: – Two sessions at AMOSSHE's national conference – University Alliance Teaching and Learning Network – Roundtable at Sheffield Hallam University
	CEO outreach activities	• The CEO featured on The Access Podcast, produced by SOAS and Forum for Access and Continuing Education (4 April 2022) • The CEO appeared as guest on the WonkHE podcast (February 2022) • In 2023, the CEO gave evidence at two All-Party Parliamentary Group hearings, on Creative Diversity and A Career Guidance Guarantee for England.
News and media mentions	Media mentions	• In 2022, website news and media mentions for TASO: – 30 news stories – 16 blogs – 7 media mentions – 5 media articles – 4 external blogs • From 18 December 2022 to 28 September 2023, website news and media mentions for TASO: – 27 news stories – 14 blogs – 10 media mentions – 6 media articles – 3 external blogs – 1 media podcast
TASO advisory groups and networks		These include: the Panel of Evaluators, Advisory Groups (Evaluation Advisory Group and Academic Advisory Panel), Student Mental Health Panel, Theme Working Groups, Sector Network.

Source: TASO communications analytics reports, interviews with TASO, desk research

Overall, TASO has maintained a comprehensive range of communications activities, using a good diversity of channels to target different audiences. It is important that TASO focuses on sustaining this in the future, especially now that the website is well-established and there may

be less 'new' content to promote. Based on TASO's monitoring data and our 2023 survey data, there is now evidence that TASO is reaching certain stakeholder groups, particularly staff working in evaluation, widening participation and leadership roles within HE.

Since the publication of the mid-term report, in December 2020, TASO has steadily increased the traffic to its website, social media followers and newsletter subscribers. The comparator WWCs all have higher levels of social media followers (Table 8). However, EEF and the College of Policing are both much more well-established and well-resourced centres. Moreover, they are more likely to attract followers from a broader range of stakeholder groups and followers from outside the UK. YEF has managed to grow its follower numbers on X (Twitter) and LinkedIn far more quickly than TASO. However, YEF has a larger grant than TASO and can therefore commit more resource to its communications strategy.

Table 10 – Social media followers for TASO and comparator WWCs

What Works Centre	X (Twitter)	LinkedIn	YouTube
TASO	3.2k	2k	54
YEF	6.8k	5k	36
EEF	124.1k	75k	2.67k
College of Policing[47]	53.3k	48k	2.77k

Source: Technopolis analysis of WWC social media accounts

TASO has posted far more frequently on X (Twitter) and YouTube than YEF. From creating an X (Twitter) account, in April 2019, to 11 December 2023, TASO posted 2,243 times. YEF, which joined X (Twitter) in March 2019, posted 1,831 times. Similarly, as of 11 December 2023, TASO has uploaded 98 videos to YouTube, whereas YEF has uploaded 47 videos. As noted in Table 9, 78% of the videos TASO has posted to YouTube (76 out of 98) had generated fewer than 100 views. By comparison, 57% of the videos YEF posted (27 out of 47) had generated fewer than 100 views. This data suggests that TASO, therefore, is actively generating social media content, but is struggling to attract subscribers or generate engagement to the same level as YEF. While it is likely that a number of factors are driving social media reach and engagement for both WWCs, TASO may wish to reflect on how it promotes its social media accounts, who it targets through its social media posts, and what kinds of content generate the highest levels of engagements. For example, TASO may wish to consider developing video content along a few key themes or developing a couple of distinctive video formats. This is an approach used by EEF, which has created videos and YouTube playlists for series such as 'Voices from the Classroom', 'Promising Projects' and 'Short Explainers'.

During 2022 and 2023, TASO's CEO and senior staff have continued to engage in PR and outreach activities, in an effort to raise TASO's profile. TASO's advisory groups and networks have also played a role in disseminating information to stakeholders and wider networks, as discussed in Section 5.1.1. Based on our qualitative research, TASO's team feels that the Sector Network has become more receptive and increased its engagement with TASO's activities. TASO not only sees the network as a receptive target audience, but feels it is increasingly important as a co-creator.

During the past two years, the level of news and media mentions for TASO, and its activities has remained fairly modest. Certain outputs, such as the 2022 report on summer schools and

[47] There are no separate social media accounts for WWCCR. Communications are shared through the College of Policing's accounts.

the September 2023 student mental health report, have been particularly successful in attracting the attention of news media. In the case of summer schools, news articles focused on the potentially controversial aspects of the report. News and media coverage of the student mental health report focused on the magnitude of the problem and contributed to a wider discourse on young people's mental health.

5.10.3 Communication challenges for TASO

The mid-term report identified several communication challenges that TASO needed to address and issues to be aware of when developing its communications strategy.

- **TASO's location in London.** As noted in the mid-term report, there are a number of benefits associated with TASO's location in the Evidence Quarter in London. However, the mid-term report also suggested there was a risk that being based in London would make it more challenging for TASO to distance itself from KCL. This does not appear to have been an issue, since TASO became an independent charity. However, it still needs to be mindful of not being overly London-centric. To date, all of TASO's conferences have taken place in London. Moreover, Greater London and the South East were the regions that attracted the largest numbers of attendees at TASO's events in 2023. Of potential concern is the fact that, in 2023, the proportion of event attendees from other regions appears to have declined compared to London and Southern regions.
- **Alignment of communication activities with those of the OfS.** TASO and the OfS have implemented a media communications protocol, which provides a joint framework for communications activities relating to TASO. There has also been increased contact between TASO's communications team and its counterpart at the OfS. This approach seems to have improved coordination and ensured greater alignment between messages.
- **Limited awareness of TASO in some segments of the sector**. While awareness of TASO has increased across the sector (as discussed in Sections 5.2.1 and 5.3.1), certain stakeholder groups still have limited awareness of TASO's activities. FECs, in particular, demonstrated very low levels of awareness in our 2023 survey. In recent interviews, both TASO and OfS staff acknowledged this communication challenge persists. Given that this issue was identified in 2020 and progress appears to have been slow, TASO may need to develop a specific communications strategy to engage further education colleges and smaller, specialist providers.
- **Prioritising communication about policy over politics.** TASO has successfully positioned itself as an independent research body. However, there are aspects of its work which are politically sensitive, and it is important that TASO thinks carefully about its approach to messaging around certain issues.
- **Demonstrating strong evidence relatively early in order to establish reputation.** This issue exceeds the area of communications. However, it was highlighted in the mid-term report as a potential barrier to TASO establishing its reputation within the sector and, thus, engagement from stakeholders. Now that TASO is producing outputs based on its research and evaluation activities, it is crucial that communications help to disseminate findings to stakeholders.

There are two further issues that have emerged in the impact phase which relate to TASO's communication activities:

- **Dissemination of evidence**. TASO has identified a need to improve the use of evidence in its strategic communications. It has also identified a need to harness project partners' resources and audiences to share findings and amplify TASO's messages. Work in this area

is ongoing, but it is clear that there remain opportunities to use TASO's existing networks to improve dissemination of evidence.

- **Knowledge mobilisation and translation of outputs**. Translating the findings of TASO's research into practical outputs that address a wide range of stakeholders, including WP practitioners, has proven to be a significant challenge for TASO (as discussed in Section 5.4.3).

5.10.4 Conclusions

- TASO has a suitable governance structure. Changes made to the structure, since TASO became an independent charity in April 2022, are appropriate and appear to be functioning well. The Grant Governing Sub-Committee no longer exists, with oversight now resting with the Board of Trustees. TASO also submits regular written reports to the OfS, in relation to activities related to the grant, and via official meetings.
- The Board of Trustees now plays a more prominent role in TASO's governance. The number of trustees has increased to ten and there is a good spread of profiles amongst the board.
- TASO's management team has assumed greater levels of responsibility and control, following the spin-out from KCL. Under its leadership, TASO has developed its own processes and ways of operating, in line with its strategic goals.
- TASO continues to undertake a wide range of communication activities, using a variety of channels. While overall awareness of TASO has increased since the mid-term report, there are still several communication challenges, including limited awareness in certain parts of the sector and how it disseminates and mobilises evidence.

Sustainability

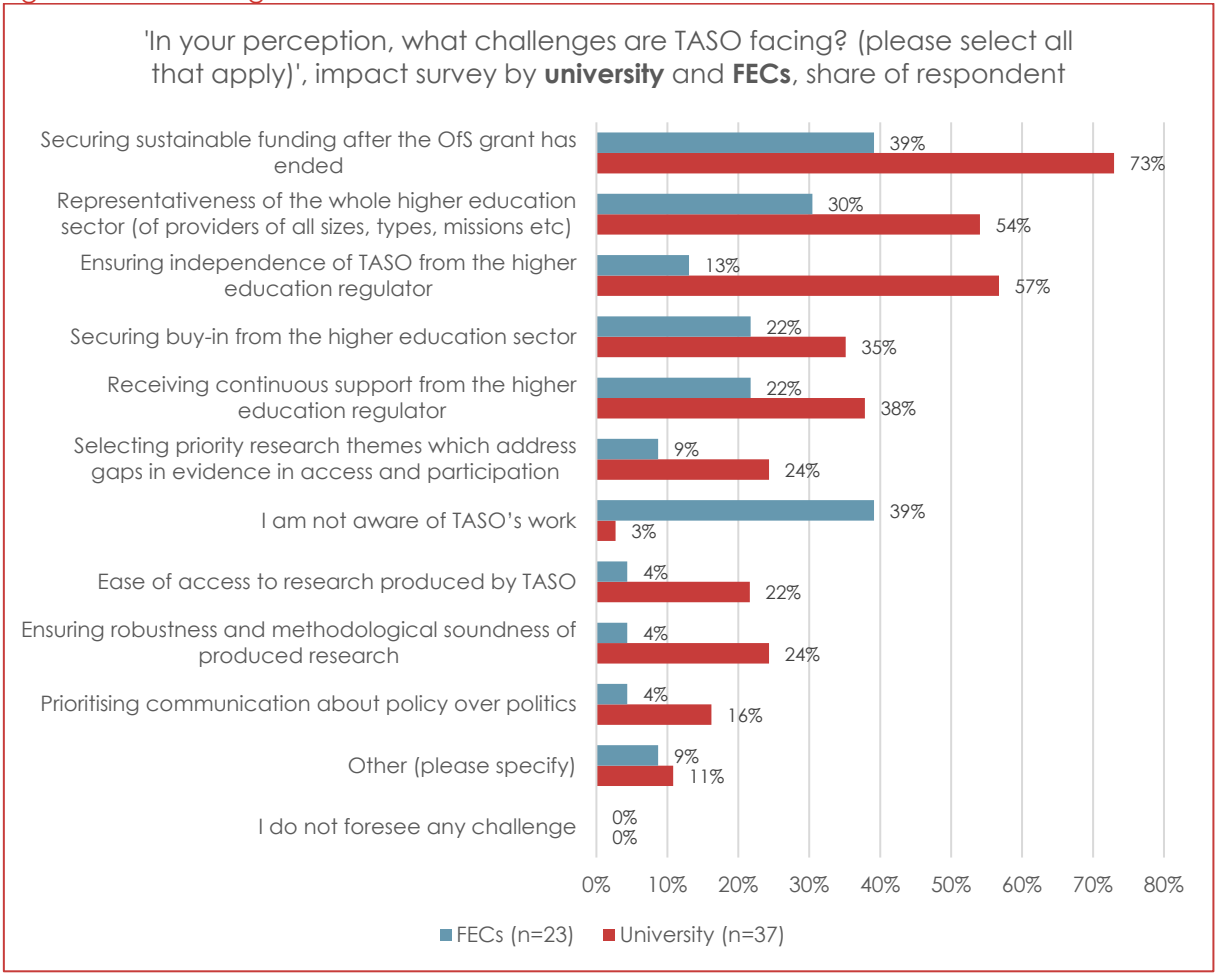
5.11 Evaluation question 11: To what extent is sustainability of TASO's impact ensured and what are conditions for that?

5.11.1 Sustainability of funding

The issue of the sustainability of funding was covered in full in the mid-term report for this evaluation. Following an agreement by HM Treasury to fund TASO for 2023–24, the DfE led a review of funding of access and participation evaluation, which included sector engagement, a clearing house and analysis of funding models for TASO. This review was submitted to HM Treasury with recommendations for future funding of TASO after March 2024. The outcome of this review is unknown at the time of writing this report. The funding grant period from the OfS was extended by one year to March 2023 (no cost extension). There were further considerations for how TASO might mobilise its own funding streams, with recognition that this could also reduce its independence. There are concerns from stakeholders (in interview) that if the clearing house is not delivered by TASO it will be more challenging for higher education providers to access resources easily, and it risks the clearing house being less visible. TASO has also been actively applying for different grants.

Overall sustainability of funding remains an issue for TASO. This is further evidenced by the impact survey – providers indicated that securing sustainable funding after the OfS grant has ended was seen as the biggest challenge for TASO, followed by making sure that TASO remains representative of the whole higher education sector.

Figure 32 – Challenges foreseen for TASO



Source: Impact survey of HEPs; analysis by Technopolis

TASO's current fundraising plan (2023–2024) sets out a goal 'to develop and deliver a revenue generation strategy to ensure the sustainability of TASO over the medium term'. The plan is to continue to receive funding from the OfS, to explore new revenue streams and to provide essential services and produced to the higher education sector. This will include market research, testing of ideas about potential products and services, launching them and generating revenue of £78,000. There are also plans to continue to work with the other WWCs. Significant effort is going into exploring additional revenue streams although it is challenging to find sources of funding beyond the UK government and HEPs. This leads to a continued heavy reliance on the OfS, which has implications for its independence.

In November 2023 the Evaluation Task Force published a 'What Works Network Strategy'[48] which explored aspects of sustainability and funding across the WWCs.

With respect to funding, in all WWCs, public funding plays a key role with over 85% of the funding for the 10 WWCs (that are independent), coming from government departments, research agencies or other public bodies. This creates difficulties in long-term planning where there are short funding cycles, something which has been a concern for TASO. The strategy

[48] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6565ed1462180b0012ce8318/What_Works_Network_Strategy_November_2023.pdf

report also calls for more diversification of funding, something which TASO has been and is investigating.

The co-location in London of a number of WWCs, and ongoing collaboration can help with sustainability. There are back-office services and joint projects already underway across the WWCs (see Section 5.12 on external coherence). In TASO's operational plan (August 2023) there is reference to building and cultivating relationships with the key influencers in the What Works movement to support fundraising.

Sustainability could also be hampered by staff turnover, both within WWCs and within government departments, according to the report. This is less of an issue for TASO than some other WWCs. TASO has maintained continuity in its senior leadership team for several years and has a normal level of staff turnover. Staff turnover in government is high but the HE sector is the major user of TASO rather than the government. However, if there is a longer-term goal to engage with and influence policy, this may hinder efforts. Further collaboration with policymakers could be considered for future funding arrangements, as set out in the What Works Network strategy. However, the report also recognises the challenge for WWCs in responding to requests for advice or support from government departments with no funding.

Interviews with the OfS support the future of TASO as a What Works Centre, as a means to deliver more activity, to support building up of the evidence base, to ensure it meets the sectors needs and in response to our expectations that the sector increases the quality and quantity of (robust) evaluation, ideally with more funding. There is a vision that TASO will become a 'go to' organisation for higher education providers. It is considered that having TASO as a charity is positive, as it protects against political uncertainties. At the moment, the relationship between the OfS and TASO is close. Therefore, it is reported to make sense for some of the funding to come from the OfS, whilst recognising this source of funding may not be sustainable. This also questions independence, an issue which was raised in previous rounds of this evaluation, by the OfS, higher education providers and other networks (see Section 5.5.1). Interviews with stakeholders support the view that the OfS has been careful not to influence activities and TASO has the freedom to define its own priorities. Other networks also suggested that TASO might lose its influence with the sector if it distances itself from the OfS – even if this hampers independence – and that maybe this tension will always remain, and need to be managed. NERUPI, for example, valued its own independence and the fact it can challenge the OfS on behalf of its members.

5.11.2 Sustainability through the use and take up of TASO products and services

Another aspect of sustainability is the use and take up of TASO. This can, for example, be seen in the referencing of TASO in APPs which would suggest that higher education providers are committed to using TASO outputs in the future (see Figure 26). As already highlighted in the report, it is evident that the frequency and use of TASO is still far higher in the universities rather than specialist providers, FECs and alternative providers, which means there will be a varying sustainability of effect.

In the previous APPs (pre-2024/25 APPs and 'Wave 1' APPs 2024/25 – 2027/28), TASO was less specifically referenced, mainly focusing on what HEPs would use from TASO rather than referencing specific products and services, and the reasons for using them. This is with the exception of the engagement with the network and the 'small *n*' resources.[49] Further information on the engagement with TASO activities is found in Section 5.2.1, Figure 12.

[49] Review of the mentions of use of TASO in the APPs pre 2024-2025.

5.11.3 *Sustainability of effect – evaluation use and sharing*

One other area of importance is sustainability of the effect of TASO through the use and sharing of evaluation. One piece of evidence from the impact survey shows the increased frequency and use of evidence in access and participation in the past three years. There is a very clear increase across all four types of providers, and these are very positive results (see Section 5.6.2.)

However, there are still low numbers of providers sharing evidence which would further reinforce the sustainability of effects (as set out in Section 5.3.1). Additionally, around two-thirds of the impact survey respondents had access to networks where the members share evidence (see Figure 8, Section 5.3.1).

Interviews with the OfS also highlighted the importance of providers stopping activities that are not working to reduce harm and ensure value for money. TASO has the opportunity to ensure that the work of providers is much more rigorous, grounded in what works and to ensure a community of practice is encouraged through the Sector Network to share what works and what does not work.

5.11.4 *Conclusions*

- There is support for TASO as a What Works Centre and a 'go to' organisation for higher education providers.
- Sustainability is something which continues to be a live issue for TASO and will remain so for the future. Without long-term funding it will continue to need to devote attention to the diversification of resources.
- Looking at sustainability with respect to effects on use of evidence and behaviour provides a positive outlook with regard to the sector's approach to access and participation.

External coherence

5.12 Evaluation question 12: How can the degree of alignment of practices on evidence and evaluation generation, translation and dissemination of TASO with the rest of What Works Centres be improved?

The mid-term report included a benchmarking exercise involving three comparator What Works Centres: The EEF, the YEF and the WWCCR. This exercise focused in detail on several aspects of these centres including:

- Aims, objectives, funding and main activities
- Research and evaluation activities
- Capacity building activities
- Stakeholder engagement
- Impact

A summary of key findings can be found in the mid-term report and further detail on the benchmarking exercise was annexed to the mid-term report. There have not been any major changes to the activities of the comparator WWCs since the mid-term report. We can therefore be confident that the majority of observations made in the benchmarking exercise are still correct.

Consequently, this section of the final report provides an overview of recent developments across the What Works Network and brief updates on the three comparator What Works

Centres since November 2020, in relation to research and evaluation activities, stakeholder engagement and capacity building and top-level impact. It also reflects on the extent to which TASO is currently aligned with its comparators and any changes in this alignment since the mid-term report.

5.12.1 *Recent developments in the What Works Network*

The What Works Network informs policy and practice across a range of sectors, by evaluating, generating and mobilising evidence. During the past decade, WWCs have designed and delivered over 500 trials and evaluations, which have informed the policy cycle and the activities of government departments.[50] Each What Works Centre addresses a particular area of policy and develops its own approach to evidence review and generation, depending on its context and funding levels.

The strategic direction of the What Works Network has been influenced by the launch of the Evaluation Task Force in April 2021. The Evaluation Task Force is a joint Cabinet Office-HM Treasury unit, which focuses on ensuring evidence and evaluation inform government spending decisions. As part of its remit, the Evaluation Task Force is now responsible for the secretariat of the What Works Network.

There are currently 13 centres in the What Works Network (Table 11). The only significant change to the constitution of the Network since the mid-term report is the launch of Foundations in June 2023, following the merger of the Early Intervention Foundation and What Works for Children's Social Care. The Evaluation Task Force's current view is that there are early indicators that this merger created a strong organisation and reduced overlap and duplication of effort.[51] While there appear to be no immediate plans to merge TASO with another WWC, the Evaluation Task Force has identified that there are overlaps in WWCs' work in education and with young people. Based on our qualitative research, TASO is also mindful of this issue.

Table 11 – List of current What Works Centres

What Works Centre	Policy area	Founded
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence	Health and Social Care	1999
Education Endowment Foundation	Education	2011
What Works Centre for Crime Reduction	Crime reduction	2013
Foundations	Children and families	2023
What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth	Local economic growth	2013
Centre for Ageing Better	Improving quality of life for older people	2014

[50] Evaluation Task Force, *What Works Network Strategy*, November 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6565ed1462180b0012ce8318/What_Works_Network_Strategy_November_2023.pdf

[51] Ibid.

What Works Centre	Policy area	Founded
What Works Centre for Wellbeing[52]	Wellbeing	2014
Centre for Homelessness Impact	Homelessness	2018
Youth Futures Foundation	Youth employment	2019
Wales Centre for Public Policy	Welsh policy	2017
Youth Endowment Fund (Affiliate)	Youth offending	2019
Centre for Transforming Access in Higher Education (Affiliate)	Higher education	2019
The Money and Pensions Service (Affiliate)	Financial wellbeing	2019

Source: What Works Network

The Evaluation Task Force's oversight of the Network has led to the development of an updated What Works Network Strategy, which was published in November 2023.[53] The strategic priorities for the What Works Network for the next five years are as follows:

- Better WWC coverage of HM Government policy priorities
- Greater use of What Works evidence to inform decisions about public services
- More collaboration between What Works Centres and with international partners
- High-performing WWCs which deliver high-quality evidence and demonstrate real impacts
- Stronger advocacy for the importance of long-term funding and independences of WWCs.

These strategic priorities have been developed to address the challenges and barriers that have slowed the uptake of evidence-based decision-making in public services. They also aim to increase consistency in how aspects of WWCs are managed and ensure the maintenance of high standards across the Network.

The relevance of the five key strategic areas to TASO and its future activities can be summarised as follows:

- There remains a good level of alignment between TASO's activities and policy needs in the area of access and participation in higher education. Assuming there are no significant changes in the HE and education policy landscape, this seems likely to continue.
- The Network is keen for WWCs to pro-actively engage with their stakeholders and to build stronger connections with the government.
- While TASO has made start to build connections with other members of the Network, there are as yet unrealised opportunities to work with other WWCs. Given that the Network sees this as a priority, TASO will need to focus on building collaborations with other centres

[52] What Works Wellbeing will close operations on 30 April 2024, due to a lack of sustainable funding

[53] ibid.

working in relevant policy areas. As already noted in Section 5.4.5, TASO has yet to build international connections in its policy area.

- The Network intends to start monitoring WWCs more closely, to ensure they have clearly evidenced impacts and generate meaningful outcomes. The current proposal is to ask WWCs to conduct regular self-assessments of performance, which are then reviewed by the Network. Until an approach to this process is agreed, in liaison with WWCs and funders, it is difficult to assess the potential impact on TASO.
- The Network is clear that current funding arrangements for WWCs are a barrier to their sustainability and has stated a commitment to helping WWCs to improve the diversity and security of their funding. Given the ongoing issues with TASO's financial sustainability (discussed in more detail in Section 5.11.1), TASO would undoubtedly benefit from additional support and guidance in this area.

While certain aspects of the Evaluation Task Force's priorities may create some challenges for TASO, the development of a coherent, overarching strategy for What Works seems likely to be beneficial in the longer term.

One area that TASO needs to be particularly mindful of is the Evaluation Task Force's focus on performance and quality assessment and how this relates to Network membership. Affiliate status, which is currently held by TASO, has been awarded to organisations that are still building their capacity and working to meet the criteria necessary for full membership. The Network's strategic plan states that affiliate members will, in the future, be expected to progress to full membership within three years. The process will involve an expression of interest, followed by a full application and a vote on whether to admit the centre as a full member, retain it as an affiliate (with a recommended time period for a further review) or revoke its membership. Given that TASO has been operating for four years, and is still an affiliate member, it seems likely that it will have to embark on this process in the near future. Consequently, TASO needs to ensure it is meeting the Evaluation Task Force's expectations in terms of 'demonstrable impacts' and 'meaningful outcomes'.

5.12.2 Research and evaluation activities across the other WWCs

TASO's approach to selecting research themes is broadly consistent with the approach taken by the comparator WWCs, as discussed in the mid-term report. There are high levels of similarity with EEF's currently approach, whereby funding focuses on themes and questions, based on gaps in the existing evidence base, with an emphasis on interventions that are likely to be particularly beneficial for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.[54] YEF has three approaches to funding: themed rounds based on its focus areas, place-based projects for specific local areas, and targeted projects that explore widely used or promising practices. WWCCR does not directly fund a large amount of research, due to financial constraints. Instead, it provides practical support so that police forces can undertake their own research and encourages academic researchers to share their findings. Consequently, themes are shaped by their stakeholders.

TASO has used its themes and evidence cycle as the core process underpinning its production of new evidence, as discussed in Section 5.4.1. When compared to the other WWCs, an unusual feature of TASO's approach to identifying evidence is its 'calls for evidence' and 'calls for examples of practice' on specific themes or topics. However, this

[54] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/apply-for-funding

distinctive approach is combined with systematic reviews of evidence, which are a common approach across WWCs.

Evidence synthesis is a core activity of all the comparator WWCs. Evidence toolkits play a prominent role in EEF's, WWCCR's and YEF's synthesis activities, presenting top-level outcomes of systematic reviews of evidence. EEF and WWCCR have developed their toolkits over a number of years and their activities in this area are discussed in more detail in the mid-term report. YEF launched its toolkit in June 2021. All three comparator WWCs continue to add to and update their toolkits based on the current evidence.

There are strong similarities in approach between the three WWCs. In the case of EEF and YEF, evidence is rated on a scale of 0–5 and users can filter results based on evidence ratings. For WWCCR, the scale for quality of evidence is 1–4. As well as scoring the strength/quality of evidence, these WWCs also rate the cost and impact of specific interventions. WWCCR uses the Effect, Mechanism, Moderators, Implementation, Economic Cost framework as the basis for its assessment. YEF has published a Technical Guide, which explains the methods used to create the toolkit.[55] This guide provides a clear explanation of how evidence and data are processed and ranked for the toolkit. As observed in Section 5.4.1, TASO's approach is not as transparent. The evidence ratings page on the TASO website only gives brief explanations of the different categories on the toolkit and provides far less depth than YEF's guide.[56]

YEF and WWCCR offer different filters on their toolkits, which are specific to their contexts of their work and designed to address the needs of their stakeholders. YEF allows users to filter by themes, prevention types, settings and outcomes. WWCCR has filters for effect, focus, problem, population and factor. While EEF does not have filters on its toolkit for specific types of intervention, it does provide a keyword search. Currently, TASO only has a filter for pre- or post- HE and so there is potential to develop this aspect of the toolkit further.

5.12.3 Stakeholder engagement and capacity building in the other WWCs

EEF and WWCCR, as discussed in the mid-term report, have paid particular attention to building capacity in their respective sectors. Both have placed peer-to-peer training at the centre of their strategies and developed networks that facilitate evidence sharing. They also have the capacity to offer bespoke training for specific schools or police forces.

There are some similarities in TASO's approach to capacity building. TASO's events generally focus on sharing good practice, with a view to increasing HEPs' capacity to conduct their own evaluation activities and, thereby, add to the evidence base for the sector. TASO has also started to offer bespoke, paid-for training events, in order to diversify its funding. The team also views its research and evaluation projects as providing opportunities for partners to develop their evaluation skills. However, while TASO has started to build networks, the approach to using these networks to disseminate evidence and share expertise is less systematic and could be developed further.

In addition to maximising opportunities to build capacity and disseminate evidence through peer-to-peer networks, TASO could also further refine its approach to knowledge mobilisation. As noted in Section 5.4.3, it faces a number of challenges in translating its research activities into practical outputs that are of relevance to practitioners. However, it is not the only What

[55] Youth Endowment Fund, Technical Guide, Version 4-1 (December 2021), https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/YEF-Toolkit-technical-guide-December-21.pdf

[56] https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/evidence-standards/

Works Centre to have difficulties relating to this area. A January 2022 evaluation of ESRC's investment in What Works Centres observed that, while WWCs produce good research, they could improve how they turn evidence into impact and support stakeholders to applying findings in a practical way.[57] The report also recommended that centres need to engage more with their target audiences to discuss how to make outputs more practical.

This said, EEF is one of the WWCs that has made significant strides in developing outputs that are of direct relevance to stakeholders and uses evidence to shape interventions. EEF produces guidance reports which provide practical recommendations, underpinned by evidence. These outputs aim to upskill practitioners who deliver activities, building on their existing expertise. The reports use plain English, outline key actions and give concrete examples. A brief overview of the evidence and sources that underpin guidance is provided, along with concise explanations of why certain inputs/activities are important, but the focus is on implementation of concepts rather than detailed explanation of the research itself.

TASO is, of course, operating in a different context to EEF, which has considerable resources to support the production of these materials. EEF has also benefited from an ESRC-funded research study, the Knowledge Mobilisation Research Package (December 2013 to August 2019), which focused specifically on developing more effective knowledge mobilisation practices. Nonetheless, TASO could reflect on EEF's strengths in this area and consider whether these approaches could be adapted to improve how it develops outputs to support practitioners and staff delivering activities.

5.12.4 Impact of other WWCs

The more established WWCs provide examples of impacts that centres can have on their respective policy areas and sectors. The major impacts of EEF and WWCCR, discussed in the mid-term report benchmarking exercise, have been sustained and, in certain cases increased.

Table 12 – Key impacts identified by EEF and WWCCR, updated for 2023

Name	Key impacts identified
WWCCR	• Embedding evidence-based practice in police training qualifications and standards for whole of England • The National Police Chiefs Council foregrounding evidence-based practice in their vision of policing and associated cultural and organisational changes • Some evidence of incremental positive change in attitude of police officers towards evidence-based practice
EEF	• Directly impacting those young people involved in its projects (as of 4 October 2023, EEF had reached over 1.8 million children and young people, including 500,000 pupils eligible for free school meals)[58] • School leaders using evidence-based practice (according to polling from National Foundation for Educational Research [NFER]), 70% of

[57] *Evaluation of ESRC Investment in What Works Centres*, Frontier Economics, January 2022, https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-investment-in-what-works-centres/

[58] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/government-confirms-funding-for-eef-to-support-evidence-informed-practice-in-the-post-16-space

Name	Key impacts identified
	school leaders use EEF's Toolkit to inform their decision making, compared to 11% in 2012[59] • Teachers using evidence-based practice (according to polling from NFER, 41% of teachers use EEF's Toolkit to inform their decision making, compared to 4% in 2012)[60] • Embedding evidence in DfE and Ofsted national level guidance • Building a core of evaluation expertise in running randomised controlled trials in the UK through their evaluators pool • Building a global evidence network, with the Toolkit translated into Spanish, Portuguese, French and Arabic

Source: Desk research and interviews

5.12.5 Alignment of TASO with other WWCs

The benchmarking exercise conducted for the mid-term report included a comparison of features of TASO with those of the comparator WWCs, to map levels of alignment. An updated version of this alignment mapping is below (Table 13).

The main substantive change is that TASO now has a panel of ten evaluators, which has enabled it to build relationships with the wider range of delivery partners and in line with the approach of other WWCs. The constitution of the panel, which includes universities and other types of research organisation, is similar to that of EEF's (which currently consists of 24 evaluators). In fact, six out of the ten evaluators on TASO's panel also hold positions on EEF's panel of evaluators. This offers opportunities for the sharing of expertise because these evaluators can draw on their experience on research and evaluation projects for both WWCs.

Table 13 – Degree of alignment between TASO and its comparators (2023)

Category of comparison	Degree of alignment
Research: choosing themes	All the WWCs adopt similar mixes of pragmatic and strategic choices of research themes.
Research: synthesising evidence	All the WWCs use toolkits as the primary means of synthesising evidence.
Governance	The overall governance structures are similar. TASO has particularly well-developed use of advisory groups.
Research: standards of evidence	Similar in many ways but TASO distinguishes between impact on attitudes and impact on outcomes.
Delivery partners	TASO now has a panel of ten evaluators, bringing it in line with other WWCs. Some research and evaluation activity is undertaken by delivery partners.
Impacts	TASO has had an impact on evaluation culture but has had less impact on policy. As a young and small WWC, impact cannot be expected on the same scale as EEF or WWCCR.

[59] EEF Annual Report 2022, https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/annual-reports/EEF-Annual-Report-2022.pdf?v=1697533119

[60] Ibid.

Category of comparison	Degree of alignment
Aims, objectives, funding and main activities	TASO carries out similar main activities but much smaller in scale than the two large endowment funds. and does not directly contribute to developing regulatory standards and guidance like WWCCR.
Relationship with funders	TASO has an unusual relationship with the funder in that the funder is also the regulatory body for the sector, whilst the funders of the other WWCs are government departments.
Plans for future sustainability	TASO continues to face significant challenges around future funding and sustainability compared with the other WWCs.
Research: mechanisms for producing new evidence	TASO's calls for evidence mechanism and thematic evidence cycles are distinctive. TASO's approach to selecting evidence is still less transparent than the other WWCs, but its approach to the synthesis of evidence and commissioning of new projects shares similarities with other WWCs.
Stakeholder engagement and communications	TASO has increased its stakeholder engagement and communication activities, but EEF and WWCCR have a much greater emphasis on building networks and peer-to-peer communications.
Capacity building activities	TASO still provides modest capacity building compared to WWCCR and EEF, but is increasing its activities in areas such as training for HEPs.

Source: Mid-term report benchmarking exercise; desk research for 2021 to 2023[61]

A lack of alignment with the comparator WWCs in certain areas is not inherently problematic. Some of the most significant differences can be attributed to the fact that TASO lacks the resources to have the same level of impact, reach and sustainability when compared to well-resourced centres like EEF. The relationship between the OfS and TASO, and the wider issue of financial sustainability, remain an issue, as discussed in Section 5.11.1.

The main areas where there is a significant lack of alignment with the comparator WWCs are as follows:

- **Stakeholder engagement and communications**. As noted in the mid-term report, there are significant similarities between TASO's strategies for stakeholder engagement and communications and those of the comparator WWCs. While TASO has not achieved all of the objectives in its stakeholder engagement plan (as discussed in Section 5.1.3), it has made significant progress since 2020. However, it does not have the same level of focus on developing networks and peer-to-peer communications as EEF and WWCCR.
- **Capacity building activities.** TASO is still only providing a modest level of capacity building activities compared to the more established WWCs. Increasing capacity within HEPs is crucial for TASO to achieve its outcomes and impacts. However, EEF can allocate significantly more budget to these activities and WWCCR can leverage its position within the college of policing to have a direct impact on police training.

[61] Note – grouped by the following classification: Green denotes very good alignment; amber denotes some differences; and grey denotes significant differences.

5.12.6 *Joint activities between TASO and other WWCs*

TASO began discussions with other What Works Centres around joint activities in 2020. After three years, this area of activity is still in its preliminary stages. TASO has engaged with other WWCs and network events, but collaboration on research projects and other outward-facing activities has so far been limited.

To date, the main collaborative project between TASO and another WWC has been the Student Mental Health project, which was commissioned by the OfS. TASO has led a consortium, which included What Works Wellbeing. TASO has acknowledged, in its 2023 operational plan, that this area needs further development.

5.12.7 *Conclusions*

- The Evaluation Task Force's new strategy for the What Works Network may be beneficial to TASO. Increased support for collaboration with other WWCs and greater recognition of funding challenges would help TASO to address some of the challenges it faces. However, there are risks related to the proposals for increased monitoring of WWCs' performance and expectations concerning the progress of newer, affiliate centres, which TASO needs to be mindful of.
- TASO demonstrates good levels of alignment with the comparator WWCs in relation to choosing research themes, synthesising evidence, governance, standards of evidence and delivery partners. The creation of a Panel of Evaluators has brought its delivery model more in line with the other WWCs.
- There remains a lack of alignment between TASO and the comparator WWCs in certain areas. In several cases, these differences are related to TASO's current funding model. However, there are areas where TASO may wish to reflect on the approach of other WWCs, particularly in relation to knowledge mobilisation, capacity building and the use of peer-to-peer networks and communications.
- TASO is still building its relationships with members of the What Works Network. While it has worked successfully with What Works Wellbeing on the Student Mental Health project, and has made some progress in discussing potential collaborations, there is potential to make further progress in this area.

6 Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for the Office for Students

- The OfS should, together with the DfE and TASO, **clarify** TASO's mission to the higher education sector. In the long term, does TASO intend to operate as a research centre in access and participation in higher education, or does it intend to operate as a service provider for the sector, or both, under a clearer structure? Each mission has its implications, financial, legal and organisational.
- Given its strong and central position of a regulator, the OfS should **remain** a strong promoter of TASO in the higher education sector.
- The OfS should continue to **maintain** close cooperation with TASO. Given that the OfS is no longer represented on TASO's governance bodies, maintaining close collaboration – in order to align the communication strategies and the main messages to be relayed to the sector – is even more pertinent than before.

- It is common across the What Works Network that What Works Centres are funded by the public sector. TASO has explored other ways of funding, including from non-profit sources, private sources and providers themselves, and none appears to be viable. Therefore, the OfS should **consider providing** funding to TASO after the current grant has come to its end. This is with the caveat
  - There should be a better alignment between the activities of TASO and those of other bodies which operate in the area of access and participation with a mission similar to TASO's.
- Given that TASO's plans have been delayed by a slower spin-out to an independent charity and by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that more impact will materialise later. Therefore, the OfS should consider **further assessing** the impact of TASO in three to five years' time. Such an impact assessment can include the use of HEAT data (in order to help assess the impact on students). It can also include evaluation techniques, such as contribution analysis and impact case studies, in order to address the issue of attribution.
- The OfS should continue **encouraging** higher education providers to share evaluation evidence across the higher education sector, including evidence on interventions which worked less well.
- The OfS should consider **working together** with providers on access and participation – offering incentives to widening participation practitioners and academics who work in the area of social mobility. There is a lot of potential learning and evidence that can be generated from such collaboration.
- The OfS should continue **reassuring** providers that submitting evidence on less successful activities (i.e. 'what did not work') will not be penalised.

6.2 Recommendations for TASO

- There is a high likelihood that more providers will face difficult decisions whether to cut funding to their widening participation activities. TASO could **help** providers by supplying evidence to justify providers' investment in the access and participation area. In this context, TASO should consider **producing** more evaluations focusing on value-for-money assessments.
- There is scepticism in the sector about using Type 3 Causality evidence and associated randomised controlled trials (RCTs). TASO should consider better **emphasising** the work it is doing on robust qualitative and quantitative evidence of Type 1 Narrative and Type 2 Empirical Enquiry, alongside Type 3 Causality evidence.
- The work of TASO around Theory of Change and its evaluation guidance are seen as very practical outputs. They are widely known across the sector, and have a growing number of users. TASO should continue **promoting** this type of content and/or **produce** new content of this type.
- TASO research and evaluation reports are seen as very high quality, and are regularly accessed online by many providers. However, commonly they do not include recommendations for providers advising them on possible improvements in the methodology/design of their interventions, and often conclude that further research is necessary. TASO should consider **putting more emphasis** on the practicability of its reports, taking the results of its research further towards recommendations based on its research findings.

- TASO should continue **making strong efforts** (with consideration to its limited capacity) to reach out to all parts of the higher education sector, particularly to smaller providers and FECs.
- TASO should **reach out** more to widening participation practitioners within providers.
- TASO should, together with the OfS, **clarify** TASO's mission to the higher education sector. Currently, TASO produces research reports of high academic quality focusing on access and participation in higher education. At the same time, TASO provides services to higher education providers and helps them comply with the regulatory reforms of the OfS. In the long term, does TASO intend to operate as a research centre in access and participation in higher education, or does it intend to operate as a service provider for the sector, or both, under a clearer structure? Each mission has its implications, financial, legal and organisational.
- TASO should continue to **review** and, if relevant, further **adapt**, its own Theory of Change to ensure it remains relevant to its activities and objectives.
- TASO should **maintain** its Sector Network as a platform where evaluation specialists and widening participation practitioners can meet and discuss/consider creating further opportunities for knowledge sharing.
- TASO should **increase** the diversity among higher education providers participating in TASO's research projects. This means, among others, including more FECs.
- TASO should **continue building** on its growing relationships with other What Works Centres.
- TASO should **consider strengthening** links with other organisations researching widening participation and social mobility. Furthermore, TASO should **consider developing** relationships with similar bodies outside England, for example in the devolved nations, Australia, and the USA, in order to obtain a richer international perspective. This includes engaging with both international literature and international academics/practitioners.

6.3 Recommendations for higher education providers

- Higher education providers should **continue to engage** with TASO and **continue to use** TASO's outputs.
- Higher education providers should **consider creating** more opportunities for their own widening participation practitioners, evaluation specialists in access and participation on the one side, and their own academics in the area of social mobility on the other side, to work together.
- Higher education providers should **share** more evaluation evidence across the sector on what works and what does not work in access and participation.
- Higher education providers should **consider conducting** more joint evaluations in order to make better use of scarce resources and capacity.
- Within higher education providers, evaluation should not be a responsibility of evaluation specialists only. More holistic approaches are necessary, and providers should **consider taking more collective responsibility** of evaluation and the necessary capacity and capability building.

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