**Evaluation with small cohorts: methods guidance**

January 2021

**Introduction**

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) aims to improve lives through evidence-based practice in higher education (HE). Our vision is to eliminate equality gaps for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, allowing all students to have the same chance to enter HE, get a good degree and progress into further study or employment. TASO was set up in 2019, by a consortium of King’s College London, Nottingham Trent University and the Behavioural Insights Team.

We are an independent hub for HE professionals to access research, toolkits and evaluation guidance to eliminate equality gaps. We inform practitioners of the best available evidence and produce new evidence on the most effective approaches. TASO is an affiliate ‘What Works’ centre and is part of the [UK Government’s What Works Movement.](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network) This means that TASO is committed to the generation, synthesis and dissemination of high-quality evidence about effective practice in widening participation and student success. Our role is to help the sector produce more [Type 3 evidence](https://taso.org.uk/evidence/toolkit/what-is-causal-evidence/) as this provides us with the best possible understanding of which activities and approaches are most effective.

This project aims to address the difficult methodological and theoretical challenges faced by Higher Education Providers (HEPs) wishing to evaluate the impact of widening participation and student success activities with small cohorts. The project aims to engage teams focussed on both pre-entry (widening participation) and post-entry (student success) activities. At the heart of impact evaluation is the requirement to link cause and effects, with a view to explaining *how* and *why* activities lead to changes in outcomes of interest. While experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation methods are able to provide the sector with the confidence required to be able to state causal inference, it’s not always possible to use these methods. Small - or specialist - providers face issues when attempting to generate causal impact evidence, and even in larger institutions, existing methods can be difficult to use with smaller cohorts of students (for example when evaluating highly targeted support).

Below is a non-exhaustive list of challenges that prevent HEPs from using experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation methods:

* Small sample sizes – some specialist providers, such as music schools, may only reach a small sample of students and young people. Equally, larger institutions and providers may be interested in an inherently small cohort, such as students from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community.
* Cost of increasing sample size requirements – not all HEPs have the budget to increase sample sizes and deliver interventions on a large scale, resulting in the production of causal evidence being restricted to only a small number of institutions that may not be representative of the wider sector.
* Resourcing - in addition to the cost of increasing sample sizes, some HEPs may have very small teams both delivering WP activities and evaluating the activity. In this scenario, experimental and quasi-experimental methods are very challenging.
* Complex and multi-intervention programmes – HEPs often deliver interventions that target multiple outcomes and intend to capture complexity, gaining a holistic picture of students and young people. It is therefore important to have a range of impact evaluation methods that we can draw on to ensure we capture complexity whilst establishing what works.

For the reasons outlined above, the HE sector needs to identify a broader selection of impact evaluation methodologies that are pragmatic enough to be adopted by a wide audience, including small and specialist providers, yet maintain the rigour that gives providers the confidence to make bold statements about what works. This project will be focused on developing a broader range of rigorous designs and methods for impact evaluations.

**Scope**

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, this project is split into three phases and will be subcontracted to two separate suppliers – with one supplier be awarded the consultation and translation & testing phases and the second supplier being awarded the methodology phase. Please note, this brief is for supplier two, to deliver the methodology phase (2) only.



**Figure1**: Three project phases split between two subcontractors.

We are commissioning a supplier to deliver the methodology phase. There are several activities that we except to be included within the scope of this project:

* Review and select the most suitable alternative designs and methods for small n impact evaluation.
* Methods that strongly support causal inference to be prioritised.
* Provide recommendations for combining designs and methods to strengthen causal claims, when necessary.
* Provide guidance on mixing methods.
* Provide guidance on implementation and process evaluation for such methods.
* The successful supplier will work independently to complete this discrete project phase but will also be required to inform and advise the translation and test phase, based on findings and outputs produced.
* The successful supplier will need to be available to review the final report from the translate and test phase and provide comments.

**Requirements**

This section outlines the requirements expected from the chosen supplier.

**Methodology**

* Interim report:
	+ Introduction – outlining the format and content of the report.
	+ Methodology – outlining the format and methodology used.
	+ Summary of the key methods and themes emerging for impact evaluation, implementation and process evaluation, and mixed methods.
	+ Conclusion - summarising the findings.
	+ Harvard style references provided for the evidence cited.
* The final report containing the following sections:
	+ Executive Summary - outlining the key findings from the report.
	+ Introduction - outlining the format and content of the report.
	+ Methodology – outlining the methodology used, enabling another party to replicate the review.
	+ The report to contain sections on each recommended impact evaluation design and method – using examples from the existing literature to signal the strength of causal claims that can be made, estimated cost of using the method, when to employ the method and any considerations around implementing the method.
	+ Conclusion - summarising the findings and recommendations.
	+ Harvard style references provided for the evidence cited.
	+ The final report will reflect TASO’s strong commitment to, and support for, the What Works movement and use of causal impact evaluation.
	+ The report will be provided in a format which is ready for external publication. A comprehensive outline of publication requirements will be distributed to the successful supplier.
	+ Presentation to TASO’s advisory groups.

**Project timeline**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Activity  | Apr 21 | May 21 | Jun 21 | Jul 21 | Aug 21 | Sep 21 | Oct 21 |
| Inception meeting & kick-off  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Methodology phase |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Receive handover from consultation phase |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Interim report due  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Draft report to TASO’s advisory groups  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Final deliverables due |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Handover to translate and test phase  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Project implementation**

The supplier will be responsible for end-to-end project management, including:

* Risk management.
* Collaborating with a separate supplier delivering the consultation and translation and test phases of this project. Findings and insight from the consultation phase will need to inform this methodology phase. Equally, the finding from this methodology phase must be carefully and accurately communicated with the supplier responsible for the translate and test phase. Therefore, the successful supplier must be able to manage this collaboration, facilitating accurate and timely bilateral communication.
* Ensuring that the final report from this phase feeds into the final deliverables from the translate and test phase. The successful supplier will need to be available to review the final report from the translate and test phase and provide comments.
* Presenting a draft final report to, and collecting feedback from, TASO’s advisory groups.
* Reporting to, and engaging, the TASO team.

In addition to financial support, TASO will:

* Provide advice throughout the project where required.
* Meet (virtually for the foreseeable future) with the contractor as per the project timeline to offer insight and feedback on the project progress.
* Support the partner in shaping outputs and framing the final report. Please note, TASO will maintain final editorial control of the content and final outputs.
* Manage the contract.

**Data protection**

Where applicable, the supplier will be responsible for ensuring data protection standards are met.

**Funding**

This project is funded by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO).

We anticipate bids of £20,000 to £25,000 (inclusive of VAT and expenses). Responses to this invitation to tender should include accurate pricing, inclusive of expenses and VAT. Please note that assessment of responses to this tender invitation will be on perceived quality of service and demonstratable ability to meet the brief, rather than the lowest cost, but value for money is a selection criterion.

**Application and timelines**

* We invite you to submit an application using the form below.
* Please save the form using the name of your organisation.
* Submit the completed form to info@taso-he.org by 1 March 2021. You will be informed of the outcome of your application in the w/c 22 March 2021.
* We anticipate the project will start w/c 26th April 2021 with final reporting in October 2021.

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| --- | --- |
| Call for applications opens | w/c 1 February 2021 |
| Deadline for applications | w/c 1 March 2021 |
| Clarification/negotiation with preferred suppliers and contracts signed | 15 March 2021 – 12 April 2021 |
| Project kick off  | w/c 26 April 2021 |

**Assessment of applications**

Your application will be assessed by the TASO Research and Evaluation team. The strength of applications will be assessed on the below criteria (please note the weighting of each section):

* *The team (40%)*
	+ The relevant experience of the project team.
	+ Evidence of success on similar projects.
	+ The team’s approach to transparency and accountability.
* *The application (40%)*
	+ How well the application answers the brief.
	+ How well it articulates the ability of the team to deliver all requirements and deliverables.
	+ How well it articulates the ability of the team to be responsive and flexible in delivering the brief.
* *Budget (20%)*
	+ Feasibility based on the budget submitted.
	+ Value for money.
	+ Financial stability and long-term viability of the organisation, including detail of the organisations last set of accounts and current year budget. Please note this criterion will receive a binary score of pass/fail and if not met the application will not be considered further.

**Expression of Interest Form**

Please note that hyperlinks to web-based information will not be accepted, and, if included, will not be evaluated.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Lead organisation** |  |
| **Contact name** |  |
| **Contact email** |  |
| **Contact telephone** |  |
| **SECTION A: Relevant experience***Please provide details of the team who would be involved in this project. Describe their proposed roles and how their skills and experience are relevant to delivering the work.**[500 words max]* |
|  |
| **SECTION B: Meeting the project brief***Please provide an overview of how you would meet the project brief. Please cover:** *How you would approach each part of the project*
* *A brief summary of key challenges/risks and you would address them*
* *A project timeline*

*[2000 words max (but please do not feel you need to meet this limit)]* |
|  |
| **SECTION C: Project budget***You may apply for funding to the value of £20,000 to £25,000 to deliver this project. Provide a budget showing how you propose to use the funding provided.*  |
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| **SECTION D: Financial stability** *Financial stability and long-term viability of the organisation is an essential criteria for this application. Please provide:** *Your organisation's last set of accounts*
* *Your organisation's current year budget.*

***You may also provide this as a pdf document alongside your completed application form.*** |
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*Additional guidance*

* TASO reserves the right, acting reasonably, to:
	+ Discontinue the award procedure in the absence of appropriate applications;
	+ Change the timetable for the procurement of the Contract, and in such circumstances TASO will notify all applicants of any change by the fastest means possible;
	+ Terminate discussions with organisations which apply;
	+ Discontinue the procedure leading to the award of the Contract;
	+ Not to award any Contract at all as a result of this process
* Under no circumstances shall TASO incur any liability in respect of any of these actions.
* No publicity regarding the project will be permitted until TASO has given express written consent to the relevant communication. No statements may be made to any part of the media regarding the nature of this application, its contents or any proposals relating to it without the prior written consent of TASO.
* TASO will not reimburse any costs incurred by organisations in connection with preparation of their applications.
* If you are unsure of the meaning of a question or anything in this call for applications then it is your responsibility to ask TASO to clarify in writing via email.
* TASO will aim to answer clarification questions within five (5) working days, but does not undertake to do so. TASO may also decline to answer a question if it deems the question to be inappropriate. If TASO is unable to answer a question, this will be communicated.