



Summary report:

Understanding the impact of interventions to address inequality in the student experience

TASO's reflections on the evidence

November 2020

Acknowledgements

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**Bridge
Group**
research
action
equality


Coventry
University

1. OVERVIEW

Higher education has long been recognised as a pathway to social mobility in England. This link has recently come under increasing scrutiny. While disadvantaged and underrepresented students are entering higher education at a higher rate than ever before, significant equality gaps remain once they get there. These student groups often do not have the same chances as others to succeed in their studies and progress to graduate-level jobs.

To address inequality in the student experience, we need to understand which interventions appear to be most effective, under what circumstances, and for whom. The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) has taken the first step in this discovery process by commissioning the Bridge Group and Coventry University to review the existing evidence base.

The review aimed to uncover the strength of evidence for interventions that higher education providers might use to reduce inequality gaps.¹ Specifically, it sought to identify evidence of causal relationships between interventions and student outcomes. That is, the review was designed to focus on understanding what evidence we have for interventions **causing** a difference in outcomes, as opposed to evidence of **associations or correlations**.² This focus aligns with TASO's remit and commitment to developing impact evidence which will help higher education providers identify the most effective approaches for use in their institution.

The final review focused on four outcome areas: attainment, retention, wellbeing, and employment. It incorporated 157 sources from both published literature and our own call for evidence, undertaken in summer 2019.³

This summary report synthesises the review's findings and recommendations with insights from TASO and our Theme Working Group on the student experience.⁴ The report concludes with our reflections and priorities for future work on this topic.

1.1 Evidence landscape

- There are strong positive associations between student engagement in several types of interventions and subsequent retention, attainment and/or employment outcomes.
- However, very few existing studies find a causal link between an intervention and student outcomes. Interventions conducted in a live higher education setting struggle to attribute effect, given the multitude of engagement initiatives occurring at the same time.
- The paucity of impact evidence may be a product of higher education providers' increased focus on universal provision and embedded practice, making it difficult to isolate the effect of specific interventions.
- Existing evidence rarely focuses on discrete outcomes such as attainment, retention, wellbeing, or employment. Generally, more than one of these outcomes are referred to as being served by an intervention.
- There are few or no studies relating to some specific groups known to have lower rates of retention and/or attainment. These groups include mature students, commuting students, part-time students, and those entering via vocational routes (e.g. with BTEC qualifications).
- There is also a lack of causal evidence as to what works to narrow deep-rooted gaps in student success outcomes, particularly relating to racial equality gaps, and gaps in non-continuation between advantaged and disadvantaged socio-economic groups.
- Most of the retention and attainment studies have taken place within a single institution – there are few studies which draw findings from across multiple sites and contexts.
- Measuring employment outcomes is a highly contested terrain. There is limited literature on the evaluation of interventions focused on closing gaps in employment outcomes, but a substantial literature on employability.⁵
- There is a lack of student voice in the design and evaluation of interventions.

1.2 Evaluation challenges

- Higher education providers are adopting holistic approaches to addressing differential outcomes and embed practice, which can create challenges for researchers looking to identify impact.
- A move away from targeted interventions towards mainstream activities to foster diversity and inclusion makes the methods needed for impact evaluation more complex.
- It is difficult to isolate interventions from the array of factors contributing to students' and graduates' outcomes. Most studies struggled to overcome methodological constraints such as intrinsic self-selection bias.
- There is a lack of reference to student perceptions of effective interventions that could support their progression. Instead, interventions are largely identified by the institution.
- It is sometimes difficult for providers to target and segment students according to student characteristics, both practically and ethically. This may be a result of institutions wanting to avoid stigmatizing students and influencing their performance expectations.

1.3 Review recommendations

- More causal evidence is needed to support efforts to narrow gaps in student success, specifically:
 - Racial equality gaps in degree outcomes
 - Gaps in non-continuation between advantaged and disadvantaged socio-economic groups
- New research should seek to address the lack of studies relating to some specific groups known to have lower rates of retention and/or attainment, namely:
 - Mature students
 - Commuter students
 - Part-time students
 - Students entering via vocational route (e.g. BTEC qualifications)

- Where the existing evidence suggests a strong association between participation in interventions and student outcomes, future research should explore whether there is causal impact; such interventions include:
 - Work experience (sandwich and/or short-term placements)
 - Mentoring, guidance, and counselling interventions
 - Financial support for students (e.g. grants and bursaries)
 - Extra-curricular activities
- Institutions should allocate more resources to develop evaluation expertise, promote innovation and ensure sustainable approaches to complex research.
- Researchers need to recognise the contextual conditions in which data are generated, including institutional culture; institutional hierarchy; and region and locality.
- Greater attention should be given to disaggregating data to understand patterns of student participation in interventions by equality and diversity groups but also by subject studied, residence and mode of study.
- Increased focus should be given to intersectionality and how disadvantage may accumulate in and beyond higher education. This has implications both for programme design and evaluation.
- Frameworks should be developed to effectively evaluate higher education providers' adoption of more holistic 'life-course' approaches.
- Institutions should develop indicators to recognise a broader understanding of graduate outcomes and impact, incorporating student perspectives of success.
- Where appropriate, evaluation should seek to develop what we know qualitatively into a quantitative frame of reference to determine impact for student and institutions.

2. TASO'S REFLECTIONS AND PRIORITIES

To bridge the evidence gaps identified in the review, TASO asked its Theme Working Group for the student experience to reflect on the findings and provide guidance on priority topics for new research. TASO's Theme Working Groups consist of a mix of practitioners, evaluators, researchers and administrators, and act as external bodies to help guide our work. In developing their advice, the group considered which recommendations from the review were most closely aligned with current sector priorities and the areas that TASO should focus upcoming efforts to produce more causal impact evidence.

2.1 Theme Working Group recommendations for TASO priorities

- Addressing racial equality gaps is a pressing concern for the sector. Given the clear need for further evidence, TASO should work to produce more research on this topic which can help providers identify the most effective practice.
- Understanding the most effective approaches to supporting employment outcomes is also a top priority for HE providers. TASO should explore how to produce more evidence on this topic and build a stronger causal evidence base on the impact of work experience.
- The group identified several of the review's recommendations as areas of particular interest to the sector which TASO should seek to embed in future research:
 - Exploring intersectionality and the most effective approaches to working with students facing a variety of barriers to success in higher education.
 - Multi-institution research to provide a better understanding of what works in different and diverse contexts, including small providers.
 - Exploring the impact of targeted activity versus universal provision - the most effective approaches and how can they be deployed.

2.2 Response and short-term research priorities

In response to the review and the Theme Working Group's guidance, TASO will work to bridge the following evidence gaps:

- Seek to generate more causal evidence linking interventions to student outcomes
- Facilitate cross-institutional knowledge sharing and best-practice research methods
- Upskill the sector to develop expertise and sustainable evaluation approaches

Based on the Theme Working Group's recommendations, TASO has commissioned research on racial equality gaps in higher education. The research project aims to identify effective ways to close these persistent gaps. Providers will evaluate promising approaches in their own institutions, supported by TASO and enhanced by the knowledge sharing among partner institutions.

TASO also plans to generate new impact evidence on interventions to support employment outcomes, following consultation with the sector on how to best approach the research given the complex interplay of factors which determine student destinations.

To address some of the other gaps identified, TASO is conducting a literature review on the barriers mature learners face entering, and succeeding, in HE. The results of this review will be used to inform the design of a suite of online experiments, which will provide further insights on how providers can best support this group.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, TASO is also exploring opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of remote and online teaching. This project will seek to identify whether certain modes of delivery are more, or less, effective in terms of minimizing the attainment gap for disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

To ensure that we continue to anchor our work in the needs and priorities of the sector, we will build on the recommendations in this report to launch a new research theme developed in consultation with student representatives and our Sector Network.

We have also begun the process of summarising evidence from the review in our Evidence Toolkit and it is also presented in the summary documents which accompany this report.⁶ Alongside producing more evidence, TASO will work to disseminate these findings through a programme of sector engagement over the course of the 2020-21 academic year.

Different types of evidence

TASO's approach to classifying evidence is aligned with the OfS 'Standards of Evidence' which categorises evidence into the following 'types':

- **Type 1** – Narrative: there is a clear narrative for why we might expect an activity to be effective. This narrative is normally based on the findings of other research or evaluation.
- **Type 2** – Empirical Enquiry: there is data which suggests that an activity is associated with better outcomes for students.
- **Type 3** – Causality: a method is used which demonstrates that an activity has a 'causal impact' on outcomes for students. This means it tells us whether an activity causes a difference in outcomes.

References and notes

- 1 Where we define 'intervention' broadly as any action/activity/programme/approach or reform which might be undertaken by a higher education provider
- 2 For more information on 'causal evidence' please access our website: <https://taso.org.uk/evidence/toolkit/what-is-causal-evidence/>
- 3 See full report for full references and definitions <https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Full-report-Understanding-gaps-in-the-student-experience-Bridge-Group-and-Coventry-University.pdf>
- 4 TASO's Theme Working Groups offer advice and recommendations relating to their relevant research areas and consist of a mix of practitioners, evaluators, researchers, and administrators.
- 5 See full report for full references and definitions <https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Full-report-Understanding-gaps-in-the-student-experience-Bridge-Group-and-Coventry-University.pdf>
- 6 Summaries are currently available on the role of financial support; mentoring, counselling, and role models; and broader student support programmes. Future releases will cover the role of institutional policies; learner analytics; and interventions to support employment outcomes (e.g. work experience). <https://taso.org.uk/evidence/toolkit/>

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