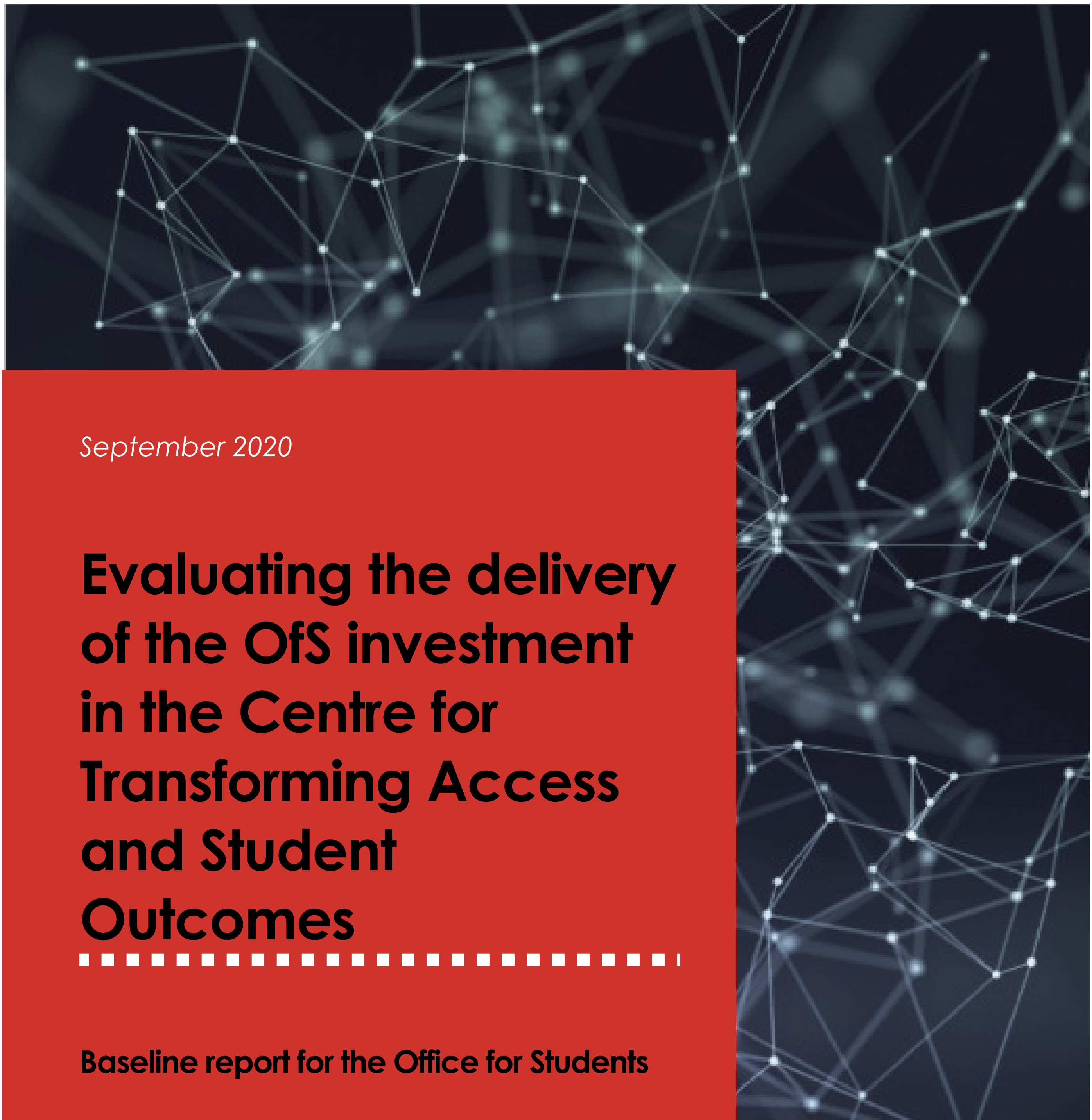

September 2020

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

Baseline report for the Office for Students

www.technopolis-group.com

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Glossary

AccessHE	Access to higher education network for London
ACORN	Categorisation of the UK's population into demographic types
AoC	Association of Colleges
APP	Access and participation plan
AUE	Alliance for Useful Evidence
AWM	Aim Higher West Midlands
BAME	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
DCMS	Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
DECE	Durham University Evidence Centre for Education
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
EEF	Education Endowment Fund
EIF	Early Intervention Charity Foundation
EMWREP	East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership
EPPI	Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EVA	Danish Evaluation Institute
FACE	Forum for Access and Continuing Education
FEC	Further Education College
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HEAT	Higher Education Access Tracker
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HELOA	Professional association of staff in higher education who work in student recruitment, outreach, marketing and admissions
HEP	Higher education provider
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IES	Institute of Education Sciences (USA)
Independent-HE	UK membership organisation and national representative body for independent providers of higher education, professional training and pathways
J-PAL	Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (USA)
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation

NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme (currently known as "Uni Connect)
NEON	National Education Opportunities Network
NERUPI	Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions
NESTA	formerly NESTA, National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
NSS	National Student Survey
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial
REF	Research Excellence Framework
RFA	Results for America
SCIE	Social Care Institute for Excellence
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SoE	Standards of Evidence
TASO	Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
TEF	Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework
TSO	Third Sector Organisation
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UUK	Universities UK
WCPP	Wales Centre for Public Policy
WP	Widening Participation
WWC	What Works Centre

Executive summary

The baseline report

The Office for Students (OfS) has commissioned Technopolis to evaluate the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) over the period of 2019-2024. The main aim of this report is to set a baseline for the evaluation of TASO. It is important to understand the situation in the higher education sector at the start of TASO's operation so that the subsequent impact assessment of TASO (planned for 2023) measures the change since the baseline and can more robustly attribute change to TASO when answering the evaluation questions set out in the invitation to tender, our proposal and the inception report for this evaluation.

TASO is an independent hub for higher education professionals to access research, toolkits and evaluation guidance to eliminate equality gaps within 20 years. Set up by a partnership of King's College London, Nottingham Trent University and the Behavioural Insights Team, TASO is an evidence centre and a member of the UK What Works Network. TASO is a crucial part of the OfS strategy for access and participation. Its role is to provide support and guidance to higher education providers (HEPs) to help them learn and adapt their practices.

The research activities of TASO are concentrated into three themes (a fourth theme was being chosen at the time of the baseline). 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.

The main methods applied in the baseline phase of the evaluation project included an online survey with higher education providers (HEPs) in England, telephone and online interviews with wider sector stakeholders and with selected HEPs, a review of access and participation plans (APPs), and a literature review. For the review of the various segments of APPs, we combined manual review (by a member of the evaluation team) with automatised semantic analysis. The various sources of evidence were used in the analysis to triangulate findings in various parts across this report.

Main findings

Use of the evaluation and research evidence in the higher education sector

The Type 2[1] evidence is the prevailing type in the sector, albeit with significant gaps, especially around the use of more advanced quantitative techniques for data analysis, such as regression analysis. In addition, Type 2 evidence appears to be used more in evaluations of interventions around access and continuation, less so in attainment and progression. A number of providers aspire to step to the use of Type 3 evidence in the future, however, it is currently used to a very limited extent. We also identified misconceptions around Type 3 evidence on the side of providers who are often surprised that using (and/or generating) Type 3 evidence is less difficult than they thought. However, more training in quantitative evaluation methods in the sector is still necessary in order for providers to be able to generate and use Type 3 evidence more confidently.

[1] As recognised by OfS, see https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/

Almost 90% of the survey respondents from universities use theory-based approaches, which is a higher share than in the case of other provider types. Further education colleges (FECs) show a lower level of use of theory-based approaches. There are differences across the various regions of England. More than 90% of survey respondents representing HEPs in London either strongly agreed or agreed that they use theory-based approaches, followed by East Midlands (89%), South West (82%) and East of England (80%).

More than 80% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the use of evidence is embedded in their business as usual. This is quite a high percentage and cannot be fully corroborated by the evidence coming from interviews. This discrepancy between the two sources of data could be partially explained by the fact that providers might have overstated their current practice when responding to the survey and that in this question, evidence was understood in the broadest sense, i.e. any evidence regardless of its type, and regardless of evaluation methods used to collect and analyse that evidence.

Some providers have established specialist evaluation units which work very closely with widening participation officers/practitioners and the professional staff in that area. However, the majority of providers either do not have specialist evaluators, in which case evaluation activities are within the remit of WP practitioners themselves, or they may only have one member of staff responsible for the whole breadth of evaluations, ranging from access to progression, often coming with a previous WP practice background. Where evaluations are carried out by WP practitioners themselves, they are responsible for the whole lifecycle of the intervention, from planning through implementation to evaluation. This often leads to fragmentation of the evaluation practice within the providers.

Providers use evidence and research in evaluation across all stages of the student journey, but to a varying degree, with activities around access enjoying the highest frequency of use of evidence, and also of the more sophisticated evaluation methods, compared to the other three stages (continuation, attainment and progression). There are several reasons:

- A longer tradition of evaluation in the area of access (OFFA focused more on access than on the other areas)
- The school sector seems to be ahead in using evaluation evidence and is more data-driven
- There is generally more data on access available (e.g. because of the past research funded by the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, now Uni Connect)

There is a striking imbalance between the two largest groups of providers, universities and FECs. Whilst almost 90% of universities use evidence in the area of access either practically always or quite often, just over three quarters of FECs do so.

Almost a half of respondents indicated that the evidence generated internally (i.e. by their provider) was either very highly available or highly available. This is a considerably higher level of availability compared to evidence generated elsewhere, where the share of respondents indicating very high or high availability was just below 37%. This suggests there is a lot of useful data generated elsewhere which providers cannot or do not use because it is not readily available. In addition, when it exists, it often needs adapting. The two most frequently used sources of evaluation evidence are providers' own activities and published statistics/datasets. HEAT data, in particular, appears to be a very important source of evidence for HEPs, however, the issues around GDPR and student consent make it difficult for HEPs to link the HEAT data to their own qualitative evidence at the individual student level.

The levels of sharing of evidence across the sector is relatively low and our research pointed to some specific issues in this respect:

- Providers tend to be less concerned about sharing evidence on activities around continuation, attainment and progression (i.e. "post-entry"), compared to evidence on activities in access ("pre-entry"). Outreach activities and access activities often overlap between WP and marketing, so providers are sometimes hesitant to share information which could potentially reveal their strategy
- WP practitioners' degree of involvement in sharing evidence is lower than that of evaluators
- There still is a lot of hesitancy on the side of providers to share evidence on what did not work. However, most of them also agreed that the sector should generally be more open about this because it is very important for learning.

Looking further ahead, there appears to be a general consensus across the sector that in the future more sharing should be happening in the area of access and participation.

A number of barriers to using evaluation evidence and research have been explored. The most common barrier was a lack of time and resources. Capacity issues were also prominent, followed by the evidence not being easily available.

Awareness of TASO in the higher education sector

Based on the analysis of the APPs, one third of HEPs are aware of TASO (which was sometimes referred to as Evidence and Impact Exchange in the plans). The survey results pointed to a very similar level of awareness. Most survey respondents indicated being moderately well prepared to engage with TASO and its work in the future. Universities reported a much higher intention to engage with TASO across all types of activities than the other provider types. In contrast, FECs reported the lowest intentions. There were concerns expressed among survey respondents that TASO would not support smaller providers with little budget to carry out evaluation and/or work with evaluation evidence were confirmed in interviews (smaller HEPs said they had sometimes found it difficult to even respond to calls for evidence published by TASO). Between one fifth and one quarter of the survey respondents have been already involved in a TASO group, body or their network.

The sector foresees a significant future challenge for TASO around achieving buy-in, credibility and long-term support. This is perceived as being linked to the diversity of the sector in terms of size and type of provider and also in terms of the diversity of current evaluation practices and methodological approaches.

Conclusions and recommendations

The baseline report provides the evaluation with an information base against which to monitor and evaluate the progress of TASO, and ultimately undertake an impact assessment. The baseline also provided the opportunity to develop a set of recommendations to be considered for the future phases of the implementation of TASO, structured around the three main audiences: OfS, TASO and the sector.

The recommendations for the OfS centre on continued communication (with TASO and the sector), supporting the championing of the use of evidence, through their close relationships with providers, and in particular the use of Type 3 evidence.

The recommendations for TASO mirror those for the OfS, with a particular focus on the better engagement of further education colleges, connecting with WP practitioners and ensuring availability and use of evaluation evidence from other sources.

The recommendations for the sector as a whole call for building a long-term relationship with TASO and connecting with other sources of evidence, reducing the fragmentation of evaluation practice and being open to submitting evidence on less successful activities.

1 Introduction

The Office for Students (OfS) has commissioned Technopolis to evaluate the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO). This report sets the baseline for the evaluation.

TASO[2] is an independent hub for higher education professionals to access research, toolkits and evaluation guidance to eliminate equality gaps within 20 years. Set up by a partnership of King's College London, Nottingham Trent University and the Behavioural Insights Team, TASO is an evidence centre and a member of the UK What Works Network. TASO is a crucial part of the OfS strategy for access and participation. Its role is to provide support and guidance to higher education providers (HEPs) to help them learn and adapt their practices. TASO was established in response to the 2016 the Social Mobility Action Group final report 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 high quality evidence following the model of the What Works Network. 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.

The research activities of TASO are concentrated into three themes (a fourth theme is currently being chosen). 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 has been established for each theme (with representatives of the higher education sector).

The main aim of this report is to set a baseline for the evaluation of TASO. It is important to understand the situation in the higher education sector at the start of TASO's operation so that the subsequent impact assessment of TASO (planned for 2023) measures the change since the baseline and can more robustly attribute change to TASO when answering the evaluation questions set out in the invitation to tender, our proposal and the inception report for this evaluation.

The report starts with a literature review of the available data sources in the access and participation area as well as a review of enablers and barriers for good-quality evaluation and evidence-based practice in access and participation and beyond in order to provide a context for the baseline.

In the next sections, we then analyse and synthesise the data collected via a survey and interviews with HEPs and interviews with wider sector stakeholders on a variety of aspects of the use of evaluation evidence and research in access to and participation in higher education in England. These include the type of evidence and research used, the degree of embeddedness of evaluation within the provider and the evaluation ecosystem at the provider level, the stage of student journey where the evidence and research is used (i.e. access, continuation, attainment and progression) etc.

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[2] More information here: https://taso.org.uk/

In the three sections that follow, we focus more closely on TASO, the awareness of and expectation of engagement with TASO in the higher education sector, its planned activities and alignment with the sector and the foreseen challenges for TASO.

The report concludes with a literature review and rapid evidence assessment of other ‘hat works’ platforms in the UK and beyond in order to inform our benchmarking exercise which will be conducted in the mid-term stage of the evaluation.

2 Methodology

Survey with higher education providers

The online survey was launched on 1st April 2020 and an invitation to respond to the survey was sent to contact persons at 284 HEPs in England. We expected that the Covid-19 pandemic would negatively affect the response rate, therefore the period during which HEPs were able to respond to the survey was extended from one month to two months. The team also pro-actively sent targeted reminders to those contacts who had not responded. This was complemented by targeted phone calls in order to boost the number of responses in some particular regions of England. The survey was closed on 31st May 2020. The total number of complete responses was 111 from 284 invitees, a response rate of 39.1%. For the purpose of this survey HEPs were asked to indicate their type: university; university college; further education college (FEC); alternative provider; or specialist provider.

Interviews

The evaluation team conducted two sets of interviews:

- Interviews with wider sector stakeholders
- Interviews with selected HEPs in order to follow up on the survey and obtain further insights into some issues identified in the survey
- The selection of HEPs was based on the survey results. Only those who agreed in the survey to be contacted again were considered for interview. Some 60% of the survey respondents shared their contact details and were happy to be contacted again for the purpose of this evaluation

In total, 29 interviews were conducted, 18 with wider stakeholders and 11 with HEPs. There was a very good level of responsiveness from the individuals invited to interview. The selection of HEPs was based on the following factors:

- Making sure there was a good balance across the various types of HEPs (e.g. universities, FECs etc.)
- Making sure there was a good balance across the regions
- Following up on an interesting issue, approach and/or highlighted in the survey which was worth exploring further
- Digging deeper into some trends coming out from the survey results, such as the levels of use of particular evidence types

Review of access and participation plans (APPs)

The evaluation team complemented the analysis with the following datasets:

- Extracted and coded strategic measures of HEPs regarding planned activities in access and participation
- Extracts of segments of APPs (evaluation, access, success, progression and financial support)

For the review of the various segments of APPs, we combined manual review (by a member of the evaluation team) with automatised semantic analysis. For the automatised semantic analysis, we used the software called MonkeyLearn, which assigns predefined labels/codes to segments of text, based on initial "training". It then returns the topics spoken about by each HEP. The results of this piece of work were used as additional source of evidence and used to triangulate findings in various parts across this report.

3 Landscape of data in access and participation, and enablers and barriers for good-quality evaluation and evidence-based practice

In this section, we focus our attention on the sources and types of knowledge and data in the UK access and participation landscape. The issue of the results and effects of initiatives and activities is being covered by TASO itself in its reviews of evidence of the effectiveness of different activities. An example of this is the recently published comprehensive review of evidence produced for TASO by the Education Policy Institute.[3]

Secondly, we look at the available literature on barriers to and enablers of good evaluation practice and evidence-based practice more widely, firstly in the access and participation in higher education area and then considering other areas that have sought to promote evidence-based practice. Promoting good evaluation practice and evidence-based practice more widely is at the core of the TASO mission and this literature review can provide useful reflections on the factors that may effect the achievement of these goals.

The review concludes with a section considering how the findings feed into the baseline for the evaluation.

3.1 Landscape of data, information and knowledge in the access and participation area

This first section largely uses the recent *Data Use for Access and Participation in Higher Education*[4] report produced for the OfS. The second part analyses the sources of wider information and knowledge relevant to practioners. This is a broader category that includes sources of reports, evaluations, best practice guides etc.

3.1.1 Data landscape

The OfS *Data use for Access and Participation in higher education* report seeks to increase understanding of the types of data that are available in the access and participation area, how they are used and how useful they are. It is based on desk research, 32 semi-structured interviews with senior stakeholders and a user survey. It provides a useful summary of the main data sources in the UK according to those using the data.

The report found that providers use data for three purposes:

- Targeting: using data to decide how to allocate resources for access and participation activities
- Monitoring: using data to manage interventions and assess ongoing impacts
- Evaluation: using data to draw lessons about which interventions work and why

The report also distinguishes broad categories of data. The main distinction is between data that is created *internally* by HEPs during processes like enrollment and recruitment activities and data that is created *externally*. External data is further broken down into publicly

[3] Robinson, David, and Viola Salvestrini. "The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: a review of the evidence" (2020). Education Policy Institute

[4] Joanne Moore "Data use for Access and Participation in higher education: Review and Recommendations by CFE Research for the OFS" (2020) CFE Research

available data sources held predominantly by government agencies and private data sources with restricted access and held by private companies or data partnerships. In the access and participation area the key partnership based data sources are the data tracking services: Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership (EMWREP) and Aimhigher West Midlands (AWM). These tracking services operate on a subscription basis and have their origins in the Aimhigher scheme. HEAT, based at the University of Kent, is the largest with 84 HEPs, 24 Uni Connect partnerships (formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)) and three third sector organisations using the service. The other services are regionally based and much smaller. EMWRP, based at Loughborough University, is focused on the Midlands and has 37 members (ten full HEP partners; three half HEP partners; four Uni Connect partnerships; and 20 continuing higher education providers). AMW, based at the University of Birmingham, is focused on the West Midlands and South West and has 12 members (six HEP partners and six colleges of higher education).

The rest of this section will outline the main data sources used by providers for the different categories of activity: targeting, monitoring and evaluation. Where relevant it will distinguish also whether a particular data source is most relevant to access (getting people into higher education), success (helping them succeed in their studies) or progression (helping them get a good job afterwards).

3.1.2 Targeting

The study found that for 70 out of 76 providers who answered the survey, POLAR data and other similar sources were in their top three sources of data. In addition to POLAR, which uses statistics collected via the census to rank areas on how many people typically go to university, these include the Index of Multiple Deprivation, which ranks areas by a series of indicators such as income, health and education and skills. Other important sources of public information include published school and college profiling data (e.g. performance tables) which are used by 60% of providers surveyed. A smaller number of larger providers use private sources such as the ACORN data providing service. Over two thirds also use UCAS data. Tracking services are also important here. Of the survey respondents who are members of a tracking service, three quarters use it in helping to target activities.

In terms of success and progression activities the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework (TEF) and the National Student Survey (NSS) are seen as important. Internal data collected at registration is also seen as important for targeting these access activities.

3.1.3 Monitoring

Around 95% of respondents said they routinely used data to monitor their activities but the types of data used differ depending on whether it relates to access activities, success related activities or progression activities. For access activities the monitoring combines internal and external sources. The most common sources are 1) activity related databases (i.e. info collected at events) 2) tracking services and 3) centralised student info systems. For those that do use a tracking service (41 out of the 76 that responded) this is the main source of data used. For success and progression the most common sources for monitoring were institutional support records systems and internal student management and learner analytics systems.

3.1.4 Evaluation

Again the data sources used depend on whether the activity relates to access, success or progression. For access, providers use their own student data, tracking services and UCAS applicant data. Pupil level information from schools is also an important source. For success, institutional student record systems and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student outcomes data is important. For progression, the three top sources are HESA student destinations data, institutional student records and internal management information.

3.1.5 *The wider information and knowledge landscape*

As well as the various data sources described above there is a well-established community of practice in the UK higher education sector that produces a wide variety of information and knowledge that can be used by providers to inspire and give ideas and, most importantly for our purposes, to draw on best practice to see what has worked in different settings. The sources listed in Table 1 are drawn from a web search, a review of the evidence sources in TASO's first publication,[5] our own knowledge and experience, and the inception report scoping interviews.

Table 1 – Sources of information and knowledge in the UK access and participation landscape

Type of source		Description/examples
Knowledge sharing platforms	Forums / networks	Spaces where practitioners can share experience and knowledge. The key forums are Action on Access – who provide networking, event information and vacancies, newsletters and briefings[6] – and the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) – who facilitate the exchange and dissemination of information and practices in Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education.[7] FACE holds an annual conference that brings together practitioners and academics and leads to a peer reviewed publication. There are also regionally based forums such as AccessHE, a London based organisation that holds forums across the range of Access, Success, Progression subjects.[8] The Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) is also a distinctive and key network. It is focused specifically on evaluation practice and produces a framework to help practitioners carry out evaluations. It provides access to resources, tools, workshops and an annual convention.
	Online communities	JISCMail is an email discussion list service for UK education and research communities that has threads specific to widening participation and is a key source for job opportunities, events and sharing online materials.
	Sector bodies	The key professional bodies are the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) and the Higher Education Liaison Officers Association (HELOA). NEON has an organisational membership model whereas HELOA is based on individual membership. Both provide access to training, resources and annual conferences.
Evaluation reports	Uni Connect	The 29 Uni Connect partnerships are required to measure the impact of their activities at the local level. Many of these

[5] Robinson, David, and Viola Salvestrini. "The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: a review of the evidence" (2020). Education Policy Institute

[6] http://actiononaccess.org/

[7] https://www.face.ac.uk/who-we-are/

[8] https://www.accesshe.ac.uk/forums-and-groups/

Type of source		Description/examples
		evaluations are published and provide an important source of evidence.
	Higher education providers	Many providers are publishing their own evaluations. E.g. Koshy, V., & Smith, C. (2019). *The Urban Scholars Programme: Evaluation Summary*. Brunel University, London and Mackintosh, M., & Edwards, R. (2018). *Student Tutor Scheme 2012-13 to 2017-18: Internal Evaluation Report*. University of Bath & Bath Spa University.
	Third sector organisations	There are a number of third sector organisations (TSOs), predominantly charities, that undertake extensive activities to promote the access, success and progression agenda. Many of these initiatives are subject to evaluations and many of these get published. Prominent TSOs who have published evaluations include The Brilliant Club, The Access Project and Sutton Trust.
Sources of analysis/synthesis of data and knowledge	Consultancies and think tanks	National Foundation for Educational Research, Higher Education Policy Institute, Institute for Fiscal Studies, The Centre for Education and Youth, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The RAND Corporation, The Behavioural Insights Team, the Institute for Employment Studies and the Education Policy Institute.
	National and international government bodies	Office for Students, Department for Education, UCAS, Research England, World Bank, Universities Scotland, EEF and others
	University-based research centres	A number of universities have established specific research centres and departments to further knowledge on Access, Success and Progression. They carry out evaluation activities but also produce reports and analysis. Prominent examples include: the Widening Participation Research & Evaluation Unit at the University of Sheffield and the Centre for Student and Community Engagement at Nottingham Trent University.
Journals	Specific to Access, Success and Progression	*Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, International Studies in Widening Participation, Journal of Extension*
	Higher education journals	*Research in Higher Education, Journal of Further and higher Education, Higher Education Quarterly, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, The Journal of Academic Librarianship, Journal of Student Financial Aid, Research in Post-Compulsory Education*
	Wider disciplinary based journals	*The British Journal of Sociology, American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, Education Finance and Policy, Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Oxford Review of Education, Economics of Education Review, The Future of Children, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Cambridge Review of Education, Journal of Education and Work, Journal of Vocational Education and Training; Gender and Education, British Journal of Sociology of Education,* *British Educational Research Journal, Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, Journal of Human Capital, Power and Education, The Scandinavian Journal of Economics, Journal of Human Resources, Social Science Research*

3.2 Literature on the barriers or enablers for good quality evaluation and evidence-based practice

The section above has reviewed the various sources of data and information used in the access and participation field in the UK. This next section seeks to draw insights from the literature about what factors may affect the way that these sources of data and information are used. The first part will review a very specific and relevant set of reports that relate to the use of data and evaluation practice within the access and participation area in the UK in the last five years. Although this literature is highly pertinent it is also limited to a small number of studies (because of a limited availability of such studies). In order to supplement these findings and provide some point of comparison the second part also looks more widely to other jurisdictions and other areas of public policy to see what insights are available which can allow for some comparison.

3.2.1 Barriers and enablers for good quality evaluation practice in the UK access and participation area

Over the last five years the OfS and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) have commissioned a number of studies that have looked at evaluaton practices. Two studies have been devoted to it: "Improving the evaluation of outreach: Interview report"[9] and "Understanding the evaluation of access and participation outreach interventions for under 16-year olds".[10] A further two studies have looked at the issue tangentially amongst other issues: "The National Collaborative Outreach Programme – End of phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations"[11] and the study already looked at above for data sources, "Data use for Access and Participation in higher education: Review and Recommendations by CFE Research for the OfS"[12]. This section will draw out the main barriers and enablers identified by each report and then compare and analyse the findings.

Table 2 – Barriers for good quality evaluation practice in the UK access and participation sector

Report	Barriers
Crawford et al 2017 Improving the evaluation of outreach	• Data – accessing what you need when you need it and the high costs • Time and resource – lack of skills, low confidence amongst staff whose primary work is outreach delivery • Lack of institutional buy in – competing claims on times for delivery versus evaluation • Lack of consistency – changes in staff, a lack of consistency across the sector, and changing targets and directives from external bodies and organisations
Harrison et al 2018 Understanding the evaluation of access and participation outreach interventions	This study looked at evaluation of access programmes targeting younger children under the age of 16. A number of general challenges were identified: • Logistical: lack of resources and staff time, issues around effective data collection, poor co-operation from schools, concerns about GDPR • Skills and knowledge: lack of application of advanced evaluation techniques. Found that dedicated outreach practitioners less likely in new higher education providers with lower spend on outreach activities

[9] Crawford, Claire, Siobhan Dytham, and Robin Naylor. (2017). OFFA and DoE

[10] Harrison, Neil, et al. (2018). OFFA

[11] Bowes, Lindsey, et al. (2019). CFE

[12] Joanne Moore (2020). CFE Research

for under 16-year olds	• Institutional: frequent changes in personnel and lack of senior staff buy in There were also a set of challenges that were particular to under 16 interventions: • Epistemological: concern about validity of self-reporting data from young people and difficulties in measuring impact of intervention amongst all the factors that influence a young person's decisions about higher education • Institutional: less buy in to under 16 activities as less directly related to higher education recruitment
Bowes et al 2019 Uni Connect evaluation	This study looked at challenges to evaluation practice as part of evaluation of Uni Connect practice. It identified some barriers specific to Uni Connect: • Short term nature of contracts has made retention and attracting staff with required evaluation experience difficult • As Uni Connect consist of multi-party partnerships the evaluations relied on many partners doing their bit of evaluation which produced inconsistencies in data collection • If learners move from one institution to another one that is not covered in the Uni Connect partnership then it is difficult to trace them Some general challenges were also identified: • Schools and colleges act as gatekeepers to participants in the evaluation. This places a lot of burden on schools to collect data • GDPR had severe effects on ability to collect data. It did not necessarily stop data being collected but the difficulty was the struggle to navigate the changes • Uploading data to tracking services is very time intensive and produces patchy data
Moore 2020 Data Use for Access and Participation	• Complexity of the data landscape (detailed above) • Lack of staff time – this differed according to size of provider. In relation to targeting, 84% of small providers saw this as barrier, while for medium-sized providers it was 56% and for larger ones only 28%, • Poor data coverage • Lack of knowledge of data sources – again this differed by size of provider. In relation to targeting, 52% of small providers saw this as a barrier and only 16% of larger providers • Uneven access to systems and data – relating to cost and knowledge. This also differed according to size of provider. In relation to targeting of access activities, 48% of smaller providers saw it as an issue and only 28% of larger providers

As well as the barriers described in Table 2, two of the studies detailed potential enablers that are being used by practitioners. The Uni Connect evaluation identified two enablers: placing engagement officers in schools to ease burden; securing buy in from senior staff; using existing evaluation frameworks; and allocating sufficient budget and having dedicated staff. The Data Use for Access and Participation report also suggests good partnerships with schools are key to enable effective sharing of information. The report concludes that the solution lies in taking a sector wide approach to data literacy, including developing toolkits tailored to different types of providers, and reports that some providers have suggested that TASO could take this role.

3.2.2 Summary of the four studies

There are two key takeaway points from these studies. Firstly, that there are some general challenges similar in nature across the studies that are likely to arise in our evaluation: that there is a lack of time and resources as well as lack of knowledge of, and access to, data;

that schools are key partners in evaluations; and that GDPR is a major issue in this area. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, what these studies illustrate is the variety of experiences across types of institution and also types of activity. Smaller providers are more likely to struggle with staff time, knowledge and access to data sources. And the studies of Uni Connect partnerships and under 16 access activities make clear that different activities bring with them particular evaluation and data challenges.

3.2.3 Wider evidence-based practice literature

This part of the review is wider and provides insights from the literature on the barriers to evidence-based practice in different countries and sectors. This part was completed by using a series of key word searches using Google and Google Scholar to establish which line of enquiry would be most fruitful.

The notion of evidence-based practice was developed in the healthcare field in the 1990s and quickly spread outwards to a range of other policy areas.[13] It can be defined as a "decision-making process for practice that includes the following five steps: formulating an answerable practice question; searching for the best research evidence; critically appraising the research evidence for its validity and applicability; implementing a practice decision after integrating the research evidence with client characteristics, preferences, and values; and evaluating the outcome".[14]

This research focused more closely on five studies and the results can be summarised as follows:

- Jenkins and Reid Kerrigan[15] concluded that the culture within organisations (colleges in the USA in this case) made a big difference to uptake of best practice
- Li and Zu[16] studied the barriers hindering adoption of evidence-based practice within organisations. They identified the following: insufficient evidence to support practice; complexity of evidence; lack of consistency; findings not translating into implementation; overload of literature; not enough time; insufficient facilitators and resources; lack of authority to change practice; limited funding; and difficulties in critical thinking, identifying research articles and journals, and evaluating research quality
- Ellen et al.[17] found that having structures in place is crucial. This includes structures of accountability to ensure evidence is used; having specific positions in place to promote use of evidence; and having people capable of taking "data and converting it to information"

[13] Reynolds, Shirley. Evidence-based practice: A critical appraisal. John Wiley & Sons, 2008

[14] Parrish, Danielle E. "Evidence-Based Practice: A Common Definition Matters". Journal of Social Work Education 54.3 (2018): 407-11.

[15] Jenkins, Paul Davis, and Monica Reid Kerrigan. "Evidence-based decision making in community colleges: Findings from a survey of faculty and administrator data use at achieving the dream colleges". (2008).

[16] Li, Shu, Meijuan Cao, and Xuejiao Zhu. "Evidence-based practice: Knowledge, attitudes, implementation, facilitators, and barriers among community nurses—systematic review". Medicine 98.39 (2019).

[17] Ellen, Moriah E., et al. "What supports do health system organizations have in place to facilitate evidence-informed decision-making? A qualitative study". Implementation Science 8.1 (2013).

- Humphries et al.[18] identified the following barriers to evidence use by managers (in the healthcare sector): informational, organisational (structure and processes), organisational (culture), individual skills and interaction
- Bowen et al.[19] concluded that the "'real challenges' to using evidence are structural/contextual/system-level barriers, not simple barriers to research transfer". They argue that it should be seen as a process rather than a single event and that the complexities of applying research in a particular environment, with its own barriers and enablers, should be taken into account

3.2.4 Key points and reflections for the baseline stage of the evaluation

The key points drawn from these wider studies, how they compare with the UK literature on access and participation, and reflections on how they may influence the baseline stage of the evaluation are the following.

- The political and institutional context and the drivers of access and participation within providers are important
- Different areas of activities and the size of providers produce distinct barriers
- There exist various barriers to using evidence
- Improving evidence-based practice requires sector wide efforts

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[18] Humphries, Serena, et al. "Barriers and facilitators to evidence-use in program management: a systematic review of the literature." BMC Health Services Research 14.1 (2014): 171.

[19] Bowen, Sarah, et al. "More than 'using research': the real challenges in promoting evidence-informed decision-making". *Healthcare Policy* 4.3 (2009): 87.

4 Use of evaluation evidence and research in the higher education sector

Assessment of the current level of use of evaluation evidence and research in the area of access and participation in the higher education sector is a very crucial element in setting the baseline for the evaluation of TASO. This is because the current level of use of this evidence determines the "starting point" for the assessment of TASO's impact later. There are a number of aspects to the use of evaluation evidence and research by providers which merit being looked at separately when setting the baseline. The baseline indicators, which were outlined in our inception report, are as follows:

- The type of evidence and research used (i.e. Type 1, Type 2 or Type 3, as recognised by the OfS[20])
- Degree of embeddedness of evaluation within the provider and the evaluation ecosystem at the provider level
- The stage of student journey where the evidence and research are used (i.e. access, continuation, attainment or progression)
- Origin and availability of the evidence and research (i.e. own evidence, external evidence etc.)
- Degree to which evidence and research is shared across the sector

Data on all these aspects was collected from various sources, namely from the survey of providers, interviews with providers and wider sector stakeholders and from the access and participation plans submitted by providers.

[20] OfS's Standards of evidence and evaluation self-assessment tool, available online at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/.

4.1 The type of evidence and research used

In this sub-section, we look closer at the type of evidence used currently in the sector. We use the three types of evidence as recognised by the OfS, i.e. Type 1, Type 2 and Type 3, as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3 – Types of evidence recognised by the OfS

	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's Standards of evidence and evaluation self-assessment tool.

There was a strong belief across all providers and wider stakeholders who were interviewed that the sector has now generally moved beyond Type 1 evidence. Although simple narratives and/or narrative stories of individual student journeys are still used in evaluations, it is rare to use only Type 1 evidence on its own.

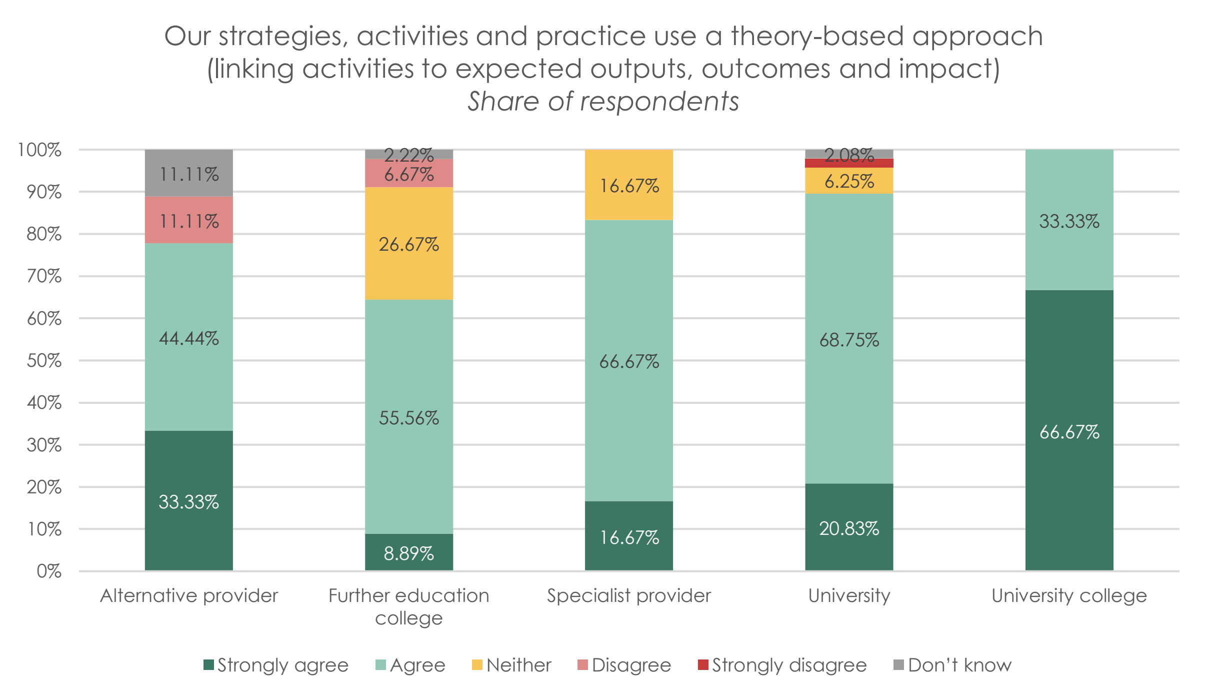
Both interviewed categories of individuals (higher education providers and wider sector stakeholders) strongly believed that the prevailing type of evidence in the sector is now Type 2. When digging deeper, it is apparent that the most frequent use of Type 2 evidence comes from launching pre-intervention and post-intervention participant surveys. It also transpires from the interviews that universities, typically, use Type 2 evidence more frequently and more confidently than other types of providers. Although, currently, there is only anecdotal evidence available to explain this, providers tend to have more in-house capacity and skills required for designing, running and analysing pre-post surveys which are typical data collection tools used to generate Type 2 evidence. It is important to note, however, that the prevalence of use of Type 2 evidence is a relatively recent development, most probably fuelled by the activities of OfS. There remain significant gaps in the use of Type 2 evidence, especially around the use of more advanced quantitative techniques for data analysis, such as regression analysis. In addition, Type 2 evidence appears to be used more in evaluations of interventions around access and continuation, less so in attainment and progression.

Where interviewees commented on Type 3 evidence, this was practically always related to aspirations of providers to step up to the use of Type 3 in the future. Only one interviewee mentioned that Type 3 evidence is currently used, but in a very limited way, by only a handful of providers, when evaluating specific interventions. There were five interviewed wider stakeholders who spoke about misconceptions around Type 3 on the side of providers. They felt providers are often surprised that it is less difficult than they thought to integrate for example randomised control trials into evaluation, if done at the right time of the intervention cycle. However, they also agreed that training in quantitative evaluation methods is necessary in order for providers to be able to generate and use Type 3 evidence. Therefore, a lot could still be done by both OfS and TASO in the promotion of Type 3 evidence in the sector and in attempting to remove this misperception on the side of providers, as well as in provision of training and other support to providers' staff.

The findings from interviews around the types of evidence used are corroborated from our analysis of extracts from the APPs of providers. In 14.8% of the plans, there were explicit references to the current use of Type 2 evidence in evaluation of activities in widening participation (WP). In 12.3% of the plans, providers mentioned the use of Type 1 evidence, often in conjunction with the use of Type 2. Some 11.3% made explicit remarks on Type 3 evidence. Type 3 was mostly mentioned in relation to planned strategic measures of providers as the type of evidence most promoted by OfS and a goal that the providers aim to ultimately reach.

Looking beyond the three types of evidence, in our baseline survey, we asked providers about the use of theory-based (or theory of change-based) approaches in their strategies, activities and practice. Almost 90% of the respondents from universities use theory-based approaches (combining those who strongly agreed and agreed), which is a higher share than in the case of other provider types. On the other hand, further education colleges (FECs) show a lower level of use of theory-based approaches. This finding was confirmed in interviews where all categories of interviewees (i.e. including wider stakeholders, university representatives and FEC representatives) mentioned that there are differences between the way theory-based approaches are used to underpin institutional policies. (Figure 1)

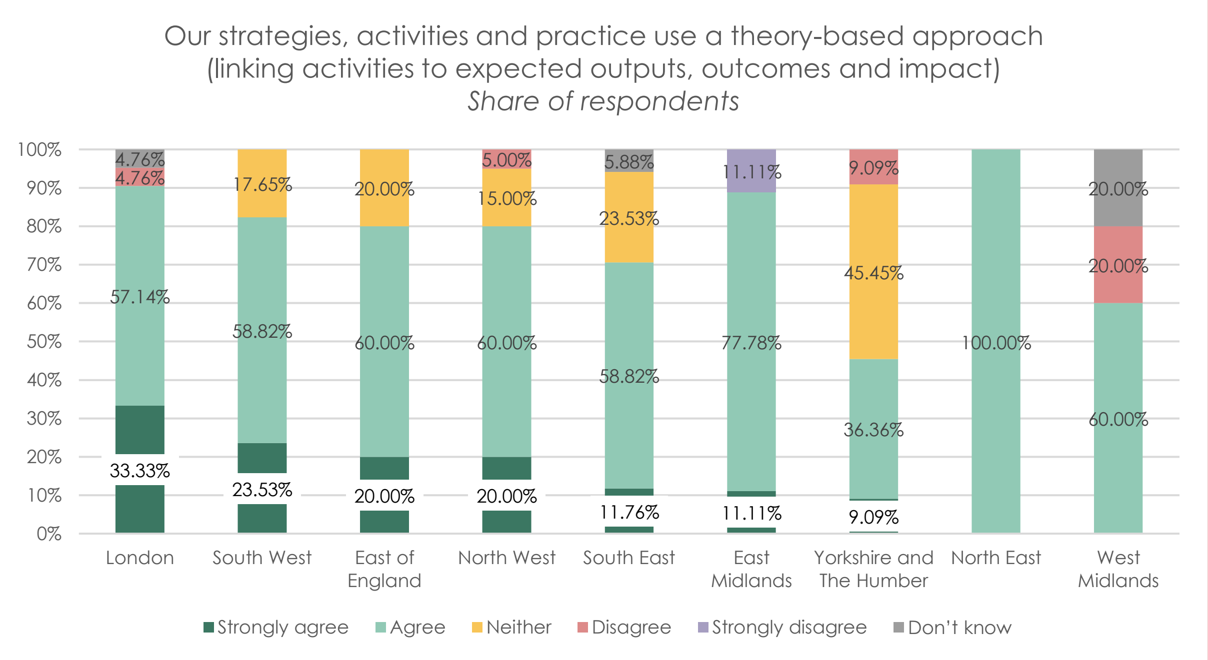
Figure 1 – "Our strategies, activities and practice use a theory-based approach (linking activities to expected outputs, outcomes and impact)"; by type of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are differences across the various regions of England. More than 90% of survey respondents representing providers in London either strongly agreed or agreed that their provider uses theory-based approaches, followed by East Midlands (89%), South West (82%) and East of England (80%). All respondents from the North East agreed that they use theory-based approaches, but none of them strongly agreed. On the other side of the scale, there are respondents from Yorkshire and the Humber where only 45% of them strongly agreed or agreed that they use theory-based approaches. The leading position of London-based providers was confirmed in interview. This could be explained by a better supply of people with the right skills to confidently use theory-based approaches in London's labour market. (Figure 2)

Figure 2 – "Our strategies, activities and practice use a theory-based approach (linking activities to expected outputs, outcomes and impact)"; by region of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement

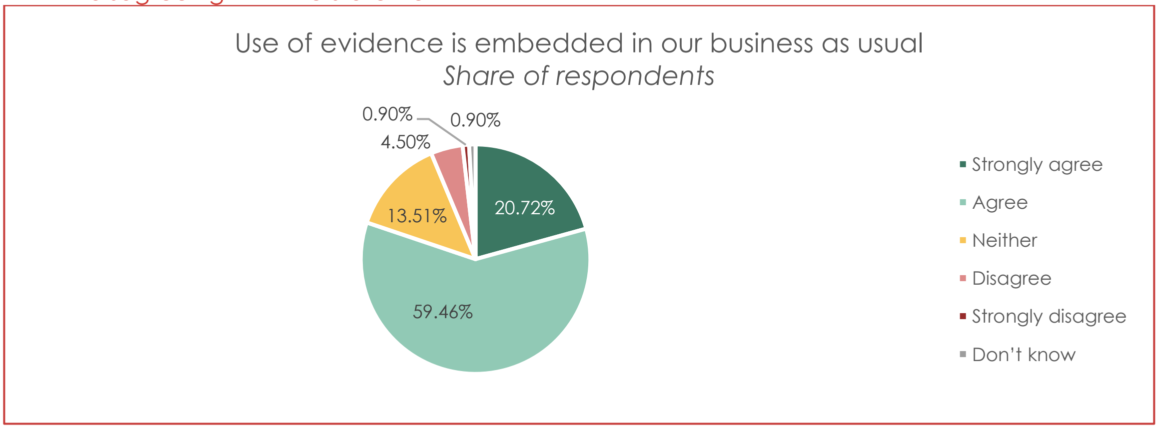


Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

4.2 Degree of embeddedness of evaluation within the providers and the evaluation ecosystem and culture at the provider level

Assessing the degree of embeddedness of the use of evaluation evidence within the providers is another important part of the process of setting the baseline. Looking at the survey results (Figure 3), more than 80% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the use of evidence is embedded in their business as usual. This is quite a high percentage and cannot be fully corroborated by the evidence coming from interviews. This discrepancy between the two sources of data could be partially explained by the fact that providers might have overstated their current practice when responding to the survey and that in this question, evidence was understood in the broadest sense, i.e. any evidence regardless of its type, and regardless of evaluation methods used to collect and analyse that evidence.

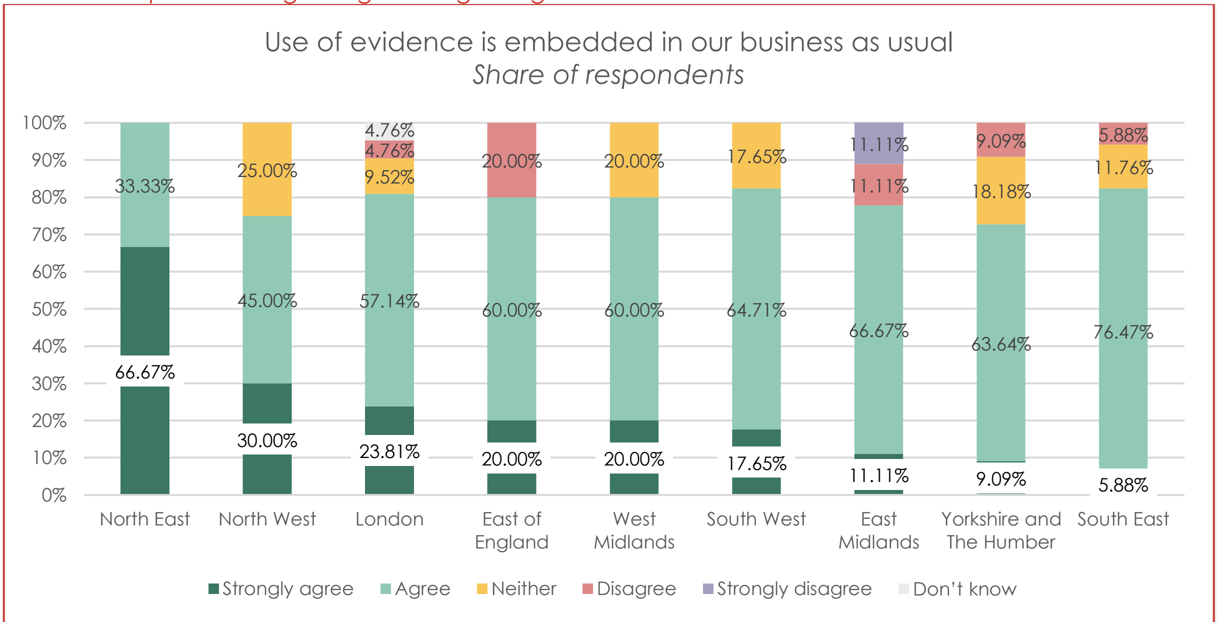
Figure 3 – "Use of evidence is embedded in our business as usual"; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

Looking closer at the breakdown per region (Figure 4), the respondents from the North East clearly stand out with regard to the use of evidence being embedded in their business as usual. Yorkshire and the Humber, their neighbours, are at the other end of the spectrum. The high ranking of respondents from North East is apparent in some other aspects of the use of evidence in access and participation (see, for example, Figure 15). Bringing in the evidence from interviews, especially from the one with a provider in the North East, the team can explain the response from the North East by the participation of providers in regional outreach partnerships and programmes, namely in the North East Raising Aspiration Partnership[21] and/or FutureMe/The North East Collaborative Outreach Programme.[22] The participation in these partnerships seems to have a significant positive effect on providers' practices in evaluation and on their confidence in using the evidence coming out from the evaluation. The positive contribution of regional partnerships was mentioned by six other interviewed providers (out of 11) and by ten (out of 18) wider stakeholder interviewees, among whom there were three collaborative outreach partnership representatives. Having partners in the region helps providers to learn from each other, generate better quality evidence on their activities in WP, and, in some cases, even raise funding to commission an independent evaluation.

Figure 4 – "Use of evidence is embedded in our business as usual"; by region of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



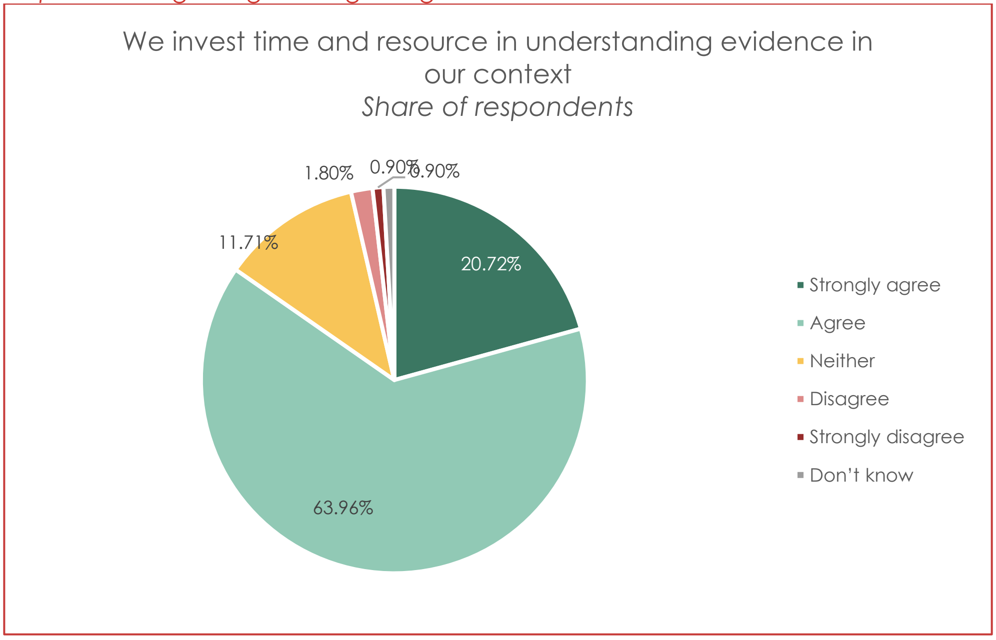
Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

Similarly, when asked about investing time and resources in understanding evidence, almost 85% of the providers either strongly agreed or agreed with that statement (Figure 5). This points to a certain commitment by providers to working with evidence in area of access and participation.

[21] Official website at: http://www.nerap.ac.uk/.

[22] Official website at: https://futureme.ac.uk/.

Figure 5 – "We invest time and resource in understanding evidence in our context"; Share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

When digging deeper into particular aspects of the embeddedness of the use of evidence via interviews, there is a significant variation across the sector in relation to the degree of embeddedness of evaluation within the activities that the providers undertake in the area of access and participation.

Some providers have established specialist evaluation units which work very closely with widening participation officers/practitioners and the professional staff in that area. This group of providers is growing and a number of them are in the process of building such specialist units and/or teams, which reflects the policy priorities of the OfS in evaluation practice. However, these providers are still in a minority in the sector. The majority of providers either do not have specialist evaluators, in which case evaluation activities are within the remit of WP practitioners themselves, or they may only have one member of staff responsible for the whole breadth of evaluations, ranging from access to progression, often coming with a previous WP practice background. In those cases, those members of staff have to seek support from other departments within their providers, such as when data analysis and/or advanced statistical analysis are required. Where evaluations are carried out by WP practitioners themselves, they are responsible for the whole lifecycle of the intervention, from planning through implementation to evaluation. This often leads to fragmentation of the evaluation practice within the providers. Four providers (out of 11) admitted in interviews that fragmentation and a lack of centralisation of evaluation activities is an issue for them. This is coupled with a lack of sharing of good practice across various parts of providers (e.g. colleges, departments), making it more difficult to acquire the necessary institutional expertise required to start using some evaluation methods – for example around attainment and progression and/or Type 3 evidence – more confidently, and also to harmonise the language of evaluation across the whole institution.

Another issue transpiring from interviews was around the interaction between evaluators and/or WP practitioners on one side and academics on the other side. There appear to be structural barriers preventing both groups from engaging in a sustained dialogue and cooperation, although both groups could benefit from such cooperation. Evaluators and WP practitioners could tap into the vast academic knowledge around social mobility, but also make use of research methods in evaluation, and therefore help address the lack of expertise and capacity described above. Academics, in turn, could obtain valuable data for their research. However, this does not seem to work in practice. It could be explained by a lack of incentives on both sides. Evaluators and WP practitioners are not incentivised to work with academics because there is usually not a requirement for them to publish on WP activities and their evaluations more widely. Although they tend to be scholarly in their work and present at conferences, they do not publish academic articles. Academics are not incentivised to work more in WP with the professional staff of their provider because the area of WP does not tend to generate academic research funding and there is no institutional level return of data on WP in the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

There are two other aspects to the level of maturity of evaluation culture within providers which repeatedly came up in interview:

- Turnover of WP staff
- Next steps within the provider after the evaluation has been completed

Although this was explicitly mentioned only by four interviewees (of 29), the high turnover of staff in WP seems to be a pertinent issue for a number of providers. In particular, practitioners in WP appear to be changing relatively quickly and outgoing staff often take the evaluation expertise with them. This leads to a lack of "institutional memory" within providers, resulting in a need to repeatedly rebuild the evaluation expertise. Examples mentioned included the use of Theory of Change, where there is a constant need for training among providers although the use of Theory of Change in access and participation has been promoted for a relatively long time.

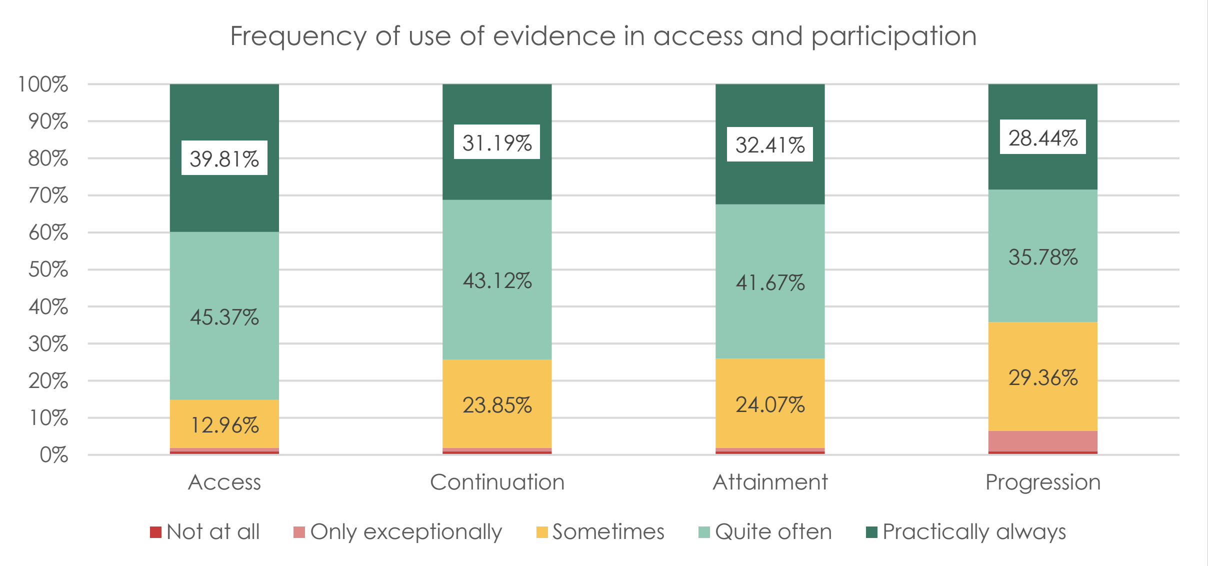
Two interviewees mentioned difficulties with making sure that evaluation reports are followed up on, recommendations are implemented and that institutional policies are adapted based on the evaluation results. Where providers commission an external evaluator, this seems to be easier to achieve. As one interviewee explained, internal evaluators cannot, by definition, be independent. Although they sometimes try to adopt a quasi-independent stance, for those who are more junior and/or less established within the provider, operationalising the results appears to be a bigger issue.

The evaluation team also analysed the relevant evaluation-focused segments of the APPs submitted by providers to the OfS with a view to further add information on the current state of play in the use of evidence across the sector. There is a significant variation across the providers in terms of how they described their current practices in evaluation. Whilst some were very open about what they have been doing, many of the providers focused mostly on their plans for the future, without mentioning the current state of evaluation practice. Unfortunately, this makes the data source quite difficult to use in setting the baseline because there was not enough information given on the current use of evidence in the APPs.

4.3 The stage of student journey where the evidence and research is used

Providers use evidence and research in evaluation across all stages of the student journey, but to a varying degree, with activities around access enjoying the highest frequency of use of evidence, and also of the more sophisticated evaluation methods, compared to the other three stages (continuation, attainment and progression). This finding transpires from both interviews and survey results. As shown in Figure 6, more than 85% of the survey respondents use evidence in the access stage either practically always or quite often (continuation: 74%, attainment: 74%, progression: 64%).

Figure 6 – As a provider, how would you rate the frequency of your use of evidence in access and participation (e.g. evaluation reports from past activities) to inform your strategies, activities and practice?



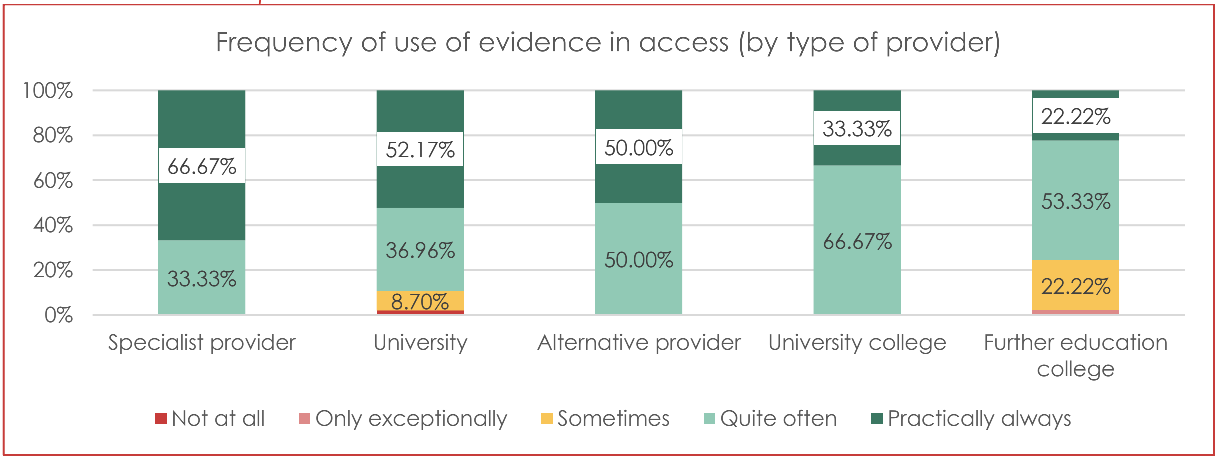
Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: variable (between 108 and 109 responses)

Digging deeper in order to understand reasons why providers undertake evaluation activities in access more than in other stages of the student journey, there seem to be a multitude of reasons for this. First of all, activities focusing on improving student access (or admissions, more specifically) have been around much longer in higher education in England than those focusing on the later stages of the student journey. This is because OFFA focused more on the access area, and it is only with the arrival of the OfS that continuation, attainment and progression became more prominent. In addition, activities around access to higher education often include outreach actions, delivered with the school sector. It transpires from interviews, and also from our literature review around the 'what works' approaches in different policy areas (see Section 6), that the higher education sector generally lags behind some other sectors, for example the school sector, in terms of the use of evidence and the degree to which activities are data-driven. Given that access activities (i.e. "pre-entry") are on the interface between secondary and higher education, the actors involved tend to make better use of available data and evaluation practices than in the "post-entry" stages. However, as discussed below in the section on barriers, there are rising concerns in the higher education sector around the use of HEAT data for tracking at the individual level, which were repeatedly shared with the team in interviews.

Furthermore, the interviewed individuals believed that there are more resources and expertise available to collect data and undertake evaluations around access, which is also enhanced by established communities of practice (which are yet to be established in the other areas). The availability of resources was also fuelled in the past, for example, by Uni Connect-funded research in the area of access.

Looking more closely at the various types of providers and their use of evidence in activities focusing on access to higher education, there is a striking imbalance between the two largest groups of providers, universities and FECs. (Figure 7) Whilst almost 90% of universities use evidence in the area of access either practically always or quite often, just over three quarters of FECs do so.

Figure 7 – As a provider, how would you rate the frequency of the use of evidence in access to (e.g. evaluation reports from past activities) to inform your strategies, activities and practice?; shares of respondents



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 108 responses

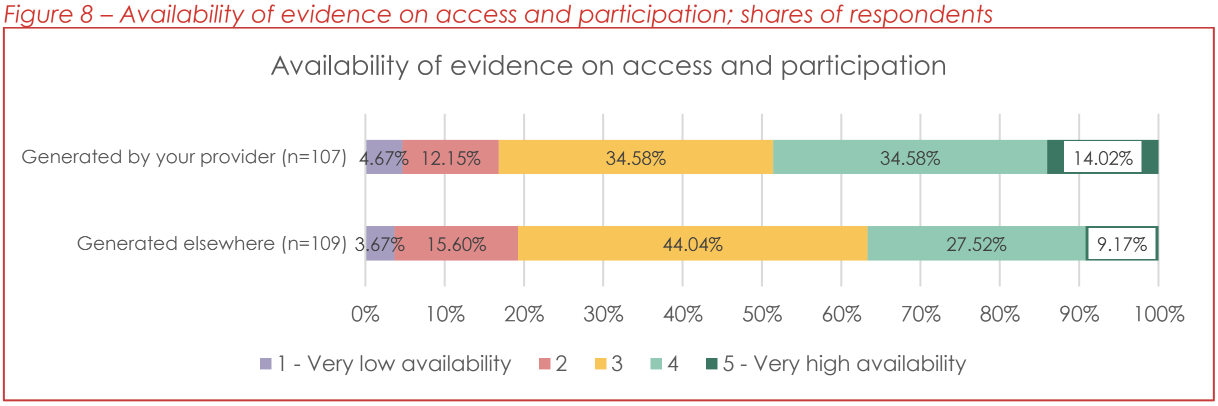
4.4 Origin and availability of evidence and research

In our research for the baseline, we also focused on exploring the different sources of evidence used by providers and its availability. In the baseline survey, almost a half of respondents indicated that the evidence generated internally (i.e. by their provider) was either very highly available or highly available. This is a considerably higher level of availability compared to evidence generated elsewhere, where the share of respondents indicating very high or high availability was just below 37%. This suggests that evidence generated elsewhere is not highly available. It also means that a lot of useful data may exist but providers cannot use and/or check it because it is not readily available.

Nevertheless, for both internal and external evidence, there were relatively low shares of respondents indicating its low availability. For internal evidence, this share was just below 17%, for external evidence, the share was just over 19%. (Figure 8)

As transpired from the interviews, providers generally praise the OfS for providing good benchmarking data. They also agreed that most external evidence, albeit relevant and useful, needs some adapting to their own context. For example, one interviewed representative of a provider in the Russell Group mentioned that for them, the only relevant external evidence would be that coming from either another Russell Group member or from other high-tariff providers.

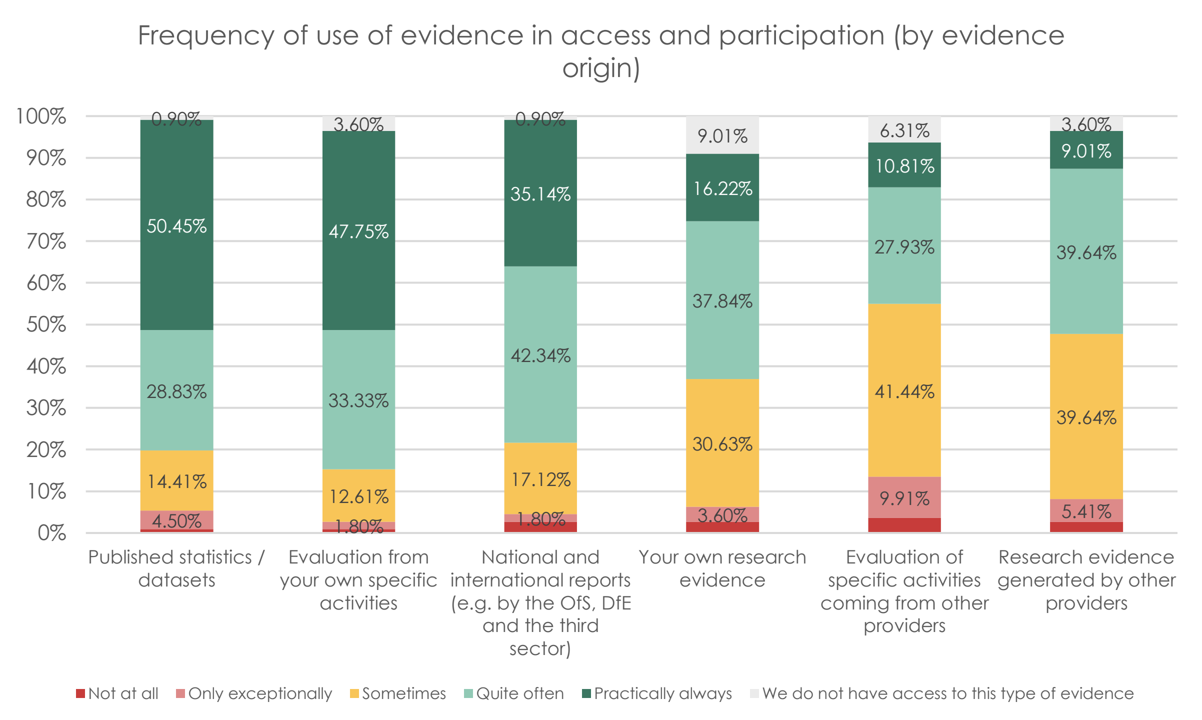
Figure 8 – Availability of evidence on access and participation; shares of respondents



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis

Looking closer at the different origins of evidence, there are three sources of evidence which providers tend to use much more than others. More than 81% of respondents use evidence from their own specific activities either practically always or quite often. This is followed by published statistics/datasets (79%) and by national and international reports, such as those produced by the OfS, DfE and the third sector (77%). Evaluation of specific activities and research evidence coming from other providers, as well as internal research evidence (as opposed to internal evaluation evidence), tends to be used less often. At the same time, this corroborates our finding above around the lack of cooperation between practitioners and academics and our findings below around sharing the evidence across the sector (the fact that providers use their own evidence significantly more than that of other providers points to lower levels of sharing).

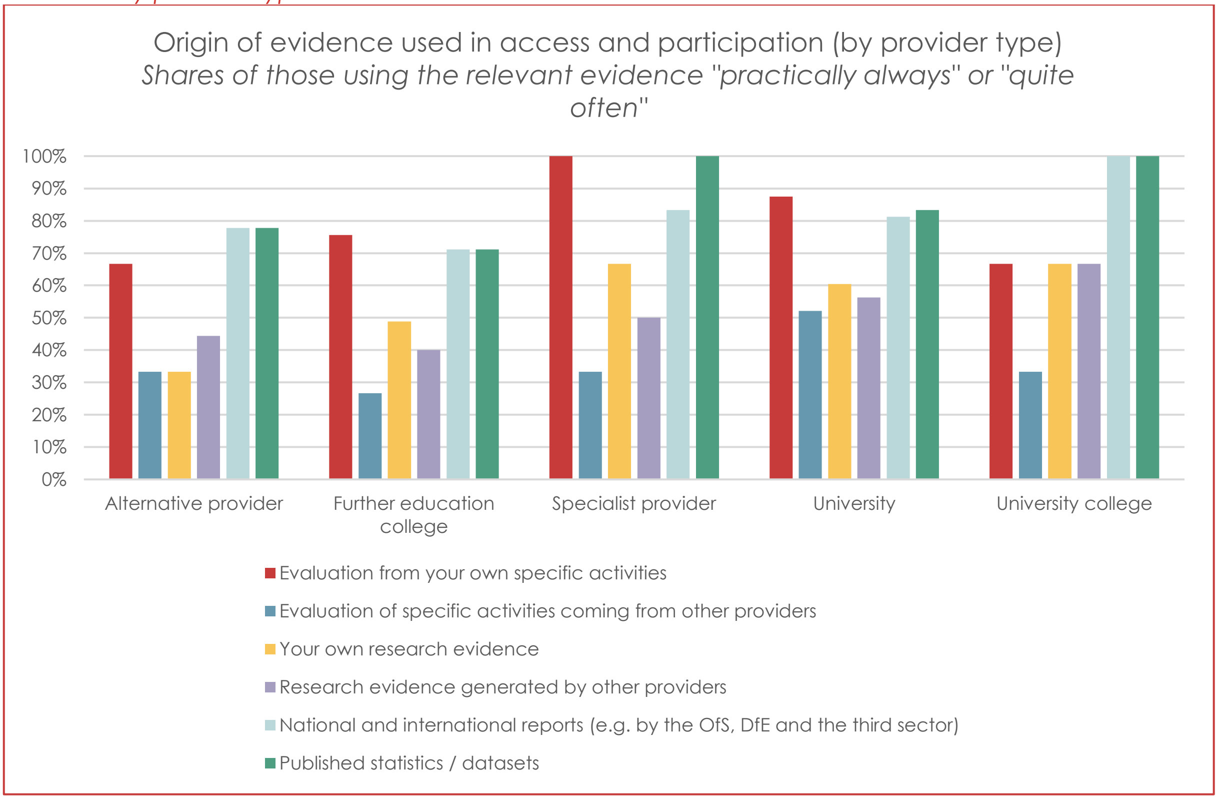
Figure 9 – How would you rate the frequency of use of the following types of evidence in access and participation?; shares of respondents



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

When broken down to particular types of providers (Figure 10), the two largest groups of providers (universities and FECs) tend to use evidence generated internally more often than other sources of evidence, but this is relatively closely followed by evidence coming from the national level (i.e. statistics and evaluation reports). For the other provider types, the national-level evidence is more frequently used than their own evidence, which could be explained by a generally small size of these providers. Important to note, however, is that the sub-population sizes were quite small for these types of providers in the survey.

Figure 10 – How would you rate the frequency of use of the following types of evidence in access and participation?; shares of respondents responding either "practically always" or "quite often"; by provider type



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

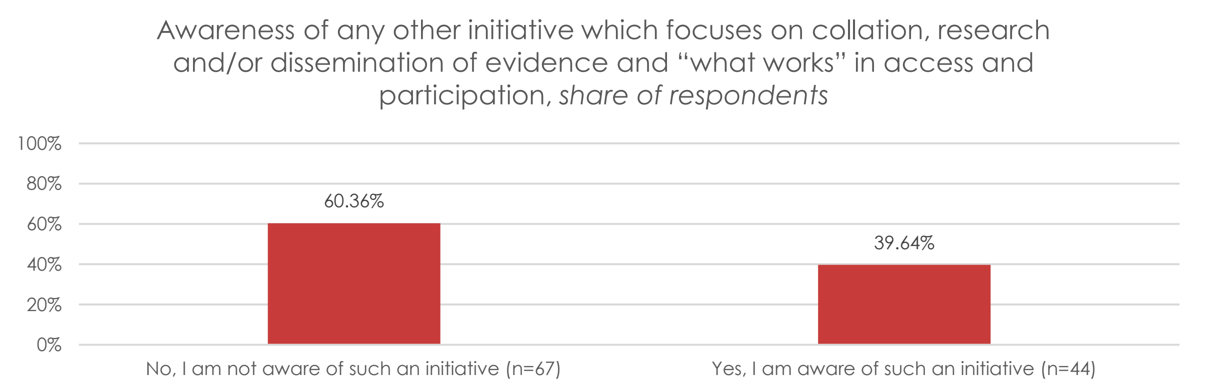
Interviewees shared some interesting insight into the origin of evidence that they use. Perhaps the most important point, shared by six interviewees (both providers and wider stakeholders), related to the use of HEAT data (hosted by the University of Kent). Overall, HEAT data is praised by providers who appreciate the possibility to anonymously benchmark themselves on how they have been doing in the area of access, although not all providers in England are part of HEAT (it is a subscription-based service). The prominent role of the HEAT data is also apparent from the review of providers' APPs. In their evaluation sections, almost one third of providers mentioned using HEAT as a source of data. Interestingly, interviewees did not mention any other tracking services, such as those provided by Aimhigher West Midlands (hosted by the University of Birmingham) and EMWPREP (hosted by Loughborough University).

However, both providers and wider stakeholders have shared concerns around the more recent reduced availability of HEAT data. The issue is to do with student consent. The default was previously that students who did not wish to provide their tracking information could opt-out. Since the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into force, the legal basis for data sharing and processing has been different. Active student consent is now required, which frustrates the tracking service for many providers. This causes problems especially when a student participated in an outreach activity organised by one provider but then went to study at a different provider. In these cases, it has become very difficult for providers to track them at the personalised level and therefore assess fully the impact of their outreach activities. Providers will only know some attributes of these students but will not be able to link them with their own qualitative evidence. This issue related to HEAT seems to be pertinent, in particular because the OfS's approach is to promote evidence-based institutional policy-making and good practice in evaluation, for which accurate data, such as HEAT is necessary.

4.5 Comparator initiatives identified via survey and interview data collection

We also asked HEPs about comparable initiatives[23] in our baseline survey and interviews. Most respondents were aware of comparable initiatives and supplied examples. (Figure 11) The three most commonly mentioned initiatives were NEON (15), Uni Connect (8) and NERUPI (7). (Figure 12) These are perhaps not surprising examples, with NEON being the professional organisation for those working in WP, Uni Connect a large partnership of HEPs, and NERUPI being another membership-type organisation for the sector, which developed an evaluation framework and guidance for HEPs. HEP interviewees also mentioned these top three, as well as higher education news sources (e.g. WonkHE) and think tanks (e.g. HEPI) as places where they would look for evidence on access and participation or become involved in events/networks for evidence use and practice.

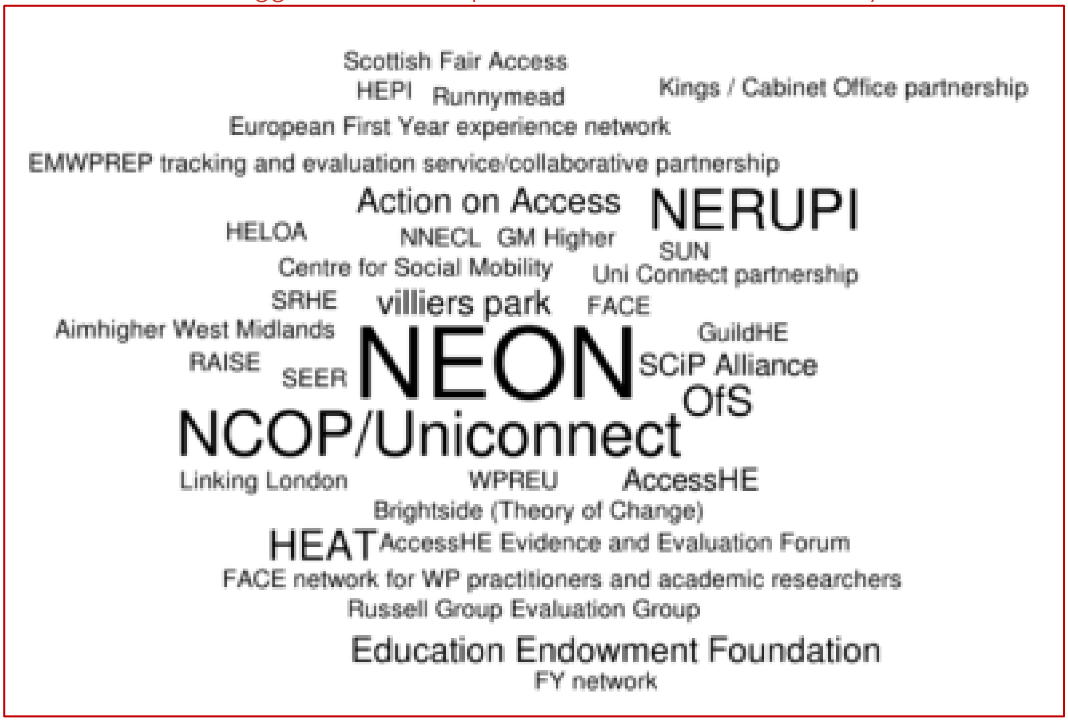
Figure 11 – Awareness of a comparable initiative



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

[23] Comparable to TASO in the sense that they either generate, collate, or both, evidence in access and participation in higher education.

Figure 12 – Word cloud of suggested initiatives (size indicates number of mentions)



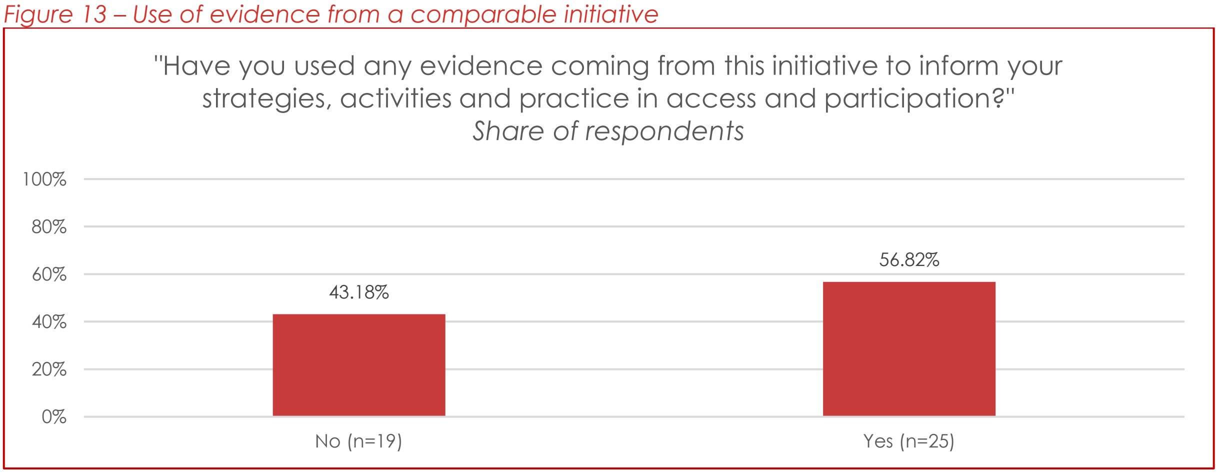
Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis

The majority of respondents offering examples of comparator initiatives claimed to have used evidence coming from them to inform their own access and participation work. (Figure 13) The evidence is used in a variety of ways:

- To gather information on specific areas of access and participation, such as the BAME attainment gap
- To directly inform theory and practice in the evaluation of HEPs' interventions
- To add a theory-based approach to intervention design
- To inform strategies around access and participation, in some cases APPs

HEP interviewees confirmed the above types of uses. Some described the cost of some services (e.g. HEAT) as a barrier for accessing high quality information on access and participation.

Figure 13 – Use of evidence from a comparable initiative



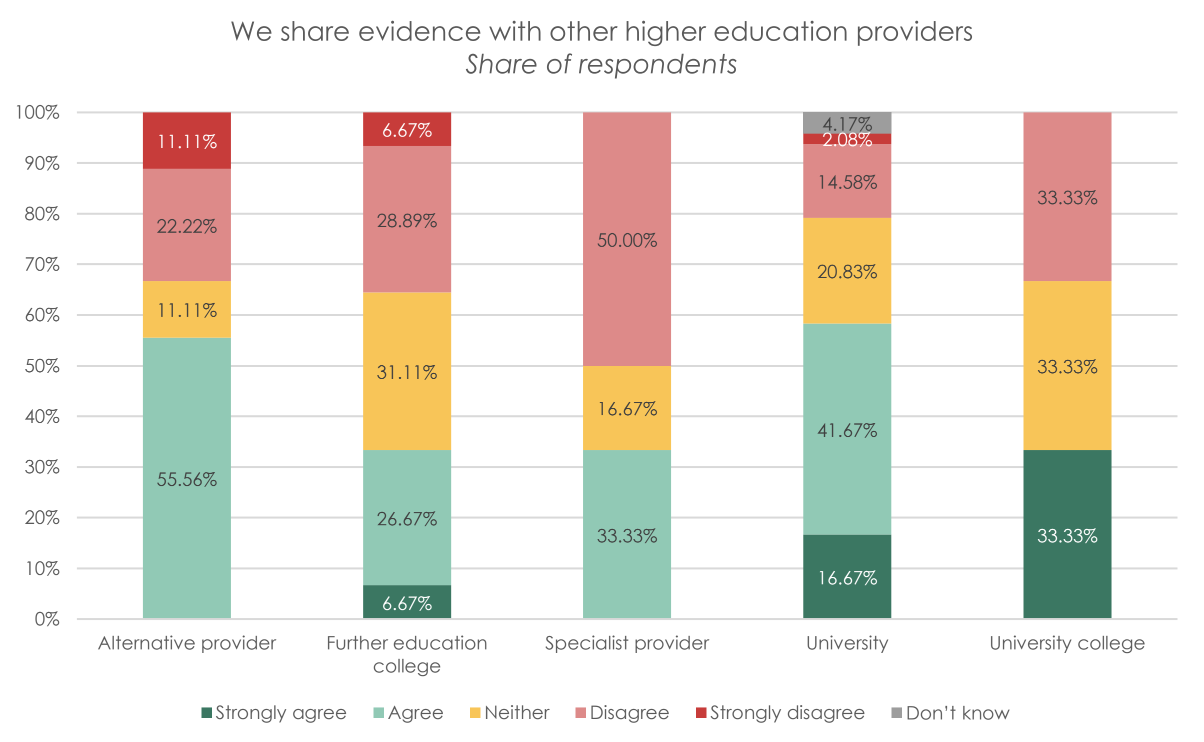
Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 44

4.6 Degree to which evidence and research is shared across the sector

In our research, we collected and analysed data on the degree to which evidence is shared across the sector. This is another important aspect to understand when setting the baseline because one of the tasks for TASO is to promote a good community of practice.

Figure 14 presents the baseline survey results around sharing of evidence. The proportions of respondents across all provider types who strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement "We share evidence with other higher education providers" were relatively higher for this statement than for the rest of the statements asked in the survey, the results of some of which are presented in this report (e.g. around the embeddedness of the use of evidence and/or on lessons learnt). The survey results, therefore, point to rather lower levels of sharing of evidence across the sector.

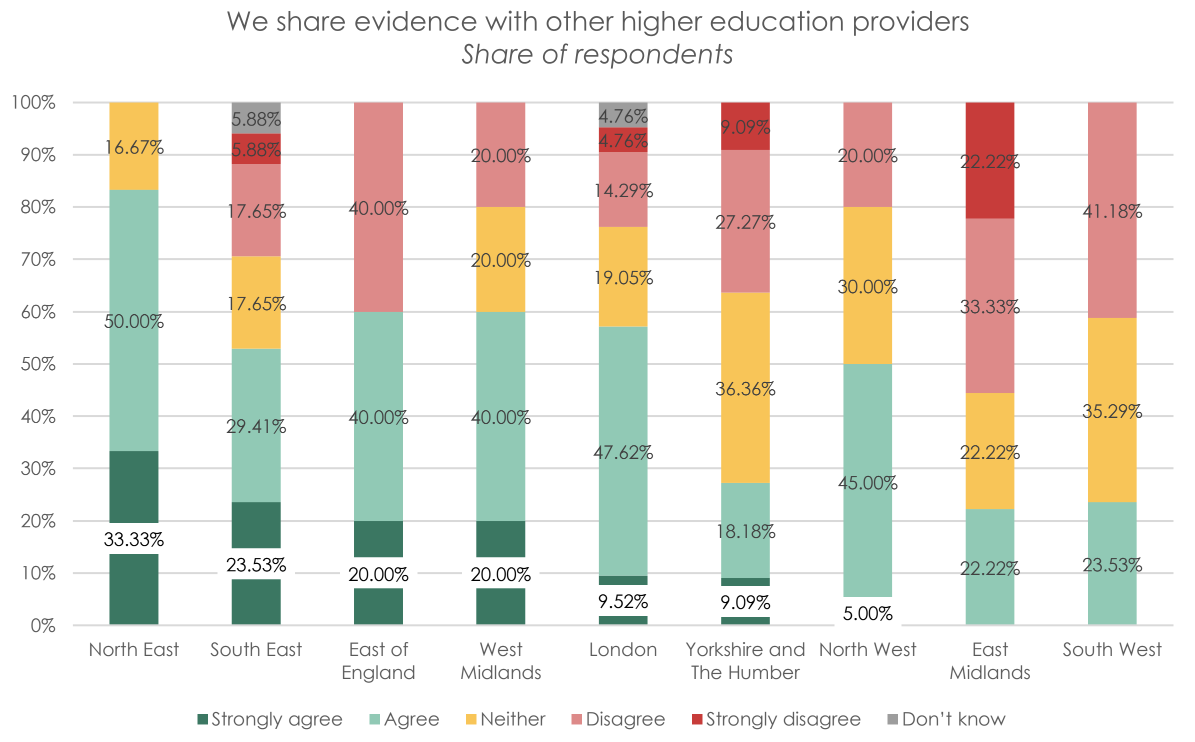
Figure 14 – "We share evidence with other higher education providers"; by type of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

When broken down by region, providers from the North East showed the highest levels of evidence sharing. As outlined above, this could relate to an important role of regional outreach partnerships in the North East, which provides a conducive environment for sharing evidence across their members. Providers from the East Midlands and from the South West show the lowest levels of sharing of evidence, with 56% and 41% of them, respectively, disagreeing with the statement.

Figure 15 – "We share evidence with other higher education providers"; by region of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

We explored the issue of evidence sharing further in interviews. These confirmed the survey findings, adding some important insights. These are summarised around the following points:

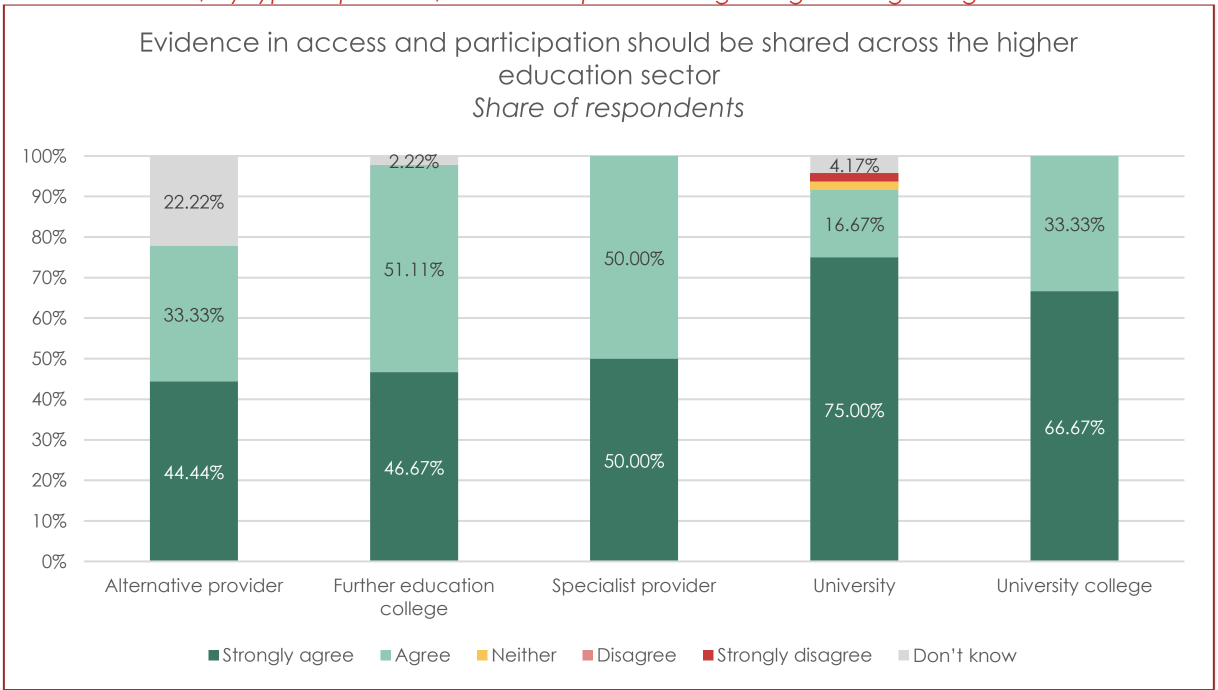
- **Different degrees of sharing of evidence around different stages of the student journey.** First of all, there appear to be differences between the stages of the student journey in terms of sharing of evidence. In general, providers tend to be less concerned about sharing evidence on activities around continuation, attainment and progression (i.e. "post-entry"), compared to evidence on activities in access ("pre-entry"). This is because incentives are different for both. Outreach activities and access activities often overlap between WP and marketing, so providers are sometimes hesitant to share information which could potentially reveal their strategy.
- **Different degrees of sharing practice among WP practitioners and evaluators**. The interviews pointed to the fact that WP practitioners' degree of involvement in sharing evidence is lower than that of evaluators. This is because evaluators appear to be generally better connected across the sector and benefit from established networks of practice, such as Uni Connect who were praised for their transparency around the process of evaluation. Furthermore, four providers mentioned that the membership in regional outreach partnerships associated within Uni Connect allows them to do collaborative work around making some student cohorts larger so that quantitative evaluation methods would be robust enough (in other words bringing data on student cohorts from various providers together, in order to create a larger student cohort). On the other hand, those WP practitioners with whom we spoke expressed a general lack of knowledge of what is going in the sector in terms of evaluation, as well as what the evaluation standards of the OfS are. As they said, this is important to know in order to make sure that evaluations not only achieve the internal goals of providers, but also to comply with the OfS's requirements.

- **Overall hesitancy to share evidence on what did not work**. Practically all interviewees agreed that there still is a lot of hesitancy on the side of providers to share evidence on what did not work. However, most of them also agreed that the sector should generally be more open about this because it is very important for learning. TASO could be instrumental in this respect and could encourage providers to submit evidence on less successful activities when a call for evidence is issued. This evidence could then be collated, synthesised and aggregated (in order not to reveal the identities of providers). Providers probably need some encouragement by the OfS that sharing of this kind of evidence is also desirable and that they will not be penalised for these examples of unsuccessful interventions, especially in current times where there is a higher risk of failure due to the covid-19 pandemic situation.

Although providers mention sharing of evidence in the evaluation sections of their APPs, the extent to which they share evidence varies significantly across the sector.

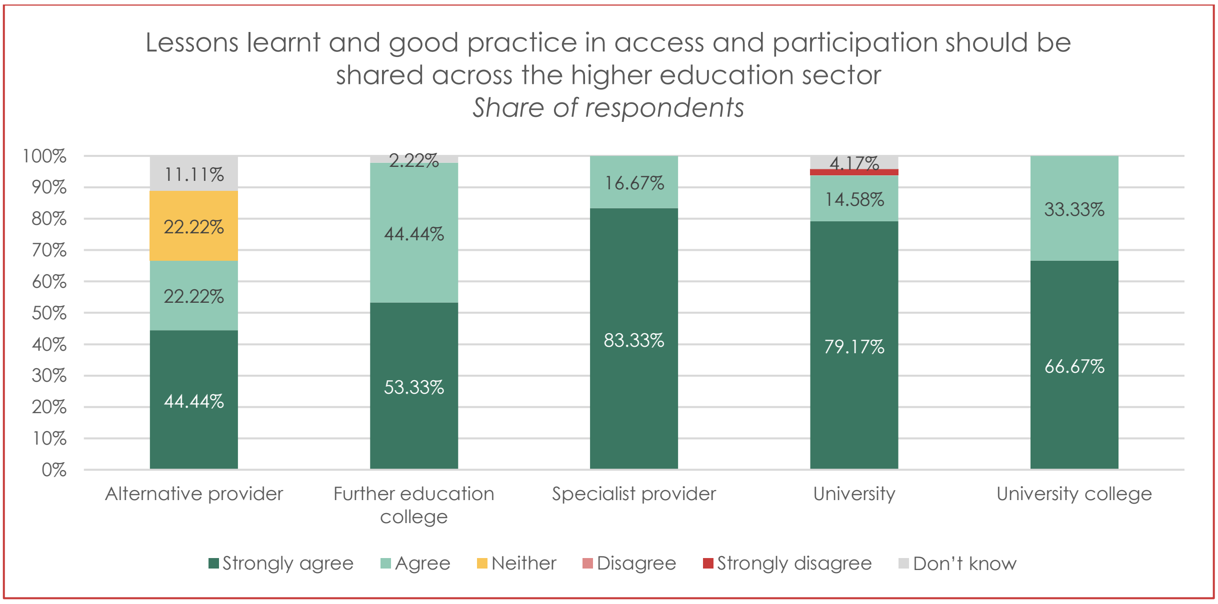
Looking further ahead, there appears to be a general consensus across the sector that in the future more sharing should be happening in the area of access and participation. Overwhelming majorities, across all provider types, either strongly agreed or agreed in the survey that evidence should be shared across the higher education sector. (Figure 16) A similar conclusion applies to sharing lessons learnt across the sector. (Figure 17)

Figure 16 – "Evidence in access and participation should be shared across the higher education sector"; by type of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

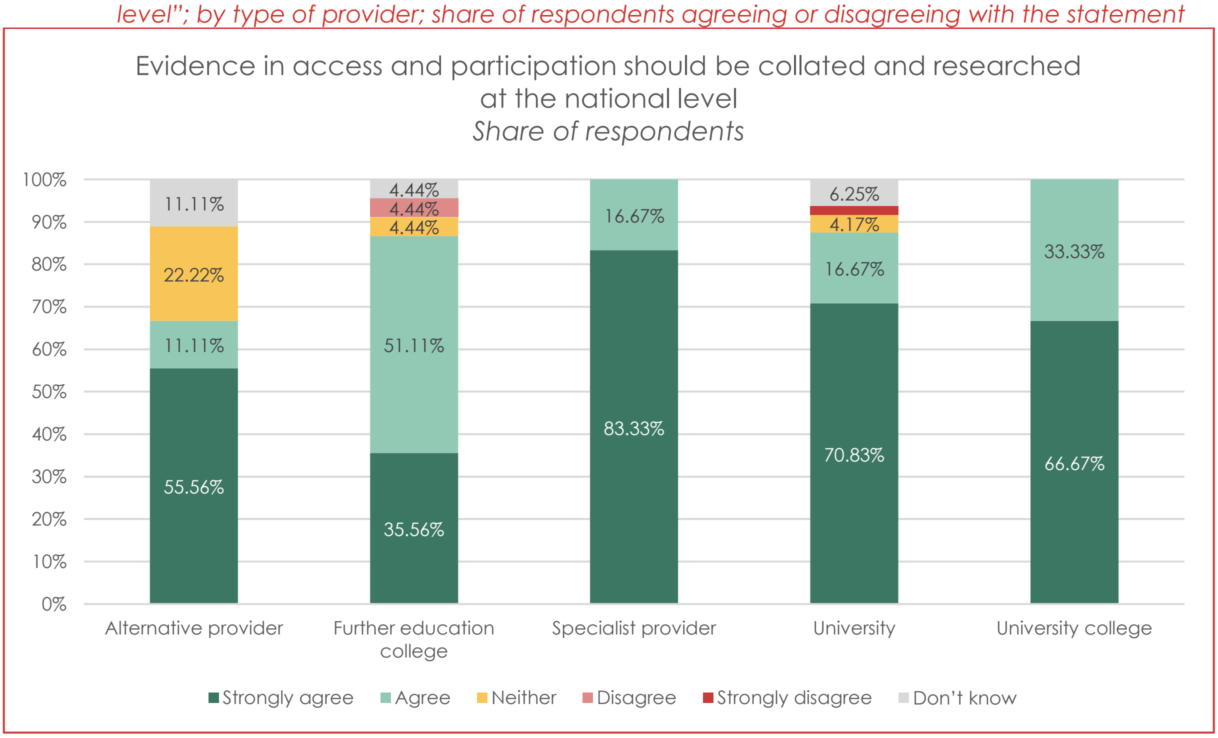
Figure 17 – "Lessons learnt and good practice in access and participation should be shared across the higher education sector"; by type of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

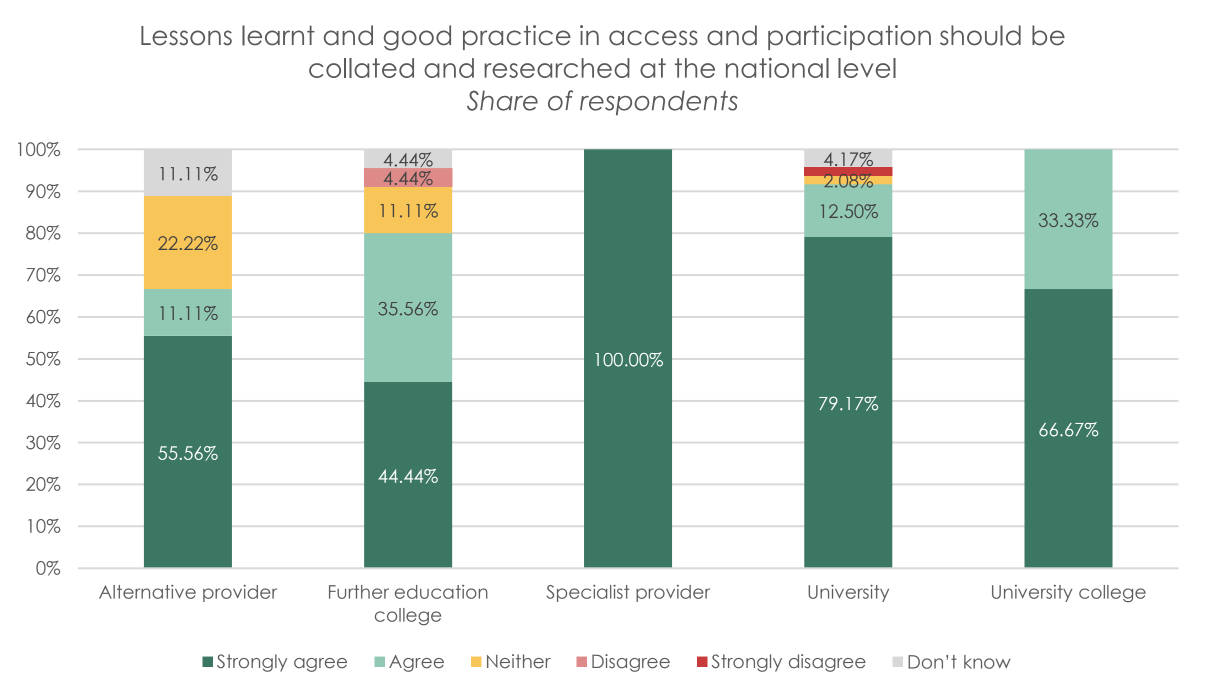
Similarly, an overwhelming majority of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that evidence and lessons learnt should be collated and researched at the national level (Figure 18 and Figure 19), pointing to a very clear mandate for TASO in this area for the future.

Figure 18 – "Evidence in access and participation should be collated and researched at the national level"; by type of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

Figure 19 – "Lessons learnt and good practice in access and participation should be collated and researched at the national level"; by type of provider; share of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

4.7 Barriers to using evaluation evidence and research in the higher education sector

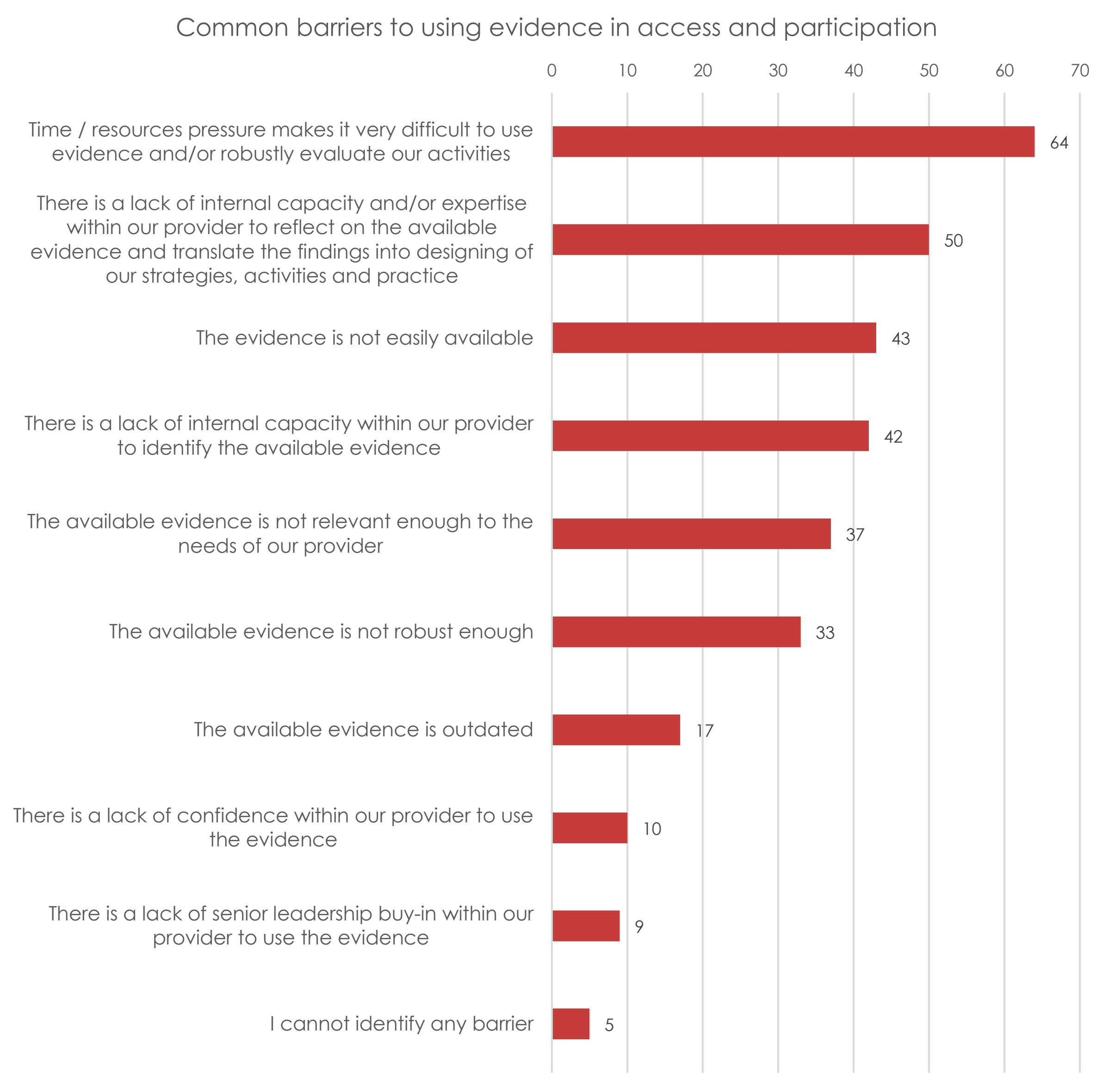
In the baseline survey we asked providers about the main barriers they experience in using evaluation evidence and research. This section begins with an overview of the survey results before considering each barrier in more detail: analysing differences of experience between FECs and universities; the extent to which interview data backs up the survey findings and also the nuances that the qualitative data adds; and finally any relevant reflections from the literature review data which looked at this issue.

4.7.1 *The main barriers to using evidence and research according to the baseline survey*

The baseline survey asked higher education providers to tick all of the barriers they believed applied to them. In total 111 providers responded to this question. (Figure 20) Only five providers were unable to identify any barriers, demonstrating that almost all the providers in the survey believed there was at least one barrier that was negatively affecting their application of evidence and research in their WP-related activities.

The most commonly cited barrier was a lack of time and resources, with over half of providers ticking this box (60 out of 111). Capacity issues were also prominent with "there is a lack of internal capacity and/or expertise within our provider to reflect on the available evidence" being ticked by 50 respondents and "there is a lack of internal capacity within our provider to identify the evidence" being ticked by 42 respondents. Another commonly cited barrier was that the evidence is not easily available (43 out of 111). Categories that were less highly cited included "available evidence is outdated" (17), "there is a lack of confidence within our provider to use the evidence" (10), and "there is a lack of senior leadership buy-in" (9). This overall picture was validated by the interview evidence in that, in general, the less commonly cited reasons were not mentioned in the interviews or only mentioned a couple of times whereas categories such as lack of time and resources and lack of capacity and skills were frequently mentioned by interviewees from both providers and wider stakeholders.

Figure 20 – Common barriers to using evidence in access and participation



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

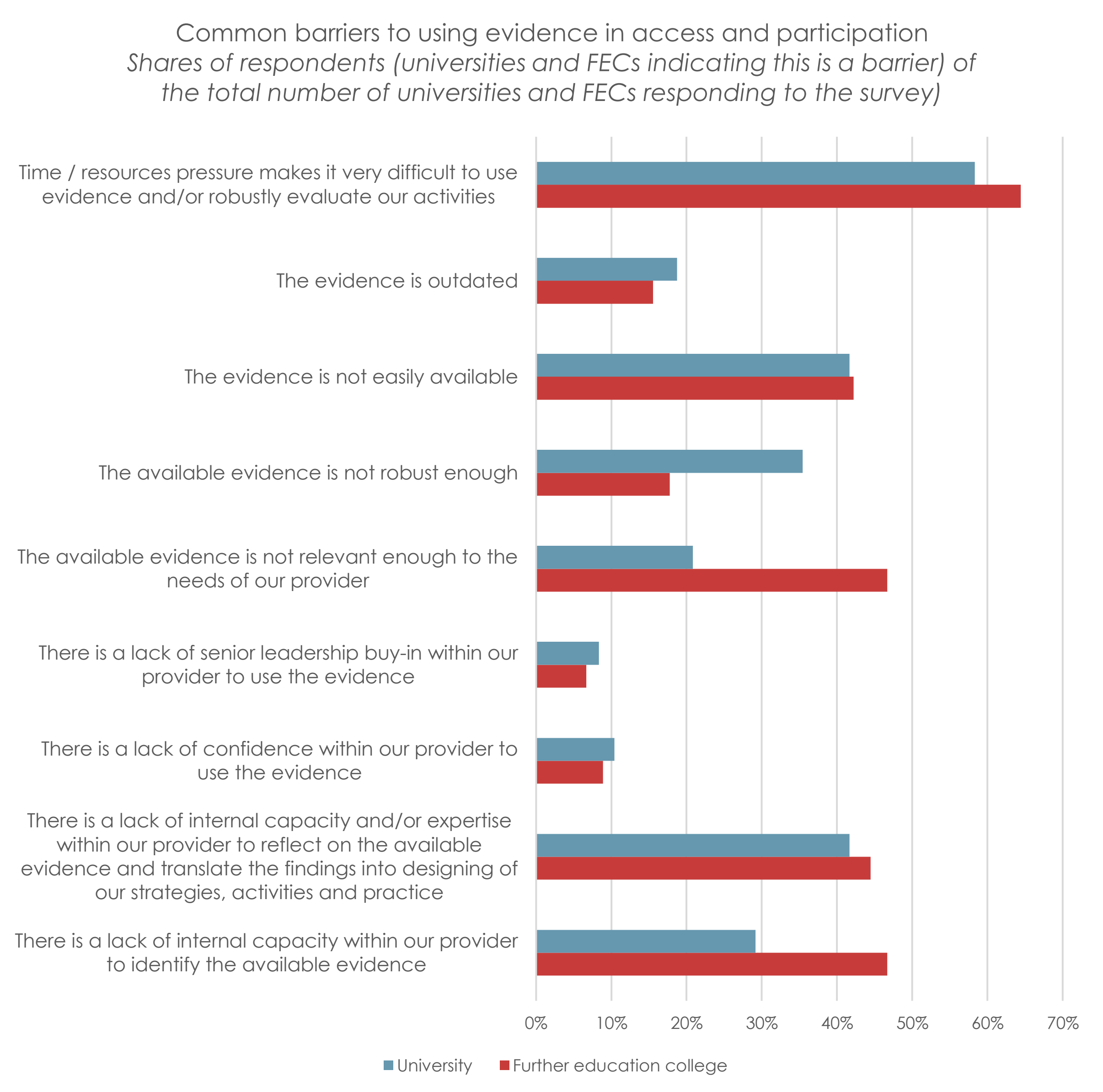
The general picture is also backed up by studies that were considered in our literature review of available evidence. All of the studies identify lack of time and resources as a barrier, three of them refer to a lack of skills and capacities in key areas, three of the studies refer to data availability issues and two of the studies cite lack of institutional buy-in.

Figure 21 below presents the survey results around the perceived barriers faced by universities and FECs.[24] Overall, FECs seem to face greater barriers in relation to most aspects, in particular around the relevance of available evidence. The only area where universities

[24] We focus here on universities and FECs as the two largest types of providers (by the number of survey responses) because they allow for a more granular analysis of their responses to the survey.

markedly reported higher barriers was with reference to the robustness of the evidence. The next section looks at a number of the barriers in more detail.

Figure 21 – Common barriers to using evidence in access and participation; shares of respondents (universities and FECs indicating this is a barrier of the total number of universities and FECs responding to the survey)



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 93

4.7.2 *Time and resources*

Figure 21 indicates that amongst the survey respondents there was not a large difference between respondents from FECs and universities in terms of the extent to which they see lack of time/resources as a barrier (64% and 58%, respectively). This means that both groups identify it widely as a barrier. The interviews with both providers and wider stakeholders suggest that it is likely to be a more significant barrier for FECs than universities. A number of interviewees referred to this as a major disparity between the two groups and not one interviewee suggested that FECs have more time or resources for this type of activity. For example, one stakeholder, who is an evaluation expert with long experience in the sector, stated plainly that “capacity is much worse for smaller providers in terms of resources, proportionally”.

Contrasting the resources of particular universities and FECs is informative in demonstrating this difference. One university reported having a WP team with three dedicated staff supported by a dedicated statistical support person in the business support department, plus nine WP academic officers who are social scientists embedded in departments who work almost full time on WP research and advocacy. In contrast, one of the FEC interviewees described how they have an ad-hoc part-time person who mainly looks at the issue periodically when writing the APP. This provider explained that “the further education sector has been underfunded for a long time. So, trying to get additional resource for something like this, it is competing with a lot of other things that are important”.

Two interviewees discussed how the key to understanding this situation is also understanding that for many FEC providers there is no real separation between their general strategies and operations and WP activities. One explained that this is because they operate for a local market and their local market has a historically low rate of higher education participants so most of their students are WP students. A FEC industry representative stakeholder agreed saying “some of our members are 90% WP students already”. It is also of course relevant to note that for many FECs, higher education students only represent a small part of what they do, meaning that they are less likely to have dedicated members of staff working on it.

University interview responses can give some insight into why they may feel that they need more resources, even if their level of resources may be high in comparison to FECs. One university interviewee described how resources were not evenly spread over access, success and progression. They reported that due to its historically greater prominence they have more resources in outreach and access spread out across the university at departmental level compared to progression and success, which are new areas and currently under resourced. The other point to consider is that although a university evaluation officer may feel under resourced in terms of needing specialist evaluators/practitioners they can often draw on wider resources across the university, a possibility which may be lacking for a FEC provider. For example, one university provider said “We have developed a model, I am the hub, I can call in colleagues from other parts of the university. If we need proper regression modelling, I go to colleagues who can do this”.

4.7.3 Barriers related to skills and capacities

The general picture that lack of skills and capacities is a serious issue in the sector is backed up by the perceptions of stakeholders. One sector expert stakeholder said that driven by OfS requirements “universities are more inclined to evaluate their WP work, and this is very positive but there still remains massive capacity issues…”.

Figure 21 shows that for the barrier of “internal capacity to identify available knowledge”, 47% of FEC respondents versus 29% of universities identified it as an issue. This difference in experience is supported by the interview data. For example, one respondent from a FEC provider said that they do not feel confident in finding comparative data to hold their data up against. It also fits with the wider picture from the interviews of the lack of resource and capacity in FEC providers in the area of evaluation.

4.7.4 Barriers related to evidence and data

Figure 21 demonstrates that there is a significant difference in terms of the data barrier issues between FEC providers and universities. Answering the question on robustness of the data, 35% of universities identified this as an issue compared to only 18% of FEC providers.

Conversely, on the question of relevance of the available information, 47% of FEC providers identified this as an issue compared to 21% for universities. This disparity fits with the general description of capacities and data needs given in the interview evidence. FEC providers, with their more limited resource and capacities, would be expected to be less likely to be concerned with evaluating the robustness of data as they are at an earlier stage in building up capacity and in many cases are not using external data at all and using only relatively simple internal data-gathering methods. Whereas FEC provider interviewees have reported that the available evidence does seem more tailored to the issues facing universities and they report struggling to apply evidence to their situation.

The barrier of outdated evidence was identified by 17 respondents out of the total of 111, representing a relatively minor issue for providers. This is backed up by the interview data where it does not feature prominently.

Figure 21 suggests that lack of availability of evidence is experienced as a barrier to a similar extent by FECs and universities, with 42% and 41% reporting this as an issue. However, the interview data suggests there may be a greater discrepancy between the two groups in terms of their experience of this issue. Two stakeholder interviewees with knowledge of FEC providers reported that they can often struggle to pay the subscription fees of valuable data services such as HESA and HEAT. It was also reported that private providers in particular can sometimes struggle to be granted access to networks where data is shared and generated because of mistrust of private providers in the sector.

Two other data issues were identified by interviewees. Firstly, two interviewees said that they find it difficult to get schools to buy in to their efforts and to share evidence. One university interviewee said that it is very time consuming and inefficient to be accessing data from schools individually and thought it would be beneficial if someone would do work with the Department for Education to arrange data sharing across the sector.

4.7.5 Buy-in from senior leadership

As reported above, only nine out of 111 survey respondents who answered this question identified lack of senior leadership buy-in as a barrier to using evidence and research. This is supported by the interview data, which largely reflected the view that senior leadership at most providers are now engaged with this issue particularly due to the regulatory push from the OfS to better evaluate activities. However, what did arise in the interviews is that for a number of providers, a lack of buy-in across the organisation, at department level for example, is more of an issue. One university provider said that they have support at the highest level, but they have limited buy in at the level below e.g. schools, faculties, departments. Two providers said that they struggle in general to get academics to support their work. One reported that academics believe that they know how to conduct evaluations already, but their evaluation practices are usually not fully compliant with OfS, and that academics also believe that any sort of centralised directorate in charge of evaluation is not necessary.

4.7.6 Partial conclusion

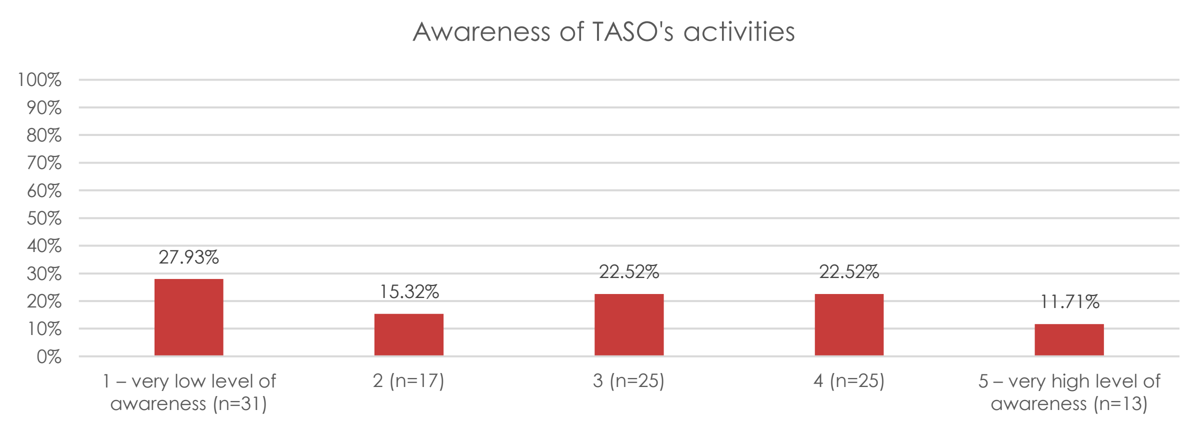
In general, the overall findings on barriers to using evidence from the survey are backed up strongly by the interview data and by the wider literature. However, the survey data does suggest that in terms of the barriers relating to resources and capacities the interview data may be overestimating the gap between FECs and universities. Another key point raised in this section is that in terms of buy-in it is important to consider buy-in throughout the provider rather than just centralised senior-level buy-in and that barriers can be structural as much as cultural or skills-based. It is not clear how TASO can impact these issues, although it could consider the value of sharing best practice on the way that some providers approach shifting attitudes and incentives to promote evaluation use and practice across and inside their institutions. But it could be that some organisations are strongly resistant, especially if they are not structured to distribute responsibility for meeting the regulatory challenges. And where change does happen it could be that it is driven by regulatory requirements more than anything that TASO has been offering. However, if changes toward more conducive structures for evidence promotion do occur in providers, whether driven by regulatory changes or by other reasons, then TASO could be in a position to help improve practice.

5 TASO and the higher education sector

5.1 Level of awareness of and expectation of engagement with TASO in the higher education sector

The OfS has provided us with extracts from the submitted APPs of 195 HEPs. Our analysis showed that 61 (31.3%) of these providers explicitly mentioned that they were aware of TASO, would like to work with its outputs and/or would like to engage with TASO in any other way. However, 24 providers referred to TASO still as the "Evidence and Impact Exchange", showing a knowledge gap.

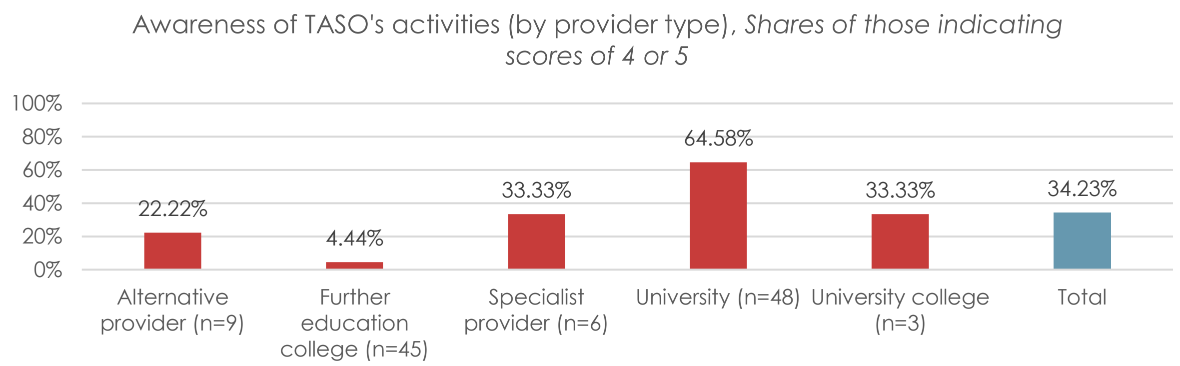
Figure 22 – General level of awareness of TASO's activities



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

Survey results somewhat reflect this generally low level of awareness, with only around a third of survey respondents (35%) indicating a good level of awareness of TASO's activities. (Figure 22) Universities, university colleges and specialist providers had the highest levels of awareness of TASO's activities, whereas FECs, in particular, were the least aware (only just over 4% of the FEC survey respondents were aware, as shown in Figure 23).

Figure 23 – General level of awareness of TASO's activities, by provider type



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111 responses

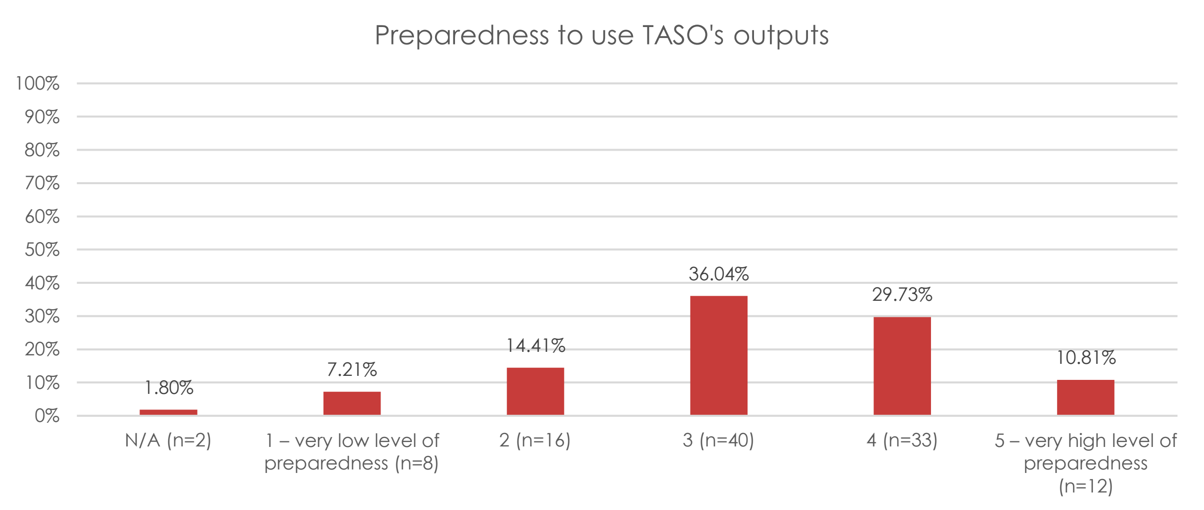
Those located in the East of England and London were more likely to be aware of TASO, with those in the East Midlands being least aware.

Wider higher education stakeholders (e.g. the Association of Colleges (AoC), Universities UK (UUK), Independent-HE) reported in interviews that they had been proactively informing their members about TASO. One reported issue was that many HEPs were not aware of TASO because of a lack of direct engagement. Smaller providers were said to be less likely to have heard of TASO, mainly because of this lack of engagement. Interviews with smaller HEPs (particularly FECs) confirmed this, with one claiming our survey was the first time they had heard of TASO. However, many of those who had heard of TASO claimed to immediately see its virtues and had begun to get involved by various means (discussed later in this section).

These findings, taken together, suggest that TASO may need to boost its name recognition and communications activities, particularly with those HEPs less likely to be aware of its work. On the other hand, it is encouraging that a not insignificant proportion of HEPs were aware of TASO and its work at the time of the survey, when TASO was still in its early stage of development.

Most survey respondents indicated being moderately well prepared when asked how they would rate their level of preparedness to use outputs produced by TASO. (Figure 24) Universities and university colleges were the most likely to indicate a high level of preparedness across the different HEPs, with FECs indicating the lowest levels of preparedness. Interviewees at FECs confirmed that they would find it difficult to use outputs from and the work produced by TASO, primarily because of a lack of time and resources. Other HEPs commented that context specific outputs would be needed to improve the rate at which TASO's outputs could be used (e.g. it is not always clear to all how, for example, randomised controlled trial (RCT) evidence can be used in practice).

Figure 24 – Level of preparedness to use outputs produced by TASO



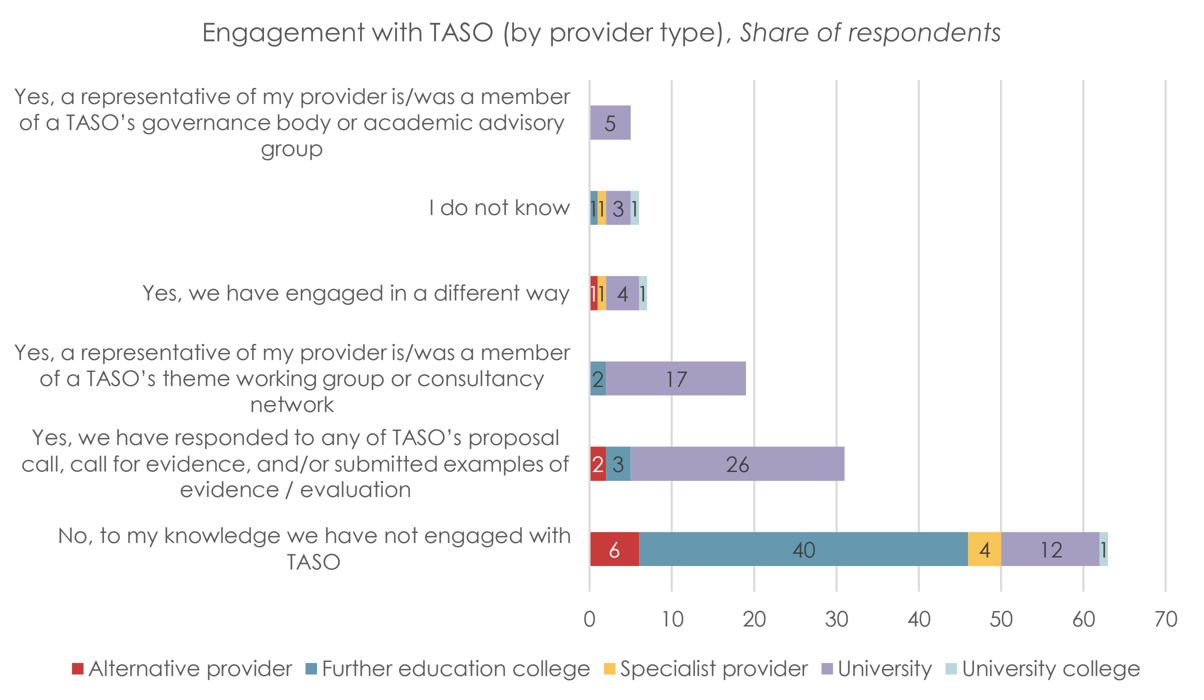
Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

Only a small number of providers (eight) mentioned in their APPs that they had already engaged with TASO (two of which are King's College London (KCL) and Nottingham Trent University, the delivery partners of TASO). The survey corroborates this finding with the majority of respondents (62%) describing not having engaged with TASO or not knowing if their HEP had engaged. (Figure 25) Almost 90% of FEC respondents had not engaged with TASO, whereas only a quarter of universities responded that they had not engaged. This is very well correlated with the low level of awareness of TASO among FECs. (Figure 23)

However, in contrast to the APP findings, 22% (n=24) of survey respondents indicated that a representative of their HEP had been involved in a TASO group, body or network. This shows the extent to which TASO has been able to engage HEPs replying to this survey, which may have been a factor for their response. The most common form of engagement (28%) was responding to TASO's proposal call, call for evidence, and/or call for submission of evidence/evaluation examples. Other types of engagement included attending events and creating an evidence template for the TASO website.

Wider stakeholder interviewees themselves had engaged with TASO via webinars, having been on or applied to advisory boards/committees, or evidence submission. There were also some who knew the team at KCL well and had followed TASO's progress since its inception. Others reported that it was difficult to engage with TASO at its early stage, but that this would improve as time went on and outputs were produced. This was also the case for HEPs, most of whom were aware of TASO, had applied to be a part of its groups, submitted evidence or mentioned it in their APP, but were not sure what else they could do to engage.

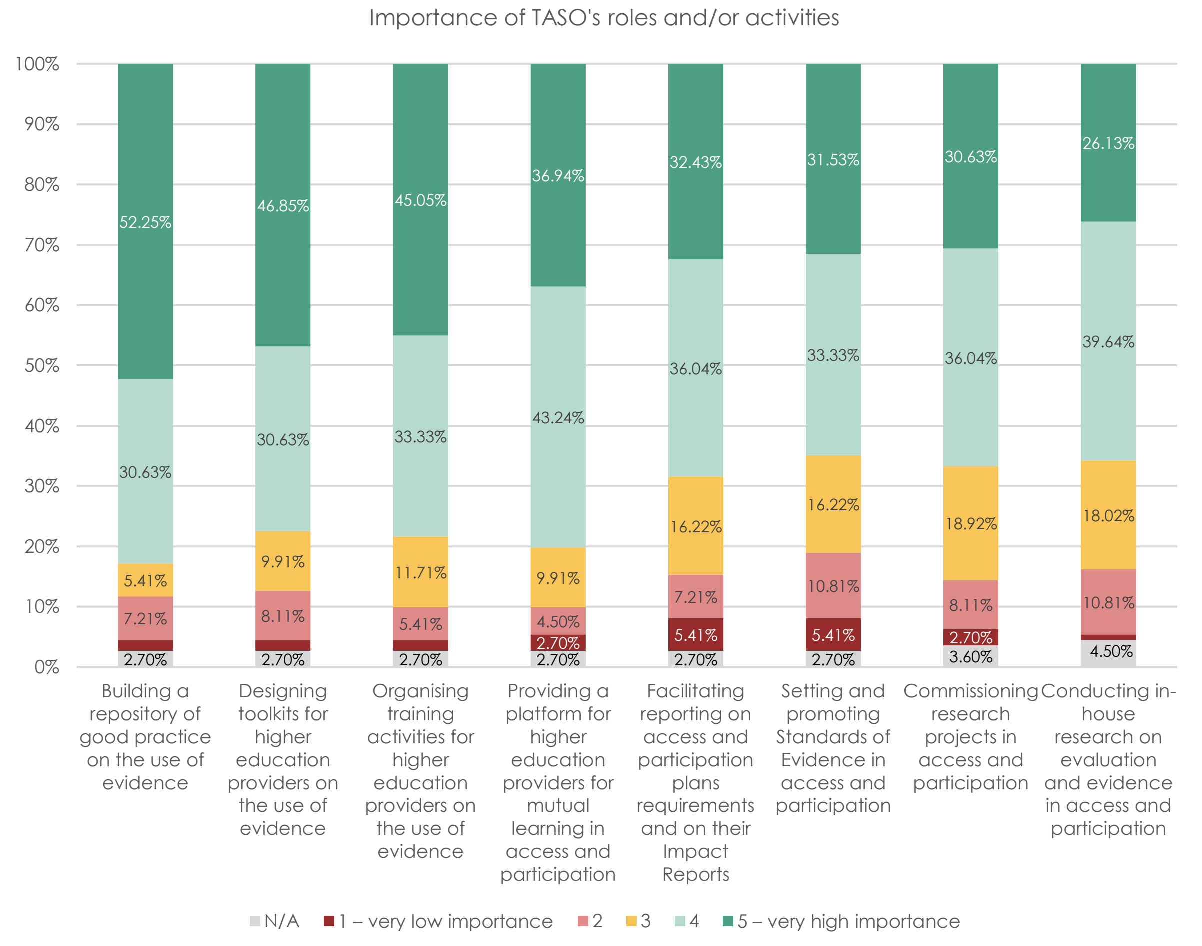
Figure 25 – Level of HEPs' engagement with TASO to date



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

Survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the importance of TASO's activities (Figure 26) with 73% indicating a score of four or five on average across all roles/activities. There were no notable differences between responses from different types of providers, indicating that these roles and activities were considered important across all HEP types. HEP interviewees considered the mutual learning platform, unified repository, toolkits, and evaluation training and resources features of TASO to be the most important, indicating a particular need for TASO's learning functions. This is an encouraging finding, showing that TASO's roles and activities are relevant to the needs of HEPs, particularly in terms of resources, toolkits and training in evidence use.

Figure 26 – The extent to which TASO's activities are considered important



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

Mentions of TASO by HEPs in their APPs were mostly positive or neutral, and predominantly orientated towards future engagement. In our survey, the majority of respondents (61%) indicated that they would engage with TASO across five given categories. (Figure 27) The average "no" response was only 9%. Universities reported a much higher intention to engage with TASO across all types of activities. FECs reported the lowest intentions to engage with TASO.

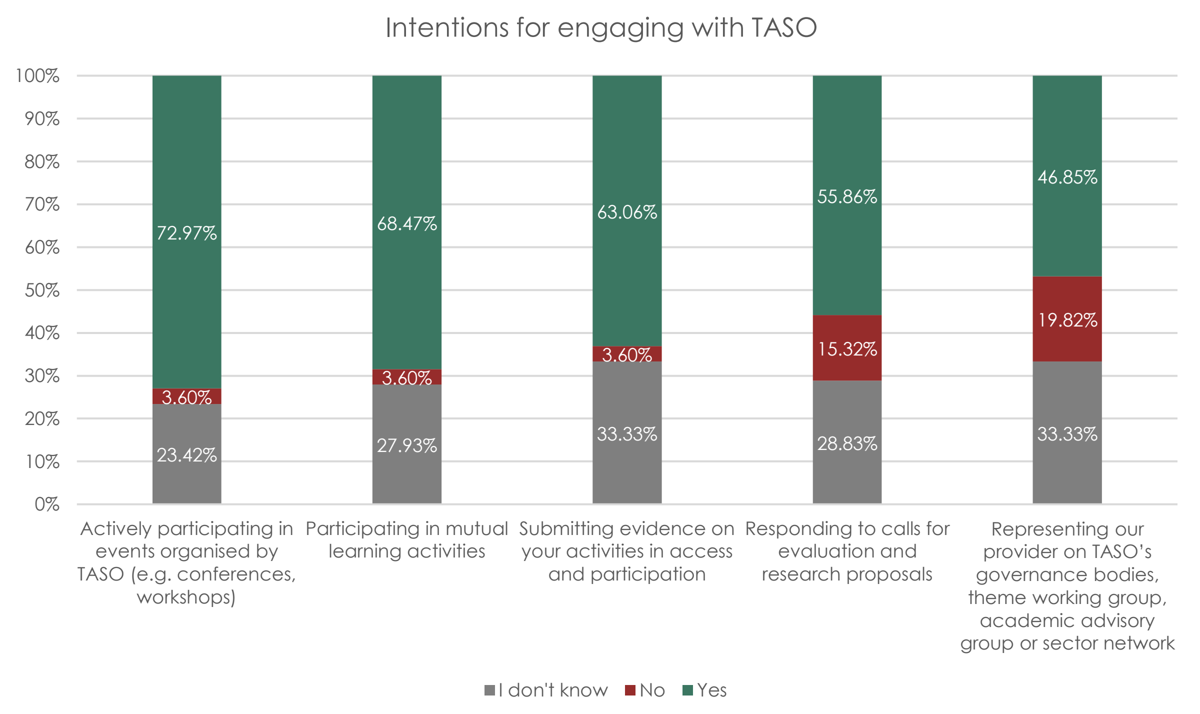
However, it should be noted that around 30% of respondents replied "I don't know" across the categories, indicating some uncertainty about engaging with TASO in the future. Comments on this question provide some insight into the reason for this. These included an assumption that TASO would not support smaller HEPs who have little budget for assessing evidence in access and participation. TASO may want to ensure it markets itself to smaller providers in a way that dispels such concerns.

Looking closer at the survey data, universities, specialist providers and university colleges were more likely to indicate that they would engage with TASO (between 67% and 77% on average) across the categories, whereas FECs and alternatives providers were less willing to engage (between 46% and 49% on average). FECs and alternatives providers were also more likely to indicate "I don't know", which reinforces the conclusion made at the end of the previous paragraph about smaller providers.

Interviews with smaller HEPs shed more light on this, confirming that they had already found it difficult to engage with calls for evidence and proposals due to a lack of institutional time and resources. One interviewee suggested that these calls could happen in the summer or during exam periods, as they struggled to respond during the busy term-time. Another suggested longer lead-in times for calls (e.g. prior notices) to ensure all HEP types have the chance to respond. Regarding events, one HEP interviewee noted that there should be events outside of London and online so that costs for sending staff to events could be more easily spread.

However, all interviewees did intend to engage with TASO in the future, particularly in mutual learning events and activities, and in terms of submitting evidence on interventions.

Figure 27 – HEPs' intended engagement with future TASO activities



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

5.2 Alignment of strategic measures and target groups of providers with planned TASO research activities

The baseline-setting stage of the evaluation of TASO provided a good opportunity to assess the alignment of strategic measures and target groups of providers (as presented in their APPs) with the planned activities of TASO.

This sub-section is informed by a review of extracts from the latest submitted APPs and complemented by interviews with providers and wider stakeholders. The team reviewing the APPs worked with relevant extracted segments provided by the OfS.

TASO is currently implementing activities around two research themes. The two research themes, as presented in the initial proposal prepared by King's College London, Nottingham Trent University and the Behavioural Insights Team, were relatively broad:

- Theme 1: Effectiveness of Widening Participation Outreach
- Theme 2: Gaps in the Student Experience

One theme, therefore, focuses on WP activities that are "pre-entry" and the second theme covers "post-entry". TASO then commissioned a literature review on both themes in order to better understand on what specific aspects within these broader themes they should focus. Based on the results of the literature review, TASO created working groups, composed of representatives from the sector, and tasked them to work further with the outputs of the literature reviews. Several specific topics were identified where a strong evidence base was lacking. The specific topics are the following:

- Theme 1: Mature learners; Children in need; Summer schools; Identifying the effective elements of multi-intervention outreach schemes; and Mentoring
- Theme 2: Continuation and attainment gaps for BAME students

In terms of target groups of students who are subject to strategic measures designed by providers, as presented in their APPs, TASO's selected topics are very well aligned with the planned activities of providers.

Table 4 – Number of providers mentioning particular target groups in their APPs

Target group of strategic measure	**Number of APPs targeting this group**	***of which: universities***	***Alternative providers***	***FECs***	***London and East***	***Midlands and South***	***North***
Mature learners	162	*93*	*15*	*54*	*44*	*72*	*46*
Care leavers	180	*105*	*17*	*58*	*50*	*73*	*57*
BAME	185	*112*	*19*	*54*	*56*	*75*	*54*
Total number of APPs with strategic measures	207	*118*	*23*	*66*	*59*	*87*	*61*
Target group of strategic measure	**Share of APPs targeting this group**	***of which: universities***	***Alternative providers***	***FECs***	***London and East***	***Midlands and South***	***North***
Mature learners	78.26%	*78.81%*	*65.22%*	*81.82%*	*74.58%*	*82.76%*	*75.41%*
Care leavers	86.96%	*88.98%*	*73.91%*	*87.88%*	*84.75%*	*83.91%*	*93.44%*
BAME	89.37%	*94.92%*	*82.61%*	*81.82%*	*94.92%*	*86.21%*	*88.52%*

Source: OfS, analysis by Technopolis

Of 207 provider APPs putting forward any strategic measures, 89% of them contain measures related to BAME students, 87% contain measures related to care leavers and 78% to mature learners. (Table 4)

Broken down by various provider types, in almost 95% of APPs prepared by universities, measures related to BAME students are included, which is the highest share across all provider types. Similarly, the highest percentage of universities' APPs contain strategic measures aiming at care leavers. In contrast, FECs included strategic measures on mature learners relatively more often than other types of providers (82%).

It is also interesting to look further at the regional breakdown. In each of the three regional categories, one group of students is targeted more than in other regions:

- Providers in London and East mention (more than in other regions) measures aiming at BAME students
- Providers in the Midlands and South focus (more than in other regions) on mature learners
- Providers in the North target care leavers more than in the rest of England

In particular, BAME students as a target group for interventions in "post-entry" stages of the student journey were mentioned repeatedly in interviews. A number of providers realise that there is an attainment gap for BAME students which has to be addressed. Interviews also pointed to a possible explanation why the share of providers planning interventions aiming at BAME students is higher in London than in other regions, and it has to do with the demographics. BAME students are more concentrated in larger cities, and there are a high number of providers in London, compared to the numbers of providers located in larger cities in the other regions.

The interviews also highlighted that whilst many providers very specifically identified the same target groups as TASO (see above), nine of 11 interviewed providers also mentioned that they target any underrepresented students, as defined by quintiles 1 and 2 in the POLAR data.

Looking further at the extracts from APPs and other TASO research topics around access to higher education, there is a certain level of alignment as well, albeit to a lesser extent. Of the 247 providers submitting plans around strategic measures in access to higher education, 63 (i.e. 26%) mentioned summer schools/programmes as a type of outreach activity and 56 (i.e. 23%) mentioned mentoring activities.

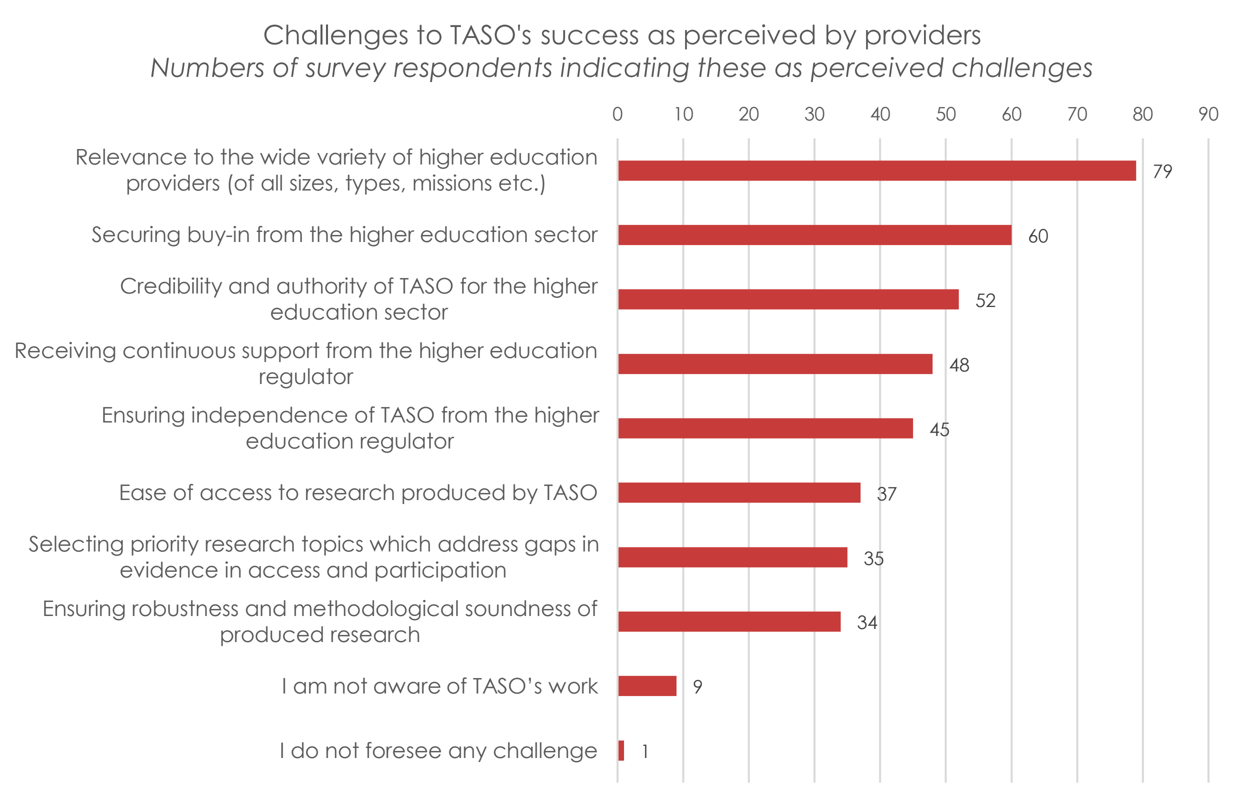
5.3 Challenges foreseen for TASO

As part of our research we have asked providers and stakeholders what they perceive to be the main challenges to TASO's success. This section starts by considering the broad picture of challenges perceived by providers as presented in the survey evidence. It then considers the detailed qualitative evidence from the interviews to add nuance to each of the categories before finally considering the interviewees view on what TASO can do to overcome some of these challenges.

5.3.1 The main challenges presented by the survey evidence

Figure 28 below illustrates the providers' responses to this question. The most significant perceived challenge, by some margin, was TASO achieving relevance to the wide variety of HEPs, with 79 out of 111 respondents identifying this as a challenge. Over half of respondents (60 out of 111) also identified securing buy-in from the sector as a challenge, with just under a half (52 out of 111) identifying the credibility and authority of TASO in the higher education sector as a challenge. Receiving continuous support and ensuring independence from the regulator also attracted significant responses (48 and 45 respectively). The remaining three categories of challenges, ease of access to research, selecting priority topics, and ensuring methodological robustness, were selected by roughly a third of respondents (37, 35 and 34 respectively). Only one respondent did not foresee any challenges for TASO. This overall picture suggests that the sector perceives achieving relevance, buy-in and credibility as major challenges for TASO, whilst more technical issues relating to research topics and methods were deemed as less pressing. This broad picture of concern around issues of credibility and authority across the sector is strongly supported by the interview evidence, with these types of issues arising most frequently in the qualitative responses of both providers and wider stakeholders. The following sub-sections will report on some of the nuance and detail coming from the interviews relating to these categories of challenges.

Figure 28 – Challenges to TASO's success



Source: Baseline survey with providers, analysis by Technopolis, base: 111

5.3.2 *Relevance to the wide variety of HEPs*

Interviewees (both providers and wider stakeholders) commented extensively on the issue of relevance. The feeling expressed was that TASO seems focused on larger providers at the expense of smaller providers, FECs and independent providers. Examples were given by a number of interviewees of the ways in which TASO activities to date have tended, in their opinion, to feel exclusionary to some groups. One stakeholder said "it is important for TASO to address colleges [FECs] in their work and nothing so far indicates they are doing this". It was felt by interviewees that the challenge is how to involve these types of smaller or alternative providers and colleges when their capacities and resources are less than those of larger universities.

5.3.3 *Securing buy-in, credibility and continuing support from the sector*

A number of interviewees (six) stated that they felt that TASO was in a good position to secure buy-in and support from the sector. They stated that there is a real need for a What Works Centre and providers want to engage. Two interviewees felt that it was too early to pass comment on the question of buy-in as they felt that little had come out of TASO so far and they were withholding judgment until they see what direction TASO goes in. A number of other interviewees stated that although the desire was there, the issue for many providers in giving their support to the initiative was the lack of capacity to engage and other barriers as mentioned above in the report.

A specific challenge for TASO will be making sure that their activities, such as calls for evidence and research calls, are carried out in a way that enables participation by all providers. For example, one provider raised concerns with the call for evidence timeframe being too tight and one stakeholder representing FECs felt that the feedback on the evidence submitted was quite critical and perhaps not handled as sensitively as it could be. This relates to a need for good communication with the sector in order to help secure buy-in. One sector-wide representative organisation said that TASO appears to have limited communications reach and does not seem to be drawing enough on already established networks.

A challenge raised by a number of stakeholders is how TASO will navigate the ongoing debate in the sector around the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches. Stakeholders perceived TASO as being closely aligned with what was variously described as a quantitative, experimental and/or RCT approach. Three sector-wide stakeholders believed that this perceived focus of TASO could alienate a large group of stakeholders. On the other hand, following the route of heavily promoting RCTs could have a distinct benefit, in that it would differentiate TASO in a crowded field of organisations working on APPs, and would lead to TASO having a distinct group of followers.

5.3.4 The issue of independence from the regulator

Reflecting the high number of survey respondents who saw independence as a challenge (45 out of 111) a number of interviewees also raised it as in issue. The general feeling was that, although TASO's connection to OfS had potential to be confusing, with sensitive handling and communication, it was not necessarily a problem. The interview responses did, however, suggest that it is a difficult issue. Many highlighted how the push for evaluation in the sector is largely coming from the OfS and that it is essential that TASO remains focused on helping providers to meet their APP requirements. One university provider said "TASO needs to move together. If TASO was less attuned to regulatory requirements this would be a major problem. My first priority is to produce things that make OfS happy." A number of interviewees were also struggling to understand how TASO relates to OfS and felt it was quite confusing and so it is clear that some effort does need to be made to ensure it is perceived as, and can be trusted to be, independent.

5.3.5 Types of effort required to ensure the sustainability of TASO in the future

Many of the interviewees were asked for their opinion on what TASO could do to ensure its sustainability and achieve the support and buy-in it needs from the sector. A number of interviewees discussed future funding models and predicted that a subscription model would be one of the options being considered by TASO. But the three interviewees who considered this were ambivalent about whether it would work well. One said that this would require a very clear added value proposition to get providers to pay the required fees. Another felt that it would likely exclude smaller providers with less resource to pay for it. Becoming a subscription service could lead to TASO becoming a platform that providers just sign up to because it looks good on APPs. Another interviewee from a university expressed concern that if TASO started obtaining funds from other sources it could mean funders would demand particular topics of research.

Beyond these issues about the funding of TASO, the team collected suggestions on what TASO needed to do to get long-term support from the sector and become sustainable. A number of interviewees expressed the opinion that TASO needed to focus on knowledge that had practical impact at the local level across types of providers and evaluation capacity levels. One university interviewee suggested establishing a local evaluator panel that could help translate evidence from the national level to the local context. Another suggested a system of providing critical friends that could visit providers and help them develop their evaluation culture. Similarly, another suggested that the focus should be on "upskilling" practitioners on evaluation. It appears to be key to make sure that any research that is commissioned is focused, from the start, on how it will be used by the sector. Looking at the experience from other What Works Centres, there is a need to avoid a trap of focusing too much on evidence generation rather than on dissemination and use. A number of other stakeholders, particularly those representing smaller providers and colleges, felt that it is essential that TASO is realistic about how evidence is currently being used and generated in many providers. This is seen to be often more informal and focused on qualitative methods. They felt that it is essential that TASO build on this current reality and produce research and knowledge products that are also relevant to this type of practitioner.

It therefore appears that the challenge for TASO is very much a communication and engagement challenge. It is essential for TASO to devote a lot of effort to consulting and engaging in both formal and informal ways to increase its brand and to make sure that it is responding to needs across the sector. There was a perception from some interviewees that TASO to date has been a bit distant from the sector and has not used existing networks enough. One stakeholder said "TASO needs a collaborative and reflective approach, they need behind the scenes consulting and evidence gathering with the sector which then results in the framing of the big questions". This suggests that there is a need for TASO to adopt a holistic way for all types of providers to engage with it, for example, via events, responding to queries and engaging with HEPs.

5.3.6 Partial conclusion

The picture emerging from the interview and survey evidence is that the sector does foresee a significant challenge for TASO around achieving buy-in, credibility and long-term support. This is perceived as being linked to the diversity of the sector in terms of size and type of provider and also in terms of the diversity of current evaluation practices and methodological approaches. As a result, many interviewees felt that the main challenges for TASO are related to how they engage with the sector in a way that is inclusive and available to all providers.

6 TASO and other "what works" platforms in the UK and beyond

The purpose of this chapter is to supplement the findings of the more topical review of the literature above with insights from similar 'what works' initiatives in the UK and internationally. This is intended to provide further contextual evidence for the evaluation and to directly inform the benchmarking of TASO during the mid-term stage of the evaluation.

By 'what works' initiatives we understand various organisations, platforms etc. which collate, generate and disseminate evidence and research on a particular topic with the aim of showcase to its target audience(s) of which approaches tend to be successful in practice. The 'what works' initiatives often, therefore, take the role of a "knowledge broker" in the sense that they present the evidence and research (i.e. the knowledge) in a way that is more digestible for the target audience(s).

This review explores the following four aspects of UK and other international "what works" platforms:

- Their approach to 'what works' i.e. How do they create, share and use (or "generate, translate and adopt") high quality evidence for decision-making? What standards of evidence are followed?
- How are they funded, structured and governed?
- What monitoring and evaluation (M&E) arrangements do they have?
- How do they deal with the challenges TASO is facing? Specifically, how do they deal with trust/buy-in, financial sustainability and independence from their funder(s)?

An effort was made to focus on initiatives with a similar focus on evidence use in access and participation in (higher) education. However, examples from other sectors are included to widen the potential learning from this exercise, with the caveat that they operate in different contexts. We also note that the closest UK platforms to TASO are the other What Works Centres (WWCs) in the UK. As part of the mid-term phase of the evaluation, we will undertake a benchmarking exercise in which we will benchmark TASO against a selection of the WWCs.

6.1 Summary of findings

In searching for comparable schemes, we quickly found that there were no exact counterparts to TASO with all its features and specific thematic focus. However, there are many entities that are engaged in similar activities to TASO regarding evidence generation, use and learning in education and other sectors. We provide a brief classification for and analysis of these types of entities below and showcase examples of each type of comparator in Table 5.

6.1.1 Classifying the landscape of knowledge brokers

The European Commission's 2017 report[25] on support mechanisms for evidence-based policy-making in education calls entities like TASO "knowledge brokers", defined as "Actors/organisations combining different sources of data to produce evidence, and also tailoring research findings so they may be more easily used by policy-makers". They can be further broken down by whether they are internal or external. Internal means that they are within government education administrations that specialise in interpreting evidence for

[25] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017) Support Mechanisms for Evidence-based Policy-Making in Education. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

policy-makers (e.g. the German Council of Science and Humanities). External knowledge brokers are typically independent institutes and agencies operating as charities (e.g. UK WWCs and TASO). The report found that only a third of European countries used knowledge brokers in developing education policy, most of which were internal brokers.

We found that the majority of the other initiatives/platforms (i.e. outside the education policy area) were external knowledge brokers. We use the internal/external dichotomy in our review and add further interrelated categories of which a combination may be used to describe one comparator, as below:

- **Enabling network** – initiatives that manage a network of members (individuals/organisations) to whom they communicate best practice evidence, disseminate findings of syntheses, provide training or accreditation, and advocate for their interests. For example, the Alliance for Useful Evidence (AUE) advocates on behalf of their large international network for better evidence use in social policy
- **Academic enabler** – initiatives tied to providers that conduct research on "what works", typically for public clients, but do not then advocate or lobby using those results like TASO. For example, the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating (EPPI) Centre and the Durham University Evidence Centre for Education (DECE).[26] The NERUPI network is another example; they developed a framework for designing and evaluating WP activities and are a member organisation for training and events
- **Research funder/broker** – initiatives that tend not to conduct research themselves, but rather outsource and then synthesise general lessons emerging from the research and condense results from evaluations into policy publications and evaluation summaries. This exactly reflects the activities of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) in the USA

TASO's activities help to provide a final layer of classification:

- **Evidence synthesiser** – Initiatives that bring together evidence in their field to provide guidance on best practice. For example, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) gathers and analyses knowledge about "what works" and translates that knowledge into practical resources, learning materials and services for social care practitioners
- **Research commissioner** – Organisations that use their funding to support evidence generation in their field. For example, the Campbell Collaboration funds systematic reviews aiming to plug policy evidence gaps across a range of issues
- **Evidence repository** – Organisations that provide evidence repositories, ranging from evidence-informed online intervention resources (e.g. the What Works Clearinghouse in education) to policy reports and articles (e.g. Results for America)
- **Network/training/events** – initiatives that run a network, provide training (typically for a fee) and/or run specific events around a theme relating to evidence use in their area. For example, leads for the Centre for Youth Impact's regional impact network coordinate training and events aiming to change the culture of impact measurement for their members
- **Advocacy/lobbying** – an organisation that champions evidence use to the relevant government ministries, or directly advises them. The Results for America's Evidence in education lab (RFA) is perhaps the best example of this since their main mechanism of

[26] Homepage of DECE: https://www.dur.ac.uk/dece/

impact is lobbying to shift federal education funds towards evidence-based, results-driven solutions

We now synthesise the findings of the review against the four aspects outlined above.

6.1.2 The 'what works' approaches

Most initiatives follow the established 'what works' approach: they generate evidence (through synthesis, their own research or commissioning), translate (via repositories, networks, training and events) and promote adoption (through advocacy and lobbying). There are three variations to this approach worth exemplifying here:

- **Accreditation/ranking** – This involves a member organisation (or an activity/intervention they run) applying for a 'mark of quality' that shows to others that they meet a certain set of best practice criteria. For example, the ECU run the Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charters, which involve HEPs self-assessing their practice for peer review and grading by the ECU (bronze, silver and gold). The RFA also index and rank good practice examples in evidence use at the state level across several criteria (e.g. evaluation policies). They also accredit cities under their What Works Cities project, which helps cities benchmark their progress and develop a roadmap for using data and evidence to deliver results
- **Standards of Evidence (SoE)** – A small number of initiatives have their own (or follow another) SoE. They use their SoE to synthesise evidence, accredit interventions and more generally promote high quality evidence. Project Oracle (run by the Centre for Youth Impact) validate interventions using their 5-point scale for projects under the Young Londoners Fund. The What Works Clearinghouse use reviewers to assess research projects against their standards, which they then publish in their repository if standards are met. Most SoEs tended to recommend RCTs as the gold standard as well as systematic reviews
- **Focus on evidence synthesis** – Organisations like the Cochrane Collaboration, the Campbell Collaboration and EPPI focus their energies far more on systematic reviews to influence evidence-informed decision making than other initiatives, often also providing training in review techniques. This may limit the contributions of non-academics

6.1.3 How initiatives/platforms are funded, structured and governed

The initiatives are (or were) usually funded by public and/or philanthropic donors. In the UK, these tend to include government departments (e.g. the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)), research funding agencies (e.g. the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)), national funding councils (e.g. the Scottish Funding Council (SFC)) and small philanthropic donors (e.g. the Blagrave Trust). Outside of the UK, large philanthropic organisations tend to be the biggest funders (e.g. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation partly fund both RFA and J-PAL), with the exception of internal brokers that are funded by central governments. Initiatives also generate income through consultancy and training (e.g. the SCIE and Danish Evaluation Institute).

UK initiatives are typically structured like small government departments, with a small leadership, a team of administrators and a larger group of researchers or policy officers, though the overall staff numbers are usually low (<30). The initiatives in the USA and those that operate globally tend to resemble corporate structures with much larger teams and divisions. Most have some form of governing or executive board made up of representatives from the education sector as well as the senior leadership teams (e.g. the Danish Evaluation Institute).

6.1.4 What M&E arrangements initiatives have

There was very little information on the M&E arrangements of initiatives. Most of this information was written in the context of how their members/stakeholders should be evaluating themselves. Each initiative showcases their impact in their annual reports and on their websites but very few formal evaluation reports exist. However, there are some examples where M&E of the organisation exists formally. For example, the ECU published their evaluation of their Athena SWAN charter, conducted by the Athena SWAN Charter Independent Review Steering Group. SCIE also publish impact evaluations of their work. One notable example is the AUE, which have their own theory of change and published their seven-year funding report where they assessed their own impact (albeit as a requirement from their funders).

6.1.5 Learnings for TASO – how other initiatives deal with the challenges

We present our findings in this section against the key challenges for TASO outlined in the inception report:

- **Trust/buy-in** – It is difficult to discern from desk research whether any of the comparators have experienced this issue. However, we can infer that they have secured buy-in since they are all established and active organisations, many with networks of members. Membership organisations that fund and provide services may be able to attract more buy-in as the benefits are more obvious. Trust will more likely come with time
- **Financial sustainability** – This is perhaps the key area for learning. Most initiatives have a range of funders and revenue streams (e.g. training and consultancy). Those that are funded by sector-specific philanthropic donors and/or by members would provide the best learning for TASO, since TASO may also opt for the membership model. ECU's charter approach may also help i.e. if TASO were to provide some sort of kitemark for HEP's WP activities, it would improve the value proposition for HEPs. There are also several initiatives (AUE, SCIE, Centre for Youth Impact) that have in recent years (or are about to) become independent of their initial funders, which will provide useful learning for TASO
- **Independence from their funders** – This links to the challenge above. For example, J-PAL was originally an academic initiative and grew to a very large organisation with no obvious influence from their original hosts at MIT. The AUE may provide useful learning since they are now considering their next move post-funding.

Table 5 below provides the results of our mapping of a selection of "what works" initiatives which share some similarities. The mapping pointed to a number of interesting points which we intend to unpack more in the mid-term stage of the evaluation.

Table 5 – Examples of "what works" initiatives similar to TASO

Name, location and sector Classification (internal/external knowledge broker)	Synthesises evidence	Commissions research	Evidence repository	Network / training / events	Advocacy/lobbying	Their "what works" approach How do they create, share and use (or "generate, translate and adopt") high quality evidence for decision-making? What standards of evidence are followed?	Funding, structure and governance	M&E arrangements	Learnings for TASO How do they deal with the challenges TASO is facing? Specifically, trust/buy-in, financial sustainability, independence from their funder(s)
The Alliance for Useful Evidence (AUE), UK Social policy **External; Enabling network and broker**	✓	✓	/	✓	✓	The AUE is a network, hosted by NESTA, that champions the smarter use of evidence in social policy and practice. They conduct and commission research on social policy. Their main mechanism for what works is to promote their work on evidence use through their global network of public, private and third sector members. Standards of evidence: Uses NESTA's standards of evidence [27], adapted from Project Oracle.	Big Lottery Fund, NESTA and ESRC fund AUE. It is an open access, virtual network of individuals hosted by the UK's innovation charity NESTA, meaning there is no single organisation that leads it. Run by 4 administrative staff, 4 associates.	Guided by their theory of change, which follows the COM-B system. They recently published their seven-year funding report where they assessed their own impact,[28] including their methods for this.	AUE has recently come to the end of their funding and are considering whether to spin out of NESTA into a university. This could, potentially, be interesting for TASO and its future steps around sustainability. Buy-in does not seem to have been an issue given their membership growth. The alliance is not a centre, but it does reflect many of TASO's features. It has faced similar challenges and there is good evidence to draw upon.

[27] Puttick, R. and Ludlow, J. (2012) 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing.' London: Nesta. Available at: https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/standards-of-evidence-for-impact-investing/

[28] AUE (2019) Our Impact. 2016–2019 funders report. Available at: https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/2020/01/Final-funders-report-Alliance-for-Useful-Evidence-19-December-2019-2.pdf

Name, location and sector Classification (internal/external knowledge broker)	Synthesises evidence	Commissions research	Evidence repository	Network / training / events	Advocacy/lobbying	Their "what works" approach How do they create, share and use (or "generate, translate and adopt") high quality evidence for decision-making? What standards of evidence are followed?	Funding, structure and governance	M&E arrangements	Learnings for TASO How do they deal with the challenges TASO is facing? Specifically, trust/buy-in, financial sustainability, independence from their funder(s)
Centre for youth Impact – Project Oracle – Young people in London **External; Enabling network and broker**	✓		/	✓	✓	Aims to bring providers of youth services in line with academically rigorous standards of evidence. Project Oracle runs the scheme that validates project evidence against the Standards. Standards of Evidence: Developed 'Standards of Evidence' with a theory of change at Level 1 to multi– site, independent RCTs at Level 5[29].	The Centre for Youth Impact now oversees Project Oracle. They are a community of organisations led by a small team of administrators and researchers (11). They are funded by DCMS, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, National lottery community fund, City of London, The Listening Fund and the Blagrave Trust.	The SoE and scheme to evaluate project evidence is rigorous and well operationalised.	Since 2015, the centre has also been funded by a range of trusts and foundations. The centre now generates all its own income. From April 2020 onwards, the centre receives no funding from central government. The centre does not evaluate the work or projects of single organisations to remain independent. Those activities that are similar to TASO's are not formalised enough for comparison.
Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating (EPPI) Centre, UK Education, Health and Social Policy **External; Academic enabler**	✓		✓	✓		The EPPI-Centre is a specialist centre for: (i) developing methods for systematic reviewing and synthesis of research evidence; and (ii) developing methods for the study of the use research. They use systematic review methods to assess and curate evidence on interventions. Also conduct research into research use, including WWCs. Standards of evidence: none explicitly stated but clearly guided by the systematic review standards.	Mainly funded by Cochrane, ESRC, UK Govt. Departments. Based in the Social Science Research Unit in the Department of Social Science, UCL Institute of Education. 31 staff.	Systematic reviews are their chief approach to M&E. They provide support to review groups preparing systematic reviews.	The rigorous approach to evidence synthesis through systematic review may be of interest to TASO, including the training services offered. The centre does not engage in advocacy nor does it commission research.

[29] Centre for Youth Impact. Project Oracle SoE. Available at: https://www.youthimpact.uk/standards-of-evidence.html

Name, location and sector Classification (internal/external knowledge broker)	Synthesises evidence	Commissions research	Evidence repository	Network / training / events	Advocacy/lobbying	Their "what works" approach How do they create, share and use (or "generate, translate and adopt") high quality evidence for decision-making? What standards of evidence are followed?	Funding, structure and governance	M&E arrangements	Learnings for TASO How do they deal with the challenges TASO is facing? Specifically, trust/buy-in, financial sustainability, independence from their funder(s)
Advance HE's equality challenge unit (ECU), UK Equality, diversity, and inclusion in HE **External; Enabling network and broker**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	The ECU promotes best practice in equality, diversity, and inclusion in higher education via research, toolkits, training and events and significant advocacy activity. A unique feature are their charters: Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charters. They fund research and provide consultancy. Standards of evidence: none, but they do have standards for research ethics.	ECU is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. They have 17 staff. ECU is funded by the SFC, HEFCW, and through direct subscription from HEIs in England and Northern Ireland. 13 people from the higher education and equality and diversity sectors sit on the board.	ECU has conducted internal evaluations of their charters and has a specific group for this: the Athena SWAN Charter Independent Review Steering Group.	ECU has an interesting funding model that includes national funding councils and individual providers. It appears to have significant buy-in with the sector and effectively engage as a lobbying body. They reflect TASO's features and activities, and have a similar thematic focus.
Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), UK Social care **External; Knowledge broker**	✓		✓	✓	✓	SCIE gathers and analyses knowledge about what works and translates that knowledge into practical resources, learning materials and services including training and consultancy. They have a database of "what works" good practice, eLearning tools and resources. They operate a large co-production network to support user, carer and equality groups. Standards of evidence: None mentioned.	Independent charity, income from consultancy and donations (previously funded by the Department of Health and devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). Governed by a board and an executive management group.	Studies available on Research Register for Social Care. They have had evaluations of SCIE's impact conducted.	SCIE evolved from a largely government-funded body to a fast-moving, high-profile and more commercial organisation, providing potential learnings for TASO in its journey to independence. It operates much like a WWC, with the exception of commissioning research.

Name, location and sector Classification (internal/external knowledge broker)	Synthesises evidence	Commissions research	Evidence repository	Network / training / events	Advocacy/lobbying	Their "what works" approach How do they create, share and use (or "generate, translate and adopt") high quality evidence for decision-making? What standards of evidence are followed?	Funding, structure and governance	M&E arrangements	Learnings for TASO How do they deal with the challenges TASO is facing? Specifically, trust/buy-in, financial sustainability, independence from their funder(s)
Results for America (RFA) **–** Evidence in education lab and What Works Cities All government policy – education **External; What works enabler and broker**		✓	✓	✓	✓	RFA leads both What Works Cities and the Evidence in Education Lab projects. The former runs a What Works Cities Certification program. RFA's main mechanism of change is in shifting funds towards evidence-based, results-driven solutions. This involves training, funding fellows and research. Standards of evidence: RFA uses "standards of excellence" where they rate providers (state, federal, cities) on criteria such as evidence use.	Independent non-profit organisation ($9.5m in revenue in 2017). RFA does not publish any other information about how they are financed. But several grants can be found from donors e.g. $5m from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2018. They are governed by a board and executive leadership.	There are many examples of impact on the RFA website but no information on M&E.	The RFA is independent and sustainable, following a what works approach. They will be of interest to TASO in understanding how they remain sustainable and how they attract grant funding. There will also be learnings in how they are able to operate at the local, state and federal level
Campbell Collaboration – Global education, criminal justice, health, and social welfare **External; Enabling network**	✓	✓	✓	✓		Provides statistical meta–analyses on education, criminal justice, health, and social welfare interventions. An international social science research network that produces high quality, open and policy-relevant evidence syntheses, plain language summaries and policy briefs. Standards of evidence: the collaboration follows their general principles for systematic reviews.	Membership organisation funded by public bodies and private foundations. It is made up of a board, coordinating groups, a secretariat, national and regional centres and networks of academics. Funders include The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, and UNICEF.	Only findings from RCTs are included in their materials. They report their achievements in their annual reports. There is no specific M&E strategy.	Much like EPPI, the rigorous approach to evidence synthesis through systematic review may be of interest to TASO, including the training services offered. The centre does not engage in advocacy and is limited in its evidence production to systematic reviews.

Name, location and sector Classification (internal/external knowledge broker)	Synthesises evidence	Commissions research	Evidence repository	Network / training / events	Advocacy/lobbying	Their "what works" approach How do they create, share and use (or "generate, translate and adopt") high quality evidence for decision-making? What standards of evidence are followed?	Funding, structure and governance	M&E arrangements	Learnings for TASO How do they deal with the challenges TASO is facing? Specifically, trust/buy-in, financial sustainability, independence from their funder(s)
What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), USA Education **Internal; Knowledge broker**	✓		✓	✓	✓	WWC reviews the existing research on different programs, products, practices, and policies in education. They focus on the results from high-quality research to answer the question "What works in education?". Standards of evidence: they have their own standards handbook and procedures handbook used to measure and communicate the impacts of interventions.	An investment of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) within the U.S. Department of Education. The actual work of the WWC is conducted by the American Institutes for Research, Mathematica Policy Research, Abt Associates, and Development Services Group, Inc.	Using their standards and procedures handbooks, reviewers' rate whether studies meet standards and then summarize results that do meet standards.	The WWC works very closely with the education sector, which may provide learnings for TASO in engaging HEPs. The WWC is an internal broker with established methods of evidence curation from a what works perspective. They also use explicit standards of practice.
J–PAL – USA – poverty alleviation Poverty in general but also education **External; Research funder and knowledge broker**	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	In addition to supporting policymakers in applying evidence from randomized evaluations to their work, sector chairs and staff write policy insights that synthesise general lessons emerging from the research, condense results from evaluations in policy publications and evaluation summaries, and fund new research through the Post-Primary Education Initiative. Standards of evidence: no standards published.	J-PAL's core staff includes more than 400 research, policy, education, and training professionals across seven offices worldwide. Funded by donors including Arnold Ventures and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The executive committee and the board govern J-PAL.	J-PAL's affiliated professors conduct randomized impact evaluations to test and improve the effectiveness of social programs.	J-PAL originated within a university and became a global research centre, independent from MIT. Learnings here about financial sustainability and independence could help TASO. How they achieved such a wide network of practitioners may also be insightful. They reflect the features and activities of TASO.

Name, location and sector Classification (internal/external knowledge broker)	Synthesises evidence	Commissions research	Evidence repository	Network / training / events	Advocacy/lobbying	Their "what works" approach How do they create, share and use (or "generate, translate and adopt") high quality evidence for decision-making? What standards of evidence are followed?	Funding, structure and governance	M&E arrangements	Learnings for TASO How do they deal with the challenges TASO is facing? Specifically, trust/buy-in, financial sustainability, independence from their funder(s)
Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), Denmark Education, including higher education **Internal; Research and knowledge broker**	✓		✓	✓	✓	EVA explores and develops the quality of day care centres, schools and educational programmes by collecting, producing and disseminating knowledge. EVA provides usable knowledge at all levels and of interest for both local governments, ministries, and practitioners in all educational institutions. Standards of evidence: no standards published.	EVA is an independent state institution established under the Ministry of Education in 1999. It has a board of directors and a board of representatives from the education sector, and ~100 staff.	There are no M&E plans published.	TASO might learn from the joined-up nature of EVAs work across the whole educational sector. EVA does not resemble a WWC and is instead an arm's length government body. It also conducts its own research rather than commissions it.

Source: Technopolis, Key: ✓ = fully reflects this feature; / = partly reflects this feature

6.2 Towards benchmarking of TASO

We plan to carry out a benchmarking exercise in which we assess TASO's practices on evidence and evaluation generation, translation and dissemination against those of the other 'what works' centres in the UK. This work includes designing the benchmarking framework, collecting data to populate it and then analysing the findings.

We have now conducted a rapid evidence assessment of WWCs. This has involved a review of information on websites, annual reports, strategies and other desk documents where available. We appraised each WWC using two key criteria: availability of information (e.g. published annual reports) and interviewees, and features and activities similar to TASO (e.g. in terms of mission, budget, support mechanisms).

We have used a traffic light system as a simple way to present the results in Table 6: red = not optimal for use as a benchmark; orange = potential benchmark if more information is available; green = recommend for use as a benchmark. Three WWCs are recommended for use as benchmarks, three more are identified as potential benchmarks if more information is available, and seven are deemed not optimal for use as benchmarks. We summarise the first two categories below for the OfS's consideration.

WWCs recommended for use as benchmarks:

- What Works Centre for Crime reduction – Very similar features and activities to TASO, similar budget, though older and different thematically. Extensive information is available, including several evaluation documents, though staff contacts are not available.
- Education Endowment Fund (EEF) – Thematically close to TASO, reflects many of their activities, including evaluation guidance and commissioned research. Evidence is abundant.
- Youth Endowment Fund – This WWC is an affiliate which is only the same age as TASO. They also fund research and have an evaluation committee. There is a lot of documentation on the website.

WWCs for use as potential benchmarks:

- What Works Wellbeing – There is cross-over in theme and target sector (universities) as well as support activities (advisory groups, repository). There is however very little information on the website.
- What Works for Local Economic Growth – Reflects many of TASOs activities and features, including toolkits, evidence reviews and events. The centre has a similar budget to TASO but there is very little information available online
- What Works for Children's Social Care – Reflects TASO's activities in that they identify gaps in evidence, create new evidence through evaluation, synthesise evidence in a repository, develop tools, use robust standards of evidence. There is good information available but no contacts or detailed information on the centre itself.

Table 6 – What Works Centres rapid evidence assessment

Centre / annual budget	Thematic area and mission(s)	Availability of data / interviewees	Features and activities similar to TASO	Conclusion
Centre for Ageing Better Est. 2015 **£5.3m – 2015-2025 (endowment: £50m over ten years)**	Quality of life in later life Mission: to bring about changes in society that enable more people to enjoy a good later life and bring fresh thinking to the challenges and opportunities associated with an aging society	Publications page on the website. 2019 accounts and trustees' annual report are available, going back to 2016, all with secondary data included. All staff emails available on people page. Good information on programmes	There is quite a large team, in contrast to TASO. They run programmes as direct interventions with employers for example, in contrast to TASO which acts more as a repository. Much further on than TASO in terms of development, due to an earlier start state. Have advisory panels, are an independent charity as TASO wishes to be	Not optimal for use as a benchmark
What Works Scotland Est. 2014 (affiliate) **£1m**	Public policy in Scotland Mission: to improve understanding to mobilise evidence, implement collaborative reform, and promote community empowerment to develop public services	The initiative has an abundance of data on their impact on their website but the initiative has now concluded, meaning it will be somewhat irrelevant for some of our indicators. It is not clear specifically who is in charge now	The centre looked at public policy as a whole and therefore may be too broad for comparison with TASO who are thematically specific. The budget was similar, and they were an affiliate	Not optimal for use as a benchmark
What Works Wellbeing Est. 2014 **£1.3m**	Wellbeing Mission: to improve wellbeing in the UK, reducing inequality and misery; this should be the ultimate objective of government policy and community action	Emails of staff are available. Otherwise, very little information on the centre itself (history, funding etc.)	Have an evidence repository, advisory groups, work with universities. Some cross over in topic (education and wellbeing in universities)	Potential benchmark if more information is available
What Works Centre for Crime Reduction Est. 2013 **£1.5m**	Crime reduction Mission: to provide those working in policing and crime reduction with the skills and knowledge necessary to prevent crime, protect the public, and secure public trust	A final evaluation was conducted in 2017 as part of the funding arrangements and good evidence is available. There is no contact list for staff, though there appears to be information elsewhere, but may now be outdated[30]	They appear to have similar mechanisms in terms of evidence use e.g. toolkits, research surgeries and others TASO might adopt in the future. Similar budget though much older than TASO and very different in topic. However, their four support mechanisms – evidence into practice, practical tools, facilitating collaboration, building capability – all reflect TASO type activities	Recommend for use as a benchmark

[30] UCL. What works centre for crime reduction. Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/research-groups/crime-reduction-policy/project-docs/what-works-centre

Centre / annual budget	Thematic area and mission(s)	Availability of data / interviewees	Features and activities similar to TASO	Conclusion
Early Intervention Charity Foundation (EIF) Est. 2013 **£1.5m**	Children's development and life chances Mission: to ensure that effective early intervention is available and is used to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of poor outcomes	Good evidence across their impact and operations. They have their annual reports on the website and a history of the organisation. Staff emails are available on the website	EIF are not quite the same type of WWC as TASO, they do not commission research, they do not evaluate nor do they have a repository of interventions, just resources. Not clear if they use any standards of evidence or what processes they use to judge evidence	Not optimal for use as a benchmark
Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP, replacing PPIW) Est. 2013 (affiliate) **£530k**	Public policy in Wales Mission: to increase evidence-informed policy-making by generating analysis and advice on key challenges facing public policy makers in Wales, focusing on demand and supply	Not much information online about their activities, finances or impact so far. Staff emails are available on the website	They organise events. They work with public services to access, generate, evaluate, and apply evidence about what works in addressing key economic and societal challenges. They cover education and skills. Help to build capacity and conduct their own research. They do not appear to commission research. Potentially, too wide thematically for comparison with TASO. They do not have a repository or standards of evidence, nor ranking of interventions	Not optimal for use as a benchmark
What Works for Local Economic Growth Est. 2013 **£1.25m**	Local economic growth, with employment, productivity and wages Mission: to encourage the use of evidence in local economic growth policymaking	No staff emails on website or list of names. Very little information on the centre itself but lots of resources for users	They provide evaluation guidance, toolkits, evidence reviews and events. They have a user panel, evaluation support and do workshops. They also seem to do consultancy for clients like BEIS. They do not commission research	Potential benchmark if more information is available
Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Est. 2011 **£16.5m – 2011-2026 (endowment £125m)**	Education outcomes for disadvantaged 3-18-year-olds Mission: to raise the attainment of 3-18-year-olds, particularly those facing disadvantage; develop their essential life skills; and prepare them for the world of work and further study	Lots of information on the centre, its history including annual reports. Staff emails are available on the website	EEF provide evidence summaries, tool kits, evaluation guidance, ranked interventions. Lots of thematic crossover with TASO. They commission research and evaluations	Recommend for use as a benchmark
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Est. 1999 **£71.3m**	Health and social care, including public health Mission: to drive and enable excellence across the health and social care system, using evidence and engagement to	They have impact reports on how their work has been used. They publish their annual reports and business plan, including a triennial review. Information on how they work is detailed and abundant. Staff emails are available	They do provide appraisals of technologies, treatments and procedures in healthcare, against their own indicators. They provide advice on methodologies for assessing interventions also. Their structure is fragmented, they have six directorates which specify goals for different thematic areas, rather than an overall set of goals comparable to TASO. They do not commission research, they do it themselves. They have	Not optimal for use as a benchmark

Centre / annual budget	Thematic area and mission(s)	Availability of data / interviewees	Features and activities similar to TASO	Conclusion
	inform, influence and support national and local policy		standards of evidence. The topics are quite different, and they are much larger and older than TASO	
Centre for Homelessness Impact Est. 2018 **Budget not clear, no figures. Some indication e.g. £927k from Crisis in 2019[31]**	Homelessness Mission: to end homelessness for good, and to create 'A society in which any experience of homelessness is rare, brief and non- recurring.' By 2024, they want more people who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness to be housed in suitable homes quickly; to be financially secure; to have strong social connections; and to have a sense of agency	Staff are listed but no emails are made available. There is basic information online, but not much about the centre itself and no annual reports	Not clear if they commission research, they say that they will in the future but there is nothing on the website otherwise. They have Evidence and Gap Maps. They have ranked interventions, repository, evaluation guidance. There is no thematic similarity, though the centre is relatively new	Not optimal for use as a benchmark
What Works for Children's Social Care Est. 2017 (affiliate) **Budget not clear**	Children's social care Mission: Developing a strong evidence base around effective interventions and practice in children's social care, and supporting their implementation by practitioners and decision-makers	Lots of useful information on how they work and lots of detail in processes. Not much information about the organisation itself, no annual reports etc. The centre has a map of engagement and there are names on the website but no emails	They identify gaps in evidence, create new evidence through evaluation, synthesise evidence in a repository, develop tools, use robust standards of evidence. Have a map of engagement. Have an evaluation advisory group and panel like TASO. Have a rating system for evidence and standards, taken from the policing WWC. They mention that the evaluation panel will review the work they "fund"	Potential benchmark if more information is available
Youth Endowment Fund Est. 2019 (affiliate) **£20m**	Youth offending Mission: to prevent children and young people from getting caught up in crime and violence by making sure that those at most risk get the best possible support, as early as possible	Lots of information on the website, including grants awarded and processes. Annual reports available. Staff are listed but no emails.	The Youth Endowment Fund is also run by the Early Intervention Foundation, therefore it would make sense to only use one or the other for the benchmark. They fund research like TASO. They have a grants and evaluation committee, expert panel. The budget is very different to TASO. They do not have a repository, ranking system for interventions of standards of evidence. It started operations around the same time as TASO. No events	Recommend for use as a benchmark

[31] Crisis (2019) Trustees' annual report and accounts for the year ended 30 June 2019. Available at: https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/241347/cri0217_impact_report_2019_aw_web.pdf

Centre / annual budget	Thematic area and mission(s)	Availability of data / interviewees	Features and activities similar to TASO	Conclusion
Youth Futures Foundation Est. 2019 (affiliate) **Budget not clear**	Youth employment Mission: to remove the barriers preventing disadvantaged young people from entering the labour market, with a particular focus on addressing the ethnic disparities in youth employment	Staff are listed but no emails. Very little information on the website as to how it works	Creating a panel of evaluators. It started operations around the same time as TASO. Awards grants. No repository, standards of evidence, ranking systems, or events	Not optimal for use as a benchmark

Source: Technopolis

7 Recommendations

Based on the findings above, the team formulated the following recommendations for the OfS, for TASO and for the providers, which could be considered during the next phases of the implementation of TASO:

For the OfS

- **Keep** communicating to the sector about TASO's activities. Provision of a mutual learning platform, unified repository, toolkits, and evaluation training and resources are considered to be the most important TASO activities, indicating a particular need for TASO's learning functions
- Further **clarify** the close connection between the OfS and TASO. TASO is independent of OfS but makes sure that its activities are relevant to the regulatory requirements of OfS
- **Consider** buy-in across whole institutions rather than just centralised senior-level buy-in because barriers can be structural as much as cultural or skills based
- **Work** closely with providers to better understand how internal distribution of responsibility within providers affects the institutional resistance to changing their evaluation culture
- **Increase** awareness of the issue of fragmentation of evaluation practice within providers, caused by WP practitioners often evaluating their own initiative separately from other WP activities within the same provider
- **Work** together with providers on offering incentives to WP practitioners and academics to work more together in the area of access and participation as, currently, WP does not tend to generate academic research funding and there is no institutional level return of data on WP in the REF
- Further **work** on the promotion of the Type 3 evidence and remove the misperception on the side of providers
- **Offer** more guidance and/or training to providers on how to set up Type 3 evaluation exercises
- **Reassure** providers that submitting evidence on less successful activities (i.e. "what did not work") will not be penalised
- **Keep** working with DfE on the issue of student consent in HEAT data and GDPR

For TASO

- **Keep** communicating to the sector about TASO's activities. Provision of a mutual learning platform, unified repository, toolkits, and evaluation training and resources are considered to be the most important TASO activities, indicating a particular need for TASO's learning functions
- **Keep** consulting and engaging with the sector in both formal and informal ways to make sure that the needs across the sector are addressed
- **Boost** TASO's name recognition and communications activities, particularly with those providers less likely to be aware of its work, especially with smaller providers and further education colleges (FECs)

- **Work** more on reaching out to FECs and on providing guidance tailored to their specific context. Unlike other providers, such as universities, FECs cannot usually draw on wider institutional resources (e.g. for data analytics skills) in cases where separate evaluation units do not exist
- **Focus** more on reaching out to WP practitioners who tend to be less well connected than evaluators (who benefit more from the established networks of practice, such as around Uni Connect)
- **Encourage** providers to submit evidence on less successful activities (i.e. "what did not work") when a call for evidence is issued
- Further **work** on the promotion of the Type 3 evidence and removing misperceptions on the side of providers
- **Offer** more guidance and/or training to providers on how to set up Type 3 evaluation exercises
- **Keep** capitalising on the existence of evaluation evidence produced by the regional partnerships (e.g. under the umbrella of Uni Connect). There seem to be pockets of good practice created within these regional partnerships

For the sector

- Closely **follow** the activities of TASO. TASO produces useful materials for providers. TASO also has a dedicated website and organises workshops and webinars for providers
- **Avoid** fragmentation of the evaluation practice within your provider by bringing the various WP practitioners, who also conduct evaluation, together for joint meetings and discussion
- **Submit** evidence on less successful activities (i.e. "what did not work") when a call for evidence is issued by TASO. This will provide another type of useful evidence and could be used by other providers as a way of learning
- **Keep** learning from the work of the regional partnerships (e.g. under the umbrella of Uni Connect)

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