TASO Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

Developing theories of change for whole-provider approaches in higher education: Case study comparison

October 2025

Authors:
Hannah Thomson, Evaluation Manager, TASO
Katherine Drew, Evaluation Officer, TASO
Professor Liz Thomas, Professor of Higher Education, University of York

Table of contents

Acknowledgments: TASO would like to thank Professor Liz Thomas, Michael Hill, and Dr Paul Fenton Villar for their contributions to the project, and the six partner providers who took part in developing theories of change.

1. Introduction

1.1 Project background

In recent years, the concept of taking a whole-provider approach to improving equality of opportunity in higher education has gained importance. Drawing on a growing recognition that institutional factors play a critical role in shaping student outcomes, both directly and indirectly (Tinto, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017), the whole-provider approach aims to support students to access, succeed in and progress from higher education. It does this by aligning institutional policies and engaging stakeholders, from senior leadership to staff and students, around the shared goal of reducing equality gaps.

However, in practice, there is variation in how different higher education providers conceptualise and implement a whole-provider approach in their context (Thomas, 2017). This not only raises the question of what constitutes a whole-provider approach, but also how its impact and implementation can be evaluated. This project aims to explore these two questions by developing a theory of change for the whole-provider approach, which serves as the first step to planning its evaluation. A theory of change summarises the activities of an intervention, their intended outcomes and impacts, and how the intervention is expected to bring about change.

The increased development and implementation of whole-provider approaches has been driven in part by regulatory requirements set out by the Office for Students (OfS). The OfS requires higher education providers in England to develop access and participation plans (APPs) that set out how they will address inequalities in access, success and progression for students from underrepresented groups (OfS, 2023a). Since the 2020-21 APP cycle, providers have been required to include a section on their whole-provider approach to access and participation.

The latest APP guidance (published March 2023) advises providers that a whole-provider approach should promote 'alignment and consistency across the organisation to create an approach from which all students benefit, irrespective of where they are located within the provider' (OfS, 2023b). While the OfS suggests some key features of whole-provider approaches in its APP guidance (OfS 2023c), in practice higher education providers vary in how they define their whole-provider approach conceptually and how it is implemented.

This includes variation in the extent to which a strategic commitment translates to on-the-ground implementation, and whether the institution's wider work and policies align

with or undermine the commitments made in the APP to widen access and improve the success and progression of students from targeted groups.

1.2 Project aims

This project seeks to capture how the whole-provider approach is conceptualised, developed, delivered and evaluated at a range of higher education providers in England. The overarching aim is to build a more comprehensive understanding of the range of whole-provider approaches adopted by the sector.

To do this, we adopted a case study methodology, working in partnership with six higher education providers. A case study approach was chosen because the nature and needs of a whole-provider approach are deeply informed by the nature of the provider itself. Case studies therefore capture the nuanced contextual information that is needed to understand how a whole-provider approach operates in practice, and ensure that the approach is not separated from the environment in which it was developed.

Each case study was developed using a theory of change framework, which served as a practical tool for understanding how providers conceptualised the purpose, scope, and mechanisms of their whole-provider approach. Further, developing a theory of change provides a starting point for developing an evaluation plan. By creating a theory of change for each approach, we hoped to generate insights on their evaluability.

This report presents our work with the six partner providers and the findings that emerged from the resulting theory of change case studies. Section 2 outlines the collaborative methodology used to co-produce the case studies. Section 3 summarises the six case studies, focusing on the similarities and differences between them. Finally, Section 4 presents our conclusions and recommendations.

For broader reflections on the concept of the whole-provider approach, including the rationale for its creation, a broad application of theory of change, and considerations for evaluating whole-provider approaches, please see the accompanying scoping report.

2. Methodology

To develop six whole-provider approach case studies, we adopted a structured, collaborative and participatory methodology. The process began with the selection of a diverse group of higher education providers from an open call to participate in the project, to ensure variation in institutional type and strategic priorities. This was followed by initial

scoping activities to better understand each provider's current approach, which facilitated the development of a set of draft theories of change.

The draft theories of change were then interrogated by provider staff and stakeholders at in-person workshops, with the resulting feedback used to finalise each theory of change in collaboration with the provider. The final stage involved conducting a comparative analysis across the six case studies to identify common themes and contextual differences.

2.1 Case study selection

TASO issued an open call for higher education providers across England to express interest in developing a theory of change for their whole-provider approach. Providers were asked to supply information on their current whole-provider approach, including how it was conceptualised, what accountability processes were in place, and how it aimed to reduce risks to equality of opportunity across the student lifecycle.

The chosen providers were:

- University of Bradford
- Buckinghamshire New University
- Lancaster University
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Teesside University
- University of York

These were selected to represent a range of institution types, student populations, and levels of maturity of the whole-provider approach. The University of Bradford, Sheffield Hallam University and the University of York were allocated to work with a team from TASO, and Lancaster University, Teesside University, and Buckinghamshire New University worked with a team led by Professor Liz Thomas and Michael Hill. Table 1 provides an overview of the providers.

Table 1: Characteristics of case study providers

Higher education provider	**Tariff Group**[1]	**Student population**	**Student characteristics (2022-23 first-**

[1] Tariff Groups. Dataset from 'Widening participation in higher education'. Explore education statistics, UK Government.

		(2023-24)[2]	year undergraduate entrants)[3]
University of Bradford	Medium	10,799 students	83.7% from IMD[4] Q1 and Q2 22.6% from TUNDRA[5] Q1 and Q2 69.7% Free school meal (FSM)-eligible 26.9% mature learners 81.3% Asian 3.7% Black 2.2% Mixed 11.8% White 1.0% Other
Buckinghamshire New University	Low	17,998 students	65.4% from IMD Q1 and Q2 25.9% from TUNDRA Q1 and Q2 78.2% FSM-eligible 83.9% mature learners 14.4% Asian 13.5% Black 8.7% Mixed 61.6% White 1.8% Other
Lancaster University	High	16,617 students	28.1% from IMD Q1 and Q2 22.6% from TUNDRA Q1 and Q2 7.6% FSM-eligible 3.2% mature learners 10.9% Asian 4.2% Black 6.1% Mixed 77.7% White 1.2% Other
Sheffield Hallam University	Low	28,646 students	44.4% from IMD Q1 and Q2 42.6% from TUNDRA Q1 and Q2 17.8% FSM-eligible 19.4% mature learners 11.8% Asian ethnicity 4.5% Black ethnicity 4.0% Mixed ethnicity 78.0% White ethnicity 1.7% Other ethnicity

[2] Student numbers for regulatory purposes. Office for Students.
[3] Access and participation data dashboard. Office for Students.
[4] IMD: IMD (the Indices of Multiple Deprivation) measure relative deprivation for small geographical areas. IMD ranks every small area from most deprived area to least deprived area.
[5] TUNDRA (tracking underrepresentation by area) classifies local areas across England based on the proportion of 16-year-old state-funded mainstream school pupils who participate in higher education aged 18 or 19 years.

Teesside University	Low	19,089 students	58.2% from IMD Q1 and Q2 47.7% from TUNDRA Q1 and Q2 25.7% FSM-eligible 41.1% mature learners 10.4% Asian ethnicity 2.3% Black ethnicity 2.8% Mixed ethnicity 83.7% White ethnicity 0.9% Other ethnicity
University of York	High	20,231 students	22.1% from IMD Q1 and Q2 26.2% from TUNDRA Q1 and Q2 8.4% FSM-eligible 4.2% mature learners 5.4% Asian ethnicity 2.0% Black ethnicity 5.3% Mixed ethnicity 86.6% White ethnicity 0.7% Other ethnicity

2.2 Theory of change workshops and development

Based on a review of institutional documentation and after an initial orientation meeting with institutional leads, the project teams developed a draft theory of change for each provider's whole-provider approach. This was informed by the APP and additional documentation sent by the provider such as internal strategies and organisational documents, and an online meeting with the institutional leads which sought further contextual information around how the whole-provider approach was conceived and developed. This draft theory of change was shared with the institutional leads for review ahead of the in-person workshops.

The workshops took place at the universities and involved a range of stakeholders, including student support staff, widening participation staff, academic staff, senior leadership and student representatives. Not every workshop included participants from each of these groups with particular variation in the inclusion of student representatives and academic staff. The selection of participants was therefore in itself an interesting reflection of which functions were deemed most relevant to include in a session on the whole-provider approach. For several partner providers, the workshops presented a useful opportunity to engage academic staff more closely in APP-related work.

In the first half of the workshop, participants reflected on their own understanding of a whole-provider approach and how the approach was understood at the institution. After

this, participants were invited to interrogate the draft theory of change, focusing on whether it was a complete and accurate reflection of the provider's whole-provider approach and identifying potential change mechanisms.

Following the workshops, the project teams revised the draft theories of change based on the feedback and insights from the participants. Final versions of the theories of change were shared, reviewed and agreed by the providers. The result is a set of six context-specific, co-produced theories of change that demonstrate how different providers conceptualise their whole-provider approach, which are included in the Appendix.

While creating the theories of change, we focused on activities currently being carried out or agreed by the providers, rather than on prospective developments. However, the whole-provider approaches continued to change and evolve over the course of the project as the providers engaged with them more deeply, so the distinction between current and potential activities was not always clear-cut.

2.3 Comparative analysis

After the theories of change were finalised, we undertook a comparative analysis to identify the similarities and differences across the six case studies. The analysis focused on two main aspects: the content of the whole-provider approaches as articulated in the theories of change; and the varying approaches in conceptualising, developing, and evaluating the approaches. While there were clear points of convergence, particularly in the associated change mechanisms of the whole-provider approaches, the diversity of institutional contexts (both historically and currently), student populations, and strategic priorities produced unique features in each case. These similarities and differences were synthesised into overarching thematic areas, as summarised in Section 3.

3. Whole-provider approach case study comparison

3.1 Developing and evaluating the whole-provider approach

3.1.1 Starting points

At the outset of the project, all providers had articulated a whole-provider approach as part of their APPs, but had reached this point in slightly different ways. For example, the

University of York had previously taken part in workshops to develop their whole-provider approach with Professor Liz Thomas, and therefore had a clear overarching vision for its approach and had already developed theories of change for whole institution interventions that linked to specific aspects. However, other specific aspects were in the early stages of development and details had not been fully disseminated to the rest of the staff body, such as an activity on improving student communications.

At Teesside University, the whole-provider approach was initially developed by considering the business-as-usual activities carried out by the university to support its home undergraduate students, most of whom are from underrepresented backgrounds. Over the course of the project, they were interested in exploring how the whole-provider approach can be extended to all students, including international students, to ensure it truly spans the whole provider.

Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Bradford both explicitly referred to 'systems thinking' as informing their whole-provider approach, recognising the complexity of interactions between the elements of the whole-provider approach. For example, Sheffield Hallam University used aspects of systems thinking to consider the student journey through their various contact points with the university and the flow of knowledge between different stakeholders within the university.

The relevance of systems thinking to whole-provider approaches has been previously emphasised by Thomas (2017), who highlights that while different groups and stakeholders within providers tend to have a shared view of the importance of equality of opportunity, they contribute to this mission in different ways, creating a complex system. Embedding a whole-provider approach can reduce some of this complexity by creating a more structured and coordinated system through which different parts of a provider contribute to reducing equality gaps.

In practice, fully developing and embedding the whole-provider approach was still a work in progress for all six universities. This included fully articulating how the key elements of the approach worked together across the provider to reduce equality gaps, how it fit in alongside the APP and other strategies, and raising awareness of and engagement with the whole-provider approach outside of formal documents such as the APP.

Over the course of the project and beyond, the whole-provider approaches at each university continued to develop and evolve as they spent more time focusing on them and gathering stakeholder input. At the University of York for example, the project workshop offered a further opportunity for staff and student input. This resulted in a restructuring of the core activities included in the whole-provider approach theory of change document, to emphasise the shared responsibility across the provider for supporting equality of opportunity. For all the providers, the project offered an opportunity to review and reenergise their whole-provider approaches beyond their inclusion in the APPs.

At several institutions, the review of the whole-provider approach was driven by organisational and staff changes. For example, Sheffield Hallam University has undergone institutional changes since developing its whole-provider approach for the APP. The project therefore offered a timely opportunity to amend its whole-provider approach in light of these changes, initially focusing on student support provisions, with work on academic departments still to follow.

Buckinghamshire New University had also recently undergone some changes in how the APP was positioned, integrating it more with the everyday core business of the university. This renewed a deeper focus on the whole-provider approach, particularly among more senior staff, and a clearer roadmap for implementing the approach over the next five years.

3.1.2 Aim of the whole-provider approach

The broad aim of the whole-provider approach is conceived similarly across the providers. All six universities aim to embed inclusion and reduce inequality across the student lifecycle, and staff and data-driven practice are seen as key drivers in enacting and maintaining this change. They all aspire to create an institution where inclusive practices are embedded, culture is transformed, and student outcomes are improved for all groups. A whole-provider approach is seen as an important supporting mechanism to enable this change. This aligns with the OfS's guidance that a whole-provider approach should promote 'alignment and consistency across the organisation to create an approach from which all students benefit, irrespective of where they are located within the provider' (OfS, 2023b).

3.1.3 Identifying areas of focus

Across all six providers, student and staff consultations informed areas of focus within the whole-provider approach. The University of York and Buckinghamshire New University used the whole-provider approach toolkit developed by the University of York's Centre for Research on Education and Social Justice to structure this process (Thomas, 2024).

The University of York participated in workshops run by Professor Liz Thomas and used the Enabling Environment Review Tool from the toolkit to identify areas of institutional strength and development, in collaboration with staff and students.

At the University of York and Lancaster University, institution-specific risks to equality of opportunity identified within the APP further informed areas of focus for the whole-provider approach. This included improving access to and transparency of information for students at the University of York, and improving access to personal and academic support at Lancaster University.

Buckinghamshire New University also used the whole-provider approach toolkit and particularly its 'enabling environment review tool' (Thomas, 2024), and worked collaboratively with Specialist Evidence, Evaluation and Research (SEER) to identify areas where they could strengthen the process. Their whole-provider approach was developed with strong senior leadership commitment and involvement from the early stages, which helped to bring together fragmented policies into a cohesive vision and support staff to relate their own work to the aims of the APP.

Sheffield Hallam University on the other hand used a more bottom-up approach to identify the core components of the whole-provider approach. This involved completing a series of internal interviews with staff in professional services and student support roles which aimed to map out various information flows and processes of their whole-provider approach. The resulting approach therefore benefits from being reflective of staff members' actual ways of working, with a student and academic staff consultation to follow.

Finally, existing institutional strategies informed the nature of the whole-provider approach in different ways. For example, at Lancaster University, developing a whole-provider approach has presented an opportunity to more intentionally align their access and participation work with institutional policies, including the Mental Health Charter and Athena SWAN, recognising that this will help to embed the whole-provider approach in practice across the university. Meanwhile the University of Bradford used their institutional equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategy as a starting point for developing their whole-provider approach, resulting in close alignment between the two. The EDI strategy is well-established at the University of Bradford and informs the practice of many academic and professional services staff and departments. This close alignment has been beneficial in securing staff buy-in to the whole-provider approach, but also raised discussions on how the whole-provider approach, the EDI strategy, and the APP work together.

3.1.3. Embedded inclusive practice and targeted interventions

The make-up of the student body varies between the six case study providers (see Table 1). Buckinghamshire New University, the University of Bradford, Sheffield Hallam University, and Teesside University have a large proportion of students from more diverse and relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. Lancaster University and the University of York have a smaller proportion of underrepresented or disadvantaged groups. This means that they have different considerations for the design and delivery of their whole-provider approach.

For the providers with a high proportion of students from underrepresented groups, inclusive practice tends to be embedded across the institution, with existing teaching and

learning practices and support services being designed to reach the whole student population. This means that teaching, learning and student-support structures are generally already inclusive of all student groups and therefore contributing to a whole-provider approach through business-as-usual practice. The whole-provider approach as a concept is therefore implicitly present, even if not fully explicitly developed and formulated in practice. Teesside University's whole-provider approach therefore emphasised coordinating business-as-usual practices, such as mental health and careers support, as well as implementing new interventions within these.

The providers with a lower proportion of students from underrepresented groups, such as Lancaster University and the University of York, focus more on targeted interventions in their APPs, to reduce equality gaps for groups identified as being at risk. This means that the whole-provider approach has a more prominent role in highlighting how provider-wide activities contribute to a reduction in equality gaps, providing an opportunity to articulate how inclusive practice is being implemented more holistically.

For example, Lancaster University's Curriculum Transformation Programme is not formally part of the APP, but included in the whole-provider approach as it works across the university to ensure that the curriculum is designed and delivered inclusively, providing an important link between academic practice and equality of opportunity.

3.1.4 Evaluation of the whole-provider approach

Despite the OfS not specifically requiring providers to evaluate their whole-provider approach, all of the providers involved in the project expressed an interest in doing so. While plans for these evaluations are currently in the early stages, various evaluation approaches have been suggested by the providers.

Several are planning a theory-driven approach to evaluate the causal pathways and outcomes identified in the theory of change completed as part of this project. The University of York has suggested including students as evaluation partners during this process and is convening a working group to develop an evaluation plan. Sheffield Hallam University plans to focus on understanding the specific components of the whole-provider approach that lead to short-, medium- and long-term outcomes. Current measurement of student and institutional culture through existing student and staff surveys may be able to contribute to this.

Buckinghamshire New University has identified potential research questions for the evaluation of the whole-provider approach and plan to develop an evaluation framework based on the theory of change with involvement from senior leaders and Specialist Evidence, Evaluation and Research (SEER) teams.

At the University of Bradford, the planned evaluation of the whole-provider approach is supported by the Bradford Action Research Cycle and Process framework, which is already being used in the evaluation of initiatives and activities across the university. Meanwhile, Lancaster University have suggested a comprehensive and ambitious evaluation strategy for their whole-provider approach, which consists of an initial phase of developmental and process evaluation for the first two years, followed by the capture of longitudinal data for use in an impact evaluation.

Teesside University suggests that a systems-change approach to evaluation may be most appropriate, as changes in one part of a provider have implications in other parts of the provider. Evaluating a whole-provider approach is therefore likely to require ongoing monitoring of changes rather than the measurement of a final outcome. For a more detailed discussion of evaluating whole-provider approaches, please see the accompanying scoping report.

3.2 Core components of the whole-provider approach

3.2.1 Addressing equality gaps across the lifecycle

All providers identify the need for the whole-provider approach to address equality gaps across the whole student lifecycle and run a number of initiatives which provide support across all stages. These initiatives include a range of approaches:

- Lancaster University has three main targeted student-facing interventions across the access, success, and progression stages of the student lifecycle, which are aligned to the Curriculum Transformation Programme.
- Buckinghamshire New University delivers four cross-institutional strategic interventions that are embedded across the student lifecycle, focusing on preparation, induction and transition; curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment; targeted student support; and universal placements to enhance employability.
- Sheffield Hallam University has a central Student Support Help Desk which operates as a single point of access for different forms of support or advice, both in-person and virtually. Student support includes academic skills development, well-being, disability and employability services, each of which run targeted and universal design interventions. Outreach is delivered through a specialist team as well as in collaboration with the University of Sheffield.
- Teesside University runs strategic outreach interventions for students, families and communities, as well as embedding a whole-university approach to positive mental health and curriculum changes for a more inclusive culture.

These initiatives are not treated as isolated initiatives, but as a coherent package of student-facing activities which are designed to feed into one another as students progress through the university journey. Depending on the student population of the provider, some activities are more targeted at specific groups where equality gaps have been identified, and some are more embedded in provision to benefit all students. Regardless of the target group, across most of the case studies the whole-provider approach tends to be more focused on the success stage of the higher education journey rather than on access or progression, although their connection is considered. This may be due to the APP's historic emphasis on access to higher education, while the whole-provider approach offers an opportunity to focus on student success and naturally centres on activities taking place within the institution.

While the whole-provider approach is typically seen as a tool to support the delivery of the APP, some providers have considered how it can be extended beyond the APP's core remit. Teesside University is exploring how the whole-provider approach can be used to deliver equal outcomes and opportunities for student populations who are not covered by the APP, such as international, postgraduate and online learners. This would be enabled by seeking student voice representation from these groups and identifying the equality gaps that exist within this population. The overall objective is to apply the APP process model to international students and build on existing research in this area, which is currently limited.

Separately, project participants at the University of Bradford considered how a culture of equality cannot only be driven by the APP interventions, but it also needs to be built into all aspects of university operation, including the physical university itself. The estates strategy was therefore listed as an example of its whole-institutional commitment to equality as it supports accessibility and positive mental health, but is not usually included in the APP.

3.2.3. Student involvement

All six providers identified student engagement as a crucial part of their whole-provider approach, with a particular emphasis on student voice, co-creation and evaluation partnerships. Improving student involvement and engagement has the dual benefit of making student-facing activities more aligned with student needs and increasing students' trust and sense of belonging at the provider, which in turn improves student outcomes.

Within the six theories of change, student involvement is positioned as both an input and an activity, emphasising the dual role of student engagement as both an enabler of the whole-provider approach and a key component of it.

While the anticipated benefits of student engagement work are shared across the case studies, specific engagement activities varied. For example:

- Buckinghamshire New University and Lancaster University include reciprocal mentoring, a collaborative approach in which students contribute to a range of university functions by sharing their knowledge, perspectives and life experiences.
- Sheffield Hallam University encourages and frequently builds in student involvement in co-designing, evaluating, and improving support systems, fostering a culture of co-creation and continuous improvement.
- The University of York plans to involve students in a review of their student-facing communications in order to improve transparency and develop more meaningful student engagement.

3.2.4 Senior leadership and governance

All providers highlight the importance of strong senior leadership and governance and alignment with institutional policies and strategies in driving forward the aims of the whole-provider approach. For example, at Teesside University, senior leaders make connections between outcomes reported to various governance committees and other strategic priorities within the university to increase alignment.

Leadership and governance is included as an input in most of the theories of change, as well as forming the basis of a causal pathway in all of them, in which senior leadership emphasises inclusive practice through institutional strategy and policy. This visibility encourages other staff to engage and align their practice with inclusivity principles, resulting in a more inclusive culture overall.

Most of the theories of change identified governance of the whole-provider approach as a core activity, highlighting its role not simply as a supporting background structure, but as a key mechanism for driving and sustaining change. Monitoring whole-provider approaches is typically integrated with existing APP and/or strategy monitoring rather than being governed as a separate entity. However, many providers were or are in the process of actively reviewing the governance structures surrounding the APP and considering how the whole-provider approach best fits within this.

For example, providers are exploring how to involve stakeholders from across the institution in governance. Lancaster University plans to incorporate student voice into its revised governance framework, involving a student-led approach to reviewing evaluation findings and data in order to provide insights and make recommendations.

3.2.5 Staff development and engagement

To facilitate staff adapting and aligning their practice with the aims of the whole-provider approach, all providers aim to build staff awareness and confidence in promoting inclusivity and equality of opportunity. This is seen as an important change mechanism for the whole-provider approach, to increase staff confidence and allow them to adapt their practice and the curriculum to become more inclusive, which in turn improves student outcomes.

Ensuring that staff development opportunities translate to changes in practice is important for ensuring that strategic changes filter down to students' experiences. For example, alongside its formal structures, Sheffield Hallam University engages staff through informal staff groups and communities of practice which facilitate knowledge-sharing across the provider. Teesside University provides regularly updated resources on designing inclusive curricula and supports staff to make use of them through champions within academic departments. Meanwhile, Buckinghamshire New University and Lancaster University incorporate student voice into their staff development via reciprocal mentoring and close working with the Students' Union, which benefits both staff and students.

However, although providers are committed to building staff capacity in engaging with APP-related activities, the workshops revealed barriers to this in practice. First, staff do not always have the time or capacity to engage in professional development and apply it in their work. Second, staff awareness of the whole-provider approach was a challenge at all of the providers. Typically, those involved in the development of the whole-provider approach and APP had a clear understanding of the approach, but details of the approach had not always been disseminated to the rest of the staff body.

While staff members were generally aware of the importance of improving equality of opportunity across the provider, not all were familiar with the terminology of a 'whole-provider approach' and how this fits in alongside the APP and institution-wide strategies. In response to this, Buckinghamshire New University and the University of York explicitly emphasise the importance of making the whole-provider approach 'everyone's business'; not just the remit of APP and widening participation teams.

3.2.6 Cross-departmental collaboration

A common barrier to widening participation and supporting equality of opportunity identified across the case studies is siloed working between and within teams at the universities, in particular between academic and professional services teams. As a result, four of the theories of change include a causal pathway to support collaboration between departments to break down silos and ensure consistency in support provision. In practice,

this collaboration is supported by improving governance structures and fostering staff communities of practice and working groups.

Some providers, including Buckinghamshire New University and Lancaster University, include partnerships with external organisations such as the regional Uni Connect (Study Higher), the Brilliant Club and SEER alongside internal collaboration, recognising the positive impact that these partnerships can have on the student experience.

Two of the providers highlighted different considerations for enabling the collaboration of staff to reduce siloed working, through formal and informal structures. At the University of York, opportunities for collaboration were created during the writing of the APP, and a challenge is how to capitalise on these structures to ensure that they are more formally embedded. Meanwhile, Sheffield Hallam University described a good level of collaboration between departments via relatively informal structures such as ad hoc conversations, alongside formal routes. These were seen to be useful for sharing knowledge and improving student cross-referrals. The whole-provider approach provides structures to enable collaborative working between teams, both those that are directly involved in the delivery of interventions, and other teams across the university.

3.2.7 Data and evaluation

In all six case studies, it was acknowledged that institutional data and monitoring is essential to inform the development and delivery of the whole-provider approach, and to determine if the intended outcomes are achieved.

When designing a whole-provider approach, and developing a theory of change, providers will need to collect and analyse data to determine if the intended outcomes are achieved. Effective data use ensures that activities are refined, tailored, and using resources effectively. However, a shared challenge is that staff do not always have adequate access to the data that they need to monitor progress, identify risks, and inform their practice. As a result, each theory of change included a planned activity around improving or formalising data collection and coordination. Examples of these activities include:

- Buckinghamshire New University has implemented the active monitoring of equality of opportunity data, including regular reporting schedules.
- The University of Bradford is developing a case management system to facilitate the identification of at-risk students and better understand patterns of inequalities.

Project participants also acknowledged that evaluations of individual activities were not always carried out consistently. They also stated that evaluation findings did not always inform the development of future practice and were not considered together to establish an overall picture of activities across the institution. This was partly due to challenges with

accessing data, but other barriers included a lack of expertise and capacity among staff. The universities are therefore working to support staff to deliver evaluations and develop provider-wide structures to ensure that evaluation findings are appropriately disseminated:

- The University of Bradford plans to run staff training to support a more widespread use of its Bradford Action Research Cycle and Process framework, to facilitate a consistent approach to evaluation across the provider.
- Lancaster University has established a specialised Widening Participation Evaluation and Impact team who will co-design evaluations for APP initiatives and work to build capacity among staff involved in delivery.
- Teesside University has put in place five strategic project groups which are aligned to specific priorities in the APP. These groups oversee the implementation, delivery, and evaluation of interventions, which ensures that evaluation findings are used to inform future practice.
- The University of York has developed theories of change for the individual whole-institution interventions that will feed into the whole-provider approach and is planning to involve more students in evaluations and support staff to use evaluation findings to improve practice.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Key findings

In this report, we have summarised common themes across six universities' whole-provider approaches to widening participation and improving equality of opportunity, and the context-specific similarities and differences between them. To capture each university's whole-provider approach, we developed theories of change and gathered contextual information about the development and evaluation of the whole-provider approach.

Across the six case studies, there was a clear consensus that using a whole-provider approach to widening participation and improving equality of opportunity is beneficial, and that students and staff should be consulted during the development of the approach.

The universities identified similar activities as the core components of the whole-provider approach, including student engagement across the lifecycle, senior leadership commitment and governance to drive the approach forward, staff development and engagement in adopting inclusive practice, cross-departmental collaboration, and the importance of using data and evaluation findings to inform student-facing initiatives. For

more detail on the outcomes and causal pathways resulting from these common activities, please see the accompanying scoping report.

While the six case study universities included similar components in their whole-provider approaches, there was variation in how these were implemented in practice. These variations were influenced by each provider's context, including factors such as size, location and the student body. These factors shaped how providers identified areas to focus on within their approaches, informed by institutional data, student and staff consultation, and existing institutional strategies.

A further influencing factor in implementing the whole-provider approach was its maturity: providers who had a more well-established approach were able to consider its relevance beyond the APP, while those who had (re)developed it more recently were focused on identifying the core components initially. By its nature, the whole-provider approach influences and is influenced by a wide range of provider functions and stakeholders, and it is necessary to select and focus on specific areas to draw these together into one overarching approach.

Finally, as each providers' student body differed, so did its whole-provider approach. Providers with a high proportion of students from underrepresented backgrounds tended to take a more embedded approach to inclusive practice. This meant all student groups were generally already included by default, contributing to a whole-provider approach through business-as-usual provision. For providers with a lower proportion of students from underrepresented backgrounds, the whole-provider approach offered a framework through which to align targeted interventions with provider-wide activities that aim to reduce equality gaps.

4.2 Recommendations for developing theories of change for whole-provider approaches

In this project, we used a theory of change approach to capture the core components, intended outcomes, and causal pathways of the whole-provider approach at each partner provider. We have summarised some recommendations for developing a theory of change for a whole-provider approach below. For further recommendations on developing and evaluating whole-provider approaches, please see the accompanying scoping report.

1. **Aim for a framework, not an exhaustive representation:** We focused on producing theories of change that were not perfect representations of the whole-provider approach, but were instead frameworks for helping providers think about their approach and the key causal pathways through which they support equality of opportunity (see Rogers, 2024). This means being intentional about what is included in the theory of change and what is not, rather than aiming for an

exhaustive list. One key consideration is to be intentional and reflective about what is currently happening (or concretely planned) at a provider versus possible future plans, depending on whether the aim is to capture current practice or support further development of the whole-provider approach. A second consideration is the level of detail included in the theory of change. This is likely to be relatively high-level as including too much detail about each activity can impede its clarity. Developing additional theories of change for individual activities can be a useful solution for capturing more detailed information.

2. **Collaborate with stakeholders:** The process of taking part in the group workshops and collaboratively developing theories of change enabled the providers to understand multiple staff and student perspectives and needs. The workshops included a critical evaluation of the whole-provider approach theory of change, which identified areas that may be less developed in practice than in theory. In many cases, the workshop sparked wider discussions on what the whole-provider approach should be trying to achieve and how it fits in alongside the APP and institutional strategies. Including staff and students in the theory of change development process also helped to raise awareness of the whole-provider approach and support their ongoing involvement.
3. **Consider narrative versus diagrammatic representations:** As the theories of change became more detailed, the numerous and interacting components of the whole-provider approach made it difficult to capture non-linear relationships fully in a diagram. We therefore ended up using tables and written narratives rather than a diagram, as the number of arrows and overlapping pathways in the diagram became unwieldy and difficult to read. To easily communicate the whole-provider approach, reverting to a diagram may be helpful, but a narrative will help to articulate the approach and its interacting causal pathways in more detail.
4. **Develop the theory of change iteratively:** Over the course of the project, the theory of change underwent several draft versions in diagram and narrative format. Taking an iterative approach helped to deepen the project participants' understanding of the whole-provider approach, regularly incorporate changes, and tease out the specific and the general elements of the approach. In this project, we developed an initial theory of change draft with a smaller team before bringing it to the workshops. This approach worked well for making effective use of the workshops with stakeholders that were less familiar with theory of change, and for expanding less developed aspects of the whole-provider approach. Iteratively re-drafting the theory of change should continue over the longer term, treating the theory of change as a living document that is reviewed regularly. It may help to schedule regular meetings with relevant stakeholders to review the theory of change at key timepoints, or to revisit the theory of change as part of existing monitoring processes.

5. **Set clear definitions and boundaries:** At the outset of developing a whole-provider approach, agree on its overall aim and how it relates to the APP and other organisation-wide strategies. Ensure there is a clear shared understanding of what each section of the theory of change includes. In practice, we found that the inputs, activities, and outcomes of a whole-provider approach often overlapped. For example, 'senior leadership' can be included as: an input that enables the implementation of the approach; an activity relating to senior leadership regularly messaging the importance of inclusive practice; and an outcome relating to increasing senior leadership engagement with the approach. It is therefore important to be intentional and explicit about each theory of change section and the boundaries between them.
6. **Consider your provider's context:** The context of a higher education provider influences the core components and areas of focus in the whole-provider approach. This includes provider-specific risks to equality of opportunity identified in institutional data, the nature of the student body, feedback from student and staff consultations, alignment with existing strategies and the APP, and existing strengths and areas for development. While these influences are not explicitly included in the theory of change, they underpin the decisions that informed its development. Recording the process of developing the whole-provider approach and the views and decisions that fed into this, alongside the theory of change, will help to produce a fuller picture of the approach. The whole-provider approach toolkit developed by Thomas (2024) can help providers capture their context.
7. **Use theory of change to inform evaluation planning:** Developing the theory of change helped providers to identify initial questions they might want to answer through an evaluation, such as how certain aspects of the whole-provider approach are implemented and whether they succeed in their aims, and the data they would need to collect during an evaluation. Further, identifying outcomes and causal pathways helped to articulate what the whole-provider approach is aiming to achieve, including challenging existing assumptions of how the approach was expected to lead to change. Providers have suggested a range of approaches to evaluating their whole-provider approach building on the theory of change. The accompanying scoping report includes more detailed considerations and suggested methods for evaluating whole-provider approaches.

5. Appendix: Whole-provider approach theories of change

5.1 University of Bradford theory of change

Aim

To develop structural and cultural enablers at the University of Bradford that help to reduce inequality of opportunity across the student lifecycle, aligned with the University's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy and Learning, Teaching and Student Experience (LTSE) Strategy.[6] The whole-provider approach at Bradford provides a University-wide holistic framework which focuses on building consistency in inclusive practice, developing staff capacity, using qualitative and quantitative data to inform targeted initiatives, and ensuring that all members of the university community feel respected, supported, and empowered to deliver change.

Inputs

Bradford's whole-provider approach is enabled by:

- Existing EDI and LTSE strategies, which support embedding of inclusive values and culture across the university.
- Strong senior leadership commitment to inclusivity, supported by governance structures.
- Staff time and buy-in across departments and services.
- Engagement of student and external community stakeholders to contribute to inclusive design and delivery.
- Work carried out and evaluated under the current APP.
- Use of institutional data and the Bradford Action Research Cycle and Process (BARCaP) to identify patterns of inequality and track the impact of initiatives.

Activities

[6] It should be noted that subsequent to the development of the theory of change and whole-provider approach, the University has put in place a new University Strategy with sub strategies (EDI and LTSE) still to be confirmed.

Core activities in Bradford's whole-provider approach include:

- **Whole-institution pipeline planning:**
  Student-facing initiatives span from access to progression, ensuring a coherent and inclusive student journey (including at application stage and working with influencers). Planning is supported by mapping and alignment of support needs across academic and professional services staff.
- **Inclusive curriculum design and development:**
  Staff are supported to design inclusive programmes which embed student skills through teaching resources, programme design principles, and curriculum monitoring processes.
- **Staff engagement and development:**
  Opportunities to engage in EDI- and teaching-related CPD and resources help to embed inclusive practice and support structural change.
- **Data-informed practice:**
  Data is used to identify students at risk and support them through a case management system (in development), understand patterns of inequalities, and tailor student-facing initiatives based on ongoing evaluation.
- **Stakeholder engagement and collaboration:**
  Collaboration within and between university departments and engagement activities with students and community stakeholders help to make practice more effective and coordinated.
- **An embedded EDI policy:**
  EDI is integrated into policies and everyday practice, supported by resources, space for dialogue, and effective communication of EDI commitments.

Intended short-term outcomes

- Greater awareness among staff of their role in advancing equality and inclusive practice.
- Staff engagement in EDI training and resources increases, with early signs of changes in practice, for example with regards to decolonising the curriculum.
- Collaborative work and use of data to identify gaps become more routine across teams.

- Good practice is identified and disseminated across the institution, improving staff awareness of ongoing student-facing activities.

Intended medium-term outcomes

- Academic and student support teams are more coordinated, leading to joined-up delivery of student-facing services.
- Academic content and delivery becomes more inclusive across departments.
- Staff adapt their initiatives in response to data and evaluation findings, improving the quality and effectiveness of student-facing activities.
- Students who access Bradford are equally supported to succeed and progress and the quality of the learning journey is improved.
- Students' sense of belonging increases and students are more engaged in the development and evaluation of initiatives.
- Monitoring of support needs becomes embedded across student groups and lifecycle stages.

Intended long-term outcomes

- Inequalities in student outcomes are reduced across the student lifecycle in line with APP targets.
- Inclusive, collaborative, and equitable principles are embedded across academic programmes and the university culture.
- A fully inclusive university community is realised, where all staff and students feel valued and able to contribute meaningfully.
- The whole-provider approach becomes a sustained university-wide enabler of equity and inclusive practice.

Impact

The University of Bradford becomes an institution where equity, diversity, and inclusion are embedded in all aspects of university life, including curriculum design, student support, governance, and community engagement. Students from all backgrounds have equitable opportunities to thrive, with outcome gaps reduced across the lifecycle. All individuals in the university community feel respected, empowered, and equipped to succeed.

Causal pathways

The whole-provider approach drives institutional change through the following causal pathways:

- **Causal pathway 1: Embedding of inclusive practice**
  Senior leaders embed the whole-provider approach within University strategy, and processes in relation to EDI and LTSE, signalling that inclusion and equity are institutional priorities. This alignment drives consistent messaging and a shared vision across the university. As staff engage with equity and inclusion work, good practice is shared and begins to spread across the institution. Inclusive behaviours become part of everyday work, which creates a sustained culture of inclusion.
- **Causal pathway 2: Capability and confidence building**
  Professional development opportunities and access to inclusive practice resources help staff build skills and confidence. Staff are better equipped to understand and respond to student needs and systemic barriers. This leads to improved quality and impact of teaching, support, and services.
- **Causal pathway 3: Student–staff collaboration**
  Students are engaged in shaping initiatives and providing feedback through evaluation, creating more responsive and relevant services. Their input enhances the quality and relevance of student-facing activities across the university. This deepens student belonging and fosters a more collaborative institutional culture.
- **Causal pathway 4: Using data and evidence to inform improvements**
  Staff use institutional data to identify inequalities and evaluate progress, supported by tools like the BARCaP. Data is used to tailor support services to student needs and inform practice adjustments. This iterative approach ensures that initiatives are targeted, effective, and accountable.
- **Causal pathway 5: Institutional consistency and collaboration**
  The whole-provider approach promotes cross-departmental collaboration and integration across the student lifecycle. Services are more consistent and aligned and good practice is shared across the university. Students benefit from more coherent and accessible support from entry to progression.

5.2 Buckinghamshire New University theory of change

Aim

To engage all colleagues, students and the Students' Union in the Access and Participation Plan (APP) as central to the core business of the University and to understand how they contribute, and how this is underpinned by evidence (data and evaluation). The whole-provider approach at BNU aims to ensure strategic decision making at all levels of policy and practice, and everyone develops understanding of and responsibility for improvements in student outcomes and equity. To engage in an honest appraisal of previous challenges and a commitment to improvement and sustainable change.

Inputs

BNU's whole-provider approach is enabled by:

- Significant Institutional and senior leadership ownership and commitment to student success and outcomes, inclusive education and student experience and equity. This includes a new Equity Board to challenge thinking and to drive BNU's equity journey. The Board consists of BNU colleagues and external experts to challenge practices and thinking.
- A new University Strategy Group (USG) with diverse voices across the institution with a deep commitment to improvement, open and frank approaches, and inclusion. The USG is responsible for delivering an ambitious agenda across the university for improvement and development. Key priorities are capability and capacity-building and establishing foundational excellence.
- An institutional APP steering group that meets regularly, chaired by senior leadership and includes membership from academic staff, students from diverse backgrounds, professional service colleagues, Students' Union and external advisors.
- The provision of regular, reliable and accessible data, and training to support a data-driven approach.
- Staff time and engagement with the APP interventions, data and evaluation and learning.
- Active involvement of students and the Students' Union in the delivery of and learning from the APP.
- External collaboration and input from organisations such as SEER (Specialised Evidence, Evaluation and Research) and Study Higher to inform the development of institutional and staff capacity and capability building.

Activities

- Delivery of four cross-institutional strategic interventions across the student lifecycle (focusing on preparation, induction and transition; curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment; targeted student support; and universal experiential learning and placements to enhance employability) to create an inclusive student experience.
- APP governance process and reverse mentoring for senior leaders which will be expanded.
- Integrating APP activities into the University's strategy and alignment with College and Directorate priorities and plans.
- More formal and regular APP data monitoring schedules and insights to inform and to forecast improvement.
- Development and delivery of training and professional development for staff to be able to use data and undertake evidence-based evaluation work, coordinated centrally by Learning Enhancement and Academic Practice.
- Expanding external engagement and collaborations to support improvement with bodies such as NERUPI, FACE, NEON, the Brilliant Club, and TASO.
- Development of dissemination and communication plans for APP to support learning and share excellence on eliminating awarding gaps.
- Working with delivery and external partners to support and develop the effective implementation and evaluation of the APP to achieve its goals.

Short-term outcomes

Inclusive student experience

Academic and professional service staff:

- Develop whole provider understanding of the APP and their contribution;
- Engage in delivery of APP;
- Collaborate with each other and students;
- Generate data and evidence to learn from;
- Develop confidence, expertise and knowledge about APP/diversity and success; and

- Review programmes to ensure inclusive curricula and assessment, and equity of student outcomes, and make changes where necessary.

Students improve:

- Motivation, engagement, wellbeing, academic confidence, skills and abilities, and belonging.

Institutional understanding and commitment

- USG, University Council, academic and professional service staff, Students' Union, student representatives and partners understand institutional commitment to equity, their contribution and how they need to use evidence and engage in continuous improvement.

Alignment of institutional strategies

- Institutional strategies and policies are informed by APP (equality of opportunity) and aligned (Quality Assurance, T&L) and develop and share appropriate expertise.

Culture: staff and student involvement

- Staff have knowledge and skills to take action in developing/changing policies, processes and practices.
- Students and student representatives are listened to when they contribute to developing understanding about equity and the student experience amongst council, leaders, staff and other students.
- Staff and students work collaboratively with delivery partners and sector-wide organisations to develop capacity and implement improvement plans that support the APP.

Data and evidence

- More staff have awareness of the data and what it means.
- More staff engage in evaluation and scholarship research to support equality of opportunity.
- More evaluation and scholarship are disseminated internally and externally.

Medium-term outcomes

Inclusive student experience

- Students develop a sense of belonging at BNU, tailored support and social connections.
- Students experience the curriculum as flexible and inclusive, building on their experiences, offering support and developing employability.
- Student Hub as a 'one-stop-shop' is developed and used by students, developing a seamless student transition pre-, during, and post-study.
- Placements and experiential learning are available for the majority of students.

Institutional understanding and commitment

- USG, Council, academic and professional service staff, Students' Union, student representatives and partners prioritise and engage with effective activities to promote access and success.

Alignment of institutional strategies

- Institutional processes, training and expectations support the University's strategy and APP.

Culture: staff and students

- Whole provider consistency for inclusive teaching.
- Students feel listened to and more included.

Data and evidence

- Greater understanding by staff and decision makers about what is working and the reasons for success.
- Improved strategic decision-making (e.g. in relation to new policies, practices, investment, training etc).

Longer-term outcomes

- Improved student outcomes including eliminating awarding gaps and reducing inequality.
- USG champions inclusive approaches and equity.
- More staff, students and partners contribute to and impact on access and success.
- Students and staff feel that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment become more flexible, inclusive, supportive and related to employability skills.

- Inclusive practice is adopted and embedded.
- Evaluation expertise and a culture of evaluation informing success.
- Greater consistency in the student experience across BNU and its delivery partners.

Impact

BNU has a joined up institutional approach and delivery of effective leadership, whole provider engagement, a common understanding of purpose, policy alignment and governance to student equity, in which students are listened to, and all staff have knowledge, skills and commitment to take action to create an inclusive, flexible and supported environment, drawing on data and evidence and achieving consistency and equity.

Causal pathways

The whole provider approach drives institutional change through the following causal pathways:

- Strong leadership at the highest level so that the purpose of the APP is understood as central to the mainstream work of the University.
- Developing clarity of focus for APP objectives, student experience and equity.
- Integrating APP with the Strategy, Equity Board and other institutional strategies and policies to create a joined-up purpose.
- Creating new governance structures to align the work and support wider staff engagement and ownership.
- Improving the understanding and knowledge of staff, including senior leaders, about equity from students' perspectives and experiences. Supporting staff through professional development.
- Raising awareness so that everyone sees APP/equity as core business and is clear on how they can contribute.
- Developing expertise in theory of change and evaluation to promote identifying, learning and sharing effective practice.
- Prioritising the development of quality and consistency across the University.

- Creating an evaluation framework, growing internal evaluation expertise to ensure that data and evidence are used to inform improvement.
- Drawing on external expertise to develop institutional and staff capacity for change.

5.3 Lancaster University theory of change

Aim

To embed the APP risks and objectives through an approach that promotes shared responsibility, collective action, and ownership across departments, services, and leadership levels. Activities will be shaped to address the eight risks, which provide both the anchor and the organising framework of the WPA.

By strengthening institutional accountability, aligning policies, and making greater use of data and evaluation, Lancaster seeks to foster an inclusive environment where all students experience a strong sense of belonging and are empowered to achieve their potential and make the most of their overall university experience.

Inputs

Lancaster's WPA is enabled by:

- Senior leadership support for addressing inequalities of the student experience.
- A clear vision for a WPA that identifies and reduces risks to equality.
- All programmes and modules are approved in line with the Curriculum Transformation Programme and Education Framework.
- A collegiate system that provides students with support and nurtures a sense of belonging.
- Funding for an enhanced evaluation team to work across the University to increase evidence, learning and build capacity.

Activities

Core activities supporting the delivery of the WPA at Lancaster University span the entire student journey and include, but are not limited to:

- **Access**: Bespoke programmes such as the Lancaster Access Programme, Uncover Progress, and Role Model Ambassadors, designed specifically for APP target groups.

- **Success**: The Lancaster Success Programme offers one-to-one coaching, networking and social events, workshops, action learning sets, and an enrichment fund to support WP students during their time at Lancaster.
- **Wellbeing**: The Student Wellbeing Partnership Service provides a holistic approach to mental wellbeing through improved support awareness, embedded advice services, reduced barriers, and peer-led, stigma-free spaces.
- **Progression**: Grow Your Future delivers targeted employability support for WP students.

These activities are aligned with the Curriculum Transformation Programme (CTP), launched in 2022, which works across the University (not as an APP intervention) to ensure that the curriculum is designed and delivered inclusively.

Policy alignment

- The APP aligns with Lancaster University's 2021-2026 Strategic Plan in terms of the value 'respect each other by being open and fair and promoting diversity'. The APP is explicitly cited in the current Strategic Plan, and the University's motto, *Truth Lies Open to All*, indicates the University's founding commitment to be an open and inclusive community. The teaching priority commits to an 'inclusive curriculum that promotes social mobility' and embedding inclusivity into teaching: 'combining excellence with equity, we will continue to deliver social mobility, welcoming those traditionally less likely to participate in higher education at a research-led University and supporting them to achieve their full potential'. The APP will inform the University's new strategic plan.
- The APP contributes to the Universities responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. This leads to alignment between the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy, Gender Pay Gap Report, EDI charter marks, the WP Strategic Plan and APP.
- There is alignment with the 2022 Curriculum Transition Programme, which is based on four principles: research-led academic excellence; inclusive design and practice; wellbeing and fulfilment for success; and an innovative and sustainable approach. The CTP contributes to diversity, student experience and employability.
- The CTP will enhance students' academic and personal support, and develop students' social and cultural capital and a sense of belonging.

- The WPA approach aims to align with the University's People and Culture Plan: the APP will provide 'consistent support through staff and student engagement'.

Governance

- Widening participation is the responsibility of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC).
- A revised governance framework has been developed as part of the 2025/26-2028/29 APP.
- The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) has institutional oversight of Widening Participation (WP) and the Access and Participation Plan (APP) at Lancaster, supported by a dedicated advisory structure. This includes monitoring progress against targets, overseeing evaluation activity, and working collaboratively across the University to embed WP in broader strategic and operational areas. Membership includes representatives from senior management, faculties, professional services, and students (via Lancaster University Students' Union).
- This group works in partnership with key University committees, such as the Standing Committee on Teaching Excellence (ScoTE), which is responsible for reviewing student engagement and performance data, highlighting good practice, and scrutinising action plans where necessary. Regular updates are provided to Council, Senate, University Executive Board, and the Student Experience Committee to ensure appropriate institutional oversight.
- Members of the advisory structure also engage with a range of other committees and working groups across the University, including those focused on cost of living, leadership, EDI, engagement, and faculty-level recruitment and student experience.
- Based on feedback from the Student Advisory Board, LU and Lancaster University Students' Union are establishing a new approach to student engagement. This will centre around a student-led approach to reviewing intervention strategies, evaluation findings and data to make recommendations and provide insights. This work will focus on those with relevant lived experiences at different stages of the student lifecycle.

Development of staff knowledge, skills and capacity and student voice

The APP aligns with the People and Culture Plan and aims to support and engage staff. The APP identifies two specific staff-facing activities:

- Reciprocal mentoring

Reciprocal mentoring is a two-way learning process in which both staff and student mentors benefit equally from the relationship. By exchanging knowledge, perspectives, and lived experiences, participants will develop a deeper understanding of the diverse realities faced by WP students. This insight will inform and embed inclusive thinking into the university's culture and practices, shaping approaches to learning, belonging, and inclusion, and driving meaningful institutional change. The collaborative nature of reciprocal mentoring will foster mutual growth, support the university's whole provider approach, and amplify the student voice in impactful ways.

- Allyship Programme

Lancaster's Allyship Programme will equip staff and students to take informed, sustained action in support of marginalised groups across the University. Grounded in self-education, accountability, and meaningful advocacy, the programme will help participants understand their own positions of privilege and how to use them to foster inclusion and challenge inequality.

Aligned with the University's whole provider approach, the programme will complement and intersect with our Reciprocal Mentoring programme - offering participants the opportunity to deepen their learning through dialogue, reflection, and shared insight with student mentors. Together, these programmes will strengthen inclusive practice, amplify underrepresented voices, and support the development and evaluation of APP-related activity across the institution.

Data and evidence

- A specialised WP Evaluation and Impact team has been established.
- WP leads and the Evaluation and Impact team will support team leads to design evaluation of APP initiatives which evidence needs and reflect staff capacity.
- Work will be undertaken to support dissemination of evaluation learning across the University to inform decision-making.
- Targeted capacity-building activity will support staff involved in APP delivery to develop the skills and confidence needed to carry out and apply evaluation effectively in their practice.

Partnerships and networks

Lancaster University is involved in a number of partnerships/networks that contribute to its whole provider approach.

- Two Uni-connect programmes to deliver outreach and work collaboratively within the local region
- Several national membership organisations to collaborate and share with colleagues and opportunities for staff development.
- Two data tools to contribute to monitoring and evaluating widening access work.
- University of Sanctuary and the Cowrie Foundation, external organisations who support and enhance bursary packages for targeted student groups.

Short-term outcomes

Inclusive student experience and support

- Curriculum is designed to be inclusive and promotes wellbeing and success
- Students have access to information and support from staff and peers and make better decisions

Policy alignment

- New policies are informed by the APP and the institutional commitment to inclusion.
- The institutional commitment is explicit to staff.
- Less fragmentation and inconsistency between policies.
- Engage more stakeholders, both internal and external, in APP

Governance

- Senior colleagues are aware of APP and its progress
- Increased awareness of APP amongst LU staff, academic departments, colleges and professional services
- Increased links made with other policies and practices
- Students involved in reviewing interventions and evaluations and sharing their experiences.

Cultural: staff and students

- Engage more stakeholders

- Increased staff knowledge, skill and capacities around supporting students from WP backgrounds.
- Students involved in reviewing interventions and evaluations and sharing their experiences.
- Collaboration enables sharing of learning and effective practice

Data and evidence

- Evaluations produce useful evidence about effectiveness of interventions
- Evidence and learning are disseminated to staff across the university

Medium-term outcomes

Inclusive student experience and support

- Students are represented, able to engage in all aspects of the academic experience.
- Students' wellbeing is good
- Students are supported academically
- Students are supported personally
- Students develop increased levels of social capital
- Students develop increased levels of cultural capital
- Students have a greater sense of belonging

Policy alignment

- Managers, staff and other stakeholders engage and contribute to APP agenda directly and through contribution to other policies.
- Stakeholders/staff recognise the links between policies.
- Stakeholders/staff view inclusion as a shared responsibility.

Governance

- Managers, staff, students and other stakeholders engage and contribute to APP agenda directly and through contribution to other policies.
- Stakeholders/staff recognise the links between policies.

- Staff and students' union view inclusion as a shared responsibility.
- Students' views shape interventions.

Cultural: Staff and students

- Staff take a more inclusive approach to the design and delivery of teaching and learning activities.
- Students and Students' Union share responsibility for APP, equality, diversity, inclusion and success.
- Students' views shape interventions.

Data and evidence

- Staff learn from the evaluation and change or improve practice to be more inclusive
- Evidence is used to inform decision making

Longer-term outcomes

Inclusive student experience and support

- Improved access for students from IMD Q1, FSM and UK Black and UK Asian.
- Improved continuation, retention, attainment, completion and progression rates for target students: contextual offer holders, mature students, LAP participants, and recipients of the Sanctuary Scholarship (asylum seekers and refugees).
- Increased employability confidence, advice and progression for WP students.
- Meet APP targets.

Policy alignment

- More stakeholders/ staff directly involved in promoting inclusion
- Students' learning experience is more inclusive
- Students' wider experience is more inclusive
- Meet 8 EDI objectives
- Meet APP targets
- Student experience is coherent and consistent

Governance

- More stakeholders involved in APP and promoting inclusion.
- Students' learning and wider experience is more inclusive.
- Learning from monitoring, evaluation and student feedback.

Cultural: staff and students

- Students' learning experience is more inclusive
- Students' wider experience is more inclusive
- Meet APP targets

Data and evidence

- Evaluation culture: more people doing and applying learning from evaluation
- Improved institutional decision making
- Evidence-informed practice
- More inclusive practice

Impact

Together, these ambitions reflect a shift toward a more joined-up, institution-wide approach that recognises access and participation as a shared and enduring responsibility, and which is underpinned by evidence.

- **Institutional ownership and accountability:** A WPA aims to ensure that colleagues across all areas of the University understand their role in delivering the APP and feel both empowered and responsible for contributing to an inclusive student experience. This includes clearer expectations around who is accountable for what, and how progress will be measured.
- **APP objectives embedded into everyday practice:** A key motivation is to ensure that the APP – including its eight identified risks – becomes part of the University's 'business as usual'. This means aligning access and participation work with core institutional processes, systems, and cultures, rather than viewing it as a standalone agenda.
- **Policy alignment and reduce duplication:** There is a strong institutional commitment to bringing together work across the APP, charter marks (such as REC and Athena SWAN), and other strategic benchmarks. By aligning these efforts, the University can streamline practices, promote connectedness, and foster more

effective cross-team collaboration. This shared direction also supports greater visibility and consistency of good practice.

- **Evidence-informed culture and decision-making:** A WPA supports the routine use of data and evaluation across the institution. Through structured dissemination of learning and outcomes, teams are better equipped to make informed decisions, continuously improve their practice, and collectively contribute to a culture of evidence-based improvement.
- **Operationalisation of inclusivity and access in meaningful ways:** Ultimately, a WPA is about making the University's strategic commitments visible and actionable in the day-to-day work of staff. This includes embedding inclusive practice across teaching, support, leadership, and governance – not only at the strategic level but within the practical realities of colleagues' roles.

Causal pathways

The WPA at Lancaster University focuses on creating an inclusive environment that supports all students, ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed, regardless of background. The approach is built on the following key features:

1. **Developing a Future EDI Strategy** – Articulating a roadmap for fairness and inclusion across the university.
2. **Embedding Support in Institutional Plans** – Aligning with the People and Culture Plan, EDI Strategy and any institutional charter marks.
3. **Implementing Curriculum Redesign** – Ensuring inclusive, research-led, and future-oriented education.
4. **Partnering with External Organisations** – Enhancing the student journey and addressing regional disparities.
5. **Co-Designing WP Interventions with Students** – Incorporating student voice in widening participation initiatives.
6. **Adopting a Lifecycle Support Model** – Supporting students at every stage from access to progression to ensure equitable outcomes.
7. **Using Robust Evaluation Frameworks** – Understanding what works and informing continuous improvements

5.4 Sheffield Hallam University theory of change

Aim

The main aim of the whole-provider approach is to develop and understand how a more holistic and joined-up model of student support at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) can support the university in embedding inclusion across the student lifecycle. The whole-provider approach aims to ensure all students feel supported within their lived experience, while enabling staff across academic and professional services to understand, value, and contribute to the APP and EEDI (Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) goals. Taking a whole-provider approach ensures that the work and expertise of staff is connected across the institution for the benefit of students and the university.

Inputs

The past and current enablers of SHU's whole-provider approach are:

- Leadership commitment and strategic prioritisation, supported by governance and monitoring processes
- Student and staff time and engagement across levels and departments
- University-wide strategy and EEDI framework to support and embed inclusion
- Funding and digital infrastructure to deliver and monitor activities
- Staff commitment and engagement with the inclusion and student support agendas
- Staff with institution-specific experience and expertise
- Contact points between staff in different support services (via formal and informal networks)

Activities

Core activities in SHU's whole-provider approach include:

- **Student-facing support initiatives:**
  Support is informed by student needs and delivered across the full lifecycle via a wide range of provision, from dedicated university services, Students' Union, peer support, and co-curricular interventions, as well as embedding skills in the academic curriculum. A central Student Support Help Desk (in-person and virtual) operates as a main point of access for different forms of support or advice. Cross-departmental working supports the referral of student support cases between staff

teams across the university, enabling all staff to develop a holistic understanding of student needs.

- **Staff engagement and development activities:**
  Leadership and university strategies emphasise the importance of all staff being involved in EEDI and APP activities. Staff are engaged through effective staff recruitment, staff groups, communities of practice, and working groups.
- **Use of data systems and accountability:**
  Enabling staff to access relevant student data, set clear roles for accountability, and use data to monitor needs and progress toward APP targets.
- **Knowledge exchange and collaboration between staff, students, and external stakeholders:**
  Formal and informal engagement within and between academic units, professional services, and external networks facilitates learning, sharing of good practice, and innovation. Students are often involved in the co-design, evaluation, and improvement of support systems, fostering a culture of co-creation and continuous improvement. This occurs through academic representation structures such as student interest groups and student voice activities, as well as centrally funded programmes of student co-research and co-creation.

Short-term outcomes

- Staff recognise the importance of EEDI and APP to institutional strategies and values.
- Staff understand their role in advancing APP and EEDI objectives and feel supported to contribute.
- Staff have increased awareness of the range of student support work being delivered across the university, where it takes place, and who is responsible.
- Staff are able to access and use student data to inform decisions and have a better understanding of students' experiences and needs, where they are not already doing this.
- Student support activities become more aligned and coordinated across departments.
- Student voice becomes more visible and impactful in shaping provision.
- Students are confident that they can find and access the support they need.

Medium-term outcomes

- Principles of equity and inclusion are visibly prioritised for a range of different audiences within and outside of the University, including prospective students and their advisors, regional stakeholders, staff, and current students.
- Organisational culture shifts toward proactive collaboration and shared ownership.
- Academic and support staff make adjustments and improvements to their initiatives based on insights from student feedback, data and knowledge/practice exchange.
- Staff learn from colleagues' and external partners' good practice and develop specific professional knowledge about service, support and academic areas.
- Staff build confidence in using data to guide practice and intervention designs and embedding inclusive practice into the curriculum and service design.
- Student support becomes more holistic, coordinated, and consistent across the lifecycle.
- Students report improved experiences of accessing support, being effectively helped to navigate support provision, and having their needs addressed.
- Staff are confident in signposting and referring students directly to support needs in other parts of the university.

Long-term outcomes

- Student outcomes improve across all lifecycle stages, with measurable reductions in equality gaps.
- All students, regardless of background, feel seen, supported, and included at SHU.
- Inclusive practice is embedded institution-wide.
- The university environment is diverse, inclusive, and welcoming for all students and staff.

Impact

SHU builds on its existing reputation as an inclusive institution, where all students experience a consistent, holistic, and supportive journey from access to progression. APP targets are met, inclusive practices are embedded in everyday operations, and staff at all levels share accountability for student success. The university fosters a culture where

diversity is celebrated, student voice is central, and inclusive practice is sustained through collaboration, reflection, and continual learning.

Causal pathways

The whole-provider approach drives institutional change through the following causal pathways:

- **Causal pathway 1: Embedding of inclusive practice**
  Leadership visibly prioritises the APP and EEDI agendas, embedding them into strategy, governance, and internal and external communication. This reinforces understanding of inclusion as a shared institutional goal. Clear expectations enable staff to act confidently and align their work accordingly. Seeing peers model inclusion encourages further participation, building momentum across the university. Inclusion becomes embedded in the institution's culture and everyday routines.
- **Causal pathway 2: Capability and confidence building**
  Staff are supported with time, training, and active communities of practice to develop inclusive practices in their roles. Increased understanding and access to resources improves staff confidence and effectiveness, and builds a shared vision and set of commitments. Over time, this shifts the quality and inclusivity of teaching and student support, ultimately having positive impacts on the institution's inclusive culture.
- **Causal pathway 3: Student–staff partnership**
  Students contribute to shaping university activities through student interest groups, student voice activities, and co-creation of interventions, research and evaluation. Students' lived experiences help tailor support systems to current student needs. This fosters a sense of agency and trust that improves students' engagement and sense of belonging and makes them feel like valued members of the organisation.
- **Causal pathway 4: Holistic student support**
  Student support staff take a holistic approach to understanding the full range of interconnected student needs, recognising the potential co-presence of different challenges, and are able to cross-refer students to the other support services they may need. This is facilitated by staff connections through informal networks and formal structures. As a result, students access support from a range of sources and benefit from the connections between them. In the long-term, this leads to

measurable reductions in equality gaps because of effective and integrated personal, academic, disability and well-being support.

- **Causal pathway 5: Institutional consistency and collaboration**
  Joined-up working across and between academic and professional services reduces operational and knowledge silos and improves the cross-referral of student cases between services. By learning from each other, staff develop and integrate their own student support practice and provision. This leads to more effective, coordinated, and accessible provision for students, and reduces the likelihood of good practice being siloed and work and resources being duplicated across the provider.
- **Causal pathway 6: Evidence-driven improvement**
  Staff access and use student data to identify outcome gaps and monitor the impact of interventions. Although this is currently a work in progress, effective and joined up data supports proactive, tailored responses and strengthens accountability. Regular use of data ensures that support evolves with student needs.

5.5 Teesside University theory of change

Aim

Teesside University undertook the project with three key aims:

1. To articulate the University's whole-provider approach, identifying logically connected enablers (staff capacity development, governance and evaluation) and activities for those students who have been identified as being 'at risk' of experiencing inequality of opportunity.
2. To consider how this approach can be extended to all students including those out of scope of the OfS requirements for APP (for example international students).
3. To consider the feasibility of evaluating the University's WPA.

Inputs

Tesside University's whole provider approach is enabled by:

- A diverse student population engaging in higher education through different routes, modes and sites, not all covered by APP requirements.
- A learning and teaching strategy utilising Universal Design for Learning in curriculum design and delivery. The pedagogic model and an academic

enhancement framework to create an inclusive student learning experience and maximise student success.

- A Student Futures Strategy embedding employability into the curriculum to enable students to achieve career ambitions.
- A commitment to improving the student experience as a key feature of the University's corporate strategy and aligned institutional strategies, in particular, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), Mental Health, Wellbeing and Resilience (MHWR), Student Futures Strategy (SFS) and the Academic Enhancement Framework.
- A multi-disciplinary APP workstream which includes students. These groups provide project management in the delivery, monitoring and evaluation of APP interventions.
- An established approach to engaging staff and students in curriculum design based on principles of inclusion and equality of opportunity.
- A strategic approach to engaging academic and professional staff in their own development and informing the continual improvement of their practice.

Activities

Through the APP Teesside University have identified a range of interventions which are designed to improve the access, success and progression of students who have been identified as at most risk of experiencing an inequality of opportunity. Core activities in the University's whole provider approach include:

Targeted student interventions

- Strategic access interventions targeting Ethnically and Culturally Diverse (ECD) groups, combining outreach for students, families and communities to raise awareness about the experience and opportunities of HE, with post entry support.
- Mental health success, including new services and a whole–university approach to positive mental wellbeing for all members of the university community. This includes specialist interventions to improve students' ability to continue and succeed in both HE and graduate employment.
- Targeted support for students with social, communication, cognitive and learning disabilities with the aim of enabling them to continue in their studies. This is

complemented by embedding curriculum changes, standard reasonable adjustments and specialist staff training and support to promote culture change.

- Specialist careers support and internship opportunities for those from TUNDRA Q1&2 communities to increase the number of students from low participation areas progressing into graduate employment.
- Pre-16 aspiration and attainment raising in the region through a programme engaging year 9 and 10 students identified as least likely to consider or progress to HE.

New governance structure

- A new governance structure was established to provide oversight and support to the APP workstreams. Chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor, regular reports are also provided to the Academic Assurance Committee and The Board of Governors. This ensures that senior staff have knowledge of the APP, oversee its progress and are able to make connections between the APP interventions and other strategic priorities within the University.

Staff training and development

- The creation of specific staff training to create an inclusive institution especially for students with mental health, social and communication and cognitive and learning disabilities.
- Established mechanisms for engaging staff ensure that emerging effective practice in inclusive approaches across the student lifecycle are disseminated to staff across the institution.

Monitoring and evaluation of activities

- Rigorous and detailed monitoring of the implementation and delivery of all APP interventions.
- Workstream and intervention-specific theories of change as elements of a comprehensive evaluation strategy. This includes the employment of standardised and validated measures across interventions.
- Reporting of effective practice and modifications to design and delivery.
- Dissemination of learning across the whole university and applied beyond APP targeted groups.

- Working in collaboration with external partners to disseminate learning to the HE sector and regional stakeholders.
- Creation of a central Equality of Opportunity Project Team, including Assistant Director, Project Manager and administrative support.

Extend APP to other student groups to ensure a WPA

The aim is to ensure equity amongst other student groups (beyond home undergraduates). The pilot activity is to apply the APP process to 'international students' to develop a whole provider approach. This will include:

- Defining international students.
- Analysing performance and identifying 'at risk' categories.
- Identifying inequalities in international student experience outcomes.
- Working collaboratively with staff and students to link international student experience and outcome work to the APP.

Short-term outcomes

- Strategic interventions are delivered as planned and reach the intended student groups.
- Senior staff have knowledge and oversight of APP.
- Increased knowledge about what is working well; early identification of issues/challenges and activities that need review.
- Improved availability, accessibility and engagement with data.
- Increased capacity for evaluation interventions and learning.
- Learning from evaluation is fed upwards and outwards.
- Staff develop awareness, skills and knowledge to improve delivery of interventions and inclusive practice through the use of evidence.

Medium-term outcomes

- Interventions which are identified as being effective through evaluation are continued/expanded to improve student outcomes.
- Increased use of evaluation data to inform strategic decision making; and use this to link with other agendas.

- Further expansion of colleagues involved in the WPA, with more staff engaged in delivering and supporting APP interventions and inclusive practice.
- Further alignment between home and international student experience, improving the consistency between home and international students and equity groups.

Long-term outcomes

- Effective practice disseminated and embedded across the whole university, benefitting all students and staff.
- Investment directed towards effective approaches.
- Strategic decision-making is informed by APP evidence and learning.
- A model for addressing inequality amongst other Teesside University student groups.

Impact

Teesside University recruits a diverse student population to participate in higher education, through alternative modes and at different locations. All students are effectively supported to succeed in higher education and to progress to graduate opportunities, achieving equity within the University and contributing to greater equality of opportunity in the North East.

Causal pathways

The whole provider approach drives institutional change through the following causal pathways:

- **Causal pathway 1:** A rigorous and evidence-based approach to monitoring and reporting on the intervention strategies (as laid out in the APP) will enable members of project groups and the APP Project Board to disseminate findings across Schools and Departments.
- **Causal pathway 2:** Senior leaders engage in outcomes reported to the APP Project Board, the Academic Assurance Committee and The Board and make connections to and inform other institutional strategies.
- **Causal pathway 3:** The systematic updating of learning resources, based on emerging effective practice, aimed at engaging and supporting academic and professional staff designing inclusive curricula and other initiatives.

- **Causal pathway 4:** Senior managers and champions within Schools and Departments encourage staff to engage in learning from emerging inclusive practice and support them in developing their professional practice accordingly.
- **Causal pathway 5:** Student representatives, including members of the Student Experience Sub-Committee, have their sustained engagement recognised and rewarded so that the student body is seen as a partner in informing, developing and embedding inclusive practice.

5.6 University of York theory of change

Aim

To create an inclusive institutional environment where reducing equality gaps becomes a shared responsibility across all staff, supported by meaningful student partnership, robust data, and consistent evaluation. The whole-provider approach at the University of York addresses institution-specific risks to equality of opportunity across the student lifecycle and aims to ensure that inclusive practice becomes business-as-usual across academic and professional services.

Inputs

York's whole-provider approach is enabled by:

- Leadership and governance, ensuring that governance structures and institutional procedures support and coordinate inclusion.
- Staff time and buy-in across academic departments, professional services, and leadership.
- Student engagement and partnership to facilitate student voice and co-creation.
- Funding and resources to implement initiatives and sustain business-as-usual activities.
- Data infrastructure and findings from data analysis to track and share outcome gaps and risks across the student journey.

Activities

Core activities in York's whole-provider approach include:

- **Reviewing leadership and governance structures:**
  Working with senior leaders to identify changes to governance, policies and procedures that are needed to prioritise inclusion. This includes practical

mechanisms to support working in coordination across directorates and developing resources to support project teams.

- **Developing and disseminating whole provider data:**
  Mapping key data flows across the applicant and student journey in directorates and service providers, and identifying improvements to coordinating data collection and use of data in addressing risks.
- **Improving communications, access to information and ways of working:**
  Work with students and staff to review communication mechanisms to identify areas of improvement regarding access to and transparency of information, practical and process barriers, and information sharing between teams/areas.
- **Expanding student voice and partnership mechanisms:**
  Developing and resourcing student voice and student partnership approaches that inform whole institution interventions and fostering an institutional culture of inclusion across all levels of the organisation.
- **Embedding a culture of monitoring and evaluation:**
  Evaluation of service delivery from an inclusion perspective and monitoring of key metrics across all services, providing accountability against targets, using data to identify trends, and involving student evaluation partners.

Short-term outcomes

- Improved awareness across all staff of their role in addressing equality gaps, not just in core APP teams.
- Staff begin to engage more with central resources and support to develop more inclusive practice.
- Applicants and students see that reducing outcome gaps is a visible university priority, increasing trust.
- Staff and students are more engaged in evaluation across the university. Data quality is improved and data is better connected across teams and across stages of the student journey.
- Results of communications review are used to inform improvements to communication mechanisms for staff, students and applicants.

Medium-term outcomes

- More departments and teams across York adopt inclusive practices and evaluate their impact.
- Staff report higher confidence and capability to address equality gaps.
- Student-facing services and teaching practices become increasingly informed by data, evaluation, and student insight.
- A more collaborative culture emerges across departments and services, reducing the likelihood of siloed working.
- Applicants and students experience more consistent and coordinated support throughout the lifecycle.
- Students have a more influential voice within the university and feel empowered to advocate, feeding into interventions.
- Communication channels become clearer, less duplicative, and better targeted to applicants' and students' needs. The number of times students need to disclose information is reduced.

Long-term outcomes

- Measurable reductions in gaps in access, continuation, awarding and graduate outcomes between student groups identified in the APP.
- Enhanced sense of belonging and increased engagement among students.
- Inclusion is visibly prioritised in the organisational culture and embedded in day-to-day operations, policies, and communications.
- Student voice mechanisms are sustained and influential across all functions.
- Whole-provider collaboration, accountability, and ownership to address gaps becomes business-as-usual.

Impact

The University of York establishes an institution-wide culture where inclusion and equity are visibly embedded across strategy and everyday practice. As barriers to inclusion are addressed, York ensures that all students are supported to succeed throughout their entire educational journey and the underlying risks to equality of opportunity at York are lessened.

Causal pathways

The whole-provider approach drives institutional change through the following causal pathways:

- **Causal pathway 1: Embedding of inclusive practice**
  Senior leaders consistently communicate the importance of inclusion, which visibly prompts wider engagement and aligns local initiatives with strategic goals, as identified in the York Risks. Staff feel supported to make inclusion a core part of their work, fostering cultural and structural alignment. Visibility of engagement encourages others to join, creating momentum and shared accountability. This reinforces institutional culture change and supports sustained improvement.
- **Causal pathway 2: Capability and confidence building**
  Training, resources, and peer learning opportunities build staff knowledge and confidence in inclusive informed practice, which is underpinned by the institution-specific York Risks. Staff gain practical tools to address barriers in their own roles and settings. As confidence grows, inclusive behaviours and innovation become more embedded and widespread.
- **Causal pathway 3: Student engagement**
  Students are actively involved in shaping policies, services, and evaluation through co-creation and sustained student voice mechanisms. This builds trust and ensures initiatives reflect and address students' lived experiences. A stronger sense of belonging and shared ownership enhances student engagement and outcomes.
- **Causal pathway 4: Using data and evidence to inform improvement**
  Improved data systems enable staff to identify risks, monitor progress, and evaluate interventions. Staff use data to refine student-facing activities and target resources effectively. Continuous feedback loops support learning, accountability, and adaptation.
- **Causal pathway 5: Collaboration & communication**
  Cross-departmental collaboration ensures that support is better aligned and more consistent across the student lifecycle. Siloed working is reduced, making it easier for students to access help and for staff to coordinate efforts. Effective communication for staff, students and applicants reduces information overload, streamlining access to opportunities. This leads to a more seamless and supportive student experience and improves whole provider collaboration, accountability and ownership.

6. References

Office for Students. (2023a) *Access and participation plans.* https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/access-and-participation-plans/ [Accessed 29th July 2025].

Office for Students. (2023b) *Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan* guidance. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8077/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance-march-2023.pdf [Accessed 29th July 2025].

Office for Students. (2023c) *Regulatory advice 6: How to prepare an access and participation plan.* https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/mesjucep/regulatory-advice-6-how-to-prepare-an-access-and-participation-plan-may-2025.pdf [Accessed 29th July 2025].

Rogers, P. (2024) Developing, representing, and using theories of change for interventions in complex systems. In: Koleros, A., Adrien, M.-H., & Tyrrell, T. (eds.) *Theories of Change in Reality: Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032669618

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change.* Paul Hamlyn Foundation. https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/hea/private/what_works_final_report_1568036657.pdf [Accessed 29th July 2025].

Thomas, L. (2017) *Understanding a whole institution approach to widening participation: Final report*. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/a57bfc5e-bc68-49ee-8e79-0eed3f5be844/understanding-a-whole-institution-approach-to-wp-final-report.pdf [Accessed 29th July 2025].

Thomas, L. (2024) *A whole provider approach to widening access and student success in higher education*. Available at: https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cresj/news/2024/widening-access/ [Accessed 29th July 2025].

Thomas, L., Hill, M., O' Mahony, J. & Yorke, M. (2017). *Supporting student success: Strategies for institutional change. What works? Student retention and success programme. Final report*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Tinto, V. (2012) *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. University of Chicago Press.