**Open call for higher education providers: Developing theories of change for whole provider approaches**

Updated 17th December 2024

### **Open call for higher education providers**

The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) is calling for higher education providers (HEPs) to participate in a project to develop a theory of change (ToC) for their whole provider approach to reducing risks to equality of opportunity in higher education.

HEPs will be supported to develop ToCs summarising their whole provider approach, the impact they intend for the approach to have, and the mechanisms by which the impact will be achieved. This project will build on whole provider approaches outlined in Access and Participation Plans (APP), in line with Office for Students (OfS) guidance to include information about a whole provider approach (see [Regulatory Notice 1 paragraphs 38f, 77-79](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8077/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance-march-2023.pdf) and [Regulatory Guidance 6 paragraphs 163-168](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8973/regulatory_advice_6_how_to_prepare_an_access_and_participation_plan_dec2023.pdf)). TASO is pleased to be collaborating with Professor Liz Thomas, an expert on whole provider approaches, to deliver this project.

TASO will publish the whole provider approach ToCs as case studies for the sector to refer to. It is an opportunity for participating HEPs to build internal evaluation expertise specifically in relation to designing high-quality ToCs, and contribute towards TASO’s ambition to support clearer conceptualisation and better evaluation of whole provider approaches.

The project will run from 27th January - 30th April 2025.

### **Introduction to TASO**

TASO aims to improve lives through evidence-based practice in HE. Our vision is to eliminate equality gaps for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, allowing all students to have the same chance to enter HE, get a good degree and progress into further study or employment.

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

### **Project background**

In the latest APP cycle, HEPs were advised by the OfS to include information about their whole provider approach to reducing risks to equality of opportunity in higher education. OfS guidance defines the whole provider approach as “a description of how staff from departments and services across the provider are led and engaged to ensure that its students are supported to access, succeed in and progress from their time at the provider”. A whole provider approach “is one in which there is alignment and consistency across the organisation to create an approach from which all students benefit, irrespective of where they are located within the provider”. More detail on the OfS’ definition of the whole provider approach can be found in [Regulatory Notice 1: Access and Participation Plan Guidance, paragraphs 38f, 77-79](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8077/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance-march-2023.pdf) and [Regulatory Advice 6: How to prepare an Access and Participation Plan, paragraphs 163-168](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8973/regulatory_advice_6_how_to_prepare_an_access_and_participation_plan_dec2023.pdf).

To support HEPs to develop their whole provider approach for their APPs, Liz Thomas at The Centre for Research on Education and Social Justice at the University of York published a [toolkit](https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cresj/news/2024/widening-access/) in May 2024, including the following resources:

* Guidance for self-assessing a HEP’s current whole provider approach
* Tools to map and review the student experience and enabling environment within a HEP, which form part of the whole provider approach
* Whole provider approach APP section template
* ToC template for interventions included in the whole provider approach.

The development of the ToCs will be informed by this guidance.

At TASO, we recognise that there is variation in how HEPs have conceptualised and developed their whole provider approach. Whole provider approaches are likely to include a range of different activities and priorities depending on the nature of the HEP. We therefore anticipate that not all HEPs will have a fully formed whole provider approach, and are interested in exploring any changes being implemented to leadership, structure, culture and data, evaluation and accountability processes. This project aims to work with a small sample of six HEPs to develop ToCs for their whole provider approaches, to better understand:

* The process by which HEPs developed their whole provider approach
* What activities and priorities the whole provider approach is focused on at this point in time
* The impact HEPs intend for their whole provider approach to have
* The mechanisms by which the whole provider approach will lead to the intended impact
* How whole provider approaches can improve equality of opportunity.

**Project scope**

TASO will select six HEPs to develop a ToC for their whole provider approach. Three HEPs will be allocated to work with the TASO team and three will be allocated to work with Professor Liz Thomas to develop a ToC, building on her previous work on whole provider approaches. The ToC development process will draw on The Centre for Research on Education and Social Justice’s [whole provider approach toolkit](https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cresj/news/2024/widening-access/) and [TASO’s ToC templates](https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/toc/). Once developed, these ToCs will be published and accessible for the wider sector to use. TASO will also publish a report outlining the process of creating the ToCs and recommendations for the sector, with HEPs contributing their reflections.

The ToCs will be created through a series of meetings and workshops involving appropriate stakeholders from each HEP to gather the necessary information to create a ToC. The aim of the ToCs is not just to describe the interventions taking place across the HEP as part of their whole provider approach, but to identify the outcomes and impacts the approach as a whole aims to achieve, and the mechanisms by which the HEP’s activities will contribute to this aim.

Participating HEPs may have previously outlined their whole provider approach as part of their APP and if so, should provide this information to TASO in their application. The whole provider approach should consider the following key features, as specified in [OfS Regulatory Notice 6](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8973/regulatory_advice_6_how_to_prepare_an_access_and_participation_plan_dec2023.pdf) (paragraph 165):

1. Staff from across the provider are actively involved and engaged, with access and participation valued as integral to their roles.
2. Students representing the breadth of the student population, particularly those from hard-to-reach groups, are engaged in formulating, supporting and evaluating access and participation across the provider.
3. A full student lifecycle approach is adopted, where support is extended from pre-entry, to on-course success and through to post-graduation progression. In many cases this starts with supporting potential learners from primary age upwards, and includes preentry outreach, including with those looking to upskill or reskill, admissions, transition, learning and teaching, student engagement and support and access to postgraduate study and/or employment.
4. A clear organisational-wide commitment, including leadership from senior management and governing bodies, to access and participation. This commitment is backed up with clearly defined target groups and expected outcomes that are shaped by evidence and aligned with other strategies, for example those relating to equality, diversity and inclusion; learning and teaching; and business and community engagement.
5. Consideration of how the plan aligns with any learning, teaching and assessment approaches, in order to develop more inclusive curricula and practice to ensure that students from all backgrounds are engaged and supported to succeed.

The level of detail included in the HEP’s APP and the amount of strategic thinking previously applied to the whole provider approach will impact the level of detail TASO is able to include in the ToC outputs, therefore participating HEPs may end up with slightly different final ToCs.

**Expectations for participating HEPs**

* TASO will select six HEPs to create ToCs with.
* Of the successful HEPs, three will be allocated to work with TASO and three will be allocated to work with Professor Liz Thomas to develop a ToC for their whole provider approach.
* ToC workshops will take place in February-March 2025.
* Successful HEPs will be expected to commit time and resourcing to the ToC development, including through meetings, workshops and reviewing of outputs. Table 1 details how project activities and responsibilities will be split across the organisations involved in the project.

*Table 1. Partner responsibilities*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **HEP** | **TASO** | **Liz Thomas** |
| Contract management |  | Lead |  |
| Project management |  | Lead | Lead |
| Expert, technical advice |  | Lead | Lead |
| Conduct ToC workshops | Participate | Lead | Lead |
| Review ToC | Review | Review | Review |
| Produce summary report | Contribute | Lead | Contribute |

**Project timeline**

The project timeline is outlined in Table 2 below.

*Table 2. Project milestones and key dates*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Milestone** | **Date** |
| Call for applications opens | 5th December 2024 |
| Open call information webinar | 17th December 2024 |
| Deadline for applications | 8th January 2025 |
| Application follow-up calls | w/c 13th January 2025 |
| HEPs appointed | 22nd January 2025 |
| Project kick off | w/c 27th January 2025 |
| ToC development meetings and workshops | February-March 2025 |
| Final ToC outputs | 28th March 2025 |
| Final summary report | 30th April 2025 |

Using the expression of interest form below, please submit information about your whole provider approach by **midnight on 8th January 2025**. If you have any questions regarding the open call, please join us on 17th December 2024 at 10:30-11:15am for an [information session](https://www.tickettailor.com/events/taso/1494205) on the project and the open call process. You can also get in touch over email via [research@taso.org.uk](mailto:research@taso.org.uk). You may be invited to a follow-up call for us to find out more about your submission in the week commencing 13th January 2025 and will be informed of the outcome of your submission by the 22nd January 2025.

### **Eligibility**

* The applicant must be a registered English higher education provider in the approved (fee cap) category.
* The applicant must commit time and resourcing to the ToC development, including through meetings, workshops and reviewing of outputs.

Please note that while we initially included an eligibility requirement for HEPs to have submitted an APP including their whole provider approach in 2023-24, we have removed this requirement following queries from HEPs to enable a wider range of providers to apply for this project.

**Assessment of applications**

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

* *Whole provider approach (40%)*
  + Level of detail included in the whole provider approach.
  + Extent to which the activities and initiatives included in the whole provider approach contribute to or are integrated into an overarching whole provider approach (as opposed to disconnected initiatives across the HEP).
  + Extent to which the whole provider approach spans the student lifecycle, engages staff and students, and ensures alignment and consistency across the organisation.
  + Clarity of the aim of the whole provider approach and what systems and structures are in place or being implemented to ensure this will be achieved.
  + How the whole provider approach aims to address risks to equality of opportunity.
  + Information on the process of conceptualising and developing the whole provider approach within the HEP.
* *Relevance/impact of the project (20%)*
  + Relevance and quality of the whole provider approach that the ToC would be developed for.
  + The HEP’s plan to use and implement the ToC beyond the lifecycle of this project.
* *Team (40%)*
  + The relevant experience of the project team in developing the whole provider approach and for developing the ToC in collaboration with TASO.
  + The team’s commitment to evidence-informed practice.
  + The team’s approach to transparency and accountability.

**Additional guidance**

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

**Expression of Interest Form**

Please note that hyperlinks to web-based information will not be accepted, and, if included, will not be evaluated, **except for links to the APP in section A**.

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| **Data Protection Notice** | Please read TASO’s [Data Protection Notice](https://taso.org.uk/taso-privacy-notice/) before submitting your application. |
| **Data Protection Notice** | Do you confirm that you have read and understood the [Data Protection Notice](https://taso.org.uk/taso-privacy-notice/)?  Yes  No |
| **Organisation/**  **provider name** |  |
| **Contact name** |  |
| **Contact email** |  |
| **Contact telephone** |  |
| **Where did you hear about this open call?** |  |
| **SECTION A: Whole provider approach**  *Please provide details on your institutions’ whole provider approach that you would be developing the ToC for:*   * *How the whole provider approach was conceptualised and developed within the HEP, including which stakeholders were involved.* * *Key activities and initiatives included in the whole provider approach and how they contribute to or are integrated into an overarching whole provider approach.* * *How the whole provider approach spans the student lifecycle, engages staff and students, and ensures alignment and consistency across the organisation.* * *What systems, processes, leadership and accountabilities are in place or are being implemented to deliver the whole provider approach.* * *How the whole provider approach aims to reduce risks to equality of opportunity across the student lifecycle.* * *If possible, link to your APP with page reference to the whole provider approach section. If this is not yet approved or published, please separately attach any drafts of the whole provider approach section when sending us your submission if you have these available.*   *[700 words max]* | |
|  | |
| **SECTION B: Relevance/impact**  *Please provide details on:*   * *The relevance of the whole provider approach for your provider and the wider sector.* * *Future plans for use/implementation of the ToC.*   *[500 words max]* | |
|  | |
| **SECTION C: Team**  *Please provide details of the team who will be involved in delivering / supporting the development of the TOC:*   * *Details of key staff who will be involved with the ToC development.* * *The team’s involvement in developing the whole provider approach.* * *Relevant knowledge and skills, of both the whole provider approach and creating ToCs.* * *The team’s commitment to evidence-informed practice.* * *Capacity to meet key responsibilities in table 1.*   *[500 words max]* | |
|  | |