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**UVAC Submission to the TASO Call for Evidence - Risks to Equality of Opportunity – Developing an Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) and Collecting Evidence that Reflects HE Provision in 2023 and Beyond**

UVAC is the national not for profit higher education representative organisation for higher education institutions committed to higher vocational learning. UVAC has over **80** HEI members and works extensively with OfS, QAA, ESFA and IfATE. We were funded by OfS to support the HE sector to develop Degree Apprenticeship provision and are now the HE partner in the DfE funded Apprenticeship Workforce Development Programme (AWDP), led by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). UVAC also works extensively with the higher education sector to help develop quality Apprenticeship provision and prepare for OfSTED inspection.

We have undertaken substantial research into and supported the sector to develop vocational and work-based higher education provision. A special edition of our Journal, *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning*, published by Emerald, focused on Degree Apprenticeship and social mobility. In 2020 we published *Realising the Potential of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship in Supporting Social Mobility and the Levelling-Up Agenda* <https://uvac.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UVAC-SocialMobility_PostCovid-29sep2020.pdf>. We also produced a discussion paper for OfS on how Access and Participation Plans should be developed to reflect apprenticeships and technical and vocational education. Key parts of this paper have been incorporated into this submission.

Since our foundation in 1999 UVAC has worked extensively to support and promote the use of vocational, higher technical and professional higher education, to support equality of opportunity. We have also promoted and worked with the sector, employers and other providers to develop progression routes for level 3 vocational learners to and through higher education. Too often in the past, approaches to equality of opportunity in higher education have been rooted in a ‘school to residential higher education model’ modified for other forms of provision, rather than using a starting point of the diversity of learners and diversity of higher education provision. Apprenticeships and work-based programmes are/will be rapidly growing forms of higher education provision and present particular equality of opportunity challenges and opportunities that need to be considered carefully.

UVAC’s response to the consultation and accompanying evidence, which has been submitted to TASO and OfS, is submitted on the basis of our role and remit as outlined above. We would offer the following observations:

**Sector Level Risks:**

1. **A Historic or Forward Looking Review?** – We are concerned that the call for evidence is focused on quantitative research that will, by nature be focused on existing types of provision and risks and not potential future types of provision, issues and challenges. As an example, the call for evidence highlights BTEC students (see point 4 for further analysis). Yet T Levels, a very different qualification, are from a Government perspective set to replace BTECs/Applied Generals and become the mainstream alternative to A levels. We are surprised no reference is made to Higher Technical Qualifications or smaller programmes that will in future be supported by the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE). The HE groups identified do not include work-based learners and those following blended programmes, individuals following programmes that lead to professional registration and membership and older learners. It would be useful to know if TASO or the OfS is planning to commission research to reflect the equality of opportunity risks as HEIs offer HTQs, Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, blended and work-based learning and smaller credit based programmes, supported through the new Lifelong Loan Entitlement?

UVAC sees the LLE as a significant development offering potential new opportunities to widen access to HE, the professions and higher-level occupations. Indeed, the LLE could lead to far more individuals studying locally, combining study with work, studying level 4 and 5 programmes and undertaking shorter programmes, providing opportunities for a wide range of potential learners including under-represented cohorts. The LLE is not, however, without risks and we cannot quite see how the equality of opportunity impact of the LLE will feature in the OfS Equality of Opportunity Risk Register, or be entirely measured through the groups identified.

One of the biggest risks regarding the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register is that it considers risks to equality of opportunity in the context of HE provision delivered in or prior to 2022 and not the provision likely to offered in 2023, 24 or 25. We also believe it is important that OfS sets out how measures/data used with the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register relate to other core Government agendas, levelling-up, increasing productivity and net zero/green jobs agenda.

1. **Appropriateness of Historic Measures of Equality of Opportunity used by OfS** – Higher education provision is changing – as demonstrated by the growth of Higher and Degree Apprenticeship, the introduction of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) and the intended introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) which can support shorter more flexible programmes.

Recent studies of new types of provision e.g., the 2022 Move on Up? study <https://www.mdx.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0030/638049/MDX_Move-on-Up_Final-report-new.pdf> by Middlesex University[[1]](#footnote-1) on Degree Apprenticeship, question the appropriateness of existing equality of opportunity measures:

“*The report makes it very clear that the IMD and POLAR methods are not reliable or valid measures of social mobility, and they are not designed for this purpose.”*

*“But these methods continue to be used by the Office for Students and influence the national policy discourse around the social mobility benefit of degree apprenticeships.”*

*“We instead used the Cabinet Office’s questions which are employer-facing and more relevant for apprentices and applied the government’s own method to a sample of Middlesex University students in order to obtain a much more informed view of the social mobility impact of the apprenticeship programme.”*

*“The results are hugely significant because they clearly show 66% per cent of students have come from lower Higher Education participation backgrounds – compared to 28% in the POLAR data which is a stark difference.”*

A real risk to the Equality of Opportunity Register is the use of inappropriate measures by OfS for new and different types of provision, that do not draw on best practice used by Government departments.

OfS need to determine base line data and measures by which to evaluate the impact of approaches to skills, technical education, Apprenticeship and adult learning provision, on access and participation for underrepresented groups. In addition to POLAR and IMD, socioeconomic status this would include:

* 1. *First in family to HE/a profession*
	2. *Progression from a lower level job role to a graduate occupation*
	3. *Progression from level 3-5 technical, vocational programmes/qualifications*
	4. *Measures of wage/salary increase for individuals moving from a level 3, 4 or 5 role to a level 6 role.*

**3. Use of Appropriate Terminology to Assess Equality of Opportunity** – Many of the existing measures used in HE to assess equality of opportunity are not appropriate for new types of higher education e.g. Higher and Degree Apprenticeship. Some of the terminology used in the consultation does not reflect such programmes. Understandably, OfS focuses on an individual as a student, but for programmes such as an Apprenticeship an individual is also an Apprentice and an employee. If OfS is to fully recognise equality of opportunity, it must consider an individual as an employee and Apprentice, as well as a student. With a Degree Apprenticeship a learner is both an employee/apprentice and a student. Through inspection, OfSTED focuses on the Apprenticeship, but not on the individual as an HE student or on the degree. To fully understand the extent to which equality of opportunity is being delivered, an HEI and OfS must understand how the Apprenticeship and degree are being delivered and the outcomes for the individual as an employee/apprentice and a student. This means there should not be an over-reliance on OfS data and data from other key agencies e.g. ESFA and Ofsted should be reflected. Language is important. The term “subject” is dominant in higher education, but for many vocational learners their focus is on the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed in a particular sector and for a particular occupation.

**4. “Vocational learners, including BTEC students”** - From the perspective of vocational education we are concerned that the call for evidence is focused on older programmes and does not reflect current and emerging changes in provision. In terms of groups identified TASO identifies *“vocational learners, including BTEC students”*. BTECs are, of course, a branded qualification and represent only one brand of Applied Generals. It is important that terminology is inclusive and to highlight only one brand of Applied General, albeit the biggest brand, is questionable. There are several reports on how Applied Generals have supported widening participation which we are sure TASO will review. The major issue here, however, is that Government intends that T Levels will replace many Applied Generals. Indeed, the mainstream options for 16 – 18 year-olds will be A Levels, T Levels and Apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are not mentioned, despite being a key priority for Government. Applied Generals were historically not a niche area of provision. Approximately 200,000 students took Applied Generals or Tech Level qualifications in 2018 and around 20% of 18 year olds applying to university, held at least one Applied General/Tech Levels. As UVAC has outlined to OfS, there is a significant risk to HE access and participation if HE providers do not reflect and adapt to changes to the level 3 qualification landscape, in their approaches to access and participation.

T Levels are not a ‘like for like’ replacement for Applied Generals. They are far larger, equivalent to three A levels, they are based on the KSBs outlined in employer developed occupational standards approved by the IfATE, involve a mandatory industry placement of at least 315 hours and a different grading structure. The purpose of Applied Generals and purpose of T Levels are very different. Applied Generals are of interest to young people with a broad interest in a sector, whereas T levels are designed for individuals with a desire to work in a particular occupation. The decline in the number of individuals taking Applied Generals and development of T Levels does potentially pose risks to equality of opportunity in higher education. Many HEIs have widened access by developing progression routes to HE from Applied Generals. HE providers will need to consider and develop approaches to recruit and deliver provision for those taking T levels. In particular, how will HE providers adapt or replace the approaches developed for Applied Generals and Tech Levels, to reach underrepresented groups and disadvantaged learners choosing to pursue T levels, or follow A levels where, in the past they would have opted for Applied Generals?

**5. Higher and Degree Apprenticeships** – We are surprised Higher and Degree Apprenticeships do not feature in the call for evidence when OfS has specifically stated its new equality of opportunity risk register could include *“Not enough non-traditional routes in higher education – such as degree apprenticeships.”* Ministers have been clear that they want to substantially expand Degree Apprenticeships – statistics on the rapid growth of Degree Apprenticeships are clearer still. Research into other non-traditional provision also needs to be considered. What is the potential role of Higher Technical Qualifications and modular provision supported through the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE)?

Research by Middlesex University has identified that Degree Apprenticeship can and does play a key role in supporting social mobility. Many of the traditional measures used to assess equality of opportunity by OfS, however, do not work well for Degree Apprenticeship provision.

Measures such as the *“Attainment gap between different school pupils”* are critical. But what of reference to level 3 college students or individuals in work, who want to progress to higher education? We are surprised there is no specific reference to work-based learning. Earning while learning is likely to be very attractive to disadvantaged cohorts, who may well be more debt averse than school leavers.

**6. Higher Technical Qualifications and New Types of Provision Supported by the Lifelong Learning Entitlement** – New types of provision, such as Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) may attract and support under-represented cohorts to use and benefit from HE provision. What approach will HE providers adopt to Higher Technical Qualifications, both in terms of gaining the quality mark for their own programmes (including exit awards), delivering programmes awarded by others and supporting top-ups to bachelors’ programmes? How will HE providers use the HTQ Quality Mark to open up opportunities to underrepresented cohorts of learners? Finally, what approaches can and should HE providers adopt to deliver smaller credit bearing programmes and CPD, focused on adult skills for underrepresented cohorts of learners?

**7. A Focus on Schools, but Insufficient Attention to Colleges, Employers and PSRBs** – We understand the importance attached to working with schools, but are surprised that not more emphasis is not placed on college/HEI relationships and how level 3 college leavers are supported to progress to HE. How should an HE provider work with employers, FE providers – colleges and independent providers, schools and PSRBs to increase the use of skills, technical education, Apprenticeship and adult learning provision, to recruit and engage more underrepresented cohorts of learners?

With the growth of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, the relationship between an HEI and employers will be a key issue concerning equality of opportunity. With an Apprenticeship (including Higher and Degree Apprenticeships), although practice does vary, it is the employer and not the HEI that recruits the student/apprentice. The HEI then contracts with the employer to deliver the Apprenticeship in accordance with ESFA’s Funding Rules. This obviously has risks to and potential benefits for equality of opportunity. An HEI may be able to work with an employer to improve recruitment practice and develop new and fairer progression pathways. Alternatively, employers may decide to focus on particular groups of employees and contract with the HEI to deliver the Apprenticeship. Many Higher and Degree Apprenticeships have been developed with PSRBs and involve routes to professional membership and/or registration. There is evidence to suggest that Higher and Degree Apprenticeship are broadening access to the professions. We would hope that the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register would reflect whether work with PSRBs through Apprenticeship was broadening access.

Awareness levels and understanding among HE providers, as to how to develop a ‘skills ladder’/’skills escalator’, needs to be enhanced. HE providers will also increasingly need to design and deliver provision in a different way and work with schools and particularly FE providers to outline opportunities to progress to HE from level 3 vocational programmes. An analysis of how to develop ‘skills ladders/skills escalators’ that support equality of opportunity is needed.

**8. *“Entry to Specific Careers (for example, Artificial Intelligence)”*** – If HE is to play an optimum role in equality of opportunity, it must be about supporting individuals to enter **and** progress within careers. The call for evidence that highlights entry to specific careers, but not progression within a career, underplays the role HE has in developing the skills of the existing workforce. Healthcare Apprenticeships demonstrate this point. Through Apprenticeships, HEIs, employers and PSRBs are developing progression pathways for existing healthcare staff to become Nursing Associates and Registered Nurses. These new routes are effective ways of broadening recruitment and supporting equality of opportunity.

We are also surprised that only one career is identified. Artificial intelligence is important, but so are others where major issues concerning equality of opportunity and diversity are apparent, nursing, policing, social work, digital, engineering and green jobs agenda programmes are good examples. A degree is now a requirement to become a police officer. Police Forces are increasingly utilising the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship to professionalise recruitment and help police recruitment to reflect the community they serve. Some initial results are very encouraging. One Police Force reported that the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship resulted in a 114% increase in applications from females and 118% increase from those identifying as BAME. See Giles York, Chief Constable of Sussex in Metlife, March 2020

Interestingly, police recruitment has often been drawn heavily from men sometimes with a family connection to the police and who, if they had entered HE, would be the first in their family to do so. It would be interesting to see how the OfS Equality of Opportunity Risk Register could specifically reflect the equality of opportunity challenges and opportunities of specific professions and the diversity agenda.

**9. How will the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register Relate to the Work of Other Quality Agencies?** – For some types of provision, OfS is one of several quality organisations. For Apprenticeship, including Degree Apprenticeship, Government has made it clear that IfATE have the leadership role in quality. Ofsted, though inspection, are the most prominent quality body and arguably have the greatest influence. ESFA have the key role of audit, monitoring and compliance. It would be good to know how TASO/OfS are incorporating evidence from inspection, including individual inspection reports and data collected by ESFA, in their research to inform the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register. The call for evidence suggests that OfS may prioritise its own data rather than data collected and analysed by other key quality assurance agencies. In developing their analysis it is essential that TASO review inspection reports and key equality of opportunity issues identified by Ofsted. ESFA monitor data and it is important that when developing its review, TASO use this data and interpret what is means for Equality of Opportunity. It is important that OfS make clear how the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register relates to the quality approach of other agencies, particularly inspection. In particular, how will Ofsted inspectors use the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register in their approach to inspection and how will it be referenced in the inspection framework.

UVAC would welcome the opportunity to discuss our response with TASO and OfS.

1. Professor Darryll Bravenboer, Degree Apprenticeship provide helping hand for students from disadvantaged backgrounds - research. 07/02/2022 – Middlesex University website accessed 06/12/2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)