



Transforming Access
and Student Outcomes
in Higher Education



Project report:

From vision to action: Harnessing Theory of Change to tackle ethnicity degree awarding gaps

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Contributors who gave permission for their roles to be included are:

- Professional Services and Student Support stakeholders: Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Coordinator, Deputy Head of Inclusive Education, Academic Success Coach, Inclusive Education Adviser, Assistant Director Careers & Employability.
- Strategic Planning stakeholders: Access and Participation Manager, Head of Access and Student Success.
- Intervention stakeholders: STRIVE 100 project coordinator.
- Academic stakeholders: Associate Deans, National Programme Director, Programme and Student Lead, Departmental Education Lead.
- Research and Evaluation stakeholders: Research and Evaluation Officer, Widening Participation Researcher and Impact Evaluator, Doctoral candidate, Business Analyst.

BACKGROUND

In 2022–23, TASO commissioned Staffordshire University to analyse access and participation plans (APPs) and interview key stakeholders to understand the current landscape of interventions being delivered in the higher education (HE) sector to tackle the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG).

The [report](#) found that many of the APPs which had targets to reduce the EDAG did not include a Theory of Change (ToC) for their proposed interventions. Of those that did, a large proportion were inadequately detailed – it was unclear how the intervention would ultimately lead to a reduction in the gap. Consequently, a key recommendation from the report was that providers develop robust Theories of Change with clearly articulated mechanisms of change linking activities to desired outcomes. The report also highlighted a widespread lack of confidence in evaluating interventions that aim to reduce the gap.

This project therefore aimed to provide support to the sector by working with HE providers (HEPs) to produce Theories of Change with associated evaluation plans for interventions they are undertaking to address the EDAG. A team from Staffordshire University and Advance HE was

appointed the independent evaluator for the project to produce the following for each HEP:

- **A Core Theory of Change (CToC)** – this is used for simplicity and follows a model of mapping inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact. It provides a high-level snapshot of how an activity is expected to lead to desired outcomes and impact.
- **An Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC)** – this is used for evaluability and to assist HEPs with robustly evaluating interventions and activities. The EToC template provides a format for capturing in-depth information about activities and mechanisms by which we expect change to happen. It includes the intervention context, mapping of links between activities and outcomes, and assumptions and change mechanisms.
- **An evaluation plan** – this is a comprehensive document that outlines the overall strategy and approach for evaluating an intervention, to include the evaluation design and suggest appropriate outcome data. It is designed to be flexible and sit between an EToC and a more detailed research protocol (which lays out exactly how the evaluation will be conducted once knowledge of the sample and data is more complete).



PARTICIPATING HEPS AND INTERVENTIONS

Six HEPs participated from across England. TASO selected these HEPs from an open invitation to tender based on their proposed interventions to address the EDAG, with the intention of representing a variety of providers and interventions. The chosen HEPs include:

- Birmingham City University
- Loughborough University
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- University of Law
- University of Southampton
- University of York

The interventions ranged widely in nature, and, after refining the initial proposal for the EToC and evaluation plan, consisted of the following:

- **Accessible Assessment Principles (Birmingham City University)**

The designing, developing, and implementing of a series of assessment guidelines for course teams which support the production of accessible assessments in terms of design, communication of expectations to the diverse student body, and marking.

- **Student Referral Scheme (Loughborough University)**

A faculty-based intervention, centred around the early identification of students from marginalised ethnic backgrounds at risk of failing in their first semester and the provision of personalised support (via staff directly reaching out to students via phone and/or email).

- **Staff Accountability Partnerships (Manchester Metropolitan University)**

A staff-focused intervention which enables students from marginalised ethnic backgrounds to build reciprocal relationships with members of the senior leadership team through reverse and mutual mentoring approaches, reconnecting senior leaders with the experiences of current students.

- **Monitoring of Inclusive Learning Panel (University of Law)**

An intervention run as part of an overarching initiative to diversify the Law curricula. Individual modules are reviewed by an inclusive learning panel to identify good practice and areas for improvement related to representation and accessibility.

- **Dissertation Retreats and the Awarding Gap Project (University of Southampton)**

The Dissertation Retreats intervention is a fully funded residential writing retreat to support students from marginalised ethnic backgrounds excel in this part of their course. The Awarding Gap Project comprises a panel of Black undergraduate students who oversee the curation of student-focused interventions, with resources and support provided by staff.

- **Departmental EDAG Framework (University of York)**

The implementation of an oversight group to engage departments/faculties in actively reviewing their (rather than the whole institutions') EDAGs and guiding their selection of appropriate interventions to address the EDAG in their own context.

The Staffordshire University and Advance HE team held separate workshops with the participating HEPs to co-develop a CToC, EToC and evaluation plan for each intervention. These outputs can be found on TASO's website [here](#).

KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The maturity of an intervention impacts ToC development

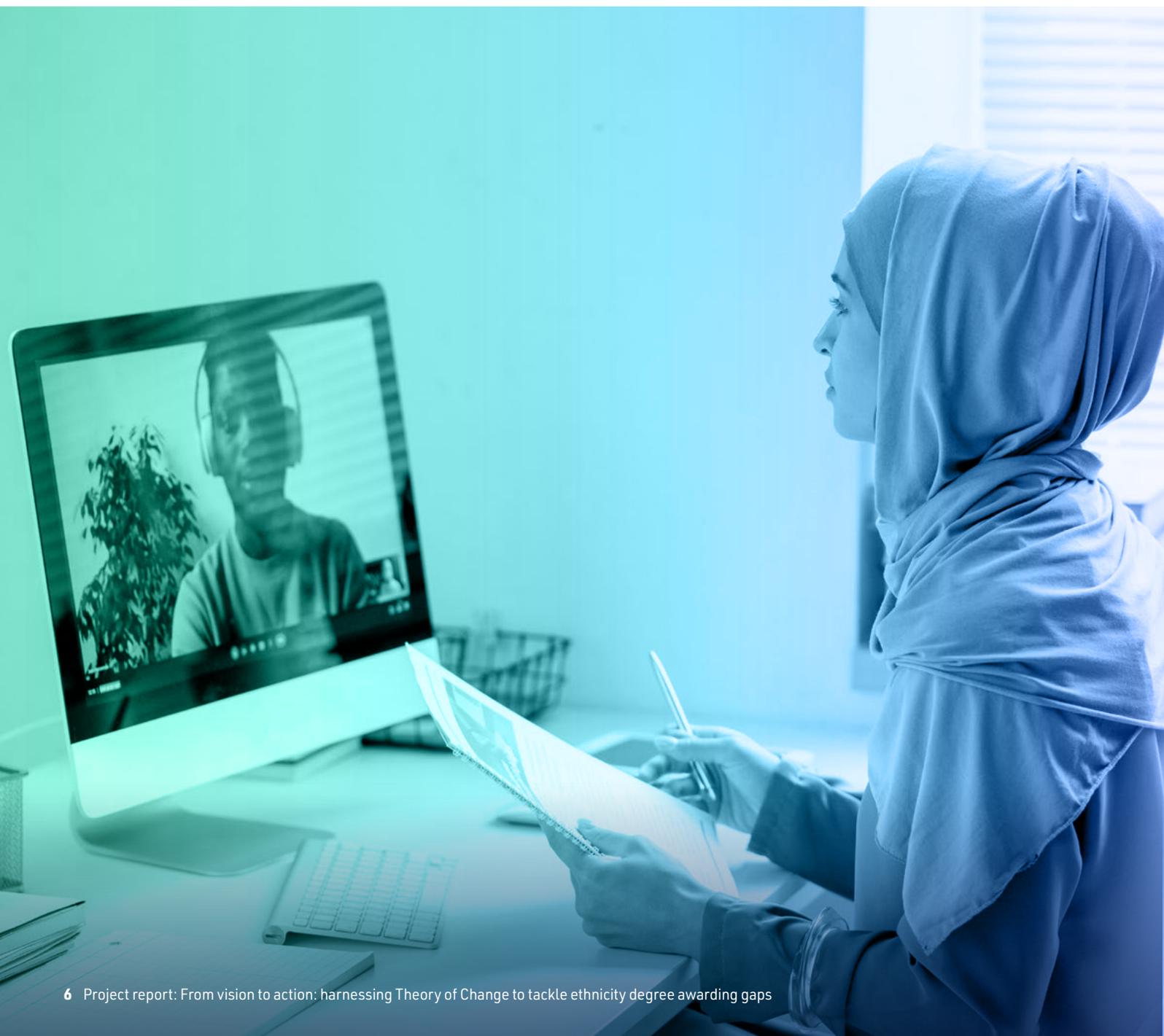
The interventions differed in their level of development and whether they were longstanding or yet to be delivered. A CToC is an important first step in planning an intervention and especially useful for those that are in the early stages of development. EToCs may then be used for different purposes depending on the developmental stage of the intervention.

- When considering an intervention that has not yet been implemented, an EToC can be used to explore

the activities or elements that offer the greatest potential to be successfully implemented and lead to intended impacts. Exploring assumptions and change mechanisms enables additional activities to be included to facilitate success criteria being met.

- Interventions that are already well-defined can benefit from using EToC development to cultivate a shared understanding of the intervention and its aims and outcomes. This shared understanding can then form the basis of an evaluation plan.

Regardless of the life-stage of an intervention, the *process* of developing an EToC and actively articulating ideas, plans, and theories is beneficial for key stakeholders to understand and unpick an intervention. EToCs also enable an intervention to be replicated in the future, and ensure the legacy of an intervention.



2. The elements of a CToC and EToC can be used for different purposes

A ToC comprises different elements which can support HEPs to dissect an intervention in different ways.

- Itemised mapping of **inputs** is valuable for putting forward a business case to request resources, and to understand and secure buy-in from diverse stakeholders.
- **Outputs** are useful for pilot activities to understand whether the intervention has been implemented as intended (note that outputs are currently only included in the CToC but HEPs can also include them in an EToC if it is useful for their purposes).
- Unpicking **outcomes** (short, intermediate and long-term as well as behavioural and non-behavioural) is beneficial to understand how and when intended change should be observed, which can inform evaluation plans.
- Including **change mechanisms** and **assumptions** is invaluable for ensuring that the planned intervention can plausibly effect change as intended and can also inform an evaluative model.

3. Face-to-face ToC development may be more effective initially

Where possible, and especially at the start of the ToC journey, having stakeholders come together in a shared space to flesh out the content of their ToC simplifies the process and reduces the amount of time required.

- Face-to-face meetings enable better engagement – as the use of physical artefacts and facilitating small group discussions allows the insights from each stakeholder to be considered.
- It is easier to give space to quieter voices by monitoring non-verbal communication.
- Participants are more likely to protect time for face-to-face meetings.
- However, leading *inclusive* workshops requires that facilitators pro-actively engage with stakeholders to understand accessibility requirements and to make reasonable adjustments to facilitate participation for all.

4. Incorporate diverse representation in ToC and evaluation plan development

It was important that HEPs involved a range of stakeholders in the project to ensure that ToC and evaluation plans considered different perspectives. This included representation from students, senior staff, evaluators, data teams, strategic planners, operational staff, and intervention planners/ developers.

Value of student representation

- Where present, students and recent graduates contributed usefully about their experiences and the reality of the context within which the intervention would be situated. This was invaluable for contributing to the potential outcomes, change mechanisms, and assumptions of the intervention.
- However, involving students can mean that interventions are tailored to the experiences of the individual representatives in the meetings. While this provides a more nuanced understanding, HEPs should be mindful of the diverse experiences of their whole student population.
- Note that student representation is not necessarily appropriate for all interventions. For example, students may be less well placed to contribute to the outcomes, assumptions and change mechanisms for interventions targeting staff accountability or focusing on new ways of working between centralised services and departmental/faculty staff.

Value of senior stakeholder representation

- Where senior staff (for example, Pro-Vice Chancellors and Directors) participated in workshops and meetings, this may have helped maintain commitment to the project and made decision-making easier in terms of scale and resource required.
- We recommend that senior staff have a visible commitment to the whole project, with requirements for their direct involvement once project staff have had conversations about 'what the intervention *could* look like', and have produced a wish list of resources. This would facilitate constructive dialogue with senior staff around human and financial resource allocation while minimising their time commitment.

Value of evaluator representation

- The presence of an evaluation specialist that was based within the HEP made conversations around which outcomes to include in the EToCs and evaluation plans significantly easier as they understood the quantity and quality of data currently being collected within the institution.
- They were also valuable sources of information regarding existing evidence to inform the rationale and assumptions, as well as providing insight into other interventions taking place across the institution (and how these are being evaluated).

Value of strategic planner representation

- The contributions of colleagues with insight into institutional strategy were particularly helpful in moving the development of the CToC forward. These colleagues held roles that tended to include oversight of APPs, for example. Their knowledge of the 'institution as a whole', the overlap of its individual parts, and the interactions

between these was essential in gaining a clear understanding of the current situation, the long-term impact of the interventions and the rationale underpinning these.

Value of operational staff representation

- Operational staff (those delivering the intervention) were essential in terms of being able to answer the 'what' questions about the interventions (for example, what would be covered in a given session, what outputs the activities were designed to produce, what resources were currently available to staff, etc).
- It was also noted that participating in these sessions provided operational staff with the opportunity to learn more about the 'inner workings' of a HEP, for instance, the layers of approvals and processes, and how these activities individually contribute to overarching strategies for the institution.



Ensuring the engagement of such voices requires that stakeholders recognise their role and the importance of their contributions.

- Consider the strengths of each individual and when and why they should be involved.
- Involve people at times when their input is most valuable; if they do not need to be there for the whole process, consider consulting before or afterwards.
- Facilitate contributions from all participants, recognising power dynamics and neurodiversity and therefore different methods of contribution. For example, using flip-chart paper and sticky notes for physical workshops and interactive software tools (such as Padlet) for online workshops to facilitate input alongside verbal contributions.

5. Recognise the time requirements of an EToC

An EToC is not designed to be completed quickly, but as an iterative process that takes time and thought.

- It is not essential to run a ToC workshop all in one day, it can be split into different elements depending on need and purpose (for example, focusing on the 'what', 'why' and 'who' of the intervention initially).
- Match the input to your intervention, as and when you need it – invite different stakeholders to different parts of the ToC development process depending on knowledge and expertise.
- Figure out what questions you want to ask of your intervention and use this to determine your methodology for the development process.
- Prioritise what is useful; you do not need to complete every section of every template, though note that doing so enhances replicability.

6. Critical questions can support the development of an EToC

While the EToC template provides definitions and prompts for each section, the following questions may also be useful during development to focus discussion and support completion.

Change mechanisms

- *How* does this activity lead to that outcome?

- *Why* do you think this will happen?
- Do we *really* think this outcome will happen as a result of the intervention? To what extent?
- What do you think the efficacy of this will depend on? Why might this not work?

Assumptions

- Will this happen for all students? Is this likely to only be effective for some students, and what will that depend on?
- Will students choose to engage in this activity?

These assumptions may reveal that additional activities are required to ensure that dependencies are met and are useful to capture to ensure that stakeholders understand the contextual requirements of the intervention.

Differentiating between outcomes and outputs:

- How will you know if it's been implemented successfully? [outputs]
- How will we know if your theory was right? [outcomes]
- What do you *know* will happen if you do the activities you have listed? [outputs]
- What do you *hope* will happen if you do the activities you have listed? [outcomes]

Differentiating between inputs, activities, and outputs:

- What do you need to do to run this intervention? [inputs and activities]
- What kind of support do you need to do those things? [inputs]
- If you carry out the activities, what will you walk away with? [outputs]

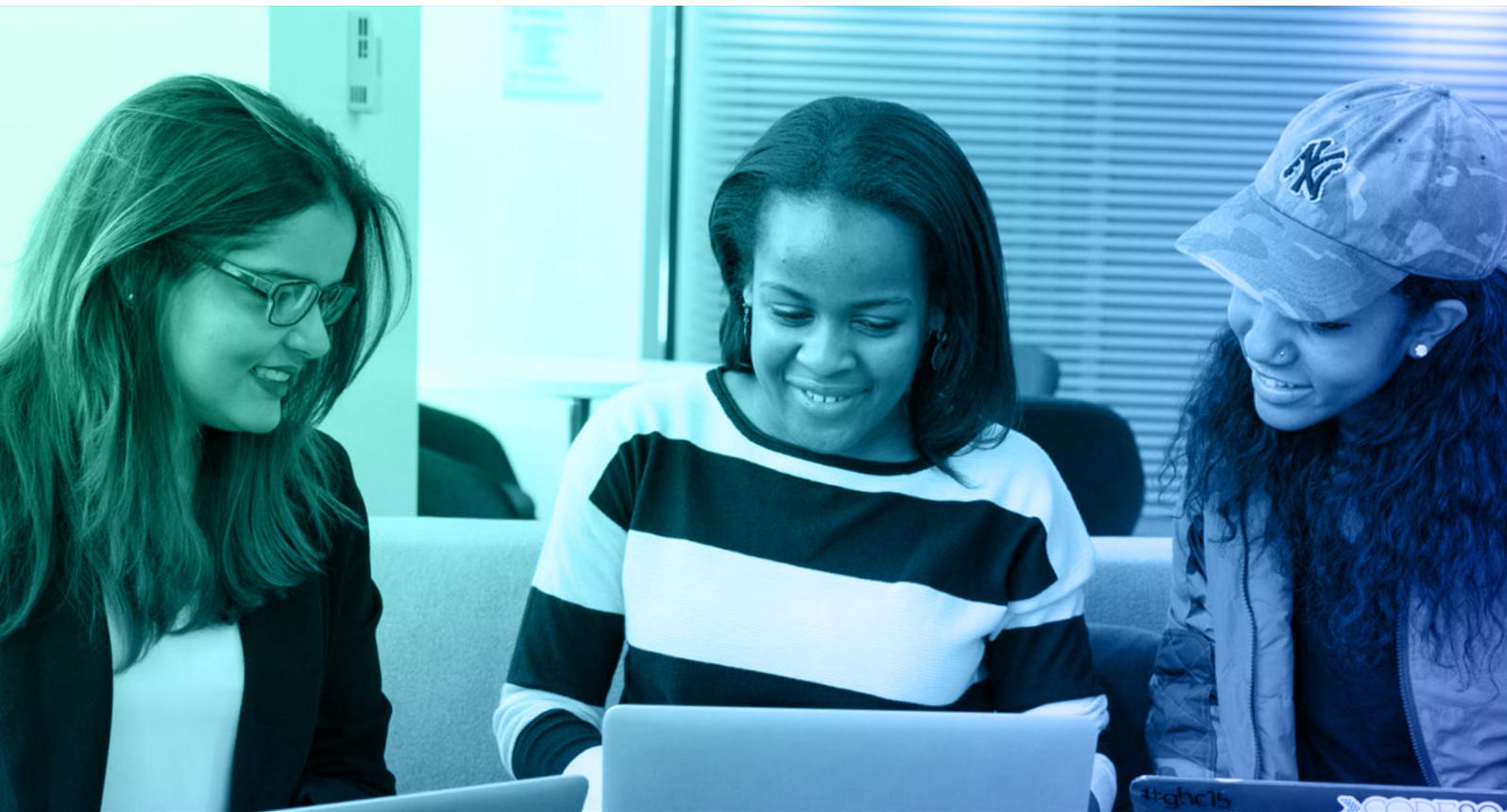
Note, piloting a new programme will require significantly more input to generate materials, and will have more outputs because of this. In contrast, future iterations of the same programme may use these outputs as their inputs and have a new list of activities and outputs to produce; ToCs are not set in stone, but rather working documents that evolve with each round of delivery and evaluation.

7. Transition from an EToC to an evaluation plan

- Begin planning the evaluation once the first draft of the EToC has been produced. At this stage, relevant stakeholders will have the requisite information available to understand what questions need to be asked of the intervention in order to develop testable hypotheses – that is, what is useful to know about the implementation, impact, and cost-effectiveness of an intervention, and what is expected.
- The EToC may continue to be developed during the development of the evaluation plan; discussions about the evaluation approach influence how the intervention is thought about and conceived.

Therefore the EToC may continue to be shaped during this period through conversations about the evaluation, as optimisation opportunities become apparent.

- Transitioning from an EToC to an evaluation plan can also help to determine what kind of evaluation approach is needed; the methodology can depend on the maturity of the intervention. Interventions that have never previously been implemented may first benefit from more exploratory questions. Having ascertained this during the EToC process, the evaluation methodologies for these interventions may then be more exploratory, or 'pilot evaluations', with plans to conduct more impact evaluations to establish causality in subsequent years.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

To reduce the longstanding EDAG across the HE sector, it is important that HEPs better understand how their interventions intend to work, and how short- and intermediate-term outcomes, such as belonging, may link to the gap. We also require

more evidence on what works, which cannot happen without effective evaluation of interventions. We hope that the insights from this project and the associated outputs will be beneficial in supporting the sector to tackle a significant inequality.

TASO

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