

TEF Special Edition – Editors’ Introduction

Editors’ Letter

The Government is introducing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) with the aim to recognise and reward excellent learning and teaching (Department for Education, 2016). While much has been published to help outline the aims and processes of the TEF, many questions and concerns remain and thus continue to be critically debated in the sector. Some of these concerns focus around examining the viability of the TEF, specifically the suitability of criteria that will be used to measure teaching excellence - the National Student Survey (NSS), Non-continuation (HESA) and Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE). Another point of tension is the unresolved dilemma surrounding the funding of Higher Education and how this is linked to tuition fees. The Government will shortly publish the outcomes of the TEF, which will inevitably focus institutions on responding to their Gold, Silver or Bronze rating. This special issue of *Compass* gives us the opportunity to look, in some depth, at the different angles and nuances of the Teaching Excellence Framework before discussion turns to concentrating on improving or maintaining the rating awarded.

We present a range of voices expressing their perspectives on the TEF. As might be expected in a collection of articles of this kind, and at this moment of transition, there is some overlap of views. This very fact, however, gives credence to the attitudes held about the TEF and indicates the strength of feeling across higher education. Reading these scholarly opinions confirms that academic practitioners are themselves already putting into place relevant self-critical measures to enhance learning and teaching, and that principles of collaboration, communities of practice and student/staff empowerment underpin their strategies. The metrics are examined, as is the TEF’s very rationale, but the authors also seek positives, and show their genuine desire to raise the game of the entire sector in the UK.

Nick Hillman’s reflection on the Teaching Excellence Framework, based on a lecture at the University of Greenwich in November 2016, begins by considering the ‘progenitors’ of the TEF. Hillman voices his concerns regarding the TEF including the possible link to fees. He also points to papers published by the Higher Education Policy Institute, by way of highlighting the efforts made to critically examine the TEF. However, Hillman notes that although the metrics used to measure excellence have caused much debate, it makes sense to start with existing metrics

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than wait for more suitable ones to arrive. Continuing this balanced reflection, Hillman praises the Government's effort to focus on enhancing teaching and learning in HE.

In contrast, J M Moore takes issue with the metrics of student satisfaction, retention and graduate employment as true measures of the quality of learning and teaching in higher education. Pointing out that these re-emphasise existing social inequalities between students, militate against those who pose a risk of failure and favour institutions which recruit the most privileged, Moore makes the suggestions that universities should not be compared and that widening participation is what gives students real choice; further recommendations include the promotion of a critical pedagogy in the light of better awareness of the needs of students and a more courageous challenge by university leaders to flawed government policy. The TEF, which will happen, Moore says, will best be modified by the development of truly participatory learning communities based on social justice values.

Similarly targeting the metrics of retention, employment and student satisfaction, Chris Rust offers a rather different perspective of each. As for retention, Rust remarks that high-achieving, motivated students and those attending prestigious establishments tend not to drop out, even if the teaching quality is not first rate; additionally, there is plenty of research to support his view that students who do drop out do so because they see the course as not for them, rather than because of perceived shortcomings in the teaching. Excellent tuition may support employment prospects, but many other factors come into play; furthermore, Rust says, not all graduates share the same aspiration to hold 'graduate jobs'. Commenting on the use of NSS scores, he not only reminds us of the criticisms already levelled at those, but also adds that, if they are low, sometimes there are reasons other than teaching for that. The paper's final and main criticism of the TEF is that it is ultimately going to operate at institutional level.

A specific alternative to the TEF is offered in an opinion piece by Chrissi Nerantzi who is unconvinced that greater competitiveness generated between higher education institutions will produce improved quality of teaching and learning. Personal study and a body of supportive literature persuades Nerantzi that what will really help to achieve excellence in HE is cross-boundary collaboration in a diverse learning community, bringing together people from different cultures and backgrounds. By this means, best innovative practice, sector-wide, may be grown and disseminated and be underpinned by continuous professional development. Partnership between students and staff, and between academics and professionals outside HE, will place

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universities, Nerantzi says, ‘at the heart of local and distributed communities and society’; the TEF, meanwhile, merely seeks ‘to categorise, rank and compare’.

A very lively analysis of the TEF highlights the intrinsic potential flaws of this chosen method of measuring excellence. Whilst James Derounian welcomes parity of scrutiny of both teaching excellence and research excellence, he has reservations about the uncertainties lurking beneath the framework. A single award for an entire institution requires that, somehow, assessors will be able to make sense of, say, variable performance across subjects and disciplines – not easy! Derounian asks how prospective students will be able to deduce from the blunt instrument of the awarded institutional standard whether a particular course is the best choice, though does accept that a planned subsequent move to subject-level awards will be a positive step. However, Derounian sees the ‘student outcomes’ measure as very problematical, as many variables influence whether students do in fact get appropriate jobs; furthermore, a census at six months post-graduation may not fairly offer enough time for students to find employment. There may well be also some difficulty in squaring the gold standard of ‘consistently outstanding outcomes for students from all backgrounds’ with the reality of the very worthy and considerable ‘distance travelled’ by some students who do not make it to further study or graduate employment. As for student wellbeing, and universities’ role in the growth of ‘decent, compassionate, giving human beings’, the TEF seems not to have a view.

It is perhaps inevitable that criticism will be levelled at the TEF on the grounds of its rationale, which Graham Gibbs sees as deeply flawed; not only does he regard the proposed metrics as invalid, but is sceptical that fine judgements about institutional rankings on the basis of metrics will be achievable, as the very small differences in scores between institutions will defy discrimination. Ironically, Gibbs suggests, universities will renew their efforts to improve teaching and learning because they see a risk in not doing so, but any rise in quality won’t be because government policy is sound; evidence indicates no substantial problem in teaching quality anyway and low value for money ratings reflect perceived high cost, not poor teaching. The only hope is that positive new thinking will spring from a sense of the TEF’s inadequacies.

Since the 1997 Dearing Report into Higher Education, much time and effort has been expended, by first the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and, latterly, the Higher Education Academy, on establishing a system for recognising and rewarding outstanding university teachers: the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS). Sally Brown, brings the weight of her NTF experience to bear upon the proxy metrics of the TEF. Brown’s preferred

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metrics focus on numbers of preferments, on the basis of teaching, to Reader or Professor, or on the proportions of staff achieving external recognition for their teaching, or on the evidence of successful staff completion of continuing professional development activities: or, in a nutshell, on authenticated measures of the true value added by institutions to the student learning experience.

In a paper striking for its contrast to all the others in this issue, a powerful challenge to the TEF comes in the form of the carefully-structured argument that *Success as a Knowledge Economy* and the TEF will constitute ‘a set of mechanisms of perpetual pedagogical control’ instead of supporting practitioner improvement of teaching and learning or empowering both teachers and students. Placing relevant aspects of Gilles Deleuze’s *Postscript on the Societies of Control* in the context of Gary Hall’s ‘postwelfare capitalism’, Conor Heaney and Hollie Mackenzie explain how the logic of the TEF will lead inexorably to the regulation of pedagogy by market forces, with the blessing and, indeed, the active encouragement of the Government. Finally, Heaney and Mackenzie call upon their peers in the UK tertiary sector to question whether this process is one they really want and whether it should be resisted by means of alternative strategies.

It’s not surprising that the weight of academic experience in the higher education sector and in previous interventions into its provision would be brought to bear in addressing the perceived shortcomings of the TEF. Indeed, the Research Excellence Framework alone, from the point of view of Ian McNay, serves very well to model government intentions and failings. McNay uses the Department for Education’s own strategy regarding the TEF - ‘to trial and pilot changes’ – as evidence of yet another ‘trial-and-error’ approach: first, confusion and then greater and greater control, driving for compliance and conformity in a marketised environment, he sees as a process hardly likely to encourage development and diversity in learning and teaching, especially as power shifts from academic professionals to managers. Like other authors in this issue, McNay systematically criticises bad metrics, which will inevitably, he suggests, be gamed. McNay’s parting shot is that, in spite of his having used history to identify what is to be expected, academics might as well be ready, too, for the unexpected!

One succinct riposte to the TEF comes in the form of a higher education consultant’s focus on the Green Paper’s stated desire for the new framework to be less burdensome. As a National Teaching Fellow with the opportunity for objective observation of the impact on institutions and their people of gearing up for the TEF, Phil Race is able to confirm huge expenditure of academic staff effort and energy. Race’s focus is clear and direct: the commitment would be

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much better devoted, not to doing much the same thing as previously in the vain hope of different results, but to improving the central elements of assessment methods and academic feedback to students. These are clearly in need of an overhaul, Race says, and whilst methods of monitoring them properly should be developed, the TEF ‘seems set to measure the wrong things’, generating unnecessary and unhelpful competition instead of collaboration.

The notion of students as co-producers rather than consumers is taken up by Sam Grogan in an opinion piece which articulates the deleterious impact of the terms ‘consumer’ or ‘customer’ when applied to higher education students. These terms, Grogan argues, diminish what he says should be ‘a genuinely humbling and transformative personal experience from which one emerges with horizons stretched’ to a merely transactional arrangement. A clever and convincing analogy between students and members of a gym supports his view that if the context is right, students are ‘consumer-producers’ at least and may succeed in becoming co-producers, creating outcomes in a real partnership with the institution.

As one might expect, there is considerable critical reflection on the TEF expressed in these articles. These might amount to a case for the prosecution, but is there a case for the defence? The quest for teaching excellence and improving social mobility for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with protected characteristics are laudable goals. The TEF is essentially about innovation and positioning UK HE within a global context. It focuses attention on teaching in Higher Education that is in step with the imperative to address societal needs. There is real value in developing a national quality benchmark that protects the reputation and brand of Higher Education UK plc by recognising the importance of excellent teaching and the value of professionalism. The TEF is a valiant attempt to reinvigorate higher education, breathe new life into programmes and link up teaching with research. In preparing for the TEF, institutions have already started to reconsider their priorities and resources, and have begun to look beyond teaching to the broader aspects of the learning environment to improve students’ outcomes. One way in which this has been done is by engaging our students more deeply and dynamically as partners and change agents.

The TEF ratings will be published imminently, and we are expecting that more universities will be awarded bronze than gold (Bagshaw and Morris, 2016). However, there remain many unknowns and we are unsure yet what the consequences and implications will be for higher education providers. For example, will TEF move to subject level, will increases in fees be pegged to ratings, and how might the outcome of upcoming general election affect the Higher

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Education and Research Bill? Once TEF ratings are published there is likely to be a shift in the debate at institutional and sector level, but it's unclear what that shift will be.

We hope that you enjoy this issue and continue this debate concerning the Teaching Excellence Framework. We welcome letters which carry on the discussion about teaching excellence practice and policy further, and encourage our readers to comment or respond to the arguments raised in this special issue.

Simon Walker and Danielle Tran

Reference list

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