

Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF): Re-examining its Logic and Considering Possible Systemic and Institutional Outcomes

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Abstract

This paper offers conceptual and theoretical insights relating to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), highlighting a range of potential systemic and institutional outcomes and issues. The paper is organised around three key areas of discussion that are often under-explored in debates. Firstly, after considering the TEF in the wider context of recent reforms, the paper offers a critical assessment, highlighting a broad range of flaws, issues and weaknesses in its design and execution. Counter to many 'common assumptions', it is argued that such weaknesses may mean the TEF is unlikely to pass smoothly or unopposed into policy and practice, and moreover it may result in a range of unexpected outcomes and 'refractions'. The paper then attempts to offer conceptual insights into possible institutional responses to the TEF, and the implications these may have for institutions and across the sector as a whole. Finally, it is argued that the TEF should be considered in its wider context, as a landmark initiative that is designed to further embed a neoliberal audit and monitoring culture into Higher Education, and one that is unlikely to bring about the proclaimed teaching excellence.

Keywords: Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF); Higher Education and Research Act; refraction; neoliberal education; alternative educational futures

Introduction: The TEF and the wider context

The Conservative Government's Higher Education and Research Act (DfE 2017; DBIS 2016), sets out a range of policy reforms that will result in profound and unprecedented changes in the UK's Higher Education landscape, potentially repositioning its critical mission and purpose. Amongst its key aims, the reforms explicitly seek to: make it easier and quicker for 'innovative and specialist providers' to set up, award degrees and secure University status and to compete alongside existing institutions; provide students with more information by placing a duty on institutions to publish application, offer, acceptance and progression rates in order to promote greater transparency; and to create a single regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), giving them power to operate a new 'Teaching Excellence Framework' (TEF), with the stated aim of raising undergraduate teaching standards. This paper focusses specifically on the TEF and highlights a multitude of criticisms and issues surrounding the framework and its implementation, which may, in turn, lead to a range of institutional actions and responses ranging from compliance, rejection, resistance and refractions of the TEF and the ideology, principles and logic upon which it has been formulated. Firstly however, it is important to locate the Higher Education and Research Act, including the TEF, against a broader context of recent UK educational reforms.

Significant policy changes have occurred in the UK since the financial crisis in 2007/8, and especially following the election of the then Conservative led coalition in 2010, which have already significantly altered the educational landscape. In what has previously been termed the *reconstituted neoliberal period* (Rudd and Goodson 2017; Goodson and Rudd 2016), there have been clear attempts to systematically incorporate principles of marketisation and privatisation at the heart of the education system. This has occurred through a strategic reorganisation via a range of 'austerity' policies presented as an

economic necessity in chastened conditions, ultimately resulting in further systemic alignment to the principles and values underpinning neoliberalism. For example, the development of the Free Schools and Academies Programmes in the schools sector, clearly reflects the central tenets of neoliberalism with: moves toward decentralisation and a move away from local authority control; the development of an emphatic discourse of privatisation and marketisation; and the conversion of ownership and management of public services into the hands of private entities. Whilst lacking widespread sectoral support, and indeed evidence that academisation leads to improvements, the Free Schools and Academies Programmes continued apace. More specifically, in Higher Education, the significant rise in student fees – up to £9000 per year initially in 2012, rising to £9250 as a result of regulations linking student fees to the inflation index from 2017 (UK Government 2016) - has arguably resulted in fundamentally changed relationships, with students being re-cast as ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’, and Universities as service providers. In turn, this recasting has shifted perceptions and discourse surrounding the purpose of Higher Education, and subsequently, the types of practices that occur within it.

Following on from above, the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), clearly seeks to promote the involvement of privately run institutions in the sector, and also aims to impose a range of metrics and measurements that are purportedly intended to raise teaching excellence and provide ‘value for money’ for students (‘consumers’). HEFCE, the body responsible for implementing the 2017 TEF exercise, working with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, highlights that the Government’s introduction of the TEF is intended to recognise and reward excellent learning and teaching. Specifically, it states that the TEF has been introduced as a way of:

- a. Better informing students' choices about what and where to study
 - b. Raising esteem for teaching
 - c. Recognising and rewarding excellent teaching
 - d. Better meeting the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions
- (HEFCE 2016, p.7).

Providers had to apply, or opt in, to the TEF (Year 2) by January 26th 2017, with outcomes finally being published in June 2017. The results of the exercise saw participating Universities given a 'gold' (outstanding), 'silver' (high quality), or 'bronze' (satisfactory) rating, which not only will be used as a public indicator of teaching standards but will also be used from 2020 to determine whether institutions are allowed to raise their tuition fees. Those that did not enter, or failed to meet the quality threshold, were not granted an award.

The TEF awards require the examination of a large volume of collected data from various sources, and the assessment framework highlights the core criteria and evidence on which assessor judgments will be largely made. These fall into three broad criteria, namely: *Teaching Quality*, which will derive evidence from sections of the National Student Survey (NSS), specifically 'scale 1 and 2' question responses ('Teaching on my course', and 'Assessment and feedback'); *Learning Environment*, which will derive evidence from NSS 'scale 3' questions ('Academic support'), as well as data collected by Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) on 'non continuation'; and *Learning and Environment*, based on Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data on 'employment and further study' and 'highly skilled employment further study'.

Based on the above information, it might be inferred that implementing the TEF is largely a procedural challenge and that sector wide adoption is a foregone conclusion. There appears to be a growing taken for granted assumption and prevailing discourse that ‘there is no alternative’ (See for example Wood in 2017) to current reforms and that the Higher Education and Research Act and its constituent parts will pass through into policies and practice unchallenged. However, this may still turn out to be some way from reality, with numerous groups opposed to the measures, the underlying logic, and the effects it is claimed it will have on practice.

As with other recent educational policy developments, nationally and internationally, opponents suggest such accountability frameworks underpin forms of marketisation, which further present education primarily as a means to gain economic advantage (Holmwood, 2015; Giroux, 2014; Collini, 2012) individually, institutionally and nationally. Moreover, the introduction of the TEF arguably also represents the exacerbation of a growing set of performativity measures and the growth of an ‘audit culture’ (Cruickshank, 2016) that orientates everyday discourse, transactions and practice toward externally imposed, proxy and decontextualised measures of ‘excellence’. This can result in ‘values schizophrenia’, whereby professionals are caught trying to reconcile their wider values and professional knowledge of the needs of students against the need to perform to newly imposed targets (Ball 2003; Macfarlane 2015). Arguably, University engagement with the TEF results in them becoming ever more target driven and auditable communities, and ironically, at real danger of providing inauthentic and standardised experiences, rather than truly excellent ones.

Critics of the TEF not only point out the numerous flaws, contradictions and glaring errors inherent within the TEF, but also illustrate the ideologically informed motives for its introduction.

Part 1. Critiques, criticisms and contradictions

Whilst the financial crisis and austerity discourse has presented and reinforced a ‘logic’ that ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA) to such neoliberal reforms, this is clearly contestable, and particularly so with regard to the TEF. Critics suggest it offers little in terms of what it purports to do, namely to bring about excellence in teaching. Below, some of the key criticisms, challenges and flaws are highlighted¹, which may also provide a basis for the refraction of policy intentions.

a) Flawed approach, design and assessment criteria

As outlined above, assessments for the TEF will utilise data from the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS is an attitudinal scale survey that gathers response data from participants based around 27 questions, which is intended to gauge student perceptions of their experiences at their HE institution. However, critics suggest that the NSS is essentially an inappropriate customer survey, which will result in flawed data being used as a basis for making funding decisions. More specifically, they point out:

1. The NSS and Teaching Excellence Framework do not actually measure teaching excellence, and thus any data used cannot be considered valid. The NSS questions used are few in number, extremely limited and do not adequately reflect, or enable students to meaningfully reflect, on all aspects of learning and teaching
2. The questions used from the NSS are not suitably pedagogically informed, and thus cannot be usefully employed as a measure of excellence. Moreover,

they do not cover breadth of valuable functions and activities that occur in Universities and therefore apply crude and truncated measures of ‘excellence’ and ‘value’

3. The TEF utilises data based on students satisfaction, which may be influenced by a whole range of other factors beyond the control of a University
4. The TEF utilises student employment and further study data, however, the likelihood of employment and further study will be influenced by a range of factors beyond the control of Universities, and may vary depending on intake, geography, local economies, and a host of other variables
5. Student responses to the NSS are optional and therefore the sample is self-selecting. This calls into question both the representativeness and reliability of any data generated, and by association, any decisions made on the basis of it
6. Student responses are clearly subject to manipulation and bias depending on how the survey is administered, so extreme caution must be applied when considering the validity and reliability of data
7. The NSS and TEF are also intensely political and contested, which is therefore likely to invalidate any conclusions that might be drawn from the data
8. Student groups, student bodies and individuals may choose to boycott or sabotage the NSS and TEF, although this is likely to vary across different institutions. This will potentially render data and conclusions inferred from it invalid, unreliable and unrepresentative. For example, the National Union of Students (NUS) are campaigning against rises in fees and called for the Government to abandon its plans. It suggested that if the Government chooses to go ahead with increasing fees, the NUS would coordinate a boycott of the NSS in the spring 2017². It had been argued that any such boycott might backfire, and possibly increase the number of students taking

part in the survey. However, even if this were the case, it would still call into question the nature of the data collected

9. Students will be aware that any responses may influence whether or not their institution may charge higher fees subsequently. This may also introduce bias and influence responses and findings.
10. Claims that the NSS is a means of giving students a voice, are arguably wide of the mark. The limited number of questions do a disservice to more meaningful measures and methods of giving students a ‘voice’. Moreover, the approach taken overlooks a rich body of research and literature that explores and explains that meaningful engagement requires student involvement in agenda setting and co-constructed and fully participatory activities. Student voice activities should also result in outcomes that are valued and useful to the students themselves, not merely provide an opportunity to respond to a limited, structured set questions based on agendas devised and set by others, especially those which have not been endorsed by the wider HE community. Clearly the potential outcomes arising from participation in the TEF and NSS may actually be seen as detrimental to students
11. One stated purpose of both the NSS and TEF is to provide students (consumers) with more information so that they may make informed decisions. However, there are question marks as to how much emphasis students (and parents) might give to the TEF rankings. A recent research report concluded that although most students in the study felt that they would consider TEF data when applying to university, many doubted the information would have influenced their choice of institution³
12. Whilst the market ‘logic’ might suggest that all consumers make equally informed rational choices, this is clearly not the case

13. Students may feel that their degrees may be devalued in the future, if the TEF and NSS go ahead and are used as a basis for distributing funding and different rankings
14. Some students may feel their institutions response to the NSS and TEF could undermine their institutions credibility in the field and/or demoralise staff
15. There is no evidence that the TEF, or similar tools, will lead to excellence or improved educational outcomes, and any claims that this may happen are (as yet) unsubstantiated and unfounded
16. The glaringly contradictory nature of students giving favorable responses regarding their experience at a Higher Education institution via the NSS/TEF, which could then enable that institution to charge higher fees to other students, raises serious questions about both the design and the logic behind such frameworks
17. The TEF is voluntary, and institutions have the option not to opt in should they disagree with its underlying premise, purpose, or the basis on which it will be organised. Moreover, given its voluntary nature, and the many flaws inherent within it, an institutions decision to enter the TEF could have unintended and detrimental effects on how that institution is perceived by students, staff, parents and within the wider HE community.

b) Why restructure? A lack of sectoral support

18. Even if we are to accept the economic arguments around funding, what basis is there for such widespread re-organisation and changes to the structure, functions and critical mission of HE? The UK HE sector enjoys a good reputation internationally, and is ranked highly in various international comparisons. For example, the UK HE sector was ranked 4th out of 50 overall by Universitas 21 in the annual ranking of national systems⁴

19. There is no crisis in Higher Education. Developing a set of additional processes to marketise ‘success’ against flawed, proxy measures, may be just as likely to create one, or present unnecessary problems
20. The reforms lack sectoral support. As well as the NUS calling for a boycott of the NSS and TEF, other major organisations in the sector are calling for similar responses, for example: the University and College Union (UCU)⁵; The Convention for Higher Education; The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts⁶, to name but a few. Beyond specific interest groups, there is significant debate as to the degree to which, students, parents, the wider community, or HE staff themselves, will support or oppose the TEF
21. The implementation of the TEF will be costly in terms of time and resources and may lead to greater uncertainty in the sector. All of which may detract from the potential to develop teaching excellence. Whilst this may be advantageous to those private sector institutions wishing to enter the marketplace, it is highly unlikely to result in improvements across the board.

c) No ‘total cost of implementation (TCI) analysis has been undertaken

22. With an intervention of such a scale, it might be assumed that due diligence would need to be undertaken and applied, including total cost of implementation (TCI) studies. This would include examining details of the cost of setting up the TEF nationally, the development and extension of roles, reach and work of organisations and bodies with responsibility for rolling out the TEF, and the increased functions, staffing and management of processes required as a result. Additionally, the development of tools and metrics so that each institution could conduct their own total cost of implementation evaluations, would enable the development of a more informed picture of the true financial costs of the TEF and any other potential implications arising from roll out and submissions. Any such study or evaluation, might reasonably include: data on how many person hours it

will require to introduce and explain the TEF; the time spent generating documentation and submissions and incorporating the TEF into institutional strategies and plans; the time and cost of developing related processes, committees and functions to deliver the TEF; the time and cost of training and professional development required for staff (and indeed students) to fully understand and implement any requirements; the additional time spent reworking courses and methods of evaluation, and so forth; and the financial and resource costs and implications relating to marketing and communications. As Collini (2016) argues:

So what will the TEF actually produce? At a minimum, the following: more administrators to administer the TEF; a greater role for business in shaping the curriculum and forms of teaching; a mountain of prose in which institutions describe, in the prescribed terms, how wonderful their provision and procedures are. It also seems pretty certain to produce more efforts by universities to make sure their NSS scores look good; more pressure on academics to do whatever it takes to improve their institution's overall TEF rating; and more league tables, more gaming of the system, and more disingenuous boasting by universities about being in the 'top ten' for this or that.

23. However, this is not a straight cost of implementation evaluation, as any cost or time incurred in implementing and executing the TEF, should be considered against existing practices and functions and teaching and scholarly activity that might be hindered, hampered, or necessarily forfeited, as a result of the newly imposed 'performance' metrics.

d) Similar neoliberal educational reforms in UK education have failed

24. Three decades of neoliberal reforms implementing similar metrics and measurements of 'excellence' in the schools sector do not appear to have

worked. Even by the rather crude international comparator measurements, such as PISA, the UK lags some way behind other countries

25. Why, despite years of reforms, are crises seemingly an ever-present feature in the schools sector? ‘Crises’ in education have seemingly never gone away, so surely lessons should be learnt, rather than attempting to introduce similar performativity measures into the HE sector and also in creating a new discourse around misguided and flawed measures of ‘success’ or ‘failure’
26. Why have ‘standards’ in the school sector seemingly both increased year on year - with overall increases in grades, including GCSE and ‘A level’ - whilst overall standards against international comparators have ultimately failed to improve? In the recent PISA rankings, the UK is now ranked behind Vietnam, Poland and Estonia. It also ranks only 27th in Maths, its lowest position since it began participating in the Pisa tests in 2000. The OECD's education director, Andreas Schleicher, described the UK's recent results as "flat in a changing world"⁷. However, it is argued that this is the result of teachers and schools responding to externally imposed measures and metrics, and consequently teaching to the test in order to provide a proxy measure for educational excellence. We may be in danger of seeing a similar transition in pedagogy and practice, if the TEF becomes a key metric for gauging ‘excellence’ and the distribution of funding in the HE sector
27. We also need to consider why, after three decades of schools sector reforms focussing on externally imposed standards, measurements and tables, does the UK have the worst crisis in teacher recruitment and retention it has ever faced? Factors such as lack of professional autonomy, pressures and workloads arising from measurement, testing and performance tables, and so forth, are all arguably contributory factors. A recent report also suggests that the Government has failed to hit necessary teacher recruitment levels for a fifth year in a row⁸, with recruitment in three quarters of subject areas being insufficient. The costs of training, comparatively poor salaries and

unfavourable conditions are likely to have longer term effects on recruitment. With the introduction of new performativity measures, greater pressure to hit externally imposed targets, more casualization, a loss of professional autonomy, and worsening pay and conditions, the argument is that we will see similar trends emerging in HE, which would be detrimental to delivering teaching excellence.

e) Undermining professional autonomy, teaching innovation, creativity and excellence

28. Students may receive a less innovative educational experience as teaching will be orientated toward those criteria exemplified in the TEF. Teaching to such crude and simplistic measures may occur as Universities ability to charge higher fees will depend on it. This may also stifle spontaneity, diversity or personalised responses professionals make on the basis of students actual needs in favour of standardised provision ensuring criteria compliance and ‘equality for the consumer’

29. Academic staff may have their professional autonomy undermined as they are conditioned to teach to external measures that may not fully reflect wider aspects of their pedagogical practice and decision making

f). Questions about the private sector ‘solution’ and the economic imperative

30. It has been argued that the TEF, and the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 more generally, need to be seen as mechanisms underpinning the development and implementation of a broader, more emphatic discourse of privatisation and marketisation

31. There are questions about whether changing the focus of HE towards economic imperatives and profit and loss motives will have beneficial effects. What evidence, if any, is there that the conversion of public to the

private, or semi-private education, will result in a HE system that is of better quality or value for money for students?

32. It is quite possible that placing a clear financial imperative into HE will result in less financially profitable courses and subjects being withdrawn, or limited. Furthermore, those subject or career paths that are more likely to lead to less well paid, or less valued employment, may become less popular over time as student debts increase

g) Why would HE institutions enter the TEF?

33. Clearly many institutions will choose to join the TEF as it is being held up as one key mechanism for attracting additional funding in straitened times. However, even if this is correct, its competitive nature will surely result in as many winners as there are losers, with different numbers of institutions obtaining gold, silver and bronze awards, as well as potential 'penalties' for institutions deemed to have submitted 'unacceptable' returns. There are also a range of other factors that may affect an institutions ability to attain higher rankings

34. What might the consequences be for Universities with lesser 'capitals' competing in a race they are unlikely to 'win', especially if reforms further open up HE to the private sector?

35. With all the potential criticisms and issues raised above, could it be disadvantageous, or detrimental, for institutions to enter the TEF? The TEF is voluntary but as it is linked to financial incentives, many institutions will feel it is impossible not to participate, even if they are opposed to it in principle. This may render institutions powerless, being coerced into entering the competitive framework.

The Higher Education and Research Act, and particularly the TEF, are already having dramatic effects on educational processes, relationships and on

perceptions about the purpose of HE. Market forces both regulate and frame these new conditions but also work on an ideological level, framing choices, perceptions and influencing decision making and practices. Such discourse and ‘logic’ can become ‘taken for granted’ and internalised as a form of reality whereby, ‘it is the way things are’, and thus stifling opposing ideas, discourse and opposition. The emergent *lingua franca*, or hegemonic newspeak (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001), becomes embedded and then both regulates and generates a new set of practices and behaviours. However, such approaches arguably also place too much faith in the ‘objective’ nature of social structures and market relations, hence producing idealist misrepresentations of social realities and subsequent cultural misrecognition that gives rise to ‘common sense’ practice and a sense of inevitability emanating from the dominant discourse. Whilst misrecognition may help anchor such assumptions in social life and culture, establishing new orthodoxies and conformity, and thus potentially providing the legitimacy required by those in power, these remain sites for debate, disputes and dialogue (Navarro 2006) in relation to the legitimacy of the ‘new reality’. However, if the common sense assumptions become embedded and dominant through practice, a powerful new ‘doxa’ (Bourdieu 1984) may arise that will result in compliance to the new wider discourse and newly constructed ‘realities’, both through conscious resignation, and more efficiently, through unconscious compliance. This may be precisely the moment we are at with regard to the Higher Education and Research Act, and particularly the TEF.

However, whilst there appears to be little clear, meaningful or coordinated party political alternative or action that might divert such reforms, there is still considerable political opposition. There is also an additional and large number of different groups and organisations who are likely to contest and resist such reforms at both the national and local levels, and for different but related reasons. For example, the Alternative White Paper (The Convention for Higher

Education, 2016), has already set out its criticisms of the Bill and offers alternative approaches and reforms that are intended to cast the HE sector as a vehicle for wider and deeper developments and improvements in society as a whole. Moreover, the HE and Research Act, and the TEF in particular, met with critical reception in the House of Lords on its ascent to an Act of parliament, particularly in relation to: the inappropriate extension of privatisation and marketization; deregulation to support the development of new private organisations in the sector; the casualisation of academic labour; the increase in student debt; the abandonment of the public role and duty(s) of the HE sector; and Government interference in teaching and research decisions and practices and the resulting loss of political independence⁹. The initial Bill suffered a setback in the House of Lords¹⁰ being ‘defeated’ at the committee stage, in the first sitting, by 248 votes to 221. However, this largely centred on the definition and purpose of Universities, and did not succumb to fundamental or wholesale changes before being passed. What the full consequences are, and how the TEF will play out across the sector, is still unclear and difficult to accurately predict. Therefore, we need to give greater consideration to possible and varied institutional responses that may arise, and what the possible consequences of these responses may be.

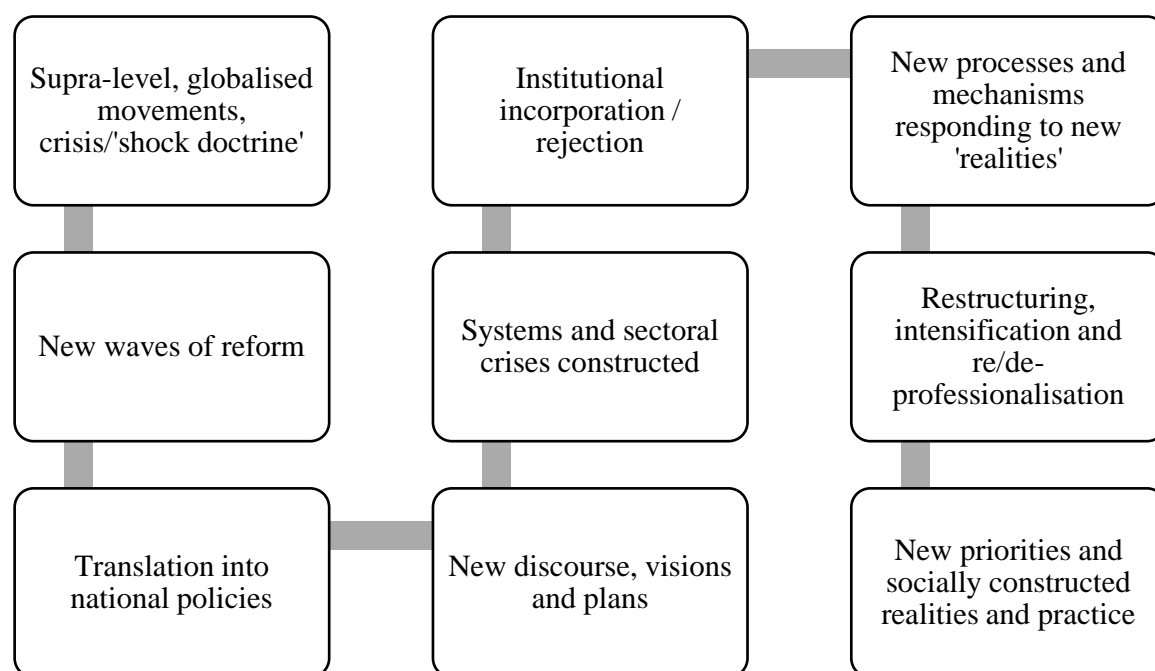
Part 2. Future projections: Considering possible institutional responses to the TEF

This section offers some initial conceptual ideas around the range of possible institutional responses and strategic decisions that may arise, the factors influencing these, and the potential consequences these may have for the sector as a whole.

The following figure suggests how the social construction of new realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) might occur in the reconstituted neoliberal period, from the global supra-level movements informing waves of reform and ‘shock doctrines’ (Klein 2008), through to translation into policies at the national and institutional levels. However, this is not a determinist, nor linear process, as the potential for mediation, or refraction (Rudd and Goodson *op. cit.*, 2016, 2012; Goodson and Rudd, 2017, 2014) can, and does occur, at various points. The concept ‘refraction’ may broadly be understood as a change in direction arising from individuals’ and groups’ own beliefs, practice and trajectories that are odds with dominant waves of reform and intended policy directions. This type of ‘bending’ or mediation occurs in various ways and for numerous reasons and must be viewed as crucial elements for analysis as it helps us better understand the interplay between structure and agency and the varied outcomes that may arise as a result.

Looking at figure 1 (below), we might consider how the process of policy formulation, presents an opportunity for refraction at each stage of the process. Different institutions, groups and individuals will have various capitals, which influence their ability to bring about change, and may enable them to exert agency through different courses of action. In this sense, decisions are not structurally determined or imposed, and waves of reform and related policies, no matter how (pre)dominant, do not pass unopposed. This will be true of specific policies, including the TEF, especially as it is strongly contested.

Figure 1. Waves of reform? Policy formulation process and ‘bending’



Responses to new policies will likely be influenced by pre-figurative beliefs and experiences, resulting in different collective, individual and institutional reactions to the changing conditions. These, in turn, will likely range from compliant integration and acceptance, through to contestation and resistance, and perhaps also, decoupling (Goodson and Lindblad, 2010). It is important that this complexity is considered in greater detail and that we focus on both the *moments of refraction* (the historical conditions and changes that present new opportunities for action) and the *episodes of refraction* (the thick descriptions and portrayals of institutional and individual counter actions and their origins) (Rudd and Goodson op. cit.), rather than assume that responses to policies are uniform and homogenous. Indeed, supra level global trends are seldom interpreted identically in the form of national policies, and similarly, national policies are rarely implemented as intended at the institutional and individual levels. Such trends and policies are mediated and redirected at each level and reinterpreted groups and individuals as part of their everyday practice. This in turn, is often influenced by pre-existing beliefs, values and trajectories but also

by the conditions and limitations placed within the context of their everyday practice. Institutional parameters both generate and regulate action, though do not determine it, and therefore we need to consider how different responses to the TEF might restrict or enable possible courses of action and reinterpretation. Figure 2, below, attempts to set out a broad and tentative typology of possible institutional responses and their key features.

Figure 2. Institutional Responses to the TEF?

Type of Response	Key factors and features
Compliant Proactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enters TEF • Clear about purpose and believe it will benefit system • Perceive there to be many to be institutional benefits and it will improve their position in the sector • Have clear aims and strategies in place that are intended to position them as leaders in the field • Early and significant investment in new systems, processes and professional development to embed and deliver TEF requirements •
Compliant Reactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enters TEF • Clear about purpose and accept claims of benefits to system • Perceived to be possible institutional benefits but unclear about how they will get ahead of the competition • Have tentative strategies, aims and systems in place to deal with the new conditions • Awaiting conditions to fully develop before investing heavily in new systems, processes and professional development
Acceptance Proactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enters TEF • Unclear about purpose and benefits to system but see no alternative. Have not considered alternatives or possible consequences arising from uncertainty and resistance • Can see institutional benefits in relation to current position but have not assured staff ‘buy in’ • Have pragmatic aims, strategies and systems in place to deal with the new conditions

<p>Acceptance Reactive</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reluctant entrance into TEF • Unsure of the benefits to system or institution but perceive it as inevitable • No clear aims or unique strategy for participation • Awaiting conditions to develop before investing in new systems, processes and professional development • Need to be convinced about levels of resource investment required and what the different options may be
<p>Refusal Reactive</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not enter TEF • Opposed in principle • Do not see institutional or systemic benefit in light of current position • Aims and strategies for ‘independence’ are not clear • Awaiting conditions to develop further • Seeking consultation and support around independence from the TEF
<p>Refusal Proactive</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not enter TEF • Perceive entering TEF will do more reputational harm than good • Opposed to its principles and methodology • Have clear purpose, aims and strategies to deal with ‘independence’ • Refusal to enter TEF as symbolic of institutions reputational value in the sector, transcending any policy changes

Clearly, the range of potential responses outlined above are for illustrative purposes and reflect only a small number of possibilities. The types of responses and strategies employed will be varied and influenced by a range of factors, including the ownership of various forms of capitals (Bourdieu 1986) that each institution possesses, and how they might mobilise these in relation to the TEF, or indeed, in acting independently of it. In drawing on Bourdieu’s work, we may be better placed to consider possible institutional responses and how each of the four forms of capital might play a role in structuring and regulating institutional decision making processes.

Economic capital – the levels of financial resources, assets and monetary wealth, including that expressed as material goods and property. At one level, this may influence institutional decision making and perceptions regarding the ‘necessity’ of entering the TEF, or not. Economic capital, considered the most ‘liquid’ of capitals, as it can be more readily, although not automatically, converted into other capitals and can be applied in a range of contexts and situations. Theoretically, this offers greater freedom of choice, can increase the range of possible and plausible actions, and over time, also influence the development of broader strategies, dispositions and practice.

Social capital - or the ‘aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to the ‘possession’ of durable networks’, will also be highly influential, especially in relation to factors that influence participation and non-participation in the framework, and also any subsequent strategic responses. In a sense, social capital can be seen to have a ‘multiplier effect’ on capitals owned in their own right. Membership to groups, networks and institutionalised relationships of mutual recognition, can provide each member with the backing of the collectively owned capital. The mobilisation of social capital, especially that which leads to collective actions amongst groups of institutions, could also give rise to notable patterns of response types over time.

Cultural capital – is that which may be considered as an instrument(s) for the appropriation of symbolic wealth, including cultural competencies, bodies of knowledge and practices that act as a basis for distinction, and also operate as signifiers of class, wealth and symbolic power. Cultural capitals exist in three forms, in the *objectified state* – or as cultural goods, the *embodied state* – as long lasting dispositions, and in the *institutionalised state* – or forms of academic standing, qualifications and recognition. Again, one might consider the ways in which institutions may mobilise their collective cultural capitals and

how this may open up or limit possibilities and influence and inform strategic decision making and responses to outcomes arising from the TEF.

Symbolic capital – may be considered as the, ‘*degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (connaissance) and recognition (reconnaissance)*’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7). In other words, the acquired reputation, prestige, respectability and perceived competence within a given field, sector or context that has recognised systems of exchange and mechanisms for distinction. Here we might consider how higher levels of ownership of symbolic capital may enable greater autonomy of choice and independence from other external pressures and/or coercive influences - such as those being introduced by the Higher Education and Research Act and TEF - or indeed provide a focus for the establishment of new relationships, alternative practice and resistance centred around those institutions with high levels of symbolic capital.

Clearly, levels of ownership of capitals will influence whether different institutions consider entering the TEF or not in the first place, and then what strategic actions they may take on the basis of such decisions. This means that some institutions may have more autonomy and greater choices than others, in either scenario. Again, this is an area that needs greater consideration in relation to how policies play out in practice across the field. Not least it might help highlight potentially unequal and inequitable outcomes, and identify some of the dangers and pitfalls for institutions that develop strategies in the belief that there is a level playing field. Furthermore, it must be noted that there are far graver dangers for institutions that make specific strategic decisions without considering: a) whether they have the required capitals to respond to the rules of the game effectively in a highly competitive arena; and b) whether their strategic decisions in responding to the new conditions may actually result in a

loss of credibility and/or ‘unique selling point’, through neglect of their true assets, values and real capitals. If numerous institutions respond and restructure activities in response to the new logic and conditions, without adequately considering where their real value lies, we may be likely to see a significant degree of similarity and standardisation in approach.

However, as yet, responses to the TEF and reaction to new conditions and outcomes, are not uniform and are still emerging. According to a Times Higher Education report (22/06/2017), 34 institutions did not take part in the TEF exercise in 2017, demonstrating one set of possible responses by institutions, although no doubt these occurred for varied reasons. Nevertheless, immediately following publication of the TEF results, it was clear that those institutions that felt they had done well from the rankings in relation to prior measures and public perceptions, quickly utilised the outcome in their communications and on their websites as a ‘badge of achievement’. This does suggest that this new proxy instrument purporting to measure teaching excellence, no matter how flawed, appears to have passed into the Higher Education sector as a potential means of attracting ‘new consumers’ for many Universities, in an increasingly marketised, competitive and profit driven system. In so doing, the purpose and critical mission of higher education has arguably become further subservient to neoliberal ideology, but also the very nature of practices within it appear to have been distorted through abstract measures performativity (Ball *op. cit.*).

Official and public responses from numerous Universities immediately following publication of TEF rankings, highlight both the criticisms of the process and also how different institutions responded based on both outcomes and in relation to other previous rankings, affiliations and cultural and symbolic capitals. For example, more than half the Russell group of Universities,

considered to be amongst the ‘best’ in the country, did not achieve the highest ‘gold’ ranking, whilst a number of newer Universities, including those residing further down traditional league tables, did so. Perhaps unsurprisingly the former questioned the logic, mechanisms and methods, suggesting that the TEF was not an adequate measure of overall quality, whilst the latter were publicly far more positive about their favourable outcomes, in some cases suggesting a significant change in established order, often with little or no criticism of the framework.

The vice chancellor of ‘gold rated’ De Montfort University, stated the results were, “*a real watershed moment for British Universities*”, and represented “... *the ushering of a new hierarchy*” (The Independent, 22/06/2017). The vice-chancellor of Coventry University, similarly also suggested the TEF outcomes highlight a ‘new hierarchy’, stating: “*Voices of concern about the simplicity of the teaching excellence framework measures don’t change the fact that a new order has been established in university rankings.*” (The Guardian (22/06/2017). Similarly, the vice chancellor of Buckingham University, not only praised his Universities ranking but further suggested that the TEF was “... *an excellent and overdue exercise*”. (The Independent, *op. cit.*).

On the other hand, the vice chancellor of the University of Southampton, said his institution would be appealing against its bronze award, stating: “*It is hard to have confidence in a teaching excellence framework which appears devoid of any meaningful assessment of teaching*”, and went on to highlight concerns about lack of transparency and the subjectivity involved in the award granting process (The Guardian, *op. cit.*). Similarly, following their bronze award, the London School of Economics interim director, Professor Julia Black, also suggested the TEF did not reflect the quality of student experience (The Guardian, *op. cit.*).

Whilst the above examples reflect only a number of public responses from senior leaders at Universities, it demonstrates the diversity of reactions to the rankings, with some eagerly entering into and accepting the framework decisions, whilst others demand that it is refined. However, it was also notable that there was little stated resistance or refuting that the TEF will take hold over the coming years.

It would appear that we are at a pivotal moment, as on the one hand we are still seeing diverse institutional courses of action and reactions to the framework, whilst on the other, we are seeing the majority of different responses and reactions debated within an externally imposed and ideologically informed frame of reference. This in turn, may ultimately result in a significant degree of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). From such a perspective, there will be a coalescing of processes and structures, which whilst established independently, are developed due to systemic conditions and constraints. Three main types of institutional isomorphism have been identified, namely normative, coercive and mimetic, which could all be in existence simultaneously. i) *Coercive* isomorphic change within institutions arises as they are forced to react in line with the new conditions imposed by external bodies, in this case governmental organisations, bodies and policies, and in line with the expectations surrounding adherence to, and delivery against, new and related metrics. These new conditions may ultimately result in greater homogeneity and less diversity across the system. ii) *Mimetic* isomorphism, on the other hand, refers to the tendency for one institution to imitate the structure and practices of another in the belief that approach and outcomes of that organisation are beneficial and reflect a preferred direction of travel. This sort of mimetic isomorphism is more likely to occur when organisational goals are unclear, and whilst outcomes may be positive, they can also result in loss of identity and direction. iii) *Normative* isomorphic change will likely be driven by pressures

brought about by internally imposed responses to the new conditions initially. However, as responses to the new conditions become established, and if institutions have clear goals and targets, new forms of ('professional') practice can arise. These will be transferred across institutions, as individuals both transfer these practices, or are socialised and conform to institutional norms, as a result of workforce changes and employment market requirements, again resulting in greater similarity in approach over the longer term.

Whilst the outcomes of the various forms of isomorphism that can arise do not necessarily lead to poorer outcomes for all organisations, given the contested nature of the Higher Education and Research Act and TEF, the clear ideological intent, the poorly designed mechanisms for measurement, and so forth, isomorphic paradoxes, pertaining to organisational remit, resources, accountability and professionalism, may arise. These paradoxes result in a shift in practices towards those that reflect the management of the new conditions and systems, and away from the previously central purpose of the organisation, in this case learning, teaching and research and scholarly activity. New and additional managerial and bureaucratic administrative processes associated with this shift, may unsurprisingly, also lead to a degree of counterproductivity (Illich, 1973), whereby institutions actually impede their purported aims, and ultimately begin to produce something far less beneficial for students, staff and society more generally.

From a different perspective, the purported intentions of the TEF, and the 'stimulus' it is likely to embed within the sector, may well result in a '*cobra effect*' (Siebert, 2001), making the problem, if indeed one really existed in this case, worse, with a whole range of unintended consequences ensuing. Perhaps, more specifically, this is more akin to Campbell's law (Campbell, 1976), which suggests that the more quantitative (social) indicators are used as targets, and as

a basis for decision making, the more they become subject of manipulation and corruption and begin distort the very processes they are intended to promote and measure. Of course, only time will tell. However, if we are to adequately consider possible outcomes, conceptualise longer term impacts on the HE system, and imagine other futures, we also need to consider the policies in their wider socio-historical context.

Part 3. The TEF in a wider socio-historical context: The need to reimagine alternative educational futures?

As others have argued, neoliberalism has purposefully neglected wider historical understandings, which is central to comprehending the recent past meaningfully (Harvey, 2007). These ‘year zero’ arguments (Woodin 2017) attempt to dehistoricise and rehistoricise in order to present and implement immediate, contemporary, and ideologically bounded possibilities, simultaneously denying the range of different possible solutions and the wealth of knowledge that lies within the multitude of real educational alternative approaches. Moreover, as Zinn (2007) contends, the lack of a historical memory results in the facts of history often being distorted or ignored in order to support the discourse and interests of the more powerful. Yet, he also argues that history is central to finding creative alternative futures, as it enables ‘new possibilities to be disclosed from the pasts hidden episodes’, including those which are premised upon different ideology and logic, and especially those based on collective resistance, mutual support, social justice and compassion.

There is much debate as to whether we are witnessing a new wave of reform in the form of a ‘reconstituted’ neoliberal period following the crises of 2007/8, whether this is a continuation or variant of the neoliberal period, or conversely, whether we are witnessing its terminal decline, and that reforms such as the proposed Higher Education and Research Act, and the TEF, are desperate

attempts to reassert neoliberal logic further into the public realm. Perhaps it is such poorly designed and executed attempts at urgent conversion, that threaten unprecedented change and irreversible damage, which may ultimately turn out to be a source of wider resistance and reimagining. Perhaps it is the denial of individual and collective professional expertise, histories, practices and experiences, which may ultimately be perceived as ideological and political overreach and conceivably turn out to be the impetus for refraction and reimagination. Whatever the precise outcomes, we can expect very turbulent times ahead in Higher Education.

Conclusion

It is clear that there are many weaknesses and flaws in the design, methodology, execution and proposed use of the TEF, and as such it represents a crude and distorted measure of ‘excellence’. It is perhaps unsurprising however, given the current ideological dominance of neoliberalism, that a new process of measurement and performance monitoring is being introduced, and moreover, that its real purpose appears to be more concerned with further marketisation. Institutional responses are likely to be varied, and outcomes may have significant detrimental repercussions for individual institutions, as well as having potentially negative impacts on pedagogical practice across the sector. Quite how it will all unfold, of course, remains to be seen. However, its contested nature means it is likely to pass through many different levels and types of refraction as, or if, it becomes embedded in policies and practice across the sector. It is unlikely to be the smooth transition many believe and hope for, even if it does become embedded over the longer term. Whatever the outcomes, it is likely to be remembered as a landmark development at a vitally important time for Higher Education in the UK. However, it is highly unlikely to bring about the innovation and improvement in standards suggested in the accompanying policy discourse. Conversely, in order to bring about significant

and meaningful change in the sector, a broad socio-historical analysis should be undertaken. This should not be limited by current, or perhaps waning, ideologically driven discourse and possibilities, but rather should be one that is informed by the rich history of alternatives, reconsiders the real purpose of HE, and examines the specific historical context in order to engage meaningfully with a range of possible and necessary futures.

Notes

- ¹ These criticisms are far from comprehensive or detailed. They were, however, collated from numerous sources, sites, press outlets, social media and other publications that entered the public domain between June-December 2016, prior to TEF submission
- ² See the NUS website for more information: <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/take-action/education/boycott-the-national-student-survey/>
- ³ Cited in: Times Higher Education (2016). Students ‘not enthusiastic’ about teaching excellence framework. Chris Havergal (24/05/16) <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/students-not-enthusiastic-about-teaching-excellence-framework-tef>
- ⁴ It must be noted that international comparator data, ranking metrics and league tables are themselves subject to criticism, for similar reasons as the TEF, including that they can distract Universities from their intended activities and purpose. A recent report by the independent think-tank Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) (Bahram 2016), pointed out that the evidence from international rankings are one dimensional, overlook a wealth of activities, and fail to identify the range of benefits and numerous functions that universities fulfil. Their conclusion should also inform decisions about the utility of The TEF: *“Universities, their governing bodies and governments should heed our unavoidable conclusion: they should focus on their core functions because it is the right thing to do, not because it may improve their position in any rankings.”*
- ⁵ University and College Union: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/>
- ⁶ The National Campaign Against Cuts: <http://anticuts.com/>
- ⁷ Cited in: The Independent (2016). UK schools falling behind leading countries, new global rankings reveal. Rachael Pells (06/12/16). <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/pisa-oecd-rankings-uk-schools-falling-behind-leading-countries-global-international-singapore-a7458751.html>
- ⁸ The Guardian (2016). Labour warns of teacher training crisis after targets missed again. Rowena Mason (28/12/16) <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/dec/28/labour-warns-of-teacher-training-crisis-after-targets-missed-again>
- ⁹ The full Hansard report of the debate on the HE Bill, can be found at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2016-12-06/debates/634C59C0-373F-4F91-B169-D8AFEAE2F8C02/HigherEducationAndResearchBill>
- ¹⁰ Reported in the Guardian, ‘Peers defeat higher education and research bill by 248 votes to 221’. Jessica Elgot, (09/01/17)

https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jan/09/peers-defeat-higher-education-and-research-bill-universities?CMP=share_btn_fb

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