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Reflections on the Teaching Excellence Framework

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Introduction

Many across the sector have been debating what the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) might contain and how it will be implemented since the speech of the new Minister for Universities and Science (Jo Johnson) at a Universities UK event on 1st July 2015. The speech included proposals for implementing three key manifesto pledges, the second of which focused on *“...delivering a teaching excellence framework that creates incentives for universities to devote as much attention to the quality of teaching as fee-paying students and prospective employers have a right to expect”*. In the speech Mr Johnson continued to outline some further key details about the need to recognise excellent teaching and provide incentives to make “good” teaching better. He also made reference to rebalancing teaching and research and outlined some aims for the TEF which include: to ensure students receive an excellent teaching experience; to build a culture where teaching has an equal status to research; and to provide information so that teaching quality can be judged. At this point the only details about the TEF were that it would *“include a clear set of outcome-focused criteria and metrics”*. Reference was also made to the TEF assessment process being undertaken by an independent external quality body and an assurance was made that lessons learned from the Research Excellence Framework (REF) meant that any future TEF would be *“proportionate and light touch”*.

Since this speech there has been much speculation across Higher Education about what this means and how it might be implemented with a range of articles published in the Times Higher Education. In one particular article by Owen (2015), it is suggested the sector should fully engage with the proposals, and that potential data could be centred on three themes: ‘input’; ‘output’ and ‘peer judgement’. A Government Green Paper consultation is promised later this autumn.

Discussions from a workshop

Both SEDA and HEDG members have extensive experience in teaching and learning across the sector and in supporting colleagues in the development and provision of teaching excellence. In addition, many colleagues across the sector have been engaged in discussion about the TEF on a range of online forums and through JISC Mail lists. SEDA and HEDG therefore felt that a workshop for discussion of the TEF would create a valuable opportunity for collating feedback in response to the imminent Green Paper consultation and for influencing and lobbying more broadly. This article will now focus on some of those discussions and the key outcomes from the joint workshop undertaken on 4th September 2015 at Woburn House in London.

The workshop was facilitated by Pam and Liz and comprised thirty-six participants from both networks and across the UK. We started by creating a mind map of issues that participants wished to raise and debate in relation to the TEF and from this six themes were identified for a world café style activity. Following this, the workshop drew to a close by summarising the key issues from the day and identifying questions that participants felt remained unanswered. Whilst the workshop focused around six themes, there was overlap in a number of the discussions. As such this article will focus particularly on 5 key themes: purpose; metrics; comparability; assessment and risks and opportunities.

Purpose

Initial key questions raised on this table were ‘what is the TEF for?’ and ‘who are the audiences?’ The answers to these two questions then frame all other aspects of TEF development. The group debate centred on whether there is one key stakeholder for TEF or many, and ‘many’ was viewed as the answer.

Enhancing student learning was deemed to be the key purpose of the TEF; particularly if it is to be valued by the sector. Some thought was also given as to how this focus might lead to greater emphasis on innovation and improvement as staff seek to explore different ways to engage students in their learning and show the impact of this. Note was also made of the importance of the TEF helping to redress the imbalance between teaching and research. This led to discussions about the importance of linking TEF to the scholarship of learning and teaching and pedagogic research; although some also felt there would be a need for the sector to undertake some development work in this area.

Jo Johnson in his UUK speech spoke of protecting the UK HE brand and having confidence in its standards. Workshop participants agreed that this could be a potential key purpose of the TEF but were concerned about the implication that there had been a dilution of standards; many felt that the UK HE brand already had a reputation for “good” teaching although there was always potential for further enhancement.

The discussion then explored the resource implications of TEF and whether its introduction could lead to a greater resourcing of teaching per se, or only for those institutions that were able to demonstrate ‘excellence in teaching’. If the latter, participants questioned what would happen to institutions who were deemed to be ‘less than excellent’. With the growing number of private providers gaining degree awarding powers, the discussion also considered whether the TEF could make it easier for new providers to enter the market.

Overall the group felt that TEF could have a very positive purpose, but that a focus on quantitative data sources that already existed, rather than qualitative data on teaching process and student learning gain, could make it a very blunt instrument. This leads into the second theme: metrics.

Metrics

This discussion focused on the need to use a mixture of input and output measures and the need to have evidence of validity in relation to each specific measure. The group felt that data could be categorised on two scales and axis: from ‘most’ to ‘least’ useful and from ‘easy’ to ‘difficult’ to assess. This led to some interesting debates around which quadrant you would place particular data items in if these two continua were used. Some examples of the data that were easy to assess but which was the least useful included graduate employment data, QAA reviews, degree classifications and KIS data. The discussions also led to a data blacklist which included items that should not be included at all, for example, external examiner reports, graduate salaries, question 22 on the NSS *“Overall I am satisfied with the quality of my course”*, league tables and international recruitment numbers.

Data that was felt to be useful and easy to assess was seen to emanate from both staff and students related metrics. For students, entry profiles were felt to be useful both to detail the range and variety of backgrounds entering higher education but also as a baseline to do basic explorations of learning gain and retention. Student views from specific NSS questions were also highlighted, particularly questions 1-4 on teaching and 5-9 on assessment. For staff, information about those with teaching qualifications and Higher Education Academy or equivalent Fellowships was felt to be useful as well as other relevant academic qualifications. Lastly, there was a view that as many HE programmes already had professional statutory and regulatory body accreditations, and the reports for these were often detailed in terms of specific teaching activities, particularly around good or innovative practice, that these should not be discounted as a source of data.

There were also some views around data that has real potential to be useful, but would be more difficult to collect and assess. This included: student engagement data such as that collected by the NSSE in the United States, because relatively few institutions in the UK at present use this approach; teaching observations and peer reviews which are extremely valuable professional development activities and provide rich qualitative comments but would require analysis; and lastly, learning gain measures as there is currently not one agreed measure of learning gain in the UK. Workshop participants also considered whether capturing excellent practice through case studies that demonstrate impact, in a similar vein to the REF, might be a useful way forward. This links to 'comparability' which is our third theme.

Comparability

In discussions around comparability it was noted that one size would not fit all and that such an approach would make levelling an already bumpy playing field extremely difficult. Participants felt that there needed to be clear consideration of comparability even within metrics, as HE institutions in the UK are of variable type (public, private, generalist and specialist) and size (from less than 1000 students to over 30,000 students) and have different missions (religious, civic, business oriented etc.). The discussion explored whether these differences might lead to institutional groupings in the TEF or a set of core metrics (TEF 1) and then specific or weighted metrics that could be aligned to or chosen by institutions (TEF 2).

Discussions around comparability also covered how institutions currently support staff in developing excellent practice in a range of ways and how recognition and reward systems differ across the sector. This particularly aligns to the discussions around TEF's purpose in promoting the status of teaching. This theme provided some very thorough and heated discussions and is doubtless an area that will be explored further as the details of the TEF emerge. The issues of comparability discussed here, link well to the next section which considers how measures can be assessed without losing sight of the valuable diversity within the sector.

Assessment

In terms of assessment, discussions were wide ranging. While metrics were identified, key questions were raised about their reliability and validity. Reference was made to the time span that the TEF would measure and whether it would take place annually or every three to five years. This then led to issues about the size of the task for institutions and an agreement that it was essential this did not become as onerous as the current REF, as acknowledged in Jo Johnson's speech. The benefits that could accrue if TEF aligned to existing annual institutional monitoring and evaluation approaches was discussed, however the diversity within the sector of these approaches was recognised as an issue.

Who should be doing the assessing was also discussed, but other than reflecting on the need for there to be calibration across the sector (which would mean the need for externally standardised peer review) there was no clear view at this point about the most appropriate approach.

Risk and Opportunities

The last theme provided discussion that linked to a number of issues and discussions in the other thematic areas. There were concerns about the risks of TEF focusing only on the teaching rather than the broader educational experience that HE provides (a return to a teacher-led focus) and the impact that this could have on stifling innovation if teachers became risk-averse to keep their TEF scores high. Participants felt that it might be difficult to engage teachers in TEF if they believed there were to be more measures of personal performance and targets rather than a focus on student learning enhancement. There were also concerns that on the one hand, students may worry that praising excellent teaching might lead to an increase in fees, while conversely, on the other, that

giving negative feedback may lead to some institutions (and awards) losing credibility if a TEF league table was produced which it inevitably would be publicly available information.

However, the discussion also noted a number of potential opportunities arising from the TEF. The potential for the status of teaching to be equal to that of research was welcomed; many participants have been engaged in discussions around promoting teaching for many years within their institutions and beyond and there is much ground still to be gained. Whilst there has been some movement in the sector to ensure there is recognition for excellent teaching, such as National Teaching Fellowship and institutional and student-led teaching excellence awards schemes, career promotion opportunities for those who focus on teaching excellence have remained variable within the sector. Many welcome the impetus that TEF may bring. It was also felt that more researchers might become engaged in teaching if recognition and reward was both clear and available.

Outstanding Questions

The workshop facilitated some rich discussions and as it drew to a close, participants raised a series of outstanding questions that we had been unable to address either due to time or to limited knowledge:

- What is the actual purpose of the TEF and how will it be used?
- Will it operate at institutional, departmental or programme level and will it include all provision - undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research?
- What is the timescale for introduction?
- Will there be two phases: TEF1 and TEF2?
- Will the results be linked to league tables?
- Will there be some form of judicial review if results are linked to funding?
- Given current other initiatives in the sector such as change to the NSS (2017) and the review of QAA (ongoing) are all the relevant bodies speaking to each other?
- Will results follow the OFSTED-model resulting in red, amber and green institutional status or will results reflect a confidence judgement?
- Will existing measures be used or will new ones be developed?

Conclusion

By the time you are reading this article the sector will know what is being proposed for TEF and indeed the current speculation around whether there will be a TEF2 will also be known. The workshop provided an excellent opportunity to discuss the issues of a possible TEF together and draw on some of the contributions many had made through online discussions prior to the event. As the reality and implementation of TEF rolls out there will be other occasions where those across the sector will want to come together as a collaborative community, so that we can provide a useful and considered contribution. We encourage you all to stay engaged and share your views through any consultation opportunities that are provided.

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