

Chepstow | **Thursday 09.00-10.15**

***In a fast-changing higher education landscape can TEF help excellence and inclusion cohabit?(0204)***

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

**In a higher education landscape how can the TEF help excellence and inclusion cohabit?**

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016 marks a key turning point for higher education in the UK. Never before has the quality of teaching in higher education been subjected to such external scrutiny, culminating in high stakes assessment outcomes for institutions through the TEF's medal ranking system of gold, silver and bronze. Given how TEF has placed the sector in uncharted territory, higher education providers are understandably still trying to make sense of what the TEF means for them and how best to organise their institutional responses to it.

The panel will critically examine how the TEF has emerged as a key plank of the current government's policy for future funding of higher education. It will also consider the other spurs for reform in the Bill, such as the desire to create a culture in higher education where teaching has equal status with research. TEF also seeks to ensure that universities provide better information about their courses and the experiences that they can offer to prospective students. Finally, and perhaps predictably, TEF is part of the governmental insistence that higher education institutions

give value for money and can be clearly held accountable for any failure to provide a quality service to students.

With regard to the issue of inclusion there is also a strong emphasis in the Bill, and TEF specifically, on widening student participation across the higher education sector and 'levelling the playing field'. However, this aspiration to improve widening participation represents a real challenge as currently any analysis of the socio-economic intake of individual university student populations reveals that participation rates in higher education by disadvantaged students has actually been uneven, and even inequitable, across English universities since over the last thirty years, resulting in very different experiences and perceptions of the sector as a whole between different social groups (Bathmaker, Ingram, Abrahams, Hoare, Waller and Bradley, 2016). Indeed, this trend appears to have become more entrenched in recent years and has been clearly linked to the increased marketisation of the sector (McGettigan, 2013). With this in mind all the contributions to the panel will explore the ways in which staff, students and in higher education and HE in FE across UK have been affected by the TEF, with a particular focus on inclusion since the first publication of rankings in 2017.

The panel offers a number of critical and informed perspectives on the TEF as well as providing a platform for participants to share their experiences, understanding of and practices around excellence and inclusion. The paper from Dr Matt O'Leary and Dr Vanessa Cui will share some of the key findings from a recent national research project exploring the impact and implications of the TEF, including the awareness,

perception and involvement of academic and professional services staff nationally about the TEF in their respective workplaces. Drawing on data from a mixed methods research project involving over 6,000 participants, this paper will provide an insight into the situated experiences of academic and professional services staff and how the TEF is being mediated at policy and practice level.

Dr Colin McCaig's contribution explores the marketisation of higher education and how it is shaping the sector's values and practices. His work sets the Teaching Excellence Framework within the wider context of higher education marketisation and differentiation that dominates the English university landscape. He is particularly interested in exploring and critiquing the TEF's ability to function as a market signal in such a highly competitive environment.

Dr Sanja Djerasic's contribution explores how the TEF seems overly attached to the human capital paradigm, constructing university-gained knowledge as a private investment. She argues that it continues to support the construction of students as customers and consumers, neglecting their citizenship, and their sense of belonging and the existing contribution to their communities. In contrast, this paper considers more inclusive, community-based learning programmes to help the civic mission of the university by both capitalising on students' embeddedness in their communities, and recognising and rewarding the educational and civic gains therein contained.

Dr Amanda French's contribution identifies how TEF focuses institutional attention on ways in which a diverse student

population is supported in their learning, yet remains largely silent on staff diversity. She argues that this silence is problematic as key TEF metrics involve student evaluations of teaching and such evaluations are inevitably informed by gendered, raced and classed judgements (which disadvantage female and BAME academic staff. These staff are under-represented across the higher education sector, particularly in the more and most senior positions. This paper will provide a timely examination of the gendered, raced and classed implications of TEF, arguing that TEF is likely to reinforce extant structural inequalities and competitive hierarchies in the sector.

These presentations on the TEF clearly add to the conference themes of excellence and inclusion by stimulate debate on the following questions:

- What are delegates' personal experiences, views and ideas about the TEF and its impact on excellence in teaching and inclusion in higher education?
- What has been the impact and implications of TEF at institutional/programme level with regard to changes relating to inclusive learning and teaching?
- How does TEF affect the increasing stratification in HE university systems, often privileging economic ends over social ones and the potential impact this has on inclusive teaching and learning?

What alternative ways are individuals and institutions creating more inclusive teaching environments which support excellence in teaching and learning?

The question of whether the TEF can foster inclusion in higher education is a crucial one. Measuring teaching excellence and ensuring inclusion are elusive, but important, challenges for higher education and it is undoubtedly crucial that debate about both issues continue to be debated across the sector in forums such as the SRHE.

### **References**

Bathmaker, A.-M., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, A., Waller, R. and Bradley, H. (2016) *Higher education, social class and social mobility: The degree generation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

McGettigan, A. (2013). *The Great University Gamble*. London: Pluto Press.