

## **T7.2** Chepstow Friday 9 December 10.30 - 11.00

**TEF: what does it mean for English FE Colleges? (0606)**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching Excellence Framework, now called the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) was introduced in 2016 to promote excellence in teaching amongst providers of HE. In its second year (year 2), almost all English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) participated in TEF, although just over 50 percent FE colleges that teach HE took part in TEF. The overall participation has since increased, and a recent analysis suggests that total of 133 colleges have obtained ratings from TEF 2 and (or) TEF 3 (WonkHE, 2018). The literature surrounding TEF largely focuses on HEIs, and scholars and commentators have predominantly focussed on TEF participation and outcomes for HEIs. This paper sheds light on significance of TEF and the drivers for English FE colleges to participate in TEF. The paper also sheds light on complexities associated with the TEF exercise and how colleges are likely to use (or not) their TEF ratings when promoting their HE offer.

### **Context**

Further Education Colleges teach Higher Education (HE) to approximately 159,000 students in England (AoC, 2018). A majority of HE is taught at a sub-Bachelor level and is characterised by offering HE opportunities to students from less advantaged backgrounds (Saraswat et al, 2015). Over 200 colleges taught prescribed HE courses in 2016 and despite being considerably under-resourced when compared with HEIs, colleges are an integral part of the HE sector.

The policy landscape in England has been subject to significant changes and as part of the recent reforms, a new regulator called Office for Students (OfS) has been established. OfS has published a new regulatory framework which is underpinned by fostering competition amongst all HE providers but also providing a level playing field (OfS, 2018a). The framework also makes it mandatory for providers with over 500 students to participate in TEF. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was introduced by the government to build evidence about the performance of the UK's world-class HE sector, complementing the existing Research Excellence Framework with an analysis of teaching and learning outcomes. TEF is expected to provide clear information to students about where the best provision and outcomes can be found and drive up the standard of teaching across the sector (DfE, 2017).

During initial stages of its development, a differentiated fee based on TEF outcomes was put forward by the government and almost all English HEIs took part in TEF. 109 FE colleges had entered into TEF year 2 (HEFCE, 2017) and 106 FE colleges received a TEF year 2 award. 47 colleges received a TEF 3 award, although 20 of

these colleges had participated in TEF year 2 and were therefore not entering TEF for the first time (WonkHE, 2018). A total of 283 providers from England have entered into TEF2 and TEF3 (OfS, 2018b), and 133 of these providers are English FE colleges. The notably high levels of participation in TEF are indicators of significance of TEF for providers, albeit the reasons for participation and how TEF ratings may be used by different types of providers can be varied.

### **Research methodology**

The research is exploratory, interpretive and qualitative in nature and adopts a phenomenological research approach. The paper draws on a focus group discussion with HE leaders from 12 FECs. The participants represented a varied group of colleges, including, large, small, specialist and general FECs. The discussion focussed on what factors influence college participation in TEF and to what extent the exercise helped recognise excellence in teaching. The discussion also explored the challenges and complexities associated with the methods and criteria that underpin TEF and subject-level TEF. The themes identified during the focus groups have informed the design and development of questions for in-depth exploratory interviews with HE leaders at 8 colleges. The interviews are currently being undertaken with colleges that have received different TEF ratings (Gold, Silver, Bronze) as well as with colleges that have not yet participated in TEF.

### **Research findings**

Some of the themes and emerging findings are outlined below.

#### **Motivations for colleges to participate**

College participation in TEF driven by an opportunity to establish parity with other HE providers and gain recognition for high quality teaching that takes place in colleges. The ability to charge higher fee is not a driver for participation in TEF for FECs. This is evidenced by lower fee charged by colleges for a majority of their HE provision. Only 75 colleges had access agreements in place for 2017/18 (OFFA, 2018). For some colleges, participation from other FECs in the region has been a key driver for entering TEF.

#### **Reasons that limit participation**

Participation in TEF is burdensome for colleges. Colleges have limited resource and the HE teams at colleges are small. HE leaders hold multiple responsibilities and TEF submissions have been demanding and time consuming for colleges that have taken part in the exercise. Colleges also recruit a significant proportion of mature and part-time students and the participants argued that while TEF ratings can inform student choice for young full time prospective students, part time students often choose to study at their local college because of accessibility and high levels of support from college tutors. Such students are unlikely to be influenced by TEF ratings of providers.

#### **Complexities associated with TEF and subject TEF**

The TEF assessment framework considers teaching excellence across three main aspects, namely, Teaching Quality, Learning Environment, and Student Outcomes and Learning Gain. In doing so, TEF draws on metrics such as National Student Survey (NSS) scores, Destination of Leavers Survey from Higher Education (DLHE) data. Colleges have small class sizes for HE and may not meet the thresholds required for the data to be reportable to inform the TEF assessments. Colleges also teach one-year level 4 HE programmes and students on such programmes do not participate in NSS and are therefore not included in TEF assessments. Participants also raised concerns that TEF is likely to be subject to gaming by providers and methods need to be more robust to avoid any manipulative behaviour.

#### Use of TEF ratings by colleges

TEF is still in relatively early stages of development and it is premature to identify how TEF ratings will be used by colleges when promoting and marketing their offer. Colleges with gold or silver ratings are already using their TEF outcomes when promoting their HE offer.

#### Implications of TEF for college HE sector

The research participants perceive that TEF has some merits and despite the limitations of the metrics used in the exercise, for the first time, a genuine effort has been made in policy terms to recognise 'excellence in teaching'. It is likely that college participation in TEF will increase further although it is unlikely that all eligible college HE providers will enter into TEF.

It is particularly important that non-participation in TEF does not have any negative connotations. For colleges that have small HE student numbers, the pressure for participation is likely to increase as more colleges enter into TEF. TEF originated as a voluntary exercise and it continues to be voluntary for smaller providers with less than 500 HE students. Colleges are not a homogenous group and there is considerable diversity amongst colleges that teach HE. Principles of benchmarking in TEF have enabled some colleges to attain a better TEF outcome than their validating HEIs, as well as that of other HEIs in their regions, which is expected to boost confidence in high quality teaching that takes place in colleges. It is early to suggest how TEF will be used by students to inform their choices, however, it is likely to challenge the long-standing positioning and rankings of all HE providers.

#### References

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