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TEF and the marketisation of English HE (0656)

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SRHE symposium

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TEF and the marketisation of English HE:

This paper sets the Teaching Excellence Framework within the wider context of marketisation and differentiation that dominates English HE. In the discourse of most recent wave of marketisation policy in England (DBIS 2015; DBIS 2016; HMSO 2017) the importance of teaching excellence is central, designed as a set of metric indicators or market signals for applicant-consumers of where 'excellent teaching' can be found in the system. It became a condition of provider registration with the Office for Students that all HEPs engage in the TEF exercise from 2019-20. The market effect would be manifested by changed institutional behaviour, including enhanced quality across the system:

The TEF should change providers' behaviour. Those providers that do well within the TEF will attract more student applications and will be able to raise fees in line with inflation. The additional income can be reinvested in the quality of teaching and allow providers to expand so that they can teach more students. We hope providers receiving a lower TEF assessment will choose to raise their teaching standards in order to maintain student numbers. Eventually, we anticipate some lower quality providers withdrawing from the sector, leaving space for new entrants, and raising quality overall (DBIS 2015, para 1.4).

The importance of informed choice about alternatives is enhanced by an exhortation that the system should offer applicants a guide to "information regarding the quality of teaching they are likely to experience and what this is likely to mean for their future employment" (DBIS 2015, para 11), which introduces a major theme of the Green Paper *The Teaching Excellence Framework*:

Currently, not all universities assign teaching the same significance that they give research. Significant funding is allocated through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to universities who deliver high quality research. There is no mechanism in place to reward teaching, resulting in a lack of focus on providing a high quality student experience. Some rebalancing of the pull between teaching and research is undoubtedly required: this should not be at the expense of research, but through additional incentives to drive up teaching quality. (DBIS 2015, para 20)

The new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) aims to recognise and reward high quality teaching. ... The TEF will increase students' understanding of what they are getting for their money and improve the value they derive from their investment, protecting the interest of the taxpayer who supports the system through provision of student loans. It should also provide better signalling for employers as to which providers they can trust to produce highly skilled graduates. (ibid, para 21)

However, early plans to attach fee caps to the various TEF ratings (with the highest fee cap reserved only for Gold-rated institutions) were abandoned during the legislative process, and a subject-level TEF was piloted from 2017-18. This would eventually provide course-level applicant information, but further dilute the original intention that applicants could easily differentiate HEPs by a single marker of teaching excellence. While much of the critique of

the TEF is focused on its poor representation of actual teaching excellence, this paper also casts doubt on the TEF's ability to function as a market signal.

References

DBIS (2015) *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, London: TSO

DBIS (2016a) *Success as a knowledge economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, White Paper Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills by Command of Her Majesty, May 2016 Cm 9258
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HM Government (2017) *Higher Education and Research Act* Norwich: The Stationery Office.