

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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A missed opportunity? How the UK's teaching excellence framework fails to capture the voice of teaching staff.

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: Drawing on recent research involving over 6,000 academic staff from in Higher Education, this paper examines the impact of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) on their professional lives since its launch in 2016. Our findings raise fundamental concerns, conceptually and methodologically, about the fitness for purpose of the TEF as a policy and its failure to take into account the views and experiences of Higher Education teaching staff. With a reliance on proxy metrics that emphasise the economic value of Higher Education over the quality of teaching, we explore how the TEF lacks legitimacy and credibility as an instrument of measurement of teaching excellence across all levels of the workforce. We also argue that the TEF has failed to achieve its original aims of improving the quality of teaching and increasing student choice to date, which raises further questions about its effectiveness and the repercussions for future policy reform. (149)

Paper: This paper acknowledges that understanding, recognising and rewarding excellent teaching in higher education (HE) is an important undertaking that has been a long standing preoccupation within the sector. The concept of teaching excellence (TE) however, whilst seductive, remains elusive and inherently subjective. Personal qualities like enthusiasm, creativity, relevance, authenticity, clarity, organisation, stimulation and expertise are consistently evoked by studies spanning nearly thirty years, suggesting that the debate has not really moved on from the conundrum that some individual teachers have an enviable ability to engage students better than others (Sherman et al. 1987; Gibbs 2016; Su and Wood 2012; Bradley, Kirby and Madriaga 2015; Parker 2015; Greatbatch and Holland 2016). As well as these personal attributes, another key factor that emerges as significant to any assessment of lecturers' performance is their ability to manage practical tasks such as producing useful materials to aid student learning, giving constructive feedback and turning marking around on time (Gibbs 2010; Brusoni et al 2014). However, even these more concrete aspects of TE remain relatively difficult to measure in any meaningful way.

As part of this ongoing debate around teaching excellence we report on some key findings and

discussion from a research project undertaken on behalf of the University and College Union (O’Leary, Cui and French 2019) into HE staff perceptions of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The TEF was introduced in 2016 as part of the new Higher Education Research Act in the UK. Its purpose was, according to The Higher Education Funding Council for England (2017), to better inform students’ choices about what and where to study; better meet the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions and, as its name suggests, raise esteem for teaching by recognising and rewarding excellent teaching. However, the extent to which it has achieved these aims, especially the latter, remains a matter of debate (French and O’Leary 2017; O’Leary 2018, WonkHe, *passim*). The biggest concerns about TEF and its ability to capture TE arise primarily out of the Government’s decision to employ a relatively narrow set of core metrics which comprise:

- ‘Teaching Quality’ (student engagement, valuing teaching, rigour and stretch, and feedback);
- ‘Learning Environment’, (resources, scholarship, research and professional practice, personalised learning)
- ‘Student Outcomes and Learning Gain’ (employment and further study; employability and transferrable skills, positive outcomes for all) (DfE 2017).

These metrics are combined to establish an ‘initial hypothesis’ which, along with a 15 page ‘contextual report’, written by each institution and assessed by independent panels, is used to rank providers’ Teaching Excellence (TE). Together they create what the Chair of the TEF panel, Professor Sir Chris Husbands, refers to as ‘a picture of the institution’.

However, the research reported on in this paper strongly suggests that the TEF current framework, in both its conceptualisation and methodology, fails to address how teaching (excellent or otherwise) can actually be identified and evaluated and furthermore supported and developed, in any meaningful way. Indeed, our research confirmed that the very staff who are most involved in teaching are rarely part of any institutional TEF planning and implementation, rather they often find themselves marooned outside the TEF process, passive recipients of strategies and initiatives which are not informed by their day to day experience of teaching and learning in HE.

In the paper we will outline the mixed-methods approach taken in the research. It was designed to provide insights into current gaps in knowledge and research regarding the UK HE workforce’s awareness, involvement and perception of the TEF. Via an online survey (n>6000) we collected between 2,000 and 5,800 free text comments, with each response ranging from two or three words to over 400 words in length in some cases. We created data sets which were divided by question themes and each set of data was analysed thematically. A number of focus groups with HE staff were also held across the country which provided an opportunity for them to describe and explore their personal experiences of the TEF in more detail with the research team. The final phase of data analysis involved cross analysis of all the quantitative and qualitative material collected.

Our findings suggested that, despite its significance as a key driver in recent HE policy reform and the high profile attention given to it since its introduction, the TEF has failed to take into account the experiences and opinions of the vast majority of the staff teaching in HE. Overall, our research demonstrated that TEF engagement remains clearly marginalised for the vast majority of teaching staff, as more than seven in ten of our participants in teaching-focused/teaching-only positions

reported no involvement and/or awareness of TEF-related work in their institutions. In contrast, we found that most TEF-related activity is management-led (although it is usually coordinated by professional services at an institutional level) as most of our participants in management positions reported some involvement and/or awareness of TEF related initiatives in their institutions. Despite their lack of involvement in the TEF, many of our participants in teaching-focused/teaching-only positions also reported ways in which the implementation of the TEF has had a negative impact on their workloads. Predictably perhaps, we found that that the TEF has created new layers of administrative bureaucracy, such as centralised systems for assessment and curriculum design, which are, more often than not, introduced with no additional resources to support their delivery.

In conclusion, we strongly suggest that under the current framework, in both its conceptualisation and methodology, the TEF fails to address how teaching might actually be captured, evaluated supported or developed in any meaningful way. However, the research made a number of recommendations to address the obvious gulf that exists between institutional responses to the TEF and the members of staff in HEIs that it most impacts on. These measures included a call for a national debate on Teaching Excellence which could inform a fundamental review of the aims and methodology of the TEF; increased staff awareness and involvement in the TEF; formal recognition of the increasing TEF-related workload as well as dedicated time for staff to engage with meaningful and ongoing teaching development.