

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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A realist reconceptualization of England's Teaching Excellence Framework as a Value for Money framework

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Abstract: The paper is an analysis of England's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) introduced in 2016, employing realist theoretical tools to describe and explain the TEF as an important public policy affecting higher education nationally and internationally. The paper is an instance of public sociology that uses reflexive knowledge (in Michael Burawoy's typology) addressing matters of political and public concern, while using cross-disciplinary *methods* from the fields of public policy analysis and 'new institutionalism' under the umbrella of a realist *methodology*. Using the notion of reconceptualization from a realist research approach, the paper first describes and then explanatorily analyses how the TEF is conceptually much closer to the notion of a 'value for money' framework or a 'transparency tool' favoured by public auditors and civil servants (operating with a New Public Management ethos) than its purported status as an formal assessment of teaching quality in universities.

Paper: England's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was described by the UK Government launching it as a teaching quality assessment designed to help students make the right choices to study at university within a higher education market. The TEF in England assigns a government rating of Gold, Silver or Bronze to institutions providing higher education in England. The creation of the TEF is an important matter for higher education researchers internationally as governments across the world, particularly in Australia, plan to use aspects of it to drive their performance management of universities on teaching matters.

The framework bases its metrication and classification of teaching excellence not on a peer review of teaching via observation or other methods, however, but on student satisfaction data ('student evaluation of teaching') and student outcomes data on employment and, in future, graduate earnings. In this sense the TEF is quite different to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), upon which it is was ostensibly modelled and named. But to use a quote adapted from Voltaire on the misnomer of the so-called Holy Roman Empire, the TEF does not proximately assess 'teaching', nor

capture 'excellence' in that regard, neither can it be said to provide a coherent 'framework' encompassing the two. The differing underlying approach from officials in devising the TEF was not reflected in a change in the name of the policy, or the ostensible function of the framework (i.e. as a 'teaching quality assessment'), until two years after the launch of the TEF in 2017 when the name of the TEF was amended to include reference to 'student outcomes'.

This *aporia* or disjunction between the name and ostensible function of the framework compared with its actual configuration is resolved in the paper by proposing the *reconceptualization* of the TEF as a consumer 'transparency tool' or 'value for money' framework, derived from New Public Management (NPM) templates for reforming public services in recent decades. Reconceptualization is a methodological tool used by those following a broadly realist understanding of social theory, the metatheoretical basis of which is outlined. The conceptual components of what might be expected from a teaching quality assessment and an outcomes-based commissioning framework are introduced and the reconceptualization of the TEF is achieved by matching key aspects of the policy with a 'value for money' auditing methodology and transparency norms employed within official documents concerning public service 'reform' in the UK.

The paper first *descriptively* outlines, through use of tools from the discipline of public policy analysis (i.e. 'policy networks', 'stages heuristics' and 'policy cycles'), how the TEF policy came into being between 2010-17. The next section of the paper, in an *explanatory* mode, uses Margaret Archer's realist understanding of structure and agency to outline how civil servants were structurally (and culturally) 'conditioned' within their institutional context (or 'logic') during the formulation of the TEF to respond to the lack of a method to assess teaching quality (via peer review) by devising a policy that instead closely resembles a 'outcomes-based commissioning' framework or consumer 'transparency tool'. The notion of a scenario of 'policy mess' is cited as a relevant one, with public officials placed in a context where the heuristic of standard NPM norms helped them create a policy that was implementable and could be sold to Ministers.

The succeeding part of the paper outlines a realist critique of the TEF as a value for money framework or a transparency tool, tentatively proposing an alternative theoretical model for assessing teaching quality. The value for money framework or outcomes-based commissioning approach, with its exclusive focus on measurable student satisfaction ratings and metricated employment outcomes ('product variables' in John Biggs' 3P's model), is treated as falling victim of the 'epistemic fallacy' defined by the noted critical realist theorist, Roy Bhaskar. This is due to the fact that the 'product variables' used in the TEF are confined to the 'empirical domain'; i.e. that which can be measured via metrical indicators, eschewing analysis of that which might properly determine the underlying causes of teaching/education quality. Finding the causes of teaching quality would require, in the realist perspective, using models that include retroductive or retrodictive inference to and from the 'reality' of high quality teaching toward the 'actual' attainment of student learning gain (in the Bhaskarian threefold ontological distinction in understanding the social world).

Constructively, the paper proceeds to propose a model based on Biggs and Graham Gibbs's 'presage' and 'process variables' for teaching quality and Gordon Brown's realist understanding of the learning environment as pivotal factors capturing potential generative mechanisms that cause *real* education quality, which in turn creates the *actuality* of learning gain. Teaching or education quality can only be considered fully at all three levels of analysis and not confined to the one domain that can be

metricated from the product of outputs and outcomes of higher education.

The paper concludes by noting the contribution that the TEF has made to raising the profile of learning and teaching issues for strategic leaders in UK universities, in a context where international league tables and institutional prestige has largely been founded on the research profile of the institution. Yet the fundamental shortcomings of the TEF as a policy purporting to measure teaching or education quality cannot be overcome without a thoroughgoing look at what the reality of teaching quality really might be. A realist understanding of teaching quality is therefore required if the policy is to deserve its appellation, lest it be satirised (in Voltairean fashion) as a Teaching Excellence Framework in name only.

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