

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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R3 | Beaumaris 2

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Control,creativity and symmetry: Academic work and the student experience in the light of the English Teaching Assessment Framework.

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**Research Domain:** Academic practice ,work, careers and cultures (AP)

**Abstract:** The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) rates institutions in England delivering higher education provision *gold, silver* or *bronze* based on an assessment of six core metrics. In 2017 the focus was institutional performance; a trial of more intensive subject based assessment (SLTEF) is currently underway. The aims of this paper are not to engage in a critique of TEF methodology (Universities U.K., 2017), rather to explore the implications for social control embedded as consequential outcomes of the process. Complementary tendencies between changes to academic work (Musselin, 2007) and posited re-engineering of the student experience are documented and an 'agenda' for further research suggested.

Musselin, C. 'The Transformation of Academic Work: Facts and Analysis.' University of Berkeley, Centre for Studies in Higher Education, Occasional Paper 4.07.

Universities UK (2017) 'Review of the Teaching Excellence Framework Year 2'.

**Paper:**

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Abstract

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) rates institutions in England delivering higher education provision *gold, silver* or *bronze* based on an assessment of six core metrics. In 2017 the focus was institutional performance; a trial of more intensive subject based assessment (SLTEF) is currently underway. The aims of this paper are not to engage in a critique of TEF methodology (Universities U.K., 2017), rather to explore the implications for social control embedded as consequential

outcomes of the process. Complementary tendencies between changes to academic work (Musselin, 2007) and posited re-engineering of the student experience are documented and an 'agenda' for further research suggested.

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Paper

The TEF originated as part of the Conservative Party election manifesto of 2015 with the ostensible aim of ensuring students received value for money against their 'investment' in higher education. As a contextual, relative, measure of performance, the exercise involves the creation of institutional benchmarks, operationally based on core metrics, to create what is known as the *initial hypothesis*. Assessment involves comparison of data on the ground with the benchmark to generate *significance flags* on a continuum from double positive to double negative. A badge, *gold, silver or bronze*, is derived by the weighting of the flags and their combinations. The technical complexities of the TEF will not be elaborated here, save to note that there are six metrics: *teaching on my course; assessment and feedback; academic support; non continuation; employment or further study; highly skilled employment or further study*. The first three metrics, abstracted from the National Student Survey (NSS), are worth half of the final three, which are the product of government statistical agencies. These external metrics are of particular relevance to the content of this paper because of their relevance to both academic work and the emergent student experience. In England participation in the TEF is more or less mandatory and has significant implications for funding, in other parts of the United Kingdom providers are able to opt in without funding implications.

### **Academic work and the student experience.**

Previous empirical investigation of academic work (Balsamo, 2012;2014) indicated a scarcity of knowledge and understanding regarding both the nature, and transformation, of work in a 'massified' higher education environment such as the U.K. Prompted by Bordieu's (1996) contention that massification had largely been considered in numerical terms, an attempt was made to understand the political economy of changes to the *labour process* in a purposive sample comprised of research and teaching intensive universities. The fieldwork involved in depth interviews with senior managers (pro vice chancellors, deans, and department heads) and also 'non-academic' managers (registrars, and faculty administrators) (Fontana and Frey, (2003); Whitchurch, 2006). Conventional triangulation, for example attendance at faculty meetings and scrutiny of minutes, was also undertaken (Jick, 1979).

Beginning with the taxonomy suggested by Barnett (1992), where teaching and research are seen as incommensurate activities, because their inner operations are defined by a preoccupation with *process* and *output* respectively, a contrary phenomenon of *hybridisation* was discovered. In the research intensive institutions process methodologies, conventionally deployed in the management of teaching, were applied to the management of research. In the teaching intensives, output methodologies, traditionally prominent in the management of research, were strongly evident in the management of teaching. The most significant output measure at the time was the NSS, increasingly used as a management tool to control the performance of academic labour. The findings suggested that *hybridisation* had important explanatory value in understanding the management of teaching

and research. It was able to shed light on how management in contemporary universities is intensified by the extension of reach and control over the key elements of the academic labour process.

Within the wider environment of the neoliberal reshaping of higher education, where relations of competition are consciously embedded (Olsen and Peters, 2005; Polanyi, 1957), universities find it necessary to gain control over their complete range of operations. *Hybridisation* aids this where the stakes are high. Research intensives need to secure higher levels of funding and both research and teaching intensives are exposed to the panoptical effects of output measures codified in league tables (Hazelkorn, 2011). Finally, intensified management, even though resisted by the "responsible autonomy" (Friedman, 1977) inherent within the academic role – arguably now a vestigial quality – leads to the neo-corporate university. Musselin (2007) describes how in the neo-corporate institution academics are defined much less by their relationship to a professional group, but, instead by how they relate to the institution. As a result, allegiance to the subject matter of academic specialism is attenuated, replaced by the higher education equivalent of the 'company person'.

The research described above was undertaken before the arrival of the TEF which, in the context of the above, can be seen as an output measure par excellence. Attempts to measure continuation employment and/or further study are tough metrics that may in the end be methodologically unsustainable. However, it is to the ideological dimensions of the TEF outputs that discussion now turns. Clearly, financial concerns, ensuring that graduates pay back the funds that they have been loaned, are in policy makers' minds. Is the concern to promulgate and police repayment by this measurement simply an attempt to close the fiscal gap between advance and repayment? Is 'value for money' all that is at stake here?

In order to clarify and explore the ideological implications of this aspect of the TEF, together with emerging symmetries between the intensified management of academic work and the student experience, two immediate concerns and possibilities present themselves. Whilst ideologically linked they can be heuristically separated.

The first concerns the student experience and nature of curriculum content. In short, what will the educational experience of students begin to look like as the exigencies of the TEF strengthen their grip? Experience in the sector to date suggests that some institutions are lessening the requirements for progression in order to manage continuation. As a consequence, assessment practice becomes the target of intervention. Whilst sound pedagogic reasons may exist for reform, consequentialism is suspected. Allied to this is the pressure to reduce marking turn around, directly increasing the work rate of academics. Significantly, curriculum content is also seen as a target for reengineering. Here the familiar clarion call to engage with the so called 'real world' takes a renewed form as a technocratic obsession with generalisable skills is set to supplant specialised subject knowledge. Social theory is out, replaced by the apparently illustrious virtues of teamwork: personality rather than subject knowledge becomes the object of assessment. Here the symmetry between the experience of the academic and that of the student is emphasised as the influence of the subject is attenuated.

The second, more abstract, concern relates to the revitalisation of the Kingsley Amis' doctrine of 'more meaning worse', albeit in a revised form (Curtis, 2016). The concern of conservatives that too many institutions and too much knowledge may be disruptive appears as to have become ingrained in to the apparently neutral fibre of the TEF, as a result its ideological potency as a force for social control, whether directly intentional or not, is a serious concern requiring further investigation.

This paper briefly highlights important contemporary trends in English higher education. Intensification of the academic labour process, as a result of *hybridisation*, has been empirically demonstrated by previous research; changes to the structure of curricula, where the influence of subject matter is becoming attenuated, as a measure to optimise employability, can also be readily observed. The interplay surrounding the pragmatics of 'value for money' and the deeper ideological ramifications of curriculum reengineering is more complex. The potentially deleterious *effects* of the valorisation of the generic, at the expense of the specific, can be intuitively grasped in the social sciences, arts and humanities with considerable face validity. However, granular level investigation is required to both establish this further and to elaborate the consequences in relation to social control and the diminution of creativity.

Balsamo, D. 'To what extent are the management of teaching and the management of research distinct, contradictory or complementary activities in contemporary higher education?

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