

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

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“Wishing won’t make it so”: Deliverology, TEF and the wicked problem of inclusive teaching excellence.

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** In official commentary, the TEF is explicitly positioned as a policy lever, designed to force HE providers to raise the standards of their teaching. The assessment methodology used to determine institutional ratings, however, is complex and opaque and at the same time, there is a high level of abstraction between the metrics underpinning the framework and teaching practice on the ground. Moreover, the HE sector, has long acknowledged that the pedagogic inclusivity challenges targeted by TEF split-metrics are highly complex, context-dependent wicked problems (Bore and Wright 2009). All of these issues mean that there can be no straightforward transmission of the regulatory force transmitted by the TEF to drive provider behaviour. From this perspective, the TEF appears to function as a purely performative policy act, responding to the political need to acknowledge HE inclusion and social mobility challenges, whilst at the same time shielding its architects from the highly complex challenges it throws up. I conclude, nonetheless, on a note of optimism by suggesting that the very complexity and indeterminateness of the TEF, combined with the regulatory pressure on institutions to formulate a response, might open up institutional spaces which learning and teaching practitioners can occupy to research, test and develop ways of delivering inclusive learning and teaching.

**Paper:** The current neoliberal malaise of Higher Education has some roots in Deliverology, a performative New Public Management approach associated with the New Labour Government of the 1990s (Ball et al 2012; Riddell 2013). The innovation of this approach to social management was to divide governance into four key stages; clarifying the social problem; identifying key stakeholders (‘delivery chains’), monitoring progress against sets of carefully chosen metrics, against which shortfalls triggers to action further responses (Barber 2011; Ridell 2013; Nordstrum et al 2017). From this perspective, policymakers articulate the problem, set the agenda and devise and impose relevant targets, while delegating responsibility for knowing how to resolve and solve these problems to delivery stakeholders further down the ‘delivery chain’. For Nordstrum et al (2017) ‘Deliverology assumes that solutions are already known’ (51).

While the design of the TEF is informed by Deliverology's performative components, it goes even further in bracketing off explicit concerns with solutions and mechanisms. The series of calculations through which the framework produces a bronze, silver or gold teaching quality assessment is opaque, complex and unpredictable, relying on a mixture of quantitative measures and the judgement of an assessment panel. This panel, which must balance and weight 6 core metrics, each of which are then further split into student diversity groups, must also consider an institution's contextual benchmarks and a narrative submission, before agreeing an outcome award on a three point scale.

Moreover, as many observers have suggested, there is an oblique relationship between the metrics used and their purported object, teaching excellence (e.g. Baker 2018; Gunn 2018; Gillard 2017; Tomlinson et al 2018; Frankham 2017; Barkas et al 2017). The core metric for 'teaching quality', for example, is derived from National Student Survey outcomes. It aggregates levels of student agreement on a five point Likert scale across four different NSS question addressing the 'teaching on my course'. Responses are collated and converted into positive or negative flags against institution specific benchmarks, before being split down further by student diversity characteristics (DfE 2017). As aggregations of responses to four separate aspects, across a student's whole academic experience, the specific 'target' or 'reference' of such metrics is impossible to parse.

At the same time, the TEF rests on an implicit assumption that HE providers can devise reliable mechanisms to produce excellence. Even a cursory reading of literature reviews on the assessment of teaching quality (Greatbatch and Holland 2016), teaching excellence (Gunn and Fisk 2013), degree outcome differences (Mountford Zimdars et al 2015) and inclusive learning and teaching (Hockings 2010) reveals a wide range of factors understood to impact on students' academic experience of HE. This complexity increases further when considering the differential HE experiences and outcomes of the different student cohorts constituting the split metric groups. When considering the relationship between teaching and student academic outcomes, Carnell and Fung (2017), for example, observe there are

huge numbers of variables at play [...] for example, in student demographics; in student prior learning experiences; in disciplinary and departmental contexts and cultures; in the communication styles and assumptions of those who are teaching or facilitating learning. (3)

As such, the teaching quality and inclusive teaching issues for which the core and split TEF metrics are proxy measures represent wicked problems for HE providers (Barkas et al 2017; Zepke 2018). Such wicked problems are highly complex issues that are 'not easily defined', have 'many causal levels and cannot be solved by generic principles or linear heuristics' (Bore and Wright 2009: 242).

This complexity serves to undermine TEF's policy function; to incentivise HE providers to increase teaching excellence. The level of abstraction between framework metrics and teaching practice

makes it impossible to devise practical mechanisms through which to reliably influence student NSS responses.

At the same time, however, political convention and public expectation requires Government and policymakers to attend to social and moral issues (Marginson 2014; Ball 2012; Hockings 2010). As Bowl (2019) suggests, when addressing HE, 'it would be deemed unacceptable for a government not to profess some kind of commitment to equality, equity, fairness or social mobility' (12). While TEF was originally devised to generate consumer data for the rational *student economicus* conjured by the 2016 HE White Paper, it was also performatively positioned as a policy lever to drive up the quality of HE teaching for 'all students' including 'those from disadvantaged backgrounds' (DBIS 2016: 14). From this perspective, the inclusion of 'split' diversity metrics begins to look like an ideological masterstroke that makes it possible to both have and eat the marketisation cake.

This is not, however, to suggest that such policy mobilisations do not have positive outcomes. Stephen Ball's (1993; 2015) work on policy 'ad hockery', suggests that there may be a space in which performative policy agendas can be subverted and used to advance a more progressive agenda. Ball's (2015) analysis of the way that school teachers resisted unwelcome policy impositions, helps unpick how this might work in practice by focusing on their subtle modes of resistance and refusal in the 'mundane and quotidian *practices of policy translation and enactment* as these occur in the everyday life of schools' (308). Likewise, writing about the imposition of performative management techniques in the learning and skills sector, Steer et al (2007) observe that practitioners might respond to policy levers by 'strategically' complying with 'the demands of external policy levers, whilst acting in accord with their own professional values and judgement' (187).

From this perspective, the very unrealisability of the TEF, the blank space where solutions should be, provides an opening for inclusive learning and teaching practitioners. Pressure on HE providers to respond to TEF's challenges could open up fractures in organizational logics, in which opportunities for more inclusive learning and teaching practice could take root. The need to respond to the TEF forces HE providers to confront the localized context of individual practice, disciplinary differences, and the diversity of students. This creates spaces for practitioners to step in and offer their capacity for providing the localized and context-calibrated expertise required.

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