

Academics' experience of national teaching evaluation schemes: Insights from research-intensive universities

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Higher education provides teaching and research which shapes society. Teaching evaluation in higher education is a 'wicked' problem – it has many different and changing variables. Some countries evaluate teaching nationally, which shapes material conditions of society. Proponents argue this offers accountability of teaching quality to society. In England, the Teaching Excellence Framework evaluates teaching nationally. This paper explores the reality of TEF within the context of research-intensive universities. Research-intensive universities place more value on research than teaching and thus, I explored whether TEF promotes the importance of teaching in academics in these contexts and how TEF influences student-facing teaching. In these contexts, TEF fails, to influence student-facing teaching and 'alienates' academics. I argue that national evaluation should not consider metrics such as student progression. Future research can assess if national evaluation influences other aspects of teaching, and question what future roles higher education may take.

Full paper

Introduction

The role of higher education (HE) in society is complex, providing teaching and research which shapes society, transcending economic, social and cultural realms (Boulton and Lucas, 2011). There is increasing pressure on academics to produce research with 'impact'. This comes at a time where teaching quality is under scrutiny. Teaching evaluation schemes are one way in which this scrutiny is applied. Some countries adopt national schemes, to evaluate teaching nationally. In England, this role is taken by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). However, the evaluation of teaching in HE is a 'wicked' problem as it has many different and changing variables.

TEF evaluates teaching in the form of assessing the overall quality of an institution where it awards ratings, chiefly: Gold, Silver and Bronze. Proponents of ratings argue that these provide accountability to society, offering an indication of teaching quality. Opponents argue that they lead to treating members of the public as consumers, a consequence of an economy-led sector. Thus, this system of awarding ratings to institutions is particularly relevant considering that some nations aspire to mirror the economy-led HE sector in England, and that national evaluation schemes shape some material conditions of society.

As there is increasing focus on producing research with ‘impact’ and as research-intensive universities place more value on research than teaching (Graham, 2019; Perkins, 2018), I investigated whether TEF promotes the importance of teaching in academics in these contexts and whether the scheme influences student-facing teaching; for example, learning material and delivery of lectures.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 13 academics from five universities in England. The findings revealed TEF as not having an influence on student-facing teaching and that it ‘alienates’ academics from such teaching. Considering this, I argue that national evaluation schemes should not use metrics such as student progression.

What is our rating?

A striking finding was the lack of any awareness amongst most academics of their own institutional rating (ratings were last awarded in late 2023) with some not even being aware of TEF in any way. There was also no individual-level worry about what rating the institution had. For example, participant 6 said “TEF isn't talked about at all. It's not on the agenda.” Being unaware of the ratings awarded or TEF itself does not mean that no work is taking place on improving student-facing teaching; however, it does mean that TEF does not influence this. This in itself was evidenced by no academics speaking about changes to student-facing teaching because of TEF, despite being asked many questions to instigate such conversations. For example, academics were asked about experience, adaptations, positive and negative aspects in relation to TEF, whether teaching is changing, future developments and specifically, aspects of teaching that changed because of TEF. A main criticism of TEF is whether it indeed promotes teaching excellence (for example, see Ashwin, 2022). These findings provide evidence that it does not in research-intensive institutions. Despite societal concerns of teaching quality, there is no individual-level worry of how the teaching quality of one’s institutions is perceived.

Data revealed that TEF may be causing more drawback than benefit in the form of ‘alienating’ those involved. For example, participant 11 stated that “changes [related to TEF] are more or less for the paperwork” where “Bureaucracy is really a big barrier [to changes]”; participant 8 thought of TEF as a “tick box exercise”. Such data uncovers an issue with national teaching evaluation in HE, an issue that may be a consequence of operating in an economy-led sector: bureaucracy. Findings on previous iterations of TEF also identify an ‘alienating’ issue, where focus is taken away from student-facing teaching towards bureaucracy (Graham, 2019; O’Leary et al., 2019). Ashwin (2020) argues that evaluation is an important mechanism that enables accountability, particularly to stakeholders; however, he recommends that measurement should focus on *educational* processes and *educational* outcomes; whilst enhancement, on teaching *practices*. The findings provide evidence for these recommendations. Particularly, they provide evidence for less emphasis on bureaucratic measures such as metrics unrelated to student-facing teaching quality. Thus, national evaluation schemes should not consider rates such as student progression (for TEF, this includes the National Student Survey [NSS]).

Future research can assess if national evaluation schemes influence other aspects of teaching; it should question what future roles HE, and individuals in it, may take. Limitations include the investigation of a national evaluation scheme in one nation. Future work can explore issues discussed in the current work with data from other nations.

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<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/study/phd/phd-in-higher-education-research,-evaluation-and-enhancement/>

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