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The English Teaching Excellence Framework: Excellence, Metrics, Evaluation, Inclusivity And (Unintended) Consequences. (0359)

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Introduction

Our objectives are to explore what underlies the recent introduction of a Higher Education Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England and examine the (unintended) consequences of TEF in relation to teaching excellence, assessment metrics and student inclusivity. Unlike some contributors to TEF literature (Barkas, Scott et al. 2017, Perkins 2018), we also emphasise other recent changes to the HE system, suggesting TEF is not about teaching excellence or ensuring all students achieve a successful job outcome but rather an endeavour to increase competition between public and for-profit universities.

Background

TEF is part of a basket of market HE measures introduced by a Conservative government. Initial TEF purposes were to rebalance over-emphasis on research brought about by the Research Excellence Framework (REF), raise the quality of HE teaching and provide a basis on which applicants can choose between HE providers. TEF was meant to be low-cost but with the piloting of subject/discipline-based not institution-wide evaluation, the costs of running peer-panels and the time/resource spent by institutions in compiling submissions are rising. TEF is part of what a report on REF metrics (Wilsdon 2015) referred to as the 'metric tide' and underpinned by the development of new managerialism in HE (Deem 2017a), and by trying to achieve common HE quality standards across Europe (Cardoso, Rosa et al. 2015). Research on teaching excellence emphasises the link to student learning, the significance of teams and different elements of teaching: curriculum design, course content, assessment, pedagogy and leadership (Elton 1998, Gibbs, Knapper et al. 2009, Ashwin 2015). TEF was originally intended to permit fee increases above the headline-fee level, though this is now suspended pending the findings of a broader investigation into the costs of HE. Some data feeding into TEF (e.g graduate employment outcomes) are not related to teaching quality but rather to social class, cultural capital and degree subject (Behle, Atfield et al. 2015). Metrics such as student satisfaction with teaching are indicators, not a direct attempt to measure teaching quality (Spooren 2013). If the wrong indicators/metrics are selected, they can drive perverse behavior (Hanson 2000).

Theory, methodology and sources

The paper draws on literature, analysis of TEF policy documents and reports, plus media coverage. Theoretically it utilises work on how teaching related metrics/indicators work and what they measure (Hanson 2000, Spooren 2013) and on how teaching excellence can be recognised and rewarded (Elton 1998, Gibbs, Knapper et al. 2009, Ashwin 2015) to question the arbitrary nature of the metrics used. We ask too if the emphasis on social mobility evident in the consultative papers prior to the 2017 Higher Education Act can actually be achieved by means of a TEF-like exercise. We draw upon research about how different ideal types of universities approach academic quality (Paradeise and Thoenig 2015). Finally we use the concept of unintended consequences of social action (Merton 1936, Krücken 2014), to speculate on the effects of TEF.

Findings

In TEF 1 institutions could put up their fees if they had passed a recent institutional visit from the Quality Assurance Agency. In TEF 2, the established order of English universities in research assessment exercises, with the Russell Group research-intensives (Paradeise's 2015 'top of the pile', 'venerables' and 'wannabees' in the middle and former ex-polytechnic 'missionaries' at the bottom) are challenged somewhat. However, some Russell group institutions used written self-assessments to overturn negative benchmark metric flags and obtain Silver or Gold. In 2018 both TEF 3 (with a much smaller entry, mostly those trying to improve) and pilot studies to consider subject-level assessment have taken place. There is as yet little written by TEF panel members on the TEF process. There are two overviews TEF 2 from UUK (Universities UK 2017) and the Higher Education Policy Institute (Beech 2017). Unlike REF/RAE, we lack any detail about how the cultural and social processes of the panel system work (Lamont 2009). Nor do we know the precise relationship between split or sub-metrics/indicators/benchmarks and written self-assessment submissions. Gaming of TEF is as likely as gaming of REF (Lucas 2006) but it is not yet clear what forms TEF gaming will take. In future new metrics/indicators may be added to TEF, from learning gain to teaching intensity. But as Ashwin (2017) notes, the latter may be meaningless without evidence that contact hours are a useful proxy for teaching excellence. Furthermore as the TEF has now become the Teaching Excellence Framework and *Student Outcomes* Exercise, it seems market competition for graduates paying back the loan fast (those in highly paid jobs) may see a move away from teaching excellence, as the major determinants of getting such jobs do not include teaching quality.

Reflections and conclusions

TEF looks set to become part of the English HE landscape for the foreseeable future even though it scarcely measures teaching excellence and relies on remote judgments and convenient metrics/indicators, not visits to institutions to observe the teaching of those HEIs awarded Gold. The Office for Students is also challenging established methods of European/international HE quality assessment and enhancement in favour of allowing the market to shape both. As TEF increases in complexity its costs will rise. Academics will be performance-managed to improve their teaching but receive no rewards. Students will still be confused about how to choose their programme and university. Though the focus on split-metrics around race/ethnicity and gender may lead to greater support for widening participation students, this may not change who succeeds in the labour market. Finally, the tide of unrest around Vice-Chancellor pay as well what English universities' purposes are, following the recent UCU pensions strike, is leading to greater questioning of the validity of the market-driven approach.

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