

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Queering the TEF

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Abstract: It may initially seem difficult to argue with the sentiments enshrined in the rhetoric surrounding the TEF – raising the status of teaching, re-balancing its relationship with research, and incentivising institutions to focus on the quality of teaching. Clearly, these are laudable aspirations that will chime with anyone who believes in the importance of students experiencing an education that enriches them and their potential. Drawing on Fraser and Lambie’s (2015) use of queer theory in relation to pedagogy, however, this paper aims to expose the TEF as a constraining exercise that restrains diversity and limits potential. Although queer theory is more usually linked with gender and sexuality studies, the queer lens used here helps us to question and contest the essentialising logics behind the TEF, and its effects in HE classrooms. This queer analysis can thus be helpful as a politically generative exercise in opening up space for new possibilities

Paper: Introduction

This paper draws on queer theory to expose the TEF as a constraining exercise. Although usually linked with gender studies, Fraser and Lambie (2014/15: 65) identify its two core elements – “its ethos of [...] contesting norms” and its aim to “disrupt [...] normative power relations.” They thus present an argument for bringing a queer lens to higher education:

In this invocation, queer is not so much a (sexual) identity as it is a practice [...] for questioning the logic of normalcy (p.65).

While there are many criticisms of the TEF, Rudd (2017) critiques its use of the National Student Survey. This aspect is important because it embeds the student-consumer at its heart. Though the concern with satisfaction might seem benign, the notion is rooted in a business ontology which

normalises a relentless homo-economicus identity.

TEF – cementing consumerist machismo

The TEF's fetishisation of satisfaction is one of four elements entrenching its consumerist hegemony. The second is the visible way it reduces HE to a gold/silver/bronze stamp. From a queer perspective, this parading of colours could be read as a flamboyantly visual attempt to flaunt the TEF's consumerist mission, in a way that is out, loud and proud. Alongside its function as a consumer-branding system, the third element concerns its fetishisation of competition. Institutions are incentivised to aim for gold to attract 'better' students and to boost income by raising fees (Ashwin, 2017). Students are incentivised to use TEF data to decide which institutions will maximise their chances of gaining the 'best degree' and the 'best employment' options. TEF logic thus encourages students to foreground economic motives (Bartram, 2016), framing the purpose of HE within a logic of competitive self-interest. A queer lens would again contest this 'biggest and best' macho-normative framing. The TEF's logic is further promoted by its emphasis on employability metrics. Barkas *et al.* (2017: 7) argue that employability has become enmeshed in a normalising discourse around HE. Seen through a queer lens, this contributes to the perpetuation of narrow expectations, privileging a fixation with macho-metrics, while 'othering' alternative ways of desiring.

'TEFfects' of the macho monolith

A queer analysis thus suggests these features combine to normalise a student-consumer identity but why might this be problematic? Firstly, its fetishisation of satisfaction may be counter-productive. Frankham (2017:635) explains that "course material that is challenging, and assignments which present students with a challenge are clear foci for student expressions of dissatisfaction [...] this may be diminishing the intellectual challenge of a university degree [...]." Heaney and Mackenzie (2017) expose two further effects: a reduced pedagogical diet ("pedagogical exploration becomes totally subordinated to the production of satisfied and employable customers" - p.13) – and a reduced course offer as universities remove degrees associated with lower satisfaction. More worryingly, Furedi (2017) argues mechanisms like the TEF operate to diminish capacity - the culture of "institutional flattery" (p.140) infantilises students and reduces potential.

From these combined 'TEFfects,' the student picture that emerges is – arguably - unflattering: diminished, inclined to massage by metrics, seduced by dataset desires, addicted to narrow satisfactions. Through a queer lens, perhaps the inevitable outcomes of a stifling (hetero-) normative ontology that fetishizes consumerist logics.

Moving forward with a queer eye

I have argued the TEF normalises a consumerist identity. Rudd (2017:73) explains how once such a vision has become embedded:

A powerful new 'doxa' (Bourdieu 1984) may arise that will result in compliance to the new wider discourse and newly constructed 'realities', both through conscious resignation, and

more efficiently, through unconscious compliance. This may be precisely the moment we are at with regard to the Higher Education and Research Act, and particularly the TEF.

A queer analysis would concur that the TEF privileges this consumer doxa. As Warner (1993: xxvi) suggested, queer theory aims to resist “regimes of the normal,” and this paper demonstrates the TEF is part of ‘the HE normal.’ Queer theory is therefore helpful in formulating a counter-stance against the TEF’s hegemony – but it can go beyond this by helping us to reflect on alternatives. It reminds tutors of addressing what Hull (2002:19) sees as teachers’ key challenge:

The teacher’s problem is to help awaken desire [...]. The solution involves developing students’ capacity for openness and receptivity to their own and to one another’s hearts, minds and passions.

This challenge is unlikely to be supported by a system that fetishizes satisfaction and competition. Munoz (2009:1) shows how a queer view helps educators contemplate alternatives:

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.... Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present..... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality [...].

My contention is that the TEF as part of this ‘quagmire’ suffocates better pleasures and closets potentiality. Queer theory’s contribution lies in encouraging reflection on practices that transform, rather than comply with dominant educational orthodoxy. Queering the TEF would thus involve a mission to allow students to bring non-utilitarian desires out of the closet and experiment with different ways of enjoying university; to queer the service-provider/user binary; to remind students of the humanistic ‘gains’ university can offer – in short, the need to nurture a dynamic diversity of satisfactions, pleasures and motives. The challenges involved are not insignificant – policy conditions students to internalise an economically-focused, macho-subjectivity, but Fraser and Lamble (2015:74) sound a note of optimism:

For us these strategies are about making small changes in order to open spaces for bigger ones; they are about doing transformative politics at the micro-relational level in order to question and rethink power at the structural or systemic level. [...]

Queering the TEF by adopting such approaches could not only help to expose the worst TEEffects, but – to finish with a filmic flourish- to move UK HE from the stark machismo of Quentin Tarantino to the gentler sensibilities of Quentin Crisp.

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