

**Conditions affecting Policy Implementation in Research-Intensive**

**Universities: Perceptions from Academics**

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### **Abstract**

#### **Background**

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) can be described as a scheme of teaching excellence that was introduced to promote teaching excellence and enhancement in England. However, its reception in research-intensive universities remains underexplored. The study investigates how academics in such institutions perceive and respond to the TEF as a policy instrument.

#### **Purpose**

The study sought the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF, aiming to examine its impact on their experiences and attitudes, and what these perceptions reveal about conditions affecting policy implementation at this type of university.

#### **Methodology and methods**

A qualitative, interpretivist approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 academics from five research-intensive universities in England. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The idea of the implementation staircase was used to interpret the findings.

## Results

Five major themes emerged: lack of familiarity with the TEF, perceptions of a lack of relevance of the TEF to the academics, unsympathetic attitudes towards it, the TEF inducing anxiety in staff and perceptions of it as unhelpful. One minor theme also emerged, the TEF instigating the promotion of teaching-focused careers. Academics perceived the TEF as disconnected from their institutional and professional realities, often regarding it as irrelevant to their research-oriented roles.

## Conclusions

The findings reveal a significant dissonance between the TEF's policy intentions and its enactment at the bottom of the staircase — the academic level — in research-intensive universities. Various factors are suggested to shape the enactment, mainly research as the cultural priority, perceived institutional messages regarding the TEF of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement and a perceived pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations. The study suggests that policy can consider the factors affecting those on the ground at different types of locations, as these condition policy implementation.

Keywords: Policy implementation, teaching excellence framework, higher education policy, research-intensive universities, implementation staircase, academic perceptions, policy evaluation

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**Author's declaration:** I declare that the study is my own and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. From the overall project, there was another piece of work which emerged. This is identified below.

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Signature 

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This thesis examines the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities in England regarding the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) as a policy instrument. By assessing how academics in this context respond to the TEF, conceptualised through the idea of the implementation staircase (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2006), it aims to offer conditions that affect policy implementation in research-intensive universities. Assessing these perceptions, this thesis also aims to provide a window into academics' experiences and attitudes regarding the TEF. I believe this to be the first empirical study to examine these perceptions exclusively in this context.

To provide context for my interest in this study, the next section explores the origins of this study. The section that follows examines the purpose of the study. The study context — the context of the universities where the data are collected — is explored in section 1.3. Following this, the rationale for the study is provided. The research questions that were developed to frame the qualitative analysis are provided in the section that follows. To contextualise the study, the section that then follows provides the policy context in England, and the relevant policy context in the UK. For the same reason, relevant information on the TEF, REF and their policy context is provided in the sections that follow. This includes information on the establishment of the TEF. To provide further contextualisation, the section that follows abridges the methodology and methods chapter. The last section in this chapter outlines the chapters in this thesis.

### **1.1 Study origins**

I developed a special interest in policy during Part One of the Philosophiae Doctor (PhD) in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement (HEREE). This is the Doctor of Philosophy programme for which this thesis is being submitted; specifically, this thesis is being submitted to meet the requirements for Part Two of the programme. During Part One, I evaluated a policy, using the policy evaluation tool Reasons, Uses, Foci, Data, Audience, Timing and Agency (RUFDATA). As part of the preliminary work, I explored the literature on policy and conditions affecting policy. This developed my interest in policy. As part of the exploration of the literature regarding

policy, I came across the implementation staircase (Saunders, 2006), which is how I developed an interest for the idea. My interest in policy was then strengthened when I undertook the evaluation. The policy that was evaluated was the policy by the Office for Students (OfS, 2022b) that sets out condition B3 as part of higher education regulation in England. The policy sets out the use of certain performance indicators, known as the baselines for student outcomes indicators or in short, B3 metrics. The performance indicators are used to inform the TEF which is how I started looking at the literature on the TEF, leading to my interest in examining the TEF further. At one point, I became acutely conscious that literature on perceptions regarding the TEF from a research-intensive context is scant. This is what led to my interest in the conditions affecting policy in this context. Ultimately, the various aspects provided in this paragraph led to myself engaging in this study.

## **1.2 Study purpose**

The purpose of the study is to examine the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF. These perceptions are examined with the adoption of the implementation staircase idea (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2006). This study seeks to understand how these academics understand and translate the TEF as a policy instrument, and how this may affect how they navigate and adapt themselves in their context, as influenced by their experiences, attitudes and perceptions.

## **1.3 Study context**

This study is based in five research-intensive universities in England. These consist of mid-size and large universities. Student numbers range from 28,000 to 40,000; out of these, 7,000 to 12,000 are postgraduate students. The number of staff ranges from 5,500 to 9,500, out of which 1,500 to 7,000 are academics. Four of the universities offer a broad range of undergraduate, postgraduate and professional programmes across disciplines, with the other university having a slightly more specialised focus.

## **1.4 Rationale for the study**

This thesis analyses academic perceptions in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF as a policy instrument. The purpose for this context arises because

of the assumption that often accompanies it – that this context places much more value on research than teaching. For example, that promotions are overwhelmingly gained through a research route, and not a teaching route, with universities placing disproportionate emphasis on research rather than teaching when assessing promotion. This is pertinent considering that the often-assumed value placed on research in this context contrasts with the policy messages of the TEF of teaching excellence and enhancement. This offers a unique environment to examine conditions that affect the enactment of the TEF and wider policy in research-intensive universities.

A lesser purpose for this study is that there is little to no empirical work on the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding TEF 2023. Further, despite the availability of studies on academic perceptions regarding TEF 2, TEF 3 and TEF 4, none of these studies adopt the idea of the implementation staircase. This thesis analyses the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding TEF 2023, assessing the impact of TEF 20223 on their experiences and attitudes, and how they experience TEF 2023 in this context.

### **1.5 Research questions**

To frame the qualitative analysis, the following research questions were developed:

- RQ1. What are the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities, if any, regarding the impact of the TEF on the experiences and attitudes of themselves and their academic colleagues?
- RQ2. What are the perceptions of academics in this context, if any, regarding how they experience the TEF?
- RQ3. What are the perceptions of academics in this context regarding the TEF as a policy instrument?

To guide the thesis, a number of research objectives were planned. These are:

1. Reviewal of the literature on policy instruments, schemes of teaching excellence, the TQEF and its shift to the TEF, the TEF, perceptions on the TEF and perceptions on a related policy – the REF.
2. Development of appropriate methods, including the design of an interview schedule for semi-structured interviews and the conduction of the interviews with academics in research-intensive universities.
3. Analysis of the data.
4. Critical analysis of the findings.
5. Offering of implications arising from the critical analysis.

To enable breadth and depth, data from several academics from the five research-intensive universities, described in section 1.3, were collected and examined. The intended audience is two PhD examiners and policy makers, scholars and researchers.

## **1.6 National policy context**

This section provides the wider context related to the establishment of the TEF. This is the radical expansion of higher education in the UK, with tuition fees increasingly being funded privately rather than publicly and the rise in these fees. Developments in both the UK and England have affected the establishment of the TEF. However, it is important to note that the policy area of education, training and skills is fully devolved across the four UK nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, some developments in this policy area affect more than one of these devolved nations.

Higher education in the UK radically expanded since the year 1960. There were 400,000 students in full-time education in 1960, two million in 2007 (Wyness, 2010)

and almost two and a half million in 2022-23 (Universities UK [UUK], 2025). The Barlow (1946) report made a recommendation to double the number of graduates via a vast expansion of university places. However, the expansion can be more closely attributed to the Robbins (1963) report. The report (Robbins, 1963) recommended massively expanding university places. To achieve this aim, the report (Robbins, 1963) made a recommendation for the expansion of the number of universities. Indeed, this was expanded. The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) further expanded the number of universities, awarding the title of 'University' to the then polytechnics – tertiary education teaching institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with a focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, particularly engineering. The Robins (1963) report and the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) led to the 'glass plate' and 'post-92' universities respectively. The Dearing (1997) report further recommended expansion. In 2015, there was the removal of the cap on student numbers.

The cost of tuition fees increasingly shifted from that being funded by the public to that being funded privately. In 1990, full universal maintenance grants for the student were abolished and replaced with student loans where half of the maintenance would be paid. The Dearing (1997) report recommended that there should be attribution to tuition fees privately and this was introduced in 1998. Indeed, a fee that needed to be paid upfront was introduced in 1998; the fee was that of £1,000 per year. Students with a less favourable financial situation were exempt. In 1998, maintenance grants were also removed. The Higher Education Act (2004) increased the cap on tuition fees in England and Northern Ireland to that of £3,000 per year; however, this did not need to be paid upfront but as part of a graduate deferred payment scheme. The Higher Education Act (2004) reintroduced maintenance grants for students with the least

favourable financial situation. The Browne (2010) report recommended an increase to the cap on tuition fees to £6,000 for universities in England and £9,000 for universities in England that met requirements in relation to Widening Participation (WP). By 2012, all universities in England met these requirements and virtually all charged £9000.

Considering the radical expansion of higher education in the UK and the increased shift towards private funding of tuition fees, it can be said that governmental thinking evolved towards a need for greater quality and consumer choice in higher education. This thinking can be strongly seen in a government green paper in 2015 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2015) and a government white paper the year after (BIS, 2016), which papers can be seen as the starting point for the TEF. Indeed, we will now move to how the green and white papers have led to the TEF as part of an argument for the context of the TEF.

### **1.7 The TEF and its policy context**

To contextualise the TEF, this section starts by an explanation of the commonness of schemes such as the TEF around the world. This section then provides information on how a 2015 government green paper (BIS, 2015) and a 2016 white paper (BIS, 2016) have led to the creation of the TEF. The section moves on to discuss the formal establishment of the TEF. Following this, context in relation to the intentions of the TEF and the ratings awarded by the TEF is discussed. This includes how the ratings are determined including the lack of a definition of teaching excellence. The context in relation to the TEF 2023 exercise and its cost is also discussed.

Countries have increasingly engaged in policies of evaluating teaching excellence in higher education at a national level. In some parts of the world (North America, North-Western Europe, Australasia, Hong Kong, and South Africa), the evaluation of



teaching excellence is common. However, in others (Southern and Eastern Europe, post-soviet countries, the Middle East, India, Africa, and Latin America), it is unusual or rare. The TEF is one such policy of evaluating teaching excellence at a national level. The TEF evaluates teaching excellence for undergraduate provision. The TEF evaluates teaching excellence chiefly in England, but also the UK. This is because the TEF is currently only mandatory for institutions in England but voluntary for those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Over the past twenty years, various aspects have fostered the creation of the TEF. A government-initiated higher education review by Browne (2010, p. 2), assumed that competition in higher education “raises quality” of provision. This assumption may be said to have reflected thinking at the time that if institutions are compared, competition is fostered and, as a result, teaching excellence is enhanced. However, the TEF coming into being and the TEF having an intention of enhancing teaching excellence can be more closely attributed to a government green paper in 2015 (BIS, 2015). The latter proposed the TEF and put TEF forward as a way for higher education institutions to raise teaching standards. The following year, a white paper (BIS, 2016) posed the TEF as a way of delivering value to students and taxpayers. The white paper endorsed competition amongst institutions in order to incentivise greater quality, the offering of greater consumer choice (choice to prospective students) and more innovative and better-quality university programmes at a lower cost (BIS, 2016). The TEF was introduced by the British government in 2016 as part of the Higher Education and Research Bill (2016) which subsequently became the Higher Education Research Act (2017). In 2019, the government-initiated higher education review by Augar (2019, p. 8), assumed that competition in higher education is “important”. The assumption was almost identical to the assumption made by the Browne (2010) review (examined at

the start of this paragraph), which can be said to reflect that potential thinking in 2010 — that if institutions are compared, competition is fostered and teaching excellence is enhanced — persisted to at least 2019.

The TEF was formally established by the OfS in 2017. The OfS is the current regulator for higher education in England which came into being through the Higher Education Research Act (2017). Through the latter, the OfS assumed activities of the former Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Office for Fair Access (OFFA). The OfS was fully established in April 2018 but there was a transition period until July 2019.

The TEF had various iterations. In this thesis, these are referred to as TEF 1, TEF 2, TEF 3, TEF 4 and TEF 2023. However, the first four have also been referred to as TEF Year 1, TEF Year 2, TEF Year 3 and TEF Year 4 respectively (OfS, n.d.) Further, TEF 3 and TEF 4 have been described as 2018 TEF 3 and 2019 TEF 3 respectively (Snaith et al., 2017).

In 2015-16, there was TEF 1. TEF 1 was a trial where no ratings were awarded. Following this, there were TEF 2, TEF 3 and TEF 2023 which were full TEF exercises. The TEF 2 exercise was held between October 2016 and June 2017. In October 2017, the full official name was change from the *Teaching Excellence Framework* to the *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework*. Nonetheless, 'TEF' is the acronym that is used in most sources, including the OfS website. Therefore, this is the acronym that this thesis adopts. TEF 3 consisted of a voluntary and pilot exercise in November 2017. TEF 4 was carried out in November 2018. The only differences between TEF 3 and TEF 4 are that they were conducted in different years (2018 and 2019) and during this period, there was the introduction of institutions needing a TEF

rating to be able to have OfS registration. As OfS registration is required for institutions in England, this effectively meant that it was mandatory for these universities to participate in TEF 4 if they have not already participated in the TEF.

The overall intention of the TEF to indicate the overall teaching excellence of an institution remained the same for all exercises; however, there was a decrease in focus on consumer choice for TEF 2023. Aligning with the white paper (BIS, 2016), TEF 2 and TEF 3 carried the intentions of enhancing teaching excellence and consumer choice. However, consumer choice became a secondary purpose of the TEF following the Pearce (2019) review, which review recommended that student interest is best served with the primary purpose being the identification and enhancement of excellence, the educational experience and outcomes, part of which was educational gain. This marked a decreased emphasis on consumer choice and more on 'educational gain'. The current primary purpose of the TEF according to the OfS (2022a, p. 6), is to promote "excellence in teaching, learning and student outcomes" and "improve and deliver excellence". The TEF has also been described as having the intention of elevating the 'reputation' of teaching in higher education to be closer to that of research; for example, by decreasing an overly focus on research (Perkins, 2019). Despite that the TEF has evolved over the years, its original intention to indicate the overall teaching excellence of an institution — as can be seen in the ratings it awards — has remained the same (Department for Education [DfE], 2016).

As part of the evaluation of teaching excellence, the TEF as a policy instrument awards a rating to institutions. The ratings awarded include *Gold*, *Silver* or *Bronze*. For TEF 2023, an institution could be categorised as *Requires Improvement*. A *Gold* rating signifies that an institution has achieved the highest standards in teaching quality and

consistently delivers exceptional performance. It ensures excellent outcomes for students from all backgrounds, especially in terms of student retention and progression. The institution also provides top-tier physical and digital learning resources. A *Silver* rating indicates that the institution maintains a high standard of education, regularly surpassing the minimum expectations for higher education institutions in the same areas. A *Bronze* rating reflects that the institution meets the basic quality requirements. While most students attain positive outcomes, the institution falls notably short of the benchmark in one or more key areas. If a university falls into the *Requires Improvement* category, this indicates that improvements are necessary before the institution can be awarded a TEF rating.

For TEF 2023, institutions were awarded two separate ratings contributing to their overall rating – *Student Experience* and *Student Outcomes*. An institution awarded with the same rating for student experience and student outcomes is awarded that rating for their overall rating. For example, if both *Student Experience* and *Student Outcomes* ratings awarded are *Gold*, then the overall rating awarded is *Gold*. An institution awarded with a *Gold* and *Silver* rating for student experience and student outcomes (irrespectively) is awarded a *Gold* or *Silver* rating for their overall rating. An institution awarded with a *Silver* and *Bronze* rating for student experience and student outcomes (irrespectively) is awarded a *Silver* or *Bronze* rating for their overall rating. An institution awarded with a *Gold* and *Bronze* rating for student experience and student outcomes (irrespectively) is awarded a *Silver* or *Bronze* rating for their overall rating. An institution awarded with a *Requires Improvement* for student experience or student outcomes, irrespective of whether the other rating awarded is *Gold*, *Silver* or *Bronze*, is awarded a *Requires Improvement* or *Bronze* rating for their overall rating. Being awarded a superior (overall) TEF rating can be said to carry various benefits for

an institution including an increased potential of attracting students and generating income.

The way TEF 2023 ratings are determined is now described. They are determined by a panel of academics and students, where the panel assesses the National Student Survey (NSS) (OfS, 2023) and student continuation, completion and progression rates (OfS, 2022a). Continuation rates are the proportion of students whom are still in study (or completed the programme) and have not dropped from the programme after one year (and 15 days) (OfS, 2022a). In the case of full-time study, completion rates are the proportion of students whom have completed the programme within four years (and 15 days) (OfS, 2022a). Progression rates are the percentage of students who are managerially or professionally employed or in further study 15 months following their studies (OfS, 2022a), assessed via the Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey (GO survey, 2025). Additionally, the panel assesses qualitative evidence by universities and optionally qualitative evidence by their students (OfS, 2022a). Qualitative evidence provides institutions with an opportunity to make their own case for teaching excellence and to provide contextual evidence (OfS, 2022a). The additional qualitative evidence by universities enables the opportunity for institutions to provide contextual evidence and their own case for assessment (OfS, 2022a). This enables institutions to provide what they deem excellent (OfS, 2022a).

This paragraph discusses the main differences in the determination of TEF ratings for different TEF exercises since the introduction of the TEF. Firstly, TEF 2 and TEF 3 considered the precursor of the GO survey – the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE). Secondly, for TEF 3, the score of the National Student Survey (NSS) (OfS, 2023) carried half the weighting (DfE, 2017) compared to the

previous TEF exercise. Thirdly, TEF 3 saw the introduction of qualitative evidence for the determination of TEF ratings. Finally, TEF 2023 saw the introduction of an optional submission of qualitative evidence by the students of an institution for the determination of TEF ratings.

In relation to what teaching excellence constitutes and thus what is judged to be excellent, a definition of teaching excellence is not provided by the TEF. The intention of the TEF for not providing a definition is, according to the DfE (2016), not to force a limit on teaching excellence and the development of such excellence, and to enable institutions to develop their own definitions of teaching excellence. For the TEF 2023 exercise, institutions were required to provide their own approach to teaching excellence (OfS, 2022a).

Between 2022 and January 2023, institutions submitted their TEF 2023 submissions. Ratings were provided to individual institutions from August 2023. The ratings were officially published at the end of September 2023, except for ratings for (53, or 23% of) institutions that lodged an appeal for the rating awarded to them. These ratings were published in February 2024, after completion of the appeals process.

According to a survey by the OfS (2025), TEF 2023 attracted approximately £14 million in costs comprising the costs for institutions and the OfS. TEF 2023 cost an average of £50,000 per university and an average of £20,000 per college-based higher education provider. The cost of TEF 2023 for the OfS was that of £4.3 million.

At the introduction of the TEF, French (2017) observed that the TEF sought to embed in legislation a government-led approach to higher education teaching, describing the TEF as a political tool for change. French (2017) argued that the TEF could become a

policy instrument which is used to push change in higher education. Six years later, it could be argued that this did materialise. The UK's House of Lords' Industry and Regulators Committee (2023) portrayed the TEF as a policy instrument as means to control the activities of higher education institutions. The committee reported that the Office for Students lacks independence and is directed by the government. Further, that despite the Office for Students being meant as an *independent* regulator and the description of itself as such, it frequently converts the attitudes of ministries and the media into regulation. The committee report makes reference to the direction the Office for Students receives from the government, citing the prescriptive and unusually frequent guidance letters it receives from it (Industry and Regulators Committee, 2023).

### **1.8 The REF and its policy context**

This section provides the policy context of the sister scheme of the TEF – the REF. The REF is relevant to this thesis because perceptions regarding the TEF compared to the REF may differ due to different attitudes to teaching compared to research. Particularly, attitudes may differ because of institutional location – whether the location is a research- or teaching-intensive university.

The REF is a similar, but also different, policy instrument to the TEF. The TEF and REF are both exercises that assess excellence. However, the TEF assesses excellence regarding teaching whilst the REF assesses excellence regarding research. Indeed, the TEF evaluates research excellence in UK institutions. Further, whilst the TEF does not affect teaching funding or tuition fees (for further detail, please see section 2.4), the REF does affect research funding institutions receive. The next paragraphs

provide detail on the administrator of the REF, REF exercises over the years and how these evolved, the intentions of the REF and how the REF conducts evaluation.

The administrator of the REF is Research England (part of United Kingdom Research and Innovation [UKRI]), on behalf of the UK's four higher education funding bodies. These are Research England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Medr (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research [Wales]) and the Department for the Economy of Northern Ireland.

Exercises that evaluate research nationally were in place in the UK since 1986. Exercises started with the Research Selectivity Exercise (RSE) exercise in 1986 and 1989. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) then followed, with exercises taking place in 1996, 2001 and 2008. This was followed by REF exercises in 2014 and 2021. The next REF exercise is REF 2029. For the RSE, each 'unit of assessment' (for example, a university department) could make a submission. The submission would require a research statement in one or more of 37 subject areas and five research outputs. Since the first exercise, the submissions have increased in complexity. For example, in REF 2014, a requirement was made for a submission of an impact case study and a narrative template to enable the assessment of research impact. Thus, research impact became a component for the assessment of research excellence. Research impact was defined as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (REF, 2012, p. 48). The requirement for a submission of an impact case study and a narrative template for the assessment of research impact indicated an aim to assess the impact of research work beyond research settings. The requirement of an impact case study meant that research impact would not be



evaluated only by data (such as bibliometrics) but also by peer review. Indeed, metrics were seen to support rather than replace expert judgement according to the Wilson (2012) review.

The intentions of the REF can be said to include research excellence informing public funding awarded to UK institutions, accountability for public funding of research, providing information on the quality of research amongst UK institutions and providing benchmarking information on the quality of research amongst these institutions. In relation to public funding, this refers to the selective allocation of grants for research to universities.

Research output, research impact and research environment are elements evaluated in the REF (2020). In relation to research output, mainly journal articles, books and research-based artistic works are considered as research outputs; these are evaluated in terms of originality, significance and rigour. Research impact is based on the submission of case studies on impact; these case studies require information on impact in the form of reach and significance and impact on the economy, society or culture, which impact is underpinned by excellent research. In relation to the research environment, there is the evaluation of data and a narrative statement on the environment. The data consists of the number of completions of Postgraduate Research (PGR) degrees and income from research generated. The statement on the environment requires the presentation of information on research works undertaken, strategy regarding staff, infrastructure, activities of staff development, research collaboration and contribution to the discipline.

## **1.9 Methodology**

Research in higher education as an area of study is relatively (to other fields of study) recent and it developed first in the United States (US) and only later in Europe (Amaral & Magalhães, 2007). This area of study was on the rise with contributing factors including the expansion of higher education and debates on the quality of higher education. Higher education ultimately became a major financial and political subject matter (Clark, 1973; Teichler, 2007; Tight, 2007; Scott, 1995). Thus, as Tight (2007, p. 235) explained, “the study of higher education is, unsurprisingly, closely linked to the growth of higher education itself”.

Higher education research closely neighbours educational research and was developed through various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, economics, history and law as well as interdisciplinary fields; for example, organisational studies and public administration. Resultantly, the research of higher education did not attain a steady position in disciplinary bounds or the structure of established knowledge. This is the likely reason why higher education research holds a flexible institutional home; for example, departmental based research or applied research establishments. As Altbach et al. (2006, p. 2) explain, “in part because higher education has no disciplinary base, it has never had a clear academic home”.

One of the bases of research on higher education is policy (Teichler, 2007). This base’s chief intention is to enrich the process of policy through information, policy-driven interpretations as well as higher education scenarios. Bell and Stevenson (2006) offered various definitions of policy; for example, that of aims, intentions or comments about what should happen. This definition echoes a previous characterisation by Harman (1984), that of statements of intentions or statements of work plans or

programmes. In the case of higher education policy, research is frequently aimed at improving the process of policy through information, reports and policy scenarios amongst other (Kehm & Musselin, 2013).

The methodological approach adopted for this study is that of a small scale in-depth qualitative study. The philosophy underpinning this thesis is interpretivism, at the back of an ontology of complexity and multiplicity of reality and an epistemology that knowledge is generated through interpretation. Considering the interpretative approach, an inductive approach to data analysis was taken. An interpretative approach also means that my role as the researcher heavily influenced the process of constructing meaning. Acknowledging this, my agency is provided –that of researcher, senior lecturer and programme leader at a teaching-intensive university. As my positionality introduces the potential for interpretive bias, I adopted a reflexive stance throughout the research process constantly reflecting on how my positionality may be influencing my interpretation during data analysis. A qualitative design was adopted, recognising that complexity is the norm in societal environments. Semi-structured interviews were deployed as the method of data collection because of their ability to elicit rich, interpretive accounts. Fourteen interviews were held with academics from five research-intensive universities. The selection of research-intensive universities was based on this context potentially focusing less on teaching and academics within this context potentially responding to the TEF differently. The full rationale for the selection of this setting is provided in section 3.2.2. To generate contextually grounded insights, a purposive sample was used. The participants were recruited through the professional online social network, LinkedIn. An interview schedule was designed for the interviews, which design was aimed at facilitating open, reflective dialogue with participants. A pilot interview was conducted to examine the effectiveness and

refinement of the interview question schedule. The interviews were held on Microsoft Teams, which were recorded and transcribed. Coding was influenced by the work of Saldaña (2011) and consisted of the initial and final coding of the data, analytical memo writing and theme development. The written analytical memos served to put my thoughts as the researcher into writing and were used as a vehicle for the data to become themes. Theme development was formed by the written analytical memos but also by the evolving engagement with the data as part of analytical memo writing. An inductive approach to theme development was taken. This thesis adopted the principles and procedures of informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained from the Educational Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

### **1.10 Outline of chapters**

This thesis comprises six chapters. This chapter, Chapter 1, provides an overview of the whole of the thesis. Chapter 1 starts with the overall intention of the study, principal information on the context of the study, research questions and chief contribution to knowledge. To contextualise this, relevant information is provided. Firstly, the policy context of higher education in England, which also includes the relevant policy context in the UK. Secondly, the TEF, REF and their policy context. Chapter 1 ends by providing the most pertinent information on the methodology and methods adopted for this thesis. Full information on these can be found in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2 is the literature review chapter. It first offers an introduction. The chapter then provides relevant information on the literature search, consisting of the search procedure for the systematic search, the search regarding particular issues that arose and the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Following this, the relevant literature identified

is reviewed. Firstly, policy within the context of this study, which enabled the introduction of relevant policy terms. Secondly, the classification of schemes of teaching excellence. Thirdly, the TQEF, the TEF and the move from the former to the latter. Fourthly, relevant literature is reviewed to examine the change theory behind the TEF and provide the idea of the implementation. Fifthly, literature is reviewed on staff perceptions regarding the TEF. Sixthly, the literature on perceptions regarding the REF is reviewed. A conclusion for the chapter is finally provided.

Turning to the following chapter, Chapter 3 provides the methodology and methods. This includes the philosophical stance and research approach adopted, the literature search and design, and finally, ethical considerations. The philosophical stance is explained as chiefly interpretivist, where to reduce the risk of bias with this, it is stated that inferences are explicitly described. The research approach is explained as a small scale in-depth qualitative study. The research design details the methods, centrally: semi-structured qualitative interviews with lecturers or senior lecturers, information on the interview question schedule, participant selection criteria, recruitment, information on data saturation stance, coding and thematic analysis. For the interview question schedule, it was explained that amongst other, it comprised questions about involvement with TEF, reactions to the TEF rating and the meaning of teaching excellence. It was explained that purposeful sampling was used where recruitment consisted of social media sites and word of mouth. Information on data saturation was provided: that this was reached, at which point four more interviews were carried out. The ethical considerations section details the considerations made for informed consent and information on the ethics application.

Chapter 4 is the results chapter. Common perceptions amongst academics in research-intensive universities revealed several themes. Firstly, that they lack familiarity with the TEF, holding limited awareness and misunderstandings regarding it. Secondly, that the TEF is not a significantly relevant matter for them. The TEF was not in the frame of mind of the academics interviewed and as per their perceptions, was not centrally related to them and their context. Thirdly, that the academics held unsympathetic attitudes towards the TEF. Fourthly, that the TEF causes anxiety in staff. Fifthly, that the TEF is unhelpful. Finally, there is a minor theme that the TEF encourages teaching-focused careers.

In the chapter that follows, Chapter 5, I offer a critical discussion of the academic perceptions by applying the implementation staircase. The findings reveal a significant dissonance between the TEF's policy intentions and its enactment. Academics show perfunctory engagement with the TEF instead of enactment of the TEF's policy messages. Using the findings, various factors at the bottom of the staircase in research-intensive universities are suggested to shape this. Particularly, the experience of research as the cultural priority, institutional messages regarding the TEF of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement, and a perceived pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations.

Chapter 6 is the final chapter, providing the key aspects of the thesis. The research questions that framed the qualitative analysis are presented, alongside the research objectives. The conceptual tool that was applied and extended was provided. The main findings are presented, followed by the main discussions that these elicited. The contribution to knowledge is then highlighted, the description of conditions which affect the enactment of policy in higher education. The chapter then offers suggestions for

research and practice, strengths and limitations. A research suggestion offered is the collection of data from parties other than academics, such as middle and executive managers, to enable triangulation. Consideration of the unique experience of policy for those on the ground was presented as a research suggestion. Strengths described are the provision of insight into conditions that influence policy enactment in research-intensive universities. A limitation provided is the reliance on the idea of the staircase. This is because whilst useful, this idea assumes linearity, oversimplifying the complexities of policy enactment. Finally, the chapter provides an overall conclusion.

## Chapter 2: Review of the literature

The aim of Chapter 2 is to review relevant literature on teaching excellence policy instruments and how these are perceived by different actors. This thesis is particularly interested in the idea of the TEF as a policy instrument in a general sense. This thesis is also interested in the idea of the TEF as a policy instrument that attempts to influence academic experiences and attitudes, particularly to teaching. As this study focused on the perceptions of academics regarding the TEF as policy instrument, literature on teaching and learning in higher education and literature on teaching excellence more generally was not reviewed.

### 2.1 Literature search

This section describes the literature search and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature. The exploration of the literature began with a systematic search and then evolved over time to reflect the particular issues that arose from the literature search. Literature on teaching and learning in higher education and teaching excellence more generally was not sought. This is because this study focuses on the perceptions of academics on the TEF as a policy instrument. Firstly, the search procedure for the systematic search is described. Secondly, the search regarding particular issues that arose is explored. Finally, the inclusion and exclusion criteria are described.

The systematic search included the following search terms: *policy instruments*, *higher education*, *teaching excellence policy*, *teaching excellence schemes*, *teaching excellence framework*, *research excellence framework* and *perceptions*. The search was not limited to a publication year. Truncation was not implemented. The electronic searches were carried out on various databases including 1) Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies, 2) British Education Index (BEI) and 3) Journal Storage



(JSTOR). An electronic search on Google Scholar was also carried out. Applicable literature was also identified from other sources. Over time, the systematic search evolved to the search of particular issues applicable to the current thesis.

The search for particular issues relevant to this thesis involved both literature searching and backward searches. A backward search is the identification of relevant literature by reviewing the references of an article. The articles in this case are the articles identified from the systematic search. The particular issues relevant to this thesis included the evolvement of the TEF, the implementation staircase and perceptions on the TEF and REF.

The inclusion criteria comprised relevant literature on policy, teaching excellence schemes, the TEF and perceptions on the TEF and REF. Exclusion criteria consisted of work with languages other than Maltese, English and Italian.

Having described the literature search and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature, we now move to reviewal of relevant literature. Literature on policy is reviewed first to provide an understanding of the positions on policy taken for this study.

## **2.2 Policy within the context of this study**

The aim of this section is to review policy literature relevant to this study. This enables the provision of pertinent information to this study to then move on to the reviewal of literature on teaching excellence policy. Particularly, this allows us to understand terms surrounding policy that will be applied in this study. This section starts with the early work by Weiss (1980) who makes an argument that it is difficult to link policy to outcomes and why this is relevant to our understanding of policy. This early work

(Weiss, 1980) is particularly useful as a basis to then build on with the later work of Saunders (2006; 2011) which provides useful ideas to think about policy for this thesis. The work by Saunders (2006; 2011) is used to situate policy terminology used for this thesis.

Policy can be described as a way to achieved desired outcomes. However, it has long been argued that is difficult to establish causation between policy and the desired outcomes of policy (Weiss, 1980). In other words, it is difficult to establish whether a policy has led to the outcomes being pursued through that policy. To make the point about causation, Weiss (1980) had talked about the complexity of processes involved in policy. This includes processes of establishing policy priorities, establishing policy mechanisms and understanding the effects of policy. According to Weiss (1980), the links between processes are probably indirect, difficult to identify and difficult to measure. The pertinence of the early work by Weiss (1980) to this study is that it is problematic to clearly verify that a policy has led to one or more outcomes. This is important for our understanding of policy as it can be taken as an advisory to be cautious with claims about the outcomes of policy.

A noteworthy point is that Weiss (1980) had introduced the term ‘knowledge creep’ to argue that part of the complexity of processes involved in policy is that knowledge in the form of empirical generalisations, ideas, conditions and events ‘creep’ into policy processes. Extending this argument, I argue that there is also ‘knowledge creep’ into views about policy. What this means for this thesis is that views surrounding policy should be seen as perceptions rather than dogmatic information.

The idea of policy design is reasonably familiar; however, Saunders (2006; 2011) makes an important contribution by introducing two terms in relation to policy –

'recipients' (Saunders, 2006) and 'policy mechanisms' (Saunders, 2011). He also makes contribution in relation to three ideas relating to policy – 'intention' (Saunders, 2006), 'policy instrument' and 'policy effect' (Saunders, 2011). In his 2006 work, Saunders (2006) refers to the term 'intention' and establishes the idea of 'recipients'. The term 'intention' is used to refer to the intention of a policy and the interests and intentions of policy 1) initiators and 2) designers. The idea of recipients was established to refer to individuals that are affected by policy. This includes individuals that experience effects of policy (be it positive or negative), including individuals at whom policy and the desired outcomes of policy are targeted and individuals that provide evidence of policy efficacy. Recipients are sometimes confused with the 'evaluated'; however, the 'evaluated' are the individuals who initiate policy (Saunders, 2006) – the thinking in the work of Saunders here is that policy reflects the intentions deliberated by these individuals.

As we can see in the paragraph above, the term 'recipients' clumps together individuals that are affected by policy irrespective of whether these individuals are (or are not) the target of the desired outcomes of policy. However, it is helpful to distinguish between these two. As such, the term 'policy recipients' can be used to refer to individuals that experience effects of policy and the term 'targeted group' to refer to the group at whom the desired outcomes of policy are targeted. For example, if a policy has the desired outcome of reducing poverty, policy recipients include individuals delivering the policy (for example, individuals making changes to processes and individuals who are introducing interventions) and the targeted group is the group of individuals with an unfavourable financial situation. The term 'targeted group' can be used to differentiate it from the term 'target group' used by Saunders (2006). Saunders (2006) uses the term 'target group' as another term referring to both recipients and the

targeted group. It is important to note that individuals can be both policy recipients and part of the targeted group. Another noteworthy point is that whilst it can be argued that the targeted group will always form part of policy recipients, this is not the case if policy has no effect on the targeted group. The term 'intention' is important for this study to distinguish it from individuals' interpretation of policy. The term 'policy recipients' is essential for this study because it draws to our attention the group of individuals who are affected by policy, differentiating these with other actors involved. This is particularly applicable to this study as the perceptions of policy recipients are examined.

In 2011, Saunders introduces the term 'policy mechanisms' (Saunders, 2011) and refers to the terms 'policy instrument' and 'policy effect'. For Saunders (2011), the policy instrument is the specific policy instruments (for example, funding or providing resources) by which a policy is furthered. The policy instrument leads to policy mechanisms and the mechanisms result in the policy effect. Policy mechanisms are the mechanisms used by policy instruments to change practice on the ground. Examples of this include specific programmes, interventions or projects. Policy effect is about the changes that materialise as a result of policy mechanisms, policy instrument and policy. For Saunders (2011), changes in behaviour can be grouped in two: 1) shifts in practices and 2) emergent recurrent behaviours. Shifts in practices can include new protocols and systems, new opportunities and networks and new tools. Emergent recurrent behaviours can be described as practice-based sustainable effects that can produce new resources and result in multiplier effects. For Saunders (2011), shifts in practices are only intermediate outcomes whilst emergent recurrent behaviours are the outcomes that should be the focus in the context of the evaluation of policy effect. The terms 'policy instrument', 'policy mechanisms' and 'policy effect'

contribute to our understanding of policy because they allow us to distinguish between different aspects of policy. The terms are important for this study because the use of these terms enables us to differentiate the different meaning amongst these.

The work by Saunders (2006; 2011) is also important for this study as it is used as a basis to situate different aspects of the TEF. For this study, the policy recipients are placed as the academics, members of leadership teams and staff at institutions. The targeted group is placed as the student and the potential student. The policy mechanisms are placed as the comparison of TEF ratings amongst institutions and change in ratings in an institution from one TEF exercise to another (for example, from a Silver rating in TEF 3 to a Gold rating in TEF 2023). The intention is placed as an intention by government to raise teaching standards, deliver value to students and taxpayers, materialise competition amongst universities, raise quality, increase consumer choice and bring about more innovative and better-quality university programmes (for further detail, please see section 1.3). The specific policy instruments are placed as the metrics, qualitative evidence by institutions and qualitative evidence by their students (the TEF as policy instrument more generally is discussed further in section 2.4). This study places itself as examining the perceptions of one type of policy recipient, the academic, on the TEF.

Policy instruments regarding teaching excellence in higher education relevant to this study are teaching excellence schemes. This is because the TEF is one form of teaching excellence scheme. Accordingly, the next section moves on to teaching excellent schemes.

## 2.3 Classifying schemes of teaching excellence

I refer to teaching excellence schemes as policy instruments. The aim of this section is to provide a context for this thesis in relation to the various types of teaching excellence schemes. This is particularly essential for our understanding of the type of scheme that the TEF is and how this type differs from other types.

There are teaching excellence schemes at international, national and institutional levels. However, schemes are usually at a national or institutional level (Chan and Chen, 2024). Usually, national teaching excellence schemes are government-originating (Chan and Chen, 2024). Teaching excellence schemes can also be referred to as system-wide teaching excellence schemes when they specifically relate to teaching excellence across a system of education (Ashwin, 2022). There are two types of system-wide teaching excellence schemes. Ashwin (2022) refers to ‘types’ of system-wide teaching excellence schemes as ‘approaches’. The two types are 1) ‘awardee’ and 2) ‘entity comparison’. Ashwin (2022) refers to these as ‘exemplar’ and ‘mapping’ types respectively. He also refers to ‘types’ as ‘approaches’.

‘Awardee’ system-wide teaching excellence schemes focus on teaching excellence in individuals, teams, departments, institutions, programmes/subjects or a range of these (Ashwin, 2022). An example of an ‘awardee’ scheme focusing on teaching excellence in individuals is the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) by Advance HE in the UK. An example of an ‘awardee’ scheme focusing on teaching excellence in institutions is the establishment of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). Another example is the *Wettbewerb Exzellente Lehre* in Germany (which roughly translates from German as ‘the Competition for Teaching Excellence’). This scheme is managed by the *Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft* (which

roughly translates as the Donors' Association for German Science). Another example is the former Global Teaching Excellence Award by Advance HE. An example of an 'awardee' scheme focusing on teaching excellence in individuals, teams or departments is the *Te Whatu Kairangi* Aotearoa Tertiary Educator Awards by Ako Aotearoa on behalf of the Ministry of Education of New Zealand. Another example is the University Grants Council Teaching Award by the University Grants Committee (UGC) of Hong Kong. An example of an 'awardee' scheme focusing on teaching excellence in individuals, programmes/subjects and institutions is the former Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) initiative by the former Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Another is the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT) by Universities Australia.

'Awardee' schemes focusing on teaching excellence in individuals generally have a process of local nomination of an individual, such as by other individuals, colleagues or students, and agreed by the institution (Ashwin, 2022). Using the NTFS as an example, individuals are nominated by the institution. For all types of 'awardee' schemes focusing on teaching excellence in individuals and places, a case for teaching excellence is submitted where each case is assessed. Using the NTFS as an example, the institution's Teaching Excellence Awards Lead (TEAL) coordinates nominations to be submitted to Advance HE.

We now move on to the type of scheme that the TEF is – an 'entity comparison' system-wide teaching excellence scheme. In 'entity comparison' system-wide teaching excellence schemes, the teaching excellence of entities across a system of education is compared (Ashwin, 2022). The entity can be a department, institution or subject grouping. The system can be a national or international system. In the case of

the TEF, the entity is the institution and the system is the national system of education. In 'entity comparison' schemes, entities can be seen to compete to be assessed as excellent or to be awarded a high teaching excellence status. For the TEF, institutions can be viewed as competing to obtain a Gold TEF rating. Similarly to 'awardee' schemes, 'entity comparison' schemes submit a case for teaching excellence which is assessed. In the case of the TEF, each institution submits a TEF submission to the OfS. In 'entity comparison' schemes, the assessment of whether an entity is awarded a high excellence status is based on achievements that have been made by the entity and the intentions of the entity to excel further (Ashwin, 2022). Taking the case of the TEF, achievements that have been made are assessed through the results of the NSS, student continuation, completion and progression rates, qualitative evidence from each institution and qualitative evidence from students from each institution. Further, in the case of the TEF, the intentions to excel further are assessed through qualitative evidence from each institution.

Having discussed the different types of teaching excellent schemes including the type of scheme that the TEF is, I now move on to discuss how the TEF is different to its predecessor, the TQEF. This enables us to assess the shift from the TQEF to the TEF.

## **2.4 The shift from the TQEF to the TEF**

This section reviews literature on the TEF and former TQEF to compare how the two differ. This is useful to consider the implications of the shift from the TQEF to the TEF. I start by introducing the TQEF. I then move on to discuss the TEF. Finally, I discuss the implications of a shift from an 'awardee' scheme under the TQEF to an 'entity comparison' scheme under the TEF.



The underpinning framework for the TQEF initiative was the provision of funding to enhance teaching and learning, and to recognise and reward teaching excellence (Ashwin, 2022). The initiative sought to adopt an integrated funding strategy by supporting improvements in teaching excellence at multiple levels – institutions, subjects and individuals. The funding strategy of the TQEF reflected the fact that during that time, there was public funding of university tuition fees through the HEFCE.

At an institutional level, funding was provided to support the execution of strategies related to learning, teaching and assessment (Ashwin, 2022). This funding was distributed by formula based on student enrolment figures. Between 1999 and 2002, over £48 million was allocated at this level, with a comparable amount distributed for the period between 2002 and 2005. Starting in 2009, additional targeted funding was introduced at this level, aimed at teaching and learning enhancement (Ashwin, 2022).

Subject-level funding was directed towards establishing the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). The intention of the LTSN was to facilitate and foster a more coordinated and systematic approach to the enhancement and advancement of teaching and learning, including the improvement of teaching practice. It is worth noting the establishment of the CETLs. Whilst they did not form part of the TQEF initiative, their intention was to contribute to the achievement of the same overall policy intention (Ashwin, 2022). CETLs were established to reward good teaching excellence practices and develop further teaching excellence. The funding of CETLs represented the HEFCE's largest ever single funding initiative in teaching and learning – £315 million (Lunt, 2008).

At the individual level, HEFCE funding was primarily directed towards establishing the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) (Ashwin, 2022). Initially, the NTFS

awarded three-year fellowships of £50,000 to 'excellent' teachers. The scheme is still in effect as of 2025; however, fellowship funding was gradually decreased and eventually withdrawn. Over time, the eligibility criteria have been expanded and the fellowship nominees can now include any role that contributes to teaching and learning, including professional staff that support learning.

As part of the TQEF, there was also the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) (Ashwin, 2022). This programme was not directly managed by the HEFCE but managed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on behalf of the HEFCE. The programme funded educational research in order to increase its capacity, improve the outcomes of students and improve educational policy and practice. Considering the TQEF is essential as this may have an influence on the perceptions of academics on the TEF.

Moving on to the TEF, it initially held a simple structure; however, this evolved and continues to evolve (Ashwin, 2022). Currently, the TEF has a more elaborate structure (for further detail, please see section 1.3). TEF 1 was a trial and because of this, it did not award the TEF ratings of Gold, Silver or Bronze. However, TEF 1 had a single level of award of *Meets Expectations* which was either met or not met depending on universities' most recent Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) award; if it was met, universities were allowed to increase fees (Snaith et al., 2017). There was a plan to attach TEF ratings to tuition fees that institutions could charge, with institutions being able to increase tuition fees if they achieve a Gold or Silver TEF 2 rating (Snaith et al., 2017). However, this plan did not materialise. After TEF 1, there were no links between the TEF and tuition fees.

TEF 2 provided an opportunity to fully test the TEF (Gunn, 2018), including the formal awarding of TEF ratings. For Matthews and Kotzee (2021), TEF ratings constitute a government-sanctioned scoring of the teaching excellence of universities. For TEF 2, ratings were intended to indicate to students the quality of programmes *as a whole* (Ashwin, 2022) at a university. Gunn (2018) refers to teaching excellence in the context of TEF 2 as the teaching mission of a university. The teaching mission involves the wider context and is much larger than practical teaching (for example, teaching that happens in a classroom). This includes activities before students enrol such as entry requirements and widening participation. Post-enrolment, the teaching mission includes online and in-person resources and facilities as well as student retention. After the completion of studies, the teaching mission includes degree classification and the destination of students.

The introduction of the awarding of TEF ratings (Gold, Silver and Bronze) to universities for TEF 2 onwards meant that the TEF would have an impact on the profile and reputation of universities (Perkins, 2019). The TEF ratings would affect the ability of universities to attract both domestic and international students. Therefore, the introduction meant a desire for universities to succeed in the TEF (i.e., achieve a Gold rating or at least a Silver rating) and the placing of an incentive on universities to increase focus on educational activities.

Between TEF 2 and TEF 3, it was assumed that TEF 3 would be sufficiently refined that it would not need further modification nor testing, meaning that it could be repeated with the same specifications (Gunn, 2018). TEF 3 was planned to include subject-level ratings (Deem & Baird, 2020). These would indicate to students the extent of teaching excellence at the subject level of a university. Institutional TEF

ratings were planned to replace or sit alongside subject-level ratings over the years (Deem & Baird, 2020). However, subject-level ratings were abandoned. Between TEF 2 and TEF 3, universities could either keep the TEF 2 ratings they were awarded for three years or make a new submission for TEF 3 (Matthews & Kotzee, 2021).

TEF 2023 saw an increased focus on the student (Mao et al., 2024). This is because there was a shift from a focus on the learning environment and learning gain to a focus on the student experience. The focus on student outcomes did not change. The increased focus on the student is reflected in the introduction of two separate TEF ratings: *Student Experience* and *Student Outcomes*. These two ratings would contribute to the overall TEF rating. This meant that universities need to focus on the experience and outcomes of students across their provision.

Considering the literature reviewed in this section, the TQEF initiative represented a collection of 'awardee' system-wide teaching excellence schemes whilst the TEF is a single, though continually evolving, 'entity comparison' scheme. Therefore, the approach of the TEF to teaching excellence over the years was subject to, and continues to be subject to, continuous change. The shift from the TQEF to the TEF is important for the context of this study because, firstly, the shift is one towards a managerial approach to teaching excellence. Secondly, the shift saw a focus on individual teaching excellence practices change to a focus on institutional teaching excellence; for example, institutions shifted from developing teaching excellence in individuals and teams to developing institutional policies on teaching excellence. Therefore, academics experienced 1) a change in institutional positioning and 2) an impact on their role. This may influence academic perceptions on the TEF and academic experiences and attitudes.

I now move on to discuss the idea adopted in this study on how the implementation of policy occurs. This is important as it influences how the implementation of the TEF is viewed.

## **2.5 The change theory behind the TEF**

This section aims to underline the complexities involved with the implementation of the TEF using the perspective of the rational–purposive theory (Trowler, 2020) and to explain these complexities using the idea of the implementation staircase (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2006). The rational–purposive theory provides us with an understanding of the underpinning assumptions behind the TEF. The staircase idea provides us with an understanding of how a policy is interpreted and reinterpreted and how individuals may respond to policy. In our case, the idea is useful as it can provide us with an understanding of how academics may respond to the TEF.

The lack of an explicitly stated change theory behind the TEF probably means that change theory was not considered and that the theory behind the TEF is tacit theory (Trowler, 2020). With tacit theory, the tendency is that the rational–purposive theory is relied upon (Trowler, 2020). Adopting this view, the implementation of the TEF is a top-down “technicist rational-purposive” implementation approach (Trowler, 2020, p.19). In this view, change is approached as a technical problem, tackled through a systematic, step-by-step process. Each step contributes incrementally to a larger, overarching goal where targets are tracked and rewarded along the way. This view is grounded in ‘rational planning’ and the planning which is based on well-defined intentions. Taking a ‘rational planning’ approach, the planning excludes ‘non-rational’ elements such as beliefs, ideologies, emotions and alternative viewpoints. The view of a top-down technicist rational-purposive implementation approach overlooks the

strength and persistence of deeply rooted practices (Trowler, 2020). It overlooks that these practices are resilient and have emerged over time (Trowler, 2020, p.126). The view also means that an overly confident and hopeful view is taken, underestimating the challenges and barriers that arise with change, especially “transformational” change (Trowler, 2020, p. 127). Trowler (2020) argues that long-standing practices can be deeply embedded, particularly at a specific location. Adopting a view of a top-down technicist rational-purposive implementation approach means that the diverse perspectives, ideologies, beliefs, memories and emotions of practitioners are excluded. Adopting this view means that individuals (academics in our case) respond to policy (the TEF in our case) in varied ways. For example, responses may include strict adherence to policy directives, their autonomous interpretation or their flexible interpretation. Adopting this view means that policy is enacted, rather than implemented, by individuals. Therefore, for the rest of this study, I use the term ‘policy enactment’ rather than ‘policy implementation’ when referring to the response by individuals to policy. An understanding of what may influence the enactment of policy can be found by applying the idea of the implementation staircase (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2006), discussed in the next section.

## **2.6 The implementation staircase**

The implementation staircase idea (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2006) is adopted for this thesis. The idea sees policy messages changing as they travel up and down a staircase of policy levels (Figure 1). The levels vary depending on context and approach. For example, the levels can be macro, meso and micro. Another example is that the levels can be funder, leader of an organisation, executive management, middle management, line management and employees. The view taken in this thesis is that of the following levels: the government / OfS, vice-chancellor, deans, discipline

leads, line managers and academics (Figure 1). For this thesis, the levels from vice-chancellor to line managers are considered institutional levels. Policy messages change as they travel up and down the staircase because as these travel, they are interpreted and adapted because of unacknowledged factors (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987), or “imperatives” (Saunders, 2012a, p. 193), that influence interpretation. The messages may then travel again and be interpreted again, in what is described as reinterpretation (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987). Adopting this idea, stakeholders at each level are both recipients and agents of policy, and policy messages are understood differently at each level.

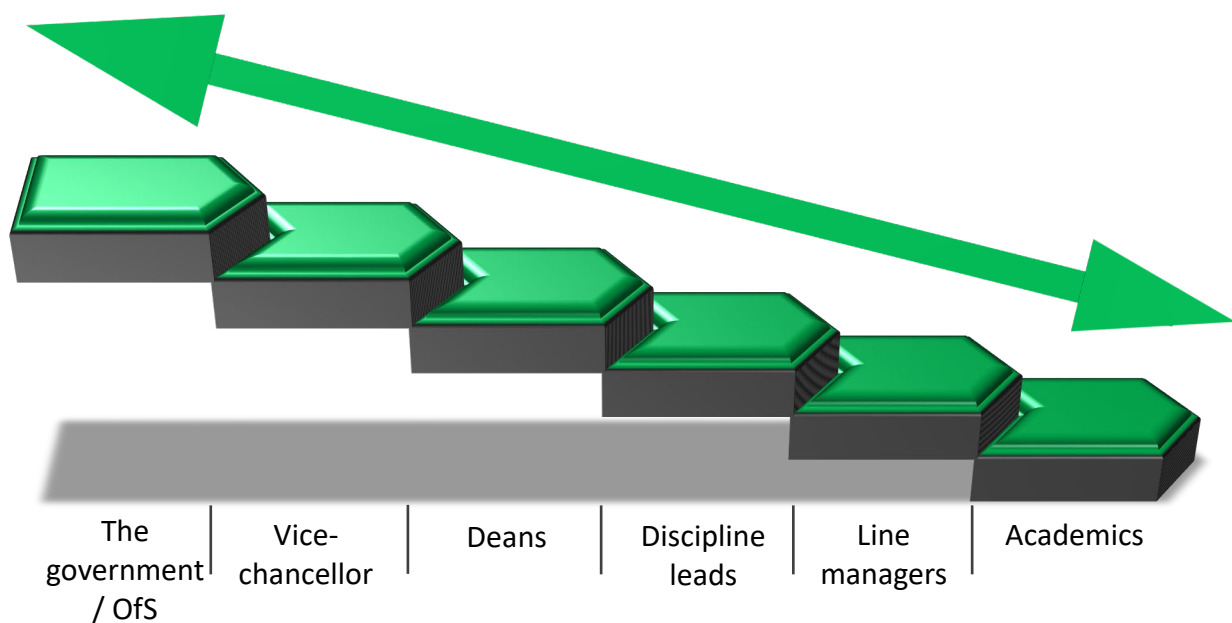


Figure 1: The implementation staircase (adopted from Saunders, 2006, p. 210).

I reserve this paragraph to draw a pen picture of how the staircase idea has been used in the literature. Mainly, the idea has been applied in educational research; however, it has been used in other areas. The idea had been applied to assess evaluations of programmes, policies and social interventions undertaken in the formerly named Centre for the Study of Education and Training (CSET), now known as the Centre for

Higher Education Research and Evaluation, in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University (Saunders, 2006). More recently, the idea has been applied to situate the position of middle managers in the enactment of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (SQEF) for learning and teaching in higher education (Saunders & Sin, 2015). The idea has also been used outside of educational research. For example, it was used very recently to assess the conditions influencing policy implementation in healthcare (Brower, 2025).

I further extend the staircase idea for this thesis, with a view that within one or more levels, there may be different locations that need to be considered. For example, there will be line managers in Department 1 and line managers in Department 2. Therefore, the level is the same but the location is different, and this needs to be considered. Further, the idea is extended in that locations can be grouped by type. Locations grouped by type can be termed location types. This sees individuals understanding policy messages differently according to, not only their level on the staircase, but also their location type. Particularly applicable to this thesis, there are academics at the location types of research- and teaching-intensive universities. Adopting the staircase idea, academics in research-intensive universities respond uniquely to policy messages because of the unique conditions influencing their interpretation and adaptation of these messages.

By adopting the staircase idea, 'policy in action' is seen as continuously shifting and evolving depending on how policy messages are adapted (Saunders, 2006). The adoption of the idea also means that policy as practice is seen as many 'policy in actions' because of different interpretations of policy messages by individuals, particularly at different levels, locations and location types (Reynolds & Saunders,



1987, Saunders, 2006). Therefore, the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF can provide insight on different 'policy in actions' of the TEF at the bottom level of the staircase and whether there are any patterns of such 'policy in actions' at this level in research-intensive universities. Further, academic perceptions can provide insight on how these 'policy in actions' or patterns of 'policy in actions' align and conflict with the intentions of the TEF. Academic perceptions regarding the TEF may also provide insight on what factors influence different 'policy in actions' and patterns of 'policy in actions'. In short, applying the staircase idea to perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF can enable the discerning of conditions that affect policy implementation at this type of university.

## **2.7 Staff perceptions regarding the TEF**

The aim of this section is to review the literature on perceptions regarding the TEF. This is useful as it provides a mandate to examine 1) academic perceptions of TEF 2023 and 2) the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF.

Relevant literature includes the study of O'Leary et al. (2019). The study was about the perceptions of staff at universities and college-based higher education institutions in the UK regarding the TEF since its introduction. As the study was carried out between February and October of 2018, this included perceptions on TEF 1, TEF 2 and TEF 3. It is important to note that the population for this study (O'Leary et al., 2019) consisted of staff who are (were) members of the University and College Union (UCU). The UCU is a trade union representing staff in further and higher education in Britain. Whilst most (70%) staff at college-based higher education institutions were not

aware of the TEF, most (85%) university staff were. Most (80%) staff at both college-based higher education and universities reported that there was no involvement, nor consultation, about their institution's activities related to the TEF or TEF submission. University staff viewed the TEF as resulting in an increase in monitoring exercises regarding teaching (for example, an increase in the number of institutional metrics). University staff did not view the TEF as achieving the enhancement of teaching excellence, nor did they see the TEF as influencing practical teaching. University staff also questioned the legitimacy and credibility of the TEF as a way of evaluating teaching excellence. Further, most university staff did not welcome the introduction of the TEF.

The pertinence of this study (O'Leary et al., 2019) is that despite the TEF attempting to influence academic experiences and attitudes, the TEF may not be resulting in this at research-intensive universities. Further, despite the TEF attempting to enhance teaching excellence at this location type, it may not be resulting in this. Further exacerbating this, the TEF as a policy instrument may not be convincing the academic at this location type. The arguments in this paragraph so far are made because academics in research-intensive universities may hold different perceptions regarding the TEF because of their location type traditionally being associated less with teaching. Evidence of this can be found in 'elite universities' focusing on the research role and universities focusing on teaching being regarded as "lower status" (Becher & Trowler, p. 154). This study (O'Leary et al., 2019) also reports that the TEF is not supported by staff. Considering that this study (O'Leary et al., 2019) is on TEF 3, this provides a basis for the examination of academic perceptions regarding TEF 2023 as these may differ from perceptions regarding TEF 3. The TEF potentially not influencing the experiences and attitudes of academic in research-intensive universities provides a

basis for examining the influence of TEF 2023 on these academics as perceived by them.

On a more positive note, staff perceived the TEF resulting in greater recognition of the importance and status of teaching in the same study (O'Leary et al., 2019). In particular, they perceived 1) positive changes to attitude regarding teaching and 2) pride about teaching. This provides a further basis for examining academic perceptions of TEF 2023. This is because it enables a useful comparison of the positive impact of the TEF on teaching between staff in higher education institutions and the positive impact, if any, on academics in research-intensive universities.

Another useful study is that of Cui et al. (2021) about the perceptions of staff in UK universities and college-based higher education regarding the TEF. It should be noted that this study (Cui et al., 2021) and that of O'Leary et al. (2019) form part of the same overall research project. This means that participants in this study (Cui et al., 2021) were also UCU members. Staff perceived the TEF leading to a shift in their institution's positioning towards a greater teaching focus. Staff perceived the TEF resulting in institutions prioritising staff obtaining teaching accreditation, particularly the Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA). There were also staff perceptions of increases in teaching-only contracts because of the TEF. Further, staff perceived the TEF leading to ongoing curriculum redesign and curriculum transformation efforts. Staff in this study (Cui et al., 2021) also perceived the TEF resulting in increased accountability exercises regarding teaching (for example, an increase in audit trails) and increased workloads (for example, because of increased administrative work). Staff perceived that the TEF resulted in a new approach to focusing the work of staff. The TEF was perceived to have led to a new approach to employment contracts by

institutions – from an approach of teaching-only or research-only contracts to an approach of teaching-focused, research-focused or teaching-research contracts. Staff perceived this new approach as a way for institutions to balance the new demands placed by the TEF alongside the existing demands placed by the REF (relevant literature on the REF is examined in section 2.7).

Considering that this study (Cui et al., 2021) is on TEF 3 in universities and college-based higher education, it would be useful to examine in what ways, if any, TEF 2023 affects the institutional positioning of research-intensive institutions as perceived by academics. It would also be useful to compare the perceptions of staff on TEF 3 with the perceptions of academics on TEF 2023 regarding accountability and workload. Further, it would be useful to assess if TEF 2023 had an impact, if any, on the way institutions balance demands placed by the TEF in research-intensive universities as perceived by academics in this context.

In the context of research-intensive universities, a particularly relevant study is the study of Perkins (2019). This is because this study is on the impact of TEF 2 on academic identity within a UK research-intensive university. Academics held good awareness of the TEF in this study. Whilst the overall identity within the university was not impacted, the TEF did have implications on it. Perceptions by academics inevitably varied; however, they generally thought that the TEF within this university causes identity conflict because of increasing role expectations around the performance of teaching. For example, participants thought there was a discrepancy between the university's rhetoric because of the TEF and the reality experienced by staff – the university underlined teaching as important whilst its systems of probation, promotion and performance focused overwhelmingly on research output. This was seen to cause

a conflict in identity for academics and to potentially result in the overwhelming of staff and negative impact on staff engagement, absence and turnover. This identity conflict was also embodied in some academics thinking of teaching excellence as 'fundamental' whilst others thinking that the TEF can further strain a system that's already overwhelmed. Academics within the university in question thought that the need to balance teaching and research was a key impact of the TEF on academic identity (Perkins, 2019). Particularly, academics saw an increase in the difficulty of balancing these two. For example, teaching and research were thought of as connected but conflict in identity was seen to arise because of the diversity inherent in the role associated with each (such as skill set required). This was also embodied in the TEF seen as resulting in an increase in focus on *excellence* in teaching where a need to excel in both teaching and research caused identity conflict and stress.

This study (Perkins, 2019) underlines an issue about TEF as a policy instrument that attempts to change academic attitudes. Research-intensive universities may be a context where it is more difficult for the TEF to change academic attitudes, particularly surrounding the value of teaching. This provides a strong purpose for the examination of the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF.

Other useful studies are the theses by Meeson (2020), Jodlowski (2019) and Graham (2018). The three theses are particularly helpful considering that the literature on academic and staff perceptions regarding the TEF is scarce. The thesis by Meeson (2020) provides insight regarding the understanding of TEF 2 by undergraduate programme leaders in British small universities. The thesis (Meeson, 2020) revealed that the programme leaders possess limited understanding of the TEF. This was because the universities provided little to no information on the TEF and programme

leaders had to rely on informal sources for such information. Programme leaders perceived that this hampered their ability to affect the TEF rating. In the thesis by Jodlowski (2019), insight is provided regarding the understanding of TEF 2 by staff in business schools across English universities. Staff in this context understood the TEF to be about the need to ensure value for money. This was because of the rise in tuition fees that had occurred. Similarly, staff understood the TEF as a way to make education more competitive.

The theses discussed in the paragraph above (Jodlowski, 2019; Meeson, 2020) provide a motive to examine the perceptions of academics regarding their understanding of TEF 2023. This is because it is useful to compare what ways, if any, understandings regarding the TEF evolved from the time of TEF 2 to the time of TEF 2023.

Moving on to the thesis by Graham (2019), perceptions of staff were examined in a teaching-intensive context – a post-92 university. The perceptions at two points in time were examined: after the university was awarded a TEF 2 rating and before the university was awarded a TEF 3 rating. Staff held positive perceptions on the intentions behind both TEF 2 and TEF 3. However, they perceived both TEF exercises not to actually evaluate teaching excellence. Staff perceived that teaching at schools was much better than teaching at universities contradicting their university's TEF 2 Silver rating. Staff perceived that TEF 3 ratings depend on the writing quality of TEF submissions. The thesis by Graham (2019) is useful as it provides a basis for comparing perceptions of staff from a teaching-intensive context regarding the evaluation of teaching excellence by the TEF compared to academic perceptions from a research-intensive context.

In this section, I have emphasised staff perceptions regarding the TEF. This is essential as it provides a basis for examining the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF. This also provides a basis for examining in what ways, if any, the TEF 2023 influences academic experiences and attitudes as perceived by them. Having reviewed the literature on perceptions regarding the TEF, we now turn to reviewing the literature on perceptions regarding the REF considering that this can be considered as the sister initiative to the TEF.

## **2.8 Academic and newspaper perceptions regarding the REF**

In this section, I review the literature on perceptions regarding the sister scheme of the TEF – the REF. This literature is relevant because perceptions regarding the TEF compared to the REF may differ due to different attitudes to teaching compared to research. This is of particular importance for this thesis as the participants examined, academics in research-intensive universities, may hold different perceptions regarding the TEF, compared to perceptions reported in the literature regarding the REF, because of their location type – whether the location type is a research- or teaching-intensive university.

The literature on perceptions regarding the REF is scant despite ample broader literature on the REF itself. Indeed, a thorough literature search on perceptions regarding the REF revealed little contribution in this area. The core contribution in this area has been made by Tony Murphy and Daniel Sage in two separate studies (Murphy & Sage 2014; 2015). One study is related to perceptions regarding the REF in newspaper articles (Murphy and Sage, 2014). It should be noted that the newspaper articles were written by journalists (145), senior/lecturers (42) and professors (36). The

other study of Murphy and Sage (2015) is on the perceptions of academics in 33 English and Scottish higher education institutions regarding the REF.

In the 2014 study (Murphy & Sage 2014), there were perceptions of a harmful impact by the REF on employment. Perceptions included a negative effect on employment conditions, relationships amongst staff and tension between university managers and academics. In the same study (Murphy & Sage 2014), there was a perception of the REF leading to gaming to achieve better REF outcomes. For example, 'impact' was perceived as associated with dishonest practice. Further, professors perceived the REF as constraining intellectual freedom. This study (Murphy & Sage 2014) highlights academic perceptions regarding the REF as a policy instrument. This is applicable for the purposes of this thesis. This is because academics in research-intensive universities may hold perceptions regarding the TEF as a policy instrument that align and diverge to perceptions regarding the REF as a policy instrument.

Aligning with the study in the paragraph above (Murphy & Sage 2014), the other study of Murphy and Sage (2015) also revealed perceptions of the REF having a harmful impact on employment. Academics perceived the REF as having a negative impact on the working environment. On a more positive note, academics perceived the REF to be valuable in terms of its mission. This is because academics perceived the REF to promote research quality, voicing perceptions of 'buying in' to the REF. The pertinence of this study (Murphy & Sage 2015) is that it provides perceptions regarding the influence of the REF on employment and the mission of the REF. Therefore, it is useful to examine the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF. This is because they may also hold perceptions regarding the influence of the TEF on employment and the mission of the TEF.



It is worth noting that in this study (Murphy & Sage 2015), there were perceptions of the REF causing a burden on workload because of increased administrative work. This aligns with the study of Cui et al. (2021) (examined in section 2.6) that the TEF is perceived to lead to increased administrative work. This provides a purpose for examining the perceptions of academics in research-intensive institutions regarding the TEF to assess whether the TEF is also perceived by academics to hamper workload in this context.

## **2.9 Conclusion for the chapter**

The intention behind this chapter was to review relevant literature to set a context for this thesis. As part of this, literature on the idea of the implementation staircase was reviewed. This is because the idea is helpful in thinking about how academics' enactment of the TEF is mediated by their location and location type. This is because the idea considers policy messages to be interpreted and reinterpreted as they travel up and down the different levels of the staircase.

As part of setting a context for this thesis, this chapter also reviewed relevant literature regarding the TEF as a policy instrument in its various iterations and how the iterations may differently affect academic perceptions and influence experiences and attitudes. The different iterations – TEF 1, TEF 2, TEF 3 and TEF 2023 were examined. The perceptions regarding the TEF and REF, particularly regarding different iterations of the TEF were reviewed. This sets the foundation for marrying up literature with the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology and methods**

This chapter puts forward the methodological framework and research methods adopted for this thesis. This is useful to provide rationale for the choices made for the thesis. The chapter starts by describing my alignment with interpretivism, where the ontological and epistemological positions adopted are described. This is useful to consider relevant implications. I then move on to discuss the research design. This is essential to justify the methodological choices in view of the 1) epistemology and ontology adopted and 2) research questions. Further, I describe my agency as the researcher. This is relevant as I acknowledge my role in the research as an active participant in the construction of meaning. This is particularly important with the adoption of interpretivism, as it enables the consideration of implications of myself as the interpreter. Finally, I articulate the ethical considerations made to protect participants. This is essential as the considerations ensured that the rights and dignity of participants were safeguarded. Before providing the rationale for the choices made for the thesis, it is useful to revisit the research questions:

- RQ1. What are the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities, if any, regarding the impact of the TEF on the experiences and attitudes of themselves and their academic colleagues?
- RQ2. What are the perceptions of academics in this context, if any, regarding how they experience the TEF?
- RQ3. What are the perceptions of academics in this context regarding the TEF as a policy instrument?

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach was adopted for the design of the thesis. Having explored the research questions, we now move to the philosophical approach adopted for this thesis.

### **3.1 Philosophical stance**

This thesis is underpinned by a philosophical stance that recognises the complexity and multiplicity of reality. Ontologically, it assumes that reality is not singular or fixed, but socially constructed through language, culture and interaction. It is characterised by a plurality of meanings, interpretations and lived experiences. In this stance, reality is dynamic, mediated by a continuous interplay of perceptions, practices and processes shaped by social contexts.

Epistemologically, this thesis is grounded in the belief that knowledge is generated through interpretation. Interpretations are not neutral or detached – they are inherently value-laden and situated. As such, the knowledge claims made in this thesis are value-bound and open to contestation. Readers may align with, or diverge from, the interpretations presented, depending on their own perspectives and experiences.

Given this interpretivist orientation, this thesis adopted an inductive approach, aiming to generate understanding from the data. Whilst this approach does not seek generalisability in the positivist sense, it offers rich, contextual insights that contribute to understanding within specific a specific context (Saunders et al., 2011). In our case, research-intensive universities. The emphasis of interpretation was the meaning as constructed by academics in research-intensive universities and myself as the researcher. Therefore, my role was central to the process. My own positionality, as both an academic and a researcher, inevitably influenced interpretation. I acknowledge that I was embedded within the research and that my interpretations were integral to

the knowledge produced. Acknowledging this, I discuss my agency and its implications (please see section 3.3). This reflexive stance recognises the subjective and co-constructed nature of an interpretivist orientation.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the analytic process is made transparent, enabling its evaluation by the reader. Whilst various data collection methods were considered, semi-structured interviews were deemed beneficial for their capacity to elicit rich, interpretive accounts. Interviews also enabled me to position myself as a partner with participants in the discovery of perceptions. Although observational methods might have offered alternative insights, they were not pursued due to practical constraints associated with accessing multiple universities.

This thesis also drew on a hermeneutic perspective. Therefore, the approach I adopted focused on how meaning is constructed and understood within a specific context. Particularly, how the meaning and experience of the TEF are shaped within research-intensive universities. A hermeneutic perspective emphasises the interpretive nature of understanding. What we perceive — ourselves, others and the world — is taken for granted; in this sense, our typical everyday world is an 'ordinary life' (Husserl, 2010). Therefore, this thesis began with ordinary life but moved beyond it through reflective inquiry (Schütz, 1967). This was facilitated by engaging in a process of interpretation including the questioning what is typically assumed. The basis for this was to uncover meanings. Unavoidably, this required me as the researcher to co-construct meaning based on my already-lived experiences.

In this section I have established the ontological and epistemological foundations of this thesis, centrally that reality is socially constructed and has multiple meanings, and

that knowledge is co-created through interpretation. Building on this, we now move on to the consideration of how these foundations informed the research design.

### **3.2 Research design**

This thesis adopted a qualitative research design, grounded in the recognition that complexity is the norm in societal environments (in our case, the environment of higher education and research-intensive universities). This is because social life consists of clusters of experiences, practices and processes in different social groups. In the environment of higher education, social groups comprise students, academics, support staff and other university staff. In relation to this, this thesis adopts the idea of the implementation staircase (please see section 2.5).

Considering the complexity described in the paragraph above, qualitative inquiry offers a valuable means of examining perceptions and experiences of individuals. Qualitative inquiry enables a depth of understanding that is particularly suited to assessing the perceptions, experiences and influences of a policy (in our case, the TEF) and its impact. This underpins the methodological choice of a qualitative approach for this thesis.

It is useful to restate that this thesis was underpinned by an interpretivist philosophical stance. Considering this and the research questions, the research design adopted for this thesis reflected a commitment to ascribe meaning to the perceptions and experiences of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF. It is important to note that with this approach, meaning is contextually grounded rather than generalisable in the positivist sense. This reflects the intention of this thesis that, rather than seeking universal claims, sought contextually grounded meaning.

Having discussed the methodological foundations of this thesis, I now turn to the practical implementation of the research design. The next section describes the data collection strategy employed to collect the perceptions and experiences of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF.

### **3.2.1 Data collection: selection of method and timing**

Semi-structured interviews was the method of data collection employed. The purpose behind this was the need to 1) directly engage with participants and 2) facilitate depth to enable the generation of rich insight. Interviews provided access to academic perceptions and experiences regarding the TEF as a policy instrument. A total of 14 interviews were held with academics from five research-intensive universities. The basis for this context was that academics at this location type may hold different perceptions regarding the TEF because of research-intensive universities potentially focusing less on teaching. This is discussed in more detail as part of the description of the sampling strategy (section 3.2.2).

Whilst alternative qualitative data collection methods were considered, these were deemed to be less beneficial than semi-structured interviews for this thesis. Other methods — such as open-ended questionnaires, consultations, think-aloud protocols and observational methods — were deemed to carry various strengths. For example, open-ended questionnaires and large-scale consultations can reveal a broad spectrum of perspectives. However, they were deemed to be unable to elicit detailed accounts. Further, written responses were deemed to carry an increased likelihood of participants voluntarily or involuntarily tailoring their responses. What is discussed in this paragraph formed part of the basis for implementing semi-structured interviews.

However, it is important to note that the central purpose for implementing semi-structured interviews can be found in the next paragraph.

Given the research questions, depth was prioritised over breadth to capture the complexity of participants' perceptions and experiences. This formed the central basis for implementing interviews. To allow myself as the researcher to probe emerging themes, this thesis considered the need for flexibility in data collection. This formed the basis for adopting a semi-structured approach. Taking this paragraph together, semi-structured interviews were implemented to enable the generation of depth whilst offering flexibility.

With the method of data collection detailed, it is useful to consider the timing of data collection. Considering the particular interest of this thesis on TEF 2023, data was collected starting at the end of February 2024. This is because the TEF 2023 ratings were fully published, including the completion of the appeals process, by February 2024 (for further detail, please see section 1.3). Therefore, starting data collection at the end of February 2024 enabled the opportunity for participants to be aware of their university's TEF 2023 rating, and the generation of perceptions regarding this. By extension, this also provided an opportunity for participants to experience the lead up to the publishing of the rating and the generation of associated perceptions. Similarly, the enabled the opportunity for participants to 1) experience any TEF-related university events taking place at the time of their university's TEF 2023 submission, 2) the lead up to the submission and accordingly 3) the formulation of perceptions regarding these two. The timing further meant that it was possible for participants to have generated perceptions regarding their university's approach to the 2021/22 continuation, completion and progression rates and the 2022 National Student Survey (NSS). These

are relevant to this thesis considering that these were used to inform the TEF 2023 ratings (for further detail, please see section 1.3). However, it is important to note that participants may have also generated perceptions regarding their university's approach to the 2022/23 continuation, completion and progression rates and the 2023 NSS. Despite these not informing the TEF 2023 ratings, they took place prior to data collection.

Saunders et al. (2018) advocate for the carrying out of a high number of interviews until data saturation is reached. Seidmann (2013, p. 58) offers similar advice, saying 'more than less'. However, both Saunders et al. (2018) and Seidmann (2013) do not offer a number on how many interviews should be carried out. Considering the advice of both Saunders et al. (2018) and Seidmann (2013), I conducted interviews until I assessed data saturation to have been reached – ten interviews. At that point, I carried out four more interviews, totalling 14 interviews. My argument behind the carrying out of four more interviews is that it can never be fully established that data saturation has been reached. Arguably, there is always a likelihood that additional insight can arise. Therefore, I carried out four more interviews after I assessed data saturation to have been reached to decrease the risk of missing relevant insight. The conduction of the additional four interviews did not result in the emergence of new insight.

Following the consideration of the method and timing of data collection, and the number of interviews carried out, it is now important to consider how participants were selected to ensure alignment with the research questions. Therefore, the next section describes the criteria for participant selection, the rationale for the sampling approach and the procedures used to access and recruit individuals across multiple research-intensive universities.



### **3.2.2 Sampling strategy**

In qualitative research, the selection of participants is not driven by statistical representativeness but by the potential to generate rich, contextually grounded insights. Considering this, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants. Fourteen participants were recruited in total.

To offer perspectives regarding the TEF within research-intensive universities in England, academics within this context were selected as participants. This reflected the mandate established as part of the review of the literature review (Chapter 2) regarding how academics within this context may respond to the TEF. Sampling from research-intensive universities provided an opportunity to examine whether academics in this context hold different perceptions, compared to other contexts, regarding the TEF. This is because it is sometimes claimed that research-intensive universities focus less on teaching and this may affect perceptions held. Further, the often-assumed value placed on research in this context contrasts with the policy messages of the TEF of teaching excellence and enhancement. This offers a unique environment to examine conditions that affect the enactment of the TEF.

Academics were recruited through the professional online social network, LinkedIn. This enabled me access to a diverse pool of academics. Indeed, the sample was not restricted by disciplinary affiliation, as the intention was to gather a range of perspectives – whilst the methodology adopted favoured depth over breadth, depth was not sought at the granularity of disciplinary affiliation. The sample was limited to academics who are not in a management position. This was based on two key considerations. Firstly, individuals in these roles are more likely to have experienced the impact of the TEF on the ground. Secondly, excluding middle and senior

management roles helped mitigate the risk of institutional bias or politically motivated responses, which could inadvertently reflect strategic priorities rather than personal perceptions. It is acknowledged that limiting the sample to academics who are not in a management position introduces a drawback in relation to the idea of the implementation staircase adopted (for further detail, please see section 2.5). The drawback is that accounts are only obtained from actors at the bottom level of the staircase, despite that there are actors at every level. However, this thesis sought to examine perceptions at the bottom level based on a line of thought that it is at this level that actors experience the most tension between research and teaching.

To situate the data analysis, an overview of participants is provided in Table 1. This supports an understanding of the diversity of participants and enables the analysis of data within their context. It is important to note that pseudonyms are used and identifiable information was removed to protect anonymity.

Table 1: Table of participants.

<b>Academic*</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>University (TEF rating)</b>	<b>Department</b>	<b>Previous universities</b>
Neil	Assoc Professor	University 1 (Silver)	Department 1	One teaching-intensive
Sarah	Assoc Professor	University 1 (Silver)	Department 2	None
Oliver	Assistant Professor	University 1 (Silver)	Department 3	None
Melvin	Assistant Professor	University 1 (Silver)	Department 4	One research- and one teaching-intensive
Telma	Senior Lecturer	University 1 (Silver)	Department 5	None
Flavia	Assoc Professor	University 2 (Silver)	Department 1	One teaching-intensive
Adenike	Assoc Professor	University 2 (Silver)	Department 2	One research- and one teaching-intensive

Bo	Assistant Professor	University 2 (Silver)	Department 3	One research- and one teaching-intensive
Stella	Lecturer	University 2 (Silver)	Department 4	One research- and one teaching-intensive
Saima	Assistant Professor	University 3 (Gold)	Department 1	None
Joshua	Assistant Professor	University 3 (Gold)	Department 2	One research- and one teaching-intensive
Blake	Lecturer	University 4 (Silver)	Department 1	One research- and one teaching-intensive
Yusuf	Lecturer	University 4 (Silver)	Department 2	None
Jason	Lecturer	University 5 (Silver)	Department 1	One research- and one teaching-intensive

*Note.* Assoc = Associate.

\*Pseudonyms are used.

With the establishment of the sampling strategy and provision of an overview of participants, we now move our attention to the interview schedule developed for this thesis. Therefore, the next section describes the schedule, including the rationale for the structuring and phrasing of interview questions.

### **3.2.3 Interview schedule**

In line with the interpretivist approach of this thesis, the interview schedule was designed to facilitate open, reflective dialogue with participants. Therefore, it was essential for the schedule to allow space for emergent insights whilst ensuring alignment with the research questions.

The interview schedule can be found in Appendix A. The interview schedule was structured in three parts: introduction guidance, prompts and indicative questions. Prompts were generated and used with an aim of guiding the interview and promoting further detail; the last prompt was an open prompt: “Any other probing questions”. The indicative questions were designed to generate new insights into academic perceptions of the TEF as a policy instrument. This includes designing indicative

questions that provide an understanding of how academics may respond to the TEF. Specifically, how the TEF may influence academic experiences and attitudes. Therefore, the indicative questions were designed to elicit responses relevant to the mandate established by the literature review (please see Chapter 2).

The designing of the indicative questions first consisted of the drafting of a list of key matters that need to be examined that reflect the research questions and the mandate established in the literature review. This list was then used to generate the indicative questions. To foster detailed responses, the (indicative) questions were open-ended. In total, 39 indicative questions were designed. Out of these, eight questions related to participant information. Therefore, there were 31 questions related to academic perceptions.

The interview schedule was structured as follows: participant information (questions 1–7), the TEF (questions 9–21), reaction to the TEF 2023 rating (questions 22–26) and perceived positives and negatives of the TEF (questions 27–39). The rationale behind the participant information questions being the first set of indicative questions (questions 1–7) was that myself as the interviewer could have contextual information which could inform probing, particularly regarding the last prompt in the schedule – “Any other probing questions.”

The rationale behind questions regarding the TEF being the second set of indicative questions (questions 9–21) was that these were questions of a more generic nature. The rationale behind the questions regarding the TEF rating, and perceived positives and negatives regarding the TEF being the third and fourth (final) set of indicative questions respectively (questions 22–26 and 27–39 respectively) was that with the

TEF having been introduced in the second set of indicative questions, the questions could then turn more closely to the focus of this thesis.

Indicative questions asked for a description of the TEF and an aspect of teaching that changed because of the TEF. Indicative questions also asked about involvement with and experience of the TEF and the TEF 2023 rating at the respective institution.

The overarching aim of the interview schedule was to elicit responses that enabled understanding of how academics perceive and experience the TEF, particularly in its most recent iteration. Therefore, indicative questions asked about academics' direct involvement with the TEF (if any) and institutional and individual reactions to the TEF 2023 rating. It was also deemed useful for the questions to ask about changes because of the TEF. This is because this could provide insight on how the TEF has influenced academic experiences and attitudes. Finally, questions asked about the importance of the TEF. This was deemed useful to elicit responses on perceived legitimacy of the TEF and particularly to elicit responses regarding the impact of the TEF regarding the recognition of the importance and status of teaching.

A pilot interview was conducted to examine the effectiveness of and obtain feedback on the interview question schedule, enabling the refinement of the interview schedule. The pilot interview did not result in responses regarding the importance of teaching. Thus, the following question was added to the interview schedule, "How do you feel the TEF has affected the importance of teaching?" The examination of the effectiveness of the pilot interview resulted in modifications to some interview questions. For example, "because of TEF" was added to: "Describe how the needs of your team are being met". Other questions added include "Why did you agree to take part in this interview?" as these were thought to potentially elicit further insight.

Additional prompts that could be used were also added such as “Do you think colleagues would also see it in this way?”

Following the establishment of the interview schedule, it is now necessary to describe how the interviews, using the interview schedule, were conducted. Accordingly, this is tackled in the next section.

### **3.2.4 Conduct and transcription of interviews**

The interviews were held electronically on Microsoft Teams. These were scheduled through Microsoft Outlook. Each interview was scheduled at the point when a date and time were established with the respective participant. In order to protect confidentiality, meetings were scheduled as ‘Private’. This ensured that other members of the participants’ organisation and other members of my organisation could not view the nature of the meeting. This also ensured that members of the participants’ organisation could not view that the meeting was with me. Further, this ensured that members of my organisation could not view who I was having the meeting with. The basis for holding the interviews electronically was practicality, considering that interviews were planned amongst academics at different universities across any geographical area of England. The basis for selecting Teams as the software platform for the interviews was that most participants would likely already be using Teams as part of their day-to-day university activities. All participants were familiar with Teams and there were no issues scheduling or holding the interviews on this platform. For information regarding when interviews were carried out, please refer to section 3.2.1.

During the interviews, the interview schedule was used with a degree of flexibility. Whilst the schedule provided structure, sometimes questions not on the schedule were asked if the participant was talking about another avenue, when the avenue was

relevant to the focus of this thesis. Whilst usually most indicative questions on the schedule were asked, sometimes some questions were not asked if these were already covered. As data collection progressed, at the latter stages of an interview, academics were provided with (anonymised) statements that previous participants provided and were asked for their thoughts on these statements. The basis for this was to elicit further insight.

The interviews were recorded through Teams so that they can be accurately transcribed later on by myself as the researcher (transcription is described in more detail in the next paragraph). The recordings were automatically stored in the cloud by Teams. This ensured the secure storage of the recordings. Access to the recordings was restricted through Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA). This ensured a high level of security, where recordings can only be accessed by myself.

The automatic transcription feature of Teams was used. When this feature is enabled for a meeting, transcripts are available shortly after sessions have concluded. However, Team transcripts require corrections. Corrections to the transcripts were made by myself as soon as possible after each interview. This was done by listening to the recordings and making necessary corrections so that the final transcripts are verbatim transcripts. During corrections, transcripts were anonymised. This included the removal of potential personal identifiers. Care was taken during corrections so that responses by participants were accurately corrected, ensuring that the given meaning of responses was maintained. This was done by being actively aware not to misrepresent responses because of my thoughts. Accordingly, this ensured that the data were not influenced by any preconceived ideas emanating from myself. It is

important to note that the automatic transcription of interviews by Teams eliminated much of the potential bias related with transcription.

Following this section describing how the interviews were conducted and transcribed, attention now turns to the analytical phase. This is because it is necessary to consider how the data, which are the result of the transcription and conduct of the interviews, were analysed.

### **3.2.5 Coding and analysis**

In keeping with the interpretivist approach of this thesis, the analysis was designed to uncover patterns of meaning within participants' accounts. This section outlines the coding and theme construction procedures employed. These were influenced by the work of Saldaña (2011). Coding and theme construction consisted of five steps. The five steps are explained in the next paragraph. More detail about three of the steps — coding, analytical memo writing and the development of themes — is provided in the paragraphs that follow.

The first step of data analysis was the initial coding which was done by hand. This consisted of handwritten annotations. Two samples of the initial coding, for transcripts of two participants, can be found in Appendix B. Based on the initial codes from all the transcripts, the final codes were then developed on Microsoft Word (Table 2). Saldaña (2011) calls for the development of categories based on the final codes before moving on to the writing of analytic memos and subsequently the development of themes. Aiming to follow this approach, I initially started developing categories on Microsoft Word (Table 3). The development of the categories was based on the final codes. However, I stopped developing categories after I had developed four categories. This was because it was particularly difficult for me to differentiate categories from themes



and codes. Resultantly, categories were not used as part of the construction of themes. Therefore, the writing of analytical memos was the third step of data analysis. The written analytical memos served to put my thoughts as the researcher into writing. The fourth, and final, step of data analysis consisted of the development of themes. However, it should be noted that the development of themes was not a linear process. Rather, it was shaped by the evolving engagement with the data as part of analytical memo writing. Coding, analytical memo writing and the development of themes are now discussed in more detail.

Table 2: Final codes.

Parent code	Child code/s
Attitude of not agreeing with the TEF	
The TEF is not in the foreground of academics	
The TEF is not in the background of academics	
The TEF does not matter	
The TEF is not important	Not affected by the TEF rating Indifferent to the TEF Not interested in the TEF What 'we' (academics) do is unrelated to the TEF
The TEF does not encourage the improvement of teaching	
There may be things which are more important than the TEF	
The TEF is compared to the REF	
Little knowledge about the TEF	
Uncaring attitude towards the TEF	

Parent code	Child code/s
The TEF leads to the need to have happy students	
Uncaring attitude to teaching	
Incorrect information about the TEF	
The TEF has a positive impact on teaching-focused careers	<p>The TEF is leading to an endorsement of teaching-focused careers</p> <p>The TEF may further endorse teaching-focused careers going forward</p>
Participants happy with TEF Silver	
Colleagues happy with TEF Silver	
Incorrect information about the TEF	<p>Inaccurate information about the TEF</p> <p>Incorrect information on TEF technicalities</p>
Doubts about the TEF	
The TEF may lead to higher grades	
The TEF is a 'game'	
A culture that research-intensive universities do not do teaching, that is something for modern universities	
The TEF leads to a customer/consumer relationship	
The TEF is not meeting its intention regarding teaching	
The TEF creates anxiety towards the TEF rating that may be achieved	
Not sure about the TEF process	Not familiar with what goes into the TEF
The TEF makes staff responsible	
Minimal staff involved with the TEF	

Parent code	Child code/s
The TEF does not make a difference to teaching	
The TEF leads to 'gerrymandering'	
Research is important	<p>The number of papers is important</p> <p>Quality of papers is important</p> <p>Grants are important</p>
The TEF does not affect research-intensive universities	<p>Russell Group universities do not actively participate in the TEF</p> <p>The TEF is a matter for teaching-intensive universities</p>
The TEF does not affect participants	<p>The TEF is not in the discourse of people</p> <p>Does not affect my activity</p>
The TEF does not affect participants nor colleagues	The TEF hardly comes up in meetings
The TEF does not affect the institution	<p>Institution happy with TEF Silver</p> <p>Low institutional attention to the TEF</p> <p>Uncaring institutional attitude towards the TEF</p> <p>Little institutional reaction to the TEF rating</p> <p>The TEF has no bearing on institutional income</p> <p>The TEF has no bearing on student recruitment</p>
The TEF is not important as the REF for Russell group universities	More attention to research than TEF because we are a Russell group university
Academics in Russell group universities are not as familiar with the TEF as they are with the REF	Unlike the TEF, the REF is a constant matter of discussion

Parent code	Child code/s
The REF is suggested as a higher priority than the TEF	
Minimal insight on the TEF and its workings	
The TEF potentially increased bureaucracy	
The TEF creates a marketisation atmosphere	
The TEF may negatively influence attitudes	
Research-intensive institutions are able to recruit students irrespective of the TEF	
Little understanding of the TEF	
The TEF does not impact my (academics') decisions	
The TEF and the NSS are the same thing	
Unawareness about the TEF	Unawareness about the TEF submission Unawareness about the TEF rating Only once Gold is achieved, there is awareness of the TEF Oblivious about the TEF
The TEF misses the point that to be at the forefront, research is needed	
The TEF is not talked about	
The TEF causes stress and anxiety	
The TEF does not impact finance	
The TEF is not effective in terms of informing student choice	
The TEF submission is not a big thing	
The TEF is not a priority	
The TEF does not inform student choice	

Parent code	Child code/s
The TEF is not achieving its intentions	
The TEF is just another university comparison scheme	Comparison of the TEF to league tables
The TEF is not what it purports to be	
The TEF is an imposition	
The TEF ratings are inaccurate	<p>The TEF is inaccurate because the quality of teaching is difficult to measure</p> <p>The metrics used by the TEF are inaccurate</p> <p>Research-informed teaching is not taken into account by the TEF</p> <p>Other metrics that can be added to the TEF should be considered.</p> <p>Criteria need to include research</p> <p>One-word rating systems are inaccurate</p> <p>The ratings that inform the TEF do not show cause and effect</p> <p>Not sure about the three ratings (Gold, Silver and Bronze)</p>
The TEF ratings do not reflect the programme or department a student may be involved in at university	The TEF ratings do not consider the department
Faux teaching enhancement is encouraged by the TEF	
The TEF materialises a focus of obtaining a Gold TEF rating	The TEF materialises a focus on the TEF rating
The TEF is the exerting of control	
The TEF leads to the entertainment of the student	
The TEF potentially hinders teaching	The TEF results in mechanical teaching

Parent code	Child code/s
The TEF may cause grade inflation	The TEF materialises the awarding of higher grades than should be
The TEF can include financial incentives	
Teaching is not affected by the TEF	
There is more emphasis on the REF rather than the TEF	
To some extent, I would welcome the removal of metrics from the TEF	

Table 3: The four categories developed.

Categories
Attitudes of 'the TEF is unrelated to research-intensive universities'
Negative attitudes towards the TEF
The TEF is inaccurate
The TEF causes many issues

In this thesis, coding was used as a transitional process – a vehicle to move from the raw data to more comprehensive analysis. Coding was not viewed as a theoretical orientation but as a heuristic device – a methodological tool that aids in the discovery and interpretation of meaning within qualitative data. In other words, coding was inductive. Initial codes were generated from the data whilst final codes were generated from the initial codes and the data. Each initial code represented a passage of data, in the form of a word or phrase, thereby indexing the data and facilitating its organisation (Saldaña, 2021). This approach was deemed particularly appropriate

given the nature of the data — data from semi-structured interviews on participants' perceptions — where initial coding allowed for the preservation of richness whilst enabling analytical abstraction. A potential drawback of coding is reductionism. An attempt to avoid reductionism in this thesis was an approach to coding as an act of analysis rather than an act of deduction. Meaning was assigned to data by distilling their essence and attributes. Importantly, no claim to objectivity is made; rather, the codes should be understood as my personal signature (Saldaña, 2011). In other words, coding consisted of my personal interpretation of the data. The codes are inherently subjective, shaped by 1) how myself as the researcher perceive and experience the social world and 2) my positionality. Coding laid the foundation for further interpretation, enabling the stimulation of analytical thinking.

This thesis employed analytic memo writing as the central vehicle for the data to become themes. Analytic memo writing is a critical reflective practice (Saldaña, 2021). Analytic memo writing was the writing of reflections on codes with an intention to transforming these into themes. This involved 1) interpretative reflection on the discourse by academics' and 2) the writing of these reflections and evolving insights. This enabled a dialogic engagement with the data and codes. Analytical memo writing enabled myself to become actively engaged with the codes, allowing me to recognise emerging patterns. This also enabled me to develop ideas. This is because analytical memo writing enabled conversations with myself, giving rise to new lines of thought. Analytical memos were written and used right away or written and used at a later time. From a practical standpoint, analytical memos made the data manageable.

The development of themes was undertaken after the coding process – the written analytic memos resulted in the themes and this is explained in the next paragraph.

Theme development was mainly inductive but also deductive. The writing of analytical memos was the inductive aspect to the process of theme development. However, the research questions were used as a frame to develop the themes so that each theme provided a meaningful response to the research questions. This was the deductive aspect to the process of theme development. It is important to note that this was the only deductive aspect of the data analysis. The themes are provided in Table 4 and discussed in the findings chapter (Chapter 4).

Table 4: The six themes.

<b>Themes</b>
Lack of familiarity with the TEF
Lack of relevance of the TEF
Unsympathetic attitudes
The TEF instils anxiety in staff
Perceptions of the TEF as unhelpful
The TEF embraces teaching-focused careers

Written analytic memos resulted in the themes in the following manner. Patterns in the codes were looked for so that a theme can be developed. When patterns were observed and a theme developed, this was written as part of the written analytical memos. When a theme was developed, relevant observations from the data in relation to the theme were considered for further development of the theme. Specifically, the observations further supported or helped refine the theme. This was captured in the memos. As an example of how the codes became a theme, the memos resulting in the theme *Lack of relevance of the TEF* are provided in Table 5.



Table 5: Written analytic memos that resulted in the themes.

Written analytic memos	Theme	Research questions
I am noticing a group of codes that all relate to a sense of detachment with the TEF so I will bring this into a theme. The theme can be called <i>The academic is disconnected from the TEF</i> .	Lack of relevance of the TEF	<p>RQ1. What are the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities, if any, regarding the impact of the TEF on the experiences and attitudes of themselves and their academic colleagues?</p> <p>RQ2. What are the perceptions of academics in this context, if any, regarding how they experience the TEF?</p> <p>RQ3. What are the perceptions of academics in this context regarding the TEF as a policy instrument?</p>
An observation from the data is a sense of detachment by academics. This aligns well with the theme of <i>The academic is disconnected from the TEF</i> .		
The data is showing me a 'struggle' between academics and the TEF. This aligns well with the theme of <i>The academic is disconnected from the TEF</i> .		
Patterns are evident in the data of a 'broken link' between academics and the TEF. This accords well with the theme of <i>The academic is disconnected from the TEF</i> .		
After getting a better sense of relevant data in relation to the theme <i>The academic is disconnected from the TEF</i> , I assess that the theme would be more congruent if it is called <i>Lack of relevance of the TEF</i> .		
The data is giving me a sense of a lack of harmony between the TEF and academics' mission in the context of research-intensive institutions. This aligns well with the theme of <i>Lack of relevance of the TEF</i> .		
Examining this further, the data has pointed me towards academics thinking that the TEF is unrelated to the academics' mandate in research-intensive higher education institutions. This accords well with the theme of <i>Lack of relevance of the TEF</i> .		

This section outlined the procedures undertaken to derive themes from the qualitative data. It is now necessary to turn inward and consider the role of myself as the researcher within this interpretive process. Accordingly, the next section details my agency as the researcher.

### **3.3 My agency as the researcher**

The construction of meaning in qualitative inquiry is not a neutral act. As the researcher, I acknowledge my role in this thesis in inherently shaping meaning. As such, this section critically examines my own agency as the researcher – how my background and decisions influenced the analytical journey. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to foreground my agency.

I am an academic situated within a teaching-intensive university in the English Midlands. My role at the university is that of researcher, senior lecturer and programme leader for a health Master of Science programme. I hold an Associate Member role at the Centre for Higher Education Research and Evaluation, Lancaster University. I am a fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) and registered as ‘Teacher’ with the British nursing regulator, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). My positionality affords me a nuanced understanding within a teaching-intensive university context. However, it also introduces the potential for interpretive bias, as my interpretations are inevitably shaped by my context, professional experiences and affiliations. Acknowledging this, I adopted a reflexive stance throughout the research process, recognising that my agency as a researcher was not neutral but that it actively shaped the construction of knowledge. I adopted a reflexive stance by constantly reflecting, during data analysis, on how my positionality may be influencing my interpretation I

also adopted this stance by continuously reflecting through this process on how I perceive and experience the social world.

Further, my prior scholarly work has a potential to unintentionally inform this thesis. This includes an unpublished evaluation of a policy by the OfS similar to the TEF, a policy of regulating student outcomes and setting numerical baselines (OfS, 2022b). This also includes an unpublished article which analyses TEF 3. Further, this includes my contribution to published research on online learning and disability (Kotera et al., 2021). Finally, this includes contribution on leadership and followership in higher education contexts (Chircop, 2024). These experiences have deepened my familiarity with English higher education policy, particularly the TEF. However, they may have inadvertently introduced preconceived notions that influenced my interpretation as part of this thesis. Accordingly, I made a conscious effort to critically interrogate myself on whether any preconceived notions are influencing my interpretation. Rather than striving for a false neutrality, I embraced a stance of critical self-awareness, challenging myself to remain open to the data and respond to emergent meanings.

Having critically examined my own agency and positionality within the research process, it is important to now turn to the ethical dimensions that underpin this study. The next section outlines the ethical principles that were for the thesis, including informed consent, confidentiality and the safeguarding of participants' rights, all of which were integral to maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of this thesis.

### **3.4 Ethics**

The aim of this section is to detail the ethical principles and procedures that this thesis followed. Particularly, the principles and procedures of informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality.

Ethical approval for this study was formally obtained from the Educational Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University in December 2023. Given that the research involved the collection of data from human participants, ethical considerations were central to the study's design and implementation. A primary concern was ensuring informed consent. This was addressed through a twofold process. Firstly, by providing participants with clear, accessible information about the study's aims and procedures. Secondly, by establishing voluntary and informed consent to participate.

Participants were professionals working within higher education, rather than students or users of a service, which mitigated some of the ethical complexities often associated with more vulnerable populations. Regardless, thorough ethics procedures were devised. The ethics application detailed these procedures. The ethics application included details on the core research aim, procedures of anonymisation and the removal of personal identifiers, and protocols for the secure collection, storage and management of data. It also included contact information for participants in the event of concerns or queries.

No foreseeable risks relating to participant vulnerability, harm or the need for additional support were identified, and none emerged during the course of the study. This assessment was explicitly addressed in the ethics application. The ethics application also included the recruitment material used for this thesis – a social media post. Further, the ethics application included the participant information sheet which was provided to potential participants. The participant information sheet detailed participants' rights to withdraw at any stage and the procedures for the deletion of their data.

Importantly, data collection did not commence until ethical approval had been granted. Further, the ethics application made clear that any substantive changes to the research design would necessitate a suspension of data collection and the submission of an amended application. In practice, no changes to the research design were required during the course of the study. The rationale for this rigorous ethical approach was to ensure that this thesis upheld the highest standards of research integrity, transparency and respect for participants throughout.

This chapter detailed the methodological framework and research methods that guided the design and execution of this thesis. It detailed the epistemological stance, data collection strategies, analytical procedures, agency and ethical considerations that underpinned the qualitative inquiry. With these foundations established, the thesis now turns to the empirical findings generated through this process. The next chapter presents and interprets the data in relation to the research questions, drawing on the thematic analysis to illuminate key patterns, tensions and insights.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The findings discuss the fairly common perceptions that the academics had about the TEF and in particular, seeing the TEF as not a relevant part of their academic life. This chapter does not present any claims directly about the TEF nor teaching excellence. In this chapter, selected quotes are used as examples to support the presentation of the findings. Specifically, to show the patterns that were observed in the data. The findings are presented under their respective themes. For the findings, it is worth restating the context of the academics – research-intensive universities. Prior to the findings, the research questions that guided the qualitative analysis are restated:

- RQ1. What are the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities, if any, regarding the impact of the TEF on the experiences and attitudes of themselves and their academic colleagues?
- RQ2. What are the perceptions of academics in this context, if any, regarding how they experience the TEF?
- RQ3. What are the perceptions of academics in this context regarding the TEF as a policy instrument?

### **4.1 Lack of familiarity with the TEF**

This section discusses that academics interviewed were not familiar with the TEF. Despite various thoughts regarding the TEF by this group of academics, they held a limited grasp of it.

#### **4.1.1 Limited awareness of the TEF**

It was evident that academics interviewed held limited awareness on information on the TEF. Despite most of the academics having heard of the TEF, most had a basic

understanding of it. Indeed, they described it simplistically and held minimal information on its details. For example, they were usually able to describe the TEF as the Teaching Excellence Framework. Some academics simply described the TEF as a framework that evaluates teaching. Others gave the impression that they only held little insight into the TEF. For example, Flavia reported that she was not attuned to it. Other academics were hesitant when asked to explain the TEF. Indeed, they used disclaimers to describe it. For example, Oliver used the remark “as far as my awareness of it”. Jason shared that “if not for this interview, I’ve hardly sat down to give TEF any form of consideration. Literally.” Some academics *assumed* that work in relation to the TEF was happening at their university elsewhere. For example, Sarah reported that she was sure that there was work in relation to the TEF going on behind the scenes despite the TEF not being on her radar. The obliviousness by Yusuf regarding the TEF was compelling. He commented that “I actually do not know much about TEF, I came to know the term by chance”. More strikingly, he said “just someone mentioned the word TEF. And I was like, what is that? And this is how I came to know it.”

Academics seemed to be unaware that their university recently made a TEF 2023 submission. Some examples come from the discourse by Blake, Flavia and Sarah to the question of whether the TEF submission at their university was a big thing. Blake reported that he does not remember whilst Flavia said that she did not know. Sarah commented that she has no idea, asking me, “When should it have gone in?” Of particular significance is the comment by Saima. Responding to a question about the extent of her involvement with the TEF at her institution, Saima mentioned that she does not know when the last TEF exercise occurred. Further, she asked me about when the last TEF exercise happened. Oliver reported that the result of the TEF

peered out of the blue one day. These were typical responses regarding the TEF submission. Similarly, there were some participants who were not sure when the TEF assessment took place. For example, Jason asked me, “When was this assessment done?”

A compelling observation was that many academics did not know the TEF 2023 rating recently awarded to their university. When participants were asked whether they were aware of the current rating at their university, there were two typical responses. One typical response was an answer of ‘no’. The other typical response, whilst consisting of an answer of ‘yes’, was followed by participants looking up the answer either online or through their emails. However, some academics straightforwardly said that they did not know the TEF rating. For example, Sarah said that “I’m not even sure where we are in TEF now actually”. What stood out was the response by Blake. He reported an incorrect rating. Indeed, Blake reported that his university was awarded a Gold rating; however, Blake’s university was awarded a Silver rating. This was clarified to the participant and the response was that he had forgot. It was also clarified to the participant what his university was awarded for the two separate ratings that contribute to the overall rating (for further detail, please see section 1.3). It was clarified to the participant that Bronze was awarded for *Student Experience* and Silver for *Student Outcomes*. Blake repeated the same response, stating that he had forgot. Only two participants, Saima and Joshua, were aware of the rating at their university. However, Saima was not fully certain. Indeed, her words were “I think we’re Gold”.

Interestingly, it seemed that academics were only likely to be aware of the TEF rating at their university if this was a Gold rating. All academics who were not aware of the rating were from universities with a Silver rating. Saima and Joshua were the only



participants at a university with a Gold rating and they were both aware of the rating (albeit Saima was not fully certain). This infers that academics at research-intensive universities are more likely to be aware of the rating at their university if the rating is Gold. However, it needs to be noted that Saima and Joshua were both from University 3. Thus, there may have been factors exclusive to the university that influenced their awareness of the rating.

Many academics equated obtaining good scores on the NSS to the TEF. Participants often spoke of the two as if they were the same matter. For example, when participants were asked about aspects that have changed because of the TEF, some thought of things needed to score well on the NSS. For example, Sarah said that work is needed to improve scores in areas of the NSS where they do not score high on. Others, when asked the same question, talked about changes done because of the NSS. Some participants talked about changes aimed at improving NSS scores because of their university achieving a Silver TEF rating. Thinking about how the TEF as a policy instrument could be improved, again some participants thought of this in terms of the NSS. For example, Neil said that a good score on the NSS does not mean that teaching is great. Some academics, when talking about negative aspects observed because of the TEF, spoke about the NSS contributing to feedback fatigue or students who had a negative experience more likely to participate in the NSS whilst students who had a positive experience, less likely to. Bo gave the example of something positive not being remembered because of no drama being associated with it. Some participants, when asked to explain the TEF, told me that they do not know a lot about the TEF but they do know about the NSS. Some academics inferred that they think of surveys when they think of the TEF. For example, speaking of the TEF, Yusuf said that “teaching excellence is much more than whether 90% of your students said that that

they thought what you did was fun”. It was also interesting to note that some participants, speaking about TEF ratings, gave accounts that the NSS is not a reliable measurement. For example, speaking about the TEF, Adenike said that student experience as reported through the NSS “is not necessarily a good marker of teaching quality”.

#### **4.1.2 Misunderstandings regarding the TEF**

It was striking that some academics appeared to hold misunderstandings in relation to the TEF such as its purpose and mechanisms. For example, Stella described the TEF as a way of checking the minimum level of expected teaching quality across all universities. However, this was probably a conflation of the TEF with the OfS policy of regulating student outcomes and setting numerical baselines (OfS, 2022b). This is because the latter policy is about baseline quality requirements. Some academics seemed to hold inaccurate perceptions about the current iteration of the TEF, TEF 2023. Neil questioned whether a university was allocated more government funding for tuition if the university is awarded a Gold TEF rating. Telma thought that a university with a Gold rating meant that the university can uplift tuition fees. Whilst over ten years ago there was a plan to attach Gold, Silver and Bronze ratings to tuition fees that universities could charge, this plan never materialised (for further detail, please see section 2.4). Strikingly, Saima thought that there was a rating higher than Gold, which she thought may have been called platinum. However, there is no rating higher than Gold. Potentially she was referring to some claims by universities of a ‘triple Gold’. Some universities who were awarded Gold for *Student Experience* and *Student Outcomes*, and therefore an overall rating of Gold, claimed that they achieved a ‘triple Gold’. However, this is not a formal rating by the OfS. Indeed, this is not a rating at all because *Student Experience* and *Student Outcomes* contribute to the overall rating –

considering these together would constitute double counting. The responses by Stella, Neil and Telma were typical of some of the academics.

It was evident that academics did not hold an accurate view regarding the TEF. The paragraph above put forward that some academics held misunderstandings regarding the TEF. Further to this, many academics held minor misunderstandings. For example, some participants described the TEF as a metric. Technically, the TEF is not a metric. Another example can be found in the comments by Blake who believed that the TEF ranked universities and colleges. However, the TEF does not *rank* universities nor colleges but it awards ratings. Further, the TEF awards ratings to universities only. There were only a few academics that had some familiarity to the TEF. For example, Saima was aware that the TEF uses various criteria related to *Student Experience* and *Student Outcomes*.

Academics seemed to try and show that they were knowledgeable about the TEF despite not being so. Most described the TEF in a confident manner. However, they described it simplistically as described in section 4.1.1 and inaccurately or incorrectly as explored in this section.

## **4.2 Lack of relevance of the TEF**

The argument that I make in this section is that, for the academics interviewed, the TEF was not a significantly relevant matter. This is because it seemed that the TEF was not in participants' frame of mind and perceptions were observed that the TEF is not centrally related to participants and their context. I start by looking at how participants compared the TEF to the REF to then move on to more specific arguments. Finally, I provide a perception that emerged of a research culture.

Many participants, when asked to explain what the TEF is, compared the TEF to the REF. For example, some described the TEF as the counterpart to the REF. What was striking was that participants that compared the TEF to the REF, immediately did so. It was noted that some participants straightforwardly showed more enthusiasm towards the REF than the TEF. For example, Blake said that he's more interested in the REF than the TEF. Some seemed to compare the significance placed on the two, perceiving that the REF attracts more emphasis at their university. For example, Bo said that "my current university is very exercised about REF rather than TEF". She also said that the "TEF isn't talked about at all. It's not on the agenda"; she contrasted this with her previous teaching-intensive institution, where the TEF was talked about significantly. Joshua said that he never had the impression that he needed to do something because of the TEF, adding that this was definitely the case with the REF. Oliver reported that everything is about the REF, saying that for institutions with a Unique Selling Point (USP) of research, it is difficult to see how a matter such as the TEF can ever register in the same way. Sarah thought that colleagues do not have a big concern about the TEF but that everyone is probably more concerned about the REF because the REF has direct impact on them. Some also inferred a perception of more emphasis on the REF in their context. For example, talking about the TEF, Yusuf said that he experienced more stress on research than teaching whilst working at his university. There were little, if any, perceptions that the TEF is more significant than the REF.

What was said by many academics can be taken to mean that the TEF is absent in their foreground and background whilst at a research-intensive university. An example is a cluster of comments by Neil. It is important to note that Neil was previously situated at a teaching-intensive university. For example, asked about how his university may

have reacted to their TEF rating awarded, Neil stated that he did not know because the TEF “disappeared” from his awareness. Another example can be found the comments by Bo. She reported that in her former teaching-intensive university, the TEF was seen as the encouragement and validation of the effort that is put into teaching. However, she reported that this is not the case at her current university. To the contrary, Bo shared that the TEF is not thought about at all in her current context. Interestingly, Adenike thought of the TEF as being discussed exclusively by colleagues with a leadership role related to teaching at her university. Adenike presumed that colleagues with portfolios where the TEF is more applicable, such as the Head of Education and colleagues with teaching-oriented leadership roles, would be having conversations about the TEF. There were minimal, if any, comments that can be inferred as meaning that the TEF is actively present in the background or foreground of the academics interviewed.

Comments by many of the participants can be inferred as an academic perception of little association between the TEF and the general practices of academics. For example, Joshua reported that he does not see how the TEF affects the decisions by him and his colleagues, adding that he never had the impression that what he and his colleagues do was because of the TEF. Oliver spoke about the TEF in an extremely casual manner. He reported hearing about the TEF results in the following manner: “I remember the results coming out and it was like, oh, TEF happened again. Did it? Yeah all right. And I was like, oh, wow. Oh, we got that. Oh, we got that award. Did we?” The responses by these two academics, particularly Joshua, were typical responses by participants. Few, academics, if any, talked about the TEF affecting them.

There was an academic perception of the TEF not being linked to individuals in research-intensive universities. Particularly, there was a perception that the TEF does not affect individuals because of their location type where there is a focus on research. Academics further perceived that the TEF is not important because teaching is not a focus at their location type. Many participants perceived a small focus regarding the TEF at their institution. Some participants thought that this was the case because their university is research-intensive. Neil was outspoken about this. He shared thoughts that the TEF will not change teaching practices at his university. This was also a view shared by other participants. Neil said that this was because the university is a Russell Group university, so research is what they do. He further reported that there may be an atmosphere at his university that “new teaching universities” do teaching. He commented that therefore, these universities actively participate in the TEF whilst Russell Group universities do not. Bo, recalling when she first started at her current university, said that “the message was very strongly that TEF is a post-92 concern. It's not what we're interested in here”, having also said that the “TEF doesn't have a high enough profile where I work at the moment for it to create that drive for change”. Speaking about the TEF, Yusuf said that lecturers and staff are usually encouraged to focus more on research. An explanation that he gave for this was that, at his university, research is somehow perceived as more important even if this is not explicitly stated. He further added that working at the university, there is usually more stress on research. Oliver, wondering why there was little, if any, reaction to the TEF rating at his university, gave a potential explanation that his university formed part of the Russell Group of universities. Some participants reported that there was a sense of the TEF not being as important as the REF. For example, referring to his university, Jason commented that “I don't hear TEF as much as I hear REF around here”. The choice of

the casual words 'around here' implies that discussions regarding the TEF would not be expected at his university. Indeed, referring to his comment "I don't hear TEF as much as I hear REF around here", Jason shared that he does not think that the TEF is as prominent as the REF in academic circles. Elaborating on this, Jason commented that they are a Russell group university and they are research-oriented. Further, he added that the REF is more or less discussed all the time, starkly contrasting with what he said about the TEF. These were typical comments by participants. There were only a few, if any, responses that may be inferred as the TEF being linked to research-intensive universities.

Reinforcing the finding in the paragraph above, some attitudes were observed that the TEF is not a concern for research-intensive universities. Some comments by participants were that as a university, they do not place much emphasis on the TEF. Some participants made comments to the effect that the TEF does not impact how research-intensive universities are viewed. A robust example is what Adenike said, referring to a hypothetical student that is able to get offers from any university. Adenike shared that she would advise the student to apply for a place at a research-intensive university. Further, she reported that she would not advise the student to consider the TEF rating to select a university. Particularly, Adenike shared that she would advise the student to apply for a place at a university that "is traditionally considered the most appropriate". I took this to mean either research-intensive universities or what are sometimes referred to as prestigious or elite universities. Adenike also added that Russell Group universities are able to recruit a large number of students with high grades, adding that they have been "oversubscribed". This infers a perception that the TEF does not concern these universities as they can still recruit 'high quality' students. Another example can be found in the comments by Flavia. She compared her current

situation to the situation at her previous teaching-intensive university. Flavia reported that in the previous situation, she was inundated with messages regarding the TEF whereas in her present situation, the TEF was barely mentioned at all in her four years working there. Bo thought that Russell group universities do not focus on the TEF, adding that when she first started, her head of school told her that they were not interested in educational research. There were also some academics who made it clear that research-intensive universities have their sights set on research. Whilst this does not directly support the argument of perceptions that the TEF is unrelated to research-intensive universities, it is of particular interest to it. For example, Saima communicated to me that “it was clear that everyone was there for research”. Perceptions that the TEF is applicable to research-intensive universities were negligible, if at all. A comment related to this was by Adenike. The comment was that *if* the TEF was a major driver behind student choice, it would play a role for research-intensive universities.

Some participants seemed to talk about attitudes of colleagues as the TEF not being a concern for them. The comments by Bo were particularly strong about this. Speaking about her institution achieving a Silver TEF rating, Bo said that the wider team was not necessarily willing to change practices. In Bo’s mind, this was because of viewing themselves as “taking the cream” of the discipline in the region. She further added that the wider team may hold a view that “students should feel very glad to have got into the university and that should maybe be enough for them to know that they're studying at this prestigious university”. Bo explained this as a different attitude to her previous teaching-intensive university.



There were several participants who strongly inferred a culture of research at their institution. Several participants emphasised the importance of research publications and research grants at their university. For example, Yusuf talked about “stress on your research performance as a research active academic”. Particularly, he talked about *the reality* at his university. He said that the reality is that there are expectations of research, having publications regularly and having research income. There were some participants who shared that the emphasis is on research when academics are recruited at their institution. For example, Jason said that research is given much more priority when an academic is being recruited. He suspected that this is the same at other research-intensive universities. His reasoning was that these universities want to ensure that when you come in, “you can contribute to their research and impact”. Joshua shared that when prospective applicants are talked about, the focus is on research, such as grants and papers. He gave the example of a candidate who has brought twice as much funding as another, saying that the former “would win by a landslide”.

### **4.3 Unsympathetic attitudes**

The argument that I make in this section is that academics were not sympathetic in regard to the TEF. The accounts of academics collected by the interviews were invariably different and diverse, informed by academics’ varying values, beliefs, cultures, and personal and professional histories. However, there were patterns amongst the accounts that pointed towards a lack of sympathy and a lack of reception towards the TEF.

#### **4.2.1 Reservations about the TEF enhancing teaching**

A clear observation emerged of a perception that the TEF is not enhancing teaching excellence and that academics are perfunctorily showing enhancement of teaching, with many participants holding these reservations. Some participants talked about the TEF not resulting in the improvement of teaching whilst others suggested perfunctory approaches by academics to teaching excellence, partially through discourse that the TEF is not meeting its intention. A participant talking about the TEF not improving teaching was Telma. Straightforwardly, Telma said that she does not think teaching has changed because of the TEF. She further added that she does not think that teaching and the TEF are linked. The discourse by Flavia was very strong in terms of suggesting perfunctory approaches to teaching excellence by academics whilst also framing the TEF as not meeting its intentions. She compared the TEF to both a prop and an actor on the stage, stating that the TEF is enacting this kind of ideology. Flavia followed these comments by questioning whether the TEF is actually doing what it says it does. Flavia also specifically made reference to a dissonance between the intention of the TEF and the lived reality. Oliver thought that the TEF ratings led to mechanical teaching. He reported that Gold, Silver and Bronze lead to a powerful figure somewhere thinking that there is a “right way” of doing teaching and a “not so right way” of doing teaching. He then thought that this leads to that figure thinking “we’re going to do things the right way, and everybody’s going to do it that way. So here’s the script. Follow the script. Here’s the things that you do in a classroom. Do these. Don’t deviate from them.” Oliver reported that he has seen this unfolding “where people have been given teaching materials and told not to adapt them in any way whatsoever because the students need to get the same experience.” These were typical reservations from all of the participants. Comments that the TEF is enhancing

teaching excellence were minor, if at all. Potentially, the closest such comment comes from Melvin. Asked about changes to teaching because of the TEF, Melvin stated “things have been more directed towards the NSS rather than towards TEF”, adding that there were changes to a research module.

#### **4.2.2 Disagreement with TEF’s evaluation method**

What became apparent was that academics did not agree with the way the TEF evaluates teaching excellence. Many academics voiced concerns with both the methods and accuracy of evaluation. For example, Sarah thought it was dangerous that one of the factors to evaluate teaching excellence was employment. Saying that she is a scientist and that she loves numbers, she stated that the TEF metrics need looking at as they do not tell the whole story. She questioned whether there is a better way to assess teaching and further reported that her colleagues questioned whether the TEF is an appropriate way to assess universities. Joshua saw the metrics used by the TEF as resulting in a focus on the metrics rather than what the metrics represent. He questioned whether the TEF actually measures things that are useful. Stella believed that the evaluation approach of the TEF should be changed, putting forward the TEF as concerned with outcomes rather than the journey of the student. Saima, speaking about the TEF, was sceptical about its evaluation method. She reported, “can we really assess excellence in teaching and learning in an objective way and also can we assess it at university level? I’m not so sure”. Neil questioned whether the TEF measures what matters and felt that there was an overemphasis on student satisfaction. As part of voicing concern with the evaluation method of the TEF, some academics thought that it was unrealistic. For example, Oliver likened teaching to a creative endeavour which cannot be captured with ratings of Gold, Silver and Bronze. He thought that these three ratings were problematic and that he would get rid of them.

Flavia explained the TEF as “divorced from reality”. The quotes provided in this paragraph were typical of the comments by these group of academics. There were little, if any, perceptions that the TEF evaluates teaching excellence well.

#### **4.2.3 Unwelcoming attitudes in view of the TEF**

It was striking that there were unwelcoming attitudes towards the TEF. Several participants were not concerned about what TEF rating their university achieved or may have achieved. For example, Neil thought that research-intensive staff at his institution do not mind their institution holding TEF Silver. Sarah said that a Silver rating seemed reasonable because it does not impact what they are doing; she also thought that her colleagues would have a “pretty neutral” reaction to getting to know the rating. Adenike thought that the opinion of most of her colleagues was that the TEF rating does not make a difference for their institution. Some participants thought that the TEF did not hold importance for academics on ‘the frontline’. For example, Telma said “I’m not sure that it [the TEF] holds the same importance with academics on the shop floor, as it would hold with the senior leaders of a university”. Some participants alluded that the TEF does not result in an interest in teaching. For example, Bo reported that where she is working, the TEF is not resulting in an interest in what is happening in the classroom. Some participants saw the TEF as what can be described as an imposition. What stood out in this regard were the comments by Oliver who said that they care about the TEF because they have to. An aspect that was compelling from the data was evidence of university leadership explicitly disapproving of the TEF. This evidence comprised the contents of a university email from the vice-chancellor, which a participant verbally shared during the interview. The contents shared were: “I’ve always been sceptical about the TEF. Not just because it was originally thought of around the time of the London Olympics. And so the results are presented as if they

were podium medals and there isn't much evidence that it informs student choice.” The participant’s understanding of the contents reinforces the view that there was disapproval of the TEF from university leadership. The participant thought that the TEF was being questioned and that the TEF does not matter to university leadership because it does not affect student recruitment and thus, does not affect income. Indeed, the participant shared that the contents mean that the tone from the top emphasised “that as an institution, I will question the TEF. We're not too much worried because it doesn't influence that much student choice, which means income”. There were few remarks by participants, if any, that could be extrapolated as a perception of a welcoming attitude towards the TEF. There were also interesting accounts linking the TEF to the closure of departments. For example, Saima wondered whether the TEF is related to the closure of many art departments.

#### **4.2.4 Perceptions that the TEF does not have an impact at their institution**

It seemed that academics held perceptions that the TEF results in little impact at their institution in general and potentially, little impact in relation to attitudes on teaching. Some participants talked about not seeing any influence of the TEF in their context. For example, Oliver said that there is nothing that he could point to and say that that is a result of the TEF. Some participants the TEF resulting in little changes. For example, Adenike, talking about how she feels the TEF affects the importance of teaching, said “I think in research-intensive institutions it hasn't had a big effect.” Indeed, she reported that there have not been any major changes because of the TEF. Some academics thought that the TEF could not make a difference to attitudes held regarding teaching because of the current environment. For example, Bo shared that unless people are made to understand that the TEF is related to an impact on students, such as how students are taught, the TEF does not make much difference. She

followed this remark by saying that there has to be a willingness to see things from the perspective of the student which is not always there. A potential exception to perceptions pointing to the TEF having little impact are the comments by one participant, Jason. I say 'potential' because whilst he reported that there is a focus on teaching at his university, he did not explicitly say that this is because of the TEF. Jason specifically reported that he is not surprised that his university achieved TEF Silver because there is a lot of emphasis on teaching. He further added that he was surprised that they did not achieve TEF Gold because at their university, they emphasise excellence in teaching, delivery, student learning and support and are driven by giving students the best. Notably, it can be argued that these comments by Jason contrast with some of his other comments. This is because he also remarked that the TEF is not prominent in his context because of a research orientation. Another such remark by him was regarding the TEF's impact on his university. He said that from the perspective of his university, the TEF has no bearing on income and particularly, no bearing on student recruitment. It should be noted that the comments by this participant of emphasis regarding teaching at his institution was the exception compared to the discourse by all of the participants.

#### **4.4 The TEF instils anxiety in staff**

My argument for the current section is that there was an academic perception that the TEF leads to anxiety. This argument arises from the common trends amongst participants' discourse specifically on the TEF and anxiety. However, there is also another supporting perception that I discuss, that of the TEF causing responsibility.

It was evident that most academics associated the TEF to anxiety. For example, Telma commented that the anxiety created by the TEF is disproportionate. Thinking about

the TEF, Yusuf said that his approach is to just do whatever is required within his control and to “somehow” ensure that he does not overwhelm himself. Some academics related the TEF to anxiety when thinking of their previous teaching-intensive university. Referring to her previous teaching-intensive university, Flavia linked the TEF to staff anxiety about student complaints, student surveys and trying to pre-empt any issues related to students. Some academics linked the TEF *rating* to anxiety. For example, Adenike linked ratings to anxiety for teaching academics. In terms of what rating may be achieved, she said that whilst there were no worries in relation to this for academics with research contracts, there was anxiety about this for academics with teaching contracts. Saima’s discourse in relation to the TEF and anxiety was extensive. Apart from explicitly stating that the TEF is “based on anxiety”, she said that whilst the TEF can be really positive, it can also be very damaging. Saima was concerned that ratings have a huge impact for a long period. Interestingly, Saima compared achieving a Bronze rating to a self-fulfilling prophecy of a downwards spiral where the Bronze rating leads to the further deterioration of teaching excellence. Saima said that, in this case, the TEF would be a punishment rather than an improvement tool. Saima was particularly fearful of where the TEF may be heading. She was concerned that the TEF may become a tool where universities deemed not to have excellent teaching are told what to do to achieve excellent teaching. Saima perceived that this may happen because there is more and more pressure to “produce people who are earning well”. Whilst not directly related to anxiety, there were also some comments that may be taken to infer that the TEF causes an increased workload. An example comes from Sarah. In reference to the TEF, she was asked what her colleagues think of ‘excellence’. Sarah replied by saying that programme leaders work very hard, adding that “we obviously have to balance that with workload”.

Similar to accounts of the TEF leading to anxiety, some academics held perceptions that the TEF made staff responsible. It was curious how Oliver spoke about this. He repeatedly said that the TEF “responsabilises” and makes people accountable. He thought that it is unjust that there is scrutiny and evaluation. Sarah and Melvin also linked the TEF to scrutiny whilst Stella compared the TEF to the creation of accountability. Thinking of her role as a chair of governors in a primary school, Saima likened the TEF to the pressures created by the ratings awarded to primary schools in England (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate). These are only some of the examples of academics talking about the TEF as adding responsibility. It should be noted that a few academics did not seem worried regarding the TEF. For example, Blake talked about the TEF casually and stated that there is more concern about the REF. He also talked about less effort with teaching. However, there were minimal, if any, accounts that the TEF does not make staff responsible.

Documentation because of the TEF, including institutional intra-module student evaluations, were discussed by some participants. Whilst it was not evident that participants perceived documentation to result in stress or anxiety, it seemed that a minority of participants held perceptions that these caused a degree of annoyance. For example, Blake, thinking about negative aspects that he has observed at his institution because of the TEF, talked about too much paperwork and too much reporting that has to be done. Joshua talked with distaste about the number of times feedback was gathered from students. He talked about a requirement to gather student feedback at two weeks and at the last week of a module, whilst also gathering feedback on the course overall. Joshua thought that this was directly or indirectly arising because of the TEF – he thought that some of this student feedback informed the TEF whilst some was aimed at making improvements because of the TEF. Stella,



speaking about whether the needs of her university were being met because of the TEF, said that a negative side of the TEF is that it feels like a tick-box exercise. Flavia, thinking of a previous experience as a module lead, talked about the student survey feeding into the TEF, saying that it felt very bureaucratic.

#### **4.5 Perceptions of the TEF as unhelpful**

Common accounts amongst participants revealed other perceptions regarding the TEF which I report in this section. I argue that these perceptions contribute to an academic understanding of the TEF as unhelpful.

Many academics understood the TEF as what I describe as an 'orchestration exercise'. Some participants described the TEF as reductionist whilst several participants talked about 'the game' in reference to the TEF. An example can be found in the discourse by Oliver on teaching excellence schemes as part of an overall conversation about the TEF. Oliver commented that there is often the use of "criteria that suit the needs of an institution". However, in the context of the conversation, it seemed that Oliver was referring to 'data' rather than 'criteria', inferring institutional gaming. Indeed, Oliver continued that the needs are "very much aligned with playing the field and playing the game". He also added that "I think that's the problem with things like TEF. There's a tendency to reduce everything to a very narrow field of vision which is focused on the 'what you do' to make this happen." Speaking about 'excellence' in terms of the TEF, Yusuf talked about "gaming the system". He said that if the idea of measuring teaching excellence is not done right, then it may be counter-effective. He compared the measurement of teaching excellence to an insurance system, saying that this has caveats that people can game it and thus, it may backfire. Thinking about anything that he would have done differently in relation to the TEF,

Joshua talked about the playing of the game, thinking of it as a problem. He thought that this problem was not reserved to his university only but is found across the whole of higher education. Joshua further thought that this was part of a wider problem where if metrics are involved then “it can be games”. When thinking about whether the TEF should be discontinued, Joshua shared that if metrics are used, people try to game the metrics. He continued that with metrics, people are forced to “collect some evidence for those metrics, or measure something, even if it's the wrong thing and reflects on the results”.

It was evident that academics associated the TEF to marketisation. Speaking about the TEF, some academics spoke of a degree programme as a “product”. For example, as part of a conversation about the TEF, Flavia compared the buying of a product to the enrolment on a programme. In particular, Flavia used an analogy of buying of an item from a supermarket. She said that if you pay for something, you expect a good or an excellent product, adding “you go to the supermarket, you're going to want to get your money's worth”. Some academics associated the TEF to students being viewed as customers. Neil was particularly vocal about this. He said that going forward, the TEF can think more about measuring what matters where university teaching should not be a service offering to students and students should not be seen as customers. He reinforced this by saying that the TEF creates a culture of the student as customer. Another noteworthy comment in relation to this comes from Joshua; he thought that if a premise is set that students are not customers, then the TEF would meet the needs of universities. It was also interesting to observe a minor number of participants seeing teaching excellence increasingly meaning being good at the TEF and associating this with a risk of viewing students as clients. Academics associating the TEF to

marketisation also came from perceptions regarding TEF Gold, as will be examined in the next paragraph.

It was compelling how academics thought of TEF Gold as a marketing strategy – a way for universities to market themselves. Many academics spoke disapprovingly of marketing artefacts arising from TEF Gold. For example, Oliver talked of billboards. Thinking of a particular university, he said that the university “capitalised on it [TEF Gold] very quickly and threw up billboards and all sorts, proclaiming to the world that they got gold”. He felt that “they had the marketing materials already created to put out onto the streets” and that it was very pervasive. Oliver said that it was a problem that there is a reduction to “PR sound bites” which are easy to market. Joshua talked sceptically about “a lot of press releases and banners”. Sarah and Neil spoke disapprovingly of the use of TEF Gold for marketing purposes. Sarah gave the example of TEF Gold being used as part of marketing on email signatures. Neil referred to his previous university, where he said that “when we got gold, it’s everywhere on the website”.

It was striking to observe an academic perception that the TEF leads to the pleasing of students. Some participants thought that the TEF materialised universities trying to please students to achieve a good TEF rating. Yusuf was one such participant. He likened universities to restaurants, saying that “the waiter is only being nice to you so that you give them a good rating”. Other participants thought that because of the TEF, they need to ensure that students are happy. For example, Saima, talking about the negative aspects of the TEF, said that “our role as educators cannot only focus on our students having a great time”. Though not necessarily related to the TEF, it was interesting to observe how some participants spoke of the current meaning of teaching

excellence as whether what you are doing is fun or how happy students are. However, there were some participants who directly linked the meaning of teaching excellence as per the TEF as students who are happy. Sarah had a strong opinion about this. She took the meaning of teaching excellence in terms of the TEF as, “that students are very happy with their courses, they're happy with their teaching they're getting”. Sarah reinforced this when asked about her involvement with the TEF. She said “working towards student satisfaction, making sure students are happy with their courses and are happy with the level of feedback they're getting”.

Strikingly, some academics thought that the TEF may be resulting in grade inflation. Some participants talked about this directly. For example, Adenike said that the TEF is leading to grade inflation. She also talked about an increasing tendency of compulsory modules being “designed in a way that is likely to lead to grade inflation”. Other participants seemingly inferring that the TEF's narrative of teaching excellence may be leading to the awarding of grades that are higher than merited. An example of this comes in the discourse by Yusuf. This is because he spoke of trying to get recognition for teaching excellence by having students with higher grades.

It was interesting to see a small number of academics thinking of the TEF as the pleasing of students in the manner of awarding higher grades than merited. Some participants talked about the TEF as leading to modules which result in both grade inflation and satisfied students. Others linked ‘excellence’ in the ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ to happy students with high grades. An interesting account in relation to this was by Neil. Thinking about how the TEF could be done differently, he recalled a lecturer who gave an ‘A’ to all students, commenting that this teacher was very popular.

Seemingly, a few participants perceived the TEF as undermining the quality of teaching and undermining learning. A rich account in relation to this was by Oliver. He thought that the TEF “depersonalises” and “reduces” teaching. He contrasted this to teaching which opens “people up to the possibilities of knowing things and other possible ways”. He further remarked that, rather than reducible, teaching is messy which messiness keeps the teacher passionate. He explicitly said that he does not think that the TEF has anything to do with teaching. Participants inferred that the TEF perpetuates a decrease in what I call ‘effort-requiring learning’. A rich example of this comes in the discourse by Flavia who questioned the role of the student twice. Firstly, commenting about the TEF and teaching, she questioned “what’s the student’s role in all of this? It doesn’t feel reciprocal. It’s teaching and learning but it feels very much like it’s all on the teacher”. Secondly, talking about reasons for why the TEF should be discontinued, Flavia questioned “What is the role of the student as a co-creator, as somebody who also participates and brings something?” Another example of discourse inferring that the TEF instigates a decrease in ‘effort-requiring learning’ stems from Saima. Talking about the negative aspects of the TEF, she commented that learning is uncomfortable. Speaking about the TEF, Saima also questioned whether getting into high paid jobs is what successful teaching is.

#### **4.6 The TEF embraces teaching-focused careers**

It was interesting to observe a minor number of academics perceiving a positive impact of the TEF on the teaching role. This was in the form of thinking that the TEF is leading to more institutional importance placed on teaching career tracks.

A few participants saw the TEF leading to more institutional focus on teaching-focused careers. For example, Adenike, asked about what future developments are likely

because of the TEF, said, “I think we are gonna see more and more of the full career track for education-only”. Asked the same question, Melvin’s account was particularly insightful. Melvin shared that he had already worked at his current university, then left and then returned again. Associating his thinking to the TEF, he said that “it is now much, much clearer how to progress your career along a teaching-focused route”. He then further considered this. He wondered whether “it’s a completely fair assessment that we’re a totally research-intensive university any longer”. Interestingly, he then thought that there is now more emphasis on teaching and teaching quality.

This chapter presented the empirical findings derived from the thematic analysis of interviews with academics in research-intensive universities. These findings illuminated a range of perceptions regarding the TEF. Importantly, the findings are not intended to make claims about the TEF per se but rather to foreground how the TEF is understood and experienced by academics within specific institutional contexts. In this manner, the findings reflect the situated nature of policy reception, shaped by the type of institution, institutional culture and professional identity. The next chapter moves beyond the descriptive presentation of the themes to critically engage with the literature. It explores how the findings contribute to existing understandings of policy. In short, the discussion chapter positions the insights of this thesis within wider literature.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter critically interprets the academic perceptions regarding the TEF presented in Chapter 4. This chapter does not evaluate the TEF itself or teaching excellence. The research questions that framed the qualitative analysis were:

- RQ1. What are the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities, if any, regarding the impact of the TEF on the experiences and attitudes of themselves and their academic colleagues?
- RQ2. What are the perceptions of academics in this context, if any, regarding how they experience the TEF?
- RQ3. What are the perceptions of academics in this context regarding the TEF as a policy instrument?

The idea of the implementation staircase (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2006) has been applied to this chapter. The idea sees policy messages being interpreted and reinterpreted as they travel up and down the staircase (Figure 1), because of factors, or “imperatives” (Saunders, 2012a, p. 193), that influence interpretation. This means that policy messages are understood differently, where policy enactment is seen to differ depending on how these messages are understood (Saunders, 2006). Therefore, policy implementation deviates from policy intention due to the factors’ influence (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987). The application of the staircase idea is useful for our case as it can provide insight into the factors which influence the interpretation of policy messages and accordingly, policy enactment. In other words, the idea provides a window of understanding for the conditions that affect policy implementation.

This thesis considers policy messages travelling up and down these levels of the staircase: the government / OfS, vice-chancellor, deans, discipline leads, line managers and academics (Figure 1). It is important to note that for this thesis, the levels from vice-chancellor to line managers are considered institutional levels. The adoption of the staircase idea means that individuals at each level are both policy recipients and agents of policy. In our case, the interpretation of policy messages and enactment of policy at the bottom level — the academic level — is essential as academic perceptions are being examined.

The idea may be extended, with a view that even within one level, there can be different locations which locations affect how policy messages are understood. For example, there will be deans in Faculty 1 and deans in Faculty 2. Thus, the level is the same but the location is different. Particularly, the idea may be further extended in that there can be location types — locations grouped by type — that affect how policy messages are understood. The location types relevant for this thesis are research- and teaching-intensive universities. I apply this idea in this chapter to examine the TEF — particularly, how the location type of research-intensive universities affects the interpretation and enactment of the TEF.

The findings suggest that the policy messages of the TEF of teaching excellence and enhancement have not been adopted at the bottom level of the staircase at the location type of research-intensive universities. The findings pose a significant dissonance between the TEF attempting to influence academics to more highly regard teaching and the TEF's enactment by the academics interviewed. A lack of interpretation of the TEF's policy messages as intended supports the approach



adopted for this thesis that even within one level of the staircase there may be different location types which need to be considered.

The prevailing point of this thesis is the experience of academics in research-intensive universities, at the bottom of the staircase, as they interpret policy messages of the TEF. Indeed, data were collected to examine the experience of the TEF for this group. Academic accounts suggest that they enact perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence instead of enacting the policy messages of the TEF of teaching excellence and enhancement. Various factors — including research as the cultural priority, perceived institutional messages regarding the TEF of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement and a perceived pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations — may explain why academics show these perfunctory attitudes instead of enacting the TEF's policy messages. This suggests that, to narrow the gap between policy and practice (Brower, 2025), factors affecting those on the ground at various types of locations should be considered. This can nurture policy enactment that is closer to policy intention.

### **5.1 Academics have to meet research activity requirements**

The argument in this section is that research-intensive universities create research activity expectations for academics in this context because of the cultural priority of research. Thinking in terms of the implementation staircase, these expectations are internal interests and this cultural priority is a trend (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987) that may impact the enactment of the TEF. The penultimate paragraph of this section argues that these unacknowledged factors indeed impact the TEF's enactment by acting as an obstacle to drive changes regarding teaching. Section 5.4 provides

arguments for further impact that these and other factors have on the TEF's enactment.

Academic accounts suggest that their position at the bottom of the staircase, results in them being engaged with perceived core academic activities expected this location type, research activity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the findings put forward research-intensive universities as holding strong values of research, with expectations of research activity for academics. Academics inferred a research culture, discussing their location type as placing an expectation on academics of publishing research and obtaining research grants. Further, they thought that because of this research-orientation, the TEF does not affect individuals at this location type. Academics also thought that the REF was relevant to them and their colleagues, starkly contrasting with their attitudes towards the TEF.

Strong values of research and expectations of research activity in research-intensive universities is also reported in the literature. Boyd and Smith (2016) talk of a 'research primacy' paradigm especially found at this location type. According to Schulz (2013), academics in 'older universities' have research as their primary interest. Schulz (2013) talks of this primary interest as the generation of revenue through the undertaking of research for external organisations. At research-intensive universities, there are also informal messages created for academics that research is more valuable than teaching (Leibowitz et al., 2011).

The adoption of the staircase idea means that the work environment of universities influences the patterns of attitudes and perceptions that emerge in academic life. This foregrounds the unacknowledged weight and influence of the culture in research-intensive universities on academics within these (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987). A

cultural priority of research at this location type appears to influence the academics to hold a perception that the TEF does not affect them. Interestingly, this may also impact them to perceive that the TEF does not lead to teaching enhancement. There was a sense by the academics that other, non-research focused, universities focus on teaching, suggesting that they see teaching as a lesser priority at this location type. This view may be influenced by the strong values of research at their institution. This is supported by reports that, in research-intensive contexts, teaching is perceived as a secondary activity even when academics care deeply about the quality of learning experience for the students (Neame, 2013).

Supporting research activity expectations in research-intensive institutions is a consideration of the culture around roles. Gormley and Kennerly (2010), examining the organisational climate in US higher education institutions, report 'work role balance' regarding teaching and research as a challenging factor. Thus, there may be difficulties with balancing one's research role with a teaching role. Being unable to balance both of these roles, one focuses on the main perceived role in their context. In research-intensive contexts, one focuses on research, further nurturing a climate of research activity expectations. Further, a presumption is often present in these contexts that resources need to be diverted away from research for the improvement of teaching to occur (Neame, 2013). This presumption may reinforce the deprioritisation of teaching, further catalysing an environment of research activity expectations.

In view that academic responses are shaped in part by considerations academics make regarding their career location (Trowler et al., 2012), research activity expectations may be strengthened by academics considering career advancement.

This is because of an apparent symbiotic relationship between research and career advancement. Over twenty years ago, Hannan and Silver (2000) reported that academics in the UK that choose to focus their activity on research rather than teaching help the advancement of their career. Whilst more than two decades have passed since this publication, it was a major study reviewing the impact of innovations in teaching and learning and this thesis' findings also support that this finding still applies today – academics perceived that research is given more priority for academic recruitment.

Continuing our thinking in line of the staircase idea, inward-facing concerns have an impact on the enactment of policy (Saunders & Sin, 2015). In our case, the findings suggest that perceived research activity expectations at the back of a cultural priority of research are a main barrier with driving change regarding teaching at research-intensive universities, despite the TEF's policy message of teaching enhancement. Compounding this, Neame (2013) argues that any impact sought on teaching is hindered in cultures with research as the cultural priority. This appears to be the case with the TEF in research-intensive universities. Further, research activity expectations also seem to influence academics to overlook the mission of the TEF of enhancing the esteem of teaching. Interestingly, a counterfactual observation of academic accounts is that there was a lack of active lobbying by academics' universities regarding the value of teaching. This may further explain the inability of the TEF's policy messages to be enacted at the bottom of the staircase. This is because Leibowitz et al. (2011) see such lobbying in research-intensive institutions as essential for teaching to succeed in this context.

Taking this section together suggests that the cultural priority of research in research-intensive universities creates research activity expectations for academics in this context. These seems to discourage the enactment of the policy messages of the TEF of teaching excellence and enhancement because of research activity expectations that influence the practices of academics. This is potentially compounded by various factors such as the need for research output for career advancement. Potentially, this is also mediated by policy effects of other policies such as the REF.

## **5.2 An academic perception of an institutional view regarding the TEF of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement**

In this section I make the argument that academics perceive two messages from their institutions regarding the TEF – 1) research supremacy and 2) assurance rather than enhancement. Aligning our thinking with the implementation staircase, this perception brings to light the unacknowledged cognitive and interactive processes that are occurring outside of the formal specifications of the TEF (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987). These and other processes are important as they may have an effect on the TEF's enactment (Saunders, 2011), as is argued for in section 5.4. I also offer supplementary arguments in this section which, whilst not central to the main narrative of this thesis, offer valuable points for consideration.

Academics at the bottom of the staircase in research-intensive institutions may interpret an institutional message of research supremacy. The findings identified that teaching excellence and enhancement were missing from academics' experience at their university. Academics saw no concrete effects of the TEF at their university and indicated that there was an absence of institutional drive for these to occur. Particularly, the academics in this thesis indicated an experience of their university's message as 'the institution is more special' as it focuses on research and that they, because of this,

are more special. They appear to interpret their university's message as 'non-research-intensive institutions are less special' and that the TEF is mostly relevant to post-1992 universities. Academics did not see the TEF influencing their university's hiring practices in relation to the candidate's potential impact on teaching. Particularly, some perceived research, not teaching, to be the priority when academics are recruited. Higher education institutions often claim that teaching and research are equally important but academics frequently experience that institutions value teaching less than research, where publication and research output are emphasised (Clarke et al., 2012; Perkins, 2019). This is generally assumed to be exacerbated in research-intensive institutions, an assumption that the findings support – academics strongly inferred research as the cultural priority at their institution. Views of research-intensive institutions and academics within them being more special because of a research focus reflect the traditional idea that research is what 'proper academics' do. The lack of action regarding teaching excellence and enhancement from research-intensive universities according to academics' experience can be explained by a focus of these universities on research. Interestingly, academics did not see the TEF impacting their university's hiring practices in relation to the potential impact on teaching by the candidate despite a few academics in this thesis seeing the TEF promoting teaching-focused careers and staff in higher education institutions similarly perceiving the TEF resulting in an institutional focus on staff obtaining teaching accreditation and a rise in teaching-only contracts (Cui et al., 2021).

An interesting point is that the lack of action regarding teaching excellence and enhancement from research-intensive universities according to academics' experience can be partially the result of a difficulty by institutions to focus on both research and teaching. Indeed, it has been reported that a research culture may not

be conducive to a teaching culture and vice-versa – examining the perceptions of nursing academics, Gormley and Kennerly (2010) report that a climate that supports a teaching role may not support a research role, suggesting that a culture that nurtures both research and teaching is difficult to achieve.

Academics seem to point towards a perceived institutional message of assurance rather than enhancement in relation to the TEF. Taking the staircase idea, academics interpret such a message because they are influenced (Saunders, 2012a) by their experience of the TEF having a limited impact on their type of university and from messages from higher, institutional, levels of the staircase that they want to achieve TEF Gold. The latter is because academic accounts suggested that the TEF has the impact on universities wanting to achieve TEF Gold despite the academics experiencing that the TEF has limited impact on their university. For example, academics perceived that if universities achieve TEF Gold, this is ‘shouted about’, using it as a marketing strategy. Such perceptions are also held by staff in British institutions, who perceive TEF Gold being used as a marketing and publicity tool deliberately, where “banners” and “logos” are “slapped on everything” such as institutions’ buildings, websites, promotional material and email signatures (O’Leary et al., 2019, p. 59). Interestingly, TEF Gold being used as a marketing strategy may explain why the academics in this thesis seemed only likely to be aware of the TEF rating at their institution if this was TEF Gold. An institutional message of assurance rather enhancement may also be reflected in the unsympathetic attitudes towards the TEF and some perceptions of the TEF as an imposition by academics in this thesis.

Interestingly, Cui et al. (2021) report perceptions of staff in British higher education institutions that the TEF leads to a shift in their institution’s positioning towards a

greater teaching focus. For example, that the TEF instigates curriculum redesign and curriculum transformation efforts (Cui et al., 2021). This contrasts with the discussions in this section of the academics interviewed perceiving no impact by the TEF on teaching at their institution. This, coupled with participant perceptions that the TEF is not a concern for research-intensive universities and that the TEF does not affect individuals in this context, suggests that the TEF has a greater impact on teaching in non-research-intensive institutions. The argument that arises from this is that the TEF's mission to promote a more equal balance between the value of teaching and research across the whole sector may be hampered considering the centrality of research-intensive institutions to influence this balance.

### **5.3 A perceived pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations**

According to the implementation staircase idea, individuals are oriented to bring about a satisfactory state of affairs (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987), where the project message is adopted because of situated realities (Bonamy et al., 2004). The state of affairs is also shaped by different priorities and interpretations at different levels of the staircase (Bonamy et al., 2004). In our case it appears that academics are interpreting the TEF's policy messages as a pressure to meet teaching excellence expectations, adopting behaviour of artificially meeting these expectations. This is because, academics, through the accounts as described in the findings, appear to problematise the TEF as a policy about having to meet teaching excellence expectations. For example, academics equated the TEF to obtaining good scores on the NSS. The academics also saw the TEF causing anxiety because of what TEF rating may be achieved, suggesting an expectation, and pressure, to obtain a good TEF rating. This poses the achievement of a good TEF rating as a priority at the institutional levels of the staircase



(Bonamy et al., 2004). The findings suggest that a perception of having to meet teaching excellence expectations because of the TEF is so extensive that some academics perceive that universities aim to please students to achieve a good TEF rating. The problematisation of the TEF by academics as about having to meet teaching excellence expectations is supported with other perceptions, from academics and staff in UK higher education institutions, as discussed in the literature review chapter. Perkins (2019) reports academic perceptions that the TEF increases expectations regarding the performance of teaching. O'Leary et al. (2019) report staff perceptions that the TEF increases monitoring exercises regarding teaching. Further, staff perceptions of the TEF leading to teaching accountability are reported (Cui et al., 2021). The staircase idea lays out that the further down the staircase levels, the more inclined individuals are to engage in surface-level behaviour such as “justificatory vocabularies” (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987, p. 211) — the use of policy terminology to show an acceptable response — rather than more demanding behaviour of thinking about and implementing policy intentions. This inclination appears strong in our case where academics, being at the bottom level, adopt their behaviour as artificially showing teaching excellence, showing an acceptable response and bringing about a satisfactory state of affairs.

#### **5.4 Academics adopt perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence instead of genuine engagement due to various factors**

This first paragraph in this section makes the argument that academics adopt perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence. The section then moves on to argue that the factors affecting interpretation at the bottom of the implementation staircase in research-intensive universities, results in academics

adopting these attitudes instead of the enactment of the TEF's policy messages of teaching excellence and enhancement.

Whilst the staircase idea brings into attention that each academic will have different adaptations to the TEF (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987), there were congruences in the accounts that point towards the adoption of perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence by academics in research-intensive universities. Firstly, the findings directly report an academic perception of academics perfunctorily showing enhancement of teaching. This was also corroborated by the findings reporting an academic perception of higher grades than merited being awarded. Higher grades than merited would show the enhancement of teaching, despite not necessarily being the case. Secondly, academics conceived the TEF as a game. This also came at the back of academics perceiving no association between the TEF and the general practices of academics and thoughts by them that the TEF will not change teaching practices. Academics looking at the TEF as a game was also supported by the findings describing an academic perception of the TEF as an 'orchestration exercise'. Thirdly, academics seemed to show perfunctory attitudes themselves, speaking about the TEF confidently, but having misunderstandings about it. This seems to be an attempt to show knowledge regarding the TEF, despite such knowledge limitedly being possessed, as shown by the lack of familiarity with the TEF. A lack of familiarity, apart from being a finding in the results, may also be supported by academics not seeing the TEF as a tool to promote the reputation or quality of teaching, which position would arguably be expected when discussing the TEF. Fourthly, academics did not seem to hold a real interest and effort in teaching and some shared discourse with negative connotations about teaching such as that other types of universities do teaching. This is also somewhat supported by the findings suggesting that the TEF did not impact

academic attitudes to teaching. Fifthly, academic perceptions of the TEF leading to the 'pleasing of students' supports a perfunctory approach regarding the TEF. Finally, the TEF has been reported not to be supported by academics in British higher education institutions (O'Leary et al., 2019). Whilst this does not directly show perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF, it does provide a context in which these may cultivate.

The first three sections in this chapter discussed 1) a cultural priority of research at research-intensive universities creating research activity expectations, 2) perceived institutional messages by these universities of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement in relation to the TEF and 3) perceived pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations. The first three sections in this chapter also pointed out issues regarding 1), 2) and 3). One aspect of the staircase idea is that individuals at different levels espouse mutually conflicting interests between themselves and policy (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987). Research activity expectations seem to be one such interest at the bottom level, posing a barrier to drive the TEF's policy message of teaching excellence. Potentially mediated by these expectations, academics also seem to perceive that the TEF does not lead to teaching enhancement. Another aspect of the staircase idea is that individuals at a level on the staircase modify messages from other levels (Saunders, 2006). In our case, it seems that the perceived institutional message of research supremacy is being modified as no institutional requirement to enact the TEF's policy messages. Further, the staircase idea suggests that individuals in varying levels of the staircase can espouse poorly articulated messages regarding policy, which impact their behaviour and that of others (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987). In our case, academics seem to espouse an institutional message of assurance rather than enhancement, influencing them to perceive no institutional requirement to enact the TEF's policy messages. The first

three sections in this chapter further noted tensions regarding 1), 2) and 3) at this location type. There may be difficulties with balancing one's research role with a teaching role in a higher education institution and a focus on teaching activity rather than research may hinder career advancement. Academics perceived a limited impact by the TEF on teaching at their universities despite the universities seemingly wanting to achieve TEF Gold. Further, the TEF seems to cause anxiety about what TEF rating may be achieved.

The factors discussed in the paragraph above show a unique, difficult, experience regarding the TEF by academics at this location type. What the staircase idea tells us is that these academics have to evolve their practices or develop new ones to navigate these factors (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2012a). These factors appear to result in academics adopting perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence instead of enacting the TEF's policy messages. Assessing these factors, one can deduce that they can influence, especially if acting together, the adoption of these perfunctory attitudes instead of the enactment of the TEF's policy messages.

#### **5.4.1 The perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence may be reinforced by research-intensive institutions also adopting perfunctory attitudes towards these**

The adoption of perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence by academics seems to be potentially reinforced by research-intensive institutions also adopting perfunctory attitudes towards these. Academic accounts in this thesis indicate institutional cultures of assurance rather than enhancement in relation to the TEF (as argued for in section 5.2) whilst the literature review chapter discussed reports of a discrepancy between institutional messages academics receive regarding the TEF and what they experience in a UK research-intensive university (Perkins, 2019).

Perfunctory attitudes by institutions may also be indicated considering that, according to the data in this thesis, there was an academic perception of the TEF not enhancing teaching excellence despite a perception of the TEF resulting in additional documentation and staff being made responsible. Further supporting institutional perfunctory attitudes towards the TEF are academics in the UK perceiving university messages surrounding teaching as a result of the TEF as merely rhetoric as discussed in the literature review chapter (Perkins, 2019). Taking this paragraph together, it seems that perfunctory attitudes is a shared, potentially mutually reinforcing, norm (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987) between the bottom level of the staircase and higher, institutional, levels.

#### **5.4.2 Other factors that may further promote perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence in academics**

This section provides a discussion about other potential unacknowledged factors that may have the capacity to reinforce perfunctory attitudes in academics regarding the TEF and teaching excellence at the bottom of the implementation staircase in research-intensive universities.

Firstly, values of research supremacy in higher, institutional, levels of the staircase, apart from directly encouraging perfunctory attitudes in academics regarding the TEF and teaching excellence (as argued for in section 5.4), may also encourage these through a perceived message of teaching non-importance. Taking the staircase idea, individuals at the bottom level have to make “interpretative judgements” (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987, p. 213). Thus, values of research supremacy in institutional levels of the staircase seem to be interpreted as a message of teaching non-importance by

academics. This is supported by the findings reporting an academic perception that teaching is not a focus at the location type of research-intensive universities.

Secondly, perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence may be seen as acceptable by academics in research-intensive universities. Forces influencing academics to behave and think in this manner (Saunders, 2012a) seem to be an academic understanding of research-intensive universities seeing the TEF as not relevant to them. Indeed, the findings reported academic perceptions that the TEF is not a concern for this location type. There was also evidence in the findings, in the form of an internal email verbally shared during an interview, of scepticism towards the TEF from institutional levels of the staircase. Further, if there is scepticism towards the TEF at institutional levels of the staircase, this can drive a meaning (Saunders, 2006) of teaching as not important at the bottom level. Subsequently, this can strengthen an understanding (Saunders, 2006) of perfunctory attitudes as acceptable at this level.

The study by Perkins (2019) provides support that views at the institutional levels of the staircase at this location type influence interpretations (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987) at the bottom level. As discussed in the literature review chapter, the study (Perkins, 2019) reports an academic perception of an increase in role expectations because of the TEF which may have come at the back of academics perceiving their university emphasising the importance of the TEF as reported in the same study (Perkins, 2019).

The third paragraph of this section made the argument that there is an academic perception of the TEF as not relevant for institutional levels of the staircase at research-intensive universities. Interestingly, this argument contrasts with the findings discussed in the literature review chapter of a research-intensive university

emphasising the TEF's importance (Perkins, 2019). One explanation for the discrepancy may be that the emphasising of the TEF's importance is exclusive to the specific university reported. As the study (Perkins, 2019) was about TEF 2, and this thesis is about TEF 2023, another explanation may be that TEF 2 had a stronger impact than TEF 2023. Alternatively, the discrepancy may indicate that the TEF is having a diminishing impact since the time of the introduction of TEF 2 in 2016 due to desensitisation. By desensitisation I am referring to the way in which individuals become less affected by a matter due to prolonged exposure. In our case, individuals at the bottom and institutional levels of the staircase in research-intensive universities becoming less influenced by the TEF due to prolonged exposure to it.

Returning to the discussion regarding factors that may reinforce perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence in academics, another factor that may be strengthening these attitudes is an academic belief that the TEF agenda is not beneficial. This is suggested by the observed unsympathetic attitudes towards the TEF. This is also suggested by the perceptions of the TEF as unhelpful. For example, there were perceptions of unintended policy effects. These include perceptions of the TEF leading to marketisation. There was also a small number of perceptions of the TEF undermining teaching and learning. A belief by academics that the TEF agenda is not beneficial may also arise as a reinterpretation (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987) of TEF-related marketing effected by institutional levels of the staircase. This is despite that these levels may engage in such marketing due to other concerns (Saunders, 2012a), such as university image or student recruitment.

### **5.4.3 Perfunctory attitudes may reflect wider reluctance to engage with the TEF and teaching excellence**

Perfunctory attitudes by academics in research-intensive universities may also display a broader unwillingness by them to truly engage with the TEF and the wider teaching excellence agenda. Indeed, it was clear that academics had minimal engagement with the TEF and aspects related to teaching excellence. An unwillingness by academics to truly engage with the TEF and the wider teaching excellence agenda is also suggested by their unwelcoming attitudes towards the TEF and a potential perception of it as a burden, because of their perceptions of it causing anxiety and responsibility. Further, academics seemed to disapprove of the TEF, holding reservations about it enhancing teaching. Academics also disagreed with the TEF's evaluation method although this is a view that is widely held by staff in UK higher education in both research- and teaching-intensive institutions as discussed in the literature review chapter (Graham, 2019; O'Leary et al., 2019), so much so that staff question the legitimacy and credibility of the TEF as a way of evaluating teaching excellence (O'Leary et al., 2019).

An explanation for why academics in research-intensive universities may hold an unwillingness to engage with the TEF and the wider teaching excellence agenda may be a low value on teaching placed by them, materialised by a transformative force (Saunders, 2012b) – the lack of concern regarding teaching by research-intensive universities as is generally assumed (Jawitz & Perez, 2016).



#### **5.4.4 The evolving structure of the TEF reinforcing a lack of enactment of the TEF's policy messages**

In this thesis, I argued that academics enact perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence instead of enacting the TEF's policy messages because of factors affecting interpretation at the bottom of the staircase in research-intensive universities. This may be compounded by firstly, the evolving structure of the TEF, discussed in the next paragraph. Secondly, by a lack of information provision regarding the TEF by higher education institutions in the UK, discussed in the paragraph after the next.

The TEF initially had a simple structure but now has a much more elaborate one. For example, TEF 3 saw the introduction of universities submitting qualitative evidence as part of the TEF assessment, and optional to universities, the submitting of qualitative evidence by their students. Further, TEF 2023 saw the introduction of two separate TEF ratings that contribute to the overall rating. More details on the evolvement of the TEF over the years can be found in sections 1.3 and 2.4.

Academics in this thesis barely mentioned any information-sharing communications or events by their institutions regarding the TEF. A similar perception by programme leaders, specifically of a lack of TEF information provision by British universities, is reported by Meeson (2020), who further reports an academic perception of having to rely on informal sources for TEF information. Similarly, a study in UK higher education institutions (O'Leary et al., 2019) reports an academic perception that they were not involved, nor consulted, in activities related to the TEF at their institution.

## 5.5 Other implications

According to the implementation staircase idea, policy implementation deviates from policy intention through the act of enactment (Saunders, 2006). As discussed in various parts of this chapter, there seems to be a lack of alignment between the TEF's policy messages and their enactment by academics. Chiefly, perfunctory approaches to the TEF and teaching excellence, instead of genuine teaching excellence and enhancement. Further, considering the staircase idea, policy enactment tends to be shaped by factors, or "imperatives" (Saunders, 2012a, p. 193), such as staff interests, institutional drivers and non-disciplinary influences (Trowler et al., 2012). In our case, the main factors affecting the bottom level appear to be research as the cultural priority, perceived institutional messages regarding the TEF of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement and a perceived pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations. Considering this, I make two suggestions in this section. Firstly, that embedded factors such as these at various location types are considered for policy so that policy enactment as intended is encouraged. Secondly, that approaches other than top-down are adopted for teaching excellence policy as these more readily have the potential to consider embedded factors, also encouraging policy enactment as intended whilst decreasing the risk of unintended policy effects.

The factors affecting the bottom of the staircase in research-intensive universities is influencing the unique response to the TEF by academics at this location type. In the literature review chapter, it was suggested that because the TEF does not explicitly state a change theory, change theory was probably not considered and tacit theory was probably adopted (Trowler, 2020). Further, the adoption of tacit theory was offered to mean that the rational-purposive theory was probably adopted, which theory signifies a top-down approach (Trowler, 2020). This suggests that the TEF does not

consider the factors at the bottom of the staircase which may be contributing to the lack of enactment of its policy messages and enactment which is not as intended. Consideration of these factors can foster policy enactment as intended. The implication that arises is that policy should consider the factors affecting the bottom of the staircase at various location types.

Another implication that arises is that teaching excellence policy should seek alternative approaches rather than top-down. Top-down approaches tend to overlook the strength and persistence of embedded factors (Trowler, 2020). The findings support this, suggesting that there was a weak enactment of the TEF's policy messages because of unaddressed embedded factors at the bottom of the staircase. Building on this, the findings suggest that another ramification of overlooking the strength and persistence of embedded factors is unintended policy effects because of the adoption of perfunctory attitudes by the academics. Taking this paragraph together, alternative approaches other than top-down for teaching excellence policy have the potential to consider embedded factors, promoting policy enactment which reflects policy intention, with a decreased risk of unintended policy effects.

## **5.6 Research-intensive institutions**

This thesis observed a strong sense by academics of importance of research by both research-intensive universities and academics within them, supporting the often-assumed culture of research-importance in this context. This poses this location type as one where it is more difficult to enact policy messages regarding teaching.

According to the findings, academics within research-intensive universities appear to hold values of importance of research activity whilst research-intensive universities are perceived by academics to hold values of research supremacy. As values cement

the positions of behaviour in a community irrespective of evidence that suggests the need for change (Becher & Trowler, 2001), these values may result in difficulty to change behaviour regarding teaching irrespective of messages regarding teaching. This is supported by the observed weak enactment of the TEF's policy messages at this location type.

Having critically examined the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities regarding the TEF, this chapter has underlined the contrast between policy messages and individual enactment. The enactment of the TEF appears to be conditioned by factors affecting those on the ground. By applying and extending the implementation staircase idea, this thesis has offered a different perspective through which the conditions are understood. The next chapter draws together the key aspects from this thesis, articulates its contribution to knowledge and provides suggestions for research and practice, strengths and limitations.

## **6 Summary and conclusions**

This thesis, driven by my interest in policy, examined the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities in England regarding the TEF as a policy instrument. It set out to examine what these perceptions and derived experiences and attitudes reveal about how academics respond to the TEF, aiming to explore the conditions affecting policy implementation in this context. The exploration was conceptualised through the idea of the implementation staircase (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2006). The universities where the study was based were five mid-size and large universities. A purpose for exploring research-intensive institutions arose because there is often the assumption that this context places much more value on research than teaching, offering a unique opportunity to examine the enactment of teaching excellence policy in this environment. The qualitative analysis was guided by three research questions:

- RQ1. What are the perceptions of academics in research-intensive universities, if any, regarding the impact of the TEF on the experiences and attitudes of themselves and their academic colleagues?
- RQ2. What are the perceptions of academics in this context, if any, regarding how they experience the TEF?
- RQ3. What are the perceptions of academics in this context regarding the TEF as a policy instrument?

The following research objectives directed the thesis:

1. Reviewal of the literature on policy instruments, schemes of teaching excellence, the TQEF and its shift to the TEF, the TEF, perceptions on the TEF and perceptions on a related policy – the REF.

2. Development of appropriate methods, including the design of an interview schedule for semi-structured interviews and the conduction of the interviews with academics in research-intensive universities.
3. Analysis of the data.
4. Critical analysis of the findings.
5. Offering of implications arising from the critical analysis.

The policy context in England and the UK, including the background for the establishment of a teaching excellence scheme was considered. The policy context of the TEF and its sister scheme, the REF, and the environment that led to the TEF was also assessed. Relevant literature on policy and teaching excellence schemes was reviewed. Literature was also examined on the TEF and the shift of the TEF from its predecessor, the TQEF. Further, literature on the implementation staircase idea was reviewed, alongside literature on staff perceptions regarding the TEF and perceptions regarding the REF. A qualitative, interpretivist approach was the methodology adopted. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted and data were analysed using thematic analysis.

The implementation staircase provided a valuable conceptual tool, enabling the analysis of how policy messages are interpreted at the bottom of the staircase and how higher, institutional, levels of the staircase affect this interpretation. This thesis supports the suggestion by the staircase that the implementation of policy deviates from policy intention through the act of enactment. This is because the findings show a contrast between policy enactment and policy messages. This thesis extended the idea of the staircase, in that locations can be grouped by type — location types — where the location type also affects the interpretation of policy messages, mediating

policy enactment. Research-intensive universities was the location type examined in this thesis. The findings support the extension, suggesting that the location type mediates the enactment of policy. This is because there was a lack of interpretation of the TEF's policy messages as intended by academics in research-intensive universities at the bottom level of the staircase, suggesting that even within one level, location type significantly affects how policy messages are interpreted and how policy is enacted.

The findings revealed a significant contrast between the TEF's policy messages of teaching excellence and enhancement, and its enactment at the bottom of the staircase. Academics demonstrated limited familiarity with the TEF, displayed scepticism about its relevance, lacked sympathy and reception towards it with reservations about its impact and evaluation method, thought that it induced anxiety in staff and perceived it as unhelpful. Academics did not perceive the TEF as effecting teaching excellence promotion nor a driver of teaching enhancement, but rather as an exercise that can be, and is, manipulated and associated with marketisation. Some academics perceived more institutional focus on teaching-focused careers because of the TEF.

Supporting the assumption that is often made that research-intensive institutions revere research, academic accounts suggested research as a core academic activity that they have to observe. Academic perceptions suggested messages from institutional levels of the staircase of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement in relation to the TEF. Academics accounts also suggested pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations. The discussion further suggested issues and tensions regarding these three. All of these factors appear to

condition the adoption of perfunctory attitudes regarding the TEF and teaching excellence instead of the enactment of the TEF's policy messages.

It can be suggested that this thesis demonstrated the value of qualitative approaches and interpretivist inquiry in capturing situated perceptions within an environment. The adoption of a qualitative design — specifically, semi-structured interviews — enabled the elicitation and interpretation of rich, contextually grounded accounts that would have not been possible through more positivist approaches. The analysis of the accounts, guided by thematic analysis and supported by coding and analytical memo writing, allowed for the emergence of themes.

## **6.1 Contribution to knowledge**

The study contributes to knowledge by describing conditions which affect policy enactment in higher education. Firstly, policy enactment on the ground is mediated by the dominant cultural priority at the location type. For academic life in research-intensive institutions, this remains research. Secondly, perceptions of messages from the higher education institution influence the interpretation of policy messages on the ground. In research-intensive contexts, two dominant institutional messages regarding the TEF appear to be research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement. Thirdly, those on the ground may hold perceptions of pressures from policy that influence policy enactment. In research-intensive universities, there appears to be perceptions of pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations. Finally, issues and tensions related to these three. This paragraph underlines the importance of considering the factors affecting those on the ground to encourage policy enactment as intended. In short, the application and extension of the implementation staircase idea to the findings suggests that location type, institutional



culture, perceived pressures from policy and related issues and tensions all contribute to how policy is interpreted and enacted.

Further, this thesis provides the experiences and attitudes regarding the TEF by academics in research-intensive institutions in England. Academics in this context experience research as the cultural priority, perceive institutional messages regarding the TEF of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement, perceive pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations and experience issues and tensions regarding these three. These factors were suggested to contribute to their perfunctory engagement with the TEF and teaching excellence instead of the genuine enactment of the TEF's policy messages of teaching excellence and enhancement.

## **6.2 Considerations for research**

This section offers broader suggestions for research. Future work can examine perceptions at one of the institutional levels of the implementation staircase. As the current thesis relied on the staircase, future research may benefit from adopting more flexible ideas. For example, sensemaking theory. Adopting more flexible conceptualisations could enable the exploration of the dynamic aspects of policy implementation. Additionally, future research can widen the data collected to include individuals situated in other levels of the staircase, such as middle and executive managers, to triangulate findings. Triangulation, apart from enhancing the validity of the current findings, would enable the assessment of whether the current findings apply more widely. Further, future work can examine individuals located in another policy context. Moreover, considering that this thesis was an isolated study in research-intensive universities in England, future research can repeat the study in

research-intensive universities in other nations of the UK. Such research would ideally consider a longitudinal approach to track academic perceptions. Finally, perceptions on national teaching excellence schemes in other countries can be examined.

### **6.3 Considerations for practice**

This section provides practical implications for policy. Policy enactment can more closely reflect policy intention by the consideration of factors affecting those on the ground at different types of locations. These factors can be sought through the voice of individuals on the ground. The voice of individuals on the ground may be sought at the outset of policy so that it can be considered for policy design. Further, teaching excellence policy may adopt other approaches rather than top-down as these more readily have the potential to consider embedded factors, which according to the findings, affect the enactment of policy messages and may cause unintended policy effects. Adoption of other approaches can lead to policy enactment that is closer to policy intention and a decreased risk of unintended policy effects.

### **6.4 Strengths and limitations**

This thesis offers an investigation using the implementation staircase idea, providing an interesting perspective to examine policy implementation in research-intensive universities. This study provides valuable insight into factors that influence the enactment of policy in research-intensive universities, drawing from the experiences and attitudes of academics found at the bottom of the staircase at this location type in England. Specifically, experiences and attitudes in relation to the TEF as a policy instrument. However, this thesis is not without its limitations. Firstly, this thesis adopted the idea of the staircase which, although useful, may oversimplify the complexities of enacting policy. Indeed, the idea assumes a significant level of linearity which may not

entirely capture the fluid and potentially iterative nature of policy enactment processes. Secondly, perceptions at the bottom of the staircase in research-intensive universities were captured, which perceptions may differ to individuals located at other levels of the staircase and individuals situated in a different policy context. Finally, this thesis only examined academic perceptions in one nation of the UK.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the idea of the implementation staircase offered a unique conceptualisation of the conditions on the ground that affect policy implementation in research-intensive universities through the perceptions of academics in this context regarding the TEF. The findings suggest various factors influencing those on the ground at this type of location, shaping policy enactment. The main factors suggested were research as the cultural priority, perceived institutional messages of research supremacy and assurance rather than enhancement in relation to the TEF, perceived pressure from the TEF to meet teaching excellence expectations and issues and tensions regarding these.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview schedule**

#### **Introduction**

Introduce self, explain background, current role and programme being read.

Ask if there are any questions.

Check consent form.

#### **Prompts**

Can you give me an example? / Can you think of another example?

What evidence do you see for this?

Do you think colleagues would also see it in this way? / Do you think other people would share the perspective?

Why?

How?

Could you tell me a little more about this?

Would you have done anything differently?

Can you talk me through an aspect that changed because of XYZ?

*Questions such as these can help elicit understanding of what is occurring; for example, assumptions.*

Any other probing questions.

#### **Indicative Questions**

Provide the following information:

The interview first starts with demographic questions such as role and discipline, please feel free not to answer these if you prefer. Afterwards the interview is roughly structured in three parts with the first focused on TEF, the second on TEF ratings and the third about TEF in relation to others.

Whatever is said here will remain confidential and anonymous.

1. What is your designation? In other words, job title?
2. Is it a teaching or research post?
3. In which discipline, school and faculty are you in?
4. What are your current roles at the institution?



5. Still speaking about your current institution, what were your past roles, if any?
6. How long have you been at this institution?
7. Have you been at other institutions prior to this one?
8. Is there any other pertinent demographic information you'd like to add?
9. Let's assume I have no knowledge at all of TEF. How would you explain TEF to me?  
What does TEF stand for?
10. What does the word 'excellence' mean for you? What does the word 'excellence' mean for other academics you work with?
11. Do you have your own view of what this word 'excellence' should mean?
12. Should the use of the word 'excellence' be discontinued?
13. What do you take the word 'excellence' to mean in terms of TEF?
14. How do you / your team make changes to teaching?
15. What positive aspects of teaching do you observe in your role? What are the potential negative aspects of teaching you observe?
16. How do you make changes to your teaching?
17. Can you tell me about informal comments you receive on teaching?
18. What does good teaching look like?
19. Were you involved with TEF at your institution? / Were there any workshops related to TEF or teaching excellence? / Were there communications in relation to TEF?
20. Can you talk me through your involvement with TEF? (at your institution) What was your experience? (in relation to TEF and TEF ratings at your institution)
21. Were any adaptations required? (to how things are done) (because of TEF)
22. Are you aware of the TEF rating at your institution? What was your reaction to the rating? (If unaware – 'the TEF rating at your institution is XYZ, what is your immediate reaction to that?')
23. How did colleagues react to the TEF rating received?
24. How did the institution react to the TEF rating?
25. Were any changes required because of the TEF rating? (to how things are done)
26. Can you talk me through an aspect of teaching that changed because of TEF?
27. What positive aspects have you observed in relation to TEF at your institution? What negative aspects have you observed in relation to TEF at your institution?

28. Is TEF helping your institution? / Do you think the needs of your institution are being met because of TEF? / Is there more focus on teaching institution-wide because of TEF? / is teaching changing {or improving} institution-wide because of TEF?)
29. Is TEF helping your team? / Do you think the needs of your team are being met because of TEF? / Is teaching getting more attention team-wide because of TEF?)
30. Is teaching changing {or improving} because of TEF?  
How do you feel TEF affects the quality of teaching?
31. Was TEF submission a big thing at your institution? Was the announcement of the TEF rating a big thing at your institution?
32. Was there chatter about it? / unofficial talking / What's your experience of how colleagues talk about TEF? / What sort of views have you heard from colleagues? (on TEF)
33. What future developments do you think are likely because of TEF (and TEF ratings)? / What do you think will change going forward because of TEF (and TEF ratings)? For example, will something different be made going forward?
34. Should TEF be changed? (How?)
35. TEF is a big submission. The team or individual that submitted TEF, what roles do they do? / What do they do in terms of role? (For example, academics, administration.) What do you think they think of the word 'excellence'? / How do you think they perceive the word excellence?
36. Should TEF be discontinued? (Why?)
37. Do you feel TEF affects the importance of teaching at your current institution?
38. Is there anything else you'd like to add?
39. Another question is, and depending on the answer it might have useful information, why did you agree to take part in this interview?

## Appendix B

### Samples of the initial coding

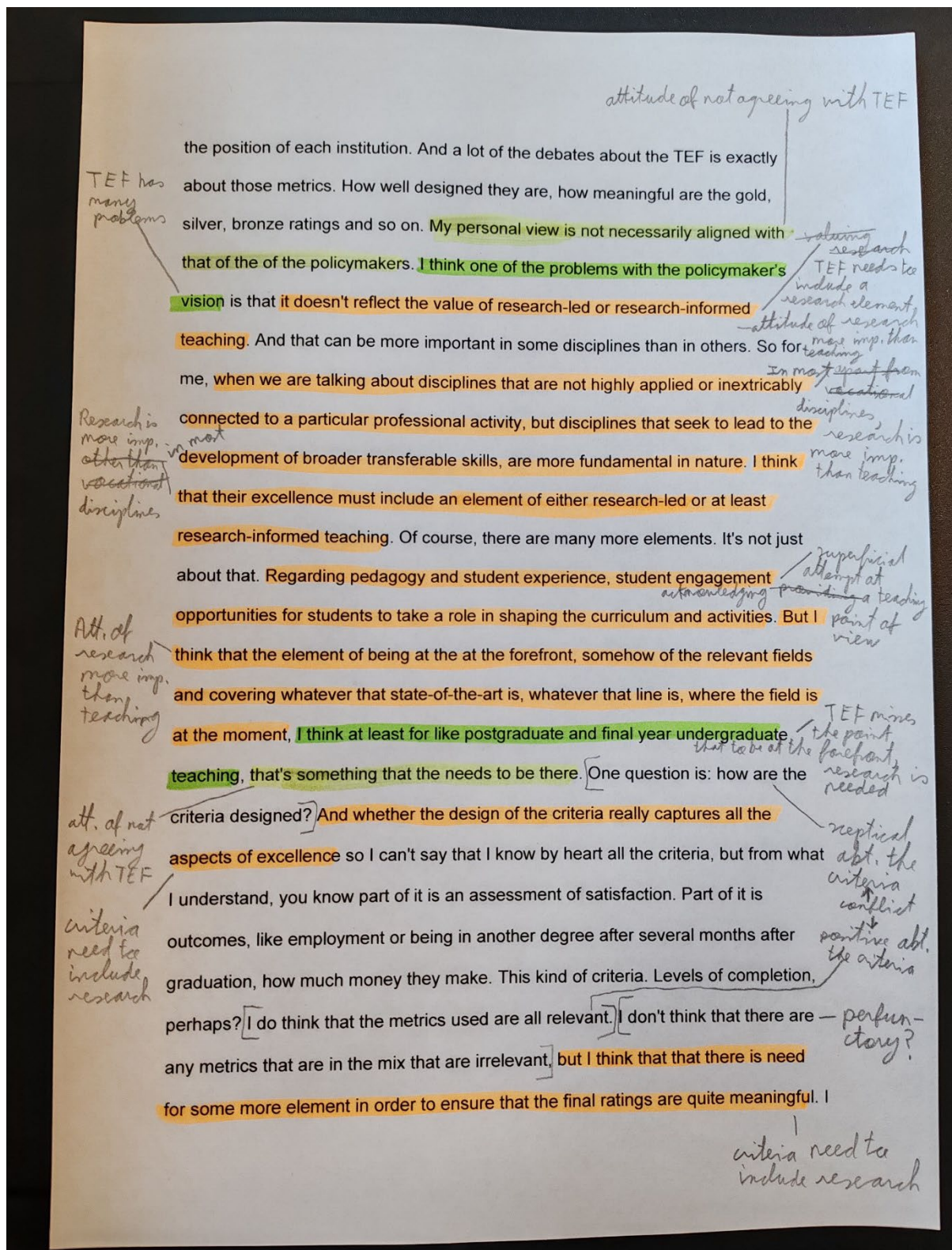


Figure B1: A sample of the initial coding for the transcript of Joshua.



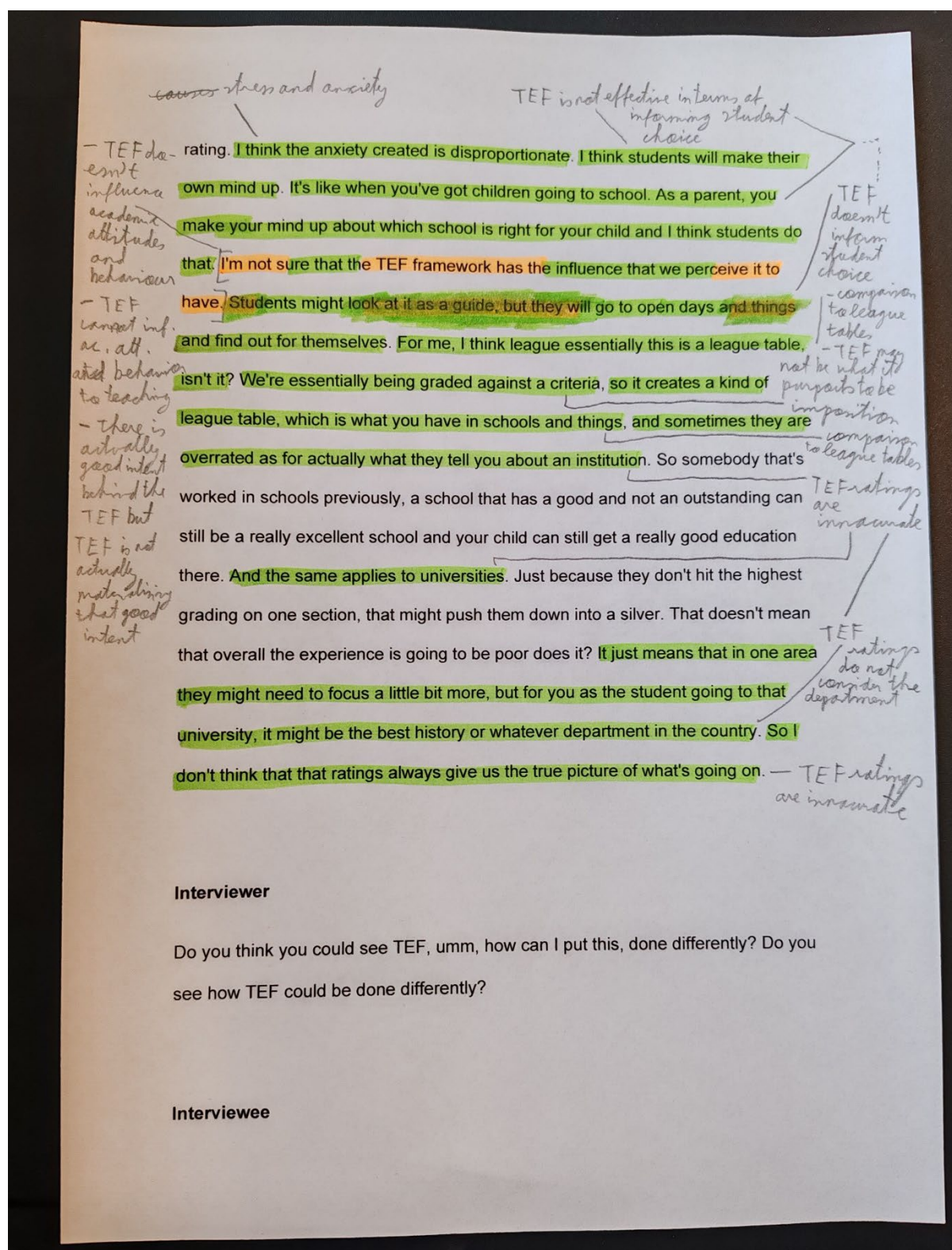


Figure B2: A sample of the initial coding for the transcript of Telma.