

## **THE TEACHING EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK (TEF)**

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a mechanism for measuring the quality of teaching in higher education institutions in England, although institutions in other part of the UK can also opt into the TEF if they choose. All higher education providers, including further education colleges and private institutions, can take part in the TEF.

This entry discusses why the TEF was introduced, how it has been implemented, how the TEF assesses teaching excellence, and criticisms of the TEF.

### **Why was the TEF introduced?**

There were two broad reasons for the introduction of the TEF. Following the Browne Review in 2010, tuition fees for UK and EU students in England were increased to a maximum of £9,000. At the time of the introduction of the TEF, all English universities charged this maximum but the government was concerned that these flat fees masked large differences in the quality of degree programs. Whilst commercial university league tables provided information on the quality of degree programs, there was evidence that these league tables tended to favor elite universities. The TEF was introduced with the purpose of providing students with better information about the quality of degree programs so that they can make more informed choices about where to study.

Second, the government's intention was also to raise the profile of teaching and ensure that it was better recognized and rewarded by universities. Initially institutions who entered into the TEF could raise their fees in line with inflation. The original plan was that the level of TEF

award achieved by institutions would determine the amount by which they could raise their tuition fees. However, following public concern over the amount students were being charged in interest on their government loans to pay for their fees, fees were frozen in October 2017.

### **How is the TEF being implemented?**

The TEF is undergoing a process of change during its implementation. In the first year, institutions were required to have a successful quality assurance review from the Quality Assurance Agency. The second year of the TEF in 2016-17, known as TEF2, examined teaching excellence at the level of the institution. The outcomes were reported in June 2017. Institutions were examined a series of metrics: students' views of teaching, assessment and academic support from the National Student Survey (NSS), student drop-out rates, and rates of employment, including a measure of highly skilled employment, and further study from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DHLE). Institutions performance was benchmarked against the demographic characteristics of their students and based on this, their performance was flagged when it was statistically significantly better or worse than their benchmark. Assessors made an initial assessment of institutions' performance based on the number of flags they had and then examined contextual information and an institutional submission of up to 15 pages that outlined the institution's case for the excellence of their teaching. Based on this, they were awarded a gold, silver or bronze TEF award. They held this award for up to three years, although they could reapply after a year.

In Year 3 in 2017-18, known as TEF3, the weighting of the metrics changed so that those from the National Student Survey were worth half of the other metrics. To reflect this, the name was changed to the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, although the

acronym remained as 'TEF'. In TEF3, 20 higher education institutions reapplied. The results were announced in June 2018 and 13 of the 20 received a higher award than under TEF2. This level of change in the outcomes from the TEF after just a year raised some concerns about how useful the information provided to prospective students was, given that TEF awards could be held for three years.

In 2017-18, there were also pilots of a subject-based TEF. This was intended to address the concern that whilst TEF 2 and 3 focused on institutional level awards, the quality of teaching varies by subject within institutions. Two models of subject-based TEF have been trialed, a 'bottom-up' model in which groups of subjects are assessed and these form the basis for the institutional award and a 'by-exception' model in which only those subjects that have metrics that are significantly different from the institution are examined. The other subjects are awarded the same TEF outcome as their institution. A number of concerns have been raised about the subject-based TEF. First, there are concerns that the groupings of subjects are too broad and do not fit with prospective students' understanding of university subjects. Second, that the metrics data are not robust enough to be used at the level of the subject. Third that the 'by-exception' model, if adopted, is likely to mean that the metrics play a more decisive role in determining TEF outcomes.

### **How does the TEF assess Teaching Excellence?**

In the TEF, providers of higher education are assessed on criteria under three broad headings: Teaching Quality, Learning Environment, and Student Outcomes and Learning Gain. In each case, institutions are first assessed on their performance on the metrics. This is used to form an initial judgement and the institutional submission is then used to consider whether this

initial judgement should be changed.

Teaching Quality is seen to be made of four elements: 'Student Engagement', the extent to which teaching engages and challenges students; 'Valuing of Teaching', the extent to which institutional cultures recognize and reward excellent teaching; 'Rigour and Stretch', the extent to which course design and assessment stretch students and enable them to reach their full potential; and 'Feedback, the extent to which assessment and feedback are used to support students' development, progression and attainment. The metrics that are used to assess these elements are from the National Student Survey (NSS) and relate to the teaching on my course and assessment and feedback.

Learning Environment is made up of three elements: 'Resources', the extent to which resources are used effectively to support students learning and development; 'Scholarship, Research and Professional Practice', the extent to which the learning environment is enriched by providing students with access to leading ideas from research, scholarship or professional practice; and 'Personalised Learning', the extent to which the learning environment is tailored to students individual needs. The metrics used to assess this elements ate students' views of academic support from the NSS and continuation rates from the first to second year of study

Student Outcomes and Learning Gain is made up of three elements: 'Employment and Further Study', the extent to which student achieve their educational and professional goals by progressing to highly skilled employment or further study; 'Employability and Transferrable Skills', the extent to which students acquire knowledge and skills that are valued by employers, and 'Positive Outcomes for All', the extent to which outcomes are achieved by all students. The metrics associated with this are from the Destination of Leavers form Higher Education (DLHE) survey.

Whilst the same metrics were used in TEF2 and TEF3, the weighting of the elements from the NSS were halved compared to the other metrics in TEF3. In addition, TEF3 included a number of supplementary metrics. An institution's performance on these was considered after the initial hypothesis had been formed. Under teaching quality, there was a supplementary metric related to grade inflation in which institutions were asked to explain changes to the profile of degree classifications awarded over a 10-year period. Under Student Learning Outcomes and Learning Gain, there were two supplementary metrics drawn from the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO), which examined whether graduates had sustained employment three years after graduation and their level of earnings three years after graduation.

### **What have been the outcomes of the TEF?**

After TEF2 and TEF3, 269 higher education providers in the UK had been awarded a full TEF rating. Of these, 27% were awarded Gold, 50% Silver and 23% were Bronze. The outcomes cut across traditional hierarchies of prestige in higher education, with many less prestigious institutions gaining a gold award and some internationally renowned institutions being awarded bronze.

### **What have been the criticisms of the TEF?**

Whilst there are many criticisms of the TEF that are focused on rejecting its underlying rationale, there are two main criticisms of the way in which the TEF tries to achieve its aims. These are of interest because they assess the TEF in terms of what it is actually trying to achieve. First, some argue that the metrics used are not valid measures of teaching excellence. In particular, the increasing prominence of measures relating to employment outcomes is argued to

be problematic because this is not directly related to the quality of teaching.

Second, some argue that the TEF does not provide useful information for prospective students. This is because it is currently focused on the institutional level, whereas the quality of teaching is determined at the level of individual degree programs. It is also because TEF awards are held for three years, with proposals to extend this to five or six years. This means that a TEF award provides a picture of the quality of teaching that may be out of date by the time that an applicant actually studies at the institution they choose on based on the information provided by the TEF.

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*See also* Browne Report 2010 (England); League Tables; Learning; Learning Outcomes; Policy; Quality Assurance and Control; Research Excellence Framework (REF); Teaching.

#### **FURTHER READINGS**

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