What is the Teaching Excellence Framework in the United Kingdom, and Will it Work?

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https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/teaching-excellence-framework

In England, the government has begun the introduction of a new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in higher education. Since tuition fees for UK and EU students were increased to a maximum of £9000 from the autumn of 2012, most English higher education providers have ended up charging this maximum. There is a sense in government that these flat fees mask differences in the quality of degree programs that students are being offered. One of the central ideas behind the TEF is that in order for institutions to raise fees in line with inflation, they will need to show that they are offering students a high quality undergraduate education. This will mean that the fees that students are charged will increasingly reflect the quality of the teaching they experience. In addition, it is expected that the TEF will provide students with information that will allow them to make more informed choices about what and where they study; will raise the profile of teaching and ensure that it is better recognized and rewarded; and will lead to higher education better meeting the needs of employers and industry.

How Will the TEF Work?

The TEF will be introduced over a number of years. In Year 1, any institution with a positive Quality Assurance Agency Institutional Review is automatically qualified to increase its tuition fees from September 2017. From Year 2, institutions will need to opt into the TEF, which will examine a series of metrics: students' views of teaching; assessment and academic support from the National Student Survey (NSS); student dropout rates; rates of employment, including a measure of highly skilled employment; and further study from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DHLE) survey. Whilst the NSS does give an insight into students' perceptions of their teaching, it is notable that none of these measures tell us directly about the quality of teaching. Rather, these measures are focused on examining the assumed effects of such teaching. Institutions performance will be benchmarked against the demographic characteristics of their students and based on this, their performance will be flagged when they do statistically significantly better or worse than their benchmark. Assessors will make an initial assessment of an institution's performance based on the amount of flags they have and then will examine contextual information and an institutional submission of up to 15 pages that outlines the institution's case for the excellence of its teaching. Based on this, they will give the institution a Gold, Silver, or Bronze TEF award. This will provide students with an indicator of the quality of the programs offered by these institutions as whole, rather than the quality of individual programs. In Year 2, institutions with each of these awards will be able to raise their fees by the same

amount in September 2018. In Year 3, the different level of awards will begin to impact on the amount by which institutions can raise fees in September 2019, and there will also be pilots aimed at focusing the TEF down onto individual subjects within institutions. In Year 4, it is planned that the subject level TEF will be introduced, and the TEF will also include taught postgraduate students.

Will the TEF Meet its Aims?

In some ways, the TEF will provide students with better information about the quality of their degree programs than what is currently offered by national higher education rankings. While they do not directly tell us about the quality of teaching, there is a logic to the metrics suggested for Year 2: it is difficult to imagine an excellent course in which the students think the teaching, support, and assessment are poor; a large proportion of the students leave without graduating; and hardly anyone gets a job or a place on a postgraduate course at the end of it. The commitment to take account of differences in student intake and flag statistically significant differences is a marked improvement on university rankings. Such rankings tend to privilege institutions with more middle-class students and, because they are simply a rank order, differences of many places are usually meaningless in terms of differentiating the quality of what is offered. However, there are issues. First, it is clear that quality resides at the level of particular programs rather than institutions (the same institution can have very good and very poor programs), but students will not get any information about this until at least Year 4. Even when they

do, initial assessments of the available data suggest that they will not be robust enough to provide meaningful information at this level.

What Will Happen in the Future?

The future of the TEF looks more concerning. It is clear that the government want to increase the number of metrics that are used and have already strongly signaled that they want to develop a metric related to the contact hours that students receive. The problem is that there is simply no evidence that this is a valid measure of teaching quality, whilst things that we do know are crucial in shaping the quality of teaching, such as the expertise of those who teach, are not even being discussed as potential TEF metrics. If the TEF ends up being based on measures that are unrelated to the quality of teaching, then the danger is that it will be more about institutional game playing than it is about excellent teaching. Focusing on contact hours is particularly problematic, as the most likely outcome is that institutions will redefine what they measure as a contact hour in order to improve their score. This will lead to apparent increases in contact hours without anything changing about students' actual experience. This is the crucial test that any metric must pass: improvements in the score on the metric must only be possible through improvements in quality of teaching that students experience.

The problem appears to be that too little account is being taken of the over forty years of research evidence about what leads to high quality teaching in higher education. This is again reflected in the assessment criteria that underpin the judgements of excellence within the TEF. For example, the assessment criteria that

are being used to consider teaching quality (there are other criteria for the learning environment and student outcomes) are a strange mixture of elements: encouraging student engagement; the institution valuing teaching; ensuring courses involve rigor and stretch; and effective feedback on student work. Whilst they might appeal to a common sense notion of what students need, it is difficult to understand the basis on which these were included and others, such as teaching expertise, were excluded. Overall, it is not at all clear how they form a coherent whole that tells us something important about the excellence of teaching or what the view of teaching is that underpins them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that the TEF has the potential to provide valid information to potential students about the quality of higher education courses at different universities. With students bearing the increasing costs of their degrees, such valid information is crucial. However, this potential is unlikely to be realized unless more account is taken of research into high quality teaching in higher education, and what we know about the ways in which institutions respond to the introduction of performance measures.