

Let's Talk About TEF: Bristol's Alternative Teaching Excellence Framework



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Introduction

In recent years the Higher Education sector has seen some of the most drastic government reforms in history. With the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework and the rise in fees, students across the country have continued to show their resistance to the marketisation of higher education.

As a full-time undergraduate student, I have seen the extent to which students are positioned as consumers rather than co-producers of their education. Students at the University of Bristol believe passionately that education is a public good which must be provided for the benefit of society as a whole, rather than the for the selfinterest of the individual student or learner. Alongside its vital role in supporting the national economy, education is a right, not a privilege.

Our vision is of a free and properly funded Higher Education system which delivers high-quality education, enables social mobility and provides students with the means to live and study with dignity. Across the country, students are living in poverty, being taken advantage of by private landlords and leaving University with overdrafts, credit card debt and other outstanding loans, all in addition to the tens of thousands of pounds of debt they have accrued from fee and maintenance loans. This system has been designed based on market principles but fails to realise that education, like healthcare, is a sector in which market forces will inevitably fail both the individual student and wider society.

While many students believe that there should be a way of ranking universities based on teaching excellence, the current TEF fails to capture the entire student experience. This research is the first of its kind in student's unions. It provides a qualitative approach to understanding the priorities of students when it comes to their education. By building an alternative teaching excellence framework that captures the priorities of students, we shed light on how the current model of TEF, based on principles of marketisation, is not compatible with students' vision for excellent teaching.



I hope that this paper not only encourages the University of Bristol but also encourages universities across the sector to shift the narrative away from marketisation and towards a truly student-centred higher education system provided for the public good.

Mason Ammar
Undergraduate Education Officer (2017-2018)

Purpose

At the University of Bristol, Bristol Students' Union has passed several motions on the Teaching Excellence Framework at its democratic meetings in the past two years. The latest motion 'New Year, New Tactic', acknowledges the changes made to the TEF and the delinking of fees, but argues that a Teaching Excellence Framework should better reflect teaching excellence rather than enabling the marketisation of higher education.¹

To achieve this aim Bristol SU launched a research project into the TEF at the beginning of 2018, to gather student views on the teaching excellence framework and start to formulate ideas about what an alternative teaching excellence framework might look like. The research is the first of its kind at a UK Students' Union. This report presents the findings of this project.

Background

The Teaching Excellence Framework was introduced by Universities Minister Jo Johnson in 2015, to build a culture that placed teaching on an equal status with research.² The Framework originally aimed to create incentives for universities to 'devote as much attention to the quality of teaching as fee-paying students and prospective employers have a right to expect'.² Initially, the government sought to incentivise universities with higher fee income for those universities that did best in the TEF. However, a national boycott of the NSS in 2016/17, combined with a poor result for the government in the 2017 general election, has seen the permanent decoupling of the TEF and fees.

While the decoupling of fees and the TEF is a welcome move, issues with the TEF remain. The NUS has criticised the TEF's narrow view of employment, particularly the highly skilled jobs metric which it argues does not accurately reflect the types of jobs graduates enter into.³ The TEF's new metrics on graduate earnings meanwhile appear to prioritise high earnings over meaningful and desirable outcomes for students. While the TEF has recently been renamed the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, in a move that aims to 'better reflect' the TEF's focus on employment and outcomes, this rebranding seems to shift the balance of the TEF too far towards outcomes and even further away from its original aim to encourage universities to focus more on teaching.⁴ The TEF's focus on grade inflation has also

¹ Bristol SU, "New Year, New Tactic", 2017, <https://bit.ly/2vPW9yD>, p1. ²

Jo Johnson, "Teaching at the heart of the system", July 1st 2005, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/teaching-at-the-heart-of-the-system> (accessed April 27th, 2018).

² Johnson, "Teaching at the heart..."

³ NUS, *TEF Technical Consultation – Government Response*, 2016, London: NUS, p1.

⁴ Morgan, J. (2017) 'Name Change for England's TEF reflects 'student outcomes' shift', available at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/name-change-englands-tefreflects-student-outcomes-shift>

been criticised as failing to 'distinguish whether improvements in degree classifications are down to genuine rising attainment'.⁵

Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken on the project, consisting of a series of focus groups with students – some based in faculties and some open to students across the University. One focus group was also held with staff from across the University. This approach was taken as a more quantitative survey-based research project has recently been undertaken by a consortium of students' unions. *Teaching excellence: the student perspective* was published in November 2017 with 8,994 student respondents from 123 different universities.⁶ The findings of this research will be drawn on throughout this report.

While *Teaching excellence* helps us to start to understand what students might want from an alternative teaching excellence framework, its quantitative survey methodology does not allow for a discursive partnership approach to creating such a framework. In this way this research project aims to build on this knowledge base to create a teaching excellence framework that truly reflects the needs of Bristol students.

Six focus groups with 27 students were held over February to March. One focus group was held with staff in April, with 6 staff members. The staff focus group was evenly split by gender, with 33% responding prefer not to say to the other demographic questions, and 67% reporting that they did not fit into any of the other demographics. Staff members were recruited through a UCU newsletter.

It is important to note that, due to the qualitative method adopted in this project, there are limitations to the extent to which these findings can be generalised to the whole student body. Having said that, the majority of the student focus group participants were course representatives, which means that they are more likely to report views and perspectives which are representative of the students in their cohort than a randomly selected student.

⁵ Anthony Seldon, "It's time to reset the Teaching Excellence Framework", January 29th 2018, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/time-to-reset-tef/> (accessed May 8th, 2018).

⁶ Trendence, *Teaching excellence: the student perspective*, 2017, London: Trendence, p3.

| Characteristics of Student Focus Groups | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Gender | Man | 37% |
| | Woman | 59% |
| | Non-binary or other gender identity | 4% |
| Ethnicity | BME | 30% |
| | White | 70% |
| Level of Study | UG | 81% |
| | PGT | 15% |
| | PGR | 4% |
| Disabled | Disabled | 15% |
| | Not Disabled | 85% |
| Faculty | Arts | 15% |
| | Biomedical Sciences | 11% |
| | Engineering | 7% |
| | Health Sciences | 15% |
| | Science | 19% |
| | SSL | 33% |
| Lesbian, gay, bisexual or other minority orientation | LGB+ | 11% |
| | Not LGB+ | 89% |

What does a 'gold standard' education look like to Bristol students and staff?

Students and staff in the focus groups were asked to describe what a 'gold standard' educational experience would look like to them. The phrase 'educational experience' was referred to rather than teaching to ensure that discussions took in the broad educational experience rather than the specific attributes of a good teacher, which would be hard to measure on a national scale.

Students had a wide range of views about what a gold standard education would look like. One of the most popular responses was the idea of lecturers and teachers being accessible, particularly through contact hours and office hours. Several students spoke about how they felt they didn't get enough contact hours in their degree subject, with one student reporting that studying Physics and Philosophy mean that they benefited from contact hours in Physics but felt like a 'headless chicken' when it came to Philosophy. These feelings correlate to the results of Bristol SU's 2017 annual survey, where 41% of students felt that an increase in contact hours would improve their educational experience.

Students also felt that it was important that they received 1:1 support from their tutors. There was a sense in the focus groups that students wanted to feel valued as an individual when interacting with their tutors. This idea also came up with staff,

who felt that a gold standard education should foster a 'familiar, trusting relationship between teachers and students'. Staff also spoke about the importance of a student staff community at university, which could improve students' education 'in leaps and bounds'. For students this linked to the need for pastoral support, as students felt they should be able to talk to their tutors or staff about issues they were facing. Mental health and academic performance were seen as intrinsically linked as a lack of support 'could really affect your learning ability'. Several students commented on the fact that the TEF does not currently capture anything related to pastoral care.

'Your mental health and your academic performance do kind of go together and if you're looking at like a gold standard university who really, in my mind that's someone who really looks after their students and so that that support should be there'

- Student participant

Many students felt that being taught by lecturers undertaking research was important, as this meant you were getting the 'newest information' which helped to motivate you when you were studying. Several students reported feeling inspired when they were taught by academics who were renowned in their field. However, some students felt that lecturers doing research was less important than them being a good teacher. Unsurprisingly excellent teaching itself came out as a strong indicator of a gold standard education, with students arguing that it was important to have enthusiastic, committed lecturers who inspired you.

'Quality of teaching, it's not just quantity, yeah some lectures can really inspire you and make you want to pursue that area and some of them like make you want to run for the hills'

- Student participant

Students were less likely to bring up the issue of facilities such as the library and IT services, but when prompted felt that these areas were important. Libraries were seen as crucial to learning, and an area which is currently missed out of the TEF. Several students also mentioned availability of books in libraries, as well as online resources. These facilities were seen as important in the Trendence research, with 86% of students feeling IT was important, 93% feeling the library was important and 94% feeling that course resources were important.⁷ One student focus group participant commented that even with excellent teaching and feedback 'without the resources there... you're missing out'.

'It feels like there's more students coming in but not the capacity to cope with them, you can really feel that when it comes to libraries, during exam period it's just a battle to get a seat.'

- Student participant

Several students also felt it was important to have a good extra-curricular offer at university as well as the academic side of study. This was also discussed by staff, however one staff member raised concerns about this being included as a metric in

⁷ Trendence, *Teaching excellence*, p4.

the TEF as some students are not able to participate because of work or caring commitments. Introducing a metric around engagement in extra-curricular activities could therefore lead to 'pushing students to do things which would be against their best interests'.

Other areas cited as important to a gold standard education by students were assessment and feedback, the quality of students at the institution and careers support. Unit choice was also mentioned by several students, but this was less important for students whose subjects did not lend themselves to much choice when it came to units. An area that came up particularly in the staff focus group was the idea that a gold standard education should create good citizens, who vote, engage in society, attend cultural events and are equipped to engage with their peers.

'I think a lot of the discourse is around the government producing people for a better economy, whereas perhaps we should be thinking about producing better people that contribute to culture not just the economy'. - Staff participant

What do Bristol students and staff think of the current TEF?

Students and staff were asked to look over the current teaching excellence framework and the measures it uses to determine TEF outcomes. Focus group facilitators introduced the TEF, explained how the different metrics worked and answered any questions that participants had.

Student participants had mixed views on the use of the NSS in the current TEF. Many students did not challenge this metric, and several felt that the NSS captured some of the elements that made up their vision of a gold standard education, in particular teaching, academic support, assessments and feedback. Other students were more critical of the NSS, particularly the fact that it is only done once at the end of a student's degree. Several students felt that the NSS was too narrow and short for students to give their full perspective on their education. There was a suggestion that more direct student feedback was needed in the TEF, so that the panel could hear from 'the students themselves'. In the staff focus group participants were also critical of the NSS, arguing that it was too narrow to capture teaching excellence.

'I think it captures the quality of teaching really well, it's got, teaching, and assessment and feedback, and academic support, which would cover tutors and things like that.'

- Student participant

Student participants were quite critical of the TEF's metrics on employment and earnings. Students were unsure how employment linked with teaching, and one student felt that it was 'fairly obvious' that students would try and get some sort of employment after graduating so graduate employment meant very little. Students were particularly critical of the TEF's highly skilled employment and above median earnings metrics. One student commented that 'if you choose to work in a sector that's less pay... I don't see how that feeds into teaching'. Another student pointed out that 'some people do charity work for example where you don't get paid that much but you feel good about what you are doing'. It was also felt that even if you

weren't in the job or pay band that you wanted to be in eventually, your position could be helping you to get there, so shouldn't be seen as a negative. Nationally students have ranked graduate employment as the least useful demonstration of excellent teaching, with the quality of teaching at #1.⁸

Staff were also critical of the inclusion of employment metrics, feeling that it would be more meaningful to ask students if they were doing 'what they wanted to do' rather than if they were in a particular kind of employment. One staff member felt that 'we should be saying our students can go on to do anything'. However, some students welcomed the TEF's metrics on earnings and highly skilled employment as an opportunity to see what they would get from three years hard work.

'Personally, when I was looking at it, it was like if it didn't get me into a really good job then... I wouldn't have applied to somewhere that I didn't think would get me there'

- Student participant

A number of students and staff participants challenged the idea of the TEF itself and the unintended consequences of having a TEF. Several students felt that universities were narrowing their aims because of the TEF which could impact upon the student experience and staff raised concerns about potential gaming of the system. One student felt that the TEF encouraged universities 'to focus on particular things that they know will up for their scores'. They reported that their department was now 'really heavy' on getting students jobs shortly after graduating, which could be stressful for students. One student questioned whether it was 'meaningful' to be measuring 'abstract and difficult' concepts related to teaching. Another felt that it was 'kind of ridiculous to... say whether something is bronze or silver'. However, nationally the majority of students are supportive of the idea of a teaching excellence framework, with 84% of students reporting that they support the idea of a government exercise that encourages excellence in teaching.⁹

'I think some sort of external teaching focused assessment or incentivisation could be a good thing if it's done right... given that we're never going to be free of external pressures, if we're REF focused then research is going to take precedence over teaching'

- Staff participant

What might an alternative TEF look like?

Students and staff in the focus groups were asked if they could think of any alternative ways of measuring teaching excellence to the current TEF. Suggestions included using unit feedback forms and conducting more surveys throughout students' time at university. However, both these suggestions could prove logistically difficult. While the University of Bristol currently runs Your Bristol, part of the benefit of this is that it is tailored to what UoB wants to know about, rather than being standardised across the country. A repetition of the NSS each year meanwhile could

⁸ Trendence, *Teaching excellence*, p8.

⁹ Trendence, *Teaching excellence*, p4.

lead to survey fatigue. Unit feedback forms are an innovative idea but would result in a huge quantity of data and would be difficult to standardise across universities.

'I do think they'd [unit feedback forms] be useful because as I've said some of my units have been taught amazingly some have been quite poor... it would be interesting to see how that could contribute to this, but I don't know if it's logistically possible.'

- Student participant

Other suggestions included interviews and focus groups with students, to capture direct student feedback. It was felt that the best people to speak about teaching excellence 'would be the students themselves'. An Ofsted approach of inspections was also discussed, although some students felt uncomfortable with this. This idea was also floated in our staff focus group, with participants generally in favour of an approach that would see well trained observers going into universities to get a better picture of teaching at institutions. Measurements for study spaces, contact hours and pastoral care were also discussed.

'TEF feels like a very narrow snapshot, whereas Ofsted feels a bit more holistic, they do actually come in and spend time in the school, a horrible hectic time but they get a better picture... that's kind of what you want from your alternative TEF, to say come in and look at our university'

- Staff participant

Focus group participants were asked whether the existence of attainment gaps should have an impact on a university's TEF ranking. The majority of students felt that the existence of an attainment gap should be considered by the TEF panel to a greater extent than it is currently. However, several students felt that if an institution could illustrate that it had done considerable work to tackle their attainment gaps this should be looked on favourably. In the staff focus group there was a discussion of students' experiences and targets which the University sets itself, with participants feeling it would be positive if more work was done on attainment gaps.

'If there's such a big gap then that's not excellent teaching for everyone... people have all got into the University on the same basis and they're all qualified to be there... I don't think that's something I'd consider to be an excellent institution'

- Student participant

Bristol's Alternative Teaching Excellence Framework

Although the metrics of the current Teaching Excellence Framework meets the priorities of the Office for Students (OfS), in order for us to be able to build a framework that captures the priorities of the student and staff participants, we could not possibly adhere to the underlying principles of this government policy, the marketisation of higher education. The priorities of the Office for Students are inadequate when it comes to understanding what students actually want out of their education.

Core Metrics

Bristol's Teaching Excellence Framework retains many of the core TEF metrics that focus on teaching and learning and ensures all the core metrics are weighted equally.

The profit incentive generated by the marketisation of higher education incentivises universities to increase student numbers. However, the current Teaching Excellence Framework does not consider the impact of increasing student numbers on resources such as study spaces and pastoral support services. By adding in two new questions around contact hours and study space and adding in a bank of questions on welfare and pastoral support we ensure that the priorities of student and staff focus group participants are reflected in Bristol's framework. Through the framework we also ensure that universities are guarding these priorities from the negative impacts profit incentives create.

The continuation metric in the TEF is retained to allow for important widening participation data to be captured through split metrics; capturing whether universities have higher drop out rates from certain demographic groups. The TEF's metric on grade inflation is removed as this was not seen as important by students in the focus groups and has been criticised in the sector.

We have eliminated those metrics which focus on future earnings and employment, which many students and staff members felt were inappropriate for a teaching excellence framework. A recent report published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that graduate earnings are highly impacted by a student's institution and subject of choice.¹⁰ It is understandable why there is a focus on graduate earnings in the current TEF, especially when operating in a marketplace with some degrees leading to higher earnings than others.

However, to better capture graduate outcomes, without favouring employment and earnings over other kinds of outcomes which are also valuable to society and to graduates, Bristol's alternative TEF introduces a new metric to replace the flawed graduate earnings metric, asking graduates whether they are doing what they want to be doing post university.

¹⁰ Department for Education (2018), *Undergraduate degrees: relative labour market returns*, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/undergraduate-degrees-relativelabour-market-returns>, accessed 20th June 2018.

Additional Evidence

While there are issues with the NSS, particularly around conflating student satisfaction with excellent teaching, the survey does give students a voice in the framework, and this is important to retain. This can be balanced by adding an additional source of evidence in the form of a focus group, conducted by the OfS, to ensure that students' views are captured in 'their own words' and in a more holistic and discursive way than in the NSS.

The 15-page written submission from the university will be retained though a further additional piece of evidence is added into the TEF as a written submission on attainment gaps from each university. The TEF panel would be encouraged to look favourably upon reductions in attainment gaps, as well as considerable work undertaken to achieve this aim. However, if a university could not demonstrate significant change or commitment to this area, a negative flag would be recorded.

The new additional evidence will be used to revise the original ranking of universities up or down.

| Aspect of Teaching Excellence | Metric | Source |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| Core Metrics (weighted equally) | | |
| Teaching Quality | Teaching on my course | National Student Survey (Q1-4) |
| Teaching Quality | Teaching on my course | NEW NSS question – My Course has provided me with an appropriate number of contact hours. |
| Teaching Quality | Assessment and feedback | National Student Survey (Q8-11) |
| Learning Environment | Academic support | National Student Survey (Q12-14) |
| Learning Environment | Continuation | HESA and ILR data |
| Learning Environment | Study space | NEW NSS question – I have been able to access a study space when I need to. |
| Welfare Resources and Facilities | Pastoral care | NEW NSS questions – add B9 optional bank 2018 into core questionnaire – 1. There is sufficient provision of welfare and student services to meet my needs. 2. When needed, the information and advice offered by welfare and student services has been helpful. |
| Student Outcomes and Learning Gain | Graduate outcomes | NEW Graduate Outcomes survey question – 'Are you doing what you want to be doing post University?' |
| Additional Evidence | | |
| 15-page written submission from the university | | |
| NEW 5-page written submission from the university reporting on their attainment gaps (if any) and demonstrating the work that has been done to reduce these gaps. | | |
| NEW Focus group with key student reps e.g. sabbatical officers, faculty reps and/or course reps, conducted by the Office for Students in each university. | | |

Conclusion

This research project has sought to encourage a different approach to the Teaching Excellence Framework, one that re-centres teaching at the heart of the framework, and brings in student concerns around study space, contact hours and pastoral care.

Through a small scale qualitative project, this research has shed light on student priorities for a gold standard education. Accessible teachers, 1:1 support, pastoral care and excellent teaching all come out as core to a gold standard educational experience for students.

Students and staff participants were both critical of the way the TEF currently measures teaching excellence, particularly its focus on graduate employment and earnings. Ideas for alternative TEF metrics sought to capture a greater student voice, including suggestions to use unit feedback, student surveys, inspections and focus groups.

The new Bristol Alternative Teaching Excellence Framework pulls together these priorities, balancing participants' suggestions with a need for metrics that are realistic and measurable.

Recommendations

We hope that the University will see this project as a useful insight into student and staff views on what constitutes teaching excellence and a gold standard education.

We recommend that;

- The University considers the findings of this report regarding what students and staff consider excellent teaching to be when making decisions around teaching provision, timetabling, facilities and student support.
- The University considers how it could collect additional data around student experience in line with the findings of this report e.g. by adding additional questions to the YourBristolSurvey (YBS).
- The University prioritises advocating for greater student engagement as part of the TEF when submitting to the TEF review in 2019.

Next Steps

This report and its findings will be disseminated to students through the Bristol SU website. The report will also be submitted to the government's independent TEF review in 2019.