

Briefing on Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

Introduction

The TEF Year 2 results were published on 22 June 2017. In total, 295 higher education providers participated in the TEF, with 231 applying for a TEF assessment.¹ The TEF rating for a given provider is:

- **Gold** for delivering consistently outstanding teaching, learning and outcomes for its students. It is of the highest quality found in the UK.
- **Silver** for delivering high quality teaching, learning and outcomes for its students. It consistently exceeds rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education.
- **Bronze** for delivering teaching, learning and outcomes for its students that meet rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education.
- **Provisional** for meeting rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher but which do not yet have sufficient data to be fully assessed.²

In terms of the results:

- 26% of providers received a Gold award;
- 50% of providers received a Silver award;
- 24% of providers received a Bronze award.³

Each award will be valid for up to three years.

What is UCU's view on the TEF?

UCU is opposed to the TEF, both in terms of its methodology and the outcomes for institutions, staff and students.⁴ This position is shared by the National Union of Students, who we have been working with to support their NSS boycott.⁵

¹ UCU welcomes the fact that a number of universities, particularly in Scotland, decided to opt out of TEF2.

² <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/It/tef/whatistef/teffaq/>

³ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/tefoutcomes/#/>

Firstly, the core metrics that were used – student satisfaction via the NSS, retention rates and graduate outcomes - are flawed for the purposes of assessing teaching quality. To a significant extent, these metrics are influenced by external factors such as social background, gender and in terms of jobs – the region of the HEI or FEC. Above all, they are poor proxies for measuring teaching excellence.

In order to provide some contextual information about the metrics, institutions were able to submit a narrative statement as part of the submission process. Analysis of the TEF2 results suggests that a number of institutions, particularly large research-intensive ones, were successful in improving their award as a result of their narrative statement, although concerns remain about the consistency in approach adopted by the panels.⁶

Secondly, the union is very concerned about the 'unintended consequences' of the TEF results. Rather than focusing on improving teaching practice *per se*, universities and colleges are likely to concentrate on targeting better NSS results, higher completion rates and graduate outcomes. For example, it is feared that institutions will increase entry requirements for students and cut student numbers on specific courses in a bid to get a better TEF outcome on retention rates. Another concern is that universities and colleges may seek to improve their rating on graduate outcomes by altering their subject mix, e.g. moving away from certain subjects in the arts and humanities.

We know that the TEF has already been cited as a reason for job cuts by some universities, eg. University of Manchester⁷, and we are concerned that other institutions may follow suit.

Thirdly, one of our major concerns with the TEF is the link to increased tuition fees in England and a further marketisation of the sector. The Westminster government has previously indicated that universities and colleges in England that have a TEF2 award will be able to increase their tuition fees in line with inflation. We are waiting for confirmation from the Department for Education on the details of the 2018-19 fee caps. Under the current timetable, TEF results, however, will not be linked to *differential* fee levels until after 2020.

⁴ See our press release <https://www.ucu.org.uk/8840> and detailed response to the TEF consultation document <https://www.ucu.org.uk/?mediaid=8226>

⁵ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/boycott-the-nss>

⁶ For further analysis, see <http://wonkhe.com/blogs/tef-results-what-the-panel-statements-say-and-dont-say/> and <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/tef-in-depth-analysis-of-results>

⁷ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/8775>

What about future changes to the TEF?

The Westminster government have described TEF2 as a 'trial' year, from which lessons will be learned for future years. Moreover, they are now required by the Higher Education and Research Act to commission an *independent review* of TEF by the end of 2019. At this early stage it is difficult to know what recommendations will emerge as part of the review, although it is likely to focus on issues such as the robustness of metrics, the status of the provider statement and the use of gold, silver and bronze awards.⁸

The government has also stated its intention to introduce a subject-level TEF exercise. The pilots will begin next year but the whole process is likely to be complex and contentious.⁹

Conclusion

UCU will continue to campaign against the TEF and push for an alternative approach to recognising and rewarding teaching quality in higher education. In terms of our campaign against the TEF, we would welcome feedback from branches and local associations about institutional and departmental responses to the TEF2 results. Please can you send in any feedback to Rob Copeland, UCU policy officer at rcopeland@ucu.org.uk

⁸<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/briefing-higher-education-research-act-implementation.pdf>

⁹See for example the analysis on Wonkhe <http://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-level-up-building-subject-level-tef/>