

## **Political Studies Association Evidence to the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee Inquiry into Assessing the Quality of Higher Education**

### Introduction

1. The Political Studies Association (PSA) is the leading organisation in the UK linking academics in political science and current affairs, theorists and practitioners, policy-makers, journalists, researchers and students in higher education.
2. Membership of the PSA is open to anyone interested in the study of politics. It spans academics in political science and current affairs, theorists and practitioners, policy-makers, journalists, researchers, politics teachers and students in Higher Education. Membership has grown steadily and now stands at over 1,900, making it the second largest such national association in the world.
3. As a charitable organisation that exists to promote the development of political studies and to encourage education and the advancement of learning in the art and science of government and in other branches of the political sciences we fully support any initiative that serves to improve standards of teaching.
4. This submission addresses questions 3, 5 and 6 of the inquiry.

### **What should be the objectives of a Teaching Excellence Framework (“TEF”)?**

#### ***a) How should a TEF benefit students? Academics? Universities?***

5. While recognising that there is already a great deal of excellent teaching taking place in British universities, the objectives of a TEF should be to assist HEIs and academics in raising the overall standard of teaching in British universities by identifying best practice, understanding the environment, skills and training that allow innovation and teaching quality to flourish and helping disseminate those findings to institutions around the country, whilst recognising that one size does not fit all in terms of both institution, discipline and academic. The TEF should be designed to encourage innovation in teaching as a means of achieving excellence rather than creating a culture of uniformity and risk aversion amongst both academics and students alike.
6. Students must be at the core of this exercise but it is important to consider its impact on academics and the wider activities of HEIs. It is thus vital that it should also be designed in such a way that it does not risk diverting resources from research or force academics into a choice of a teaching or research career but encourages HEIs to explore the synergies between teaching, research and impact.
7. Students must be encouraged to recognise that being spoon fed information by their teachers does not represent an appropriate form of teaching at undergraduate level and they will learn most by being challenged and made to undertake independent research. They must also recognise that diversity of approach is positive and they should judge the quality of the teaching they receive on the basis of mental stimulation and ability to think critically and creatively and not simply on the basis of salary secured on graduation.
8. It is important to recognise that there are many students from low income families, who for financial reasons live at home during their undergraduate years, and, therefore, attend the closest institution, often a post-92 university. These students may not have the highest grades on leaving school but receive excellent teaching and make significant educational advances. Access and diversity could be damaged if the TEF was used to justify an increase in fees at these

institutions or the closure of those courses whose graduates do not secure the highest salaries on graduation.

**b) What are the institutional behaviours a TEF should drive? How can a system be designed to avoid unintended consequences?**

9. The design process must not be rushed. Sufficient time needs to be given to consulting widely amongst all stakeholders. The system must also be designed to accommodate the fact that one size does not fit all but that the basis on which quality should be judged will vary considerably across disciplines and institutions, reflecting the different intellectual capacity and strengths of the students.

**c) How should the effectiveness of the TEF be judged?**

10. The effectiveness of the TEF should be judged on a broad range of criteria including:

- pedagogical innovation
- increased levels of pedagogic reflection evidenced through increased levels of publication on pedagogic issues
- the adoption overseas of new teaching approaches developed by institutions in the UK
- an increase in the proportion of staff who have teaching level of qualifications and an increase in the level of those teaching qualifications
- increased opportunities for academics to undertake qualifications with an increase in the number of HEIs running active teaching and learning support units
- widening student access
- a reduction in student turnover
- increased educational value added

11. It should also be judged alongside research performance to avoid the further stratification of British HEIs into research or teaching institutions.

12. Metrics and student evaluations are problematic reflections of teaching because the former cannot fully capture the full range of areas in which a student has gained knowledge and skills, and give them appropriate weighting, nor can it measure the quality of relations developed between a teacher and student, and the latter is subject to many students' bias in favour of ease of learning (such as spoon feeding) and minimal workload. However, the PSA acknowledges that in a light touch regime, some modest use of metrics may be inevitable.

**What do you think will be the main challenges in implementing a TEF?**

13. The REF created a huge amount of costly bureaucracy within HEIs and the biggest challenge associated with introducing a successful TEF process will be creating a light touch system that avoids creating another onerous layer of management that stifles innovation and actually diverts academic time away from teaching and student contact.

**How should the proposed connection between fee level and teaching quality be managed?**

14. There is no clear rationale for having standards of teaching as a reason to increase fees and the TEF should not be used as the basis for justifying fee increases.

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