Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

What is the TEF?

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a scheme being introduced by the government to measure the quality of teaching at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England. Universities will be given a rating to indicate the level of teaching quality that they provide. In future years it is intended that this rating will be awarded not just at an institutional level, but also at a discipline level.

The scheme will be administered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). They will be supported in delivering TEF by staff at the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Once established the Office for Students (OfS) will take over responsibility for the implementation of TEF from HEFCE.

The government’s stated intention is that TEF will be used 1) to ‘provide clear information to students about where the best provision can be found’ 2) to ‘encourage providers to improve teaching quality to reduce variability’ and 3) to ‘help drive UK productivity by ensuring a better match of graduate skills with the needs of employers and the economy’. TEF will also be linked to the ability of a university to raise the level of tuition fees charged to a student.

The proposals for TEF are included in the Higher Education and Research Bill 2016-17. This saw its Second Reading in the Commons on 19 July 2016. Following on from Theresa May’s restructuring of Whitehall, this Bill is now under the auspices of the Department for Education (DfE) and its Secretary of State, Justine Greening. However, the relevant minister is still Jo Johnson, Minister of State for Universities and Science, who is now co-located in the DfE and the new Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

When will TEF launch?

TEF ratings for Year 1 (2016/17) have already been awarded. Year 1 was a trial year where all providers who have passed a QAA inspection received a TEF rating of ‘Meets Expectations’.

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1 The Office of Students will be the market regulator for students and taxpayers in Higher Education. It will take on most of the functions of HEFCE and The Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Please see BIS, (2016), ‘Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice’ p. 63-67 for more information.


3 Grove, J, 2016, 19 July, ‘HE Bill passes second reading as Greening makes case for reforms’, The Times Higher Education Supplement
This means that those providers have been judged to be operating at national levels in teaching quality and standards and therefore can increase tuition fees in line with inflation.

96% of all HEIs in England passed this QAA inspection in 2014. A provisional list of TEF Year 1 eligible providers is found [here]. This will be finalised by the end of August 2016.

Year 2 (2017/18) will also be a voluntary year where the assessment process will be trialed in practice. This will be awarded in the academic year 2016-17. This assessment will provide an institutional level award and take place in Spring 2017. Again all providers will receive the ‘Meets Expectations’ award. Institutions may also be awarded an ‘Excellent’ or ‘Outstanding’ award. These TEF assessments will be valid for up to 3 years.

Year 3 (2018/19) will be the first full year of TEF assessment. It will no longer be voluntary at this point. Year 4 (2019/20) will, it is intended, be the first year of TEF assessment at the discipline level. Following on from a review of the first four years of TEF, the TEF assessment may be introduced to give specific awards for postgraduate provision.

How will TEF be assessed?

The TEF rating will be made against three criteria: Teaching Quality; Learning Environment; and Student Outcomes and Learning Gain. This will be a university level rating.

It is intended that Teaching Quality should be assessed through the extent to which: 1) ‘Teaching provides effective stimulation and challenge and encourages students to engage’ 2) ‘Institutional culture recognises and rewards excellent teaching’ 3) ‘Course design, development, standards and assessment are effective in stretching students to develop knowledge, skills and attributes that reflect their full potential’ and 4) ‘Assessment and feedback are used effectively in supporting students’ development, progression and attainment’.

It is intended that Learning Environment should be assessed through the extent to which: 1) ‘... Resources [are] designed to support students’ learning and aid the development of independent study and research skills’ 2) ‘The learning environment is enriched by linkages between teaching and scholarship, research or professional practice’ and 3) ‘Students’ academic experiences are tailored to the individual, maximising rates of retention’.

It is intended that Student Outcomes and Learning should be assessed through the extent to which: 1) ‘Students achieve their educational and professional goals, including progression to further study or employment’ 2) ‘Students acquire knowledge, skills and attributes that prepare them for their personal and professional lives’ and 3) ‘Positive outcomes are achieved for students from all backgrounds, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who are at greater risk of not achieving positive outcomes.’

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4 Kernohan, D, 2015, ‘The TEF’s First Assessment’, Wonkhe.com
5 BIS, (2016), ‘Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice’ p.44-45
The TEF rating will mainly be assessed by metrics, but there is, however, some concern in the profession about whether the core metrics specified by the scheme can provide an accurate measurement of the above assessment criteria. The metrics to be used include: survey responses on ‘the teaching on my course’, ‘assessment and feedback’ and ‘academic support’ originating from the National Student Survey (NSS); retention figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency; and statistics on the proportion of former students in employment and further study from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DHLE).\(^7\)

However, awards will not be based exclusively on metrics. HEIs will be able to provide further contextual information through a written report, which will be limited to a maximum of 15 pages. Beyond the metrics, it is here that providers may be better able to state that they reach the above assessment criteria. A provider can include mitigating information such as their mission statement; quantitative assessments of teaching intensity; course recognition by professional bodies; initiatives on supporting students in HE; the extent of employer engagement in courses; and student involvement in providing internal feedback and evaluation. The central focus of the provider submission should be on the ‘impact’ and ‘effectiveness’ of teaching in an institution.\(^8\)

The government is currently reviewing whether to include a highly skilled employment metric in the TEF from Year 3. However, the government has stated that it is conscious that ‘there is no universally accepted list’ of highly skilled graduate jobs.\(^9\) Also, the current metric (the DLHE) only captures information six months post-graduation, when many graduates may still be undertaking work not necessarily linked to their degree. The government is therefore still considering how it would bring in a highly skilled employment metric. In addition, amid concerns that the NUS would boycott the NSS\(^10\), one of the main data sources of the TEF, the government has stated that no provider would be disadvantaged if their Student Union or the NUS in general were to carry out this boycott.\(^11\)

A TEF assessment panel will make decisions against the above three criteria of Teaching Quality; Learning Environment; and Student Outcomes and Learning Gain. All of the three criteria will be given equal weighting in the TEF rating.

The panel will bring together individuals with experience of teaching and learning in the academic context and students. It will also contain employers and widening participation experts. There is no requirement, at present, to have representatives from different disciplines on the TEF panel, though we can expect representation from the social sciences and humanities, as well as STEM. The panel will review decisions made by a team of TEF assessors who will be assisted by TEF officers and will review a providers’ statistical and contextual information and produce a preliminary decision. The TEF Panel will make the final

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\(^7\) Ibid. p.19. There will also be a requirement for those taking part in TEF to provide an Access Agreement or other proof of actions to widen participation.

\(^8\) Ibid. p. 28-31

\(^9\) Ibid. p.22

\(^10\) Packham, A. & Jacobs, E., 2016, 20 April, ‘Students vote to sabotage plans to rate teaching in universities’ The Guardian

decision. Not all TEF assessors will be TEF Panel members, but all Panel members will be assessors.\textsuperscript{12}

Professor Chris Husbands, Vice Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University has been appointed as the TEF Panel Chair by government and HEFCE\textsuperscript{13}. Professor Husbands will be in post for 2 years. In the future, the OfS will have responsibility for selecting a TEF Panel Chair.

There will be three different TEF ratings – *Meets Expectations*, *Excellent*, and *Outstanding*. At the ‘Meets Expectation’ level there is a focus on academic standards, teaching quality, continuous improvement and the accessibility and reliability of a provider’s information to both students and the wider society. The higher awards of ‘Excellent’ and ‘Outstanding’ are linked more explicitly to the three TEF assessment criteria outlined above.\textsuperscript{14}

Whilst the TEF rating will be institutional there will be benchmarking by HESA’s subject area groupings\textsuperscript{15} for the metrics of student satisfaction, non-continuation and employment destinations. It is intended that discipline level TEF ratings will not be awarded until TEF Year 4. What discipline level information a TEF assessment will require will not be delineated until pilot assessments for Year 3. It is intended that this will include an as yet undefined measurement of teaching intensity and statistics from the Longitudinal Education Outcome survey.\textsuperscript{16}

In future years providers may be awarded a ‘commendation’ within each of the three aspects of the TEF criteria. Commendations would only be given to around 5 – 10\% of providers.\textsuperscript{17}

**What effect will TEF have?**

TEF assessments will be used to enable HEIs to raise student tuition fees in line with the rate of inflation up to a maximum fee cap, which will be higher than the current fee cap of £9,000 per annum.\textsuperscript{18}

The TEF Award for Year 1 will allow providers to increase tuition fees in line with inflation for the academic year 2017/18. Some universities, such as Durham and Manchester have already announced they will be charging fees of £9,250 from 2017/18.\textsuperscript{19} Others are likely to follow. The TEF award for Year 2 will be differentiated, but this differentiation will have no impact on fees for the academic year 2018/19.

Differentiation in fees will only take place at TEF Year 3 (2018/19) and apply to the academic year 2019/20. Providers who are awarded ‘Meets Expectations’ will be entitled to charge 50%
of the inflationary increase. Those who are awarded ‘Excellent’ or ‘Outstanding’ will be entitled to charge 100%.20

Next Steps

The TEF technical consultation finished on 12/07/16. Please see here for the PSA’s joint response with BISA and UACES to this consultation. The government is now reviewing if any changes to the TEF scheme are needed. A final response to the consultation will be given by the government in September 2016.

This will be followed by the provision of Technical Guidance on TEF and the publication of a providers’ core metrics in mid-October 2016. At this point applications for the submission of additional contextual information will open. Applications will close in December 2016. Assessment will take place from January to March 2017 and TEF decisions will be announced in April 2016. This will be followed by a review process to learn the lessons of TEF for Year 3.21

Further Reading


BIS, (2016), Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (Specifically ‘Chapter 2: Choice’ p.40 – p.60)

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20 BIS, (2016), Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice’ p.44-45
21 BIS, (16 May 2016), TEF Commissioning Letter to HEFCE