A missed opportunity? How the UK’s teaching excellence framework fails to capture the voice of university staff.

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Drawing on recent research involving approximately 6,000 higher education staff, this paper examines the impact of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) on their professional lives since its launch in 2016. Our findings raise fundamental concerns, methodologically and conceptually, about the fitness for purpose of the TEF and its failure to take into account the views and experiences of higher education staff. With a reliance on proxy metrics that emphasise the economic value of higher education over the quality of teaching, we explore how the TEF lacks legitimacy and credibility as an instrument of measurement of teaching excellence across all levels of the workforce. We also argue that the processes informing the TEF fail to take into account the experiences and perceptions of staff directly involved in teaching, which given their centrality to the quality and development of higher education, seems a lamentable exclusion.

Keywords: teaching excellence, the TEF, education policy, teaching and learning, quality improvement

# Introduction

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate around teaching excellence and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) 1. Since its conception, debate around the TEF has focused, not only on the government’s choice of methods to inform TEF ratings (matrixes and additional contextual evidence) but on the ability of those methods to actually capture anything meaningful about teaching excellence (Gunn 2018; O’Leary and French 2017). Since its implementation, attention has shifted to the TEF’s impact (potential and actual) on higher education teaching practices and the quality assurance processes that higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly putting in place around teaching and learning (O’Leary, Cui and French 2019; Vivian et al 2019). Specifically, this paper focuses on the fact that whilst the rhetoric around the TEF may articulate government aspirations for teaching excellence in higher education, its implementation does not appear to have involved the majority of staff who actually deliver teaching in higher education.

The TEF2 was introduced as part of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 in the UK. Its purpose was, according to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2017), to better inform students’ choices about what and where to study; better meet the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions and, as its name suggests, raise esteem for teaching by recognising and rewarding excellent teaching. However, the extent to which it has achieved these aims, especially the latter, remains a matter of debate (e.g. O’Leary and French 2017; O’Leary, Cui and French, 2019). The biggest concerns about the TEF and its ability to capture teaching excellence arise primarily out of the Government’s decision to employ a relatively narrow set of core metrics that comprise:

* ‘Teaching Quality’ (student engagement, valuing teaching, rigour and stretch, and feedback);
* ‘Learning Environment’ (resources, scholarship, research and professional practice, personalised learning)
* ‘Student Outcomes and Learning Gain’ (employment and further study, employability and transferrable skills, positive outcomes for all) (DfE 2017).

Combined to establish an ‘initial hypothesis’, these metrics, along with a 15 page ‘contextual report’, written by each institution and assessed by independent panels, are used to rank providers’ teaching excellence. Together they create what the Chair of the TEF panel, Professor Sir Chris Husbands, refers to as ‘a picture of the institution’ (O’Leary, Cui and French 2019). However, the chosen proxies for the TEF have been critiqued as a poor but deliberate choice by the government (French and O’Leary, 2017). Analysis of the TEF carried out by Canning (2019) argued that the policy is a ‘hyperreal simulacrum’, a sign which has no traceable genealogy to the practice of learning and teaching. Rather than actually capturing teaching excellence, they reflect a wider government value for money and the ongoing graduate employability agenda with regard to higher education.

The concept of teaching excellence has been the subject of much discussion over the last two decades, with its multifaceted and complex nature often a common theme to emerge from the research literature in higher education (e.g. Moore et al 2017; Piascik et al 2011; Skelton 2004; Su and Wood 2012). Skelton’s work (2004) has stressed the contested and contingent nature of the term, highlighting how it is inherently prone to shifts in meaning and interpretation from one context to another, as well as being temporally bound and subject to a myriad of variables that are in a constant state of flux. This makes it extremely difficult or even impossible to arrive at an accepted definition of teaching excellence that is not reductionist in some way. Besides, teaching does not exist in a vacuum detached from the needs and priorities of the wider organisation or academic communities that it serves. Moore et al (2017) suggest that the term has become commonplace as a comparative indicator of performance, but also as a mainstay of advertising and strategic plans. In this way the term becomes everything and nothing at the same time. Similarly, Collini (2012, 109) has argued that there is a ‘vacuity’ associated with the term when used in the context of policy debates about raising standards and improving quality. Moore et al (2017, 3) argue that: ‘Because it lacks content, “excellence” serves in the broadest sense solely as an (aspirational) claim of comparative success,’ thus highlighting the weakness of excellence as a basis for describing teaching activities which are complex in nature, differing between disciplines, levels and contexts. It also implies the distorted importance of the issue in the current higher education environment, where excellence has become a competitive tool rather than a collaborative signifier.

McCaig (2018) and McGettigan (2013) have both written convincingly of how successive governments have deployed various strategies, such as raising tuition fees and now the TEF as a smoke screen for driving sectoral change and making HEIs more accountable to the State. More recently, the newly established Office of Students (OfS)3 has used the TEF as a vehicle to drive through the employability and value for money agenda. Given its experience of financing sector-wide inspection regimes for the schools and further education sectors and the costs incurred in supporting such systems, the Government is understandably reluctant to want to commit to the same level of investment in a quality assurance system for higher education, as it would undoubtedly prove to be extremely costly. The established traditions of higher education academic freedom and institutional autonomy also make it more difficult for the government to intervene directly in higher education policy and practice on teaching and learning. This is arguably why they have pursued a more indirect approach with policies like the TEF. It is in the context of these complex political and economic factors that this paper examines the impact on institutional operationalisation of the TEF and the higher education workforce, as well as its impact on teaching and learning across the sector.

# Methodology and methods

This mixed-methods study was undertaken between February 2018 and January 2019 with a view to contributing to the current gap in knowledge and research regarding the UK higher education workforce’s awareness, involvement and perception of the TEF, as well as the issue of teaching excellence. At the time when this project took place, 287 English institutions, six Welsh institutions and five Scottish institutions took part in TEF 24 assessment between 2016 and 2017, thus the specific focus on participants’ awareness, involvement and perception of TEF 2.

Participants were self-selected volunteers from the University and College Union (UCU) 5 membership base. Quantitative methods were used to facilitate the analysis of a large sample size, allowing us to explore and capture the overarching trends emerging across the UCU membership in order to draw out generalisable conclusions. Other methods used sought to explore, describe and explain the situated perceptions and experiences of participants of the TEF by capturing contextualised examples from their workplaces in order to create a research narrative and so required a qualitative approach. The adoption of a mixed-methods approach not only enabled the research team to harness the complementary strengths of these different methods but also to explore the research topic in sufficient breadth and depth (Creswell, 2014). For the purpose and scope of this paper, only data collected from the online survey and national strategic seminars is included.

The research adhered to British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA 2011) and gained ethical approval through the ethics committee at the university the research team was based. Participation was voluntary and participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw the research data they provided to the study at any stage of the project before publication. Participants were assigned numbers for reporting purposes and any information disclosed considered a risk to revealing their real identities was edited to remove any identifying features. Any data from the survey, seminars and interviews that referred to institution names and/or specific individuals had the names removed or replaced by an appropriate broad description to ensure data could not be traced to specific institutions or individuals.

## The online survey

The online survey was designed to explore participants’ awareness, experiences and perceptions of the TEF in their respective workplaces. The aim of the survey was to canvass respondents’ views and insights into the impact and implications of the TEF’s intended and unintended consequences on their work in general and related to learning and teaching in particular. It included binary choices, Likert scale and open-ended questions that focused on self-reported opinions and experiences. The survey can be obtained from O’Leary, Cui and French’s report (2019). Pilot testing of the survey was carried out using a smaller sample from the total population.

Between April and June 2018, the online survey was made available to all UCU members in HEIs and college-based HE via the Online Surveys platform. The link to the survey was sent to members through UCU headquarter electronic mailing. Before the participants completed the online survey, they were presented with a participant information leaflet and consent form. To participate in the online survey, respondents were asked to provide their consent electronically. Given the levels of detailed demographic information collected through the survey, the research team was mindful of protecting participants’ anonymity. Data analysis of the survey data therefore only focused on broad categories and avoided focusing on specific individuals or risking individuals’ identities being compromised.

## The national strategic seminars

Five national strategic seminars took place in June 2018 across the UK. They were carried out in order to collect detailed evidence in the following areas:

* Changes that have taken place since the introduction of the TEF and participants’ views and experiences of these changes;
* Suggestions and/or examples on approaches and methodologies with the aim of understanding, recognising and rewarding teaching quality, which are alternatives to the metrics.

The seminars also collected responses to some of the preliminary analysis of the survey data, thus acting as an important means of validation and stimulating further analysis. Participants’ identities at each seminar session were known to each other. However, to create a safe space for participants to openly share their experiences and views and to protect their anonymity from outside the seminar session, the project team requested that participants respect the privacy and anonymity rights of other participants by treating the discussions at the focus group as confidential. Summary notes of discussions and each participant’s handwritten postcard notes were emailed to them to check for accuracy and verify potential anonymity and/or confidentiality issues.

## Data analysis

Raw data from the online survey were downloaded and the quantitative data were cleaned through visual inspection and plotting. The quantitative data analysis then followed two phases:

1. demographic categories and questions were selected using the chi-squared and Kruskal-Wallis H tests to detect statistical significance signals across the data while taking into account key themes and issues from the literature review;
2. descriptive and inferential statistics (the chi-squared test for binary data, the Kruskal-Wallis H test and post hoc Mann-Whitney U tests for the Likert scale data) were used to understand how the demographic features identified affected findings on participants’ opinions on awareness, involvement, experience and perception of the TEF.

The project collected a vast amount of qualitative data. The survey generated over 6,000 free text comments for some questions, with each response ranging from two or three words to over 400 words in length. The strategic seminars generated over 40 hours of recorded group discussion. The data sets were divided by question themes between the research team and each set of data was analysed thematically (see O’Leary, Cui and French 2019 for details). To avoid the ‘anecdotalism’ (Silverman 2005) of the participants’ responses, qualitative data was analysed by looking for patterns across institutions and the sector as a whole. The final analysis included multiple perspectives and diverse quotations, as well as challenging and contradictory data.

The final phase of data analysis involved cross analysis of quantitative and qualitative findings. This involved comparing key findings, identifying similarities and differences.

# Participants

The overall targeted population for the project was the UCU’s membership across the UK from both HEIs and college-based HE. For the purpose and scope of this paper, only data collected from participants based in HEI are included. The participant characteristics reported in this paper include their mode and terms of employments and their role profiles, as this paper focuses on examining the extent to which HE staff’s awareness, experiences and perceptions of the TEF differ according to their contractual roles, modes and terms of employment.

The total number of online survey participants from HEIs was 58956 from 154 institutions. Table 1 shows the number of participants in each of the characteristic groups. Overall, the vast majority of participants (88.09%) were from English HEIs – this was slightly larger than the proportion of UCU members based in England (83.22%). However, this was expected considering TEF 2 mainly included English institutions. 84.11% of participants were employed full-time and 87.36% of participants were on a permanent/open-ended contract – these were much larger than the proportions of UCU members who were on a full-time contract (65.34%) and a permanent/open-ended contract (60.86%).

Table 1: Sample characteristics as reported in the survey

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristic | No. of participants (%) | No. of UCU HE members (%) |
| Country |
| England | 5193 (88.09%) | 70869 (83.22%) |
| Scotland | 365 (6.19%) | 8204 (9.63%) |
| Wales | 227 (3.85%) | 4309 (5.06%) |
| N.Ireland | 92 (1.56%) | 1773 (2.08%) |
| Not assigned | 18 (0.31%) | N/A |
| Mode of employment |
| Full-time | 4958 (84.11%) | 55640 (65.34%) |
| Part-time | 730 (12.38%) | 11535 (13.55%) |
| Hourly-paid | 166 (2.82%) | 5524 (6.49%) |
| Other | 41 (0.70%) | 12459 (14.63%) |
| Terms of employment |
| Open-ended/permanent  | 5150 (87.36%) | 51827 (60.86%) |
| Fixed-term | 581 (9.86%) | 18957 (22.26%) |
| Zero hours | 72 (1.22%) | 1613 (1.89%) |
| Other | 51 (0.87%) | 12761 (14.99%) |
| Variable hours | 41 (0.70%) | N/A |
| Role profile | N/A |
| Teaching and research | 3805 (64.55%) |  |
| Teaching-focused/teaching-only | 785 (13.32%) |  |
| Teaching and scholarship | 473 (8.02%) |  |
| Research-focused/research-only | 449 (7.62%) |  |
| Academic/professional services role | 258 (4.38%) |  |
| Management | 86 (1.46%) |  |
| Other | 39 (0.66%) |  |

The participants for the five national strategic seminars were self-selected volunteers who were predominantly UCU members, though some non-UCU members also took part. In total, 39 participants attended and contributed to the discussion at the seminars. The participants were from a range of HEIs across the UK and a number of different academic disciplines. The majority of participants were lecturers/senior lecturers and others were hourly paid lecturers, faculty/institution management staff, professional service staff and a UCU policy officer.

# Findings and analysis

## How have staff been involved in the TEF institutionally?

Only 837 out of 5895 participants (14.20%) reported they were consulted on TEF-related activity in their institution, with a majority coming from English institutions (n=772). 15.34% of those on an open-ended/permanent contract and 14.76% of those on a full-time contract reported being consulted, while much smaller proportions of those working fixed-term (6.37%), hourly-paid (5.43%) and variable hours (4.88%) reported being consulted. The Chi-Squared test revealed a dependence between the mode and the terms of employment and whether participants had been consulted on TEF-related activity in their institution (mode: *p=* 0.00216; terms: *p=*8.86 x 10-09). More participants on an open-ended/permanent contract reported being consulted than expected, while fewer staff on a fixed-term contract or a zero-hours contract did so.

Research-focused participants had not largely been involved in TEF-related activities in their institution. Only 98 out of 785 participants in teaching-focused roles reported any involvement in TEF consultations (12.48%). In contrast, 44.19% of those in management roles reported that they had been consulted institutionally on the TEF. The Chi-Squared test revealed a strong dependence between individuals’ role profiles and whether they had been consulted on TEF-related activity in their institution (*p*=5.64 x 10-18). In short, more participants in an ‘academic related/professional services’ role and a ‘management’ role reported being consulted, while fewer participants in teaching roles reported being consulted.



*Chart 1: Participants consulted on TEF-related activity at their institution - by role profile*

The qualitative data reinforced the understanding that very little actual *‘consultation’* had taken place with staff across the sector. As the following quotes illustrate, in many places, information about the TEF was typically fed-down to them from bodies/individuals responsible for managing TEF related activities within their institution.

I am not sure consultation is the correct term. It has been much more of an information giving exercise - and the setting out of targets (for example, graduate employment rates) and how we need to meet them. (Teaching and research, full-time, permanent)

A deteriorating relationship whereby staff at the teaching 'coal-face', are not consulted but seen as recipients of instructions rather than a valued resource with good ideas and lots of experience. (Teaching and scholarship, multi-contract)

Email was the most common means used to communicate directly with staff about the TEF (n=160). However, the majority of these comments were characterised as *‘info dumps’* where staff were *‘not so much consulted as told via email’*. Following this, meetings and presentations were the next most common means of communication. These were typically university-wide and/or faculty-wide briefings specifically about the TEF, given by senior managers such as the vice chancellor or pro-vice chancellor. A small number of participants had also been invited to workshops, away days or question and answer sessions about the TEF held by specialist staff responsible for its management in their institution (e.g. members of TEF unit/steering group/working party, or senior managers in charge of the TEF). Finally, some participants had sat on programme, departmental or faculty-based committees, which had worked on TEF as part of a wider managerial remit. Faculty and university-wide teaching and learning and academic committees were also mentioned, as they were involved in preparing TEF submissions and subsequently used as designated conduits for information about TEF.

472 participants reported they were directly involved in their institution TEF-related activities (8.01%), 442 of whom were from English institutions. None of those on a variable hours contract reported direct involvement, very small proportions of ‘hourly-paid’ (0.06%), ‘zero hours’ (1.39%) and ‘fixed-term’ (3.10%) contracted participants did so. Once again, a very small proportion of those in a ‘teaching-focused/teaching-only’ role reported they were directly involved in TEF-related activities in their institution (5.86%). Conversely, much larger proportions of those in an ‘academic-related/professional services’ role (18.22%) and in a ‘management’ role (36.05%) said they had direct involvement. The proportion of management staff who reported involvement in TEF submission activities was again over four times larger than the proportion of all participants reporting on the same answer.



*Chart 2: Participants direct involvement in TEF-related activity– by role profile*

Participants reported on a variety of TEF related activities that they had been involved in. The most common one was receiving information giving/briefings about the TEF (n=307). 186 participants reported they had been involved in consultation activities, 175 participated in practice-sharing activities, 170 were part of a TEF working group, 153 worked on TEF-related quality assurance initiatives and 91 were involved in training/development for staff about TEF. Some participants reported that they contributed directly to the TEF submission and/or subject TEF pilot submission at their workplace whilst a very small number of participants reported they led the TEF work at their institution and/or worked on TEF specific roles.

While TEF-related activity is purportedly meant to capture the teaching excellence of an institution collectively, the data clearly revealed that in many providers, very small groups of staff (i.e. often those in management and professional services roles) were largely responsible for the majority of this work. Most participants in non-permanent and/or non-full time posts reported no involvement or consultation with regard to the TEF, suggesting that they were on the periphery of their institutions’ preparations for the TEF and TEF-related activities.

## What impact has the TEF had on teaching and learning?

Participants were asked if they had experienced any changes at their institution with regard to teaching and learning policies/procedures since the introduction of the TEF. 1319 participants reported ‘yes’ (22.37%), 2336 reported ‘no’ (39.63%), 1983 reported ‘not sure’ (33.64%) and 257 reported ‘not applicable’ (4.36%). Once again, there is a big difference between the proportion of participants in management roles7 who reported an awareness of the impact the TEF had on teaching and learning (41.86%) and the proportions of participants in other groups who did so. Qualitative data from the survey and seminars revealed the detail of these changes in teaching and learning policies/procedures.

### Institutional standardisation and centralisation

Across disciplines and institutions, participants talked of *‘curriculum redesign’* *‘curriculum transformation’* and, in some cases, a *‘complete overhaul of programmes’*. A recurring focus of staff’s perceptions of such activity was the manifestation of management’s desire to standardise policies, procedures and practices. For example, ensuring a close alignment between the teaching and learning outcomes and any accompanying assessments was often cited as a priority. In addition, ‘employability’ was a key focus for many institutions during the process of course revalidation and review. Participants repeatedly mentioned the increasing *‘pressure to embed employability skills into modules’*, which was often experienced as a particular challenge for those subjects where there was no clear vocational pathway.

Our curriculum is being hollowed out to meet TEF requirements. We have had a curriculum reform which has generated a set of new courses which are supposed to enhance the student experience. (Teaching and research, full-time, permanent)

All undergraduate programmes have gone through a process of "curriculum refresh" with a particular emphasis on employability; there is also a university-wide project aimed at eliminating attainment gaps. However, the downside is that everything is driven by metrics - we have been undergoing our own "internal TEF" for the last two years with questionable methodology that works against the Humanities. My university was awarded TEF gold - this is at the expense of staff being placed under unacceptable amounts of pressure and receiving no reward or gratitude from the institution. (Management).

Many participants commented that there had been a flood of top-down, centralised initiatives, projects and activities introduced to ostensibly manage and monitor the quality of teaching. Examples of such initiatives included student performance reviews, standardisation of teaching plans, module plans, marking and feedback forms and procedures, though these were often introduced with little or no consultation. One participant remarked that another layer of administrative accountability had been added as a result of recent initiatives in his workplace and that *‘it takes the pleasure out of teaching it makes you feel as though you are being watched constantly’*.

### Increased monitoring of staff performance and student outcomes

Increased monitoring of teaching *‘performance’* featured in many participant accounts made evident through a range of initiatives, with repeated references to *‘audit trails’* of staff-student interactions. Participants mentioned peer reviews, teaching observations, action plans (based on student module evaluations) and the recording of all lectures and tutorials. Some of these changes were characterised as an overall *‘tightening up of teaching protocols’* rather than directly linked to TEF and the issue of improving or supporting teaching quality .

In the context of specific interventions introduced to monitor teaching performance, observations of taught sessions were reported as being on the rise. Many participants also reported the introduction of teaching performance and the quality of teaching in performance review or appraisal meetings. In addition, participants reported that the quality of teaching was being scrutinised more directly in some institutions through the introduction of programme reviews and management-led observations, where the performance of staff was graded according to internally devised ranking scales.

Participants repeatedly made reference to an increase in the levels of accountability that academic staff were subjected to, often manifested through the introduction of additional KPIs and metrics. For example, a Head of Student Experience remarked that in her workplace *‘new TEF-related metrics and analytics’* had been created, which in turn had spawned another layer of work for academics around benchmarking and development planning. These changes permeated course content, design, delivery, marking deadlines, module evaluations with module evaluations regularly cited as an example of KPIs that were used to interrogate staff performance and call them to account. In one case, any modules with an overall score of less than 4 out of 5 were required to produce an action plan for future improvement.

Some participants talked of the focus being very much on *‘the TEF as some sort of inspection and accountancy experience rather than an opportunity for creative reflection and review’*, which resulted in *‘weariness’* and even resentment among staff in some institutions. Often there was an emphasis on competition rather than collaboration, with student involvement largely restricted to that of evaluators of staff performance across courses, which were then publicly compared and monitored. For example, a senior academic remarked that in their institution, students had been provided with a mobile application with a ‘Report it’ function for notifying their university on things such as their lecturers arriving late or cancelling sessions, receiving feedback on their assignment later than planned, etc. Data from the application was subsequently appropriated by managers to produce modulate evaluation scores in the form of a *‘league table’* which was disseminated across the institution. Courses in the lowest performing quartile were targeted for various interventions and this had even led to the closure of poorly performing courses and a *‘wave of staff leaving on voluntary severance schemes’*.

Running parallel alongside this increase in surveillance of staff performance was a *‘relentless focus’* on monitoring and improving the student experience, student satisfaction and student outcomes. While this was not necessarily a novel focus that could be attributed to the TEF per se, given the longstanding importance and influence of national surveys such as the NSS, there was a consensus across data sets in the report that the TEF had played a key part in triggering an intensification of this activity. Some participants mentioned that in addition to the NSS and end of module evaluations there were *‘pre-module, mid-module evaluations, course evaluations’*, all of which increased the demands on students for feedback, *‘with students fed up of being surveyed’* whilst not necessarily aware of the impact that their comments were having on academic staff in some instances.

Participants also reported an increased focus on student retention, which manifested itself in a variety of ways. Student retention data were more closely monitored on a regular basis across departments and courses. Some institutions had introduced specific policies targeted at tracking or improving retention figures. For example, one institution established a 50-day ‘engagement policy’, which meant that in the event of students failing to engage during the 50 day period, they would be withdrawn by the institution before the window for Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) continuation figures.

### A greater recognition of the importance and status of teaching

Some participants from institutions that achieved TEF Gold8 remarked that the quality of teaching had always been good and, as such, little had changed as a result of the TEF, though these responses tended to be discipline specific. At the same time, staff from institutions that received TEF Gold commented on how there had been *‘positive changes in attitudes towards teaching’*, with *‘a sense of pride and welcoming of recognition of good teaching and the hard work of staff’*.

Responses generally indicated an increase in the recognition of the importance of teaching in a strategic and operational sense. Some institutions had created institutional teaching strategies and pedagogies which staff were encouraged to adopt across disciplines. The introduction of teaching and learning conferences and other teaching and learning related events such as pedagogic training/workshops and practice sharing were popular developments across providers, with the perception that *‘greater value [was] being given to teaching’* than had been the case previously. There were also comments on teaching and learning being discussed more frequently in faculty and departmental meetings in terms of improving its quality.

The greater recognition of the importance of teaching was not rhetorical as many participants mentioned how they had witnessed new investment and opportunities in their workplaces. Some mentioned how budgets for teaching initiatives, innovations and project grants had been increased, allowing them to pursue small-scale inquiries exploring teaching related topics. Often, such initiatives were targeted at *‘improving student/staff collaboration or TEF-metric related outcomes’*.

Participants often made links between the TEF and a growth in CPD opportunities, for example, peer mentoring schemes, practice sharing events and the creation of collegial communities of practice. Furthermore, some participants noted the creation of a *‘teaching excellence institute’* and a *‘specialised unit for teaching excellence’* since the introduction of the TEF. The way in which this work was managed clearly differed across institutions with some describing it as a *‘welcome boost for teaching’* but others expressing concern about the *‘substantial managerial oversight, some of which is problematic’*.

Overall, only a small proportion of participants in this study saw evidence in their institutions of the original aims of the TEF (BIS, 2016) which focused on improvements in TE. 22.90% reported they saw evidence of the TEF ‘sharpening focuses on teaching and outcomes that matter to students’ in their institution and 14.57% reported they saw evidence of the TEF ‘recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching, learning and outcomes’. The differences between participants in different roles was less pronounced. However, teaching-focused/teaching-only remains the group that has the smallest proportion of participant reported awareness (19.49% saw evidence of the TEF ‘sharpen the focus on teaching’; 13.63% saw evidence of the TEF ‘recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching’), while management is the group with the largest proportion of participants reported they saw evidences on these aspects (33.72% saw evidence of the TEF 'sharpen the focus on teaching’; 18.60% saw evidence of the TEF ‘recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching’).

Participants were also asked how much impact they felt the TEF had had on teaching and learning at their institution and on their own practice. 41.90% participants felt the TEF had had either great or some impact on their institution’s teaching and learning, whilst only around 26.50% felt the TEF had impacted on their own teaching and learning either greatly or at some level. On the other hand, 53.60% participants felt the TEF had had very little or no impact on their own teaching and learning. This could mean that participants in this study felt the TEF was mainly operating at a higher/managerial level and at the time of the survey it was yet to reach them.

Kruskal-Wallis H tests on data from these two questions using the participants’ role profiles revealed there were significant differences of perceptions between groups (perceived impact at institution-level: *p=0.0004*; perceived impact on their teaching and learning: *p=0.00041*). The perceptions of impact at institution-level from participants in different role profiles showed a significant difference (*p=0.0004*). On both institutional level and in their own teaching and learning, those in a ‘teaching-focused/teaching-only’ role considered there was a weaker impact compared to the perceptions reported by participants from the other groups. This difference in perception between the groups may have been due to their differing levels of involvement in TEF-related activity and subsequently a greater/lesser sense of ownership with it. This calls into question the tangible impact of the TEF policy on those most directly involved in teaching and learning and those charged with putting TEF policy into practice in their institutions.

## What impact has the TEF had on the HE teaching workforce?

### Changes to work conditions and environment

A strong theme from across the data set was how the TEF had created another layer of administrative bureaucracy, which had given rise to additional work streams and an increase in workloads, often with no additional resources to support the resultant extra workload. There was often mention of a ‘busy-ness’ surrounding the TEF with many new policies and initiatives introduced simultaneously. However, many participants found it was difficult to understand how such initiatives were connected to each other or formed part of a coherent institutional TEF strategy. A large proportion of participants experienced increasing workloads without any accompanying increase of hours and/or pay. One of the knock-on effects of this was a reduction in time for teaching preparation, teaching development and/or marking. Participants perceived the impact of the TEF to have been mostly negative on their working conditions, their personal health and wellbeing.

There was also anxiety reported by some participants who were waiting to see how the recent TEF outcome in their institutions would impact on their contracts, their departments and/or their programmes. These participants were anxious about what they perceived as a lack of clarity about the day-to-day implications of changes to academic contracts. 386 participants from over 95 institutions reported they were aware of contractual changes that had taken place since the introduction of the TEF. In most cases, a variation on a new pathway model had been introduced that placed staff members onto teaching-focused, research-focused, teaching and research and teaching and scholarship pathways or tracks. Participants acknowledged this contractual change was driven by a combination of the TEF and the Research Excellence Framework (REF)9, as institutions sought to meet the demands of both by trying to focus staff on one or the other. However, a small number of participants mentioned the creation of new pathways/career tracks solely for the progression/promotion of ‘teaching focused staff’. The introduction of teaching based promotion for ‘principal lecturers’, ‘associate professors’ and ‘teaching professors’ were cited as examples of pathways that until recently had been largely unattainable for teaching staff in many institutions, unless they were able to demonstrate a portfolio of accompanying publications and research. Such changes were broadly welcomed among participants.

In addition, many participants, predominantly those from professional/academic services, reported restructuring of their teams/departments. Many of these restructurings were not directly caused by the TEF, but participants commented on how the new structures were ‘*more streamlined towards TEF work*’ with clear focuses ‘*on student experiences*’ and ‘*employability*’. In most cases, the restructuring was taking place while other changes were also happening at these institutions, which resulted in ‘*chaos* and ‘*confusion*’ for all staff.

### Teaching qualifications, accreditation and awards

Many participants reported a heightened urgency for newly appointed and existing lecturers to achieve appropriate teaching qualifications and/or accreditation since the introduction of the TEF. In particular, the issue of evidencing and validating prior teaching experience and/or expertise via the Higher Education Academy’s (HEA) Fellowship scheme featured as a strong theme in many responses across the data sets. Participants from across the range of HEIs commented on how it was an increasingly obligatory requirement for academic staff, at all levels, to obtain their HEA Fellowship, often with institutions setting specific targets. For example, one lecturer said that his employers had *‘made HEA qualification a goal for 75% of staff by 2020’*. Another participant remarked that it was a *‘prerequisite for internal promotion’* from senior lecturer to professorship in some instances. Participants also mentioned that HEA Fellowship was a ‘*key target*’ included in performance review/appraisal meetings.

Approximately 300 survey respondents who made textual comments referred to the use of *‘teaching excellence’, ‘teaching innovation’* and/or *‘extra mile’* awards as formal recognition/reward of teaching excellence in their institutions. These rewards occurred at institutional and faculty levels and ranged from student-led to peer-led nominations as well as a combination of both. In addition to the esteem attached to these awards, some also carried with them a monetary reward. In some cases, this comprised an allocation of internal funding to support small-scale learning and teaching projects. It is worth adding the caveat that many of the participants who made reference to teaching awards also stated that they often pre-dated the introduction of the TEF. However, there was a general feeling that teaching awards had become more heavily promoted and emphasised in their workplaces since the introduction of the TEF.

### Stratification of teaching and research?

There was clear evidence across data sets of an increase in new teaching-only contracts, with supporting evidence in some cases that these teaching-focused roles were specifically linked to an institutional focus on teaching and learning and the TEF. Although it was not always possible to determine whether changes to more teaching intensive contracts had been driven by the REF rather than the TEF, there was a groundswell of views that the introduction of the TEF had provided some employers with additional leverage to divert some staff towards teaching intensive workloads. Many staff across the sector were being asked to accept new roles and/or job specifications with different workload arrangements and performance related activities, such as teaching appraisals, which could result in suspension of increments, being put in ‘special measures’ or the allocation of a mentor for staff perceived to be in need of development .

A five-point personal performance rating has been proposed (partly in response to the TEF, partly in response to the REF), which colleagues fear will be used to manage 'under-performance' defined in the narrowest of ways OR as a 'rationalising' tool i.e. for selecting which staff to switch to teaching-only or part-time contracts, to re-apply for their jobs, and which staff to make redundant. (Teaching and research, full-time, permanent)

The University has introduced a career progression route for staff on teaching and scholarship role profiles. Hitherto there was no such progression route-only progression for research active staff e.g. to Readership/Professorship. Whilst the recognition and rewarding of teaching is welcome (and long overdue in HE), the way in which the changes have been implemented have been very controversial. (Professor, full-time, permanent)

Research and/or teaching contracts appeared to be becoming more clearly differentiated across many providers. One participant stated that their institution framed these changes ‘*so that everybody has the best chance to succeed in their role (because they can opt for the one that suits them) and then won't have to “also do” stuff they don't want to do/cannot do so well*’, however, the majority commented on how staff were often ‘*bullied*’ or ‘*forced*’ into new contracts and that they ‘*had to choose between teaching and research*’.

# Discussion and conclusion

Changes to organisational behaviours were reported by those who work in higher education teaching and learning, with many of the changes focused on satisfying the TEF metrics. This echoes the findings from the government’s own evaluation of the TEF2 (Vivian et al, 2019). While changes appear to have had some impact on teaching and learning and the higher education workforce, there has been very little evidence of any substantive and meaningful impact on the everyday teaching and learning cultures and practices of staff and students. As stated by a participant:

… senior colleagues do take notice of the TEF, it gives them another set of levers with which to micro-manage academic colleagues from a position of assumed and spurious managerial neutrality. And most fundamentally, the TEF quite openly continues the encroachment of metrics-driven management into HE. Metrics redefine achievement in terms of arbitrary targets, degrade work by reducing it to the measured delivery of objectives, put staff into competition with one another and turn managers into controllers. These are not the side effects of metrics but their core effects.

Both this study and Vivian’s study confirm that institutional approaches have mainly focused on initiatives and activities that directly collect data/information for TEF submissions, changing environment/practices with a focus on addressing TEF core themes/metrics. To this end, institutions’ behaviours serve to legitimise the TEF policy. However, our findings clearly show that the operationalisation of the TEF within institutions is mainly top-down and instructional rather than inclusive and discursive. The majority of staff, especially those most involved in teaching, are excluded from the TEF process and its related activities. This contradicts one of the central aims of the TEF stated by Sir Michael Barber that it should *‘*be a catalyst for improvement of, and innovation in, the quality of teaching *… [to] generate informed dialogue about teaching quality* both within institutions and between them*’* (2017). This study found very limited evidence that any such dialogue has occurred within HEIs.

What we found reinforces the position that the operationalisation of the TEF by HEIs extends the hyperrealism of teaching excellence (Canning, 2019) – with institutions implementing strategies, initiatives and activities that are mainly directed at satisfying TEF metrics, whilst most of those in teaching and learning roles are side-lined or remain passive recipients of institutional diktats. Across the sector, evidence of active and meaningful staff involvement in TEF-related activities was very limited. If the implementation of institution-wide teaching excellence policy carries on like this, it could be argued the dissonance between the TEF narrative of higher education teaching and the everyday experiences of teaching and learning by students and staff will become even greater. In the report by O’Leary, Cui and French (2019), Professor Sir Chris Husbands repeatedly uses the analogy of the TEF assessment processes as a vehicle for *‘telling a story about the institution’*. Continuing this analogy, some of the key questions for the future direction of the TEF are: Who are the narrators of the story? Who are the audiences? To what extent do the protagonists of the story have the opportunity for their voices to be heard?

Understanding, recognising and rewarding excellent teaching in higher education is an important undertaking that is welcomed by staff working across HE provision, as the participants in our study repeatedly emphasise (O’Leary, Cui and French 2019). However, the findings from this paper strongly suggest that the TEF’s current framework, both conceptually and methodologically, fails to address how teaching (excellent or otherwise) can actually be identified, evaluated, supported and developed, in any meaningful way. Indeed, our research confirmed that the very staff who are most involved in teaching are rarely part of any institutional TEF planning and implementation, rather they often find themselves marooned outside the TEF process, passive recipients of strategies and initiatives that are not informed by their day to day experience of teaching and learning in higher education.

The project findings also reinforce how the current TEF policy fails to address how teaching and learning might actually be supported and developed with a view to bringing about sustainable improvement across the sector. Our data revealed a dearth of evidence on authentic, organic approaches to improving teaching and learning developed by staff and students.While the TEF has only been in place for a relatively short period of time and assuming it will continue to evolve, it is important to acknowledge that judgements are being made in a market setting, which have the potential to establish market positions (positive or negative) for providers that may endure in the longer term. Indeed, a recent survey by the Universities and Colleges Admissions service (UCAS) with more than 85,000 students explored if and how students were using the TEF ratings to inform their application choices. Overall, 17.1% of students who completed the survey stated they had heard of the TEF and knew what it was prior to making their applications. Amongst this group of students, 58% said the awards were ‘important’ or ‘extremely important’ to them in deciding which HEI to apply to and they were more likely to apply to an institution with a TEF Gold rating. However, UCAS does not make clear if students were making their judgements based on a desire to ensure the best teaching and learning experience. Beyond its use as a market signal for categorising providers according to its ranking system, the question remains as to how can the TEF ever become a *‘catalyst for the improvement and innovation in the quality of teaching’* when it is based on a unidirectional, episodic, desk-based assessment of a collection of data?

Given the shortcomings identified in how the TEF has been narrowly conceptualised and employed as a reductive policy tool across higher education to date, another aspect that merits further exploration is what alternatives there are to current policy and what might such alternatives look like? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these in any depth as it requires a separate paper in itself, this study generated a series of key pointers that can help to inform reimagined visions of and approaches to teaching excellence in higher education.

Those alternative visions of teaching excellence articulated by the participants in this study were characterised by an overarching ethos of collaboration between staff and between staff and students within and across institutions, rather than the ethos of competition that underpins current TEF policy. For an alternative model of teaching excellence to make a meaningful and authentic contribution to stimulating and supporting the sustained improvement of teaching quality, it would require academic staff and students to work together to develop a shared understanding of what matters to teaching and learning. There should be less of an emphasis on individuals’ interactions with students and more on ways of supporting discussions about how curricula are designed, delivered, evaluated and further enhanced, along with more opportunities for staff to share effective teaching and development practices within and across institutions. Linked to this, there should also be a greater focus on research-informed approaches to teaching in higher education, with academic staff driving the focus and the development of this work.

Whatever the methods used to generate such data, the participants in this study were clear that there needs to be a greater weighting attached to the qualitative aspect to ensure that those local cultures and context-specific practices of individual HEIs are captured transparently and equitably. Participants felt that such qualitative approaches would help to produce data that might be more meaningful for institutions to compare across similar organisations, with a view to improving their provision, rather than attempting to produce quantitative data to satisfy a one-size-fits all definition of ‘teaching excellence’.

This project is the first to explore the views of large numbers of staff working in HEIs about the TEF and teaching excellence. Although UCU is the largest further and higher education union in the world, representing a considerable number of staff in HEIs and college-based HE, there are currently 211,980 academic and 217,580 non-academic staff members working in UK HE (HESA 2019). Future studies on the TEF and other HE policies should aim to capture the breadth of the whole HE workforce experience. Staff from Scottish, Welsh and/or Northern Irish institutions also have a valuable contribution to make to the debate – while participation in the TEF is voluntary for institutions from the devolved nations, the TEF is currently used by some institutions as a market lever (O’Leary, Cui and French 2019). The impact and implication of such approach to the TEF on HEIs and their students and workforce across the UK need to be further explored.

Notes

1. In the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the original framework was named the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). In October 2017, the official title was renamed The Teaching Excellence and Students Outcomes Framework, however its acronym remains the TEF on the OfS website, the UCAS website and the UK government’s website.

2. Details on the TEF policy, iterations, methodology, assessment outcomes and institution rankings are published on the OfS website: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/what-is-the-tef/>

3. The Office for Students is a non-Departmental public body of the Department for Education, established to fulfil a role as the main regulator of higher education in England. Administrating the TEF is one of its key functions.

4. TEF 2 took place between October 2016 and June 2017. This was after the first TEF assessment which included 430 English institutions for fee increases in 2017/18 academic year. Leach’s article (2017) talks about more background and details.

5. The UCU is a British trade union in further and higher education, representing casualised and permanent staff, established in 2006. At the time of the research, it held around 120,000 members and claims to be the largest further and higher education union in the world.

6. In total, there were 6337 participants who completed the survey and gave their consent to use the data. 5895 participants were from 154 HEIs, 420 from 143 college based higher education providers and 22 did not state which sector they were from. This paper only included participants from HEIs.

7. Participants in management positions came from over 50 institutions with which there were over 2900 participants from these institutions.

8. The assessment outcomes of the TEF are rated and ranked as Gold, Silver and Bronze. The OfS website publishes details on the TEF methodology and the rankings of participation institutions.

9. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) was first implemented in 2014, succeeding the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), to assess the research of British higher education institutions in order to provide accountability for public investment in research. It is administrated by the higher education research councils of the four nations. In relation to the TEF, the government’s argument was that if teaching were to be considered of equal value to research, then an equivalent scheme to the REF.

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