**Examining universities' articulations of 'teaching quality' in the context of TEF in England**

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The paper examines how English universities articulate their perspectives on ‘teaching quality’ in the context of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) in the UK. By adopting a qualitative thematic analysis approach, the author examines how a sample of English higher education institutions [n=18] articulated their perspectives on teaching quality by analysing the ‘teaching quality’ section of their qualitative TEF submissions. The findings have shown that higher education policies, such as TEF, have greatly shaped institutions’ perspectives on teaching quality and teaching excellence. In turn, universities’ articulation of teaching excellence appeared to have significant implications for their management and academic practices, such as institution priorities, resource allocations, performance evaluation, and academic career development.

Key words: teaching excellence; teaching quality; education policy; higher education; marketisation; measurement culture

Education policies in higher education are often used as discursive strategies to foreground political ideologies and to shape institutional governance and academic practice (Wilcox, 2021). The paper explores how institutions articulate their perspectives on teaching quality in the context of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) by analysing the ‘teaching quality’ section of their qualitative TEF submissions. The ‘teaching quality’ refers to ‘the extent to which a provider recognises, encourages and rewards excellent teaching’ (DfE, 2017: 24), and my aim was to understand these institutions’ perceptions of teaching excellence through the choice and presentation of evidence for teaching quality in their settings.

The TEF was introduced by the government in the UK in 2016 to recognise and encourage excellent teaching in universities and colleges. The TEF uses a mix of quantitative metrics such as student satisfaction levels based on the National Student Survey (NSS) together with qualitative narratives submitted by universities to assess their own teaching quality. The qualitative narrative submission is up to fifteen pages in length. In the qualitative submission, universities are expected to cover three broad areas of teaching quality: learning environment, student outcomes and learning gain. Based on their overall scores, universities and other higher education providers are awarded a Gold, Silver or Bronze. The awards cover undergraduate teaching (HEFCE 2017). By October 2020, 290 higher education institutions had participated in the TEF exercise – 77 of them were awarded Gold, 136 Silver, 61 Bronze and 16 Provisional. For those institutions that were awarded Provisional, it was because they had insufficient data to be fully assessed. All higher education providers in the UK can take part in the TEF exercise. Although some providers in Scotland and Wales participated, ‘the TEF remains principally an English exercise’ (O’Leary et al. 2019: 16).

Gillard's (2018) study shows that the process for TEF is not purely data-driven. TEF assessors allocate awards using the metrics as one component of their decision-making. Higher education providers' qualitative TEF submissions have a significant effect upon the final award bestowed to them. Build on the previous studies, this paper focuses on universities’ qualitative TEF submissions and explores how they have successfully articulated the ‘teaching quality’ section of submissions. This was also the main reason why I had only included universities with TEF Gold award in the study samples.

**Teaching excellence, neoliberalism** **and measurement culture in higher education**

‘Teaching excellence’ is in common parlance now in higher education and a manifestation of the influence of a particular ideology. Excellence can be understood as ‘a technology of neoliberal ideology’ (Saunders and Blanco Ramírez 2017: 398) and ‘the new currency of the higher education marketplace’ (Nixon 2008: 20). Neoliberalism is ‘the doctrine of uncontrolled markets’, and in the higher education sector the impact has been felt globally (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017). Collini (2012: 134) notes the political expediency of the business analogy: ‘One of the supposed benefits of treating universities as though they were businesses is that their efficiency can then be measured and improved’.

We may be becoming inured to the market analogy being applied to the university and to the importation of thinking and terminology from the commercial world into higher education, as Collini (2012) has observed. Excellence and consumer choice are bedfellows in the market rhetoric, according to which ‘everyone can now buy into the excellence of their own choice – or so the argument runs’ (Nixon 2007: 15). Operating in a competitive, marketised system, ‘universities now need to market themselves aggressively and compete to attract new groups of students. Teaching excellence is one way of staying ahead of the competition and securing a good position in exercises which rank institutions’ (Skelton 2005: 5).

In the UK context, the Office for Students’ overview of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) (2019) states that ‘the TEF measures important aspects that matter to students’ and ‘it sharpens the focus on teaching and outcomes that matter to students, by encouraging universities and colleges to deliver the best experience for their students and achieve higher ratings’. The TEF can be seen as one way of quality-assuring the value for money of their investment in higher education, quality-assuring the experience that students, as customers, have ‘purchased’. The Office for Students website notes the role of the TEF as a tool to encourage excellence and inform student choice.

Nixon (2007: 22) suggested that excellence is ‘a process of growth, development and flourishing; it is not just an endpoint’, and the importance of such processes and qualitative dimensions is missed if teaching excellence is boiled down to numbers. Gibbs’ (2012) report instances examples of universities adopting ‘harder data-driven approaches’ to review their performance against competitors and ‘whatever the actual reliability or validity of NSS and other data, they are taken more seriously and given more weight than the kinds of observations previously made about the quality of programmes’ (p. 22). The problems with ‘using matrices to measure something as nebulous as teaching excellence’ are noted by French (2017: 16), and yet they persist. Ashwin (2021) also argues that teaching excellence policy instruments' intention, design and measurement need to be focused around educational enhancement if they are to be effective.

**The Study**

In this paper, I analysed the ‘teaching quality’ section of the qualitative submissions from eighteen universities in England which were awarded a ‘Gold’ award in the TEF. Nine of the institutions were considered to be research intensive universities while the other nine were considered to be teaching intensive universities. These research intensive universities were all part of the Russell Group, which is a self-selected association of twenty-four public research universities in the UK. Most of the teaching intensive universities were new universities, which gained their degree awarding powers after 1992.

The university samples were randomly selected for the study. The sample was also purposive, with description rather than generalisation being the aim (Dawson 2007) and ‘random purposeful’ sampling (Creswell 2007: 127) was used to make a random selection of a sample of 18 from the list of 76 institutions awarded Gold. The narrative submissions are available on the Office for Students’ website under the TEF section. For the purposes of anonymity, each of these institutions is given a code name. T1 to T9 to represent teaching intensive universities while R1 to R9 represent research intensive universities. In this paper, I report the findings from the analysis of how these institutions articulate teaching quality in relation to student engagement, valuing teaching, rigour and stretch, and feedback. I also explore if there are any differences in the articulation of teaching quality between research intensive universities and teaching intensive universities.

The study adopted a qualitative thematic analysis approach to develop an understanding of the chosen universities' articulations of teaching quality in their TEF narrative submissions. The textual data set contains 155,957 words of written narratives by the sample institutions. The broad themes were taken from the headings in the ‘teaching quality’ section, and then each section was examined in turn for specific inherent ideas and claims. The analysis consisted of inductively examining the data within each of these themes. My analysis is of a sample of the whole population of provider submissions receiving gold awards. There were some common and recurrent themes in the submitted narratives. It was valuable to learn how the selected providers had each evidenced teaching quality and how they each presented this. It was perhaps not unexpected that there would be commonality in the examples selected, given that possible examples of evidence of teaching quality were set out for providers in TEF. My aim was to understand these institutions’ perceptions of teaching excellence through the choice and presentation of evidence for teaching quality in their settings.

Regarding trustworthiness of the data, I recognise the narratives were written for a specific purpose and acknowledge the importance of the rating awarded for institutions. Whilst I am not suggesting any false claims nor questioning the integrity of the narrative accounts, I am aware that pressures exist in a competitive environment where ratings may be used in marketing and advertising. I suggest that there is considerable self-interest at stake in the quest for high ratings and therefore an inherent incentive to present the data in the provider statements with this in mind. This is a consideration in reading the accounts. Ethical approval for the study was granted by a university research committee.

The context specificity of the English higher education settings is important in this research, whilst at the same time recognising that there are also transferable aspects of the findings which may be of wider interest and relevance to other higher education settings. As discussed earlier, in many parts of the world higher education is often influenced by neoliberalism and measurement culture.

**What I found**

There were four themes in the assessment criteria for ‘Teaching Quality’ narrative submissions in the Department for Education Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework Specification (2017): Student Engagement, Valuing Teaching, Rigour and Stretch, and Assessment and Feedback.

***‘Student engagement’ in the learning and teaching process***

In TEF, ‘student engagement’ is assessed through the extent to which ‘Teaching provides effective stimulation, challenge and contact time that encourages students to engage and actively commit to their studies’ (DfE, 2017: 25).

Sixteen universities in the sample articulated their initiatives for student engagement in relation to student voice and student partnership. Many universities have claimed that student engagement is part of their institution’s strategies.

Student engagement lies at the heart of our teaching quality and enhancement strategies. It can be seen and evidenced at every level of our governance structure, our feedback mechanisms and through our extensive methods deployed to support students’ learning. Our sustained excellent NSS performance highlights the effectiveness of this approach. (T9 university)

Almost all universities have claimed that they have established a formal student representative structure to ensure that student voices are represented across their operations at different levels. At a strategic level, there are examples where students are represented on relevant institutional committees, such as the board of governors, academic board and learning and teaching committee, as well as on programme validation and review panels. National Student Survey (NSS) results are often used to indicate validation of the effectiveness of such approaches.

The student voice is embedded into our validation processes through their membership of curriculum delivery approval panels. (T5 university)

A recurring theme in my analysis of the institutions’ narrative submissions is universities’ embrace of the ‘students as partner’ concept in their articulation of student engagement. This encompasses many aspects of teaching and learning. There is also an emphasis on the universities’ partnerships with students’ unions. In their submissions, three universities in the sample included supporting statements from their student unions.

Partnership with our students is critical. The student voice is powerful and has led to direct improvements in teaching and learning. (T6 university)

These three universities also highlighted student engagement with their student-led staff awards in their submissions.

The Students’ Union (SU) coordinates Student-Led Staff Awards, and the exceptional contributions of those staff who excel in teaching are celebrated annually at our degree ceremonies. From the many hundreds of nominations typically received, the SU thematically analyse outcomes and disseminate them at the University’s Learning & Teaching Conference. The award winners also contribute their work to the professional development programme for staff. In these ways, students’ views on the teaching they most value are embedded back into our practices. (T5 university)

In addition to the NSS, students’ voices are also captured and addressed by some universities through course evaluations, ad hoc surveys and focus groups. One university (R7) explicitly stated that student course evaluation results play a prominent part in the staff personal development and performance review process and have a significant impact on promotion decisions. In the USA, there are similar practices in academic tenure. Some might argue that this practice leads to academics adopting popular approaches rather than evidence-informed approaches for effective learning. At one university (T6), students were also trained to evaluate teaching.

For some of the research intensive universities, the importance of small group teaching is highlighted in their narrative submissions as a way of engaging students in learning.

We routinely use small-group teaching to facilitate engagement (generating enthusiasm through up-to-date thinking and debate), interaction (immediate feedback), reflexivity (establishing an active learning environment for both students and staff) and flexibility (iterative and dynamic learning). (R7 university)

At R2 university, small group teaching means that a small number of students (typically two or three) meet with a subject-specialist teacher for an in-depth discussion of a particular topic. Face-to-face contact hours are also used by one university (R5) as a way of engaging students in learning and teaching. At this university, students can expect to be in timetabled sessions for between twenty and twenty-five hours per week. Some might question, though, whether these face-to-face contact hours necessarily mean that students engage with the intended activities within the session.

***‘Valuing teaching’ shown by higher education institutions***

In TEF, ‘valuing teaching’ is assessed through the extent to which ‘Institutional culture facilitates, recognises and rewards excellent teaching’ (DfE 2017: 25).

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, most universities in this study have explicitly claimed that they value teaching, and typically evidence is cited from human resources processes for promotion exercises, available learning and teaching awards, internal learning and teaching funding, and ongoing professional development. In the accounts, universities also make explicit the links that exist between teaching and research. Commitment to both teaching and research is also apparent in the evidence for ‘rigour and stretch’.

The promotion criteria and annual performance review require academic staff to demonstrate a commitment to both teaching and research. (T7 university)

Such statements may prompt a number of critical questions, such as, for example, how providers define and judge ‘effectiveness’, ‘commitment’ and ‘sustainability’.

In promotion exercises, some universities have emphasised equal career progression for both teaching and research focused academics.

We recognise and reward teaching excellence equally with research in the promotions system. This includes a promotion route to professor ‘for academic colleagues on teaching-only contracts who have made an exceptional contribution to teaching at the highest level of excellence’. We make no distinction in academic title between those who are on Research and Teaching, and Teaching-only contracts. (R9 university)

To highlight the importance of teaching and student education, universities in the UK have increasingly created senior posts in these areas.

Our commitment to student education is advocated and led at the most senior level of the University by a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Student Education). Each faculty has a Pro-Dean for Student Education, who reports to the Dean and Deputy Vice-Chancellor. (R6 university)

Different learning and teaching awards are also used by universities to demonstrate their recognition of outstanding teaching. These internal awards are largely divided into two categories – one is coordinated by the university’s centre of learning and teaching, and another is often student-led and coordinated by universities’ student unions. Award categories include the vice-chancellor’s teaching award, outstanding student support, outstanding innovation in teaching, best employer engagement initiative, and most inspirational lecturer. Six research intensive universities also provide internal funding to support learning and teaching related innovations or interventions.

We operate three institutional schemes for excellence in teaching; two award outstanding current practice, as identified by our students, and one provides project funding for innovation and enhancement in scholarship. (R3 university)

Universities have also offered postgraduate certificate level courses for their own staff to develop their teaching capacities. These courses are often aligned with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and accredited by Advance HE (formerly the Higher Education Academy (HEA)). These courses normally lead to HEA fellowship recognition such as Fellows and Senior Fellows. Both research intensive and teaching intensive universities use the proportion of staff holding a teaching qualification as an indicator of teaching competence and expertise. Peer review of teaching and an annual learning and teaching day are also adopted by universities to provide ongoing professional development opportunities.

***‘Rigour and stretch’ in curriculum design and delivery***

In TEF, ‘rigour and stretch’ is defined through the extent to which ‘Course design, development, standards and assessment are effective in stretching students to develop independence, knowledge, understanding and skills that reflect their full potential’ (DfE 2017: 25).

On academic rigour and stretch, universities often emphasise either their research-led or research-informed curriculum and teaching. For research intensive universities, ‘cutting-edge research’ and teaching by ‘experts’ are often referred to.

World-leading researchers as teachers – the passion of research-active academic staff for their subject, their conviction about its importance for the intellectual growth of their students, and their wish to pass on and share their enthusiasm is fundamental to the success of the University’s educational vision. (R8 university)

For some of the research intensive universities, in relation to intellectual stretch, the availability of cross-university common modules is often referred to.

A cross-university initiative encourages all first year students to study up to 20 credits outside their main discipline drawn from our comprehensive catalogue of modules. (R1 university)

Based on NSS narrative results, some students have found it challenging to study at these research intensive universities. These (research intensive) universities have shown their awareness of this and have stressed the need for a balance between academic rigour and stretch and student wellbeing.

The University is acutely aware of the need to find an appropriate balance between rigour and stretch on the one hand and student work-life balance and good mental health on the other. (R5 university)

For teaching intensive universities, strong industry links are often highlighted. Links with professional statutory regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are also cited as exerting rigorous external scrutiny and standards.

The University is committed to an industry-led curriculum, designed in concert with employers, alumni and industry experts. The University has introduced industry advisory panels for each academic department to add value to the curriculum and the student experience. (T2 university)

External examiner scrutiny and Higher Education Reviews are also cited as evidence of rigour.

All of our programmes are academically rigorous. This is evidenced explicitly by our 250 external examiners who unanimously endorsed our standards and successful 2016 Higher Education Review, which endorsed the effectiveness of our quality processes in assuring standards. (T9 university)

The NSS results are used by many universities as evidence of the rigour and stretch of their degree programmes. Student responses to the following two NSS statements, concerned with ‘intellectual stimulation’ and ‘academic challenge’, are often referred to: ‘The course is intellectually stimulating’ and ‘My course has challenged me to achieve my best work’.

A small minority of universities have used the proportion of first and upper second class degrees awarded as an indicator of student attainment.

The proportion of 1sts and 2:1s awarded has increased from 78% in 2007-08, to 91% in 2016-17, with the proportion of 1sts rising from 18% to 31% over the same period. (R3 university)

Whilst evidence of outcomes, arguably this could be achieved by a number of possible different means and influenced by a range of factors, including improvements in teaching and learning. The issue of grade inflation is a live issue in the sector and could potentially be another explanation for improved student attainment outcomes.

***Assessment and ‘feedback’ practice***

In TEF, ‘feedback’ is viewed through the extent to which ‘Assessment and feedback are used effectively in supporting students’ development, progression and attainment’ (DfE 2017: 25).

Assessment and feedback, crucial to student learning, have traditionally been challenging for universities in terms of student satisfaction. Many universities have attempted to address this through achieving a speedier assignment feedback turnaround time, the use of a variety of methods of summative and formative assessment, the use of standardised approaches to ensuring consistency in feedback and the use of technologies in the process of assignment feedback.

The maximum time periods for tutors to mark, grade and provide student feedback on submitted coursework are currently 3 weeks for first and second year undergraduate students and 2 weeks for final year undergraduate and postgraduate students. (T3 university)

Some universities have aimed to develop students’ assessment literacy, a term which refers to students’ understanding of the purposes and practices of assessment and feedback, and appreciation of their relationship to learning.

We pay particular attention to developing students’ assessment literacy to ensure they understand the purpose and forms of assessment, how judgements are reached and how grades and feedback align with intended learning outcomes. (T5 university)

In some universities’ accounts, the availability of personalised support for students on assessment feedback was noted; this was usually through small group tutorials or discussions with personal tutors. Arguably important too are approaches to improving student engagement with feedback which may help to maximise its usefulness in supporting progress and ‘feed-forward’. This can be understood as the ‘forward-pointing aspects of feedback’ (Race and Pickford 2007: 116) to inform and support future learning. The timeliness of feedback is important (see for example Race and Pickford 2007) in improving student engagement with feedback.

**Discussion: the implications for academic governance and practice**

Common ideas apparent in many of the narratives such as ‘student as partner’ and ‘student voice’ and ‘engagement’ suggest students tend to be positioned by the institutions as central to the concept of teaching excellence and located ‘at the heart of their services’ (Beech 2017: 55). In the analysis, the institutions’ narratives appeared to signal this prime focus on the student first and foremost whilst the structures, resources, processes and practices described conveyed a sense that their purpose was enabling and supporting students and their learning. Beech’s study of provider statements from a sample of institutions having had their awards changed during the TEF process recommended that higher education institutions should show that students matter (Beech 2017: 57), a theme I found inherent in the sample of narrative submissions. In other writing, my colleague and I have argued implicitly in our writing for the importance and centrality of intangible aspects of the pedagogical relationships between teacher and learner (Wood and Su 2017: 462). Nixon (2008: 106) spoke of ‘encouragement’, ‘helping’ and ‘reaching out’ in teaching: ‘Teaching is about encouraging people to learn; and encouraging people to learn is about helping them find reasons for taking their own learning seriously; and helping them do that involves reaching out to them beyond our existing horizons.’ Inspired by these words and the findings of my own research study, we suggested (Wood and Su 2017: 462) that ‘reaching out’, inspiring with confidence and developing critical capable learners may not sit easily within the current policy discourse. My contention is that an inclusive perspective on academic practice may help to restore these things to a position of primacy in discussion of teaching excellence. The inclusive perspective here also refers to inclusion of intangible aspects of academic practice, such as encouragement and inspiring learners with confidence. Gravett and Kinchin (2020) reconsider teaching excellence from a posthumanist perspective that ‘shifts the gaze beyond the measured individual to explore our intra-actions within a wider context’ (p.1029). They suggest that taking ‘a posthuman lens’ may ‘offer openings for us to think differently, moving from notions of excellence as a performative, measurable, concept to an affirmative, values-based, ethical approach’ (p.1033).

In terms of the development of academic practice, it would be useful for institutions to consider what the market model of higher education and putting students at the heart of the system means to them. Universities might reflect on how they can show that students matter as ‘contributors’ in a way which is not construed solely as financial contributors investing in higher education but as active contributors to the process of learning and intellectual work. For instance, Mimirinis’s (2020) study found that that current institutional metrics do not equally take account of all aspects which undergraduate students perceive as excellent teaching.

Institutions’ articulations of teaching quality have a significant impact on academic career development. For instance, whilst some of the universities’ contextual narratives emphasise the existence of equal opportunities for career progression and academic promotion for teaching and research, the existence of separate ‘teaching-focused’ and ‘research-focused’ career pathways and the existence of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and TEF sets teaching and research apart from each other. Blackmore (2016: 132) observes that ‘even within the most favoured research intensive institutions’ much of the teaching may be undertaken by teaching-only contracted colleagues and by graduate teaching assistants. Ingold (2018: 72) has expressed the similar concern by arguing that ‘there cannot be research without teaching’, seeing both as ‘practices of education, and both are inextricably linked’.

The separation of research and teaching may have some unintended consequences, and if seen in some ways as different activities, opportunities to benefit from the mutuality of research and teaching are lost. The commercialisation, commodification and marketisation of higher education have influenced both institutions’ strategic priorities and management practices to monitor the achievement of these. This is perhaps unsurprising, as Blackmore notes in connection with his discussion of prestige, ‘every league table can increase or damage institutional standing, in an environment that is now global rather than national’ (Blackmore, 2016: 67). It may be understandable, therefore, if the ‘strategic positioning of staff’ is an institutional response to such factors.

The findings of this study have also raised other important questions, for instance, is the proportion of first and upper-second class degrees awarded a good indicator of teaching quality? Do universities genuinely provide equal career progression for both teaching and research-focused academics? And, would academics perceive the same prestige for teaching-focused promotions?

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined how higher education policies have shaped institutions’ perspectives on teaching quality, with a particular focus on English universities. In turn, universities’ articulation of teaching quality and teaching excellence has significant implications for their management and academic practices. The existence of separate frameworks for teaching excellence and research excellence may undermine the synergies and relationships between teaching and research. Such compartmentalisation may also create silos within institutions and be divisive in terms of career trajectories evolving along discrete research or teaching pathways.

Due to the scope of the study, this paper has only explored one particular aspect of higher education institutions’ qualitive TEF submissions. Gillard (2018) suggests that the TEF process and data generated warrants further study. For instance, further studies could expand the sample size by including qualitive TEF submissions from those institutions obtaining Bronze and Silver awards. Is it possible that the submissions from these institutions with Bronze and Silver awards might have signaled different things in their articulations of teaching quality? Another area of further study could be the comparison of higher education institutions’ official qualitive TEF submissions and their internal documentation related to polices, practices, and priorities at the subject, departmental and institutional levels. Could there be a difference between what institutions submit, and the more day-to-day guidance and policies which shape learning and teaching and academic governance? The TEF, like the REF, and other formal measures, and the stakes associated with them, could potentially encourage higher education institutions to present the best version of themselves, which might not always marry-up with the reality on the ground in all instances.

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