

Better Informing the Market? The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in British Higher Education

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A cornerstone of the Tory government's higher education policy has been the belief that the introduction of market forces and greater competition will raise quality. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is often quoted as a good example of this, although its introduction in the mid-1980s was actually designed as an instrument to strengthen the concentration of British research in fewer universities for primarily academic reasons. A consequence of the continuation of the exercise over some 30 years, and the reputational and financial benefits that accompany success in it, is that REF has made an enormous impact on universities and led to criticism that they have prioritized research over teaching. The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has been, in part, a response to this, and an attempt to alter the balance toward a greater concern about teaching. But perhaps a larger influence has been the move to full-cost tuition fees in 2010 and the removal of the cap on student numbers, which has led to much increased competition in student recruitment. This has heightened a sense that the market needs to be better informed about the quality of teaching in individual institutions, especially when universities in England are charging the maximum fee permitted, £ 9,000. (Similar arguments were adduced in the 1990s to justify the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the bureaucratic overload produced by its review and reporting processes).

The introduction of a TEF first appeared in the Tory Party Manifesto for the 2015 general election and was vigorously pursued by the new minister, Jo Johnson, when he took office. From the beginning, it was clear that this was to be a metrics-based exercise rather than the burdensome (and expensive) QAA approach. A panel of academics, students, and employers (the so-called stakeholders) was set up to put flesh on the bones, and the concept was firmly embedded in the new Higher Education and Research Bill that replaced the Funding Council with an Office for Students and also restructured the research councils. The TEF was only mandatory in England and it was left optional as

to whether Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland wished to join. A new incentive was introduced, which only applied in England, in the provision that only institutions that performed well in the TEF would be permitted to raise their tuition fees. In the House of Lords debate on the Bill, there was considerable criticism of the metrics to be employed in the TEF ratings, but negative votes were overridden in the Commons in the eventual passage of the Bill.

A METRICS-BASED APPROACH

Criticism of the metrics has, however, been widespread since the program's inception. The TEF assessments were to grade institutions Gold, Silver, and Bronze—where Bronze recognized provision as being of satisfactory quality only. These grades were based on three metrics and six data sets: the National Student Survey (NSS) (run for the government by Ipsos Mori), which records students' views separately on teaching, assessment, and feedback on their individual degree programs and on the overall academic support provided; the Higher Education Statistics Agency's data on institutional dropout rates; and data on employment after graduation. None of these are flawless. The NSS data is collected from returns by final year students and can be subject to events on campus unconnected with teaching, by the way universities encourage the completion of the forms, or by the recognition that favourable responses will ultimately be reflected in a university's league table position. The rate of return is variable though 50 percent is the qualifying minimum. Dropout statistics are inevitably correlated with social class and economic disadvantage, while the employment statistics, which distinguish between employment only and highly skilled employment, are based on returns by graduates six months after graduation and are notoriously variable in the return rates and the quality of information. Data for each institution is benchmarked against the demographic characteristics of its students, adding a further variable. Bundled together, this is a statistical "mish mash."

Each institution is invited to submit a 15-page report contextualizing the data and describing its teaching aims and objectives. Insofar as these submissions are critical to the assessment, as the chair of the TEF panel has claimed them to be, it can be argued that the TEF is metric led but not metric determined. This statement needs to be reconciled, however, with the published statement that marking was to assign plus or minus flags to each of the six core metric ratings; institutions receiving three or more plus flags and no minus flags qualified for consideration for a Gold assessment, and institutions receiving two or more minus flags qualified for a Bronze. Marks falling between these two qualified for a Silver.

THE RESULTS

The results of the first TEF assessment were published in June 2017. This first round was always recognized as a trial year, after which the panel would review the exercise and the criticisms. This has not stopped media headlines about some distinguished Russell Group universities only being awarded Bronze, and a number of post-1992 universities taking out double-page spreads in national newspapers to celebrate their Golds. (In fact, 33 percent of universities received Gold and 82 percent Gold or Silver). The minister has even taken the opportunity to couple the award of a Bronze mark to a Russell Group university with the (high) salary of its vice-chancellor and use it as a basis for criticizing vice-chancellors' salaries in general.

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The significant questions that the review panel will need to address, apart from the flaky nature of some of the data, include that the TEF does not actually assess teaching but only the imperfectly recorded reactions to it. From the point of view of informing the market, it conveys only an institutional view and not an assessment of the actual degree program (or even the department) in which a candidate wishes to study. The selection of Gold, Silver, and Bronze awards can only be described as crude, populist, and pandering to media exploitation, especially when some of the most selective institutions and some of the most access-orientated may be disadvantaged by the benchmarking methodology. Some possible future refinements are even more questionable: the introduction of metrics based on contact hours or the incorporation of actual graduate salaries after five years to be acquired from the tax authorities.

However unsatisfactory, it seems that the TEF is here to stay—at least while a Tory government is in power—and that it will continue to remain controversial. We can also confidently assume that some of the best minds in institutions will be devoted to “gaming” the data to ensure that their institutions are positioned to protect their brand, and to thrive in the market that has been created, as well as to be able to raise their tuition fee levels when the government gives them leave. ■

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Reenvisioning Welsh Post-compulsory Education

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Like most countries and regions around the world, Wales is facing rapid social and economic change. As a nation within the United Kingdom, its future is being shaped as much by its own decisions as by the outcome of the current Brexit negotiations. The decision to leave the European Union, known as Brexit, passed by a slim majority in Wales (52.5 percent to 47.4 percent). Today, there is little indication that attitudes have changed since the referendum, despite ongoing uncertainty about what Brexit will mean in practice.

If the ongoing confusion surrounding the United Kingdom's future relationship with Europe was not enough, Wales faces its own share of demographic, labor market, and economic challenges. By 2039, the Welsh population is projected to increase by 6.1 percent to 3.38 million. Of particular significance, and concern, is the decline in Welsh-domiciled undergraduate entrants studying in Wales, and limited (funded) opportunities to pursue advanced/postgraduate qualifications, in contrast to the number of Welsh-domiciled young people entering further education and vocational training. These education trends compound deeper structural problems in the economy.

Wales is primarily a micro, small, and medium-sized enterprise economy, comprised of low-level manufacturing and large dependency on the public sector. There are few large employers. The city of Cardiff, which is integrated into the UK economy, is an exception. Despite some economic revival since the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, Wales continues to have the lowest economic growth (measured by gross value added or GVA) of any region within the United Kingdom.

The situation presents stark challenges. How best should the educational system be organized to maximize student learning opportunities and quality, as well as research excellence? How best can educational institutions help shape the future of Welsh society and economy? How effective are the current governance arrangements, and what needs to change?

POSTCOMPULSORY EDUCATION IN WALES

Over the years, the Welsh government had identified ongoing challenges for its education system stemming from the