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The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

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Summary

For years it has been suggested that in many higher education institutions (HEIs) teaching has been less valued than research. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) aims to address this issue and to make teaching and research, in universities and colleges, of equal status and to provide students with better information on teaching standards.

A commitment to introduce 'a framework to recognise universities offering the highest teaching quality' was included in the [Conservative 2015 Election Manifesto](#) and the TEF process was introduced in November 2015 in the higher education Green Paper [Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#).¹

The TEF will encourage high quality teaching by financially rewarding HEIs which are identified as delivering excellent quality teaching. HEIs which are assessed by the TEF process as deemed to be providing high quality teaching will be allowed to increase their fees in line with inflation.

The first TEF awards were made in 2016; awards were granted to HEIs with a current quality assessment of meeting, or exceeding the expectations for quality and standards in England. Under this criteria the majority of HEIs in England qualified for an award and most of these providers subsequently announced a tuition fee rise in 2017/18.

In year two TEF awards will be made on the basis of performance against a set of metrics. During this phase of the process the metrics chosen use currently available data on student satisfaction, retention and employment outcomes. HEIs will also be able to submit a qualitative submission to support their metrics. HEIs will be assessed at three levels of award Gold, Silver and Bronze. Providers which are successful at any level will be able to increase their fees in-line with inflation on top of their previous increase.

From year three onwards the TEF will develop to allow differential fees and subject level fees and ultimately postgraduate courses may be included.

Overtime the TEF will create a complicated system of fee levels which will vary across providers and courses.

The TEF has received support from HEIs, but concerns have been expressed about the reputational impact of the TEF on UK higher education. The linking of the TEF to increased tuition fees and overseas student recruitment has also proved controversial. Furthermore at a basic level critics have suggested that the use of metrics is not a good proxy for teaching quality and that the TEF may not be a meaningful measure of what is generally considered to be good teaching quality.

¹ BIS, [Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), November 2015, Cm 9141

1. Background

The Government has introduced a process called the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The TEF aims to measure the quality of teaching in English higher education institutions (HEIs) and to reward HEIs with high quality teaching.

1.1 Rationale for the TEF

Historically many of the UK's leading universities have been 'research intensive' universities and this led to suggestions that in some institutions teaching had been treated as a 'poor second cousin'² to research.

Furthermore since the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2012 debate has increased about the benefit of higher education and in particular whether higher education offers good value for money. In 2015 the [Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\) – Higher Education Academy \(HEA\) Student Academic Experience Survey](#)³ found that only 35 per cent of students from England paying fees of up to £9,000 thought that they had received 'good' or 'very good' value for money from their degrees.⁴

Also the increased marketisation of higher education and issues around access to higher education have led to calls for improved information on the standard of teaching in HEIs and on course outcomes.

The TEF aims to address these issues.

1.2 Measuring teaching quality

The idea of monitoring the quality of teaching in HEIs is not new, but TEF is very different to other earlier schemes. The TEF aims to ensure that all students receive an excellent teaching experience and that **teaching and research are given equal status** in higher education institutions (HEIs). It will also, rather controversially, **reward institutions with the highest level of teaching by allowing them to increase their tuition fees**.

Year One of the TEF took place in 2016 and in September 2016 the Department for Education (DfE) published a list of providers who were eligible for TEF awards.⁵ The first year of the scheme was a pilot process and from Year Two the framework will develop and the procedure for making awards will evolve.

The TEF has been generally supported by HEIs, but the operation of the TEF and the linking of TEF results to fee increases and to international student visas has proved highly controversial.

"There is extraordinary teaching that deserves greater recognition. And there is lamentable teaching that must be driven out of our system. It damages the reputation of UK higher education and I am determined to address it"

Jo Johnson,
Minister of State for
Universities,
Science, Research
and Innovation for
Science,
[Universities UK
Annual Conference
2015](#)

² Jo Johnson quote in speech to Universities UK Annual Conference, [Higher education: fulfilling our potential](#) 9 September 2015

³ [The HEPI- HEA 2015 Student Academic Experience Survey](#)

⁴ *ibid* p3

⁵ Department for Education, [Teaching Excellence Framework eligible providers Year one](#), September 2016

2. The development of the TEF

The 2011 HE White Paper: [Students at the Heart of the System](#) set out proposals to 'put excellent teaching back at the heart of every student's university experience'.⁶ The Paper discussed the provision of 'a high quality learning experience' and raising teaching quality – the paper also proposed increasing the amount and type of information available to students. In the event the White Paper did not lead to a Bill.

A commitment to introduce 'a framework to recognise universities offering the highest teaching quality' was included in the [Conservative 2015 Election Manifesto](#)⁷ and re-stated in the [Summer Budget 2015](#) when it was announced that institutions offering 'high teaching quality' would be allowed to increase their tuition fees in line with inflation from 2017-18.⁸

2.1 TEF introduced in HE Green Paper 2015

On 6 November 2015 the Government published its HE Green Paper [Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#).⁹ The paper set out proposals to reshape the HE landscape, raise standards and increase competition in the sector and carried forward many of the aims of the earlier 2011 White Paper. The paper also introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The aims of the TEF as stated in the Green Paper were to help students make more informed choices about higher education and to improve the teaching that students receive by identifying and rewarding HEIs with the highest quality of teaching.

Library briefing paper CBP 7399, [Higher Education Green Paper Fulfilling Our Potential](#), 10 November 2016 discusses the Green Paper in detail and contains comment on the proposals.

Details of the TEF in the Green Paper

The Green Paper stated that in **Year One** of the TEF, **meeting or exceeding the expectations for quality and standards in England, as demonstrated by a recent quality assessment review, would be sufficient for a Level 1 TEF award**. HEIs awarded a Level 1 TEF in this first year would be able to raise their fees in line with inflation, up to a maximum fee cap, from the academic year 2017/18.¹⁰ The increased fees would apply only to **new students** entering higher education from 2017/18.¹¹ A Level 1 award would last for three years.

In **Year Two** and beyond higher levels of TEF could be awarded **based on metrics**, initially three common metrics would be used:

"The TEF should change providers' behaviour"

HE Green Paper, Fulfilling Our Potential p19

⁶ BIS, [Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System](#) June 2011 p25

⁷ [Conservative 2015 Election Manifesto](#) p35

⁸ [Summer Budget 2015](#) p59

⁹ BIS, [Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), November 2015, Cm 9141

¹⁰ *Ibid* p23 para 22

¹¹ *Ibid* p24 para 26

Employment/destination data from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey, and from 2017 HMRC data will be incorporated

Retention/continuation data from the UK Performance Indicators published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and

Student satisfaction indicators from the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS).¹²

Institutions would have to apply for a TEF assessment and the outcome of the assessment process would be announced in spring 2017. The Green Paper stated that financial incentives would be applied at the institutional level from the academic year 2018/19 and would be differentiated according to the TEF level awarded; awards would last for three years.

The TEF would develop over time as criteria evolved and more metrics were integrated, and as improvements were made based on past experience. In the future it was hoped that metrics on engagement in study and learning gain would be incorporated into the process.

The Green Paper said that excellent teaching must also incorporate and reflect diversity, so the metrics used in the TEF would be broken down by disadvantaged backgrounds and under-represented groups.¹³

The TEF assessment would additionally take into account **qualitative evidence** supplied by HEIs on areas such as teaching intensity, contact time, training of staff and diversity of students.¹⁴

Also as a precondition of the TEF, HEIs should observe the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)'s guidance on consumer protection law and higher education providers.

TEF assessments would be made by a panel of independent experts¹⁵ and institutions would be expected to bear the cost of the TEF assessment process.

2.2 Changes to the TEF in the HE White Paper

The HE White Paper, [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), May 2016,¹⁶ contained significant changes to the TEF which were made in response to feedback to the Green Paper proposals.¹⁷

Respondents to the Green Paper were **supportive of the overall aims of the TEF** and the focus on high quality teaching to drive up standards and improve student choice. However **concerns were expressed at**

¹² BIS, [Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), November 2015, p33

¹³ *Ibid* p22 para 20

¹⁴ *Ibid* p34

¹⁵ *Ibid* p28 para 9

¹⁶ BIS, [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), May 2016, Cm 9258

¹⁷ Library briefing CBP 7600, [Higher Education White Paper Success as a Knowledge Economy](#), 18 May 2016 gives an overview of the paper and its proposals

the speed with which the TEF was being introduced, respondents said that the implementation timetable was 'too ambitious' and that there should be testing and piloting prior to full implementation.¹⁸

The White Paper acknowledged the concerns voiced by respondents and the recommendations of the BIS Committee and said that there would be some changes to the proposals:

In our Green Paper, we proposed a quick timetable towards implementation, with four different TEF ratings and differential fee caps introduced from Year 2. We welcome the feedback from the consultation and the recent report by the Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee, suggesting that we need to take more time to introduce the TEF. We agree on the need for a robust assessment process for the use of financial incentives. We are therefore taking a measured approach for implementation that is slower overall, and will trial and pilot each change with the sector.¹⁹

Adjusted arrangements for the TEF

For **Year 1** proposals were the same as in the Green paper - all providers with a satisfactory quality assessment would automatically be awarded a grade of 'Meets Expectations' and allowed to raise their fees in line with inflation.

In **Year 2** the White Paper made some changes to the Green Paper proposals:

- Year Two would be a **trial year** to test the framework; providers may take part on a voluntary basis.
- There would be **three TEF levels**, not four as proposed in the Green Paper – Meets Expectations, Excellent and Outstanding.
- **Financial incentives would not be differentiated according to level of award and all providers who achieve at least Meets Expectations would receive the full inflationary uplift**
- A **lessons learned exercise** would be carried out after Year Two.

Year 3 would, subject to the results of the lessons-learned exercise, be the first full year of assessment at provider level. Other metrics would be introduced once these became available and HEFCE would ask HEIs to look into developing methodology to measure contact hours and teaching intensity. A [Technical Consultation](#) paper published alongside the White Paper also sought sector input on measuring graduate employment. During Year Three a number of **pilot assessments at disciplinary level** would be carried out.

Year 4 would, subject to the results of the disciplinary pilots, be the first year in which **disciplinary level assessments take place**. This year is the **earliest that taught postgraduate courses** may also be included.

¹⁸ BIS, [Summary of Consultation Responses: Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), May 2016, p8.

¹⁹ BIS, [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), Cm9258, May 2016, p44.

The Green Paper proposed that only providers with 50% of their students on higher education courses would be eligible for the TEF. Respondents to the Green Paper thought that this was an arbitrary ban and the White Paper therefore proposed that in Year One **all providers** would be eligible. **Part-time courses would also now be included** as a result of responses to the consultation. Detailed eligibility requirements were set out in Annex A of the White Paper.

Box 1: TEF and financial incentives

In **Year One** the White Paper proposed allowing providers awarded Meets Expectations to maintain their fees in line with inflation.

In **Year Two** three levels of TEF may be awarded – providers that were successful at any level would keep their award for a maximum of three years and would be allowed to increase their fees in line with inflation on top of Year One increases.²⁰ There would be **no differential fee increases**.

From **Year Three onwards** awards at three levels would be made in the same way as Year Two and a **differentiated fee cap would be introduced**. Providers with an award of **Meeting Expectations** would be allowed to increase their fees by **50% of the inflationary uplift** and providers with **higher awards would be allowed 100% of the inflationary uplift**. The system would also be 'history-blind', meaning that a provider's fee/loan cap would be solely dependent on their current TEF level – institutions would not be able to 'bank' increases gained if they performed better in previous years. This would allow new or improving providers to catch up.²¹

The fee changes would **apply to all students at a provider** – there would be **no differential fee caps per cohort**, so if fee levels dropped one year this would apply to all students at the provider and they would have to lower fees for existing students.²²

Overtime the TEF process could result in a complicated system of different fees at different providers and eventually, additionally, different fees for different courses at the same provider.

2.3 Technical Consultation on TEF Year 2

A [Technical Consultation](#) paper on Year Two of the TEF was published alongside the White Paper – this covered the operational detail of the TEF in Year Two including the development of future metrics such as learning gain.²³ TEF awards made in Year Two would apply to students starting courses in 2018/19.

TEF Year Two final specification

The Government response to the Technical Consultation was published in a Department for Education (DfE) document, [Teaching Excellence Framework: year two specification](#), September 2016. The document set out the criteria for TEF awards in Year 2 and included some further amendments to the process:

- introducing an **appeals process** to allow providers to appeal their TEF outcome on the basis of a procedural irregularity
- **renaming the ratings Gold, Silver and Bronze** to make them easier to understand, and providing clearer information on how the assessment process will work

²⁰ BIS, [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), Cm9258, May 2016, Box 2.5, p50.

²¹ *Ibid*, p51.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ BIS, [Teaching Excellence Framework Technical Consultation for Year Two](#), May 2016.

- **benchmarking the highly skilled employment and further study metric** by social disadvantage and disability, to ensure that providers which take large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds are assessed fairly
- **removing an anomaly which meant that providers with very high benchmarks could not get good ratings**, to ensure that providers which are achieving some of the best absolute outcomes will be treated fairly
- **using a definition of 'employment' consistent with that used for the UK performance indicators**, which excludes students who are not seeking work. This definition will maintain consistency for providers, easing interpretation of their TEF metrics
- adjusting the list of possible examples for **additional evidence, to better recognise positive outcomes such as entrepreneurship and preparing students for research careers**.²⁴

The final specification states that **from Year 2 the Gold, Silver or Bronze awards will still be allocated on an institutional level**. Applications for Year Two must be made by the end of January 2017 and outcomes will be announced in spring 2017. Any fee uplift awarded will apply from autumn 2018 and the award will generally be valid for up to three years.

Only providers which are designated for student support and with an access agreement in place will be eligible to apply for TEF awards.

A series of pilots will take place in Year Three to test the assessment framework before the assessment moves to subject level.

2.4 The Higher Education and Research Bill 2016

On 19 May 2016 the Government presented the [Higher Education and Research Bill \(HERB\) 2016](#). The Bill seeks to implement the proposals in the HE White Paper. Clause 25 of the Bill will allow a newly established body, the Office for Students (OFS), to operate a scheme to rate HEIs on the quality and standard of their provision – this clause will allow the OFS to administer and develop the TEF. Schedule 2 of the Bill will allow the charging of differential fees under the TEF.

The details of the TEF are not however on the face of the Bill but are found in a large number of accompanying documents.

²⁴ DfE Press Release, [Teaching Excellence Framework moves forward](#), 29 September 2016

3. TEF implementation

Initial criticisms of the TEF suggested that the introduction of the TEF was being rushed. In response to these criticisms the TEF is being developed over a period of years.

3.1 TEF Year 1 (2016/17)

The TEF was introduced in 2016 and the first year of the TEF aimed to **create a baseline of quality**.

In Year One TEF awards were based on a past satisfactory quality assessment report and this resulted in most HEIs qualifying for a TEF award – a list of all qualifying providers is given in a DfE publication [Teaching Excellence Framework eligible providers Year one](#) September 2016. The document explains that providers who met the criteria would be able to increase their fees by an inflationary amount in 2017/18 and that this increase would apply to all students at the provider:

This list details both publicly funded and private providers of full and part-time Higher Education who meet the eligibility requirements set out in the Government's White Paper for participation in Year One of the Teaching Excellence Framework.

Publicly funded English providers on this list will be eligible to increase their fees up to the maximum tuition fee caps, which will be increased in line with forecast inflation (2.8%) for the academic year 2017/18.

For all new students and eligible continuing students who are undertaking courses at publicly funded or private higher education providers that have achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, the maximum fee loan will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) for the academic year 2017/18. For public and private providers that have not achieved a TEF rating of Meets Expectations, the maximum fee loan for full-time courses will be remain at the levels that apply for 2016/17.

A written statement, [Higher Education Student Finance](#), on 21 July 2016, set out details of the maximum tuition fee and fee loan caps in 2017/18 for higher education courses at providers that have been awarded a rating of Meets Expectations in TEF Year One (2016/17). **TEF awards will last for one year.**

Box 2: TEF regulations

Two statutory instruments (SIs) the [Higher Education \(Basic Amount\) \(England\) Regulations 2016](#) SI 1205 and the [Higher Education \(Higher Amount\) \(England\) Regulations 2016](#) SI 1206 were laid before Parliament on 15 December 2016. The basic amount regulations will allow eligible providers (those with a TEF award) to charge fees of £6,165 per year and the higher amount regulations will allow eligible providers to charge fees of £9,250 per year.

The regulations came into force on 6 January 2016.

Early Day Motions 850 and 851 seek to annul the regulations

The TEF regulations are subject to the negative resolution procedure; a statutory instrument of this type will automatically become law without debate unless there is an objection from either House.

EDMs [850](#) and [851](#) pray against SIs 2016/1205 and 2016/1206 and seek to annul them. EDM 850 states:

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1206) dated 13 December 2016, a copy of which was laid before this House on 15 December, be annulled.

The EDMs were tabled on 10 January 2017 and their primary sponsor is Jeremy Corbyn MP. If a debate were granted on the EDMs a vote could be taken to annul the regulations; annulling the SIs would prevent TEF awards from increasing tuition fees in line with inflation.

3.2 TEF Year 2 (2017/18)

Year Two of the TEF will be a **trail year** and a **lessons learned exercise** will be conducted afterwards. Applications for TEF Year Two should be submitted by 26 January 2017 and awards will be announced in May 2017.²⁵

Applications for awards will be assessed against the criteria as set out in the DfE document, [Teaching Excellence Framework: year two specification](#), September 2016.

Assessments will be made against various aspects of quality categorised as: **Teaching Quality** (TQ), **Learning Environment** (LE), and **Student Outcomes/Learning Gain** (SO). These categories will be assessed using data from the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS), employment data from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey and student retention data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

Other **contextual data and a qualitative submission** by providers will be analysed as part of the process.

Box 3: Qualitative submissions

From Year 2 HEIs will be able to make qualitative submissions alongside their metrics data. Submissions should be **no longer than 15 pages** and can be used to support or explain performance against the core metrics, particularly where performance is not strong.

The TEF year two specification says that the emphasis in the provider submission “should be on **demonstrating the impact** and effectiveness of teaching on the student experience and outcomes they achieve” and “wherever possible, **impact should be demonstrated empirically**”

Awards will be made at three levels – **Gold, Silver and Bronze** – providers that are successful at any level will keep their award for a maximum of three years and will be allowed to increase their fees in line with inflation on top of Year One increases.²⁶ There will be no differential fee increases.

TEF awards given in Year Two will be **valid for three years** (subject to a provider continuing to meet eligibility requirements), unless a provider

²⁵ DfE, [Teaching Excellence Framework: year two specification](#), September 2016 p51 para 8.22.

²⁶ BIS, [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), Cm9258, May 2016, Box 2.5, p50.

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does not have the requisite three years of core metrics to inform the assessment. For a provider that has only one or two years of core metrics, the award granted will last for one or two years respectively.

3.3 TEF Year 3 (2018/19)

DfE document [Teaching Excellence Framework: year two and beyond Government technical consultation response](#), September 2016 sets out the development of the TEF after Year Two.

The document states that **differentiated fees will begin in Year Three** based on Year Two awards. Providers may choose to re-enter TEF in Year Three or future years to obtain a new award, in which case the latest TEF award will be used.

Subject level pilots will be trailed in Year Three.²⁷

3.4 TEF Year 4 (2019/20)

Subject level awards will begin in Year 4 and postgraduate provision may be included in the assessment.

²⁷ DfE, [Teaching Excellence Framework: year two and beyond Government technical consultation response](#), September 2016 p5 para 8

4. TEF assessment panels

The TEF assessments will be made by peer review. A TEF panel, comprised of students, academics, widening participation experts and employers, will be responsible for deciding the assessment outcomes. The TEF panel will be chaired by Professor Chris Husbands Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University, a list of the panel members is on the [HEFCE website](#).

4.1 Assessment process

Initially three panel members will review a TEF submission, following this a group of nine panel members and assessors will consider the application and form a recommendation. The initial assessment will be based on the metrics. The provider submission will then be considered and both pieces of evidence will be used to reach a holistic judgement.²⁸

Following this process the whole TEF Panel will consider the recommendation and making a final decision.

Assessors will be supplied with contextual data on each provider, which will allow them to understand their nature and operating context (including size, location and student population).²⁹

²⁸ Deposited Paper, (Dep 2017 0067) [Letter from Lord Younger of Leckie to Peers regarding the Higher Education and Research Bill](#)

²⁹ DfE, [Teaching Excellence Framework: year two specification](#), September 2016 p24 para 5.1

5. Cost of the TEF

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills document, [Higher Education and Research Bill Detailed Impact Assessments](#), June 2016 states that the cost of the TEF to individual HEIs will be around £53,000 per year and the cost of the TEF assessment panel will be around £7m per year:

Institutions collectively will experience average annual costs of £22m as a result of familiarising, signing up and applying to the Teaching Excellence Framework, once the TEF covers discipline level assessments. This is equivalent to an average of £53,000 per institution, significantly less than the Research Excellence Framework (REF) at £230,000 per institution per year.

Students/ Taxpayers will experience average annual fee charges of £1.3bn in real terms as a result of allowing high quality institutions to increase their fees by, we expect, some proportion of inflation. The student loan system ensures that any index-linked increase to the fee cap will not affect the up-front costs of higher education. Tuition fee loans will, for providers whose fees are capped, automatically adjust to ensure this is affordable, with graduates expected to repay their loans only once they are earning enough to qualify for repayments. Any additional loan amount (and interest) unpaid after 30 years will be written off.

Taxpayers will experience an increase in average cost of £7m per annum as a result of covering the cost of operating the independent TEF assessment panel.

Student Loans Company will experience an increase in average annual cost of £220,000 associated with adapting and operating systems and processes to manage its tuition fee loans, given a greater number of fee caps will be in operation due to the different TEF ratings.³⁰

³⁰ The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills document, [Higher Education and Research Bill Detailed Impact Assessments](#), June 2016 p8

6. TEF outcomes

6.1 TEF Year 1

The results of the TEF awards Year 1 were published in a DfE document [Teaching Excellence Framework eligible providers Year one](#) September 2016. The publication shows that around **470 HEIs in England were eligible for TEF awards**. Of these eligible providers, **121 HEIs with full-time undergraduate students will raise their fees** for 2017/18 to £9,250 per year – only two such institutions, University College Birmingham and University of Mark and St John Plymouth will keep their fees at £9,000 per year. At 36 institutions the fee rises will apply to all courses.³¹

6.2 TEF Year 2

There had been concerns that some HEIs would opt out of TEF Year 2. But in the event the majority of HEIs applied for a TEF Year 2 assessment, details were released on 27 January 2017:

Applications for the first set of TEF assessments closed on 26 January 2017 and revealed that 299 providers agreed to participate, including all English members of the Russell Group. This included applications from more than 100 colleges and alternative providers.³²

Twelve providers from the devolved administrations opted into the process.

The results of the assessment will be announced in May 2017.

³¹ [“Almost all universities confirm £9,250 tuition fees for 2017-18”](#), *Times Higher Education*, 6 September 2016

³² DfE Press Release, [Universities show their support for a new assessment framework as part of government plans to raise standards](#), 27 January 2017

7. Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Committee Report on the TEF

The BIS report, [*The Teaching Excellence Framework: Assessing quality in Higher Education*](#), 23 February 2016 analysed the TEF proposals.³³ The report generally welcomed the concept of the TEF, but raised several areas of concern.

The **use of metrics as proxies** for quality was seen as problematic. The report stated that the use of metrics should be based on evidence of their validity as proxies for quality. Using employment destination as a metric was highlighted as not being proven as a good proxy for teaching quality, as graduate destination tends to be more influenced by social and economic factors than by teaching quality. The report was also concerned about unintended consequences of using metrics, such as creating incentives for 'game playing' – this is a particular issue with the National Student Satisfaction Survey. The Committee also asked questions about the weighting to be given to metrics compared to the qualitative report. Overall the Committee concluded that the use of metrics required further work.

The report also said that **most HEIs were against linking TEF awards to raising fees**. The Committee recommended that this should only go ahead if confidence could be placed in the metrics to be used.

The Committee also raised concerns about the **timetable for bringing in the TEF**. The first awards are to be announced in April 2016 and TEF 2 in 2017 – the Committee felt that this was insufficient time and recommended that the Government set out how it would collate evidence and the timescale for the development of the TEF.

With regard to whether the TEF should be awarded at subject level or institutional level, the report said that most HEIs were in favour of TEF awards being at subject level as this would be more useful to prospective students, but they expressed concerns about increasing the bureaucratic burden on HEIs.

³³ Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, [*The Teaching Excellence Framework: Assessing quality in Higher Education*](#), 23 February 2016, HC 572.

8. Concerns about the TEF

The higher education sector has been supportive of the introduction of the TEF but various concerns have been raised about the process.

8.1 Measuring teaching quality

The stated aim of the TEF is to reward 'teaching excellence', however the Green Paper acknowledged that measuring teaching quality is problematic.³⁴ After Year One the TEF will rely on metrics as a proxy for teaching quality and to simplify the process it will use existing data sets to inform judgements. It has been suggested however that this approach does not actually measure what most people would consider to be 'teaching quality' and the choice of metrics has been criticised.

In 2010 the Higher Education Academy published a report by Professor Gibbs, *Dimensions of Quality* which looked into educational quality in undergraduate education in the UK – the report was referred to in the 2011 HE White Paper. The report suggested that certain measurable variables could be used as indicators of the quality of teaching, the paper proposed the following indicators:

- Class size
- Cohort size
- Extent of close contact with academics
- Levels of student effort and engagement
- Volume, promptness and usefulness of student feedback
- Proportion of teaching undertaken by full-time academics and proportion of those with postgraduate teaching qualifications

The work of Professor Gibbs could provide a useful insight into the type of indicators that could be developed and included in the TEF as the process develops over time.

8.2 The TEF metrics

From Year two onwards the TEF will be based on metrics, three metrics have initially been chosen - student satisfaction, student retention and graduate employment. The use of these particular metrics has been criticised for using **outcome based data** such as student satisfaction and graduate employment rather than measuring **inputs** such as contact hours. Commentators have suggested that it would be more valid to use input based metrics such as: contact time, assessment and teaching qualifications of staff, as these are more commonly associated with what students consider as teaching quality.

The BIS Committee report made the following statement on the use of metrics:

There is 'no one broadly accepted definition of teaching excellence'

HE Green Paper, *Fulfilling Our Potential* p21

³⁴ Fulfilling Our Potential p 21 para 15

To this end, we recommend that Government includes in its further consultation on metrics:

- an assessment of the evidence that any proposed metric is linked to teaching quality; and
- an assessment of the potential unintended consequences which could arise from an institution seeking to optimise its score on each metric, with proposals on how these risks can best be mitigated.

We would also urge the University sector to engage fully with the technical consultation in order to develop a set of appropriate metrics.

The use of metrics on student experience and employment have been particularly criticised.

Student experience

Since 2005 the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS) has been used to measure the quality of the student experience at universities, the survey is conducted by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The NSS requires final year students to fill in a questionnaire and to rate various aspects of their time at university. The results of the survey are published and form part of universities Key Information Set, they are also used in university league tables.

The NSS has however been criticised for being too open to 'game playing' by students and HEIs.³⁵ An article in the *Times Higher Education* said that there was some evidence that students were rating their institutions too highly:

Growing numbers of university leavers may be giving the same response to every question on the National Student Survey because of "overzealous promotion" by institutions concerned about their public profile, a study suggests.

In 2014, 6.1 per cent of those completing the NSS online gave the same answer to every question – a phenomenon known as "yea-saying" – up from 1 per cent in 2005. The majority of these responses comprise wholly positive ratings.

[...]

Ipsos MORI says that institutions are "aware of the importance of the survey and the visibility of the results, especially in the media and league tables". This, the report says, "may encourage some overzealous promotion" of the NSS, and "could lead students to rate their institutions more generously".

"Strong NSS scores at the institutional level can benefit both students and institutions themselves...there may therefore be some incentive on the part of both to encourage or give positive ratings," the report says.³⁶

³⁵ ["The National Student Survey should be abolished before it does any more harm"](#) *The Guardian* 13 August 2015

³⁶ ["NSS 'yea-saying': is institutional zeal to blame?"](#) *Times Higher Education* 8-14 October 2015

Some commentators have expressed concern about using NSS data in a TEF.³⁷ To allay fears of the sector the chair of the TEF assessment panel, Chris Husbands has said that the student satisfaction scores will have only a limited impact on whether universities are judged as Gold, Silver or Bronze:

Chris Husbands told an audience at the House of Commons that his team would “not be overweighting the NSS” when calculating which medal an individual university would receive.

Speaking at an event organised by the Higher Education Academy and the Higher Education Policy Institute on 24 January, the vice-chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University said that the TEF “should not place an overemphasis on satisfaction data”.

“I do not think student satisfaction is an accurate proxy for teaching quality,” said Professor Husbands, a former director of the UCL Institute of Education who was named chair of the TEF panel by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in August 2016.

[...]

He added that the TEF panel would “not draw policy from a single data point” and that “all data” are “flawed” in some respect. However, he went on, the challenge was to recognise and understand the flaws, and to learn how the information could be used effectively.³⁸

The National Union of Students (NUS) are unhappy with linking the TEF to fee increases and they have organised a boycott of the NSS to derail the TEF. Currently 25 HEIs including Cambridge University have joined the boycott.³⁹

Graduate employment

The [Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey](#) (DLHE) publishes data on the number of graduates in graduate level jobs six months after leaving university. Using this as a metric for the TEF has been questioned. Critics have argued that graduate employment is determined more by degree subject and location of graduates than by teaching quality at university. Other commentators have suggested that social networks play a large part in employment outcomes and that this prejudices students from low income backgrounds who tend to have poorer social contacts. It has been suggested that **employability** rather than actual employment outcomes might therefore be a better measure of teaching standards.

Learning gain

It is intended that overtime new metrics will be developed and included in the TEF. An area that has received a lot of attention is the concept of learning gain and how this could be meaningfully measured. Learning gain is defined on the [HEFCE Learning gain website](#) as an

³⁷ See Quentin McKellar vice chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire quoted in “[How might a teaching excellence framework be built?](#)”, *Times Higher Education* 23-29 July 2015

³⁸ “[TEF to limit use of ‘flawed’ NSS scores](#)”, *Times Higher Education*, 2-8 February 2017

³⁹ *ibid*

“improvement in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development made by students during their time spent in higher education”.

HEFCE has been administering a programme of 13 pilot schemes of learning gain projects. These pilots will test and evaluate different ways of measuring and assessing learning in HE. The pilots will help in the development of a learning gain metric for potential future inclusion in the TEF.

The BIS Committee report on the [TEF](#) made the following comments and recommendations on learning gain:

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is currently carrying out pilot studies to look at how added value metrics might work in universities and we were told that it may be “two or three years” before something “a bit more robust and consensual” emerged.”¹¹ We heard more support for the development of measures, such as learning gain or value added, as part of assessment mechanisms for the TEF, but there appears to be limited appetite for their speedy development. Universities have been diligent in identifying reasonable concerns with the impact of any chosen metric, but we found they were less likely to propose viable alternatives. **We urge universities to engage constructively on the technical consultation to ensure that the metrics chosen for the TEF are as robust and reliable as possible. In particular, we recommend that priority is given by everybody involved to the speedy establishment of potentially viable metrics relating to learning gain.**⁴⁰

8.3 Reputational risk to UK HE

Many commentators have expressed concern about the impact of the TEF on the reputation of UK HE. HE in the UK is a major business and revenue generator and the impact of the TEF on recruitment of overseas students is of particular concern. HEIs are worried that the TEF may produce unintended consequences by labelling some institutions as lower quality than others.

Universities UK made the following comment in its response to the TEF Year Two consultation:

Consideration should also be given to the potential impact of the TEF on international student recruitment markets and communication measures that could be taken to mitigate negative effects. This includes the wider reputational impact of the TEF as well as the potential use of TEF judgements in scholarship decisions by overseas authorities.⁴¹

However Viscount Younger said during the Committee Stage of the Higher Education and Research Bill in the House of Lords that the TEF would allow students to make better informed assessments of the quality of UK HE :

⁴⁰ Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, [The Teaching Excellence Framework: Assessing quality in Higher Education](#), 23 February 2016, HC 572 p9 para 14

⁴¹ [Universities UK response to the Teaching Excellence Framework technical consultation for year two](#), 12 July 2016

Both home and international students already make judgments as to the relative merits of different universities, based on all sorts of unreliable measures. The TEF will allow those judgments to be better informed, based on evidence rather than prejudice.⁴²

8.4 Could the TEF become like the REF?

Since 1986 research in HEIs has been measured by some form of review process. The first reviews were called Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) – the most recent review in 2014 was renamed the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF is a peer review process conducted every three to five years which aims to provide comprehensive and definitive information on the quality of UK research in each subject area. The results of the REF are then used to allocate funding to HEIs according to the scores obtained in the review.

The REF has been criticised for being a significant administrative burden and for being hugely expensive. The last [REF in 2014](#) used a new metrics driven process which aimed to streamline the procedure, but the process still cost around £60m to run and took years to conduct. Commentators are concerned that the TEF could become similarly administratively burdensome:

The most recent consequence of this ratcheting up was REF 2014, which cost around £250m according to HEFCE. TEF may well start out as a light touch exercise rushed through on a short timeline, but the pressure for it to become more comprehensive, and so more bureaucratic, will grow when TEF's assessments come under scrutiny or challenge from the sector.⁴³

8.5 Linking the TEF to fee rises

Tuition fees in England have been fixed at £9,000 since 2012 and HEIs have said that over time the value of the £9,000 tuition fee has fallen to £8,500 in real terms.⁴⁴

The HE White Paper stated that the value of the TEF awards to the sector will be around £1 billion a year during the first ten years.⁴⁵

Many HEIs have wanted fees to rise in line with inflation, but the BIS Committee report said that many stakeholders in the HE sector were unhappy with linking rises in tuition fees to the TEF:

The weight of evidence we heard in this inquiry from the universities sector was against creating a link between TEF and tuition fees. Whilst there was acceptance of and support for a requirement to demonstrate a minimal teaching standard before increasing fees—such as that envisaged under TEF 1—there was widespread concern about applying TEF to a more sophisticated, differentiated set of fee levels based upon teaching quality. The arguments against this link included:

⁴² [HL Deb 18 January 2017 c277](#)

⁴³ Wonkhe, [TEF, REF and lessons from history](#), October 2015

⁴⁴ [English universities to raise tuition fees for first time since they trebled](#), *The Guardian*, 20 July 2016

⁴⁵ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, [Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice](#), May 2016, p51

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- a financial incentive could heighten the likelihood of institutions seeking to manipulate or “game” the TEF, rather than working meaningfully within it;
- an increase was already necessary to fill holes in existing finances;
- the reputational benefits, rather than financial incentives, would be sufficient to ensure TEF was taken seriously; financial incentives were limited at a time of low inflation; also, with inflation rates subject to variation, fee increases may reflect economic conditions more than teaching quality;
- Other incentives to improve teacher quality—such as the feedback in the National Student Survey or a greater focus on teaching for career progression purposes—might have a bigger and more rapid effect than a TEF rating that lasts for at least three years;³⁶
- The rate of inflation at the time of the increase would have a disproportionate impact on funding for the following few years;
- A financial link—especially one that could be set for a five year period—would reward the high performing institutions but not provide the resources necessary for others to invest in improving teaching quality.⁴⁶

Mr Paul Blomfield MP suggested during the Committee Stage of the *Higher Education and Research Bill 2016* that some universities were in favour of the TEF because it was the ‘only show in town’ as far as fee rises were concerned.⁴⁷

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills document, [Higher Education and Research Bill Detailed Impact Assessments](#), June 2016 shows that an HEI with a TEF award of excellent or above could be charging tuition fees of £11,697 by 2025/26.⁴⁸

An article in the *Guardian* suggested that linking the TEF to fee increases could price some students out of a high quality teaching experience:

The TEF, rather than a licence to raise fees should be a method to locate the best public investment opportunities in the interests of students – be that bursaries, infrastructure, or better staffing and staff recognition. The process could be good for students and for universities.

But we can surely do better than finding the best teaching, and then increasing the prospective debt of the young people who might benefit most from that teaching.⁴⁹

On 11 October 2016 the NUS launched a [campaign](#) to sever the link between tuition fees and TEF.

⁴⁶ BIS Committee Report, [The Teaching Excellence Framework: Assessing quality in Higher Education](#), 23 February 2016, p13 para 28

⁴⁷ Public Bill Committee 15 September 2016 (morning), c254.

⁴⁸ The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, [Higher Education and Research Bill Detailed Impact Assessments](#), June 2016, p40

⁴⁹ [“Will the Teaching Excellence Framework be a licence for universities to raise fees?”](#), *The Guardian*, 22 August 2016

8.6 Linking the TEF to overseas student visas

In October 2016 the Home Secretary Amber Rudd said at the Conservative party conference that overseas student visas could be linked to the quality of courses:

The UK government plans to introduce tougher rules for overseas students coming to Britain to study “low quality” courses, instead prioritising the “best” universities.

Amber Rudd, the home secretary, said the government will consult on changes to the “student immigration” system in her speech at the Conservative party conference in Birmingham today.

The proposal for further tightening of student visas is likely to be of huge concern to many in UK higher education, who see overseas students as a vital source of income to all universities as well as a major contribution to the UK economy and British “soft power”.

Ms Rudd reaffirmed the government’s commitment to reducing net migration into the UK to the “tens of thousands”.

As part of this, she said the government would be “looking for the first time at whether our student immigration rules should be tailored to the quality of the course and the quality of the educational institution”.⁵⁰

The statement by the Home Secretary has been taken to mean that TEF rankings could be used when deciding student visa applications and that HEIs with Bronze or Silver awards could face restrictions on recruiting students.

A tightening of student visa criteria could adversely affect some of Britain’s world renowned universities such as London School of Economics, King’s College London and Bristol University:

Anxiety is escalating behind the scenes that the Home Office may want to use the Teaching Excellence Framework – the new system for ranking universities’ teaching – to decide which universities to cut. University heads warn this could have shocking unintended consequences, as some world-class research universities are not predicted to score well in the new teaching rankings.⁵¹

A parliamentary question was asked about the TEF and overseas student recruitment on 17 October 2017:

Overseas Students: Written question - 49044

Q Asked by **Mr Jim Cunningham**

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate she has made of the effect on university finances of linking Teaching Excellence Framework outcomes to the enrolment of international students; and if she will make a statement.

Answered by: **Joseph Johnson**

“There’s no rationale for linking it to the regulation of international student recruitment as it was not designed for this purpose. It would damage the UK’s attractiveness as a study destination in what is a very competitive global market place.”

Edward Byrne
principal of King’s
College London -
[The Guardian 25
October 2016](#)

⁵⁰ [UK government to toughen student visa rules for 'low quality' courses](#), *Times Higher Education*, 4 October 2016

⁵¹ [Overseas student crackdown could hit LSE, King’s College London and Soas](#), *The Guardian*, 25 October 2016

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The Government recently set out its response to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Year 2 Technical Consultation and the operational specification for TEF Year 2.

Overall, we expect the TEF to enhance the international reputation of UK higher education by encouraging all universities to maintain and improve their teaching standards. By showcasing the excellence of UK higher education, the TEF will support the sector by attracting international students in a globally competitive market. We anticipate that the outcomes of the TEF assessment process will inform student choices, including international student choices. However, no direct link (and therefore no estimate) has been made between TEF outcomes and international student enrolment.⁵²

During the House of Lords Committee stage of the Higher Education and Research Bill 2016 Viscount Younger said that the TEF would not be used to limit the number of overseas students:

I confirm again that we have no plans to cap the number of genuine students who can come to the UK to study, nor to limit an institution's ability to recruit genuine international students based on its TEF rating or any other basis.⁵³

⁵² PQ 49044 [[Overseas Students](#)] 17 October 2017

⁵³ [HL Deb 18 January 2017](#) c273

9. Reaction to the TEF

The HE sector has been generally supportive of the introduction of the TEF, however reservations have been expressed about some aspects of the scheme – in particular the use of metrics. Below are a few reactions to the TEF:

University of Oxford

The University of Oxford fully supports the government's wish to raise the profile and standing of teaching in higher education. We agree that it is in the interests of students, employers and the taxpayer to promote the highest standards of teaching across the sector, whatever the mission of the provider or profile of its students.

The University has always placed the quality of its teaching at the heart of what it does. We believe that an Oxford education, characterised by close and personalised teaching, intellectual rigour and critical inquiry, and extensive academic and pastoral support, demonstrates key aspects of teaching excellence.

However, the University of Oxford continues to have reservations about the value of the TEF as currently constructed, and would welcome the opportunity to continue to participate in its recasting as it evolves. We are not convinced that, as currently conceived, the TEF will improve the quality of teaching across the sector, or that it will deliver more genuinely informed student choice.⁵⁴

Universities UK

Universities UK welcomes the government's commitment to encouraging excellent practice in teaching and learning through the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (the TEF). To ensure the TEF is effective in achieving this aim, we believe that it should be developed in line with the following principles. The TEF should:

- support institutional improvement of teaching
- give students useful information about teaching to inform choices
- respect the institutional diversity of the sector
- encourage pedagogical diversity and innovation
- preserve and promote the international reputation of the UK sector
- minimise bureaucratic processes and costs
- avoid perverse incentives or unfair market distortion

The UK higher education sector has a longstanding demonstrable commitment to improving and developing teaching and learning practice. This has translated into high levels of student satisfaction and attainment across the sector and the UK outperforming our international competitors. The TEF is a complex and innovative exercise that will only make an effective contribution to student

⁵⁴ University of Oxford, [Teaching Excellence Framework Technical Consultation Response](#) July 2016

decision making and teaching and learning practice if it is well designed and implemented.

Following the vote to leave the European Union, allied to the transition to the new regulatory framework as set out in the Higher Education and Research Bill, the UK higher education sector is now facing a period of significant instability. The recruitment of overseas students – particularly from the EU – is potentially at risk, and economic forecasts are increasingly challenging, both of which have implications for the financial sustainability of the sector.

In light of this it is essential that TEF 2, including its implementation and outcomes, is clearly treated and presented as a test exercise. Furthermore, future versions of the TEF, including piloting of discipline-level assessments, should not proceed until lessons about the impacts of TEF 2 have been learned.⁵⁵

MillionPlus

MillionPlus has had longstanding concerns about the criteria proposed for the TEF which were outlined in our response to the Green Paper that was published in November 2015.

We welcome the government's amendment of the timetable to delay the introduction of TEF Year Two and, by allowing universities to increase fees with inflation from 2017/18, the acknowledgement that the university experience requires investment if students are going to benefit from high quality teaching and academic support.

However, if the TEF Year Two is to be introduced, MillionPlus still believes that more thought needs to be given to how it is constructed before it is allowed to impact on the sector.⁵⁶

University and College Union

As outlined in our response to the Green Paper, we have fundamental concerns about the proposals to introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). We remain deeply concerned by any proposed link between quality as defined in the TEF and additional fee income, and will oppose any move to further increase the lifetime cost of higher education, which already sits at over £50,000 for the poorest undergraduates.

Everyone recognises the need to support high-quality teaching, but it is hard to see how many of the measures which have been proposed for the TEF will either measure quality or improve it. In particular, we remain concerned about the use of flawed, proxy metrics as indicators of 'teaching quality' and the increased bureaucracy and game playing that will result in the implementation of the TEF. We also believe that the introduction of the TEF will significantly undermine the linkages between teaching, scholarship and research embedded within higher education.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Universities UK, [Response to Teaching Excellence Framework Technical Consultation For Year 2](#), July 2016

⁵⁶ MillionPlus [Response, Teaching Excellence Framework Technical Consultation](#) 14 July 2016

⁵⁷ University and College Union, [Teaching Excellence Framework Technical Consultation response](#), 14 July 2016

For these reasons we call for BIS to withdraw the current proposals and work with the sector in coming up with alternative plans that genuinely recognise and support teaching quality.

National Union of Students

NUS has stated our general acceptance of the underlying criteria for teaching excellence, in the sense that they are broad principles, but we are fundamentally opposed to how they are being reduced to broad metrics.

We raised concerns over the imbalance in the government's focus on employer engagement over student engagement. We give evidence of why student engagement is an important factor in the development of excellent teaching and question whether employer engagement is always to the benefit of students.⁵⁸

10. Parliamentary debate on the TEF

There has not been a parliamentary debate on the TEF – however the TEF has been discussed on other occasions such as during the passage of the *Higher Education and Research Bill 2016*.

10.1 Higher Education and Research Bill 2016, Public Bill Committee debate

The TEF provisions were discussed during the Committee Stage of the Higher Education and Research Bill 2016. There were a number of lengthy debates in particular concerning the alleged lack of detail in the Bill on the TEF and the linking of TEF results to increases in tuition fees. Mr Gordon Marsden, the Shadow Minister for Further Education and Skills contended that the Government was attempting to avoid proper debate of the TEF:

By not putting the teaching excellence framework in the Bill in any shape or form other than the rather oblique way it is dealt with in clause 25, they have done their best to truncate any broad discussion of its merits or demerits or any attempt to address any of the significant concerns that have already been expressed.⁵⁹

The Minister reassured the Committee that Parliament would retain control over tuition fees and that they would, at most, rise in line with inflation. He further said that the lack of detail in the Bill was necessary to allow flexibility and to allow the TEF to adapt over time.

Members expressed concern about the reputational impact of the TEF on UK HE and about the reliability of the metrics.

Other concerns raised by members about the TEF included that it would: alienate young people, be administratively burdensome and that it could have perverse outcomes.

Schedule 2 of the Bill containing fee limits which would allow differential fees under the TEF was pressed to a vote and was passed by 11 votes to 7.

Clause 25 which would allow the Office for Students to administer the TEF also generated heated debate. Several opposition amendments to the clause were moved and Government amendments were agreed which would allow the devolved administrations to be given TEF ratings.

Library briefing paper CBP 7768 [Higher Education and Research Bill: Committee Stage Report](#), 26 October 2016, discusses the Committee debate on the TEF in detail on pages 26-28 and pages 34-36.

⁵⁹ Public Bill Committee 15 September 2016 (morning) c246

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