Annex A: Feedback from student representatives

This annex collates student feedback captured via: a document drafted by subject panel deputy chairs based on their experience of the first TEF subject pilot (2017-18), a focus group with a wider cohort of student subject panel members, and three focus groups with student representatives and their supporting staff who were not involved as panel members in the pilot, but some of whom were based at participating providers. The objective of the engagements was to explore how the TEF could be made more meaningful to students through developing the subject-level pilots.

Feedback on the subject pilot methodology

1. Students agreed that the TEF criteria should focus on what matters to and impacts most upon the experience and outcomes of students. Deputy panel chairs suggested that Teaching quality criterion 1 be split into two distinct aspects: student engagement with learning, and student partnership. This was supported by both providers and panel members.

2. Students felt that the data evidence base which highlights performance against the criteria and forms part of the TEF assessments should be as relevant as possible to what matters most to students. Given the importance of learning resources and student partnership to students, and the availability of relevant data (National Student Survey (NSS) learning resource and student voice questions), additional metrics should be developed and piloted.

3. Students agreed with Main Panel feedback that the subject pilots should clearly distinguish between what is being assessed at subject-level and provider-level throughout the criteria and ratings descriptors.

How can student engagement with submissions be strengthened?

4. Student panel members felt that evidence of meaningful student engagement with provider submissions was extremely important. It provides panel members, and ultimately applicants, with confidence that TEF judgements are based on evidence that is relevant to, and reflective of, student experience and outcomes. Furthermore, it ensures that TEF operates as a vehicle for supporting meaningful partnership between students and providers for ongoing improvement of the student experience and outcomes.

5. By engaging with submissions, students can support and endorse: the provider's unique approach to meeting the TEF criteria; how effective this approach is; and whether the provider has effectively dealt with, or is dealing with any issues raised by the metrics data with demonstrable impact. This is seen as particularly important given the view that the half-weighting of the NSS-based metrics, the lag in the data used for core metrics, and the current breadth of the Teaching quality 'student engagement' criterion, have led to a reduced focus on student-based evidence.

6. Student panel members often found it difficult to determine the level and effectiveness of student engagement with submissions. This was further complicated by the quality of the

submissions, and it was suggested that ways to improve the general quality of submissions could be explored. Students, especially student panel members, felt that there was such a degree of flexibility in approaches to writing and coordinating the submissions that student issues could easily be missed out. They agreed that this could be avoided by strengthening guidelines for providers on writing and coordinating submissions, and providing direct support for student representatives throughout the pilots to support their engagement.

7. Student panel members also recommended that the panels' focus on student issues could be increased by setting expectations for student input into, or alongside, the provider submission, if they chose to contribute. They agreed that this could take the form of: student comments or student representative comments (which are generally least trusted as they were felt to be 'cherry-picked'); student approval for provider submissions; a separate comments section for students in the provider submission; or a separate standalone student submission.

8. Student representatives across the focus groups and panels had a strong preference for having the option of writing an independent student commentary on the provider submission. Deputy chairs also felt that there should be strong encouragement for a version of the options above. Most students agreed that students should be able to choose which of the options set out above best suits them in terms of resource capabilities, and reflecting their approach to partnership. The student focus groups highlighted the potential for superficial engagement where providers have ultimate editorial oversight, and suggested that this could be mitigated through clear OfS communications and guidance, around the purpose and importance of student engagement. They also felt it would be useful to explore different assurance mechanisms, such as a student declaration that they had had the opportunity to be meaningfully engaged in the provider submission, and endorsed its content.

How effective were the student panel roles and what could be done to strengthen them?

9. Student panel members felt that the student roles generally worked very well. Their contributions were effective and for most panels, the chairs and other members made sure that they were fully integrated into discussions and decision-making. Panels worked best when student views were not 'singled out' as such, but where skilful chairs made all panel members feel included and respected. There were very few, if any, occasions for most panels where there was a split in rating judgement with students on one side and academics on the other.

10. Students felt it would be more effective to name the 'deputy chairs' as 'co-chairs', and provide more explicit opportunities for the students to chair cases at the meetings.

11. Students felt that they were able to focus panels on making judgements based on actual student outcomes and the impact of provider efforts on students. This was particularly important when academic peers may have been minded to 'give the benefit of the doubt' to providers that were making efforts to remedy issues but not yet demonstrating impact for students, or where evidence of excellence across aspects of the criteria more generally may have been 'thin', but metrics performance alone would dictate a more forgiving rating.

12. Students did however, still note a general, potential 'over-use' of the Silver category as a result of panel members feeling uncomfortable with Bronze descriptors and the impact of a Bronze award on the value of students' qualifications and staff morale at the providers.

13. The following ways of strengthening student roles in the TEF assessment were suggested:

    a. Appoint a student Co-chair to the Main Panel.

    b. More clearly define student deputy panel chair roles, and transparently recognise the valuable aspects of student roles more generally.

    c. Increase the proportions of students who are not 'deputies' to the Main Panel, and even consider increasing the proportion of academics to students to 50:50 on subject panels.

    d. Improve evidence available to allow student members to deploy their expertise on student issues (see paragraph 7).

    e. Improve messaging around communications of ratings, in particular the need to recognise Bronze as not failing, to enable the whole panel to feel more comfortable with using that category, given its likely impact on the perceived value of students' degrees and on staff morale at the provider.

    f. Improve training on metrics in particular. In addition, there should be a student session, separate from all of the joint sessions, recognising that students often would not have TEF specialists to call on from their day jobs (in the way that, for example, academic members might draw on planning colleagues).

    g. Improve training on how to assess submissions to ensure consistency and agreement on how to deal with poor submissions, especially for borderline cases.

    h. Improve diversity of panel members. Consider recruitment practices to readdress the lack of students of colour, international students, and students based at further education colleges.

    i. Build a network of student panel members from an early stage, to provide support.

    j. Improve support, including out-of-hours support for TEF IT systems for students.

Other student issues

14. Student panel members found the lack of international student representation problematic. The international student experience and voice in submissions, and evidence relating to international students in metrics, was felt to be almost non-existent across the panels. Action could be taken to review how far TEF focuses on international student issues, and how this area could be strengthened.

15. Student panel members were generally uncomfortable with the focus on employment outcomes, suggesting that this was overly strong and disproportionate. They felt there should be more explicit acknowledgement that for some students, and provider or subject missions, employment is not the 'end goal.' For example, students may already be in graduate-level level jobs or be 'leisure learners'.

16. They recommended that better measures of teaching excellence could be developed, or at least providers should be encouraged to present their own bespoke evidence of, for example, learning gain and distance travelled.

17. A number of widening participation issues were raised by student panel members. They felt that widening participation terminology could be updated to reflect the sector focus on student success. There is a clear read-across between widening participation issues and the rating descriptors, but student panel members were less confident that this had been consistently and robustly applied. They raised the concern that providers could get Gold or Silver ratings while failing a particular group of students. It was felt that:

    a. There should be analysis of negative flags for disadvantaged student splits and ultimate ratings.

    b. Widening participation needs its own section in panel training and calibration to ensure that panels are applying consistent tolerances or intolerances to widening participation issues when arriving at ratings. This should also explain how widening participation issues are considered as part of the eligibility requirements (i.e. what providers must have already demonstrated in relation to access and participation to meet quality and access and participation requirements.) This could be better supported by a clearer integration of widening participation experts across panels.

    c. Guidance to providers should explicitly require them to address any negative flag for disadvantaged students in their submission.

18. The student panel members felt that the rating descriptors could explicitly reference the effectiveness of practices undertaken by the provider to address any differences in student outcomes. This should include any attainment gaps, though this would require extra information about attainment from the provider.

19. The student panel members expressed a real concern for the possible unintended consequences of focusing on widening participation. The focus must be retained but carefully managed and monitored to avoid disincentivising widening participation intakes.

20. The panel members and student focus groups felt it was important to consider how TEF outcomes could better inform students and applicant choice. Statements of findings should be planned for subject-level, and clearly target the student and applicant audience.