



Department  
for Education

# **Teaching Excellence Framework: Lessons Learned**

**Summary policy document**

**September 2017**

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## Purpose

1. The government has considered the lessons learned from Year Two of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), for which outcomes were published on 22 June 2017. The lessons learned exercise has focused on the practical operation of the TEF in line with the commitments made earlier this year (see Annex A).

## Key Findings

2. The operation of Year Two of the TEF has demonstrated that the process has operated in a fair and transparent way.

3. Assessors were able to come to clear and robust findings on the basis of the metrics, provider submissions and guidance; the balance of evidence between metrics and submissions was broadly right; the moderation process worked well; and the results are generally perceived as credible and reflecting teaching excellence across the sector. Statistical analysis of the results has confirmed that there were no significant biases by region, gender, ethnicity, social disadvantage, subject breakdown and research income.

4. We are therefore making no changes to the overall structure or methodology of the TEF, and will be retaining the method and process of assessment, the centrality of peer review, the criteria, the ratings, the core metrics and the use of the provider submission. The lessons learned exercise did, however, also highlight a number of areas for improvement: either refinements to the existing assessment process to ensure excellence is fully recognised, or steps to strengthen the way that TEF holds providers to account for delivering excellent teaching.

## Refinements

5. Principal refinements to the assessment process include:

a) Weighting of National Student Survey (NSS) metrics

The NSS remains a key component of TEF but, in order to achieve a more balanced assessment, the weight of each NSS metric will be halved for the purposes of determining the initial hypothesis.

b) Part-time provision

In order to recognise excellence in part-time provision appropriately, we will offer providers with a majority of part-time provision the opportunity to submit an additional page of quantitative information alongside their metrics and refine the assessment procedure for providers with similar numbers of full-time and part-time students.

- c) Very high and low absolute values

Whilst benchmarking will remain at the heart of TEF assessment, the flagging and benchmarking system has limitations at the extreme ends of the metrics. We will therefore explicitly mark the top and bottom 10% of absolute values for each metric. These indicators will be taken into account in the calculation of the initial hypothesis, where a provider is not already flagged.

## Strengthening Accountability

6. The principal ways we will be strengthening the way that TEF holds providers to account for delivering excellent teaching include:

- a) Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data

We will include supplementary metrics derived from LEO data in order to exploit the rich data about graduate employment now available. As supplementary metrics, these will not affect the initial hypothesis but will be considered alongside the provider submission.

- b) Grade inflation metric

A new supplementary metric on grade inflation will be linked to the existing criterion on 'Rigour and Stretch' to aid assessors in making judgement in this area and allow providers that are taking genuine steps to tackle grade inflation to be recognised for doing so.

- c) Allow the Director for Fair Access, or successor, to comment on whether 'gaming' has taken place

The Director for Fair Access will have the opportunity to determine whether 'gaming' has taken place (i.e. a significant alteration in a provider's student profile since the last TEF assessment, that involves a reduction in the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups) so that panels can take this into account.

- d) Power of referral

Where the assessment process suggests concerns about the underlying quality of a provider, the TEF Chair will have the right to refer the provider to the Office for Students with a recommendation that the OfS should consider an investigation to confirm whether the provider continues to meet baseline quality requirements.

7. Further details on the principal changes are set out at Annex B.

## Next Steps

8. The full lessons learned report and TEF Specification will be published later in September 2017.
9. The findings of the lessons learned exercise will inform the operation of TEF until such time as the Independent Review concludes. This is expected to be for the assessment rounds taking place in 2017-18 and 2018-19 ('TEF Years Three and Four') at provider level.
10. HEFCE and, in future, the Office for Students, will publish annual procedural guidance which will, amongst other things, set out time-dependent elements for the relevant year, such as the dates on which the application window opens and closes.
11. In parallel to this, the subject pilots will take place, as will the consultation on subject-level TEF. The changes implemented as a result of this lessons learned exercise will also be implemented in the subject pilots that are taking place during 2017/18 and 2018/19. The purpose of these pilots and consultation is not to determine whether to proceed to subject-level assessment, but how to do so in the best and most proportionate way. The first full assessments for subject-level TEF will, as previously announced, take place in academic year 2019/20 ('TEF Year Five').

## Transition to the Office for Students and Independent Review

12. The Government intends to commence Clause 25 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) on 1 January 2018, in line with the creation of the Office for Students (OfS). Between January and April 2018, HEFCE will implement the TEF on behalf of the OfS and, from April, the OfS will be solely responsible. This will not cause disruption for providers involved in the process or for students.
13. We therefore anticipate the Independent Review will take place in academic year 2018/19, in line with the timetable set out in HERA. We intend for the Independent Review to report in time to determine the assessment specification for 2019/20, which will also be the first year of assessments at subject-level.
14. The assessments taking place in academic year 2019/20 will therefore constitute the completion of the TEF development process. At this point, subject to the findings of the Independent Review, we anticipate that TEF will move to a five-year cycle: TEF ratings will last for five years, with providers able to reapply for assessment either three, four or five years after their last application. This will deliver value for money for the sector and be a proportionate approach to adopt once the TEF has been independently reviewed.

## Annex A: Scope and Method

The TEF Year Two lessons learned exercise focused on six main issues:

- Whether the process of application and assessment worked smoothly and effectively;
- Whether the guidance to providers was clear and understandable;
- The way in which the metrics were used, in particular the use of significance flags and their role in generating initial hypotheses;
- The balance of evidence between core metrics and additional evidence;
- Whether commendations should be introduced for the next round of TEF assessments;
- The number and names of the different ratings and their initial impact internationally.

The lessons learned exercise was conducted by means of:

- a survey of all UK participating providers;
- a survey commissioned by Universities UK of its members
- feedback from students involved in the provider submission;
- feedback from the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland;
- feedback from key national stakeholders;
- feedback from panelists and assessors;
- desk-based research and analysis of TEF provider metrics;
- input from providers (and their representatives) who chose not to participate in the trial year, as well as those who did not have sufficient data to receive a full assessment. The tested subjects were the 5 most widely-taught in Europe: biology, chemistry, physics history and geography. Each jurisdiction tested their pupils in 2 of these subjects. In England, these were chemistry and physics.

## Annex B: Further detail on principal changes

### *Weighting of National Student Survey (NSS) metrics*

The three core metrics based on the NSS will have a weight of 0.5 each for the purposes of determining the initial hypothesis. The other three core metrics will continue to have a weight of 1.0 each. This will mean a consequential change in the way in which the initial hypothesis is calculated.

In order to determine the initial hypothesis, when looking at the delivery mode in which providers teach the most students:

- A provider with three or more positive flags in core metrics that have a total value of 2.5 or more (previously 3) and no negative flags should be considered initially as Gold.
- A provider with two or more negative flags in metrics that have a total value of 1.5 or more (previously 2) should be considered initially as Bronze, regardless of the number of positive flags.
- All other providers, including those with no flags at all, should be considered initially as Silver.

### *NSS Boycott*

The boycott had no impact on the metrics or results in TEF Year Two.

In future years, no provider shall suffer disadvantage as a result of the NSS boycott.

If a provider does not have reportable metrics for the 2017 National Student Survey and there is evidence of a boycott of the NSS by students at that provider, the provider shall be treated as if it had reportable metrics for that year for the purposes of eligibility and award duration.

A core metric for all providers will be constructed either by, as for other providers, aggregating across all three years (if the three-year response rate is above 50%) or, if this is not the case, omitting 2017 from the metrics calculation.

The guidance will explicitly instruct assessors to take care to ensure no provider, including those where the boycott did not cause the response rate to fall below 50%, suffers disadvantage as a result of the boycott.

### *Part-time provision*

For providers with similar numbers of full-time and part-time students, instead of the minority mode being considered in a similar way to a 'split', an initial hypothesis will be

calculated for each mode separately, before proceeding to subsequent stages of the assessment.

Providers with a significant proportion of part-time provision (over 35% by headcount) will have the opportunity to submit an additional page of quantitative information alongside their metrics on specified matters that relate to continuation and to progression to employment and further study. This information will be considered by the assessors alongside the metrics when determining the initial hypothesis.

Providers may choose not to submit this information or to submit information on only some of the matters specified. This will not be viewed negatively but will simply mean that the assessors rely solely on the metrics when determining the initial hypothesis.

### *Very high and low absolute values*

Although absolute values were already considered where an indicator had a high absolute value but was not flagged, in accordance with the Year 2 guidance, in future years we will explicitly mark the top and bottom 10% of absolute values for each metric in each mode of provision. These indicators will be visible on the core metrics page (indicated by a star for the top 10% and an exclamation mark for the bottom 10%) and will be taken into account by assessors when forming the initial hypothesis. In interpreting a very high absolute value, assessors will:

- If the core metric is positively flagged, a star will reinforce the assessor's judgement that the provider is performing exceptionally well in this area.
- If the core metric is unflagged, and does not have negative flags in any of its split metrics, a star will be considered in a similar way to a positive flag in determining the final position of the initial hypothesis.
- If the core metric has a negative flag, or has negative flags for any of its split metrics, a star will not be taken into account by assessors. This will ensure that a provider cannot gain credit for having high absolute values if it is significantly under-performing with respect to members of a disadvantaged group.

In interpreting a very low absolute value, assessors will:

- If the core metric is positively flagged, an exclamation mark will not be taken into account by assessors.
- If the core metric is unflagged, an exclamation mark will be considered in a similar way to a negative flag in determining the final position of the initial hypothesis.
- If the core metric has a negative flag, an exclamation mark will reinforce the assessor's judgement that the provider is performing exceptionally poorly in this area.

As in Year Two, assessors will be able to consider all evidence holistically in the final stage of determining a provider's rating.

### *Benchmarking factors*

Any alterations to the benchmarking factors as a result of the HEFCE statistical review will be set out in the TEF specification.

### *Local students*

Challenges faced by local students were taken into consideration in TEF Year Two when raised in the provider submission. However, in future years the guidance to assessors will now also explicitly refer to local students.

### *Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data*

We will include supplementary metrics derived from LEO data. As supplementary metrics, these will not affect the initial hypothesis but will be considered alongside the provider submission. Assessors will therefore be able to use their academic judgement to weight evidence from this source alongside other evidence from the metrics and provider submission.

The supplementary LEO metrics will provide evidence against all three of the criteria under Student Outcomes and Learning Gain: Employment and Further Study (SO1), Employability and Transferrable Skills (SO2), and Positive Outcomes for All (SO3). LEO metrics will be benchmarked, flagged and split in a similar way to core metrics.

The two metrics are:

- The proportion of graduates in sustained employment or further study three years after graduation; and
- The proportion of graduates in sustained employment earning over the median salary for 25-29 year olds<sup>1</sup> or in further study.

The median salary for 25-29 year olds is currently £21,000. The figure is drawn from the ONS/HMRC publication *Personal Incomes Statistics 2014-15*, which is a survey of income data from HMRC and DWP and will be updated annually. This figure is below the starting salary for most modestly paying but socially valuable graduate jobs such as nursing, teaching or midwifery and the metric therefore records such outcomes as being equally valuable as higher paying professions such as banking or law. This issue was considered as part of some provider submissions and the use of LEO metrics provides a further way in which these considerations can be incorporated into the assessment process.

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<sup>1</sup> Rounded to the nearest £500.

The guidance will remind assessors that the LEO data is currently experimental and, in particular, does not yet include data from self-assessment tax records. The proportion of graduates with self-assessment records will be included as contextual information.

### *Grade inflation metric*

As a supplementary metrics, the grade inflation metric will not affect the initial hypothesis but will be considered alongside the provider submission. Assessors will therefore be able to use their academic judgement to weight evidence from this source alongside other evidence from the metrics and provider submission.

The supplementary grade inflation metric will record the proportion of firsts, 2:1s and other grades as a percentage of all classified degrees at that provider 1, 2, 3 and 10 years before the year of assessment. It will be collected by a mandatory declaration from all providers that apply for assessment.

The supplementary grade inflation metric will provide evidence against criterion Rigour and Stretch (TQ3). If grade inflation has occurred, this will be considered evidence of reducing rigour and stretch. If grade inflation has not occurred, or has been tackled, this will be considered evidence of maintaining or increasing rigour and stretch.

The purpose of the grade inflation metric will be solely to evidence whether or not grade inflation has taken place. Assessors should not consider the proportion of 2:1s and firsts to provide evidence as to the quality of teaching; the proportion of each grade awarded is determined entirely by individual degree awarding providers and can provide no positive evidence as to the excellence of teaching or outcomes at that provider.

### *Allow the Director for Fair Access, or successor, to comment on whether 'gaming' has taken place*

The Director for Fair Access<sup>2</sup> will have the opportunity to determine whether 'gaming' has taken place (i.e. a significant alteration in a provider's student profile since the last TEF assessment, that involves a reduction in the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups).

In extreme cases, if the Director for Fair Access is confident that a provider has 'gamed' the TEF deliberately, with a principal aim of reducing the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to improve their TEF metrics, this could lead to a provider being disqualified.

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<sup>2</sup> Or, in future, the Director for Fair Access and Participation

The Director for Fair Access will not assess or consider a provider's absolute student profile, only changes in a provider's student profile since its last TEF assessment.

The specification will set out in more detail the precise mechanism whereby this will be implemented, including setting out how providers will be engaged in the process if the Director for Fair Access is considering making such a finding.

#### *Power of referral*

Where the assessment process suggests concerns about the underlying quality of a provider, the TEF Chair will have the right to refer the provider to the Office for Students with a recommendation that the OfS should consider an investigation to confirm whether the provider continues to meet baseline quality requirements.

The OfS will take account of this and consider carefully whether further action should be taken under baseline quality assessment to investigate whether these providers continue to meet baseline quality requirements. Should a subsequent investigation determine that a provider is not meeting baseline quality requirements, a provider may lose its TEF rating.

If the provider is in the devolved administrations, the TEF Chair will instead inform the head of the relevant funding authority in that nation. It will be entirely at the discretion of the relevant funding authority as to whether any further action is taken.



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