

Teaching Excellence Framework – what is it and what could it mean for students?

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Overview

The government has announced that it wishes to implement a 'teaching excellence framework' to try and drive up the quality of teaching in English higher education institutions. They have also announced that those institutions deemed excellent by the framework will be allowed to raise their tuition fees in line with inflation. The name of this measure is inspired by the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a system for assessing the 'quality' of research in UK HE institutions, which is used by public research funding bodies to inform how they allocate grants.

NUS completely opposes any attempt to further raise tuition fees, and believes that students have a right to excellent education, no matter where they choose to study.

There are no set ideas at this time about what a teaching excellence framework might look like, and the government are intending to formally consult in the Autumn. This creates a crucial opportunity for students' unions and students to form a narrative about how teaching excellence should be driven, encouraged and supported in our institutions, and how, if at all, a national framework would help reach our goals.

There are four key aspects of a framework that need to be considered when developing a teaching excellence framework that will work for students:

- What is our definition of teaching excellence?
- What should a teaching excellence framework aim to achieve?
- How do you measure excellence?
- How should teaching excellence be assessed?

There are some additional questions that need to be asked in relation to the particular context that an English teaching excellence framework is being developed in:

- How does/should a framework link to the Quality Assessment Review?
- How can/should be students be involved as partners in both these processes?
- How will linking a framework to fees change institutional behaviours in ways that could undermine the original aims?
- Is a national framework what students even want or need (right now)?

We explore some of these questions below, however, this needs to be the start of a conversation with students' unions. Please respond to the [Quality Assessment Review](#) by 18 September and watch out for upcoming consultation events run by NUS.

Let us know what you think in the meantime. We are only able to develop robust responses that are reflective of what students think if you tell us. Please pick up the phone or email with any initial thoughts, ideas or questions.

Sorana Vieru (Vice President Higher Education)
e: sorana.vieru@nus.org.uk

Bethan Dudaš (Policy Engagement Manager)
t: 07939529278
e: bethan.dudas@nus.org.uk

What is the Teaching Excellence Framework?

The 2015 Conservative Manifesto contained a commitment to '[introduce a framework to recognise universities offering the highest teaching quality](#)' (p.35). This commitment was embedded in a wider set of promises about higher education, and was assumed by many to be a 'nice to have' in an election that at the time was thought to deliver another coalition, rather than a majority government.

However, following the success of the Conservative Party in winning a majority in May, Jo Johnson MP was appointed to become Minister for Universities and Science and co-incidentally was a key player in writing the Conservative Manifesto and a champion of including a teaching excellence framework in the manifesto.

Jo Johnson used one of his first speeches to the higher education sector to further detail his vision for a [Teaching Excellence Framework in July 2015](#). In particular he outlined the aims to be:

- to ensure all students receive an excellent teaching experience that encourages original thinking, drives up engagement and prepares them for the world of work
- to build a culture where teaching has equal status with research, with great teachers enjoying the same professional recognition and opportunities for career and pay progression as great researchers
- to stimulate a diverse HE market and provide students with the information they need to judge teaching quality – in the same way they can already compare a faculty's research rating
- to recognise those institutions that do the most to welcome students from a range of backgrounds and support their retention and progression to further study or a graduate job

Shortly after this speech, George Osborne MP, Chancellor for the Exchequer announced in the [Emergency Budget speech](#) his intention to 'link the student fee cap to inflation for those institutions that can show they offer high-quality teaching.' In essence, this means allowing institutions that have been deemed 'excellent' at teaching through a teaching excellence framework to raise their tuition fees. It is intended that this will take effect from 2017-18.

Beyond this speech and the budget announcement, Jo Johnson and the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) have few set ideas about what a TEF might look like. What we do know is that in addition to aims, they want a system to be 'light touch' and include outcomes based metrics.

As such, they are now conducting an informal conversations with the higher education sector to develop into a formal consultation ([Green Paper](#)) in the autumn.

Challenges with a Teaching Excellence Framework

This public discussion about teaching excellence has brought important challenges to students' unions thinking about how we can organise to secure the best results for students. There is no doubt that students and students' unions want teaching to be excellent on their courses. There are some critical questions about the ability of any form of national framework to create this. However, one might argue that drawing on the evidence and expertise from students and

academics, a framework could support institutions to develop and enhance their teaching practice. Currently, all of this possibility is completely undermined the moment any form of financial reward is attached – particularly when it is in relation to tuition fees.

When taken in the context of other priorities of the sector, and this government – in particular the need to maintain the global reputation on UK higher education – there is little chance that any Minister for Universities and Science will allow a system which identifies only a small number of institutions to be 'excellent' – the imperative for all to be 'excellent' is too strong. Not only will this result in full-scale fee increases; it will render any system that attempts to identify, develop and share our collective understanding of excellent teaching meaningless. The need to ensure 'success' in an excellent framework linked to fees will ultimately drive behaviours which result in negative consequences for both teachers and students in order to play the system – a claim which is often levelled at the Research Excellence Framework.

In addition, there is also no way a proposed system would allow the type of institution that is typically seen to excel in teaching, often the less 'prestigious' institutions, to be able to raise fees over and above those that typically do not, which are often the more 'prestigious' institutions.

Ultimately, undergraduate students are currently paying £9,000 per year already – if that doesn't mean they get excellent teaching, what does? Creating a system where students have to pay an additional premium to gain access to what should be a basic expectation – excellent teaching – is wholly unacceptable and entrenches elitism.

NUS will never be able to support any policy agenda that includes tuition fee rises. It is dangerous to link fees with an agenda aimed at building consensus across our diverse sector, and has potential to support the development of teaching excellence beyond the tired and narrow definition currently held by many in power today. To link teaching excellence with an agenda which is so divisive and dangerous will only condemn any attempt to enhance teaching excellence to failure.

What do we think a teaching excellence framework could be?

At the moment, there are no set ideas about the specifics of a teaching excellence framework from government. This gives us, as a student movement, a powerful opportunity to shape any framework into something genuinely meaningful and to oppose any measures we deem counterproductive or harmful. Following an informal discussion day with sabbatical officers from across England, we have developed some early thoughts.

This is the start of the discussion, not the end of it, and we invite you to send us any thoughts and ideas you have to further shape our response as a movement.

What does teaching excellence look like?

- Excellent teaching happens at disciplinary level, but institutions are responsible for creating an environment in which it can thrive.
- Excellent teaching is inclusive and enables all students to learn and be successful.
- Excellent teaching is a narrow frame: what students care about is excellent learning – which includes teaching, independent study, assessment and a physical and intellectual environment that stimulates this.
- Excellent teaching is enabled and supported to take risks and to innovate

- Excellent teaching happens in a team – drawing on knowledge and expertise of a wide range of people, including students.

What should the core aims of an excellence framework be?

Core aims:

- To enable diverse students to develop as autonomous learners through taking an evidence-based strategic approach to the learning and teaching culture at an institution.
- Make demonstrable progress in creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments in which a student's likelihood of access and success is not affected by their gender, social background, race, sexuality or disability status.
- Innovate in creating novel and holistic approaches to learning, teaching and personal development that speak to the challenges and opportunities we face in 21st-century society and equip students to be active citizens including, but not limited to, in their future employment.
- Recognise and reward the teaching and professional support staff and students who make a contribution to enhancing the curriculum or co-curriculum (rather than simply rewarding good teaching).
- To collectively increase our understanding of how to enable and deliver teaching excellence

How could teaching excellence be measured?

Any set of indicators would need to take account of the diversity of context and approach across institutions and across disciplines. As such, it would make sense to have a baseline set of indicators based on evidence that can be added to by individual departments, based on their own specific definition of excellence (which we would expect to be developed in partnership with students). It is also clear that any set of measures would need to include qualitative information as well as quantitative data. For example, publishable case studies explaining how a discipline has shown substantial improvement in driving excellent student outcomes in that subject.

Baseline indicators would need to be controlled to ensure that data is both robust and contextualised for factors such as student demographics or predominant mode of study e.g. to take account of distance learning. As far as possible they should be derived from work that academics are already doing, and not add to academic workload. It will be important to consider the needs of a teaching excellence framework in reviewing and developing existing surveys particularly the National Student Survey (NSS), the UK Engagement Survey (UKES) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), recognizing the latter two are currently confidential to the institution. It is also important to note that measures of 'student satisfaction' are not, and should not be used as proxy information for excellent learning. NSS data should only ever be used as an indicator for further investigation and inquiry in partnership with students and staff. We discuss in detail how measures only based on consumer satisfaction are reductive in our [Manifesto for Partnership](#).

Baseline indicators worth exploring and/or developing could include:

Learning environment

- Average class size at UG and PG levels
- Percentage of staff with teaching qualifications or in good standing with an established professional body
- Academic staff development & training opportunities and support networks
- Development of early years teachers
- Percentage of UG and PG courses with named and trained student representatives

- Learning resources (NSS, PTES)
- Learning community e.g. students working with other students (UKES)
- Innovation, evaluation and dissemination of practice
- Skills exchange*

Academic processes

- Student agreement that feedback is constructive and/or prompt (NSS)
- Ratio of formative to summative assessments
- Course challenge (UKES)
- Active learning (UKES)
- Engagement with research, inquiry and scholarship (UKES)
- Student voice

Outcomes

- Attainment gap(s)
- Student judgements about teaching excellence, for example, derived from student-led teaching award data
- External peer references on teaching excellence
- Value added or learning gain
- Global citizenship **

* We are not confident in the use of employment outcomes as a measure of quality and excellence as we do not believe that these tell us very much about the quality of learning. However, it might alternatively be possible to develop an indicator of the extent to which departments are engaged with the external environment and create opportunities for students to develop appropriate professional and personal capabilities *where applicable* either through employer or community-engaged curricula, provision of co-curricular opportunities, work placements, study abroad or the equivalent.

** Many higher education providers aspire to produce global citizens but it is not always very clear what is meant by global citizenship. There is an opportunity to develop an understanding of how to capture the development of graduate attributes that are associated with global citizenship such as creativity, change agency, social conscience and intercultural awareness. This could also enable accreditation or recognition of students' contribution to their learning environment and wider community.

Of course, we must be exceptionally cautious in understanding the different behaviours any measures may incentivise within the context of a framework not attached to fees, and one that is linked to being able to raise fees. For example, a measure aimed at encouraging teaching to become more inclusive may involve measuring improvements in narrowing the BME attainment gap. This is a complex and important aspect of excellent teaching, which if done properly takes time and effort. Of course, with the prospect of annual increases of fees, institutions will be incentivised to find quicker fixes – perhaps reducing the number of BME students, or only selectively recruiting BME students who would be sure to succeed in the current teaching environment. Changing the student body to fit the current system is far easier than changing the system itself.

Of course, these are currently theoretical consequences – what is abundantly clear is that whatever metrics and evidence is used, it will need to be thoroughly tested and assessed to ensure that the behaviours of institutions do not ultimately undermine its original core aims.

How could teaching excellence be assessed?

For a teaching excellence framework to be effective the judgements it uses must be credible and based on the views of academic staff, education experts and students. It must incentivise departments to develop their practice and use and create evidence, which takes time. If it is to produce information that helps students to understand the different types of excellence available then all departments must take part and the information must be relatively current, for example, no more than three years old.

All this adds up to a fairly labour intensive (and consequently, expensive) process – albeit not quite as labour intensive as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). However, this might be acceptable if the assessment process was considered to be credible, if it avoided creating added labour for academics and a true reflection of the efforts of departments in improving teaching and learning outcomes with students.

The involvement of students as external reviewers is crucial to ensuring a teaching excellence framework is relevant and meaningful to students and includes students as stakeholders in the determination of teaching excellence. All members of assessment panels, including students, would need adequate support and training to carry out their role.

Whilst, as a movement, we have made huge wins in ensuring that students are included as partners in decision making over the years, we all know that there are still arguments to be won. Perhaps the biggest of these is the often deeply held belief that students are not equipped to be able to judge excellent teaching, as they are not educational experts.

Of course, students' unions have contributed significantly towards challenging this, particularly through projects such as Student Led Teaching Awards. Ensuring that students are equally included in how teaching excellence is assessed will be a key issue for students' unions to push for in the coming consultation.

However, by tying the outcomes of an assessment to fee increases, the question of who does the assessing becomes all the more pressured. The desire of those in positions of greater power (institutions) to share and give power to those with less (students) is dramatically reduced in relation to the increased "risk" posed to an institution's bottom line.

The plot thickens – what about the quality?

In October last year – long before the General Election – the funding councils for England, Wales and Northern Ireland announced that they would be reviewing how quality of higher education would be assessed (Scotland are also conducting their own separate review). There are clear links between a teaching excellence framework and quality assessment, and we would strongly encourage students' unions to respond to the current consultation. It closes on 18 September – we have written a short guide to responding to the consultation here:

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/review-of-quality-assessment>

There is consensus across most of the higher education sector in agreeing that both quality assessment and teaching excellence must align together – creating duplication and unnecessary bureaucracy will only serve to divert staff and students away from the most important task – actually delivering excellent education.

Considering our assessment that excellent teaching happens at discipline level, and that the institution is responsible for developing an environment that supports this to flourish, the

institution-wide metric approach is more suitable for assessing that threshold standards are being met than for enabling differentiating judgements of excellence. The individuals who should be meaningfully engaging with teaching excellence are heads of department and programme leads, working with students through subject representatives, academic societies and other means.

The judgement of excellence of any given department or subject area can include metric-based assessment *only* to the extent that these truly shed light on quality, but must also include contextual and qualitative information given that many of the available metrics, particularly employment outcomes, have only a loose relationship to learning and teaching quality.

The quality assessment regime should focus at the level of the institution. It should make effective use of a range of institution-wide metrics that are associated with academic quality and have been determined in partnership with academic staff and students within the institution. In addition, qualitative self-assessment information validated by external adjudicators should also be used. Quality assessment should include an assessment of the quality of the environment and infrastructure for enabling the pursuit of excellence in learning and teaching such as staff reward structures, policies, provision of staff development opportunities, arrangements for inducting and training postgraduate teachers and breadth and depth of student engagement in learning and teaching enhancement.

A teaching excellence framework should build on the quality assessment process and would likely use some of the same metrics. It should be administered at the departmental or subject level, seeking to promote and incentivise the collective evidence-based pursuit of excellence within subject communities of staff and students. Its focus should be on evidencing how established or innovative approaches foster positive outcomes for students.

What next?

Please respond to the Quality Assessment Review consultation:

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/review-of-quality-assessment>

It is essential that we draw out the importance of aligning both these agendas with each other – but more importantly with the needs of students from all backgrounds.

There will be a Green Paper published in the Autumn. We will run a number of consultation events – both in person and online to develop our collective opinions on a response. Watch this space.

Let us know what you think in the meantime. We are only able to develop robust responses that are reflective of what students think if you tell us. We also encourage you to discuss these questions with academic staff, especially your SUs allies as they could have interesting points to raise. Please pick up the phone or email with any initial thoughts, ideas or questions.

Sorana Vieru (Vice President Higher Education)

t: 07596097028

e: sorana.vieru@nus.org.uk

Bethan Dudaš (Policy Engagement Manager)

t: 07939529278

e: bethan.dudas@nus.org.uk