HEA reflections on Evidencing teaching excellence

Overview

“No higher education system in the world has hitherto released such a fabulous resource for understanding teaching”

[Husbands, C. (2017) Universities, don’t rest on your laurels – use the TEF to improve. The Guardian. 23 June]

With Professor Chris Husbands, chair of the TEF2 panel, exhorted Higher Education Providers (HEPs) to use the TEF outputs to improve student learning experiences and performance. A large element of these outputs was the provider submissions: narratives of up to 15 pages, these submissions were designed to provide a case for excellence, with providers being asked to concentrate on “demonstrating the impact and effectiveness of teaching on the student experience and outcomes they achieve” (HEFCE, 2016/32, p.42.).

The submissions played – contrary to some expectations – a key part in the “metric-led, not metric determined” (Husbands, 2017) TEF process: 64 (22% of all submissions, or 28% if Provisional awards are excluded) providers saw their rating change from that indicated by the initial metric-determined hypothesis. These cases for excellence did, then, impact the TEF award level.

How that impact played out during assessment panel discussions cannot be determined. Indeed, if we compare the Gold HEI so confident in its metrics that it submitted less than 150 words with the Bronze FEC that did not submit a narrative and was downgraded from an initial metrics-determined hypothesis of Silver, we can see how difficult it is to presume the role of submissions in the holistic judgement.

Nevertheless, regardless of role, these narratives provide an undeniably rich source of evidence for both teaching excellence and impact evaluation practice. As such, the HEA commissioned ARC Network to conduct an analysis of all provider submissions achieving a Gold, Silver or Bronze award, as well as of the statements of findings for so-called “upgraded providers”. This analysis, which holds a mirror up to the submissions, is
Writing about teaching excellence

The report illustrates that the stronger submissions were those with a clear narrative story, those that responded to their metrics in a proactive manner, those that were able to make clear links between themes and criteria, and those evidencing embedded provision. Ultimately, the strongest submissions were those that articulated a clear institutional identity, that wound that identity throughout their narrative, and that provided a coherent and convincing story as to how this identity impacts on and is played out in the TEF criteria.

On the one hand, this encourages providers to “know who they are”, to be authentic to their mission, vision, values and ethos, and to translate this into practice, policy and culture. In short, it encourages providers to understand the why rather than the what: Why do you exist and why do you do what you do, in the way you do it?

We might assume that it is easier to articulate such a narrative if you are a small specialist, a conservatoire or an arts school with fewer subject areas and a more defined pedagogy, and this might explain the prevalence of such institutions – and of small HEIs more generally – achieving a Gold award. Or it might be easier for
those very large institutions who are more often confronted with the difficulty of tackling the “identity question”, who again feature strongly in the Gold category. However, what about those who do not have the advantage of size, those less familiar with articulating such narratives, or those whose HE offering comprises a fraction of their profile and thus is perhaps less integrated into their overall identity? **Do such institutions’ profiles act as an obstacle to TEF success?**

Similarly, strong submissions were those that **connected their narratives to TEF criteria**, be that through structuring accordingly or by cross-referencing to specific criteria indicators (e.g. TQ1, LE1 etc.). Much like writing a supporting statement in a job application, those that explicitly guided the panel as to how the evidence they chose to present met the TEF definition of teaching excellence were more likely to be successful. At first, such a finding may seem innocuous, harmless even; but again we must ask, **what of those less familiar with writing such narratives? To what extent were they disadvantaged in the TEF process not by what they did, but by how this was presented?**

**Defining teaching excellence**

Although high-achieving providers were more likely to align their narratives to the TEF criteria, what institutions used to evidence teaching excellence under each criterion differed. For example, explorations of staffing were found under or cross-referenced to TQ1, TQ2, LE1, LE2, SO1 and SO2. Hence, the mapping of the submissions in the report is categorised not according to the TEF criteria but instead according to five emergent themes: i) institutional level aspects, structures and processes; ii) staffing factors; iii) teaching delivery factors; iv) support for learning; and v) wider support and experiences of students.

On the one hand, such a diversity of interpretations about what belongs to which criteria illustrates how the TEF2 process allowed for, and perhaps even encouraged, institutional distinctiveness to be communicated: it is precisely this that leads to an overall impression of sector vibrancy and diversity. This was also seen in institutional interpretations of specific criteria or themes themselves: for example, while “personalised learning” (LE3) was referred to by almost four-fifths of submissions, varying interpretations were given including conceptions of student choice/tailoring of modules, individualisation of support from personal tutors, and tailoring of co-curricular interventions. Similarly, while several submissions (35%) referred specifically to “students as partners”, interpretations of the term ranged from student representation on committees, to students as researchers, to students co-creating the curriculum.

There is, however, also a potential problem here: if institutions interpret criteria, themes and even teaching excellence differently, **how much confidence can we have a) in understanding these terms as they apply to the UK HE sector and b) in a process that assesses institutions on such differently interpreted**

“The submissions illustrate that higher education providers are proud of their provision and are keen to highlight aspects of excellence in undergraduate education and to demonstrate their commitment to teaching that meets the needs of students and other stakeholders. While some key themes emerged from the mapping, overall, the submissions are incredibly diverse and give a rich portrayal of the vibrancy and plethora of approaches.”

Extract from *Evidencing teaching excellence: Analysis of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF2) provider submissions.*
What does teaching excellence comprise?

We are not, of course, arguing that teaching excellence – or related terminology – should be narrowly defined. A key value of the UK HE sector is, we believe, the distinctiveness of institutions and the flexibility with which they can operate and develop their own versions of excellent teaching. Further, at the moment, the TEF appears to be achieving a delicate balancing of institutional identity and sector diversity with a government-driven interpretation of teaching excellence. However, there is a risk that, as institutions seek to achieve Gold awards, teaching excellence becomes narrowed to a dominant interpretation of the TEF criteria and so leads to a homogenising of the sector, rather than a celebration of its diversity. To combat this, those leading the TEF should consider formalising within its processes flexibility in, and celebration of, institutional understandings of, approaches to and outcomes from teaching excellence and should utilise the submissions themselves in their future developments of the framework.

Indeed, there are lessons to be learned from what institutions chose to submit as evidence in favour of teaching excellence. So, we find that despite the introduction of a teaching intensity metric in the subject-level TEF pilots, and despite the inclusion of contact time in TQ1, only two-fifths of submissions discussed contact time / hours and less than 30% referred to student-staff ratios, suggesting that this was not a strongly agreed upon criterion for teaching excellence.

Conversely, over three-quarters of submissions (77%) mentioned approaches to securing teaching qualifications, and over two-thirds mentioned HEA Fellowship (though this figure was much higher for HEIs than FECs). This suggests that teaching qualifications are seen as a criterion for teaching excellence, despite the ruling out of their inclusion as a TEF metric, and their absence in the TEF2 criteria. If TEF leaders take seriously the submissions’ approaches to teaching excellence, they might have to reconsider current developments.

More generally, the practices and approaches cited in the submissions were notable more for their sheer range than any particular innovation or activity, and this was seen both across the submission corpus and in individual narratives (though Gold award providers tended to include more of a range than those with a Bronze award).

Rather, the submissions illustrated that teaching excellence is less about what is done and more about how. So, stronger submissions were more likely to discuss mechanisms for teaching practices and teaching innovations, such as funding arrangements, use of dedicated teams, opportunities to share practice and research, rewarding staff, offering staff sabbatical/secondment opportunities, student-led research projects, and external partnerships and collaborations.

They were also more likely to discuss a joined up approach to teaching excellence, linking not just vision and practice as noted above, but also theory and practice and initiatives and course design. For example, in relation to employability, while statements of findings to Silver upgraded providers tended to refer to opportunities for students to engage with employers, those upgraded to Gold were more likely to receive feedback regarding the linking of this engagement to course design.
Finally, at the core of all high-achieving submissions was how their **practices and mechanisms for teaching excellence fostered student engagement** (which was variously defined and approached), with more than half of providers who were upgraded being commended for student engagement, particularly upgraded Gold award providers. That the TEF metrics do not measure this has been well rehearsed during the TEF2 process. However, the HEA UK Engagement Survey (UKES) does and those providers involved in UKES often discussed it within their submissions, either as evidence for impact of practice on student engagement or as a mechanism by which institutions can pinpoint areas of future enhancement (or as an intention to use UKES in the future for these purposes).

"Some providers used responses from UKES to consider the efficacy of initiatives to support employability and graduate attributes. Others commented on how questions from the UKES had been adapted for use in internal module evaluation surveys. One Gold FEC, for instance, said that adapting and using the UKES internally with students through their VLE allowed them to discuss learning and studying approaches while students are on programme. This was said to be especially important as a large share of students were outside the NSS population."

Extract from *Evidencing teaching excellence: Analysis of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF2) provider submissions.*
Evidencing teaching excellence

As noted above, the TEF2 provider submissions were explicitly required to demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of teaching on the student experience and outcomes they achieve. It was notable in the research that while a range of evidence mechanisms were used in the support for institutional claims to teaching excellence (e.g. attainment figures, retention rates, qualitative research, UKES etc.), overall the submissions showed a lack of systematic evaluation of impact. Further, where evaluation of impact did appear, this tended to relate to specific pedagogic interventions or innovations rather than being institution-wide.

HEA support of teaching excellence

Indeed, while we were delighted to see the HEA’s work appearing so regularly in the submissions, illustrating how we have supported the sector over the years in the pursuit of teaching excellence, we will be taking our own lessons from them and developing our offerings accordingly.

HEA mentions within the submissions ranged from accreditation and recognition for staff, sharing of expertise and good practice, development of pedagogic research and case studies, and support for the development of pedagogy through our frameworks, strategic programmes, funding opportunities and consultancy offer. It included references to the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, our surveys and use of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR). HEA activity was particularly mentioned in relation to supporting student engagement generally and in supporting targeted initiatives (such as our work on closing attainment gaps between White and BAME students).
Such prevalence of the HEA across the submissions suggests that we are moving in the right direction to accomplish our mission of improving learning outcomes by raising the status and quality of teaching in higher education. This is perhaps best reflected in the strong overlap between the TEF2 report recommendations for improving teaching excellence, derived solely from the submission analysis, and our key drivers for positive change in our framework for student success (developed in 2015/16).
Regarding higher education providers, teaching excellence:

1. Requires approaches to be embedded.
2. Is supported by a clear vision for teaching excellence, demonstrably translated into action, and corresponding to mission and context.
3. Draws on course design features which promote student engagement and offers opportunities for the linking of theory to practice.
4. Draws on evidence-based approaches to student support for achieving the best student outcomes.
5. Is outward facing, demonstrating the relevance for professions and employment.
6. Is underpinned by an institutional culture of recognition, reward and development, and assuring the competency of staff.

However, it is clear that this support is not reaching all providers: while 95% of HEIs mentioned the HEA, only 54% of FECs did so (though Gold FECs were much more likely to mention the HEA than Bronze (79% vs 37%)). The onus is on us to ensure our reach extends to FECs and that our offering is suited to this sector. Further, while HEA mentions ran the gamut of our provision, it was clear that our previous funding opportunities were particular catalysts for pedagogic innovation. While our ability to offer funding opportunities is limited post removal of government funding, it is clear that we must consider what it was about this funding that catalysed enhancement and ensure that we make this a key part of future activity.

“The HEA’s role in supporting strategic development of provision through their strategic enhancement and change programmes came out strongly. For example, a Silver award HEI commented on the importance of the HEA Vice-Chancellors Strategic Excellence Initiative to the evolution of an institutional strategy to address the gap in attainment between White and BAME background students.”

Extract from *Evidencing teaching excellence: Analysis of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF2) provider submissions.*
Finally, we will be utilising the findings of the report – as in the example of impact evaluation mentioned above – to understand where our offering might best be focused (i.e. which areas need the most support, which are most effective etc.) and develop accordingly. The HEA is committed to supporting teaching excellence and welcomes the findings found within the report that illustrate both where we are doing well, but also where we might improve to best support the sector over the coming years.

Evidencing teaching excellence: Analysis of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF2) provider submissions highlights that the UK HE sector is passionate about and dedicated to the achievement of teaching excellence for the enhancement of student success. The mapping of the submissions displays the breadth, vitality and vibrancy of our universities, colleges and alternative providers, and there are examples of great practice from across all three levels of award. However, there are concerns to be had: there is a danger that the TEF preferences those with certain institutional profiles and those more familiar with writing such narratives; there is a risk that as the TEF continues, the definition of teaching excellence will narrow and lead to a homogenising of the sector; and there is a real need to ensure our HE providers are adequately resourced (financially and in relation to such activities as impact evaluation) to best deliver student success.

Finally, there is indication that future developments in TEF (such as the introduction of a teaching intensity metric) runs counter to how HEPs are currently achieving teaching excellence. Indeed, as the TEF begins to see further changes (such as the addition of grade inflation metric and the reduction in weighting of the NSS), there is a danger that it moves increasingly further away from teaching excellence, becoming instead a magic wand for policymakers’ latest concerns.

In closing, we return to the Chris Husbands’ quote with which we began: yes, providers should learn from the TEF outputs in their pursuance of teaching excellence; however, those involved in leading the TEF and its developments, the government in its decision-making activities regarding higher education, and we at the HEA (as well as other sector agencies) must also learn from the submissions. These are not just repositories of teaching excellence but also strong indicators of what we should – and should not – be doing in our future endeavours to support the higher education sector. It is up to us to listen to them and act accordingly.

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