

The Teaching Excellence and Students Outcomes Framework—how it has affected higher education providers

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Local Government analysis: The Office for Students has announced the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) results for 2019. Tom Morrison, partner and head of further education at Stone King, assesses the impact on higher education providers in the three years TEF has been running.

Original news

Office for Students awards 76 gold awards in teaching excellence and student outcomes framework, [LNB News 20/06/2019 58](#)

The Office for Students has announced the results of the TEF assessment. The total number of higher education providers in the UK subject to TEF assessments is 282. Out of these, 204 are continuing from previous assessments and 78 are new participants. In 2019, the Office for Students awarded 76 gold awards, 132 silver and 60 bronze.

How has the TEF system worked in practice over the last three years?

There has been a marked impact on higher education (HE) providers in the three years TEF has been running. This does not just affect universities—colleges being major providers of HE in widening participation for example. The publication of the first full set of results in 2017 sparked wide-spread controversy across the sector. Several Russell Group universities in particular expressed deep concern around the subjective elements involved in the rankings. Over time, however, views in the market appear to have settled somewhat. This year saw 64 providers reapplying with a view to increasing their award and 14 providers applying for the first time. The continued interest in achieving TEF rankings highlights the growing importance of rankings as a tool for prospective students and the growing importance of the TEF system.

Awarding rankings is not without its difficulties, however. Recent years have seen students boycotting the National Student Survey (one of the metrics used in establishing TEF rankings) at highly regarded universities, including Oxford and Cambridge. Additionally, concerns have been raised across the sector around the recently piloted subject-level TEF rating system. These issues could dissuade further institutions from taking part, compromising the efficacy of the system itself.

Have many institutions successfully challenged their grading?

Following publication of the initial rankings in 2017, 18 institutions lodged appeals including at least four Russell Group universities. On completion of the appeals process, however, only five were successful. Among them was the University of East Anglia, which was notably the only institution to have successfully made a case for re-grading moving from silver to gold. Despite the low success rates, these early appeals paved the way for increased transparency in the appeals process, highlighting that identifying procedural irregularity is key. The latest set of appeals saw a significantly smaller number but with a greater degree of success, with four out of the five providers successfully challenging their grading.

Has this grading system had any impact on UK universities' global reputation on international league tables?

The UK is widely recognised for its top-tier HE system and UK universities still play an important role on the global stage. Despite several well-known providers receiving bronze rankings in the initial results in 2017, there is nothing to suggest that this has had a detrimental impact. In fact, over the past three years, the discrepancies between international league tables and the TEF rankings appear to be narrowing, with many providers successfully increasing their awards. This suggests that the impact, if any, is minimal at a university-wide level. It remains to be seen whether the potential implementation of subject-level TEF will prove more telling.

Is there any evidence that it has influenced student choice domestically and internationally?

Going forward, it is likely that TEF will continue to gain ground as an important resource for students, as the results and outcomes are widely publicised. At this stage, there is little to suggest that the TEF is having a substantial effect on domestic students—however, this is not the case internationally. A whole range of factors influence university choice, and prospective students have to sift through a multitude of information. It is no surprise therefore that for international students, who often do not have knowledge of different areas in the UK, are heavily influenced by rankings. This could mean that TEF rankings could carry greater weight with international students, leading to shift in application numbers to TEF ranked institutions.

The Augar report recommended reducing student fees, if those proposals are accepted how would this sit with the TEF grading impact on fee increases?

The proposal to reduce maximum tuition fees from £9,250 per year to £7,500 per year could have a significant impact for providers. While providers may be able to apply for a direct government grant for the outstanding value on courses deemed worthy of state support, overall providers will see less money coming in. The current TEF system offers an incentive for taking part in the TEF system, allowing those with a ranking to charge up to the higher maximum tuition fee of £9,250, while those without may only charge up to £9,000. It remains to be seen whether this grading system would continue to be used if the overall fee cap were lowered or whether the incentive would be removed altogether.

Interviewed by Evelyn Reid.

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