

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

The Potential Impact of the TEF on Engaging ‘Hard to Reach’ Students

Corony Edwards, Independent HE consultant¹

A key driver for the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England in 2016 was the United Kingdom (UK) government’s stated commitment to deliver “*better access, retention and progression for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and underrepresented groups*” (BIS, 2015:14). In addition to requiring Higher Education (HE) providers wishing to take part in the TEF to have an approved Access Agreement or equivalent (Department for Education [DfE], 2016:13), providers must demonstrate teaching and learning excellence across their entire provision, while being assessed on their performance relating to groups of students with specific characteristics (DfE, 2016:36-37). Any failure to deliver an academic experience or outcomes of equal quality for students with specific characteristics or disadvantages will be exposed and will potentially have undesirable consequences for the institution.

The TEF comprises three broad ‘aspects’ of excellence: teaching quality, the learning environment and student outcomes and learning gain. The criteria for each of these aspects describe a range of practices, provision and outcomes that should provide an excellent experience for *all* students. While some readers may be sceptical of the TEF’s potential to measure and drive up teaching quality, I would argue that its requirements will exert pressure on HEIs to embed all kinds of good practice, academic and otherwise, into their provision and thus include and engage ‘hard to reach’ students in the process. In the same way that the widely-criticised UK National Student Survey has resulted in improvements to the student experience beyond the expectations of many who work in HE, the TEF has, I believe, serious and genuine potential to enhance the academic experience of ‘hard to reach’ students. This improvement should in part stem from the greater deployment of inclusive approaches that not only benefit all students, but also avoid the potential stigmatisation or segregation of some groups – a situation which may further alienate the ‘hard to reach’ – and which go far beyond basic mitigation for the recent changes to UK students’ Disability Support Allowance payments.

This improvement will not be straightforward to achieve, or comfortable for the staff members involved, however. Examples of the types of provision that HEIs may need to reconsider as a result of the TEF requirements include personal tutoring, academic literacy and skills development, and employability development. Pedagogic approaches, assessment methods and learning design, including research-based approaches to teaching and learning, should come under scrutiny, and widespread changes to curriculum design may be needed, all with the aim of ensuring that all students experience an inclusive and welcoming learning environment, with the flexibility to accommodate a range of needs. This is because, over the last decade or more, an entire professional services industry has developed to provide ‘bolt-on’ services for students, all too often seen by academics as activity that ‘real’ academics should not have to undertake. These professional services are typically staffed by experts who are eager to drive forward an enhancement agenda, but are frequently perceived as fulfilling a remedial function, and in some cases (e.g. employability) focusing on aspects of student development that some believe should not be part of the mission of higher education at all. The presence of these services looks good in the prospectus and on open days, but, however skilled and committed the professionals, resource constraints mean they will inevitably have limited impact in terms of the range and numbers of students they can reach and the effectiveness of the interventions. There will always be a role for the specialist professionals to play, as there will always be students who do engage with, and benefit from, additional support and guidance. But there will equally continue to be many students in serious need of help who ‘slip through the net’, or who choose not engage with co-curricular opportunities because they seem irrelevant to the

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

students' main focus - their degree programme - or because they are 'hard to reach' for other reasons explored elsewhere in this special edition.

If there is to be an improvement for *all* students, the professionals providing specialist services will need to do more to work alongside academics to embed such provision into the curriculum instead of attempting to deliver the service direct to all students themselves – which would be an impossible task. Two things need to be in place for this to work:

First, academics must accept that their role (and identity) is changing as, like it or not, external factors reshape the nature and purpose of the UK HE system in which they work. They must accept that it *is* part of their role to design and deliver a curriculum and learning support that meet the needs of the large cohorts of 21st century students we have today (including those who have specific learning needs, disabilities, challenging personal circumstances, wellbeing issues etc.) and that, to do this, they will have to develop appropriate expertise and be given the resources (especially time) to do this.

Second, professional staff must be sufficiently proficient in pedagogy and learning design at the discipline level and have the credibility and respect necessary to be able to partner with academics in incorporating provision into the mainstream curriculum.

This points to an acceleration of the shift towards 'blended professionals' and 'hybrid academics' (e.g. Whitchurch, 2008), in order to deliver a truly inclusive curriculum in the widest sense. As Whitchurch and others (e.g. Churchman and King, 2009) point out, this is often an uncomfortable transition. I believe that in the coming years we *will* see improved provision for *all* students, but that this will come at a cost. Many academic staff already struggle with increased stress levels and 'reduced opportunities for creativity and autonomy' (Churchman and King, 2009:509); furthermore, the requirement to develop inclusive curricula with 'built-in' academic literacies and employability support is likely to exacerbate this situation. I also believe, however, that the great majority of academics *do* want to do their best for their students, but have been discouraged from doing so by the lower status afforded to teaching in relation to research in UK HE. It is worth noting, then, that another purpose of the TEF is to 'raise esteem for teaching' and to 'recognise and reward excellent teaching'. If, as I have implied in this article, excellent teaching is inclusive, then truly valuing and rewarding such teaching would make the role and identity changes I describe considerably easier. Let us hope that the TEF not only succeeds in its aims of improving matters for all students, but that it also results in improving matters for the staff who will be instrumental in providing this improved academic experience.

Reference list

Churchman, D. and King, S. (2009) 'Academic practice in transition: hidden stories of academic identities.' *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(5), 507-516.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2015) '*Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/higher-education-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice> (Accessed: 23 May 2017).

Department for Education (2016) *Teaching Excellence Framework: year two technical specification*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-excellence-framework-year-2-specification> (Accessed: 23 May 2017).

Whitchurch, C. (2008) 'Shifting identities and blurring boundaries: the emergence of Third Space professionals in UK higher education.' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 377-396.

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

ⁱ Corony Edwards, PFHEA, www.coronyedwards.co.uk
contact@coronyedwards.co.uk