

SPEAKING NOTE

Dr Steven Jones, Senior Lecturer, University of Manchester
All Party Parliamentary University Group – 24 November 2015

The proposed Teaching Excellence Framework: How can we measure teaching quality in universities and how should it be rewarded?

The five key points that I make are:

1. The notion of **learning gain is very difficult to measure in an accurate and meaningful way**. The problem is not with input measures because, to a large extent, the different qualifications and backgrounds with which students enter university can be standardised and controlled for. The problem is with output measures. This is because variation in marking criteria and mechanisms for degree classifications differ across universities. The external examiner system is currently limited in the extent to which it can address disparities. Moving to a GPA (grade point average) reporting model is helpful in many ways, but does not mitigate against different marking standards or formulae for calculating final degree awards. The Green Paper favours drawing on a range of metrics around learning gain, but an exclusively metric-based approach, I argue, allows only for a partial picture to emerge.
2. There is general support in many parts of the sector for the argument that a **'rebalancing' of teaching and research is needed**, including among students. The Green Paper's criticism of the 'industries' that have grown up around the REF chimes with many university staff, and assurances that the TEF will be less burdensome and expensive than the REF are welcome. The greater focus on research in recent years has arguably resulted in an unhelpful separation from teaching. Ways are suggested to reintegrate the two, noting the potential of the TEF to encourage universities to conduct more original research into HE, put data held about students to better use, and develop a robust evidence base to underpin pedagogical activities and developments.
3. Some of **the questions that the TEF might usefully ask of universities** are discussed next. I present an 'undergraduate pipeline', arguing that different expectations are appropriate at different stages of the student journey. For the university applicant, the TEF might explain the thinking that underpins teaching on each degree programme. Key Information Sets currently publish raw data on contact hours, student satisfaction, average graduate salary, etc. However, wider context about the nature and range of teaching offered would allow both more informed decisions and smoother school-to-university transitions to be made by students. For the undergraduate, the TEF might ask how a unit's research informs its pedagogy, how academic staff are supported and incentivised in relation to teaching, how

the progress of different types of students is measured and monitored, and how differentials in outcome (GPA, retention, employment, etc.) are addressed. For the graduate, the TEF might allow employers a more complete picture of each student's learning journey and ensure that universities' claims about 'employability' are based on direct and current empirical evidence.

4. In asking **what the TEF can learn from the REF**, I suggest that the approach of peer-evaluating impact case studies and environment statements (as contributing 20% and 15% to final REF scores respectively) could be usefully replicated in the TEF. By focusing on teaching impact and teaching environment, institutions could begin to create their own, publically available narratives around teaching rather than rely on sector-wide metrics to demonstrate excellence. Impact could be evidenced by localised measurements of learning gain or by demonstrable responsiveness to students' needs according to particular shared characteristics (WP status, ethnicity, gender, etc.) or according to discipline-based pedagogical needs. Environment would embrace the student context (e.g. cohort diversity) and the staffing context (e.g. engagement with senior researchers), as well as institutional facilities and extra-curricular learning opportunities.

5. Finally, I ask **what the longer term directions for the TEF might be**, suggesting a small number of core principles that might usefully underpin developments, namely that research and teaching be reunified as well as rebalanced; that applicants and students become better informed about university teaching; and that different kinds of student may benefit from different kinds of excellence. I suggest that such an approach may lead to the TEF ultimately shunning blunter metrics as universities grow more confident in their own research into HE pedagogy, articulate clearer narratives to would-be students and potential employers, and undertake/share candid evaluations of teaching practices. The TEF's role would then develop into one of robust peer assessment (and differentiation) of the evidence base that underpins local teaching practices.

sj@man.ac.uk
@StevenJones_MCR