



# The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

## **Note of Speaker Meeting: “The proposed Teaching Excellence Framework: How can we measure teaching quality in universities and how should it be rewarded?”**

Speakers:

**Jo Johnson MP**, Minister for Universities and Science, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

**Dr Steven Jones**, Senior Lecturer, Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester

**Iain Wright MP**, Chair, Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee

**Jo Johnson MP** described the context around the green paper. He set out how he felt that universities are a national success story, great engines of social mobility and drivers of productivity, although there still some way to go for institutions to fulfil their potential in both respects. He raised his concerns that too few people from disadvantaged backgrounds go to university and far too many of those that do fail to progress well when they are there and once they leave. He noted the ambitious goal in the green paper, the Prime Minister’s target of doubling the participation of the most disadvantaged by 2020. He stated OCED research that suggests there are a greater proportion of graduates emerging from university with weaker basic skills than has been acknowledged. Therefore for these graduates the returns on their university qualifications are modest. He set out what he described as a troubling figure, although clearly acknowledging that university is not solely about graduate earnings, that between 20% and 60% of graduates aren’t in graduate jobs, that the average earnings premium is declining and is negligible, or even negative for significant numbers of graduates towards the bottom end of the earnings distribution.

The Minister mentioned the HEPI survey that shows in excess of a third of students don’t think they get value for money from their university experience. He explained how he wants all young people to have the opportunity to benefit from a university education and to be fully informed when they take the decision to go to university, meaning that the sector must be more transparent. Students must be made aware of the course content and structure, how the course will be delivered, what the balance will be between the various elements and details about the general level of experience or status of the staff involved in delivering the course. He set out the green paper’s plan for a higher education system built around the

student which does better at widening participation, opens the sector to greater competition and innovation, drives up quality and choice, delivers better value for money for students and taxpayers and drives productivity in the economy by raising the quality of the graduate skills pipeline.

He then went on to discuss the manifesto commitment to introduce “a framework to recognise universities offering the highest teaching quality”, stating that the balance of teaching and research has long been a concern of ministers from government and the opposition. He stated that his goal was to address variability in teaching between and within institutions, shining a spotlight on good practice and raising the status of excellent university teaching.

Jo Johnson closed his remarks with signposting the government’s consultation on these objectives and that in the new year (2016) there will be a follow up with a technical consultation on the actual TEF design. He stated his ambition of ensuring the TEF reflects the sector’s diversity, is robust and reliable, and avoids being big, bossy and bureaucratic. Finally he encouraged attendees to provide qualitative submissions making clear how they are delivering “excellence” and taking into account the needs of their own particular students.

**Dr Steven Jones** provided an academic view of the proposals in the green paper. He set out five main points covering how to measure learning gain, the general support for the rebalancing of teaching and research, questions that the TEF might usefully ask of universities, what the TEF can learn from the REF and what the longer term directions for the TEF might be.

He set out how difficult the notion of learning gain is to measure in an accurate and meaningful way. He said that in particular it is the output measures which are hard to control for, such as the variation in marking criteria and mechanisms for degree classifications across universities, and described how moving to a GPA (grade point average) system, although helpful in many ways, would not mitigate against different marking standards or formulae for calculating final degree awards. He acknowledged the general support for rebalancing teaching and research, including amongst students, and welcomed assurances that the TEF will be less burdensome and expensive than the REF. He flagged that the greater focus on research in recent years has arguably resulted in an unhelpful separation from teaching and noted 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.

Dr Jones presented 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. 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 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. He also set out how the approach of peer-evaluating impact case studies and environment statements used in the REF could be usefully replicated in the TEF. Institutions would be able 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 or according to discipline-based pedagogical needs. Environment would embrace the student context and the staffing context, as well as institutional facilities and extra-curricular learning opportunities.

Finally he suggested 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.

**Iain Wright MP** welcomed the Minister’s engagement with the BIS Select Committee pre-publication of the green paper. He described how the Committee is currently conducting an inquiry into quality in higher education.

He commented that the green paper was indeed “very green” and there was a lot that attendees could do to shape its final outcome. He then went on to state some of the questions and concerns that had come up for the Committee through their initial considerations and evidence session. These included:

- Whether there should be a TEF rating at individual course level and how would this trade off with the clear priority that it not be overly bureaucratic.
- Noting that the green paper is suggesting the TEF use existing metrics for measurement, which metrics should be considered and what approach would need to be taken for implementing these. He stated that he felt it was very important to look much wider than just salary in the use of graduate employability metrics, for example.

- He noted concerns of unforeseen consequences, particularly around linking the TEF with the raising of tuition fees and the possible distortion in the market place this could be responsible for.
- Whether it was possible that the TEF would reduce diversity and choice in the sector. If a particular course were to be bottom of the rankings, how would an institution respond, by improving the course or closing it down?
- If the ambitious timescale for the implementation is possible.
- Whether the TEF should be linked with widening participation targets.
- If the drop out rate is high, perhaps in particular after the first term, what institutions plans for retention of students are.

He closed his remarks by encouraging all attendees to provide evidence to the Committee on these questions and any other comments on the green paper, noting the real opportunity to feed into and work with the government in the development of a successful Teaching Excellence Framework.

#### **Q&A and Discussion**

Many attendees raised concerns about using the **National Student Survey** as one of the possible metrics for the TEF. They stated that the REF has been successful because of its robust criteria and the statistical basis of the TEF needs to be corrected and the National Student Survey improved before a system is built upon it.

Other attendees mentioned concerns about the **definition of graduate jobs** and **plans for looking at longitudinal data**. One university representative specifically mentioned students who are setting up their own businesses not being counted as having graduate level employment; others mentioned students that come from disadvantaged backgrounds who for family reasons are unable to find graduate employment immediately after graduation and the importance of improving data taken from 14 months onwards rather than focus on the six month after graduation figures.

**Jo Johnson MP** stated how closely BIS and HEFCE were working together on looking at the National Student Survey, including HEFCE's current review into the NSS, and stated the positive significant sector buy in while recognising the need to make it more robust. He also mentioned that the green paper does propose to consult on the use of 14 month mark data and welcomed views on this and on the best definition of a graduate job.

The importance for any metrics to measure more widely than absolute outcomes and reflect on the other investments that attending university provides such as **social mobility** and **distance travelled** or **learning gain** was championed by many attendees.

Finally, while the language around **student engagement** was welcomed, many attendees and speakers also raised the importance of recognising those in institutions that provide both teaching and research and ensuring the balance between these. There were comments about the **lack of clarity of responsible bodies**, that the architecture of the green paper seems to be towards separating the oversight of both teaching and research, and that innovation wasn't mentioned. There was wide acknowledgment that research and teaching are synergistic and encouraging the engagement of students is strongly linked to their involvement in the production of research.