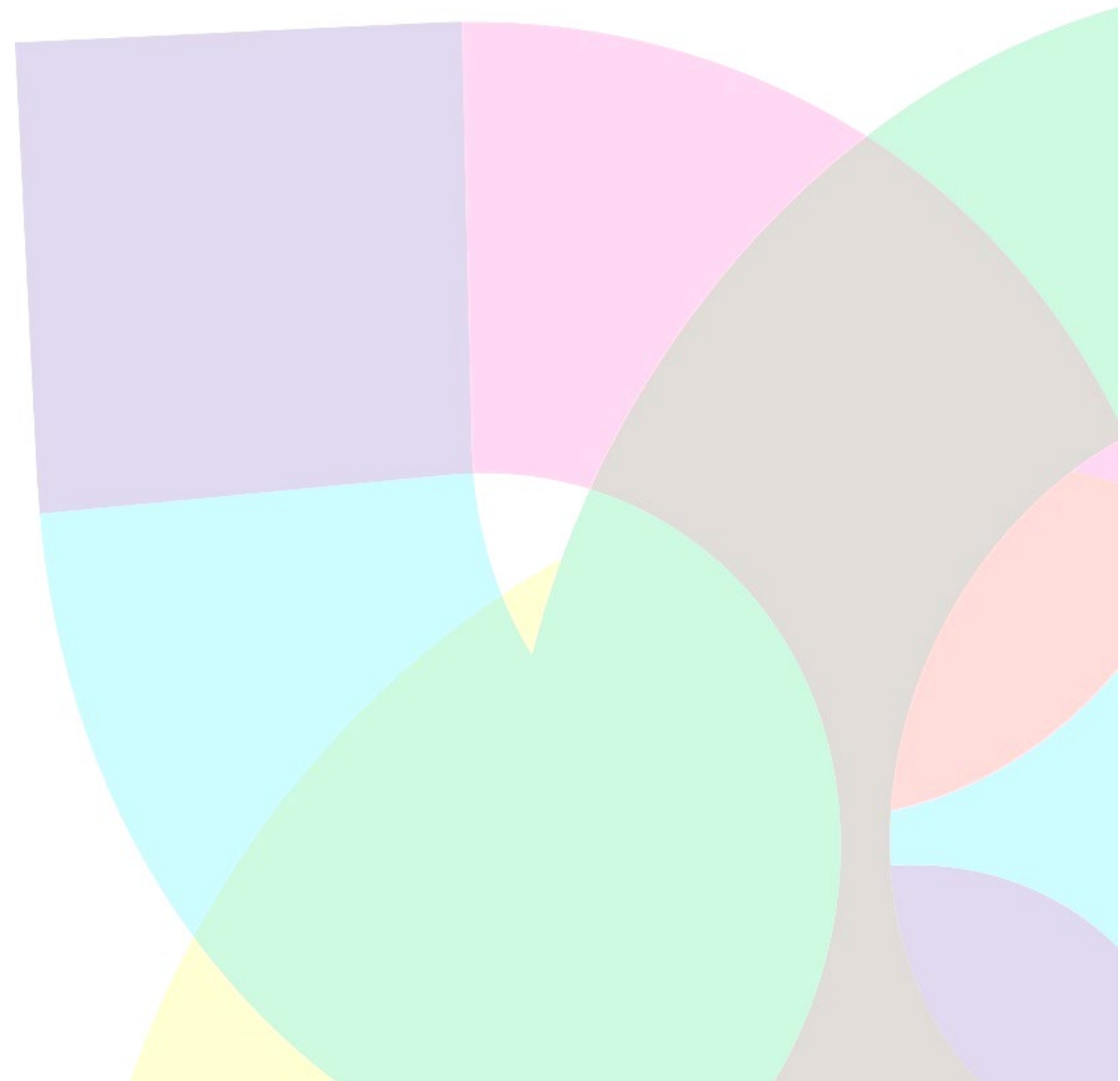


HE Briefing Note

TEF 2023

October 2022



1. Introduction

Following a period of consultation, the Office for Students (OfS) has now launched the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) exercise for 2022-23 (referred to as TEF 2023) and has published [Guidance](#) for providers, students, and panel members. The final submission deadline for institutions to TEF 2023 is 24 January 2023, with outcomes and submissions published from September 2023.

The total number of higher education providers across the UK with a TEF award, as at 19 June 2019 was 282, with the following profile¹:

Gold	76 providers	28%
Silver	132 providers	49%
Bronze	60 providers	22%

A poor TEF outcome is clearly a risk to all institutions required to take part, particularly for those institutions who hold an award from these previous rounds.² Providers in each of the award categories will be seeking to maintain or improve their outcomes under the new rules and the risk of losing position (moving from Gold to Silver, for example), could lead to a range of reputational consequences and changes to internal policy (if an inevitable appeal to the OfS results in a no change position). The loss of their TEF rating and the introduction of a “requires improvement” category is something every provider will be looking to avoid.

Changes of internal policy leading to excellence, as judged by the TEF, is part of the OfS’ “theory of change” - *The TEF aims to incentivise a higher education provider to improve.....We intend that TEF ratings will create this incentive by putting a spotlight on the quality of providers’ courses, influencing providers’ reputations and informing student choice.*

This short briefing note does not consider in detail the changes to the TEF. Rather, it provides some observations on elements of the new exercise, with the aim of assisting those compiling submissions and those overseeing academic governance. The structure of the Provider Submission is covered initially, with further focus on quality in relation to the student experience aspects (section 3) and indicators (sections 4 and 5) and on the student outcome feature of educational gain (section 6). Whilst there will be a desire in institutions to optimise outcomes, there is also opportunity to begin to embed the preparation work for TEF into current practices, whether this be via condition compliance matrixes or through rearticulation of an institution’s academic risk, through a TEF lens. Any model of educational gain needs to be robust enough to weather subsequent TEF exercises, and care taken now should put an institution in a good position to achieve this.

¹ These ratings shall expire, following publication of TEF 2023 outcomes.

² To date there have been three rounds of TEF assessment, with TEF ratings awarded to participating providers between 2017 and 2019 in accordance with the DfE’s TEF specification.

2. Provider Submission

A provider TEF 2023 submission is comprised of four parts – Provider Context; Student Experience; Student Outcomes; and Evidence. According to the main TEF Guidance ([Regulatory advice 22](#)) (“Guidance”), the TEF assessment is structured to assess excellence (see Section 3 for its definition) in **two aspects: Student Experience and Student Outcomes**. Each aspect covers four different areas:

TEF aspect	Student experience		Student outcomes	
	1. Academic experience and assessment	2. Resources, support and student engagement	3. Positive outcomes	4. Educational gains

Underpinning the first three of these four areas are (i) **quality features** and (ii) **TEF Indicators**. These and observations on them are taken in turn. (Educational Gains is considered in Section 6).

3. Quality features: high, very high or outstanding

Quality features are of three orders – high, very high or outstanding.

High quality features are met by compliance with the relevant OfS B Conditions - the set of minimum requirements for quality and standards and for positive outcomes which providers must satisfy if they are registered with the Regulator. The TEF scheme rates higher education providers for very high quality or outstanding quality (“excellence”) above these. The Guidance, Annex A, sets out a characterisation of excellence for very high and outstanding quality. A mapping to the different characterisations of quality, under Student Experience, Academic experience and assessment, are given in Table 1. If you are “outstanding” in this area, the institution can demonstrate that, not only are the B Conditions being met, but that they are *embedded, highly effective, and tailored*.

Table 1

TEF aspect	Student experience
	1. Academic experience and assessment
High quality	<p>Condition B1 Academic Experience: The provider must ensure that the students registered on each higher education course receive a high-quality academic experience. A high-quality academic experience includes but is not limited to ensuring that each higher education course: is up-to-date; provides educational challenge; is coherent; is effectively delivered; and requires students to develop relevant skills.</p> <p>Condition B4 Assessment & Award: The provider must ensure that students are assessed effectively; each assessment is valid and reliable; academic regulations are designed to ensure that relevant awards are credible; academic regulations are designed to ensure effective assessment of technical proficiency in the English language in a way which appropriately reflects the level and content of the course; and relevant awards granted to students are credible at the point of being granted and when compared to those granted previously.</p>
Very High quality	SE1. The provider has embedded very high-quality teaching, feedback and assessment practices that are effective in supporting its students' learning, progression, and attainment.
Outstanding quality	SE1. The provider has embedded outstanding teaching, feedback and assessment practices that are highly effective and tailored to supporting its students' learning, progression, and attainment.

Many institutions will have already mapped the recently revised B Conditions against practice, perhaps via an assurance map, to ensure compliance. This is by way of meeting OfS Registration Conditions. Institutions may have also “RAG-rated” compliance to show strength in meeting the minimum standards and where further work is required. By way of example, providers may demonstrate broad compliance with Condition B1 as follows:

Condition B1 Academic experience	Compliance
The provider must ensure that the students registered on each higher education course receive a high-quality academic experience. A high-quality academic experience includes but is not limited to ensuring that each higher education course: is up-to-date; provides educational challenge; is coherent; is effectively delivered; and requires students to develop relevant skills.	<p>Policies: Curriculum Design Policy ▪ Programme Validation and Revalidation Code of Practice ▪ Feedback mechanisms</p> <p>Processes: Quality is reviewed annually in Senate’s Annual Quality Assessment Report to the Board ▪ Quality assurance is provided by the external examiners which are required to sit on exam boards.</p>

Institutions will not have needed to consider or demonstrate *whether the quality of the practices is, beyond the B minima, “very high” or “outstanding”*. It is this assessment that shall be being undertaken in institutions now, relying on their interpretation of indicators and evidence, to determine their likelihood of ensuring a good TEF outcome. There are several ways in which institutions may use this assessment effectively for their own internal purposes. For example, evidence of very high and outstanding quality is a useful way of informing risk around compliance with the B Conditions. Clearly, where there are such examples, there is a supposition that the Condition is being met easily. This may inform therefore any RAG rating of compliance. In addition – and to assist with audit committee’s oversight of academic risk - institutions may want to build this quality distinction into a report on compliance. A report to the governing body, responsible under the OfS for *actively seeking and receiving assurance that academic governance is robust and effective* might then usefully begin to comment on this quality distinction.

4. TEF Indicators

TEF indicators are drawn from the NSS results (for the Student Experience aspect) and performance against OfS Student Outcome thresholds (for the Student Outcomes, Positive outcomes)³. The overall indicator is generated by applying the TEF indicators to three modes of study (full-time, part-time and apprenticeship), as set out in Figure 1.

TEF aspect	Student experience	Student outcomes	
	Academic experience and assessment	Resources, support and student engagement	Positive outcomes
Indicators	NSS The teaching on my course Assessment and Feedback	NSS Academic support Learning resource Student Voice	OfS Student Outcomes Progression, Continuation, Completion
+			
Mode	Full time	Part time	Apprenticeship

= Overall Indicator
Figure 1

³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-sets-new-expectations-for-student-outcomes/>

The “overall indicator” (aspect indicator + mode) combines students at all undergraduate levels of study, all four years of available data, and students who are either taught or registered at the provider (or both). So, for example, there is an overall indicator for full time students, combined for the last four years, for the teaching on my course.

The OfS also produces “split indicators” – a further breakdown of groups within the mode of study to which the overall indicator refers. Split indicators include time series (so you could look at the first year or all four years individually for the example given above), student characteristics, and subject (so you could contrast and compare full time students, combined for the last four years, for the teaching on my course who are studying different subjects).

The indicators are presented through interactive data dashboards, with benchmarks used to indicate how well a provider has performed for its mix of students and courses, compared with performance for similar types of students on similar types of courses in the higher education sector as a whole.

This multi-dimensional way of considering student experience and positive outcomes is to support delivery of the OfS mission:

.... to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers⁴

The TEF 2023 ratings themselves are meant to *reflect the extent to which a provider delivers an excellent experience and outcomes **for its mix of undergraduate students and across the range of its undergraduate courses and subjects.*** (Author’s emphasis.)

In its Guidance, OfS states that Assessment Panel members should:

- Primarily consider the overall indicators within each mode of study.
- Secondly, consider the ‘split’ indicators within each mode of study to:
 - Consider how far very high quality and outstanding quality features might apply across all a provider’s student groups and range of courses and subjects.
 - Test the evidence in a provider’s submission about its strengths and areas for improvement, including the provider’s own analysis and use of the split indicators, alongside any other evidence it determines for itself.⁵

This means of assessment allows an outcome indicated positively overall (say, Student Voice) to be investigated at a more granular level to determine if this is the experience of all students, in a range of contexts.

⁴ [OfS Strategy 2022-2025](#)

⁵ In addition, assessors should, in their consideration, interpret the strength of the statistical evidence by using four indicative categories. (This advice is not dealt with here.)

Institutions should be aware therefore that:

- Above benchmark performance in an overall indicator cannot be relied upon until all possibilities where this may not be the case (as found in the split indicators) can be ruled out. This is the guidance to assessors.
- A full analysis of benchmark position across all levels of disaggregation will identify outliers or more systemic issues.

There is however some means of mitigating the risks of below benchmark results in NSS indicators (see next section).

5. All Things Being Equal

On the NSS indicators, the OfS writes:

*268 (a) We consider the NSS indicators **important but not direct measures** of the student experience features. Panel members should interpret the NSS indicators as providing **part of the evidence** they need to identify relevant very high quality or outstanding quality features of the student experience.... These indicators **would need to be supplemented** with further evidence of excellence in the submissions. (Author's emphasis.)*

For the Student Outcome indicators, rates of completion and continuation and rates of progress, there is no similar caveat. The OfS states in 268(b) that they *consider these outcome indicators to provide **more direct measures** of assessment.*

In relation to the NSS, the OfS writes (much earlier in the guidance):

172. A provider may wish to include information from other NSS scales or statements within its submission.

This understanding is important information for compiling the provider submission as NSS indicators are comprised of individual questions. For example, the NSS Student Voice indicator may be above benchmark at overall indicator level, and for a majority of split-level indicators as well, but may be below benchmark in some subjects. In this case, excellence for the provider's *mix of students and courses* would be in doubt. Further analysis of the individual NSS question set that make up Student Voice results may provide some argument in defence / mitigation of the performance as part of the institution's evidence, particularly where that evidence can show that progress improvement shall be closely monitored. The OfS writes in the Guidance, Section 6 Assessment:

266. The following non-exhaustive list provides examples that the panel might consider as clearly below the level of 'very high quality' or that may be of concern:

c. *If there are split indicators that are materially below benchmark for some subjects and materially above benchmark for others, and the information in the submission does not adequately explain why this is the case or set out an effective approach the provider has in place to deliver high quality courses in those subjects that are below benchmark.*

Again, the outcomes of this close analysis may provide further consideration of what constitutes an institution's academic risk.

6. Educational Gains

Moving away from Student Experience aspects and towards Student Outcome aspects, the OfS has left it for the institution to determine what information and evidence to provide for an assessment of Educational Gain. Recognising that there is currently no national measure of educational gain, the Guidance states (pg 11):

*The approach to assessing educational gain in the TEF 2023 is intended to enable providers **to demonstrate** a clear articulation of their ambitions for educational gain, **credible approaches** for delivering this, **and** where possible **evidence** that it is delivered in practice. (Author's emphasis.)*

The reason for this is to *allow providers **time to establish their practice** in measuring and evidencing educational gains.*

Institutions should, where feasible, take advantage of this allowance, noting that educational gains, much like research impact in the most recent Research Excellence Frameworks, will become, as OfS states, *the focus of assessment in subsequent exercises.*

When determining educational gains, institutions shall need to consider not only the *articulation of their ambition* but how this articulation reads across strategies and policies and feeds into principles such as Value for Money and other Regulatory Conditions, such as C on Protecting the Interests of Student:

C1: The provider must demonstrate that in developing and implementing its policies, procedures and terms and conditions, it has given due regard to relevant guidance about how to comply with consumer protection law.

An ambitious educational gain statement is worth little if it does not evidence its role in providing every student, whatever their background, a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. And institutions will want to take care that their articulation of educational gain is rigorous and relies upon solid evidence, independently assured. They will also want to ensure that any model holds its value over time. The Guidance notes: *Panel members should not prevent a provider from being awarded higher TEF ratings solely based on an absence of its own developed measures of educational gains.*

The salient point to make in terms of education gain is that institutions need to put their student, whatever their mode of study or programme, at its heart and not to rely wholly on existing educational strategies or branding. There is no point detailing that students gain educationally, for example, through an internationalised curriculum if, for a large part of the student population, this is untrue and for some students on some programmes, irrelevant.

7. Conclusions

TEF 2023 is likely to present institutions with a range of issues to deal with, which go beyond the current exercise and the short window⁶ (October 2022-January 2023) in which to draft, agree and submit their Provider Submission, as well as working with their student representative bodies on any student submission. It is clear that the exercise itself, following a protracted period of review and consultation, is now a fixture of external assessment, and institutions will need to carefully consider approaches and institutional strategy to different elements of the exercise to make these effective over time and in advance of the next round.

We can help

We are happy to discuss the content of this paper further with you and provide support for developing and reviewing your approach to the OfS Regulatory Framework, B Conditions and the TEF.



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⁶ Despite the round of consultations since [Dame Shirley Pearce's review on the TEF](#) began in early 2019.