THE ROYAL SOCIETY

October 2015

Response to Business, Innovation and Skills Committee inquiry on assessing quality in higher education

Summary

1. The Royal Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee's inquiry on assessing quality in higher education.
2. The Royal Society is the national academy of science in the UK. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists working in academia, charities, industry and public service. It draws on the expertise of the Fellowship to provide independent and authoritative advice. As the UK's national academy of science, the Society is concerned with the health of the UK's research, innovation and education system as a whole.
3. This response outlines a set of principles, challenges and risks that will need to be taken into account when developing and implementing a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). However, the Government has not yet published the details of its proposed TEF. There may also be significant changes to the research and teaching landscape over the coming months. As a result, this response is necessarily high-level, and the Society expects to develop further advice on this issue over time.
4. The Royal Society welcomes the Government's commitment to recognise universities that offer the highest teaching quality, and to ensure that students get good value from their higher education.
5. The proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has the potential to strengthen undergraduate teaching. This will be important for providing students with the skills they will need for success in a range of careers, as well as to satisfy strong future demand for STEM skills. In the medium-term, stronger teaching would also lead to stronger research, by ensuring the UK's graduates and their training remain among the best in the world.
6. However, it will be challenging to ensure the TEF achieves its objectives while avoiding unintended consequences.
    i. These unintended consequences are likely because: teaching quality is difficult to define and measure; there is substantial diversity in higher education teaching; and the available data sources are unlikely to paint a clear picture of teaching quality.
7. To address these challenges, the Government must ensure that:
    i. the TEF's objectives are well-defined and understood by all stakeholders;
    ii. its design and implementation are open and transparent; and
    iii. its effectiveness is monitored closely, with a clear timetable for review and revision. Reviews must be informed by careful and credible research into the effects of the TEF – intended or unintended. A rigorous evaluation strategy should be planned well in advance of implementation.
8. The TEF would be a new policy instrument with ambitious goals, and can only succeed with the support, input and trust of higher education institutions, academics, industry and students.

Objectives of the Teaching Excellence Framework

9. The principle aim of the TEF should be to recognise and promote excellence in teaching. Ideally, the TEF should measure teaching excellence by examining what – and how much – students learn throughout their time at university. This may include subject knowledge, skills within the subject, transferable skills and problem solving.

    i. Eventually the TEF should be based on direct measures of teaching quality. However, these are not currently available. In the meantime, the Government will need to consider other possibilities.

    ii. One set of measures available now would involve looking at employment and economic outcomes of graduates. However, these outcomes capture a range of other factors beyond teaching quality. Care will be needed in applying these.

    iii. An alternative would be to assess institutional strategies and structures aimed at driving improvement in teaching. Although this would require more careful judgement than using pre-existing metrics, this method should make it possible to take a broader set of factors into account.

10. An effective TEF would result in:

    i. universities striking an appropriate balance between teaching and research, while preserving differences in institutional focus and teaching arrangements;

    ii. universities being self-critical, looking for strengths and weaknesses in their teaching and opportunities to innovate by developing more effective teaching practices;

    iii. academics being supported to improve their teaching practices – this may involve formal training or professional development opportunities, increased collaboration or mentoring from colleagues on teaching practice;

    iv. excellent teachers being appropriately recognised by institutions; and

    v. research and teaching being respected and considered complementary by universities and teachers, not pursued as separate priorities.

11. Preserving the link between research and teaching is especially crucial in the sciences. Developing an understanding of research and the scientific process is central to higher education in the sciences, and relies on academics being involved in both teaching and research.

Challenges and risks in implementing the TEF

12. A key challenge for the Government will be crafting a TEF that measures teaching quality while remaining light touch and minimising compliance burden.

    i. Achieving both objectives will be difficult. The Government has proposed using a basket of metrics to measure teaching quality in a light touch fashion. However, none of the available metrics is an accurate measure of teaching quality.

    ii. External assessors may provide a more direct gauge of teaching quality, but are unlikely to be compatible with the aim of being light touch.

    iii. Whatever measures are used, they will need to assess teaching quality across a diverse range of institutions with different missions, teaching styles and student populations.

13. There is a risk that institutions may seek to game the system, targeting particular metrics to meet the minimum standard required to raise tuition fees.
    i. For example, if dropout rates or student grades are included in the basket of metrics, pressure to improve results could result in easier courses and grade inflation, rather than improved teaching.
14. The TEF may cause unintended shifts in institutional focus and funding allocations.
    i. Attempts to meet the TEF criteria may result in funding being shifted to undergraduate teaching from research or postgraduate study.
    ii. Different course types may be affected differently. In particular, STEM subjects are more expensive to provide than many others, and might be commensurately more expensive to improve over lower-cost courses. This could result in an incentive to shift funding into low cost courses, where it could drive greater improvements in teaching for the same cost.
    iii. Similarly, if the TEF is assessed at the institution level, there is a risk that funding and focus might shift away from stronger departments in an attempt to raise standards in weaker ones.
15. Some institutions may fail to meet the required standards.
    i. If this failure is due to mismeasurement of teaching quality in the TEF, these institutions will suffer unwarranted declines in real fees, damaged reputation and likely declines in student demand.
    ii. If this failure is due to persistent low-quality teaching, the fee link may imply that poor teaching is acceptable, so long as it comes at a lower cost.
    iii. Institutions could fall into a trap where falling real-term fee income means they cannot afford to raise teaching standards, cementing disparities between institutions over time. The high cost of STEM courses in particular might mean that universities where fees are falling in real terms find it disproportionately difficult to provide excellent STEM courses.

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