

Jo Johnson MP
Minister of State for Universities and Science
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London
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From the President Venki Ramakrishnan

12 July 2016

Dear Jo,

The Higher Education and Research White Paper and Teaching Excellence Framework

I am writing following your department's publication of the Higher Education and Research White Paper and technical consultation on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

I would like to reiterate the Royal Society's support for the Government's ambition to strengthen undergraduate teaching. The best university teachers need to be given more credit and be held in higher esteem.

For the TEF to be an effective tool for achieving this aim, the Royal Society believes it would need to fulfil the following requirements:

1. Research-led teaching needs to be recognised throughout the assessment criteria.
2. A broader range of metrics is needed to recognise the diversity of excellent practice both within and between disciplines, including interdisciplinary teaching.
3. To avoid placing excessive burdens on individual academics, the TEF must be as light touch as possible.

At a time when today's PhD content is tomorrow's course content, the link between teaching and research is crucial in the sciences. Links between teaching and research can support course providers in responding to emerging research, helping institutions to equip graduates for the employment market-place. Student research projects develop key skills through exploratory and creative science. Experience of teaching is also beneficial for young researchers, with evidence that it improves the



President Sir Venki Ramakrishnan
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written quality of their scientific papers and their teaching skills¹. The Society therefore believes that the TEF should explicitly recognise the value of research-led teaching throughout the assessment criteria, including within teaching quality and student outcomes.

The TEF consultation sets out plans to use the National Student Survey as one of the key sources of information about teaching excellence. Relying on a limited number of metrics related to the National Student Survey which is not considered robust, is a concern. The Society therefore welcomes the current review of the National Student Survey. There are some indications that courses considered 'hard to do' may receive lower satisfaction scores even though they may be more useful to a student's future employment prospects. One university found that their graduates assigned a different value to their course a few years into their career than they did during their studies. The gender bias in student satisfaction surveys also needs to be explored, following research showing female academics receive lower scores in student evaluations². The Society would be pleased to help your department to explore and address these issues.

There is a large choice of courses available in higher education institutions, and this diversity helps engage students and deliver excellent teaching and learning for all. It also remains our view that the TEF must be as light touch as possible to avoid placing excessive burdens on academics and the creation of perverse incentives. These two factors are difficult to reconcile. Most light touch assessment systems involve collecting a relatively small number of metrics, which are inevitably formulated into league tables. This works against diversity and fails to provide students with the information they need to select the best course for them. By using existing measures of good practice in teaching development and monitoring, such as proven accreditation schemes, the TEF could more effectively capture evidence of excellence across the breadth of courses available.

In designing the TEF care should be taken to ensure that timing, processes and incentives align with those of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and recognise and value interdisciplinary research. The Society has recommended an approach to the REF that takes the focus away from the individual, with institutions submitting outputs to be assessed by discipline-specific panels. This could be at the level of teams or larger groups.

The Society will continue to monitor the detail of the Government's proposals on the TEF and REF as they emerge over the summer months, and to work with the wider community to inform their development and suggest practical measures to mitigate any concerns. I would be delighted to discuss how the Society could best support you during this process.

Yours faithfully

V. Ramakrishnan

Venki Ramakrishnan

¹ Feldon et al 2011, [Graduate Students' Teaching Experiences Improve Their Methodological Research Skills](#), Science, Vol. 333, Issue 6045, pp. 1037-1039

² Boring 2015, [Gender Biases in Student Evaluations of Teachers](#)