

SCONUL response to BIS inquiry: Assessing the quality of higher education

The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) represents all university libraries in the UK and Ireland, irrespective of mission group, as well as national libraries and many of the UK's colleges of higher education. We promote the awareness of the role of academic libraries in supporting research excellence and student achievement and employability.

The response which follows addresses questions 3-5 of the inquiry.

3. What should be the objectives of a Teaching Excellence Framework ('TEF')?

SCONUL represents and values the diversity in the UK Higher Education sector. We believe that the objectives of the TEF should be to drive quality in teaching across that broad sector, enhancing the international reputation of UK Higher Education whilst continuing to support the range of approaches and missions to meet the diverse needs of our UK student body.

3.a: How should a TEF benefit students? Academics? Universities?

Students: A TEF should benefit students by driving up standards, ensuring that students benefit from teaching that enables academic success and prepares them for employment after graduation. Students should feel the benefits from the focus on teaching, not just in the classroom, but in access to resources and environments designed to facilitate teaching and learning. SCONUL understands that good teaching must be supported by professional staff and services dedicated to adding value to the student journey.

Academics: Academics would benefit from having their valuable contributions to excellent teaching and support for students recognised in promotion and career progression. The TEF offers the potential to place the value of academics' teaching contributions in parity with that of their research contributions.

SCONUL's view, though, is that the TEF should recognise that teaching required in preparing students for academic success and graduate employment comes from a range of professional, sometimes non-academic, staff. Librarians are involved in direct teaching that supports "graduate-ness" and employability; specific skills such as understanding complex and competing information in a digital age are indicators of a graduate's ability to enter the workplace. Librarians across the sector deliver this teaching in innovative ways – through online tutorials, face-to-face sessions, and by working with academics to embed the teaching into the curriculum, to name but a few examples¹. A high proportion of librarians, like many academics, achieve professional recognition for their contributions to teaching and learning through the HEA. The TEF should embrace and recognise the teaching contributions made by staff across professional roles.

A TEF which increases the visibility and quality of teaching on a national level will necessarily recognise the contributions of the broad range of professionals involved in enhancing and delivering teaching, enabling career progression and recognition.

Universities: The TEF should benefit universities in providing a recognisable mark of quality that will serve not only to attract students, but to recruit professional and academic staff committed to delivering the expertise and skills employers expect from graduates.

3.b. What are the institutional behaviours a TEF should drive? How can a system be designed to avoid unintended consequences?

Against a backdrop of evolving technologies and a focus on the student experience, the potential of the TEF is to drive a culture of innovation in teaching that embraces the contributions of professional staff across the institution. There is a danger, however, that valuable innovation would be stifled if there are unrealistic expectations. Institutions may be discouraged from applying creative energy to addressing the diverse needs of learners throughout the sector if the TEF only values and rewards proven successes. A system should be designed that recognises and rewards innovative and creative approaches.

SCONUL is a conduit for a great deal of collaborative work. We see that institutions can work cooperatively in cost effective ways that add value to the student experience. There is a risk that a TEF will increase competitiveness between institutions in a way that stifles collaborative work with tangible benefits to the sector. A system which embraces the sharing of best-practice and cooperation will benefit the sector broadly and drive up quality, enhancing teaching excellence.

3.c. How should the effectiveness of the TEF be judged?

Evaluating the actual impact of teaching on a student’s journey means understanding the quality and excellence of the learning that takes place. To do so, requires acknowledgement that students do not begin their journeys in higher education from a level and equal playing field. Students enter education with varied levels of ability and attainment. The TEF is ineffective if it discourages institutions from reaching out to student groups who are more likely to leave education. The effectiveness of the TEF can be judged by evidencing that good quality teaching adds to attainment at all levels. We should see the added value that quality teaching brings to the student journey across all institutions.

4. How should the proposed TEF and new quality assurance regime fit together?

University Library Services are subject to quality assurance in the current QA configuration via the established mechanisms of both Institutional and Collaborative Audit. The Library will usually be considered alongside a suite of other “Professional Services” and appropriate staff can expect to be part of the preparation of the HER submission and the QAA visit.

It is imperative that the library remains a part of any future QA regime by way of indicating areas for improvement and highlighting best practice. The TEF can be a key element of this if it addresses the points made above, and includes the contribution of libraries to teaching excellence via the provision of professional skills delivery, resources and support. As such the TEF can form a significant element of a QA regime which seeks to evaluate the quality of institutional provision and the student experience at any university.

5. What do you think will be the main challenges in implementing a TEF?

The main challenges for the TEF will not be administrative; there are already significant structures in place through the quality assurance regime to implement a process for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching at an institution. The challenge that SCONUL and its members will be concerned with is whether or not the TEF

- recognises the contributions from professional staff throughout the institution in supporting and delivering teaching
- values the breadth of the higher education sector and understands that this breadth is necessary to meet the diverse needs of students and potential employers
- encourages innovation and risk, whilst celebrating and sharing good practice
- allows for a culture of collaborative working across the sector in supporting and improving the student journey
- evaluates not only the “excellence” of teaching but also the quality and excellence of the learning that takes place as a result – and the benefit delivered to the student as “learner”.

1. Some specific examples of contributions to teaching are:

- Collaboration between academics and librarians to imbed essential information literacy skills into a primary initial teaching education programme at Worcester: <http://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/view/LLC-V8-I2-2014>
- Face-to-face, interactive sessions to support students in developing specific academic skills at Sunderland University: <http://library.sunderland.ac.uk/skills/>
- Support for ‘object-based learning, a method of teaching that is both preferred by students and of great value to academic staff wishing to innovate, engage and enhance the student experience’ at University of the Arts London: http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/6_12.pdf
- Live interactive online tutorials that recorded and available to those students unable to participate in the live sessions at the Open University: <http://www.open.ac.uk/library/training-and-events>
- Close working with academics at to enhance library provision around a particular course, resulting in a dramatic increase in NSS scores at University of the West of England: http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/14_13.pdf