



# TEF'ing It Out

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## Introduction

At last, the results of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) have arrived. They have been known to individual institutions a few days before they were revealed to the rest of the world at 12.01am Thursday June 22<sup>nd</sup>. Once the headlines about some Russell Group Universities getting Bronze and further education colleges getting gold dies down, what lies ahead?

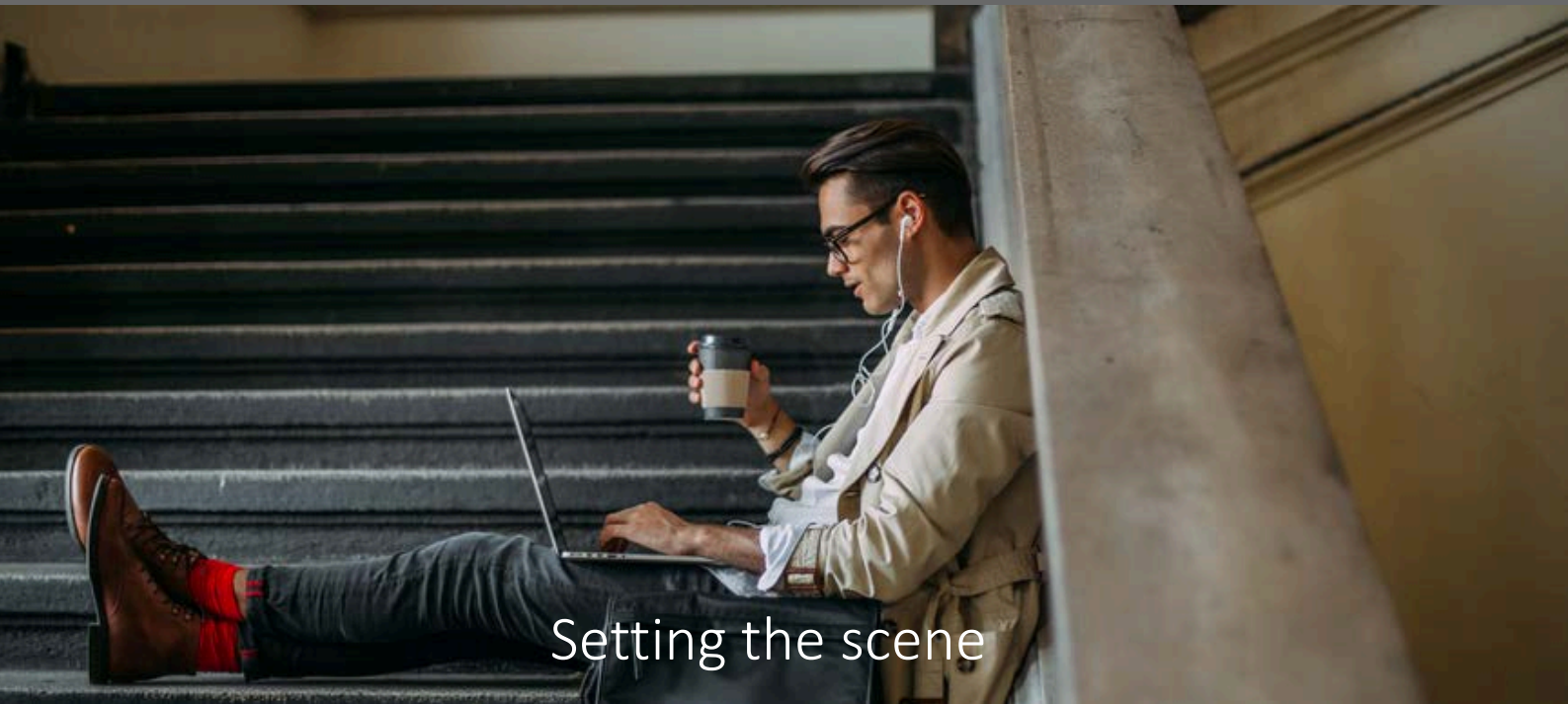
TEF has grown exponentially in its importance within the UK (largely English) HE. It was a mere nine lines in the 2015 Conservative Party election manifesto, a manifesto written for coalition rather than for government, borne out of good intentions to provide to students, their families and advisors an objective and data lead means of judging the quality of teaching in universities. The latest in a long line of attempts to provide insights into the return students could expect from the taking on debt and a delay in entering the world of work, it follows the National Student Survey (NSS), Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) and Key Information Sets (KIS). Indeed, these elder siblings of TEF particularly the first two, are where the majority of metrics used in the TEF are drawn from.

The more we get away from today's headlines and the closer we get to the metrics used - the additional 15-page contextual information supplied by institutions in January and the judgements of the TEF panels who had the final call on the 'gold', 'silver', 'bronze' rankings - the further away we seem to be from TEF's original intentions.



Most in the sector had agreed some time ago that at best the metrics were proxies for good teaching and told us next to nothing about learning and the gaining of employability skills. But it soon became clear that TEF was really the only game in town. A view that was enhanced when the last Government planned to tie fee increases due to inflation to TEF scores. Get a bronze and you could only raise your fees by 50% of the rate of inflation. At one time, it looked as if the ability to sponsor the visa of would be international students could be tied to your TEF rating.





## Setting the scene

If we review the timeline for all things TEF over the next few years, it reveals a confusing and potentially contradictory picture for universities and colleges

- Today's TEF gold, silver, bronze ratings will be in force until 2020
- However, TEF is an annual process and resubmissions are possible
- TEF metrics cover three years of NSS, DLHE and retention statistics
- A number of questions in the NSS are shortly going to change
- The new DLHE's first cohort will graduate in July 2018, be surveyed in October 2019, and have their results published in 2020
- TEF is due to be independently reviewed in 2019

The last six months have seen some major changes in the world of TEF. The passage of the Higher Education and Research Bill through the House of Lords loaded it with amendments designed to break any link between fee increases and TEF scores. Metrics were subject to severe criticism from the Lords and alternatives proposed. And then the election was called.

In the scramble not to lose the Bill, some but not all, changes to TEF were hurriedly agreed. Perhaps most notably that the metrics used and indeed the whole process will be independently reviewed in 2019. This was driven not least by a number of factors; both the NSS and DLHE are to undergo change the later quite radically, the Government wants to move to a subject level TEF as the present one is at a single Institutional level and eventually to postgraduate TEF for which there will be no NSS data. Despite all these caveats for the future, it looks like TEF is here to stay. In the same way that since 2003 the NSS has become part of the rhythm of the academic year and a major policy and investment driver so Universities will come to terms with and develop ways to 'game' the production of metrics that will go into TEF, but ultimately this is a dangerous game to play.

The recent radical reforms to DLHE, with its move to centralised data gathering and 15-month post-graduation survey timeline, has come about by in no small measure because of the way in which universities who have been responsible for their own data gathering since 2005. During this time they have learnt in subtle, and sometimes not so subtle ways, to phrase their questions to their graduates to elicit the most 'productive' response.

## So, what to do?

There are short term and some long-term investments that can be made to mitigate the risks around both the uncertainty over the of form of TEF and the reputational impact made by some of today's scores.

Despite the headlines, Russell Group universities still did proportionally well with gold scores. The long-trailed award of bronze to the LSE sits in very stark contrast to the fact that only a few days ago they scored the highest in the LEO data set of graduate long-term earnings. In other words, those that can will choose to focus on their existing brand value and point to other high scoring outputs whilst working to improve their metrics perhaps for an early review in next year's TEF.

But buried away in the wealth of data released last week, lies some very important indicators. Every institution entering the TEF were measured, not in absolute terms, but against benchmarks set for each metric. They were allowed to submit a 15-page document to contextualise their scores against their benchmark back in January 2017. These submissions were reviewed by an independent TEF committee and, where the committee felt they had a case, an institution was pushed up a level when their raw benchmarked metrics indicated that they should have received a lower award.



An analysis of where this has happened reveals some very interesting decision making on the part of the TEF panel:

- Qualitative rather than quantitative evidence seems to have a greater impact when assessing universities contextualising information as to missed benchmark scores.
- The TEF panel seem to be less swayed by the NSS scores of an institution than by employability and retention data.
- University submissions have been taken at their word.

It is doubtful if this situation will exist beyond this round of TEF as there is increasing government frustration that public money is being spent via these agreements without any data or impact assessment. It is against this background that institutions should start to brace themselves to be able to prove with ideally longitudinal data ideally longitudinal, to back up their TEF submissions in the future. It will not go unnoticed by the 2019 TEF independent reviews that 'a universities' word is its bond' approach is not acceptable any more.

It will a much smaller number of institutions entering into the next round of TEF assessments, with the majority being those who have only been given a 'provisional TEF' award. These will typically be alternative providers who have sat outside of the requirements of DLHE and NSS and therefore do not have the required three years' worth of data.

## Actions for success

Whatever the 'colour' of today's awards it will be dangerous for any institution to sit on its laurels for the following reasons:

- Even within 'gold' institutions there will be pockets of practice and student experience that are less than 'gold'
- Resources will still need to be invested so that institutions stay above their benchmark. That will remain the only way to move up to the next level and to avoid relegation to a lower one
- Benchmarking is dynamic and the student body and the outside world of employment can change before the 2020 TEF round.
- The 2019 TEF review will place more emphasis on data and as such institutional context statements will need to be much more data driven.
- There will be a longer gap in employability measurements between old DLHE and new DLHE. As percentage returns are benchmarked the challenge of staying in touch with graduates will stretch from 6 to 15 months. A real challenge for any student record system.
- Universities will have to start preparing for subject level TEF even though it is vastly complex. The LEO data shows large variations between subjects in terms of earning power. The fact that LEO can show this level of granularity would indicate that LEO could become part of any subject level TEF.

Ironically, whether it be preparing for next year's TEF, 2020's or future subject and postgraduate level ones, the only really effective way forward is to take an institutional level approach. Universities are 'highly siloed super tankers', to mix metaphors. They are slow to respond to change, and change can often look very different in different parts of the institution. However, they are increasing using data to measure and to plan interventions.



A survey of students by [ComRes](#) released earlier this week showed that the thing a student values the most is the nature of their personal relationship with their university. Get that right and good things will follow. Institutional enterprise solutions correctly implemented can help cement this personal relationship. If a student feels that a university cares and supports them then they are more willing to respond to data driven interventions. If they know that from day one the university cares about their success both academic and in future employment then retention, NSS and DLHE scores will improve.

## What's next?

*"Innovative approaches to student engagement and employability are now a necessity to the success of UK institutions. Partnerships are important to have the greatest impact on institutional culture and our students. That is why we have partnered with Symplicity to support our work in this area." – Charles Prince, Director of the Centre for Student Success at the University of East London*



The next three years will be filled with the fallout from the TEF results, but things can be done to turn things around that need to be turned around. Things need to be done to build on success:

- Human resources will not increase so implementation of technology solutions will be vital to both support existing staff and to reflect the diversity of student needs and future proof their demands
- Enterprise level systems need to be sourced and implemented to support students' success even prior to starting
- Technology needs to provide interventions to support employability and retention, as well as allow students to try, test and learn from bite-size exercises that help build skills and self-confidence
- Systems need to speak to each other and to be interrogated by both staff and students in such a way as to drive success interventions and outcomes. As education technology grows within HE, so single sign-on and 'plug and play' systems will need to be the norm
- Meaningful data needs to be available throughout the student lifecycle. Technical solutions that create data based on a student's interaction with the system. Such action driven data will be worth their weight in gold, not just for the next TEF, but for the future success of all students
- This granular-level data will future-proof TEF submissions, reviews and appeals, as well as offering constant insight into how the employability and success needs of sub-groupings of students are being addressed
- The weakness of standard student record systems to be able to keep pace with student's changing contact details particularly post graduation, something that is now vital for success in the new DLHE, needs to be urgently addressed. Systems must be capable of where necessary replacing central record systems to ensure success in the new style DLHE
- A gold today, without investment in these sorts of technology systems, may not be gold tomorrow. If Universities and College want to stand out and to create the platform for future success for their students such investment is not a luxury it is a necessity

But it will depend on new sets of alliances, new partnerships both inside and outside of the university campus.





## About Symplicity

Founded in 1997, Symplicity is the global market leader of student employability solutions. For the last 20 years, our focused approach has enabled us to become the platform of choice for employability in more than 1,200 career centers worldwide, including New York University, London Business School and Yale University, who are fully deployed on our platform. We are the trusted partner and advisor in helping to implement institution-wide employability programmes. In fact, 75% of the top 100 universities in the world use Symplicity as the backbone of their career services departments.