

Teaching excellence - what counts?

Jan Smith

Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom

jan.smith@durham.ac.uk

In May 2015 a new UK government was elected with a manifesto pledge to introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to English universities. A Green Paper appeared in November 2015, containing initial suggestions on how to measure such excellence. Despite an acknowledgement that metrics give a limited overview, the initial TEF intends to use extant datasets to measure teaching excellence: National Student Survey scores; Destination of Leavers from HE; Retention data; and a satisfactory Quality Assurance Agency Review. Further metrics, including graduate earnings data, will be added to the mix over time. The Green Paper has an explicit aim: to ensure that “teaching is valued as much as research” (p.18), and improvement is to be incentivised. Research receives £1.5bn funding annually (p.20) whereas a successful TEF outcome will result in HE providers being able to increase fees (current maximum £9000, frozen since 2012) in line with inflation (0.1% in November 2015).

The wisdom of introducing a TEF is a worthy point of debate in and of itself. In this session, however, I would like to connect the Green Paper proposals to the work of those who teach and learn on Postgraduate Certificates in Academic Practice (PGCAP). If institutions, initially, and individual departments eventually, are to be graded in a TEF exercise so reliant on outcomes, what kinds of professional development are required? Since the credentialing of the teaching role began in the UK over 20 years ago, most programmes have rooted their ethos in the notion of reflective practice. This stance is often accompanied by acknowledgement that ‘good’ teaching is patiently reflective and intimately linked to disciplines and biographies. The implications for PGCAPs, when what matters in terms of league tables for public consumption, are student satisfaction and graduates’ salaries, are profound.

A new layer of external control is to be visited on English universities via the TEF, re-opening the old question of whether we measure what counts, or count what gets measured? The Green Paper acknowledges that some institutions may close courses and also the possibility of “lower quality providers withdrawing from the sector” (p.19) so I would like this debate to address the question of how best to prepare new academics for their teaching roles in an environment that has the potential to reputationally damage them, their departments and their institutions.

Reference

Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2015). Fulfilling our potential: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice - Green Paper Cm 9141. London: HMSO. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications. Last accessed 20 January 2016.