

UNION BULLETIN

TEF UPDATE

TEF takes a back step – major victory for SU-UCU campaign at Queen's

QUB Senate decided yesterday that the university won't be joining the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

In a major victory for the Students' Union (SU) and UCU joint-campaign against TEF, the university's governing body decided not to implement the controversial measure. Although the motion on TEF that was put to Senate allows the university to reverse this decision if there are 'significant changes' to TEF before the 26 January deadline for institutional 'opt-in', this scenario seems increasingly unlikely. Given the strength of opposition to the measure at Senate – not just from student and staff representatives, but from concerned lay-members as well – it now seems that TEF will not be coming to Queen's. TEF, which is being managed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), is a UK



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government initiative that has already met with sustained opposition from a range of stakeholders across HE. Students, staff and professional HE bodies have argued that TEF would result in further inequality, increasing marketisation and overall reputational damage in the higher education sector across the UK.

TEF has been opposed by the National Union of Students (NUS) and UCU, and significant concern has also come from members of the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee and representatives of the Scottish education sector, including the Royal Society of Edinburgh. It now seems that HE in Northern Ireland may also reject TEF, in a potentially significant blow to Westminster plans for further marketisation across the HE sector.

TEF proposes to rate universities as Gold, Silver and Bronze institutions based on a market-oriented metrics scoring system, including success in graduate employment. Essentially, this would define teaching excellence, not in terms of the educator-student relationship, but rather in terms of its market value in a relationship with employers and big business. TEF would also be used by Westminster to justify tuition fee increases from 2017, which would see fees soar beyond the current cap of £9,000 for students at the best-rated institutions, increasing the growing gap between universities and threatening access for more disadvantaged students—of which there are many in the north of Ireland.

UCU has argued that TEF has to consist of more than just a series of measures to rank teaching, and that a proper appraisal of university teaching is required instead.

Our general secretary, Sally Hunt, stresses that 'everybody agrees that teaching, alongside high quality research, should be at the heart of higher education. Our high standards are one of the reasons so many overseas students continue to choose to study here.'

However, the UCU's primary concern is that TEF will not improve teaching, but instead damage universities throughout the UK: 'We have concerns about exactly what measures would be used in any TEF. Simply finding a few measures to rank teaching will do nothing to improve quality and we fear that manipulation of statistics may be the name of the game, rather than bolstering the student experience.'

'Quality teaching is underpinned by decent working conditions for staff and a good place to start to improve teaching would be to tackle the widespread job insecurity that blights the university sector. Good teaching also needs to be properly recognised in academic career structures.

'The time has come to ensure that the staff voice is heard on the bodies that will shape how quality and the student experience is monitored and improved. One of the easiest ways the government could improve academic quality and standards is to restrict, rather than increase, the role of for-profit, private providers.'

This week, UCU joined with the National Union of Students (NUS) in issuing a joint statement on TEF, ahead of a planned student boycott of the NSS in 2017. As TEF relies on NSS data, a potential boycott could make TEF unworkable.

Hunt noted on Tuesday that 'UCU and NUS have a proud history of working together to defend education. We believe the government's plans for TEF will damage our education system and support NUS' plans to boycott the National Student Survey. We are encouraging our members to work with students locally to support the boycott.'

NUS Vice President Sorana Vieru added that 'the government has so far ignored the overwhelming opposition to the TEF from both students and staff'. She argues that 'boycotting the NSS is a powerful way for students to fight back against these dangerous proposals. Tuition fees were trebled only four years ago, so for fees to be raised further every year from now on in relation to how universities score in the TEF is appalling and will have a terrible impact on students and academic communities.'

The joint statement argues that 'the introduction of the TEF in its proposed form will accelerate the marketisation of our sector, entrench inequality and damage the UK's academic reputation.'

Yesterday, Queen's took an important step in opposing a series of measures that threaten to damage our university, adversely affect our local economy, and most worryingly, make entry to and success in HE more difficult for our students. This is a great victory for the SU-UCU 'Take Back Queen's' campaign—further evidence that when students and staff stand together we can turn the tide on marketisation, metrics and the string of negative measures over recent years that have made the university an increasingly difficult place in which to study and work.