



CHALLENGING THE TEACHING EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

Diversity Deficits in
Higher Education Evaluations

Amanda French and Kate Carruthers Thomas

” GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CHALLENGING THE
TEACHING EXCELLENCE
FRAMEWORK

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Education Evaluations

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PREFACE: TEACHING EXCELLENCE AS 'INSTITUTIONAL POLISHING'?

Kate Carruthers Thomas and Amanda French

INTRODUCTION

Taking as its starting point Barad's assertion that '*The optic/ apparatus for observations will determine what is seen*', this edited collection offers a lively and thought-provoking discussion about gendered, raced and classed implications of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the United Kingdom's increasingly neoliberal higher education (HE) sector. The essays in this collection critically interrogate and cast doubt on the usefulness of the notion of 'excellence' to attempt to evaluate teaching in HE. In the process, they draw attention to the fact that mobilising unrealistic comparisons between higher education institutions (HEIs) around a reductionist conceptualisation of teaching excellence creates deficits through the inevitable difference that exists across institutions, disciplines and through the specific teaching interactions between individual lecturers and students in HE.

This introductory essay both outlines the content of the collection and invites readers to consider whether the performativity of ‘excellence’ in the TEF bears comparison to Ahmed’s concept of ‘institutional polishing’: the labour of creating shiny surfaces (Ahmed, 2017, p. 102). Ahmed originally invokes the term ‘institutional polishing’ in relation to the performativity of diversity within HEIs (2012, 2017). This essay proposes that while explicitly stating a concern with teaching provision, learning gain and student outcomes for ‘disadvantaged’ students, the relationship between diversity and excellence in TEF rings hollow in relation to staff diversity, diversity in HE provision and different disciplinary and personal teaching styles. TEF and its associated matrixes and information therefore risk being a form of ‘institutional speech act’, that is, they collectively create corporate statements which do ‘not go beyond pluralist understandings of diversity and are non-performative in the sense that they fail to deliver what they have promised’ (2006, p.764). Furthermore, analyses predating the TEF of teaching excellence (Greatbatch & Holland, 2016), performativity (Ball, 2003) and quality assurance (Morley, 2001) highlight the complexity of the microprocesses and power structures involved in performing teaching excellence which the TEF signally fails to address or even acknowledge.

LET’S GET ETYMOLOGICAL

Excellence is a word with lofty origins from the Latin *excellentia* meaning superior; from *excellentum* meaning towering, distinguished; from *excellere*, meaning to surpass, be superior (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2020). Excellence is, therefore, relational in character. Yet in contemporary UK HE, excellence has become ubiquitous! Academics and institutional

managers working in this competitive, marketised arena (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017, p. 392) are continuously pressured to demonstrate excellence of teaching through the TEF; research through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) will shortly grapple with the KEF – the Knowledge Exchange Framework. Excellence is now a key source of reputational advantage and sector-wide comparisons within the increasingly neoliberal UK HE landscape. The ubiquity of excellence is, however, not surprising if we consider it in the context of performativity.

THE PERFORMATIVITY OF EXCELLENCE

Ball views performativity 'as one of three interrelated policy technologies of the UK education reform "package"' (2003, p. 216), the other two being the market and managerialism:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions both material and symbolic.

(Ball, 2003)

Let's examine the ways in which the performativity of excellence mobilised in the TEF fulfils the three key functions in Ball's definition. Firstly, the TEF invites reward or sanction in a moment of promotion or inspection. The Government White Paper, *Success as a knowledge economy* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016), legislated that from 2020, TEF awards would determine whether or not providers were permitted to raise tuition fees, thereby creating a link between the material 'quality' of an institution (symbolically

freighted as Gold, Silver or Bronze) and what they could charge for their provision. Although recent and rapid changes in UK government have delayed this ruling, governments' intention to reward – or sanction – HEIs through the TEF rankings remains. The status and market dynamics created by the TEF are already in play. For example, they are clearly signalled through marketing campaigns that proclaim an institution's TEF Gold status at every opportunity. Even though recent research by UCAS (2018) suggested students and parents have very little idea what it actually means, it was clear they viewed it very positively as a market proxy for quality. Thus, the TEF process appears to have successfully abstracted complex social, educational processes (though it's various matrixes and contextual information) into potent symbolic rankings. Increasingly, these rankings unproblematically facilitate comparison between institutions in much the same ways as the REF tries to. Thirdly, in doing so, the TEF requires every institution to 'fabricate a formal textual account' (Ball, 2003, p. 225) of its performance of teaching excellence, which is submitted or 'displayed' in return for a rating. This, however, clearly does not actually tell students much about the teaching they might actually experience once they begin their studies.

Morley's pre-TEF perspective on quality assurance as 'a process of reform or modernisation of public services ... which has created considerable pressure to produce and perform' (2001, p. 465) echoes Ball's perspective on performativity in its claim that 'the results of audit provide a reified reading, which becomes a truth... encoded in league tables' (2001, p. 476). A reward/sanction binary is also visible in her argument, 'for those at the top there is an artificial halo effect for universities at the bottom of the league tables, identity is a form of negative equity' (2001, p. 472). However,

Morley also pays attention to the effects of the quality assurance process at the micro level, arguing that any damage to institutional reputation as a result of a blanket quality assurance judgement becomes an attack on the competence of every organisational member. Regarding the TEF, it is striking that it is often HE lecturers, delivering the teaching, who are least likely to be involved in TEF processes. Furthermore, Morley identifies the way a one-size-fits-all quality assurance like the TEF creates its own structures and systems of power and exposes the micropolitics of gendered/racialised/able-bodied and classed power in organisations. Again this, as we discuss in this collection, affects those HE lecturers who are interacting with students and delivering teaching on a daily basis and who become most subject to TEF-related processes and judgements.

TEACHING EXCELLENCE AND DIVERSITY DEFICITS (BOOK TITLE)

The seven essays in this collection address varying aspects of power and micropolitics embedded in TEF and notions of teaching excellence. In *'Elusive and elastic, and 'incorrigibly plural': definitions and conceptualisations of teaching excellence'*, Saunders, Moore and Zimbars offer a critical consideration of the notion of 'excellence' underpinning the performative measures of TEF in a neoliberal, marketised sector. In their companion piece, *Operationalising teaching excellence in higher education: from 'sheep-dipping' to 'virtuous practice'*, the same authors take a critical look at mechanisms for developing teaching excellence, specifically, developing capability and rewarding success and pedagogy. Their approach problematises the entanglement of individual academics' teaching identities with their employers'

commercial goals and market position and questions the validity and reliability of how TEF measures ‘excellent teaching’, specifically in relation to those academic staff least powerfully positioned in the system. The pernicious effects of such micropolitics, especially when they go unacknowledged, are explored in Bartram’s queer analysis of the TEF in Chapter 6 *Queering the TEF*, while in Chapter 3, Crockford’s analysis, ‘*Wishing Won’t Make It So....*’: *Strategic ambiguity, Policy Ad hoc’ery, Deliverology and the Wickidity of TEF’s Equality and Diversity Aspirations*, critiques ‘the requirement to fabricate a formal textual account’ (Ball, 2003, p. 225) of teaching excellence in return for a rating.

The TEF highlights an explicit concern with teaching provision, learning gain and student for ‘disadvantaged’ students (ref). Yet in Chapter 4, *Rapport and Relationships: The Student Perspective on Teaching Excellence*, Lawrence, Hunt, Shaw and Symonie offer a number of firsthand accounts of how students from a widening participating background actually perceive quality teaching. These accounts are far removed from National Student Survey data, currently the main evaluation survey used in TEF metrics. Moreover, diversity in HE is not confined to students; HE staff are of all genders, of diverse class, ethnic and national background, age, faith and sexual orientation. Yet, student evaluation surveys used by TEF as measures of excellence are biased against female and minority ethnic staff already overrepresented in lower grades and more precarious roles within the sector. This is the issue discussed by French in Chapter 5, ‘*It’s not what gets taught, or how well it may be taught, but who is doing the teaching*’: *Can student evaluations ever deliver a fair assessment on teaching excellence in HE?* French makes clear how academic career progression is entwined with the TEF (and

REF) yet argues that racial and sexual prejudices (amongst others) and stereotyping make it more difficult for some staff to 'perform' excellence. Equally, structural conditions of precarity and minority exacerbate the employment and career impacts of not doing so.

Working in HE is the only option available for academics who are passionate about teaching their subjects and their students. Must they then, to an extent, become complicit with the daily enactment of excellence in a sector shaped by the ideology of neoliberalism? In Chapter 7, Brogan's essay, *Diversity Deficits: Resisting the TEF*, explores how lecturers might push back against such complicity working with their students to create alternative, potentially disruptive spaces for teaching and learning. If, as Ahmed argues, institutional polishing is the labour of creating shiny surfaces resulting in the fabrication of a 'textual account' of diversity through which an organisation can reflect back a good image to itself, we must 'be careful not to lose ourselves in the reflection' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 102).

TEACHING EXCELLENCE AS 'INSTITUTIONAL POLISHING'?

In closing, let's return to the question: does the performativity of 'excellence' in the TEF bear comparison to Ahmed's concept of 'institutional polishing'? Ahmed argues that when the labour of polishing is successful, the image is shiny. 'The labor removes the very traces of labor ...' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 102). Institutional polishing is therefore closely allied to her definition of an 'institutional speech act' whereby

...a diversity policy can come into existence without coming into use ... such policies can be 'institutional

speech acts' which do not go beyond pluralist understandings of diversity and non-performative in the sense that they fail to deliver what they have promised.

(2006, p. 764).

Applying this argument to teaching (and/or research) excellence, institutional polishing results in the fabrication of a 'textual account' of excellence (Ball, 2003, p. 225) and the 'reified reading which becomes a truth' (Morley, 2001, p. 476). In this way, the TEF facilitates institutional polishing by creating an institutional speech act of 'teaching excellence' which is largely performative and restricted to the narrow criteria established by TEF metrics. This results in a failure to address the actual complexity of the relationship between teaching excellence and diversity in HE.

Neither is it enough to understand how shiny surfaces create convincing reflections. We must also appreciate what is obscured. As Ahmed warns, 'When something is shiny, so much is not reflected' (2006, p. 764). This brings us to a second question: what is *not* shown in the performance of teaching excellence? As previously noted, 'performing' teaching excellence does not mean we need to remain ignorant of the ideology at its root, nor of the relationships of power which keep it in play, nor of the complex social processes of teaching and learning which TEF claims its metrics distil (but which we argue they cannot). The inherent structural inequalities of society, which are tacitly replicated within the academy, universities and the HE sector as a whole, are also visible in the TEF – disadvantaging women and people of colour, people with disabilities and different sexual orientations. Indeed, the reflected glory of TEF's misleading coda of