

## TEF vs REF: Are Teaching and Research Now Adversaries?

*A report on a series of high-level roundtable sessions held at the Labour, Conservative and SNP conferences during September and October 2016.*

### Introduction

The Physiological Society brings together over 3,600 scientists from over 60 countries. Since its foundation in 1876, its Members have made significant contributions to our knowledge of biological systems and the treatment of disease. The Society works for the benefit of its Members and physiology as a discipline.

A key strand of this work considers the reward and recognition of teaching in Higher Education. Many academic physiologists are heavily involved in teaching on a wide variety of undergraduate courses ranging from physiology and biology to medicine and veterinary sciences. The Society has worked for a number of years to promote teaching as a valued academic career strategy and ensure those who devote some or all of their work to teaching are appropriately recognised and can move up the academic career ladder. For The Society's publications in this area, please visit [www.physoc.org/current-education-policy-work](http://www.physoc.org/current-education-policy-work).

Teaching in Higher Education has been in the spotlight recently due to the UK government's commitment to introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This has the intention of driving up standards of teaching across the sector. Details of how this will happen have been released in stages, including the White Paper "Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (2016)" and, following that, the Higher Education and Research Bill, which is currently (as of November 2016)

before Parliament. The picture put across is that teaching has too long been a poor relation of research, and that there is a need to redress any imbalance.



*Roundtable at Labour Party conference*

The Society believes that aspects of this are true. Teaching is not suffering from a specific problem of quality, but one of lack of status. For too many universities, research is perceived as the headline activity while teaching is merely an obligation. The reasons for this are multifaceted, but centre on the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the money it brings to universities strong in research, and the prestige of high-profile researchers whose work is feted by the REF. This is contested by newer universities whose main income is from students rather than research. They argue there are many types of university, and not all conform to the 'traditional' image of a research intensive institution.

The TEF aims to inform students on teaching provision and provoke an overall increase in quality. This could lead to a redress of the balance, bringing teaching up to equal status with research. That, in itself, is commendable. However, it must be carefully implemented in order to avoid negative consequences on the sector. A significant risk

is that the two structures of TEF and REF drive a wedge between teaching and research within university infrastructures and staff career paths. This goes contrary to the sector's ideal that teaching should be connected to research, allowing students to experience the real cutting-edge of their subject and gain training in specific and transferrable skills.

Current government rhetoric is contradictory. The undergraduate experience is portrayed as a conveyor belt from school to employment,

with work skills and attitude the most important outcomes. To this end, the TEF plans to use information on graduate employment destinations six months after finishing their course. However, it also uses retention data and student satisfaction results. These are far more dependent on the whole student experience than the teaching they receive, and do not tend to have a bearing on future employability.

The sector has concerns about the effectiveness of the TEF. However, the general desire is to

## Recommendations to government

- **Say what you mean** – the TEF as planned is measuring the whole student environment, not just teaching. Greater clarity is required on the range of expected inputs and the institutional changes required to score highly.
- **Include details from the student voice** – the National Student Survey (NSS) is a very broad tool which makes it hard to distinguish between institutions as almost all universities cluster around 80–90% satisfaction. More direct input – e.g. from Students' Unions/Course Reps – will address the information requirements of the TEF.
- **Compare learning gain** – student satisfaction doesn't correlate to course strength and teaching ability. Utilise the external examining system where peers judge the learning gain across the sector and consider transferable skills as well as subject learning.
- **Recognise the good teachers and educational researchers** – the TEF as currently planned is rigidly impersonal. It should reward standout individuals as well as faculties. Demonstrating good teaching and teaching innovation must be reflected positively and bring tangible career rewards.
- **Celebrate course diversity** – teaching should be linked to local research. Research-focused academics are pushed to think differently when they are teaching, and students engage more with their subject if they are exposed to real life research. Without this, courses around the country could become homogenised.
- **Beware of perception** – students must be aware that education is more than a transaction. They should know that good teaching isn't spoon-feeding, and their education and development comes down to more than simply contact hours.

improve it rather than obstruct it. To this end, The Physiological Society, in partnership with think tank Demos, convened meetings at the Labour, Conservative and SNP conferences in September and October 2016. The aim was to discuss with politicians and sectoral experts the situation concerning the TEF, REF, and the future of Higher Education. At our Conservative conference event we were joined by Lord David Willetts, former Science Minister; at Labour by Roberta Blackman-Woods MP, the Chair of the APPG on Universities; and the SNP conference by Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, the Minister for Higher Education and Science, along with Roger Mullin MP and Carol Monaghan MP, who are on the committee examining the Higher Education and Research Bill. This report gives recommendations based on the combined output of these discussions, and a summary of the nature of the conversation and the points raised. The sessions were held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed should not be attributed to any individual present.

## Summary of the Conversations

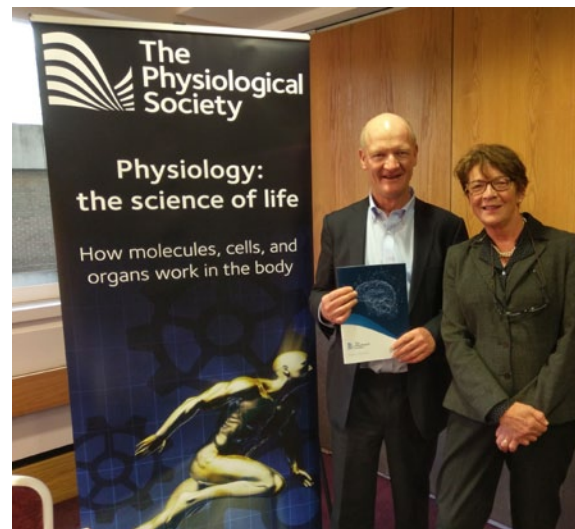
The broad view of our party conference events was that the metrics currently planned for the TEF are not a good representation of teaching quality. There are inherent flaws, such as:

- Retention and graduate employment is dependent on the nature of the student intake, the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the economy (local and national), and geographic factors rather than teaching.
- Student satisfaction is a broad-brush measure only tangentially related to teaching, and not always correlating good teaching with a good score.
- Destination metrics are a “lagging indicator”. This means that those who caused the outcome are not those who are being judged by it. This

could hold back departments after investment in teaching, meaning improvements are not recognised.

- The TEF as planned does include a brief submission of contextual information, but it is unclear how important this will be in affecting the outcome.

Reservations were expressed at our roundtable sessions about the “marketisation” of higher education. Even if increasing the (actual or perceived) level of competition in the sector does have the effect of driving up quality, it strongly affects the image of higher education and the attitude of new and prospective students.



*Conservative Party Conference: Lord David Willetts (former Science Minister) with Professor Bridget Lumb (Deputy President, Physiological Society)*

The Higher Education sector in this country is extremely strong overall, but the Gold, Silver and Bronze tiers of TEF results propose to brand a large proportion of universities second- or third-rate. Those future students, especially from overseas, who buy in to the transactional impression of a degree are potentially less likely to engage in wider

independent study and other traditional strengths of academia. Similarly, this risks losing the idea of a university “community” between students, postgraduates and academics.

Many contributors to our roundtables were uneasy about the effect of new “alternative providers” in the higher education sector and how their model may perform well in the TEF but poorly in terms of real-world educational outcomes. Divorcing undergraduate provision from academic institutions and researchers in this manner could lead to a homogenisation of course content and a divide in knowledge and attitude between students ostensibly following the same subject. Similarly, degree apprenticeships and accelerated degree courses, while valid methods of provision in some cases, are highly differing learning modes to traditional degrees. This, and the variance in fees from unrestricted providers, makes them unsuitable for analysing within the same framework and judging results against each other.

While many participants favoured a greater emphasis on peer review in leading to accurate teaching assessment, there was disagreement on the level of cost and bureaucratic burden this would cause. Several highlighted existing examples of light-touch internal peer review systems involving a small number of staff members. At some institutions, external examiners report privately to course directors, giving informal advice on quality improvements. Some method of harnessing this pre-existing peer evaluation was favoured by many participants, but there was a general desire to avoid an intrusive “Ofsted for Universities” system. Currently there is no reward or prestige attached to being involved in this type of peer review, but formalising the process could see recognition for being part of the process of driving up quality. One advantage of external examiners is that it avoids a closed system of

universities setting their course content, marking their exams, and deciding their own learning gain measures.

One area which saw different views expressed is the degree to which individual staff should be considered by the TEF. Excellent teachers are a benefit to any department and should be rewarded accordingly. The Society is pleased that TEF plans explicitly state that the proportion of staff with teaching qualifications, and the use of teaching in promotion criteria will be considered as metrics in future iterations of the TEF. However, some respondents felt that considering the effort of individuals to the same degree as the REF would take away from the collective endeavour of all staff teaching in a department, and lead to a blame culture concerning TEF results. There were worries around difficult and unsophisticated HR hurdles being instituted as universities strive to make all teachers equally commendable. Furthermore, this could lead, to an even greater extent, to academics being pushed to research-only or teaching-only career paths against their wishes.

Comparisons between the TEF and the REF are unavoidable at other levels as well. This is especially the case as TEF links teaching to fees, and therefore university resources. Some felt that an outcome of the REF has been to cluster research funding in an “ever-more-concentrated” group of top universities. Replicating this with the TEF would extend the competitive, adversarial aspects between and within universities to teaching as well as research. It was observed that Post-1992 universities which receive fewer research grants have always concentrated on their strength in teaching, but there was uncertainty that funding boosts from the TEF would reach them accordingly.

There were also concerns around the level of

inclusion of the student voice. Using only the answers provided to the National Student Survey (NSS) would represent a reduction in student participation compared to the current QAA system, where Student Unions can submit a separate response. The NSS is a poor differentiator as satisfaction for most universities is clustered within the 80–90% range. Student Unions are concerned with excellence and improvement in teaching and learning. However, going through these student bodies does risk a lack of parity depending on the relationship between the Union and the University.

Some participants drew attention to activities overseas which were felt to more successfully



*SNP Conference: Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP (Scottish Government's Science Minister) with Professor Blair Grubb (Policy Committee member, Physiological Society)*

track and improve excellence in teaching. For example:

- Germany has a professional framework of teaching standards derived through a consortium of professionals involved in the

sector.

- Norway uses the same type of inputs as in the TEF, but the narrative submission accounts for the vast part of the outcome with metrics being a minor contributor.
- In the USA universities conduct self-assessments, but these are kept private specifically to prevent a league table forming. This means they are used solely internally to drive improvement.

## How is the Situation Different for Scotland?

Scotland already has a different system for assessment of universities, using quality “enhancement” rather than quality “assessment”. This defines enhancement as “taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students”. It is felt that this produces a less adversarial system and is of overall greater benefit to the sector as a whole. The Scottish Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) system has six assessment themes relating to broad areas of institutional activity:

- Institutional context and strategic framework
- Enhancing the student learning experience
- Enhancement in learning and teaching
- Academic standards
- Self-evaluation and management of information
- Collaborative activity

The Scottish Higher Education sector has chosen to focus on long-term improvement and is considering how to measure and improve learning and teaching. We believe the TEF could benefit from incorporating some of these measures, such as student involvement in quality assessment

processes, and public dissemination of information about quality.

The Scottish Government remains committed to providing free tuition for home students. Therefore, the linking of the TEF to undergraduate fee increases in England and Wales is liable to put Scottish universities at an increasing financial disadvantage as the difference in provision per student widens. The Scottish Government calculates that Scottish universities are currently funded at levels around £2000 less per domestic undergraduate.

The Scottish Government has allowed Scottish HEIs to participate in TEF years one and two but has expressed concerns over the speed of the process. It is assumed that Scottish HEIs will continue to be permitted but not encouraged to engage with the TEF process, to counter the reputational risks of their not participating. Many institutions which have expressed interest want to participate in order not to weaken their marketing positions, especially to international students.

## Alternative Proposals

While the incoming system of a parallel REF and TEF seems set, future changes need not stay within this structure and could bring in a greater degree of nuance. One idea suggested during our roundtable sessions was a “Teaching Excellence and Improvement Framework”. This takes into account the starting point of benchmarking teaching excellence, and adds the Scottish aspect of enhancement, recognising the development of institutions’ understanding of their teaching and their acting upon it. This allows for greater differentiation between courses and modes of provision while allowing a level playing field upon which to compare the efforts made towards improvement.

Another suggestion was combining the two Frameworks into a “TREF”, which would be a much more holistic, department-level look at the integrated teaching and research efforts found in UK universities. This avoids the problems of splitting the consideration of teaching and research from one another, but does bring in other difficulties such as how the outcome could be linked to undergraduate fees, as seems to be a government priority. A further consideration is the difficulty in obtaining a single ‘score’ from a system that uses so many broad and significantly disparate factors.

## Acknowledgements

The Physiological Society would like to thank everyone who participated in our roundtable meetings.

## Disclaimer

These roundtable sessions were held under the Chatham House Rule. The views expressed in this report are those of The Physiological Society and should not be attributed to any individual present at the meeting.

## Contact

Should you wish further information about The Physiological Society or our work on the Teaching Excellence Framework, please contact our policy team by emailing [policy@physoc.org](mailto:policy@physoc.org).