



# Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF): Findings from the subject-level pilot 2018-19

## Annex B: Student findings report

This is an independent report completed in autumn 2019 following the conclusion of the pilot.

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# Introduction

## Purpose

This report summarises the feedback and key findings of student panel members who were involved in the 2018-19 Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) second subject-level pilot. The report has compiled feedback given at panel meetings, through formal feedback mechanisms, and through constant open communication between panel members, student deputy chairs, and Office for Students (OfS) staff. It separates feedback into thematic areas and presents key findings where consistent views of student panel members were held. This evidence has been brought together by Josh Gulrajani, Main Panel Deputy Chair (student) of the 2018-19 second subject-level pilot.

This report highlights the importance of gathering student feedback throughout the TEF second subject-level pilot that is independent from both panel members and provider contacts.

## Key findings

This report outlines the following key findings:

- a. The increase in student membership on panels has aided the assessment process but further steps could be taken to ensure panels consist of an equal number of students and academics.
- b. In future TEF exercises, further baseline training for students would help them to better prepare for the assessment process.
- c. Further support could be provided to students to help them better understand their role within the assessment process and what their expected workload will be.
- d. Panels should be as diverse in their membership as possible, reflecting the diverse nature of the student population and higher education sector in the UK.
- e. Panel members value evidence of student engagement in both their teaching and learning, and the submission process. Future TEF exercise should consider a student submission which outlines how actively engaged students are with their provider.
- f. The TEF specification and guidance could be developed to provide further support to providers on how to actively encourage and evidence meaningful student engagement. The guidance could benefit from further consideration of the diverse nature of the higher education sector, including the wide-ranging levels of student representation within providers.
- g. The student voice metric has been a welcome addition to the TEF assessment process; this should continue to form part of the core metrics set by which providers are assessed as part of the TEF.

- h. The change to weighting of the National Student Survey (NSS) metrics has had the unintended effect of diminishing direct quantitative measures of student views on higher education. Going forward, the change should be reversed to allow the NSS metrics to be weighted at least equally to that of currently higher weighted metrics.
- i. The TEF should continue to play a part in informing student choice on where to study. By including differential attainment data as a core metric, thus encouraging providers to address negative performance against this metric in the submission process; a diverse range of student groups will be better informed on attainment.

# Student findings report

## Panel composition and the role of student panel members

Throughout all years of the TEF, students have been involved in the assessment process at all stages. Through the subject-level pilots, there have been opportunities to increase and vary student involvement in the assessment process, with students holding roles of varying responsibility but equal importance.

The commencement of the second subject-level pilot saw the creation of student deputy chairs, two sitting on each of the subject panels, alongside two academic colleagues who were the joint subject panel chairs. Introducing student deputy chairs meant there was both an academic and student representative able to share subject-level feedback and topics of interest between the subject panels and pilot main panel. Furthermore, this role guaranteed that all subject areas were represented at the pilot main panel, by both academic chair and student deputy chair.

Feedback at the end of the first subject-level pilot suggested that the workload of the student deputy chairs was larger than that of any other assessor, particularly as the sole students sitting on the pilot main panel. It was also noted that the main panel was the only panel without a student deputy chair. Both of these pieces of feedback were addressed ahead of the second subject-level pilot, with the introduction of a main panel deputy chair (student) and three additional student main panel members and the caseload being removed for the student deputy chairs. Finally, feedback collated for this report highlights that, going forward in the TEF, a balance of the two prior caseloads should be sought for the deputy chairs.

While all panel members, through various forms, have expressed the usefulness of having students as part of the assessment process, and it is widely regarded as one of the strongest aspects of the TEF, there remains a lack of balance in terms of the actual number of student assessors and non-student assessors on all panels. In the second subject-level pilot, students remained outnumbered by academics, employer representatives, and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRB) representatives.

Throughout the second subject-level pilot, student panel members unanimously agreed that, as the TEF develops, there needs to be both an increased student voice in the submission process and increased student involvement in the assessment process.

Students are of prime importance to the provision of information to inform prospective student choice and can play a crucial role in the creation of clear information on the teaching and learning excellence at higher education providers within the UK. The steps taken so far demonstrate the importance of student assessors as part of the process, and the equality with which their objective judgement is taken by panels is testament to the ability of students to engage in a national framework without being seen as a token gesture in the field of student engagement.

Any future TEF exercise will involve a fresh round of recruitment and many previous student panel members will be out of scope for a role as a panel member, having surpassed the recruitment requirement of: having graduated; or having held a student representative role within the previous three years. Because of this, future TEF exercises will be subject to a loss of panel expertise, which may require some form of mitigation. Many student panel members expressed an interest in working with the OfS to establish a 'buddy scheme', where previous student panel members

support those new to TEF, providing them with knowledge and expertise on the assessment process.

**Key finding 1:** The increase in student membership on TEF panels has allowed for a richer, more robust discussion and decision-making process to be undertaken. As the TEF develops, further steps could be taken to make membership of all TEF panels comprise an equal number of academic and student panel members.

## Training of student panel members

While there has been a great focus from the OfS to ensure that students are treated as equal members in this process, this has not necessarily been the best approach from a logistical and operational point of view, as a baseline level of knowledge and training was assumed at the start of the process. Student panel members were diligent in their preparations and assessments; however, they often faced a steeper learning curve in order to prepare for their assessments when compared to academic panel members. Student panel members agreed that further baseline training would be of a great benefit in helping them to better prepare for the assessment process.

The ability to provide specific preparatory opportunities for student panel members does not diminish the steer that students should be treated as equal members of panels – it in fact strengthens that position, providing self-confidence and empowering students to feel better equipped to engage in a constructive and amplified way.

**Key finding 2:** The OfS should provide training opportunities to appointed panel members as early as reasonably possible following their appointment. While all training opportunities should be open to all panel members, the following training should be mandatory for these roles (through the contract of employment):

- Chairperson training – for main panel chair/deputies, subject panel chair/deputies
- Equality and diversity training – all panel members
- Unconscious bias training – all panel members
- Self-confidence, resilience and negotiating workshops – not mandatory but strongly recommended for student panel members
- Data literacy training – not mandatory but strongly recommended for student panel members.

## Role of student panel members

Panels and panel members considered the role of student panel members throughout the pilot; especially when assessing a broad and complex range of criteria, of which some are more student focused than others. The questions considered by panels included:

- Are student assessors there to assess against all the criteria through the eyes of a student representative?
- Are student assessors there to assess solely against specifically student-focused criteria?

Panel members were in agreement that while student assessors and panel members should view themselves as champions of student engagement - ensuring that the criteria relating specifically to these areas is considered at all stages of the assessment process - students are first and foremost present as assessors who will look across all criteria against which a provider is measured, applying a reasoned and holistic judgement to the level of teaching excellence of such providers, in the same way as other assessors.

A better understanding of this nuanced difference is required to be explained to all assessors and panel members at the commencement of the TEF assessment process going forward, providing clarification to all from the outset.

**Key finding 3:** Throughout the pilot exercise, the expectations and requirements of student panel members has been subject to continual improvement. Feedback has recognised that students feel better prepared to undertake the role than in previous iterations of the TEF. In a full exercise: the job descriptions; role requirements; and expectations of student panel members and student deputy chairs; should be clearly outlined, in a rounded approach, while also considering the remit and role of other panel members.

## Panel diversity

The TEF panels aim to reflect the diverse nature of the UK higher education sector, including provision and provider type, in the assessor pool. However, reflections from panel members highlighted that there is still work to be done to ensure that the construction of panels represent the true diversity of the UK higher education sector, and society more broadly.

The TEF should aim to ensure it has a diverse range of panel members, concentrating on the representation of minority groups. A strong recruitment campaign, with specific reference to having a gender balance and a proportion of panel members self-declared as BAME or disabled, would benefit the assessment process. This would ensure that future panels consider how these students are being supported to achieve within their provider.

The OfS should also consider how it can involve current undergraduate students and sabbatical officers in the recruitment of panel members for future TEF exercises. In the second subject-level pilot, student panel members noted that the TEF would benefit from having the student voice of those currently enrolled; or very recently enrolled at a provider, as part of the assessment process.

The OfS should publish panel recruitment data to ensure transparency in its process.

**Key finding 4:** Panels should be as diverse in their membership as possible, reflecting the diverse nature of the student population and higher education sector in the UK.

## Student engagement in the submission process

### Student submission

The ability to accurately capture students' engagement in the enhancement and development of their teaching and learning, along with a way to measure their engagement in the submission process for the TEF, are objectives that have been tackled throughout both subject-level pilots.

In the first subject-level pilot, the specification in this area remained unchanged from the provider-level specification that was used in TEF Year Two: "Providers are expected to provide opportunities for and seek to secure meaningful student engagement with the provider and subject-level submissions" included in the TEF subject-level pilot guide<sup>1</sup> (paragraph 176). As panel members, we witnessed wide interpretation of this broad statement across providers, with some demonstrating variable levels of student engagement in the process, but also with variations in the articulation of such engagement. This led to many conversations between panel members: firstly about what good student engagement looked like in UK higher education; but also how this might best be evidenced as part of the submission process.

The stance of some Students' Associations/Guilds/Unions is to not engage with the TEF and the panels noted that the TEF would need to consider the wider political context. Specific note was also made by all panel members that any future change to this point in the specification should reflect the diversity of student representation structures within providers across the UK, and the existence of Students' Associations at all should not be assumed to be universal.

Following feedback from the first subject-level pilot, and a roundtable discussion of student deputy chairs and main panel members, the second subject-level pilot was used as an opportunity to test a different format to collect information within the assessment process. Through further consultation with students across the subject panels, the 'Student declaration' (Appendix A) was created to be piloted in the second subject-level pilot. Further to this, specific operational steps were put in place to identify lead student representatives (LSRs) for each of the providers taking part in the second subject-level pilot, and it was agreed that the LSR would be responsible for the completion of the declaration. This was accompanied by advice and guidance, as well as training sessions provided by the OfS, specifically targeted at: student engagement, understanding the TEF, and assistance in completing the student declaration.

Of the 45 providers taking part in the second subject-level pilot, 37 student declarations were submitted. These were examined in detail by all members of the main panel. In the latter stages of the assessment process, the student declarations were scrutinised as part of the assessment materials; conversations included specific reference to the student declarations and the information contained within.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/teaching-excellence-and-student-outcomes-framework-subject-level-pilot-guide/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/teaching-excellence-and-student-outcomes-framework-subject-level-pilot-guide/).

Panel members employed a continual improvement process, identifying flaws in the current student declaration and highlighting developments that would be welcomed by panel members carrying out the assessment. Overall, the main panel concluded that while the concept of an independent declaration completed by students and submitted alongside the provider submission was useful to the assessment process, the declaration used was limited in that it could only establish a student's involvement in the submission process, and did not contain any narrative on how involved students were with their teaching and learning in a much wider context.

Panel members felt there were legitimate questions that could be asked relating to the students' involvement more broadly in the enhancement of teaching and learning. The student declaration could not accurately be used as a proxy for this, as it was not created for this purpose. It was concluded therefore that, while the student declaration was successful in achieving its initial aims, it was the broader involvement of students that panel members wanted information on. It was advised that the declaration should be enhanced further, rather than removed from the TEF assessment process.

Moving forward, any student declaration should allow panel members to understand easily both students' involvement in the TEF submission process, and their involvement in the development, maintenance, and enhancement of their teaching and learning. Due to the broadening scope of this document, the term 'student submission' is more accurate than 'student declaration'. The main panel agreed they would welcome a student submission with a broader scope in future assessment.

The student submission should be independent of the provider and should not replace any of the guidance around student engagement within the provider submissions. The current student declaration guidance, which states that there is no necessity for the LSR to share the contents of the student submission with their provider, should also remain.

The panel agreed that a more structured submission would be better than the current format, to provide an element of consistency in the responses received and to assist the LSRs in completing them. It should, however, contain space for the LSR to comment in both quantitative and qualitative formats on student engagement in the TEF process, and more widely in the enhancement of teaching and learning at their provider.

Guidance and advice for LSRs should be constructed using feedback obtained from the range of students engaged throughout the pilots, and consultation should be sought where appropriate, with relevant sector and representative bodies that are experts in the field of student engagement and representation.

Once submitted, the student submission should form part of the assessment process and the ability to influence a provider or subject-level rating should not be withheld as a result of the information provided. The student submission should be completed at provider-level, with specific space for comments about subject-level engagement. The submission in its entirety should be made available to both the main panel and the subject panels in which they focus.

**Key finding 5:** Where the student voice fed into the assessment process, it was found by panel members to be both valuable and meaningful. In taking forward a more detailed and structured 'student submission', it will be easier for panel members to understand the level of student engagement in: the TEF submission process at each provider, how engaged students are with their teaching and learning, and how students value their educational environment and learning resources.

## Provision of specification guidance

The OfS provides advice and guidance to providers on what effective student engagement in the TEF provider submission process might look like, and should seek to maintain and build on the current list of examples in the TEF subject-level pilot guide<sup>2</sup> (paragraphs 177 a-f).

- It was however noted that there was a lack of consistency in how providers chose to demonstrate student engagement in teaching and learning through the submission process. One way to address this is for a clearer steer to be given than the current wording in the TEF subject-level pilot guide<sup>2</sup>: "Providers are expected to provide opportunities for and seek to secure meaningful student engagement with the provider and subject-level submissions" (paragraph 176).
- Within this point, there is no inherent obligation on the OfS to ensure the guidance and examples it provides are useful across the breadth of UK higher education providers. As such, guidance should be built further to demonstrate examples of how student engagement can be sought when there is no Student Association, Union or Guild, or there is political non-engagement from student representatives. The OfS may wish to consult with LSRs involved in the pilots, along with outgoing student panel members, to seek wider examples of good practice in student engagement across the sector.

**Key finding 6:** The current level of guidance on meaningful student engagement provided as part of the specification is helpful to the assessment process, but further support on how a provider should approach student engagement with the TEF could be provided. Therefore, this guidance should be maintained and developed further, paying note to the diversity of UK higher education and the wider context of the TEF.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/teaching-excellence-and-student-outcomes-framework-subject-level-pilot-guide/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/teaching-excellence-and-student-outcomes-framework-subject-level-pilot-guide/).

## Student voice metric

The student voice metric, comprising National Student Survey (NSS) questions<sup>3</sup> 23-25, was introduced as a metric within the teaching quality aspect of a provider's metric workbook in the second subject-level pilot. This, as a proxy, was recognised by the OfS and the TEF panels as the main form of quantitative information measuring student voice, which has the capability of being benchmarked across the breadth of providers taking part in the TEF.

Panels throughout the second subject-level pilot treated this metric in the same way as the remainder of the NSS metrics, allowing it to inform all stages of the assessment at both provider and subject level. Student panel members felt that this improved the evidence that they could draw upon, providing a rich data source into students' views of the teaching and learning they received as part of their higher education experience. As such, students that were involved in the pilot fed back that it had a strong impact on their assessments and felt it would be in the best interests of the TEF for student voice to remain a core metric in the future.

**Key finding 7:** The student voice metric has been a welcome addition to the TEF assessment process; this should continue to form part of the core metrics set by which providers are assessed as part of the TEF.

## National student survey weighting

In the second subject-level pilot, the five metrics derived from the NSS (teaching on my course, assessment and feedback, academic support, student voice, and learning community) were weighted at 0.5, while the continuation metric was weighted at 2.0 and the three employment metrics weighted at 1.0. As such, the NSS metrics, derived directly from students' opinions of their higher education experience, accounted for 2.5 of the 7.5 metric weightings that contributed to the initial hypothesis of a provider.

Throughout the assessment process, it was noted that there was a perceived imbalance in how the quantitative evidence was used by panels. A provider could score negatively in four of the five NSS metrics but just one positive score in the continuation metric would hold the same weighting. Feedback from student panel members at various assessment meetings stated that this diminished the level of importance given to students' views of their higher education experience, a point that should be rectified for future TEF exercises.

**Key finding 8:** The change to weighting of the NSS metrics has had the unintended effect of diminishing direct quantitative measures of student views on higher education. Going forward, the change should be reversed to allow the NSS metrics to be weighted at least equally to that of other metrics.

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/> and see <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/d462a46b-0eba-42fd-84a1-c8b6dc883c99/nss-2020-core-questionnaire-and-optional-banks.pdf> [PDF].

## **Current ratings and informing student choice**

### **Current ratings**

The ratings of Bronze, Silver and Gold have been used since the first round of TEF provider-level assessment in 2016-17. In the first subject-level pilot, these were the three ratings available to both provider and subject-level assessments.

The issue as to whether the Bronze, Silver and Gold ratings are accurate reflections of the level of teaching excellence at a provider is yet to be resolved. Panel members have repeatedly questioned whether a rating of Bronze against a descriptor of 'meeting the standard for UK higher education' is accurate or misleading. The broadness of terminology within the Silver descriptor allows for a wide interpretation, and as such some panel members felt that Silver potentially covers such a wide pool of providers that it becomes an accurate reflection of none.

An issue highlighted throughout the second subject-level pilot relates to the number of ratings a course might receive, and whether this is in fact useful information to prospective students. Take the hypothetical situation of an undergraduate joint honours programme, based across two subject areas: you might find three ratings relating to this programme (two subject-level ratings and one provider-level). Student panel members particularly highlighted this as an area where the TEF might not be as informative as was intended.

Student panel members are particularly keen that, whatever the ratings are named, they are easily understandable, clear to prospective students and applicable to the broad range of higher education provision in the UK. Student feedback throughout this process has also been clear that the ratings that derive from the TEF need to honestly reflect the provision of teaching and learning to all students studying at the subject or provider.

Further feedback by students in the process in this specific area would be to ensure that the TEF ratings become a relevant and vital part of a prospective students' decision-making process.

### **Information available within the assessment process**

As the TEF has developed, so too has the amount of information available to, and considered as part of, the framework. The TEF has also shifted in terms of what information forms part of the core set (that which directly influences ratings in a formulaic way), supplementary information (that which has the ability to influence ratings but in a less formulaic way) and contextual information (that which provides further context and may be of use to panel members and assessors).

In the first subject-level pilot, the Longitudinal Employment Outcomes (LEO) dataset was included for the first time as a supplementary dataset, meaning that panel members were able to use the data provided within this dataset to inform ratings. While LEO was a part of the supplementary metrics, panel members found it useful to contextualise the employment metrics provided in the core metrics set derived from Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data, but there were significant questions raised where the two datasets seemed to not align.

Following on from this, for the second subject-level pilot, LEO became part of the core metrics workbook. Panel members felt that, while LEO is an important metric that provides a great deal of information on the long-term employability of graduates, it could be enhanced further to note the regionality of long-term employment, particularly in median salary calculations.

In the second subject-level pilot, data was provided that pertained to differences in attainment by students of different personal characteristics. This information was presented as a supplementary dataset at provider level, to be considered at step 1b of the assessment process, alongside the split metrics by different student characteristics. It was most often discussed in relation to the criterion SO3: Positive Outcomes for All, and whether that criterion could be met if the data showed significant differences in attainment between student groups.

While this information was incredibly useful in its current form, its weight in the process is limited by its status as a supplementary dataset. As such, panel members were concerned that where a rating was made, but data provided suggested large differences in attainment between students of differing characteristics, this could lead to either confusion or a rating not truly being reflective of the student body.

One way that the specification might address this is to revisit the criterion specifically pertaining to 'Positive Outcomes for All', more explicitly stating that this may be an unrealistic aspiration for higher education providers and, therefore, while panel members should always employ a 'best-fit' model in reaching judgements, this might be easier if the wording of this criterion is reconsidered.

Another approach to take would be to increase the importance of the differential attainment data. In thinking about how the TEF should inform student choice, it should have the ability to inform the choices of prospective students of all backgrounds and from all walks of life. Including differentials in attainment as a core part of the assessment process would ensure that the outcomes are informative to all student groups.

**Key finding 9:** The provision of differential attainment data as a supplementary dataset was welcomed by all panel members, but particularly student panel members for whom this provides a key piece of information about the parity of teaching excellence at higher education providers.

Including benchmarked differential attainment data as a core metric would encourage higher education providers to address gaps in attainment through the provider submission. This would highlight good practice and mitigate negative performance, as is the case for current core metrics.



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