

SCONUL response to TEF technical consultation for year two

1. Background note to members

The HE White paper outlines in greater detail the government plans for broad changes to the sector, including the implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Alongside this White Paper, the Government has issued a technical consultation around the supporting evidence and assessment criteria for the TEF. Our response aims to recommend changes that will allow librarians the best opportunities to demonstrate their role in the academic enterprise of their institution. We have elected to respond to questions 1, 8, 9, 10, and 12.

It should be noted that the core metrics, that is NSS scores, HEFCE and DLHE data, have already been decided and we are not being given the opportunity to comment on our view of those as accurate indicators of excellence in teaching and learning.

Overall, we believe that the framework being proposed here provides clear opportunities for libraries to make a meaningful contribution to their institutions' TEF submission in year two, and we look forward to doing future work that will support libraries in demonstrating their input to and impact on teaching and learning. Our substantial criticism herein is that the advice proposed in relation to how panels should assess teaching excellence (figure 4) is not reflected adequately in the advice being proposed around possible evidence to include in submissions (figure 6). The changes we suggest below, particularly with regard to question 8, are around introducing greater consistency between the two sets of advice and thus allowing greater scope for libraries to make a valuable contribution to the TEF submission.

2. Response to questions

Question 1: Do you agree with the criteria proposed in figure 4? Please outline your reasons and suggest alternatives and additions.

- a. **General:** Librarians have an essential role to play in each of the three aspects of the criteria and we believe that the language that is to be reflected in the panel member guidance in figure 4 allows scope for this.
- b. **Teaching quality:** We agree especially with the statement:

Evidence might include initial and continuing professional development for teaching and academic support staff, reward and recognition, promotion and progression opportunities, and the level of experience and contractual status of staff involved in teaching.

The above statement gives panels the opportunity to recognise the importance of professional development in relation to teaching for staff both directly responsible for teaching and for those supporting its development throughout the institution.

The development of qualified and knowledgeable staff throughout the institution, including both academic and other professional staff, will support and promote high standards of teaching. We know, for instance, that the number of hours

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librarians spend engaged in the teaching of information literacy skills (essential skills related to independent learning and employability) has increased by over 20% in the past ten years¹. This number excludes the time librarians dedicate to the important functions of developing the spaces (both physical and virtual) and collections (physical and virtual) that impact on a student's experience of teaching and learning at their institution, representing as they do areas where students actively engage with learning

- c. **Learning environment:** There are references in this section to facilities and resources being both physical and virtual. We support this language and feel that it provides potential for institutions to represent their diverse and multi-faceted learning environments.

We hope that panels will be guided, too, to view the definition of 'effectiveness' of a learning environment in the context in which it exists. There is no single and equitable definition of 'effectiveness' that can allow due recognition for the richness of the UK university sector and it is hoped that panels are encouraged to assess this term in a context that is appropriate to the individual institution and student profile.

We also believe that providing panels with a definition of "effectiveness" if only by way of illustrated examples, will contribute to more insightful and consistent judgements.

Point 66 of the Consultation, indicates that the learning resources questions (16-18) from the NSS will not be included in the core metrics. The responses to these questions, however, may be usefully incorporated in an institution's submission, particularly with regard to evaluating learning environment, and should not be overlooked by panels.

- d. **Student outcomes and learning gain:** We suggest the following change:

Evidence may include input measures such as employer engagement in the curriculum, course accreditation by professional regulatory or statutory bodies, *the embedding of skills related to employability and independent learning in the curriculum*, and extracurricular activities designed to enhance employability and transferable skills. Evidence may also include the impact of using methods such as Grade Point Average (GPA) to record students' achievement.

SCONUL feels that skills related to employability are most valuable and effective when they are embedded in a student's academic experience and directly related to learning outcomes and that should be reflected here in the advice to panels.

¹ Figure derived from the SCONUL Annual Statistics, see http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Analysis_Evolving_spaces_and_practice_2015.pdf

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Question 8: Without the list becoming exhaustive or prescriptive, we are keen to ensure that the examples of additional evidence included in figure 6 reflect a diversity of approaches to delivery. Do you agree with the examples?

a. **General:** We feel that there is a notable disconnect between what the panels are being encouraged to assess (figure 4) and what institutions are being encouraged to submit (figure 6), namely around recognising the valuable contribution by professional services staff and the importance of virtual and physical places and learning resources for teaching and learning. Our recommendations below aim to bring the two sets of advice closer together.

b. **Teaching quality:** We suggest the following change:

Quantitative information relating to the qualification, experience and contractual basis of staff who teach *and professional staff directly involved in delivery and support of teaching and learning at their institutions.*

We feel strongly that the guidance on evidence should reflect the guidance given to panels and assessors and recognise the value of having professional services staff develop their expertise and gain recognition for their role in teaching and learning.

c. **Learning environment:** We note with disappointment that none of the examples of evidence make reference to virtual or physical space or learning resources. The *place* in which a student's academic life takes place can have a profound and meaningful impact on modes of teaching and learning. We advise an amendment to one bullet point and three additional bullet points:

Quantitative information demonstrating proportional investment in teaching and learning infrastructure, including *investment in learning spaces (eg, the library) and resources.*

The extent, nature, and impact of pedagogically informed physical or virtual spaces, such as the library, in supporting teaching and learning.

Quantitative data demonstrating engagement with specialised learning resources and collections.

Qualitative evidence of impact which may include, for example, the narrative and experiential views of students about how their learning environment has supported their engagement with learning.

Question 9: (a) Do you think the TEF should issue commendations? (b) If so, do you agree with the areas identified above? Please indicate if you have any additional or alternative suggestions for areas that might be covered by commendations.

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- a. We agree that commendations have the potential to recognise areas of excellence and help better identify the unique qualities of an institution.
- b. We appreciate the list of commendation areas recognises especially the importance of widening participation and diverse learning and teaching methods. The list of commendation areas lacks, however, any reference to learning spaces and resources. We recommend an additional area:

Excellence in innovative spaces (virtual and physical), services and resources in supporting teaching and learning.

- c. We again wish to emphasise that professional services staff who are well-qualified and possess expertise in teaching and learning make a considerable contribution to student success. We recommend the following amendment to allow for commendation in this area:

Excellence in the support, reward and recognition available for teaching *and other professional staff with a role in supporting teaching and learning.*

- d. Clear criteria for achieving a commendation should be stated.

Question 10: Do you agree with the assessment process proposed above? Please outline your reasons and any alternative suggestions. The proposed process is set within a relatively tight timescale, reflected in the key dates included in Annex B. Responses should be framed in this context.

- a. Looking specifically at the roles played by each representative in the proposed assessment process (figure 8), in order for panels to achieve a broad and holistic understanding of teaching at an institution, professional librarians should be included in TEF panels and as TEF assessors or specialists. Librarians have a key role in the academic enterprise of their institutions. They are responsible for directly teaching students in areas that are essential to a graduate's career readiness and academic success. Librarians are actively involved in each of the three aspects of the TEF and are well positioned to provide expertise and experience in evaluating excellence. It is also a profession with a strong history of using data to evaluate and improve services. It would be wise to include these voices in a panel charged with assessing an institution's teaching excellence. We therefore recommend changes to the descriptions of the roles:
- b. **TEF assessor:** TEF assessors are experts in teaching and learning in a higher education setting *and may be drawn from academic and professional services staff (eg, librarians)*. TEF assessors also include students. Their role is to assess TEF applications and agree provisional outcomes.
- c. **Specialist:** Specialists are individuals with expertise in particular areas. This may include expertise *in the strategic development of teaching and learning spaces, services and resources*, widening participation or employer perspectives. Their

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role is to provide specialist input to the assessment process, further to that which may already be available through existing expertise of assessors.

- d. **TEF Panel:** The TEF Panel is the decision-making body, led by the TEF Chair. Its members will be made up of assessors and specialists *and should include professional services staff in either of these capacities*. The role of the TEF Panel is to moderate and confirm provisional outcomes recommended by assessors. Not all assessors will be members of the TEF Panel but all Panel members will be assessors.

Question 12: Do you agree with the descriptions of the different TEF ratings proposed in Figure 9? Please outline your reasons and any alternative suggestions.

- a. SCONUL notes that the descriptors do not provide detail that would differentiate the definition of 'excellent' from 'outstanding', and recommends further descriptive language is included so that the ratings are more meaningful to those participating in the process.

In addition to more descriptive titles, we suggest, that the categories themselves be more descriptive: Meets expectations, Exceeds expectations and Outstanding.