Written evidence submitted by the University and College Union branch at Birmingham City University (HERB 45)

We are responding to the consultation as representatives of the University and College Union branch at Birmingham City University; we represent academic and professional services staff. Our submission will focus on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) element of the Higher Education and Research Bill. We will discuss the implications for teaching, for equality, and the HE sector in general. We are basing evidence on response to a workshop carried out by the Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education research centre at BCU, as well as on Higher Education research.

1. The implications for teaching

The Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education (CSPACE) at BCU held a workshop on the Teaching Excellence Framework and also collated responses from staff; notes are attached as an appendix. It was based around four questions:

1) What is teaching?
2) What is “excellent” teaching, and how does this vary across discipline?
3) How can excellent teaching be captured validly and reliably?
4) How can excellent teaching be developed and supported, and what are the challenges?

The responses to these questions raise questions about the methods used to determine “teaching excellence” in the TEF and the implications for teaching.

1.1 What is teaching?

It was agreed that teaching has moved a long way from the traditional lecturing format and now takes place in a variety of forms (including small groups or one-on-one, in work placements, through “community of practice” and “critical friend” relationships involving students and staff, as well as critical reflection on teaching, professional learning and self-learning) and sites (including off-campus and online).

1.2 What is excellent teaching?

“Excellence” was a constructed and contested term. For some staff, particularly those in Education, ‘excellence’ is part of a colonised discourse associated with agencies such as Ofsted as well as a marketised term that lacks clarity. It was suggested that one alternative term might be for us to talk of ‘fit for purpose’ teaching. The external examiners and their identification of “best practice” in their role as independent assessors was seen as particularly important, as was the needs of students in shaping decisions about what constitutes best practice – as pedagogy should be adapted to students’ needs, and teaching practices that might enable some types of students to learn might be more difficult for others.

1.3 How can “excellent” teaching be validly and reliably captured?
Several key themes emerged from the workshop:

- The need to triangulate evidence from a variety of sources of data including through student feedback – notably this included focus groups and other methods for collecting data, and that individual datasets (such as the NSS) would not be enough. Examples of some of the sources of data mentioned included: student feedback (i.e. via surveys, case studies, focus groups etc.); module evaluations and annual programme reviews; capturing the views of other stakeholders and external agencies (e.g. employers, service users, health organisations etc.); observing teaching; teacher self-evaluations and self-reflections.

- There was a consensus that in order for this to be meaningful and attempt to capture the complexities of learning and teaching, a longitudinal perspective over time was needed rather than a snapshot or episodic perspective. This applies to both staff and students. In the case of the latter, several colleagues commented how useful it would be to track the journeys of students, post-completion, in order to gauge the value of their studies in a workplace context; this was important in responding to the emphasis on employability too.

- Participants emphasised the important role that students have to play in defining and shaping the curriculum as well as providing valuable insights into the quality of their learning experience and the role that “excellent teaching” plays in this. Rather than relying on instruments such as the National Student Survey (NSS), staff suggested that colleagues should look for opportunities to engage students in evaluating into their learning experience on an ongoing basis and embed their feedback into continuous improvement of programmes if they are not doing so already.

- Participants also agreed on the importance of case studies. Given the diverse profiles/backgrounds and complex needs of some students at BCU and other post-92 institutions who often come through ‘non-traditional’ routes (i.e. not straight from A Levels), the ‘distance travelled’ of some of these students is very significant.

1.4 How can excellent teaching be developed and supported, and what are the challenges?

Several key themes emerged from the workshop:

1) The importance of sharing and disseminating good practice, through a variety of formal and informal processes, including mentoring and developmental teaching rather than punitive or managerial teaching observations based on a “communities of practice” model (this has been piloted in one Faculty of BCU and now is being implemented university-wide). It was clear that respondents did not appreciate a ‘one size fits all’ approach and
acknowledged diverse teaching methods. Time issues were identified with the need to reduce administrative work to enable more time for effective teaching.

2) The importance of developing an appropriate climate for quality teaching. Academic identity was considered which promoted a greater degree of staff autonomy, and the promotion of Learning and Teaching practice as ‘collaborative rather than adversarial’ and done ‘with you not to you’, alongside positive messaging and valuing teaching within a culture that rewarded good practice rather than a punitive “blame culture”.

3) Being able to offer effective student support was a specific theme that emerged. As participants felt this was such an important element of the student journey overall, there was an associated need to offer staff development in pastoral support/coaching/mentoring/health & well-being. An applied example was to be able to offer effective support when discussing exit strategies with students.

A related discussion point was about student analytics in general, and the need for a system to identify students at risk or failing early on, which would allow for targeted interventions to be made.

Another specific topic related to the need for lecturers to acknowledge the demographics of their own students. This could be highlighted within any academic development courses. As an example, many courses receive diverse student groups including students where English is not their first language, who will need greater support with academic writing skills. This broader issue could be linked back to developing pastoral support through personal tutoring perhaps, so that tutors know when and how to signpost students to appropriate support.

1.5 Summary
The CSPACE workshop responses point to the complexity of learning and teaching (which now takes place in a variety of contexts and forms beyond the traditional lecture); and the need to adapt to diverse student demographics, rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The responses also emphasise to the importance of a collaborative and supportive environment for fostering and sharing best practice rather than managerial and punitive approaches. They also emphasised the importance of triangulating a range of datasets which could capture this complexity including longitudinal studies and case studies.

2. The implications for equality
A number of studies have highlighted gender and race bias in student evaluations of teaching. Given the NSS will be a key metric to the TEF, we feel it is important to raise concerns about the prominence it will be given. For example, research conducted at the University of California found that female staff consistently received lower scores on student evaluations of teaching (Boring, Ottoboni and Stark, 2016). A study in Canada found that female tutors were more likely to be judged harshly than male tutors in student evaluations when they did not give higher marks; those who received the low marks also made reference to gender stereotypes in criticising the evaluators (Sinclair and Zunda, 2000). In the UK, a study carried out by researchers at the University of Reading found that
the ethnicity of lecturers had an impact on NSS scores, through cross-referencing NSS scores with statistics on staff demographics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (Bell and Brooks, 2016). This also follows on research in the US which found that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) lecturers tended to be evaluated more harshly on websites such as RateMyProfessor.com, with many commenters claiming that lecturers with Asian surnames could not speak English well (Close Subtirelu 2015). Given the systemic issues facing women and BME staff in Higher Education (for example, a report from the Runnymede Trust found only 17 black female professors in UK Higher Education; see Runnymede Trust 2015), giving too much weight to NSS scores as a measure of teaching quality risks undermining progress made on equality in HE, and should be treated with caution. It is also crucial that the equality impact of the TEF be monitored.

3. The implications for the HE sector

We see teaching and research as intrinsically linked and mutually beneficial, and so we are concerned that the Teaching Excellence Framework will further divide the sector - even more than it is now, into “research” and “teaching”-focused universities, as institutions choose to concentrate resources and attention either on REF or TEF. There is little evidence of co-ordination between the two frameworks, and they place contradictory demands on institutions. Forced to choose between the two, we are concerned that many post-92 institutions may limit their support and resources for research – to the detriment of the sector as a whole. In a recent paper for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), Paul Blackmore et al. have argued that the metrics chosen to measure teaching quality in TEF are not robust enough to function as a credible counter to the REF and so would not have the necessary authority to challenge the prestige of research-intensive institutions in the perception of prospective students and employers. Blackmore et al also warn that the Bill will have negative implications in particular for Post-92 institutions such as BCU, because – more than Russell Group institutions – they will be forced to compete with the private providers who enter the sector as a result of measures outlined in the Bill (Blackmore, Blackwell and Edmondson, p6). We are also concerned, like the authors of the paper, that there will be pressures for institutions to focus resources - including increased fee income - on ‘iconic and attention-grabbing projects’ to protect their reputation rather than on meaningfully improving the quality of teaching (ibid).

4. Summary

For these reasons, we are concerned that the three measures for capturing teaching quality, namely NSS scores, graduate destinations and retention figures are too crude and inadequate to accurate measure it. Furthermore, we are concerned about how the criteria might lend themselves to punitive and managerial approaches which will not improve the quality of teaching and may be detrimental to staff morale. Research has demonstrated race and gender bias in student evaluations of teaching, and so proposals to give prominence to the NSS as a metric should be treated with caution, particularly in relation to their equality impact. We call on the TEF to be reconsidered and redrafted based on evidence from higher education research, and with input from lecturers, students trade union and other stakeholders; and that they also play a role in the oversight of the implementation of the
TEF. Furthermore, we believe the TEF needs to receive full parliamentary scrutiny and oversight.

5. References


Close Subtirelu, N., 2015. “‘She does have an accent but...’: Race and language ideology in students' evaluations of mathematics instructors on RateMyProfessors.com’. Language and Society 44 (1), 35-62.


17 September 2016
**APPENDIX: DETAILED NOTES ON THE CSPACE TEF WORKSHOP**

**TEF without tears: making sense of the TEF and what it means for university staff**

On 11th July 2016, a workshop focusing on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) took place at the CSPACE Conference at the City South campus. Members of staff from a range of different disciplines and faculties from across the university attended the workshop, during the course of which they discussed and debated four fundamental questions relating to the TEF. This document summarises the breadth and richness of those discussions in the form of a set of notes corresponding to each of the four questions covered during the workshop and the responses of staff. It is hoped that these notes will act as a stimulus for further discussion and help to inform the university’s positionality around the TEF. The four questions discussed in the workshop were as follows:

1. **What constitutes ‘teaching’ in HE?**
2. **What is ‘excellent teaching’? And does this vary across disciplines?**
3. **How should the university seek to capture ‘excellent teaching’ validly and reliably?**
4. **How should the university go about developing and supporting ‘excellent teaching’? And what are the challenges involved?**

**Question 1: What constitutes ‘teaching’ in HE? (Definitions, roles, environments)**

In practice-based courses, it was agreed that ‘teaching’ has moved a long way from the traditional lecturing mode and often involves the following characteristics across a range of different disciplines and programmes:

- Working with students in small groups and on a one-to-one basis (e.g. tutorials, placement visits, observations of practice)
- ‘Teaching’ is not restricted to the campus but can happen off-site, online etc
- Importance of building relationships as well as covering curriculum content (i.e. staff-students; staff-staff; students-students)
- Community of learners supporting each other, critical friends, peer learning, informal learning
- Application of learning to the practice environment – strong focus
- Meta-teaching particularly in ITT and Health courses (e.g. teaching student teachers to teach reading, teaching student nurses how to take a patient’s blood pressure)
- A lot of unrecognised ‘teaching’ occurs while students are on placement through both placement mentors and university personal tutors
- Theory-Practice relationship-space and links
• Impact of digital learning + online communication between staff and students
• Keeping up to date with technological and pedagogical developments
• Critical reflection on teaching, professional learning and self-learning
• Learning events, conferences, seminars, supervisions, research Cafes

Question 2: What is ‘excellent teaching’? And does this vary across disciplines? (Models, stakeholder perceptions, outcomes)

A key starting point for the group discussion was how ‘excellence’ was perceived as a problematic and contested term. For some staff, particularly those in education, ‘excellence’ is part of a colonised discourse associated with agencies such as Ofsted; a marketised term that lacks clarity. It was suggested that one alternative term might be for us to talk of ‘fit for purpose’ teaching. In relation to this, the role of external examiners may be important and their comments on the ‘best practice’ that they have identified in their capacity as independent assessors. Who our students are emerged as a key criterion for making decisions about ‘excellence’ in teaching as invariably ‘excellent teachers’ shape and adapt their teaching according to their students’ needs.

Key discussion points

• Students’ expectations of their programmes may vary from one subject to another. Excellence is subjective and is influenced by students’ contributions
• How does ‘excellence’ relate to the increasing importance of employability?
• ‘Excellence’ involves differentiation and assessment variation
• Value of subject knowledge & experience
• A balance between academic vs experience in practice/industry (for some courses). Students and staff need to appreciate the value of both aspects and work to integrate the two.
• Publicly accepted perceptions of a specific profession may impact on expectations
• An excellent teacher should engender excellent learning and engage students’ attention
• Being able to adapt what you do to meet the needs of different groups of students
• A variety of styles; mindful of students’ preferred ways to learn/engage
• Passionate about your subject and being able to transmit that passion to students
• Listening to what students want to learn and incorporating this into the course, whilst managing their expectations
• “Excellent teaching” uses engaging models such as flipped classroom, PBL and simulation.
• “Excellent teaching” includes multidisciplinary teams such as inter-professional learning.
• Students feel that although education may challenge them, they feel supported and safe during that process.
• Students’ perceptions of the process as well as the outcomes. We need to make sure that this is captured DURING and not just at the end of a module
• Praxis: theory & practice
• Excellence changes over time!!
• Inspiring & transformative
• Excellent teaching: passion and enthusiasm coupled with a sound grounding of knowledge and a good evidence base; flexibility and openness to new methods and ideas; someone who captures the excitement behind the topic and conveys this to students; someone who still realises they have a lot to learn

Question 3: How should the university seek to capture ‘excellent teaching’ validly and reliably? (Stakeholder input, methods/data collection, building the narrative)

Collated Post-it responses (n=28). Several clear themes emerged from the group discussion that resonated with staff working in a variety of subject areas and with diverse groups of students. These themes were as follows:

• **Triangulation of data/sources of evidence** – it was noted that in order to develop a rounded, authentic and credible picture of ‘excellent teaching’ across the university, a range of sources of data/evidence would need to be drawn on rather than relying on individual sources/data sets. Examples of some of the sources of data mentioned amongst the group included: student feedback (i.e. via surveys, case studies, focus groups etc); module evaluations and annual programme reviews; capturing the views of other stakeholders and external agencies (e.g. employers, service users, health organisations etc); observing teaching; teacher self-evaluations and self-reflections.

• **Longitudinal view** – following on from the need to ensure a multidimensional range of data/evidence to inform the university’s analysis of ‘excellence’ in teaching, there was a consensus that in order for this to be meaningful and attempt to capture the complexities of learning and teaching, a longitudinal perspective over time was needed rather than a snapshot or episodic perspective. This applies to both staff and students. In the case of the latter, several colleagues commented how useful it would be to track the journeys of students post-completion in order to gauge the value of their studies in a workplace context; this was important in responding to the emphasis on employability too. It was agreed that piecing together a longitudinal view represented a significant challenge for the university in terms of capturing and distilling this into a coherent and representative narrative, but it is a challenge worth pursuing if the university is to ensure that the story it tells in its TEF return is authentic.
• **Importance of student involvement** – ‘student voice’ emerged repeatedly in written comments and the group discussion. Colleagues emphasised the important role that students have to play in defining and shaping the curriculum as well as providing valuable insights into the quality of their learning experience and the role that ‘excellent teaching’ plays in this. Rather than relying on instruments such as the National Student Survey (NSS), staff suggested that colleagues should look for opportunities to engage students in evaluating into their learning experience on an ongoing basis and embed their feedback into continuous improvement of programmes if they are not doing so already.

• **Importance of BCU ‘case studies’** – given the diverse profiles/backgrounds and complex needs of some of the university’s students and how they often come through ‘non-traditional’ routes (i.e. not straight from A Levels), it was felt that the university needed to make it very clear in its position paper/TEF return that the ‘distance travelled’ of some of these students is very significant. This is something that the university needs to be very proud of and not be afraid to boast about more openly internally and externally. It was suggested that perhaps case studies could be captured in different genres e.g. written form, video stories, online testimonials etc.

**Question 4: How should the university go about developing and supporting ‘excellent teaching?’ And what are the challenges involved?** (Culture, climate, formal and informal support)

Collated Post-it responses (n=33). Two main themes emerged from this activity:

**Theme 1: sharing good practice**

A significant number of responses captured the need to share and disseminate effective practice. Forums and ‘L&T cafés’ (similar to research cafés) or simply the time and space to encourage pedagogic conversations were offered as potential solutions. An interdisciplinary theme also emerged with responses highlighting a need for more cross faculty and institutional working, both internally and externally, to communicate and share practice. From a more individualised perspective, mentoring was suggested as an option to allow ‘excellent teachers’ and practice/subject experts or ‘champions’ to guide initiates. It was also suggested that consultation and pastoral support are often undervalued in a target driven culture. Formative (rather than punitive) peer observation that can generate formative feedback was also highlighted as an effective method to share good practice, such as the HELS model of teaching observations. Furthermore, peer observation can be an opportunity to ask staff about the areas of teaching they struggle with and how they want support to develop.
Theme 2: developing the appropriate climate

A number of responses acknowledged the need for the University to develop an appropriate climate for teaching excellence, which in turn could foster a positive culture change. Academic identity was considered which promoted a greater degree of staff autonomy, alongside the promotion of lecturers as ‘teachers’ although whether this was in contrast to staff as researchers or subject experts was not clear. Some staff welcomed the Reciprocity between higher management and grass roots staff was also considered with responses suggesting that the promotion of L&T practice should be ‘collaborative rather than adversarial’ and done ‘with you not to you’, alongside positive messaging and valuing teaching. It was clear that respondents did not appreciate a ‘one size fits all’ approach and acknowledged diverse teaching methods. Time issues were identified with the need to reduce administrative work to enable more time for effective teaching. Although a greater degree of lecturer autonomy within a mutually supportive environment was endorsed, the need for strong leadership also emerged and this was in relation to Transforming the Curriculum. It is clear that colleagues would welcome greater guidance in this context. The use of university resources i.e. CELT and TELT to ensure that staff remained up-to-date with learning technologies and how students learn (today) was endorsed.

Round-table discussion themes

Time was identified as a key issue amongst participants, and it was felt that workload allocations should allow for concentrated portions of time to be allocated to staff development or research. It was felt that concentrated time would be more effective in targeting development and in generating some effective outputs.

Building a culture of practice was another key theme. Participants felt that there should be more opportunities for networking to build a ‘sharing culture’. Rewarding good practice was also discussed as an important factor in contrast to a damaging blame culture. From a broader perspective, more cross faculty dissemination events were endorsed, together with more team away days from a more local perspective. It was felt that it was important to build cohesive teams with a shared vision of what constitutes effective practice. Although the group acknowledged the challenges of the Transforming the Curriculum process, they did appreciate fully the benefits of ‘Design Initiation Events’ as per TTC. Such events support critical conversations about curriculum design, wider stakeholder engagement and vision sharing through the co-construction of a programme philosophy. It was acknowledged that more regular programme approval (or review) events would be beneficial, to help maintain these critical conversations and reflective practice.

Being able to offer effective student support was a specific theme that emerged. As participants felt this was such an important element of the student journey overall, there was an associated need to offer staff development in pastoral support/coaching/mentoring/health & well-being. An applied example was to be able to offer effective support when discussing exit strategies with students.
A related discussion point was about **student analytics** in general, and the need for a system to identify students at risk or failing early on. This would allow for targeted interventions to be made.

Another specific topic related to **the need for lecturers to acknowledge the demographics of their own students**. This could be highlighted within any academic development courses. As an example, many courses receive diverse student groups including students where English is not their first language. In this context, students will need greater levels of support for developing literacy skills. Do staff know where and how to support this? This broader issue could be linked back to developing pastoral support through personal tutoring perhaps, so that tutors know when and how to signpost students to appropriate support.