**TEF vs REF: integral or distinct enterprises?**

There is no argument that universities should endeavour to improve the quality of teaching in order to ensure that students get real value for money and graduate with the training and skills employers require. It is also evident that the teaching and excellence framework (TEF) has a role to play in creating accountability and will ensure that the government is able to monitor and assess the quality of teaching in England’s universities.

Indeed such a strategy by the government to monitor quality is not a new concept as the research excellence framework (REF) is a similar approach that has been in place for some time now as a recognised way of assessing, evaluating and incentivising high-quality research. What may not be fully appreciated however is that imposing TEF on universities without a stage of development and appraisal is in danger of damaging rather than enhancing the quality of teaching and may divert the focus of effort even more towards the importance of teaching and away from the value of undertaking research.

Within non red brick universities the architecture of higher education is heavily geared to prioritise teaching above academic research and, while TEF is a good thing for our teaching this should not be all encompassing and at the expense of REF or our science base. The issue exists that teaching and research may be underpinned by a mentality that sees these activities as competing rather than interrelated activities and it can be difficult for staff to reunite these processes. The government’s vision of parity between teaching and research is a good idea but this is an ambitious aim, particularly in universities where there is an inverse relationship between the two and I am not certain that TEF is the best way to achieve equivalence. The Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU) argued in a recent blog post that ‘There is no differential funding for good teaching, nor is there a financial penalty for poor teaching, so the notion that the £9K fee regime would enhance the quality of teaching would seem to be a fantasy.’ (Gordon Campbell professor of Renaissance studies at the University of Leicester and chair of CDBU’s executive committee).

Universities will inevitably focus on TEF and hopefully not as a paper exercise but one designed to deliver genuine improvements and preserve the strong reputation of UK higher education. However in order to succeed it must build on, not undermine attempts to build its research prowess and endeavour to facilitate and incentivise staff towards undertaking research activity.

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