

## **Imperial College Union Council**

### **A note prefacing a paper on the Teaching Excellence Framework submission and Higher Education Funding Policy**

By Luke McCrone, Deputy President (Education) & Nas Andriopoulos, President

#### **New Legislation in Higher Education – The Changing Landscape**

The Higher Education and Research Bill (HERB)<sup>1</sup> which is currently moving through the House of Lords having passed through the House of Commons, seeks to bring forward a range of measures to increase competition and choice in the higher education sector as well as raising standards and strengthening capabilities in UK research and innovation.

The Bill legislates for the creation of a new regulatory body, the Office for Students (OfS) with the specific responsibility of assessing teaching quality in UK Higher Education Providers. In anticipation of the creation of OfS, the government has instructed the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to create a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which is currently undergoing a technical consultation phase, in parallel with the passage of the Bill. Once the HERB is passed and the OfS is in working order it will take control of the TEF process.

*In short: the HERB mandates assessment of higher education providers and HEFCE/OfS (i.e. the government) will oversee the development of the TEF.*

The TEF, as laid out in the Department for Education's (DfE) White Paper<sup>2</sup> is envisaged by the current government to encourage, recognise and reward excellent teaching, in the same way that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has aimed to promote excellent research.

The government have made it clear that the TEF intends to fulfil the following aims:

- 1) Widening access and participation of students in higher education, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- 2) Decisions made by prospective students are more well-informed when choosing between different universities, through improving the information about teaching quality available
- 3) Permitting highly-performing institutions the ability to raise their fees in line with inflation, whilst preventing poorly performing institutions from raising fees.

The HERB is currently being considered in the Committee Stage of the House of Lords, where amendments will be debated before being jointly considered by both Houses. So far, 516 amendments<sup>3</sup> have been proposed. Much of the debate set to focus on: the role of a university, promotion of free speech in universities, the ability for new providers to enter the sector as well as new delegated powers to the newly formed OfS to de-register institutions of University status<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/2016-2017/0076/lbill\\_2016-20170076\\_en\\_1.html](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/2016-2017/0076/lbill_2016-20170076_en_1.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-white-paper>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/2016-2017/0076/17076-l.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cherwell.org/2017/01/02/oxford-chancellor-criticises-ham-fisted-higher-education-bill/> , <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/08/universities-warned-snowflake-student-demands/> , <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/dec/31/lords-revolt-tory-plans-free-market-universities>

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However, from the marshalled list of amendments, it appears that the assessment of quality of teaching will not be given any level of scrutiny beyond that of the rest of the Bill at this stage, although it may at the Report Stage.

Having already passed through the House of Commons, it is our view that the Bill as a whole (including the provision for a TEF) will almost inevitably be approved in some form, substantially modifying the UK's higher educational landscape for the foreseeable future.

### **TEF Requirements**

The Teaching Excellence Framework will assess the teaching quality of universities in England via a written submission and six different metrics. Half of these metrics (three of six) are derived from the annual National Student Survey (NSS) meaning that the framework heavily relies upon student satisfaction rates. The remaining metrics focus on measuring learning environment and employment prospects of graduates.

Imperial College London, along with the majority of universities, has opted to engage with the TEF two years after its inception. HEFCE has dictated that participating institutions will now have to compile a submission document (limited to 15 pages) which requires universities to evidence how their educational approaches have had an impact on the quality of teaching and learning; the submission also expects institutions to show how they have engaged with students in the interest of promoting educational quality. Imperial College Union have been invited to contribute the TEF submission.

Following the most recent HEFCE TEF briefing event, which the DPE attended alongside College staff, it was made clear that the written submission will play a substantial role in the assessment of universities. In our view, this emphasis on the content of the submission is a positive step as it reduces the reliance on the numerical metrics which have not been conclusively shown to be reliably indicative of teaching quality. Furthermore, there is consequently even greater scope for the Union to influence the assessment of the University by contributing to the assessment.

The submission deadline to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is the end of January 2017.

### **Imperial College Union's Past Policy & Actions on Higher Education**

The Union's Higher Education Funding policy<sup>5</sup> was last reviewed by Council in 2014. Following the information gathered by an online survey (~300 respondents), it resolved that the Union will condemn the marketization of higher education as well as any subsequent tuition fee raises. Overall, the paper concluded that, whilst the majority of students thought contributing financially to their own education was fair, a revision to lower fees should be pursued by the Union. It should be noted that this policy was produced before the introduction of the HERB or TEF.

Something to note here is the relatively low participation rate of overseas students in the survey itself, although the report does highlight the frustrations of many international students at the large gulf in fees between themselves and home students.

A second document that holds some relevance is the response to the government's Green Paper, authored by Jennie Watson and seconded by Andrew Tranter. This was submitted on behalf of the Union to DfE as part of the initial TEF consultation, but was not approved by Council at the time, due in part to the quoracy issues.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.imperialcollegeunion.org/dbfile/pbf/20>

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Following this period of consultation, certain areas of concern – including making Universities exempt from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and altering Student Union rights – were not included in the Bill, yet linking fees to teaching quality, establishment of OfS and easing entry of new providers were retained by the government.

### **The Question at Hand: Imperial College Union's Outlook on the TEF Submission**

It is understood that the TEF will bind together the improvement of educational quality with the fees an institution is able to charge. However, whilst raising fees is an unnecessary component of the TEF, the sole purpose of the TEF is to bridge the gap between research and teaching excellence whilst challenging institutions like Imperial to improve their educational offering for students.

The very nature of the submission which universities submit to HEFCE necessitates institutions to begin evaluating the impact of their teaching practise which will inevitably benefit the quality of education received by students. Imperial College Union strongly believe that the TEF will facilitate an important shift in emphasis toward a more evidence-based education system.

Imperial College Union have long made profound contributions to improving educational quality in College including via SACA's, the Academic Representation Network and our annual National Student Survey (NSS) Response. After all, this aspect of our activity is deeply embedded in our charitable objectives and is largely overseen by myself, the Deputy President (Education).

As a consequence, Imperial College Union is now faced with a critical dilemma, where in anything we do to improve educational quality for our members could be perceived as assisting an inflationary increase in home fees. Yet, improving the educational experience of our members, both home and international, is a fundamental cornerstone of our *raison d'être* as a Student Union.

This dichotomy has been brought to the forefront of our thought because of the invitation from College to contribute to the written TEF submission; but essentially boils down to whether the duty to improve the educational experience of our members trumps the principle of opposing inflationary fee rises.

The Union therefore looks to its Council to explore this issue and update its Higher Education Policy accordingly (Part B of the paper), whilst also providing guidance on the Union's involvement in the TEF Submission (Part A of the paper).

Below we explore some illustrative scenarios that cover a range of stances the Union could adopt on the TEF Submission and attempt to analyse the potential implications:

#### **Scenario 1: Boycott the NSS and do not contribute to the TEF submission**

***What it would entail:*** Following suite with the National Union of Students (NUS) in boycotting the National Student Survey. This would involve Imperial College Union encouraging final year students to avoid filling out the NSS. The intention here is to corrupt three of the six metrics from which the TEF measures teaching excellence, ultimately degrading the information which the TEF relies upon. We would not make a contribution to the TEF submission.

***Our reflections:*** There is uncertainty around how HEFCE will mitigate this issue, however, what is certain is that in HEFCE's methodology all metrics will be averaged over the past three years. Ergo, if NSS participation is insufficient this year then it is likely that HEFCE will resort to finding a work-around, for example taking an average of the past two years, as a way of evaluating institutions. It was also emphasised during the TEF submission briefings, hosted by HEFCE and attended by myself, the Deputy President (Education), that the written aspect of the submission will hold substantial weighting, above that of the metrics. Therefore, the assessment of institutions is likely to proceed even if the quality

of particular metrics may be compromised. As a consequence, we have limited confidence that a boycott would have an impact on the TEF assessment, even if we manage to keep participation rates below the 50% requirement.

Many NUS Union members have similarly recognised the futility of this approach and have opted out of the boycott, with only 45% of the member institutions still standing by the original NUS motion<sup>6</sup>.

This scenario would be particularly adversarial for the Union because the NSS has proven to be one of the Union's most effective tools for achieving educational change year-on-year, notably via our annual NSS response. This year's response led to the Union being mandated by College to pursue all NSS recommendations put forward. As such, compromising the NSS would be surrendering one of the strongest educational change-weapons in our arsenal. The Vice-Provost Education, Simone Buitendijk, has admitted the following in the past: "The NSS results created the sense of urgency to change the education experience this year" & "Students have never had more power than they do now because of the TEF". It is clear that we would severely hinder the Union from effecting educational change in the future by encouraging a boycott of the NSS.

*In short: ICU, like many NUS members, are not convinced that a NSS boycott would effectively prevent a TEF assessment and that there is a substantive risk of negatively affecting our ability to improve the experience of our members in the future.*

### **Scenario 2: Make no contribution to the TEF submission**

**What it would entail:** Make no contribution to the TEF Submission for the sake of being emphatic about our opposition to the TEF. College will request input from Imperial College Union for insertion into the submission which gives us the freedom to have the student voice heard in what is a significant document. There is an option for the Union to avoid contributing at all to the submission to express our opposition to the TEF.

**Our reflections:** This still sends a signal that we are not happy to directly contribute to the TEF and is somewhat of a weaker stance than Scenario 1, but would not carry the potential damage of boycotting the NSS. However, refusing to contribute to the submission is refusing to ensure that the student voice at Imperial College London is properly heard and represented; against one of the Union's aims to amplify the student voice on educational matters.

It could be irresponsible for the Union to pass-on the opportunity of shaping College's future thinking on education. Furthermore, relinquishing the opportunity to have the student voice heard in Imperial's TEF submission could result in College misrepresenting our views; having student input and influence in a document of this magnitude is imperative.

There is an additional risk that this scenario would undermine our push for greater student input in their education in College through the Learning & Teaching Strategy.

*In short: in this case Imperial College Union stand by the principle that we will not support the TEF directly, but by doing so we will pass up an opportunity to present the opinion of our members to the government in a high level public document.*

### **Scenario 3: Contribute to the TEF submission**

**What it would entail:** Collaborate with College on writing Imperial's TEF submission, with a view to accurately representing students' views on their own educational experience.

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<sup>6</sup> [NSS Boycott or Sabbotage Consultation - Results.pdf](#)

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**Our reflections:** We can safely say that if we do not participate in co-writing the TEF submission, College have to send one anyway. In our eyes, this is the most powerful way to present both the benefits and shortfalls of an Imperial education and give a fair assessment of students' experience. Secondly, part of the Union's wider strategy is centred around engaging with College on educational matters and this approach has enabled us to challenge College on several important issues. The trust we have established as a critical friend to College has enabled a series of historic educational successes including the implementation of a College-wide Feedback Traffic Light system and the co-creation of the Learning and Teaching strategy.

*In short: this is the only way we can ensure that students' views on their own educational experience are heard by HEFCE, leading to a more accurate TEF assessment. By contributing to the submission we would not be endorsing the TEF, but recognising that we should play an active role in managing its impacts.*

### **Our Position**

Imperial College Union has built up a track record of empowering students to improve the quality of education they receive. Avoiding engaging in the TEF is avoiding an important set of conversations which allow us to influence College on education. Contributing to the submission means that we retain the ability to influence College, not only in this singular instance, but also in future. The alternatives, such as opting for scenarios one or two, whilst showing our discontent with TEF, would imminently compromise that influential ability, which we so often take for granted. We want to avoid failing our members, by neglecting the opportunity of affecting long-term educational change for the promotion of their own and other's development.

### **Acronyms**

**DfE:** Department for Education

**FOI:** Freedom of Information

**HERB:** Higher Education and Research Bill

**HEFCE:** Higher Education Funding Council for England

**ICU:** Imperial College Union

**NSS:** National Student Survey

**NUS:** National Union of Students

**OfS:** Office for Students

**TEF:** Teaching Excellence Framework

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A Paper on the Teaching Excellence Framework Submission and Higher Education Funding Policy

Proposer: Luke McCrone, Deputy President (Education)

Seconder: Nas Andriopoulos, President

Part A: TEF Submission

**The Union notes that:**

1. Since the Green Paper consultation in 2015, the HERB has been drafted, has passed through the House of Commons and is currently being debated in the House of Lords.
2. The TEF is still in a consultation period, and will be at least until the OfS is created, meaning there is an opportunity to give technical feedback now and in the future.
3. The College has opted to be part of the TEF and is required to submit a report evaluating its teaching quality to HEFCE by the end of January 2017.
4. The College have invited the Union to contribute to this submission.
5. The Union is constituted to advance the educational experience of our members, including, but not only limited to, representing the views of its members to College and the government on the matters of education policy and experience.
6. The Deputy President (Education) has the delegated responsibility to collaborate widely with College in the interest of achieving the best possible educational experience for all members.

**The Union believes that:**

7. That the HERB is highly likely to be approved by the House of Lords without significant alteration to the principles and roles of the OfS. As such a link between teaching quality and mandatory fee limits will be established.
8. It is important to play an active role, now and in the future, voicing any concerns with the HERB and TEF to College and the government via the appropriate channels.
9. The Union should continue all efforts to make the educational experience for Imperial College Union members, present and future, the very best it can be.

**The Union resolves to:**

10. Mandate the Union Leadership to work with College in co-authoring the TEF submission.
11. Review this policy if or when the HERB is approved to law or a period of 6 months' time elapses, whichever occurs first.

Additionally, the Council is invited to consider:

Part B: Higher Education Funding Policy

**The Union notes that:**

1. Our existing Higher Education Policy predates the conception and consultation of the HERB and TEF.
2. A detailed and current policy helps inform members and Officers of the Union.

**The Union believes that:**

3. The landscape of higher education has been, and will continue to be, significantly changed by the introduction of the HERB and TEF.
4. The Union's existing Higher Education Policy has become outdated by the development of new legislation and does not provide adequate guidance on the current issues within higher education.

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**The Union resolves to:**

5. Mandate Council to review and update the Union's existing Higher Education Funding Policy immediately (or as soon as practical) instead of when it lapses in July 2018.
6. Broaden the scope of Higher Education Funding Policy to include the current legislative changes proposed.