

UCAS response to the Office for Students' consultation on the Teaching Excellence Framework

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Background

UCAS provides careers education and admissions services to help over 700,000 people progress in education and training each year. As a trusted, independent charity, supporting people across the UK from all backgrounds to discover their future is in UCAS' DNA, and at the heart of our strategy, *Discover Your Future*. Our reach is significant: ucas.com receives 30 million unique visits a year, and our programme of UK-wide virtual and physical events is attended by 150,000 individuals each year.

UCAS' main interest in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) relates to its utility as a student information tool. While we acknowledge the purpose of the TEF has been clarified to 'incentivise excellence in teaching, learning and student outcomes', it remains the case that the Office for Students (OfS) intends to 'make TEF ratings accessible for prospective students'. It is in this context we are responding to the OfS' consultation on the TEF.

The key points from our submission include:

- As the largest provider of careers education to students, with 92% of students using UCAS resource to inform their choices, UCAS is committed to deepening its personalisation technology to provide the right information, including data such as the TEF, at the right time for everyone.
- The importance the TEF is highly individual and dependent on the individual's point in their research journey – personalisation is critical.
- UCAS survey analysis suggests that although applicants value information about quality, the impact of the TEF on student choice has, to date, been limited.
- The extent to which the TEF is relevant, timely, simple, and comparable will influence its utility as a student information tool.

- Care must be taken to ensure students are alert to those factors embedded within the TEF to promote understanding.

The role of the TEF in informing student choice

Our recent research into student choice, [Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make](#), highlights the varied and diverse factors deployed by individuals in making their choices. We found that more than three in four students first realised higher education was an option for them before they started post-16 education, and one in three first realised this when they were still at primary school. This shows that pathways through education are scoped at a young age, with aspirations embedded long before individuals engage with information such as the TEF.

Within the same report, we identified that 83% of students choose their degree subject before they think about the university or college they want to attend. As acknowledged in [research carried out by UCAS](#) in support of the Pearce Review, this naturally impacts the point at which provider-level information such as the TEF influences student choice.

Nonetheless, when making the (often) subsequent decision of which university or college to apply to, the 'quality of staff/teaching' and 'quality of teaching facilities' are identified as the two most important academic factors, with over half of respondents to UCAS' new applicant survey rating these as 'extremely important'. This suggests the respective importance of factors differs based on the individual's point in the student journey. The TEF may be of minimal importance during the early phase of research when a degree subject is determined, but more integral when refining provider choice.

With specific reference to the TEF, just 15% of respondents say the TEF rating was 'extremely important' when deciding which universities and colleges to apply to – one of the least important academic factors.¹ So, while applicants value information about quality towards the latter end of their research journey, the impact of the TEF specifically on student choice is, thus far, limited.

A new iteration of the TEF comes with it the opportunity to enhance its usefulness by students. Its evolution must be considered within the broader context of Professor Sir John Holman's careers review with the intention of creating a 'clear, all-age careers system' unpinning by a 'single source' of careers information as set out in [the Skills for Jobs White Paper](#).

¹ UCAS' new applicant survey 2021, with 45k respondents, weighted to the whole applicant population, sent between October 2020 and June 2021

UCAS' use of the TEF

Since launch, UCAS has made TEF ratings available both within the UCAS Hub and its course search tool. How this information was displayed was formulated through extensive work with universities, colleges, teachers, and students UK-wide. We will take a similar approach with how the revised version of the TEF is effectively communicated to students via our services.

This is important because whilst TEF in isolation may be a useful information tool for some, for others, specific component parts will be most pertinent; for example, some will be interested in metrics around assessment, whereas others will wish to explore educational gains. This means the TEF will have variable interest and use as a standalone metric. Similarly, as per above, the respective importance of the TEF (and its component parts) also differs based on the individual's point in the student journey – different elements may be of minimal importance during the early phase of research, but more integral when refining choices.

We are committed to deepening the personalisation technology within the UCAS Hub to provide the right information and advice at the right time for everyone. This will incorporate our approach to communicating not just the TEF to students, but also its component parts.

Indeed, given the multiple touchpoints across ucas.com and the OfS' [Discover Uni](#) platform, there is potential, as the OfS considers its new strategy, to reduce overlaps by retiring the Discover Uni site in its current form as students find this duplication of advice unhelpful. Then, in partnership with the OfS, the UCAS Hub and broader ucas.com estate would become the key vehicle for surfacing outcomes data, such as the Unistats dataset, and metrics related to quality, including the TEF, to students. This would create a more coherent experience for students and generate efficiencies for the sector.

Effective communication of TEF to applicants

Relevancy

An enhanced role for the student voice within the TEF is welcome, as research consistently shows that students value the opinions of their peers. The rising influence of peer discussion led UCAS to partner with Unibuddy to allow students to gain authentic insight into the higher education experience by chatting to existing students. The inclusion of an independent student submission will therefore improve the relevancy of the TEF.

Timeliness

As is commonly the case with outcomes data, the lag between the awarding of the TEF and when it is displayed to students will limit usefulness. This will be compounded by the intention for TEF ratings to be reviewed on a quadrennial basis in future. As such, it is probable that the information about student outcomes would be based on the experiences

of graduates from several years prior. More specifically, care must be taken to ensure that the quadrennial updates are aligned to the admissions cycle.

Simplicity

Better explanation of the Gold, Silver, and Bronze ratings is welcome and, as [evidence from UCAS](#) submitted to the Pearce Review has demonstrated, a single rating like TEF can make it easier for students to engage with and use the information. However, the inclusion of a proposed fourth rating - 'requires improvement' will need caution. This is because the TEF, as currently defined, is a measure of excellence *above* baseline, so the question would naturally be, what needs improvement? It is UCAS' view that such 'requires improvement' would need to be accompanied by an explanation.

Comparability

Mindful that the TEF will be voluntary for universities and colleges in the devolved administrations, coverage is likely to be inconsistent UK-wide, limiting comparability for the tens of thousands of students each year who explore options across the borders. It is also worth noting that, while the TEF will encompass all UG provision at English registered universities and college, many other education and training options, such as apprenticeships studied through employer and training provider partnerships and credit-based study, sit outside of its scope.

In conclusion, as a result of considering the four areas above and drawing on student sentiment to date as outlined above, in its proposed form, the TEF while useful for some, is unlikely to have a significant role in informing student choice.

UCAS' broader approach to improving information and advice

Our aim is to be entirely 'route neutral', ensuring parity across academic, apprenticeship, and technical routes, as well as engaging with students from as early as 13 as they think about their future. Our commitment to continuous improvement and innovation is clear. Recent improvements include:

- The [UCAS Hub](#), our personalised information and advice dashboard, is the go-to place for students of all ages to explore their choices, with 92% of students saying they use the UCAS Hub.
- [Careers Adviser support](#), aligned to Gatsby Benchmarks, to help schools and colleges provide high quality careers advice, share good practice, as well as guidance for parents and guardians.
- A new [Careers Quiz](#), matching students to careers and shows them the skills required, typical daily tasks, and salaries. The quiz has been used 500,000 times since launching in September 2021.

- UCAS' [Discover Your Future events programme](#), both physical and virtual, to connect students, teachers, and advisers with universities, colleges, apprenticeships, employers, and support.
- A growing library of [subject](#), [career](#) and [city guides](#), supported by labour market data, in recognition that student motivation to study is highly individual – whether that be salary, employability, or a healthy work/life balance.