

# Parliamentary Review of the TEF

## Call for Views

### BU Response as submitted

Consultation: [the terms of reference for the Parliamentary review of the TEF are here](#)

This Independent Review needs to report on the following:

1. The process by which ratings are determined under the scheme and the sources of statistical information used in that process;
2. Whether that process, and those sources of statistical information, are fit for use for the purpose of determining ratings under the scheme;
3. The names of the ratings under the scheme and whether those names are appropriate;
4. The impact of the scheme on the ability of higher education providers to which the scheme applies to carry out their functions (including in particular their functions relating to teaching and research);
5. An assessment of whether the scheme is in the public interest; and
6. Any other matters that the appointed person considers relevant

The outcomes of this review will influence the form and content of TEF year 5 – which will be based on subject level TEF, will start in 2019/20 for outcomes to be announced in Spring 2021. The closing date is 1<sup>st</sup> March 2019. The consultation is being conducted on-line – the BU policy team will submit it once it is finalised.

The [call for views document](#) says “The Independent Reviewer requests that provider responses have been considered by their governing body in view of the importance of her review”. We have circulated this to our board and received positive support for the submission.

#### Why have TEF? – Qus 10-12

**10. Do you support the aim of assessing the quality of teaching excellence and student outcomes across providers of higher education?**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

**Please explain why.**

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	We believe in ensuring that we offer high quality education and learning experiences to our students, and that our students achieve good outcomes. Achieving these objectives is part of the contribution to society that a university makes. We believe that it is important for the regulator to assess quality and student outcomes as part of its oversight of the sector.
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The Government has stated that the purpose of the TEF is to:

- better inform students' choices about what and where to study;
- raise esteem for teaching;
- recognise and reward excellent teaching; and
- better meet the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions.

**11. These purposes fall into two main areas: providing information, and enhancing the provision of higher education.**

**(a) Which of these is the most important (select one option only)?**

<input type="checkbox"/>	Providing information
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Enhancing provision
<input type="checkbox"/>	Both are equally important

<input type="checkbox"/>	Neither are important
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**(b) Please outline below the reasons for your answers**

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	<p>We strongly believe that it is important for HE providers to focus on enhancement of their provision of higher education. Providers should, and do, use information about quality of education and learning experience and student outcomes to inform their operations and planning and to make decisions. At our university, we valued education as well as research before the introduction of the TEF and used our own measures to support our decision making, but we also supported the ambition to raise esteem for education alongside research. We therefore supported the objectives of the TEF when it was first announced.</p> <p>We believe that there is value in a cyclical quality review of each institution, and a metrics informed, qualitative review on a regular cycle (not annually) could fill the gap that has been created by the removal of the cyclical QAA review. A reformulated institutional level TEF could provide this.</p> <p>We believe that it is important to provide information to potential and existing students, potential and existing staff, and potential and existing employers and business partners about higher education so that they can make choices about current and future relationships. However, there is already a great deal of publicly available data available to these stakeholders. If the TEF had been differently formulated, then it might have been a valuable additional source of new information – as it is, the TEF metrics data is already freely available and the TEF award itself does not, in our view, provide added value for these stakeholders.</p>
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**12. Should there be any other purposes for TEF?**

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	<p>The TEF should highlight excellence and provide a source of inspiration, best practice and support and encouragement for the sector so that those seeking to enhance their provision or the outcomes of their students are able to learn from each other. We do not believe that this is supported by the current structure.</p> <p>There are other government initiatives looking at information provision. We believe that the potential users of such information should be consulted on what is most useful to them and the best way to present it.</p> <p>We believe that there is value in a cyclical quality review of each institution, and a metrics informed, qualitative review on a regular cycle (not annually) could fill the gap that has been created by the removal of the cyclical QAA review. A reformulated institutional level TEF could provide this.</p> <p>We have suggested in this submission that the TEF should be restructured to be more like the REF – something that we have written about in consultation responses since the TEF was first proposed. The REF does not reduce everything to one “label”, it makes use of case studies and peer review, it supports impact and excellence without being focussed on direct comparability.</p> <p>In a REF-like version of the TEF, there would still be a challenge with subject definitions for the reasons described below, but a less rigid approach could be adopted to enable institutions to group their programmes in a way that makes sense for them.</p>
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**How well does TEF work - questions 13 - 16**

*An independent expert view of the statistical information used in TEF will be commissioned separately, but we would also like your views on the following questions.*

*As referred to in the TEF overview ..., TEF is being delivered at both provider-level and subject-level. We are interested in views on both. Please make clear which level you are referring to in your answers to each question.*

**13. Are the criteria used in TEF<sup>1</sup> appropriate?**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1

<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know
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If not, what criteria would be more appropriate?

<b>Draft response:</b>	<b>N/A</b>
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14. There is no direct measurement of teaching quality currently available. As a result, the TEF uses existing data as indirect measures of teaching quality. These measures are known as “proxies”.

a. Are the metrics used in TEF the best proxies for measuring the TEF criteria?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

b. If you answered no, what metrics would be more suitable proxies?

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	<p>There are substantial gaps in the criteria for which there are no metrics, proxy or otherwise. There has been little progress on the development of new metrics - for example the HEFCE projects to develop measures of learning gain have not been conclusive and it is not clear how these are being taken forward.</p> <p>Strong concerns were expressed across the sector before the TEF was launched about the use of NSS data, and yet when the weighting of the NSS factors was reduced, strong concerns were expressed about the dilution of the student voice. We believe that NSS data is valuable, acknowledging that it has limitations as a proxy for better measures, and we also welcome the inclusion of additional NSS data in the recent subject level TEF pilot because they are closely linked to the criteria.</p> <p>We have serious concerns about ongoing discussions about measuring contact time and teaching intensity, and measures of “grade inflation” based on raw metrics related to year on year improvements in outcomes. So far the analysis in these areas suggests that there has not been sufficient research into the metrics to make these measures as proposed so far either robust or effective. Proposed measures of “grade inflation” so far raise questions that they do not answer about the cause of improved outcomes.</p> <p>Early government documents on the TEF always focussed on the importance of measuring impact, and outcomes, not inputs. Measures of contact time or teaching intensity focus on input not outcomes.</p>
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15. The TEF metrics are benchmarked to account for factors such as the subject of study, prior attainment, ethnicity and educational disadvantage of the provider’s student intake (see that ‘What is TEF?’ section for detail).

a. Should the metrics be benchmarked to allow for difference in a provider’s student population?

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

b. Does TEF benchmark for the right factors?

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	<p>We believe that it is important to take account of all of the factors mentioned when benchmarking, including the factors used for the data splits.</p> <p>We also believe that geography - both where students came from and where they go to, and the economic situation of the region in which the university is located, is an important factor when looking at outcomes (university experience and employment opportunities vary widely by geography, and so do a student’s tendency to travel or relocate for work). This is an issue when reviewing the LEO data but also when looking at other metrics used in the TEF, including retention and</p>
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	<p>employment outcomes. The attempt to resolve this in TEF year 2 by providing maps and inviting comment in written submissions did not address the serious challenges of comparing data when there are so many variables,</p> <p>We also note the challenges with the metrics data, where there is bunching and differences can be small. Because the TEF methodology was deliberately created to force comparisons, we are concerned that small differences can have a disproportionate effect on the initial hypothesis for an award.</p> <p>Benchmarking is important, and helpful, but does not legitimate an approach that in our view is over focussed on metrics which are proxies of varying quality and which do not address the majority of the criteria.</p>
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**16. The TEF process uses both quantitative evidence (for example, the core metrics) and qualitative evidence (for example, the written submission).**

**a. What are your views about the balance of quantitative and qualitative evidence considered in arriving at ratings?**

<p><b>Draft response: (250 words)</b></p>	<p>The qualitative submission is where institutions can address the majority of the criteria, which are not supported by metrics or proxies, and address anomalies or concerns raised by metrics or benchmarking.</p> <p>It provides an opportunity for an institution to provide context for data which may be substantially out of date, such as the LEO data which relates to students who left many years ago and who may have been studying on programmes which are no longer offered or which have been substantially changed since.</p> <p>It is the only opportunity for providers to address geographical issues – to note some of the regional data that may influence employment, salary , retention and other metrics. It is also the only current way that students can contribute to the submission – we included a statement from our Students’ Union in our TEF submission.</p> <p>The qualitative part of the submission is vital – and we are concerned that one result of the subject level structure, including the way that criteria are dealt with at subject and institutional level, combined with a desire to create a perception that the workload for institutions has been limited, will lead to a reduction in the space available for the qualitative aspect of the submission.</p> <p>In our view the TEF should be metrics informed and not metrics led, and the qualitative part of the submission should become much more important – something that could be achieved by adopting a methodology for the TEF that is much more like the REF in structure.</p>
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**b. Are there any other aspects of the process that you wish to comment on?**

<p><b>Draft response: (250 words)</b></p>	<p>Rather than creating high-level single awards, we believe that the TEF should adopt an approach similar to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) . By using case studies, institutions would be able to provide rich and relevant information that reflects the range of learning opportunities provided to students and the outcomes for those students. This would have much more value to external stakeholders. TEF should also be run on a much longer cycle – one that does not coincide with the REF.</p> <p>We are concerned about the implementation of the subject level TEF – while we understand the premise that comparing metrics and submissions for similar programmes should give a more useful set of data for the relevant stakeholders, in practice the subject definitions mean that the programmes will not be similar – a subject will cover a wide range of programmes that are delivered in very different ways across different departments of the university. Institutions will need to artificially create for the purpose of the submission a description of a learning experience which no student actually has.</p> <p>We do not believe it is necessary to have a subject level TEF process for those subjects which are regulated and subject to very high levels of scrutiny through the professional accreditation process. PSRB accreditation is an intensive process including visits and ongoing monitoring. Employers understand the value and importance of such accreditation by their professional bodies, a TEF award will not add value for a student or an employer in these cases.</p>
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## Are the ratings right – questions 17 and 18

We will be separately investigating the needs of applicants and employers as well as the international impact of the scheme and the ratings, but we would also like your views on the following questions.

### 17. Are the purpose(s) of TEF met by:

#### a. awarding a single rating?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know
<b>Please explain your answers. (250 words)</b>	<p>We have consistently argued that the same approach should be taken for the TEF as for the REF, which allows excellence to be recognised wherever it occurs, and which does not force institutions into a ranking or give a single award.</p> <p>If one purpose of the TEF is information provision, we do not believe that single awards at either an institutional or subject level adequately represent the diversity and innovation that is offered across the sector. Single awards do not provide useful information to potential students, students, employers or other stakeholders. In our experience, students are interested in qualitative information and make choices based a range of factors including their own personal circumstances and, most importantly, the content of the programme and the learning environment they experience – things that are not measured by the TEF.</p> <p>Employers are interested in the many qualities and strengths of their potential employees and the opportunities available to them from working with institutions, a single institutional or subject “label” does not tell them about these things.</p>

#### b. with three levels of differentiation, plus a fourth rating for those unable to be assessed?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know
<b>Please explain your answers. (250 words)</b>	<p>As described above, we do not believe that a single award either by institution or subject level, is a good way of describing the quality of education or outcomes, and we do not believe that a three tier award is helpful. All institutions already meet a baseline quality level in order to be registered with the Office for Students.</p> <p>We are very concerned that the Gold/Silver/Bronze ratings are now firmly associated with good/fair/poor in the minds of the public and the international community. When the then Minister announced the subject level consultation in Spring 2018 this impression was repeated: Universities Minister Sam Gyimah said: “Prospective students deserve to know which courses deliver great teaching and great outcomes – and which ones are lagging behind. In the age of the student, universities will no longer be able to hide if their teaching quality is not up to the world-class standard that we expect.” (<a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-to-be-rated-by-subject-quality">https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-to-be-rated-by-subject-quality</a>).</p> <p>We note the point made by our Students' Union (SUBU) in their submission to this Call for Evidence, that NUS research has shown that some applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds may be put off from applying to gold-rated institutions.</p>

#### c. ratings named Gold, Silver, Bronze and Provisional?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No

☐	Don't know
<p><b>Please explain your answers. (250 words)</b></p>	<p>We do not believe that the gold/silver/bronze labels have been helpful. As we have noted above, bronze is now firmly perceived by the public to be “poor”. A radical change of the award structure and the labels associated with them could change this perception but minor changes to communications or methodology will not.</p> <p>One reason for the choice of labels was simplicity and accessibility for applicants. We note that UUK in their report have highlighted the small proportion of applicants who said the TEF was important in their decision making.</p> <p>Even if students do use the TEF, we endorse the points made by our Students' Union (SUBU) in their submission to this Call for Evidence that these awards are not helpful to applicants, whose choices are driven by a wide range of factors, including in the case of many disadvantaged students or students from lower participation groups, by location and proximity to support networks. As we have noted above, labelling an institution as gold may make it appear inaccessible and a bronze label may discourage an applicant who believes they have no other practical choice or demotivate them once they have started their course.</p>

**18. If you answered no, what alternatives you would suggest:**

**a. For provider-level TEF?**

<p><b>Draft response: (250 words)</b></p>	<p>Subject to our earlier comments about the disadvantages of a single award by institution, we have consistently said: there should only be two levels – excellent and good. The third category would be “did not qualify” – i.e. those who are not eligible because they have failed to achieve quality standards. There could also be a provisional award. We suggest that this should now be reconsidered.</p> <p>These awards could be supported by a system of specific commendations for particular aspects of excellence, as was proposed in the original green paper.</p>
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**b. For subject-level TEF?**

<p><b>Draft response: (250 words)</b></p>	<p>Subject to our earlier comments about the challenges with subject level TEF, if this is implemented it will be important to ensure that subject level ratings are not the same as provider awards as this will be confusing for applicants. Alongside excellent/good awards for an institution, we would therefore propose that subjects should be rated with one or two stars. An applicant looking at a subject would thus be able to compare effectively, e.g. Excellent* with Good**, requires less explanation than Gold/Bronze or Bronze/Gold.</p> <p>However, we do not believe that subject-level TEF will provide more valuable information than that already available at a more granular (ie programme) level through public information sets and that there is a risk that it will be misleading, because it reflects an artificially generated set of programmes.</p>
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**c. If your previous response(s) reflected on the impact of the TEF on the international reputation of institutions and/or the UK as a whole, we would welcome any evidence or information you can provide that might support your view or help inform the independent review.**

<p><b>Draft response: (250 words)</b></p>	<p>Universities Minister Sam Gyimah said: “Prospective students deserve to know which courses deliver great teaching and great outcomes – and which ones are lagging behind. In the age of the student, universities will no longer be able to hide if their teaching quality is not up to the world-class standard that we expect.” (<a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-to-be-rated-by-subject-quality">https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-to-be-rated-by-subject-quality</a>)</p> <p>The perception that “bronze=poor” is settled – and only a radical change of awards and their names will change this.</p>
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## Has TEF changed anything – questions 19-22

The review will consider the recently published [Evaluation of Provider-level TEF 2016-17 \(Year 2\)](#) as well as other available evidence, but we are also interested in your thoughts.

### 19. Has the introduction of TEF positively changed the educational experience of students (e.g. teaching and learning)?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

If yes, how?

<b>Draft response:</b>	N/A
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### 20. Has the introduction of TEF negatively changed the educational experience of students (e.g. teaching and learning)?

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

If yes, how?

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	<p>One of the government's stated purposes for the TEF was to raise esteem for teaching in higher education. However, the impact of the changes to the REF, which have taken place over the same time frame, combined with the increased attention on education has, in our view, led some institutions to encourage, or even force, a greater separation between teaching and research. Universities with staff involved in both teaching and research activities are penalised in the REF, because we have a larger number of people spending a smaller proportion of time on research. The increased attention on the TEF has given cover to those institutions who wish to split their staff into teaching only and research only, to improve their REF outcomes.</p> <p>In our view, university staff should be focussed on both education and research, as well as engagement with industry, practice and their community. The impact of the TEF, when taken alongside the impact of the REF changes, has been to increase the proportion of teaching only staff in universities. Isolated from the wider research and practice elements of the academic role, these staff will not be able to progress, and over time this may have a negative impact on education and student outcomes.</p> <p>As we have already noted, we focussed on education and learning opportunities before the introduction of the TEF, and the time and effort required to compile TEF submissions, particularly at subject level, takes up resources that could more usefully be focussed on that.</p>
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### 21. Has the introduction of TEF impacted positively on research and/or knowledge transfer?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

If yes, how?

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	N/A
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## 22. Has the introduction of TEF impacted negatively on research and/or knowledge transfer?

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

If yes, how?

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	<p>One of the government's stated purposes for the TEF was to raise esteem for teaching in higher education. However, the impact of the changes to the REF, which have taken place over the same time frame, combined with the increased attention on education has, in our view, led some institutions to encourage, or even force, a greater separation between teaching and research. Universities with staff involved in both teaching and research activities are penalised in the REF, because we have a larger number of people spending a smaller proportion of time on research. The increased attention on the TEF has given cover to those institutions who wish to split their staff into teaching only and research only, to improve their REF outcomes. In our view, university staff should be focussed on both education and research, as well as engagement with industry, practice and their community.</p> <p>The impact of the TEF, when taken alongside the impact of the REF changes, has been to increase the proportion of teaching only staff in universities. Isolated from the wider research and practice elements of the academic role, these staff will not be able to progress, and over time this may have a negative impact on education and student outcomes.</p>
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## Is TEF worth it – questions 23-25

*We are interested to assess whether the scheme provides outputs that are in the public interest and arrives at these outputs in a cost effective way that meets public interest principles. The review intends to consider research about the costs and benefits of provider and subject level TEF, but we are also interested in your views of the range of benefits, and costs, of the scheme to individuals, institutions and society.*

**23. Does TEF help you as a student/student union/provider/employer/other? Please explain the reasons for your answer.**

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know
<b>Please explain your answers. (250 words)</b>	<p>Providers should, and do, use information about quality of education and learning experience and student outcomes to inform their operations and planning and to make decisions.</p> <p>At our university, we valued education as well as research before the introduction of the TEF and used our own measures to support our decision making. The TEF has provided external context for these internal discussions, but we would have held them in any case.</p> <p>As we have said in a previous response, there is a value to institutions in having a periodic review, and the TEF could, if reformulated, fulfil this role. However, as it stands, with annual changes to the methodology, the challenges with the metrics-led approach and the limited qualitative assessment, and given the additional specific concerns and challenges with subject level TEF, we do not believe that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.</p>

**24. Explaining your reasoning, what are the most significant costs of:**

**a. Provider-level TEF?**

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	<p>There is a significant overhead in reviewing the data and metrics, the splits and the benchmarks and preparing, reviewing and finalising the submission, a lot of which is senior management time.</p> <p>Since year 2, the criteria have changed and become more sophisticated, and more metrics have been introduced. Addressing all the relevant issues in a small number of pages of a written submission is</p>
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	<p>challenging – effort is spent on drafting and redrafting to ensure that as many points are addressed as possible in a small space.</p> <p>There is also significant cost in managing the reporting and publicity around TEF announcements, internally and externally.</p>
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**b. Subject-level TEF?**

<p><b>Draft response:</b> (250 words)</p>	<p>The time commitment for subject level TEF will be many times that for institutional TEF. As we have noted above, the subject boundaries cross our departmental and faculty boundaries. We will therefore have to convene cross departmental groups to generate a description of the student learning experience across those unrelated and separately-taught programmes. Staff from every department in the university, will have to review and consider benchmarked data and data splits for each subject category, which will be different from the data for their own programmes. We will need to moderate all our subject level submissions across the whole university, and prepare an institutional submission.</p> <p>The criteria have become more complex and more metrics have been introduced. We will need to seek to address all the criteria - many of which do not have associated metrics.</p> <p>There is also significant cost in managing the reporting and publicity around TEF announcements, internally and externally.</p> <p>While we agree that the original proposal to look at a limited selection of subjects was unworkable, suggestions to reduce the workload of the current model by limiting the number of pages of the submission, for example, are unhelpful as they reduce the impact of the qualitative aspects of the process and make the outcome less likely to be accurate or valuable.</p>
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**25. Explaining your reasoning, what are the most significant benefits of: a. Provider-level TEF?**

<p><b>Draft response:</b> (250 words)</p>	<p>Little substantive benefit as currently formulated.</p> <p>At our university, we valued education as well as research before the introduction of the TEF and used our own measures to support our decision making. We understand the desire to raise esteem for the educational aspect of the activity of a university and that TEF may have contributed to that in a positive way.</p> <p>We do not believe that the TEF is necessarily the only or best way of supporting the enhancement of education, or the only or best way of providing information, but we agree that it may have made a contribution in both of these areas.</p> <p>We believe that the REF has had a positive impact on research across the sector and that a modified TEF using a similar model, that did not focus so much on comparison and single “label” awards, and was run much less frequently, would be much more valuable to the sector and to its stakeholders. Such a TEF could also provide a useful replacement for the cyclical quality review that no longer exists in the OfS regulatory model. However as currently formulated, the metrics-led version of TEF with a single word award does not provide this opportunity for a meaningful qualitative review.</p>
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**b. Subject-level TEF?**

<p><b>Draft response:</b> (250 words)</p>	<p>Little substantive benefit as currently proposed</p> <p>We understand the objective behind subject level TEF - that it could provide more granular, and therefore more valuable information than the provider level TEF but we believe that because of the practical limitations of the implementation and the current award system the information will be of limited value to students or potential students, to providers or to other stakeholders and that the cost and effort involved will outweigh the benefits.</p> <p>Providers and stakeholders are able to and do review their own metrics at a more granular programme level and so the subject level awards and metrics will be of limited use – the only potential additional benefit is the benchmarking process, but here we believe that the limitations, including the forced differentiation between things that are not very different, are more significant than the benefits.</p>
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## Is TEF fair – questions 26 and 27

In the following question, we are particularly interested in views about:

- providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland;
- harder to reach applicant/student groups;
- part-time students and part time provision;
- small providers;
- specialist providers and specialist provision;
- private providers;
- further education colleges providing higher education.

**26. Are there particular types of students, provision or providers that are disadvantaged by the current design of TEF, in a disproportionate way?**

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

**If so, what changes could be made to address this?**

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	N/A
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**27. Are there particular types of students, provision or providers that are advantaged by the current design of TEF, in a disproportionate way?**

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	No
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Don't know

**If so, what changes could be made to address this?**

<b>Draft response: (250 words)</b>	N/A
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Figure 1: The TEF process and evidence base

