

Tackling TEF

How VLEs can boost TEF and NSS scores

Love it or hate it, universities are having to get their heads around the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Introduced by the government in 2016 to redress the perception that higher education prioritises research over teaching, when the first year's results were announced, they created much discussion and more than a little controversy amongst educational institutions.

For some universities, the [TEF¹](#) provides a real opportunity to level the playing field. Post-1992 institutions, in particular, including Nottingham Trent, Derby and Bournemouth performed well against some of the top traditional universities, with Coventry University claiming: 'a new order has been established in university rankings.'²

A number of the older and historically more prestigious universities, however, were awarded bronze ratings, the lowest award in the new framework. With the vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton saying 'it was hard to have confidence' in the assessments, appeals against some of the gradings decisions were immediately launched.³

It's true to say that the system is still in its infancy, focusing as it does on how the entire university operates, rather than on specific courses, or modules (although that will come in future iterations of the framework). It also grades institutions based solely on data, and is heavily influenced by the National Student Survey (NSS), rather than from any physical observation of lectures.

TEF results 2017: Top 10⁴

University	TEF Result	THE World University Ranking 2016-17	REF GPA
Arts University Bournemouth	Gold	NR	2.30
Aston University	Gold	351-400	3.05
Bangor University	Gold	301-350	2.99
University of Bath	Gold	251-300	3.17
University of Birmingham	Gold	130	3.07
Bishop Grosseteste University	Gold	NR	1.96
University of Buckingham	Gold	NR	-
University of Cambridge	Gold	4	3.33
Conservatoire for Dance and Drama	Gold	NR	-
Coventry University	Gold	601-800	2.67

¹Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Results 2017 - Times Higher Education June 22, 2017

²<https://guardian.ng/features/coventry-university-secures-its-reputation-with-gold-ranking/> - The Guardian - Coventry University secures its reputation with gold ranking, July 17, 2017

³<https://www.ft.com/content/be2277ba-568a-11e7-9fed-c19e2700005f> - FT.com - Russell Group universities fall short of teaching quality benchmark, June 22, 2017

⁴<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/teaching-excellence-framework-tef-results-2017#survey-answer>



What's a degree worth?

In reality, the TEF should be an opportunity for higher education establishments to improve. The principle behind the TEF is sound. The idea that some universities focus too heavily on research, to the detriment of teaching, is not wholly palatable for students spending from £20,000 to upwards of £45,000 for a degree.

Although research is vitally important to society as a whole, students understandably want to know their money will be well-spent, buying them quality teaching from a supportive and student-centric institution. The TEF is billed as a way of measuring this, helping to inform decisions about which university to choose.

Universities that are awarded a higher TEF rating will invariably see that success reflected in application numbers, but a gold award also means they will be able to maintain fees in line with inflation. Performing well is a win-win for institutions and their students, so it is useful to shift the focus from asking 'what's wrong with TEF?' to 'how can the framework be used to make improvements to teaching quality?'"

Given that TEF ratings rely heavily on the results of student feedback via the National Student Survey, it makes sense to look at ways of enhancing the student experience as a natural first step. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) can help to do this, providing one simple, easy to use and engaging platform for universities and further education colleges.

Guiding principles of the TEF

The TEF assesses institutions across three categories, all with individual measurement criteria. Modern VLE technology can impact all three of these areas, making it a key input into overall performance.

1) Teaching Quality

Teaching quality is largely measured by NSS questions around teaching on individual courses, which is then aggregated to give the university an overall score. Measures also include the quality of assessment and feedback as well as a university's own statement on its effectiveness, approach to innovation, use of technology and reward schemes.

VLE impact

At a very basic level, an engaging, user-friendly and interactive VLE makes learning more interesting. Unlike many of their tutors, today's students are digital natives. Their lives are spent moving between different digital platforms and channels. They expect their interactions with technology to be intuitive, responsive and visually engaging, with a great user experience at the heart of everything. And let's not forget, learning should be enjoyable for students of all ages. As economic historian [Professor Maurits van Rooijen⁵](#) says, "there is a serious and persistent misassumption that good education by definition has to be boring". He argues that the introduction of techniques such as gamification, which can be incorporated within a VLE, are effective learning tools because they make learning more fun.

Both aesthetics and usability matter, and in truth this leaves many universities and academics playing catch up. Most institutions use a VLE but for many it's old technology and is little more than a content repository, a place to put lecture notes and slides. There's no massive incentive for students to use the VLE if it's perceived on both sides as being a half-hearted attempt at online learning.

But modern VLEs have the capability to give students exactly what they want, when they want it. They can also have the same experience regardless of the device they're using e.g. laptop, mobile or tablet and whether they're online or offline. This also benefits academics who can grade assessments on the go.

Accessibility also means being accessible for users with additional needs. The best VLEs will rigorously test their platform to ensure they can be read and used by all – helping to improve the user experience, and consequently user feedback, for every student.

Personalisation is also key to a better learning experience. Academics can harness the functionality of VLEs to work more closely with their students – from providing video feedback on assignments, to setting action triggers depending on grades for specific assignments. For example, a congratulatory note for a student that does particularly well or additional learning resources for students that need to improve.

Content can also be tailored depending on the student's learning preferences - for example, do they prefer to read text or are they a visual learner?

2) Learning Environment

The Learning Environment measure of the TEF addresses issues such as drop-out rates, how supportive universities are and what they are doing to improve retention.

⁵[Good Quality Education Starts With Enjoyable Learning - Huffington Post July 14, 2017](#)

VLE impact

In terms of impacting these measures, a VLE can provide the analytics used to trigger early warning signals of at-risk students - an indicator that is crucial for retention. VLE technology should be able to present actionable data, in real-time, that helps both students and academics gain clarity on progress in every module, providing the appropriate tools for support where necessary.

Learning analytics within VLEs also enable students to access their marks online and benchmark their performance against others, if they find this useful or motivating. On the flip side, academics can monitor how much individuals are interacting with the VLE and whether they are engaging with course materials and their course mates. This level of engagement may be a reflection of how well they are engaged in the course overall. Marry that with the grades they're achieving and you begin to build up a picture of whether there's a problem and whether intervention is needed. Identifying who is at risk and addressing any issues early on can have a huge impact on retention rates.

3) Student outcomes

Student outcomes are measured by a combination of Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) scores, the highly skilled employment index – for careers in fields including law and medicine – and a university's own account of what it is doing to help disadvantaged students progress and achieve.

VLE impact

With students spending so much on fees they want to feel confident they will be work-ready when they graduate. Universities take this very seriously and are now working much more closely with industry to make sure graduates are equipped with the skills they need for the workplace.

VLEs that are used as an integral part of the learning experience can also be integrated with ePortfolio tools that capture everything a student has achieved during their time at university or college. This includes core competencies or learning outcomes that demonstrate progress. The ePortfolio can also log achievements and certificates from outside of the VLE to build a comprehensive picture of a student's accomplishments throughout their university life – a powerful resource for students when it comes to making those all-important job applications.

Embracing the TEF

If we assume that the TEF is here to stay then institutions need to do everything they can to maintain or improve their current status. If that means a greater focus on teaching standards, embracing new technology, adapting to modern ways of learning (online, offline, distance or a combination of all three), then this can only be a positive thing.

Rather than feeling under pressure, this is a huge opportunity for educators to embrace technology that enhances the learning experience – ensuring both NSS and TEF scores reflect a positive and supportive environment. The better they perform within the framework the more they'll see the benefits - through increased applications, higher retention rates and increased fees that ultimately continue to fund vital research efforts.

If you would like to find out more about how a modern VLE can impact your TEF rating, please contact D2L Europe on +44 (0) 203 865 1263.

About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes learning experiences better. The company's cloud-based platform, Brightspace, is easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, organisations can personalise the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that organisations can take action in real-time to keep learners on track.

Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, schools, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore.

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