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Mr Iain Wright MP
Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee
House of Commons
London
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Dear Mr Wright

Inquiry into quality assessment in Higher Education (HE)

The Engineering Professors' Council (<http://epc.ac.uk>) represents the majority of academic engineers in the UK, with 82 university engineering faculty members comprising over 6,000 academic staff.

Please find below our responses to the questions set out to inform the above inquiry.

1. What should be the objectives of a Teaching Excellence Framework ('TEF')

Very simply, a TEF should encourage and seek to improve the behaviours and practices that support students in their learning.

2. How should a TEF benefit students? Academics? Universities?

A TEF can only be of benefit if it helps universities to communicate more accurately what they do and how they do it and students to understand better the environment in which they will learn and whether it is appropriate to their specific learning style, discipline and situation.

3. What are the institutional behaviours a TEF should drive? How can a system be designed to avoid unintended consequences?

Any metrics-driven system will be fraught with unintended consequences and can be "gamed". It is going to be extremely difficult to agree a single set of metrics and characteristics associated with high quality teaching that are comparable between institutions, never mind between disciplines in a sector that consists of institutions which take in students with a very broad spectrum of prior achievement.

Evaluation/assessments such as TEF need to be developmental processes with a supportive relationship between the HEI and the assessor/assessment mechanism. Very careful positioning and communication of any negative feedback for HEIs would be essential if HEIs are to continue to innovate in programme content and delivery.

Avoiding the creation of new league tables is essential: providing ways to enable institutions to concentrate on good teaching in the lecture theatre/lab does not lend itself to outcomes that can be easily quantified or ranked.

4. How should the effectiveness of the TEF be judged?

An effective TEF needs to encourage continuous improvement and enhancement and “good outcomes” for students and their employers. The current Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE), which measures employment after 6 months, for example is not an appropriate metric as in many disciplines, of which engineering is one, students tend to wait until graduation before starting their job search which can take more than 6 months.

5. How should the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework and new quality assurance regime fit together?

In engineering, we have worked extensively with our Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) to ensure that the processes of accreditation and quality assessment complement each other and avoid duplication and unnecessary bureaucracy. For example, the inclusion of a student reviewer in the QAA’s process and the review of institutional governance and facilities has meant that these need not be a focus of engineering accreditation visits. But, not all programmes in all subject areas have such a relationship with a PSRB and so the desired consistency of approach would be compromised (use of external peer review, alumni etc, the examples provided as alternatives could be viewed as less objective). Further, simply because a programme is accredited by a PSRB does not mean that learning outcomes are comparable between institutions (or disciplines), rather, they provide threshold standards of achievement/outcome.

In technical and scientific disciplines, our fields are developing so quickly and we constantly need to update our programmes in order to ensure our students are learning through up-to-the-minute curricula. Assessment needs to be light touch so as not to stifle curricula developments but it also needs to provide sufficient information to enable institutions to identify areas for improvement. TEF should support these aims also and avoid duplicating what is done in quality assessment.

6. What do you think will be the main challenges in implementing a Teaching Excellence Framework?

Avoiding unintended consequences, avoiding the reuse of the NSS scores as metrics and creating new league tables. The NSS scores can be popularity driven. High contact hour, intensive subjects, such as engineering, are seen by students as very hard work and so at the time they complete their surveys may not have perceived the quality of the course and its ability to prepare them for their future careers.

Further, our universities are at the forefront on innovation in learning and teaching, as well as in subject discipline development. An inflexible framework is likely to discourage risk taking and innovation.

7. How should the proposed connection between fee level and teaching quality be managed?

There are many other parameters to take into account when setting prices. Student perception of teaching quality at a point in time can only be one of many. The cost of delivery of many STEM undergraduate programmes such as engineering is already higher than the current capped fee levels and needs to be taken into account, as will the impact of substantially higher fees on social mobility.

8. What should be the relationship between the Teaching Excellence Framework and fee level?

See above. There should be no link.

We would be pleased to elaborate on any of these brief responses if invited to do so.

Yours sincerely



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