

TEF at subject-level: summary of pilot guide for 2018-19

Development of subject-level TEF

- Subject-level TEF is being developed over two academic years (2017-18 and 2018-19) before it will be implemented. The first subject-level pilot (which ran in 2017-18 and is referred to in this document as ‘the first pilot’) tested two options for producing both provider-level and subject-level ratings in one exercise. The second pilot will be carried out in academic year 2018-19 alongside, but independently from, the provider-level TEF Year Four exercise.
- Given the scale of the first full subject-level TEF exercise, it will be conducted across two academic years, 2019-20 and 2020-21, to enable it to produce robust outcomes. This will ensure there is additional time for providers to make submissions and for panels to conduct the assessments. The application window is expected to open in early 2020, with outcomes published in spring 2021.

Changes to the duration of provider-level TEF awards

- The final provider-level exercise with published outcomes (TEF Year Four) will take place in 2018-19 and will operate completely independently from the subject-level pilots. So that subject-level TEF produces comprehensive outcomes to inform student choice, the DfE has decided that published awards from provider-level TEF Years Two, Three and Four should no longer be valid when subject-level TEF awards are published in 2021.
- At that point, all awards from provider-level TEF will expire, and be replaced by awards made through the first full subject-level TEF exercise (these awards will be at both provider and subject levels).

Purpose of the 2018-19 subject-level pilot

- Following the first pilot and the government consultation, the second pilot will test a revised model of subject-level assessment, which combines successful features from the two models tested in the first pilot.
- It will also test and develop a series of other refinements to improve the meaningfulness of subject-level TEF to students, strengthen student engagement with submissions and assessment, test revisions to the evidence base and assessment method, and explore how to address limitations with the data at subject level.

The model for provider-level and subject-level assessment

- The revised model that will be tested in this pilot consolidates the best features of the two models tested through the first pilot, whilst seeking to address issues it identified. The model has been conceptually tested with providers and panel members, including students, who were involved in the first pilot.
- The revised model is comprehensive, in that it assesses all provision in the university or college. Each subject is assessed, and in parallel so is the university or college as a whole. The assessment process, evidence base, criteria and ratings descriptors are all tailored at subject and provider levels.

- The process for the second subject pilot is : 1) providers receive their provider and subject-level metrics and contextual data 2) providers prepare a common single two page provider summary statement and a separate five-page submission for each subject 3) subject panels assess each subject and the outcome is a rating and statement of findings for each subject.

The relationship between provider- and subject-level assessment

- Provider and subject-level assessments will be conducted separately from each other: Provider-level assessments will be undertaken by the pilot Main Panel and will be primarily based on provider-level evidence, assessed against the provider-level criteria.
- Subject-level assessments will be undertaken by subject panels and will be primarily based on subject-level evidence, assessed against the subject-level criteria. Although the assessments will be conducted at each level separately, the OfS will test some linkages between the two and seek to achieve an appropriate coherence between them.
- This recognises that teaching and learning in a subject takes place in the context of the provider; and that the overall performance of a provider is reflected at least in part by teaching and learning across its subjects.
- In particular, the OfS will test the following linkages: a) Using a common set of 11 criteria which are tailored at provider and subject levels b) The provider-level assessment will include some information broken down into subjects.
- The subject-level assessment will include some information about the whole provider: After initially considering information purely at subject level, the subject panels will also consider information about the whole provider and how this affects performance in the subject.
- There will be interaction between the pilot Main Panel and subject panels: The chairs and deputies of each subject panel are also members of the Main Panel. The Main Panel will provide oversight of the subject panels to ensure consistency in their assessments across subjects and coherence between subject and the provider-level assessment.

The assessment criteria and framework

- The TEF has been designed, in partnership with sector representatives and sector agencies, to focus on three aspects of quality: 1) teaching quality 2) learning environment 3) student outcomes and learning gain. Providers and subjects will be assessed in relation to these three aspects, which are broken down into 11 common criteria (see table 1).
- The overall framework applies to both provider and subject level, though there are some detailed differences in terms of the way the criteria and ratings are described at provider and subject level, to recognise the different expectations and responsibilities at each level.
- Each provider will have a distinct approach to managing teaching excellence and achieving excellent student outcomes in relation to the criteria. TEF assessments will focus only on the impact of different approaches on the student experience and outcomes, rather than seeking to make judgements on intentions which have not yet demonstrated an impact.
- The evidence used to assess each provider and to assess each subject will comprise: 1) a standard set of metrics produced by the OfS 2) a submission made by the provider with appropriate student involvement.
- Independent panels of experts will carry out the assessments, applying their judgement to the combination of metrics and submitted evidence. Contextual information is also provided at provider and subject levels to inform and orientate panel members for assessment.

- The pilot Main Panel will be collectively responsible for deciding the provider-level ratings. Each pilot subject panel will be collectively responsible for deciding the subject-level ratings for all subjects within its remit.
- The panels will follow a structured method of assessment to maximise consistency in judgements and fairness of assessment; the final judgement, however, is holistic and takes into account all the evidence.
- Specifically, each assessment will begin by considering standardised contextual information. Next, the panel members will form an initial hypothesis based on the metrics. They will then review the submission, considering how far it provides evidence of excellence in relation to all three aspects of quality. Having considered all the available evidence, the panel members make a holistic judgement about which of the rating descriptors is a 'best fit'.
- Provider-level assessment in the pilot will result in one of three possible indicative ratings: Bronze, Silver, or Gold. Subject-level assessment in the pilot will also result in Bronze, Silver, Gold ratings, but the OfS will also test circumstances where a subject may not receive a rating, where the panel deems there is insufficient evidence to make a 'best fit' judgement.

Table 1: TEF assessment criteria at provider-level and subject-level

| TEF assessment framework: criteria at provider-level and subject-level |
|---|
| <p>Teaching quality (TQ)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student engagement with learning (TQ1) • Valuing teaching (TQ2) • Rigour and stretch (TQ3) • Feedback (TQ4) • Student partnership (TQ5) |
| <p>Learning environment (LE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources (LE1) • Scholarship, research and professional practice (LE2) • Personalised learning (LE3) |
| <p>Student outcomes and learning gain (SO)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employability and transferable skills (SO1) • Employability and further study (SO2) • Positive outcomes for all (SO3) |

Table 2: TEF metrics

| TEF assessment framework: metrics |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching on my course (NSS) • Assessment and feedback (NSS) • Student voice (NSS) • Academic support (NSS) • Learning resources (NSS) • Continuation (HESA/ILR) • Highly-skilled employment or higher study (DLHE) • Sustained employment or further study (LEO) • Above median earnings threshold or higher study (LEO) |

The definition of subjects and scope of subject assessments

- The scope of subject-level TEF covers all undergraduate provision leading to qualifications at the appropriate levels of the national frameworks for higher education qualifications, and all modes of delivery, including full-time, part-time, distance, work-based and blended learning.
- To participate in the pilot, a provider must be eligible for TEF and have suitable metrics at provider level as defined for TEF Year Four. For the providers participating in the pilot, the OfS will test criteria and processes for determining which subjects 1) are 'in scope' and 2) have sufficient data for assessment at subject level.

What is a subject?

- All students on undergraduate courses are assigned to between one and three subject codes to reflect the subject or subjects their overall qualification relates to. The detailed subject codes are aggregated according to the HESA Common Aggregation Hierarchy. The OfS have adapted level 2 of the CAH for this pilot, based on feedback from the first pilot.

Which subjects will be assessed through the pilot?

- All subjects at participating providers that are 'in scope' and have sufficient metrics data will be assessed in the pilot in their own right as separate subjects. The first pilot identified some subjects at providers that were inappropriate to assess (for example, where all the provision in a subject had been discontinued). In the second pilot the OfS will treat subjects made entirely of courses that are no longer recruiting students as out of scope.
- Participating providers will be provided by the OfS with a data-driven indication of their subjects that appear to be in and out of scope, based on whether they have recently recruited students in that subject. The provider will be able to review and request changes to this, if necessary.
- The first subject-level pilot also identified limitations in how far the data in some subjects could inform robust assessments. The second pilot will test ways of generating robust ratings while also setting thresholds for the minimum data required.
- A provider's subjects that are in scope will be assessed where they have sufficient data for assessment, as follows: a) At least two of the following TEF 'metric types' are reportable in the subject's majority mode of study: NSS-based metrics, continuation, or employment metrics (either the LEO or DLHE metrics) b) The data covers at least 20 students for the subject's majority mode of study.
- For the purpose of this pilot, the threshold of at least 20 students is deliberately lower than the first pilot indicated might be necessary to inform robust assessments. This is so that the OfS can test the lower limits with a view to maximising the coverage of subject-level TEF.
- The OfS will also test ways of presenting TEF outcomes for subjects that are out of scope or do not have assessable data, as part of the overall package of subject-level TEF outcomes for a provider. Particular attention will be given to avoiding negative implications where a subject does not meet the requirements for assessable data.

Interdisciplinary provision

- A number of considerations have been taken into account regarding how interdisciplinary provision will be accommodated in this subject pilot. Interdisciplinary provision is a term that in itself can reflect a variety of different types of arrangements. For the purposes of the subject assessment, the OfS are primarily concerned with courses where metrics span multiple CAH2 subjects.

- In some subjects, the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach may be reflected in metrics data and require no further explanation. Where providers wish to draw out the impact of their interdisciplinary approach separately from the TEF metrics, they will be able to do so through the written submissions for the relevant subjects.

Single-subject providers

- In the first pilot, single-subject providers were identified as those whose provision was delivered entirely within one CAH2 subject. Although the criteria are tailored at provider and subject levels, it is envisaged that a single-subject provider– would always receive the same rating at provider and subject levels.
- The OfS has considered two options for assessing single subject providers in the pilot: either the Main Panel could conduct the assessment using provider-level evidence, and the same rating would be awarded to the subject; or the subject panel could conduct the assessment using subject-level evidence and the same rating would be awarded to the provider.
- Following initial feedback they will pilot the latter approach. Single-subject providers will write a maximum two-page provider summary statement and a maximum five-page subject submission, which are assessed by the relevant subject panel.

Submissions

- The evidence used in assessments comprises metrics as well as written submissions, which are essential for the panels to make holistic assessments against the broad set of criteria.
- Three types of written submission are required in the pilot: 1) a provider submission (max 15 pages), 2) a subject submission for each subject being assessed (max 5 pages) and 3) a single provider summary statement (max 2 pages).
- A subject submission is required for every subject that is being assessed; that is, every subject that is in scope and has sufficient data. In addition, some providers are eligible to submit an optional extra page of quantitative information relating to part-time students.

Table 3 Features of provider and subject-level submissions

| Provider submission | Subject submissions |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15-page maximum • Addresses provider-level criteria • Engages with provider metrics (and supplementary degree attainment data where applicable) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five-page maximum • Addresses subject-level criteria • Engages with subject metrics |

- Submissions should provide further context, engage with the metrics and provide additional evidence in relation to all three aspects of quality. In this pilot the OfS will test guidance that is more directive about the scope and content of submissions, so that they can be assessed in a comparable way.
- In particular, the guidance sets out clearer expectations about the range of additional evidence that should be included, and how submissions should engage with the metrics. However, the OfS do not provide a prescriptive template, recognising the diversity of providers and subjects and the many ways in which evidence of excellence can be presented.
- In this pilot the OfS also sets clear expectations that students should be given meaningful opportunities to be involved in creating both provider and subject submissions. The student declaration aims to provide assurance to the panel that this took place.

- To enable the panels to make holistic best-fit judgements against the rating descriptors, submissions should at minimum cover all three aspects of quality (Teaching Quality, Learning Engagement and Student Outcomes), engaging with the metrics and providing additional evidence in relation to each aspect. Submissions do not need to address every criterion.
- Provider- and subject-level submissions are expected to cover provision for all students in scope of the assessment. This includes both full-time and part-time students, and international students studying in the UK or other groups who may not be captured in all the TEF metrics for technical reasons, but nevertheless remain in scope of the assessment.
- Subject-level submissions should cover all programmes and modules that make up the metrics reported for the subject, even where these cross internal departmental or other organisational lines.
- Where there are franchise arrangements, the quality of provision will be assessed at the provider that delivers the teaching. This may or may not be the provider that awards the qualification or registers the student.

Additional evidence

- The final rating awarded is based on the panel's holistic judgement of the evidence in the metrics and the submission. Providers should note that the rating given by the initial hypothesis can move down as well as up when the totality of evidence is considered against the rating descriptors and a best-fit judgement against them is made.
- Where the initial hypothesis based on the metrics is Gold (or Silver), the submission will need to include additional evidence in the submission that supports that hypothesis, to merit a best-fit judgement of Gold (or Silver) based on the totality of evidence.
- Panels are particularly looking for evidence of the impact that policies and practices have had on student learning and outcomes, rather than descriptions of policies and practices alone. Submissions should connect policies, practices and the impact they have had, referring to the TEF metrics or other evidence of impact supplied within the submission.

Provider summary statement

- Feedback from the first pilot indicated that many providers wished to use space in their subject submissions to set out the provider's context to effectively explain their subject-level provision, which reduced the amount of space available to provide evidence for excellence at subject level. Subject panels often found this helpful in their assessments.
- Therefore in this pilot the OfS will test the inclusion of a separate provider summary statement; a single statement from each provider that will be made available to the subject panels to inform their subject assessments. This is intended to enable providers to set their five-page subject submissions more effectively within the institutional context.

The assessment process

- The assessments are carried out by independent panels of academics, students, and subject and other experts. They follow a three-step method of making holistic assessments against the criteria, taking into account all the evidence available in the metrics and submissions.
- A key challenge for full subject-level TEF will be to carry out robust assessments in a consistent manner on a much larger scale. In this pilot the OfS are explicitly testing panel processes and a panel structure that could be deployed to accommodate a significantly larger volume of assessments in full subject-level TEF.

The pilot panels

- The pilot Main Panel will be collectively responsible for deciding the provider-level ratings. Each pilot subject panel will be collectively responsible for deciding the subject-level ratings for all subjects within its remit. The Main Panel will provide oversight to ensure consistent standards of TEF assessment across the subject panels.
- Full subject-level TEF will require subject panels to make thousands of subject-level assessments. The configuration of pilot subject panels and the assessment processes are designed to test approaches that can be scaled up to a full subject-level exercise. At this stage the OfS anticipate that full subject-level TEF will require approximately 10 subject panels.
- To test scalable processes with realistic panel workloads, the OfS have five 'paired' subject panels in the pilot. Each of the five 'paired' pilot subject panels comprises two main clusters of subjects, and could operate as two separate subject panels in future.
- On each subject panel the OfS will identify members who will act as WP liaisons. These panel members will identify and highlight widening participation issues within and across panels, working with the Main Panel experts to develop advice and ensure a consistent approach to assessment as necessary.
- On each subject panel the OfS will also identify members who will act as interdisciplinary liaisons. They will be academic or student members of the subject panel, with additional responsibility for advising other panel members in their discussions of cases concerning interdisciplinary provision.

Outcomes

Ratings and statements of findings

- Each provider that participates in the pilot will receive indicative ratings and statements of findings at provider level, and for all of their assessed subjects. These will not be published. Statements of findings will set out at a high level the rationale for the rating.

Communication and use of outcomes

- In full subject-level TEF the OfS envisages publishing each provider's and subject's metrics, submissions, ratings and statements of findings as official sources of information for students. As the pilot is developmental, the OfS will not publish this information from the pilot.
- In the interests of transparency, and to enable preparation for full subject-level TEF, the OfS will publish summary sector-level data from the subject-level TEF pilot. This will not be attributable to any provider or individual subject.

Evaluation of the pilots and next steps

- Pilot participants, TEF student representatives and panel members will be expected to fully contribute to evaluation activities. Full evaluation findings and aggregate data will be published at the conclusion of the pilot. The findings will be considered alongside the outcomes from the government's independent review of the TEF to inform the final design and implementation of full subject-level TEF.