

## **Book Review:**

**Gunn, A. (2023) *Teaching Excellence? Universities in an age of student consumerism*. London; Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE.**

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'Teaching excellence' is no longer merely about the recognition of good practice. Instead, the phrase is now characterised by a complex interplay of pedagogy, metrics, reputation, marketisation, quality control, and political ideology. Defining teaching excellence sparks a chain reaction leading to measurements of institutional quality and performance. Once definitions have been established, they can be used to hypothesise the outcomes of students who experience teaching excellence. After determining outcome metrics it becomes pertinent to attempt to measure these in a way that is applicable across subjects and institutions. If this is achieved, the door is opened to combining metrics to construct an indicator of institutional quality. This final step, the endeavour to create a quality indicator through the measurement of teaching excellence, is the origin of the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The most recent round of the TEF concluded in 2023 and is now used by the sector to inform applicant choice, to allow differentiation between providers, and to influence regulation.

In *Teaching Excellence? Universities in an age of student consumerism*, Andrew Gunn offers a detailed exploration of this process, contextualising the politics,

economics, and ideology that have resulted in the model of the Teaching Excellence Framework we have today. Gunn describes the book as having a 'hybrid nature', dealing both with the measurement of teaching quality as well as debates relating to the marketisation and regulation of HE. The author takes a more neutral approach to the political subject matter than many authors have in the past, including many contributors of the Sage Swift series, for example '*Rank Hypocrisies: The Insult of the REF*' (Sayer, 2015). This measured approach creates room for a nuanced critique. For example, rather than arguing against the principle of marketisation, Gunn instead gently points out that if a free market is indeed the government's goal, then the TEF may not be the best tool to incentivise this.

## **Relevance and Significance**

The book is designed as a 'swift, short and topical' introduction to the world of the TEF. As the TEF is something all HE providers in England need to engage with as a condition of their registration, the significance of this work is widespread.

Although not a practical guide to teaching, this book is relevant to anyone working in HE, particularly those involved in pedagogy or strategic oversight. The introduction clearly draws links to three of the key competencies in the UK Professional Standards Framework for those wishing to make an application for fellowship. The book is filled with examples and references to research, acting as a guidebook to the salient points of the last few decades of HE policy and an excellent springboard for staff interested in institutional research.

This book is of particular importance now, after the most recent TEF exercise of 2023, when university leaders have a chance to step back and assess their strategy for demonstrating teaching excellence over the coming years. Policy makers and members of the Office for Students will also have interest in this work, as it identifies important considerations for the future deployment of the TEF.

## Contents

The text of the book runs a little over 120 pages and after a brief introduction is divided into four chapters: 1. Student Consumerism, 2. Measuring Teaching Excellence, 3. The Higher Education Market, and 4. Grand Challenges. The second chapter, Measuring Teaching Excellence, is the longest, occupying roughly half the total page count and containing six subsections.

The first chapter situates the narrative around student consumerism and highlights the different roles students can play in a consumerist system. Here, the author offers a challenge to the assumption that the dialogue has shifted recently from HE as a personal development experience to HE as a commodity, by reviewing historical models of higher education. The decline of the status accorded to teaching is discussed in comparison with the rise of the status of research.

Chapter two is a complex section which looks at the development of the TEF, its metrics, and its reception. It is split into six subsections. The first subsection examines the definitions of teaching excellence, including the issues with measuring teaching (compared to research) and different strategies taken in the past to create a measurement of learning outcomes. Gunn reminds us of the increased desire for information from applicants and parents due to the transfer of the financial burden from society to the individual, and the culture of data availability.

The second section of chapter two provides a detailed history of the TEF, explaining its origins in government ideology and the economic context which underpinned its creation. Gunn clearly illustrates the connections between HE and economics, situating the 2008 'UK productivity puzzle' in the context of the relationships between graduates and economic growth. The author explains the importance of reputation and product information in a market which links courses to job prospects.

Section three details the iterations of the TEF and the political contexts for each variation, including explanations for why some metrics were abandoned or reweighted. This section also provides an analysis of the results of the 2017-2019 TEF exercises, although there is no analysis of the 2023 results as the book was published before the final submission date. Here, Gunn makes the very relevant case that one of the aims of the TEF (the incentive to raise teaching standards) could conflict with the ambition of improving applicant choice. That is, if all institutions work to increase their TEF rating to Gold, then this removes the ability for applicants to distinguish between quality. However, if the hierarchy is preserved, how can we reward performance improvements?

The latter portion of chapter two covers the TEF's ambition of devising new metrics to measure higher education, such as learning gain and grade inflation, and discusses the utility of student evaluations. The chapter concludes with an examination of previous TEF consultations and reviews.

The book's next two chapters deal with the HE market and the remaining challenges to a creating measure of teaching excellence. Chapter three provides an explanation of marketisation and quality assurance and examines two economic theories of particular significance to higher education. Higher Education is discussed as sharing many aspects of a credence good (where value cannot always be assessed, even after consuming the good). In this context, the influence of the TEF is explored in its attempts to promote attributes of a search good (where value can be assessed prior to consuming through the means of searching for information). The behaviour of students as consumers is discussed, including their limited ability to 'vote with their feet', and the various student voice mechanisms including the influence of the Consumer Rights Act.

The final chapter focuses on the enduring challenges faced by measuring teaching excellence and the attempt to turn the HE sector into a planned market. Here Gunn

contends that a true free market isn't achievable in a sector funded in some way by the state, and that it is not in fact the goal of the Conservative ideology to make it one. Therefore, either governments must embrace a quasi-market system with all its 'bureaucratic baggage', or they must abandon some of their principles.

## Limitations

The coherence of the text suffers from the choice of structure, as it is rather unintuitive to navigate. A full contents page including subheadings would begin to remedy this, in consideration of the limited space for signposting within the text itself. The feeling of fitting into a bigger picture was often lost in the discussion of details. The world of HE is full of acronyms, and without a glossary or redefinitions, paragraphs sometimes became challenging to follow.

As previously mentioned, the value of this text may depreciate as new iterations of the TEF emerge. The political climate around HE appears volatile and it's likely the book's relevance will decrease over time.

## Reflections

Gunn answers the original deconstruction of 'teaching excellence' by exploring the definitions, outcomes, and measurements of excellence, and examining how these aspects influence, and are influenced by marketisation. In doing so, he presents a well-considered and thorough analysis, bringing in relevant material to form a comprehensive map of the factors which have influenced policy over the last few decades, and thereby creating an incredibly useful toolkit for understanding the current context of HE in the UK. *Teaching Excellence?* is rich with external sources and references to policies and research, making it a highly valuable source for those furthering their knowledge of higher education or conducting institutional research.

Throughout the work, Gunn remains analytical and dispassionate, tending to withhold from offering an opinion himself. This position works well to diffuse the

reactivity to the issue and allow a more considered understanding of how creating more of a market in HE has influenced policy and behaviour. Gunn uses his wide experience of HE policy to provide a valuable and timely overview of the Teaching Excellence Framework and the political and social landscape that founded it. Overall, *Teaching Excellence?* is a thorough and comprehensive volume, rich with research, which provides an excellent and impartial introduction to the subject.

## References

Sayer, D. (2015) *Rank Hypocrisies: The Insult of the REF*. London: SAGE. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473910270>.

## Disclosure Statement

All materials included in the article represent the authors own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list.

This work has not been previously published nor is it is being considered for publication elsewhere.

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