



Teaching excellence: the student perspective

Research commissioned by a consortium of students' unions

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Introduction

As the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) moves into its third year, universities and students are becoming more familiar with the government's new university rating system. With the year 2 ratings released in June 2017, the majority of HE providers in the UK now have a Gold, Silver, or Bronze TEF rating.

A consortium of students' unions have come together to better understand what students across the UK think of TEF and of 'teaching excellence'. Together with **trendence** UK, they have conducted the UK's largest research project to date on students' views of the TEF metrics.

This survey was conducted so that we can hear students' voices on what they think of the TEF, how students themselves measure 'teaching excellence', and how the framework could, in its current incarnation, change the way students perceive the value of their universities and their courses.

This summer we questioned thousands of current university students, asking them to answer a range of questions about teaching experience and to give their opinions of the TEF. Some of the questions were straightforward and quantitative, others were open-ended and qualitative. This report summarises the findings.

About this study

- 8,994 students took part
- Respondents were studying at 123 different universities
- Full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students were both represented
- The questionnaire was conducted online
- Respondents were surveyed from 5 July – 30 August 2017
- Quota sampling was used
- Findings weighted by university and gender



Findings at a glance



- There is strong support amongst students for a government exercise that encourages excellence in teaching (84% agree).
- Students believe that this should encompass a number of factors related to the teaching and learning environment not currently in TEF (86% IT, 93% library, course resources 94%).
- Students are in favour of their feedback being used – such as the opportunity to give direct feedback to teachers/tutors/lecturers (59%) or an end of year evaluation form (56%). With the National Student Survey (NSS) weighting halved in TEF year 3, students' feedback will be a significantly less important component of the TEF ratings.
- When we asked students to tell us which factors most demonstrate that a university has excellent teaching, the quality of the teaching/teachers themselves was the #1 factor, while graduate employment came at the bottom of the list (#7).
- When considering factors that indicate that a university has excellent teaching, students are over three times less likely to identify high graduate earnings when compared to access to resources.
- While 68% of students agree that universities should be held to account for teaching 'not good enough to enable them to succeed', only 34% agree they should be held to account if graduate jobs ratings are poor, and just 18% agree they should be held to account if students drop out.
- While only around 1 in 5 disagree with "Gold, Silver, Bronze" rankings, 3 in 5 don't agree that student fees should be linked to the rating of the university.
- 50% of students would have reconsidered or not applied to their University if they had known it was rated "Bronze".
- 6% of students would have reconsidered or not applied to their University if they had known it was rated "Gold".
- 11% of students from an ethnic minority background say that they would have reconsidered applying or not applied to their university if it had been rated Gold, compared to only 5% of white ethnicity students.
- Similar proportions would have reconsidered or not applied if the same judgements were levied at course level.

Students on the TEF: is it an excellent framework?

The TEF was introduced by the government as an exercise to measure and benchmark universities based on the quality of their teaching. After being assessed, universities are awarded a Gold, Silver or Bronze rating.

We've found that 84% of students agree that the government should be running an exercise to encourage excellent teaching in universities. Students are less sure about the "medals" system: 58% of the students surveyed agreed with the giving Gold/Silver/Bronze ratings to universities based on their level of teaching excellence.

However, when it comes to the TEF's approach to measuring teaching excellence, less than half (47%) of students are in favour of a national framework. Many students preferred methods involving them, such as direct feedback to the teachers/tutors/lecturers (59%) or an end-of-year evaluation form (56%).

Students agree about the need for a government-led initiative to encourage excellent teaching, but the majority of students prefer measures specific to their institution. When we looked at the qualitative data for an explanation, students argued that it is difficult for a national framework to capture the rich diversity in teaching styles, histories, heritage, and unique student communities.

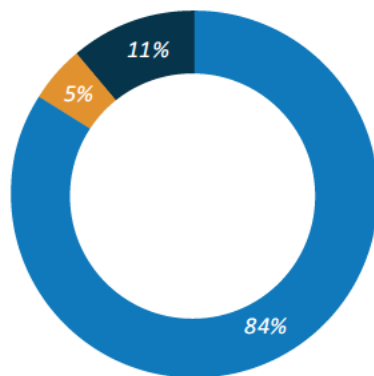
Do students think the TEF is a good measure of 'teaching excellence'?

'I think [the TEF] is useful in that it provides a general standard on which universities can be compared from an academic viewpoint. However, I do not think it can be relied upon as I think that other factors will inevitably influence the ratings, such as student satisfaction in light of social opportunities which have nothing to do with the teaching. [...] There are too many factors and differences within each uni for a rating to be completely accurate. Therefore it is useful but should not be over-emphasised.'



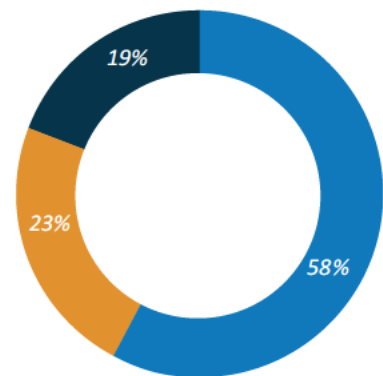
Should the government be running an exercise to encourage excellent teaching in universities?

■ Yes
■ No
■ No opinion



Do you agree with the government giving ratings (Gold/Silver/Bronze) to universities based on teaching excellence?

■ Yes
■ No
■ No opinion



How should excellent teaching be evaluated?



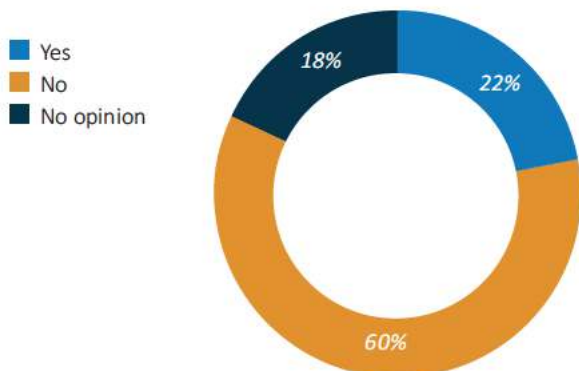
Students agree that fees should not be linked to the TEF

With the government's recent announcement that there will be 'an immediate freeze in maximum fee levels' (October 2017), the link between the TEF framework and student fees appears to be broken. Universities with a Gold TEF rating will no longer be able to increase tuition fees in line with inflation.

When we conducted this research project, a link between TEF ratings and tuition fee increases was still a distinct possibility. Just 22% of students agreed with the proposed link between TEF ratings and fees.

When we asked students why they disagreed with student fees being linked to the rating of the university, they told us that it would 'divide students based on social standing rather than ability', and that it would disadvantage students who are not from 'well-off' families.

Should student fees be linked to the TEF rating of the university?



Students on the link between TEF rating and rising student fees

'It seems like a terrible idea. As someone who doesn't come from a well-off family, it would encourage me to pick a lower rated university for the sake of my finances.'

'It is another way to divide students based on social standing rather than ability. It means wealthier students can afford a higher standard of education, increased opportunity, and higher paid graduate jobs while those from poorer backgrounds will suffer in the cheapest universities.'

'It would be very unwise to link the rating, if implemented, to tuition fees. This would only encourage elitism amongst universities and would serve as a deterrent for those who wish to go (and are capable of going) to a gold rated university, but do not wish to be saddled with extra debt for doing so especially if they come from poorer backgrounds.'



What does ‘excellent teaching’ mean to you?

As the TEF moves into year 3, the metrics used to assess teaching excellence will remain the same: the government is satisfied that no changes need to be made to the ‘structure or methodology’. The way that the TEF metrics are prioritised, however, will change: in year 3, the weighting of the NSS metrics will be halved. The only component of the TEF that directly measures student feedback will be significantly less important in TEF year 3 than it was in TEF year 2.

If the NSS weighting is halved, then the relative importance of the other TEF metrics will increase: the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE) data, HMRC data, and retention/continuation data will play a larger role in determining the final TEF scores.

When we asked students to tell us which factors most demonstrate that a university has excellent teaching, the quality of the teaching/teachers themselves was the #1 factor, while graduate employment came at the bottom of the list (#7).

Students highlighted multiple ways to assess teaching excellence that the TEF does not take into account: in the current TEF methodology the equipment, facilities, libraries, and IT resources are not considered. 86% of students consider IT facilities rather important or very important to teaching excellence and the percentages are even higher when we look at the library (93%) and course-specific resources (94%).

There is a significant discrepancy between what policy makers believe constitutes excellent teaching and what students think makes excellent teaching. While the TEF framework is currently shifting its focus to graduate outcomes and institutional metrics, students consider the most important metric of ‘teaching excellence’ to be the excellence of the teaching and support they receive – and the only TEF metrics that ask direct questions about teaching quality and satisfaction are found in the NSS.

Qualitative comments reveal that students are not only concerned with teaching outputs – learning gain and helping students to achieve their potential are regarded as valid elements to consider.

What does ‘teaching excellence’ mean to you?

‘The overall perception a student possesses of the standard of teaching they’ve received, based mostly on how comfortable they feel with assessments and whether or not they feel supported throughout the process.’

‘Where the growth and progress of a student is measured instead of just their final grade – more emphasis would be given to skills gained, application of knowledge and abstract thinking.’

‘A framework which encourages students to be the best that they can be and one that encourages students to be in control of their own development.’

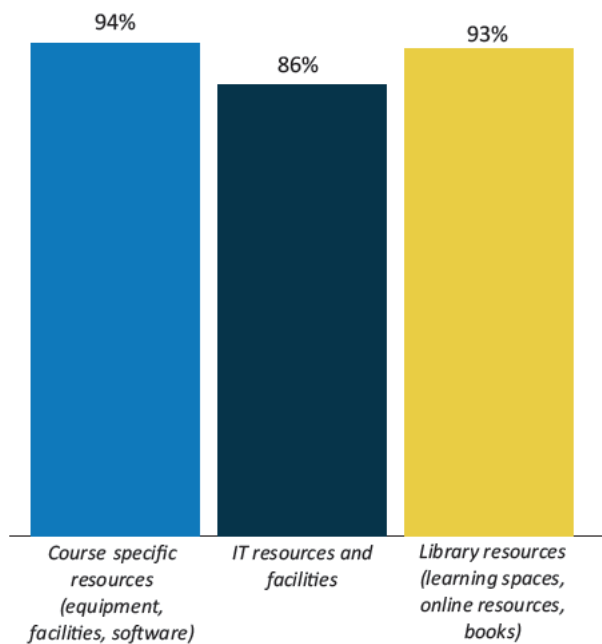
Principal refinements to the assessment process include:

a) Weighting of National Student Survey (NSS) metrics.

The NSS remains a key component of TEF but, in order to achieve a more balanced assessment, the weight of each NSS metric will be halved for the purposes of determining the initial hypothesis.

Teaching excellence framework: lessons learned, summary policy document, DfE, September 2017

Percentage of students that regarded each factor as either 'important' or 'very important' for their teaching experience



Which of the following factors most demonstrate that a university has excellent teaching?



Gold, Silver, Bronze: how much is a medal worth?

In 2015 the Department for Business Innovation and Skills said that the TEF should provide a 'clear signal to students' about 'value for money and potential employment outcomes'.

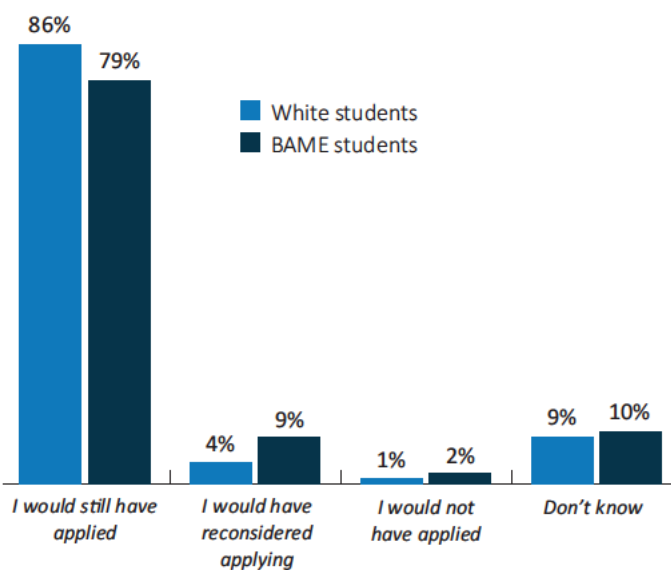
The findings in this study show that the TEF ratings system is not likely to work in the way that was originally intended. When we asked students to tell us whether their decision to apply to their university would have been affected by a Gold or a Bronze TEF rating, the answers were interesting.

While the majority of students said that they would still have applied if their university had been given a Gold rating, 6% of students said that a Gold rating would have caused them to reconsider their application or not apply at all.

Certain groups of students are more likely to be deterred by a Gold rating: 11% of students from an ethnic minority background said that they would have reconsidered applying or not applied to their university if it had been rated Gold, compared to only 5% of white ethnicity students

When we look at the impact of the Bronze rating, 50% of students would have reconsidered their application or not applied if their institution had been given a Bronze rating. Students from post-1992 universities are more 'loyal' to their institutions (43% would have still applied) than students studying at Russell Group universities (only 31% would still have applied).

If your university had been given a Gold rating when you applied, would it have affected your decision to apply?

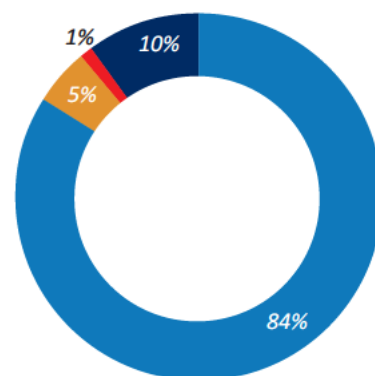


We found no evidence that students understood that the TEF Medals are based upon performance against a benchmark rather than absolute performance: whenever students talked about medals, they consistently assumed that a 'Gold' rating at one institution is directly comparable to the 'Gold' rating at another institution.

TEF Medals measure performance against a benchmark, which means that two universities with very different DLHE results (for example) could both be given a 'Gold' rating.

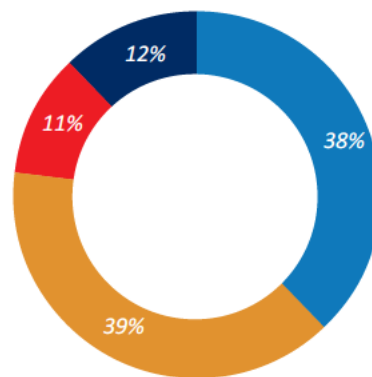
If your university had been given a Gold rating when you applied, would it have affected your decision to apply?

■ I would still have applied
 ■ I would have reconsidered applying
 ■ I would not have applied
 ■ Don't know



If your university had been given a Bronze rating when you applied, would it have affected your decision to apply?

■ I would still have applied
 ■ I would have reconsidered applying
 ■ I would not have applied
 ■ Don't know



Considering everything you now know about the TEF, what is your opinion of this new government initiative?

'[...]quite unfair for everyone who goes to these universities that have the misfortune to graduate from a bronze university – damaging for job interviews. Also bad for careers of people who work at them. Bad bad bad.'

'Bit childish, did enough of my own research on which university would be right for me without having to give it a 'medal', and what is important to one student may be different to another, so an overall categorisation may draw attention away from more important aspects eg satisfaction and enjoyment[...]'

'Creates more division in society, less social mobility, especially for ethnic minorities like me who have to overcome more challenges than the typical UK student, and therefore the TEF is just going to make things harder, especially for young Muslims like me, to pursue higher education and get those top jobs.'



The TEF rating system

Gold for delivering consistently outstanding teaching, learning and outcomes for its students. It is of the highest quality found in the UK.

Silver for delivering high quality teaching, learning and outcomes for its students. It consistently exceeds rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education.

Bronze for delivering teaching, learning and outcomes for its students that meet rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education.

From: 'New assessment highlights excellence of teaching and learning across UK universities and colleges', HEFCE, June 2017

Students on: problems with the medal system

We asked all respondents to tell us, in their own words, what they thought of the TEF ratings. When we analysed the responses we discovered a collection of common themes related to signalling: students were worried that the TEF ratings would change the perceived value of their degrees and they objected to the potential discrepancies between their university rating and their course rating.

Students frequently worried that the introduction of the TEF rating system would change the value of their degrees: many students told us that they were concerned that a degree from a Bronze institution would be less valuable than the same degree from a Gold institution. They also seemed to believe that the TEF ratings will have negative implications for their graduate outcomes, if employers seek candidates from Gold institutions.

Although course-level TEF ratings have yet to be calculated or released, our respondents were already talking about the possibility that their courses may be awarded a different rating to the university as a whole. Some students made the point that the level of teaching excellence across the whole university is not reflected in the teaching quality on their particular course, which means that the TEF does not accurately or transparently represent the level of teaching quality to an applicant. Other students objected to the idea that a Bronze course could be run in a Gold institution.

While the purposes of the TEF might be, as the government says, to provide a 'clear signal to students' about value for money and employment outcomes, the students themselves seem unconvinced. Many of our respondents voiced a concern that low TEF ratings might actually harm their employment prospects, while many other students objected to the lack of transparency around the difference between course quality and the quality of tuition across the whole institution.

Students' opinions: the TEF rating system

'My university has been given gold but my course is definitely not gold.'

'My own experience is that I got an excellent education and opportunities to study at other universities; I do not feel my education was 'substandard'. I received a first, but I now have to worry that employers will perceive my hard-earned degree to be a '3rd rate first' over someone with a first, or even a 2.1, from a silver or gold university.'

'People are already aware of differing qualities at university with league tables, but choosing a university is a deeply personal choice; as much as league tables play a part, it's how the student feels when they visit the universities, along with many other factors.'

'I don't know how much this tells you about the university or course you are applying to. Each student's experience is different and sometimes you have to go there and do it to find out whether it will work for you.'

'I think that graduates of 'Bronze' universities or those with no accolade will be discriminated against in job interviews where they are up against a graduate of a 'Gold' or 'Silver' university, which will worsen the issue of socio-economic disadvantage and social divisions.'

'Honestly, psychologically putting a gold standard on a course would sway my opinion to apply and would potentially jeopardise me getting on the most appropriate course [...].'



Consequences and accountability

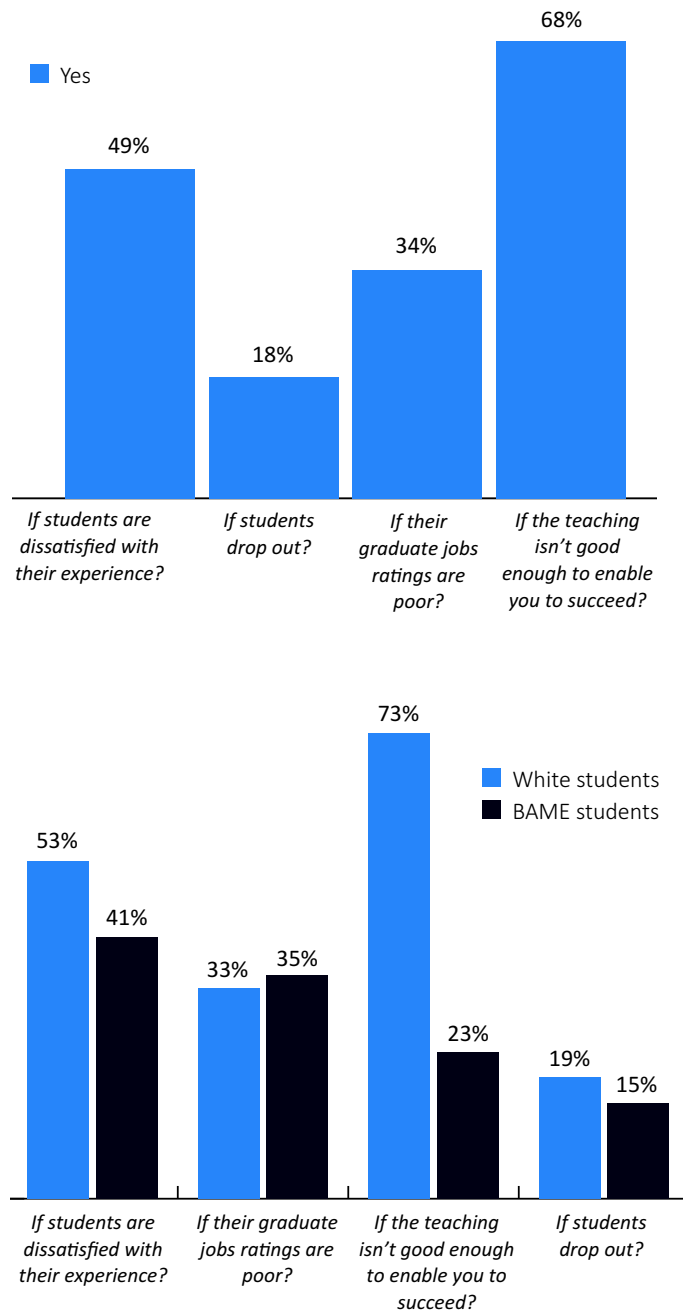
In the 2016 Higher Education White Paper, the government talks about creating a competitive market that will encourage HE Providers to raise their game to meet students' expectations. Graduate employment was particularly stressed: the paper declared that the most important outcome of higher education is finding employment.

However, when we asked current students if universities should be held to account if graduate employment figures are poor, only 34% agreed. When we asked students whether their universities should be held to account if students drop out, only 18% agreed. On the other hand, 49% of students believe that their university should be held to account if students are dissatisfied with their experience.

We asked those students who consider their providers accountable to tell us who should hold the universities accountable and what the consequences of poor satisfaction rates should be: while some favoured more public ways of identifying underperforming universities (with the idea that poor recruitment figures will encourage improvement), others preferred more discreet methods, such as constant internal monitoring and reviews of staff and a decrease in funding.

The answers to the questions about accountability differ significantly when we examine respondents from different ethnic groups. While 73% students of a white ethnicity consider their universities liable for poor teaching quality, only 23% of BAME ethnicity students agree. For the latter, their student experience (41%) and graduate jobs ratings (35%) are the two areas where universities should be most accountable.

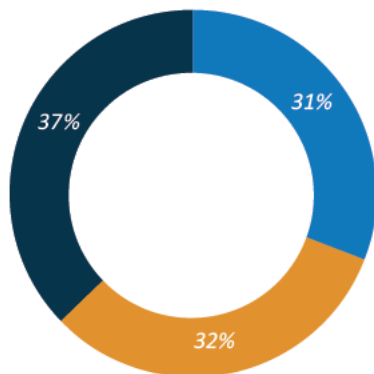
Should universities be held to account...



Profile of respondents

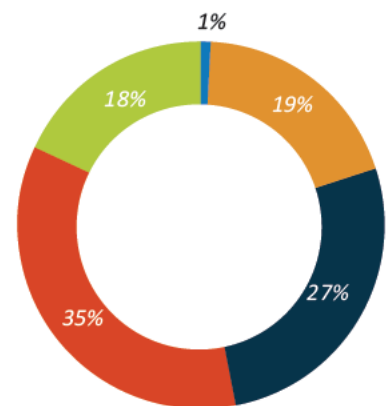
University type

- Russell Group universities
- Post 1992 universities
- Other

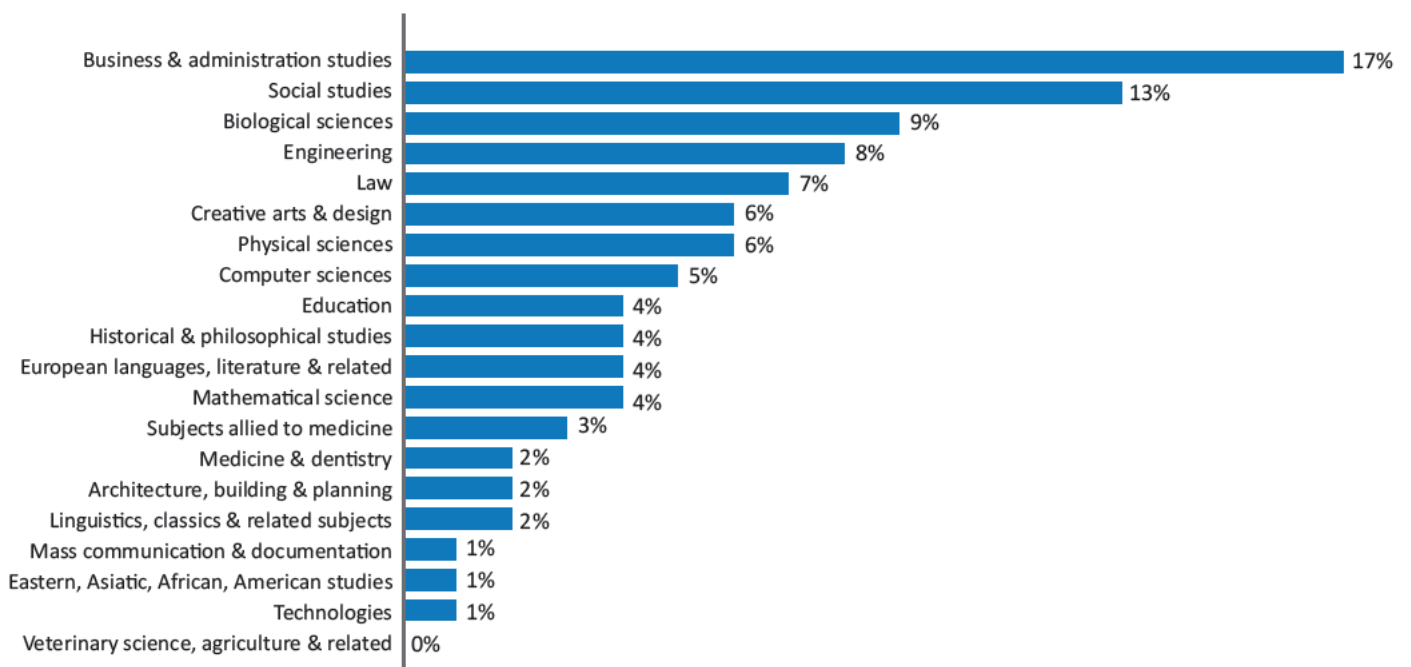


Year group

- Foundation year
- First year
- Second year (middle years)
- Third year
- Postgraduate



Subject of study



What do you think about the TEF?

'It does not directly affect the student. The course succeeding depends of the quality of teaching staff not what rating a university achieved as a whole.'

'Students must take into account many factors when choosing a course that's right for them – course, course structure, distance, cost of travel, cost of living and, of course, the teaching level. Not everyone is able to be so picky about teaching level when discussing the option of university. [...] To impose this sort of traffic light system might make people say 'What's the point?' if they're shown that very few provide great teaching and the rest are sub-par, if you will.'

'University is about more than standard of teaching. The teaching standards may be gold at one university but the course may not suit your wants or needs as much as a similar course at a university with bronze standard teaching.'

'Whether or not my course or university was graded bronze silver or gold, I would still have applied. Like many people with responsibilities at home I am tied to a certain area. It is my belief that this type of banding simply furthers the gap between the haves and the have-nots [...]'

'It would be great to have the framework as it can help students to choose their preferred university, however, sometimes it does not matter what "ranking" the university has as long as they have the course or subject you are passionate about and want to study it in detail.'

'[...] I believe the uni's rating should be influenced by this but should also consider the location/affordability of the area eg travel to campus, cost of halls. As well as restaurants/cafes onsite, the amount of students that get placements, 'atmosphere' described by students/government visit?'

'How up to date they keep their technology/library & how often they update their course material. Whereas the course should be much more based on teaching experience & course content/resources. Like some schools are known for maths and science, universities should be known for the same type of thing, rather than academic and 'old polytechnic'.'

'I think it's a good overall idea, yet we as student need a better way to speak up about the problems in our universities, and we should have a system that allows us to have a say on how the course is being taught and still manage to stay anonymous, so future students can have a better experience at the university. We as students should have a say if we feel like a tutor or lecturer should be put under investigation, and if we feel like we are being treated unfairly and are not pleased with our experience. The students should rate the overall experience of the university and course. We need a better way to communicate with the people higher up in charge of our educational system.'

'It's good to distinguish an overall consensus of the university by associating award status, but this does not do well for the courses within, particularly if there's a good course in a bronze university.'

'The bronze/silver/gold ratings don't say a lot about the university unless the courses and facilities are also ranked.'



Contact

This study was commissioned by a consortium of students' unions.

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 King's College London Students' Union
 Leeds Beckett Students' Union
 Liverpool Students' Unions
 London South Bank Students' Union
 Manchester Metropolitan Students' Union
 Middlesex University Students' Union
 Northumbria Students' Union
 Oxford Brookes Students' Union
 Royal Holloway Students' Union
 SOAS Students' Union
 Solent Students' Union
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