The Teaching Excellence Framework: Discursive Institutionalism, Policy and Academic Discourse

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Abstract

The Teaching Excellence Framework, by claiming to measure the quality of teaching in higher education institutions in the UK, represents a significant move in quality management, student choice, accountability and marketisation for universities. This study places its introduction and development into the context of historical changes in the way UK universities are funded and managed, as well as shifts in how governments position universities as drivers of social mobility and economic growth.

This research aimed to understand how teaching quality is framed in TEF policy, how it is discursively interpreted by academics and implemented by universities and their staff. Fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with academics across universities, occupying a range of positions/roles in relation to TEF. Their responses are interwoven with text from six core policy documents on the TEF. The conceptual framework of discursive institutionalism has been used to support analysis of this data. This approach helps explain actions and reactions to the TEF policy framework based on agents' institutional and ideational positions.

The findings reveal how academic staff seek to maintain the capacity to control (but not dominate) both the meaning of and ideas about teaching 'excellence' through their own discourse and in their practice. The coordinative/communicative discourse of policy and university leadership, maintaining a certain power over ideas, creates the ideational conditions for limited institutional change. However, institutional change is also affected by a perceived lack of cognitive argumentation in policy and process for the academic community (e.g. use of metrics as proxies to measure the quality of teaching at institutional and national level). Conflicting ideas which were identified in policy were either taken up or reformulated by academic staff, particularly at leadership level; at the same time, existing practices, often at individual and departmental levels were used to structure understandings about learning and teaching.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CRA	Consumer Rights Act
DI	Discursive Institutionalism
DLHE	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey
DOE	Department for Education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
NSS	National Student Survey
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OfS	Office for Students
ONS	Office for National Statistics
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
REF	Research Excellence Framework
TEF	Teaching Excellence Work
UCU	University and College Union
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation

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1. Introduction

This research deals with academics' conceptions of quality in higher education and brings into focus: tools for measuring quality at an institutional and national level (as set out in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS 2016; DfE 2016; DfE 2017); and the discursive way these tools are implemented at an institutional level, by investigating policy and academic discourses regarding the TEF. The first round of results of the TEF, published in 2017, were made up of three levels: teaching quality (including student satisfaction), institutional learning environment, and student outcomes. Explanations for the introduction of the TEF range from needing greater transparency and accountability in higher education, to governments' plans to turn the sector into a commercialised and competitive market (Gunn 2018).

It is a significant government move in UK higher education as it will have serious implications for universities' ability to attract students, funding, reputation and the way they plan and carry out teaching. The TEF as a 'multi-purpose evaluation tool' has been explored (although in a less critical way) (Gunn 2017, p.129) and it is clear that its implementation is an important turning point in a decades long shift from public higher education to HE as a market sector involving competition, value for money and the generation of revenue (Neary 2016). The political, ethical purposes and social value of higher education lie at the heart of this debate (Forstenzer 2016). Furthermore, Neary (2016) has pointed out that while many working in HE acknowledge the need for reform, the nature of that reform is still up for debate, from which many academics feel they have been marginalised. It is this context that has engendered this thesis which brings together data from semi-structured interviews with academics and TEF policy texts to bring the nuanced academic narrative to the fore. This data is further contextualised, and made sense of through a critical evaluation of relevant literature and historical developments in UK higher education.

Universities have witnessed some significant changes since I began researching the TEF. The impact of austerity, Brexit and COVID-19 have all had an impact on the sector, and these are discussed below, however the most contemporary and pressing issue relates to the crisis in funding, which has led to universities effectively being expected to do more with less. Academics have faced growing job losses, increasingly precarious working conditions,

increasing workloads, reductions to pensions, falling pay (The Week, 2025). Strikes have taken place across the sector and staff well-being and morale are reported to be low (Douglas et al., 2024). These issues and the negative direct impact they are having on teaching and learning were mentioned by many participants in this study, however, it must be noted that the financial situation that many institutions are confronted with has worsened since I carried out the interviews and it seems fair to assume that this has led to a heightened crisis with subsequent consequences for academics, as well as the associated impact on students, teaching and learning.

1.2 Note on use of terms

This thesis uses the term 'academics' in a broad sense to encompass people with differing roles in academia – but principally those involved in both teaching and/or research (if not at the time of the interview, then at some point in their career), and who may have been involved as a TEF panel member. The participants in this study came from a wide range of institutional roles, including higher management. All those interviewed had relatively long experience, and had worked in various academic positions – not only the one they held at the time of being interviewed. Individual participants are referred to throughout the thesis by their generic job title (to help maintain anonymity) and critical commentary has been made on how their institutional role and career may contextualise their responses.

1.3 Researcher role and reflexivity – my positionality

1.3.1 Professional background

While I have tried, as far as possible, to maintain the neutral and objective position that fair investigation requires of any researcher, I have also found it useful to reflect on my own positionality within the research process. The political nature of education research, as highlighted by Punch and Oancea (2014), mean that even the most innocent discourses have a political undercurrent – or at least the potential to carry political meaning. I also consider research to be a human construction and the work carried out for this thesis took place in specific social contexts and has been framed in turn by discourses which would be difficult to describe as abstract or neutral. By recognising the suffusion of politics into social science

research, I attempted to step back from my practice, taking a more critically balanced approach towards the themes of my research (Ozga et al., 2006).

Professionally, I teach, coordinate and examine language courses in a public European university, having previously been a visiting lecturer in UK higher education for a number of years. Prior to working in higher education, I taught languages in the private sector. My experience of teaching and learning has obviously influenced the way I think about it in both practical and theoretical terms and the extensive training I have followed throughout my career also informs my practice. However, it is as a researcher that I have been able to engage theoretically and critically with the wider pedagogical, political and institutional contexts of teaching and learning.

While working as a lecturer in UK HE I experienced and witnessed first-hand, in several institutions, what it means to be employed under precarious contracts. This is something which a number of participants, regardless of seniority, highlighted as symptomatic of the move to marketise the sector and make it more competitive – there is always a price to pay: by academic staff in terms of career stability and development; by institutions in terms of financial viability; by students in terms of quality and continuity of teaching and learning provision; and ultimately by society as a whole when a market-driven higher education sector may negatively impact student experience (by burdening tutors or lecturers by asking them to do more with less).

Since moving to a public university in Belgium as a lecturer, I have also observed first-hand how having a stable contract and clear career path can impact on the quality of teaching one can offer. Access to training, the possibility for promotion and recognition of professional development and mobility are enriching elements for someone working in education and essentially lead to better outcomes for staff and students alike. Another observation is that there appears to be better alignment between institutional and individual goals when academic and teaching staff are valued beyond the results they might achieve in metric evaluations of their performance as educators.

1.3.2 As a researcher

It was through the discursive interactions of interviewing candidates that this research project, in many senses, came to life. During the discussions I had with academics in various institutional roles, the vigorous, thoughtful and logical way that they expressed their positions and put forward arguments brought home the reality of lived policy experience. This thesis draws on ideas expressed in Gitlin (2014) about the way research, through power and method, can be directly linked to political and institutional change; and this tied in with the theoretical framework of DI, seeking nuanced explanations of such change by critically examining discourses in institutional contexts (Schmidt, 2010).

Since I have worked in higher education for a number of years, familiarity with the sector from the inside meant that, during the interviews, conversation was able to turn more quickly to the questions that were important to the research because the basic tenets of teaching and learning and the broad trends/contexts in HE were evident to myself and the participants – nuanced participant views and a wealth of individual experience were able to come to the fore, and perhaps more quickly than if I had been an outsider.

All participants, regardless of their positions (be they lecturers or vice chancellors) expressed an interest in my doctoral research (sometimes offering advice), as they had all taken the same journey at some point in their academic careers. Whatever their reflections on the interview questions, there was a shared interest between researcher and participant, in the TEF (and the future of HE more broadly) and this facilitated the process to no small degree. An absence of suspicion about my motives for carrying out the research also enabled a good degree of trust.

1.3.3 Personal background

Here I mention several topics: Brexit and Austerity. They are important to the context of the TEF and higher education in the UK (as detailed in an earlier chapter); both were raised consistently by participants in this study, as well as being referenced in policy. I am someone who lost their European citizenship due to political decisions – and have noted the consequences that the UK leaving the EU has had on our higher education system – for

academics, for research and for students (Highman et al., 2023). Opportunities that I had as a student are denied to those at university today (Stone, 2024).

Furthermore, I have a vested interest in the way our higher education system functions and develops, not only because I work in it but also because as a father I can envisage that my child might one day pursue higher studies; and as many participants pointed out – a healthy and autonomous higher education sector is a vital component for building a society that is able to overcome some of the fundamental challenges ours faces: inequality; issues in gender, race and class; environmental and economic sustainability. I would add that while I place importance on the abovementioned elements, I did my best to approach the interviews and analysis of responses and policy texts in a neutral way, guided by a sense of criticality and following a rigorous and proven analytical framework. I also wanted the full range of academic voices to come through in the thesis and to allow space for different perspectives in both interview and policy data.

I also acknowledge my own position as a both a teacher and researcher in higher education. My lived experience of UK HE as both a student and staff member gave me insights into institutional practice and change, as well as directing, to some extent the elements of my research, which I considered worthy of investigation and my approach to studying them.

2. The TEF: background and context

2.1 General Background

The TEF - "teaching excellence framework" is said to be a means of measuring (and informing potential students) of the quality of teaching in HE in the UK. Introduced in a tentative form in 2017, it went through three rounds of 'assessment'(OfS, 2023) under the auspices of the Higher Education Finding Council for England (HEFCE) before being adopted and implemented by the Office for Students (OfS), in 2018. Because of its name, obvious comparisons have been made with the REF; they both also draw on large-scale forms of peer review and have faced criticism due to their attempts to 'measure' the immeasurable (REF-research outputs, environment and impact quality, TEF-teaching quality) (Gibbs, 2017). The TEF uses a series of metrics, such as data from graduate first salaries, student satisfaction surveys, retention rates, as well as written submissions by universities, to signal the quality of teaching delivered by each individual HE institution that signed up (more than 300 to date). It also is hoped that the TEF will help students to determine the added value of different HEIs, and act as a tool to select which HEI to apply for. Exploring the background to the TEF also brings to the fore the underlying theoretical framework used in this thesis. One can notice the cognitive arguments, rooted in a historical narrative in higher education policy that have been used to discursively set up the introduction of the TEF.

The TEF has been seen as a way of addressing multiple challenges and issues in HE. At the same time, its results are presented in the form of 'medals' (Gold, Silver, Bronze, Requires Improvement) creating hierarchies between HEIs, which in turn engenders certain behaviours. Because of this complexity of agendas into which the TEF is woven, I will use this chapter to set out the various arguments that circulate around the TEF in UK HE, as well as trace the brief history of its origins, implementation and initial reactions in both the academic and policy spheres. A description of the TEF as it was supposed to function when set up originally, is given below.

The origins of the TEF can arguably be traced back to the late 90s, when the then Labour government introduced tuition fees for public universities, replacing the grant system. A

relative lack of student opposition to the introduction of fees at the time can be explained in several ways: the initial fee was quite low - £1000 and was means tested; drawing on Beck (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and Giddens' (Giddens, 1991) individualization theory, it might be argued that students consider their education to be an investment and thus worth paying (often getting into debt) for. In addition, the first and second governments of Tony Blair witnessed a wider shift in political and social thinking in which students began to be positioned more as consumers, obliged to seek individual rather than politically active and collective solutions, thus placing the introduction of tuition fees into their social context and laying the ground for a diminishing sense of political agency in younger people in general and a series of tuition fee rises that at the time of writing, mean universities can charge up to £9250 per year.

The social and political construction of the student-consumer has been traced back much further than this (Williams 2010) however the importance of this change cannot be underestimated; it began the transformation from the student as learner and the prevailing notion of higher education in the broadest possible Humboldtian sense, to the student as a focused consumer and the university becoming part of a higher education 'marketplace', not only in conceptual terms but in monetary reality. The Humboldtian idea of a space in which research and teaching (and learning) happen together, and the university as a 'unified' place, has thus been challenged by more recent developments in higher education. Widening participation and marketisation, coupled with a neo-liberal model of the university have been cited in previous studies (Reiners, 2014) as contributing to these changes and this is reflected in the nuanced responses also gathered in the present study, in which academics and university leaders refer to the difficulty in meeting the needs of massification (of HE) and creating a new unified concept of the university which responds to both Humboldtian ideals as well as the reality of marketisation, student as consumer and the shift towards a teaching-focused institution (Schimank and Winnes, 2000; Chiang, 2012). This has also resulted in the idea of a split in institutions, where research-led teaching is emphasised (research intensive) versus universities which place a greater emphasis on teaching (at volume – teaching intensive). One objective of the TEF has been to bring institutional focus towards teaching, if not by directly linking results to tuition fees, then by drawing students' attention towards non-research led values (e.g. student experience of learning).

The cost of a university education has shifted from the state to the individual, backed by a move towards the idea that education is a private good which benefits the individual rather than (or more than?) the state (Wilkins, Shams and Huisman 2012). This is also supported by the notion of the 'graduate premium' – a belief that compared to non-graduates, graduates earn more money on average throughout their careers, and are also more likely to be in employment (Department for Education 2019). Hickey (2022, p.1) argues that this move to introduce and then keep increasing tuition fees for HE in England, led to four evolving themes which have been developed, in policy terms, over the last 25 years: 'national politics and political narrative; the marketisation and neo-liberalisation of HE; the link between the costs and benefits of education; and the pressures of the economic environment'.

Whereas other public services (rail, water, electricity/gas) in the UK have been directly sold and privatized over the last 40 years, often piece by piece, higher education has remained largely "public", instead being subject to a series of reforms and measures to overcome the challenges of funding an ever expanding HE system while also attempting to render the system more competitive, and with the stated intention of providing students with better choices and better post-education prospects. University enrolment has significantly increased since 1997, although the introduction of the new undergraduate funding scheme in 2012-2013 (burdening many students with significant, long-term debt) saw a temporary drop in enrolment (Universities UK 2014). It has also been shown that the rapid switch from free, to fee-paying higher education has also led to issues with equity, and the introduction of proxies for institutional quality, in which the TEF plays a role (Murphy, Scott-Clayton and Wyness, 2019). Because the TEF can be viewed as an attempt to change the value system by which universities are judged (and by which students, including international ones may choose to study at), it is also part of the move to construct a market in higher education (Deem 2020).

Although there was opposition to the initial introduction of tuition fees in 1998 (The Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998), the modest amount (approx. £1000 per year) and the ambitious and aspiring nature of the Labour government's plan for higher education (Lunt 2010), blurred the reality of the shift and few people at the time (most importantly those writing in the education press) were able to foresee the path which had been laid out. The first fee introduction in 1998 followed the recommendations of the Dearing report (*Dearing*

Report 1997). In 2004, fees of £3000 were introduced along with income contingent student loans. The report by the Browne committee led to a maximum of £9000 in tuition fees being introduced. Almost all public universities raised fees to £9000 to avoid positioning their institution below perceived quality standards.

Putting the TEF into context is further complicated by several other factors which have had an impact on the higher education sector, most notably: austerity, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, several authors (Maude 2014; Moscowitz et al. 2014; Perugini et al. 2019) have pointed out that the effects of these have been felt unequally along both social, political and gender lines in UK HE and beyond, countering the government message that "we're all in this together" (Osborne 2012). The following sections introduce the background to the TEF through a number of contemporary contexts: austerity, Brexit, the Covid-19 crisis, policy, the academic response and the political narrative.

2.2 Austerity

While 'austerity' may on the face of it be a general reduction of government spending, as Bramall points out, it is also 'a complex ideological phenomenon' underlying policies which have socio-cultural as well as financial implications (2013, p.3). The (ongoing) period of austerity has been accompanied by a marked turn to populism and centre-right policy making, which have tended to frame education in the context of 'value-for-money', focusing, as the TEF does, on metrics (for example future earnings) as an indicator of quality (Davies and O'Callaghan 2014). The logical appropriateness of these arguments also feature in TEF policy and government communication, as explained in later chapters, where discursive institutionalism can be used to show how such communication serves not only to persuade others of the validity and value of ideas, but also to structure thought and discourse in institutional contexts.

Some authors (Murphy et al., 2019) point out that despite the continuing financial downturn (since 2008), England's turn to student-funded higher education has not resulted in a long-term drop in enrolments. However, it is also true that the cost of studying for a degree, at least from the student perspective if not the HEIs, is mostly delayed until graduates start

working and earning over a certain amount (Murphy et al. 2019). It is also important to note that the manner of HE funding has also changed. Until 2012, a substantial proportion of HE funding came from the government through the teaching grant, but the onus then shifted towards the student fees – which was seen as a way to reduce up-front government spending which was in line with the logic of austerity (Bolton, 2021). By doing so, the government was able to remove, in 2016, student subsidies (loans) from its spending data. What it has meant, in real terms, is that spending on teaching resources has steadily declined and the value of maintenance loans has also fallen (*Drayton et al, 2023).* Universities are thus continually having to do more with less; possible solutions proposed to this would be either to lift the cap on tuition fees or increase public teaching grants (Ogden and Walton, 2024). Despite tuition fees rising only very slightly since the introduction of the TEF, because of inflation, students have also faced a fall in real terms in the value of maintenance loans; this has knock on effects on the inequality of access to higher education, affecting students in the lowest income brackets the hardest; and is coupled with the diminution of sought-after degree programs (such as economics) being offered in universities that tend to be more likely to accept these students (Johnston et al., 2014). It is worth noting that one of the objectives of the Office for Students (OfS) is to increase student diversity, and to this end the OfS, through the TEF agenda, collects and publishes data on access to, participation in and continuation at higher education according to, for example, gender, ethnicity as well as a range of indicators which it calls 'characteristics of students' (OfS, 2022). Raising awareness of this diversity issue among the academic community and at university management levels may help to spur universities to offer broader learning support services, stimulate universities to adopt a more inclusive approach to admissions as well as encourage teaching staff to think about how curricula are produced and teaching delivered (Knight, 2021).

Nevertheless, using metric data to evaluate provision across the higher education sector may not by itself guarantee quality in teaching, nor help to address other fundamental issues which universities face, such as a premium being placed on economics and business degrees over the arts (mentioned above), nor recognize the broader social and economic role that universities play, or help widen access. The knowledge based economy and society that has emerged in the 21st century has meant that universities are coming to be seen not only as producers of research and degree holding graduates (also measured in terms of societal and

economic terms), but also as 'economic engines' – stimulating and stimulated by the market and the state (Soysal & Baltaru, 2021, p.317).

The TEF's focus on teaching quality in HE starts to make sense when put into the funding context: although student 'tuition' fees have risen dramatically since 1998, cuts to the teaching grant mean that universities are much shorter of cash than is perceived by both students and the public alike (*Report*, 2014). A report by the Higher Education Commission, without specifically referring to the TEF, does set out several challenges it attempts to address: relying on a market approach to higher education when the consumer base remains uninformed; the need for ratings agencies to have a better understanding of universities' position in that market and the 'value' that they are offering prospective students. The report also acknowledges that the wider social and economic value of higher education, along with research funding, should not be undermined (ibid, 2014).

As Hargreaves (2020) puts it,

> 'An unholy trinity of austerity, overzealous advocacy for any and all technology, and educational privatization is presenting a formidable challenge and threat to the entire future of public education as something that inclusively serves the common good.'

Cribb and Gewirtz (2012), for example, point towards a recent decline in civic governance and standards (using a series of banking and ethics scandals as cases in point) as a direct result of a financially self-interested and performance related culture, stemming from a university environment that is increasingly 'hollowed out', and without a clear social role to play. Nixon (2008) goes a step further to argue that universities have become more concerned about good management, economic efficiency and staying competitive to the exclusion of academic excellence. In a society (such as the UK's) where positions in which knowledge and knowledge exchange are highly financially rewarded, Glasman (2011) notes that universities have an important civic function as centres of 'de-commodified' knowledge .

Austerity and more broadly conservative fiscal policy as applied to education is relevant to the HE sector as a whole and specifically to the introduction of the TEF as the motivation behind

HE reform has shifted through a number overlapping themes: the desire to expand the sector and rapidly increase enrolment; the increasing marketisation of HE; discussion over who benefits from university level studies and the challenges of funding in the face of economic downturn. The more recent shift in policy focus from private student investment to what the government can do to guarantee value for money for the student-as-consumer is directly reflected in the introduction of the TEF to answer this question.

2.3 Brexit

Of significant consequence to note here is the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), which gave the government greater control over the sector and is aimed at making it more competitive. It was introduced following uncertainty about the higher education while details on the Brexit deal (and what impact it would have on HE) were still vague. It brought research councils under one body (UKRI) and blurs to some extent, the differentiation between public and for-profit HE providers. It also crucially created the Office for Students (OfS). There is provision in the Act for 'teaching only' universities, which could lead to a further distancing of research from teaching, while for some time many academics have indicated that research linked teaching is a good way to improve and maintain quality of tuition. It should also be noted that the Act explicitly places students as customers under the Office for Students, providing a direct link to university ranking and rating through the TEF (Corbett 2021). The terms of the UK's exit from the European Union not only led to uncertainty regarding the future of research collaboration and EU funding (e.g. Horizon 2020) but to also to some concrete impacts for students in UK universities – most notably the UK opting out of the Erasmus scheme – removing UK university students the opportunity of funded periods of study abroad. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the work of Schmidt (2017) who has used a discursive institutionalist analysis of Brexit (and the 2016 US election), to explore the ideational causes of discontent and mistrust that led to these two political outcomes. Furthermore, it could be argued that similar rhetorical strategies to those used during Brexit can be found in a discursive analysis of the TEF; using this framework, it is also possible to investigate the economic, social and political issues woven into the TEF and the circulation of ideas and means in discursive communities with an interest in its implementation.

2.4 The OfS

The Office for Students (OfS), an independent, government sponsored body was created in 2017 by the Higher Education and Research Act of that year, and became fully operational in April 2018, taking over from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), as the regulator for higher education, including responsibility for the TEF. Its stated mission is to regulate both the sector as a whole and individual institutions by focusing on: 'access and participation, quality of academic experience, consumer protection, financial sustainability, governance and management, information for students and data provision, fees and compliance with terms and conditions of funding' (Dandridge, 2019). The OfS has not been without its critics, both from the academic community and government. This is partly because it has been asked to act in an increasing number of regulatory fields (as the list above suggests) assuming tasks that were previously shared among various agencies and bodies, but also because its engagement with the academic community (and vice versa) has been characterized as 'adversarial' (Behan et al, 2024). It has also been noted that the OfS differs in nature from the HEFCE in that the OfS is seen as a regulator (even being called a 'market regulator' by Jo Johnson) whereas the HEFCE, as the name suggests, was more of a funding council with less of a role as a regulator. The nature and tasks of the OfS have also evolved over time to concentrate more on outcomes, quality and standards (HL Paper , 2023). In this sense, DI can help to put the creation of the OfS into context: if institutions function as codified systems of ideas, then the OfS could also be seen to sustain the new practices (and ideas) within the TEF. The TEF thus appears to have been at least partly constructed on the back of ideational preconditions expressed in policy: the discursive construction of a crisis in higher education that called for change, and the insitutionalisation of policy paradigms as a way to normalize new practices.

2.5 Covid 19

A recent government COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing surveillance report (2022) noted that key workers in health and education had been amongst those to be more adversely affected by the pandemic. The vicissitudes of working under and adapting to lockdown measures, moving to online teaching (often involving increased time and energy spent on

administration and learning of new technical skills), social and professional isolation led to increased pressure on academics in a number of areas, and this has been shown to be a gendered issue (Mukhopadhyay, 2023; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2020). These measures came on the back of an increasing culture of performance management in higher education, including attaining extrinsically set metric targets and maintaining a 'business as usual' service despite many academics facing the same logistical and social challenges as everyone else (Hadjisolomou et al. 2022; Jayman et al. 2022). In addition, existing inequalities came to the fore as the effects of the pandemic were shown to disproportionately (negatively) impact on, for example, women, BAME employees and those on less stable contracts (Dougall et al. 2021).

Some authors (Jayman et al. 2022) link the downturn in academics' wellbeing in part to a growing need to serve the 'machinery of performativity' of which the TEF is a part. Connected to this are claims that the pandemic raised the level of perceived institutional control, managerialism and a questioning, by academics, of their autonomy and authority as researchers (Martin, Dabic and Ibbotson 2023).

Although hybrid courses had been around long before COVID-19, the pandemic forced universities worldwide to switch to online learning methods in a very short space of time and some of the changes that were implemented during the pandemic have become either permanent or have stimulated a rethink about the way HE teaching and learning takes place - with many institutions adopting mixed learning and teaching approaches post -pandemic (Daniel, 2021). The trend towards a hugely increased use of online teaching and learning platforms alongside the emergence of generative AI has also pushed both the OfS and universities to focus more on the way courses are accessed, as well as the way they are assessed and presented (*Beech et al.*, 2024). The TEF has obliged many in the higher education sector to reevaluate just what teaching excellence is, regardless of their views on the framework itself.. At the same time, the TEF has been part of the intensification of other developments in higher education, such as increased accountability, digital transformation, data analytics and a changing conception of students from varying perspectives (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2022).

2.6 The policy story

The following section describes the policy process of the TEF. One criticism of the TEF is that it is not ideologically neutral and forms a core part of a broader policy initiative, started in 2015, to focus on public returns on HE, marketisation, student choice and value for money (Oancea, 2019). The discourses around HE education policy count because they are part of the rhetoric leading to the normalization of neoliberal values being applied to education reform and the devaluing of more qualitative ways of defining and assessing teaching quality (Horrod, 2023). It has indeed been claimed that the application of TEF policy runs counter to improving teaching quality and devalues education which does not fit into the ideological basis on which it has been molded (Huxtable, 2022).

The conservative manifesto leading up to the 2010 general election promised to delay implementation of the REF due to concerns about a 'robust and acceptable' way to measure research. However, implementation of the recommendations in the Browne review (see below) was proposed, and referred specifically to how universities could be used to transform the economy, as well as a reference to focusing on 'teaching of the highest quality' (Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010).

The government green paper, 'Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' (BIS 2015) set out the government's plan for defining and measuring teaching quality as well as making the HE sector more competitive, with the stated objective of giving students more choice and access to greater social mobility. This was followed up in 2016 with the white paper, 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' (BIS 2016) which defined more clearly the policy actions and consultations which the government wished to take forward. In essence, the white paper intended to guarantee that excellent teaching would lead to excellent outcomes for students.

The development of the TEF policy was preceded and accompanied by three government commissioned reviews which informed the process and led to a number of recommendations being adopted in legislation. The Dearing report (Dearing, 1997) was commissioned in 1996 by then Conservative education secretary Gillian Shephard but reported in 1997, by which

time a new Labour government had been elected. The main findings were that participation in HE did not reflect the socio-economic make-up of the country. To redress this, it suggested that much greater funding would be needed and the cost should be rebalanced to fall more upon those that most benefited from it. Although arguments have been made to show that university education can benefit society as much as individuals (OECD, 2013), the report also made the link between going to university and employment rates, salaries, as well as public and private returns. Dearing consulted widely in the sector and the comprehensive and detailed report was condensed into relatively few topics when it appeared in the media: funding, expansion, teaching, standards and the future (BBC 1997). The report led to the introduction of (modest) tuition fees through the 1998 Teaching and Higher Education Act. The Browne Review was commissioned by then business secretary Lord Mandelson in 1999, but like the Dearing report before it was delivered to a new coalition government almost a year later (Browne 2010). The report outlined six principles: greater investment in HE; increased student choice; widening of access to HE; affordable fee repayments (and) which should be dependent on work. The Augar Review was published in 2019 and focused on eight themes: the beneficiaries of HE; equality of access; breadth of provision; balance of costs; organisational accountability; government responsibility; the role of market forces; and the future (Augar 2019).

Hickey (2022) has analysed how the discourse of these reports (and their authors) shifted across the time they were commissioned and published. The political/policy narrative moved from debates about long-term underfunding of HE and tuition fees, through questioning 'value for money', other FE options and most recently towards popularist notions of 'levelling-up'. Alongside this is the discourse of neoliberalism in HE, i.e. marketisation, competition and placing the student at the centre of the sector as a consumer. Moral questions about who benefits and who pays for university education have also been played out in the policy and public discourse (Rothstein 1998). This took place against the background of turbulent economic (2008 financial crisis), social (Covid) and political (Brexit) times, characterized by reactions in government that ranged from austerity to ambiguity – for example, at least one author has pointed out that the drive to promote a market approach to HE is at odds with proposed standards for regulation (Frankham, 2017).

Following on from the green and white papers which effectively got the TEF ball rolling, year two of the TEF rollout saw the introduction metrics, available at the time, for the evaluation of teaching. These were: student satisfaction, retention, employment outcomes, and the submission of a qualitative written document by each institution. Approximately 300 institutions took part in England. A summary of the first two years of the TEF and an outline for forthcoming years appeared in a policy document from July 2017 (DfE 2017a) which also detailed how the subject level TEF assessments would be piloted in year 3. The document reiterates the purpose of the TEF to:

- Better inform students' choices about what and where to study
- Raise esteem for teaching
- Recognise and reward excellent teaching
- Better meet the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions. (ibid.)

The logic behind the subject level measurements in teaching quality make sense within the context of the TEF and follow a similar approach to that used for provider level assessment.

2.7 Reviews of the TEF by expert panels

Nevertheless, a parliamentary briefing paper from June 2017 notes that concerns remained about the impact the TEF would have on UK HEIs. The paper also noted that, while the TEF was generally supported by HEIs:

> 'at a basic level critics have suggested that metrics is not a good proxy for teaching quality and that the TEF may not be a meaningful measure of what is generally considered to be good teaching' (Hubble, 2017).

The same report also highlighted several problematic elements in the TEF, even if HEIs were mostly (publicly) positive about its uptake. One such being the impact on universities' ability to recruit international students at a time when the government appeared to be reluctant to issue student visas for 'low quality' courses (ibid. p.25). Some of the more technical issues and criticisms encountered during the first years of the TEF were addressed in several documents

(DfE 2017b; DfE 2017c). Several further reports by the Office for Students (although overseen by academics) were issued to reflect and learn on the subject level TEF rollout (OfS 2018). Further reports and reviews were commissioned into the statistical elements and validity of the TEF (James et al. 2019).

In August 2019, Dame Shirley Pierce submitted the first independent review of the TEF, offering both praise and criticism, noting that efforts had been made to refine the system as well as approving of the underlying intention to drive up standards. The use of peer reviews and benchmarked subject-level data for institutions were also seen as positives. However, the way the TEF data is analysed, the fairness of the process in a diversifying sector and the level of involvement of students were seen as weaknesses to be addressed. The review also concluded that processes and structures of the TEF need to be improved (Pearce et al. 2019). The British Academy has also contributed on three separate occasions to reviews of the TEF, reiterating approximately the same recommendations each time: that the TEF should serve to incentivise excellence in teaching, rather than measure it; that qualitative evaluations should be given more importance; that the link between metrics such as employability and teaching quality are questionable; and that the ratings are simplistic and do not allow for nuance or granularity (British Academy 2022). A key comment in the British Academy's response to the TEF is to, 'highlight that the best teaching is embedded in a culture that fosters excellent research' (ibid, p.3), noting again that the structure of the TEF (and of the REF) mean that sharing best practices and connecting the activities of teaching and research is difficult.

Mathews and Kotzee (2022) on the other hand, through a (corpus-assisted) discursive analysis of the texts submitted by institutions to the Office for Students (for the TEF) and the UKRI (for the REF), found that universities do not always find that teaching and research are mutually beneficial and according to the authors, while excellence in research lends prestige and positively impacts on teaching, the reverse is not always the case. The TEF at times seems to justify a reversal and separation of research and teaching; a consistent idea put forward by participants working in academia interviewed for this study was that universities need to remain places of scholarship – both for researchers and students (as future critically engaged subjects – whatever field of occupation they pursue after their studies). While the fundamental stated aims of the TEF are laudable 'recognise excellent teaching', 'help

prospective students choose where to study', it has also been pointed out that the TEF does not reliably account for a shift in the balance between research and education, especially in research intensive institutions.

2.8 Chapter summary

This chapter set out to introduce the TEF, its origins and developments over the past few years. It has come into being following long-term and significant changes in the HE sector that has seen the number of young people going to university more than triple since 1992 (ONS 2016). This led to a rethink not only in the way HE was funded but also in the way it was conceived of by government and public alike. The changing political ideology and shifts in discourse reflected in policy, politics and the media have also shaped the way the TEF has been implemented and refined. To some extent, the narrative of the TEF has mirrored broader changes in UK society, including political (Brexit), economic (global downturn) and social (Covid-19). The following chapter attempts to untie teaching excellence from the institutional discourse of the TEF through a critical review of the current literature in the field.

3. Literature review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on the TEF so that readers can grasp the complex debates and issues surrounding the topic; the chapter also sets the scene for this thesis which seeks to fill a gap (identified at the end of the chapter) in the field. The chapter presents the academic responses to the TEF and reviews the literature on teaching excellence in the UK. It explores how teaching quality has been evaluated and measured in higher education and brings in an important and relevant themes such as neo-liberal discourse and the marketisation of the HE sector.

3.1.1 General introduction and background

The TEF has prompted a wave of research publications, think pieces and grey literature and while critical interest in the TEF is evidenced by studies into its recent introduction, these sit within the context of broader research into European standardisation and quality assurance in higher education, as well as other enduring themes, which are highlighted in the following section. The TEF is also related to other areas of critical interest such as the marketisation of universities and the positioning of students as consumers and education as a product that can be measured in terms of value to individuals and society. This is also linked to research that examines the impact of neo-liberal discourse in higher education, not only in terms of economic thinking but also in terms of universities as places in which political, media and institutional ideas and norms can be tested and challenged.

3.2. Academic responses to the TEF

3.2.1 Issues in quality assurance

Brady and Bates (2016, p. 157) have highlighted the ongoing search at a European level for standardisation in quality assurance in higher education, finding that quality assurance schemes led to a 'distortion of academic professional practice'. They also revealed that quality assurance often produced outcomes that were characteristically 'administrative' and concerned with 'efficiency' rather than providing the accountability or quality enhancement

they were aiming for. While Brady and Bates' study is concerned with quality more generally and does not focus on the TEF, it nevertheless raises common themes which occur in the TEF debate.

Published around the time that the TEF began its journey from policy to practice, Brady and Bates' 2016 article draws on a study into a Business Faculty at a post-1992 English university to investigate how the 'quest' for standardisation in quality assurance in HE often takes shape - broadly aiming at developing instruments for measuring 'accountability' and 'enhancement'. What the paper argues is that due to the process focusing more on accountability, academic practice becomes skewed when academic responsibilities (such as curriculum development) are framed as administrative tasks and a meaningful focus on teaching methods and standards is dropped in favour of measurable learning outcomes or 'skills'.

Brady and Bates' paper is important because it builds on the narrative of quality assurance in England and contextualises it in relation to other changes in higher education; most notably widening participation, changes to funding and fees and the fact that (at least until Brexit), quality assurance in English HE education did not happen in a vacuum but was part of a wider drive to improve and standardise quality across the European Education Area. This is also relevant when considering authors advocating a softer approach to creating values and regulatory mechanisms in HE. Lawn (2006), for example, cites the European Learning Space as a way to encourage open coordination among institutions and practitioners, around a shared identity, in which 'networking, seminars, reviews, expert groups etc.' are used to enable links across education areas, e.g. research, policy, evaluation and so forth where education actors can work within and work to shape regulation (Lawn, p.272).

Brady and Bates also make the link between the roles of quality assurance agencies and government policy objectives and several authors (Wiliiams, 2010; Salter & Tapper, 2000) who argue that both the HEFCE and the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) in England have been used to steer institutions towards the goals of the Department for Business and Innovation (also closely linked to the TEF). This ties in with a picture of ever more intrusive forms of audit in higher education, going back to the early 1990s. Williams (2010) also notes that the move towards a more performative review of quality, then by the QAA, was not only linked to the

government's drive to make the HE sector more internally competitive and marketized but also deeply affected the discourse of external quality assurance as well as changing the discourse inside universities, effectively working to 'shape the priorities of those who work within it' (Amann, 2003 page).

What Brady and Bates show in their study is that the discourse of quality, imposed from outside the institution (in this case by the QAA) is taken up at a managerial level within university departments, leading to an adoption of seemingly descriptive codes of practice but which in reality separate teaching (academics' task) from the evaluation of teaching (management task) and through the same discourse places quality enhancement in the hands of management or administrators while positioning academics as the final implementers of policy from which they have been strategically removed. The authors, using documents from within a university business faculty, also highlight how the discourse on evaluating teaching remains concise and is geared more towards satisfying QAA regulations than a true/deep indication of quality of teaching. This is echoed in participant responses in the present study which warn of the risk of 'epistemological closure' or 'teaching to the numbers' where teaching method and content are narrowly defined by what can be explicitly assessed and measured (Barnett, 1994). A key point made by Brady and Bates is that the discursive distancing of academics from their core work leads to a 'dissociation' and can lead to them no longer feeling that they are part of a community of practice and may actually lead to a decline in quality standards.

3.2.2 Academic perspectives

Building on the idea of dissociation, is a project report undertaken for the UCU (Universities and Colleges Union) by O'Leary, Cui and French (2019) which found that despite being a driver of recent policy reform, the TEF has not engaged the majority of staff working in higher education, many of whom feel marginalised by a process that is led by university management with much of the TEF related activity being coordinated by specific professional teams who prepare their university's submission to the TEF panel. In addition, the study also found that surprisingly few staff were fully aware of the changes brought about by the introduction of the TEF but among those that were, its implementation was seen to have had a negative

impact on workloads and as having a greater impact on institutional policies rather than on teaching quality itself. This is backed by a limited but detailed, qualitative study carried out by Graham Perkins, who found that the TEF has had a 'significant' (negative) impact on academics' self-identity as well as potentially increasing workload and work type (Perkins, 2019, p. 315).

One aim of the UCU report (which the present study shares) was to bring in the perspectives of staff who are affected by the TEF rollout, as well as drawing on contributions from the chair of the TEF assessment panel and representation from the NUS (National Union of Students). The report drew on feedback from 6000 members of the UCU working in HE. It must be noted that while this is a high number of participants, it represents only about 5% of total UCU members. Nevertheless, I include the report here (in addition to O'Leary and French's earlier work on the TEF) because it points to several recurring themes in the TEF debate: the validity of the TEF as a measure of teaching quality; its importance as a recognised tool (however imperfect) in the debate on teaching excellence; what 'teaching excellence' actually is; and for who and for what purpose has the TEF been introduced.

Building on a similar theme, one of the authors' of the UCU report's underlying statements is that the TEF falls short of its objectives to improve teaching and learning and serve a broader audience precisely because it is the result of a policy driven, outcomes-based process, rather than one including critical voices from across the sector. Furthermore, the report also points out that a repeated notion to emerge from TEF policy and debate is a desire for universities to provide 'value for money', and that it has already been established that significant institutional energy, time and money have been invested to achieve desirable TEF 'outcomes' (ibid, p.83). The report does, however highlight that some of the data used to generate TEF rankings are valuable (such as statistics on BAME recruitment and retention) and will help universities act to improve specific goals related to those variables.

I include the report in this review as there are parallels with the present study. The discourse presented in the data - from a range of university staff in some way linked to the TEF, as well secondary data from an interview with Chris Husbands – carried out by O'Leary, Cui and French (2019), at the time Chair of the TEF panel - brings to the fore the discursive power in

and through ideas within an institutional context (discussed in detail in the following chapter on discursive institutionalism). The report also has parallels with the present study as it elicited many alternative visions of teaching excellence, including the need to recognise and reward good teaching, a system for assuring teaching quality and enhancement, and accountability. In a follow up article (Cui et al., 2021), the same authors condense their findings, reporting that, where universities had received a gold TEF rating, many staff members said that the quality of the teaching was already high, and that the introduction of the TEF had changed little. Participants said too that the award of the gold rating had brought about 'positive changes in attitudes to teaching'. At the same time, very few respondents to the online survey used in the study said they had been involved with TEF related activities – even those in teaching-focused roles. The authors identified with Canning's interpretation of 'hyperreality' of teaching excellence (Canning, 2019) (see below), with 'strategies, initiatives and activities that are mainly directed at satisfying TEF metrics, whilst most of those in teaching and learning roles are side-lined or remain passive recipients of institutional diktats' (Cui et al., 2021, p.1767). They further added that respondents called for an 'ethos' of collaboration inside and between institutions instead of the 'ethos' of competition embedded in the TEF. Other authors have also noted that the process of drawing up TEF procedures itself sidelined academics who are at the forefront of teaching (Neary, 2016).

3.2.3 TEF efficacy and methods

A number of papers also call into question how useful and accurate the TEF is for students who want to make an informed choice about where to study. Weston and McKeown (2020) clearly set out the challenges facing the HE sector and the government regarding the provision of better information for prospective students. The government white paper in 2016 recognised that the information available to students about prospective places to study was insufficient to support their aim of creating a market in higher education. An independent panel review in 2019 (the Augar report) emphasised this, stating that previous levers to 'free' the market, such as a higher fee cap and looser control on student numbers had failed to deliver results either on price competition or to drive-up quality (Hubble, 2019). There were two responses to this shortcoming: a consumer rights act, in 2015 (CRA, 2015) which succeeded in raising awareness of the need for HEIs to provide accurate information to

prospective students ('consumers' in this context) but failed to serve as a market regulator; the second was the TEF which focused on providing information about teaching as an indicator for students of the value of their investment in university studies as well as being seen as a way to drive up standards.

The issue that many authors have highlighted is the validity of using metrics as proxies for teaching excellence, which has been described as 'all outputs, no inputs' (Weston & McKeown, 2020) and that the methods used to elaborate the metric data are not producing an accurate picture of the quality of learning in any specific institution. For example, students did not consider class sizes to be a determining factor in terms of quality, yet research indicates that smaller class sizes are far more inducive to learning (Neves and Hillman, 2019). Contrarily however, there is also evidence to suggest that Russell Group and gold rated universities have the largest class sizes, and their reputation has not been dented since the introduction of the TEF. A common thread with many papers that tackle the methodology and data treatment of TEF implementation is that a comprehensive and accurate picture is not being drawn.

The grading, gold, silver and bronze are based on three metrics and six data sets: the NSS (National Student Survey) which records views on teaching, assessment, feedback and academic support; and Higher Education Statistics Agency data on continuation and employment after graduation. Return rates of forms can be as low as 50%, further weakening its validity and representation. Data is also benchmarked against demographic information about the students from each institution. One author has stated that the TEF does not actually assess teaching quality but instead records 'imperfectly' reported reactions to it. Shattock (2018, p.22) goes as far as to call the oversimplified ratings system as 'populist' and 'crude' but backs up this claim by pointing to the contradictory results the TEF can produce: extremely selective and respected institutions, as well as those oriented to widening access may be put at a disadvantage by the methodology. Rudd (2017) and others (Blackmore et al., 2016) also take issue with the methodology the TEF uses and argue that when put into a wider context, fits more into a neoliberal culture of audit than a genuine effort to improve teaching.

While the metrics have come in for criticism, other authors anticipate equally critical issues with a turn away from metrics as proxies. For example, Wood and O'Leary (2017) suggest that

pedagogical work could be initiated from the bottom up, with a more open timeframe, coming also as a result of dialogue and discourse between the most interested parties – academics and students – eliminating targets and standards set by management - what they term a 'responsibility-led' system. Yet their defence of adopting a more emergent form of pedagogy raises other questions: how to measure quality without using metrics?; how to guarantee academics engage with pedagogy if they are not being monitored?; how might institutions take strategic decisions if management is not part of the quality process? These questions are not fully answered by the authors, who too often return to a critique of the existing systems of quality assurance and how it would not fit a more organic style of pedagogy. However, they do also state that dialogue within institutional settings needs to be more vertical, i.e. academics should be involved not only in implementing a new agenda but also in forming it, arguing that teaching and learning are socially situated, that they need to reflect the different (sometimes contradictory) voices within and between institutions , and that leaders, rather than being 'overseers' take on the role of 'facilitators' who help to build communities of good practice.

Thomas and French (2020) write about the TEF in terms of 'institutional polishing' (an expression borrowed from Ahmed (2017)) in which teaching excellence is reduced to a performative 'institutional speech act' defined and restricted to the criteria set out in the TEF (Ahmed 2006, p. 764). Such acts enable policy to come into existence inside an institution without coming into use – there may be textual accounts of excellence as well as discursive use of the term, without it ever being put into practice. In this way, the idea of 'excellence' becomes an untrue 'truth'. In addition, the same authors posit that the TEF serves to project to the outside, as well as reflect to the inside, a 'shiny' surface which not only hides the imperfect tools (metric data behind the TEF) used to 'polish the institution' but also to obscure or blind stakeholders to the complex processes that make up teaching and learning in HE and at the same time make it more difficult to overcome or challenge the inherent institutional and societal inequalities (based on gender, class, race etc.) which the TEF claims to want to overcome.

The student survey data used to generate TEF results has also come in for criticism from several different angles. Over reliance on student evaluations is problematic because it

ignores important nuances which happen in practice. French (2020) points out that students' perceptions of teachers in HE can vary dramatically depending on, for example, the gender, age and social class of the lecturer, making it difficult to ensure that student assessments of teaching are fair across courses and institutions. If these inequalities are not taken into consideration, as with the 'institutional polishing' mentioned above, assessments can serve to sustain inequality, rather than reduce it. Other authors have questioned the complex and obscure way in which TEF outcomes are arrived at, leading to the original policy being blunted and reducing it to a gesture towards social mobility, as well as allowing policy makers to avoid tackling the complicated contexts of higher education (Crockford, 2020).

3.2.4 TEF in academic context

Allied to this view is the position that the TEF is part of a much broader trend in recent years towards what Hall (2016) terms 'postwelfare capitalism', driven by privatisation, official deregulation and austerity, and the growth of sharing economies motivated by profit and using the market to regulate, in this case, pedagogy. This entails both a reduction in the state as provider and owner towards a position of oversight and management. This appears to be playing out, at least in part in institutional practice. A recent study which drew on staff perceptions of the TEF found that the stated aims of the framework, particularly the focus on driving up teaching quality, were welcomed in the academic community but that doubts arose in terms of academics' readiness to implement the framework. Furthermore, the implementation of the TEF was seen as an extension of the accountability trend in HE with comparisons being made to other public spheres where the motor for change comes from achieving desirable metric outcomes instead of generating genuine institutional commitment to improve real world teaching (Graham, 2019).

The TEF has also been viewed as a means of coercive control through policy and as a potential site of resistance and subversion (Barkas et al., 2019). Doing so frames the TEF as a higher level external policy imposed on the academic community, normalising regulatory power and limiting lower level agency, however it is also necessary to take into account the historical narrative of TEF policy as it is interpreted at different levels in an academic context – something which the present study attempts to do by examining the discursive spaces of TEF

policy and implementation at grass roots level. One study has examined the TEF in a similar vein, focusing rather on professional services staff at a Russell Group university and their experiences implementing the TEF; findings broadly fell into three groups: regulatory policy as an opportunity to redress a perceived imbalance between teaching and research and to 'make the most' of the TEF; policy as subjugation – adding more regulatory bureaucracy without bringing tangible benefits to teaching and learning; the TEF as a threat to internal relations within institutions, e.g. between professional services staff and academics – with a discursive construction of some of the former as bureaucratic agents of the government (McKay & Robson, 2023). This study is interesting because it highlights the role of 'structured agency' (Ball, 2015) and brings to the fore the discursive nature of the TEF in an institutional setting – for example, the complex nature of interactions between policy makers being asked to define what teaching quality is, practitioners who are asked to take strategic decisions to improve and monitor teaching quality, and academics who are ultimately responsible for implementing new notions of teaching excellence. The TEF has given a limited 'structured agency' (ibid) to professional services staff through access to policy and institution-led changes to the way teaching should take place, but leaving them short of knowledge on how teaching actually takes place and thus feeling unable to engage with academics in a meaningful way (McKay & Robson, 2023) – a view that was echoed by participants in the present study.

Deem and Baird (2020) make the case for the TEF being an *index*, rather than a *measurement* of teaching quality, pointing out that the data collected by the OfS (NSS, graduate wages, continuation rates.) might be indicators of teaching excellence – but so might many other factors – and it may well be that different variables in addition to or completely separate from the ones the TEF uses are what affect graduate outcomes, for example – and in reverse, teaching quality. The authors develop this point by noting that the TEF sets out what HEIs should be achieving, but because the very term 'teaching excellence' is a moot one and very few working in academia or policy makers agree even on a broad definition, the TEF only measures a constructed idea of teaching excellence by using data that is easily and readily available (Deem & Baird, 2020). In short, there is no causal model which links teaching to TEF data. The nebulous character of what teaching excellence is, is evident in participants' (in this

study) difficulty in defining it – responses showed long pauses, repetition and answers that often moved away from the original question.

Furthermore, the risk involved with using the 'wrong' indicators to build a picture of a university's quality of teaching is that attempts by the institution to drive up these metrics will result in the wrong kind of behaviours such as using resources to game TEF submissions rather than building networks inside institutions to develop excellent teaching. In addition, from the student perspective, using the TEF to select a place to study puts the emphasis on final earnings over interesting course content; ignoring innovative programmes or a focus on scholarship in favour of 'value for money'; doing so partly transforms HE into a product to be bought on the market, i.e. a private good and to some extent sidelines student effort which can lead to public good (Deem and McGowan, 2019).

3.2.5 Complementary studies

A relevant paper which complements the current study very well was carried out by Matthews and Kotzee (2019) who examined the discourse in the 15-page written statements provided by each university as part of their TEF evaluation, using a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach. As mentioned before, these education 'provider submissions' are taken into account alongside the quantitative data. Matthews and Kotzee aimed to uncover main themes in the discourse of the TEF as they consider them to be an accepted part of the discourse of teaching in HE. They found these to be: 'employment, employability, student outcomes and research' (ibid, p.523). Their findings reinforced the idea that TEF submissions are being very carefully constructed by universities to help ensure the award of a gold rating. Various papers have been published on the work done by professional services and outsourced companies to create a perfect TEF submission (e.g. Wolstencroft et al., 2020). In addition, they were able to show that universities that aligned their submission more closely and mentioned key words from the guideline documents provided by the OfS (in terms of what they expected and how the submission would be evaluated) were more likely to achieve a higher rating, leading to the authors concluding that 'successful submissions largely attempted to mirror the "approved" discourse around teaching and learning that was communicated to universities by the TEF panel' (ibid, p. 534).

An interesting part of Matthews and Kotzee's paper looks at the discourse of research in TEF submissions. They found that successful submissions mentioned research a lot and also collocated it very often with teaching, e.g. 'research-led, research-inspired, research-based' but were vague on how research actually informs or shapes teaching. While the presentation of a high quality research environment seemed to help the overall submission, the authors found no obvious discourse showing how research is directly linked to teaching excellence. Turning to the present study, qualitative analysis of participants' responses reveals a similar emphasis on the importance of research – with links being more tenuously made to teaching (as detailed in the data chapters), however a closer connection can be made with a quote from an *unsuccessful* TEF submission, provided by Matthews and Kotzee: 'Moreover, it made clear that [our] students expect our education to act as more than a conduit for gainful employment, but also as a means through which to develop intellectually.' (ibid, p. 535). Similarly to some of the qualitative answers given in the present study, the authors express concern that the 'approved' discourse of employment outcomes will come to dominate and notions of education for social good, personal development and equity will be drowned out.

3.2.6 Accountability and the TEF in practice

The TEF has undergone various modifications since it was first introduced and as it continues to be rolled out and adapted, the academic community has followed suit with an ever-increasing bank of literature emerging in response that is both critical and supportive of the framework. Tomlinson, Enders and Naidoo (2018: 1), call for resistance to the TEF, which they argue is a 'lever in the continued operation of a measured market in the sector'. Furthermore, the authors state that the TEF aims to produce conditions which facilitate such marketisation by affirming the role of students as consumers, a preoccupation with students' employment prospects after graduation and the misuse of metrics to reflect institutions' performance in teaching quality. The research takes an uncompromising and clearly critical stance towards the TEF, however, this is based on a deep, critical reading of the literature on neo-liberal political influence in HE and a tried and tested analytical approach (policy framing analysis) to data and documents (Ball 2015; Frankham 2017; Heaney and Mackenzie 2017). A more neutral and nuanced approached has been attempted by Gunn (2002) who rather than dismissing the

idea of creating a market in higher education, argues that if the government sees competition as the way to improve standards and choice, the TEF may not be the best way of doing it.

Some authors highlight the importance of graduate employability while pointing out that proponents of the TEF are too keen to link graduate employment outcomes to universities' rights to raise tuition fees (Blackmore et al. 2016). The same authors also argue that the metric data produced by the TEF is in any case misused and fails to consider other variables which impact on graduate employability. In terms of teaching quality, Blackmore et al. (2016, p. 6) suggest that, rather than complain about 'consumerisation' in HE, an alternative solution is 'to link research and teaching together more closely at all levels…with research and teaching recognised as complex forms of learning'. Not everyone researching and working in higher education, therefore, is fundamentally opposed to the TEF (although many authors concede that it is unpopular) but do have concrete reservations about the way metric data is used and the underlying political aims for its use (Shattock 2018).

In their research, Wood and Su (2017) used email to interview a range of academics from post-1992 universities on the topic of teaching excellence and the TEF. Using an immersive 'iterative' approach, it emerged from their data that the very concept of 'excellence' has become somewhat 'vacuous' and contentious and that interpretations of the TEF depended heavily on the language used to discuss and describe it. As with Blackmore (2016), the idea of linking research and teaching more closely also emerges as a possible solution to improving and measuring teaching quality.

Some authors have criticised linking the assessment of teaching quality to employability after graduation (as the TEF does), particularly arguing that the performative nature of higher education, coupled to students' internalisation of the importance of employment mean that the implementation of the TEF will in fact work against preparing students for the workplace (Frankham 2017). More specifically, the focus on 'student outcomes' and creating graduates who are 'oven ready' employees has led to a mismatch in perceived skills that make a person attractive on the job market and the skills that are needed and required in the real world – as reported by employers. Frankham (2017) goes on to report that a further level of mismatch exists because many employers do not believe that such skills can be learnt at university. The

author takes issue with government rhetoric of employability, as pushed by the TEF and subsequent moves within higher education to respond to this need (or at least to be *seen* to be responding), resulting in both teaching and learning being geared towards students prioritising elements they think will help them find employment, rather than skills actually need in the workplace. Frankham's argument that 'the idea that wider processes of change often begin in changes in discourse' is something which is taken up in the chapter on policy and is discussed further in the chapter on discursive institutionalism which form the basis of the conceptual framework for the present thesis; As Suspitsyna (2010) puts it 'the official rhetoric is not just an illustration of policy; it is also a vehicle through which social reality is constructed and maintained'.

Forstenzer, a strong critic of the TEF, questions the almost exclusive use of metric data to assess teaching excellence and points out that,

> *the TEF is wedded to a false conception of the epistemic good because it assumes that epistemic goods associated with edification, civic participation and a rich pedagogic relationship are of less epistemic value than epistemic goods associated with student satisfaction, retention and short-term employment. This assumption is false because edification, civic participation and a rich pedagogic relationship are appropriate pedagogic goals that yield vitally important epistemic goods for students* (Forstenzer 2018, p.556).

Nevertheless, the TEF remains a key measure of teaching quality in higher education, whether or not it is fit for purpose. It must be pointed out that universities also submit a prose report, not based on externally applied metrics which the TEF takes into account. At a minimum, Forstenzer argues that the TEF must be separated from tuition fees and graduate employment and earnings, which he argues have little or nothing to do with teaching.

Wood and O'Leary point out that the TEF is only the latest government move in the development of accountability systems in HE since the 1990s (Wood & O'Leary, 2019); and they argue that it is part of a wider ideology which aims at increasing the role of the market, regulation and accountability in public services. Nevertheless, the areas which the TEF

attempts to measure, were also cited by some participants as being an important part of a university education: teaching quality, learning environment, student outcomes and learning gain. Where differences emerged, also reflected in many academic responses to the TEF are the methods of evaluation – as mentioned above, the proxies used to measure excellence have been called into question with some authors emphasising that the current system has moved away from engaging with the 'meaning, process and complexity' of teaching and fail to focus on either of the real stakeholders in teaching and learning (students and academics) (ibid, p. 7). Although the TEF positions the student at the centre of its narrative, some consider it a way to manage universities, at a micro level, to meet the needs of the market. The open ended and changing nature of the TEF, it has been argued, creates environment for both teachers and management in which they are constantly preparing for the next round of (possibly altered) monitoring and adapt their behaviour to fit the 'mechanisms of perpetual pedagogical control' (Heaney & Mackenzie, 2017, p.38). This reconfiguration of teaching excellence from examining pedagogical practice through innovation and research to market activity and accountability has also prompted a call for teaching excellence to be redefined and reconceptualised, as examined in the following section.

3.3 What is teaching excellence in UK HE?

3.3.1 Conceptualisation and theory

The concept of teaching excellence remains vigorously debated with no clear definition or agreed upon notions coming from the literature. It also needs to be noted that 'teaching excellence' differs from 'teacher excellence' or 'excellent teaching', which appear to be defined more at the micro and individual level whereas 'teaching excellence' seems to apply more to broader, institutional or system wide contexts (Sanders et al., 2020). The definition, delivery and measurement of teaching quality in HE also suffer from a lack of articulation in the research literature which leads to grey areas and a clear explanation or even interpretation of the difference between, for instance, acceptable quality and excellent quality, with some authors even calling for an approach in which 'good enough' teaching and support is adopted (Clegg, 2007). Gunn and Fisk (2013) note that the development of theory around leadership in teaching is largely absent and is coupled to a gap between on the one hand mainly

academics and students who conceive of teaching in terms of enhancement and innovation and, on the other hand, those who see teaching as a performative task.

3.3.2 Shifting meanings of excellence

The discourse around the true meaning of 'excellence' in teaching has also shifted somewhat over time and Gunn and Fisk question what rhetorical purpose such a term means when almost all universities put it in their mission statement (ibid, p.22). Runté and Runté, (2016) have illustrated that the concept of excellent teaching, being socially and culturally situated, has been modified by shifting interests from students and government over time, and are not always aligned; for example the needs and ambitions of past graduates (disinterested study, cultural rites passage, transfer of cultural capital) are often not reflected in those of today and the same can be said of changing state views on the purpose of higher education.

Picking up on this, Wilcox (2020) interrogates the way the TEF has changed the notion of teaching excellence in higher education by foregrounding a particular educational (and political) ideology through policy, and through discursive strategies, resulting in a disjuncture between policy claims and institutional practice. Analysing provider submissions and several policy documents, Wilcox identifies 'discursive silences' and 'competing discourses' on key aspects of the TEF. These findings and use of CDA as an analytical tool provide a useful background study to the present thesis – the author advises treating the term 'teaching excellence' with caution – highlighting instead the need to 'develop a deeper understanding of pedagogic practice in relation to teaching excellence by engaging with the perspectives of academic staff' (Wilcox, 2020, p. 55) which is partly what the present thesis attempts to do.

3.3.3 Levels of excellence

A useful overview of what teaching excellence might mean at macro, meso and micro levels is provided by French and Thomas (2020), although they stress that the descriptors in the table do not represent clearly demarcated lines in practice. The table is reproduced here:

Level	**Description**	**Teaching excellence**
Macro	Social and economic influences, sectoral andgovernment policy	Excellence by international standards and aspirations to be 'world-class', excellence related to national economic aims and global competition.
Meso	Individual institutions/ disciplines/departments	Institutional learning and teaching strategies and policies and practices. Teaching excellence initiatives, recognition, rewards and awards schemes. Tensions between central/discipline and top-down/bottom-up approaches
Micro	Individual course and teacher–learner interactions, peer learning	Implementation of transformative, student-focused practices that link to individual teaching philosophies. Individual recognition and reward.

Table 1. (French and Thomas, 2020, P.28)

Using the table as a textual guide, it becomes clearer that differences (or 'tensions') in conceptions and practice about teaching excellence are likely to arise at the meso level, or between meso and micro, which may be partly due to the discourses on teaching excellence aligning less within and between these levels and more between the meso and macro. What also appears to happen is that the policy-led discourse of aspiration gets mixed in with pragmatic aims to standardise practice, giving precedence to quality processes over teaching content and the conception of teaching excellence set out in the table above (Skelton, 2007). Skelton's slightly earlier work on teaching excellence (2005) highlighted a need not only for teachers to be reflective on, but also to share and disseminate good practice, noting however, that it takes place within, and therefore needs to consider the requirements of the wider academy. Skelton identified seven features that contribute towards teaching excellence: reflecting on and meeting individual student needs; starting from the place of students and promoting active learning; communicating – knowing and valuing students through dialogue; making use of technologies; adopting problem-solving methodologies; including the development of transferable skills; offering learners flexibility and choice.

3.3.4 Visionary vs. prescriptive teaching

Nevertheless, this very functional approach to conceptualising and naming the attributes of good teaching practice have been criticised in turn, for example by Su and Wood (2017), who argue that a moral and ethical basis for teaching is equally important – a commitment to invention, vision, risk-taking, energy, excitement and enthusiasm are vital to ensure that teaching and learning do not become mechanical and prescriptive. A further sticking point that arises from the literature is the debated meaning of 'excellence' itself. French and O'Leary's (2017) work deals more widely with teaching excellence in HE but also offers a discussion of the general background leading to a recent increased focus on teaching quality, the political aspect driving change and considers some of the possible impacts of the TEF. It is relevant because the discussions in the book are grounded on academics' experiences and the authors recognise teaching quality as a complex theme and the need for an evidence based, inter disciplinary approach to exploring it (French and O'Leary 2017). The term 'excellence' has come to permeate the discourse of higher education, from research to teaching, student experience to vacancy listings. 'Excellence' appears to have become a catch-all term that must

be used to validate an institution or programme's identity and mission. However, by being so over-used, various authors argue that the term has lost most of its meaning, yet it continues to be deployed as an indicator of quality and performance, as well as in advertising and strategic planning (French and O'Leary, 2017).

As noted by Moore et al. (2016, p. 3), 'excellence serves in the broadest sense solely as an aspirational claim of comparative success: that…[an] institution can be asserted in a hopefully convincing fashion to be better…than some other'. In this way, the idea of excellence becomes part of an institution's armoury in an increasingly competitive market, rather than a true indicator of quality.

This is apparent when looking at the literature of the TEF which focuses on competition, employability and productivity, and some authors have linked these factors to a demand for greater accountability and transparency from the government, which emphasises that teaching and learning should be geared towards employability and transferable skills. In this interpretation, a direct link is made between the narrative of the TEF and the real-world implications of its application within institutions. As Charles (2017, p. 8) bluntly states, the 'focus on quality of education and on teaching excellence are connected to the need for state-directed interventions within the education industry in order to increase national productivity in the interests of capital.' However, linking the TEF in this way to human capital theory (e.g. Marginson, 2019; Fleming, 2017) ignores both the reality of how it is being applied in the classroom and also does not take into account more nuanced and pragmatic approaches to implementing it at the meso level, which emerge when gathering responses from university staff at the strategic management level.

3.3.5 Conceptualising teaching quality

Perhaps 'excellence' still serves as a useful concept that can encompass both internal and external conceptions of quality teaching – and be interpreted flexibly and diversely by teaching academics – whose approaches to 'excellent teaching' may vary, and might be difficult to measure, but still conform to broadly agreed upon notions of what good teaching is. Thus, as noted by Kreber (2002), metric indicators tend to turn excellence into a reductive,

rather than a formative process – regardless of what is happening on the ground. As has been pointed out, the positive and negative responses to the TEF in the academic community pivot around the point where teaching excellence goes from being 'a matter of individual aspiration embedded within a sense of collective professionalism, to an institutional marketing/management tool in a consumerist HE context' (Bartram et al., 2018, p. 13).

The last two decades have witnessed an increasing focus on the quality of teaching in higher education whereas previously, quality assessments of universities tended to focus on their research activities. This growth has been due to a number of factors: greater public interest in universities' accountability; the need to be more competitive in an international environment; the need to justify public funding; to emphasise value for money and the ability to produce graduates ready to enter a knowledge based economy; growth in the sector has also led to increased competition to attract increasingly mobile students and a recognition of the importance of meeting the needs of a diverse student body (Harrison et al. 2022).

Defining teaching quality is difficult because: it is hidden inside broader frameworks for improving HE quality; perception on quality differ; it is very hard to measure; the way teaching is delivered is evolving fast with the rise of AI, technology and a diversifying student body. Greatbatch and Holland (2016) note that defining teaching quality is difficult because it comprises a large number of elements which are, by themselves difficult to define and measure, let alone synthesise and integrate into a cohesive assessment of overall quality. These include: teacher experience, qualifications, strategies and development; access to resources (both teacher and student); institutional, student and societal expectations; group dynamics, student body and past teaching practices. In addition, evaluations of teaching quality need to take into account differences at individual, faculty and university levels, as well as at national and increasingly international levels.

The lack of a clear definition of teaching excellence hampers our ability to design tools or systems to measure and/or assess it (Eales-Reynolds, 2021). With few agreed on common frameworks, objective and accurate assessments of teaching quality become harder still. Nevertheless, the international network for quality assurance agencies in higher education (INQAAHE) is one, and national quality codes for HE, using external agencies, now exist in

many countries. The ECTS in the European Higher Education Area implicitly recognises a broadly level playing field in terms of quality across European universities, without which international mobility of students and academic staff would be extremely difficult. Teaching excellence also seems to be caught up in debates around the purpose of higher education itself. As industry, society and government demand a workforce that is sufficiently equipped to fit into a post-industrial, information-based world, the higher education sector and its funding partners (usually the state) have been pushed to address quality management, including teaching and learning. It is thus important to note that teaching quality is often hidden inside broader frameworks aimed at measuring and improving quality in HE institutions. This is also reflected at international level by the establishment of, for example, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) ((Barbato et al., 2022).

Another barrier to finding a clear definition of what constitutes teaching quality (and quality in higher education more generally) is that of differing perceptions (Iacovidou et al., 2009). In this sense, groups tend to emerge, producing differing views on which factors are important to teaching quality: students, staff, institutions, state agencies (mainly the OfS) and government departments (mainly the BIS). The TEF is interesting in that although it prioritises students as stakeholders in the evaluation, the policy process is driven by government, with limited input from HE institutions through panel reports in the data collection phases (and academic actors in the policy phase). There is even more limited scope for academics engaged in teaching to formally feed into the evaluation data. This study, therefore aims to partly redress this imbalance by including direct input, within the context of the TEF, from academics at different levels of university hierarchy, on how teaching quality may be defined and evaluated.

Building on the idea of varying definitions, it has also been found that conceptions of teaching quality vary over time and place (Crebbin, 1997). In addition, very few evaluation or measurement systems are able (or even set out) to address the complexity of teaching. Crebbin (1997) argues that, as stated above, the focus on teaching quality comes off the back of a larger discussion, at national levels about the overall quality of higher education. Furthermore, as is the case with the TEF, that although the push for change comes from

outside universities, it is through the 'experiences, actions, language and thoughts…[of academics]…that changes are interpreted and implemented' 'ibid, p. 22). Crebbin notes, as I also do, that careful consideration must be given to the position from which those in the academic community may comment and reflect on their teaching, placing them in context alongside the discourse of their institutions, national dialogue and the language of public policy.

Defining what constitutes quality teaching in the age of an expanding and diversifying student body has also added further external pressure on the academic community. More is expected of faculty, yet often with less human and physical resources (Day, 2012). In addition, the widespread use of newer technologies to carry out administration and a growing expectance to use it in the seminar room, lecture theatre and online has also meant that faculty members cannot necessarily rely on the techniques they experienced as students (Cheng, 2017).

Contradictions in the conception of what constitutes 'teaching excellence' also emerge. For example, a shortfall in research into teaching quality means a lack of analysis and agreed upon findings in what constitutes good teaching practice, which in turn makes it harder for institutions to identify and accurately evaluate such skills. Even where common aspects of good teaching can be identified, it is far from evident that they can be either evaluated or measured. Following on from this, several authors suggest that learning outcomes can be directly linked to teaching methods – grouping the two into a 'teaching and learning' category (Postareff et al., 2007), however, assessing learning outcomes does not directly solve the evaluating and measuring conundrum. In the absence of a clear definition of teaching quality, research has nonetheless tended towards finding common frameworks and methods for measuring it (Daumiller et al. 2023), which are discussed in the following section.

3.4 Measuring and evaluating teaching quality in higher education

Much of the literature on measuring and evaluating teaching quality in UK higher education emphasises two main elements: the complex nature of teaching and the extreme difficulty in coming up with a universal and accepted way to either define and/or create a framework to evaluate it; furthermore, many papers assert that the discourse of teaching 'excellence' has

become part a broader neo-liberal discourse which locates teaching within an increasingly commodified and marketised higher education sector – meaning that the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning, between staff and student is reduced. Wood (2017), for instance, stresses that if would be helpful to focus less on publicly identifying teaching excellence and more on understanding and promoting authentic and effective practice at an institutional level.

There appears to be broad agreement that the TEF has brought welcome attention to the importance of teaching in HE, and the problem of evaluating it has also engendered a dynamic and evolving debate, with many authors pointing out the complex nature of teaching at both institutional and individual levels and the difficulties faced when trying to measure it. Complexity and inherent indeterminacy, as pointed out by Crockford (2020), appear in the TEF at both a structural level (the complicated methodology based on amalgamating different metrics) and in the construction of the metrics themselves.

The TEF core metrics, used to build up a picture of an institution's teaching offering, are drawn from existing data sets (as explained in the previous chapter) – two each on 'teaching quality', 'learning environment' and 'student outcomes and learning gain' – coming from the NSS (student outcomes), HESA (continuation indicators) and DLHE (destination of leavers of higher education) surveys. There are also supplementary metrics and the qualitative provider-statements. The link to policy is made through the framework by splitting metrics according to policy definitions of social concern (widening participation, inclusion, social justice, mobility) – however critics of this method point out that the supplementary components looked at in the final stage of evaluation can have a disproportionate and significant effect on the final rating (Gillard, 2017). The 'holistic' panel that decides on the final award needs to take into account both qualitative and quantitative data and indicators to make a 'best fit' judgement (DfE, 2017, p. 57). Some have commented that this turns what was initially considered a data-driven process into a 'black box' exercise with assessors giving unspecified weighting to multiple data (Crockford, 2020, p. 104).

Without going into a detailed breakdown of the statistics behind the TEF, a brief look at one of the metrics can illustrate the complexity which various authors call into question. 'Teaching

quality', for instance, is determined by a set of questions on the NSS concerning 'the teaching on my course', with responses to four items being collated, benchmarked and then split according to diversity characteristics. The four questions in this area are:

- Staff are good at explaining things
- Staff have made the subject interesting
- The course is intellectually stimulating
- My course has challenged me to achieve my best work

(thestudentsurvey.com).

Responses are given on a Likert scale (1-5). It is worth noting that an 'intellectually stimulating' course might be due to the content, or fellow cohort, rather than the teaching and 'achieving my best work' may also be due to the participation and examination requirements, or self-motivation, as opposed to excellence in teaching. In addition, the methodologies and formulation of the NSS have been criticised in several papers (Bell & Brooks, 2018; Canning, 2019), and as Parker and Matthews (2001) have pointed out, 'the survey, given to students in their final year of study, effectively asks them to sum up what might be three or more years of potentially variable experiences.'

It has also been noted that the aggregate, just for this question, comes from four different aspects student experience, making it hard to link the metric measure to its benchmark or specific context, in turn leaving an institution with no way of identifying concrete ways in which to address shortcomings in reported student experience in teaching and learning (Crockford, 2020). The desire to raise the quality of teaching does appear to be a shared goal across government, policy, management and implementation levels, and may well happen at the level of individual agency within institutions, however, change is hampered because tension exists between the conception of policy and at the level of practice. Or, more simply, those responsible for implementing policy are excluded from policy discourse and determination and the risk is that external measurement is seen not as reinforcing professionalism but forcing compliance (Bottery & Wright, 1997).

This disjuncture between policy and practice may arise partly because externally conceived procedures for raising the quality of teaching might be based on false assumptions about teaching and learning, especially if they also aim to serve political ends. More explicitly, one set of authors identified four 'wisdoms' about teaching and professionalism and highlighted how they can be counter-productive to effective teaching and learning (Schuck et al., 2008). For instance, 'measuring teaching quality improves student learning' – yet 'student learning' can include, among others, growth of knowledge, critical and analytical skills, engagement and enthusiasm for a topic – and the authors ask whether extrinsic measurements enhance teaching or shift the aim towards raising scores. The other three problematic wisdoms addressed are whether accountability improves professionalism, issues defining professionalism, and if students' views accurately capture the essence of good teaching (Schuck et al., 2008, p. 543). The authors raise more questions than they answer and provide only brief and partial explanations for how their alternative approaches might function, pointing towards collegial reflection, consideration of ethical issues and risk-taking as ways to enhance teaching. Nevertheless, these form part of the discourse of TEF responses which move from criticality and rejection towards pragmatic alternatives, explored in more detail below.

While the TEF as a force for enhancing teaching and learning has come in for criticism, relatively few authors propose alternative ways to evaluate them, preferring to question or reject the notion that teaching excellence can be measured in the first place. Perhaps logically, responses tend to highlight university-led ways to enhance teaching – noting that this makes up an important part of the TEF rationale.

I have found Wood's (2017) outline of emergent pedagogies to be a good summary of the ideas expressed in academic responses to the TEF :

Present practice	Societal contexts	Policy Socio-economic and cultural change	Future practice
	Organisational contexts	• University and disciplinary cultures • Programme relations	
	Collaborative growth	• Professional development • Collaborative development and learning • Research	
	Personal growth	• Professional skills • Understanding learning and pedagogic content knowledge • Experience and reflection • Research	
	Affective foundations	• Values • Attitudes • Philosophies	
	Time/Emergence		

Table 2, (Wood, 2017, p. 62)

Lying even deeper under attempts to create a system-wide approach to teaching excellence are the differences in how the purpose of higher education changes depending on perspective. Phill Wood argues for a return to a more Humboldtian philosophy of higher education in which academics and students develop practices and experiences together, which can be transformative for both (Wood, 2017). Yet such a view does not take into account the fact that HE now needs to be part of a public, political and more popular debate, with other conceptions of university study being taken into account. Alongside this, Ashwin (2020) reiterates that it is difficult to raise teaching standards by focusing on outcomes and

suggests using collaborative conversations between academics, students, policy makers and other contributors to educational processes. As the data sections of this thesis attempt to bring these voices together, the following section deals with the wider discourse of higher education in the UK.

3.5 Neo-liberal discourse and the marketisation of higher education in the UK

Despite being variously interpreted and explained, 'neoliberalism' appears to be a useful term to describe the current phase of capitalism in western Europe. It can be more specifically seen as a 'theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2010, p. 10). Alongside this, it advocates a state which aims 'to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices' (ibid).

A further definition of neoliberalism is provided by Bhopal (2018), as

> '*an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labour and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatisation of social goods and withdrawal of government from provision for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient.'*
> (Bhopal, 2018, p. 2)

It has also been noted that neoliberalism is not limited to the theory and practice of government and markets but also exists as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon (Gray et al., 2018). Gray et al. point to the way in which institutional discourse has been colonised by neoliberal lexis, becoming pervasive, taking on new meanings through proliferation as well as taking on important ideological functions (2018). Holborrow (2012, p. 41) identifies numerous neoliberal keywords which are 'resemanticised' for changing ideological purposes. For

example, some authors claim that education as a market commodity is being normalized through public and policy discourse (Lynch, 2006).

Maisuria and Cole (2017) posit that the enmeshing of neoliberal discourse into the policy agenda has been part of a move to make quality assurance more ambiguous, synonymizing the process with 'excellence' and affecting the way we think about the purpose of higher education and the way it functions. The same authors state that by claiming to put students at the heart of learning, the neoliberal discourse of the TEF creates the conditions to justify changes to quality assurance that give precedence to metrics and proxies to provide proof that the whole endeavor is worthwhile, suggesting that 'the notion of investment for personal flourishing is central to the UK government's consultation with regard to radical reforms extending and accelerating Neoliberalism in the English HE system' (Maisuria & Cole, 2017, p. 606), by doing so, more qualitative evaluations of academic experience get passed over.

Using the framework of policy archaeology, Huxtable (2022) sees the TEF as both an instrument to advance, and a result of, neoliberalism, stating that, 'discursive activity linking higher education to neoliberalism is, therefore, important in understanding the social regularities of HE, and HE policy exist within' (Huxtable, 2022, p. 132). The particular social regularity Huxtable refers to here is that of 'governmentality' – previously defined as a 'kind of governance that counts, describes, defines, that brings everything under its gaze' (Scheurich, 1994, p. 306). Huxtable considers that this neoliberal governmentality has been embedded in the TEF since its inception, with the aim of entrenching market values at the expense of teaching excellence – or as others have put it, it seeks to 'value what is measurable rather than measuring what is valuable' (Klemencic & Ashwin, 2015, p. 8).

Morrish (2019) argues that the TEF falls within the broader scope of neo-liberal reform and discourse. In this view, both students and academics are being turned into 'neo-liberal subjects' controlled by a calculated set of proxy data (through the TEF process), which is justified by appealing to such measures as 'value for money', transparency and 'competition'. The discursive choices made in accompanying policy documents and rationale for the TEF, argues Morrish, also fit in with neo-liberal ideals (ibid, p.355). Secondly, Morrish, as with various other critics of the TEF, suggests that universities should support and promote

'disinterested inquiry', contributing to a society in which institutions, the press and political ideas are tested, as well as the transmission of cultural and intellectual enterprise. While this may be an understandable position for academics to take, it does not address the government's initial concerns about the purpose of universities and their contribution to the economy. Gourlay and Stevenson (2017), for example, provide an excellent overview of the critical, academic responses to the TEF. An equally acerbic account of the TEF is provided by John Canning (2019) who views it through the lens of Baudrillard's 'hyperreality' (whereby the image and/or idea of a something is more significant than the thing itself (Wolny, 2017)), in which it 'has no traceable genealogy to the practice of learning and teaching' (Canning 2019, p.319).

3.6 Identifying the gap

This thesis attempts to make an original contribution to the existing debate about teaching excellence in UK higher education by addressing the discursive way in which the TEF is acted out, drawing on primary interview data with academics working in a range of positions and institutions and strategic management players in UK universities as well as a critical use of policy documents that form part of the TEF narrative. By using the conceptual framework of discursive institutionalism applied to TEF policy and interview data, I try to show that intentions regarding teaching excellence and higher education reform as expressed by government through policy are pragmatically and critically interpreted at an institutional and individual level. Using Schmidt's 'toolkit' to unpack the textual data, it becomes clearer that agents within universities possess the potential for discursive and persuasive power over ideas and discourse, even if policy makers mostly retain control over the public and coordinative narrative, with critical responses being mostly confined to academic literature and debate. Emergent pedagogies to meet the challenges of a rapidly expanded higher education system in the UK exist in both academic literature, and within institutions, are expressed at an individual level, however the power in these ideas (for reasons explained later in this thesis) seems yet to be adopted in the guiding discourse in which moves to raise teaching quality take place.

4. The theoretical framework of Discursive Institutionalism

4.1 Introduction

Discursive Institutionalism (DI) has been defined as the 'fourth New Institutionalism' (Schmidt, 2010, p. 1), arising out of the existing field of sociological and institutional study that contains three principal schools of thought: rational choice (RI), historical institutionalism (HI) and sociological institutionalism (SI) – explored in the following section. This choice of conceptual framework for understanding the TEF is based on a need to bridge the gap between the discourse of teaching *policy* in higher education and the discourse of academic *perceptions* of teaching, policy and the institutional setting in which they take place. The TEF marks a significant move, contributing to a long-term shift in the way higher education in the UK is seen by government, the public, university staff and students alike. DI allows researchers to theorise and critically consider: the discourse which actors engage in, in order to generate, reflect on, legitimise, criticise, adapt or subvert political action within the institutional context of universities (Beland & Cox, 2010). A more detailed explanation of discursive institutionalism and how it has been employed in this study is given in a following section in this chapter. DI (as noted below) is an umbrella term, bringing together different approaches within the field of 'new institutionalism', but in this thesis I draw mainly on Vivien Schmidt's theory of coordinative discourse (policy data) and communicative discourse (academic responses and interview data) to analyse perceptions of teaching quality and the roles of higher education in today's society. Furthermore, as outlined below, DI locates the enabling and constraining aspects of institutions more as an internal framework for agents' when they engage discursively with both internal and external actors and texts.

It is important to clarify that the policy data drawn on in this research was closely read, using the framework of DI, to triangulate data from the interviews; thus, the policy documents were not subjected to a critical policy analysis, in its purest sense, but were examined in order to investigate how discourses in TEF policy texts were perceived and contextualised in academic practice. Elements of critical policy analysis were incorporated, such as: placing it into social,

historical and political context, how problems are constructed, policy and text production, interpretation and recreation, empowering and neutralising discourses, policy as public expression of authority - to ensure data underwent rigorous treatment. However, it was the interplay between the language of policy and academic discourse, positioning academics as discursive agents engaging with critically interpreted texts and practices, using DI, that formed the analytical basis of the research.

4.2 DI – origins and wider field

4.2.1 Historical Institutionalism (HI)

Historical institutionalism can help to frame institutional change over time, as well as bridging the gap between social and rational interpretations of institutional theory (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). It can be said to focus on regularised patterns and routine practices, following a logic of 'pathway dependence', it also tends to forefront structures and processes which are considered external to actors rather than consider individual choices and interests which may lie at the root of change. One criticism of the HI approach is that it places too much emphasis on external events as the motor for change, ignoring to a large extent, the agents of change and the discourses that bring it about. Historical institutionalism also considers the operation of institutions, and the consequences (intended or otherwise) that result from their development (Hall & Taylor, 1996). The data collected in the present study, showed that while many participants were well informed about historical developments in higher education and education policy, they tended to be viewed differently depending on where the interviewee positioned themselves in their own institution; this fits in with Schmidt's call to employ discursive institutionalism, in a theoretically inclusive way, rather than dismiss or come into conflict with historical, rational choice and sociological institutionalism, i.e. to incorporate them as complementary approaches which can add depth to the more discursive analysis of DI.

4.2.2 Rational Choice

Rational choice sees actors as making decisions according to a logic of calculation and pursuing personal interests and following incentives provided by the institution(s) they are in.

Institutions, in this view can also reduce uncertainties that arrive due to the wide variety of personal interests and issues that have to co-exist (Ostrom, 1990). This approach seems both valid and problematic, for example in light of more recent developments in working conditions for university staff (especially early career academics); precarity and inequality were cited by more than one participant in the current study – but it is harder to theorise how this can be broached or explained by HI which tends to overlook the myriad reasons for human action – or account for this view being expressed by late stage career academics who likely have more stable professional circumstances (Mansbridge, 1990). Limiting, or assuming that choice is guided by (economic) self-interest also appears overly deterministic and the idea of institutions being neutral is more problematic considering the way they are being couched (most often by government) more and more in terms of social, political and (especially) economic spaces. Academics at the forefront of teaching and research, rather than in university management, who participated in this study, rarely described universities as economic entities (but did talk about university funding and financing) – highlighting that internal discourse might be a more insightful way to explain change over time that an approach that emphasises 'external shocks' (Green & Shapiro, 1994).

4.2.3 Sociological Institutionalism (SI)

Sociological institutionalism views institutions as socially constituted and culturally framed (Beland & Cox, 2010). Specific cultural practices are seen to guide human action with institutions providing systems of meaning as well as a symbolic and ceremonial frame. Scott (1995), for example, suggests that where rational choice and sociological institutionalism cross over, purposeful and sometimes goal-oriented behaviour is guided by a socially/culturally constructed institutional 'logic of appropriateness' (Olsen & March, 2004, p.2). This approach at least begins to take into account more individual reasons for action which can help to round out interpretations of events that historical institutionalism brings to the fore. A risk however with cultural institutionalism is that it applies cultural norms which may ignore individual action that break away from accepted social or cultural practice, although it can also reveal how such norms are institutionalised, and the struggles to account for institutional change over time. Participants in the present study, for example, felt inclined to break some norms of the established discourse during the interviews, when expressing specific personal

perspectives – these statements carried (I argue) a certain kind of weight – because of their rule-breaking nature and the context in which they were made.

The following table also summaries the set of connected approaches that make up the four 'new' institutionalisms.

	Rational Choice	**Historical Institutionalism**	**Sociological Institutionalism**	***Discursive Institutionalism***
Object of explanation	Rational behaviour and interests	Historical rules and regularities	Cultural norms and frames	*Ideas and discourse*
Logic of explanation	Calculation	Path-dependency	Appropriateness	*Communication*
Problems of explanation	Economic determinism	Historical determinism	Cultural determinism or relativism	*Ideational determinism or relativism*
Ability to explain change	Static : community through fixed preferences	Static: continuity through path dependence	Static: continuity through cultural norms	*Dynamic: change and continuity through ideas and discursive interaction*

Table 3. (Beland & Cox, 2010, p. 49)

4.3 DI as a conceptual framework

DI builds on other new-institutionalist frameworks of analysis by defining institutional context in several ways: as embodying the 'structures and constructs of meaning, internal to agents', 'background ideational abilities'…[which] enable them to create (and maintain) institutions while their 'foreground discursive abilities' enable them to communicate critically about them so as to change them' (Schmidt 2017, p.252); and by providing an external institutional context (either formal or informal) which constrains or enables agents according to neo-institutional theories such as rational choice, historical pathway or cultural practice (ibid). DI also separates discourse from ideas in order to examine each according to its distinctive attributes: specifically, 'persuasive power through ideas and discourse, coercive power over ideas and

discourse and structural/institutional power in ideas and discourse' (ibid). DI therefore operates at differing levels, which have been summarised neatly by Wahlstrom and Sundberg (2018) who posit that existing DI studies are characterised by:

> *an interest in the content of ideas in terms of 'what is' and 'what ought to be'…concerned with the interactive processes of ideas and the ways in which ideas are exchanged and modified through discourse, understanding institutions as both enabling and constraining and providing insights into the dynamics of institutional change* (2018, p.167).

Discursive institutionalism also makes a further important distinction between the societal/institutional 'realm' and the programmatic 'realm'. When the different levels of cognitive and normative ideas are linked to coordinative and communicative discourses, it becomes possible to see how and where significant discursive and ideational events take place, and why. It has also been noted that when meaning is embedded in a specific context, and the context is then changed or moved, there is the potential for a mismatch – sometimes termed a 'discursive gap' (Sivesind and Wahlstrom 2017, p.14) – this is explored in more detail in the following section.

The table below presents DI as a conceptual framework:

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES AND OTHER COMMUNICATIVE DEVICES **Cognitive arguments:** justify ideas in terms of expert knowledge and logics of causation **Normative arguments:** legitimate through appeal to societal values and logics of appropriateness **Ideas as:** coalition magnets, frames of reference and empty signifiers **Appeals to** emotion, values, empathy	**IDEAS AND PERSUASIVE POWER** **Power through ideas:** actors' capacity to persuade others of the cognitive validity and/or normative value of their worldview **Power over ideas:** actors' capacity to control and dominate the meaning of ideas directly through discourse **Power in ideas:** when certain discourses serve to structure thought or when particular ideas are institutionalised
TYPES OF DISCOURSE **Coordinative discourse:** used in policy construction by policymakers and networks of experts to share ideas and expertise **Communicative discourse:** used by political leaders, interest groups and the media to communicate policy ideas to the public **Academic responses**	**ACTORS AND DISCURSIVE COMMUNITIES** Ideational leaders, politicians, policymakers, Education experts, university authorities University leaders, academics, students The public The media

Table 4. Adapted from Bates et al. (2010, p. 4)

4.4 DI as a constructivist framework of analysis and theoretical underpinnings

The strength of the discursive institutionalist framework lies in its broadness and flexibility, because it brings together various approaches within the social sciences, tapping into historical, social, political and linguistic frameworks of analysis; it is also underpinned by an approach to discourse analysis that turns more towards post-structuralist philosophy, citing

authors such Bourdieu, Foucault, Wittgenstein, Habermas and also John Searle to explain ideas, content, and discourse as tools for institutional change.

Schmidt (2012) seeks to add further layers to discourse analysis as a way to represent or embody ideas (Bourdieu, 1990; Foucault, 2000) and look at the interactive processes that generate them and how people coalesce around them to form discursive communities – particularly in an institutional context; how these ideas are communicated are also important (Dryzek & Dryzek, 2002; Wodak, 2009). The institutional context is relevant as it may play a role in shaping the discursive practices, as well as the substantive content that delineate what is possible or imaginable (Bourdieu 1994); discourse can also frame the way problems are perceived and defined and contribute to creating a shared meaning as the basis for collective action (Bourdieu, 1998; D. A. Stone, 1988).

A key point to DI is that agents in institutions are both structured by them and also construct them. Searle (1995) is more explicit about this, insisting that institutions are process rather than product. Facts about institutions exist because there is collective agreement about (constructed) ideas which they stand for – organisation, finance, property, hierarchy etc., although these ideas can be changed over time according to how people refer to them in speech and practice. The constitutive rules of institutions then partly make up what DI calls agents' 'background abilities' – how the world around them functions and how it can be constructed, negotiated and changed. Schmidt (2012) draws a link between the notion of 'background ideational abilities' and Bourdieu's 'habitus' – where behaviour is at the same time constituted and constitutive – following the logic of practice or appropriateness depending on the setting and time spent in certain conditions – and how individuals come up with new ideas as well as following old ones (Bourdieu, 1990).
Along with such 'background ideational abilities', DI must also take into account 'foreground discursive abilities' which enable people to,

> 'think and argue outside the institutions in which they continue to act, to talk about such institutions in a critical way, to communicate and deliberate about them, to persuade themselves as well as others to change their minds about their institutions,

and then to take action to change them, individually or collectively (Schmidt, 2012, p. 8).

Schmidt also points out the ontological importance of this characterisation, arguing that it leads to at least two types of discourse which agents 'decide' to use: at the level of generating and communicating about institutions and as critical communication (between agents) about what happens within them. According to DI, this is a conscious decision, because 'the deliberative nature of discourse allows them to conceive (ideas) of and talk (discourse and argue) about institutions as objects at a distance, and to dissociate themselves from them even as they continue to use them' (ibid, p. 9). I found this distinction to be particularly relevant and useful when analysing participants' responses in the present study, when the data contained various examples of 'communicative action'. This is a term and theory which DI borrows from Habermas (1989), and aligns with theories of discursive or deliberative democracy which aim to purposefully break up the discursive (and practical) monopoly held by elites at strategic and national decision-making level (Dryzek & Dryzek, 2002).

By adopting a discursive institutionalist approach, this study recognises that some responses from across the academic community to the TEF (including the data collected for this thesis) at times seek to break hegemonic discourse, as noted by Gramsci (1971). DI may also at times consider such responses as stepping away from dominant ideational positions by using their 'foreground discursive abilities' to engage with and/or oppose what Bourdieu calls the 'doxa' which conditions people to see the world according to elite and dominant views; thus the clash of ideas and discourse, Schmidt notes, is as important to institutions as is the acceptance or consensus of political or pedagogical frameworks whether internally or externally imposed (Schmidt, 2012). Ontologically speaking then, in this study discursive institutionalism posits the question/answer framework: how is the TEF constructed? How is it maintained? (background ideational abilities); how will institutions change? How will it be implemented (foreground discursive abilities)?

The ontology of DI and turning towards social constructivism raise several issues which need to be resolved if the analysis of the data in this study is to be dealt with critically and meaningfully. Specifically: avoiding the trap of relativism. A constructivist approach which

assumes that most reality (apart from at a very basic level) is made by social actors might be problematic in a framework that places structure and agency on the same level; and risks turning reality itself into a social construction. DI deals with this by working through critical realism (Gofas & Hay, 2008) and materialist-constructivist (Wendt, 1999) research to couch the problem in different terms: to define what is material and real; and to define what is real even if it is not material (rather than ask whether material reality exists). Thus, institutions may be considered real - they consist of interests and cause things to happen even if they are socially constructed. The brute (material) facts of, for example, a university are vital to the way most of them operate, but also incidental – the move to online learning (who knows where learning and teaching will take place in the future?) showed that educational institutions continued to exist beyond their bricks and mortar. Searle (1995) points out that while some material facts exist, regardless of whether they are known or unknown, institutional facts, which are socially constructed are real enough as long as there is collective agreement on what constitutes them; other examples exist to emphasise this point (e.g. Ingham, 2008). As Schmidt (2012) asserts, relativism does not need to be a problem so long as we know we can be certain of some things – especially involving experience – and others that we can often doubt, especially when they involve not direct experience but our images of the world.

The following table presents DI as a constructivist-institutionalist framework of analysis:

Theoretical approach	To sensitize the analyst to key moments of change and to the conditions of existence of complex institutional change
Theoretical assumptions	Actors are both strategic and socialized— they can behave in a variety of different ways
Analytical approach	Deductive–inductive
Method	Theoretically-informed process tracing; discourse analysis
Conception of institutions	Institutions as codified systems of ideas and the practices they sustain
Institutional change	1 Focus on the socially constructed nature of political opportunity structures 2 Focus both on institutional creation and post-formative institutional change 3 Focus on the ideational preconditions of institutional change
Key themes	Discursive construction of crises; institutionalization as the normalization of policy paradigms
Weaknesses	Unclear about the origins of both interests and of systems of ideas; unclear about the relative significance of material and ideational factors

Table 5. (Hay, 2008)

4.5 Discursive Institutionalism and the TEF

Although discursive institutionalism (DI) has been principally developed as a toolkit for political science (Schmidt 2017), DI can be used in an innovative way to examine textual data related to education policy and policy enactment. There is some precedent for using DI as a tool for analysis in educational research (Wahlstrom and Sundberg 2017; Alexiadou and Lange 2013: Uljens and Ylimaki 2015). These studies have mostly utilised DI to bridge shortcomings

in curriculum theory and to analyse education and education related policy, the second of which DI is well suited for. Since the TEF has deep seated origins in government policy, DI is also a good match for investigating it. In addition, and as several of the above-mentioned articles highlight, DI also lends itself to the discursive nature of educational institutions in that it 'aims at understanding how cognitive and normative ideas are developed across societal, philosophical, policy and programme levels' (Uljens and Ylimaki, p.10). Paradoxically however, while the discursive nature of education and the critical nature of the academic environment should be well placed to critically engage with the policy that shapes the way it functions – the formulation and operation of the TEF works directly against it, as academics have expressed frustration at the constraints which the metric approach of the TEF places on them and the work they do (Gourlay and Stevenson, p.394).

What makes DI an interesting framework for education research is that it considers institutions as dynamic places of change, taking into account the substantive content of ideas along with the 'interactive processes of discourse in institutional context' (Schmidt 2010, p.2). Where the TEF and higher education is concerned, this approach can therefore help to explain actions and reactions to the framework based on agents' institutional and ideational positions as academics and/or university managers and leaders.

The concept of a 'discursive gap' (Bernstein, 2000), referred to above, acknowledges that when policy moves from its coordinative phase to the communicative phase or enactment, it is subject to interpretation according to agents' experience and perceptions of their role (Maguire et al., 2017). This becomes particularly apparent when looking at participants' responses to question six in the interviews I carried out (Has the TEF affected the way you work/teach? In what ways?) for the current study; academics' 'enactment' of the TEF is not always congruent with policy makers intentions (even if some objectives are shared) and responses also highlighted that academics' understanding of their role as educators affected the way they thought the shared objectives of the TEF could be achieved as well as how policy can be 'recontextualised', both in practice but also by changing the discourse of the TEF according to their own personal conceptual frameworks; conclusions which have been drawn by authors conducting similar studies using interviews and policy as data (Singh et al., 2013; Spratt, 2017).

Unpacking this further, it is possible to see how DI can show that discursive communities emerge (policy, leadership, academic) and how at the enactment level, staff working in higher education sometimes foreground elements from policy to emphasise change (or a need/desire to change) while, through their 'background ideational abilities', they also attempt to maintain practices or seek to (subversively?) recontextualise policy according to both individual experience and the constraints and structure of the institution.

DI can offer insights into how and why change comes about by 'focussing on agents cognitive and normative ideas about what they were doing and why at different levels of generality - policy, program, and philosophy' and in the case of the TEF can help to trace the changing interpretations of ideas as content flows from policy to enactment (Schmidt & Monnet, 2008, p. 3). In addition, it is important to recognise that DI, as a framework, relies on other approaches which consider the 'substantive and the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed and exchanged through discourse' (ibid). More specifically, Schmidt argues that by looking at discourse it is possible to see where people are able to 'think outside the institutions in which they continue to act, to critique, communicate and deliberate about such institutions and to persuade one another to take action to change them, whether by building "discursive coalitions" for reform against entrenched interests in the coordinative policy sphere or by informing, orienting, and deliberating…in the communicative…sphere' (Schmidt, 2010, p. 56). The communicative sphere, and the discursive coalition, in the case of the TEF, is made up of public and academic responses, to which this thesis, by critically engaging with TEF discourse in both the coordinative policy data and interview responses contributes.

Much of the critique of the 'marketisation and metrics' as tools for 'quality control' in higher education has been developed through policy research (Tomlinson, Enders and Naidoo 2018; Morrish 2019; Forstenzer 2018) or by critics of managerialism in higher education (Deem and Brehony 2005; Deem 1998). How DI can be applied as a theoretical tool to unpack higher education policy, and link it to the other data in this study is explored in the next section. At the time of writing, and to the best of the author's knowledge, this study is innovative in using the conceptual framework of Discursive Institutionalism to help explain academics' and higher university management actors' responses to TEF policy and its implementation.

4.6 Discursive Institutionalism and higher education policy

In the present study, policy documents relating to the TEF are drawn on (as detailed in the methodology chapter), along with interview responses, to build a critical and composite picture of: the discourse and intentions of TEF policy; how TEF policy plays out in pedagogical terms in universities; how the discursive narrative of the TEF frames both policy and its perceived impact among academics at grassroots and leadership level. DI is well suited as a tool to investigate the discourses of policy and practice because it partly rejects the notion of agents as individualist, rational actors, neutrally enacting national (or global) models and instead emphasises research into the 'actual practices through which global ideas are incorporated in local contexts, as well as on the discourses that motivate actors in the modern world to behave so uniformly in several ways' (Alasuutari, 2015, p. 162). Powell and Dimaggio (1991) have emphasised this in their work, also noting that observations about the way individuals and organisations take decisions have led researchers to question assumptions about rationality and functionalism – this seems particularly relevant to the discursive way the TEF is being implemented, and what the data collected in this study can add to that discourse. The authors state that 'administrators and politicians champion programs that are established but not implemented; managers gather information assiduously, but fail to analyse it; experts are hired not for advice but to signal legitimacy' (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 3) This is further testified by the growth of units, internal to universities and outsourced, to develop a TEF discourse at institutional level to feed back in to the administration and justification of the framework, via the OfS; but which also informs discourses in policy, leadership, academia and curriculum development.

Using DI to read deeper into the policy and interview data can begin to reveal tropes, incorporated from cultural sociology (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990) arguing for a less utilitarian consideration of individuals and which also brings to the fore, in the case of the TEF, the juxtaposition of two divergent discourses (TEF policy and academic interpretation) with common or shared themes. These shared themes, for example teaching excellence, find a place in both discursive sets and are equally recognised as important and requiring action. DI, drawing on parallel work on globalisation and institutional change (Campbell, 2004), in this case sees local actors as able to define, if not the processes, then the manner in which external

ideas are implemented, by assimilating, adapting or subverting the discourse surrounding them, in a way which fits the culture of the institution they are in. Institutional change and newness may take place because of what Schmidt terms 'background ideational abilities' as well as 'foreground discursive abilities' – making policy and practice compatible, for instance, within the micro-culture of individual university departments (Schmidt, 2008). Thus, one of the tasks of discursive institutionalism is to 'scrutinize and reconstruct the cultural logic of people's actions' (Alasuutari, 2015, p. 169).

Participants in the current study cited themes, also developed in TEF policy, e.g. student-centred teaching, which they sought to incorporate into their own discourse about higher education, and expressed particular ways in which they considered and implemented such ideas. Authors working in the field of institutionalism have shown how policy can be mediated and processed locally, with local actors, who may be initially marginalised and/or distanced from policy formulation (often the perceived case for academics affected by but not creators of the TEF), able to bring their own institutional knowledge and professional expertise to formulate internal solutions to external ideas (Maman & Rosenhek, 2007).

The 'epistemic' work of both policy makers and academics means that they base their arguments and positions not only facts and figures but also on appeals to shared values – even across divergent groups (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2014). Discursive institutionalist researchers point out that political reform of institutional practice seeks to paint the status quo as unsatisfactory and in need of the proposed measures (partly the case for the introduction of the TEF) and that from the political side this involves a normative element and assumes common values, e.g. that current teaching quality in HE is 'woeful' or that there is a direct causal link between teaching and graduate salaries.

4.7 TEF policy documents included in data

The following section outlines the policy documents included in the thesis data, including a critical summary and HE context of each document. The theoretical aspects of the following sections draw heavily on the work of Ball (2015) and Horrod (2020), Each document is presented and its discursive context examined and explained. By looking at each document

in turn, it is hoped that the complex way in which policy evolves can be placed critically alongside and later woven into the data from participant interviews.

BIS (2011). *Higher education: Students at the heart of the system*. HMSO.
BIS (2016). *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice.* HMSO.
Pearce, S. (Ed). (2019). *Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)*. OGL.
DfE. (2021*). Government response to Dame Shirley Pearce's Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)*. HMSO.
OfS (2023). *Regulatory advice 22 - Guidance on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023*. OfS 2022.60

Table 6 – TEF policy documents included in data

4.7.1 - BIS (2011). Higher education: Students at the heart of the system. HMSO.

This document positions higher education as a 'public-private' partnership (government funding – institutional autonomy) and as the title suggests, purports to set out government aims of providing better accountability for students and taxpayer and widening participation; at the same time forcing universities to become more competitive and provide higher quality while lowering costs. Thus, one of the earliest pieces of policy directly leading to the TEF demonstrates serious intention to affect the higher education sector. It might be noted that significant actors (and the participants in this study) are largely left out of this document, and are rarely mentioned (yet more rarely in a positive light) in TEF policy in general. Nevertheless, considering the changes the document proposed to HE, it seems fair to say that those working in HE would also be affected, with subsequent implications for both equity and social justice, and in the way those working in academia think subjectively about who they are and what they do (Ball, 2015).

Looking at the way in which this document sets out reform of the HE sector, it becomes evident that even the early discourses of TEF policy begin to make claims that construct, as opposed to describe or represent social reality (Ball, 2015). Taking policy as text, but not

necessarily matter of fact, and at the same time thinking about the lived experience and practices of education, it is possible to be guided by notions of how HE is 'formed' and 're-formed' (Ball et al. 2011), or more specifically how (in the case of this study) academics with an interest in teaching cope with an increase in education policy and are 'coped with' by policy texts (ibid).

When carrying out the research, I identified with what Ball calls a 'transgressive' way of working, caught between practice and discourse on the one hand, and meaning, agency and interpretation on the other. I tried to avoid lazy ontological assumptions when looking at policy and interview data, and instead tried to think about them more carefully (Ball, 2015): in this sense, the underpinnings of discursive institutionalism helped by positioning both myself and the participants both within and external to the institutions we work in, reflecting critically about what happens inside and outside universities – and the context of political, social and economic change. As explained earlier in this chapter, such an approach led to critical thought about how the TEF is constructed by policy, how it will change, and change institutions, and how it will be interpreted at different levels by different actors. The policy document from 2011 appears to be the starting point for embedding practice, and through its silences, also seems to anticipate concerns over noncompliance. As explored below, the discursive strategies of TEF policy shift over time from appropriating academic genres, for example acknowledging the complexity of teaching and learning in HE and not being over prescriptive, to then move towards language that, while still aiming to be persuasive, blurs ideological intentions through the presentation of 'theory-free' practice and language of regulation.

4.7.2 - BIS (2016). Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice. HMSO.

This is the principle policy document relating to the TEF and in which political ambitions are brought to the fore – the HE sector is couched in terms of its importance to the economy and the student experience linked closely to employment. The discourse of regulation, measurement and standards feature more prominently, and student choice is discursively connected to competition and marketisation. Ball's idea that 'we do not do policy, policy does us' (Ball, 2015) informed readings of the document and participant responses: universities as

places of disinterested inquiry, wider learning, critical thinking and crop up as statements in TEF policy, and these attributes were often cited by participants as an important goal of higher education. However, the discursive strategies differ; quite often where policy attempts to construct universities as neoliberal institutions, those interviewed emphasised that the skills picked up at university were part of a scholarly endeavor – including resisting and critiquing the status quo. TEF policy conceptualises good practice, perhaps with the aim of encouraging institutions to embrace its terms, however, more than one participant openly stated that academics were conscious of, and willing to engage linguistic (and statistical) game playing in order to tick the boxes, either for institutional or personal career gains (Horrod, 2020). It is difficult to state how far policy texts become formalised institutional guidelines (ibid), but universities leaders interviewed for this research indicated that values embedded in policy (for example on inclusion) affected the way they thought about their institution's direction and future – even when the discourse of policy was more regulatory in nature.

It became evident that the assertive discourse of TEF policy also caused what Ball calls 'discomfort' (ibid), yet I found that participants, while absorbing or agreeing with some policy tropes, developed their own assertive discourse on university teaching and learning. Alongside this, interviewee responses sometimes indicated that prescriptive regulation and conceptions of HE from government led to a sense of 'ontological insecurity' (Ball, 2015), questioning the meaning and worth of who they are and what they do. As a researcher, I was affected both by my reading of TEF policy texts and by what interviewees said – this created a level of uncertainty in the way I approached the overall discourse of the TEF; while the framework of discursive institutionalism helped me find a methodical, critical and reflective way through this, I also bore in mind another idea expressed by Ball – that policy cannot be taken at face value, and critically unpacked with a bit of distance (ibid). In this sense, I tried to be critically involved with the policy texts, and sensitive to how and why the statements in policy, and interview responses were made possible and how they were constructed. As mentioned later, policy texts and participants were at times self-contradictory.

4.7.3 - Pearce, S. (Ed). (2019). Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF). OGL.

This independent review was commissioned by the government to evaluate the success of the TEF a few years after it had been implemented. The document is both critical of and supportive of the aims of the TEF. This ties in with Ball's assertion that policy enactment is not always 'linear and rational' (Ball, 2015). While policy enactment may well be a step by step process of addressing problems, including various forms of feedback, consultation and various iterations of policies, and this holds true for the TEF, concrete adaptations to issues raised during this process are less easy to find in later TEF policy documents.

This is not to say that TEF policy has not brought about institutional transformation, but rather that actors within universities are aware of a disconnect between notions of institutional freedom expressed in policy in the way universities can meet the demands of the TEF and regulatory tools the TEF adopts, along with the coercion that greater emphasis on competition market principles imply (Ball, 2015). As noted by Ball (ibid), and as observed in the interviews for this thesis, it is here that resistance and refusal take shape in the discourse of the TEF within universities; i.e. the TEF, and what it stands for are contested – but the discursive strategies of the TEF have also forced academics, at all levels of the university hierarchy to confront their own practice. One might argue that this may bring about the kind of culture change, within HE institutions, so that the same contested aims of TEF policy become embedded in institutional practice.

The fact that participants referenced policy aims (for example on widening participation) suggests that there are discursive mechanisms at play to facilitate policy becoming 'embedded' (Horrod, 2020). The intertextuality of earlier TEF policy documents, and explicit statements from interviewees about box-ticking and linguistic gaming (for example of TEF written submissions) supports the idea that policymakers know part of their audience will be skeptical and lay the ground for easier compliance (ibid).

The Pearce review raises concerns about the processes of the TEF, and draws attention to the fact that those most affected – students, academics, institutions – do not have sufficient agency to signal how they can be part of those processes, or to influence or change them.

4.7.4 - DfE. (2021). Government response to Dame Shirley Pearce's Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF). HMSO.

This document details the government's response, through Department for Education, to the review carried out by Dame Shirley Pearce. The text acknowledges the criticisms put forward but also doubles down on previous statements, engaging to some extent in a strategy of mitigation by formally discussing counter-arguments, before rejecting them (Horrod, 2020). It is interesting as a development of the TEF because it is part of what Ball (2015) explains as a distinction between 'policy as text' and 'policy as discourse' (ibid); specifically that context and agency matter because they affect the way policy may be represented, and encompass the effects of implied knowledge and assumptions about actors positionality.

This text concentrates government aims for the TEF to address perceived issues with higher education's role in the economy, labour market and social mobility. It is possible to observe textual changes compared to earlier documents, in which content and ideas essentially remain the same, but the discourse shifts further towards a framework for practice (Horrod, 2020). Ball (2015) notes on this that such discourses (and this notion was borne out in some participant responses) might 'shape everyday existence'.

4.7.5 - OfS (2023). Regulatory advice 22 - Guidance on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023. OfS 2022.60

This fifth document marks a shift from broader policy to more specific regulation. There are discursive changes, such as the move from institutions providing 'greater accountability' to students and taxpayers, to 'protection' for the same two groups (from whom/what?). The terms of measurement are more clearly defined and forms of assessing teaching in higher education are narrowed. The document helped me to examine more closely where tensions can arise between policy guidelines and a (sometimes pre-existing) discourse of teaching and learning evidenced in participants' responses. Differentiation and tailored approaches to teaching are directly referenced in the text as compelling evidence of teaching excellence, yet participants consistently stated that larger group sizes, bigger cohorts coupled to financial instability at an institutional level and consequent cuts to staff have made such a bespoke and individual approach to teaching and learning even more difficult than in the past.

The text avoids imposing specific regulations for the way teaching and learning must be carried out and there appears to be a deliberate vagueness in the phrasing, perhaps pushing institutions towards a cultural shift. However, aside from the metric data, and institutional TEF written submissions (which may be subject to linguistic gaming) the document considers the overall TEF rating awarded as the incentive to implement changes which will bring about improvements in what it terms students' 'academic experience'. The necessity for universities to 'understand' its students is reiterated, and this concept came through in interviews with university leaders.

In sum, drawing on the work of Ball (2015) and Horrod (2020), discursive institutionalism provides the theoretical framework for this thesis, to critically examine the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse surrounding TEF policy and the impact of its implementation.

5. Methodology

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I briefly explore constructivism as a research paradigm from which I see myself operating and how this shaped my study. I also set out my research aims and questions, followed by an exploration of the research design and methods. This is followed by an exploration of the theory and practice of interviews, and how they were carried out, as well as an overview of the policy documents used in the research. The interview questions and how they were conceived is presented and I detail the ethical consideration of the study and provide profiles of each participant. Data handling and storage is also briefly covered. The final section of this chapter presents a reflection on my fieldwork experiences and my positionality as researcher.

In brief, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 academics from a range of disciplines, at different levels of hierarchy, across different universities in England. Four key policy documents along the TEF timeline were also chosen for close textual analysis. The two datasets were analysed using the theoretical framework of discursive institutionalism.

5.2 Constructivism as a research paradigm

By adopting constructivism as a research paradigm I adhere (mostly) to the idea that knowledge is subjective and contextualised, resulting from personal experience, and that both existing knowledge and language are worth exploring because they shape individual perceptions and realities. In this sense I find the notion that research findings 'are created as the investigation proceeds' in line with the idea of doctoral research contributing to knowledge generation (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p. 111) and also reflects the way this thesis evolved as the data I collected shaped the research techniques and guided the choice of analytical tools. In addition, I also acknowledge that findings are created through interactions between the researcher and the people and objects being researched (Egbert & Sanden, 2013). This involved an element, already identified in the constructivist approach, of remaining flexible towards my own status as a researcher as well as the tools and methods

adopted (Guba and Lincoln, 2000). This view distances itself from the idea that plans are established at the start and are carried out perfectly or imperfectly and allows for the researcher to interact during the process as well as changing the dynamics, bringing forth new ideas and generating options (or close down earlier plans/options).

This research paradigm also informs the way data has been collected and analysed, as well as the choice of conceptual framework (discursive institutionalism) which is closely linked. In particular, I have tried to understand the TEF through the multiple lenses of individual academics, as well as seeing how they respond to it as individuals and as a group. Cohen, Manion and Morrison have stressed the need for social science researchers to take into account how people make meaning from their social (and professional) situation by looking at the manner of their interactions, the context they live/work in, their environment and biography (Cohen et al., 2017). Thus, time was taken, and a specific question asked, about academics' professional biographies – in their own words – which later added significant depth and meaning to their contributions. I mention this because the participants' background, professional experience and context were important to understand and make sense of what they said; their words could be more meaningfully analysed alongside their personal biographies. Respondents were also asked to talk about process and types of communication within their institutions. Doing so refocused 'language, action and interaction as priority modes for the creation of knowledge' (Petit and Huault, 2008, p. 86). Participant profiles, which have been redacted to ensure anonymity, are presented below in the participant profiles section.

Taking the subjectivity of the researcher into account has also meant reflecting on my own value systems and positionality. As a member of staff at a European university, as a teacher, as a researcher, I am also part of the world I am investigating and take the view that ideas do not exist independently from the people who hold them. In addition, I am drawn to the idea that multiple realities exist – especially in an institutional context – and that absolute consensus about truths, held either collectively or objectively, are problematic (Hammersley, 2013, p.15). In this study, I have found it more useful to focus on the processes and interactions that have led to the construction of ideas and perceptions about the purpose of

and practice in higher education (ibid, p.36) – in this case regarding the TEF in institutional context – the rationale behind my choice of discursive institutionalism the tool of analysis.

In this thesis, I make the assumption, as have others, that there are legitimate, differing, (socially) constructed conceptions of reality between individuals and shared communities and have tried to work this into the research process (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 2008). Although the data collected fell necessarily within a specific scope, I have also tried to ensure that, among academic responses, and as far as possible in the policy documents chosen for scrutiny, there is a broad spectrum of views and positions – which the analysis bears out – and is also a reflection of the varying positions and contexts from which participants spoke and how the policy documents were produced. The phenomenological and hermeneutic aspects present in constructivism also guided elements of the current study, especially when coming up with research questions and how data was collected (Eichelberger, 1989; Neuman, 1997).

Several interview questions offered respondents the opportunity to reflect on their own self-consciousness, as well as their positionality regarding the TEF; document analysis also takes interpretivist values into consideration – policy was analysed not to identify truths or falsehoods but more to understand better how its production is rooted in culture, history and context, as well as the discursive practices that allow for interpretation and critique.

5.3 Research aims and questions

At the beginning of the thesis, three clear research aims were identified:

1. To examine discourses on teaching quality in the UK HE context;
2. To develop deeper understandings of academics' evaluations of the TEF and how it affects the work they do;
3. To make an innovative contribution to knowledge about teaching quality in higher education by examining the TEF through the lens of discursive institutionalism.

The research aims also generated the following more specific research questions:

Research questions

I. How is the quality of teaching defined, measured, monitored and incentivised within the TEF?
II. How has TEF policy been implemented, in UK higher education institutions?
III. What are the perceived implications, in the academic community, of its implementation?
IV. Are there any alternative frameworks that would enable improvement in the quality of teaching in higher education?

When formulating suitable research questions, several points arose. The thorny issue of causation forced a rethink of how several questions might be rephrased. Although some authors consider that causation either belongs to a more positivist tradition in research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) or that most subjects (especially in qualitative research) are too complex and fast changing for causation to be a useful research aim (Neuman, 2011), others argue that the close-up methods of qualitative analysis and the possibility to filter through cycles and processes can help to assess causality – allowing researchers to understand not just what happened but why and how (Miles et al., 2013). The research questions in this study were developed in order to look directly at macro and micro process in discourse that underlie events and practices over time.

5.4 Research Design

The research design was a comprehensive process, in that I followed the example of previous authors who have pointed out that planning a research project needs to take into account all aspects of theory and execution: from the initial gap in research, choosing a theoretical framework, data collection methods and analysis to how the results will be published (Blaikie, 2009; Miller & Salkind, 2002). In addition, the research design evolved through decisions taken throughout the process, recognising the need to place the researcher (and the research) in the empirical world; a specific aim when designing the research was to ensure that there was a clear link between the data collected and the research questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Cresswell (2003) has noted the pluralistic and complex nature of qualitative research and the need for researchers to maintain a critical and open attitude. Indeed, the original design for this study was to use a case study approach (the TEF being the case), and to collect data not only from academics and policy documents but also from university websites and if possible, from policy makers. However, as the data collection began, it became apparent that: direct participation from the writers of policy would be hard to come by due to a reluctance on their part to be interviewed and/or their invisibility (it is not always clear who the leading authors of government policy documents are), making it sometimes difficult to identify possible participants. Website data tended to take the form of very targeted and relatively short texts, often produced by specific units within universities and quite removed from the sometimes contrasting voices of academics and policy texts that I was interested in exploring and analysing. In terms of textual data, I decided to only collect and analyse the main policy documents, published by the UK government, as these were the ones which were most often cited in existing academic papers/responses to the TEF and so more likely to be familiar to participants. I also anticipated (and analysis holds this out) that the two main sources of data would provide extremely rich and probably conflicting points of view, discursively explored and expressed, on common topics – borrowing again from a methodology often employed in case study research; Greene, for example, promotes a mixed method 'way of thinking' and the idea of triangulating and corroborating results from one form of data with another and what she calls the 'generative' potential of difference when data sets from the same sample diverge (Greene, 2007, p.xii).

Nevertheless, exploring case study methodologies did help to refine the research design. Merriam (1998) emphasises the importance of boundaries, both to define and limit the context and content of what is to be included in a piece of research and rationalise what will *not* be included. I sought to make the study more ecological and efficient by eliminating elements that proved to be either too long winded or too onerous in terms of data collection; case study methods also advocated bounding research in terms of data, time, theme and place and while I cannot claim to have achieved the 'thoroughness' of a good case study approach, limiting data collection to a focused and manageable sample of actors working in research, teaching and management in HE enabled me to explore it in a much deeper and qualitative way. This thesis then, took inspiration from case study research but was equally shaped by the

diversity of voices that emerged from the data and the discursive framework through which they were interpreted and analysed, following Gilham's (2000) suggestion that theoretical notions will make sense (and be adopted) once the data and context are clear.

5.5 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary way to collect data as they allowed participants to talk in depth about the TEF and the issues connected to it, more or less on their own terms, and in their own words (Check & Schutt, 2012). These same authors note that interviewing allows researchers to engage more actively with subjects, ask tailored follow up questions, and allow the interview to take a conversational turn, while remaining committed to consistency and thoroughness in the way data is collected (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out. They all lasted approximately 30 minutes and all interview questions were asked and answered in every interview (as well as follow up questions and prompts). As detailed below, the interviewees represented a diverse mix of academics (lecturers, vice chancellors, readers, professors) from a range of different universities in England. Using semi-structured interviews also allowed for a level of flexibility in which unforeseen and emergent themes could be explored (Kallio et al., 2016; Headland, Pike and Harris, 1990).

5.5.1 Methodological strengths

An observation by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) sums up quite succinctly the situational and discursive nature of interviews:

> 'Interview knowledge is produced in a specific interpersonal situation, and the situational and interactional factors influencing the knowledge produced need to be taken into account, such as is done today in discursive and conversation analyses of interviews. Rather than seeking universal knowledge, the emphasis is on situated knowledge. What matters is not arriving at context-independent general knowledge, but producing well-described situated knowledge from the interviews' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018).

I found that keeping these notions in mind both when conducting the interviews and when analysing data raised the quality of knowledge that was produced.

Using interviews as data collection method and as a conversational means of knowledge production can also foreground commonalities and shared perspectives between participants (Kircher and Zipp, 2022). The flexibility and spontaneity of interviews also means that existing knowledge can be confirmed, challenged or reinterpreted; and new knowledge (and new aspects of previous knowledge) can be brought out.

Galletta (2013) notes that the reciprocity in interviews can be viewed as a strength because the research can spontaneously ask follow up questions, or seek clarification on complex topics. In addition, having a previously studied and formulated set of question means that the same data is collected from each participant, allowing for variation in response but maintaining consistency in investigation (Holloway and Galvin, 2023).

Despite working with a relatively small sample size, the depth of knowledge and the openness of contributions helped make the finding credible, as did the breadth of experience and positionality the interviewees held. The participants were able to draw on extensive lived experience working in higher education which involved teaching, researching and in many cases the application of policy in institutional context and in the coordinative discourses of policy making – all of which came through in their use of language. The participants' institutional positions also lent their contributions weight: as senior management staff at rectorate level, as grassroots lecturers, as curriculum developers, researchers and also through involvement with policymaking institutions outside of higher education. In addition, common positions and the adoption of specific discourses revealed that there was agreement among much of the sample. A number of questions put to interviewees elicited comparable responses; in a similar vein, the uptake of policy rhetoric, as well as discursive strategies to engage with and counter policy ideas bore out the notion of discursive communities – communicating about common issues in shared or similar ways.

5.5.2 Methodological weaknesses

One limitation of interviews is that they take place at a certain time, in a certain place and in a certain manner (Heller et al., 2024). At the time the interviews took place, online interviewing and online interaction were commonplace, especially in a higher education context, as it came after the COVID-19 period in which many working in academia became familiar with MS TEAMS (and other online video-conferencing applications), for teaching, meetings and with video-conferencing more generally for personal and professional communication. The manner and circumstances of interaction in interviews can thus be affected by this (Kastareas, 2022). However, in this research, participants were given free reign not only to reflect on and adapt their answers, but also to reflect on and reformulate the language they used – some doing so out loud. As an interviewer, I tried to take time and structured the sets of questions so that a) it was possible to build a good rapport with the participant and, b) prior knowledge about each other and the topics being discussed did not overly determine the form of the interactions.

Regarding sample size, although participants came from a wide range within university hierarchies, a greater number of interviews, with more participants would have lent the conclusions of this thesis more weight. The smaller sample size makes it more difficult come to broader conclusions. It also has to be acknowledged that a bigger sample size may have led to further themes emerging from the data, other than those discussed in this thesis. Nevertheless, Henninck and Kaiser (2022) for example, concluded that saturation can be achieved with smaller samples, when the population is relatively homogenous and research objectives are clearly defined. This is broadly the case in this study as all interviewees came from comparable career backgrounds (even if they occupied very different roles), and the objectives of the study were firmly established at the beginning of the research process.

In addition, I was a solo, part-time researcher and this placed certain limitations on time and scope of what was achievable in terms of data collection. I deliberately sought out a sample that could provide nuanced, critical and well informed responses to my questions which considering the relatively small numbers involved directly with the TEF, already provided quite a limited pool to draw on (a fair number of a participants I approached declined citing lack of

familiarity with or knowledge of the TEF). I was reliant on university staff with significant experience giving up their time, although there was a good distribution among institutional ranks, university types and gender. There are several indications that there was a good degree of saturation in the sample – many commonalities emerged and a greatly expanded sample size might have led to diminishing returns for the effort required from a research working alone.

5.5.3 Suitability

The semi-structured interview lends itself well to the aims of this research because of its ability to accommodate various research goals and involve the participants more in the study (Galletta, 2013, p.50). Another advantage is that interviews permit the elicitation of knowledge that is grounded both in participants' experience as well as engage with existing constructs (ibid). Schwoerer (2025) has pointed out that interviews provide both the researcher and interviewee with the reflexive possibility to break away from commonly held beliefs and/or normative thought in literature and the context of enquiry. The same author emphasises that research participants need to be able to theorise their own experiences and create knowledge from it; the discursive (and at times conversational) and anonymous nature of the interviews carried out for this thesis helped to achieve this.

My aim of conducting the interviews as a space for both interviewee and interviewer to make meaning (Denzin, 2001) aligns with the constructivist paradigm that underpins this research (Roulston, 2010). Furthermore, I consider that the experiential and theoretical are interconnected and not necessarily completely distinct – theories of knowledge may transpire through a narrative (Ahmed, 2017) – a view supported by Schwoerer (2025) in her research findings.

5.6 Sampling

The initial target for participants was academics in university education departments as I considered that they would be more engaged with the issue of teaching and learning and because they would be closer to my own career and research backgrounds (this was an erroneous belief - interest in teaching and learning proved to be something which was not

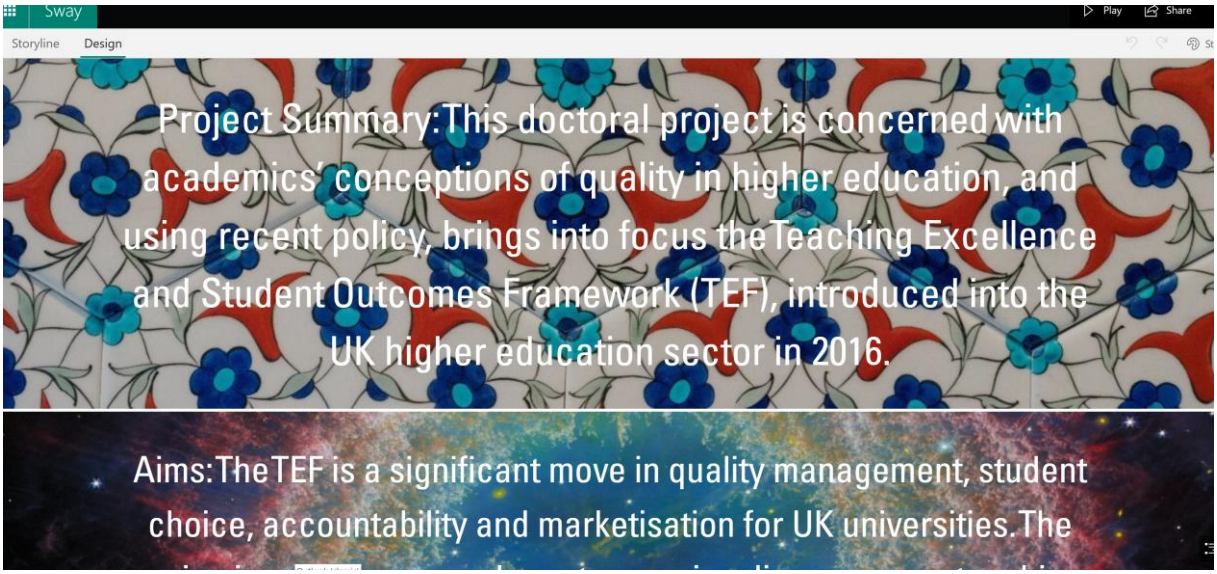
defined by the genre of department an academic worked in). Moreover, it was very difficult to get academics to commit to taking part in a relatively long (30mins) interview on a topic they were not always familiar with (again revealing in itself – some prospective respondents replied that although they were willing to take part, they knew very little about the TEF). Thus, I turned to a more purposive strategy for selecting potential participants who had a proven interest and knowledge of the subject, but who would still represent a range of perspectives and insights (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

To this end, I contacted academics who had either published on the TEF or had worked as panel leaders or consultants for the OfS/BIS on TEF policy and working documents and it was this group that responded so enthusiastically to my invitation to participate in semi-structured interviews about the TEF. Participants came from a wide variety of university departments and from universities with differing TEF ratings. Thus, interviewees were academics in research, teaching and management who had at some point in their careers been directly or indirectly involved with the TEF, within or external to their home institution (and sometimes both).

Simons (2009, p.5) states the need to move beyond a positivist, experimental tradition in educational research. She argues that engagement in research should also 'contribute to participants' self…and political knowledge' and that dissemination to wider groups can help to inform 'decision making, policy and practice', an idea that rings loudly in the context of the TEF. In practice, participants were keen to share their experiences and knowledge on a subject that affected the work they do and which many felt needed reform. The interview responses confirmed Simon's position – many interviewees gave thoughtful, reflective answers and were clearly contemplating the topics being discussed in a meaningful way.

Several other factors appear to have played a role in successfully recruiting participants : I created a webpage using MS SWAY (screenshot below) which briefly, and visually, summarised my research project, aims, methodology, conceptual framework, as well as a very short blurb about myself and my background; it also seems that the timing was important – I contacted the vast majority of potential participants just before the Christmas break – almost all

committed to an interview in January or early February – typically a quieter time in the academic year.



5.7 Interviews and policy documents: analytic process, thematization synthesis and presentation

The idea of a 'policy trajectory' (Ball, 1993, p.16) informed the process of how data was organised, analysed and discussed, although it must be noted that there is greater focus in this thesis on the responses from the recipients of policy and the intentions/ideas embedded within, than on the discursive means and contexts of policy production (I did not interview policymakers). Nevertheless, I do pick up on Ball's idea of policy as text, encoded and decoded in complex ways 'via actors' interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context' (ibid, p. 11); and policy serving as discourse in which social agency and intentionality abound through actors 'making meaning, being influential, contesting, constructing responses, dealing with contradictions, (and) attempting representations of policy' (ibid, p. 14).

By creating a table it was possible to organise research themes (role of HE, teaching excellence, TEF objectives and methods, wider context, TEF impact) into a logical layout and begin extracting information from policy documents and interviews so they could be grouped and analysed thematically. The themes were taken from the research and interview questions

and also from common topics that came up during the interviews and/or appeared in the policy documents. The organisation of the table broadly followed examples from existing qualitative techniques for organising data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, pp. 33-44; Richards, 2005, pp. 96-97) separating data into categories: about the speaker/text production; topic (i.e. content); and analytical coding. This separation was vital in order to apply the discursive analytical tools during deeper analysis (described below).

Thus, there were three steps: Firstly, I began with a close rereading of the policy documents, inserting relevant thematic quotes and information into the table. Secondly, I worked through the interviews (as detailed below), copying quotes into the table so that the data matched research themes and lined up with policy data. The third step was to add initial analytical comments according to the theoretical framework which brought the policy and interview data together. These comments might be identified as 'memos' but were more than that – they were intended as the foundation of conceptual content rather than just describing the data (Charmaz, 2006, pp.72-96). It should be noted that data from policy and interviews sometimes fitted into more than one theme or category. In addition, some of the analytical steps overlapped – as explained in more detail below. Although the table ended up quite large, it provided a good overview and base from which to explore the data in an integrated and nuanced way – following a rough 'timeline' from policy, through academic reaction, to (my) theoretical interpretation.

The first step when processing the interview data was to simultaneously replay the videos while reading through the MS TEAMS generated transcript. This helped to ensure that the interview data was as reliable as possible and served numerous functions: correcting errors in transcription; identifying and coding topic subsets according to interview questions and responses given; initial identification of significant quotes for answering the research questions. Rewatching and rereading the interviews also allowed me to: identify non-verbal and non-literal elements in the data and reflect on how the interviews went. However, Brinkman and Kvale (2018) point out that a completely valid transcription of an interview is impossible because transcribing involves 'translating from an oral language, with its own set of rules, to a written language with another set of rules' (ibid) and so transcriptions are somewhat decontextualised and an interpretive construction serving a particular purpose.

This also relates to the selection of which material was to be added to the final dataset, and what omitted - for which I drew on the same authors' suggestion that the selection of features in a conversation should match the intended use. The elaboration of the data involved cycling between policy documents and interview transcriptions and it was this constructed interplay between policy text and the discursive reflections on its meaning and wider/connected topics in HE that helped inform decisions about which data was included.

Once the table had been completed, I began to synthesise the policy and interview data and the analytical comments into prose in the thesis. It was at this stage that further reflection and application of the theoretical framework took place, including a recursive process in which I returned to the policy and interview data to see if depth could be added from further policy and interview content and context. I also drew on Miles and Huberman's 'tactics' for generating meaning from data, as follows: noting patterns and themes; seeing plausibility; clustering; making/noticing metaphors; contrasting and comparing; moving from the particular to the general; building logical chains of evidence; making conceptual/theoretical coherence (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 245-262).

I was also guided by Srivastava and Hopwood's (2009) approach to data analysis and bore in mind the questions they keep in mind when conducting empirical research: what is the data telling me? (subjective), what do I want to know (research aims), and how are these linked? At the same time, relistening/rewatching/rereading both interviews and policy documents allowed me to immerse myself somewhat in the data, and to synthesise (through discursive analysis) a way to locate it within current literature (Wellington, 2000). Thus, thinking about how to present the findings of the study led me back to the table (and comments) I used to gather together both sets of data and the interpretive analysis. Cycling between presentation, redaction of data, and attempting to analyse and draw conclusions formed the principal stages of data analysis and happened at the same time, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994).

5.8 Policy documents

Four policy documents were chosen which were considered to be key documents in the development and rollout of the TEF. The first, published in 2011, 'Students at the Heart of the

System' laid the groundwork for the main policy document, introduced in 2016, 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice', which effectively launched the new framework and set in motion the shifts that this entailed. Both of these documents were produced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). The third document is a government commissioned, independent review of the TEF, published in 2019 and led by Dame Shirley Pearce, which was carried out after the TEF had been up and running for a few years and thus was able to assess not only the feasibility of the new programme but also its impact and function to that date. This report, as expected, also made a number of recommendations, to which the government responded in the form of the fourth policy document chosen for analysis, published in 2021, 'Government response to Dame Shirley Pearce's Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)', this time produced by the Department of Education. In addition, a fifth document produced more recently by the Office for Students – 'Regulatory advice 22 Guidance on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)' (OfS, 2023) - was included in the dataset to add greater depth to the policy narrative.

The policy documents were chosen because they set out, and set up, a clear set of guidelines for future evaluation of teaching quality in UK higher education but also contain a political vision, linked to wider social and economic themes and trends. The independent review was chosen because it provides an assessment of how the TEF was perceived to be functioning several years after being implemented. The four policy documents are critically presented in chapter four.

5.9 Interviewing in practice

Participants were already aware of the interview questions as they were sent as part of the email inviting them to take part in the study – this allowed interviewees not only to make a well-informed decision about whether to take part or not but also to begin thinking about the questions, themes and research topic in advance of discussing them in the interview (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). I found this to be useful in several ways: participants were able to give well thought-out responses and make connections between wider themes and topics that the questions alluded to, without taking several attempts or giving long-winded answers – an

ecological advantage – although participants were under no time pressure and given free rein to reflect and elaborate in their answers (Gorden, 1998); in addition, some participants took the initiative to assume control of the interview schedule and rhythm, at times guiding *me* through the questions, while also providing critical feedback on the questions themselves. This helped, to some extent, to overcome the social context of the interviews and reduce the perceived imbalance of researcher extracting information from the interviewee (Wengraf, 2001).

The first few minutes of each session dealt with clearly setting out the purpose and goals of the interview, including: housekeeping - how long it would last, freedom to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time, reassurances about anonymity; the participants often used this warmup period to question me about my background and research project, which I felt helped not only to build rapport but also place the interaction on an even footing (Kvale, 1996). Reflecting on the dynamics of the interviews, it was possible to draw on some perspectives from feminist interviewing principles. Being open and self-disclosing about my own position, professional experience and research objectives may have helped to build trust at the start of the process and paved the way for the interview to become a way to 'co-create' data though dialogue and discourse (Haig, 1999). Avoiding a 'hierarchical pitfall' (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992), appeared to be less of an issue as all of the interviewees were senior to me both in years, experience, qualification and academic standing, however, a feminist perspective redefines the interview as a place to transform interviewers and respondents into coequals, conversing about a common theme which often involves biographically relevant issues (Denzin (ed) & Lincoln, 2005). It was this biographical aspect to participants' answers and the importance of personal experience that added a somewhat unexpected and critical dimension to their knowledge and practice of the TEF; for example, many participants cited formative and structural shifts in their careers or personal lives when commenting on the broader issues connected to the implementation of the TEF.

Slightly overestimating the time needed for each interview (approx. 30 minutes) meant that they could proceed at a fairly relaxed pace, with no need to rush or skip questions, or cut any responses short – participants had ample time to give full answers and develop complex responses and arguments i.e. there was time and space for dialogue. Rapport between myself

and the participant was established during the warm up section of the interview in which both the interviewee and myself shared information on professional background, and established common ground, which mostly meant having worked and taught in UK higher education.

The general rapport in the interviews was very good and I put this down to a few key factors: being an attentive and active listener; the participants' engagement with the themes and topics of the TEF; and the role that humour and cynicism played in the interviews (mentioned elsewhere in this thesis).

As the investigator, I did not offer any opinions during the interviews, but did ask follow up questions when participants offered theirs, to encourage them to elaborate on their responses. On one or two occasions, questions about the efficacy of the TEF as a tool for measuring and improving teaching quality appeared to be interpreted as provocative or critical in their tone. This happened specifically with participants in higher level management positions who had been involved more closely with TEF policy development or consultation and who perhaps either felt the need to defend something they had personally been involved with, or, as explored more deeply later in this thesis, were accustomed to answering questions of this nature in the language of communicative discourse at an institutional level. On these occasions, I reiterated that the questions were not meant to be partisan or subjective, but open to interpretation. The same interviewees were practiced in communicating about the TEF to different audiences, from experience in their roles in HE management and were adept at giving responses that were, if not evasive, then carefully crafted to fit more closely the narrative of TEF policy, as opposed to blunt criticism that other interviewees put forward.

The participants occupying roles in university rectorates were also well versed in dealing with questions that they felt challenged the TEF (such as the one mentioned above); they revealed that were able to draw on a number of discursive or rhetorical tools, which I felt impacted the dynamic of the interview, such as repeating the question back to me or requesting clarification of the underlying meaning of questions, which reversed somewhat the roles or interviewer/interviewee. However, these instances were very few and the general dynamic of the interviews was extremely positive.

As noted above, many of the interviewees, regardless of their position in academia, often drew on humour and cynicism to get their point across, perhaps as a way to vent their frustrations or emphasise a critical response. As explored later in this thesis, forms of cynicism emerged as a notable aspect of both policy and policy response among participants.

5.10 Interview questions

All participants were asked the same ten open ended questions, for consistency, however the responses to these fixed questions often prompted further exploratory questions and dialogue that lead to other, connected topics being spoken about (Check & Schutt, 2012). Where necessary, sub-questions were asked, however the interviewees often anticipated these in their answers to the main questions. The questions began with quite broad themes and became more focused on the TEF as the interview progressed; however, some of the interviews took on a more fluid nature and participants sometimes returned to earlier themes if they found a connection within the issue being discussed.

1. *Please say a little about yourself and your career to date.*

This first 'grand tour' question situated the interview according to the background and experience of the interviewee; the responses also added context to later analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The opening question about the interviewee's professional background also placed the resulting narrative in context and permitted the participant to relate more targeted questions to their own experience and interests (Wolcott, 2005).

2. *In your view, what is the role of higher education in today's society?*
    - *Should the performance of this role be evaluated? If so, then how? For what purpose?*

    - *What are your views about the balance between teaching and research*

This second question invited participants to offer a broad perspective on higher education, with the TEF already established as an important element of the discussion. It was a question (along with the two follow up prompts) that elicited perhaps the most forthright responses and ultimately led to extraordinarily rich data. In addition, by allowing interviewees to engage

freely with the topic, it served to steer the discussion towards the thematic focus of later questions (Gudkova, 2018) and equally importantly helped to foster cooperation and build rapport (Hansen, 2007). Most of the interviewees spoke passionately about HE and this set the tone for open and frank discussions as the interviews wore on.

3. *What does 'teaching excellence' mean to you?*
    - *Can you give an example of 'teaching excellence in action', i.e. as it happens in academic practice?*

This third question (and sub question) aimed to drill down into conceptions of teaching quality as they are played out in institutional practice. It also aimed to draw out comparisons and contrasts with conceptions of teaching quality in TEF policy. The questions also began to move the interview towards what Galletta and Cross (2013, p. 53) call the 'middle segment', in which more specific questions were posed and participants were asked to explore more complex topics which related directly to my research questions and in which they could loop back to their experiences as they related to the same topic.

4. *In your view, should 'teaching excellence' be evaluated/measured? How?*
    - *Do you feel that teaching excellence can be measured? If so, how?*

Question four was asked for the participants to offer an opinion, and how they valued the topic. Although I wished to avoid a mechanistic approach to the interviews, it seemed a logical step that an opinion/value question followed on from Q3 (about experience) because it allowed interviewees to make a connection between their lived experiences and conceptions of 'teaching excellence', and the challenges raised by the need to evaluate rather than just describe it.

5. What is your department's approach to 'teaching excellence'?
    - Is this aligned to institutional approach? What processes have been put in place to implement the TEF?
    - And what alternative measures / processes could drive improvement to teaching? And to student learning?

Question five focused on the participants' knowledge of TEF practice within their institution. It aimed to uncover social and/or organisational structures and to identify where/if culture and process interact to bring about change or improvement (Bronnimann, 2022). It also anticipated Q8 by indirectly inviting participants to reflect on their own agency, autonomy, practice and external/new processes.

6. Has the TEF affected the way you work/teach? In what ways?
    - Does the TEF differ from your existing or previous methods for evaluating teaching quality? In what ways?

Question six (and follow up question) was formulated to allow the interviewees to speak about their practice, while keeping the question relatively neutral, i.e. the participant could feel free to answer the questions positively or negatively (or otherwise), rather than directing the interview in a particular direction, or guiding the response. It was hoped that this question would elicit an answer that related to the topic via a specific experience or event (Seidman, 2013).

7. Would you consider the TEF to be an effective tool for improving/measuring teaching excellence?
    - Why? / Why not? If not, how do you think teaching quality could be improved in higher education?

This (Q7) was the key question which the interview was narrowing towards, and was formulated to obtain both a clear statement from participants, and, with the sub questions, give them an opportunity to explain in depth their evaluation of the TEF as a tool measuring and improving the quality of teaching.

8. Do you feel it is within your means to change/improve teaching quality at your institution? To what extent?

This question essentially refers to agency. The responses to this question allowed me to make links later through my theoretical framework (discursive institutionalism), and by doing so to directly address nuanced issues related to discourse, as well as answer research question III, and research aim 3 in detail (Roberts, 2020). In addition, this question prompted responses which generated unexpected knowledge about how participants view themselves within their institution.

9. How would you frame the TEF within wider changes and reforms in UK higher education?

This question served to add further depth to question 1, placing the TEF and the participant roles within the broader scheme of changes in HE. It also elicited responses which added political and cultural context to the impact the TEF has had on academics and the work they do.

10. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

The last question was asked to make sure that participants had the chance to add details or thoughts that were not directly covered by the other interview questions. Most participants actually used this question to turn the interview around and ask me some questions about my research, experiences as a post graduate researcher, future plans. It offered the chance to wrap up the discussion in a balanced and neutral way. All of the participants offered comments that were encouraging and supportive of the research process and many requested a summary of the findings once available.

5.11 Ethics and participant profiles

One of the first stages of data processing was to create brief profiles of the interviewees (presented below) including non-identifying information about: their institution, position, short biography, which type of university department they worked in. It was at this stage that pseudonyms were allocated (e.g. prof 1, lecturer 2) and every precaution was taken to ensure that the participants and their universities remained anonymous. Likewise, because I had

guaranteed all participants their anonymity, and several asked for confirmation of this during the interviews, any phrase or reference during the interview that might identify either the participant of their institution is not presented in the thesis. Gender distribution among the sample was very even, eight of the participants were female and seven were male.

Prior to contacting participants and conducting interviews, I applied and obtained ethical permission from my home institution (see appendix). As part of this process, I created participant information and consent forms (see appendix), which were sent by email to participants and returned to me duly signed either before the interview took place or as a preliminary procedure at the beginning of the interviews themselves. Several participants raised the issue of anonymity, as mentioned above, and all measures have been taken (as prescribed by the ethics committee at my home institution) to protect participant anonymity, right to withdraw and general participant safety and wellness.

As mentioned above, information about participants' career paths, institutional positions and other non-identifying details were collected which helped both to build a composite picture of who they were as academics, how they thought about themselves and to situate and contextualise the responses they gave. In addition, a short quote from their interviews regarding their reflections on their experiences in higher education were also selected from the data to further put their commentaries into context in the data chapter.

5.12 Data handling and storage

In line with the specifications of the ethics approval document (see appendix), all data was stored according to the current UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (see appendix). Password protected, institution linked cloud storage was used for all data management,. Participants were offered the opportunity to review and edit any interview data before processing. Several participants asked if they could have a summary of the research results, once the study is completed – a request that I will be happy to fulfil.

All interviews took place on MS TEAMS, with both the researcher's and participants cameras on. Video and audio from the interview were recorded and the transcription tool was used to record the entire interview text. Video and audio were used during the data clean up, organisation and analysis to correct mistakes in transcription.The reliability of the video recording (which captured both the interviewee and the researcher) and the delegation of transcription (at least in rough form) to an automatic transcription tool within MS TEAMS meant that a very complete record of each interview was possible. In addition, it freed me from having to take notes or for example fiddle with recording equipment and so I was able to concentrate fully on respondents' answers and think ahead for follow up questions and prompts, if needed.

5.14 Chapter summary

This chapter aimed to provide a detailed explanation of my methodology and research paradigm. The research aims and questions were presented, along with the research design. An in-depth justification of the principal data collection methods was given, as well as a description and explanation of sampling techniques. The chapter also set out why I chose interviews and provided an overview of the literature which informed the way I carried them out. Information about ethics, data handing was presented and participant profiles, respecting anonymity were provided because of the importance they played in contextualing the interview data.

6. Data – exposition and analysis

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the full data collected during the research: data from policy texts and interview transcripts was organized thematically and is presented and analysed together. The key themes dealt with are: the role of higher education in the UK; teaching excellence; TEF objectives and methods; the wider context of the TEF and HE; TEF impact. Findings from interviews are interwoven with analysis from policy documents because most issues needed to be juxtaposed next to each other, and to avoid significant repetition if two separate data chapters had been written. In each section, policy is presented first, with interview data which directly relates to it being brought in, followed by a synthesis of thematic and discursive elements explored through the conceptual framework of DI. The themes emerged throughout the entire research process – from the formulation of research aims, devising interview questions, an original close reading of policy texts as well as during the analytical process when policy and interview data was considered together for comparison, contrast – thus the thematization of the data was a recursive process. The chapter closes with a broad summary of the research findings and concluding remarks.

6.2 Role of HE

The government white paper from 2011, 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System, published by the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills (BIS), characterises higher education as an autonomous sector that is funded by the public,

> 'Higher education is a successful public-private partnership: Government funding and institutional autonomy' (BIS, 2011),

however, the term 'public-private partnership' is better known for entering public discourse during the neoliberal reforms both before and during the Blair governments from 1997 onwards, with the aim of expanding the role of the private (profit driven) sector into public services. The use of this term here, rather than being seen as a form of 'privatisation by stealth'

(Shaw, 2003), indicates the policy maker's wish to tap into existing terminology to anticipate concerns (detailed below) about changes to regulation in the HE sector.

Where the role of HE in society is concerned, this early policy document sets out the highlights of UK HE thus:

> 'Higher education has a fundamental value in itself and our universities are, in many ways, world-class: in research; in attracting international students; and in contributing to the economy.' (ibid, p.4)

The initial listing of these positives is then followed by challenges to the sector, presenting the document as balanced in its perspective/judgement. The text then moves on to state where HE is failing:

> But the challenge they face is putting the undergraduate experience at the heart of the system.' (ibid).

Along with excelling in research, contributing to the economy and focusing on the student 'experience' (this notion is called into question both by participants in this study and independent review), universities must also:

> 'take more responsibility for increasing social mobility' (ibid).

Thus, having positioned the HE sector as 'private' and 'autonomous', the impetus for social change is transferred to universities (funded by the students that will benefit from it).
Similar patterns are used in the subsequent policy document from 2016, again using antanagoge (strategic positioning of praise and criticism). The introduction to 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice', written by Jo Johnson, also published by the BIS, praises the HE sector (with an appeal to national pride) noting its importance for society, before identifying where HE falls short:

> ‘Our universities have a paramount place in an economy driven by knowledge and ideas. They generate the know-how and skills that fuel our growth and provide the basis for our nation’s intellectual and cultural success. Higher education continues to be a sound financial and personal investment with a wide range of societal benefits. But there is more to be done for our university system to fulfil its potential as an engine of social mobility, a driver of economic growth and cornerstone of our cultural landscape’. (BIS, 2016)

Broader, societal ‘goods’ that higher education bring are used to introduce the policy agenda, the main elements of which are set out very clearly. However, in the next quote, a direct link is made between the policy objectives of gearing HE more towards creating graduates for employment and the teaching they receive:

> ‘Universities provide an environment for deeper and wider learning, allowing for the development of analytical and creative thinking, objective inquiry and primary research. But evidence suggests that for most students, the most important outcome of higher education is finding employment. The teaching students receive can transform their life chances, as demonstrated by the strong graduate premium, and low graduate unemployment rates.’ (ibid, p. 11).

However, linking life chances directly to teaching is a false cause. As explored below, participants picked up on the themes mentioned in this quote but did not prioritise employment or earnings in their responses.

The following quote from the main TEF policy document integrates its main objectives by linking market concepts such as choice, competition, regulation and value for money to widening participation and student experience:

> ‘The OfS will be explicitly pro-competition and pro-student choice, and will make sure that a high quality higher education experience is available for students from all backgrounds. For the first time, we will put the interests of the student at the heart of

> our regulatory landscape. By enabling better student outcomes, we will also protect the interests of taxpayers and the economy.' (ibid, p. 15)

The notion of 'protection' is introduced, which is taken up in subsequent policy texts. This is a term which only appeared in policy texts. One might ask what interests of the taxpayer and the economy are being protected? (e.g. waste or inefficiency of public resources?) And from what/whom (e.g. ineffective universities and/or lecturers?) does danger arise?

The 'Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework' (the Pearce Review), led by Dame Shirley Pearce, in August 2019, rearticulates the positive societal impact of higher education but also introduces a more localised and regional aspect:

> 'Our graduates have a profound impact on the economic, cultural and social wellbeing of communities across the world in which they live and work' (DfE, 2019, p. 4)

And,

> 'Many universities also make a considerable civic contribution. They are torch carriers for their community's economic, cultural, social and environmental development, often in partnership with their local authorities and local businesses.' (Ibid, p. 75).

Citing a Civic University Commission report, the review also links universities to other key local institutions which are directed or governed at the national level – i.e. local authorities and the national health service:

> 'it is clear that universities are alongside the NHS and local authorities – one of the key institutions in and for local society, and especially in many economically vulnerable places and this role will become more important.' (Ibid).

This placing of universities as central to regional development and prosperity is emphasised by quoting figures relating to economics and employment:

> 'This is difficult to quantify but estimates put the value of pro-bono work by HEIs through public initiatives, knowledge exchange and participation in science and

cultural events, charitable endeavours and social enterprise at over £3 billion in 2017' (Ibid).

The importance of universities to the local communities is also cited by several participants, but in different contexts. As highlighted below, Prof 3 notes that HE is:

'there to relate to communities and local areas'.

However, Prof 5 stresses that universities are being expected to fill other roles at a regional level, which puts the policy statement of universities working 'alongside' other local services into a different perspective:

'I also think now there's more responsibility for higher education to be mopping up some of the work that should have been done by well-funded social services. So, things like supporting students with mental health difficulties, you know, it is not the role of higher education to do that… but it has become it because there are no other services, so they seem to be seen as all things to all people and it's just an impossible situation'.

Thus, experience on the ground suggests that the claim made in the earliest policy document (BIS 2011) that the TEF is part of a 'one nation' conservative plan to reform higher education, appears to bear out in practice.

A comparison of these statements on the role of HE, from policy and from experienced academics, demonstrates to some extent the socially constructed nature of political opportunity. On the one hand – universities make a 'civic' contribution and positively impact 'social wellbeing', - a good example of policy makers following a logic of communication in which universities are framed within politically defined objectives and national interests, whereas frontline staff in higher education, as institutional actors, rather than turn to economic data, draw on pragmatic arguments and real world examples to make their point. Nevertheless, the government's response to the Pearce Report, in terms of the wider role of HE was succinctly put, and as the policy evolved, the task of HE to provide employable graduates and fit into a neoliberal economic model became more focused:

> ‘The Government is firmly committed to ensuring that our higher education sector is better aligned to the needs of the labour market and economy; delivering high quality education that sets students on the right path towards excellent outcomes, levels up regionally and locally; and guarantees fairness and accessibility for all students’ (DfE, 2021, p. 6).

Picking up on themes in the Pearce report, the regional/local aspect is mentioned more, along with widening participation. This may be because the discourse in the independent review, while being critical of the methodology of the TEF (explored in the following thematic section and widely criticized by academics across university hierarchies) helped policy makers to develop policy that is convincing to the public because it is rationally justifiable, as well as being somewhat persuasive in normative terms. Incorporating and referencing language from the independent policy review also confers greater legitimacy on the policy discourse. Since the UK is a country with primarily majoritarian representative institutions, policy which is drawn up without consultation from one or more deeply implicated stakeholders (teaching and researching academics in this case) needs to be elaborate enough to legitimise the changes it envisages, unless it is to face protest from interested groups - which it has in the form of a scathing response in academic literature – (e.g. Cui et al., 2021; Crockford, 2020) and/or loss of support from the public, leading to potential loss of electoral power (Schmidt, 2008). Thus, TEF policy discourse resounded with some audiences because it used the right terms, in the right way, to frame widely held concerns about economic development, regionality and student outcomes.

The final document included in this analysis represents the most recent (at time of writing) in the ongoing development of a new regulatory system for higher education, overseen and implemented by the Office for Students. ‘Regulatory advice 22: Guidance on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023’ sets out a more crystallised and pragmatic version of the aims expressed in preceding policy:

> ‘The TEF is part of the OfS’s overall approach to regulating quality and standards. Under this approach our conditions of registration are designed to ensure a minimum level of

> protection for all students and taxpayers. Beyond this minimum, we encourage choice for students and innovation by autonomous higher education providers free to pursue excellence as they see fit. We seek to incentivise providers to pursue excellence in their chosen way. We do this in a number of ways, including through the TEF' (OfS, 2022, p. 6).

It is interesting to note that principle themes first mentioned in the earliest policy documents on the TEF are carried over into regulatory advice – protection of students as consumers and value for taxpayers. Schmidt (2008) argues that ideas count towards the substantive content of discourse and this notion can be seen to be carried out at the level of policy, programme and the underlying philosophy behind these; the pragmatism in the above statement is the discursive result of TEF policy development and learning from the different stages of its rollout. This regulatory advice comes six years after the initial implementation of the TEF and draws on a series of trials, including a subject-level TEF (which was rejected), several independent reviews and a changing economic and political environment which had an effect on the higher education sector as a whole.

The assertion that HE institutions are 'free to pursue excellence as they see fit' is necessary in the absence of agreed on definitions of 'excellence', even if the OfS provides guidelines on 'features of excellence' (OfS, 2022, p. 74). It also demonstrates an awareness on the part of policy makers that institutions are not necessarily 'external-rule-following structures' but exist as constructs that are internal to agents' ideational abilities; in addition, higher education institutions often maintain or change their practices according to their own codified systems of ideas. Couching universities as 'autonomous' entities acknowledges this and may also help to mollify commentators who consider that TEF regulation goes too far – an opinion voiced quite clearly in academic literature. The OfS document then is aimed at a specific audience – university leaders and management who will be involved in both its application at institutional level and will possibly contribute either to their 'provider submission' and/or be part of a TEF panel that analyses and awards the TEF ratings. To this end, the wording of the regulatory document moves away from political doctrine and towards a pragmatic discourse that can be put into practice at institutional level.

The apparent freedom that the TEF grants to universities to 'pursue excellence as they see fit' also lines up with responses given by academics in this study, particularly those more closely involved in teaching (elaborated on below), many of whom stated that the essential features of 'teaching excellence' in TEF guidelines are already part of both institutional, departmental and individual practice. For example, Lecturer 1 stated:

> 'my department doesn't have an approach to teaching excellence as a thing. Does it have things that are to do with teaching excellence? Yes.'

So, agency is maintained by academics in their domain even if their views do not always enter the communicative discourse of policy making. TEF policy acknowledges this but a reliance on metrics guiding the process means that the context of academic agency is lost. For example, Cui et al. (2021) have argued that the TEF fails to take into account valuable contributions from academic staff, and that metrics and proxies cannot capture the experience of academic staff who teach.

Some of the broader purposes of higher education expressed in TEF policy are shared at an academic level. For example, Prof 1, an experienced academic in a STEM subject at a Russell group university, and head of department who also served on a TEF advisory panel, echoed the introductory paragraphs in TEF policy documents and saw the role of HE as follows:

> 'to produce trained and educated graduates who have skills and ability and knowledge… that enhances a society, that they're able then to make a contribution to society through the, you know, through the economy or some other aspect… universities should be providing the sort of fundamental research base on which, you know, civilization as a whole can increase its understanding'.

However, other academics were keen to pick up on the political nature of universities and the role they play in democratic processes and public debate. Vice Chancellor 1 was well positioned, both in terms of their management role and as a TEF panel member to redeploy the language of TEF policy to suit their needs:

> ‘University should be the absolute bastion of free speech, where people can exchange, debate, and disagree and agree’.

This comment reflects the fact that the speaker belongs to more than one discursive community. VC1 was able to influence policy as a TEF panel member and through that involvement pick up on the coordinative discourse that is denied to most academics; in addition, the comment also reflects their position as an ideational leader, and while not being a politician, VC1’s discourse was sometimes political. While I would not argue that VC1 is breaking new ground, the above comment does suggest that they are able to use their foreground discursive abilities to indicate that the intellectual role of universities might partly be to reason, debate and change the structures we inhabit, by breaking the existing, hegemonic discourse filtering down from policy to institution. This view was echoed by Prof 4:

> ‘in this day and age we need to be working with people to actually understand issues around freedom of speech.’

As with other participants who held higher management level positions, VC1 emphasised the learning aspect of university:

> ‘they are knowledge systems, but they're also systems of helping people learn… and I think university should be at the forefront of that’

VC1 was also one of several participants who recognized higher education’s impact on societal and personal well-being:

> ‘All the statistics say that universities, you know, if people have tertiary education, they are…I mean, I hate these terms, but you know, they're sort of healthier. They are more satisfied in their jobs. They're able to change jobs more quickly’

What is interesting to note is that while VC1 highlights the social benefits of HE, they also make a strong link to the labour market, more in keeping with policy aims; yet the take appears to be different – the dynamic and often precarious nature of the labour market (gig economy,

zero hour and short term contracts) require graduates to possess the resilience to survive in an unforgiving and declining post-colonial / post-industrial economy such as that in the UK. Policy describes this as the 'knowledge economy' – a term not mentioned by the academics who took part in this study.

Prof 4 also noted the link between tertiary education and personal and societal health and wealth:

> 'higher education changes your life and it makes you, as they say, happier, healthier and wealthier'

TEF policy intimates this but is much less explicit or articulate. Prof 4 goes on:

> 'I think it has a social purpose both for individuals and for organizations. As an individual, you're more likely to umm to vote, less likely to be obese or go to hospital or your GP, more likely to be engaged with your children's education. You're more likely to earn a higher amount of money throughout your life. You're more likely to be in control of your life, and so I think it's, I think, higher education is a sign of a healthy society and contributes in that way'

It is worth noting that Prof 4 had also served in VC roles in their career as well as being on a TEF advisory panel. As such, like VC1, they were connected into the coordinative discourse and were also able to locate the TEF narrative within its institutional context. Prof 4 was able to give slightly more specific examples of the health and well-being outcomes produced by universities for individuals and society; such benefits are not specifically mentioned in policy, where positive outcomes are measured more by graduate earnings, employment and research output, and this is perhaps why these benefits rarely appear in the discourse on the wider role of HE. In a free-market, class-based, consumerist model such as the UK, perhaps arguments around well-being are subsumed by other indicators of success, dominant in policy discourse, such as purchasing power and social mobility.

Some participants were openly frustrated by the introduction of the TEF and expressed themselves in very direct, sometimes ironic or exasperated tones – see following quote. Although these comments could be viewed as being unconstructive, when pressed, the same participants were able to clearly explain why they were opposed to the TEF – opposition mostly took the form of criticism of the methods the TEF has adopted, rather than its overall objectives. Reader 1, on the role of HE:

> 'Well, it's a way of keeping young people off the unemployment statistics.'

Humour or sarcasm was a technique used by academics when addressing aspects of the TEF (and HE more generally) that they either disagreed with or found problematic. Furthermore, what seems like a flippant comment was qualified by questioning the purpose of HE and engaging with policy:

> 'That whole notion of employability and what people do after higher education, but if higher education is supposed to be about preparing people for employment and things are not going too well in our economy, then, you know, who's to blame?' (Reader 1).

To interpret this, I turn for a moment to the work of Blyth (2010), and Schmidt (2000) who explore the idea of economic uncertainty which Reader 1 is alluding to. Policy seems to suggest that there is a stable and predictable world in which the subjective probability of outcomes can be predicted according to preferences – hence the policy focus on student choice and graduate outcomes. However, this is, as can be expected, a more political approach to decision making. Reader 1 may be more concerned with a world which is less stable and less observable – such as the global economy – where agents (students and university staff for instance) cannot be sure either of their interests or how to achieve them. In this light, it is easier to understand why the discourse of the TEF has been vigorously challenged by academics who are struggling to make sense of programmatic sets of ideas and discourse which do not help them make sense of their experience in the real world, or provide just explanations for policy – Reader 1 related personal and observed experiences of the increasingly flexible labour market, which has also affected staff at all levels of higher education, including researchers and lecturers.

Building on this theme, Schmidt (2008, p. 5) points out that:

> 'in society, programmatic success is judged not just by social scientists but also by citizens. This is why the success of a program depends not just on the presence of cognitive ideas capable of satisfying policymakers as to the robustness of the solutions provided by the program. It also depends on the presence of complementary normative ideas capable of satisfying policymakers and citizens alike that those solutions also serve the underlying values of the polity.'

Lecturer 2 adds to this by explaining that this is partly due to how higher education has been situated in discourse over time:

> 'there's always been a historical narrative. I think it's important to know that the term "higher education" as we know it today didn't start with the £9000 fees… for you and I higher education's a big deal, but, you know, for the average person, the average politician thinking about the average voter, it's probably not a massive concern'.

The same participant questions the philosophy or 'paradigm' that underlies the successes/failures of the higher education system (Hall, 1993) – coming back to the earlier mentioned policy idea of universities as autonomous institutions - funded, (and regulated) by government; as with Reader 1, direct experience of how changes to the labour market have affected higher education appear to be an important but missing part of the discourse:

> 'We seem to have combined the worst elements of central planning and free market. Increasing casual labour I think is another big issue and people increasingly on temporary contracts and clearing out of experienced staff'.

Prof 3 also raised the issue of changes to the way staff are increasingly hired (casualisation of younger and early career staff) and her comments point towards a link between policy objectives and the influence of a market approach on HE:

> ‘And there's a lot of emphasis on everything in terms of how education relates to the student, and how the student is the only beneficiary. And that's a particular focus in a marketized systems like ours… and of course, a lot of people teaching are not on permanent contracts, they're on precarious contracts. It should be seen as a privilege to teach first year undergraduates rather than as a nuisance that you'd like to get out of and give to somebody else who's on a temporary contract.’

The debate about the purpose of HE becomes ever more problematic because, as seen, policy statements about universities serving a public good, are often echoed by academic staff. That the HE sector also needs to come to terms with ever increasing student numbers while maintaining and improving provision of teaching and learning is also recognized as a challenge by most commentators. However, Prof 3 highlighted diverging views:

> ‘if you look at research on how leaders of higher education institutions see what their key priorities are, they will often talk about social justice and inequality. But in practice, those always go to the bottom of the pile, so reputation and getting in the league tables and all those kind of things and financial issues all come much much higher up than social justice or anything to do with kind of doing things for the general public.’

Thus the ideational preconditions for change appear to be at odds with policy in practice. By prioritising competition amongst institutions, the TEF might actually be weakening universities’ power to achieve common aims regarding social mobility, widening participation and serving the public good.However, many participants picked up on the policy narrative that stresses the need for HE to provide a skilled and employable workforce, as well as being a social/public good, and doing research. Fellow 1 stated:

> ‘we end up with two polarizations, sometimes it's instrumentally for employment in the economy and on the other pole it's for social and public good and the dissemination and creation of knowledge.’

Fellow 1 explains why he used the term ‘polarisations’:

> ‘as higher education has grown as an institution and with much increased funding, I think it has a responsibility to the economy and to jobs and employment, but I think it is also a need for the public good and what can happen, I think, is we can swing too far into one of those polarized positions’

Academics interviewed for this study expressed concern about the ability to meet the diverse needs of students, with fewer resources and with rising student numbers.

The key policy statement (BIS 2016) on developments in HE provides an alternative view:

> ‘the combination of financial and cultural factors in the HE teaching system result in our higher education provision becoming less demanding…the example of the “crafty mutually convenient disengagement contract among distracted academics and instrumentalist students…” We must act pre-emptively to ensure that this risk of disengagement, which undoubtedly already exists in part, is not allowed to take hold systemically.’

‘Distracted’ and ‘disengaged’ are not terms which came up during the interviews for this study. Lecturer 1, on teaching vs research, noted that:

> ‘you don't really need to choose. We can have both. We've always had both. We still need to have both, so higher education is to do multiple roles in terms of stuff that's related to the wider world and stuff that isn't.’

It is the ‘stuff that isn’t’ that policy chooses to brush over and participants found difficult to describe clearly. However, Prof 7, on the role of universities, thought they should be about:

> ‘the core development of cognitive and intellectual capabilities which should be empowering for graduates and extend the scope of what is achievable. This also helps democratic processes, which it further needs in the current context of post-truth media discourse, authoritarian populism, culture wars and artificially generated/de-contextualised knowledge production. The more people who can access the (often

tacit) knowledge and cognitive gains from HE, the more these trends may be troubled. A related issue is that HE can have a social function of supporting social mobility in the widest social sense and enable people to improve their socio-economic fortunes.

In this sense, university education may encourage students to question the logics of causation which policy draws on (and even the TEF itself!). The related idea of a 'knowledge economy' may well be an empty signifier (not only about the production and consumption of intellectual capital) because as with other aspects of the TEF discourse, these terms may mean different things to different people.

Lecturer 2, as did other participants, linked scholarship and research to social needs:

> 'there's the scholarship of the people who work in universities'

Although the idea of scholarship is a key term in the academic discourse it struggles to take hold – Schmidt (2017) has noted that the power of ideas that hold cognitive validity also somewhat shape worldview - but sometimes fall at the moment they try to become normative. The idea of 'scholarship' does not fit into the TEF discourse and subsequently loses weight in the public domain, despite also being cited by various academics who took part in this research, as a way to improve the quality of teaching and to bridge the gap between teaching and research. Prof 4:

> 'So I suspect the current government and proceeding governments feel it's about developing, you know, contributing to a skills agenda and skills in a way that are not the sort of skills that historically higher education would have given people. It's become part of a broader idea that higher education rather than further education, meets some part of the skills agenda. But I think it's very vague what those skills are, and I don't think what we teach in higher education necessarily meets that skills agenda. There's a disconnect.'

Prof 4 also states:

> ‘there's a whole other area about personal growth, personal development, achieving potential that are students’ choices why they might go in and not necessarily anything to do with what government thinks that higher education is about’

And:

> ‘In the sort of very narrow years of higher education, it was an opportunity to actually showcase who was privileged in society, who are going to be the future leaders, and then sort of the establishment could take those people into their fold type of thing… I think that still happens, so that's a purpose’

The participant’s argument here is quite nuanced and appears to question whether the TEF is actually reinforcing the class distinctions that TEF policy purports to be trying to change. VC2, at a post 92 institution is more forthright:

> ‘a number of institutions have got a very much a regional focus, so their role is about producing those or supporting higher skills, increasing inward investment, supporting productivity and growth in industry. That's really important, but that could, by some, be seen as a quite utilitarian approach to higher education, but if you look at our post 92s and those who are polytechnics, that's kind of been their role for a long time.

Reading into this comment, it appears that the participant is making a distinction between post 92 universities as more important to the local economy and continuing their previous roles as technical institutions focused on vocational, rather than academic skills. This discourse lines up with policy, to some extent, as the principle policy document proposes :
‘excellent teaching that supports their (students) future productivity’ (BIS, 2016, p.8).
And claims that there is a:

> ‘strong correlation between opening universities and significantly increased economic growth.’ (ibid, p. 9).

It also demonstrates how key terms from policy have entered the academic discourse. This might be explained partly because VC2 comes from a background of leadership in post-92 universities (including setting up a brand-new institution), as well as being involved in

consultation on TEF policy. However, returning to Prof 4's quote above, other academics (often not in higher management roles) used the term 'growth' in a different context – linking growth to personal development rather than national economic interests.

VC2 goes on:

> Then you've got others [HE institutions] who've got a wider contribution, perhaps who make, particularly around research and curiosity, research around applied roles.

It could be argued that VC2 is making the subtle suggestion here that these other institutions- i.e. Russell group and more traditional research-driven universities, produce graduates who are better equipped to enter the 'Knowledge Economy' at the heart of TEF policy as both the institutions themselves and their graduates are able to capitalise on and apply research. This view is couched slightly differently by Prof 7, who comes from a very long background of research and teaching in the fields of education and employment:

> 'HE has historically, and continues to have, a number of core social functions beyond the traditional human capital imperative of economic gain and value-of-return. HE has traditionally been about the generation of powerful and innovative knowledge and ideas. Most of the highest value and high impact knowledge has come out of HE, albeit that HE is not the exclusive site for knowledge production. This extends to wider society and translates as public goods if such knowledge is used to societal advancement and not concentrated among a few.'

It is interesting to note that Prof 7, similar to Lecturer 2 and Prof 5, points out the 'historical' (and continual) function of higher education as a social good. An emphasis here seems to be that universities are places of knowledge production (rather than knowledge transfer) and it is through being engaged with an institution where knowledge is generated, that students are equipped with skills that not only make them employable, but also provide the critical skills needed to create and be part of a healthy society. This is an important theme in the academic narrative that policy seems to engage with differently, perhaps because it does not fit into the

'logic of (political) appropriateness' (Schmidt, 2008), that the government of the time tended to follow.

Reflecting on the above quote, it is worth noting how the normative ideas expressed in TEF policy often attach value to political action (Olsen & March, 2004), and it is possible to observe how policy is made to resonate with the general public, as well as reflecting and making the values of a changing society – while acknowledging (and sometimes critiquing) long-standing societal norms:

> 'We are not seeking to assess other experiences that do not relate to the educational experience within TEF, for example, experiences that are primarily social, or outcomes or gains that arise primarily from social experiences' (OfS, 2022 p. 11)

However, separating education from its social context is problematic. Doing so ignores the 'core social functions' that Prof 7 cites and reduces social institutions to entities in an 'ordinary' market place, meaning that education 'has become an instrument for economic progress moving away from its original role to provide context for human development'. (Kromydas, 2017, p. 1). Furthermore, Kromydas (ibid, p. 1) points out that the debate on the purpose of HE needs to be:

> 'placed under the context of the most recent developments of increasing social inequalities in the western world and its relation to the mass model of higher education and the relevant policy decisions for a continuous increase in participation.'

As noted by Prof 4, these elements of the debate have necessarily been brought into the policy narrative:

> 'particularly if we're looking at leveling up, widening participation, all these other things, we can't leave it to chance'.

And this was echoed by Prof 8, who stated that higher education was a public good, and :

> As such, it should support the emancipatory function for individuals and an economic function for society.'

These two functions, however, are only two of many facets of the higher education sector and it has been argued that both theory and policy fall short when it comes to frameworks for understanding the individual and collective outcomes for society. It has been pointed out too that 'interpretations of the term 'public' in higher education are normative and political…and shaped by the agents who exercise the judgment' (Marginson, 2024, p. 5). Participants' notions about the historical development of a higher education narrative can be linked to Simon Marginson's investigation of the meaning of 'public' and 'common' good(s), locating these terms within the development of (Western) ideas about the relationship between individuals and society – further arguing that 'economic policy in higher education works with a distinctive understanding of 'public goods' that diminishes recognition of the non-pecuniary outcomes of higher education' (ibid, p. 5). But this perceived diminution at a discursive level cannot be taken at face value; drawing on VP1's comments, it could be argued that the seemingly non-pecuniary rewards which some institutions are more likely to offer than others, provide students with precisely the

> 'social capital and connections and networks and exposing people to research and critical thinking'

which mean they are far better placed to succeed in their professional careers.

VP1, a vice provost who has led medical schools and has held roles in student experience was able to concisely sum up the multi-faceted nature of higher education:

> 'I suppose a broad purpose which is around making it a better society to live in…through the other things universities do around social capital and connections and networks and exposing people to research and critical thinking. But I think it also has a role in employability in its very broadest terms… opening up all sorts of possibilities for a career that requires those skills you pick up at university'

In addition, VP1 gave a concrete example which suggests that the government reshaping of HE through the TEF has become a discursive game:

> ‘Let's look at continuation and that tension you have between getting your continuation numbers up because the TEF measures it and widening access to your program and taking a risk with students who are nontraditional… It drives certain sets of behaviours which, if you foreground one behaviour, you have to background another and so if you were canny, the thing to do is not take people from diverse backgrounds - like I would take them as far as you're action and participation plan requires you to - but don't take a risk on a mature student, somebody who’s changing subjects. It's too risky.’

Thus, at a coordinative level, and taking into account moves to prioritise labour market driven reform of the HE sector, the TEF can, in theory, be incentivising institutions to behave in ways that create the exact opposite conditions to meet the main policy objectives of widening participation and social mobility.

6.2.1 Section summary

Ideas about the role of higher education in society varied greatly between policy, interview responses, and also showed a shifting narrative within policy and between interviewees (and even within individual interview responses). Policy tended to take a more neo-liberal position, expressed through the language of public (in Margison’s reconsidered meaning) good and value for money, whereas academics tended to stress the cultural and societal ‘common’ good that higher education brings through the development of the individual, more in line with Biesta (Biesta et al., 2022). Policy also stressed the potential that higher education brings to social mobility and an individual’s contribution to economic growth. Policy also tapped into neo-liberal discourses, emphasising the need for consumer protection, although earlier, more positivist ideals in policy appeared much looser and vague in later iterations, moving towards a more liberal interpretation of how the TEF might be taken up by institutions. However, social ideals, social and labour market objectives espoused by policy were often undermined when many participants were able to point to contradictory developments in policy, noting that

historical shifts in HE, along with cynical reactions to the TEF were leading it away from its previous role as a cornerstone of social development, economic development and liberal critique of contemporary democracy. The next section focuses on the theme of teaching quality, bringing to the fore notions of 'excellence' and interpretations of 'excellent teaching' at individual, departmental and institutional level.

6.3 Teaching Excellence

The earliest policy document is relatively light on definitions or objectives regarding teaching excellence:

> 'The primary goal of our reforms is to improve the quality of students' academic experience and to increase their educational gain' (BIS, 2011).

These two broad aims of improving 'academic experience', and 'educational gain' were often shared by participants in this study. The document is the only one to offer a set of 'dimensions of quality' that contribute to 'excellence' in teaching:

> ● Class size
> ● Cohort size
> ● Extent of close contact with academics
> ● Levels of student effort and engagement
> ● Volume, promptness and usefulness of student feedback
> ● Proportion of teaching undertaken by full-time academics and proportion of those with postgraduate teaching qualifications' (BIS, 2011, p. 27).

As with the first two objectives, these aspects were echoed by interviewees when asked about teaching quality but such clear cut dimensions do not appear in following or final policy documents, perhaps because they did not fit into the developing narrative on teaching quality and (as seen below) proved to be problematic to integrate into measurements of teaching 'excellence', which as discussed earlier in this thesis, is an extremely contested term.

The principle TEF policy document appears to deliberately construct an ambiguous and contrasting picture of higher education teaching. Close together in the text are general and unsubstantiated praise for the existing standards:

> ‘Higher education in the UK enjoys a world-class reputation, with globally renowned teaching and cutting-edge research and innovation’ (BIS, 2016),

Quickly followed by statistically backed claims indicating that reform is needed:

> ‘60% of students feeling that all or some elements of their course are worse than expected and a third of these attributing this to concerns with teaching quality’ (BIS, 2016, p. 8).

Juxtaposing these two differing evaluations of teaching in UK HE, and using data to support a critical viewpoint while keeping the positive observations general and unreferenced may appeal to readers’ rational values and sets up metric-driven value judgements of teaching. However, such logics of causation were questioned by several academics in the present study. Prof 2 gives a practical example of why value judgements of teaching (in this case by students) can be problematic:

> ‘If I do a Module that's particularly - I'm gonna use colloquial language - but kind of a sexy module that students kind of quite like, then I probably would get high scores because of the activities and the nature of the things that I'm teaching. And if I taught something a little bit dry, perhaps a little bit heavy going, I might not get as good scores because of the anonymous surveys’.

Returning to the ‘worse than expected’, Prof 5 places this into the context of a HE sector that has been increasingly commercialized, in which students may be positioned more as consumers, and to some extent that they may see themselves as such. It is interesting to note, however, that in this instance Prof 5 does not use any of the lexical terms associated with a marketized system that appear both in policy and in the TEF discourse more broadly:

> ‘I think that the students feel that they're buying a service that pushes academics and professional services staff to be in the position where they have to produce an individualized plan for every student and every person. It's unworkable, so this is what worries me in terms of improving teaching’

The ‘unworkable’ aspect of providing an individualised learning path for every single student is worth taking up because the link between higher education and the individual is entrenched in interview responses. It seems important to make a distinction between Prof 5’s quote about students as consumers, which incorporates elements from the coordinative discourse of policy, and the socially constructed idea of students as individual learners. Only one participant directly referred to students as ‘consumers’ but many participants cited a commitment to individual students as being a key part of what constitutes ‘excellent’ teaching, as well as the ‘individual’ responsibility which staff felt towards their students.
On teaching excellence, Reader 1 stated:

> ‘It's all about delivering what you said you'd deliver in a way that the students understand and you can close that circle and everyone's happy. It's about that commitment to the endeavor, isn't it? And then it's about that commitment to those individuals’.

Lecturer 1 echoed these comments:

> ‘For me it's all about, you know, enriching the individual’

When specifically asked to define ‘teaching excellence’, a number of participants cited the importance of making a connection with individual learners. VP1 on teaching excellence:

> ‘So it is the thing that we do that creates excellent learning outcomes and that thing is millions of different things. An example of excellent teaching in action is being involved in a teaching session which is formal in some way and dropping in with an individual and checking on their learning, giving motive, whatever is required’.

VC2 also stated:

> ‘In my view about what impact that teaching has on the individual, it is about how you are developing the individual’.

Prof 4 emphasised the role of academics as individuals and cited constructive alignment as a guiding principle:

> ‘And I think excellent teaching is constructive alignment. It's where the organization or the individual lecturer thinks about the students that they have in front of them. The diversity of the students they have in front of them. The background of the students they have in front of them, they then on the other side know very clearly where they want to get them.’

Prof 4 also stated, as did other participants, that the drive for quality teaching came from a mix of external, institutional factors and intrinsic responsibility:

> ‘We need to be held to account in order to ensure that we do the best we can. There is an institutional approach, but there's also a sense of individual responsibility. As a teacher myself, I feel a responsibility and I can always improve my teaching’

However, as VP1 stated, teaching excellence,

> ‘is the thing that we do that creates excellent learning outcomes’

This is a powerful theme (outcomes) that is carried over from policy:

> ‘Good teaching – broadly defined to include learning environments, student support, course design, career preparation and ‘soft skills’, as well as what happens in the lecture theatre or lab – pays dividends in terms of outcomes for students.’ (BIS, 2016, p. 11)

Policy texts also hint at the 'millions of different things' (VP1) that contribute to teaching quality:

> 'We take a broad view of teaching excellence, including the teaching itself, the learning environments in which it takes place, and the outcomes it delivers. The Government believes that excellent teaching can occur in many different forms, in a wide variety of institutions, and it is not the intention of the TEF to constrain or prescribe the form that excellence must take. What we expect though, is that excellent teaching, whatever its form, delivers excellent outcomes. There is of course more to university than financial gain, but the idea that excellent teaching occurs in a vacuum, independent of its impact on students' future life chances, is not one we can or should accept' (ibid, p. 43).

Prof 1, who acted as a consultant on TEF policy, acknowledges the link between teaching quality and outcomes, and the indirect way it could have an impact:

> 'The TEF provides these institutional incentives and institutions then set their policies and you know it's sort of in my view, TEF delegates this to institutions, which is the right thing to do, and institutions then have this incentive to make sure that they're doing their best within their individual disciplines. And that might mean different things in different disciplines to enhance the outcomes and actually, over the process brought by which those outcomes are achieved, then I think that that probably is as effective as it can be.'

Yet Prof 1 goes on to specify the difficulty in both defining and measuring the quality of teaching:

> 'What teaching quality might mean in different subjects is very different. It's as much down to the personality and the character of the teacher as anything that they're specifically doing. You know how that's going to be taught, but beyond that? We don't have a, you know there isn't a sort of rule book'

VC 1 also noted that individual interpretation of the term 'excellence' may vary:

> 'My excellence will not be your excellence'

Furthermore, VC 1, in a leadership position in HE and as a former consultant on the TEF, predicted that technological developments will shape teaching, learning and assessment – forcing a change in the way 'excellence' is perceived:

> 'I think in the way in which universities are currently teaching, that's going to change quite dramatically. So there's a concept of excellence will change, you know, as we were just saying about generative AI and large language models that I think will revolutionize what teaching and learning are and what assessment is and what excellence is.

Thus, actors are both strategic and socialized; academics might interpret excellence in a variety of ways, but it is institutions that seek to normalize policy paradigms (Schmidt, 2010).

A fundamental issue appears to be defining teaching excellence in a clear way and the difficulty in linking the multifaceted nature of university education with outcomes, as they are measured by the TEF. This key issue is taken up by the independent review, carried out by Shirley Pearce, which suggests using the term 'educational excellence' instead:

> 'In clarifying the purpose of TEF, we use the term educational excellence rather than teaching excellence' (Pearce et al, 2019, p. 26).

The independent review, in discursive terms, is a key text because it attempts to correct the normative arguments put forward by policy, which go on to act as frames of reference for subsequent policy as well as in academic discourse (as seen below, 'outcomes' was a term employed by many participants, not only those who consulted on the TEF). By sticking to the idea of 'teaching excellence', policy texts and subsequent guidelines issued by the OfS ignore the powerful arguments put forward by both academics and the independent review (and even broadly acknowledged within government policy texts) that question the link between

'teaching' as defined by the TEF, outcomes and the use of a contested term ('excellence') as a useful measure. This issue is compounded because the TEF acronym, within which sits the problematic term, serves to structure thought and practice at an institutional level and individual level.

As the independent review states:

> 'Studying HE involves a great deal more than being the recipient of excellent teaching. Learning is an active process not simply related to the quality of teaching. Learning experiences that shape student and graduate outcomes arise from a multitude of opportunities that HE provides in addition to excellent teaching. The TEF includes no direct measures of teaching. Indeed, there are as yet no generally agreed metrics which can be used to assess the quality of teaching across different subjects and different institutions.' (Ibid, p. 26).

And,

> 'We heard concerns that the TEF metrics are not direct measures of teaching excellence. This is a common criticism that came through strongly in both the call for views and the listening sessions' (ibid, p. 34).

Nevertheless, the government, in its response, explained the reasons why it felt the TEF name should remain:

> 'The Government would like the scheme to continue to be known as 'the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)'. This name has a well-established brand value, and is increasingly understood, in the UK and internationally, to mean a rating on teaching, learning and student outcomes' (DfE, 2021, p. 7)

When asked to define 'teaching excellence', VC 1 picks up on this choice of words:

> 'Well, I think of it more not necessarily as teaching excellence, but learning excellence and teaching excellence was something that the government felt was a more explicable term'

In this quote, it is possible to see where seeming nuances in language can have significant impact. Discursive institutionalism's focus on what Schmidt terms the 'ideational preconditions' of institutional change can reveal a lot about how and why these linguistic choices might be made. 'Teaching' excellence clearly puts the onus on universities as institutions (and ultimately on individual staff in academia) as being responsible for improvements in learning outcomes. 'Learning' excellence, appears only in the quote from VC 1 and has not entered into the discourse of the TEF – perhaps precisely because it hints at a more involved (and more expensive, more difficult to assess externally) development of higher education pedagogy, with looser forms of audit and assessment of teaching than the metric driven TEF methods allow for. VC 1, having a voice in institutional matters, appears to have both identified and accepted that the use of the term 'teaching excellence', in line with changing conceptions about what higher education is and what it is for, has resulted in part, 'not just from the power clash among interests, the prerogatives of position, or the scripts of culture but from the battle of ideas through discourse and deliberation' (Schmidt, 2010).

Many academics interviewed for this study cited personal motivation and a desire to constantly improve their own practice, which involves inherent reflection of their development as teachers in HE. In addition, an awareness of students' needs and goals were also often cited when participants expanded on what 'teaching excellence' meant to them, as well as the collegial nature of teaching in which ideas and practices are shared, often informally, or at least within departments. Although Prof 4 was the only academic to directly cite the work of John Biggs, many respondents effectively described the fundamentals of what Biggs terms 'constructive alignment' – a learning outcomes based approach that includes various aspects of a constructivist view of education and is especially focused on adapting teaching to a diverse student body (Biggs et al, 2022). As Prof 2 states, teaching excellence is:

> 'Creating a motivational climate. All those many, many variables and factors. To do those to the best of our ability to try and support the people that we're working with to further them on from point A to point B, whatever that might be. So I guess it's all those things, doing that to the best of our ability'.

It is perhaps understandable that some of the more personalized approaches that contribute to teaching quality are brushed over in policy – partly because teaching at the micro-level is delegated to individual institutions – but also because other factors that TEF policy cites as affecting the quality of teaching take place at macro-institutional level:

> 'Good teaching – broadly defined to include learning environments, student support, course design, career preparation and 'soft skills', as well as what happens in the lecture theatre or lab – pays dividends in terms of outcomes for students' (BIS, 2016, p. 11).

Although policy places a particular emphasis on linking such broader institutional factors to outcomes, and the importance of these, there are also sections of policy which drill down into teaching at a micro level:

> 'Excellent teaching needs to flourish across the sector; lacklustre teaching and unacceptable variability in quality need to be addressed' (BIS, 2016, p. 13).

However, the quote from the independent review of the TEF cited above, provides a counterpoint to this view – that individual teaching cannot be measured under the TEF. One academic interviewed in the present study, was able to exercise a certain power over the ideas expressed in policy by providing a pragmatic interpretation of what the TEF stands for. Lecturer 1:

> 'My definition of teaching excellence is not this performance in the classroom. When the government says teaching, they mean the teaching mission of the university, broadly, they don't mean the practical teaching in the classroom'.

This view highlights the way 'teaching' has become an ambiguous term in the wider discourse of the TEF. Yet it is difficult to separate a university's mission and what actually happens in lectures, seminars, labs, tutorials and other institutional learning environments. As Fellow 1 pointed out:

> ‘I think institutionally and well maybe it's more at department level. I think excellence needs a real attention on teaching.’

VP 1 gives an example of this:

> ‘an example of excellent teaching in action is being involved in a teaching session which is formal in some way and dropping in with an individual and checking on their learning, giving motive, whatever it is required’.

The earliest policy document in 2011 was quite succinct in determining the underlying motivation for reform:

> ‘The primary goal of our reforms is to improve the quality of students’ academic experience and to increase their educational gain.’ (BIS, 2011, p. 25).

And educational gain is taken up by a number of participants in the present study as a key indicator of teaching quality. Fellow 1 reflected:

> ‘Educational gain. I think that is the key concept and it's something that hasn't been cracked and it's really, really difficult. That idea of distance traveled, how can you evaluate how far someone has traveled in their educational gain with people starting at different levels?’

The independent review noted that:

> ‘We also heard that learning outcomes should play a greater role in the process. The current aspect in TEF entitled ‘Student Outcomes and Learning Gain’ does not include any measures of ‘learning gain’ – it is listed as one example of evidence that the provider could present’ (Pearce et al. 2019, p. 45).
>
> ‘While the challenges in defining and measuring learning gain were noted, we heard a consistent message that it was important to consider and assess learning gain’ (ibid, p.34).

If institutional self-assessments of educational gain are included in the provider contribution to the TEF panels, one risk appears to be that if low level (e.g. individual course) outcomes do not match national or institutional outcomes, specific factors such as educational gain become a discursive, zero-sum game. VP1, who was involved in contributing to their institution's TEF submission, explained:

> 'I think educational gains is game playing at this stage, so the people who got golden educational gains played the right games'.

This ties back in with policy conceptions of 'excellence' as a prerequisite in institutions in order to create and contribute to the 'Knowledge Economy' in the main title of the principle TEF policy document. Fairclough and Wodak (2008, p.132), point out that the two distinct concepts of a 'knowledge society' and a 'knowledge-based economy' have become semantically 'merged', and that the 'excellence of universities is construed as a necessary condition for success in a 'knowledge society'. Building further on this is Mats Alvesson who points out that even in post-industrial societies there are still many routinised, low qualification jobs, and well qualified graduates may find it difficult to find employment which matches the expectations they believe their higher studies have prepared them for (Alvesson, 2013, p.73).

Prof 8 reiterated that 'teaching excellence' was:

> 'hard to define, as all the literature attests to the fact that there are no common qualities of teachers or lessons that are deemed to be excellent by observers.'

However, as with other participants, Prof 8 was able to provide a clear set of behaviours and elements that they considered contributed to quality teaching:

> 'The characteristics must be that there is a high level of knowledge of the subject from the teacher, that they have a clear pedagogical communication style and that there is dialogical feedback in the lesson'

Overall, it was noted that academic perceptions of teaching 'excellence' erred towards the qualitative, rather than the quantitative, a notable departure from TEF methodology, even where definitions overlapped. One example of this is the use of benchmarking. Although this is something taken up in the following section of this chapter, it is worth noting that the independent review dedicated various sections to this and emphasised,

> The TEF should however, ensure that in delivering against its primary purpose of encouraging enhancement, institutions consider the needs of all their students from all backgrounds. We therefore support the continued use of design elements in TEF such as benchmarking, split metrics and the criterion about 'positive outcomes for all' (Pearce et al. 2019, p. 2).

VC 2 was the only participant to use the term 'benchmark' when speaking about 'teaching excellence' and that may reflect their involvement as a panel expert in the TEF consultation process, and/or as a leader in HE – thus being more involved or concerned with the results of student surveys at a higher institutional level:

> 'it is about how you are developing the individual and for it to be excellent you need to be able to benchmark it and you need to be able to understand and the value of it'

Nevertheless, VC 2 also provided a more concrete definition of teaching excellence that was rooted in observed practice – even if links between classroom teaching and TEF proxies remain unstated:

> 'a good example would be where students or learners more generally are able to engage with the material, develop as part of that, and are they able to contribute back as part of the process?'

In addition, several academics were also clear on how the quality of teaching in HE can be raised. Prof 7 separated teaching at a pedagogic level and at an institutional level.

> ‘At a pedagogic level, this entails motivating students to learn more about the subject and related areas and be passionate about continued learning. It’s about opening up intellectual spaces that enable disruption to extant world views and mental habits. To this extent, the teacher must believe in the value of what they teach and its longer-term value in students’ lives, as well as being based on firm subject knowledge’
>
> ‘At a more institutional level, the best ways of promoting this are likely to be through a more dialogical approach based on informed professionalism and inter-professional trust. This is where the idea of knowledge sharing and mentoring comes into play so that colleagues can learn from each other’

These two quotes from Prof 7 are a good example of how ideas in academic discourse around teaching can differ, and be employed differently, from those found in policy. Schmidt (2008, p. 3) encourages scholars to think about how actors may ‘carry’ ideas ‘through’ discourse; that is, ‘they {can} exert a causal influence in political reality and, thereby, engender institutional change’. However, not only is Prof 7 presenting an alternative set of ideas about what quality teaching might consist of, and how it might be improved, they are also obliged to represent those ideas in other ways. It is interesting to note that Prof 7 proposes an institutional, dialogical approach to teaching quality – based on trust, whereas the narrative in policy can at times actively question the ‘professionalism and inter-professional trust’ that Prof 7 suggests as a starting place for developing teaching excellence in higher education. For example, TEF policy from 2016 cites the,

> ‘crafty mutually convenient disengagement contract among distracted academics and instrumentalist students’.

Prof 6 also noted a perceived erosion of trust that came out of TEF policy discourse:

> ‘it's the principle {of the TEF} I disagree with because I think what it does is, it communicates a lack of trust’,

And also echoed Prof 7’s ideas of promoting teaching quality through more informal ways amongst teaching academics:

> ‘We should trust people to be able to teach when we give them, you know, development and support, you know, maybe like a PGR cert course, all that kind of stuff or maybe more informally and collegiate, maybe support mentorship, have more experienced colleagues sitting in on the class and give them some advice, I think that's enough’

The issue of professional trust was also taken up by some participants when asked to put the TEF into a wider context (explored in a later section in this chapter).

A number of participants saw teaching ‘excellence’ in terms of student outcomes which were more focused on building students’ knowledge in specific disciplines, alongside developing critical thinking, being motivated in their scholarship, an ability to learn in the long-term, and to engage in intellectual activity which could challenge norms and bring about change – this is significantly different from TEF outcomes which are not based on any of the above list. Prof 5:

> ‘Teaching excellence is if we have taught people to be critical thinkers, to become tolerant, to actually be able to think for themselves, to be able to work with information and understand their responsibilities in relation to it. That they’ve become humans that are supportive of each other, that we're able to perform at a level in society that makes us decent human beings’

At the same time, they brought into question the notion of ‘skills’ which are cited so often in policy. Explicitly arguing that these ‘skills’ are not what the TEF measures. Prof 5 states that:

> ‘if the government is arguing that what we should be doing in higher education is producing people with skills, teaching excellence should be about - have we maximized people's ability to have the skills we need in society? That's not what's necessarily measured’.

The nomination of actors and ideas that takes place both in policy and academic responses (through published articles or as participants in this study) helps to linguistically construct them according to perceived positive or negative traits. For example, where policy discourse constructs ‘distracted academics’ in order to legitimise the objectives of the TEF, likewise Prof

5 seeks to undermine the 'government' viewpoint by questioning the TEF as a tool - claiming that it does not measure the thing it sets out to – and thus is less effective in bringing about improvement. In both cases, the viewpoints are expressed quite overtly; both academic and policy discourse turn to ideas and employ cognitive validity as persuasive devices, as well as seeking legitimacy through both normative and cognitive arguments.

6.3.1 Section summary

This section revealed that the discourse of teaching 'excellence' is muddied, both in policy and in academic conception. Although some participants (mostly in HE management) recognized the value in benchmarked standards of quality in HE teaching and indicators of quality such as educational gain, interview responses varied greatly and tended to be based on experience, anecdotal and theoretically informed notions of how students learn best. Overall, policy took a normative approach and posited HE teaching as a problem to be solved, whereas academic staff who took part in this study used real-world examples to explain in detail about how quality teaching takes place and located issues in quality as arising from governance, rather than lack of quality at an individual teaching level.

Although several academics dismissed 'teaching excellence' as a lexical term, for example Lecturer 1, 'I don't think it really means anything', its use in TEF policy, in OfS guidance documents, and in academic discourse, mean that it has nevertheless become a focus for the ideational conditions of institutional change. The discursive construction of what 'teaching excellence' has come to mean is linked to the expression of interests from government, and stakeholders at a variety of levels within and across universities. Some of the most problematic discursive strategies appeared when agents and texts sought to critique or rationalise TEF policy objectives and methods, which is the theme of the following section.

6.4 TEF objectives and methods

While the earliest policy document included in this study acknowledges the importance and prestige that quality research brings to, and beyond, the higher education sector, the 'culture of excellence' that is cited, in research terms, is not linked to teaching:

> 'This reform focuses on higher education teaching but our universities have a much wider role. The quality of research in UK universities is a national asset. Despite growing international competition, the UK research base is second in the world for excellence and the UK is the most productive country for research in the G8, producing more publications and citations per pound of public funding than any other major country. This reflects the contribution of the higher education sector to developing a research infrastructure, and a culture of excellence, that have made the UK a place where many of the most talented researchers in the world want to work.' (BIS, 2011)

By praising the quality and output of research in the UK, the document positions teaching in HE, as it is nominated in the following piece of policy, as 'the poor cousin of research in significant parts of English higher education' (BIS, 2016). This early document also foreshadows key elements in later policy by combining recognition of quality in research and pointing out that the UK research output is also significant in terms of quantity and efficiency,

> – 'the UK is the most productive country for research in the G8, producing more publications and citations per pound of public funding than any other major country' (ibid).

The text paves the way for later policy by creating parallel lexis for the TEF, which mirrors the acronym for research excellence, the REF. However, research in the UK is positioned, not as a driver of excellence in teaching by linking the two together (research-led or research-informed teaching) but rather as a parallel example of excellence to which those teaching should aspire – to some extent pitting one against the other – and reinforcing the 'poor cousin' concept which is repeated several times throughout the 2016 policy text.

Research, as a separated and privileged activity is subtly positioned in the policy texts, however it is rarely associated with the scholarship and intellectual rigour that participants in the present study suggested that study at university should, at least partly, be about. In addition, policy texts link the quality of teaching in HE to government aims to widen participation and facilitate social mobility:

> '{The TEF} will help drive up teaching standards overall; enhance the life chances of students; drive economic growth; and be a catalyst for social mobility' (BIS, 2016)

and create 'productive' graduates. The TEF wishes to foster,

> 'excellent teaching that supports their {students} future productivity' (ibid, p. 7).

The core objectives of the reforms implied by the TEF are also clearly set out:

> 'In order to enable greater competition, we will simplify the regulatory landscape. We will create a level playing field with a single route to entry and risk-based approach to regulation' (ibid, p. 9).

The 2016 policy document directly mentions the measuring of teaching quality as an objective, focusing on student interest, rather than the broader higher education community:

> 'By introducing the TEF, we will tackle the challenge of measuring teaching quality head on so that students can be served better in the future' (BIS, 2016).

However, the effectiveness of the TEF as a measurement tool was questioned by almost every single participant in this study, including those who had been involved in TEF consultation roles; those who were located higher up in the university hierarchy; those who tended to talk about the TEF in positive terms; those that saw the bigger picture and ignored direct impact on teaching.

The independent review raised the issue of the metrics as a tool for measuring teaching quality:

> 'In the current framework, the NSS metrics, which provide information about a student's reported satisfaction at the end of their course, are used as a proxy for measuring two aspects of quality: 'Teaching Quality' and 'Learning Environment'. What the NSS actually measures is students' agreement with a range of statements… using NSS indirectly to evaluate both 'Teaching Quality' and 'Learning Environment' with significant accountability implications for institutions has attracted criticism that this stretches the validity of the metrics' (Pearce et al. 2019, p.34).

The doubt surrounding the metrics behind OfS evaluations is important because these are a crucial part of what policy calls as a 'risk-based approach to regulation' (BIS, 2016). More specifically, the OfS notes that:

> 'We take a risk-based approach to regulation. This means that we focus regulatory attention on those providers that are at greatest risk of breaching their conditions of registration. For such a risk-based approach to work effectively, we need to assess the risk of a breach of each condition. When assessing risk, we will consider the likelihood of something happening as well as the severity of the impact (on students in particular), if it does happen' (OfS, 2020).

Yet there is little transparent detail about how the data driven sources for identifying risk are treated and analysed by the OfS. The above also appears to suggest that the OfS favours an alternative framework which goes against established methods of using a risk-based approach. As King (2018 page) writes, 'Increasingly the focus of such a model (risk based approach in education) is less the anticipation of future harm and hazard and more a move towards education and guidance, at least as a first resort, as a means of developing organizational learning and resilience'.

But perhaps encouraging institutions to become self-regulating, risks discouraging them from taking the kind of risks that might facilitate the widening of participation and inclusion that policy texts highlight as an objective of the TEF. Returning to VP 1:

> 'That tension you have between getting your continuation numbers up because the test measures it and widening access to your program and taking a risk with students who are nontraditional'

It is worth looking in closer detail then, why policy and OfS methodology turn to a 'risk based approach'. First of all, it is an approach that has 'travelled' from more commercial sectors of the economy but aligns with a general move towards the marketisation of HE and consumer-driven models of regulation (Czarniawska & Joerges, 2011). It has already been applied to other public sectors such as health care and justice. Although a risk-based approach may help to make an institution's achievements more visible, this is difficult to envision under the TEF's simplified rating system, as pointed out by the independent review,

> 'While a single rating was supported by some groups for its simplicity, the more common view was that a single rating risks oversimplifying the outcome' (Pearce et al. 2018, p. 64).

Some authors have argued that it can also be used to control institutions from the outside (Huber, 2024). Perhaps more problematic is the different interpretations of the term 'risk', in educational contexts. While policy texts construct 'risk' in terms of assuring quality and 'protecting' students, or what Gert Biesta sees as a move towards making education 'strong, secure, predictable and risk-free' (Biesta, 2015), risk in more pedagogical and less policy oriented texts is sometimes seen as a necessary condition that makes learning possible (e.g. (Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2006). This was also hinted at by Prof 7,

> 'It is also about taking some risks'.

VC 2 seemed to suggest that the metric nature of the TEF also contributed to potential inaccuracies in how university teaching is represented, as well as stifling the motivation for them to break new ground in teaching:

> 'The problem is that in generalizing you lose the complexity of our sector. The complexity of what you're trying to deliver has a potential to stifle innovation in the sector because we've become metric focused and actually some things won't necessarily neatly display within metrics.'

This other view of risk in education is difficult to identify in policy and represents an area in which the coordinative and communicative discourse of government does not line up with that of the academic community, neither does this conception of risk appear to have become normalised in broader TEF discourse in as much as the different discursive communities employ the term in very different ways – even those academics who were engaged in TEF consultation or as leaders in HE. This may be partly explained by Schmidt's conception of 'agents and the interactive dynamics of discourse' (Schmidt, 2017): although the risk-based approach to regulation is a very real concept, and apparently but opaquely being used by the OfS as a method of quality assurance, in practical terms it would also appear to be something of an empty signifier. The use of the term in political communication may resonate normatively and cognitively with specific audiences such as taxpayers and students – i.e. it can be seen as part of the move to construct and realise the political and economic order in line with the programme of the government of the time. In this sense, rhetorical leadership (Jo Johnson wrote an impactful introduction to the landmark 2016 policy paper) can exercise 'power through ideas, commanding authority and public trust by employing communicative appeals to shape principled beliefs' (ibid). Considering that Schmidt places such discourse within a wider discursive dynamic in which ideas posited by ideational leaders (such as Jo Johnson) are taken up by the public and media in an era of 'post-truth', it is no wonder that the discursive response from the academic community has tended to question not only the objectives of the TEF and the methodology used to achieve them, but also the essence and expression of political and economic beliefs that underpin it.

Prof 4 was among many participants who warned against relying too much on the metrics, data and proxies that the TEF uses to 'measure' teaching quality,

> 'be very careful of measurement because you might get what you asked for'.

And Prof 2 noted that the student surveys which provide some of the NSS data, may not be very representative because of low return rates:

> 'I might have something like 20% completion of that survey out of a cohort'.

When asked if teaching quality could be 'measured', VC 1 stated:

> 'Yes, I do actually.'

The adverbial phrase seems to suggest that the participant knew that this view has been challenged in academic responses; it was quickly qualified by the following remark:

> 'Measured is probably the wrong term. I think it can be evaluated'.

The dislike of a metric approach in the academic community was also touched on by Lecturer 1:

> 'Obviously the TEF is very much metrics driven and a lot of academics don't like the metrics in there, which is understandable.

Prof 5 indicated that an overemphasis on metric data perhaps leads teachers away from what they called 'intuitive' teaching skills and possible drawbacks to overly focusing on outcomes:

> 'You don't fatten the pig by weighing it. Just because you put more and more metrics in place does not mean the quality of anything improves. I think then what happens is people start to teach to the metrics and they're not teaching intuitively, instinctively'

The use of metaphor in this quote might seem somewhat reductive, however, it might be argued that in the context of the semi-structured interview, it gave the participant the chance to introduce a rhetorical device that is used both in policy – 'For too long, teaching has been the poor cousin of research' (BIS, 2016, p. 12), and as an effective tool in academic (including educational) inquiry and the interpretation of policy (McCandless, 2012). The use of metaphor as a persuasive device in policy is well documented (Bessant, 2002; Edwards et al., 1999; Nicoll & and Edwards, 2000); examining TEF policy and the critical, discursive responses from the academic community, it is possible to see that apparently meaningful and logical statements in policy become very complex to interpret, or implement in practice. These policy statements may be aimed at a general electorate who are more susceptible to normative arguments, rather than what policy ideas may mean in an institutional context - as Baker (2002, p. 1) notes, policy writers may seek to create an 'optimal projective test…that allows agreement to vague precepts so that the bargaining process does not get bogged down in the details of the programme. This strategy has become even more important as the process of policy development and the power of the information media are increasingly entwined.' Thus the complexities and complications associated with interpreting, analysing and reporting metric data are hidden inside, for example, metaphor, both in policy and discursive responses to it.

The metrics of the TEF were raised in much plainer terms both by the independent review and by participants in the present study:

> 'The TEF includes no direct measures of teaching. Indeed, there are as yet no generally agreed metrics which can be used to assess the quality of teaching across different subjects and different institutions.' (Pearce et al. 2019, p. 26).

And:

> 'Using NSS indirectly to evaluate both 'Teaching Quality' and 'Learning Environment' with significant accountability implications for institutions has attracted criticism that this stretches the validity of the metrics.' (ibid, p. 34).

Lecturer 1 highlighted the disconnect between the metrics of the TEF and its impact on their own teaching practice. The quote seems to suggest that change or improvement in teaching stems as much from individuals, as from external agencies; that power over ideas is located

within their own personal narrative and the discourse around teaching and learning in their institution:

> ‘I make the assumption if I try my very best and whatever teaching excellence is, I mean, whatever metrics or framework someone places on me to assess me, I will still pursue the best that I can do. I wouldn't teach to a particular framework’.

This view was also partially backed by VP 1:

> ‘It (participant’s department) has an overarching approach which is about taking learners places that they want to go and that we as a university think they should go, whether that be values, knowledge, skills, or competencies’

Prof 7 gave an even more direct assessment of the TEF approach, and again highlighted that teaching was too complex and nuanced an activity to be assessed using metric data:

> ‘Many of the criteria that constitutes high-quality teaching are not always reducible to crude metrics. Much of this is subjective and will depend on the pedagogic values and approaches of different lecturers’.

On the other hand, VP 1, also argued that the non-metric data (university submissions, student submissions), was too subjective to be of use, was too time-consuming to compile and that they added no value to TEF, however they were the only voice within TEF discourse that suggested using metrics alone. Considering the critical (at times exasperated) tone of the comment, it may have been made to emphasise their view that the TEF more broadly does not fulfil its purpose:

> ‘I think you could use the metrics. Take away all the subjective stuff. Take away all the effort. It would be no more or less valuable than it is now. I suspect. Just use the metrics. Don't make us write anything. It's worth looking at the metrics and then extrapolating who has dramatically got a different score to their metrics. And I would say it's a small number of people who are excellent wordsmiths or paid for one of those

> consultancy companies to come in and write their TEF. Now, I don't think that means excellent teaching, so why go to all that effort? Just use the metrics. What motivated me was I had to do it, we've got to do the TEF return. Everyone has to do it, So what motivates me is keeping my job'.

VP 1 creates a strong narrative of being forced to enact policy (which they do not believe in) by external agencies. While this is not in line with other respondents who were at higher management level in their institutions, it does tie in with their earlier comment that 'excellence' or improvements in teaching often come from within university departments and are driven by long established sets of skills and knowledge which have been identified as having academic and vocational value. Along these lines, Prof 7 was quite clear about how the TEF is unable to capture, evaluate or measure pedagogy at a granular level within institutions:

> 'The TEF is a crude and flawed measurement of teaching quality. This is largely because it is outcome-based and performative rather than processual and development'.

In addition, Prof 1 notes that more established forms of university assessment (such as league tables) are preferred by prospective students, and consequently what universities really focus on, over the TEF:

> 'I think institutions always kept a close eye NSS, but actually that's much more because the driver for that is not TEF, it's league tables, to be honest, brutally honest, they have much more of an impact on us'.

VP 1 summed up the TEF rating system:

> 'I understand where the OFS is coming from around accountability, but I don't think it's doing a great service to students. I don't think a TEF gold, silver or bronze necessarily reflects in any way the overall teaching activity of an institution'.

Another issue that arose both from the data was that of learning or educational gain. The TEF positions it as an important measure but leaves it up to the provider to give details and

convince the OfS of both the value and evaluation of its performance in this area. As the independent review noted:

> 'The current aspect in TEF entitled 'Student Outcomes and Learning Gain' does not include any measures of 'learning gain' – it is listed as one example of evidence that the provider could present' (Pearce et al. 2019, p. 45).

In this light it is difficult to see how the OfS might be holding institutions to account on this aspect, especially when participants pointed out that the value of provider submissions are dependent to a certain degree on an institution's capacity to produce a convincing TEF submission. Because universities are judged on metrics and on a written submission, the latter can be crafted to suit needs, and the former is also subject to manipulation. As VP 1 stated,

> 'I think educational gains is game playing at this stage, so the people who got golden educational gains played the right games'.

The *idea* then of 'educational gains', and the discourse around it, appear to function as a 'coalition magnet' (Béland & Cox, 2017). Different groups employ different rhetorical strategies to convey persuasive messages 'not only directly, through the content of the message, but also subliminally, through linguistic and psychological mechanisms' (Schmidt, 2017). For example, 'educational gain' could be considered an idea 'with ambiguous or polysemic characteristics that make it attractive to groups that might otherwise have different interests, with policy entrepreneurs gaining power by employing such ideas in their coalition-building' whilst at the same time appealing to those in the academic field for whom 'educational gain' has long held importance – but may be interpreted as having a different meaning; i.e. 'educational gain' serves as an idea, but also as an empty signifier 'bringing disparate people together in a common cause', even when their cause is not necessarily the same (ibid, p. 262).

Prof 7 locates 'educational gain' (or 'academic gain') within the discourse of a marketized and commodified university sector:

> ‘Like many markers of value in commodified HE environment, many of the measures have little to do with intrinsic educational or academic gain and about signifiers of market positioning within competitive national and international leagues tables’

Fellow 1 emphasised the importance of educational gain while highlighting both the difficulty in capturing data that measures it, as well as questioning the ability of the TEF in its current format to do so:

> ‘The recent iteration of the TEF looked at educational gain. I think that is the key concept and it's something that hasn't been cracked and it's really, really difficult. That idea of distance traveled, how can you evaluate how far someone has traveled in their educational gain with people starting at different levels? You know, so people coming in from different backgrounds and internationally from different countries with different languages, how do you measure that on an individual basis?’

The TEF also discounts gains that arise from social experiences:

> ‘We are not seeking to assess other experiences that do not relate to the educational experience within TEF, for example, experiences that are primarily social, or outcomes or gains that arise primarily from social experiences’ (OfS, 2023).

This becomes problematic when considering the government’s focus, expressed in policy, on higher education as a means to achieving social mobility, as it ignores both the social impact of education (both individual and societal) and education as a social activity, despite this being raised by numerous participants and backed by broad literature in the field (Hallinan, 2006; Morrish, 2019; Naidoo, 2003).

The usefulness of measuring learning gain and methodologies for doing so have already been explored elsewhere (McGrath et al., 2015; Speight et al., 2018), and while these approaches may not be practical at national level, shifting accountability onto the higher education sector allows for the ‘gaming’ of this theme which several participants alluded to:

> ‘As soon as you introduce measures which are then connected to prestige and competition between institutions, you find yourself in a situation where the institutions are going to game the system in order to climb the ranks’.
>
> (Prof 6).

‘It appears to be a largely blunt and wasteful instrument and subject to gaming’.

(Prof 7).

It is somewhat contradictory that TEF policy limits commentary on the social aspect of HE to social mobility but ignores the social and cultural contributions that universities make to local communities, at the same time overlooking the social impact that universities have on individual educational trajectories, or the influence of the local community on the institution. The independent review pointed out that:

> ‘Many universities also make a considerable civic contribution. They are torch carriers for their community’s economic, cultural, social and environmental development, often in partnership with their local authorities and local businesses’ (Pearce et al. 2019, p. 75).

And,

> ‘That there is widespread concern that other positive outcomes of HE, such as wider social and cultural benefits, are not included in the framework’ (ibid, p. 44).

Prof 4 also noted:

> ‘I think it has a social purpose both for individuals and for organizations.’

Taking a cue from discursive institutionalism that change is, at least in part, socially constructed – and that it also happens in institutional contexts - be they university campuses, seminars, in the coordinative discourse of policy entrepreneurs or in policy texts, it would seem that the TEF, by choosing to downplay the impact of broader social aspects of HE is either delegating an element of higher educational quality that is hard to measure to universities, or prefers to allow what Slavoj Zizek has called a ‘postmodernised version of Adam Smith’s invisible hand of the market’ to regulate quality in HE (Zisek, 2009, p. 15). More

specifically, that 'market and social responsibility are not opposites' (ibid). Thus, the discourse of the TEF, in an institutional context, may shape the way quality in HE is framed according to 'logics of rationalist incentive structures, historically established path dependent rules, or the frames of culturally imposed practices and identity' (Schmidt, 2017).

Another area which reveals differing perceptions regarding TEF methods and objectivity were evidenced by participant responses to the possibility of a subject-level Teaching Excellence Framework and how this was developed in policy; a pilot was carried out but ultimately subject level data and results for the TEF have not been adopted, largely due to the perceived financial cost and regulatory burden it would imply for universities. However, the independent review, argued that the benefits of a subject-level TEF would outweigh the costs:

> 'At provider level, with a strong focus on subject variation, we believe the public interest case is strong. We recognise that the quantified costs are material (at £65 to £75 million over 10 years) and that there are some unintended consequences related to reputation, teaching morale, reduced collaboration and risk to innovation. However, when compared to the investment being made in HE by both students and taxpayers, we think the costs of TEF are proportionate and justified by the potential benefits of enhancing educational provision for undergraduate students' (Pearce et al. 2019, p. 11).

Varying perceptions of teaching quality was also raised by several participants in the present study. Prof 1 noted that,

> 'What teaching quality might mean in different subjects is very different'.

And VP 1 pointed out that the quality of teaching in different subjects within the same university might vary significantly – bringing into doubt the usefulness of the TEF as an indicator of quality for prospective students:

> 'The problem with TEF is it doesn't really tell students what they need to know. First of all, it's of no use whatsoever at institutional level. Absolutely none whatsoever,

because there could be a subject in there that's brilliant and a subject that's rubbish and you've got no way of knowing that'.

Yet the same participant, speaking from experience of being involved with their university's TEF submission, also restated the policy position that a subject-level TEF would put unreasonable administrative strain on providers:

'Not that I'm suggesting we should have subject level TEF because I was involved in that pilot and it was an even bigger consumer of time.'

However, VP 1 also commented on the problem of using the medals system of rating,

'I think the gold, silver, bronze stuff is absolute nonsense. For example, you might have an overall satisfaction of 80%, but nestled within that there may be a subject within a satisfaction of 50%, and it makes you look at those individual subjects because you can't do well in the TEF if you don't (obtain a high overall score)'.

So it would seem from this comment that while the TEF could be considered - less accurate as a measure at a granular level, it might serve to drive up standards overall, and this is reflected in the government response to the independent review:

'We think that, not only should there be action to drive out low quality provision that does not secure good outcomes, but there should be incentives for universities and colleges to deliver excellence on all aspects of quality.' (DoE, 2021, p. 6).

It has also been pointed out that a subject-level TEF would lead to other issues. The independent review stated:

'Problems are exacerbated for subject-level TEF. All parts of the sector reported concerns about the impact of small numbers or non-reportable data at subject level. 92 FECs and APs particularly raised concern that, for smaller cohorts, they struggled to produce data that had any statistical significance and/or data that was reportable.

> They feared this put them at a disadvantage compared to other providers' (Pearce et al. 2019, p. 40).

VC 2 echoed these concerns, especially regarding data for smaller institutions:

> 'Some of it is far too binary. The data sets are really difficult when you start to drive down into small student numbers. When you start to deal with smaller providers, it becomes really tricky'.

VC 1, who had been involved in TEF consultation and worked directly with student satisfaction at their institution, stated that subject level differentiation was possible:

> 'We had action plans from different subjects for what was happening with regard to the National Student Survey, and we've also taken performance indicators like continuation and graduate outcomes, you know very, very seriously and in data driven ways'.

However, the same participant also seemed to imply that the most impactful data was qualitative rather than quantitative:

> 'If you put the medals to one side, there are a lot of data out there, which is really, really good. The provider submissions, the student submissions, the panel statements, summaries, the indicators are fantastically good'

Thus, the issue of subject-level assessment became a contested item both within and between policy, independent review and among participant responses. Quite often, it may be that agents' reactions to these contested terms are shaped by their institutional context, i.e. conceptions of quality are perceived through the meaning within the agent's university, their role and what these terms mean in practice. It might be said from the above two quotes that institutional leaders, who have a say in how the TEF is implemented, attempt to reconcile existing practices with the TEF objectives – to make them 'fit', following the institutionalist notion of cultural practice or historical path. However, the above quotes may also imply that

there is an interplay between the politically constructed language of 'measuring' and 'quality', at a coordinative level in universities, and a more pragmatic, yet equally constructed discourse of post-formative change at institutional level in higher education that seeks to provide cover for the continuation of existing practices. As Lecturer 2 put it:

> 'I don't think we've ever really established what the unit of analysis is. I don't think it is strictly meaningful, that university can be generally excellent or generally good. You can have things in place that enable people to do their best'
> 'If you can put the right things and say you have the right things in place, you can sort of bring yourself up from your metrics. That was really demonstrated that it was a lot about process and documentation rather than about what actually happened in any classroom or what anybody learned'.

Prof 5 also added that,

> 'It's (the TEF) gone for a sort of pragmatic route that I think solves nothing. What worries me is that so, for example, the NSS is being used across a lot of TEF narratives as evidence of teaching excellence'.

This is an interesting point, especially when considering the emphasis that VC 1 puts on qualitative submissions from institutions. When thinking about the changes that the TEF might bring about, in an institutional context, Bevir and Rhodes (2003) theorise that ideational meaning can be '(re)created' through narratives or arguments about how what an individual (or institution) is doing fits with tradition – at the same time that they are changing it. At the substantive level, an individual's narrative or discourse of events can also shape their understanding of it (Roe, 1994). This makes more sense when considering that outside the formalised and institutionally controlled way in which individuals and universities can take part in the discourse of the TEF through their submissions and through academics and university management being part of TEF panel discussions and consultation, there is little scope for teachers in higher education to be part of the official TEF narrative. As Prof 4 noted, at an institutional level,

> ‘teaching excellence, becomes about who can write the narrative best, who can actually construct the most convincing story.’

Prof 7 pointed out perceived risks in the introduction of the TEF:

> ‘A related challenge is that once this instrument has been in place it becomes harder to reform and revamp rather than tweak around the edges. When used to fuel market choice the challenge is sunken costs with the worst markers of quality getting intensified rather than weakened’.

Prof 7 links the TEF back to ‘market choice’ – a lexical item borrowed from policy texts but not mentioned by participants in this study as being important to teaching. However, Prof 7 was not the only respondent to link the TEF to wider shifts in HE in the UK, which is the focus of the following section.

6.4.1 Section summary

This section highlighted how policy sets up HE teaching as a failing entity by comparing it to the REF, although many participants pointed out that teaching in the UK is funded differently from research, and teaching in most UK universities is neither driven by nor strictly linked to research. The metric driven evaluation of teaching that the TEF adopts was challenged by almost all interviewees; participants who spoke positively about measuring teaching quality using metric data did so cautiously. Both participants and policy texts drew on a range of rhetorical devices to strengthen their points, although there seemed to be wide acceptance in all data that ‘teaching excellence’ is very hard to define and measure; using metrics which do not directly measure teaching was criticized by most participants who noted that it was open to linguistic gaming and manipulation by HE institutions in their TEF submissions. Some noted that data on student background could help to identify where universities could make improvements in access and educational gain, but also pointed out that the same data would directly encourage institutions to exclude students based on performance and thus undermine government objectives regarding widening access and social mobility. The discourse of TEF policy has tended to shape the way HE is framed, according to rationalist and

market driven incentives, along with the imposition, revealed at times also in participants' choice of language, of culturally imposed practices – affecting the identity of academics and the public image of higher education. The following section explores the shift in discourse towards a more market based narrative, as well as presenting and analysing data on the links between research and teaching and accountability in HE.

6.5 Wider context of TEF and HE

The following section presents and critically analyses collected data within its wider context, as well as bringing in the themes of research and teaching, and accountability. The first sub-section deals with conceptions of value and moves on to a discussion of cynicism within policy and TEF discourse.

A common thread that runs through the policy narrative is that of placing 'students at the heart of the system'. This appears to be true not only in a teaching and learning sense but also in terms of funding. As the white paper from 2011 states:

> 'By shifting public spending away from teaching grants and towards repayable tuition loans, we have ensured that higher education receives the funding it needs even as substantial savings are made to public expenditure.' (BIS, 2011, p. 4)

In this early document, references to creating a more competitive and marketized HE sector are downplayed, or couched in more opaque terms, and the vision of a HE marketplace is also set out in less direct language:

> 'Our reforms are designed to deliver a more responsive higher education sector in which funding follows the decisions of learners and successful institutions are freed to thrive; in which there is a new focus on the student experience and the quality of teaching' (ibid, p. 8).

There is a link made between teaching quality (which becomes teaching 'excellence' in later policy texts) and a 'more responsive' HE sector – perhaps directing the reader's attention away

from reforms driven by economic and market principles towards the notion of improving educational standards. 'Students at the heart of the system' (BIS, 2016) is not just a simple double entendre because the 'shift' here is also that a substantial part of the cost of public higher education is transferred to students, coupled with framing them as consumers. It is also important to note that tuition fees have been frozen since 2017 and this shortfall in funding is partly contributing to the current financial crisis that many universities are facing (Ogden and Waltmann, 2024).

In the following policy text from 2016, universities, by not being mentioned, are positioned somewhat in opposition to who the government considers the main stakeholders in higher education:

> 'We will deliver better outcomes and value for students, employers and the taxpayers who underwrite the system' (BIS, 2016, p. 8).

Compared to the 2011 white paper, the language of the 2016 document evidences a shift from educational to that more associated with business, markets and economics:

> 'Information, particularly on price and quality, is critical if the higher education market is to perform properly. Without it, providers cannot fully and accurately advertise their offerings, and students cannot make informed decisions.'

Universities become 'providers' of a service rather than educational institutions and the HE sector is considered a 'market' which has to perform, perhaps according to underlying economic and financial principles followed by the government of the day. Hall (2005, p.151) sees this reinterpretation of terms as one of the ways that policy actors (re)frame issues to suit their purpose – making sense of actions by thinking about how they are perceived by themselves and by others – striking a balance between multiple interests and identities, and by making reference to 'a set of narratives that draw heavily on past experiences and the interpretations of them that have authority in their community'.

Policy texts hone in on the public and personal financial aspects of higher education, and gains and outcomes are often couched in terms of costs versus benefits. VC 1 picked up on this theme:

> 'The other thing of course is that we're talking about a hell of a lot of money that is being spent by students and their families on higher education and regulation is coming from the view of government and obviously from families that there is a sense there should be value for money and opportunities for all.'

'Value' in this quote seems to be more closely linked to the policy meaning in that investment in education should be measured in monetary terms. However, other interviewees used it in a different context and linked the idea of value directly back to the broader mission of universities and the quality and development of university teaching. Prof 5 for example, stated:

> 'We should be really valuing scholarship and I still don't think we value scholarship which is a thing that actually everybody should be inquiring into, their own practice, understanding their field, engaging in the latest conversations in relation to their discipline. I think scholarship is the thing that could fill that gap between those two things (research and teaching) in a really good way if it was given institutional backing'.

In this way, while some of the normative arguments put forward by policy, which appeal to societal values are taken up by voices in university management and leadership, using specific lexical items to rationalise government regulation, the same terms are interpreted differently by academics, and appear to structure thought and meaning according to the practices they engage in. Placing teaching within the context of their institution, rather than on externally set outcomes or measures is another response to the TEF which was shared by academics who participated in this study and is explored in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

Building on this, the differing interpretation of 'value' in the responses from VC 1 and Prof 5 are relevant here because they represent different forms of cynicism that are apparent in: academic responses to the TEF; the discourse of academics interviewed for this study; and

arguably embedded within TEF policy itself. Carolyn Veldstra describes cynicism as a 'neoliberal affect', which is associated with neoliberal sociopolitical shifts – more specifically that cynicism is 'a feeling of living under structural conditions that curtail—in ways that are often effaced—the kinds of self-determining subjectivities that have been taken for granted as a feature of Western, liberal democracies and remain foundational to imagined modes of dissent' (Veldstra, 2014, p. iii). Paul Bernal, on the other hand, identifies a trend towards cynicism in the communication of government, business and media that questions whether 'ethical, moral, philosophical or cultural values' can be considered on a par with 'financial or economic "value"' (Bernal, 2014). The same author goes on to argue that such an approach becomes problematic when neoliberal economic and social principles are applied to subjects (such as teaching excellence) where metric data and measurements are not able to capture the full depth or hidden 'value' of the field:

> 'Being able to quantify things, to measure things, to compare and analyse can make it easy to miss the underlying issues. Focusing on the price makes it easy to miss the real value – and can turn what should be complex decisions based on combinations of ethics, morals, culture, empathy, philosophy and understanding of society into much simpler *games* based on numbers and calculations' (ibid).

Determining what 'value' (along with other lexical items) actually means in TEF discourse, then, becomes a critical matter. Gounari points out that,

> 'Market ideology is naturalized and disseminated…through the use of a commodified, de-historicized language, where terms such as knowledge, skills, access, freedom, choices, opportunities, and so forth acquire a new content and are aligned with the logic of the market' (Gounari, 2006, pp. 77-78).

Thus the language may be the same, but the inherent meaning is not. Schmidt indicates a further danger in such shifts in language when it comes to policy:

> 'Coordinated market economies, neo-liberal ideas brought in from the outside, carried and conveyed by national actors whose discourse serves to represent and reinterpret those ideas in national terms, may challenge on-going practices. If these ideas spread,

> disseminated through the media, or as managers begin voicing dissatisfaction with the status quo, using these ideas as a power resource to legitimate policy reform, they may disrupt the existing complementarities, undermining the tacit consensus, and actually get policy changes which, once introduced, could jeopardize the system as a whole' (Schmidt, 2008, p. 10).

Other authors have shown that cynicism on the part of both policy makers and citizens can affect the way policy is formed (Boswell & and Corbett, 2015), and Colin Leys supports both Gounari's and Schmidt's idea that cynicism is a necessary condition of neoliberal democracy. Assuming a more combative tone in his commentary, Leys argues that a key feature of what he terms the 'new policy regime' is that it is less concerned about listening to evidence or critics (and thus less accountable in Leys' view) and more 'fundamentally about national competitiveness and responding to global market forces' (Leys, 2009). Yet considering the academic panel submissions and student submission that make up part of the TEF evaluations, and the independent reviews that have been commissioned, it would seem that the development of the TEF both as policy and as practice via the OfS does take into account evidence and criticism; but as many participants in this study pointed out, NSS data and particularly the qualitative contributions from universities are subject to linguistic gaming and may be 'represented and reinterpreted' to reflect dominant political thought in order to obtain a higher TEF rating. There is the possibility too, then, that the discourse of teaching quality in HE is affected by a kind of 'state cynicism' or as Oscar Wilde who, through the character of Lord Palmerston in Lady Windemere's Fan put it,

> 'Cecil Graham: What is a cynic?
> Lord Darlington: A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.' (Wilde, 1893).

VP 1 highlighted that the cynicism shown towards the TEF on the part of universities and academics affected the way it has been perceived:

> 'I think also the problem is that TEF comes in the middle of a load of other **** being thrown, and so even if the OFS were to present us with this nugget of gold, we'd say

> “that's rubbish”. We don't want it, so it has created a situation where nothing it does can be viewed as positive by the sector.’

This perception, explained VP 1, was linked to regulation and a more politicised HE sector:

> ‘The space is becoming over-regulated and the OFS is extending its reach beyond education to political. It's part of an overreach by government into areas that don't really concern it’

Lecturer 1 connected the TEF to broader and historical changes taking place at a political level,

> ‘The TEF was woven into this much bigger agenda that Jo Johnson inherited from David Willetts in the Conservative government after the election of 2015. So it was to do with competition and choice, and the TEF was to provide signals to consumers about where to study’

And commented on the shift in funding that has taken place in higher education:

> ‘One of the things I regard as a problem is that most universities make their money from teaching. So teaching is what's paying the overhead’.

Prof 4 and VC 1 made links between the TEF and changes to funding and what these meant for widening participation and a diversifying student body. Prof 4 stated:

> ‘The funding regime is so different, and the objective for continuous improvement, if you go back to my constructive alignment, must mean that the TEF has helped us look at different groups of students and in a way that we didn't do before’.

This view was emphasised by VC 1,

> ‘But actually one of the things I think that is very important that the Office for Students talks about and it's not because of the Office for Students, it's for the student population. There is something about opportunities for all, so there is something about

> if you're coming from an underrepresented group, however you define that, your experience should be as good, and you're achievement should be as good as someone else who maybe has had a more advantaged route into different tertiary institutions.'

It is important to note that both these participants were involved in TEF panel discussions and had held roles in higher education management.

6.5.1 Research and teaching

Prof 4 identified a cyclical link between teaching and research:

> 'There's almost a little cycle, which is students bring you money and money allows you to do research and research brings you reputation and reputation, brings more students'.

Prof 1's comments added to this, making a connection between an academic's research profile and their career advancement – which they saw as changing slightly to take into account teaching as well – but saw this as being driven by the market, rather than the TEF:

> 'How one gets promoted, how one gets pay rises, how you get hired by another institution at a higher level or at a higher salary…traditionally that was almost entirely research based. Now things have pulled back the other way a little bit, and we do take in consideration the other things and we do in particular have teaching and focus on staff who are progressing through outstanding achievements on the teaching side. I wouldn't say any of that's driven by TEF though I do think it's it is driven by the fact that it's driven by the market'.

Prof 6 noted that less stable working conditions were also a part of the teaching vs research discussion:

> 'I think another really important point is that we don't rely, we shouldn't rely on precarious, precariously employed early career researchers'.

Taking these comments into account, an emerging theme from the discourse is that a number of reforms and changes have brought teaching into greater focus, such as: the introduction of tuition fees, cutting teaching grants, reorganization of funding so that research grants are focused on fewer researchers, lower student-staff ratios and increasing marketisation of the sector. Yet research and teaching were still reported as quite separate activities. Prof 2 noted that critical reactions to the TEF affected the way academics perceived its value:

> ‘People don't see it as being fit for purpose. So therefore people don't take it as seriously as a research assessment’.

Fellow 1 echoed these comments but speculated that the TEF had started a long term shift towards a more equal balance between research and teaching,

> ‘I think as a starting point, it's becoming established so people are talking about it more (the TEF)… So I think there's a sort of a long game, maybe to be played where teaching can have some sort of parity to research. It’s starting to do that’.

However the same participant acknowledged the primacy of research and that splitting the two practices was linked to employment, contractual issues and a division of labour,

> ‘Research, often in institutions, is the gold standard and of course then it becomes a division. So some people can sometimes be only on teaching contracts. If you don't do good research, you won't get an academic job. But then good teaching is, you know, everybody wants to do good teaching, having the time and space to do that is difficult.’

In addition, Fellow 1 also emphasised that many academics thought of themselves primarily as researchers, from the moment they embarked on a research degree. It is interesting to note

that in both these responses, the participant associates *research* with 'gold' – the highest ranking in the TEF:

> 'I think we all do PhDs to be researchers, and I think we're trained as researchers and I think research is the institutional sort of gold standard for league tables and for many of us, you know, publishing and researching is the thing that we do'.

Although Prof 5 did not see a separation of research and teaching as inherently part of the problem,

> 'Good teaching should be based on good research, and it doesn't matter in a way who's done that research'.

Reflecting on my own doctoral journey, I recall that in early doctoral training courses, I was reminded and encouraged to reflect on what it meant to 'become a researcher' – in what felt like deliberate contrast to 'being a teacher'. Although none of the participants in this study mentioned this directly, perhaps the separation of teaching and research is embedded in academic perceptions from the earliest stages of doctoral research.

6.5.2 Accountability

A number of participants stated that the TEF was necessary in order to make universities more accountable. However, most comments focused on the need for accountability than confirming or explaining how far the TEF is able to fulfil this task. Prof 2 commented on the variability of teaching in HE in the past:

> 'It's probably here to stay (the TEF) because I guess the accountability of staff and how they teach, I think probably something needed to happen. You know, back in the day people could get away with kind of... all kinds of standards of teaching and I certainly remember as an undergraduate getting some extremely poor teaching, but very good teaching as well'.

Prof 4 also saw a need for accountability:

> ‘Unless we change the funding of higher education, I think we have to have something like this to hold us to account.’

VP 1 was clearer in acknowledging the need for accountability but expressed doubt about the extent to which the TEF facilitates it:

> ‘I understand where the OFS is coming from around accountability but I don't think it's doing a great service to students because I don't think a TEF gold, silver or bronze necessarily reflects in any way the overall teaching activity of an institution’

However, the independent review seemed to imply that the TEF ratings do hold universities to account but questioned whether the way it does so is fair:

> ‘Using NSS indirectly to evaluate both ‘Teaching Quality’ and ‘Learning Environment’ with significant accountability implications for institutions has attracted criticism that this stretches the validity of the metrics’ (Pearce et al. 2019, p.34).

VC 1 raised the issue of regulation in the HE sector and how this perception affected their reactions to the TEF,

> ‘I think it is unfortunate to be honest, that the teaching excellence framework can be seen and is seen as by some people as a tool for regulation, when in fact it's very difficult to regulate with TEF. I think that's how people perceive it and they perceive it as associated with the DfE, which it is, and they associate it principally as part of the regulatory regime’.

VC 1, instead stated that the TEF, rather than regulate, encouraged universities to think about research engagement,

> ‘They think about research engagement in ways I think that they wouldn't have done so formally and systematically had it not have been for their teaching excellence framework.’

Nevertheless, across the policy texts and within participant responses, the TEF was consistently viewed as a regulatory tool for HE, for example, the OfS guidelines state,

> ‘The TEF is part of the OfS’s overall approach to regulating quality and standards.’ (OfS, 2023, p. 6).

And several participants in this study referred to the added ‘regulatory burden’ that the TEF brought to higher education.

6.5.3 Section summary

In this section, normative arguments put forward by policy about value are juxtaposed with views from academic contributors who put the policy narrative into institutional and personal context, mostly rejecting the normative policy concepts about the value of teaching; the section also examined how cynicism can operate at different levels and in different ways to either lay the foundation for, or challenge ideational change. Despite the similarity in name and acronym, participants questioned the linguistic and practical links between teaching and research, also noting that while the TEF had brought discourse on teaching to the fore, the two were seen as separate activities. Both policy and participants recognised the regulatory burden that the TEF had brought and while a greater accountability of the HE sector proposed by policy was accepted by most academics who took part in this study, most rejected it as a useful tool for students to assess institutional quality, or as a means to raise standards across the sector. The following section thus deals with the perceived discursive impact of the TEF.

6.6 TEF impact

By incorporating the voices of a range academics, in different institutional roles, into this analysis, and analysing them through the same lens as the policy narrative, this study attempts to 'look inside' as Schmidt (2008) terms it, to examine how agents may 'layer, interpret or subvert' the institutions they exist in (and which exist in them); investigating:

> 'what public actors say and do that lend insight into their ideas, that is, what they think about what to do; into their discourse, that is, what they say about what they think about what to do; into their actions, to see if deed follows words; and into the effects of their actions, to see if their ideas and discourse actually did make a difference, serving to reconstruct their institutions' (ibid, p. 9)

Thus, this section examines the perceived impact of the TEF and the discourse through which it has been enacted.

Early policy texts advocate returning power to students, through choice and 'financial power' as consumers. However, it is unclear from policy why students might be better informed than universities, employers or other stakeholders in a possible future economy; i.e. very few voices in the discourse of higher education appear to be certain about which skills are going to be sought after in the future:

> 'To be successful, institutions will have to appeal to prospective students and be respected by employers. Putting financial power into the hands of learners makes student choice meaningful' (BIS, 2011, p. 5

'Financial power' could be interpreted in a number of ways and positions students in positive terms that are typically not associated with those studying in higher education. This could be to present students: as having literal financial power (unusual for students/young people who do not come from a wealthy background nor have had time to become wealthy though work); as having power as consumers; it may also hint at the possibility of higher future earnings as graduates (known as the 'graduate premium'); it also places students firmly within a market

economy as 'neo-liberal' subjects. In addition, Frankam (2017), has argued that the TEF, through the rhetoric of its discourse and focus on student outcomes, rather than prepare students for the workforce, in fact does the exact opposite. It is also less clear how employers might feed into this system when they are not a formal part of the TEF and according to the independent review conducted by Dame Shirley Pearce 'are largely unaware of the TEF' (Pearce et al. p. 25).

TEF policy texts, often follow a fairly straightforward problem-identified – solution-offered format, in which the issues in higher education are listed or stated, followed by how these will be addressed by enacting policy to bring about change. It is interesting to note that policy phrasing also draws on modal forms of language (such as must, should, need to) which imply intention and obligation rather than a commitment to concrete action or promised or guaranteed outcomes:

> 'There are also pronounced differences in retention, degree attainment and progression to employment and further study, between students from some black and ethnic minority groups and white students, which cannot be explained by other factors such as prior educational attainment. We need to take a whole lifecycle approach to all of these challenges, looking across access, retention, attainment and progression from HE' (BIS, 2016, p. 55).

There appears to be some agreement across the sector with the issues raised in this quote, and participants in this study noted that the TEF had refocused their attention, if not directly on teaching then on other aspects that were seen as connected, such as 'access, retention, attainment and progression'. For example Prof 1 said,

> 'I think the progression metric for us is the one that's, well, at least at my level, the head of department level is the one that I keep a bit closer of an eye on because of TEF.'

And Prof 3 stated,

> ‘I think the emphasis on the progression of people from ethnic minority groups, for example, I think that's important.’

Several participants in higher level management noted that the TEF had forced universities to think more specifically about certain issues, and this was also noted by academics who were not and had not necessarily been in management positions. Lecturer 1 commented,

> ‘It's raised the profile of teaching at that sort of managerial level in universities, which is those people at the very top, like your Vice Chancellor’.

Indeed, VC 2 stated:

> ‘In some institutions there is an attainment gap and it wasn't understood, now, whereas the impetus to try and understand that and prove it so the TEF does help give some motivation around there to look into these things in more detail and have that wider conversation as an institution about how you may want to address some of those’.

And VC 1 gave a concrete example of how their institution had responded to the TEF:

> ‘We have a formal university mechanism which is looking at what is called, this is not my term, teaching excellence action plans as part of teaching excellence monitoring and it's system wide, it's institution wide and that is the way of taking a data driven approach’.

However, when examining whether these institution level moves are implemented at departmental or individual teaching level, participants gave slightly differing responses. Prof 1, when asked if the TEF had changed the way they work and teach, responded,

> ‘Probably not. The only thing that is affected I think is umm, I think we have a little bit more of an eye on progression than we used to.’

VC 1, one of the participants who in addition to being very knowledgeable about the TEF and was overall more supportive of the TEF aims and process, noted that it was difficult to prove that it is an effective tool for measuring and improving teaching:

> 'I think that to ask a question like that would think you are asking for evidence and I'm not sure whether anyone has that evidence'

Reader 1 was more direct in their assessment of the TEF's suitability of capturing teaching quality,

> 'Another very poor attempt at making judgments about something which is much more complicated than people want to acknowledge'

Prof 3 suggested that while awareness of the TEF at an institutional level was there, it was not driving change at a micro-teaching level,

> 'We still have the same questionnaires that we had before, so I'm not sure that it has really changed it to be honest'.

One reason put forward for why this might be was the institutional nature of many universities as hierarchical, top-down structures. Prof 3 noted that even where good practice or change took place at lower levels, it might go unnoticed at managerial level and by the OfS:

> 'I think you know there are lots of things you can do (to improve teaching quality), but they're not necessarily things that stand out. With TEF, the debate takes place within the Office for Students and their ideas about who they want to consult. And of course, the sector gets consulted on these things, but often what they say isn't taken seriously and also it's not the people at the ground level who are doing the teaching who are responding. (It's) the people higher up, so you need to have a distribution of both.'

The work of John Searle can go some way to explain this further, and why the TEF might not be effective in bringing about change. He argues that institutions are consciously constructed

(or created) through words and actions, but may become subconsciously embedded in the people that use and exist within them, even as they evolve. Agents use and exist in institutions as part of a 'hierarchy of institutional facts' (Searle, 1995, p. 140) and Schmidt names these as part of agents' 'background abilities' – enabling them to speak and act according to discursive institutionalist notions of how people 'cope' with the world and follow the external and internal rules of institutions (Schmidt, 2008, p. 13). This is not to say that change cannot happen from a bottom-up perspective since many participants reported that their departments already had in place measures to keep teaching adaptive and responsive. However, as Schmidt (ibid, p. 19) notes (and as Prof 3 also notes), the problem with top-down, or top-to-top discursive practices is that legitimation for ideas and action remains very hierarchical, with elites at a managerial level initiating and communicating about shifts in ideas, and the discourse then becomes too focused on these ideas, rather than on the 'on-going contestation in deliberative discursive processes' (ibid), which Prof 3 and other participants allude to. This thesis has aimed to tap into such 'deliberative discursive practices' by listening to the critical voices at grassroots higher education teaching, as well as incorporating viewpoints from agents at university managerial level who have contributed to the 'top-to-top' communication that was part of the communicative discourse of policy formation.

The independent review also noted that universities were perceived as having less agency than the OfS:

> 'There is insufficient opportunity for the rating to be influenced by an institution's articulation of their educational mission and how it leads to the distinctive learning opportunities and outcomes they aim to provide' (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 37).

This brings into question whether there is a further separation or disconnect between the (sometimes professionally written) university submissions, as a crafted institutional text – designed to represent their university in the best possible light, and the communicative discourse of TEF policy and OfS guidelines, which set out quite clearly what the TEF panel judges are looking for:

> ‘Evidence should be considered more compelling, and greater weight placed on it, where the submission demonstrates the provider has a clear understanding of its students, tailors its approaches to its mix of students and courses and demonstrates impact on its students’ (OfS, 2023, p. 63).

VC 1, on the provider submissions said that universities were expected to,

> ‘Just tell us a little bit about what you as an institution are trying to do in terms of the education you provide and if there was one thing that I think you will be able to see in looking through the provider submissions is, is this an institution that knows its own students?’

However, Prof 6, along with other participants thought that provider submissions were vulnerable to ‘gaming’:

> ‘As soon as you introduce measures which are then connected to prestige and competition between institutions, you find yourself in a situation where the institutions are going to game the system in order to climb the ranks’.

Prof 3 added,

> ‘I think there's a lot more time spent on kind of things that will look good in the TEF’.

While the intention to produce effective change in universities may be apparent in the OfS guidelines, they may also serve to help institutions tailor their submissions to meet expectations, rather than enact meaningful changes. Many participants explained that different measures of teaching quality (and ways to improve teaching) had already existed in their departments and universities long before the TEF and that what had changed was the way the data from these measures was being reported. Fellow 1 spoke about how the hierarchical nature of their university affected academic reactions:

> ‘I think it's treated as we're being told to do this, which then which then forms a sort of resistance, you know, by quite a lot of people… So you sort of get this kind of top down, bottom up resistance’.

Lecturer 2 was somewhat more blunt in describing how the TEF was perceived within their department,

> ‘My department doesn't have an approach to teaching excellence and we don't have one because my department is dominated by people who would regard the TEF as something that needs to go away’.

However, the same participant clarified these remarks by commenting on teaching excellence in their department,

> ‘My department doesn't have an approach to teaching excellence as a thing. Does it have things that are to do with teaching excellence? Yes.’

Thus, Lecturer 2 implies that academics maintain agency within their own domain. TEF policy acknowledges this to some extent but using metrics to guide the process may mean that the context of academic agency is lost, and remains outside the communicative discourse of the TEF. Ironically, Lecturer 2 also points out that the use of metrics and keeping the discourse higher up the chain of hierarchy, means that for many lecturers the administrative burden associated with the TEF is avoided,

> ‘They don't see it, so kind of measuring the TEF is actually quite good because it doesn't place much of a burden on academics. They kind of can just leave it to other people.’

Time spent on TEF submissions and awareness about it differed among participants. Both the independent review (Pearce et al;, 2019, p. 82) and several participants highlighted that the administrative burden of the TEF was taking time away from teaching and teaching related

activities. The Department of Education was responsive to this concern, issuing the following statement in 2021:

> ‘This Government is determined to help refocus university resources on the front-line activities of teaching and research at this time of significant pressure on providers, alongside a commitment to permanently reduce bureaucratic burden. We also recognise that many providers have felt that too much burden was imposed upon them under the TEF, and we will want the OfS to ensure that, when implementing a revised TEF, they minimise the administrative burden on providers’ (DoE, 2021, p. 6).

However, when the data for this study was collected (early 2024) various participants continued to highlight the high burden of TEF administration. VC 2 said that,

> ‘I think there is a risk around and administrative burden on institutions and there is more regulatory requirements than there's ever been’.

The independent review also raised this as an issue, stating that among other concerns was,

> ‘the impact of TEF on academics’ time to conduct research and increases in administrative load’ (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 80).

VP 1 was very direct in their assessment of the cost-benefit analysis of the TEF,

> ‘If you saw the amount of time and resource we spent in OfS returns that we could spend in teaching and support of teaching learning, it would make you weep.’

Prof 3 also appeared to suggest that the TEF had reduced the agency of academics to find local solutions to improving learning and teaching,

> ‘One of the effects it (the TEF) has on people who are in management roles is that they feel obliged to kind of make the lives of people teaching kind of more difficult rather than making it easier and kind of trying to get them to think through themselves’

Prof 5 brought together some of the frustrations that other participants expressed by placing the TEF into the context of a sector in which a number of universities are facing grave financial pressure, and which many within the system felt to already be suffering from over regulation:

> ‘That almost makes it feel like that their role (academics) is to solve all of society's ills and so the TEF is one of the things that sits within a set of scrutinies of the practices of higher education that feel overwhelmingly burdensome to a system that was never intended to be any of these things’.

As mentioned in the main TEF policy paper from 2016, the government envisions students as the agents driving change in HE:

> ‘This Government has therefore chosen to put choice for students at the heart of its higher education reform strategy’ (BIS, 2016, p. 11).

And,

> ‘A competitive and dynamic higher education sector needs students who actively and regularly challenge universities to provide teaching excellence and value for money’ (ibid, p. 53).

The OfS guidelines emphasise that universities must focus on making ‘excellent’,

> ‘The student experience aspect, which focuses on the extent to which teaching, learning, assessment and the educational environment deliver an excellent educational experience for each provider’s students’ (OfS, 2023, p. 10).

In contrast, participant responses, as well as the independent review, emphasised that university environments, including aspects which go beyond the formally educational and also include social and extracurricular factors, were equally important, not only for students’ university experience but also the role they play in student choice.

In addition, most participants reported that their departments already took student feedback into account, to monitor and raise quality, and in the language of the TEF, to improve outcomes. Prof 1 explained that,

> 'We we're always talking to students. We're always trying to learn off the, you know, off what the students think is effective. We're always trying to optimize our outcomes.'

Prof 3 spoke about activities which they had organised in a previous institution for staff,

> 'We did quite a lot of small events and during the year we had people coming to talk about different things, you know, about equality stuff and about curriculum issues and about modes of assessment.'

Nevertheless, Fellow 1 suggested that national/formalised training for academics provided limited scope for improving teaching,

> 'I've done the senior fellowship of the Higher Education Academy… And to be honest, it was a bit of an exercise to get it done rather than actually sort of reflect and learn on one's own practice.'

Fellow 1 also commented on agency within the TEF process,

> 'There's a difference between the REF and the TEF there and the REF you were very much involved, so you'll have your own outputs. You'll have impact statements or potentially be involved and so there's a real ownership, if you can do it, it's down to you. If the university gets gold I don't think there's necessarily a feeling that it was contributed to by a department. It was definitely at the institutional level.'

The same participant expanded on how/why the TEF differs from the REF:

> 'I think some smaller institutions that may be more practice led are probably much more oriented towards teaching and practice and I think in a policy perspective, I think

> the REF is much more embedded now in institutions than the TEF is. I don't think it has been implemented within the department. We don't hear much and I guess from a policy perspective, the reason for that is, it is institutional.'

So perhaps academics have had more time to be heard within REF discourse, but for the TEF there is still a disconnect between the personal and the institutional. Universities, at a higher level, seem to be the owners of TEF discourse. Even for Fellow 1 who was engaged with the TEF saw it as someone else's matter, suggesting that gaps between discursive communities (policy, university management, academics) have yet to be bridged when it comes to the TEF.

6.6.1 Section summary

This section has shown that policy positions students as neo-liberal subjects and adopts a marketised discourse to place emphasis on expected student outcomes, rather than on identifying good teaching practices and facilitating knowledge sharing on teaching in the HE community, as identified by various participants as a way of improving the quality of teaching provision in universities. While most participants considered 'teaching excellence' to be an empty signifier 'my excellence will not be your excellence' (VC1), those that were in management positions and thus had a broader view of their institution and its objectives, noted that the TEF metrics had helped to focus minds on structural issues such as participation, access and learning gain. Several participants indicated that the TEF discourse was unevenly distributed towards higher management – missing out on the grass-roots learning and teaching activities that many academics are involved in. The work of John Searle and the theoretical framework of discursive institutionalism were instrumental in exploring how/why institutional practice is constructed and embedded through the words and actions of those who operate in them – and how this affects the way that TEF policy comes to be enacted, bringing about or provoking a reaction against, change. The data also revealed a discursive 'disconnect' between the personal and the institutional.

6.7 Chapter summary and conclusion

While broad concepts regarding the purpose of higher education appear to be shared across discursive communities, normative arguments expressed in policy and those who create and support (parts of) it, are pitted against cognitive-normative ideas put forward by those who are affected by it. Both communities draw on expert knowledge but the academics interviewed for this study tended to draw on experience and context to give their ideas validity. Policy texts as well as participants deployed a range of rhetorical strategies and persuasive devices.

This chapter brought together data from TEF policy and interviews with academics to examine, thematically, through the lens of discursive institutionalism, discourses on teaching quality, and the role and impact of the TEF in higher education. The broader context of contemporary and historical changes to the higher education sector, along with academic agency, experience and self-reflection were brought out and also informed the analysis. In addition to the above summary of the chapter's main findings, the following chapter discusses in more detail how the data helped to answer the principle research questions and explores in more depth the key discussion points which emerged from the analytical process.

7. Discussion

The following chapter discusses the key themes to emerge from the analysis and interpretation of the policy and interview data. The first section examines how the four main research questions have been addressed. The second section (key findings) critically brings together the key discussion points that were raised in the previous data chapter and reintroduces the literature in the field to analyse the discursive interplay between existing findings about the TEF and the bearing the data from this study has on it. The fourth section contextualises this thesis within existing research and the final section identifies the contributions made to the field.

7.1 Returning to the research questions

I. How is the quality of teaching defined, measured, monitored and incentivised within the TEF?

7.1.1 Defined

Policy texts tend to define 'teaching excellence' according to measured outcomes, which according to both academic literature and the participants in this study, may be an overly reductive process because the proxies being used are not adequately representative of the quality of the multifaceted nature of teaching and learning.

7.1.2 Measured

The TEF prioritises metrics as an indicator of teaching quality, using data from student satisfaction surveys, continuation rates and graduate earnings, as well as qualitative data from providers' written statements and student submissions. Independent review and responses collected for this thesis questioned the usefulness and validity of metric data because the TEF contains no direct definition of teaching. As highlighted in the literature review in this thesis, various academic responses to the TEF are also critical of the way metric data is used, suggesting that both the underpinning concepts - 'teaching' and 'excellence' - of the TEF are unrepresentative of what the framework intends to do .

7.1.3 Monitored

TEF policy and guidelines foresee that each round of the TEF will result in universities being awarded a gold, silver or bronze (or 'requires improvement') rating. Universities also receive two 'underpinning' ratings for student experience and student outcomes. Academic responses on this topic indicated that the 'medals' system oversimplified the teaching taking place overall in an institution and did not provide students with detailed enough information. Independent review and literature also noted that the ratings system used by the TEF did not allow institutions to clearly articulate their educational mission, or how they provide learning opportunities and guarantee outcomes.

7.1.4 Incentivised

TEF policy and OfS guidelines couch the incentivisation of quality in terms of driving out lower quality and making a link to outcomes. Within this framework, institutions are nominally encouraged to pursue 'excellence' in any way they see fit – so it appears there is a large degree of flexibility in the framework, as long as outcomes match policy/government expectations. While the literature on the TEF highlighted the gap between measured outcomes and the complexity of HE teaching, some participants in this research recognised that the TEF could have an impact at a broader, institutional level. However, interviewees also noted that the TEF was more about process and documentation than about raising standards in university teaching spaces. This is a crucial point, because the discursive framework of the TEF has begun to institutionalise the way teaching is perceived, evaluated and practised and this was noted by several participants in this research. Through the logics of rationalist incentive structures, historically dependent path rules and culturally imposed practices and identities, the TEF will have a significant impact.

II. How has the TEF policy been implemented in UK higher education institutions?

Policy mostly sees the TEF as functioning at a higher, institutional level, as part of regulation of quality and standards – implemented by the OfS, and that this higher level framework will drive up teaching at the micro level. However, this becomes problematic in practice because, as much of the literature points out, there is a disconnect between TEF processes and goals and the way teaching happens in institutions. In addition, both literature and academics

questioned for this study perceived the TEF more as an extension of existing accountability tools, coming from outside their institution, rather than a framework for improving teaching quality. Many respondents noted that the TEF seemed to be happening 'in the background', with limited observable changes taking place in teaching environments.

III. What are the perceived implications, in the academic community, of its implementation?

The key policy documents and independent review emphasise that the TEF carries significant implications in terms of institutional accountability. Academic responses in literature focus more on the effects the TEF narrative has on the way the purpose of higher education is discussed, perceived and implemented – making a link to broader government ambitions to harness human capital and to economic productivity. The present study found that, among the academics interviewed, the implications of the TEF were concentrated more at a strategic management level, rather than at grass roots teaching level and may contribute to discursive gaps between university leadership, professional staff and academics. Furthermore, interview data showed that the discourse of the TEF is part of bigger, historical and ongoing changes in the higher education sector; that the discourse of TEF policy is driving institutional change. The political and economic ideas in policy are discursively constructed through the TEF and while some of the academics interviewed in this research played down this institution-level impact, others recognised that the discourse of the TEF is serving to codify and normalise some of the neo-liberal practices foreseen in policy.

IV. Are there any alternative frameworks that would enable improvement in the quality of teaching in higher education?

Literature in the field suggests that frameworks to improve teaching quality need to include formal recognition and rewards for good teaching, alongside systems that ensure quality and enhancement (Cheng, 2017; Schuck et al., 2008; Ashwin, 2022). There is also the suggestion that research and teaching should be more closely linked – and acknowledged as complex. Collegial reflection, deeper consideration of ethical and moral approaches to learning, as well as risk-taking are also put forward as important factors in developing and delivering meaningful and impactful teaching in HE. Responses in the current study largely supported these ideas and advocated other ways to maintain and raise teaching quality, such as using an

institutional, dialogical approach. The 'emergent pedagogies' described by Wood (2017), and constructive alignment were also repeated by participants in this study, however the power in the ideas behind such approaches have not yet been taken up in the dominant, policy driven discourse of the TEF.

7.2 Key findings

The data collected during interviews with a range of academics, some of whom have been directly involved in consultation on the TEF, when put into the contextual evolution of policy, revealed the following:

The development of a specific discourse surrounding the TEF has emerged – through policy, and reactions to it in the academic community, both of which draw on connected narratives, which often overlap – i.e. the ideas expressed in policy frequently become 'frames of reference' for other stakeholders when speaking or writing about the TEF.

Overall, the policy texts and interviewees evidenced self-contradictory statements which reflected the enormous difficulty actors have in discursively constructing very complex problems/solutions. In this sense, institutions can be used not only to normalise policy paradigms but also to codify the ideas and practices they sustain. Thus, conflicting ideas which were identified in policy were either taken up or reformulated by academic staff, particularly at leadership level; at the same time, existing practices, often at individual and departmental levels were used to structure thoughts about learning and teaching. Various respondents stated that a more collaborative and less competitive approach to teaching excellence was needed in the HE sector, and that the discourse of the TEF pushed institutions towards the latter, in line with findings by Cui et al. (2021).

Various interviewees placed the TEF into the context of an evolving, deeper regulation and management of higher education, aligning somewhat with reactions in the literature (Wood and O'Leary, 2019; Heaney & Mackenzie, 2017), with the latest move seen to be focusing on pedagogical control, without engaging with the complexities of teaching and learning.

The concept of 'teaching excellence' appears to have developed within TEF discourse: participants in this study gave concrete examples of what they thought constituted 'excellent' teaching and these were often offered as a response rather than a clear definition; policy offered little in the way of examples or definitions; as a result, participants appear to have adopted a pragmatic view in which 'teaching excellence' can be applied, as noted by Sanders et al. (2020), to system-wide, institutional contexts, as a broader guiding principle. Policy texts also seem to develop towards this more pragmatic position – leaving the specific details of how teaching is done up to individual providers. This ties in with literature which identifies a split between those who think of teaching as enhancing/innovative (academics and students) and a more performative idea of teaching (policy texts) (Gunn and Fisk, 2013).

The impact of the TEF, in the eyes of academics in this study, has been somewhat incidental. If teaching quality has improved at individual, departmental or institutional level, it is because the reforms have focused attention on HE teaching in general. The theoretical assumption that actors are both strategic and socialised means that any change will necessarily be institutional; whether through leadership channels, informal networks or individual belief, the interviews showed that academic staff maintain the capacity to control (but not dominate) both the meaning of and ideas about teaching 'excellence' through their own discourse (and in their practice). To some extent, this is foreseen in later policy texts.

While nuanced discussions about teaching - and the many ways it was reported to happen by interviewees in this study - are mostly absent from TEF policy and guidelines, this does not mean that excellent teaching is not recognised, supported and encouraged at institutional level as the testimonies given by participants in this thesis bear witness; the nebulous character of the term 'teaching excellence' may even serve to represent the ways in which individual approaches and collective professionalism lead to 'excellent' learning outcomes. Yet the TEF, with its emphasis on metrics, struggles to capture this, turning learning/teaching into a reductive rather that a formative process (Kreber, 2002), and as noted by Bartram et al. (2018), academics' reactions to the TEF were more negative when it was perceived more as a management/marketing tool – indicating relative or comparative success (Moore et al. 2016).

The coordinative/communicative discourse of policy and university leadership, maintaining a certain power over ideas, has created the ideational conditions for limited institutional change. However, institutional change has also been hampered by a perceived lack of credible cognitive argumentation in policy and process among the academic community, e.g. using unreliable metrics as proxies to measure the quality of teaching at institutional and national level (the validity of statistical techniques have also been questioned). The effects of what Ball (2015) terms 'structured agency' were apparent both in policy texts and interview responses, and it was possible to observe categories of responses which McKay and Robson (2023) grouped into: TEF as opportunity, as subjugation, or as disruption to institutional relationships. Policy- and institutional-led changes tended to be seen as top-down approaches and highlighted the discursive nature of the TEF in its institutional setting; participants, as suggested by Barkas et al. (2019), did sometimes frame the TEF as a normalising regulatory power being imposed from outside (or above). The same authors cited the TEF as a possible site of discursive, if not actual, subversion and resistance – and this was perhaps referred to in policy as a 'crafty mutually convenient disengagement contract among distracted academics and instrumentalist students'. However, the majority of academic voices in this study did not mention complicity among or between any groups. Various participants considered that universities had the potential to question democratic norms and make positive critical contributions to public debate but did not make specific reference to the TEF as a point of departure for resisting or subverting coercive control through policy.

The name 'teaching excellence framework' is not widely considered to be an accurate reflection of the purposes or impacts of the legislation, leading to the setting up and activities of the OfS, under TEF policy. However, the TEF name has stayed because of government insistence on its 'brand' value – that it will become recognised by students as an indicator of institutional quality – this has been challenged both by academics and independent review. However, various participants in the study noted that both the narrative and linguistic devices employed in TEF policy and OfS guidelines had successfully focused attention more generally on the quality of teaching in higher education, and had particularly focused minds at management and strategic level.

Scholarship as critical engagement with a broad range of topics, was a key term that came out of the participant interview data; it was cited as a driver of improvement in teaching quality and as a way to link teaching and research. As noted in the previous chapter, the power of such ideas can help form agents' views, as well as give those views cognitive validity. However, the idea of 'scholarship' has not become normative, perhaps because it failed to take root in TEF policy or wider TEF discourse outside of academic reflection. The idea of scholarship in teaching may also not have entered the TEF discourse because those that cited it did not link it to the specific measurable outcomes that the TEF values; 'scholarship' is thus thrice removed: from policy, from TEF measures and from public discourse on the TEF.

In the academic narrative on the TEF, emphasis was given to the historical social functions of higher education as places of knowledge production and students' engagement with these practices as a way to equip them with the skills needed to enter the workforce and develop the critical and creative approaches that a healthy society depends on. This view was not taken up significantly in policy, or by the OfS, perhaps because it does not fit into the logic of political appropriateness that TEF policy texts adopted.

The data examined in this thesis supports earlier claims (e.g. Wilcox, 2020) that the TEF has foregrounded certain educational and political ideologies, through policy, and that there is a disconnect, also supported by interview data, between policy and practice; furthermore, academics who were more engaged with the TEF as practice highlighted that there is something of a battleground between policy, provider submissions and the discursive silences of academic voice, whose perspectives are vital at the meso-level of HE teaching and learning (French and Thomas, 2020). The absence of a critical, experienced, academic narrative in the TEF means that fundamental input from academics is left out or 'discursively silenced'. Depth of knowledge and detail, often based on student interactions and student centred learning and approaches to teaching is thus absent from the TEF discourse, making it harder to include (and thus disseminate) strategies to improve teaching quality, located within the academy, that participants in this study, and existing literature cited as being important (Skelton, 2007). In addition, the moral and ethical basis for teaching, along with elements such as invention, risk-taking, enthusiasm, and energy also gets left out (Su and Wood, 2017).

The historical development of the university, as a motor of social, economic and individual change in the UK - that participants elaborated on - can be linked to a deeper questioning of the meanings of 'public' or 'common' good. Non-pecuniary rewards that are brushed over in the policy discourse were highlighted by participants as important collective economic and social outcomes. Many participants recognized that HE needs to equip students with appropriate skills to enter the workforce, but did not necessarily consider such skills to be the end-means of going to university.

An impactful response from at least two academics in the present study focused on what Hall (2016) has called 'post-welfare capitalism', linked to austerity and privatisation. Emotional examples were given of the shifting of the state as provider and owner of essential services such as health and social care, to one of oversight and regulation; and in some cases of these services being de facto passed on to higher education providers. These views were also linked to scepticism about using a market approach to regulate pedagogy and teaching (e.g. Graham, 2019).

As mentioned by various participants, the TEF fits into specific historical debates about quality in HE and the purpose and role universities play in preparing individuals (and society) for an uncertain future. While the push for change may come from external factors, changes at faculty level happen due to the 'experiences, actions, language and thoughts' of academics (Crebbin, 1997, p. 22). What the TEF does not account for, but which took place in the interviews, is that policy in its much broader historical and political context will be critiqued and interpreted by the same people in academia tasked with implementing it. A number of participants, at several hierarchical levels vigorously defended universities as places of critical scholarship – questioning power and the discourse of those who wield it.

Although it is a contested term, 'teaching excellence' has nevertheless become a focus for the ideational conditions of change, being employed across and within institutions to express differing interests from government, policy-makers, and university stakeholders. The discursive strategies used to either promote or critique TEF policy objectives show that while agents' positionality may differ, engagement with the TEF is there; the discursive construction of what it means is linked more to how each agent or producer of a text wishes to employ it

as a lexical tool, rather than any broadly agreed on meaning or measure of either 'teaching' or 'excellence'. Several participants in the present study suggested that TEF methodology was subject and susceptible to both statistical and linguistic 'gaming'.

'Teaching excellence' as a term remains a contested and deeply problematic element of the 'Teaching' excellence framework (as does the definition of 'excellence') although as noted in the previous chapter, the brand value of the acronym (and perhaps it being recognisable by its similarity, in name, to the REF) was enough to convince the government of its continued use. Most participants were able to give anecdotal and comprehensive definitions of what constitutes quality teaching – but the myriad nature and complexity of responses indicated that an agreed on definition is allusive; measuring a contested term, as the TEF attempts to do is thus very difficult. Interview responses not only confirmed this but also lent credibility to the idea that normalised discourse can give rise to change through the power of the flexibility of its meaning; in this vein, Frankham (2017) has already noted that changes in processes often begin with changes in discourse and the official rhetoric of the TEF in policy is not only an illustration or idea – it can also become the way in which social reality is constructed and maintained (Suspitsyna, 2010).

Universities have been construed by policy as 'providers' in a higher education 'market'. This is one way in which policy (re)frames the issues in HE so that they suit a particular purpose – taking into account the way they are seen by different audiences, with multiple interests and identities. The authority of policy texts also comes from a narrative that draws on the (re)construction of past and present experiences and a broader vision of economic and political principles that resonate with the public and can be used by interested actors to justify change. Equally, many participants focused on the use of neo-liberal terms in TEF discourse to critique the disconnect between the language of HE reform and putting policy into practice.

An unexpected feature of the discourse was the way in which some rhetorical devices revealed much deeper meanings than at face value. Cynicism, for example, was identified in policy as a device to blur the difference and nuance between - for example - ethical, moral, metric and social principles; it was also identified in participant responses as part of a 'neo-liberal affect',

a feature of Western democracy that allows for self-determination, subjectivity and can form the basis for imagined and real modes of dissent.

A key finding in this thesis was that the academics who were interviewed were very well informed about the above mentioned developments in the higher education sector over the last twenty to thirty years, and the shifting perceptions of the role(s) universities have to play in society; moreover, they wanted to engage discursively with the TEF under these terms. It was perhaps for this reason that few participants were willing to go into depth about the black box, proxy measurement approach of TEF metrics (Crockford, 2020) and spoke about this in fairly dismissive ways. Instead, participants appeared to turn the concept of discursive silence on its head – that is, by essentially dismissing the colonising linguistics of a neo-liberal policy approach to teaching as a means to force compliance, rather than reinforcing professionalism, they were able to reject the idea – normalised through public and policy discourse (Lynch, 2006) - of education as a market commodity.

If neoliberal discourse has been enmeshed into HE policy, as described by Maisuria and Cole (2017) then it is no surprise that academics also draw on the same discourse both as everyday language to talk about their practice but also to identify and resist the social regularities that these discursive moves make possible. Although they expressed the role of government in different ways, many participants saw the TEF as part of a continuing over regulation of universities, i.e. as governmentality that 'counts, describes, defines, that brings everything under its gaze' (Scheurich, 1994, p.304). In this respect, participants' responses aligned somewhat with the critical literature on the TEF. Many acknowledged the need for accountability but made clear that the TEF failed to achieve this.

Interview questions about the impact of the TEF prompted respondents to highlight that tools to measure and improve teaching quality already existed in their institution, well before the introduction of the TEF. Several participants also pointed out that information about student satisfaction and feedback on teaching collected at institutional level remained unchanged but that the way it was reported had changed – most often to achieve higher scores in TEF measures; i.e. that methods had altered to meet OfS expectations rather than enact change. Where literature has questioned whether the TEF is providing better information for students,

this was echoed by many participants, despite being a TEF priority. The validity of TEF proxies and the methodology used to interpret data were spoken about in critical terms by participants, and extensively in the literature (Weston and McKeown, 2020; Shattock, 2018; Rudd, 2017; Balckmore et al., 2016). Although there appeared to be a somewhat cohesive discursive community among academics, either as authors of TEF-critical literature or participants in this study, descriptive techniques did differ; some participants referred to TEF 'gaming' while the literature calls it 'institutional polishing' (Ahmed, 2017; Thomas and French, 2020). Nevertheless, this 'gaming' or 'polishing' was seen to obscure TEF methodology, reducing well-intentioned policy aims such as social mobility and a reduction of inequality in the HE system to discursive gestures, blocking rather than facilitating a frank policy engagement with the complex contexts of higher education (Crockford, 2020). Participants alluded to the fact that university submissions to the TEF were often 'constructed', as noted by Matthews and Kotzee (2019).

There was agreement across all data sources that the administrative burden of the TEF was too high and was taking away time and resources that could be spent directly on improving the quality of teaching, and teaching related activities. The need for accountability was aired both in policy and participant responses; perceived objectives for accountability, however, differed. Participants tended to side with authors such as Williams (2010) and Salter and Tapper (2000), who argued that quality assurance agencies have so far steered universities towards the performative goals of the BIS. Academics who took part in this study were mostly negative about the administrative burden that the TEF has placed on departmental leaders and this view tied in with authors who stated that changing discourses inside universities were shaping the priorities of those that work in them (Amann, 2003).

As put forward by Brady and Bates (2016), participants often noted the tendency for teaching to become something that can be administered, rather than organically grown from within institutions. In addition, the complexity (if not the impossibility) of measuring or evaluating teaching quality became apparent both in the contradictory discourse in both policy texts and in participant responses and reflected the need for an evidence-based, interdisciplinary approach to exploring it (French and O'Leary, 2017), alongside a more flexible discourse that is able to encompass critical views and input from across the higher education sector.

At the same time, other participants felt that the TEF was something that was happening in the background – noting a certain amount of indifference or ignorance towards its existence. Some participants also felt marginalised, as found by O'Leary, Cui and French (2019). Exasperated and cynical responses might also reflect that the TEF has had a negative impact on academics' self-identity, as reported by Perkins (2019).

Many participants recognised the need for benchmarking and continuous improvement in higher education teaching; many also drew on their personal experience, institutional context and expertise in the sector to question whether the TEF is the most appropriate way to achieve these goals. The use of metrics and proxies, along with qualitative submission which are subject to rhetorical and linguistic 'gaming' also raised doubts among participants. What came through from the interviews is that the TEF needs to be put into historical context and considered as part of a broader shift in the social and political narrative of higher education reform.

7.3 Context and contribution to the field

7.3.1 Policy in historical and linguistic context

By tracing the changes that higher education has gone through over the past thirty years or so, I have attempted to put the TEF into its historical context; this is also something which interviewees stressed was important. Furthermore, thinking about the TEF as a linguistic and political tool of the government, and the discursive silence that many academics referred to, helped to position it as part of broader shifts towards the language and practice of a higher education 'marketplace'. Participants also emphasised the importance of putting the TEF into its historical and linguistic context, as well as the wider role of universities, not only to understand the issues facing higher education but also to find realistic solutions to the challenges being faced. The analysis they are able to provide should be a more prominent part of TEF evaluations – it is crucial in order to construct discursively rich, collaborative approaches to teaching and learning.

7.3.2 Policy-practice dynamic

When asked about alternative ways to improve teaching in HE, many participants referenced, using similar terms, the 'emergent pedagogies', identified by Wood (2017), often stating that consolidated and collaborative efforts to evaluate and improve teaching within their departments already existed; the TEF might be seen to focus minds at management level by introducing a discourse of competition and a broader emphasis on quality. However, most academics questioned in this study emphasised specific, qualitative pedagogical practices which the TEF either brushes over or delegates to institutions, which because of the quantitative nature of the TEF, are difficult to capture – explaining to some extent why it has become a system to be statistically and linguistically 'gamed'. By gathering nuanced and complex contributions from a range of academics, at different levels of hierarchy and in different institutional roles,about their experiences of developing and providing quality teaching and learning, sometimes over long and varied careers in higher education, this thesis also attempts to emphasise the crucial importance of non-measurable elements of teaching and learning, which the TEF in its current form largely omits.

7.3.3 Voice of academics

Capturing a clear academic narrative, which I argue the TEF process misses out on (or silences) was one of the key motivations for conducting this research. During the interviews I carried out, participants expressed themselves openly and articulately and showed that they were aware of the power of ideas and discourse that the TEF uses. As the interviews played out, it became apparent that to engage with policy, participants engaged with its associated discourse; however, it was also noted that to challenge (and support) the principles of the TEF (which many interviewees did) it was also necessary to draw on differing discourses – rooted in the language of scholarship, political engagement and lived experience. This was already hinted at in the literature – i.e. TEF policy as a 'hyperreality' (Canning, 2019) vs the 'real' knowledge of higher education practitioners. The power of these academic voices lies in their unique and shared experiences, interactions with students and fellow staff and their scholarship and reflection in the field of pedagogy; this has been presented in this thesis but in its present form, the TEF does not fully utilise these perspectives.

7.3.4 Discursive institutionalism

Looking at participants' responses in detail revealed that they were able not only to tap into (and logically reject) the normalising discourse of TEF policy but also put forward persuasive arguments through the power of their own ideas based on individual and shared experience, scholarship and capacity to control the meaning of those ideas through their own cognitive arguments.

While participants were not immune to the normalising argumentation of some policy themes (such as accountability and social mobility) the same discursive strategies allowed them to use common frames of reference to justify their ideas using expert knowledge and the logics of causation – building on and adding to arguments already made in the literature (e.g. Morrish 2019; Huxtable, 2022).

Academics who took part in this study employed a range of rhetorical devices to build their arguments, tacitly noting that the political nature of change is often socially constructed. As strategic, institutional actors, they seemed to acknowledge the ideational preconditions of change that come from policy discourse but also offered more locally grounded examples – reinforcing the idea that one way to be universal is to be individual (Mendelson, 1979) – that is, drawing on critical, professional reflection and the 'complexities and absurdities' of real life.

8. Conclusion

This chapter begins with a comment on broader developments in HE regulation, followed by a recap of the insights from the research. A recapitulation of the underlying elements of the study are also briefly presented. I offer some reflections on the methodology and the theoretical framework as they evolved in practice and how they helped me to answer the principle research questions. The chapter closes with three possibilities for future research which the thesis has opened up.

8.1 Recap of insights

As a researcher looking at the language and discourse of the TEF, it was tempting to dismiss comments that adopted a cynical or ironic tone as being the result of personal frustration or bitterness towards a sector which is going through turbulent times - in the same way other public services have been – and this was apparent in a rejection of reforms of their practice, and/or a way of manifesting resistance to social and political changes, coming from what many viewed as a government hostile to their view of higher education. Yet these comments are powerful precisely because they indicate that the impact of the TEF, in the context of wider changes to the higher education sector, has been highly personal. Education professionals value their role, and the role of their institutions in society very highly, very few of them are in it for financial gain – and many expressed a belief in the power that higher education has to transform the lives of those who are able to benefit from it, displaying obvious pride in being part of a system that makes that possible. It makes sense then that their responses to reforms which they consider detrimental to their profession, are charged not only with critique but also thinly disguised anger and dismay. Unexpected rhetorical devices (such as cynicism) revealed deeper and more nuanced aspects of the TEF discourse, both in policy, the literature and in academic responses; such as neo-liberal affects and modes of dissent.

The overlapping narratives of policy and academic practice mean that ideational turns in policy also become frames of reference for those discussing and affected by the TEF in institutional contexts. However the normalising discourse of policy has not fully taken grip within the academic community partly because of perceived flaws in TEF methodology and partly due to

academics maintaining control over ideas and practices in teaching through their own discourse. In addition, a perceived lack of cognitive argumentation in policy has limited the impact of the TEF at grassroots level, while nevertheless creating the conditions for ideational change at leadership level. Within the discursive community of academia, scholarship was cited as a key part of continued improvement in teaching and learning but does not appear to have entered into the discourse of policy or public debate about the TEF.

Improvements in the quality of teaching in HE were perceived as mostly incidental since the introduction of the TEF, with many academics in this study citing existing practices to ensure quality of teaching. Nonetheless, the TEF was seen as having an impact at strategic, management level and as a focusing minds on certain indicators such as widening participation.

Academic responses in the current research emphasised the historical development and importance of higher education as places of social function (including individual and societal non-pecuniary rewards) and knowledge production and the effects these have on the students and their learning. Almost all respondents in this research saw universities as places of critical and creative engagement, often in a politicised way, however this view does not appear to fit with the logic of political appropriateness of policy and thus does not feature in the policy narrative.

The discursive construction, in policy, of higher education as a competitive market has complicated, rather than clarified the meaning and purpose of 'teaching' in the sector. 'Teaching excellence' remains a contested term and the methodology and objectives of the TEF have been called into question because of the possibility for providers to engage in statistical and linguistic gaming to achieve a higher rating. Despite many within the higher education sector noting that 'Teaching Excellence Framework' is not an accurate name or acronym (TEF), the government has kept it due to its 'brand value'.

Many participants recognised the need for benchmarking and continuous improvement in higher education teaching; many also drew on their personal experience, institutional context and expertise in the sector to question whether the TEF is the most appropriate way to achieve

these goals. The use of metrics and proxies, along with qualitative submission which are subject to rhetorical and linguistic 'gaming' also raised doubts among participants. What came through from the interviews is that the TEF needs to be put into historical context and considered as part of a broader shifts in the social and political narrative of higher education reform.

8.1.1 Accountability and widening participation in higher education

Almost all interviewees agreed that accountability was an important factor for universities and some mentioned their own experience of higher education as students when actors across institutions were held less to account. TEF policy texts focus on functional aspects of this – in terms of value for money for students (and their families) and the taxpayer. Most participants noted that continuous reform and vigilance of quality standards, especially at an individual and departmental level were important, and in many cases existing systems already existed in terms of monitoring and guaranteeing quality of teaching and learning. Nonetheless, the TEF has been criticised for being too broad to capture levels of detail about individual subjects, and therefore of little use to prospective students. It is also difficult for TEF evaluations to take in account the efforts made at a micro level to ensure that teaching caters to a broad and diverse student population. In essence, it would appear that the TEF process needs to be more balanced and nuanced in its consideration of accountability.

TEF policy texts send a clear message that widening participation was a core aim of higher education reform for the government of the time; policy makes a direct link between the quality of teaching and widening participation. TEF practice also bring student numbers and statistics to the game to include data on who is accessing HE. However, because of the risk-based, competitive elements that the TEF introduces to the sector, university leadership interviewees, while acknowledging that TEF data had enabled them to address participation, also noted that the TEF encouraged sets of behaviours at an institutional level that mean fewer universities would take a risk with 'non-traditional' (VP1) students, or those that would have, for example, lower continuation rates. Unless the TEF is able to incorporate experience-based evidence into its dataset, it is difficult to see how it will be able to encourage the kind of risk-based decisions, at management and recruitment level, that might result in the kind of broader participation that it purports to foster. The Olympian system of evaluating universities rewards outcomes to which

institutions will adapt and cater to; the academic voices in this study emphasised that the real risk was that foregrounding institutional behaviours (e.g. raising continuation rates) that look good in TEF terms would mean backgrounding behaviours that might favour inclusive practices (e.g. enrolling more students from diverse backgrounds).

8.2 Reflections on the theoretical framework in practice

The following section explains in detail how discursive institutionalism helped me to critically investigate and contextualise the data, and answer the research questions. In addition to the broader framework of DI, the toolkits designed by Brady and Bates (2010) and by Hays (2008) were extremely useful as a starting point for data analysis, synthesising interview and policy texts as well as digging deeper to understand, explain and draw conclusions.

The theoretical framework of Discursive Institutionalism (DI) formed the basic structure for analysing both interview and policy data. Using this framework it was possible to identify cognitive arguments that justified ideas in terms of expert knowledge, for example when policy cited previous studies that supported a certain position; and when ideas were justified by the logic of causation, for instance – TEF policy that directly links survey proxies to teaching quality.

DI also highlighted normative argumentation devices in texts, such as policy appeals to societal values and logics of appropriateness – a good case being a call for HE to represent 'value for money' and for higher education regulation to 'protect' students. Using DI, it was possible to understand better when ideas were being used as coalition magnets – TEF policy, for example, placing textual importance on social inclusion – and where agents (academics) were able to resist such coalition magnets as by using alternative frames of reference – i.e. how policy ideas are implemented in practice and by revealing some policy terms, which enter the wider discourse, to be empty signifiers, used to build broader support and acceptance.

Employing DI brought a focus on actors' capacities to persuade others of the cognitive validity of their ideas and/or the normative value of their world view; interviewees were able able to draw on personal experience and relate powerful accounts of teaching that supported their

argumentation. These were not just anecdotal; participants could give nuanced examples of interaction with students, as well as provide socially convincing arguments regarding the value of scholarship.

Looking at the data through the lens of DI highlighted instances of when actors' and texts controlled the meaning of ideas through discourse. For example, using the discourse of political engagement, participants were able to critique the discourse of marketisation employed in TEF policy. DI also showed that power in ideas comes when they are institutionalised or when certain discourses serve to structure thought; some participants took up notions of accountability as it was presented in policy discourse.

The conceptual framework also aided a structured analysis of the data by providing categories for actors and discursive communities, even if these overlapped, leading to a 'discourse of the TEF' which bridged discursive communities. Placing discourse into social, institutional and biographical background also provided for a deeper level of analysis and understanding of the data (Bates et al. 2010).

DI helped me as a researcher to become more sensitive to elements of personal and institutional change that lay in the data, as well as help me explain complex moments of institutional exchange. The assumption within DI that actors are both strategic and socialised led to interesting interpretations regarding the discourse and actions present in the data – institutions exist as much 'in' individuals as they exist 'in' an institution. The philosophical underpinnings of discursive institutionalism meant that I was also more open to diverse interpretations of discursive events. Codifying institutions as systems of ideas and how practices are sustained within in them was a useful way to make sense of and explain participants' responses, and helped to understand policy data in greater detail – cynicism, for instance, was found to be a powerful and meaningful discursive element both in policy texts and participant responses.

The weakness in DI in being able to make clear the origins of interests and systems of ideas was hopefully overcome by bringing the context of political and institutional changes to HE back into the analysis, along with adding in further contextual elements such as participant

background. The other shortcoming in DI regarding the significance of material and ideational factors was tempered by allowing participants to expand, using semi-structured interviews, on lived experience in academia, and inviting them to reflect on the material and narrative changes in HE throughout their careers – as well as leaving space to bring in contemporary factors (e.g. precarious contracts for academics) – participants related emotive and powerful ideas and content, which an analysis of policy texts alone would have been hard to uncover (Hay, 2008).

8.3 Looking forward

This section briefly explores three possible future projects which this thesis has highlighted. The first considers academic identity as part of the TEF; the second deals with academic narratives; and the third raises the issue of reconciling emergent pedagogies with a trend toward metric proxies as a means of quality assurance in HE.

8.3.1 Discourse of academic identity and the TEF

Although it was not a focus of this thesis, the role the TEF has had on academic identity emerged subtly from the interview data. At least one author has already published work which directly addresses this topic (Perkins, 2019), and another has written about way dynamic changes taking place in higher education (digital transformation, higher enrolments, diversification) are forcing many in academia to reconsider their identity (Nelson, 2024). Several other authors investigate how neo-liberal tendencies (data-led staff evaluations, neo-liberal principles of exchange and private gain) affect the way academics, both new and old, think about themselves and the work they do (Brogan, 2020; McCune, 2021). However, at the time of writing, there does not appear to be any exploration of how the discourse of these changes to academic identity are playing out. A contemporary investigation of how the discourse of the TEF has affected academic identity, and the discursive changes to that identity, building on the work of Perkins (2019), might make for a fruitful and constructive addition to the TEF literature.

In particular, the TEF appears to be part of a larger dismantling of professional identity, coupled to an increasing erosion of trust in educators in higher education. Various interviewees expressed dismay at the destabilisation of academia in terms of career progression, recognition and in purely economic terms – not necessarily disputing pay, but decrying short-termism, unstable contracts, and being increasingly asked to do more with less. These factors may be linked to a changing narrative in the way university education is being couched both in policy and in public debate – the markers of educational success , as argued one interviewee in this study, reflect the commodified nature of HE – the intrinsic value of education, scholarship or academic gain do not feature in a marketized HE environment. The idea of collegiality or informed governance has thus been replaced by a managerial approach according to market principles, in which the actor at the forefront of teaching and learning has had their voice somewhat silenced; it is perhaps in this discursive context that academic staff have to redefine, or renegotiate, their professional identity.

8.3.2 Sustainability and equality in TEF discourse

Sustainability as a term exists in the policy texts used in this study, only as 'financial sustainability', neither is equality directly mentioned. 'Inequality' appears in only a handful of examples between the policy texts and interview data and is used to refer exclusively to student bodies, notably in reference to the fulfilment of neoliberal ideals of individual participation in markets (education, economic, employment) – also being linked to inclusion and access; one interviewee mentioned equality when speaking about curriculum and modes of assessment. Sustainability and equality then are silent (and silenced) aspects of the TEF process, particularly when it comes to reflection on professional engagement with the TEF as a means to bring about change; sustainability was not integrated into the research aims or questions in this research (perhaps reflecting its absence from existing literature) and neither did it emerge as a topic from the data – yet considering the overwhelming evidence that this is a theme which enters into all aspects of teaching a learning – it is a stark omission. Equality as a theme relating to teaching and learning activities among academics was again entirely missing from policy data examined, but was raised by most participants as a pressing issue affecting their work. It is difficult to see how an education system that does not put these two themes at the heart of its mission, at an institutional level, and as applied to staff as well as

students, will successfully overcome the challenges (and future challenges) it faces. Institutions (including universities) codify the ideas and practices they sustain – and impact heavily on the actors in (and which they exist in), and in this sense, the discursive silence of sustainability and equality in the TEF have yet to be addressed.

8.3.3 How to insert academic narrative into the TEF

The validity and credibility of the TEF as a tool for measuring teaching quality, has been questioned by several authors (Cui, French and O'Leary, 2019). They note that by excluding the experiences and perceptions of staff involved in teaching, ignoring the essential role they play, means that the TEF is a flawed system for guaranteeing quality. While this thesis has presented the experiences and critical/constructive voices of academics involved in teaching in HE, it is still not clear how these academic narratives can be inserted into the TEF in a meaningful way. Scholarship that could convince government and university leadership to make grassroots academic reflection and discourse on teaching an integral part of the TEF process would be a positive step towards including a fundamental aspect of teaching and learning in the development of higher education.

8.3.4 Reconciling emergent/critical pedagogies with metric data on teaching quality

Arguments have been made for a move away from reductive, metric-driven evaluations of teaching towards more holistic and contextualised accounts that embrace notions of emergent pedagogies (Wood, 2017). Other authors have proposed a reshaping of existing metrics to make evaluations of teaching more inclusive and balanced (Hayes, 2019; Hayes and Cheng, 2018). On the one hand, these suggest a complete departure from current trends, and on the other an adaptation of the current model to overcome a perceived lack of nuance. An alternative would be to investigate how tapping into academic experience and the kind of narratives presented in this thesis could be synthesised into shared conceptions of what constitutes 'excellent' teaching, and to develop a convincing discourse that can challenge and replace the dominant narrative of the TEF.

9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1 – Participant mini biographies

Name	TEF rating	Position	Field	University type	Short bio	Bio Quote
Prof 1	Gold	Professor HoD	STEM	Russell	Head of department in a STEM subject at a Russel group university. Several decades as an academic - lecturer and leader. Served on a TEF advisory group.	'The RSS was very critical of TEF' 'I'm not actually very heavily involved in TEF from an institutional point of view'
VC 1	Gold	Professor Provost Deputy VC	MED	Russell	Professor in the field of medical studies. Long career in academia and higher-level university management – vice chancellor and provost. Served on a TEF advisory group	'I have always been absolutely passionate about higher education and particularly around student empowerment and engagement' 'That's my very strong thing about engagement, empowerment and experience'

Reader	Silver	Reader	EDU	Post 92	School teacher, then researcher, as well as teaching in HE. Moved from Russel group to post 92 institution.	'This new tyranny, the NSS'.
Prof 2	Silver	Associate Professor	EDU	Post 92	Sports scientist, then school teacher, then academic – teaching and researching in HE.	
Prof 3	Silver	Professor	EDU	Post 92	Very experienced academic. Worked at polytechnic, Russel group and the Open University. Held directorships in teaching, research. Management in HE including VP, dean. Long experience in teaching (managing,	'I learnt more about how you teach than any other institution I've ever been at. Because in those and this was in the 80s, but they their input into supporting students with all kinds of challenges and problems, whether it was illness, whether it was not having

					innovating, researching).	sat an exam for 30 years or whatever, they were just really good at that at the time when conventional universities didn't really do that at all'
Lecturer 1	Silver	Lecturer	EDU	Russell	Lecturer at a Russel group university who works on policy, politics and education.	'So the fact that that's where I come from does influence the sort of work that I do'
Fellow 1	Silver	Fellow	EDU	Russell	Mixed academic background in STEM subjects – online learning, design, technology, and education.	'So I've sort of…had a hybrid sort of academic disciplinary career… and not always been an academic'
VP	Silver	VP	MED	Russell	Professor in the field of medical studies. Held many roles in academia over several decades, including management	

					(head of school). Has held roles in student experience.	
Prof 4	Gold	Professor	BUS	Post 92	40 years of experience in HE in professional services and as an academic. Roles in management (VC, provost). Served on a TEF advisory group (subject level).	'I also am engaged nationally'
Lecturer 2	Gold	Senior Lecturer	SOCSCI	Post 92	Long experience as an academic in education and development, learning and teaching. Worked at various institutions.	'and then they sort of stopped funding the subject centres'
Prof 5	Gold	Professor Research associate	SOCSCI	Post 92	Has held various roles in higher education and research interests include student experience, outcomes, educational inequality.	'I've got a portfolio career'

Prof 6	Silver	Professor	EDU	Russell	Professor of education.	'I have had a varied career'
VC 2	Gold	Professor PVC	EDU	Post 92	Has held various roles in university leadership and management (PVC, dean). Leading a new provider in HE. Served on a TEF advisory group	'So I've been involved in lots of policy, particularly education policy'
Prof 7	Silver	Professor	PSY	Russell	Research and experience in education and employment. Long experience of teaching at many levels in HE.	'I have had a fairly traditional/linear career route'
Prof 8	Gold	Professor	EDU	Russell	Has moved from education services sector to academia. Worked at various Russell group universities. Has been involved heavily with assessment.	'I do a lot of policy-focussed work'

9.2 Appendix 2 – Participant Information Sheet

Alexander Cornford
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All that glisters : the TEF, Discursive Institutionalism and Teaching Quality in UK HE

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). You have been invited to participate in this study because of your professional knowledge and engagement with the TEF. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researchers:

Alexander Cornford, EdD candidate, University of East Anglia, School of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Dr Esther Priadharshini, Associate Professor, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

Your participation will involve having an interview about the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This will take place via video conference (via MS TEAMS) at a time that is convenient to you and the interviews will be audio recorded. You will be asked questions relating to your experiences and opinions of the TEF. You will be able to review the transcript of your interviews, if you wish to ensure they are an accurate reflection of the discussion.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

The interview should not exceed 30 mins.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

Participating in the study will contribute to a better understanding of the discursive nature of the TEF, its implementation, consequences of its use and perhaps the identification of some alternative approaches to evaluating and managing teaching quality in UK universities, all of which should benefit higher education professionals and policy makers alike.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to me collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2019). Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will only be disclosed with your permission, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Alexander Cornford, the researcher, will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact him at: a.cornford@uea.ac.uk

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have the right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. This feedback will be in the form of a one page summary of the research findings. You can access this feedback after July 2025, the expected completion date of the researcher's EdD.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Alexander Cornford, PGR student
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ
a.cornford@uea.ac.uk
If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:
Dr Priyadharshini,
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
e.priya@uea.ac.uk
If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the interim Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Nalini Boodhoo at N.Boodhoo@uea.ac.uk.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to the researcher by email at: a.cornford@uea.ac.uk. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information. The researcher will then contact you to arrange a convenient time and place for the interview via MS TEAMS.

This information sheet is for you to keep

9.3 Appendix 3 – Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:
✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East now or in the future.
✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.
✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Reviewing transcripts** YES ☐ NO ☐
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....
Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

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