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# **The rhetoric of the UK higher education Teaching Excellence Framework: A corpus-assisted discourse analysis of TEF2 provider statements**

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The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is an evaluation of teaching quality at UK universities. The aim of the TEF is to raise esteem for teaching in line with research and recognise teaching excellence.. In 2017 all universities who took part in the TEF exercise were awarded ratings of gold, silver or bronze for teaching quality. These awards were based on a set of quantitative measures and a 15-page provider submission from each university to describe teaching at their institution. In this paper, we analyse the provider submissions that played a crucial role in universities' TEF rating. We conducted a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of all of the provider statements (228 statements; 1,742,438 words) submitted by participating institutions in order to un-earth the discourse of the TEF. We found that the themes driving success in the TEF are (1) employment, (2) employability (3) student outcomes and (4) research. Recognising what discourse is rewarded in the TEF has important implications for the accepted discourse of teaching excellence in UK higher education. It is anticipated that, in future, university discourse around teaching quality will continue to be dominated by employability discourse (rather than discourse around, for instance, social goods, personal development or equity).

Keywords: teaching excellence framework, TEF, discourse analysis, higher education, corpus linguistics, teaching quality

## **1. Introduction**

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is an evaluation of the quality of teaching at English universities. Introduced following the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) the officially stated purpose of the TEF was:

Better informing students' choices about what and where to study

Raising esteem for teaching

Recognising and rewarding excellent teaching

Better meeting the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions

(HEFCE, 2016: 7)

Next to these (laudable) aims, however, in policy-terms the TEF forms part of a series of reforms of UK Higher Education introduced by the 2010 coalition government and continued by the 2015 and 2017 Conservative governments aimed at marketizing UK Higher Education. It is well known that the Browne Review (2009) marked an important moment in shifting the cost of Higher Education from the public purse to the individual student. In the coalition years following the Browne Review and the raising of the tuition fee cap to £9,000 in 2010, it was expected that market forces would allow better quality providers to charge a higher price, leading to diversified tuition fee setting across the sector. However, a number of factors, including the setting of a fee cap, buoyant demand for higher education, and the introduction of a student loan system, meant that a true market never developed and that most UK universities today charge broadly the same (the maximum £9,250 today allowed by the 'fee cap'). The 2017 TEF was designed partly to break this deadlock. In order to establish market forces in higher education, it was deemed necessary to give consumers more extensive information on the quality of service that they could expect from providers. With such information available, including a government sanctioned 'ranking' of the quality of higher education, it was expected that prospective students would finally begin to make 'value-for-money' calculations about higher education; the possibility of raising the tuition cap for institutions offering the best quality teaching was also mooted. As an instrument to encourage the marketization of higher education, the TEF was therefore always controversial.

Next to its being part of a general marketization of higher education, the TEF proved controversial also for its results. Following the publication of the TEF2

results, many (e.g. Barkas *et al.*, 2017; Gunn, 2018; Royal Statistical Society, 2019) expressed doubts about the accuracy of the TEF as a measure of teaching quality and noted the inherent bias towards high status providers (Gillard, 2018). Other authors (Canning, 2017; Bainbridge, Gaitanidis and Hoult, 2018; O’Leary and Wood, 2018) directed criticism at the ideology behind the TEF: they see the TEF as a neoliberal project which reflects only managerial notions of teaching quality and is divorced from real teaching.

In this paper, we continue the critical discussion of the TEF by analysing and discussing one of its particularly controversial aspects: the provider submissions that formed the qualitative data used to determine the TEF ratings. The introduction of the TEF was one of the most important policy moments in UK Higher Education in the decade 2010 to 2019 and, as Gillard (2018: 56) makes clear, the provider submissions are crucial in understanding the TEF. In our first-of-a kind research, we used the methods of corpus linguistics to conduct a discourse analysis of the TEF provider submissions. Using the method of corpus linguistics represents an innovation in Higher Education Policy research, and enabled us to study not only a sample of provider submissions (compare Beech, 2017) but *all* of the provider submissions and to analyse important distinguishing features of the submissions that led to success in the TEF statistically, before following this up with a reading in context. In this paper, we show how the TEF provider submissions are shaping and changing universities’ *discourse* around teaching quality. In particular, we hold that the TEF, in its current form, plays a key role in the marketisation of higher education by

framing the discourse around university teaching quality mainly in terms of *employment, outcomes* and *employability*.

The paper unfolds as follows. In section 2, we sketch the background, by discussing the methodology of the TEF. In section 3 we describe the methods of our own study, a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the TEF2 provider submissions. In section 4 and 5 we present our findings and section 6 offers our conclusions.

## **2. The TEF2 provider submissions**

The first TEF results were published in summer 2017 (called TEF year 2, or TEF2). In TEF2, universities in the UK were rated bronze, silver or gold for the quality of their teaching. In 2018 (TEF3 or 2018 TEF) institutions were provided the opportunity to make a new submission or to retain the gold, silver or bronze classification awarded in 2017 for three years. In 2021, results of a new 'subject level TEF' are planned; in the subject-level TEF, not only universities, but different subjects within universities will be rated bronze, silver or gold (Office for Students, 2018b).

The TEF2 ratings were largely derived from three data sources:

- The National Student Survey (NSS), yielding data on student satisfaction.
- The Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE), yielding data on student employment after university.

- Individualised student record data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, yielding data on drop-out rates. (HEFCE, 2016: 22)

A three-step procedure was used to arrive at each university's TEF rating based on these data sources. In the first phase, evaluators analysed data from the NSS (National Student Survey) as well as (non) continuation data and graduate destinations data (further study and employment). These quantitative data (called 'flags') were used to construct an 'initial hypothesis' regarding a university's teaching quality. In the second phase, assessors read the 15-page 'provider statement' from each institution in order to see whether anything about how an institution describes their own teaching offering contradicted the initial hypothesis. In Step 3, a panel of assessors evaluated both the provider submissions and the quantitative flags in tandem to determine the TEF rating of bronze, silver, or gold (HEFCE, 2016: 22) .

In understanding the outcomes of the 2017 TEF, the written, 15-page qualitative submissions are of particular significance. Firstly, the written submissions made a crucial difference to the outcome of almost 15% of institutions. Based on their provider statements, 34 institutions' awards were changed from the 'initial hypothesis', 33 universities' results were upgraded and one downgraded (Baker, 2017). In fact, in his statistical analysis of the TEF results, Gillard (2018: 56) highlighted the important role that the provider submissions played in the final outcome of many awards. However, exactly *how* the written submissions influenced the final awards is not open to purely statistical scrutiny. This is because, as qualitative submissions, the written submissions are open to

interpretation and the evaluating panel had to use judgement in how to evaluate the written submissions. Close study of the provider submissions, therefore, would give us not only an insight into the deeper workings of the TEF, but, because of its status as the officially sanctioned rating of UK universities' teaching quality, the provider submissions give us a unique opportunity to evaluate the discourse of teaching in UK universities in relation to recent policy.

The only in-depth research on the provider statements to date is a study by Beech (2017). Beech analysed the provider statements of 12 institutions, all of which were upgraded to a higher award based on their written submission.

Beech stated that this analysis looked at:

‘types of themes, evidence and presentation styles that persuaded the TEF panel to award an institution a higher ranking on account of the narratives submitted’ (2017: 21)

Beech identified a number of common buzzwords in these submissions, including: ‘outstanding’, ‘creative’, ‘fusion’, and ‘connected curriculum’. She found that the institutions whose provider submissions scored highly described teaching as something not just confined to the lecture hall, and they used quantitative and qualitative measures to provide evidence of the impact of teaching initiatives; moreover, Beech concluded that those universities awarded gold included more student-centred initiatives in their submissions. According to Beech, the central themes of the successful submissions were research-led teaching, co-creation, academic employment contracts, rewards and recognition, student input, extra-curricular concerns, digital connectivity, accessibility, mentoring schemes, geographical factors, employability



programmes and careers support. While Beech held that the twelve submissions she analysed were 'all different' she expressed the fear that, in future TEF provider submissions will all become more formulaic and similar (Beech, 2017: 53)

### **3. Methods**

Following on from Beech's work, we studied the TEF provider statements in an attempt to uncover the discourse behind 'teaching excellence' as it is demonstrated in the TEF. In particular we asked: what are the discourse themes (if any) that differentiate those submissions that performed well in the TEF in contrast to those that performed poorly?

In order to answer this question, we collected all 228 TEF2 provider statements submitted by the participating institutions in 2017 (1,742,438 words) and constructed a 'corpus' of TEF2 provider statements. (The TEF provider statements are all public documents, freely available from the OFS website (Office for Students, 2018a).) We then analysed these statements using the methods of corpus-based discourse analysis (more below). Our study is original in being one of the first in-depth studies of the function of the TEF and being the first to study '*a full census*' of provider submissions; it is also one of the first studies to bring best practice methods in corpus linguistics to the study of Higher Education Policy. Corpus linguistics is little used in Educational research at present. While a search in the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database returns 3,097 papers that mention corpus methods, only 178 deal with Higher Education and a clear majority of these 178 papers concern second language instruction in HE. We find only five papers that apply corpus

methods to UK HE and only one (Stockwell and Naidoo, 2017) that deals with UK HE policy. As such, our paper is not only the first to analyse all TEF2 provider submissions, but serves as a testing ground for the utility of corpus methods in educational policy research.

Having collected the 228 provider statements in PDF format, we used LancsBox 4.0 software (Brezina et al, 2018) to conduct our analysis. Given the large size of our data (1.7 million words), methods were needed both to make sense of these data at a high level, but also to read texts in enough depth in order to understand the nuances at play in individual texts. For our analysis, we therefore chose the method of corpus-assisted discourse analysis, a form of discourse analysis in the social sciences that draws upon the methods of corpus linguistics (Mautner, 1995). Corpus-linguistic approaches to the study of text involves taking a large body of real-life texts (a corpus) and using computer analysis tools to analyse the texts for patterns and key words (McEnery and Wilson, 1996). In corpus linguistics, texts can be analysed in order to understand real linguistic usage (this is the interest that the linguist as a scholar of language use takes in a corpus). However, the techniques of corpus linguistics may also be used in an attempt to uncover something that is happening in society and is reflected in changing use of language (this is the use that a social scientist may make of a corpus). An early example of the use of corpus linguistic techniques in social science can be found in the work of Stubbs (1996). As a socio-linguist, Stubbs adapted the tools and techniques of corpus linguistics to study what insight we may gain into social forces by

understanding the linguistic features of bodies of texts. Stubbs proposed the following techniques for the social scientific use of corpus linguistic methods: the determination of keywords and the investigation of patterns of word frequency, concordance and collocation (Stubbs, 2001).

In our study, we were interested in what the language of the TEF provider submissions can tell us about how institutions went about convincing the TEF panel of their worthiness of gold status and which of these efforts were successful or not. We were interested in what the discourse found in TEF2 provider submissions showed about how universities describe their own teaching quality and when that is successful; we surmised that this would give us an insight into what is currently the ‘authorised’, ‘sanctioned’, ‘accepted’ or ‘approved’ discourse around teaching quality in the UK. We used Stubbs’s methods of studying word frequency, concordance and collocation in order to give us a high level, quantitative insight into the use of words describing teaching quality in our corpus of TEF provider submissions. However, following a method proposed by Mautner, we then followed up our corpus linguistic analysis with an in-depth reading of a small number of provider submissions of particular interest. Mautner, amongst others (Mautner, 1995; Baker *et al.*, 2008; Mulderrig, 2011; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Partington, Duguid and Taylor, 2013; Toolan, 2016) have combined the traditionally quantitative corpus methods with qualitative critical discourse analysis. Combining these two methods enabled us to find high-level patterns of word use and then to study how these patterns play out in individual texts.

## 4. Corpus Analysis

### *Keyword analysis*

First, we divided our submissions into those that resulted in an institution being upgraded from the initial hypothesis and those that were not upgraded by creating two sub-corpora to compare: ‘upgraders’ and ‘non-upgraders’ (Table 1). We surmised that the 33 submissions that resulted in an institution being upgraded would be particularly representative of the kind of discourse that the TEF evaluators admired and then chose to commend, through the award of an upgrade to a higher award (be it silver or gold).

Table 1: Sub-corpora constructed	
195 institutions not upgraded based on qualitative submission	33 institutions upgraded based on qualitative submission
Corpus size: 1,444, 145 words	Corpus size: 298, 293 words

In our analysis, we compared how frequently those institutions that were upgraded used a particular word compared to those institutions that were not upgraded. This resulted in a ‘keyness’ analysis to ascertain which words capture the most important differences between the two sub-corpora of upgraders and non-upgraders. In corpus linguistics, ‘keyness’ is usually evaluated in terms of the overlap between statistical significance and effect size. To test the statistical significance of differences in word frequencies between the two sub-corpora, we calculated the log-likelihood ( $G^2$ ) of the

frequency of use of the identified keywords. Rayson et al (2004) hold that log-likelihood provides a more accurate test of significance than chi-square for corpus linguistics and the following comparison in table 2 is usually drawn between p-value and the  $G^2$  statistic:

However, in contrast with much research in the social sciences that regards a p-value of  $<0.05$  as indicating significance, researchers in corpus linguistics usually adopt a more rigorous threshold, with Wilson (2013: 8) advocating a threshold of  $p < 0.01$  ( $G^2 = 6.63$ ) and Rayson et al (2004) advocating a threshold of  $p < 0.0001$ . In line with Rayson, we have adopted a significance threshold of loglikelihood  $G^2 = 15.13$  for our study.

Effect size is the difference between normalised (use per 1k words in this case) use in both corpora. Gabrielatos (2018) stresses the importance of statistical significance and effect size and not to confuse the two: statistical significance shows us that the sizes of the actual differences observed are bigger than those that might be expected by chance, but the effect size shows us the magnitude of the difference between two sets of results. We report effect size as the difference between normalised (used per 1k words) frequencies as %diff<sup>1</sup> and absolute increase in frequency per 1k words.

Thirdly, we studied the frequency of the use of keywords throughout the corpus. Egbert and Biber (2019) warn that heavy use of a particular keyword in only a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/people/paul/SigEff.xlsx> (latest version, 4 July 2016). Paul Rayson also maintains a webpage offering a statistical significance calculator, as well as information on a large number of metrics: <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html>

small number of texts in the corpus can influence results. Mindful of this problem, we set a frequency threshold of one occurrence per 1,000 words; this ensures that unique words to individual texts are excluded in line with our aim of looking for dominant discourse differences between the sub-corpora. We also report Range % to ensure the even distribution of our keywords across all texts within a corpus (Brezina, 2018)

To summarise our approach: The combination of (1) effect size with, (2) a statistical significance threshold, and (3) frequency and dispersion thresholds enabled us to establish our ‘Candidate Key Items’ (CKI’s) as follows.

Table 2: P value and loglikelihood comparison	
p value	G <sup>2</sup>
< 0.05	3.82
< 0.01	6.63
<0.001	10.83
<0.0001	15.13

**Table 3: Keyness analysis by %diff – keywords used significantly more in upgraders corpus compared with non-upgraders**

Word	Use per 1k words (upgraders)	Use per 1k words (non upgraders)	Increase freq per 1k words	Dispersion Range % (upgraders)	Dispersion Range % (non-upgraders)	Log Likelihood	%diff
<b>we</b>	6	3.54	2.46	96.97%	87.44%	335.35	69.26
<b>our</b>	10.91	6.93	3.98	100%	91.46%	465.31	57.36
<b>employability</b>	1.86	1.31	0.55	96.97%	99.97%	48.17	41.39
<b>research</b>	3.08	2.31	0.77	100%	95.48%	56.85	33.47
<b>2016</b>	2.16	1.62	0.54	100%	96.98%	39.8	33.45
<b>outcomes</b>	1.91	1.46	0.45	100%	98.49%	30.46	30.66
<b>employment</b>	2.28	1.79	0.49	100%	97.99%	28.98	26.82
<b>university</b>	6.26	5.2	1.06	100%	97.49%	49.37	20.34
<b>by</b>	6.14	5.28	0.86	100%	98.99%	32.31	16.21
<b>have</b>	5.36	4.62	0.74	100%	98.99%	27.24	15.9

Table 3 shows us that use of the following words seemed to make the largest and most certain difference to whether a university was upgraded or not: 'we', 'our', 'employability', 'research', '2016', 'outcomes', 'employment', 'university', 'by' and 'have'.

In our analysis, we were interested in how universities describe their teaching and learning practices and environments in substantive terms; following Beech (2017), we were interested in unearthing the 'buzzwords' associated with TEF provider submissions. For this reason, we discarded pronouns ('our', 'we'), prepositions ('in', 'by') and the verb to be ('have'). While we do not rule out that *stylistic features* like writing in the first person ('our', 'we') or grammatical features may have influenced the reception of TEF provider statements, our focus was on words that clearly communicate some description of a university's approach to teaching and learning. For this reason, we selected the following keywords out of the list above: 'employability', 'research', '2016', 'outcomes', 'employment', and 'university' for analysis.

### *Collocation analysis*

Following our keyword frequency analysis that identified a number of substantive words relating to universities' teaching that made a difference to whether an institution was upgraded or not, we conducted collocation analyses of the use of these words.



Collocation analysis shows which words are statistically most likely to occur next to or near a keyword (Baker, 2006). By understanding which words tend to appear next to or close to a keyword, we can understand how that keyword is used; as Firth (1957: 11) stated: ‘you shall know a lot about a word from the company it keeps’. In the tables below, these collocates are identified including the frequency with which they appear as well as the Mutual Information (MI) statistic. Association or collocation measures tell us how strong the associations between the collocate and the keyword are (Brezina, 2018: 70), the higher the number, the stronger the association. Lancsbox uses the following equation to

calculate MI:  $\log_2 \frac{O_{11}}{E_{11}}$  We only report here MI above 7.0 to show the strongest associations (tables 4-8).

We first turned our attention to the word ‘university’. We found that the word ‘university’ mostly occurs closely to the names of universities. This indicates that the word ‘university’ does not tend to describe anything notable about teaching practice in our two sub-corpora, but only shows that universities often refer to themselves (using phrases like ‘University of X’) in their submissions. Indeed, a quick glance at the 33 upgraders will reveal that they are all universities; while there are a number of Further Education Colleges in the corpus, they are all found amongst the non-upgraders. This led to the conclusion that the word ‘university’ only appears more frequently in the upgrader sub-corpus because no FE colleges were upgraded. This impression is confirmed by the fact that the words ‘college’ (loglikelihood = 929; %diff = 71)

and 'FE' (loglikelihood = 55; %diff = 85) are found statistically more frequently in the non-upgrader sub-corpus. 'University' was therefore discarded from our analysis.

However, the following remaining keywords yielded notable results.

Table 5: Collocation for the word 'research'			
Keyword: Research			
Corpus: 33 upgraders			
Collocate	MI Stat	Freq (coll.)	Freq (corpus)
scholarship	7.90170439	91	123
informed	7.09066791	35	83
le2	7.53995803	19	33
forefront	7.12492021	19	44
ref	7.11403231	12	28
scholarly	7.48842817	10	18
findings	7.07339007	10	24
conduct	7.44334064	7	13
institutes	8.11402925	6	7
Capstone	7.65835436	5	8
power	7.33642412	5	10

Table 6: Collocation for the word 'employment'			
Keyword: Employment			
Corpus: 33 upgraders			
Collocate	MI Stat	Freq (coll.)	Freq (corpus)
further	7.487901011	206	503

study	7.063571917	206	675
highly	7.839755876	173	331
skilled	8.428501595	169	215
sustained	7.413244844	21	54
so1	7.666190994	19	41
highly-skilled	8.676278136	14	15

Table 7: Collocation for the word 'employability'			
<b>Keyword: Employability</b>			
<b>Corpus: 33 upgraders</b>			
Collocate	MI Stat	Freq (coll.)	Freq (corpus)
transferable	8.221949625	30	54
embedding	7.91466803	22	49
so2	8.002832698	21	44

Table 8: Collocation for the word 'outcomes'			
<b>Keyword: Outcomes</b>			
<b>Corpus: 33 upgraders</b>			
Collocate	MI Stat	Freq (coll.)	Freq (corpus)
positive	7.219707221	119	417
achieving	7.770995096	23	55
so3	8.827159501	20	23
longitudinal	8.269800953	13	22
risk	7.090193907	12	46
achieves	8.581334137	11	15
differences	7.443830613	10	30

Table 9: Collocation for the word '2016'			
<b>Keyword: 2016</b>			

Corpus: 33 upgraders			
Collocate	MI Stat	Freq (coll.)	Freq (corpus)
qaa	7.13789455	47	154
her	7.07430736	33	113
september	7.89073383	18	35
november	8.26513023	12	18
june	7.91149255	12	23
december	7.92409269	10	19
ofsted	7.77970374	10	21
opened	7.71258899	10	22
january	7.52816473	10	25

Across the sub-corpora we can see that keywords ‘employment’, ‘employability’, ‘outcomes’, ‘2016’ and ‘research’ all have some interesting collocates. Firstly, ‘employment’ collocates with the word ‘so1’, ‘employability’ collocates with the word ‘so2’ and ‘outcomes’ collocates with the word ‘so3’. ‘SO1’, ‘SO2’ and ‘SO3’ are abbreviations for the TEF2 evaluation requirements as outlined by HEFCE to universities in advance of writing their submissions. ‘SO’ stands for ‘Student Outcomes’ and is one of the key areas that universities were briefed they would be evaluated on (as part of the Student Outcomes and Learning Gain aspect):

*SO1 - Employment and Further Study,*

*SO2 - Employability and Transferable Skills,*

*SO3 - Positive Outcomes for All.*

(HEFCE, 2016)

It is no surprise that the word ‘employment’ collocates with SO1, that ‘employability’ collocates with SO2 and that ‘outcomes’ collocates with SO3.

Universities were briefed that they would be evaluated against these three criteria and, quite naturally, used the language of these criteria in those sections devoted to demonstrating how they had met the criteria.

It is still notable, however, that the words ‘employment’, ‘employability’ and ‘outcomes’ are more often used in the context of the ‘*Student Outcomes and Learning Gain*’ sections of TEF submissions and *not* in the context of the *Teaching Quality* and *Learning Environment* sections. This would suggest that the words ‘employment’, ‘employability’ and ‘outcomes’ are, in the minds of the writers and readers of submissions, a matter of student outcomes – of what results from university education.

Looking at the other collocates of the word ‘employment’, one can see words like ‘further’, ‘study’, ‘highly’, ‘skilled’, ‘highly-skilled’ and ‘employability’. These again link back to the TEF2 guidelines. The following ‘possible examples of evidence’ can be found in the guidance under the aspect of Student Outcomes and Learning Gain (SO):

“Evidence of longer-term employment outcomes and progression of graduates including into highly-skilled employment”

“Evidence and impact of initiatives aimed at preparing students for further study and research”

“Evidence and impact of initiatives aimed at graduate employability”

(HEFCE, 2016:45)

By analysing the collocates of the word ‘employment’, we can see that universities tended to use, in their submissions, the same words as are found in

the guidelines. It seems that, in the successful written submissions, the universities 'mirror' or 'repeat back' the approved language found in the TEF2 guidelines.

Secondly, looking at the word 'employability' and its collocates we can clearly see that, other than 'SO2', two words in particular collocate with employability: 'transferable' and 'embedding'. The concept of 'embedding employability into a curriculum' is the practice of designing all university curricula with the aim of promoting employability. 'Transferable' skills are those skills that students can 'transfer' from academia into employment. It is clear from the collocation analysis that 'transferable' and 'embedding' are two particular words that occur very frequently close to or next to 'employability' in the submissions of those universities that were upgraded. This provides an indication that discourses around 'embedding employability' and promoting 'transferable skills' are particularly important in the TEF.

While the use of the words 'employment' and 'employability' were easy to understand based on the collocation data alone, it took more analysis to make sense of the use of the keywords 'outcomes', '2016' and 'research'. To see this, consider that the words 'employment' and 'employability' each have a clear meaning in this context: universities were instructed by the evaluators to report how degrees enabled employment and it seems that submissions that were upgraded indeed gave much attention to these matters. However, 'outcomes', '2016' and 'research' can have many meanings depending on the context, so it is particularly important to give attention to the context of these words. For this

reason, we followed up our collocation analysis with a concordance analysis of 'outcomes', '2016' and 'research'.

### *Concordance analysis*

In order to understand written submissions' use of the word 'outcomes' we conducted a concordance analysis. We produced concordance lines of 'outcomes' as used in context with the ten words either side. We then read each of these lines, to gauge exactly how written submissions use the word 'outcomes' in context (see Table 10 for examples).

Table 10: A selection of concordance lines for 'outcomes'		
Left	Node	Right
evidenced to lead to excellent	outcomes	for our students. This is
term intervention and support. Student	Outcomes	and Learning Gain Employment and
be significant as the educational	outcomes	result in a 'graduate premium'
are required to set learning	outcomes	both for overall course and
implemented across the institution. Positive	Outcomes	for All (SO3) The contextual
is designed to secure positive	outcomes	for all. These high DLHE
enhance their academic and employment	outcomes.	While the positive BME and
improve their prospects. Long-term employability	outcomes	compare positively with the sector.
risk of not achieving positive	outcomes.	Through a newly established Business
demonstrate that we provide excellent	outcomes	for our students in terms

Looking firstly at the word 'risk' in context through analysing concordance lines, we observed that the exact phrase 'at greater risk of not achieving positive outcomes' is very frequently found in the upgrader submissions. In context, this phrase is used when universities describe how they take students who come from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' such as part-time or BME students and then describe how their approaches to teaching and other interventions allow for

these groups to have positive outcomes equal to 'non-disadvantaged' students. This again links strongly to one of the key metrics of TEF2, that of learning gain which falls under the aspect of Student Outcomes and Learning Gain. Institutions here are showing how much further these students have progressed from joining the university to their outcomes. The same is the case for words like 'positive' (outcomes), 'achieving' (outcomes), 'longitudinal' (outcomes) and 'achieves' (outcomes). Exploring use of the word 'differences' further in context shows that the uses are to describe the causes of different student outcomes amongst groups of students. For instance, two institutions reference a 2015 HEFCE document titled *Causes of differences in student outcomes* (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015). In context, it appears that the word 'causes' is used to explain why different groups of students have different outcomes.

Next, when looking at the use of the word '2016', we can see that the words 'QAA' and 'HER' collocate most often with '2016'. 'QAA' stands for Quality Assurance Agency and HER stands for 'Higher Education Review' which was an exercise conducted by the QAA in 2016. Amongst the upgraded institutions, many use the words '2016', 'QAA' and 'HER' to evidence teaching quality. Table 11 shows a selection of concordances to illustrate the examples of 'HER' in use.

Table 11: A selection of concordance lines for 'HER' in the 33 upgrader corpus		
Left	Node	Right
and related practices, the QAA	HER	report identified as good practice
(2016) QAA Higher Education Review	(HER)	where we achieved the most
degrees. Given the 2016 QAA	HER	endorsement of the quality-assurance



		processes
external validation. Our 2016 QAA	HER	report noted nine areas of
In addition, our 2016 QAA	HER	report praises specific strategies that
acknowledged in our 2016 QAA	HER	report. Our online digital support
recognised in our 2016 QAA	HER	report which identified as good
and activities. The QAA (2016)	HER	report emphasised the valuable contribution

It appears that mention of the 2016 Higher Education Review was particularly frequent in the statements of those providers who were upgraded (Table 11).

Looking finally at ‘research’ gives us the only other insight into one of three aspects of the TEF other than Student Outcomes and Learning Gain.

<b>Table 12: A selection of concordance lines for ‘research’</b>		
<b>Left</b>	<b>Node</b>	<b>Right</b>
building the excellence of education, growing our	research	strength and deepening the contribution of professional
of knowledge “ our graduates undertake genuinely novel	research	projects as part of their degree programmes
research contracts, and 92% of teaching and	research	staff were returned to the 2014 REF.
REF. Whilst this appears lower than other	research	intensive universities it reflects the fact that
million journal article downloads. Our academic staff	research	publication repository is linked through Discover, which
would be able to publish their URSS	research	findings as part of a peer-reviewed journal
to student retention. One of our 4*	research	impact case studies in the REF 2014
and novel, i.e. they are not “dummy”	research	projects where the lead investigator already knows

The key collocates of ‘research’ in table 5 are ‘scholarship’, ‘informed’, ‘le2’, ‘forefront’, ‘ref’, ‘scholarly’ and ‘findings’. The aspect of the TEF in which all of these relate is ‘Learning Environment’, abbreviated ‘LE’. In particular, LE2 is that aspect of the ‘Learning Environment’ relating to Scholarship, Research and Professional Practice (HEFCE, 2016). Just as we saw with , SO1, SO2 and

SO3 above, it seems that universities tended to present their research in the context of addressing one of the evaluation criteria – in this case ‘LE2’. Arguably, the fact that the evaluation process required mention of LE2 explains the fact that the word research frequently occurs close to words like ‘LE2’, ‘scholarship’ and ‘scholarly’. Furthermore, we can see that universities frequently write about research in the context of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which many research-intensive universities use to describe their institution and subsequently their teaching as research informed. Reading what universities write about their research in context, makes clear that universities view ‘research’ as a matter of the kind of environment or atmosphere that research creates as a backdrop for teaching and learning. Furthermore, universities use the chance, when talking about their research, to advertise their research successes. As indicated by collocates like ‘REF’ and ‘forefront’ use of the word ‘research’ in TEF provider statements seems to function like a marker of success or status. This finding also relates to our finding reported earlier, that only *universities* were upgraded and no FE colleges were upgraded. Research as a status marker and as an ‘environment’ factor might further explain why only universities were upgraded: as the LE2 criterion was designed, only universities could say much about their research environment and the most successful universities had the most to report here. The research/teaching nexus (Tight, 2016) is complex and due to space cannot be explored further here, but we can see that talking about research and links to teaching was beneficial in TEF2.

## **5. Discourse analysis**

Our corpus analysis, reported on in section 4, already showed up some clear patterns in university discourse on teaching excellence, encapsulated in the TEF provider statements. Those universities that were upgraded used words like 'employment', 'employability', 'outcomes' and 'research' more frequently than other institutions. They used these words more or less in line with expectations that were communicated to them regarding how their TEF submission would be evaluated and a number of stock words or phrases stand out: next to 'employment', 'employability' and 'outcomes', institutions frequently wrote of 'embedding', 'transferable' and the QAA Higher Education Review in 2016. This broad information about the pattern of word usage in the TEF shaped the next stage of our analysis, a more in-depth and qualitative discourse analysis of TEF provider submissions.

In our discourse analysis of TEF provider submissions, we conducted a targeted reading of a small number of apparently successful and apparently unsuccessful TEF2 written submissions in order to investigate discourse around the TEF in more detail and to confirm our initial finding that (1) discourse around student outcomes, graduate employment and employability and research status played a crucial role in the TEF and (2) that successful submissions largely attempted to mirror the 'approved' discourse around teaching and learning that was communicated to universities by the TEF panel.

We selected the following submissions for a close reading:

‘Successful submissions’: we selected for close reading a small number of what we judged must have been quite successful submissions. These were the submissions of five institutions that were upgraded to gold in TEF2, despite the fact that they occur in the lower reaches of the main university league tables like the Guardian and Times league tables.

‘Unsuccessful submissions’: we selected for close reading a small number of submissions that apparently did not meet with the approval of the TEF evaluators. These were the submissions of the three universities in the Russell Group who achieved bronze in TEF2 and whose written submission did not result in an upgrade. In the group of unsuccessful submissions, we also included the sole university whose TEF ranking was downgraded from their initial hypothesis in TEF2.

This gave us nine submissions to read in depth: five that we label as ‘successful’ and four as ‘unsuccessful’. Importantly, we stress that these judgements of ‘success’ are not our own. We do not make any judgements ourselves about which universities wrote ‘good’ or ‘bad’ TEF submissions or, indeed, about the teaching quality on offer at any of these universities. As a matter of objective fact, the TEF panel awarded universities ‘gold’, ‘silver’ or ‘bronze’ medals in the TEF and chose to upgrade some submissions but not others. This, and the rankings of individual universities, was widely reported in

the UK press in 2017.<sup>2</sup> In itself, our analysis does not add anything good or bad to the reputational judgement that the TEF panel already made and published in 2017; rather, we only attempt to understand *why* the TEF panel may have made the judgements that they did and to map out the ‘discourse of teaching excellence’ that is now crystallising out of these submissions in the years following TEF2.

Be that as it may, our reading of the five ‘successful’ and four ‘unsuccessful’ submissions yielded the following contrasts.

*Use of words like ‘employability’ and ‘employment’*

In order to gauge the prominence that universities gave to employability related themes beyond just the level of quantitative analysis, we read all nine of these submissions in depth and conducted thematic coding of references to employment and employability in order to study where and how universities mentioned employability related themes in their submission.

It was clear that successful submissions mentioned employability related themes throughout their submission. By contrast unsuccessful submissions confined mention of employability to only part of their submission and did not

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Weale (2017)

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/22/many-top-uk-universities-miss-out-on-top-award-in-controversial-new-test>

highlight it throughout. For instance, one unsuccessful submission mentions the word 'employability' only twice. Furthermore, the same submission confines most mentions of the word 'employment' to only two sections: the sections devoted to 'student outcomes and learning gain' and 'employability and transferable skills'. These two sections correspond to two of the explicit evaluation criteria set by the TEF panel, making it appear that the university making this submission only mentioned employability when they absolutely had to. In fact, at one point in their submission, the university in question downplay the importance of employment to it as an institution.

'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.'

While mention of employability related matters was both more frequent and better distributed in the other two unsuccessful submissions, these two institutions still tended to draw a distinction between their university's teaching and learning missions and their development of employability. For instance, it was noticeable that the two submissions in question positioned employability mainly in the context of their employment outcomes (that is graduate destinations) as well as in connection with extra-curricular provision for students. For instance:

'The University has made a significant investment in work dedicated to enhancing the employability of its students; we are committed to

ensuring that our graduates are sought after and valued by employers. The number of staff employed in in our Careers and Employability service has increased from 23.8 to 32.3 FTE in the period 2013 to 2016.'

This seems to indicate this institution conceive of developing employability mainly as a task for the careers service. In context, it appears that this example sketches employability as an 'additional' matter, tackled by 'initiatives' that are separate from the university's main teaching and learning offering.

We see a similar attitude to employability in another unsuccessful submission:

'All students are offered opportunities to enhance their employability and transferable skills through year in industry programmes, Study Abroad opportunities including language years abroad and the Year in China programme.'

Furthermore, under the heading 'extra-curricular activities and skills development' a non-upgraded institution say say:

'...is an online hub highlighting the range of co- and extra-curricular activities available to students, aimed at encouraging them to engage with skill-building experiences beyond their studies and to recognise the range of employability skills they can develop through such activities.'

It appears that this submission, too, situates employability as an 'add-on' activity that is a different matter from study. The examples show that, where unsuccessful submissions do make mention of employability, it is as an 'add-on', not 'embedded' in all teaching and learning.

By contrast, successful submissions gave employability not more frequent mention as such, but let it have pride of place. Amongst successful submissions, one finds the following examples of discourse around employment and employability:

'As part of the University's new 'Learning & Teaching Strategy 2016-2020', a cross-institutional Employability Working Group chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience) has been established, tasked with implementing at pace a range of strategic initiatives designed to improve graduate employability across all subject areas.'

'The work of the University's Careers and Employability Service (CES) is fully integrated into the life of the Schools, so that there is a seamless link between teaching and employability.'

'... set out a new 'Strategy for Enhancing Student Employability'. All students now receive targeted, timetabled employability sessions embedded within the curriculum in each of years 1, 2 and 3 of their studies. The development of a positive employment-focussed attitude is main-streamed in every student's course...'



‘The L&T Plan directly aligns to the Employability Action Plan (SO1 and SO2) resulting in the embedding of graduate employability skills alongside opportunities for placements and work shadowing.’

Universities that were upgraded clearly positioned employability as central to their teaching and learning mission. Indeed, in the collocation analysis, above, we found that, in successful submissions, the word ‘employability’ often collocates with the word ‘embedded’ and this is confirmed in our close reading of the five submissions we identified as particularly successful. The word ‘embedded’ or, in one successful submission ‘integrated’, is indeed very frequently used in this context. Successful submissions sketch employability as a central and structuring consideration in *all* university teaching and learning and not just as an ‘add-on’ or ‘initiative’.

#### *Discourse around ‘outcomes’: using quantifiable metrics*

Next to discourse around ‘employment’ and ‘employability’, in our close reading of TEF submissions we were also interested in use of the word ‘outcomes’ and in how universities framed discourse around outcomes. From our close reading it appears that those that were more successful in TEF2 *quantified* outcomes in a certain predictable way: successful institutions made mention of some kind of intervention and then provided data and evidence for its success. For instance, one successful university quantify some of their student outcomes as follows:

'With regard to the highly skilled employment (HSE) outcomes, the metrics show a strong positive trend over the 3 year period. Of students in employment, 73.2% of our graduates are in HSE compared to a national average of 70%. This is as a result of a sustained, deliberate employability strategy to further improve the positive job outcomes for our students. Paying regard to the trend demonstrated in the data is particularly relevant to institutions such as ours which show continued improvement in outcomes over a sustained period rather than being in 'steady state'.

Particularly interesting is how some universities sketched even apparently *negative* outcomes as a positive through the presentation of data. For instance, another university write:

The University has **successfully widened access and improved outcomes for students** from disadvantaged backgrounds or who come into higher education with lower entry qualifications. In the five years to 2015-16, full-time student numbers fell by 511 (5.1%) while part-time student numbers fell by 1,115 (24.7%). The overall reduction in students was 1,626 (11.1%), although full-time first degree numbers rose by 667 (8.8%). The reduction in full-time 'other' undergraduates follows a strategic decision to develop our first degree portfolio while reductions in part-time undergraduate students follow a national trend since the fee increases of 2012. (bold text in the original)

By contrast, institutions that did not perform well seemed to take their student demographics as a given and explained outcomes in terms of underlying

demographic factors rather than in terms of 'initiatives' that the university had launched. For instance:

Employment is the natural outcome for \*\*\*\* graduates. In 2014/15 fewer of our graduates (7.6%) chose further study, than in GuildHE HEIs (9.8%) or the sector as a whole (17.4%). Further study, whilst an appropriate next step for graduates, is an outcome measure over which institutions can have greater control (through pricing, bursaries and targeted marketing), than the employment measure, where graduates' abilities are judged in the labour market.

\*\*\*\* has a particularly high proportion of students holding BTEC entry qualifications, especially at higher tariff points. The effect of this is to reduce the likelihood of these graduates gaining highly skilled employment or further study, other things being equal.

In short: successful submissions took even seemingly unfavourable data and wrote about how some institutional initiative turned the bad outcomes around; while unsuccessful submissions treated outcomes either as a *fait accompli* or only in vague terms.

While the final example provides perhaps the starkest example, some other unsuccessful submissions were simply vague about what the university was doing to improve outcomes, without providing quantitative evidence that interventions were succeeding. For instance:

\*\*\*\*\* is committed to a system of continuous improvement to enhance opportunity, student satisfaction and graduate outcomes. In this we work in close partnership with the Guild of Students and our student body, as evidenced by the multiple initiatives in our student-led Enhancement Projects and department-led Enhancement Plans. The year-on-year improvements we are seeing in student satisfaction and graduate employment demonstrate that this enhancement-led approach is effective.

Our confidence that we engage our students in research-informed learning, which consistently engages them with developments at the forefront of research, fosters personal development, and allows them to consistently achieve outstanding outcomes, is reinforced by feedback from a broad range of external stakeholders.

### *Research*

Thirdly, in our in-depth reading of 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' submissions, we were interested in how universities described research. Reading our sample of submissions in depth, it became clear that all nine submissions, whether they mentioned research frequently or not and whether they were upgraded or not, treated research in more or less the same way. Firstly it was notable that most mentions of research could be found in those sections to do with the 'Learning

Environment'. Furthermore, all the submissions read sketched the value of research mostly in terms of how research formed a fruitful 'backdrop' for undergraduate teaching. Indeed, what was most striking was use of the stock phrase 'research-informed teaching'. This phrase, or variants of it, were used in all nine submissions; variants included: 'research-rich', 'research-inspired', 'research-connected', 'research-based', and 'research-led' teaching, in addition to 'research-informed teaching'. As to *how* research informs teaching, however, submissions were notably vague. A number of submissions mentioned opportunities created for undergraduates to acquire research skills, for instance through research methods teaching, through undergraduate research projects and through undergraduate journals. However, most institutions seemed to conceive of research as being a factor that creates a certain atmosphere or climate in which undergraduate teaching can take place without articulating in depth what it is about the content of their particular research that makes the difference. To put it starkly, while universities tried to be as specific and quantifiable as possible about the 'outcomes' of their teaching (and while this was rewarded in the TEF) they were vague about the exact value of research as an 'input' factor. It appears that the presence of a high quality research environment did potentially play some part in convincing the judges of teaching excellence at an institution but there appears to be no clear discourse as to how this contributes directly to teaching excellence.

*Attitude displayed in the written submission to the TEF*

A fourth (and last) matter became apparent through our reading of the written submissions but was not as clear through our corpus-assisted analysis. This was the attitude betrayed by written submissions to the TEF as a worthwhile assessment of teaching and learning in itself. From our reading, it became clear that successful submissions quite consciously 'bought into' the TEF as an exercise. By that, we mean that the submissions portrayed themselves as engaged with the TEF as an exercise and taking it very seriously. For instance, one successful submission reflected as follows on the TEF itself:

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has been debated at University committee and sub-committee level, with students fully represented in all these groups. The President of [the] Student Union has been fully engaged with the TEF submission as a full member of the cross-institutional TEF Steering Group.

Moreover, successful submissions engaged with the TEF process in an accepting manner. For instance, the most successful submissions seemed to engage with the TEF process by consciously discussing the 'quantitative flags' they had received during the data driven stage of the TEF and trying to paint their 'initial hypothesis' in the best possible light. For instance an upgraded institution reflects on their 'flags' as follows:

The institution has positive flags in each of the three aspects of quality for full-time learners: Two in 'Teaching Quality', one in 'Learning Environment' and one in 'Student Outcomes and Learning Gain'. This

balanced distribution of positive flags demonstrates \*\*\*\*\* excellence across the full range of the assessment framework.

By contrast, unsuccessful submissions portrayed themselves as being sceptical towards the TEF as an exercise or betrayed doubt about its accuracy or value. For instance, amongst the unsuccessful submissions, we find the following written about the TEF and its methodology:

... the SO1 metric represents an unusually small group... We feel strongly that our full DLHE data, as reported to HESA, provide a more complete and accurate picture of \*\*\*\*\* student outcomes and learning gain in terms of Employment and Further Study (SO1).

NSS results need to be read in the context of the intentionally challenging learning experience the School's teaching and assessment methods create for students...

... the University's performance as indicated by the DLHE-based metrics available to TEF shows an incomplete picture.

In the clearest sign of opposition to the TEF, one submission includes a commentary from the university's Students Union that reads:

\*\*\* Students' Union is democratically mandated to oppose the TEF, its links to tuition fees, the marketization of higher education and the potential to link this to tier 4 visas... Although the SU believes that the student voice should be central within this submission, our contribution to

it should not be mistaken for support for the Government's misguided education policies.

No such opposition to the TEF is expressed in the 'successful' submissions.

## **6. Conclusion**

Putting quality teaching high on the agenda of policy makers and university management is a welcome move. The UK university sector now has an assessment of Teaching Excellence (the TEF) alongside an assessment of Research Excellence (the REF) in an attempt to achieve parity between the two. While the REF is by no means perfect (Watermeyer, 2016; Tymms and Higgins, 2018) there is one crucial difference between the REF and the TEF: the REF evaluates *actual* research, but the TEF does not evaluate actual teaching, it only evaluates what people (that is students and institutions themselves) say about teaching (through the NSS and the provider submissions). An important contrast between the REF and the TEF then, is that in the TEF, a university's presentation of or interpretation of their teaching plays more of a role than their actual teaching. This aspect of the TEF has been called 'hyperreal' (Canning, 2017).

Against this context, in which discourse is (literally) evaluated more than reality, it is crucial to evaluate the discourse around the TEF. In a study of 12 TEF provider submissions, Beech (2017: 53) identified a number of different themes that universities return to in their submissions: research-led teaching, co-



creation, academic employment contracts, rewards and recognition, student input, extra-curricular concerns, digital connectivity, accessibility, mentoring schemes, geographical factors, employability programmes and careers support. By contrast, our analysis of *all* the TEF provider submissions demonstrates that the themes given most attention *by the most successful submissions* (that is, those submissions that resulted in the institution's award being upgraded) were: employment, employability, outcomes and research. Furthermore, we were struck by how *similar* successful submissions were. Successful submissions followed, in some ways quite literally, a 'script' and self-consciously mirrored the language of the TEF as a bureaucratic exercise.

In particular, we found that those institutions that were upgraded based on their written statement consistently and significantly wrote about 'employment', 'outcomes' 'employability' and 'research' more than those that were not upgraded. Three of the four keywords identified were associated with one particular TEF2 aspect of quality, this was *Student Outcomes and Learning Gain* ('research' is linked to the aspect of *Learning Environment*) and *not* the corresponding aspect of quality: *Teaching Quality*. We can conclude that the writers of provider submissions, or the evaluation panel – or both – attached great importance to student outcomes and learning gain with some focus on research. The keywords that seemed to make the greatest difference to whether an institution was upgraded or not was found in these sections and collocated with words that have to do with the outcome of student employment.

Moving towards a more qualitative reading of successful provider submissions, we found a common route to success was again to 'play up' the themes of employment and employability. Furthermore, successful submissions used quantitative evidence to demonstrate the success of initiatives which aimed to improve teaching (even if, sometimes, the quantitative evidence demonstrated both good and bad news). Moreover, successful submissions quite consciously 'bought into' the philosophy behind the TEF and showed their support for this initiative; criticism of the TEF as an exercise or questions regarding its accuracy was confined to the unsuccessful submissions we studied.

The TEF has a clear impact on how institutions can now market themselves as providing a certain quality of teaching (be it gold, silver or bronze). From one perspective we can say that a greater focus on the quality of teaching in higher education is welcome; on the other hand, the discourse of what a quality learning and teaching experience is and what the outcomes of achieving a degree in the UK can be heavily influenced by policy and regulatory exercises such as the TEF. We therefore expect that, in future, the discourse around 'quality' learning and teaching in UK Higher Education will become ever more similar as institutions realise that the only way to achieve a gold TEF rating is to adopt the 'approved' discourse that sees quality in teaching and learning in higher education as metric driven progress towards greater employment outcomes for students. Should this discourse become the dominant message for educators, institutions, students and public discourse, discourse around employability and degree outcomes will further drown out discourse around higher education for social good, personal development or equity.

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