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The TEF crosses the devolved border (Part 1)

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By Vicky Gunn

It would not perhaps be an exaggeration to say that the last two months of higher education policy in the UK have been a little like an unimaginable soap opera in which the main protagonist was Jo Johnson and the main anti-hero, the higher education sector. Rapid change was ushered in south of the border through the English government's commissioning of HEFCE to introduce the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This happened at the same time as a radical overhaul of and, in some quarters, cuts to the UK-wide Quality Assurance Agency. 'Another periodic rupture in the continuum of university and college accountability systems?' Scottish VPs Learning & Teaching asked from our comfortable devolved zone, in which we debate the relative merits of quality enhancement over audit. Not quite. The intensity, cunning, and speed of the TEF's introduction and its explosive amplification of the paradoxes of devolved education caught us by surprise.

There was a quick move to understand what the bigger picture underneath the TEF was and Universities Scotland organized an initial group (chaired by me) to establish a brief that would enable the Scottish universities to come to some sort of opening position about how to move forward with the TEF, when our own teaching quality system was so different to the one being proposed in England. We started with a few acknowledgements about the emergence of the TEF and its accompanying architecture as outlined in the White Paper:

- Given the scale of politico-technological change in the UK in the last 20 years, something is happening around how HEIs should adequately be held accountable to the socio-economic (UK-wide & Scottish-local) environments they inhabit and create.
- The impact of this is playing out in growing tensions between Scottish HEIs, arms-length bodies, governments North and South of the border, and the broader tax-paying population. These tensions represent a convergence of the following:
- A shift in the relationships between universities and government. Universities in Scotland are used to designing accountability systems through collaborative and cooperative processes which include a range of agencies (Scottish Funding Council, QAA Scotland, NUS, Universities Scotland, and HEA) providing views and intelligence on ways forward. TEF speculation was stomping over that borderline like an infectious disease without much formal communication between the two governments at all. We then found ourselves in the midst of election purdah, which meant ministers either side of the border weren't talking. For a group to respond adequately was practically impossible, because the etiquette necessary for inter-governmental agreements that had sector-wide backing was totally missing and, to be honest, not something most VPs L&T have had to consider before. The nearest to a consensus that we could achieve is that our Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) system had to be compared from a place of *different but equal* status with the TEF. As such, there was awareness of the TEF's bad-side effects unpicking our decade of enhancement-led teaching development.
- The consistent inability of the Westminster government as represented through BIS (UK government) to understand the nature of higher education as both devolved and UK-wide: therefore, what happens in BIS does affect Scottish institutions. It remains to be seen how the recent reshuffle of English HE into the Department of Education (DoE) whilst having a Minister who straddles both DoE and the newly formed Department of Business, Enterprise and Industry Strategy (BEIS) will play

out.

- The seeming inertia of the Scottish government, failing transparently to explore the implications of the *both devolved and UK-wide* paradox for HE being accentuated by the TEF. I have many opinions about the root of this inertia and suggest that in considerable part it represents Holyrood's legalistic view that the TEF is an English quality structure defined in a predominantly English legal context. If only it were that simple. Whilst the Scottish government wasn't going to stand in the way of a Scottish HEI entering the TEF, it had no responsibility to help it to do so. The HEIs, on the other hand, were beginning to point out the problems of Scottish institutions being absent from what was likely to become such an important 'market indicator'. This was made all the worse when the Scottish HEIs discovered that BIS had added them to the list of institutions to be submitted for TEF1 – without consultation but with a postscript that we could opt out. I still wonder how that particular jurisdictional wobble was possible.
- The irresponsible maintenance by the media (and, ironically, English HEIs) of the idea of HE being a 'UK' thing rather than a different but equal devolved thing and thus the mistaken assumptions about how Scottish HE is funded (especially capped funded places for domiciled students) and how metrics' instruments designed for three year specialist degrees don't fit easily or comfortably in a four year degree context (in which students effectively have major and minor components), not to mention the lack of awareness that we reported widening participation completely differently (through a system of Outcome Agreements rather than Access Agreements as well as using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation: SIMD rather than Participation of Local Areas classification: POLAR);
- The over-simplifying narrative of them and us that has developed concerning how Universities operate (the *them*) and the people who work in and study in them (the *us*) which tends to see the *them* as morally bad and the *us* as morally good. This trickles down into the public domain as universities being less than a good thing, with institutions not meeting their socio-cultural-economic responsibilities. So, why shouldn't we be held more directly accountable and wouldn't metrics be a good way to do it?
- The constant cuts to agencies that might be expected to provide more positive PR support for what we do in higher education, which has led to these agencies competing with and criticising us – without understanding what we do, what impact we have or just how much enhancement and change has occurred in the last ten years.

We are moving in a rapidly emerging governance and regulatory context, one which is increasingly trying to articulate how metrics and technological advances can assist governments through forms of automated decision-making (eg metrics which enable the introduction of and subsequently perpetuation of variable fees). This is changing the nature of the game in terms of:

- How both the Scottish and Westminster governments communicate with us about their ways of valuing and judging higher education;
- How HEIs might be more efficiently held to account when there is so much readily available data collected across a range of agencies and metrics' oriented instruments now.

In some respects, as soon as the White Paper was published related speculation seeped across the Tweed, rattling the doors of Vice-Chancellors/Principals in Scotland who recognised immediately the financial bottom line, at the same time as making VPs Learning & Teaching sit up and suddenly become aware of the seismic shift potentially coming to assurance systems. It has had a more universal unravelling effect though, at least in Scotland, because it has made us try to work out how we are to be held accountable by the Scottish government whilst still very much playing within the quality

brand that is the UK HE sector (an even more complicated situation since the Brexit vote). As the TEF design emerges and we in Scotland review our own accountability systems, I leave with one substantial concern. It looks like TEF4 will have a strong disciplinary dimension (if pilots go well). VPs L&T had a very rapid and steep learning curve to come to terms with institutional TEF. As the TEF increasingly centres on disciplines (possibly to be defined not as REF disciplines units of return are but through HESA reporting mechanisms known as JACs codes), Deans L&T in colleges/faculties and heads of L&T at school/department level within the colleges might well find that their role becomes both more politically charged and external facing. I wonder, will they be ready?

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