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Barkas, Linda Anne, Scott, Jonathan, Poppitt, Nicola and Smith, Paul (2017)  
Tinker, tailor, policy-maker: can the UK government's teaching excellence  
framework deliver its objectives? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. ISSN  
0309-877X

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*Tinker, Tailor, Policy-Maker: Can the UK Government's  
Teaching Excellence Framework deliver its objectives?*

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**Word Count** (excluding references, this line and title 6,426)

**Brief biographical notes of the authors under 150 words**

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Nicola is a Principal Lecturer in the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Team within Academic Registry. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and in 2009 was awarded the status of University Teaching Fellow. Nicola has designed, delivered and led business related degree programmes and also contributed to other University programmes. For nine years as the School Learning and Teaching Coordinator she took a lead role in the development of learning and teaching across the School and the University. In 2015 she moved to her current post and leads the University's accredited Professional Development Framework in addition to other learning and teaching enhancement activities. Having previously been involved in a number of discipline based research projects/activities her current research interests are more focused around pedagogic research and she has presented at conferences and published around the areas of feedback and assessment and work based learning.

Paul Smith is Programme Director for the Executive MBA. Previously he has worked at Teesside University as Head of the Human Resource Management and Organizational Behaviour

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***Tinker, Tailor, Policy-Maker: Can the UK Government's  
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**Abstract:**

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), originally proposed in the United Kingdom (UK) Government's Higher Education White Paper, now the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), is a national mechanism to assess teaching quality in universities. This paper provides a critical account of the TEF, underpinned by an overview of the policy context and marketisation and employability agendas exploring the rationale for implementing TEF within universities. We argue, firstly, that the White Paper's narrative, the rhetoric of the TEF, seems positive but its implementation appears to be conceptually flawed. Secondly, its complex quality metrics system demands yet another layer of bureaucracy in an already micro-managed system of higher education. Thirdly, claims made by the White Paper must be supported by evidence-based

research to ensure that the objectives are clear. We conclude by questioning whether the quality of the student experience can be improved by the TEF reforms.

**Key words:**

2017 Higher Education and Research Act, 2016 White Paper, Teaching Excellence Framework, Employability, Marketisation, Skills.

**Word count: 6,246**

## **Introduction**

The title of this article is abridged from one of John Le Carré's popular, best-selling novels. However, – unlike his carefully crafted, creative and innovative spy story – the reforms, including the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) originally proposed in the United Kingdom (UK) Government's 2016 White Paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2016)) do not provide a 'clear sell' to the United Kingdom's (UK) Higher Education (HE) sector. This White Paper was implemented as the Higher Education and Research Bill (Department for Education (DE) and Department for Business, Energy and Industry Strategy (BEIS) (2016) and has now passed through Parliament as the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. In 2016, the White Paper had become a 'Bill' and later an Act, once the various stages through Parliament had been completed. In the UK, legislation passes through the two Houses (the House of Lords and House of Commons) and agreement must be reached before a Bill can become Law. At the time of writing (summer 2017) there remained issues with the Act, so the proceedings were at the 'ping-pong' stage where the legislation alternates between the two Houses of Parliament (UK Parliament 2017).

The aim of this paper is as follows. First, we provide an outline of the background and context of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Section One). Second, we clarify the definition of the Teaching Excellence Framework (Section Two). Third, we explore the themes underpinning the TEF (Section 3) and, fourth and finally, we question the nature of the reforms and offer some concluding arguments (Section 4).

## Section One: Background and Context

The UK higher education system was originally conceived in the mid-nineteenth century as largely elitist and offered a '*higher culture*', stemming from John Henry Newman's 'idea of a university' as a knowledge provider in the pursuit of truth (Bligh 1990). Over the past 50 years, however, UK university education has deviated from this theory. Instead, successive governments' policy discourse has moved from the creation of new universities and polytechnics in the 1960s and 1970s, to an emphasis on the economic role of higher education with widening participation and abolishing divisions in the 1990s, to gradueness and employability in the 2000s (Barkas 2011a). These developments have run parallel to the gradual marketisation of higher education as a product 'for sale' in the market (Brown and Carasso 2013) and the rise in student numbers entering higher education in the UK. The marketisation of higher education became possible for two main reasons. First, because of the dominance of the belief that a higher education gives an individual a lifetime's advantage in earnings potential so the individual should contribute to the cost of the provision; second, aggravated by the economic downturn in 2008, because the public funding of higher education was no longer sustainable. The Browne Report (2010) was, therefore, commissioned to propose a system of student loans to replace the previous publicly funded grant system. Student loans to pay higher education fees (now £9000.00 per annum, with some popular programmes costing more) were thus introduced.

Over the past five decades, shifting employment patterns throughout the globe have changed the role universities are expected to fulfil to one of ensuring graduates are equipped to gain employment in an increasingly competitive market place (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2008). This change has resulted in a heavily complex and contested discourse surrounding what constitutes appropriate 'graduate knowledge' and 'skill development' (see, *inter alia*, Ainley

2000; Barkas 2011b; Brown and Carasso 2013). Throughout these developments over the past few decades, the value of a higher education as a private good has changed to an economic commodity in a fluctuating market, which has resulted in the creation of unintended divisions in higher education in terms of efficiency, diversity and quality (Brown and Carasso 2013). Over this period of time, successive governments have enforced numerous legislatures to try to control these diverse variables surrounding what constitutes a higher education fit for the modern economy. The impact of this legislation manifests in a differentiated discourse on graduateness and employability that has moved backwards and forwards from issues in students' skills deficits, to up-skilling or high skilling, described as 'policy hysteria' by Stronach and Morris (1994, 5).

In an effort to further manage these challenges, however, governments have introduced several policy reforms that have increased the bureaucracy required to measure the impact of change. Two of the most influential mechanisms to measure the efficiency of universities are the ranking of institutions in league tables and the National Student Survey (NSS). The introduction of the ranking of institutions and the publication of the league tables started in the USA and were introduced in the UK from 1993 onwards. The scores are published in newspapers and on websites such as the Complete University Guide (2017). In 2005, and in practice today, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was commissioned to implement the NSS throughout the higher education sector. The remit of the NSS is to ascertain students' views of their experience at university with the intention that the information can help universities assess their teaching provision and address any issues that may impinge on a positive experience for students (HEFCE 2017). The NSS is completed by students in the final year of their degree usually between January and April before their final assessments. The timing of the

survey is an attempt to elicit a realistic impression of the student experience with the aim of establishing their level of satisfaction with their programme of study. The students are invited to score their programme over a range of factors such as quality of teaching, feedback, resources and so on. Student staff ratios and employability are also important and strong influences on student satisfaction. Criticisms of the validity of the NSS results centre on the difficulty in ensuring rigour in data collection and also establishing the quality of the information obtained. Not all students complete the forms, and the students who do complete the forms may not be representative of the programme as a whole. For example, research on the NSS has suggested that it is possible that the timing of the survey may influence students disproportionately, such that (a) some students may be hoping for a high grade and may believe that if they do not score their institution highly enough it will be to their detriment and (b) other students perceive that their tutors have not supported them properly may under-score their programme (Vaughan and York 2009; Lenton 2015). Regardless of how the NSS results are utilised, the findings are important to how universities will be scored in the TEF but, as observed by Vaughan and Yorke (2017, 1): ‘...it is useful here to resist the temptation to conflate student satisfaction with student learning – an important distinction often lost – but rather to be realistic about what the first 21 core questions of the survey are actually asking (and what they are not).’ The scores from the NSS are published on the HEFCE website and have become a key factor in the marketing of universities as the scores are included in the ranking of institutions.

The marketisation and employability agendas in higher education have, therefore, developed against a complex backdrop of both the internationalisation of higher education and the globalisation of business markets. Whilst the internationalisation of HE can be seen as attempts to create ‘border crossing activities’, the fast development of globalisation of business markets

over the past few decades has resulted in a ‘turbo-capitalism’ that creates equally competing mechanisms (Teichler 2004, 4). The results of these forces are heavily debated in the literature (see, *inter alia*, Beck et al. 2007; De Wit 2002; Teichler 2004; Ashwin 2016). In this article, we examine how these forces influence the employability and skills discourse that are manifest in the 2016 White Paper.

This change in ideological perspectives for universities, therefore, began during the 1980s whereby HE has seen successive governments pursue neo-liberal policies which focus primarily on the economic benefits of HE rather than viewing it as a social good (see also Maskell and Robinson 2001). The resulting conflicting demands placed on universities has led to several competing ideologies of influence that are once again seen in the narrative of the 2016 White Paper (see, *inter alia*, Beer and Lawson 2017; Barnett 1998; Young 2009; Young and Muller 2010; Leach 2016). In its earlier stage the Higher Education and Research Bill (DE and BEIS 2016) was criticised by various online outlets as well as some of the articles cited in our introduction, including whether the TEF can claim to be a ‘fair reflection of quality’ (Leach 2016), or whether ‘The market is free, yet everywhere it is in chains,’ expressing concerns about whether the HE White Paper’s reforms would challenge an institution’s rights to safeguard its role in assessing ‘standards’ in relation to students’ achievement without the imposition of conditions imposed by the legislative proposals (Jamdar 2016).

While emphasising the key role of research in HE policy, Kehm (2015, 69) argued that national governments and other ‘supra-national’ agencies create a super-complexity of pressures. (For example, supra-national agencies such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO]). Kehm (2015, 69) ascribes these pressures to the combined

effects of ‘multi-actors’ contributions such that ‘any policy agenda can be constrained even distorted in the process of implementation because implementation takes place at the institutional level and includes processes of translation and adaptation to the local circumstances.’ The term ‘multi-actors’ is a generic phrase used to depict the different opinions, often contradictory, for example, as depicted by Kehm (2015). So this *translation of policy to practice* means for universities, as Kehm’s (2015, 69) research findings have demonstrated, ‘a preoccupation with strategy, structure, management, and profile or branding’ which due to the preponderance of managerial and administrative staff that are essentially ‘compliance officers.’ Hence universities may have stifled their innovativeness and creativity, to the detriment of students. This ‘preoccupation’ can be seen in relation to the White Paper’s arguments to make systems clearer for students. For example, one of the key points of the 2016 HE White Paper is the need to improve the ‘management’ of employment or careers information and guidance in HE. And yet, a recent survey by Universities UK (UUK) found that 83 per cent of students were very satisfied or quite satisfied with their careers advice in the UK (UUK 2015). The 2016 White Paper also emphasises the requirement to raise teaching standards but again 86 per cent of students studying in the UK appear to be satisfied with their course, rating the existing high standards of teaching as being very important to them (ibid). It also found that international students are more likely to recommend HE in the UK than in any other of the major English-speaking countries (ibid).

The following section explains the nature of the Teaching Excellence Framework.

## Section Two: Defining the TEF

Starting with an explanation of the purpose of the TEF, our examination of the challenging ideas to be addressed in TEF are explored through a discussion of some key influences in the differentiated discourse on employability, skills and the role of HE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The TEF is a new metrics-based initiative introduced by the UK government ostensibly to increase ‘excellence’ in teaching at UK HEIs. The metrics include data and statistics from the NSS, benchmarks and destinations to assess teaching, learning and outcomes for students.

Universities’ TEF categories were announced in June 2017 (Times Higher Education 2017) and have been awarded gold, silver or bronze status as follows:

- **gold** for delivering consistently outstanding teaching, learning and outcomes for its students. It is of the highest quality found in the UK
- **silver** for delivering high quality teaching, learning and outcomes for its students. It consistently exceeds rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education
- **bronze** for delivering teaching, learning and outcomes for its students that meet rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education.

(HEFCE 2017)

Being similar to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which enables the ‘excellence’ of research to be assessed, the TEF evaluates and ranks institutions – and their various disciplines – based on a number of measures. The White Paper (BIS 2016, 18) states that the TEF ‘will identify and incentivise the highest quality teaching to drive up standards in HE, deliver better quality for students and employers and better value for taxpayers.’

The TEF is different from previous teaching evaluations and quality enhancement initiatives in the UK in that it attempts to offer a national framework to judge the quality of teaching. Several objectives are outlined in the White Paper (BIS 2016, 18-19), which, *inter alia*, specifically attempt to ‘encourage excellent teaching for all students’, enhancing HEIs’ teaching excellence ‘by highlighting exemplary practices’, ‘build a culture where ... teaching has equal status with research’, and to support widening participation of students from ‘disadvantaged backgrounds.’

The attempts of successive UK governments to introduce policies and legislation to combine social cohesion agendas with market-based economics, however, have floundered because the basic flaw is one of incompatible models. The subsequent dilemma is, therefore, faced by universities as they also ‘tinker and tailor’ the curriculum to try to respond to the demands of four quite different stakeholders: students who want the knowledge to compete in the job markets, academic staff who have certain professional and personal/career requirements, employers who want to choose the best graduates for their own purposes and the government who endeavour to improve the country’s prosperity and economic competitiveness by instigating drivers through its employability agendas. Thus, the TEF is introduced against this backdrop of competing ideologies, which manifests in a changing landscape that could lead to a new range of competitive and potentially destructive forces in terms of the potential of new entrants to the HE sector. Arguably, over the longer term more competition in the HE sector (BIS 2016, Chapter 1, 23) could potentially level down quality and standards; and hollow out the research capacity of existing universities as new providers operate ‘corporate university’ business models (see Parker and Jary 1995), rather than enhance them. The practice of universities validating their partners is not necessarily ‘anti-competitive’ (BIS 2016, 21) but it is in fact, collaborative in the spirit of partnerships between the private and third sectors (universities mostly being charities). A broader

philosophical question, and related to the utilitarian post-Robbins consensus (after the Robbins Report in 1963), is: why does the sector need more competition at all? Indeed, the White Paper describes the new entrants as ‘high quality institutions’ (BIS 2016, 29), whereas there is little evidence to support this assertion. In reality, as stated above, they are more likely to reduce levels of quality in the sector.

This same chapter suggests that bureaucracy would be reduced (BIS 2016, 68) and yet is, in fact, renamed as ‘infrastructure’ or ‘architecture’, whereas bureaucracy inhibits (i.e. it is a barrier) and that is one of the risks of the utilitarian, technocratic, neo-liberalist approach of the White Paper which is not in the spirit of the post-Robbins consensus. Whilst these are important contextual issues that emerge, we now focus specifically on the White Paper’s chapter 2 on ‘choice’.

Essentially, the rationale for the TEF is cloaked in the words *quality* and *choice* and in the goal ‘enabling more people to benefit from higher education’, including ‘disadvantaged groups’ (BIS 2016, 40). And yet, there is an inherent contradiction here in that forcing universities into cost-based strategies to compete with new entrants could potentially lead to lower quality because of downward cost pressures. Employability, lack of informed choices, skills mismatches and outcomes (BIS 2016, 42-43) are reported as the main arguments for increasing choice in this way. It is not, however, clear how new lower-quality, low cost, non-research providers would remedy these systemic problems. Counter-intuitively, improving existing provision by reviewing pay and rewards for academics and reducing the level of bureaucracy and administration in universities would be a more effective approach to address these important and relevant policy issues. These are the policy ‘drivers’ behind this White Paper; however, they are not necessarily the correct policies to address these problems. The timeline for the three TEF ratings is stated in the 2016 White Paper as being introduced as a ‘staged approach’ over three years, starting with

Year One (2016/17) where universities have started with ‘Meets Expectations’, progressing to Year 2 (2017/18) as the trial year followed by Year 3 onwards which introduces the major changes (BIS 2016). Section Three presents the themes which underpin the justification for the introduction of TEF.

### **Section Three: Themes underpinning the introduction of the TEF**

The interest in assessing teaching quality in universities has its origins in the differential discourse on what a ‘higher education’ should mean, with debates about whether it should remain strictly academic or to meet the challenges of economic demands, if it should embrace more fully vocational dimensions. The tensions created by numerous challenges in providing academic and vocational education for the twenty-first century are at the centre of the marketisation of HE. The differentiated discourse, however, in relation to the themes of skills and employability need to be seen in the context of an unstable job market in a global economy (Wilton 2011; BIS 2015). While it could be argued that the value of HE in prosperity terms has always existed, the extended emphasis on the economic value of HE (which existed for some time) has been re-emphasised after the Robbins Report in 1963. However, Barnett (1994, 18) disagreed when he suggested that the Robbins report presented the start of a different set of values as it ‘marked the end of HE as a cultural or positional good, rather than economic.’

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) was intended to abolish the binary divide between polytechnics and universities and was perhaps one of the most important reforms to attempt to make UK HE more responsive to increased economic competitiveness. Arguably, twenty-five years on the binary divide still exists as employers still treat the two types of university differently and it was also reinforced by HEFCE in its REF allocations for ‘externally-facing’

research, which may have diverted academics' attention away from learning and teaching towards obtaining grant funding, publishing peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs (what we term 'externally-facing' research to differentiate it from the more pedagogically oriented research-informed teaching). A primary proposal of the White Paper (BIS 2016, Chapter 3, 64) is that research would be split from teaching: whereas, in fact, they should be integrated. This is because research-informed teaching and evidence-based practice helps implement improvements in the curriculum. For example, critical pedagogical theories of students' learning help academics understand students' needs for reflexivity, plan their programmes and embed employability initiatives alongside strategies for knowledge acquisition (see, *inter alia*, Rogers 1969; Williams 2013; Ingleby 2015). The introduction of another auditable process in terms of the TEF, in addition to the REF, brings another measurement tool that may 'measure the measurement' (process), rather than improve the quality of the process (outcomes).

The further tension of 'measuring the measurement' is then compounded by introducing another category of HE provider that utilises its own quality systems. By offering degree awarding powers to further education colleges and other new private sector entrants, this White Paper may potentially create a third tier: a non-research, teaching super-intensive 'post-2016 university.' This concern can be traced back to Coffield's (1998, 51) observation that: 'investment in education and training is necessary but not a sufficient condition of sustained economic prosperity; the point is neatly captured in the phrase *let them eat skills*. This exhortation is the title of the article by Noble' (1994, 22 quoted in Coffield 1998, 51)'. The key issue is that changing work patterns in the USA and UK result in job insecurity that is not just about skills deficits. This trend, Coffield (1998) argued, is occurring because organised labour has been all but destroyed, and most new jobs are in the low-wage, temporary, part-time service sector,

requiring minimum skills. The result may be a ‘highly skilled elite and a growing army of the (at best) semi-skilled and expendable’ (Coffield 1998, 51): the so-called *precarariat*. This pattern of increasing job insecurity is still observable in 2016 as multi-national corporations move their operations around the globe (BIS 2016). The reality of the job market for graduates is unstable, particularly in different regions. Despite the criticisms of the role of HE provision in the development of the country’s strong economy, its economic competitiveness and widening participation remained the focus of further legislation from 1992 in which HE expanded and tuition fees were introduced (Newman 2010).

The Minister of State for Universities and Science, Research and Innovation, Jo (Joseph) Johnson MP (BIS 2016, 5) stressed the use of the terms *skills*, *knowledge* and *employability* in the 2016 White Paper to support the proposals made, whilst emphasising the need for urgent reform based on largely economic arguments that he links to skills (see, for example, Maskell and Robinson’s (2001) formidable critique of this conception of universities), including critical thinking and use of evidence in the ‘knowledge economy’. Accordingly, the 2016 White Paper proposes instigating these ‘reforms’ through more competition, choice and additional information for students and further regulations by forming an Office for Students. While the interrelated proposals in the White Paper (and the subsequent Bill and Act) are all important for evaluation and discussion, this article adopts a broader critique of the issues, framed and contextualised within the discourse around marketisation, employability and skills.

Because only clauses 23-26 of the original Bill provide for the TEF (DE and BEI, 2016) and we, therefore, focus our analysis here on the 2016 White Paper (BIS 2016) in which the detailed operation of, and rationale for, the TEF is articulated strongly. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017, however, provides the means to enact all these changes (following prior

legislation e.g. the *Students at the Heart of the System* White Paper (BIS 2011) which focused on raising the cap on tuition fees to £9,000 per annum, promoting a better student experience and enhancing social mobility).

Whereas some important developments are suggested, in many instances the document appears to be theoretically mismatched, with no clear lines of reasoning, supported by several examples of highly selective statistics, and distorted or poorly supported rationale. Critics of the preceding Green Paper on HE reform argue that their concerns have not been addressed properly in the subsequent White Paper since too much ambiguity remains in its proposals (for example, Leach 2016). The perhaps myopic focus on the marketisation of HE and the promotion of new entrants to the sector to compete with the incumbent universities is akin to encouraging entrepreneurship *within HE* and fostering economic growth and job creation through disruptive change and ‘intrapreneurship’, i.e. entrepreneurial approaches in large organisations such as universities (Pinchot 1985; Pinchot and Pinchot 1978). Although the opening sentence of this article is somewhat light-hearted, the issues raised are reflective of a much deeper concern for the development of UK university provision over the next decade. The 2016 HE White Paper is also ambiguous in places: for example, it emphasises the further dominance of a business modelled ‘market’ approach to HE whilst, on the other hand, the proposals are paralleled by a draft of contradictory regulation of standards. It is these ambiguities in the design of the TEF that has led to concerns expressed in an emerging body of literature (Frankham 2017; Gibson 2016; Ingham 2016; Neary 2016; Robinson and Hilli 2016; Snowden and McSherry 2017; Van der Sluis et al. 2017). For example, whilst generally supporting the premise that more information on the quality of teaching should be available to potential students, Ashwin (2017) suggests the crude performance mechanisms of the TEF will not be representative of the complexities interwoven

into what constitutes ‘good teaching’. Wild and Berger (2016, 48), however, who are equally supportive of ensuring that more data is available to students, argue that the TEF is a good idea ‘...insofar as the need to make students from a wide range of backgrounds employable, makes good business sense...however without identifying the key skill(s) which increase employability, nor the means by which to objectively chart whether these skills have been developed or enhanced, the TEF does not provide the ‘framework’ of ‘teaching excellence’ that it promises.’ This paper, therefore, also acknowledges the continuing need to provide accurate data for potential students; but we also believe the metrics incorporated in the TEF do not help to improve teaching quality but merely ‘measure the existing measurements’ already implemented in the HE system.

#### **Section Four: Can the TEF reforms metrics succeed?**

The main contradiction in the White Paper and the TEF is that the reforms and the metric system strive to measure two competing ideological views of the role of HE in society. Hensley *et al.* (2013, 553) identified this as resulting from, firstly, viewpoints ‘that societal good emerges as a result of the skills gained and knowledge disseminated by graduates’ versus, secondly, that HE is a private good that ‘can hold more currency ...in part because it is more difficult to operationalise (and therefore market) the public benefits of higher education: values such as ‘tolerance’ are not easily measured and the financial impact of community service can be difficult to gauge.’ So legislation attempts to combine these opposing views of HE’s role in society. The result is a confusing and contradictory discourse.

Throughout the debates about this legislation, the different ideas about the role of universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century relate to expectations of how far universities can prepare students for life and work. Employability is broadly a notion that implies that a university should offer a set of learning outcomes or skills to its students that on graduation will make them more attractive to employers. Hence, terms such as ‘graduateness’, ‘skills’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘employability’ (Barkas 2011a; Brown et al. 2008; Unwin 2004; Young 2009) have been chosen as descriptors, but the discourse remains problematic as the terms are not used definitively without ambiguity. These words are not explained within a specific context, but instead are repeated in rhetorical strategies that are not questioned. Thereby creating a ‘discourse’ that appears to be normal, whereby the *implicit meaning* is accepted even when the *intended meaning* is not made clear, so with continued use, an unquestioning *acceptance* becomes embodied in the language, a process that Bernstein (2000) termed ‘normalisation of genericism.’ That is, ‘employability’ is loosely associated with ‘graduateness’ or ‘graduate skills’ and written about so generally that their meaning is neither made explicit nor supported by evidence or examples. This process of genericism is also then transposed onto the modular system. For example, Ainley (2016, 107) suggests higher or tertiary education may be termed *Business Studies Universities* or *BSU*, whereby module choice is offered in terms ‘Bernstein (1977) called ‘a collection code’ of equivalent levels without any necessary progression from one to the other.’

As in legislation since the 1992 reforms, the underpinning concept for the further changes originally proposed in the 2016 White Paper is the need to maintain a strong ‘knowledge economy’ (BIS 2016, 5). The term *knowledge economy* became popular in HE legislative rhetoric in the early 2000s as the concept of knowledge-based economies (KBEs) became enmeshed in the discourse about *employability* that despite occupational stratification (Brown

and Hesketh 2004, 47) has also become generically normalised. This same ‘normalisation of genericism’ (Bernstein, 2000) can be said to apply to the word ‘standards’ that is written about so dominantly in the 2016 White Paper in relation to the TEF. A key question here, therefore, is what can the TEF instil in universities that the existing efforts to embed ‘employability’ initiatives into the curriculum through its existing quality processes have not already achieved? The quality of teaching metrics in the TEF must somehow embrace Bernstein’s (2000) *normalisation of language* over four main strands of HE discourse – marketisation and social cohesion; managerialism and quality control; employability and skills; knowledge economy and graduateness – what exactly can be measured when the ‘intended meaning’ of the terms are not agreed?

Equally, policy-makers in the UK have certainly been concerned with employability for some time (see, for example, Hillage and Pollard 1998; Smith et al. 2000; Brown et al. 2003; Brown and Hesketh 2004; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Cranmer 2006) as have other entities, such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA 2016) (Moreland 2006; Yorke 2006; Yorke and Knight 2006). Therefore, we need to consider the best model for HE reforms in the light of these ‘employability initiatives’ (defined by O’Byrne and Bond (2014, 578) as a choice between three possible paradigms: ‘a consumerist, intellectual or managerial model’), in the same way that the Robbins Report emphasised the critical importance of the economic value of HE just as the era of the primacy of the cultural impact of university came to an end (Barnett 1994). While the economic value of a degree was one of the stated aims of higher education in the Robbins Report, in writings after its publication, Robbins stressed that his intention had been taken out of context and that access to universities and the intellectual development of the student was at the core of what became known as the ‘Robbins principle’ (Robbins 1980, 6)

The White Paper (2016, now the Higher Education and Research Act 2017) places the employability agenda and thus its economic value once again in pole position; this myopic vision of HE, as noted by O’Byrne and Bond (2014, 571), places ‘universities at the intersection of three competing and often contradictory paradigms.’ It is not clear whether employability is a generic outcome of the ‘right’ university education, i.e. an ‘institutional achievement’ or ‘the propensity of the individual student to get employment’ (Harvey 2001, 97). Indeed, the individual-level teaching excellence of academics may be a capability that enhances graduates’ employability.

In some senses, therefore, the logic underlying the linkage of TEF and employability is not, in fact, as directly linked as policy-makers in the relevant Government department(s) may think. Similarly, the incoming first-year student’s social capital, financial capital or human capital (often the result of his or her social class and prior educational experiences) may be a major predictor of subsequent post-graduation employability. Similarly, much has been written, as indicated above, on how educators (and, by implication, universities) can improve their learning and teaching offering to enhance employability (Fallows and Steven 2000; Morley 2001; Knight and Yorke 2003, 2004), as well as more critical perspectives on the employability debate and agenda (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). Mason et al. (2009), however, did not find a causal connection between curricular employability skills, teaching and improved labour market performance: instead, work experience and other initiatives had greater impact. Both Cranmer (2006) and Mason et al. (2009) confirmed that involving employers in developing and delivering courses improved *de facto* employability outcomes.

The TEF potentially has various problematic issues in terms both of its design, implementation, outcomes and impact on a range of stakeholders in HE. For example, this process could present

further challenges for academic staff as they may have to engineer existing programmes to highlight areas where ‘teaching excellence’ is emphasised rather than students’ learning development. We have critiqued the underlying ‘marketisation’ agenda that underpins the new White Paper. While contradicting the highly regulated approach, it is similar to subsequent Governments’ approach to the free market in the wider economy which is only as free as its regulators enable it to be. Similarly, there will be a free market for universities but again within a rigid Government regulatory framework. The marketisation agenda has a number of intended outcomes, one of which is to improve the quantity of HE provision in the UK, with the regulatory framework (such as the TEF, in addition to the already existing REF) being designed to improve its quality.

However, it is not clear whether this mixed approach of marketisation and regulation will work in practice. The marketised approach of the TEF, as with the REF, could be considered to be a technocratic neo-liberalist approach to HE – in other words, trying to manage something that is inherently intangible and unmanageable by managers, which could be regarded as a ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel and Webber 1973) in regards to the lecturer-student learning interaction.

The discourse around teaching and learning in the policy documentation highlights this dilemma. For example, the emphasis on improving teaching for students in universities started when the Institute for Learning and Teaching in HE was introduced after the 1997 Dearing Report (the forerunner to the current HEA). The Dearing Report examined all aspects of HE but it was Recommendation 21 that introduced requirements for the ‘intention’ (learning outcomes)’ of a programme to be clearly stated in the documentation. This move to an outcomes-based approach means that the emphasis on learning moves from the tutor to the student (Dillon 2005). This change to outcomes-based HE has caused considerable debate over the past decade (see *inter-*

*alia* Hussey and Smith 2003; Knight and Yorke 2004; OECD 2012); so therefore, whether the emphasis on professional development for academic staff should be on how to improve their teaching or on how to enhance the environment for learning remain key issues in the concerns over the inherent challenges presented by the introduction of the TEF, simply because the narrative in the 2016 White Paper puts the emphasis back on teaching and not students' learning. In the same way as the deficiencies and problems in the REF were exposed through 'game playing' whereby institutions manipulated their status (Williams 1998), the TEF approach is more metrics-based than the qualitative evaluative thinking that underpins, for example, the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and the HEA fellowship scheme. As well as involving top-down policy implementation, the TEF (unlike the individual-level HEA fellowship scheme) would ultimately provide aggregate departmental and institutional level data on the ephemeral concept of 'teaching excellence'. Equally, further challenges surround the notion of being able to quantify this 'excellence' through the three dimensions of quality: teaching quality, the learning environment, and students' outcome(s) and learning gain as stipulated in the TEF.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have expressed concern over the narrative in the 2016 White Paper. While the rhetoric of a TEF appears positive, the implementation of such a scheme is conceptually flawed. It is hindered still further by a complex quality metrics system that demands yet another layer of bureaucracy in what is arguably an already micro-managed system of HE. The gradual marketisation of HE has coincided with changing expectations surrounding universities' roles, whereby knowledge has been *commodified* in what was termed in the 1990s the 'McUniversity' (Parker and Jary 1995). This process, in turn, allowed managerialist structures to gain a stronghold within the 'new public management' (Chandler et al. 2002). Universities, therefore,

must serve different masters; on the one hand, they must provide individuals with choice, while, on the other, they must explicitly ‘manage’ something such as an individual’s learning that is generally engaged in implicitly (Henkel 2000).

Looking back over the discourse of change in HE, what has been learned? Has HE been able to respond to the UK central Government’s demands for economic competitiveness? The answer is multi-faceted: while HE has opened up to more opportunities, it has had to deal with a range of competing demands which has led to the management of bureaucracy taking an ever-greater role in universities. There has never been a greater need for higher skills and knowledge in all their forms and multi-faceted definitions (Brown and Hesketh 2004; O’Byrne and Bond 2014). Any claims that the HE 2016 White Paper (now the Higher Education and Research Act 2017) makes must, therefore, be genuine and should be underpinned, ironically, by evidence-based research to ensure that the objectives of the reforms are clear.

To return to our analogy of a spy novel, the loose rhetoric of *employability* and *graduate skills for knowledge-based global economies* in the 2016 HE White Paper (now the HE and R Act 2017) creates another *Tinker and Tailor* in the policy plot lines in the drama of the past few decades of ‘what HE needs to do next.’ During the Cold War when Le Carré wrote his novel, governments were suspicious of each other and uncertain about the ‘truth behind the words’ in all international discourse. And yet, how far removed is this scenario over 50 years later when there is so much uncertainty and ambiguity in the rhetoric about the role universities need to play? Running parallel to these debates, the expectations for HE are complicated even more by universities in metaphorical *knowledge wars* but in an economic framework where the *winner takes all in the market* (Frank and Cook 1996).

In the twenty-five years since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the HE sector has embraced several legislative changes. It has changed from elite to mass provision, introduced fees instead of grants, and fulfilled governments' requirements for more visible links to employment. Equally, the past twenty-five years have seen unprecedented changes in structural employment patterns across the globe and the challenges to the relationship between universities in, and representative of, a society's values remains. We do not know, however, whether the standards and quality of student experience that result in graduate employment can be linked to the TEF reforms. This is a topic for further discussion and research to validate any claims that can be made.

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