

“As a geographer, I can continue to do my job without doing a Mooc; but of course if I did a Mooc and I could suddenly get 30-40,000 students around the world interested in the topic, it would look good for Japanese studies,” he said.
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TEF ‘not meaningful’ until discipline data available

Institution-level statistics will be ‘too generic’, THE/HEA webchat hears

Ratings in the teaching excellence framework will be of little use to students or employers until discipline-level data are available, it has been warned.

Stephen Isherwood, chief executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters, told a webchat hosted by *Times Higher Education* and the

Higher Education Academy that institutional data would be “too generic” to be used in application or employment decisions.

Under proposals released as part of the higher education White Paper, the TEF will not operate at course level until 2019-20, following piloting in 2018-19.

But most students choose their university by course, and there can be widespread variation in standards across institutions.

Mr Isherwood said that the TEF was unlikely to “start to get any real traction” until discipline-level data were available, and that it was a “disappointment” that it would take so long to get to that stage.

“I understand getting it right and taking time [but] four years away? That bothers me that it takes so long to get to discipline level,” Mr Isherwood said. “I think people will need it at discipline level – that’s where it becomes meaningful around student choice. Institution level is too generic a rating.”

Mr Isherwood was joined in the webchat by Stephanie Marshall, the HEA’s chief executive, and by Julie McLeod, pro vice-chancellor (student experience) at Oxford Brookes University.

Professor McLeod argued that the government’s decision to phase in the TEF more slowly was welcome because proposed metrics such as satisfaction and graduate employment were “poor proxies” for teaching standards. She argued that strong weight would need to be placed on the written evidence that institutions will be able to submit alongside their evidence.

“Metrics can over time lead to a herd mentality and chasing numerical scores,” Professor McLeod said. “Therefore the contextual element of the TEF will be critical in ensuring different missions are best recognised.”

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Benefits of free university tuition in Scotland ‘not evident’

Sutton Trust study finds disadvantaged students still struggle to get into Scottish universities, and instead enter the college sector

It is “not evident” that maintaining free higher education has given Scotland an advantage over the rest of the UK on widening access, a report says.

Research by the University of Edinburgh for the Sutton Trust shows that Scottish 18-year-olds from the most advantaged backgrounds remain four times more likely than those from the least privileged areas to go straight to university. In England, the equivalent figure is 2.4, and it is about three in Wales and Northern Ireland.

The report puts this down to the capping of student numbers in Scotland and contrasts this with the situation in England, where the lifting of number controls and the intro-

duction of £9,000 fees have fuelled significant expansion of the sector. Increased competition for university places has a disproportionately negative effect on students from poorer backgrounds, the report says, because they are less likely to achieve the best school qualifications.

Many Scottish students start their higher education in the college sector, and this is reflected in the country’s better higher education participation rate among under-30s compared with England.

One in five Scots (20.9 per cent) started higher education in a college in 2013-14, with 34.1 per cent going straight to university, while in England only 6 per cent started in college, with 40.6 per cent going straight to university.

About half (47 per cent) of students taking Higher National qualifications in Scottish colleges do progress to university, but the report says that they may struggle to get into a prestigious institution or get a job in the professions.

In particular, only half of those who do transfer receive full credit for their prior learning and are able to leapfrog the start of the university course, with the rest being required to repeat one or more years of study, meaning that it could take five or six years to obtain an honours degree.

The report says that this is particularly concerning because higher education students from deprived areas are becoming more concentrated in colleges. Sixty-one per cent of this group entered higher education via college in 2013, compared with 55 per cent in 2006, meaning that 90 per cent of the overall growth in the participation rate for disadvantaged students has been via this route.

Authors Sheila Riddell, Lucy Hunter Blackburn, Gitit Kadar-Satat and Elisabet Weedon call for a “much more nuanced” discussion of Scottish higher education funding.

If free tuition is retained, they say, it must be accompanied by a stronger focus on access, such as reserved places for disadvantaged

students at universities.

“It is not evident from the data that divergence in fee policy has given Scotland any specific advantage compared to other parts of the UK, in relation to increasing overall levels of participation or participation by more disadvantaged groups,” the report says.

“Improvements in participation have been largely driven by the growth of college higher national provision in which students from poorer backgrounds are overrepresented,” it adds.

“This is because the supply of university places in Scotland has not kept pace with rising demand and increased competition for university places, particularly in the most selective universities, has had a disproportionately negative effect on students from the most deprived backgrounds.”

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Part-time postgraduate support scrapped in Wales

Institutions face losing up to a quarter of their total funding council grant as cuts from Welsh government bite

Funding council support for part-time postgraduate study in Wales has been scrapped in the wake of government spending cuts.

The £6.5 million fund that was in the past distributed to universities annually by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales was removed after the Cardiff government reduced the organisation’s budget by £11 million.

In total, Hefcw plans to allocate £132.3 million to institutions in 2016-17. The amount of quality related research funding remains unchanged for the fifth year in a row at £71.1 million, while support for postgraduate research training, part-time undergraduate provision and

higher cost full-time undergraduate courses stays largely the same year-on-year.

However, Hefcw warned that institutions could face a further in-year cut if the Welsh government withholds as much as £21.1 million of its 2016-17 budget. Ministers have said that they would use this to fund any increase in the cost of the tuition fee grant that subsidises

Welsh students’ undergraduate studies in Wales and in the rest of the UK.

This is currently budgeted at £236.7 million but, if it went over this, Hefcw says that it would be forced to make further cuts to support for expensive undergraduate courses and, potentially, research and part-time funding.

Welsh institutions have expressed concern about the amount of funding that is being used to support students being charged £9,000 tuition fees at English universities.

David Blaney, Hefcw’s chief executive, said that the review of student finance in Wales being led by Sir Ian Diamond would “be critical to informing a future policy that provides a sustainable balance of investment between Welsh students and Welsh higher education providers”.

The loss of support for part-time postgraduate study means that some Welsh universities face significant percentage cuts in their total Hefcw funding. Cardiff Metropolitan University is set to lose 25.7 per cent of its grant (£623,000), while Glyndwr University will lose 20.4 per cent (£803,000).

The biggest loser in absolute terms is Cardiff University, which will see its funding reduced by £2 million (3.4 per cent).

“I cannot stress it enough: government expenditure on higher education is not just a cost, it is an investment in the future of Wales,” Dr Blaney said. “Universities are employers, educators, influencers and investors. Successful universities are an essential part of a strong and prosperous nation.”

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Universitas 21 rankings: UK top while India and China overtake US

Governments overall are spending more of GDP on tertiary education but less on research

The UK has topped a ranking of national university systems that adjusts for countries’ levels of economic development, while both India and China rank above the United States.

This boost to the UK’s position in the Universitas 21 rankings for 2016 has not been caused by an improvement in performance, but a revision to the methodology to take

into account public funding that was not previously measured by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Nonetheless it has propelled the UK from second to first position in the development-adjusted table, and from eighth to fourth in the overall rankings, after the US, Switzerland and Denmark.

The Universitas 21 rankings are created by a global consortium of research universities to compare the performance of whole countries, as an alternative to other rankings that focus on individual institutions.

The rankings are based on 25 separate variables, including the number and impact of research articles produced, university enrolment and graduate unemployment, a qualitative assessment of a country’s “policy environment”, and spending on tertiary education as a proportion of GDP.

Although still the world’s most powerful university system, the US has slipped one place to 16th when the rankings are adjusted for development. This is measured by adjusting GDP in purchasing power parity terms to compensate for different prices across countries.

The US ranks behind China, which has leaped from 16th to fifth place, and India, which is one place