

“AdvanceHE

+ Teaching Excellence Framework 2023: Patterns of excellence

June 2024

Joanne Moore, Helen May, Geoff Stoakes

A decorative pattern of colored squares in various shades of teal, blue, and purple, arranged in a staggered, geometric layout on the right side of the page.

Contents

Executive summary	5
1 Introduction	14
1.1 Background to the review	14
1.2 Purpose of this study	14
1.3 Changes to the TEF	15
1.4 The sample of provider submissions	16
1.5 Methodology	17
1.6 Limitations of the study	18
2 Teaching, learning, curriculum and pedagogy	19
2.1 Teaching, feedback and assessment practices	19
2.2 Course content and delivery	28
2.3 Research, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement	33
2.4 Evidence and evaluation	41
3 Professional development of staff	49
3.1 Support for professional development of staff	49
3.2 Qualified staff	50
3.3 Delivering CPD	52
3.4 Quality assurance and enhancement	54
3.5 Evaluation of staff professional development	56
4 Student support and learning environment	58
4.1 Student support	58
4.2 Physical and virtual learning resources	68
4.3 Evidence and evaluation	73
5 Student engagement with continuous improvement	77
5.1 Student engagement	77

5.2	Evidence and evaluation	86
6	Mitigations of student outcomes	89
6.1	Types of mitigations	89
6.2	Commitments and actions undertaken	91
6.3	Evidence and evaluation	97
7	Educational gains: conceptions, approaches and evaluation	100
7.1	Conceptions of educational gains	100
7.2	Approaches to supporting the achievement of educational gains	108
7.3	Evaluation of educational gains	116
8	Triple Gold: reach, value and impact	132
8.1	'Blueprint' for excellence	133
8.2	Embedded continuous improvement cycles	137
8.3	A future focus and impact beyond higher education	144
9	Conclusions	148
	Annex A. Research methodology	150
	Annex B. Summary of TEF 2023	152
	Annex C. References	153

Executive summary

Introduction

The Teaching Excellence Framework 2023 (TEF 2023) rated higher education providers for excellence above a baseline set of requirements for quality and standards in undergraduate programmes. It was based on evidence submitted by providers (provider submissions), optional student submissions and a set of indicators. It led to awards of Gold, Silver and Bronze overall and in relation to the categories Student Experience and Student Outcomes. As a member benefit, Advance HE commissioned a qualitative thematic review of a sample of submissions, to better understand how providers have achieved and demonstrated teaching excellence.

The study

The research focused on a sample of 40 providers identified as having received a Gold award in at least one category of TEF 2023, either as a new entrant to the TEF or as an 'improved' provider whose award had increased compared to a previous award.

The study started with a thematic analysis of submissions to highlight patterns in how successful providers articulated and evidenced teaching excellence, and investigate what they did to make a difference to their students' experience and outcomes, contributing to their rating. Particular attention, and further qualitative analysis, was paid to sections dealing with education gains, as this is a new element within the criteria for submissions in TEF 2023.

The second part was an in-depth review of a subset of six submissions from providers in the sample with an overall Gold rating underpinned by Golds in both categories (providers with a Triple Gold award), to analyse any common features of approach and more deeply examine their rationale, reach, value and impact.

The structure of the analysis reflected the TEF 2023 criteria, clustered to reflect different priorities and activities for excellence within the student experience, namely aspects relating to teaching, learning, curriculum and pedagogy aspects (SE1-3); professional development of staff (SE4); student support and physical and virtual learning resources (SE5-6); and student engagement (SE7). Consideration of student success focused on how providers said they had addressed areas requiring improvements in student success, continuation, completion and progression for students and courses (SO1-3), and the narratives on educational gains (SO4-6). Attention was given to the implications of the pandemic and approaches to tackling mental health issues.

Teaching, learning, curriculum and pedagogy (SE1-3)

Providers referred to the development of **institutional frameworks** for teaching and learning, principles for assessment and feedback and institution-wide curriculum initiatives in order to demonstrate a commitment to an excellent experience for all students. Larger providers in the sample were seeking to **balance consistency and coherence** with

institutional objectives and flexibility to support subject requirements and the needs of different student groups. **Fundamental reviews** of curriculum and delivery models, supported by ongoing teaching enhancement activities, had increased the focus on inclusive teaching and learning, alignment with employability and graduate outcomes, and curricula for sustainable development. More recent framework reforms were prioritising mental health and wellbeing.

Most providers in the sample described developments in **assessment and feedback**, particularly the use of a variety of assessment and feedback types, rebalancing formative and summative assessment, sequencing of assessment, and better management of student assessment loads. The integration of programme-level approaches to assessment (beyond unit/module assessment) was a feature characteristic of providers seeking to evidence the embedded nature of career-focused teaching and learning for all students. Almost half of submissions talked about **new approaches** to online teaching, assessment and tutoring that had been used during the pandemic, and which in many cases were continuing to influence post-pandemic strategy.

Developments in the use of **research** as part of teaching and learning were discussed in nearly all the submissions, and there were several examples of further education colleges and small and specialist providers making commitments to expand scholarship activities. The submissions were keen to highlight the ways in which their academic experience could be considered **distinctive**, especially in relation to provision that was highly focused on practice, industry/business and the professions. They described innovations in authentic assessment and feedback designed to provide students with the opportunity to apply their learning, make decisions and exercise agency in solving (often real-life) problems. Embedding **employability** as a key part of the curriculum featured prominently. There was a wide variety of approaches to employer engagement, including: employers contributing to the curriculum design and delivery; and employers and community organisations providing access to practice-based opportunities to apply learning.

In seeking to demonstrate the **impact** of their approaches to teaching and learning, providers tended to refer to the TEF metrics, such as split metrics to illustrate inclusivity. This evidence was often supported by testimonials (from students, examiners, PSRBs, employers), survey results and module evaluations and, where available, external awards and recognition. In some cases, providers were able to make a **direct correlation** between changes in curriculum design and delivery at institutional or subject/department level and improvements in student outcomes.

Professional development of staff (SE4)

All the submissions sought to demonstrate the various ways in which they had embedded a **culture of training, reward and recognition** of their staff. In several cases, this embraced not simply academic staff, but also those professional and technical staff who were student-

facing. There were revisions to, or the development of new, academic **career pathways**, including recognising teaching and learning as a promotional route to full professorship. Other pathways focused on institutional priority areas such as enterprise and leadership. There was a particular emphasis on demonstrating that staff were appropriately **qualified to teach** with several providers making teaching qualifications a contractual requirement for new staff. Specialist institutions tended to focus on ensuring the continuing professional engagement of practitioners.

Over three-quarters of the sample indicated their support for **recognition of staff by Advance HE** (formerly HEA) Fellowship. A few had made Fellowship a condition of promotion. Several Russell Group providers cited increased numbers of academic staff holding Fellowships since the previous TEF exercise, perhaps suggesting that they were purposefully addressing the perceived imbalance in status between research and teaching. Investments in new or enhanced **centres of learning and teaching** were mentioned frequently as means of identifying and disseminating good practice and delivering training. Among smaller providers, responsibility was more devolved and, on occasion, dependent on local champions. The **scale and connectedness** of CPD provision varied with larger institutions providing across-the-board training delivered in-house and smaller ones often using external provision. The overall impression created was one of providers increasingly driving forward CPD **strategically** in key priority areas, such as inclusive teaching and assessment, and digital capability. In the latter case, especially, the pandemic provided significant impetus.

In evidencing the **impact** of reward, recognition and training on effective teaching, providers tended to use measures of student or staff satisfaction or to cite raw numbers or percentages of staff suitably qualified. Two providers spoke of developing more robust measures of evaluation in future.

Student support and learning environment (SE5-6)

The TEF sought evidence of supportive learning environments, including access to outstanding quality academic support tailored to students' needs, and physical and virtual learning resources that support outstanding learning and teaching.

Student support

In seeking to demonstrate a supportive learning environment for students, several providers reported moves to **coordinate** different forms of student support (academic and professional) and to make them more visible and accessible through a single portal. There was clear evidence of the **beefing-up and greater personalisation** of student support, for example, through greater training of, and the introduction of new frameworks and codes of practice for, personal tutors. There was considerable evidence of the **targeting and tailoring** of support to students who might not otherwise progress. Some explicitly aimed at narrowing attainment gaps.

While all but one provider described greater investment in support for **student wellbeing**, a number placed this at the heart of institutional strategy or tied it to developing a greater sense of belonging/community. Virtually all the submissions mentioned action related to student **mental health**. A few noted that they had adopted (or were in the process of adopting) the University Mental Health Charter designed by Student Minds.

All the submissions mentioned measures designed to enhance student **employability**, either through revision of the curriculum and/or through greater investment in careers-related provision, sometimes targeted at disadvantaged groups.

Institutions facing the familiar challenge of isolating the **impact** of particular interventions on student outcomes tended to rely on participant feedback, improved continuation rates and NSS scores. The exceptions tended to be where there had been investment in specific evaluation projects.

Physical and virtual learning resources

Three-quarters mentioned investment in the physical learning environment, and several reported the **consolidation and concentration** of student support facilitated by recent capital investment, with streamlined services replacing dispersed points of contact. State of the art equipment and **technologies** offered greater opportunities for practice-based learning and simulated assessment. There had been considerable development of **spaces for group learning and independent learning** (student hubs/focal points/social spaces). Reports of domestic 'spatial poverty' during the pandemic were providing additional impetus in some cases. These initiatives also supported changes in pedagogic practice.

In many cases, **investment in technology** was facilitating digital/virtual learning with providers keen to ensure that the quality of the virtual learning experience matched in-person provision. Several providers noted improvements in access to the **library**, such as 24/7 opening as well as greater investment in e-books, particularly in response to the pandemic. **Learning analytics** was proving to be a powerful tool in surfacing accurate and timely data to drive student support interventions, as well as providing management information to facilitate decision-making linked to the student support.

Evidence of the **impact** of student engagement with the physical and virtual learning resources on teaching and learning largely took the form of responses to the NSS questions and figures for student usage, for example of the library and online resources. Formal evaluations were somewhat rarer.

Student engagement with continuous improvement (SE7)

To demonstrate embedded student engagement, providers cited changes in **governance** structures (forums and committees), which had increased the representation and influence of students in decision-making. There was also evidence of increased **partnership working** between staff and students aligned to efforts to build a stronger sense of community, for

example, the employment of students as paid researchers or consultants to support curriculum development. Those students involved were getting the opportunity to develop skills and experience. A key theme was increasing the number and **diversity of students** engaged in student representation and quality enhancement projects designed to amplify the voice of minority ethnic groups.

Changes in **feedback mechanisms** for module evaluation to get more frequent and expanded data seemed particularly important in facilitating evidence-based enhancement. Informal mechanisms such as eliciting 'real time' feedback through, for example, student voice platforms and apps were increasingly common. The importance of communicating back to students the response to their feedback – 'closing the **feedback loop**' – was being addressed by the creation of frameworks, charters, principles and memoranda of agreement on student engagement. While many of these changes were already in train, the pandemic clearly intensified efforts to ensure student engagement and data collection, for example through pulse surveys and check-in calls. The identification of digital poverty and the response to it served as an important illustration of their effect.

As evidence of the **impact** of their efforts to make student engagement more effective, providers pointed to improved performance in NSS student voice results, and enhancements in practices and delivery. While these served to illustrate improvements in the student experience, demonstrating a direct link between such efforts and improvements in student outcome measures seemed more problematic.

Mitigation of student outcomes (SO1-3)

The review focused attention on the approaches taken by providers to aspects of provision identified as not meeting the expectations for teaching excellence due to being materially below benchmark performance on student outcomes. It explored the factors, which, providers said, mitigated current performance or offered the prospect of improvement.

The **pandemic** had materially affected providers' performance in relation to TEF student outcomes data and providers referred to pre- and post-pandemic trends to demonstrate this. A quarter of providers highlighted the pandemic as an ongoing issue. Around two-thirds were able to show evidence of improvement.

Just under half the submissions highlighted concerns about the **TEF outcome measures** themselves. Most commonly, submissions highlighted the small scale, specialist or marginal nature of the underperforming cohorts in comparison to the outcomes for the large majority of the institution's students.

Just over half talked about **changes to delivery, curriculum or support mechanisms** likely to feed through into improvements in the future, and more than a third spoke about research or scoping at the time of the submission as a prelude to implementation of improvements.

In terms of **improving continuation and completion rates**, providers cited changes to assessment and feedback, targeted interventions with widening participation students, and individual targeting of academic and pastoral support based on student engagement data. Changes to curricula and co-curricular employability measures were commonly mentioned as addressing below benchmark graduate progression outcomes.

Actions targeted at **poorly performing programmes** included reorganisation or closure of specific programmes (one in five of the providers in the sample mentioned this). However, more generally, the response took the form of more wide-ranging strategic reform, including the application of consistent principles, policies and governance arrangements.

Where possible, providers used **internal data**, such as module evaluations, retention and progression statistics and surveys to demonstrate that improvements were already being made in advance of the publication of TEF student outcomes data.

Educational gains: conceptions, approaches and evaluation (SO4-6)

Educational gains were introduced as a feature of Student Outcomes in TEF 2023, and providers were asked to define and evidence gains as relevant to their students, their mission and specific character.

Conceptions of educational gains

Providers referenced educational gains throughout their submissions, as both evidence of the effectiveness of their student experience or 'teaching excellence' (something that has been achieved) and as outcomes to be embedded within policy and practice (something to be achieved), characteristic of both the **retrospective and future facing** elements of the educational gains criterion.

The submissions universally conceived of educational gains as **multi-dimensional or multi-faceted** – referenced more than one gain – as well as interconnected, positioning the 'whole as greater than the sum of the parts'. This reflected a holistic consideration of gains – articulated in different ways – as derived from connecting curricular and non-curricular activity; a summation of all the gains achieved over time, across the whole of a student's experience; or derived through all aspects of a student's life (the 'whole person').

Educational gains fell broadly into **four inter-related dimensions**, characterised as personal, professional, academic and social gains. These broadly align to categories of educational gains proposed by OfS (OfS, 2022a, p31).

While there was significant synergy between providers in how educational gains were defined, there was **significant variation** in how these dimensions were articulated. Providers had generated their own nuanced definitions, as required by OfS. There was variation between providers in the extent to which they referred to gains as being **universal**

or personalised ie unique to each student, raising questions about who the gains are for. This was articulated by a Russell Group university, as: “The word ‘futures’ emphasises that students can build their own personal definition of educational gains” (Russell Group university).

Less commonly, providers articulated a ‘so what’ element of educational gains, considering **students’ impact** on societies, whether nationally and globally.

Approaches to achieving educational gains

Providers used a **multipronged approach** to achieve educational gains, referring to a variety of practices. Approaches associated with achieving educational gains can be grouped into **five main enhancement areas**: strategic oversight; curriculum; co/extra-curriculum; student support; and recognition and reward.

Providers referred to existing and **well-established approaches** to achieve educational gains, whether designed to enhance the student experience and/or student outcome rates. A small minority of providers referred to how such well-established practices had already impacted their educational gains.

There was evidence of more **recently established activity** and/or plans to achieve educational gains – particularly in the areas of strategy development and/or raising students’ awareness of their educational gains.

Evaluation of education gains

Providers varied in the level of detail used to describe their **evaluation approach**. On one end of the continuum there were providers that made little or no reference to any evaluation plans. At the other end, there were providers that described strategic, multi-method evaluation plans, covering each gain and data sources for each.

Providers were also at different stages in their development of evaluation measures – some referenced well-established measures and thus evidence of value and impact was already identified. Other measures were clearly newly established and, as a consequence, it will take some time for the value and impact to emerge.

Where evaluation plans had been described, providers referred to drawing on **multiple data sources** to evaluate educational gains, including standardised TEF indicators data and a range of provider-specific (‘internal’) measures. This echoes the findings of previous research, which identified no single measure of learning gain was sufficient (for example, HELGA). There was strong evidence that providers were drawing on measures and/or learning from previous **learning gains research**. Evaluation plans for educational gains encompassed a combination of student experience (behavioural/affective/cognitive) and outcome (continuation/completion/progression) measures. A high proportion of providers referred to using TEF or B3 condition student outcome metrics as part of their evaluation.

Different **conceptions and definitions** of education gains influenced the type of measures used.

Student success was demonstrated at **multiple levels** – referencing the provider, discipline and individual success – evident both within and across submissions.

Triple Golds: reach, value and impact

Providers achieving a Triple Gold rating all articulated a statement of **intent**, associated with their vision, mission or a statement of change, at the start of their submission. This spoke to their identity and strategic focus, as a whole institution, irrespective of institutional size or scope. This was repeatedly referenced throughout, showing how this intent translated into practice across the student experience and contributed to enhanced student outcomes. This led to a coherence across the whole narrative. Looking across the Triple Gold-rated submissions, there were three emerging **commonalities of approach** to teaching excellence, with each articulating:

- + a distinctive and integrated strategic ‘blueprint’ for excellence
- + embedded cycles of continuous improvement to assure excellence for students, programmes and curricula
- + a focus on students’ future and impact beyond higher education.

Reach was a distinguishing feature of the Triple Gold submissions, evident in the scale and integrated nature of approach across every programme, both in terms of achieving teaching excellence (with unifying purpose and strategy) but also in safeguarding excellence through continuous improvement. Providers articulated a whole-institutional conceptualisation of excellence, driving a culture intent on assuring consistently high practice standards and providing demonstrable **value** to students. It was through an analysis of the intent behind the approaches to teaching excellence that value was continuously signposted throughout their narratives, with the goal of ensuring the benefits are evident to students. There was a distinct emphasis, given a common widening participation ethos, of ensuring value for all students – promoting high aspirations, equitable outcomes and success beyond obtaining a graduate role. There were thus three tiers of **impact** inherent within Triple Gold-rated submissions: intent of maximising student success, graduate success, and graduates’ impact on society.

Conclusions

The providers identified a range of catalysts for improvement including the regulatory framework overseen by the Office for Students (learning from the previous TEF exercises; Access and Participation Plans) and sometimes more specific drivers such as a change of chief executive.

A number of overarching themes emerged from the analysis, including the development of institution-wide strategies for excellence, tied to mission and values, which indicated a clear direction of travel. There was also evidence of deliberate moves to coordinate approaches to learning and teaching, designed to ensure greater consistency and coherence in the student experience. The embedding in the curriculum or co- and extra-curricular activities of key institutional priorities around employability, digital learning and inclusion were also recurrent themes. Efforts to ensure student wellbeing and a sense of belonging also featured prominently.

There was also considerable recent activity prompted by the need to define, support and evaluate educational gains from which to evidence student and graduate success.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the review

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) was introduced by the UK Government in 2015 to recognise excellence in teaching in higher education (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). Three rounds of assessment were conducted between 2017 and 2019. In 2023 a revised TEF (TEF 2023) was introduced, run by the Office for Students (OfS), which aimed “to incentivise excellence in teaching, learning and student assessment” (OfS, 2022a, p6). The new scheme rated higher education providers for excellence above a baseline set of requirements for quality and standards necessary for registration with the OfS.

The assessment covering undergraduate programmes was based on evidence submitted by providers (provider submissions), optional student submissions, and a set of indicators related to two aspect ratings: Student Experience and Student Outcomes. Each provider received an overall rating and a rating for each of the two aspects. The ratings were Gold, Silver and Bronze with an additional outcome – Requires improvement – “where there is an absence of evidence above the minimum requirements” (OfS, 2022a, p9).

For more detail see Annex B: summary of TEF 2023.

1.2 Purpose of this study

The TEF 2023 submissions are a rich source of information and so Advance HE commissioned a team of associates to undertake qualitative thematic research, as a member benefit, to better understand how providers achieved and demonstrated teaching excellence.¹ This research focused on providers that received a Gold rating in one or both aspects of Student Experience and Student Outcomes, for the first time in 2023, having improved their performance since last time or having submitted for the first time. The research spotlights those with a Triple Gold rating, to analyse any common features of approach and more deeply examine their rationale, reach, value and impact.

By looking at providers that had improved to a Gold rating or achieved a Gold in their first attempt, this study aimed to highlight how successful providers articulated and evidenced teaching excellence and investigate what they did to make a difference to their students’ experience and outcomes, contributing to their rating. Although there has been a development and strengthening of the criteria in the latest round of the TEF compared to those in 2017-19 (see section 1.3), it is recognised that many of the aspects of the key underpinning framework have remained. There should therefore be some ‘read-across’ (Kernohan, 2023). This approach therefore complements previous research into those who were successful at achieving a Gold rating (Beech, 2017; Su, 2024).

¹ The analysis did not include student submissions or summary panel feedback.

1.3 Changes to the TEF

Since the inception of the TEF, the political and educational climate has changed significantly. The first TEF round of assessment ran in 2017 on a voluntary basis and included 295 providers. Following the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) in 2017 and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) as a regulatory body, participation became mandatory for higher education providers (HEPs) in England with at least 500 undergraduates (OfS, 2018a, p94). Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were able to participate on a voluntary basis with the consent of the relevant devolved administration. None chose to do so in 2023.

The onset of the pandemic in 2020 and consequent shift to online provision during the lockdown posed significant challenges to the maintenance of the quality of the student experience and academic standards. This impacted not only students' access to teaching and the nature of their learning and experience, but also extra/co-curricular aspects of student life. How well providers managed these challenges would impact on the baseline metrics, monitored by the OfS, but also those used by the TEF in 2023.

The original methodology involved an assessment of: teaching quality; learning environment; and student outcomes and learning gain, based on a range of metrics (such as continuation and completion) as well as a submission from providers to highlight areas of excellence and provide commentary on the metrics. Since TEF 2017, the assessment methodology and metrics have changed, reflecting emerging priorities and data concerns.

- + The collection of data about graduate professional and managerial employment became part of the progression indicator, reflecting an increased emphasis on successful student outcomes in TEF 2023.
- + In TEF 2023 there were no ratings for individual subjects, but the institutional ratings were informed by the student outcomes of the subjects on offer.
- + Educational gains were made a key feature of Student Outcomes in TEF 2023 (reflecting the suggestion of the independent review of the TEF (published in 2019) that “the student interest is best met by TEF having the primary purpose of identifying and encouraging enhancement of the educational experience and outcomes for HE students in the UK” (TEF Independent Review, 2019, p12). It was left for institutions to define and evidence educational gains according to their specific character and mission.
- + TEF 2023 metrics were used as indicative indicators rather than direct measures of excellence (OfS, 2022a, p65) and contributed “no more than half of the evidence of very high quality or outstanding features, for each aspect as a whole” (OfS, 2022a, p68). This followed concerns about the weight given to metrics in previous rounds (TEF Independent Review, 2019, p11) and concerns about the need to allow for statistical

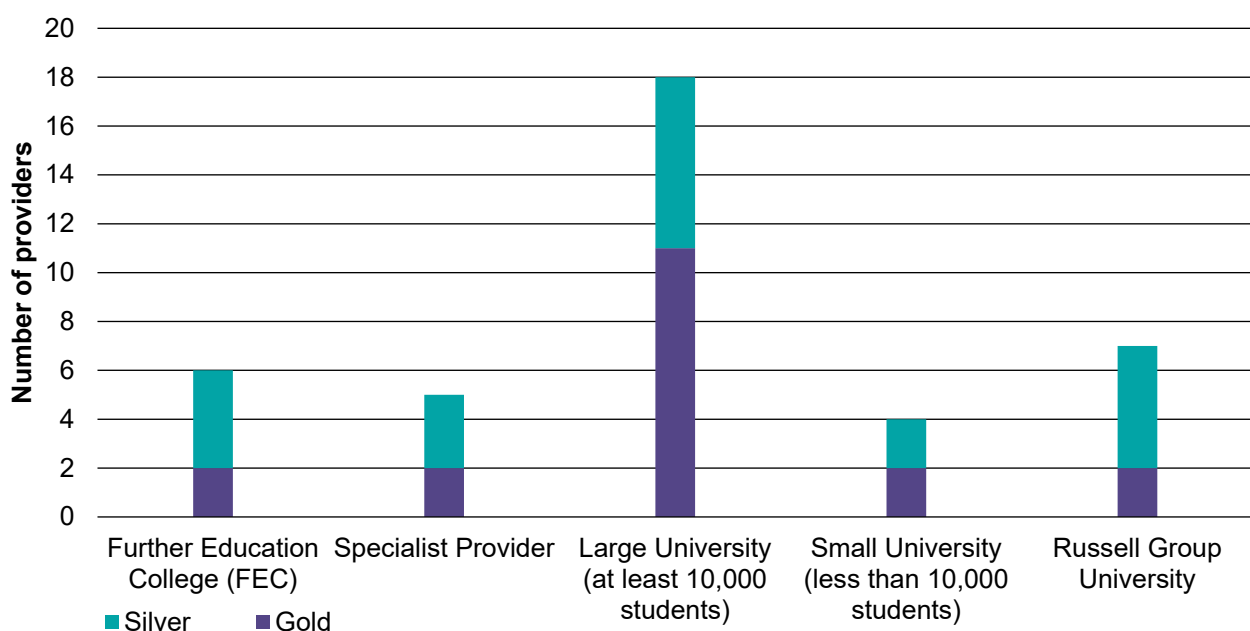
uncertainty (ONS, 20121, p7). The more limited role for the metrics in 2023 therefore put an even greater premium on the provider submissions.

1.4 The sample of provider submissions

Submissions from 40 providers were included in the research, identified as having received a Gold award in at least one category of TEF 2023 as a new entrant to the TEF or as an ‘improved’ provider whose award had increased compared to a previous award. The TEF 2023 rating profile included 19 overall Gold award providers (48% of the sample) and 21 overall Silver award providers (52% of the sample). In order to capture the trends related to aspects awarded Gold, the analysis included the whole submission of all 40 providers irrespective of overall award.

This group represents a range of types of higher education providers (Figure 1.1). Among all provider types, apart from Russell Group providers, at least half had moved to a higher overall rating. The remainder had improved to Gold in one category without affecting their overall rating.

Figure 1.1. Providers in the sample by type and level of award (TEF 2023) ²



Twenty-five providers had been rated Gold for student experience (63% of the sample); 21 providers had been rated Gold for student outcomes (56% of the sample) with one Bronze (Figure 1.2). Six providers were rated Gold in both categories (15% of the sample).

² Student numbers based on enrolments in 2021-22, all levels all modes (HESA, 2023).

Figure 1.2. Providers in the sample by overall rating and Student Experience and Student Outcome categories (TEF 2023)

		Gold overall		Silver overall		
		Student Outcomes		Student Outcomes		
		Gold	Silver	Gold	Silver	Bronze
Student Experience	Gold	6	8		8	3
	Silver	5		9		
	Bronze			1		

The level of improvement in the rating in 2023 compared to the previous TEF exercise varied:

- + of the providers with overall Gold in TEF 2023 and a previous award, 14 had risen from Silver and one from Bronze
- + most of the other providers had improved from a Silver award (and, in a few cases, Bronze awards) to achieve a current Gold award in student experience or student outcomes
- + two providers were rated Gold overall in the current round who had received a provisional award in 2017 due to insufficient information (and two were not entered last time).

1.5 Methodology

The method was designed to support understanding of the patterns underpinning the submissions demonstrating improvement in teaching excellence and capable of drawing out evidence of how providers were making and evidencing their improvement. The research adopted a mixed method approach combining a thematic trend analysis of the submissions with narrative analysis and in-depth qualitative review. Annex A describes the methodology in detail; in brief, the approach included the following.

Thematic analysis of the sample of submissions

The first stage involved thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) across all 40 submissions in order to give an overview of key themes and trends. This started with an inductive approach drawing on aspects of teaching excellence highlighted in the then Higher Education Academy's previously commissioned review of teaching excellence submissions (Moore et al, 2018). As described in Annex A, this was combined with elements of a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1997) to consider themes outside of the

previous framework. Use of qualitative analysis software (NVivo 14) enabled the researchers to apply data mining processes to discover the patterns in the dataset.

The reporting was structured around the themes identified in the TEF 2023 criteria, paying attention to effectiveness, embedding and evidencing practice in relation to: teaching, feedback and assessment; course content and delivery; use of research, innovation, scholarship, professional practice/employer engagement (SE1-3); support for the professional development of staff (SE4); supporting learning through student support (SE5) and the tailoring of physical and virtual learning resources (SE6); and methods of student engagement leading to improvements (SE7). Analyses of narratives on approaches to student success (SO1-3) focused on the ways in which providers said they had approached the task of driving up rates of continuation, completion and progression for students and courses in areas requiring improvement. Particular attention was paid to narratives on educational gains (SO4-6), which is a new aspect of criteria in TEF 2023. Attention was given throughout to the implications of the pandemic and approaches to tackling mental health issues.

‘Deep dive’ into submissions with a Triple Gold award

Further qualitative analysis was applied to a subset of six submissions, which were those with an overall Gold rating in TEF 2023 supported by Golds in both student outcomes and student experience categories. This group was chosen to provide additional insights into how teaching evidence was being evidenced and what providers did to make a difference to their students’ experience and outcomes, contributing to their rating, given that these were all providers that had risen above the level awarded in the previous round of the TEF (four were formerly Silver, one Bronze, and one provisional). The six submissions were interrogated to analyse common features of approach and draw out their rationale, reach, value and impact.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The approach provides an overview and indication of patterns and trends in improvement and does not claim to be exhaustive. There are challenges in studies of this type due to the need to work with narratives written by a variety of providers with differing vocabulary and conceptions of higher education provision and excellent practice. This means some caution is needed in terms of the categories applied to group the themes and concepts.

Furthermore, because the TEF narrative submissions were written by the providers themselves, there is a danger of overstating the results since no attempt was made to verify the authenticity of the narratives or the claims being made.

2 Teaching, learning, curriculum and pedagogy

This section discusses how the provider submissions in the sample sought to demonstrate excellence in respect of Student Experience Criteria SE1, 2 and 3. These criteria sought evidence in relation to: the teaching, feedback and assessment practices that are embedded and tailored to supporting students' learning, progression, and attainment; course content and delivery that inspires students to actively engage in and commit to their learning, and that stretches students to develop knowledge and skills to their fullest potential; and the use of research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement to contribute to an outstanding academic experience.

2.1 Teaching, feedback and assessment practices

SE1. The provider has embedded outstanding teaching, feedback and assessment practices that are highly effective and tailored to supporting its students' learning, progression and attainment.

2.1.1 Teaching effectiveness

The question of teaching effectiveness was addressed in different ways by providers in terms of the emphasis and attention given across a number of dimensions, which included:

- + reference to the distinctive character or traditions of the providers' teaching system
- + description of strategies and policies in place for the transformation of teaching and learning to the demands of an inclusive 21st century curriculum experience
- + the inputs in terms of staff teaching credentials and status of teaching (discussed in Section 3)
- + the systems in place for and responsiveness of the curriculum and pedagogy to student engagement in teaching and learning (discussed in Section 5)
- + the contribution of teaching enhancement programmes.

Narratives of teaching and learning

The narratives regarding teaching included reference to the **values and mission** underpinning the offer to students, drawing on different educational traditions, such as: industry, technology and education links; education based on scholarship and the creation of new knowledge; education for empowerment and transformation; and meeting the needs of a diverse student body of 'non-traditional' students facing barriers to higher education.

The providers highlighted pedagogical practices on feedback and *actions* designed to foster strong student communities and opportunities for meaningful dialogue between students and staff (see Section 5). These issues seemed particularly in the frame following the

pandemic. It was notable, for example, that more than half the providers sought to make a formal statement about their commitment to in-person teaching. This was alongside developments in digital and online learning delivery mechanisms.

Specialist providers perhaps found it easier to describe the distinctive characteristics of their teaching systems in a way which made clear the approach to teaching and learning because the model went across the breadth of the provision – for example, with reference to class size, staff-student ratios, professional focus, or in relation to arrangements in the curriculum for work-based or practice-based learning. Establishing the model and providing these types of details was perhaps harder in larger providers where teaching and learning systems were devolved, and the discipline traditions and the requirements of different subject areas made a difference. Frameworks and statement of principles for teaching and learning sought to bring coherence across diverse provision.

- + Staff understanding and a common language had been underpinned by a glossary for teaching and assessment methods (aligned to the curriculum model and using a hybrid model of learning with flexibility to take account of the mix of students' needs) (small university).

Teaching and learning frameworks

Wide-ranging changes since the last TEF were apparent in the approaches to teaching (described in over a third of the submissions) due to the adoption of **new teaching and learning strategies** or a re-refresh of the strategy. Changes had been underpinned by establishing the key strategic goals within curriculum transformation initiatives, which fed through into approaches to teaching, feedback and assessment. Key priorities reflected in curriculum transformation initiatives included: embedding delivery of graduate attributes and employability outcomes; securing diversity and inclusion; and committing to global sustainability goals. For example:

- + The driver for curriculum reform was changes to the student body. All undergraduate programmes were reviewed and revalidated between 2016-2018. Revisions included a new academic year model, increased contact hours, more diverse and authentic assessments, realignment of module credit ratings, an audit of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and internationalisation across all programmes (large university).
 - + From 2020 curriculum reform put in place new themes: education for transformation; inclusive education for all; education for the future; and education enabling success in the wider world (small university).
 - + Becoming a signatory to the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education (UN PRME) in 2017 enabled collaborative work with learning communities on global challenges and embedding of the UN PRME in the academic curriculum (FEC).
-

- + A new framework for inclusive curriculum was put in place, following a change of VC in 2018, delivered through a 'kaleidoscope' of emancipatory pedagogic approaches, designed to reflect the contributions of wider diasporic communities and support engagement of the minoritised students at this university (large university).

Curriculum transformation strategies which majored on embedding graduate competences and employability and the development of graduate attributes to curriculum delivery were also very much in evidence among the providers in the sample (discussed in Section 2.4).

Most providers spoke about curriculum in the context of processes for ongoing review and refinements, and it was clear that additional priorities were being added within the provider-level frameworks over time. For example, a framework established in 2019 was reviewed in 2022 to include nine core themes: Future Ready, Research Active, Digitally Empowered, Globally Connected, Socially and Ethically Engaged, Transitions, Student Success, Student Voice, and Wellbeing (large university). A 2022 renewal of the strategy at a large university had put education gains at the centre of delivery and introduced new foci such as education for sustainable development, inclusive curricula, and education for mental health and wellbeing.

Developments in relation to **digital enhancement strategies** were prioritised in a quarter of the submissions in the sample. Depending on the context, a digitally enhanced curriculum and actions on digital empowerment were referred to as either an outcome of curriculum objectives (for example, as a graduate attribute), or a vehicle for embedding other key principles of the teaching and learning enhancement strategy (for example, technology to support practice-led and knowledge-applied approaches and as an enabling tool for research and interdisciplinary learning).

Curriculum refocusing activity had, in some cases, been undertaken in parallel to a **portfolio review** and the refinement of the modules and programmes on offer.

- + Programmes were removed in 2018 in areas where the institution no longer considered themselves able to offer research excellence, and more inter-disciplinary programmes, modules and modes of delivery were brought in to support research-inspired education (Russell Group university).
- + Objectives were set to focus on fewer undergraduate courses and make sure courses were focused on graduate outcomes. From 2018, curriculum design and learning, teaching and assessment practices were aligned to the principles of a 'real-world' curriculum framework, which was refreshed in 2022 to incorporate inclusivity into the framework (large university).

Teaching enhancement approaches

As noted above, providers had gone through wholesale teaching system refocusing exercises but, even within those providers working to an established framework, there were many other examples of work going on to **review and enhance teaching practices**. In fact it was notable that almost all the submissions talked about curriculum reviews that had led to changes in teaching provision or methods, above and beyond the reformulation or restatement of curriculum principles (sometimes linked to the fall-out from pandemic related changes).

Enhancement projects were a key mechanism for implementing key curriculum priorities. These put the focus, for example, on programmes of work to define not just the practices for course teams that best delivered on the objectives but also work to ensure that all elements of the student experience – from resources, to teaching environment, to staff development and so on – remained strategically aligned and coherent.

Ongoing teaching enhancement programmes in some providers had been expanded through 'bottom-up' reviews and additional investment in strategic projects (such as decolonising the curriculum and integration of employability objectives).

- + The review at a large university in 2016-17 was designed to encourage staff to reflect and improve on their practices, involving a formal peer review process methodology – which led to changes in classroom teaching and the teaching and learning materials on some courses.

There were also examples of changes related to departmental and programme level reviews and action plans (for example, linked to module evaluations). For example, a Russell Group university had established data-led and action-orientated faculty education plans to identify actions designed to have the greatest impact. Responding to the needs of students, improving outcomes and co-leadership of students, professional services and academic staff were key themes in relation to teaching enhancement activities. Student partnerships were especially apparent in activities related to inclusion/decolonising the curriculum (through partnership with students' unions), and school-led reviews of teaching (see also Section 5 on student engagement with continuous improvement).

A related trend was the re-consideration of students' experience of whole programmes of learning (so, addressing issues related to coherence between modules and units and thinking through implications for holistic assessment strategies).

- + A 'curriculum festivals' approach to direct investment from 2019 through partnerships of academics and students had led to discrete units being brought into a programmatic design across different disciplines and practice-based units involving employability skills were created (Russell Group university).

A programme level approach to assessment and skills had been mainstreamed in other providers:

- + Learning outcomes were completely replaced by a programme-level approach focusing on graduate attributes – encompassing discipline competencies with digital competencies and communication skills (large university).

Changes in the approach to **academic support** and personal tutoring were discussed in most of the narratives and personal tutors stand out as an area of particular focus when moving towards a greater student-centred approach (discussed further in Section 4.2).

- + A pedagogic re-orientation and student-centred agenda had been implemented through investment in strategic projects beginning in 2018 and addressing the curriculum. During this period, personal tutoring had been revised, career planning introduced for every student and an expansive co-curricular programme had been introduced (large university).

Co-creation activities between staff and students was mentioned in 14 submissions and covered a range of definitions of the concept, including both creation based on feedback and consultation and joint programmes of work on research and development of new methods, models and practices (discussed further in Section 5.2).

Providers talked about co-creation across a number of dimensions of strategy, most commonly in relation to the ways in which staff-student co-creation projects had informed: assessment assignments and the types of assessment and feedback; inclusive education models; frameworks for student support; pedagogical practice developments and toolkits in relation to different student groups. Co-creation activities drawing on research funding sources internally seemed to be having an important impact on student engagement in research and scholarship. Other examples of co-creation included design of periodic events such as annual induction/transition support programmes; design of annual teaching and learning conferences.

A handful of providers gave details of how co-creation approaches had been integrated as part of the delivery of their curriculum offer.

- + Learning Through Co-Creation was a model for teaching which began in 2019 and involved creation of artefacts (designed to meet the requirements at each of Levels 4, 5, 6). An 'orientation' week has been implemented which was designed to prepare students and support their involvement in co-creation activities (FEC).
- + From 2020-21, co-created, interdisciplinary credit-bearing modules were offered by the Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning, which had enabled student-centred work on curriculum design, quality enhancement, and work to amplify the voices of marginalised communities (Russell Group university).

- + Teacher training programmes had units and a syllabus defined by the placement experiences students bring to them. Departments had instigated partnership units where students co-constructed a programme of events and activities with their tutors (large university).

2.1.2 Assessment and feedback

Approaches to assessment

Developments in providers' approaches to assessment were a key part of curriculum transformation initiatives noted above, and providers were keen to point out co-creation of assessment strategies and practices with their students. A Russell Group university said a new assessment strategy was launched in 2022 because of the need for a strong shared direction for assessment post-pandemic.

Almost three-quarters of the narratives submitted by providers highlighted the role of **formative assessment** and feedback in promoting learning.

- + A large university described the use of early low-stakes assessment and portfolios of small stakes in-class assessments to give students rapid feedback.
- + At a small university an immersive/block module learning experience was embedded at the start of Level 4, designed to act as a launchpad for positive attainment and progression through intense and personalised formative feedback.

The use of **varied assessment practices** was said to be central to the approach described by 25 providers in the sample. These were variously linked to aspects related to inclusivity and providing opportunities for all students to demonstrate their progress; challenging students in relation to different skills, competences and capabilities; and/or sequencing progressive approaches to academic and practical skills development.

- + Modes of assessment were designed to allow students to develop and demonstrate skills useful in contexts beyond academia (for example, assessment of contributions to collaborative discussion on module forums, audio-visual presentations, blog posts and reviews, policy reports, essays and projects) (large university).

There was also a clear trend towards the use of forms of **authentic assessment**, which provided the opportunity for students to apply learning, make decisions, and exercise agency in solving problems in 'real world' situations.

- + Principles of assessment committed to cross-institutional development of authentic assessment such as publication; web design; policy papers and presentations; and integration of placements and project-based assessments and research projects (small university).

- + 'Live briefs' were used in every course whereby employer partners presented real-world challenges directly to students and gave feedback on students' submitted work, alongside feedback and formal marking by academic staff (large university).
- + Coursework assessment tasks which had been designed to mirror real-world assignments to communicate results to different audiences in different fields. In one curriculum area, assignments required students to apply learning to live business projects, working with external organisations to mirror professional practice (large university).

As noted above, **programmatic approaches** to assessment based on frameworks for core competences were evident in the submissions. Indeed, a key change described was a shift from assessment testing knowledge and recall, to providing opportunities for demonstrating competence through authentic experiences.

- + A large university had set the requirement that all assessment must prepare students for their graduate futures. The marking criteria had been aligned with competencies and the aims of an inclusive assessment policy.
- + A Russell Group university had revised its skills framework to align with the curriculum. As had another Russell Group university, whereby the design of assessments was aligned with learning outcomes to assess and build knowledge, skills and behaviours.

Changes in the approach to **marking** were cited in submissions, such as the use of single component assessment (rather than separate thresholds for continuous assessments) and use of weightings and thresholds in assessment (large university), and a refresh of marking criteria (as part of the process of developing departmental level action plans) (Russell Group university).

Other elements coming out of the narratives to demonstrate that the approach to assessment was effective and embedded included:

- + Assessment loading
 - For example, in a Russell Group university, departments were being encouraged to use an assessment load model and visualisation tool to think about the volume and timing of assessments. Another Russell Group university had rolled out a methodology for evaluating how students experience assessment, enabling staff to make changes to assessment patterns.

+ Assessment literacy

- Providers said use of assessment principles and frameworks had enhanced assessment literacy among students and staff. For example, efforts at a large university had focused on sustained interventions to demystify assessment practices and expectations (alongside efforts to empower students to take ownership of their own learning).

+ Consistency of assessment rules and procedures

- Examples to achieve greater consistency across departments included a ‘root-and-branch review’ of assessment regulations at a Russell Group university, which had brought in common progression, classification and reassessment rules for all programmes (with subject-specific variation where academically appropriate), and revised procedures for marking and extenuating circumstances procedures.

The establishment of **statements and principles on assessment** were ways to enact new teaching priorities. For example, a renewed and co-created assessment strategy in 2017 at a large university stipulated that all assessments must be enjoyably challenging and prepare students with the skills and attributes required within their discipline and by employers, as well as being fair and high quality.

Feedback

In relation to the provision of **student feedback**, the narratives referred to policies and procedures they considered to represent good practice in their context, particularly in relation to:

+ Timeliness of feedback

- Examples included formative feedback within one week (FEC), within 15 days (large university) and within 20 days (large university).

+ Use of a variety of feedback mechanisms

- Where used, providers listed a multiplicity of ways feedback was given in order to create as many opportunities as possible for students to engage and to tailor feedback on the individual student’s communication and learning styles.
- + An FEC said methods included formal structured feedback; email feedback; reflections on sessions; year group feedback (tutor-led and learner-led); small group peer feedback; and feedback on the VLE.
 - + A specialist provider said tutors made extensive use of audio and video to provide tailored feedback for students (often with a second marker), which is stored on the VLE, plus group and peer feedback so that students become accustomed to critical feedback from others and are encouraged to reflect on their own approach to a given task.
-

Electronic methods of assessment and feedback were mentioned in relation to inclusive practice (for example, providers said an increase in e-assessment had improved inclusivity by reducing the need for reasonable adjustments or extenuating circumstances). Notable also were references to investment in third-party products, including online assessment platforms, feedback packages such as Studiosity (mentioned by three providers) and assessment workflow management systems.

- + A large university had made a commitment in TEF 2017 that grading and feedback of assessed work would all be delivered electronically, unless the assessment prohibits it (for instance, submission by artefact or performance).
- + A large university had set up a digital assessment centre bringing together specialists to work with staff across the university to design, create, deliver, monitor and review digital assessments at all levels.
- + A small university said the move to online submissions and feedback at the end of 2018 was part of a drive to ensure consistency after noting the volume of uncollected scripts, which meant students were not engaging with their written feedback.

The implementation of change projects relating to assessment and feedback required staff CPD and this issue was being addressed in a range of different ways (see also Section 3). Examples included:

- + Staff tutors provided training for all new associate lecturers on good practice in providing feedback, supplemented by faculty-specific support (large university).
- + Staff development at subject level and activities to refine the level and style of feedback (through sharing best practice) (small university).
- + Staff development on the active learning strategy, pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment design embedded into all internal training activities (including new staff inductions and post graduate teaching qualifications) (large university).

A programme of support for staff on assessment practices at a large university launched in 2018 led to an assessment toolkit, a series of good practice guides, and several school projects undertaken to embed best practice.

Four providers mentioned the use of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. Staff communication and development activities included a focus on inclusive practices.

- + Module teams were required to evaluate the accessibility of proposed assessments and to provide alternative assessments to enable students to demonstrate they have achieved the learning outcomes. Associate lecturers were provided with research-based guidance on good practice in marking the work of students with disabilities such as dyslexia (large university).

- + Processes for students to flag inclusivity issues in the curriculum and assessment briefs, rubrics and content (such as stereotyping, misogyny and culturally context-dependent material) (Russell Group university).

2.2 Course content and delivery

SE2. Course content and delivery inspire the provider's students to actively engage in and commit to their learning, and stretch students to develop knowledge and skills to their fullest potential.

The types of curriculum transformation initiatives noted above tended to be multi-dimensional and cut across different priorities in terms of course context and delivery, as can be seen in the revised curriculum frameworks that had emerged since the last TEF. These frameworks were informed by aspects such as inclusive education; practice-led and knowledge-applied pedagogies; and career-focused and employability-driven learning.

2.2.1 Curriculum approaches

Inclusive curriculum approaches

Inclusive curriculum approaches were presented as a fundamental aspect of student engagement with learning. Nearly all the provider narratives included discussion of inclusive education practices. Work on decolonising the curriculum and making assessment and feedback inclusive for disabled students were two ways in which providers were moving forward on inclusive education. The commentaries made clear that inclusive approaches were considered part and parcel of discussion of course content and delivery and were contributing to innovations in teaching and learning. Providers spoke about commitments where these were in place to inclusive education frameworks such as Athena SWAN (seven providers) and the Race Equality Charter (seven providers), the Stand-Alone Pledge (four providers).

- + Commitments and frameworks
 - A framework for inclusion at a large university was described as “moving practice from a culture of reasonable adjustments for individual students to considering the needs of a diverse student body”. The action plan for inclusive education at a Russell Group university was designed to address dominant structures in higher education (academic mentoring, inclusive pedagogies, curriculum enhancement, building anti-racism and developing HE identities).
 - + Staff/student research collaborations
 - An example at a Russell Group was a project examining diversification and decolonisation within the curriculum, which had introduced a workshop series to support staff to build anti-racism into their everyday practices.
-

+ Provider teams

- Examples included a centre for equity and inclusion set up in 2020 with a remit to review curricula; tackle discrimination and focus on fair outcomes (large university); a dedicated Inclusive Education team and project managers to support the delivery structures (Russell Group university); part-time faculty academic Race Equality Leads, and four paid Race Equality Student Advocates (large university).

+ Internal and cross-provider projects

- A large university said a model for decolonising the curriculum had been developed in 2020 through a curriculum enhancement internship, and rolled out through student-staff collaboration, which developed resources designed to ensure teaching and learning materials reflect diversity. In other cases, projects were part of cross-provider partnerships. For example, external project funding as part of a consortium bid was apparent in relation to work on the BAME degree-awarding gap at a Russell Group university.

Progress on inclusive education objectives were linked in several provider narratives to Access and Participation Plans (APP), which provided a framework for making commitments and monitoring progress. For example, a large university said the APP ensures that access and student performance were addressed in the context of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Another large university had set a goal in the APP to decolonise its curriculum by 2025 (the commitment has been integrated into validation and programme review, and the impact was monitored through a module evaluation question).

Career-focused learning

Career focus featured heavily in the narratives. Importantly, in some cases this priority was driving fundamental changes in how programmes were delivered and assessed as well as moves towards cross-programme assessment rather than module/unit based (discussed above).

Narratives describing **career-focused approaches** were particularly evident within submissions from providers which had implemented focused strategic approaches designed to benefit all students while improving graduate outcomes on some traditionally poorer performing courses.

- + A large university said career focus and professional experience had been made core parts of the student journey, realised by transforming the core, credit bearing curriculum of all undergraduate programmes. Employer-directed social action and industry-led consultancy projects were a key part of the delivery (students working in teams to complete projects submitted by employer partners that addressed real-world concerns).

Career focused learning was naturally an important focus for providers with vocational and employer-led courses, including FECs and specialist providers working in different industries. An FEC said courses were co-designed and delivered with employers in engineering, construction and land-based industries, and curriculum design incorporated academic and professional tutorials throughout.

A further approach clearly linking to career focus and employability was evident among those providers which had put in place frameworks for skills development and educational gains relating to employment outcomes.

- + A 'Pillars of Employability' framework had triangulated the skills and capabilities most sought after by students and employers (based on extensive consultation exercises), leading to courses being re-designed and activities to embed employability into new programmes, working in a consortium of partners (Russell Group university).
- + The competence framework was focused on supporting students to acquire graduate competencies and attributes and was supported by investment in paid internship opportunities with SMEs and employers within the charitable sector or within university departments (large university).
- + Applied learning had been part of the curriculum for all students since 2019, supported by a "transition toolkit" which introduces employability in the course context, and by delivery of in-curriculum short placement/work-integrated learning sessions (large university).

The shift to authentic and practice-based assessments discussed above was also a key tenet of the employability strategy found among the providers in the sample.

In several cases the framework for delivery of skills cut across curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Particular links were drawn out in the submissions between career-focused learning and special projects, employer-led and community-based initiatives. One example in relation to digital competencies was a partnership with local authority, industry and numerous local organisations under the OfS Local Graduates Challenge. This had led to a project to upskill students from courses that were not digitally oriented, but where employers signalled a need for disciplinary skills (such as the copywriting capabilities of English students) (Russell Group university).

Active practice-led learning

Practice-based approaches to learning were fundamental to the specialist, creative providers in the sample. For example, one of these framed its approach as 'practice as research', whereby knowledge was created through the transformation of experience (FEC). These types of claims were also in evidence in submissions describing professional practice courses in medicine and healthcare.

The most common approaches within the sample of providers were the use of ‘real-world’ scenarios, challenge-based approaches, and team and individual projects. Real-world problems as the basis of active learning were often linked to local and regional issues, such as local manufacturing challenges, culture and heritage projects, regional development initiatives and issues, and well as linking to global challenges and sustainability goals.

- + Active learning had been incorporated cross-institutionally through the use of a model designed to identify, review, evidence and consolidate provision (large university).
- + The pedagogical framework at departmental level included an interdepartmental curriculum in years one and two based on intensive and immersive projects (for example, How to Change the World, an intensive two-week multidisciplinary project with industry partners, based on the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (Russell Group university)).

The submissions included numerous examples of collaborations on different forms of knowledge exchange projects involving industry, public sector and community sector. These were described in the context of research activities but were also referred to more broadly as part of partnership and collaborations, for example in relation to employability and competency development.

- + The submission from a small university said knowledge exchange between student, academic and industry or community was embedded in course design and delivery (as illustrated, for example, in preventative healthcare clinics).
- + A large university said the approach to employability and entrepreneurship education, started 10 years ago, drew on internationally recognised research in this field – knowledge exchange initiatives at this provider included a marketing agency and business advice centre which exposes students to live student-led campaigns, access to networks and employability through experiential learning.

Collaboration and peer support, often across levels, was described as helping students to deepen their engagement by learning from others and sharing their expertise. For example, the submission from a large university described Vertical Studios and Colabs in some subject areas where students support one another in authentic business roles.

A concern for EDI was also identified within the narratives relating to active and practice-based learning. Providers gave figures to show investment that had provided the additional resources needed to increase learning opportunities for disadvantaged students to take part in the opportunities available. One large university said many of its programmes included practical elements (such as an online law clinic project) and had paid for virtual internships for students from underrepresented groups.

Role play and simulation

Numerous and varied examples were given of how **simulation and role play** had been developed in different contexts and subject areas. This included description of classroom practices such as mock negotiations or mock trials to simulate experiences in social science subjects, along with technology-enhanced simulations in the sciences. Examples included:

- + An immersive projection room that can simulate real-world healthcare scenarios (large university).
- + Live simulations involving external partners (for example, paramedic science students undertake live simulations of clinical incidents collaborating with policing, drama, journalism, occupational therapy students and local emergency services) (small university).

It was notable that the submissions referenced extensive investments in a range of new facilities and digital capabilities which supported simulations (also see discussion in Section 4 on learning resources).

Other ways in which investment in physical resources and facilities was influencing course content and delivery were given by a large university – the adoption of “studio culture” teaching in Computer Games Programming was made possible through the development of a dedicated Games Lab workshop space, investment in games-specification PCs and dedicated technician posts, and a partnership with Sony, which gives students hands-on access to an industry-standard development environment in a simulated workplace in which they develop authentic assessment artefacts.

Opportunities for interdisciplinary learning

Delivery of interdisciplinary forms of learning were explicitly mentioned in the submissions from just over half of the providers in the sample and stood out as part of a strategic approach to curriculum delivery in several of these.

- + A review of the academic framework at a large university in 2020-21 put the focus on the development of opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, which was explicitly addressed in its strategy and project work.
- + At a Russell Group university, students could access optional credit-bearing interdisciplinary learning units delivered through research centres and focusing on societal challenges that replicated authentic work scenarios (including units co-constructed with students).
- + A similar approach had been taken at another Russell Group university using open units as part of a curriculum enhancement approach.

2.2.2 Co-curricular and extra-curricular approaches

Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities frequently played into the narratives regarding course content and delivery, particularly in relation to practice based learning – for example, challenge initiatives and knowledge exchanges delivered through project work.

- + Research-related enrichment was through a public engagement project with students paid to visit schools to support pupils to participate in scientific research, to help with project management, communication and leadership skills as well as technical skills in chemistry and microbiology (large university).
- + The range of co- and extra-curricular enrichment activities included 'Ethical Grand Challenges', volunteering, placements abroad, student clubs and societies (Russell Group university).

Schemes which provided opportunities for all students to gain **accredited experiences** about co-curricular learning featured as increasingly central to the providers' visions regarding student experience.

- + A programme of co-curricular learning opportunities initially targeted at students at risk of poor job outcomes had grown by 3,000 places a year since 2018 via significant levels of annual investment, which enabled funding for staff to lead projects or to commission external partners to participate (enables students to accumulate points which count towards classificatory credit or additional qualifications) (large university).

As with other aspects of curriculum transformation and teaching enhancement, providers described the staff development designed to support inclusive, career-focused and practice-based learning. Professional development of staff is discussed in Section 3.

2.3 Research, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement

SE3. The provider uses research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarships, professional practice and/or employer engagement to contribute to an outstanding academic experience for its students.

2.3.1 Use of research in relevant disciplines

Engagement of students in research

The provider contexts were very diverse, and the mechanisms for engaging students in research ranged from, on the one hand, inviting students to weekly in-person and online postgraduate research seminars to learn from presentations from academics in the wider HE sector (specialist provider) to student involvement in substantive research for publication in peer reviewed academic journals (Russell Group university).

Narratives describing how research was contributing to the academic experience included designing ‘research throughlines’ into the curricula.

- + The approach at a large university was described as students learning about staff research, then learning to research and doing it, and then practising research through modules and projects.
- + A Russell Group university said the introduction to research methods and small research projects in the first year, culminating in research dissertations or extended policy papers in the third year, was part of efforts to empower students to become critical consumers of information and knowledge creators in their own right, as an enhancement to its research-led curriculum, in which students traditionally learnt about the research findings of others.
- + The Connected Curriculum model implemented at another Russell Group university, introduced in 2018-19, sought to engage students in research, innovation and professional practice from the start of programmes.

These types of approaches were aimed at developing a range of skills linked to effective research (critical understanding, public engagement, impact and so on), linking to employability and graduate attributes.

Curricula that included major **project work** was a key way in which research was used to support learning, although there were clear differences between different types of providers. Practice-based providers tended to stress the enactment of practice as research. Indeed, the links between research-informed and applied learning was stressed in most of the submissions.

- + Level 6 students (65% to 100% depending on programme) undertake a major project (such as live projects, participation in advanced-level research, working with experts on industry challenges using cutting edge technologies). Research-related enrichment activities, such as public engagement projects, also featured (large university).
- + Practice-based activities were through inclusion of musical, production and industry practices and developing new ways of working and creating (for example, as part of broadcasts, documentaries, social and community engagement projects) (specialist provider).

Investment in facilities and digital capabilities was strengthening students’ engagement in research in some contexts – for example, improved Neuropsychology Labs, state-of-the-art Movement Labs, and specialist laboratory facilities which integrated with digital learning technologies (large university).

Most providers drew on a range of approaches to supporting student research. For example, by strengthening their research centres and research support, broadening interdisciplinary opportunities and providing students with opportunity to be involved in research through supporting primary research, final year projects and involvement in laboratory initiatives (large university).

Scholarship

Providers described how they supported student engagement with research and scholarship in addition to the major projects embedded in academic programmes. Examples included:

- + Research centres
 - Mechanisms for embedding student research projects were through a central unit at a specialist provider. The team of eight staff members provide research teaching (lectures and practical workshops) to students and support staff and students to develop scholarship, publish research and develop and implement externally funded collaborative studies (the submission noted projects that had directly informed the curriculum and impacted on students' learning activity).
- + Journal publications for student research activities
 - A FEC said students had published work nationally, alongside teachers publishing their own literature. An online, peer-reviewed journal for undergraduate student research was a feature at a Russell Group university in a collaboration with an international partner.
- + Research conferences
 - For example, a Russell Group university spoke about an annual international two-day event starting in 2013 in partnership with 14 universities around the world that aims to challenge undergraduate students to rethink their work from an international and interdisciplinary perspective.

Supporting staff research

The efforts providers were making in relation to using research to inform research-led and research-informed teaching were underpinned by strategies and **policies for staff** to participate in research. Clearly different organisational contexts provided different opportunities and constraints, but several of the specialist providers and teaching universities pointed to the existence of new strategies to progress research as an institutional priority.

- + In the case of a specialist provider with a key role in scholarship, there was a requirement on staff to help secure research funding, build capacity for new areas of work, disseminate their work and support the development of their colleagues' research and scholarship.

- + A large university spoke about how the promotion of staff engagement in REF-eligible research had underpinned the embedding of research-informed learning, as part of a 'strategic ambition' to integrate education and research.

FECs in the sample were engaging with a narrative of research-led teaching in different ways.

- + An FEC said an agenda to push forward research had been achieved by linking expectations for staff to undertake research and introducing research-enriched curricula by encouraging collaboration on research internationally, including annual research conferences.
- + Another FEC was operating a system of 'purchasing' hours to allow for scholarship activities directed to demonstrable outputs such as internal/external publications and conferences.

Linkages between staff research activities and support for professional development were apparent in the narratives.

- + A large university encouraged staff to undertake a doctorate as part of its CPD strategy.
- + A specialist provider mentioned its Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education programme as providing learners with the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching, learning, assessment, feedback and educational research methodologies.

The submissions not from the research-intensive providers tended to point to or infer the existence of priorities for research-led teaching aspects. These played out in the types of staff research projects that were most supported. This included references to prioritising scholarship of teaching and learning in the disciplines and/or research related to the strategic commitments and priorities (such as social justice-themed research, research around embedding UN Sustainable Development Goals and key initiatives such as decolonising curricula).

2.3.2 Professional practice

A focus on professional and practice-led curricula was demonstrated with reference to the number and range of programmes approved by Professional and Statutory Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs). For example, a large university said the number of PSRB-accredited courses (over 80, equating to nearly half of degrees awarded) demonstrated the relevance and currency of its curricula in preparing students for professional practice.

Placements as a mechanism for student engagement in professional practice were mentioned in three-quarters of the submissions. For example, a large university described the use of a professional placement year, or a 'micro-placement'. Work placements had

been supported at an FEC through a European Social Fund project focused on engaging SMEs in work placements.

Discussion of professional practice aspects overlapped with the types of practice-based curriculum developments mentioned above. This was a deliberate strategy where there were limits on the availability of placements. For example, a small university said 'real-world' experiences in the curriculum were designed to ensure all students were exposed to them (ie not just those benefiting from work placements, etc) through, for instance, recording content at the Festival of Learning and Teaching, and experiences in the local Law Centre and the Citizens Advice Bureau.

2.3.3 Employer engagement

Employer involvement in **programme design and validation** activity was mainly at programme level: providers talked about employer involvement as part of review and validation arrangements. An FEC mentioned programmes that had been directly developed in response to major employers or as collaborations with local and regional partners with an interest in local labour markets or supporting widening participation and engagement.

A few of the narratives spoke about employer involvement in overall portfolio development as well as programme-level engagement.

- + At a large university this was through Sector Interest Groups (first used in 2021-22 and now standard practice).
- + An FEC said sector-based Employment and Skills Boards, established in 2014, allowed direct communication between employers and the curriculum teams, where knowledge exchange was the primary goal.
- + A Russell Group university said employers contributed to the undergraduate curriculum through departmental advisory boards or through professional bodies and there was a wider Employer Advisory Board, which worked with the careers service to keep knowledge of employer expectations up to date.
- + A large university said that, where PSRB recognition is not available, the provider works with the most relevant sector bodies to create industry panels, deliver masterclasses and webinars and employ visiting industry practitioners and professors to ensure the best real-world learning experience related to careers is available.

The narratives sought to confirm that mechanisms were in place to ensure the curriculum was at the forefront of industry practice. The specialist providers pointed out that use of industry-active tutors effectively meant that there was a direct line into latest developments in, for example, the creative industries. One specialist provider said teaching teams undertake reviews of technology and other changes used in their industry to inform the upcoming scheme of work (software and tools used, assessment scenarios and methods).

Employers played a key part in the provision of placement, mentoring and project opportunities. Providers were keen to point out where employers had played the active role in designing the briefs and assessments as well as contributing to the delivery. For example:

- + Professionals were matched with 400 students a year for six months of 1:1 mentoring. Impact measures consistently demonstrated the success of the scheme (large university).

Other ways in which providers demonstrated employer interactions embedded into the curriculum included use of employer trips and visits; external expert speakers from professional practice, employers and graduates; events which showcase student work to which industry employers were invited (such as end of year film, fashion and music student collaborations). At a large university these types of activities were supported through course leader funding allocations.

Industry-led consultancy projects, which were employer directed, were being used in some programmes (such as students working in teams to complete projects submitted by employer partners that address real-world concerns). These seemed particularly prevalent for providers with established links into the professions, with public sector employers or sectors with strong representative bodies (for example, engineering) or working in labour markets with ready access to educationally active large employers.

All the submissions described the plethora of work that was going on at provider and department levels to put students in contact with employers, as part of employability skills development initiatives.

- + Activities, in addition to the graduate and careers support, were delivered by the university, externally delivered, or in partnership. Examples included: an accredited project management course, an employability-focused business game; a 'social media' masterclass. A mock assessment centre project in been undertaken in partnership with a major graduate employer, and also a graduate-level Kickstart Job Placements scheme (large university).
- + The approach included: engagement with local employers, opportunities for employers to network with students, creation of experiential learning opportunities with placements and live projects. A survey introduced in 2018 was used to capture the effect on student outcomes and help with tailoring (large university).

The balance between curriculum embedded and centrally supported employer engagement and employability support comes out as a consideration. Several providers in the sample took time to explain how employer engagement was evolving and the structures being put in place to support this. For example:

- + An action plan for a coordinated approach across faculties, professional services and the students' union, based on four objectives (relating to the role of the curriculum, the Careers Service offer, encouragement for work-based experience and support for self-employment, and management of employer partnerships and profile) (large university).
- Employability support is discussed further in Section 4.2.

Teaching and learning during the pandemic

Most providers in the sample were keen to celebrate their efforts in continuing to deliver teaching to a high standard during the pandemic.

- + 100% online provision was accomplished within a week, thus minimising disruption to students' learning (large university).
- + The use of Panopto enabled the college to provide students with an almost identical educational offer to that pre-pandemic: students could watch the course material for each session of every unit during the normal timetable and then had a dedicated live tutorial via Zoom with their unit tutor (specialist provider).
- + Staff excelled in recognising and responding to students' needs and ensuring their academic progress through online, social and academic events, peer support, and continued personal tutoring (Russell Group university).

Almost half of submissions talked about new approaches to online teaching, assessment and tutoring used during the pandemic, and which in many cases were continuing to influence the post-pandemic strategy.

- + Staff across the university were making an increased amount of video content available to our students... much higher than it was pre-pandemic, with our academic staff embracing the benefits of video for learning and teaching (small university).
- + We have found that [Discord] has opened doors to a whole new way of supporting students both on and off campus...the innovations developed and deployed throughout the pandemic have been well received by both staff and students, and this is having a positive impact on the quality and timeliness of academic support, on retention and overall student engagement (specialist provider).

Providers talked about investment in blended provision, which had become an established feature, particularly the use of online lectures alongside face-to-face teaching so that learners had the option of attending remotely or when catching up. The submission from a Russell Group university said the whole approach to teaching delivery was being reconceptualised to explore the opportunities for increasing blended and flexible learning and enhancing collaborative pedagogies, and to explore how flexibility over pace, place and pathway can support learners' individual choices.

During the pandemic, advances had been made in relation to online materials for learning and assessment. Many of these innovations have continued post-pandemic in response to positive student feedback.

- + The university invested in innovative solutions to bring practice to life for students (Russell Group university).

Use of simulations, and online work placements, featured in the narratives as a particular innovation that had influenced post-pandemic delivery.

- + For courses with compulsory practice placements, we created virtual simulated placements for students (large university).
- + The pandemic prompted our team to work even more closely with employers to identify virtual and innovative ways for students to gain workplace experience. An example is our Simulated Work Placement module (small university).

Data and monitoring systems developed during the pandemic had sustained and been further evolved in some cases. The narratives also mentioned developments in personal tutoring. Plus, learning during the pandemic was also noted in relation to inclusive practices, particularly in relation to more inclusive methods of assessment, which providers said had led to reduced outcome gaps. In contexts where digital-supported learning was already a trend, the changes supported curriculum transformation projects that had started prior to the pandemic.

- + We learnt a great deal. With no face-to-face exams, we fast-tracked our move to programme-level assessment, online assessments, as well as the use of digital resources to support teaching and learning. All this injected new momentum into our transformation programme (Russell Group university).

2.4 Evidence and evaluation

This section discusses evidence that providers in the sample used to demonstrate the effectiveness of their different contributions to an outstanding student experience. These types of practices were inter-related – for example, assessment based on engagement in practice-based learning or student research and scholarship connected to in-the-field experiences such as responses to real-world challenges and knowledge exchange activities.

Importantly in terms of setting out effectiveness claims, it was usual for providers to include facts and figures to demonstrate the breadth, scale and take-up of the practices being described. This type of evidence seemed particularly useful to illustrate the scale of adoption of new practices – and the direction of travel – and/or to illustrate that practices were inclusive of different student groups. For example:

- + Data on the trends in the shares of staff members who were delivering different types of feedback (small university).
- + Statistics regarding the share of assessment meeting quality standards for turnaround times (large university).

When it came to evidencing the different ways in which providers were using research as part of the student academic experience, they detailed, for example, the numbers of student research projects; the number of student researcher conference speakers; numbers of students and employers involved in real-world projects; and the growth in the numbers enrolled on inter-disciplinary courses with a major research project. Data to show the involvement of disadvantaged groups was included in some narratives.

- + In the case of a student researcher scheme at a large university, the data showed a higher proportion of student researchers were female, had a declared a disability, had a learning contract and a lower average entry tariff compared to the student body as a whole.

2.4.1 Use of TEF metric data

As might be expected, evidence linked to student **outcomes and satisfaction** was prominent in provider submissions – NSS outcomes for ‘teaching on my course’ and ‘learning opportunities’ being used to directly showcase the curriculum and teaching practices being described. References to the TEF metrics were especially evident where providers were aiming to demonstrate the success of changes that had been made in approaches to teaching, assessment and feedback.

- + A large university reported NSS scores seven percentage points above the sector after marking criteria were aligned with competencies and the aims of an inclusive assessment policy.
- + An FEC pointed to NSS student satisfaction rates 20 percentage points above benchmark, which it attributed to mechanisms for prompt formative feedback, and robust assessment practices, coupled with interventions to provide focused support.
- + Results at a Russell Group university associated with subject level changes in assessment (more formative assessment and an overall reduction in the volume of assessment) had led to a rise in NSS score for ‘assessment and feedback’ in the subject areas associated with new practices (which this provider said gave confidence in the approach as an institution-wide practice).

In provider contexts where provision was spread across several faculties and schools, comparisons of TEF satisfaction data at **subject level** were used as evidence of the importance of curriculum design and pedagogical developments in those subject areas leading the way in terms of new developments.

Those providers that reported high satisfaction ratings in the NSS related to assessment and feedback linked their performance to such internal practices as delivery of prompt formative feedback (FEC); or clarity of assessment criteria (large university), or use of varied assessment (FEC).

Introduction of co- and extra- curricular activities to contribute to the curriculum offer had affected on-programme results. For example, research-related enrichment through a public engagement project had contributed to high levels of student satisfaction for academic support (as well as developing students' subject knowledge) (large university).

The evidence contained in the TEF metric **split indicators** for completion and continuation were used by providers as a demonstration of inclusive practices and/or evidence of effective intervention strategies which targeted individuals in need of additional support. For example, an FEC said the effectiveness of targeted support for students who were falling behind was shown by completion and continuation data that did not differentiate between the different students' characteristics.

Four providers in the sample had shifted from substantially below to above benchmark since the last TEF, including in relation to the feedback by different student groups. The submission from a Russell Group university attributed substantive improvements in the NSS question 'marking and assessment has been fair' to revisions to the procedures for anonymous marking, second marking, and Boards of Examiners and revised extenuating circumstances procedures to achieve greater consistency across departments, combined with work to close the BAME awarding gap. Inclusivity benefits were also reported from an assessment project at a small university which had helped to achieve consistent responses regardless of whether a disability was reported or not, and consistent across all years, for younger and more mature students, and across all IMD quintiles.

2.4.2 Use of qualitative evidence

Qualitative evidence in the form of quotes and reflections featured in submissions as a way for providers to illustrate how their approaches were generating benefit. Examples of this type of evidence included the following.

- + Quotes from students were used to reflect on the student experience, including the benefits of research and practice-based activities beyond the classroom. Testimonials that highlighted the benefits for individual students, such as improved confidence, or a job offer, were used. Quotes from students were also used to demonstrate the benefits of changed practices for student engagement, taking account of different learning styles (for example, engagement with video feedback (small university). A large university included extensive quotes from students highlighting satisfaction with practice-based learning, changes to how students engaged with learning; and appreciation for the opportunities available. There were also examples illustrating how innovations such as digital learning were supporting the needs of particular groups of students (such as enabling learning from home for students with caring responsibilities).
- + Quotes from **employer partners** who were involved in real-world and applied project activities were used to draw out perspectives on the quality of the student contributions and/or to illustrate the links to graduate attributes. There were also examples of where employers were cited concerning their involvement in curriculum development and validation/re-validation exercises.
- + Quotes from **external examiner** reports and feedback were used to give an external perspective on the benefits of different practices and/or where they showed examiners had confidence in the processes and mechanisms involved. Also, some sought to highlight aspects of partnership working with examiners as part of the approach to curriculum transformation and course level developments/re-validation exercises. External examiner reports were referred to where providers wanted to showcase student improvement, the quality of student work, and to feedback on teaching practices, teaching environments and practices towards assessment and feedback.
- + Providers with professional accredited programmes cited evidence from **PSRBs**. For example, a large university said positive commendations were made in relation to learning conversations with students about assessments in several PSRB visits.
- + Comments from external **quality assurance bodies** were included in submissions which had been subject to periodic review or specific scrutiny. A FEC drew heavily, for example, on quality body comments generated as part of the degree awarding power processes. These were used to support the arrangements in place for staff engagement in pedagogic developments and discipline knowledge.

+

- + External **frameworks and standards** were also referred to in the submissions to illustrate the quality of provision. One example of this was alignment with the National Centre of Excellence for Food Engineering (NCEFE) standards for live projects (large university). Another example was collaborative working with employers on an internship and placement programme under the AGCAS Membership Quality standard (large university).

2.4.3 Research and evaluation activities

Commentaries related to different types of research and evaluation emerging internally and from the sector, through the **scholarship of teaching and learning**. One example was scholarship work awarded through a National Teaching Fellowship (Russell Group university). Another example was the development of the Connected Curriculum model, which had been supported by open-access collections of practical examples, peer-reviewed articles exploring the impact on students, and a growing library of case studies.

Providers also described approaches to research and evaluation of curriculum and pedagogy that involved students in evaluating key areas and seeking to understand more about the impact of their experience on their outcomes (see Section 5.2). An example of internal research and evaluation brought into submissions in support of providers' approaches included research into sense of belonging (Russell Group university).

Referring to the available research and evaluation seemed a useful approach in situations where providers wanted to establish the credibility of developments that were fairly new and as yet unrepresented in the provider metrics.

- + A large university said research backed up its extensive use of an online package that supports independent learning.
- + A Russell Group university referenced a National Teaching Fellowship-funded project on the student experience of assessment, which was informing internal developments with further evaluation in train to evidence the institutional impact.

2.4.4 Provider and departmental surveys

The providers in the sample drew on the perspectives of their students in various ways to show evidence of effective practice or confirm high satisfaction with the student experience. Surveys were the most commonly cited source of evidence. Programme evaluation surveys were used to provide feedback on programme developments. However, average levels of feedback from programme evaluations were also used to highlight the benefits of significant whole-provider level policies. The response rates for internal questionnaires (including programme evaluation surveys) tended to be higher, and were more up-to-date, than the NSS results. Hence, for some metrics, for example in relation to assessment and feedback,

internal evidence was presented to demonstrate that the students' experience was perhaps better than the NSS would suggest.

- + Confidence with assessment in module evaluation surveys improved following actions to address a range of assessment issues in some subject areas, including authentic assessments and formative feedback (large university).
- + Results on overall average levels of overall student satisfaction captured in module evaluations showed the benefits on modules that included major project assignments (large university).

Survey responses were being collected to record and track aspects of employability. This was especially the case for providers who were using 'real-world' and problem-based learning as the basis of active learning. Considerations of career-readiness were mentioned in 21 submissions, and five were using scores in the Careers Registration survey. Examples were also found of data from bespoke surveys undertaken as part of evaluation of specific schemes and initiatives.

- + Significant increases in careers readiness were reported in relation to a manufacturing problem-solving initiative (large university).
- + In feedback, student perceptions confirmed the employability benefits of a professional mentoring programme (large university).

2.4.5 Student outcomes data

Providers compared the outcomes of students who had participated in different types of curriculum or co-curricular activities with those of non-participants to demonstrate the success of an initiative. For instance, the data presented in the submissions in respect of research and practice-based activities and employability measures confirmed the benefits for:

- + **Completion and attainment.** For example, the share of students achieving a first-class degree was more than double the overall rate among students who had participated in funded student research project opportunities (Russell Group university).
- + **Graduate jobs.** For example, students in one school who had undertaken a professional placement year, a 'micro-placement', or bespoke placement were more likely than average to progress into positive outcomes, including a higher share of highly skilled jobs, based on the graduate outcomes survey, and these programmes were being scaled up (large university).

Submissions also made claims linking teaching approaches and the overall provider-level outcome measures, where shifts had been observed. For example, a small university said the offer of a range of authentic assessment opportunities had contributed to high completion rates and increasingly positive graduate outcomes. A large university attributed its best benchmarked results across a range of measures (NSS, TEF and DLHE) to a revised curriculum from 2018-19.

When it came to consideration of the experiences of 'at risk' student groups, analysis of the behavioural and non-behavioural outcomes for different groups of students was used to show inclusiveness and/or targeted approaches to working with student from disadvantaged groups. For example:

- + Tracking results following participation in co-curricular programme: above average rates of participation, career readiness, student satisfaction, continuation and achievement of good honours on graduation, by students with disabilities, BAME students and students from deprived areas (IMD Q1) who had participated in the programme (large university).
- + Use of an 'impact dashboard' approach to assess the experience of students in different activities. In the case of student researchers, a higher than average proportion achieved good honours and first class degrees and demonstrated higher module marks at every level of study (large university).
- + Student attainment data: induction, learner diagnostics, bridging materials, and peer and individualised support had 'significantly contributed' to reducing awarding gaps (large university).
- + Student awards: more than 10 percentage point reduction in the gap in good honours degrees awarded between white and racially minoritised UK first degree students between 2018-19 and 2020-21 attributed to cross-university work to decolonise curricula and reading lists and develop new approaches to assessment (Russell Group university).

2.4.6 External recognition and awards

A quarter of providers in the sample pointed to being nominated for or winning awards for aspects of teaching and learning, including awards for the following:

- + activities demonstrating promising practices and outcomes for **disadvantaged student groups** – for example, National Levelling Up Universities Awards; UK Social Mobility Awards
- + developments in **curriculum and pedagogy** – for example, Guardian Award for Course Design, LearnSci Innovation Award; Advance HE Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE)

- + activities involving **collaboration and partnership** arrangements – for example, AGCAS Award for Excellence for building effective partnerships
- + contribution to impactful work on key **sector priorities** – for example, UN sustainable development goals Times Higher Education Impact Ranking
- + **‘all round’ awards** – for example, shortlisting/achievement in THE University of the Year awards.

2.4.7 League table rankings

A quarter in the sample made reference to their position in one or more of the various league tables for higher education. League table position was used to illustrate engagement with widening participation and social mobility agendas (such as Times/Sunday Times Social Inclusion league) as well as to back up comments regarding provider performance in relation to student experience.

2.4.8 Performance in the REF

Just over half of the submissions in the sample referenced the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Various details were included, such as share of staff submitting to the REF, share of subject areas and star rating performance in the REF across submitted work. Research relating to pedagogical innovations was highlighted as contributing to REF results (large university). Performance in the REF stood out as being particularly significant to providers that had made commitments to enhancing their research activities. For example, one large university’s submission reported a major increase in its REF related activity and performance as part of a ‘strategic ambition’ to integrate education and research.

Results in the REF were used to illustrate excellence at the course or programme level. For example, linking indicators for teaching and assessment to research-enabled academic experiences, and connecting research going on at department level in entrepreneurship education (large university).

3 Professional development of staff

In assessing the quality of the student experience, the TEF identified the level of support for the professional development of staff and the extent to which excellent academic practice was embedded across the provider. This section focuses on what providers said they had done to enhance the quality of their staff and how they have evidenced that enhancement.

3.1 Support for professional development of staff

SE4. There is outstanding support for staff professional development and excellent academic practice is embedded across the provider.

3.1.1 Commitment to staff development

Support and recognition for the contribution of teaching staff was identified as critical to the student experience and student outcomes. An FEC, which achieved an overall Gold at its first attempt, described its extensive staff team as “the most valuable resource [provider name] invests in”. A large university said it placed “outstanding academics and professional services staff at the heart of [its] strategy” because it was impossible to bring about sustainable change without supporting and engaging its staff.

This commitment translated into provider-wide initiatives of different kinds – for example, by:

- + increasing levels of financial investment in academic and professional/technical staffing levels (small university)
- + removal of casual contracts and the integration of such staff into faculties with time for continuing professional development (large university)
- + development of an Advance HE accredited integrated Academic Practice Standard framework (large university)
- + developing an all-embracing Future Facing Learning framework (large university).

Providers had revised existing or developed new **academic career pathways**, and these were particularly noticeable in submissions from research-intensive providers. For instance, two Russell Group universities described the introduction since the previous TEF of procedures to recognise teaching and learning as an academic promotion pathway to full professorship, perhaps designed to address a perceived imbalance in status between research and teaching. Other providers spoke about different promotion pathways (in addition to research and teaching) to recognise distinctive aspects of provider specialisation. Examples included: Enterprise and Innovation; Leadership; and Professional Practice (small university); practice-focused careers (large university); Research, Education and Citizenship, alongside Education, Pedagogy and Citizenship (large university).

Action to address inequalities in the promotion of staff were alluded to in a handful of submissions. One provider in the sample described annual promotion and advice sessions for women and BAME staff in order to support staff from these groups to gain promotion (small university).

As evidence of impact, providers generally cited increasing numbers of promoted staff on these pathways.

3.2 Qualified staff

3.2.1 Postgraduate-level teaching qualifications

Ensuring that academic staff had **recognised teaching qualifications** was a key driver of staff development in over half of the provider narratives.

A significant proportion of the improver group had made postgraduate-level teaching qualifications a contractual requirement for those with no recognised teaching qualification (large university) or limited teaching experience (in some cases, less than two years, in others less than five). These took the form of a full PG Certificate in Learning and Teaching (large university) or PG Certificate in Academic Practice or 60 credits in the same (large university).

There were also examples of specialist providers using **bespoke qualifications** based on postgraduate options in order to meet specific requirements of its educators. One specialist provider developed ‘a unique Postgraduate Certificate in Academic and Clinical Education qualification’ which encompassed clinical, practical and academic teaching skills and methodologies and aimed to provide experienced clinicians with the skills to become competent and confident educators. A specialist provider explained that staff who had undertaken the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education had gone on to develop an induction module, ‘Introduction to teaching higher education at [name of provider]’.

As evidence of impact, providers cited raw numbers or percentages of staff achieving PG Certificate in Academic Practice, PG Certificate or Diploma in Learning and Teaching or MA awards. Other providers benchmarked themselves against sector data provided by HESA.

3.2.2 Advance HE (formerly HEA) Fellowships

Thirty-four submissions spoke about Fellowships. As with postgrad qualifications, the providers were concerned to establish the **teaching credentials** of their staff by supporting staff to pursue recognition by Advance HE.

In demonstrating the impact of this, most submissions cited the share of staff who were Fellows at different levels. Some sought to demonstrate the extent of their achievement by comparison to sector or mission group averages or to benchmarked providers. Some mentioned that Senior Fellows supported the development of other staff.

Several Russell Group providers pointed to increased numbers of academic staff holding Fellowships since the previous TEF exercise, again perhaps indicating the increased priority given to teaching quality as a result of the evolution of the TEF. However, the narrative about the share of staff with these types of credentials was not restricted to research-intensive providers. Other providers (specialist provider; FEC) also referred to ‘significant growth’ in the number of Fellows in recent years.

The presence of **provider-level frameworks** benchmarked against the UKPSF and targets for the number of fellows suggested that recognition by Advance HE (formerly HEA) was an expectation of its teaching staff. One provider had set a target of having all of its academic staff holding an HE Fellowship or equivalent (Russell Group university).

Fellowship had been made a prerequisite for career progression in many cases, for example: as a requirement for successful completion of probation (large university); HEA Fellowship as a requirement for promotion (Russell Group university); achievement or active pursuit of Senior and Principal Fellowship as a condition of promotion to associate and full professorship (large university).

3.2.3 Technical, support and professional services staff

Reflecting an increased understanding of the role of professional and technical staff in supporting student learning, 11 providers from across the sector reported training/support for professional and technical staff, and two said they were encouraging professional/technical staff to pursue recognition as Fellows by Advance HE. One expected professional staff without teaching experience, who support student learning, to undertake a module ‘Introduction to Supporting Learning’ (Russell Group university).

3.2.4 Professional expertise of staff

Most providers were keen to ensure that staff members had or maintained **professional/industry experience**. This was particularly the case with a number of specialist providers. A specialist provider for the creative industries claimed its team were “some of the most qualified and experienced in the industry” and:

“...it is not simply the case that ‘some’ academic staff ‘used to be’ animators, visual effects artists, film-makers and sound engineers, as is commonly seen in larger higher education providers; rather, it is the case that all of academic staff are currently active in their respective professional and creative fields” (specialist provider)

Providers were putting increased effort into increasing the numbers of staff with professional experience and giving staff time to maintain professional credentials (large university). The submission from a large university noted the benefits of professional experience on student outcomes, particularly in regard to employability.

3.3 Delivering CPD

Nineteen providers made specific reference to delivering staff development that aligns with the **UK Professional Standards Framework**, as evidence of a commitment to teaching excellence. One large university said: “The UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) is embedded in our PGCert in HE, which has had significant impact on the quality of teaching and learning across [name of provider].”

As means of promoting excellent academic practice, most providers had invested in the work of **centres of learning and teaching** (or equivalent). As might be expected, these varied by type of provider. Larger providers tended to describe the scale and extent of the work of well-established centres. There was evidence of investment since the first round of TEF assessments in new centres of teaching excellence or academies and of consolidation of support for academic development, digital enhancement and innovation.

In a few cases, providers said the responsibility for the identification and dissemination of good practice and support for staff CPD was devolved to faculty level (large university) or individual disciplines (Russell Group university). In one small provider, responsibility was devolved to individual Advanced Practitioners (FEC).

Submissions from universities described how they supported teaching and learning by funding pedagogic research and scholarship, the findings of which were disseminated across the providers and informed curriculum development. Specialist providers and FECs gave evidence of working groups and teams being created to coordinate pedagogic enhancement.

In other examples, providers were funding research projects designed to improve the quality of education (Russell Group university), but also to raise the profile of staff engaging in research in order to support submissions for excellence awards. In one specialist provider there was a clear strategic imperative:

“...in transitioning from a teaching-intensive specialist higher education provider to a more rounded academic institution, we have sought to build upon and promote the synergies between research, enterprise, teaching and learning” (specialist provider)

Examples of the **use of internal data** to direct their staff development efforts included setting up exchanges to transfer good practice from subjects performing materially above benchmark in the National Student Survey across the provision to improve performance in areas materially below benchmark (large university). Others have used in-depth statistical analysis of awarding gaps in projects to better understand how the impact of staff approaches to education affected student outcomes.

Systematic review of **student feedback** through staff meetings was commonly cited as informing staff development. One specialist provider had engaged students directly in staff development activity, which provided not only valuable feedback to staff, but also empowered students to be critically reflective of the training they'd received.

3.3.1 Staff development and strategic priorities

There were numerous examples of **training initiatives to address particular issues**, such as equity, diversity and inclusion, culturally responsive learning and teaching, and decolonisation designed (in part, at least) to address differential outcomes between student groups. Often designed by staff and students working together, these aimed to embed change in practice. These included:

- + An Education for Social Justice Framework training package (large university).
- + The redesign of Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice and the design of an inclusive education framework so that all assessments are inclusive, authentic and competence based (large university).
- + Staff development on strategies to support Black students, decolonising academic practice and creating anti-racist classrooms (large university).

3.3.2 Nature of CPD provision

The **scale and connectedness** of the CPD provision reported varied widely, largely depending on size of the provision. Larger providers spoke about provision of across-the-board training delivered in-house and geared directly to established career progression frameworks. These included:

- + 'Future Education Leaders' and 'Good to Great' targeted at staff working towards Readership or chairs (large university).
- + Two taught pathways for academic staff and for professional staff who support students as part of the [name of provider] Academic Practice Standard framework (large university).

A range of different types of **short courses** were also described in the submissions, for example 'MicroCPDs' in good assessment practice (Russell Group university) and 'on demand' provision where staff have access to a self-service course on teaching and learning design and a curriculum content creation course (large university).

Specialist providers and FECs seemed to rely more on links to professional organisations and to external providers of staff CPD, such as the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education. One specialist provider encouraged its staff to undertake an NVQ in Diversity and Equality; another (FEC) listed a wide range of external training, including on Employability; Mental

Health First Aid; Transgender Awareness and Safeguarding. An FEC used validating partners and other external experts to keep its staff up to date with emerging technologies, skills and practices.

3.4 Quality assurance and enhancement

3.4.1 Induction and new staff

All the submissions mentioned arrangements for the induction of new staff. The nature of these varied considerably. One large university required that all staff new to higher education undertook an unaccredited module 'Introduction to Teaching and Learning in HE' before embarking on the accredited programme lasting 18-24 months. Another large university had in place a mentoring programme with a requirement to produce a Teaching Development Plan within the first six weeks as part of a comprehensive Learning and Teaching Development Plan. Other large universities referred to the completion of a single introduction to teaching and learning module (or equivalent). Some providers drew attention to their provision for sessional staff new to higher education (large university).

3.4.2 Performance reviews

Staff appraisals were referred to in 18 of the 40 submissions both as a driver of individual staff development and as a way of promoting teaching excellence across the provision. A number of providers made it clear they had devised performance indicators which linked directly to the achievement of strategic goals. For example, one provider's academic careers framework translates its strategy into 'measurable indicators associated with different posts and levels of responsibility'. Another small university's performance review guidance urged managers to concentrate on those aspects (of learning and teaching) which related directly to the provider's strategic plan for excellence. One FEC described a performance review which considered lesson observation action plans and drew on data about continuation, completion and progression from the previous year.

However, overall, the sense emerged that providers were becoming more strategically proactive in driving forward CPD across their staff teams in response to the evolving higher education context and requirements of teaching excellence. Even at the individual level the link was being made to the strategic objectives.

3.4.3 Observation of teaching

Twenty submissions (50%) mentioned observations of teaching. **Peer observation of teaching** was one way of supporting staff to develop their practice by identifying training needs and sharing what works. It also provides evidence for staff appraisals and promotion. Peer observation can therefore be controversial and the narratives from some of those using it suggested that they have beefed up their processes. One large university said it had integrated a university-wide peer observation scheme into its Professional Development

Review. An FEC said all staff were observed as part of a 'now fully embedded' learning and teaching strategy. Further evidence that approaches to the observation of teaching were part of an improvement journey was provided by one provider, which revealed that it had introduced observation by senior staff, and inter-departmental observations and a link to appraisal (large university).

The frequency of staff observations varied from 'at least every two years' (large university), to annually (Russell Group university), to twice a year (large university). One large university required all Advance HE Fellowship applicants to be observed twice during their application.

3.4.4 Mentoring

Nineteen providers made reference to systems for mentoring. One provider (FEC) had introduced a system of self-referral as well as referral by manager. In another, a large team of 85 mentors supported its Teaching Recognition and Accreditation scheme, this resulting, it was suggested, in an ongoing increase in staff achieving professional recognition (Russell Group university).

3.4.5 Staff award schemes

Twenty-five submissions mentioned staff awards/prizes. These included student-led teaching awards as well as top-down recognition (for example, Vice-Chancellor's Teaching Excellence Award). Some providers linked the awards directly to other schemes of staff recognition, for example, putting forward award-winners for Advance HE's National Teaching Fellowship scheme (small university; large university), or encouraging staff to pursue further development through an internal professional recognition scheme (large university). One provider (large university) included a cash prize to be spent on enhancement of their academic practice.

3.4.6 Opportunities for sharing

The majority of the providers alluded to well-established centrally organised annual **learning and teaching conferences** or festivals designed to share good practice and build capacity among staff. They provided a forum for the dissemination of research findings and the sharing of best practice. Some invited students to participate. There was also evidence of ongoing programmes of networking opportunities. One large university described a dedicated programme to support course leaders, designed 'to brainstorm solutions to wicked problems'. Another large university referenced its 'targeted Quality Enhancement series'. Other less extensive opportunities, for example, 'lightning lunches' and 'research breakfasts', were also in evidence.

In addition, there were references to established communities of practice – for example, of course leaders (large university) and of associate lecturers (large university). Smaller, specialist and alternative providers had devoted efforts to create opportunities for sharing,

often drawing on external expertise or partners (FEC). Some relied on groups of internal committed staff (specialist provider).

The pandemic and staff development

The pivot to online delivery produced significant challenges. One large university proved to be ahead of the curve having introduced a mandatory Digital Development Programme for all student-facing staff in 2018. Others reported that they had responded quickly to lockdown in 2020 with new initiatives including:

- + Introducing basic training for staff in the use of MS Teams, Google Classroom and Moodle (FEC).
- + Producing how-to guides and video tutorials (large university).
- + Delivering online workshops (Russell Group university).
- + A five-week training course in blended learning (Russell Group university).
- + A 'digital drop-in' to support staff, which had since become embedded (large university).

As one provider said, citing a staff survey in 2021: "the pandemic was a period of accelerated professional development for many" (Russell Group university) (see also Section 3). In evaluating their response to the pandemic on the staffing front, providers referenced:

- + Expansion of counselling provision to meet increased support needs (FEC).
- + The enhancement of personal tutoring (large university) and equipping staff to support student with mental health problems (small university).
- + Evaluations of the emergency provision, for example a virtual environment health check (large university).

3.5 Evaluation of staff professional development

Providers chose to demonstrate the impact of staff development policies and initiatives in different ways, including:

- + External awards, such as an Investors in People Gold award (large university).
- + Participant feedback, which showed satisfaction with, and the impact of, the types of training being delivered.

- + Programme evaluations, which demonstrated that confidence with assessment had increased by 4.2% on the previous year as a result (large university).
- + External examiner reports, which noted the impact of CPD on course management and delivery (FEC).

Evidence of impact on students generally took the form of improvements in student satisfaction rates rather than student outcomes. However, a few providers (small university; FEC) recognised this in their submissions and spoke of developing a more robust approach to impact evaluation of staff development on academic practice in future.

4 Student support and learning environment

The first part of this section explores how providers have described efforts to ensure a supportive learning environment, and that students have access to a wide and readily available range of outstanding quality academic support tailored to their needs and how they have evidenced their impact. The section goes on to explore the ways in which providers sought to demonstrate that their physical and virtual learning resources were tailored and used effectively to support outstanding learning and teaching and how they evidenced their impact.

4.1 Student support

SE5. The provider ensures a supportive learning environment, and its students have access to a wide and readily available range of outstanding quality academic support tailored to their needs.

Developments **to coordinate support** for students were reported in the submissions. For example, a Russell Group university said that communication channels to enable all students to access the support they need had been improved by a Student Support Map (developed in collaboration with the students' union in 2020-21). At a Russell Group university support available throughout the student journey had been summarised in a 'tube map'. A large university had made all forms of support accessible through a single portal.

4.1.1 Transition support

All of the submissions in the sample made some reference to support to help students transition into higher education. However, in smaller providers there appeared to be more emphasis on individual-focused interventions within course groups. Many larger providers referred to multiple transition support activities combining whole year-group, cohort, group-targeted and individual interventions.

Whole-provider frameworks were being developed by academic and professional staff in collaboration with the students' union designed to ensure that key operational processes and start of year events were presented as a cohesive picture. These tended to cover not just welcome and orientation activities but also pedagogic scaffolding (large university).

Sixteen submissions were found to explicitly refer to **online and virtual forms** of transition support. Various approaches had been adopted, such as:

- + A VLE course comprising of recordings and activities to develop academic, information literacy and digital skills (large university).
- + An induction module on the VLE (small university).

- + A series of regular virtual events and interaction opportunities hosted or co-hosted by student ambassadors (large university).

Half of the submissions included commentary on their programmes of '**welcome activities**' – usually combining activities designed to prepare students for university with forms of academic skills development and orientation. Again there were a wide range of approaches, for example:

- + A university-wide initiative over three weeks (large university).
- + A series of remote and on-campus events developed with the students' union (large university).
- + Activities at the level of academic schools, with an additional series of workshops for late starters (open to all students who can use them for additional support) (large university).

Forms of **peer support** featured in 13 submissions, typically with new students being matched with a transition mentor to ensure bespoke advice. A large university offered every first-year student a peer mentor with an opt-in feature enabling students to choose to be paired with a mentor who shares characteristics such as ethnicity, religion or sexuality. Benefits noted by providers of peer transition support included building a sense of community, as well as orientation, academic and personal support. A Russell Group university found peer support was associated with tighter grade distribution across the population at the upper end, and improved continuation, particularly for BAME and disabled students. Students in peer support roles were found to benefit in terms of rates of continuation and the share progressing to positive graduate destinations.

Seven providers in the sample said that transition support started **pre-entry** and a further seven providers spoke about outreach and partnership activities prior to higher education as part of their transition support activities. The scale, form and content of pre-entry activities differed widely from online pre-arrival packages, with transition resources (large university; Russell Group university) to a four-week bridging process designed to build student confidence but also to identify specific student needs early on (large university). A similar package at another university was said to be associated with higher continuation rate of over 5.5 percentage points with take-up being relatively high among groups at higher risk of non-continuation – commuting, BAME and IMD Q1/Q2 students.

Outreach was a feature of transition, including bespoke school engagement programmes on study skills and mentoring (sometimes in collaboration with INTO University). One large university spoke about a transition support scheme targeted at 'first generation' higher education students in Year 12 and 13, designed to nurture a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Participants who progressed to the university received donation-funded bursaries and a bespoke transition package.

Three of the submissions in the sample spoke about extended programmes to aid transition for **widening participation students**. Two providers (large university; Russell Group university) said a foundation year was seen as a key to improved continuation and success rates.

The narratives in eight of the submissions explicitly discussed approaches related to embedding forms of transition support into **teaching and learning** activities (these types of activities are discussed further in Section 4.2.1). Approaches included:

- + embedding study skills in their first core research module (large university)
- + scaffolding support in the early stages of the student journey to create space later for growth, development and independence (FEC; specialist provider)
- + the employment of ‘crossover staff’ (available seven days a week and out of term time) who provide one-on-one support to students on the full range of technical learning resources available (specialist provider).

4.1.2 Tutoring

Different forms of personal tutoring/advising systems were referenced in all but one of the submissions, with personal tutors being often held up as a key means of **personalising delivery** to the student body. A couple of alternative providers delivering creative courses talked about 1:1 tutoring from nominated artists or industry tutors. An FEC said that all students were entitled to weekly tutorials, which enables them to get detailed feedback and agree improvement targets. This provider said: “This has led to deeper learning and helps to accelerate progress made.”

At a Russell Group university, **personal tutors** were guided by a new student support framework developed in direct response to student and staff feedback. A large university said a review of the personal tutoring system in partnership with the students’ union in 2019 had led to significant enhancements (including a new leadership role, a dynamic dashboard to enable bespoke individual student support, creation of an enhanced senior tutor role; and mandatory mental health awareness training for tutors). An online portal for tutors was introduced at a Russell Group university to give them access to the resources they need. A large university had introduced a new code of practice for personal tutoring in 2018-19, which had been verified as offering consistent standards of practice in an Academic Professional Standards evaluation; this included a consistent workload allocation.

Systems of staff training and tutor support come out as important to the effectiveness of personal tutoring. Six of the providers in the sample spoke about their association with UK Advising and Tutoring community of practice. There was certainly evidence of increased support and training for personal tutors including:

- + The creation of a new student advisor role creating a link between academic staff and health and wellbeing services (Russell Group university).
- + Support from senior tutors to provide for oversight and consistency (Russell Group university).
- + Personal tutor access to data systems bringing together information about students in one place (large university; Russell Group university).

Providers often evidenced the impact of such initiatives by reference to materially above benchmark indicators in academic support.

Pastoral tutors and forms of individual personal support featured in commentary in three-quarters of the submissions. There were examples of recent moves to provide a holistic approach to support. The impression given by the submissions was that there had been a beefing up of support and training for personal and pastoral tutors. For example:

- + A Russell Group university piloted new models that separated procedural, pastoral and academic aspects of personal tutoring through a triage system, so that students feel known by someone equipped with the skills and knowledge to support their personal development (Russell Group university).
- + From 2016-17, an FEC used Success Coaches providing pastoral support to a case load of 300 HE students, which contributed to sustaining completion and success rates during the pandemic.
- + From 2018-19, a large university used a 'triangle' approach to provide designated advisers for academic, support and careers matters from enrolment onwards.

4.1.3 Academic support

Forms of academic support in addition to tutoring and peer support included resources, workshops and individual forms of support. The academic skills resource at a Russell Group university provided self-study resources, interactive workshops and one-to-one appointments with specialist tutors trained in academic literacy and learning. Another Russell Group university included Peer Assisted Study Sessions among a range of other support. See also Section 2.

Other individualised forms of targeted and inclusive academic support included **coaching**. For example, a large university said coaches were being put in place for students repeating first-year modules, who provide bespoke 1:1 sessions (part of a package of student support measures, which this provider associated with strong continuation and completion). A central team of study coaches at another large university were said to provide 800 individual appointments and 160 group tutorial sessions each year.

Study skills courses and resources featured in most of the narratives. For example, a specialist provider requires all new undergraduates to attend a study skills course during their first semester to promote an understanding of the necessary skills to demonstrate good academic practice. Another FEC delivers a broad range of workshops, embedded into the main programmes of learning as well as outside of the course, to support a wide range of academic needs such as skills development, essay writing and referencing. Another FEC attributed the maintenance of graduate outcomes between 2018 and 2022 to an academic achievement service as part of ‘wraparound’ support for research skills.

The role played by **Library** teams in study skills was also apparent in many of the narratives, providing group, online and individual forms of support for academic skills.

Supporting students with **academic writing** was explicitly mentioned in half of the submissions. Four of the providers in the sample said they had one or more Royal Literary Fund Fellowship members who also assisted with academic writing support. In one large university, Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellows had helped with more than 800 individual tutorials.

The TEF narratives suggest that **coordination of academic support systems and professional services** was an increasingly important consideration, with data increasingly having a role to play in targeting resources. For example, the submission from a small university spoke about the close link between the academic advisor system and the range of other initiatives on academic support that were tailored to student needs. A large university reported an evidence-based redesign of student academic support services with a data-led approach, allowing personal tutors to connect with targeted student success interventions. See Section 4.3.4 for more on learner analytics.

4.1.4 Peer support

Different methods of using peers to support the academic progress of students could be identified across 16 providers in the sample. There were several examples of **peer mentoring**, for example:

- + Trained student mentors working in collaboration with learning developers and English language staff to improve students’ academic writing (large university).
- + A student-designed Academic Mentoring Programme (Russell Group university).

Peer relationships were also the basis of **peer learning**. For example, a large university described a long-standing co-created Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALS), which trains 200 students annually to become PALS leaders. A large university noted that, on average, participating students reported a 26 percentage point increase in academic confidence having engaged in its PALS scheme from 2019 onwards.

4.1.5 Targeted and tailored support

Various examples of targeted and tailored support were mentioned, which included:

- + Bespoke welcome programmes for international and commuter students (Russell Group university).
- + Bespoke induction for care-leaver/-experienced students that links students to peers from similar backgrounds, and annual bursaries (large university).
- + A long-running scheme for WP students that offers a two-day pre-induction (small university).
- + A wide-ranging online scheme that supports applicants who are first generation to higher education, mature, care experienced, estranged, disabled, young carers, have a low household income or are entering with a BTEC as their main qualification. An internal evaluation showed that participants had an increased chance of progressing (large university).

Some of the narratives pointed to concerns to **flex academic support provision** to the needs of different groups. For example, a Russell Group university investigated best practice in personal tutoring for Black students, international students, students with disabilities, and those with intersectional experiences. A large university ran a collaborative attainment project for BAME students to encourage submissions of their work and attributed an increase in the number of submissions and reduced attainment gap to this project.

Disabled students were a focus for targeted support through inclusion initiatives. Among many examples, a Russell Group university attributed parallel attainment across disabled and non-disabled student groups to individualised inclusion plans underpinned by personalised assessment arrangements. A large university noted that the disability team engages with students prior to starting their course, providing a remote or in-person welcome to the team and individual discussion of support requirements with a dedicated pre-entry advisor. Another large university said it had developed a holistic programme of support, which was recognised in 2021 by a Levelling Up Universities Award. The programme includes sending out positive messages, transition days, a campus tour and chance to register early, transition events with disabled staff, and support for DSA applications. An HE in FE provider used local data to show that mechanisms, such as person-centred teaching support plans as well as assistive technology, had narrowed the gap for continuation and completion between students with a disability and those without to under two percentage points.

International students were a particular focus for targeted support at some universities (15% in the sample). One provider, for example, delivers a bespoke English for Academic Purposes course for international undergraduates. Another large university matches new international students with home student buddies at the start of the academic year.

Development of **personal support plans** was a feature in a minority of submissions. Examples included two specialist providers conducting educational needs assessment plans before students start studying. An FEC offered students the opportunity to construct a personal development plan during career days.

4.1.6 Wellbeing initiatives

All but one of the submissions spoke about fairly recent wellbeing initiatives. In a quarter of them, wellbeing was described within the context of an overall strategy or programme approach.

The student wellbeing programme at a large university, launched in 2019, was based on the “Thrive” principle, focusing on supportive social, physical and digital environments. Similarly, another large university described a whole-university approach, implemented in 2021, integrating and aligning academic and support services with an explicit focus on wellbeing for learning, setting out defined roles and clearly developed pathways to support.

A Russell Group university claimed that it had the most comprehensive mental health and wellbeing offer of any UK university, underpinned by a stepped care model which aimed to create a complete continuum of provision. Tools and interventions had included: mental health services, a social prescribing offer, a harm reduction approach for drug and alcohol use; a 24/7 mental health and wellbeing support service and app; an on-campus primary care service. Another Russell Group university had invested £558,000 in expanding and redesigning its central Student Wellbeing Services, creating a single point of entry for students to access an appointment and onward referral for expert advice. It had also partnered with an external provider to ensure 24/7 phone support.

In many of the narratives, wellbeing was closely linked to creating a sense of belonging and community. Specific wellbeing initiatives included:

- + Increased pastoral support with the appointment of Wellbeing Champions and comprehensive support for vulnerable students (large university).
- + Support for postgraduate students to live in halls of residence as Student Resident Advisors, a scheme designed to create a culture of positive wellbeing (their role includes running events, responding to welfare issues, reaching out to new students) (Russell Group university).
- + A SafeZone app for all students and staff, augmented by a wearable device for more vulnerable students, which enables students to check in regularly and to report an emergency situation (large university).

Sixteen providers in the sample made reference to **cost-of-living support**. A Russell Group university said its student survey had showed that 80% of students were concerned about the cost of living. This provider had responded through a grant scheme set up jointly with the

students' union for students incurring additional costs as a result of the pandemic and other measures such as rent reductions and support for IT equipment and internet dongles.

Mental health

The term mental health appeared in 37 submissions (all but one talked about wellbeing). Mental health was a university-wide priority. Four providers had adopted (or were in the process of adopting) the University Mental Health Charter produced by Student Minds in 2019 in recognition of the growing incidence of mental health concerns among students and staff.

- + A Russell Group university said its Institute of Mental Health was playing a pivotal role in improving student mental health support as part of a university-wide strategy; and is a partner in a new initiative with the NHS to support student mental health, which had been commended by the OfS.
- + A Russell Group university adopted a Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework (SMHWF), explicitly aligned with the UUK Stepchange Framework recommendation of a whole-provider approach and the principles of the Mental Health Charter, and UUK guidance on suicide-safer universities.

Data and intelligence

Initiatives to build data and intelligence in support of mental health interventions included:

- + A project on 'Mental Health Analytics' funded by the OfS Mental Health Challenge Competition (MHCC) (which reported evidence that the analytics programme had reached previously unidentified students) (large university).
- + An annual Student Welfare Support and Wellbeing Survey (which included students' suggestions for improvement in mental health support and facilities for relaxation) (FEC).

Staff resources and training

Taking forward priorities on mental health included resources or training for staff. For example:

- + Pedagogic toolkits (including mental health learning and teaching) (large university).
- + Mandatory mental health awareness training for personal tutors (large university).

- + An all-staff introductory online training course, supported by a network of more than 250 Mental Health First Aiders (Russell Group university).

Student support services

Examples of investment in support services included:

- + Expanding provision of the Science of Happiness open unit, which includes peer learning to help students develop strategies for a more fulfilling life (Russell Group university).
- + A 24/7 student assistance programme (which recorded more than 400 critical contacts in 2021-22 with over 50% related to mental health concerns) (large university).
- + Fundraising over five years for a private, in-house counselling service which can support students on site (FEC).

4.1.7 Employability support

All the submissions described measures to address employment and employability issues, either via curriculum-based development and enhancements (discussed in Section 2) or additional interventions targeted at students needing extra support – for example, when coming up to graduation – discussed here.

A Russell Group university described a ‘hub and spoke’ **employability model** to deliver breadth and depth – the central Careers team ran employer-focused events and delivered a suite of workshops, and each department had a dedicated careers partner who supported departments to embed employability in their curriculum. A large university had restructured employability support in 2017-18, creating a new central service focusing on three key priorities – improving career preparation and professional experience opportunities for students; enhancing career readiness support through the curriculum; and working with employers to increase the opportunities for students to develop professional experience. This was alongside efforts to make curriculum-related employability measures more consistent, compulsory and with a clearer link to assessment (discussed in Section 2.2).

There was considerable evidence of the strengthening of the role of central **careers service**, both in its own right and in support of curriculum-related employability developments. A large university said that the careers service had been ‘significantly expanded’ over the TEF period (from 46 to 80 FTE) enabling more reach and support for students (alongside faculty teams). Developments included increased provision of self-service resources, external mentoring, and a ‘coffee with a graduate’ scheme. Restructuring at a small university had led to a dedicated student employability, wellbeing and skills development week (in collaboration with the students’ union). The skills and employability team at an FEC hosted graduate recruitment events to give those attending an overview of graduate job opportunities.

This team also hosted welcome meetings for students to introduce them to the employability offer, contributed to sourcing industry speakers and organised trips to provide students with insights into different careers.

As might be expected, additional support appeared to be concentrated as students were coming up to graduation (and beyond). Examples included:

- + Fortnightly email reminders to final year students signposting a range of services designed to help them transition to the world of work (large university).
- + A scheme for final-year UK undergraduate students from disadvantaged backgrounds without future career plans or professional experience, consisting of 1:1 career coaching, careers and employability workshops and the opportunity to apply to paid graduate-level internships within the university (or with external employers) (large university).

A quarter of providers in the sample used **careers registration data** to direct employability support. For example, a Russell Group university said that its use of careers data to identify individuals who might need additional support had been cited by the OfS as an example of good practice. A number of universities were running Career Readiness or Career Registration Surveys (an idea piloted in the Learning Gain project) run at enrolment and during a student's course and post-graduation. One large university was using it to track readiness for employment; another large university to drive activities for all students as well as targeting specific groups using APP criteria (the latter included a 10-week employer mentoring programme). In some contexts, one to one provision was used to direct support. For example, an FEC said individual career guidance provided during the recruitment facilitated decisions on the options that students took during their programmes.

Different types of **targeted careers support** were mentioned, including for disabled students, BAME students, LGBTQ+ students, women, widening participation and low socio-economic group students. Examples of activities included:

- + Internships and shadowing experiences to enhance access to highly skilled work experience for BAME students (small university).
- + Career-focused mentoring for students using alumni targeting Black students (Russell Group university).
- + A graduation award of £1000 for widening participation students to help with transition to employment (small university).

4.2 Physical and virtual learning resources

SE6. Physical and virtual learning resources are tailored and used effectively to support outstanding teaching and learning.

It was clear that the providers took pride in the quality of the physical learning environment. Small and large providers alike pointed to impressive aspects of the learning environment such as: cultural facilities with an international profile (large university); cutting-edge technical facilities used by leading creative industries (specialist provider); and partnership investment in regeneration and civic assets with local and national stakeholders (FEC).

Thirty-three (over 80% of providers) talked about capital investment programmes affecting the physical environment that had taken place since the last TEF (others spoke about planned projects in the pipeline). A third of the providers with large-scale capital investment programmes linked physical developments to technological development that would benefit digital learning, the student experience and support for this. Changes to the physical environment were often linked to the **consolidation of student support services**, as well to physical and digital learning resources. For example,

- + An FEC was moving to dedicated provision for higher education learners in new and refurbished buildings, across multiple sites, alongside the concentration of its student services for HE.
- + A large university said large-scale investment in 2015-18 had drawn a range of services together through new student hubs that also included study spaces, space for one-to-one support and group activities.
- + At a Russell Group university changes to the physical environment had (inter alia) streamlined services for student support replacing dispersed access points.

The common areas of development (and investment) in learning resources related to four aspects of higher education provision: namely, improvements to teaching and learning spaces, enhancement to library facilities and services, and the implementation or furthering of development for digital/virtual learning, and associated infrastructure. There were clear linkages between these aspects and provider strategies: for example, improvements to teaching spaces and spaces facilitating new pedagogies and digitalisation; the role of libraries in supporting virtual learning and as learning spaces.

4.2.1 Teaching and learning spaces

The submissions sought to illustrate the relevance of the facilities and their related resources to the latest developments in the different fields and industries involved, and the opportunities for practice-based learning and simulated assessments (discussed further in Section 4.3).

There were examples of multiple investments from each provider, as illustrated below:

- + Cultural facilities and recording rooms for creatives, an experimental flume for environmental scientists, genome-sequencing equipment and chain reaction machines for biologists, mock law courts for law students, laboratories for medics, robotics labs for computer scientists (large university).
- + Wet and dry labs, moot courts for law students, and lecture theatres that can be transformed for performances or events (Russell Group university).
- + An industry-standard creative/digital technologies and engineering and design facility, a new teaching block and refurbished and newly equipped buildings (small university).

The development of **spaces for group and independent learning** were referred to in half the submissions. This appeared to be a particular priority since the pandemic when it became apparent that some students lacked appropriate study space at home. However, these developments were generally part of wider investments to improve the environment for collaborative teaching and learning (often combined with upgrades to the digital infrastructure). Among many examples:

- + A large university said its library learning spaces covered five floors, with different zoning on each floor to cater for a wide range of study needs.
- + Two universities, one large and one small, spoke of investing in social learning spaces with the aim of enhancing individual learning and group learning between students.
- + An FEC had created two new HE-specific spaces since the last TEF, which contained HE designated study spaces, classrooms, IT facilities, social areas and breakout spaces.

Creating spaces for wellbeing came out as an emerging theme – one example was a ‘switch-off zone’ in an area of the Reading Room. This large university also referred to space for art/exhibitions and additional facilities such as a family room (a dedicated and safe learning facility combining working spaces with an area for young children to play).

Well over a third of submissions drew attention to their estates strategy. Developments in the physical estate were related to access and inclusion priorities in some cases, especially for providers with aging buildings. A Russell Group university said it was developing design standards for teaching and learning spaces that set out principles for future refurbishments, including guidance on power and data provision for different-sized spaces, and detailed guidance on accessibility.

4.2.2 Libraries

Libraries featured in all but two of the submissions (the exceptions were two small alternative providers of creative education). Eight in the sample (20%) talked about new/refurbished library buildings. There was a considerable diversity in the nature of library provision in the sample, including central buildings, libraries on multiple campuses, and libraries shared with other providers. Six of the providers in the sample cited the achievement of the Library Customer Service Excellence standard as evidence of impact.

Over a quarter (13) providers said changes to the **physical layout** of libraries were driven by the need to support new types of learning spaces. A large university said the library provides more than 2,450 learning spaces, including quiet and silent study areas and space for collaborative work. Others noted the provision of study rooms and assistive technology rooms. In several cases, libraries were playing a role in other types of student support schemes. For example, a specialist provider said:

“Our traditional library has been redesigned as a vibrant Learning Hub introducing a team of Learning Advisors, and the Student Support Officer (SSO) role has been refocused to support mental health and disability needs, reasonable adjustments and those who are at risk of failing or withdrawing from the course as well as aligning student support services more closely to course and student learning outcomes.”

Making library resources more **accessible** was a key theme. One large university said libraries were open 24/7 on 365 days a year. Another large university had run a Bringing the Library To You campaign, whereby the library was accessible wherever students were located – either remotely or on one of several campuses. Another large university noted how the physical library provision had been complemented increasingly by online service provision (including a live chat facility). The impact was usually measured in terms of the increasing numbers of out-of-hours engagements.

Expanding library collections through **e-books and online catalogue resources** was also noted in well over half of the submissions. Several providers referred to the impact of the pandemic when explaining increases in investment in the number of e-books and in online and on-demand access to key textbooks. An FEC spoke about a shift to using a new interface of a leading research database in response to student feedback indicating that the original was difficult to navigate.

The enhancements had not all been in the digital space, however. Among other examples, an FEC had procured more than 600 additional print publications following feedback from learners and had set a target to maintain a book to student ratio of 5:1. Libraries were also supporting digital learning in other ways – through training and guidance, and access to equipment through, for instance, computer loan schemes.

Some providers talked about libraries supporting curriculum transformation initiatives, for example, decolonising collections and expanding collections on LGBTQ+ subjects.

4.2.3 Digital and virtual learning

Three quarters (30) of submissions talked about large-scale **technological investment programmes**. In many cases, the pandemic had been a driver for enhancements to digital/virtual learning. An FEC said its VLE was especially strengthened following the pandemic. An FEC developed remote, streaming and digitised environments and use of digital pedagogies to create an integrated and comprehensive learning experience that was, it said, authentic and agile to student needs and access issues. The digitally enabled learning environment at a large university integrated blended and online delivery on all modules, including services such as lecture capture, digital assessment services, e-portfolio, reading lists, library resources, online seminar tools and the student app.

Developments in digital learning had often been taking place before the pandemic, focusing on wholesale digital infrastructure and transformation programmes. For example, a large university, which had won an award for digital innovation in learning and teaching, said the digital transformation programme for learning and teaching since 2018 had included a new VLE, learner analytics platform, student app and attendance recording solution.

Concerns about the quality of the virtual learning experience came over in submissions, in particular concern to demonstrate that the students' experience of virtual learning matched in-person provision. It was clear, for example, that the virtual learning environment required continual development and updating; one small university referred to annual upgrades to the VLE over the TEF period, usually involving redesigns of the user interface.

The virtual environment was also supporting providers to delivery industry-relevant teaching and learning experiences. The use of **simulation** was mentioned by 28 providers for different disciplines. A large university, for example, had created:

- + a virtual control room to simulate plant conditions for Chemical Engineering students
- + a digital manufacturing suite to create prototypes for Mechanical Engineering students
- + a financial markets laboratory and software for Business School students
- + a clinical skills simulation suite.

Simulation centres and a finance and trading room for business students were also highlighted by a Russell Group provider. Some providers were keen to show they had gone beyond simulation where possible to provide real-world learning opportunities in the digital space (see also Section 4.3). An 'extended campus' initiative at a large university was being taken forward with a commercial partner, bringing the very latest gaming technology into the classroom and involving students in software development projects.

The **integration of student systems in the digital space** had been the goal of many providers. For example, a small university spoke about the digital ‘ecosystem’ at course level, which was designed to create synergy between the systems used as part of learning and teaching, those used to develop digital literacy, and aligned systems such as student apps, placement allocation systems and student records. A large university said its VLE templates had been designed with students and ensured threshold standards for a consistent and accessible user experience.

The narratives usually made reference to the **human resources and technical expertise** supporting these types of developments. As an example, a central unit at a Russell Group university leading on delivering innovation and expertise in learning technologies launched an Essential Digital Skills programme in 2020 – an online, self-paced, certified programme aimed at new students (but open to all). It cited around one million interactions by September 2022. Several referred to the increased accessibility of IT support and the introduction of chatbot services.

4.2.4 Data analytics

Eighteen providers spoke about investment in data/learner analytics and 15 described monitoring attendance and engagement, though the scale of use and approaches varied. For example, a large university said it had a team of 50 learner analytics staff while a specialist provider referred to an early-warning monitoring system for students whereby flags were raised with student services and the relevant programme leader.

The narratives suggest that data-driven approaches to student support can be a powerful **catalyst for making targeted interventions** with individual students. For example:

- + A small university said its learner-analytics system was used to inform personalised supportive conversations focused on student engagement data, allows information to be recorded and shared between services, and facilitates tracking of students’ developmental needs. A further development will be ‘push’ notifications and a call centre for disengaged students. The provider said the dashboards had driven improvement in continuation and led to additional action plans in some subjects.
 - + A large university had used an engagement monitoring system that includes data on students’ financial status (reviewed weekly) for targeted approaches and monitoring of activities. The institutional engagement monitoring policy has established timelines, key leads, inputs and outputs for interventions.
 - + A large university introduced a new learner analytics platform in 2019 that provides personalised dashboards for staff and students to monitor engagement with learning and associated interventions, including records of tutorials, library resources engagement, attendance records and online interactions. The system was designed to encourage student engagement by comparing individual engagement measures with those of their
-

peers. It aids the identification of students in need of additional support and facilitates seamless referrals and monitoring of individual students between support functions into a single unified approach.

Systems integrating student data were clearly also playing a role in course-, departmental- and provider-level management and decision-making process (as well as student-level targeting). For example, the submission from a large university argued that the data platform delivers key strategic insights “critical to the implementation and monitoring of the University’s strategic plan and allows for ‘fluidity’ in decision making in areas such as non-submission, components of assessment and the student experience.”

4.3 Evidence and evaluation

4.3.1 Student support

Naturally, the provider narratives frequently linked efforts to ensure a supportive learning environment to student outcomes in terms of continuation, completion and progression. However, it was clear that the interventions were considered to work cumulatively, and, in many cases, the impact of specific measures was hard to unpick. One exception was a Russell Group university that presented evidence for a review of peer support, which suggested that participation was associated with improved outcomes, tighter grade distribution across the population at the upper end, and improved continuation (>90%), particularly for BAME and disabled students. Students, who take on peer support leadership roles after their first year, appeared to benefit particularly, with a nearly 25% improvement in continuation and a 10% increase in the proportion progressing to positive destinations, compared to non-participants.

However, the impact of support systems was generally evidenced via **improved metrics**, particularly the student satisfaction scores in the NSS. For example, the submission from a large university talked about its data-led approach to academic support aiding improvements in the NSS ranking. Another large university attributed a +13 percentage point above benchmark satisfaction score in a subject area to additional online academic support sessions in this department. Smaller providers also relied very heavily on the metrics. For example, an FEC said its model of support (students being able to contact staff whenever they wanted to) delivered over 10 percentage points above benchmark performance in NSS data on academic support.

The other main sources of evidence of impact identified in the narratives included:

- + **Self-reported participant** measures, such as improvement in how students rated their skills and how confident they felt. Students who engaged with study coaches at a large university reported an improvement in their academic skills and feeling more confident about their next academic assignment.

- + **Participant feedback.** For example, feedback from participants in a student success programme at a large university suggested that the students felt more confident and more engaged with their studies after completing the programme.
- + **Data from provider surveys.** For example, a large university collects feedback on Student Support Advisers in their annual surveys of new and returning students and the results showed very high satisfaction with the quality of support provided.
- + **Data from programme evaluation feedback/questionnaires.** For example, a large university pointed to increases in satisfaction with academic support that were associated with the introduction of a coordinated student support model.
- + **Tracking data.** Follow up of a group of students who took part in an employability skills and employment bursary programme at a Russell Group university found that all were in graduate-level employment or further study 15 months after leaving university.
- + **Outcomes.** The learner analytics system at a large university showed the students that were identified as 'at-risk' and subsequently supported saw lower than average withdrawal rates. See Section 4.3.4 for more on learner analytics.

Some providers could point to evaluation projects, usually those associated with funded programmes, which demonstrated benefits for student outcomes. For example, the evaluation of an OfS-funded project at a Russell Group university designed to address significant mental health difficulties and distress had shown significant clinical improvement, improved safety and increased likelihood of student success during and beyond their studies. In the case of a large university, an evaluation, supported by the APP process, showed that interventions on transition, the curriculum, and inclusive assessment were associated with a reduction in the gap in good honours between young and mature students.

4.3.2 Learning resources

In seeking to demonstrate that resources were used effectively to support outstanding learning and teaching, providers used a variety of measures.

Figures on investment in state-of-the-art facilities to improve the student experience were often cited, usually with reference to favourable comparisons to sector averages of spend per student, for example on library provision (large university). The figures, however, tend to indicate the level of commitment rather than effective deployment.

Providers brought in usage data from various sources to demonstrate the importance of key developments in physical and virtual learning resources, for example, the number of visits, growth in take-up etc. A few examples:

- + A large university said the impact of investment in digital resources and a 24/7 contact-a-librarian service had meant a 28% uplift in engagement with out-of-hours support since 2020.
- + A large university said library e-resource use has significantly grown since 2018 (including a 289% increase in e-book usage).

Internal surveys came out as an important source of evidence of impact. For example,

- + A small university cited positive comments on the library developments from a survey conducted by its Library Services Team.
- + An FEC reported that the share of students agreeing that the learning resources assisted in their learning and completion of assessments was up 19 percentage points on the previous year and the share agreeing they were able to access specialised equipment, facilities and rooms was 49 percentage points higher.

Positive **programme evaluation feedback** was used to demonstrate the value in new facilities – for example, the numbers reporting increases in their confidence, technical or soft skills.

- + Following online developments at a large university, access to resources, ease of navigation of sites and learning materials received the highest student satisfaction rates in 2021-22 in module evaluation questionnaires.
- + Responses from a module evaluation survey at another large university were used to demonstrate sustained satisfaction with access to module-specific resources throughout the pandemic.

However, the **NSS indicators for student satisfaction with the learning resources** were the most commonly cited measure used by providers to demonstrate students' satisfaction with their provision, particularly when these results were above benchmarks and sector averages.

Feedback on the NSS question about facilities was being used to evidence the impact of particular developments in the physical environment. For example:

- + A small university said NSS student satisfaction in relation to course-specific resources had risen by over five percentage points during a campus refurbishment initiative in 2106-22, which was designed to address below benchmark scores in Computing and Creative Arts and Design
- + The score from Medicine students at large university had risen to over five percentage points above benchmark following the creation of a new medical school, which opened in 2016.

- + The impact of developments in the cultural facilities (including studio spaces) on the student experience at a large university was evidenced by above benchmark NSS results for learning resources in Performing Arts.

Responses to the NSS questions about learning resources were also used to evidence the impact of improved library services. For example:

- + A small university noted that NSS results for the learning resources overall (IT resources and facilities, library resources, course-specific resources) exceeded the sector average and the OfS benchmark in every year of the TEF timeframe.
- + Comparison of split metrics was discussed in order to demonstrate an inclusive approach across different groups, for example by types of disadvantage.

Where available, some submissions brought in feedback from **external quality assurance** organisations as testimony to the quality of the learning environment and resources. For example, an Ofsted inspection report from 2019, confirming that apprenticeship programmes were well resourced, was used by one large university to indicate that lower than average student satisfaction during the pandemic had been due to the exceptional pressures of working and learning remotely. One development at a large university was named as Britain's best new building in 2021 by the Royal Institute of British Architects as it was a place where "quiet reading, loud performance, research and learning can delightfully coexist".

5 Student engagement with continuous improvement

This section focuses on the ways in which providers said they were engaging with students, with particular attention to developments in approaches since the last TEF, and the evidence the providers presented of effective and embedded methods of student engagement leading to improvements to the student experience and/or outcomes.

5.1 Student engagement

SE7. The provider embeds engagement with its students, leading to continuous improvement to the experiences and outcomes of its students.

5.1.1 Student representation in decision-making

Commentary on the systems for student representation were made in all but one of the submissions in the sample (the exception was a submission from a small specialist provider that spoke about whole group opinion mechanisms). In most cases, well-established systems of engaging students in quality assurance and decision-making on teaching and learning were apparent. These were articulated through the framework of student representatives involved from module level up to executive level, and operating through formal mechanisms such as the staff-student liaison groups, through the committee structures and steering groups for curricula and student experience. On occasion they included the corporate governance bodies and executive boards themselves as well as the sub-committees. As might be expected, the terminology and structures varied depending on the context.

- + Changes to governance structures had included a new Student Access and Success Committee, a new Student Life Committee and a new Staff-Student Partnership Committee co-chaired by the students' union. A new executive role for Student Academic Engagement had been created to give Faculty Student Reps a direct channel to senior education leaders (Russell Group university).
- + Changes in 2017-18, following a research exercise and a referendum, had put in place a full-time Vice President and two volunteer Executive Committee roles for each core faculty. The submissions noted: "this has enabled student voice to be more embedded in academic enhancement at every university level" (large university).
- + New student Subject Chair roles were introduced in 2022 for each faculty/institute (small university).

Examples were found within the sample of significant increases in the number and diversity of student representatives.

- + Student representatives at a Russell Group university grew from 800 to more than 1300 between 2018-22.
- + A large university said there were 480 course reps on student in 2022 compared around 300 a year earlier.
- + A Russell Group university recognised for good practice in student engagement said its recommended ratio was at least 1 rep to 30 students.

Equity and inclusion issues were at the forefront in changes to student representation in order to amplify the voices of different student groups such as minoritised ethnicity students (alongside extending the reach of consultation and feedback mechanisms discussed below).

- + Since 2019, BAME ambassadors had worked with the Executive Group and as expert consultants developing action plans across departments and professional services. Institutional level NSS voice score for BAME students had risen to above both sector average and that for White students (large university).

Arrangements for training and support for student representatives were given in five of the submissions (examples included an annual training programme for student representatives, peer support mechanisms and training in specific issues such as collaborative working).

Dialogue was also going on through scheduled meetings between student representatives and managers (the timing, content and invitees to the meetings varied). A Russell Group university said regular open meetings were held which any student can attend.

5.1.2 Module and programme reviews

The frameworks in place for module and programme reviews stood out as a key mechanism by which student engagement activities were influencing higher education strategy and enhancements to delivery. Again, the arrangements varied but typically included arrangements for students to provide feedback on their experience of their academic programmes and modules, representation on regular staff-student liaison groups and periodic programme review meetings. Providers highlighted student involvement in programme validation and re-validation through student feedback process and as members of validation panels.

- + A 'refreshed' Programme Board Agenda was being used with standard items which gave more attention to responding to student feedback (including NSS) and the issues raised by student representatives (small university).

- + Course Boards had been replaced with Student Voice Fora (SVFs) which meet over the academic year – a shift which was designed to reinforce collaborative working (large university).
- + Staff-student engagement meetings provided regular course- and school-level dialogue, and action planning and discussion of key actions were included in subject/school ‘dialogue days’ (small university).

Recruitment of individual or a panel of students to provide in-depth feedback and enhancement seemed to be a fairly common approach. There were also examples of engaging students in project work on teaching and learning matters, such as inclusive design (discussed further below).

- + Student Inclusive Curriculum Consultants were paid to work with and advise course teams on accessibility matters, review study materials and make recommendations (large university).
- + Since 2021 students influence change as Student Quality Reviewers (with a remit for curricula, teaching, programme design, assessment design and quality) (Russell Group university).

Mechanisms for feeding up programme level feedback to inform faculty- and provider-level developments were also noted.

- + A large university said reports from trimesterly staff-student liaison meetings were analysed thematically for the faculty-level and whole-university committees.
- + At an HE in FE provider student module evaluations forms were used as part of staff appraisal discussions with line managers to enhance delivery techniques and agree CPD opportunities for staff.

Developments to embed and extend the effectiveness of the module evaluation process as a student engagement tool, which emerged from the submissions in the sample, included:

More frequent feedback. Examples included use of mid-module and end of module evaluations (small university), and implementation of internal early, mid and end of module student surveys (large university).

- + **Extending and diversifying feedback mechanisms.** Developments in electronic systems for collecting student feedback aimed to increase the timeliness and levels of student feedback and achieve more consistency by using cross-provider digital approaches. Examples included: an online survey of all taught students using standard questions each semester (large university); simplified feedback questionnaires on teaching administered via an app (large university).

- + **Setting up student-owned platforms.** For example, the student voice platform, moderated by student reps, at a Russell Group university enabled students to raise an issue among their peers before it was passed to staff for comment or action.
- + **Use of qualitative feedback.** Examples included routine student focus groups (small university) and listening room projects with different student groups (large university). At a specialist provider students meet the programme panel and make a submission using a short film and SWOT analysis. A small university aimed to ensure external examiners meet annually with groups of students and comment on feedback in the examiners' reports.

It was apparent that informal and ongoing means of communication with students outside of formal structures of representation and feedback were also being expanded.

- + Academic and professional services staff were encouraged to engage in dialogue with students (described as a first-response approach) (large university).
- + A Continuous Module Dialogue approach was being trialled which encouraged early and frequent communications with students (Russell Group university).
- + Programme teams engaged in an ongoing process of Continual Monitoring, Evaluation and Enhancement (CMEE), capturing the student voice in working journals (large university).
- + Informal feedback opportunities were built into formal teaching and the personal tutoring system, and weekly 'check-in' calls were used to provide insight into the experiences of a sample of individual students from across the university (large university).

5.1.3 Staff-student enhancement partnerships

Providers took different approaches to the involvement of students in quality enhancement activities, although the use of student panels seemed fairly common. Student panels had a role in supporting curriculum developments and approaches to academic support at programme level but were also a mechanism for engaging students in provider-wide strategy developments on the student experience.

- + A curriculum design student panel had been in place since 2017 (with more than 3,000 students taking part since then) (large university).
- + A panel of one hundred students had been set up in 2018-19 to be strategic partners in the development of initiatives (followed by a series of advisory councils and forums at faculty level) (Russell Group university).

- + Members of the Student Experience Panel received a regular newsletter with opportunities to shape the direction of new initiatives through focus groups, workshops and online polls (Russell Group university).

Resources were being put in place to enable student participation in **research and co-creation** activities. Examples included:

- + Funding for students to work in partnership with staff to improve education (73 projects in 2021-22) (Russell Group university).
- + Formal Student Staff Partnership Scheme which included paying students for time on projects (large university).
- + Pool of dedicated Student Engagement Assistant posts (with full staff status), who had the opportunity to identify, create and participate in projects intended to improve the student experience (large university).
- + Appointments for students as paid researchers, working on around 20 projects per year (including a recent pilot study to explore students' views on how they conceptualise educational gain) (small university).
- + Commissioning students as 'freelance consultants' to work on teaching and learning content without prescribing topics or ideas (Russell Group university).

The submissions included numerous examples of where these types of schemes had resulted in new resources for teaching and learning such as, among other things, revised curricular models, toolkits for staff, development of new modules and study support resources, changes to personal tutoring. Some developments had been provider wide – for example, development of the flexible curriculum and a review of the marking framework. At a small university students had participated in working groups on a redesign of the learning, teaching and student experience strategy. A similar approach was taken during a refresh of the graduate attributes framework (large university). Other examples of strategies and policies, which providers said had been particularly influenced by students' voice, included the APP, equity initiatives (such as Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter), networks for inclusion (gender, race, LGBTQ+), and curriculum initiatives (Black History Month, and Decolonisation and Race Equality Network). There were also examples relating to the estates strategy – for example, the conception and design of a 'student life' building having been particularly influenced by students at a large university. At a large university students had led an accessibility audit of the university estate.

Student involvement in higher education decision-making also included student representation in recruitment, reward and recognition of staff; student-led purchasing schemes (for example, for library resources) and involvement of students' unions on research investment panels.

5.1.4 Student-led research

Student-led research to take forward different forms of consultation – including as part of research modules – seemed fairly common for providers with a focus on scholarship of teaching and learning, such as a project to hear the voices of students with disabilities at a large university. This approach was used in relation to qualitative research projects involving library spaces and services at a Russell Group university. Providers were able to point to the development of new frameworks, resources for staff training and changes in provision as a result of student research (the above example resulted in extended opening hours, work to improve signage, increased visibility of resources and guidance for staff on how to decolonise reading lists, for example). The outputs from these types of projects involving student researchers also included academic publications and conference presentations.

5.1.5 Student surveys

The results of national surveys, particularly the NSS, were mentioned as a key source of intelligence underpinning enhancements to the learning experience (results being fed into course level, provider level and priority-led mechanisms). A large university said that comparisons with sector benchmarks and national trends were particularly helpful to enable critical reflection on performance. Providers also said NSS results were being used to identify different aspects of good practice that could then be shared across teams.

Ad hoc and periodic consultation exercises were a feature (particularly student surveys, which featured in 38 submissions), and these informed various decision-making structures, including working group and standing committees. Annual student voice surveys were being used to gather student feedback that could be triangulated with the NSS.

- + The survey of students in their penultimate year at a large university mirrors the NSS and provides longitudinal feedback at course level.
- + A specialist provider measures a range of areas related to student satisfaction and experience, including teaching on the course, organisation and management, student voice, community, assessments and pastoral care.

Ad hoc consultation approaches included initiatives such as feedback weeks or single-issue consultations. The use of a feedback week was described as securing high survey responses that shaped a new workshop model of teaching (Russell Group university). In a few submissions providers said students had played a key role in determining the form and content of consultations, and a leading role in ensuring take up.

- + A strategic survey steering group (with student representation) guided survey timing, developed a programme of incentives, and influenced the questions set (for example addressing the university's curricular commitment to social justice) (small university).

Mechanisms for receiving and responding to feedback from new students on their transition experience were mentioned in five submissions. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were being used.

- + A 'first impressions' survey conducted at the beginning of each intake to measure student satisfaction with the processes from applying to the university, induction and the initial few weeks in class (specialist provider).
- + Calls had been made to new students as part of their ongoing student check-in programme (large university).
- + A listening room project had been used to gather information from new Level 4 students (leading to changes in induction) (large university).

Providers described procedures for elevating student feedback to a strategic level resulting in action planning as a result of surveys, consultation activities or research, which were channelled into different mechanisms for monitoring and review.

- + Student Experience Action Plans (SEAPs) set out the previous year's activities and outcomes, and planning operational priorities based on the key themes identified through the Annual Review of Teaching and Learning (Russell Group university).
- + Student priorities for education and wellbeing based on the minutes from undergraduate and postgraduate meetings were tracked through the Education Committee via the Student Priorities Action Tracker (Russell Group university).
- + Group representatives fed through actions to the HE meeting which went into an action log monitored by the managers (FEC).

5.1.6 Closing the loop

As evidence of good practice in student engagement, feedback loops were included in some submissions, especially those that sought to demonstrate the feed-through into action or a dialogic approach to student voice. The online student voice sites, survey platforms and apps described above had 'closing the loop' functions. Other approaches included:

- + Academics were asked to respond to students about feedback and record their responses on the VLE (Russell Group university).
- + 'You said, we did' statements were published including via a student-facing student voice website (large university).
- + Responses to surveys were disseminated by course and level of study (large university).

5.1.7 Frameworks and agreements

Providers described different types of frameworks and agreements in relation to the various aspects of their student engagement work, such as: principles for student engagement; memorandum or partnership agreements between the university and the students' union; and commitments to implementing mechanisms for collating student voice as part of decision-making. These were expressed in different ways, but overall were part of the process of bringing together and concretising the commitments to different aspects of student engagement, within a cross-provision adoption framework.

- + Student voice principles implemented in 2019-20 set out principles that opportunities to be heard should be regular, responsive, accessible, ethical, inclusive and enacted both formally and informally, strengthening collaboration between the university and the students' union (large university).
- + The Student Charter set out principles and commitments on student engagement and a Relationship Agreement agreed priorities for partnership work (commitments to ensure engagement was representative of the student body and the encouragement of online forums and meetings; focus groups; students as critical readers; user testing; co-researcher opportunities in scholarship projects; student panels to inform curriculum design, library and employability services; 'real time' student feedback; social media; consultant and intern opportunities) (large university).
- + A Memorandum of Understanding with the students' union, and a Student Voice Partnership Agreement, provided a framework for reviewing, designing and delivering representation practices across the university, and a triennial Relationship Agreement defined priority areas for strategic focus (with termly reports to the University Executive) (Russell Group university).
- + The framework (updated annually) comprised four pillars: student representation on committees and panels; student surveys; students' union activities and other student feedback mechanisms (large university).

Student engagement during the pandemic

The pandemic was a driver of changes in approaches to student engagement, given that listening to students was foregrounded during this time. A Russell Group university said there were deficiencies in the communications with students in the early days of the pandemic, which had since led to the co-creation of a completely new approach. A large university said a formal Student Partnership Agreement was co-created with the students' union during 2020-21, informed by the experience of Covid-19. Another Russell Group university said close partnership working with the students' union and a cultural shift had been facilitated by the pandemic, which helped the university and the students' union to fully appreciate the wider benefits of working together. It was notable in this example that year-on-year student voice data had moved from -3.3% below benchmark in 2019 to within -0.6% of benchmark in 2022.

Instances were found of student engagement and data collection exercises being intensified during the pandemic to inform activities. Examples included: an all-student survey and regular 'check-in calls' with students (large university); 'pulse' surveys and online Q&A sessions (small university). Data analytics also played a part (for example, to identify and provide equipment for students who were unable to access IT at the start of lockdown) (large university).

Student engagement related enhancements during the pandemic

Initiatives to address digital poverty and hardship during the pandemic were informed directly by feedback and engagement. Other pandemic/post-pandemic enhancements were in academic support, such as provision of tailored examination support sessions.

- + The Library Skills team delivered exam support in response to student concerns about the reintroduction of in-person examinations for subjects where this was a requirement from external bodies (large university).

Changes and enhancements to education and the student experience, which were ongoing after the pandemic, were also attributed to the student dialogue mechanisms that had been intensified during the pandemic. Examples of claims to this effect included: commitment to in-person teaching; rollout of lecture recording; investment in social spaces for collaborative learning and individual study.

5.2 Evidence and evaluation

5.2.1 Breadth of student engagement

Success in engaging students was illustrated numerically in terms of the breadth of engagement (such as the number of students responding to surveys or taking part in consultations and incidences of feedback received – including spontaneous as well as requested feedback). Some providers were concerned to demonstrate that all learners, whether attending full time, part time or through an apprenticeship, could engage with the students' union and their course leaders. Engagement either remotely or through on-campus forums was therefore also an indicator.

5.2.2 Performance against TEF benchmarks

As might be expected, providers pointed to improved NSS scores as a measure of effective student engagement. A few providers referred to their ranking among their mission group and regionally. High performance across disciplines and student groups was held up as evidence of a positive provider-wide culture of student engagement.

Providers made claims that improvements, for example, in NSS student voice indicator results, had resulted from changes to the mechanisms for engaging with students.

- + Above benchmark performance in relation to staff valuing students' views about their course reflect the approach to partnership between staff and students (small university).
- + Coordination of engagement, through agreement of a student engagement framework, was reflected in above benchmark scores (large university).

The scores across different subject areas and/or the split categories of TEF data were included in some narratives, especially where these were materially above the provider's benchmark. In a couple of cases, providers identified a direct link between improvements in scores and the specific actions undertaken to enhance mechanisms for identifying and acting on student voice at department or programme level.

- + In one subject centre, scores for NSS q.24 ('staff value students' views and opinions about the course') had increased by over 14 percentage points following increased number of direct feedback conversations and embedding of live feedback mechanisms into VLE sites to enable students to see rapid responses from staff (small university).
- + Redesign of the content for year 1 modules led one subject area to achieve materially above benchmark performance for student voice (large university).

The benefits of having a range of informal and formal mechanisms and options for collecting feedback on teaching was alluded to.

- + 'Real time' student feedback via mid-trimester 'spot check' surveys, and online discussion boards, had led to good performance in relation to feedback for 'Staff have shown that they value students' views and opinions about this module' (large university).

The value of 'closing the loop' was evidenced by a large university – this submission said above England average scores in NSS responses confirmed that students were clear how students' feedback was acted on.

Performance against metrics relating to student belonging and learning community were also referenced to indicate student satisfaction with engagement approaches.

5.2.3 Examples of enhancements

The submissions included numerous examples of changes to provision or new developments. Providers said these were a direct result of student engagement activities, and therefore evidence of effective and embedded engagement, which led to continuous improvement to the student experience and would, in time, would feed through into improved outcomes.

Examples of enhancements as a result of student engagement cut across a range of aspects of the student experience. On the one hand, there were examples of embedded changes to the curriculum based on student voice as part of course redesign processes; adoption of anonymous marking practices, and extended provision of academic tutorials; implementing Universal Design for Learning in all learning materials; changes to the learning strategy for various modules to support set task completion and weekly seminar participation; introduction of new first-year modules and structuring of module choice, more bespoke study skills provision; modifications to courses to concentrate more on contemporary issues. On the other hand, some enhancements related to specific aspects of the student experience, such as: introduction of eduroam access for students; an increase in value of printing credit allocated to each student; introduction of 'heat and eat' spaces on campuses; targeted mental wellbeing initiatives.

One provider linked changes at course level to non-behavioural indicators of student satisfaction: student satisfaction and ratings for assessment expectations via module evaluations had improved following removal of group assessments as summative assessments (small university).

Only a minority of the submissions were able to put forward evidence to demonstrate that the student-informed enhancements were associated with improvements in student outcomes. The ways in which they had changed outcomes included:

- + Increase in the rate of Distinctions awarded and a decrease in the failure rate following faculty co-design of a study skills module for undergraduate dental students (Russell Group university).

- + Improved continuation following redesign of induction in one subject centre and above benchmark continuation rates in a subject sector following changes to induction based on listening to students (large university).
- + Improvement in retention of foundation students transitioning to Level 4 following changes to induction support and supervision for this group (large university).

5.2.4 Other student feedback

Internal student surveys were another source used to provide additional evidence of the effectiveness of student engagement. The results of surveys of student panel members and staff might also be used. Qualitative comments from students were also included.

- + Module evaluation questionnaires (over 17,000 responses) were consistently high in relation to tutors valuing students' views and opinions about the module (large university).
- + Module evaluation questionnaire results to show positive increases in relation to student voice questions across all courses (large university).
- + Panel participants in co-creation activities felt their contribution would lead to improvements in student experiences (Russell Group university).

5.2.5 Recognition of work on student engagement

A couple of providers in the sample were able to show how their approaches to student engagement had been recognised as good practice in the sector, through contribution to national guidance on staff-student partnerships, conferences papers, keynotes and representation at national and international conferences. Providers that had been nominated, shortlisted for or won student experience, communication, or student experience awards made reference to this where possible.

Evidence from quality assurance mechanisms, such as comments from PSRBs and external examiners, was also used to illustrate external recognition of the effectiveness of the response to intelligence emerging through the student engagement.

5.2.6 Reviews of student voice activities

Two providers in the sample spoke about reviews or audits of their student voice activities. An audit by an external organisation in the case of a specialist provider resulted in a (favourable) risk assessment and a (leading) benchmark rating. In the case of another specialist provider an internal review concerned with the effectiveness of the staff-student liaison committees resulted in a new Code of Conduct.

6 Mitigations of student outcomes

SO1. The provider deploys and tailors approaches that are highly effective in ensuring its students succeed in and progress beyond their studies.

SO2. There are outstanding rates of continuation and completion for the provider's students and courses.

SO3. There are outstanding rates of successful progression for the provider's students and courses.

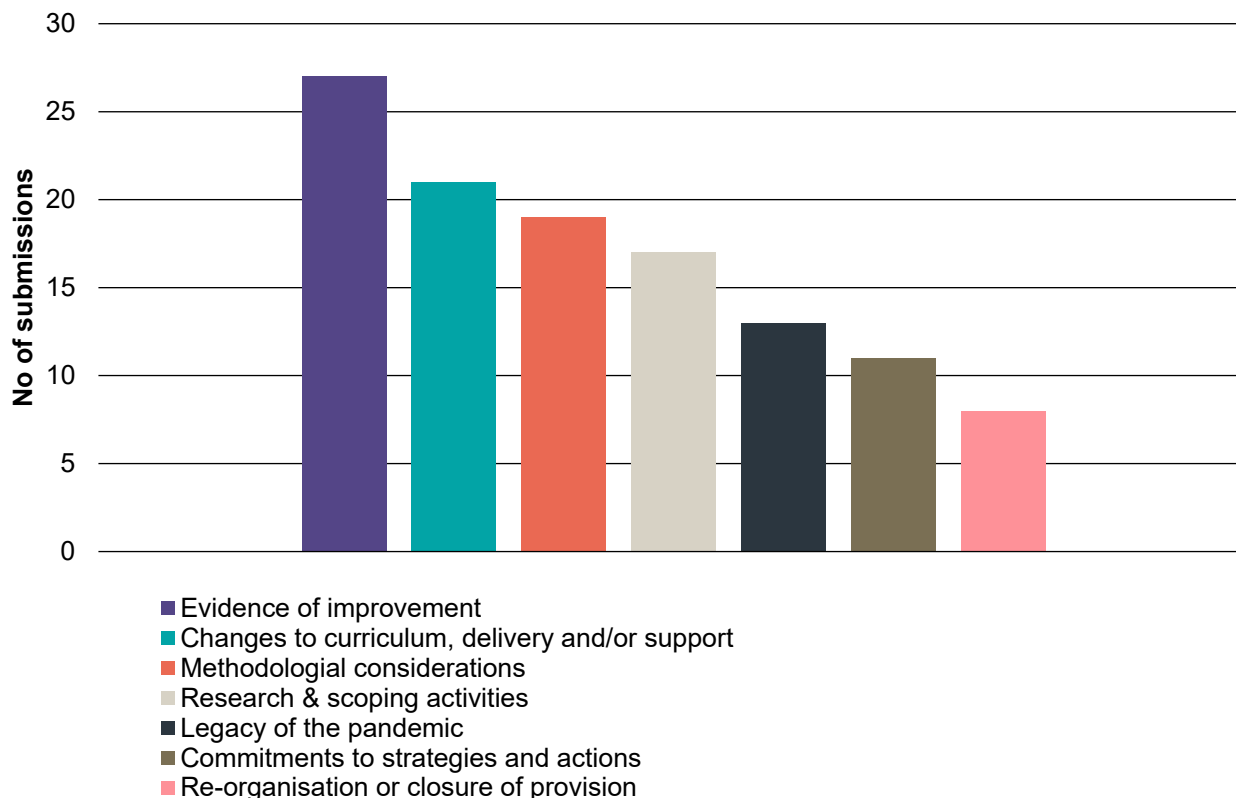
This section discusses the approaches taken within the submissions to aspects of provision identified as not meeting the expectations for teaching excellence due to materially below benchmark performance on student outcomes. The OfS guidance on TEF 2023 stated that if performance on student outcomes performance was materially above benchmark then no further evidence was required: "Within the student outcomes aspect, features SO2 and SO3 could be identified without necessarily requiring further evidence in the submission" (OfS, 2022a, p69). Therefore, the analysis explores the narratives to draw out what providers said was behind the poor performance, and mitigations providers said would improve student outcomes performance when this was required.

6.1 Types of mitigations

All but one of the submissions in the sample included comments relating to below benchmark outcomes. Across the sample of submissions, mitigations addressed either overall levels of performance against the benchmark, or for student groups by demographics using split indicators, or for specific types of provision experiencing differences compared to other areas (such as part-time and apprenticeships). Some providers sought to demonstrate their considered and comprehensive approach to addressing the 'weaker' performing areas of their provision by addressing issues for programmes which, although not materially below their benchmark, were flagged as having a high degree of statistical uncertainty for shares below benchmark. A small number included the 'optional' category ("Higher education modules or credit-bearing programmes at undergraduate level that do not lead to the award of a qualification") especially those providers that were demonstrating their commitment to vocational, flexible and lifelong learning opportunities.

Different types of mitigating factors were mentioned (see Figure 6.1). The majority of providers in the sample were able to point to a narrow range of provision experiencing the disappointing results (these tended to be where student numbers were lower – such as part-time provision, with knock-on effects to mature learners).

Figure 6.1. Types of mitigations identified in the sample, by number of submissions



As expected, the effects of the global **pandemic** from 2020 were frequently mentioned. Data broken down into the last three years was used to show the effects of the pandemic. Providers drew attention to differential impacts on face-to-face education determined by their geographic location and the lockdown conditions imposed. The implications for outcomes seemed particularly acute for programmes requiring higher levels of practical and experiential learning. Often these had been impacted by workplace closures and lack of opportunities to progress applied learning experiences in 2020-22.

However, mitigations to do with exceptional circumstances alone were referenced by only a minority of submissions. Around two-thirds were able to show demonstrable improvements based on the latest internal or external data. Just over half of submissions went into detail about changes being made to bring about improvements and a third referred to commitments to research/scoping of new strategies or actions to address performance.

Where providers raised concerns about the **TEF data** in mitigation, most were concerned to show the small scale, specialist or marginal nature of the under-performing cohorts in comparison to the outcomes for the large majority of the provider's students. One provider noted that, due to coding anomalies, some students were visible in the statistics that would normally be excluded (credit bearing and stand-alone modules).

The suitability of the measurements were questioned for some types of provision, for example unreliability of data due to the size of specific programme cohorts or the suitability of the benchmarking methodology (for example, foundation programmes for part-time teaching assistants being compared with programmes leading to qualified teacher status, or continuation data for part-time learners sponsored by employers being compared with programmes intended to lead to full qualifications). A handful of providers questioned the suitability of graduate outcome metrics to the careers in their particular sector (for example, graduates taking time to become established as freelance artists and creatives before going on to international careers).

6.2 Commitments and actions undertaken

Around half the submissions spoke about their **improvement journey** and the actions they had already taken to address performance in relation to the student outcomes benchmarks. Providers also spoke about the range of mitigation measures they had started to introduce during the pandemic, many of which were continuing.

Overall, the importance of **data and intelligence** stands out as a key factor underpinning mitigation activities. For example, a large university said that improvements were attributed to programme teams' in-depth understanding of underperformance and implementation of targeted interventions (the statements implied a commitment to listen and respond to students). Other submissions gave specific examples of research and intelligence gathering activities to inform activities to address areas of poor performance.

- + A group had been convened to conduct thematic analysis of NSS free-text comments and formulate actions for immediate implementation (for example, recruiting more staff to support students with IT enquiries), alongside recommendations for longer-term enhancements.
- + A research project in 2020-21 explored the challenges faced by a science-subject cohort in their transition to university, as part of an intensive review of this provision through a continuous enhancement initiative (large university).
- + NSS results and an institutional 'build your own university' survey was used to identify areas to address (Russell Group university).

If mitigation actions were not in hand, then providers gave assurances about their commitment to action to improve student outcomes, for example by setting a strategic target, initiating research activities or setting up working groups.

6.2.1 Continuation and completion

Actions to boost academic success, and graduate outcomes, included those as part of **provider-wide improvement strategies** for all students, or targeted group specific interventions, as well as making changes at the programme level. The actions cut across a wide range of student groups and a plethora of activities as discussed below.

Provider-wide activities

Actions to generate improvements in continuation and completion, taken at the whole provider level, tended to be wide-ranging, including those as part of strategies on student engagement, teaching and co-curricular enhancement.

- + A new approach to peer-learning networks to support engagement had been prioritised at subject level for below benchmark programmes (resulting in changes to transition activities and increased field course provision) (large university).
- + Cross-institutional actions as part of a co-curricular enhancement strategy were expected to pay dividends for below benchmark programmes (large university).
- + Improvements were linked to the introduction of a new expanded and data-informed academic tutoring model, and a robust and well-supported assessment resit process (small university).

Interventions in relation to assessment and feedback came out as one of the main ways providers were tackling below benchmark retention rates within specific programmes, although these actions seemed to link to the provider-wide priorities.

- + Actions had been taken in the lowest performing subject area within the framework of a cross-provision action plan to address concerns with the timeliness of feed-forward (Russell Group university).
- + In some subject areas, efforts focused on making sure marking and moderation processes were clearly explained through cohort meetings and the VLE. In others, staff development activities were used to help teachers meet the expectations for student-centred, formative feedback (large university).

Targeted interventions

Work going on to address below benchmark performance for groups at risk of lower outcomes included investment in **targeted interventions** to build cultural capital and to close attainment gaps between groups. These types of targeted actions were often referenced to APP objectives. A handful of providers also pointed to commitments made via other frameworks and kitemarks (such as the Standalone Pledge).

- + A small university said its action plan for the current year was implementing good practice in peer mentoring, and support for groups at risk of disadvantage or disengagement (for example, local commuting students) and further enhancing its induction materials.
- + An FEC attributed reductions evidenced in young-mature student attainment to wraparound support and the use of work and professional experiences to build cultural capital and bridge age gaps.
- + An FEC spoke about embedded approaches to boosting achievement across different groups, as well as enhancement and employability support interventions.

Other examples of targeted actions included additional support to enhance the completion rate for students with disabilities, such as one-to-one support sessions with specialised staff, tailored in-class support, use of an online screening tool and support with Disabled Students' Allowance applications.

Measures designed to improve performance in continuation and attainment also included the identification, and targeting, of academic and pastoral support for individual students, such as use of individualised progress-tracking documents or a Monthly Student Support Management Group meeting to identify students at risk of non-continuation.

- + 'At-risk' procedures had been introduced combining improved training and improved recording of information by programme teams using more user-friendly systems (small university).

Programme-specific activities

Overall, provider-wide initiatives predominated, but there were examples of actions specific to **particular programmes**. For example:

- + Action on poor completion revealed incorrect expectations and failure to meet the programme requirements. Publicity materials and recruitment processes were revised (including using multi mini interviews), along with new systems for early identification of progression issues and exit interviews to garner intelligence (large university).

A minority (one in five) spoke about reorganising or closing programmes. These were mainly small cohorts at the margins of provision, although in a few submissions changes were part of departmental/school level transformation. In a couple of cases, poor performing programmes had been withdrawn or were being taught out.

Changing the delivery pattern was a retention-focused mitigation measure to meet the needs of specific student groups involved in different programmes.

- + A shorter graduate apprenticeship model was being brought in to assist retention of apprentices (large university).
- + Fixed delivery patterns and more contact hours in small groups was used because inconsistent delivery was creating problems for students in paid work (large university).

6.2.2 Graduate progression outcomes

In relation to graduate progression outcomes, analysis suggested that curricula supporting **practical and experiential skills** development were increasingly considered essential for all students, not just in relation to vocationally orientated and professional subjects.

- + Skills and competences were being embedded in the curriculum along with systems of employability support, expanded experiential learning and placement opportunities, additional skills awards, and employer mentoring opportunities (small university).
- + Actions in subject areas included employer panels and technical skills development; an updated work-related learning module; a bespoke programme with graduate recruiters and industry leaders (small university).

There was evidence that providers were putting additional efforts into supporting employment outcomes for students in sectors that have been adversely affected by national and global labour market trends – such as in engineering and industrial, chemicals and pharmaceutical employment.

- + Career planning support, work experience, and opportunities to take part in international experiences (funded opportunity to travel and learn from alumni about their businesses, roles and career journeys) (large university).

New approaches were also in evidence to supporting **employability** for students from groups experiencing differential progression outcomes. For example:

- + Part-time and virtual professional paid-work opportunities for students experiencing financial hardship or from backgrounds associated with lower social capital (small university).
- + Cross-provision inclusive practice, and targeted employer mentoring and networking aimed at closing the gap between BAME students and White students (large university).

Programme-specific actions to boost progression outcomes tended to be within the framework of strategic approaches to integrating a career-focused curriculum and employability support.

- + A transformation plan for one school had initiated a new and refined undergraduate portfolio, supported by a comprehensive careers curriculum-based enhancement plan covering all academic stages, and embedded in timetabled module delivery (large university).
- + Students helped to develop curriculum coherency across seven undergraduate programmes in one school (an explicit spiral curriculum around core disciplines with a professional practice strand at each level, culminating in a final year placement) (large university).

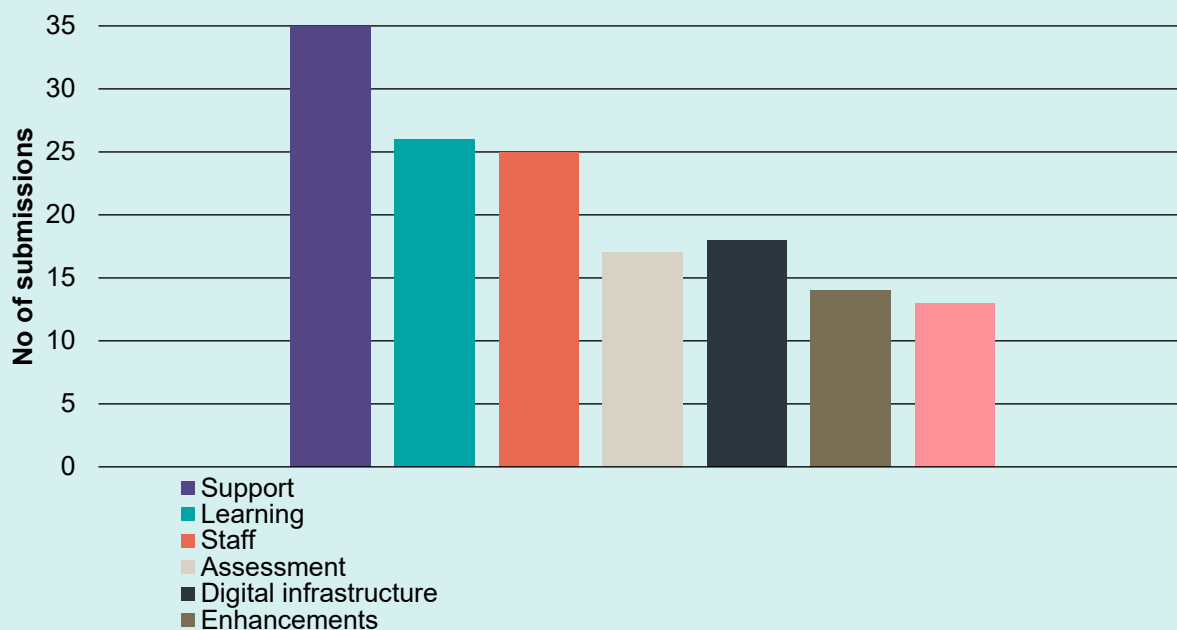
Extending the range of support for recent graduates was an emerging theme with the potential to generate improved graduate outcomes for those facing barriers in the labour market after graduation.

- + Measures to boost job outcomes included alumni employment and part time CV/employability 'booster' employment through project-based work, along with work shadowing and a (CPD certified) training and development programme for alumni (FEC).

Mitigations during the pandemic

The majority of submissions spoke about additional support for students to help continuation and progression during the pandemic (Figure 6.2). Examples of hardship support included financial support and equipment to help close the digital divide. Investment in new welfare support roles also featured. Opportunities for individual and group academic tutorials were expanded.

Figure 6.2. Types of pandemic-related interventions by number of provider submissions



More than half had made additional investment in learning resources, which included digital platforms, lecture capture and live-streaming systems, and systems to build online learning communities. Online learning resources had been expanded.

Well over half of the submissions spoke about proactive arrangements to build staff members' skills – not only digital skills but in learning how to deliver active and inclusive learning and student support online. A few submissions noted changes to supporting digital skills (such as a digital drop-in at a large university).

Around a third of submissions spoke about changes to assessment practice. Actions included introduction of a No Detriment Framework (large university) and use of assessment safety net principles (large university).

Around a quarter of the submissions spoke about efforts to consult with students during the pandemic. This was mainly through surveys and focus groups, although a small number had also used telephone 'check-ins'.

6.3 Evidence and evaluation

Almost all the providers in the sample spoke about the exceptional circumstances in the last few years and could point to prior and subsequent performance against the metrics; many talked about their future expectations of recovered levels of performance as more data becomes available.

- + An FEC said the pandemic had a nationwide detrimental impact on outcomes such as graduate employment and gave evidence of subsequent improvements in job outcomes, linked to measures recently introduced to enhance students' 'work readiness'.

Providers drew on domestic data, such as surveys and data used in ongoing programme reviews, to show that improvements could be evidenced which had a high chance of feeding through into the TEF student outcomes datasets. This was particularly the case where the pandemic was associated with wholesale reviews of teaching delivery that might reap benefits over time, such as across-the-board changes in assessment practices, curriculum initiatives and support for employability. Improvements in scores in programme evaluations were cited as evidence of making progress towards improved outcomes, linked to subject-specific teaching practices.

- + A large university made the case that subject-specific measures to increase transparency and understanding of assessment were associated with around a six percentage point increase in students' confidence in assessment, based on module evaluation data. Programmes which had used staff development to address assessment issues had seen confidence in assessment using module evaluation data rise by four percentage points overall and more than 10 percentage points in a couple of programmes.

Where available, and depending on the timescales, providers used their internal data to show that wholesale and tailored changes to support students' learning, progression and attainment were already making a difference.

6.3.1 Internal retention, attainment and progression data

Current data held internally was held up as proxies for improvements that might feed through into TEF student outcomes data over time (although providers said pandemic-related challenges hampered consistent evaluation of impact).

- + Based on internal progression data at a large university, targeted support for progression for BAME graduates in Year 3 had improved by between five and seven percentage points.
- + Internal analysis of module-level grade awards at a Russell Group university suggested gaps were reduced. This provider had established a cross-institutional research group to understand the impact of socioeconomic background on HE study.

- + The shift to trimester delivery patterns for HE students at an FEC was associated with improvement in the in-year retention rate of students compared to the previous academic years, with particularly large effects on programmes where skills and competencies were the priority for learning outcomes (for example, creative and healthcare related programmes).

6.3.2 Student surveys

Data from student surveys was also referred to as an indication of changes which in time might counter past negative performance in relation to outcomes. Careers surveys in particular stood out as an earlier indicator of likely improvements in graduate outcomes.

- + A large university said that survey-based measures of students' sense of belonging had increased by nine percentage points two years after measures had been put in place, which was associated in this provider's data with increased levels of optimism and confidence when it comes to study success.
- + A large university said it will monitor the impact of investment in student support, pedagogy and curriculum design, and cross-cutting employability initiatives against career readiness scores, as a lead indicator for progression.
- + A small university said internal career readiness data – which had started to be collected for the last couple of years – will be used in parallel to the Graduate Outcomes Survey.

6.3.3 Individual feedback

Submissions that talked about targeted and intensive work with different groups of students brought in quotes and testimonials from participants in order to demonstrate the individual benefits.

- + A small university, for example, drew on student testimonials to show the benefits for individuals in terms of confidence, access to networks, inspirational stories and so on.

Not all providers registered successes in terms of their mitigation activities and, in these cases, the discourses were ones of learning and development.

- + For example, the submission from a large university spoke about how revised methods of assessments for performing arts and drama students involving performance on video during the pandemic did not meet student expectations.

In relation to dips in outcomes during the pandemic, providers were looking forward to 'business as usual' under post-pandemic conditions, and especially for practice- and workplace-based degrees.

Where changes designed to impact student outcomes had been in place for a long enough time, improvements in year-on-year student outcomes using TEF metrics were referenced. Further evaluation work will be needed to assess the extent to which outcomes had been subject to the Covid mitigation policies to ensure they were not impacted by learning in lockdown.

7 Educational gains: conceptions, approaches and evaluation

Educational gains was introduced as a feature of Student Outcomes in TEF 2023, and providers were asked to state how they define gains, and approach and measure achievement of those gains, as relevant to their students, their mission and specific character.

7.1 Conceptions of educational gains

SO4. The provider clearly **articulates the range educational gains** it intends its students to achieve, and why these are highly relevant to its students and their future ambitions.

This section starts by addressing the question of ‘what characterises the way that improver submissions defined educational gains and expressed their relevancy to their students?’. The analysis draws on extracts with explicit mention of educational gain, learning gains (or related terms such as distance travelled and value added), from the wider corpus. It picks up on references to educational gains across the submissions. The section reflects providers’ descriptions of their approach to achieving educational gains, as relevant to their students, and explores the measures of educational gain (covering the range of sector-wide and provider-specific measures of educational gain and how these were applied to the different dimensions of educational gain).

7.1.1 Positioning and language of educational gains

Providers were building on previous work in conceptualising educational gains. This was evident in several ways across the submissions:

- + citing sector research, including the evaluation of learning gain (Kandiko Howson, 2018; Kandiko Howson, 2019; McGrath et al, 2015; or OfS, 2021)
- + referring to educational gain categories suggested by OfS guidance
- + explicit mention of prior work as part of the HEFCE-funded Learning Gain projects
- + positioning their gains as consonant with their mission, vision, commitment or their strategy /charter
- + deriving their gains from their values, heritage, reputation and/or ethos
- + relating their gains with an external strategy or charter (such as Mayor of London, Skills for Londoners Strategy).

A range of terms were used in association with providers' conceptualisation of educational gains across the 40 submissions. These include:

Learning gain	Transformation	Value added
Distance travelled	Improvement	Development
Foundation	Change	Realising potential
Excellence	Empowerment	Success
Collaborative	Equipping	

7.1.2 The process of defining educational gains

Several providers described the process of defining educational gains as part of their submission; referring to having conducted surveys, workshops, forums, or cross-provider working groups to explore perceptions of importance, and/or ideas for how their educational gains should be defined. For some this was about identifying different perceptions and ideas, while for others it was about co-creating a definition to have wider relevance and ownership. These activities involved three main stakeholder groups, including:

- + Students/student representatives and/or their students' union: ensuring the relevancy and authenticity of the gains for students.
- + Colleagues: unifying the collective expertise and experience of the university community.
- + Employers: aligning gains to employers' expectations.

Among those engaging students to conceptualise gains, examples included:

- + A survey of student reps – top answers were: 'Critical thinking, analytic reasoning and problem-solving skills' (95%), 'Subject knowledge' (89%), 'Academic writing, research and referencing skills' (68%), 'Communication, team working and interpersonal skills' (63%), and 'Professional accreditation' (45%) (Russell group university).
- + Psychology student survey – educational gains were defined by these students as:
 - skills (for example, using SPSS, a statistical software package heavily used in the social sciences; debate; analysis; leadership, etc)
 - knowledge (theories, techniques, cognitive, etc)
 - self-awareness (stress management, determination, independence, etc) (small university).

- + Student survey – results demonstrate learning gain, including increased subject knowledge; learning practical and professional skills; and improving their communication and organisational skills. This provider said: “Respondents told us that learning happens through academic engagement, but also through broader university interactions and communities” (small university).

For seven providers, the process of defining educational gains had been formalised into a specific strategy, framework or model, by which to embed, monitor and/or measure educational gains. Others had embedded educational gains within existing strategies, including curriculum frameworks (see Section 7.2.1).

7.1.3 Definitions of educational gains

All submissions referred to more than one educational gain, and thus to different types of gains that students acquired throughout higher education. The educational gains fell within four inter-related dimensions: personal, professional, academic and social (Table 7.1).

While the four dimensions of educational gain were compelling across the submissions, this was at the broadest conceptual level. Not all providers referenced these dimensions in the same way, as evident from the ‘articulations’ column in Table 7.1. Furthermore, not all providers used the same outcomes to convey these dimensions as evident in the ‘outcomes’ column. Notably, there were also outcomes that cut across all four dimensions, due to the different contexts in which this emerged. These included ‘confidence’ (cited by 22 providers), with articulations of self-confidence (personal); students’ confidence in their studies, academic abilities, potential, to ask for help (academic); confidence to participate (social); confidence to articulate their skills/competences to employers (professional). Other cross-cutting outcomes were associated with social, cultural and/or psychological capital (referenced by 10 providers), raised particularly in the context of supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds or underrepresented groups. These outcomes encompassed building friendship networks (personal/social) or employer networks (professional), assimilating relevant social and cultural knowledge (academic or professional) or widening their experiences through the curriculum (academic), work (professional) or extra/co-curriculum (personal, social, academic). References to personal dimensions of gain included other dimensions, for example, one provider referred to ‘personal skills’ as including subject expertise, research and enquiry, leadership and influence (small university). This illustrates the fact the dimensions are not necessarily mutually exclusive of one another.

Table 7.1. Dimensions of educational gains

	Articulations	Outcomes	Frequency
Personal	+ personal development	a. state of being such as 'being successful personally'.	33 submissions (82%)
	+ personal transformation	b. becoming more autonomous; motivated, confident; resilient or influential.	
	+ personal gains	c. learning beyond the 'classroom'; whether as gains from extra or co-curricular activity or wider opportunities on offer.	
	+ personal insights	d. developing self-awareness, self-efficacy, growth mindset, wellbeing, or identity.	
	+ personal impact	e. acquiring and/or applying generic/life competencies /transferable skills such as interpersonal, communication, organisation, time management, literacy and/or numerical skills.	
Professional		f. achieving personal goals, ambitions, life-balance, wellbeing or personal fulfilment.	38 submissions (95%)
		g. building their friendship networks, contributing to their social and cultural capital.	
	+ work readiness	a. becoming more confident; able to articulate competencies to employers.	
	+ career readiness	b. preparing students to be successful in gaining highly skilled, sustainable employment upon graduation, within an evolving, dynamic marketplace.	
	+ progression	c. acquiring and/or applying competencies, skills or behaviours relevant to employers or the workplace including leadership, managerial, digital, inclusive, reflective, problem solving, communication, entrepreneurial.	
	+ employability	d. acquiring and/or applying knowledge associated with commercial, business, industry and professional contexts.	
	+ graduate gains	e. diversifying students' professional and work-based experiences.	
	+ future success	f. widening students' employability networks, communities, reach or future career aspirations, contributing to their social and cultural capital.	
	+ future professions		
	+ career impact		

	Articulations	Outcomes	Frequency
Academic	+ academic gain	a. being successfully academically, achieving higher attainment and/or obtaining one or more qualifications as well as becoming more confident, curious, creative, proactive, resilient as learners.	29 submissions (72%)
	+ cognitive gain		
	+ academic development	b. acquiring and/or applying academic competencies or skills including critical investigation, research, curiosity, referencing, analytical, evaluative, comparative, reflective, problem solving, communication.	
	+ curriculum gain		
	+ lifelong learning	c. acquiring and/or applying discipline or subject knowledge.	
	+ academic success	d. diversifying, stretching and challenging students' learning or experiences.	
	+ intellectual learning	e. expanding students' learning across discipline, cultural, and national boundaries, contributing to their social and cultural capital.	
	+ academic impact		
Social	+ social gain	a. making a positive contribution to communities and societies.	22 submissions (55%)
	+ community	b. acquiring a sense of belonging; becoming more confident; open-minded; collaborative; respectful; socially/environmentally responsible.	
	+ cultural learning	c. preparing students to make an effective contribution to society and/or communities beyond graduation or throughout their lives (as 'change makers', 'thought leaders', 'productive, ethical citizens').	
	+ societal impact		
	+ societal contribution	d. acquiring and applying social skills/competencies including networking, teamwork, interpersonal, influential, inclusive.	
	+ citizenship	e. acquiring and/or applying knowledge - global, social, cultural, ethical, inclusive mindset. f. diversifying students' civic, social, cultural, community engagement experiences (for example, volunteering, campaigning, knowledge exchange) g. expanding students' networks and connections, contributing to their social and cultural capital.	

Furthermore, nine submissions provided a unique definition of educational gain. These providers used different conceptualisations, tending to 'package up' graduate qualities in ways that were nuanced to their distinctiveness and identity. It was noticeable that many were still aligned to one or more of the categories above but were articulated less directly and categorised in a more cross-cutting way. Examples included:

- + Work ready, world ready and future ready (large university).
- + Graduate capital /social capital /cultural capital /psychological capital (FEC).
- + Digitally empowered; research active; socially and ethically engaged; globally connected; future ready (themes associated with future-facing learning) (large university).

- + Thinking self; learning self; principled self; connected self (Russell Group university).
- + Positive citizens of change (large university).
- + Stretching intellectual, social and experiential learning, increasing agency for life during and after study (Russell Group university).

Among the four dimensions, a less commonly articulated dimension across the submissions was 'social' gain. Identification of 'social' gain was derived from two factors: the prevalence and importance of community, networks and collaborative learning in association with student experience and student outcomes; with the wider notions of community at a civic or cultural level, connecting communities (beyond the boundaries of higher education or the UK). A social dimension thus picked up on the expressed desire, among some providers, to prepare students not only for moving on into employment but also to prepare them to make an effective contribution to society as graduates, having an impact on society. Notably, however, the impact of education was less often articulated across the submissions.

Providers universally drew on more than one of the four educational gains dimensions and, moreover, often associated one dimension with another, evident from several emerging narratives. Seven providers referred to creating an interconnected 'framework' or 'model' of educational gains, and five described or illustrated their emergent 'theories of change' for educational gains. For example:

- + We developed a simple theory of change, which posits that improved awareness of students' abilities (through self-assessment) should, over time, increase education gains and, ultimately, progression outcomes (specialist provider).

Making connections reflected a holistic or inter-related conceptualisation of educational gains, as illustrated in the following quote:

- + Our conception of work readiness requires, however, that we prioritise the two other broad areas that the TEF guidance foregrounds as educational gain: academic development or 'value added' and personal development (large university).

There were a number of emerging change narratives evident, connecting the holistic contribution of all aspects of HE provision to the whole person. One that was particularly strong connected the 'personal' and 'academic' dimensions as contributing to the 'professional' dimension – with students' work-readiness seen as being derived from personal development (growth, skills) and academic achievement (learning, understanding, completion). One provider quoted prior learning gain research, offering a similar logic that "students who get good degrees are more likely to enter highly skilled work" (McGrath et al, 2015). Another narrative connected 'personal' and 'academic' dimensions over time, with educational gains being seen as derived from students' engagement with both their programme of study (or subject) and a range of co-curricular or enrichment activities or the

collective outcomes of having done so. It was common for providers in their narratives to refer to the gains across the whole student journey or lifecycle, as everything acquired between two points in time, articulated as ‘distance travelled’, or ‘value added’ conceptions of educational gains. More than half the providers in the sample (11 for ‘distance travelled’ and 12 for ‘value-added’) drew on learning gain research³ to inform their conceptions, drawing on variations of the definition of learning gain as “a change in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development, as well as enhancement of specific practices and outcomes in defined disciplinary and institutional contexts”. They thus referred to educational gains as an exploration of the relationship between entry tariff scores and degree outcomes and, in doing so, saw entry qualification as a form of individualised benchmark from which to evidence gains; recognising gains as a relative concept and acquired over time, throughout the course of their studies.

7.1.4 Relevancy to students

Relevancy was expressed in a number of ways across the submissions, but not all. These included in relation to:

- + **Their student profile:** this represented the most common way that relevancy was expressed across the submission, noticeable particularly among providers with a widening participation mission or having a diverse student population. Therein, providers referred to having a ‘greater than average’ student number or previously identified differential outcomes associated with having:
 - one or more protected characteristic (for example, disability, ethnicity)
 - a disadvantaged background (for example, first in family, IMD quintiles, free school meal eligibility, social capital levels, aspiration levels)
 - lower prior achievement (for example, entry tariffs, mature)
 - additional demands on their time (for example, caring responsibilities, commuting, in paid employment).
- + These providers referred to students’ associated needs, additional considerations, and the need for them to ensure equity and parity between student groups of educational outcomes. APPs were widely referenced as contributing to provider conceptualisations and/or approaches to educational gains. One provider even referred to access and participation as one of their educational gains:
 - As a widening participation provider, a key part of the educational gain we offer is to broaden access to, and encourage participation in, higher education in the first place,
 -

³ Including OfS Higher Education Learning Gain Analysis (HELGA); Kandiko Howson (2019); McGrath et al (2015)

- adapting our offer to meet the needs of the students we attract and serve, ensuring success regardless of background (large university).
- + **Their students' needs and interests:** less often referenced across the submissions was gains being expressed as relevant to students' needs and interests. This may reflect the fact that many took a more generalised approach to conceptualising their gains and noting that there had been providers who had defined their gains in collaboration, informed by what students (and other stakeholders) defined as relevant, as exemplified below.
 - These themes were co-developed with a range of internal and external stakeholders to ensure their relevance for our distinctive student body (large university).
- + Two providers referred to undertaking research to better understand their student body.
 - Research has helped us to improve our understanding of educational gain for different groups within our student population (large university).
- + Two providers spoke directly about the students' interests as associated with their educational gains, for example:
 - Our students are passionate about sustainability and want to live their lives in ways that are sustainable both for themselves personally and for wider society (large university).
- + **Their discipline(s):** subject-relevancy was noted by some providers, particularly among more specialist providers, and/or those referring to the relevancy of gains to the mix of programmes.
- + **Future progression** (employment, further study, and/or career): a final more enduring category emerged associated with making gains relevant to students in the future, supporting their onward progression. This was particularly expressed in terms of skill development (digital, technical, professional, transferable) or experiences (associated with work readiness) in order to support students to secure graduate level employment or equipping them with skills/experiences that are needed in the workplace or for undertaking further study. One provider referred to their desire for students to understand their gain's relevancy to their future:
 - ...this handbook clearly articulates the range of educational gains the college intends its students to achieve, and why these are highly relevant to its students and their future ambitions (specialist provider).

7.2 Approaches to supporting the achievement of educational gain

SO5. Approaches to supporting its students to achieve these gains are evidence-based, highly effective and tailored to its students and their different starting points.

7.2.1 Strategic oversight

Strategy development

Well over three-quarters of submissions referred to having or developing a strategy, model or framework to lead practice across the whole provision, improve its consistency and quality, and thus systematise the achievement of educational gains. A small minority referred to having needed to balance the desire for consistency with disciplinary nuances and requirements, requiring flexibility or a 'local translation'. One provider reported having "built educational gains into the strategy, mission and vision of the university" (large university). Seven providers referred to having developed (or being in the process of developing) an educational gains strategy, framework or model to systematise their approach for achieving educational gains. Other themes referenced as associated with achieving educational gains are summarised in Table 7.2.

Governance

Providers report using committee, board and/or senate for a variety of actions associated with achieving educational gains, including:

- + approving educational gains
- + approving related strategies
- + setting performance indicators
- + assuring accountability
- + defining measures
- + evaluating gains
- + monitoring progress
- + monitoring data trends
- + driving interventions to achieve educational gains.

One provider reported changing their committees to create one focused on alignment to educational gains. Another provider referred to their intent to require an institutional initiative to report on the educational gains they have made to the Board of Directors (Russell Group university).

Table 7.2. The range of strategies for achieving educational gains

	Articulations	Link with educational gains
Employability	+ An employability strategy, outlining plans to integrate employability and/or employer engagement within the curriculum. + Their strategic approach to skill and/or competency development such as future skills strategy or framework for transferable skills. + Defined graduate competencies/attributes, how these will be developed and/or communicated with or by students such as graduate capital model, to achieve and articulate educational gains.	Used as a means: – to define educational gains – to standardise achievement of educational gains – (for students) to recognise learning as educational gains – (for students) to articulate educational gains to employers.
Curriculum	+ A generic curriculum or learning framework, articulating their unique approach to learning and teaching. + Their strategic approach to embedding a specific theme within the curriculum (for example, Future Facing Learning; practice as research; competency-based approach; or knowledge exchange. + An explicit assessment and feedback strategy, detailing their approach (for example, authentic assessment). + The curriculum strand of a Race Equality Strategy.	Used as a means: – to lead educational gains – to standardise achievement of educational gains – to maximise educational gains – to set milestones for achieving educational gains.

Educational Enhancement	Articulations	Link with educational gains
	+ A generic educational strategy, which articulates the providers' pedagogical approach to enhance their student experience and outcomes. + A student success framework. + An academic enhancement framework. + A support interventions framework. + A strategic plan. + Academic strategy action plan.	– Used as a means: – to standardise achievement of educational gains – to assure a more targeted approach to achievement of educational gains – to embed educational gains into 'business as usual' – to ensure actions are logged and monitored for achieving educational gains.

Investment

Four providers reported specific investments to support achievement of educational gains in association with their APP. Examples included investment in pedagogic innovation forums exploring themes relevant to educational gains (small university), or expansion of the careers and employability service (large university) or investment in research.

Staffing

As part of their approach to achieving educational gains, providers referred to staffing related enhancements (cf SE4) including:

- + the provision of continuing professional development associated with educational gains
- + a requirement for closer partnership working between central and academic teams to achieve gains
- + the recruitment of specific roles with responsibility for identifying, evaluating and sharing emerging good practice related to educational gains
- + promotion criteria to recognise impact on educational achievement and gain
- + enhancement working groups with designated responsibilities associated with learning gain.

7.2.2 Curriculum

Curriculum design and delivery was most commonly mentioned in relation to delivery of educational gains (22 providers), embedded into all undergraduate programmes. This was reflected in different ways including:

- + building in standard learning outcomes, defined by discipline and/or level of study
- + embedding a 'signature' pedagogy or pedagogical approach, such as inclusive practices, co-creation, experiential, practice-based, interactive, stretch, curiosity authentic learning and assessment
- + introduction of structural changes, including reduced class sizes, or higher levels of contact time (one provider)
- + embedding common content, including mental health/wellbeing, interdisciplinarity, internationalisation, digital skills, environmental/social sustainability, knowledge exchange
- + embedding common core modules into the curriculum, designed around educational gains, and most commonly associated with employability (see below) – one provider had introduced an immersive module, tailored by discipline, to introduce elements of their educational gain module (small university)
- + embedding specific interventions into the curriculum, designed to enhance educational gains, including workshops, additional qualifications, employability programmes, inclusive awareness theory or role models.

Curriculum review: three providers referred to using the periodic review process to embed and/or measure educational gains. However, it is notable that a number of providers referred to undertaking recent curriculum reviews, as means to enhance the student experience (see Section 2.1.1).

Embedding employability and/or employer engagement was a strong theme across providers in association with the curriculum and aligned to their approach for achieving educational gains (see Sections 2 and 6). Fourteen providers referred to introducing specific career/employability modules and four mentioned entrepreneurship schemes, such as a university-wide social enterprise scheme. Eight providers reported having incorporated work experience, a placement or internship (whether as an option or requirement) into the curriculum, with one using the Bright Network for virtual work experience. For example:

- + We have embedded student KE [knowledge exchange] across all three faculties as part of our theory of change model for educational gains, further developing student skills and linking our students to the regional jobs market. The university brokers this relationship,

ensuring success of the tripartite relationship – student, institution, community stakeholder – with benefits to all parties (large university).

Other employability mechanisms for achieving educational gains included:

- + use of authentic, practice-based or experiential learning experiences, including simulated workplace experiences (such as practice clinics) and/or assessment methods
- + integration of an employability model into presentation slides, introduced in every module, across every programme
- + an on-campus recruitment agency to help students obtain work
- + employer engagement in curriculum design and delivery
- + growing students' employer networks
- + employability-focused sessions including a career development day or programme of activities. For example:
 - The students' union engages in a Skills Development Programme (SDP) containing a series of workshops and courses to provide additional skills and qualifications within our educational gains model. Workshops include Consent Matters, Online Safety, Public Speaking, Starting Your Own Business and more. These have been popular with students and saw over 3,000 booking in the first week of opening in January 2022 (specialist provider).

7.2.3 Co/extra-curricular

Co- or extra-curricular schemes emerged as a strong theme across 11 providers, with others referring to activities contributing to enrichment and achievement of gains (Section 2.2).

There was some evidence that this had been a growth area for some as a means to enrich their students' experience (learning and sense of belonging, skill development) and improve student outcomes (attainment, continuation, completion and progression). This is exemplified in the following quote:

- + We have accompanied growth in active and collaborative learning within the curriculum with an expansion of opportunities and incentives for students to learn beyond their courses to support their work readiness (large university).

Two providers referred to offering a platform (or one stop hub) to facilitate students' access to the range of opportunities on offer. Co-curricular activities were wide-ranging, aligned to the following categories:

- + **Continuing professional development.** Eight submissions referenced CPD opportunities in the context of educational gains. These ranged from the application of personal development planning or an equivalent framework (three providers) to help students reflect on, articulate and evidence core employability skills and attributes, to the provision of programmes for personal development; asynchronous professional development modules available via the VLE; short courses; conference; themed weeks and optional additional workshops. One FEC referred to offering opportunities for students to gain additional qualifications alongside their studies, to support their engagement, learning and employability.
- + **Volunteering/community engagement.** Nine referred to volunteering opportunities, while others referred to a range of community engagement opportunities, such as giving public performances or offering business consultancy to local organisations.
- + **Enrichment programmes.** Seven reported developing specific programmes for their students (and even alumni), focused on skill, leadership and confidence development. One provider commented that such a programme had enabled them to position co-curricular learning as core to their student experience and described that “students accumulate points for evidenced effort, which can be translated into micro-credentials, recognition on their transcript and, in most cases, classificatory credit in addition to their course units” (‘Rise’ programme).
- + **Networking groups or events.** Four providers referred to offering opportunities to network or expand their networks, to enhance educational gains achievement.
- + **International enrichment.** Four referred to the provision (or growth therein) of international activities. For two, this was aligned to their mission – around global citizenship or internationalisation – leading to a strategic imperative to expand the range of intercultural and international opportunities to enhance educational gains. Activities across the providers included the development of online global, collaborative learning opportunities for students, increased mobility or exchange, storytelling day or ‘know my country’ series.
- + **Competitions.** Three reported using external competitions as a means of motivating and challenging their students and thus expanding their educational gains.
- + **Clubs and societies.** Three providers referred to the wide range of clubs and societies, contributing to educational gains.
- + **Campaign or specialist groups.** Referenced by two providers, focused on global significant themes, including inclusion and sustainability.

- + **Paid or other roles.** Two referred to offering paid work opportunities, including curriculum consultant, research associate or open day ambassador, contributing to their skills, while one other provider referred to offering leadership roles.

7.2.4 Student support

In describing their approach to achieving educational gains, a significant number of providers referred to having one or more support schemes, both within and outside the curriculum. These inevitably overlap with those used to support graduate outcomes (Section 4.1.). In the context of educational gains, support schemes aligned to the following categories:

- + **Targeted support interventions.** Six providers referred to undertaking early or routine reviews of their course-level data (including engagement, performance, survey) to identify and target particular cohorts/students requiring additional support.
- + **Academic support.** Six providers reported on their academic enhancement/support provision.
- + **Alumni support.** Six providers referred to offering support post-graduation, including access to resources or a network.
- + **Personal tutoring/coaching.** Five providers referenced having an embedded form of individualised support within the curriculum to help achieve educational gains.
- + **Peer support.** Four providers noted using peer mentoring and/or buddy schemes to support the educational gains (personal/academic development). This has been systematically implemented on all campuses and across all programmes at an FEC.
- + **Wellbeing support.** Four providers referred to the provision of wellbeing support, including two who described taking a whole-provider approach to embedding wellbeing into the curriculum.
- + **Early support.** One provider referred to efforts to support academic and personal development from the outset.

7.2.5 Student recognition and reward of educational gains

Ensuring that students recognise educational gains emerged as a theme across a number of providers, with a range of ways that educational gains and their relevancy were communicated to students including through:

- + programme marketing information
 - + pre-university welcome activities
-

- + graduate charter
- + programme specifications and student handbooks
- + a visual representation incorporated into presentation slides used on every module
- + orientation activities
- + marketing materials – one provider co-produced a resource bank of 50 videos featuring students' articulation of their educational gains (large university)

Other providers referred to ensuring students were aware of their approach to achieving educational gains, including ways of developing associated competencies/skills, relevant opportunities and/or visibility of key priority areas. Examples included:

- + tailored communications, based on survey responses findings, signposting opportunities relevant to students
- + routine communications (such as emails, notifications, weekly bulletins, signage) used to promote key themes or inform students about upcoming opportunities
- + a research project to identify ways of enhancing the presence and visibility of activities associated with their characteristic approach
- + student guides on themes of importance.

Another emerging feature associated with recognition and reward was the availability of a structured approach to enable students to **record and chart their own educational gains development**. Eight providers referred to having such an approach, albeit uniquely named by each provider, including a 'recognition scheme', 'model', 'award', 'compass', 'passport' or 'graduate matrix'. They each provided a reward and recognition structure for students, embedded within the curriculum, albeit varying slightly in remit, including logging students' learning intentions/goals; students' reflections on their values/experience; students' relevant experiences; students' progress against graduate attributes/skills; and any achievements (such as micro-credentials, additional qualifications). In addition, there were two providers who give students access to the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) and recognised its value in conveying gains to employers.

7.3 Evaluation of educational gains

SO6. The provider **evaluates the gains made by its students**, and demonstrates its students are succeeding in achieving the intended gains

This section examines how providers describe their plans for evaluation of educational gains and are demonstrating that their students are succeeding. It is split into three broad parts: a) examining their articulation of evaluation methodologies and how these have evolved, drawing on previous work and scholarship; b) examining the range of sector-wide (external) and provider-specific (internal) measures of educational gain and how these were applied across the four emerging dimensions of educational gain; c) an exploration of how achievement of educational gains was articulated.

7.3.1 Evaluation methodology

Features of their evaluation approach

In describing their approach to evaluation, a number of features emerged evidencing that providers are building the evaluation of educational gains into the existing structures for monitoring, improvement and reporting. These features include:

- + **Strategic approach to evaluation:** seven providers referred to having developed (or being in the process of developing) an evaluation strategy (framework, checklist or model) for educational gain; for the purpose of establishing 'robust practices' and/or 'a consistent and systematic approach to measurement'. One large university incorporated the use of both self-reported and behavioural indicators against each gain. Another provider reported having a student survey strategy, developed in partnership with its students, with a strand specifically on educational gains. This was to ensure it had a coherent range of surveys by which to understand distance travelled at cohort level. Collectively, such evaluation strategies recognise the need for coherence of approach, as well as continuous evaluation of educational gain.
- + **Reporting mechanisms:** five providers using their governance structures for routine reporting of educational gains (progress, trends), through committees to the Academic Board and the Board of Governors.
- + **Continuous improvement cycle:** six providers referred to implementing or making use of quality assurance, monitoring and enhancement, or strategic business planning cycles, as part of ensuring a 'robust cycle of innovation and improvement' as part of educational gains evaluation.
- + **Targets:** four providers referenced setting targets (key performance indicators, in-year indicators, or leading indicators) as a way of managing and monitoring performance against educational gains.

- + **Data dashboards:** two providers referenced using or developing dashboards to support colleagues (including course leaders, senior managers) to monitor student data and track progress.
- + **Analysis of student data:** among those detailing their evaluative approach, it was common for providers to reference their analysis of student data, covering:
 - analysis by demographic splits or student characteristics
 - analysis by cohort, level of study or programme
 - analysis by discipline, faculty/school or department
 - analysis across mission groups, similar providers, whole sector.

Providers thus referred to monitoring performance variations at different levels and thus measure progress. Five providers referred to analysis of learner analytics, student engagement and/or performance data (lead indicators) to target interventions at those in the greatest need of support, including one who had started this early after students start. One provider was using its student data to inform the design of modules, to ensure they are relevant to students.

- + **Use of benchmark data:** it was evident that providers were using multiple measures from which to evidence relative progress and/or value associated with educational gain. Different forms of benchmarking included reference to:
 - progress against external nationally set metric benchmarks
 - improvements over the TEF period, or between two points in time
 - the use of pre- and post- measures (such as for a particular event or module)
 - the use of pre-entry experience or perceptions
 - the relationship between entry and exit qualifications.

Evolution of evaluation

There was evidence among providers' descriptions of educational gains that having them has led to development of their evaluative approach. In addition to developing evaluation frameworks or models for educational gains (seven providers), described in the section above, around two-thirds of providers described **revising student surveys** to better reflect their educational gains, including generating new surveys, adding additional items into the NSS and/or updating their programme evaluation survey. For example,

- + We will revise module evaluation questions to focus on active learning and encourage reflection on personal development. This will facilitate students' reflection on knowledge, skills, and experience (large university).

A Russell Group university reported partnering with an external agency in developing its survey:

- + We are currently working with The Brilliant Club to explore whether their validated survey scale could be used to track student development over time to enhance our measures of learning gain. We propose to use these validated scales to map student trajectories over the course of their study.

Providers recognised the **speed** at which they had to work to develop their evaluation, as exemplified below:

- + The university has been swift to define, measure and develop plans in relation to educational gains (large university)

There was also acknowledgement that there was **further work** to be done, with seven providers referring to future plans to enhance measures of educational gain. Examples include:

- + In addition to developing richer 'student voice' data on educational gain, we have committed to building on our existing measures of co-curricular learning gain (small university).
- + As part of our developing approach to measuring learning gain, our Careers and Employability Service implemented a pilot project, informed by national best practice, to collect information from students at enrolment on their stage of career readiness to provide student support. From 2022-23, all students now must complete this process, which provides rich data to inform employability provision. The data feeds into our systems and students can change their stage in real time (large university).

Other developments in process included a new survey strategy, incorporating a strand on educational gains; a combination of provider and subject-relevant measures relevant to core aspects of their gains; or incorporating measures to better understand value added.

It was evident that providers were at different stages of advancement in terms of data collection. Those with surveys established following the previous TEF cycle could report on their progress and the impact on student outcomes (for example, Career Readiness Survey used during enrolment since 2017 (large university); those in the process of developing pilot data collection projects or rolling out measures across the provider will require time for progress and impact to be identified. Some conceptualisations of gains overlaps with existing mechanisms (such as employability measures which have already been a focus), others (such as personal gains) are the subject of more recent work.

Learning from previous work

Providers had drawn on previous work to inform their approach to evaluation of educational gains, including:

- + **Access and participation plans (APP):** seven providers referenced their APP in association with measuring or evaluating educational gains and an additional provider mentioned using its APP data to evidence employability benefits. The alignment with APP is illustrated in the following quote:

“Our evaluation approach is informed by a theory of change and aligns with the approach taken in our APP.” (large university)
- + Explicit reference to theory of change was made by a further five providers with respect to evaluation. One provider reported having embedded the theory of change methodology into all initiatives, ensuring that contributions to educational gain were pre-identified, and plans for research and evaluation aligned to intended impacts and change mechanisms.
- + **HEFCE/OfS learning gain research and measures:** there was strong evidence that the findings from previous learning gain projects had influenced providers’ measures of educational gains. These included:
 - National Mixed Methodology Learning Gain project – cited by two providers, evaluating students’ skills, attitude and engagement, and subsequent outcomes.
 - Learning Gain in Higher Education (McGrath et al, 2015) – referenced explicitly by two providers (but 11 referred to ‘distance travelled’ and a further nine providers described a ‘value-added’ measure of learning gain, as originating from that study). These providers reported using entry tariffs, or value-added scores, to achieve the following:
 - identify disparities between student characteristic groups
 - analyse the probable achievement of any given student by entry tariff/subject
 - recognise different starting points
 - drive staff engagement
 - identify factors contributing to awarding differentials.
- + One provider said entry tariff was a suitable proxy because it reflected prior educational attainment and likely educational deficit (large university). It was further cited as being used to inform targeted interventions. This is illustrated by another submission:
 - The introduction of the value-added score in 2018-19 has enabled a more detailed analysis of differential outcomes between student groups and has particularly highlighted the significance disparity between BAME and White students’ degree

classifications, which has informed our projects and targeted activities (large university).

- + Higher Education Learning Gain Analysis (HELGA) study – cited by three providers, in relation to the value-added measure of learning gain and exploration of the relationship between degree outcomes and tariff point score.
- + Career registration measure of learning gain – referenced by three providers, as a way of tracking students' intentions, aspirations and sense of readiness for onward progression.

Despite the reference to several learning gain projects, there were clearly others that were not referenced in the submissions, even where providers had been part of a pilot project.

Use of research and scholarship

Across the providers, there was the occasional reference to prior research and scholarship as informing their evaluative approach. One provider cited numerous research studies across its submission to explain its rationale, for example:

- + Research has found that self-efficacy correlates with academic performance and is a crucial determinant of academic success across a wide variety of disciplines (Multon et al, 1991) (small university).

7.3.2 Measures of educational gains

Sector-wide measures of educational gains performance

Among the sector-wide, external measures of educational gains, there were significant numbers of references to student outcome data. Such measures of student outcomes were sector-level, validated externally, and enduring and systematic data sources, enabling providers to monitor and measure progress over time, across disciplines and diverse student groups (in association with APP), as well as against OfS benchmarks, and other providers. The justification for use of these measures is exemplified in the following:

- + Overall, we regard the Student Outcomes aspect of TEF and the associated indicators as the best current measures of impact and success of educational gains. If we are successful in supporting students to feel they belong; have curated opportunities to develop; and can look forward with confidence to a positive destination after graduation, then Continuation, Completion and Progression are the most relevant measures. These also require comparison across students with different characteristics to ensure we are enabling all our students to succeed (Russell Group university).

The student outcome measures referenced across the provider submissions included:

- + **Progression rates** (17 providers): used to evidence achievement of consistent levels of progression to highly skilled professional employment, SOC 1-3 jobs, further study, and/or specific careers/high profile roles. Some referenced their targets to address
-

differentials and others indicated use of split indicators to ensure 'professional' educational gains were being achieved by all student groups.

- + **Continuation rates** (12 providers): seen as a reliable indicator of educational gain.
- + **NSS data** (nine providers): used to evidence student satisfaction with what was provided to achieve educational gains, in association with more than one dimension of gain (personal, cognitive and professional). Three providers referred to making use of optional questions, or adding provider-specific questions, as part of the NSS, as evidence of educational gain. One provider referred to using the open text questions:
 - NSS free text comments analysis at institutional and subject level will continue to capture a more nuanced longitudinal dynamics of student priorities and attitudes (large university).
- + **Completion rates data** (nine providers): used to evidence year on year student awarding achievement and/or in comparison with other providers, in association with the achievement of 'academic' gains.
- + **Degree outcomes** (five providers): used to evidence the level of the award relative to other comparable universities, in relation to academic gains.

Beyond the use of metric data, providers referred to other **external** data sources as evidence of educational gain, including:

- + **UK student engagement survey** (two providers): used as a whole or an adapted version, from which to evidence student engagement and/or skill development, across different dimensions of educational gain.
- + **REF impact case studies** (one provider): used to evidence the impact of relevant research, on the theme of equity of achievement of educational gain.
- + **English Social Mobility Index**⁴ (one provider): using access, continuation, and progression (LEO) data, evidencing the social distance travelled by graduates and progression rates among the most socially deprived or disadvantaged groups.
- + **Awards data** (eight providers): referring to their success in national awards (Collaborative Award Teaching Excellence; Times Higher; Guardian; Green Gown; Race-Equality Charter or Athena Swan) or referred to award-winning-centres or practices, as evidence of success in achieving educational gain.

⁴ Phoenix (2021).

- + **League tables** (two providers): referring to their position relative to others or improvement in positioning over time, including social mobility league table or the Guardian league table for value-added measure scores.
- + **Designations** (one provider): referring to gaining accreditation or designated status through external application and peer review process.
- + **External quality review** (one provider): referring to an external review, assessing the quality of their provision.
- + **Ofsted annual trainee online survey** (one provider): used as an evidence source of student perception.

Internal measures of educational gains performance

Where an evaluative approach was described, there were a variety of provider-specific ('internal') measures in use, designed to systematically evidence achievement of educational gains. It was common for more than one measure to be used, and for methods to be repeated over time from which to evidence progress. A **multi-method approach** echoed previous work that no one measure of educational gains is sufficient (McGrath et al, 2015; Kandiko Howson, 2019). This was exemplified by a submission that referred to the benefit of bringing together different evidence sources:

- + While individually each survey might have limitations in terms of sampling and timing, overall, they provide convergent evidence on support, engagement, educational gains and the impact of our interventions. In addition to these targeted surveys, each module has a Module Evaluation Questionnaire completed by each student at the conclusion of the module (large university).

Given the prominence of internal measures, and the use of evaluation frameworks or strategies, providers were generally aware of the need for a coherent, multi-layered approach to demonstrating educational gains.

In deriving their measures of educational gains, two providers incorporated **externally validated scales** into their surveys as part of their evaluation of gains, drawing on evidence-based instruments and providing a more nuanced analysis. These included:

- + Learning strategies and metacognitive strategies subscale
 - + Self-efficacy for learning and performance subscale
 - + Office for National Statistics subjective wellbeing sub-scale
 - + Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale
 - + Dweck open learning mindset scale.
-

Two providers referred to deliberately including or using **open-ended questions** at a subject level, to evaluate their students' educational gains, for example: 'What did you learn from your programme? (small university).

There was evidence that evaluation measures were being used **early** in the students' journey, integrated into pre-entry, induction or welcome activities, or in advance of a learning activity, as a form of benchmark – prior knowledge, skills, confidence – from which to demonstrate progress (in addition to informing and tailoring interventions). It was common for providers to integrate measures of evaluation into the **curriculum**, in recognition that module-level data provides a systematic data source, which can be monitored at multiple levels (individual, cohort, programme and provider), as illustrated in the following example:

- + Module-based data will offer a granular picture of a student's journey and help us to understand the extent to which learning is non-linear and shaped by academic and personal successes and setbacks, and this will be monitored through the personal tutor system (large university).

While module-level surveys were the more common way of integrating measures within the curriculum, five providers referred to focusing on **learning outcomes** as a way of monitoring and demonstrating achievement of educational gains, across all programmes and/or against embedded themes, as exemplified below.

- + The focus on core skills which surround the mechanisms of change will be maintained via curriculum and regulatory design and managed by calibrated academic marking, and external examiner assessment. We have implemented a system of discipline-specific Level Learning Outcomes (LLOs) at the end of each academic year as opposed to single Programme Learning Outcomes set at the highest level of award. Such an approach, implemented for programmes initiating validation from the end of 2021-22, enables the university to establish and monitor key throughlines within all provision (small university).

Another way in which evaluation was integrated into the curriculum was through **reflective methods**, including a reflective log or report assessment, used continuously or at the end of a module or level of study. This was provided as a choice for students (non-mandatory) by some providers and linked to awarding credit (mandatory) by others.

Beyond the curriculum, measures in place to evaluate specific initiatives or activities included pre- and post-activity evaluation, to demonstrate value or gain, for example:

- + An annual evaluation to understand student perceptions of their employability linked to their engagement with FutureYOU shows encouraging results that students were beginning to recognise their individual educational gains (large university).

Provider-specific evaluation measures were primarily targeted at **students**, but other stakeholder groups were mentioned by a few providers. It was notable that, for students, the predominant method of data collection was surveys, as a self-reported measure, with other student data being used, in the main, as progress indicators. One provider highlighted some clear tensions in using self-reported measures, in the quote below:

- + We recognise that student self-assessment of educational gain has both benefits and downsides. Benefits include students being encouraged to take increased ownership of their learning, becoming more invested in the process and taking more personal responsibility for their progress; students may also be prompted to reflect upon their own strengths and weaknesses (and to consider ways to address these over time). Finally, student self-assessments will also provide academic and support staff with valuable information about the areas in which they require additional help. Conversely, we are mindful of the propensity for response-bias shift (for example, where students over-estimate their level of ability at the outset of the survey, and later underestimate their level of ability as they develop their understanding of the subject matter) and for the need to ask sufficiently detailed questions so as to adequately augment measurements taken from assessment alone (specialist provider).

The above point further supports a multi-measure approach. In their evaluation strategy, another provider referred to deliberate use of one self-reported measure and one behavioural measure for each educational gain. The range of measures used across the providers is summarised in Table 7.3 by stakeholder groups targeted, highlighting how the data was being used.

Table 7.3. Range of evaluation measures of educational gain by stakeholder group

Measures		Forms of evidence
Students		
Surveys		
+ Module evaluation surveys: conducted at the mid-point and/or end-of-module, incorporating items related to educational gain. + Pre-entry survey: charting students' prior achievement (such as experiences, skills, confidence) from which to evidence gain. + Post-arrival survey: logging students' perceptions (such as aspirations, confidence) on entry from which to demonstrate gain. + Skills survey: evidencing skill development over time. + Employability/readiness survey: covering aspirations; perceptions of readiness for onward progression; support needs; applied as one off or on enrolment and annually. + Experience survey: covering different aspects of the student experience across their programme, level of study and/or curricular/co-curricular; conducted annually (with closed and/or open questions). + Pre and/or post-activity survey: for example, for work placements or support sessions to capture perceptions of quality or learning. + Specific surveys: including surveys on motivated strategies for learning; mental wellbeing, self-efficacy. + Pre graduation survey: as a reflection on how effectively they have acquired graduate attributes.		– Effectiveness or quality – Progress or improvement – Personal growth/development – Provider expansion or growth – Positive/change in perception – Need – Importance or value
Student voice mechanisms		
+ Student feedback data: including feedback through representatives or student-staff liaison committee. + Reflection data: conducted as a dialogical session, or reflective log of experiences, learning and/or value, from which to evidence gains.		– Effectiveness or quality – Progress or improvement

Measures		Forms of evidence
Student lag data		– Personal growth/development – Provider expansion or growth – Positive/change in perception – Need – Importance or value
+ Learner analytics data: used to monitor engagement behaviour and target those in need of support to help achieve. + Participation data: count or frequency associated with uptake of opportunities, for example, extra-/co-curricular activities; additional qualifications; placements; professional membership. + Attainment data: including prior attainment, and modular attainment; between-year progression.		
Learning outcomes		
+ Learning outcomes: defined by programme; level of study or module by which to demonstrate gains (including skills, knowledge, behaviours).		
Research data		
+ Research study: conducted by the provider or students' union, to improve their understanding of educational gains or how they apply to different student groups, as well as provide evidence of effectiveness. + Focus groups: held on a regular basis, to discuss educational gains.		
External Examiners		
+ Feedback from external examiners: used as evidence of educational gains, progress, or areas of strength. + Evaluation of external examiner reports: used to evidence quality of practices and that programme design will lead to educational gains.		
PSRB		– Quality data
+ Feedback to PSRB		
Employers		– Relevancy – Distinctiveness
+ Annual employer perception survey: used as evidence of the words associated with their students. + Feedback from employers and/or industry, such as through employer partners + Employer focus groups: to check relevancy and update graduate attributes		

Measures	Forms of evidence
Alumni	
+ Alumni/graduate surveys: reflecting on personal skill development or achievements; skills required within the employment market. + Participation data: uptake of support opportunities	– Effectiveness – Market need

Alignment to dimensions of educational gains

It was noticeable that varied approaches were taken to different dimensions of educational gains (see Section 7.4) as fitness for purpose.

Varying **conceptions and definitions** of education gains influenced the measures used. Among providers articulating their reasoning, or theory of change, TEF metric data was commonly referred to as evidence of student success, with a range of other measures used to monitor progress and inform interventions (lead indicators). Table 7.4 summarises the range of lead and lag measures and indicators used by providers, linked to different dimensions of educational gain.

Table 7.4. The range of lag and lead measures and indicators by dimension of educational gain

Lead measures	Lead indicators	Lag measures	Lag indicators
Personal gain			
Self-reported (qualitative) and behavioural (quantitative) measures: + Surveys (for example, of skills; self-efficacy, perception, satisfaction). + Take up rates (for example, extra-curricular/learning opportunities, awards). + Reflection (for example, log, portfolio, award, report).	- Engagement - Attitudes - Perceptions - Feelings - Confidence - Satisfaction - Skill/value development	Student outcome data: - NSS	- Prior NSS outcomes (including qualitative data)
Academic gain			
Self-reported (qualitative) and behavioural (quantitative) measures: + Value-added metric (entry/exit tariff). + Attainment data. + Surveys (for example, module evaluation). + Continuation rates. + Learner analytics. + Take up rates (for example, academic support). + Reflection (for example, log, portfolio, award, report).	- Performance /attainment - Knowledge - Academic skills development - Satisfaction - Confidence - Engagement - Awareness - Continuation	Student outcome data: - NSS - Completion rates - Degree outcomes	- NSS outcomes (satisfaction/perception) - Completion rates - Degree classification level

Lead measures	Lead indicators	Lag measures	Lag indicators
Professional gain			
Self-reported (qualitative) and behavioural (quantitative) measures: + Surveys (for example, career readiness/registration). + Take-up rate (for example, work experience, wider community activities volunteering, placements). + Count (for example, relevant activities work). + Reflective (for example, log, portfolio, award, report). + Research.	- Knowledge - Professional Skills - Satisfaction - Confidence - Engagement - Awareness	Progression (Graduate Outcomes Survey)	- Highly skilled employment rates - Progression to further study rates - Median salary
Social gain			
Self-reported (qualitative) and behavioural (quantitative) measures: + Surveys (for example, pulse, experience). + Reflection (for example, log, report) + Take-up rate (for example, paid roles, community activities, clubs). + Research (for example, belonging).	- Belonging - Engagement - Attitudes - Perception - Feelings - Confidence - Satisfaction - Skill development - Continuation	Student outcome data - NSS (optional items)	- NSS outcomes

7.3.3 Demonstrating educational gains

While all providers who articulated their evaluative approach referred to multiple measures to demonstrate educational gain, across more than one dimension, student success was evidently demonstrated at **multiple levels** – referencing the provider, discipline and individual success – both within and across submissions, as a further point of differentiation.

+ **Provider success:** demonstrating sustained provider success in achieving educational gains, through more generalised evidence of quality, effectiveness and/or impact, for example through:

- student outcomes and/or across characteristic groups, including completion, progression and degree outcomes
- achievement against OfS benchmarks; APP or provider targets
- reputational (peer-reviewed) achievement, such as league tables, awards, testimonials.

An example of articulation of success is illustrated in the following example:

- Continuation rates of 94%-96% and completion success rates of 91%-100% over the last three years of outcomes further magnifies the distance travelled narrative and is absolutely vital to understand in terms of educational gains (FEC).

+ **Disciplinary success:** demonstrating sustained disciplinary success, using a subject lens by which to evidence quality, effectiveness and/or impact, for example through:

- subject level outcomes and/or across characteristic group, as relevant to specific roles, professions and/or industries
- subject level value-added scores
- discipline case examples and testimonials.

A disciplinary focus on success is illustrated in the following example:

- The number of [provider name]’s graduates in positions and in high profile roles within the charity sector is evidence of the historic and current effectiveness of the College’s approach to supporting its students achieving the intended educational and learning gains (specialist provider).

+ **Individual success:** evidencing sustained personalised success in the achievement of educational gains, through evidence of the effectiveness and/or impact on students.

Evidence sources included:

- outcomes for groups with particular characteristics
 - value-added or distance travelled outcomes, meeting (and raising) students’ aspirations or goals
 - students’ levels of satisfaction, confidence, self-efficacy, agency, mental wellbeing, or awareness
-

- students' engagement with systems for rewarding and recognising their gains.

A student focus on demonstrating success is illustrated in the following example:

- At its core is the students' own account of their confidence in realising their goals, and the progress they are making towards this. Our approach accounts for both how students perceive gains and the effort they expend towards realising them. This enables students to chart their own progress towards their personal goals and for the university to evaluate the extent to which we are meeting their individual needs (large university).

8 Triple Gold: reach, value and impact

This section spotlights those achieving a Gold rating overall as well as in Student Experience and Student Outcomes for the first time, as a different lens by which to interrogate the submissions and offer further insights. The analysis has sought to identify any trends associated with the approach taken by these providers, to identify commonalities, not just in terms of what they did but how they went about it that may have contributed to their success. In particular, the analysis focuses on the rationale (intent) behind their approach, where stated, to understand the key purpose, benefit or relevance, and how reach, value and impact was articulated through their approaches. The analysis does not evaluate the type or quality of the evidence that contributed to their success, reflect on their individual journeys, or consider the TEF panel feedback.

The sample of providers achieving their first Triple Gold rating in TEF 2023 is small (six providers) and thus, these findings come with a caveat that the emerging trends may not be reflected in Triple Gold providers who retained their Gold rating. Also, several trends identified in this sample corroborate with the findings of this study and thus were not unique to the newly acquired Triple Gold-rated providers. It was notable, however, that while these providers were diverse in size, location and mission group, as shown below, there were significant commonalities of approach to achieving reach (across programmes), value (of demonstrable benefit to students) and students' impact (within society) identified.

The subset of submissions awarded Triple Gold ranged in size and type of higher education provision, including a specialist provider. There were differences in the entry requirements and the nature of the programmes being offered, with implications for the overall strategy and tailored and targeted approaches (Table 8.1).

Table 8.1. Characteristics of providers achieving Triple Gold

Size (a)	OfS provider grouping (b)	Key characteristics of the provision
Fewer than 500 students	Specialist: other	Package of PSRB-related courses at different education levels through both taught and distance programmes. Mainly mature, 'second career' higher education students.
10,000 students	Low tariff	Majority young full-time undergraduate student body, mainly on first degree courses.
20,000 students	Low tariff	Multiple campuses and a wide variation of student profiles across programmes (for example, by age, mode of study, prior qualification profile and home/international status).
23,000 students	Low tariff	Majority regional recruitment focus and relatively high shares of mature students. Over a third of all students were studying part-time.
19,000 students	Medium tariff	Majority full-time provision for UK domiciled students with longstanding collaborative arrangements with many regional FE sector academic partners.
29,000 students	High tariff	Track record of research-led education (over 50 research centres) with a significant minority of EU/international students and a commitment to inclusive teaching.

(a) Based on all levels, all modes in 2020-21 (Source: HESA, 2023)

(b) Based on the OfS provider typologies (OfS, 2022b) which splits providers into thirds (the equivalent tariff point thresholds would be 110 points for 'Medium tariff' providers and 126 points for 'High tariff' providers).

All of the providers spoke about commitments to widening access and participation and five demonstrated above-benchmark shares of 'non traditional' students measured through low participation neighbourhood data or free school meal (FSM) status. Four out of the six providers emphasised their strong local and regional focus, which included strong community and school-college linkages locally for widening participation outreach. Relatively high, or increasing, shares of ethnic minority background students were noted in four submissions. Three of the six providers mentioned delivery of programmes with a Foundation Year.

8.1 'Blueprint' for excellence

All six had distinctive focus or approach to achieving teaching excellence – which characterised their identity as an institution and the value they offered to their students. This was articulated by all six in the first few paragraphs of their submission and thereafter repeatedly referenced throughout, providing a coherence of narrative – justifying their investments and framing their use of pedagogic practices, support and resources. This blueprint outlined their 'input' factors that were used to achieve teaching excellence and thus student success.

These distinctive, strategic approaches were said, by five providers, to be driven by their institutional mission or vision. All six providers articulated their approach through an overarching strategy, or set of strategic documents (frameworks, policies, models), which apply to the whole institution. These included reference to an overarching institutional strategy, for example ‘A Future of Excellence’ or ‘Ready for the Future’ and/or more specific ones relating to learning, teaching and/or assessment such as ‘Academic Framework’ or ‘Education and Student Experience Strategy’ or ‘Real World Curriculum Framework’. There were varied stated purposes for having a strategy, including:

- + pursuing a ‘consistent vision to develop graduates’
- + ‘to bring the university together around our common goals of enhancing student experience and success’
- + [to] ‘map a route to ensure that whatever students starting points, they benefit from excellent teaching’
- + ‘to support the continuation of an established institutional culture of excellence’
- + ‘to ensure all students benefit from a diverse and student-centred education and experience’
- + [course level expectations] to ensure all students receive a coherent and well-structured academic experience.

Although these were diverse articulations of strategic purpose, each provider had an outcome-based strategy – relating the setting of a consistent, systematic experience with benefits for their students in order to maximise their success.

All six referred to having diverse student populations, and inclusivity was core to their intent and an inherent part of their approach to achieving excellence. This was expressed in terms of a commitment to social justice, social mobility, social inclusion, inclusivity, or core institutional values. It was common for intentions to reference value to all students.

Five of the six providers detailed four to six strategic *dimensions of practice* as foundational aspects of their student experience (described as characteristics, tenets, strands, pillars, goals, principles). While these dimensions were distinct to each provider, there were commonalities between them, as ways of enriching students’ learning, skill development and application of knowledge. Common themes included research (all six submissions); real-world, experiential and/or authentic learning experiences (five submissions), and interdisciplinary learning (four submissions). Providers articulated a range of ways their distinct practices will benefit the students, for example:

- + [active, research informed, experiential approach] ‘to promote engagement and challenging students to reach their potential’
- + [Future Facing Learning strategy] ‘provides all [provider’s] students with the skills, knowledge and tools to thrive in a complex and uncertain world’
- + [key academic outcome] ‘is that they can demonstrate to prospective employers...that they can operate as capable, reflective community ...practitioners, leaders and managers...’
- + [disciplinary excellence and signature pedagogies] ‘to engage and support student learning’
- + [assessment principles] ‘to ensure that students are provided with the right balance of challenge and support to achieve their best work’.

While benefits are naturally aligned to practice (context), akin to the purposes associated with a whole-institutional strategy above, providers commonly linked their approach (input) to a range of outcomes, in the short and/or long-term, so it was clear how students would benefit.

All six providers referred to systematically integrating their strategic pedagogic approach within the curriculum through their *design (validation/revalidation) process* – reaching both existing programmes and new provision. It was notable that all six providers referred to having external input into programme design, with all six referring to partnerships with students, employers/industry and PSRBs. One provider referred to developing a network of subject-level employer advisory boards to provide continuous input in programme development. External input was described as contributing to the credibility, rigor and currency of programmes; to ensure that they were challenging, building students’ confidence, and/or included up-to-date or discipline-specific skills/knowledge, needed for onward progression.

Furthermore, a standardised foci had implications for staff *academic practice and professional development* (SE4). There was an intent in three submissions to ensure new staff had relevant skills and expertise, or developed them from the outset, with their approach to teaching excellence impacting contracting and onboarding processes. There was a clear intent to build staff capacity to achieve their ‘blueprint for excellence’, with continuing professional development commonly described, such as through mandatory programmes, toolkits, policies, guidance, themed conferences and supporting staff to engage with scholarship of teaching and learning (see Section 2.3.1). Finally, the aim of recognising teaching excellence was referenced in four providers, who had generated teaching promotion pathways, with promotions linked to enhancement by three of those four providers, as exemplified in the following example:

“Individuals progressing through this promotional pathway contribute to key institutional initiatives to enhance pedagogic practice, demonstrating an embedded institutional approach to talent management....Once appointed, Associate Professors and Professors undertake enhancement projects across the institution to deliver pedagogic enhancement at scale”.

In summary, the *reach or scale* of strategic approach across all programmes was an enduring feature across all six narratives. All six had a defined a whole-institutional ‘blueprint’ for achieving teaching excellence across their undergraduate provision – having a unique and distinct foci defined within one or more strategy/ies and a common pedagogy embedded within curriculum design and academic practice/development (see Table 8.2). Their stated purpose demonstrated the *value* to students, with an intent that *all* students, irrespective of their starting point or background, were able to achieve their potential, succeeding within their programme, their onward progression and society.

Table 8.2. Triple Golds: strategic and integrated approaches to teaching excellence

Input: Blueprint for Excellence		
Dimensions of practice	Features	Intent
Strategy for excellence	Coherent set of strategies/frameworks/ policies with defined strategic focus: - aligned to their vision/mission - aspirational and future facing, relevant to students, now and in the future - covering values, expectations and/or approach.	- To drive a culture of excellence or consistent high-quality student experience. - To maximise students' success and preparedness beyond HE. - To impact social mobility.
Pedagogy for excellence	Defined pedagogical approach, aligned to strategic focus, incorporating: - distinctive curricular themes - universal pedagogic methods - wider learning (research/applied).	- To maximise student engagement, and/or stretch. - To widen students' learning and experiences (social, cultural, and work). - To set high expectations and/or promote students' high aspirations. - To improve students' chance of success within/beyond HE.
Design for excellence	Distinct processes to embed strategic/ pedagogic foci in all programmes: - informed by external partnerships (employers, industry, professions) - designed with students - incorporating given curricular content, structures, experiences and forms of support.	- To deliver up-to-date, distinct and relevant programmes. - To ensure a well-structured, coherent student experience. - To provide rigor and credibility. - To build students' knowledge skills and confidence. - To prepare students for onward progression.
Professional excellence	Staff processes, strategically aligned to achieve excellence through: - staff recruitment and induction - targeted continuing professional development at scale - peer review, networks and external engagement opportunities - systems for reward and recognition, including progression pathways.	- To drive their strategic focus. - To build parity of esteem for teaching. - To recognise excellence academic practice. - To build capacity. - To encourage innovation.

8.2 Embedded continuous improvement cycles

All six providers referred to having robust and embedded cycles of continuous improvement, with three broad quality cycles evident – in-year student monitoring, (bi)annual programme monitoring and periodic curriculum review, distinguishable by the regularity and purpose of data monitoring. Three providers described steering an integrated whole-institutional data-driven approach:

- + We encourage all [our] staff to be enhancement-led and metric-minded, creating a gold standard on-course experience for our students, while keeping students' ultimate outcomes and destinations firmly in sight.

For one of these providers, having an integrated approach served to recognise that all staff were jointly responsible and accountable for teaching excellence. Other providers attested to the range of robust processes in place.

The first cycle was **'in-year' monitoring** of predominately student/cohort data, including learning analytics (engagement data), attendance, module evaluation, student feedback/queries/complaints/ appeals. In-year continuous improvement cycles appeared to serve two purposes – to inform the tailoring of practice or targeted academic support – as depicted in Figure 8.1.

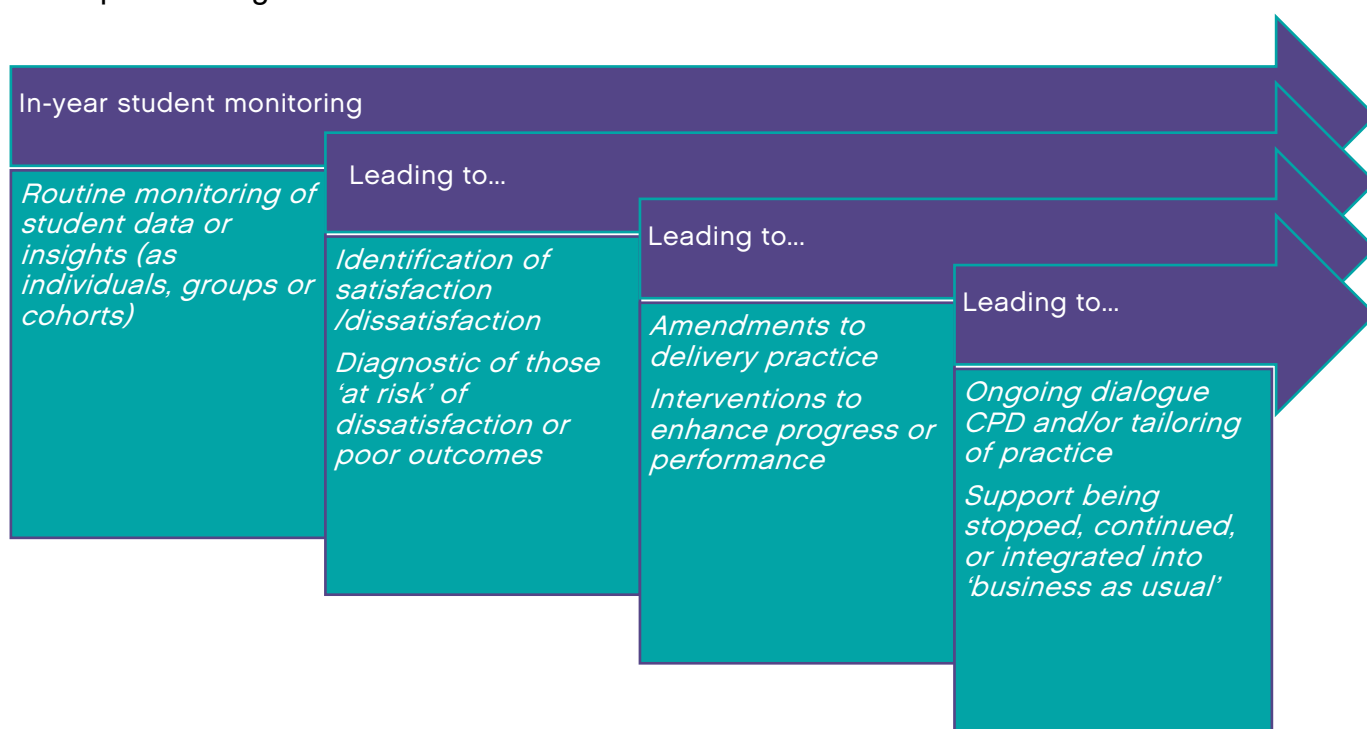


Figure 8.1. In-year student monitoring cycle

Tailoring of practice: it was common practice for providers to have mechanisms in place to receive feedback from students, through student representative systems, module evaluations, pulse surveys (see Section 5.1.2). This was said to 'ensure a more granular approach to gaining feedback and driving improvement' or 'help understand what is working and where to focus attention'. Monitoring varied from within semester/term to end of term. One provider referred to conducting an early review, to effect prompt change:

- + We also make use of locally managed Early Module Review (EMR) across our provision to ensure that any issues are identified and can be tackled in a timely manner, directly benefitting the students providing the feedback.

Two providers referred to having invested in central-driven data systems for module evaluation to drive consistency of data collection and use. This was said to ‘give confidence to all stakeholders’ and enable ‘timely interventions and building staff capacity for evidence-based enhancement through a data-led approach’. Another provider referred to trialling the use of an app within one faculty, in which students can rate their experience and provide a commentary and get a response within a week. This has enabled them to monitor spontaneous and continuous feedback.

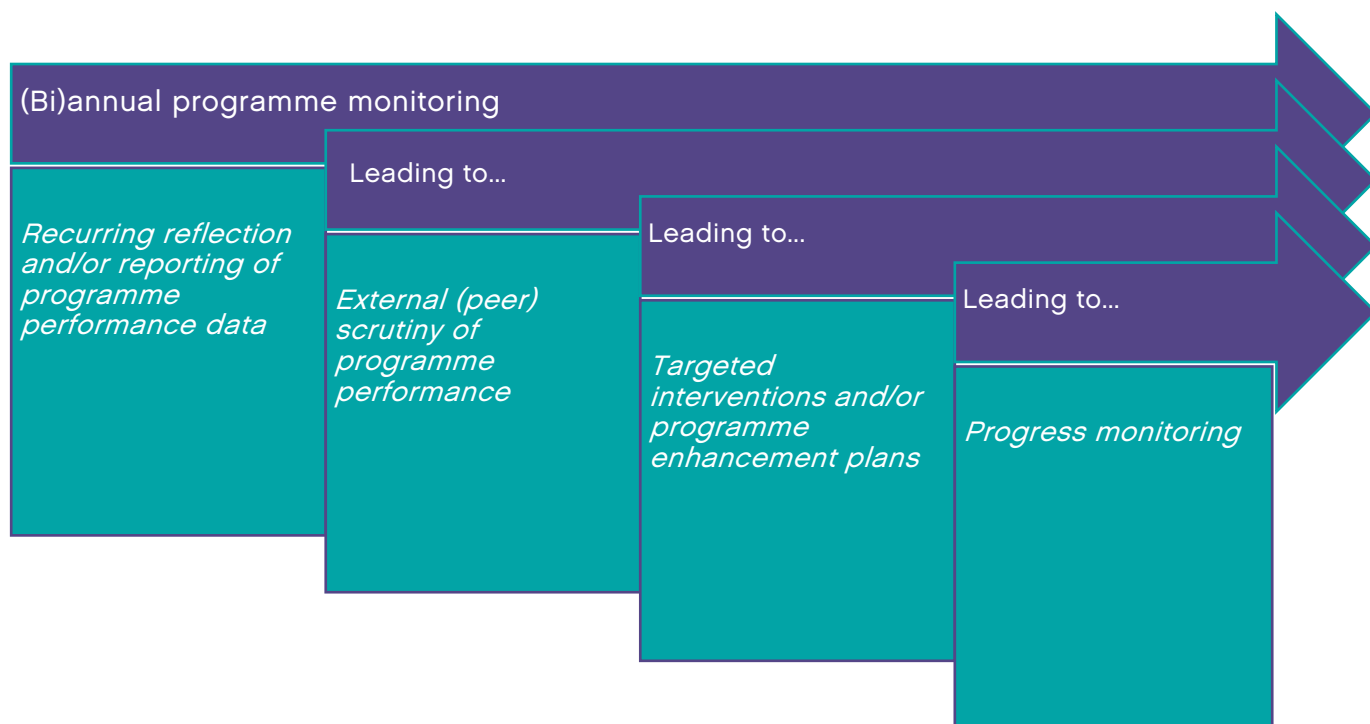
Targeted support: five providers spoke of monitoring leading to targeted support, with the intention of improving the engagement, academic performance, progression, or graduate outcomes – whether of individual students, or selected characteristic student groups. Four providers referred to using data dashboards (see Section 4.2.4) to monitor student data ‘in year’ including ‘student success system’, ‘learner analytics system’, ‘data insight dashboards’, module/course/assessment performance dashboards, with two reportedly linked to personal tutoring and referral systems, and two open to both staff and students. These data dashboards served three purposes – a) wider access and use of data b) holistic view of various data sources c) informing timely interventions as exemplified in the purposes in the following quotes:

“This enables us to identify potential issues as they emerge and take immediate actions, rather than acting solely on historical data to make improvements for future students.”

“This allows personal tutors, and other key members of staff, to access a holistic view of student engagement, achievement, and progression, and to determine what supportive interventions might be required.”

A second continuous improvement cycle of programme monitoring, as a means of ensuring quality assurance and ongoing enhancement, was evident across all six providers. These were either bi-annually or annually, involving consideration of a range of stakeholder data from students (including behavioural, feedback, continuation, academic performance, completion, degree outcomes and progression), external examiners, programme teams and/or employers. The programme quality monitoring cycle is summarised in Figure 8.2.

Figure 8.2. Routine programme monitoring cycle



It was notable that programmes were typically reviewed against defined performance standards or indicators – either set locally or against national benchmarks. One provider highlighted sector-level measures (NSS) as an advantage:

- + Of particular value are comparisons that we can make to sector benchmarks and trends, which provide a valuable opportunity to critically reflect on our own performance and situate it within a national context.

External examiners were referenced by all six providers as important to performance monitoring in providing external peer scrutiny. External examiner reports were used to demonstrate that quality standards had been followed or highlight areas of effective/ineffective practice.

Three providers referred to subsequent action, with two describing enhancement programmes to work with programmes that were not on track to achieve positive student outcomes. This is described in the following case example.

“Drawing on this data insight, for the last three years we have undertaken targeted annual course level intervention work – **the [Provider] Course Enhancement Program (S-CEP)**. To date, S-CEP courses are chosen either because they do not meet internal or external benchmarks for quality or because a course and its continuing robust performance is deemed to be strategically important for [Provider]. Originally focused solely on NSS, our current S-CEP iteration is designed to drive improvements in all areas of the student experience and outcomes aligned to institutional KPIs and external metrics. To demonstrate the impact of our targeted approach, in the first year of S-CEP 13 courses were selected of which 12 are currently still active. Initial analysis of how these courses performed before and after the intervention shows that their total RAG weighted scores (an internal measure that reflects performance across key areas) have improved, moving from an average of 3.27 to 2.81 after two years (the lower the figure the better the performance).”

A third continuous monitoring cycle was evident, associated with curriculum improvement, as depicted in Figure 8.3.

Figure 8.3. Periodic review and improvement cycle



Four providers referred to undertaking periodic curriculum reviews, typically on a five-year cycle, as part of their quality assurance and enhancement process. One provider described this whole-institutional process every five years, involving all academic and student-facing professional service departments, while others appeared to operate more of a rolling programme-level periodic review cycle aligned to validation. While conducted for the purpose of reviewing performance data, akin to annual programme reviews, these periodic reviews were also described as an opportunity to embed distinctive content or approaches

into the curriculum as well as ensure programmes/services are relevant, current and effective. A different form of periodic curricular review was described by one provider, which had undertaken a portfolio review in recent times ‘to focus on fewer, bigger, better’ programmes, and stated that it was “continuously reviewing the shape and size of their programme portfolio”, with the intention of ensuring “our academic portfolio delivers the best outcomes for our students and our region”.

Aligned to curriculum improvement, five of the six provider narratives have an explicit commitment to innovation, as part of their institutional-wide approach to continuous improvement, thus promoting creativity and development in their pursuit of excellence. Four of these providers referred to having schemes in place to reward and recognise colleagues on the grounds of innovative practice, with one offering funding to award winners to further support innovation:

- + Winners are awarded up to £3k to spend on enhancing their learning and teaching practices. Provost Award winners are supported to further develop their effective and innovative pedagogic practice.

Curriculum innovation was also explicitly encouraged through a variety of professional development activities including events (such as webinars, conferences, learning festivals) or more longitudinal activity (communities of practices; learning circles). Such activity was reported to enable dialogue – sharing, inspiring, challenging – as well as enable co-creation to support more sustained policies and practices.

In summary, the prevalence of embedded and integrated data monitoring systems evidences a high level of reach with respect to continuous improvement. The three quality improvement cycles at student, programme and curriculum level (see Table 8.3), were used to provide evidence of having assured and sustained value and success, demonstrable to their students and external stakeholder groups.

Table 8.3. Triple Golds: embedded continuous improvement cycles

Quality of outputs: continuous improvement		
Dimensions of practice	Features	Intent
Continuous improvement of student success	Integrated systems for continuously monitoring and improving student outcomes through: - systematic, consistent, and robust sources of student data - holistic, data monitoring systems to improve access to student data - targeted and integrated support interventions to improve student engagement, performance and outcomes.	- To affect timely and prompt interventions for students who require additional support to achieve success. - To affect prompt adjustments to delivery practices, tailored to students' preferences, needs and/or aspirations. - To maximise academic performance and wellbeing, leading to success.
Continuous improvement of programme excellence	Integrated, robust assurance processes to continuously monitor programme quality through: - reporting processes, requiring team routine programme review, reflection and quality improvement actions - mechanisms to ensure peer scrutiny of programme performance data against quality standards, indicators or benchmarks (including governance) - systemic support interventions for programmes at risk of poor outcomes.	- To prompt routine internal and external scrutiny and dialogue about programme effectiveness and quality improvement. - To sustain high academic standards and student outcomes.
Continuous improvement of curriculum /service excellence	Periodic cycle of curriculum/service review by which to: - receive constructive feedback on the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of programmes - continuously evolve, refine and/or refresh curriculum content and pedagogy - rationalise the portfolio, by reducing, refining, or introducing programmes.	- To standardise the quality and/or distinctiveness of the student experience. - To increase curriculum/service attractiveness, efficiencies, and effectiveness. - To ensure that core values (such as flexibility, inclusivity, sustainability) have been upheld. - To maximise the potential for programme and student success.

Quality of outputs: continuous improvement		
Dimensions of practice	Features	Intent
Innovation for excellence	Explicit commitment to innovative pedagogic practice, through: - staff networking (such as webinars, conferences, learning festivals) - co-creation activity (communities of practices; learning circles) - seed funding staff/student innovative projects - reward and recognition systems.	- To enable continuous enhancement of academic practice. - To cultivate creativity or 'engender a sense of prestige' in teaching innovation. - To motivate, inspire and/or empower colleagues. - To support and maintain high quality academic experience and student outcomes.

8.3 A future focus and impact beyond higher education

Across the six providers, it was notable that among the articulations of student success, there were multiple tiers of impact identified. This is akin to a 'ripple effect' charting the consequence of students' multiple achievements within higher education, impacting not only their future success outside of higher education but also enhancing their potential to contribute to, and influence, the world around them. Among the Triple Gold providers, there was a notable focus on the students' future and/or their wider impact on societies. Each layer of impact connects to the theory of change consideration of outcomes in terms of short-term (learning), medium-term (conditions) and long-term (impacts). It was clear that they were referencing wider 'so what' outcomes and impacts in their narratives.

Student success within HE: all providers articulated a rationale for every student to achieve or reach their full potential as individuals, irrespective of their starting point, benefiting from the wealth of opportunities available across their programme, work-based experiences, and co/extra-curricular experiences (life-wide). Associated with the commitment for all students to reach their full potential, was the goal of removing any barriers impeding their engagement and success, with strategic interventions to facilitate access for disadvantaged student groups, for example, to digital technology, travel, international opportunities or employer networks, as illustrated in the following intervention:

- + Our ELEVATE programme offers targeted support to our Black students to address some of the structural barriers they face in progression to graduate employment or further study and was co-created with Black students and staff.

As a means to support students to define what was unique about what they had achieved, all six Triple Gold-rated providers had defined graduate attributes/competencies/core skills. Furthermore, four had systems in place for students to capture those successes (expressed as a compass, award, living CV) – three operating across the provider and one at discipline-level. Integrated from the outset, they each are said to provide a framework for students to collate and recognise all their achievements, derived from their curriculum, work-based and co/extra-curricular experiences.

Graduate success: unsurprisingly, all providers articulated an intent to support graduate success, with an explicit focus on their future beyond their studies or time in higher education. While an overarching purpose was to enable students' successful progression into highly skilled employment and/or further study, all six providers expressed wider dimensions of graduate success, including:

- + to be lifelong learners
- + to be adaptive and versatile thinkers in a contemporary world that is dynamic and evolving
- + to [be] 'work-ready, world-ready and future-ready' students
- + [to develop] confident, capable graduates with the agency to learn beyond boundaries and succeed in the world around them, regionally, nationally and internationally
- + [to provide] students with the skills, knowledge and tools to thrive in a complex and uncertain world
- + to enhance the life chances of our students through the provision of an excellent education that will equip them to succeed
- + to function effectively in a complex and ever-changing society ...to become motivated, able and agile graduates ready for the current and future demands of employers.

It was notable that a number of these expressions of intent referred to a global context and the uncertainties therein.

Societal influence and impact: this dimension of success is an intent to harness the transformational power of education on on economies, communities and societies locally, nationally and globally. Across all Triple Gold-rated providers, there was a broader strategic purpose of developing students to make a future impact on societies as graduates. This dimension of success goes beyond an intent to ensure graduates succeed personally and professionally, for them to influence the lives of other people and make a difference across the world. All six articulated commitments of this nature, as follows:

- + [to] 'make a meaningful contribution to the communities that they serve'
- + 'to develop graduates who are "sought after for their ability to shape society and contribute to the economy"'
- + to be active agents of social transformation.... [to] 'contribute to an inclusive society and make a difference'
- + 'to develop a global citizen mindset'

- + 'The Sustainable and Global Citizen, able to contribute to a more sustainable future as an informed, responsible and active citizen, both locally and globally'....'The Competent and Confident Professional ready to play an active role in shaping a sustainable society and economy'
- + 'The global mission and world awareness dimension: This is concerned with living and working as people who share in God's work of redeeming and transforming the world'.

In summary, there was a clear intent for students' success to reach beyond higher education and their student experience and outcomes. Three tiers of impact were identifiable across the Triple Gold-rated providers (see Table 8.4), with the intent of maximising success of their students throughout their journey in HE; of their graduates to derive the greatest value from their education in their working and personal lives; and of other citizens, in contributing to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the world around them.

Table 8.4. Triple Golds: future-focused success

Sustained impact		
Dimensions of practice	Features	Intent
Impact on student success	Maximising students' educational gains, across curricular, work-based and co/extra-curricular experiences through: - a focus on students being able to reach their full potential - a commitment to ensuring equitable success for all students - supporting students to connect all their achievements and have them recognised - having clearly defined graduate attributes and distinctive.	For students to: - have agency, self-confidence and personal insight - recognise all the skills and knowledge across every aspect of their student experience - articulate their distinctiveness within the workplace - apply and/or adapt their skills within a range of contexts.
Impact on graduate success	Harnessing the transformative impact of higher education on students as graduates through: - extending their networks (reach) - facilitating lifelong learning - engaging in knowledge exchange activities - experiential, authentic and work-based experiences.	For students to: - meet future workforce demands - be adaptable to the complexities and ever-changing society - continue to learn and be successful as graduates - be socially responsible citizens - improve their life chances.

Impact on society	Preparing students to contribute and/or shape societies in future through: - developing global and responsible citizenship - exploring global issues associated with sustainability and inclusivity - contributing to economic stability and growth.	For students to: - have an impact on sustainability and social justice - be agents of change - improve local, regional, national, and global communities - make a difference to other people - safeguard future societies.
-------------------	--	--

9 Conclusions

This review of a sample of provider submissions in TEF 2023 set out to identify patterns and trends in academic practice presented as excellent by the providers themselves. In broad terms, this is what it has found.

The providers identified a number of **catalysts for improvement** in their provision since the last exercise. Several of these derive directly from the regulatory framework overseen by the Office for Students. Learning from previous rounds of TEF itself, which is now purposefully aligned with the regulator's baseline requirements for quality, continuation, completion and progression (albeit performance above threshold level) is cited prominently (OfS, 2022a, p10). The reference in the submissions to alignment with Access and Participation Plans demonstrating how they were improving equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or one or more protected characteristic groups. The personalisation and tailoring of support for students derives, in part at least, from these priorities. The submissions also reveal more local drivers for improvement – for example, the appointment of a new chief executive, the merger of institutions, or changes to the student body. Furthermore, learning from the experience of the pandemic has also propelled, or at least accelerated, the process of change.

This process of change often took the form of all-embracing institution-wide **strategies for excellence**, tied to their mission and values, and effectively translated, via policies and frameworks, into practice and enhanced student outcomes. The most convincing narratives showed how strategic enhancements of the student experience led directly to improvements in student outcomes and achievement of educational gains (see Section 8).

A further trend was the drive to **coordinate approaches** in teaching and learning in order to ensure a greater consistency and coherence of the student experience. This manifested itself in provider-wide comprehensive frameworks, which encompassed policies to inform (among others) curriculum development and revalidation, the recognition, reward and promotion of staff, and to direct investment in resources and student support.

The **embedding of key institutional priorities** was a further noticeable trend. This derived from established practice linked to institutional mission or from more recent sector-wide developments. There were significant recent developments in **employability**, which extended beyond those providers majoring on vocational provision to those seeking to improve graduate outcomes by making work-readiness an integral part of the curriculum or co- or extra-curriculum. Investing in **digital/virtual learning** was another key priority, accelerated for many by the requirements of the pandemic. This resulted in the provision of staff and student training and enhanced digital support as well as investment in digital resources and infrastructure. There was also evidence of an increased focus on **student belonging and wellbeing**, which took the form of extended student support mechanisms encompassing the whole student journey from outreach to graduation and sometimes beyond and meeting the pastoral as well as academic needs of students. **Inclusion** was another common theme within the submissions. This was leading to the re-design of the

curriculum and approaches to assessment as well as concerted efforts to ensure greater diversity in student representation and narrowing attainment gaps between different groups of students.

The submissions also presented evidence of significant **new activity**, in particular, around the concept of educational gains and new ways of evidencing impact. For most, the need to define, support and evaluate educational gains was a recent and pressing challenge. However, others, who had acted, for example, on the lessons of the Learning Gain project, were able to use or retrofit existing strategies and policies. Providers were also devising measures of impact which went beyond the TEF metrics, as means of conveying student and graduate success. These included qualitative data (from student, employers and other stakeholders) collated through systematic evidence-gathering exercises and the reports arising from external quality assurance processes.

Annex A. Research methodology

Stage 1: development of the coding framework

The research team worked with a sample of seven submissions in order to establish a coding framework for the trends analysis, making reference to the coding framework developed as part of previous TEF submissions analysis (Moore et al, 2018). Although the sample was not representative of the improver group as a whole, it was considered to represent the most improved. The researchers worked independently to identify the key themes that would subsequently be worked up and applied as codes to the relevant segments of the corpus of submissions. As might be expected there were differences in how the researchers approached the work, and this was an intended part of the method in order to make sure that the research took account of a range of perspectives and the content of improver documents as well as the requirements of the latest teaching excellence exercise. The codes were grouped according to different aspects of the TEF requirements (SE1-3; SE4-5; SE6-7; SO1-3 and SO4-6). The proposals were based on seeking to minimise the number of main themes, work towards a hierarchy of sub-themes, minimise the overlaps, and apply cross-cutting themes to give nuanced understanding.

Stage 2: analysis using qualitative data analysis software

The submissions were uploaded into Nvivo 14, and text and coding queries were generated in order to identify themes in the narratives which could then be coded. Because of the diversity of the submissions, including differences in terminology and how aspects of teaching excellence were conceptualised, the work involved many manual searches and manual checks of any auto-coded themes. The submissions were coded in various ways (by phrase, sentence(s) or paragraphs). Manual checks were particularly important to capture intersections in submissions where there was a discussion of a particular theme with the inclusion of evidence or mention of particular approaches or methods. A key challenge was consistency across the body of submissions as a whole. To this end, responsibility was located to a specific team member.

This stage also involved getting insights and taking an overview of themes and codes identified, and clarifying the meaning, and then organising the suggestions. The reading of documents in this stage flagged up a number of findings about the submissions, alongside consideration of context (particularly by type of higher education provider and level of TEF award). The results formed the basis of discussion among the team of the overall findings and informed thinking on the final report.

Stage 3: in-depth analysis of submissions with Triple Gold

This analysis involved in-depth reading of six submissions that achieved an overall Gold rating as well as Gold in both Student Experience and Student Outcomes. It explored and extracted any commonalities of approach taken by these providers, not just in terms of what they did but how they went about it that may have contributed to their success. Once the commonalities were identified, the rationale (intent) behind each approach was extracted to understand the key purpose, benefit or relevance. The analysis further explored how reach, value and impact were articulated through their approaches. The study was undertaken to

provide a different lens by which to interrogate the submissions and offer further insights. It served to corroborate many of the overall findings and conclusions of the study.

Stage 4: reporting

Once the researchers had progressed the analysis and become familiar with the nature of the data, the team agreed the content and report format. The researchers took responsibility for different criteria. The approach to reporting synthesised both stages of research and drew on the individual provider submissions to give examples of different approaches to the enhancement of teaching excellence provision and how this has been evidenced by providers that have demonstrated progress in the TEF since the first round of assessments.

Annex B. Summary of TEF 2023

Summary of the TEF						Relevant guidance
Ratings	Overall rating	An overall provider rating				Part 1: The assessment framework Annexes A and B
	Aspect ratings	Student experience rating		Student outcomes rating		
	Categories	Gold, Silver, Bronze, Requires improvement				
	Duration	Ratings last for four years until the next TEF exercise concludes				
Aspects and criteria	What the aspects cover	Academic experience and assessment	Resources, support and student engagement	Positive outcomes	Educational gains	
	Ratings criteria	The extent to which a provider has very high quality and outstanding quality features across the range of its courses for all its groups of students.				
Participation and scope	England	Participation in TEF is mandatory if condition B6 of the regulatory framework applies to a provider. An eligible provider can participate voluntarily if B6 does not apply to it.				Condition B6 of the regulatory framework Part 2: Participation and scope
	Devolved nations	Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can participate on a voluntary basis.				
	Courses in scope	All a provider's undergraduate courses, and the students on those courses, are in scope of the assessment. Certain courses are in scope optionally.				
Published information	TEF outcomes	OfS publishes the ratings and the panel's reasons for them, the submissions and other information. A provide can display its own rating.				Part 3: Implementation and outcomes
	Annual indicators	OfS publishes TEF indicators annually as official statistics for all registered providers.				
Evidence	Provider submission	A provider submits evidence of excellence in relation to the experience and outcomes of its students (up to 25 pages).				Part 4: Provider submissions
	Student submission	A provider's students can optionally contribute their views on the quality of their experience and outcomes, in a single independent student submission (up to 10 pages).				Guidance on student submissions ⁶
	Indicators	OfS produces indicators based on National Student Survey (NSS) responses.		OfS produces Continuation, Completion and Progression indicators.		Part 5: TEF indicators ⁷
	Accompanying data	OfS produces data about the size and shape of provision for each provider.				
Assessment	Expert review	A panel of experts, including academic and student members, conducts the assessments and makes decisions about ratings.				Part 6: Assessment

Annex C. References

Beech, D (2017) *Going for gold: lessons from the TEF provider submissions*. HEPI report 99. Oxford: HEPI.

Braun, V and Clarke, V (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2): 77-101. Available at: doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2015) *Fulfilling our potential: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7f3f67ed915d74e62294af/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf

Department for Education (2016) *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework: year two specification*. London: Department for Education.

Department for Education (2021) *Government response to Dame Shirley Pearce's Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework*. London: Department for Education.

HESA (2023) '*HE student enrolments by HE provider*'. Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-1

Husbands, C (2017) 'TEF results – the chair's post-match analysis'. *Wonkhe* blog, 23 June.

Kandiko Howson, C B (2018) *Evaluation of HEFCE's learning gain pilot projects year 2 report*. London: Kings College London.

Kandiko Howson, C B (2019) *Final evaluation of the Office for Students learning gain pilot projects. Report to the OfS learning gain pilot projects evaluator*. London: King's College London.

Kernohan, D (2023) 'The Unanswered TEF questions'. *Wonkhe* blog, 2 October.

Kernohan, D, Salmon, M and Bagshaw, J (2023) 'What TEF submissions told us about outcomes'. *Wonkhe* blog, 18 December.

McGrath, C H, Guerin, B, Harte, E, Frearson, M and Manville, C (2015) *Learning gain in higher education*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/11b42adc-534c-481e-91e9-aa87fbddff62/learning-gain-rand-report.pdf

McVitty, D, Matthews, A and Coe, J (2023) 'TEF submissions reveal a range of conceptions of educational gain'. *WonkHE* blog, 18 December.

Moore, J, Higham, L, Sanders, J, Jones, S, Candarli, D and Mountford-Zimdars, A (2017) '*Evidencing teaching excellence: analysis of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF2) provider submissions*'. York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/evidencing-teaching-excellence

Multon, K D, Brown, S D and Lent, R W (1991) 'Relation of self-efficacy beliefs to academic outcomes: a meta-analytic investigation', *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 38 (1): 30-38. Available at: doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.38.1.30

Office for National Statistics (2019) *Evaluation of the statistical elements of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework. A report by the Methodology Advisory Service of the Office for National Statistics*. Newport: ONS. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fc66558e90e0762adb31ee9/5.ONS.Statistical.Evaluation-accessible.Sept.2020.pdf>

Office for Students (2018a) *Securing student success: regulatory framework for higher education in England*. Bristol and London: OfS.

Office for Students (2018b) *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework: year four procedural guidance*. Bristol and London: OfS.

Office for Students (2018c) *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework: findings from the first subject pilot, 2017-18*. Bristol and London: OfS.

Office for Students (2021) *Gravity assist: propelling higher education towards a brighter future: report of the digital teaching and learning review*. Bristol and London: OfS.

Office for Students (2022a) *Regulatory advice 22: guidance on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023*. Bristol and London: OfS. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-22-guidance-on-the-teaching-excellence-framework-2023

Office for Students (2022b) *Provider typologies 2022: methodology for grouping OfS-registered providers*. Bristol and London: OfS. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/provider-typologies-2022

Phoenix, D (2021) *Designing an English Social Mobility Index*. HEPI Debate Paper 27. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/03/04/an-english-social-mobility-index-new-report-proposes-a-ranking-of-universities-impact-on-social-mobility

Scott, L, Blake, S and Dickinson, J (2023) 'What TEF submissions told us about the student experience'. *WonkHE* blog, 18 December.

Strauss, A L and Corbin, J M (eds) (1997) *Grounded theory in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Su, F (2024) 'The datafication of higher education: examining universities' conceptions and articulations of 'teaching quality', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 28 (1): 38-45. Available at: doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2022.2064933

TEF Independent Review (2019) *Independent review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF): report to the Secretary of State for Education*. London: OGL. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60018a0de90e0763a7b4abb0/TEF_Independent_review_report.pdf

Contact us

All enquiries

Email: communications@advance-he.ac.uk

Advance HE helps HE institutions be the best they can be, by unlocking the potential of their people.

We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address inequalities, promote inclusion and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector.

We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Company limited by guarantee registered in Ireland no. 703150. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607. Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. Registered Office: Advance HE, Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR, United Kingdom.

© 2024 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at Advance HE: communications@advance-he.ac.uk

advance-he.ac.uk

in **X** **f** **@AdvanceHE**