



Evaluating Excellence: TEF 2023 Submission and Panel Statement Analysis



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Foreword

Much has changed in English higher education since I published the first sector-wide analysis of TEF (Year 2) provider submissions in my 'Going for Gold' report for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) in 2017.

Since then, several intakes of students have lived through the disruption of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and generative artificial intelligence (AI) has seeped into students' learning habits. For many of today's students, the online learning environment has become just as central to the student experience as the quality of physical estates.

Demand for higher education is also on the rise across England as the country emerges out of its demographic dip and the number of 18-year-olds seeking further study is steadily increasing. This raises expectations on higher education providers to deliver for a rapidly diversifying student population.

Let's not forget the fact, too, that there has been a further eight government ministers in the Department for Education with responsibility for higher education since the TEF was introduced by the Rt Hon Jo Johnson during his first stint as Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation. We cannot, therefore, even be sure if the TEF holds much weight with the government of today or if, indeed, current ministers and officials are fully aware of its initial purpose and intentions.

What is for sure, however, is that over the years the TEF has gained traction within England's higher education sector as an important tool for internal benchmarking and assessing if teaching is both meeting students' expectations and also the needs of our ever-changing world.

Today, TEF provider submissions are accompanied by student submissions. As such, providers, regulators and policymakers are able to build the clearest picture yet of how institutions are delivering for students, what teaching and learning developments are most valued, and what challenges are likely to lie ahead.

As an early analyst of the TEF, I am pleased to see this report by QAA provide fresh insights into the big themes for improving teaching and learning in England's higher education sector based on the 2023 TEF submissions and panel statements. I am not surprised to see employability and industry-related content featuring strongly as we move into a world where students have their eye on good graduate outcomes. Neither am I astonished to see consideration of the 'right' balance of engagement and active learning as providers and students embrace new and emerging modes of course delivery.

What this report shows clearly though, is that higher education providers have not taken their eye off the ball while these 'big ticket' issues play out - foreign direct investment interventions, fostering student belonging, and enhancing student wellbeing are all shown to be growing priorities for institutions up and down the country as the sector seeks to put the needs of students firmly at its heart.

The findings of this latest study of TEF submissions should therefore go a long way to help providers across England share best practice at a time when resources are scarce and collectively uphold the quality and prestige of our world-leading higher education sector as it prepares to deliver for the students - and indeed the nation - of tomorrow.

Diana Beech, CEO, London Higher



Introduction

The Teaching Excellence Framework 2023 (TEF) provides significant insight into teaching and learning practices in England's higher education institutions. The submissions from providers, and in many cases their students, provide a treasure trove of information about what is happening within providers to deliver the student experience.

Participating providers invested a huge amount of effort in collating their TEF submissions. As the UK's expert quality body with a belief in the value and importance of quality enhancement, QAA has chosen to analyse these submissions and the TEF panel statements to enable providers to learn and enhance their own practices through analysis that they may not have the resource or time to conduct themselves.

This report is not intended to make judgements about specific practices or specific providers, but rather demonstrate the extent of work happening within the sector, extracting key themes and learnings from what the panel recognised as excellent practice, that can both help the sector enhance their provision and prepare for the next iteration of the TEF. While only providers in England participated in the TEF, QAA hopes the analysis will be useful for providers across the UK.

QAA recognises that not all providers believe their ratings accurately reflect their provision, and that there are valid critiques of the TEF process. For the purposes of this report, the TEF ratings will be used as they were intended: to denote practice in each feature of excellence that is of 'outstanding quality' or 'very high quality'. Where the panel has stated there is not enough evidence to conclude that a feature is either, we have referred to this in the report as 'insufficient evidence'.¹

One of the strengths of England's higher education sector is its diversity. But this means that, in some aspects of the TEF, it is important to consider differences between providers based on certain characteristics. Where the analysis of a feature of excellence appears to differ significantly by provider type, this is highlighted. Otherwise, the points made will apply to all providers.

¹ These ratings taken together across the seven features of excellence determine a provider's overall TEF rating of Gold, Silver, Bronze or Requires improvement.

Methodology

We produced this analysis using thematic analysis techniques on the qualitative data in the provider submissions and panel statements. We did not analyse the student submissions independently but, when referenced in the provider submissions or panel statements, we used evidence from them to inform the analysis.² Analysis of the quantitative TEF indicators used to determine ratings is not included.³

Using the software [NVivo](#), we coded the submissions by each feature of excellence included in the TEF (for example, SE1 - teaching, assessment and feedback). Most submissions linked their content explicitly to a relevant feature of excellence. Where content was not explicitly linked, we made a reasonable judgement of the most relevant feature. Similarly, where content could have related to more than one theme, we made a judgement of best fit.

We then divided the features of excellence into themes based on the most common topics within the submissions and the types of practice commented upon in the panel statements. We analysed these themes based on the panel's ratings for each feature (outstanding, very high quality and insufficient evidence).

We also analysed panel statements via feature of excellence and the corresponding ratings. We divided statements into two categories for analysis: the evidence used to support the rating given, and the comments made by the panel about the decision.

The TEF submissions and panel statements provide an immense amount of data. Because of this, and the inherent nature of thematic analysis, there are inevitably many ways in which the data could be cut, coded and analysed. This report represents one interpretation but is not definitive.

The analysis also enables providers to consider what distinguished submissions were judged to be of outstanding quality. This analysis does not, however, guarantee that delivery of anything mentioned will result in a specific rating in any future iterations of the TEF.

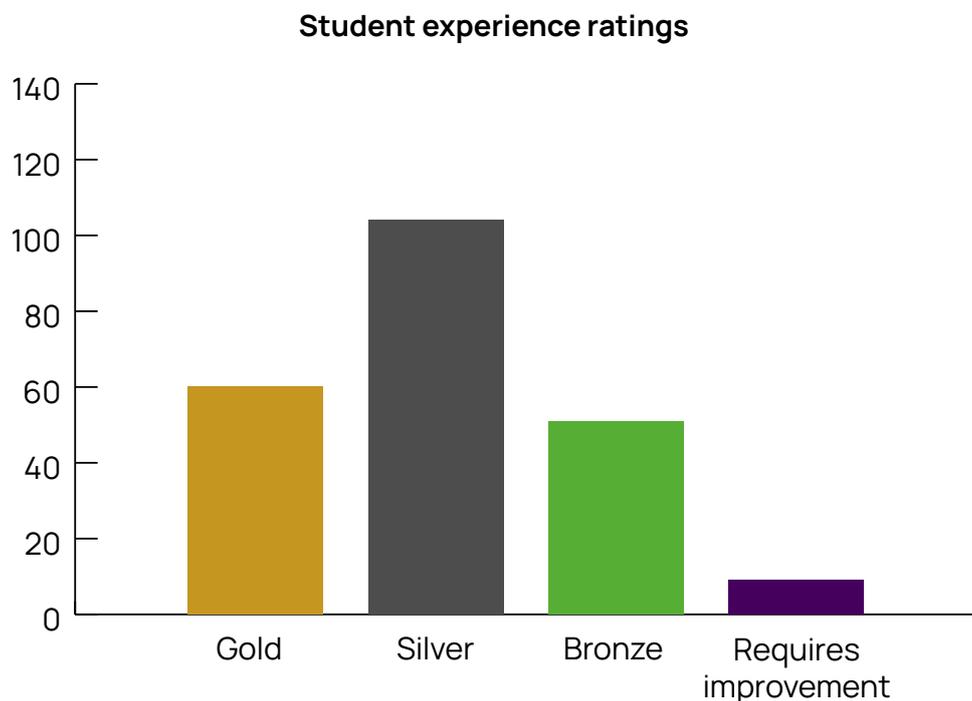
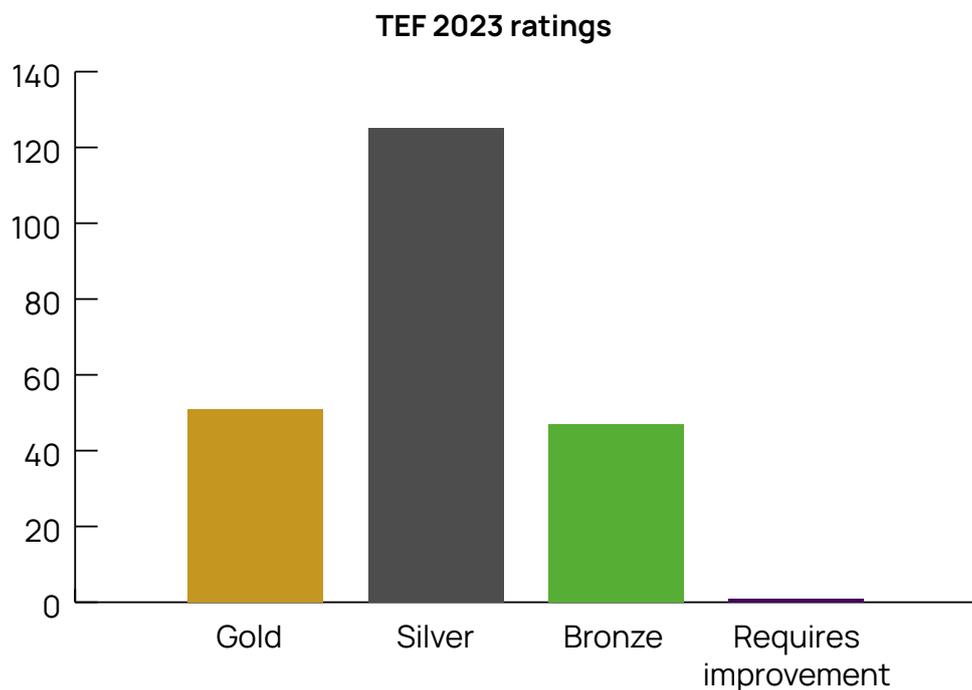
² QAA is exploring a student-led piece of work analysing the student submission.

³ QAA will explore how this analysis could interact with the quantitative data later in 2024.

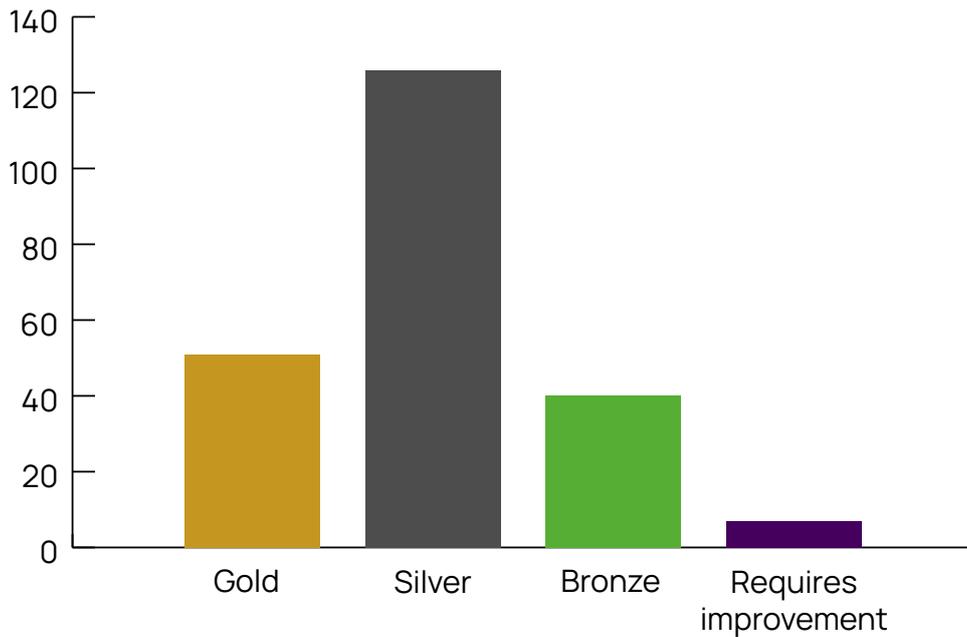
TEF ratings across the sector

The overall TEF ratings demonstrate a bell curve, with most providers (125) receiving a rating of Silver, indicating typically very high quality. 51 providers received Gold, and 48 received Bronze. Three providers who were not awarded a TEF rating were instead ascribed 'Requires improvement for a TEF award'.

The TEF ratings are criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced, meaning that, theoretically, all providers could receive 'Gold'.

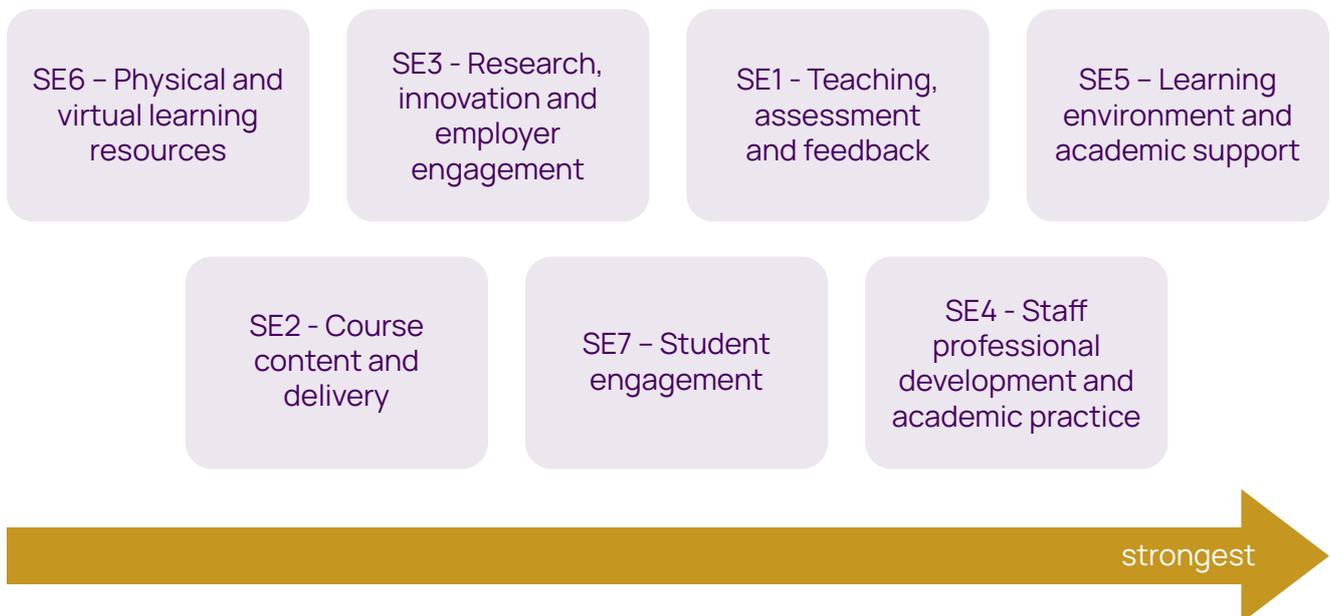


Student outcomes ratings



Features of excellence

The sector's performance across the features of excellence



The above graphic indicates the features on which the sector performed most strongly, although this is not to overstate the difference in performance across the features, which was not extensive. No provider achieved 'outstanding' on all seven features.

Common reflections in panel statements across all features

Scope and consistency

The TEF panellists commended submissions which demonstrated approaches that were of benefit to a broad range of students and courses. The term 'embedded' was mentioned over 500 times across all the panel statements. Providers who used examples which demonstrated an impact on many students did better than those who used more narrow examples that only benefitted a select group, even if the impact on the select group was significant.

Tailoring to groups of students

The submissions more likely to be rated as outstanding demonstrated how these consistent approaches were then tailored for specific groups of students. A recognition that any embedded practices also need agility to impact a broad spectrum of students and programmes was important in demonstrating an understanding of context and the ability to meet the needs of a provider's specific student body.

Demonstration of impact

The panel statements mentioned 'impact' nearly 500 times. Where examples of good practice were cited but there was no evidence of impact, this was drawn upon by the panellists to justify the rating given. This tended to disadvantage newer initiatives that did not impact on students for the whole TEF assessment period, and there are examples of panellists recognising promising interventions that have not run long enough to be able to sufficiently demonstrate impact. Providers who selected examples where they had the data to do so were more likely to be highlighted as evidence of very high or outstanding quality in the panel statements.

Linking to the learning experience

Some submissions mentioned initiatives, such as boosting the provider's civic engagement, but did not articulate how the initiative contributed positively to the learning experience of students. This observation was particularly pertinent in the features regarding research, innovation and employer engagement (SE3), staff professional development (SE4), and some areas of physical and virtual learning resources (SE6). Examples were only considered evidence of very high or outstanding quality if the provider detailed *how* it improved the student learning experience.

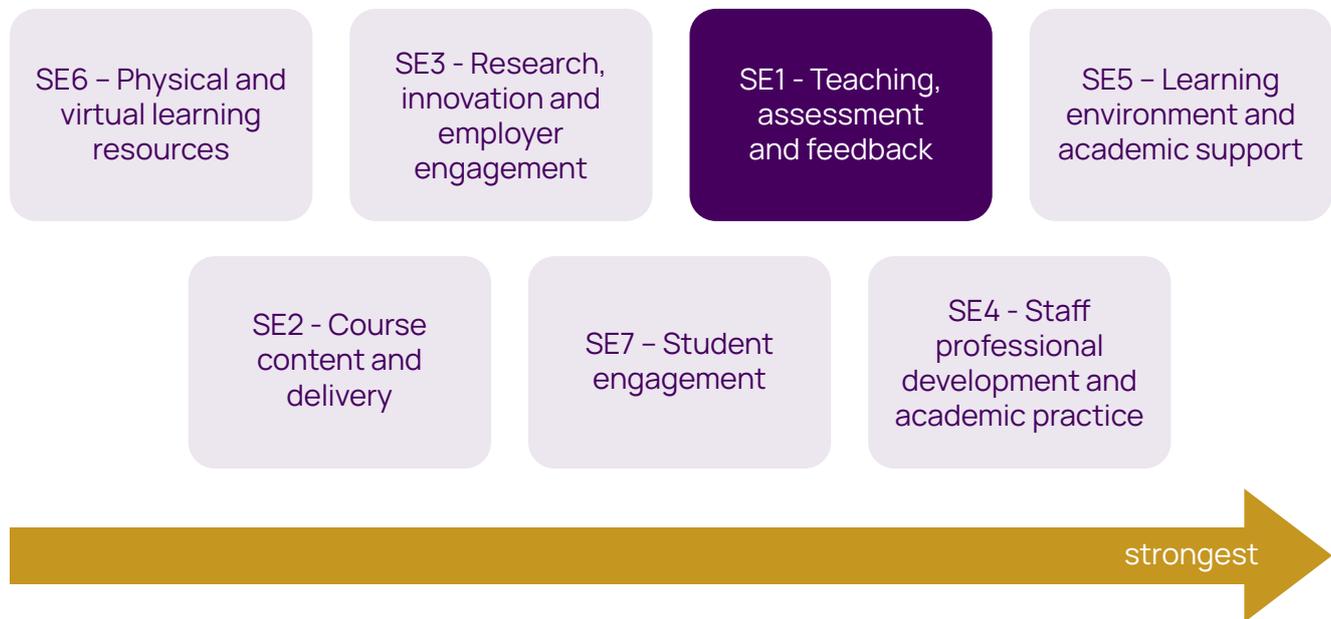
Less content, more context

The panel statements clearly demonstrate that the panellists' role was not to assert their own judgement on what a provider should be delivering for their students. While examples are drawn out as evidence for why a rating is chosen, the panellists' focus is much more on how the practices work in the provider's context, why they were chosen, and what impact they had. Commonalities across panel statements are less about what specific practices were implemented and, instead, where providers made a compelling case for what they had delivered.

Features of excellence



SE1 - Teaching, assessment and feedback





Themes across provider submissions on SE1

The themes detailed below were the most prominent aspects of this feature that provider submissions discussed. The themes are defined and include anonymous examples from submissions rated as outstanding by the panel or their corresponding panel statements, unless specified otherwise.

Teaching approaches

This feature of excellence inevitably overlaps with SE2 (course content and delivery). While delivery methods will be discussed in more detail under SE2, the role of teaching approaches is often discussed in submissions within SE1. Broader than delivery methods, submissions discussed the dynamic between educator and student, the balance in their learning and how different approaches to teaching at different stages and for different purposes contributed to a cohesive learning experience geared towards achieving good outcomes.

An example of an approach cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ *Provider wide teaching and assessment frameworks which take a whole system approach to promote a sense of belonging, sense of purpose, self-efficacy, resilience and engagement; an inclusive education framework which has influenced curriculum and assessment design and seeks to address awarding gaps.* ”

Assessment methods

The methods used to assess students were discussed extensively across the submissions, both as important components of the learning experience itself to support and evidence learning and skill acquisition, but also to facilitate inclusive design. The variety of methods, including examples of innovation, and the use of digital assessment were all discussed at length.

Examples of assessment methods cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ *Using assessment methods directly relevant to its student groups, such as pass/fail assessment, negotiated final projects, and group critique.* ”

“ *Clearly communicating with students around its ‘learn through doing’ approach, with assessment briefs that allow students to interpret and apply concepts to their practical work.* ”

➤ Sub-theme: Authentic assessment

Authentic assessment was discussed extensively across the submissions. Methods included use of live briefs (current real-world examples presented by an employer) and practical assessments, and significant use of digital assessment and measurement of digital literacy, indicating that these skills are considered important in preparing students for life and work after graduation. There was an interesting disparity on this topic - in provider submissions, the concept of authentic assessment was explored significantly with over 1,800 mentions, whereas it is only named in 14% of panel statements as evidence of outstanding quality. Authentic assessment is broader than industry alignment, but this aspect was where the panellists made the most comments.

Example of authentic assessment cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ *The focus is on authentic assessments which recognises that assessment is a learning experience designed to help students to progress through the programme. The student submission describes the assessment format as an appropriate preparation for work and careers.* ”

➤ Sub-theme: Formative vs summative assessment

The balance between formative and summative assessment was discussed in many submissions and the use of formative assessment and feedback was highlighted by the panel, particularly in statements for providers rated as outstanding for this feature.

An example of formative assessment cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ *There is evidence in the provider’s submission that students are assessed in a variety of ways and receive constant diagnostic and formative feedback on their work. The student submission states that ‘they don’t receive lots of written feedback but do have a constant ongoing dialogue with tutors’.* ”

Assessment standards

Submissions detailed at length how providers maintain the rigour and strength of their assessment practices, using external sector reference points, internal moderation processes and in their approach to marking.

An example of a method to maintain assessment standards cited by the panel as evidence of outstanding quality:

“ *The policy includes provision for an ‘Assessment Scrutiny Panel’, whose primary function is to ensure that assessment conforms with approved programme and module specifications. Most of its members are of course teaching staff, however, membership also includes the student support officer and a member of the Learning Resource Centre staff, who are there to ensure that assessments are equitable, that reasonable adjustments relating to disability are anticipated and consequent learning resource requirements can be met.* ”

➤ Sub-theme: External examiners

Comments from external examiners were utilised throughout submissions but within assessment standards, providers also discussed how external examiners are used to maintain standards, indicating the weight this method still holds within sector practice.

An example of how a provider rated as outstanding for this feature used external examiners to maintain assessment standards:

A key measure of impact regarding our assessment strategy is the feedback we receive annually from our External Examiners in their reports. In addition to the sign off regarding the quality and standards of assessment, the qualitative comments are extracted and thematically analysed, and are then reported annually.

➤ Sub-theme: Adjustments and penalties

Within the submissions' discussion of assessment is how adjustments and penalties are implemented where necessary. The volume of discussion on this is likely influenced by the proliferation of 'no-detriment' policies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An example of an adjustment cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

Its response to the coronavirus pandemic, with adjustments such as 'bioscience at home' kits.

Academic integrity

Academic integrity was an important topic across the submissions and measures to protect against academic misconduct were cited as evidence of outstanding practice by panellists. Artificial intelligence (AI) was only mentioned in a handful of submissions, likely due to the infancy of the sector's response to AI at the time submissions were written and the fact that submissions will have drawn from historic practice. The discussion of academic integrity is likely, therefore, to develop significantly in the next iteration of the TEF.

A method to maintain academic integrity cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

Developed in partnership with the Students' Union, the University's Academic Integrity Module takes students through the definitions of academic misconduct with advice on how to ensure they are working with integrity in preparing and submitting academic assessments. Completion of the module is contingent on students passing a quiz which reviews their understanding of key issues. Students are encouraged to complete this before they submit work for assessment.

Feedback

Feedback is considered integral to 'closing the assessment loop' and vital to ensuring assessment is a tool to support and not just evidence learning. Submissions discussed a variety of methods for providing feedback, including written, verbal and in some cases, video or audio recordings. Timeframes were also discussed, particularly when efforts had been made to shorten response times, sometimes in response to student feedback, or when response times were particularly short.

Examples of feedback practices cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ *Examples of a personalised academic experience using content that is targeted towards student learning needs, reflecting on their starting points and supporting their learning. This includes one-to-one tutorials providing opportunities for personalised feedback and discussions on progression, skills development, and areas for improvement.* ”

“ *Feedback practices for supporting the progression and attainment of all student groups. The student submission confirmed that 'feedback is paced as staff help students realise their full potential.'* ”



QAA reflections

1 Frameworks that produce consistent approaches and broad evidence dominate submissions rated outstanding

Over a third of panel statements reference a teaching or assessment framework as evidence for an outstanding rating. They are often used as a precursor for an embedded approach across a provider, delivering a foundation on which all programmes can draw.

This approach was less reliant on selective evidence, which was one of the biggest limitations highlighted as insufficient evidence of very high quality. Surveys without response rates, focus groups without a clearly defined scope or representation and specific comments were not considered to demonstrate a broad enough scope of impact.

An example of a framework cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“The panel noted that the provider’s strategic teaching, assessment and feedback framework is clearly articulated across both the provider and student submission, with compelling evidence that this strategy informs provision. The provider’s submission refers to four key pillars that guide its work to improve student learning and outcomes: transitions and careers; addressing awarding gaps; reviewing regulations; and developing student engagement.”

2 Distinct assessment characteristics were most likely to be cited as evidence of outstanding quality

The following characteristics of assessment were most frequently highlighted as evidence of outstanding quality in the panel statements.

Inclusive assessment

For example:

A provider wide focus on inclusive assessment practice, in collaboration with an external regulator and other providers. Students are given tailored training on 'readiness for assessment' and digital assessment literacy, including peer marking.

Flexible assessment

For example:

Flexible online assessments and proactive support for resources has resulted in a significant decrease in students delaying assessments due to an accident or illness.

Innovative assessment

For example:

Innovative assessment, including televised class debates followed by reflective summaries.

Employment or industry-aligned assessment

For example:

Student assessments made by the provider are reflective of industry - they are public performances, auditions or portfolio submissions in a variety of settings. There are opportunities to be assessed by external judges as well and the student submission suggests that students focus on their collective development rather than individual rivalry.

Assessment tailored to the student body

For example:

Tailored assessment support for students from ethnic minorities aimed at improving the experience and outcomes of students.

3 A data-driven approach is commended most within this feature

Much more than other features, the evidence cited to explain an outstanding rating included data-driven approaches, the use of analytics to determine how teaching and assessment was delivered, and evaluation techniques to enable continuous improvement.

Examples of data-driven approaches cited as evidence of outstanding by the panel:

Use of analytics to enhance monitoring of student feedback and taking a data-driven approach to address dips in student satisfaction. Courses that go through this process consistently outperform others in terms of student satisfaction.

A systematic approach to programme enhancement drawing on data including feedback from students, external examiners, and student outcomes data. Staff track the success of each programme and monitor enhancement actions in response.



QAA resources for SE1

If you would like to explore the areas raised in this section further, we recommend the following resources as a starting point:

- [The Inclusive Education Framework](#) - Led by the University of Hull, this QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project generated a cross-institutional framework and self-directed online learning resource bank that features practical materials to help implement inclusive educational practices effectively.
- [Hallmarks of Success: Assessment in Digital and Blended Pedagogy](#) - This playbook can be used to stimulate discussion about how assessment can support student engagement, achievement and skills development; to devise assessment practices that enable students to use feedback to enhance their work and learning strategies; to review strategic approaches to assessment design and delivery at course or programme level.
- [Understanding academic integrity](#) - Resources and guidance to support you with enhancing and promoting academic integrity, managing academic misconduct processes, assessment and digital assessment security, and artificial intelligence. Learn about contract cheating, student attitudes to misconduct, and the regulatory frameworks and legislation that underpin how the sector maintains standards in this [QAA Membership Podcast](#).
- [Using outcomes-based approaches to learning, teaching and assessment](#) - A set of resources aimed at supporting higher education providers to address challenges such as overassessment, demands for increasingly flexible student pathways, and forms of assessment that are more directly related to graduate skills and scenarios.
- [External Examining Principles](#) - External examiners play a crucial role in ensuring the quality and fairness of assessment in higher education. This set of principles and reflective questions can help you to better understand the essential role of the external examiner system and ensure your institution achieves full value from the network of examiners who are engaged across the sector.



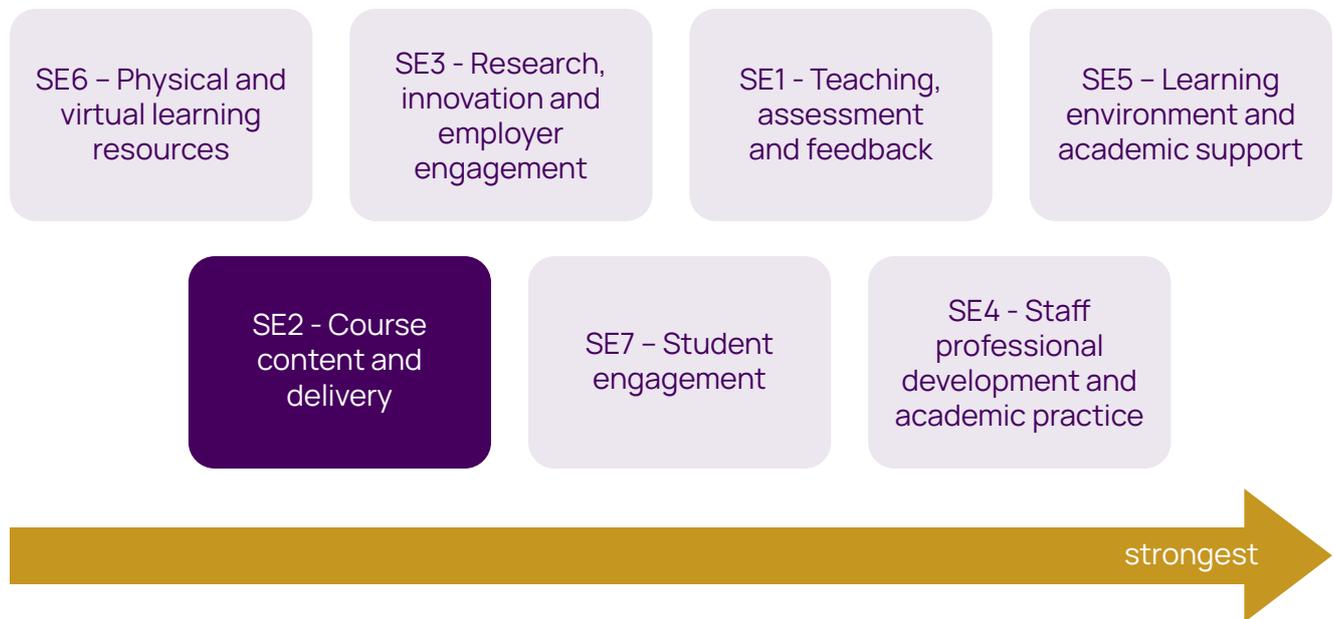
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SE2 - Course content and delivery





Themes across provider submissions on SE2

The themes detailed below were the most prominent aspects of this feature that provider submissions discussed. The themes are defined and include anonymous examples from submissions rated outstanding by the panel or their corresponding panel statements, unless specified otherwise.

Curriculum design

Submissions detailed a variety of approaches to curriculum design, including practice-led, research focused, active engagement-led and industry-aligned, and the processes involved in developing them. Many providers have undergone curriculum transformation projects in recent years that were highlighted as examples of developing good practice.

An example of curriculum design cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ *Implementing a project that ensures the curriculum promotes excellence, is practice led, applies knowledge, enables research, fosters interdisciplinary learning, and prioritises employability. Emphasising a practice led curriculum with strong employer engagement and a focus on applying research and/or practice elements to enhance student engagement.* ”

Course content

Submissions discuss the process for designing and reviewing the course content and how the content creates engagement with students and their learning experience. Some providers discussed the balance between foundational and stretching material, the inclusion of contemporary thinking and selection of content designed to inspire students.

An example of a panel comment on a submission whose course content was rated outstanding by the panel:

“ *The provider and student submissions provided evidence of innovative and highly effective course design and content that inspires students to actively engage in and commit to their learning.* ”

Content beyond campus

Content outside of the set structures of each programme, such as years spent studying internationally or on placement, was recognised as an important contributor to the student learning experience and discussed as an example of additive content experienced outside of the traditional provider setting.

An example of international study opportunities cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ *Excellent use is made of international mobility schemes, including short periods supported by bursaries, which are positively received by students; an Intercultural Training programme to encourage global competencies; an International Intensive Study programme, which provides cross-departmental intensive; credit-bearing modules for students at all levels with key international partners.* ”

Year-on-year progression

The teaching and material of an undergraduate degree spans from Level 4 to Level 6⁴ and some submissions detailed how this influenced the structure of their programmes to enable and support students to progress through these levels and achieve their qualification.

An example of progression from Level 4 cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

Programme-level assessment is considered such that students develop and are assessed on skills from level 4 that they will meet again later in their award, giving them an opportunity to build on their skills development as the award progresses.

Delivery methods

More operational than teaching approaches, delivery methods were detailed across submissions to highlight the variety of teaching and the intention behind certain methods, whether to achieve specific outcomes or to deliver a tailored approach to specific groups of students.

An example of delivery methods considered innovative by the panel and cited as evidence for an outstanding rating:

Through innovative methods, including: placement learning for all geography students; student learning through Law and Sports Therapy clinics; a review of assessment in Nursing and Midwifery; a live assessment centre for Business students; Graphic Design students enhancing wards of Lincolnshire Hospitals; the College of Arts employing live projects working with local and national businesses in the creative industries.

Delivery structure

The construction of the teaching year and the structure of courses within this (for example, class sizes, timetabling, contact hours) were discussed in many submissions.

Examples of delivery structures detailed in submissions that contributed to an outstanding rating from the panel:

We responded to student demand by restructuring our delivery so they can attend classes on fewer but longer evenings, supported by excellent online resources. We have extended three-term learning across all departments so that students can learn at a more even pace across the year.

⁴ These levels refer to the [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#) (FHEQ).



QAA reflections

1 Demonstrating stretch and challenge is the biggest distinction between outstanding quality and very high quality

The TEF guidance expects providers to demonstrate that they are stretching their students and the ability to demonstrate this was the biggest differentiator between submissions rated as outstanding, very high quality and insufficient evidence. The distinguisher in the TEF guidance between outstanding and very high quality is to stretch students to develop knowledge and skills 'to their fullest potential'. This was demonstrated in a variety of ways, including rigorous assessment standards that challenged students to achieve certain marks, continuous verbal feedback or mid-term feedback, and mandatory mid-term tutorials that acted as motivators for students.

Examples cited as evidence of outstanding quality that demonstrate methods for stretching students to their fullest potential:

“ A truly employer led curriculum, with authentic assessment, practice-based teaching methodology, employer advisory boards and course content responsive to local employer needs and priorities. ”

“ The provider submission includes 11 subject-specific examples of how course content stretches students' skills, demonstrating impact with external data and recognition. ”

“ Feedback from students included 'in simulation you can see the gaps in your knowledge, and it acts as a stimulus to learn'. ”

There is some recognition of the balance needed between stretch and wellbeing - particularly where students have highlighted the challenges to their wellbeing from excess stretch - but these were not given as much weight by the panel as evidence of where stretch was successfully achieved.

2 Illustrating how students are actively engaged in their learning was important to secure ratings of *very high quality* and *outstanding quality*

In many panel statements, active engagement and demonstrable commitment to learning go hand-in-hand with stretch and challenge. Submissions which were rated outstanding distinguished themselves in their discussions of student engagement in the content and delivery of their course, including examples which demonstrated active learning. Active engagement is measured through methods such as curriculum co-design, independent study or delivery methods that require active participation. The panel ultimately commended those whose evidence demonstrated that their students were engaged in and committed to their learning irrespective of the specific practices employed to achieve this.

An example of negotiated assessment, which is cited as outstanding evidence by the panel:

“ Students can input and shape assessment in a personalised and career focused manner. This leads to many opportunities for students to develop their own distinctive artist identity and voice. ”

An example of active learning techniques cited as outstanding evidence by the panel:

“ Active learning approaches are developed across the curriculum and include practice-based learning, group work, gamification and flipped approaches to teaching practices. ”

3 Delivering a tailored course experience was a key factor in achieving an *outstanding* rating

The panel statements for submissions that were rated outstanding explore how course content and delivery enable students to receive a tailored learning experience. Examples include module selection (one provider has a catalogue of over 50 elective modules) and the use of small group teaching to enable educators to tailor their delivery more easily. The practices inevitably look different across course programmes, but outstanding providers tend to have developed an embedded approach that allows for agile tailoring.

An example of a provider’s approach to module design that enables agile tailoring, cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ ...our bespoke Module Design Toolkit (comprising good practice suggestions, examples and recommendations) which has been developed in conjunction with a student intern to support all Course Teams to create high-quality experiences that meet student expectations, provide intellectual challenge and promote engagement in learning. Our Module Evaluation Survey helps us to understand where this is working and where we need to focus attention. Utilisation of module-level student feedback enabled a local focus on improvement and enhancement, drawing upon targeted staff development (both internal and external) and the publication of specific resources and guidance for course teams. ”



QAA resources for SE2

If you would like to explore the areas raised in this section further, we recommend the following resources as a starting point:

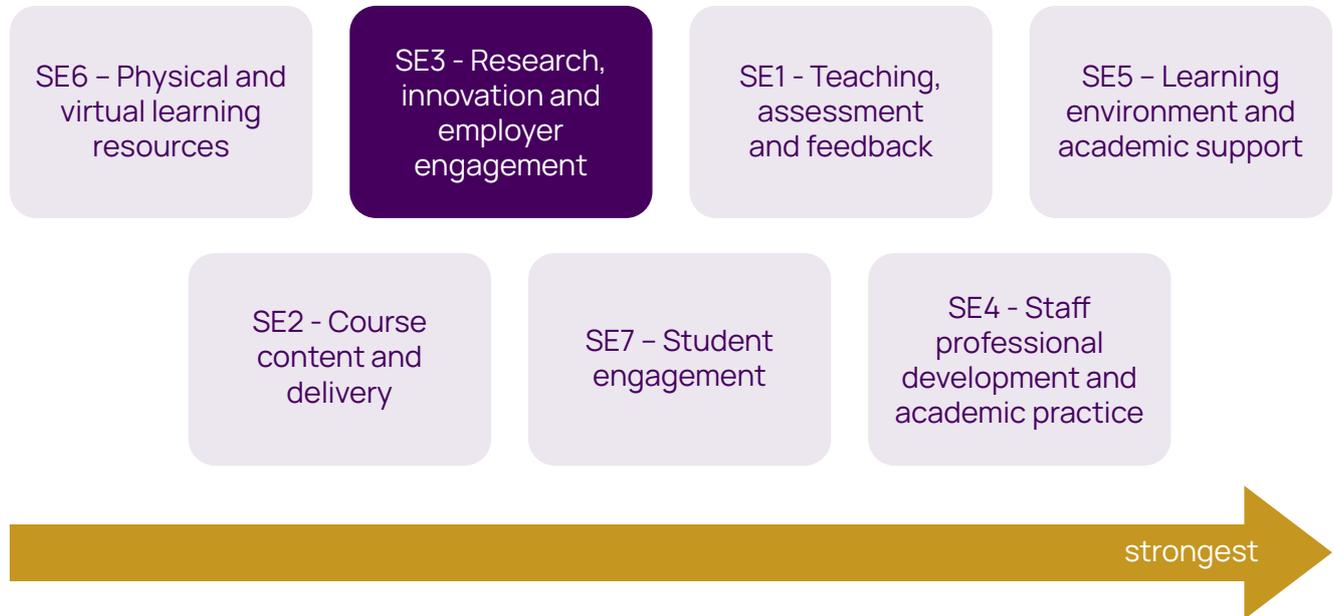
- [The rewards of collaborative observation](#) - This QAA-funded project promotes opportunities for students and staff to reflect on their experiences of learning together and consider how these reflections affect their overall understanding of their subject areas. Includes a practical step-by-step guide and resources to support the training, preparation and implementation of a cycle of collaborative observation as a quality enhancement tool for students and staff. Find out more in this [QAA Membership Podcast](#).
- [Hallmarks of Success: Course Design, Approval and Management](#) - The third playbook in the Hallmarks of Success series, this edition can help higher education providers consider what success in course design, approval and management looks like in blended and digital environments within their institution.
- [Active online reading](#) - This QAA-funded project includes pedagogic resources, case studies and examples of effective approaches from current students to help enhance students' reading practices.
- [Subject Benchmark Statements](#) may also be a useful resource for those exploring their course content.



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SE3 - Research, innovation and employer engagement





Themes across provider submissions in SE3

The themes detailed below were the most prominent aspects of this feature that provider submissions discussed. The themes are defined and include anonymous examples from submissions rated as outstanding by the panel or their corresponding panel statements, unless specified otherwise.

Research culture

The role of the broader higher education experience in exposing students to, and engaging them with, research was recognised across submissions. Providers therefore detailed the impact a wider research culture within the institution had on their students, including the delivery of research conferences and provider-wide research and employer engagement events.

An example of initiatives creating a research culture considered evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ A thriving research culture promoting artistic innovation, exploration, and self reflection, including hosting a world leading centre for performance science. ”

Research-informed learning

To deepen and tailor the research culture within a provider, most submissions also discussed how research feeds directly into their teaching and the learning experience. This took a variety of forms, both within and across providers, including research-based activities and assessment, contemporary research informing content and staff engaging students with their own research as part of the course.

An example of the panel's comments on research-informed learning in a submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

“ The panel noted that it is evident within the provider submission that research-led teaching is a core component of all of their courses and also that teaching methodology research informs specific teaching approaches. ”

Students as researchers

Many submissions highlighted examples of students explicitly engaging in active research activity, either contributing to or supporting ongoing research, or conducting it independently. In some cases, this took place within the course itself as part of assessment, or through course-related opportunities; but provider-wide initiatives were also utilised to enable students to conduct research, and staff with research profiles often engaged their students in support of that research.

An example of student research from the panel statement of a provider rated as outstanding for the feature:

“ The provider submission describes a research project involving Sociology and Computing students, investigating levels of unemployment in local minority ethnic groups, and the support available for those groups. This project gives students chances to shadow research leads and help with transcribing interviews, and research outcomes have informed the social work curriculum. ”

Course design engagement

One of the most prominent examples of employer engagement within a provider was involvement in course design. Input received from employers or industry professionals ensured courses were relevant and up-to-date, successfully supporting students with potential career opportunities post-graduation. Most, if not all, providers have formalised advisory boards that they utilised in course design, but some also had more informal mechanisms to engage employers.

Examples of employer engagement in course design cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ In 2019-20 the provider convened 33 curriculum co-design groups that brought together employers, students, learning technologists, educational developers and course teams to refresh the curriculum. ”

“ Employers feed into curriculum design to ensure alignment with professional, community, and industry needs and expectations. These include employer advisory boards, insight events, and round tables. ”

➤ Sub-theme: Accreditation

Most submissions detailed the extent to which their courses were accredited with PSRBs, and some explained how this enriches the learning experience and supports students to progress following graduation. The prevalence of PSRB accreditation was also commented upon in panel statements as evidence of very high or outstanding quality.

An example of the PSRB engagement panellists cited as evidence for submissions rated as outstanding for this feature:

“ There are 65 programmes which are accredited by professional statutory and regulatory bodies (which collectively represent 2,000 graduating students per year), including the triple crown accreditation in the business school. ”

In-course opportunities

In addition to students' research opportunities within their course, many courses also provide students with the opportunity to engage with relevant industry professionals and employers during their course. Some take a more ad-hoc approach, through engagement events, whereas other submissions detailed extensive engagement that included placements, live briefs for assessment and field trips.

An example of in-course opportunities the panel cited as evidence of outstanding quality:

“ A wide range of employer and partner engagement activities. Among others, these include work placements in an industry of choice, short term paid roles with businesses, practice learning designed with local and regional partners, and problem based learning drawn from real cases. ”

Staff profiles

There is inevitable overlap in this theme with SE4 (staff professional development and academic practice). However, many providers chose to highlight the research or industry credentials of their staff within this feature to demonstrate the impact this has on the learning experience and their students' involvement in research and industry projects, in addition to enabling them to ensure the content they deliver is relevant.

An example of staff profiles and their impact on the learning experience cited as evidence of outstanding by the panel:

“The provider says that it has a research-informed teaching approach, with teaching teams including industry practitioners. All permanent academic staff are active in research and are expected to either hold or be working towards doctoral qualifications.”



QAA reflections

1 Research activity and employer engagement *must* be linked to the learning experience to access higher ratings

Research activity and employer engagement provide a range of benefits to a provider and its local, national and global community, but TEF panellists were primarily concerned with how it benefits the provider's student population. Panellists tended not to view examples which failed to highlight how the activity linked back to the academic experience as sufficient evidence of very high or outstanding quality, even if benefits like an economic contribution to the local area were detailed.

Research and employer engagement needed to be embedded into the academic experience. While staff research and industry profiles perhaps demonstrate implicit benefits, unless this was explicitly linked to the curriculum being delivered, the panellists found a lack of evidence. Similarly, smaller examples such as final-year projects that failed to demonstrate a strategic and thoughtful approach across the institution tended to result in a rating of insufficient evidence.

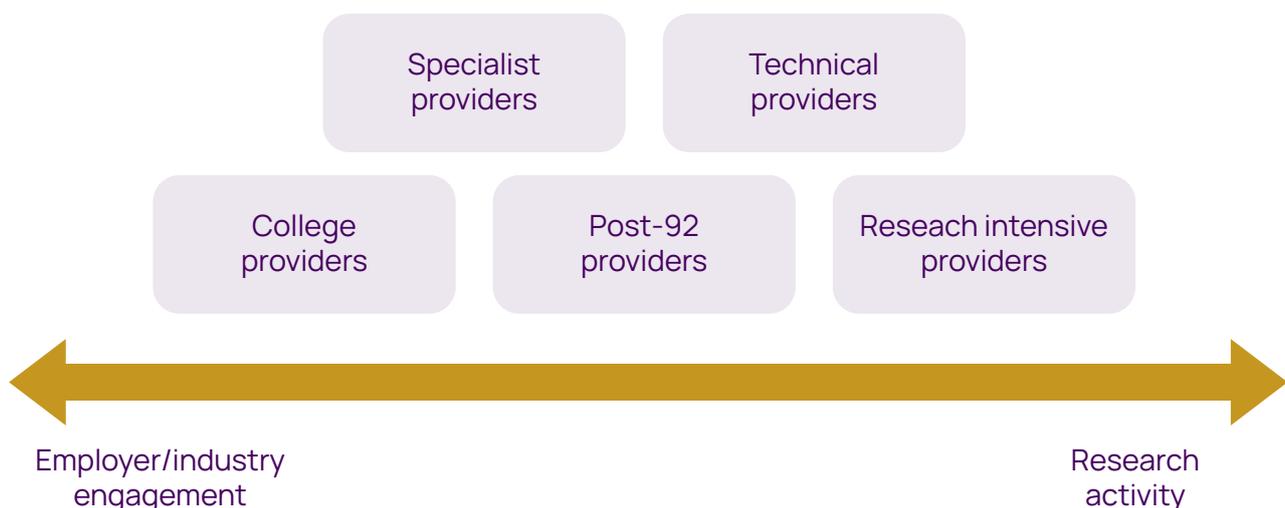
An example of the panel comments for a submission rated as outstanding which linked their activity to the learning experience:

6 The links between the educational provision and professional practice and industry are well articulated in the provider submission. The panel noted that teaching staff are experts from the field. Many still have active careers and can bring their 'real world' experiences to students. Feedback is rooted in industry practice and given by experts in the field; comments from external examiners reflect this point.

2 The balance of employer engagement and research was considered in the provider's context

The panel considered the balance of employer engagement and research at the discretion of the provider, provided the submission explained how the balance worked within their individual context. Explanations for limited research capacity - such as in college providers - was more readily accepted than lack of employer engagement, perhaps demonstrating the importance of an employer focus that has increased in the higher education sector in recent years.

Analysis of the balance across provider type produced the following results:



3 Students' research and industry identity was as important as staff's

In addition to research and industry practice informing their learning, outstanding submissions included evidence of students forming part of the research community, developing an academic identity, and building a sense of belonging in research culture. This demonstrated clear impact from the research and industry activity, and enabled providers to demonstrate a consistent approach rather than pockets of impact occurring where research or industry activity was particularly high among staff. Some student submissions expressed concern about the prioritisation of research over teaching. This could either be a barrier to building students' research identities or could suggest that building this identity among the student population could mitigate some of this concern.

Examples of initiatives which embedded students in the research community, cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

6 *Innovations such as a law clinic, architecture superstudio, the Inspired Festival, and InnovationFest, which offer tailored opportunities for students to develop skills and engage with employers.* 9

6 *A scheme providing opportunities and funding for students to participate as co-researchers with academic staff.* 9



QAA resources for SE3

If you would like to explore the areas raised in this section further, we recommend the following resources as a starting point:

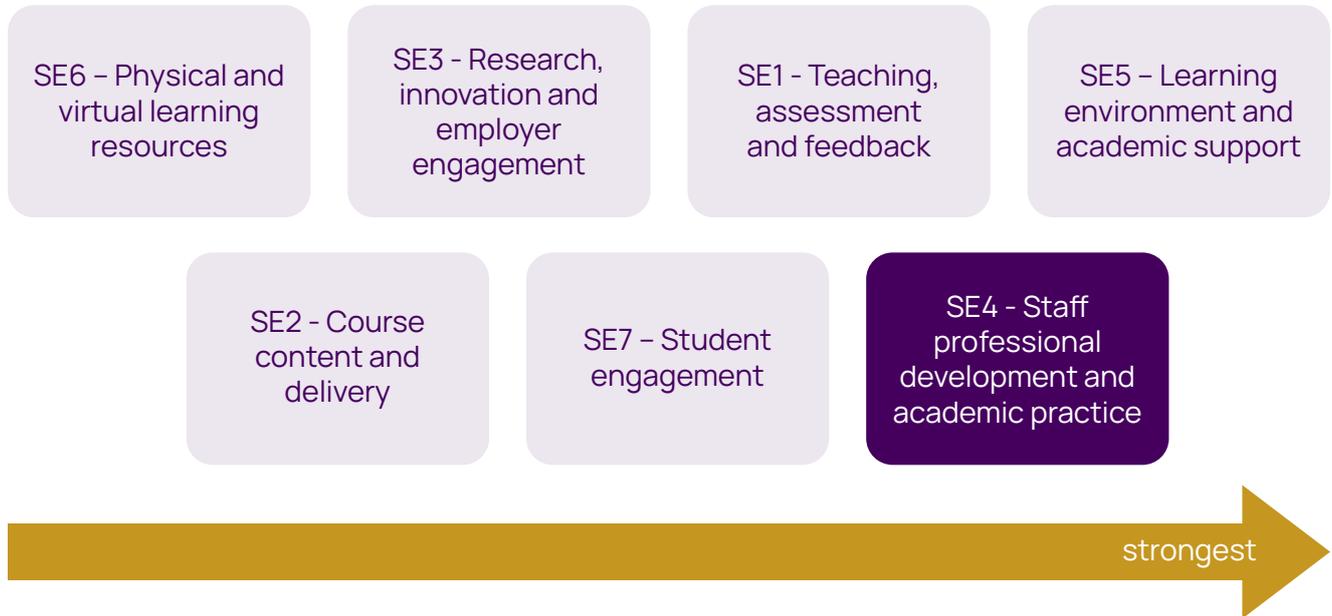
- [Competence-based Education \(CBE\)](#) - Our primer offers a broad introduction to CBE and its value to students and society, accompanied by three institutional case studies demonstrating the value of CBE in action. See also the University of Hull's [Competence-based Education \(CBE\) Framework](#).
- [Implementing a pedagogic research model](#) - This project created a 'how to' guide for colleges and universities to develop and promote the value of pedagogic research as an underpinning for decision-making about quality.
- [The value of HE engaging with industry](#) - This QAA Membership Podcast explores the importance of having a close relationship with industry at undergraduate and postgraduate level, what collaboration means for staff, students and employers, and how higher education might be developed in collaboration with representatives from relevant industries.



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SE4 - Staff professional development and academic practice





Themes across provider submissions in SE4

The themes detailed below were the most prominent aspects of this feature that provider submissions discussed. The themes are defined and include anonymous examples from submissions rated as outstanding by the panel or their corresponding panel statements, unless specified otherwise.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

Submissions discussed the breadth of continuing professional development (CPD) provided to staff. This included self-guided resources, workshop programmes, requirements to participate in national and international networks, provision of coaches or specific support teams to deliver activities that enable development, among many other elements of professional support.

An example of professional development activities cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

...a range of more in-depth sessions and guidance documents for individuals and groups as required, addressing areas such as curriculum design and development, teaching and learning techniques and methods and inclusive assessment. There are additionally three professional development events each year when the HE community meet, network and share practice, including the Annual Learning and Teaching Conference which features internal and external speakers.

➤ Sub-theme: Fellowships

Many providers encourage or require engagement with Advance HE fellowships, whether to meet certain skills requirements, to access progression opportunities or to address skills gaps within teaching staff. The National Teaching Fellowship scheme offered by Advance HE was mentioned with particular frequency across submissions.

An example of panel comments on the uptake of fellowships within a provider rated as outstanding for this feature:

Over the assessment period a total of 397 fellowships have been awarded, resulting in 88.6 per cent of academic staff holding a fellowship, which is significantly above the sector average.

Peer learning

Most submissions spoke about using peer learning to facilitate staff professional development and the development of strong academic practice. Peer observation was the most common technique cited in submissions to assess and consequently improve the quality of teaching.

The Peer Review criteria is benchmarked against the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) set by Advance HE. Teaching is reviewed against three core themes: Areas of Activity, Core Knowledge and Professional Values. During 2021/22, 100% of available staff completed the process, confirming the dedication to continuous improvement of practice. This means insight is drawn across all levels of delivery to enhance pedagogy. The process has enabled teaching teams to take part in 'share and inspire' activities that have resulted in collaborative research, sharing best practice and inspired further studies.

Progression and recognition

Submissions commonly discussed the importance of staff receiving recognition for their work in the form of promotion (formal structures) and progression (more informal structures such as opportunities for additional responsibilities). The submissions rated as outstanding successfully linked this back to the student learning experience and the impact this had on the quality of teaching, the ability to recruit and retain high-calibre education staff, and consequent student outcomes.

An example of a progression initiative in a provider submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

We have implemented a progressive approach to promotion and recognition for our staff, with a specific focus on rewarding educational excellence. In 2018, we introduced two academic career pathways: Research, Education and Citizenship (REC) and Education, Pedagogy and Citizenship (EPC). Staff are now appointed, performance reviewed and promoted against their alignment to one of these tracks. Importantly, education is core to both career pathways, signalling that work with students is a key responsibility for everyone.

➤ Sub-theme: Teaching awards

Most providers used teaching awards as a method of recognising teaching staff and engaging students, who were often involved in nominations, in this recognition.

An example of teaching awards in a provider submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

Teaching excellence is recognised at an annual awards ceremony where students and colleagues are able to nominate staff for an award. All nominees are recognised and awards are made in a number of categories.

Qualifications and requirements

The requirements of staff involved in teaching varied, but many providers detailed their requirements for teaching qualifications – or mandatory professional development for staff members without them – in recognition of the specific skills and competencies required to deliver a high-quality learning experience.

An example of teaching requirements cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

All new staff without teaching qualifications are required to complete the Post Graduate Certificate of Higher Education or an equivalent apprenticeship in Academic Practice followed by fellowship of Advance Higher Education.



QAA reflections

1 Submissions rated *outstanding* were more likely to discuss professional development across a range of staff

Many submissions focused their evidence for this feature around their educators, but panel statements for submissions rated as outstanding also cited evidence of professional development extending to other staff members. There was particular recognition of the role of technicians, librarians, research students and academic development staff. The panel commented that this evidence demonstrated an embedded approach to staff professional development and academic practice that reached across the student experience.

An example of the breadth of support detailed in a provider submission, cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

Support for professional development that is embedded across the provider for all staff, including technicians, librarians, research students, research staff, academic development staff and teaching staff.

This wider-ranging approach also demonstrates the role that professional services staff have in contributing to the learning experience. While professional development has many benefits, the panellists were interested in how this impacted the student learning experience, either through improving teaching practice, ensuring up-to-date pedagogy or enhancing the learning environment.

An example of how professional development enhances the learning experience, cited by the panel as evidence of outstanding quality:

The creation of the Institute of Teaching and Learning in 2019 and broad activities to support teaching excellence; staff engaging with career development opportunities relevant to their specific area of expertise, as well as related to their understanding of learning and teaching.

2 The sector is increasingly recognising teaching in line with research

Many submissions detailed the steps they had taken to achieve greater parity of progression and promotion for their teaching and research staff to better recognise the value of the former. Some had altered their career frameworks to put education, research and practice careers on equal footing, or required research and learning and teaching criteria to be met for successful promotion, even if one was the focus. Some examples then discussed the explicit impact this had on promotion rates. These pathways were cited most across outstanding and very high-quality submissions.

An example of a pathway recognised by the panel as evidence of outstanding quality:

6 The Academic Career Pathways framework reinforces the importance of teaching practice as a pillar in academic staff promotion and career progression, making sure that teaching is not only valued by all academic staff but also as a path toward career progression. In the three years to 2021-22, 68 staff were promoted via the teaching pathway, with 2021-22 showing the highest number of teaching specific promotions over the last five years.

3 Fellowships are the most mentioned mechanism of CPD

Fellowships are the most frequently cited mechanism of CPD in submissions rated as outstanding. They are used both for continuous professional development, and to assure the quality of teaching by recent hires and those without formal teaching qualifications. The panel comments are specific, commending high numbers or rates of uptake within providers, including those above sector average. For submissions deemed to display insufficient evidence in this feature, fellowships are mentioned (although at a much lower rate) and the numbers undertaking them are noticeably dwarfed by submissions rated as very high or outstanding quality. Given the financial and time costs associated with undertaking fellowships, it is possible this may be impacted by the financial constraints the sector is facing.

An example of a submission's discussion of fellowships, cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

6 Over this TEF cycle we undertook to increase the numbers of Fellows and Senior Fellows through the experiential route. The initiative was supported by incorporating time within the academic staff Workload Allocation Model for preparing applications and for providing mentoring. In four years, following this initiative, numbers of staff with Fellowship increased from 35.1% to 50.3%. We are consistently above average in comparison to the sector for the award of Fellow and Senior Fellow.



QAA resources for SE4

If you would like to explore the areas raised in this section further, we recommend the following resources as a starting point:

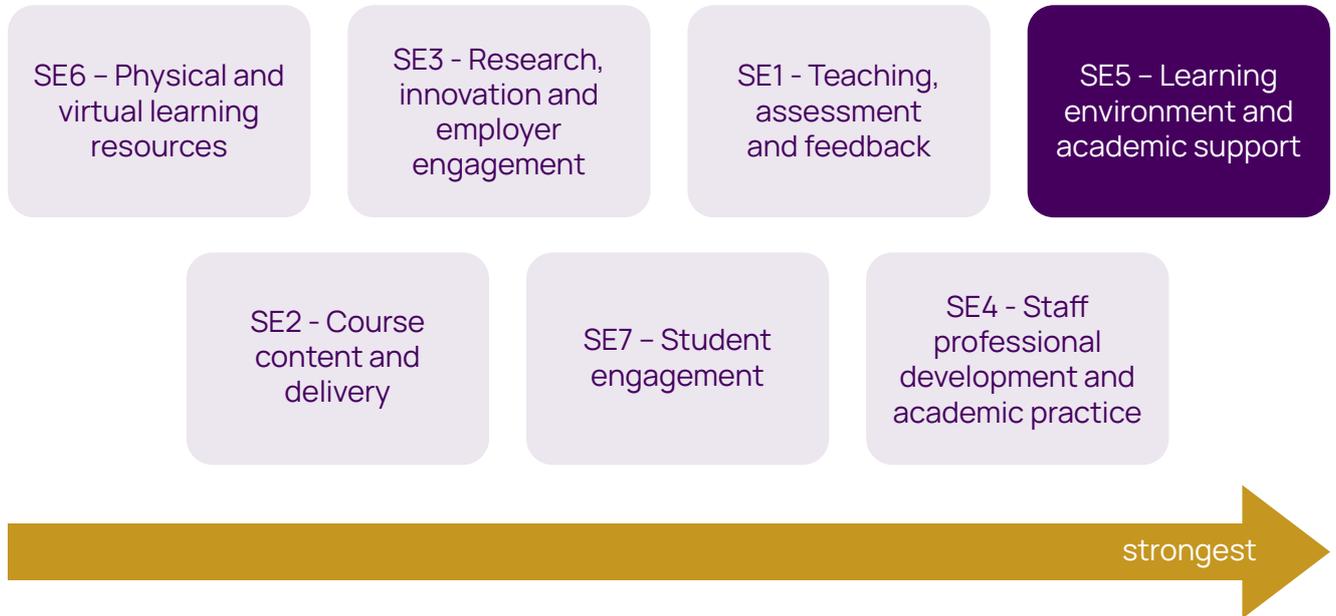
- [Professional development programme for QAA Members](#) - QAA's professional development programme offers opportunities for members to actively engage as part of an online cohort to learn effective practices from QAA specialists as well as peers drawn from across the sector. We currently offer three regular courses designed for colleagues at different stages in your quality career: Step into Quality; Introduction to Quality; Quality in Practice: Quality Management. These courses are free to attend for staff from UK higher education providers with full QAA Membership.
- [Enhancing quality through collaborative \(peer\) observation](#) - A step-by-step guide, case studies and other materials to support the design and implementation of peer observation with the aim of enhancing learning and teaching. This involves observation by students as well as staff.
- [Developing a peer-evaluation system](#) - A framework and related resources to support the development of peer evaluation in providers.
- [Hallmarks of Success: Supporting and Empowering Teaching Staff in a Digital Environment](#) - This playbook aims to inform thinking and decision-making about supporting and empowering teaching staff in a digital environment, in what is a process of continual change - for organisations, for staff and for students.



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SE5 - Learning environment and academic support





Themes across provider submissions in SE5

The themes detailed below were the most prominent aspects of this feature that provider submissions discussed. The themes are defined and include anonymous examples from submissions rated as outstanding by the panel or their corresponding panel statements, unless specified otherwise.

Course-specific support

Submissions refer to the support offered within courses that is specific to the skills, knowledge and competencies required for successful qualification from that course.

An example of course-specific support cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ Our departments provide high quality learning environments which ensure tailored, personalised, discipline-specific learning support is easily available to students. To ensure academic support meets our students’ needs, colleagues in academic departments and central support teams often collaborate to define and deliver programme-specific, academic skills resources and sessions. Our Statement on Teaching Performance Expectations further states our expectation that all staff are to be approachable and timely in offering support. ”

Skills support

Many providers encourage or require engagement with Advance HE fellowships, whether to meet In addition to course-specific support, many providers also spoke of the department, faculty or provider-wide initiatives that deliver support for cross-discipline skills such as essay writing, referencing and research. These are often, but not always, delivered via library services.

An example of skills support cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ Coaches have provided around 800 individual appointments and 160 group tutorial sessions each year, and that students who engaged with coaches reported an improvement in their academic skills and feel more confident about their next academic assignment. ”

Pastoral support, including personal tutoring

Providers also detailed the broader support they provide to students, normally in a one-to-one or small group setting, to support their broader wellbeing and success in higher education. Often, this is tailored to the individual or is the initial point of contact for more tailored support. This includes, but is not limited to, traditional personal tutoring methods, which some submissions highlighted that providers are reconsidering.

An example comment from a panel statement about a personal tutoring approach in a submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

“ The provider submission described a coherent approach to personal tutoring which includes the allocation of a personal tutor to every student with training, and digital resources to support the process and personalises support plans. Models of the personal tutor system vary across departments to meet specific needs, for example Maths and Physics focus on delivering small group sessions whereas Education formulates goals through whole group, small group and one to one timetabled sessions. There is support and training available for personal tutors and an app which offers peer-to-peer advice and guidance, developed by recent graduates and proven successful by qualitative evidence. ”

Equality, diversity and inclusion interventions

In recognition of the gaps existing within the sector, many providers have implemented interventions that are specifically aimed at delivering greater parity between students from underrepresented backgrounds and their peers. Many of these are targeted at the BAME awarding gap, likely an indication of both the size of this issue, particularly post-pandemic, and the importance of directly linking this support back to the learning experience.

An example of an intervention cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ For non-traditional students, and those with protected characteristics, this extensive and timely support is further enhanced to ensure that any additional or personalised learning support is in place ahead of beginning their studies and is regularly reviewed and amended as needed throughout their learning journey. Care-experienced students receive direct one-to-one mentorship and a bespoke transitions package. ”

➤ Sub-theme: Disability support

A significant element of many providers' evidence was the support provided to those with a disability or learning difficulty, perhaps indicating the impact this is considered to have on the learning experience.

An example of disability support cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ A robust system for supporting students with a disability or learning difficulty. For example, a learning difficulty bursary scheme covers assessment and equipment, there is support to apply for the disabled student allowance, and reasonable adjustments for learning and assessment are agreed on an individual basis. ”

➤ Sub-theme: Wellbeing and welfare

Mental health support has grown within the sector in recent years, and this is exemplified in the prominence it receives in the providers' submissions. Given the pandemic period covered in the TEF submissions, it is perhaps unsurprising that this plays a significant role.

An example of the mental health provision cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ The submission also provides details of the responses taken by the provider to support an increase in student mental health concerns, which included mental health talks and webinars to support the return to campus. ”

➤ Sub-theme: Hardship provision

This evidence largely focused on discrete funding but also encompassed the provision of resources such as laptops. Similar to mental health provision, the pandemic means this is likely to have greater prominence in this TEF period, but the cost-of-living crisis has also influenced the scale of this provision. There is some overlap with SE6 (physical and virtual learning resources) but, within this feature, evidence tended to focus on addressing specific needs.

An example of the hardship provision detailed in a provider submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

“ During the pandemic, we doubled the amount available in our student hardship fund (recently renamed Student Engagement Fund) and have retained this level of funding post-covid. This enables students to continue to engage in their studies in cases of financial hardship, and evidence from our Student Engagement Monitoring Group demonstrates the positive impact of this support at an individual level. ”

Sense of belonging

Many submissions referred directly to sense of belonging or detailed broader initiatives that were used to foster a supportive and inclusive learning environment to address what can sometimes be a less tangible area of support for students. Providers detailed efforts within inductions, peer support networks and more holistic efforts to achieve this.

An example of an initiative aimed at instilling a sense of belonging from a submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

“ The college has taken a 'whole life cycle' approach to the way it supports its students. Starting with pre-application and application advice, the college employs a dedicated Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach Officer who provides consistent and timely advice for students engaged in the application cycle. Students with additional support needs are identified early (on application where disclosure is made) and the HE Admissions Officer liaises with the college's wider student support team to ensure that additional support needs are put in place. Followed by a personalised induction programme for all new students, including face-to-face staff introductions, subject specific facility tours, library, e-Learning inductions and the ability to meet with existing students. 86% of students in our HE Early Findings survey found that induction helped them to settle into their course. ”



QAA reflections

1 To achieve higher ratings, support needed to be embedded even when it was tailored to a granular level

The importance of tailoring is particularly evident in this feature from both the provider and panellist perspective. The common themes arising from the provider submissions are largely structured around specific groups and the support they require, reflective of how this feature is approached in the submissions. Tailored support is recognised across outstanding panel statements and the corresponding panel comments consider this support at a granular level. This is where the tension between this tailoring and demonstrating consistency across a provider becomes most apparent. Effectively presenting the full scope of provision within the TEF submission is difficult, but this demonstrates how selective providers must be in choosing which examples best articulate their provision.

An example of a panel comment explaining why a provider was rated very high quality:

The panel considered it did not find evidence of outstanding support tailored for all needs; for example, support for learning differences and disabilities other than dyslexia were not discussed.

An example of where this support was cited as evidence of outstanding quality:

The provider has also recognised that there is an increase in students reporting a disability and has introduced specific support for these students. The student submission commented on helpful support which led to a dyslexia/ADHD diagnosis, library staff offering support and deadlines being adjusted to take account of additional needs.

2 Personal tutor systems continue to dominate pastoral support, but alternative approaches are also demonstrating impact

Individualised support is prevalent across the submissions. A personal tutoring system of some kind remains the dominant method of delivery and is referenced in many outstanding panel statements, but for some providers it forms one pillar of their pastoral support offer alongside peer support and student services, while others prioritise small group support or one-to-one support directly with a student's educators.

The dominance of the personal tutoring system varies across provider type:

Provider type ⁵	% of statements citing personal tutoring as evidence
Technical & employer/industry focused	52%
Specialist	32%
Research-intensive	42%
Post-92	66%
College	22%

The panellists do not make a judgement on whether a personal tutor is integral to an outstanding quality experience but rather whether the individualised support is intentional and impactful.

An example of a personal tutoring approach cited as evidence of outstanding quality:

6 *Strategically developing the personal tutoring system using personalised student analytics such as engagement, performance, and career readiness data, along with a Student Engagement Dashboard; integrating a five year plan into personal tutoring to support students' reflection and goal setting, with 79 per cent of undergraduates saying in a survey they were aware of the plan and 27 per cent working on it; survey data shows two thirds of students find personal tutor meetings useful, with student feedback showing the provider committed to further enhancements.* 9

An example of an alternative approach cited as evidence of outstanding quality:

6 *Academic mentors support students to understand what is required in assessment, find resources, and develop skills and confidence. Peer assisted learning is also in place, with the student submission noting that students find these approaches valuable and accessible.* 9

⁵ To determine provider type:

- i Colleges were categorised by their official status as FE colleges.
- ii Specialist providers were categorised by their provision focusing on one specialism or a small number of related specialisms.
- iii Technical, research-intensive and post-92 were categorised by mission group membership (University Alliance, Russell Group and MillionPlus, respectively). Outstanding post-92 institutions were categorised based on the date they became a university. Outstanding research-intensive and technical providers were categorised based on whether they were more focused on research or employer/industry engagement.
- iv A small number of participating providers were private institutions. These were not included in this analysis because their small sample size risked distorting the results.

Apparent in the panel statements is the risk personal tutoring presents for consistency - the variables present in the number of personal tutors within a provider and the number of students with which they engage makes it difficult to maintain standards across an institution, and this is highlighted, particularly within student submissions.

An example of very high-quality evidence which addresses this obstacle:

6 *A student support strategy built around a comprehensive framework of support through personal tutoring. The structure includes a network that is headed by a university senior tutor who leads 131 schools-based senior tutors, who in turn lead personal tutors, all of whom undertake annual training.* 9

3 Creating a supportive learning environment requires a holistic approach

The prominent themes within provider submissions demonstrate the many elements that are involved in creating a supportive learning environment and the consequent layers of support that are required. This corresponds with the TEF guidance, which distinguishes outstanding from very high quality via the 'wide ranging' support delivered; the descriptor of 'wide ranging' is what the TEF uses to distinguish outstanding from very high quality. Acknowledgement of this potentially speaks to the broader debates happening across the sector regarding duty of care and the inclusion of mental health provision within regulatory activity and providers' commitment to demonstrating how they are seeking to address them.

An example of a panel comment highlighting a holistic approach as evidence of outstanding quality:

6 *The student submission also details differing areas of support which are available to them, for example, financial, placement support, and assignment support. Students also reference the holistic development which is reflected in their overall experience.* 9



QAA resources for SE5

If you would like to explore the areas raised in this section further, we recommend the following resources as a starting point:

- [Creating inclusive subject communities](#) - This and related resources can be used to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of providers' approaches at provider and subject level.
- [Supporting successful student transitions](#) - Offers positive approaches and practical solutions to help support a range of transitions. Includes support for students to manage goals and expectations across the learner journey, resources to make the world of higher education more transparent and straightforward to navigate, plus materials to help staff engage with evolving student needs and expectations and build stronger communities.
- [Hallmarks of Success: Student-Centred Learning and Teaching](#) - The first in a series of playbooks, you can use this resource to stimulate discussion about successful student-centred learning and teaching, inform the delivery of new courses and future curriculum changes, review departmental and institutional strategies that take account of learning and teaching practice, and help direct teaching practice and student support.

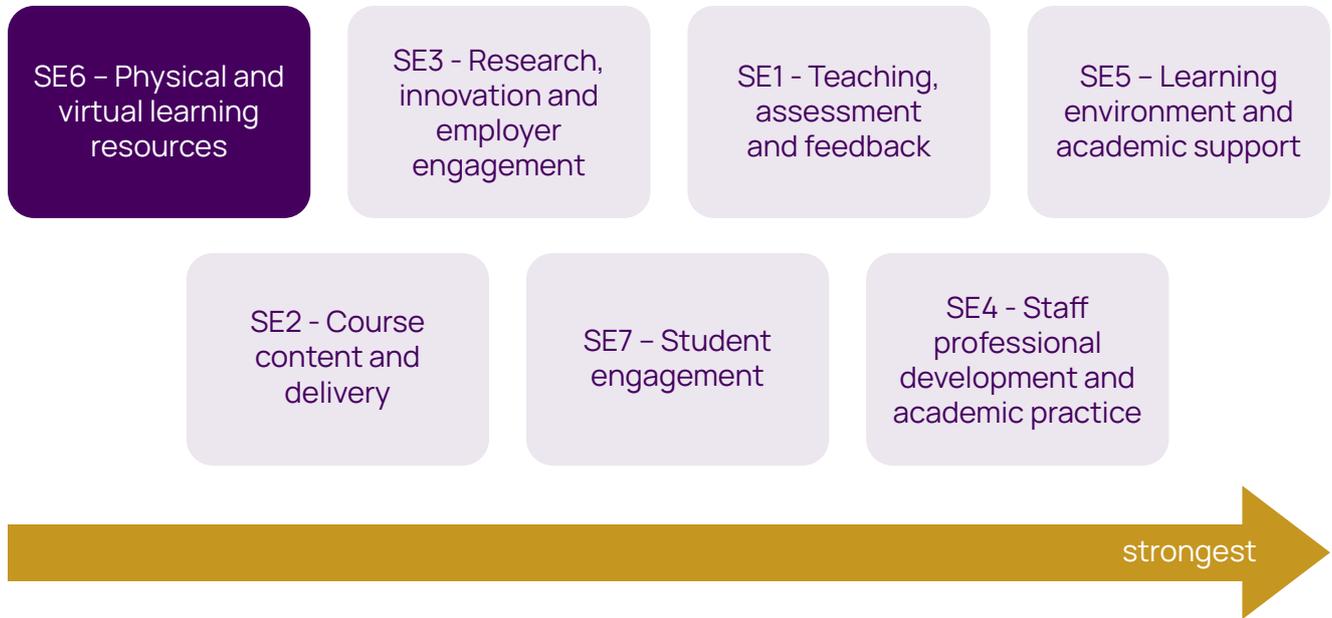
QAA will also be publishing a resource on awarding gaps later in May 2024.



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SE6 - Physical and virtual learning resources





Themes across provider submissions on SE6

The themes detailed below were the most prominent aspects of this feature that provider submissions discussed. The themes are defined and include anonymous examples from submissions rated outstanding by the panel or their corresponding panel statements, unless specified otherwise.

Physical estate

Submissions described the campus and buildings that constitute a provider's full physical presence. Although implicitly beneficial, the submissions which linked this effectively to the student learning experience were more likely to be rated as outstanding; for example:

6 *Investing £275 million in upgrading the campus, including innovative facilities such as its Student Life building, and completing the refurbishment of all teaching rooms.* 9

➤ Sub-theme: Discipline agnostic learning spaces

Many providers have created spaces and resources - physical and virtual - to support students across the institution regardless of discipline, including study rooms and quiet spaces, and online platforms.

An example of panel comments on the introduction of these spaces in a submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

6 *The student submission outlines that, following the coronavirus pandemic and cost of living pressures, student behaviour has changed about where they study and they are increasingly likely to use university spaces to stay warm. This has created some challenges but the submission notes that the provider has responded by creating additional study spaces during exam periods as well as more study space across city facilities and in accommodation blocks, with a long-term strategy underway.* 9

Library services

The library formed a core part of many providers' evidence for this feature. The prominence of the library cuts across other features of excellence too, including research, skills development and staff professional development. For some providers, library services were contained to a single physical space, but for many the concept of the library was much broader and encompassed digitised provision.

An example of evidence regarding library investment in a panel statement for a submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

6 *Significant investment in the library and digital resources which led to a 500 per cent increase in physical library usage; significant improvements in access to digital scholarly content for those with accessibility requirements, with strong qualitative feedback from students; and initiatives to enable academic librarians to support academic colleagues with increasing the diversity of reading lists and contribute to decolonisation of the curriculum.* 9

Digital resources

Many providers explicitly highlighted the resources they provide digitally but also the resources they provide to upskill their students and ensure they have the digital skills needed, through platforms such as Adobe and LinkedIn Learning. As the sector's response to generative artificial intelligence (AI) was in its infancy in the higher education space when these were drafted, there is minimal mention of AI technology.

An example of the digital resources cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“Virtual learning resources include the use of Microsoft Teams as a digital learning community, giving access to module content, assessment, plagiarism checking, and remote access to sessions. This supports students with potential barriers to learning and a digital session for staff has helped enhance practice across the institution, resulting in new courses being designed with blended and remote delivery options.”

➤ Sub-theme: Virtual learning environment

The virtual learning environment was recognised as a core component of a provider's digital resources across most submissions, with a small handful of platforms dominating provision.

An example of evidence in a panel statement for a submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

“A Virtual Learning Environment where all written and recorded work is submitted and marked, which also holds programme documentation and support materials.”

Course resources

Resources which are specific to the course at hand, whether that is purpose-built laboratories for biological sciences courses or performance spaces for arts subjects, were also highlighted in submissions. This is a good example of embedded but tailored-- for example, some providers are using simulation facilities that are used across a range of disciplines, but the activity within the facility is tailored to the subject

An example of course resources that were used as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“Course-specific facilities such as wet and dry labs, moot courts, simulation centres and a trading room for business students. The student submission cites investment in physical facilities as a success, with 82 per cent of students reporting they could access course-specific resources.”

Covid transition

The impact of the Covid pandemic was particularly explicit within this feature-- likely because of the upheaval brought by a transition to fully online provision and assessment, and back again, with a return to some form of hybrid model for most providers. Submissions detailed, at length, the changes made to resources because of the pandemic, but the many rated as outstanding also discussed what lessons were learned from this and how the positives have been incorporated into their more permanent learning approaches.

An example of learnings from practice during Covid from a submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

- “ In November 2020, we launched the ‘Covid pedagogical legacy’ project to identify aspects we should continue to develop and utilise to complement our campus-based provision post Covid-19. The project, which evaluated our experiences during the pandemic, resulted in three significant additions to our virtual learning resources:
1. Commitment to recording all theory sessions which are made available via an on-demand service (supported by investment in a campus wide lecture capture system);
 2. Providing up to 2 hours online teaching per week;
 3. Embedding elements of online assessment in a student’s assessment journey.
- ”



QAA reflections

1 Physical and virtual resources are the feature where the sector performed weakest, indicating an area for development

There is no significant variation in the sector's performance across the features, but physical and virtual resources was the feature rated lowest by the panel overall. Below are three possible causes, based on what providers highlighted in their submission.

- **The impact of Covid:** The transition from in-person to online delivery and returning in a hybrid format caused significant upheaval across the sector. It fundamentally changed the students' expectations of how their courses were delivered, the ability of technology to facilitate their learning and the resources providers supply to support them.
- **Influence on National Student Survey scores:** This analysis has not included the quantitative indicators used by the panel, but providers reflect on how temporary measures such as wi-fi issues may have influenced their NSS scores when contextualising the data in their submissions.
- **Consequences of funding scarcity:** With physical and virtual resources, perhaps more than other features, it is difficult to make efficiencies while continuing to deliver the same quality. The impact of a difficult operating environment with a declining unit of resource is potentially more visible in this feature.

2 The sector is increasingly embracing digitisation

Investment and improvement in the provider's digital resources is cited across panel statements as evidence of very high or outstanding quality. This most often pertains to digital strategies, improving access to digital resources and engaging students to involve and upskill them in a provider's digital environment.

An example of engaging students in digital strategy that was cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

“ A Digital Interns Scheme to ensure the active engagement of students in decisions about the further development of digital learning materials. ”

Specific references to hybrid or blended activity are present but rare within the panel statements, although there are references to the resources needed to deliver this, such as lecture capture mechanisms. As digitisation continues in the sector, the next iteration of the TEF will likely emphasise this further. The submissions and panel statements also demonstrate that an embrace of digital is changing how many providers conceptualise their resources. For example, libraries are conceived of less as physical entities and more as a blended service which acts as a resource facility as well as a study space, and providers across the sector are investing in digitising these services.

An example of evidence of outstanding quality that demonstrates how digitisation has increased engagement with the physical library:

6 Significant investment in the library and digital resources which led to a 500 per cent increase in physical library usage; significant improvements in access to digital scholarly content for those with accessibility requirements, with strong qualitative feedback from students.

The submissions present a snapshot in time and, having been written when the sector response to generative AI was in its infancy, it is interesting to observe how many of these initiatives within submissions will be facilitated more easily by generative AI, or made obsolete.

3 Specialist facilities are one of the most common features in submissions rated outstanding

Specialist facilities are cited across panel statements for submissions rated as outstanding. These examples span a variety of resources, but the common factor among them is their role in delivering industry-aligned, practical learning environments that support students in preparing for employment. A distinction between very high quality and outstanding quality is the breadth of facilities cited as evidence. This speaks to the embedded but tailored approach the panel have commented on across all features.

An example of specialist features cited as evidence by the panel for a submission rated as outstanding:

6 A significant range of high-specification specialist facilities such as theatres, studios, mixing suites, computer-aided design facilities and scenic workshops; specialist facilities to help students develop familiarity with professional music environments, such as concert halls, performance spaces, broadcast studios, and fully equipped practice rooms; students have access to a range of specialist and orchestral doubling instruments, including historical performance instruments and a substantial collection of string instruments.



QAA resources for SE6

If you would like to explore the areas raised in this section further, we recommend the following resources as a starting point:

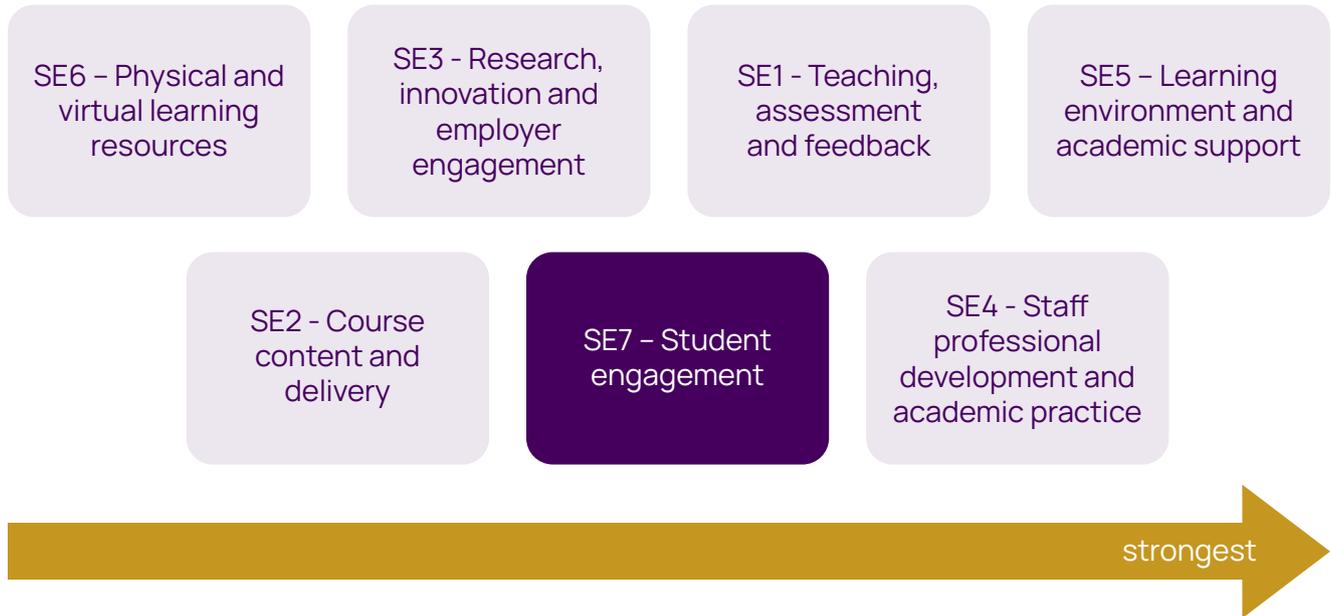
- [Differing Perceptions of Quality of Learning](#) - This Collaborative Enhancement Project reinforces the importance of wellbeing, sense of belonging and community as students from different ethnic and disciplinary contexts reflect on the quality of learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19.
- [Hybrid teaching: A futurist model or a realist model for the future?](#) - This project explored the implementation of hybrid teaching across the University of Nottingham and University of Birmingham in order to inform the future potential for post-pandemic approaches.
- [Social induction framework](#) - Created as part of a Collaborative Enhancement Project led by Falmouth University, this resource can help to familiarise learners with in-house learning environments through a social-based framework for engagement.
- [Harnessing multimodality in higher education](#) - Led by Teesside University, this Collaborative Enhancement Project is exploring what multimodality is in the context of higher education and how best to harness it in teaching, learning and assessment to support the student experience and success.



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SE7 - Student engagement





Themes across provider submissions on SE7

The themes detailed below were the most prominent aspects of this feature that provider submissions discussed. The themes are defined and include anonymous examples from submissions rated outstanding by the panel or their corresponding panel statements, unless specified otherwise.

Feedback mechanisms

Submissions detailed a variety of methods used to gather feedback from students, including surveys and focus groups. Submissions rated as outstanding were clear on why they were using certain methods, and how effective they were, with examples demonstrating the changes that were implemented because of feedback received.

An example of a panel statement commented on feedback mechanisms in a submission rated as outstanding for this feature:

The provider's submission outlines a strategic approach to feature which is based on creating democratising and equalising spaces where the student voice can inform policy and practice. It describes using internal surveys and feedback data, and that monthly online forums were organised during the coronavirus pandemic.

Governance

Most submissions described involving students in formal governance structures through representation on committees or on the governing board. Submissions rated as outstanding were clear on how this involvement affected change.

An example of governance cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

A clear system of student representation on committees, including the programme boards and the board of trustees as well as governance and management committees.

Approach to engagement

The broad scope of student engagement activity within the provider submissions demonstrates the individual relationship all providers have with their student body. Many detailed their broader strategy towards student engagement, and how this works within their specific context, enabling them to achieve their mission.

Examples of student engagement strategies cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

The provider submission states that the student voice is embedded in its strategy and that the student engagement strategy is included in staff and student induction programmes.

A student engagement strategy, addressed through an Annual Monitoring Review, with periodic targets set for teams and individual professional development reviews.

Student representation

Outside of formal governance, many submissions detail their student representation mechanisms that enable students to share the views and concerns of their representative group.

An example of student representation cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

A student academic representation system, overseen by a joint students' union/university subcommittee. All courses have a student course representative, and bespoke training is available to elected representatives devised in partnership by the students' union and school academic representation coordinators.

Student campaigns and partnerships

Students are an autonomous body and take proactive action to deliver change within their institution. Although student submissions were published alongside many provider submissions, the latter still reference specific campaigns or projects that students have led or engaged with to demonstrate the changes implemented because of student views.

An example of student initiatives that led to change cited by the panel as evidence of outstanding quality:

The provider and student submissions add evidence that the student voice has influenced a number of initiatives at the provider, for example: implementing a safety net policy, IT equipment provision, remote access to specialist software, and hardship funding during coronavirus; introducing an online induction course for students; deadline extensions, incorporating more interactive classes, and improvements to the personal tutoring system; providing more laptops for loan and changing parking arrangements to accommodate commuting students; implementing a data system to reduce awarding gaps for ethnic minority students.

Students' unions

Most providers have a students' union/guild and the providers' submissions detail their relationship with them and how this has impacted on the student learning experience.

An example of engagement with a students' union cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

The integration of the students' union into the academic student experience, leading to collaboration between students and staff, including funding, hiring, and training a team of sabbatical officers, and appointing an additional student voice sabbatical officer; regular meetings to discuss student matters between the students' union manager and department managers such as wellbeing skills and diversity, careers and employability, and student mentoring.



QAA reflections

1 A partnership approach is popular among submissions rated outstanding

A clear strategy and approach to inform student engagement was a prominent feature of the evidence cited for outstanding ratings. Examples include a 'Student as Partner approach' or 'established principles of partnership to guide work'. This enabled providers to demonstrate the key distinction between very high quality and outstanding quality in the TEF guidance - 'embedded engagement' rather than 'effective engagement'. Where evidence of very high-quality student engagement referred to embedded practice, these tended to refer to specific mechanisms or elements of student engagement-- for example, representation on decision-making bodies. In submissions rated as outstanding, however, the evidence of embedded student engagement was much more related to the provider's strategic approach and the structures created to deliver this approach, with evidence of how it worked across a provider.

An example of a partnership approach cited as evidence of outstanding quality by the panel:

An introduction to the Student Engagement Strategy is included in staff and student induction programmes. The Student Engagement Learning and Teaching Committee and the Academic Board agendas align closely with the Strategy. At an operational level, each academic team indicates how each pillar is being addressed through their Annual Monitoring Review, with periodic targets set via team briefings and also individual professional development reviews.

An example of evidence that led to a rating of very high quality, rather than outstanding:

The student submission also points out that the lack of a university-wide strategy means that successful local initiatives do not always benefit other areas of the provider.

2 Engagement alone was not sufficient to achieve higher ratings

In the context of the TEF, simply engaging with students is not sufficient to be rated as of very high or outstanding quality. The panel statements instead focus on how this engagement leads to either improvement - or, in the case of outstanding submissions, continuous improvement - to the experiences and outcomes of a provider's students. Many providers used examples of the 'you said, we did' approach or similar, to demonstrate how their engagement had led to improvement. The most compelling then demonstrated the impact this had on the learning experience. The example below demonstrates explicitly how student engagement is used for the broader benefit.

An example of engagement leading to improvement in the learning experience cited by the panel as evidence of outstanding quality:

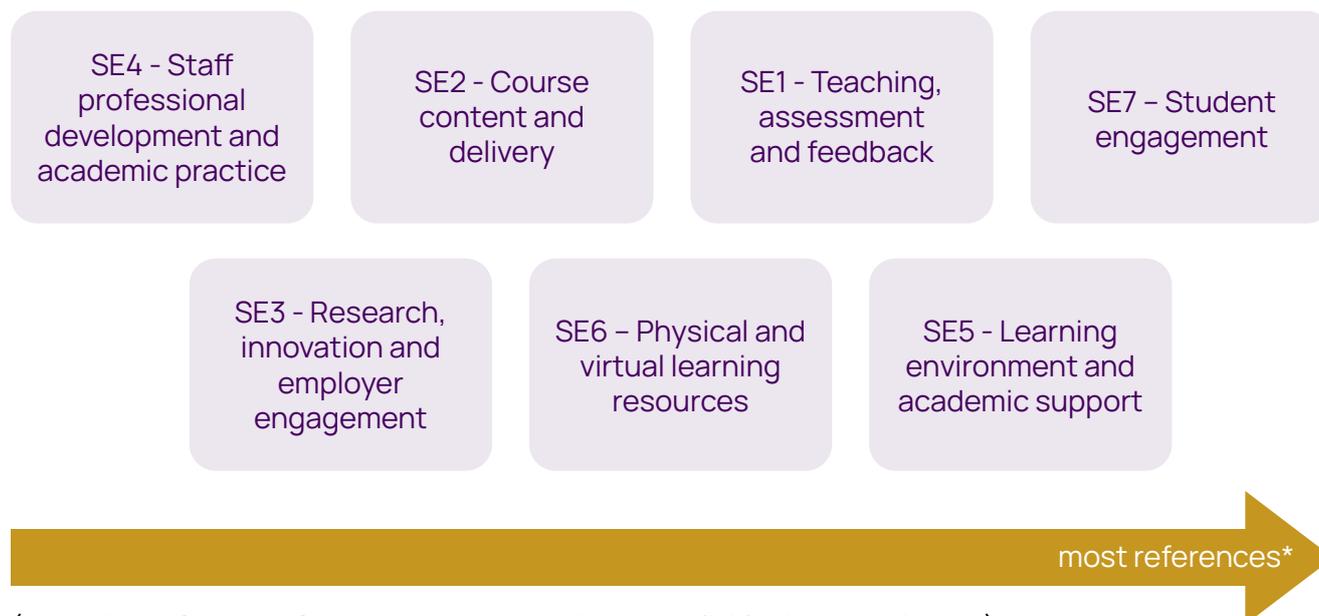
The provider has established 118 student assistants for learning and teaching to support hybrid class delivery and to respond to pandemic and post-pandemic emergent teaching requirements effectively.

Another example cited how their students' union Vice-President (Education) met regularly with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and led to ensuring improvements, including co-designing social learning spaces and co-creating student surveys.

3 The role of the student submission⁶

The evidence provided by the student submission is particularly interesting in this feature where, in addition to SE1 and SE5, it receives the highest rate of references in evidence cited as outstanding quality. Perhaps expectedly, the student submission is more likely to corroborate the positive evidence from the provider on the feature of student engagement in those rated as outstanding, although there is positive corroboration from the student submission across all ratings.

The features ranked by how many times the student submission was referenced in panel statements for submissions rated outstanding



(* mentions of content from the student submission explicitly cited as evidence)

The panellists' focus on what the evidence demonstrated, rather than the specific practices cited, was also found in their consideration of the student submissions. There are examples of where the student submission provided weaker evidence which was then weighted less strongly by the panel. It also appears more difficult for the panellists to add weight to the student submission if it merely repeated examples in the provider's submission rather than providing additional evidence. Interestingly, in one example, the omission of evidence on student engagement in the student submission was treated neutrally, not as a lack of evidence.

An example of where the student submission's evidence was given less weight by the panel:

Some positive evidence in the student submission around student voice and impact on change, which the panel placed some weight on, although overall the provider submission evidence was weighted more strongly as it included more sources of evidence.

⁶ Not all provider submissions were accompanied by student submissions and therefore this evidence relates to a specific sub-set of the TEF ratings.



QAA resources for SE7

If you would like to explore the areas raised in this section further, we recommend the following resources as a starting point:

- [Student Engagement Guidelines](#) - Learning from innovative practices introduced in response to COVID-19, this resource considers students' priorities and how they engage in the post-pandemic world of higher education. Find out more in this [QAA Membership Podcast with the project team](#). See also QAA's [Made Digital](#) research which highlights approaches to learning, teaching and assessment that are associated with improved student engagement and performance.
- [Student experience and engagement projects](#) - including [Standing out in the crowd: A framework for inclusive and effective student engagement](#), [The Audit of Student Representation and Voice Practices Project](#) and [Improving retention and attainment: the promotion of the 'sticky course'](#).
- [Supporting staff to undertake staff-student partnership opportunities](#) - Led by the University of Sussex, this project explores strategies for developing successful student-staff partnerships. Based around key themes for establishing successful partnerships, the resource includes video materials developed in collaboration between students and teaching staff on setting expectations, trust, empowerment and impact.



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Next steps

This report forms the first in a series of outputs QAA is delivering on the TEF. The remaining outputs will be available to all QAA Members. If you would like to find out more, please contact your Membership Engagement Manager or membership@qaa.ac.uk

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