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Title: *University Challenge*

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Abstract:

The paper addresses the debate on performance management in higher education with reference to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). We develop a conceptual framework of the value of higher education, using Bourdieu's (1998; 1984) concept of habitus. We then assess the predictive power of TEF in identifying the value of HEIs by comparison with that of reputable rankings and with the verdict of the 'market' as represented by the institution choices of the best informed 'segment' of the population. We identify significant discrepancies between the TEF and both the Times Higher Education ranking and the Institute for Fiscal Studies data. We also find that the TV programme 'University Challenge' is a better predictor than TEF. We conclude that TEF's flawed assumptions about what represents 'excellence' in higher education create misinformation that will disproportionately affect candidates from the lower socio-economic background.

Track 2: Critical Management Studies

Word count: 1,818

Introduction

The current developments in the public domain and the state of the political debate in the UK alert us to deep-cutting rifts in the fabric of society. Persistent socio-economic divisions, compounded by a decade of austerity and aggravated by populist discourse, come into harsh relief as the country finds itself in an impasse over its values, identity and governance. We are witnessing a crisis of democracy and progressive values throughout the developed world. Underpinning these developments are disparities in levels of access to education: for instance, the fault lines of the Brexit debate are drawn across the population of the UK along the lines of educational attainment (The Economist, 2019). At the same time, the Russell Group warns that the anticipated changes of government policy on tuition fees will have a disproportionate negative effect on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (The Russell Group, 2018).

It is thus both purposeful and timely to examine the ideology behind the current performance management regime governing the HE sector in the UK. We do so with reference to its latest incarnation, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). We derive our conceptual framework from Bourdieu's (1998; 1984) theory of society, using the notion of habitus to develop a critical perspective on the value of and access to higher education. We examine the predictive power of TEF in relation of our framework and find that it is a poor indicator of 'excellence' and a misleading guide to university choices that will have damaging consequences for students, the academic profession and the wider society.

The value of Higher Education

The debate on the value of universities is polarised between two perspectives. The instrumental view of value, currently dominating policy in the UK and across the Western developed economies, sees universities as serving external stakeholders by providing marketable knowledge, technology and skills. The opposing Humboldtian model of higher education vests inherent value in knowledge generation, custody and dissemination as defined from within the academic community itself (Ruegg, 2004). The tension between these two perspectives and the parallel dynamics of control versus autonomy have been widely discussed in the context of the commodification of higher education (Willmott, 1995), marketization of universities (Chandler et al., 2002), managerialist logic permeating universities (Robinson et al., 2017) and deterioration of the attractiveness of academic work (Kallio et al., 2016). The focus of recent critique relating to the UK has been largely on research, with successive iterations of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) receiving particular scrutiny (e.g. Kellard and Śliwa, 2016; Butler and Spoelstra, 2014).

Our focus is on the value of higher education (rather than universities as such) considered as the society's economic, social, cultural, and symbolic investment in the next generation. We want to develop an understanding of the value of education that reaches beyond both extremes of the debate. We do see the importance of the economic outcomes of HE and appreciate the analytical usefulness of measuring the financial ROI realised by graduates. However, we wish to avoid the economic reductionism of the employability logic that purports to capture the value of a complex social phenomenon in short-term monetary returns. We are equally weary of falling into the tautology inherent in the ideal of education for education's sake that would have no regard for the economic dimension of academic pursuits.

Theoretical framework

In his theory of distinction, Bourdieu (1998; 1984) theorises society as a relational space, a field, where agents embody the dispositions corresponding to the positions they occupy. Collectively, these dispositions define one's habitus, i.e. the embodied relational capital of the social position (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic). The habitus endows agents with the practical sense that enables them to play for the stakes available to them through their membership of and position in the field. The game is played by strategically accumulating and trading different forms of capital to elevate one's position in the field in relation to others, who are invested in the same game.

The university is a unique social space where students develop their habitus through education and engagement with different social and cultural influences. Therein lies the value of higher education: students' enrichment in cultural, social and symbolic capital. The graduate premium, i.e. the economic capital derived from higher education, is the dividend from the enriched habitus that students develop during their time at university. Students' personal enrichment, through their own investment in the game, also enriches the society at large in all the same ways: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic.

Homology between students' pre-university habitus (family background and schooling) and that encountered at the university will facilitate students' practical strategies of capital accumulation. Thus, students who bring with them the right dispositions, have a higher chance of success. To the extent that professions select on the grounds of homology of habitus, students who have managed to develop the right portfolio of capital will be preferred. Whilst this means that the likelihood of success is greater for the students who are born into a homologous habitus, it also creates a significant chance for the less-privileged if they can choose the right university and are able to seek out and take advantage of the chances that it offers.

This, however, presents another problem: the dispositions of the familial habitus guide young people's life choices. In the absence of relevant dispositions, e.g. in the case of first-generation students, the choice of university and subject of study, as well as the decision to go to university in the first instance, becomes more ambiguous. There is a plethora of information available but the 'algorithm' needed to process it is lacking. It is more likely, therefore, that students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, who cannot rely on the practical reason of their own habitus to guide them, may be persuaded by superficial claims to excellence and value-for-money. This is why it is important to ensure that all aspiring students, regardless of their background, have equal access to *meaningful* information about what the full value of higher education is and which universities are the most likely to help them realise it.

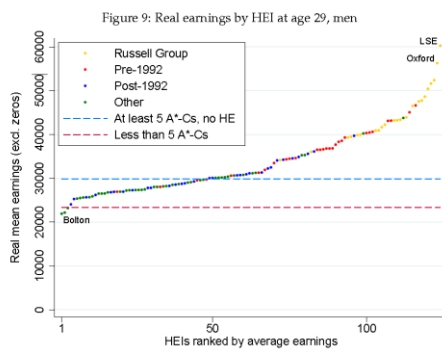
University Challenge v. TEF

We do not attempt to evaluate the TEF index as such: it has been thoroughly scrutinised already and found to be lacking in its assumptions, definitions, choice of metrics (UCU, 2019) and 'value for money' (UUK, 2019). Rather, we take issue with the fact that, in reducing the value of education to 'use-value' and relying on superficial measures of student experience and outcomes, TEF misinforms potential students about what matters when choosing a higher education institution. We argue that this will adversely impact students

from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who are more likely to rely on government advice. We compare and contrast this view with the view of the industry insiders, as expressed in league tables, and with the verdict of the ‘market’ as represented by the institution choices of the best informed ‘market segment’ (i.e. those who choose the most effective education route).

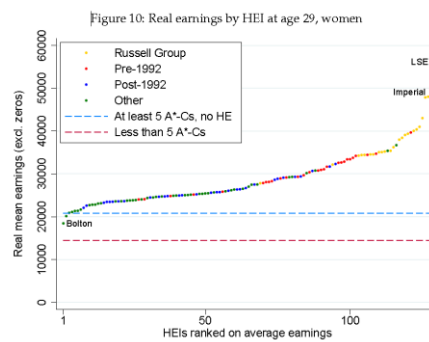
Differential access to education and its consequences for income inequality are well documented in a recent report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS, 2018), which reveals a much more complex picture than just a correlation between level of educational attainment and income level. Family background, subject and institution choice all have a significant impact on the earnings five years after graduation (IFS, 2018), which is consistent with the influence of the habitus. Moreover, also in keeping with our predictions, reports (Gov.UK, 2019) show that schooling at top independent schools (an indicator of a privileged habitus) predicts higher A level results, which predict the choice of university, which predicts earnings (IFS, 2018). We can conclude that ‘the high-end market segment’, associated with educationally sophisticated dispositions of the privileged habitus, are able to identify and realise the benefits of the high-value-added HEIs without reference to TEF.

Figure 1.



Note: Figure shows average earnings (2018 prices) by higher education institution attended (including dropouts) for the 2002 GCSE cohort in 2015-16, conditional on being in sustained employment, with earnings capped at the 1st and 99th percentiles and exclude self-employment income.

(IFS, 2018: 22)

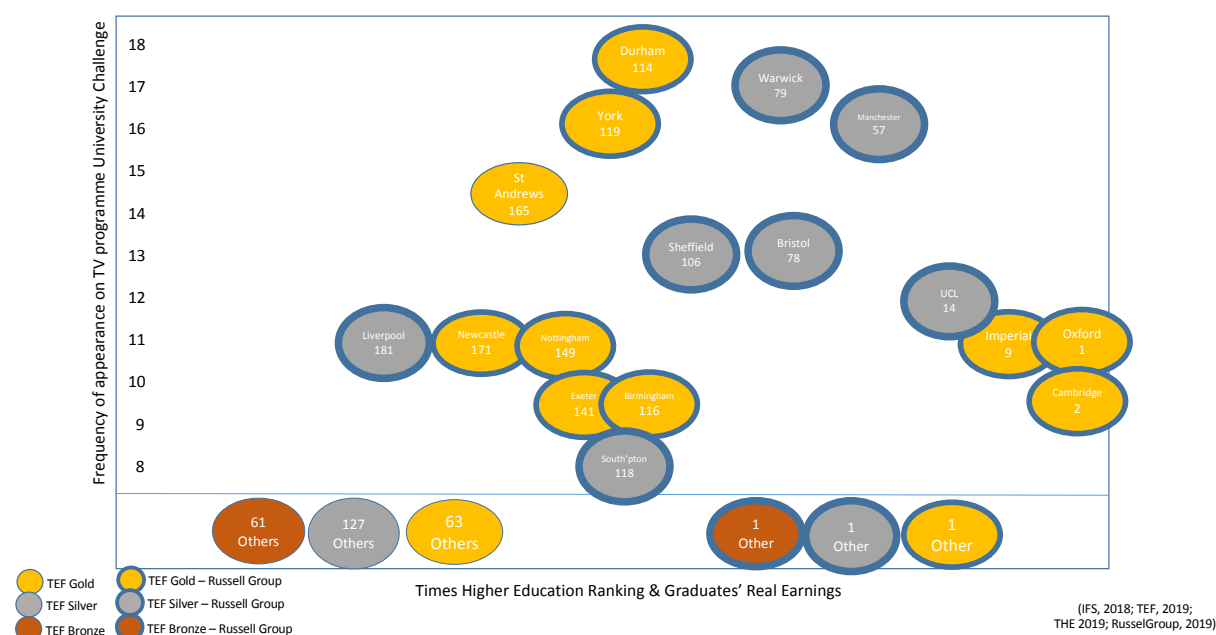


Note: Figure shows average earnings (2018 prices) by higher education institution attended (including dropouts) for the 2002 GCSE cohort in 2015-16, conditional on being in sustained employment, with earnings capped at the 1st and 99th percentiles and exclude self-employment income.

(IFS, 2018: 23)

In order to gauge the extent to which the homology of the habitus predicts the value of university experience for students we chose to use the popular television programme, University Challenge (UC), as a source of information about the distribution of students with high volume of cultural and social capital among universities. We plotted the frequency of appearance of British universities on UC against their status as members of the Russell Group, which is a proxy for real earnings resulting from completion of degrees in those universities (IFS, 2018). Figure 2 visualises fairly clearly that there is a correlation between appearing on UC and being a higher ranked university, which correlates with higher real earnings. Moreover, there is no correlation between TEF Gold and Silver and being a higher ranked university/higher income. However, there is a correlation between being a lower ranked university and having a TEF bronze. Therefore, the frequency of appearance of a university on a TV programme is a better predictor of yielding a better job, than TEF gold or silver, as predicted.

Figure 2.



Conclusions

Performance-management of universities has reached its apex with the introduction of TEF: a poorly constructed, superficial and misleading measure. Nevertheless, TEF has met with surprisingly little push-back from the academic community – perhaps because having been performance-managed by other questionable frameworks and indices for decades now, we have disconnected from the Humboldtian ideal enough to separate out research (high status) and teaching (low status) in our own identities and practices.

In one sense, the introduction of REF is just the next inevitable step in tightening up the performance-management regime. The 1992 reform divorced research from teaching in higher education in principle. The RAE/REF regime separated the two aspects of academic labour further by re-defining the very rules of practice in the field. TEF is encroaching on academic practice even further, threatening to downgrade teaching at universities to imparting standardised, ‘useful’ knowledge that conforms to external specification. This will impoverish the experience of students and diminish the value of higher education that we tried to capture in our Bourdieusian framework. The price that will be paid by the academic profession will doubtless be felt in further taylorisation of academic labour, and a widening rift between those deemed worthy of being ‘research active’ and the deskilled others, who must bear the brunt of the downgrade in the academic profession’s status.

But TEF is also different in that it serves to draw a veil of misrecognition over the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) that already limits the life choices of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Far from empowering students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in making one of the most important decisions of their lives, it blurs the rules of the game even further by purporting to be a credible, state-assured framework. This puts the society as a whole at a disadvantage by displacing its investment – economic, social, cultural and symbolic – in the next generation. If this kind of vicious circle is allowed to perpetuate, the lessons regarding the value of education arising from the current crisis of democracy will never have been learned.

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