



Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023

Summary TEF 2023 panel statement

University of Cambridge

Summary of outcomes

Overall: Gold

Typically, the experience students have at University of Cambridge and the outcomes it leads to are outstanding.

Student experience: Gold

The student academic experience is typically outstanding.

Outstanding quality features include:

- embedded outstanding teaching, feedback and assessment practices that are highly effective and tailored to supporting its students' learning, progression, and attainment
- course content and delivery that inspires the provider's students to actively engage in and commit to their learning, and stretches students to develop knowledge and skills to their fullest potential
- use of research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement to contribute to an outstanding academic experience
- compelling evidence that physical learning resources are tailored and used effectively to support outstanding teaching and learning.

There are also some very high quality features including:

- effective support for students to achieve educational gains
- support for staff professional development and excellent academic practice is promoted
- effective engagement with students, leading to improvements to their experiences and outcomes.

Student outcomes: Gold

Student outcomes are typically outstanding.

Outstanding quality features include:

- tailored approaches that are highly effective in ensuring its students succeed in and progress beyond their studies for most groups of students
- outstanding rates of continuation and completion for the provider's students and courses
- outstanding rates of successful progression
- approaches to supporting students to achieve educational gains are evidence-based, highly effective and tailored to its students and their different starting points.

There are also some very high quality features including:

- articulation of the educational gains the provider intends its students to achieve, and why these are relevant
- evaluation of provision in relation to the wider gains made by students, such as through external engagement.

About the assessment

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a national scheme run by the Office for Students (OfS) that aims to encourage universities and colleges (providers) to improve and deliver excellent teaching, learning and student outcomes.

The TEF does this by assessing and rating providers for excellence above the high quality baseline that we expect from all providers. It covers undergraduate courses.

Throughout this document, we use the terms 'outstanding' and 'very high quality', which are defined in terms of the TEF 2023 assessment as follows:

- 'outstanding': the quality of the student experience or outcomes are among the very best in the sector, for the mix of students and courses taught by a provider
- 'very high quality': the quality of the student experience or outcomes are materially above the relevant high quality minimum requirements, for the mix of students and courses taught by a provider.

The assessment was carried out in 2022-23 by the TEF Panel, a panel of academics and students who are experts in learning and teaching. This document sets out a summary of the panel's findings and judgements.

The panel reviewed the following evidence:

- numerical indicators produced by the OfS, using national datasets
- a submission made by the provider, setting out its own evidence
- a submission made by the provider's students, setting out students' views.

The panel applied its expert judgement to:

- identify particular features of the student experience and student outcomes that are excellent (above the high quality baseline requirements)
- decide a rating for the 'student experience' and for 'student outcomes'
- decide an overall rating for the provider.

Throughout the assessment the panel took account of the context of the provider and judged how well it delivers teaching, learning and student outcomes for its mix of students and courses.

In making its decisions the panel took account of the OfS general duties and the public sector equalities duty.

Summary of panel assessment

Information about this provider

The University of Cambridge states that its mission is 'to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence'. Teaching is based on 'a global reputation for excellence in research, and its positive societal impact'.

The provider is a confederation of departments, faculties and other academic institutions, attached to one of six schools. It includes 31 colleges, each of which is a separate legal charity.

It is committed to four key areas: 'its global reputation on research; freedom from discrimination; an education which enhances the skills and capabilities of students and supports potential to succeed and thrive whatever their background; and personalised education for students based on weekly supervisions in the colleges'.

It is a multi-subject provider with a combined four year aggregate of 49,750 full-time undergraduate students – around 12,000 were enrolled in each of the four years covered by the TEF assessment. Part-time student numbers are relatively small, and there are also small numbers of apprenticeships.

In 2020-21, the largest of the undergraduate subject areas are Engineering (11.6 per cent) and Medicine/Dentistry (12.9 per cent). History (8.9 per cent), Languages (6.9 per cent) and Law (5.3 per cent) also have large cohorts. Most programmes are three-year degrees.

Most students are under 21 years (94.8 per cent), and most (86.8 per cent) do not report any disability. The majority are white (56.6 per cent), and the gender split has been female (47.8 per cent) and male (52 per cent).

Entry levels are very high, at 72.5 per cent AAA or higher. The typical offer for UK students applying to STEMM subjects and Economics is A*A*A at A Level and A*AA for all other undergraduates.

The assessment considered information about the provider's undergraduate courses and students on those courses.

Full details about the provider's student demographics used in the TEF 2023 assessment are available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/data-used-in-tef-2023/.

More information about this provider can be found on the OfS Register at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register/the-ofs-register/.

Student experience: Gold

Throughout this section, we refer to indicators. These indicators are based on students' responses to the National Student Survey. The indicators are 'benchmarked' to show how well the provider performs for its particular mix of students and courses.

The panel weighed up all the evidence determined the student experience aspect rating to be 'Gold'.

It weighed up this evidence to identify very high quality and outstanding quality features, noting the absence of student experience indicators.

In the absence of these indicators, the panel looked for evidence in the provider and student submission statements and weighed them more strongly due to the wider number of data points and evidence. It looked for credible evidence in the student submission to corroborate the statement or provide additional examples of very high quality or outstanding features.

The panel considered the extent to which there are very high quality and outstanding quality features across the aspect as a whole, and how far these features apply across all the provider's student groups and the range of its courses and subjects. It found:

- four features to be outstanding
- three features to be very high quality.

In terms of the panel's assessment of how far the provider delivers excellence for all its groups of students, including students from underrepresented groups, and across the range of its courses and subjects, the panel considered that the outstanding and very high quality features apply broadly to all the provider's groups of students, including students from underrepresented groups.

The panel found most features of the aspect to be outstanding for all groups of students. It therefore judged this aspect to be 'Gold', because the aspect is typically outstanding.

The panel's assessment of the student experience features is set out below.

Teaching, assessment, and feedback

The panel considered this feature to be outstanding.

The provider has drawn on data from its internal student barometer survey in lieu of indicators. In 2019, overall undergraduate student satisfaction rate was 93.1 per cent, with 45/55 reportable courses having a satisfaction rate above 90 per cent. The provider reports that 90.5 per cent of undergraduate students were satisfied with support services, and 89.4 per cent with their academic experience.

The same survey saw students rate their satisfaction with the expertise of lecturers/supervisors as 98 per cent and overall satisfaction with the size of classes at 95 per cent. The panel found the year-on-year rates of student satisfaction difficult to judge because the provider submission's internally-generated student survey data did not cover the whole of the four-year TEF period. However, the panel agreed that the data available shows very high levels of student satisfaction across a range of themes.

The student submission argues that there is an unevenness of academic experience between colleges and across schools and faculties, and the absence of clear mechanisms to address concerns.

Evidence of outstanding provision in the provider submission includes:

- a teaching and learning model based on focused weekly supervisions which both challenge and support students' learning
- the use of supervisions to encourage students to adopt a reflective orientation to their learning, develop the ability to communicate effectively (in writing and verbally), present ideas, evaluate evidence critically, and solve problems
- the clear consideration given to the changing demographics and needs of students
- tailored pastoral support for disabled and black students: for example, a first-year induction programme to help incoming black students to network
- external examiner reports, which are positive in terms of very high quality practices
- access to learning via undergraduate certificates and diplomas, by way of a part-time route offered by the Institute of Continuing Education (ICE). This provision for 'non-traditional' learners was deemed outstanding in terms of its accessibility to a wider student demographic.

Although the panel considered the evidence of specific and embedded impact across all groups of students to be somewhat limited, the panel considered there to be sufficient evidence to judge this to be as an outstanding feature.

Course content and delivery; student engagement in learning and stretch

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

In the 2019 barometer survey, students rated their satisfaction with the expertise of lecturers/supervisors as 98 per cent, and the size of classes at 95 per cent. In 2020, the survey results showed 89 per cent of respondents were satisfied with their learning experience, and the overall satisfaction rate was 93 per cent. There were only results from 2019 and some results from 2020, but the panel did note the very high rates of student satisfaction in the data provided.

The provider submission sets out its approach to course content and delivery. Evidence includes:

- delivery of courses through small group teaching of students (supervisions) which stretches students consistently throughout the degree programmes and across all areas of the provider
- highly individualised teaching and support provided through the college structure and director of studies systems
- clear quality assurance processes outlined for the development of new courses and enhancement of existing courses
- extensive investment in books and journals that supports course development and delivery
- compelling evidence of very high quality virtual learning environments including good use of cloud-based software, and university-wide distribution of recorded lectures.

The provider has, over the past two years, planned and introduced a full-time, one-year, residential foundation year at level four in arts, humanities and social sciences. This is a free and fully funded programme aimed at those who demonstrate academic potential but who have experienced considerable educational disadvantage and disruption.

The wide portfolio of undergraduate certificates and diplomas, studied on a part-time basis, delivered by the Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) was thought to be outstanding.

The student submission critiqued the provider for too much 'stretch', referring to an 'approach [which] emphasises intellectual rigour, but at the expense of a more rounded approach which can enhance the academic experience and support student wellbeing'.

The 2019 survey into student loneliness, with 1,679 respondents, found 62 per cent citing the intensity of the academic workload as a cause of loneliness 'as friendships and social life were crowded out'. The panel considered this critique in the light of wider sector findings. On balance, the panel agreed that course content and delivery inspire the provider's students to actively engage in and commit to their learning, and stretch students to develop knowledge and skills to their fullest potential.

Research, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and employer engagement

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

This provider performed extremely well in the research excellence framework and draws on this to highlight its research-informed approach to education and students' access to excellent research resources and facilities. Two case study examples are provided.

Further evidence includes:

- independent research opportunities are integrated into undergraduate programmes, including dissertations and extended essays
- the undergraduate research opportunity programme offers funded summer placements in a range of departments with around 100-125 places filled each year
- a large number of programmes have professional accreditation, across a wide range of subject areas
- the provider offers multiple opportunities for students to engage with innovation and entrepreneurship
- students engage with initiatives such as the research experience placement, and internships with a summer research programme at King's College.

The student submission corroborates that teaching is research-led, although it notes that the provider could be clearer in terms of articulating how it impacts the curriculum and how it influences the overall student experience.

17 per cent of PhD students support undergraduates and the panel noted that this helped students share ideas and foster knowledge exchange opportunities.

Overall, the panel considered there to be sufficient evidence to suggest an outstanding feature, and that the provider uses research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement to contribute to an outstanding academic experience for its students.

Staff professional development and academic practice

The panel considered this to be a very high quality feature.

The panel found that the provider creates developmental opportunities for all staff and found compelling evidence of the promotion of academic practice.

Evidence includes:

- an established postgraduate certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, which provides an opportunity for teaching staff to engage with educational research
- a scheme that supports new teachers via the Cambridge teaching forum – reaching 799 new small-group teachers in 2021-22
- the development of a new academic pathway (teaching and scholarship), to recognise and provide career development pathways for education-focused staff. Students also welcome this in their submission
- the university rewards excellent and innovative teaching through the annual Pilkington Prize (twelve awards are presented each year to academics whose teaching is exceptional).

The panel did not consider this feature to be outstanding, because it found only limited evidence of the extent to which excellent teaching is developed and excellent academic practice promoted for all relevant staff across the institution, throughout their careers. However, the panel judged that there is very high quality support for staff professional development and excellent academic practice is promoted.

Learning environment and academic support

The panel considered this to be a very high quality feature, which includes some outstanding practices.

Examples include:

- the support for all students provided through college structures and regular supervisions
- compelling evidence of support for disabled students, including through an annual student survey to engage with students, where the provider seeks feedback and improves services in response to results. The student submission did raise concerns about how well support is integrated in some areas, for example assessment support, but the evidence base for these was unclear
- the Black Advisory Hub, which focuses on building a diverse and inclusive community for all students and staff members and aims to improve black students' outcomes
- the unlimited number of bursaries available to undergraduate degree students from low-income backgrounds through the Cambridge bursary scheme. The panel considered this to show highly personalised support.

The panel found limited evidence of maximising the virtual learning environment in ways that could be regarded as outstanding and it was judged that there was 'limited use [of the] Moodle virtual learning environment, which is...left largely to the preferences of individual staff members'.

Overall, the panel judged that the provider fosters a supportive learning environment, and its students have access to a readily available range of very high quality academic support, and there are some outstanding practices.

Learning resources

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

Evidence includes:

- the Cambridge University Library (CUL) is a network of 34 libraries which holds almost ten million books, journals, and other documents, in more than 2,000 languages, ranging from 3,000-year-old manuscripts to the latest electronic journal articles
- expenditure per student from the university library and faculties/departmental libraries in 2021-22 was £475 which is claimed to be higher than the sector
- support for disabled students to access resources in alternative formats
- an outstanding range of study spaces (4,000 study spaces in the CUL and faculties and departmental libraries and the new West Hub)
- it is highly unusual in the sector to have eight internationally renowned museums and botanic gardens. This is an example of an exceptional provision of resources – these are available both to the public and to support students' learning.

The student submission suggests there is a more limited level of development and engagement with digital resources through the virtual learning environment, and there is inconsistent recording of lectures. The provider submission addresses the need for further developments in these areas, explaining that it is looking to improve its digital resource offering with a wide-scale review of its approach to digital education and planning to more than double the staff capacity.

The panel found that overall there is compelling evidence that the physical learning resources at this provider are tailored and used effectively to support outstanding teaching and learning.

Student engagement in improvement

The panel considered this to be a very high quality feature.

The provider submission outlines some good examples of student voice and representation. However, the panel found insufficient evidence of exceptional or sector-leading practices.

Evidence for this feature includes:

- module evaluations across most courses, which have led to some changes
- student consultative committees, which include two representatives from each year group. The panel noted a particularly positive part of this process is that course organisers must seek student feedback before course changes can be approved
- a 2019 -20 survey shows students are exercising their voice to support positive outcomes
- the provider has engaged with 2020/1 the students' union review of the effectiveness of student representation, where 'findings were mixed'. This has led to the development of new standards for academic representation

- the student submission notes that it is 'promising to see members of university staff engage with Cambridge's students' union cost of living campaign over the past six months', which the panel considered to be very positive.

Overall, the panel agreed that the provider effectively engages with its students, leading to improvements to the experiences and outcomes of its students. However, it did not rate this feature as outstanding due to limited evidence of how the provider has embedded engagement with its students in such a way that it has led to continuous improvements in their experiences and outcomes.

Student outcomes: Gold

Throughout this section, we refer to indicators. The indicators for continuation, completion and progression rates are based on national data about higher education students. The indicators are 'benchmarked' to show how well the provider performs for its particular mix of students and courses.

The panel weighed up all the evidence relating to the student outcomes aspect as a whole and determined its rating to be 'Gold'.

The panel weighed up this evidence to identify very high quality and outstanding quality features then considered how far these features apply across all the provider's student groups and the range of its courses and subjects. It found:

- four features to be outstanding
- two features to be very high quality.

The panel judged there to be compelling evidence that the very high quality and outstanding features apply to all the provider's groups of students, including students from underrepresented groups.

It rated this aspect as 'Gold' because most features of the aspect are outstanding quality for all groups of students.

The panel's assessment of the student outcomes features is set out below.

Approaches to supporting student success

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

The provider's outcome data confirms its graduates' continued progression success with those in sustained employment, further study, or both at five years post-graduation at 84.2 per cent.

The indicators suggest evidence of outstanding quality.

Continuation, completion and progression rates are all at outstanding rates and the provider statement includes several examples of how the provider supports students to succeed. These include:

- evidence of personalised support: the panel noted that three colleges accept mature undergraduates only and in turn provide support tailored to their needs (for example, childcare places, and study and employment skills seminars)

- the use of supervisions to encourage students to adopt a reflective orientation to their learning, develop the ability to communicate effectively (in writing and verbally), present ideas, evaluate evidence critically, and solve problems
- extensive opportunities for academic and co-curricular support through student-led clubs and societies
- investment in an online skills framework platform that matches students' skills profiles to their prior attainment, academic attainment, and their onwards progression into employment.

While the student submission suggests that work-based learning opportunities are limited, it does note that these opportunities would be hard to engage with to a significant degree 'given the already intense workload'.

Weighing up all the available evidence, the panel noted that this provider has offered compelling evidence that it has developed tailored approaches that are highly effective in ensuring its students succeed in and progress beyond their studies for most groups of students.

Continuation and completion rates

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

It noted relevant guidance for this feature and found that overall, 'continuation' and 'completion' indicators provide outstanding evidence for full-time undergraduate students, who make up the vast majority of the student body. This varies for some student groups and courses, but the provider still performs well.

For part-time students, the indicators provide evidence of below very high quality, which varies across different groups. For 'completion' there was an initial concern for the panel as the indicators for year 1 provide evidence of not very high quality, but after year 1 they provide evidence of outstanding quality. This was thought to be an anomaly, as explained in the provider's submission. The panel judged the explanation to be credible and this was taken into consideration when assessing continuation rates.

The data for more recent part-time cohorts show 'continuation' and 'completion' rates above the OfS thresholds – the continuation rate for part-time students in the most recent year of data was outstanding. There is only one part-time subject that shows evidence of below very high quality.

Overall, the panel found outstanding rates of continuation and completion for the provider's students and courses.

Progression rates

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

The overall indicator for 'progression' provides evidence of outstanding for full time students, and that this applies to most groups and subjects, showing very high quality and outstanding levels of progression across students and courses. There is no evidence of below very high quality for undergraduate students.

There is no data for part time students.

Based on the indicator data, the panel concluded that there are outstanding rates of successful progression for the provider's students and courses.

Intended educational gains

The panel considered this to be a very high quality feature.

The provider submission offers an articulation of educational gains in terms of the skills and knowledge that enable students to thrive academically and in their progression from the university. These are linked with the 'research-intensive nature [of the provider] and the translation of research into the learning experience'.

There is limited evidence in the student submission that adds to this wider view of educational gains, except a concern that additional skills offerings are judged to add to an already pressured workload.

The provider has considered whether the exceptionally high educational attainment of students makes the measure of educational gains more challenging. It claims that its expectations for independent study, challenging work schedules and assessment through end-of-year exams helps students develop the ability to manage their resources and time, to prioritise and to meet deadlines. The student submission claims this can also be problematic.

The panel noted that the provider is developing an undergraduate skills framework to supplement academic course study, but judged it to be too premature to evaluate the success of this.

While the provider articulates the educational gains it intends its students to achieve, and why these are relevant to its students, it does not fully and clearly articulate why these are highly relevant to its students and their future ambitions, therefore the panel judged this to be a very high quality feature rather than an outstanding one.

Approaches to supporting educational gains

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

Evidence for this judgement includes:

- the opportunity to learn over 180 languages through self-study – a greater range than most providers of this size and scale
- supporting entrepreneurship
- an impressive range of societies, workshops and experiences, including co-curricular activities with 354 official students' societies
- an outstanding range and level of activities in terms of music and sport (80 sports clubs and societies, local competitions, or the intercollege sport leagues)
- investment in 'Handshake' in June 2020, a platform allowing individual appointment types to be 'ring-fenced' based on a wide range of criteria, including academic course and year of study, career aspiration, and equality, diversity and inclusivity characteristics, enabling targeted provision of a responsive service
- evidence of targeted support such as the Black Career Journeys project

In conclusion the panel judged the provider's approaches to supporting its students to achieve these gains are evidence-based, highly effective and tailored to its students and their different starting points.

Evaluation and demonstration of educational gains

The panel considered this to be a very high quality feature.

Evidence includes:

- the careers service engages actively with more than 7,000 unique employers
- alumni engagement provides employment opportunities for students
- the provider's engagement with higher education graduate outcomes data.

The submissions lacked explicit demonstration of how the provider measures and checks that its students are succeeding in achieving the intended gains, so the panel did not rate this as outstanding. However, it judged the provider takes steps to evaluate its provision in relation to the wider gains made by its students, for example through external engagement.

Overall: Gold

Applying the guidance and the panel members' expert judgement, the panel considered the overall 'best fit' rating for this provider to be 'Gold'.

The panel considered the student experience aspect rating to be 'Gold' and the student outcomes aspect rating to be 'Gold'. The panel weighted these two aspects equally and considered all the evidence across all features and across all the provider's student groups, subjects and courses to come to a 'best fit' decision about the overall rating.

There were no features in either student experience or student outcomes the panel found to be not very high quality. The panel judged that across all the available evidence the student experience and student outcomes are typically outstanding.