



Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023

Summary TEF 2023 panel statement

The Open University

Summary of outcomes

Overall: Gold

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

Student experience: Silver

The student academic experience is typically very high quality.

Very high quality features include:

- course content and delivery effectively encouraging the provider's students to engage in their learning, and stretch students to develop their knowledge and skills
- the research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement to contribute to a very high quality academic experience for its students
- a supportive learning environment, with student access to a readily available range of very high quality academic support
- effective engagement with its students, leading to improvements to their experiences and outcomes.

There are also some outstanding quality features including:

- embedded very high quality teaching, assessment and feedback practices that are effective in supporting its students' learning, progression and attainment
- outstanding support for staff professional development and excellent academic practice embedded across the provider
- learning resources are tailored and used effectively to support outstanding teaching and learning.

Student outcomes: Gold

Student outcomes are typically outstanding.

Outstanding quality features include:

- and tailored approaches that are highly effective in ensuring its students succeed in and progress beyond their studies
- outstanding rates of progression for the provider's students and courses, particularly considering its specific context
- the provider clearly articulates the range of educational gains it intends its students to achieve, and why these are highly relevant to its students and their future ambitions
- the provider's approaches to supporting its 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:

- very high rates of continuation and completion for the provider's students and courses
- the provider evaluates the gains made by its students.

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 Open University has a very specific characteristic as a provider and is the largest university in the UK. It offers significant flexibility for students and allows up to 16 years to complete a qualification. Over 63 per cent of students take around five years to complete, which compares with around 15 per cent for the rest of the sector. It also offers flexibility for students to transfer in credit from prior study, and, for example, in 2021, 48 per cent of students had credit transfer in their profile.

The overall teaching model is 'supported distance learning', and the university's key mission is stated as being 'open to people, places, methods and ideas'.

The provider has had an average of around 114,000 part-time undergraduates each year over the past four years, with a steady increase in their number over the period. Around 90 per cent of students are studying undergraduate degrees and a small number of these are undergraduate degrees with postgraduate components. In addition, around 6,000 students each are studying level 4 and 5 courses in a part-time mode. There are also relatively small numbers of full-time undergraduates and there are no full-time postgraduate students.

The majority mode of delivery is for part-time students. There is significant apprenticeship provision at undergraduate level (2,570), mainly in business and management, and nursing and midwifery, and the provider states that this is the largest in the sector.

Most part-time students are mature – only 11 per cent are under 21 years on entry. The vast majority of students are also white, and female (63 per cent). Of the part-time students, 25 per cent declare a disability, and of those 11 per cent have multiple or other impairments, which is stated in the provider submission as being very high for the sector.

There is a broad mix of entry qualifications at all levels.

Full details about the provider's student demographics used in the TEF 2023 assessment are available at <https://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: Silver

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 in the indicators and the submissions relating to the student experience aspect as a whole and determined its rating to be 'Silver'.

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

It found:

- three of the features to be outstanding
- four of the features to be very high quality

The panel found evidence across the aspect that the provider embeds effective approaches and tailors its approaches to its students. 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. The panel considered the contextual information regarding the proportion of students from underrepresented groups to be relevant to this assessment.

The panel considered the best fit rating to be 'Silver' because the evidence 'best fits' the description that 'all features of the aspect are very high quality for most groups of students' and courses.

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

Teaching, assessment, and feedback

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

The overall indicator for 'teaching on my course' and the indicator for 'assessment and feedback' provide some initial evidence of very high quality for part-time students. The indicators suggest that this evidence applies to almost all the provider's groups of students, including students from underrepresented groups.

It was noted, however, that these indicators provide limited evidence on their own.

The provider submission describes a number of outstanding features across teaching, tutorials and assessment, especially in the context of the provider. Key highlights are:

- laboratories providing online access to equipment and experiments
- the learning resources are created in partnership with academics and education developers
- a culture of embedding evaluation in everything they do
- outstanding tutorial support, with pilots such as quick response forums in key modules

- a plan which embeds principles of anti-racists, anti-discriminatory, accessible and inclusive practice and that a diverse student voice is integrated into the planning of teaching.

The student submission includes evidence of positive comments about teaching, although there is also mention of some inconsistent practice and areas for improvement in assessment.

Overall, the panel concluded that the provider has embedded very high quality teaching, assessment and feedback practices that are effective in supporting its students' learning, progression and attainment (noting that the indicators contributed no more than half of the evidence of excellence and, in this specific case, that there was a large contribution from the provider to its own benchmark. – As such, the panel placed more weight on the submissions than the indicators and they considered this to be an outstanding feature.

Course content and delivery; student engagement in learning and stretch

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

The provider submission focuses on the module delivery strategy and shows consistent student satisfaction on individual questions in the National Student Survey. For example, the provider highlights that an average of 90 per cent of students find their course intellectually stimulating.

The provider submission also contains a number of examples of positive comments from external examiners, external assessors and accrediting bodies, which confirms the intellectual rigour of their provision. The panel was unable to find detailed evidence as to how the students actively engage in their learning across all of the subjects, however.

Overall, the panel concluded that course content and delivery effectively encourage the provider's students to engage in their learning, and stretch students to develop their knowledge and skills, and that this is a very high quality feature.

Research, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and employer engagement

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

The provider submission states that one of five key principles in their 'Learning and Teaching Plan 2022-2027' is that teaching and learning is designed and delivered as a research-informed process. The panel noted limited evidence in the submission, which includes more focus on the provider's research-informed teaching and learning methods. However, some initiatives are described to support teaching development, which the panel identified as very high quality.

The panel found limited evidence in the provider submission of employer engagement in the programmes, although it did note that there is a growing apprenticeship provision.

The panel considered overall that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the provider uses research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement to contribute to a very high quality academic experience for its students. The panel did not consider there to be sufficient evidence to support a judgement of outstanding.

Staff professional development and academic practice

The panel considered this to be an outstanding quality feature.

The provider submission notes that many of its staff were moved to permanent contracts in 2022, allowing more time and opportunity for staff development. There are several examples within the provider submission of outstanding support for staff to develop their academic practice, including:

- clear progression pathways through all career stages to professor, with evidence of promotions which recognise teaching
- new academic staff follow a postgraduate certificate in academic practice
- staff are supported to enter national teaching award schemes, with success noted
- a university-wide learning design team which works with all module production teams
- the creation of a community of practice by staff, supporting quality enhancement
- the assessment hub provides material on assessment from across the university to support sharing of good practice.

After its assessment, the panel considered that there is outstanding support for staff professional development and that excellent academic practice is embedded across the provider.

Learning environment and academic support

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

The overall indicator for 'academic support' provides compelling evidence of very high quality for part-time students, across almost all student and subject groups. The panel noted, though, that the evidence from the indicator provides limited evidence on its own.

The provider and the student submissions supplement the indicator evidence by providing further evidence of a very high quality feature, which includes:

- the open source virtual learning environment, which is critical to online provision
- there is a rigorous module development process, including the use of typical student profiles and testing via a student panel
- modules are scaffolded carefully to support students to study
- students are assigned to dedicated student support teams.

The panel considered that there is some evidence in the provider submission that could be considered to be outstanding, including:

- significant effort to ensure that the curriculum is accessible to students with a disability, and it noted that in 2021 there were 28,000 requests for alternative formats
- the use of a chatbot to provide disability support.

The student submission includes examples of positive experiences of support, but it also states that they perceive there is a need for greater signposting of students to the available support.

The panel considered the characteristics of the student body when considering this evidence. It concluded that the provider fosters a supportive learning environment, and its students have access to a readily available range of very high quality academic support.

Learning resources

The panel considered this to be an outstanding quality feature.

The overall indicator for 'learning resources' provides compelling evidence of very high quality, and that this applies to almost all student and subject groups. The panel noted however, that the indicator provides limited evidence on its own.

The provider and the student submissions supplement the indicator evidence by providing evidence which included a number of outstanding features, for example:

- learning resources are focused on the virtual learning environment as a main delivery vehicle
- interactive module maps and an inclusive curriculum tool
- the use of an open studio to support peer sharing and feedback
- considerable access to e-books and journals
- labs which are innovative and support the practice-based subjects.

The student submission also praises the quality of the resources, providing additional evidence that this is an outstanding feature.

The panel considered the characteristics of the student body when considering this evidence. Overall, the panel concluded that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that learning resources 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 indicator for 'student voice' shows compelling evidence of very high quality for full-time students, for almost all student and subject groups. The panel also found that the indicator for 'student voice' gives initial compelling evidence of very high quality for part-time students.

The evidence in the provider submission of very high quality engagement with students includes:

- the student charter and the Open University student association
- student voice action plans and the annual student voice week and associated student voice toolkit
- 3,000 students taking part in curriculum design student panels and 7,000 students signed up to the 'engage with students' consultation

- the fact that module feedback has evolved to a three-part survey across the beginning, middle and end of a module
- online forums.

The panel noted that the provider submission states that there are some particular challenges with both teaching students in secure environments and flexibility in study intensities, and that it provides evidence of tailored approaches.

The student submission raises some concerns about the provider's response to coronavirus and in particular, that there was 'too great a focus on academic standards and insufficient focus on the impact on students' resulting in the establishment of an exceptional appeals process.

Overall, the panel concluded that there was evidence that the provider effectively engages with its students, leading to improvements to their experiences and outcomes. The panel did not consider that there was sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the provider has fully embedded engagement with its students or that it has reached a culture of continuous improvement. Therefore the panel judged this to be a very high quality feature.

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 in the indicators and the submissions relating to the student outcomes aspect as a whole and determined its rating to be 'Gold'.

The panel considered the very high quality and outstanding features across all student groups and courses and found:

- four of the features to be outstanding
- two of the features to be very high quality
- that the very high quality and outstanding features apply to all the provider's groups of students, including students from underrepresented groups.

The panel considered the evidence in the provider submission to be important to the panel's assessment of the indicator evidence and features, such as contextual evidence. It found evidence of outstanding quality provision across all groups of students and for all courses and subjects.

The panel considered the best fit rating to be 'Gold', because most features are outstanding for all groups of students and courses.

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 quality feature.

The provider submission describes the scale of the support they provide to support student success and demonstrates the scale and complexity of their accredited information, advice and guidance service.

There is a particular focus on consistency across all services to ensure staff have access to the latest and most appropriate information to advise students.

The evidence in the provider submission of an outstanding approach to supporting students includes:

- provider investment in chatbots for key items of basic information provision, which are apparently well-received. This frees up staff to support more complex problems
- additional support for students from underrepresented groups – there is a 21-strong team of personal learning advisors
- specific focus on supporting large numbers of students declaring a disability and wider mental health services, with evidence of success presented
- an innovative virtual internship programme
- targeted academic support because of the use of predictive analytics, which was well received in the student submissions.

Overall, the panel considered that there is sufficient evidence of outstanding practice, and that the provider deploys and tailors approaches that are highly effective in ensuring its students succeed in and progress beyond their studies.

Continuation and completion rates

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

The indicators for 'continuation' and for 'completion' provide initial compelling evidence of very high quality for full-time students. It is noted, though, that these indicators provide limited evidence on their own.

The panel also considered additional evidence within the provider submission. It found:

- a continuous focus on enhancing continuation and completion rates
- the TEF indicators for the more recent four years are slightly more variable (although they are possibly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic)
- there are significant numbers of students who are transferring in credit, which affects the credibility of the datasets
- the provider submission recognises a number of challenges that they face and has launched an institutional student outcomes programme.

The provider monitors the proportion of students who have succeeded by the third year of study; counting credit achievement, current study and gaining a qualification as positive student outcomes. There is also a reflection of the motivation of why some students study with the provider, stating that this may not be about the award itself but for other reasons, such as to obtain a promotion at work.

The panel considered the characteristics of the student body when considering this evidence. In conclusion, it judged that there are very high rates of continuation and completion for the provider's students and courses.

Progression rates

The panel considered this to be an outstanding quality feature.

The overall indicator for 'progression' shows initial evidence of very high quality with compelling certainty for part-time students.

The provider submission explains that their students have different employment needs: 55 per cent of students are in full-time employment already, and 20 per cent in part-time employment.

The provider also contends that the graduate outcomes survey is not wholly applicable to their student body and has developed its own alumni survey three years after qualifying.

There is evidence from the graduate outcomes survey which shows that 87 per cent of students go on to achieve their study goal.

The panel carefully considered the characteristics of the student body when considering this evidence. Overall, the panel considered that there are outstanding rates of progression for the provider's students and courses, particularly considering its specific context.

Intended educational gains

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

The provider submission clearly articulates systematic educational gains, and it was evident that the provider understood its student body and the particular challenges which that presents.

Educational gains are articulated as:

- academic gains – subject knowledge and academic skills (demonstration of achievement of qualification and module learning outcomes)
- personal gains – soft skills and personal growth attributes
- graduate gains – work readiness and transferable skills and confidence building (identified as a key gain for their students).

The provider submission also states that confidence-building is a key aspect of the educational gains intended that reflects the nature of its student body. It also demonstrates how these gains particularly academic, vary in terms of programme context.

The FutureYou tool supports students in the identification of the core employability skills which are tailored to their career aspirations. It was also noted by the panel that 50 per cent of students using the tool in an early evaluation have identified it was helping them develop core skills and personal goals.

The panel considered all the evidence in the round and found that the provider clearly articulates the range of educational gains it intends its students to achieve, and why these are highly relevant to its students and their future ambitions.

Approaches to supporting educational gains

The panel considered this to be an outstanding feature.

The provider submission details its approaches to supporting educational gains across each of their three areas: graduate gain, personal gain and academic gain.

The panel noted outstanding evidence of graduate gain in the provider submission: data is presented from the 2022 survey which asks the graduates to reflect on their skills development across a number of different areas.

To evidence personal gain, there is also data presented from different student confidence surveys, showing how study has helped with personal development and confidence.

The provider submission details the use of responses to National Student Survey questions to evidence academic gain. These are combined with specific question responses from the graduate outcomes survey around how much the graduates agree that they are applying what they have learned during their studies in their current work/activity.

There is recognition by the provider that it has a uniquely diverse student cohort, with changing career and personal aspirations, and that it understands its student body.

Overall, the panel considers there is sufficient evidence that the provider's approaches to supporting its students to achieve educational 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.

The provider submission gives evidence from the graduate outcomes survey in 2019-20 that 71 per cent of their graduates were using skills learnt in their current work. Additionally, 81 per cent of students agreed that the skills they develop will be useful for their future career, and 74 per cent believed that their studies have improved their career prospects from individual questions in the National Student Survey 2022.

The panel considered overall that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the provider evaluates the gains made by its students. The panel did not find evidence that the provider is fully demonstrating that its students are successful in achieving the intended gains yet, so it did not rate this feature as outstanding.

Overall: Gold

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

The panel considered the student experience aspect rating to be 'Silver' and the student outcomes aspect rating to be 'Gold'.

The panel found all student experience features to be of very high quality for most groups of students and courses and most student outcomes features to be of outstanding quality for all the provider's groups of students, including students from underrepresented groups, and courses. The panel also found there to be some outstanding quality student experience features.

When determining whether the overall rating should be 'Gold' or 'Silver', the panel judged all the evidence to show there to be typically outstanding quality provision for all groups of students and courses rather than typically very high quality provision. The provider has also presented compelling evidence to show that its approaches are embedded across the university, as well as evidence demonstrating that the provider tailors its approaches to its students, including those from underrepresented groups.