



Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023

Summary TEF 2023 panel statement

Activate Learning

Summary of outcomes

Overall: Silver

Typically, the experience students have at Activate Learning and the outcomes it leads to are very high quality.

Student experience: Bronze

The student academic experience is typically high quality, with some very high quality features

Very high quality features include:

- embedded teaching, feedback and assessment practices that are effective in supporting students' learning and progression
- course content and delivery that effectively encourages students to engage in their learning, and stretches them to develop their knowledge and skills
- support for staff professional development and promotion of excellent academic practice.

Student outcomes: Silver

Student outcomes are typically very high quality.

Very high quality features include:

- effective support for students to succeed in and progress beyond their studies
- very high rates of continuation and completion for students and courses
- very high rates of successful progression for students and courses
- effective support for students to achieve educational gains.

There is also one outstanding quality feature:

- a clear articulation of the range of educational gains it intends its students to achieve, and why these are highly relevant to the provider's students and their ambitions.

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

The vision of Activate Learning is 'to achieve far reaching, progressive change and impact through learning', with a mission of 'providing talent for business and transforming lives through our Learning Philosophy by empowering every learner to reach their full potential'.

Activate Learning is a large general further education college, with a small higher education provision. It has 1,500 students in its higher education courses in 2020-21. Between 2017-18 and 2020-21, full-time student numbers have increased to 880, while part-time students have seen a steady decline from 250 students in the same period.

Around a quarter of full-time undergraduates study Business and Management, with around 15 per cent studying Allied Health and 10 per cent studying Agriculture, Food and Related Studies. For part-time students Engineering is the most popular subject, with around a quarter studying this, while around 24 per cent are in Business and management and around 14 per cent are in Architecture, Building and Planning.

The large majority of students are mature on both full-time and part-time courses. Full-time students who have a disability make up almost 20 per cent of the population, while this is around 10 per cent of part-time students. A relatively low proportion of students are from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. More students enter the college with BTEC, access or foundation qualifications than with A-levels.

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 <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: Bronze

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.

Across the aspect of student experience the panel found:

- three features are very high quality
- insufficient evidence to judge four features as very high quality, although one feature had elements of very high quality

The panel did not find any features that were clearly below the level of 'very high quality' or that may be of concern. When considering the aspect of student experience, the panel considered the provider's context regarding the size and scope of its assessment. The panel noted that indicator data for the provider's part-time students is not reportable due to small numbers, so proportionately greater weight was placed on this evidence in the submissions when assessing the features.

The panel applied the criteria and found the 'best fit' rating to be 'Bronze'. This is because some features are very high quality for most groups of students, consistent with a rating of 'Bronze'.

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

Teaching, assessment, and feedback

The panel considered this feature is very high quality for some groups of students and/or subject areas.

The indicators showed:

- initial evidence that 'teaching on my course' and 'assessment and feedback' is very high quality for full-time students
- there was no reportable indicator data for part-time students.

The provider and student submissions provide evidence including:

- teaching options that cater to diverse student and employer needs
- teaching practices that incorporate real world scenarios and work based learning
- a commitment to teaching excellence, through a culture of continuous enhancements
- external examiners' validation of the quality of feedback given to students
- an award winning learning philosophy, that creates an environment where students can develop 'attributes for success', designed in collaboration with employers. However details of the award are not given.

- a recent internal student satisfaction survey, showing positive student responses to teaching on the course and assessment and feedback, along with endorsement in the student submission.

While the panel found evidence of teaching, feedback and assessment practices aligned to the vocational nature of its courses, it also noted limited evidence of how its strategic plan is embedded and how an inclusive learning culture is achieved. Additionally, how the provider evaluates the effectiveness of its approaches, and how they are tailored to different student needs, was not detailed clearly. Therefore, the panel did not consider this feature to be outstanding.

Looking at the evidence overall therefore, the panel concluded that the provider has embedded very high quality teaching, feedback and assessment practices that are effective in supporting its students' learning, progression, and attainment.

Course content and delivery; student engagement in learning and stretch

The panel judged this feature as very high quality for some groups of students and/or subject areas.

The provider and student submissions provide evidence, including:

- how courses incorporate work related, work based learning, placements, or work experience
- examples of content, learning and opportunities to stretch students on specific courses
- co-designed and co-delivered provision, with external examiner endorsement
- positive student feedback on practical lessons, and the teaching team sharing their professional experiences.

The panel noted survey data in the student submission that identifies areas for improvement, such as guest lectures and the timely release of content to enable students to engage.

However, considering the evidence in the round, the panel found 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. This is consistent with a very high quality feature.

Research, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and employer engagement

The panel found insufficient evidence to judge this feature as very high quality.

The provider and student submissions provide evidence, including:

- an emphasis on a highly responsive curriculum, aligned with employer needs, research, and professional practice
- examples of very high quality employer and professional input into the teaching programme
- positive comments in the student submission on the use of practicing counsellors.

However, the panel noted there is limited evidence on the strategic implementation of this approach across colleges. There was no discussion on how the highly responsive curriculum is informed by research, although the panel noted the reference to the Research College Group and the interest in practitioner research.

The panel placed weight on the contribution to academic experience of professional practice and employer engagement, recognising very high quality within specific programmes. However, it noted the limited evidence concerning how this contributes to a very high quality academic experience across the provision.

Considering the evidence in the round, it found insufficient evidence of how 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.

Staff professional development and academic practice

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

Evidence of very high quality in the provider submission includes:

- a learning and development policy encouraging staff to play an active part in identifying their own needs. This is done through appraisals and annual reviews, along with undertaking relevant learning and assessing its effectiveness.
- induction support for new higher education tutors from the college's HELP team
- the applied learning foundation (ALF) supports higher education tutors with resources, mentoring, and development funding for external training or qualifications. However, the panel noted little information on continuing professional development investment, staff engagement, and how many staff hold teaching qualifications
- how the ALF serves the higher education teams community as a practice sharing forum. Limited information of the effectiveness of the foundation was noted however, apart from an example of supporting on change programmes such as the Research Ethics Framework.
- details of industry sabbaticals for staff, that were recognised in a nomination for a Beacon Award for engagement with employers.

The panel considered there was not enough evidence of how excellent practice is embedded across the academic community. However, when considering the evidence in the round, the panel concluded there is very high quality support for staff professional development and excellent academic practice is promoted. This demonstrates a very high quality feature.

Learning environment and academic support

The panel considered there is not enough evidence of very high quality for this feature.

The indicator showed there is compelling initial evidence that 'academic support' is below very high quality for full-time students. There was no reportable data in the indicator for part-time students.

Evidence in the provider and student submissions includes:

- a positive student response to academic support from a supplementary internal survey
- positive student responses to the NSS Learning community questions
- academic support from six higher education study support tutors, including personalised assistance, especially with students identified as at risk of not continuing or completing, although there was limited evidence on student engagement and the relationship with academic teams
- inclusive support services in the higher education student charter. This includes a specific focus on disabled and ethnic minority students, though there was limited explanation of the approach.
- financial support for purchasing equipment, materials, and additional work placement costs.

The panel noted evidence of a range of very high quality academic support. However, there was not enough evidence of a strategic approach to academic support and how it was implemented, promoted and evaluated.

Considering the evidence in the round, the panel concluded that there is insufficient evidence of how the provider fosters a supportive learning environment, and of how its students have access to a readily available range of very high quality academic support.

Learning resources

The panel found there is insufficient evidence of a very high quality feature.

The indicator shows evidence that 'learning resources' are below very high quality for full-time students. There was no reportable data in the indicator for part-time students.

The provider and student submissions showed evidence including:

- the Activate Learning Online virtual learning environment offers a platform to support the learning experience
- a positive student survey feedback on the college's learning resources and additional endorsement in comments from Engineering and Land based subject students. However, Education and counselling students identify areas for resource improvement
- Higher Education Student centres offer support, along with supplementary learning resources such as books, e-journals, equipment, course materials There is limited explanation of how these relate to specialist areas
- being a Beacon Award finalist for the Jisc Award for Effective Use of Technology in Education
- additional investment in physical and digital resources for Animal behaviour and welfare, and Counselling.

Looking at all the evidence, the panel concluded there is insufficient evidence to judge that physical and virtual learning resources are effectively used to support very high quality and teaching for all the student groups. Therefore this was not rated as a very high quality feature.

Student engagement in improvement

The panel considered there was not enough evidence of very high quality for this feature.

The indicator showed compelling evidence that 'student voice' is below very high quality for full-time students. There was no reportable data in the indicator for part-time students.

Evidence in the provider and student submissions includes:

- using student engagement processes, including surveys, focus groups, and student representation within academic governance to gather feedback and identify areas for improvement
- an HE Student Newsletter, including a section for 'You said, we did', although limited examples of improvements are cited
- introducing student led enhancement projects (StEPs) supporting learning and employability, but with limited evidence of how these are sustained and embedded
- high student satisfaction in student voice through an internal survey, although there was limited evidence in the student submission of the effectiveness of student voice.

The panel considered evidence of how the provider engages with its students, but found limited detail on effectiveness and of how engagement has led to improvements. The panel noted student led enhancement projects are very high quality, but found insufficient evidence of how enhancements were further embedded across the provider.

Considering the evidence in the round, the panel concluded there is insufficient evidence that the provider effectively engages with its students leading to improvements to the experiences and outcomes of its students.

Student outcomes: Silver

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 found there is evidence of typically very high quality across student outcomes as a whole. Across the aspect the panel found:

- most features are very high quality
- one feature is outstanding
- there was not enough evidence to judge one feature very high quality.

The panel found that the very high quality and outstanding features apply to most of the provider's groups of students.

The panel applied the criteria and considered that the rating with the best fit is 'Silver'. This is because all features are very high quality for most groups of students, consistent with a rating of 'Silver'.

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

Approaches to supporting student success

The panel found this feature to be very high quality.

The provider and student submissions showed evidence, including:

- using Promonitor and the formative assessment boards to identify students at risk and any additional support needed
- embedding of work-related and work-based learning in the curriculum, alongside work with key local, national and international employers. An example includes 200 hours work experience in zoo management
- endorsement by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education which sees the work related and based learning in the curriculum as an effective strategic commitment to develop and enhance student employability, linked to learning opportunities
- specialist one-to-one careers advice offered to students when approaching graduation
- a student toolkit available signposting students to different opportunities, resources, and guidance to support further development. The panel placed less weight on this because it was established outside the TEF period.

The panel considered the evidence of embedded employability and links to industry described within the outline of courses and endorsed by external examiners. Looking at the evidence in the round, the panel concluded the provider effectively supporting its students to succeed in and progress beyond their studies. The panel therefore concluded this feature to be very high quality.

Continuation and completion rates

The panel considered this as a very high quality feature for many student groups.

The indicators showed that:

- for full-time students, there is compelling evidence that 'continuation' is very high quality; and strong evidence that 'completion' is very high quality
- for part-time students there is probable evidence that 'continuation' is very high quality; and compelling evidence that 'completion' is outstanding.

The panel considered that this evidence applied to most of the providers student groups, with some variations in subject areas. It placed weight on the overall ratings in full-time and part-time groups in forming its conclusions.

Considering the evidence in the round, the panel found there are very high rates of continuation and completion for the provider's students and courses.

Progression rates

The panel considered this is a very high quality feature.

The indicators showed that:

- for full-time students there is initial evidence that 'progression' is very high quality
- for part-time students there is initial evidence that 'progression' is very high quality.

The panel noted further evidence in the submission regarding Furniture Design and Making courses for full time students. Although this subject is not classified as a managerial or professional occupation, graduates are actively sought after by employers, with 100 per cent of graduates progressing to professional employment in 2021-22.

The panel considered the very high quality performance of the progression indicators, alongside the provider's internal graduate destination information, which shows 94 per cent of students progressing to employment or further study.

Looking at the evidence overall, the panel considered there are very high rates of successful progression for the provider's students and courses, consistent with a very high quality feature.

Intended educational gains

The panel found this feature to be outstanding quality.

The panel noted that the provider describes how the educational gains are based upon its vision and mission, and are defined as: measurable improvements in academic achievement; increased motivation for personal development; and increased knowledge and skills relevant to career growth.

The panel also considered how these educational gains align to the learning approach, underpinned by the provider's learning philosophy, which encourages students to develop their 'Attributes for Success', determined in collaboration with employers as being: confident, professional, resilient, enterprising and aware.

The panel noted how at the start and end of each year, students complete an attribute survey, which provides personalised feedback on each student's 'attributes' areas of development. Students also have the opportunity to engage in activities and events, and with resources to support this development.

Looking at all the evidence, the panel concluded 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. Therefore, this is an outstanding feature.

Approaches to supporting educational gains

The panel considered this as a very high quality feature.

Evidence of a very high quality approach in the provider submission includes:

- the educational gains model that illustrates how the learning philosophy supports educational gains
- wider activities also support the quality of educational gains, such as financial aid, teaching quality, technology, feedback, inclusive curriculum, study support, learning environment, and enrichment
- students participate in attributes surveys, identifying strengths and signposting areas for development
- the launch of the MyStudentHub toolkit planned for February 2023.

The panel noted the student led, personalised approach outlined by the provider, but did not consider there to be sufficient evidence of how the approaches were evidenced based and highly effective, in order to support an outstanding feature.

Considering the evidence in the round therefore, the panel concluded that the provider's approaches to supporting its students to achieve these are highly effective. This is consistent with a very high quality feature.

Evaluation and demonstration of educational gains

The panel considered there was insufficient evidence to judge this feature as very high quality.

The panel noted the provider outlines the means to measure educational gains and is developing ways to do so, but that currently there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate the provider evaluates the gains made by its students.

Therefore, the panel concluded there is not enough evidence to demonstrate a very high quality feature. In line with TEF guidance, the provider was not prevented from being awarded a higher rating solely based on the lack of a developed way to measure educational gains.

Overall: Silver

Based on the guidance and the expert judgement of panel members, the panel found the 'best fit' rating to be 'Silver'.

The panel considered student experience features to be 'Bronze'; and student outcomes features to be 'Silver', and gave equal weight to both. It carefully examined the evidence across all features, student groups, subjects, and courses.

It found that some student experience features are very high quality for most groups of students, and most student outcomes features are very high quality for most groups of students. The panel considered the context of the size and shape of the provider throughout its assessment.

In judging 'Bronze' or 'Silver' to be the best fit, the panel considered all the evidence and judged it to show, on the whole, that the student experience and student outcomes are typically very high quality, consistent with a rating of 'Silver'.