

Reflection

KEF, TEF, REF and all that: The current state of art & design higher education in the UK

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International scholars may be rightly confused by the complexity of the UK university quality landscape. The UK has introduced a series of measures over the last decade to evaluate the quality of Higher Education (HE) knowledge exchange, teaching and research provision. This short piece reflects on the employment of assessment exercises for the art and design higher education sector in the UK.

As we have recently heard, the UK creative industries are the fastest growing sector in our economy. In 2018, the DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) sectors (digital, creative industries, cultural, sport and civil society) contributed £224.1bn with the creative industries providing a large chunk at £111.7bn (DCMS, 2018). Annually, Art and Design schools across the UK provide a constant flow of high-quality graduates into the creative economy, demonstrating that our educational provision is meeting requirements and our graduates are outperforming those from many other sectors.

The UK government's industrial strategy gave us all something to get hold of in terms of the relevance of art and design provision from undergraduate to post graduate research degrees. The creative industries continue to expand as predicted back in 2012, in that immense growth would occur in the sector between 2012 and 2022. This has held true to date. The past decade is expected to have seen over a million new jobs by 2022. As challenges occur in many work sectors in the UK, such as automation, the creative industries are proving to be resilient and see their workforces continue to expand. Many Art and Design Schools have collaborated across their institutions and introduced wider skill sets to their cohorts of students, such as digital design and coding. The skills portfolio of the art and design graduate is expanding to allow them to apply their skills effectively in a fast-changing world of work. We must continue to seek, teach and develop new agile skillsets that will maintain the value to employers and long term resilience of our graduates.

As economic measures are used to evaluate an art and design education, stakeholders for each student (including parents) are demanding a transparent understanding of the value of higher education. This goes beyond the cost of the degree to the individual student, but also seeks to articulate and measure the value of the complete university. What contribution does it make to the region, the UK economy and even the Global perspective? Attempts to provide answers and give value ratings for universities has partially been achieved through mechanisms such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). For fuller accounts, assessment agencies have been constructed; the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and now the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF).

Partly due to the three Excellence Frameworks (EFs) we are able to demonstrate that our sector does add significant value to the economy, to society and to wider cultural communities. The three EFs are affecting the work of art and design educators, bringing challenges and opportunities in abundance. No sooner has one set of data been translated into an understandable language than another set of terms and acronyms appear. This lexicon of meanings and measurements have and will continue to influence the lives of colleagues who teach and research in Art and Design across the UK in a number of ways. Navigating through this network of metrics and terminologies may appear joined up and fluent to the top-level architects who developed them, but translating this into values that the end user can judge to be worthwhile and worth investing in is a challenge.

All three EFs are designed to improve the visibility of our work in HE and demonstrate globally how much of a contribution we are making to 'UKPLC'. Institutions will benefit from this level of transparency so that consumers of education will know what to expect when they sign up to study or start a career in the academy. Or will they? As HE becomes a commodity for all stakeholders, do we understand the direction of travel, our responsibilities to ourselves and our users and where it will all land?

Strategies attempt to capture future visions of 3-5 years, 10 years and even 20 years. Reverse engineering is a tried and tested way of predicting the future and understanding what is needed to achieve ambitions and meet objectives, but does this really work with art and design education? How many strategies meet their consumer's needs, in the past, present and in the future? Should the student and academic expect to explore and take risks to further their understanding of the world and develop means to solve problems and future challenges for their stakeholders? The three EFs can show us how we are doing as institutions, positioning departments and all sorts of structured clusters of teachers, researchers, those engaged in knowledge exchange, but these mechanisms are not designed to further the development of individuals. It is the submission that counts, the unit, the body of work and the collective whole, not the person who has created the endeavour (the work).

Looking outwards from art and design, how is our sector performing against other sectors in the wider academy? Is it important to take account of this and is it appropriate to compare our work to other sets of values, such as science or other wider cognate areas? What will we gain from this and how will we develop ourselves as individuals and as a sector to ensure our future sustainability and cultural profit? Let's unpick the three EFs and see if this helps. I will not repeat the purpose of the three as these are given in the respective websites, REF: <https://www.ref.ac.uk>, TEF: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/what-is-the-tef/> and KEF: <https://re.ukri.org/knowledge-exchange/knowledge-exchange-framework/>

KEF, the Knowledge Exchange Framework was due to commence in earnest in 2019/20 but this has been held back until next academic year, probably a wise decision taking into account the volume of work required to manage and administer the upcoming 2021 REF

submission. The KEF will measure knowledge exchange and has organised a group or cluster of institutions by their likely ability, taking track record into account. So, universities find themselves competing with a whole new set of competitors. For some this is a relief, to be accepted into that particular club, for others it is as expected and of course for some that will be a challenge.

REF, the Research Excellence Framework, shortly to close its second census period on 31 July, 2020 has had earlier iterations of Research Assessment, with the RAE running from 1986 - 2008. The first REF (2014) which assessed research outputs, impact and environments between 2008 and 2013 changed the research landscape for art and design. We saw 84 institutions assessed and a significant amount of Quality Research income dispersed to the various institutions that achieved quality profiles (that is, included three and four star recognition for their research). The forthcoming REF (2021) has amended some of the rules governing the submissions and assessment of research. I expect that the following exercise (2027/28) will see further changes, some of which the sector will like, and others dislike.

TEF, the Teaching Excellence Framework has also had its controversies particularly of the resulting badges awarded to institutions; Gold, Silver and Bronze. Not all went as expected with some reputable universities achieving lower awards than anticipated. Some adjustments have been made and this occurs on a rolling basis and as new Higher Education Institutions are formed, they bring their assessments of teaching quality into the mix.

The various commissioned reviews of REF2014 caused some stirs in the Higher Education sector resulting in anomalies of an interim or transitional REF such as the ability of academics to move institution within the census period and 'port' outputs so that both employers for the individual in the census period could have some claim to outputs. What this has really shown is that the institution that sponsored the research owns the outputs not the individual. Submissions are now known as 'our work' not 'my work.' Interestingly, impact cannot be ported by academics as they move to a new post at another University. The most significant change has been the ability of universities to choose if they wish to submit all academic staff to REF or if they wish to produce a code of practice that describes their selection process, resulting in less academics being submitted to REF. As anticipated, submitting institutions are taking a variety of approaches in how they orchestrate this. All institutions that have submitted a Code of Practice have had to have it assessed by Research England, who manage the REF.

Can we anticipate that these three quality assessment processes will improve the provision of art and design higher education enabling us to improve what we do and better serve our stakeholders, allow the rest of the world to understand who we are and what we are capable of and finally maintain and improve our global standing? Of course, there are many other benefits of an art and design education, which includes contributions to lesser publicised audiences and marginal communities. It is not just the job at the end of a degree which is important, it is the development of the person throughout that journey which makes a wider contribution to society and develops the collective mind.

In some ways it is difficult to predict what the future of art and design will be because of KEF, TEF and REF. What we do know is that Higher Education has changed, and we can be sure it will not return. It will increase in its marketisation and continue to use measurements to be evaluated and judge itself. Metrics are here to stay, they bring value when used effectively, but the danger is that an educational focus on a measured set of imposed values can damage creativity and innovation through a lack of risk. This is even impacting design and technology at school level, for example the recently introduced English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) qualification may be guilty of this

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/englishbaccalaureate-ebacc>).

A purpose of the three assessments in HE is to seek and find excellence and, once found, to promote it. This will have a number of dimensions; it will promote the sectors that participate, it will allow for greater access to our work of benefit to a range of stakeholders, it will offer attractive careers for school leavers.

How well do the three EFs do this in the UK and how much appetite for risk and innovation do they invite? Are they effective mechanisms for encouraging young teachers and researchers to join the sector and do these new recruits see opportunity for an exciting career where they can make a valuable contribution to society? Do other countries or regions use equivalent processes to measure the quality of knowledge exchange, teaching and research? It would be interesting to hear views from international colleagues on the effectiveness of such processes that are in place, or opinions on whether the introduction of such quality measures would benefit international art and design higher education institutions.