A MELTing Moment in UK Higher Education? Reflections on how the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) Challenge Academic Leaders to Foster New Ways to Integrate Education and Research

Michael Wilmore[1]

[1]Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, UK

Corresponding author email address: mwilmore@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

The advent of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and proposed changes to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) provide added incentives to the integration of research and education in UK universities. MELT and RSD frameworks are ideally suited to meet these needs. However, these opportunities will not be realised in practice unless leaders in higher education are able to develop approaches to professional development that not only foster academic interest, but also lead to sustained changes in teaching practice that incorporate these frameworks for research-integrated education. This paper briefly summarises one approach to academic professional development that was inspired by MELT-style approaches to education, and identifies university leadership practice as a new focus for RSD/MELT research.

Balancing the needs of education and research creates an ever-present tension in the life of most academics. This tension is also celebrated, because the fusion of these twin pillars of higher education often leads to intense creativity. Nevertheless, such tension has consequences for the careers of academics and students at all levels, influencing the allocation of teaching responsibilities, promotion criteria, and investment in campus infrastructure. This paper looks at how the Research Development Framework and its MELT variants (RSD website) might be influenced by, and, in turn, influence, resolution of these tensions in UK higher education given the way that key government policies are laying new foundations for the conceptualisation of these activities and their integration. The potential challenges for academic leaders who must implement RSD/MELT-based solutions to the integration of education and research are also considered, along with a brief summary of a MELT-influenced solution to academic development.

Within the past three decades, attempts to resolve actual and potential tensions between education and research in the UK, particularly in England, have been institutionalised through the operation of the

Research Excellence Framework (REF, 2014) and its predecessors: the Research Selectivity Exercise (1986 and 1989), the Research Assessment Exercise (1992, 1996, 2001, and 2008), and now the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF, 2016 onwards). The implementation of each exercise has been highly controversial (Molesworth et al., 2011), but in the context of a governance landscape typified by audit cultures of various stripes (Waters, 1989), these exercises are accepted by many as a price worth paying to maintain public investment in universities.

The introduction of the TEF was in part intended to correct the perception, rightly or wrongly, that universities' evaluation through REF and its antecedents had reinforced the dominance of research within university decision-making at the expense of work to ensure the quality of education. The failure of several 'elite' universities to achieve more than a Bronze award in the 2017 TEF exercise, the first in which such graded evaluations were made, was seen by many to be a sign that this corrective action was finally starting (Galbraith, 2017).

Nevertheless, closer inspection of some of the current documentation underpinning the TEF and REF seems to indicate that there is a desire to move both towards some form of rapprochement or accommodation that avoids the needless dichotomisation of education and research. For example, the TEF guidance documentation provides the following information about one of the main 'aspects of quality', Learning Environment:

> Learning Environment includes the effectiveness of resources such as libraries, laboratories and design studios, work experience, opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and extra-curricular activities in supporting students' learning and *the development of independent study and research skills*. The emphasis is on a personalised academic experience which maximises retention, progression and attainment. *The extent to which beneficial linkages are made for students between teaching and learning, and scholarship, research or professional practice (one or more of these) is also considered* (Department of Education, 2016, p.19; emphasis added).

In addition to the baseline metrics used in the TEF exercise, universities have had to articulate through a fifteen-page written statement how they can evidence their achievement of the linkages between education and research referred to in this aspect of quality.

Likewise, the recent review of the REF led by Lord Nicholas Stern 'emphasised the importance of integration of *teaching and research*' (Stern, 2016, p.34; emphasis in original) and contained a large

number of observations about their interconnection, some couched in terms of the then looming TEF announcement, of which the following are broadly representative:

> Many HEIs argue that their research and teaching activities are closely intertwined. Indeed, some argue that research and teaching are 'jointly produced' and that the economies of scope in this joint production should be recognised in order to avoid the distortion of allocations and career choices, and indeed the strength and effectiveness of the UK academic base.

> Efforts to capture case studies through which research can be shown to have had a major impact on university teaching might help to avoid such distortions. How a subject is taught, and what is taught in a discipline could be an important indicator of research impact. It will also be important to ensure that the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is carefully considered in developing the REF, to ensure that consistent approaches are taken, and that TEF and REF do not incentivise universities to separate inappropriately or dichotomise their research and teaching missions (ibid., p.17)

This is supported by the following statement leading to recommendation 7:

> Better to align the REF with the TEF, we…recommend that research leading to major impacts on curricula and /or pedagogy within or across disciplines should be included.

> Recommendation 7: Guidance on the REF should make it clear that impact case studies should not be narrowly interpreted, need not solely focus on socio-economic impacts but should also include impact on government policy, on public engagement and understanding, on cultural life, on academic impacts outside the field, and impacts on teaching (ibid., p.23).

Likewise:

> The renewed emphasis on the range of research and scholarship based activities that can be used for Impact Case Studies, and their broadening to include, for example, the impact of research on innovation in teaching theory and practice (ibid., p.28).

Although we do not know how many of Stern's recommendations will be accepted following the formal review of REF that subsequently took place, it appears likely that most, if not all, will be adopted in some form. Attention has been focussed on some of the recommendations that would appear to have a direct

impact on the implementation of the next REF in 2021, such as the requirement to submit to the assessment exercise all academics who have some element of research included in their contract of employment (Sweeney, 2017). Nevertheless, the alignment of the message of 'integration' between education and research seems to indicate a wider attitudinal change within UK higher education.

It is within this context that MELT and the Research Development Framework, along with other models of pedagogy, can provide much-needed support for the now more urgent drive towards research-integrated education (or research-engaged education, or some other term – the nomenclature is not really important). However, this then raises the question of how those who have long advocated for both the integration of research and education and the value of models such as RSD which provide coherent frameworks for achieving this can best ensure that the moment is seized. This question can and should be asked by all who are invested in the fulfilment of the specific recommendations made in the Stern review or the wider intentions that underpin them, whether this is a direct or indirect requirement of our position in the academy.

I would contend that the advent of new approaches to the TEF and REF in the UK (which will perhaps inevitably go on to influence policy and practice in other countries, including Australia) is most significant for those who hold leadership positions in our universities. This is because reliance on the emergence of renewal from the uncoordinated actions of academics who have autonomously developed their own teaching practice will achieve change only at a very slow pace, or perhaps not at all. Everyone attending this conference will attest, I'm sure, to their own excited use of the RSD or similar frameworks in their teaching, but also to the frequent indifference of colleagues to the adoption of these innovations in the practice and philosophy of education.

Communication is, therefore, a necessary but not sufficient part of the solution to this problem. Studies at various levels of education, including in schools (Hattie, 2009) and universities (Matthews, 2017), have shown that even when teachers are aware of the positive potential of innovations in learning design and pedagogy, they are reluctant to adopt them into their own practice for fear of negative consequences should these changes lead to problems that outweigh positive outcomes. It was to counter this reluctance that the Faculty of Health, Arts and Design at Swinburne University of Technology (where the author previously held the role of Associate Dean for Learning Innovation), experimented in 2015-16 with a more structured approach to supporting colleagues who were identified, either through standardised evaluation metrics or self-selection, as likely to benefit from a MELT-style professional development course to help redesign the units they coordinated and taught (Kehoe et al. 2016a).

Although the Research Skill Development framework was only occasionally used explicitly as a resource in the PD materials, it provided on-going inspiration to the author in his Associate Dean role, because it enabled him to articulate more clearly to the recipients of the PD and to other academic leaders how the learning outcomes of each unit and their constructive alignment to both the proposed learning activities and assessment in the new version of units could be rethought and explained to students. In particular, the structured dialogue used in this academic development process led to a clearer understanding of how the academics' own research might inform the learning outcomes of the unit and its assessment strategy, including the reconfiguration of assessment criteria. Initial evaluations of this approach to supporting academics indicates that they found it useful both in relation to the specific unit under consideration and to academics' confidence in the wider adoption of new approaches to education (Kehoe et al. 2016a and b).

The aspect of practice that I am most concerned with here is that of the leaders in education in our universities, particularly those in 'middle management', such as Deans and Associate Deans, who may have to simultaneously convince those who are active in the classroom and those setting policy and strategy at the most senior level of the university of the merits of RSD and MELT inspired approaches to integrate research into teaching and learning. I argue that the advent of the new approaches to TEF and REF in the UK make it more likely that senior leaders will be responsive to the opportunities that RSD/MELT provide to support the development of education practice and curricula, but it is the challenge of convincing those at the 'chalk face' of the opportunities they bring for improvements in student learning that will be harder to meet (Bolam et al., 2005). This provides a new focus for RSD/MELT research, because we need to understand how best to bring these frameworks to the attention of colleagues and then ensure that they are enthusiastically and successfully adopted as part of on-going teaching practice and learning design.

In conclusion, there has never been a time when there was a greater opportunity or requirement for the integration of research and education in UK higher education. Nevertheless, any resulting changes will only be successfully implemented and sustained if they use an underlying framework or model that convinces all stakeholders, particularly the students who ultimately experience the resulting learning environment, that this integration of research and education has genuine intellectual coherence. Perhaps this is the MELTing moment we have been waiting for in the UK, because every university in England stands to benefit from the adoption of a model that has proven effectiveness and impact. Nevertheless, the challenge of ensuring that this adoption occurs is ours to meet.

References

Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S. and Wallace, M., 2005. *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities.* Bristol: General Teaching Council for England.

Department of Education, 2016. *Teaching Excellence Framework: year two specification*. London: Department of Education, UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-excellence-framework-year-2-specification (Accessed 19th July 2017).

Galbraith, G., 2017. Let's use the TEF to bring lofty universities back down to earth. *The Guardian*, 3rd July, https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2017/jul/03/lofty-universities-tef (Accessed 19th July 2017).

Hattie, J., 2009. *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.

Kehoe, T., Williams, B., Branigan, E., and Wilmore, M., 2016a. Rethinking the Role of the Academic Developer: Learning design processes and fostering communities of practice. Unpublished paper.

Kehoe, T., Schofield, P., Branigan, E. and Wilmore, M., 2016b. Unit Improvement Planning: A case study in academic development. Unpublished paper.

Matthews, D., 2017. Academics 'fail to change teaching because of fear of looking stupid'. *Times Higher Education*, 6-12th July, p.8.

Molesworth, M., Scullion, R., and Nixon, E. (eds.), 2011. *The Marketisation of Higher Education: The Student as Consumer*. London: Routledge.

Stern, N., 2016. *Building on Success and Learning from Experience: An Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework*. London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review (Accessed 19th July 2017).

Sweeney, D, 2017. Significant responsibility: an update on the consultation for REF 2021. *WONKHE*, 19th July, http://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-update-reforms-ref-2021/ (Accessed 19th July 2017).

Waters, M., 1989. Collegiality, bureaucratization, and professionalization: A Weberian analysis. *American Journal of Sociology*, *94*(5), 945-972.