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The Programme Director and the Teaching Excellence Framework: How do we train the former to survive the latter?

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Abstract

The programme director undertakes a key role within UK universities in linking the department, or school, directly with the student (Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012) and their experience of the university. The role is multi-faceted and complex with a number of competencies required to successfully undertake it. Furthermore, the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was fully introduced in 2016 and utilises existing measures such as student satisfaction, retention rates and destination of leavers (HEFCE, 2016) as a proxy for teaching excellence. Many of these metrics are also part of the day to day concerns of programme directors within universities. This research surveyed 89 programme directors on the training they have received to carry out their role and how it links to the TEF outcomes. The paper argues that there is insufficient training for programme directors and an increase in training may have a beneficial outcome for a university's TEF results.

Keywords

Programme Director; Course Director; Training; Teaching Excellence Framework; Teaching Excellence, Leadership

Introduction

The UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) first set of awards were announced in June 2017 (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, n.d.). The TEF is a voluntary assessment of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the UK that awards a gold, silver or bronze to the institution based on their; teaching excellence; the learning environment; and student outcomes (HEFCE, 2017a). The TEF utilises aspects such as student satisfaction, retention rates and destination of leavers (HEFCE, 2016) as a proxy for excellence. Many of the TEF's metrics are also part of the day to day concerns of programme directors [1] within universities.

Programme directors are responsible for the delivery of academic programmes within HEIs. They are the individual academic responsible for ensuring that the right students, undertake the right number and type of modules, at the right level and quality to ensure that they are eligible to graduate with their chosen award. The programme director is usually an experienced academic, predominately in the field being studied by the students, who undertakes the administrative duties in relation to an award bearing course. The role of the programme director is varied and contains a number of activities which can encompass; the recruitment of students; day to day liaison with students; management of the course content; and liaison with both academic and support staff. The role provides a first line of management within universities focused at the student level.

The aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of the training requirements of the programme directors by providing a fuller appreciation of the role. The research utilises the

TEF as a backdrop to understanding the role of the programme director within UK universities. The research question and sub-questions are:

RQ: What training is provided to build the skills required of the Programme Directors for the Teaching Excellence Framework?

SRQ1: What activities are Programme Directors required to undertake?

SRQ2: What training do Programme Directors receive?

SRQ3: What is the perceived relationship between the TEF and the programme director's role?

Context and Review of the Literature

Olssen and Peters' (2005) treatise on neoliberalism and the higher education sector identifies that the evolution of the sector to a more state regulated market structure has meant that governments, both UK and international, have developed techniques to measure the sector. They identify that

> "A further consequence of marketization has been the increased emphasis on performance and accountability assessment, with the accompanying use of performance indicators" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 327)

This increase has included the development of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) and, more recently, the TEF. These represent an agency cost, to both the universities and government, of defining, meeting and providing evidence of meeting the identified standards (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Within universities there are limited funding and, as such, all expenditure on meeting these standards ought to be effectively focused.

The Role of the Programme Director

Within HEIs the concept of 'distributed leadership' is the most usual structure of the organisation; Bolden, Petrov and Gosling's (2009, p. 261) research identified this structure "was not just conceivable…but a necessity" due to the complexity and importance of leadership in this context. The benefits of distributed leadership includes "improved responsiveness to students" (ibid, 2009, p. 266), however, the perceived challenges include issues relating to the individual's abilities and clarity of role expectations. Nonetheless, Bolden et al's (2009) research identified that programme directing provides an incremental opportunity for staff to become part of a universities distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership comes from the top downward, with devolved roles and responsibilities, and from emergent leadership (either bottom up or horizontal) through individuals or teams collaborating to achieve an objective. With regards to the programme director's role, they may span both types as their role may be defined in relation to the student outcomes but may require "individual agency" (Bolden et al., 2009, p. 271) to lead the teaching team where they do not have line management responsibilities for individuals. Likewise, Milburn (2010) identified that the programme director's ability to influence the implementation of policy is based on two factors; their situation and their personal attributes. As such, the programme directors may need multiple skill sets to deliver their assigned role.

Preston and Floyd (2016) identify that the role of the Associate Dean is not well understood, likewise it can be argued that the role of the programme director also lacks understanding and clarity. Within the educational research literature, little is written directly about the role of the

programme director in the higher educational context especially outside of the field of medicine (Bryman, 2007). Nonetheless, Vilkinas and Ladyshewsky (2012, p. 110) identify that the programme directors have

> "a significant role to play in learning and teaching outcomes for students, program quality and the reputation of the institution within which they work".

They go on to note that the programme director undertakes a key role in linking the department, or school, with the student (Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012); this includes translating the university's vision to the reality delivered to the student (Milburn, 2010).

Bordage, Foley and Goldwyn (2000) undertook to identify the skills that a medical programme director needs and identified, from a survey of 139 hospital deans and administrators, over 60 different skill sets required from interpersonal skills to being visionary. They concluded that programme directors have a "a key leadership role" and that they have a strong role within the university with regards to future developments (Bordage et al., 2000, p. 210). However, they also note that the there is an imperative need to training "future programme directors with leadership qualities" (Bordage et al., 2000, p. 210).

The Value of Training

Training is designed to provide, or increase, a participant's skill set in a relatively short timeframe and is focused on a specific activity (Anderson, 2007). According to Tharenou et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis of 67 studies, training is positively correlated to HR outcomes,

such as attitudes and behaviours, and organisational outcomes, such as performance and productivity.

A training needs analysis is usually undertaken to consider the requirements in relation to; an entire organisational; operational or job specific activity; or at an individual level (Moore & Dutton, 1978). The analysis usually takes into consideration an individual's growth requirement or a requirement to standardise knowledge for a particulate group, for example, across all programme directors. Additionally, the training may take into consideration external factors that influence, or are about to influence, an organisation, in the case of this research this includes teaching excellence measurements, specifically the TEF.

What are the TEF's requirements?

The TEF was introduced in the UK as a trial run in 2015 before being fully implemented in 2016 with the first full awards made in 2017 for undergraduate level teaching only (HEFCE, 2017b). The assessment and award process is managed by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) on behalf of the UK's Department for Business, Innovation and skills (Hannant & Payne, 2016). All UK based HEI's, including universities and other awarding bodies, delivering either; first degrees (undergraduate); integrated masters; or levels 4 and 5 Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas were invited to apply to be assessed (HEFCE, 2016, p. 10). Of the eligible institutions 130 chose to engage with the process with approximately 35 choosing not to (Times Higher Education, 2017). It is worth noting that postgraduate teaching is currently not included in the review, initial plans were to include it in year four (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2016, p. 45) however this is yet to be confirmed.

The AY2016/17 assessment process looked at three areas of quality; Teaching Quality (TQ); Learning Environment (LE); and Student Outcomes and Learning Gains (SO) (HEFCE, 2016, p. 24). These quality areas were subdivided into ten criteria (HEFCE, 2016, p. 24):

- TQ1: Student Engagement
- TQ2: Valuing Teaching
- TQ3: Rigour and Stretch
- TQ4: Feedback
- LE1: Resources
- LE2: Scholarship, Research and Professional Practice
- LE3: Personalised Learning
- SO1: Employment and Further Study
- SO2: Employability and Transferable Skills
- SO3: Positive Outcomes for All

The measurements are based on existing data from the National Students Survey (NSS), Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) and Destination of Leavers Survey from Higher Education (DLHE) as well as a supporting 15 page submission from the HEI. This was then assessed by a panel of experts who also review the contextual data for the HEI, for example, student's economic background (HEFCE, 2016, p. 26). The HEI's were then awarded a Gold, Silver or Bronze rating which is valid for three years (HEFCE, 2016, p. 64).

The TEF itself is not without critics, Sir Christopher Snowdon, vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton believes it to be “fundamentally flawed” and or “no value or credibility” (Grove, 2017). In many ways, the TEF is still under significant development, for example, in the 2017/18 iteration the additional use of graduate salary data has been included in the metrics (HEFCE, 2017c). As such, whilst this paper utilises the TEF as a context for the analysis of the programme director’s role, it is acknowledged that the TEF itself is a limited proxy for the concept of teaching excellence both in terms of content and stability of requirements. Nonetheless, as Olssen and Peters (2005) identify, the change in the international market structures has led to the increase use of measurements to assess the marketization of the sector and, therefore, measurements of teaching excellence are likely to be constant for the foreseeable future.

Methods

The research was based within a pragmatist framework utilising an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 23). The stage one of the mixed methods research was an analysis of the activities a programme director undertakes. This was undertaken through the identification of 16 programme director role descriptions located on UK universities’ websites; this represented approximately 10% of the UK’s universities. The role descriptors varied from programme director handbooks to internal vacancy adverts. These were analysed using thematic analysis (Bryman, 2008, p. 530) to identify the core activities expected of the programme director.

Once the activities had been identified they were used within a survey to understand the training received by programme directors as stage two of the mixed method. The survey was

sent via email, utilising Qualtrics survey software, to 400 individuals identified on their university's website as being a programme director or similar. This was done following ethical approval being granted by both sponsoring [2], with particular emphasis on confidentiality and anonymity to ensure the respondents were able to answer the questions openly. The sample was limited to programme directors at UK based universities and excluded other degree awarding bodies to facilitate the comparison of the results.

The survey focused on what training the programme director received, using closed questions. It then utilised Likert scales to understand the programme directors' views on their activities in relation to the TEF results across all 14 identified programme director activities. Finally, it looked at the respondents views on their ability and responsibility to impact their university's TEF results.

Overall 89 useable surveys where completed. The respondents came from across the major disciplines with, for example, 18% from Business and Administration, 10% from Education, 3% from Computer Science; the only JACS codes (HESA, n.d.) not represented were Law, Physical Sciences and Veterinary Sciences.

The survey respondents were 44 female and 45 male, 73% held a Doctorate and 55% were Senior Lecturer grade. Predominately they were in the 40-49 or 50-59 age range and had worked in academia for an average of almost 15 years. The average time as a programme director was 6.5 years with a mean of 146 students on their courses, though this varied from 10 to 1,500. Overall 73% managed postgraduate programmes, 43% of respondents managed undergraduate programmes and a 13% managed doctoral programmes, with many managing

more than one level. Respondents only managing doctoral programme were excluded from the research as there is currently no plans to include doctorates in the TEF (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2016, p. 46). Only one in ten of the respondents received additional income directly related to the programme director role, for example a stipend.

Results and Discussion

What Does a Programme Director Do?

The analysis of the programme director's role identified 14 core activities that they are expected to undertake. Table 1 provides the full list of the activities and exemplars of what each of the activities include. It should be noted that not all of the programme director specifications includes all of these role, however, the more comprehensive role descriptor documents did cover all of the activities.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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In general, the activities undertaken by a programme director vary in type but can broadly be categorised into; administrative, interactive and enforcement. Each of these three categories utilise different skill sets, for example, the administrative activities require the following of prescribed processes to ensure that the programme is effectively delivered, this requires skills in organisation, planning and attention to detail. The interactive role requires the ability to interact on a personal level with students, faculty, support staff as well as

industry, this includes skills such as tact, diplomacy and empathy. Finally, enforcement activities, for example, student disciplinary management requires skills such as accurate record keeping, fairmindedness and policy interpretation. In short, the analysis of the programme director's activities show that they are required to have a broad range of skills and abilities in order to successfully undertake their role.

As the first line of student management within the university, programme directors have a close relationship with the students and their priorities. As such, a key part of their role is to try to meet both the students' and the university's priorities. The survey respondents were asked to order the 14 activities as they perceived the university's priorities and, again, as they perceived the students' priorities. For the university, programme director's listed 'Programme Quality', 'Student Recruitment' and 'Programme Delivery' as the top three roles. Likewise, from the students' perspective the respondents perceived 'Programme Delivery', 'Programme Quality' and 'Student Experience' as the top three. In contrast, the bottom three for the university's perspective is perceived as 'Programme Financial Management', 'Industry Requirements' and 'Staff Liaison'. For the students' perspective, the bottom three are 'Programme Financial Management', 'Programme Compliance' and 'Industry Requirements'. In short, the key activities for the programme director role are typically short term in nature focusing on current and incoming students with the lower activities being, generally, of a longer term nature for the university.

What Training Does a Programme Director Receive?

With the programme director's roles and priorities as a backdrop, the training they receive can be reviewed. Overall, 32% of surveyed programme directors had no training before

undertaking the role. Following on from that 17% had still had no training after their first year in post and, finally, 13% of respondents had received no training at all.

The majority of training received by programme directors was related to working with other staff with over a third of respondents stating that they had this training before, within one year and regularly after appointment. The second highest training subject is 'Student Recruitment' which reflects the priority of that activity to the university as perceived by the programme directors. It is interesting to note that two of the top concerns for both the university and the students, 'Programme Delivery' and 'Programme Quality', are ranked ninth and eleventh respectively for training. The programme director's activity which received the least amount of training, as listed in table 2, is 'Industry Requirements' followed by 'Student Pastoral Care'.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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With regards to the TEF itself, just over half (51%) of the respondents who had responsibilities for an undergraduate programme had receive training on the TEF, either as the focus of a training session or as part of other training. In contrast, only 30% of respondents responsible for only postgraduate programmes had received any training on the TEF. As the TEF is currently only looking at undergraduate provision, and there has been no firm decision on the date of incorporating postgraduate programmes in the evaluation, this lower rate is not unexpected for postgraduate programme directors. Nonetheless, this low rate

of training on the TEF does indicate that the link between the programme director's role and teaching excellence is not seen as a core relationship within universities.

The TEF's Relationship with the Programme Director's Activities

As part of the research, respondents were asked to rate how relevant they perceived programme director activities are to the TEF. They were asked to rate each of the activities on a scale of entirely, a lot, somewhat and not at all. When combining the top two levels of the scale, four scored as over 90% relevant to the TEF; 'Student Experience Management' (97.4%), 'Programme Quality' (94.8%), 'Programme Delivery' (90.9%) and 'Assessment Management' (90.7%). In contrast, 'Student Disciplinary Management' (51.4%), 'Student Recruitment' (45.3%) and 'Programme Financial Management' (17.6%) were ranked as the bottom three.

Additionally, the respondents were asked to score the impact their activities have on the TEF outcomes against each of the three TEF areas. Three out of the four top impact categories are the same as for relevance with 'Assessment Management' being replaced with 'Programme Admission' in the fourth place. Likewise, 'Programme Financial Management' was also ranked at the bottom of the table with 'Exam Board Management' next and 'Student Recruitment'

The relevance and impact to the TEF can be compared with the training received on each of the 14 activities, as illustrated in table 3. Whilst a ladder board may provide a somewhat simplistic representation of the findings it does show that in, general terms, the likelihood of having training is broadly inversely proportional to either its impact or relevance to the TEF.

In short, what the programme directors are receiving training on has little or no relationship to the current measures of teaching excellence.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Programme Directors Perception of their Role in Relation to the TEF

Finally, the programme directors were asked to consider their ability and responsibility to impact the TEF scores. For half of the ten TEF sub-categories the respondents felt that they had over a 70% ability to significantly or somewhat influence the results. In relation to their perception of their responsibility in six of the categories they rated themselves as having either 100% or 75% responsibility for the TEF score. In other words, the programme directors see themselves as part of the TEF process and as a core actor in the success, or otherwise, of their university. In short, they have a leadership role to play in the successful evaluation of the teaching excellence within their institutions.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Conclusion

What is clear from this research is that the programme directors receive very little training with regards to their role and related activities. In addition, the training they receive is not directed at their role priorities, from either the university's or student's perspective; nor it is aligned to the value the role can bring to teaching excellence leadership. In short, there is a significant gap between the programme directors' role in relation to teaching excellence and the training they are provided with. Whilst this is unlikely to be a surprise finding it does present opportunities for universities to review the core skills their programme directors' need to support both the university itself and the students.

In relation to leadership, Milburn (2010, p. 93) identifies programme directors are in a "powerful position from which to effect grass-roots change". The most trained activity is 'Staff Liaison', whilst this does not have a strong relationship with teaching excellence, it may enable the programme director's ability to provide emergent leadership (Bolden et al., 2009) and thereby facilitate change.

The bottom three of the training ladder table are worth considering within the wider UK context. Firstly, within the TEF data collection non-continuation is a core metric, however, 'Student Pastoral Care' receives only 12.6% of the training focus. In their research into student retention Bernardo et al. (2016, p. 6) identify that good relationships between all academics and the students

> "contribute[s] to academic results and the completion of degree studies [and] …[t]his makes it vital to improve university teachers' initial and continuing training so that faculty members have the knowledge and skills they need to effectively play their [part]."

Secondly, the UK government introduced the concept of the Batchelor and Masters level apprenticeships and in 2015 announced a levy to support the funding of the scheme, effective from April 2017 (HM Government, 2016). This source of income requires universities to work with industry to develop suitable programmes, as such programme directors have a key role to play in accessing the funding. Nonetheless, the lowest level of training received by programme directors related to understanding 'Industry Requirements'; maybe this scheme is the catalyst required to increase the programme directors ability to engage with industry.

Thirdly, Adams (2017) writes that universities in the UK are suffering from a lack of funding, in Adams' article Tim Bradshaw, the Russell Group's acting director, states that "[f]or a number of years, funding for teaching has been squeezed". As such, the lack of training on 'Programme Financial Management' seems naive, if not negligent. Assisting programme directors to understand their budget may not be relevant or impact the TEF directly it may, however, prove to be a quick win for universities in general.

In the UK versions of the REF have been undertaken since 1986. Likewise, many other nations have developed methods of evaluating the cost and value of academic research (Geuna & Martin, 2003) which are often aligned to government funding distribution mechanisms in a neoliberal environment (see Olssen & Peters, 2005 for a fuller discussion).

Many of these international approaches have their roots in the UK approach, including China whose new approach is thought to be heavily influenced by the UK REF system (Grove, 2018). It is likely that, as the concept of measuring educational excellence is not unique to the UK, there may be a similar international uptake of the TEF's aims internationally. As such, it is reasonable to posit that the learnings contained within this paper can be considered within international contexts.

This research looked at the formal training that was received and excluded training that was offered to the programme director but declined. In addition, the role of peer to peer learning was not included within this study. Preston and Floyd (2016, p. 276) identify that for Associate Deans' "their main source of learning and support [came] from others in the same role", this may also be the case for programme director's. Both of these areas deserve further research.

Finally, whilst this research utilises the context of the TEF for the research it should be noted that the context is still in a developmental stage and, as such, is likely to evolve over the coming years. In addition, as noted above the TEF is somewhat controversial and this may have influenced the view of the respondents. That said, the role of the programme director will, most likely, remain an influential and important role within universities. Additionally, the concept of teaching quality is likely to be part of the measurement of an educational establishment's value for the foreseeable future.

Footnote

[1] Programme directors are also known as course directors, course/programme conveners, course/programme leaders. The term programme director is often used to refer to the individual academic responsible two or more award bearing courses with a course director being responsible for one; however, within this research they are treated as the same.

[2] This research was undertake as part of an MA in Academic Practice at City University of London. As such, ethical approval was gained at both Cranfield University and City, University of London.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of a Programme Director's Role

Activities	Exemplars
Student Recruitment	Marketing Admissions Processes
Student Experience Management	Student Liaison Committees Student Induction Student Surveys and Feedback
Student Progression Management	Extensions Suspensions General Monitoring of Students' progression Student Placements
Student Pastoral Care	General Monitoring of Students' health and well-being
Student Disciplinary Management	Investigations Plagiarism Reports
Industry Requirements Management	Accreditation Industry Advisory Inputs Horizon Scanning
Exam Board Management	External Examiner Selection Exam Board Preparation Post Exam Board Student Contact
Programme Administration	Handbook Management General Student Information Management School/University Committees Attendance
Programme Financial Management	Expenditure Authorisation Budgeting
Programme Delivery	Timetable Management Room Booking Management
Staff Liaison	Module Leader Management (direct or indirect) Support Staff Liaison
Programme Quality	Programme's Academic Standards Programme Reviews
Programme Compliance	University's Policy and Procedures External Policy and Procedures Health and Safety
Assessment Management	Quality Assurance Timings of Deliverables Assessment Styles Assessment Quantity Feedback Quality e.g. Moderation

Table 2: Percentage of Respondents who Have Received Training on each of the Programme Director's Activities

% of Respondents who Have Received Training on each of the Programme Director's Role	Before Appointment	Within First Year	Regularly after Year 1	Averaged Likelihood of Having Received Training	Order of Averaged Likelihood
Staff Liaison	35%	35%	41%	36.7%	1
Student Recruitment	33%	35%	32%	33.3%	2
Student Disciplinary Management	32%	33%	22%	29.0%	3
Student Progression Management	32%	26%	28%	28.5%	4
Student Experience Management	19%	30%	28%	25.6%	5
Assessment Management	23%	30%	22%	25.1%	6
Programme Compliance	22%	26%	26%	24.6%	7
Programme Administration	16%	26%	25%	22.2%	8
Exam Board Management	13%	29%	23%	21.7%	=9
Programme Delivery	16%	26%	23%	21.7%	=9
Programme Quality	14%	19%	16%	16.4%	11
Programme Financial Management	9%	19%	14%	14.0%	12
Student Pastoral Care	12%	14%	12%	12.6%	13
Industry Requirements	1%	12%	10%	7.7%	14

Table 3: Programme Director's Activities Relevance and Impact on the TEF in Relation to the Training Received

Activity Undertaken by Programme Director	Likelihood of Having Training		Role's Relevance to the TEF			Perceived Impact on the TEF Requirements		
	Average of 'Before', 'Within 1 Year' & 'Regularly'	Position	% Selecting 'Entirely' +'A Lot'	Position	Change of Position in Relation to Likelihood of Training	Total Impact Score; 'Yes' to Impact on 'TQ'+'LE'+' SO'	Position	Change of Position in Relation to Likelihood of Training
Staff Liaison	36.7%	1	51.4%	11	-10	131	7	-6
Student Recruitment	33.3%	2	45.3%	13	-11	105	12	-10
Student Disciplinary Management	29.0%	3	51.4%	11	-8	106	11	-8
Student Progression Management	28.5%	4	88.2%	5	-1	128	8	-4
Student Experience Management	25.6%	5	97.4%	1	4	170	3	2
Assessment Management	25.1%	6	90.7%	4	2	142	5	1
Programme Compliance	24.6%	7	75.3%	7	0	126	9	-2
Programme Administration	22.2%	8	68.1%	8	0	152	4	4
Programme Delivery	21.7%	9	90.9%	3	6	179	2	7
Exam Board Management	21.7%	9	59.5%	9	0	98	13	-4
Programme Quality	16.4%	11	94.8%	2	9	181	1	10
Programme Financial Management	14.0%	12	17.6%	14	-2	80	14	-2
Student Pastoral Care	12.6%	13	84.2%	6	7	132	6	7
Industry Requirements	7.7%	14	55.2%	10	4	123	10	4

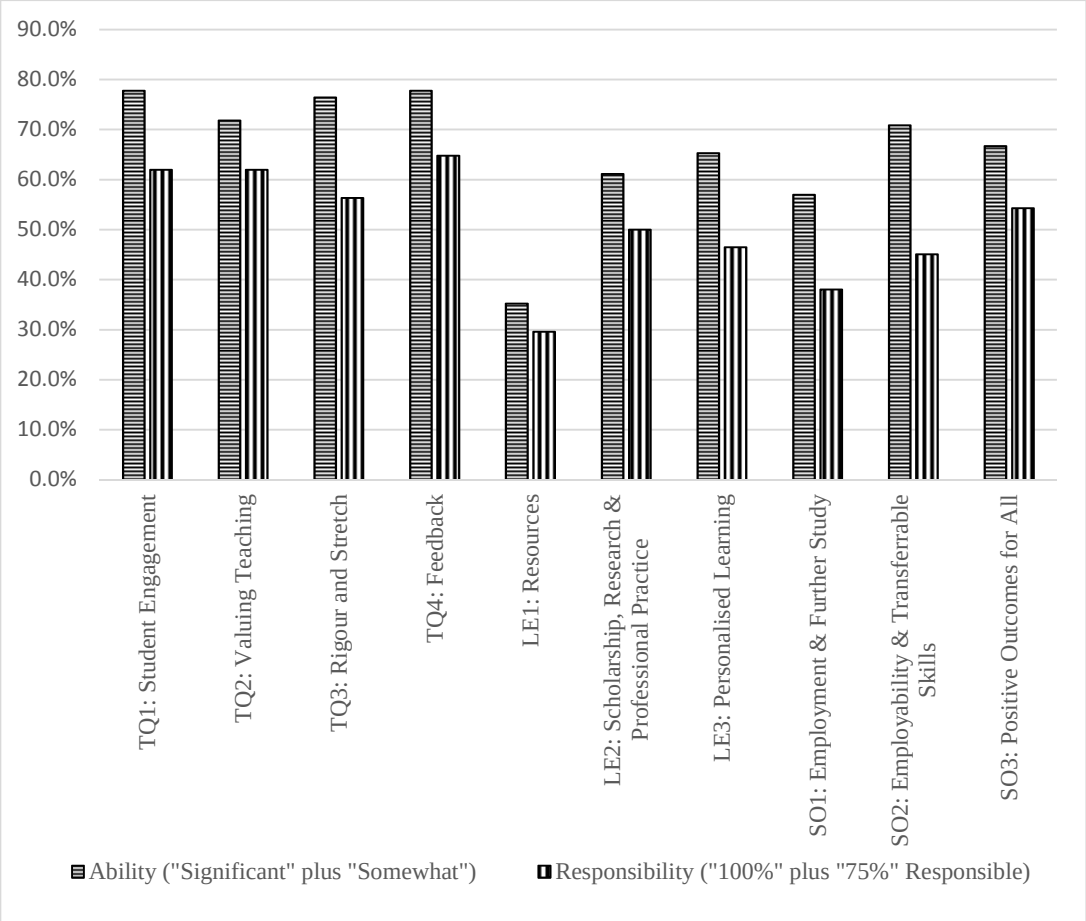

Figure 1: Programme Director's Ability and Responsibility to Impact the TEFs Outcomes

Total Word count including Abstract and References: 5168