



Collecting evidence about student experience and outcomes

A guide for student representatives

Produced by Higher Futures for the Office for Students

Authors: Toby O'Brien, Jade Underwood, Tymon Zgorzelski and Professor Janice Kay



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About this guide

This guide is for current student representatives. It's intended to support you with collecting evidence to include in future Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) student submissions.

The guide has been produced by some of the student and academic members of the TEF panel and is based on their experiences as panel members and student representatives.

In it, they consider the why, what and how of collecting evidence about the student experience and student outcomes at your institution.



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Why you should gather evidence for the student submission

To ensure the student perspective is considered

The TEF panel uses several sources of evidence when assessing universities and colleges, including written submissions and data indicators. Your aim is to offer an authentic, independent account with your submission. You can use the student submission to amplify the institution's submission, add support to the points it makes, or present a valuable alternative viewpoint.

The student submission can play a key part in the panel members' judgement because it is the voice of the students, and they recognise that has inherent value. In the 2023 TEF, panel members used evidence from the student submission to inform their understanding of the student experience and outcomes at the institution, and their judgements. In some cases, student submissions delivered crucial information that helped the panel understand different perspectives.

To ensure the submission is truly able to reflect the views of students it needs to have a sound evidence base. The panel decides how much weight to place on each source of evidence, and including robust evidence within the student submission is more likely to convince the panel to give the submission weight when making decisions. This is a key reason why we have put together this advisory guide.

To provide evidence that covers the whole assessment period

The TEF assessment covers several years. That means you ideally need to collect information for the submission that covers the whole of this period. It's not possible for the students producing the actual submission to do this. So, we make suggestions about how to support them by gathering evidence throughout the period, including recording information regularly and from year to year.



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To enhance the relationship with your university or college and support your own priorities

Your effectiveness as a student representative and your ability to deliver change for students can depend on how you and your university or college work together.

Gathering evidence for the TEF submission can enhance how you work together by providing a shared agenda for improving student

experience and outcomes. It can facilitate conversations around how to improve the student experience, what the expectations of students are and the issues affecting them. The OfS polled students who produced submissions for TEF 2023, and the vast majority who responded agreed that participating in the TEF strengthened the student voice in discussions with their institutions and helped influence positive change. The experience overall was positive for them too.

The evidence you gather could also be useful for your day-to-day work as a student representative or student union officer. Or perhaps you have some manifesto priorities which need some research or more persuasive arguments before they are presented to key stakeholders. Using the approach set out in this guide can help you to create a robust evidence base for all your work.

Top tip for making your submission count

Build a robust evidence base, ideally collected over a number of years, so the submission can represent the views of your students and carry weight in the assessment.

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How to decide **what** evidence you should gather

Find out what is already available

Bear in mind that your institution will have information and data that you can also draw on to support your arguments and you should discuss what this could be and your access. This will help you to understand what is already available that is relevant to the issues you want to cover and decide what additional evidence you want to gather.

Remember that beyond data and indicators, you will have access to a lot of information that can serve as evidence, such as:

- records of your student public meetings like Town Hall events
- your own reports
- minutes of meetings you're involved in
- public statements and policy documents.

Your institution will also have an evidence base of information that it will be helpful for you to gain access to.

It will also be useful to understand, as a frame, the institution's strategic approach to delivery of education and educational gains. This is often referred to as the institution's education strategy, overseen by a senior university or college staff member and key committees.

Top tip do an audit ✓

With your institution, you might want to audit the different kinds of information that are available to you.

Understand and synthesise the material to focus on areas that may be of concern or of good practice.

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Think about the issues you want to focus on

Before you begin to collect evidence, you first need to think about the kinds of issues that you want to focus on. This will help you plan and get the best use out of what you do.

Student representatives will have different priorities for students' education and outcomes and what you focus on can be informed by your priorities and your specific institutional context.

For example:

- if a lot of your students are on vocational courses, you might want to look for evidence about how effective work placements are
- if your students are in the arts, they might be particularly concerned about performance spaces
- if your institution prides itself on research, your students might care about access to leading researchers and their work.

As part of your submission, you might want to describe what the most important things are for your students and what they want from their experience at your institution, and try especially to convey to the panel the particular flavour of education and outcomes there. You'll want to gather evidence that supports what you want to say about this.

Consider the student experience *and* student outcomes

TEF 2023 examined two 'aspects': student experience and student outcomes. It was clear to the panel that students were more comfortable discussing student experience than student outcomes in student submissions and this was borne out in responses to the OfS student contact poll. In a way, this is unsurprising because representatives may be less aware of support that an institution is providing to produce better outcomes for its students in terms of retention and progression.

However, it is important for you to understand performance indicators about outcomes, **including withdrawal rate (dropout), course completion and progression to work or further study** and the

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reasons behind them. Your university or college should be able to support your understanding about student outcomes, including relevant performance indicators, and measures and mechanisms that exist to support retention, completing awards and progression.

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Increases and decreases in the rate of student withdrawals or other performance indicators can signal issues with the quality of a course or a service such as mental health support. It's important for you to understand this data, and what it can tell you about where improvements can be made.

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As part of the student outcomes aspect, TEF 2023 asked institutions to describe their approach to **educational gains**. This concerns what students might be expected to benefit from and gain as part of learning at that institution, and how these educational gains are evaluated and demonstrated. Given this was the first time that educational gains were included as part of the TEF, institutions were still able to gain a higher TEF award if they were unable to provide evidence of how they evaluate and demonstrate gains. For the future TEF, it is worth student representatives understanding their institutional intentions, approaches to, evaluation and demonstration of gains from education. This should be part of the ongoing dialogue with the institution in terms of student outcomes.

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Getting a better understanding of how your institution supports students to achieve positive outcomes will help you to identify whether there are areas that your students might want to feature in a future student submission and to gather relevant and robust evidence.

Top tip for gathering evidence about student outcomes ✓

Build your evidence-gathering about student outcomes through discussion with your institution about what performance indicators they use, and how to interpret and improve them, and their approach to educational gains.



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How to approach gathering evidence

In this section, we give you some tips for how to approach gathering evidence.

Consider your institutional context

The context of a university or college matters when deciding how you go about gathering evidence.

Ensuring that data, views and information are representative rather than anecdotal is key to producing a robust student submission. Whatever your approach is to gathering evidence, the context of your university or college will inform how you collect evidence that is representative of the student body as a whole.

The larger your institution, the more important it is for you to consider a wide variety of data and information sources, including understanding issues in different faculties, schools or departments, and among different student groups. You can work with your student representatives at course and department level to help you do this.

While students at smaller providers may have fewer dedicated resources to support widespread or large-scale collection of evidence, you may be able to take more personalised approaches to evidence-gathering, which can be done on a smaller scale.

Work collaboratively

Working collaboratively with your student body and your institution to develop your approach to evidence-gathering and pulling your evidence base together will help you to produce a stronger submission.

One of the features of the last TEF was the focus that it placed on student engagement and voice. The panel looked for evidence about how an institution involved its students

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and student representatives to enhance students' experience and outcomes. It also looked for evidence that the student submission was constructed in collaboration with the wider student body, reflecting its current view and that of previous years. When producing the submission, you should consider how you can use teamwork and draw on the support of other students, even in a small institution.

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As you collect evidence, it's worth considering how you and your institution share data, evidence and information, and what support they can give you to understand existing information and collect robust new information. Working collaboratively with your institution should give you a more comprehensive understanding of existing evidence you can draw on and may provide mutually beneficial insights to institutions and student representatives about how to work better to improve students' experience and outcomes. You will also need to consider how you work with your institution when preparing the submission, such as sharing drafts, while maintaining your independent voice.

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Top tip on working collaboratively ✓

Your institution should be able to help you gather evidence.

Focus on and develop the relationship with your institution and be clear about how you would like to work with it and with students.

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Start as soon as you can and plan ahead

Starting early allows you to build an evidence base that is solid, comprehensive and representative and understand a bit more what is available and what might need improving. Gathering as much evidence early in the process about what the student experience and student outcomes are like will help you and future representatives to plan for a future submission that reflects the full TEF period.

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Year-on-year evidence-gathering is important: think about how you can continue evidence-gathering from one year to another and from one set of student representatives to another. It is also important to keep a careful record so that future colleagues can follow what you did and what you found.

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Regular collection also helps to catch trends early and may identify things that you want to pick up before the next submission.

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Learn from TEF 2023 student submissions

For TEF 2023, student representatives in different institutions sought feedback in lots of ways. The 2023 student submissions have a wealth of information about how student representatives approached preparation and gathered feedback, which can help you plan your own approach. You can explore them on the TEF outcomes pages (<https://tef2023.officeforstudents.org.uk/>).

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Top tips for planning ahead



Plan for evidence collection over a period longer than your tenure. You should decide how you might structure the evidence to guide your colleagues in the future and this may influence the variety of methods you choose. Think carefully about the practicalities of recording and storing the evidence for future users, and how they'll interact with and understand the information. Your handover or transition process to new student representatives could include information on the existing work and how to carry this forward.

If you can, work with your university or college to think about regular data collection. This way, issues can be thought about consistently.

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Below are some examples of how students described their approach to evidence collection.

Examples of collecting evidence from TEF 2023



“ The evidence for the student submission was largely pre-existing, and sources are detailed below. A wide range of student feedback data was analysed to identify key themes, with supplementary evidence drawn from university reports, policies and meeting records. Additionally, we used the initial data analysis to identify areas to explore further with students and conducted two focus groups specifically for TEF: one covering academic support and the sense of community at (the University), and one looking at the disabled student experience. The report went through several draft phases, with the lead student officers reviewing and revising at each stage, and we are confident that the evidence-led approach we have taken ensures that this submission is a fair reflection of the views of the student body at the University. ”

“ In my role in compiling this submission I was approached by [my college] and asked if I would be interested in completing the student submission. At the broader university, I am a student that also sits as a Student Representative, Student Ambassador, member of the Sustainability Society and sits on the ... College Group Sustainability Committee. In creating this submission, there has been involvement from four other students, these were student representatives. To gather the evidence for this submission a survey was created to feedback on the student experience of all students at [the College]. We initially surveyed Student Representatives, then the wider student body and a focus group with Student Representatives to discuss the results. This was used to gather evidence towards the current student experience. ”

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The table below includes examples of evidence-gathering activities students carried out and existing evidence they drew on in their submissions. You should consider how multiple methods or ‘basket of measures’ could be used to capture a representative range of perspectives.

Evidence collection for the submission

- Short snapshot or pulse surveys
- Welcome (induction) surveys
- Specific issue surveys
- Module or class feedback surveys
- Heatmap surveys
- Focus groups or drop-in sessions held by student representatives or the institution
- Informal conversation that can direct representative evidence gathering

Existing evidence and data



- Records of meetings such as Town Hall events
- Minutes such as those from representative forums, education committees, governing bodies
- Service-use data from the institution or students’ union
- Engagement data from the institution or students’ union
- Institutional public statements
- Institutional policy documents
- Demographic data
- National Student Survey data, including TEF indicator data on student experience
- Existing student outcomes data, including Graduate Outcomes Survey and TEF indicator data
- Data about approaches to, demonstration and evaluation of educational gains

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Try to ensure your evidence is representative and your data is robust

Having representative data is important. The panel will find it difficult to give weight to evidence if it doesn't appear to be representative of the student body.

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'Representative' means that the data is based on a sample from a larger group that accurately represents the views of the larger group.

The panel and any other stakeholders you work with will want to know how reliable and valid your data is. That's why it's important to plan how you will make information and data collection as robust as possible before you start. You do not want to get to the end of data collection and then find the evidence is difficult to interpret or worse, unusable.

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You can ask your institution for advice about how to make data and evidence more representative and robust.

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And if you think there is information that should be included in the submission that doesn't provide a consensus view or is a view of only part

Example why representative evidence matters



An interview of 20 students from different courses and year groups at a provider with a student population of 100 can carry weight. The same cannot be said about an interview of 20 students from one faculty at a large multi-faculty provider with 20,000 students when you want to tap into the views of the whole university or college. In this case, you would need to consider how you collect views that are representative across the whole institution, that is, across departments, schools, faculties and campuses. One way of doing this is to ensure that you get enough responses to any surveys you run across the institution.

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of the institution, then construct an argument that can be included in the submission to explain why you think it is important (for example to recognise different perspectives).

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Suit your methods to your questions

It is important to use methods of gathering evidence that allow you to address particular points and issues of concern. For example, if you want a rapid answer to how students are affected by a particular matter, consider a pulse survey rather than scrutinising minutes from representative forums or embarking on a large survey that will take time to construct and run.

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Consider accessibility and reach

How you gather information should be accessible across student groups, and across the institution. It is worth considering the whole process in the round, including things like advertising and promotion. How you collect information should be accessible for people with specific learning difficulties, for example, and thinking about this can improve the scale and scope of your insights.

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Top tip for representative evidence



Do your best to ensure that the feedback you capture is representative of the wider student population. Indicate where you think it is not representative, but it is important to include in the submission and document your reasons why, so that your future colleagues can understand these.



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Using and collecting survey and focus group data

This final section includes some tips for using and collecting survey and focus group data to use in your submission. As you collect this information, continue to focus on what impacts you've identified and the insights you've gained.

Surveys

The higher education sector has a lot of national survey information from students, some of which is publicly available and some of which your institution should be able to share with you and help you to interpret.

When considering the student experience, you may want to use evidence from the National Student Survey, which is the basis for benchmarked indicators used in the student experience aspect of the TEF. The NSS has been running over many years, and while some questions have changed, been added to or adapted, it has a high response rate with representative data that allows benchmarking across institutions and courses. It includes qualitative and quantitative questions and it's useful to have access to responses to both. The Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) is another good potential source of evidence.

Top tip 1 for using existing survey data

Ask your institution for support with existing survey data

Support from your institution to access and interpret existing survey data will be important. Remember, survey data will be valuable not just for TEF purposes but for a more general understanding of student experience and outcomes.

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For student outcomes, you may want to draw on responses to the Graduate Outcomes Survey for your institution. This survey is the basis for progression indicators in the student outcomes aspect of the TEF.

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In addition to national surveys, institutions and students' unions often survey their own students in-year and across years, and it is useful to have access to survey results and the institution's insights, particularly if outcomes can be tracked over time.

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There are pros and cons to running your own surveys. While a robust set of survey outcomes can carry weight, you should bear in mind that constructing them is a difficult science. Begin by understanding what it is that you want to find out and why it would need a new set of data. Your institution can tell you whether data and information that can answer your questions is already available.

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If running your own survey, you will need to think carefully about the issues you want to address and how best to structure questions. You will also need to ensure that the data you collect is representative as far as possible. Creating and running a survey is resource-intensive and it requires time and skill to produce a good dataset. If you do decide to carry out a survey, it may be more effective to focus on questions or concepts that are not taken into consideration by national surveys like the NSS.

Top tip 2 for using existing survey data

Consider both qualitative and quantitative data from surveys such as NSS

This is important for understanding the indicator data that the TEF panel will have access to, including trend data (that is whether survey outcomes appear to improve or get worse over time), as well as helping you to build your own narrative.

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Example of running a survey



“ [The University Group’s] Head of Access and Participation sent a student-wide call out for people to support with the submission and a group of students met for some meetings via Teams. The TEF student submission team created a collaborative document to pull together the questions for a survey for the student submission with each student creating questions for different sections of the submission. One of the key aims of the survey was to make it accessible to as many students as possible by using language that made things clear and concise so we could capture the most precise data with a tight turnaround. We also ran a competition that would see 2 students win £100 each from a random prize draw to support them with the cost of living. We also chose to do a survey rather than hosting focus groups because the December-January period is some of the busiest times in Semester 1 as students are completing assessments during this time. We decided that a remote way to feed into the report was the fairest way to gather data that was considering the needs and focus of students right now. The survey received a total of 809 responses (which is c. 10% of the total population of the provider), with 35 different courses and learning pathways being represented from all colleges and courses

... Support with the best approaches to interpreting data has been provided by Group Head of Access and Participation and AP Data Analyst also supported with interpreting some of the long form responses. ”

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Top tip run ongoing and regular surveys

It is hard to create a representative survey during the year leading up to TEF. Ongoing and regular surveys that have institutional support are more likely to be representative, so working with your institution to support regular data gathering from pulse surveys, for example, will be valuable

Focus groups

The TEF panel will want to understand what is working well and what not so well. Bear in mind that while quotes from students can really bring discussion to life, the panel will not be able to weight them if they are not backed up by evidence that they are representative.

Focus groups are another method for gathering representative views. There are a number of ways of running focus groups but to get maximum usable data: plan who you are targeting to come, why and how you are going to run sessions (from advertised sessions to less formal 'drop in' sessions).

Some of the positives of talking directly to students are the immediacy of feedback, the timeliness of issues, and the ability to target particular student groups. Remember that targeting particular groups can still be consistent with collecting representative data as long as the students involved are representative of this wider group.



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Top tips for running focus groups

1. Ensure that the numbers and coverage of those involved in focus groups will give you a representative sample of views.
2. Try to take the consensus view rather than a single opinion.
3. Meet and record answers about issues you want to discuss in the student submission. Topics for discussion will stem from the issues you have identified, but whatever you choose, listen and give time for students to express their views.
4. Record what individuals say: presenting quotes is helpful to give the TEF panel (and institution) direct and qualitative evidence.

Producing a submission

Always keep in mind that your evidence should reflect the authentic voices of your students when preparing your submission. Consider who will produce the submission and compile the information, which may involve the assistance of external advice. You could try an alternative format to relay this information in your submission, such as a podcast in the example below.

Example of a podcast submission

One submission was a podcast made by two students and an alumnus who described their experiences at the provider. They talked about why they decided to study there, what their experience was like, and how the courses are improved among other things. The podcast was structured in segments related to TEF features. The personal nature of the submission allowed the panel to see a real example of student experience at the provider. The TEF panel received a transcription of the podcast and a link to the video.

This guide is meant to be an inspiration to you. It hopefully will have demonstrated the kinds of evidence that student representatives have used in the past. And, during your tenure, how to choose the data and information you gather, and methods to collect it. Good luck with your work to improve student experience and outcomes.

