THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYABILITY DATA: TEF, GRADUATE OUTCOMES & LEO
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When the TEF results were released in June this year, the analysis revealed the extent to which universities’ contextual statements were successful in changing the award that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) benchmark data indicated they would receive. Successful statements included a large quantity of qualitative information and, based on the recent policy document, TEF: Lessons Learned, this will continue to be critical, as we learned that the weighting for the National Student Survey (NSS) will be halved in the next round of TEF. This is particularly true for part-time providers, who will be allowed to supplement their submission with additional data to better contextualise their position.

However, governmental pressure for data continues as the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is increasingly requiring hard data from universities to measure the impact of funding spent on fulfilling their OFFA agreements.

Where is this data likely to come from? Well, valuable data lies at the heart of learning, generated by students’ interactions with virtual learning environments (VLEs), ebook platforms, attendance monitoring, library systems, and employability modules. Often these are not on the university server, but on the server of a third party; yet, if they can be brought together on one system, there is the potential for greater insights into trends and patterns of engagement for both management and institutional reporting.

As the pressure for data continues, there is also an increasing debate around the value of higher education. This is likely to grow in the future with increased monitoring of spending of HE institutions (see recent reports about vice-chancellor salaries), as well as the impact of HE on students’ lives and employability. Any spend must be linked to a clear return on investment, one that cannot necessarily be “cashed out” but that clearly has a positive impact, not only to TEF metrics, but over a new timeline – “the extended student lifecycle” – starting prior to entry into university and extending five years after graduation.

As we move towards the next round of TEF and pilots for subject level TEF, universities need to rapidly shift towards being able to deliver and measure support over the new timeline – a timeline that could cover up to ten years. Systems that can deliver this will not be just nice to have, but vital for the following reasons:

GAMING OF STATISTICS IS ON ITS WAY OUT
It is an open secret within the sector that universities learned how to get the best results from the NSS and from the Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE). The “gaming” of institutional statistics is steadily being removed, however, with HEFCE developing a methodology for subject level TEF that is not capable of being “gamed” by universities. Additionally, the recent announcement in
the TEF Lessons Learned policy document advised that the Director of Fair Access will have the opportunity to determine whether “gaming” has taken place so that the TEF panels can take this into account.

THE LONG-TERM IS THE NEW SHORT-TERM
Particularly when it comes to employment data, there is a clear trend to move away from institutional reporting and rely on longer term data often held by the government. One example is the role of HMRC data in the recent Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO), which will be included in the TEF metrics from 2018. Here, it is worth reviewing the case of LSE, who obtained only a bronze TEF award and was near the bottom of the 2017 NSS tables while the university was undoubtedly the winner when looking at the LEO data.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE GRADUATES GONE?
From 2019 on, DLHE will be no more, and will be replaced by Graduate Outcomes. Whilst there are a number of concerns about the new Graduate Outcomes survey, it is the move from six to fifteen months and the introduction of a single company undertaking the survey that should spread the most alarm.

Unlike the NSS, where contact details of existing final year students are supplied to the survey company, universities will have to deliver working contact details for graduates fifteen months after they have left. Ask any alumni department what their biggest challenge is, and you will see the scale of the problem.

However, it’s not simply a question of keeping the institution student record system updated with alumni contact details, but rather of finding reasons for graduates to keep in touch and update their own records. Only by providing high-quality, continuous and relevant employability skills enhancement will graduates feel motivated to stay in touch.

The impact of this change is that in 2020, we are likely to see major fluctuations in employment statistics and benchmarks, which to the general public could seem like failures in one of the central tasks of universities in the 21st century to get their graduates into well-paid and worthwhile employment.

CONCLUSIONS
As the need for data grows across different metrics, universities will have to come to terms with the need for institution-wide systems that can support, develop and measure employability both before, during and, now, well after graduation.

This requires an appropriate system to hold up-to-date contact details while also being capable of delivering employability support geared to the needs of tomorrow on-demand, when and wherever students are.

This, in combination with the new Graduate Outcomes survey, provides a challenging time ahead for those seeking to hold onto their TEF Gold status or those seeking to upgrade their award.