

University's appeal against silver TEF ranking rejected

By Samuel Chadwick, News Editor (2017/18)

Tuesday 31 October 2017



Image: Arian Kriesch

The University has described its disappointment after their appeal against the 'silver' ranking given by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was rejected.

Last June, the newly-devised government assessment which is the TEF published their first set of annual results on the teaching quality of universities. The results are produced by a panel of 10 industry experts who compile data to award gold, silver, or bronze rankings according to four categories of measurements: students' views of teaching; assessment and academic support from the National Student Survey (NSS); student dropout rates; and rates of employment.

Initiated by the Department for Education (DfE), it is intended to better inform prospective students' choices, especially given the burdensome long-term financial investment which is tuition fees.

The results released last June contained some surprises, the most notable of which was the bronze ranking dispensed to the world renowned LSE. The University of York, alongside nine other Russell Group institutions such as Durham and UCL, was awarded silver. Of the 21 Russell Group universities, eight were gold-ranked, and three bronze. Millie Beach, then YUSU President, described York's ranking as "a great result for the first year of the TEF".

However, no later than a week after the rankings were published last June, the University announced that it was appealing the TEF's verdict, with their appeal eventually being rejected just before term started, keeping York's ranking settled until new results are published next summer. Of the 17 other institutions which appealed, only the University of East Anglia, who moved up to gold from silver, was successful.

A University spokesman described the appeal's rejection, an apparent surprise to University bosses, as

"obviously disappointing", given that York sits in the "top quartile in the UK" on all teaching related metrics.

"Our lecturers and support staff work incredibly hard, delivering high-quality teaching programmes and ensuring that our students acquire the skills that are valued by employers. We offer a compelling choice for committed and ambitious students."

The DfE's official description of silver is provision of "high quality", but not "outstanding," a description reserved for gold. The data-crunching methods of the TEF are not without debate over their accuracy, not least because 2017 was the trial year, meaning that the latest set of results released were also the first thus far. The Times Higher Education did point out that a gold-ranked university "can offer programmes that differ significantly in quality, which means that the TEF award does not tell prospective students about the quality of individual degree programmes", meaning that it is highly likely that a bronze ranked institution can indeed offer excellent courses, and similarly a gold-ranked one is not guaranteed to have excellent teaching in every department.

The TEF's report for York stated that student satisfaction with teaching quality and academic support was "very high", and it praised York's academic culture, high quality facilities, and learning via the collegiate system, for example with peer mentors and college tutors. However, assessment and feedback was the University's weakest area. A total of 295 universities, colleges and alternative providers of higher education volunteered to take part in the first year of TEF ratings. However only 134 were given ratings, with 43 (32 per cent) scoring gold, 67 (50 per cent) silver and 24 (18 per cent) bronze.



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